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GSM: 0803 3596 818

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**COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN FOREST CONSERVATION AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN SECURITY IN NIGERIA**

**Ebire, Matthew Olusola^{1*}, Adeniyi, Israel Ademola²,
Agbonifo, John³**

*Global Affairs and Sustainable Development Institute Osun State
University, Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria*

*Email: isoleb2005@gmail.com,
israel.adeniyi@pgc.uniosun.edu.ng*

agbonifo1@gmail.com

^{1}Corresponding Author*

Abstract

This study investigated the role of community participation in forest conservation and its implications for human security in Ondo State. Using a cross-sectional design, it employed focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and demographic surveys across eight forest-dependent communities in Akure and Idanre LGAs, involving 136 participants including stakeholders, forest users, contractors, and forestry officials. Thematic analysis revealed that weak institutional capacity, restrictive policies, corruption, and poor communication are key barriers to participation. Despite existing frameworks, enforcement lapses and political interference allow illegal logging and encroachment to thrive, undermining livelihoods and security. Findings indicate that the exclusion of communities from decision-making fosters alienation, economic vulnerability, and non-compliance. The study concluded that weak forest governance threatens conservation, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. Strengthening participatory governance, integrating traditional knowledge, and building local capacity are essential to improve conservation outcomes and enhance human security.

Keywords: Community participation, forest management, human security, forest conservation

Introduction

The management of forest resources in many African countries, including Nigeria, has historically been centralized under national or state governments, often excluding the input of local communities. This top-down approach creates a gap between forest management policies and the lived realities of forest-dependent populations. Forests are not just ecological assets but also vital sources of food, fuelwood, timber, medicines, and income for millions of rural dwellers. Additionally, they provide essential ecosystem services such as soil conservation, water regulation, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity preservation, all of which are critical for the well-being of the local population and environment at large (Amusa, 2024).

Despite their importance, Nigeria's forests face significant threats from urbanization, agricultural expansion, industrialization, and population pressure. It is estimated that over 80% of the country's forest cover has been lost (Abiodun & Oduntan, 2024), leading to ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and worsening climate change impacts. These challenges intensify pressures on the remaining forests, resulting in rising poverty, food insecurity, and loss of livelihoods for already vulnerable forest-adjacent populations (Adjei et al., 2023).

Deforestation in Nigeria is driven by illegal logging, land conversion for farming, charcoal production, and bush burning, often within protected areas where law enforcement is weak (Abiodun & Oduntan, 2024). Government efforts to curb illegal exploitation are hindered by limited monitoring capacity, poor policy enforcement, and the absence of alternative livelihoods for forest-dependent households (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021).

A major obstacle to effective forest management is the persistent exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes. Centralized policies frequently overlook the needs, knowledge, and cultural practices of forest dwellers, leading to a lack of ownership and accountability (Basse, 2003; Adam & Eltayeb, 2016). This disconnection results in fragmented conservation efforts and missed opportunities for sustainable use options such as eco-tourism, non-timber forest products, and community-based forest management (CBFM). When local knowledge is ignored, policies are often poorly adapted to local realities, which further worsens forest degradation.

Growing evidence suggests that participatory and community-based forest management can improve conservation outcomes and livelihood security. Studies indicate that local communities hold valuable traditional ecological knowledge and have a vested interest in protecting forest resources. Their involvement can lead to more sustainable management, equitable benefit-sharing, and better social and economic results (Adjei et al., 2023; Nkemnyi, 2016). However, translating these benefits into practice has proven challenging, with issues ranging from weak institutional support to inadequate funding and political will.

In Nigeria, forest loss is increasingly linked to security concerns. Forested areas have become sites of illegal logging, poaching, bush burning, and, more critically, hideouts for insurgent groups, bandits, and other armed actors (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2021). This connection makes forest conservation not only an environmental issue but also a matter of national security. Militarized responses to forest insecurity have been implemented, but they often fail to address the root causes of resource exploitation. Without alternative livelihoods, improved governance, and local participation, such security-driven approaches remain insufficient (Wodschow, Nathan & Cerutti, 2016).

Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) offers a promising path forward by positioning local communities as co-managers of forest resources. It seeks to integrate local priorities and knowledge into forest policies and management decisions, ensuring more sustainable outcomes (Lund, Rutt & Ribot, 2018; Nkemnyi, 2016). Despite evidence of its potential, CBFM in Nigeria remains limited and faces implementation challenges. This paper, therefore, investigates the role of local communities in forest conservation and its relationship with human security in selected local government areas (LGAs) of Ondo State, Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the extent of local community participation in forest conservation, identifies barriers to effective engagement, and explores how these barriers affect livelihoods and security. By addressing these issues, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on sustainable forest governance that balances conservation objectives with the socio-economic well-being and security of forest-dependent populations.

Theoretical Review

This paper is anchored on Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1988), which provides a framework for understanding the dynamic interaction between forest conservation strategies and human security. The theory identifies five nested systems such as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem that collectively shape both human development and environmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

The microsystem refers to the most immediate environment influencing individuals, including direct interactions with biotic and abiotic factors. In the forest context, it represents soil quality, climate, and biodiversity conditions that directly determine forest health. Studies by Ihenyen et al. (2009) underscore that protecting local biodiversity and tree species is vital for sustaining forest ecosystems, much like nurturing environments are critical for child development.

The mesosystem captures interactions among different microsystems. In forests, this parallels the interplay between ecological factors and land-use patterns. Ati et al. (2010) show, through GIS-based analysis, that agricultural expansion and urbanization drive deforestation when environmental and development policies are poorly integrated. The exosystem represents external influences such as policies, market forces, and community institutions that indirectly affect both individuals and ecosystems. Oduntan et al. (2013) reveal how logging, grazing, and inadequate regulation accelerate forest degradation, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's idea that distant systems can significantly shape outcomes without direct interaction.

At the macrosystem level, cultural values, governance structures, and laws play a decisive role in shaping environmental behavior. Ojo & Asinwa (2022) emphasize that governance quality, enforcement of forestry laws, and socio-political stability strongly determine forest sustainability. Cultural norms regarding forest use also influence conservation practices, consistent with the theory's assertion that overarching systems guide the behavior of sub-systems.

Finally, the chronosystem addresses changes over time, such as ecological succession and policy evolution. Neugarten et al. (2024) demonstrate how political crises in Madagascar disrupt conservation efforts, while Oluwole et al. (2017) link prolonged forest depletion in

Uganda to declining environmental security. Overall, this theory highlights that forest conservation and human security are outcomes of interconnected systems that evolve over time. Empirical evidence by Sidi et al., (2020), supports this view that forest regeneration enhances climate change mitigation, and community participation strengthens conservation, equity, and livelihood resilience (Akindele et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, primarily employing a qualitative research approach. The population of this study is 252,464 consisting of the population of two selected local government areas (Akure South and Idanre LGAs) according to 2006 census. A multi-stage sampling approach was employed, involving purposive selection of forest-based local government areas, random selection of eight communities within a five-kilometer radius of the forest reserves, and proportional sampling was employed to select respondents of the study based on the size of the sampled forest reserve communities. The communities were clustered into different categories of respondents, including retired and current staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest Resources, community stakeholders, forest contractors and other forest users. Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). A total of 136 respondents participated in the study. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis to draw out key themes and patterns from the interview and focus group transcripts.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

Forest Governance in Selected Forest Reserve Sites in Ondo State, Nigeria

Historically, forest governance in Ondo State has been centralized under the State Ministry of Natural Resource. It is guided by principles of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and sustainability. Within the framework of its responsibilities, the government is empowered to develop forest policies, enforce regulations, issue permits, and coordinate conservation and afforestation programs. However, forest governance is not the responsibility of one agency alone.

The senior officer of the Forestry Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Forest Resources stated that:

“Forest governance cuts across sectoral collaboration between ministries, local governments, NGOs, and the private sector to create a coordinated response to threats facing forest reserves” (Senior Forest officer, personal communication, August 12, 2024).

Forest reserves ensure integrated decision-making, shared responsibilities, and collective accountability. It is multi-functional (ecological, economic, cultural), and no single agency can manage them effectively. He acknowledged that the collaboration helps address complex forest issues like illegal logging, climate change, and land -use conflicts in a holistic and inclusive manner. Forms of collaboration include joint forest management (JFM) that consists of shared roles between the government and local communities in forest governance and natural resource management, particularly through co-management and community-based forest management (CBFM). He further stated that:

“We cannot neglect the fact that conservation requires a multi-stakeholder approach — government, private sector, communities, and civil society must work together. Local communities are the first custodians of our forests. Their involvement is vital for effective conservation and forest protection. (Senior Forest officer, personal communication, August 12, 2024).

A statement from a forest officer in Ipogun/Kajola during an interview aptly noted that:

Our ministry understands that effective forest governance cannot occur in isolation. That’s why we have prioritized collaboration across sectors—bringing together environmental agency, security services, and development partners. Through joint monitoring, stakeholder dialogue, and shared responsibility, we aim to safeguard our forest reserves while ensuring equitable development outcomes. (Forestry officer, personal communication, August 27, 2024).

Despite the existence of legal and institutional frameworks, forest governance has faced numerous challenges which include lack of funding, weak enforcement and lack of community engagement. Over the years, unsustainable exploitation of forest resources, encroachment and illegal logging have increased, largely due to poor monitoring and ineffective implementation of forest management policies as well as lack of investment in forest-dependent communities' livelihoods has further weakened local incentives for conservation. A key informant interview with a senior forest guard in Idanre forest zone of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest Resources pointed out that: The ministry remains committed to promoting sustainable forest management practices that ensure the protection of our natural resources while supporting rural livelihoods. We recognize some of the challenges in our conservation efforts, but local communities are critical partners in conservation while working to ensure participatory forest governance by involving them in some conservation programs. (Senior forest guard, personal communication, September 17, 2024).

In addressing marginalization and exclusion of indigenous people from forest conservation, he further affirms that: We are revising our forest policies to address past exclusion of indigenous communities. Through national reforestation programs, we aim to engage the locals to restore degraded lands and improve forest cover. Their traditional knowledge is invaluable to promoting forest conservation. (Senior forest guard, personal communication, September 17, 2024).

However, existence of indigenous knowledge is central to the success of forest conservation. This is evident during interview session with Baale of Aponmu community who affirmed that:

“Local knowledge, traditional practices, and cultural values are essential for fostering respect for the forest and encouraging active participation” (Baale of Aponmu community, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

In the same vein, the interview with high chief Olomola in Aponmu community added that:

“Including local communities or indigenous peoples in decision-making processes not only give communities sense of belong but also significant control and decision-making power over conservation activities can lead

to substantial improvements in forest health and management” (High Chief Olomola, personal communication, October 10, 2024).

Government restrictions against forest access and farming are contrary to customary practices, eliminating contributions of the community. The designation of the reserve reduced their land control, which promoted distrust.

Community Participation and Forest Conservation

Communities living around the selected forest reserves are aware of their existence as protected areas aimed at conserving lowland rainforest and biodiversity. These reserves, managed by the Ondo State Ministry of Natural Resources, are intended to curb deforestation, protect endangered species, and promote sustainable forestry. Despite this awareness, actual participation by local communities in forest management remains minimal.

In Ipogun/Kajola, most participants were aware of the 600-hectare Strict Nature Reserve (SNR) known as the “Queen’s Plot,” but reported little or no participation in conservation activities. Several respondents admitted that they knew little about the rationale for conservation. Similarly, in Ayebambo, while some participants associate conservation with biodiversity protection, others felt that it unjustly limited access to resources through boundary restrictions. This perception of exclusion and marginalization was common across study sites, with many linking forest governances to rising poverty, food insecurity, and livelihood loss.

Contrary to official claims that forest governance involves cross-sectoral collaboration, participants widely reported that communities are rarely consulted. Many respondents stated that government decisions regarding forest reserves are made without their input. Focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed frustrations over the erosion of traditional authorities in forest protection. As one Ayede participant explained:

“Our voices are never heard. They say the forest belongs to the government, so they don't think it is necessary to involve us, even if we have lived beside it all our lives... The elders still tell us about some of the taboos of the forest, but they are no longer given official recognition.” (FGD, November 16, 2024).

Traditional leaders also confirmed that their historical role in land use and forest governance has been sidelined, leaving decision-making largely in the hands of government agencies and loggers. Similar experiences were reported in Jimbe and Idi-Araba, where communities described themselves as completely excluded from forest management.

Interviews with key stakeholders, including a retired forestry officer, identified structural barriers to participation such as lack of community understanding of CBFM, unclear land tenure systems, monopoly of benefits, political interference, and gender bias. The retired officer emphasized the need for inclusive frameworks, financial and technical support, and conflict resolution mechanisms to sustain participatory initiatives.

The study further found that decision-making authority and forest-related benefits remain centralized, with democratic decentralization of resource management still uncommon. Weak enforcement of forestry regulations, insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, irregular supervision, and political interference were frequently mentioned as obstacles. Many participants accused government authorities of neglect, claiming that forest protection exists only on paper while deforestation continues unchecked.

FGDs also highlighted the exclusion of indigenous groups due to lack of legal recognition and formal land rights. Without such recognition, communities are often treated as encroachers rather than custodians of the forest. As the Baale of Ayebamibo explained:

“We are sidelined simply because government view us as encroachers rather than custodians of the forest... they think we are the ones destroying the forest, so they push us aside instead of partnering with us.” (Baale, January 21, 2025).

This exclusion fosters tension between communities, contractors, and government agencies. Community members reported that contractors often exploit weak governance systems, using bribery, divide-and-rule tactics, and patronage to bypass local engagement. A CDA chairman in Ipogun/Kajola stated:

“Most timber contractors do not recognize the value of community engagement... Sometimes, they use divide-and-rule

tactics, bribes, or patronage to silence or bypass collective community action.” (CDA Chairman, February 22, 2025).

Institutional capacity gaps further undermine local participation. Many forestry offices lack funds, personnel, and operational resources for monitoring or patrols. Participants observed that even when illegal logging is reported, little action is taken, sending a message that forest protection is not a government priority. This neglect has eroded trust and discouraged community involvement.

Forest Conservation and Human Security Threats

Forest management practices in the study area have significant environmental, social, economic, and political security implications. Forests form a vital part of local ecosystems and sustain community livelihoods, meaning that mismanagement or unsustainable exploitation generates serious security threats. Understanding these threats is essential for designing inclusive and sustainable management approaches.

Deforestation and habitat loss disrupt ecosystems, exacerbate climate change, and undermine conservation efforts. As one senior forestry guard explained, *“Forest conservation is not merely an environmental concern but a crucial aspect of human security... it supports economic stability and overall well-being of communities” (personal communication, September 17, 2024).* Forest degradation accelerates soil erosion, disrupts water cycles, and increases vulnerability to natural disasters.

The study found that poor management and top-down policies displace indigenous practices, eroding cultural heritage and weakening conservation incentives. One FGD participant stated, *“Active community participation strengthens commitment... the integration of indigenous knowledge with scientific methods significantly improves conservation practices” (February 22, 2025).* Properly managed forests reduce land-use conflicts, resource-based violence, and enhance social cohesion, protecting identities and traditions deeply tied to forest landscapes.

Forests act as a natural food and safety net, especially during agricultural failures, by providing fruits, nuts, and other essential resources. Participants emphasized that forest conservation

strengthens food security and prevents malnutrition. However, agricultural expansion into forest areas, driven by land scarcity, degrades soil and heightens disease risk. A women herbal producers' leader warned that unsustainable practices threaten medicinal plant resources and increase health risks: *"Forests house medicinal plants... their conservation contributes to public health and biosecurity"* (April 18, 2025).

Beyond timber, forests offer opportunities for ecotourism, restoration projects, and non-timber product value chains that create jobs and reduce poverty. A forest officer confirmed that investing in conservation can boost employment and diversify local economies. When communities have sustainable access to forest resources, they cooperate more and resist illegal exploitation.

The study highlighted that forest mismanagement is increasingly linked to insecurity. Akure and Idanre Forest Reserves have become hideouts for bandits, illegal loggers, and armed herders. Community members shared accounts of farm destruction by cattle and violent confrontations. One woman from Aponmu recalled losing her cassava, maize, and vegetables in a single day due to herders' cattle, leaving her without income for her children school fees. Security concerns have turned forests into "lawless zones," deterring legitimate users while emboldening criminals. Farmers' attacks and kidnappings for ransom are common. Members of the Amotekun network reported engaging in dangerous forest patrols and encountering armed groups with superior weapons, resulting in injuries during skirmishes. A major finding was the weak government presence and law enforcement. Retired forestry officers and FGDs reported that inadequate personnel, insufficient patrol vehicles, and corruption among officials allow illegal activities to flourish. These lapses erode trust, discourage community participation, and worsen forest exploitation.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that forest governance in Ondo State remains highly centralized, characterized by weak enforcement, inadequate funding, and minimal community participation. Despite existing legal and institutional frameworks, enforcement lapses and political interference enable illegal logging, encroachment, and unsustainable exploitation to continue. Interviews revealed that logging is often "legal but

unmonitored,” as contractors operate with government permits but exploit weak oversight and internal corruption. Underfunded forestry departments, insufficient resources such as fuel for patrols, and low staff morale further compound governance failures. These findings align with existing literature, which highlights that centralized forest governance in developing nations often prioritizes revenue over conservation (Fabricius, 2007; Ribot et al., 2006).

A major finding was the exclusion of local knowledge and cultural practices from conservation strategies. As Berkes (2009) suggests, integrating indigenous knowledge improves conservation outcomes, yet bureaucratic, permit-based systems have marginalized traditional management approaches, eroding cultural heritage and local stewardship. This top-down approach has left communities feeling alienated and powerless.

Participants consistently reported limited involvement in forest reserve decision-making, fostering frustration and economic vulnerability. Many respondents admitted to supporting or participating in illegal logging out of necessity, highlighting how livelihood insecurity drives non-compliance with forest regulations. This confirms participatory forest management studies that argue excluding local stakeholders diminishes their motivation for conservation while increasing rule violations (Ostrom, 1992; Pretty, 2003).

Barriers to participation identified in this study include lack of sustainable livelihood support, weak institutional capacity, restrictive policies, and inadequate incentives such as training or access to seedlings. These gaps leave communities without viable alternatives, pushing them toward unsustainable exploitation (Akinola, 2025).

Finally, the transformation of Akure and Idanre Forest Reserves into security hotspots, serving as hideouts for bandits, illegal loggers, and herders poses severe risks to both conservation and community safety. Participants described the forests as “lawless zones,” where insecurity deters rangers and residents from engaging in protection efforts, while also encouraging further exploitation. Security crackdowns often disrupt farming and worsen mistrust, eroding cooperation between government authorities and local communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study emphasized the negative impact of centralized forest management on conservation, people's livelihoods, and human security in the Akure and Idanre Forest Reserves. While the communities possess rich knowledge and a cultural relationship with the forests, exclusion from governance and systematic failure in decision-making reinforce degradation and suspicion. By recognizing the communities as partners rather than opponents, the study recommended the development of co-management frameworks involving community participation in the forest management plans. While governments investing in sustainable livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, will reduce potential conflicts, dependence on forest resources and incentivize conservation. Strengthening participatory governance, recognizing traditional knowledge, and providing local capacity support are vital for improving conservation and human security outcomes, and ensuring sustainable forest management.

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