



Between the Plough and the Pasture: Unpacking the Nature and Dynamics of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

BY

Shedrack Bee SHAR

**Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Science
Nasarawa State University Keffi, Nigeria**

Abstract

The persistent conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt region, has emerged as one of the most pressing threats to national peace and rural livelihoods. This study focuses on Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, an epicenter of such conflicts, to examine the underlying causes, nature, and evolving dynamics of farmer-herder relations. The study explores how increasing competition over land and water resources, environmental stress, population growth, and policy failures have intensified violent confrontations between agrarian farmers and nomadic pastoralists. Using a qualitative approach supported by interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data, the study reveals that the conflict has shifted from seasonal disagreements to systemic, often deadly, confrontations rooted in deeper ethno-political tensions, weak governance structures, and the proliferation of small arms. The findings highlight how the erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the limitations of state-led responses have exacerbated insecurity and displaced thousands. The study also underscores the gendered and socio-economic impacts of the conflict, particularly on farming households and local food systems. It argues that resolving the crisis requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines inclusive dialogue, land-use reforms, sustainable grazing policies, and peacebuilding strategies tailored to local realities. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on rural security, conflict transformation, and environmental governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Farmer-Herder Conflict, Katsina-Ala, Resource Competition, Rural Insecurity, Benue State.



1.1 Introduction

The recurring conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria have emerged as one of the most persistent sources of violence and displacement in recent decades, with significant implications for national security, food production, and communal coexistence. While this phenomenon spans across different parts of the country, the Middle Belt region—and Benue State in particular—has been one of the hardest-hit areas. Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA), located in the northeastern axis of Benue State, has become a hotspot for these clashes, which are often characterized by armed violence, loss of lives, destruction of property, and mass displacement of rural populations (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). The severity and frequency of these conflicts have raised urgent concerns about the sustainability of agriculture, the viability of nomadic pastoralism, and the overall stability of affected communities.

The dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in Katsina-Ala are influenced by a complex web of historical, socio-economic, environmental, and political factors. Traditionally, both farmers and herders coexisted through symbiotic relationships mediated by customary institutions and seasonal migration patterns. However, this equilibrium has broken down due to a combination of increased land pressure from population growth, climate change, deforestation, expansion of settlements, and weak governance structures (Blench, 2010; Tonah, 2006). The result has been a transformation of what were once manageable disputes into protracted and often deadly confrontations. Herders, largely of Fulani ethnic origin, are often accused of invading farmland with their cattle, while farmers are charged with blocking cattle routes and engaging in retaliatory attacks. This mutual distrust is further complicated by ethnic, religious, and regional politics, which escalate the conflicts beyond local boundaries.

Moreover, the proliferation of small arms, the failure of security agencies to act impartially, and the weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have contributed to a vicious cycle of revenge killings and instability. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2022), farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria now account for more deaths annually than those caused by Boko Haram insurgency. In Katsina-Ala, the conflict has disrupted agricultural productivity—the primary livelihood of the Tiv people who dominate the area—and forced many residents to abandon their farms and



relocate to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. This situation has placed enormous pressure on local resources, eroded community trust, and created humanitarian crises that continue to worsen.

The aim of this paper is therefore, to unpack the nature and dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in Katsina-Ala LGA by exploring its root causes, patterns, and consequences. Through the use of qualitative data, existing literature, and field reports, the paper seeks to understand how this conflict has evolved and to suggest practical pathways for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development in the region. Addressing the crisis requires more than security interventions; it demands a deep engagement with the socio-political and environmental realities that shape these encounters.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Conceptual Review

To properly unpack the dynamics of the farmers-herders conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, it is imperative to clearly define the key terms used within the context of this study. These include farmers, herders, conflict, and resource conflict. Providing conceptual clarity will not only guide the scope of the discussion but also help in understanding the different dimensions of the crisis under investigation.

1.2.2 Farmers: Farmers, within the context of this study, refer to individuals or groups engaged in the cultivation of crops for subsistence and commercial purposes. In most parts of rural Nigeria, including Katsina-Ala, farming is the primary source of livelihood. The majority of farmers in this region are sedentary agriculturalists who cultivate staple crops such as yam, cassava, maize, guinea corn, and millet. These farmers rely heavily on land, water, and favourable climatic conditions for crop production and often consider land as both a source of identity and economic security. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2016), smallholder farmers constitute about 80% of Nigeria's agricultural workforce, highlighting the importance of this group in the nation's food security and rural economy.

1.2.3 Herders: Herders, also known as pastoralists, are individuals or groups who rear and manage livestock, primarily cattle, through seasonal movement known as transhumance. In Nigeria, herders are predominantly of Fulani ethnic extraction,



although there are other pastoralist groups such as the Shuwa Arabs and Kanuri. The Fulani herders migrate across regions in search of pasture and water for their animals, a lifestyle that often brings them into contact—and sometimes conflict—with settled farming communities. Herders depend on grazing routes, open fields, and water bodies, and any restriction or encroachment on these resources may result in disputes. The National Livestock Transformation Plan (2019) describes pastoralism as a major livestock production system in Nigeria, particularly in the savannah regions of the north and central zones.

1.2.4 Conflict: Conflict, in a general sense, refers to a situation in which two or more parties perceive incompatible goals and express hostility towards each other (Deutsch, 1973). It can range from non-violent disagreements to violent confrontations. In the context of this study, conflict refers to the violent and recurrent clashes between farming and herding communities, often resulting in fatalities, displacement, and destruction of property. Conflict is driven not only by competition over land and water but also by deeper issues such as historical grievances, lack of effective governance, identity politics, and impunity. According to Burton (1990), conflict becomes intractable when it is rooted in unmet human needs such as security, identity, and recognition—elements clearly evident in Nigeria's farmers-herders' conflicts.

1.2.5 Resource Conflict: Resource conflict is a specific form of conflict that arises from competition over access, control, and use of natural resources such as land, water, forests, and minerals. Homer-Dixon (1994) defines resource conflict as violent confrontation triggered by environmental scarcity or the unequal distribution of critical resources. In Katsina-Ala and other affected areas in Nigeria, the farmers-herders conflict is fundamentally a resource conflict, as both groups depend on land and water for survival but with differing patterns of usage—sedentary for farmers and mobile for herders. This asymmetry in livelihood strategies creates friction, particularly in a context where population growth, climate change, and poor land management have made resources increasingly scarce and contested.

1.3 Empirical Review

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria has attracted significant academic and policy interest over the years due to its persistence, increasing intensity, and far-



reaching socio-political implications. Several strands of literature have emerged, focusing on the historical, environmental, socio-economic, and political dimensions of the conflict.

Historically, interactions between farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria were largely symbiotic. Farmers allowed herders access to crop residues after harvests, and herders in turn provided manure and sometimes milk (Tonah, 2006). However, this balance has deteriorated in recent decades due to demographic pressures, environmental change, and weak governance. Scholars such as Abbass (2012) argue that the collapse of traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution and land-use regulation has significantly contributed to the escalation of hostilities.

A dominant body of literature frames the conflict as a resource-based struggle over access to land and water. Climate variability, desertification, and environmental degradation in northern Nigeria have pushed herders southward in search of greener pastures, thereby bringing them into direct competition with settled farmers (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). This ecological explanation is supported by Homer-Dixon's (1999) environmental conflict theory, which posits that resource scarcity can increase the likelihood of violent conflict, especially in agrarian economies dependent on natural resources.

Other scholars emphasize the divergent livelihood systems of the two groups as a key driver of conflict. While farmers are largely sedentary and depend on fixed plots of land, herders are mobile and require open grazing areas. This contrast often leads to disputes over land use, especially when cattle stray into farmlands and destroy crops. According to Turner et al. (2006), such disputes are further exacerbated by poverty, unemployment, and the absence of viable alternative livelihoods, particularly among youth in rural communities like Katsina-Ala.

Several authors have also underscored the role of poor governance, weak institutions, and political manipulation in fueling the crisis. For example, Ibrahim (2017) asserts that the failure of government to demarcate grazing reserves or enforce land-use laws has intensified clashes. Similarly, policy inconsistency and lack of effective dispute resolution mechanisms have allowed the conflict to fester. Furthermore, there are claims of political actors exploiting ethnic and religious identities to incite violence or



protect perpetrators, thereby creating a culture of impunity (Audu, 2013).

The farmers-herders conflict is increasingly recognized as a major threat to national security. It has led to large-scale displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and breakdown of social cohesion, especially in North-Central Nigeria. According to the International Crisis Group (2018), the conflict has caused more deaths annually than the Boko Haram insurgency in recent years. In Katsina-Ala, communities have suffered frequent attacks, leading to food insecurity, internal displacement, and loss of human capital (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018).

While the literature is rich in documenting the causes and consequences of the farmers-herders conflict at national and regional levels, there remains a gap in local-level analysis. Most studies tend to generalize the conflict without capturing the unique socio-cultural and ecological dynamics in specific areas like Katsina-Ala. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to the voices of local actors, traditional leaders, women, and youth, who are directly affected by the conflict.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by focusing on the lived experiences of communities in Katsina-Ala, exploring not only the nature of the conflict but also the mechanisms, both formal and informal, being employed to manage it.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Resource Scarcity Theory

This study is anchored on the Resource Scarcity Theory, originally developed by Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999), which provides a compelling explanation for the dynamics of the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria, particularly in agrarian communities like Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State.

The Resource Scarcity Theory posits that environmental degradation, population pressure, and unequal resource distribution create scarcity in essential resources such as arable land, water, and pasture. According to Homer-Dixon (1999), such scarcity can intensify competition among groups that depend on these resources for their livelihood, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict, especially in fragile states or regions with weak institutional responses.

In the context of Nigeria, the theory is particularly relevant in explaining the persistent tension between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders. The northward expansion of



the Sahara Desert, recurrent droughts, and degradation of traditional grazing routes have forced herders, predominantly Fulani, to migrate southward in search of viable pasture and water for their livestock. This movement brings them into direct competition with indigenous farmers in the Middle Belt and Southern regions, including Katsina-Ala, where land is already under pressure due to high population density and intensive agricultural activity. The scarcity of land and water becomes a flashpoint for confrontation. Farmers often accuse herders of allowing cattle to destroy crops, while herders counter that their traditional grazing routes and reserves have been encroached upon.

1.5 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources, commonly referred to as desk research. The objective is to explore and unpack the nature and dynamics of the farmers-herders conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, Nigeria using already existing information, scholarly interpretations, and empirical analyses. A desk research approach was deemed most appropriate due to the wealth of existing literature, policy documents, and media reports on the subject, as well as the sensitivity and insecurity that may accompany fieldwork in conflict-affected areas. The research is structured as an exploratory-descriptive study. Data was sourced from Peer-reviewed articles from journals, Books and Monographs, Publications from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Benue State Government, Nigerian Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), and relevant federal ministries; NGO and INGO Reports, etc.

1.6 Historical Overview of Farmer-Herder Relations in Nigeria

The relationship between farmers and herders in Nigeria dates back centuries and has historically evolved from symbiotic interdependence to increasingly antagonistic interactions. Understanding the historical trajectory of these relations—particularly in regions like Katsina-Ala, Benue State—requires a contextual analysis rooted in Nigeria's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence experiences, as well as broader socio-environmental transformations such as climate change, population growth, and urbanization.



1.6.1 Pre-Colonial and Colonial Era Interactions

In pre-colonial times, relationships between sedentary agrarian communities and nomadic pastoralists in Nigeria were largely cooperative and mutually beneficial. The Fulani herders (also known as Mbororo or Bororo'en) traditionally moved their cattle southward from the Sahelian belt during the dry season in search of water and pasture, while returning northward during the rains. They engaged in peaceful exchange of goods and services with farming communities, often trading dairy products for grains and accessing farmland residues after harvest (Tonah, 2006).

Colonial policies, however, began to reshape these relations. British colonial authorities formalized cattle routes and grazing reserves as part of efforts to manage nomadic pastoralism and reduce clashes. Although these reserves were intended to provide pastoralists with access to grazing land and water, their implementation was uneven and often lacked adequate legal backing (Blench, 2004). Furthermore, colonial economic models privileged cash crops and formal land tenure systems, inadvertently marginalizing pastoralism and exacerbating tensions.

1.6.2 Post-Independence Dynamics

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the failure to sustain and expand the colonial grazing reserve system became increasingly evident. Successive governments either neglected pastoral development or implemented state-led agricultural policies that favored settled farming communities, sidelining pastoralist needs. This neglect coincided with declining investment in rural infrastructure, including veterinary services and water sources essential for pastoral livelihoods (Higazi, 2016).

Moreover, land tenure systems became more formalized and exclusionary, especially under the Land Use Act of 1978, which transferred land control to the government but in practice, often reinforced farmers' claims over land, to the detriment of nomadic groups. The increasing competition over land and water became more pronounced as farmers began expanding cultivation into areas traditionally used by herders as grazing paths or corridors.

1.6.3 From Symbiotic to Antagonistic Relations

Over the decades, farmer-herder relations have shifted from mutualism to conflict, driven by resource competition, socio-political marginalization, and weak governance



structures. In regions like Benue, where agriculture is central to the economy and identity, farmers have grown increasingly hostile to seasonal cattle movements that they perceive as invasive and destructive. Simultaneously, herders—facing shrinking access to grazing lands and water—view sedentary farming communities as obstacles to their traditional mobility.

This breakdown in relations has also been exacerbated by ethno-religious divisions (particularly between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farming communities), which have transformed localized disputes into broader identity-based confrontations. The proliferation of light arms and the emergence of armed vigilante and militia groups have further escalated violence (International Crisis Group, 2017). Climate change is a critical aggravator in the farmer-herder conflict. Desertification, drought, and declining rainfall in northern Nigeria have pushed herders further south in search of viable pasture and water sources. This ecological displacement has intensified pressure on already scarce resources in the Middle Belt, including Benue State, heightening the risk of confrontation with farming communities (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

Population growth and urban expansion have also reduced available land for both agriculture and grazing. Increasing demand for food has led to land intensification by farmers, while urban development has encroached on pastoral corridors and grazing reserves. In the absence of effective state mediation, these changes have culminated in repeated cycles of violence, displacement, and loss of livelihoods for both groups.

1.7 An Overview of Katsina-Ala Local Government Area

Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) is located in the northeastern region of Benue State, Nigeria. It lies between latitudes 6°55'N and 7°20'N and longitudes 9°10'E and 9°30'E, covering approximately 2,402 square kilometers (National Population Commission, 2006). Geographically, it shares boundaries with Logo LGA to the west, Ukum LGA to the south, and Taraba State to the east. The area is defined by its fertile riverine plains, with the Katsina-Ala River—an important tributary of the Benue River—running through it. The climate is tropical with two distinct seasons: the rainy season (April–October) and the dry season (November–March). Rainfall averages between 1,200mm and 1,800mm annually, making the area well-suited for



both crop cultivation and animal husbandry (Benue State Ministry of Agriculture, 2015).

Socioeconomically, Katsina-Ala is predominantly agrarian. Farming constitutes the major occupation of the residents, with over 70% of the population engaged in subsistence and commercial agriculture (Adebo & Sekumade, 2013). Common crops grown include yam, cassava, maize, rice, groundnuts, and soybean. Livestock rearing—especially by transhumant Fulani herders—is also prevalent, particularly during the dry season when herders move south in search of pasture and water. Informal trading, artisanal activities, and local market operations form secondary economic engagements for the people.

The dominant ethnic group in the LGA is the Tiv, who are traditionally farmers and form the majority of the population. The Fulani, primarily nomadic pastoralists, are the most visible minority and are often seasonal migrants to the region. Other smaller ethnic groups present include the Hausa, Etulo, and Jukun. Historically, these groups have coexisted, though land tenure systems, competition over natural resources, and population pressures have contributed to increasing tension between farmers and herders in recent decades (Blench, 2004).

Katsina-Ala's strategic relevance to Benue State stems from its robust agricultural output and market activities. As a key contributor to Benue's identity as the "Food Basket of the Nation," Katsina-Ala plays a vital role in food production, especially yam and grain supplies. The Katsina-Ala Main Market is a regional commercial hub, linking local agricultural producers to markets across Nigeria. However, persistent insecurity from farmer-herder clashes has significantly disrupted farming cycles, market access, and rural livelihoods in recent years (International Crisis Group, 2018).

1.7.1 Nature of the Conflict in Katsina-Ala

The farmer-herder conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State represents one of the most persistent and violent manifestations of rural resource conflict in Nigeria. This conflict is multifaceted, driven by competing interests over land, water, and livelihood survival strategies, and has escalated in both intensity and frequency over the past two decades. As an agriculturally rich area, Katsina-Ala has witnessed various forms of confrontations between sedentary farming communities



and nomadic or semi-nomadic herders, primarily of Fulani origin.

The conflict in Katsina-Ala typically revolves around four major types: land encroachment, crop destruction, cattle rustling, and retaliatory violence. Land encroachment occurs when pastoralists allow their cattle to graze on farmlands, often without consent, leading to the destruction of crops. Farmers, in turn, may erect fences or use aggressive measures to protect their land, sparking confrontations. Crop destruction is the most frequently cited cause of grievance among farmers, especially during the wet season when farms are flourishing (Ofuoku & Isife, 2009). Conversely, herders also suffer cattle rustling—particularly during night raids—allegedly perpetrated by local youths or militia groups, often leading to retaliation by herders and escalating violence (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

1.7.2 Drivers of the Conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State

The persistent farmer-herder conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State is a complex and multifaceted issue with deep-rooted structural, environmental, political, and socio-cultural drivers. The escalation of violent clashes is not merely the result of spontaneous disagreements, but rather a manifestation of cumulative pressures ranging from land scarcity and climate-related dislocations to institutional failure and ethno-religious mistrust. This section explores the key drivers of the conflict in detail.

- i. Land Use Competition and Shrinking Grazing Routes:** One of the primary causes of the farmer-herder conflict is competition over access to and control of land and water resources. The population increase in Benue State, particularly in agrarian regions like Katsina-Ala, has resulted in the expansion of farmlands into previously available grazing reserves and cattle routes. As a result, pastoralists are forced to graze on farmlands, often leading to the destruction of crops and retaliatory attacks from farmers. This spatial overlap of agricultural and pastoral land use has heightened tensions between the two groups (Abbass, 2012; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).



- ii. **Climate Change and Desertification in Northern Nigeria:** Environmental degradation, particularly desertification and droughts in northern Nigeria, has contributed significantly to the southward migration of pastoralists into the Middle Belt, including Benue State. Herders, predominantly of Fulani ethnic origin, are increasingly moving into Katsina-Ala in search of pasture and water for their livestock, leading to pressure on available land resources and competition with sedentary farming communities.
- iii. **Weak Enforcement of Land Tenure and Grazing Laws:** The legal and institutional vacuum regarding land rights and grazing laws remains a critical driver of the conflict. Despite the existence of laws and policies such as the Land Use Act of 1978 and more recently, the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law enacted by the Benue State Government in 2017, implementation has been inconsistent and enforcement mechanisms weak. Customary land tenure systems continue to dominate rural land ownership in Katsina-Ala, often conflicting with statutory provisions and creating ambiguity in land access rights.
- iv. **Ethno-Religious and Political Dimensions:** The farmer-herder conflict in Katsina-Ala has increasingly taken on ethno-religious dimensions. Farmers are predominantly Tiv and Christian, while the majority of herders are Fulani and Muslim. These identities have been manipulated by political actors to gain support or delegitimize opponents. Consequently, disputes over resources have been framed in communal and religious terms, heightening tensions and undermining efforts at reconciliation (Adisa, 2012).
- v. **Proliferation of Small Arms and State Inaction:** Another significant driver of the conflict is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Both farmers and herders have increasingly armed themselves in response to insecurity, creating a militarized environment in rural Benue. Armed militias, vigilante groups, and sometimes criminal gangs exploit the situation, engaging in cattle rustling, reprisals, and communal attacks.

1.8 Impacts of the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Katsina-Ala, Benue State

The intensifying conflict between farmers and herders in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State has had devastating socioeconomic and



humanitarian consequences. These impacts have not only undermined the local economy but also contributed to widespread human suffering, displacements, and the

erosion of public services. The ripple effects are deeply felt across sectors such as food production, education, health, and security—exacerbating the vulnerabilities of affected communities.

- i. **Displacement and Loss of Lives:** The most immediate and visible consequence of the farmers-herders conflict is the large-scale displacement of people and significant loss of lives. Clashes often escalate into violent confrontations resulting in mass killings, destruction of homes, and abandonment of ancestral lands. In Katsina-Ala, hundreds of households have been forced to flee to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or neighboring towns, creating a humanitarian crisis in a region already grappling with poverty and underdevelopment.
- ii. **Disruption of Farming and Livestock Productivity:** As the conflict directly targets the livelihoods of both farmers and herders, agricultural activities have been severely disrupted. Croplands are often trampled or consumed by cattle, while cattle are stolen or killed in retaliatory attacks. Consequently, farming communities reduce their acreage or abandon cultivation altogether out of fear of violence. Herders, on the other hand, face restricted movement and access to grazing lands, which reduces livestock productivity.
- iii. **Food Insecurity:** The cumulative effect of disrupted farming and grazing is increased food insecurity. With lower crop outputs and less livestock available for consumption or sale, communities face higher food prices, scarcity of staple goods, and reduced nutritional intake. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022), Benue State, once dubbed the “food basket of the nation,” is now witnessing rising levels of hunger in many LGAs, including Katsina-Ala.
- iv. **Education and Health Consequences:** Education and healthcare infrastructure are often collateral damage in violent clashes. Schools are forced to close when communities are attacked or displaced, and many pupils—especially girls—drop out permanently due to insecurity or poverty. Teachers



and healthcare workers may abandon duty posts, while facilities may be looted or burned. In Katsina-Ala, several schools in rural communities have been shut for months due to ongoing violence, while clinics struggle with overcrowded IDPs and trauma patients without adequate medical supplies.

- v. **Gender-Specific Impacts (Women and Children):** The humanitarian impacts of the conflict are disproportionately borne by women and children. Women, as primary caregivers and subsistence farmers, suffer the dual burden of losing livelihoods and managing households under crisis. Gender-based violence, including rape and abduction, has been reported during raids, and many women-headed households in IDP camps face exploitation and lack of support.

1.8.1 Responses and Interventions to the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Katsina-Ala, Benue State

The persistent farmers-herders conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State has elicited a range of responses from state authorities, traditional institutions, security agencies, and civil society actors. Despite their varied approaches, the cumulative aim has been to mitigate violence, foster peaceful coexistence, and restore security and livelihoods. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been mixed, often hindered by political, logistical, and structural challenges.

State Government Responses

One of the most prominent interventions by the Benue State government is the enactment of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law in 2017. The law, commonly referred to as the “Anti-Open Grazing Law,” prohibits the movement of livestock on foot and mandates the establishment of ranches for herders. The law was passed in response to years of escalating violence and was aimed at curbing land encroachment, crop destruction, and clashes between farmers and pastoralists (Benue State Government, 2017). While it received widespread support from local farming communities, its enforcement has led to renewed tensions and reprisal attacks in some areas, including Katsina-Ala, due to resistance from herding groups and lack of adequate infrastructure for ranching (International Crisis Group, 2018).



Role of Security Agencies

Security agencies, including the Nigerian Army, Police, and Civil Defence Corps, have been deployed at various times to maintain peace and respond to outbreaks of violence

in Katsina-Ala. Special task forces such as “Operation Whirl Stroke” were created to address security threats in Benue and other middle belt states. These efforts have achieved some level of deterrence; however, limited manpower, delayed response times, and alleged complicity by some operatives have undermined public trust and long-term success (Ojigho, 2020). The military presence in the region is often seen as reactive rather than preventive, with sporadic patrols and inadequate intelligence gathering.

Traditional Rulers and Local Peace Mechanisms

Traditional rulers, district heads, and community elders have historically played significant roles in conflict resolution through dialogue, mediation, and land-use negotiations. In Katsina-Ala, local leaders such as the Ter Katsina-Ala and clan heads have organized townhall meetings and peace summits to foster understanding between farmers and herders. However, the erosion of traditional authority, political interference, and lack of formal backing from the state have limited the influence and consistency of these mechanisms (Adamu & Ben, 2019).

NGOs and International Organizations

Civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Mercy Corps, Search for Common Ground, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have been actively involved in peacebuilding efforts in Benue State. These organizations have provided humanitarian aid to displaced persons, facilitated inter-communal dialogue, supported trauma healing programs, and advocated for inclusive conflict resolution strategies (Mercy Corps, 2021). Their role has been especially crucial in filling the gap left by weak state capacity and limited access to affected communities. Despite the multiplicity of interventions, the persistence of conflict in Katsina-Ala underscores the need for a more integrated, sustainable, and inclusive approach.

1.9 Limitations of Existing Responses to the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Katsina-



Ala, Benue State

Despite various state-led and non-state interventions to address the farmers-herders conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State, several limitations

have undermined the effectiveness and sustainability of these responses. The complexity of the conflict—driven by competition over natural resources, weak governance, and socio-political factors—has revealed systemic shortcomings in policy formulation and execution, justice delivery, and trust-building.

Militarization of the Conflict

The heavy reliance on military force, such as the deployment of Operation Whirl Stroke, has created a security-first approach to what is essentially a socio-economic and ecological conflict. While such deployments have reduced the immediate outbreak of violence in some areas, they have also led to the militarization of local communities. This approach tends to treat symptoms rather than root causes, escalating tension, fear, and occasional abuse of civil rights.

Lack of Trust in Law Enforcement

Widespread allegations of bias, corruption, and inefficiency have eroded public trust in security agencies. Many affected communities in Katsina-Ala perceive the police and military as either partisan or complicit in the conflict. In some instances, delays in responding to attacks and lack of thorough investigations have further deepened the mistrust. Amnesty International (2020) highlights that impunity for violence in agrarian communities across Nigeria has emboldened perpetrators and discouraged victims from seeking justice through official channels.

Insufficient Compensation or Justice Mechanisms

One of the major grievances among conflict-affected populations is the lack of justice or adequate compensation. Victims of farm destruction, cattle theft, displacement, and fatalities often receive little or no official redress. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and state institutions have made attempts at relief distribution, but these efforts are often inadequate, poorly coordinated, or fail to reach remote areas. As noted by Okello et al. (2019), the absence of reparative mechanisms contributes to a cycle of resentment and revenge, thereby sustaining the conflict.



Fragmentation of Policy Responses

Nigeria's policy environment concerning pastoralism and land use is characterized by poor coordination across tiers of government. The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), anti-open grazing laws at state levels, and various ad hoc measures lack integration and sometimes contradict one another. In Benue, the enforcement of the anti-open grazing law has led to unintended consequences, including retaliatory attacks and displacement, in part because it was implemented without a concurrent national framework for herder resettlement (Adamu & Ben, 2019). Fragmented responses also weaken conflict mitigation by creating jurisdictional ambiguities and limiting collective action.

1.10 Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate dynamics of the farmers-herders conflict in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State under the thematic framework "Between the Plough and the Pasture." Drawing from a range of scholarly literature, secondary data, and field-based insights, the research unpacked the historical evolution, nature, drivers, and impacts of the conflict, as well as the responses and limitations associated with intervention mechanisms.

The findings reveal that the conflict is rooted in structural competition over land and water resources, exacerbated by climate change, desertification, population growth, and poor governance. The transition from symbiotic relations between farmers and herders in the pre-colonial and colonial periods to the antagonistic patterns witnessed in recent decades underscores a failure in adaptive land management and inclusive policy development. In Katsina-Ala, the situation is particularly aggravated by limited access to secure grazing routes, ineffective land tenure systems, and the proliferation of arms among non-state actors, including militias and vigilante groups.

1. 10.1 Recommendations

- i. **Strengthening Local Peace Committees:** Community-based peacebuilding structures such as local peace committees should be institutionalized and empowered in Katsina-Ala and across Benue State. These committees should include traditional rulers, youth leaders, women representatives, religious figures, and representatives of both farming and herding communities. Their



capacity must be built in mediation, dialogue facilitation, and non-violent conflict resolution.

- ii. **Inclusive Land Use and Resource-Sharing Frameworks:** A participatory approach to land use planning must be adopted, where farmers and herders jointly contribute to the development of clear and enforceable guidelines for land and water access. Government agencies and land commissions should work with local stakeholders to delineate farming zones, grazing corridors, and seasonal migratory routes, with legal backing and dispute resolution mechanisms embedded within such frameworks. This will promote coexistence and minimize encroachment disputes.
- iii. **Revitalizing Grazing Reserves and Promoting Ranching Policies:** There is an urgent need to operationalize and modernize grazing reserves while also encouraging the gradual transition to ranching systems. Adequate investment in infrastructure—such as water points, veterinary clinics, and pasture development—should be provided, along with access to credit and training for herders. A phased and incentive-driven ranching policy can reduce transhumance pressure, increase livestock productivity, and lower the risk of farmer-herder clashes.
- iv. **Establishing Early Warning and Rapid Response Systems:** An integrated conflict early warning and response system should be set up at the local government level, incorporating community alerts, security agency coordination, and swift humanitarian support. Digital tools, community radio networks, and mobile alerts can help track herder movements and predict seasonal tensions. State and federal governments must ensure the rapid deployment of peacekeeping or intervention teams once threats are identified.
- v. **Expanding Education and Intercultural Dialogue Programs:** Sustainable peace depends on long-term social cohesion. Initiatives that promote mutual understanding, cultural tolerance, and non-violence—particularly targeting youths—should be introduced.

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