



Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons and Farmer-Herder Conflict in Plateau State, Northcentral Nigeria (2013-2023)

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Abstract

The fundamental objective of the paper is to evaluate the effect of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. To achieve this, the paper evaluates the extent to which the proliferation of SALW has affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, and also recommends how the proliferation of SALW could be better controlled in order to address the issue of farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. The paper adopted the Social Conflict Theory. With respect to the research methodology, out of the four hundred (400) questionnaires distributed, three hundred and eighty-two (382) were retrieved and used for data presentation and analysis. On the other hand, twenty-two (22) key informants were interviewed. Based on data presentation and analysis, findings revealed that, there is a link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, because the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State by intensifying the conflict through the availability of arms. The findings are in line with the paper's conclusion, which maintains that the availability of small arms and light weapons has intensified the conflict between farmers and herders in Plateau State. One of the recommendations made states that, the Federal Government of Nigeria should strengthen national firearms laws and regulations, impose licensing requirements, and carefully restrict their manufacture and transfer.

Key Words: Proliferation, Small Arms, Light Weapons, Farmer-Herder, Conflict.



1. INTRODUCTION

The effects of small arms are far-reaching when consideration is given to its economic cost, social upheavals, resource allocation away from human needs, and the undermining of the legitimacy of the states in Africa. Armed conflict costs Africa around \$18 billion per year. There is also a psychological dimension to the damage that is being perpetrated by small arms proliferation and use. Increasingly, across large parts of Africa, there is the growing perception that the well-being and security of individuals and communities can only be guaranteed through the possession of small arms (Projectreserve, 2022).

Arms proliferation is one of the factors responsible for intensification of so many conflicts in the world. For instance, conflict between farmers and herders has become a common feature in the way people are engaged in search for economic livelihood in West Africa (Tonah, 2006). Between 2010 and 2013, there were as many as 60 media reports of clashes between farmers and herders in many parts of Ghana. The conflict between herdsmen and komkomba people in the Gushiegu District of Northern Ghana and the Agogo people in the Ashanti Region left so many people killed and property destroyed (Bukari, Sow & Scheffran, 2018). Other countries in West Africa that have also recorded the recurring Farmers-Herders conflicts are; Senegal, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra-Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The estimated stocks of SALW in sub-Saharan Africa, are 11 million state-owned SALW and 40 million SALW in the hands of civilians (Machakanja & Shollah, 2021, p.993).

Violent conflict between farmers and herders is as old as the existence of man, this conflict have existed since the early beginning of agriculture (Rashid, 2012). As long as human



beings live together; conflicts are inevitable most especially in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and religious societies like Nigeria where norms, culture, values and traditions vary from each other.

Nigeria has been grappling with diverse security challenges since it returned to civil democratic rule in 1999, some of these challenges are militancy, kidnapping, corruption, insurgency, election violence, economic sabotage, socio-political upheaval, environmental degradation, farmers-herders conflicts among others. There have been several cases of farmers-herders conflicts across various states and locations in Nigeria. Such states that have experienced the recurring farmers-herders conflicts are Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Kaduna, Nassarawa, Enugu, and some parts of the southern States. Affected villages in these states include Barkin-Ladi, Bassa, Mangu, Agatu, Mambila, Kachia, Nimbo among others.

Barkin-Ladi, Bassa and Mangu Local Government Areas of Plateau State are among the major theatres that have experienced the farmer-herder conflicts. The impacts of herder and farmer conflicts are multi-dimensional in nature, but apart from loss of lives and food insecurity, social and economic activities also have been hampered. According to Tenuche and Ifetimehi (2009), land as a main factor of production is rapidly declining in fertility while population is increasing at annual rate of 2.5% in the face of declining agricultural production. For instance, the social interaction that used to exist between farmers and herders in these local governments has declined. In other words, since the emergence of conflicts between the two parties, there has been distrust between them in terms of social interaction. Economically, businesses were affected; farming activities and cattle rearing have been reduced drastically.



It is worthy of note that, most of the literature on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State are on the effects of the conflict. Also, in an attempt to examine causes of the conflict, much attention has not been given to the effect of arms proliferation on the crises. Therefore, the little attention given to the effect of proliferation of small arms and light weapons by both government and scholars has created a gap in the body of literature. Hence, the quest for filling this gap is what necessitates this paper, which is to evaluate the effect of the proliferation of SALW on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, Northcentral Nigeria, using Barkin-Ladi, Bassa and Mangu Local Government Areas as case studies.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification

Small Arms and Light Weapons: According to the United Nations Panel of Experts on Small Arms, small arms include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. While light weapons on the other hand include heavy machine guns, hand-held under barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles (sometimes mounted), portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems (sometimes mounted), and mortars of caliber less than 100 mm.

Farmer-Herder Conflict: It is basically the verbal and lethal confrontations that farmers usually have with the herdsmen as a result of their competition over the available resources of grazing farmland on one hand and drinking or use of water for irrigation on the other hand. Farmer-Herder conflict in Nigeria is mainly a dispute over land resources between Fulani herders and sedentary agrarian communities (farmers) that has claimed thousands of lives and lost properties, and also led to displacement of some people (Aliyu, Ikedinma, & Akinwande, 2018, p.120).



1.2 Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted the Social Conflict Theory. The main proponent of the social conflict theory is Karl Marx, and another renowned contributor to this theory is Friedrich Engels. The theory as suggested by Karl Marx claims society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. It holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than consensus and conformity. According to social conflict theory, those with wealth and power try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless.

The theory further argues that individuals and groups within society interact on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. Through various forms of conflict, groups will tend to attain differing amounts of material and non-material resources. More powerful groups will tend to use their power in order to retain power and exploit groups with less power. One of the most powerful sociological explanations of social conflict is that of Karl Marx, who posited a class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie intrinsic to capitalist, industrial society. This notion is powerful in being dynamic, intuitively persuasive, and appearing to fit well with history. It is powerful in providing in one package a description, an explanation, and a prediction of contemporary problems, and a remedy. It is important to recognise that Marx viewed the structure of society in relation to its major classes, and the struggle between them as the engine of change in this structure (Rummel, 1977).

The key to understanding Marx is his class definition. A class is defined by the ownership of property. Such ownership vests a person with the power to exclude others from the



property and to use it for personal purposes. In relation to property there are three great classes of society: the bourgeoisie (who own the means of production such as machinery and factory buildings, and whose source of income is profit), landowners (whose income is rent), and the proletariat (who own their labor and sell it for a wage). Class thus is determined by property, not by income or status. These are determined by distribution and consumption, which itself ultimately reflects the production and power relations of classes. The social conditions of bourgeoisie production are defined by bourgeois property. Class is therefore a theoretical and formal relationship among individuals (Dahrendorf, 1968).

Social conflict theorists view conflict as an engine of change, since conflict produces contradictions which are sometimes resolved, creating new conflicts and contradictions in an ongoing dialectic. In the classic example of historical materialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that all of human history is the result of conflict between classes, which evolved over time in accordance with changes in society's means of meeting its material needs, which is changes in society's mode of production.

In summary, social conflict theory sees society as a composition of two antagonistic classes always in conflict, where each of the classes tries to outsmart, control or even eliminate the other in a quest to appropriate the limited resources. The theory also postulates that the resistance by the oppressed group and the desire to maintain the status quo by oppressing group leads to conflict.

Therefore, in linking the theory to this paper, the occurrence of conflicts cannot be disassociated from struggle for resource control in which land is primary, whereby those that control the land do all they could to maintain the status quo, while those that are not



in control try all they could have access to the land for either farming and rearing. In such struggle, frictions are bound to happen. This can also be connected to farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, whereby the struggle over land control/ownership leads to conflict between farmers and herders which also leads to arms proliferation. It is therefore on this note the theory fits into this paper.

1.4 Research Methodology

The general population of this study is Plateau State, while the target population is the people of Barkin-Ladi, Bassa, and Mangu Local Government Areas, the categories of the people that were sampled from the target population are government officials, academicians, farmers, herders, traditional heads, Christian and Muslim clerics, among others.

The hybrid method of data collection was adopted, meaning the study utilises both quantitative and qualitative method of data collection. The quantitative method was used to collect the questionnaire data, while the qualitative data shall be collected through Key Informant Interview (KII) and existing literature.

1.5 Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1.1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Male	267	69.9
2	Female	115	30.1
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025



Table 1.1 indicates that, 267 of the respondents representing 69.9% are male, while 115 representing 30.1% are female. The result shows that most of the respondents are male. Most of the respondents are male because most of the farmers and herders are male, and men/male are always at the forefront in every crises.

Table 1.2: Distribution of Respondents by Age

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	18-25	44	11.5
2	26-30	71	18.6
3	31-35	44	11.5
4	36-40	101	26.5
5	41 and above	122	31.9
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.2 shows that 44 of the respondents representing 11.5% are between the ages of 18-25, 71 representing 18.6% are between the ages of 26-30, 44 representing 11.5% are between the ages of 31-35, 101 representing 26.5% are between the ages of 36-40, 122 representing 31.9% are between the age of 41 and above. From the foregoing, it is obvious that most of the respondents are between the age of 41 and above, follow by those that fall within 36-40. This owed to the fact that people within the age bracket of 36 and above are assumed to be still very active and at the same time because of their age, they have knowledge regarding the subject matter.



Table 1.3: Distribution of Respondents by Location

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Barkin-Ladi LGA	103	26.9
2	Bassa LGA	108	28.3
3	Mangu	171	44.8
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.3 indicates that 103 of the respondents representing 26.9% are from Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area, 108 representing 28.3% are from Bassa Local Government Area, while 171 representing 44.8% are from Mangu Local Government Area. From the result, it means most respondents are drawn from Mangu Local Government and this owed to the fact that Mangu has more population compared to the other two local government areas.

Table 1.4: Distribution of Respondents by Ethnic Group

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Mwagavwu	50	13.1
2	Pyem	48	12.6
3	Irigwe	41	10.7
4	Rukuba	59	15.5
5	Berom	46	12.0
6	Foron	34	8.9
7	Fulani	36	9.4
8	Hausa	49	12.8



9	Others	19	5.0
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.4 shows that 50 of the respondents representing 13.1% are Mwagavwu, 48 representing 12.6% are Pyem, 41 representing 10.7% are Irigwe, 59 representing 15.5% are Rukuba, 46 representing 12.0% are Berom, 34 representing 8.9% are Foron, 36 representing 9.4% are Fulani, 49 representing 12.8% are Hausa, and 19 representing 5.0% are extracted from other ethnic groups such as Igbo, Yoruba, Jukun, among others. From the foregoing, majority of the respondents are Rukuba.

Table 1.5: Distribution of Respondents by Occupation

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Civil Servant	90	23.5
2	Public Servant	45	11.8
3	Farmer	72	18.8
4	Herder	35	9.2
5	Trading/Business	68	17.8
6	Student	63	16.5
7	Others	9	2.4
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.5 shows that 90 of the respondents representing 23.5% are civil servants, 45 representing 11.8% are public servants, 72 representing 18.8% are farmers, 35 representing 9.2% are herders, 68 representing 17.8% are traders, 63 representing 16.5% are students, and 9 representing 2.4% are into other occupations. However from the



foregoing, majority of the respondents are civil servants.

Table 1.6: Whether there is any link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Yes	382	100.0
2	No	0	0.0
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.6 reveals that all the respondents 382 representing 100.0% agreed that, there is a link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State.

However, in affirmative with the questionnaire respondents, all the key informants that were interviewed also agreed that there is a link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the conflict. Their responses are presented and analysed subsequently. Based on this, it means there is a link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State.

Table 1.7: The extent which proliferation of small arms and light weapons affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State

S/No.	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Intensifying the conflict between farmers and herders by making arms available	217	56.8



2	Making arms available for the security agencies to be used for combating the conflict	27	7.1
3	Making arms available for the people to defend themselves against their enemies	138	36.1
4	Others	0	0.0
	Total	382	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1.7 indicates that 217 of the respondents representing 56.8% agreed that proliferation of small arms and light weapons has affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State by intensifying the conflict between farmers and herders through the availability of arms. 27 representing 7.1% said is by making arms available for the security agencies to be used for combating the conflict, and 138 representing 36.1% said is by making arms available for the people to defend themselves against their enemies.

Meanwhile, from the conducted interview, one of the key informants is of the opinion that:

There is proliferation of arms on populace now. This proliferation actually intensifies the conflict between the two groups, because what I can see here, about five years ago in such a fight, a community here in Bassa known as Jebu Miango was completely burnt down. What I could deduce there was that, the herders have sophisticated weapons more than even the soldiers. I can authoritatively tell you that because they had four complete days burning down houses, and the soldiers couldn't go in. That was a terrible experience in my lifetime that I have ever witness. I have witnessed different crises in Plateau State right from 2001, but I have never seen inaction by the Nigerian Army to the extent that a very big completely is burnt down like



that. When I asked a soldier the reason why they didn't confront the herders, he says what he is holding is just to protect himself. Not to be bias, even we the locals have been forced to look for ways of protecting ourselves, and we are also involved in purchasing arms (Interview, 2025).

According to another respondent:

Of course, arms proliferation is contributing to farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. It is with these weapons that the invaders are intimidating our people. Also, our people that are involved in cattle rustling in most cases made use of these arms. Lastly and most importantly, the entire crises are fought with arms (Interview, 2025).

Another interviewee holds that:

Before now, when there is farmer-herder conflict anywhere, the casualties will not be much because you will see herders using only their sticks and cutlasses, farms will also be using cutlasses. But today, both sides are using sophisticated weapons, especially the herders. That is why today we are having more casualties than before. That is to say, arms proliferation is contributing in heating the crisis. This is really affecting us. Personally, my farms were destroyed and because they have guns, we cannot face them (Interview, 2025).

Another interviewee simply said: "It has impacted negatively on the crisis, because it is what is leading to death of many people, especially innocent children" (Interview, 2025).

In his view, a respondent asserts that:

Arms proliferation is what really emboldens every conflict, which that of farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State is inclusive. Sometimes people will say they have these weapons to protect themselves and their people, but you later on see them using it to attack their fellow beings. This has been the case of arms proliferation and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. People who don't have these weapons now device a means of getting them either by buying them or producing them locally. The number of deaths, injuries, loss of livelihood and displacement of



people are all perpetrated by this conflict through the use of these arms that are been proliferated (Interview, 2025).

Furthermore, according to one of them:

Highly sophisticated weapons are used increasingly in the crisis, and it makes the crisis to becoming more intense. I said so because, with these weapons, people are aimed and shot far away which must not be in a close range. In other words, the increasing use of weapons has been contributing in fueling the crisis between farmers and herders in Plateau State. If not because of the weapons they are holding, we would have stay back and fight them. The strategy is that, if they use these weapons and kill us, they can get our lands, but if we are still alive, they can't. Therefore, weapons must be used (Interview, 2025).

A female respondent stated that:

The crisis in Miango is becoming more serious whenever it is fought, especially on the use of sophisticated weapons. Meaning, the availability of small arms and light weapons in the hands of people is really contributing to our crisis. Actually, the crisis in Mangu is not more of farmer-herder conflict but religious conflict. But whichever way, arms circulation is negatively impacting on all kinds of crisis here in Mangu Local Government Area. Like in our resent crisis in February, 2024, so many people were killed, and the crisis took some days (Interview, 2025).

Also, a key informant asserts that: "Honestly, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has impacted so badly on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. For instance, it is weapons that are used in most of the clashes. Therefore, the more weapons are proliferated, the more intense the conflict is becoming" (Interview, 2025).

In an interview with another interviewee, he maintains that: "It has greatly impacted the conflict. For instance, the herders are coming with heavy weapons and since the military that their primary assignment is to protect us but could not; we have to protect ourselves by arming ourselves as well. Because we don't have money like the herders, we even



fabricate some of these arms ourselves” (Interview, 2025).

Talking about displacement as a result of arms proliferation, a respondent maintains that:

Arms proliferation has played a role in displacing many of our villagers. For instance, immediately if you get out of Barkin-Ladi; around Sho, there was a village called Rahai which has been displaced by Fulani with the use of heavy weapons. There are a lot of villages that have been displaced, in which after displacing the people, the Fulani people will then come and occupy such areas. You will keep seeing our people living with us within the town. It has become a consequence of insecurity because the way our people are living, it is not the way they are today (Interview, 2025).

Lastly, another respondent observes that: “Proliferation of small arms and light weapons has impacted negatively on farmer and herder conflict in Plateau State to a very large extent. This owed to the fact that most of the weapons used in farmer-herder conflict are small arms and light weapons that are always at the people’s disposal” (Interview, 2025).

To buttress on the above presentation and analysis, it has been observed that Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) remain cheap and easily accessible instruments for participating in armed conflict, terrorism, and crime. It is now well documented that the proliferation of SALW poses a threat to peace and security, development, and the enjoyment of human rights. The increasing victimization of civilian populations, in particular children, has been a disconcerting trend in the use of SALW by some politicians and highly placed self-centred people (International Peace Institute, 2009).

In Plateau State, some of the farmers organised into ethnic militias in their struggle to protect their land, while the herders have joined armed bandits and insurgents as a means of protection. The situation has been exacerbated by the ineptitude and bias of the state



security agencies in arresting and prosecuting perpetrators of violence in Plateau. The involvement of external armed groups, who were able to cross porous borders to engage in cattle rustling and trade in arms in Nigeria, can also be attributed to the weak state and local institutions (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024).

However, using statistics to buttress on how of proliferation of small arms and light weapons has impacted on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, WANEP (2018), reported that, between 2nd -14th March 2018, 74 people including four security personnel (2 Military Personnel and 2 Police Officers) were reported dead with several others injured including security operatives and local Vigilante members in violent attacks carried out in Bokkos and Bassa LGA's of Plateau State – there are reports that indicate that the Military Personnel were killed by suspected herdsmen while responding to a distress call of the clash between community members and herdsmen at Rafiki Village, Bassa LGA of the State. However, a counter statement emerged from the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) claiming that five (5) Fulani Herdsmen were killed with over 150 houses burnt down in the State. Allegations of attacks and killings with cattle rustling have largely been attributed to reprisal attacks. These attacks triggered peaceful protests from Irigwe community women in Miango District, Bassa LGA, against the killings of women and children during attacks in Miango Villages. The affected communities in Plateau State include; Nzharuvo, Rotsu, Dundu, Rafiki, Dong and Dutse Kura in Bassa LGA and Ganda community in Bokkos LGA (WANEP, 2018).

Furthermore, using media reports, Confidence has tracked more than 177 deaths in Plateau state resulting from the herder-farmer clashes between 2019 and 2021. But, local journalist Masara Kim said many deaths go unreported. In one of the attacks, residents of



Maiyanga, a village in the Bassa Local Government Area (LGA) which was formerly home to 400 people, many of them subsistence farmers from the Irigwe ethnic group, said they are not sure how many people were killed that day – but that it was more than was reported by the police. Joseph Ochogwu, one of the lead researchers on the survey and an associate professor at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, explained that about 100,000 in Plateau State as the result of the crisis (Olufemi, 2021).

From the foregoing, it can be deduce that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State by intensifying the conflict through the availability of arms.

1.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The effects of small arms are far-reaching when consideration is given to its economic cost, social upheavals, resource allocation away from human needs, and the undermining of the legitimacy of the states in Africa. Armed conflict costs Africa around \$18 billion per year. There is also a psychological dimension to the damage that is being perpetrated by small arms proliferation and use. Increasingly, across large parts of Africa, there is the growing perception that the well-being and security of individuals and communities can only be guaranteed through the possession of small arms.

Violent conflict between farmers and herders is as old as the existence of man, this conflict have existed since the early beginning of agriculture. In Nigeria, Plateau State is one of the major theatres that have experienced the farmer-herder conflicts. The impacts of herder and farmer conflicts are multi-dimensional in nature, but apart from loss of lives and food insecurity, social and economic activities also have been hampered. The



fundamental objective of this paper is to evaluate the effect of the proliferation of SALW on farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State. In line with the findings, the paper concludes that, there is a link between proliferation of small arms and light weapons and farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State, because the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has affected farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State by intensifying the conflict through the availability of arms.

However, based on the findings, the paper made the following recommendations:

- i. The Federal Government of Nigeria should strengthen national firearms laws and regulations, impose licensing requirements, and carefully restrict their manufacture and transfer.
- ii. Nigeria as a country should not only invest in tightening up the borders but also enact and implement policies that will strengthen our cross border relations. This will go a long way in reducing the influx of small arms and light weapons into the country and illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons which has contributed in intensifying farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State.
- iii. The security formations and apparatuses in Plateau State and the country should be upgraded and driven by modern equipment. Importantly, the use of ICT and requisite electronic devices in crime prevention and detection should be promoted. This will be of help in detecting hidden weapons by individuals and also checkmate arms circulation in Plateau State.
- iv. Plateau State government should implement anti-open grazing law, as well as make provision for grazing routes. This will go a long way in minimizing the



confrontation over land for farming and grazing of cattle which is resulting to farmer-herder conflict.

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