
FARMER-HERDERS CONFLICT IN GUMA, KATSINA-ALA AND AGATU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: *The study investigates farmer–herder conflict patterns in Benue State, with particular attention to Guma, Katsina-Ala and Agatu Local Government Areas. The study's objectives were to identify the root causes of the clashes, evaluate the roles of managing and resolving institutions, analyze policy responses, assess the socio-economic consequences for local communities, and determine the risk of the conflict escalating into broader ethnic tensions. Three Local Government Areas were purposively selected. Thirty-nine respondents were engaged through snowball sampling: fifteen farmers, twelve cattle herders, four police officers, four community chiefs, and four other stakeholders. Data were collected using a structured in-depth interview guide, while open content analysis was employed to interpret the findings. Results indicate that population growth, land encroachment, crop destruction, cattle rustling, corruption by traditional rulers and police, arms proliferation, and climate factors drive the conflict. The study recommends strengthening security, punishing offenders, addressing environmental pressures, encouraging ranching, and supporting local dispute resolution.*

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INTRODUCTION

In their 2005 report *Peace and Conflict*, Marshall and Gurr provided a global survey of armed conflicts, revealing that disputes persist across diverse regions and dimensions including Africa, Europe, and Asia. According to Fefa & Tough (2015, p. 1) “conflict is the reciprocal actions of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from one another in achieving those goals.” In general, conflict can be understood as a situation of tension or opposition



that emerges within a group when members' values, opinions, or behaviours clash or fail to align. Nigeria has long struggled with recurrent ethnic and religious disputes across its states. The nature of conflicts changes depending on the groups involved and how the situation progresses. The most recent dimensions of conflict in Nigeria include the Boko Haram insurgency in the northern states and the farmer–herder conflict in the North-Central region. Adisa (2012, p. 3) explained that disputes between herders and farmers are the most common form of resource conflict in the country.

All farming systems have a clear boundary that separates them from the larger environment. Abdulbarkindo and Alupse (2015, p. 6) observed that farmer–herder conflicts are increasingly a common aspect of West Africa's economic landscape. Studies show that the highest frequency of farmer-herder conflict occurred in the West African savannahs before the turn of the 20th century (CPDDS, 2012, Adetula, 2016, p. 2; Crisis Group, 2017, p. 3). This situation allowed Fulani herdsman to access expansive grazing lands, as agricultural activity in the Sudan and Sahel was restricted to small-scale crop production during the brief rainy season (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 2). With the introduction of irrigation farming in the savannah belt of Nigeria to enhance food security, more land was brought under cultivation, thereby reducing access to pasture and pushing herders to migrate further south (Crisis Group, 2017, p. 3).

While several resources can spark disputes, land remains the main source of tension between various groups of users. The conflict between Fulani herdsman and farmers over agricultural land has become more intense and widespread in Nigeria, largely due to the intensification of production activities driven by the rising human population (Genyi, 2014, p. 3; Feyekpimi, 2016, p. 3). Studies of major sources of conflict between Fulani pastoralists and farmers show that land-related issues, particularly grazing fields, constitute the largest proportion of these conflicts. In other words, the struggle over the control of economically viable land generates heightened tensions and violent confrontations among communities.

Large geographical areas of Guma and Agatu and Katsina-Ala local government areas have placed farmers in situations that compel them to live alongside Fulani herdsman, especially during the dry season (November to April). Since the herdsman still practice the free-range system, they migrate from the far north to the Benue Valley, where pasture and water are available. This movement increases competition for arable land and generates hostility between the two groups. As a result, farmer–herder conflicts have become a recurring phenomenon in Benue State, often leading to violent clashes, displacement, and loss of livelihoods.

Recent studies confirm the persistence of these tensions. Musa et al. (2023, p. 821) demonstrated through spatial analysis that Guma and Logo local government areas are hotspots of recurrent farmer–herder clashes, with patterns strongly linked to land scarcity and population growth. Similarly, Daniel and Duncan (2024, p. 45) highlighted that conflicts in Agatu undermine sustainable development goals by disrupting agricultural productivity and deepening household poverty. Food security concerns have been emphasized, as recurrent clashes significantly reduce farm output and create cycles of hunger in Agatu and surrounding areas (Onojah, 2025, p. 104). In Katsina-Ala Local Government Area, studies reveal that escalating competition over land and water resources, coupled with environmental stress, has intensified conflicts, making them more systemic and increasingly deadly. Beyond livelihoods, the conflict has increasingly become a national security issue. Ioryue

(2024, p. 245) noted that the farmer–herder crisis in Benue is not only a localized struggle for land but also a potential trigger for ethnic polarization and broader instability in Nigeria.

The term conflict implies differences and disagreement. Conflict is a coinciding event that occurs between two or more mutually incompatible impulses or motives (Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025, p. 1). Adeoye (2017, p. 129) described it as a struggle involving opposing ideas and limited resources. International Crisis Group (2018, p. 2) distinguished among disputes, violent conflicts, and conflicts of interest, noting that disputes are disagreements that may escalate into violent conflict when lives and property are destroyed. In the context of farmer–herder relations, conflicts of interest over farmland and cattle routes have increasingly turned violent, posing serious threats to the livelihoods of both groups (Abbas, 2012).

Social and economic factors continue to provoke these clashes. Theoretically, competition over scarce resources helps to generate and sustain conflict (Daniel & Duncan, 2024, p. 48). Empirically, the complex land-use system in Benue, shaped by climate stress and demographic pressure, has intensified competition for resources (Musa et al., 2023, p. 834). The therefore aims at examining the underlying causes of farmer–herder conflicts and to assess the roles of relevant institutions in addressing and resolving these conflicts in Benue State.

MAIN TEXT

Literature Review

The long-running disputes between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria, with particular intensity in Benue State, have attracted significant scholarly attention due to their destructive impact on livelihoods, security, and social cohesion. Scholars agree that these conflicts are largely driven by competition over scarce resources, exacerbated by climate change, population growth, and land-use pressures (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014, p. 76; Abass, 2012, p. 339). In Benue State, often referred to as the “food basket of the nation,” recurrent clashes have resulted in displacement, loss of lives, and declining agricultural productivity (Ijirshar et al., 2025a, p. 389; Nnaji, 2022, p. 1).

Several causes have been identified. Early studies emphasized crop destruction, cattle rustling, and encroachment on farmlands as key triggers (Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025, p. 2; Adisa, 2012, p. 4). More recent analyses show that climate variability, desertification, and farmland expansion have heightened tensions (Mustafa & Sa’ad, 2025). Additionally, weak governance, corruption among local authorities, and the proliferation of small arms have further fueled violence (Ioryue, 2024, p. 249; Daniel & Duncan, 2024, p. 58).

The role of institutions in conflict management has also been a major focus. Traditional rulers, security agencies, and local vigilante groups often mediate disputes, though their effectiveness is questioned due to corruption and bias (Omale, Shuib, & Bayo, 2025, p. 5). Among the policy responses is the 2017 Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, which has generated mixed reactions. While the law aims to reduce farmer–herder conflicts, some observers argue that it has intensified tensions by restricting traditional pastoral practices. Recommendations for the adoption of a ranching system are increasingly viewed as a sustainable alternative (Mustafa & Sa’ad, 2025).

The socio-economic repercussions of these conflicts are extensive. Studies consistently report large-scale displacement, reduced agricultural output, food insecurity, and disruptions to education in affected areas (Abbass, 2012; Ijirshar et al., 2025b, p. 1). Recent reports warn that unresolved farmer–herder clashes in the Middle Belt threaten national food security and may escalate into broader ethnic rivalry (ThisDay, 2025, p. 1). Overall, the literature suggests that farmer–herder conflict in Benue State is multi-causal, shaped by environmental, socio-political, and institutional factors. While both informal and formal mechanisms exist for conflict resolution, their effectiveness depends on impartial enforcement, stronger security frameworks, and the long-term adoption of sustainable livestock management practices.

Theoretical Framework

Conflict theory: It was originally propounded by Karl Marx, explains that societies are often marked by continuous struggles arising from unequal access to and competition for limited resources. Marx emphasized the power imbalance between the bourgeoisie, who control resources, and the proletariat, who are marginalized (Marx, 1971, p. 12). Over time, scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and C. Wright Mills expanded the theory to explain how ideology, politics, and elite dominance reinforce inequality.

This theory is relevant to the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, where competition over land and water resources, coupled with unequal access to political power and justice, fuels violent clashes. The struggle reflects the broader conflict perspective that power and resource imbalances generate instability and resistance. Recent studies (Mustafa & Sa’ad, 2025; Daniel & Duncan, 2024, p. 58) identify crop destruction by cattle, grazing on fallow land, contamination of water sources, and bush burning as recurring triggers of the conflict. These studies further note that such conflicts, rooted in resource competition between farmers and herders, result in displacement, food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and declining community development. Both studies also highlight the absence of effective state interventions and weak conflict-resolution mechanisms as factors that allow these disputes to persist.

Structural functionalism: This was advanced by Emile Durkheim, explains how societies maintain cohesion and stability through interdependent institutions. Durkheim identified “mechanical” solidarity in simple societies and “organic” solidarity in complex societies, where interdependence sustains order. From this perspective, crime and conflict can be functional by exposing social dysfunctions and pushing for reform (Chika & Onyishi, 2024, p. 1). Applied to the farmer–herder conflict, structural functionalism highlights how such clashes reveal weaknesses in Nigeria’s security and governance structures. The conflict, though destructive, has drawn attention to lapses in resource management, law enforcement, and policy implementation, prompting the need for reforms to restore balance and stability. Recent studies (Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025, p. 2; Mohammed, 2024, p. 233) show that violent conflicts in Nigeria expose institutional weaknesses, particularly in agricultural policies, land management, and rural security, thereby underscoring the need for urgent reforms.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Guma, Katsina-Ala and Agatu Local Government Areas of Benue State, North Central Nigeria, areas that are frequently affected by farmer–herder clashes. Benue State is predominantly agrarian and is home to diverse ethnic groups, with farming and cattle rearing serving as the major sources of livelihood. These Local Government Areas were purposively selected

because of the persistent occurrence of farmer–herder conflicts in the region. Qualitative research design was employed to capture the lived experiences of respondents and to explore the socio-economic effects of the conflict. The target population comprised crop farmers, cattle herders, security officers, and community leaders. A snowball sampling technique was used, given the displacement and mobility of respondents. In total, 39 participants were engaged: five farmers, four herders, two police officers, two community chiefs, and two other community stakeholders drawn from Agatu, Guma, and Katsina-Ala Local Government Areas.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, guided by a semi-structured interview schedule, while secondary data were drawn from relevant literature, reports, and policy documents. Content analysis was adopted to interpret qualitative data, following Krippendorff's (2004) framework for making replicable and valid inferences from textual materials. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. Sensitive information was reported with caution to protect the safety and identity of participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Criminology and Security Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

Results

This study employed qualitative methods and used the snowball sampling technique to select thirty-nine respondents for in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed through open content analysis. The respondents included twelve Fulani herdsmen and fifteen farmers (five each from Agatu, Guma, and Katsina-Ala), four community chiefs (drawn from the study areas), 4 Police Officers, and 4 others (2 Igbo traders and 2 Yoruba Primary School Teachers). These participants were chosen to capture diverse perspectives on the conflict between Fulani herdsmen and farmers.

All thirty-nine respondents participated fully, yielding a response rate of 100%. Out of these, 35 were indigenes of Benue State, while 4 were non-indigenes. Most respondents were aged 61 years and above (45%), followed by those aged 41 to 50 years (40%), with the remaining participants aged between eighteen and forty years. This age distribution reflects the perspectives of mature community members with firsthand knowledge of the conflict. The research questions guiding the analysis focused on the factors driving farmer–herder conflicts, the roles of institutions in conflict resolution, the policy mechanisms employed by government, the socio-economic impacts of the conflict, and the potential for these tensions to escalate into ethnic rivalry.

Factors responsible for Conflicts between Herders and Farmers in the Study Area

Findings revealed that farmers and Fulani herdsmen had historically coexisted peacefully, often engaging in intermarriages and mutual exchanges, such as cattle fertilizing farmland in return for grazing rights. Minor disputes were traditionally resolved by village and Fulani leaders through restitution and compensation. However, these mechanisms have recently become ineffective, leading to the escalation of conflicts.

Population Growth and Land Pressure

The study indicates that population growth has reduced available grazing land and water, forcing herders to migrate and, at times, encroach on farmlands. This pressure on resources was identified as a major cause of conflict. As one traditional Chief explains that, ‘Population has grown over the



years, in those days there used to be vast lands for farming, my grandfather had a large plot of land, he had four children, subsequently, the plot of land belonging to one man is now divided into four, the four children also had their own children totaling seventeen children, the plot of land which first belonged to one person then, migrated to be owned by four people and now shared by seventeen children. What this means is that while land becomes limited, farmers subsequently try to expand into formerly uncultivated land which was initially used by the Fulani's for grazing, and this is the root cause of the conflict' (IDI/Male/Traditional Chief/Agatu-Benue/2024).

It can be observed from the above statements that there is a struggle for resources. As farms and residential areas expand, they occupy grazing zones and cut off the migration routes herders traditionally used. As the population increases, competition for scarce land and water intensifies, often leading to violent clashes. One Fulani respondent revealed that, 'Our cattle multiplied making it difficult for us to feed our cattle with the land allocated to us, I lost two of my cows in one month because there was no grass for healthy feeding. I started using some of the lands that my father used for grazing, we can't allow our cows to continue dying just as farmers would not allow their means of livelihood to die' (IDI/Male/Fulani/Agatu-Benue/2024).

This reflects the broader struggle highlighted by Abbas (2009), which shows that both farmers and herders contest access to limited land, often resulting in violent confrontations. Recent studies indicate that rapid population growth and land conversion in northern Nigeria are intensifying competition over farmland and pasture, especially as pastoral routes shrink. Insecurity is also reducing agricultural output (Ijirshar et al., 2025a, p. 390).

Damage to Crops and Grazing land

Farmers often report that conflicts arise when herders' cattle stray onto cultivated land, damaging crops and grazing areas, which sparks tension between the two groups. Indiscriminate grazing frequently damages farmland, threatening farmers' livelihoods and deepening mistrust between the two groups. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies in Benue and neighboring states, where crop destruction and the loss of rangeland were cited as immediate triggers of farmer-herder clashes (Nnaji, 2022).

This statement was supported by another respondent who said, 'Initially, the herdsmen and our people cohabited in peace. Suddenly, the herdsmen changed and turn violent that whenever our people cultivate farm crops, the Fulani people allow their cattle to graze on crops, this happened for a long time with no resolution. In fact, it got to a time that the Fulani women started adding poison to cow milk before giving it to our people. We didn't notice this until our people began to fall sick. When the issue was reported to their chiefs, they claimed it was a mistake and that we should forgive them' (IDI/female/Katsina-Ala/ Benue/2024).

The above was further supported by the assertions of one the Fulani herders who explained that 'Our people move long distances with many cattle when searching for grass and water. We carry weapons mainly to defend the animals, but this often causes problems with farmers who accuse us of letting the cows destroy their crops. The farmers also destroy our grazing routes by burning it, they even cut down trees and burn the shaft from their farm produce out of wickedness and pure hatred and for our cattle to go hungry' (IDI/Male/Fulani herder/GUMA/2024).

The responses revealed that crop damage was not limited to destruction of growing crops; it continued when cattle grazed on harvested fields without permission. Farmers alleged that indiscriminate grazing by herders often led to violent retaliation, while herders countered that farmers deliberately burned grazing routes, felled trees, and destroyed crop shafts during the dry season, leaving no fodder for cattle. These practices forced herders to encroach on farmlands, further escalating tensions.

Earlier studies identified crop destruction, bush burning, and blockage of stock routes as recurrent triggers of farmer–herder clashes (Aliyu, 2015, p. 59; Bello, 2013, p. 129; De Haan, 2002, p. 113). Recent studies also indicate that factors such as land scarcity, crop damage by cattle, and climate pressures contribute to recurring “farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria’s Middle Belt” (Ijirshar et al., 2025a, p. 406).

Cattle theft, Rustling, and Killings by host Communities

According to responses from participants, cattle theft, rustling, and killings by host communities were identified as major reason for the farmer–herder conflict, although this assertion was majorly supported by the only herders.

One Fulani herder interviewed explained that a respected man named Ardo Madaki was invited by the district head to resolve the problem. However, the Agatu militia allegedly beheaded him in front of the district head, which triggered a call for revenge. The respondent added that ‘no action was taken by the village police officers even till date’ (IDI/Male/Fulani herder/Agatu-Benue/2024). Another respondent added, ‘We, the Fulanis, are often attacked by groups from nearby farming communities who come after our cattle. Most times, we only act to protect ourselves’ (IDI/Female/Fulani Herder/Katsina-Ala/2024).

These responses align with existing literature identifying cattle theft as a major cause of farmer–herder conflict, often accompanied by violence (De Haan, 2002, p. 1). Fulani herders also highlighted the killings and harassment of their women by host communities and these issues often overlooked by previous studies. These ongoing threats may further escalate recurring conflicts involving farmers and herders, as supported by Audu (2013, p. 25) and Ijirshar et al. (2025b, p. 1).

Corrupt Traditional Rulers and Police Officers

Local-level corruption has made it difficult for herders and community chiefs to settle disputes in the traditional way. Before now, problems such as cattle straying into farms or crop damage were usually resolved by village heads, sometimes under local government oversight. However, with corruption in the criminal justice system, these institutions have failed to provide justice, and even conflicting parties hardly run to them because of mistrust. In the absence of effective mediation, aggrieved groups increasingly resort to violence.

During an in-depth interview, one respondent explained, ‘We always report to the police at obgaji police station and all the time we lost the case because the police are more interested in who gives them more money than in finding out the truth’ (IDI/Male/farmer/Agatu-Benue/2024). Similarly, another respondent said, ‘Whenever we report Fulani to any of the chiefs, they keep saying they’ll do something about it and traditional rulers at times extracted fines and bribes from the Fulani herd’s men and let them have their way’ (IDI/Female/Farmer/GUMA-Benue/2024).

Corrupt traditional leaders often accept bribes from herdsmen or collude with farmers and police to punish herdsmen, worsening tensions and fostering enmity between the groups. Consequently, Herders and farmers alike have lost trust in the authorities' role in settling disputes effectively. A respondent confirmed this, stating that, 'In 2013, about twenty Agatu and Tiv militia invaded the compound of Shehu Abdulahi to steal cattle and in trying to resist, Shehu was killed and over 200 cows were carted away. The police is our witness as they arrested four perpetrators when they were carrying some of the meat on their motorcycles and they were taken to Naka Police Station, the remaining sixteen offenders escaped. The police after investigation said they knew where one hundred and fifty cows were kept, they promised to recover and return the cows but up till today nothing has happened' (Ajijah, 2016, p. 5). Findings indicate that traditional mechanisms for resolving disputes between Fulani herders and farmers have weakened due to corruption, with rulers often accepting bribes instead of administering justice. This contrasts with previous literature. The proliferation of arms and the general breakdown of law and order have also fuelled conflicts, with little government intervention to address the problem.

Environmental and Climate Factors

Climate change further exacerbates tensions. Flooding of riverbanks in Agatu LGA forces Fulani herders to relocate to farmland on the hillsides, increasing clashes with farmers. One respondent explained, '...once its rainy season and the river overflow, most times the herders move to neighbouring villages until the river subsides, but recently, this has not been the case as we heard from neighbouring villages that the Fulani are troublemakers and were no longer welcomed in their village' (IDI/Male/Farmer/Agatu/2024).

In Guma LGA, decreased rainfall in recent years has reduced farm yields and shrunk available pastures, forcing herders' cattle to graze on stored produce. This has angered farmers and escalated violent clashes. One respondent noted, 'In dry season, the Fulani herders allow their cattle to eat our stored produce waiting to be cultivated in the rainy season, even after we warned them to discontinue, instead they go around terrorizing children and women off the farm, we went on asking them to vacate our land since we can no longer cohabit peacefully, and the Fulani herders got angry and started fighting us' (IDI/Male/Guma/Farmer/2024).

In Katsina-Ala Local Government Area, resource scarcity and environmental stress intensify herder-farmer tensions. Pressure on land and water sources forces herders into farmlands, escalating conflict and displacement. A farmer from the region encapsulated the pervasive insecurity caused by these clashes, 'We have lost everything because of this crisis. The children can no longer go to school, and we live in constant fear. Our lives are not safe anymore' (IDI/Male/Farmer/Katsina-Ala-Benue/2024).

Historically, Fulani herders and farmers coexisted peacefully, with grazing rights exchanged for soil fertilization. Conflicts were minor and settled by community leaders. Recently, disputes have escalated due to population growth reducing grazing land (Abass, 2012, p. 340), crop destruction by cattle (Aliyu, 2015, p. 61; Bello, 2013, p. 129), cattle theft (De Haan, 2002, p. 19), and corruption among traditional rulers and police, which undermines local dispute resolution. Environmental factors, such as river overflows during the rainy season, have also forced herders into farmlands.



These findings reflect conflict theory, demonstrating that competition over scarce resources drives social tension and contributes to recurring violence between farmers and herders.

Management of Conflict

Both formal institutions (police, courts, local and state governments) and informal bodies (Traditional rulers, MACBAN, religious groups, families, and village youth) play roles in conflict resolution. The police are active in managing disputes, with some officers even losing their lives during interventions. However, respondents questioned the overall efficiency of the police in preventing and reducing conflicts. One of the respondent opts that, ‘Whenever fulani herders destroy our farm, we report to the traditional head first, but recently it is now beyond our traditional head who direct us to the police, the police are not effective as they wouldn’t answer until you give them money, most of us are poor farmers and cannot afford to pay the police, so we lost the cases most times’ (IDI/Male/Farmer/Agatu-Benue2019).

Another respondent said, ‘The police tried their best, one thing that is clear is that the Agatu and Guma divisional police station cannot measure up to the ammunicions carried by these herders, it was impossible to repel these men. The Fulani herdsmen were armed with AK-47’ (IDI/Male/Police Officer/Agatu-Benue2019). Similarly, another officer noted, ‘The police force must hold people accountable and that’s why they are here. The most important thing to all of us here is that there must be peace’ (IDI/Male/Police/Katsina-Ala-Benue/2024).

These statements show the police have not been effective in addressing the conflict, with corruption cited as a major obstacle. Challenges include inadequate vehicles, motorcycles, and weapons to match the Fulani herders, consistent with CPDDS (2012), which noted that limited logistics hinder effective crisis response. Other law enforcement agencies, including the military and Civil Defense, are usually deployed only after conflicts have escalated violently.

Government committees, usually ad hoc, including representatives from state and local governments, traditional rulers, farmers’ associations, immigration, police, and sometimes the military mostly participate in the conflict resolution even if the measures are inadequate Respondents also noted that court involvement in conflict resolution remains minimal. Civil institutions, including NGOs and community-based organizations such as MACBAN, synagogues, and Interfaith Reconciliation and Peace building Projects, also participate in conflict management.

Informal institutions, particularly families, village youth, and traditional rulers, are considered the most effective in resolving disputes. Traditional rulers, due to their closeness to the community, play a key role. One respondent explained, ‘There have always been to an extents disagreement between Fulani herders and farmers over minor issues that are most times resolved by community heads. The Agatu village head and the Fulani head usually reach a consensus that is inform of restitution but recently, the conflict has escalated beyond their capabilities to handle’ (IDI/Female/Farmer/Agatu-Benue/2024).

This confirms that traditional rulers remain the most successful institutions for managing the conflict, consistent with CPDDS (2012), which noted that these institutions, embedded in local culture, are trusted by communities, while formal criminal justice mechanisms are considered as last resort.

Mechanisms Adopted by the Necessary Institutions

Results from the in-depth interviews show that the study highlights the different approaches used to manage and resolve farmer–herder conflicts in the study area. The findings reveal that both formal mechanisms (government policies) and informal mechanisms (non-governmental and traditional institutions) are tools used for conflict resolution, the informal mechanisms are still the most effective and commonly used.

Informal mechanisms: The study found that the most used informal methods for resolving conflicts were amicable resolution, verbal warnings, and compensation payments. A respondent stated, ‘Conflict between the two parties is most times are managed by the elders and chiefs through internal mediation, restitutions and compensation payments, sometimes the youth call themselves to order and place justice at the village square, sometimes its settled among immediate families’ (IDI/female/Farmer/Katsina-Ala-Benue/2024). This finding underscores the leading role of informal institutions in resolving conflict. It aligns with Turner (2007), who stated that conflicts is usually the effect of competitiveness in a diverse livelihood but are better managed at the local community level. Informal traditional mechanisms remain widely used in several communities, as both farmers and pastoralists tend to rely on local arbitration to settle disputes (Adelakun et al., 2015).

Civil society: Civil society mechanisms vary, ranging from organized press conferences aiming to raise national and international awareness of their situation, to post-conflict reconciliation and peace building.

Government Policy-based Mechanisms: Interviews revealed that federal, state, and local governments have developed several strategies to address farmer-herder conflicts, including deployment of military operations (e.g., “Cat Race” in Benue State) and intensified security patrols to affected communities to prevent reprisals and further breakdown of law and order. A respondent said, ‘Government has sent their representative to tell farmers to go to the police whenever Fulani herders look for their trouble, also the government has deployed soldiers to every home to further prevent the killings’ (IDI/Male/Agatu-Benue/2024).

Government Committees: The state government established a joint security committee comprising stakeholders from both Fulani herders and Benue farmers, as well as relevant law enforcement agencies, to investigate the root causes of the conflict and find sustainable solutions.

Curfews: To prevent further escalation, the government-imposed dusk-to-dawn curfews in affected communities.

National Food Security Council: The federal government created and inaugurated this council to help prevent and mitigate farmer-herder clashes.

Anti-grazing Laws: The introduction of open grazing bans in Benue State, although intended to promote peace, has further strained relations between farmers and herders. Farmers in the study area largely supported the anti-grazing laws, as they were perceived to be in their favour. However, Fulani herders, on the other hand, opposed the law, arguing that it deprives them of their means of livelihood.

The above findings highlight the efforts of relevant institutions to address the root causes of the dispute and reconcile between both parties to restore social stability and equilibrium. These institutions have employed various mechanisms to achieve their goal of promoting societal peace.

Consequences of Conflicts for people in the Study Area

This study revealed that clashes between cattle herders and crop farmers are a major source of violence and insecurity in Nigeria, with adverse economic and social consequences. Respondents noted, ‘There was a time when the herdsmen complained about their cattle been stolen from around Okokolo village, this led to the herdsmen bringing in mercenaries to destroy Okokolo, Adana, Ogugbe, Alopa where an unverified number of people were killed in these villages. That attack preceded those of Ekwo and Okpanchenyi, where over 60 people lost their lives with about 40 houses burnt’ (IDI/Male/Farmer/Agatu-Benue/2024).

In support, another respondent said, ‘By the time we returned, we met dead bodies littered all over, we also discovered that our village head was among those massacred with our houses and belongings burnt, we discovered more corpses in the bushes. We lost 22 people including visitors that came to marry from our community on that faithful day’ (IDI/Male/Farmer/GUMA-Benue/2024).

Another respondent said, the government has arrested no one in the murder of Fulani herders, including women and children, and the slaughtered and stolen cattle, the Fulani herders also lost their homes and love ones, but because we don’t have people in government or the media, no one said anything when we were being killed’ (IDI/female/Fulani/Benue/2024). It has been observed that herder–farmer conflicts remain widespread, and their persistence often results in significant loss of lives and property, consistent with the findings of Ioryue (2024, p. 259).

Destruction of Crops: In the study area, frequent cattle invasions often damage farmlands each year, making it hard for residents to sustain their livelihoods. Many affected farmers have switched to jobs such as Okada (commercial motorcycling) riding or petty trade to survive.

This study found that farmers were the worst affected by the conflicts, as their family farming activities were disrupted leading to reductions in farm output, loss of property, and scarcity of food. The clashes have continued to destroy crops and properties in the study area, further impoverishing already vulnerable communities. Consequently, crop productivity has declined in a region traditionally referred to as the country’s food basket (Ioryue, 2024, p. 259). The conflicts have disrupted local food security, with urban dwellers relying on these farmers experiencing scarcity and skyrocketing food prices (Ofem & Inyang, 2014). Failure of security agencies has also triggered reprisal attacks by community youth against herders, involving the destruction of property and livestock (Olugbenga, 2013, p. 77).

Furthermore, both farmers and herders experience displacement. Nomadic herders move to safer areas, while host farmers, particularly women, avoid distant farms, increasing dependence on neighbors and exacerbating poverty. These findings align with recent studies highlighting that farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria significantly affect livelihoods, food security, and socioeconomic stability (Aliyu, 2015, p. 59; Ajijah, 2016, p. 5). In support, one respondent said, ‘...our wives and children have refused to come back home from Makurdi and other villages they have run to for

safety. Another painful thing here is the fact that the security forces the government brought for our safety have refused to come here where the real deal took place, leaving us to our fate should such an attack re-surface. We need the security operatives to come here to strengthen us and allow our wives and children to come back home for us to continue our farming as that is what we do best and only. So we appeal to the authorities to come to our rescue, else hunger will kill the remaining of us, seeing that we have not been going to our farms' (IDI/Male/Farmer/GUMA-Benue/2024).

Communities are left in disarray, with many farmers internally displaced across the region. Some estimates indicate that communal violence between farmers and herders claimed more lives in 2016 alone than the Boko Haram insurgency, highlighting its magnitude nationwide (Crisis Group, 2017, p. 3).

Distrust between Herdsmen and Farmers: Respondents reported that most Fulani are peaceful pastoralists, but their communities are often mistrusted by local farmers because of the actions of a minority who engage in violence. This has undermined the historical trust between Fulani herders and their host communities. (IDI/Male/farmer/GUMA-Benue/2024)

Disruption of Academic and other activities: Most farmers in the affected states have abandoned their farms for fear of being attacked by herdsmen. Schools in the affected areas have been left unattended. This has hurt children's education badly. In response to this, 'As you can see, the community is in a complete standstill; no activities are going on presently; schools and clinics are out, and the students have missed out of exams (IDI/Community Chief/Katsina-Ala/2024).

The farmer-herder conflict has adversely affected education, with many children dropping out due to the loss of breadwinners and reduced farming incomes. Wilfred Uji, the Executive Secretary of the Benue State Teaching Service Board, stated that persistent attacks displaced 300,000 children from school, with 12 of 24 nomadic schools and over 35 primary schools closed due to armed attacks and IDP camps (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 2).

The conflict also negatively impacts livelihoods and food security, reducing household production and income. This aligns with Global Terrorism Index (2015, p. 3), who noted that conflicts lead to food scarcity, poverty, and disease, and Crisis Group (2017, p. 4), who highlighted how disruptions in transportation and agricultural activities reduce production. Recent studies further indicate that such conflicts in Nigeria exacerbate rural poverty, increase food insecurity, and threaten socioeconomic stability (Aliyu, 2015, p. 59; Ajijah, 2016, p. 5).

Understanding the Ethnic Dimension of the Conflict

Fulani herders and host farming communities in Benue have been engaged in conflict influenced by ethnic identity, economic interests, and group solidarity. The Fulani, a minority pastoralist group, maintain strong cultural cohesion and are often isolated from predominantly Tiv and Idoma farmers, who rely on peasant agriculture for food and income. Population growth, declining soil fertility, and scattered settlements have reduced cultivable land, intensifying competition.

Fulani herders, predominantly Muslim, migrate southwards during the dry season (November–April) moving to find grazing land and water, particularly in the Benue valley and along rivers such as Katsina-Ala. The rainy season (April–June) limits movement due to muddy terrain and shrinking



grazing routes caused by expanded farming, bringing herders into closer contact and conflict with local farmers. To support the above proclamation, one respondent said, ‘.... the farmers live at the hillside due to its support of cultivation while the Fulani people live at the riverbanks area due to its support for their lives stock’ (IDI/Male/Farmer/Katsina-Ala -Benue/2024).

Some Fulani herders’ violent behavior has intensified negative feelings against the Fulani with minor incidents often provoking harsh reactions due to entrenched stereotypes. To buttress the above proclamation, one respondent said, ‘The Fulani herders are nothing like us, they behave and act without mercy, slaughtering women and children, they lack human compassion, we’ve always notice traces of hatred amongst their tribe, but we did not heed to the signs and warnings (IDI/Male/Community Chief/GUMA-Benue/2024). Also in support, another respondent said, ‘...we do not also like the Fulanis because they don’t like us too and it has even grown into generational hatred. If they come across anyone from my village and they had the chance to kill, they would do so. I do not want to have anything to do with a Fulani’ (IDI/Male/Farmer/Agatu-Benue/2024).

Burton (2016, p. 1) observes that most Fulani are peaceful pastoralists, yet the violent acts of a few have created widespread distrust and strained relationships with host communities. These clashes are increasingly characterized by ethnic and religious differences, especially in the Middle Belt, where predominantly Muslim Fulani herders interact with Christian farming communities, sometimes perceived as an “Islamisation force.” This perception risks escalating tensions nationally, as confrontations could draw actors from neighboring states. As Tonah (2006) notes, while farmer-herder conflicts are rooted in resource disputes, they often take on ethnic dimensions due to differences in culture, values, and livelihoods.

The study revealed that farmers and Fulani herdsman, who once co-existed in a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship, now experience frequent clashes driven by rising population, competition for land, corrupt leadership, availability of weapons, cattle rustling, and weak law enforcement. This reflects Marx’s conflict theory, which links social struggles to competition over scarce resources, and Durkheim’s notion that the erosion of solidarity undermines cohesion.

In managing the conflict, both formal institutions (police, courts, and government at various levels) and informal actors (traditional rulers, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, religious institutions, families, and village youth) play significant roles. According to the Centre for Peace, Diplomatic and Development Studies (2012), while the police are relatively effective, traditional leaders and community chiefs remain the most trusted mediators due to their closeness to the people, highlighting the central role of traditional institutions in grassroots conflict resolution.

Mechanisms adopted to address the crisis include amicable settlement, verbal warnings, payment of compensation, and government policies. Community-level approaches, supported by NGOs, media publications, and rallies, have also been employed, aligning with Turner (2002), who emphasized that livelihood conflicts are often best resolved at the local level.

CONCLUSION

The rising tensions between pastoral Fulani herders and farmers in Benue State have increasingly threatened national security and peace. Scholars such as Daniel and Duncan (2024, p. 57)



and Ioryue (2024, p. 259) emphasize that these clashes undermine peace and jeopardize sustainable development, food and national security. To stop additional bloodshed, the government should focus on conflict prevention, strengthen local mediation mechanisms, and provide safe grazing zones for herders. Addressing grievances transparently and equitably is equally important, while in the longer term, tackling the influx of arms and the environmental pressures driving herders to southern part is crucial.

Recommendations

To mitigate the herder–farmer conflict, several urgent steps are required. First, security must be bolstered by deploying well-equipped police, strengthening local intelligence, disarming armed groups, and curbing arms inflow across borders. Second, impunity should end through prompt investigations and trials of perpetrators and sponsors of violence. The state anti-grazing laws should be reviewed: Benue should suspend strict enforcement alongside the federal government, support herders' transition to ranching through pilot projects and education programs.

The National Livestock Transformation Plan should be elaborated, publicized, and implemented with herders' and states' buy-in. Equally, fostering dialogue between herders and farmers by reinforcing local peace initiatives and grassroots mediation is important. Environmental drivers must also be addressed through climate change adaptation programs and initiatives such as the Great Green Wall.

In addition, herder leaders should embrace lawful channels, discourage violence, and encourage members to transition toward ranching, while communal, religious, and ethnic leaders must denounce violence and promote peaceful coexistence, human rights organizations should speak out more against abuses, and aid agencies should give more help to displaced people. Although, some measures may take time to work but federal and state authorities must act quickly to prevent Nigeria from falling into even worse conflict.



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