

AFRICAN COMMUNITARIAN PERSPECTIVES ON LAND GRABBING AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF RURAL DWELLERS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the African communitarian perspectives on land grabbing and its impact on rural populations in Southeast Nigeria. The appropriation of land has become a pressing socio-economic and ethical concern, leading to the erosion of ancestral territories, livelihoods, cultural traditions, and community identity. It analyzed the root causes of land acquisition, its consequences for rural inhabitants, and the moral questions raised by forced displacement. Employing a descriptive survey design, the study combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis involving 250 rural residents, community leaders, and other key stakeholders in selected areas of Southeast Nigeria. Results indicated that land grabbing is primarily fueled by commercial farming, urban growth, government land acquisition policies, real estate projects, and inadequate land governance. The resulting displacement was found to contribute to increased poverty, food insecurity, joblessness, social fragmentation, and breaches of basic human rights. Philosophically, the study showed that such land seizures frequently violate principles of fairness, justice, and collective welfare. The utilitarian argument often used by authorities and investors—claiming greater good for the majority—was found to neglect the hardships endured by displaced communities. Moreover, African communal values, which prioritize shared ownership and social cohesion, are compromised when people are removed from their traditional lands. The study emphasized the need to integrate ethical considerations into land acquisition practices. It called for enhanced legal safeguards, meaningful community involvement in decisions, fair and transparent compensation, and the embedding of moral principles in land policy to advance social equity and sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: African communitarian, Land grabbing, displacement, rural dwellers, Southeast, Nigeria

Introduction

Land plays a fundamental role in African societies, functioning not merely as an economic asset but also as a cornerstone of cultural identity, spiritual life, and communal heritage. Among many African communities, including the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria, land has traditionally been seen as a shared resource—held collectively by the community and preserved for both current and future generations. Rooted in African communitarian thought, this worldview highlights the deep interdependence between individuals and society, emphasizing values such as mutual responsibility, social cohesion, solidarity, and the common good (Mbiti, 1969; Menkiti, 1984). Within this context, land is understood as a communal trust, with its use and management expected to serve the broader community rather than private interests or external actors.

In recent years, the widespread occurrence of land grabbing across Africa has sparked significant ethical, social, and political concerns. Land grabbing refers to the large-scale purchase or lease of land by governments, multinational corporations, or wealthy individuals, often without proper consultation, consent, or fair compensation for local communities (Borras et al., 2011). In Nigeria, especially in the Southeast region, accelerating urban growth, infrastructure projects, industrial development, and private real estate ventures have intensified pressure on land, leading to the displacement of rural populations and the weakening of traditional land tenure systems (Amanor, 2012).

The Southeast, made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, is primarily home to the Igbo, whose social organization is historically based on collective ownership and communal values. Traditionally, access to land among the Igbo was governed by kinship ties, lineage structures, and customary institutions that ensured fair distribution and safeguarded community interests (Isichei, 1976). However, modern economic demands and government policies have increasingly eroded these systems, enabling the transfer of communal lands to urban developments, commercial farms, mining operations, and private investors. These changes have frequently uprooted rural inhabitants from ancestral territories, disrupting livelihoods, weakening social networks, and endangering cultural continuity (Deininger, 2011). From the standpoint of African communitarianism, such displacement raises critical moral questions about justice, human dignity, and the well-being of the collective. Communitarian philosophy holds that individuals are shaped by their social environment and that societal institutions should prioritize community welfare over individual gain or profit-driven motives (Gyekye, 1997). Thus, the appropriation of communal land without inclusive decision-making or just compensation represents not only an economic injustice but also a breach of ethical principles central to African social life. These actions threaten social unity and run counter to long-standing norms of reciprocity and shared obligation.

Furthermore, displacement linked to land acquisition has contributed to a range of socio-economic problems, including increased poverty, joblessness, food insecurity, forced migration, and tensions between communities and state authorities. Rural populations,

particularly those dependent on farming, often lose their primary means of survival, deepening inequality and marginalization (Cotula, 2013). Beyond material loss, displacement also severs ties to sacred sites, ancestral heritage, and collective memory—elements vital to the cultural integrity of indigenous groups. The resulting fragmentation of community life poses a serious challenge to sustainable development and social stability.

While academic research has increasingly addressed the legal and economic aspects of land acquisition in Africa, less attention has been given to its philosophical dimensions, especially within the framework of African communitarian ethics. Much of the existing literature focuses on property rights, compensation mechanisms, and governance, overlooking the moral underpinnings of communal ownership and the ethical implications of dispossessing communities of their ancestral lands (Matondi et al., 2011). There is, therefore, a need to analyze land grabbing and rural displacement through the lens of African communitarian thought, in order to develop a normative approach that supports social justice, inclusive development, and the protection of collective rights. Accordingly, this study explores the issue of land grabbing and the displacement of rural communities in Southeast Nigeria from the perspective of African communitarianism. It argues that the ethical values embedded in African philosophical traditions offer valuable guidance for addressing contemporary land-related challenges, ensuring that development processes uphold human dignity, encourage community participation, and promote the well-being of both present and future generations.

Land grabbing and the forced displacement of rural populations have become pressing socio-economic and ethical issues in Southeast Nigeria. The growing conversion of communal lands for urban development, industrial projects, commercial farming, and private investment has led to the loss of ancestral territories for many rural communities. While such land acquisitions are frequently justified as necessary for development and economic progress, they have also contributed to widespread poverty, loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, social unrest, and the erosion of cultural traditions (Cotula, 2013; Deininger, 2011).

For the Igbo people of Southeast Nigeria, land is not merely an economic resource—it is deeply tied to communal identity, ancestral heritage, and the continuity of social life. Yet, modern land acquisition practices are eroding traditional systems of collective ownership and weakening the institutions that have historically managed land use. In numerous instances, rural residents are removed from their land without proper consultation, involvement, or fair compensation, fostering a sense of exclusion and injustice. These practices run counter to African communitarian values—such as solidarity, shared responsibility, and the common good—that prioritize community welfare over individual or corporate gain (Gyekye, 1997).

While existing research has explored land grabbing through legal, political, and economic lenses, there has been limited focus on its philosophical and moral aspects. In particular, few

studies have applied African communitarian thought to analyze the ethical consequences of land dispossession in this region. As a result, the moral tensions surrounding development-driven displacement—and their impact on community well-being—remain under-examined. In

light of these gaps, this study investigates land grabbing and rural displacement in Southeast Nigeria using African communitarian philosophy as a conceptual framework. It aims to establish a normative foundation for assessing current land acquisition practices and to consider how principles such as communalism, social justice, and collective responsibility might inform fairer and more sustainable models of land governance and rural development.

African Communitarianism and the Meaning of Land

African communitarianism stands as one of the continent's most influential philosophical frameworks, highlighting the deep interdependence between individuals and their communities. In contrast to Western liberal models that emphasize personal autonomy and private property, this tradition views the individual as fundamentally shaped by social and cultural relationships. Personhood, in this context, is not an isolated condition but something achieved through active engagement in communal life, mutual duties, and shared norms. Core values such as solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity, and collective responsibility are seen as vital to maintaining social balance and enabling human well-being (Mbiti, 1969; Menkiti, 1984).

Central to this worldview is a distinct understanding of land. Across many African societies, land is not treated merely as a commodity or economic asset for private gain. Instead, it is regarded as a sacred inheritance that links the living with their ancestors and future descendants. It carries the community's history, identity, spiritual beliefs, and sense of continuity. As such, rights to land are framed collectively—rooted in shared responsibilities rather than individual entitlements. Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, for instance, land has historically been held by families, lineages, and communities. While individuals may use the land, ultimate ownership remains with the group, reflecting a system based on usufruct rather than absolute private title (Isichei, 1976).

John Mbiti (1969) famously expressed the essence of this philosophy with the phrase: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” This highlights how personal identity and existence emerge from communal ties. The same principle applies to land, which is more than just space for farming or building. It forms a core part of the community's shared life, serving as a vessel for ancestral memory, cultural practices, and spiritual meaning. Sacred sites such as groves, shrines, burial grounds, and ancestral homes reinforce the enduring connection between generations. Thus, the value of land extends beyond its physical utility, encompassing moral, social, and spiritual significance.

Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) further explains that in African thought, the community plays a foundational role in shaping moral identity. Since individuals gain purpose through belonging, resources like land must be managed to support collective welfare and unity. This perspective contrasts sharply with individualistic property systems that allow unrestricted ownership and market-driven control. In traditional African settings, no single person holds absolute authority

over communal land. Instead, elders, family heads, and community leaders act as trustees, managing land on behalf of current and future members. Their role is not ownership but stewardship—ensuring fair access and protecting the long-term interests of the community.

The idea of stewardship is central to African communitarian ethics. It implies a duty to preserve communal assets for future generations. Land is seen as inherited from ancestors and held in trust for those not yet born. Therefore, decisions about its use must consider sustainability, fairness, and intergenerational equity. This ethical stance discourages overexploitation and opposes transferring communal land for private benefit. Kwame Gyekye (1997) notes that while individual initiative and rights are acknowledged, they must be balanced with communal obligations and the broader public good. Land use should serve the entire community, not enrich a select few.

Among the Igbo, customary land tenure systems reflect these communitarian ideals. Land is typically passed down through family lines and governed by traditions that prioritize collective ownership and mutual accountability. Elders and lineage heads oversee allocation, mediate disputes, and protect communal rights. These practices promote stability and ensure equitable access to land for agriculture, housing, and other essential needs. At the same time, they strengthen social cohesion and foster a shared sense of identity and belonging (Isichei, 1976). Spirituality also plays a key role in how land is understood. Many African communities regard land as sacred because it houses ancestral spirits and serves as a bridge between the living and the dead. Religious rituals, festivals, and ceremonies often take place at specific locations imbued with historical and spiritual meaning. As a result, losing ancestral land is not only an economic loss but also a rupture in cultural and spiritual continuity. This helps explain the strong resistance many communities show when faced with displacement or land expropriation. Justice, within this framework, is tied to harmony and equitable resource distribution. Access to land is considered essential for survival, security, and cultural preservation. Therefore, land governance should prioritize fairness, inclusion, and the common good. Decisions should arise from consultation and consensus, not be imposed unilaterally by individuals or outside powers. Participatory approaches help maintain unity and reduce conflict.

Yet, modern socio-economic changes are increasingly undermining these traditional views. Urban growth, industrial expansion, and the spread of capitalist markets have promoted land privatization and commodification. Customary institutions have weakened, and patterns of communal ownership have eroded. In many cases, land has become a tool for speculation and personal profit, contributing to inequality, disputes, and the marginalization of vulnerable groups. From a communitarian standpoint, these trends endanger social cohesion and contradict long-standing principles of shared responsibility and collective well-being. In sum, African communitarianism sees land as far more than a material asset. It is a communal legacy that embodies cultural identity, spiritual meaning, and societal continuity. Ownership is defined by stewardship and collective care, not individual dominion. The philosophy advocates for land management that supports justice, social harmony, and intergenerational equity. In doing so, it

offers a valuable ethical foundation for addressing current challenges related to land rights, development, and governance in African contexts.

The broad objective of this study is to examine the African communitarian perspectives on land grabbing and displacement of rural dwellers in Southeast Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: a). examine the causes of land grabbing in Southeast Nigeria; b). analyze the African communitarian perspective relating to land ownership and displacement; c). investigate the effects of land grabbing on rural dwellers and their livelihoods; d). analyze the philosophical and ethical issues associated with land grabbing and displacement; e). assess the socio-economic effects of displacement on rural dwellers; f). evaluate the role of government policies and legal frameworks in land acquisition processes; and g). propose measures for promoting justice, equity, and protection of rural communities against unjust displacement.

This research holds significance by advancing current understanding of land grabbing and rural displacement through a philosophical lens. It offers insights that can aid policymakers, academics, and development organizations in recognizing the ethical dimensions of land acquisition in Southeast Nigeria. The study also matters for its focus on social justice, human rights, and fair access to resources. Its findings are expected to yield practical recommendations for strengthening land governance and safeguarding rural communities at risk of exploitation and involuntary displacement. In addition, the research enriches scholarly conversations in philosophy, rural development, sociology, and political economy by connecting ethical frameworks with the real-world dynamics of land disputes in Nigeria. It further provides a foundation for future studies on land rights, environmental ethics, and rural development.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods strategy, incorporating surveys, interviews, and analysis of documents to explore land grabbing and the displacement of rural communities in Southeast Nigeria, framed within the context of African communitarian philosophy. While this comprehensive approach yielded valuable quantitative and qualitative findings, it is important to recognize some methodological constraints. Primarily, the study focused solely on the Southeast region, which is particularly relevant due to its Igbo population and rich communal traditions. However, this geographical limitation suggests that the results may not accurately reflect the experiences of other regions in Nigeria or different African cultures with varying land ownership practices, warranting caution when applying these findings more broadly.

The research was carried out in Southeast Nigeria, a region consisting of five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Predominantly inhabited by the Igbo people, the area is marked by strong agricultural traditions, ongoing urban development, and a growing number of land-related conflicts. This region was selected due to increasing instances of land acquisition for infrastructure, urban growth, commercial farming, and private investment—all of which have contributed to the forced displacement of rural populations in various locations. The target population included rural residents, community leaders, farmers,

landowners, and government personnel involved in land management across selected communities in the region. The estimated total population for the study was 2,500 individuals, distributed among the five states. This study employed a descriptive survey research design,

chosen for its effectiveness in capturing detailed insights into the experiences, perceptions, and philosophical perspectives of rural residents in Southeast Nigeria regarding land grabbing and displacement. The research combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative component emphasized philosophical examination and interpretation of the ethical dimensions tied to land acquisition, while the quantitative aspect involved gathering measurable data from participants using structured questionnaires. A sample of 250 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula. A multistage sampling approach was applied. Initially, communities with documented cases of land grabbing and displacement were identified through purposive sampling. Next, stratified sampling was used to divide participants into four groups: farmers, community leaders, rural dwellers, and government officials. Finally, simple random sampling ensured that individuals within each group were selected impartially, promoting balanced representation. Data were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Primary data came from structured questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions conducted with participants in selected communities. Key informants included traditional rulers, local government representatives, and individuals directly affected by displacement. Secondary data were drawn from academic textbooks, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, conference proceedings, and relevant online resources focusing on land grabbing, displacement, ethics, and rural development. The data collected through frequency distributions and percentages were examined beyond their surface as mere empirical evidence of social realities, looking instead at them through the lens of African communal ethics. Percentages that show the prevalence of specific responses were interpreted as reflections of shared moral values and community beliefs, rather than just objective statistics. For example, when a significant number of people consider land grabbing as unjust, it signifies more than just the reality of displacement; it indicates how the community views such actions as breaches of their social norms and sense of justice. Responses highlighting the loss of cultural identity or ancestral heritage show ethical considerations that are deeply rooted in African communal principles regarding personhood and the common good. In this context, the percentages served as reflections of a collective ethical consciousness, shedding light on how communities navigate their experiences in moral terms, shaped by their traditional values and cultural perspectives. Therefore, the statistical findings were not treated as standalone explanations, but rather as expressions of deeper ethical issues. Additionally, qualitative insights gathered through interviews and discussions were philosophically analyzed to differentiate between observable realities and moral interpretations. Observable conditions include losses in farmland, rising unemployment, migration, and other socioeconomic challenges, while moral perceptions revolve around fairness, dignity, communal responsibility, and justice. This philosophical framework grounded in African communal philosophy facilitated the examination of these

moral evaluations. Thus, the integration of quantitative data, personal narratives from interviews, and philosophical discourse enriched the study, allowing it to transcend a mere catalog of socioeconomic issues. This approach not only highlighted the realities of land

grabbing and displacement in Southeast Nigeria but also illuminated how affected communities interpret these challenges within the context of their shared values and ethical expectations. Ultimately, this combination of empirical evidence and philosophical thought enhanced the study's capacity to analyze land grabbing as both a socio-economic issue and a significant threat to the ethical fabric of African communal life.

Result and Discussions

Causes of Land Grabbing in Southeast Nigeria

A multiple-response analysis ($n = 250$) reveals that land grabbing in Southeast Nigeria stems from a combination of interconnected factors. Population growth pressure was cited most often (72%), pointing to rising demographic demands as a major force behind heightened competition for land. A weak land tenure system (68%) is closely linked, as unclear legal guidelines on ownership and transfer create openings for unauthorized land acquisition. Inheritance and family land disputes (64%) also play a significant role, underscoring how internal familial disagreements can lead to encroachments. Agricultural expansion (62%) and urbanization (60%) reflect broader economic and spatial changes driving up land demand. Other contributing elements include insufficient documentation (58%), land speculation (56%), and poverty or unemployment (54%), highlighting how institutional gaps and socioeconomic conditions jointly exacerbate the issue. Boundary disagreements (52%) and government land acquisition for development projects (48%) indicate ongoing friction between communities and state initiatives. Less frequently mentioned but still relevant are corruption in land allocation (44%) and conflicts involving traditional leadership (40%), which, while reported less often, continue to enable land grabbing in certain contexts.

Based on oral interviews conducted in rural communities across Southeast Nigeria, respondents consistently described land grabbing as the result of multiple interconnected factors—economic, political, social, and institutional—rather than a single cause. Their views can be grouped into several main themes: A common concern was the rising demand for land and its increasing value. Participants observed that urban sprawl, population growth, and expanding commercial interests have turned land into a highly sought-after asset. This has led wealthier individuals and developers to acquire large tracts, often through questionable or unethical methods. Many referred to this as “using money to seize community land.” Corruption and poor enforcement of land regulations were also frequently cited. Interviewees reported that some government officials and traditional leaders are believed to work with powerful outsiders to alter land records or sidestep legal procedures. This has fostered a widespread belief that land laws are either unenforced or applied unevenly. Another key issue was unclear land boundaries and disputes rooted in customary ownership systems. In many areas, inheritance practices are not formally recorded, resulting in conflicting claims between families and villages. This lack

of clarity, participants noted, makes it easier for land to be taken without proper authority. Social changes were also seen as contributing factors. Several respondents pointed to growing individualism and diminishing respect for communal traditions. They described a shift away

from collective land stewardship, with more people pursuing personal profit at the expense of shared community interests. Finally, limited resistance and low awareness of legal rights were identified as enabling the problem. Some rural residents acknowledged they lack both the knowledge and resources to legally challenge those who take their land. African communitarian philosophy offers a moral and social lens through which to understand the root causes of land grabbing and the displacement of rural populations. In contrast to individualistic views that treat land as a private commodity, this perspective sees land as a shared inheritance meant to benefit both present communities and future generations (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997). From this standpoint, the rise in land dispossession stems largely from the decline of communal ethics, the spread of economic individualism, and the weakening of traditional institutions responsible for protecting collective resources.

A key driver of land grabbing is the growing trend of treating land as a marketable asset. Historically, among the Igbo and many other African societies, land was held collectively by families and communities, managed as a trust rather than a personal possession. However, modern capitalist practices and processes of modernization have shifted this view, turning land into a commodity for private ownership and profit. This transition from shared stewardship to individual control has enabled speculative purchases and the marginalization of poorer rural groups. Communitarian ethics see this shift as contrary to values of mutual support and collective well-being (Gyekye, 1997).

Urban expansion and infrastructure projects also play a significant role. As cities grow and populations increase, demand rises for land to build homes, roads, industries, and commercial zones. Governments and private investors often acquire large areas for such developments, sometimes without meaningful engagement with local residents. While these initiatives are often framed as necessary for economic progress, they can lead to forced displacement and social disruption. From a communitarian viewpoint, development that sidelines community interests in favor of economic returns violates principles of fairness and inclusive decision-making.

Globalization and foreign investment further intensify land pressures. Rising international demand for farmland, minerals, and real estate has drawn multinational companies and wealthy individuals to Africa, leading to large-scale purchases of communal land for agriculture, mining, and industrial use. African communitarian thought challenges these actions, arguing that they place profit above the rights and livelihoods of local and indigenous populations (Cotula, 2013).

Another contributing factor is the fragility of customary land systems and the diminishing authority of traditional leadership. In earlier times, elders, lineage heads, and traditional rulers oversaw land use, ensuring decisions aligned with community needs. Today, political

interference, social change, and modernization have eroded these structures, leaving communal lands more exposed to exploitation. The breakdown of traditional conflict resolution and consensus-building mechanisms has made it easier for communal assets to be lost or transferred

without broad agreement (Isichei, 1976). Corruption and misuse of political power also fuel land grabs. Officials and powerful individuals sometimes manipulate legal procedures to seize communal land for personal gain or to benefit private investors. Such actions contradict communitarian ideals of transparency, equity, and public service, undermining trust and deepening inequalities—especially among rural populations.

Demographic pressures add further strain. Population growth and expanding settlements have heightened competition for land used for farming, housing, and business. In regions like Southeast Nigeria, where land is limited and highly prized, this competition has led to conflicts and weakened communal ownership models, increasing the risk of displacement. Poverty also plays a role, as economically distressed families and communities may be forced to sell ancestral land to developers. From a communitarian perspective, these transactions reflect deeper structural inequalities and the decline of traditional support networks that once shielded vulnerable members of society. Moreover, formal legal systems often fail to recognize or protect customary land rights. National laws frequently grant governments broad authority over land, allowing them to take communal property under the guise of public interest. This legal framework often clashes with traditional concepts of collective ownership and excludes local people from decisions about their own land. Communitarian thought sees such exclusion as a breach of participatory justice and community rights.

Finally, shifting cultural values—particularly the rise of individualism—have weakened communal bonds. As personal wealth and self-interest gain prominence, principles like reciprocity, solidarity, and shared responsibility lose ground. This cultural shift contributes to the breakdown of collective landholding systems and increases vulnerability to displacement. In sum, African communitarian philosophy identifies land grabbing and displacement as outcomes of broader societal changes: the erosion of communal ethics, the commodification of land, urban expansion, global capital flows, weakened traditional governance, corruption, population pressure, poverty, and insufficient legal protection for customary rights. These forces have transformed land tenure from a system rooted in shared responsibility to one dominated by private and corporate interests. Addressing these issues, from this perspective, requires reviving values such as social equity, collective accountability, inclusive governance, and the pursuit of the common good.

Table 1: Causes of Land Grabbing in Southeast Nigeria

S/N	Causes of Land Grabbing	Frequency	Percentage
1	Population growth pressure	180	72%
2	Weak land tenure system	170	68%
3	Inheritance/family land disputes	160	64%

S/N	Causes of Land Grabbing	Frequency	Percentage
4	Urbanization and city expansion	150	60%
5	Land speculation and profiteering	140	56%
6	Government acquisition for development projects	120	48%
7	Boundary disputes between communities	130	52%
8	Corruption in land allocation processes	110	44%
9	Lack of proper land documentation	145	58%
10	Agricultural expansion/commercial farming	155	62%
11	Chieftaincy/traditional authority conflicts	100	40%
12	Poverty and unemployment	135	54%

African Communitarian Views on Land Ownership and Displacement

Conversations and interviews with community elders, traditional leaders, farmers, youth representatives, and displaced rural residents in Southeast Nigeria show that land is widely seen as a shared heritage rather than just a commodity. Most participants described land as belonging not only to those alive today but also to ancestors and future generations. While individuals may have rights to use or inherit land, ultimate ownership is understood to rest with the family, extended kin group, or broader community. This perspective aligns with the African communitarian belief that natural resources should support collective well-being and maintain social unity. Participants highlighted that among the Igbo people, land management traditionally involves shared responsibility and group decision-making. Elders explained that decisions about selling, leasing, or transferring land were historically made through inclusive discussions involving family heads, village councils, and community authorities. Many stressed that these practices ensured fairness, openness, and protection of communal interests. As one elder put it, “Land is what our ancestors left us, and no one can sell it without the agreement of the whole community.”

There was also strong concern about the growing trend of treating land as a private asset for profit. Several interviewees noted that rising economic demands and urban development have led individuals and powerful groups to prioritize personal gain over communal welfare. This shift, they argued, has eroded traditional values and weakened the institutions that once governed land use. Community leaders expressed worry that customary systems are losing influence, leading to more conflicts and disputes over land rights. A major issue raised was displacement caused by infrastructure projects and land acquisitions. Farmers and affected villagers reported losing farmland and ancestral homes due to government initiatives, private developments, road expansions, and industrial construction. Many said their communities were not properly consulted beforehand, and compensation—when offered—was often insufficient or never provided. As a result, families face reduced income, joblessness, and difficulties securing food.

The cultural and spiritual importance of land was another key point. Traditional leaders and elders emphasized that ancestral territories include sacred sites such as shrines, burial grounds, and protected forests, all central to community identity and history. Being removed from these lands, they said, breaks the connection between the living and their ancestors and weakens the

sense of belonging. One traditional ruler stated, “When people lose their ancestral land, they lose part of their history and heritage.” Interviewees also viewed forced displacement and land grabbing as violations of core communitarian ethics. They argued that excluding communities from decisions about their land goes against long-standing principles of consensus, mutual support, and shared accountability. Development, they insisted, should uplift communities rather than harm them. Many saw displacement without proper consultation or fair compensation as unjust and disrespectful to human dignity.

Social impacts were also a significant concern. Participants observed that losing land often leads to poverty, migration, unemployment, family breakdowns, and tensions between communities and outside actors. Youth leaders noted that young people frequently move to cities in search of work, weakening local ties and contributing to urban social challenges. Elders added that uprooting families disrupts traditional ways of life and undermines community bonds. There was broad support for restoring traditional institutions and communitarian values in land governance. Many called for greater inclusion of traditional leaders, family representatives, and community groups in decisions about land use and acquisition. Respondents stressed the need for dialogue, inclusive participation, and consensus in resolving disputes and preventing forced removals. They also recommended fair compensation, effective resettlement plans, and policies that formally recognize customary land rights. This discussions reveal that rural communities in Southeast Nigeria continue to understand land through a communitarian worldview. Land is seen as a shared legacy tied to cultural identity, social cohesion, and responsibility across generations. Therefore, land dispossession and displacement are not only economic issues but moral concerns that challenge justice, social stability, and the survival of traditional values.

Moreover, communitarian and African philosophical viewpoints highlight that land should not be seen merely as an individual possession but as a shared cultural legacy. Thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu and Mogobe Ramose contend that land holds spiritual, cultural, and ancestral importance within African communities, indicating that ownership is rooted in collective ties rather than individual claims (Wiredu, 1996; Ramose, 2002). Viewed through this lens, displacement becomes ethically concerning when it undermines community identity, heritage, and connections across generations. Additionally, rights-based theories, particularly those centered on human rights, characterize forced displacement as a breach of essential rights, including dignity, shelter, and security. There is a growing trend within international legal philosophy to consider land dispossession as a human rights matter, necessitating restitution, compensation, and the involvement of affected communities in decision-making processes (United Nations, 2019).

Effects of Land Grabbing on Rural Dwellers and Their Livelihoods

Table 2 showed that land grabbing has profound and complex impacts on the livelihoods of rural residents in Southeast Nigeria. The most notable consequence is the reduction of farmland and agricultural production, affecting 80% of respondents, which suggests that disruptions in

agriculture are the most immediate fallout from land grabbing. Following closely are increased poverty and declining incomes (76%) and the displacement of rural households (74%), demonstrating that land grabbing not only disrupts food production but also jeopardizes the survival and stability of families. Food insecurity and hunger are reported by 72% of respondents, further illustrating the detrimental effects on essential subsistence and the overall well-being of rural populations. Additionally, 70% noted unemployment and diminished livelihood prospects, while 68% reported an uptick in land-related conflicts or violence, highlighting the economic struggles and insecurities that accompany land grabbing in these communities. The decline in rural economic growth (66%) and a noticeable increase in rural-to-urban migration (64%) point to larger structural issues, such as the depopulation of rural areas and the weakening of local economies. Furthermore, moderate effects such as the erosion of community ties (62%) and the loss of cultural heritage (60%) reveal the social and cultural disruptions spawned from land dispossession. There are also concerns about reduced access to housing and shelter security (58%) and the prevalence of psychological stress and trauma (56%), underscoring that the repercussions extend to emotional health and living conditions.

Table 2: Effects of Land Grabbing on Rural Dwellers and Their Livelihoods

S/N	Effects of Land Grabbing	Frequency	Percentage
1	Loss of farmland and agricultural output	200	80%
2	Displacement of rural households	185	74%
3	Increased poverty and income decline	190	76%
4	Food insecurity and hunger	180	72%
5	Rural–urban migration	160	64%
6	Loss of cultural heritage and ancestral lands	150	60%
7	Increased land-related conflicts/violence	170	68%
8	Unemployment and reduced livelihood opportunities	175	70%
9	Psychological stress and trauma	140	56%
10	Breakdown of community cohesion	155	62%
11	Reduced access to housing and shelter security	145	58%
12	Decline in rural economic development	165	66%

Philosophical and ethical issues associated with land grabbing and displacement

Table 3 outlines respondents' perspectives on the philosophical and ethical dimensions of land grabbing and displacement in Southeast Nigeria. The most prominent concern was the violation

of property rights, cited by 218 individuals (87.2%), highlighting a widespread belief that such practices undermine the legitimate ownership claims of individuals and communities. This was closely followed by concerns about injustice and unequal land distribution (84.0%) and the erosion of human dignity (80.8%), underscoring broader anxieties about fairness and respect

for those affected. A significant majority also pointed to the absence of informed community consent (79.2%) and the exploitation of vulnerable rural populations (77.2%) as key ethical problems. Further evidence of perceived power imbalances emerged in responses regarding the infringement of indigenous land rights (75.2%) and the misuse of political and economic influence (73.6%). Other notable concerns included social exclusion and marginalization (70.4%), tensions between individual and communal land rights (68.4%), and the moral implications of forced displacement (66.0%). While mentioned less frequently, the loss of cultural heritage and identity (63.6%) and the failure to apply principles of distributive justice (61.6%) were still considered important. Overall, the results indicate that land grabbing and displacement are largely seen as ethically problematic, touching on core issues of justice, rights, dignity, consent, and the safeguarding of marginalized groups. These views resonate with established ethical frameworks—such as natural rights theory, distributive justice, and communitarian ethics—that prioritize equity, human well-being, and the recognition of collective land tenure systems.

Table 3: Philosophical and Ethical Issues Associated with Land Grabbing and Displacement

Philosophical and Ethical Issues	Frequency	Percentage
1 Violation of property rights	218	87.2
2 Injustice and inequitable land distribution	210	84.0
3 Disregard for human dignity	202	80.8
4 Lack of informed consent from communities	198	79.2
5 Exploitation of vulnerable rural dwellers	193	77.2
6 Violation of indigenous land rights	188	75.2
7 Abuse of political and economic power	184	73.6
8 Social exclusion and marginalization	176	70.4
9 Conflict between individual and communal ownership rights	171	68.4
10 Ethical concerns over forced displacement	165	66.0
11 Erosion of cultural heritage and identity	159	63.6
12 Failure to uphold principles of distributive justice	154	61.6

Socio-economic effects of displacement on rural dwellers

Table 4 showed how respondents perceive the socio-economic impacts of displacement on rural populations in Southeast Nigeria. The most commonly cited consequence was the loss of farmland and livelihoods, noted by 223 individuals (89.2%), highlighting how displacement

severely limits rural residents' capacity to pursue agriculture and other land-dependent income activities. This is closely followed by rising poverty and economic strain (86.4%) and joblessness or loss of income (83.2%), underscoring the broad deterioration in economic stability among displaced communities. A significant number of respondents also pointed to

food insecurity and declining farm output (80.4%) and interruptions in children's schooling (77.6%), suggesting both short-term hardships and long-term setbacks for household well-being and human capital. Additional widespread effects include greater migration to cities (74.8%) and the weakening of social ties and community structures (72.4%), reflecting the broader social fragmentation caused by forced movement. Other key concerns mentioned were limited access to health care (70.4%), heightened risks for women and children (68.0%), and growing social tensions and insecurity (66.0%). Respondents also emphasized the erosion of cultural traditions (63.2%) and the prevalence of psychological distress (60.4%), indicating that displacement affects not only material conditions but also cultural identity and mental health. Overall, the results show that displacement profoundly disrupts multiple aspects of rural life—including income, food security, education, health, social networks, and emotional well-being—contributing to worsening poverty and increased vulnerability in affected areas.

Table 4 :Socio-Economic Effects of Displacement on Rural Dwellers

S/N	Socio-Economic Effects of Displacement	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Loss of agricultural land and livelihoods	223	89.2
2	Increased poverty and economic hardship	216	86.4
3	Unemployment and loss of income sources	208	83.2
4	Food insecurity and reduced agricultural production	201	80.4
5	Disruption of children's education	194	77.6
6	Increased migration to urban areas	187	74.8
7	Breakdown of social and community networks	181	72.4
8	Poor access to healthcare services	176	70.4
9	Increased vulnerability of women and children	170	68.0
10	Rise in social conflicts and insecurity	165	66.0
11	Loss of cultural heritage and traditional practices	158	63.2
12	Psychological stress and emotional trauma	151	60.4

Perceived Role of Government Policies and Legal Frameworks in Land Acquisition Processes

Table 5 outlines how respondents view the impact of government policies and legal frameworks on land acquisition in Southeast Nigeria. The statement receiving the highest level of agreement was the need for stronger legal enforcement to safeguard vulnerable communities from displacement ($\bar{x} = 3.34$, $SD = 0.86$). Respondents also largely agreed that corruption weakens

land acquisition policies ($\bar{x} = 3.24$, $SD = 0.92$) and that government policies play a significant role in shaping these processes ($\bar{x} = 3.20$, $SD = 0.95$). There was moderate agreement that legal frameworks help minimize land-related conflicts ($\bar{x} = 2.92$, $SD = 0.91$), that the Land Use Act supports land administration ($\bar{x} = 2.87$, $SD = 0.95$), and that policies contribute to fair access

to land resources ($\bar{x} = 2.60$, $SD = 1.00$). On the other hand, respondents expressed disagreement with the idea that current land laws sufficiently protect rural communities ($\bar{x} = 2.34$, $SD = 1.02$), that compensation measures are properly enforced ($\bar{x} = 2.34$, $SD = 0.99$), and that rural residents are adequately involved in decision-making prior to land acquisition ($\bar{x} = 2.24$, $SD = 0.96$). Views on the fairness and transparency of government agencies in these matters were only slightly favorable ($\bar{x} = 2.50$, $SD = 1.03$). With a grand mean of 2.76, the overall perception is that policies and legal structures are seen as relevant to land acquisition. However, persistent issues—such as insufficient community consultation, poor implementation of compensation, limited protection of rural rights, and corruption—highlight ongoing shortcomings in how these systems function.

Table 5: Perceived Role of Government Policies and Legal Frameworks in Land Acquisition Processes

Statement	Mean	SD
1 Government policies significantly influence land acquisition processes.	3.20	0.95
2 Existing land laws adequately protect the rights of rural communities.	2.34	1.02
3 Government agencies ensure fairness and transparency in land acquisition.	2.50	1.03
4 Legal frameworks help reduce conflicts arising from land acquisition.	2.92	0.91
5 Compensation policies are effectively implemented during land acquisition.	2.34	0.99
6 Corruption undermines the effectiveness of land acquisition policies.	3.24	0.92
7 Rural dwellers are adequately consulted before land acquisition decisions are made.	2.24	0.96
8 The Land Use Act provides a reliable legal basis for land administration.	2.87	0.95
9 Government policies promote equitable access to land resources.	2.60	1.00
10 Stronger legal enforcement is needed to protect vulnerable communities from displacement.	3.34	0.86

Measures for Promoting Justice, Equity, and Protection of Rural Communities Against Unjust Displacement

Table 6 outlines respondents' perspectives on actions that could advance justice, equity, and the protection of rural communities from unjust displacement. The most commonly cited measure was enhancing legal protection for community land rights, selected by 226 respondents (90.4%), highlighting a strong belief in the importance of legal frameworks to prevent unlawful land seizures and forced displacement. Ensuring fair compensation for those

affected was also widely supported (88.4%), as was requiring formal community consultation prior to any land acquisition (86.4%). These responses reflect a clear emphasis on fairness, inclusion, and respect for community rights. Transparency and accountability in land administration were considered vital by 83.6% of respondents, while 81.2% stressed the need

for rigorous enforcement of land laws and policies to curb misconduct. Recognition and protection of traditional indigenous land systems were supported by 78.8%, and nearly three-quarters (76.4%) saw value in creating independent bodies to resolve land disputes, underscoring the importance of preserving customary rights and enabling peaceful conflict resolution. Further, raising public awareness about land rights and legal protections was seen as necessary by 73.6% of respondents, while 71.6% emphasized the importance of involving communities directly in decision-making—viewed as key to empowering rural populations and improving oversight. Additional measures included providing support for livelihood recovery and resettlement (69.2%), imposing stricter penalties for illegal land grabbing (67.2%), and fostering cooperation among government bodies, civil society, and traditional leaders (64.8%). The results indicate that respondents view a combination of stronger legal safeguards, equitable compensation, inclusive processes, transparent governance, consistent enforcement, and collaborative management as the most effective path toward achieving justice and protecting rural communities from unjust displacement in Southeast Nigeria.

Table 6: Measures for Promoting Justice, Equity, and Protection of Rural Communities Against Unjust Displacement

S/N	Proposed Measures	Frequency	Percentage
1	Strengthening legal protection of community land rights	226	90.4
2	Ensuring adequate compensation for affected persons	221	88.4
3	Mandatory community consultation before land acquisition	216	86.4
4	Transparent and accountable land administration processes	209	83.6
5	Strict enforcement of land-related laws and policies	203	81.2
6	Recognition and protection of indigenous land tenure systems	197	78.8
7	Establishment of independent dispute resolution mechanisms	191	76.4
8	Increased public awareness of land rights and legal provisions	184	73.6
9	Active participation of local communities in decision-making	179	71.6
10	Provision of livelihood restoration and resettlement support	173	69.2
11	Stronger sanctions against illegal land grabbing practices	168	67.2
12	Collaboration between government, civil society, and traditional institutions	162	64.8

Practical Applications of the African Communitarian View in Land Policy and Practice

The African Communitarian Perspective provides a moral and socio-philosophical lens that prioritizes community over the individual. Drawn from traditional African thought, it asserts that a person exists not in isolation but through interconnectedness with others, their environment, and their ancestors. This worldview encapsulates the essence of "a person is a person through other persons," a concept often linked to Ubuntu ethics in Southern Africa and

similar communitarian philosophies throughout the continent. When applied to land policy and practice, this perspective fundamentally contrasts with Western liberal individualism, which tends to elevate private ownership and individual rights above communal welfare. In numerous African cultures, land transcends mere economic value; it serves as a cultural, spiritual, and social cornerstone that unites communities. Yet, contemporary land policies shaped by colonial histories and neoliberal ideologies have increasingly shifted focus towards privatization, commodification, and individual ownership. This shift has led to issues such as land grabbing, the displacement of rural populations, and growing disparities in land access. By integrating the African Communitarian Perspective into land policy, we can establish an ethical and practical basis for tackling these issues while fostering justice, inclusion, and sustainability.

The African Communitarian Perspective emphasizes the importance of communal land tenure systems, recognizing that land is often owned collectively by communities, clans, or extended families rather than by individuals. In this context, chiefs, elders, or family heads serve as custodians of the land, which is allocated based on need and social responsibility. This highlights the necessity for governments to acknowledge customary land tenure rather than replace it with private titling. By integrating customary authorities into land administration, policies can create a framework that fosters transparency and accountability while preventing land alienation, thereby preserving land as a shared resource for both current and future generations.

Participatory land governance hinges on the principles of African Communitarianism, which values collective decision-making through dialogue and consensus. This framework should be integrated into current land policies, ensuring communities are actively involved in land-related decisions, such as allocation and planning. For instance, any development project requiring communal land must prioritize meaningful consultations with the impacted communities, where compensation mechanisms are negotiated collectively instead of being imposed. Such inclusivity fosters trust between the government and citizens, ultimately aligning land development with the community's genuine needs and values.

Land grabbing poses a significant challenge in modern African land relations, often resulting in the displacement of rural communities by powerful domestic and foreign entities. The African Communitarian Perspective provides a compelling ethical critique against such actions, arguing that any land acquisition that compromises community dignity and survival is morally wrong, regardless of legal backing. It emphasizes that land is a collective inheritance rather than a mere commodity for profit. To address this issue, policies must enhance legal protections against forced displacement and ensure that land acquisition processes are

transparent, equitable, and centered around community needs, incorporating comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments that respect cultural and spiritual connections to the land. Furthermore, any necessary resettlement initiatives should focus on maintaining community cohesion, ensuring that families and social structures remain intact rather than fragmented

Sustainable land use in African Communitarianism fosters a deep connection between people and their environment, viewing land as a vital entity that serves current and future generations. This perspective aligns with modern environmental sustainability practices. To put this into action, policies should prioritize sustainable agriculture, forest and water resource protection, and the prevention of environmental harm from overuse. Strengthening community-based resource management allows locals to take charge of their environment, with initiatives like communal monitoring of forests and waterways effectively deterring illegal activities while leveraging local expertise and shared accountability, thus promoting intergenerational justice and ensuring the land's productivity for years to come.

Land conflicts are prevalent across numerous African communities, frequently stemming from issues such as inheritance, boundary disputes, and competing claims involving both local communities and external entities. The African Communitarian Perspective advocates for a restorative approach to resolving these conflicts, in contrast to a punitive mindset. The traditional justice systems found in Africa prioritize reconciliation and dialogue, aiming to mend relationships rather than impose legal penalties. When applied to land disputes, this approach calls for the integration of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods within formal land administration frameworks. Establishing mediation committees that include community elders, legal professionals, and government officials can facilitate conflict resolution in a way that respects cultural contexts. These committees should focus not just on establishing land ownership but also on renewing social cohesion and preventing future disputes. Implementing these strategies alleviates pressure on formal court systems, which are often slow and hard to access. Additionally, they resonate with local values that emphasize unity and mutual respect.

To successfully implement the African Communitarian Perspective, it is essential to weave it into formal institutional frameworks, necessitating reforms in land administration that balance statutory law with customary practices. Governments should create hybrid land governance systems that merge modern regulations with traditional communal values, while also ensuring that land officials receive training on indigenous land ethics and communal ownership. Additionally, enhancing anti-corruption strategies within land agencies is crucial to safeguard community resources from elite capture. Measures such as transparent land transactions, digitized land records, and community oversight can foster accountability.

Conclusion

The issue of land grabbing and the forced displacement of rural communities in Southeast Nigeria presents not only economic challenges but also serious ethical concerns. Land

represents more than just a resource; it is crucial to identity, culture, and livelihoods. Taking land without proper consultation or fair compensation raises questions of justice and human rights. Evidence shows that such actions have led to displacement, poverty, and the breakdown of social and cultural ties. Despite claims of economic benefits, the adverse effects on affected communities are often ignored. Ethical practices and communal values highlight the need for

a framework that prioritizes human dignity and collective well-being. Policies must focus on justice and fairness, encouraging collaboration among governments, investors, and local communities for transparent processes and equitable compensation. By integrating philosophical insights into land governance, we can better protect vulnerable populations, reduce conflict, and foster sustainable development in the region, thereby improving social stability and trust in land administration. The African communitarian philosophy therefore, urges a shift in land policy and practice to prioritize inclusiveness, fairness, and the collective good. It supports participatory decision-making, the acknowledgment of customary land rights, equitable compensation, sustainable development, and the reinforcement of traditional governance structures. Embedding these values into land management enables policymakers to tackle issues like land grabbing and forced displacement, while also safeguarding the social and ethical fabric of African communal societies.

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