

Impact of Land Disputes on Rural Poverty and Community Development in Abia State, Nigeria

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Land disputes in Nigeria, particularly in Abia State, have severe socioeconomic consequences, devastating communities and hindering human capital and infrastructure development. This study reviews existing literature on the impact of land disputes on rural poverty and community development in Abia State, employing historical and descriptive research design based on qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The findings reveal that land disputes are a pervasive issue in Abia State, caused by various interconnected factors, including ambiguities in customary land tenure, territorial boundary conflicts, succession-related conflicts, land acquisition and development-related disputes, and inadequacies in land administration. These disputes have led to reduced agricultural productivity, food insecurity, and poverty among rural households. To address land disputes in Abia State, the government should enhance land administration by investing in digital registration systems and training administrators. Additionally, establishing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as community-based mediation centers, can help resolve disputes amicably. Promoting sustainable land use practices, like agroforestry and conservation agriculture, and supporting community-led land use planning can also prevent conflicts. Finally, improving access to essential resources, including land, water, and credit facilities, is vital to reduce poverty and improve agricultural productivity.

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Background to the Study

In Nigeria, the quest for land control and the emotional ties to ancestral territories are primary drivers of conflict (Agheyisi, 2019). Land access can unlock opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, education, and youth empowerment. However, competing land claims have fueled around 90% of violent communal clashes, with farmer-herder conflicts escalating tensions (Otite & Albert, 2012; von Uexkull & Pettersson, 2018; Watson, 2023). Research on communal conflict highlights the pivotal role of shared community identity, which can be shaped by demographic, socioeconomic, and situational factors (Brosche & Elfversson, 2015). The struggle for control over resources like land and local political power often leads to violent confrontations. Historically, communal land conflicts have caused widespread displacement, hardship, and devastation, resulting in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Land-related issues, including disputes, invasions, and annexations, as well as farmer-herder clashes, are key catalysts of communal conflict (Anierobi & Obasi, 2012).

Land disputes are a persistent challenge in Abia State, Nigeria, driven by the quest for land control and emotional ties to ancestral territories (Uche, 2013). Access to land is crucial for socioeconomic mobility, education, and youth empowerment in the state (Nwajiuba, 2017). However, competing land claims have fueled violent communal clashes, with farmer-herder conflicts escalating tensions in Abia State (Ikejiofor, 2018; Okoro, 2019). Research highlights the pivotal role of shared community identity in communal conflict, shaped by demographic, socioeconomic, and situational factors (Okoli, 2015). The struggle for control over land resources and local political power often leads to violent confrontations in Abia State. Historically, communal land conflicts have caused displacement, hardship, and devastation, resulting in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the state (Anierobi & Obasi, 2021). Land-related issues, including disputes, invasions, and annexations, as well as farmer-herder clashes, are key catalysts of communal conflict in Abia State (Ezeanya, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The pervasive issue of land disputes in Nigeria has far-reaching consequences for the socioeconomic fabric of both rural and urban areas. The fallout from these disputes can have devastating and potentially lethal repercussions, affecting not only individuals but also entire communities and societies (Mbazor, 2019). This research endeavours to explore the nexus between land disputes and the development of human capital and infrastructure in affected communities with focus in Abia State, Nigeria. To this end, the study undertakes examination of the specific ways in which land disputes impede community development in the State, with a view to identifying pragmatic solutions to mitigate these disputes and promote sustainable rural growth. Abia State, Nigeria, is grappling with the entrenched issue of land disputes, which has severe repercussions for rural socioeconomic dynamics and community growth. The confluence of fertile agricultural land and escalating demands for urban expansion and industrial growth has spawned a complex web of competing land claims, igniting inter-personal, inter-communal, and inter-ethnic conflicts. These disputes have stifled rural progress, entrenched poverty, and eroded social harmony. The fallout of land disputes on rural poverty is particularly distressing. Land-related conflicts have precipitated the displacement of rural populations, loss of income-generating activities, and destruction of

agricultural assets. This has exacerbated poverty, food insecurity, and vulnerability among rural households. Moreover, land disputes have also hindered community development by fostering social discord, undermining institutional trust, and diverting resources away from critical public services. The protracted nature of land disputes in Abia State, Nigeria, underscores the need for a nuanced examination of their impact on rural poverty and community development.

The Objective of the Study

To review existing literature on the impact of land disputes on rural poverty and community development in Abia State, Nigeria.

Method

The study employed historical and descriptive research design. Qualitative data collection from secondary was adopted, which were analysis analysed based on their content and documentary relevance to topic.

The Study Area: Abia State

Abia State, located in southeastern Nigeria, is a hub of commerce and industry, renowned for its vibrant markets, craftsmanship, and innovations in manufacturing. The state is deeply rooted in its cultural heritage, while embracing modern advancements, making it an attractive place for entrepreneurs and innovators.



Figure 1: The Political Map of Abia State

Brief History

Abia State was created on August 27, 1991, following the division of the former Imo State. Its capital is Umuahia, while Aba is its commercial nerve center. The state is made up of 17 local

government areas and has a long history of commerce, craftsmanship, and agricultural production.

Leadership

The current Governor of Abia State is Dr. Alex Chioma Otti, OFR, a Nigerian economist, banker, investor, philanthropist, and writer. He was sworn in on May 29, 2023, and is currently serving his first term in office, with Engr Ikechukwu Emetu as his Deputy Governor.

Economy and Geography

Abia State is bordered by Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom States. The state has a variety of geographic features, including rivers, forests, and fertile lands, making agriculture a major part of its economy. Abia is an important player in oil palm production, yam, cassava, and vegetable cultivation. Apart from agriculture, Abia is also rich in crude oil and gas, contributing to Nigeria's petroleum industry.

Cultural Heritage

Abia is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people, and its residents are known for their strong cultural identity and entrepreneurship. The state is renowned for Akwete cloth, a traditional textile unique to the Akwete people in the Ukwu East local government area. Ekpe and Masquerade festivals are integral parts of the state's cultural heritage, reflecting the rich traditional beliefs and practices of the people.

Demographics

The population of Abia State is about 4.8 million people, with 46% of the population in the labour force. 70% of the labour involved in agriculture. The literacy rate is about 89%, representing a significant pool of skilled labour. The internet penetration in the state is about 58%.

Conceptualization

The Concept of Land Disputes

Land disputes and insecure land tenure exacerbate rural poverty, while secure land ownership can be a powerful catalyst for economic growth and poverty alleviation. In rural areas, limited access to land perpetuates poverty, undermines food security, and restricts household income. Land disputes, in particular, can lead to the displacement of rural communities, loss of livelihoods, and destruction of agricultural infrastructure, thereby entrenching poverty. Conversely, resolving land disputes and securing land rights can empower marginalized communities, enhance their food security, and increase their household income, ultimately contributing to sustainable rural development (Cotula, Toulmin & Quan, 2006).

A substantial body of research indicates that a more equitable distribution of land is conducive to robust economic expansion (Deininger & Squire, 1998). Although historical precedents, such as the industrialization of Great Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, demonstrate that economic development can occur despite significant land inequality, empirical evidence suggests that countries with more balanced land distributions tend to

exhibit higher economic growth rates over the long term (Deininger, 2003). Furthermore, a more equitable distribution of land is also linked to enhanced social stability and cohesion, as concentrated land ownership can foster perceptions of injustice, potentially culminating in land invasions and violent confrontations (Cotula et al., 2006).

The interplay between land access and poverty alleviation is inextricably linked to the broader landscape of agricultural and economic policies, as well as rural development strategies and environmental considerations. The allocation of land rights and opportunities for land access has far-reaching implications for wealth distribution, economic growth rates, poverty levels, and the trajectory of agricultural development (Cotula et al., 2004). Moreover, the dynamics of agricultural development exert a profound influence on farm incomes, land values, and demands for land resources, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to addressing the complex relationships between land access, poverty, and sustainable development.

In Abia State, the prevalence of land disputes has been linked to the state's complex land tenure system, which is characterized by overlapping claims, conflicting interests, and inadequate land administration (Ikejiofor, 2018).

The Concept of Rural Poverty

Poverty constitutes a multifaceted societal issue characterized by insufficient access to essential resources, thereby hindering individuals' ability to participate fully in economic and social activities. This deprivation can lead to social exclusion, as individuals are compelled to restrict their consumption below the minimum standards accepted within their country or region. Furthermore, poverty can also be spatially concentrated, affecting specific geographic areas, such as peripheral regions distant from major urban centers. The complexities of poverty extend beyond mere financial constraints or low consumption levels, encompassing also the notion of "consumption convention," which denotes an objectively assessable deprivation of fundamental needs, ultimately impeding social integration (Kalinowski, 2016).

Concept of Community Development

According to Ebo and Udentia (2023), rural development constitutes a holistic concept that integrates multiple dimensions, including socioeconomic advancement, educational progress, and political empowerment. To achieve economic prosperity, rural populations must adopt rational economic practices and cultivate competitiveness. However, World Bank Group (2018) states that rural development is a targeted strategy aimed at enhancing the economic and social welfare of rural populations, particularly the most disadvantaged. This approach involves ensuring that the benefits of development are shared equitably with vulnerable rural populations, including smallholder farmers, tenants, and landless individuals, who rely heavily on rural resources for their livelihoods. Key indicators of rural development examined in this study include agricultural productivity, healthcare service delivery, and human capital development.

Rural development entails a multifaceted transformation aimed at elevating rural communities to optimal standards of living, characterized by social cohesion, economic viability, political empowerment, educational advancement, and infrastructural development. According to the workshop on Rural Development in Africa and the workshop group on integrated approach to Rural Development (1996), Rural Development is predicated on the equitable allocation of national resources, recognizing that comprehensive national growth necessitates the inclusive participation of all segments of the population. This concept is further elucidated as a socioeconomic process geared towards achieving a more balanced distribution of resources and income within a societal context. A pivotal aspect of Rural Development involves the economic mainstreaming of rural populations, who constitute a significant majority in most developing countries. In many of these countries, agricultural activities serve as the primary occupation for a substantial proportion of rural inhabitants.

Theoretical Framework

Social Conflict theory

Social conflict theory posits that social change arises from conflicts, not gradual value adjustments. This perspective counters structural functional theory, which emphasizes societal order. Conflict is a pervasive social phenomenon, driven by power struggles and competing interests. It is a normal aspect of community dynamics, but becomes problematic when violence is involved. Conflict is an inherent part of human awareness, shaping individual and collective experiences. Through conflict, societies undergo transformative processes, yielding new social orders and compromises that differ from initial conditions (Prayogi, 2023).

The foundations of conflict theory can be traced back to Karl Marx's seminal work in 1814, which centered on the dialectical tensions between the ruling elite (bourgeoisie) and the subjugated masses (proletariat). Marx's critical examination of capitalism's ascendancy in Europe revealed a system fraught with economic, social, and political disparities. He posited that the inherent contradictions between the dominant bourgeoisie and the exploited proletariat would inevitably spawn conflict, as their interests were fundamentally incompatible, and resources were disproportionately allocated in favor of the powerful minority. The connection between land and conflict is often unbreakable. Land and natural resource disputes frequently underlie or significantly contribute to the outbreak of conflict. Research has shown that natural resources have been a factor in at least 40% of internal conflicts worldwide (UNEP, 2009). Furthermore, land issues have been a major driver of nearly all intra-state conflicts in Africa since 1990, with only three exceptions (Wiley, 2005).

Social Conflict Theory sheds light on the complexities of land disputes in Abia State, Nigeria. It reveals how unequal land distribution fuels social tensions, economic hardship, and stifled community progress. By examining the intricate relationships between land disputes, rural poverty, and community development, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the issue. Furthermore, this theoretical framework highlights the role of competing interests, power struggles, and resource inequality in driving social transformation. In Abia State, land

disputes often mirror class divisions between affluent landowners and marginalized rural communities. The influence of power dynamics on land allocation perpetuates poverty and hinders growth. Nevertheless, conflict can catalyze positive change, paving the way for more equitable land access and sustainable development.

Empirical Review

Causes of land disputes in Abia State, Nigeria

Land-related tensions are a pervasive issue in Nigeria and other African nations (van Baalen, 2024). The age-old conundrum is particularly pronounced in boundary communities, where the value attached to land is a significant factor. As a vital resource that sustains life, communities are reluctant to cede control to outsiders (Nwokafor, Obasi, & Emenike, 2020). Any perceived infringement on land rights is met with fierce resistance, often escalating into violent conflict (Obasi, Nwokafor, & Olisa, 2020). Communal land disputes can assume various forms, including intra-community, inter-community, and inter-state conflicts. In some instances, these disputes involve government entities and communities, resulting in devastating consequences, including loss of life, property destruction, and displacement (Ugwuoke, Ajah, 2020). A study examining land disputes in Nigeria's Southeast zone revealed alarming losses in human lives and materials. In Abia State, for example, approximately 5,000 individuals across 20 communities in 17 Local Council Areas were displaced.

The proliferation of land disputes in Abia State, Nigeria, can be attributed to a multitude of interconnected factors, which include but not limited to:

Ambiguities in Customary Land Tenure: The customary land tenure system in Abia State is often shrouded in ambiguity, leading to contentious issues surrounding land ownership. This ambiguity can precipitate disputes, particularly when competing claims or overlapping boundaries are involved (Umeoduagu, 2018).

Territorial Boundary Conflicts: Conflicts over territorial boundaries are a pervasive issue in Abia State, frequently arising from disagreements between communities or individuals regarding the precise delineation of their lands. Such disputes can escalate into encroachment, trespassing, and other forms of conflict (Eke, 2017).

Succession-Related Conflicts: The demise of a landowner can trigger intense disputes among family members or beneficiaries regarding the rightful inheritance of the land. The absence of a clear will or succession plan can exacerbate these conflicts (Nwagbara, 2015).

Land Acquisition and Development-Related Disputes: The increasing demand for land in Abia State has led to conflicts between communities, individuals, and government agencies regarding land ownership, compensation, and development. These disputes can be complex and contentious (Uche, 2020).

Inadequacies in Land Administration: The ineffective administration of land in Abia State is a fundamental cause of land disputes. Inadequate land registration, poor record-keeping,

and inefficient dispute resolution mechanisms all contribute to the prevalence of land disputes in the state (Okoye, 2013).

Impact of Land Disputes on Rural Poverty and Development in Abia State

Land disputes can have devastating effects on a country's progress, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon. In these places, weak laws and corrupt systems make it hard for poor communities to access the land they need to survive (Wehrmann, 2008). Land conflicts can ruin lives, communities, and even entire nations. They also stop cities from growing and developing. Since land is crucial for people's livelihoods and well-being in Nigeria, as Mudenda (2006) says, "Land gives us food, shelter, status, and power," this study looks at how land disputes affect people's lives and community development.

Nigeria's land dispute landscape is characterized by intricate layers of complexity, with shifting dynamics influenced by regional specifics. Unraveling the intricacies of land disputes in Nigeria, particularly those that escalate into violent crises and impede urban growth, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the diverse dispute categories and a critical examination of their historical antecedents and contemporary contexts. As Gausset, Michael and Torben (2005) astutely noted, disparate perceptions of the same territorial space can fuel conflicts, which often stem from fundamental disagreements over resource definitions, management protocols, and competing perspectives.

The key areas where land disputes have affected rural poverty and development in Abia State, Nigeria, are:

Food Insecurity: Land disputes have led to reduced agricultural productivity, resulting in food insecurity and poverty among rural households (IFAD, 2013; Olomola, 2015).

Lack Livelihood Diversification: The lack of access to land has forced rural households to diversify their livelihoods, often leading to unsustainable practices and further poverty (World Bank, 2018; Ajayi, 2015).

Resource Base Needs: Land disputes have hindered rural farmers' access to essential resources, including land, water, and credit facilities (Oxfam, 2017; UNEP, 2009).

Agricultural Land Availability: Abia State's agricultural land availability is a significant concern, with only a fraction of the state's land area being economically utilized (NBS, 2017; Olomola, 2015).

Economic Opportunities: Land disputes have limited economic opportunities for rural households, forcing them to rely on unsustainable livelihoods and perpetuating poverty (World Bank, 2018; Ajayi, 2015).

Lack of Social Cohesion and Conflict: Land disputes erode social cohesion, fueling conflict, violence, and displacement in Abia State, leading to loss of lives, property, and livelihoods (UNEP, 2009; Olomola, 2015). They also cause displacement, exacerbating social tensions and conflict (IFAD, 2013).

Poor Economic Development and Infrastructure: Land disputes hinder economic development in Abia State, reducing investment, economic growth, and increasing poverty (World Bank, 2018; Ajayi, 2015). They also impede agricultural development, a significant contributor to the state's economy (AfDB, 2017, p. 20), and reduce infrastructure development (NBS, 2017).

Lack of Environmental Sustainability: Land disputes lead to environmental degradation in Abia State, causing deforestation, land degradation, and loss of biodiversity (UNEP, 2009, p. 25). They also result in pollution and soil erosion (NEST, 2015, p. 15).

Conclusion

In conclusion, land disputes are a pervasive issue in Abia State, Nigeria, with far-reaching consequences for rural poverty and development. The customary land tenure system, territorial boundary conflicts, succession-related conflicts, land acquisition and development-related disputes, and inadequacies in land administration are some of the interconnected factors contributing to land disputes in the state. The impact of land disputes on rural poverty and development in Abia State is devastating. Land disputes have led to reduced agricultural productivity, resulting in food insecurity and poverty among rural households. They have also hindered rural farmers' access to essential resources, including land, water, and credit facilities, and limited economic opportunities for rural households. Furthermore, land disputes have significant social and economic implications for community development in Abia State. They erode social cohesion, fueling conflict, violence, and displacement, leading to loss of lives, property, and livelihoods. Land disputes also hinder economic development in the state, reducing investment, economic growth, and increasing poverty.

Recommendations

To address the issues of land disputes in Abia State, Nigeria, the Abia State Government should take the following key steps:

- i. Enhance Land Administration:** The Abia State Government should establish efficient and transparent land registration, surveying, and mapping systems. This can be achieved by investing in digital land registration systems, training land administrators, and promoting community involvement in land administration.
- ii. Establish Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** The Abia State Government should set up community-based mediation centers, train mediators, and promote the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. This will help resolve land disputes amicably and reduce the burden on the formal justice system.
- iii. Promote Sustainable Land Use Practices:** The Abia State Government should encourage sustainable land use practices, such as agroforestry and conservation agriculture. This can be achieved by providing incentives for sustainable land use practices, promoting extension services, and supporting community-led conservation initiatives.
- iv. Support Community-Led Land Use Planning:** The Abia State Government should provide technical assistance to communities, promote participatory planning

processes, and support community-led initiatives. This will help prevent land use conflicts and promote sustainable land use practices.

- v. **Improve Access to Essential Resources:** The Abia State Government should promote land reform initiatives, support irrigation development, and provide microfinance services to rural farmers. This will help ensure that rural farmers have access to essential resources, including land, water, and credit facilities, to improve agricultural productivity and reduce poverty.

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