

NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Nigeria.mosesoatese@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Examining the complex relationship between food crop production and Fulani herdsmen activities in Benue State, Nigeria, this study employs a political ecology framework to explore the challenges of farmer-herder conflicts for sustainable food production. As Nigeria's "Food Basket," Benue State faces significant threats to its agricultural success due to disputes over land and resources between local farmers and Fulani herdsmen. By analyzing the historical, economic, and social factors underlying these conflicts through the lens of political ecology, this research reveals the complex power dynamics and environmental factors that shape farmer-herder relationships. The study evaluates the impact of these conflicts on food crop production, including reduced yields, displacement of farmers, and growing threats to food security. Furthermore, it assesses responses from local and state governments, traditional leaders, and community groups, providing insights into sustainable solutions for mitigating farmer-herder conflicts and promoting food security in Benue State.

I. INTRODUCTION**Benue State: Historical and Social Context**

Benue State, situated in Nigeria's North-Central region, boasts a rich agricultural heritage (Otite, 1990). The state shares borders with several others, including Nassarawa to the north, Taraba to the east, Cross River to the south, and Kogi to the west, with its southern boundary touching Enugu State and the Republic of Cameroon (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2007). The state's name is derived from the Benue River, a vital waterway that traverses its heart, nourishing the fertile soils that make this region productive (Adejuwon, 2006). This natural bounty has earned Benue the title of Nigeria's "Food Basket of the Nation" (Usman, 2014).

Agriculture is the backbone of Benue State's economy, with over 70% of its population engaged in farming (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). The state is renowned for producing essential food crops, including yams, cassava, maize, rice, sorghum, millet, and groundnuts, as well as fruits like oranges, mangoes, and guavas (Olayemi, 2015). Benue's tropical savanna climate, characterized by distinct wet and dry seasons, is ideal for year-round farming (Adejuwon, 2006).

The people of Benue State are diverse, with several ethnic groups, including the Tiv, Idoma, and Igede (Otite, 1990). These communities have rich cultural traditions and live a communal lifestyle, with agriculture serving as the cornerstone of their social fabric (Adejuwon, 2006). With a population of over 5 million, Benue is a mix of rural and urban settings, although the majority of its residents live in rural areas, where farming remains the mainstay of life (National Population Commission, 2020).

Food Crop Production in Benue State: Mainstay of the Economy and Culture

In Benue State, food crop production transcends economic activity; it is an integral part of the state's identity and survival (Otite, 1990). Agriculture is the backbone of the state's economy, providing food security not only for its population but also for the entire nation. Benue is renowned for its high-quality produce, particularly yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), which are in high demand nationwide (Adejuwon, 2006).

Beyond its economic significance, agriculture plays a vital role in shaping the state's cultural and social practices. Many festivals, rituals, and communal events in Benue are centered around the farming calendar and harvest seasons, reflecting the deep connection between the people and their land (Olayemi, 2015).

Historically, Benue's agricultural landscape has undergone significant transformations. During the colonial period, the British administration encouraged the cultivation of cash crops like groundnuts (*Arachis hypogaea*) and cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*), which shifted the focus away from subsistence farming (Usman, 2014). However, food crops remained essential for local sustenance, and many families continued to rely on subsistence farming to meet their daily needs.

After Nigeria gained independence, Benue's agricultural sector continued to grow, benefiting from government initiatives aimed at increasing food production (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Despite these advancements, most farming in Benue remains small-scale and labor-intensive, with limited access to modern farming techniques and equipment.

Major Food Crops Produced in Benue State

Benue State is a leading producer of several staple crops, including yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), rice (*Oryza sativa*), maize (*Zea mays*), sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), and millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*). These crops are not only essential for the local diet but also contribute significantly to the state's economy.

Yams (*Dioscorea* spp.): Yams are a celebrated crop in Benue State, with the state consistently ranking among Nigeria's top producers (Adejuwon, 2006). For the Tiv people, yams are a symbol of culture, celebrated with festivals that mark the harvest season.

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*): Cassava is a staple crop in Benue State, providing a major source of carbohydrates (Olayemi, 2015). The crop is processed into various forms, including garri, fufu, and tapioca.

Rice (*Oryza sativa*): Rice has become a significant crop in Benue State, particularly in areas with access to irrigation (Usman, 2014). The state's rice is well-regarded for its quality, contributing significantly to the state's agricultural income.

Maize (*Zea mays*): Maize is a crucial crop in Benue State, grown extensively across the state (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). It is a staple food and is also used as animal feed.

Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) and Millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*): These crops are vital in the drier regions of Benue, providing food security for rural communities (Otite, 1990). They are used in various traditional foods and beverages.

The contribution of Benue's agriculture to the national economy is multifaceted. Firstly, the state's surplus production of staple crops such as yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), and rice (*Oryza sativa*) helps to stabilize food prices and reduce the risk of shortages in Nigeria (Adeju, 2006). This, in turn, has a positive impact on the overall food security situation in the country, particularly in urban areas where food demand is high (Olayemi, 2015).

Secondly, Benue's agricultural production supports the food processing industry, a significant sector in Nigeria's economy. The state's farmers supply raw materials such as cassava, yams, and rice to food processing companies, which in turn produce a range of food products for domestic consumption and export (Usman, 2014). This not only generates income for farmers but also creates employment opportunities in the food processing sector.

Thirdly, Benue's agricultural sector has the potential to contribute significantly to Nigeria's export earnings. The state's produce, particularly yams and cassava, is in high demand in international markets (Otite, 1990). However, the export potential of Benue's agricultural produce is yet to be fully realized due to challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, poor quality control, and lack of access to international markets (Ovaga et al., 2023).

Finally, Benue's agricultural sector plays a critical role in promoting economic growth and development in Nigeria. The sector provides employment opportunities for millions of people, both directly and indirectly, and contributes significantly to the country's GDP (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Therefore, supporting Benue's agricultural sector is essential for promoting economic growth and development in Nigeria.

Theory of Political Ecology: A Framework for Analyzing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria

Political ecology is a theoretical framework that examines the complex relationships between environmental issues, power dynamics, and social justice (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing the farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, as it highlights the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and political factors that shape these conflicts (Wolf, 1972). The concept of political ecology was first introduced by Eric Wolf in 1972. However, it was later developed and popularized by scholars such as Piers Blaikie, Harold Brookfield, and Susan Stonich (Blaikie, 1985; Stonich, 1993). The key concepts of political ecology include:

Environmental degradation: The degradation of natural resources, such as land, water, and forests, which can lead to conflicts over access and control (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

Power dynamics: The distribution of power and resources among different groups, including the state, corporations, and local communities (Wolf, 1972).

Social justice: The fair distribution of resources, benefits, and costs among different groups, including marginalized communities (Stonich, 1993).

The theory of political ecology is particularly relevant for this study on farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, for several reasons:

Interconnectedness of environmental and social factors: Political ecology highlights the interconnectedness of environmental issues, such as land degradation and water scarcity, with social factors, such as power dynamics and social justice (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

Power dynamics and social justice: Political ecology emphasizes the importance of power dynamics and social justice in shaping environmental outcomes (Wolf, 1972).

Contextualizing local conflicts within broader structures: Political ecology encourages researchers to contextualize local conflicts within broader structures, such as national and global economic and political systems (Stonich, 1993).

While the theory of political ecology provides a useful framework for analyzing farmer-herder conflicts, it has some limitations:

Overemphasis on structural factors: Political ecology may overemphasize the role of structural factors, such as power dynamics and social justice, at the expense of local agency and context-specific factors (Blaikie, 1985).

Lack of clear policy prescriptions: Political ecology may not provide clear policy prescriptions for addressing farmer-herder conflicts, as it focuses more on analyzing the underlying structures and power dynamics that shape these conflicts (Wolf, 1972).

Risk of oversimplification: Political ecology may oversimplify the complexities of farmer-herder conflicts by reducing them to simple power struggles or environmental issues (Stonich, 1993).

Despite these limitations, the theory of political ecology provides a useful framework for analyzing the complex relationships between environmental issues, power dynamics, and social justice that shape farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. By contextualizing local conflicts within broader structures and emphasizing the importance of power dynamics and social justice, political ecology offers a nuanced understanding of the underlying causes of these conflicts (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). However, researchers should be aware of the limitations of this framework and strive to balance structural analysis with local context and agency.

The Farmer-Herder Conflict in Benue State, Nigeria

The Fulani people have become an integral part of the local life in Benue State, with intermarriage and language exchange between Fulani and indigenous communities (Otite, 1990). However, the agricultural harmony in Benue State has been disrupted by conflicts between local farmers and Fulani herders. The Fulani, traditionally nomadic pastoralists, migrate across Nigeria with their cattle, leading to conflicts with local farmers over access to land and resources (Adejuwon, 2006).

Causes of Conflicts

Several factors contribute to the conflicts between farmers and Fulani pastoralists. These include:

Competition for Land and Resources: The growing population in Benue State has led to increased demand for land, resulting in decreased grazing lands for herders (Ovaga et al., 2023).

Climate Change and Environmental Degradation: Changes in climate patterns have forced Fulani herders to migrate further south, intensifying pressure on land resources (Olayemi, 2015).

Weak Governance and Inadequate Regulation: The lack of effective governance and regulation regarding land use and resource management has contributed to the escalation of conflicts (Usman, 2014).

Ethnic and Religious Tensions: Conflicts are often framed in ethnic and religious terms, exacerbating tensions between Fulani herdsman and indigenous farming communities (Ovaga et al., 2023).

Criminality and Banditry: Criminal elements have exploited the conflicts, engaging in cattle rustling, banditry, and violence (Hir, 2024).

Impact of Herdsman Activities on Agricultural Communities

The activities of Fulani herdsman have had devastating effects on agricultural communities in Benue State. Conflicts often result in the destruction of crops, loss of livestock, and displacement of entire communities (Ovaga et al., 2023). Farmers accuse herdsman of allowing their cattle to graze on farmlands, destroying valuable crops like yams, maize, and cassava.

Case Studies of Herdsman Violence in Benue State

There have been numerous cases of herdsman violence in Benue State, resulting in loss of life, displacement, and destruction of property. For instance, a news story reported that 13 persons were killed in two separate attacks on Agatu and Gwer West Local Government Areas (Hir, 2024). The author of this paper has also experienced the devastating effects of herdsman violence firsthand. The farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, is a complex issue with deep-rooted causes. Addressing the conflict requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the historical, cultural, and environmental contexts. It is essential to develop effective policies and strategies to mitigate the conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence between farmers and herdsman.

Understanding the Role of Government and Non-Governmental Organizations in Supporting Agriculture in Benue State, Nigeria

The Nigerian government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in supporting agriculture in Benue State, focusing on improving food security, increasing agricultural productivity, and enhancing the livelihoods of farmers (Adejuwon, 2006). To achieve this, the government has implemented several initiatives.

Government Initiatives

At the national level, the government has launched policies like the Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) and the Anchor Borrowers' Program (ABP) to boost food production. The ATA aims to attract private sector investment in agriculture, reduce post-harvest losses, and add value to local agricultural produce. The ABP provides loans to farmers at low interest rates, enabling them to access modern inputs and improve their productivity.

State Government Initiatives

The Benue State government has also been active in supporting agriculture through various initiatives. The *Benue Agricultural and Rural Development Authority (BNARDA)* provides agricultural extension services, training for farmers, and distributes inputs, promoting best practices in farming and improving productivity.

Non-Governmental Organizations' Contributions

Non-governmental organizations, such as the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and local NGO's have made significant contributions to agriculture in Benue State. They have introduced innovative farming techniques, provided training on climate-smart agriculture, and supported farmers in accessing markets, empowering smallholder farmers and promoting food security.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including difficulties in accessing credit, modern inputs, and markets. The state's agricultural infrastructure is often inadequate, and issues like land tenure insecurity, climate change, and conflicts with herdsman continue to pose significant challenges. Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive approach that involves government, NGOs, and local communities working together to promote sustainable agricultural development in Benue State.

Way Forward

To overcome these challenges, the government and NGOs should focus on:

Improving agricultural infrastructure: Investing in roads, storage facilities, and processing plants to enhance the efficiency and productivity of the agricultural sector.

Enhancing access to credit and markets: Providing loans to farmers at low interest rates and supporting them in accessing local and international markets.

Promoting climate-smart agriculture: Introducing innovative farming techniques and providing training on climate-resilient agricultural practices.

Addressing land tenure insecurity: Implementing policies and programs to secure land rights for farmers and reduce conflicts over land.

By addressing these challenges and working together, the government, NGOs, and local communities can promote sustainable agricultural development in Benue State, improve food security, and enhance the livelihoods of farmers.

Government Response in the Farmer- Herder Conflict in Benue State

The Benue State government has implemented various measures to address the farmer-herder conflicts, but the effectiveness of these measures has been mixed.

Measures Implemented by the Benue State Government

Anti-Open Grazing Law

In 2017, the state government passed the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, banning open grazing and encouraging ranching instead.¹ This law aims to protect farmers' crops and provide a controlled environment for cattle rearing. However, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) has publicly condemned some of the attacks carried out by herders, dissociating itself from them, but also indirectly blaming the government for the violence, attributing it to unfavorable policies like the law prohibiting open grazing [1].

Security Measures

The Benue government has collaborated with federal agencies to improve security, launching operations like "Operation Whirl Stroke" to deploy military and police forces to volatile areas. However, military actions have proven counterproductive, as bandits and armed groups often launch deadly reprisal attacks against communities.

Humanitarian Efforts

The state government, in collaboration with the federal government and international agencies, has established camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and provided basic necessities like food, shelter, and medical care. As of May 2024, more than 1.5 million people have been displaced from their homes in Benue state.

Peace Talks and Mediation

Local and state authorities have attempted to mediate peace between herders and farmers through dialogue and negotiation. However, deep-rooted mistrust between the two groups has hindered efforts to establish lasting peace. The Benue State Chapter of MACBAN claimed that foreign herdsmen were behind violence against farming communities during a peace meeting with the state government in February 2024.

Community-Based Initiatives

Some community-based initiatives, such as the Protecting Our Community Initiative (POCI), have shown promise in preventing conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers. The POCI project promotes civilian security, where youths and women engage in constructive dialogue to build resilience.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite these efforts, the conflict persists, and the Benue State government faces challenges in addressing the root causes of the conflict. To find a lasting solution, it is essential to identify and address these underlying issues, including land disputes, climate change, and social and economic factors.

The government should work directly with civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to understand the needs of stakeholders in the affected communities and develop strategies to promote peacebuilding. Most importantly, the Benue State government should collaborate with non-governmental institutions to educate herders on the importance of ranches and their legal acquisition, while farmers should get justice when their farms get damaged by cattle.

A critical aspect of this process involves addressing the proliferation of weapons among herders and farmers in the state. This includes identifying local manufacturers and importers of guns, as these weapons are the main tools used to perpetrate violence, which can undermine conflict prevention.

The Role of Traditional Institutions and Local Communities in Resolving Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria

The protracted farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, have necessitated the exploration of alternative conflict resolution mechanisms. In this regard, traditional institutions and local communities have emerged as crucial stakeholders in resolving these conflicts. This chapter examines the role of traditional institutions and local communities in conflict resolution, highlighting their initiatives, challenges, and opportunities.

Traditional Institutions and Conflict Resolution

Traditional institutions, comprising traditional leaders, councils of elders, and community-based organizations, have played a vital role in resolving farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State. These institutions possess a deep understanding of local dynamics, cultural nuances, and historical contexts, enabling them to facilitate effective conflict resolution (Ukiwo, 2006).

Traditional leaders, in particular, have been instrumental in mediating between farmers and herders. Their authority, derived from their position as custodians of traditional norms and values, enables them to command respect from both parties (Albert, 2005). Through mediation, traditional leaders have facilitated dialogue, negotiated peace agreements, and helped to establish grazing routes (Ostein, 2017).

Community-Based Initiatives

Local communities have also established various initiatives to resolve farmer-herder conflicts. One such initiative is the Conflict Resolution Committee (CRC), which brings together representatives from both farming and herding communities. The CRC provides a platform for ongoing dialogue, enabling both parties to address grievances, negotiate compensation for damaged crops, and establish mutually beneficial agreements (Ostein, 2017).

Another community-based initiative is the Protecting Our Community Initiative (POCI), which promotes peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders through education and awareness programs. POCI has helped to foster a spirit of reconciliation, encouraging both parties to work together to prevent conflicts (Ostein, 2017).

Challenges and Limitations in Addressing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Benue State

Despite the efforts of Government, traditional institutions and local communities in resolving farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, several challenges persist. These challenges undermine the effectiveness of conflict resolution initiatives and hinder the achievement of lasting peace.

Inadequate Recognition and Support from Government Agencies

One major challenge is the lack of recognition and support from government agencies, which often undermines the authority and effectiveness of traditional leaders (Ukiwo, 2006). This lack of support can lead to a lack of trust and confidence in traditional institutions, making it more difficult to resolve conflicts.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons

Another challenge is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which has exacerbated the conflict and made it more difficult to resolve (Ostein, 2017). The presence of these weapons has also led to the emergence of vigilante groups, which can further escalate the conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Ineffective Security Measures

The security measures put in place by the government have been ineffective in preventing attacks, particularly in remote regions with limited security presence. The establishment of IDP camps has been counterproductive, as the ongoing violence has hindered the goal of reintegrating displaced persons into society.

Failed Peace Talks

Peace talks between the state government and herder groups, such as the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), have yielded little results, often ending in disagreement. This has led to a breakdown in relationships, further exacerbating the conflict.

Inadequate Security Apparatus

The failure of these measures has exposed the inadequacies of the security apparatus in curbing conflicts in the region. The former governor of Benue State, Samuel Ortom, even called for self-defense by the Benue people, highlighting the need for alternative solutions.

The farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, are complex and multifaceted, requiring a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution. Traditional institutions and local communities have emerged as vital stakeholders in this process, offering a unique perspective and approach to conflict resolution. However, their initiatives face several challenges, including the lack of recognition and support from government agencies, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the emergence of vigilante groups. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to recognize and support the role of traditional institutions and local communities in conflict resolution. Ultimately, resolving farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State requires a collaborative approach, involving government agencies, traditional institutions, local communities, and civil society organizations. By working together, these stakeholders can develop a comprehensive and sustainable approach to conflict resolution, promoting peace and stability in the region.

II. Conclusion: Unpacking the Political Ecology of Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Benue State

The theory of Political ecology insists that we contextualize local conflicts within broader structures. It encourages researchers to prioritize local conflicts within broader structures, such as national and global economic and political systems (Stonich, 1993).

This understanding has illuminated the complex dynamics underlying the farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. The analysis has revealed that these conflicts are not simply a result of ethnic or cultural differences, but rather are deeply rooted in the political economy of resource access and control.

The struggles over land, water, and pasture are not just environmental issues, but are also deeply embedded in the social and economic structures of the region. The historical and contemporary dynamics of colonialism, neoliberalism, and environmental degradation have created a perfect storm of competition and conflict over resources.

To achieve sustainable peace and stability in Benue State, it is essential to address the underlying political ecological drivers of the conflict. This requires a comprehensive approach that incorporates:

Transformative land-use policies_: Developing and implementing policies that prioritize equitable access to land, water, and pasture, while promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Decentralized and inclusive governance_: Strengthening local governance structures to ensure that decision-making processes are participatory, transparent, and accountable to all stakeholders.

Support for traditional institutions and community-led initiatives_: Empowering traditional institutions and community-led initiatives to mediate conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence.

Economic diversification and sustainable livelihoods_: Promoting alternative economic opportunities and sustainable livelihoods that reduce dependence on land and resources, while enhancing the resilience of local communities.

Ultimately, resolving the farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State requires a fundamental transformation of the political ecological landscape. By recognizing the intricate relationships between environment, economy, and society, we can begin to build a more just, equitable, and peaceful future for all stakeholders.

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