

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DRIVERS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT IN BORNO STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistent conflict between farmers and herders in Borno State, Nigeria. The conflict, which has deep historical roots, has escalated in recent years, resulting in significant loss of life, livelihood destruction, and internal displacement. The primary objective was to identify the key drivers of the conflict and assess its socio-economic impact on the affected communities. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, with a structured questionnaire administered to 150 respondents and in-depth interviews conducted with 50 key informants, making a total study population of 200. The respondents were drawn from farming and herding communities in the local government areas of Hawul, Konduga, and Damboa. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that the primary drivers of the conflict are competition over scarce land and water resources (85%), climate change-induced desertification and erratic rainfall (78%), the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (72%), and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (65%). The conflict has led to severe socio-economic consequences, including the destruction of farmlands and livestock (90%), forced displacement (82%), a decline in household income (88%), and food insecurity (85%). The study concludes that the farmer-herder conflict in Borno State is a complex crisis driven by environmental scarcity, economic pressure, and security failures. It recommends an integrated approach that includes the revitalization of traditional mediation systems, investment in climate-resilient agriculture and ranching schemes, enhanced security deployment and disarmament initiatives, and policy reforms to address land tenure issues.

Keywords: Farmer-Herder Conflict, Borno State, Climate Change, Resource Competition, Socio-Economic Impact, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists is one of the most pervasive threats to human security in Nigeria. While historically managed through informal, traditional institutions, this conflict has escalated in scale, frequency, and intensity, particularly in the Middle Belt and Northern regions (Higazi, 2015). Borno State, while often overshadowed by the Boko Haram insurgency, has been a significant theatre of this destructive farmer-herder violence. The conflict poses a grave challenge to livelihoods, social cohesion, and regional stability.

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The ecological profile of Borno State, located in the semi-arid Sudan Savanna zone, makes it particularly vulnerable. Factors such as population growth, climate change manifesting as desertification and unpredictable rainfall, and the southward expansion of pastoralists from the Lake Chad Basin have intensified competition for dwindling arable land and water resources (Blench, 2014). Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the region, exacerbated by the instability in neighbouring countries and the Boko Haram insurgency, has militarised previously non-lethal disputes (International Crisis Group, 2017).

This study seeks to provide a micro-level analysis of the farmer-herder conflict in Borno State. By focusing on the lived experiences of affected farmers and herders, it aims to move beyond macro-level narratives and identify the specific drivers and impacts of the conflict. The central research questions are:

1. What are the primary underlying and immediate drivers of farmer-herder conflict in Borno State?
2. What are the socio-economic consequences of this conflict on the livelihoods of farmers and herders?

Literature Review

The farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has generated a substantial body of academic literature, which can be broadly categorized into several thematic areas. This review synthesizes key perspectives on the causes, dynamics, and impacts of the conflict, identifying the gaps that this study seeks to fill.

The Historical and Ecological Foundations

Scholarly consensus indicates that farmer-herder conflicts are not new in Nigeria. Historically, relationships were largely symbiotic, characterized by exchanges of manure for crop residues and mutual respect for designated grazing routes (Burtali) and farmlands (Tonah, 2006). However, this equilibrium has been disrupted. Blench (2014) and others argue that the fundamental shift began in the 20th century due to a combination of factors: population growth, which expanded farmlands into traditional grazing reserves; the abolition of traditional governance structures by colonial and post-colonial governments; and environmental pressures. Borno State, situated in the Lake Chad Basin, has been acutely affected by the dramatic shrinkage of Lake Chad, which has displaced millions of people who depended on it, including fishermen, farmers, and herders (Muhammed, 2019).

The Climate Change and Resource Scarcity Nexus

A dominant paradigm in the literature frames the conflict as a direct consequence of environmental scarcity. Climate change is identified as a critical "threat multiplier" (International Crisis Group, 2017). Progressive desertification in the far north and erratic rainfall patterns have compressed the available grazing land and shortened the grazing season, forcing pastoralists to move southwards earlier and remain longer in the crop-growing areas of the Middle Belt and states like Borno. This environmental pressure creates a constant state of competition for land and water, turning previously transient interactions into zero-sum contests for survival (Homer-Dixon, 1999). This study builds on this framework by investigating how these macro-level climate phenomena are experienced at the micro-level in Borno's specific communities.

The Political Economy and Governance Dimensions

Beyond environmental factors, scholars have highlighted the role of poor governance and political economy. Okoli and Atelhe (2014) critique the failure of the Nigerian state to develop and enforce clear policies on land use and grazing reserves. The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP, 2019) is a recent federal initiative aimed at transitioning pastoralism to ranching, but its implementation has been slow and fraught with political and logistical challenges. Furthermore, the literature points to a "criminalization" of the conflict, where elements from both communities, and sometimes external actors, engage in cattle rustling, armed banditry, and land grabbing, exploiting the volatile situation for economic gain (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). The state's security apparatus is often perceived as ineffective, slow to respond, or partial, leading to communities resorting to self-help.

The Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)

A critical evolution in the conflict's character is its militarization. The presence of SALW has transformed local disputes into deadly confrontations. The International Crisis Group (2017) and Umar (2018) link the proliferation of arms to regional instability, including the civil wars in Chad and Sudan, and the fallout from the Libyan crisis. In the specific context of Borno State, the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency has flooded the region with weapons and created a culture of violence,

which has inevitably spilled over into farmer-herder clashes. This study examines the extent to which this militarization has altered the dynamics and outcomes of conflicts in the study area.

The Borno State Specific Context: The Overlap with Insurgency

While the general literature on farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria is rich, there is a relative paucity of studies focusing specifically on Borno State, as much of the academic and policy focus has been understandably directed at the Boko Haram insurgency. However, these crises are not isolated. The insurgency has created a complex humanitarian emergency, leading to massive internal displacement, the collapse of local governance, and the destruction of livelihoods, which in turn intensifies competition over the scarce resources that remain (Muhammed, 2019). This creates a vicious cycle where conflict over resources weakens community resilience, making them more vulnerable to insurgency, and vice-versa.

Gap in Literature

This review identifies a significant gap: the need for a focused, empirical study on the farmer-herder conflict within Borno State that accounts for its unique confluence of environmental stress, pre-existing economic patterns, and the overarching context of a debilitating insurgency. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing grounded data on the drivers and impacts of this conflict, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding necessary for crafting effective, localized interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. This allowed for the triangulation of data, providing both breadth and depth of understanding.

Population of the Study

The population for this study was 200 participants. This comprised individuals directly affected by farmer-herder conflicts in selected communities across three Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Borno State: Hawul, Konduga, and Damboa. These LGAs were purposively selected due to their history of recurrent conflicts.

Sampling and Data Collection

A multi-stage sampling technique was used. First, the three LGAs were purposively selected. Second, five communities from each LGA were randomly selected. Finally, from these communities, respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation from both farming and herding populations.

Data was collected using two primary methods:

1. Structured Questionnaire: A total of 150 questionnaires were administered to farmers (75) and herders (75). The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data on demographics, perceptions of conflict causes, impacts on assets and income, and preferred resolution mechanisms.
2. In-depth Interviews (IDIs): 50 key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. This group included community elders from both groups, leaders of farmers' and herders' associations, local officials, and members of traditional conflict resolution committees. The interviews explored historical context, the evolution of conflict dynamics, and the perceived failure of formal and informal institutions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were

used to summarize the data. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, narratives, and insights.

Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Findings

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Of the 200 respondents, 60% were farmers, 35% were herders, and 5% were community leaders involved in mediation. The majority (82%) were male, reflecting the primary role of men in farming and herding activities in the region. The age distribution showed that 70% of respondents were between 30 and 50 years old.

Drivers of Farmer-Herder Conflict

The analysis identified several interconnected drivers of the conflict, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Perceived Major Drivers of Farmer-Herder Conflict (N=200)

Driver Percentage of Respondents Acknowledging Key Interpretation

Competition for Land/Water 85% The scarcity of fertile land and water points is the fundamental trigger. Encroachment of farmland by cattle and blockage of cattle routes by farms are daily occurrences.

Climate Change Effects 78% Erratic rainfall and desertification were frequently cited, forcing herders to move south earlier and into farming areas, compressing the available space and time for resource use.

Proliferation of Arms 72% Disputes that were once settled with sticks and machetes now involve automatic weapons, leading to higher casualties and a cycle of revenge attacks.

Breakdown of Traditional Mechanisms 65% Traditional rulers and councils, which once effectively mediated disputes, have seen their authority wane, partly due to the militarization of the conflict.

Destruction of Crops 90% (Farmers) For farmers, the physical destruction of their crops by cattle is the most immediate and tangible cause of conflict.

Cattle Rustling/Theft 80% (Herders) For herders, the theft of cattle is a major economic loss and a primary grievance that often triggers violent reprisals.

A community leader from Hawul elaborated during an interview: "Before, if cattle entered a farm, the herder would come to the village head, we would assess the damage, and he would pay compensation. It was settled in a day. Now, the farmer will call his brothers with guns, and the herder will also come with his own armed men. The issue is no longer about the crops, but about who is stronger."

4.3 Socio-Economic Impact of the Conflict

The impact on livelihoods has been devastating, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Reported Socio-Economic Impacts of the Conflict (N=200)

Impact Percentage Affected Key Interpretation

Destruction of Farmland/Livestock 90% This is the most direct impact, destroying the primary capital of both groups and pushing them into poverty.

Forced Displacement 82% Many have abandoned their homes and ancestral lands, becoming Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), which further strains host communities.

Decline in Household Income 88% The destruction of productive assets directly translates to a sharp decline or complete loss of income.

Food Insecurity 85% With farms destroyed and livestock lost, food production plummets, leading to hunger and malnutrition.

Breakdown of Social Cohesion 75% Inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages and friendships are breaking down, replaced by deep-seated suspicion and hatred.

A farmer from Konduga stated: "I have not been to my farm for two seasons. It is too dangerous. My entire maize farm was destroyed, and my barn was burnt. Now, my family depends on food aid, which is not enough." A herder from the same area echoed this: "They killed 15 of my cows and I had to flee with the rest. I have no money to pay for veterinary services or feed. My way of life is finished."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with, but also contextualize, the broader literature on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria. The identification of resource competition as the paramount driver confirms the thesis of environmental scarcity as a source of conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999). In Borno State, this scarcity is acutely exacerbated by climate change, creating a "trip wire" effect that ignites latent tensions.

What is particularly salient in the Borno context is the convergence of this resource conflict with the wider security crisis. The proliferation of arms, a finding strongly supported by 72% of respondents, is a force multiplier. It transforms a manageable dispute over crop damage into a potentially deadly confrontation. This militarization fundamentally undermines the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that were once the bedrock of inter-communal peace, as reported by 65% of respondents.

The socio-economic impacts are not merely consequences but are also drivers of future conflict. The displacement, loss of income, and food insecurity create a pool of disenfranchised, unemployed youth who are easily recruited into militancy or criminality, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence (Muhammed, 2019). The conflict is therefore not a standalone issue but is deeply intertwined with the challenges of underdevelopment, poor governance, and the overarching security crisis in the Northeast.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study set out to investigate the drivers and socio-economic impacts of farmer-herder conflict in Borno State. Based on data from 200 respondents, the research conclusively identifies competition over land and water, exacerbated by climate change, as the core driver. This competition has been catastrophically militarized by the proliferation of small arms, leading to a breakdown of traditional mediation. The consequences are severe: widespread destruction of livelihoods, mass displacement, increased poverty, and food insecurity.

Conclusion

The farmer-herder conflict in Borno State is a complex, multi-causal crisis rooted in environmental scarcity and socio-economic competition. It is no longer a simple issue of resource access but a deeply entrenched security challenge. The conflict is eroding the social fabric of communities and poses a significant threat to long-term stability and development in the region. A failure to address its root causes will only lead to its further escalation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Traditional and Formal Justice Systems:** Government should support and formally integrate credible traditional rulers into conflict resolution frameworks, providing them with training and legal backing to adjudicate disputes fairly and efficiently.
2. **Promote Climate-Resilient Agricultural and Pastoral Practices:** Invest in and promote drought-resistant crops, irrigation schemes, and the establishment of grazing reserves and cattle ranches to reduce direct competition for open land and water.

3. Disarmament and Security Reform: Implement a robust, community-sensitive disarmament programme to mop up small arms. Furthermore, deploy dedicated, mobile police and military units to rapidly respond to flare-ups in hotspot areas.
4. Socio-Economic Interventions: Launch targeted livelihood support programmes for victims of the conflict, including soft loans, input subsidies for farmers, and veterinary services and feed subsidies for herders, to rebuild decimated assets.
5. Dialogue and Peacebuilding: Facilitate sustained, inclusive dialogue platforms at the community and state levels involving farmers, herders, women, and youth to rebuild trust and foster collaborative resource management.
6. Land Use Policy Reform: The Borno State government should review and clearly demarcate existing cattle routes (Burtali) and grazing reserves, protecting them from encroachment by farming and settlement, in line with the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP).

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