

BOUNDARY DISPUTE, SECURITY AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE OF COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Background:

Boundary dispute constitutes a persistent structural threat to communal stability in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, in so far as contested claims over land ownership have repeatedly degenerated into violent confrontation, thereby compromising both the physical security of residents and the inter-communal trust on which peaceful co-existence depends. This study investigated the effect of boundary dispute on the security and peaceful co-existence of communities in Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezillo and Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu in South-East Nigeria.

Objective:

To determine how boundary dispute affects the security of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and to determine the extent to which boundary dispute threatens peaceful co-existence of the affected communities.

Methods:

The study adopted a descriptive and correlational design involving 400 respondents drawn, through 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 security and peaceful co-existence subscales returned Cronbach's alpha reliability indices of 0.92 and 0.80 respectively. Analysis was conducted using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and simple linear regression, tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

Result: Findings revealed that 77.79% of respondents reported that boundary dispute constituted a strong threat to security, while 72% reported that it also strongly threatened peaceful co-existence. Regression analysis confirmed that boundary dispute significantly increased security concern ($p < .001$) and threats to peaceful co-existence ($p < .001$).

Conclusion: The study concludes that unresolved boundary dispute constitutes a structural, rather than incidental threat to the security and peaceful co-existence of affected communities in the South-East, and that durable stability requires interventions which address both territorial adjudication and inter-communal trust-building concurrently.

Keywords: Boundary dispute, security, peaceful co-existence, community development, South-East Nigeria.

Introduction

Land boundaries occupy a foundational place in human settlement, economic sustenance, and social organisation. Disputes over their demarcation have accompanied human society since its earliest formation and continue to shape the security landscape of communities across the developing world. Boundary dispute, in this context, refers to disagreement or conflict between two or more parties,

whether individuals, communities, or states, over the rightful ownership, demarcation, or use of a defined territory. It is concerned primarily with land ownership rather than the mere assertion of rights to possession or occupation (Onwuegbusi, 2020; Ode & Ani, 2020). Osakwe (2021) argued that boundaries are constructs of human anxiety, arising from the desire for control over resources at the individual, group, and community levels. This desire is often intensified where colonial-era demarcations, undertaken with little regard for historical or cultural affiliations, fragmented previously cohesive communities into contested units. In Nigeria, the amalgamation of diverse ethnic and political interests during the colonial period produced administrative boundaries that have continued to generate friction long after independence, despite the establishment of the National Boundary Commission in 1990.

This friction is nowhere more evident than in the South-East geo-political zone, whereby the incidence of communal land conflict has been documented across virtually all constituent states. In Abia State, no fewer than 5,000 persons across approximately twenty communities in seventeen local government areas have been displaced by land-related hostilities (Anierobi et al., 2024), while in Ebonyi State the Ezza-Ezillo conflict in Ishielu Local Government Area has persisted for over a century, having claimed numerous lives and properties despite the establishment of a military barracks at Ezillo and the creation of autonomous communities as remedial measures (Anierobi et al., 2024; Oji, 2015). A related dispute between the Lekwesi and Obiagu communities and their neighbours in Ivo council area of Ebonyi State has similarly resulted in mass displacement (Anierobi et al., 2024), and the discovery of limestone deposits in Isu community of Arochukwu, Abia State, has since 1989 engendered an inter-state conflict with Utuma community in Biase council area of Cross River State, displacing over 3,500 indigenes and destroying more than fifty houses (Anierobi et al., 2024). In Anambra State, the Aguleri-Umuleri, Onitsha-Obosi, Omor-Igbukwu, and Ajalli-Ukpo conflicts (Nnamani & Ugwu, 2020; Obi, 2017), and in Enugu State the Anekeode-Obangene, Iggah-Ojor, and Ikem-Neke disputes (Anierobi et al., 2024), further illustrate that boundary contestation in the zone is neither episodic nor localised but structural and recurrent. The Eco-Violence Theory propounded by Homer-Dixon (1994) offers an explanatory basis for this pattern, in that it holds that conflict frequently arises from the scarcity of renewable resources, such as cropland, forests, and freshwater, upon which developing populations depend for survival, and that this scarcity manifests in structural, demand-induced, and supply-induced forms which rarely occur in isolation but interact to intensify competition over land.

With respect to the impact of boundary disputes on community security, the evidence is substantial. Prolonged uncertainty over land ownership fosters a steady accumulation of frustration, anxiety, and vulnerability among residents. Dunmoye and Johnson (2017), in a longitudinal study of interethnic relations and boundary disputes, observed that stalled or inconclusive negotiations create conditions in which sporadic confrontations can quickly escalate into sustained community-level violence. Such violence not only destabilizes the immediate conflict zone but also strains law enforcement capacity and opens avenues for criminal exploitation of the resulting disorder. Similarly, Ilelah et al. (2024), analyzing governance failures in Bauchi State, found that persistent communal violence erodes inter-community trust and weakens broader security governance. Their findings, though drawn from a different locale, remain instructive for the South-East, underscoring the wider implications of unresolved disputes for regional stability. The persistence of unresolved tensions is evident in events as recent as July 2026, when officials and traditional rulers from Anambra and Abia States met with the

National Boundary Commission in Awka to address the outstanding eight-kilometre stretch of their shared twenty-three-kilometre boundary. That such an intervention was required underscores the inadequacy of the earlier demarcation of fifteen kilometres, which failed to dispel the underlying insecurity (Chukindi, 2026). This dynamic is particularly troubling in the South-East, where overlapping settlement patterns mean that a single contested boundary can implicate multiple adjoining communities. In such contexts, violence originating in one locality readily spills over into neighbouring settlements, amplifying insecurity across the region.

The extent to which boundary disputes undermine peaceful co-existence – the ability of neighbouring communities to sustain amicable, trust-based relations despite differences of interest, identity, or historical grievance, is considerable. Evidence points to a corrosive and cumulative effect. Williams (2020) noted that social divisions rooted in contested identity are among the principal drivers of intractable disputes, as repeated territorial confrontations entrench mistrust and foreclose the informal cooperation on which peaceful relations depend. Oji et al. (2015), documenting the Ezza–Ezillo conflict of 2008–2010, similarly found that the loss of lives and property left a legacy of suspicion that endured beyond the immediate hostilities. Van Baalen (2024), drawing on a natural experiment in Côte d’Ivoire, further demonstrated that communal peace is most durable where legitimate local institutions actively manage grievances in the shadow of wider conflict – a finding that underscores the vulnerability of the South-East, where such institutions are often absent. Omitola et al. (2023) added that even formally adjudicated disputes leave communities grappling with post-conflict developmental challenges, such as destroyed farmland and reduced agricultural income, which perpetuate grievance long after territorial questions appear settled. Where disputes persist over extended periods – as among the Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezza and Ezillo, and Isu and Utuma – the resulting mistrust can outlast the original grievance, rendering the restoration of peaceful co-existence increasingly difficult even after formal resolution.

This suggests that interventions limited to territorial adjudication are unlikely, on their own, to restore either security or peaceful co-existence. Dedicated trust-building initiatives and institutional mechanisms are additionally required. Against this backdrop, the present study interrogates two central questions: first, how boundary disputes have affected the security of communities in the South-East geo-political zone; and second, the extent to which such disputes have threatened the prospects of peaceful co-existence among those same communities.

Statement of the Problem

Meaningful community development cannot be sustained in an environment characterised by recurrent violent conflict, and the persistence of boundary dispute in Umuleri and Aguleri, Ezillo and Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu communities has continued to impede the security and peaceful co-existence on which such development depends. Although successive interventions, including customary mediation and statutory boundary adjudication, have been attempted in these communities, the underlying tensions have neither been fully resolved nor systematically documented in terms of their effect on residents’ sense of physical safety and their capacity to maintain amicable relations with neighbouring communities. This gap in the empirical record leaves policymakers, traditional authorities, and community leaders without a clear evidentiary basis for designing targeted security and peace-building interventions, in so far as the available literature on boundary dispute in Nigeria has tended to treat security and peaceful co-existence as incidental consequences of broader socio-economic disruption,

rather than as distinct outcomes warranting dedicated empirical measurement. The problem which this study addresses, therefore, is the absence of a focused, empirically grounded account of how boundary dispute has affected the security and peaceful co-existence of the affected communities in the South-East geo-political zone of Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. How did boundary dispute affect the security of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?
2. To what extent did boundary dispute threaten peaceful co-existence of 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. Boundary dispute did not significantly affect security of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.
2. Boundary dispute did not significantly affect peaceful co-existence of the people in the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopted a combination of descriptive and correlational research designs, whereby the descriptive component enabled the characterisation of the security and peaceful co-existence 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 geopolitical 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 longstanding history of boundary dispute and the significant disruption which such dispute has occasioned to security and inter-communal relations.

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. A simple random sampling technique was applied to select respondents for questionnaire administration. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, the Boundary Dispute and Community Development Questionnaire, which included dedicated subscales measuring the effect of boundary dispute on security and on peaceful co-existence, with responses scored on a four-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Content and face validity were established through review by subject-matter experts in boundary dispute and dispute resolution, while reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach's alpha from a pilot administration of the instrument to residents of Awara community in Oguta Local Government Area, Imo State. The analysis yielded indices of 0.92 for the security subscale and 0.80 for the peaceful co-

existence subscale. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while the hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression at the 0.05 level of significance.

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 in equal proportion from Umuleri, Aguleri, Ezillo, Ezza, and Usaka Ukwu, with each community contributing 80 respondents, representing 20% of the sample. The respondents were also evenly distributed across the four age categories of 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, and 50 years and above, with each category comprising 100 respondents, representing 25% of the sample. This distribution ensures balanced representation across the five boundary-affected communities and the major generational cohorts under investigation, thereby strengthening the comparability of subsequent findings across community and age-based subgroups.

Research Question One: How did boundary dispute affect the security 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 Disputes on Security in Affected Communities in South-East Nigeria

S/N	Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (x)	Std. D
1	Boundary dispute between our community and neighbouring community often leads to violent conflicts.	158 (39.5)	137 (34.25)	67 (16.75)	38 (9.5)	3.04	0.87
2	Boundary dispute often creates an atmosphere of fear for safety among the residents of our community.	110 (27.5)	240 (60)	33 (8.25)	17 (4.25)	3.11	0.78
3	Boundary dispute in our community often displaces people from their homes to places where they become refugees.	98 (24.5)	208 (52)	70 (17.5)	24 (6)	2.95	0.90
4	Boundary dispute often disrupts economic activities in our communities, thereby inflicting hardship on the life of the residents.	108 (27)	214 (53.5)	61 (15.25)	17 (4.25)	3.03	0.83
5	Boundary dispute strains relations between our community and neighbouring communities, thereby making it harder for the people to access essential goods and services.	71 (17.75)	248 (62)	68 (17)	13 (3.25)	2.94	0.79
6	Boundary dispute sometimes leads to human rights violations such as excessive use of force and rape.	104 (26)	202 (50.5)	49 (12.25)	45 (11.25)	2.91	0.89
7	Constant boundary dispute between our community and neighbouring community often claims lives.	56 (14)	224 (56)	83 (20.75)	37 (9.25)	2.75	0.74
Grand Totals		311 (77.79)		89 (22.21)		2.98	0.85

Note. n = 400. Source: Field survey.

Table 2 reveals that respondents consistently regarded boundary disputes as a major threat to communal security, with all seven items recording mean scores above the criterion mean. The most prominent concern was the atmosphere of fear among residents (Item 2, mean = 3.11), followed by exposure to violent conflict (Item 1, mean = 3.04) and disruption of economic activity (Item 4, mean = 3.03). In total, 77.79% of respondents reported that boundary disputes exerted a strong negative impact on community security, while 22.21% acknowledged a lesser, though still adverse, effect. Overall, these results demonstrate that residents perceive boundary disputes not as abstract territorial disagreements but as immediate, pervasive threats that undermine daily safety and wellbeing.

Research Question Two: To what extent did boundary dispute threaten peaceful co-existence of the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria?

Table 3: Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on Boundary Disputes and Peaceful Co-existence in Affected Communities in South-East Nigeria.

S/N	Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (x)	Std. D
1	Disagreements over land ownership in our community often escalate into violent confrontation.	67 (16.75)	177 (44.25)	134 (33.5)	22 (5.5)	2.72	0.84
2	Many residents in our community have mistrust that makes it difficult to engage in peaceful relations with rival communities.	60 (15)	201 (50.25)	121 (30.25)	18 (4.5)	2.76	0.86
3	Contentions over ownership of disputed areas often claim lives.	84 (21)	258 (64.5)	38 (9.5)	20 (5)	3.02	0.83
4	Boundary dispute leads to destruction of economic activities.	104 (26)	255 (63.5)	25 (6.25)	16 (4)	3.17	0.94
5	Communities engulfed in boundary dispute experience unhealthy social divisions.	74 (18.5)	208 (52)	109 (27.25)	9 (2.25)	2.87	0.70
6	Boundary dispute has often led to destruction of cultural heritage within the disputed territories.	78 (19.5)	286 (71.5)	30 (7.5)	6 (1.5)	3.09	0.64
7	Boundary dispute in our community has often led to humanitarian crises.	18 (4.5)	154 (38.5)	200 (50)	28 (7)	2.41	0.78
Grand Totals		289 (72)		111 (28)		2.86	0.80

Note. n = 400. Source: Field survey.

Table 3 shows that respondents identified boundary disputes as a substantial threat to peaceful co-existence, with six of the seven items recording mean scores above the criterion mean. The most strongly endorsed concerns were the destruction of economic activities (Item 4, mean = 3.17) and the loss of cultural heritage within disputed territories (Item 6, mean = 3.09). By contrast, the humanitarian-crisis item (Item 7, mean = 2.41) was the only one to fall below the midpoint, indicating that respondents more readily associate boundary disputes with material and cultural loss than with humanitarian catastrophe. Overall, 72% of respondents reported that boundary disputes had a strong negative effect on peaceful co-existence, confirming that such disputes are widely experienced as a pervasive threat to community harmony.

Hypothesis One: There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the security 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 Security

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p	Decision	
(Constant)	.335	.141			.018		
Boundary dispute	.991	.049	.741	20.360	.000	Significant, rejected	H ₀₁

Note. Dependent Variable: Security Concern. p < 0.05.

Table 4 shows that boundary dispute produced an unstandardised coefficient of B = .991, a standard error of .049, a standardised coefficient of β = .741, and a t-value of 20.360 ($p < .001$), indicating a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between boundary dispute and security concern. The

null hypothesis was rejected, confirming that increases in the intensity of boundary dispute are associated with corresponding increases in security concern among residents of the affected communities.

Hypothesis Two: There would be no significant effect of boundary dispute on the peaceful co-existence 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 Peaceful Co-Existence

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p	Decision
(Constant)	.721	.369		3.182	.043	
Boundary dispute	.694	.064	.729	18.283	.000	Significant, H_{02} rejected

Note. Dependent Variable: Peaceful Co-Existence. $p < 0.05$.

Table 5 shows that boundary dispute produced an unstandardised coefficient of $B = .694$, a standard error of $.064$, a standardised coefficient of $\beta = .729$, and a t-value of 18.283 ($p < .001$), demonstrating a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between boundary dispute and threats to peaceful co-existence. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected, confirming that boundary dispute significantly increases threats to peaceful co-existence among the affected communities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Effect of boundary dispute on the security of communities in the South-East

This study revealed that boundary dispute exerts a strong, statistically significant negative effect on security, a finding which corroborates the theoretical proposition of the Eco-Violence Theory, in that competition over a scarce and contested resource, namely land, has translated directly into measurable deterioration in residents' sense of physical safety. This pattern is consistent with the longitudinal evidence reported by Dunmoye and Johnson (2017), whereby prolonged interethnic boundary dispute was found to produce sustained deterioration in residents' sense of security as negotiations stalled and confrontation became normalised. In the South-East context, this manifests concretely in the atmosphere of fear reported by respondents, the displacement of residents into effective refugee status, a consequence documented across Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra, and Enugu States where thousands have been forced from their homes by land-related hostilities (Anierobi et al., 2024), and the disruption of the movement patterns that historically connected interwoven Igbo and Annang settlements along the Abia-Akwa Ibom axis (UbongAbasi et al., 2017; Michael, 2017); these consequences suggest that security in the affected communities cannot be restored through episodic policing alone, but requires resolution of the underlying territorial contestation. This further implies that security agencies deployed to such flashpoints address only the symptoms of the conflict, whereas the National Boundariy Commission, empowered under its 1990 enabling statute, remains the institution best placed to confront the root territorial cause and thereby restore lasting stability.

Effect of boundary dispute on peaceful co-existence in communities in the South-East

This study revealed that boundary dispute similarly undermines peaceful co-existence, a finding which supports the observation of Williams (2020) that identity-based social divisions arising from territorial contestation tend to entrench mistrust independently of the resolution of the underlying land claim. This pattern is corroborated by Oji et al. (2015) in the Ezza-Ezillo conflict, whereby the human and material losses sustained between 2008 and 2010 left a residue of suspicion that persisted well beyond the cessation of hostilities. This is evident in the present findings, whereby respondents identified mistrust of rival communities and the destruction of shared economic and cultural resources as central to their experience of boundary dispute, notwithstanding that the humanitarian-crisis item registered comparatively weaker endorsement. This destruction of shared resources aligns with the finding of Omitola et al. (2023) and Onwuegbusi (2020), who observed that communities were still faced with issues of diminished farmland, income, and social infrastructure long after territorial questions are formally settled, such that grievance is sustained by economic deprivation even where the legal dispute itself has concluded. The result suggests that security and peaceful co-existence, while conceptually distinct, are empirically interdependent in the context of boundary dispute, such that interventions addressing one dimension in isolation are unlikely to achieve durable improvement in the other. Van Baalen (2024) demonstrates, from a natural experiment in Côte d'Ivoire, that durable communal peace depends substantially on the presence of legitimate local institutions capable of managing grievance before it escalates, which implies that a combined approach, integrating territorial adjudication with dedicated trust-building and institutional strengthening, offers the more defensible path towards restoring stability in the affected communities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that boundary dispute exerts a strong and statistically significant negative effect on both security and peaceful co-existence in communities in the South-East, thereby confirming that unresolved territorial contestation constitutes a structural, rather than incidental, threat to communal stability in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study further concludes that security and peaceful co-existence are essential, interdependent components of community life. Evidence shows that lasting progress in one dimension cannot be sustained without corresponding attention to the other, highlighting the need for holistic interventions that address both simultaneously.

Recommendations

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

1. The National Boundary Commission and relevant state governments should institutionalise community-based early-warning systems capable of detecting escalating tension before it translates into violence.
2. Traditional rulers and religious leaders should be formally incorporated into dispute resolution structures, given their demonstrated capacity to facilitate dialogue between contesting communities.
3. Dedicated trust-building programmes, distinct from territorial adjudication processes, should be established to address the entrenched mistrust which boundary dispute has generated between the affected communities.

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