

Vol.1, ISSUE 7, August 2019

# SPD Nextier

Security . Peace . Development

## NIGERIA: ENDING THE LAND WARS



Copyright © 2018  
 Nextier SPD  
 All Rights Reserved.

Published since 2018 by  
 Nextier SPD,  
 5, Kikuyu Close,  
 Off Nairobi Street,  
 Wuse 2, Abuja, Nigeria.

Design and Layout  
 Samson Iroko

The board and management  
 of Nextier encourages you  
 to please consider the  
 environment before printing.

This publication has been  
 designed to be read on a  
 digital device to minimize the  
 number of trees that are cut  
 down every year to produce  
 paper.

Produced in Nigeria



## CONTRIBUTORS

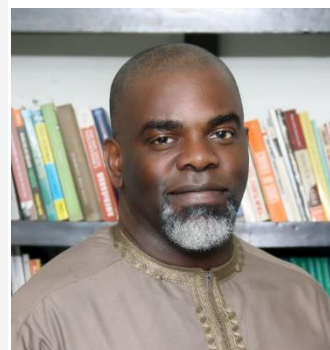
**Oarhe Osumah, PhD**  
*Consultant Associate*

He was educated at the Edo State University (now Ambrose Alli University), Ekpoma and the University of Benin, Benin City. He currently lectures in the Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma. He is published in reputable local and international journals in Africa, Asia, America and Europe. His major areas of research interest are governance, public policy, legislature, democracy, conflict management and security studies.



**NDUBUISI N. NWOKOLO, Ph.D**  
*Senior Policy and Research Lead*

Ndu is an expert in natural resources conflict and governance, security sector reform, building state capacity, etc. His most recent publication is "Consolidating or Corrupting the Peace? Power Elite and Post-conflict Peacebuilding in the Niger Delta, Nigeria" with Iro Aghedo (2018). Ndu is also a non-residential Research Fellow at the School of Government and Society, University of Birmingham.



**PATRICK O. OKIGBO III**  
*Founder/Principal Partner, Nextier*

Patrick provides strategic leadership on a range of governance issues to Federal and State government in Nigeria. He was part of the team that developed the "Niger Delta Action Plan" with support from UNDP. He was involved in the development of "The Buhari Plan" for the stabilisation and redevelopment of the North East region of Nigeria.

## Editor's Note

### PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSIONS

Welcome to the August 2019 edition of Nextier SPD Monthly publication. This magazine is designed to deepen our knowledge and insight on security, peace, and development issues in Nigeria. It brings to the fore thematic issues such as conflict, peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction, and security sector reforms (SSR), disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), violent deaths, state building, environmental violence and natural resources-fuelled violent conflicts.

Every month, this publication provides a step-by-step analysis of security and development issues using different narratives, research philosophies, methodologies and trajectories. The fundamental objective of the publication is to provide a platform for evidence-based and scholarly discussions of contemporary security issues facing Nigeria and other African countries in general. The publication provides evidence-driven research and proffers well-thought out policy recommendations. It is our desire that policymakers, practitioners, and development partners will use the ideas presented here to engage in discussions to improve their policies, programmes, projects, and operations.

This month's Nextier SPD Monthly examines the persistent violent conflicts over land and boundaries in Nigeria. Since pre-colonial era to the present, Nigeria suffers from relentless 'land wars' which have led to quantifiable loss of lives and properties. Unfortunately, no part of the country is insulated from this debacle. Relying on observation and desk research, the Monthly traces the origin, history and causes of some land wars in Nigeria factors which till date have sustained land and boundary linked violence in the country. With examination of costs, and state responses to the land wars; the essay argues that state responses are not only non- pre-emptive but has little confidence from warring parties. Subsequently, the article offers recommendations such as ADR, recreation of historical ties among communities, appointment of credible persons to peace committees, etc, as some measures for building peace among communities at war over land.



**NDUBUISI N. NWOKOLO, Ph.D**  
*Senior Policy Lead Nextier SPD*

August 2019



# Nigeria: Ending the Land Wars

Land in Nigeria are not only a factor of production with economic worth, but also has historical and ancestral values. These values as well as factors such as faulty colonial boundary demarcations and the new economic role of land introduced by colonial-capitalist domination, are some of the main enablers of violent conflicts over land. In addition, creation of more states and local councils by successive military regimes increased the boundary lines awareness, which further fuelled the war over land. Despite ligations, judicial inquiries and re-demarcation of disputed areas, land conflicts are on the increase. Therefore, practical measures to be taken in resolving the conflicts include pursuance of politics of inclusion, disarmament of warring communities, seeking of alternative dispute resolution, etc.

A photograph of a chain-link fence with a red sign that reads "VIOLATORS WILL BE SHOT! NO TRESPASSIN' SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGAIN!". The sign is made of a dark red material with white, distressed lettering. The fence is set against a background of dry, brownish ground and some sparse vegetation.

## Introduction

*Land is prone to drive various communal conflicts. However, there appears to be an increased focus on international boundary disputes where the internal one are prone to greater conflagration.*

**Land is prone to drive conflict.** As an asset class, it is pivotal to developmental processes and for the realisation of the basic needs of mankind in terms of farms (for food), minerals (for economic activities), buildings (for shelter), etc. Land is also tied closely to cultural identity. Hence, as such an active factor in livelihood and identity, delineation of land boundaries are froth with incendiary fodder.

**Land disputation has been at the root of various communal conflicts.** Land and boundary disputes have occurred from ancient periods of human development to pre-colonial times, through the partitioning of Africa by European imperialists, to post-Independence Africa as political and military rulers delineated administrative territories. The situation has been largely the same across the world with international and internal boundary conflicts between North Korea and South Korea, India and China, India and Pakistan, Somalia and Ethiopia, Israel and Arab neighbours, etc. (Palmer and Palmer, 2007).

**There appears to be more focus on international boundaries than on internal ones.** The furore and near all-out war between Nigeria and Cameroun over the Bakassi Peninsula is one of the reasons for this increased awareness of the significance of common borders in determining sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighbouring countries.



**There is a risk that a neglect of internal land and boundary disputes can trigger an even greater conflagration.** This edition of **NEXTIER SPD POLICY MONTHLY** profiles boundary and land-related conflicts across Nigeria, examines extant strategies that have been adopted to address the disputes and reasons for their limited success with a view to recommending more measures needed to address them.



## Theorising Terra-Disputes in Nigeria

*Land and boundary disputes abound in Nigeria and both have rich historical context. Even more contemporary efforts to create more states and local government areas have exacerbated conflicts. Socio-cultural factors, such as the need for one to be buried in one's ancestral land, have increased conflict over access to land.*

### **Theoretically, land disputes are different from boundary**

**disputes.** Land dispute denotes disagreement by two or more communities having contiguous territories over the right to ownership of a body of land.

Boundary dispute, on the other hand, is a contestation between political or autonomous units having a similar measure of independence. These could be sovereign states in the context of international relations; politico-administrative units like states, districts, councils and communities; or ethnic groups in the context of a sovereign state.

**All boundaries are not equally prone to conflict.** The boundaries with the potential to

bestow economic or strategic advantages (such as useful natural and material resources) are the ones that are more prone to trigger conflicts. Demarcations or adjustment of boundaries may not stem such disputes but have significant potential of diminishing their significance.

There is a historical context to boundary conflicts in Nigeria. Prior to colonialism, Nigeria, as it is known today, was a loose collection of kingdoms, empires and communities whose boundaries were agreed upon by landmarks mostly natural features such as rivers, trees and mountains. These pre-colonial boundaries were not permanent and had the potential to trigger

conflicts (Uwakwe, 2018). Indeed, land and boundary problems were the key drivers of some of the pre-colonial communal and tribal wars.

**The colonialists helped exacerbate the conflicts.** In an effort to advance their interests, European merchants, and later the colonisers, provided military, legal and political support to their favoured communities to wage territorial wars against their adversaries. According to Ibeanu (2003), through the courts and self-interested district officers, colonialists transferred territories to their favoured communities. These colonialists also acquired plots of land at border areas between communities for trading, religious and administrative infrastructure. With their exit at independence, some of these land have become the sources of land conflicts.

**A new economy introduced by the colonialists also worsened land conflicts in Nigeria.**

Colonial influence aided urban

population growth which necessitated the need for increased food production by peasants. In the same vein, replacement of slave trade with legitimate trade led to an increased demand for more unused land for cultivation of cash crops. This resulted in increased contestation between residents in contiguous communities.

Land and boundary conflicts escalated in post-colonial Nigeria. This factor was driven mainly by the high expectation and self-assertion that heralds a nation's political independence from colonial rule. According to Ibeanu (2003), economic interest of various classes escalated with privation and frustration with the post-colonial economy, persistence of communal sentiments, frequent alterations of boundaries, and just the growing importance of land as it is largely of a finite supply.

Successive military administrations in Nigeria have



also exacerbated the conflicts through the creation of states and local government areas. These changes brought increased awareness and focus on boundary lines. Between 1984 to 1999, in that last phase of military governments that precedes the restoration of democracy, 17 states and over 300 local government councils were arbitrarily created in Nigeria. Each of these new territories meant the re-adjustment of existing local

boundaries and opportunities for conflict.

Land is still the predominant eternal resting place and many Nigerians still wish for their final abode to be in their ancestral land. Most Nigerians expect to own a home in their villages. Even when they migrate to the cities to live and work, the expectation is that their remains, upon death, would be returned to their country homes for burial.







On the other hand, the intra-state conflicts often take the forms of inter-communal or inter-ethnic conflicts. The key actors are typically youths, women, local chiefs and the elite. This form of dispute often become violent with resort to armed conflict. Most often negotiated settlements are disregarded as unacceptable by a losing party. The prominent intra-state or inter-communal or ethnic conflicts include Ilaje-Ijaw Arogbo conflict in Ondo State (1998/1999), the conflict in Ife and Modakeke areas of Osun State (2000-2001), Itsekiri-Urhobo conflict (in the 2000s), conflict in Aguleri and Umuleri areas of Anambra State (1995, 1999-2000); and Ezza and Ezillo conflict in Ebonyi state which had lasted over five decades with the most recent escalation of hostilities occurring in February 2010, 2014 and 2015.

Certain boundary conflicts assume the form of both inter-state and inter-communal conflicts. The key actors in these types of conflicts are youths, women, traditional rulers and politicians. These conflicts escalate into physical violence involving the use of sophisticated small and light weapons and engender destruction of property and human fatalities. These conflicts are exemplified by the boundary issues between Umuode and Orukwu communities in Enugu state; Ikwuano and Osisioma in Abia state; land ownership dispute between Ekepedo in Edo state and Ogori in Kogi state in 2003; as well as the boundary dispute between Ngbo community in Enugu state and Agila community in Benue state.



## Costs of Disputes

*Both land and boundary disputes result in significant costs to all involved. These include loss of lives and properties, internal displacements, various forms of violence against the populations, etc.*

**Land and boundary conflicts in Nigeria are too costly.** They spawn catastrophic effects in terms of loss of lives, investments, internal displacement, tension and anxiety, mutual distrust and suspicion, depression and psychological trauma. For instance, the Ife-Modakeke conflict in the year 2000 claimed over 2,000 lives (Ojo, 2006). In the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in Anambra State in 1999 and the Ilaje versus Ijaw Arogbo conflict in Ondo State in 1998/1999 over 1,000 people were killed respectively (Ojo, 2006). Clashes between Usumutung and Ediba communities in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River state resulted in the death of about fifteen people. Similarly, the clash between Anakpa and Unna Enin communities of Cross River state in August 2016 resulted death of about fifteen people.

and and boundary disputes result in major population displacements. The Ife-Modakeke conflict led to the displacement of over 10,000 persons. Similarly, in the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict, Ohaneze Ndigbo the pan-Igbo association claimed that over 500,000 persons were internally displaced (Ojo, 2006). No fewer than 180,000 people from 68 communities were displaced in the Ilaje-Ijaw Arogbo conflict (Ojo, 2006). These disputes result in depression and psychological trauma. For example, the Itsekiri versus Urhobo conflict in Delta state resulted in starvation, sexual violence against women and young girls, even unto death (Eguavoen, 2003).

Valuable assets and investments are lost in these conflicts. According to Ojo (2006), the conflict between Itsekiri and

Urhobo in Warri, Delta State is estimated to have led to the loss of over 30 billion naira both in oil revenue and valuable property. The conflict between the Ilaje and

Ijaw Arogbo resulted in the destruction of 45 communities with more than 13,000 residential buildings razed down (Ojo, 2006).





## State Responses to the Disputes

*The governments, both at the federal and state levels, have employed various responses to achieve peace: deployment of security force, set up of Panels of Inquiry, arbitration and court intervention, use of the local populations to seek peace. Neither of these approaches have delivered a permanent solution.*

**The conflicts elicit different types of responses from the government and other stakeholders.** Both the federal and state governments typically respond with a deployment of security operatives in the wake of any such violence with the core objective being to restore peace. Judicial Commissions of Inquiry are typically established to investigate the immediate and remote causes of the conflicts while peace talks are initiated to reconcile the warring parties. In some cases, there are boundary re-demarcation or readjustments by the National Boundary Commission. In some cases, the courts are invited to adjudicate a resolution. This was the case in all the famous cases such as the conflicts between Ilaje and Ijaw

Arogbo communities in Ondo State in 1999, the Ezza and Ezillo communities in Ebonyi state in 2008, and 2014, and the clashes between Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja in Delta State in February 2016.

**Although temporary restraint may be achieved, lasting peace is still an illusion in many of the conflicts.** At best, the intervention of the security operatives achieves the peace of the graveyard. For example, in the Ilaje versus Ijaw Arogbo conflict, on September 24, 1999, Federal Government of Nigeria deployed security operatives to occupy all the locations that served as the connecting links between the two ethnic groups which led to a ceasefire (Ayoyo, 2015). The tenuous peace



typically falls apart as the security operatives are relocated to any theatre of conflict. In some cases, warring parties use the lull in the conflict to re-arm for the re-start of the conflict. In some cases, fully re-armed with sophisticated weapon, the community may overrun the security operatives. In the Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja dispute, the disputing parties often overwhelm the police due to their possession of sophisticated weapons.

**Peace meetings and panels of inquiry are usually organised to facilitate peace but they typically fail to produce a White Paper.** For instance, in the wake of the Ogbe-Ijoh and Aladja violent clashes several committees and peace talks were set up including the Justice Dan Azinge Judicial Panel of Enquiry, the Frank Nwaulu Judicial Panel of 2009, the Abednego Ekoku Panel of 2016, and the March 24, 2016 meeting with the Delta State governor, Ifeanyi Okowa. None of these

panels of inquiry and peace talks produced any White papers thus creating the impression with both warring parties that the state government was only playing politics with the resolution of the conflict. The peace-talk between the state governor and the representatives of the two warring communities on March 24, 2016 broke down mid-stream for the lack of trust, suspicion and allegation of partiality against the government in resolving the conflict. Similarly, in the aged-long Aguleri-Umuleri conflict, Anambra state government set up two Commissions of Inquiry; the Justice Moses Nweje led five-man Judicial Commission of Inquiry in 1995 and the Justice Emmanuel Araka Commission in 1999. Both Commissions shared similar mandates to investigate the root cause of the conflict and to make recommendations. The composition of the Nweje Judicial Commission and the White paper released based on the report of the Commission were contested

as biased and as such could not be implemented. The report of Araka Commission of 1999 on the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict did not restore peace (Ibeanu, 2003). Similarly, in the boundary dispute between Ngbo Community (in Ebonyi state) and Agila Community (in Benue state), a Joint Meeting between the two state governments with the National Boundary Commission was held. This has however not resulted in the resolution of the dispute.

**The government has, in some cases, resorted to the use of peace summits organised by key stakeholders in the warring communities.** This has recorded mixed results. For instance, in the 2015 to 2016 dispute between Ishiagu community (in Ebonyi state) and Umulokpa (in Abia state), both state governments, intervened through joint missions including the National Boundary Commission, government security agencies, and traditional

institutions. In 2007, Government of Ondo state used a similar tact by organising a National Youth Peace Summit in conjunction with the Presidential Youth Initiative and the Community Development Committees. The meetings were held at Naval Base in Igbokoda (as a subtle show of force by the government). Representatives were drawn from both Arogbo Ijaw and Ilaje communities. At the end, all participants pledged to shun violence and to peacefully co-exist (Ayoyo, 2015).

**The Federal government has sought to resolve land and boundary disputes in the country through demarcation.** Owing to the multiple boundary conflicts across Nigeria, the Murtala/Obasanjo regime constituted the Justice Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission in 1976 to come up with a more permanent solution to the boundary disputes. Similarly, the mandate of the National Boundary Commission is to address

boundary disputes wherever they occur in Nigeria. Despite the Commission's mandate, about 150 active border disputes resulting from non-delimitation of boundaries exist within and between states across Nigeria. Petitions and protest by affected communities seeking redress (for lost assets such as farmland resulting from the creation of new administrative units) were either ignored or refused. Some of these communities have resorted to violence as a solution. Indeed, even in some of the cases where the Commission has intervened, it was faulted on the ground of being unscientific, arbitrary and biased in its resolutions. According to Ibeanu (2003), Federal government boundary adjustment of 1985 was seen as biased and a source of further tensions. For instance, the local boundary readjustments generated tension between Ikot Offiong community (in Akwa Ibom state) and Odukpani Local Council (in Cross River state).

**Government's efforts to respond to land and boundary disputes have also manifested in litigations through the courts.**

Interventions by the law court were sought twice in the conflicts between Rivers and Bayelsa States over oil wells, the inter-communal land disputes between Ezza and Ezillo in 1955, the inter-communal land dispute between Aguleri and Umuleri (twelve times within over 60 years between 1920-1984), and the land ownership tussle between the Ijaws and Binis in Ovia North East, Edo State (four times within 13 years, 1970-1983) (Ibeanu, 2003). Such interventions through the law court have not helped to resolve these conflicts.

**Despite the decisions of the court, the conflicts persist.**

Litigation is more interested in enforcing legal rights than in protecting the interests of parties involved (Oni-Ojo and Roland-Otaru, 2013). In most cases, legal remedy has been tortuous,



technical, expensive, emotionally draining and unpredictable. The court decision may leave the victorious party jubilant while it leaves permanent scars on the

minds of the losing party. Rather than a solution, court resolutions may sow the seed of new enmity and foster hostility among the parties in future.

## Reasons for the Failures

*Despite various forms of state responses to curtail land related violent conflicts, such violence is on the increase. Some of the reasons why these interventions have failed, include, the intent to deliver victory to one party rather than build consensus between warring parties; being used as remediation rather than precautionary tool; and interventions are not designed as sustainable peace tools but rather efforts at managing the immediate crisis.*



## Stemming the Disputes

*Given the rising tides of violent conflicts associated to land disputes and boundary contestation in Nigeria, efforts such as disarmament of warring communities, inclusive programmes, the use of alternative dispute resolution(ADR), appointment of credible persons accepted by all stakeholders to head panels and peace committees and re-building old long relationship among waring parities, will offer sustainable panacea to the menace*

Given the challenges associated with efforts of government at the federal and state levels to curtail the array of land and boundary disputes across Nigeria, more measures are needed.

**Disarmament should be the first response.** Government should vigorously pursue disarmament as the availability of small and light weapons in the hands of warring parties emboldens them to continue violent campaign as solution to their disagreements. Many of these violent conflicts take place in rural and agrarian communities. Considering that many of such communities are with functional traditional institutions, government should make such traditional authorities to

work with the security agencies in mopping up the arms or face harsh consequences.

**Focus on inclusion.** The recurring conflicts among groups have been largely sustained by a vast majority of the excluded population in the distribution of national wealth. These excluded people are willing to partake in violence as it offers them the opportunity to loot public and private property, thus they need to be effectively incorporated in the distribution of national wealth. Interventions like building of communal centres and infrastructures on such contested land will wield the violence.

### **Seek alternative dispute.**

Realising that the institutional and legal mechanisms adopted so far have yielded only graveyard peace because they have essentially produced win-lose scenario, adoption and strengthening of traditional and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms which can guarantee a win-win scenario becomes imperative.

Engagements which tries to assuage the position of the parties should be developed. This should encourage the parties to take non- legal means and find solutions that accommodates everyone.

**Come to equity with clean hands.** Owing to the trust deficit in the processes government has been responding to land and boundary disputes, government

needs to redeem itself through display of openness and neutrality in handling land and boundary disputes. Members appointed to such government inquiry panel, must be men and women whom both parties trust, and who are with no hidden interest in the resolution.

**Evidence-based resolutions:** An effective collaboration between the state government and the National Boundary Commission in clearly delineating the contentious boundaries among communities by using local knowledge is needed. Considering that many of the parties are kith and kin, helping these communities in rebuilding their shared old and ancestry history will help in building sustainable peace.



## References

- Ayoyo, D.D (2015). “A Sociological Post-Mortem Of Issues In The Arogbo Ijaw-Ilaje Conflict: An Agenda for Peace”, *European Scientific Journal*, 11 (17), 319-336
- Eguavoen, A. (2003). “Urhobo-Itsekiri Conflict in Delta State” in T.A. Imobighe (ed.) *Civil Society and Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, pp.223-255
- Ibeanu, O. (2003). “Aguleri – Umuleri Conflict in Anambra State” in T.A. Imobighe (ed.) *Civil Society and Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, pp.167-222
- Israel, U.A.E, Udoh, E.M and Okpalaeke, P.C. (2017). “Boundary Disputes and Its Implications on Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria: The Annang-Igbo Experience, 1987-2015”, *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research*, 3 (12), pp.30-47
- Ojo, E. (2006). “Mechanisms for Conflict Management in Plural and Divided Societies: The Nigerian Experience”, *French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA)*, Nigeria, Special Research Issue, vol. 2, pp. 19-39
- Oni-Ojo, E.E. and Roland-Otaru, C. (2013). “Alternative Dispute Resolution Strategies for Sustainable Development in Africa: insights from Nigeria”, *Journal of Management and Entrepreneurial Development* 3(1), pp. 37-54,
- Palmer, N.D. and Palmer, G. (2007). *International Relations (Third Revised Edition)*. Delhi: A.I.T.B.S Publishers
- Uwakwe, S.I. (2018). “An Exploratory Assessment of Interstate Boundary Disputes in Nigeria”, *International Journal of African and Asian Studies*, vol. 46, pp.21-27



# Nextier<sup>SPD</sup>

Security . Peace . Development

[info@nextierspd.com](mailto:info@nextierspd.com), +234 701 002 7301  
[www.nextierspd.com](http://www.nextierspd.com)