Interfaith Responses to Economic Hardship in Nigeria

Arowosola, Oladuni Agboola & Ajide, Elijah Olamidipupo

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Abstract

Nigeria's current and persistent economic hardship has exposed the fragility of social structures and highlighted the critical role of religion in sustaining community resilience. While scholarship has often emphasized Christian-Muslim relations, Indigenous religious traditions remain underexplored in this discourse. This study examines how Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions respond to economic crises, and how their practices intersect to provide pragmatic solutions. Using theological analysis, sociological perspectives, and case studies, the research investigates faith- based welfare systems, communal solidarity, and indigenous mechanisms such as cooperative labour and ritual practices. Findings reveal that Christian churches, particularly Pentecostal movements, emphasize empowerment and prosperity teachings, while Islamic institutions mobilize zakat and waqf to alleviate poverty. Indigenous religions contribute through communal labour systems such as Aaro, Gayya, and Nkwado, ancestral guidance, and traditional leadership structures that redistribute resources. Despite doctrinal differences and occasional mistrust, interfaith collaboration has emerged in joint relief efforts, peacebuilding initiatives, and grassroots development projects. The study argues that integrating Indigenous religious practices into interfaith frameworks enriches Nigeria's capacity to confront economic hardship. By highlighting convergences across traditions, this research underscores the potential of tri-faith cooperation as a sustainable model for resilience. It concludes that religious institutions, when engaged collaboratively, can complement state and non- governmental interventions, offering culturally grounded strategies for poverty alleviation and social stability.

Keywords: Nigeria, interfaith, indigenous religion, economic hardship, christianity, islam, communal resilience

Introduction

The life of a typical Nigerian is inseparably bound to religion, which functions as both a spiritual compass and a social safety net. In times of economic hardship, Nigerians often interpret their struggles through theological lenses, seeking meaning and solutions within their faith traditions. As Mbiti observed, "Africans are notoriously religious," and this religiosity permeates every dimension of life, including responses to poverty, unemployment, and social instability.[1] Religion, therefore, is not merely a matter of belief but a pragmatic force that shapes communal resilience in the face of adversity.

Yet, Nigeria's economic hardship cannot be understood apart from its wider sociopolitical realities. Widespread corruption and mismanagement of public funds have consistently undermined development efforts, eroding trust in state institutions and deepening poverty.[2] Nepotism has distorted access to opportunities, while insecurity, ranging from insurgency in the northeast to banditry, kidnapping, and communal clashes in the middle belt, has devastated livelihoods, displaced communities, and crippled local economies.[3] These structural challenges intensify the demand for religious institutions to step in where government support is either absent or ineffective.

Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religions each provide distinctive frameworks

for confronting hardship. Pentecostal churches emphasize empowerment and prosperity teachings, presenting faith as a pathway to economic survival.[4] Orthodox churches, by contrast, have historically leaned on charity and communal support. Islam institutionalizes welfare through zakat and waqf, reinforcing communal responsibility and providing structured responses to poverty.[5] Indigenous religions, often overlooked in scholarship, contribute through communal labour systems such as Aaro among the Yoruba, Gayya among the Hausa, and Nkwado among the Igbo, which mobilize collective effort and redistribute resources.[6] These traditions, while distinct, converge in their concern for human dignity and survival.

But can Nigeria truly overcome its economic crises while insecurity continues to ravage communities and disrupt markets? Can Christian charity alone sustain households when corruption drains public resources meant for social welfare? Can Islamic zakat and waqf, though structured, reach every vulnerable family when nepotism distorts distribution? And can Indigenous communal labour systems continue to thrive in urbanized societies where individualism and violence erode traditional solidarity? These questions demand serious reflection, for they point to the limitations of isolated religious responses and the urgent need for collaboration.

Existing scholarship has often privileged Christian–Muslim relations, highlighting tensions and dialogue between the two,[7] while neglecting the enduring role of Indigenous practices. Peel demonstrates that Nigerian religions are not isolated but constantly interacting, shaping one another in complex ways.[8] This study builds on such insights by situating Indigenous traditions within interfaith responses to economic hardship, arguing that a tri-faith framework—Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous—offers a more comprehensive and culturally grounded understanding of resilience in Nigeria.

The research therefore employs a qualitative approach, drawing on theological analysis, sociological perspectives, and case studies from Nigerian communities. By examining how these traditions respond to economic crises, the study seeks to demonstrate that interfaith collaboration enriched by Indigenous practices can provide pragmatic strategies for poverty alleviation and social stability. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on religion and development, offering evidence that faith traditions, when engaged collaboratively, can complement state and non-governmental interventions in addressing Nigeria's economic challenges.

Religion as a Lifeline in a Collapsing Socioeconomic Landscape

Nigeria's prolonged economic decline has created a reality in which religious institutions have become indispensable to everyday survival. As inflation rises, insecurity spreads, and state structures fail to provide basic welfare, millions of Nigerians now rely on churches, mosques, and Indigenous communities not only for spiritual grounding but for material support and emotional stability. Religion has effectively become a parallel welfare system, a role it assumed not by design, but by necessity.

The severity of the economic crisis is well documented. According to the National

Bureau of Statistics, inflation climbed to 40.01%, with food inflation surpassing 40%, pushing essential commodities beyond the reach of many households.[9] The naira's rapid depreciation, from ₦461/$1 in May 2023 to over ₦1,300/$1 presently, further eroded purchasing power and deepened poverty. In this environment, religious institutions stepped into roles traditionally associated with the state: providing food, shelter, counselling, and small-scale economic support.

Christian churches, especially Pentecostal congregations, expanded their welfare programs as hardship intensified. As Ojo notes, Pentecostalism has long emphasized empowerment and hope themes that became even more pronounced during the 2024 inflation crisis.[10] Many churches organized emergency food drives and relief distributions, offering immediate support where government assistance was delayed or absent.

Islamic communities responded through structured welfare systems such as zakat and waqf. Zakat foundations in Kano, Kaduna, and Kwara reported unprecedented demand for assistance within the past two years, as more families slipped below the poverty line.[11] Mosques became distribution centres for food, clothing, and small cash stipends, especially during Ramadan and Eid periods when giving is religiously emphasized.

Indigenous religious communities, though less formalized, continued to rely on communal labour systems and kinship networks. Traditional cooperative practices such as Aaro, Gayya, and Nkwado remained vital in rural areas, enabling communities to farm, rebuild homes, and support bereaved families.[12] These Indigenous systems, grounded in reciprocity and collective responsibility, provided culturally rooted forms of resilience where modern welfare structures were absent.

Yet, the growing dependence on religious institutions raises difficult questions about sustainability. Churches, mosques, and Indigenous communities provide essential support, but their resources are limited, and their interventions cannot address the structural causes of hardship. The burden placed on them reflects a deeper crisis of state capacity — one marked by corruption, insecurity, and chronic mismanagement.

Religion also plays a psychological role in this landscape. Beyond material assistance, it offers meaning, hope, and a sense of belonging. For many Nigerians, religious narratives help interpret suffering, cope with uncertainty, and imagine a better future. This emotional resilience is crucial in a context where hardship is both pervasive and persistent.

Hence, religion is more of a lifeline in Nigeria's collapsing socioeconomic landscape. Churches, mosques, and Indigenous/Traditional communities play critical roles in providing welfare, fostering resilience, and sustaining social cohesion. Yet, their interventions remain constrained by the broader structural realities that produce hardship. Understanding the role of religion in this context requires a nuanced appreciation of both its strengths and its limitations, a theme that becomes even more evident when examining the structural barriers that undermine religious interventions.

Structural Realities that often Undermine Religious Interventions in Nigeria

Religious institutions in Nigeria have historically served as stabilizing forces during periods of crisis. They provide welfare, moral direction, and communal solidarity. Yet, their ability to respond effectively to economic hardship is consistently undermined by

structural realities that lie beyond their control. Insecurity, corruption, nepotism, and chronic mismanagement of public resources form a complex web of constraints that weaken religious interventions and deepen the vulnerability of the communities they aim to support.

Insecurity

Insecurity remains one of the most serious obstacles to religious intervention in Nigeria, as violent attacks, kidnappings, and communal clashes continue to disrupt daily life and restrict the activities of churches, mosques, and Indigenous communities. The Methodist Church Nigeria warned in April 2026 that rising insecurity was worsening economic hardship and threatening community wellbeing.[13] This reflects a long-standing concern among religious leaders that insecurity not only causes suffering but also prevents relief efforts.

The scale of violence has grown significantly. CHRICED reported in April 2026 that more than 1,100 Nigerians had been abducted since January, with many others killed in renewed attacks across several regions.[14] Under such conditions, religious institutions struggle to deliver aid, conduct outreach, or maintain regular worship.

During the 2026 Easter season, coordinated attacks in communities around Jos forced churches to halt programs, suspend food distribution, and evacuate worshippers.[15] A similar situation occurred in March 2026 when insurgents attacked the Maiduguri General Hospital axis, causing widespread panic and forcing humanitarian workers and Islamic charities to suspend operations.[16]

Across Kwara, Kogi, Kaduna, Benue, and Niger States, insecurity has disrupted farming, trade, worship, and community life. In Kwara, repeated kidnappings forced farmers to abandon their land and compelled churches to suspend rural outreach. In Kogi, persistent attacks along major routes made it difficult for religious bodies to reach rural communities. Kaduna experienced severe disruptions as communities in Birnin Gwari, Giwa, and Chikun faced relentless attacks, leading to the suspension of youth programs, Qur'anic classes, and Indigenous communal labour systems.[17]

Benue and Niger states faced similar challenges, with attacks destroying farmlands, displacing thousands, and weakening traditional leadership structures that religious institutions rely on for coordination. Across all these regions, insecurity has dismantled the social systems that support religious intervention, leaving communities vulnerable and limiting the ability of religious institutions to function effectively.

Corruption and Mismanagement of Public Resources

Corruption remains one of the most persistent barriers undermining religious interventions in Nigeria. Funds meant for poverty alleviation, agriculture, and social welfare are often diverted or mismanaged, leaving citizens dependent on churches, mosques, and Indigenous communities for survival. Falola and Heaton argue that corruption is deeply embedded in Nigeria's political economy, weakening state institutions and worsening inequality.[18]

Recent events illustrate this clearly. The hoarding of COVID-19 palliatives in several warehouses across the country in 2020 showed how corruption directly harms the poor by withholding relief during crises.[19] More recently, irregularities within the National

Social Investment Programme (NSIP) in 2024–2025, including unaccounted funds and ghost beneficiaries, were widely reported.[20]

Corruption also weakens the security sector. Misappropriation of funds intended for personnel allowances, fuel, and equipment reduces the capacity of law enforcement agencies to protect communities. Religious institutions are then left to operate in unsafe environments, discouraging participation in worship and outreach.

Nepotism

Nepotism is another structural factor that consistently undermines religious interventions. Favoritism in public appointments weakens institutions, distorts decision making, and erodes public trust. Kuforiji argues that nepotism undermines fairness and accountability, creating a culture where officials feel insulated from consequences.[21]

When key positions in welfare, agriculture, or emergency management agencies are filled through nepotism, inefficiency follows, Communities are left without boreholes, feeder roads, or basic services, forcing churches and mosques to step in with water distribution and relief, for example, Premium Times reported that delays in rural development projects linked to poorly qualified appointees, leaving vulnerable households without support.[22]

Nepotism also affects the security sector. Appointments based on loyalty rather than competence weaken operational effectiveness, leaving communities exposed to attacks. Religious groups then struggle to conduct outreach or distribute relief safely. In some areas, disputes over imposed traditional rulers fractured communal unity, making it harder for churches, mosques, and Indigenous groups to mobilize collective support.[23]

In essence, nepotism weakens the very institutions that should complement religious interventions. It creates inefficiency, reduces trust, and forces religious bodies to compensate for state failure, further stretching their limited capacity.

Social Class and Religious Responses in Nigeria

Religion in Nigeria is inseparable from class dynamics. The wealthy often shape how faith traditions respond to hardship, but their interventions vary in teaching, practice, and success, yet with a targeted outcome of empowering adherents.

Islamic teachings emphasize zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and sadaqah (voluntary charity) as duties of the wealthy toward the poor.[24] In practice, elites fund zakat foundations, waqf institutions, and Islamic microfinance banks. For example, Jaiz Bank, heavily backed by Muslim investors, provides interest-free loans to small traders, enabling economic participation without riba (interest).[25] Elite sponsorship of schools and hospitals across the country has also expanded access to education and healthcare, although critics note uneven reach and politicization.[26]

Among Christians, teachings stress charity, stewardship, and social justice. Orthodox traditions emphasize service through schools, clinics, and rural missions.[27] Pentecostal churches preach prosperity and empowerment, encouraging entrepreneurial faith practices.[29] In practice, elites fund universities, hospitals, empowerment programs, and nationwide feeding initiatives such as RCCG's "His Love Foundation."[29] Successes include large-scale philanthropy and social services, though prosperity preaching sometimes burdens the poor with "seed sowing," raising questions about exploitation.[30]

In other cases, too much emphasis on prosperity teachings has been misinterpreted as seeing poverty as a sign of unrighteousness.[31]

Indigenous traditions emphasize reciprocity, communal responsibility, and ancestral guidance. Practices extend beyond local labour systems to include communal festivals aimed at redistributing resources and reinforcing solidarity. Cultural gatherings such as the New Yam Festival, Argungu Fishing Festival, Hunting festivals, Oro and Egungun festivals, Osun-Osogbo festival, Ijakadi, and Durbar are often sponsored by wealthy individuals, with the goal of redistributing food and affirming agricultural abundance.[32] These celebrations, often funded by elite lineages, demonstrate how Indigenous religion mobilizes class resources for collective goals: feeding the poor, sustaining cultural identity, and reinforcing social cohesion.[33]

Reimagining Religion and Indigenous Knowledge as Strategic Assets for National Development

Nigeria's ongoing socioeconomic crises have exposed the limits of conventional development models and forced a deeper reflection on the cultural and spiritual resources that already exist within society. Religion has long been recognized as a powerful social force, yet its developmental potential is often reduced to charity, moral instruction, or emergency response. A broader and more honest assessment shows that religion, together with Indigenous knowledge systems, represents some of Nigeria's most underutilized assets.

In a context where state institutions struggle with legitimacy, capacity, and public trust, these cultural systems offer alternative frameworks for resilience, social organization, and community-driven development. To rethink the role of religion in national development, it is necessary to move beyond the assumption that religious institutions are simply welfare providers. Churches, mosques, and Indigenous communities already perform functions that, in many societies, fall under the responsibility of the state. These include conflict mediation, social protection, moral regulation, and community mobilization. Kukah argues that religion in Nigeria is not merely a private belief system but a public institution with deep historical roots in governance and social organization.[34] Religious bodies possess forms of authority, legitimacy, and social capital that the state often lacks, and development planning should recognize them as central partners rather than peripheral actors.

Indigenous knowledge systems further expand this developmental potential. Long before the emergence of modern state structures, Indigenous communities developed sophisticated systems of agriculture, environmental management, conflict resolution, and communal welfare. Practices such as aaro, gayya, nkwado, and igba odo reflect traditions of collective labour and mutual support.[35] These systems are not relics of the past; they remain active in many rural communities and continue to sustain livelihoods where state presence is minimal. Awolalu and Idowu emphasize that Indigenous religions and knowledge systems are built on reciprocity, communal responsibility, and ecological balance, values that align with contemporary development goals such as sustainability, social cohesion, and inclusive growth.[36]

Despite their potential, both religion and Indigenous knowledge systems remain largely excluded from formal development frameworks. This exclusion is partly a legacy

of colonialism, which privileged Western models of governance and dismissed Indigenous systems as backward.[37] It is also linked to the modern state's discomfort with sharing authority with non-state actors, especially those with strong grassroots legitimacy. The result is a development landscape that is often technocratic, disconnected from local realities, and unable to mobilize the moral and cultural energies of the population.

Reimagining the role of religion in national development requires a shift in mindset. Religious institutions should be seen as co-architects of development, not just emergency responders. This involves integrating religious leaders into local governance structures, leveraging their influence for community mobilization, and drawing on their moral authority to promote accountability, peacebuilding, and civic responsibility. Interfaith collaboration becomes essential in this regard, not only as a peace mechanism but as a developmental strategy.[38]

Indigenous knowledge systems also need to be integrated into national planning. Their approaches to agriculture, conflict resolution, and communal welfare offer practical models that can complement modern development strategies.[39] These systems are rooted in local realities, culturally grounded, and capable of mobilizing community participation in ways that state institutions often cannot.

Furthermore, integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into national development planning offers practical benefits that modern frameworks often overlook. Their approaches to agriculture, conflict resolution, environmental management, and communal welfare are not only culturally grounded but also sustainable and adaptable. Religious institutions can play a central role in bridging Indigenous knowledge with modern development strategies. Churches, mosques, and traditional communities already command trust and moral authority, and they can use this influence to promote community-based initiatives that align with national goals. When religious leaders collaborate across faith lines, they create a unified platform that can counter divisive politics, encourage civic responsibility, and mobilize communities for development projects. Interfaith cooperation therefore becomes not only a peacebuilding tool but also a strategic asset for national progress.[40]

To maximize this potential, policymakers must be willing to engage religious and Indigenous institutions as genuine partners. This requires moving beyond token consultations and creating frameworks that allow these groups to contribute meaningfully to planning, implementation, and evaluation. Their insights can strengthen local ownership of development projects, improve accountability, and ensure that interventions reflect the cultural realities of the communities they aim to serve.

Thus, religion and Indigenous knowledge systems offer Nigeria a reservoir of social capital, cultural legitimacy, and community-based solutions that can complement formal governance. When combined with effective state policies, they can help build a more resilient and inclusive development model, one that reflects the lived experiences and values of the Nigerian people, thereby reflecting the ideal spirit of interfaith relations in a multi religious State like Nigeria, as opined by Akande, that:

> The word inter-faith has nothing to do with religious syncretism; neither is it about asking others to leave their religions to embrace other religions. Inter-faith relation is about developing good relationships with individuals whose religious beliefs, doctrines or faith differ. It does not compel participants to put aside, abandon, or lessen the significance of their own religious traditions.[41]

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria's persistent economic hardship has revealed both the strengths and the limitations of religious and Indigenous institutions in addressing national challenges. Churches, mosques, and traditional communities have become essential sources of welfare, emotional support, and social cohesion, especially in regions where state institutions struggle to function effectively. Their interventions demonstrate the depth of communal resilience that exists within Nigerian society, yet they also expose the structural barriers that consistently undermine these efforts.

Insecurity, corruption, and nepotism and many more social issues weaken the environments in which religious institutions operate. These structural problems disrupt outreach programs, limit access to vulnerable communities, and force religious bodies to shoulder responsibilities that should belong to the state. While these bodies try to provide food, shelter, counselling, and empowerment programs, none of these efforts can fully compensate for systemic failures in governance. Thus, for Nigeria to move forward, this study therefore recommended that;

a) Religious leaders should be integrated into local governance processes to strengthen accountability and community trust.

b) Indigenous knowledge systems should be incorporated into national development planning, with applications in agriculture, conflict resolution, and community welfare.

c) Interfaith collaboration among Christians, Muslims, and Indigenous groups should be promoted as a tool for peace building and social cohesion.

d) The state should deliberately partner with religious and cultural institutions, recognizing them as strategic assets for sustainable national development.

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