

# DYNAMICS OF FARMER–HERDER CONFLICTS IN BENUE STATE: A SOCIO-POLITICAL AND SECURITY ANALYSIS.

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## Abstract

Farmer–herder conflict has emerged as one of the most persistent and destabilizing forms of communal violence in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, with Benue State occupying a central position due to its agrarian economy and strategic food-production role. This paper examines the intrastate and intercommunal dimensions of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, focusing on its drivers, dynamics, and consequences. Drawing on recent empirical studies, policy analyses, and human-rights reports, the study interrogates how climate variability, land-use pressures, governance failures, and identity politics interact to escalate localised disputes into large-scale violence. Anchored in political ecology and human security perspectives, the paper argues that state responses, particularly anti-open-grazing legislation, have produced ambivalent outcomes, reduced visible pastoral movement, and intensified underground mobility and violent reprisals. The paper concludes that sustainable conflict mitigation in Benue State requires integrated land governance, inclusive policy implementation, and conflict-sensitive livelihood interventions that address both structural and immediate human security needs.

**Keywords:** Farmer–herder conflict, Benue State, land governance, climate change, political ecology, human security

## Introduction

Farmer–herder conflict has emerged as one of the most persistent and complex security and development challenges confronting Nigeria’s Middle Belt, with Benue State occupying a particularly strategic and symbolic position in this crisis. Benue is widely described as Nigeria’s “food basket” due to its heavy dependence on subsistence and commercial agriculture, especially the cultivation of yam, rice, maize, and cassava. Consequently, any disruption to farming activities in the state carries implications not only for local livelihoods but also for regional food security and national economic stability. Historically, informal but largely effective arrangements governed relations between sedentary farming communities and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. These included seasonal grazing routes, negotiated access to water points, and customary mediation by traditional rulers and community elders, which helped to manage competition over land and resources with minimal violence.

Over the past decade, however, these historically adaptive relationships have increasingly broken down. What were once manageable disputes over crop damage, grazing trespass, or livestock theft have escalated into recurrent episodes of extreme violence characterised by mass killings, the destruction of entire villages, and the widespread displacement of rural populations (Tiwo, 2023). In Benue State, this escalation has been particularly severe, with several attacks resulting in dozens or even hundreds of fatalities, prompting humanitarian crises and drawing sustained national and international concern. Reports by Amnesty International and international media outlets such as Reuters document patterns of coordinated assaults on farming communities, the burning of homes and food stores, and the displacement of thousands of residents into informal camps with limited access to basic services (Amnesty International, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

The intensification and persistence of violence suggest that farmer–herder conflict in Benue State can no longer be understood as a series of isolated or spontaneous clashes driven solely by interpersonal disputes. Rather, the conflict reflects deeper structural and governance failures that shape how land, identity, and security are negotiated in contemporary Nigeria. Environmental stressors, particularly climate variability and desertification in northern Nigeria, have increased southward pastoral migration, placing additional pressure on already scarce land resources in agrarian states such as Benue (Tiwo, 2023). Yet, environmental change alone does not sufficiently explain the scale and brutality of the violence. Scholars increasingly argue that weak land tenure systems, the erosion of customary conflict resolution institutions, the politicisation of ethnic identities, and inconsistent state responses have transformed resource competition into violent intercommunal confrontations (Efobi, 2025; Nwankwo, 2024).

Critically, state interventions intended to manage the conflict, most notably the enactment and enforcement of anti-open-grazing legislation, have produced ambivalent outcomes. While such policies aim to protect farming livelihoods and reduce farmer–herder encounters, their implementation has often occurred without adequate consultation, compensation, or viable alternatives for pastoralists. This has, in some cases, deepened perceptions of exclusion and injustice, inadvertently contributing to cycles of retaliation and clandestine grazing practices that further heighten insecurity (Nwankwo, 2024; Amnesty International, 2025). The Benue case thus illustrates a broader governance dilemma, in which policy responses that prioritise territorial control and security enforcement over inclusive land-use planning and livelihood protection risk exacerbating the very conflicts they seek to resolve.

Against this backdrop, the persistence of violence despite formal policy interventions reveals a critical problem: existing land-use governance and security responses have not effectively addressed the complex socio-environmental and institutional dynamics underpinning farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. Evidence from 2024 and 2025 indicates continued and, in some cases, escalating attacks, widespread displacement, and severe disruptions to agricultural production (Amnesty International, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This gap between policy intent and lived outcomes underscores the limitations of approaches that emphasise regulation without adequate institutional capacity, inclusivity, and livelihood alternatives (Nwankwo, 2024). More fundamentally, while environmental

pressures contribute to resource competition, violence is more likely to emerge where such pressures intersect with fragile institutions, politicised identities, and declining trust in both customary and formal conflict-resolution mechanisms (Efobi, 2025).

In response to this problem, the present study aims to critically examine the causes, dynamics, and consequences of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. Specifically, it seeks to identify the structural and environmental factors sustaining the conflict, examine the proximate triggers of violent encounters, assess the influence of state interventions, particularly the anti-open-grazing policy, on conflict dynamics, and explore policy and community-based strategies capable of reducing violence while safeguarding livelihoods and human security. Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following key questions: What structural and environmental factors contribute to the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State? What immediate or proximate factors trigger violent encounters? How have state interventions influenced the dynamics and escalation of the conflict? And what strategies can effectively reduce violence while protecting affected populations?

By addressing these questions, the study makes significant contributions at multiple levels. Practically, it provides insights for humanitarian and development actors seeking to design conflict-sensitive interventions that move beyond short-term relief toward sustainable recovery and peacebuilding. At the policy level, it offers an evidence-based basis for rethinking land-use governance and conflict-management strategies, emphasising inclusive policy design, equitable implementation, and viable livelihood alternatives. Theoretically, the study advances understanding within political ecology and human security frameworks by demonstrating that environmental stress alone does not produce violence; rather, conflict emerges through its interaction with governance failures, institutional fragility, and identity-based tensions. In doing so, the study bridges the gap between theory, policy, and practice, offering a comprehensive lens for understanding and addressing farmer–herder conflict in Benue State.

### **Theoretical Framework, Conceptual Clarifications, and Literature Review**

Farmer–herder conflict in Benue State is best understood through an integrated analytical lens that brings together theoretical insights, conceptual clarification, and empirical evidence. This study draws on political ecology and human security frameworks to explain how environmental pressures, institutional arrangements, and socio-political dynamics interact to shape conflict outcomes, while also situating key concepts such as intrastate and intercommunal conflict within the broader literature.

From a political ecology perspective, farmer–herder conflict is not merely a consequence of environmental scarcity but a product of the interaction between ecological change, political power, and socio-economic structures. Political ecology emphasises that land and natural resources are socially constructed and politically regulated, shaped by historical inequalities, governance systems, and competing claims of legitimacy (Robbins, 2020). In the context of Benue State, this framework explains how climate variability, desertification, and declining pasture in northern Nigeria have intensified pastoral migration southward, thereby increasing pressure on agrarian land (Tiwo, 2023; Agu et al., 2020; Abado, 2022; Ahmadu, 2018). However, the framework also clarifies that

environmental stress alone does not produce violence; rather, it is mediated through weak institutions, ambiguous land tenure systems, and selective policy enforcement (Efobi, 2025; Nwankwo, 2024).

Empirical literature supports this interpretation. While Benue State's favourable rainfall and vegetation make it attractive for grazing, increasing farmer–herder interactions (Alexander, 2022), spatial analyses demonstrate that areas experiencing high climatic stress do not always correspond with high levels of violence (Madu & Nwankwo, 2020). Qualitative studies further show that both farmers and pastoralists reject simplistic climate determinism, emphasising governance failures and social relations as key drivers of conflict (Nwankwo, 2024; Ogbogu & Eze, 2025). Thus, climate change functions primarily as a risk multiplier, intensifying existing tensions rather than independently causing violence (Chukwuma, 2020; Nwankwo, 2024).

Closely linked to this are institutional and legal dynamics, which political ecology identifies as central mediating factors. The coexistence of multiple land tenure regimes, customary systems, constitutional provisions on freedom of movement, ECOWAS transhumance protocols, and state-level anti-open grazing laws, creates legal ambiguity and competing claims over land use (Vanger & Nwosu, 2020; Okoye et al., 2024). Empirical studies in Benue State associate persistent conflict with restricted land access, weak governance, and declining trust in security institutions (Abado, 2022; Okoye et al., 2024). Perceptions of procedural and restorative injustice, particularly regarding compensation for crop damage or livestock loss, further exacerbate grievances. Among pastoralists, anti-open grazing policies are often perceived as exclusionary, reinforcing marginalisation and increasing the likelihood of retaliatory violence (Nwankwo, 2024; Nwankwo, 2025).

The literature also highlights the interconnected environmental, socioeconomic, and identity-based drivers of conflict. Environmental pressures such as erratic rainfall and water scarcity intersect with economic challenges, including land scarcity, livelihood loss, and rural poverty. These dynamics are compounded by institutional weaknesses and contested enforcement mechanisms. Importantly, identity narratives, framed around indigeneity, ethnicity, and religion, play a critical role in transforming resource disputes into intercommunal violence. Discourses such as “Fulani savagery” or fears of “fulanization” reinforce group boundaries and heighten mistrust, thereby escalating conflict (Eke, 2020; Chukwuma, 2020; Nwankwo, 2024).

Within this context, the conflict can be conceptually understood as both intrastate and intercommunal. As an intrastate conflict, it occurs within the territorial boundaries of Nigeria and reflects broader governance and state-capacity challenges. As an intercommunal conflict, it involves collective actors, primarily farming and pastoralist communities, whose interactions are shaped by shared identities, historical relations, and competition over resources. Importantly, the conflict evolves from routine disputes (crop damage or grazing trespass) into organised violence when institutional mediation fails and identity narratives become securitised (Efobi, 2025; Nwankwo, 2024).

Complementing political ecology, the human security framework shifts the focus from structural explanations to lived experiences. Human security emphasises freedom from

fear and want, highlighting how conflict affects livelihoods, food security, personal safety, and dignity. In Benue State, repeated attacks have disrupted agricultural production, displaced populations, and deepened food insecurity, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and children (Amnesty International, 2025; Reuters, 2025). This perspective underscores that farmer–herder conflict is not only a governance or environmental issue but also a profound human crisis affecting everyday survival and well-being. It also reveals the limitations of state responses that prioritise coercive security measures without adequately addressing livelihood protection and social cohesion.

Policy responses to the conflict further illustrate the interaction between theory and practice. The anti-open grazing policy in Benue State represents a prohibition-oriented approach aimed at reducing farmer–herder encounters. However, its implementation without adequate infrastructure for ranching, negotiated grazing corridors, or inclusive consultation has exposed significant gaps (Michael et al., 2023; Nwankwo, 2024; Okoye et al., 2024). Evidence from Nigeria and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa suggests that more sustainable outcomes are associated with integrated approaches that combine climate adaptation, inclusive land-use reforms, and community-based mediation (Adams et al., 2023; Ogayi & Agada, 2025; Ogbogu & Eze, 2025).

Despite their explanatory value, both political ecology and human security frameworks have limitations. Political ecology has been criticised for its strong emphasis on structural and macro-level dynamics, which may underplay the role of agency, local variation, and immediate triggers of violence. It may also insufficiently capture the rapid escalation of conflict driven by emotions, rumours, or opportunistic actors. On the other hand, human security, while valuable for highlighting lived experiences, can be conceptually broad and difficult to operationalise, often lacking precision in identifying causal mechanisms or prioritising policy interventions. Additionally, its focus on individual and community well-being may overlook the structural power relations and political interests that sustain conflict.

Taken together, the integration of political ecology and human security provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. Political ecology explains how environmental change interacts with governance failures, institutional ambiguity, and power inequalities to produce conflict, while human security highlights the lived consequences of these dynamics for affected populations. The literature consistently demonstrates that farmer–herder conflict is not driven by a single factor but emerges from the convergence of environmental stress, institutional fragility, socio-economic pressures, and identity-based tensions. Consequently, effective responses require integrated strategies that address land governance, livelihood security, social cohesion, and inclusive policy implementation, rather than relying solely on environmental or security-based interventions.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a cross-sectional explanatory research design to examine the nature, causes, and patterns of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State within a clearly defined time frame. The cross-sectional approach is appropriate because the study seeks to capture the prevailing dynamics of conflict at a specific historical moment, particularly in a context characterised by rapidly evolving patterns of violence, displacement, and policy responses. In conflict and security research, cross-sectional designs are valuable for providing a systematic “snapshot” of interactions among key variables, such as environmental pressures, institutional arrangements, and security outcomes, without requiring long-term tracking, which is often impractical in volatile settings (Snyder, 2019). In the case of Benue State, this approach enables the study to analyse how contemporary climatic conditions, governance structures, and policy interventions converge to shape current conflict realities rather than relying solely on historical narratives.

The explanatory component of the design strengthens the analytical depth of the study by moving beyond description to identify relationships among socio-political, environmental, and security factors. Specifically, it allows for the examination of how structural drivers (e.g., land tenure systems and institutional weaknesses), environmental stressors (e.g., climate variability and migration patterns), and policy interventions (for example, anti-open-grazing legislation) interact to influence conflict persistence and escalation. By focusing on these relationships, the study is able to account for the observed gap between policy intentions and outcomes, particularly the persistence of violence despite formal regulatory frameworks. Existing scholarship suggests that this persistence is linked to governance failures, uneven implementation, and the marginalisation of key livelihood groups rather than the mere absence of policy instruments (Nwankwo, 2024; Efobi, 2025). Thus, the explanatory design is well suited for uncovering the causal pathways through which these interrelated factors sustain farmer–herder conflict in Benue State.

### **Data Sources, Sampling, and Analysis**

The study relies on secondary data drawn from three principal sources: peer-reviewed academic literature, reports from reputable human rights organisations, and international media coverage. Academic journal articles were purposively selected based on their relevance to key themes such as climate change, land governance, institutional dynamics, and conflict theory. These sources provide theoretically grounded and empirically validated insights into the structural and environmental drivers of farmer–herder conflict.

In addition, reports produced by organisations such as Amnesty International were included to capture detailed accounts of human rights conditions, patterns of displacement, and the humanitarian consequences of violence. International news agencies, including Reuters, were also utilised to provide timely and corroborated documentation of major conflict events and state responses (Amnesty International, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The selection of these materials followed a purposive sampling strategy, guided by criteria of credibility, relevance, recency, and consistency with the study’s analytical focus.

To enhance transparency and replicability, the study employed a systematic document review and qualitative content analysis. Data were organised thematically according to

key analytical categories derived from the research objectives, including structural drivers, environmental factors, policy interventions, and conflict outcomes. Through this process, patterns, relationships, and recurring narratives were identified and synthesised across sources.

The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation, thereby strengthening the reliability and validity of the findings. Academic literature contributed conceptual and analytical depth; human rights reports provided grounded evidence of lived experiences and institutional gaps; and media sources offered contextual immediacy regarding the scale and evolution of violence. This integrated analytical strategy ensures a comprehensive and balanced understanding of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State while enhancing the credibility and reproducibility of the research.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, with particular attention to recurring patterns related to environmental stress, governance failures, policy enforcement, and processes of conflict escalation. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically organise and interpret qualitative evidence across diverse sources, allowing for the identification of shared meanings and dominant explanatory narratives while maintaining contextual depth (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach is well suited to conflict research, as it enables the synthesis of complex and multi-layered data drawn from academic, policy, and humanitarian materials.

A comparative analytical strategy was applied across sources to identify areas of convergence and divergence in explanations of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. By comparing findings from peer-reviewed studies, human rights reports, and media accounts, the study was able to corroborate key drivers of violence while also highlighting gaps and inconsistencies in existing interpretations (Snyder, 2019). This process supported a critical assessment of dominant narratives, such as climate-driven conflict or policy failure in isolation, and facilitated a more integrated understanding of how environmental pressures, institutional weaknesses, and governance practices interact to sustain cycles of violence (Efobi, 2025).

### **Limitations of the Theory**

While political ecology and human security frameworks offer valuable analytical insights into farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, each has notable limitations when applied in isolation. Political ecology’s strength lies in its focus on structural inequalities, power relations, and institutional mediation of environmental stress. However, this focus can downplay the actions and efforts of individuals and communities, especially the everyday peace efforts, informal talks, and coping methods that farmers and herders use to handle tensions without relying on official government systems. Recent studies caution that over-structural explanations risk portraying conflict as an almost inevitable outcome of ecological change and political exclusion, thereby overlooking local resilience and the possibility of non-violent coexistence even under conditions of scarcity (Robbins, 2020; Nwankwo, 2024).

Similarly, the human security framework, while crucial for centring the lived experiences of affected populations, carries its limitations. Its focus on immediate threats to livelihoods, food security, and personal safety can unintentionally privilege short-term humanitarian responses over deeper structural reforms. In conflict settings such as Benue State, such an approach may translate into policy approaches that prioritise relief, displacement management, and civilian protection without sufficiently addressing underlying issues such as land tenure reform, institutional accountability, and political inclusion. Scholars have noted that without such structural attention, human security-orientated interventions risk managing the symptoms of conflict rather than transforming its root causes (Efobi, 2025; UNDP, 2022).

In recognition of these limitations, this study adopts political ecology and human security as complementary analytical lenses rather than deterministic explanations. Their combined use allows for a more balanced interpretation of farmer-herder conflict—one that accounts for the structural and institutional drivers emphasised by political ecology while also foregrounding the human consequences and livelihood insecurities outlined by the human security perspective. This integrative approach provides greater analytical flexibility and supports a more sophisticated appreciation for conflict dynamics and pathways to sustainable peace in Benue State.

### **Analysis and discussion of Findings**

The findings from this study demonstrate that farmer-herder conflict in Benue State is sustained by the interaction of climate-induced pastoral mobility, contested land governance arrangements, and weak institutional enforcement, rather than by isolated environmental or ethnic factors. Climate variability, particularly prolonged droughts and desertification in northern Nigeria, has reduced pasture availability and water access, compelling pastoralists to migrate southward in greater numbers and for longer periods. This movement has intensified encounters with sedentary farming communities, where land is both economically vital and culturally significant (Tiwo, 2023; Efobi, 2025). However, consistent with political ecology insights, climate stress functions primarily as a risk multiplier rather than a direct cause of violence. Similar ecological pressures in other contexts have not produced comparable levels of conflict, underscoring the mediating role of governance structures and institutional arrangements.

A central finding is the fragility of land governance systems, which reflects a core concern of political ecology regarding how power and institutional arrangements shape access to resources. The coexistence of customary and statutory land tenure systems creates overlapping claims and ambiguity over ownership and authority. This weakens both traditional and formal mechanisms for dispute resolution, reducing trust and increasing the likelihood that grievances are expressed through violence (Nwankwo, 2024; Okoli & Atelhe, 2023). From a policy perspective, this highlights the limitations of fragmented land governance frameworks and the need for coherent, transparent, and inclusive land-tenure systems that can effectively mediate competing claims.

The analysis further shows that anti-open-grazing policies, while intended to reduce conflict, have produced mixed and sometimes counterproductive outcomes. By restricting pastoral mobility without providing viable alternatives such as ranching infrastructure or

negotiated grazing systems, these policies have inadvertently reinforced exclusion and marginalisation. As political ecology suggests, when policies reshape access to land in uneven or exclusionary ways, they can intensify rather than resolve conflict (Efobi, 2025; Okoli & Atelhe, 2023). Empirical evidence indicates that such restrictions often lead to clandestine grazing practices and heightened tensions, particularly when implementation lacks consultation and compensatory measures (Nwankwo, 2024; Bello, 2023). This finding carries clear policy implications: regulatory approaches must be complemented by inclusive planning and livelihood support to avoid unintended escalation.

Another key finding is the role of militarisation and the proliferation of small arms in escalating disputes into large-scale violence. The emergence of vigilante groups and armed self-defence mechanisms reflects both weak state capacity and declining trust in formal security institutions. Human rights documentation shows that coordinated attacks have resulted in mass casualties, destruction of property, and widespread displacement (Amnesty International, 2025). From a human security perspective, this trend highlights the erosion of safety and dignity at the community level, while also indicating that coercive security responses alone are insufficient to restore stability. Effective policy responses must therefore combine security provision with trust-building, disarmament efforts, and community-based conflict prevention mechanisms.

The humanitarian consequences of these dynamics further reinforce the relevance of human security theory. Recurrent violence has disrupted agricultural production, reduced household food stocks, and forced large populations into displacement, undermining livelihoods and long-term development prospects. Reports indicate that insecurity has affected planting cycles and exacerbated food insecurity beyond immediate conflict zones (Reuters, 2025). These outcomes demonstrate that farmer–herder conflict is not solely a security issue but a broader human and development crisis, requiring policy interventions that prioritise livelihood protection, food systems, and social welfare alongside security measures.

These findings confirm that the persistence of farmer–herder conflict reflects systemic governance failures rather than the absence of policy frameworks. Theoretically, this supports the political ecology argument that environmental pressures become violent through institutional mediation, and the human security argument that unresolved structural issues translate into everyday insecurity. Practically, it implies that sustainable peace requires integrated strategies that address land governance, institutional capacity, and human well-being simultaneously (Efobi, 2025; Okoli & Atelhe, 2023).

## Conclusion

The study demonstrates that farmer–herder conflict in Benue State is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by environmental change, governance failures, and contested land-use systems. While climate variability has intensified pastoral mobility and resource competition, it does not independently explain the scale or persistence of violence. Instead, the interaction between ecological pressures and weak, exclusionary, or inconsistent governance structures creates conditions under which conflict escalates and persists.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce the complementary value of political ecology and human security frameworks. Political ecology explains how power relations, institutional weaknesses, and policy choices mediate environmental stress into conflict, while human security highlights how these dynamics translate into displacement, livelihood loss, and insecurity for affected populations. This combined perspective underscores that effective conflict management must address both structural drivers and lived consequences.

At the policy level, the study highlights the limitations of enforcement-driven approaches such as anti-open-grazing legislation when implemented without inclusive consultation, adequate infrastructure, or livelihood alternatives. The persistence of violence despite such policies demonstrates that regulatory measures alone are insufficient and may, in some cases, exacerbate tensions.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in Benue State requires a shift from reactive and fragmented interventions toward integrated, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive strategies. Addressing the structural roots of conflict, particularly land governance, institutional capacity, and social trust, while simultaneously protecting livelihoods and human security is essential for breaking cycles of violence and fostering long-term stability.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. **Integrated Land-Use Governance Reform:** Policies should prioritise participatory land-use planning that incorporates both farming and pastoral livelihoods. Consistent with political ecology insights, such reforms must address power imbalances and clarify land-tenure systems to reduce ambiguity and conflict.
2. **Investment in Sustainable Pastoral and Agricultural Systems:** Government and development partners should invest in ranching infrastructure, grazing reserves, water systems, and agricultural support services. From a human security perspective, these investments are critical for protecting livelihoods and reducing vulnerability to conflict.
3. **Conflict-Sensitive Policy Implementation:** Existing land-use and anti-open-grazing laws should be implemented in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and proportionate. Avoiding the blanket criminalisation of pastoral groups and incorporating dialogue-based approaches can reduce perceptions of injustice and prevent escalation.
4. **Strengthening Community-Based Conflict Resolution and Early Warning Systems:** Traditional mediation structures and local peacebuilding mechanisms should be reinforced and integrated with formal institutions. This aligns with both theoretical frameworks by addressing institutional weaknesses (political ecology) and enhancing community safety and resilience (human security).
5. **Security Sector Reform and Arms Control:** Efforts should be made to reduce the proliferation of small arms and rebuild trust in formal security institutions. Combining security provision with community engagement can help restore the state's legitimacy and reduce reliance on armed self-help mechanisms.

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