

## **A Critical Analysis of the Implications of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Benue and Plateau State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

**T**he persistent conflict between farmers and herders in Benue and Plateau States has evolved into a major threat to human security, food stability, and communal coexistence in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. This study critically analyses the root causes, dynamics, and far-reaching implications of the conflict. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, the research examines how environmental degradation, resource competition, weak policy implementation, ethnic tensions, and the proliferation of small arms have exacerbated violence between agrarian and pastoralist communities. The study finds that the conflict has led to widespread displacement, loss of lives and livelihoods, disruptions in agricultural productivity, and a deepening of inter-group distrust. It also highlights the socio-political consequences of the crisis, including governance challenges and the strain on state security apparatuses. The paper concludes by evaluating current mitigation strategies and recommending more inclusive, community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, strengthened security presence, and sustainable land-use policies. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and development actors aiming to foster peace and socio-economic resilience in the affected states.

**Keywords:** Farmers-Herders Conflict, Benue State, Plateau State, Communal Violence, Security

### **Introduction**

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria, particularly in Benue and Plateau States, has become one of the most pressing security and socio-economic challenges confronting the country. Traditionally, the relationship between these two groups was symbiotic, with herders relying on crop residues for their cattle and farmers benefiting from manure left by cattle. However, over the past two decades, this relationship has deteriorated into violent confrontations, leading to significant loss of lives, destruction of properties, and displacement of communities (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

Several factors contribute to the intensification of the conflict. Chief among them are desertification in the northern regions, population pressure, and the expansion of farmlands, which have collectively forced herders to migrate southward into the Middle Belt in search of pasture and water (Tenuche & Ifatimehin, 2009). This migration has increasingly brought them into conflict with sedentary farming communities in Benue and Plateau States. These two states, characterized by fertile lands and ethnic diversity, have become hotspots for recurring violence between pastoralist Fulani herders and indigenous farmers (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The conflict is further exacerbated by weak governance structures, poor land-use policies, and the proliferation of small arms among civilians. Often, the Nigerian state's response has been

reactive, with security interventions largely failing to prevent cyclical violence (Adisa, 2012). Moreover, ethno-religious dimensions and political interests have often complicated efforts at peacebuilding, leading to the perception of government bias and further alienation of affected communities (Iro, 2004).

In Benue State, the implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law in 2017 was intended to curb the conflict. However, the law has also led to increased tensions, with herders viewing it as exclusionary, while farmers see it as a necessary step to protect their livelihoods (Olayoku, 2014). Similarly, in Plateau State, historical grievances and contested claims over land have made reconciliation efforts difficult and fragile. This study aims to critically analyze the implications of the farmers-herders conflict in Benue and Plateau States, focusing on its impact on human security, agricultural productivity, and community cohesion. It also evaluates existing conflict mitigation strategies and proposes more sustainable and inclusive approaches for lasting peace.

### **Conceptual Review**

Conflict refers to a situation in which two or more parties pursue incompatible goals, interests, or ideologies, leading to tension, confrontation, or violence (Galtung, 1996). In the context of the farmers-herders conflict, the incompatibility arises primarily from competition over land and water resources, which are central to both agrarian and pastoralist livelihoods. This competition has escalated into violent clashes, particularly in areas with fragile governance structures and limited conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Resource competition theory posits that conflicts often arise when different groups compete for scarce natural resources such as land, water, and grazing fields (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Environmental changes, desertification, and population growth in Northern Nigeria have forced pastoralists southward, bringing them into direct conflict with farming communities in the Middle Belt, particularly in Benue and Plateau States. The absence of clearly defined grazing routes and the encroachment of farmlands into traditional migration paths have intensified these struggles.

Human security focuses on protecting individuals from critical and pervasive threats to their lives, livelihoods, and dignity (UNDP, 1994). The farmers-herders conflict severely undermines human security in affected regions, resulting in mass displacement, food insecurity, loss of income, psychological trauma, and disruption of education and healthcare services. In Benue and Plateau, communities have been destabilized, with significant declines in agricultural output and social cohesion. Communal violence refers to violent conflict between ethnic, religious, or cultural groups, often involving entire communities (Varshney, 2002).

The farmers-herders conflict has increasingly taken on a communal dimension, as herders (often associated with the Fulani ethnic group) and farming communities (mostly indigenous ethnic groups) perceive each other as existential threats. The ethnicization and politicization of the conflict have made resolution efforts more difficult, as grievances are often deep-rooted and intergenerational. Land tenure refers to the legal or customary rights individuals or groups hold over land. In Nigeria, the Land Use Act of 1978 vests ownership of land in the state, creating ambiguity and tension over access and usage (Omilola, 2010). Poor land administration, weak

enforcement of zoning laws, and the absence of inclusive land-use planning have contributed to disputes over territory, particularly in fertile areas like Benue and Plateau.

Ineffective land-use policies exacerbate competition and hinder conflict mitigation efforts. Pastoralism is a livelihood system based on the rearing and movement of livestock across large geographical areas, often seasonally. Sedentarism, on the other hand, involves settled farming communities with fixed boundaries. The clash between these two modes of life is central to the conflict. While pastoralists depend on open grazing routes, farmers require fenced and secure farmland. The lack of integration between these systems creates conditions for frequent disputes and violence (Blench, 2004). The farmers-herders conflict is a multidimensional issue involving environmental, socio-economic, and governance-related concepts. A deep understanding of these concepts—conflict, resource competition, human security, communal violence, land tenure, and livelihood systems—is essential for analyzing the root causes and implications of the conflict, and for crafting holistic and sustainable solutions.

### **Literature Review**

The farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly with the rising frequency and intensity of violent clashes in the Middle Belt region. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the nature, causes, and implications of the conflict, with a focus on Benue and Plateau States. Historically, the relationship between herders and farmers in Nigeria was cooperative and symbiotic, with both groups depending on each other for complementary resources such as manure and crop residues (Blench, 2004). However, this relationship has deteriorated into violent confrontations due to environmental degradation, population growth, and competition over land and water resources (Abbass, 2012). Benue and Plateau States have become epicenters of these violent clashes, largely because of their fertile lands and mixed ethnic populations.

Climate change and desertification have severely affected grazing lands in Northern Nigeria, forcing herders to migrate southward in search of pasture and water (Higazi, 2013). This migration has increased pressure on farmlands in Benue and Plateau, where local farmers view the encroachment by herders as a threat to their livelihoods. Several studies point out that the reduction in arable and grazing land has intensified competition and fostered resentment between the two groups (Ofem & Inyang, 2014).

Weak institutional frameworks, poor enforcement of environmental and land-use policies, and the absence of functional conflict resolution mechanisms have worsened the situation. For example, the Land Use Act of 1978 has been criticized for failing to clearly define land ownership rights, thereby fueling disputes (Omilola, 2010). Additionally, the anti-open grazing law enacted in Benue State in 2017, though aimed at resolving the conflict, has been met with resistance and has arguably escalated tensions (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

Many scholars emphasize the ethno-religious and political undertones of the conflict. The herders are predominantly Fulani Muslims, while most of the affected farming communities are Christians belonging to various ethnic minorities. This has transformed a resource-based conflict into one laced with identity politics, fueling cycles of revenge and communal violence

(International Crisis Group, 2017). Moreover, the perception of state bias—whether real or imagined—has further polarized the groups and undermined peace efforts (Olayoku, 2014).

The implications of the conflict are far-reaching. Numerous studies report massive displacement of people, destruction of property, loss of lives, and food insecurity in affected areas (Adisa, 2012; Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). These states have witnessed a decline in agricultural productivity, increased poverty, and disruption of social cohesion. School closures, restricted movement, and trauma among affected populations have compounded the humanitarian crisis. Interventions by state and non-state actors have yielded limited success. While military operations such as "Operation Whirl Stroke" have helped in quelling violence temporarily, long-term peace remains elusive (Hassan & Fabamise, 2018). Scholars argue for the need for community-based conflict resolution, inclusive policy-making, and the revitalization of traditional dispute mechanisms to restore trust and ensure lasting peace (Blench, 2004; Adisa, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Resource Scarcity Theory posits that violent conflict can arise when key natural resources—such as arable land and water—become scarce due to environmental degradation, population pressure, or climate change (Homer-Dixon, 1999). In the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, desertification and erratic rainfall have pushed herders further south into farming communities, intensifying competition over shrinking land and water resources. In Benue and Plateau States, the seasonal migration of herders into areas already under strain from farming expansion often leads to disputes. These escalations are particularly acute during the dry season when pasture and water become critically limited (Abbass, 2012). While useful in identifying environmental stressors, this theory often overlooks socio-political variables, such as governance failures, legal structures, and identity politics, which are deeply embedded in the Nigerian context.

Frustration-Aggression Theory suggests that aggression is a consequence of blocked goals or unmet expectations. When individuals or groups are frustrated in achieving essential needs—such as livelihood, protection, or justice—they may redirect aggression toward those perceived to be responsible (Dollard et al., 1939). This theory is applicable to both farmers and herders. Herders may resort to violence when denied grazing rights or when their cattle are stolen, while farmers retaliate when crops are destroyed or when government responses are perceived as biased. The cycle of reprisal killings, as witnessed in Guma and Logo LGAs of Benue, illustrates this theory in action (Okeke, 2014). The theory offers psychological insights but fails to account for broader systemic factors such as state inaction, institutional decay, or legal ambiguity.

Political Ecology Theory goes beyond environmental determinism by examining how power relations, economic systems, and institutional frameworks shape access to natural resources (Watts & Peet, 2004). The theory emphasizes that environmental conflicts often reflect deeper political and economic inequalities. In Nigeria, policies such as the 1978 Land Use Act have centralized land ownership under the state, creating contestations between "indigenes" and "settlers," especially in Plateau State (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Similarly, the 2017 Anti-Open Grazing Law in Benue State, though aimed at protecting farmland, has been perceived by Fulani herders as discriminatory, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and persecution (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Political elites often manipulate ethnic and religious identities, using the conflict as a tool for political mobilization. This dynamic has transformed resource disputes into ethno-religious clashes, especially in Plateau's volatile areas like Barkin Ladi and Riyom (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). Though comprehensive, Political Ecology Theory can sometimes overgeneralize, making empirical testing difficult. However, its multidimensional nature is valuable for understanding Nigeria's layered conflict environment.

Political Ecology Theory is adopted for this study because it provides the most robust framework to analyze the farmers-herders conflict in Benue and Plateau States. Unlike the other theories, it integrates both environmental pressures and socio-political dynamics. The theory explains not only what actors are fighting over (land and water), but also why these conflicts escalate—due to historical injustices, exclusionary laws, weak institutions, and elite manipulation of identity politics. By using Political Ecology, the study can develop a comprehensive and policy-relevant understanding of the crisis.

### **History of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Benue and Plateau State**

Historically, relations between farming communities and pastoralist Fulani herders were largely symbiotic. In Benue and Plateau States, herders moved seasonally across territories in search of pasture and water, while farmers benefitted from manure provided by livestock and sometimes hired herders for animal traction and field clearing. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms—such as dialogue mediated by chiefs and elders—were commonly used to resolve occasional disputes over crop damage or water use (Blench, 2004).

The introduction of formal land tenure systems during British colonial rule began to disrupt traditional grazing and farming arrangements. The 1978 *Land Use Act* centralized control of land under state governors, undermining customary land rights and creating confusion over ownership and access (Omilola, 2010). Post-independence population growth and agricultural expansion led to increased competition over arable land, especially in the Middle Belt region. In Plateau State, historical grievances between the predominantly Christian Berom farmers and nomadic Fulani herders were compounded by ethnic and religious tensions. Similarly, in Benue State, the Tiv and Idoma farming populations began to view herders as encroachers on ancestral lands, a perception that became more widespread by the 1980s.

By the 1990s, resource-based tensions were becoming increasingly politicized. The decline of grazing reserves, deforestation, and erratic rainfall (linked to climate change) forced more herders southward, intensifying clashes with sedentary farmers. During this period, sporadic violence began to replace traditional resolution methods. For instance, the 2001 Jos crisis, which had strong ethno-religious undertones, also involved tensions between farmers and herders. The conflict between "indigenes" and "settlers" created fertile ground for local herder-farmer disputes to turn violent. In 2001 and again in 2004, violent clashes in Logo and Gwer West LGAs resulted in the deaths of hundreds of people and the destruction of villages. These incidents marked a shift from localized disputes to organized attacks.

The 2010s witnessed a dramatic increase in the scale and brutality of the conflict. Several factors contributed to this escalation: The rise of armed militias on sides, inadequate policing and ineffective state responses and the failure of grazing routes and reserves due to urbanization and

farming expansion. In Benue, the introduction of the *Anti-Open Grazing Law* in 2017 was a key turning point. While the law aimed to prevent herders from encroaching on farmland, Fulani groups perceived it as discriminatory. The implementation of the law was followed by one of the bloodiest episodes in the conflict: the 2018 New Year's Day massacre, where over 70 people were killed in coordinated attacks in Guma and Logo LGAs. In Plateau, violent clashes became more frequent and widespread, particularly in Barkin Ladi, Riyom, and Bassa LGAs.

In June 2018, attacks in Barkin Ladi left over 200 people dead in what was described as one of the deadliest herder-related massacres in Nigeria's history (Amnesty International, 2018). The Nigerian government launched security operations such as *Operation Whirl Stroke* (2018–present) to address rising insecurity in Benue, Plateau, and neighboring states. These operations have had limited success, as attacks continue to occur sporadically. The current phase of the conflict involves the use of automatic weapons and targeted community attacks, increased displacement, with thousands in IDP camps in states, escalation of ethno-religious narratives and deep-seated mistrust and the entrenchment of criminal networks, cattle rustling, and reprisal killings. The farmers-herders conflict has become intertwined with other national security issues such as banditry, terrorism, and communal militias.

### **A Critical Analysis of the Implications of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Benue and Plateau State**

The farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria, especially in the Middle Belt states of Benue and Plateau, has escalated into one of the most destructive internal security challenges in recent history. Originally rooted in competition over natural resources, the conflict has evolved to encompass political, ethnic, religious, and governance dimensions. The implications of this conflict are far-reaching, affecting human security, food production, interethnic relations, and national cohesion. Understanding the implications is essential for sustainable peacebuilding and socio-economic development in the affected regions.

A major implication of the farmers-herders conflict is the severe threat it poses to human security. Thousands have been killed in violent attacks, while hundreds of thousands have been displaced. In Benue State, the mass killings in Guma and Logo Local Government Areas in January 2018 led to the deaths of over 70 people and the displacement of tens of thousands (Amnesty International, 2018). Similarly, Plateau State has witnessed waves of attacks, such as the June 2018 massacre in Barkin Ladi, where over 200 people were reportedly killed. Displaced persons are often forced into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps with limited access to healthcare, education, and sanitation. This situation not only creates a humanitarian crisis but also strains government resources and disrupts normal social and economic life in the region.

Benue and Plateau States are known as the “food baskets” of Nigeria due to their significant agricultural output. The conflict has disrupted farming activities, leading to a decline in agricultural productivity, food insecurity, and inflation in local markets. Farmers in affected areas abandon their farms due to insecurity, resulting in reduced harvests and loss of income (Ofem & Inyang, 2014). For example, in Benue's Agatu and Gwer West LGAs, fertile farmlands lie fallow due to recurrent attacks.

Moreover, herders also suffer economic losses through cattle rustling, killing of livestock, and restricted access to grazing lands. This dual loss undermines rural livelihoods and increases poverty, deepening the cycle of violence. The economic cost of the conflict has been estimated in billions of naira annually, affecting both state and national economies (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). The farmers-herders conflict has significantly damaged interethnic and interfaith relations in Benue and Plateau. In Benue, the predominantly Christian Tiv and Idoma communities increasingly view the Fulani Muslim herders as aggressors, while in Plateau, the Berom and other indigenous groups have suffered repeated attacks they believe are aimed at land grabbing and religious domination.

This perception has led to retaliation and the rise of local militias, further polarizing communities (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). The mutual mistrust has escalated to the extent that entire communities now operate with fear and suspicion. Communal festivals, trade, intermarriages, and joint farming ventures that once fostered unity have largely disappeared. These deteriorated social ties hinder reconciliation and make peacebuilding efforts more difficult. The government's response to the crisis has been widely criticized for being reactive, inconsistent, and often biased. While laws such as the Benue State Anti-Open Grazing and Ranches Establishment Law (2017) were introduced to regulate pastoralism, they have also generated resistance and further confrontation. Fulani herders perceive the law as a deliberate attempt to expel them from the state, while many farmers see it as a necessary tool for protection (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Moreover, the security agencies have often been accused of failing to prevent attacks or arriving late at the scene of violence. In some cases, communities accuse security forces of collusion or turning a blind eye. The lack of accountability and failure to prosecute perpetrators embolden violent actors and erode public trust in the state. The conflict has fueled the proliferation of small arms and light weapons across Benue and Plateau, contributing to the militarization of local conflicts. Armed groups—both among herders and farming communities—have taken up arms in self-defense and retaliation. This has turned what was a once sporadic resource-based clash into prolonged and systematic violence (Blench, 2004).

In Plateau State, the cycle of attacks and reprisals has evolved into organized violence that involves both local militias and transnational elements. As both sides arm themselves, the lines between criminality and ethno-political violence are increasingly blurred. This development threatens not only local stability but also regional peace, especially as arms flow across porous borders. The disruption of farming and herding activities has a direct impact on food security in Nigeria. Benue and Plateau are key suppliers of yam, rice, maize, potatoes, vegetables, and livestock to other parts of the country.

The decline in agricultural production leads to shortages, higher food prices, and increased reliance on food imports. This economic pressure affects urban and rural populations alike and poses a risk to national stability. In addition, the conflict undermines Nigeria's broader goals of national integration and development. It provides grounds for ethnic nationalism, vigilante justice, and secessionist sentiments, particularly when communities feel abandoned by the state. The implications of the farmers-herders conflict in Benue and Plateau States are complex, devastating, and multidimensional. They touch on human security, economic development, intergroup relations, governance, and national cohesion. Without a holistic and inclusive

approach that tackles both the root causes and immediate triggers, the conflict will continue to destabilize the region and impede Nigeria's development. Sustainable peace will require strong political will, community engagement, and long-term investment in structural reforms.

## Conclusion

The farmers-herders conflict in Benue and Plateau States is a multifaceted crisis that extends far beyond mere resource competition. It reflects deeper structural challenges such as environmental degradation, population pressure, weak governance, and socio-political exclusion. The implications—ranging from mass displacement and food insecurity to the erosion of communal trust and national stability—demonstrate the urgency for a coordinated and inclusive response. Despite efforts by government and civil society, the conflict persists due to policy gaps, inconsistent enforcement of laws, and limited grassroots involvement.

A lasting solution will require an integrated approach that combines climate resilience, land-use reforms, inclusive dialogue, and the strengthening of local peacebuilding institutions. Without decisive and inclusive action, the conflict will continue to hinder development and perpetuate cycles of violence in the Middle Belt and beyond. Thus, addressing the implications of the farmers-herders conflict is not only a matter of regional stability but also a national imperative for peace, food security, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

## Recommendations

To mitigate the implications of the farmers-herders conflict, several measures must be implemented:

- i. All stakeholders, including herders' associations, farming cooperatives, traditional rulers, and civil society, should be involved in crafting sustainable policies.
- ii. Comprehensive land-use planning that accommodates both agriculture and pastoralism is essential. Well-managed grazing reserves and ranching can reduce conflicts.
- iii. Government must equip and deploy security agencies fairly and effectively, while ensuring accountability for violent actors.
- iv. Local peace committees and traditional institutions should be empowered to resolve conflicts before they escalate.
- v. Investment in climate adaptation and diversified livelihoods can reduce dependence on land-intensive practices.

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