

FARMERS–HERDERS CONFLICT IN NIGERIA’S MIDDLE BELT: CAUSES, PATTERNS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT. 1999-2023

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Abstract

The farmers–herders conflict has emerged as one of the most significant threats to national security and socio-economic development in Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Although farmers and pastoralists historically maintained mutually beneficial economic relationships, growing competition over land, grazing routes, and water resources has transformed these interactions into violent confrontations. This study examines the causes, patterns, effects, and possible solutions to the conflict, focusing on Benue, Plateau, and Southern Kaduna States. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, drawing on primary data from key informant interviews with community leaders, traditional rulers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as secondary data from scholarly publications and reports by organizations such as the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International. Guided by Social Disorganization Theory and Social Conflict Theory, the study argues that the crisis extends beyond resource competition and has evolved into a complex security challenge shaped by environmental pressures, criminality, ethnic and religious tensions, and weak governance. Findings identify climate change, desertification, southward migration of pastoralists, proliferation of small arms, poor conflict management, and land grabbing as major drivers of the conflict. The violence has resulted in widespread loss of lives, destruction of property, mass displacement, and deepening ethnic and religious mistrust, thereby undermining national cohesion and internal stability. The study recommends improved security measures, transparent land policies, sustainable ranching systems, climate adaptation strategies, community dialogue initiatives, equitable justice delivery, and decisive action against perpetrators of violence.

Keywords: *Farmers, Herders, Conflict, Land Grabbing, Middle Belt, Security, Displacement.*

1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Symbiotic economic associations between farmers and herders based in Nigeria, have been long-established for centuries. Traditionally, in the Middle Belt farmers followed a pattern of allowing pastoralists to let their cattle graze on harvested fields after the cropping period while herders provided manure that enriched soil fertility as well as dairy products and meat (Audu & Audu, 2023). This interdependence sustains food production and rural livelihoods. But it soon deteriorated in to violent clashes since the late 1990s, hence the farmers–herders conflict becoming one of the biggest contemporary national security and development challenges facing Nigeria (Obikaeze et al., 2023).

Driving this escalation are environmental and demographic pressures. Many large migrations of Fulani pastoralists seeking pasture and water have shifted down into the Middle Belt states: Benue, Plateau, and Southern Kaduna (Genyi, 2014; Odinka et al., 2025), to escape climate change, drought, desertification in northern Nigeria and closing grazing lands. Meanwhile, both rapid population growth and expansion of agriculture have increased pressure from indigenous farming communities on competition for scarce arable land and water. Beginning with sporadic

clashes over crop destruction, it escalated into lethal military confrontations as bands of fighters mounted systematic nighttime assaults, incineration of villages or wars of attrition over farmland and whole populations uprooted.

Unlike many other incidents, the clash is not limited to a single state but has raged across more than one state, however it appears to be particularly fierce in Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna. In such regions, armed groups, commonly called Fulani militias, carry out coordinated assaults on villages, particularly during the planting and harvest seasons. They are like homes left leveled, food mangled, human beings murdered or crippled, and those who live for another day the ones to run with nowhere. This results in widespread perceptions of deliberate land grabbing, with many abandoned farmlands subsequently occupied or receiving new designations. It is a tragedy of rules directed at the victims, "that looks sad but silly as pointed out by the Gbong Gwom Jos Da Jacob Gyang Buba where most of occurrences paraded as farmer-herder clashes are just a script and not for grazing or to change too (Abubakar, 2025). Violence determined ethno-religious divide has pitted largely Christian indigenous agrarian communities against largely Muslim agro-pastoralists amongst the Fulani. This dishonesty has exacerbated the distrust, stimulated retaliation attacks and made resolution beyond difficulty. The proliferation of small arms, weakened state institutions, cattle rustling and banditry has helped militarise the disputes into a chronic security crisis. From 1999 to 2023 thousands lost their lives and hundreds of communities were wiped out, mass displacements recorded with far reaching impact on food security, economic development and national unity (Ngutjinazo, 2026) This research investigates the causes, trends and impact of the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria’s Middle Belt focusing on land grabbing as a major cause. It utilizes Social Disorganization Theory and Social Conflict Theory as theoretical bases to explain institutional failure and resource scarcity contributes to continual violence.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

However, no government law or order apparatus (even military intervention, peace committees, and curfew) has stopped the abuse of lives/assets and calamitous disruption to national stability brought by farmers–herders conflict. Over 62,000 people have been reported displaced in Kaduna, Plateau and Benue since 2015 alone as a direct result of the crisis (UNDP, 2018–2021), with cumulative displacement figures running into hundreds of thousands. Most displaced persons remain in IDP camps with little access to basic needs as abandoned farmlands lie fallow or are usurped jeopardizing food production within the belt of Nigeria.

Economic losses by way of crop failure, devastation of livestock and infrastructure have led to worsening poverty, unemployment and food insecurity. It has undermined social cohesion between ethnic and religious groups, interrupted schooling and inflicted psychological harm on survivors. All this has fed back into the lack of governance, as well a weak notion that security forces respond in biased ways toward some groups, and perpetrators operate with virtual impunity knowing they will have little to worry about from retaliation attacks (Sabo et al., 2025)

While some scholars have explored different dimensions of the crisis, from its historical socio-economic context to grievances over marginalisation and underdevelopment, there has been little focus on land grabbing as a core cause or systematic integration of both lived experiences of IDPs and traditional chiefs with larger security implications. This gap provides a rationale for the present study which aims to fill this gap by providing a detailed description and analysis

of conflict variation, including causes, patterns and consequences in relation to national security and development 1999–2023.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Broadly, the study seeks to investigate causes, patterns and implications of farmers–herders conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt (1999-2023) for national security and sustainable development.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the major causes and observable patterns of the conflict.
2. Assess the implications of the conflict for security, economy, social relations, and national development.
3. Examine government responses and identify existing gaps.
4. Propose sustainable solutions, with emphasis on equitable land policies, ranching systems, and justice mechanisms.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the primary causes and patterns of farmers–herders conflict in the Middle Belt?
2. How has the conflict impacted security, economic activities, and social cohesion?
3. What has been the nature and effectiveness of government responses?
4. What practical measures can be adopted to achieve lasting peace and stability?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is a contribution to the academic debate on land grabbing by adding to the understanding of land grabbing dynamics in resource conflicts. It gives solid empirical proof to policy makers, security agencies and development partners to what interventions are effective. The study also assists peacebuilding actors within the traditional institutions, civil society organisations, and the communities themselves who are impacted.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The study is set in a delimited area of three states: Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna states from 1999 to 2023. It highlights causes, patterns (especially displacement and land occupation), implications and solutions, using mostly qualitative data in these impact areas.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Causes of Farmers -Herders Conflict in Nigeria

Conflict in society is generally regarded as bad and destructive, but in the view of some scholars like Onigu Otite and Isaac Olawale Albert, conflict can be a tool in the hand of an individual or group to achieve social change when handled appropriately (Otite & Albert, 2001). Violence becomes dangerous when it threatens peace and stability of the society and it increases in the process of the conflict. The farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria went beyond isolated incidents to become one of the most serious security issues in Nigeria. The conflict was primarily in Plateau State, Nasarawa State and Benue State between 1997 and 2011, before it became widespread and extensive across the nation leading to the loss of lives and destruction of property (Ogu et al., 2023).

Conflicts are defined in a number of different ways, but are all based on the idea that they are the result of conflicting interests, resource competition (for limited resources), and threats to goals and values. In his book, *Conflict: A Normal State of Human Affairs*, Butcher (2023) says that conflict is inevitable in human interaction, which is not harmful in itself, but can grow personal and violent. Also, M. Afzalur Rahim, Idris, Lewis A. Coser and Thompson define conflict as a competition for limited resources, power, status or interests (Coser, 1956; Rahim, 2003). Conflict is therefore seen as a result of groups who feel that their life, livelihood or their goals are at risk from other groups.

Migration of Fulani herders in Futa Jallon, present-day Guinea, has been associated with the history of nomadic Fulani in Nigeria. Fulani pastoralists are known to have traditionally travelled all over West Africa looking for pasture. Others claim they were prone to conflicts with indigenous groups, particularly over land ownership and territorial control. According to Moritz (2010), in some instances, the herders build peaceful relations first and then the act of violence later develops with host communities.

Competition for land and natural resources has been blamed by many scholars as the major problem behind the farmers–herders conflict from the point of view of its economic dimension. Research indicates that the pressure of land use for farming and grazing has been exacerbated by the expansion of farms and grazing lands in Nigeria (Solagberu, 2012). Farmers and pastoralists' farm/graze conflicts have been exacerbated by the overlap of their territories in the states of Taraba, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Kwara and others. Both are very dependent on land for their survival, and competition for fertile farmland, grazing routes and water resources is worse.

Social Disorganization Theory and Social conflict theory can be used to explain the farmers – herders conflict in Nigeria. These theories illustrate a more general understanding of why institutional failure, competition for limited resources, inequality and power conflicts lead to violent conflict in society.

Social Disorganisation Theory is a theory that was created by the Chicago School of scholars like Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, which supports that violence and criminal activities flourish when social institutions and community structures become weak or ineffective. The theory is that institutions like the family, traditional leadership, religion and the law help to preserve social order and control of behaviour. The absence of these institutions leads to high insecurity, crime, and violent conflict.

These are important aspects of social disorganisation, reflected in the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria. Traditional norms, local conflict resolution processes and mutually beneficial economic exchange facilitated peaceful relations among farming and pastoral communities in the past. The farmers grazed cattle on their harvested farm lands and got manure and dairy products from the pastoralists in exchange. But due to the rapid population growth, desertification, climate change, environmental degradation and growing competition over water and soils, these traditional systems were slowly deteriorating. Social cohesion weakened, and the ability of local communities to resolve conflicts peacefully and keep order was of course lost.

The theory also accounts for the violence that got worse as a result of the breakdown of traditional authority structures. The role of elders, community leaders and traditional rulers, who once managed conflicts, is now weakened or lost in the negotiation of agreements and control of armed groups. In many rural communities, weak governance, corruption, lawlessness

and insufficient policing and security response have resulted in lawless situations. As a result, violent attacks, reprisals, cattle rustling, kidnappings and farmland destruction is common as the institutions tasked with maintaining social control are weak.

Meanwhile, Social Conflict Theory sees the conflict as a competition for limited resources and power in society. The theory, which was associated with Karl Marx and other scholars, suggests that conflict is a natural part of competition for scarce economic resources, political power, etc., social dominance. Farmers and herders are squabbling over grazing lands, land fertility and access to water resources in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt. Competing for limited resources was exacerbated by the increasing movement of pastoralists to southern Nigeria where they were forced to join farming communities due to environmental pressures like desertification and shrinking of grazing lands in northern Nigeria.

Social Conflict Theory also highlights the importance of inequality, the attitude of marginalisation and perceived injustice as significant factors in social violence. Government's reactions to attacks are perceived as being insufficient or discriminatory by many farming communities, and herders often feel excluded from access to grazing areas and economic opportunities. Anger, mistrust and retaliatory violence have heightened between the two groups due to their sense of injustice and exclusion. In some States of the Federation like Plateau, Benue and Southern Kaduna States, the conflicts which started as resource competition have taken over ethnic and religious overtones, thus aggravating ethnic and religious conflicts and thus affecting national unity.

In addition, the proliferation of small arms, trans-border movements, cattle theft and rural banditism has made any non-violent conflict into systemic violence. Inadequate institutions and porous borders are an opportunity for criminal groups to attack vulnerable communities. The lack of proper arrest and punishment of offenders has provided opportunity to repeat acts of revenge and continuing insecurity.

Finally, both Social Disorganization Theory and Social Conflict Theory concluded that the conflict between the farmers and herders in Nigeria can be attributed to the failure of social institutions, inadequate governance, inequality, environmental stress and resource and power struggles. If government institutions, security agencies, as well as traditional conflict resolution and negotiation processes are not enhanced and social injustice while redressing the inequalities of resources are not addressed, the conflict may continue to pose a threat to the peace, stability and national development of Nigeria.

2.2 Patterns and Conflicts Over Lands between Farmers and Herders

The attacks, which have been perpetuated by armed groups of Fulani pastoralists in parts of Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna States in Kaduna State have become one of the most sensitive and controversial security challenges in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. It is not clear whether these attacks are driven by resources, crime, ethnic conflict, or a planned territorial occupation, as most scholars, security analysts, community leaders and government officials disagree. Nevertheless, patterns can be discerned from a review of past studies and field reports. Historically, there was good cooperation between Fulani pastoralists and farming communities in Middle Belt. The farmers would let the cows graze after harvest, and the pastoralists would buy land for the cows in exchange of their dairy products and manure. The impact of environmental challenges, including competition for land and water resources due to the

process of desertification, population growth, climate change and reduction in the availability of grazing areas, intensified over time (Ehiane et al., 2024)

Often the tensions start with issues such as grazing routes, farm destruction, water rights or cattle rustling that are noticed. These conflicts often evolve over time, and turn into organized attacks on farming communities. Many raids are reported in the night or early morning hours when the villages are at their most vulnerable. Armed assailants reportedly besiege settlements, set fire to houses, destroy food storage facilities, attack civilians, and make residents flee from the areas. In a few instances, whole communities are abandoned following multiple rounds of attacks (Allegrozzi, 2026). These attacks are not made by all Fulani people, however, because there are numerous peaceful pastoralist communities. But there have been a number of reports of violence against herders by armed groups in the broader herder–farmer conflict, including violent raids, killings, displacement and attempts to seize rural lands (Bloem et al., 2025). The attacks are of the type targeting of rural farming communities in agricultural rich areas. The potential for grazing is particularly attractive in Benue, Plateau, and Southern Kaduna due to their rich vegetation, water access and strategic positioning. They also report that conflicts over the destruction of grazing lands are at their peak during planting and harvesting seasons, making these periods the time of the highest incidence of attacks (Elijah & Francis, 2021)

Another form is deliberate attacks on isolated villages typically at night or early in the morning. Houses are frequently burned, the food store is destroyed, inhabitants are killed and the survivors flee. In a number of documented situations, IDPs are not able to return for fear of, or ongoing insecurity. This repeated displacement provides opportunities for long-term occupation or control of abandoned lands, critics argue (Oluwasanmi, 2024).

In Plateau State especially in Barkin Ladi, Riyom, Bokkos and Jos South, cycles of reprisal violence between the Fulani pastoralists and indigenous farming communities like the Berom, Anaguta and Afizere peoples are described in the studies. These conflicts can be exacerbated by ethnic identity, religious differences, and conflicts over indigene-settler status (Uti, 2026). The same trend has been observed in the south of Kaduna State. In cases where there has been some tension and conflict in the community, such as a dispute over grazing rights, cattle theft or community conflict, the communities are often attacked again. The communities are often attacked again following periods of tension that may have arisen due to some conflict, e.g. dispute over grazing rights, cattle theft or some form of conflict in the community. Weak security presence and terrain are reported to be exploited by armed groups to launch raids and flee rapidly (Chukwuma, 2020).

The attacks are viewed as an attempt to steal land in Benue State where many leaders and residents see attacks as deliberate attempts to displace native farmers. The impression grew after the various attacks against the communities in Guma, Logo, Agatu and Kwande Local Government Areas. Some idle farmlands are later converted into grazable lands or as temporary habitation (Nwankwo, 2023).

The results from the DP and community leaders' corroborated that many of such farmlands and communities which were found abandoned by indigenous farmers throughout the Middle Belt states, Taraba states, Adamawa states and southern Kaduna are now being renamed and reoccupied by the Fulani pastoralists.

Among other factors, security analysts cite the escalation of the conflict through a militarization trend, as well. Many modern attacks are not pastoral conflicts, but rather, they include the use of sophisticated weapons and organized armed groups. Violent armed conflict has resulted from

local conflicts becoming deadly due to the proliferation of small arms in the Sahel region, cross-border migration, cattle rustling networks and lax law enforcement in the region (Vesco et al., 2024).

It is important to note however that the controversy over the issue is very strong. Others warn against the notion of the Fulani pastoralists as an aggressive group, emphasizing the fact that many Fulani communities have been attacked, displaced, and experienced cattle theft. There is also a claim by some that criminal gangs/bandits could be active as herders, adding to the complexity of the conflict (Moritz & Mbacke, 2022). Again, the way raids are carried out in this research location is frequently described as coordinated raids on rural communities, displacement of farm communities, destruction of livelihoods, and occupation of abandoned lands over time. The conflict has been often claimed as a farmer-herder dispute, but several observers see it as a multifaceted security crisis that is criminal, ethnic, characterized by poor state response and competition over territorial control.

In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, the continuous farmers–herders conflict could be seen from the Social Disorganisation perspective as a result of the failure of traditional institutions, security structures, governance system and peaceful mechanism which once helped to regulate the relationship between the farming and herder’s communities have now been lost thereby created condition that produces violence, displacement and criminal activities. The conflict is consistent with the Social Conflict Theory, where a struggle for scarce resources like land and water, a struggle for territorial control, a struggle for economic survival, and a struggle for political domination between the herders and indigenous farming communities has led to the occurrence of recurrent violence, ethnic tensions, and power struggles.

2.3 Implications of the Farmers–Herders Conflict.

1. **Food insecurity and economic decline:** The war has dramatically affected food production in affected regions. Farmers are sometimes forced to flee their farms because of attack and herders have their cattle taken away during violent encounters. Crop destruction, destruction of food storage facilities and markets have been a factor of food insecurity and increased poverty in many rural communities (Abodunrin et al., 2024). Agriculture is still one of the dominant sectors of the Nigerian economy and a decline in productivity has a significant impact on food security and economic stability of the nation.
2. **Loss of Lives and Humanitarian Crisis:** Thousands of people have lost their lives as a result of the war and many people have been displaced in Benue, Plateau, Taraba and Southern Kaduna. Families have lost homes, family members and livelihood. The quality of IDP's living conditions, food security, access to health services, and diseases are frequently poor (Anierobi et al., 2024). Government and aid agencies are continuing to be burdened by the humanitarian situation.
3. **Ethnic and Religious Tensions:** The crisis has exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions in Nigeria. The conflict is often viewed as ethnic and religious, given the fact that the main ethnic groups involved are the Fulani Muslims (pastoralists) and the farming communities, which are mainly Christian. This has led to higher levels of mistrust, hostility and retaliatory violence between communities (Danfulani & Danfulani, 2018).

4. **National Security Threat:** The conflict has become a serious security threat due to the growing use of sophisticated weapons and organized armed groups. Poor border control, illicit arms trading and banditry have contributed to an increase in violence in the affected areas (Amali & Buthelezi, 2025). Nigeria's unity and political stability are constantly under threat of continued insecurity.
5. **Psychological/Social Trauma:** Victims' attacks can cause emotional trauma, fears, anxieties and psychological distress. Children are denied education, families are split and social connection between communities is broken. Long-term displacement of populations is also a source of social disintegration and cultural heritage loss.

2.4 Solutions to the Farmers–Herders Conflict

1. **Establishment of Ranching Systems:** The Government should promote modern ranching systems rather than open grazing. Ranching helps to limit the grazing route competition and the encroaching of cattle on farm land. Good ranching management can enhance livestock productivity and decrease the degradation of the environment (Aigbokhaevbo & Eidenoje, 2024)
2. **Improving Security and Law Enforcement:** Security forces need to be able to respond promptly to an attack and to safeguard vulnerable communities. Improve the security of borders to decrease illegal migration including small arms from neighbouring countries; and arrest and prosecute those engaged in acts of violence regardless of their ethnic and religious background. Impunity and loss of trust in policing can be mitigated through effective policing and intelligence gathering.
3. **Equitable Land and Resource Management:** Government to put in place equitable land-use policies, establishing clearly demarcated grazing areas, farming areas, and access to water. Disputes over natural resources and land can be reduced through the implementation of community based resource management systems (Siamabele et al., 2020).
4. **Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Traditional rulers, religious leaders, community leaders and civil society organisations should foster dialogue and reconciliation between farmers and herders. Revival of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms can help to restore trust and avoid the occurrence of violent reprisals.
5. **Climate Change Adaptation Strategies:** The government and international organizations need to provide funding and support for irrigation, water conservation, reforestation and sustainable agriculture to mitigate environmental stressors that drive migration and competition for resources.

To conclude, Overall, the violence in the middle-belt is a product of interplay between various factors of environmental stress, land-economic dispute, ethnic distrust, political woes, crime, and poor security governance. The attacks by many of the affected communities are seen as being for the purpose of occupying their ancestral lands, and most researchers agree that there is no single factor which can be isolated as the cause of the crisis.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this research, qualitative descriptive research design was used. This approach is to summarize events, experiences, and phenomena in a comprehensive, simple manner without a

lot of theoretical interpretation, using everyday language (Deckert & Wilson, 2023). It was selected because the Farmers-Herders conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt is an issue that cannot be described in general terms without considering the context, the causes, what it looks like, how it affects the lives of the victims and the implications for national security and development between 1999 and 2023. The design ensured that both primary and secondary data were integrated and thus brought out the violent clashes between farmers and herders, especially in the Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna states, which has resulted in the historical nature of farmer-herder symbiosis being altered by environmental pressures, weak governance and land grabbing.

3.2 Study Area

The study covered Middle Belt of Nigeria which includes Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna states. These areas were specially chosen because conflicts have occurred frequently and intensely since 1999. Southern Kaduna (Zangon Kataf, Kaura, Kauru, Jama'a, Kajuru, Kachia), Plateau (Barkin Ladi, Riyom, Bokkos, Jos South, Bassa), and parts of Benue are the areas of conflict where fertile lands, climate-induced migration, and indigene-settler tensions converge.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The target groups were community leaders, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), royal fathers, farmers, and other groups affected by the conflict or who have an interest in it. The 20 key informants were selected through purposive sampling: 8 Community/Youth Leaders, 7 IDPs, 3 Royal fathers/Traditional rulers and 2 Local officials. The process was supplemented with snowball sampling. Participants were selected for their first-hand experience, their leadership status and willingness to share their insights. For a qualitative descriptive study, Guest et al. (2006) report that data saturation was gained in this sample.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary Data: The primary data collection tools employed were semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) which were carried out from 2022 to 2023. The interviews were of 15-30 minutes' duration, audio recorded with consent and held in safe environments. Some of the questions raised to IDPs, community leaders and royal fathers were:

- i. What is your reason for staying in the IDP camp?
- ii. Do you hope to return to your community? If no, why?
- iii. What is the reason you believe that your community is under attack?
- iv. What are your solutions?

Probes into patterns of attack, motives for land grabs, government reactions and socio-economic effects. The perspective of the Gbong Gwom Jos who said that the major reason for many attacks in the Plateau is to grab land was particularly insightful.

Secondary Data: Secondary sources gave historical background and triangulation. These ranged from scholarly works (Meydan & Akkas, 2024), reports from International Crisis Group (2018), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Bank (2020), UNOCHA, and government security documents. Displacement data indicated that during the sampled periods, more than 62,000 were displaced in the three States, with a trend of night raids, fires in villages, and then occupation of the land.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. Steps involved were familiarization with the data, initial coding, development of themes (causes, patterns, implications, solutions), review, and reporting. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing. The transcripts of the interviews were triangulated with secondary reports to increase validity.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The institutional committee approved the ethics of the study. The following principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity (particularly for IDPs) were maintained. Data were safely stored and only used for academic research.

3.7 Limitations

Some informants were reluctant, potential recall bias and restricted access to high-risk areas due to insecurity. These were addressed through triangulation and multiple sampling. Findings are context-specific.

4. Findings and Discussion

This summarizes the key findings gathered from primary data (key informant interviews with community leaders, IDPs and royal fathers) and secondary sources thematic analysis. Themes of interrelation are presented in the analysis, which includes: causes of the violence, trends of violence, socio-economic and security implications, and government response. Data analysis is carried out in relation to the concepts of Social Disorganisation Theory and Social Conflict Theory while the focus is on the major role of land grabbing in the farmers–herders conflict in Middle Belt Nigeria from 1999 to 2023.

Causes of the Farmers–Herders Conflict

Environmental, socio-economic and institutional issues constitute a complex mix which is at the root of the conflict. The situation of climate change and desertification in northern Nigeria has drastically reduced its available grazing lands, forcing pastoralists to move southward to the Middle Belt parts of Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna in Nigeria (Bello & Kazibwe, 2022). Competition for limited land and water resources has been further exacerbated by population growth and agricultural expansion.

Poor governance, easy availability of small arms, and the breakdown of traditional dispute resolution processes have paved the way for violence. One of the royal fathers from Southern Kaduna claimed it was due to climate change which brought him here but the extent of burning and occupation suggests that it is beyond the grazing. “Systematic displacement of our people continues,” he said. This is in line with social disorganization theory which says that when social institutions like the traditional leadership do not play their role appropriately, the norms/social rules that used to regulate relationships between the farmers and herders, are gone, and there is space for lawlessness. This competition over limited resources, perceived power imbalance, when the conflict between indigenes and settlers is ethnic and religious, can also be explained by Social Conflict Theory. There were several points of commonality among the individuals who reported on the issue: that the conflicts over resources have become intentional territorial control.

Patterns of Violence and Land Occupation

Night or early morning raids on the rural farming communities in productive areas are often systematic in nature. Armed groups, sometimes referred to as Fulani militias, set fire to villages, killing villagers and evicting them. The abandoned farm lands are then reoccupied or renamed, suggesting that land grabbing is a major motivation.

The figures for displacement are shocking. At least 62,000 people were displaced in 2015 in Kaduna, Plateau and Benue with approximately 182,530 displaced in sampled periods up to 2021 reported by Amnesty International (2018–2021; ACAPS, 2017). This has taken away the lives of hundreds of communities in LGA's such as Zangon Kataf, Kaura, Riyom, Barkin Ladi, Guma and Agatu, leaving behind abandoned villages and communities. In the Southern part of Kaduna State, an IDP community leader, Male 52 (farmer) stated that: “Our village was attacked at night, houses were set on fire and people were killed, we ran for our lives for safety, and now the land is being taken by others, our return is a guarantee of our deaths.”

The patterns are calculated and not spontaneous conflicts. Many people started to believe what the Gbong Gwom Jos Da Jacob Gyang Buba said, “the real motive for the killings across Plateau is land-grabbing, which is just a script as the intention of the herders and farmers clashes is to be done in order to take over their land”. These narratives lend support to Social Conflict Theory's emphasis on the struggle for territorial control and resources and the dissolution of traditional authority structures, a theory that is later supported.

Implications for National Security and Development

The conflict has profound multi-dimensional consequences. In the economic aspect, it has destroyed agricultural productivity, farmlands and livestock, disrupted the market, and caused food insecurity and malnutrition in once productive areas (Margarate & Effungani, 2026). Loss of access to farming land by many farmers is causing increased poverty and unemployment.

The violence has left thousands dead, thousands of widows and orphans, and entire communities displaced, with widespread psychological trauma. “Our communities are now ghost villages, we lost our farms, homes, and loved ones, there is fear and mistrust everywhere, we don't trust anyone from the other side,” said an IDP youth leader from Plateau State. Schools have been closed and faced low enrolment, disrupted academic calendars, and education has suffered as a result; ethnic and religious tensions have increased and undermined national cohesion.

The conflict at the macro level is a serious threat to the internal security, the diversion of scarce resources and the undermining of development efforts. The outcomes indicate the vicious cycle that both theories predicted: institutional failure leads to violence, which leads to more competition for resources and social fragmentation.

Government Responses and Proposed Solutions

Past government interventions have generally been reactive, involving curfews, sporadic military interventions and peace committees which have produced only short-lived results. Perceived bias, failure of the rehabilitation system and a culture of impunity were regularly cited by informants. As one of the traditional title holders said, “The government only comes with curfews after the damage is done. If they don't arrest the sponsors, they don't return the lands, then peace will never be achieved.”

Many IDPs reported that they have not received any relief material, which exacerbated their suffering. This is one of the institutional weaknesses that further supports Social Disorganization Theory. The solutions proposed by informants involve proactive measures: enforcement of ranching systems to minimise open grazing conflicts; just land policies with clearly demarcated reserves; fortifying the security measures with an impartial prosecution of perpetrators; climate adaptation measures; and a true dialogue within the communities with an element of justice. “Government must secure our lands, enact ranching, and prosecute attackers,” it was said, again and again, “Dialogue must be complemented by justice.”

The findings present the farmers–herders conflict as having developed from a resource conflict, to a more multifaceted security problem largely driven by land-grabbing. The effects of environmental stress, the breakdown of institutions and political disputes have created a terrible cycle of violence, displacement and occupation. A combination of comprehensive, equitable and decisive measures is needed to bring peace, security, sustainable development back to Nigeria's Middle Belt if these root causes are to be addressed.

This study largely supports and validates the existing literature on farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The found causes of climate change, desertification, southward migration, resource scarcity, weak governance and arms proliferation are similar to what was also reported by the World Bank (2020), Blench (2010), and Margarate & Effungani (2026), all of which blame the crisis on environmental stress and competition for dwindling cropland. This study, however, has largely focused on land grabbing as a main driver, which has been previously considered as a secondary or contested driver. Patterns of night raids, burning of villages, mass displacement and occupation of farmlands found here are consistent with those documented by Amnesty International (2018-2021) and International Crisis Group (2018) of systematic violence and forced displacement in Southern Kaduna, Plateau, and Benue. These statistics of displacement (more than 62,000 since 2015, with a longer-term impact of more than 180,000 in sampled periods) further corroborate these reports and make note of the long-term territorial consequences that were often overlooked in previous studies.

This research also contributes to the understanding of the ethnic and religious dimensions and how conflicts over resources have been exploited as identity based violence, as noted by Assal (2006) but detailed in the vivid key informant narratives here. When narrating the violence, the IDPs and royal fathers (including the Gbong Gwom Jos) argue for a more in-depth look at the deliberate land acquisition strategies and not just a simplistic discourse about resource-competition.

The results are very congruent with the two adopted frameworks. Social Disorganization Theory (Shaw & McKay) is supported by the obvious decline of traditional institutions, elders' mediation, symbiotic farmer-herder relationship and community cohesion that previously helped to ensure order. Low state presence, impunity and broken conflict resolution systems have fostered environments that allow for continued violence and crime. The increasing struggle for limited resources and power is understood by Social Conflict Theory (Marx, Coser). Interests of groups exist in the context of inequality, as reflected in the competition for fertile lands, perceived marginalisation and territorial dominance. Land grabbing becomes a symptom of power imbalance, and the aim of armed groups to change the demographic and economic landscape by taking advantage of institutional weaknesses. The theories provide a glimpse into how environmental factors contribute to social disorganisation and conflict dynamics, which in turn can contribute to the perpetuation of violence.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by showing how the land grabbing phenomenon can be viewed as an important link between disorganisation and conflict in fragile agrarian settings. Long-term effects and effectiveness of ranching and justice-based interventions are worth studying in the future.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt Country (1999–2023) has evolved from a symbiotic relationship to a complicated security issue in large part due to land grabs in the context of environment and resource constraints. This qualitative study was carried out based on key informant interviews with IDPs, community leaders, as well as royal fathers and secondary sources, and found that some of the most major factors are climate change, desertification, southward migration, weak governance, and arms proliferation. The phenomenon of coordinated night raids, burning of villages, mass displacement and occupation of farmlands, however, suggest deliberate territorial expansion in Benue, Plateau and Southern Kaduna.

Results show that more than 62,000 people have been displaced since 2015 (and more than 180,000 since then), people have been killed and food insecurity is increasing, as well as ethnic-religious mistrust. The war is threatening national security, social cohesion and sustainable development. Social Disorganization Theory is an appropriate way to understand the breakdown of traditional institutions and state authority that has contributed to impunity; Social Conflict Theory helps understand the competition over resources and power. Testimonies by the Gbong Gwom Jos which have been presented, have highlighted how the crisis has morphed from an ordinary dispute to organised violence with long-term demographic implications. If no decisive measures are taken the Middle Belt can become an unstable region with national impact.

5.2 Recommendations

The following actionable steps are recommended in order to reduce the conflict:

- i. Ranching Systems: Modern ranching in a fast-track with proper facilities to replace open grazing and reduce the encroachment of farms.
- ii. Equitable Land Policies: Engage in detailed land use mapping, create protected grazing areas and ensure safe return of displaced communities, while not allowing illegal occupations.
- iii. Security and Justice: Expand proactive security operations, increase border control on arms trafficking, and provide fair prosecution against perpetrators and sponsors, curbing impunity.
- iv. Climate Adaptation and Dialogue: Invest in reforestation in Northern areas and in providing irrigation to decrease migration pressure, and institutionalize community dialogues with traditional and religious leadership.
- v. Victim support: ensure IDP and affected families receive full rehabilitation, compensation and psychosocial support to rebuild livelihoods and confidence in governance.

Successful implementation requires political commitment, multi-stakeholder cooperation and ongoing monitoring. Peace, food security and national stability in the Middle Belt will be

restored, only if justice, equitable resource governance and institutional strengthening are achieved.

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