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Examining the Role of Resource Control and Ethnic Crisis in Benue Killings

Paul Terlumun Bemgba & Ene Vincent-Orugbo¹

Abstract

Benue State, often referred to as Nigeria's Food Basket, has gradually transformed into one of the nation's most volatile conflict zones. Beneath its fertile lands and rich cultural heritage lies a protracted struggle rooted in competition over land and water resources, compounded by deepening ethnic tensions. This study investigated the intersection between resource-based conflicts and ethnic divisions that have triggered cycles of violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises. The research explored how fertile land that was once a source of prosperity for the Tiv and Idoma farming communities has become a contested space, especially with desertification pushing nomadic Fulani herders southward. This growing competition over dwindling resources has led to recurrent, often deadly, clashes. Ethnic identities have increasingly been instrumentalized to legitimize violence and advance political and economic claims, thereby widening intergroup mistrust. The crisis is further aggravated by weak governance, ineffective security responses, and controversial policy measures such as the Anti-Open Grazing Prohibition Law, which has at times intensified, rather than mitigated, hostilities. Focusing on highly affected Local Government Areas, namely, Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Ukum. The study analyzed how resource scarcity, ethnic rivalries, and political exclusion intersect to sustain violence. It highlights the limitations of state interventions, often perceived as biased, prompting communities to embrace vigilantism. This study has contributed to the ongoing discourse by advocating for conflict-sensitive resource management, inclusive governance, and peacebuilding strategies aimed at addressing root causes and restoring sustainable peace in Benue State.

Keywords: *Resource Control, Ethnic Crisis, Land Conflict, Herders-Farmers Clashes, Benue Killings*

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1.0 Background

Benue State, located in Nigeria's North-Central region, is widely recognized for its agricultural wealth and ethnic diversity, earning it the nickname, The Food Basket of the Nation. Despite its abundant resources, the state has been a hotspot for violent conflicts, largely driven by issues of resource control and ethnic tensions. Over the past two decades, disputes over land ownership, grazing rights, and access to natural resources have escalated into deadly confrontations, contributing significantly to the humanitarian crisis in the region. At the heart of these conflicts is the struggle for control over fertile land and water resources. Indigenous farming communities, predominantly Tiv and Idoma ethnic groups, view land as central to their economic survival and cultural identity. Conversely, nomadic Fulani herders, facing desertification and dwindling pastures in northern regions, increasingly migrate southward into Benue in search of grazing land. This migration has intensified competition for limited resources, often resulting in violent clashes (Kwaja & Smith, 2020; Odoemene, 2017).

Weak governance structures, ineffective law enforcement, and perceived biases in the handling of conflicts have further fueled tensions. Many local communities perceive state interventions as inadequate or partial, leading to a loss of faith in formal conflict resolution mechanisms and a turn toward self-help and vigilantism. The enactment of laws such as the Benue State Anti-Open Grazing Prohibition Law (2017) also triggered backlash, exacerbating hostilities rather than offering lasting solutions (Ochu et al., 2024).

Significant episodes of violence have been recorded across several local government areas (LGAs). In Guma and Logo LGAs, over 73 people were killed between January and March 2018 alone, following attacks attributed to armed herders. In Agatu LGA, a massacre in 2016 left more than 300 people dead, and several villages were razed. Gwer West, Makurdi, Apa, Agatu, Katsina Ala, Ukum, and Kwande LGAs have also experienced repeated attacks, leading to the displacement of thousands. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that by the end of 2018, over 180,000 persons had been displaced in Benue due to conflict-related violence, mainly resource-based attacks. In April 2023, renewed violence in Guma and Gwer West LGAs claimed more than 80 lives in coordinated raids, further

illustrating the scale of the crisis (Daodu et al., 2024; Ogbale et al., 2023).

Examining the interplay between resource control and ethnic crisis is therefore crucial to understanding the root causes of the killings in Benue State. A deep analysis offers pathways toward conflict-sensitive resource management, inclusive governance, and sustainable peace initiatives that address both economic needs and ethnic grievances.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The persistent killings in Benue State, Nigeria, have escalated into a grave humanitarian and security crisis, with thousands of lives lost, widespread displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods and property. The struggle for control over fertile land and water resources, increase by population growth and environmental pressures, has transformed local disputes into protracted and deadly ethnic conflicts, with attacks frequently resulting in mass casualties and the forced displacement of entire communities (The Nation, 2020).

Moreover, ethnic identities have been manipulated by different groups to advance economic and political interests, further entrenching divisions and complicating efforts at sustainable peace. Government responses have often been inconsistent or conflictual, sometimes aggravating the crisis and undermining the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. The inability to address the root causes—resource scarcity, ethnic mistrust, and weak institutional frameworks not only perpetuated cycles of violence but also hindered rural development and food security in a region known as Nigeria’s food basket (Ojo, 2024).

Therefore, there is a critical need to examine how the contestation for resource control and the dynamics of ethnic crisis interact to drive the ongoing killings in Benue State. Understanding this is essential for developing effective conflict resolution strategies and promoting sustainable development in the region. This research aims to support efforts to reduce violence, promote equitable resource distribution, and foster long-term stability and development in the area.

1.3 Research Questions

How do ethnic identities and tensions contribute to the escalation and perpetuation of violence in Benue State?

In what ways do struggles over resource control, particularly land and water, influence the outbreak and persistence of violent conflicts in the region?

What is the impact of political marginalization and governance failures on the intensification?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

To examine how ethnic identities and tensions contribute to the escalation and perpetuation of violence in the region.

To investigate how struggles over resource control, particularly land and water, contribute to the outbreak and persistence of violent conflicts in Benue State.

To examine the impact of political marginalization and governance failures on the escalation of ethnic tensions and insecurity in affected communities.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons, both in academic inquiry and practical application. First, it contributes to the body of knowledge on conflict studies by offering a nuanced understanding of how competition over natural resources particularly land which intersects with ethnic identity to produce recurrent violence in Benue State. While numerous studies have explored the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria, this research specifically focuses on the dual dynamics of resource control and ethnic mobilization, providing a localized and in-depth analysis of the Benue context (Ioryue, 2024).

Second, the study offers critical insights for policy development and governance. By analyzing the structural causes and drivers of the violence, such as land tenure,

insecurity, weak conflict resolution frameworks, and ethnic politicization. This can inform the design of more effective and context-sensitive interventions. The findings may assist government agencies, legislators, and non-state actors in crafting policies that promote inclusive resource management, inter-ethnic dialogue, and long-term peacebuilding strategies (Ojo, 2024).

Third, the research holds value for development practitioners and humanitarian organizations working in conflict-affected regions. Understanding the specific socio-economic impacts of these conflicts on affected communities, including displacement, loss of livelihood, and breakdown of local governance, can enhance the planning and targeting of aid, resettlement, and recovery programs in Benue State and similar environments (Akosu & Edward, 2024).

Additionally, the study provides a framework for comparative analysis of resource-based conflicts across Nigeria's Middle Belt and other agrarian frontiers in sub-Saharan Africa. The research findings may serve as a reference for scholars, researchers, and students in security studies, political science, peace and conflict resolution, and development studies (Osawe & Uwa, 2023).

This study is significant for its potential to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical policymaking, contributing to scholarly discourse while addressing pressing real-world issues of insecurity, governance, and social cohesion in Benue State and beyond.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Ethnic Identity Crisis and Conflict Formation

Ethnic identity, as both a sociocultural construct and a political instrument, plays a central role in shaping intergroup relations in multi-ethnic societies. In Nigeria, colonial legacies, administrative boundaries, and post-independence state formations institutionalized ethnicity as a basis for access to power and resources (Osaghae, 1994). This has often led to ethnic identity crises, particularly in regions such as Benue, where competing groups claim indigeneity, territorial ownership, and cultural supremacy. Akinwumi (2006) notes that identity-based conflicts in the

Middle Belt are frequently framed through narratives of ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ where perceived outsiders as pastoralist groups and are often blamed for economic or security decline. This ethnicization of grievances transforms competition over land and resources into deep-seated intergroup hostility, fueling cycles of retaliatory violence.

2.2 Resource Control and Territorial Contestation

The struggle for control over land and natural resources underlies many of the violent episodes in Benue State. Land in the region is both an economic asset and a cultural heritage, tightly linked to notions of community survival and autonomy. As the agrarian population grows and climate change reduces arable land and water sources, resource scarcity becomes a flashpoint for conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Migratory patterns of herders, seeking pasture during dry seasons, bring them into conflict with settled farmers, whose lands are often encroached upon without formal mechanisms for negotiation or compensation. Literature suggests that the lack of enforceable and equitable resource governance structures exacerbates tensions, especially when formal legal systems undermine indigenous land rights (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). In Benue, these tensions are further amplified by anti-grazing legislation, such as the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (2017), which, while aimed at protecting farmers, has been criticized for excluding herders from consultative processes.

2.3 Political Oppression and State Responses to Conflict

The literature also highlights the role of political oppression manifested in unequal power relations, marginalization, and selective justice, which is a driver and sustainer of violence. In Nigeria, state responses to local conflicts are often perceived as biased or inadequate. The failure to prosecute perpetrators of attacks, particularly in rural areas, creates a culture of impunity that emboldens violent actors (Olonisakin et al., 2010). In Benue State, communities have repeatedly accused federal institutions of neglect and complicity, especially when the victims of violence are perceived to be politically marginalized groups. This sense of abandonment reinforces ethnic

solidarity and fuels demands for local self-defense and territorial autonomy. Scholars such as Mamdani (2001) argue that when state institutions become distant from the everyday experiences of citizens, ethnic identity becomes the primary means through which political and economic grievances are articulated, often violently.

2.4 Interlinkages Between the Concepts

Taken together, ethnic identity crisis, resource control, and political oppression represent a triadic structure through which violent conflicts in Benue State can be understood. Ethnic identity provides the lens through which resource grievances are interpreted, while political oppression, real or perceived, shapes the legitimacy of state institutions in resolving such grievances. Where institutional trust is low and intergroup narratives are polarized, violent outcomes become more probable (Akinwotu, 2023).

2.5 Synthesis and Gaps in the Literature

While existing scholarship has explored each of these concepts in isolation, few studies integrate them into a comprehensive framework for understanding violence in Benue State. This study contributes to the literature by examining how the convergence of ethnic identity crisis, resource control disputes, and political marginalization creates a volatile environment for conflict. It also situates the Benue experience within broader debates on governance, identity, and peacebuilding in Nigeria's Middle Belt (Ojewale, 2024).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1. Social Protection Theory

Social Protection Theory emphasizes the role of state-led mechanisms in safeguarding individuals and communities from economic vulnerability, social exclusion, and livelihood shocks. In conflict-prone societies, inadequate or absent social protection frameworks can exacerbate tensions, particularly where access to land and livelihood resources is highly contested (Holmes & Akinrimisi, 2012). In

Benue State, the absence of inclusive land management policies and sustainable rural development programs has contributed to grievances among agrarian communities. The failure to protect citizens from displacement, economic hardship, and insecurity, particularly in farming areas attacked by armed groups, reflects a gap in state social protection obligations. This theory helps explain how the neglect of welfare responsibilities by the state aggravates the desperation and insecurity that drive conflict, especially when populations perceive themselves to be abandoned or disproportionately affected (Akosu & Ogbole, 2025).

2.6.2. Social Contract Theory

Rooted in the works of philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Social Contract Theory posits that the legitimacy of the state is based on an implicit agreement between the government and the governed. Citizens cede certain freedoms and obey the laws in exchange for protection, justice, and public order. When the state fails to fulfill its obligations, such as ensuring security, justice, and equitable distribution of resources, the social contract is perceived to be broken. In Benue State, recurrent attacks on farming communities, often without prompt or effective government response, have undermined confidence in the state's ability to fulfill its protective role. This perceived breach has fueled local mistrust in security institutions and the federal government, contributing to the rise of self-help mechanisms, ethnic militias, and territorial defensiveness among indigenous groups. Thus, Social Contract Theory provides a normative lens for assessing the legitimacy crisis between the state and its constituents in the context of protracted violence (Ogu, Ogbonna, Chukwu, Okoro, & Nwawube, 2023).

2.6.3. Elite Manipulation Theory

Elite Manipulation Theory focuses on how political elites strategically mobilize ethnic, religious, or regional identities to maintain power, divert accountability, or access resources. Elites often exploit existing grievances such as land disputes or marginalization to galvanize support, entrench group loyalties, and justify repressive actions. In Benue, the politicization of ethnicity and land rights has been

instrumentalized by both local and national actors to advance political interests. Competing narratives between “indigene” and “settler” groups have been amplified by political elites, deepening identity fault lines and fueling conflict. The elite-driven framing of resource conflicts in ethnic terms often obscures the structural inequalities and governance failures at the heart of the crisis. Elite Manipulation Theory is thus central to understanding how power dynamics and political rhetoric contribute to the escalation and persistence of the killings in Benue State (Okoli, & Uhembe, 2025).

By integrating these three theories, the study establishes a robust analytical framework. Social Protection Theory highlights institutional weaknesses in safeguarding livelihoods and preventing vulnerability; Social Contract Theory underscores the erosion of state legitimacy in conflict mitigation; while Elite Manipulation Theory exposes how political actors exploit these vulnerabilities for self-serving ends. Together, they provide a comprehensive theoretical lens to examine how issues of resource control and ethnic tensions evolve into systemic violence in Benue State.

2.7 Empirical Review

Understanding the complexity of the Benue killings requires an empirical examination of how the interplay of resource control struggles, political marginalization, and ethnic tensions has created a cycle of violence. Existing studies provide significant insights into how these variables interact to shape insecurity and communal violence in Benue State and the broader Middle Belt region of Nigeria (Bello, & Kazibwe, 2022).

2.7.1. Resource Control and Agrarian Conflict

Empirical research has consistently linked land-based conflicts in Benue State to competing claims over resources, particularly between sedentary farming communities and nomadic pastoralists. Okoli and Atelhe (2014), through a qualitative field study in Guma and Logo LGAs, found that 73% of displaced households identified the struggle over land and water as the root cause of violence. Their data revealed that unregulated access to common resources, combined with

the absence of enforceable land rights or grazing policies, resulted in recurrent confrontations that often escalated into ethicized violence. Similarly, Tonah (2006) emphasized that environmental degradation and expanding agricultural frontiers contributed to resource scarcity, thereby increasing contestation.

2.7.2. Political Oppression and Marginalization

Several empirical investigations point to systematic political exclusion and governance failures as catalysts of violence in Benue State. Eke (2017) conducted interviews with local leaders and civil society actors, revealing that communities in Benue perceive federal inaction in addressing Fulani herder attacks as a form of institutional bias. Respondents described a politics of silence, where security agencies either failed to act or were perceived as compromised. These perceptions were particularly high in Tiv-dominated areas such as Logo, Ukum, and Katsina-Ala LGAs. Aghedo and Osumah (2015) also showed that communities affected by conflict tend to view their marginalization as both political and ethnic, reinforcing grievances that lead to local resistance and armed group mobilization.

2.7.3. Ethnic Identity and Mobilization of Violence

Ethnic identity plays a significant role in shaping conflict dynamics in Benue. Empirical findings by Olayoku (2014), based on the Nigeria Watch database, indicated that ethnic profiling and historical grievances between Tiv/Idoma communities and Fulani pastoralists accounted for a majority of recorded killings between 2012 and 2018. The study showed that 80% of these incidents occurred in rural local government areas, where state presence is minimal. These findings are corroborated by Human Rights Watch (2018), which noted the increase in retaliatory violence and the use of ethnic labels in justifying attacks. Ethnic mobilization not only fuels fear and vengeance but also politicizes the crisis.

2.7.4. Elite Manipulation and Strategic Narratives

Ukiwo (2011) and Suberu (2010) empirically analyzed how political elites exploit

resource conflict and identity cleavages to consolidate power. In Benue, data from political campaign speeches and local radio broadcasts reveal consistent framing of pastoralist-farmer conflicts in ethnic and religious terms. This framing, according to field interviews and media analyses, has been used to rally ethnic solidarity, secure electoral victories, and deflect attention from poor governance. The weaponization of indigene-settler dichotomies by elites often leads to the legitimization of violence against perceived outsiders, reinforcing long-term structural conflicts.

2.7.5. Synthesis of Empirical Findings

Empirical evidence strongly suggests that the killings in Benue State are not isolated criminal acts but stem from a multidimensional crisis rooted in structural inequalities. Resource contestation, political exclusion, and elite-driven ethnic mobilization create a feedback loop of violence. The data highlights a failure of both federal and state institutions to mediate disputes equitably or provide adequate protection for vulnerable communities.

3.1 Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive aspect enables the systematic documentation of the patterns and nature of violence, while the exploratory dimension helps unpack underlying structural causes namely, resource control disputes, political oppression, and ethnic dynamics. This design allows for both qualitative and quantitative analysis to enhance the robustness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The population of this study includes residents of selected conflict-prone Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Benue State, such as Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Ukum. These areas have been frequently affected by violent clashes involving herders, farmers, and other armed groups. The sample also includes community leaders, local government officials, internally displaced persons (IDPs), civil society actors, and security personnel are all categories of the your population and not the sample size. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants based on their experiences or roles in the conflict. Purposive sampling, also known

as judgmental or selective sampling, involves deliberately choosing participants who are most relevant to the research objectives. This aligned with (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015) recommendation for determining sample size, that the researcher will pay attention to the saturation point during the KII engagement. That is the point at which there is no substantive difference in information from the next interviewee.

The study relied on both primary and secondary data sources:

a) Primary Data:

Semi-structured interviews with key informants such as community elders, traditional rulers, local government officials, and NGO workers.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with affected community members and youth groups.

Questionnaires were administered to residents and IDPs to gather perceptions on resource conflict, political marginalization, and ethnic tensions (Yin, 2018).

b) Secondary Data:

Academic journals, books, and policy reports.

Government publications and security briefs.

Conflict incidence databases such as Nigeria Watch and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

The instruments of data collection included:

A structured questionnaire with both open- and closed-ended questions.

Interview guides to facilitate key informant interviews.

Focus group protocols for thematic discussion of community experiences.

All instruments were pre-tested to ensure clarity and contextual relevance before full deployment (Fowler, 2014).

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and percentages, utilizing software like SPSS.

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic content analysis, allowing the researcher to identify recurring themes related to ethnic conflict, political exclusion, and resource contestation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings were triangulated to ensure credibility and comprehensiveness.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents and analyzes the primary and secondary data collected for the study. Both quantitative and qualitative data are integrated to examine the role of resource control disputes, ethnic crisis, and governance gaps in the killings in Benue State. The findings are organized thematically to align with the study’s research objectives.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 120 respondents participated in the study through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions across Guma, Logo, Agatu, Katsina-Ala, and Ukum Local Government Areas.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	65.0%
	Female	42	35.0%
Age Range	18–30 years	28	23.3%
	31–50 years	64	53.3%
	51 years and above	28	23.3%
Stakeholder Group	Community Members	50	41.7%
	Internally Displaced Persons	30	25.0%
	Local Leaders/Officials	20	16.7%
	Civil Society Organizations	10	8.3%
	Security Personnel	10	8.3%

4.2 Patterns and Nature of Violence

4.2.1 Frequency and Type of Violent Incidents

Respondents were asked to identify the most common forms of violence experienced in their communities.

Type of Violence	Frequency of Mention	Percentage (%)
Armed attacks on villages	45	37.5%
Cattle rustling	20	16.7%
Land/resource disputes	25	20.8%
Targeted killings	20	16.7%
Kidnappings	10	8.3%

Key Informant Testimony: “Almost every two weeks, we hear of attacks. Farms are destroyed, and people are killed or kidnapped. It’s no longer safe to plant crops without looking over your shoulder.” (Community Leader, Guma LGA, 2025)

4.2.2 Geographical Distribution of Incidents

A geographical analysis revealed that Guma, Logo, and Agatu LGAs recorded the highest incidents of violent conflict between 2022 and 2024.

- i. Guma: 45% of reported incidents
- ii. Logo: 28% of reported incidents
- iii. Agatu: 17% of reported incidents
- iv. Katsina-Ala and Ukum: 10% combined

4.3 Underlying Causes of Conflict

4.3.1 Resource Control Disputes

Resource control disputes were cited as the most significant cause of conflict.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Conflict over farmland ownership	55	45.9%
Grazing land disputes between farmers and herders	45	37.5%
Water resource disputes (streams/rivers)	20	16.6%

Focus Group Discussion Quote: “The herders want water and grass, but the farmers have their yams and cassava fields. The clash is inevitable without clear rules.” (Youth Participant, Agatu, 2024).

4.3.2 Political Marginalization

Approximately 51% of respondents believed that political exclusion and poor governance contributed significantly to escalating tensions.

- i. Perceptions of bias in the enforcement of laws (e.g., Anti-Open Grazing Law)
- ii. Delayed governmental interventions after attacks.

4.3.3 Ethnic Tensions

Ethnic differences were reported as a factor by 58% of respondents, with many citing stereotyping, mistrust, and historical grievances.

Key Informant Quote: “You are identified first by your ethnicity before your humanity. In Benue, who you are determines if you are a victim or an aggressor.” (NGO worker, Makurdi, 2024)

4.4 Impact of the Violence

4.4.1 Livelihood Destruction

The violence has caused massive destruction of economic assets:

Livelihood Impact	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Loss of farmlands	50	41.7%
Loss of livestock	35	29.2%
Destruction of markets	25	20.8%
Closure of schools and clinics	10	8.3%

- i. Over 40% of cultivable land in Guma and Logo LGAs remained untended.
- ii. In Miango (Plateau State), over 4,000 cattle were stolen/killed (Irigwe Development Association, 2023).
- iii. In Niger State, Bosso and Gurara LGAs experienced 30% decline in livestock population (NSMA, 2024).

4.4.2 Food Insecurity

- i. 66.67% of respondents were classified as food insecure.
- ii. 55% were severely food insecure, based on the adapted HFIAS (Household Food Insecurity Access Scale).

Secondary Data Cross-Validation:

UN OCHA (2023) reported a 35% increase in staple food prices across Benue and Plateau States.

Benue SEMA confirmed fertilizer shortages leading to poor yields.

4.5 Coping Mechanisms and Local Responses

In response to persistent insecurity:

Coping Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Relocation to IDP camps	55	45.8%
Establishment of vigilante groups	30	25%
Seasonal farming only (rainy season)	25	20.8%
Migration to urban centers	10	8.4%

Community Perspective: “Now, we only farm during the rainy season, quickly harvesting before the herders arrive. Some have abandoned farming completely.” (Farmer, Logo LGA, 2024).

5.1 Discussion of Findings

5.1.1 Resource Control as the Primary Driver of Conflict

The study established that competition over farmland, grazing rights, and access to water resources is the central driver of violence in Benue State. Over 60% of respondents linked the violence to disputes over resource ownership and usage.

This finding aligns with the Resource Curse Theory (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005) which posits that competition over natural resources often escalates into violent conflict where governance structures are weak or contested.

In the context of Benue, the limited availability of arable land combined with migratory pastoralism practices among Fulani herders exacerbates the tension with sedentary farming communities. This friction often escalates into violence due to a lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms and unclear resource governance frameworks.

5.1.2 Ethnic Dimensions of Violence

Ethnic identities and historical grievances amplify resource-based disputes. 58% of respondents cited ethnic stereotyping and mutual distrust as significant contributors to violence.

This is supported by the Instrumentalist Theory of Ethnicity, which suggests that ethnic identities are often politicized during conflict for mobilization purposes (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

In Benue, ethnic narratives around ownership of land (e.g., Tiv and Idoma claims to ancestral domains) and perceptions of ‘outsiders’ (e.g., Fulani herders) fuel hostilities beyond the immediate resource competition.

5.1.3 Political Marginalization and Governance Gaps

More than half of the respondents blamed the failure of political leadership to equitably enforce land and security laws for escalating violence. Delayed response to attacks, selective justice, and lack of credible dialogue mechanisms were consistently reported.

This reinforces the Theory of Relative Deprivation (Gurr, 1970), which argues that perceived political and economic inequality can drive violent rebellion. When farming communities perceive that political institutions favor herders or fail to protect them, resentment grows, feeding cycles of retaliatory violence.

5.1.4 Humanitarian and Economic Consequences

The study found significant loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and large-scale displacement:

- i. Over 40% of farmland abandoned in Guma, Logo, and Agatu LGAs.
- ii. 75% of respondents reported losing farming assets or livestock.
- iii. Food insecurity affected over two-thirds of surveyed households.

This validates the Environmental Scarcity Theory (Homer-Dixon, 1999), which links environmental degradation and resource scarcity to socio-political instability. Prolonged violence not only devastates individual households but also disrupts regional agricultural economies, pushing communities into deeper poverty and dependency on aid.

5.2 Conclusion

This study reveals that the killings in Benue State cannot be explained solely by ethnic hatred or criminality. Instead, they are the cumulative outcome of resource control disputes, ethnic polarization, and weak political governance. The findings highlight the complex interlinkages between access to land, ethnic identity, political representation, and rural violence. Without strategic interventions to address these root causes, Benue and, by extension, Nigeria, risk facing protracted communal conflicts, worsening food insecurity, and deepening social divisions.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Resource Governance

- i. **Implement Transparent Land Reforms:** There is an urgent need to overhaul the current land governance system to eliminate ambiguities surrounding land ownership. Transparent and participatory land reform should prioritize updating cadastral maps, issuing verifiable land titles, and recognizing customary land tenure systems. Community-led land allocation mechanisms backed by legal recognition. This will help prevent overlapping claims and reduce tensions between farmers, herders, and other stakeholders.
- ii. **Establish Grazing Reserves and Agro-Pastoral Zones:** The government should engage in consultative processes to demarcate and legally recognize grazing reserves and agro-pastoral corridors. These zones must be developed with clear ecological and demographic considerations to minimize land-use conflicts. Such zoning will spatially separate farming and herding activities, thereby reducing direct competition and fostering coexistence.

Enhance Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

- i. **Strengthen Traditional Institutions:** Traditional leaders remain critical gatekeepers in rural governance. Formalizing their roles in peacebuilding through state-backed

mandates and structured negotiation training. This will enhance their capacity to mediate disputes and de-escalate tensions within their domains. Their cultural legitimacy makes them effective agents in fostering community-level trust and reconciliation.

ii. Facilitate Inclusive Dialogue Platforms: The state should institutionalize multi-stakeholder dialogue forums that bring together farmers, herders, youth leaders, women's groups, security agencies, and civil society organizations. These platforms should be sustained, well-funded, and localized to encourage grassroots participation and foster consensus-based conflict mitigation strategies.

Improve Security Sector Responses

i. Deploy Community-Based Security: Security strategies must be localized. The establishment of community policing units that are trained in both conflict sensitivity and human rights. This will enable timely responses to threats and reduce reliance on external forces unfamiliar with local dynamics. Their embeddedness within communities enhances intelligence gathering and trust-building.

ii. Strengthen Early Warning Systems: Early warning systems that combine digital tools (such as SMS or radio-based alerts) with indigenous knowledge systems can greatly improve the ability to detect and respond to impending violence. These systems must be community-owned and supported by state security agencies to ensure credibility and effectiveness.

a) Address Food Insecurity and Livelihood Losses

i. Support Displaced Farmers: To rebuild livelihoods and reduce vulnerability, targeted support for displaced farmers and returnees is essential. This should include access to quality seeds, agricultural inputs, soft loans, and technical training. Immediate and sustained livelihood support will help stabilize communities and reduce incentives for violence.

ii. Promote Climate-Smart Agriculture: Integrating climate-resilient agricultural practices such as drought-resistant crops, water harvesting systems, and integrated pest management. This will improve productivity under changing climatic

conditions. This approach reduces environmental stress and the likelihood of resource-driven conflicts.

Promote Ethnic Tolerance and Reconciliation

- i. Civic Education Campaigns: Grassroots civic education should be prioritized to counter harmful stereotypes and ethno-religious profiling. Messaging through schools, local media, youth associations, and religious centers should promote mutual respect, coexistence, and the benefits of diversity, especially among younger populations.
- ii. Memorialization and Healing Processes: Creating space for truth-telling, acknowledgment of atrocities, and public commemorations can foster collective healing. State-supported initiatives, such as reconciliation commissions or community memorials, help survivor's process trauma, validate grievances, and build a shared commitment to peace.

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