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Mapping the Conflict Terrain: Nature of Farmer-Herder Clashes in Southern Adamawa

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Abstract

The nature of Farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has intensified in recent years, assuming violent dimensions that have led to loss of lives, destruction of farms and livestock, and mass displacement. In the southern region of Adamawa State, the recurrent clashes threaten agricultural productivity, food security, and rural livelihoods. This study assessed the nature of farmer-herder conflict, with a focus on its specific dynamics, including the forms it takes, the triggers that sustain it, and its broader implications. This paper adopted a desk review methodology, drawing on secondary data to examine the dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa. The review synthesised insights from a range of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, institutional reports, NGO assessments, and documents produced by international agencies. These materials provided a broad evidentiary base for understanding the forms, triggers, and implications of the conflict within the region. The study concludes that farmer-herder conflict in southern Adamawa is deeply rooted in competition over shrinking natural resources, with both groups deploying limited but context-specific mitigation and adaptation strategies. However, financial, psychological, and institutional constraints hinder their effectiveness. It is recommended that government and development agencies support joint resource management initiatives, demarcate clear farming and grazing boundaries, and strengthen local conflict resolution mechanisms. Investment in livelihood diversification, and infrastructure for both farmers and herders is crucial to reducing violent encounters and fostering sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: Famers, Herders, Conflict, Nature, Forms, Southern Adamawa State

Introduction



Farmer-herder conflict has become one of the most persistent and complex forms of communal violence across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in regions where climate variability, population growth, and land-use pressures intersect. According to Brottem (2021), The escalation has been most pronounced in Nigeria, the central corridor spanning Mali and northern Burkina Faso, and select regions of the Central African Republic. Although farmers and pastoralists have long maintained competitive interactions, the scale and intensity of recent violence marks a departure from historical patterns (Adams et. al, 2023, Adamset. al, 2019; Walwa, 2020).

In Nigeria, farmer-herder conflict has evolved into a nationally significant issue, exhibiting diverse expressions across the country's geopolitical zones. From some parts of Northeast, the Middle Belt to the North-West and southern regions, the conflict is shaped by a mix of local factors, including environmental differences, patterns of migration, and how governments respond in each area. Despite its widespread effects, the conflict is far from uniform. Its manifestations vary across regions (Dangusau, 2020; Agaptus, 2020).

In Adamawa, the conflict terrain is particularly complex. Here, farmer-herder clashes are shaped by a convergence of ecological pressures, historical land disputes, and evolving patterns of authority and identity. Uwakweet al (2025), observe that for decades, farming and herding communities in the state maintained a mutually beneficial relationship, farmers relied on cattle dung to fertilise their fields, while herders fed their livestock with leftover crop residue. However, this long-standing symbiosis has sharply declined over the past ten years, giving way to recurrent violent clashes. In recent years, mounting pressure on land resources has consistently triggered conflict between the two groups across multiple local government areas in the State. The region's proximity to international borders, its history of seasonal migration, and its diverse ethno-religious composition further complicate the dynamics. Notable characteristic of farmer-herder conflict in Adamawa State is its tendency to spill over into neighbouring Local Government Areas, leading to wide-ranging and multifaceted impacts (Uwakweet al, 2025).

However, it is noticeable the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria, including Adamawa State is frequently understood through a narrow lens that emphasises episodic violence. This reductive framing often obscures the deeper structural, environmental, and socio-political forces that sustain and complicate the conflict. These variations in conflict are shaped by regional, seasonal, and socio-political dynamics. In some areas, tensions escalate during the dry season as herders migrate southward in search of pasture. In others, violence is triggered by incidents such as crop destruction, livestock theft, or perceived acts of disrespect. Some confrontations erupt spontaneously, while others are premeditated and prolonged (Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025). Such occurrences are common in Adamawa State, where localised expressions of conflict reflect these broader patterns (Uwakweet al., 2025; Abdullahi, 2024). These shifting typologies have often obscured the local dynamics that drive conflict in different areas, with underlying tensions around land access, identity, and authority. Traditional leaders, local governments, and security agencies frequently struggle to mediate disputes, especially when violence escalates rapidly or involves external actors in affected communities.

Therefore, this paper examines the farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa State, with a focus on its specific dynamics, including the forms it takes, the triggers that sustain it, and its broader implications.

Objectives

1. To examine the forms of farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa,
2. To explore the triggers and escalation pathways of conflict.
3. To assess the implications of the conflict typologies or forms



Theoretical Framework

The farmer–herder conflict in Southern Adamawa can be examined through several interconnected theoretical perspectives that highlight its psychological, structural and relational dimensions. One relevant framework is the Frustration Aggression Displacement Theory, originally developed by Yale psychologists John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Neal Miller, Orval Mowrer and Robert Sears in 1939. This theory suggests that aggression arises when individuals are prevented from achieving their goals. When the actual source of frustration, such as climate change, land scarcity or elite-driven exclusion, is inaccessible, the resulting aggression is often redirected toward more vulnerable or socially acceptable targets. This dynamic helps explain why violent clashes between farmers and herders may erupt even when neither group is directly responsible for the underlying causes. The theory also provides insight into the formation of stereotypes, prejudice and hostility toward perceived out-groups, particularly when frustration is projected onto those seen as adversaries (Dollard et al., 1939).

A complementary theoretical lens can be introduced to further unpack the structural and institutional factors that sustain the conflict. Social Conflict Theory, originally developed by Karl Marx and later expanded by Lewis Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf, views society as a competitive space where groups contend over limited resources and power. In the context of Adamawa, structural inequalities between landowners and pastoralists, compounded by urban expansion, environmental degradation and weak governance, create persistent conditions for conflict. The struggle for control over land and livelihoods reflects deeper class divisions and systemic exclusion, making violent confrontation increasingly likely (Marx & Engels, 1848; Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959).

Human Needs Theory, pioneered by John Burton and Edward Azar, argues that deep-rooted conflicts endure when basic human needs, such as identity, security, recognition and autonomy, remain unmet. In Southern Adamawa, the breakdown of peaceful coexistence, widespread displacement and the erosion of livelihoods reflect violations of these essential needs. Human Needs Theory provides a normative framework for designing trauma-informed, culturally grounded and structurally responsive interventions (Burton, 1990; Azar, 1990).

Together, these three theories offer a robust and interdisciplinary framework for analysing the dynamics of farmer–herder conflict and for informing inclusive peacebuilding strategies.

Literature Review

In recent years, the conflict between farmers and livestock herders across Africa has attracted growing scholarly and policy attention, driven by concerns over its increasing frequency and severity. This form of violence has become particularly acute in parts of the continent, primarily fuelled by competition over natural resources between pastoralist communities and sedentary farming populations (Uwakwe et al., 2025; Adams et al., 2023; Adams, 2019; Walwa, 2020). At its core, the conflict is shaped by a complex web of external pressures, including climate-induced droughts and desertification, shifting migration patterns, environmental degradation, rapid demographic expansion, persistent social and gender inequalities, and the rise of regional extremism (Amoako, 2025; Kendrick & Sanders, 2024; Bukari, 2023; Osaretin and Akov, 2013). Together, these factors have contributed to widespread displacement, the proliferation of arms, and escalating insecurity across affected regions. The farmer–herder conflict, once largely seasonal and localised, has become more entrenched and volatile, shaped by a convergence of environmental, demographic, and socio-political pressures.



Among these pressures, climate change-induced droughts and desertification are particularly significant. They have reduced access to grazing land and water, compelling herders to move into farming zones in search of sustenance. This movement often results in crop damage, provoking retaliation from farmers whose livelihoods depend on their harvests. As arable land continues to shrink, competition over scarce resources intensifies (McNeil, 2025). At the same time, traditional migratory routes are being disrupted by environmental shifts, population growth, and agricultural expansion, forcing herders onto unfamiliar paths that increase friction with farming communities (Magda, Flintan & Fiona, 2023; McNeil, 2025). Beyond environmental pressures, rapid population growth and entrenched social inequalities further strain land and governance systems. As demand for farmland and pasture rises, existing institutions struggle to manage resource allocation, exacerbating tensions (Magda, 2023).

Farmer-herder conflict in Africa manifests in multiple forms, including seasonal disputes, retaliatory violence, land encroachment, and inter-communal clashes. These forms are shaped by environmental, socio-political, and governance dynamics. One of the most common forms is resource-based confrontation, where herders' livestock damage crops or trespass on cultivated land, leading to disputes over compensation and access rights (Amoako, 2025; Kendrick & Sanders, 2024; Mbiet al., 2018).

Another form involves seasonal disputes that arise during dry periods, when herders migrate in search of pasture and water, often encroaching on farmlands and triggering tensions over land use, particularly in areas with weak land governance. The occurrence and casualties to armed conflict in Benue State were seasonal (Abuguet al; 2022). These encounters can escalate into retaliatory attacks, frequently provoked by crop destruction, livestock theft, or perceived disrespect, and often spiral into cycles of revenge between communities, as observed in countries like Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso (Brottem, 2021). Another prevalent form involves land encroachment and tenure-related disputes, where unclear or contested land rights fuel perceptions of invasion and deepen hostilities (Brottem, 2021). Another form is institutionalised marginalisation, where policy frameworks and land governance systems systematically exclude pastoralists. This includes denial of land tenure rights, forced sedentarisation, and unequal access to justice, leading to protests and resistance (Nwankwo, 2025).

Farmer-herder conflicts in Africa are caused by a mix of environmental, social, and economic pressures. These tensions often grow worse due to poor governance, political divisions, and the spread of armed groups. One major driver is the growing scarcity of land and water, which forces pastoralists to move into farming areas in search of grazing space. This leads to disputes over crop damage and land access. At the same time, farmers are expanding into areas traditionally used by herders, increasing competition. A review by SPARC (Nassef, Magda, Flintan and Fiona, 2023) shows that land grabbing, weak protection of customary land rights, and government support for large-scale farming often push both small farmers and herders to the margins. These problems are made worse by environmental damage and unpredictable rainfall, which reduce the amount of usable land (Suliman, 2024).

The escalation of farmer-herder conflicts frequently follows identity-based divisions, where ethnic, religious, and cultural differences are politicised. In regions such as Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, particularly in West and Central Africa, declining inter-communal trust and the weakening of traditional dispute resolution systems have allowed tensions to deepen over time (Brottem, 2021). Militant groups often take advantage of these fractures by framing local disputes over land and resources as part of broader insurgent movements. This framing transforms what might have remained localised conflicts into wider inter-communal violence, marked by cycles of retaliation that extend far beyond the original incidents. Entire communities are sometimes branded as insurgents or bandits, a dynamic that fuels further reprisals and significantly undermines efforts toward peacebuilding and reconciliation (Brottem, 2021).



Method

This paper adopted a desk review methodology, drawing on secondary data to examine the dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa. The review synthesised insights from a range of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, institutional reports, NGO assessments, and documents produced by international agencies. These materials provided a broad evidentiary base for understanding the forms, triggers, and implications of the conflict within the region.

Nature of Farmer-Herder inter-Conflict in Southern Adamawa

Nature of Farmer-Herder Conflict

Farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa manifests in diverse forms, ranging from non-violent negotiations to violent clashes. While some disputes are settled amicably, others escalate into destructive confrontations involving loss of life and property. These conflicts are broadly categorized into inter-conflict (between groups) and intra-conflict (within individuals), as defined by Doyle (2022). The inter-group clashes often stem from competing claims over land, water, and grazing routes, exacerbated by environmental stress and population pressure. Mercy Corps (2023), highlights that misinformation and ethno-religious framing further distort the nature of these disputes. The dynamic and pervasive nature of these conflicts, especially in Southern Adamawa, underscores the need to recognize their multiple forms—seasonal migration disputes, retaliatory attacks, and resource-based tensions.

Important to note also is that, the humanitarian challenges in Adamawa were further exasperated by communal clashes, including deadly clashes between herders and farmers. The state now has about 194,000 internally displaced persons, 23% of whom are believed to be displaced due to these communal clashes (NGO Jobs in Africa, 2019). Though farmers and herders have historically maintained a peaceful, symbiotic relationship—where cattle fertilize farmland in exchange for grazing rights—this balance has deteriorated. The violent conflict has reached a magnitude that severed mutual trust and cooperation, with farmers increasingly viewing herders as existential threats to their land and livelihood (Mustapha, 2019).

Triggers and Escalation Pathways of farmer-herder Conflict in Southern Adamawa

Triggers of farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa include resource scarcity, crop damage, livestock theft, and water pollution. These issues often arise due to the absence of mutually agreed frameworks for resource sharing. As resolution mechanisms falter and trust in authorities erodes, minor disputes can rapidly escalate into violent confrontations. Assessment Capacity Projects (ACAPs, 2017), documented a surge in violence during 2016 and 2017, resulting in over 1,300 deaths and the displacement of 300,000 individuals. The escalation pathways typically follow a trajectory from localized grievances to widespread humanitarian crises, driven by breakdowns in communication, lack of institutional support, and retaliatory cycles.

The humanitarian and economic toll increases in frequency, intensity, and geographical scope, leading to increased migration to already populated safety zones, destruction of property, crops, livestock, and human lives. This heightens pressure on farmlands and intensifies disputes over crop damage, water pollution, and cattle rustling (Crisis Group, 2017). Mahdi (2018), observed that Adamawa State, once peaceful, experienced recurring violent conflict between 2015 and 2018, particularly in LGAs like Numan, Demsa, Lamurde, and Song. These reprisal attacks have severely undermined sustainable farming, food security, and economic growth.



It is pertinent to note also that the case of farmer-herder conflict has drawn much attention and it has now become a threatening issue that affects the country's integration. The hitherto peaceful relation between the two groups is degenerating and has resulted in the death of hundreds of people, the destruction of thousands of homes, and extensive harm to people's livelihoods (Mustapha, 2019). Several people have been killed in DemsaLGA and other surrounding LGAs due to incessant violent clashes between farmers and herders (Abdullahi, 2024). The conflict has reached a magnitude that severed mutual trust and cooperation, with farmers viewing herders as sworn enemies and herders fiercely protecting their livestock. Hostility has consumed herds and farms, resulting in dwindling production by both groups. The inferno plunges farm families and herders into abject lack and makes farming unattractive due to the absence of safety for crops and livestock.

Implications for Early Warning, Mediation, and Policy Response

Understanding the typologies of farmer-herder conflict is critical for designing effective early warning systems and policy interventions. The dynamic nature of these clashes calls for context-sensitive mediation strategies, such as seasonal migration protocols and community-based dispute resolution. Trust-building initiatives between farmers, herders, and local authorities are essential to prevent escalation. USAID (2019), emphasizes that what began as isolated incidents has evolved into large-scale violence, causing billions in economic losses annually. Policy responses must include resource governance reforms, trauma-informed peacebuilding, and inclusive dialogue platforms to address the root causes and mitigate future risks.

The escalation of farmer-herder conflict has drawn national attention, threatening Nigeria's integration and stability. The destruction of thousands of homes and extensive harm to livelihoods has created a humanitarian crisis, particularly in Demsa LGA and surrounding areas (Amnesty International, 2019). Albert (2010), notes that insecurity has displaced many farmers, rendering them homeless and reducing agricultural productivity. The persistent reprisal attacks have led to widespread displacement, with farm families and herders plunged into abject poverty and farming becoming increasingly unattractive due to the lack of safety for crops and livestock.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The farmer-herder conflict in Southern Adamawa is a multidimensional crisis rooted in environmental stress, structural inequality, and psychological pains. This paper has mapped the terrain of conflict forms, triggers, and escalation pathways, revealing a complex interconnection of seasonal migration disputes, retaliatory violence, and resource-based tensions which have eroded social trust. Thus, the application of the Frustration, Aggression and Displacement theory provided explanations to uncover the emotional, structural, and cognitive drivers of violence. These frameworks highlight the need for trauma-informed peacebuilding, inclusive governance, and culturally sensitive mediation.

Based on the outcome of the study, the following recommendations are made;

A, sustainable solutions should tilt towards prioritising not only material conditions of conflict but also the unmet psychological and social needs of affected communities. Peace in the affected area would empathy, in which Face to face meeting or dialogue and family elders or community leader's involvement, equity, and shared stewardship of life and land uses, where a clear boundary and agreement can be established for farming and grazing and both parties must be present while establishing the boundaries and agreements and strict adherence must be enforced by authorities concerned. Furthermore, a sustainable resource management practice must be established by authorities concerned and strict adherence must be enforced too.



More so, it will be appropriate if empowerment programs is developed involving farmers and herders and local leaders in order to provide them with skills, and economic opportunities, to reduce tension and promote peaceful coexistence.

Finally, both farmers and herders must engage in collaborative planning in order to identify further potentially conflict areas and develop mutually beneficial solutions. Government or NGOs must support and promote sustainable livestock management practice which includes provision of concentrates and alternative grazing areas to reduce pressure on farmlands. Farmers must also be supported to implement effective crop protection measures such as fencing or other deterrents of animals

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