Resolving Farmer-Herder Conflicts

- Operationalise Already-Designated Grazing Reserves
- Facilitate Establishment of Commercial Cattle Ranches
- Leverage mediation and dialogue groups
- Mop-up Arms Across the Country
- Facilitate Communicative Engagement
- Encourage Private Sector Investments
- Build Community Peace and Security Architecture
- Advocate for Amendment of the ECOWAS’s Transhumance Protocol
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Overview

Farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, which were predominantly in the North-Central region, have spread across the country. The conflicts result in indiscriminate and avoidable loss of lives and properties. The country is locked in a perennial macabre dance between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists or herders. Although mostly an agrarian resource problem, an inaccurate definition of the conflict has turned it into one rooted in political, cultural, and ethnoreligious beliefs; and other distorted considerations. These narratives and profiles have aided aggressive encroachment and reprisal aggression between the parties leading to mutual hostility and reverse-violent attacks.

Data from Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database\textsuperscript{13} shows that in the twelve months to September 2021, farmer-herder conflicts occurred 71 times, accounting for 406 deaths, 49 injured, and 15 kidnapped persons. Except for one death, all the victims were civilians.

\textbf{Figure 2: Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria from October 2020 to September 2021 (Source: Nextier SPD Violent Conflicts Database)}

\textsuperscript{13} Fatality figures were culled from the Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database which sources its data from media reported violent conflicts. The database categorizes the conflicts into banditry, terrorism, farmers-herder crisis, extra-judicial killings, cultism, armed robbery, domestic violence, civil unrest, piracy, and communal clashes.
The North-Central region remains the hotbed for farmer-herder conflicts (in terms of incidents), while the North-West is the most violent in terms of casualties per incident. The North-Central region recorded 58 percent of the incidents and accounted for 61 percent of the casualties. At the same time, the South-West region recorded the second-highest number of incidents (25 percent of the total), only 12 percent of the deaths. The North-West region, on the other hand, recorded 4 percent of the incidents but 15 percent of the deaths. These proportions hold even when comparing all the victims (death, injured and kidnapped) to the total number of incidents. It is worthy of note that although the South-East recorded 6 percent of the incidents, it accounted for 9 percent of the deaths. The South-South had 6 percent of the incidents but only 3 percent of the casualties.

Judging by the narrative around the conflict, one would think that all the local government areas in Nigeria are at risk of getting embroiled in the restiveness. However, the Nextier SPD Violent Conflicts Database shows that the conflicts are centred around specific states and communities. In the last twelve months, farmer-herder conflicts have been reported in 5 percent (39 out of the 774) local government areas in Nigeria. Ten Local Government Areas in Nigeria (mostly in the North Central region) account for 49 percent of the reported incidents and 68 percent of all the reported conflict victims. This insight suggests that this conflict is more localised than the euphoria of a national crisis. Therefore, the government should adopt a more targeted engagement with these communities to seek peaceful resolution of the conflicts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region - State - Local Government Area</th>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>Victims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent of Total Number of Incidents</td>
<td>Percent of Total Number of Victims</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Central-Benue-Guma</td>
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<td>29 Local Government Areas</td>
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<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 8: Summary of Farmer-Herder Conflict Data from September 2020 to October 2021 (Source: Nextier SPD Violent Conflict Database)

The reoccurrence of the farmer-herder conflicts has impaired development in the affected regions. Between 2001 and 2018, about 300,000 people were displaced across four states: Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa and Taraba. These states, part of
Nigeria’s food production belt, risk economic collapse and growing food insecurity. The rest of the country will suffer the spillover effect. In the twelve months to September 2021, Nigeria has recorded a 20.7 percent food price inflation.\(^{14}\) However, the International Monetary Fund expected that food price inflation would decline towards the end of 2021 “following the removal of border controls and the elimination of base effects from elevated food price levels.”\(^{15}\)

**Drivers of Farmers-Herders Conflict**

*Climate change* is arguably the major cause of farmer-herder conflicts. In the northern region, desertification and inadequate rainfall have led to shrinking grazing lands and scarcity of water. In addition, camels from the Sahel eat up the leaves from the trees meant to cover the fragile earth, further worsening the situation. As a result, herders migrate further south in search of forage and water. In the south, erosion has reduced the size of available farmlands, pushing communities to farm deeper inside the forests, where nomadic herders have patrolled unhindered for generations.

Poor agronomic practices (by both the farmers and herders) increase the need for land. As farmlands become nutrient-poor, farmers migrate to more fertile lands. Some of the most fertile lands are on designated cattle routes fertilised for generations by cattle droppings. Some of the farmers lay traditional claims to these lands, oblivious that they were designated cattle routes by the government. On the other hand, herders also claim these paths because they have travelled them, with their cattle, for generations. Significant increases in human and livestock populations exert pressure on available lands and put both parties on a collision course. The current transhumance cattle migration and the extensive farming practices set up a competition for landbound to become violent.

Any perceived threat to a herdsman or farmer’s livelihood is a call to war. To the nomad, life is worthless without the cattle. Therefore, any threat to this source of existence is reciprocated with sufficient force. Therefore, encroachment of the grazing fields by the farmer is a call to war. Likewise, most farmers live below the subsistence level; therefore, any perceived affront to their means of livelihood elicits an equally severe response. Farmers perceive a threat to their livelihood when cattle trample through their farms and eat up their crops.

Conflicts over economic resources have assumed dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions. There is increasing distrust amongst herders and farmers, with each

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\(^{14}\) Calculated with data obtained from Trading Economics (https://tradingeconomics.com/nigeria/food-inflation)

Community convinced that there is a plan to exterminate the other. Ethnic and religious bigotry are attributed as the primary motivation of the attacks. The farmers (mostly Christians) see the escalating conflicts as part of a plan to Islamise Nigeria. Many commentators point to historical parallels to the Fulani Jihads. While some fringe elements long held this opinion, the recent activities of Boko Haram and the increased frequency and severity of the farmer-herder conflicts have led the leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria to join in propagating this argument. Similar views are strongly held in the Middle Belt region and have become the dominant narrative in various parts of southern Nigeria. It has defined the lens through which these communities engage with the issue. Many groups in Southern Nigeria see the herders as an advance-army for a larger political agenda. Such politicisation of the issue forecloses channels for any considered solutions to the problem.

There is a conflict between the religious and secular interpretation of land use in Nigeria. The Fulani, who constitute a large percentage of the herders in Nigeria, believe that “Komai na Allah ne. Ko wonai fili na Allah ne, ba naku ba”. (Everything belongs to Allah. Therefore, every piece of land belongs to Allah and not yours). This religious position directly conflicts with more secular views that land belongs to the government, community, or the individual.

Large-scale criminal cattle rustling enterprises is a major trigger for this conflict. These criminal networks steal the cattle and keep them in large scale holding facilities in the bush for subsequent sale. In some cases, the cattle rustlers pillage and burn communities in the area as a partial distraction from their activities. Such acts lead to reprisal attacks by the herders on the sedentary communities and perpetuate a cycle of unnecessary carnage. A Communiqué issued by the Conference of Autochthonous Ethnic Nationalities Community Development Associations (CONAECDA) after its second annual conference in October 2015 explained that herders were increasingly turning to crime because of the impending poverty due to the loss of their cattle to cattle rustlers.

Other driving factors include the failure of government policies and legislation to address subsisting land tenure challenges. Efforts to address these issues have been politicised under the heavy clouds of political suspicion. Confusion between modern and traditional governance mechanisms continue to exacerbate the


problems. The government has failed to advance policies that address the underlying economic and agronomic roots of the problem, setting the stage for worsening the conflicts. This conflict is worsened by other security challenges, including a failed governance and security architecture, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, porous borders and ungoverned spaces enable the free flow of bandits across international borders.

Prior Intervention Efforts

The Nigerian government response to the conflict has been to deploy security agents to the affected areas. The strategy is reactionary and has yielded minimal results. In 2019, following a surge in violent incidents, the Federal Government adopted the 10-year National Livestock Transformation Plan to alter these deadly patterns. However, widespread distrust between the parties has made the programme ineffectual. Herders worry that the proposed ranches and grazing reserves might be unviable for their herds within the stipulated ten years. They fear that the period is too short for them to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. On the other hand, farmers are worried that the programme might force them to forfeit their land to livestock producers. The lack of funding, compounded by the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, further thwarts the initiative.

Beyond government interventions, several civil society organisations and international development actors implement programmes to build peace in the affected communities. However, these measures are mostly community-level conflict management initiatives that, while welcome, do not address the fundamental economic and climatic challenges that triggered the conflict.

Recommendations

Operationalise Already-Designated Grazing Reserves

The Federal Government of Nigeria proposes the establishment of grazing reserves in all states of the Federation to solve the herder-farmer clashes and boost the milk production capacity of Nigerian cattle. This proposal heats the polity as it plays into the suspicions of those who believe there is a Fulaniisation or Islamisation agenda to subjugate the rest of the country under a hegemony. While this view is yet to be substantiated, it is a strongly held perception in many quarters and should be considered and addressed in any proposed solution.

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The suspicion is exacerbated by the fact that the Government of Nigeria has developed only 115 out of the 415 existing grazing reserves. Of this number, only a few (data not available) are in operational condition. This information raises doubts about why the government needs more grazing reserves if it cannot develop over 70 percent of the existing grazing reserves.

In the light of the above, the proposal for additional grazing reserves is seen as provocative and can escalate an already tense political situation in the country. Moreover, this proposal is even more incendiary given that the states expected to designate the grazing lands are predominantly agrarian, do not raise cattle, and do not see the justification for depleting their shrinking arable land to support a business (cattle husbandry) that is not strategic for the states’ economic agenda.

Facilitate Establishment of Commercial Cattle Ranches

Many commentators have recommended the establishment of commercial cattle ranches as a more optimal solution. In this model, cattle owners and herders will have access to pasture on land specially prepared to offer all the services needed to raise a commercially viable cattle husbandry business. The cattle ranches will provide the right type of pasture, veterinary services, access to market for the products, social services (education, healthcare, recreation, etc.) for the herders and their families, etc.

The herders under the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) have rejected this proposal, insisting on free access to grazing reserves and cattle paths. Their position is informed by the assertion that Fulanis (who constitute most of the herdsmen) are a nomadic people for whom it is unnatural to settle in a place for longer than a few months. This point demands further interrogation as there are at least three classes of Fulanis based on settlement patterns: nomadic/pastoral or Mbororo, semi-nomadic, and the settled or "Town Fulani."

Furthermore, it is imperative to explore the optimal economic model for managing the ranches to ensure their commercial viability. The government has proven its inability to manage the ranches; therefore, it needs to explore private sector models for achieving the desired ends. Such an economic model should integrate the ranchers' genuine fears and concerns, especially given their current educational levels and fears that the cost of the ranches may distort their current economic model of near-zero feed costs.

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Leverage mediation and dialogue groups

There is a need to bridge the mistrust between the herdsmen and farmers through the active involvement of representative community groups. These groups could be federal- or state government-sponsored. The groups can be funded by civil society organisations seen by all parties to be neutral. In Jos, a city in Nigeria’s middle belt and one of the hotbeds of violence, social ties between communities in potential conflict with one another and between community leaders and local youth/militias appear to have played an important role in moderating the violence. Similar approaches were used in Tanzania, where a researcher identified two major approaches to resolving the conflicts: a consensual approach and a non-consensual approach. The consensual approach involved conflict resolution processes such as facilitation, moderation, conciliation, consultation, mediation, and arbitration.

On the other hand, the non-consensual approach requires action backed by legislation. The action may either criminalise the invasion of farmlands or compel farmers to accommodate the herdsmen. Furthermore, recognising that the herdsmen-farmer clashes can be categorised under the general land conflict phenomenon provides better insight into the potential solutions.

Mop-up Arms Across the Country

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) means that simple provocations can easily morph into major conflicts that lead to avoidable deaths and injuries (Duquet, 2009)20. Agrarian disagreements that should be resolved by simple police work escalate to deadly proportions because of the easy availability of illicit weapons are in the hands of herdsmen and farmers. Therefore, the Federal Government of Nigeria, working with the sub-national governments, should implement a mop-up of SALWs from across the country.

Facilitate Communicative Engagement

Data on the conflict patterns and trends should be leveraged in designing advocacy programmes to deliver social cohesion. Such programmes should target the traditional leaders from both parties. In addition, the government should work with civil society organisations to set up a safe space for the warring parties to speak sincerely and freely about the various grounds for their claims in the conflict. Such an approach will enable each party to see and think through the other party’s claims.

empathetic, creating a willingness to seek common grounds jointly. Open and honest dialogue can achieve gains that deployment of force will not accomplish.

Encourage Private Sector Investments

The organised private sector can collaborate with the state governments to set up ranches under a public-private partnerships model. Such collaboration, which exists in other agricultural value chains, should be extended to animal husbandry. The government’s involvement in such a scheme could help assuage the herders’ fears about private investors.

Build Community Peace and Security Architecture

Establishing community architecture for peace and security will help in the early detection and resolution of potential conflicts. The solution set should include inclusive and participatory platforms for dialogue and conflict management by all stakeholders. For example, local vigilante groups should work with the herders and farmers to deliver mutual protection. Collaborative efforts will enhance mutual understanding among them. A similar strategy was successfully deployed by South Africa’s Hemmersbach Rhino Force and its anti-poaching rangers.

Advocate for Amendment of the ECOWAS’s Transhumance Protocol

In 1998, ECOWAS Member States recognised cross-border pastoralist transhumance as a valuable economic activity for the region. The organisation defined a regional regulatory framework for cross-border transhumance that upheld the ECOWAS principle of free movement of persons, services, and goods. However, significant changes in the political context and improvements in agricultural production systems have prompted calls for amendments to the protocol. What was once seen as an asset is now potentially a liability given the rise of violence within the sub-region. Amendments to the framework will provide a broad outline for national changes.