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# Land Governance, Security Dynamics and Food Security in Rural Niger South, Nigeria

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## *Abstract*

This study examined the relationship between land governance, security dynamics, and food security in rural Niger South (Zone A), Niger State, Nigeria. The study investigated how land tenure ambiguity, farmer–herder conflicts, communal violence, judicial delays, and weak institutional coordination undermine agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. A qualitative exploratory research design was adopted using secondary data derived from court records, policy documents, conflict databases, media reports, and scholarly literature. Key data sources included reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), World Bank, and Nigerian government publications. The study was anchored on Human Security Theory and Political Ecology of Conflict, while the FAO's four dimensions of food security availability, access, utilisation, and stability provided the analytical framework. Findings revealed that weak land governance systems, prolonged litigation, overlapping customary and statutory land tenure structures, and insecurity have contributed to farmland abandonment, destruction of irrigation facilities, displacement of farming households, and disruption of local food markets. The study further established that food insecurity in Niger South is driven more by governance failures and institutional insecurity than by insufficient agricultural potential. The interaction between insecurity, weak judicial processes, and poor land administration has significantly reduced agricultural productivity and increased rural vulnerability. The study concludes that sustainable food security and rural development in Niger South require integrated reforms in land governance, judicial administration, rural security, and agricultural infrastructure. It recommends digitisation of land records, accelerated dispute resolution mechanisms,

strengthening of community-based peacebuilding structures, rehabilitation of rural infrastructure, and improved institutional coordination to enhance agricultural sustainability and rural livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Land Governance, Security Dynamics, Food Security, Rural Development, Farmer–Herder Conflict, Niger South, Nigeria

## *Introduction*

Land governance challenges and insecurity in Niger South (Zone A), Niger State, have increasingly manifested through recurrent land disputes, communal violence, weak institutional coordination, and prolonged judicial litigation. These dynamics have significantly disrupted agricultural production systems and undermined rural livelihoods. Rather than isolated events, they reflect deeper structural weaknesses in land administration, tenure security, and rural justice delivery systems, consistent with broader patterns observed in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2019; FAO, 2020). Land governance literature confirms that insecure tenure systems and overlapping statutory and customary authorities often generate disputes that escalate into violence or prolonged legal stalemates (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; World Bank, 2022). In such contexts, agricultural systems become highly vulnerable because land functions simultaneously as a productive asset and a contested political resource (Le Billon, 2001). Empirical observations across Niger South indicate that land-related conflicts follow a recurring structural pathway in which disputes escalate into violence or judicial paralysis, ultimately resulting in agricultural abandonment and reduced food production. This pattern is consistent with findings from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020), which links conflict-driven land disruption to declining agricultural output and rural food insecurity. Some selected land conflicts and agricultural impacts in Niger south is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Selected Land Conflicts and Agricultural Impacts in Niger South**

| Conflict Area | Nature of Conflict | Impact on Agriculture | Food Security Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Gudzan Poto/Ketso** | Communal land dispute | Irrigation infrastructure destruction | Reduced crop yield |
| **Doko (Lavun LGA)** | Ruling house/land ownership conflict | Court injunction halted harvesting | Food loss and income decline |
| **Gbapo/Gidigi (Katcha LGA)** | Communal conflict | Farmland abandonment | Reduced food availability |
| **Etisheshi/Tako Wangwa** | Land litigation/ inheritance dispute | Farming suspended pending court ruling | Decline in output |
| **Tama/Dangi (Mokwa/Edati axis)** | Inter-community conflict | Farm and fishing abandonment | Livelihood displacement |

**Analytical Pattern**

The cases examined reveal a recurring pattern in which land disputes evolve into violent confrontation or prolonged judicial restrictions, both of which disrupt agricultural production and weaken rural livelihoods. Rather than being isolated incidents, these conflicts reflect deeper structural problems associated with weak land governance, institutional fragmentation, and unequal access to productive resources. This observation supports the Political Ecology perspective, which argues that resource-based conflicts are shaped less by scarcity alone and more by governance failures, power relations, and institutional inequalities (Le Billon, 2001; Peluso & Watts, 2001). In the same vein, Ribot and Peluso (2003) contend that access to land and other productive resources is determined not merely by formal ownership but by the ability of individuals or groups to exercise control through social, political, and institutional mechanisms.

In Niger South, the destruction of irrigation facilities and other agricultural assets has significantly affected farming activities by interrupting water supply during critical cultivation periods, thereby reducing crop yields and increasing the likelihood of food shortages. This finding corresponds with FAO (2020), which reports that conflict-related destruction of agricultural infrastructure directly undermines food availability and rural livelihoods. Similarly, prolonged court injunctions intended to prevent escalation of disputes often result in the temporary suspension of farming activities on contested lands. Such judicial delays discourage agricultural investment and leave productive land idle for extended periods (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, many farming households experience declining incomes, seasonal food shortages, and increased economic vulnerability. The interaction between insecurity, land governance, and food security has become increasingly important within contemporary development discourse, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Food security is commonly understood through four interconnected dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability (FAO, 2020). In many rural communities, however, these dimensions are undermined not only by environmental and economic pressures but also by governance failures and institutional insecurity. In Niger South, land remains the principal productive asset, yet its administration is complicated by overlapping customary and statutory systems, weak enforcement of land regulations, and prolonged legal disputes. These conditions often transform land from a source of livelihood into a trigger for social tension and conflict.

Security challenges in the area therefore extend beyond physical violence to include institutional insecurity arising from legal ambiguity, ineffective governance, and limited access to justice. This reflects the Human Security perspective, which emphasises the interconnected nature of protection from both “fear” and “want” (UNDP, 1994). Although previous studies have extensively examined farmer–herder conflicts and climate-related pressures on agriculture in Nigeria, limited attention has been given to the institutional and judicial dimensions of land-related insecurity. In particular, the effects of court injunctions, unresolved land tenure disputes, and fragmented governance systems on agricultural abandonment remain insufficiently explored. This study addresses that gap by examining the

judicial–security–food security nexus in Niger South. It provides a micro-level institutional analysis of how legal processes, governance failures, and insecurity interact to disrupt agricultural production and undermine rural livelihoods. By moving beyond descriptive accounts of conflict, the study offers a more integrated understanding of how weak governance structures contribute to food insecurity at the community level

## Literature Review

This section reviews existing scholarship on the interrelated themes of farmer–herder conflict, land governance, judicial institutions, rural development, and food security. It also identifies the specific gap that this study addresses in the context of Niger South, Nigeria.

### Farmer–Herder Conflict and Food Security

A substantial body of literature has established that farmer–herder conflicts are a major driver of food insecurity in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. These conflicts arise primarily from competition over land and water resources, and they frequently result in the destruction of crops, livestock loss, and displacement of rural populations (Udo, 2021; Jooji, 2020). Studies by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020) further show that such conflicts reduce food availability by disrupting agricultural production cycles and limiting access to farmlands. In Nigeria, the northern and central regions have been most affected, where recurring clashes have led to significant declines in cereal production and rural livelihoods. However, most of these studies focus on violent encounters between farmers and pastoralists, with limited attention to the institutional and legal structures that mediate land access and conflict escalation.

### Land Governance and Rural Violence

Land governance has been widely recognised as a critical determinant of rural stability and agricultural productivity. Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access highlights that control over land is not only legal but also political and institutional, shaped by power relations and governance structures. In Nigeria, weak land tenure systems, overlapping customary and statutory authorities, and poor land registration systems have been identified as key drivers of rural conflicts (World Bank, 2020). Le Billon (2001) also argues that when land governance is weak, resource competition becomes politicised, often leading to violence and prolonged insecurity. Despite these insights, many studies treat land governance issues as background factors rather than central mechanisms through which insecurity and food insecurity are produced.

### Judicial Institutions and Insecurity

The role of judicial institutions in shaping rural conflict outcomes remains underexplored in the literature. While courts are expected to resolve disputes and enforce property rights, delays in judicial processes, weak enforcement of judgments, and the use of interlocutory injunctions often contribute to prolonged insecurity in rural areas. Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) argue

that institutional failure within governance systems can deepen human insecurity by preventing access to justice and basic livelihoods. In Nigeria, land-related court cases frequently remain unresolved for years, creating legal uncertainty that discourages farming activities and increases tensions among disputing communities. However, empirical studies linking judicial delays directly to agricultural abandonment and food insecurity remain limited, particularly at the micro-community level.

**Rural Development and Agricultural Decline**

Rural development literature emphasises agriculture, infrastructure, and institutional support as key drivers of rural transformation (World Bank, 2020; Ayres & McCalla, 1996). In theory, improved infrastructure, access to credit, and modern agricultural practices should enhance productivity and reduce poverty in rural areas. However, in conflict-prone regions, these development gains are often reversed. Studies have shown that insecurity leads to farm abandonment, destruction of infrastructure, reduced investment in agriculture, and market disruptions (FAO, 2019). In Nigeria, despite numerous agricultural programmes, rural development outcomes have remained weak due to persistent insecurity, policy inconsistency, and weak institutional coordination

**Summary of the Literature Review**

The reviewed literature demonstrates that while insecurity and land conflicts are well documented in Nigeria, there is still a significant gap in understanding how judicial processes, land governance failures, and institutional fragmentation collectively shape agricultural decline and food insecurity at the community level. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the judicial–security–food security nexus in Niger South, thereby contributing a more integrated and micro-level institutional perspective to existing scholarship.

**Research Gap**

Existing scholarship on insecurity and food security in Nigeria has largely focused on broad national and regional dynamics, particularly farmer–herder conflicts, terrorism, banditry, and climate-induced displacement. Studies by scholars such as Udo (2021), Jooji (2020), and various reports from FAO and World Bank frameworks tend to emphasise macro-level drivers of food insecurity, including environmental stress, resource scarcity, and generalized violent conflicts. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat insecurity as a homogeneous phenomenon and rarely disaggregate the institutional and legal processes that mediate land access and agricultural production at the community level. More critically, limited attention has been given to the role of judicial processes, land tenure ambiguity, and institutional fragmentation in shaping patterns of rural insecurity and agricultural decline. In particular, the ways in which prolonged litigation, interlocutory injunctions, weak enforcement of court rulings, and overlapping customary and statutory land governance systems interact to produce land abandonment and disrupt farming systems remain underexplored in the Nigerian context. This gap is significant because land disputes in many

rural communities are not only resolved through violence but are also prolonged through legal processes that unintentionally freeze agricultural activities and undermine livelihoods. Furthermore, existing literature rarely connects judicial delays and governance failures directly to the four pillars of food security availability, access, utilization, and stability at the micro-community level. As a result, the cumulative effect of legal uncertainty and institutional breakdown on food production systems is often overlooked, despite its clear implications for rural welfare and development outcomes. This study therefore makes a distinct contribution to the literature by examining the judicial–security–food security nexus in Niger South (Zone A), Niger State. It shifts the analytical focus from generalized conflict narratives to a micro-level institutional analysis of how land governance disputes, court interventions, and enforcement weaknesses interact with insecurity to produce agricultural abandonment and food insecurity. By integrating human security and political ecology perspectives, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how legal and security systems jointly shape rural development outcomes in conflict-prone agrarian communities.

**Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the complex interaction between land governance, judicial processes, security dynamics, and food security in Niger South (Zone A), Niger State. Rather than testing hypotheses, the design enables an in-depth interpretation of institutional, legal, and socio-political processes shaping agricultural outcomes in conflict-prone rural communities.

**Study Area**

The study was conducted in Niger South (Zone A), Niger State, Nigeria, with specific focus on Mokwa, Lavun, Edati, and Katcha Local Government Areas (LGAs). These areas were selected due to their persistent exposure to land disputes, farmer–herder conflicts, communal violence, and judicial land litigation, all of which have been repeatedly linked to agricultural disruption and rural livelihood decline. The zone is largely agrarian, with farming as the dominant economic activity. However, recurrent insecurity has led to abandoned farmlands, destruction of irrigation systems, displacement of farmers, and reduced agricultural productivity, making it a critical case for examining the security–food security nexus.

**Data Sources**

Data for this study were derived exclusively from secondary sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on food security, land governance, and conflict studies
- Government reports (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Niger State Ministry of Agriculture)
- Food security datasets and reports (FAO, World Food Programme, Cadre Harmonisé reports)
- Security and conflict datasets (ACLED reports on Nigeria)

- Court records and legal documents (High Court and Magistrate Court rulings on land disputes in Niger State)
- Media reports documenting conflict incidents and agricultural destruction
- Books and policy documents on rural development and land tenure systems

These sources were triangulated to ensure reliability and validity of findings.

**Sampling Approach and Case Selection**

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique in selecting documented conflict cases. Cases were selected based on the following criteria:

- Presence of land ownership disputes or communal conflict
- Evidence of judicial intervention or court injunction
- Documented impact on agricultural activity or infrastructure
- Availability of verifiable secondary records

Key cases were identified from Mokwa, Lavun, Edati, and Katcha LGAs due to their recurrence in legal disputes and media documentation. These cases were not treated as statistical samples but as analytical units for thematic interpretation.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. This involved:

1. Systematic reading of all collected documents
2. Coding of recurring themes such as: land tenure ambiguity, judicial delays, farmer displacement, infrastructure destruction, agricultural abandonment, food insecurity outcomes
3. Classification of patterns across cases
4. Interpretation within the frameworks of human security and political ecology

This method allowed the study to move from descriptive accounts of conflict to analytical explanations of how institutional failures translate into food insecurity.

**Methodological Justification**

The use of a qualitative design is justified because land conflicts and food insecurity in Niger South are institutionally and socially complex, involving overlapping legal, cultural, and political systems. Quantitative methods alone cannot adequately capture: judicial delays and injunction effects, informal land governance systems, socio-political mobilization in conflicts and long-term agricultural abandonment patterns. Therefore, qualitative thematic analysis provides a more suitable framework for explaining the security–land governance–food security nexus.

**Security Dynamics**

Security dynamics refer to the constantly evolving interactions between threats, institutions, and social responses within society (Buzan et al., 1998). Security is no longer viewed solely from a military perspective but increasingly includes economic, political, environmental, and societal dimensions. Weak governance, poverty, food insecurity, and environmental stress frequently interact to produce localized instability and conflict (Krause, 1996).

**Food Security**

Food security involves consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food required for a healthy and active life (FAO, 2020). The FAO framework conceptualizes food security around four pillars: availability, access, utilization and stability. Insecurity disrupts each of these pillars by reducing agricultural output, limiting market access, displacing households, and destabilizing livelihoods.

**Human Security Theory**

The Human Security Theory developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) shifts the focus of security from the state to the individual. The theory emphasizes protection from fear, hunger, poverty, and social instability. The study applies this theory to explain how insecurity, judicial delays, and land conflicts undermine food security and rural livelihoods in Niger South.

**Political Ecology of Conflict**

Political Ecology explains how environmental resources, institutional arrangements, and power relations interact to produce violent conflict (Le Billon, 2001). The theory argues that conflict emerges not merely from resource scarcity but from unequal access and weak governance structures. In Niger South, weak land administration systems and unresolved ownership disputes contribute significantly to insecurity and agricultural decline.

**Agricultural Policy and Security Dynamics**

Since independence, Nigeria has implemented a wide range of agricultural and rural development policies aimed at achieving food self-sufficiency, improving rural livelihoods, and promoting agricultural commercialization. Key interventions include the National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution Programme, the FADAMA Development Programme, the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA), and the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (ABP). These programmes were designed to increase productivity through improved input access, credit support, mechanisation, irrigation development, and value chain integration (Ayres & McCalla, 1996; World Bank, 2020; FMARD, 2016). However, despite decades of policy intervention, Nigeria continues to experience persistent food insecurity, low agricultural productivity, and rising rural poverty. Empirical evidence indicates that these outcomes are largely driven by policy inconsistency, weak institutional coordination, corruption, inadequate

infrastructure, and insecurity (Okunmadewa, 2003; FAO, 2020; World Bank, 2020). The frequent abandonment of agricultural programmes across successive administrations has also created a "policy discontinuity syndrome," where new initiatives replace rather than strengthen existing structures, thereby limiting long-term impact. A critical but often underemphasised factor undermining agricultural policy effectiveness is insecurity, particularly in rural agrarian regions such as Niger South. Studies have shown that conflict and insecurity reduce agricultural output through multiple channels, including forced displacement of farmers, destruction of crops, vandalisation of irrigation infrastructure, restricted access to farmlands, and disruption of rural markets (FAO, 2020; Udo, 2021). In conflict-prone communities, farmland abandonment has become increasingly common, leading to reduced cultivation cycles and declining food supply. For example, targeted destruction of irrigation systems and farm assets not only reduces immediate yields but also weakens long-term agricultural sustainability. This aligns with Le Billon's (2001) concept of "warfare ecology," which explains how environmental resources become strategic targets in conflict settings, further destabilising local food systems. Beyond physical insecurity, the judicial-security nexus plays a significant role in shaping agricultural outcomes. In many rural communities, land disputes are prolonged through litigation processes that may take years before final resolution. During this period, interlocutory injunctions issued by courts while intended to maintain peace often prevent all parties from using contested land. This legal "freeze" results in agricultural inactivity, leading to reduced production and food shortages. Empirical legal studies confirm that weak judicial efficiency and delayed dispute resolution contribute to economic stagnation in agrarian communities by creating uncertainty over land access and discouraging investment in farming activities (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). In Niger South, this dynamic is particularly pronounced, as overlapping customary and statutory land tenure systems frequently result in prolonged litigation and enforcement challenges. Overall, the interaction between agricultural policy implementation and security dynamics demonstrates that food insecurity in Nigeria is not solely a production problem but also a governance and institutional stability issue. Without addressing insecurity and judicial inefficiencies, agricultural policies will continue to yield limited impact regardless of funding or design.

**Discussion and Analysis**

The study reveals that land conflicts and insecurity have become major threats to food security and rural development in Niger South. Persistent disputes over land ownership, grazing routes, and traditional authority have generated violence, displacement, and destruction of agricultural infrastructure. The findings demonstrate that insecurity contributes directly to declining agricultural productivity through: destruction of crops, abandonment of farmlands, vandalization of irrigation systems, displacement of farmers, and disruption of rural markets. The study also reveals that prolonged judicial processes and weak enforcement of court decisions intensify insecurity by creating uncertainty surrounding land ownership. In several communities, fertile agricultural lands remain uncultivated due to pending court cases and fear

of violent reprisals. The conflict–food security feedback loop identified in the study demonstrates that declining agricultural production contributes to rising food prices, poverty, and household vulnerability. These conditions further increase competition over scarce resources and heighten the likelihood of renewed violence. Thus, insecurity and food insecurity reinforce one another in a cyclical manner. The findings align with Human Security Theory, which emphasizes the interconnected nature of insecurity, poverty, and food deprivation (UNDP, 1994). Similarly, Political Ecology explains how weak governance structures and unequal access to land contribute to conflict and exclusion (Turner, 2004).

## Conclusion

The study concludes that food insecurity in Niger South is fundamentally linked to weak land governance, insecurity, judicial delays, and institutional failures rather than agricultural insufficiency alone. Persistent land disputes, farmer–herder conflicts, and communal violence have disrupted agricultural production, displaced rural populations, and weakened local food systems. The study further establishes that prolonged litigation and weak enforcement of land-related judgments contribute significantly to agricultural abandonment and rural underdevelopment. Sustainable rural development in Niger South therefore requires integrated interventions that address both security and governance challenges. Government should strengthen land administration systems by digitizing land records, clarifying ownership rights, and accelerating judicial processes relating to land disputes. Community-based peacebuilding mechanisms involving traditional rulers, farmers, herders, and local authorities should be institutionalized to prevent conflicts before they escalate into violence. The study also recommends improving rural security infrastructure through community policing and rapid-response mechanisms in conflict-prone communities. Government and development partners should rehabilitate damaged irrigation facilities, rural roads, and storage infrastructure to stabilize agricultural production and market access. Agricultural extension services should be strengthened to promote climate-smart agriculture, improved seed varieties, and modern irrigation techniques. Finally, integrated rural development policies that combine agricultural support, conflict resolution, infrastructure development, and institutional reforms are necessary for restoring food security and sustainable rural livelihoods in Niger South, Nigeria.

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