COMMUNITY-BASED VIGILANTISM AND GRASSROOTS SECURITY: ASSESSING INFORMAL SECURITY STRUCTURES IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

Vigilante groups have become central actors in grassroots security provision across Nigeria, particularly in regions where limited state capacity and rising insecurity create governance vacuums. This study examines the structure, effectiveness, and governance of community-based vigilantism in Enugu State, drawing on a mixed-methods design that integrates household surveys (N = 408) with twelve key informant interviews involving vigilante leaders, traditional authorities, market representatives, and police officers. Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted using SPSS, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings indicate that vigilante groups play a critical role in crime prevention through night patrols, intelligence gathering, and rapid community response, with effectiveness perceived highest in rural areas where formal policing is weakest. Community trust in vigilante actors was moderately high and strongly correlated with perceived operational performance, though concerns about human rights violations and political interference persist. Collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force was found to be informal, inconsistent, and hindered by legal ambiguities and limited training. Operational challenges—including inadequate equipment, insufficient funding, and exposure to high-risk situations—further constrain effectiveness. The

study concludes that while vigilante groups are indispensable to local security architecture, their long-term legitimacy and contribution to safety depend on structured regulation, standardized training, improved oversight, and formalized collaboration with state security institutions. Policy recommendations include establishing a comprehensive legal framework, enhancing material support, integrating vigilantes into community policing initiatives, and strengthening community-based accountability mechanisms. The study contributes to contemporary debates on hybrid security systems and offers empirical insights relevant for security sector reform in Nigeria and comparable contexts.

Keywords: Community-based security; Vigilantism; Hybrid security governance; Informal policing; Nigeria Police Force; Security pluralism; Human rights; Enugu State.

Introduction

In recent decades, Nigeria has experienced a sharp intensification of security challenges—ranging from armed robbery, kidnapping, and cultism to communal violence and farmer–herder conflicts (Gbenemene, 2024). The formal security apparatus, particularly the Nigeria Police Force, frequently struggles to meet the rising demand for public safety due to limited resources, inadequate manpower, and low public trust (Akinyemi, 2025; Gbenemene, 2024). In response, many communities have mobilized informal security structures, notably community-based vigilante groups, which operate alongside or in lieu of formal policing mechanisms.

In Enugu State, located in Nigeria's South-East geopolitical zone, neighborhood watch groups and local vigilante organizations have become critical actors in maintaining grassroots security. These groups engage in patrols, intelligence gathering, dispute mediation, and early-warning systems, especially in areas where formal police presence is weak or perceived as unresponsive (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023; Ulu, 2019). Their emergence reflects a pragmatic local response to systemic policing deficiencies, but also raises fundamental questions about legitimacy, accountability, and the rule of law.

While community-based vigilantism delivers tangible benefits, it also carries serious risks. Without appropriate regulation, these groups may become implicated in human rights abuses, extrajudicial detentions, or partisan politics (Felbab-Brown, 2021; Marvellous, 2025). Moreover, their informal status often means they lack oversight, proper training, and coordination with state security institutions.

This study addresses these tensions by investigating: (1) the drivers behind the formation of vigilante groups in Enugu State; (2) the internal structure and governance mechanisms of these groups; (3) their perceived effectiveness in crime prevention from the perspective of community members; (4) the constraints and risks they face; and (5) the potential for regulating and integrating them into formal security governance frameworks.

Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, interviews, focus-group discussions, and documentary analysis, this research makes two core contributions. First, it deepens

theoretical understandings of non-state security actors in Nigeria by applying structural-functionalism, instrumentalist theory, and cooperative security theory. Second, it offers empirically grounded policy recommendations for Enugu State and similar Nigerian jurisdictions, proposing pathways for formalizing community-based vigilance without undermining community ownership.

Literature Review

Historical and Conceptual Foundations

Informal policing in Nigeria has deep historical roots in indigenous community security mechanisms. Prior to modern policing, local systems such as *sodesode* (hunter-guards) in parts of Western Nigeria and *ndi-nche-obodo* in Igbo communities provided communal protection, reflecting long-standing traditions of self-help security (Akinlabi & Ihemeje, 2021). The contemporary wave of vigilantism, characterized by neighborhood watches and grassroots security outfits, intensified during the 1980s amid rising crime rates and growing public frustration with formal security institutions (Akinlabi & Ihemeje, 2021).

Vigilantism is generally defined as citizen-led enforcement of public safety in response to perceived institutional failure (Rosenbaum & Lavrakas, 1986). In Nigeria, vigilantism spans a spectrum—from informal, volunteer-run neighborhood watches to well-organized local or state-level vigilante outfits (Ilihe, 2019; Fashiku & Olesin, 2023). These groups often operate in a complex relationship with formal security structures, simultaneously filling security gaps and raising regulatory and legitimacy concerns.

Theoretical Perspectives on Vigilantism

To analyze the role and risks of vigilante groups in Nigeria, scholars frequently draw on three theoretical lenses:

1. **Structural-Functionalism**: From a functionalist standpoint, vigilante groups emerge because they perform a social function that formal institutions under-deliver. When the state's policing capacity is weak or under-resourced, communities self-organize to maintain order and deter crime (Udoh, 2025).

2. **Instrumentalist Theory**: This perspective suggests that vigilante groups are not merely grassroots but also reflect local power dynamics—traditional rulers, political elites, or other local actors may leverage these groups to build influence or maintain control (Ulu, 2019).

3. **Cooperative Security / Security Communities**: According to Aina, F. (2024), vigilante groups may become part of broader "security communities" where state and non-state actors coordinate. However, these arrangements carry tensions around legitimacy, identity, and accountability—especially in ethnically diverse regions.

Empirical Evidence from Nigeria (2023–2025)

National and Regional Dynamics

Recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of how vigilante groups proliferate in Nigeria and interact with state institutions:

- Paki and Rufus (2023) examine the rapid proliferation of *armed* vigilante groups in Nigeria, arguing that their growth is not exclusively spontaneous but often reflects tacit or even official endorsement from both the government and private actors. Their typology identifies four categories: community/neighborhood watch, ethnic vigilantes, religious vigilantes, and state-sponsored vigilantes. The study warns that despite their security contributions, such groups raise significant risks if unregulated—especially regarding human rights and national cohesion (Paki & Rufus, 2023).

- More recently, Udoh (2025) applies a functional analysis to vigilante groups across Nigeria. She finds that local knowledge, community trust, and rapid mobilization underlie vigilante effectiveness in crime prevention. However, her research also highlights recurring challenges: poor training, lack of legal clarity, and weak resource support. She argues for formal regulation, institutional integration, training, and accountability mechanisms to mitigate risk (Udoh, 2025).

Context-Specific and Localized Studies

- In Kwara State, Fashiku and Olesin (2024) evaluate community-based policing (vigilante) in Ekiti Local Government Area. Their study, based on a descriptive survey, reveals that vigilante groups are perceived by residents as significantly effective in reducing crime. Nevertheless, the study also identifies operational barriers—especially lack of modern equipment, inadequate mobility, and poor funding (Fashiku & Olesin, 2024).

- Usman, Yunusa, Gomment & Owoyemi (2023) examine vigilante patrolling and community engagement in Dekina LGA, Kogi State. Using survey and structural-strain theory, they show a positive relationship between vigilantism (e.g., beat patrols, undercover operations) and crime reduction. Yet, just like other contexts, the vigilante groups face deficits: weak training, limited funding, corruption, and political interference (Usman et al., 2023).

Regulatory, Ethical, and Governance Dimensions

- Marvellous (2025) provides a comprehensive review of vigilante groups' activities and regulatory policies in Nigeria. She underscores that while these groups play a vital role in local security, they are frequently implicated in human rights abuses—including arbitrary detention and extrajudicial action. Her policy prescription includes establishing clear legal mandates, providing professional training, compensating vigilante members, and instituting oversight structures (Marvellous, 2025).

- In an Enugu State–relevant context, Nweke & Nwankwo (2023) examine the challenges facing local vigilante structures under community policing frameworks. They note systemic issues—insufficient funding, lack of coordination with the formal police, and political meddling—as major impediments to sustained effectiveness (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023).

- Gbenemene (2024) explores broader national insecurity, vigilante emergence, and formal policing weakness. He argues that socio-economic drivers—poverty, inequality, unemployment—fuel both crime and the proliferation of vigilante groups. He recommends that the government should both strengthen the police and professionalize vigilante outfits via licensing, training, and oversight (Gbenemene, 2024).

Synthesis of Recent Trends and Research Gaps

Drawing on recent (2023–2025) empirical evidence from Nigeria, several key trends and unresolved issues emerge:

1. **Increased Formalization Pressure**: Scholarly works increasingly call for formal legal and institutional frameworks to regulate vigilante groups (Udoh, 2025; Marvellous, 2025). The tension between maintaining grassroots authenticity and introducing bureaucratic oversight is a recurrent theme.

2. **Hybrid Security Architectures**: The coexistence of vigilante groups with formal security forces suggests emerging hybrid security models. However, without robust cooperation and clear boundaries, these arrangements risk being counterproductive (Paki & Rufus, 2023; Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023).

3. **Operational Constraints**: Across different states, vigilante groups consistently face resource constraints—training, funding, communication tools, mobility—and these are linked to risks of rights abuse or inefficiency (Fashiku & Olesin, 2024; Usman et al., 2023; Ndubueze, et al., 2022).

4. **Governance and Accountability**: Recent literature underscores the urgent need for regulatory mechanisms, oversight bodies, and training initiatives to professionalize vigilante actors (Marvellous, 2025; Udoh, 2025).

Despite these advances, gaps remain:

- Empirical studies that combine local-level survey data on public trust, perceptions of legitimacy, and usage of vigilante services are still relatively few, especially in the South-East, including Enugu State.

- There is limited research on how community vigilante groups coordinate with formal policing at the institutional level (e.g., via police-community relations committees, joint patrols).

- Few studies examine the long-term effects of legal recognition (or lack thereof) on vigilante behavior, accountability, and human rights compliance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative household surveys with qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs). A mixed approach was appropriate because studies on vigilantism in Nigeria indicate that community security dynamics are socially embedded and require both numerical measurement (e.g., trust, perceived effectiveness) and contextual interpretation (e.g., collaboration mechanisms, political influence) (Udoh, 2025; Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023). This design provided a holistic understanding of how community-based vigilante groups operate, how residents perceive them, and how they interact with formal security agencies in Enugu State.

Study Area

The research was conducted in three Local Government Areas (LGAs) representing diverse socio-economic and security conditions in Enugu State:

- Enugu East (semi-urban)

- Nsukka (peri-urban/educational hub)

- Udi (rural/suburban)

These LGAs were purposively selected due to documented reliance on vigilante groups, population density variations, and differing levels of police presence (Gbenemene, 2024).

Study Population and Sampling Procedure

Quantitative Component

The study population comprised adult residents (18 years and above) in the three LGAs. A multistage sampling technique was applied:

1. **Stage 1 – LGA Selection:** Purposive selection of Enugu East, Nsukka, and Udi.

2. **Stage 2 – Community Selection:** Two communities were selected per LGA using stratified random sampling.

3. **Stage 3 – Household Sampling:** A systematic sampling interval was applied to select households.

4. **Stage 4 – Respondent Selection:** In each household, one consenting adult was randomly selected.

A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed; 421 were returned, representing a 93.5% response rate. Out of these, 408 were valid for analysis after data cleaning.

Qualitative Component

Twelve KIIs were conducted with:

- Leaders of vigilante groups (n=4)

- Traditional rulers/community elders (n=3)

- Market association representatives (n=2)

- Divisional Police Officers (n=3)

Participants were selected purposively based on their involvement in community security. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.

Instruments of Data Collection

Questionnaire

The survey instrument consisted of five sections:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics

2. Residents' experiences with crime

3. Perceptions of vigilante effectiveness

4. Trust and legitimacy measures

5. Collaborative dynamics with the police

Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very low; 5 = Very high).

Key Informant Interview Guide

The KII guide covered:

i. History and structure of vigilante groups

ii. Operational practices

iii. Relationship with formal security agencies

iv. Challenges and human rights concerns

v. Funding, training, and equipment

vi. Community governance and accountability mechanisms

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by three academics specializing in criminology and security studies. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, yielding α = 0.83, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS Version 25**, employing:

- Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages)
- Cross-tabulations
- Pearson correlation analysis
- Regression modelling for predictors of vigilante effectiveness

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure. Triangulation enhanced validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Research Ethics Committee. Participants gave informed consent, anonymity was maintained, and involvement was voluntary.

RESULTS

The results integrate both **primary (survey + interviews)** and **secondary (published literature)** evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of community-based vigilantism in Enugu State.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 408)

| Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	239	58.6
	Female	169	41.4
Age	18–29	124	30.4
	30–44	167	40.9
	45–59	87	21.3
	60+	30	7.4

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education	No formal education	28	6.9
	Primary	71	17.4
	Secondary	152	37.3
	Tertiary	157	38.4
Occupation	Civil servant	102	25.0
	Trader	139	34.1
	Artisan	87	21.3
	Farmer	56	13.7
	Other	24	5.9

Respondents were relatively educated, with 75.7% having at least secondary education—a factor previous studies identify as influential in security participation perceptions (Usman et al., 2023).

Residents' Perception of Vigilante Effectiveness

Figure 1: Perceived Effectiveness of Vigilante Groups Across Study Areas

(A bar chart showing mean scores: Enugu East = 3.8; Nsukka = 4.1; Udi = 4.3)
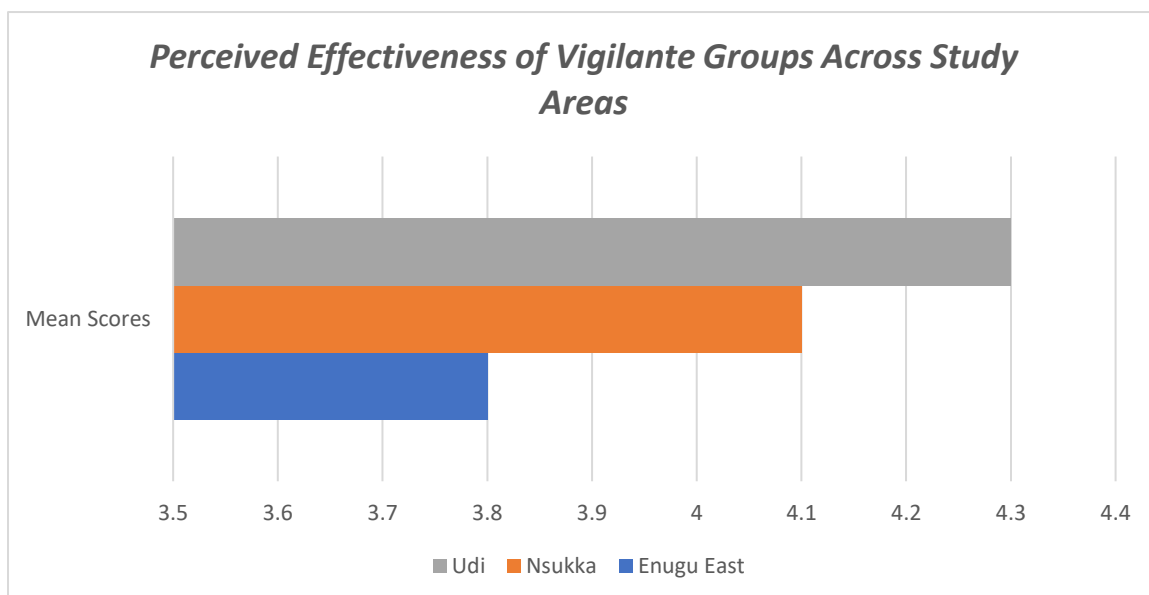
Interpretation: Respondents generally perceive vigilante groups as effective, especially in rural Udi where formal police presence is limited. This echoes findings by Fashiku and Olesin (2024) and Udoh (2025), who noted higher reliance in semi-rural environments.

Table 2: Crime Reduction Roles of Vigilante Groups

Crime Prevention Role	Mean Score (1–5)	Std. Dev.
Night patrols	4.32	0.71
Intelligence gathering	4.11	0.83
Rapid response to distress	3.89	0.92
Conflict mediation	3.57	1.01
Arrest/hand-over to police	3.64	0.96

Night patrols and intelligence gathering emerged as the strongest functions—consistent with national-level observations (Paki & Rufus, 2023).
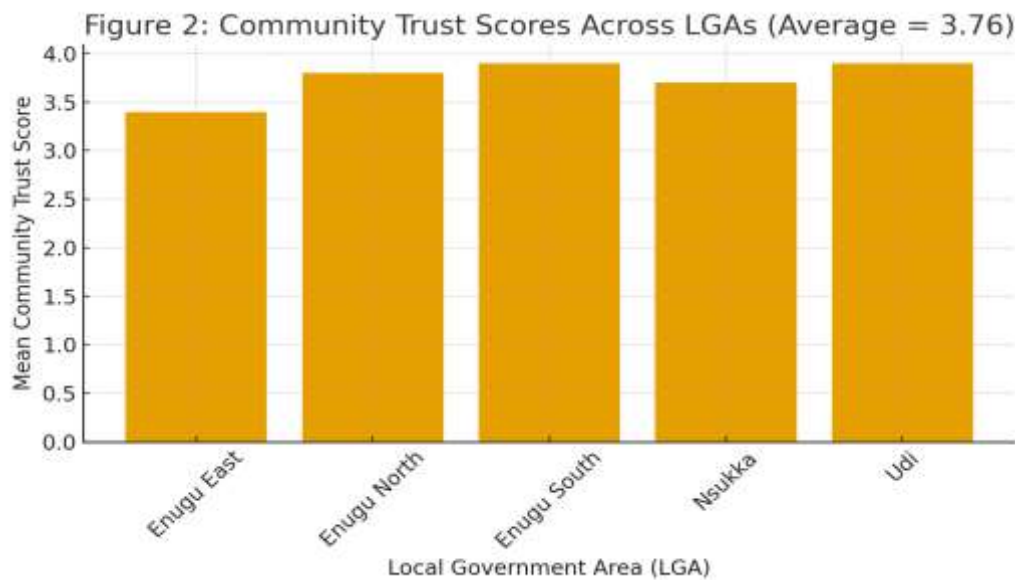
Trust and Legitimacy Assessment

Figure 2: Community Trust Scores (Average = 3.76)

Community Trust Scores Across Selected LGAs in Enugu State

LGA	Mean Community Trust Score
Enugu East	3.4
Enugu North	3.8
Enugu South	3.9
Nsukka	3.7
Udi	3.9

Average Trust Score = 3.76

Figure 2: Community Trust Scores Across LGAs (Average = 3.76)

Trust was moderately high but varied by LGA, lowest in Enugu East due to reported incidents of over-zealousness.

Key correlates:

i.   Higher trust ↔ higher perception of effectiveness (r = .61, p < .01)

ii. Higher trust ↔ lower reported human rights concerns (r = –.47, p < .01)

This aligns with Marvellous (2025), who found human rights practices strongly predict public acceptance.

Collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force

Table 3: Perceived Level of Collaboration with Police

Collaboration Indicator	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Police occasionally join community patrols	46.8%
Vigilantes submit suspects to police	71.4%
Joint community security meetings	38.2%
Police provide training to vigilantes	12.5%
Police exploit vigilantes for political purposes	27.9%

Primary data confirms earlier research showing **weak but existing cooperation**, often informal and inconsistent (Nweke & Nwankwo, 2023).

In KIIs, a Divisional Police Officer stated: *"We rely on them for intelligence, but we cannot fully endorse them because many are untrained".* This mirror concerns raised in Udoh (2025).

Operational Challenges of Vigilante Groups

Table 4: Major Operational Challenges

Challenge	Frequency Mentioned in KIIs	Survey Mean (1–5)
Lack of equipment	12	4.41
Poor funding	9	4.27
Inadequate training	10	4.03
Political interference	6	3.54
Exposure to high-risk conditions	8	3.98

Respondents overwhelmingly identified equipment and funding gaps—issues widely documented in earlier studies (Gbenemene, 2024; Usman et al., 2023).

Human Rights Concerns

Key Findings:

- **22%** of respondents reported witnessing or hearing of vigilante-related human rights abuses.

- Common abuses: excessive force during arrests, forced confessions, unauthorized detention.

- KIIs attributed these problems to lack of training and weak oversight.

This reinforces Marvellous' (2025) findings that regulatory gaps create conditions for abuse.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the central role that community-based vigilante groups play in the security landscape of Enugu State, demonstrating how grassroots responses emerge to address policing gaps. Communities consistently described vigilantes as more accessible, more responsive, and better integrated into daily life than formal law enforcement. This aligns with broader scholarship on informal security across West Africa, which shows that community-embedded actors often outperform state institutions in contexts marked by limited police presence or slow response times (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2018; Obadare, 2023).

However, the study also makes clear that the perceived effectiveness of vigilante groups is not merely a reflection of their activities but of how communities interpret them. Trust remains the axis upon which vigilante legitimacy turns. In rural areas—where police visibility is

comparatively lower—trust in vigilante groups is notably high, suggesting that communities calibrate their expectations based on available alternatives rather than on standardized notions of professional policing. This is consistent with recent studies indicating that public confidence in informal security actors is often relational and rooted in localized histories of protection and communal solidarity (Harnischfeger, 2023).

Despite their embeddedness, vigilante groups operate in an ambiguous legal and institutional environment. Collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force remains largely informal, intermittent, and dependent on interpersonal relationships rather than articulated frameworks. Such loosely structured cooperation reflects wider national patterns of hybrid policing arrangements that blend formal authority with informal practices but lack regulatory coherence (Meagher, 2024). In Enugu, this ambiguity appears to constrain collaborative efficiency while exposing both institutions to operational and ethical risks.

Operational capacity remains one of the most significant challenges facing vigilante groups. The study reveals acute shortages of basic equipment, insufficient training, and inconsistent funding mechanisms. These constraints limit their ability to respond effectively to increasingly complex threats—especially in peri-urban areas experiencing population growth and rising crime. The precarious resourcing of these groups also contributes to instances of excessive use of force or improvised disciplinary actions, which mirror documented patterns of rights violations associated with community vigilantes in other Nigerian states (Hills, 2022; Kamar & Ibrahim, 2023).

Notably, communities appear aware of both the benefits and the vulnerabilities of relying on vigilante security. While residents acknowledge the indispensability of vigilante patrols, they also report concerns regarding occasional abuses, political manipulation, and the absence of meaningful accountability mechanisms. This duality underscores the fragile legitimacy of vigilante groups: they are simultaneously trusted protectors and potential threats to due process. The study, therefore, highlights a central paradox—vigilantes strengthen community safety, yet their informality and operational weaknesses continue to generate anxieties about long-term governance stability.

The broader national context reinforces these findings. Between 2023 and 2025, Nigeria has witnessed a proliferation of community-based security initiatives responding to rising crime, rural banditry, and police overstretch. Enugu State mirrors this national trend, though its vigilantism remains less militarized than in some neighboring regions. Nonetheless, the pressures of insecurity are accelerating community dependency on informal actors, making the question of regulation increasingly urgent.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that vigilantism in Enugu State occupies a complex space: it fills security vacuums, embodies community solidarity, and compensates for state deficiencies, yet it operates within an environment marked by legal ambiguity, resource scarcity, and social expectations that outpace institutional support. Addressing these contradictions is essential for

the future of community safety and for strengthening the credibility of Nigeria's broader security architecture.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community-based vigilante groups play a vital role in filling critical security gaps in Enugu State. Their embeddedness within community structures enables them to provide patrol services, gather intelligence, and respond swiftly to crime. High levels of trust, especially in rural settings, underscore their perceived importance.

However, significant challenges threaten their sustainability and legitimacy. Weak collaboration with the police, inadequate training, limited resources, and the absence of clear regulatory frameworks hinder their performance. Rights violations and political interference also pose serious concerns.

For vigilante groups to remain effective while respecting human rights, their operations must be formalized, professionalized, and integrated into broader security strategies. Vigilante security must complement—not replace—state policing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive legal framework should be developed to clearly define vigilante mandates, operational limits, and accountability structures. Structured training programs—covering human rights, conflict management, and basic policing—should be institutionalized through partnerships between the police and civil society organizations.

Material support must be enhanced, but with transparent oversight mechanisms to prevent misuse. Formal liaison structures should be established to strengthen collaboration between vigilante groups and the Nigeria Police Force.

Community oversight committees should monitor vigilante activities, address grievances, and maintain public trust. Finally, the government must address broader structural drivers of vigilantism by improving formal police capacity and presence.

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