

## Communal Conflict and the Challenges of Development in Benue State: The Bonta-Okpute-Aino Experience

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### Abstract

The study investigated the impact of communal conflict on economic development in Benue State; with special focus on Bonta/Okpute-Aino communal conflicts. The purpose of the study was to find out the effects of communal conflicts on economic development. The study adopted the survey research design. The population of the study comprised 4,343 people living in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities of Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas of Benue State. A sample of 366 using a multi-stage sampling technique was selected for the study. Data were collected focus group discussions and key information interviews and the data analyzed using the political economy of resource scarcity theory. The findings revealed that the major causes of the communal conflict are land, boundary contestation precipitated by youthful exuberance, the lackadaisical attitude of the government towards boundary demarcation and the ego of the illustrious sons of the two communities. The actors in the conflict were revealed also. The government should also adopt a long term approach curbing communal disputes by developing early warning systems in the communities and adopt peace education suitable to tackle communal conflict in good time to prevent escalation. Basic amenities such as water, health facilities and electricity, should be provided for the communities to encourage small scale businesses. This will reduce idleness and poverty.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Communal, Development, Peace, Boundary

### Introduction

Whenever people stay together and interact, there is the possibility of conflict. Since man must associate with his/her fellow out of necessity, conflict is inevitable. Conflicts arise mainly as a result of clash of interest. According to Adekola and Enyiche (2017), conflict also occurs when there is a breach of peace as a result of quarrels over religious beliefs, cultural differences and infringement on a community's economic or social interest by another community, individual or group. Tsuwa (2021) therefore, argue that conflict as a phenomenon is promoted by certain factors and conditions. Conflicts of the highest sort occur between interest groups and individuals who disagree over one thing or the other. To be in a better position to appreciate conflict and its causes, one needs to understand its original nature and metamorphosis. A flash back at the conflicts that had occurred in the past in Nigeria, the ones that are presently devastating communities and the

ones presently looming to explode, would reveal some social, economic, cultural, religious and political origins. In Nigeria, Colonial imposition of subjugated stereotypes and classification of groups as stateless and state centric and indigenes and settlers reinforced the squabbles and pockets of communal resistance that resulted in conflict situations between the British and Nigerians. Notable among these conflicts were those that occurred in the Eastern part of Nigeria like the conflict that led to the destruction of Long-Juju at Arochukwu in 1910; in Western Nigeria, the Egba women riot of 1918, and again in the East, the Aba women riot of 1929 (Kachii, 2019).

The non-consultation of the traditional groups that led to the amalgamation of 1914, just like the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 solidified the division that colonial rule had designed. The post-independence Nigeria continued to witness conflicts mainly resulting from boundary disputes between neighbouring

communities. Some of these conflicts were the conflict between Ife and Modakeke in the present day Osun State, Aguleri and Umuleri, the Osile-Ogbunike incident, all in the present day Anambra State, the Tiv/Alago conflict in Nassarawa State, the Benue Cross Rivers conflict, the Benue/Taraba conflict and most recently, there was a conflict between Ezza and Ezilo communities in Ebonyi State. Benue State too, is not an exception to inter-communal conflicts in the post-independence era. Some of these include; the Tiv/Jukun conflict, the Mbakor/Nongov border conflict in Guma and Tarka LGAs, the Mbaivur/Mbasombo communal conflicts in Gwer East Local Government Area, Mbatyav- Mbazerem conflict in Gboko and Konshisha Local Government Areas, Ugaambe/Mbaiase communal conflicts in Gwer East and Konshisha Local Government Areas of Benue State and most recently, the Bonta/Ukpute-Aino communal conflicts in Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas of Benue State respectively (Kachii, 2019; Iornumbe, 2021).

Communal conflicts are often marked by atrocities and ethnic cleansing. Even, when the destruction and the killing subside, it tends to leave behind serious legacies of trauma, displacement, loss of market structures and a weakened social trust. It is one of the social problems that pose serious security challenges and is a threat to the unity of the community or state. These communal conflicts militate against development as they interrupt farming activities, breed enmity between the conflicting communities, obstruct the operation of schools and business activities as well as discourage investors from investing in the communities (Tsuwa, 2021).

This dislocation of socio-economic activities, exacerbate the challenge of development as the basic livelihood of the people is dislocated and members of such communities suffer poverty and starvation as their farm produce, food source and other economic sources are destroyed as a result of the conflict, they are displaced from their homes and suffer psychological trauma as a result of the loss they incur. This usually reverses the development strides of a people, especially in some communal conflicts where even economic trees are destroyed, farmlands

destroyed alongside buildings and markets. In this kind of conflicts, resettlement and reintegration becomes very difficult and problematic as core values are distorted. Re-establishing structures for development therefore becomes very expensive and challenging.

This paper therefore, examines the challenge of communal conflict and development in Benue State. It overhauls the stifling effects of communal conflicts on development especially in the rural area that is affected by communal conflict with emphasis on the Bonta and Okpute/Aino conflicts. This is done to unravel the major actors in the conflict and their interest with the aim of developing workable strategies that would prevent the reoccurrence of the conflict and re-establish development agenda for the communities.

## **Conceptual Framing**

### **Conflict of Conflict**

Conflict is a disruption caused by differing of ideas or actions, often related to the selfish pursuit of needs that ends in state of unrest. Tsuwa and Ochoga (2015) conflict is natural to human life and can be some time destructive or productive depending on the circumstance and it is inevitable in everyday life. Conflict refers to the contradictions inherent in power relations and which manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities. Conflict is the motor of transformation and is either positive or negative. It can be creatively transformed to ensure equity, progress and harmony; or destructively transformed to engender acute insecurity.

### **Concept Communal Conflict**

Communal conflict is defined as a conflict between non-state groups that are organized along a shared communal identity. They are products of social relations and involves threat or action of one party directed a community's rights, interest, privileges of another because of differences over economic issues, power or authority, cultural values and beliefs (Tsuwa, 2017). Communal conflict is defined in this study as a conflict between non-state groups

that are organized along a shared community identity.

This is succinctly captured in Kachii (2019) who sees conflict as the struggle between parties who want to gain control over some disputed and perceived indivisible resource, such as a piece of land or local political power. The groups involved are non-state groups. This means that neither actor controls the state, although the state might be involved as an important supporting actor in a communal conflict thus, this category of collective violence is more symmetric than typical civil wars. In communal conflicts, no actor is empowered with the authority that a government has, and none of the parties is in control of the national army. Likewise, the groups are not formally organised rebel groups with standing capacities for violence but are groups that only occasionally organise to engage in conflict. The higher level of organisation and material strength of state-based conflicts means that they usually have a higher destructive potential, and a tendency to drag on for a longer time than communal conflicts.

Additionally, the groups are organised along a shared communal identity. Some would equate the concept of communal identity with ethnic or religious identity, but as conceived here the definition is purposefully left more open because group identity is considered to be socially constructed rather than a static phenomenon. Communal identity is conceptualised as subjective group identification based on a common history, culture, or core values (Ugwu, 2013). Focusing solely on ethnic or religious identity would make the term less flexible and unable to capture other forms of relevant identity. For instance, in some local conflicts, the dividing line is between the “original” inhabitants of an area and more recent “settlers”. In this study, this is seen as a form of communal conflict because people strongly identify themselves (and the “other” group) along these lines.

This type of demarcation often causes sons-of-the-soil conflicts where the original inhabitants perceive themselves as the rightful owners of the land (Kachii, 2019). In other areas, the main identification might be based on one's livelihood, and conflicts sometimes arise

for example, between groups such as pastoralists and agriculturalists. Livelihood conflicts often parallel ethnic lines because, for instance, pastoralists living together often are from the same ethnic community. This is not always the case. For instance, farmers in a village might identify as inhabitants of a particular village no matter how ethnically homogenous or heterogeneous the village may be. The bottom line is that what constitutes the basis for a communal identity can differ across time and space.

### **Concept of Development**

Development is a process that creates growth, progress, and positive change of the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and demographic components. It brings about a rise in the level and quality of life of the population, and the creation and expansion of income and employment opportunities, without damaging the resources of the environment. Development is usually visible and a gradual process and includes an aspect of quality change and the creation of conditions for a continuation of that change (Society for International Development, Feb. 2021) (<https://sid-israel.org>).

Development could also be defined as a process of providing the conditions that offer opportunities for improving the quality of human life in a community. This entails improvement in food security, essential amenities like water, electricity, good roads, health services, educational facilities and environmental protection, where farming, business and commercial activities can thrive.

Deekor and Urho (2021) conducted a study to examine the influence of communal conflicts on community development in Udu and Okpe Local Government Areas of Delta State. The researcher formulated three (3) objectives for the study, three research questions and hypotheses to guide the study. The research design adopted was the descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of 2,000 members of a community-based organisation. The sampling technique used was a proportionate sampling technique with a sample size of 400 persons which is 20 per cent of the total population. The instrument used for the study is a self-structured questionnaire titled “influence of communal crisis on community

development questionnaire". The instrument was validated by two experts in measurement and evaluation while the test-retest method was adopted for the reliability of the instrument. The data gathered were analysed using mean and standard deviations for the research questions while the null hypotheses were tested using the z-test statistical tool at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that social effects and political and economic impacts are among the effects of communal crises in society.

Their work is also relevant to this study research. This is because the scholars have considered communal crisis (conflicts) and its bearing on development. The study brought to the limelight that communal conflicts have social, economic and political impacts. However, their work was salient in identifying the causes of communal conflicts, the extent of these conflicts and the methods of resolving communal conflicts. This has created a knowledge gap which suggests a need for a study to fill this knowledge vacuum.

Another study relevant to this study is that of Adekola and Enyiche (2017). They examined the effects of insecurity on community development projects in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni and Ahoada East Local Government Areas of Rivers State, Nigeria. The study was guided by two research questions and one null hypothesis. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a population of 3,211 members of various community-Based Organisations in the study areas. A sample of 682 members of various CBOs was selected using the random and proportionate-stratified sampling techniques. Data for this study were collected with the use of a self-designed questionnaire titled "Effects of Insecurity on Community Development Projects Questionnaire (EICDPQ)".

A correlation index of 0.81 was obtained to determine the reliability of the instrument. Responses to the questionnaire items were analysed with the mean statistics and the hypotheses were tested using the chi-square statistics at a 0.05 level of significance. The result of the analysed data revealed that the causes of insecurity in the study areas are cult conflict, conflicting political factions, poor distribution of resources, violent resistance to exploitation by government and corporate

organisations and neglect of the people. The study, therefore, recommended that Government in collaboration with companies operating in this conflict-prone area should engage stakeholders (community leaders, youth leaders and other leaders of Community-Based Organisations) in town hall meetings and collectively come up with lasting solutions to these insecurity issues that impede their development.

Adekola and Enyiche's work is suitable for the understanding of communal conflicts and their bearing on community development projects. This is because where there are communal conflicts; there is general insecurity in the area. Nonetheless, Adekola and Enyiche's work is different from the present study in geography. While their study was conducted in Rivers State, the current study is conducted in Benue State. This study examines the effect of communal conflict on development in Benue state and especially its effect on the conflicting Bonta and Ukpe-Aino communities. It goes further to discuss the causes, effects and consequences of communal conflicts and the various methods of resolving communal conflicts.

Other researchers have examined the effect of communal conflicts on economic activities which have become a hindrance to development. The researcher noted that no study has specifically discussed the effect of communal conflicts on development in the warring communities of Bonta and Okpute-Aino. This has created a knowledge vacuum which has necessitated the present study, with emphasis on communal conflict and the challenge on development in Benue State; the Bonta and Okpute-Aino experience.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Framework**

The researchers relied on both primary and secondary sources of data to examine the meaning, origin, causes and consequences among other elements of communal conflicts and their effects on development in Benue State. Primary sources of Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were used. In total, 20 Key Informant Interviews were conducted. 5 were from the security agencies, 5 from traditional and community leaders, 5 were from youth groups and religious



leaders each and the other 5 were taking from traders and other groups from both communities. A number of 5 Focal Group Discussions were held 2 in Bonta, 2 in Okpute-Aino and 1 in Makurdi the state capital. The FGDs comprised of between 6-10 persons.

Theoretically, this paper adopts the political economy of scarcity theory. This theory posits that ecological borders are in most cases also ethnic and cultural borders. In essence, ecological borders become ethnic and cultural lines of demarcation, where people meet to co-operate or to fight. For instance, in most West African countries, including Nigeria, an ethnic dimension comes to play in the conflict which often appears to oppose two broad ethnic groups, the Tiv/Jukum ethnic groups in Abintse, the Tiv/Igede in Konshisha Local Government in Benue State. This ethnic dimension to the conflict does not only occasion the increase in competition over natural resources but also a breakdown in the balance between the two groups.

### **Empirical Review**

In the 2021 works of Collier, the greed versus grievance theories is articulated and developed to explain broader processes of conflict which include civil wars, and meticulously question the role of scarcity in conflict causation. Collier thus argues that conflicts are related to proxies for greed rather than proxies for grievance (inequality, lack of political rights, etcetera). He opines that the actual motivators of conflict are thus, the possibilities of predation and for doing well out of war.

Cohen and Brenner (1974) argue that the common, as well as competing interests of actors over the use of the natural environment, is an enduring fact of human life. Therefore, conflicts over scarce environmental goods are not in any way a new phenomenon. They form an intrinsic part of dialectical interactions between human beings and nature.

The experience of scarcity in the sense of which individuals or groups get access to the sources and means of livelihood, for example, land and boundaries (used within the context of this research) and which individuals or groups do not rely on the distribution of political and economic power within society. Scarcity and hunger which may lead to group conflict are not

always natural; it is usually socially constructed, politically manufactured and economically distributed. Even when there is 'natural' scarcity, the distribution of its effect within society is socially determined. Therefore, the foremost basic way in which scarcity leads to conflict is through the deliberate creation of scarcity and or injustice in its distribution within the various parts of society. Scarcity and its consequences can be distributed within society such that no group is made to suffer more than the rest. Most of the traditional common tenure regimes permit joint management of land and so limit the ability of any one group or individual to control access.

The nub of the argument here is that, where abundance is distributed with some level of justice, scarcity too will be spread out to some degree. The breakdown of common property regimes through a joint process of state appropriation of land as well as the general penetration of capitalist market relations into the countryside has led to the marginalization of the politically weaker section of the rural communities. Deriving from the theoretical view on the political economy of scarcity, the work argues that people are driven into the fringes of society, not because of the scarcity of land or over-population, but through a sustained process of agricultural colonisation, political marginalisation and social exclusion. The Bonta-Ukpute-Aino communal conflict ensue as a result of resource, scarcity of land, a feeling of marginalization by politically weak section of the community, a struggle over ownership of a market. This is in line with the assertion of that the basic reason why scarcity leads to violent conflict can be located in the social and political relations as well as patterns and processes of identification with specific identities. Based on their status in the local and broader political economy of a nation or region, specific groups of people in most West African states in the contemporary era, may be denied access to resources, and farmland or can be increasingly marginalised (Abba & Usman, 2008).

### **Historical Overview of Bonta-Okpute-Aino Relations**

Bonta is a small community within Konshisha local government with a population of about 2,730. It is inhabited by the Tiv and the Ochoro

(Igede) people who happen to have lived with their Tiv hosts for almost a century and have become part and parcel of the community until the time of the violent conflicts. According to reports by the Konshisha local government Security Secretary, about 17 Ochoro people are on the payroll of Konshisha Local Government. Ukpute/Aino is a settlement area which comprises three communities which include Oyiwo, Ekwungo and Ochoro. More so, Okpute is situated within Bonta, Konshisha Local Government Area, while Aino is within Oju Local Government Area (*Key informant interview with the Security Secretary, Konshisha Local Government, May 2022*).

The Tiv people in the course of the migration came to settle in Bonta beside their Igede brothers - the Okpute, at the border of the present day Konshisha Local Government Area. These people shared a lot of things in common. Some aspects of cultural practices such as dances and oaths bound them together. As time went on, some few Igede extraction of Aino approached their boundary Tiv neighbours from Bonta-Mbatoor kindred of Mbagusa, Shangev Tiev of Konshisha Local Government Area; and requested a piece of land to settle and situate a market. This request was granted and the land was shown to these neighbours who settled and established a market. Another uniting future of this intergroup relationship was an oath, an area where female slaves were buried alive including Antyumbe, Anchanda, among others. the relationships started to go sour with a misunderstanding arising from the ownership of the Iho-abila market and other issues surrounding the land where the market is sited.

### **Discussion of Findings/Analysis**

Conflict resolution, as a process aimed at resolving conflict through constructive means, is multi-faceted in that it applies to many types of conflict. In most cases of ethnic conflict, panels or committees are set up to investigate communal clashes, identify the underlying causes of the conflict and address them by guiding the parties towards solutions that are mutually satisfactory, self-perpetuating and sustaining. The violent conflicts between the communities in Konshisha and Oju of Benue State around Bonta and Okpute settlement in

June 2020 attracted the attention of the Benue State Government.

Responding to this in a Security Council Meeting held in Government House Makurdi in June 2020, a directive was given that the Benue State Boundary Committee should bring the critical stakeholders in Oju and Konshisha Local Government Areas together for peace building initiative which would lead to the conflict mapping and eventual discovery of what the conflict issues were. The state government had swiftly responded to the conflict situation upon a report from the local government chairmen and set up a fact-finding committee which was to look into the circumstances of the crisis over the said piece of land and proffer possible ways of resolving it. Along the line, the unfortunate incidence of youth militia in Konshisha seizing and killing the twelve military officers who were on a mission which the said youth suspected to be the supply of ammunitions to their opponent occurred. This then was followed by the military invasion of several communities in the Konshisha local government killing six persons, injuring many and the destruction of properties worth several millions Naira (Iornumbe, 2021).

The Government had set up a Boundary Demarcation Committee which was in the process of demarcation before the unfortunate incidence. An informant from Oju in his account of the Bonta and Okpute/Aino communal conflicts asserted that Aino-Ette in Ukpute is the nearest village that shares a boundary with Bonta in Konshisha. There is Iho-billa in Aino-Ette market that is attended by the two communities at the border. He said that the said boundary over which the communities are disputing was vacant land between the communities but which was on the side of the Okpute.

The findings indicate that the major causes of the communal conflicts are land boundary disputes precipitated by youthful exuberance, the lackadaisical attitude of the Government towards boundary demarcation in the conflict-ridden area and the ego of the illustrious sons of the two communities. Furthermore, it was revealed that the major actors in the communal conflicts are the youths who are idle in the area who see conflict as a means to satisfy their

economic needs and some illustrious sons of the two communities; and their interest is personal ego and the desire for relevance, reverence and affluence in their communities.

The findings have indicated that communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute/Aino communities had negative social, political and economic implications on communities. Finally, the finding of solutions to the communal conflict revealed that boundary demarcation is the only lasting solution to the communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. It is based on these circumstances that it is advisable to introduce conflict prevention and management strategies in almost every community in Benue State. These institutions would assist in informing the populace on conflict prevention, resolution and management and avoid any issues that may result in conflicts in society. This would be of great merit to the government and non-governmental organisations to help sponsor these institutions so that peace would reign in the crisis-ridden communities and Benue State at large and the government would not spend much on managing conflicts.

### **The Challenges Posed by the Communal Conflicts on Development in Bonta and Okpute-Aino Communities**

#### **Social and Economic Implications of the Conflicts**

Communal conflict generally has affected the developmental prospects of Benue state as each time a community is involved in communal conflict there is wanton destruction of public property, private residential houses, schools, churches etc. Each this happens the community is a step backward in development as the this destroyed have to be build up again instead of making progress on what was in existences.

Public properties like schools, market places, hospital boreholes and even places of worships were destroyed. Furthermore, residential houses, farmlands and crops were destroyed rendering members of the conflicting communities homeless, helpless and hopeless. The resultant effect of which was food crisis, abject poverty and starvation. This was a big set back to the developmental prospect of his communities as it inhibited the likelihood of

investment by businessmen in the community, capital flight, human migration to safer abodes.

This communal conflict has overwhelming negative effect on food security not only in the conflicting communities but on the state in general. There were also the humanitarian problems of Internally Displaced Persons. All commercial activities within the region have stalled, and markets, churches and schools have been deserted. There is no functional clinic in the area as part of the FSP clinic was destroyed and all the health workers have left the area for their safety. All sources of potable water have been destroyed, and the two communities have been reduced to nothing as a result of the violent conflict (KII).

Similarly, a probable link to the reduction in production was inadequate food for the family. According to Good hand (2001), one of the most devastating effects of conflicts is the scarcity of food items which often leads to poverty and diseases. This further buttressed the manifestation of poverty in the conflict communities. Interruption of education of children and reduction in health care provision of the family were also some of the social insecurity effects of the conflict identified as critical issues in the life of the communities. These hamper accomplishment of other life endeavours including economic activities such as production and marketing. The lower proportion might not be unconnected with the fact that most children of the respondents no longer attend school. It has been established that most violent conflicts do not stop at the boundary of the communities in which the conflict occurs; they often spill over to neighbouring communities.

According to Adorowa (2022) the aftermath of Communal Conflict is social distrust as the bitterness that ensures in the course of the crisis go a long way to promote social distrust among members of the conflicting communities over a long period of time? In a Focus Group Discussion, a youth from one of the communities said that up to the time of this research, no member of Bonta community crosses the road dividing the community to Okpute and vice visa for fear of being killed as they are still suspicious of one another. These are the same persons that had been friends in the past but were now suspicious

of each other.

There is also the assertion that the first economic parameter often affected by communal conflict situations is the price of goods and services because other factors such as transportation cost, labour and information disruption affect the price of goods and services. Scarcity of foods during conflict is a very common phenomenon as there could be a blockage in supply and diversion to a peaceful environment. Social insecurity is a common manifestation in conflict situations especially when it is violent ones. People develop a fear of being attacked unnecessarily which also negatively affects their ability to carry out their economic activities. Perhaps, there were also fewer refugees in some of the communities during the conflict. However, it was one of the most important effects of conflict as asserted which creates a huge burden on the government or the affected communities.

#### **The implication of the Conflict on both Communities:**

It is a universal opinion that in every violence-prone society, youths are jobless; resources are scarce after the scourge of the conflict and cannot go around all the needy ones. In such a situation no meaningful development can take place. In the case of these two communities, basic amenities meant for the communities were destroyed during the conflicts: schools, hospitals, boreholes and houses were destroyed and in some places, people deserted these areas. During the research, participants from both communities also asserted that conflict between the two resource users is real and increasingly assuming an alarming proportion with serious implications for agricultural productivity. For example, some informants in one of the focus group discussions argued that: “until something is done about this conflict, we shall be forced to abandon crop farming completely” (Focus Group Discussions). This sense of helplessness and frustration seem to resonate with all the farmers across all the communities visited during the research period. Therefore, this conflict has adversely affected the economic growth and development of not only the war-torn communities but also the entire Benue State.

The conflict has impeded development in

the community and Konshisha Local Government as a whole as the military inversion was not limited to Bonta but was extended to over 12 communities in the local government area. Nearly all the infrastructures in the area like schools, markets and even hospitals were attacked and destroyed as a result of the lingering conflict and eventually the military inversion. All commercial activities within the region have stalled, and markets, churches and schools have been deserted. There is no functional clinic in the area as part of the FSP clinic was destroyed and all the health workers have left the area for their safety. All sources of potable water have been destroyed, and either of the two communities has been reduced to nothing as a result of the violent conflict.

#### **Ways of Managing Conflicts in Bonta and Okpute/Aino Communities**

In an interview 40 respondents out of the 100 persons interviewed were of the view that boundary demarcation is a solution to communal conflicts. Also, 25 respondents suggested that negotiation and settlement are a solution to the conflicts while 35 out of the respondent in the interviews said joint platforms for the implementation of agreements are a solution to communal conflicts. From the responses, it is observed that boundary demarcation had the highest responses of 40 and followed by negotiation and settlement with 35. It implies therefore that boundary demarcation is the only lasting solution to the communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities.

To further unveil other efforts aimed at resolving the communal conflicts in the area, the researchers engaged some informants in a Focus Group Discussion. Participants observed that violent confrontations have become a defining feature of inter-group relations among communities in the middle belt region of Nigeria most especially in Benue State. Environmental degradation, social manipulation of ethno-religious biases, and technological advances has altered relationships that were historically inter-dependent and mutually beneficial and the Bonta and Okpute/Aino communities are not an exception. Several efforts have been made in



managing the conflicts. Participants revealed the following efforts aimed at resolving the communal conflict in the area:

### **Efforts by State Government**

The state government swiftly responded to the conflict situation upon a report from the local government chairman and set up a fact-finding committee which was to look into the circumstances of the crisis over the said piece of land and proffer possible ways of resolving the conflict, then along the line the unfortunate incidence of youth militia in Konshisha seizing and killing the twelve military officers who were on a mission which the said youth suspected to be the supplier of ammunition to their opponent occurred. This then was followed by the military invasion of several communities in Konshisha local government killing six persons, injuring many and the destruction of property worth several million Naira. The Government had set up a boundary demarcation committee which was in the process of demarcation before the unfortunate incident occurred.

The traditional conflict resolution process has been employed by the warring communities to bring about relative peace. The government has also set up a boundary demarcation committee which is still in the process to demarcate the boundary. The piece of land in conflict has temporarily been taken over by the government, no member of the conflicting communities is allowed to make use of the land till the demarcation is completed (Focus Group Discussion). According to Iogyer Sonsha of Mbaakpur community, as cited by Iornumbe (2022), in the course of the lingering communal conflicts, the Benue State government had held several peace meetings with the leaders of both communities.

The Deputy Governor who was the Chairman of the boundary committee held a series of meetings with leaders of the communities in July 2020. The Governor of Benue state had also held expanded security meetings with chairmen and elders of the two conflicting local governments intending to achieve amicable settlements. Considerable progress was made in the resolution effort of the government and a date was fixed on 9th April 2021 to demarcate the boundary so that the two

communities could live in peace again. The boundary committee was to move into the disputed area for this assignment on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 for the final meeting.

Unfortunately, the Bonta armed militia on the eve of the final meeting for the demarcation of the boundary allegedly invaded Ukpute community, killed and attacked everything in sight, as well as destroyed houses. Survivors of the community ran to neighbouring communities for their lives. The government again made efforts to restore peace to the communities by holding two peace meetings with leaders of the two communities in Makurdi suing for peace. This was followed by sensitisation and advocacy. There was even a novelty march between members of the two communities in August 2020 to cement the relationship but this also failed to yield the desired result. Shortly after these peace resolution efforts, the Bonta Boys mounted a checkpoint along the road where they seized a 12-member military troop commanded by a captain, took them to the nearby forest, killed and burned their bodies beyond recognition, and carted away their weapons (FGD).

The military defiling all sense of legal and moral principles invaded several communities in Konshisha Local Government with sophisticated weapons, shooting and burning everything in sight. About 12 communities in Konshisha local government came under siege by the Nigerian Army troop. The state government, however, has made some efforts in restoring relative peace in the conflicting communities and the boundary demarcation is still in progress.

### **Responses by some Members of the Okpute-Ainu Community**

The Okpute elders had given the piece of land to Aproffin (a construction firm) who built structures there, on the premise of the Aproffin vacating the site, and some members of their neighbouring Bonta communities started farming on the site, then sometime later some went and started building houses and planting economic trees there. When members of Okpute Aino communities discovered this they raised in protest against their neighbouring community whom they felt were trespassing on the land. Mediation is an intervention by a

neutral third party to assist warring parties in conflict arrives at a voluntary settlement of their differences, through an agreement that will define their future co-existence. This often takes shape within the immediate social context.

In this regard, mediators are sought from within the family or families of disputants or neighbourhoods of disputants. People of good personality and integrity who enjoy social respect and recognition are selected. This helps to resolve the problems of representation. The mediators would inevitably be associated with the disputing parties. There was a rapid intervention at the initial stage as chiefs and elders of the two communities called for a meeting and dialogued on the land issue and the dispute was settled. Several other conflicts arose over the same piece of land between these two communities, which the state government eventually after an investigation panel set had submitted her report started the process of demarcation of the boundary. In March 2020, a violent conflict arose again between the Bonta and Okpute Aino communities which resulted in massive destruction of property and casualties on the sides of both communities. In

the course of intervention in the conflict by the military (Operation Whirl Stroke) according to an informant the Bonta militia arrested and killed twelve soldiers which led to the soldiers sending a reprisal attack on several communities in Konshisha (Focus Group Discussion).

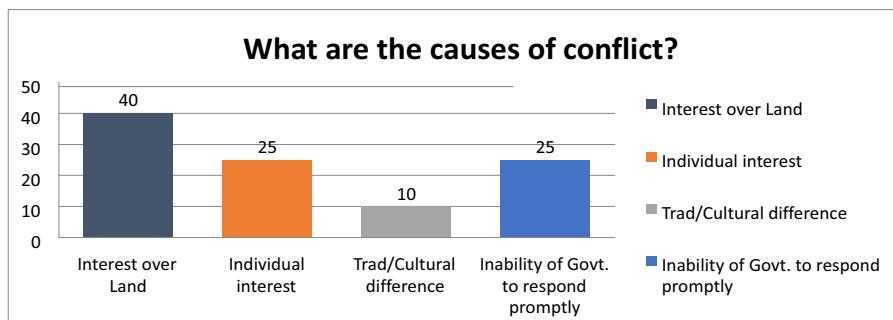
A key informant from Oju, in his account of the Bonta and Okpute/Aino communal conflicts, asserted that Aino-Ette in Ukpute is the nearest village that shares a boundary with Bonta in Konshisha. There is Ihio-billa in Aino-Ette market that is attended by the two communities at the border. He said that the said boundary over which the communities are disputing was vacant land between the communities but which was on the side of the Okpute (*Focus Group Discussion May. 2022 field research on Bonta and Okpute-Aino communal conflict*).

#### Analysis of Findings.

#### Causes of Conflicts in Bonta and Okpute / Aino Communities

Below shows respondents' views on the causes of the communal conflicts;

**Figure 1:** Below Shows Respondents' Views on the Causes of Conflicts in Bonta and Okpute/Aino Communities.



#### Check as above

Figure 1 shows an interview with some members of the conflicting communities, these were their views on the causes of the communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute/Aino Communities. Out of the 100 persons interviewed 25 respondents agreed that the conflict is caused by the inability of the government to respond promptly to the conflicts, 10 respondents indicated that cultural and traditional differences are the cause of the conflicts 25 of the respondents indicated that individual interest is the cause of the conflicts

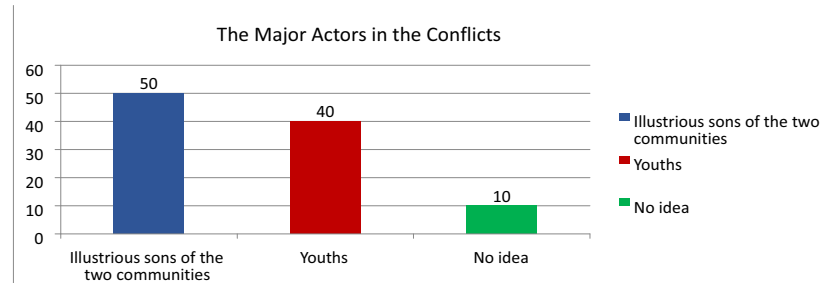
while 40 respondents indicated that interest over land is the cause of the communal conflict. From the responses, it is observed that interest over land received the highest responses 40 and was closely followed by the inability of the government to respond promptly to crisis 25. This is indicating that the major cause of the conflict is interest over land and governments' inability to respond promptly to the conflict ensures its continuation. This position was corroborated by members of the Focus Group Discussion.

**Major Actors in the Conflicts**

The major actors in the communal conflicts were also investigated in two approaches; Focused Groups Discussion and Key Informant

Interviews. Figure 2 below shows the responses in Focused Groups Discussion and Key Informant Interviews

**Figure 2:** Who are the Major Actors in the Conflicts?



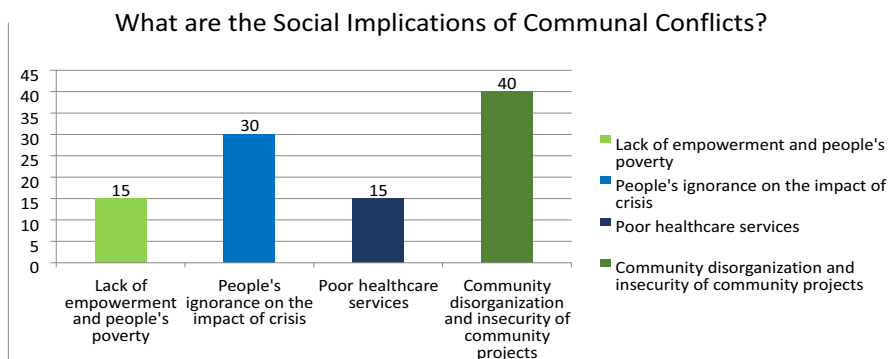
*Check as above*

Figure 2 indicates an interview with 100 participants, 50 respondents indicated that illustrious sons of the two communities are the major actors in the communal conflicts. Also, 40 respondents alleged that youths are the major actors in communal conflicts while 10 respondents indicated that they had no idea of who are the major actors in the conflicts. During the Key Informants Interview, a respondent said that the lingering communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute/Aino communities are caused by youthful exuberance of some idle youths and the selfish interest of some illustrious sons in the two communities who have their personal interests in the conflicts. Most persons in the interaction in the Focus Group Discussion concurred with this view asserted by the above respondents.

**The Implication of the Communal Conflicts on Development in Bonta and Okpute-Aino Communities**

Figures below show the views from the interviews and the Focus Group Discussions. In the course of the study, the researcher interrogated members of the community on the implications of communal conflicts on development in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities in Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas respectively. The figures below show the results of data gathered from the interviews. The interviews and discussions were based on three aspects of development: social effects, political effects and economic effects on the development of the communities.

**Figure3:** What are the Social implication of Communal Conflicts on Development in Bonta and Okpute-Aino Communities?



*Check as above*

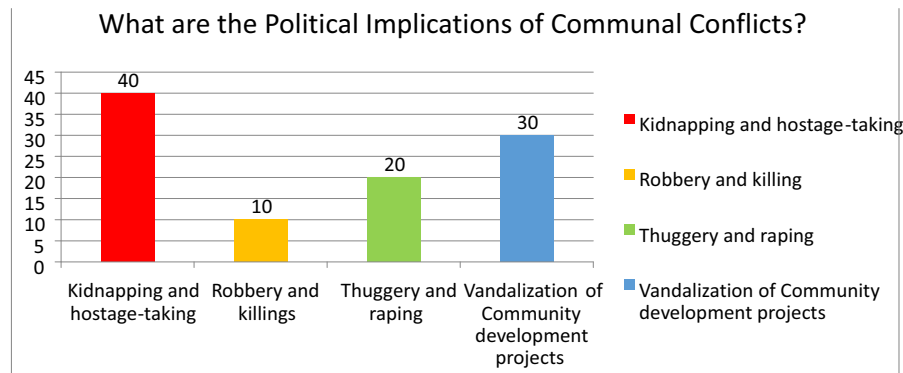
Figure 3 shows that 15 out of the 100 people interviewed accepted the point that lack of empowerment and people's level of poverty is one of the social effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities in

Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas respectively. It was still observed that 30 respondents in the interviews and Focus Groups discussions accepted the fact that people's ignorance on the effect of crisis are also social

effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. 15 interviewee revealed that poor healthcare services are a social effect of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. 40 of the persons interviewed were of the view that

community disorganisation and insecurity of community projects are among the social effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. These views were corroborated by members of the Focus Group Discussion

**Fig 4:** What are the political Implication of the Communal Conflicts on Development in Bonta and Okpute -Aino Communities?

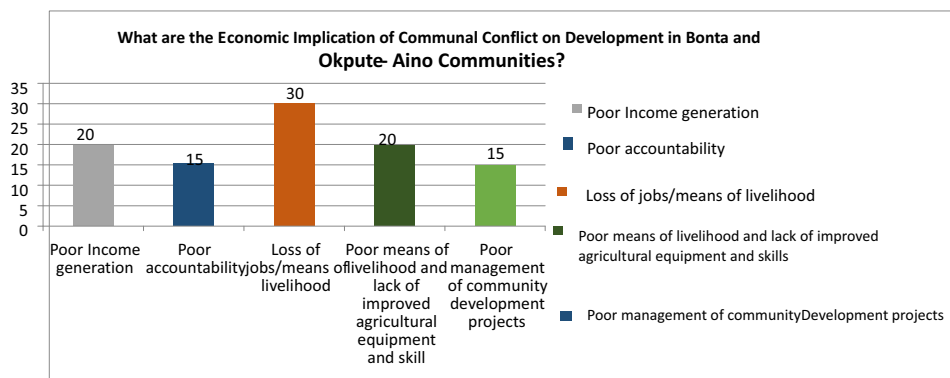


**Check as above**

Figure 4 shows that 40 of the people interviewed were of the view that kidnapping and hostage-taking are part of the political effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. 10 of the people interviewed believed that robbery and killing are among the political effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. 20 out of the people interviewed agreed on the fact that thuggery and rapping are the political effects of

communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. While 30 persons were of the view that vandalisation of community development projects is one of the political effects of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. In the Focus Groups Discussions most of them had similar views on the political implication of the Communal Conflicts on the Communities as the responses on the interviews.

**Figure 5:** What are the Economic Implication of Communal Conflicts on Development in Bonta and Okpute Aino Communities?



**Check as above**

The Figure 5 reveals that 20 out of the persons interviewed were of the view that poor income generation is an economic impact on communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. 15 of the persons interviewed agreed with the fact poor accountability of

income is the economic impact of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. It was also observed that 30 of the persons interviewed agreed on the fact that poor means of livelihood, lack of improved farming /fishing skills, and poor agricultural



production are among the economic impacts of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities. The Interview revealed that 15 persons out of the people interviewed in agreed on the fact that poor management of community development projects and rural-urban migration of young people are among the economic impacts of communal conflicts in Bonta and Okpute-Aino communities.

**The implication of the Conflict on both Communities:** It is a universal opinion that in every violence-prone society, youths are

jobless; resources are scarce after the scourge of the conflict and cannot go around all the needy ones. Essential resources such as water, electricity, houses, roads, schools and churches are destroyed, leaving the community with an impoverished environment and a dispossessed population, refugees in its state. In such a situation, there is hardly any development to talk of. In the case of these two communities, basic amenities meant for the communities were destroyed during the conflicts: schools, hospitals, boreholes and houses were destroyed and in some places, people deserted these areas.

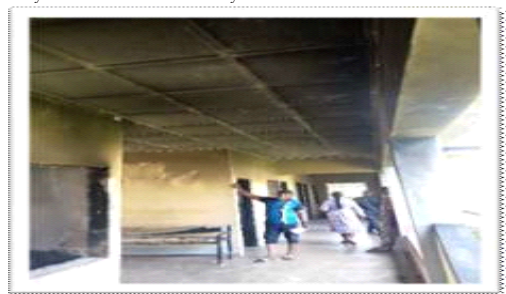
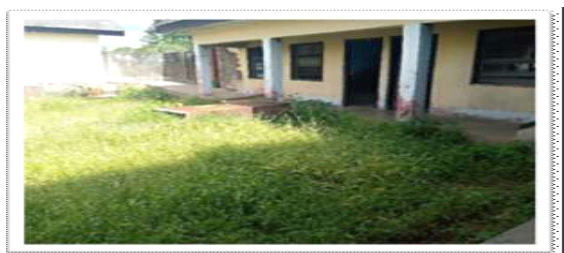
*Plate I: LGEA Primary School Mbatoo, Bonta burnt down as a result of the communal conflicts. Source: Researcher's field work 2022*



During the research, participants from both communities also asserted that conflict between the two resource users is real and increasingly assuming an alarming proportion with serious implications for agricultural productivity. For example, some informants in one of the focus group discussions argued that: “until something is done about this conflict, we shall be forced to abandon crop farming completely” (Focus

Group Discussions). This sense of helplessness and frustration seem to resonate with all the farmers across all the communities visited during the research period. Therefore, this conflict has adversely affected the economic growth and development of not only the war-torn communities but also the entire Benue State.

*Plate II: The researcher inspecting FSP Clinic, Bonta, Mbatoo, Konshisha Local Government Area, Benue State destroyed and abandoned as a result of the conflicts. NOTE: This is the only health care facility within Bonta community*



**The Implications of the Conflict on Livelihood:** Communal conflict is generally considered a negative phenomenon, which often leads to the loss of lives and properties which invariably affects the community

negatively. During Focus Group Discussions, respondents stated that reduction in farm production was the most seriously affected, followed by increased poverty within and among the communities, social insecurity and

inadequate food supply for the family. Reduction in farm production could be linked to many other factors and consequences. This could be brought about by scarcity and an increase in the cost of inputs including labour resulting from the conflict. Consequently, food items are scarce and there is a reduction in

income leading to poverty. This may not be far-fetched from why the manifestation of poverty was rated the highest effect of conflict.

Similarly, a probable link to the reduction in production was inadequate food for the family.

Plate III: The ruins of Ihoibilla Market in the Ukpute-Aino community after the conflicts



### Conclusion

Benue State being an agricultural state is very vulnerable to communal disputes. Most communal disputes in the state are disputes over ownership. The majority of the respondents blamed the state government, for being largely responsible politically, for the recurrent communal conflicts cum land disputes in the study area that have led to the displacement of so many people from their original settlements and are now internally displaced persons in other places. Judging from the result of the finding of this research, it was indicated that communal conflict has negative implications on development in Benue State, Nigeria. Therefore, if the recommendations made below are put forward in the belief that they are attainable, their implementation will reduce the rate, at which communal conflicts are ravaging the fabrics of community development in Bonta and Okpute-Aino Communities, Benue State, Nigeria and Africa at large. Consequently, this study appeals to the governments of Nigeria - local, state and Federal governments to adopt positive attitudes to the funding of the control of communal conflicts to stem the tide at which they are stifling community developments in Benue State, Nigeria and Africa. In this way, various communities would experience improved standards of living.

There can be no sustainable development in any country, state or community with prevalent security challenges. A community can only develop socially, economically and

politically when relative peace is sustained

### Recommendations

From the major findings of this research, we recommend as follows:

1. The state government should urgently make efforts to demarcate the boundary of the conflicting communities; this will eliminate the clamor by the various communities for ownership of different portions of the land. It will also help government to manage the border lines effectively;
2. The government should also adopt a long term approach curbing communal disputes by developing early warning systems in the communities and adopt peace education suitable to tackle communal conflict in good time to prevent escalation;
3. Provision of Basic amenities to the communities; water, health facilities and electricity, should be provided for the communities to encourage small scale businesses. This will reduce idleness and poverty.

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