

DIGITAL NARRATIVE, YOUTH MOBILISATION, AND RESOURCE CONFLICT IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Countering Divisive Messaging through Non-Kinetic, Youth-Led Engagement



A Policy Brief by

Engaging Borders Strategy Research and Development (SRD)

Produced under the Delimi PROSPER Project

March 2026

SUPPORTED BY THE STRENGTHENING PEACE AND RESILIENCE IN NIGERIA (SPRING) PROGRAMME
FUNDED BY THE UK FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH & DEVELOPMENT OFFICE (FCDO)



CONTENTS

ABOUT THE DELIMI PROSPER PROJECT	3
ABOUT ENGAGING BORDERS SRD	3
DISCLAIMER	3
EXECUTIVE	5
SUMMARY	5
FRAMING THE PROBLEM	6
WHAT THE DATA SHOWS (EVIDENCE BASE)	8
WHAT THE YOUTH LENS ADDS	9
GENDER, DISABILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (GEDSI) CONSIDERATIONS	10
IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY	11
POLICY OPTIONS AVAILABLE	12
CONCLUSION	13



ABOUT THE DELIMI PROSPER PROJECT

The Delimi PROSPER Project is an eight-month initiative implemented by Engaging Borders Strategy Research and Development (SRD) under the Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRING) Programme. The project focuses on addressing resource-based conflict in Kaduna and Plateau States through non-kinetic, community-driven peacebuilding approaches.

Operating at the intersection of youth engagement, digital advocacy, and policy dialogue, the project strengthens local capacity to detect, prevent, and counter divisive narratives linked to competition over land, water, and environmental resources. It places particular emphasis on youth leadership, gender equity, and the meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Through Community Peacebuilding Workshops, digital campaigns, Communities of Practice, Peace Public Square engagements, and executive policy dialogues, the project generates practical insights that connect grassroots experiences with state-level decision-making.

The policy briefs in this series synthesise evidence from SPRiNG-commissioned research alongside youth-generated perspectives captured through project activities, offering policy-relevant options for strengthening preventive and inclusive peacebuilding approaches.

ABOUT ENGAGING BORDERS SRD

Engaging Borders Strategy Research and Development (SRD) is a Nigerian policy and peacebuilding organisation dedicated to advancing evidence-informed, inclusive, and locally grounded approaches to conflict prevention and resilience.

The organisation works at the intersection of research, youth engagement, digital advocacy, and high-level policy dialogue, translating community experiences into practical strategies for government and institutional actors.

Engaging Borders SRD collaborates with state institutions, civil society organisations, security actors, and development partners to design and implement non-kinetic interventions that strengthen social cohesion and democratic accountability.

Through rigorous analysis, structured dialogue platforms, and adaptive learning frameworks, the organisation supports sustainable pathways to peace and resilience in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

DISCLAIMER

This publication was produced under the Delimi PROSPER Project with support from the Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRING) Programme, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

The views and analyses presented in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily

reflect the official policies or positions of the SPRING Programme, the UK Government, or any affiliated institutions.

All reasonable efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information presented. However, Engaging Borders SRD accepts no responsibility for errors or omissions.



**DIGITAL NARRATIVE,
YOUTH MOBILISATION,
AND RESOURCE
CONFLICT IN
NORTHERN NIGERIA**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the role of digital narratives and youth mobilisation in shaping resource-based conflict dynamics across Northern Nigeria, with particular reference to Kaduna and Plateau States. Drawing on SPRiNG-commissioned research and youth-generated insights from the Delimi PROSPER Project, it highlights how misinformation, identity framing, and online mobilisation intersect with environmental stress and governance gaps to accelerate conflict escalation.

Evidence indicates that digital rumour networks increasingly function as conflict multipliers. Unverified claims regarding land disputes, communal violence, or state bias spread rapidly through WhatsApp groups, religious networks, and informal influencers. In contexts marked by historical grievances, such narratives amplify fear and trigger retaliatory mobilisation. Youth are central actors within this digital ecosystem. They are both highly exposed to online content and highly influential in shaping narrative flows. However, structured mechanisms to engage youth as partners in preventive governance remain limited.

This brief outlines policy options to strengthen digital resilience, support youth-led counter-narratives, integrate early-warning analytics into peace architecture, and embed inclusion principles within digital governance strategies. It argues that preventive peacebuilding in the digital age requires intentional investment in narrative management, trust-building, and youth inclusion as core components of state security strategy.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Resource-based conflict in Northern Nigeria increasingly unfolds not only in physical spaces (farmlands, grazing corridors, and contested settlements) but also within digital spaces. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and community-based social media channels now serve as primary sources of information for many citizens. In fragile contexts marked by historical grievances, land competition, and identity tensions, digital narratives can accelerate escalation timelines. A rumour that once circulated locally may now reach thousands within minutes, often framed in emotionally charged language that reinforces “us versus them” dynamics. Youth are disproportionately active within these digital ecosystems. As primary users of mobile technology and social media platforms, they both consume and generate narratives that shape community

perceptions. In environments where trust in institutions is fragile, peer networks frequently carry greater credibility than official communication channels.

Existing policy responses tend to treat misinformation as a communications issue rather than a conflict driver. However, digital rumour amplification directly influences mobilisation patterns, retaliatory cycles, and intercommunal mistrust. At the same time, digital platforms offer opportunities for preventive engagement. Youth-led campaigns, positive storytelling, interfaith dialogue videos, and verified information networks can slow escalation and build resilience.

If digital narratives continue to operate without structured preventive engagement, escalation cycles may intensify. Conversely, integrating digital governance strategies within peace architecture offers a pathway toward preventive, non-kinetic stability.



“

A rumour that once circulated locally may now reach thousands within minutes, often framed in emotionally charged language that reinforces “us versus them” dynamics. Youth are disproportionately active within these digital ecosystems.

”



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS (EVIDENCE BASE)

SPRiNG-commissioned research across North-West and North-Central Nigeria highlights that resource-based conflict is multi-dimensional, shaped by environmental pressures, governance gaps, and identity mobilisation. Increasingly, digital misinformation operates as an accelerant.

Studies examining social cohesion indicate that rumour-driven escalation often precedes physical confrontation. Where verification mechanisms are weak and trust deficits exist, narratives of victimhood or bias spread rapidly. Digital amplification compresses decision-making timeframes for both communities and security actors.

Research on farmer-herder conflict mitigation further demonstrates that disputes over land and livelihoods are frequently reframed through identity

narratives. Digital channels provide a platform for reinforcing polarised interpretations. Evidence from SPRiNG-supported trauma-informed interventions shows that unresolved psychosocial stress can intensify susceptibility to inflammatory narratives. Trauma-informed community support strengthens emotional regulation and reduces grievance retention, indirectly enhancing digital resilience. Emerging comparative research suggests that youth-led digital counter-narratives (when credible and locally anchored) can reduce the spread of rumours and promote de-escalation messaging. However, such initiatives require coordination, digital safety safeguards, and institutional recognition.

The data indicates that digital ecosystems are now integral to conflict dynamics. Policy approaches that ignore narrative management risk overlooking a central driver of escalation.

“

Studies examining social cohesion indicate that rumour-driven escalation often precedes physical confrontation.

”

WHAT THE YOUTH LENS ADDS

Youth consultations within the Delimi PROSPER Project provide operational insight into how digital narratives shape mobilisation.

Participants report that:

1. Rumours often originate from emotionally framed posts within trusted WhatsApp groups.
2. Screenshots and voice notes circulate without verification.
3. Influencers within religious or ethnic networks significantly shape perception.
4. Correction messages rarely travel as far as original rumours.

Youth also observe that digital narratives are frequently linked to offline grievances (unemployment, exclusion, land disputes), making them emotionally resonant. Importantly, young participants emphasise their willingness to act as digital peace advocates when provided with structure and recognition. Youth-led content creation (blogs, short videos, podcasts, and infographics) can amplify positive narratives and counter divisive rhetoric. Women and persons with disabilities highlight additional dimensions: online harassment, exclusion from digital dialogue spaces, and limited access to verified information channels.

These insights demonstrate that youth are not merely vulnerable recipients of digital narratives but potential architects of preventive communication ecosystems.



GENDER, DISABILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (GEDSI) CONSIDERATIONS

Digital ecosystems do not operate in isolation from gender and inclusion dynamics. Women may experience disproportionate online harassment and exclusion from public narrative spaces. Persons with disabilities may face accessibility barriers to digital information.

At the same time, inclusive digital engagement enhances legitimacy and reach. Integrating women's voices and disability leadership into digital counter-narrative strategies broadens credibility and representation. Failure to integrate GEDSI considerations into digital governance risks replicating offline exclusionary practices in online spaces.

“ Integrating women's voices and disability leadership into digital counter-narrative strategies broadens credibility and representation. ”



IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Digital narratives now function as strategic variables within resource-based conflict dynamics. Preventive peacebuilding must therefore integrate narrative governance alongside traditional mediation and security measures. Ignoring digital mobilisation risks escalation before physical indicators emerge. Conversely, structured digital engagement offers an opportunity to detect early signals, counter misinformation, and reinforce inclusive narratives. Youth represent

both a risk factor and a strategic asset. Without engagement, digital spaces may amplify grievance and polarisation. With structured support, youth networks can function as stabilising forces.

Institutional recognition of digital peace architecture (supported by inclusion safeguards and trauma-informed awareness) can strengthen preventive capacity while reinforcing State legitimacy.



POLICY OPTIONS AVAILABLE

Option 1: Establish Youth Digital Peace Networks

Formalise youth-led digital monitoring and counter-narrative initiatives at state level.

Benefit: Rapid rumour verification and de-escalation.

Consideration: Requires safeguards for digital safety and neutrality.

Option 2: Integrate Digital Early Warning Analytics

Develop structured mechanisms to track rumour patterns and online escalation indicators.

Benefit: Improved response timelines.

Consideration: Requires data protection and transparency.

Option 3: Support Trauma-Informed Digital Engagement

Integrate psychosocial awareness into digital messaging strategies.

Benefit: Reduces inflammatory responses.

Consideration: Requires training and referral systems.

Option 4: Promote Inclusive Digital Governance

Ensure women and people with disabilities are represented in digital peace initiatives.

Benefit: Enhanced legitimacy and reach.

Option 5: Institutionalise Digital Narrative Strategy within Peace Architecture

Embed communication strategy within State peace frameworks.

Benefit: Aligns narrative management with governance priorities.

CONCLUSION

Preventive governance in Northern Nigeria must integrate digital narrative ecosystems within broader peace architecture. Evidence and youth insights indicate that inclusive digital engagement, trauma-informed awareness, and structured counter-narrative strategies reduce escalation risk while strengthening trust. Recognising youth as partners in preventive governance transforms the digital space from a vulnerability into an asset. These pathways offer practical, evidence-informed options for strengthening stability in digitally connected conflict environments.







Engaging Borders Strategy Research and Development (SRD)

Email: info@engagingborders.com

Website: www.engagingborders.com

Project Page: delimi.engagingborders.com