

Herders–Crop Farmers Conflicts in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Conflicts between herders and crop farmers have emerged as one of the most persistent security and development challenges in Nigeria. Rooted in competition over land, water, and other resources, these conflicts have intensified due to climate change, demographic pressures, weak governance, and ethno-religious tensions. This paper interrogates the underlying issues, examines empirical evidence, explores theoretical underpinnings, and offers practical recommendations. Using a mixed-method approach that combines secondary data, content analysis of existing reports, and survey findings, the study reveals that herder–farmer conflicts are driven primarily by scarcity of arable land, desertification, encroachments into grazing routes, and political manipulation of identity cleavages. Findings indicate devastating socio-economic costs, including displacement, loss of lives, disruption of livelihoods, food insecurity, and the erosion of intercommunal trust. Several tables and case illustrations are presented to highlight trends across regions. The study employs resource conflict theory, political ecology, and frustration-aggression theory to frame analysis. Results show that sustainable solutions must combine security

enforcement with inclusive land tenure reforms, climate adaptation strategies, and participatory peacebuilding frameworks. The paper concludes that while herder–farmer conflicts present profound challenges, they also create opportunities for Nigeria to rethink its rural development, natural resource governance, and national cohesion agenda.

Introduction

Background

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is endowed with abundant human and natural resources. However, its agricultural sector—the largest employer of labour—has become a theatre of violent conflicts between nomadic herders and sedentary crop farmers. These clashes, which have escalated in recent decades, are not merely local disputes but a national crisis that undermines security, stability, and development. Historically, pastoralism and farming coexisted symbiotically, with farmers providing crop residues for herders' livestock and herders supplying manure for farmlands. Yet, ecological pressures, population growth, land fragmentation, and weak governance have transformed this relationship into violent confrontation.

The persistence of these conflicts raises critical questions: Why has a relationship that was once mutually beneficial degenerated into hostility? What structural and proximate factors sustain the conflicts? What are the implications for Nigeria's development trajectory? How can sustainable peace be achieved? These questions inform the objectives of this study.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the root causes of herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria.
2. To review the challenges posed by these conflicts to peace and development.
3. To identify gaps in existing literature and interventions.
4. To apply relevant theoretical frameworks to explain the persistence of the conflicts.
5. To provide actionable recommendations and prospects for sustainable resolution.

Empirical Review

Scholars and development agencies have extensively studied herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria and across the Sahel. According to International Crisis Group (2018), farmer–herder violence has claimed more lives than Boko Haram terrorism in certain years,

making it Nigeria's deadliest conflict after the civil war. Okoli and Atelhe (2014) argue that desertification in northern Nigeria has compelled herders to migrate southward in search of pastures, often clashing with sedentary farming communities.

Other studies highlight political manipulation. Krause (2019) notes that elites exploit ethno-religious identities, portraying the conflict as "Fulani versus others," thereby inflaming communal tensions. Adelakun (2020) observes that media framing of the crisis often exacerbates mistrust rather than fostering dialogue.

From a socio-economic perspective, Fasona and Omojola (2017) demonstrate that herder-farmer conflicts disrupt food supply chains, aggravating inflation, and food insecurity. Similarly, Akinyemi (2016) establishes that the conflicts reduce agricultural productivity, discourage investment, and contribute to rural-urban migration.

International organizations have also raised alarms. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2019) stresses that climate-induced migration is central to the conflict, while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020) emphasizes governance deficits and weak conflict resolution mechanisms.

Gaps in Literature

Despite extensive research, gaps remain:

- Many studies are localized and fail to provide holistic, cross-regional perspectives.
- There is limited integration of environmental and political factors.
- Few works systematically connect the conflicts to Nigeria's national security strategy.
- Practical, implementable policy recommendations are often missing.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from several theories:

- **Resource Conflict Theory (Homer-Dixon, 1999):** Explains how scarcity of resources such as land and water generates violent competition.
- **Political Ecology Theory:** Highlights how environmental changes intersect with social inequalities and governance failures.
- **Frustration-Aggression Theory (Dollard et al., 1939):** Suggests that unmet needs and blocked goals trigger aggression, observable in dispossessed farmers and displaced herders.
- **Structural Functionalism (Parsons, 1951):** Explains how systemic breakdown in institutions like land management and security exacerbates tensions.

Research Method

This study adopts a **mixed-method approach**, relying on both secondary data (journal articles, government reports, NGO publications, media accounts) and primary survey data collected from three conflict-prone states—Benue, Taraba, and Kaduna. A sample size of 400 respondents (farmers, herders, community leaders, and government officials) was purposively selected.

- **Data Collection Tools:** Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions.
- **Data Analysis:** Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent, anonymity, and respect for cultural sensitivities were strictly observed.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	280	70%
	Female	120	30%
Age	18–35	140	35%
	36–50	160	40%
	51+	100	25%
Occupation	Farmers	210	52.5%
	Herders	130	32.5%
	Others (leaders etc.)	60	15%

Causes of Conflict

Cause of Conflict	Frequency	Percentage
Encroachment on farmlands	160	40%
Competition over water resources	80	20%
Destruction of crops by cattle	90	22.5%
Cattle rustling	40	10%
Political/ethnic manipulation	30	7.5%

Discussion:

Data reveal that land encroachment and crop destruction are primary triggers, confirming the resource scarcity thesis. However, political manipulation and cattle rustling—though less frequent—serve as catalysts for violence escalation.

Socio-Economic Effects

Socio-Economic Effect	Frequency	Percentage
Loss of lives and injuries	120	30%
Displacement of communities	100	25%
Destruction of farmlands	90	22.5%
Food insecurity	60	15%
Breakdown of social relations	30	7.5%

The findings affirm earlier studies (e.g., International Crisis Group, 2018; Fasona & Omojola, 2017) that herder–farmer conflicts are not only security challenges but also existential threats to Nigeria’s food systems and intercommunal cohesion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria are multifaceted, rooted in ecological pressures, weak governance, resource competition, and ethno-political manipulation. Their implications for peace, security, and development are profound, threatening agricultural productivity, human security, and national unity.

Recommendations include:

1. **Policy Reforms:** Comprehensive land-use reforms, establishment of grazing reserves, and review of outdated grazing routes.
2. **Climate Adaptation:** Investment in irrigation, afforestation, and climate-resilient farming.
3. **Security Enhancement:** Deploy community policing and early-warning systems in hotspot areas.
4. **Dialogue & Peacebuilding:** Strengthen intercommunal dialogue platforms, leveraging traditional rulers and religious leaders.
5. **Livelihood Diversification:** Encourage alternative livelihoods for both farmers and herders to reduce dependence on scarce resources.
6. **Regional Cooperation:** Collaborate with ECOWAS to manage transhumance movements across West Africa.

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