

Access to Land and its Effect on Rural Economic Empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Access to land is a crucial determinant of rural livelihoods and economic empowerment in developing countries. This study empirically investigates the relationship between land accessibility and rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria. Employing a mixed-methods approach, which includes 250 household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, the study examines land tenure systems, constraints in land acquisition, and their implications for agricultural productivity and rural entrepreneurship. Findings reveal that limited access to land significantly restricts rural economic empowerment due to tenure insecurity, gender bias, and the lack of formal land documentation. The study recommends reforms in land administration and increased community sensitisation to promote inclusive access and foster rural development.

Keywords: *Land, Rural Economic Empowerment, Southern Cross River State, Nigeria*

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Background to the Study

Land is a fundamental asset in rural economies, serving as the foundation for agriculture, housing, and investment. In Southern Cross River State, Nigeria, land plays a pivotal role in shaping the livelihood opportunities available to rural households. However, customary land tenure systems alongside increasing land scarcity have contributed to limited and unequal access, thereby impeding rural economic empowerment (FAO, 2019; Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020). Land remains a critical asset for economic development, especially in rural areas where the majority of the population depends on it for farming and other livelihood activities. Across sub-Saharan Africa, access to land is not only a means of production but also a source of identity, security, and empowerment (Cotula, Toulmin & Hesse, 2004). In Nigeria, land plays an indispensable role in rural economic empowerment, with over 70% of the rural population reliant on land for farming, forestry, and housing (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). Yet despite its importance, access to land remains highly contested and unequal, often shaped by customary tenure systems, statutory regulations, gender norms, and political power dynamics (Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020; Udo, 2010).

Southern Cross River State, characterized by diverse agro-ecological zones and a high rural population density, presents a compelling context for analysing the nexus between land access and economic empowerment. Many rural communities in the region practice subsistence and smallholder farming, with land forming the bedrock of their livelihood strategies (Nwosu, 2014). However, challenges such as insecure tenure, land fragmentation, limited formal documentation, and exclusionary customary practices hinder the productive utilisation of land (Ayoade, 2017). These barriers often perpetuate rural poverty, restrict agricultural investment, and undermine the capacity of rural dwellers to diversify their income sources.

Access to land, in both its physical and legal dimensions, determines the ability of rural individuals and households to engage in economic activities, obtain credit, and invest in long-term improvements (Deininger & Jin, 2006). Secure and equitable access enables economic empowerment by enhancing productivity, ensuring food security, and reducing vulnerability to shocks (Holden & Ghebru, 2016). Conversely, land insecurity can lead to disputes, discourage investment, and marginalise already vulnerable groups such as women and youth (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Ezeano & Obasi, 2014).

Despite various policy reforms—including the Land Use Act of 1978 and subsequent rural development strategies—many intended goals remain unmet. The centralised land ownership system has not translated into improved access for rural populations, especially in regions like Cross River State where customary tenure still prevails (Udo, 2010). In practice, access to land is shaped more by local traditions, elite capture, and socio-political affiliations than by formal laws (Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020). This discrepancy between policy and practice highlights the need for empirical research that interrogates how land access affects the economic agency of rural communities.

This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the effect of access to land on rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria. It aims to understand the nature of land access in the region, the challenges faced by rural households, and the extent to which land access contributes to economic outcomes such as income generation, investment, and livelihood diversification. By doing so, the research provides insights that can inform policy and intervention strategies aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable rural development.

Problem Statement

Land is an essential asset for rural livelihoods, particularly in agrarian economies such as Nigeria, where over 70% of the rural population depends on land for farming, housing, and natural resource extraction (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). In rural Southern Cross River State, land is not only the principal means of production but also a critical determinant of socio-economic status and empowerment. However, access to land remains a persistent challenge, characterised by tenure insecurity, gender-based exclusion, communal disputes, and bureaucratic obstacles to formal land ownership (Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020; Udo, 2010).

Despite constitutional and policy frameworks aimed at enhancing equitable land access—such as the Land Use Act of 1978—rural communities in Southern Cross River State largely operate under customary tenure systems that are often informal, patriarchal, and susceptible to elite capture (Ezeano & Obasi, 2014). These customary systems frequently deny women, youth, and migrants secure land rights, thereby limiting their participation in productive economic activities (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997). The absence of clearly defined property rights undermines investment in land-based enterprises, discourages long-term planning, and restricts access to credit, as land cannot be used as collateral under insecure tenure conditions (Deininger & Jin, 2006).

The result is a vicious cycle whereby land-poor rural dwellers remain economically marginalised, unable to diversify their livelihoods, accumulate capital, or escape poverty (Holden & Ghebru, 2016). This situation is particularly problematic in Southern Cross River State, a region characterised by high levels of rural poverty, limited off-farm employment, and growing pressure on land due to population increase and environmental degradation (Nwosu, 2014). Furthermore, youth unemployment in rural areas is exacerbated by limited land access, which restricts their entry into agriculture and other land-based livelihoods (Ayoade, 2017).

Empirical studies have confirmed the link between secure land access and rural economic empowerment, demonstrating that households with secure land rights tend to enjoy higher productivity, better food security, and greater income stability (Barrett et al., 2001; Cotula, Toulmin & Hesse, 2004). However, there is a lack of region-specific evidence from Southern Cross River State that clearly elucidates how variations in land access affect rural economic outcomes such as income generation, investment, and livelihood diversification.

This gap in knowledge hinders the formulation of targeted rural development policies and land reforms that address the specific needs of local populations. Without empirical insights into the dynamics of land access and its economic implications, efforts to empower rural communities and alleviate poverty in Southern Cross River State risk being ineffective or misdirected. Thus, this study seeks to examine the extent to which access to land influences rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria. It aims to identify key barriers to land access, assess the socio-economic implications of insecure tenure, and explore the pathways through which land access contributes to empowerment and livelihood transformation.

Objective of the Study

the primary objective of the paper is to investigate the relationship between land accessibility and rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to,

1. Examine the level of access to land among rural households in Southern Cross River State.
2. Assess the relationship between land access and agricultural productivity.
3. Evaluate how land access influences rural economic empowerment in

Literature Review

Conceptualising Access to Land

Access to land refers to the ability of individuals or groups to utilise land for productive purposes under various legal, social, and economic conditions. It encompasses rights to use, control, and transfer land, which are essential for agricultural productivity, food security, and rural development (FAO, 2019). In many African countries, including Nigeria, access to land is governed by a dual tenure system—customary and statutory—which often results in overlapping claims and legal ambiguity (ECA, 2004; Ayoadé, 2017).

In Southern Cross River State, customary tenure systems predominate, with land usually inherited or allocated by community leaders. However, this form of access is often informal and undocumented, creating insecurity and limiting investment potential (Nwosu, 2014). Women and young people are particularly disadvantaged under customary tenure arrangements due to traditional gender norms and age-based hierarchies (Ezeano & Obasi, 2014).

Land Access and Rural Livelihoods

Land is the most important physical asset in rural areas and forms the basis for both agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods (Ellis, 2000). In rural Nigeria, the majority of economic activities are land-based, such as farming, forestry, and small-scale mining. Limited access to land restricts households' ability to expand agricultural output, diversify crops, or engage in agro-processing (Adepoju & Obayelu, 2013).

According to Deininger et al. (2008), land access influences rural poverty through three channels: production (growing crops), collateral (accessing credit), and security (reducing vulnerability). Households with secure land access are more likely to invest in land improvement and engage in long-term agricultural planning. Conversely, insecure tenure discourages investment and encourages short-term land exploitation (World Bank, 2003).

The gendered nature of land access remains a persistent issue across Nigeria, including Cross River State. Despite their significant contribution to agriculture, women are less likely to own or control land (Ezeano & Obasi, 2014). Cultural practices often vest land ownership in men, leaving women dependent on male relatives for access. This marginalisation limits their ability to make independent economic decisions, secure credit, or invest in land development (Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020).

Studies have shown that gender-inclusive land policies lead to greater household food security and higher income levels (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997). In Ethiopia and Rwanda, for instance, reforms that strengthened women's land rights improved agricultural productivity and household welfare (Peterman et al., 2011). Similar reforms in Nigeria could empower rural women, increase productivity, and improve livelihood outcomes.

Land Tenure Security and Economic Empowerment

Tenure security—defined as the certainty that land rights will be recognised and enforced—plays a critical role in rural economic empowerment. Secure tenure encourages investment in land, facilitates access to credit, and reduces the risk of land-related disputes (Deininger & Jin, 2006). In regions where land is undocumented or arbitrarily allocated, rural dwellers face uncertainty that undermines their economic potential.

Holden and Ghebru (2016) found that land certification significantly increased agricultural investment and productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in Nigeria, the 1978 Land Use Act centralised land ownership under state governors, limiting individual land ownership and discouraging private land markets (Udo, 2010). This has led to widespread tenure insecurity, particularly in rural communities.

Land Markets and Economic Diversification

Efficient land markets enable rural households to access land through purchase, lease, or rent, supporting land mobility and economic diversification. However, in Cross River State, land markets are poorly developed due to the lack of formal documentation and the dominance of customary tenure (Ayoade, 2017). Consequently, non-farm rural economic activities such as agro-processing, animal husbandry, and horticulture are constrained.

Economic empowerment in rural areas depends not only on owning land but also on the ability to use land productively. The absence of formal titles often prevents rural entrepreneurs from using land as collateral for loans, limiting capital formation and

business expansion (World Bank, 2003). This is particularly evident in southern Cross River State, where land scarcity combined with institutional inefficiencies constrains rural development (Akinyemi & Nwosu, 2020).

Policy and Institutional Frameworks

The Nigerian government has implemented various land-related policies, including the Land Use Act (1978), the National Agricultural Policy (2001), and the Land Reform Agenda (2009). However, these have had limited impact on rural empowerment due to poor implementation, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and lack of community involvement (Udo, 2010).

Donor-supported programmes, such as the World Bank's Land Governance Assessment Framework, have highlighted the need for decentralised land administration and community-based land governance mechanisms (FAO, 2019). In Southern Cross River State, initiatives combining legal land titling with community sensitisation are considered essential for sustainable rural development (Nwosu, 2014).

Access to land is both a driver and a constraint to rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State. While customary tenure systems provide initial access, the lack of formal land titles, tenure insecurity, and gender disparities undermine the economic potential of rural households. Improving land access through legal reforms, institutional strengthening, and gender-sensitive interventions is critical for enhancing rural livelihoods and fostering inclusive development.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive survey design was employed, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Study Area

Southern Cross River State comprises the local government areas of Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Biase, Bakassi, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South, and Odukpani. The region is characterised by rainforest vegetation and predominantly agrarian livelihoods.

Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select three local government areas in the southern senatorial district: Odukpani, Akamkpa, and Biase. A multistage sampling approach then selected 250 rural households across five communities within each LGA. These LGAs were chosen due to their shared borders and land characteristics. Additionally, six key informant interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted.

Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and focus group discussion guides were utilised. The questionnaires captured demographic data, land access mechanisms, landholding size, and economic activities.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 25 for descriptive and inferential statistics (correlation and regression). Qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Results

Table 1: Respondents' Access to Land

Land Access Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inherited	110	44.0
Purchased	50	20.0
Rented/Leased	40	16.0
Communal Allocation	30	12.0
No Access	20	8.0
Total	250	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 2: Landholding Size and Economic Output

Landholding Size (Hectares)	Average Annual Income (₦)
Less than 1 hectare	180,000
1–2 hectares	350,000
2–4 hectares	600,000
Above 4 hectares	900,000

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3: Regression Analysis – Land Access and Rural Economic Empowerment

Variable	Beta Coefficient	t-value	p-value
Landholding Size	0.487	6.432	0.000
Security of Tenure	0.355	4.218	0.001
Access to Land Titles	0.298	3.821	0.002
Constant	1.004	2.004	0.046

Dependent Variable: Economic Empowerment Index (based on income, productivity, and investment)

Source: Regression Output from SPSS, 2024

Discussion

The findings indicate that inherited land remains the most common means of access, consistent with previous research emphasizing the dominance of customary tenure systems in Nigeria (Ayoade, 2017). However, the uneven distribution of land and the absence of formal titles restrict its effective utilization, particularly in accessing credit and

making long-term investments. The regression analysis reveals a strong positive correlation between landholding size and economic empowerment, suggesting that larger landholdings are directly associated with increased productivity and income. This aligns with findings by Adepoju and Obayelu (2013), who reported that access to land significantly influences rural income levels in Nigeria.

Security of tenure and formal land titling also emerged as significant predictors of empowerment, corroborating evidence that legal recognition of land ownership encourages investment and reduces land-related disputes (UN-Habitat, 2020). Gender disparities were highlighted during focus group discussions, which revealed that women—despite their substantial contribution to agricultural labour—frequently lack direct land ownership. This supports the argument by Ezeano and Obasi (2014) that entrenched patriarchal norms continue to impede women's economic participation in rural Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has comprehensively examined the critical role that access to land plays in shaping rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State, Nigeria. Land remains a vital asset and the foundation of rural livelihoods, serving as the principal resource for agricultural production, housing, and income-generating activities. The findings confirm that access to land is strongly linked to rural households' economic outcomes, including income generation, agricultural productivity, and entrepreneurial engagement.

A key conclusion is that customary land tenure systems continue to dominate land access in the region, with inherited land being the primary means through which rural households acquire land. However, the predominance of informal and undocumented landholding arrangements has led to widespread tenure insecurity. This insecurity undermines investment incentives and restricts opportunities for rural dwellers to use their land as collateral to obtain credit, thereby limiting capital accumulation and economic diversification. The absence of formal land titles further exacerbates these constraints, preventing many households from fully realising the economic potential of their land.

The research also highlights a significant disparity in land access between genders. Women, despite their critical involvement in agricultural and rural economic activities, frequently lack secure land rights due to entrenched patriarchal customs and traditional inheritance practices. This gender-based exclusion not only limits women's empowerment but also constrains overall household and community development, as women's secure land access is positively correlated with improved food security and income levels.

Moreover, the size of landholdings was found to be a decisive factor in determining the degree of economic empowerment. Larger landholdings correlate with greater

agricultural productivity and higher household incomes, emphasising the importance of equitable land distribution. However, land scarcity and fragmentation, combined with ineffective land markets and administrative inefficiencies, present persistent barriers to enhancing land access and utilisation. The study underscores the necessity for a multi-faceted approach to improving land access in Southern Cross River State. Legal reforms aimed at formalising land tenure and promoting gender equity must be prioritised alongside community education and sensitisation to change cultural norms and practices that marginalise women and youth. Strengthening institutional frameworks to ensure transparent and participatory land governance is also vital to reducing tenure insecurity and fostering inclusive rural development.

In conclusion, access to land remains both a driver and a constraint to rural economic empowerment in Southern Cross River State. Addressing the existing challenges related to tenure insecurity, gender disparity, and inadequate land administration is essential for unlocking the full economic potential of rural communities. Sustainable improvements in land access will not only enhance agricultural productivity and income generation but also contribute significantly to poverty reduction, social inclusion, and overall rural development in the region.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following,

1. Land Tenure Reform: Establish land registration systems that provide legal titles, with particular focus on women and youth.
2. Gender Equity Measures: Promote women's access to land through community sensitisation and legislative reforms.
3. Credit-Linked Titling: Link land documentation to microcredit schemes to facilitate investment in land-based enterprises.
4. Awareness Campaigns: Educate rural communities on their land rights and best practices for land-use optimisation.
5. Policy Integration: Ensure that land access is incorporated into rural development and poverty reduction policies at both local and state government levels.

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