

# OBSTRUCTED PATHS TO JUSTICE: LAND GRABBING AND THE CRISIS OF RECONCILIATION IN CENTRAL NIGERIA'S POSTCOLONIAL CONFLICTS

Gloria Longbaam-Alli<sup>1 2</sup>



## Introduction

Proudly referred to as the “Food Basket of the Nation,” Central Nigeria was once regarded as a tranquil region, largely insulated from the ethno-religious conflicts prevalent in Northern Nigeria. Historical and colonial legacies from the pre-colonial era allowed farming communities in Plateau and Benue to coexist alongside Fulani pastoralists. When conflicts arose, traditional conflict resolution systems were employed. However, British indirect rule facilitated the political dominance of the Hausa-Fulani elite over minority groups in Central Nigeria. Land policies favoured “settlers,” such as the Hausa-Fulani, while marginalising “indigenes,” thus creating administrative hierarchies that fostered enduring resentment (Madueke 2018; Logams 2004; Ochonu 2014)

Post-independence, relations among minority groups that rallied under the “Middle-Belt” identity emerged as a form of resistance to Hausa-Fulani control. The foundations of identity politics established during the colonial period, along with the weaponisation of historical grievances, have

<sup>1</sup> Department of History and International Studies, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria. E-mail: longbaang@unijos.edu.ng. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3581-8550>.

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been utilised over the years to justify violence and clashes involving herders and farmers. For instance, land conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and farming communities in Central Nigeria have recently intensified, resulting in cyclical violence and hindering reconciliation efforts. This study explores the critical role of unresolved land grabs in perpetuating farmer-herder clashes and obstructing sustainable peacebuilding in the region. Between 2010 and 2022, ethno-religious tensions, cultural disputes, and land conflicts between Fulani Muslim pastoralists or agro-pastoralist settlers and Indigenous Christian farmers have had a devastating impact, leading to numerous fatalities (Nigeria Watch 2021).

Recent research links these conflicts to factors such as patrimonial state policies, climate change, terrorism, cattle rustling, and population growth (Ajala 2020; Benjaminsen and Ba 2021; Ejiofor 2022; Lenshie et al. 2021; Olaniyan and Yahaya 2016; Olumba 2022; Olumba et al. 2022). Consequently, a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been residing in temporary camps for over three years, facing abysmal living conditions and losing hope of returning to their ancestral lands due to insecurity and a lack of government intervention (Longba'am 2022; Ukase and Jato 2022).

While previous studies have explored conflict management strategies involving collaborations between non-state actors and security forces (Lar 2018; Longba'am 2022), there is a need to address the impact of land grabs on peace, justice, and reconciliation, an underexplored area. This study fills this research gap by demonstrating how unresolved land dispossession injustices fuel cyclical communal conflicts and derail reconciliation in Central Nigeria. It critiques the shortcomings of existing conflict resolution attempts and proposes structural political solutions to address this fundamental barrier to peacebuilding. The study offers a unique perspective by examining the issue through the lens of the affected population rather than technical policies or elite disputes. It sheds light on the overlooked human costs and security implications of the ongoing tensions, which can be traced back to the colonial legacy.

Finally, this study makes a significant contribution by elucidating the critical role of land injustice in perpetuating conflicts and hindering reconciliation in Central Nigeria. It compels us to confront the real-world consequences of unaddressed land crises and kleptocratic governance, which endanger lives and impede social repair. As such, the study's findings hold practical relevance for developing context-specific strategies to address land conflicts and promote sustainable peacebuilding in the region and beyond.

Land grabs in Central Nigeria have significantly undermined conflict resolution efforts, necessitating a re-evaluation of conflict management approaches that recognise the political economy of land in the region and prioritise addressing land grabbing to ensure sustainable peace, justice, and reconciliation.

We will address the thesis statement by addressing these questions:

1. How do patterns of land grabbing shape the dynamics of conflict and prospects for peace in post-conflict societies?
2. What strategies do state and non-state actors employ to address land-related conflicts, and how effective are these interventions in achieving sustainable resolution?
3. To what extent do power relations between different actors influence justice and reconciliation outcomes in land dispute resolution processes?

## Literature Review

Land grabbing, best defined as the acquisition of large land areas by powerful actors, is a global issue observed across different regions, including Africa, Europe, and Latin America (Borras and Franco 2011; Bunkus and Theesfeld 2018; Rulli et al. 2013). Various motivations, such as agricultural investments, food security concerns, agribusiness expansion, and speculation, drive this phenomenon (Lahiff 2014; Sosa Varrotti et al. 2022; White et al. 2012). However, land grabbing often leads to negative consequences, including social impacts, injustice, conflict, and displacement of small landholders.

The impact of land grabbing is particularly severe in post-conflict regions, hindering recovery and reconciliation efforts. Restoring land and property rights systems is crucial for returning displaced populations, reviving agriculture, and ensuring food security (Unruh and Shalaby 2022). However, the complexities of land tenure policies and confusion surrounding land ownership in post-conflict regions contribute to insecurity and vulnerability (Castro and Kuntz 2022). This insecurity affects individuals, communities, and conservation efforts in areas where land tenure is uncertain (Robinson et al. 2017).

From an African continental perspective, studies conducted in Cameroon argue that land grabbing marginalises land users and leads to conflicts within and between communities and companies (Ndi and Batterbury 2017). In post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire, land disputes hinder sustainable returns and

peace despite government attempts to formalise land rights (Pritchard 2016). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), land conflicts arise from violence and ethnic divisions, with rights granted to the “strongest” individuals, often employing the army, state agents, and chiefs (Mudinga et al. 2014). Land grabbing in the DRC is deeply rooted in broader political competition.

From the Nigerian perspective, historical antecedents and the exclusion of local communities are cited as causes of land-related conflicts. Olayinka Akanle (2017) and Nnabuihe et al. (2020) work links land grabs to tin mining during the colonial period. It explains how the British colonial authorities altered the customary tenure systems through the Land Acquisition Ordinance of 1900. The British colonial notion of land ownership significantly differed from the African family land system, thereby changing the African system and forming the roots of post-colonial land grab problems in Jos, Plateau.

Land grabbing poses a significant threat to communities and livelihoods, creating conflicts that can only be resolved through inclusive processes. Accountability mechanisms and activism can aid in addressing this issue, but factors such as political competition, authoritarianism, and ethnic tensions also influence the outcomes. Research, knowledge co-production, and developing new models are crucial for addressing the land grabbing phenomenon.

## Theoretical Framework

Ethno-religious conflicts present ongoing challenges in regions characterised by political instability and weak governance. In these areas, the nexus between opportunistic land grabbing and institutional capacity generates complex conflict dynamics. This study examines two complementary theoretical frameworks: opportunistic land grabbing theory, which illustrates how actors exploit vulnerable situations to seize land through coercive means, and institutional theory, which examines how governance structures impact conflict management processes. Both frameworks exemplify how power imbalances and institutional legitimacy influence the effectiveness of conflict resolution.

The researcher draws on the opportunistic land grabbing theory, which focuses on the actions of individuals or groups who exploit circumstances to acquire land for their gain. This theory is particularly relevant in situations of conflict and displacement, where influential individuals or

organisations may use violence or coercion to seize land and its resources (Dell'Angelo et al. 2021; Jurkevics 2022; Twomey 2014). Various needs, including agricultural and developmental requirements and opportunistic motives, drive land grabbing. The theory emphasises the involvement of governments, corporations, and investors in exploiting circumstances to acquire land for purposes that go beyond immediate agricultural production.

In conflict resolution, institutional theory examines how formal and informal institutions impact the management and resolution of conflicts. This perspective analyses how institutional structures, norms, and practices influence the behaviour and interactions of individuals and groups involved in the conflict. Institutions are crucial in providing frameworks for negotiation, cooperation, and peaceful resolution, whether formal entities like courts or informal mechanisms such as community-based mediation. Institutional theory emphasises the dual aspects of normative and structural influence and highlights the significance of adaptability over time. The theory also suggests that the power and effectiveness of institutions rely on their perceived legitimacy. Trust and compliance are more likely when all parties consider conflict resolution institutions legitimate. Recognising the legitimacy of the process increases the probability of adherence to institutional decisions or agreements.

The researcher draws insights from opportunistic land grabbing and institutional theories to analyse how the influence and motives of land-grabbers affect conflict resolution in Plateau State. For example, literature on opportunistic land grabbing shows how powerful actors exploit unclear land tenure systems, conflict-related displacement and imbalances to acquire land (Borras and Franco 2011; Fonsah 2015; White et al. 2012). Similarly, the literature on institutional theory argues that weak governance facilitates unchecked land grabbing, while legitimate institutions contribute to nonviolent solutions (Mora 2022; Mudinga et al. 2014). These arguments emphasise how norms and structures influence conflict outcomes. These theories provide a foundation for exploring the drivers and effects of opportunistic land grabbing and institutional factors in Plateau state and their impact on conflict resolution.

## Methodology

The study employed a qualitative historical research design to analyse how land grabs in Central Nigeria hinder conflict resolution efforts. This approach facilitated the examination of colonial records, landscape changes, media coverage, and oral interviews, allowing for precise cause-and-effect analysis between land grabs and conflict resolution. Two primary data collection methods were utilised. Archival research investigated land grab issues in official documentation, while oral histories were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 key informants from Plateau and Benue States between 2019 and 2023.

Interviews were conducted in English, Hausa, and Tiv, with a research assistant aiding in interpreting questions for Tiv-speaking respondents. Most interviews were recorded digitally, with notes taken from those who opted not to be recorded. The interviews followed a flexible guide, enabling participants to discuss topics beyond the initial focus. This approach explored intergroup relations, the political economy of land, land displacement impacts on internally displaced persons, and barriers to sustainable peace.

The thematic analysis focused on patterns, trends, and causality over time. A three-stage process — primary coding, pattern recognition, and contextual analysis — mirrored traditional historical analysis. Themes emerged that reflected both long-term historical processes and immediate causes of land grabbing and conflict, informed by temporal sequences, causal relationships, and the interplay of agency and structure. The analytical framework contextualises land grabbing as a contemporary issue rooted in historical patterns. The study reveals how past events shape current conflict resolution efforts by examining themes through a historical lens. The researcher acknowledged Denzin's emphasis on data triangulation to enhance reliability (Denzin 2012).

To protect confidentiality and participant privacy due to the sensitive nature of the data, interviewees were chosen based on their experience and conflict management skills, with sample size determined by data saturation.

## Historical Context of Land Ownership and Use in Central Nigeria

### *Case 1- Plateau State*

The political economy of land in Central Nigeria illustrates how colonial institutional manipulation established systematic frameworks for opportunistic land appropriation, which continue to influence contemporary conflicts. In Plateau State, the Mineral Acts of 1903 and the British Land Proclamation Acts of 1904 and 1910, enacted by Lord Lugard, exemplify a central tenet of institutional theory: that changes in formal rules fundamentally alter power relations and patterns of resource access.

These Acts transferred indigenous land rights to the British Crown, granting colonial authorities exclusive powers over land allocation for economic gain. The economic motivation became evident with the commencement of expatriate tin mining in 1904. The British government profits from this industry, with revenue increasing from 10,486 tons, valued at £1,435,157 in 1938, to 11,942 tons in 1952-53 — illustrating the opportunistic land grabbing theory's central theory that powerful actors prioritise their selfish gains over indigenous rights or sustainable development (Azgaku and Osuala 2015).

A direct consequence of the Colonial Acts and Ordinances was the forced relocation of Berom farmers from their ancestral lands ('JOS PROF 220/51 Notes on Procedure, Jos Division' 1946). C.W. Rowling, the acting Resident of Plateau Province, stated:

It is among the Bi Rom<sup>3</sup> that by far the largest portion of [Nigerian] land has been alienated [for mining]. Some village communities have been forced to hire fatherland from neighbouring communities... No improvement of agricultural methods have been introduced to check the progressive deterioration of the situation. The above conditions have already produced in some areas changes in the tribal system of land tenure and changes are still taking place (Rowling 1935, n.p.).

This land displacement exemplifies the principles of institutional theory, which posits that changes in formal laws can disrupt informal governance

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I have chosen to maintain the colonial spelling, "Bi Rom," when quoting archival sources, but for the remainder of my paper, I will use the post-colonial spelling, "Berom." This approach ensures consistency and clarity, allowing me to respect historical accuracy while acknowledging the term's contemporary and widely accepted spelling.

systems. The alienation from their land transformed social relations within the Berom community. Moreover, the displacement impacted traditional economic relationships, altered social hierarchies, and weakened community autonomy, compelling members to rely on neighbouring communities for access to land. Poor soil conditions and deteriorating environmental circumstances, resulting from continuous farming in their newly allocated areas, further exacerbated food insecurity. These changes underscore how opportunistic land grabbing can lead to instability in traditional institutions, with consequences that extend far beyond immediate economic effects.

The British government's approach to land policies was inconsistent, implementing nationalisation, privatisation, and commercialisation at different times. District Officer Rowling emphasised the need to compensate farmers affected by the colonial government's actions, which had impacted their livelihoods and access to land, instead of monetary compensation. However, the colonial government mandated a £2 per acre payment to all affected areas (Rowling 1935). The distribution of this compensation was delayed until 1941 due to mounting resistance from the Berom community regarding the land issue. This resistance sparked a more forceful, widespread, and organised movement (Mangvwat 2013).

The increasing migration of pastoralists in Plateau State led to tensions and conflicts with farmers. In 1947, Rowling observed unease and friction between these groups in the Bukuru district. Land issues intensified due to overgrazing and land seizures by Hausa and Fulani pastoralists as cultivated crops encroached on previously untouched hunting and communal areas (Rowling 1935). Considering the cautious relationship between the Berom people and the nomadic Fulani — stemming from the jihadi conquests attempted by Usman Dan Fodio in the pre-colonial era, which resulted in land disputes and disrupted social structures — the “sub-colonialism” experienced by the Berom and other ethnic groups in central Nigeria under the policies of indirect rule led them to perceive that the British altered their traditional political system. This alteration conferred excessive control over land and administrative, judicial, and protective authority to Hausa chiefs appointed by colonial officers instead of local districts (Plotnicov 1972).

The colonial administration's failure to effectively manage narratives of marginalisation and address the concerns of minorities, such as the Berom, contributed to escalating tensions between pastoralists and farmers, which occasionally resulted in violence. This violence included attacks on Fulani cattle and disputes over encroachments into sacred and hunting grounds (JOS PROF 1930). For example, in Rim district, the remains of a missing Fulani

were discovered, and Atiri of Jol, a non-Muslim, was accused of murdering him, allegedly in retaliation for cattle damaging his crops. Mr C. R. Walker, who was appointed on March 6, 1930, presided over the trial, ultimately finding Atiri guilty of manslaughter and sentencing him to four years in prison with hard labour (JOS PROF 1930). Over time, many Fulani in Central Nigeria shifted to settler herding, acquiring land from local populations and cultivating crops.

Nigeria's 1978 Land Use Act transformed the country's land tenure system, intensifying rather than resolving land conflicts in Central Nigeria. Following independence, this legislation nationalised land ownership by abolishing freehold interests and indigenous tenure systems, granting state governors authority to issue statutory rights of occupancy for up to 99 years. The Act produced three critical consequences that catalysed contemporary farmer-pastoralist conflicts. First, it concentrated excessive land control with state governors, creating opportunities for political manipulation and elite favouritism in allocation decisions. Second, it dismantled customary tenure rights that had previously provided frameworks for resolving disputes between agricultural and pastoral communities. Third, it imposed Western land ownership concepts contradicting indigenous land access norms, leaving farmers and pastoralists without adequate legal protections for their traditional land-use rights.

Rather than establishing mechanisms for collaborative governance, the legislation incentivised zero-sum competition between communities while insufficient political representation exacerbated these tensions (Krätli and Toulmin 2020). Consequently, the Act created a legal vacuum that transformed previously manageable community disputes into violent confrontations characterised by land speculation and forced evictions.

The establishment of Jos North Local Government Area in 1991 marked a pivotal escalation in land-related tensions between Fulani pastoralists and indigenous farming communities in Plateau State. Although conflicts between these groups were rarely documented between 1961 and 2000, this period witnessed significant instances of contested land acquisition, particularly involving lease extensions without adequate compensation. The most contentious case emerged when Major General Ibrahim Babangida created Jos North LGA in 1991, a decision that indigenous Berom communities perceived as state-sanctioned land appropriation driven by ethno-religious favouritism.

The Berom viewed this administrative restructuring as fulfilling a historical agenda dating back to Usman Dan Fodio's unsuccessful 1804 jihad,

arguing that it provided the Jasawa people — supported by Hausa and Fulani interests — with territorial legitimacy in the region. The Berom Educational and Cultural Organisation (BECO) condemned the decision as a deliberate strategy to displace indigenous populations from their ancestral lands while advancing the Islamization of predominantly non-Muslim communities (Egwu 2004; Bingel 2023<sup>4</sup>). This administrative intervention thus transformed relatively isolated land disputes into a systematic pattern of contestation that would define subsequent farmer-pastoralist relations in the region.

Their allegations were justified, as the Jasawa Youth Association wrote to President Babangida in 1991, thanking him for addressing their concerns about the division of Jos into two local government areas: Jos North and Jos South (Egwu 2004). The importance of Jos North rests on the narratives of the Berom, which trace their traditional histories and institutions to the contested area. Reverend Father Paul Pam states that Jot Bato-Jos North is the head of the Berom Nation, suggesting that without it, Berom identity would be lost, akin to a man unable to survive without his head (Se Tok 2023).

The contestation of Jos North highlighted the deep-rooted grievances between indigenes and Hausa settlers in Central Nigeria, particularly Plateau State. This issue arose from the settlers' claims of social, educational, and political marginalisation, arguing that despite their contributions to Plateau State's economy, the indigenous population has marginalised them in state affairs (Danfulani U. H and Danfulani W.A 2018). Inter-group relations became sour between the Hausa-Fulani and the Berom after the creation of the Jos-North local government. By 2001, these tensions had escalated into violence that spread to towns and villages across the state. The notable consequence of the 2001 crisis was religion-based residential segregation. Allegations of displacement and occupation also became prevalent, with communities presenting evidence of land grabbing. Mr. Mang highlights Mahanga village in Barkin Ladi to illustrate this point.

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4 Interview with Baba Thomas Bingel, 12 September 2023.

Fulani pastoralists began to move and settle in droves in that area in 2008. These Fulani were arming themselves, unbeknownst to the state and its communities. They built their communities by not allowing Berom farmers, who owned land in this area, to farm. If a farmer tries to cultivate his land farm, he is either killed or maimed; crops are destroyed in other cases. As a result, it became a contentious issue, and the state at the time, under Governor Jang, brought the issues to the forefront, but the governor was warned not to act, as it would only make a bad situation worse.<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to explain:

By 2015, when ‘Governor’ Lalong came, Mahanga had been established, and there was a military in Mahanga; there was still a military base protecting the Fulani. Unfortunately, it was from Mahanga that Berom villages were being attacked at various moments because Fulani would leave without the knowledge of the security agents, attack villages, and return home.<sup>6</sup>

By 2022, five groups—Emancipation Center for Crisis Victims in Nigeria (ECCVN), Atakar Development Association (ADA), Berom Educational and Cultural Organization (BECO), Irigwe Development Association (IDA), and Ron Kunlere Development Association (RKDA) — submitted a petition titled “A Petition Against Land grabbing by Fulani Invaders on Native Communities in Parts of Barkin Ladi, Bassa, Bokkos, and Riyom LGAs of Plateau State” to inform the Plateau State government that over 102 communities had been forcibly displaced by land grabbers and the government has been unable to reinstate the displaced people to their homesteads (Busari, 2021; Disturbing Occupation of 151 Villages by Armed Herders in Plateau State n.d.).

The study noted competing narratives to the increasing land grabs, the Berom attributes current conflicts to systematic land grabbing facilitated by political manipulation and ethnic bias. For example, in Barkin Ladi, the Fulani community began unauthorised construction on any available land, claiming divine ownership and seeking approval from their Ardos without the consent of the actual landowners. This situation is further complicated for the Berom, who accuse the Ardos of signing change of ownership forms for non-indigenous individuals, known as settlers, who buy and sell land. This creates the impression that the Ardos wield authority over the district, effectively acting as the de facto head of the Berom community. Similarly, Da

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Henry Gyang Mang, January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Henry Gyang Mang, January 2021.

Edward Pwajok, the *Gwom Rwei* (traditional leader) of Barkin Ladi, contends that the growing numbers and perceived wealth of the Fulani have led to orchestrated attacks on the Berom, aimed at acquiring their ancestral land.<sup>7</sup>

Bingel posits that while the Fulani were victims in the 2001 Jos conflicts, being attacked alongside the Hausa, they also exploited the situation to seize land from the Berom and other indigenous groups in Barkin Ladi, Riyom and Bassa. For instance, the Vanguard Newspaper reports that herds-men have attacked over 54 communities in Riyom and Barkin Ladi, displacing residents and renaming the areas. Rotchun is now Rafin Acha, Dankum is Mahanga, Hywa is Lugere, and Fass is Tafawa (Danfulani U. H and Danfulani W.A, 2018). Additionally, efforts to reclaim these lands encounter opposition from influential federal politicians (Mang 2021).

Fulani pastoralists offer a counterargument: land disputes in central Nigeria stem from broken land transactions, animosity, and ethnic profiling. They argued that they were unfairly connected to conflicts involving the Hausa (Jasawa), who were blamed for the 2001 crisis. They noted the detrimental impacts of ethnic and religious profiling that ensued, portraying the Hausa-Fulani community as jihadist descendants aiming for regional dominance. This stigma has hindered their livelihoods. As tensions grew, landowners in several Central Nigerian states ceased selling land to the Hausa and Fulani communities.

Therefore, apart from the animosities arising from the incessant conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, the *Ardo* of Ropp (Fulani leader in Barkin Ladi) explains that land dynamics in various parts of Plateau State arise from the Berom community's efforts to oust the Fulani, who previously acquired land from them. The *Ardo* further explains that this shift is driven by the Berom's increasing demand for land due to population growth, affecting their agricultural, residential, and grazing needs.<sup>8</sup>

## Case 2 - Benue State

Long-standing tensions and violent conflicts between the Tiv and their neighbours in Taraba and Nasarawa states stem from disputes over land and resources in the Benue River valley. The Tiv, Jukun, and Nasarawa residents depend on subsistence farming and cattle herding. Competing claims over land boundaries and inheritance rights, intensified by drought, exacerbate conflicts. Disagreements often escalate into violence, typically tri-

7 Interview with Da Edward Pwajok. March 2019.

8 Interview with Alhaji Abubakar, 19 November 2019.

gged by encroachments on what one group considers ancestral lands (The Tragedy in Benue – Zaki Biam Through the Eyes of People There 2017). Cattle rustling stems from territorial tension. Despite efforts through customary and state legal systems, resolving long-standing land claims between the Tiv and their neighbours remains difficult, fuelling ongoing conflicts between these ethnic communities (Alubo 2006).

The most recent cycle of conflict involves clashes between pastoralists and farmers. This pattern of attacking farming communities and displacing people from their ancestral land, observed in Plateau State, has also been seen in Benue State. Mr Moar, an internally displaced person from Benue State, explained that before 2011, pastoralists and farmers had a cordial relationship, with pastoralists using sticks to control their cattle.<sup>9</sup> However, things changed in 2011 when pastoralists who migrated seasonally into the area began carrying guns. Additionally, farmers are shot when they attempt to cultivate their land or drive off cattle, which destroys their crops. As of 2025, at least 12 local government areas are under siege by marauders. The displaced individuals are unable to return home and rely on assistance from charitable organisations, non-governmental organisations, or international donors for their survival (Shobayo 2024).

Reverend Father Solomon supports Mr Moar's account, having been displaced three times due to attacks by pastoralists. He firmly believes that their intent is to seize the land, as the Fulani he once knew are different from those he encounters today. He elaborates further:

The Fulani used to come with their wives, children, and sticks when there were forests and wild animals around. However, now that there are no forests or wild animals, these people come as herdsmen, but they do not bring their wives or children; instead, they come armed with AK-47s, indicating a shift in their agenda. They arrive in the village, attack and displace people, and take over land. They invite their relatives; before you know it, they have set up their tents. Security agents do not attempt to send them away because the pastoralists' weapons are sometimes superior. We know they have an agenda; they are not simply coming to graze; they intend to occupy our land.<sup>10</sup>

Institutional failures have led to ongoing conflicts and land grabbing. Moar and Solomon's narratives reveal that various, often competing, institutional frameworks influence the relationship between pastoralists and

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Moar, 17 April 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Reverend Fr. Mfa, Solomon, 19 April 2021.

farming communities. For instance, traditional authorities may grant grazing rights to pastoralists. At the same time, state institutions allocate the same land for commercial farming, resulting in confusion that opportunistic actors exploit.<sup>11</sup>

Institutional theory underscores how the “governance and security vacuum” identified by Kwaja and Smith (2020) enables land grabbing. As formal institutions weaken due to insurgency or conflict, alternative arrangements arise. The researchers point out that criminal networks establish parallel governance systems that challenge state and traditional authorities (Kwaja and Smith 2020). In parts of the Sahel, jihadist groups have implemented their own land management systems, illustrating what North (1990) terms “institutional layering,” where multiple, often conflicting, frameworks govern the same resources.

Moar and Solomon’s emphasis on the cross-border dimension introduces additional institutional complexity. Traditional institutional arrangements for managing herder-farmer relationships function within territorial boundaries. However, cross-border movements create scenarios where traditional, state and international frameworks intersect and conflict. For example, traditional grazing agreements between communities in northern Nigeria and Niger may conflict with national border control policies, leading to gaps that criminal networks can exploit.

## **Impact of Land Grabs on Local Communities and Social Structures**

The most obvious impact of land grabs on Central Nigeria is long-term displacement and its effects on the people’s cultural, economic and social structure. In IDP camps, individuals often express dissatisfaction with their living conditions and long to return to their homes, where they can support themselves and work towards restoring their lost cultural, social, and economic values. For instance, Mr Moar, the chairman of the Daudu Camp in Makurdi, disclosed:

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Jemkur, Joseph, 12 October 2023.

The government is colluding with the military at the federal level to protect Fulani pastoralists who have currently set up camps on our land. However, our state governor is also doing nothing to alleviate this situation. Since we were displaced from our homes, the government has not organised a dialogue between the disputing parties to solve the problem.<sup>12</sup>

In Plateau State, the plight of the IDPs was not different. Da Edward Pwajok, the traditional chief of Barkin Ladi, explained as follows:

Despite some level of respite after years of clashes between pastoralists and farmers, most Berom farmers cannot return home either because the military cannot assure the people of their continuous safety when they return home or because pastoralists have taken over their land. The only option for displaced persons is to continue squatting with relatives or to remain in IDP camps.<sup>13</sup>

Da Pwajok's assertion reflects a common sentiment among respondents who feel powerless against the government's inability to address land grab issues. The Fulani community contends that President Buhari's role as Grand Patron has ironically undermined their interests. They express frustration over being labelled as bandits, terrorists, kidnappers, and land grabbers in media narratives. They also highlight their victimisation, particularly during the Jos crises and the enforcement of anti-grazing laws in Benue State, which they perceive as efforts at ethnic cleansing and marginalisation by state governments that threaten their livelihoods (Plateau Peace Dialogue 2021).

Land grabbing and related conflicts have affected farm production and food security through interconnected mechanisms. Farmer-Herder conflicts and attacks in Plateau state have forced many to abandon their farmlands, thus disrupting food supply chains from a region considered the food basket of Nigeria. In Benue State, violence in Agatu, Guma and Logo LGAs displaced farmers, leading to fallow farmlands and a 30-40% decline in staple crop production. The State, which contributes 30% of Nigeria's yam output, has depleted its food reserves (Gbaoron 2025; Haaga et al. 2025; WanaData 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr. Moar, 17 April 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Da Edward Pwajok. March 2019.

## Hybrid Conflict Management Approaches

Contemporary ethno-religious conflicts necessitate comprehensive management strategies that extend beyond traditional state-centred approaches. Hybrid conflict management recognises the complex interplay among governmental institutions, non-state actors, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in addressing entrenched communal tensions. This section examines the unique contributions of these stakeholders in terms of capabilities, resources, and legitimacy in conflict resolution, particularly in contexts characterised by limited state capacity or where communities demonstrate greater trust in alternative actors.

### *Strategies employed by State Actors*

Initially meant to resolve conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, Nigeria's 1978 Land Use Act nationalised land ownership and promoted ranch establishment and animal production by creating Nigerian Ranches Limited (NRL), a government entity tasked with acquiring and developing ranches. The Act also established a Ranch Development Fund to support ranch acquisition, development, and loans for livestock production. Additionally, the government created a Ranch Development Board to manage NRL and oversee livestock production activities. The primary goal was to reduce land disputes by designating grazing areas for pastoralists. However, the Act's limited implementation failed to prevent clashes between pastoralists and farmers or to resolve land contestation issues (Egbuta 2018; Vanger and Nwosu 2020).

Since 2014, conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, alongside land grabs, have intensified. In 2016, Hon. Sadiq Ibrahim introduced the National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill in the Senate to address these conflicts more inclusively and equitably (ACLED 2024; Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2023). The bill mandated that state governors consult local communities and recognised landowners when designating grazing areas and routes. It emphasised the importance of fair compensation and obtaining consent before acquiring grazing reserves. However, the 2016 bill and subsequent proposals, such as cattle colonies, ranches, and the Ruga Policy introduced in 2018, faced significant backlash.

The federal government's 2019 National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) represents a fundamental departure from previous grazing policies through its comprehensive approach to livestock production, marketing, processing, health, grazing, and community development. This initiative

significantly shifts away from earlier policies by adopting a participatory framework that engages communities in ranch planning and negotiates land acquisition through informed consent and fair compensation mechanisms. The NLTP prioritises designated ranch lands over open grazing systems, directly targeting conflict reduction between pastoralists and farmers. Beyond addressing immediate land disputes, the plan tackles underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to land conflicts through complementary rural development projects.

The emphasis on private or cooperative ranches empowers local stakeholders more effectively than previous state-reserve models, while the plan's flexible, state-specific design demonstrates greater responsiveness to diverse regional needs compared to earlier uniform policy proposals. This community-centred planning approach, combined with structured ranching systems, positions the NLTP as a potentially more successful framework for reducing land grabbing than its predecessors. However, the plan's promise remains largely theoretical, as implementation has stalled since President Tinubu assumed office in 2023, leaving communities without the anticipated relief from ongoing land conflicts.

State-level opposition to federal cattle ranching policies has emerged as a defining feature of land governance disputes in Central Nigeria, reflecting deeper concerns about executive bias and inadequate justice mechanisms. The Benue State government and various socio-political groups have criticised President Buhari's cattle ranch policy as evidence of federal favouritism toward pastoralist interests. Governor Ortom demonstrated this resistance in 2017 by enacting an Anti-Open Grazing law that imposes penalties for land grabbing (Benue State of Nigeria 2017). Similarly, escalating demands for restitution of forcibly acquired lands prompted the Plateau State House of Assembly to pass comprehensive anti-land-grabbing legislation in 2020, with Part III specifically addressing prohibited land seizures, violent occupation, armed grabbing penalties, and illegal property occupation (Plateau State Anti-Grabbing and Related Offences Bill 2020).

However, these legislative measures have proven inadequate in addressing historical injustices, as the Plateau State government remains indecisive about actions concerning lands seized before 2020. This failure to facilitate the return of displaced persons to their ancestral territories has generated significant community frustration, with critics like Bingel analogising the situation to a judge who, despite clear evidence of wrongdoing, implores victims to "allow peace to reign" without enforcing justice or returning stolen property. While state-level legislation demonstrates institutional

recognition of land grabbing problems, the absence of retroactive enforcement mechanisms perpetuates displacement and undermines community confidence in legal remedies.

### ***Strategies Employed by Non-State Actors***

Traditional institutions have played a significant role in addressing land grab issues in Central Nigeria. Traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms rely on mediation, negotiation, and compensation.<sup>14</sup> These communal strategies are more effective and trusted than state mechanisms because they are inclusive and fair. In disputes between farmers and pastoralists, the village chief and Ardo often lead in settling disagreements related to wandering livestock, damaged crops, poisoned or stolen cattle and land grab issues. The continuity of pre-colonial and colonial dispute resolution methods in the post-colonial period is evident. However, their efficacy has diminished due to the 1976 local government reforms that stripped executive and judicial powers from traditional chiefs (Pwajok 2019).

The lack of clarity regarding the official roles of traditional leaders in conflict resolution, as discussed in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Benue State, highlights challenges within local government structures.<sup>15</sup> Removing judicial powers from chiefs has led to defiance from parties seeking resolution through local authorities or law enforcement, with reported dissatisfaction stemming from perceived corruption within the police force.<sup>16</sup> The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Benue State highlighted the ambiguity of traditional leaders' roles in conflict resolution within official local government structures.<sup>17</sup> Blench supports this ambiguity regarding traditional rulers in preventing and mediating conflicts in North-Central Nigeria. His research confirms that traditional rulers play an important role in dialogue; however, their influence does not prevent youths from conflicting sides from resorting to violence, including killing, maiming, and property destruction. During the colonial period, the Berom chiefs of Plateau State wielded limited power with minimal political organisation, resulting in disputes between individuals and groups, often ending in armed clashes (Blench et al. 2006).

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Da Edward Pwajok, March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Focus group discussion, in Benue State, personal communication of the author, 17 April 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Z.Z. Alumaga, 11 February 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Focus group discussion, in Benue State, personal communication of the author, 17 April 2021.

## ***Non-Governmental Organisations***

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), Mercy Corps, and Search for Common Ground tackle the root causes of land grabbing in Central Nigeria, including opportunistic motives and institutional deficiencies. There is an urgent need for legitimate and equitable institutions to deter such behaviours among the elite. Additionally, fostering dialogue and mediation is crucial to countering actions that often lead to violence.

Jemkur<sup>18</sup> asserts that the intercommunal dialogue processes organised by HD in Plateau and Southern Kaduna have significantly reduced conflicts among communities. These initiatives resulted in key declarations, including the Plateau State Declaration of Commitment to Peace (2014), the Southern Plateau Peace Declaration (2016), and the Kafanchan Peace Declaration (2016). Edward Pwajok, the district head of Barkin Ladi, confirmed the success of these dialogues. Notably, mediators from the eight ethnic groups involved in the 2014 Plateau dialogue have been trained to mediate in Southern Kaduna and Nasarawa states.

However, Jemkur identifies substantial challenges in addressing land grabbing in Nigeria. Issues include deep-rooted distrust stemming from past violence, wealth and power imbalances that enable land grabbers to displace vulnerable farmers and pastoralists, and the complexities introduced by porous borders and herder mobility. Climate pressures and population growth exacerbate resource strain, leading to further conflicts. Insecure conditions threaten the safety of mediators and hinder progress. Limited funding restricts engagement and follow-up on agreements, while political resistance from state actors and elites benefiting from land grabbing persists. Moreover, the weak rule of law fails to deter powerful land grabbers, and ongoing community trauma fosters scepticism. Overcoming these obstacles to build trust, enforce agreements, and implement reforms remains a critical challenge. Sustainable solutions require addressing the root causes of the land grabbing crisis through political will and targeted policies to empower and protect vulnerable populations.

## **The Centrality of Land to Conflict Resolution**

This study's examination of colonial policies in central Nigeria reveals that the absence of transparent systems for resolving conflicting claims over

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Jemkur, Joseph, 12 October 2023.

resources, such as farmland, water, and minerals, along with disputes over ownership and use rights, compels individuals to use force to assert their perceived land rights. Interviews with farmers and pastoralists indicate a profound distrust of state security agencies, which has hindered dialogue and mediation. When property rights are not enforced impartially, unresolved disputes threaten livelihoods and security, destabilising regions and fuelling violence.

Additionally, several interviewees agreed that opportunistic individuals among farmers and pastoralists exploit the political and ethnic tensions surrounding land claims, worsening community divisions. The widespread availability of small arms further increases the likelihood of land-related conflicts. Addressing these disputes and mitigating escalation risks is essential to preventing tensions from erupting into violence. In the next section, we will analyse perceptions of land grabbing and its effects on sustainable peace to clarify these arguments.

Land grabs in Central Nigeria have created complex dynamics of mediation and negotiation. Many farmers report being forcibly displaced by pastoralists, while the government seems unresponsive to their grievances. Its policy on cattle ranches and colonies faces widespread rejection from Nigerians, who criticise the federal government for potentially harbouring a hidden agenda aimed at land acquisition for the Fulani community. Prof. Nwabueze's concerns about the legal and political implications of cattle colonies resonate with many affected by farmer-herder conflicts and land grabbing issues. Consequently, these individuals are hesitant to trust the government with land that could be expropriated in the future.

Mr. Aaron Maren, a representative of the Plateau Initiative for Development and Advancement of Natives (PIDAN), argues that if the ranching system were accessible to all, it could benefit both pastoralists and farmers interested in animal husbandry. However, the federal government's failure to raise public awareness about this program has led to scepticism regarding its sincerity and the interests it aims to protect. Maren expressed this concern:

From the beginning, it appears that the programme was preparing Fulani to occupy or take over territory that was not theirs. It afforded Fulani pastoralists more advantages, which is why we (PIDAN) insist that ranches and grazing colonies should be community-based. Let indigenes be involved. We have lived with some Fulani for a long time, and there are peaceful Fulani; not every Fulani is dangerous. I have been a boy herder for seven years. That is why I see insincerity when they talk about cattle colonies, ranches, or *Ruga*, especially when the government wants to get involved. Therefore, indigenes must be involved, and bringing the Fulani to take over our land is wrong.<sup>19</sup>

Maren's statement echoes with people who feel excluded from the government bailout for livestock producers. Rooted in frustration and reality, narratives of injustice from Central Nigeria explain why some groups distance themselves from state-initiated conflict management strategies. Since 1994, various panel and peace committee recommendations have remained unimplemented (Oosterom et al. 2021). The lack of trust in government and efforts to achieve justice have hindered reconciliation and sustainable peace.

B.T. Bingel puts it this way:

Conflicts persist without restitution, as the lack of recourse for seized land breeds resentment and fuels ongoing clashes, hindering reconciliation. No amount of dialogue or mediation can overcome distrust when unlawful land occupants evade meaningful redress. Until appropriate actions restore land access or compensate victims, agreements urging communities to "forgive and forget" yield only fragile peace.<sup>20</sup>

Interviewees' accounts of land grabs reveal challenges to institutional credibility. Corruption in security agencies intensifies grievances among pastoralists and farmers, highlighting systemic issues in resolving land disputes. Concerns arise that the government avoids labelling wrongdoers as criminals due to religious and ethnic favouritism, particularly when one group is depicted as barbaric and violent. When parties see the Nigerian government as a biased mediator, convincing the affected that justice is fairly administered becomes difficult.

Land seizures worsen the power imbalance between pastoralists and farmers. Disputing parties often pursue competitive zero-sum resolutions, tied to retributive justice. In Plateau and Benue States, this reliance on retri-

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mr. Aaron Maren, 18 September 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Baba Thomas Bingel, 12 September 2023.

butive justice has impaired efforts to mitigate land grabs among farmers and herders (Plateau Peacebuilding Agency 2019). Injustice and resentment from those whose lands have been illegally occupied have led some to violence in their quest for justice.

## Conclusion

Land conflicts in Central Nigeria represent systematic institutional failures that perpetuate displacement and inhibit sustainable peace, rather than spontaneous ethnic disputes. The colonial foundation of systematic land appropriation, particularly through tin mining policies and administrative restructuring, established precedents that enable opportunistic actors to exploit governance weaknesses for territorial gain. Contemporary farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau and Benue States demonstrate how these historical patterns have evolved into coordinated land grabbing strategies that employ violence, administrative manipulation, and security capture to achieve a permanent displacement of indigenous communities.

The indigene-settler dilemma reflects deeper structural problems within Nigeria's institutional framework, where competing authorities create opportunities for exploitation while undermining collaborative governance. The 1978 Land Use Act exemplifies this institutional dysfunction by concentrating land authority with political elites while eliminating traditional conflict resolution systems, transforming manageable community disputes into violent competitions for territorial control. Current conflict management strategies yield mixed results because they address symptoms rather than the underlying institutional weaknesses that incentivise zero-sum competition over collaborative resource sharing.

Hybrid conflict management approaches arise from institutional gaps where formal governance structures fail to provide adequate protection or dispute resolution mechanisms for affected communities. These local adaptations showcase both community resilience and the inadequacy of existing frameworks to address systematic appropriation. However, without comprehensive institutional reform that addresses historical injustices and contemporary governance failures, these hybrid approaches remain insufficient to prevent ongoing displacement and violence.

Sustainable peace in Central Nigeria requires institutional transformation that eliminates incentives for opportunistic land appropriation while establishing collaborative governance mechanisms that protect indigenous

rights and ensure equitable resource access. Security interventions alone are inadequate, as they may temporarily reduce violence while allowing continued appropriation through administrative means. Effective resolution demands prompt enactment of protective legislation, establishment of grievance platforms for safe expression of community concerns, and comprehensive institutional reform that addresses the political economy of land rather than merely managing ethnic tensions that obscure underlying structural causes of systematic displacement and conflict.

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## ABSTRACT

Despite extensive research on the sectarian and farmer-herder conflicts bedeviling Central Nigeria, little research on the complicating effects of land grabs on conflict resolution has not been adequately explored. This study examines the effects of land appropriation on peacebuilding efforts. This paper employs a historical research design to argue that the political economy of land ownership poses specific challenges to conflict resolution that existing hybrid management strategies fail to adequately address. Secondly, it presents an analytical framework that prioritises land as the central unit of analysis, offering fresh insights into the limited effectiveness of current conflict resolution strategies. This research enhances our theoretical understanding of how resource appropriation relates to the recurrence of conflict in post-colonial African contexts. This research explores the roles of state and non-state actors in promoting or obstructing justice and reconciliation regarding land grab issues. Utilising historical data and oral interviews, the findings indicate that effective conflict resolution in Central Nigeria requires a fundamental reassessment of how land ownership dynamics impact peace processes. This study has significant implications for theory and practice, enhancing our understanding of resource-based conflicts in fragmented communities and providing practical insights for policymakers addressing Central Nigeria's human and food security issues.

## KEYWORDS

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