THE SIT-AT-HOME ORDER IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: ECONOMIC DISRUPTION, CIVILIAN VULNERABILITY, POLITICAL MOBILISATION, AND THE SEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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Abstract
The sit-at-home order in South-East Nigeria, initially associated with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) following the arrest of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, in June 2021, has evolved from a declared form of civil disobedience into a recurring governance and security crisis. Although presented by its proponents as a non-violent method of political protest, its enforcement has frequently involved coercion, attacks on civilians, closure of markets and schools, disruption of transport, and intimidation of residents who attempt to conduct normal economic activities. This paper examines the sit-at-home phenomenon through four interrelated lenses: economic disruption, civilian vulnerability, political mobilisation, and the search for sustainable peace. It argues that the order has imposed severe costs on small businesses, transport operators, informal workers, students, and low-income households, while also weakening public confidence in state institutions. At the same time, the persistence of the order cannot be understood solely as criminal coercion; it reflects deeper grievances concerning marginalisation, insecurity, state repression, and contested political authority in the South-East. The paper concludes that a sustainable response requires a combination of rights-respecting security reform, credible dialogue, economic recovery measures, educational continuity, community-based protection, and political inclusion. A purely militarised approach risks reproducing the grievances that sustain mobilisation, while unconditional tolerance of coercive enforcement would deepen civilian suffering and institutional decay.
Keywords: Sit-at-home, IPOB, South-East Nigeria, economic disruption, peacebuilding

Introduction

The sit-at-home order has become one of the most visible expressions of political contestation in South-East Nigeria since 2021. “It is commonly associated with IPOB, a pro-Biafran self-determination movement, and was introduced shortly after the arrest of Nnamdi Kanu in June 2021 as a weekly and ad hoc form of civil disobedience” (UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6). What began as a political signal demanding Kanu’s release and drawing attention to Biafran self-determination claims has, in practice, become a recurring disruption of social and economic life across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States.

The order is politically significant because it demonstrates the capacity of non-state actors to shape everyday behaviour in territories formally governed by elected authorities. Scholars have observed that “IPOB’s sit-at-home directives, alongside declarations of Biafra Remembrance Day, have helped the movement present itself as a form of de facto political authority in parts of the South-East” (Nwosu, 2023, p. 4). Yet the order’s practical effects extend far beyond symbolism. Markets close, transport services are suspended, schools shut, businesses lose income, and residents face uncertainty about whether defiance may attract violence.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore not simply whether the sit-at-home order is politically justified. Rather, it is how a protest strategy intended to express collective grievance has produced widespread civilian harm, economic dislocation, and insecurity, while simultaneously functioning as a mechanism of political mobilisation. This tension is crucial. A movement seeking legitimacy cannot easily dismiss the suffering of the very population in whose name it claims to act. Equally, the Nigerian state cannot address the order effectively if it treats all expressions of Igbo political grievance as criminality while failing to protect civilians or address the underlying drivers of alienation.

This paper makes four arguments. First, the sit-at-home order has imposed substantial and unequal economic costs, particularly on informal traders, transport workers, daily-wage earners, small enterprises, and students. Second, it has increased civilian vulnerability by restricting freedom of movement and exposing residents to coercion and violence from both non-state armed actors and state security operations. Third, the order remains politically meaningful because it draws upon historical memories of Biafra, perceptions of marginalisation, distrust of the state, and the mobilisational reach of IPOB and its diaspora networks. Fourth, sustainable peace requires more than enforcement: it demands a comprehensive strategy linking security, justice, dialogue, economic recovery, and civilian protection.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first situates the sit-at-home order within the political and historical context of Biafran agitation in Nigeria. It then analyses its economic effects, civilian consequences, and political mobilisation functions. Thereafter, it evaluates state and non-state responses before proposing pathways toward sustainable peace. The analysis draws on peer-reviewed studies, human rights reporting, government country information, and recent empirical assessments of the order's impact.

Historical and Political Context

Biafra, memory, and self-determination

The South-East is the heartland of Igbo-speaking Nigeria and carries a powerful historical memory of the Nigerian Civil War, commonly known as the Biafran War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. The war followed the secession of the former Eastern Region under the name of the Republic of Biafra. Although the war ended in 1970, narratives of wartime suffering, post-war marginalisation, and unequal incorporation into the Nigerian federation have remained politically consequential.

Contemporary neo-Biafran agitation draws upon these memories. IPOB emerged as one of the most prominent organisations advocating self-determination for the Igbo people and, more broadly, for a restored Biafra. Its appeal has been strengthened by perceptions among some Igbo citizens that the region has been excluded from national power, infrastructure investment, and equitable security protection. Research on neo-Biafra separatism finds that "feelings of victimisation and marginalisation among Igbos have contributed to the movement's mobilisational strength, even as armed violence and state repression have intensified insecurity" (Onuoha, 2022, p. 44).

The sit-at-home order should therefore be understood not as an isolated security event but as part of a longer political struggle over belonging, recognition, and self-determination. Its symbolic power lies in its ability to convert private grievance into public action. By asking people to remain at home, IPOB and allied actors seek to demonstrate that political allegiance to Nigeria can be suspended, at least temporarily, in the region.

The emergence of the order

The modern weekly sit-at-home order is generally traced to August 2021, following Kanu's arrest and extraordinary rendition to Nigeria. The UK Home Office notes that "IPOB introduced weekly and ad hoc sit-at-home orders shortly after Kanu's arrest in June 2021, and that although IPOB later announced the lifting of weekly orders, enforcement by IPOB and other armed actors reportedly continued through violent means" (UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6). The date of 9 August 2021 is especially important because Amnesty International identifies "the enforcement of an IPOB/ESN sit-at-home order covering the South-East from that date as a turning point in the human rights consequences of the campaign (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12).

The order initially operated as a protest against Kanu's detention. Over time, however, it became attached to additional demands, including the release of Kanu, a referendum on Biafran self-determination, and opposition to actions perceived as anti-Igbo. Diaspora mobilisation has also played a role in sustaining the order's visibility. Onyemechalu and Ejiofor (2024, p. 15) show that "diaspora actors have repeatedly declared sit-at-home protests and framed them around demands for Kanu's release and a Biafra referendum date."

This transnational dimension matters because it illustrates how contemporary separatist mobilisation is no longer confined to territorial communities. Social media, diaspora advocacy, and online broadcasting allow political entrepreneurs to issue directives, interpret events, and mobilise supporters across borders. Yet the costs of such mobilisation are borne locally, by residents of the South-East who must navigate the consequences of every declared or feared sit-at-home day.

Contestation over authorship and control

One of the most complicated features of the sit-at-home order is the question of who authorises and enforces it. IPOB has at times announced suspensions or modifications of the order, but enforcement has continued in many communities. The UK Home Office observes that" reports indicate continued enforcement by IPOB and other armed actors, including beatings, floggings, targeted assassinations, and beheadings, with deaths documented among both security personnel and civilians" (UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6).

This discrepancy between declaration and enforcement reflects a broader governance problem. The South-East security environment includes IPOB, its Eastern Security Network (ESN), criminal gangs, vigilante groups, state-backed paramilitary outfits, and official security forces. Amnesty International's 2025 report "documents unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and displacement by a range of state and non-state actors between January 2021 and December 2024" (Amnesty International, 2025, pp. 3–5). In such an

environment, the sit-at-home order can be exploited by criminal groups or local armed actors even where the original political leadership does not directly command them.
The result is a situation in which civilians cannot always distinguish political protest from predation. A resident may comply not because they support Biafran independence, but because they fear being attacked on the road, having their shop destroyed, or being identified as disloyal. This coercive dynamic undermines the moral claim that the order represents voluntary civil disobedience.

Economic Disruption

Markets, commerce, and informal livelihoods

The most immediate economic effect of the sit-at-home order is the interruption of commerce. South-East Nigeria has a dense commercial culture built around daily markets, roadside trading, transport hubs, artisanal production, and small-scale services. Many households depend on daily income rather than monthly salaries. When markets and shops close, the loss is not merely deferred; for many workers, it is income permanently lost.

Empirical studies consistently identify severe negative effects on small and medium-sized enterprises and the transport sector. A qualitative analysis of the 2021–2023 period found that "the sit-at-home order had severe negative impacts on the South-East economy, particularly in the areas of SMEs and transportation" (Nwankwo et al., 2023, p. 8). Similarly, an assessment covering the five core South-East States found significant negative effects on economic activity, social infrastructure, and foreign direct investment, with evidence of business closure, relocation, and capital flight (Eze *et al.,* 2023, p. 12).

The informal sector is especially exposed. Traders who sell food, clothing, phone accessories, spare parts, or household goods often operate on thin margins and without savings. A single lost trading day can affect school fees, food purchases, rent, transportation, and debt repayment. For workers in restaurants, hairdressing salons, tailoring shops, mechanics' workshops, and market stalls, there is frequently no compensation for days when customers cannot come.

The economic disruption also has a multiplier effect. When traders do not open, transport operators lose passengers; when transport is limited, suppliers cannot move goods; when suppliers cannot move goods, market prices rise; and when prices rise, household purchasing power falls. A study of enforcement of the order found that "it contributed to rising food prices and a heightened cost of living, thereby impeding economic growth" (Okeke, 2024, p. 6). This chain of effects demonstrates that the sit-at-home order is not simply a one-day interruption; it is a recurring shock to local economic systems.

Transport, mobility, and supply chains

Transport is one of the sectors most visibly affected by sit-at-home enforcement. On sit-at-home days, intercity transport is often reduced or suspended, commercial motorcycle and tricycle operators stay off the roads, and interstate travel becomes risky. The closure of transport routes affects not only passengers but also the movement of food, fuel, medicine, agricultural produce, and manufactured goods.

"A study of the order's effects on the South-East economy identified serious disruption to the transport sub-sector, financial and social institutions, and investment patronage" (Nwankwo et al., 2023, p. 8). Transport workers face a particular dilemma: if they work, they may be attacked or have their vehicles damaged; if they do not work, they lose income. This creates a coercive economic environment in which compliance becomes a survival strategy rather than a political choice.

The disruption of mobility also affects regional integration. The South-East is closely connected commercially to neighbouring regions, including the South-South and North-Central. Traders moving goods between Onitsha, Aba, Enugu, Nnewi, Abakaliki, and Owerri depend on predictable road access. Repeated sit-at-home days reduce the predictability of supply chains and raise transaction costs. Businesses may respond by delaying deliveries, increasing prices, relocating warehouses, or avoiding the region altogether.

Investment, employment, and state revenue

Beyond daily commerce, the sit-at-home order affects longer-term investment decisions. Investors generally seek locations where production schedules, staff movement, logistics, and security can be predicted. Recurring civil disruption undermines that predictability. Research on the economic consequences of the order found that it negatively affected foreign direct investment and contributed to capital flight from the region (Eze *et al.,* 2023, p. 12).

This has implications for employment. When firms delay expansion, relocate, or close, job opportunities decline. Young people, who are already disproportionately affected by unemployment and underemployment, face fewer pathways into stable work. The irony is that economic stagnation may strengthen the very grievances on which separatist mobilisation depends. If young people see fewer legitimate economic opportunities, they may become more susceptible to recruitment by armed groups or more supportive of radical political messages.

State governments also lose revenue. Reduced commercial activity lowers sales taxes, levies, licensing income, and other forms of internally generated revenue. "A gendered analysis of the order found dislocation of investment capital, reduced internally generated revenue for South-East states, and reduced productivity in the transport sector" (Nnamani *et al.,* 2024, p. 9). These losses reduce the fiscal capacity of state governments to fund schools, health facilities, roads, and security, thereby worsening the public-service deficits that already fuel public frustration.

Education and human capital

The economic cost of the sit-at-home order is not limited to present-day income; it also affects future productivity through education. Schools in the South-East have repeatedly closed on Mondays and during ad hoc sit-at-home days. This reduces teaching and learning time, disrupts examinations, and increases anxiety among students and parents.

"A large cross-sectional study of 5,723 adults found that the public perceived the sit-at-home order as reducing household income, productive work hours, teaching and learning hours, and educational quality" (Iheanacho *et al.,* 2025, p. 5). This finding is important because it shows that residents themselves recognise the order as an educational as well as economic burden. Education is a long-term form of capital: lost classroom time may translate into weaker learning outcomes, examination stress, and reduced future earnings.

"Amnesty International similarly reports that enforcement of the sit-at-home order has led to school closures, disrupted examinations, and violations of the right to education" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12). The educational impact is especially severe for children from low-income households. Wealthier families may arrange private lessons, online learning, or alternative schooling, while poorer households may lack such options. In this sense, the order deepens inequality within the region.

The long-term danger is the production of a generation whose schooling has been repeatedly interrupted by insecurity. Education is not only an economic asset; it is also a civic institution through which young people acquire knowledge, skills, and a sense of possibility. When schools become unreliable, young people may become more vulnerable to political manipulation, criminal recruitment, or emigration.

Measuring the aggregate cost

Attempts to quantify the aggregate cost of the sit-at-home crisis produce sobering figures, though such estimates should be interpreted carefully because methodologies and timeframes differ.

A 2026 report cited by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting estimated that the South-East suffered N7.6 trillion in economic damage, 776 fatalities, and 332 violent attacks between 2021 and 2025 (International Centre for Investigative Reporting [ICIR], 2026, para. 4). Another report cited by the same outlet placed the broader cost of the crisis at more than N17 trillion when wider economic losses were included (ICIR, 2026, para. 3).

These figures should not be treated as precise accounting facts, since estimating informal-sector losses, forgone investment, and indirect multiplier effects is inherently difficult. Nevertheless, their magnitude is consistent with the qualitative evidence. Multiple studies agree that "the order has damaged SMEs, transport, trade, education, public revenue, and investor confidence" (Amana *et al.,* 2023, p. 7; Nwankwo *et al.,* 2023, p. 8; Eze *et al.,* 2023, p. 12). The economic evidence therefore supports the conclusion that the sit-at-home order has become self-defeating for the region's development.

Civilian Vulnerability

Freedom of movement and the right to work

The sit-at-home order restricts several basic freedoms, including freedom of movement, freedom to work, and access to public services. Amnesty International states that "enforcement of the IPOB/ESN order issued on 9 August 2021 led to violations of the rights to life, freedom of movement, and education" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12). These are not abstract legal categories. For ordinary residents, they concern the ability to go to the market, travel to work, take a child to school, visit a hospital, or attend a funeral.

The right to work is particularly affected. Many South-East residents are self-employed or work in the informal economy. They cannot simply work from home or recover lost wages later. When a mechanic, food vendor, tailor, bus driver, or market trader is forced to remain at home, the immediate consequence is loss of income. Over time, repeated disruptions can push vulnerable households into debt, food insecurity, and poverty.
The order also affects access to essential services. Hospitals may experience reduced staff attendance; patients may delay treatment; and emergency travel may become dangerous. Although some essential services are formally exempted, fear and uncertainty often make residents unwilling to test such exemptions. The practical effect is that a political directive can become a de facto curfew.

Coercion, intimidation, and violence
"The most serious civilian vulnerability arises from coercive enforcement. Although IPOB has denied violently enforcing sit-at-home orders and has attributed attacks to criminals, human rights organisations and government assessments have documented violence associated with enforcement" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12; UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6). Residents who open shops, drive commercial vehicles, or attend school on a sit-at-home day may face threats, beatings, property destruction, or worse.

"The UK Home Office reports that enforcement has continued through violent means including beatings, floggings, targeted assassinations, and beheadings, with deaths among both security forces and civilians" (UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6). Whether every such act is directly ordered by IPOB leadership is less important, from a civilian-protection perspective, than the fact that armed actors invoke the order to justify or legitimise violence. The order creates a social environment in which defiance can be interpreted as betrayal.

This coercive environment has gendered dimensions. Women traders, market women, and female-headed households may face particular risks when attempting to sustain income-generating activities. A gendered analysis of the order found that "its effects included dislocation of investment, reduced productivity, and harm to both employed and unemployed people in the region" (Nnamani *et al.,* 2024, p. 9). Women who depend on daily market activity may also bear additional caregiving burdens when schools close and children remain at home.

State security operations and civilian harm
Civilian vulnerability in the South-East is not produced by non-state actors alone. State security responses, including raids, arrests, checkpoints, and military operations, have also generated fear and harm. Amnesty International documented at least 115 people killed by security forces between March and June 2021, as well as more than 500 arrests following police and military raids, 52 incidents of unlawful killings, and 62 cases of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment, and torture (Amnesty International, 2021, pp. 1–3).
These findings do not excuse violence by armed groups. Rather, they show that civilians are trapped between multiple sources of insecurity. On one side, residents may face coercion from armed groups enforcing sit-at-home orders. On the other, they may face raids, arbitrary detention, or excessive force during security operations. Amnesty International's later reporting "documents unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and displacement by state and non-state actors between 2021 and 2024" (Amnesty International, 2025, pp. 3–5).

A sustainable peace strategy must therefore reject a simplistic narrative in which the state is exclusively protective and non-state actors exclusively predatory. Both state and non-state actors have responsibilities under international human rights law. Where security forces commit abuses, they weaken public trust and provide propaganda material to armed groups. Where armed groups attack civilians, they undermine any claim to represent popular interests.

Psychological effects and social fear
The sit-at-home order also produces psychological harm. Repeated uncertainty about whether one can safely leave home, attend school, or operate a business creates chronic anxiety. Children may internalise fear of Mondays; traders may plan their lives around potential violence; and families may avoid travel even when no formal order has been declared.

Research on insecurity in the South-East notes that "residents face terrorisation from the chaos and violence associated with non-state actors, sit-at-home orders, kidnappings, farmer-herder clashes, and other forms of criminality" (Ojo *et al.,* 2024, p. 5). This broader insecurity means that the sit-at-home order does not operate in isolation. It interacts with kidnapping, armed robbery, communal conflict, and political violence to produce a generalised sense of insecurity.
Fear can also alter social behaviour. People may avoid discussing politics publicly, refrain from reporting crimes, or withdraw from community associations. Such withdrawal weakens social capital, which is essential for

collective problem-solving. A society in which people are afraid to speak, trade, travel, or organise is less capable of resolving its own conflicts peacefully.

Political Mobilisation

Sit-at-home as symbolic politics

Despite its harmful consequences, the sit-at-home order is politically meaningful. It transforms an abstract demand for self-determination into a visible collective act. By closing markets and keeping people at home, proponents seek to demonstrate that Biafran identity and political loyalty remain powerful. The order thus functions as symbolic politics: it makes grievance visible, creates a shared ritual of protest, and communicates defiance to the Nigerian state.

Ejiofor's work on symbolic politics and ethnonationalist struggle helps explain why such orders resonate beyond their immediate practical demands. "Political movements often rely on symbols, memory, and collective performance to sustain identity and commitment" (Ejiofor, 2023, p. 18). In the South-East, the memory of Biafra provides a powerful symbolic resource. The sit-at-home order allows supporters to participate in a modern form of political action while connecting it to historical narratives of survival and resistance.

However, symbolic power does not automatically translate into democratic legitimacy. A protest becomes more credible when participation is voluntary, transparent, and accountable. Where coercion replaces persuasion, the order risks becoming a tool of domination rather than liberation. The central political question is therefore whether the sit-at-home order expresses popular will or disciplines a population through fear.

Marginalisation and grievance

The durability of the sit-at-home order cannot be explained by coercion alone. It draws energy from real and perceived grievances. Many Igbo citizens believe that the South-East has been marginalised in federal appointments, infrastructure investment, security planning, and national political representation. Whether or not every claim of marginalisation is empirically accurate in every sector, the perception is politically real and has consequences for mobilisation.

Research on neo-Biafra separatism argues that "state repression has contributed to the mutation of IPOB's strategy from non-violent options toward armed struggle" (Onuoha, 2022, p. 44). This does not mean that repression justifies violence against civilians. It does mean that heavy-handed state responses can strengthen radical narratives by appearing to confirm the claim that the Nigerian state is hostile to Igbo political aspirations.

The political mobilisation around the sit-at-home order therefore feeds on a cycle: grievance produces mobilisation; state repression and armed violence intensify insecurity; insecurity deepens economic hardship; hardship reinforces grievance; and grievance provides further material for mobilisation. Breaking this cycle requires addressing both the violent methods used to enforce the order and the political conditions that make separatist appeals persuasive.

Diaspora mobilisation and digital activism

The sit-at-home order is also sustained by transnational activism. Onyemechalu and Ejiofor (2024, p. 15) demonstrate that "diaspora mobilisation has been central to contemporary Biafran self-determination campaigns, including repeated declarations of sit-at-home protests and demands for Kanu's release and a referendum. Diaspora actors can raise funds, circulate propaganda, lobby foreign governments, and shape the movement's public narrative."

Digital media intensify this process. Messages about sit-at-home days, security threats, and political betrayal can spread rapidly through WhatsApp, Facebook, X, YouTube, and Telegram. This creates an environment in which rumours can be as consequential as official directives. A single message claiming that a sit-at-home has been declared may cause markets to close and transport to stop, even where no formal order exists.

The diaspora dimension also raises accountability questions. Political actors who issue calls for sit-at-home protests from outside Nigeria do not necessarily bear the immediate consequences of those calls. The people who lose income, face violence, or miss school are usually residents of the South-East. Sustainable peace requires political communication that distinguishes legitimate advocacy from reckless incitement and coercion.

Authority, legitimacy, and parallel governance

The sit-at-home order reveals a crisis of political authority. Elected governments formally control the South-East states, yet non-state actors have at times been able to determine whether markets open, schools operate, and roads

are used. A study of IPOB and political authority in the South-East argues that the legitimacy crisis faced by governments in the region has encouraged separatist activity and enabled IPOB to present itself as a de facto political authority (Nwosu, 2023, p. 4).

This does not mean that IPOB has replaced the state in a formal sense. Rather, it means that the state's monopoly over political communication and public order has become contested. When residents comply with a sit-at-home directive more consistently than with official government instructions, the balance of everyday authority shifts. This is dangerous because parallel authority often emerges where formal institutions are perceived as absent, corrupt, coercive, or unresponsive.

Restoring legitimate authority therefore requires more than arresting suspects or deploying soldiers. It requires demonstrating that the state can protect citizens, deliver services, respect rights, and respond to grievances. Legitimacy is earned through performance. Where citizens experience the state mainly through checkpoints, raids, and repression, they are more likely to accept alternative claims to authority.

State and Non-State Responses

Militarised responses and their limits

The Nigerian state has responded to South-East insecurity through arrests, prosecutions, military deployments, and operations against armed groups. These measures may be necessary where individuals commit violent crimes, but militarisation alone has not produced durable stability. Onuoha (2022, p. 44) argues that "the repressive disposition of the Nigerian state toward Biafra separatism has contributed to the mutation of IPOB's strategy from non-violence toward armed struggle."

The danger of a security-first approach is that it can treat the symptom—violent enforcement of sit-at-home orders—without addressing the causes—political exclusion, weak governance, criminality, and mutual distrust. It can also produce civilian casualties, arbitrary arrests, and collective suspicion of Igbo communities. Such outcomes may further radicalise affected populations and make peaceful dialogue more difficult.

Security operations must therefore be lawful, intelligence-led, and accountable. The state has a duty to protect civilians from armed groups, but it must do so in ways that respect human rights. Where security personnel commit abuses, investigations and prosecutions are essential. Impunity by state actors is as corrosive to peace as impunity by non-state actors.

IPOB's declared positions and enforcement gap

IPOB has at times claimed to have suspended or modified sit-at-home orders, and it has denied responsibility for violent enforcement. The UK Home Office nevertheless reports that "enforcement by IPOB and other armed actors has continued through violent means despite announced lifting of weekly orders" (UK Home Office, 2026, p. 6). This gap between official declarations and street-level reality is central to the crisis.

If IPOB genuinely opposes coercive enforcement, it faces a responsibility to communicate clearly, disavow violence, identify those abusing its name, and cooperate with credible mechanisms for civilian protection. Political movements cannot claim the benefits of mass mobilisation while disclaiming responsibility for the violence that makes mobilisation effective. At the same time, the state must avoid attributing every criminal act in the South-East to IPOB, since Amnesty International notes that "criminal groups have been responsible for many attacks and that some armed camps are known to residents and security agents" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 5).

Community responses and local resilience

Communities are not passive victims. Religious leaders, traditional rulers, market associations, transport unions, teachers, youth groups, and civil-society organisations have attempted to negotiate safe days, protect markets, and maintain essential services. These local efforts are important because they demonstrate that South-East communities desire both political dignity and everyday stability.

However, community resilience cannot substitute for structural solutions. Local leaders may lack the capacity to confront armed groups, especially where state protection is weak. They may also face accusations of betrayal from activists or suspicion from security agencies. Sustainable peace requires creating safe civic space in which community leaders, women, young people, and victims can participate in dialogue without fear of retaliation.

Toward Sustainable Peace

Protecting civilians first

The first principle of any peace strategy must be civilian protection. No political objective, including self-determination, release of a detained leader, or protest against marginalisation, can justify attacks on civilians,

coercion of traders, destruction of property, or denial of education. Amnesty International's finding that "sit-at-home enforcement has violated rights to life, movement, and education establishes the human-rights baseline from which policy must proceed" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12).

Civilian protection requires several practical measures. Security forces should distinguish clearly between armed perpetrators and ordinary residents. Armed groups should issue unambiguous instructions prohibiting attacks on civilians and those who choose not to participate in protests. Community early-warning systems should document threats and enable rapid response. Schools, hospitals, markets, and transport routes should be treated as protected civilian spaces.

Rights-respecting security reform

Security reform is indispensable, but it must be rights-respecting. The state should investigate abuses by security personnel, prosecute those responsible, and establish transparent complaint mechanisms for residents. Amnesty International's documentation of "unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced disappearances in the region indicates why accountability is not optional" (Amnesty International, 2025, pp. 3–5).

Reform should also improve intelligence and community policing. Heavy military presence without local trust often produces fear rather than safety. Community policing models that involve accountable local institutions, civil society, and traditional authorities can improve information flow while reducing abuses. The objective should be to protect residents from criminal violence without treating entire communities as suspects.

Dialogue and political inclusion

Sustainable peace requires credible political dialogue. This does not necessarily mean negotiating away Nigeria's territorial integrity or accepting every demand of armed groups. It means creating legitimate channels through which grievances can be expressed, examined, and addressed. Dialogue should include federal and state governments, elected representatives, traditional rulers, religious leaders, women's groups, youth organisations, victims' families, civil society, and credible representatives of non-violent advocacy movements.

The political drivers of mobilisation must be taken seriously. Perceptions of marginalisation, insecurity, and exclusion have fuelled support for separatist goals. Research on support for IPOB's secessionist goal shows that "historical memory and contemporary political grievances remain important drivers of mobilisation" (Ukiwo, 2024, p. 30). A peace process that ignores these grievances will likely fail, even if it suppresses visible violence temporarily.

Political inclusion should include fair representation in federal institutions, transparent infrastructure investment, credible electoral processes, and meaningful consultation on security policy. It should also protect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Citizens must be able to advocate self-determination, federal reform, or any other political position without violence, provided they do so within the law.

Economic recovery and livelihood protection

Because the sit-at-home order has damaged livelihoods, peacebuilding must include economic recovery. Governments, development partners, and private-sector actors should support small businesses, market associations, transport operators, and young entrepreneurs affected by repeated disruptions. Measures may include low-interest credit, grants for microenterprises, skills training, digital-market access, and infrastructure rehabilitation.

Economic recovery should prioritise groups most affected by the order: informal traders, daily-wage workers, women in market sectors, transport workers, and out-of-school children. A study of public perceptions found that "residents associate the order with reduced household income, productive work hours, and educational quality" (Iheanacho et al., 2025, p. 5). Policies that restore income and learning time would directly address the material basis of civilian suffering.

Economic measures should not be presented as rewards for violence. Rather, they should be framed as obligations of public institutions to citizens whose livelihoods have been damaged by insecurity. Transparent targeting, community participation, and independent monitoring are necessary to prevent capture by political elites or armed groups.

Educational continuity

Education deserves special attention in any peace strategy. Governments should develop contingency plans that allow schools to operate safely during periods of insecurity. These may include flexible school calendars, make-up classes, remote and radio-based learning, examination rescheduling, safe transport arrangements, and psychosocial support for affected students.

The goal is not merely to reopen schools after each disruption but to guarantee continuity of learning. Amnesty International's documentation of school closures and examination disruption shows that "the right to education has been directly affected by sit-at-home enforcement" (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12). Protecting education

is both a humanitarian duty and a long-term investment in peace, because educated young people are better positioned to participate in civic life and resist recruitment into armed groups.

Accountability for all perpetrators

Peace requires accountability for violence regardless of the perpetrator's identity. Armed actors who beat, kidnap, kill, or extort civilians must face justice. Security personnel who commit unlawful killings, torture, arbitrary detention, or enforced disappearance must also face justice. Amnesty International's 2025 report documents "abuses by state and non-state actors and calls for thorough investigation and prosecution of perpetrators" (Amnesty International, 2025, pp. 5–7).

Accountability should be paired with victim-centred reparations. Families of those killed, persons unlawfully detained, victims of torture, and communities whose property was destroyed require acknowledgment, compensation where appropriate, and guarantees of non-repetition. Without reparative justice, peace agreements may be perceived as elite bargains that ignore the suffering of ordinary people.

Regional cooperation and conflict-sensitive governance

Because insecurity in the South-East interacts with criminality, kidnapping, farmer-herder tensions, and cross-border movements, peacebuilding requires regional cooperation. South-East governors should coordinate security policy, intelligence sharing, market regulation, transport protection, and emergency response. They should also avoid contradictory public statements that deepen confusion about whether sit-at-home days are official, tolerated, or illegal.

Conflict-sensitive governance means assessing the potential consequences of public policy on peace dynamics. For example, aggressive rhetoric that labels entire communities as criminals may strengthen separatist narratives. Conversely, silence in the face of armed-group coercion may signal state weakness. Public communication should be firm, accurate, and oriented toward civilian protection.

Conclusion

The sit-at-home order in South-East Nigeria is a complex political, economic, and humanitarian phenomenon. It began as a form of civil disobedience connected to IPOB's campaign for Biafran self-determination and the release of Nnamdi Kanu, but it has become a recurring source of economic disruption and civilian vulnerability. Its enforcement has closed markets, disrupted transport, reduced household income, interrupted schooling, and exposed residents to intimidation and violence. At the same time, its persistence reflects deeper grievances concerning marginalisation, state repression, insecurity, and contested political authority.

"The evidence reviewed in this paper shows that the order has imposed severe costs on the South-East economy, especially on SMEs, transport, informal traders, and education" (Amana et al., 2023, p. 7; Nwankwo et al., 2023, p. 8; Iheanacho et al., 2025, p. 5). It has also produced serious human rights harms, including violations of the rights to life, movement, and education (Amnesty International, 2025, p. 12). These harms cannot be justified by political objectives, however deeply felt.

Yet a sustainable response cannot rely on repression alone. Militarised approaches may suppress visible defiance temporarily, but they risk reinforcing the grievances and distrust that sustain mobilisation. The search for sustainable peace must therefore combine lawful security operations with accountability, civilian protection, political dialogue, economic recovery, educational continuity, and inclusive governance. The people of the South-East need security without abuse, political voice without coercion, and development without fear.

Ultimately, the sit-at-home order presents a test of Nigerian democracy. Can the state protect citizens while respecting their rights? Can political movements pursue collective aspirations without harming the communities they claim to represent? Can grievances rooted in history and marginalisation be addressed through dialogue rather than violence? Answering these questions affirmatively is the necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and politically stable South-East within a democratic Nigeria.

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