

# **An Assessment of Nigeria's Security Sector Reforms and the Fight against Insecurity in North-Central Nigeria**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) has increasingly gained prominence as a strategic framework for addressing institutional weaknesses, governance deficiencies, and operational inefficiencies within security agencies, particularly in regions afflicted by persistent insecurity. This study examines the role and effectiveness of SSR in combating insecurity in North-Central Nigeria. A region characterized by recurrent communal clashes, banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, and other forms of armed criminality. Anchored on the Human Security Perspective, the paper analyzes the structural, political, and socio-economic factors that undermine effective security governance in North Central Nigeria. It critically assesses ongoing reform initiatives and highlights key implementation gaps, especially in areas such as community participation, transparency, inter-agency coordination, and strategic long-term planning. The findings reveal that without a comprehensive, people-centered approach and sustained political will, the goals of Security Sector Reform will remain elusive, thereby impeding the realization of sustainable peace and stability in North-Central Nigeria. The paper concludes by recommending the enactment of a legal framework for local security outfits, formalization of community participation through local security councils, integration of security-for-development projects in high-risk areas, creation of an independent multi-stakeholder oversight commission, and shifting to a civilian-centric and intelligence-driven policing model.

**Keywords:** Insecurity, Nigeria, North-Central, Security Sector Reforms,

## **Introduction**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) has emerged as a globally endorsed framework for strengthening state security institutions, particularly in nations grappling with persistent instability or transitioning from conflict (OECD, 2007). It aims to transform institutions such as the military, police, and judiciary by enhancing their governance, efficiency, accountability, and compliance with human rights standards (Sedra, 2010). Yet, the translation of these normative principles into tangible security gains remains a profound challenge, often revealing a critical disconnection between national doctrine and local realities. In Nigeria, a nation confronting multifaceted security challenges, SSR presents a critical mechanism for overhauling the security architecture to better protect citizens and uphold democratic values. Nowhere is this need more acute than in Nigeria's North-Central region, comprising Benue, Plateau, Niger, Kogi, Kwara, and Nasarawa states. This area has become one of the country's most volatile zones, plagued by armed banditry, kidnapping, and intense communal clashes most notably, protracted conflicts between herders and farmers (Agbiboa, 2018; Nnamani & Onuoha, 2021). These conflicts, often rooted in competition over land and water resources, are increasingly exacerbated by environmental degradation, climate change, and population growth (Idris, 2020). The devastating human and economic consequences include widespread displacement, significant loss of life, the destruction of livelihoods, and a deepening humanitarian crisis (Okeke, 2020).

The capacity of the Nigerian state to respond to these crises is hampered by a security sector built upon colonial frameworks historically designed for control rather than public service (Ibeanu, 2019). This legacy has fostered a contemporary system characterized by politicization, corruption, limited operational capacity, and documented human rights abuses (Amnesty International, 2019). From this perspective, this is not merely a legacy issue but an active, self-perpetuating cycle: the very institutions meant to ensure security often operate in ways that inadvertently fuel the grievances they are tasked to quell. Consequently, public trusts in security agencies are critically low, a particularly debilitating issue in the ethnically and religiously diverse North-Central region, where community cooperation is essential for effective security operations (Ikelegbe, 2017).

In recognition of these deficits, the Nigerian government has initiated various reform programmes including the restructuring and reorganization of the Nigeria Police Force, particularly under democratic reforms of 1999; the establishment of the Police Service

Commission in 2001 (as an external oversight body); and the introduction of the national community policing initiative in 2020 to strengthen citizen engagement and intelligence sharing among others (Onuoha, 2020; Ibeanu, 2019). However, as captured by Eze (2022), the implementation of these reform initiatives remained largely ineffective due to inadequate funding, weak leadership, limited political commitment, and entrenched bureaucratic inertia. Despite successive reform efforts, the security sector continues to suffer from overlapping institutional mandates and poor coordination among key actors such as the military, police, civil defence corps, and local vigilante groups, often resulting in operational duplication and inter-agency conflict (Onuoha, 2020). In several instances, the state's reliance on heavy-handed and militarized responses has further intensified local tensions, deepened perceptions of state bias, and alienated affected communities (Agbibo, 2021).

These challenges still persist after the introduction of these reform programmes suggesting that the reforms have not fundamentally transformed the underlying dynamics of insecurity. Rather, many of the interventions have been largely technocratic in nature, addressing immediate operational deficiencies without confronting the deeper structural problem. Therefore, the absence of a broad political consensus regarding the role, accountability, and societal purpose of the security sector has gravely affected the efficacy of these Security Sector Reforms. The persistence of insecurity is further compounded by adverse socio-economic conditions, including widespread poverty, high youth unemployment, and limited access to education and basic social services. Such conditions continue to provide fertile ground for criminality and insurgent recruitment, while perceptions of political and economic marginalization fuel grievances that sustain violent conflict (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2018; Agbibo, 2021; Idris, 2020). Against this backdrop, this paper assesses the extent to which Security Sector Reform has mitigated the pervasive insecurity in Nigeria's North-Central region.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Security**

Security is a comprehensive and evolving concept that entails protection from threats, harm, and danger, while also ensuring peace, stability, and well-being within societies. Traditionally, security was perceived through a narrow, state-centric lens focused on military defense and the preservation of national sovereignty against external threats (Buzan, 1991). However, contemporary perspectives have broadened this view to incorporate non-traditional dimensions

such as human, economic, environmental, and societal security. The concept of human security, introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), emphasizes the protection of individuals through access to food, healthcare, income, and freedom from violence and oppression. Economic security relates to the availability of stable employment and access to essential resources (Sen, 1999), while environmental security addresses the safeguarding of natural systems to prevent ecological degradation that could trigger conflict or displacement (Matthew et al., 2002). Societal security involves the protection of cultural identity, community cohesion, and social stability (Waeber, 1993). Security threats can originate internally such as insurgencies, terrorism, or civil unrest or externally, such as foreign invasions or global terrorism. In the modern era, emerging challenges like cybercrime, climate change, pandemics, and transnational organized crime require multidimensional approaches that go beyond military responses, emphasizing a balance between protecting state interests and ensuring individual welfare (Paris, 2001; Baldwin, 1997).

### **Insecurity**

Insecurity refers to a state of uncertainty, fear, or danger where individuals or communities feel unsafe due to threats such as violence, crime, conflict, or instability. It involves the absence of protection for lives and property, and often results from weak institutions, poor governance, or socio-economic challenges (Achumba et al., 2013).

### **Security sector reforms**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) involves restructuring and strengthening a country's security institutions such as the military, police, and judiciary to ensure they operate effectively, transparently, and under democratic oversight (OECD, 2007). It addresses issues like corruption, abuse, and inefficiency, particularly in post-conflict or fragile states (Sedra, 2010). SSR promotes accountability, rule of law, and public trust in security agencies (Ball & Hendrickson, 2005). It is essential for achieving sustainable peace, development, and human security (UNSG, 2008). In Nigeria, Security Sector Reform is crucial for tackling insecurity and restoring civilian control over security forces (Alemika, 2013).

### **Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts a descriptive and explanatory approach. The method is suitable for evaluating the nature and effectiveness of security sector reform (SSR) in mitigating insecurity across North-Central Nigeria, because it enables a comprehensive examination of security

structures, reform initiatives, and their impact on peace and stability in the region. The data sourced were directly from secondary sources such as official reports, policy documents, academic literature, media publications, and data from regional and international organizations like the African Union and the United Nations, regarding the security sector reforms and insecurity in north-central region and Nigeria at large.

The paper utilized the Human Security Perspective for theoretical analysis. The Human Security Perspective redefines security as the protection of individuals from critical and pervasive threats to their safety, livelihood, and dignity, rather than just the defense of territorial borders (UNDP, 1994). In the context of North-Central Nigeria, insecurity is not only rooted in armed conflicts, such as herder-farmer clashes and communal violence, but also in socio-economic vulnerabilities like poverty, displacement, food insecurity, and weak governance (Ogundiya, 2011). Security Sector Reform (SSR), when viewed through this lens, must go beyond traditional military and police restructuring to address the broader human needs of affected communities. Reforms should focus on enhancing the capacity of security institutions to protect civilians, uphold human rights, and respond effectively to humanitarian crises, particularly among internally displaced persons and vulnerable groups (UNHCR, 2021).

Furthermore, Security Sector Reform must promote trust, accountability, and collaboration between state security actors and local communities. The human security framework emphasizes participatory approaches such as community policing, inclusive decision-making, and justice reform to bridge the trust gap between security forces and civilians (Abiodun, 2020). A people-centered reform agenda that integrates human development, institutional accountability, and social welfare is essential for transforming the security landscape of North-Central Nigeria in a lasting and meaningful way.

The Human Security Perspective explained that effective Security Sector Reform in North-Central Nigeria goes beyond conventional military, police restructuring but rather centers on people particularly the most vulnerable. It focuses on protecting lives, restoring dignity, and promoting human development while addressing the root causes of violence. Without this people-centered approach, SSR remains superficial without achieving a sustainable transformation in the North Central's security landscape.

## **Assessing the Security Sector Reforms and Fight against Insecurity in the North-Central Nigeria**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Nigeria has evolved as a response to the country's longstanding challenges with security governance. Its historical development is closely linked to Nigeria's turbulent political past, which includes extended periods of military rule, fragile democratic institutions, and recurrent security crises. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced multiple security challenges such as military coups, a civil war from 1967 to 1970, and ongoing ethno-religious conflicts. Under military regimes (1966-1979 and 1983–1999), security forces were often tools used to maintain authoritarian control instead of safeguarding citizens' rights (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000). This period entrenched secrecy, impunity, human rights violations, and inefficiencies within security agencies.

The transition to civilian governance in 1999 marked a critical shift, creating opportunities to realign the security sector with democratic values. Initial SSR initiatives focused on professionalizing the police and military, establishing oversight mechanisms, and rebuilding public confidence. The 1999 Constitution established civilian supremacy over the military and introduced bodies such as the National Security Adviser's office to coordinate security policies (Ibeanu, 2016). However, early reforms faced significant obstacles including institutional inertia, corruption, and weak political backing. Throughout the early 2000s, Nigeria pursued various reform programmes, often in collaboration with international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and African Union. The Nigeria Police Force underwent reforms aimed at enhancing community policing, capacity building, and respect for human rights (Alemika, 2009). The military initiated modernization efforts to bolster its counter-insurgency capacity, particularly as Boko Haram insurgency intensified from 2009 (Onapajo, 2015).

Despite these initiatives, progress in Security Sector Reform has been uneven. Persistent issues such as corruption, inadequate funding, political interference, and institutional weaknesses have hindered comprehensive reform (Ibeanu, 2016). The complexity of security threats including terrorism, ethno-religious violence, and organized crime highlighted gaps in coordination and capability, emphasizing the need for more integrated reforms. More recently, the Nigerian government has embraced a more holistic Security Sector Reform strategy, combining security reforms with improvements in governance, judicial systems, and community involvement. Efforts such as reforms in the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps and the

creation of specialized units to combat banditry and kidnappings reflect this more integrated approach (Agbiboa, 2020).

Thus, SSR in contemporary Nigeria reflects a gradual shift from a militarized, authoritarian security system toward more accountable, professional, and citizen-focused security institutions. Nonetheless, the historical legacy of political instability, corruption, and weak institutions continues to challenge the reform process, requiring sustained commitment, adequate resources, and inclusive governance for genuine transformation.

### **An Overview of Insecurity in North-Central Region, Nigeria**

North-Central Nigeria, often called the Middle Belt, is a region notable for its ethnic and religious diversity, encompassing states such as Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, Kwara, Niger, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). This diversity, while culturally enriching, has historically been accompanied by complex and persistent security challenges. In recent years, the region has experienced a significant escalation in insecurity manifested through a range of violent conflicts, including communal clashes, herder-farmer disputes, banditry, kidnapping, and sporadic extremist activities (Agbiboa, 2019; Umar, 2020). One of the primary sources of violence in the Middle Belt is the herder-farmer conflict, which stems from intense competition over scarce natural resources such as arable land and water. Environmental degradation driven by climate change, desertification, and poor land management has compounded resource scarcity, pushing Fulani pastoralists southward into farming communities. This movement has ignited violent confrontations between pastoralists and sedentary farmers, with devastating consequences for both livelihoods and regional stability (Adesoji, 2019; Okoli & Atelhe, 2020). The conflict has led to widespread displacement, destruction of property, and significant loss of life, underscoring the urgency of sustainable resource management and conflict resolution strategies.

Beyond resource-based violence, North-Central Nigeria is plagued by communal and ethnic conflicts fueled by historical grievances, political marginalization, and religious differences, particularly in states like Plateau and Benue. These tensions often escalate quickly, perpetuated by cycles of revenge attacks and a lack of effective mediation mechanisms (Bello & Abdulkadir, 2021). The limited presence and capacity of security agencies in these areas create opportunities for criminal elements to exacerbate violence, complicating efforts to restore peace (Umar, 2020). The region has also witnessed a disturbing rise in banditry and kidnappings,

criminal activities largely driven by youth unemployment, proliferation of small arms, and weak law enforcement. Armed groups engage in cattle rustling, highway robberies, and mass abductions for ransom, severely disrupting socio-economic activities and instilling fear among local populations (Agbiboa, 2020). These security breaches further stretch already overstretched security agencies and hinder development efforts.

While the Boko Haram insurgency primarily affects northeastern Nigeria, North-Central states have experienced spillover violence and growing extremist threats, particularly in border areas. This situation has diverted some government focus and resources toward counter-insurgency operations in the northeast, often at the expense of tailored interventions to address the region's unique security challenges (Onapajo, 2015). Structural factors underpinning these security challenges include poor governance, corruption within security institutions, ethnic politicization, and weak community-security force relations (Ibeanu, 2016). A lack of effective early warning systems and limited trust between communities and security personnel exacerbate vulnerabilities, making prevention and conflict management difficult (Abiodun, 2020).

### **Security Sector Reforms Initiatives and Policies in the North-Central Nigeria**

In response to these multifaceted threats, even though currently, there is no federal legislation or constitutional provision specifically establishing or fully regulating most state-backed or regional security outfits in Nigeria, the federal government and regional authorities have implemented various policy reforms and initiatives aimed at enhancing security and stability in the Middle Belt. Security Sector Reform (SSR) has become increasingly relevant in addressing the rising insecurity across North-Central Nigeria. This region faces persistent threats ranging from farmer-herder clashes and ethnic tensions to organized banditry (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). A major development at the sub-national level has been the creation of state-backed security outfits as a localized response to the perceived shortcomings of federal security agencies. Regional security initiatives like the Western Nigeria Security Network (Amotekun), Ebube Agu, Livestock Guards and *Anyam Nyor* in Benue State were established by state governments to address escalating insecurity yet their existence highlights a significant constitutional friction within the Nigerian federation. While these states enacted local laws to provide legal standing for the outfits, their operations are frequently challenged by pointing to Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution, which mandates the Nigeria Police Force as the sole policing body under the Exclusive Legislative List (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Conversely, States justify these organizations by citing Section 14(2)(b), which asserts that the security and welfare of the people are the primary purposes of government, thereby empowering states to protect their citizens (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

These state-level interventions are tailored to local realities and legal frameworks, often operating alongside federal security deployments. Benue State, for instance, not only enacted anti-open grazing legislation in 2017 but also established the Benue Livestock Guards; now Benue State Civil Protection Guards to enforce this law and protect communities from violent herder-farmer conflicts (Gundu & Falola, 2021). Similarly, Plateau State has moved to bolster its security architecture by recruiting and training operatives for Operation Rainbow, a state-funded security outfit designed to complement the federal military task force, Operation Safe Haven.

Other states in the region have followed suit. Nasarawa State launched the Nasarawa State Security Watch to support intelligence gathering and rapid response at the grassroots level. In Kogi State, the Kogi State Vigilance Service has been formally recognized and integrated into the state's security framework to combat kidnapping and armed robbery. Niger State established the Niger State Security Corps to address the severe challenges of banditry and kidnapping, while Kwara State operates the Kwara State Vigilante to enhance local patrols and intelligence.

These state-level outfits are a direct manifestation of the renewed focus on community policing and local engagement, seeking to leverage indigenous knowledge and foster collaboration between security forces and local populations (Abiodun, 2020). However, their effectiveness is often constrained by systemic challenges. They frequently operate with inadequate funding, insufficient training, and a lack of sophisticated equipment. Furthermore, the complex and sometimes contentious relationship with federal security agencies, coupled with the lingering public distrust of security personnel, has hindered the full realization of their objectives (Alemika, 2020).

Federal security deployments, including the joint military and police task forces Operation Whirl Stroke and Operation Safe Haven, continue to operate in the region, sometimes independently and at other times in collaboration with state-backed security outfits and local vigilante groups. While these interventions have achieved some degree of stability in certain hotspots, they have also been criticized for human rights violations and a lack of long-term engagement with communities (Ogbonnaya & Ehigiamusoe, 2020). The proliferation of state-level outfits, while filling a critical gap, also raises questions about coordination, conflicting

mandates, and the potential for fragmentation in the overall security response. While several reform strategies and localized security initiatives have been introduced to tackle insecurity in North-Central Nigeria, their success has been constrained by systemic inefficiencies and implementation gaps.

### **Assessing the Effectiveness of Security Sector Reforms in North-Central Nigeria**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) in North-Central Nigeria has emerged as a response to the growing insecurity in the region, which faces persistent threats such as banditry, herder-farmer clashes, communal violence, and organized crime. While several initiatives have been rolled out ranging from legislative measures to operational strategies and institutional restructuring the actual impact of these reforms remains mixed due to various structural, political, and logistical limitations. One of the significant developments in the region has been the adoption of Nigeria's National Security Strategy in 2019, which advocates a more inclusive, people-centered approach to security (NIA, 2019). States like Benue and Plateau have introduced context-specific measures, including the formation of local security outfits such as the Benue State Livestock Guards; now Benue State Civil Protection Guards aimed at addressing herder-farmer violence (Gundu & Falola, 2021). However, these reforms often face implementation challenges owing to limited institutional capacity and inadequate funding (Alemika, 2020).

The Federal Government's renewed focus on community policing was intended to bridge the gap between citizens and law enforcement by fostering trust and collaboration. While these policing structures have been set up across North-Central states, poor logistical support, lack of clarity in roles, and inadequate training have restricted their effectiveness (CLEEN Foundation, 2020). Deep-seated mistrust between local communities and security personnel often stemming from past abuses also continues to hinder productive engagement (Alemika, 2020). Additionally, military-led interventions such as Operations Safe Haven and Whirl Stroke have achieved some tactical gains, especially in dislodging armed groups and calming conflict zones. Nevertheless, these operations are typically reactive and short-term, focusing more on use of force to address security challenges without necessarily tackling underlying causes of violence such as climate change and competition over land resources (Ogbonnaya & Ehigiamusoe, 2020). Human rights concerns, including reports of excessive force and extrajudicial actions, have further undermined community trust in these efforts (HRW, 2021).

Non-state actors, including international development agencies and civil society organizations, have also supported SSR in the region through peacebuilding, capacity development, and advocacy. Organizations like the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) and Search for Common Ground have worked to promote dialogue and build resilience in affected communities (CDD, 2021). Despite these contributions, their efforts have often been localized and disconnected from broader government reform agenda. Several issues continue to hamper the full realization of Security Sector Reforms goals in the region. These include weak institutions, insufficient coordination among agencies, political interference, corruption, and inadequate funding. Moreover, SSR has not sufficiently tackled the underlying structural drivers of insecurity such as resource-based conflicts, which continue to fuel violence and instability (Onapajo, 2015).

### **Challenges facing Security Sector Reforms in Addressing Insecurity in North-Central Nigeria**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) in North-Central Nigeria faces numerous challenges in addressing the region's complex and persistent insecurity. The area continues to suffer from farmer-herder conflicts, ethnic and communal violence, organized banditry, and rural criminality, all of which have exposed the shortcomings of existing security institutions (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Despite ongoing reforms, the effectiveness of Security Sector Reform is hampered by systemic inefficiencies and a mismatch between national policies and local realities. Federal-led reforms often overlook community-level dynamics such as local distrust, traditional conflict resolution systems, and socio-cultural tensions, thereby limiting grassroots impact (Alemika, 2020). Furthermore, poor coordination among security agencies leads to overlapping roles, weak intelligence-sharing and fragmented responses to crises (CLEEN Foundation, 2020).

Inadequate funding, outdated equipment, and understaffing further weaken the operational capacity of security agencies, especially in vast rural areas. This has led communities to rely on vigilante groups, which can worsen violence (Akinwale, 2010). Political interference and the manipulation of security forces for partisan interests also undermine the credibility and neutrality of reforms (Onapajo, 2017). Additionally, human rights abuses, lack of accountability, and weak civilian oversight have eroded public trust, making community policing efforts difficult to implement. The failure to address root causes of insecurity such as poverty, youth unemployment, and poor governance has also limited the long-term impact of Security Sector

Reform. Institutional fragmentation and inefficient coordination among the military, police, and other agencies further delay responses and reduce public confidence. The absence of a holistic, inclusive approach that integrates development, justice, and socio-economic interventions has kept SSR reactive rather than preventive (International Crisis Group, 2018).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Security Sector Reform (SSR) represents a critical framework for addressing the protracted and multifaceted insecurity in North-Central Nigeria, a region profoundly afflicted by communal violence, herder-farmer conflicts, rampant banditry, and deep-seated socio-economic grievances. Despite the introduction of various reform initiatives ranging from community policing to institutional restructuring, meaningful progress has remained elusive. This stagnation is attributable to a constellation of systemic impediments, including pervasive corruption, inter-agency incoordination, chronic underfunding, political interference, and a fundamental deficit of meaningful community participation. When analysed through the lens of the Human Security paradigm, these shortcomings are thrown into sharp relief. This perspective elucidates that a purely state-centric, militarized approach is inherently insufficient. It reveals that for SSR to be effective, it must transcend traditional law enforcement and military responses to embrace a people-centered approach. Such an approach would strategically integrate civilian protection, inclusive governance, and targeted socio-economic development into the core of security policy.

The prevailing failure to holistically address the root causes of violence and to genuinely incorporate local communities as partners has systematically undermined reform efforts, rendering many of their achievements superficial and short-lived. Consequently, fostering a genuine and sustainable transformation of the security sector necessitates a fundamental reorientation. SSR must be reconceptualized as a holistic, development-driven, and community-anchored agenda, whose success is ultimately contingent upon a foundation of unwavering transparency and robust cooperation between the state and its citizens.

For Effective Security Sector Reform in North-Central Nigeria there is a required need for a fundamental shift from militarized approaches to a holistic strategy that integrates legal frameworks, community participation, and socio-economic development. By prioritizing local ownership, institutional accountability, and human security principles, these interconnected recommendations offer a viable pathway toward sustainable peace and institutional legitimacy in the region, as thus;

- i. The enactment of a comprehensive legal framework for local security outfits is essential to clearly define their powers and oversight mechanisms, thereby transforming them from ad hoc formations into accountable and coordinated actors within the formal security architecture, which is crucial for addressing insecurity in North-Central Nigeria.
- ii. Formalization of Community Participation through Local Security Councils. Mandate for the creation of inclusive councils at the local government level to embed community input, oversight, and intelligence-sharing directly into security governance is also paramount to this fight against insecurity in the region.
- iii. The integration of security-for-development initiatives in high-risk areas is essential, whereby security operations are directly linked with immediate socio-economic interventions such as youth employment programmes and agricultural support, in order to address and reduce the economic drivers of violence in the region.
- iv. The establishment of an independent multi-stakeholder oversight commission is necessary, comprising civil society actors and professional representatives mandated to monitor Security Sector Reform budgets and operations, with the aim of enhancing transparency, and curbing corruption as well as political interference.
- v. Shifting to a Civilian-Centric and Intelligence-Driven Policing Model; which is about the redeployment of resources toward investigative capacity and human rights training, using trust and crime reduction not arrest counts as the primary metrics of success in the region.

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