

## Herder-Farmer Conflicts in Nigeria: Policy Options to Stop an Emerging Catastrophe

By Hyginus Banko Okibe, Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar

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### Overview of the Challenge

Nigeria has faced myriad challenges since democracy was restored in 1999. One growing problem, which reflects several intersecting challenges, is especially troubling: hunger. From 2018 to 2020, 21.4 percent of the population in Nigeria experienced hunger.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, World Bank reports declared that Nigeria was “the poverty capital of the world.”<sup>2</sup> One of the major contributors to the country’s dire poverty is conflicts between herders and farmers, which have spread across Nigeria’s agrarian zones. Food production has declined, and food prices have risen as consequence. Scores of farming communities have been displaced; countless farms have been destroyed. The conflict has become pervasive in the past decade. Successive governments have failed to devise workable solutions to bring it under control. The South East zone of Nigeria, currently less affected than the country’s worst-hit regions, merits scrutiny as the growing conflict threatens to amplify its historical and religious divides.

The direct cause of the conflict in Nigeria can be put down to the open grazing of cattle by Fulani herdsmen. Fulani is one of the largest ethnic groups in the Sahel and West Africa. They are widely dispersed across the region but concentrated in West Africa and northern parts of Central Africa. There are three types of Fulani, differentiated based on their settlement patterns: the nomadic-pastoral or Mbororo, the semi-nomadic, and the settled or “town” Fulani. Out of an estimated total population of 25 million, approximately half are nomadic or semi-nomadic herders of cattle, goats, and sheep who travel across large areas of West Africa to provide grazing land for their livestock.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, Fulani livestock tramples on and damages crops planted by farmers, who in turn insist on payment for the damages. Compensation can sometimes settle the rift, but not always. Disputes between herders and farmers generally stem from two contrasting agricultural practices: rearing and maintaining free-range livestock, on one hand—and crop farming, on the other. The competition for land resources between the two can rapidly escalate into violent conflict, as well documented across West Africa. Failure to accept responsibility for any misconduct on both sides can lead to cyclical violence. Peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers becomes more difficult to obtain where the state is absent or dysfunctional.

To date, Nigeria’s federal government has proved hapless in the face of worsening herder-farmer conflict. What counts for the government’s peacebuilding policy, which is supposed to provide a roadmap for managing and mitigating the herder-farmer conflict, is wholly inadequate and ineffective. The current failed policies negate efforts in the agricultural sector that could improve food production and food security to mitigate the conflict.

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## Trends and Developments

In February 2018, the National Executive Council (NEC), the highest policy-making body in Nigeria, constituted a sub-committee to examine herder-farmer conflicts. Based on its recommendations, the NEC approved that open grazing of cattle in Nigeria should be banned.<sup>4</sup> The federal government has neither implemented the decision of the NEC nor lobbied the National Assembly to enact the relevant legal enforcements. The 17 state governors in southern Nigeria and the governor of Benue State in the North Central zone banned open grazing, but the federal government viewed the ban differently, and thus it does not exist in practice.<sup>5</sup> President Muhammadu Buhari, born to a Fulani family, is accused of not being proactive in providing viable solutions to the conflict. Many accuse him of favoring Muslim Fulani over predominantly Christian farmers in parts of the country.

The federal government has approved N6.25 billion<sup>6</sup> (approximately US\$14 million) to build a cattle ranch in Katsina to help address the problem, but this is a tokenistic measure. Fulani herders will resist confinement in any ranch, given their strong nomadic culture, unless accompanied by strong government action. President Buhari has blamed non-Nigerian Fulani herders for the country's herder-farmer violent conflicts, saying that they have breached border protocols on the free movement of people from the ECOWAS member states. However, few pastoralists carry or possess personal, formal identification documents. As such, some local groups and associations can disown them, alleging that they are foreign militants who operate with AK-47 rifles. For its part, the federal government tacitly permits ownership of outlawed weapons used by militant Fulani herdsman by failing to enforce the Firearms Act 1959, which was reviewed in 2014 to prosecute or investigate how they came to own such weapons.<sup>7</sup>

## Impacts

According to the International Crisis Group, violence across Nigeria between herders and farmers has taken the lives of over 1,300 people since January 2018<sup>8</sup> though many deaths and missing persons go unreported. Crop production, which previously accounted for a huge chunk of the agricultural sector, representing 88 percent of total activities, has declined due to the conflict. The contribution of agriculture to Nigeria's GDP dropped by 31 percent, from US\$113.64 billion in 2013 to US\$78.45 billion in 2017. Nigeria loses almost \$14 billion in revenue annually due to the conflict, which has increased the country's reliance on food imports to meet its needs.<sup>9</sup> A marked absence of political will to tackle the problem at the national level and a lack of cooperation between federal and southeast authorities have stymied attempts to bring the conflict under control.

## Policy Options and Recommendations

External and internal intervention mechanisms are needed to mitigate the effects of the herder-farmer conflict, both in terms of public safety and food security. It requires government and stakeholders to show the previously absent political will to tackle the problems.

### 1. The African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

a. The African Heads of State and Government adopted the African Pastoral Policy Framework in January 2011, which acknowledges the rights of pastoralists and the necessity to provide security, services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities in those areas, in line with what exists in non-pastoral areas. The policy framework will enable pastoralism to play a key role in economic growth in the continent, but only when adequately funded and implemented by member states. To date, it has not been implemented in Nigeria, which was a signatory to the policy document.

### 2. The Federal Government of Nigeria

a. The presidency should collaborate with the National Assembly to enact legislation that prohibits open grazing in Nigeria.

b. The federal government must collaborate with other tiers of government (state and local), law enforcement agencies, and community leaders to confiscate illegal arms. So long as terror groups carry illegal weapons with impunity, it will be impossible to sustain any disarmament campaign directed at Fulani herders in contravention of Nigeria's Firearms Act.



- c. Improve border surveillance and control, and enforce the provisions of the ECOWAS Protocol on the Free Movement of People and Goods.
- d. Partner with the private sector to invest in ranching and grass cultivation in the North. Although Fulani pastoralists would likely resist any form of confinement, adequate education and information campaigns about the advantages of ranch options could lessen their opposition.

### 3. State Governments

- a. Register cattle owners in southern Nigeria pending the completion of ranching projects in the North.
- b. Reform land administration policy in Nigeria to avoid conflict between the federal and state governments (as observed in the Land Use Act 1978)<sup>10</sup>, over their jurisdiction. Confusion and ambiguity hinder the ability of states to regulate the occupations of pastoralists and farmers in line with their constitutional authority.

### 4. Pastoralists, Farmers, and Community Leaders

- a. Constitute a non-partisan joint monitoring and conflict resolution committee, comprising respective leaderships of both communities (herders and farmers), and include observers from state and local governments, law enforcement agencies, and civil society. The committee will monitor herders and farmers, settle breaches of peaceful conduct, and enforce disciplinary actions.

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**Dr. Hyginus Banko Okibe** holds a Ph.D. Degree in Political Science. He is a Senior Lecturer at Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Department of Political Science, and at the Institute for Peace, Conflict and Development Studies of the University. He has research interests in social sciences subjects, governance, and development. Currently, he is the Director of Work Ethics at the University, the Coordinator of the Postgraduate Program in the Department of Political Science, and the Secretary of the Nigerian Political Science Association, South East Zone in Nigeria. He is also a guest speaker on political issues on radio and TV programs. He is happily married with lovely children. His hobbies include reading, writing, speaking, and traveling. He was a Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) Scholar during summer 2022 (May to August) term at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.



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