

FARMER AND HERDER CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA



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Background

Nigeria is faced with an array of security threats that continue to undermine its peace and security. In 2019, the Global Peace Index placed Nigeria among the five least peaceful countries in sub-Saharan Africa; ranking it 148th out of 163 countries surveyed . The escalating communal violence between the farmers and herders in Northern Nigeria has become the gravest security challenge. The farmer-herder conflict reportedly led to the death of at least 1,600 people and internally displaced 300,000 in 2018 . This data suggests that the conflict now claiming more lives than Boko Haram related attacks in the country .

The roots of the conflict have been attributed to a combination of the ethnic, political, economic, cultural, and religious tensions between the two groups as well as competition for scarce resources and environmental factors . Changes in agricultural practices that began in the late 1980s, have led to the conversion of traditional grazing reserves into fertile farmland, which in turn has resulted in disputes over land use rights in the region. Herdsmen are moving further south into predominantly farming communities in search of land on which their cattle can graze. The competition over the control of economically valuable lands has increased tensions and contributed to violence between the two groups. These clashes have led to large scale destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods with significant impact on women, youths and children. The problems have been compounded by weak institutions and non-existent government presence in remote areas.

In this environment of state fragility, economic inequalities, and severe insecurity, communities have increasingly moved to organise themselves into militia groups to defend their livelihoods, villages and families. The multi-dimensional nature of the crisis has complicated efforts to resolve it, with interventions often failing to account for social conditions or not addressing the broader issue of human rights and accountability. Both federal and state government's approach to dousing tensions and mitigate the conflict has been counterproductive. Slow and non-responsive police and court systems which fail to deliver justice are examples of weak institutions that have contributed to a growing trust deficit between them and citizens.

Therefore, it is imperative to pay close attention to the escalating conflict and find sustainable solutions to it. It is in view of this that the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) convened a one-day multi-stakeholder meeting to discuss the emerging trends and patterns of the farmer-herder conflict, the current strategies and gaps and the approaches needed to tackle the conflict.

Several emerging trends surrounding the farmer-herder crisis were highlighted in the meeting, that shed light on the complexities of the issue and the need for rapid but sustainable responses. The trends and dynamics are stated as follows:

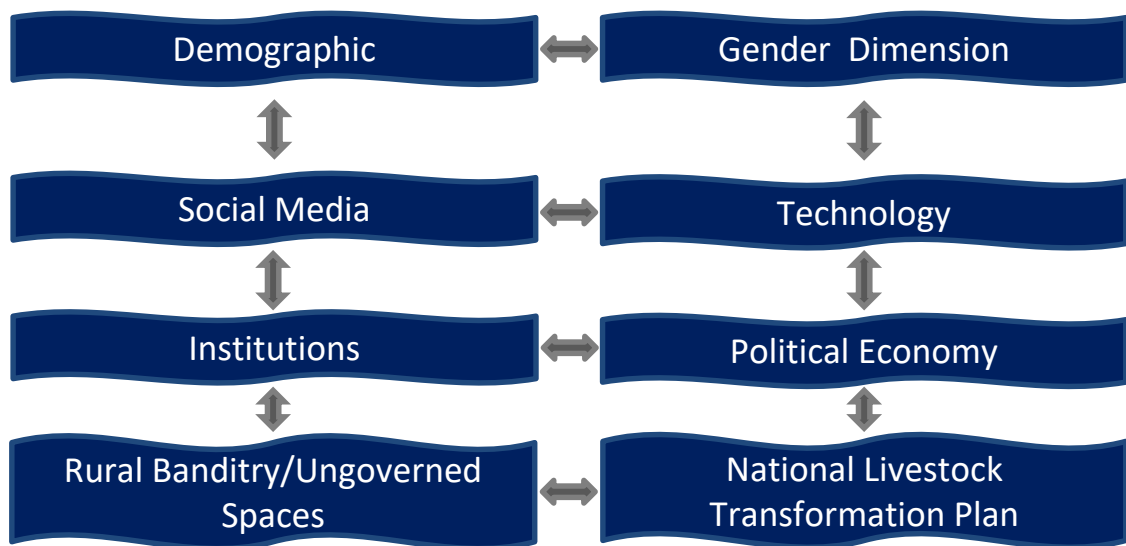
1 <https://punchng.com/nigeria-ranks-148th-on-global-peace-index/>

2 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/nigeria>

3 CNN

4 Adisa, R. S. (2012). Land Use Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen – Implications for Agricultural and Rural Development, Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Farmer - Herder Conflict in Nigeria: Trends and Dynamics



Rural Banditry, Other Criminalities and Ungoverned Spaces

The nexus between rural banditry and ungoverned spaces emerged as a significant part of the discourse surrounding the farmer-herder conflict. What originally began as a communal conflict between farmers and herders has metamorphosed into rural banditry with a heavy human and economic cost. Rural banditry, characterised by depredations, cattle rustling, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, sexual assault of women and girls and illegal toll collection at village markets, have all become recurrent in communities across Northern Nigeria. In particular, the Kamuku forest in Kaduna, Falgore forest in Kano, Dansadau forest in Zamfara and Davin Rugu forest stretching through Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states.

Bandits are rampant in insecure environments where a power vacuum can be filled by extremist groups and/or criminal activities. These ungoverned spaces give bandits the opportunity to roam freely and prey on unprotected citizens along highways and rural roads. They have overtaken remote areas where state presence is minimal or non-existent. The weak state capacity to regulate and establish effective governance has resulted in a high level of illegal activities perpetrated by criminal gangs, particularly in Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna State where cattle rustling is prevalent. Although, there is lack of proper documentation and reporting of incidences of rural banditry and other criminalities, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) reported that between 2011 and 2015, about 1,135 people were killed in Zamfara by cattle rustlers and other gang related conflicts .

Another common pattern stressed at the meeting involves the formation of vigilante groups by communities to tackle rural banditry themselves. Groups such as Yan Banga, Yan Sa Kai and Kato da Gora in Borno State are formed with the aim to defend their communities against criminals. But in some cases, arrest and summary execution of rustlers have caused retaliatory violence. In other cases, vigilante groups have become predators themselves, extorting cash and cattle from herders as a 'protection levy'. The activities of these new groups need to be properly scrutinised and separated from farmer-herder conflict, in order to devise means to combat them separately.

Demographic Factor

There are several dimensions in which demographic factors affect the conflict:

Nigeria's population is growing at an alarming and unsustainable rate. Currently at 200 million, it is projected to reach 400 million by 2050 . Population increase of this magnitude directly implies a linked increase in demand for food as a basic need for survival as well as increase in demand for farmland to produce that food. Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation leave little land for farming and grazing reserves/routes.

In addition, Nigeria's youth accounts for almost half of its population. There is a question as to whether Nigeria can harness its demographic dividend to boost economic growth, reduce poverty and ensure its long-term sustenance or whether its growing youth population is simply a ticking time bomb. Already, the country is experiencing growing youth unemployment that is projected to reach 35% by 2030 . Unemployed youth have taken up small arms and light weapons in northern Nigeria, escalating the intensity of the conflict in the region.

Gender Dimension

The gender dimension of the farmer-herder conflict is often overlooked. There are significant gaps in existing strategic responses in terms of gender inclusion at both national, state and local levels. The roles women play in relations to the conflict are under-emphasised in discussions around peace and security. Aside from being direct victims of the conflict, particularly being victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), women also play mediation and peacebuilding roles, in terms of providing early warning information for conflict prevention. Other roles they play include:

- Primary role: as perpetrators of the conflict;
- Secondary role: actors interested in the outcome of the conflict;
- Third-party role: influencing the dynamics of the conflict behind the scene;

Women's contribution to both the conflict and peace-building process are multi-faceted. There is a need to create safe spaces for dialogue that are inclusive and promote the participation of women and youth in decision-making, mediation and dialogue processes involving farmers and herders. This requires building their capacities and providing them with quality education, particularly on the issue as a tool of empowerment.

Institutions

The role of weak institutions in Nigeria is a common factor when discussing the dynamics of the conflict. Failure of the government to strategically implement and monitor policies that are designed to sustain peace in affected areas continue to dampen the general efforts of non-state actors. The government is more focused on responsive measures rather than preventive ones.

The rising conflict, which is increasingly taking various dangerous forms, is causing citizens to have less trust in the government and security agents. Across affected communities there have been claims of impunity, poor responses to early warning and in some cases total failure on the part of the military and security agents. Non-state actors, particularly, civil society groups, are beginning to experience a spill over effect as communities are losing confidence in them.

Land grabs are also a contributing factor that drives the conflict. The effects of state-backed land grabbing for large agricultural investments, often accompanied by corrupt practices at various government levels, have all contributed to the shortage of available lands. The effects of such displacement are seen in farmer communities in the form of land and water resource use conflicts.

Recently, the National Transformation Live Plan (NLTP) was developed by the federal government with the desire to work with all levels of government and key stakeholders to build an ecosystem for livestock production, economic development, peaceful co-existence, law and order, and food security in the country. Seven state namely, Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba and Zamfara were chosen as pilot states for the implementation of the plan. Already, experts have stated that there are several flaws in the plan (see below).

Media as the driver of Misinformation and Disinformation

The narrative of the farmer-herder conflict is more complex than a simple battle over resources but that is not always captured by debates on social media. It allows instant messages to reach a wider audience faster and online the conflict is increasingly framed online and, in the media, as ethno-religious; further exacerbating divisions and tensions. For example, the media, mostly portrays farmers as the victims of the conflict and herders as the aggressors. Along with this inaccurate and unhelpful framing there are dangerous exaggerations or distortions of true stories which are more difficult to spot. But these stories are often widely believed, from the grassroots to the halls of government. In penetrating the highest levels of political, religious and traditional leadership they inhibit a collective national response to the farmer-herder issue. Consequently, journalists, bloggers and social influencers need to be trained on how to report the circumstances and instances of violence as to prevent twisting the conflict in a way that is detrimental to the country in the long run. The media must apply “Do No Harm” principles in their reporting of the conflict.

Technology

It is important to consider the role of technology and innovation in tackling the conflict between farmers and herders. At the meeting, the following were emphasised:

- A continuous dialogue surrounding the use of technology and data to assist political leaders make informed decisions regarding policies that affect the conflict is needed.
- Phones and ICT tools can be used to produce adaptive support means for herders
- ICT can be used to engage youths in the farmer and herders' communities about more efficient ways of herding and farming.
- Better data collection (number of cattle, where are the cattle, no of herders, no of farmers, grazing routes, no of days) is key.
- A geographic information system should be established to monitor movement and routes.

Political Economy

It is important to pay attention to the political economy dynamics that sustain the conflict in Northern Nigeria. Participants at the meeting acknowledged the need for a practical approach to be driven by the realities of the conflict which has to go beyond technical interventions. There was recognition that several actors involved in the conflict benefit from doing so, – so-called conflict entrepreneurs. To better understand how politics affects the conflict, participants urged that the following should be further interrogated.

- Who is investing in herding?
- Who is acquiring land for farming?
- Who are the shadow actors and conflict entrepreneurs benefitting from the conflict?
- What is the role of politicians in the conflict?
- Who are the people sponsoring the distribution of small arms and light weapons?
- Who is partaking in purchasing and the distribution of drugs amongst the youth?

Current Strategies and Gaps in Responding to Farmer-Herder Conflict

- The Forum on Farmer-Herder Relations (FFARN) was established in 2017 with the mandate to collaboratively bring research practitioners, academics and government agencies together to positively influence policy making and programming on the farmer-herder relations in the country. However, significant gaps still exist between these actors in their approach to tackling the conflict.
- The Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) policy that was initially set up to put an end to the recurring conflict by providing reserved communities for herders to live and tend to their cattle was recently suspended by the federal government, because it was inconsistent with the recently adopted National Transformation Livestock Plan (NTLP).
- There are several flaws in the NLTP and RUGA policies. They have not been designed in a way that thoroughly exploits existing knowledge about the conflict. The NLTP is not available to the public and has not incorporated existing activities aimed at tackling the crisis by various groups. It also lacks a gender dimension. Furthermore, the strategies that are being developed within the country, are failing to capture what is happening in the Sahel and Sudan. This conflict is a regional issue and should be addressed as such.
- Among CSOs there are gaps in synergy, cooperation and coordination. If practitioners can be more coordinated, in their efforts to find solutions to the conflict it will help avoid unnecessary duplications of effort and ensure a wider reach.
- The quality of leadership in the country creates a major gap in addressing the conflict. In the last 20 years, the quality of leadership has been depreciating, with every set of elections bringing in people that are far less competent and qualified to hold leadership positions. This is especially true of the security sector, where nepotism and sycophancy are rife.
- There are gaps in the military operations such as, Operation Yaki, Harbin Kunama 11 in the North West involved in tackling these conflicts. Military and other security agencies are not integrated in terms of considering the environmental implication of their activities. In the North East and North West, a lot of military activities are being conducted in places that used to be grazing reserves – exacerbating the shrinking of resources available to farmers and herders and pushing them to areas where they are more likely to engage in conflict.
- There remain significant gaps in the ratio of police to citizens. A general under-investment in the security sector has left many underequipped and unsupported.
- There are gaps in provision of social services, particularly in ungoverned and neglected areas. Government must concentrate on establishing legitimacy in these communities by providing social services, such as healthcare, quality education and access to clean water. There is also a need to provide resettlement for people who have been displaced from their homes as a result of violent clashes.
- It is imperative to collect accurate data on a range of metrics - number of cattle, location of cattle, numbers of herders, numbers of farmers, grazing routes, proliferation of arms and so on. This will help to better understand the scale of the problem and ensure a more effective and informed response. It is imperative to use both technology and traditional methods to gather this information.

Policies, Programs, and Partnerships: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Institutional weakness and failure

- A major root cause of the conflict highlighted is the institutional weakness and failure in the society upon which this conflict thrives. These weaknesses in our institutions leads to a system of governance that is not capable of resolving disputes and end up propagating the crises.
- Empowering local informal institutions which are more trusted and respected could bring greater effectiveness in this conflict prevention and resolution.

Erosion of Traditional Mechanisms

- There is a need to restore the traditional methods used previously in resolving farmer-herder crisis. Substantial investment needs to be made in re-establishing traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which would reduce the corruption witnessed in the judicial system. There should also be capacity building for farmers/herders in order to get them more involved in this process of conflict resolution.

Developing a Comprehensive Policy Framework

- A new evidence-based policy framework should be designed which embraces the welfare of both the farmers and herders and that is inclusive of all active stakeholders in the conflict.

Lack of synergy amongst government agencies

- There is a need for stronger synergy among government agencies in proffering solutions to this crisis. The current lack of synergies between government agencies and departments leads to poorly developed policies.
- The disconnect between the three tiers of governments needs to be bridged

Lack of trust amongst citizens

- The National Orientation Agency should play a central role in re-orientating citizens and countering disinformation that is characterising the conflict. The presence of government in various communities and ability to address policy incoherence will go a long in building trust. This will help increase citizens acceptance of solutions provided by the government and in return earn their trust.

Strengthening partnership between government and CSOs

- The gap in trust between CSOs and the government needs to be bridged. It limits the impact that both parties can make in conflict resolution.

Improving the capacity of the Nigerian Police Force

- Investments need to be made to build the capacity of the police force with the aim of improving their integration within the affected communities. A re-orientation will bring about better policing which would help in the resolution of the farmer-herder crisis.
- The government needs to address the current size of the police force which is just slightly above 300,000 for a population of 200 million. This will help ensure an appropriate police to citizens ratio of 1: 400 as stated by the United Nations requirements and ensure more effective security, particularly in conflict affected communities.

Improvement of communication strategy with citizens.

- The government should improve communication strategies to ensure citizens understand and embrace the various policies aimed at resolving the conflict.