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FROM CONFLICT TO DEVELOPMENT: EXPLORING NONVIOLENT APPROACHES TO COMMUNAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN YAKKUR LOCAL COUNCIL, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Communal disputes remain a recurring challenge to social stability, security, and sustainable development in many parts of Nigeria, often resulting in great mortality, property destructions, and disruption of community development and relations. This study explored non-violent options for the settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Council of Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular focus on government intervention and traditional institutions intervention. The study which hinges on the Protracted Social Conflict Theory and adopted a survey research design. Findings revealed a significant relationship between government intervention and the settlement of communal disputes, indicating the importance of timely and impartial state involvement in conflict management. The study further established that traditional institutions play a significant role in dispute resolution by promoting dialogue, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence within communities. The study concludes that sustainable peace in communal settings is more achievable when government agencies and traditional institutions collaboratively intervene in conflict prevention and resolution. Consequently, the study recommends impartial government intervention and proactive engagement of traditional leaders in peacebuilding to enhance the effectiveness of non-violent dispute settlement mechanisms.

Keywords: *Communal disputes, nonviolence, government intervention, traditional institutions.*

Introduction
Conflict remains one of the persistent causes of violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, often leading to population displacements, loss of lives, property destruction, and disruption of local livelihoods (Sundberg, Eck & Kreutz, 2012). Unlike interstate conflicts, communal disputes are largely rooted in disagreements within or between local communities and may escalate into wider political violence when poorly managed (Brosché & Elfversson, 2012). Evidence from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program indicates that communal conflicts account for a significant proportion of violent conflicts across Africa, highlighting their importance as a community development and governance challenge (Elugbaju, 2016).

In Nigeria, communal conflicts have become a recurring feature of social relations, particularly in rural communities where disputes over land ownership, boundaries, and access to resources are common. Cross River State has experienced numerous communal clashes, many of which have been linked to contested land claims and territorial boundaries. These conflicts have adversely affected agricultural production, social cohesion, and local

development, while exposing vulnerable populations to insecurity and displacement (Daily Trust, 2023).

Scholars have often explained the persistence of communal conflicts in Africa in relation to weak State institutions and limited State capacity to effectively prevent or manage disputes (Mkutu, 2008). Economic constraints and inadequate security resources further reduce the ability of governments to respond promptly and sustainably to local conflicts (Lamidi, 2019). Consequently, attention has increasingly shifted toward non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms that complement formal State interventions.

Traditional institutions have historically played important roles in maintaining peace and resolving disputes within African societies. Although their formal powers have declined, traditional rulers continue to command respect and legitimacy in many communities and remain actively involved in mediation and reconciliation processes (Wodu, 2021). Their continued relevance suggests that non-violent approaches rooted in local institutions may offer viable pathways for sustainable conflict management and community development.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the causes and consequences of communal conflicts, limited attention has been paid to the effectiveness of non-violent mechanisms involving both government and traditional institutions. This study therefore examines non-violent options for settling communal disputes which impact negatively on community development in Yakurr Local community of Nigeria.

The Problem

Communal unrest in Nigeria has reached a critical stage, posing serious challenges to peace, stability, and national unity. Given the country's diverse ethnic composition, disputes among communities and ethnic groups have persisted for decades, including conflicts that originated before independence and continue to recur. These tensions have transformed several localities into centres of violent confrontations where advanced weapons are frequently employed. Notable examples include the Ife–Modakeke crisis and the Zango–Kataf conflict in Kaduna State.

As the most populous nation in Africa, Nigeria has witnessed recurring communal violence fueled by factors such as ethnic and religious differences, competition over scarce resources, and political interests. These conflicts often inflict severe damage on public infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities, roads, and bridges. Educational activities are disrupted when schools are attacked or teachers are forced to flee, while the destruction of medical facilities limits access to healthcare services. Communities repeatedly affected by ethnic and communal clashes experience setbacks in education, economic development, and social integration, with livelihoods and public assets suffering considerable damage. Furthermore, communal violence has led to the destruction of government property, interruption of academic programmes, displacement of households, loss of human lives, and extensive property damage, thereby undermining sustainable community development and social progress.

The incessant outbreaks of communal conflicts with violence have claimed lives, destroyed property worth millions of naira, and turned many natives into refugees in their own

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communities. If the current trend of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area is left unabated, relative peace, security of lives and property, and community development may become a thing of the past. It is against this backdrop that this study examines non-violent options in settling communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria.

Research questions

1. What is the significant association between government intervention and settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State?
2. Is there any significant association between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State?

Research objectives

1. To investigate the significant relationship between government intervention and the settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State.
2. To examine the significant relationship between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State.

Research hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between government intervention and settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State.
2. There is no significant relationship between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State

Literature Review

Concept of Communal Disputes

Communal conflicts are confrontations that occur among non-governmental groups whose members are united by common ethnic, cultural, religious, or social identities. These disputes emerge from interactions within society and typically involve challenges to a group's rights, interests, status, traditions, authority, or access to valuable resources (Essien, 2020). In many cases, such conflicts are triggered by struggles over ownership and control of resources, especially land, as well as competition for influence within local political structures. Unlike insurgencies conducted by organized rebel groups or armed militias, communal conflicts are largely shaped by identity-based divisions and collective group interests (Gurr, 2000).

Communal disputes constitute a recurring challenge in Africa's socio-political landscape and are particularly common in multi-ethnic societies such as Nigeria. Historical evidence shows that inter-kingdom rivalries and inter-community conflicts existed during both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It emphasizes the roles of place, interaction, and subsistence in communal life, arguing that shared geographical spaces and social interaction often create conditions for conflict (Ogban-Inyam, 2005).

Similarly, Otite and Albert (1999) identify differences in perception, scarce resources, inequitable treatment, role conflicts, and territorial violations as major sources of communal disputes, with land accounting for a substantial proportion of such conflicts in Nigeria. Consequently, communal disputes frequently disrupt peace, economic activities, and social progress, often resulting in loss of lives and property (Mbwirire & Kurwa, 2018).

Government Intervention and Settlement of Communal Disputes

Government intervention in communal disputes is influenced by both strategic interests and state capacity. The likelihood of intervention often depends on the location of the conflict, the availability of resources, and the state's ability to project authority across its territory (Buhaug, 2010). In many African countries, governments exercise varying degrees of control over different regions, with remote and poorly connected areas often proving difficult to monitor and govern effectively (Boone, 2014).

Previous studies indicate that strategic concerns such as the protection of ethnic constituencies, local resources, and political stability may motivate government intervention in communal conflicts (Touval & Zartman, 1985). However, the capacity of the state remains a critical determinant. States with stronger material and military resources are more likely to intervene successfully, whereas intervention becomes less probable when governments face competing security challenges or when conflicts occur in geographically inaccessible areas (Bates, 2008; Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

In Nigeria, governments at the local, State, and Federal levels have employed mediation, negotiation, and peacebuilding measures to address communal crises. These efforts demonstrate the potential of governmental institutions to facilitate conflict resolution and peace enhancement (Wodu, 2021). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that interventions characterized by indiscriminate force often undermine sustainable peace (Cox, 2016). Similarly, state-led initiatives may fail where governments lack commitment or sufficient understanding of local realities. In some cases, disarmament programmes have generated new grievances by disrupting existing local power relations (Abbink, 2000; Law et al., 2008; Mkutu, 2008).

Traditional Institutions Intervention and Settlement of Communal Disputes

Traditional institutions constitute the foundational social and ethical structures upon which communities are built. Although contemporary societies have increasingly embraced Western-oriented governance systems, leading to the weakening or transformation of many indigenous institutions, these traditional structures continue to play important roles within modern governance frameworks. Their enduring significance is particularly evident in areas such as conflict resolution, including social, communal, and land-related disputes. Additionally, they contribute to the conservation and stewardship of cultural heritage, natural resources, and historically significant sites, demonstrating their continued value in community development and social order (Mbwirire & Kurwa, 2018).

Scholars argue that traditional rulers can serve as a first line of defence against communal violence because unresolved disputes often escalate gradually into more complex conflicts (Ikelegbe, 2006; Kamat, 2003). While traditional rulers already contribute to conflict management, contemporary conflicts require additional skills beyond those acquired through

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customary practices. Consequently, training in modern conflict resolution techniques, peacebuilding, restorative justice, gender inclusion, and early-warning mechanisms has been recommended to strengthen their effectiveness (Wodu, 2021).

Traditional institutions derive their strength from their close relationship with local communities and their role as custodians of customs, traditions, and values. Through effective communication and community engagement, they contribute to governance, conflict resolution, and social cohesion (Crook, 2005). As respected local authorities, traditional rulers are often well positioned to facilitate peaceful negotiations and narrow differences between disputing groups (Skalnik, 2004). Across Africa, traditional institutions continue to play vital roles in promoting coexistence and resolving communal conflicts through both formal and informal mechanisms (Mutsini, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Protracted Social Conflict Theory

This study is grounded in the Protracted Social Conflict Theory, formulated by Edward Azar in 1990. The theory posits that enduring and recurrent conflicts emerge when fundamental human needs—including safety, identity recognition, social acceptance, meaningful participation in governance, and equitable access to economic opportunities—remain unmet over an extended period. According to the theory, the continued deprivation of these essential needs generates grievances and tensions that can escalate into long-lasting social conflicts.

According to Azar, societies characterized by ethnic, religious, cultural, or racial divisions are particularly vulnerable to protracted conflicts when certain groups perceive exclusion, injustice, or threats to their identity.

The theory further posits that historical experiences, colonial legacies, state policies, and the multi-communal nature of society contribute to the emergence and persistence of such conflicts. Its relevance to this study lies in its explanation of how unmet needs, perceived marginalization, and competition over resources can sustain communal disputes. It therefore provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of communal conflicts and the need for effective mechanisms such as government intervention, traditional institutions, and mediation in promoting peaceful coexistence.

Methodology

The research utilized a survey design and was carried out in Yakurr Local Government Area. The target population consisted of residents aged 18 years and above living within the study area. A multistage sampling approach was adopted for respondent selection. Initially, five communities—Nko, Idomi, Mkpani, Inyima, and Ekpeti—were chosen through a random selection process. Thereafter, participants were deliberately selected based on their familiarity with and understanding of communal conflict issues. The Taro Yamane sampling formula was applied to derive a sample size of 400 respondents.

Information was gathered using a structured questionnaire designed for the study. Descriptive statistical tools, specifically frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarize the data, while the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) technique was utilized to examine the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level.

Results

Hypothesis One

H0: There is no significant relationship between government intervention and settlement of communal disputes.

Correlation analysis on government intervention and settlement of communal disputes

		Government intervention	Settlement of communal disputes
Government intervention	Pearson Correlation	1	.876**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	503.217	503.215
	Covariance	1.255	1.252
	N	378	378
Settlement of communal disputes	Pearson Correlation	.876**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	503.215	507.878
	Covariance	1.252	1.255
	N	378	378

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The analysis showed a correlation coefficient of 0.876 indicating the existence of a significant relationship between government intervention and settlement of communal disputes. The test was significant at 0.05 significance level, and this led to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis Two

H0: There is no significant relationship between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes.

Correlation analysis on the relationship between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes

		Traditional institutions	Settlement of communal disputes
Traditional institutions	Pearson Correlation	1	.791**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	497.594	505.631
	Covariance	1.244	1.375
	N	378	378
Settlement of communal disputes	Pearson Correlation	.764**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	505.631	497.594
	Covariance	1.375	1.722
	N	378	378

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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The analysis showed a correlation coefficient of 0.791 indicating the existence of a significant relationship between traditional institutions intervention and settlement of communal disputes. From the table above, the test was significant at 0.05 significance level hence, the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the 387 valid questionnaires revealed significant relationships between government intervention and traditional institutions intervention in the settlement of communal disputes. The test of the first hypothesis showed a significant relationship between government intervention and the settlement of communal disputes. This finding supports the views of Bates (2008), who argues that government intervention in communal conflicts is influenced by strategic interests, State capacity, and the availability of material and military resources. Similarly, Bahug (2010) contends that the likelihood and effectiveness of intervention depend on a combination of motivational and structural factors, including the government's ability to project power across geographic and social distances.

The second hypothesis also revealed a significant relationship between traditional institutions and the settlement of communal disputes. This finding corroborates Skalnik's (2004) assertion that traditional institutions serve as important local authorities capable of facilitating peaceful negotiations and resolving intercommunal disputes. As custodians of community values and interests, traditional rulers play a crucial role in narrowing differences between conflicting parties. The finding further aligns with Mutsini (2011), who emphasizes the enduring relevance of traditional institutions in peacebuilding, coexistence, and conflict resolution across African societies.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of non-violent options in settling communal disputes in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular emphasis on government intervention, and traditional institutions' intervention. Guided by the Protracted Social Conflict Theory, the study adopted a survey design and collected data from 387 valid respondents selected through a multistage sampling procedure.

The findings revealed significant relationships between government intervention and the settlement of communal disputes, traditional institutions' intervention and the settlement of communal disputes. The results underscore the importance of timely government action, the continued relevance of traditional institutions in maintaining peace and social cohesion among disputing communities.

Recommendations

1. The government should remain impartial and address the root causes of communal disputes through fair and timely intervention. They should not take sides but rather, serve as an intervening variable in peacemaking and communal conflict resolution.
2. Traditional rulers, clan heads, family heads, and other community leaders should continue to promote peaceful coexistence by encouraging aggrieved parties to seek redress through legitimate channels rather than resorting to violence.

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