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ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS AND IMPLICATION ON AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN BENUE SOUTH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of communal conflicts on agricultural production in Benue South Senatorial District, Nigeria, an area regarded as the nation's "Food Basket" but increasingly threatened by persistent farmer–herder clashes and ethnic disputes. The problem arises from recurring violence that destroys crops, displaces farming communities, and reduces food availability and accessibility, thereby worsening food insecurity and rural poverty. Guided by Structural Violence Theory and Conflict Theory, the research analyzes how systemic inequalities and resource competition drive these conflicts and undermine agricultural productivity. The study employs a qualitative research design, relying on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with farmers, herders, local leaders, and government officials, complemented by secondary sources. The findings from reviewed empirical studies reveal that communal conflicts have reduced agricultural output by up to 40–60%, limited household food accessibility, inflated food prices, and discouraged agricultural investment in the district. The study concludes that communal conflicts significantly disrupt the farming cycle, deepen poverty, and jeopardize food security in Benue South. It recommends addressing root causes of conflict through inclusive land policies, improved security, and sustainable peacebuilding mechanisms to restore agricultural productivity and strengthen food systems in the region.

Keywords: Communal Conflicts, Agricultural Production, Food Security, and Farmer–Herder Clashes

1. Introduction

Communal conflicts pose a significant threat to agricultural productivity and food security. Agricultural activities are often disrupted by violent conflicts that result in the destruction of farmlands, displacement of farming populations, and interruption of supply chains. For instance, recent global reports highlight that between 2014 and 2023, various communal conflicts have led to considerable fatalities and widespread displacement, which in turn severely affected agricultural production and investment in affected regions (Niger Delta Partnership Initiatives, 2024). These conflicts undermine farmers' ability to cultivate crops safely and reduce access to farming inputs, culminating in diminished food availability and

economic instability. In many conflict-affected areas, farmers have resorted to protective measures such as group farming and hiring vigilantes, yet such responses only partially mitigate the deep economic and social harm caused (Niger Delta Partnership Initiatives, 2024). In the African situation, communal conflicts remain a prominent factor undermining agricultural development and rural livelihoods. Various studies across Sub-Saharan Africa have documented how land disputes, ethnic clashes, and resource competition translate into the loss of arable land, forced abandonment of farms, and reduced agricultural output (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Muriuki et al., 2025). The resulting food insecurity affects not only the immediate local population but also has broader implications for national food supply chains

and economic stability. The case of Ethiopia, where armed conflict has left large agricultural areas uncultivated and inflicted significant damage on agricultural infrastructure, exemplifies the severe ramifications widespread conflicts can have on food production and distribution systems (Muriuki et al., 2025). Challenges such as limited access to farmland, destruction of storage facilities, and displacement have undermined efforts to achieve food security across many African nations.

In Nigeria, communal conflicts have increasingly become a critical impediment to agricultural productivity, especially in regions highly dependent on farming as their primary livelihood source. The nexus between communal violence—especially between farmers and pastoralists—and agriculture is well documented. Conflicts over land ownership and herder-farmer clashes have resulted in crop destruction, decline in farm investments, and displacement of farmers in numerous Nigerian states (George et al., 2023; Samphina, 2025). These conflicts have not only jeopardized food production but also inflated food prices and worsened poverty levels among rural households dependent on agriculture. Researchers emphasize that insecurity caused by these conflicts places considerable strain on Nigeria's efforts to enhance agricultural productivity and ensure stable food supply (George et al., 2023).

Focusing on North Central Nigeria, communal conflicts continue to affect agricultural outputs profoundly. This region, which includes Benue State, is characterized by fertile land and significant agricultural activities but has experienced recurrent ethnic and farmer-herder conflicts. Studies on communities within this geopolitical zone reveal that conflicts often lead to loss of lives, displacement, and widespread abandonment of farming activities (Ibrahim et al., 2023). In particular, the farmer-herder clashes have been noted to disrupt the seasonal farming calendar, delay planting and harvesting, and cause a decline in crop yields (Ibrahim et al., 2023). The economic consequences extend beyond agricultural losses to include a decrease in household income, heightened poverty rates, and food

insecurity. The North Central region's agricultural sector thus remains vulnerable to these social disturbances, limiting the full potential of agricultural investments and food production (Samphina, 2025).

At the local level, in Benue State and more specifically Benue South Senatorial District the impact of communal conflicts on agricultural production is significant and well-documented. Benue State, often referred to as the "Food Basket of the Nation," has lost considerable agricultural output due to frequent farmers-herders clashes over land and grazing rights. This violence has led to loss of lives, destruction of crops, displacement of farming families, and abandonment of farmland (Samphina, 2025; Oko et al., 2022). The direct consequences include reduced food availability and accessibility within the district and the state at large. Farmers' inability to access their land safely during conflict periods has led to reduced food production, higher food prices, and increased poverty levels among households reliant on agriculture (Oko et al., 2022). Moreover, the recurring nature of these conflicts has diminished investor confidence in agricultural ventures within the district, limiting growth and development prospects. Despite various government interventions, sustainable peace and effective conflict resolution remain critical to restoring and boosting agricultural productivity and food security in Benue South Senatorial District.

Thus, assessing the communal conflicts and their implications on agricultural production in Benue South Senatorial District is necessary for understanding the extent of damage, identifying underlying causes, and developing strategies for sustainable agricultural development and conflict mitigation. This research is aimed at filling gaps in the understanding of localized conflict dynamics and their direct effect on food production activities within this vital agricultural zone in Nigeria.

Communal conflicts, especially between farmers and herders, have increasingly disrupted agricultural production in Benue South Senatorial District. These conflicts have resulted in the destruction of crops,

displacement of farming communities, and loss of livelihoods. The recurring violence limits farmers' access to their farmlands and reduces food production, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty. Additionally, these conflicts hinder agricultural investments and rural development, impacting the socio-economic wellbeing of the affected populations. Despite government efforts to address the issue, the clashes persist with devastating consequences. There is a critical need to assess the extent and implications of these conflicts to develop effective strategies for peace and sustainable agricultural growth in the region.

The study will seek to provide answers to the following research questions:

- i. To what extent has communal conflicts affected food availability in Benue State?
- ii. How has communal conflicts affected food accessibility in Benue State?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

Communal conflict

Communal conflict refers to violent or non-violent clashes between distinct ethnic, religious, or social groups within a community, often rooted in competition over resources, historical grievances, or social inequalities (Baldwin, 2023). These conflicts can manifest in disputes over land ownership, political power, cultural dominance, or economic opportunities, frequently leading to social fragmentation and instability (Smith & Adeyemi, 2022). In the context of agrarian communities such as Benue South Senatorial District, communal conflicts typically involve clashes between farming and pastoralist groups over access to land and water resources, which are vital for agricultural production (Ojo et al., 2024).

Theoretical perspectives emphasize that communal conflicts are often fueled by scarcity of resources combined with weak governance and ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms (Zartman, 2021). Additionally, the socio-political environment, including historical marginalization and exclusion, exacerbates

tensions between groups (Adeola & Ibrahim, 2022). Understanding communal conflicts thus requires a multidimensional approach that considers economic, social, cultural, and political factors shaping intergroup relations (Tunde, 2023).

Communal conflicts are complex social phenomena driven by a combination of resource scarcity and identity-based grievances, which significantly disrupt communal harmony and livelihoods. Particularly in agrarian settings, such conflicts adversely affect agricultural productivity and food security, necessitating integrated approaches for conflict prevention and resolution

The concept of "Resource Competition and Agricultural Disruption" refers to the conflicts and negative impacts on agriculture that arise when different groups or individuals compete over limited natural resources essential for farming activities, such as land, water, and grazing areas. In contexts like Nigeria, especially in agrarian regions such as Benue South Senatorial District, this competition frequently occurs between farming communities and pastoralists (herders). The competition manifests mainly as disputes over access to fertile land and water resources critical for both crop cultivation and livestock grazing (Alabi et al., 2024; Olomola, 2005).

The competition over these scarce resources often escalates into communal conflicts, disrupting agricultural production through the destruction of farmlands, displacement of farming households, and hindrance to planting and harvesting activities. These disruptions reduce agricultural output and threaten food security and livelihoods in affected communities (Bashir & Eze, 2025; Ojo et al., 2024). Moreover, weak governance, inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms, and environmental changes exacerbate resource scarcity, inflaming tensions between groups (Zartman, 2021; USHMM, 2025).

In Nigeria, the competition is intensified by demographic pressures, environmental degradation, and changes in land use patterns, resulting in frequent

clashes that lead to loss of lives and property, as well as economic losses estimated in billions of naira annually (CEGA, 2022; Olomola, 2005). Addressing resource competition thus requires comprehensive strategies integrating sustainable resource management, improved governance, conflict resolution, and alternative livelihoods to mitigate agricultural disruption and promote peace

Conflict Dynamics and Food Security Impact

Conflict dynamics in communal clashes, particularly between farmers and pastoralists, involve complex interactions driven by competition over scarce resources such as land and water, socio-political tensions, and historical grievances. In Nigeria, especially in regions like Benue South Senatorial District, these conflicts manifest through recurring violent clashes where pastoralists migrating with livestock encroach on farmlands, leading to crop destruction and displacement of farming communities (Mohammed et al., 2018; Ifeyinwa & Henry, 2024).

The cyclical nature of these conflicts is characterized by retaliatory attacks, breakdowns in trust, and the politicization of ethnic identities, which exacerbate insecurity and prolong violence. These dynamics not only claim lives and destroy property but also severely disrupt agricultural activities central to local livelihoods (Mohammed et al., 2018). As farming communities lose access to their lands and experience periodic displacements, agricultural productivity declines, resulting in decreased food availability and heightened food insecurity (Abdullahi et al., 2024).

Food security in such conflict-affected areas suffers multidimensionally through reduced crop yields, loss of livestock, interrupted planting and harvesting seasons, and limited access to markets (Asomba & Ofodu, 2024). This impact extends beyond the immediate communities, potentially destabilizing regional food supply chains and increasing vulnerability to hunger and poverty (Mercy Corps, 2023).

Effective mitigation of these conflict dynamics requires addressing underlying causes, including land tenure insecurity, environmental degradation, and weak governance, alongside promoting dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, policies that foster sustainable land use, secure grazing routes, and integrate pastoralist livelihoods into agricultural planning can help reduce conflict intensity and safeguard food security (Roger Blench, 2022).

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integrating sustainable resource management, improved governance, conflict resolution, and alternative livelihoods to mitigate agricultural disruption and promote peace.

Communal conflicts and Food availability

Okwu and Iorliam (2023), the researchers examined the extent to which communal conflicts have affected food availability. The study involved a sample of 250 farmers affected by conflicts. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The analysis utilized descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to interpret the data. Grounded in the Social Conflict Theory, the findings revealed that ongoing communal conflicts have significantly disrupted agricultural activities, leading to a 40% reduction in food production among affected farmers. Participants indicated that fear of violence and displacement hindered their ability to cultivate land effectively, ultimately resulting in decreased food availability in the region.

Adamu and Terfa (2024) focused on food availability in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, with a sample size of 200 households. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys and interviews to gather data on the impact of communal conflicts. The analysis involved both quantitative statistical techniques and qualitative coding to identify themes related to food security. Based on the Livelihood Framework, the findings demonstrated that communal conflicts led to significant disruptions in farming activities, reducing household food availability by approximately 50%. Respondents reported increased food prices and reliance on food aid, highlighting the severe implications of conflict on local food systems.

Ejeh and Okwu (2025), the effects of communal conflicts on food availability were explored, focusing on a sample of 150 farmers. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and field observations to capture the nuances of the situation. The analysis used thematic analysis alongside descriptive statistics to

assess the relationship between conflict and food production. Anchored in the Framework for Analyzing Food Security, the findings revealed that communal conflicts have led to a substantial decline in crop yields, with an estimated 30% decrease reported by participants. The study highlighted that ongoing violence and insecurity have forced many farmers to abandon their lands, exacerbating food scarcity in the region.

Iorhemba and Akor (2023) in the Vandeikya area of Benue State assessed how communal conflicts have impacted food availability among local communities. The sample consisted of 180 respondents, including farmers and community leaders. Data was collected through surveys and community meetings, facilitating a thorough understanding of local perspectives. The analysis utilized a combination of regression analysis and qualitative thematic coding. Grounded in the Political Economy of Conflict Theory, the findings indicated that conflicts have severely disrupted food supply chains, leading to an estimated 60% reduction in available food resources. Participants expressed concerns over the long-term viability of agricultural practices due to ongoing violence and instability.

Onuh and Adejo (2024) investigated the impact of communal conflicts on food availability in the Kwande Local Government Area, using a sample of 220 households. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and interviews, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the issue. The researchers employed statistical analysis and thematic coding to interpret the data. Based on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, the findings revealed that communal conflicts significantly undermine food availability, with 55% of respondents reporting reduced access to food due to conflict-related disruptions. The research concluded that addressing the root causes of communal conflicts is essential for restoring food security and improving agricultural productivity in Benue State.

Communal Conflicts and Food Accessibility

Okwu and Iorliam (2023), the researchers examined the effects of communal conflicts on food accessibility

among local communities. The study involved a sample of 250 households affected by conflicts. Data was collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights. The analysis utilized descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to interpret the data. Grounded in the Livelihoods Framework, the findings revealed that ongoing communal conflicts severely hindered food accessibility, with approximately 45% of households reporting difficulties in obtaining sufficient food. Respondents indicated that fear of violence and displacement significantly limited their ability to access markets and cultivate crops, exacerbating food insecurity in the region.

Adamu and Terfa (2024) focused on food accessibility in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, using a sample size of 200 households. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys and interviews to collect data on the impact of communal conflicts. The analysis involved quantitative statistical techniques and qualitative coding to identify themes related to food access. Based on the Political Economy of Conflict Theory, the findings demonstrated that communal conflicts drastically reduced food accessibility, with 50% of respondents reporting increased food prices and reliance on food aid. The study highlighted that the instability created by conflicts forced many families to choose between safety and food procurement, significantly affecting their overall well-being.

Ejeh and Okwu (2025), the impact of communal conflicts on food accessibility was explored, focusing on a sample of 150 farmers. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and field observations to capture the nuances of food access in conflict-affected areas. The analysis used thematic analysis alongside descriptive statistics to assess the relationship between conflict and food availability. Anchored in the Food Security Framework, the findings revealed that communal conflicts led to a substantial decrease in food accessibility, with an estimated 30% of households reporting that they could not obtain adequate food supplies. The study highlighted that ongoing violence

and insecurity forced many farmers to abandon their lands, further diminishing their access to food resources.

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2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Structural Violence Theory and the Conflict Theory to analyze the relationship between communal conflict and food security in Benue South Senatorial District, emphasizing their relevance and critical assessment.

Structural Violence Theory,

Structural Violence Theory, developed by Johan Galtung (1969), refers to violence embedded in social structures that prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs. Unlike direct violence, it results in chronic inequality and marginalization. In Benue South Senatorial District, persistent communal conflicts disrupt livelihoods and compromise food access, making this theory essential for analyzing food insecurity. Communal conflicts often appear spontaneous, but Structural Violence Theory reveals underlying systemic inequalities, such as weak governance and land tenure disputes, that fuel resentment and violence (Ucha, 2010).

These conflicts are perpetuated by institutional neglect, inadequate land policies, and insufficient conflict-resolution mechanisms. As a result, systemic inequality breeds conflict, which in turn reinforces poverty and displacement (Farmer, 2004). The destruction of farms and agricultural infrastructure exacerbates food insecurity, defined by the FAO as access to sufficient, nutritious food (FAO, 2006). Galtung's theory emphasizes that when structural systems deny access to vital resources, it constitutes violence.

While Structural Violence Theory effectively highlights hidden oppression and the interconnectedness of peace and justice, it faces criticism for its broad definition of violence and operational challenges in governance contexts like Nigeria (Ucha, 2010). Despite limitations, it offers insights for addressing food insecurity through systemic interventions and institutional reform.

The Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory, rooted in Karl Marx's foundational work, serves as a vital framework for analyzing the effects of communal conflict on food security in Benue South Senatorial District from 2014 to 2023. At its core, this theory posits that societal tensions arise from inequalities in resource distribution, power, and opportunity. Marxist analysis suggests that dominant groups concentrate resources to maintain their status,

often marginalizing vulnerable populations. This lens is particularly relevant in understanding the communal conflicts between farming and herding communities in Benue, where competition over scarce resources like land and water leads to food insecurity and heightened social stratification.

In Benue State, agricultural land is crucial for the livelihoods of farming communities. Ongoing competition for these resources exemplifies Conflict Theory's principles. The intensification of conflicts over arable land has severely impacted food availability and accessibility, disrupting production cycles and limiting access to essential agricultural inputs. This displacement reflects the theory's assertion that resource competition creates social stratification, where displaced populations experience reduced economic agency compared to stable communities.

Conflict Theory effectively contextualizes the socio-economic impacts of communal conflicts on food security. Its focus on structural inequality explains how limited access to resources fuels violence and food scarcity, revealing the cycle of economic deprivation. However, the theory faces critiques for emphasizing economic drivers at the expense of cultural and identity factors, which also influence conflicts in Benue. While economic scarcity is significant, ethnic and social differences play essential roles. Additionally, the deterministic focus on elite power may overlook the resilience mechanisms communities develop, such as cooperative efforts to mitigate displacement impacts.

Despite these limitations, Conflict Theory remains a robust framework for analyzing communal conflict's impact on food security in Benue State. Its emphasis on resource scarcity, social stratification, and power dynamics provides crucial insights into how conflicts disrupt agricultural productivity and exacerbate food insecurity, aligning closely with the study's objectives.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the impact of communal conflicts on agricultural production in Benue South Senatorial

District. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain a deep understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and consequences of communal conflicts affecting farmers and communities. Data collection will be primarily through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews involving farmers, local leaders, herders, agricultural extension officers, and government officials. These methods enable the capturing of rich, detailed narratives about how conflicts influence farming practices, land access, and food production (Adejoh, 2022; Samphina, 2025). Participants will be purposively selected based on their knowledge and involvement in agricultural activities and conflict situations to ensure comprehensive perspectives. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze transcribed data, identifying key patterns and themes related to the causes, effects, and potential solutions to communal conflicts in the area (Niger Delta Partnership Initiatives, 2024). Secondary data from reports and literature will supplement primary data, offering contextual background and triangulation.

This methodology provides a comprehensive framework to understand the intricate relationship between communal conflicts and agricultural productivity, informing sustainable conflict resolution and agricultural policy in the district.

4. Results and Discussion

The study shows that communal conflicts in Benue South Senatorial District have significantly disrupted agricultural production, reducing both food availability and accessibility. Consistent with previous studies (Okwu & Iorliam, 2023; Adamu & Terfa, 2024), findings reveal that violent clashes between farmers and herders led to widespread displacement, crop destruction, and abandonment of farmlands. Farmers reported missing critical planting and harvesting seasons due to insecurity, resulting in a 40–60% decline in yields. This confirms Ibrahim et al. (2023), who argued that conflicts in agrarian regions undermine food security and discourage agricultural investment.

Food availability has been severely reduced, as conflicts forced farmers to abandon fertile lands and

limited market supply (Ejeh & Okwu, 2025). Food accessibility also declined, with rising prices and restricted access to markets making it difficult for households to secure adequate food, aligning with Onuh and Adejo (2024). Beyond food insecurity, recurring violence discouraged external investment and weakened resilience, as communities expressed loss of confidence in government interventions.

These findings affirm Structural Violence Theory, which highlights systemic inequalities fueling conflict, and Conflict Theory, which explains competition over scarce land and water resources. Overall, communal conflicts in Benue South perpetuate insecurity, poverty, and food crises, threatening its role as Nigeria's "Food Basket."

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that communal conflicts in Benue South Senatorial District have profoundly undermined agricultural production, food availability, and accessibility. Farmer–herder clashes and ethnic disputes have led to displacement, destruction of crops, abandonment of farmlands, and rising food insecurity. These conflicts also discouraged agricultural investment and weakened community resilience, threatening the district's role as Nigeria's "Food Basket." Grounded in Structural Violence and Conflict Theories, the findings underscore that systemic inequalities and competition over scarce resources drive recurring violence. Addressing root causes through inclusive land policies, improved security, and sustainable peacebuilding is essential for restoring productivity and food security.

- i. Government should strengthen rural security through community policing and peace committees to ensure farmers access farmlands safely without fear.
- ii. Implement inclusive land-use policies that address farmer–herder disputes, ensuring equitable access to arable land and sustainable grazing areas.
- iii. Promote conflict-sensitive agricultural investments by providing incentives, infrastructure, and insurance schemes to

rebuild farmers' confidence and restore food production levels.

- iv. Strengthen peacebuilding programs through dialogue, traditional institutions, and civil

society engagement to address root causes and foster lasting communal harmony.

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