Transatlantic Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
(p-ISSN: 2672-5371) (e-ISSN:2735-9808)
Journal Homepage: https://tjmr.org/
Vol. 7(1) 2025

TJMR
Transatlantic Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Drivers Of Discontent In University–Host Community Relations In Owerri West Local Government Area Of Imo State, Nigeria

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| ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics and drivers of discontent characterising university–community relations in Owerri West Local government Area of Imo State. Qualitative research was conducted with data collection via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions from university officials, community leaders, and residents. Theoretical insights from the Theory of Relative Deprivation underscore how systemic inequalities and institutional neglect contribute to a sense of injustice among host populations. Findings reveal that host communities often feel marginalized despite the presence of prestigious institutions in their domain, thus leading to acrimonious relationships, periodic protests and conflicts. The paper recommends the establishment of formal engagement frameworks, inclusive development initiatives, and policy interventions aimed at promoting mutual understanding, equitable resource sharing, and sustainable coexistence between universities and their host communities.

| KEYWORDS

University-host conflict, Community Relations, Land Conflicts, Relative Deprivation, Owerri West

Introduction

The role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the socioeconomic transformation of societies has long been acknowledged (Altbach, 2018: Marginson, 2020: Adeyemi, 2019; Okorie & Eze, 2020). This role is not only visible in their core mandates of teaching, research, and knowledge dissemination but also very noticeable in their symbiotic relationships with host communities (Adeyemi, 2019; Ezeani et al., 2021; Nwosu & Okoro, 2020; Ukeje, 2019). These relationships, usually referred to as "town-gown" relationships, mirror the interdependence between academic institutions and the localities in which they operate

(Maurrasse, 2001). The origins of the town-gown relationship date to the medieval era. During this period, the earliest universities in Europe, such as Oxford, Bologna, and Cambridge existed with urban centers and often clashed with their host towns over issues related to student conduct (Bender, 1988). These initial tensions accentuated the duality of universities' identities and roles as both intellectual center as well as catalyst for socio-economic development in their communities (Leshukov, &Gromov,2017). With time, academic institution's roles grew beyond teaching and research to include wider shared responsibilities. By the turn of last century, universities began to position themselves as "anchor institutions," using their enormous assets to stimulate local economies, solve community problems, and engender civic engagement (Maurrasse,2001; Andrew, 2017). This new paradigm expressed a growing commitment to institutions of learning as drivers for sustainable development, particularly in rural society. Ndifoni, Asu-Okang, Achunekang, & Ategwu (2024) posits that development-oriented universities play a crucial role in addressing national development challenges through their mission, which focuses on creating contextualized research, providing relevant knowledge and recommendations for policy formulation and implementation, addressing critical issues. Fatoki (2017) noted that establishing a tertiary institution in a community has the potential to create employment opportunities for both skilled and unskilled labor. This peculiar factor motivates many communities in Nigeria, to lobby for the establishment of tertiary institutions in their locality.

In Nigeria, Universities' -host community relations tend to show deep rooted tensions that emanate from incompatible interests, asymmetrical power relations, and underlying grievances.

These conflicts are manifest in Owerri West Local Government Area (LGA) of Imo State, Nigeria, where three tertiary institutions Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO). Federal Polytechnic Nekede and Federal College of Land Resources Technology, Oforola are located.

While these schools are conventionally regarded as development tools, their location in these peri-urban areas tends to disrupt prevailing sociocultural, economic, and environmental balance. This has resulted in ongoing clashes between the communities and the institutions.

This paper examines the drivers of university–host community conflict in Owerri West LGA, drawing attention to the structural, economic, and sociocultural dimensions that shape these tensions. Utilizing a descriptive approach, the study seeks to place both the immediate and remote factors that fuel university-host community conflict.

In this process, it will contribute to our knowledge of how schools can engage more responsibly and sustainably with their hosting communities. apt in the Nigerian with ever expanding education sector. The task should not be only to open new institutions but how to translate their presence into inclusive, community-focused development.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Theory of Relative Deprivation, which was originally developed by Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues (1950) when they explored variations in soldiers' perceptions of fairness and promotion opportunities during World War II. Later, the theory was greatly expanded by Runciman (1966), who made a differentiation between egoistic and fraternal deprivation, and by Gurr (1970), who employed it in its use in explaining the psychological origins of political violence and group unrest.

It is not the absolute condition of want that counts most here but the comparative idea of comparison between what individuals or categories feel they should be receiving and obtaining and what others are perceived to be receiving. Whenever aspirations exceed reality in the context of relative comparison and such perceptions are not corrected over a long period of time, the potential for grievance and mobilization builds.

For university–host community conflict in Owerri West Local Government Area, the theory provides a real framework by which to study and analyze the host community and university relationship. Host communities often feel that they are excluded from economic and social benefits that accrue from playing host to federal institutions even though they are in close proximity to high-status federal institutions of higher learning. It is precisely this form of perceived injustice when built up for a long time that triggers protest, resistance, or disruption in institutions- host community relations.

Methodology

Research Design

An exploratory research design is employed in the study to examine the drivers of university–host community conflict in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State.

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with respondents directly involved in or impacted by the relationship between the community and the university. They comprise university officials, traditional rulers, youth representatives, and members of the host communities. Focus group interviews were also employed to obtain varied perceptions from various social categories.

Secondary data were gathered from published sources, official government reports, and institutional reports on land utilization, development plans, and public participation policies (Braid, 2016).

The Study Area

The research was conducted in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State. It is bounded by geographical coordinates of latitude 5° 1630N to 5° 3130N and longitude 6° 5100E to 7° 500E. Owerri West with administrative headquarters in Umuguma consists of fifteen independent communities.

Owerri West is geographically on the southwestern side of the Imo State capital, Owerri, and strategically positioned at about 3 kilometres from the Owerri–Elele–Port Harcourt Road. Of particular interest, Owerri West are home to three Federal Owned institutions of tertiary education namely Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Federal Polytechnic Nekede and Federal College of Land Resources Technology, Owerri are located in Ofurola.

Discussion

The relationship between higher education institutions and their host communities in Nigeria and specifically in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State can best be described as characterized by underlying tension, grievances and mutual distrust. These situations are not incidental, rather they are product of entrenched socio-historical processes and uneven power relations that favour institutional imperatives over communal interests. Evidence participant observation and community engagement in both Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) and Federal Polytechnic Nekede (POLYNek) and host communities reveal an array of interrelated conflict drivers. These drivers range from allegations of land grabbing to symbolic violations of moral codes. These issues, while often treated in isolation, combine to produce a tense atmosphere of mutual distrust.

Land-Related Conflict

Land-related conflict remains the most recurrent source of hostility. These disputes go beyond the armpit of survey maps or official title deeds; they are tangled in collective memory and communal self-definition. For the indigenous populations surrounding FUTO and POLYNek, land is not merely an economic asset—it is a historical repository, interlinked with agrarian ritual, lineage, and spiritual rites. What has been described as "acquisition" by institutional authorities is interpreted locally as expropriation, particularly where consultation was absent and compensation either nominal or entirely withheld. In contexts where statutory land documentation is rare, oral traditions and genealogical recall serve as the dominant registers

of legitimacy (Akinrinade, 2016). The structural invisibility of these forms of land tenure within national legal frameworks further aggravates the dispossession.

A host community member identified as Mr. C. has this to say on land dispossession.

> *"We no longer have land to plant and grow food for our people. Our major occupation in this place is farming and our main input, which is land has been denied. We are dying of hunger, and FUTO management telling us that our forefathers sold the land to them. How? Does it mean that they lack the knowledge of population growth in this part of the world? What provision did the management have for the growing population of the host communities?".*

Compounding this perceived historical injury is the contemporary reality of physical demarcation and fencing. Infrastructure expansion projects, especially those that redefine physical access or territorial boundaries, tend to reopen latent grievances. These infrastructural incursions often reignite disputes and contribute to episodic clashes. The reaction is not solely about the land being taken, but about the systematic erasure of symbolic ownership and spatial recognition. Mamdani's (1996) thesis on the politicisation of space resonates here—where state-linked institutions instrumentalize land not only for development but for the assertion of dominance.

Economic Marginalization and Developmental Asymmetries

Beyond territorial concerns, socioeconomic exclusion constitutes a parallel line of contention. Although location of a tertiary institution in a community leads to an increase in wealth creation and flow such as physical development of host communities in terms of construction of new buildings as hostel accommodation (Patrick & Ijah. 2010). Host communities report that despite their proximity to tertiary institutions, they remain marginal to the benefits these institutions generate. Roads servicing the university and the community roads remain potholed and impassable. The job market tells a similar story. Indigenes of host communities, particularly youth, report being systematically bypassed in recruitment processes, they are only given unskilled or semi-skilled roles. Major contracts for maintenance, and supplies are frequently awarded to external contractors with pre-existing ties to university management.

This pattern of exclusion engenders a form of economic alienation that Bauman (2001) terms "liquid marginality"a state of being surrounded by growth yet detached from its dividends. Importantly, these grievances are not solely material; they reflect a moral economy in which communities expect reciprocal engagement, given the sacrifices made for institutional

expansion. When such expectations are unmet, the resultant sentiment is not merely disappointment but a deep-seated perception of structural disrespect (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010).

Mr. B., a member of the host community, summarized this sentiment when he noted that,
"FUTO and FNPO do not consider our people for employment at ally, they only created security jobs for our people. As a matter of fact, since we are their landlords, we are expected to have at least 15% of the employment opportunities in these institutions. We have many graduates, even postgraduates' youths among us, yet many of them are unemployed. When FUTO and FPNO are always employed from outside the communities. How then do you think we can bond perfectly with these institutions? It cannot work!".

Students' Antisocial Behaviour and Cultural Dissonance

The influx of a youthful, urbanized student population sometimes creates tension in this relationship. These students often bring with them new and strange social practices that are frequently perceived as disruptive by local inhabitants. They often indulge in late-night parties, public drinking, and unregulated social relationships which are against the local ethos. Negative behaviors from students, including vandalism, theft, and antisocial behavior not only damage property and erode trust but also fuel resentment, and escalate tensions between students and local residents (Ndifoni et al., 2024).

Although some of these activities are not universally practiced by all students, their visibility and repetition in local milieu tend to be amplified in community discourse, creating enduring stereotypes of students as disrespectful outsiders without morals. Stanley Cohen's (1972) concept of "moral panic" provides a useful analytical lens here. The community's reaction to perceived student misbehaviour is not just about conduct; it reflects deeper anxieties over cultural erosion and the loss of normative authority. This dynamic is most pronounced among local male youths, who often view students not only as cultural deviants but as competitors—occupying educational, economic, and even romantic spaces from which they feel increasingly excluded. The above view is captured by Chief N, a community leader in one of the communities, when he noted that,

"Some of the students of these institutions are unruly. They lack moral upbringings and have a corrupting influence on our children. They lack morals and often engage in nefarious cult related activities".

Exclusionary Governance and Asymmetric Engagement

Administrative decision-making processes within universities often perpetuate feelings of marginalization. The governance structures of many institutions remain top-down, with

limited provision for community input in strategic development matters. While some institutions convene town hall meetings or stakeholder forums, these platforms are often perfunctory and lack genuine dialogical engagement. Community representatives are invited to observe rather than to influence, producing a sense of participatory void. The effects of this exclusion are not limited to missed opportunities for consultation. They manifest in broader disaffection and cynicism toward institutional authority. Gaventa (2006) argues that when governance is extractive rather than dialogic, it produces not just silence, but alienation. In the context of university–host relations, this means that institutional legitimacy becomes compromised, and even development projects intended for public good are interpreted through a lens of suspicion.

Environmental Stress and Insecurity

Environmental degradation adds a critical dimension to local discontent (Nwosu& Okoro,2020). Campus expansion often involves forest clearance, soil excavation, and the conversion of communal land to build infrastructure. These changes not only disrupt ecological systems but also local livelihoods. In FUTO for instance host communities' members report increased vulnerability to erosion, flooding, diminished arable land for farming and limited access to local water resources due to construction and sand mining activities by the University. Igwe. & Nzewi, (2021) posited that campus expansions often lead to environmental degradation that disproportionately affect host communities thereby contributing to conflict. Environmental impact assessments, if conducted at all, are rarely shared with affected communities, and mitigation measures are either poorly implemented or entirely absent (NEST, 2018).

Security concerns further complicate this landscape. While host communities associate rising crime levels, including theft, drug use, and youth violence, with the unchecked growth of the student population. School authorities and administrators frequently finger community youth for theft, vandalism of school property (Ezeh, & Onyekachi, 2023). They attribute this to community policing, and unwilling by host communities to collaborate with the authorities as hindrances to security and order in formal documents and in casual conversation.

This cross-cutting suspicion generates a spiral of blame where each points finger at the other for societal instability. Instead of a collective reaction to insecurity, the scenario becomes polarized: citizens feel overwhelmed or abandoned, institutions perceive themselves as being under siege by hostile or insensitive locals. While empirical data on student involvement in

crime remains inconclusive, the prevailing perception is that campus expansion has inadvertently facilitated social disorder. This corresponds with Garland's (2001) theory of the "criminology of everyday life," which suggests that structural change often engenders emergent forms of disorder that are not adequately addressed by institutional mechanisms.

Poor Engagement Strategies

Good communication and effective stakeholders' management are key to maintaining good relationships between host universities and communities. Most corporate organizations in Nigeria follow a top-down approach in their communication and engagement process.

Good communication and effective stakeholders' management are key to maintaining good relationships between host universities and communities. Most corporate organizations in Nigeria follow a top-down approach in their communication and engagement process. They meet occasionally with host communities and rarely deliver on promises (Ndifoni et al., 2024). Obi and Ekwe (2022) further posited that without inclusive engagement and feedback mechanisms, grievances that might otherwise have been managed constructively will degenerate into enduring conflicts. The lack of institutional sensitivity to local demands, customs, and concerns reinforces the perception that universities are exploitative, self-serving entities rather than development partners. Therefore, any meaningful strategy to improve university–host community relations must prioritize continuous, participatory, and transparent communication frameworks that reflect mutual respect and shared interest.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The cumulative weight of these issues—spatial dislocation, economic exclusion, moral contestation, governance opacity, environmental degradation, and rising insecurity—generates a relationship defined less by partnership and more by mutual apprehension. Rather than functioning as engines of inclusive development, universities in these contexts are perceived as insulated enclaves of privilege. The asymmetry of benefit versus burden fuels a durable pattern of estrangement, one that cannot be resolved by token gestures or superficial engagement. Unless institutional actors confront these structural inequalities and recalibrate their relations with host communities, future interactions are likely to reproduce the very conflicts they seek to avoid.

Recommendation

Drawing from extensive scholarly insights, this paper proposes the following evidence-based recommendations to promote peaceful coexistence and sustainable development.

1. **Create Inclusive Engagement Committees:** Formal Community-University Liaison Committees (CULCs) should be structured with equitable representation from the university administration, students, host communities, and local governments to enable open discourse and joint decision-making.
2. **Enact Fair Land Use Agreements:** Carry out inclusive land use planning that acknowledges local over claims of land, provides equitable compensation where necessary, and ensures mutual access to built-up areas.
3. **Prioritize Local Economic Integration:** Enable policies that bring benefits to locals in employment, purchases, scholarships, and vocational training to cut economic exclusion and resentment.
4. **Promote Environmental and Cultural Responsibility:** Regularly carry out environment audits and provide cultural orientation to workers and students to balance environment degradation and deference to local values.
5. **Invest in Common Infrastructure and Security Cooperation:** Establish infrastructure investments across the two universities and their respective local communities, alongside collaborative security initiatives that bring both local stakeholders and institutional leaders together.

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