

**SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR THE REHABILITATION
OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS) IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Internal displacement represents a complex humanitarian and development challenge with far-reaching social, economic, and psychological consequences. This paper provides an in-depth examination of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with particular emphasis on Nigeria. Using secondary data, the study explores the causes, impacts, and lived realities of displacement, and critically analyzes social work intervention strategies across micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Anchored in Trauma Theory, the paper argues for integrated, sustainable, and rights-based approaches to rehabilitation. The findings highlight gaps in policy implementation, service delivery, and coordination, while emphasizing the importance of empowerment-driven interventions.

Keywords: Community reintegration, Economic empowerment, internally displaced persons (IDPs), Psychosocial support, Rehabilitation, Social work intervention.

1. Introduction

Forced displacement has emerged as one of the most significant global crises of the 21st century, affecting millions of individuals across different regions of the world (UNHCR, 2024). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) constitute a major proportion of this population, as they are forced to flee their homes but remain within their national borders (United Nations, 1998). Unlike refugees, IDPs often lack access to international protection frameworks, making their situation particularly precarious. Internal displacement is driven by armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, and environmental disasters (IDMC, 2024). The increasing frequency of climate-related disasters, such as floods and droughts, has further intensified displacement trends (World Bank, 2023). In many cases, displacement becomes protracted, lasting for years or decades, thereby transforming what was once considered a temporary humanitarian issue into a long-term development challenge. Recent studies emphasize that internal displacement is increasingly prolonged and complex, requiring long-term, adaptive intervention strategies. Social work practice must evolve to address changing displacement patterns and the growing invisibility of some displaced populations who lack access to services (Frederico et al., 2023; Collado, 2025).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the problem is particularly acute due to weak governance structures, political instability, and environmental vulnerability (World Bank, 2023). Nigeria presents a critical case, with millions displaced due to insurgency, banditry, and natural disasters (IOM, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Nigeria represents one of the most complex and large-

scale internal displacement situations in Sub-Saharan Africa, characterized by multi-causal drivers and protracted humanitarian conditions. The country consistently ranks among those with the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) globally, with millions affected across diverse regions (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024; International Organization for Migration, 2023). Unlike more localized crises, displacement in Nigeria is widespread and deeply embedded in the country's socio-political and economic landscape. The North-East region, particularly Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States, remains the epicenter of displacement due to the prolonged insurgency led by Boko Haram and its affiliated groups. Years of violent conflict have resulted in the destruction of homes, livelihoods, and critical infrastructure, forcing millions into displacement. Many affected populations reside in formal camps, while others seek refuge in informal settlements or host communities, often under precarious conditions (IOM, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). In contrast, the North-West and North-Central regions are increasingly experiencing displacement driven by banditry, farmer–herder conflicts, and communal violence. States such as Zamfara, Katsina, Benue, and Plateau have witnessed recurring cycles of displacement, often with limited humanitarian attention compared to the North-East (World Bank, 2023).

In addition to conflict-related drivers, environmental factors significantly contribute to internal displacement in Nigeria. Seasonal flooding, desertification, and climate variability have displaced thousands of people annually, particularly in vulnerable rural communities. The intensification of climate-related shocks has compounded existing socio-economic vulnerabilities,

leading to a complex interaction between environmental stress and human insecurity (World Bank, 2023; IDMC, 2024). Furthermore, development-induced displacement, though less documented, occurs through urban expansion and infrastructure projects that lack adequate resettlement planning. The living conditions of IDPs in Nigeria reflect severe humanitarian and developmental challenges. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare and education are common across both camps and host communities. Notably, a large proportion of IDPs reside outside formal camps, making them less visible to humanitarian actors and often excluded from assistance programs (IDMC, 2024). Women and children, who constitute the majority of displaced populations, face heightened vulnerabilities including gender-based violence, exploitation, and disrupted education. Reports by the United Nations Children's Fund indicate high levels of malnutrition, psychosocial distress, and school dropout among displaced children in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2023).

Institutionally, Nigeria has demonstrated commitment to addressing internal displacement through frameworks such as the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons, which aligns with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Agencies like the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs) are tasked with coordinating response efforts. Despite these frameworks, significant gaps persist in implementation, including inadequate funding, weak coordination, corruption, and insufficient data management systems (IOM, 2023; World Bank, 2023). As a result, responses are often reactive and short-term, with limited emphasis on sustainable rehabilitation and durable solutions. A defining feature of internal displacement in Nigeria is its protracted nature. Many IDPs remain displaced for extended periods due to ongoing insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and destruction of their communities of origin. This has led to long-term dependency on humanitarian assistance and increased risks of poverty, marginalization, and

social exclusion (IDMC, 2024). The lack of effective transition strategies from emergency relief to long-term development further exacerbates the situation. Overall, the Nigerian context highlights the complexity of internal displacement as both a humanitarian and developmental issue. It underscores the need for integrated, multi-level, and rights-based interventions that address immediate needs while also tackling structural drivers of displacement. For social work practice, this context demands a holistic approach that combines psychosocial support, community-based rehabilitation, policy advocacy, and sustainable livelihood interventions to facilitate the long-term recovery and reintegration of internally displaced persons (Frederico et al., 2023; Collado, 2025).

2. Literature Review

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals or groups who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters but remain within the borders of their country (United Nations, 1998). This distinction is critical because, unlike refugees, IDPs do not benefit from international protection frameworks and instead rely primarily on their national governments for safety and assistance. As a result, they often face heightened vulnerability, including lack of access to basic services, legal protection, and sustainable livelihoods. Rehabilitation in the context of internal displacement refers to a comprehensive and continuous process aimed at restoring displaced individuals to a state of functional independence and well-being. It encompasses multiple dimensions, including psychological recovery from trauma, economic empowerment through livelihood opportunities, and social reintegration into communities. Rehabilitation also involves ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing, thereby enabling IDPs to rebuild their lives in a sustainable manner (Payne, 2020). Psychologically, IDPs often experience trauma, anxiety, and depression due to exposure to violence, loss, and prolonged insecurity. Trauma-informed care is essential to mitigate these effects and promote resilience (Oluwayomi, 2024; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Social rehabilitation emphasizes the rebuilding of disrupted community networks and the facilitation of acceptance within host communities. Economically, rehabilitation programs often focus on livelihood restoration, vocational training, and microfinance opportunities, enabling IDPs to regain autonomy and reduce dependency on humanitarian aid (Joseph, Kure, & Raymond, 2023). Furthermore, access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and housing is foundational for sustainable reintegration. Educational programs, for example, restore normalcy for displaced children and reduce the risks of child labor or recruitment into armed groups (OCHA, 2022). Social work intervention involves a range of professional activities designed to improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities affected by displacement. These interventions are grounded in principles of social justice, human rights, and empowerment. In IDP settings, social workers engage in counselling, advocacy, community mobilization, and policy development, with the aim of addressing both immediate needs and long-term challenges (Payne, 2020; Saleebey, 2013).

Displacement itself refers to the forced movement of people from their habitual residence due to external pressures such as conflict, disasters, or persecution. This process often results in profound social, economic, and psychological disruptions, including loss of identity, breakdown of social networks, and increased vulnerability to poverty and exploitation (IDMC, 2024). Psychologically, displaced individuals may experience trauma, grief, and anxiety,

affecting their ability to engage in social and economic activities. Socially, displacement can strain relations between IDPs and host communities, sometimes generating tension or discrimination (Oluwayomi, 2024). Economically, sudden loss of assets and employment opportunities can push households into extreme poverty, exacerbating their vulnerability (Joseph et al., 2023). Overall, the conceptualization of IDPs, rehabilitation, social work interventions, and displacement demonstrates the interconnected nature of social, psychological, and economic factors affecting displaced populations. Effective rehabilitation and social work strategies require multi-layered, context-sensitive approaches that prioritize human rights, resilience, and sustainable reintegration. Recognizing the diverse vulnerabilities and capacities of IDPs is fundamental for designing interventions that are ethical, evidence-informed, and effective in restoring the dignity and well-being of displaced populations.

3. Theoretical framework

This paper is anchored in Trauma Theory originally developed by Judith Herman (1992) provides a critical framework for understanding the psychological and emotional impact of forced displacement on internally displaced persons (IDPs). It explains how exposure to distressing and life-threatening events such as armed conflict, violence, loss of loved ones, destruction of property, and forced migration can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, resulting in lasting psychological harm (Herman, 1992; Acha-Anyi, 2024). At its core, Trauma Theory emphasizes that traumatic experiences are not only defined by the event itself but also by the individual's subjective response to that event. For IDPs, trauma is often cumulative and prolonged. Unlike single-event trauma, displacement frequently exposes individuals to repeated stressors, including insecurity, poverty, uncertainty, and social exclusion (IDMC, 2024). This prolonged exposure increases the likelihood of complex trauma, which affects emotional regulation, identity, and interpersonal relationships (Herman, 1992).

One of the central concepts within Trauma Theory is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that may develop after exposure to traumatic events. Symptoms of PTSD among IDPs may include flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, emotional numbness, and avoidance behaviors. In addition to PTSD, many displaced individuals experience depression, anxiety, grief, and feelings of hopelessness (Faluyi, 2024). These conditions are often intensified by the loss of social support systems and disruption of community structures.

Trauma also affects cognitive functioning. IDPs may struggle with concentration, decision-making, and memory due to the psychological burden of their experiences. This has significant implications for their ability to engage in education, employment, and social interactions. For children, trauma can interfere with developmental processes, leading to behavioral problems, learning difficulties, and impaired emotional growth (UNICEF, 2023). Another important aspect of Trauma Theory is the recognition of collective and intergenerational trauma. In displacement settings, trauma is not only experienced individually but also collectively within families and communities. Shared experiences of violence and loss can shape group identity and influence social dynamics. Furthermore, trauma can be transmitted across generations, particularly when parents are unable to provide emotional stability due to their own unresolved trauma (Herman, 1992).

Trauma Theory also highlights the importance of trauma-informed care, which is essential in social work practice with IDPs. Trauma-informed care is based on key principles such as safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity (Acha-Anyi,

2024). Social workers must create supportive environments where IDPs feel secure and respected, while avoiding re-traumatization. In practice, trauma-informed interventions may include individual counselling, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), group therapy, and psychosocial support programs. These approaches aim to help IDPs process their experiences, develop coping strategies, and rebuild a sense of control over their lives (Payne, 2020). Additionally, Trauma Theory underscores the need for holistic interventions that go beyond psychological support. Addressing basic needs such as shelter, food, healthcare, and security is essential for trauma recovery. Without stability in these areas, psychological interventions alone may be insufficient (World Bank, 2023). Trauma Theory is highly relevant in understanding the experiences of internally displaced persons. It provides insight into the profound psychological effects of displacement and guides the development of effective, compassionate, and culturally appropriate interventions (Herman, 1992; Acha-Anyi, 2024).

4. Methodology

This study adopts the content analysis of secondary data to examine social work intervention strategies for the rehabilitation of IDPs in Nigeria. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from international organizations such as the United Nations and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), and policy documents from government and non-governmental agencies.

The use of secondary data enables a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the experiences, needs, and challenges of IDPs, as well as the strategies employed by social workers to facilitate rehabilitation. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, challenges, and best practices in psychosocial support, economic empowerment, and community reintegration. This approach aligns with prior research methodologies in displacement studies, which emphasize the synthesis of empirical evidence to inform practice and policy (Oluwayomi, 2024; Joseph et al., 2023). The methodology also allows for critical analysis of existing interventions, highlighting gaps in service provision, limitations in national policy frameworks, and areas requiring strengthened community engagement. By integrating insights from multiple secondary sources, the study provides a robust foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of social work interventions and formulating evidence-based recommendations for IDP rehabilitation.

Critical Analysis of Social Work Intervention Strategies for the Rehabilitation of IDP in Nigeria

Social work interventions for the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria have shown both successes and challenges. Research indicates that psychosocial support, livelihood programs, and community reintegration initiatives have been effective in enhancing the resilience and well-being of IDPs (Joseph et al., 2023; Ekezie, 2022). For instance, vocational training programs and small-scale enterprise support have provided displaced individuals with sustainable income sources, reducing dependency on humanitarian aid and promoting autonomy. Trauma-informed counselling has also demonstrated significant benefits in alleviating psychological distress among women, children, and other vulnerable groups (Oluwayomi, 2024). Despite these successes, gaps remain in policy implementation and service delivery. IDPs frequently encounter inconsistent access to healthcare, education, and housing, especially in remote or conflict-affected regions. Governmental support is often limited by resource constraints, weak coordination among agencies, and insecurity in high-risk zones (Adeleye & Aremu, 2023). Additionally, interventions sometimes fail to adequately

consider cultural sensitivities and the specific needs of sub-populations, such as elderly IDPs, persons with disabilities, or single-headed households, resulting in uneven benefits across communities (Oluwayomi, 2024). Another key challenge is social integration with host communities, where tensions can arise due to competition for resources and differing social norms. While community-based approaches promote cohesion, long-term sustainability requires systemic policies that integrate IDPs into national development plans, rather than treating them solely as recipients of emergency aid (Payne, 2020; Saleebey, 2013).

Building on these foundations, the strengths perspective in social work underscores the importance of leveraging IDPs' inherent capacities and community resources for more effective rehabilitation. Interventions that combine psychosocial support with livelihood strategies have proven particularly promising when they incorporate social capital networks, enabling displaced populations to recover economically and emotionally in protracted displacement settings (Kolade, 2022). Empirical studies from northern Nigeria further demonstrate that IDPs themselves actively engage in resilience actions such as informal mutual support systems and self-organized livelihood initiatives which complement formal programs and reduce reliance on external aid (Ekezie, 2022).

A critical examination, however, reveals persistent structural limitations in service provision. Qualitative analyses highlight that social work interventions remain fragmented, with a disproportionate emphasis on material humanitarian assistance at the expense of holistic psychosocial rehabilitation, advocacy, and long-term capacity building (Amadasun, 2020). This fragmentation is exacerbated by inadequate training for practitioners in trauma-informed and culturally responsive methods, limiting the depth of support for vulnerable subgroups and contributing to uneven outcomes across regions (Oluwayomi, 2024). Moreover, psychosocial implications of displacement, including elevated risks of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and somatic symptom disorders, are often inadequately addressed due to gaps in coordinated mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services, despite documented needs in camp and non-camp settings (Faluyi, 2024).

Regional disparities compound these issues: healthcare access and security challenges vary significantly between northern conflict zones and urban self-settled IDP populations, where integration into host communities is hindered by housing shortages, employment barriers, and social stigma (Ekezie, 2022). Critically, while short-term emergency responses have yielded measurable gains in immediate well-being, the absence of durable solutions such as facilitated voluntary return, local integration, or sustainable resettlement perpetuates cycles of vulnerability and dependency. Social work's role in policy advocacy and inter-agency coordination remains underutilized, underscoring the need for a shift toward development-oriented frameworks that embed IDP rehabilitation within national sustainable development agendas (Amadasun, 2020; Payne, 2020). Although social work interventions have advanced resilience and autonomy among IDPs in Nigeria, their overall effectiveness is constrained by systemic, cultural, and operational gaps. Future progress hinges on scaling participatory, culturally sensitive, and multi-sectoral approaches that prioritize IDP agency, strengthen governmental accountability, and foster genuine social cohesion for sustainable rehabilitation.

5. Findings

Analysis of secondary data reveals several consistent findings regarding the rehabilitation of IDPs through social work interventions. Analysis of the literature emphasizes that psychosocial interventions are fundamental in addressing the mental health and emotional

well-being of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Displacement often results in exposure to traumatic events such as violence, loss of property, and separation from family, which can manifest as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Counseling services, trauma-informed care, and structured community support groups have been shown to alleviate these psychological burdens by providing safe spaces for expression, emotional processing, and resilience-building. Additionally, psychosocial interventions help IDPs develop coping mechanisms, reduce social isolation, and enhance their ability to participate in rehabilitation programs. This highlights the centrality of mental health support as a cornerstone of successful social work intervention (Oluwayomi, 2024; Psychiatry Research, 2024).

Economic interventions are vital for enabling displaced individuals to regain independence and a sense of agency. Livelihood programs, vocational training, and microfinance initiatives not only provide immediate income-generating opportunities but also equip IDPs with sustainable skills to support themselves and their families. Evidence suggests that economic empowerment reduces long-term dependency on humanitarian aid and strengthens self-esteem, social status, and community engagement. By facilitating financial autonomy, social work interventions support both individual well-being and broader community stability, as empowered individuals are more likely to contribute positively to the social and economic life of the host community (Joseph et al., 2023). Community involvement is a key determinant in successful reintegration of IDPs. Programs that engage displaced individuals in local decision-making processes, such as leadership committees or collaborative development projects, foster inclusion and mitigate social marginalization. Social work practices that emphasize participatory approaches encourage trust-building between IDPs and host communities, reduce tensions, and create platforms for collective problem-solving. Furthermore, community-based interventions help rebuild social networks disrupted by displacement, which are critical for social cohesion, identity reconstruction, and long-term resilience (Ekezie, 2022).

Despite various interventions, the sustainability of IDP rehabilitation efforts is often limited by systemic gaps in policy and coordination. Studies indicate that fragmented governmental responses, inconsistent funding, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms weaken the long-term effectiveness of programs. The absence of a coherent framework often results in duplication of services in some areas while leaving others underserved. Social work interventions, therefore, require alignment with national policies and coordinated multi-agency efforts to ensure continuity, accountability, and measurable outcomes (Adeleye & Aremu, 2023).

Interventions that fail to account for local cultural, social, and economic contexts often encounter resistance or underutilization. Social work programs that are culturally sensitive respecting traditional norms, gender roles, and the specific needs of sub-populations such as women, children, and the elderly tend to achieve higher participation and sustainability. Tailoring rehabilitation strategies to the unique characteristics of displaced populations ensures that services are relevant, acceptable, and effective. Culturally attuned approaches also facilitate trust-building between IDPs and service providers, which is critical for engagement and program success (Payne, 2020). The findings highlight that successful social work interventions for IDPs require a holistic approach addressing mental health, economic needs, social reintegration, policy coherence, and cultural sensitivity. Programs that integrate these elements not only support individual recovery but also foster community resilience and long-term sustainability of rehabilitation efforts.

6. Conclusion

Internally displaced persons in Nigeria suffer from multifaceted and interrelated challenges stemming from armed conflicts, communal violence, natural disasters, and socio-political instability. These challenges extend beyond immediate physical survival to long-term psychosocial, economic, and cultural dislocations. The rehabilitation of IDPs, therefore, cannot be limited to emergency relief; it requires a comprehensive, sustained, and multi-dimensional approach that addresses both urgent needs such as food, shelter, healthcare and long-term recovery objectives, including education, economic empowerment, and social reintegration. Social work interventions grounded in Trauma Theory play a pivotal role in this process. By acknowledging the pervasive psychological impact of displacement, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and loss of social identity, trauma-informed approaches help restore mental health, foster resilience, and enable coping mechanisms among affected populations. In addition, social work strategies that incorporate economic empowerment, such as vocational training and microenterprise support, provide displaced individuals with the means to regain autonomy and reduce dependency on humanitarian aid. Community-based programs further facilitate social cohesion, creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration between IDPs and host populations, thereby mitigating social tension and fostering a sense of belonging.

Despite these positive strides, persistent barriers impede the overall effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts. These include policy inconsistencies, inadequate funding, insufficient coordination among governmental, non-governmental, and community actors, and limited cultural sensitivity in program design. For rehabilitation to be truly sustainable, it must move beyond top-down approaches and actively involve IDPs in decision-making processes, ensuring that interventions reflect their lived realities and local contexts. Ultimately, a holistic, participatory, and culturally attuned framework is essential to achieve meaningful reintegration and long-term resilience for internally displaced populations in Nigeria.

7. Recommendations

Building on the analysis of current challenges and best practices, the following recommendations aim to strengthen IDP rehabilitation in Nigeria:

1. Governments at the federal and state levels should develop comprehensive and coherent policies specifically addressing IDPs, ensuring alignment with broader social and economic development plans.
2. Scaling up psychosocial support is critical to address the long-term mental health consequences of displacement. This includes providing accessible counselling, trauma-focused therapy, peer support groups, and child- and gender-sensitive interventions. Special attention should be given to vulnerable populations, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.
3. Economic empowerment initiatives should be integrated into rehabilitation programs to enhance self-reliance. These may include vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, microfinance opportunities, and employment facilitation.
4. Programs should actively involve both IDPs and host communities in collaborative projects, dialogue forums, and local leadership roles. By promoting shared responsibilities and mutual understanding, such initiatives reduce social friction, mitigate discrimination, and build cohesive communities capable of supporting long-term integration.
5. There is a critical need for sustained advocacy aimed at ending prolonged displacement by

promoting safe, voluntary return and resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes or ancestral lands. Social workers, in collaboration with government and non-governmental organizations, should advocate for policies that ensure security, reconstruction of communities, and restoration of land and property rights. Where return is not feasible, structured and culturally appropriate resettlement programs must be implemented to preserve identity, dignity, and social cohesion. Such advocacy should prioritize the protection of IDPs' rights, prevent forced or premature returns, and ensure that all resettlement processes are participatory, inclusive, and sustainable.

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