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Disaster and Inequality in Rural Nigeria: Flooding, Food Security, and the Politics of Relief in Ibaji

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Abstract
This paper interrogates the relationship between environmental disaster, rural inequality, and the politics of relief distribution in Kogi State using Ibaji, a flood-prone agrarian community in Kogi State, Nigeria, as a study. The study area was bedeviled by the 2012 flood, which was reported as one of the most devastating disasters in Nigeria's recent history. The impact of this catastrophe cut across social and spatial divides. This differential impact, along with the interventions by state and non-state actors and their implications, has remained insufficiently explained in the existing literature. Arising from this problematic, this paper maintained that the disaster did not merely disrupt livelihoods but exposed and deepened pre-existing structural inequalities between urban and rural populations through the theoretical lenses of moral economy in crisis and entitlement failure. The study demonstrates that the vulnerability of the population in Ibaji was less a function of environmental exposure alone and more a consequence of systemic neglect and unequal access to support mechanisms. In addition, the paper adopted a historical approach to the collation of its data, relying on interviews, government reports, and secondary literature, and included a descriptive analysis of local experiences. The paper qualitatively, situates Ibaji within the broader debates on disaster vulnerability and rural marginality, while foreground the lived realities of peasant households whose coping strategies reflected both resilience and structural exclusion. It concludes that addressing natural disasters and food insecurity in flood-prone regions requires not only technical interventions but also a reconfiguration of governance frameworks to ensure equitable disaster response and rural inclusion.

Keywords: Disaster, Inequality, Flooding, Food Security and Ibaji

Introduction

Environmental disasters have increasingly become a defining feature of contemporary African societies. Despite this, the impact and response of state and non-state actors to disasters have remained unevenly distributed across populations in Africa.[1] In Nigeria, flooding represents one of the most recurrent and devastating ecological hazards, with the 2012 flood widely regarded as the worst in over four decades, affecting more than thirty states and displacing millions of people.[2] While national narratives often frame such disasters in aggregate terms, focusing on statistics of displacement, infrastructure damage, and economic loss, these macro-level accounts tend to obscure the uneven experiences of different social groups. Rural communities, particularly those dependent on subsistence agriculture, often bear a disproportionate burden due to their ecological exposure, economic vulnerability, and limited access to institutional support.[3] It is within this broader context that the experience of Ibaji, a predominantly agrarian region in Kogi State, becomes analytically significant.

The central argument of this paper is that the 2012 flood in Ibaji was not merely a natural disaster but a socially differentiated crisis that exposed the structural inequalities embedded within Nigeria's disaster response framework. The study was carried out through the historical approach and the conceptual lenses of moral economy in crisis and entitlement failure with a view to demonstrate how the vulnerability of Ibaji peasants cannot be adequately explained by environmental factors alone. This was because, in the case of Ibaji, the flood disrupted production systems and undermined access mechanisms, thereby precipitating a dual crisis of availability and entitlement. The implication of this, has earlier been demonstrated by Amartya Sen's entitlement failure theory where he averred that food insecurity arises not from absolute scarcity but from the inability of individuals to command access to food through legitimate means.[4]

Sen's perspective was further enriched by the concept of moral economy, as articulated by Thompson and Scott, whose emphasizes were on the prescriptive expectations that govern economic relations within communities.[5] To them, these expectations often give rise to collective survival strategies that challenge market logic and state neglect. In Ibaji, the emergence of communal coping mechanisms such as shared fishing and redistribution of

- 1 Christopher Ihinegbu. 2021. Conceptualization and Management of Disasters and Climate change events in Africa: A Review. *SN Appl. Sci.* 3, 848. doi.org/10.1007/s42452-021-04829-5
- 2 Emergency Appeal Operation update- Nigeria: Flood. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 27 December, 2012
- 3 Ottah, Gabriel Alhassan. 2017. Impact of Radio Kogi's Flood Disaster Awareness Campaign on Residents of Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH), Ethiopia*, Vol.6(3). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v6i3.7
- 4 Amartya Sen. 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 45-51
- 5 Thompson, E.P. 1971. *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*. Past & Present, 50(1). https://doi.org/10.1093/past/50.1.76

resources reflects a form of moral economy activated under conditions of environmental and institutional stress.[6] However, rather than romanticizing these practices, this paper situates them within a broader context of structural abandonment, where communal resilience compensates for state failure.

Despite a growing body of literature on flooding in Nigeria, significant gaps remain in understanding how disasters intersect with rural inequality and food systems. Existing studies have largely focused on urban flooding, infrastructural damage, and climate variability, often neglecting the specific experiences of rural agrarian communities. In some cases, where rural areas were considered, the emphasis tends to be on vulnerability mapping and risk assessment, with limited attention paid to the socio-political dynamics of relief distribution and the transformation of local food economies. More critical is the fact that few studies have examined Ibaji, despite its strategic importance as a major food-producing region within Kogi State. Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative historical approach and relied on a combination of primary and secondary sources. These include government reports such as the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, publications on flooding and food security, and existing studies on Ibaji and Kogi State. A qualitative approach was used to report local experiences. Through this, the socio-economic dynamics of the flood and its aftermath were captured. By integrating empirical data with theoretical insights, the paper moved beyond a descriptive analysis of disaster impacts and offered a more nuanced understanding of the relationship among environmental shocks, social inequality, and state responses.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge environmental history, political economy, and rural studies within the Nigerian context. By foregrounding the experience of Ibaji, the paper challenged dominant narratives that privilege urban perspectives and underscored the need for more inclusive approaches to disaster management. It argued that addressing food insecurity in flood-prone regions requires not only technical solutions such as improved drainage and early warning systems but also administrative reforms that address underlying inequalities, vulnerability, and response capacity. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on disaster governance and rural marginality in Africa.

The 2012 Flood in Ibaji and Rural Vulnerability

The 2012 flood in Nigeria marked a critical environmental disaster whose consequences were felt across multiple ecological zones, yet nowhere were its effects more profoundly experienced than in riverine agrarian communities such as Ibaji in Kogi State.[7] Located within the lower Niger–Benue confluence basin, Ibaji's ecological configuration is characterised by extensive floodplains, tributaries, and seasonal wetlands. This has historically and economically shaped

- 6 Oral interview with Pharm. Josiah Udokwu in Ibaji, on December 27th, 2023,age 53 years.
- 7 Lingering Hardship after Nigeria Floods. *Daily Trust*. 19 Feb. 2014. Retrieved from www.dailytrust.com/lingering-hardship-after-nigeria-floods/

both its agricultural productivity and vulnerability to hydrological shocks.[8] While seasonal flooding has long been integral to local farming systems, particularly in the cultivation of rice and yam, the magnitude and duration of the 2012 flood exceeded historical patterns and hence, overwhelmed the existing local adaptive capacities.[9] According to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA 2012), the flood affected over 30 states nationwide, with Kogi State among the worst hit due to its geographical positioning along the Niger and Benue rivers.[10] In Ibaji specifically, approximately 80 percent of the landmass was submerged, resulting in the destruction of farmlands, homes, and food reserves. This specifically transformed the existing water bodies in the area from being ecologically advantageous to a catastrophe, thus underscoring the paradox of riverine livelihoods, where the same natural systems that sustained production can also precipitate large-scale disruption when destabilized.

Be that as it may, the origins of the 2012 flood can be traced to a combination of climatic and hydrological factors, including above-average rainfall across West Africa and the controlled release of water from upstream dams in Nigeria and neighboring countries.[11] The Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET) had earlier issued warnings in its 2012 Seasonal Rainfall Prediction, highlighting the likelihood of excessive rainfall and potential flooding along major river basins.[12] Despite these warnings, institutional preparedness remained limited, particularly in rural areas where early warning dissemination and disaster planning mechanisms were weak.[13] The situation was further compounded by the release of water from the Kainji and Jebba dams, as well as from Lagodo Dam in Cameroon. As a result, the water level in the downstream area rose beyond its banks. Studies by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Federal Government of Nigeria's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment confirmed that the confluence of the aforementioned factors was responsible for the unprecedented flood across the Niger–Benue corridor.[14] In Ibaji, the cumulative effect was a prolonged inundation that lasted several weeks, disrupting not only agricultural cycles but also patterns of settlement and mobility.

At this juncture, suffice it to say that the impact of the flood in Ibaji was not uniform but varied along the existing social and economic hierarchies within the community. Peasant farmers, who constitute the majority of the population, were disproportionately affected due to their reliance

- 8 Ottah, Gabriel Alhassan. 2017. Impact of Radio Kogi's Flood Disaster Awareness Campaign on Residents of Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH), Ethiopia*, Vol.6(3). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v6i3.7
- 9 Oral interview with Kala Atama, a farmer at Ejule-Ojebe on 28 December 2023,age 51
- 10 Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET). 2012. *Seasonal Rainfall Prediction (SRP).* Abuja: NIMET.
- 11 Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET). 2012. *Seasonal Rainfall Prediction (SRP).* Abuja: NIMET.
- 12 Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET). 2012. *Seasonal Rainfall Prediction (SRP).* Abuja: NIMET.
- 13 Oral interview with Gariel Udokwu in Ibaji on November 20th, 2021, a civil servant, aged 63
- 14 Emergency Appeal Operation update- Nigeria: Flood. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 27 December, 2012

on land-based livelihoods and their residence in low-lying areas. As reported by Edina Uteno in Ibaji, "everything we had was inside the water, our farms, our houses, even the food we kept for the year; we had nothing to fall back on."[15] This testimony captured the depth of loss experienced by rural households whose survival depended almost entirely on subsistence production. Unlike urban residents in Lokoja, whose primary losses were limited to residential flooding and temporary displacement, Ibaji farmers faced a complete collapse of their livelihood base. The destruction of both standing crops and stored food meant that households were simultaneously deprived of current consumption and future security, thereby intensifying their vulnerability.

Beyond material losses, the 2012 flood also disrupted the social and institutional structures that underpin rural life in Ibaji. Schools, health centers, and local markets were either submerged or rendered inaccessible, effectively suspending everyday activities and social interactions.[16] The displacement of approximately 90 percent of the population into temporary camps in Idah, Anambra, and Edo States further fragmented community networks and exposed residents to new forms of hardship. The conditions in these camps were widely reported to be overcrowded and under-resourced, with inadequate provision of food, sanitation, and healthcare services.[17] An interview with a displaced woman in one of the camps in Idah, she reported that "we were many in one place, but the food was not enough; sometimes we waited all day and still slept hungry."[18] This report revealed the gap between official narratives of relief provision and the lived realities of affected populations. In addition, there was the issue of inequalities and classification within the displaced community, where access to limited resources became heavily contested.

The differential impact of the flood between Ibaji and urban centers such as Lokoja raises an important question about spatial inequality in disaster experience and response. While Lokoja received significant media attention due to the flooding of major infrastructure, including the Lokoja–Abuja highway, the situation in Ibaji remained largely underreported. This disparity in visibility had implications for the allocation of relief resources, as areas that attracted greater public and political attention were more likely to receive prompt intervention. Scholars such as Ajayi et al, Ayuba, and Denis have noted that disaster response in Nigeria often exhibits an urban bias, with rural communities receiving less attention despite experiencing more severe

- 15 Oral interview with Edina Uteno in Ibaji on November 22nd, 2021, a civil servant, aged 63
- 16 *Nigeria Post-Disaster Needs Assessment 2012 Floods*. A Report by the Federal Government of Nigeria with Technical Support from the World Bank, EU, UN, and other Partners. Retrieved from www.gfdrr.org/sites/default/files/publication/pda-2012-nigeria.pdf
- 17 Emergency Appeal Operation update- Nigeria: Flood. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 27 December, 2012
- 18 Oral interview with Mrs. Ukwenya Akwu at Idah on November 30th, 2012, trader, age: 53

impacts.[19] In the case of Ibaji, this bias was evident in both the scale and timing of assistance, reinforcing existing patterns of marginalisation within the state.

Aside from environmental factors, the role of administrative factors in disasters such as flooding remains inadequately explained. This is because human activities and governance failures play a significant role in shaping vulnerability. While Ibaji's flooding cannot be attributed to urban encroachment or poor drainage, a common explanation in urban contexts, it is nonetheless linked to broader issues of environmental management and regional coordination. The release of water from dams within and outside the country, for instance, reflects decisions made at higher levels of governance that have downstream consequences for local communities. This was further corroborated by Etuonovbe, who asserted that flooding in Nigeria often results from both natural processes and human interventions, including infrastructure and policy choices.[20] The absence of effective coordination between upstream and downstream actors, as well as the lack of adequate compensation mechanisms for affected communities, highlights the structural dimensions of disaster risk in the country.

Besides, the historical relationship between Ibaji communities and their environment further complicates the narrative of vulnerability. For generations, the people of Ibaji have adapted to seasonal flooding through a range of practices, including the timing of planting cycles, the use of flood-resistant crops, and the integration of fishing into their livelihood strategies.[21] These adaptations reflect a deep ecological knowledge and a degree of resilience that has enabled the community to coexist with its environment. However, the scale of the 2012 flood disrupted these established patterns, rendering traditional coping mechanisms insufficient. As observed by Paul Edino, while seasonal flooding can enhance agricultural productivity by depositing nutrient-rich alluvial soil, extreme flooding events can have the opposite effect by destroying crops and eroding soil quality.[22] In this sense, the 2012 flood represents not just a continuation of environmental variability but a shift that challenges the sustainability of existing livelihood systems. Unlike gradual environmental changes, shocks such as the 2012 flood produced sudden, widespread disruptions that exceeded the adaptive capacity of affected communities in Ibaji and elsewhere. In Ibaji, the flood not only destroyed physical assets but also undermined

- 19 Ajayi, O. O., S. B. Agbola, B. F. Olokesusi, B. Wahab, O. J. Taiwo, M. Gbadegesin, D. O. Taiwo, et al. 2012. "Flood Management in an Urban Setting: A Case Study of Ibadan Metropolis." *Hydrology for Disaster Management: Special Publication of the Nigerian Association of Hydrological Sciences.;* Kwari, Joshua Williams, Solomon Ayuba, and Latseumso David Denis. 2015. "Cross-Case Assessment of Impacts of Flooding on Socio-Economic Development and Agriculture in Kogi State." *International Journal of Advanced Research* 3 (8): 151–162.
- 20 Etuonovbe, Angela Kesiena. 2011. The Devastating Effect of Flooding in Nigeria. A Paper presented at the FIG Working Week 2011, *Bridging the Gap between Cultures*, Marrakech, Morocco, May 18-22. Retrieved from www.fig.net/resources/proceedings/fig_proceedings/fig2011/papers/ts06j/ts06j_etuonovbe_5002.pdf?utm_source
- 21 Oral interview with Simon Ogala on 22nd January, 2024 at Odogwu, farmer, age 47.
- 22 Oral interview with Paul Edino on 22nd January, 2024 at Odogwu, farmer, age 47.

the social and economic relations that facilitate recovery. The loss of livestock, tools, and seeds, for example, reduced households' ability to resume farming in subsequent seasons, thereby prolonging the disaster's effects.[23]

Flooding, Food Security, and Entitlement Failure in Ibaji

The relationship between flooding and food security in Ibaji must be understood not merely in terms of physical destruction but as a systemic disruption of agrarian production, distribution, and access. Prior to the 2012 flood, Ibaji occupied a strategic position within the food economy of Kogi State and the wider Igalaland region.[24] Its ecological endowment, particularly the fertile alluvial soils deposited by seasonal flooding created the enablement for large-scale cultivation of rice and yam, making the area a critical food-producing hub.[25] Studies such as Boston have long noted the complementary agricultural system within Igalaland, where Ibaji functioned as a lowland producer of rice and sea food while upland areas such as Ankpa and Dekina specialised in tree crops and grains.[26] This interdependence fostered a relatively stable regional food system that was anchored on exchange and ecological diversity. However, the 2012 flood disrupted this equilibrium by simultaneously undermining production and severing access to existing distribution networks.

Food security, as conceptualized in development literature, rests on three interrelated pillars: availability, accessibility, and utilization.[27] In Ibaji, all three dimensions were severely compromised by the 2012 flood. The destruction of farmlands and stored produce directly affected availability, while the displacement of farmers and the collapse of local markets limited accessibility. Utilization was also affected, as overcrowded camp conditions and inadequate nutrition undermined households' ability to maintain healthy consumption patterns. Yet, as Amartya Sen has argued, food insecurity is rarely a simple function of supply shortages; rather, it reflects a breakdown in the entitlement systems through which individuals secure access to food.[28] This breakdown was starkly evident as households that had previously relied on self-production were suddenly forced into market dependence without the means to participate

- 23 Emergency Appeal Operation update- Nigeria: Flood. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 27 December, 2012; also see Wisner, Ben, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis. 2004. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- 24 Felix Ayegba Sanni and Ugbedeojo Musa. 2025. Enhancing sustainable Agriculture through Deployment of 5G Technology in Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi State. *Asian Journal of Advances in Agricultural Research*, Vol. 25(12). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.9734/ajaar/2025/v25i12693
- 25 Ugbede Joseph Ineke. 2025. The Food Economy of Colonial Igalaland, 1900-1960. *Economic History of Developing Regions*. https://doi.org/10.1080/20780389.2025.2504681
- 26 Boston, J. S. 1968. *The Igala Kingdom.* Ibadan: Oxford University Press. 3
- 27 Simon, George-André. 2012. "Food Security: Definition, Four Dimensions and History." SUPAgro Montpellier Working Paper. 3-4
- 28 Amartya Sen. 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 45-51

effectively in exchange relations. Before the flood, the majority of households operated within what may be described as a subsistence-entitlement framework, in which access to food was secured primarily through direct production. Peasant farmers cultivated rice, yam, and other staples not only for household consumption but also for exchange in regional markets such as Idah, Onitsha, and Aganebode. As one elderly farmer recalled in an oral interview, "we did not depend on buying food; our farms gave us everything we needed, and what we did not eat, we sold."[29] This system, while vulnerable to environmental fluctuations, provided a degree of autonomy and resilience, as households were not primarily dependent on market forces. The flood, however, dismantled this system by destroying both crops in the field and reserves stored for future consumption. In doing so, it eliminated the primary entitlement mechanism available to rural households.

Besides, the post-flood period witnessed a dramatic shift from production-based entitlements to market-based dependence, a transition that proved deeply problematic for displaced populations. With farms destroyed and income sources disrupted, households lacked the purchasing power required to access food through markets. This situation aligns with Sen's argument that famine and food crises often occur not because food is unavailable but because individuals lack the means to obtain it.[30] Empirical evidence from the aftermath of the flood indicated that between 60 and 98 percent of affected households relied on market purchases for food, despite having limited or no income.[31] At the same time, food prices increased due to reduced supply and logistical challenges, further constraining access. This was further elaborated by one of the displaced populations who explained that, "even when food was in Idah, the closest market to us, we could not buy it; we had no money, and everything was expensive." [32]This illustrated the core dynamic of entitlement failure, where the collapse of production was compounded by the inability to engage in exchange.

The transformation of Ibaji from a food-surplus region to a food-deficit area also had broader implications for regional food security. This was because, prior to the flood, the area was estimated to contribute a significant share of staple food production in Kogi State, particularly rice and yam. The disruption of this production not only affected local households but also reduced food availability in surrounding markets, thereby contributing to price inflation and supply shortages. Research on flooding in Kogi State by Kwari, Ayuba, and Denis reaffirmed that agricultural losses during the 2012 flood had cascading effects on both local and regional economies.[33] As a result of this, the 2012 flood in Ibaji was not an isolated event but part of a

- 29 Oral interview with Alhassan Ogwu in Ejule Onu on December 27th, 2023, farmer, age 49
- 30 Amartya Sen. 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 45-51
- 31 Oral interview with Pharm. Josiah Udokwu in Ibaji, on December 27th, 2023, age 53 years.
- 32 Oral interview with Mrs. Martha Ikwuji at Idah on December 30th, 2023, age 60
- 33 Kwari, Joshua Williams, Solomon Ayuba, and Latseumso David Denis. 2015. "Cross-Case Assessment of Impacts of Flooding on Socio-Economic Development and Agriculture in Kogi State." *International Journal of Advanced Research* 3 (8): 151–162.

wider crisis that exposed the vulnerability of food systems that depended on ecologically fragile zones. In addition, the spatial dynamics of food access further exacerbated inequality in the post-disaster context. While food remained available in urban centers and in relatively unaffected areas, the displacement of Ibaji residents to camps created logistical and economic barriers to accessing it. The physical separation from farmlands and markets meant that households had to depend on external supply systems, which were often inadequate and poorly coordinated.[34] This was because despite the presence of the government and humanitarian interventions, most of the materials provided were insufficient compared to the displaced population and their needs. According to reports from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, food distribution in camps was irregular and inadequate, with many households receiving far less than the minimum nutritional requirements.[35] This gap between need and provision underscores the limitations of formal relief mechanisms in addressing entitlement failure.

The ecological dimension of food insecurity in Ibaji also encompasses the loss of complementary livelihood activities, such as fishing and livestock rearing. While flooding can sometimes enhance fishing opportunities, the scale and intensity of the 2012 event disrupted normal patterns and limited access to fishing grounds. Similarly, the loss of livestock through drowning and displacement removed an important buffer against food shortages. These losses reduced the diversity of livelihood strategies available to households, thereby increasing their dependence on a single, fragile source of food access.

In synthesizing these dynamics, it can be argued that the food crisis in Ibaji in the aftermath of the 2012 flood was not simply a consequence of environmental destruction but the result of a complex interaction between ecological shock and socio-economic structures. This is attributed to the flood acting as a trigger that exposed underlying vulnerabilities, particularly the dependence on a narrow set of entitlement mechanisms and the absence of effective institutional support. By integrating the concept of entitlement failure with empirical evidence from Ibaji, this section demonstrates that food insecurity in disaster contexts must be understood as a relational phenomenon shaped by access, power, and distribution.

Coping Strategies, Moral Economy in Crisis, and the Politics of Relief

The immediate aftermath of the 2012 flood in Ibaji was characterized by a profound struggle for survival, as displaced populations sought to navigate the collapse of their traditional livelihood systems. With farmlands submerged and food reserves destroyed, the most pressing challenges faced by the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were access to food and shelter. The Kogi State Government, in collaboration with federal agencies such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and humanitarian organisations, established temporary camps in

- 34 Oral interview with Pharm. Josiah Udokwu in Ibaji, on December 27th, 2023, age 53 years.
- 35 Emergency Appeal Operation update- Nigeria: Flood. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 27 December, 2012; also see Wisner, Ben, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis. 2004. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

locations such as Idah, Anambra, and Edo States.[36] While these interventions provided a basic framework for accommodation, the conditions within the camps were widely reported to be inadequate, with issues of overcrowding, poor sanitation, and insufficient food supply. These shortcomings created a context in which formal relief mechanisms were unable to fully address the needs of the displaced population, necessitating alternative coping and adaptation strategies.

Within this context of institutional insufficiency, the displaced population in Ibaji activated a range of communal survival strategies that reflect the dynamics of a crisis-ridden moral economy.[37] The concept of moral economy, associated with the works of E. P. Thompson emphasised the role of shared norms and collective expectations in regulating economic behaviour, particularly in times of hardship.[38] In Ibaji, these norms manifested in practices of resource sharing, collective labour, and mutual support, which enabled households to mitigate the worst effects of food scarcity. One of the most notable strategies was organizing group fishing activities in flooded areas, where displaced individuals pooled labor and resources to harvest available aquatic life. As reported by Achenyo, "we went together to fish, and whatever we caught, we shared among ourselves; that was how many of us survived."[39] This practice not only provided a supplementary source of food but also reinforced social cohesion within the displaced community.

The emergence of the above communal approach must be understood not as an expression of rural solidarity but as a pragmatic response to structural exclusion. In the absence of adequate state support, the displaced population relied on internal redistribution mechanisms rooted in pre-existing social relations. These mechanisms extended beyond food acquisition to include the sharing of relief materials, accommodation, and information. For instance, individuals who received assistance from relatives or external networks often redistributed a portion of these resources within the camp, thereby ensuring a more equitable distribution. In addition to collective strategies, households employed individual coping mechanisms, including asset liquidation and the reconfiguration of consumption patterns.[40] Many displaced persons reported selling personal belongings such as bicycles, motorcycles, and household items in order to purchase food and other necessities. While this strategy provided short-term relief, it also had long-term implications for recovery, as the loss of productive assets reduced households' ability to rebuild their livelihoods after the flood. This process of asset depletion is a common feature of disaster-induced poverty, where coping strategies in the immediate aftermath of a shock can

- 36 Oral interview with Pharm. Josiah Udokwu in Ibaji, on December 27th, 2023,age 53 years.
- 37 Oral interview with Pharm. Josiah Udokwu in Ibaji, on December 27th, 2023,age 53 years.
- 38 Thompson, E. P. 1971. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past & Present* 50 (1): 76–136.
- 39 Oral interview with Achenyo Inama on 29th December, 2023 at Ejule Ojebe, farmer, age 42
- 40 Oral interview with Achenyo Inama on 29th December, 2023 at Ejule Ojebe, farmer, age 42

exacerbate vulnerability in the longer term.[41] In Ibaji, the sale of assets represented a form of distress coping that underscored the depth of the crisis.

Despite these adaptive responses, the politics of relief distribution remained a central factor in shaping the displaced population's experience. Evidence from government reports and media sources suggests that relief resources were unevenly distributed, with a disproportionate allocation to urban centers such as Lokoja. While official statements indicated that funds and materials were disbursed across affected areas, many Ibaji residents reported receiving little or no direct assistance. This perception of neglect was further reinforced by the construction of post-flood housing estates in Lokoja, despite the city's relatively lower level of destruction compared to rural areas.[42] These disparities raise important questions about the criteria used in allocating relief resources and the extent to which political considerations influence disaster response. The uneven distribution of relief can be interpreted through the lens of political economy, where access to state resources is mediated by visibility, influence, and proximity to centers of power. Urban areas, by virtue of their infrastructural significance and media visibility, are more likely to attract attention and intervention, while rural communities remain marginalized. In Ibaji, this dynamic was evident in both the scale of assistance provided and the timing of intervention. The delay in relief delivery, coupled with inadequate supplies, exacerbated the suffering of the displaced population and undermined their capacity to recover. This aligns with broader critiques of disaster governance in Nigeria, which highlight corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability in relief management.

The long-term recovery process in Ibaji further illustrates the interplay between communal resilience and institutional failure. Following their return from the camps, many households engaged in collective efforts to rebuild homes and restore farmlands. Practices such as rotational labor, in which community members worked together to rebuild houses and clear fields, became central to the recovery process. These efforts reflect the persistence of moral economy principles beyond the immediate crisis and underscore the capacity of rural communities to mobilize internal resources in the face of adversity.

On the whole, the coping strategies adopted by the displaced population in Ibaji reveal both the strengths and limitations of community-based resilience in the face of environmental disaster. While the activation of moral economy practices enabled households to survive the immediate crisis, these strategies were insufficient to address the structural conditions that produced vulnerability in the first place. The politics of relief distribution, characterized by spatial inequality and institutional inadequacy, further compounded the challenges faced by rural communities.

- 41 Wisner, Ben, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, and Ian Davis. 2004. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- 42 Oral interview with Monday Uteo on 25th January, 2024 at Lokoja, Businessman, age 53

Conclusion

This study argued that the 2012 flood in Ibaji was more than an episode of environmental disruption due to how it exposed the deep entanglement between ecological shock and structural inequality in rural Nigeria. Rather than acting as a neutral natural occurrence, the flood served as a social stress test that exposed the uneven distribution of vulnerability across geography, class, and livelihood systems. In Ibaji, where subsistence agriculture underpins economic and social life, the disaster did not merely damage property but dismantled an entire system of production and survival. The destruction of farmlands, the loss of food reserves, and the displacement of households transformed a once food-secure agrarian landscape into a site of acute deprivation. In this sense, the flood did not create inequality; it exposed and intensified long-standing structural imbalances.

At the analytical level, the crisis in Ibaji is best understood through the lens of entitlement failure, as articulated by Amartya Sen. The collapse of food security was not simply the result of insufficient food supply, but of the breakdown of the mechanisms through which households accessed food. Before the flood, peasant farmers relied on direct production as their primary means of sustenance, sustaining a relatively stable subsistence system. The flood disrupted this foundation by destroying both current output and future productive capacity, forcing households to rely on markets without the means to participate in exchange. The resulting gap between food availability and accessibility underscores a critical insight: in disaster contexts, hunger is less a function of scarcity than of exclusion from systems of access and control. Complementing this is the emergence of a moral economy in crisis, which shaped local responses to displacement and scarcity. In the absence of adequate state intervention, households mobilized communal strategies such as shared fishing, collective consumption, and mutual aid—to sustain life under extreme conditions. These practices reflect deeply rooted norms of reciprocity and social obligation, revealing the enduring resilience of rural communities.

The paper contended that the uneven politics of relief distribution further underscores how disaster response can reproduce existing inequalities. Evidence from this study shows that relief efforts were shaped not only by need but by spatial visibility and political centrality. Urban centers such as Lokoja, which attracted media and administrative attention, received disproportionate support compared to rural areas like Ibaji, where destruction was more extensive but less visible. This urban bias reflects broader governance patterns in Nigeria, where access to state resources is mediated by proximity to power. The allocation of post-disaster resources, including housing and financial assistance, thus reinforced rather than mitigated inequality, raising serious concerns about the equity and accountability of disaster management frameworks.

Ultimately, the experience of Ibaji compels a rethinking of how disasters are understood and addressed in rural Africa. The 2012 flood was not only an environmental crisis but also a political revelation, exposing the hierarchies that shape access to protection, relief, and recovery. While communal resilience enabled short-term survival, it cannot substitute for a responsive and equitable state. Responding to environmental shocks and preventing the recurrence of such unequal outcomes will require more than technical solutions; it demands structural

transformation. Disaster governance must shift from reactive intervention to proactive inclusion, prioritizing vulnerable rural communities and embedding equity at the center of policy. Only then can future crises be managed in ways that do not reproduce the very inequalities they reveal.