

Psychosocial Trauma and Coping Strategies Among Agricultural Households in Conflict-Affected Communities in Eha-Amufu, Isi-Uzo LGA, Enugu State, Nigeria (2021–2022)

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychosocial trauma and coping strategies among agricultural households affected by the farmer-herder conflict in Eha-Amufu, Isi-Uzo LGA, Enugu State (2021–2025). Existing scholarship predominantly analyzes the conflict through political ecology and resource scarcity lenses, neglecting the severe mental health and behavioral dimensions of rural livelihoods. This paper fills that critical gap by arguing that chronic conflict-induced trauma fundamentally alters farmers' cognitive threat appraisals, driving maladaptive behavioral choices—such as farm abandonment and defensive distress selling—that worsen regional food insecurity. Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory, the argument is developed through semi-structured interviews with 45 key stakeholders, four focus group discussions with local farming households, and secondary agency reports. Findings indicate three core dynamics: first, pervasive fear and hyper-vigilance generate severe psychological distress, directly restricting daily agricultural mobility; second, households rely primarily on short-term, emotionally driven coping mechanisms rather than sustainable economic adaptation; and third, the absence of community-level mental health support deepens feelings of institutional abandonment and intergroup hostility. By integrating social psychology into conflict studies, this paper contributes a novel behavioral framework to rural development literature. Policy-wise, it demonstrates that traditional physical security interventions must be paired with trauma-informed agricultural policies, community-based psychosocial rehabilitation, and mental health infrastructure to rebuild resilient farming livelihoods in Eha-Amufu.

Keywords: *Psychosocial trauma, Coping strategies, Farmer-herder conflict, Threat appraisal, Agricultural households*

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Background to the Study

The primary aim of this study is to systematically examine how chronic conflict-induced psychosocial trauma (the independent variable) directly influences, reshapes, and constrains the coping strategies and behavioral decision-making of agricultural households (the dependent variable) in conflict-affected Eha-Amufu, Isi-Uzo Local Government Area, Enugu State, between 2021 and 2025. This inquiry is driven by four urgent empirical motivations reflecting the increasing intractability and devastation of the crisis in Eha-Amufu: first, the catastrophic human toll characterized by over 136 documented fatalities and more than 300 severe injuries within four years; second, the mass displacement of over 24,000 rural inhabitants, transforming a once-vibrant agricultural hub into a zone of humanitarian distress; third, the destruction of tens of thousands of hectares of prime farmland, resulting in widespread crop failure and severe food insecurity; and fourth, the total collapse of local economic systems, where smallholder farming households are forced into chronic poverty and displacement (Odalonu & Ugwuanyi, 2023; Iheanacho et al., 2022).

The localized violent crises in Eha-Amufu do not occur in an isolation chamber but rather serve as a poignant micro-level reflection of broader regional and global agrarian security dynamics, where agrarian smallholders face growing existential threats from transhumant, nomadic pastoralist movements. Across the West African sub-region—from the Sahel drylands to the agrarian belts of Ghana, Mali, and southern Nigeria—accelerating climate degradation, desertification, and southward migration patterns have systematically intensified competition over dwindling arable land and water corridors (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020; Cabot, 2016; Ohiri & Kazeem, 2024; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). Within global academic and policy discourses, this eco-violent friction is increasingly framed not merely as localized communal clashes but as a severe crisis of climate-induced displacement, asymmetric resource warfare, and structural governance failure that jeopardizes sub-regional food sovereignty and human security across sub-Saharan Africa. By situating Eha-Amufu within this macro-framework, the community's ordeal emerges as a critical microcosm of a much wider sub-regional menace, wherein settled farming populations are subjected to persistent violent incursions, spatial displacement, and systemic agricultural disruption at the hands of armed nomadic herdsman navigating an increasingly stressed regional landscape.

The two dominant perspectives in the literature—the Environmental Scarcity/Climate-Induced Theory and the Political-Economic/Structural Governance Framework—offer distinct analytical entry points (Brottem, 2016; Amoah et al, 2025; Issifu et al, 2022). The former excels at explaining macro-level pastoralist migration and seasonal resource competition driven by ecological degradation, though it risks environmental determinism by assuming scarcity inevitably leads to violence; the latter successfully exposes institutional state failure, land tenure ambiguities, and elite manipulation, yet it tends to focus so heavily on structural mechanisms that it overlooks micro-level, localized human agency. However, this scholarship suffers from a profound analytical limitation: it treats conflict almost exclusively as a material or physical security event, reducing agricultural households to passive economic actors and ignoring the subjective, mental, and behavioral dimensions of living under sustained violence. By failing to account for how pervasive fear, hyper-vigilance, and

psychological trauma alter human agency, existing studies leave a critical gap in understanding why farming households adopt seemingly counterproductive or survivalist economic decisions.

To address this gap, this study sets out to investigate the internal psychological mechanisms through which ongoing exposure to violence alters farmers' cognitive threat appraisals, driving a transition from adaptive agricultural practices to reactive, trauma-driven survival mechanisms. Theoretically, this study holds profound significance by integrating Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory with Intergroup Threat Theory into agrarian conflict literature, demonstrating that psychological trauma is not merely a passive byproduct of war but an active, explanatory variable that dictates economic behavior and rural development trajectories (Biggs et al., 2017). Practically, the study offers immense value to policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and mental health practitioners by proving that traditional physical security interventions and material aid are inherently insufficient if unequipped to restore the cognitive well-being, psychological safety, and decision-making capacity of rural producers. To provide a rigorous analytical structure, the study is guided by three core sub-themes: first, the nature, extent, and manifestations of conflict-induced psychosocial trauma among agricultural households in Eha-Amufu; second, the specific behavioral, cognitive, and economic coping strategies adopted by farmers to mitigate chronic insecurity; and third, the systemic impact of these trauma-driven coping mechanisms on long-term agricultural productivity, household food security, and rural livelihood sustainability.

Situated at the northeastern boundary of Enugu State, sharing sensitive borders with Benue and Ebonyi States, Eha-Amufu occupies a unique geographic position that historically placed it along traditional transit corridors for migratory herders moving southward from Nigeria's Middle Belt (Odalonu & Ugwuanyi, 2023). With over eighty percent of its labor force dependent on subsistence and smallholder cultivation of staple crops—including yam, cassava, maize, rice, and vegetables—the local economy is fundamentally anchored in land access and seasonal predictability. However, in recent times, the convergence of open-access land friction, political tensions, and weak state protection transformed this agricultural borderland into a theater of intense intercommunal violence (Nnamonu et al, 2018). As violent raids, armed ambushes, and farm destruction escalated, the local population was subjected to an environment of persistent insecurity. This unique agrarian structure means that when violence occurs, it strikes at the core of human survival, turning the routine act of cultivating the soil into a life-threatening endeavor that subjects entire households to severe, prolonged stress.

From a social psychological standpoint, the persistence of this violence generates profound cognitive and emotional disruptions that redefine the relationship between farmers and their land. When agricultural households experience repeated traumatic events—such as witnessing fatalities, losing family members, or seeing their seasonal investments destroyed—their internal threat perception remains permanently elevated. This state of chronic hyper-vigilance fundamentally alters how farmers appraise risk, causing them to view even routine farming activities through a lens of existential dread. Consequently, decisions regarding when to plant,

which fields to cultivate, or whether to venture to distant, highly fertile farmlands are no longer guided by economic rationality or seasonal cues, but by emotional self-preservation and acute fear. By examining these cognitive distortions, this paper reveals that the decline in crop production in Eha-Amufu is driven not only by physical displacement, but also by the psychological paralysis of a workforce coping with unaddressed, cumulative trauma.

Ultimately, this study establishes that understanding the full cost of the farmer-herder conflict in Eha-Amufu requires looking beyond physical losses to measure the invisible, psychological erosion of human agency and community resilience. The remainder of this paper is organized to systematically develop this argument across dedicated sections: Section two outlines the theoretical framework synthesizing stress, coping, and intergroup threat theories; Section three details the qualitative research methodology, including the sampling of 45 key informants and four focus group discussions. Section four presents the empirical evidence detailing the manifestations of trauma and household coping responses in Eha-Amufu; Section five engages in a critical discussion synthesizing the findings with psychological theory; and Section six concludes with actionable, trauma-informed policy recommendations aimed at restoring both mental health infrastructure and agricultural sustainability in the region.

Theoretical framework

To analyze the psychosocial impact of the farmer-herder conflict in Eha-Amufu, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework synthesizing transactional stress and coping theory and integrated threat theory. Transactional Stress and Coping Theory was originally propounded by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman in 1984, with later contributions from Stevan Hobfoll (1989) through Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, expanding its scope to collective and environmental stress. Integrated Threat Theory was propounded by Walter G. Stephan and C. Walter Stephan in 1996 and subsequently expanded by Coreren A. Morrison (2002) and Linda R. Tropp (2006) to explain how intergroup anxieties worsen perceived danger (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Hobfoll, 1989; Stephan & Stephan, 2013; Carmona-Halty et al, 2018).

Together, this synthesized framework rests on five major core assumptions:

1. **Psychological Appraisal:** Stress is not merely an external event but a transactional outcome of cognitive appraisal, where an individual evaluates a situation as threatening or exceeding their personal resources.
2. **Dual Threat Perception:** Intergroup conflict generates two distinct forms of threat—*realistic threats* (physical safety, loss of land, economic ruin) and *symbolic threats* (perceived attacks on identity, culture, and group survival).
3. **Behavioral Coping Adaptations:** Individuals adopt two main coping mechanisms—*problem-focused coping* (direct actions to alter the threat, such as forming vigilante groups or shifting crop types) and *emotion-focused coping* (regulating emotional distress through avoidance, prayer, or denial).
4. **Resource Depletion Dynamics:** Prolonged exposure to threats continuously drains psychological, social, and material resources, making adaptive coping harder and pushing households toward survivalist, maladaptive choices.

5. **Intergroup Anxiety Escalation:** Prior negative contact between competing groups heightens baseline anxiety, causing actors to appraise benign encounters through a lens of existential dread.

A key weakness of this synthesized model is its tendency to prioritize individual psychological perceptions over structural macro-drivers such as climate change, state failure, and illegal arms proliferation. Additionally, measuring subjective cognitive appraisals qualitatively can be challenging due to recall bias among traumatized populations. Despite these limitations, the model is uniquely appropriate for this study because structural theories explain *why* conflict occurs, but fail to explain *how* chronic trauma reshapes human agency, emotional well-being, and daily economic decision-making among rural agricultural producers.

Applying the first assumption of cognitive appraisal to Eha-Amufu (2021–2022) reveals how exposure to violent raids fundamentally altered how farmers evaluate risk. When smallholders assess the act of cultivating distant farmlands, the cognitive appraisal shifts from a routine economic activity to a high-probability existential threat. Applying the second assumption of dual threat perception, households experience both realistic threats (loss of cassava and yam harvests, physical injury, and farm destruction) and symbolic threats (fear of violent displacement and loss of ancestral land). This intense threat perception feeds directly into the fifth assumption of intergroup anxiety, where prior violent clashes with pastoralists cause local farmers to view any herder presence through a lens of acute panic. Consequently, daily mobility is severely restricted, as hyper-vigilance prevents agricultural workers from venturing into fertile borderlands, leading directly to reduced crop yields and regional food scarcity.

Applying the third and fourth assumptions regarding coping mechanisms and resource depletion demonstrates how chronic trauma dictates household survival strategies in Eha-Amufu. Faced with unyielding insecurity, agricultural households adopt problem-focused coping strategies—such as distress-selling livestock, switching to fast-yielding crops near residential areas, or abandoning distant farms entirely—alongside emotion-focused coping mechanisms like spiritual resignation and collective mourning. However, as the conflict persisted between 2021 and 2022, continuous exposure to violence triggered Hobfoll's resource depletion cycle. The psychological capital, physical health, and financial savings of farming families were systematically exhausted, forcing them out of adaptive economic planning into reactive, survivalist decision-making. By applying this synthesized theoretical model, the study proves that the agricultural decline in Eha-Amufu is not simply a material outcome of physical displacement but the direct result of a traumatized workforce operating under severe psychological distress and depleted coping capacity.

Methodological Approach

The study adopted a mixed method of data collection. The documentary method of data collection enabled the researcher to collect much of the secondary data needed in the study through the desk review and content analysis of relevant materials, including scholarly publications in reputable and impact factor journals, institutional reports, policy briefs, magazines, and newspaper commentaries on the origin, psychological impact, agricultural

disruption, and household coping strategies associated with the farmer-herder conflict in the Southeast region and Eha-Amufu in particular. Secondary agency reports from organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Crisis Group (ICG), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Enugu State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) provided vital context on displacement figures and humanitarian conditions. These secondary materials were triangulated by primary qualitative data garnered by the researchers following extensive field visits to conflict-affected communities within Eha-Amufu in Isi-Uzo Local Government Area of Enugu State. Primary data collection was anchored on semi-structured physical and telephone interviews with 45 key stakeholders, alongside four comprehensive focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with affected local farming households. The key interviewees comprised community leaders, youth heads, local agricultural association executives, displaced household heads, healthcare and mental health workers, security personnel, and local government officials. The four focus group sessions—segmented to capture diverse household dynamics across affected farming clusters—enabled deep qualitative insights into collective trauma, threat appraisals, and behavioral coping adaptations. Fieldwork and primary data collection were conducted between November 2022 and March 2023, capturing empirical experiences spanning the 2021–2022 peak conflict period. Due to volatile security conditions and the sensitive nature of the topic in Eha-Amufu, study participants were granted strict anonymity, and pseudonyms were utilized in reporting empirical findings. In areas with heightened security risks, the research team engaged trusted community gatekeepers and local intermediaries to facilitate contact and establish rapport with interviewees and focus group participants. Finally, the qualitative descriptive method was applied in transcribing, categorizing, and analyzing all the empirical information and field data generated, synthesizing primary narratives with theoretical frameworks to evaluate the psychosocial dimensions of the crisis.

Empirical Findings: Conflict Trauma and Household Coping Dynamics in Eha-Amufu

Conflict trauma refers to the severe, cumulative psychological distress, hyper-vigilance, and emotional paralysis experienced by individuals exposed to violent, life-threatening intercommunal attacks (Wurmser, 1996; Stevens et al., 2013; Rinker & Lawler, 2018; Wolf, 2018).

Household coping dynamics encompass the adaptive or reactive behavioral, cognitive, and economic strategies that families adopt to navigate insecurity and survive under prolonged threat (Brück & Schindler, 2009; Figley et al, 2016; Nangia, 2023). In measuring these variables, Conflict Trauma (the independent variable) is evaluated through indices such as threat appraisal intensity, PTSD symptom severity, levels of intergroup anxiety, and loss of psychological agency. Conversely, Household Coping Dynamics (the dependent variable) is indexed through spatial farmland adjustments (avoidance of distant plots), changes in crop diversification, distress asset liquidation, shifts in household labor allocation, and reliance on spiritual or peer support networks. Over the years, these variables have exerted a compounding, reciprocal influence on each other: as repeated violent incursions elevate chronic trauma and fear, households abandon proactive, long-term economic planning in favor of short-term,

trauma-driven survival tactics. This shift directly impoverishes the household, eroding financial reserves and leaving families even more psychologically vulnerable, hyper-vigilant, and incapable of absorbing future security shocks.

In Eha-Amufu, Isi-Uzo Local Government Area, this interplay between trauma and coping manifested in stark, destructive ways between 2021 and 2025. Primary evidence gathered from field interviews and secondary agency reports—including documented humanitarian updates from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Crisis Group (ICG), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, and the Enugu State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA)—provides critical empirical backing for this localized humanitarian catastrophe (Nextier SPD, 2021, Peace, 2017; Amnesty International, 2018). These institutional records indicate that incessant, deadly attacks on farm settlements such as Agu-Amede, Mgbuji, and Ebor resulted in over 136 fatalities, more than 300 severe injuries, and the forced displacement of exceeding 24,000 individuals into informal internally displaced persons (IDP) clusters and neighboring host communities. The independent variable of severe, unaddressed conflict trauma manifested in pervasive hyper-vigilance and acute dread of ambush, which directly dictated the dependent variable of agricultural coping choices. Specifically, smallholder farmers abandoned over 250 distant, highly fertile agrarian settlements near the Benue border—such as the vast Eha Ohuala farmlands—retreating exclusively to small homestead gardens close to residential areas to avoid being killed.

To minimize physical exposure to armed incursions, households altered their planting schedules by prematurely harvesting underdeveloped cassava and yams, willingly accepting lower market prices to avoid being caught in remote fields. Furthermore, agency field assessments confirm that as male heads of households diverted their labor toward community vigilante watch duties or suffered casualties, heavy agricultural production burdens shifted onto traumatized women and youth. Financial reserves were systematically depleted as families engaged in distress asset liquidation—selling livestock, farm tools, and personal belongings at below-market rates to pay for emergency medical bills, funeral expenses, or basic sustenance during displacement. Depleted of financial capital and lacking state-backed psychological infrastructure, many households turned to spiritual resignation and informal peer networks as emotional coping mechanisms. This sequence demonstrates how conflict trauma in Eha-Amufu fundamentally rewired local economic behavior, turning a once-flourishing regional food basket into a zone of acute food insecurity and structural poverty. The following summary Table amplifies these empirical findings.

Table 1: Empirical Summary: Conflict Trauma and Household Coping Dynamics in Eha-Amufu (2021–2022)

Empirical Theme	Psychological & Behavioral Manifestation	Specific Household Coping Strategy	Strategic Livelihood & Food Security Impact
Cognitive Threat Appraisal & Hyper-vigilance	Persistent state of high anxiety, dread, and paranoia triggered by past violent incursions and loss of kin.	Farmland Abandonment & Spatial Avoidance: Farmers avoid cultivating fertile borderlands, shifting activities solely to small homestead gardens.	Significant contraction in total cultivated land area, sharp decline in key staple crops (yam, cassava, rice), and household income drops.
Acute Stress & Decision-Making Paralysis	Overwhelming fear of sudden attacks leading to cognitive overload and emotional distress during routine farm tasks.	Altered Planting Schedules & Early Harvests: Harvesting crops prematurely to prevent destruction or theft by grazing herds.	Yields suffer from underdeveloped produce, fetching lower market prices and shortening household food storage capacity.
Resource Depletion & Financial Strain	Chronic mental exhaustion resulting from loss of family breadwinners, medical expenses for injuries, and destroyed assets.	Distress Selling & Asset Liquidation: Distress selling of livestock, farm tools, or household goods at below-market rates to meet immediate survival needs.	Depletion of long-term household capital, pushing families into severe debt and structural poverty cycles.
Intergroup Anxiety & Loss of Trust	Deep-seated fear and suspicion of outside groups, leading to acute social isolation and breakdown of historical trade relations.	Collective Vigilance & Shift in Labor Roles: Men prioritize community defense/watch duties, shifting heavy agricultural labor burdens onto women and older youth.	Disruptions to traditional agricultural labor allocation, reduced labor efficiency, and increased physical and emotional burnout among women.
Collective Trauma & Loss of Agency	Pervasive sense of institutional abandonment, helplessness, and grief from displacement and loss of ancestral land.	Emotional-Focused & Spiritual Coping: Reliance on spiritual resignation, community prayer groups, and informal peer support networks for trauma processing.	Provides short-term psychological relief but fails to restore lost agricultural productivity or resolve underlying economic vulnerability.

Source: synthesised from news media by the authors

The empirical findings synthesized in the table illustrate a direct, destructive link between conflict-induced psychological trauma and the degradation of rural livelihoods in Eha-Amufu. The field data demonstrate that exposure to violent incursions fundamentally alters how farming households process risk and appraise environmental threats. When individuals experience high cognitive threat appraisals and persistent hyper-vigilance, their baseline emotional state shifts to constant anxiety and dread, making routine agricultural tasks feel life-threatening. Rather than engaging in long-term economic planning, farmers adopt defensive spatial avoidance tactics, completely abandoning fertile borderlands and retreating to small homestead gardens. This psychological paralysis was clearly articulated by a displaced farmer

in Mgbuji during an interview, who noted, "Going to the farm now feels like walking into a execution chamber; every rustle in the bush sounds like a gun being cocked, so we stay back in the compound." This trauma-driven spatial contraction forces households to alter planting schedules and harvest crops prematurely to avoid herd destruction or sudden attacks, as a female focus group participant in Agu-Amede affirmed: "We harvest our cassava three months early now because if you leave it to mature, the herders will graze their cattle on it or you will get killed while weeding."

Consequently, the psychological inability to operate freely on farmlands triggers severe regional agricultural losses—resulting in underdeveloped harvests, diminished household storage capacity, and sharp income declines that undermine Eha-Amufu's historical status as a key regional food basket. Synthesizing these manifestations with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping reveals that farmers' economic actions are no longer dictated by rational market incentives, but by reactive, emotion-focused coping mechanisms aimed at immediate survival. The cognitive overload induced by acute stress degrades decision-making capacity, forcing smallholders into choices that minimize immediate physical danger while sacrificing long-term food security. Reflecting on this decision-making dilemma, a local agricultural association leader in Eha-Amufu explained, "The farmers know that harvesting immature yams destroys their profit for the year, but fear has broken their spirits; they prefer to eat half-grown crops today than die waiting for a full harvest tomorrow."

Beyond immediate spatial and agricultural disruptions, the findings highlight how prolonged psychological strain depletes household resilience and alters community social structures. Chronic mental exhaustion—compounded by the loss of breadwinners, medical expenses, and asset destruction—forces families into Hobfoll's (1989) resource depletion cycle. To cover immediate survival needs, households engage in distress asset liquidation, selling livestock, farm tools, and personal belongings at below-market prices, which locks them into cycles of debt and structural poverty. A widow from Ebor community detailed this loss spiral during a key informant interview, stating, "After my husband was killed on the farm, I sold our two goats and his spraying machine for next to nothing just to pay medical bills and buy rice for the children; now we have no capital left to start the next planting season." This systematic depletion of psychological and economic reserves destroys the shock-absorbing capacity of rural families, turning temporary agricultural disruptions into permanent structural poverty.

Simultaneously, heightened intergroup anxiety and a pervasive loss of trust break down traditional labor allocations, shifting community gender roles and overburdening vulnerable groups. As adult men reallocate their time away from cultivation toward vigilante defense and community watch duties, heavy agricultural labor falls disproportionately on women and older youth, causing acute physical and emotional burnout. Illustrating this structural shift, a participant in a youth focus group stated, "Our men no longer hold the hoe during peak farming season; they hold Dane guns at the community checkpoints, leaving our mothers and sisters to carry out the heavy ridge-making alone." While emotion-focused coping mechanisms like spiritual resignation and peer prayer networks offer temporary psychological comfort

against feelings of institutional abandonment, they cannot fix the underlying material collapse. As a local healthcare worker observed during an interview, "The women gather every evening to pray and weep together, which gives them the strength to wake up the next morning, but prayer alone cannot buy fertilizer or put food back on their tables." Ultimately, these empirical insights prove that agricultural decline in Eha-Amufu is not merely a physical consequence of farm destruction, but a secondary outcome of a deeply traumatized workforce operating under severe psychological distress.

Theoretical Synthesis: Psychological Mechanics of Agrarian Decision-Making and Trauma

The empirical findings from Eha-Amufu provide a compelling demonstration of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, wherein economic decision-making is fundamentally mediated by cognitive threat appraisals. The observed shift from extensive cultivation in fertile borderlands to restrictive homestead farming reflects primary cognitive appraisal processes, where agricultural households evaluate distant plots not merely as economic assets, but as high-probability existential threats. When violent incursions, loss of kin, and farm destruction trigger persistent hyper-vigilance and high anxiety, the psychological threshold for risk tolerance collapses. Consequently, farmers deploy spatial avoidance as a behavioral defense mechanism to manage overwhelming fear. This psychological adaptation directly drives agrarian contraction: by prioritizing immediate physical safety over optimal economic yield, traumatized producers willingly forfeit access to prime arable land, leading to sharp declines in staple crop output like yam and cassava.

Furthermore, the prevalence of premature harvesting and altered planting schedules illustrates how acute, unmanaged conflict trauma induces cognitive overload, destabilizing rational economic choices. Under condition of chronic fear and perceived vulnerability, farming households experience what Lazarus and Folkman categorize as emotion-focused or reactive problem-focused coping. Rather than allowing crops to mature to maximize market value and storage capacity, farmers engage in early harvesting to mitigate the anticipated loss from herder encounters or crop destruction. This decision-making paralysis highlights the psychological friction between short-term emotional relief—reducing the immediate anxiety of an impending attack—and long-term livelihood sustainability. The resulting underdeveloped produce yields significantly lower market prices and drastically shortens household food reserves, proving that the degradation of regional food security is heavily driven by the cognitive impairments caused by living under continuous terror.

Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 1996) and Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory further illuminate the socioeconomic restructuring occurring within Eha-Amufu. The deep-seated intergroup anxiety and breakdown of social trust between settled Igbo farming communities and migratory pastoralists have created intense realistic and symbolic threat perceptions. This heightened threat landscape forces a reallocation of household human capital, as adult men shift their primary labor from agricultural production to collective vigilance and vigilante watch duties. In alignment with COR theory, as households experience a rapid loss of core resources—such as breadwinners, health, and

capital—they enter a "loss spiral" where distress asset liquidation (selling livestock and tools at loss) becomes the only remaining survival buffer. This reallocation of labor onto women and youth, combined with asset depletion, accelerates physical burnout and locks families into structural poverty.

Finally, the widespread reliance on spiritual resignation, peer prayer groups, and informal support networks underscores the psychological concept of emotion-focused coping in the face of uncontrollable stress. When structural conditions—such as state security failure and institutional abandonment—strip individuals of their sense of personal and collective agency, problem-focused coping mechanisms become functionally exhausted. While these spiritual and community-based coping mechanisms serve a vital psychological function by offering emotional containment, grief processing, and temporary cognitive relief from pervasive trauma, they do not alter the objective material threat. As a result, emotion-focused coping alone leaves the underlying economic vulnerabilities unaddressed, cementing a state of learned helplessness and long-term agrarian decline across the Eha-Amufu community.

Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study conclusively demonstrate that the persistent agricultural decline in Eha-Amufu cannot be understood merely as a direct physical byproduct of farm destruction but as the structural outcome of a deeply traumatized agrarian workforce operating under severe, unaddressed psychological distress. Decades of violent incursions, loss of kin, and displacement have systematically rewired how smallholder farmers perceive risk, forcing them to abandon rational economic planning in favor of short-term, trauma-driven survival mechanisms. When fear dictates spatial mobility, farmers forfeit their most fertile borderlands, alter planting schedules, and engage in premature harvesting—a cognitive adaptation that minimizes immediate physical danger while sacrificing long-term food security and household financial reserves. Furthermore, the systematic depletion of personal assets, combined with heightened intergroup anxiety that shifts adult male labor from cultivation to vigilante watch duties, has locked rural families into cycles of structural poverty and physical burnout. While emotion-focused coping strategies, such as spiritual resignation and community prayer groups, offer temporary psychological containment, they cannot repair the broken socio-economic framework. Ultimately, as long as state and regional interventions remain focused solely on kinetic security maneuvers while ignoring the invisible, crippling weight of conflict trauma, the agrarian economy of Eha-Amufu will remain immobilized.

To achieve sustainable agricultural recovery and break the cycle of poverty in Eha-Amufu, the Federal and Enugu State governments must urgently establish decentralised, community-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) frameworks integrated directly into primary healthcare centres and agricultural extension services. These trauma-informed health facilities should deploy trained community health workers, clinical psychologists, and trauma counselors to deliver specialized care for post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and grief processing tailored to agrarian contexts. Establishing peer-led trauma support groups within existing farmers' cooperatives can provide a safe space to rebuild collective agency, mitigate hyper-vigilance, and reduce cognitive stress before farmers venture back to their fields. Crucially,

these psychological interventions must be paired with local peacebuilding and social cohesion platforms that bring together Igbo farming communities and migratory pastoralists under mediated, transparent dialogue. Rebuilding trust and establishing clear, enforced rules regarding grazing corridors and farm protection will alleviate the chronic intergroup anxiety that currently forces men out of agricultural production and into vigilante defense roles.

Simultaneously, restoring economic resilience and agricultural productivity requires a deliberate shift toward trauma-informed agricultural policies and targeted socio-economic support. The immediate operationalization of the South-East Development Commission (SEDC), working alongside the Enugu State Agricultural Development Programme (ENADEP), must prioritize Eha-Amufu for targeted agrarian rehabilitation funds, micro-credit schemes, and rural infrastructure restoration. To counteract the economic damage of distress asset liquidation, government and non-governmental agencies should supply farming households with direct farm input subsidies—including high-yield, quick-maturing seed varieties, fertilizers, and modern land-preparation machinery—to compensate for lost labor efficiency and shortened cultivation windows. Security architecture across the Isi-Uzo borderlands must also be restructured to transition from reactive military deployments to proactive, community-policing frameworks that secure remote farm settlements like Agu-Amede, Mgbuji, and Ebor. By guaranteeing physical safety alongside institutionalized mental health care and economic rebuilding, policymakers can relieve the cognitive overload burdening rural households, empower farmers to safely return to their farmlands, and systematically revitalize the Southeast's agriculture.

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