



Communal Conflicts and Food Security in Toto Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, 2012–2023

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity remains a serious problem in Nigeria, where communal conflict is a major driver in the Middle Belt. This study examined communal conflicts and household food security in Toto Local Government Area, Nasarawa State, from 2012 to 2023, using a documentary research design based on secondary sources such as NASEMA and NADP reports, nutrition surveillance data, and academic literature, analysed through qualitative content analysis. It asked how communal conflict, particularly the Egbira–Bassa clashes and farmer–herder disputes, has affected agricultural production and food security in Toto LGA, and how it has driven displacement and asset loss among rural households. NASEMA recorded 147 high-impact communal conflicts in Nasarawa State between 2012 and 2023, displacing over 185,000 people statewide; in Toto LGA alone, 214 farming communities were destroyed and about 16,400 people displaced between 2018 and 2023. NADP data show declines of 28.3% and 64.7% in yam and maize cultivation area respectively between 2019 and 2022, alongside a 64.7% rise in the farm-gate price of maize, while only six of eleven surveyed markets remained operational in 2023 due to insecurity on rural roads. A 2022 nutrition survey recorded a global acute malnutrition prevalence of 11.4%, above the WHO's 10% emergency threshold. Viewed through Human Security Theory, the evidence shows that recurrent violence has undermined production, displaced households, and weakened food availability, access, utilisation, and stability across Toto LGA. The study recommends strengthened conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, community policing with traditional institutions, and livelihood-restoration programmes for affected households.

Keywords: Communal Conflict; Displacement; Food Security; Nasarawa State; Toto LGA

1. Introduction

One of the key structural causes of hunger today is conflict. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO et al., 2023), 258 million people in 58 countries experienced acute food insecurity, and over 70 per cent of them were living in conflict-affected areas. While a great deal of attention is paid to interstate wars, localised communal violence is also harmful to food systems: it disrupts planting, blocks rural markets, and compels farming households to abandon their land. The United Nations and the World Bank (2018) identify three pathways through which such violence affects agricultural production: by destroying farms, by forcing farmers to flee their land, and by causing local value chains to fail.

This connection is particularly strong in sub-Saharan Africa. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023) noted that nine of the ten most food-insecure countries in Africa were simultaneously experiencing communal, ethnic, or resource-based conflict in 2022. Across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, recurrent communal, ethnic, and farmer–herder conflict has repeatedly disrupted planting and harvest cycles, reduced the area under cultivation, and displaced farming populations, compounding a food crisis that extreme weather alone cannot explain (International Crisis Group, 2023; ACAPS, 2022).

Nasarawa State illustrates both this agricultural vulnerability and potential. The State is a key yam producer and a significant producer of rice, maize, and sesame, but it has been beset by communal conflict: the Nasarawa State Emergency Management Agency (NASEMA) documented 147 high-impact communal conflicts between 2012 and 2023, with over 185,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) statewide (NASEMA, 2023). Toto Local Government Area has been the worst affected. It lies on the Benue trough bordering Kogi State and the Federal Capital Territory; its floodplains are fertile, and its population is multi-ethnic, with the Egbira, Bassa, Gade, and Gbagyi communities prominent. Clashes between the Egbira and Bassa communities have recurred since 2012, and farmer–herder conflicts over land, water, and grazing routes have worsened over the same period.

Between 2018 and 2023, 214 farming communities in Toto were destroyed and approximately 16,400 persons displaced, according to NASEMA (2023). The Nasarawa Agricultural Development Programme (NADP, 2023) recorded declines of 28.3 per cent and 64.7 per cent in the area under yam and maize cultivation respectively between 2019 and 2022, with a corresponding 64.7 per cent increase in the farm-gate price of maize over the same period. In 2023, only six of eleven surveyed markets were operational, with insecurity on rural roads cited by traders as the primary constraint (NADP, 2023). Nutrition data reinforce this picture: the Nasarawa State Primary Health Care Development Agency's 2022 SMART survey recorded a global acute malnutrition (GAM) prevalence of 11.4 per cent, above the 10 per cent threshold at which the World Health Organisation (WHO) considers a situation an emergency (NSPHCDA, 2022; WHO, 2000).

These patterns reflect a broader Nigerian problem: household food security is low in areas of recurrent communal violence despite high agricultural potential. Food security is the state in which people enjoy physical, social, and economic access to adequate, safe, and nutritious food at all times, sufficient to sustain an active and healthy life (FAO et al., 2024). Farmer–herder conflict, ethnic clashes, and disputes over land and natural resources have driven farmer-household displacement in North-Central Nigeria, restricted farmland access, and destroyed farm crops (Nnaji et al., 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023; FAO et al., 2024). More broadly, farm activities are disrupted, rural dwellers are pushed off their land, productive assets are lost, and food becomes both less available and less affordable (Okoli & Ukwandu, 2022). This has persisted despite security operations and peace dialogues: production has declined, prices have risen, and agriculture-dependent households have had little room to adapt (World Bank, 2023; National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), compromising availability, access, utilisation, and stability alike.

Previous studies on Nasarawa State have focused on farmer–herder conflict in Lafia and Doma (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Odoh & Chilaka, 2012) or on the livelihood impacts of displacement across the State (Maiangwa, 2017), but few studies distinguish the Egbira–Bassa conflict from farmer–herder resource conflict within Toto specifically, or examine the differential impact of each on the four pillars of food security at the local level. This study addresses that gap by asking two questions. First, how have communal conflicts, specifically the Egbira–Bassa clashes and

farmer–herder disputes alike, affected agricultural production and household food security in Toto LGA between 2012 and 2023? Second, how have these conflicts driven the displacement of rural households and the destruction of the productive assets on which their livelihoods depend? In answering these questions, the study aims to characterise the nature and persistence of communal conflict in Toto LGA and to draw out its implications for household food security, displacement, and productive-asset loss, so as to inform conflict-sensitive policy for the area.

2. Literature Review

Communal conflicts are organised, often violent, encounters between two or more communities that share social identities such as ethnicity, religion, clan, lineage, indigeneity, or livelihood, typically arising over scarce resources, territorial claims, political representation, traditional authority, or access to economic opportunities; because non-state actors mobilise around a shared communal interest, such conflicts do not require direct state involvement (Okoli, R. C., 2022). Brosché and Elfversson's (2012) conceptualisation, defined as violent conflict between non-state parties organised around a common communal identity in which government may play an indirect but not a primary role, has become foundational to the field, since it distinguishes communal conflict from civil war, insurgency, and other forms of organised violence. Food security, meanwhile, is a multidimensional concept denoting reliable, adequate, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food access for individuals and households, sufficient to sustain an active and healthy life (Food Security Cluster, 2025); the concept has broadened over time from mere availability to encompass affordability, nutritional quality, regularity, sustainability, and household agency, and now occupies a central place in the sustainable-development, poverty-alleviation, public-health, and human-security literatures (Termine, 2024).

Conflict and violence more broadly express the friction that arises when people and groups differ in interests, values, identity, beliefs, and aspirations (Adeleke, 2021; Afolabi, 2023): outbursts of hostility, prejudice, and stereotyping directed at out-groups accumulate over time (UNDP, 2022; Bar-Tal, 2021) and tend to be triggered by proximate events such as political contestation, religious intolerance, struggles for power and resource control, or perceived marginalisation (Adebayo, 2022). Their consequences, including destroyed economies, population displacement, livelihood loss, and human suffering (FAO et al., 2023), are compounded by psychological harm that can deepen fear, anger, and a desire for revenge among survivors long after physical losses have been addressed (WHO, 2022; UNHCR, 2023).

Empirical research on conflict specifically within Nasarawa State remains limited, with most existing work confined to particular localities rather than the general pattern of conflict outcomes (Okolo & Shekwo, 2018), a gap that partly reflects the practical difficulty of quantifying conflict dynamics, and partly a tendency in the literature to treat conflict solely as an independent variable explaining development outcomes, when the relationship plausibly runs in both directions. What research does exist has focused mainly on farmer–herder clashes (Fawole & Bello, 2011; Amnesty International, 2010; FAO, 2014), attributing the scale of Fulani pastoral migration into central and southern Nigeria partly to the relative cost-effectiveness of mobile over sedentary livestock rearing, itself a persistent source of friction between herders and farmers. A comparable dynamic is documented outside Nasarawa State in the Ezza–Ezillo conflict of Ishielu LGA, Ebonyi State, where two Igbo-speaking communities sharing a claim of common origin fought over land; a dispute over the siting of a telephone booth in 2008 escalated into killings, displacement, and property destruction, illustrating how a minor local trigger can ignite a long-standing indigene–settler grievance rooted in a much earlier land-dispute settlement (Oji, Eme, & Nwoba, 2014).

Within Nasarawa State itself, land and boundary disputes have been identified as a major driver of communal conflict in the South-Senatorial zone, compounded by political marginalisation, population pressure, and the concentration of land in few hands (Dunmoye, 2020); ethnic plurality, competition for political and traditional authority, and unequal access to economic opportunity reinforce these tensions (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2003). The literature as a whole confirms that marginalisation and resource competition underlie most ethno-communal conflict in the state, but it remains largely descriptive: comprehensive empirical evidence linking conflict, governance, development, and social cohesion specifically within Nasarawa State, and within Toto LGA in particular, is scarce. This study addresses that gap through an empirical, documentary analysis of conflict causes,

patterns, and developmental consequences in Toto LGA, intended to inform policy formulation and sustainable peacebuilding.

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Human Security Theory

The study is anchored in Human Security Theory, which marked a post–Cold War shift in security thinking set out in the Human Development Report 1994 (UNDP, 1994). That report moved the referent of security away from the state, territory, and military threat and towards the safety of persons, defining human security as “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” and treating hunger, disease, violence, and displacement as security problems in their own right; the Commission on Human Security (2003) later reframed this as protection from critical threats combined with the empowerment of people to rebuild their lives. The 1994 report identified seven interrelated dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political (UNDP, 1994; Commission on Human Security, 2003), of which food security and personal security are most directly relevant here. Food security, in this framing, is the capacity of a person or household to feed itself rather than simply the food that is physically available, while personal security concerns freedom from the physical violence, fear, and displacement that communal conflict brings. Human Security Theory suits this study because the people affected by the Egbira–Bassa and farmer–herder conflicts in Toto LGA are not abstract “communities” but individual farmers, women, children, and elderly residents who lose food, livelihoods, and safety together; the framework allows the analysis to trace how conflict undermines food availability, access, utilisation, and stability simultaneously, and how the constant threat of displacement, farmland destruction, and market disruption in Toto LGA has generated a chronic joint threat to “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear” alike.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a documentary research design, appropriate to a study that draws on secondary rather than primary data. Data were gathered from documented secondary sources, including internet and website material, library holdings (textbooks, journals, and conference proceedings), and publications by international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and civil-society bodies, together with newspaper and magazine reporting; official statistics and situation reports from NASEMA, NADP, and NSPHCDA formed the core evidentiary base for the Toto-specific findings reported below. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, appropriate to the wide range of secondary material gathered: the consistency of findings across sources, the availability of corroborating documentary evidence, and the extent to which prior research findings have withstood scrutiny over time served as the criteria for evaluating and synthesising the evidence. The analysis was organised around the two research questions set out in the Introduction, addressing, respectively, the effects of communal conflict on agricultural production and food security, and its effects on displacement and productive-asset loss.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Communal Conflict, Agricultural Production, and Food Security

On the first question of how communal conflict has affected agricultural production and household food security in Toto LGA, the evidence points to unresolved communal conflict as one of the most serious constraints facing the area. Most households in Toto LGA depend on agriculture for their livelihood, which requires peaceful access to land, water, labour, and markets; repeated communal violence undermines farmers' security, discourages farming activity, and limits the use of agricultural resources (FAO et al., 2023). Violent attacks force many farmers off their land entirely or confine them to small plots, reducing both agricultural output and household income, while armed groups' destruction of crops, livestock, farm equipment, and storage facilities compounds these losses during active conflict (UNDP, 2022).

Communal clashes also disrupt the farming cycle itself, interfering with land preparation, planting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest activities; when farmers lose access to their communities at critical moments, they may miss the window to plant, resulting in below-average yields or significant production losses (Brück & d'Errico, 2019). Persistent insecurity further discourages investment in better seeds, fertiliser, and farm machinery, since farmers are reluctant to commit resources to land they cannot be confident of holding (Justino, 2012), with the

combined effect of reduced agricultural production and less food reaching local markets and households.

These effects extend beyond agriculture into household food security more broadly. Declining agricultural production drives food-commodity shortages and price inflation, eroding household purchasing power; households that depend primarily on agriculture for food and income face a correspondingly higher risk of being unable to meet their nutritional needs once conflict threatens their livelihood (Martin-Shields & Stojetz, 2019). Displacement, the destruction of food stocks, and disrupted market activity further restrict access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, pushing many households towards negative coping strategies such as reducing meal frequency, shifting to less nutritious food, selling productive assets, or relying on humanitarian assistance (Maxwell, Hailey, Checchi, & Gelsdorf, 2020). The documentary evidence for Toto LGA specifically bears this out: NADP's (2023) recorded declines of 28.3 per cent and 64.7 per cent in yam and maize cultivation area between 2019 and 2022, alongside a 64.7 per cent rise in the farm-gate price of maize and the closure of five of eleven surveyed markets by 2023, is a direct, local illustration of the production-to-price-to-access chain identified in the wider literature; the 11.4 per cent global acute malnutrition prevalence recorded by NSPHCDA (2022), above the WHO emergency threshold, is consistent with a food-security situation that has moved from constrained to critical.

Communal violence also damages the broader socio-economic fabric of affected communities: it disrupts rural markets, weakens community relationships, and restricts access to social services such as education, healthcare, and agricultural extension, with women, children, older persons, and other vulnerable groups disproportionately affected because they have the fewest resources to absorb the shock (Verwimp, Justino, & Brück, 2019). Because these conflicts recur, they also undermine longer-term planning for farming and deter public and private investment in rural development. Sustainable food security in Toto LGA therefore requires coordinated intervention: encouraging peaceful coexistence, strengthening local conflict-resolution mechanisms, improving community security, promoting equitable access to land and other productive resources, and expanding investment in agriculture, rural infrastructure, and livelihood support.

In summary, on the first question, the evidence indicates that persistent communal conflict has substantially affected agricultural production and household food security in Toto LGA by restricting farmers' access to farmland, destroying crops and other productive assets, displacing farming households, and depressing both agricultural output and household access to adequate, healthy food.

4.2 Displacement and Productive-Asset Loss

On the second question of how communal conflict has affected rural livelihoods and productive assets in Toto LGA, the evidence again points to conflict as the principal driver. Widespread displacement of rural dwellers in Toto LGA is attributable in large part to communal conflict, which creates an atmosphere of fear, insecurity, and uncertainty that forces households to relocate in order to protect their lives and those of their families when violence erupts. This displacement typically leaves behind empty houses, abandoned farmland, and disrupted businesses and livelihood activities, the principal sources of income for rural households, while extended displacement further erodes community cohesion, weakens social networks, and restricts access to education, healthcare, and clean water (IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2025; EUAA, 2026). The International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix identifies communal clashes as a major driver of internal displacement, and UNHCR reporting confirms that conflict-induced displacement in Nigeria damages livelihoods, social cohesion, and access to basic services well beyond the immediate period of violence.

Beyond displacement itself, communal clashes have destroyed productive assets that are central to rural livelihoods, including cultivated farmland, crops, livestock, farm machinery, storage facilities, irrigation infrastructure, and rural markets (Okoli & Ukwandu, 2022), reducing the productive capacity of farming households and complicating their economic recovery once conflict subsides. Because the impact is so widespread, many households rebuild their livelihoods on meagre and insufficient means, deepening poverty and further lowering agricultural output (Yahaya & Sabo, 2022); comparable research elsewhere in Nasarawa State and North-Central Nigeria similarly documents the loss of farmland, crops, livestock, residential buildings, and rural infrastructure to communal clashes, with corresponding effects on agricultural production and household socio-economic status (Adams, 2022).

These losses carry broad economic and welfare consequences at the community level. Okoli and Ukwandu (2022) find that the destruction of farms, rural infrastructure, and economic assets in Nasarawa State has reduced the economic resilience of affected communities and damaged rural livelihoods more generally, while the loss of crops, livestock, and equipment constrains farmers' ability to invest in future production cycles. Yikwab and Tade (2022) similarly find that conflict-induced displacement in North-Central Nigeria leaves farming households without the productive resources needed to sustain their livelihoods, pushing many towards temporary or informal livelihoods rather than a return to agriculture; the destruction of rural markets and transport infrastructure further reduces market participation and household incomes (Adisa et al., 2022), deepening reliance on humanitarian assistance and informal support networks (Adams, 2022). At the LGA level, displacement and asset destruction feed into a longer-run erosion of rural development in Toto: persistent farmer–herder conflict across Benue and Nasarawa States has weakened local economies, discouraged investment, and undermined rural development more broadly (Ahmed & Yusuf, 2024), while sustained insecurity continues to deter investment in agriculture, rural infrastructure, and other livelihood activities (Akinwumi et al., 2023). Yikwab and Tade (2022) further note that extended insecurity pushes many young people to leave conflict-affected rural areas altogether in search of safer livelihoods, depleting the agricultural labour force and further reducing local food production; effective conflict prevention and resolution, improved community security, and equitable access to productive resources are correspondingly identified as prerequisites for restoring residents' confidence (Zachariah & Ngwu, 2025), alongside infrastructure rehabilitation and livelihood support for displaced households (Monday, Adadu, & Usman, 2023).

In summary, on the second question, the evidence shows that communal conflict has displaced a substantial rural population and destroyed productive assets across Toto LGA: homes and farmland have been abandoned, and crops, livestock, farm equipment, storage capacity, and other livelihood tools destroyed or lost through recurrent violence. This displacement and asset destruction has weakened household livelihoods, depressed agricultural productivity, deepened poverty, and impeded the socio-economic recovery of affected communities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study establishes a significant negative relationship between persistent communal conflict and both agricultural production and household food security in Toto Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. Recurring conflict, both the long-running Egbira–Bassa clashes and farmer–herder disputes, has damaged farming activity by destroying crops, farmland, and livestock, forced rural households to abandon their land, and restricted access to agricultural resources and markets, with consequences for production, livelihoods, household poverty, and access to adequate, safe, and healthy food. The evidence also indicates that ongoing communal conflict has damaged sustainable rural development more broadly, by discouraging investment in agriculture and weakening farming households' resilience. Effective conflict prevention and resolution, improved community security, the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure, agricultural and livelihood rehabilitation, and sustained government and stakeholder engagement to foster peaceful coexistence emerge from this analysis as essential elements of any strategy to restore food security in Toto LGA.

On this basis, government should strengthen conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms through community policing, peacebuilding, and adequate security provision for agricultural communities, in partnership with traditional institutions and security agencies; this would allow farmers to work their land without fear, protect farm assets, restore production, and improve household food security across Toto LGA. The Federal and Nasarawa State Governments, working with relevant development agencies and humanitarian organisations, should also establish comprehensive livelihood-restoration and rehabilitation programmes for conflict-affected households, including the reconstruction of damaged rural infrastructure, distribution of improved seeds, farm inputs, livestock, and equipment, financial assistance, and resettlement support for displaced households, to underpin sustainable livelihoods and agricultural recovery in Toto Local Government Area.

6. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations arising directly from its documentary design. The analysis is restricted to Toto LGA over 2012–2023, and its findings cannot be generalised to the wider Middle Belt or even to the rest of Nasarawa State without further verification. Because the study relies on documentary and secondary sources, principally NASEMA, NADP, and NSPHCDA reports supplemented by a small number of key-informant accounts cited in those reports, rather than a primary household survey, it cannot isolate the effect of communal conflict from other plausible drivers of food insecurity, such as rainfall variability, food prices, or poor road infrastructure, with the same precision that household-level data would allow. Food utilisation specifically was not measured directly, the Egbira–Bassa and farmer–herder conflict pathways were not quantified as two statistically distinct channels, and the documentary sources used provide a single retrospective account rather than a basis for tracking whether individual households have since recovered from displacement.

Future research should build a household panel covering planting and harvest seasons across Toto LGA, with a clearly documented sampling procedure that allows high-intensity and less-affected communities, including areas more exposed to Egbira–Bassa conflict as against farmer–herder conflict, to be compared directly. Measures of dietary diversity, child feeding, and morbidity should be collected alongside official displacement and farm-area data, and matched with rainfall and price series to disentangle conflict effects from other shocks. Comparative research extending to Doma and Keana Local Government Areas, together with targeted interviews with displaced women and a review of the role of local peace committees and dry-season patrols, would help identify which interventions are most effective at restoring farming activity, market function, and household food access.

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