

**BOUNDARY DISPUTE AND THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE OF
COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Background: Boundary disputes remain a persistent constraint on the economic and social life of communities in Nigeria’s South East geo political zone. Contested claims over land ownership disrupt agricultural production, hinder trade, and weaken the social cohesion on which collective community functioning depends. This study examined the effects of boundary disputes on the economic and social life of selected communities in the South East geo political zone Objective: To determine the effects of boundary dispute on the economic life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and to ascertain the effects of boundary dispute on the social life of the people in the affected communities. Methods: The study adopted a descriptive and correlational design involving 400 respondents drawn, through purposive and simple random sampling, from a population of 1,059,431 persons across the affected communities. Data were collected using a structured and validated four-point Likert-scale questionnaire whose economic and social life subscales returned Cronbach’s alpha reliability indices of 0.90 and 0.91 respectively. Analysis was conducted using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and simple linear regression, tested at the 0.05 level of significance. Higher scores represented stronger perceived disruption arising from boundary dispute Result: Findings revealed that 75.21% of respondents reported that boundary dispute had a strong negative effect on economic life, while 73% reported a similarly strong negative effect on social life. Regression analysis confirmed that boundary dispute exerted a significant negative effect on economic life ($p < .001$) and on social life ($p < .001$). Conclusion: The study concludes that unresolved boundary dispute constitutes a structural constraint on both the economic productivity and the social cohesion of affected communities in the South-East, and that livelihood restoration and social reintegration require concurrent, rather than sequential, policy attention.	Boundary dispute, economic life, social life, community development, South-East Nigeria

Introduction

Land constitutes the principal productive resource upon which the economic and social life of agrarian communities in South-East Nigeria depends, such that disputes over its ownership carry consequences that extend well beyond the immediate territorial grievance from which they arise. Boundary dispute refers to disagreement or conflict between two or more parties over the rightful ownership, demarcation, or use of a defined territory (Osakwe, 2021). Such disputes have recurred with particular intensity in Umuleri and Aguleri (Anambra State), Ezillo and Ezza (Ebonyi State), and Usaka Ukwu (Abia State) – communities whose economies remain predominantly agrarian and whose social organization is closely tied to communal land tenure. Udejaja and Mefor (2018), in a case study of boundary dispute in Cross River and Akwa Ibom States, demonstrated that contested land ownership disrupts trade, agricultural production, and investment, thereby generating economic consequences that compound over time as uncertainty over tenure persists.

The economic implications of boundary disputes in the South-East are substantial. The closure of trading points, abandonment of farmland, and reluctance of investors to commit resources to contested territories collectively erode the livelihoods of residents. Ihugba and Ahiakwo (2021), in their study of boundary disputes and economic activity in Nigeria, found that uncertainty surrounding land tenure discourages farmers from adopting improved agricultural techniques or making long-term investments, thereby depressing productivity even in the absence of outright violence. This observation aligns with the broader observation of Machingambi and Wadesango (2019) that land disputes constrain economic growth by diverting communal attention and resources away from productive activity and toward the management of territorial contestation. Homer-Dixon's (1994) Eco-Violence Theory situates this dynamic within the wider phenomenon of resource-induced conflict in developing agrarian economies. Beyond its economic consequences, boundary dispute exerts a corrosive effect on the social life of affected communities, in so far as contested land ownership polarises opinion, strains relationships between neighbours, and weakens the communal bonds that traditionally underpinned collective identity (Ilelah et al., 2024; Anierobi et al., 2024). Amadi (2021), in an examination of the emotional impact of boundary dispute on affected communities in Nigeria, found that prolonged territorial contestation generates sustained psychological distress among residents, whereby uncertainty over land ownership and the recurring threat of displacement produce heightened anxiety that, in turn, strains family and community relationships. Ukoha (2018) and UbongAbasi et al. (2017) similarly observed that boundary dispute in Nigeria disrupts the informal social interactions, including shared festivals and cross-community associational life, that historically bound neighbouring communities together, such that the erosion of these interactions compounds the social fragmentation already produced by territorial contestation.

The economic and social dimensions of boundary dispute can therefore be viewed as interdependent rather than discrete, in so far as the erosion of livelihood security both results from and reinforces the erosion of social cohesion, whereby communities preoccupied with economic survival have diminished capacity to sustain the collective institutions, associations, and traditions on which social cohesion depends. This interdependence is of particular significance in Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezillo and Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu, where agrarian livelihoods and communal social organisation have historically been closely intertwined, such that a disruption to one dimension can be expected to propagate readily to the other.

Statement of the Problem

Sustainable community development in Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezillo and Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu remains constrained by persistent boundary disputes. Despite successive rounds of customary mediation and statutory intervention, the economic and social consequences of these disputes have neither been fully resolved nor systematically quantified. Farmers have continued to report restricted access to farmland, disrupted trade, and diminished investment in agricultural infrastructure, while residents more broadly describe strained inter-communal relationships and the erosion of traditional social practices. Yet, existing literature on boundary disputes in Nigeria has tended to treat these economic and social consequences as incidental to broader conflict narratives rather than as distinct outcomes warranting empirical measurement. This gap leaves policymakers, agricultural extension agencies, and community development practitioners without a clear evidentiary basis for prioritizing livelihood restoration and social reintegration interventions. The problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the absence of a focused, statistically grounded account of how boundary disputes affect the economic and social life of communities in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. What were the effects of boundary dispute on economic life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?
2. What were the effects of boundary dispute on social life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the study at 0.05 alpha level.

1. There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the economic life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.
2. There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the social life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive correlational design, whereby the descriptive component enabled the characterisation of the economic and social conditions prevailing in the affected communities, and the correlational component permitted estimation of the strength and direction of the relationship between boundary dispute and each of these two outcome variables. The study was conducted in three community clusters in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria, namely Umuleri and Aguleri in Anambra State, Ezillo and Ezza in Ebonyi State, and Usaka Ukwu in Abia State, communities selected on account of their predominantly agrarian economies and their longstanding exposure to boundary dispute.

The population of the study comprised 1,059,431 persons resident in the selected communities, drawn from figures published by the National Population Commission (2006). A sample size of 400 was determined using the Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where N represents the population size and e the 0.05 margin of error. After the purposive selection of the affected community clusters, simple random sampling was used to select respondents for questionnaire administration (Yin, 2009;

Neuman, 2014). Data were collected using a structured instrument, the Boundary Dispute and Community Development Questionnaire, which contained dedicated sub-scales measuring the effects of boundary disputes on economic and social life. Responses were scored on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used for interpreting item responses; mean scores of 2.50 and above were interpreted as agreement, while mean scores below 2.50 were interpreted as disagreement. Content and face validity were established through expert review by specialists in boundary dispute and dispute resolution. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha from a pilot administration to residents of Awara community in Oguta Local Government Area, Imo State, yielding indices of 0.90 for the economic life sub-scale and 0.91 for the social life sub-scale. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from respondents, and confidentiality was maintained by excluding personally identifying information from the questionnaire. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations), while hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression at the 0.05 level of significance. Higher scores on the outcome variables represented greater perceived disruption to economic life and social life.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Variables of the Respondents

Table 1: Socio-Demographic data of respondents (n=400)

Variables	Options	Frequency (n = 400)	Percentage (%)
Umuleri		80	20
Aguleri		80	20
Ezillo		80	20
Ezza		80	20
Usaka Ukwu		80	20
Age (in years)	20-29	100	25
	30- 39	100	25
	40 49	100	25
	50- above	100	25
Marital status	Single	116	29
	Married	244	61
	Separated	40	10
Religion	Christian	364	91
	Muslim	20	5
	Traditional	16	4
Education Level	Primary	67	16.75
	Secondary	219	54.75
	Tertiary	114	28.50
	Farmers	121	30.25
Occupation	Artisans	96	24.00
	Public servant	58	14.5
	Private employment	125	31.25

Source: Field work results (2026).

Table 1 presents a sample of 400 respondents, drawn equally from Umuleri, Aguleri, Ezillo, Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu (80 each, 20%), and evenly spread across the four age brackets of 20 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, and 50 years and above (100 each, 25%). Married respondents predominated (61%), followed by singles (29%) and the separated (10%), whereas Christians constituted the overwhelming majority (91%), against Muslims (5%) and adherents of traditional religion (4%). Educational attainment favoured secondary schooling (54.75%), followed by tertiary (28.50%) and primary (16.75%) levels, whilst private employment (31.25%) and farming (30.25%) dominated the occupational distribution, thereby indicating a predominantly married, Christian, moderately educated, and economically diverse respondent base across the affected communities.

Research Question One: What were the effects of boundary dispute on economic life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Effects of Boundary Dispute on the Economic Life of People in Affected Communities in South-East Nigeria

S/N	Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (x)	Std. D
1	Boundary dispute often disrupts agricultural activities in our community, thereby cutting down the income of the residents.	116 (29)	255 (63.75)	19 (4.75)	10 (2.5)	3.19	0.89
2	Most farmers in our community are unable to access their fields to harvest crop as a result of violent boundary dispute.	80 (20)	180 (45)	105 (26.25)	35 (8.75)	2.78	1.03
3	Our community residents that rely on cross-border trade for their livelihoods are facing economic hardship.	71 (17.75)	168 (42)	122 (30.5)	39 (9.75)	2.68	0.79
4	Boundary dispute creates an environment of uncertainty in our community, and this often hinders economic activities.	70 (17.5)	207 (51.75)	96 (24)	27 (6.75)	2.80	0.96
5	Boundary dispute often discourages government investment in infrastructure in our communities.	96 (24)	268 (67)	25 (6.25)	11 (2.75)	3.12	0.65
6	Boundary dispute often increases the cost of doing business in the communities.	43 (10.75)	224 (56)	79 (19.75)	54 (13.5)	2.64	0.78
7	Regular clashes related to boundary dispute often slow down economic activities in our community.	69 (17.25)	259 (64.75)	68 (17)	4 (1)	2.98	0.75
Grand Totals		301 (75.21)		99 (24.79)		2.88	0.84

Note. n = 400. Source: Field survey.

Table 2 shows that respondents consistently identified boundary dispute as a constraint on economic activity, with six of the seven items returning mean scores above the criterion mean. The most strongly endorsed concerns were the disruption of agricultural activities (Item 1, mean = 3.19) and the discouragement of government investment in infrastructure (Item 5, mean = 3.12), whereas the items on cross-border trade hardship (Item 3, mean = 2.68) and increased cost of doing business (Item 6, mean = 2.64) recorded comparatively lower, though still meaningful, endorsement. In aggregate, 75.21% of respondents reported that boundary dispute had a strong negative effect on the economic life of the affected communities, while 24.79% indicated a lesser effect. This implies that boundary

dispute undermines economic life primarily through disruption to farming, infrastructure investment, business activity, and livelihood stability in the affected communities.

Research Question Two: What were the effects of boundary dispute on social life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Effects of Boundary Dispute on the Social Life of People in Affected Communities in South-East Nigeria

S/N	Variables	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (x)	Std. D
1	Some of our community members are displaced and separated from their families and loved ones due to boundary dispute.	35 (8.75)	259 (64.75)	44 (11.00)	62 (15.50)	2.67	0.84
2	Disagreements over land resources have often led to social divisions among the community residents.	88 (22)	275 (68.75)	24 (6)	13 (3.25)	2.91	0.98
3	Boundary dispute in our community has often disrupted social cohesion.	91 (22.75)	250 (62.5)	48 (12)	11 (2.75)	3.05	1.09
4	Boundary dispute often disrupts educational activities of students.	89 (22.25)	246 (61.5)	60 (15)	5 (1.25)	3.04	0.78
5	Boundary dispute often disrupts cultural festivals in our communities, thereby denying the people opportunity to socialize.	58 (14.5)	252 (63)	72 (18)	18 (4.5)	2.52	0.84
6	Some people in our community are living isolated life as a result of increased focus on their safety and well-being.	18 (4.5)	152 (38)	189 (47.25)	41 (10.25)	2.37	0.89
7	Some people in our communities have experience of trauma due to boundary-dispute related violence.	59 (14.75)	222 (55.5)	95 (23.75)	24 (6)	2.79	0.75
Grand Totals		299 (74.79)		101 (25.21)		2.84	0.76

Note. n = 400. Source: Field survey.

Table 3 shows that respondents generally identified boundary dispute as a major disruption to social life in the affected communities, with six of the seven items returning mean scores above the criterion mean. The most strongly endorsed concerns were the displacement and separation of community members from their families and loved ones (Item 1, mean = 3.05), disruption of social cohesion (Item 3, mean = 3.05), and disruption of educational activities among students (Item 4, mean = 3.04). By contrast, the item on isolated living due to increased concern for safety and well-being (Item 6, mean = 2.37) recorded the lowest mean score and fell below the criterion mean, indicating comparatively weaker endorsement. In aggregate, 73% of respondents reported that boundary dispute had a strong negative effect on the social life of the affected communities, while 27% indicated a lesser effect. This implies that boundary dispute undermines social life mainly through family separation, weakened

social cohesion, disruption of schooling, reduced cultural interaction, and trauma associated with boundary-related violence.

Hypothesis One: There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the economic life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Table 4: Regression Analysis for the Effect of Boundary Dispute on Economic Life

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p	Decision
(Constant)	.024	.117		.205	.838	
Boundary dispute	.905	.041	.676	21.958	.000	Significant, H_{01} rejected

Note. Dependent Variable: Economic Life. $p < 0.05$.

Table 4 shows that boundary dispute produced an unstandardised coefficient of $B = .905$, a standard error of .041, a standardised coefficient of $\beta = .676$, and a t-value of 21.958 ($p < .001$), indicating a strong and significant negative relationship between boundary dispute and economic life. The null hypothesis was accordingly rejected, confirming that increases in the intensity of boundary dispute are associated with corresponding decreases in the economic life of residents of the affected communities.

Hypothesis Two: There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the social life of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Table 5: Regression Analysis for the Effect of Boundary Dispute on Social Life

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p	Decision
(Constant)	.146	.127		2.295	.562	
Boundary dispute	.861	.071	.659	17.048	.000	Significant, H_{02} rejected

Note. Dependent Variable: Social Life. $p < 0.05$.

Table 5 shows that boundary dispute produced an unstandardised coefficient of $B = .861$, a standard error of .071, a standardised coefficient of $\beta = .659$, and a t-value of 17.048 ($p < .001$), demonstrating a strong and significant negative effect of boundary dispute on social life. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, confirming that boundary dispute exerts a significant, quantifiable, and negative effect on the social life of the affected communities in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Effect of boundary dispute on the economic life of communities in the South-East

The result showed that boundary dispute exerts a strong and significant disruption on economic life, thereby corroborating the position of Udejaja and Mefor (2018), whose case study of boundary dispute in Cross River and Akwa Ibom States found that contested land ownership disrupts trade and agricultural production in ways that intensify over time. This pattern is evident in the present study, as respondents identified the discouragement of government investment in infrastructure and the disruption of agricultural activity as the most severe economic consequences of boundary dispute. The result also aligns with Ihugba and Ahiakwo (2021), and Okereke et al. (2021), who observed that tenure uncertainty discourages both public investment and farmers' adoption of improved agricultural techniques. In practical terms, the result suggests that economic recovery in the affected communities

cannot be achieved through agricultural extension support alone; it requires the prior or concurrent resolution of the underlying tenure uncertainty that discourages farmer-level production, government infrastructure investment, and broader livelihood stability.

Effect of boundary dispute on the social life of communities in the South-East

The result showed that boundary dispute undermines social life, thereby supporting the observation of Amadi (2021) that prolonged territorial contestation generates sustained psychological and relational strain among affected residents. This pattern is reflected in the present findings through the strong endorsement of items addressing the disruption of social cohesion and the displacement of community members from their families. This is consistent, too, with the account offered by Ukoha (2018) of the erosion of shared festivals and cross-community associational life as boundary dispute persists, a dynamic evident in the present study's findings regarding the disruption of cultural festivals. The overall findings suggests that economic and social life are empirically interdependent in the context of boundary dispute, in so far as the erosion of livelihood security constrains the resources and stability required to sustain communal social life, so that interventions confined to either dimension alone are unlikely to achieve durable recovery in the affected communities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that boundary dispute exerts a strong, statistically significant negative effect on both the economic and the social life of communities in Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezillo and Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu, thereby confirming that unresolved territorial contestation constitutes a structural constraint on livelihood security and communal cohesion in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria. The study further concludes that these two dimensions of community life are empirically interdependent, such that durable improvement in one is unlikely to be sustained without corresponding attention to the other.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. State agricultural agencies should prioritise the restoration of secure land tenure arrangements in the affected communities, with a view to re-establishing farmer confidence sufficient to support investment in improved agricultural techniques.
2. Government and private-sector investment in infrastructure should be extended to the affected communities as part of a deliberate confidence-building strategy, so that the discouragement of investment identified in this study does not become self-reinforcing.
3. Community development organisations should support the deliberate revival of shared cultural festivals and cross-community associational activities, in order that the social bonds eroded by boundary dispute may be progressively restored alongside economic recovery.

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