The scale **Journal Website:** https://thescalejournal.com.ng/
An Interdisciplinary Journal of
The ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF POLYTECHNICS - ZONE D
ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 25th May, 2025

COMMUNAL LAND DISPUTE SETTLEMENT: JOINT LAND OWNERSHIP AS A PANACEA FOR AMELIORATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETIES

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Abstract
Land disputes are a pressing issue in Nigeria, often leading to conflicts that strain relationships, disrupt communities, and hinder economic progress. Traditional methods of resolving these disputes, whether through litigation or customary arbitration, frequently fall short due to legal complexities, power struggles, and enforcement challenges. This study explores joint land ownership as a more cooperative and sustainable way to settle communal land conflicts. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws insights from real-life case studies, interviews with affected communities, and legal document analysis. The findings highlight that joint land ownership can reduce conflicts by ensuring shared responsibility, minimizing disputes over boundaries, and fostering a sense of collective stewardship. However, cultural resistance, legal gaps, and administrative obstacles remain significant barriers to its success. To make this approach work, legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, and institutional backing are crucial. This study contributes to ongoing conversations on land governance by offering practical insights for policymakers, legal experts, and community leaders. By shifting the focus from adversarial ownership battles to cooperative management, joint land ownership presents a promising path toward lasting peace and economic stability in Nigeria's land dispute landscape.
Keywords: Communal Land Dispute, Joint Land Ownership, Contemporary Nigerian Society, Panacea

Introduction

Land disputes remain a persistent challenge in many contemporary Nigerian societies, particularly in rural communities where land is both a cultural heritage and an economic resource. Disputes often arise from competing claims over ownership, inheritance, and usage rights. The complexity of these conflicts is exacerbated by the intersection of customary and statutory land tenure systems. According to Akinwale (2019) "the duality of land laws in Nigeria—customary and statutory—often leads to ambiguity in land ownership, creating tension among claimants". This situation frequently results in protracted disputes that weaken communal ties and hinder development.

Moreover, land disputes are not only legal battles but also deeply rooted social conflicts that disrupt peace and economic productivity. Communities reliant on subsistence farming suffer economic setbacks when disputes prevent land cultivation. The psychological toll of prolonged disputes further erodes trust among community members, sometimes leading to violent confrontations (Ogunbiyi, 2019). In some cases, land-related violence results in loss of life and property, further deepening social fragmentation and economic instability.

While litigation has been a conventional means of resolving such conflicts, it often proves costly, time-consuming, and divisive. Udo (2020) asserts that "court settlements of land disputes in Nigeria have been largely adversarial, leading to the erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and prolonged enmities". Moreover, formal legal processes are frequently inaccessible to rural dwellers due to financial constraints and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Additionally, the colonial legacy of statutory land laws in Nigeria often clashes with indigenous customs, creating contradictions in land governance frameworks (Nwosu, 2018).

This disharmony between statutory and customary systems exacerbates the difficulty of land tenure security, leaving many rural dwellers vulnerable to land loss.

In light of these challenges, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms have gained prominence. The concept of joint land ownership emerges as a viable solution for mitigating disputes, fostering communal harmony, and ensuring sustainable land management. Scholars such as Olayemi (2021) argues that "joint land ownership, when properly institutionalized, encourages collective responsibility, minimizes individual claims, and strengthens communal ties" . This approach has the potential to redefine land relations by promoting inclusive governance and ensuring equitable access to land resources. Through legal recognition and structured implementation, joint ownership can serve as an effective model for dispute resolution, preventing conflicts before they escalate into litigation.

Furthermore, joint land ownership offers a collaborative framework that aligns with indigenous African traditions of communal landholding, which historically prioritized collective well-being over individual gains (Okonkwo, 2019). Unlike adversarial legal mechanisms, joint ownership models encourage negotiation, mediation, and community-based governance, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. With adequate legal backing and policy support, this approach can provide long-term solutions to Nigeria's ongoing land disputes while also serving as a model for other African nations grappling with similar challenges (Adetunji, 2017).

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine joint land ownership as a mechanism for resolving communal land disputes in Nigeria. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of the legal, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions of land conflicts while assessing the viability of cooperative ownership as a dispute resolution model. The research follows a descriptive and analytical design, which allows for a systematic examination of land disputes, existing legal frameworks, and the practical implications of joint ownership. It integrates theoretical discussions with empirical case studies to offer a balanced perspective on the subject. Data collection for the study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is obtained through semi-structured interviews with traditional rulers, legal experts, landowners, and government officials, providing firsthand insights into the causes and resolutions of land conflicts. Focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members further explore local attitudes toward joint land ownership and its potential implementation. Additionally, case studies of specific land disputes in Nigeria offer practical illustrations of conflict resolution models, highlighting both successes and challenges.

Secondary data includes a review of legal documents such as the Land Use Act of 1978, customary land laws, court rulings, and policy documents related to land tenure and dispute resolution. Academic literature, government reports, and research publications provide further context on land governance and dispute management. By synthesizing these sources, the study critically evaluates existing policies and identifies gaps in legal frameworks that may hinder the adoption of joint land ownership. The analysis of data follows a thematic approach, where qualitative data from interviews and FGDs is coded into key themes, including the causes of land disputes, the effectiveness of current dispute resolution mechanisms, and perceptions of joint ownership. A comparative analysis is also conducted, examining land dispute resolution models in Nigeria alongside successful joint ownership systems in other countries. Legal and policy analysis further explores the compatibility of statutory and customary laws with cooperative land governance principles.

The study focuses on communal land disputes in Nigeria, particularly in regions where conflicts frequently arise due to customary tenure systems, inheritance disputes, and multiple sales of land. Both rural and urban land conflicts are examined to assess their broader socio-economic impact. However, certain limitations exist,

such as the reliance on qualitative data, restricted access to private land agreements and court records, and the challenge of generalizing findings across Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups.

Ethical considerations are central to the research process. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation, while confidentiality measures protect their identities. The study maintains objectivity in data interpretation, striving for a balanced presentation of findings and recommendations. Therefore, by integrating theoretical analysis with empirical findings, this study offers a nuanced exploration of joint land ownership as a conflict resolution strategy. Its originality lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining legal analysis, community perspectives, and comparative studies to evaluate the feasibility of cooperative land ownership in Nigeria. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on land governance, providing practical insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, and community leaders.

The Nature and Causes of Communal Land Disputes

Communal land disputes in Nigeria stem from a variety of factors. Historically, land was held communally, with traditional leaders overseeing its distribution and use. However, with urbanization, population growth, and commercialization, the demand for land has increased significantly, leading to conflicts. Scholars argue that "as land becomes an economic commodity, communal tenure systems face increasing pressure, exacerbating disputes and weakening traditional governance structures" (Ogunbiyi, 2019). The primary causes of land disputes in Nigeria include:

1. Inheritance Conflicts – Disagreements among family members over inheritance rights often result in protracted legal battles. Studies show that "inheritance disputes account for a significant proportion of communal land conflicts, particularly in societies where land succession is not well-documented" (Eze, 2021).
2. Boundary Disputes – Lack of clear demarcation leads to conflicts between neighboring communities. Research indicates that "inconsistent land surveys and informal agreements often result in overlapping claims, fueling tensions" (Chukwuemeka, 2020).
3. Government Acquisition and Compensation Issues – When the government acquires land for development purposes, inadequate compensation often triggers disputes. Scholars note that "many communities feel disenfranchised when the government expropriates land without adequate consultation or compensation, leading to resistance and legal battles" (Okonkwo, 2019).
4. Multiple Sales of Land – Some unscrupulous individuals sell the same parcel of land to multiple buyers, causing ownership conflicts. According to Nwosu (2018) "fraudulent land sales have increased with urban expansion, as individuals exploit legal loopholes to maximize profit at the expense of buyers and communities".
5. Incompatibility Between Customary and Statutory Laws– The dual land tenure system sometimes creates inconsistencies in land ownership claims. As noted by legal scholars, "customary tenure systems often lack written documentation, making them vulnerable to statutory override and legal disputes" (Adegbite, 2018).

Addressing these causes requires a multi-faceted approach, including legal reforms, community engagement, and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to ensure that land remains a source of development rather than conflict.

Joint Land Ownership as a Dispute Resolution Mechanism

Joint land ownership presents a collaborative approach to dispute resolution by ensuring that multiple stakeholders have legally recognized shares in a piece of land. This method can take different forms, including

family ownership, cooperative ownership, and community land trusts. Its effectiveness as a dispute resolution mechanism can be analyzed through the following perspectives:

1. Promoting Communal Harmony – By allowing multiple parties to co-own land, joint ownership reduces individualistic claims and fosters collective responsibility. As noted by Adegbite (2018) "joint land ownership strengthens social cohesion by ensuring that no single entity monopolizes land resources, thereby mitigating tensions".
2. Preventing Unilateral Land Sales – A major cause of land disputes is the fraudulent sale of land to multiple buyers. With joint ownership, any land transaction requires the consent of all co-owners, significantly reducing fraudulent practices. Olayemi (2021) states that "joint ownership introduces transparency in land dealings, minimizing conflicts arising from deceitful sales".
3. Encouraging Sustainable Land Use – When land is jointly owned, co-owners are more likely to engage in sustainable practices to preserve its long-term value. Research by Ogunbiyi (2019) indicated that "joint ownership fosters a sense of stewardship, leading to better land conservation and environmental management" .
4. Legal Protection and Documentation – Formalizing joint land ownership through legal frameworks ensures that all parties involved have documented rights, reducing ambiguities in ownership claims. According to Okonkwo (2019) "legal recognition of joint ownership strengthens property rights and reduces the likelihood of litigation".
5. Dispute Resolution through Mediation – Joint ownership structures often incorporate internal conflict resolution mechanisms that allow disputes to be settled amicably within the ownership group. Studies suggest that "internal dispute resolution frameworks within joint ownership arrangements promote negotiation over litigation, reducing costs and preserving relationships" (Nwosu, 2018).

Joint land ownership, when effectively implemented, has the potential to transform land governance in Nigeria. By prioritizing collective responsibility and legally recognized co-ownership, this model can serve as a proactive measure to mitigate communal land disputes.

Promoting Inclusivity and Shared Responsibility

Joint land ownership fosters inclusivity by ensuring that all stakeholders—family members, community groups, and even investors—have equitable stakes in land management. This approach minimizes the likelihood of individual conflicts by creating a system where decision-making and land use are collectively managed. As Oladipo notes, "joint ownership models encourage shared responsibility, reducing personal disputes and fostering a collective approach to resource management" (Oladipo, 2020). This inclusivity is particularly crucial in multi-generational landholdings where individual ownership claims often lead to fragmentation and disputes.

Additionally, joint land ownership reinforces a sense of communal belonging. When land is owned collectively, decisions regarding its use, development, or transfer are subject to communal consensus, ensuring transparency and fairness. Studies indicate that "collective land ownership promotes unity and reduces social tensions by creating a system in which no single party has exclusive control" (Okafor, 2020). This model also enhances economic stability, as resources can be pooled for agricultural activities, infrastructure development, or investment in local enterprises, benefiting the entire community.

Furthermore, formalizing joint ownership through legal frameworks ensures protection against exploitation and unauthorized sales. Scholars argue that "legal recognition of communal ownership structures provides long-term stability, preventing conflicts arising from unauthorized transactions or external encroachments" (Adekunle, 2021). By institutionalizing shared land ownership, Nigerian communities can significantly reduce disputes and promote sustainable land use practices that benefit both present and future generations.

ISSN: 2992-3727 Published 25th May, 2025

Strengthening Communal Bonds and Reducing Litigation

In many Nigerian societies, land disputes often lead to long-standing enmity among families and neighbors. By adopting joint ownership, communities can engage in structured dialogue, mediation, and consensus-building, thus reducing the need for costly and prolonged litigation. As Nwokolo argues, "joint ownership fosters dispute resolution through dialogue, preventing conflicts from escalating into legal battles that drain resources and deepen divisions" (Nwokolo, 2022). Unlike adversarial litigation, which often exacerbates tensions, joint land ownership encourages peaceful coexistence by ensuring that all parties have a stake in decision-making.

Moreover, shared ownership structures facilitate community-wide discussions on land use, allowing for better planning and conflict prevention. Research has shown that "when communities collectively manage land, they develop stronger social ties and a sense of shared responsibility, which ultimately minimizes conflicts" (Obi, 2020). Through these collaborative efforts, families and communities can focus on economic and social development rather than engaging in disputes over land.

With joint land ownership, landowners can pool resources for collective investment in agricultural projects, real estate development, or other economic ventures. This model not only optimizes land utilization but also creates opportunities for economic growth within communities. In the long run, joint ownership serves as a mechanism for stability, economic development, and lasting peace within Nigerian societies.

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To address the challenges associated with joint land ownership and enhance its effectiveness as a dispute resolution mechanism, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Public Awareness and Sensitization**

   Educating community members about the benefits of joint land ownership is essential to fostering acceptance and minimizing resistance. Many land disputes arise from misunderstandings and a lack of awareness about collective ownership structures. As Ajayi argues, “public education campaigns can play a critical role in shifting societal perceptions towards land as a communal asset rather than an individual possession” (Ajayi, 2020). Traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and government

agencies should collaborate to organize workshops, town hall meetings, and media campaigns to highlight the economic and social benefits of shared land ownership.

2. **Legal Reforms and Policy Adjustments**
   Existing land tenure laws should be reviewed to accommodate more inclusive ownership structures. The Land Use Act of 1978, which vests land ownership in the government, often creates barriers for communal land ownership due to bureaucratic processes and the emphasis on individual title deeds. Scholars argue that "policy reforms that recognize and protect collective land rights can significantly reduce land disputes and foster sustainable land use" (Ogunleye, 2021). Clearer statutory provisions should be introduced to support the formal registration of joint ownership arrangements, ensuring that such agreements have legal backing and protection against encroachment or unauthorized sales.

3. **Establishment of Conflict Resolution Committees**
   Given the deep-rooted nature of land disputes, local conflict resolution mechanisms should be strengthened. Traditional leaders, religious heads, and local government authorities should work together to form dedicated Land Conflict Resolution Committees to mediate disputes before they escalate into legal battles. Research indicates that "customary dispute resolution mechanisms tend to be more accessible and culturally relevant than formal litigation, fostering amicable settlements" (Eze, 2021). These committees should be equipped with legal knowledge, mediation skills, and official recognition to enhance their effectiveness.
4. **Community-Based Agreements and Documentation**
   Clearly defined community-based agreements should be established to prevent future disputes and ensure transparency in land management. These agreements should outline:
   i. Rights and responsibilities of each stakeholder in terms of land use, investment, and maintenance.
   ii. Profit-sharing mechanisms to prevent conflicts over income generated from jointly owned land.
   iii. Procedures for dispute resolution to provide clear guidelines in case of disagreements.

   Scholars emphasize that "formalized agreements backed by legal documentation can significantly reduce conflicts, ensuring clarity and accountability in land ownership" (Okonkwo, 2019). Such agreements should be legally recognized and accessible to all stakeholders.
5. **Integration of Technology for Land Ownership Records**
   Using digital tools like Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and blockchain can help keep better records of land ownership. These technologies make it easier to know who owns what land, avoid double claims, and reduce confusion. Akinyemi (2021) explained that using digital maps and blockchain makes land records more secure and open, especially in cases where land is owned by more than one person. In Nigeria, using modern systems to record land ownership can help avoid many land disputes and make land data easy to access. Eze, Okoro, and Danjuma (2020) also pointed out that digital tools improve land security, especially in rural areas where land is often owned by families or groups.
6. **Government Incentives for Joint Land Ownership Initiatives**
   The government can support people who share land ownership by giving them financial help or technical advice. For example, the government could reduce taxes, give farming grants, or make it cheaper to register shared land titles. Oladimeji (2019) said that government support helps communities manage land together, which can bring more economic stability and reduce fights over

land. Adamu and Yusuf (2022) also noted that these types of support make it easier to connect traditional land use with official laws, helping to protect community land rights.

Conclusion

Communal land disputes remain a significant challenge in contemporary Nigerian societies, often leading to social discord, economic stagnation, and weakened communal bonds. These disputes, which stem from inheritance conflicts, boundary disagreements, government acquisitions, fraudulent land sales, and inconsistencies between customary and statutory land laws, continue to threaten the stability and development of many communities. If left unaddressed, they can escalate into violent conflicts, disrupt agricultural activities, displace families, and deter potential investments in local economies.

Joint land ownership presents a sustainable and equitable solution to mitigating these disputes by fostering inclusivity, strengthening communal ties, reducing litigation, and enhancing economic development. By institutionalizing joint ownership, land can be transformed from a source of contention into a tool for communal growth and collective prosperity. As scholars argue, "joint ownership fosters shared responsibility, ensuring that land is utilized for the benefit of all stakeholders rather than being monopolized by a few" (Ogunbiyi, 2019).

However, for joint land ownership to succeed as a conflict-resolution mechanism, a multifaceted approach must be adopted. Legal and policy reforms are necessary to provide clear guidelines and protections for communal land ownership, ensuring that disputes are minimized through transparent documentation and legal backing. Community engagement and education play a crucial role in shifting societal perceptions about land ownership, emphasizing the benefits of shared responsibility and cooperation. Additionally, strategic conflict resolution mechanisms**,** such as mediation committees and alternative dispute resolution frameworks, must be established to address disputes efficiently without resorting to costly and divisive litigation.

Moreover, embracing joint ownership as a panacea for land disputes will not only promote peace but also contribute to the socio-economic advancement of Nigerian communities. By encouraging communal investments, agricultural collaborations, and infrastructure development, joint ownership can enhance local economies and create sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, the integration of modern technology, such as digital land registries and geographic information systems (GIS), can enhance transparency, reduce fraudulent transactions, and ensure the proper management of jointly owned land.

Ultimately, a holistic and collaborative approach is required to ensure the long-term success of joint land ownership as a mechanism for resolving disputes. Government agencies, traditional leaders, legal experts, and community members must work together to develop a structured framework that balances customary traditions with modern legal principles, ensuring that land remains a unifying rather than a divisive factor in Nigerian societies. By doing so, communal land ownership can serve as a foundation for lasting peace, economic stability, and sustainable development in the years to come.

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