



Farmer -Herder Conflict and Displacement of People in Keana Local Government council of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Abdullahi Dan'Asabe Jibrin¹ & Dr. Usman Gayam²

¹Department of political Science Federal University of Lafia Lafia, Nigeria

²Department of Political Science Nasarawa State University, Keffi Keffi, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Abdullahi Dan'Asabe Jibrin

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The recurring farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has escalated into one of the most pressing internal security and humanitarian challenges, particularly in agrarian communities such as Keana Local Government Area (LGA) of Nasarawa State. This study investigates the underlying causes, patterns, and consequences of the conflict and its role in population displacement within the area. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach comprising surveys, interviews, and secondary data, the study reveals that competition over land and water resources, exacerbated by climate change and weak land governance, are the primary triggers of conflict. Seasonal migration by pastoralists into farming territories has led to the destruction of crops, retaliatory attacks, and the mass displacement of rural populations. Findings indicate that a significant proportion of the population has been displaced—particularly women and children—resulting in loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and social fragmentation. The state response to displacement remains largely reactive and insufficient, with inadequate support for resettlement, livelihood recovery, or peacebuilding. Community coping strategies, while commendable, are not sustainable without state intervention. The study recommends the establishment of grazing reserves, robust land-use policies, early warning mechanisms, and integrated support for internally displaced persons (IDPs). It concludes that a multi-stakeholder, conflict-sensitive approach is essential to mitigating the crisis and restoring peace and development in Keana LGA and similar conflict-prone areas.

Keywords: Farmer; Herder; Conflict; population; displacement.

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Introduction

In recent decades, Nigeria has witnessed a disturbing rise in communal conflicts, especially between farmers and pastoralists over land and water resources. These conflicts have grown in intensity and frequency, particularly in the North-Central zone, also known as the Middle Belt, where Nasarawa State is located. The dynamics of the conflict are primarily driven by environmental degradation, demographic pressure, climate change, and resource scarcity, which have heightened competition for land use between sedentary agrarian communities and nomadic pastoralists (Adisa, 2012; Okoli &

Atelhe, 2014).

The traditional symbiotic relationship between farmers and herders in Nigeria has broken down, evolving into violent confrontations. Once marked by seasonal and negotiated interactions, these relationships have become increasingly characterized by distrust, destruction, and displacement. In states such as Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau, and Taraba, the consequences have been severe, resulting in thousands of deaths and the internal displacement of farming communities (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The violence that results from these confrontations has led to population



displacement, the destruction of livelihoods, and a breakdown of community relations.

These displacements create a humanitarian crisis, where affected populations—mostly women and children—are forced to flee their homes without access to shelter, food, education, or healthcare. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2023), over 300,000 people in Nigeria were displaced due to farmer-herder conflicts alone between 2020 and 2022, with Nasarawa being one of the hotspots. The absence of coordinated state response and lasting conflict resolution mechanisms has allowed the crisis to deepen.

Scholars like Tonah (2006), and Blench (2004), have argued that the failure of the Nigerian state to regulate land use, coupled with climate-induced migration and poor governance, has significantly contributed to the escalation of these conflicts. Moreover, the proliferation of small arms, the politicization of identity, and the weakness of traditional conflict resolution systems have worsened an already volatile situation (Egwu, 2014).

Despite the wide coverage of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria, there is limited localized empirical study focusing specifically on Keana LGA. This research, therefore, aims to fill that gap by examining the causes, consequences, and displacement patterns resulting from the conflict in Keana, while also exploring possible policy interventions.

Literature Review

Farmer-herder conflict refers to the contestation between two primary land-use groups—sedentary farmers and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists—over access to and control of natural resources such as land, water, and pasture. In Nigeria, this conflict has become increasingly violent and widespread, especially in agrarian communities of the Middle Belt, including Nasarawa State.

Farmer-herder dynamics has been ongoing for generations, predating the modern Nigerian State. Anthropological studies have shed light on the intricacies and complexities of herder-farmer interactions across the country (Chukwuma,

2020). It is important to note that the Fulbe/Fulani pastoralists stand out as the largest and most prominent herd-owners among Nigeria's various pastoral groups.

According to Blench (2016), a blend of cooperation and conflict characterizes the relationship between farmers and herders with the introduction of cattle in the North Central region. He also notes that there exist a formidable understanding and cooperation between the two groups in the Sahel region, given rise to the exchange of milk for cereal, and cattle manure for disposing grazing residues. At the early stage of colonialism, demographic pressure on land was at its lowest ebb, and herders could move unhindered in a sparsely populated landscape. Disease and attack from wild animals were the major challenges impeding the open grazing of herds. Farmers enjoyed increased availability of protein and the mutually beneficial exchange of dairy products for staples. Consequently, the two groups enjoyed mutual beneficial relations that were generally good, with little or no record of conflicts reported. The colonial authorities viewed the Fulani/Fulbe's livestock production and Islamic faith as valuable assets, thus leveraged on it to establish protected grazing reserves.

Cooperation between farmers and herders remained formidable even after the colonial era and the emergence of Independence in Nigeria. However, according to Blench (2016), two situations changed the situation: the first was growth in population and a decline in loyalty shown to the authorities in the colonial period. The massive demographic increase in West Africa made the trajectory of safe movement much more complex than in previous times. Climate change became the primary driver reshaping herding practices, outpacing the impact of rapid population growth and static farming methods. Nigeria's population explosion, from under 5 million before 1900 to approximately 170 million by 2016 (Gerland et al., 2014), has significant implications. Despite urbanization, most Nigerians still reside in rural areas, relying heavily on subsistence farming.

Since Nigeria must feed its megacities, food

items were imported to complement the shortfalls in food supply. Importation was also made possible and sustained due to high oil prices. However, this strategy was difficult to sustain due to the fall in oil prices. The absence of sustainable intensive farming to feed the markets, left the entire burden on small scale farmers to meet the demand for staples. As a result of this, an increased amount of arable land in the sub-humid and semi-arid zones was needed for farming and this confined herders to smaller grazing areas.

The lands reserved for herders in the colonial era, the burti and the Grazing Reserves (protected from agriculture for decades, and fertilized by cattle manure) attracted the attention of farmers because they appeared good for farming, as the trees could also be cut down for charcoal and other domestic use. This necessity led to series of encroachments; where maize, rice and other high-value crops were planted in reserves and across designated grazing tracks. Some of these incursions were encouraged by local politicians, who saw the herders as having no rights and opening up 'new' farmland as a vote-winner. Consequently, upon returning to their traditional routes, herders often found farms encroaching on grazing areas, leading to livestock-related conflicts. Crop damage frequently resulted in arrests, court cases, and interpersonal violence and reprisal attacks. Herders were disproportionately represented in police custody and courts, often due to farmer-herder conflicts. Moreover, government officials' perception of herders' wealth made them targets for extortion (Blench, 2016).

Herders require access to rivers for their cattle and rely on the lush grasses along riverbanks. However, in semi-arid areas, irrigated farms have taken over major river systems, blocking herders' access to water and grazing land. This encroachment has led to friction between herders and crop farmers, who often have limited understanding of each other's way of life. Historically, farmers and herders enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, exchanging food and animal products, with herders assisting farmers during harvests and farmers relying on herd manure. However, competition over dwindling

resources has strained this relationship, leading to more violent conflicts since 2001 (Blench, 2016).

It is imperative to note that farmers and herders have previously enjoyed a symbiotic relationship; exchanged food and animal products that are beneficial to each other. During such encounters, herders equally help farmers to harvest their produce on the farm in order to have access to the by-products of harvested crops for their herds. Farmers, on their part, also rely on the remains of their herds for manure. This relationship was mutually beneficial until competition over shrinking natural resources became higher.

Mohammed et al., (2021), view the farmer-herder conflict as some kind of crisis that is prevalent between farmers and herders who are on two opposing sides. The crisis influenced by the desperate aspiration of both groups for survival. This struggle for survival is heightened by the inadequacy of natural resources in the face of unlimited needs. Specifically, this is due to the unprecedented effects of global warming on the ecosystem, drought and its attendant impact of desertification, this compels herders to migrate further in the arid zones in search of greener pastures and water. In most cases, they settle in location where inhabitants are already battling with already existing problems associated with population growth that increases the pressure on farmlands. This has made violent clash between the two groups more frequent.

Higazi (2016), averred that local conflicts which resulted in minor injuries have been recorded since the earliest incursion into the North Central zone by herders. However, such disputes did not last long as they were easily resolved, and communal peace rapidly restored. However, the Jos Crisis of 2001 changed the dynamics in the feud between farmers and herders. It began as a political crisis in Jos and quickly spiraled into all manner of attacks on herding groups in Plateau State. From this period, the whole of Plateau and neighbouring states such as Nasarawa, Kaduna, Benue and Taraba have regularly experienced violent conflict. Violent conflict between farmers and herders has led to attacks and counterattacks that the state has been unable to

control (Blench, 2016).

Amaza (2016), links farmer-herder violence to overgrazing, insufficient rainfall, and increasing desertification of nomadic grazing grounds, which are traditionally used for raising cattle. He also observed that nomadic herdsmen have been migrating further south in search of grass and water for their herds. In the North Central Nigeria, which is a fertile agricultural belt, it has led to violent crisis between herders and farmers whose farmlands are damaged. Furthermore, he highlighted that these tragic encounters have begun to occur more regularly in the Southern States. In places like Rivers, Enugu, and Ondo, there have been violent attacks on farmers by herders. Violent conflicts between farmers and herders usually arise when grazing cattle are left to roam and graze on cultivated plants like rice, cassava, yam tubers, and maize in the farms of host communities, especially when they tended by underage herders. Any attempts by the owners of such farms to voice their displeasure over the destruction of their means of subsistence (food crops and cash crops) by pastoralist livestock are invariably met with resolute resistance, which leads to communal disputes. Farmers sometimes take coercive measures by shooting stray cattle or reporting to constituted authorities for the arrest and prosecution of invaders of their farms. However, the herders turn hostile and assault the host community, who are most times farmers, often with the help of mercenaries, when the communities try to control their behaviour or ask them to leave.

Obaze (2018), agrees that the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has grown into a big challenge that poses a danger to the country's security. Between 1997 and 2017, 389 incidents of violent conflicts were recorded between farmers and herders, with the majority taking place within the North Central region, while 1,300 lives were lost in 2018. Between 2015 and 2017, about 62,000 people experienced internal displacement. More so, Nigeria loses an estimated N14 billion annually, with property worth about N95 billion destroyed since the conflict started in the late 1990s (Obaze, 2018).

The farmer-herder clashes are widespread in the Northern and Southern Nigeria regions as well as

outside of Nigeria. This is in contrast to the Boko Haram terrorism, which is confined to the country's Northeast region. This, therefore, gives the crisis a clear international and cross-border dimension. The farmer-herder conflicts have far-reaching consequences, including danger to people's lives and property, food insecurity, disruption of social norms, stoppage of religious and educational activities, disruption of various social welfare Programmes, and disruption of economic activity (Obaze, 2018).

Similarly, Nwozor (2016), opines that the major differences between farmer-herder conflict and Boko Haram terrorism are imbedded in their end-goal and the disposition of the Nigerian authorities toward them. All three groups (Boko Haram, farmers and herders) deploy the use of firearms for violent attacks to attain their various goals. The Boko Haram seeks to realize the utopian ideals of Islamizing Nigeria, while the herders are concerned about occupying lands to feed their cattle as an integral part of their livelihoods (Blench, 2017).

According to Bagu and Smith (2017), attacks by herders on farming communities often provoke retaliatory responses, leading to escalating violence. The cycle of attacks and reprisals has created a persistent and complex conflict, hindering resolution efforts. Critics, including Amnesty International (2018), have blamed governments at various levels for failing to take decisive action to address the violence, thereby perpetuating the cycle of attacks and counter-attacks.

In spite of the devastating impact of violent conflict between farmers and herders, insufficient attention is given to developing and distributing resources in a way that promotes fairness and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, scholars often overlook how vested interests in the Nigeria polity, politicize farmer-herder relations for personal interest and gain. While commentators frequently highlight drivers like infrastructure, climate change, and cattle rustling, they tend to downplay the role of politicization, including the exploitation of ethnic, religious, and clannish sentiments, in exacerbating these conflicts.

According to Tonah (2006), farmer-herder conflicts are often the result of environmental stressors, population growth, and changes in land-use patterns. These conflicts become more intense when government regulation is weak or biased. In Keana LGA, the overlap of farming and herding zones, especially during dry seasons, triggers disputes that escalate into communal violence.

Tonah (2006), further argues that conflict between farmers and herders is a regular component of West African economic livelihood. The Fulani cattle herders have highlighted land usage conflicts as the most serious difficulty they face in their occupation. Farmers want land for cultivation, whereas herders require an area for grazing. In many places in Nigeria, this has resulted in competition for arable land, resulting in major hostilities and social friction between the two user groups. According to Amao, Adeagbo, Olojode, Oguleye, and Ogundoyin, (2018), farmer herder's disputes have been the most prevalent resource – use conflict in Nigeria. These conflicts have shown a significant potential to increase insecurity and food crises, particularly in rural areas where the conflict is most hit, with nationwide repercussions.

Conflict, as defined by Gurr (1980), Gyong (2007) and others, among others, is an interaction between two groups (whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-economic, political or others) in which the involved participants engage in mutually opposing actions and use coercive behavior to destroy, injure, thwart, or otherwise control their opponents. Farmer-herders conflict is therefore, the interaction between farmers and herders in which they engage in mutually opposing actions and use coercive behavior to destroy, injure, and even kill their opponents.

People Displacement

People displacement refers to the forced movement of individuals or communities from their habitual places of residence due to conflict, violence, natural disasters, or development-induced changes. In the context of Keana, displacement is a direct consequence of violent

farmer-herder confrontations.

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) define internally displaced persons (IDPs) as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence... and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”

Theoretical frame work

The study adopts an eclectic approach by using two theories viz: Resource Conflict Theory and Structural Violent Theory. The essence is for the two theories to complement each other in addressing comprehensively the phenomenon of farmer-herder conflict and population displacement. The study first, draws on the Resource Conflict Theory, which posits that competition over natural resources- especially in an ecologically stressed environments- can lead to violence when institutional mechanisms for resource allocation are weak (Homer -Dixon, 1999). It also relies on the theory of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), to understand how systemic marginalization and policy failure contribute to displacement and humanitarian crises.

Methodology

An appropriate framework for any study cannot be determined in a vacuum. It is dictated by the nature of the problem to be investigated, and a consideration of which research tools and approaches will enhance the study. Thus, in fashioning the approach to the study of farmer-herder conflict and population displacement in Keana, the study adopts a descriptive survey research design with mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative approaches). This design enables the researcher to systematically collect and analyze both statistical and narrative data to explore the dynamics of farmer-herder conflicts and their displacement consequences in Keana LGA.

A mixed-method approach allows triangulation of data, providing a comprehensive understanding of causes, patterns, and implications of the conflict (Creswell, 2014). While the quantitative aspect measures the scope

of displacement and frequency of conflict, the qualitative aspect explores the lived experiences and perceptions of affected communities.

However, considering the fact that the investigation is taking place after some time lag of the incidence, a number of research strategies and techniques had to be combined in order to obtain the relevant data. In addition to archival materials, and a number of other government publications. The research also relied on indepth interviews with important personalities and opinion leaders. This was complemented with the use of Focus Group Discussions in which people directly involved in conflict and displacement had opportunity to engage in relating experiences. In addition to these, we relied on basic survey method, which involved a general survey of Keana LGA.

Study Area

The research is situated in Keana Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, located in Nigeria's North Central region. The LGA consists of communities such as Kadarko, Agaza, Alosi, Giza, and Keana town, which are known hotspots for farmer-herder clashes. The area is agriculturally productive and strategically located along transhumance routes, making it prone to recurrent conflict.

Discussion

The finding indicates that the major concern of herders that fuels recurring violence between the two competing groups is the cultivation of cattle routes by farmers. This leaves herders with no other option than to graze on cultivated lands to be able to access grazing areas and water. On the part of farmers, the destruction of farmlands by herders has nothing to do with the cultivation of cattle routes. Farmers accuse herders of engaging in willful and deliberate destruction of their farms. From the data collated, it was observed that some farms are destroyed at night when all farmers have retired to their resting places. For instance, even rice farms that are protected during the day get destroyed when the farmers are no longer keeping watch. Again, given the level of complaints recorded about the destruction of

farmlands by herds, the mere encroachment of cattle routes by farmers is not enough to warrant the level of destruction of farmlands being recorded.

Responses from the qualitative findings also revealed that even though farmers are cultivating beyond their designated farmlands and encroaching into cattle routes, it is not enough reason for the constant destruction of crops on the farm, especially when such destruction covers a large expanse of lands beyond the routes that herds could use to make their way to any grazing area, river or stream to access water. It is worthy of note that there exist cattle routes from Yelwa in Shendam Local Government Area in Plateau State, down to Assakio and Lafia in the capital of Nasarawa State. The same route leads to the Lafia Cattle Market located at Shinge. There exists another cattle route from Yelwa, to Kwande in Plateau State, leading to Azara, Awe, and Keana Local Government Areas of Nasarawa, and then to Gbajimba and Makurdi in Benue State. It is observed that these routes have been occupied by farmers or developed to provide infrastructures such as schools, hospitals, and roads.

Secondly, findings indicate the negative consequences of farmer-herder conflict in food production, education, health and infrastructural development. It was also discovered that the conflict has significant psychological, physical and economic devastation to the victims.

Thirdly, findings, revealed a strong link between the conflict and Population Displacement which also affect food production as farmers are relocating from farming communities to urban centres in search for other means of livelihood. The study has also revealed that a significant part of the areas that are supposed to be cultivated in large hectares are laying fallow because farmers have been displaced from many communities and they are afraid of returning for fear of being attacked.

This has unintentionally depressed farmers' motivation to grow additional crops. In addition to others who have been uprooted and lost their homes and possessions to live in IDP camps, the lives of farmers and herders, especially women

and children, have been needlessly cut short. Additionally, because farming is their primary occupation and the herds destroy their farm product, farmers are eventually subjected to poverty and unemployment as a result of its devastation.

5.2 Conclusion

This research sought to investigate violent conflict between farmers – herders and population displacement. Based on data collected and analyzed, it is evident that violent conflict between the two competing groups is fueled by the scarcity of natural resources such as water and grazing fields. Access to cattle routes and availability of grazing fields for herds have also caused herders to resort to the destruction of farmlands for the survival of their own trade. It is imperative to note that the cultivation of cattle routes and the destruction of farmlands are the common causes of violent conflict between the two competing groups and population displacement.

It is equally evident that the conflict impacts the ability of farmers to produce food and contribute to food security. Empirical evidence shows that many farming communities have come under severe threat, leading to the displacement of farmers while a large expanse of land suitable for production remains uncultivated due to fear of attacks. Many farmers have been forced to abandon their farmlands in search of other means of livelihood in urban centres and other safer communities. Investment in agricultural production is risky because of the loss of investment as well as the loss of lives arising from attacks on farming communities. Consequently, food production has experienced a continuous setback despite the willingness of farmers to increase production, thereby significantly affecting the state's ability to contribute to national food security.

Despite the efforts of the government at both federal and state levels to curb the recurring conflict through the adoption of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), the conflict still persists with no end in sight. Hence, more effort is required in the holistic implementation of the plan to ensure that open

grazing is restricted while herders are provided with all that is required to rear their herds more sustainably.

This study concludes that the commitment of the government in the implementation of strategies for addressing the farmer-herder conflict is inadequate to the extent that the government is more reactionary than preventive or proactive. Not many farmers and herders are adequately informed about the significance of the NLTP to the transformation of livestock rearing, which will also allow farmers to produce food without any obstruction or destruction of their farmlands by cattle. Many citizens are aware of the plan but do not know to what extent it is capable of addressing the lingering conflict between the two competing groups – hence, not much support is given to the implementation of the plan.

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested as measures to address the recurring violent conflict between farmers and herders.

1. The government should mobilize traditional leaders closest to the people to be deliberately involved in finding solutions to the farmer-herder conflict. Accordingly, both groups should be extensively engaged to respect the boundaries and profession of each other for mutual coexistence; thereby ensuring that cattle routes are demarcated and uncultivated to allow for the free passage of herds to grazing areas and water sources.
2. Government should coordinate efforts and establish a common ground for communication, negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation between the conflict actors in the area. This would allow both communities to air their grievances, clear up any misunderstandings, and find a way to live together peacefully and support one another's trade.
3. Functional and sustainable conflict management mechanisms should be established by government and community leaders in farming communities with various interest groups incorporated with a

dedicated mechanism that is empowered to address the concerns of all parties. Traditional rulers should be deliberate in justifying the confidence repose in them as local leaders and ensure that farmers and herders respect boundaries as they play significant roles in achieving food security and wealth generation.

The holistic implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) should be pursued. The Nasarawa State Government should partner with international development agencies to finance the plan and ensure that more herders are adequately sensitized about the benefits of ranching covered by the plan to curb open grazing.

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