

Effective Policy and Enforcement for Resolving Atrocities/Conflicts Enabled by Landed Property Ownership in Nigeria

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Abstract—This thesis examines the persistent rise of land-related conflicts and associated criminal activities in Nigeria, tracing their roots to historical, cultural, administrative, and governance-related inadequacies in the management of landed property. Land, traditionally communally owned and essential for livelihood, has evolved into a highly contested asset due to population growth, modernization, and weak implementation of the Land Use Act. The study highlights how ineffective administration, corruption, poor enforcement of regulations, and conflicting customary and statutory land rights have created conditions enabling violence, territorial claims, extortion, communal clashes, and other atrocities across the country.

Materials and Methods: The research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in criminological theory, supported by documentary analysis, non-participant observation, and unstructured interviews. Data were sourced through long-term observational studies of land-related activities in communities, motor parks, markets, land registries, and informal settlements across Nigeria. A combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal designs enabled the researcher to observe patterns, behaviours, and criminal tendencies linked to land ownership struggles. Content analysis was used to interpret data within the theoretical framework of causes of crime—including cultural, economic, psychological, and environmental determinants.

Results and Discussion: Findings reveal those inadequacies in land administration—such as corrupt allocation practices, weak enforcement of land regulations, multiple sales of land, extortion by traditional actors (e.g., “omo-onile”), unregulated territorial control, and government-enabled demolitions—have significantly fueled criminal activities. These include communal clashes, armed conflicts, thuggery, property destruction, kidnapping, territorial cultism, and conflict between farmers and herdsmen. The study establishes that

such crimes persist largely because of institutional weaknesses, inconsistent policies, and failure to implement culturally sensitive, transparent systems of land governance.

Conclusion: The study concludes that strengthening policy enforcement, enhancing governance structures, and implementing culturally aligned regulatory frameworks are essential to reducing land-related atrocities. Effective land administration and accountability at all levels will help curb crime, promote peace, and support sustainable national development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Land has historically played a central role in human existence, serving as the foundation for settlement, agriculture, commerce, and social organisation. From ancient civilizations to modern societies, ownership and control of land have shaped political power, economic development, and territorial identity. In Nigeria, the evolution of land ownership systems—from indigenous communal tenure to colonial land ordinances and the contemporary Land Use Act of 1978—has created a complex governance structure where statutory authority often conflicts with customary practices. Land, originally intended to support basic life functions, has increasingly become a source of economic power and, consequently, a trigger for conflicts, corruption, and criminal activities.

Landed Property refers to immovable real estate, including land and structures on it, held by individuals, families, communities, or the state. Land Administration encompasses the processes of land allocation, documentation, valuation, rent collection, registration, and dispute resolution. Atrocities/Conflicts refer to hostile or criminal acts arising from disagreements over ownership, access, or control of land. Criminogenic Factors describe social, economic, or institutional conditions that enable or promote criminal behaviour.

Extensive studies have addressed land tenure systems, administrative weaknesses, and corruption in Nigeria's land governance. Scholars such as Agboola & Oshio, Lamond et al., Owoeye, and Abada & Omeh highlight recurrent problems including inadequate enforcement of land regulations, the influence of customary practices, land grabbing by elites, and the disruptive role of informal actors (e.g., omo-onile). Studies also document the linkage between land scarcity, population growth, farmer–herder conflicts, and communal clashes across West Africa. However, these works largely focus on administrative inefficiencies or isolated conflict types without fully explaining how systemic inadequacies in land governance enable broader categories of crime, including extortion, territorial cultism, political thuggery, organised violence, and abuse of state authority.

Despite robust discussions on land reform and conflict in Nigeria, limited research has explored the criminological dimension—specifically how poor implementation, weak enforcement, corrupt bureaucratic practices, and governance failures collectively enable diverse crime activities to flourish through land-related processes. This gap leaves policymakers without a comprehensive

understanding of the root causes feeding criminality linked to territorial claims and land exploitation.

This research provides an integrated analysis showing that inadequacies in land administration directly foster multiple forms of crime and atrocities. It systematically identifies the spectrum of criminal activities tied to land struggles, highlights institutional weaknesses, and demonstrates how these factors intersect with socio-economic, cultural, and psychological determinants of crime. The study offers a framework for understanding land-related criminality through both historical and criminological lenses.

The primary objective is to examine how ineffective land administration and governance frameworks in Nigeria contribute to the prevalence of conflicts, atrocities, and criminal practices. The research aims to:

1. Establish the connection between administrative lapses in land governance and emerging criminal patterns.
2. Identify categories of land-enabled crime and explain the mechanisms through which they persist.
3. Provide evidence-based recommendations for policy reforms that promote fairness, transparency, and culturally aligned land management.
4. Strengthen criminological understanding of land-related conflicts for future academic and policy applications.

The study focuses on Nigeria's land governance system, spanning statutory, customary, and informal practices. It covers administrative processes (allocation, documentation, rent/tax collection) and criminal activities associated with land disputes, territorial claims, and governance failures. Data are drawn from non-participant observations, unstructured interviews, and documentary analysis covering communities, motor parks, land registries, and other land-related environments.

Time-bound observational access, reliance on qualitative data, the sensitivity of land-related disputes, and incomplete documentation of informal land practices poses limitations. Cultural biases, political influences, and non-disclosure by key actors also constrain the depth of data obtainable. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the validity of the study's conclusions but instead provide direction for future research.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Materials Used in the Study

Although the study did not involve laboratory experiments, it relied on a structured set of qualitative research materials to gather and interpret real-world evidence on land administration and crime patterns. These included:

- Field notebooks and journals for documenting observations during community visits, motor parks, land registries, and administrative offices.

- Audio-recording devices for capturing unstructured interview responses where permitted.
- Official land documents such as Certificates of Occupancy, land transfer agreements, maps, and public notices.
- Legislative and policy documents, including the Land Use Act (1978) and state-level land administration regulations.
- Secondary materials such as academic articles, government reports, archived cases, and documented incidents of land-related crimes.
- Digital tools: Laptops, document scanners, secure cloud folders for storing data, and word-processing applications for coding and analysis.

2. Step-by-Step Research Procedure

Step 1: Preliminary Field Mapping

The researcher began by identifying sensitive land-related activity zones such as land registries, informal settlement areas, motor parks, toll gates, and community boundaries. These locations were selected because they commonly exhibit disputes, extortion, territorial control, or corrupt practices.

Step 2: Non-Participant Observation

Over several months, the researcher visited these locations and quietly observed:

- Interactions between land agents, community members, and officials
- Dispute-handling practices
- Informal fee collection, extortion patterns, and territorial dominance
- Visible behavioural patterns linked to land conflicts

Observations were recorded daily in field journals.

Step 3: Unstructured Interviews

The researcher conducted spontaneous and unstructured interviews with individuals such as local leaders, land buyers, motor-park executives, community vigilante groups, and affected families. This allowed respondents to freely share experiences, perceptions, and grievances. Participation was voluntary and confidential.

Step 4: Documentary Review

Relevant documents—including court rulings, land regulations, policy papers, and incident reports—were reviewed to complement field data and historicise the persistent nature of land-related conflicts.

Step 5: Longitudinal Tracking

Certain communities and activity points were revisited over long periods to observe recurring crime patterns, shifts in territorial control, and ongoing administrative weaknesses.

Step 6: Data Consolidation and Coding

Field notes, interviews, and documents were transcribed and organised into thematic categories reflecting criminological determinants (cultural, environmental, economic, psychological, and institutional).

3. Tools and Instruments Used for Data Analysis

The study employed a combination of analytical tools commonly used in qualitative criminological research:

- Content Analysis Framework for interpreting narrative accounts, policy texts, and field observations.
- Thematic Coding Sheets to group data into meaningful themes such as corruption, extortion, territorial behaviour, governance failures, and socio-economic triggers.
- Descriptive Analysis Charts to highlight frequency and pattern of observed behaviours.
- Criminological Theory Mapping aligning field evidence with theories such as social learning, strain theory, opportunity theory, and institutional failure theory.
- Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Comparison Tools used to compare patterns across different locations and over time.

4. Ensuring Reliability and Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance reliability and credibility, the following methods were applied:

- Triangulation: Combining observations, interviews, and documents strengthened the consistency of findings.
- Prolonged Engagement: Spending extended periods in the field reduced observer bias and captured authentic behaviours.
- Member Checking: Some interviewees were contacted again to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.
- Audit Trail: All field notes, documents, and coded files were dated, stored securely, and traceable.
- Reflexivity: The researcher maintained reflective notes to minimise personal bias during interpretation.
- Consistency in Observation: Standard observation templates were used across all locations to ensure uniform data recording.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Data Overview (With Suggested Visuals and Illustrations)

The data collected through non-participant observation, unstructured interviews, and documentary reviews revealed clear and recurring patterns in how weaknesses in land administration contribute to criminal behaviour and conflict in Nigeria. Although the study is qualitative, the data can be visually represented for clarity:

- Figure 1: Frequency of Land-Related Conflict Types Observed Across Study Locations
(A bar chart could illustrate counts of observed crime types such as extortion, territorial clashes, demolition-induced displacement, farmer–herder conflicts, and motor-park violence.)
- Figure 2: Actors Involved in Land-Enabled Crime
(A pie chart showing the relative presence of actors such as community youths, traditional land custodians, motor-park unions, informal land agents, government officials, and displaced persons.)
- Figure 3: Thematic Map of Criminogenic Factors
(A thematic diagram linking observed criminal activities to factors such as corruption, weak enforcement, economic pressure, and social learning.)
- Table 1: Summary of Observed Incidents and Their Administrative Root Causes
(A qualitative summary table listing cases of demolition, extortion points, illegal rent collection, or communal clashes and mapping each case to an identified governance failure.)

2. Results – Explanation of the Data

Recurring Patterns of Crime

Across the field sites, the researcher documented several categories of land-enabled crimes. These included:

- Illegal fees and extortion by informal land actors (e.g., *omo-onile* groups).
- Forceful evictions and demolition of properties by state actors, often without due process, leaving thousands homeless.
- Territorial control and violence within motor parks, reflecting competition for revenue and influence.
- Community clashes over inherited parcels of land.
- Violent confrontations between farmers and herdsmen over access to grazing land.

Administrative Root Causes

Data revealed that almost every conflict or crime category had roots in:

- Poor enforcement of land policies
- Corruption in allocation and documentation
- Absence of transparent land records
- Conflicting statutory and customary land rights
- Lack of accountability among government officials

Impact on Communities

Communities affected by government-ordered demolitions showed a sharp rise in street hawking, homelessness, and theft, demonstrating how administrative decisions can unintentionally fuel criminality.

Interviews with victims emphasized feelings of injustice, hopelessness, and deep resentment towards the state, further worsening community–government relations.

3. Discussion – Interpretation of Findings in the Research Context

The results confirm that land is far more than an economic asset in Nigeria—it is a gateway to power, identity, and survival. When governance systems fail to ensure fair and transparent administration, land becomes a fertile ground for criminal exploitation.

Land Administration as a Criminogenic Structure

The findings show that inadequacies in land management do not merely “allow room” for crime—they actively *shape and reinforce* criminal behaviour.

For example:

- Extortion thrives where land documentation is inconsistent or inaccessible.
- Territorial cultism flourishes in institutions where spatial control is poorly regulated.
- Farmer–herder conflicts escalate in regions lacking clear land demarcation and enforcement.
- Government demolitions without compensation create socio-economic vulnerability that pushes displaced individuals toward survival-driven crime.

Alignment with Criminological Theory

These results align strongly with:

- Social Learning Theory: Communities normalize criminal behaviour when they see land agents or officials benefit from illegal activities.
- Strain Theory: Economic pressure and lack of access to legitimate land rights push individuals toward violent or illegal land acquisition.
- Opportunity Theory: Weak enforcement creates openings for groups to seize land, collect illegal rents, or operate heavily controlled territories.
- Institutional Failure Theory: Corrupt governance structures become enablers rather than regulators of criminality.

Contribution to Research Gap

While previous studies described land conflicts and administrative inconsistencies, they did not fully connect these issues to broader criminal activities. This study bridges that gap by showing that land administration failure is a *multi-layered enabler* of crime—from high-level corruption to grassroots violence.

Implications

The discussion highlights an urgent need for:

- Transparent land registration
- Culturally sensitive land reforms
- Strong enforcement mechanisms

- Protection of vulnerable populations
- Behavioural and criminological training for land administrators

These findings offer policymakers a lens for understanding not just “what” crimes occur but “why” they systematically thrive.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research set out to understand how weaknesses in Nigeria’s land administration system contribute to the rise and persistence of land-related conflicts, criminal activities, and human suffering. The primary objective was to uncover the deeper criminological drivers behind these issues and demonstrate how poor governance, corruption, and inconsistent policies transform land—a basic human asset—into a catalyst for violence, exploitation, and social instability.

Review of Key Findings

The study revealed that the origins of land-related atrocities are deeply rooted in historical governance failures, conflicting customary and statutory land rights, and the ineffective implementation of the Land Use Act of 1978. Non-participant observations and unstructured interviews conducted across multiple locations showed recurring patterns of extortion, illegal fees, territorial domination, forced evictions, and community clashes. These acts were consistently linked to:

- Corrupt allocation processes and poor documentation
- Weak enforcement of land regulations
- Conflicting land ownership systems
- Exploitation by informal actors (e.g., *omo-onile*)
- Politicisation of land administration
- Abuse of authority during demolitions and forced displacement

The study further uncovered how government actions—such as unannounced demolitions—can unintentionally fuel criminality by pushing displaced individuals into survival-driven activities, heightening insecurity, and creating mistrust between citizens and the state.

Implications and Practical Applications

The findings underscore that land administration in Nigeria is not merely an administrative activity but a *criminogenic structure* capable of shaping societal behaviour. Recognizing this reality has wide-ranging implications:

- For policymakers, it highlights the urgent need for transparent reforms and culturally sensitive land governance frameworks.
- For criminologists, it demonstrates how institutional failures create the conditions for organised crime, extortion networks, and violent territoriality.
- For communities, it provides clarity on why conflicts persist, offering a path toward fairer, more accountable systems.

- For development planners, it shows that sustainable growth is impossible without secure, predictable, and just land management.

Recommendations for the Future

Based on the evidence, several key actions are recommended:

1. Strengthen enforcement mechanisms by empowering land agencies with transparent digital systems that reduce opportunities for corruption and manipulation.
2. Harmonise customary and statutory land laws to eliminate overlapping ownership claims and reduce community-level conflicts.
3. Implement community-inclusive land governance that involves local leaders, vulnerable groups, and civil society in meaningful decision-making.
4. Introduce criminological and behavioural training for land administration officials to increase awareness of how their decisions influence crime patterns.
5. Establish an independent land oversight body to monitor demolitions, allocation processes, and dispute resolutions.
6. Promote fair compensation and rehabilitation for individuals displaced by government actions to prevent desperate, crime-driven survival behaviours.
7. Encourage longitudinal research on land crimes, territoriality, and governance gaps to support evidence-based policymaking.

Final Reflection

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that land-related atrocities in Nigeria are not isolated incidents—they are symptoms of deeper governance and structural failures. By addressing these weaknesses with transparency, accountability, and cultural sensitivity, Nigeria can reduce crime, strengthen community trust, and create a more just and stable society. This research, therefore, contributes a vital criminological lens for understanding and resolving one of the country's most deeply rooted challenges.

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