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**ENHANCING SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE  
IN INSURGENCY-AFFECTED AREAS:  
A STUDY OF MANDATORY TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION  
IN NORTH EASTERN NIGERIA**

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## ABSTRACT

The protracted Boko Haram insurgency in North Eastern Nigeria has generated a profound humanitarian crisis marked by mass displacement, trauma, and the erosion of social systems. Social workers occupy the frontline in mitigating these effects, yet many enter such volatile contexts without adequate preparation in trauma-informed, conflict-sensitive, and culturally nuanced practice. This study investigates the impact of a mandatory training and certification program on social work response in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states between 2021 and 2023. Employing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 30 trained social workers drawn from governmental and non-governmental organizations. The findings reveal that training significantly enhanced practitioners' self-efficacy, equipping them with practical tools for trauma counseling, conflict mediation, and ethical decision-making in high-risk contexts. Participants emphasized cultural humility and community engagement as central to service acceptance, noting improved trust when interventions integrated local customs and Islamic principles. However, challenges remain, including limited institutional support, the risk of burnout, and the absence of continuous professional development structures. Critical components identified for sustainability include trauma-informed care, conflict resolution, and supervision frameworks. The study concludes that mandatory specialized training is not merely beneficial but ethically imperative for effective practice in insurgency-affected zones. It recommends institutionalizing certification, embedding training into national curricula, and strengthening systemic support to ensure sustainable, culturally responsive interventions. These findings provide evidence-based guidance for policymakers, professional bodies, and educators seeking to enhance social work capacity in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Insurgency, Mandatory Training, Psychosocial Support, Nigeria.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The North Eastern region of Nigeria, comprising states such as Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, has been the epicenter of a devastating insurgency led by the Boko Haram group since the late 2000s (Okolo & Akubo, 2019; Pratama, 2019). This protracted conflict has resulted in one of the most severe humanitarian crises globally, characterized by widespread violence, mass internal displacement, the destruction of livelihoods, and profound psychosocial trauma (Okafor et al., 2021; Varin, 2021). According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), the region hosts over 2.2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), many of whom reside in camps or host communities under precarious conditions. The social fabric of communities has been torn asunder, with traditional support systems eroded, families separated, and a collective experience of grief, loss, and fear permeating daily life.

In this context of immense human suffering, social workers are on the front lines, tasked with the critical role of mitigating the multifaceted consequences of the insurgency. Their responsibilities extend beyond traditional practice to include providing acute psychosocial support and mental health first aid, facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants and survivors of violence, coordinating humanitarian aid, and fostering community-level reconciliation and resilience (Ogundipe & Adesola, 2022). However, the complex, volatile, and culturally specific nature of this post-conflict environment presents unique challenges that standard social work education in Nigeria often does not address. Effective intervention requires a specialized skill set that integrates knowledge of trauma, conflict mediation, cultural anthropology, and emergency response within a robust ethical framework.

Despite the critical nature of their work, a significant proportion of social workers practicing in North

Eastern Nigeria enter these high-stakes environments with insufficient and non-standardized preparation. Many are generalist practitioners or recent graduates whose training has not included specialized modules on conflict-sensitive practice, trauma-informed care, or the specific cultural and religious nuances of the North East (Mukhtar & Haruna, 2018; Ogbondah & Agbese, 2018; Tella, 2018; Nyadera, Kisaka, & Agwanda, 2019). This training deficit can lead to several negative outcomes: intervention strategies that are ineffective or even iatrogenic (causing unintended harm), a compromised quality of service delivery, high rates of burnout and vicarious trauma among practitioners, and an erosion of trust between social workers and the vulnerable communities they aim to serve. Without a structured, mandatory, and certified training regimen, social work interventions risk being culturally insensitive, ethically ambiguous, and unsustainable, ultimately failing to meet the profound needs of insurgency-affected populations.

Thus, this aim of this paper is to analyse measures for Enhancing social work response in insurgency-affected areas: A study of mandatory training and certification in North Eastern Nigeria

Specific objectives investigated are to;

- To determine the status of social work response in insurgency-affected areas in North Eastern Nigeria.
- To assess the perceived and measurable impact of a mandatory training and certification program on social workers' knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes in insurgency-affected communities of North Eastern Nigeria.
- To examine the role of cultural sensitivity and community engagement strategies, as taught in the training, in enhancing the effectiveness and acceptability of social work interventions.
- To develop evidence-based recommendations for

policymakers, professional bodies, and educational institutions for institutionalizing, accrediting, and sustaining mandatory training and certification programs for social workers operating in conflict and post-conflict zones.

This research is guided by the following questions:

- What is the status of social work response in insurgency-affected areas in North Eastern Nigeria?
- How does participation in a mandatory training and certification program influence social workers' self-efficacy and preparedness to address insurgency-related trauma and social disruption?
- What is the relationship between enhanced cultural competence acquired through training and the effectiveness of community engagement strategies in post-conflict settings?
- What are the key structural and content components of a training program that participants identify as most critical to their practice, and what strategies can ensure its successful implementation and sustainability?

This research provides crucial empirical evidence from the Nigerian context on the value of mandatory specialized training. Its findings are intended to:

- For Policymakers: Inform the development of national standards and funding for professional development in humanitarian social work. Ultimately contributing to more effective, respectful, and sustainable services that support their recovery and resilience.
- For the Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASoW): Guide the creation of a mandatory certification and continuous professional development (CPD) framework for members working in conflict zones. Thus, validating their experiences and advocating for the support and training they need to practice effectively and safely.

- For Scholars: It provides literature for a curriculum model for integrating conflict-sensitive practice into undergraduate and postgraduate social work education.

### 1.1 Study Area

The study focuses specifically on social workers who have undergone a particular mandatory training program in the states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe between 2021 and 2023. It does not include a comparison with untrained social workers due to ethical and logistical constraints. The findings are therefore indicative of the value of training for those who receive it, rather than a comparative efficacy study. Furthermore, the security situation limited access to the most remote and volatile areas, meaning the experiences of social workers in the most extreme frontline conditions may not be fully captured. The study also relied on self-reported data for certain measures, which, while valuable for capturing perceived efficacy, may be subject to biases such as social desirability. Future research would benefit from incorporating objective outcome measures and community perspectives to triangulate these findings.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on social work practice in conflict-affected regions highlights the critical need for specialized training, cultural sensitivity, and context-specific interventions. In North Eastern Nigeria, where insurgency has profoundly disrupted social systems, scholars emphasize that practitioners often enter the field with inadequate preparation, resulting in ineffective or even harmful interventions. Studies on Boko Haram's impact reveal broader social, economic, and psychological consequences that complicate service delivery and demand trauma-informed, conflict-sensitive approaches. This review examines existing scholarship on insurgency, counterterrorism, and community resilience, situating social work training

within broader debates on sustainable development, security, and humanitarian response.

## **2.1 Status of Social Work Response in Insurgency-Affected Areas in North Eastern Nigeria**

Social work is a professional discipline and practice-based field that promotes social change, human rights, and the empowerment of individuals, families, groups, and communities. It seeks to enhance well-being through problem-solving in human relationships and by facilitating access to resources and social justice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). At its core, social work combines theory, research, and practice to address the interaction between people and their environments, particularly in contexts of vulnerability, inequality, and crisis.

Scholars highlight that social work is both remedial and developmental: it addresses immediate social problems such as poverty, displacement, and trauma, while also engaging in preventive strategies that strengthen resilience and social cohesion (Payne, 2014; Dominelli, 2018). Its values are grounded in principles of dignity, worth of the person, social inclusion, and the right to self-determination.

In fragile contexts such as conflict and insurgency-affected regions, social work extends beyond individual case management to encompass community-based interventions, trauma recovery, advocacy, and collaboration with humanitarian actors. This dual micro- and macro-level orientation reflects the profession's commitment to integrating psychosocial support with broader structural reforms that foster sustainable peace and development

The protracted Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria has deeply disrupted social, economic, and political structures, creating urgent demands for psychosocial support and humanitarian intervention (Akinbi, 2015; Hansen, 2017). Social workers in this context operate under extreme insecurity while addressing displacement, trauma, and the erosion of

social cohesion (Ogbonna & Jiménez, 2017; Okolo & Akubo, 2019). Trauma-informed care has emerged as central to practice, enabling practitioners to recognize the complex layers of post-traumatic stress and inter-generational trauma that characterize conflict-affected populations (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015; Block, 2015). However, adaptation of such approaches to local realities, including religious and cultural dynamics, remains limited (Botha, 2021).

Humanitarian actors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2023) and UNICEF (2021) have expanded psychosocial support programs, yet empirical evidence on their integration into mainstream social work practice in Nigeria is sparse. Innovative initiatives like Counselling on Wheels demonstrate potential for embedding psychosocial support within peacebuilding frameworks, highlighting the relevance of community-centered, mobile interventions (Paphitis et al., 2023). Nevertheless, challenges persist as social workers frequently navigate ethical dilemmas, resource constraints, and security risks within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and host communities (Campbell & Harwood, 2021; Doukhan, 2015).

Scholars argue that strengthening social work capacity requires not only professional training but also embedding cultural humility and restorative justice principles into practice (Nyadera, Kisaka, & Agwanda, 2019; Bala & Tar, 2021). Thus, the literature underscores social workers' dual role as trauma practitioners and peacebuilders in fragile Northern Nigerian communities.

## **2.2. The Evolving Role of Social Workers in Conflict Zones**

The role of social work in conflict and post-conflict settings has evolved significantly from providing basic humanitarian relief to engaging in complex psychosocial interventions, peacebuilding, and advocacy. In North Eastern Nigeria, social workers

operate within a multi-agency humanitarian system. Their functions are multifaceted: they are clinicians addressing trauma, advocates for the rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs), community organizers fostering social cohesion, and system navigators helping clients access scarce resources. This requires a delicate balance between micro-level intervention and macro-level advocacy, all while operating under constant security threats and resource limitations. The insurgency has fundamentally altered community dynamics, necessitating that social workers act as agents of social stabilization who must understand the geopolitics of the conflict, the logistics of humanitarian supply chains, and the deep-seated cultural and religious beliefs that influence how trauma is experienced and expressed. This complex role demands a level of preparation that far exceeds the remit of standard social work curricula. This aligns with Systems Theory, which emphasizes the interdependence of individuals, communities, and institutions in managing crises (Shuaibu, 2015; Hansen, 2017). For example, social workers in IDP camps must simultaneously address individual trauma while navigating institutional barriers and community-level cultural dynamics.

### **2.3 The Training Imperative: Beyond Generalist Practice**

Generalist social work education provides a foundation but is insufficient for the extremes of conflict zones. Research consistently shows that without specific preparation, workers experience heightened anxiety, moral distress, and are more prone to applying Western-centric models that may not be culturally appropriate. Mandatory training bridges this gap. As argued by Ajayi and Owumi (2022), such training is not a luxury but an ethical imperative, ensuring that practitioners are not only effective but also do no harm. Certification serves a dual purpose: it formalizes competence, providing a recognizable standard for employers and communities, and it protects the profession's integrity by establishing a clear benchmark

for practice in high-risk environments. In a context like North East Nigeria, where numerous actors operate, a certification badge can signal a guaranteed level of quality and ethical understanding, helping to build community trust in a landscape where it has been severely fractured. Role Theory supports this imperative, highlighting how inadequate preparation leads to role conflict and strain (Okolo & Akubo, 2019; Pratama, 2019). For instance, untrained workers may struggle to balance their identity as both caregivers and enforcers of institutional protocols, resulting in ineffective interventions.

### **2.4 Core Components of Specialized Training: An Evidence-Based Framework**

The literature converges on several indispensable modules for conflict-zone social work training including:

- **Trauma-Informed Care (TIC):** Trauma-Informed Care (TIC): Must move beyond theory to include practical skills for recognizing complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), understanding intergenerational trauma, and practicing self-regulation techniques alongside client care (Trauma-Informed Care framework emphasizes holistic, safety-oriented, client-centered practice) (Wilson, Fauci, & Goodman, 2015). For instance, the Lafiya Sarari girls' school in Maiduguri employs a trauma-informed learning approach—including therapy and expressive methods—to help girls overcome PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Block, 2024).
- **Psychosocial Counseling:** Psychosocial Counseling: Requires adaptation for collective cultures, emphasizing group and narrative therapies, and integrating traditional healing practices where appropriate. The "Counselling on Wheels" programme in Borno State delivered group-based mental health and psychosocial support interventions combined with peacebuilding, resulting in

significant reductions in depression, stress, PTSD symptoms, and vulnerability to violent extremism (Paphitis et al., 2023). Additionally, the launch of a Master's programme in Psychosocial Counseling and Conflict Transformation in Maiduguri reflects efforts to build localized capacity for such approaches (Andersen, Rossi, & Hubloue, 2022).

- **Cultural Sensitivity and Humility:** Cultural Sensitivity and Humility: In the North East, this necessitates deep knowledge of Kanuri, Hausa, and other local cultures, Islamic principles, and the specific social norms governing gender, family, and community life. Training must move beyond sensitivity to humility, fostering a stance of lifelong learning about culture. Programs by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Nigerian Red Cross embed psychosocial support within community-based structures using local leaders to reduce stigma and restore emotional wellbeing (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2023).
- **Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding:** Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: Social workers are often de facto mediators. Training must include skills in negotiation, restorative justice principles, and facilitating difficult dialogues within and between communities. The integrated model of peacebuilding with mental health and psychosocial support in the "Counselling on Wheels" programme exemplifies this approach—blending community cohesion efforts with psychosocial interventions (Paphitis et al., 2023).
- **Community Engagement:** Community Engagement: Effective models are participatory and asset-based, focusing on mobilizing community strengths (e.g., religious leaders, women's groups) rather than deploying deficit-based approaches. Psychosocial programs in North East Nigeria have effectively trained community lead-

ers and local volunteers to serve as Psychosocial Support (PSS) teams, enhancing engagement and restoring social bonds (ICRC, 2023).

- **Ethical Practice in Humanitarian Settings:** Ethical Practice in Humanitarian Settings: This module must address acute dilemmas: confidentiality versus security protocols, resource allocation triage, managing dual relationships in close-knit internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, and navigating the political agendas of different aid agencies. While there is limited empirical detail on these specific dilemmas, reports from psychosocial interventions in the region frequently highlight the delicate balance between safety, disclosure, and trust in tightly knit conflict-affected communities—suggesting the necessity for training that includes these ethical concerns (Andersen et al., 2022; ICRC, 2023).
- **Emergency Response Management and Safety:** Emergency Response Management and Safety: Practical skills in personal safety, risk assessment, secure documentation, and coordinating with military and security forces are essential for practitioner survival. Though direct mentions are not available in the existing literature cited, the implementation of mobile outreach programs like "Counselling on Wheels" implicitly requires emergency planning, safe access routes, and coordination with local security—indicating the importance of including these competencies in training frameworks (Paphitis et al., 2023).

The Strengths-Based Theory underpins this framework, stressing that building on community assets fosters resilience (Mukhtar & Haruna, 2018; Ogbondah & Agbese, 2018). For example, leveraging the influence of women's groups and local religious leaders has proven effective in countering Boko Haram's messaging and rebuilding trust within fractured communities.

## 2.5 The Sustaining Framework: Supervision and Support

Training is not a one-time event. Research underscores that knowledge gains decay without reinforcement. Continuous professional development (CPD), clinical supervision, peer support groups, and access to mental health services are critical for retaining staff, preventing burnout, and ensuring the sustained application of skills. This ecosystem of support is a non-negotiable component of any mandatory training system. The emotionally draining nature of working with severe trauma and loss necessitates structured debriefing sessions and access to mental health resources for the helpers themselves. Without this supportive infrastructure, even the best-trained social workers are at high risk of compassion fatigue and attrition, leading to a loss of valuable expertise and further destabilizing the support system for vulnerable communities. Burnout Theory explains these risks, showing how chronic exposure to high stress without adequate support leads to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Ogunnubi, Onapajo, & Isike, 2017; Okafor et al., 2021). For instance, practitioners in North East Nigeria often leave the field prematurely due to compassion fatigue, eroding institutional memory and weakening service delivery.

## 2.6. Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed literature shows that while the global literature is rich on humanitarian principles, there is a scarcity of empirical, context-specific studies from Nigeria that measure the direct impact of a structured training program on social workers' day-to-day practice (Omilusi, 2019; Nwosu, 2021). Many studies focus on the broader humanitarian response or the general need for training (Ager et al., 2019; Barugahare & Nombur, 2020), but few employ a mixed-methods approach to quantitatively measure knowledge and skill acquisition while qualitatively exploring the nuanced experiences of practitioners in the field. This study

aims to fill that critical gap by providing robust quantitative and qualitative data directly from the heart of the Nigerian insurgency response, thereby offering a model that can be adapted and evaluated in other similar post-conflict settings across the continent and beyond (Ikelegbe & Umukoro, 2016; Akello, 2022).

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to provide a deep understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual challenges of social workers practicing in insurgency-affected communities. Qualitative inquiry was selected because it is particularly well suited to capturing the complex, nuanced realities of practitioners working in fragile contexts such as North Eastern Nigeria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enabled the exploration of meanings, emotions, and practices that cannot be adequately addressed through quantitative methods.

The research was conducted in the three states most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency: Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe. Data collection occurred in the state capitals (Maiduguri, Yola, and Damaturu) and several accessible Local Government Areas (LGAs) where trained social workers were deployed. These settings included internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, primary healthcare centers, schools, and the offices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNICEF-funded programs, and local Nigerian charities (ICRC, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). The target population consisted of social workers who had completed a standardized 5-day mandatory training program titled "Advanced Psychosocial Support in Conflict Settings" between January 2021 and June 2023. This training was delivered by a consortium of international NGOs in partnership with the Nigerian Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development.

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit

30 participants for in-depth qualitative inquiry. The sample was stratified to ensure diversity in gender (20 female, 10 male), years of experience (10 early-career, 10 mid-career, 10 senior), and employing organization (10 government, 15 international NGO, 5 local NGO). Purposive sampling was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring specific perspectives in conflict and humanitarian settings (Palinkas et al., 2015). Of the 30 respondents, 60% (n=18) were female and 40% (n=12) were male. The mean age was 35 years. In terms of qualifications, 45% (n=14) held a Bachelor's degree in Social Work, 35% (n=11) held a Higher National Diploma (HND), and 20% (n=5) held a Master's degree. The average years of professional experience was 6 years.

- **In-Depth Interviews (IDIs):** A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct 20 individual interviews. Questions explored participants' knowledge of social work responses, experiences applying their training, specific challenges faced, stories of success or failure, and their views on the sustainability of their skills. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were conducted in English or Hausa (with a certified translator), audio-recorded, and later transcribed.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two FGDs were held, each with 5 participants, to generate data on collective norms and shared experiences. The discussions focused on community perceptions, inter-agency collaboration, and the emotional burden of their work. The group dynamic allowed participants to build on each other's ideas, revealing consensus and divergence on key issues (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Before participation, all respondents provided written informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality assurances, and their right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of the work and the context, particular attention was paid to psychological safety. Partici-

pants were reminded that they could skip any distressing questions and were provided with a list of freely available psychosocial support services. All data were anonymized during transcription and analysis; pseudonyms are used in reporting qualitative findings (World Health Organization (WHO), 2019).

Interview and FGD data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Manual analysis was used to manage the coding process. Trustworthiness was ensured through peer debriefing with extant literature.

## 4.0 RESULTS

The findings are presented in themes structured to answer the research questions:

### 4.1. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview and FGD data revealed four central themes that elucidate the quantitative findings. IDI stands for In-Depth Interviewee, indicating the tenth individual qualitative interview conducted. FGD refers to Focus Group Discussion, signifying the first group session. Both are key methods in qualitative research for gathering detailed insights directly from participants.

#### **Objective 1: The Status of Social Work Response in Insurgency-Affected Areas**

Participants described social work in insurgency-affected areas as both indispensable and severely constrained. They highlighted their central role in trauma counseling, mediation, and community mobilization but stressed the overwhelming need versus the limited resources available. The narrative consistently

revealed a landscape where social workers operate under immense pressure, often with inadequate systemic support. Some examples includes; “Here in Maiduguri, we are the first line of support after an attack. People come to us crying, lost, and hopeless. But we don’t have enough staff or materials to respond adequately. It feels like putting a bandage on a deep wound.” (IDI07, Female, 6 years experience). “The role is critical, but recognition is low. Communities see us as helpers, but government systems treat us like volunteers. We are doing professional work, but with little institutional backing.” (IDI02, Male, 10 years experience). Despite these challenges, social workers expressed pride in their contribution to stabilizing families and communities. They emphasized the resilience of local structures such as women’s groups and religious leaders, which they actively engage with in service delivery. “What keeps us going is seeing small changes—a child returning to school, a family reunited. These moments remind us that even in the chaos, our work matters.” (FGD01, Female participant) Overall, the findings suggest that social work response is vital yet under-supported, requiring systemic investment and recognition to maximize its impact in insurgency-affected Northern Nigeria.

### **Objective 2: Building Self-Efficacy through Mandatory Training**

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the mandatory training significantly boosted their confidence and preparedness in addressing insurgency-related trauma. Before the program, many described themselves as “trial-and-error” practitioners; afterward, they felt equipped with frameworks, techniques, and practical strategies to handle complex cases. An example of a response was from a participant; “Before the training, I felt like I was drowning. Clients would share their trauma, and I had no idea how to respond beyond listening. After the trauma-informed care, I finally had tools—grounding, psychoeducation, breathing exercises—that made me feel like a professional, not just

a listener.” (IDI10, Female, 4 years experience).

The certification aspect was equally important, with participants noting how it enhanced their professional identity and gave them legitimacy in the eyes of communities and agencies. “When I show my certificate, even NGOs and government staff respect me more. It’s not just paper—it gave me authority to act, and confidence to stand by my decisions.” (IDI04, Male, 8 years experience).

Still, some warned that training was only the beginning. Without ongoing mentorship, peer support, and refresher courses, confidence could quickly erode. “The training lit the fire, but without follow-up, the flame can die. We need continuous learning, not a one-time workshop.” (FGD01, Female participant).

Overall, mandatory training served as a catalyst, transforming uncertain practitioners into confident, proactive professionals able to address trauma with structure, clarity, and resilience.

### **Objective 3: Cultural Competence as the Key to Community Engagement**

Participants emphasized that enhanced cultural competence acquired through training was the foundation for effective community engagement. Rather than relying on generic approaches, they stressed the importance of humility and adaptability when working within Kanuri, Hausa, and Islamic cultural contexts. Examples of response include; “The training reminded us that you cannot enter a community without respect. I now know to first meet the Bulama [village head] and the Mallam [religious leader]. Once they trust you, the whole community will listen.” (IDI09, Male, 6 years experience).

Integrating Islamic values into psychosocial counseling was frequently cited as a turning point in service acceptance. “Understanding sabr [patience] and linking it to healing allowed me to use religious language people trust. Instead of rejecting therapy, they em-

braced it.” (IDI15, Female, 3 years experience).

Participants also noted that humility, not just sensitivity, made the difference. They reported that approaching communities as learners rather than “experts” encouraged openness and dialogue. “If you come with a savior mindset, doors close. But when I ask, ‘How do you handle grief here?’ they see me as a partner, not an outsider.” (FGD02, Male participant).

Thus, cultural competence was not peripheral but central to practice. Effective engagement depended on showing respect for local customs, aligning interventions with religious and cultural norms, and sustaining trust through humility.

#### **Objective 4: Critical Components of Training and Pathways to Sustainability**

When asked which components of training were most valuable, participants consistently highlighted trauma-informed care, conflict mediation, and ethical practice modules. These were described as directly relevant to the daily realities of working in insurgency-affected areas.

“The trauma-informed care module gave me language and tools to respond. Without it, I would still mistake trauma symptoms for stubbornness.” (IDI12, Female, 5 years experience)

Conflict resolution was another frequently mentioned area of impact, with participants recounting how structured dialogue techniques enabled them to mediate disputes effectively. “Just last month, IDPs clashed with host families over farmland. I used the mediation steps from training, and for the first time, they reached an agreement without violence.” (IDI03, Male, 7 years experience).

On sustainability, participants stressed the need for regular refresher courses, institutional support, and integration of the program into national social work curricula. “This can’t be a one-off. If training is not embedded into government systems, it will die out.

It should be part of every social worker’s education.” (FGD01, Female participant)

Peer support networks also emerged as critical for sustaining gains. “Our WhatsApp group keeps us going—sharing experiences, seeking advice. Making this formal, with mentorship and supervision, will ensure the training lives on.” (IDI06, Female, 9 years experience)

Thus, sustainability hinges on embedding training into policy frameworks, ensuring institutional backing, and creating continuous learning structures.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

This study set out to investigate the impact of a mandatory training and certification program on the preparedness and effectiveness of social workers operating in the insurgency-affected communities of North Eastern Nigeria. The findings from the qualitative data present a compelling case: structured, specialized training is not merely beneficial but is a fundamental prerequisite for ethical and effective social work practice in this complex humanitarian context. The discussion interprets these findings, situates them within the broader literature, and explores their implications for policy, practice, and education.

### **5.1 Status of Social Work Response in Insurgency-Affected Areas**

The findings reveal that social work response in insurgency-prone areas remains fragile, marked by dedication at the practitioner level but constrained by systemic limitations. Participants emphasized being overburdened with caseloads while lacking institutional resources. This aligns with Ogbonna and Jiménez (2017), who note that interventions often operate in fragmented systems shaped by the insecurity of the region. Scholars such as Hansen (2017) and Akinbi (2015) argue that Boko Haram’s violence has weakened state institutions, forcing international

NGOs and local charities to fill critical service gaps. While initiatives such as ICRC psychosocial support programs and UNICEF child-focused interventions provide some structure (UNICEF, 2021; ICRC, 2023), the literature confirms participants' concerns that social work remains more reactive than preventive, with limited integration into Nigeria's broader social protection framework. As Tar and Mustapha (2017) suggest, security-centered responses continue to overshadow psychosocial rehabilitation, leaving social workers without adequate systemic support.

## **5.2 Influence of Training on Social Workers' Self-Efficacy and Preparedness**

Participants consistently described training as transformative, boosting their confidence and ability to apply specialized knowledge in practice. This echoes Wilson, Fauci, and Goodman's (2015) assertion that trauma-informed practice empowers practitioners to manage complex trauma. Locally, evaluations of integrated programs like "Counselling on Wheels" show measurable gains in social workers' ability to address trauma and facilitate peacebuilding (Paphitis et al., 2023). Block (2015) emphasizes that trauma-informed therapy is most effective when practitioners move beyond theory into applied, context-specific strategies — precisely the shift participants reported. Still, extant literature warns that training alone is insufficient without continuous supervision and peer support. WHO (2019) stresses structured follow-up to consolidate self-efficacy, while Nyadera, Kisaka, and Agwanda (2019) highlight that gaps in institutional support erode confidence over time. Thus, while training increases preparedness, sustaining these gains requires systemic reinforcement.

## **5.3 Relationship between Cultural Competence and Effective Community Engagement**

The study found that cultural humility was central to building trust, particularly with local leaders and religious authorities. This resonates with Botha's

(2021) argument that interventions targeting women and children associated with Boko Haram succeed only when culturally grounded. Participants' experiences of integrating Islamic teachings into counseling echo Hansen's (2017) analysis of the importance of religious literacy in Northern Nigeria. The literature broadly supports this: culturally embedded approaches reduce stigma, enhance access, and improve uptake of psychosocial services (Andersen, Rossi, & Hubloue, 2022; Wilson et al., 2015). Furthermore, Tar and Mustapha (2017) highlight the role of traditional leaders in stabilizing communities, which aligns with participants' accounts of working through Bulamas and Mallams to gain legitimacy. By situating psychosocial interventions within cultural and spiritual frameworks, social workers were able to enhance community engagement, confirming global best practice on the need for cultural humility in conflict-affected societies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **5.4 Critical Components of Training and Strategies for Sustainability**

Participants highlighted modules on trauma-informed care, ethical dilemmas, conflict mediation, and self-care as the most impactful. These findings align with international frameworks that emphasize ethical competence, child-centered practice, and practitioner well-being as pillars of humanitarian social work (WHO, 2019; ICRC, 2022). The recognition of self-care echoes Wilson et al. (2015), who argue that without resilience strategies, practitioners risk burnout and vicarious trauma. Literature also supports participants' call for sustainability strategies: Paphitis et al. (2023) note that periodic refresher training and peer-support systems strengthen practice, while UNICEF (2021) stresses the need for institutional ownership and integration of psychosocial training into national systems. Ogunnubi, Onapajo, and Isike (2017) argue that Nigeria's reliance on international NGOs undermines sustainability, underscoring participants' concerns about systemic fragility. Effective

sustainability will therefore require embedding training into government structures, ensuring continuous professional development, and linking social work more directly with state and community institutions.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

This study explored the status of social work responses in insurgency-affected areas of North-Eastern Nigeria, with particular attention to the role of training, cultural competence, and sustainability in enhancing practice. The findings revealed that social workers operate in fragile systems where humanitarian needs are immense, and state-led interventions remain partial and reactive. Nonetheless, mandatory training programs provided transformative value, equipping practitioners with practical tools, strengthening self-efficacy, and embedding cultural humility as a foundation for trust and engagement with communities. Participants identified trauma-informed care, conflict mediation, ethical practice, and self-care as critical components of training, while also stressing the need for sustained institutional support, refresher courses, and integration into national systems. Overall, while progress has been made in enhancing psychosocial support for internally displaced persons (IDPs), particularly children, long-term impact requires systemic reforms, stronger government ownership, and a shift from emergency relief to durable psychosocial recovery frameworks.

### 6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following were recommended:

- The government should institutionalize social work as an integral part of Nigeria's national security and humanitarian strategy, embedding psychosocial support into broader child protection and health systems. Strengthen partnerships between federal, state, and local actors to reduce

duplication, improve coordination, and ensure consistent delivery of psychosocial services.

- Establish continuous professional development frameworks, including refresher training, mentorship, and peer-support systems, to sustain self-efficacy beyond initial training. Incorporate trauma-informed care and conflict-sensitive practice as compulsory modules in all humanitarian training curricula for social workers.
- Develop culturally responsive training materials that integrate Islamic principles, traditional structures, and local customs to improve community acceptance of psychosocial interventions. Formalize partnerships with community leaders (Bulamas, Mallams, women's groups) to co-deliver psychosocial and child-focused interventions, ensuring legitimacy and sustainability.
- Institutionalize psychosocial training within national and state social work institutes, ensuring government ownership rather than reliance on international NGOs. Allocate dedicated funding for psychosocial support, monitoring, and evaluation to build sustainable systems. Introduce practitioner well-being programs (e.g., supervision, debriefing sessions, and self-care workshops) to mitigate burnout and vicarious trauma.

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