

**FARMERS-HERDERS CONFLICT IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL
EVALUATION OF THE BUSINESS OF HERDS MEN IN BENUE STATE**

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Abstract

The study interrogates “farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria: A Critical Evaluation of the activities of Herds men in Benue State”. The objectives of the study which are in synergy with the research questions are to determine the causes of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State, to ascertain the level of damage caused by farmers-herders conflict in Benue State to proffer solution that will end or reduce farmers-Herders conflict in Benue State. The researcher applied intractable conflict theory and employed qualitative research methodology involving secondary data. The researcher made the following findings: Land and hatred are the major causes of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State, a lot of lives and properties have been lost in Benue State as a result of Farmers-herders conflict and Federal Government has not shown enough commitment in resolving the conflict between farmers and herders in Benue State. The researcher also made the following recommendations: Implementation of Benue state grazing law where farmers and herders will never own land in the same area. There should be farming land and grazing areas. Government should pay huge compensation to the family of those killed in the crop farmers and herders conflicts to douse the tension. International Modern ranching can be pursued as one of the possible models in areas with lower population densities in the North East (Sambisa Game Reserve in Borno State) and North West (Gidan Jaja Grazing Reserve in Zamfara State).

Key Words: Conflict, Farmers, Herders, Fulani, Grazing, Ranching

1. Introduction

Herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria are a series of disputes over land resources across Nigeria between mostly Muslim Fulani herders and mostly Christian non-Fulani farmers. They have been especially prominent in the Middle Belt (North Central) since the return of democracy in 1999 (Moritz, 2010). The previously harmonious relationship between farmers and herders however changed over time and is now marked by frequent disputes over land, farm trespass/crop damage and desecration/contamination of water sources. The problems concomitant with this crisis include rape, cattle rustling, and disputes over the appropriateness of recompense for agricultural damage or injured or killed cattle, problems with extortion, and violent follow-ups with unfavorable outcomes. Moritz (2006) portends that the dynamics and context of the herder-farmer relationships in West Africa are changing and leading to disputes. Hagher (2013) noted that conflicts between farmers and herders are intricate confrontations that are induced and exacerbated by ecological exigencies and ethnicity.

The farmer-herder crises in Benue State have been going on since the 1980s, featuring predominantly arable farmers and the Fulani herdsmen, escalating every year into higher dimensions (BENSEMA,

2014). Of particular importance is the fact that prior to this time, the movement of herders in Benue State, were originally cyclical, usually during the desiccated time of the year with herders northward voyage necessitated by the commencement of the rains. Ortserga (2012) explained that the original cyclical herder's voyage style in Benue State was with time altered, escalating precariously and sooner or later became all year round. While farmer-herder crises have endured, they were insignificant in contrast to when herders jettisoned their serial exodus pattern for permanent residency in Benue State. This position is corroborated by Tsuwa, Kwaghchimin and Iyo (2015), who avail that the alteration in the hitherto migration pattern made the monitoring of grazing activities cumbersome and farm trespass and crop damage inevitable. Iro (1994) elucidates that at the height of the drenched season, livestock *browsing* overlaps considerably with farmer's cultivation season which puts farmers and herders on collision course over farm trespass and crop damage. Hitherto, the admittance of the herders to Tivland as observed by Tsuwa, Kwaghchimin and Iyo (2015), needed to be conferred by constituted authorities who permitted the herders to inhabit the neighbourhood earmarked for herder's occupancy in line with Tiv native customs, solicited guidance from willing community members to lead them to areas with lush vegetation while avoiding farm trespass. The destruction of crops by strayed animals was accorded adequate compensation for the damage caused by the livestock.

Towards the end of the 1980s and the wake of the 1990s, the original bargained entry pattern was jettisoned. The herders violated the entry conditions negotiated with community gatekeepers. This violation featured prominently in the failure to stick to the negotiated number of herdsman as double the number was seen littered all over the admitting community (Tsuwa, Kwaghchimin and Iyo, 2015). This had consequences for checkmating the grazing behaviour as issues related to farm trespass and crop damage became a common sight while the herders increasingly exhibited hesitation towards recompensing for crop damage hitherto anchored on established mechanisms through which disputes between this interdependent parties were resolved, probably based on emerging interests (Ortserga, 2014).

These conflicts have recorded various degrees of consequences ranging from psychological trauma, economic dislocation and security challenges (Alimba, 2014, Azahan, Terkula, Ogli and Ahemba, 2014,

BENSEMA, 2014). The magnitude of loss recorded from the conflicts has implication for food security, wellbeing and livelihood access/loss of the affected farmers in particular and the State economy in general.

According to the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (2014), the total Value of Personal Losses (less houses) in naira in communities in Agatu, Katsina-Ala, Logo, Kwande and Makurdi Local Government Areas alone stood at N17, 491, 293, 526.00. As a country, Nigeria stands to lose over US \$12 billion every year as a consequence of the farmer-herder conflicts in States of Benue, Kaduna, Nassarawa, and Plateau alone. This is premised on the fact that a projected 64% boost in affected household income is possible in a near zero conflict scenario (Mercy Corps, 2017). This is more so that Mercy Corps (2016) revealed that the enduring bickering flanked by farmers and herdsman traversing the North-Central aside the unpleasant consequences it has visited on the nation's economic advancement, it is estimated to have robbed Nigeria of food security and a probable income in the neighbourhood of \$14 billion in three years. In furtherance to this, Mercy Corps (2017) avails that Nigeria as nation is prone to lose an amount equivalent to over US \$12 billion every year as a consequence of the farmer-herder conflicts in States of Benue, Kaduna, Nassarawa, and Plateau only especially that a projected 64% boost in affected household income is possible in a near zero conflict scenario.

The conflict took a more violent dimension since the beginning of the 21st century. And in recent times, Benue state has had its share of the conflict. To give credence to the foregoing, a study by Gambo (2019), found that 1572 farmers were allegedly killed by suspected herdsman in a period of six years (2013-2018) in Guma, Logo and Agatu Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the state; while over 73 herders and 5000 cattle have been killed by suspected native farmers in the state within the same time frame. Governor Samuel Ortom of Benue State have been reported by Vanguard Newspaper of 5th February, 2017 that more than 1,878 persons lost their lives from 2014 to 2016, while over 3,920 people died in the famous Agatu massacres between 2013 and 2017 according to the Sole Administrator of Agatu LGA, Benue State, Mr. Inalegwu as reported by the same newspaper. As a result of this conflict more than 64,750 cattle were stolen and at least 2,991 herders killed in North-central Nigeria in 2013 alone (Samuel, 2015).

As a result of these killings and destructions, the ensuing hardship that accompanies it and in a bid to find lasting solution, the

Benue state government in November 2017 enacted the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (OGP/REL). The law prohibits open grazing of animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs etc, and the compulsory establishment of ranches. According to Section 3(a-b) of the OGP/REL, the main objective of the law is to: Prevent the destruction of crop farms, community ponds, settlements, and property by open rearing and grazing of livestock; and prevent clashes between nomadic livestock herders and crop farmers (Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017:2). The law contains different penalties for offenders. For example, anybody found moving livestock on foot in any part of the state is liable for Five Hundred Thousand Naira (500,000.00) fine or one-year imprisonment or both for the first offender. For the second offender, the fine is One Million Naira (1,000,000.00) or three years" imprisonment or both (Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017).

It was premised on curbing physical contact between land users with varying production systems and land use patterns with its attendant unpleasant consequences. By the enactment of the law, it repealed the Grazing Reserves Law Cap.72, Laws of Benue State, 2004. The law objects to extensive land use practices like open nurturing and *browsing* of livestock while championing intensive land use practices with ranches establishment and livestock management, regulation and control (Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2017).

Causes of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State

The movement of herdsmen and subsequent clashes with farmers and host communities in recent times has heightened insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central region and by extension in other parts of the country. The driving force of the clashes is the competition for available resources, especially grazing land. It seems that the government has abandoned the grazing reserve system created by the Northern region government in 1965. Then, the government created over 417 grazing reserves in the north. Under the grazing reserve system, government provided space, water and vaccinations for the livestock while the herdsmen paid taxes to the government in return. However, the discovery of oil and subsequent exploration and export made Nigeria an oil economy, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently, the grazing reserve system was abandoned due to the

neglect of the agricultural sector as the mainstay of the country's economy.

Consequently, grazing reserves which were under a neglected agricultural sector could not be sustained. It received little or no attention from succeeding administrations. As a fall-back, herdsmen began to resort back to their traditional and seasonal grazing routes which had been interrupted or interfered with by industrialization, urbanization, demographic and other natural factors. This then led to clashes and conflict with farmers and host communities. These conflicts have been on the increase in recent times and now constitute one of the major threats to Nigeria's national security.

To address these challenges, the Federal government in June 2015 constituted a Strategic Action Committee to look into the issue and make recommendations that would help government address the problem. A major stakeholder in this effort, the umbrella body in the cattle rearing business, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), agreed that the effect of climate change and desertification was a major causal factor leading to trans-human movement from North to the South annually.⁴ Since climate change and other associated factors are beyond what farmers or herders could address, there is need for concerted efforts by the government, private sector, regional bodies and the international community at large to come together to address these challenges.

Climate is a critical factor in the activities of herdsmen and farmers. The changing climatic condition, generally referred to as global warming, is no doubt taking a toll on the survival of herdsmen and farmers business. The desert encroachment from the Sahara towards the Sahel region and other associated climatic conditions have continued to affect the livelihood of herdsmen as they push further south in search of available space, pitching them against farmers and host communities. This global phenomenon is currently affecting many parts of the world with attendant consequences – including the herdsmen-farmer conflict.

Constant urbanization and demographic shifts in the present day world has increased the tendency and likelihood of farmers to move further afield for farming activities. At independence in 1960, the Nigerian population stood at about 35 million people.⁵ However, 58 years later, it has leaped to over 180 million people and the growth is expected

to persist in the near future. Population increase of this magnitude also means a geometric increase in the demand for food products as a basic human need. This also implies an increase in the quest for farming space for farmers. Conversely, industrialization and urbanization have continued to claim all available land, leaving little or nothing for farmers survival.

Figure 1: Desert encroachment and climate change that affects livelihood of herds men that push them to Southern Nigeria to look for grazing land



Source: *World Bank Data Base*

The Level of Damage Caused by Farmers-Herders Conflict in Benue State

Clashes between herders and farmers date back in decades and at the centre of it is the struggle for land. The conflict worsened after President Muhammadu Buhari came to office in 2015. In 2016, a massacre occurred in Agatu area of the state where over 500 villagers were killed and thousands displaced, according to the Benue State government. In January 2018, an attack claimed 72 lives in several communities in the state, leading to a mass burial. As recent as May 2021, the Samuel Ortom-led state government said suspected herdsmen killed over 100 persons in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area. In

response, the government in 2017 enacted a law banning open grazing of cattle in a bid to halt the violence. That hasn't solved the problem because the police, controlled by the federal government, have not effectively enforced the new law. The Benue government accuses Mr. Buhari, a Fulani, of refusing to act against killings in the state as the perpetrators are also from the same ethnic stock, an allegation the president denies. "Mr. President is pushing me to think that what they say about him, that he has a hidden agenda in this country is true because it is very clear that he wants to finalize but he is not the first Fulani president,"(Governor Ortom as quoted by told Channels TV in August 2015). The Federal High Court in Abuja in May 2021 affirmed the right of states to implement anti-grazing laws, rejecting the federal government's argument championed by Attorney-General of the Federation, Abubakar Malami, that such legislation is unconstitutional. Attempts by the Benue government to enforce the law using its own security unit, called Livestock Guards, has not solved the problem; instead, it has led to more bloodshed. So many people have been killed within the period.

Figure 2: Picture showing the mass Burial of victims of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State





Source: *Hameed Sadiq, From Posterity Media Photos 11 January 2018*

Figure 3: Cattle Grazing Near a Maize Field in Benue State



Source: *Benue staff Bureau of statistics*

Solution that will end or reduce farmers-Herders conflict in Benue State

The solution to herders-farmers violent clashes in Nigeria has remained elusive due to lack of consensus, especially between the Federal Government of Nigeria and affected north-central and southern states' Governments, regarding the right methodology for curbing the menace. This lingering lack of consensus is attributable to the sentimentalization of this sensitive national issue given the wide ethnic

and religious differences between two warring groups-the 'herders' who are predominantly Muslims and Fulani, and the crop farmers who are predominantly Christians from the middle-belt. The quest of this paper, therefore, is to identify any key stakeholder group that uses scientific methods devoid of sentiments to study any phenomenon before concluding fact-based findings. It is against this backdrop that this study strives to examine academics' recommendations on the sustainable panacea to Herders-Farmers conflict in Nigeria. The paper is empirical in nature to the extent that it employed library-and-desk research methods for data collection. The population of the study constitutes journal articles on Herders-Farmers clashes in Nigeria. Twenty-eight papers were sourced and analyzed using content analysis. The study found that the majority of the academics recommended conflict resolution mechanisms, mass orientation, and ranches as the sustainable panaceas to the constant herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. The study, therefore, recommends that the ranches proposed by the Federal Government of Nigeria should be piloted in some affected states to be able to appraise its real potentials rather than totally rejecting it without subjecting it to any form of experimentation.

Theoretical framework

Intractable Conflict Theory

The researcher adopted intractable conflict theory for the explanation of Farmers-Herders conflict in Nigeria in general and Benue State in particular. As noted in Onuoha (2008), intractable conflict theory can be used in analysing conflicts bordering on land, religion and culture. This is applicable in the farmers-herders conflict. It is imperative to state that none of the Parties is ready to surrender for peace in the Benue State, the Fulani herders are insisting on occupying a land that does not belong to them and Benue people are not also ready to relinquish their land to the Fulanis. The conflict has lasted for years without the arbitrators finding lasting solution to resolve or manage it. The theory was made popular by Northrup (1989) in an article entitled 'The dynamic of identity in personal and social conflict'. Northrup argues that identity is always an important factor in relationships, as threats to identity can cause conflict or contribute to its intractability. As Burgess (2005) noted, intractable conflicts are those conflicts that stubbornly seem to elude resolutions, even when the best available

techniques are applied. Essentially, intractable conflicts are ones that remained unresolved for long periods of time and then become stuck at a high level of intensity and destructiveness.

Application of the Theory to the Study

Since intractable conflicts are immense disagreements that have had a long history, an inability to resolve issues over time, high stakes, and can result in violence, either physical or emotional. The Farmers-herders conflict can be categorized under this since the conflict has lasted for a very long time. The issue of farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria has generated a lot of conflict even before the first and second regime of Mohammadu Buhari, but it appears that it got to its crescendo as President Mohammadu Buhari became President in 2015. From that 2015 till date, uncountable lives and properties have been lost especially in Benue State where mass burial of farmers and other members of Benue communities became the order of the day.

Summary of findings

1. Land and hatred are the major causes of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State
2. A lot of lives and properties have been lost in Benue State as a result of Farmers-herders conflict.
3. Federal Government has not shown enough commitment in resolving the conflict between farmers and herders in Benue State.

Discussion of Findings

Land and hatred as major causes of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State

The fertility of Benue State inevitably attracted Fulani herdsmen to the state; and due to the peculiarity of the activities of these herdsmen, they move from one place to another in search of pasture. In this process, they frequently trespass farmlands owned by locals in their host communities, destroying crops and valuables. Most times, the farmers are overpowered, injured and killed, while others are evicted from their homes. Sometimes, the herdsmen are accused of taking advantage of the opportunities to steal, rape, burn houses and kill innocent people of the communities they pass through (Akinkuolie, 2018; Blench, 1984 & World Bank, 1989). The herdsmen were perhaps more security

conscious than the farmers. More than the farmers, herdsmen 'prepared for the worst', 'tightened security', and 'used charms' (Adisa, 2012). This view is also corroborated by Adeoye (2017) when he asserted that a combination of charms, spears, swords and guns are mostly used during the confrontations. So, the farmers lament about the wanton ravaging of their lands as it destroys of their source of livelihood. In February 2018, as a result of a clash between herdsmen and farmers in Benue State, 40 people were killed, about 2,000 displaced and not less than 100 were seriously injured. Over the last 2 years, more than 92 Nigerians were massacred by suspected Fulani Herdsmen in Benue and Niger states. With these the researcher deduced that land and hatred are the major causes of the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State.

Lives and Properties Lost in Benue State as a Result of Farmers-herders Conflict

According to Alia (2020), an estimated 7,000 Nigerians died between 2015 and 2019 in the persistent violence between farmers and pastoralists in the middle belt states of Benue and Nasarawa, a report funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Titled "Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN)," the report also said the violence has cost the Nigerian economy \$13 billion a year over the past five years. An international non-governmental organization, Mercy Corps, conducted the study across the states and wrote the report. The group said the study was aimed at preventing violent conflict between farmer and herders in the middle belt states. The report was presented at Bon Elvis Hotels On Thursday in Abuja. The presentation was witnessed by the paramount ruler of the Tiv, Tor Tiv James Ayatse; the Country Director, Mercy Corps, Darius Radcliffe; USAID Mission Director, Stephen Haykin, represented by USAID country Democracy Officer, Beatrice Reaud, and other community leaders from Benue and Nasarawa states. The report said a programme of interventions in the middle belt states by Mercy Corps had helped to reduce conflict in the area by 13 per cent. The report said trained participants in the programme succeeded in resolving 1932 inter and the intra-community disputes. According to the report, over 600 disputes over grazing routes, seasonal access to water points, crop damage, cutting down of economic trees, water pollution by animals, and commerce were addressed peacefully in the communities where ECPN

worked.

The long-standing conflict between semi-nomadic herdsmen and settled local farmers in the central states of Nigeria has claimed thousands of lives in recent decades and shows little sign of abating. The president, Muhammadu Buhari, faces accusations of favouring the herdsmen with whom he shares ethnicity. However, at the heart of the issue is not ethnicity, but rather a competition for scarce land resources that is liable to prove as difficult to resolve as any ethnic rivalry, given economic and land-ownership constraints. Following the public outrage at the [slaughter](#) of at least 71 people by armed Fulani herdsmen in Benue state in early January, Mr Buhari defended himself against accusations by critics that he has favoured the predominantly Fulani Muslim herdsmen and shown indifference to the plight of the mostly Christian farming communities. In a statement on February 7th the presidency dismissed such allegations as unkind and incorrect and listed several steps taken by the administration in response to atrocities committed by herdsmen in Benue and other states, including deployment of security forces to the affected areas.

Federal Government Low Commitment in Resolving Farmers-herders Conflict in Benue State.

Federal Government has not shown enough commitment in resolving the conflict between farmers and herders in Benue State. No significant step has been taken the Federal Government to end the killings in Benue State. The Governor of Benue State Samuel Orthom have been shouting telling Federal Government the level of destruction of lives and properties going on in Benue State but Federal Government has not done anything significant. On a serious note, if Federal Government is actually interested in resolving the conflict, Benue State gracing law should be implemented where farmers and herders will not own land in the same place. Pastoral business is not more important than crop farming business. Therefore the Benue State gracing law should be implemented to the fullest to separate the two belligerent warring factions that will reduce or stop the conflict. With the current situation, people will be dying on daily basis because Benue people are now prepared than ever before to face the challenge of herdsmen. The RUGA system Federal Government tried to impose on Nigerians did not see the light of the day because Benue State was among the first state to reject the policy which believed was aimed to plant Fulanis in various

parts of Nigeria. Federal Government was made to understand that giving value to cattle than human life is not descent, moreso cattle business is a private or individual business, therefore nobody should use it to destroy other peoples' business and colonize them. As with many other cases of communal conflicts over land use in Nigeria, the main underlining issue in the herdsman-farmer troubles is arguably weak enforcement of private property rights. Many herders believe they have a traditional right to roam across the country in search of pastures, while the members of local communities assume that land and its resources belong to local communities. Less than 10% of land in Nigeria is titled. Therefore modernizing the nation's agricultural sector, including livestock, requires not only improving security in rural areas but also land-ownership reform to make it easier for the development of large-scale commercial farming and husbandry. A combination of a lack of financing, ethnically charged language, mistrust and insecurity will get in the way of this for years to come. In all Federal Government should not treat the matter as usual. Urgent steps should be taken to resolve the crisis in order to stop the killings going on in Benue State considering that the primary responsibility of Government is to protect lives and properties. Anything outside this means failure on the part of Government. The issue of private security arrangement going on in Benue State would have been necessary if Federal Government was able to meet up with her constitutional mandate of protecting lives and properties.

Conclusion

[Herder-farmer conflicts](#) in Nigeria have deep roots and date back to pre-colonial times (before the 1900s). However, these conflicts have become far more severe in recent decades due to population pressures, climate change, and various other factors. During the British colonial era, herders and farmers would agree on a system called *burti*, in which specific migration routes were set up for herders, with mutual agreement from the farmers, herders, and local authorities. However, the *burti* system collapsed around the 1970s when farmers increasingly claimed ownership of lands along cattle migration paths, increasingly leading to conflicts. Before, herders frequently exchanged milk for cereal grains with farming communities. However, in recent decades, milk is no longer being widely bartered as packaged beverages became more popular in towns. Modern medicines have also made it possible for

herders to move their livestock further south into the "[tsetse fly](#) zone" in the south, whereas before, herders could not keep their cattle on a large scale due to tropical diseases in humid climate zones. Starting from those implemented by the British colonial administration, tsetse control programs have reduced the threat of diseases such as [trypanosomiasis](#).

Today, herders also have easy access to drugs for [trypanosomiasis](#) and [dermatophilosis](#) in order to keep their livestock alive. In addition, over the past several decades, herders have cross-bred [trypanosome](#)-intolerant [zebu cattle](#) with [trypanosome](#)-tolerant humpless breeds, thereby increasing the cattle's tolerance of tropical diseases. All of these factors have enabled the widespread migration of Fulani herders into the southernmost areas of Nigeria, where they could easily sell their livestock for higher prices due to strong demand for beef and other meat products in Nigeria's populous southern towns and cities. However, in the south, they would encounter sedentary communities that have not historically had any experience with peacefully negotiating and co-existing with nomadic herders. Increasing ease of access to weapons and religious polarization among both Christians and Muslims have added to the potential for violence.

Since the [Fourth Nigerian Republic](#)'s founding in 1999, farmer-herder violence has killed more than 19,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more.^{[11][12]} It followed a trend in the increase of farmer-herder conflicts throughout much of the western [Sahel](#), due to an expansion of agriculturist population and cultivated land at the expense of pasturelands; deteriorating environmental conditions, desertification and soil degradation; [population growth](#); breakdown in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms of land and [water disputes](#); and proliferation of [small arms](#) and crime in rural areas. Insecurity and violence have led many populations to create self-defence forces and ethnic and tribal militias, which have engaged in further violence. The majority of farmer-herder clashes have occurred between Muslim [Fulani herdsmen](#) and farmers, exacerbating hostilities.

Recommendations

1. Implementation of Benue state grazing law where farmers and herders will never own land in the same area. There should be farming land and grazing areas.
2. Government should pay huge compensation to the family of those killed in the crop farmers and herders conflicts to douse

the tension.

3. International Modern ranching can be pursued as one of the possible models in areas with lower population densities in the North East (Sambisa Game Reserve in Borno State) and North West (Gidan Jaja Grazing Reserve in Zamfara State).

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