

Why Some Communities Choose Active Immobility in Conflict Zones in Nigeria¹

Abstract:

The staying behaviour of collectives that choose to remain in areas affected by violent conflict has received little attention in migration research. Addressing this research opportunity, this paper examines why some communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt choose to remain on their ancestral land despite recurring brutal armed attacks, high displacement risks, and absent state protection. Drawing on focus group discussions conducted in 2022 across communities in Benue and Nasarawa States, and underpinned by the *Resilience–Accessibility framework*, this paper employs *reflexive thematic analysis* to examine the factors shaping active immobility in conflict-affected settings. The findings suggest that active immobility in the study locations is shaped by two interrelated dimensions of life: the *material*, attachment to land and its physical, social, and economic resources, and the *symbolic*, their desire to preserve their lifescape while on their ancestral land. Together, these dimensions make staying put both viable and meaningful. The paper argues that active immobility constitutes an agentic and collective response to adversity, and extends debates on (im)mobility beyond Eurocentric and climate-focused perspectives by foregrounding collective experiences of immobility in conflict settings.

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Introduction

In Nigeria, most especially in the North Central regions commonly referred to as the Middle Belt, eco-violence has led to widespread mass murders, the displacement of over a million people, and the destruction of houses and barns within the communities in the region. The following report on a Yelwata farmer who survived one of such attacks illustrates its human impact.

45-year-old farmer Terhemba Lormba farmed rice, maize, cashew nuts and citrus and sat on a stool outside what's left of his home. Eight of his family were killed. "Most of them were burnt alive," including three of his children, he said, wiping his eyes with his shirt as he spoke. "They were hiding in the bedroom." (Akinwotu, 2025)

This tragedy occurred on June 13 2025, in Yelwata. When the armed attackers struck, they killed over 160 people and destroyed houses in the community within a few hours (Achirga, 2025; Akinwotu, 2025). Yelwata village is a community in the Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, situated in the Middle Belt region. The Middle Belt region of Nigeria experiences the highest incidence of eco-violence, marked by widespread fatalities, mass displacement, and the destruction of homes and farms by armed groups (Nwankwo, 2023; Olumba, 2024c). These violent conflicts, which typically involve the sedentary farmers and nomadic Fulani herders, have become a near-weekly occurrence over several decades, particularly in Benue and Plateau States (Nwankwo, 2023; Olumba, 2024c).

What distinguished the Yelwata massacre from others, in recent times, was the visibility that it got. Unlike previous attacks that went largely unreported, Martins Otse, also known as VDM, documented the aftermath, and the video footage that he shared online went viral, drawing national attention. The recordings depicted the charred remains of several women and children in different homes and barns. Pope Leo XIV described the killings as a 'terrible massacre' and called for prayers for the rural Christian communities of Benue State (Daka & Kukwa-Yanor, 2025; Tulloch, 2025). This exposure prompted international responses, including condemnation of the killings and the negligence on the part of the Nigerian state.

Following the Yelwata massacre, incidents of eco-violence have persisted in Middle Belt communities, particularly in Benue and Plateau States. Since then, many more communities in the two states have experienced mass killings and displacement from their ancestral lands. Most of the IDPs in the Middle Belt live in host communities, while others reside in IDP camps (Olumba, 2025a). According to the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) of the International organisation for Migration (IOM) (2023) Benue State alone has over 390,000 displaced persons, spread across 17 official and unofficial camps (Duru, 2024). One camp in Makurdi, the state capital, shelters approximately 35,000 people (Tade, 2022). Yet, despite the ongoing killings, displacement, and destruction, compounded by the absence of government security in rural areas in the Middle Belt, some communities choose to stay put and remain on their ancestral land. They exhibit a staying behaviour known as active immobility. Active immobility refers to an immobility category where people, despite having the resources and resilience to migrate from areas affected by adversities, deliberately choose to remain and confront challenges that threaten their continued presence in those locations (Olumba, 2025a; Robins, 2022).

Previous studies on eco-violence in the Middle Belt have examined its underlying causes (Ajala, 2020; Akingbe, 2022; Nwankwo, 2024a, 2025; Ojo, 2023; Olumba, 2024c; Yeboah et al., 2023), its manifestations (Nwankwo, 2024c, 2024b; Tade, 2022), as well as its effects on society, the economy, politics, and governance (Ejiofor, 2022; Jacquemot, 2022; Olamide Sowale, 2024; Omotola, 2025; Tuki, 2025). Others have examined how the ineptitude of the Nigerian state is sustaining it (Mlambo, 2023; Muhammed et al., 2024; Okoye et al., 2024; Olumba, 2024c) and factors that have led to its escalations and persistence in the region (Nwangwu, 2025; Okonkwo, 2025; Olumba, 2023). The part of this literature that intersects with migration studies has mostly focused on those displaced or forced to flee, with little attention paid to those who remain in conflict-affected areas.

This research gap is also evident in migration studies, where attention has centred on those who flee violence, while those who stay put are often neglected (Biehler, 2023; Bogdan, 2024; Erdal et al., 2023; Olumba, 2024b). In line with this research opportunity, Hagen-zanker et al. (2024, p. 19) argue that ‘This question of immobility in conflict-affected places is one that warrants further research’. Similar calls have been made by Esparza et al. (2020, p. 246) and Marston 2020, p. 1999), urging exploration of the staying behaviour of communities that remain in areas affected by violent conflict. These gaps suggest a persistent imbalance and bias in migration studies, which continues to emphasise Western-centric perspectives and mobility-

focused narratives. De Haas (2025, p. 1) argues that the limited attention to the drivers and effects of migration from ‘non-Western sending countries’ creates a ‘very problematic’ bias that gives a view of migration that reflects only ‘half the picture’.

Thus, the decision of communities to remain in areas affected by violent conflict has received limited scholarly attention. This paper addresses this gap by examining the factors shaping *why* some communities in Nigeria’s Middle Belt remain on their ancestral land despite recurring eco-violence, ongoing threats from armed groups, and limited state protection, whereas others choose to flee. Using the Resilience–Accessibility Framework (Olumba, 2025a) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) to analyse the data, this paper argues that active immobility, as experienced by the communities in the study locations, constitutes an agentic and collective response to adversity, influenced by their perception of land as integral to their identity and their quest to preserve their lifescape. It arrives at this argument by drawing on rare empirical evidence from a 2022 study conducted with hard-to-reach respondents in communities across Nigeria’s Middle Belt who chose to remain in their ancestral homes despite ongoing violent conflict and state neglect. It links two underexplored dimensions of life that influence immobility (the *material* and the *symbolic*) to explain why people remain in places affected by violent conflict.

The findings illustrate how the material dimension, the affective attachment to land and the physical, social, and economic resources it provides, sustains everyday life and makes remaining in the community both viable and desirable, and how the symbolic dimension, their desire to preserve their lifescape in their ancestral land, also drives their quest for active immobility. This paper contributes to migration studies by operationalising the Resilience–Accessibility framework to deepen theoretical understanding of immobility in conflict-affected areas. In addition, this paper advances debates on (im)mobility by moving beyond Eurocentric and climate-centred perspectives that emphasise individual movement, instead highlighting collective experiences of active immobility in areas affected by persistent violent conflict.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the methodological approach, detailing how, when, and why the data were collected and analysed. This is followed by a review of selected literature on active immobility in areas affected by violent conflict, situating the study within broader debates on (im)mobility. The findings section then presents two thematic explanations of why some communities in Nigeria’s Middle

Belt choose to remain on their ancestral land despite ongoing violence and the absence of state protection. The paper concludes by discussing how these findings advance theoretical and empirical understandings of immobility in violent conflict settings.

Methods

This paper is based on a multi-site project conducted in 2022 as part of doctoral research. The project aimed to examine the staying behaviour of communities exposed to violent conflict. Focus group discussions (FGDs) served as the primary data collection method to obtain group-level insights into collective experiences, perceptions, and responses to shared challenges, given that eco-violence constitutes a communal phenomenon. I conducted fieldwork in two communities, Odi² and IG, involving 54 participants across five FGDs and two mini FGDs. Four sessions, including both mini-groups, were held in Benue State. One session was conducted in Nasarawa State. Most communities in the two states have been devastated by eco-violence, and the violent conflicts which were ongoing during the period of data collection continue to this day.

Table 1. Focus Group Demographics

Group Cypher	Gender	Status	Number of Respondents	Location	Venue
IG-M	Male	Returned from displacement	9	IG	Chief's House
OIU-M-IDP	Male	Displaced	11	Odi	Odi Primary School
OIU-F-IDP	Female	Displaced	12	Odi	Odi Primary School
OIU-M-3	Male	Active Immobility	3	Odi	Odi Primary School
OIU-F	Female	Active Immobility	8	Odi	Odi Primary School
OIU-M	Male	Active Immobility	11	Odi	Odi Primary School
None	Female	Displaced	2	Odi	Odi Primary School

² For ethical and security reasons, the names of the communities have been anonymised. The Odi community is situated in Agatu Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, while the IG community is located in Nasarawa State.

The primary study site was the Odi community in Benue State (see Table 1), which exemplifies active immobility and resistance to displacement. Data were collected from participants who were displaced, those who had returned after displacement, and those who had resisted displacement. In Odi, FGDs were conducted with both internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in the community and indigenous residents. One session included eight women and another included eight men from the community. Two additional groups consisted of displaced persons hosted in Odi, one with twelve women and another with eleven men.

I facilitated two mini-focus group discussions (Nyumba et al., 2018, p. 24), which were also conducted in Odi. The first mini FGD, comprising three youth members, provided a setting for sharing sensitive narratives that could not be disclosed publicly due to concerns about being perceived as informants. The second group involved two sisters (IDPs) seeking refuge in the Odi community. In addition, I facilitated one FGD with nine men from the IG community in Nasarawa State. The community members of IG reported fleeing their village after attacks by armed groups and subsequently returning after reclaiming their land through community-led resistance.

The focus group discussions lasted approximately one hour each, while the mini-focus groups ran for about thirty minutes. Before each data collection session, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Those who declined to sign the consent form provided verbal consent, which was recorded in accordance with ethical guidelines. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee of Royal Holloway, University of London (ID: 2667), on 20 January 2022. I facilitated the data collection primarily in pidgin English to accurately capture participants' perspectives and ensure inclusivity. Pidgin is '... the main lingua franca for the Nigerian masses or the grassroots' (Osoba, 2015, p. 132) and is one of the two principal languages spoken in Benue State and surrounding areas (Egbokhare, 2021, p. 82). Some participants also contributed in English. My fluency in pidgin English facilitated effective management of the research process, including data collection, transcription, and analysis.

All focus group discussions were recorded using a password-protected, encrypted digital recorder, which ensured data security and enabled focused listening and effective probing during sessions, a practice beneficial for qualitative studies (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 69). The recordings were manually transcribed verbatim into secure Microsoft Word files to facilitate systematic analysis. Transcriptions from pidgin to English were conducted with

attention to preserving the authenticity and cultural specificity of participants' expressions. The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591).

My role as the researcher involved co-constructing meaning with participants (Slawecki, 2018). My positionality, which aligned with what McFarlane-Morris (2020) described as an experience of 'betweenness', presented both advantages and limitations, as I was neither a complete insider nor an outsider. I served as both facilitator and moderator, guiding discussions and encouraging participation while maintaining a neutral approach to ensure unbiased responses (Bryman, 2012). During fieldwork, I drew on insights from the Credibility and Approachability Framework (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017) to navigate access, build rapport, and foster trust with participants. Through this study, I extended the framework's application to conflict-affected contexts by highlighting the collective dimensions of credibility, approachability, and bearability that shape researcher–community relations in such settings (see, Olumba 2024b).

Active Immobility in Violent Conflict Zones: An Overview of the Literature

This review examines the limited literature on the factors that influence immobility in areas affected by violent conflict. It also identifies intersections with studies on eco-violence, particularly those focused on Nigeria's Middle Belt, some of which were outlined in the introduction. A key future challenge for scholarship and effective policy-making in migration studies is to understand immobility alongside mobility in times of crisis, whether linked to violent conflict or climate change (Erdal et al., 2023, p. 44).

Many studies on immobility have typically been conducted in the context of adverse climatic conditions, such as flooding and rising sea levels (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2020; Blondin, 2021a; Nahin et al., 2022; Tripathy Furlong et al., 2022). Immobility in the context of adversity has been studied in relation to challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, and violent conflict (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2020; Mallick & Schanze, 2020; McMichael et al., 2021; Niemi, 2020; Nwankwo, 2024a; Robins et al., 2024; Tripathy Furlong et al., 2022; Yee et al., 2022; Zickgraf, 2019). A recent review by Sengupta (2025) offers a valuable overview of environmental immobility. Although scholars have noted that immobility in the context of climate change and disaster risk has received insufficient attention (Blondin, 2021b, p. 291; Tripathy Furlong et al., 2022), immobility in crisis migration, particularly in situations involving violent conflict, has received even less attention. It is often assumed that most people flee during periods of conflict (Olumba, 2025a); however, Biehler (2023) contends that the

number of those who remain in conflict-affected areas is often underestimated. Building on this, the literature review in this paper will primarily focus on immobility in the context of violent conflict.

Immobility can be understood as a choice (Coulter et al., 2016; Morse & Mudgett, 2018, p. 267), yet individuals do not always exercise full agency over it (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Mata-Codesal, 2018; Schewel, 2020). As Orlova (2022, p. 6) observes, ‘... immobility, or staying in a faltering place, could be involuntary, and yet, a decision’. In essence, immobility may be voluntary or imposed, shaped either by personal preference or by external constraints beyond one’s control (Olumba, 2025a; Schewel, 2020). Scholars have described these different experiences using terms such as *active immobility*, *voluntary immobility*, *stable-acquiescent (im)mobility*, *vulnerable-acquiescent immobility*, *involuntary immobility*, and *acquiescent immobility* (Olumba, 2025a; Robins, 2022; Schewel, 2020). These categories capture how people experience staying in place under varying conditions, both in stable settings and in times of crisis. Among them, *active immobility*, *stable-acquiescent (im)mobility*, and *vulnerable-acquiescent immobility* are particularly relevant to those facing adversities such as violent conflict or climatic stress.

The socio-economic status of people is a significant determinant of their propensity to remain or flee due to disaster or conflict (Crookston et al. 2008; Ogbozor 2016; Schewel & Fransen 2018; Sengupta & Samanta 2022; Yikwab & Tade 2021). Social networks and the resources they provide can impact people’s decisions to remain in conflict zones (Adhikari, 2013; Williams, 2013; Krakowski, 2017; Yikwab and Tade, 2021). The social network provides aspirations, beliefs, and orientation through the activities of role models and peers who influence and guide the decisions of those within their network (Mani & Riley, 2019). Strong cooperation and coordination among community members engender their social resilience and resistance towards armed conflict and displacement (Krakowski, 2017; Williams, 2013). Social networks provide and utilise community resources, such as markets, cooperatives, health centres, and mills, to reduce their vulnerability to violence and the likelihood of migration (Adhikari, 2013; Shapira et al., 2020; Williams, 2013; Yikwab & Tade, 2021).

Some communities remain in conflict-affected areas because their relationships with community leaders or armed groups create a sense of safety and stability (Marston, 2020; Maxted, 2003). These connections provide the impetus to stay rather than flee. In some cases, civilians view collaboration with the armed group controlling their area as a way to secure

protection (Bellamy & Paul, 2009; Steele, 2009, p. 424). Such perceptions of safety reinforce their decision to remain.

Political factors and structural constraints are among the significant determinants of immobility in certain contexts (Carling, 2001; de Haas, 2008; Agbiboa, 2018; Zickgraf, 2019). Research on the immobility of African migrants seeking to reach Europe while stranded in North African countries often documents experiences of hardship, enslavement, high mortality, and abuse (Asongu & Kodila-tedika, 2018; de Haas, 2008; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020; Iranzo, 2021a). Many of these migrants experience vulnerable-acquiescent immobility because they are not only exposed to vulnerabilities but also ‘acquiesce to living amid adversities that are beyond their control’ (Olumba, 2025a, p. 14). They experience immobility due to political and structural constraints that restrict their movement, including crackdowns on migrants and smuggling networks, the externalisation of European border controls to North African states, and nativist rhetoric promoted by politicians and the media (Asongu & Kodila-tedika, 2018; Hélène et al., 2007; Iranzo, 2021b). Many of them are in countries exposed to adversities such as war or violent conflicts, for example, in Libya, Niger and Ukraine.

Even after crossing into Europe, many migrants continue to experience both acquiescent and vulnerable-acquiescent immobility. In Malta, for instance, their immobility is shaped by intersecting legal frameworks and the everyday social and physical barriers that restrict their movement (Nimführ & Sesay, 2019; Quagliariello, 2021). Many migrants of African and Asian origin who fled Ukraine and sought refuge in Europe experience acquiescent immobility, living in limbo as a result of structural racism, local nativism, and the weaponisation of policies such as the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which was designed to ease the suffering of those escaping war and conflict (Aribot et al., 2022; Ojwang et al., 2024; Olumba, 2025b).

Political factors also shape why some people choose to remain in conflict-affected areas in Nigeria. In the Northeast, joint security operations with state agencies against Boko Haram have further strengthened public confidence in safety (Agbiboa, 2018a). Collaboration between government forces and community vigilante organisations, such as the Yan Gora (Civilian Joint Task Force), has contributed to a sense of security among residents (Agbiboa, 2018a; Nwozor et al., 2021). These security measures have directly influenced some communities to stay put rather than seek refuge elsewhere.

The broader migration literature shows a *mobility bias* (Schewel, 2020), with much of the research focusing on movement processes, as well as a *receiving-country bias* (De Haas, 2025),

which portrays some regions as ‘sending’ and others as ‘receiving’ countries, overlooking historical patterns of migration such as colonial settlement, slavery, and indentured labour, and thus rendering such distinctions ahistorical. Studies of migratory experiences in the Middle Belt reveal similar patterns in migration dynamics. Existing studies on the intersection of eco-violence and (im)mobility (see, Nwankwo & Upton 2025; Ogbozor 2016; Shehu & Abba 2020; Tade 2022; Yikwab & Tade 2021) primarily address mobility from conflict-affected communities and immobility within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Consequently, there is a significant research gap regarding the factors influencing the decision of some communities to remain in their ancestral homes despite ongoing violent conflict. Addressing this gap aligns with recent scholarly calls (see, Biehler 2023; Bogdan 2024; Erdal et al. 2023; Esparza et al. 2020; Hagen-zanker et al. 2024; Marston 2020) for research on the dynamics shaping immobility in violent conflict contexts.

Findings

Through the analysis of the collected data, two primary themes emerged as dominant factors influencing the active immobility of the communities I studied in the Nigerian Middle Belt. These themes include their ironclad quest to sustain their lifescape in their community and the idea of their land as part of their communal identity.

Land as part of their Communal Identity

Land ownership and control over it hold great significance for the inhabitants of the communities in the Middle Belt. In most African nations, land ownership was based on a customary land tenure system (Tonah, 2002). Tonah (2002, pp. 44–45) observed that colonial land policies fostered competition for land among communities, while cash crop production for colonial establishments intensified this by creating demand for private ownership in areas where land was traditionally held by lineage groups. One such colonial policy is the 1917 ‘ring fence policy’, a colonial measure implemented by the British in the Middle Belt, which triggered violent conflict between the Tiv and Jukun over agricultural land (Dorward, 1969) and generated collective memories that continue to influence contemporary eco-violence in the region (Olumba, 2023).

According to the literature, one of the major causes of eco-violence in the Middle Belt is competition for control and access to water sources, land, and other agricultural resources

(Nwankwo, 2023; Olumba et al., 2022). From the outset of the discussions during the focus groups, the importance of land was evident in the narratives of almost all respondents. I asked the respondents about their allegation that nomadic Fulani herders frequently attack them from across the Benue River to gain access to their land.

Question: Why would they want to cross the river? Is the same river not accessible from the other side?

The reason is that we have fertile land here, where they will be able to access grazing opportunities that their cattle can feed on and multiply in numbers (#1-OIU-F).

The perspective of this woman (#1-OIU-F) illustrates how community members frame their experiences in ways that align with wider portrayals in academic literature and the media, where Benue State is often described as the ‘food basket’ of Nigeria due to its fertile land. In her account, the fertile land in the Agatu area (Odi) is seen as providing the lush pastures sought by herders for grazing. The competition over access and control of this fertile land is widely understood to fuel recurrent violent conflict between herders and farmers.

The idea that the land in the Middle Belt influences the communal life in the region is supported by historical evidence (Ahokegh, 2014; Ikime, 1973; Makar, 1994; Ochonu, 2008). For the Odi community, fertile land functions as a ‘retain factor’, encouraging members to remain in their village. Beyond sustaining their livelihoods, their ancestral land reinforces a shared sense of communal identity, making migration less desirable.

In addition, the massive importance of the farmland was emphasised in the perspective below:

Moderator: During the conflict, what other source of livelihood do community members in your community adopt?

#2-OIU-M: We have nothing else. The only occupation that we have is farming. Only a very few artisans, mainly mechanics who repair motorcycles, continue their trade during times of conflict.

Most respondents commonly expressed the opinion shared by respondent (#2-OIU-M). A response from one of the displaced women crystallises the opinion that farming was a significant source of her livelihood when she stated that

Life here is very difficult because everything we use, we buy; unlike before, when we could obtain things from our farms. Getting farm land to hire is also difficult (#1-OIU-F-IDP).

According to community members, farmland is their source of livelihood. Yet, they are unable to cultivate or harvest during periods of conflict, as attackers often ambush and kill those working on the farms. Access to farmland is essential for their survival, since farming is the primary, and often the only, source of income. This attachment to land is understandable, given that most households in the communities in Benue State and other parts of the Middle Belt depend on arable farming. However, in areas marked by ongoing violent conflict where the state fails to provide security, the reasons for remaining tied to the land may extend beyond economic benefit.

During the focus group, one community member (#2-OIU-M) described a factor motivating their pursuit of active immobility, a sentiment shared by most respondents:

Another factor is that the area where we are settled now belongs to our forefathers, and if we flee and abandon this place, where are we heading to? Even when we stay in our own community, we feel hungry. Then, for us and our entire families to move out of this place and relocate to another, how do you think we can feel? Since we have no place to run to, which is why we decided that since this is our land, we must live on it. So when they come, we push [fight] more. These are the reasons why we do not give them a chance to penetrate [conquer our land] (#2-OIU-M).

According to the respondent, he regards the land in his community as an ancestral inheritance which he identifies with. He went further to state that even on their ancestral land, they do not have the adequate resources they need. This perspective comprises three principal elements: emotional attachment to land, anticipated consequences of displacement, and a commitment to resistance aimed at safeguarding it. Their conceptualisation of land extends beyond its role as a dwelling to encompass deep emotional significance. This is expressed through the often-

used phrase ‘my father’s land’, which conveys a filial bond with ancestral land. Preserving this relationship requires continued residence on their ancestral land. Also, this perspective, commonly shared among many respondents, highlights concerns about displacement. The respondent questioned how survival would be possible if they were forced to leave, given the lack of alternatives that could provide the same livelihood and sense of identity rooted in their community. This attachment is so integral to their self-worth that they express readiness to resist, even under threat of serious harm.

For most community members in the village, identity is closely tied to what they call their ‘father’s land’; losing it through displacement would be devastating. This unwavering resolve arises from deep emotional bonds with the land, compelling them to make great sacrifices, even at the risk of their lives, to preserve this connection. As Sullivan & Rosenberg (2018, p. 504) note, losing one’s land is comparable to losing one’s identity and enduring a lingering death. For them, the choice is stark: stay on their ancestral land or lose everything.

In a focus group discussion with displaced women hosted by the Odi community, the significance of land and the hardships caused by its loss were also made clear:

Life here is not comfortable at all, because I was a farmer in my community and was very productive, but since I came here [in the host community], I am unemployed, and even eating is a problem for me and my children, as well as the kids going to school is another problem. I am suffering here because this place is not my village (#4-OIU-F-IDP).

This perspective, delivered through tears, highlights the struggles of those who have endured displacement. For community members in Odi, hosting displaced people makes these consequences visible. Witnessing the hardships faced by the IDPs reinforces their determination to remain in their ancestral community and avoid the harsh conditions of displacement.

Their determination to resist displacement and remain on their ancestral land, keeping the community intact, aligns with the assumptions of the Resilience–Accessibility framework. The Resilience–Accessibility framework holds that the decision to stay in times of adversity is shaped ‘... (1) their *agency/(in)actions*, (2) *resilience*, (3) *accessibility* to specific resources,

and (4) the *structures* and adversities in their surroundings. Furthermore, (5) people's decisions/(in)actions impact those structures, and the perceptions attributed to them' (Olumba, 2025a, p. 10).

Viewed through the Resilience–Accessibility framework, the community's quest for active immobility can be understood as the mobilisation of 'protective factors' (resources for violent resistance) to confront vulnerabilities and resist displacement. These actions reflect their agency shaped by 'retain factors' within their ancestral home and strengthened by 'internal boosts', both of which serve to counter the 'repel factors', exemplified by the destitution experienced by displaced persons in the Odi community.

'Protective factors' refer to measures that reinforce immobility and support community efforts at self-defence, whereas 'vulnerability factors' include adversities such as violent conflict (Olumba, 2025a). 'Repel factors' are conditions elsewhere or at home that diminish the aspiration to migrate (Olumba, 2025a; Schewel, 2020), while 'retain factors' represent valued characteristics of the land that encourage people to stay (Schewel, 2020). 'Internal boosts' are the spiritual and cultural motivations that strengthen the desire to remain (Olumba, 2025a), and 'internal constraints' are personal attributes that prevent movement (Schewel, 2020, p. 339). The intersection of these factors aligns with the respondents' accounts and reflects the *material dimension of life*, where attachment to ancestral land and the benefits it provides embody the framework's emphasis on resilience and access to resources. These attachments and dependencies help explain why community members view their land as integral to their identity and are willing to stand their ground, deploying resources to reinforce resilience and resisting adversities to remain, even at the risk of death.

Thus, the ancestral land of the Odi community serves not only as a means of survival but also as a source of communal identity. For them to choose to risk their lives when flight is possible may appear irrational. Still, it demonstrates how their attachment to land extends beyond material needs to encompass deep emotional ties. The literature acknowledges that people often hold ties to a place or community that go beyond residence, encompassing feelings and beliefs (Wester-Herber, 2004, p. 112). In expressing their determination to stay, community members emphasise their ancestral bond (often framed through references to their 'fathers' or 'father's land'), their reliance on the land for survival, and their fears of insecurity elsewhere. Within the Nigerian Middle Belt context, such fears are genuine. For them, losing access to

ancestral land would mean not only material loss but also a huge rupture of their communal identity.

Sustenance of Lifescape in their ancestral home

Arable farming, as previously stated, is the primary source of livelihood for community members in the study location. Farmland in the Odi community and across the Middle Belt is often located far from people's homes, many in the bush. Despite the violent conflicts, most respondents insisted they would rather remain in their community to access their farms, even when exposed to danger. As one female participant from Odi explained:

We have our personal house here, we have our personal farm here, we have a school that our children attends and some of us have a means of livelihood for sustaining ourselves and families. If we are displaced we will lose that freedom to access these things (#1-OIU-F).

Her perspective frames access to land and social amenities as an expression of agency. To flee would mean forfeiting the freedom to use resources and sustain the interactions that underpin communal life. These connections depend on access to family, community members (including extended kin), farms, familiar surroundings, and ownership of what they believe is theirs. Without this, respondents explained, they would not be at peace and might live in agony. They stressed that moving to IDP camps or other locations would prevent them from farming, which is why they reject displacement. In this context, displacement is understood as a restriction of freedom, particularly the freedom to access their community. This perspective aligns with the definition of the idea that when people are displaced, their lifescapes are reconfigured in ways that deprive them of the social, material, or symbolic resources necessary to realise their essence (Lubkemann, 2008, p. 193).

Lifescape refers to the people and resources that individuals rely on to carry out the normal ways of life they consider meaningful in their community (Convery et al., 2008; Lewis & Winkelman, 2017; Lubkemann, 2008). In Mozambique, the loss of cultivable land severely affected community members' social power and independence (Lubkemann, 2008, p. 193), a reality also reflected in the experiences of IDPs displaced from other communities who are hosted in Odi. Olumba (2025, p. 448) argues that communities sustain their lifescape by

remaining on their ancestral lands, where they draw on relationships and resources to uphold their traditional ways of life. Preserving this lifescape embodies a symbolic dimension of life which also serves as a key motivation for their active immobility.

In addition, the respondents' narratives indicate that farmland functions not only as an economic resource but also as a social space, where household members interact and socialise, often in their makeshift huts on their farms. Among the farming communities in the Nigerian Middle Belt, most community members construct ad hoc mud huts with thatched roofs on their farms, which they use as a resting place from the harsh heat, to take breaks and to store many of their basic farm tools and seedlings. As such, the farm serves as a second home. They believe that life outside of their community may not provide the necessary resources and relationships for them to live their daily lives.

The determination and collective actions of Odi community members to remain on their ancestral land to preserve their lifescape reflect how proximity to family, social networks, landscape, and community shape immobility (see Casey, 2001; Raymond, Brown and Weber, 2010; Morse and Mudgett, 2018; Ayeb-Karlsson, Kniveton and Cannon, 2020; Husa and Morse, 2020; Blondin, 2021). While much of this literature focuses on contexts not affected by violent conflict, the concept of lifescape is particularly relevant for explaining why community members choose to remain despite ongoing violence and state neglect in Nigeria's Middle Belt. As in other forms of crisis migration, social networks play a vital role in sustaining the lifescape. Yet, in the study locations, it is not only these social networks but also the community itself, its landscape, culture, and the human and non-human elements that compose its lifescape that shape their determination to stay put on their ancestral land. Thus, the desire to sustain their lifescape emerges as a central factor motivating their decision to stay put on their ancestral land, thereby preserving their traditional way of life even amid state neglect and ongoing or threatened eco-violence.

According to Ochonu (2018), a sense of collective responsibility exists among the community members of the Idoma people, resulting from their having an *honour code* that obliges certain members to protect the rest of the community. The Odi community, which is located in Agatu, is part of the Idoma people in the Middle Belt. Concerns for the welfare of immediate family members and a sense of community have been widely cited in the literature as primary motivators for communities to stay put (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2020; Blondin, 2021b; Husa &

Morse, 2020; Krakowski, 2017; Morse & Mudgett, 2018). The honour code, an integral part of the Idoma people's value system, functions as both a 'retain factor' and an 'internal boost' (cultural tool), motivating and supporting them in sustaining their lifescape and reinforcing their commitment to maintain active immobility. As a 'retain factor', the honour code fosters the belief among community members that their village will be defended, making life within their conflict-affected community appear viable and worth sustaining, while enhancing their sense of safety and stability. In addition, the honour code serves as an 'internal boost' that instils a sense of duty (agency and moral obligation) to the *ach'anyilo* and 'youths'³ (village warriors), motivating them to undertake collective actions aimed at protecting the community in order to preserve their lifescape.

Being displaced is more than just the loss of a home; it is also a struggle to find a place in the world where meaningful action and togetherness are possible (Turton, 2005, p. 258). For community members, displacement represents more than the loss of physical space; it entails the erosion of social togetherness and the inability to live meaningfully within familiar communal settings, in other words, the loss of their lifescape. This understanding underpins their quest for active immobility. This understanding resonates with Casey's (2001, p. 406) view that '... there is no place without self; and no self without place'.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper demonstrates why some communities in the Middle Belt choose to remain on their ancestral land amid violent conflict, even in the absence of state protection. Two primary factors influence this decision: the perception of land as essential to communal identity and the commitment to maintaining their established way of life within their ancestral territory. These findings align with the Resilience–Accessibility Framework, which posits that immobility in conflict-affected regions is influenced by agency, resilience, and access to resources that could enable communities to withstand structural and environmental challenges. In this context, the ability to confront obstacles resulting from state neglect and persistent violence illustrates community agency and highlights deficiencies on the part of the state.

³ The 'youths' are young men who protect the community. The *ach'anyilo* (singular: *och'onnyilo*) are experienced warriors who also defend the community using automatic firearms and are believed to possess voodoo powers.

Previous studies on contestations over land have also suggested how identity is connected to land and survival (Berry, 2009; Sullivan & Rosenberg, 2018; Vorster, 2019). In South Africa, the land is seen ‘... as a space of rootedness, a locus of life and a place of history-making where identities are formed’ (Vorster, 2019, p. 4). In this way, the land provides these community members with a social space within their society and a location for the formation and sustenance of their identity. Similarly, scholars have observed that identity is often tied to place (Bar-tal, 2007; Hernández et al., 2007; Korpela, 1989, p. 245; Obradović, 2016; Onwuzuruigbo, 2013; Sullivan & Rosenberg, 2018; Tonah, 2002). While these studies establish the interrelationship between identity and place, this paper extends the discussion by drawing from communities that continue to live within areas affected by violent conflicts. Despite the persistent violence and displacement risks they face, few studies have examined such contexts through the lens of (im)mobility. By focusing on these communities, this paper presents an original perspective on the literature regarding the connection between communal identity and land in influencing the decision to stay put in conflict-affected areas.

Lubkemann (2008) observes that displaced people in Mozambique during the civil war (1977–1992) experienced a disruption of their *lifescape*, depriving them of the symbolic resources that sustained their way of life. In a similar vein, this paper argues that the respondents expressed comparable concerns about losing access to the symbolic dimensions of their lives if displaced. For these communities, displacement from their ancestral land would rupture vital communal connections and erode their capacity to live meaningfully. Their continued habitation of their ancestral land, therefore, reflects agentic *resilience* influenced by *access* to both material and symbolic resources.

The symbolic dimensions of life discussed in this paper, which influence immobility, correspond to the intangible factors shaping mobility identified in existing studies (see, Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023; Kwateng-yeboah & Kwateng-yeboah, 2025; Mazzilli et al., 2024). These intangible factors include emotions, feelings, and beliefs. While these studies primarily examine mobility, this paper advances the discussion in this area by demonstrating how both the material and symbolic dimensions of life (tangible and intangible factors) shape immobility. In doing so, it contributes to this body of work by showing how these dimensions jointly influence the decision to remain, even in areas affected by violent conflict.

This paper demonstrates that remaining in areas affected by violent conflict does not inherently indicate acquiescence; instead, it can constitute a deliberate and collective exercise of agency

in response to adversity. While the data are limited to two local communities, the study provides insights that reinforce Müller-Funk's (2023, p. 213) argument regarding the value of qualitative research in conflict-affected contexts. Further research should investigate *how* such communities maintain active immobility and adapt to persistent challenges despite no support from their government.

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