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Mini Review Article

The Impact of The Covid-19 Pandemic on Humanitarian Operations in Northeast Nigeria A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Introduction: *The COVID-19 pandemic continues as a significant worldwide health threat. The pandemic affects everyone worldwide, but the magnitude and impact of the COVID-19 crisis are highly heterogeneous and vary from region to region and country to country. Undeniably, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria.*

Objective: *This study aimed to systematically review published available literature, reports, and case studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian aid programming and lessons learned throughout the pandemic period in the study area to avoid redundancy and to identify new problems and possibilities for further research.*

Methods: *We employed a systematic literature review approach. We employed a comprehensive and rigorous mixed research method for this systematic review. An extensive literature review was carried out from August to October 2021 by searching various online databases like Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and PubMed using specific keywords related to SARS-CoV-2, the COVID-19 pandemic, impact, humanitarian aid, and Nigeria.*

Results: *The initial electronic search identified over 500 scholarly papers and potentially published articles, of which 44 met the inclusion criteria. Ultimately, this study included and reviewed 44 documents. Most of these studies noted a significant association or effects of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria, and most studies were descriptive in nature and reported. Overall, international humanitarian actors faced the double burden of increasing needs with limited access and a significant funding reduction, including massive cost-cutting and reallocation of funds. Also, COVID-19 has compounded the existing humanitarian crises in Nigeria with an increased need for foreign aid and access. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria.*

Conclusions and recommendations: *The result of this systematic review confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria. There is a lack of research and information on the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations, responses, and interventions in the study area. Therefore, it will be recommended that operational research be conducted to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian operations and associated factors in Northeast Nigeria or a similar context to understand the full impact.*

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Impact, Humanitarian Operation, Systematic Review, Nigeria

Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
IDP	Internally displaced people
INGO	International Non Governemntal Organizations
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
NCDC	Nigeria Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
NGO	Non Governmental Oraganization
NSAGs	Non-State Armed Groups
SARS-CoV-2	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund,
UNOCHA	The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the infectious agent that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which was initially identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world [1]. SARS-CoV-2 is extremely contagious and quickly spreads throughout the world. The COVID-19 outbreak was deemed a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020 [2]. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak to be a pandemic [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic remains a major global health concern [4]. By August 10, 2021, COVID-19 had killed nearly 4,303,515 people and infected 203,295,170 people in almost 220 countries worldwide, making it a serious global health issue [5]. The pandemic is the world's worst health crisis in the past 75 years, according to the UN [6]. The deadly virus that has all but shut down the universe is called COVID-19. Several million people have died as a result of it globally [7]. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world and become a serious threat to public health worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant loss of life on a global scale and poses an unprecedented public health challenge. In the twenty-first century, COVID-19 poses the biggest threat to economies and public health worldwide [9]. The COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone worldwide, but the magnitude and impact of the COVID-19 crisis are highly heterogeneous and vary from region to region and country to country [10]. However, Africa is the least-hit continent compared to other continents [11]. In response to the outbreak, governments and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are implementing various measures to address the pandemic; however, the standard public health measures adopted are particularly challenging to execute in humanitarian settings. Africa is one of the continents affected by the pandemic, and Nigeria is one of the countries affected [8,12]. Nigeria was among the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to identify coronavirus cases [13]. On February 27, 2020, an Italian national in Lagos tested positive for the coronavirus, marking the first confirmed case of the pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 in Nigeria [14]. As of September 7, 2021, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) reported 2,556 deaths, discharged 184,882 patients, and 195,890 confirmed cases [15]. The UNFPA report states that COVID-19 has impacted Nigeria's 36 states as well as Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory [16]. However, new cases of the ongoing pandemic are reported every day, which presents a serious threat to public health. The future appears uncertain in these conditions [17]. Nigeria is one of the African countries significantly affected by the rapidly spreading pandemic, primarily due to its poor healthcare system and limited resources. But since the outbreak, the Nigerian government has been fighting the pandemic by enforcing border controls, limiting the movement of refugees, and closing down camps for displaced people. These actions could make it extremely difficult to deliver life-saving services and humanitarian aid. Paradoxically, before the pandemic, humanitarian actors faced a wide range of access challenges due to security threats by insurgents called Boko Haram, especially in northeast Nigeria.

Humanitarian organizations have already reported reduced access to affected populations and disruption of humanitarian operations, exacerbated the humanitarian response in complex humanitarian crises, and affected program performance or projects. The suspension and lockdown of international flights, quarantines, testing requirements, curfews, and travel prohibitions across regions have seriously affected international staff and supply chains. Indeed, the pandemic has severely affected humanitarian assistance, especially in complex emergency contexts, both the delivery of assistance and program performance in northeast Nigeria. However, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian programming delivery vary significantly from organization to organization and place to place, coupled with movement restrictions imposed by the country and security threats due to insurgents. The pandemic has had an acute impact, especially on vulnerable populations receiving humanitarian assistance. Due to bureaucratic obstacles, increased movement restrictions, and the suspension of both domestic and international flights, the COVID-19 outbreak led to a reduction in humanitarian efforts to "life-saving assistance" in certain contexts. Furthermore, governments have imposed further limitations on humanitarian organizations' access to populations in need in certain contexts. Ironically, the pandemic made things worse, led to more people in need, and raised the demand for humanitarian aid. As a result, many donors began prioritizing humanitarian response over longer-term development funding. The major cost-cutting and reallocation of funds away from important humanitarian projects to combat the pandemic is, regrettably, the most devastating effect of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid. Even though aid has increased from pre-pandemic levels, the global economic downturn has resulted in significant funding shortages for humanitarian aid in a time of growing need and inequality, which has affected their capacity to fulfill their basic missions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the need for foreign aid in certain contexts because its devastating effects have rapidly worsened development indicators and dramatically decreased other sources of development finance, including investment and remittances. Unquestionably, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on humanitarian aid operations. Since the pandemic started, scholars have been researching and publishing their studies on the impact of COVID-19. However, scientists have not yet fully understood the full impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on humanitarian programming or intervention, specifically in developing countries like Nigeria. Therefore, there is a lack of evidence or limited research on the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid. However, it is still unclear which aspects of impact on humanitarian aid and response have already been studied and which aspects require further research, even though the number of articles on this topic has been steadily rising due to the lack of systematic literature reviews. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct this systematic review of existing research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on

humanitarian aid and provide recommendations and lessons learned in the near future. This study can provide valuable information about the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian responses and interventions, which will assist NGOs, donors, policymakers, experts, researchers, academicians, and other stakeholders in making informed decisions to design and implement specific sustainable solutions and interventions. Moreover, the results of this study provide baseline information for further research and a foundation for predicting the impact of a similar epidemic based on the study's findings. Additionally, the findings from this study will offer insights into how pandemics affect humanitarian aid strategies, thereby assisting in the formulation of policies for effective planning for future outbreaks based on the latest scientific evidence. Furthermore, this review will also provide valuable evidence to support donors, international assistance agencies or donors, implementing agencies, and government sectors to plan for and respond to emergencies during the pandemic or other waves or for other newly emerging diseases or outbreaks in the near future.

2. Methods

2.1. Description of the study area

Nigeria lies in West Africa and is formally known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. It is positioned in the Atlantic Ocean between the Sahel to the north and the Gulf of Guinea to the south. It is 923,769 square kilometers (574,003 square miles) big and has more than 211 million people living there. In the north, Nigeria shares a border with Niger. In the northeast, it shares a border with Chad. It is bordered to the east by Cameroon. In the west, it shares a border with Benin. Nigeria is a federal republic with 36 states. Abuja is the capital city of the country.

2.2. Study Design

We employed a systematic literature review approach. Also, we employed a comprehensive and rigorous mixed research method for this systematic review.

2.3. Search Strategy

A systematic review of published and unpublished literature in English up to the end of September 2021 was conducted on the impact of Covid-19 on humanitarian aid. Published articles were systematically searched on platforms like Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, MeSH, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), SciMatic, Cochrane, Elsevier, Wiley, PLOS, Semantic Scholar, BMJ, and others using specific keywords: SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 pandemic and impact, humanitarian aid, and Nigeria. We scrutinized the references cited by each potentially relevant paper, review, and book chapter to identify additional potential papers. We searched and added reports and updates from the World Health Organization (WHO), NGOs, UN agencies, funding agencies, the Nigeria Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC), the private sector, and other authentic sources. We also searched relevant websites. The final selection was based on the full text of all potentially relevant articles. Accordingly, literature was reviewed from journals, policy briefs, press releases, and different sources for this systematic review, and data from the Federal Ministry of Health, the National COVID-19 database, NCDC, and UN agencies were also reviewed. The final selection was based on the full text of all potentially applicable articles.

2.4. Eligibility Criteria

All studies and reports, whether published or unpublished, that are written in English and relevant to the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid in Nigeria are eligible for consideration in this study. There was no restriction on the study period or type due to limited research in the area. Papers were excluded if they were review articles, studies reporting confused data or with probable errors, studies without any information on the country, or studies that could not be fully accessed. The papers that met the inclusion criteria did not undergo a formal quality evaluation. We contacted the corresponding authors using the email address or phone number provided in the published articles.

2.5. Data Extraction

We systematically extracted data from relevant scientific papers and reports. The required information that was extracted from all eligible papers was as follows: data on the study, study outcome, first author's last name, year of publication and country of the study, the study name, study design characteristics, study years, and findings of studies. This review organized and presented the results systematically. We did not undertake any quality assessment of the included papers.

2.6. Risk of Bias and Quality Assessment

Due to a lack of data, we did not exclude any studies based on study quality. Thus, a formal assessment of bias was not possible for each study.

2.7. Ethical Consideration

Since this systematic review uses existing data from previously published studies in which primary investigators obtained informed consent, it did not receive ethical approval.

3. Results and Discussion

The initial electronic search identified over 500 scholarly papers and potentially published articles, of which 44 fulfilled the inclusion criteria. First, we read the titles of the 500 documents and excluded 424 of them because of the non-relevant titles. Secondly, we read the abstracts of the remaining literature and excluded 52 of them, as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. In the end, we included and reviewed 44 documents. Figure 1 summarizes the screening and selection process for the study.

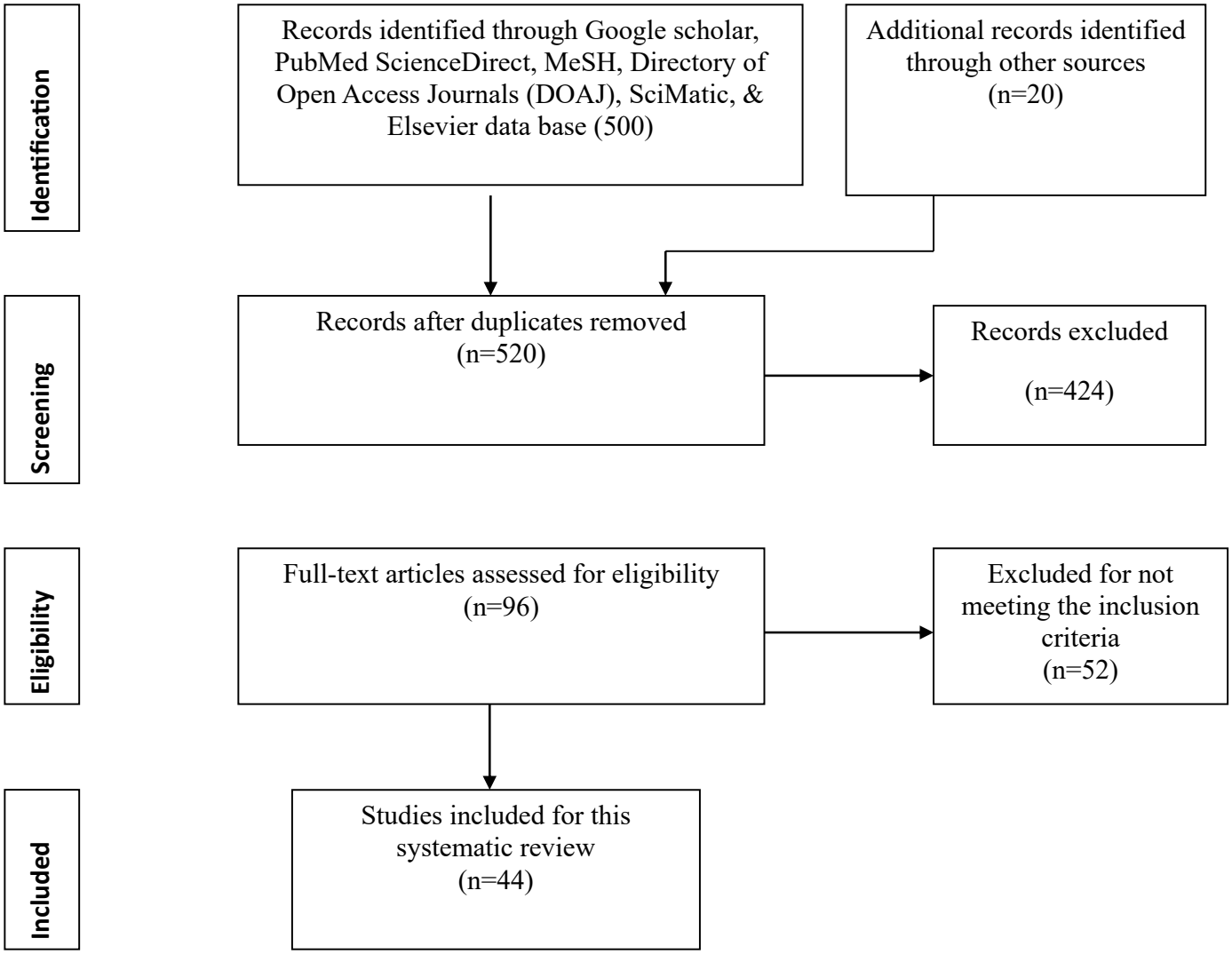

Figure 1: Flowchart for the Literature Search Strategy

This systematic review assessed the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria. Thus, we reviewed studies and reports identifying the effects and associations between COVID-19 and humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria. Most of these studies noted a significant association or effects of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria. Most studies were descriptive and reported their findings. Northeast Nigeria is one of the most pronounced, multi-faceted, and complex humanitarian and development crises [18]. The security situation in Northeast Nigeria continues to remain unpredictable and has deteriorated over time [19]. Due to ongoing conflicts and military operations, insecurity has led to waves of mass displacement and continues to impact humanitarian operations [20]. The ongoing conflict in Northeast Nigeria has led to increased population displacement, loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, malnutrition, inadequate basic health services, and poor sanitation [21]. According to the UNOCHA 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 35% of health facilities in Northeast Nigeria, specifically in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states, were damaged due to the conflict [22]. Humanitarian organizations have faced increased access constraints and security-related incidents that hamper more effective humanitarian response in Northeast Nigeria, and humanitarian aid organizations were forced to scale down activities and temporarily withdraw their staff in some areas [23]. According to the UNICEF report, there is an increase in non-state armed groups (NSAGs) attacks against civilians, humanitarian workers, and aid facilities, and humanitarian access is highly restricted in northeast Nigeria. The situation has remained highly volatile for humanitarian actors due to increased hostilities and military operations that have led to waves of mass displacement and continued to impact humanitarian operations [24]. Because of insecurity and the risk of attacks on aid workers, humanitarian access is severely restricted in areas affected by conflict and under armed group control. In Nigeria, obstacles to humanitarian access are still severe. The Boko Haram crisis has led the Nigerian military to prohibit aid organizations from

operating outside government-controlled areas in the northeast. This has prevented those in need from accessing areas controlled by insurgents. The operational environment is unstable and unpredictable due to insurgent-caused insecurity, which includes reported attacks on important road infrastructure [25]. Undeniably, humanitarian access in the conflict-affected areas of northeast Nigeria has been highly constrained since the start of the crisis in 2009 [26]. As a result, Nigeria is one of the most challenging operational environments for humanitarian aid organizations. Therefore, before the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak, humanitarian actors faced a wide range of access challenges. Surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic came at a time of worsening security and growing humanitarian needs [27]. Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the situation and increases the risk of chaos among the most vulnerable. Conversely, access constraints, congestion in IDP camps, and poor health and sanitation infrastructure make the COVID-19 pandemic response more complex. This makes the humanitarian situation in northeast Nigeria pose particular challenges for COVID-19 infection prevention and control. The humanitarian situation in Nigeria remains one of the largest crises in the world today [28].

The COVID-19 pandemic added unprecedented challenges to implementing humanitarian intervention in Northeast Nigeria. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic harms all dimensions of human security [29,30]. However, scientists have not yet fully understood the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the impact on humanitarian aid in a complex emergency. Therefore, this systematic review assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria, and the following section briefly describes these impacts. Nigeria's government imposed many rules and regulations on movement restrictions, partial lockdowns, and cargo movement in response to the pandemic. The government temporarily banned supply chains, social and religious gatherings, and closed schools and businesses. Movement restrictions and lockdowns seriously affect supply chains and the delivery of vital life-saving humanitarian assistance in the study area. Meanwhile, aid workers have been stepping up their efforts to raise awareness about preventing the spread of COVID-19 and putting risk mitigation measures in place, such as setting up handwashing stations and building quarantine shelters [31]. Humanitarian aid organizations struggle to provide help in a more dangerous environment while maintaining the progress made in the area; additionally, COVID-19 movement restrictions have made reaching vulnerable populations harder. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting humanitarian operations and access in northeast Nigeria. Humanitarian agencies in Nigeria say that staff members not being able to move freely around the country has made it harder to provide services and assistance and in some cases has even stopped program activities for long periods of time, including life-saving services like basic health care, nutrition programs, and food distribution [32]. The restriction has also made it harder to evaluate and monitor program delivery. Furthermore, the suspension of this program is likely to lead to a significant decline in the nutritional status of internally displaced individuals. In turn, limited monitoring also impacted the quality of the activities implemented and the ability of humanitarian actors to assess the existence and level of new or increasing needs. However, the impact varied significantly between large international organizations and smaller national and local ones [33]. The military and security forces have made it even harder for humanitarian groups to get the help they need by delaying the import of life-saving drugs and other medical supplies and setting fuel restrictions for assistance groups. This is on top of the already huge problems they confront because of the COVID-19 outbreak [34]. Bureaucratic obstacles that hinder humanitarian access include the high cost and lengthy processing of international staff visas, the inability of organizations to import basic supplies like fuel and medicine, and the vagueness of registration laws. COVID-19 containment measures like travel bans and visa restrictions are likely to aggravate the situation [35]. Additionally, restrictions on the movement of humanitarian cargo continue to impact operations in northeast Nigeria. The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting people's livelihoods and deepening hunger with lockdowns and movement restrictions limiting livelihood opportunities, hindering access to farmlands, and reducing the food available in markets across northeast Nigeria. In Nigeria, movement restrictions have messed up supply chains, food distribution, and the delivery of humanitarian help. This situation has forced humanitarian efforts to be cut back to solely life-saving aid, which has affected the delivery of humanitarian programs. However, it varies significantly from place to place and organization within a country [24,36,37]. Reports have indicated a shortage of medical supplies, particularly essential drugs. At the same time, it took one year to get drugs from abroad, which resulted in a devastating impact on health program quality and performance [38]. The COVID-19 crisis has made things worse in all parts of Nigeria, both directly and indirectly. The COVID-19 pandemic has also greatly compromised human capital through travel restrictions and mandatory distancing, posing numerous obstacles for international organizations to carry out the logistics of relief operations. Since the outbreak of the epidemic in March 2020, movement restrictions, limitations on mass gatherings, and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have interrupted both development and humanitarian program delivery. This includes life-saving interventions such as food distribution, nutrition, and other basic health services. Additionally, increased food insecurity is expected to lead to higher levels of malnutrition in the study areas [37].

The result from another study showed that interruption of community-based malnutrition programs had increased the prevalence of wasting by 10–50%, with an excess of 40,000–2,000,000 child deaths [39]. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic is also a contributing factor to the increase in the prevalence of malnutrition in Northeast Nigeria. It has exacerbated the nutritional status among mothers and children in the study area [40]. Moreover, the IPC acute malnutrition analysis conducted by the Nutrition Sector in February 2020 indicates

that the nutritional situation has deteriorated. Researchers have reported a high prevalence of malnutrition in Northeast Nigeria during the COVID-19 outbreak compared to pre-pandemic levels [41]. Unfortunately, the most devastating impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid has been the massive cost-cutting and reallocation of funds away from key humanitarian projects to address the pandemic, which has caused humanitarian organizations to face severe challenges in reaching their targets and assisting the people who are most in need [37, 42,43]. This cost-cutting measure in response to COVID-19 compelled most of the international charitable organizations and local NGOs to shut down their operations partially or entirely and reduce their presence on the ground in Northeast Nigeria, where relief programs are needed. Thus, funding has been a significant challenge in northeast Nigeria's humanitarian response. Despite the significant reduction in funding, considerable funding was pumped into the COVID-19 pandemic response for organizations working in health sectors. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has created funding opportunities for some organizations. During the pandemic, we observed high price inflation, in addition to funding deficits and resource reallocations. Effective and efficient provision of humanitarian relief aid has been problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northeast Nigeria [44]. Overall, international humanitarian actors faced the double burden of increasing needs with limited access and a significant funding reduction, including massive cost-cutting and reallocation of funds. Also, COVID-19 has compounded the existing humanitarian crises in Nigeria, which have led to an increased need for foreign aid and access. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria.

4. Limitations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

4.1. Limitations

This systematic review used only results from peer-reviewed articles and reports published in the English language in the final analyses, and it was limited to studies conducted in Nigeria, specifically in northeast Nigeria. We also noted a significant degree of heterogeneity across studies.

4.2. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, based on this systematic review, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted humanitarian aid operations in Northeast Nigeria. This review will provide valuable evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations or responses and interventions for international NGOs, local NGOs, UN agencies, donors, policymakers, experts, researchers, academicians, and other concerned bodies for decision-making to take appropriate measures by designing and implementing specific sustainable solutions, interventions, and responses. Moreover, the results of this study provide baseline information for further research and a foundation for predicting the impact of similar epidemics based on their findings. Also, the findings from this study would provide insights into the impact of pandemics on humanitarian aid strategies and hence help inform policy for effective planning for future outbreaks based on the latest scientific evidence. The study area has limited research and information on the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian aid operations, responses, and interventions. Therefore, it will be recommended that operational research be conducted to assess the real impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian operations and associated factors in Northeast Nigeria or a similar context to understand the full impact.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Non applicable

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