Journal of Political Discourse

Academic Journal domiciled in the Department of Political Science, Federal University Gusau- Nigeria.

ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618

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JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 2, Issue 2, No. 1 / June 2024
https://www.jopd.com.ng

POLITICS AND THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEST FOR LAND RESOURCES IN THE MIDDLE-BELT, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract
It is widely acknowledged that the land is the most vital resource that humans require for daily survival. However, because of growing population and environmental issues, this valuable resource is now severely scarce. For many decades, resource-based conflicts have been a persistent and worsening cycle in the Nigerian Middle Belt region. Thus, this study examined the politics of the current struggle for land resources in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The political economy approach served as the study's analytical framework and secondary sources of data were used. These causes, including population growth, were found in the study. Again, the lack of clarity about the constitutional interpretation of indigeneship creates an opportunity for its abuse in many parts of the country. The study also established that issues relating to poor governance and corruption aggravate the politics behind the contestation for land. It recommended among others that there should be an amendment to the Land Use Act, to ensure the security of land tenure in Nigeria. It also recommended that there is a need to improve land dispute resolution mechanisms in the Middle Belt, Nigeria.

Keywords: Contest for Land, Land Resources, Middle Belt, Politics**.**

Introduction

The acquisition, control, and use of land explain the politics and competition for land resources in Nigeria, especially in the Middle Belt. Land is the most basic of all economic resources, fundamental to the form that economic development takes. Its use for agricultural purposes is integral to the production of the means of human subsistence. It is noteworthy that land ownership is a major determinant of the degree of economic inequality. For instance, surges in land prices cause major redistributions of wealth in any society. The land question is fundamental to human existence and production. These considerations indicate the need for a coherent political-economic analysis of land in capitalist societies. Suffice to add that the role of land about economic production, income distribution and economic growth was a major concern for classical political economists, such as Smith, Ricardo and Malthus. However, the intervening years have seen land slide into a more peripheral status within economic analysis (Abiodun, Odumosu & Omodare, 2020). Yet, the importance of land as a resource for human existence and development has continued to make the land a choice resource that is heavily guided by the use of appropriate state-wide legislation for the purpose of efficient administration (Otubu, 2018). The absence or sometimes weakness of the above, coupled with the competition for land has resulted in several cases of land disputes, litigation, land-related violence and eventually a very high amount of economic and human loss.

More so, as Mwamfufe (2015) posits, land and water resources in Nigeria, as in most African countries are primary assets for survival and a major source of income and livelihood for the rural population. According to him, land is not only a source of livelihood and a valuable economic asset but also carries spiritual values with it. The access to landed

resources is therefore not merely a matter of productive use of the ecological environment; it involves power and symbolic relations. Land is a social necessity (even animals also fight to protect their land and territory); it is therefore understandable if human beings have an attachment to their land and display a tendency to defend it (Viashima, Ilim & Ogoh, 2014). This explains why land and water resources have continued to have both historical and spiritual significance. Thus, Viashima, et al, further explain the relationship between man and land as they contend that:

> land to man is what water is to fish …. It provides a means of existence for man; it also represents a form of social security, and community or ethnic identity; it is therefore inevitable that conflicts must arise as people compete (Viashima, et al, 2014, p.112).

While land resources have been acclaimed as the most important resources needed by man for his day-to-day existence, land resources are limited. Over the years therefore, the competition over these resources, especially in the Middle Belt Nigeria, has increased the prevalence of conflictual relationship between different groups. In other words, competition for access to diminishing land resources often pitted both groups against each other, threatening livelihoods and national security (Adelakun et al., 2015). Garba (2016) and Vande (2016) agree that increasing human and animal populations have continued to exert great pressure on available land and other ecological resources with varying environmental and socio-economic implications. Thus, competition for access to diminishing land resources has often pitted both groups against each other.

Land is therefore the object of competition in several potentially overlapping ways: as an economic asset, as a connection with identity and social legitimacy, and as political territory. In other words, competition over land and its resources is at the centre of the nexus between land and conflict. Competition can occur between any number and type of identity groups, whether based on ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or generation. When that competition involves groups of people, rather than individuals, the risk of larger-scale violence increases. Some conflicts grow directly out of competition for land, but land is often not the sole cause of conflict; other factors, such as ethnic or religious tensions or political marginalization contribute to conflict (Enisan & Aluko, 2015).

This study is therefore designed to investigate the politics around the contemporary competition for land resources in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. While Nigeria is reported to have a total land mass area of 923,768 square kilometres (356,376 square miles), extending from the Gulf of Guinea in the south to the Sahel (the shore of the Sahara Desert) in the North, and a population of over 200 million people, the competition over land has been fierce and leading violent conflict. What then are the causes and manifestations of the competition over land resources in the Middle Belt? Again, what land administration practices have been put in place to effectively manage the competition and violence over the acquisition, control and use of land? This study sets out to investigate these and ancillary questions, drawing up conclusions and making recommendations for an effective land administration policy in Nigeria and the Middle Belt, in particular.

Conceptual Issues

i. Politics

Politics is an inescapable and pervasive human endeavour that prevails in all spheres of life and is as old as human history. That is why no human being exists beyond the scope or reach of politics and its consequences. Given the nature and character of politics, it has witnessed a plethora of definitions. It has however been defined as an empirical science that studies the shaping and sharing of power about "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell,

1958). This definition captures politics and distributive activity. More so, Easton (1965) defines politics as the persistent pattern of human interactions in a society mainly oriented towards "authoritative allocation of values". This indicates that politics has to do with authoritative or binding decisions concerning the distribution of the state's resources. Easton's definition suggests that once a decision is made, it conveys the idea of legitimacy and binding compulsion. This covers the realm of public politics because resolutions are authoritative within the structures of government.

On the whole, politics consists of the activities of individuals and groups operating within a society's political and economic arena and seeking to affect the nature and outcome of official decision-making and action by the government. Interested individuals and groups, each striving to further its special interests by making particular demands or claims on the entire political community, engage in competition, conflicts, negotiation, bargaining of who in the political community gets what, when and how. Thus, politically interested and active individuals and groups seek to impact the governments' authoritative allocation of the society's resources and values, each individual or group hoping to maximize, increase, or at least prevent a reduction in the benefits, rewards and advantages it receives from the allocation and to minimize, lower or at least, prevent an increase in the costs, burdens and deprivations.

ii. Land

Land is a delineable area of the earth's terrestrial surface, encompassing all attributes of the biosphere immediately above or below this surface including those of the near-surface, climate, the soil and terrain forms, the surface hydrology (including shallow lakes, rivers, marshes, and swamps), the near-surface sedimentary layers and associated groundwater reserve, the plant and animal populations, the human settlement pattern and physical results of past and present human activity (terracing, water storage or drainage structures, roads, buildings, etc.) (Food and Agricultural Organisation, 1995).

The UN-Habitat (2018) adds that land includes the surface of the earth, what is beneath and above it, and all things fixed to it. This includes buildings, housing, and other improvements, as well as the natural resources located below or above the soil. Bringing the dynamic aspects of human engagement into the picture, the land also forms part of economic, social, political, cultural, and historical activity. In this sense, the land is tied directly to many concepts that are fundamental to peace and security, human rights, and development.

iii. Middle Belt

The Middle Belt is a term used in human geography to designate a belt region stretching across central Nigeria longitudinally and forming a transition zone between Northern and Southern Nigeria. It is composed of the southern half of the defunct Northern Region of Nigeria and is characterised by its lack of a clear majority ethnic group, and is the location of Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (Blench, 2020). The Middle Belt region has numerous minority groups, which give it a heterogeneous, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic character. This diversity has been manipulated and exploited by various actors within the conflict, including both farmers and herders, dividing communities along ethno-religious lines and disrupting the delicate ecosystem of diversity in the country (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelhin, 2018). States of Nigeria which are generally referred to as belonging to the Middle Belt are: old Plateau (now Plateau and Nasarawa), old Gongola (now Adamawa and Taraba), Niger, Kwara, Kogi, Benue, the Federal Capital Territory, alongside Southern Kaduna, Southern Bauchi, Southern Kebbi, Southern Gombe, Southern Yobe State and Southern Borno, all culturally considered as part of the Middle Belt (Blench, 2020).

Theoretical Anchorage

This study was anchored on Marxist Political Economy as its framework of analysis. The political economy paradigm is based on the Marxist historical and economic approach toward the understanding of society. It emphasizes the need for the utilization of a holistic approach to the understanding of economic, political and social phenomena. The political economy approach is based on Marxian dialectical materialism. The theory argues that in the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

As presented above, the theory and method of Marxian Political Economy are laid on such foundation that places much emphasis on the economic factor, which it holds determines the socio-political life of the people. It is in this sense, therefore, that Ake (1981) refers to the theory as a method which gives primacy to material conditions, particularly economic factors, in the explanation of social life. He further explains that economic need is man's most fundamental need, and unless man is able to meet this need, he cannot exist in the first place. He argues that man must eat before he can do anything else such as worship, pursue culture or become an economist, etc. He contends that it is by man's productive activity that he is able to obtain the economic means which he needs to sustain life. Ake further dramatically puts it this way: "it is true that man does not live by bread alone, but it is a more fundamental truth that man cannot live without bread" (Ake, 1981, p.1). He thus concludes that, the methodological implication of the foregoing analysis on the primacy of material conditions for a student of society is that he must pay particular attention to the economic structure of society and indeed use it as the point of departure for studying other aspects of society. In his words:

> Once we understand what the material asset and constraints of a society are, how the society produces goods to meet its material needs, how the goods are distributed, and what types of social relations arise from the organization of production, we have come a long way to understanding the culture of that society, its laws, its religious system, its political system and even its modes of thought (Ake, 1981, pp.1-2).

Generally, political economy as a field of analysis has evolved historically and can be viewed from two major dimensions. In the first place, political economy can be viewed in the context of how socio-economic activities take place and secondly, as a tool for understanding the material production in societies, the construction of social forces and classes (George-Genyi, 2009, p. 89). Again, before being raised to its present level of discourse, it was merely referred as economics in the 19th century. Thus, in the classical period, the socio-economic and political factors that may impede or facilitate the growth of the economy were the subject matter of classical political economy (George-Genyi; 2009, p. 90). The progenitors of classical political economy include; Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, James Stuart Mills etc.

Suffice it to add that classical political economy was replaced with neo-classical political economy in the wake of the "Great Depression" of the 1930's. It became apparent that market forces could not adequately account for nor provide for public goods and effective distribution of resources. Thus, there was a shift from a deregulated economy to a state regulated economy. The next phase in the development of the political economy approach was

the rise of Marxist political economy, propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. As submitted by George-Genyi (2009, p. 90), the Marxist political economy studies society scientifically in its totality and takes into consideration the interconnection of social relations, class conflict and the organic relationship between the sub-structure (economy and super structure (polity).

Essentially, the Marxian political economy approach is based on the two concepts of historical and dialectical materialism. The Marxian perspective argues that it is the material existence of an individual or society that determines the individual or society's consciousness. This indicates clearly that the Marxian political economy gives primacy to the material existence and production of society. The Marxian political economy has thus established the nexus between the economy and polity. The approach therefore probes into the depth of issues, the interconnection of phenomena, policies, attitudes, orientation and behaviour, with a view to knowing their class origin, character and composition and logic of their existence and future (Momoh & Hundeyin, 1999). The essence of political economy is to penetrate deep into processes and policies, lay bare their essence and then explain concrete forms of their manifestations in everyday life. The theory of political economy therefore deals with the basis of social development in any society – the production of material wealth. The state therefore is an organ or the instrument of oppression by the ruling classes; it exists as an instrument of oppression of one class by another.

On the strength of the above, the relevance of the political economy approach to this study should be obvious given that the approach makes it possible for an analysis of the contemporary competition for land in the Middle Belt Nigeria. Hence, it will not be out of place to infer that the politics and competition for land in Middle Belt Nigeria precipitate conflict. The importance of political economy as an approach to the study of political, economic and social phenomenon is predicated on the fact that economic relations are the basis of all social life. This is to say that, by paying particular attention to the economic structure of the society, one can use it as a point of departure for studying other aspects of society.

An Overview of the competition of Land Resources in the Middle Belt, Nigeria

Land holds a central position in human existence and development. Since the appearance of man on earth, he has used land and its resources to meet his material, social, cultural, and spiritual needs. The land is used for the provision of food, clothing, shelter, and heat; for producing a large variety of goods and services for their own use or market exchange; for moving around and transporting goods; for recreation and leisure; for aesthetic pleasure; for attaining social status and prestige; for spiritual satisfaction; and for claiming territorial sovereignty (Bruce, 2013). Consequently, land-related issues figure in many violent disputes around the world. For instance, the pervasive communal violence and farmer-herder conflict, among others in Nigeria are tied to competition over scarce fertile land and poor resource governance (Adelakun, Adurogbangba & Akinbile, 2015).

Suffice it to add that land is one of the most controversial assets of nature, a resource of primary importance upon which the whole economy of any nation hinges; hence any policy on land affects the economy of a nation positively or negatively, depending on whether a right or wrong policy is initiated. Land is said to be fragile and scarce. This implies that it is not enough and difficult to acquire and also human activities can damage or destroy the land resources. It is short in supply and needed to be effectively utilized in order to satisfy the aspiration of those who acquired it. Land is the basic necessity of life which provides food, shelter, and livelihood to man. The important insight is that humanity realized and to decide how negotiable the organizing principles of linkage between society and landscape are. It provides that economic, social and environmental future of our country depends on the

wise use of land. It is construed that no development can be effective without land (Okafor & Nwike, 2016).

Furthermore, Keghku, Alom and Fanafa (2019) maintain that the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has become a recurring decimal. They also maintain that the cause can be ascribed to control over land for farming and grazing, massive desertification of vegetative lands and droughts in Northern Nigeria which compel herders to migrate towards the Middle Belt region and some parts of the south in search of greener pasture and water for their livestock. In the course of their movement, the nomadic herders settle in farming communities where there is green vegetation and water such as within the Middle Belt. Often, farmers accuse the herdsmen of encroaching and destroying their farmlands and crops and contaminating their main source of water supply (Okoro, 2018). The herders, on the other hand, accuse the farmers of poisoning, killing or even stealing their livestock, especially cattle. The herdsmen also accuse the farmers of blocking their grazing routes, alleged to have been established in the early 1960s. The conflict has assumed a more worrisome dimension with the use of sophisticated weapons and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). As indicated by Genyi (2019), resource conflict, especially land resources, has increased tremendously, in recent times in the Middle Belt, also known as North-Central Nigeria.

More so, Vande (2020) submits that though this conflict, resulting from the expansion and intensification of competition over land resources has been around for decades and all over the country, there has been a drastic escalation in the Middle Belt. He maintains that the conflict is rooted in a confluence of factors: including the expansion of land under cultivation, environmental degradation in the Sahel region, the decline in relevance and power of traditional authority in both farming and herding communities, land grabbing, urbanization, the unprecedented rise in the scale of cattle rustling and the proliferation of arms. Again, the steady and unregulated growth of the human population and settlements and expansion of private commercial interests have encroached on grazing routes and reserves designated by the government of the old Northern region (now split into nineteen states).

There is no gainsaying the obvious therefore that the Middle Belt region of Nigeria has been locked in a protracted and worsening cycle of violent conflict between herders and the sedentary agrarian communities (Bagu & Smith ,2017). Again, findings (Awotokun, Nwozor & Olanrewaju, 2020 and Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018) affirm that the conflict, among others, has humanitarian, social, economic, and security impacts on the Middle Belt and the country at large. Conflicts between farmers and herders have created a domino effect of security problems and inflicted serious costs on the Nigerian economy in terms of loss of resources and human lives as well as jeopardized the prospects of meeting the global goals of poverty eradication and zero hunger (International Crisis Group, 2020 and Awotokun et al, 2020).

Aside the loss of lives and destruction of property, incessant resource conflicts, resulting from the competition over land resources have forced farmers to abandon their fertile farmlands, rendering several farming communities deserted and have consequently reduced crop farmers to tenants in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps. This constitutes a threat to food security in Nigeria. Consequently, the effects of these events are the looming hunger, famine and general food insecurity in Nigeria. Again, the increasing commercialization of agriculture, land degradation, and expanded shifting opportunities for labour migration have become a serious issue that imposes great constraints on the process of land use change and resource management in Nigeria (Enisan & Aluko, 2015).

Causes and Manifestation of the Competition over Land Resources in the Middle Belt Nigeria

The last decade has seen a dramatic increase in the global demand for land, driven by growing demand for agricultural products, biofuels, carbon sequestration, and conservation uses. While some land to meet this demand is being met through purchases from private international and domestic investors, large areas of land are often acquired from public lands, obtained from national governments on lease or concession. Many developing country governments consider land not registered as private lands to be allocated at will for investors. For this reason, vast expanses of public lands attract the interest of private investors. However, governments and investors alike may fail to take into account that what appears to be vacant and sparsely settled lands are claimed by local communities. Much of the public land being committed to new uses has been used and claimed under local custom for generations by local communities (Bruce, 2013).

Again, land grabbing, which has to do with heavy land take by an individual for purposes of personal investments as against the general interest of the community, state or country is a major manifestation of this competition. Ojo and Offiong (2018) have argued that taking control of large extents of land, territories and related rights is a problem regardless of who takes it. They also maintain that the population of Nigeria which continues to increase at an alarming rate with the corresponding rapidly growing rate of urbanization as a result of the influx of a great number of people into urban areas worsens the case of land grabbing. Suffice it to add that Nigeria has continually witnessed an increasingly urbanized and urban oriented society characterized by a daily influx of people of different tribes into major Nigerian cities since 1960. The resultant effect of such is increase in the value of land especially in the Nigerian cities. Invariably, land has become gold and acquiring a plot of land in any of the aforementioned cities is not a walk in the park, whether by legal or illegal means. Land litigation has incited attacks – both spiritual and physical causing loss of lives and properties. In their argument, Ugonabo, Egolum and Ogbuefi (2019) submit that the unwholesome activities of the land grabbers include but not limited to: forceful dispossessing lawful owners of their landed properties, selling of a particular parcel of land to several persons, extorting different fees/levies from land developers/investors before and during construction of new houses, demolishing structures, employing excessive physical force on land developers/investors or workers on sites which may lead to maiming or death, carting away building materials from the sites, forming multiple different factional groups which subject land developers/investors to multiple settlements and collecting development fees/levies before building owners can effect repairs or renovation on their old buildings, among others. The activities of the land grabbers have remained unabated for a long while and have not only hindered property development and maintenance. As Ojo & Offiong, (2018) submit, a major effect linked to the acquisition of vast tracts of land is the potential loss of residential-based assets. Such effects may be, especially worsened when the land is acquired forcefully without any form of negotiation and also accompanied by forced evictions of affected population and livelihood assets.

More so, Okafor and Nwike (2016) aver those large areas of such land, often land used as pasture or cultivated under forest-fallow systems, are now being shifted from smallholder food production to other uses. Traditional livelihoods are negatively affected, and local food security put in question. Bargains struck between investors and governments often ignore customary rights or treat them as having little value, and often communities are not compensated for the land lost. Government revenue anticipated from new development schemes is prioritized over local benefits. Where there are promises of benefit streams for local communities, such as local development funds and improved employment opportunities, they often do not materialize or are diverted to others. Other arrangements, like land leases, fail to materialize because communities lack the registered property rights that

are so necessary to negotiating fair contracts with investors. In the end, land development is slow, leaving land once used by local communities idle or underused while communities struggle to intensify production on their remaining land. As a result, the initial excitement over the prospects of investment sours and resentment grows; conflict among local communities, investors, and governments can soon threaten the investment's viability (Ojo & Offiong, 2018).

Furthermore, the displacement and sense of grievance generated by neglect of customary rights are pregnant with land-related conflict, and with a potential for violence. This conflict constitutes a serious risk for investors and those who fund their investments. It can also threaten political stability. More so, scholars (Okafor and Nwike, 2016) agree international development agencies and other concerned actors, including producer associations, are seeking to mitigate these potentials for conflict. Again, development agencies are at a disadvantage, in that they are not directly involved in these transactions; they are deals between investors and national governments. They have, however, sought to provide guidance for investors and governments that can avoid or mitigate such conflict. Some international organizations have established mandatory standards for their projects. Others have promulgated more broadly applicable but voluntary standards. These standards call for strong consultation processes with local communities, recognition of customary land rights, avoidance of displacement where possible, and where displacement occurs, appropriate compensation for loss of assets and assistance with resettlement. International investor and producer associations have also enunciated principles regarding responsible investment, but these tend to not deal specifically with land issues (Ojo & Offiong, 2018).

More so, a number of factors have been identified by scholars as responsible for communal conflict in Nigeria. But land has been linked with most of the inter-communal conflicts in the country. Yecho (2006) indicates that the causes of communal conflicts are not static but rather dynamic and varied in nature depending on the socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances at the time. Thus, Onwudiwe (2004) listed social conditions as population explosion, economic migration, and the anti-poor policies of the government as triggers of communal friction. Again, while Albert (2001) identified indigene/settler problem, religious differences, ownership of land and its resources, goals and aspirations of people as some of the factors that can ignite communal conflict in the country. Lyam (2000) mentioned loss of soil fertility, soil erosion, deforestation, bush burning and flooding as some of the causes of communal conflict.

To Yecho (2006), the fundamental causes of communal conflict are poor economic conditions, high level of illiteracy, the quest for, and fear of domination by other groups, land disputes, market ownership, chieftaincy tussle and party politics. Agreeing that competition for land is at the root of communal conflict, Varvar (2000) indicates that, increased demand for land for agriculture, unemployment, rural hunger, poverty, impoverishment as communal conflict triggers. Suffice to reiterate that deprivation and competitions for land and chieftaincy tussle are the major causes of communal conflict in the Middle Belt. Examples of land-related communal conflict in Middle Belt Nigeria abound. These examples include that, in Nasarawa in 1993, Alago, Hausa and Tiv clashed over land and chieftaincy from 1995-2005, the Egburra and Bassa in Toto clashed over land, chieftaincy and politics. In 1989, 1990 and 1997, intra-communal conflict occurred in Ipav in Gboko based on land problem. In Taraba State, between the Chamba/Jukun and Kuteb over chieftaincy tussle since 1996 when it stated, it is still ongoing; in 2004 in Adamawa State between the Bachama and Hausa/Fulani over land ownership, politics and religious. On March 5, 2005, communal clash between Maruta (Jigawa) and Burmin (Bauchi) occurred over market relocation. On June 2003, Ekepedo and Ogori clashed over land ownership in Kogi/ Edo States. Best (2006) argued that in the Middle Belt, the pressure on land from all directions heightens the

proliferation of ethnic and communal conflicts in the region, including the political ones, most of them arising from the land question.

Suffice it to add that competition over land, at some level, is normal. Land is a limited and multipurpose resource, and most countries depend upon some combination of markets and regulatory frameworks to mediate that competition. If these mechanisms are working well, conflict is unlikely, but markets are often constrained by regulatory and administrative barriers or by information problems, and politicians often thwart good land governance. A modest level of conflict can be constructive if managed effectively to prevent it from escalating into violence.

Competition for Land and the related Conflict in the Middle Belt Nigeria

It is apt to emphasise that with a land area of about 923, 768 square km, it would appear that there is enough land space for every citizen to use for productive purposes. However, the contrary is the case. The indigene and settler conundrum are far wider than land space or its adequacy. Suffice it to add that Nigeria is largely a tribal society in which various ethnic groups lay claims to territories to the exclusion of other groups. For emphasis, the competition and contestation arising from the indigene-settler problematic stems from the conception, definition and perception of who is an indigene and who is not or who is a settler and what right does one have which the other should not have (Oji et al, 2014).

Furthermore, Oji et al, 2014) reveal that a reasonable number of communal conflicts in Africa and Nigerian communities are traceable to land scarcity, territorial disputes and competition for the use of land resources. Again, Dunmoye (2003) in a survey of conflicts in the Middle Belt zone of Nigeria, traced the cause of communal conflict to land scarcity and boundary disputes, due to population pressure, alienation and concentration. However, the argument that land scarcity results into dispute flies in the face of other documented findings about the socio-economic and cultural values of land and territory as economic resources. Moreover, conflicts over land are antithetical to equity, justice in distribution, allocation and use of land-based resources.

Again, Young (2020) submits that the roots of conflict in the Middle Belt, primarily lie in land-use disputes, but reasons for escalation are complex and varied. He also argues that, climate change and desertification have decreased the availability of water and suitable grazing land in northern Nigeria, forcing farmers and pastoralists south. Invariably, poor resource management by the Nigerian government and the encroachment of large-scale development projects onto grazing lands exacerbate this displacement. These factors, alongside rapid population growth, have intensified resource competition between the communities.

The economic significance of land in Middle Belt Nigeria (in raising incomes, providing employment, and exporting crops and other extractable resources as well as providing tax revenue for governments) has transformed land into a social security resource that has been responsible for rationalizing conflicts (Mbah, 2014). Again, livelihood in Middle Belt Nigeria, depends so much on land, especially due to the agrarian nature of the societies where over 70% of its population live in rural areas and engage in peasant agriculture. It is true and should be stressed that the use of land for direct production of livelihoods contributes less of a proportion than in the past due to the occupational changes that occur across the societies of the continent but this change in production has not substantially altered the relevance of land to the people and societies of the Middle Belt. The importance of land, irrespective of various competing conditions, is not proportionately reduced because land still provides a portion of livelihoods that may be the difference between survival or not. Indirectly, land offers the base structure, and sometimes the only basis for social security throughout life among Nigerians (Obioha 2013). It is noteworthy that, in most sub-Saharan African societies, land, by its nature is regarded as the economic

and subsistence base of a people. The economic importance of land accounts for its use as the base for agricultural activities in the predominantly agrarian societies in the African continent (Osegbue, 2017).

As submitted by Osegbue (2017), the scarcity-derived scramble for land, induced by global capitalism that explains the new political economy sources of rural land disputes between individual farmers and groups and ethnic communities in the Middle Belt. It is instructive to observe that land appropriations during the colonial era including land reservation for European traders, the development of trading posts, the construction of residential areas, and its perpetuation by the postcolonial state were a response to rapid globalization. But because much of the expropriated land spanned rural boundaries, disputes ensued between communities sharing the borders. More so, it is worthy of note that acute land shortages are accompanied by a corresponding increase in the human and cattle population. Thus, over-grazing on the Mambilla Plateau in Middle Belt, Nigeria, for example, has direct effect on rural economies in the region with consequences reflected in "occupational" boundary disputes. Again, there are numerous clan and communal conflicts, mostly within the borders of single states, but sometimes spilling over across state boundaries.

Examples of competition for land, creating land/border disputes, communal conflict and farmer-herder conflict abound in Nigeria, generally and the Middle-Belt, in particular. For instance, the conflict between the Tiv and the Idoma in Benue State; the conflict between the confrontation between the eastern and western Kogi State, centered around the Igala and the Igbira respectively; the three-pronged fight between the Nupe, Hausa, and the Gwari in Niger State; the armed confrontation between the Tiv and the Jukun in Taraba State; the escalated farmer-herder conflict in the entire Middle Belt, among others. Suffice it to add that communal conflict has manifested itself as the most pandemic issue next to ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria with ownership, access to and use of land as the driver of the conflict. Communal conflict exists in all the geopolitical zones of the country though the character of the conflicts may differ between these zones. In the Middle Belt Nigeria, for instance, the character of the conflict revolves around farmers and herders, indigene-settler issues, as well as communal and land disputes which occur either in pure form and sometimes colored with ethnicity (Osegbue, 2017).

The Middle Belt region has also seen its fair share of conflicts. Indeed, the Tiv-Jukun in Wukari which has to do with the case of Indigene/settler have become intractable as is with the Chamba-Kuteb Chieftancy tussles over the selection process; the Basa-Egbura in Nassarawa; the Hausa/Fulani-Sawaya in Bauchi; Fulani-Irigwe and Yelwa-Shendam, both in Plateau State. Communal conflicts also exist in Nasarawa State, especially in Askia, Obi and Odobu communities in Lafia Local Government Area. Even in Abuja, communal conflict between Fulani pastoralists and Gwari farmers in Gwako village in Gwagwalada Area Council poses serious security challenges. There is no part of the country that is spared from its ugly deficiencies. It is pertinent to observe that the character of the conflict in Middle Belt Nigeria is a combination of land questions, manifesting in indigene-settler issues, communal disputes over land and the resource conflict between farmers and herders (Nwagwu, 2016).

According to Azad et al., (2018), conflict and violence events in North Central Nigeria, which is synonymous with the Middle Belt, have remained steady from 2013 to 2016. They also maintained that 25% of households experienced any type of conflict event from 2010 to 2017, and more than half of all reported conflict events (55%) were caused by disputes over access to land or resources. Again, about 33% of conflict-affected households had at least one member displaced as a result. The scholars have also submitted that the most common and most important outcome of these most recent conflict events experienced by the household was displacement or migration of at least one household member, which affected one-third of households (33%). Twenty-nine (29) percent of households reported losing

economic opportunity. The next most common consequence was facing additional costs, such as having to spend money on medical treatment or replacing resources, affecting 13% of conflict-affected households. Eleven (11) per cent of conflict-affected households had sent their children away or removed their children from school

The Cost of the Competition for Land in the Middle Belt, Nigeria

The competition for land, manifesting in communal conflicts, and farmer-conflicts are highly volatile, involving large scale destruction of human and material resources, and also causing humanitarian problems in the society. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database (2020) stated that communal violence has an extremely high human cost, although it is only a small share of overall violence, it is typically extremely fatal. For instance, In May 1992, the communal feud that occurred between the Katafs and the Hausas in Kaduna State claimed lives and caused serious damage to property. Also, in October 1991, the Tiv/Jukun communal crisis claimed 5,000 lives with not less than 12 villages burnt down and over 150, 000 people displaced. The Fulani/Tiv communal conflict outbreak in Benue State in May, 2011, claimed not less than 30 people and left over 5000 people displaced. Ostien (2009) explained that between 1991 and 2007, there were several outbreaks of communal violence in Jos, out of which those of April 1994 and September 2001 stand out for their destructive tendencies. Human Rights Watch, HRW (2001) reported that: from September 7 to 13, 2001, Jos became the scene of mass killing and destruction. According to Best (2006) the Kuteb and the Chamba/Jukun conflict as early as August 1998, months after it started, led to the loss of 43 villages, 269 deaths and an estimated 3,000 internal population displacements. The volatile nature of communal conflict in the North stems from the illegal use of sophisticated weapons in its prosecution. Sophisticated small arms have been introduced into the prosecution of the conflict, and they are often used abnormally and recklessly to cause havoc on human and material resources in places where they surface. Mac-Leva (2009) and Abbah (2009) attested to the fact that the Jukun-Chamba/Kuteb conflict in Taraba has assumed violent posture overtime and is characterized by excessive usage of sophisticated weapons. Usually, the destructive tendencies of communal conflicts, emanating from land disputes are such that have largely affected the development prospect of the country as a whole. The consequences are mistrust, suspicion and large-scale destruction of lives and properties.

Again, Oboh and Hyande (2006) aver that in the communal conflict in Oju in Benue State, apart from the usual destruction of lives and property, trees and arable crops, livestock, houses, schools, markets and hospitals were destroyed in the process. They concluded that all these have overwhelming negative influence on food security thereby worsening the already existing food problems with its attendant problems of malnutrition, under nutrition and abject poverty. It is clear that competition for land, resulting in communal conflict is highly destructive in nature.

Another cost of the competition over land resources is the production of humanitarian problems such as internally displaced persons. (Adetula, 2014) reported that the number of internally displace people in Jos crises since 2001 and 2004, were up to 220,000 people, with the Jos crises of 2001 recording over 1000 people on the death list. On December 2012, the conflict between the Gwari and Fulani nomads at Gwagwalada in Abuja produced over 1,500 displaced persons from about 27 settlements. In Nasarawa State, communal crises have continued intermittently, over 11 villages were affected over 4,500 people were displaced. Out of this number, the then Governor of the State, Al-Makura was able to move 2,000 displaced people back to their origin, that is, Bassa District and donated five hundred thousand (500,000) naira to each of the 11 communities affected in the crisis. Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2010) indicated that more than 13,500 people have been killed in land-related

violence since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. On May 3, 2005, Buruku/Katsina-Ala in Benue State in a violent clash over ownership of a piece of land, farms and houses were destroyed and women were abducted. The clash between Tsagari and share communities in Kwara State on 8 September 2000 claimed several lives and property. In Nasarawa State, the conflict between the Azara and Tiv led to the killing of Azara traditional leader making the conflict to escalate.

Again, Mercy Corps (2015) affirms that decades-long violent conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria between farmers and pastoralists has devastated local communities, drastically reducing both security and economic activity. In a country that boasts Africa's largest economy, these resource-based conflicts have impeded market development and economic growth by destroying productive assets, preventing trade, deterring investment, and eroding trust between market actors. These conflicts also take an enormous toll on the economic health of families and households, in addition to the obvious and incalculable loss of human life. Consequently, reinforcing these triggers for violence and terror is the insensitivity and insincerity of political elites to the feelings of the citizens such that the approaches adopted by various agencies, panels, committees etc. assigned to contain the intractable inter-communal conflicts are blurred by political, ethnic, religious and economic sentiments.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The multipurpose uses and the limited availability of land resources have consequently necessitated the eruption of different shades of competition for its acquisition and utilization. While non-agricultural user groups compete with agricultural user groups for available land on the one hand, there also exist various levels of intra-user group competition on the other hand. Thus, the ownership and use of land are at the root of many conflicts in Nigeria. The study explored the causes and manifestations of the competition for land resources in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. It identified these causes like population growth, urbanization, climate change, migration and expansive agricultural practices, among others as the roots of the competition for land resources in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. Again, the lack of clarity about the constitutional interpretation of indigene creates an opportunity for its abuse in many parts of the country. Again, the land struggle is not only about land distribution. People are also struggling for food and shelter boof th which are connected with land, and which explain the reference that land struggle is the foundation of many other struggles. While the ownership of the disputed territories is the lasting cause of the conflict, the animosity arising from a lingering sense of deprivation has assured its persistence. It is in the context of this animosity that the land amongst others has become a central basis for contracting, propagating, primodializing and intensifying the differences between the two communities.

Again, the conflicts in many parts of the Middle Belt Nigeria draw attention to recent population movements in northern Nigeria which was heightened by the influx of refugees initially from the Sharia states and lately from the states experiencing insurgent violence, escalation of long-standing conflicts, including increased wave of conflicts between crop farmers and cattle herders due in part to desert encroachment and resource depletion in north-eastern Nigeria. The frequency of conflicts between agriculturalists and pastoralists in villages in central Nigeria over access to land resources needs to be attended to urgently through comprehensive land legislation on access to and control of agricultural and pastoral resources. Again, many of the land-related conflicts in the country are also linked to economic stagnation and decline, inequitable access to public goods and social services, in addition to lack of transparency and accountability in governance. In this regard, the pool of unemployed frustrated young men with little or no opportunity for positive engagement in the country constitutes a serious risk factor.

It is therefore recommended that:

i. A land reform programme including the review of the Land Use Act (1978) to address all the limitations and challenges of the present legal framework for land use and ownership should be embarked upon by both the Federal and State Governments. This will go a long way to address land scarcity in Nigeria, generally and the Middle Belt, in particular. Governments can often increase the availability of land through reforms such as opening up state lands while taking account customary claims, removing regulatory and administrative barriers to liberalize land and rental markets, or more directly through legislating land reforms.

ii. There is thus the need to address the insecurity of land tenure. Measures that strengthen and/or extend property systems can play an important role in reducing the insecurity of tenure and the competition for land in Nigeria.

iii. There is a need to improve land dispute resolution mechanisms in the Middle Belt, Nigeria. The combination of poor records of land rights and cumbersome court procedures often delays resolution, allowing disputes to fester, and resulting in major backlogs of land disputes in the courts. Measures that can help include reinforcing traditional dispute resolution mechanisms; upgrading capacity in local courts; simplifying court procedures by allowing for plain language submissions or submissions in local languages; adopting paralegal and legal aid programmes targeted toward land and natural resource rights; and providing other, non-court modes of land dispute resolution—for example mobilizing nongovernmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs) to mediate land disputes.

iv. Empowering communities, particularly the poor and marginalized, to pursue their land rights is recommended. Programmes that can empower them include public education on land law and administrative procedures, training of community-level paralegals to act as a bridge to the formal legal system, creation of fora in which aggrieved communities can voice their concerns, and support for responsible leadership (as opposed to conflict entrepreneurs) in those communities. Building the capacity of local communities to negotiate fair contracts with external domestic or international investors for rental or leasing of community lands can go a long way toward creating a level playing field and greater transparency between all parties.

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