
Integrating Narratives into Farmer-Herder Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Policies in Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

Farmer-herder conflicts and related violence are often rooted in complex, multifaceted, and competing narratives and ideologies about land, identity, history and belonging. As such, scholars of the conflict have begun to capture diverse narratives about the drivers of farmer-herder conflicts in West Africa. In contemporary narratives of these conflicts, threats of religious subjugation and political domination of one ethnoreligious group over another persist in addition to claims of climate-induced resource and land scarcity in the region. These analyses also consider ethnic differences in the region (Bah 2005; Chukwuma 2020; Ochonu 2014).

In northern Nigeria, where farmer-herder conflicts have intensified in recent decades, conflict actors typically differ from one another by social, cultural, and economic characteristics. Since these social dynamics contribute to violence, policy responses require thorough analyses of common beliefs held by conflicting parties and the sources of their grievances. In addition, the views of stakeholders experienced in conflict mediation and victim assistance are critical for developing practical and effective

farmer-herder conflict resolution and peacebuilding policies.

This study addresses the lack of analysis of stakeholders' perceptions of the factors that fuel grievances between farmers, herders, and other conflict actors. We ask the question, how do different actors and stakeholders define the primary drivers of farmer-herder conflicts in northern Nigeria?

Ultimately, this policy brief highlights the importance of designing conflict intervention programs that are tailored to the local triggers of conflict. Moreover, the brief identifies the need to create mechanisms for integrity and accountability among government personnel. Finally, the brief considers future directions for land management in light of the stakeholders' perspectives highlighted in the brief.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This policy brief is based on a qualitative study involving stakeholders with personal and/or professional experience with the conflicts in southern Kaduna State or Plateau State. We conducted 22 interviews in 2022 with leaders of NGOs, lawyers, doctors, and political advocates with personal and/or

professional experience in Kaduna and Plateau State. We recruited participants through snowballing, asking each interviewee for additional individuals to contact. The open-ended interview questions addressed the nature of each stakeholder’s involvement or experience with farmer herder conflicts and their perspectives on the major drivers of farmer-herder conflicts. We recorded and transcribed the interviews and applied discourse analysis to the narratives to extract stakeholder perceptions of how historical and social realities shape both the conflict and mediation attempts. Employing thematic analysis, our findings summarize the central ideas and critical perceptions held by the interviewees.

3. KEY INSIGHTS

Ethnoreligious narratives fuel mistrust and blur the definitions of farmer-herder conflicts.

Many contend that “farmer-herder conflicts” have become an umbrella term which may benefit from being more acutely distinguished from conflicts driven by ethnoreligious differences. While religious extremism and intolerance are important factors influencing violence in northern Nigeria, interviewees varied in the level of focus placed on the religious motivations of violent actors in farmer-herder conflicts. Respondents who either work for institutions committed to interreligious dialogue or did not self-identify as working for farmers’ rights spoke more neutrally regarding the history of interactions

between religious groups. In contrast, individuals who self-identified as sympathetic or affiliated with the cause of non-Fulani farmers in northern Nigeria begin their description of the conflict’s drivers with descriptions of jihadist pressure from Hausa-Fulani figures.

Most of our interlocutors contend that media outlets use scapegoating to suggest the identity of an aggressor, deliberately or implicitly altering the public’s understanding of violent events. Digital and print media sources use language that can inaccurately highlight or ignore the role of ethnoreligious differences. As argued by Kolawole (2021) and Madu and Nwankwo (2020), doing so ignores the complex interaction between religious, political, and environmental factors that trigger conflict.

Debating the rights of “indigenous” and “settler” communities.

Discourses of ethnoreligious identities are linked to the debate of indigene and settler rights in northern Nigeria (Human Rights Watch 2006; Maiangwa 2017; Ugwueze et al. 2022). Farming communities defend their right to claim indigeneity as a proxy for the right to land ownership. In contrast, herders affirm their right to pastoral lands on the basis of necessity and historical precedent rather than indigeneity as the term is legally defined. The discourse of indigeneity and settlement in northern Nigeria is shaped by a sense of marginalization and divergent interpretations of the rights of citizens. Interviewees emphasized unity among the

non-Hausa-Fulani, non-majority tribes in northern Nigeria. Despite intermarriage and cultural exchanges, Fulani remain typified as foreign settlers.

The lack of clarity regarding the rights of indigenes vis-à-vis citizens incentivizes Christians in ethnic minority groups in Northern Nigeria to unite to prevent herders' entry and land use. Moreover, the continued use of arms among herders and vigilantism among farmers points to failures to prosecute actors of violence and investigate the involvement of state security personnel in violence. Interviewees in legal and non-legal professions noted that corruption in local justice systems and their incapability to manage large caseloads reduces trust in government institutions among citizens. Meanwhile, social exclusion and minimal representation at state levels enhances herders' sense of isolation.

Land negotiations reflect greater beliefs about belonging.

Our study's participants suggest that economic vulnerability, manifested in the lack of land or lack of the capacity to farm or graze livestock, is associated with cultural instability. A common perspective among diverse stakeholders is that land access is integral to communal functioning. In discussions of farmer-herder conflicts, land is not simply a disputed resource. Rather, how land is managed reflects greater beliefs about who belongs and who does not belong in a locality. While competition over land remains a driver of conflict at the regional

level (Adams et al. 2023), greater attention to social attachments to land can create space for common ground to be reached and dialogue and trust-building to be achieved.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Adapt conflict prevention and mediation efforts to local contexts.

As suggested by Shola (2025), practitioners and scholars have recognized the importance of relying on local perspectives in order to determine how conflict emerges from social cleavages. For this reason, state-level mediation efforts must be designed with sensitivity to the main source of disagreement, whether ethnoreligious, political, or environmental, and how factors interact to precipitate violence.

Interviewees confirm that the degree of religious differences and the relevance of these differences in the development of conflict in Kaduna State is distinct from Plateau State. For instance, in the early 2000s, episodic violence emerged in Jos, Plateau in relation to elections and religious tensions (Higazi 2018). On the other hand, in Kaduna, a bloody crisis emerged from the proposed introduction of Sharia law (Guttschuss 2013). Similar distinctions must be made for states like Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, and others that have experienced farmer-herder conflicts due differences in contemporary religious compositions of the states. Practitioners and policymakers must consider how ethnoreligious and political tensions can limit the feasibility of implementing future peace interventions.

State peace institutions, such as the Kaduna State Peace Commission and Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency, should be positioned to develop personalized and sustainable peace initiatives. Moreover, peace programs that lack strategic engagement with local stakeholders and adaptive management of funds due to limits set by external donors or shifts in government administration are less likely to have sustainable effects in abetting conflict (Ferbach 2020). The direct involvement and feedback on program design from the community in which program implementation will take place are necessary.

Address corruption, increase accountability, and focus on security.

A challenge for regions responding to farmer-herder conflicts remains creating mechanisms for integrity and accountability among government personnel. As a result, the identification of perpetrators and the protection of attacked communities is stifled in the wake of violence. While communities often seek justice or remediation outside of judicial mechanisms, efforts to improve the institutional capacity of government entities, such as security and judicial systems must occur to reduce distrust. Failure to do so can result in increased reliance on vigilantism in attacked communities in need of defense.

Despite structural barriers and internal ambiguity regarding the commitment of local, state, and federal governments to reduce violence, the institutionalization of peacebuilding has led to more nuanced

responses to farmer-herder conflicts. Moreover, interviewees who partner with these state institutions reiterated the capacity for early warning systems to mitigate conflict. However, interviewees also lament a dearth of adequate, timely responses to identified threats. Hence, increased investments in public trust-building and state peace architectures has the potential to mitigate violence.

Strengthen and update land policies to recognize land as a social and economic asset.

Secure land access and effective land management are shared priorities among both agricultural and pastoral communities. At the regional level, competition over natural resources continues to be a principal driver of farmer-herder conflicts (Adams et al. 2023). Thus, strengthening policy frameworks that recognize land as both an economic asset and a social institution can therefore provide an entry point for conflict prevention and reconciliation initiatives. Strategies to counter narratives that heighten mistrust are needed for inclusive conflict mitigation and stakeholder engagement across affected interest groups. In this context, community-based dialogue mechanisms that account for land-use transitions and social vulnerability as key drivers of pastoral mobility can contribute meaningfully to conflict mitigation and sustainable land governance.

As a result of state-wide bans on open grazing, many doubt the capacity of reserves to prevent crop destruction, cattle rustling,

and human deaths. For instance, Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) Policy of 2018 faced high barriers to implementation and questionable effectiveness as a policy response to conflicts (Ejiofor 2022; Dan-Azumi 2025). As argued in a study of southern Kaduna, grazing reserves failed to be implemented due to lack of political will and ignorance of how ethnic, religious, and cultural differences fuel conflicts (Dan-Azumi 2025). As the current federal administration advances the operations of the National Ministry of Livestock Development, policies which emerge from the ministry should learn from the challenges faced by past administrations. Hence, policymakers must engage a diversity of stakeholders and assess the viability of land management strategies in the localities in which they are to be implemented.

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