Community Leaders' Roles in Managing Security Challenges: Perspective of Community Dwellers in Rural Areas of Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Despite the efforts of the government to curb insecurity in the recent times, the rate of insecurity in rural communities in Nigeria has risen. Community engagement of rural dwellers for internal security of their communities can only be achieved through community leaders' efforts. This study therefore investigated the roles of community leaders in managing security challenges in agrarian communities of Osun state, Nigeria. It identified prevailing security challenges and their causes; examined the perceived roles of community leaders in managing security challenges; and identified problems facing community leaders in tackling security challenges in their communities. The interview schedule was employed to gather information from 135 community members selected across the state through a multistage sampling procedure while 15 key informant interview sessions were conducted to collect qualitative data from 15 community leaders. Descriptive statistic was used to analyse quantitative data while content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. The. Results showed that farmers-herders conflict (79.1%) and crop thefts and vandalism (45%) were the most prevailing and major causes of security challenges identified. While settlement of conflicts and disputes (90.4%), collaborating with law enforcement agents (87.1%) and creating awareness on security issues (80%) were the most prominent roles performed by community leaders in security management. Inadequate funds (80%) and poor communication and coordination (70.1%) were the major constraints facing community leaders in managing security challenges in rural communities. The study concluded that the majority of the community members indicated that their leaders played significant roles in managing security challenges of their communities to ensure community peace and sustainable food security. The study recommended that government and all relevant stakeholders should empower community leaders by organising capacity building, training, and workshops on conflict resolution, crime control, and community policing to equip them with the requisite knowledge and skills to handle security issues.

Keywords: Community leaders, food security. rural areas, security challenges

Introduction

Nigeria is grappling with widespread of security issues that have devastated the country's socio-economic progress, resulting in significant human and material losses, including loss of life, destruction of property, economic instability, and a pervasive sense of insecurity (Adekola and Enyiche, 2023). As of today, almost every part of the country

including in the rural areas is facing an endless attack that has often resulted into destruction of lives and properties, the major focal point of food production and livestock farming (Oyedokun et al., 2022). Security challenges such as bandits, kidnapping, stealing/armed robbery, ritual killing, farmer-herder conflict and terrorism have made the rural areas their centre of focus ultimately due to poverty, hunger, high rate of unemployment inadequate, infrastructural facilities and inadequate well-trained security personnel as evident in rural communities of Nigeria. The growing rate of insecurity has made it very difficult for the nation to develop, as any nation hardly develops when there is a high level of insecurity in the society (Adekola and Enyiche, 2017).

Community engagement for internal security can only work through leaders of communities. It is these leaders that activate the dormant potentials of their members through motivation and interpersonal relationship. They have the responsibility of securing the lives and properties of their members and preventing security challenges in their domains. According to Ngurukwem et al. (2024), community leaders are strategic partners in the development of rural areas who live in their respective communities and familiar with the peculiarities and needs of their members. Community leaders fall operation within the informal sector operators which can be either selected or elected, with responsibility of maintain peaceful co-existence among their members. Minkler (2015) views community leaders as the people who inspire, mobilize, and guide others to work together to address important community issues and concerns. These leaders may be traditional authorities, elected officials, or informal leaders who are committed to improving to quality of life their community members. Famakinwa and Adisa (2020) also describe community leaders as individuals who possess strong social skills and genuine interest in addressing community issues whenever the need arises. They are approachable, empathetic and proactive in finding solutions to community problems.

The security situation in rural areas in Nigeria has been a major concern in recent years as this as continued to threaten the community peace, safety and livelihoods of Nigerians. Rural areas in Osun State are not left out with a growing number of security challenges that threaten the safety of lives and economic well-being people. Insecurity such farmer-herders conflict, armed robbery, communal conflicts, kidnapping and other forms of criminal activities are become more serious issues affecting socio-economic development of Nigerians. Ajibefun (2018) reported that a lot of violent conflict has erupted between farmers and herders in Southwestern Nigeria, where farmers can no longer farm and live peacefully. Alo (2023) reported that 204 people were kidnapped in Southwestern Nigeria between 2018 and May 2020. About 50 people were kidnapped in Osun State while 99 people were kidnapped in Ondo State between 2018 and May 2021. These states can be seen as the bedrock for kidnapping in the Southwest. Makinde (2018) also reported some cattle herders attacked farm settlements located at Esa Oke in Osun State where about 120 acres of economic crops were destroyed. Besides, it was also reported that crops worth millions of naira were destroyed by herders as a result of their grazing activities in another two separate communities in Osun State. Besides, countless incidents of kidnapping have been reported along Ife-Ibadan and Ife-Ilesa expressways, especially in the early hours of the morning and at night by bandits where some of victims were later released after payment of ransom.

As a result of this growing trend in Nigeria, governments at various levels in Nigeria have been making concerted efforts to curb this insecurity, especially in urban centres. In contrast, rural areas are often neglected (Lindstrom, 2015) which might be due to the shortage of well-trained security personnel and security apparatus, until recently

when the Government of Southwestern States in Nigeria inaugurated Western security forces otherwise known as Amoketun Corps to complement the efforts of law other enforcement agents to curb crime rate and reduce the rate insecurity in their various states (Adisa et al., 2022). Active involvement of community leaders in security management has become imperative as the formal security agent lacks adequate manpower and resources to effectively police rural and urban areas of Nigeria all alone. Since community leaders such as traditional rulers have been playing crucial roles in maintaining peaceful co-existence in their domains, therefore, these leaders are expected to support the government efforts in the maintenance of peace cum management of security of their communities because they live in these communities which give them better understanding of the security situation of their communities; and are in the better position to mobilize their members to respond to any security threats (Osayemwenre, 2021).

Previous studies conducted by Famakinwa et al. (2019) and Famakinwa and Adisa (2020), claimed that community leaders played a vital role in resolving conflicts within their communities. The involvement of community leaders in conflict resolution has significantly reduced the number of violent incidents in the community. This may be connected to fact that community leaders are held in high esteem and accepted as men and women of wisdom with impeccable characters whose pre-occupation is to see to the peaceful co-existence among their kith and kin as observed by Alabi and Famakinwa (2017). It has also been observed that community leaders significantly influence the behaviour of their followers by mobilising them to participate actively in taking community action against any security threat, thereby reducing criminality and violence (Ngurukwem et al., 2024). The participation of community leaders in security governance can enhance security in rural areas because these leaders live in the communities and are aware of needs and problems of the people at the grassroots. Osayemwenre (2021) stated that community leaders used community policing, neighbourhood watch groups and traditional mechanisms for resolving conflict and addressing insecurity in their domains. Akinpelu and Adekunle (2018) also opined that community leaders are effective in reducing the crime rate through the adoption of proactive measures and in mobilizing their members to take community action against security threats. Similarly, a study conducted in rural Uganda by Akoi et al. (2020) reported that community leaders were instrumental in coordinating and mobilizing the community to address security threats. Chaudhary and Bertrand (2021) reported that community leaders were instrumental in reducing violence against women in rural India. The study further revealed that community leaders who received training on gender-based violence were able to identify and respond to incidents of violence and also raise awareness about this issue in their communities.

Based on the foregoing, extant literature has reported that community leaders played key roles in conflict resolution, fostering peace, and protecting their members' welfare, however, there is still inadequate empirical information on the roles of community leaders in managing security challenges in the study area. Hence, this study sought to examine the community leaders' roles in managing security challenges in Osun State, Nigeria. Specifically, it ascertained the causes of prevailing security challenges, identified the roles played by the community leaders in managing security challenges, and identified the challenges faced by community leaders in managing security challenges in the study area.

Method

Mixed research design was used for this research which involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were first elicited from the rural community members through structured interview schedule followed by collection of qualitative data from community leaders through key informant interview guide. The research was conducted in Osun State, Nigeria; which has 30 local government areas (LGAs) with three Agricultural zones based on Osun State Agricultural Development Programme (OSSADEP) classification. These are Oshogbo zone with 13 LGAs, Iwo zone with 7 LGAs and Ife/Ijesha zone with 10 LGAs. The population for this study was rural community members and community leaders. Respondents were chosen through a multistage sampling procedure. In the first stage, two Agricultural zones (Oshogbo and Iwo) were purposively picked due to the high prevalence of security challenges in these zones. The second stage involved the purposive selection of 15% of the LGAs in the chosen ADP zones. They are Iwo LGAs from Iwo zones, Ede South, and Odo-Otin LGAs from Oshogbo Zones due to incessant security challenges in these areas. In the third stage, 8% of the communities were randomly picked from these selected LGAs; which translated to seven communities from Iwo local government, five communities from Ede and three communities from Odo-Otin, making a total of 15 communities. Finally, a random sampling technique was employed to pick nine respondents randomly from each community to have a total of 135 respondents. Also, one in-depth interview of community leaders was conducted per community, making a total of 15 key informant interview sessions.

The dependent variable for this study was conceptualized as the perceived roles of community leaders in managing security challenges. This was captured by asking the respondents to indicate what they perceived as the roles of community leaders in managing security challenges in their communities, and measured with "yes" or "no". Option "yes" was scored 1 while "no" was scored 0. The cause of security challenges was determined by asking the respondents to identify the causes of security challenges among the options listed. Each response ticked was scored one point and otherwise was zero point. To measure the problems facing community leaders in managing securing challenges in their communities, respondents were asked to indicate the problems facing their leaders in carrying out these roles with options "yes" and "no". Option "yes" was scored 1 while "no" was scored 0.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Types of security challenges experienced by the Respondents

The result in Fig. 1 shows that the respondents identified farmer-herder conflict over land resources (79.1%), crop theft and vandalism (45.2%), corruption and weak law enforcement (39.6%), land/farmland dispute (35.7%), poverty and unemployment (33.2%), and climate change and environmentally induced conflict (25%) among others as the major types of security challenges prevailing in the study area. This implies that farmer-herder conflict is the most sensitive issue in Nigeria as it has become a major serious security challenge in nearly every rural community of Nigeria as noted by Ajibefun (2018) who described it as a hydra-headed problem that defiled solutions due to ethnic colouration exhibited in handling this situation. Armed cattle herders have been ravaging farming communities causing both economic and social losses in terms of loss

of lives, displacement of farmers from their farms and homes, low productivity, loss of houses and properties, destruction of infrastructure damage, and scarcity of agricultural products especially food (Adisa et al., 2022). This result is in line with the findings of Meduoye (2022) who established that farmer-herder conflict was one of the most prevalent security challenges facing farming communities in Nigeria.

This finding was supported by excerpts from the KII sessions conducted across the study area:

Our main challenge in this community is that Fulani herdsmen are destroying our crops without any reason, even if we try to stop them and send them away from our farm, they will still come back again. Also, the issue of land disputes among members and crop theft have become recurrent issues in our area.
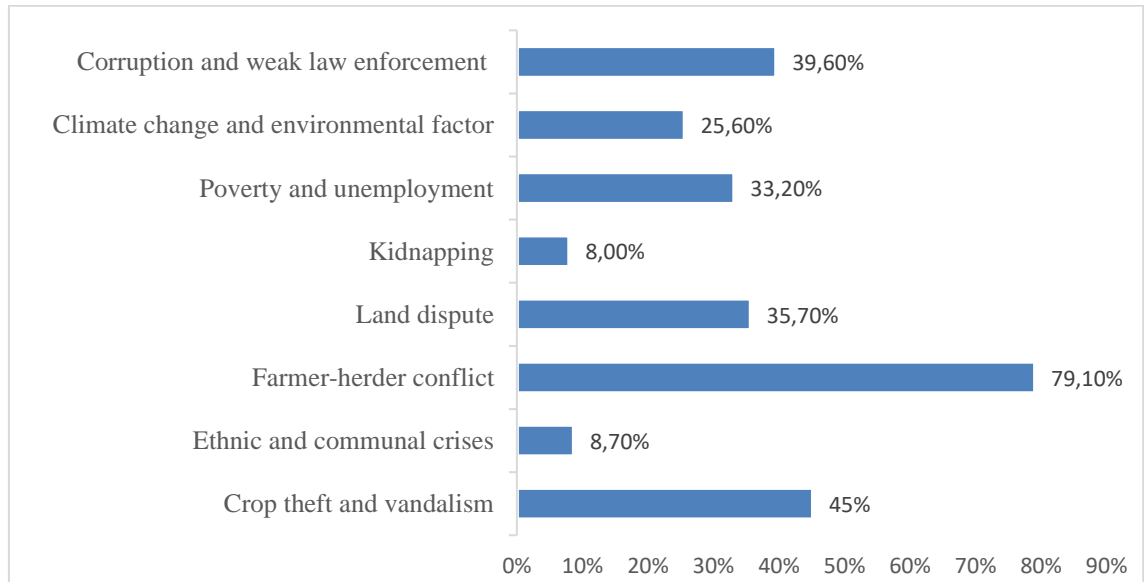
(KII excerpt from a community leader of Aba Otun community, Ede South, LGA Osun state)

Fulani cattle rearers are using their cattle to destroy our crops. Sometimes they even attack us in our farms with dangerous weapons when my people are trying to challenge them.

(KII excerpt from a community leader of Oke-Osun, Olugbona community, Iwo, Osun State)

Findings from both qualitative and quantitative data support that major causes of security challenges in rural communities are farmer-herder conflicts, and crop thefts and vandalism.

Figure1

Types of security Challenges experienced in the study area

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Roles of Community leader in managing security challenges

The results in Table 1 show that most rural community members agreed that settlement of conflicts (90.4%) took the lead among roles performed by their leaders. This indicates that community leaders engaged in mediating disputes, resolving grievances, and preventing tensions among their members which could have escalated violence within their communities, thereby maintaining stability and fostering peaceful co-

existence among people of different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds within their communities. This concurs with the findings of Famakinwa *et al.* (2019) and Famakinwa and Adisa (2020) who reported that the settlement of disputes and conflicts among community members was one of the major roles of community leaders in Southwestern, Nigeria. The majority (87.1%) of the community members claimed that their leaders collaborate with law enforcement agencies. This suggests that their leaders work closely and provide the necessary support to law enforcement agents like local police and vigilante groups to address issues of insecurity in their communities. Also, about (82%) indicated that their leaders engaged in carrying out vigilance and surveillance activities of their communities by gathering and disseminating security information to the relevant authorities to address the security situation. This is because community leaders organise vigilante and neigbouring watch groups to monitor and gather necessary information about security threats, criminal activities, and suspicious individuals within their communities and also disseminate such information to the relevant authorities, for them to take necessary actions to forestall anything that can cause security threats in their communities. This supports the finding of Akinpelu and Adekunle (2018) who reported that community leaders are more effective in reducing crime rate and improving security in rural areas, through identifying security threats and engaging law enforcement. Besides, the majority (80%) also acknowledged that their leaders create awareness on security issues. This was done by educating their members through regular meetings, briefing them on the general security situation, and mobilising their members to be security conscious and involved in community policing. The community members also agreed that their community leaders effectively engaged in peace-building activities among community members (74.8%). This means that community leaders engage in activities that foster peace, unity, and social cohesion among their members, thereby reducing the likelihood of internal conflict in their communities. They also claimed that community leaders raise funds and resources among members to address security threats (71.1%), and interrogate new faces in their communities (64.2%) in managing security challenges. These results clearly demonstrated that the majority of the community leaders play vital roles in managing security challenges in their communities, especially in a country like Nigeria where issues of insecurity are prevalent, by settling conflicts, bridging the gap between community members and security agents, promoting peace-building among community members, and gathering and sharing security information with the government and security agents among others. These actions contribute significantly to the community members' well-being and resilience.

These above findings were supported by excerpts from the KII sessions conducted across the study area

I usually act as soon as Fulani herdsmen bring their cattle into our farm to destroy our crops by arresting their cattle and compelling them to pay for the damages by ransoming their cattle at any amount of money concluded.

(KII excerpt from a community leader of Imuleke community, Odo-Otin LGA, Osun State)

Countless numbers of times, I have gone to the camp of Fulani herdsmen with community security agents to report issues to them or to warn them from destroying our farm crops. Sometimes we report the security threats to policemen. In fact, we have seen cases where we have to chase them and their animals out of our community.

(KII excerpt from a community leader of Aba Otun Community, Ede South LGA, Osun state*)*
My role is to call for peaceful co-existence between my community members and the Fulani herdsmen to have meetings with them to solve disputes amicably and so many times they begged us. Sometimes, we arrest them with the assistance of policemen to sign an undertaken at the police station, promising that they would not transgress into farmland again.
(KII excerpt from a community leader of Imuleke Community, Odo-Otin, Osun State*)*

Based on the roles played by these leaders with the support from the government and other relevant stakeholders in providing enabling environment, capacity building, and empowerment to these leaders to perform all these roles effectively, this can lead to improvement in crop availability, adoption of new agricultural technologies by farmers, ensure efficient supply chain of agricultural products to stakeholders, reduction in rural-urban migration, ensure stable food prices in the market, reduced malnutrition among rural dwellers and enhanced food security in Nigeria. All these can only be possible if there is community peace and rest of mind among rural dwellers.

Table 1

Role of community leaders in managing security challenges

Roles	Freq	Percentage
Conflict and dispute resolution	122	90.4
Collaborating with law enforcement agencies	118	87.1
Vigilance and surveillance roles	111	82.2
Creating security awareness	108	80.0
Promoting peace-building among community members	101	74.8
Promotion of community policing	98	71.1
Raising funds and resources to address security threats	92	68.2
Interrogating new faces in their communities	87	64.4
Informal arrest of criminals	68	50.3
Ostracizing/punishing erring members	25	18.5

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Problems facing community leaders in management

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of the rural community members indicated that poor funds and resources (80%), poor communication and coordination with security agents, government and other stakeholders (70.1%), inadequate intelligence gathering and sharing (67.2%), limited training and capacity building (65.1%), and limited authority and power of community leaders (64.2%) inadequate security agents and posts in the rural areas (57.8%) were the major problems identified by community members facing their leaders in confronting insecurity in their communities. These results suggest that community leaders do not have enough resources and funds to support and strengthen the security of their areas; they have limited capacity to carry out surveillance and intelligence gathering of relevant security information; and they have limited capacity to enforce binding decisions on security issues due to the advent of law enforcement

agents like police and civil defense. Besides, the limited number of law enforcement agents in rural areas who are expected to man the rural areas against any security threat limits the performance of community leaders. The qualitative findings also buttress the fact that the majority of the community leaders said their major problems were lack financial resources and the power to permanently stop the Fulani-herdsmen from destroying their crops.

Table 2

Problems facing community leaders in security management

Problem	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate funds	108	80.0
Poor communication and coordination	94	70.1
Inadequate intelligence gathering and sharing	90	67.2
Inadequate training and capacity building	88	65.1
Limited authority and power	86	64.2
Inadequate security agents and posts	78	57.8
Political interference and influence	51	38.1
Corruption and favoritism	46	34.3
Dependence on external security agencies	36	26.9
Lack of community members' cooperation	33	24.6

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Conclusion

The study revealed that the prevailing security challenges experienced by the rural community dwellers were farmer-herder conflict and the majority of the rural dwellers agreed that community leaders played some significant roles in managing security challenges in their areas. Despite their roles in security management, their efforts were limited by limited resources and funds, poor communication and coordination with security agents, and inadequate intelligence gathering and sharing skills, among others. In addressing these barriers, governments and all relevant stakeholders should organize capacity building and training on conflict resolution, crime control, and community policing for community leaders and local security members to equip them requisite knowledge and skills to handle security issues. The government needs to re-position the roles of community leaders not just serving as agents of conflict resolution in their communities but must be empowered to play specific roles in security service such as enforcing binding decisions on criminals in their local communities to complement the efforts of government security agents to ensure security of lives and properties. Policymakers and other stakeholders should provide security facilities such as police posts, communication tools, and other essential infrastructure to enhance community leaders' performance in security management. The government should employ and train more security personnel and deploy them to every part of the country especially rural communities where there are security threats to ensure the security of lives and properties. Finally, there should be proper synergy and coordination among community leaders, local vigilantes, and formal security agents to enhance the

effective performance in managing security challenges in rural communities to enhance agricultural development and food security in Nigeria.

Author Contributions

FM took the lead in conceptualisation, research design, instrument development, methodology and writing the manuscript. OMO was involved in data analysis, data management, interpretation and co-writing of the manuscript while OST was involved in data collection and manuscript preparation.

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