

# Herders–Farmers Conflict and the Nigerian Economy 2015–2020

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**Keywords:** conflict, herders-farmers conflict, Nigerian economy

## Abstract

This paper examines strategies implemented by the President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in order to resolve frequent clashes between herders and farmers, bearing in mind the economic implications of this violent conflict for the economy of Nigeria. The paper adopted the Human Needs Theory as its framework of analysis. The data were sourced from academic journals, internet materials, newspapers, and textbooks. The herders–farmers conflict pre-dated the Muhammadu Buhari presidency but in terms of scale and intensity of killings and wanton destruction of properties, it gained momentum during his administration. The non-verbal language of the Presidency's description of the conflict situation at the time Nigerians needed a strong comment became worrisome to the affected victims who concluded the pro-herder's sympathy stance of the President. Not until the Presidency began to take bold actions by introducing the grazing bill allowing a cattle colony of about 5,000 hectares in the states of the Federation, deployment of military personnel to the concerned states and holding stakeholders meeting across the states, Nigerians decided to unanimously join their forces with the government to tackle the herders–farmers impasse headlong. The conflict situation is no better even in the face of strategic policies implemented, however, the nation-state is trying to minimize the negative effects of the imbroglio on the agricultural sector of the country which is a huge resource to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

## Introduction

Conflict is an integral part of human existence and to all intents and purposes it constitutes a development process in any given society. Kegkku (2004, p. 149, cited in Nwosu, Wilson, 2004) observed that not all conflicts are harmful. Some conflicts are almost inevitable and could serve as a platform for possible resolution of a dispute that resisted all peaceful solutions. Whether this opinion is well founded or not depends on the perspective. McGregor (2014), strengthening the above view, narrowed the manifestation down to Nigeria by stating that conflict, especially that between the herdsmen and farmers, has been a recurring decimal in the Nigerian political system

and the region worst affected by it have been the north central states or what can be referred to as the Middle Belt which comprises Benue, Nassarawa, Plateau, Taraba, among others.

A report credited to SMB Intelligence and cited in Amzat et al. (2016) reveals that over 2,000 people have lost their lives to the farmers–herders’ conflict across Nigeria in 2015 alone, and the numbers have been on the increase ever since then. This reality only goes to affirm the fact that the herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria has become a case too many. Concerned parties have also tried to find out the cause of this dastardly act in the Nigerian polity and some of the reasons given were ascribed to the control over land for grazing by the herders which runs contrary to the farmers who use it for farming. Herders have had to migrate southwards in search of greener pasture and water for their livestock and in the course of their movement they settle in communities blessed with their needed resources to keep their cattle alive. However, the host communities see a clear audacity of abuse and encroachment of their farmlands by the herders who also feel entitled to grazing routes alleged to have been instituted in the 1960s by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). It is this boldness, that dares farmers to confront the herders and demand they vacate their farmlands for good, which always resulted into a conflict situation between the farmers and the herders.

Suffice it to mention that herders migrate southwards in search of greener pastures mostly during the dry season because a significant number of the northern region pastures would have completely run out of water and pastures. The fact, therefore, remains that just like cattle rearing is the mainstay of the herders, farming is the source of livelihood of their host communities whose farmlands they encroach during these periods. So, what can practically be done to resolve the impasse becomes a cause of concern to all interested parties, starting from the Chief Executive officers of the states that experience the conflict the most, to the affected farmers and herders involved in the conflict.

The purpose of this paper is to examine strategies and mechanisms implemented by the President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration in order to resolve frequent clashes between the farmers and the herders, bearing in mind the economic implications of this violent conflict for the economy of Nigeria. To achieve this purpose, the paper has been divided into three sections. The first section introduces the research framework and discusses the research methodology. The second one examines the conceptual issues and theoretical discourse of the subject matter. The third, final section describes the government strategies applied to resolve the farmers-herders conflict, outlines the implication of this conflict for the Nigerian economy and offers conclusions.

## Theoretical framework and methodology

This paper utilized secondary data and materials sourced from archival documents, textbooks, academic journals, official publications, and internet materials. The Human Needs Theory has been adopted as the framework of analysis. The Human Needs Theory was developed in the 1980s as a means to examine human behaviour and its power to evoke conflicts in society. According to Burton (1979), the act of conflict between individuals or groups stems from their quest to meet

a need they are struggling with in the society. The conflict can arise at any phase of society's life such as *security, identity, recognition, and development*, among others. In the face of these needs comes the urge to be in control of one's environment irrespective of the contending parties.

The significance of this theory consists in that it recognizes and legitimizes both the herds-men's and farmers' needs in Nigeria. The needs of both these groups must be met, not the needs of one of them at the expense of the other. This helps to move the conflict from zero-sum to win-win. The abstraction of the "human needs" helps to eliminate the sense of mutually exclusive goals. Rather than fighting over the constitutional future of the grazing routes, with the mutually exclusive goals of maintenance of peace, the situation shifts to one in which both communities seek to fulfil their needs such as security, identity, recognition, and development. These needs are not satisfied at the expense of the other community, but are realized along with the other community's needs. These needs are not mutually exclusive or gained at the expense of another – they are universal.

## Conceptual issues

### Conflict

Conflict is an integral ingredient of the human society and is inevitable in any form of social relation in the state. The management of conflict, then, becomes the onus of government in the state where the security of lives and properties are paramount, irrespective of the situation. To put the concept of conflict into a better perspective, let's review a number of opinions on the concept by various scholars.

Hellriegel and Slocum (1996) viewed conflict as an opposition that came about as a result of don a defined goals or objectives, emotion or thoughts among interested individuals, organization or departments. This clearly shows that conflict arises when the actions of an individual or a group of individuals are intended to affect the actualization of desired goals or objectives by another person or group (Lindelov, Scott, 1989; Donohue, Kolt, 1992). According to Wilmot and Hocker (2011) conflict is a struggle on purpose between two or more individuals over perceived or real differences in values, worth, goals or the control of scarce resources. It portends a situation of threat by a party towards or against another and the desire to be in charge. This reality is manifested in the incompatible relation between the farmers and herders in the north-central region of Nigeria and virtually every other region of the country. The disagreement cut across many grounds – the control over land, cultural and linguistic differences, among others. For example, in Benue state, one of the states most seriously affected by the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria, there are farmers, including Tiv, Idoma, Agatu and Igede, who speak a different language from the herders who are mostly Fulfulde speakers. So, there is little or no socio-cultural affinity between the two opposing parties. Olagbaju (2014) described this situation properly when he asserted that effective communication is also a tool of managing conflict, and there cannot be effective communication without language – verbal or nonverbal.

## Farmers–herders conflict

The farmers–herders conflict appears quite natural; however, the context of its manifestation suggests that it is a by-product of a failed interaction process and a clash of interests of the involved parties (Stern, 1998; Akorede, 2005). This position demonstrates that the expectations and interests of farmers and herders in Nigeria are no doubt at variance and are responsible for the increasing rate of conflict situation in the country. Shadrach (2016) puts the above in a proper perspective:

The fact that cows began to be slim meant there was no more water for them to drink and for the love of herd. The herdsman began to work down towards central Nigeria (Middle Belt). By the time they reached Plateau, Taraba, and other Middle Belt states, they began to see fresh green grass and water.

This position described by Shadrach (2016) naturally puts the herders and farmers in a conflict situation because the *fresh green grass* are the sweats of farmers who are patiently waiting to reap their harvest and have a good reward for their labour.

Lederach (1990, cited in Mamkaa, 2018) trying to draw parallel with the farmers–herders impasse, was of the opinion that among other causes of conflict there is a feeling of entitlement that characterizes herders whenever they overrun farmlands owned by farmers and the boldness they display in defense of their actions even if it involves killing the affected farmers as the case may be. Therefore, examining these perceptions becomes important. Coser (1965, cited in Mamkaa, 2018) aptly demonstrated the potency of perception by stating that claims to scarce resources, with the goal of the opponents (in this case the herders) being to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals (farmers), simply tell us how dangerous perception could be and how it serves as a force of conflict.

This reality is responsible for the countless incidences of herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria and the Nigerian state is suffering from it, not to mention the number of innocent lives and properties that have been lost as a result of this impasse (Catholics Farmers..., 2020).

## Theoretical discourse of herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria

Apart from the conflict between farmers and herders over the ownership of land and other scarce resources, the rate of killings and destruction of property as a result of their differences was not as frightening before as it is in today's Nigeria. Statistics concerning the herders–farmers conflict in the years 1997–2011 showed that the incidence was limited, only isolated cases were recorded in a few states such as Plateau, Nasarawa and Benue with exceptional clashes in other states. The transformation of the conflict into a serious violent situation in Nigeria that has almost turned every corner of the state into a hotbed is worrisome, given the staggering numbers of lives and properties that are lost daily as a result of the herders–farmers conflict (Higazi, 2016). This assertion was reiterated by Aluko (2017) who pointed out that the herders–farmers conflict occurred in a miniature form in the early 2000's in Nigeria, when it was confined to the north-central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and its scale of violence was small. The incidence began to rise steadily

from early 2014 on and up to the point that the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) rated the herder's militant group as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world (Global Terrorism Index, 2019).

Scholars and commentators have noted that the herders–farmers conflict took a different turn during the early phase of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. Amzat et al. (2016) in their argument stated that the rate of killings that characterized the herders–farmers conflict in 2015 alone appeared to have no end in sight and was a result of negligence of duty of the security officials and the government's inability to successfully prosecute possible suspects. Omoleye and Segun (2018), on the other hand, maintain that the herders–farmers conflict gained more momentum as a result of the absence of law enforcement agencies in the rural areas as opposed to the urban centres. This clear gap in the security of lives and property of an average Nigerian is a rally point for the continuation of mindless and senseless killings by the herdsmenterrorists.

Godwin (2018) in his reflection on the destruction of properties and wanton killings of innocent farmers in Benue state by herdsmen, posited that the Benue state government appeared incapable of handling the conflict in their state and all appeal to the Federal Government of Nigeria seems to fall on deaf ears as the Benue state government was rather mandated to upturn their Anti-Open grazing bill. Oladele (2018) further supported this claim by maintaining that the Benue state government, given the herders' stance on Anti-Open grazing, puts them at loggerheads with the Federal Government whose position on reinstating the grazing routes is clear. On this note, Abubakar and Dano (2018) were quick to point out that amidst all the setback between the Federal Government and the Benue state government, the farmers are at a lost position and the situation of their poor community is unfavorably reported by the news media.

In a rather sharp contrast to the above, Moge kwu (2011), Adisa and Adekunle (2010) and Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) observed that labeling the Fulani herdsmen a terrorist group is a way of building up ethnic sentiments which in the long run could degenerate to ethnic conflict overtaking all over the country. They cautioned that herdsmen-killers should be called who they are but their operations and activities do not represent the Fulani tribe as a whole. The media were particularly appealed to since they shape public opinion of a vast number of Nigerians and the earlier the herdsmen-killers are treated in the language they understand, the better for Nigeria as a country whose image has already been battered internationally by the herders–farmers conflict.

Taking into account all the above mentioned views, an important question arises what role the President Muhammadu Buhari's administration played in confronting the herdsmen – farmers conflict in Nigeria.

## **Buhari's administration and the herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria**

According to Nwosu (2017), the fact is that the herdsmen – farmers conflict predated the Buhari's administration, but the spike of mindless killings gained momentum during his administration and his actions and inactions in the face of the audacious conflict are meaningful. A case in point is that the Buhari's administration remained silent instead of sending a strong message against the herders–farmers conflict after the *Agatumassacre* in Benue state. Nwosu (2017) argued that

the body language of the President sent the wrong signal to Nigerians. When it was coming from the proscription of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as a terrorist organization by the same Federal Government immediately afterwards, the Buhari administration was perceived as sympathizers with the herdsmen-killers.

Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehen (2018), lending their voice to the Buhari's administration handling the herdsmen and farmers' conflict, stated that the presidency more or less sowed the seed of distrust amongst Nigerians and, to worsen the situation, took the back seat when Kaduna state needed the comfort of the Federal Government in a reported case of herders killing and sacking the farmers community in southern Kaduna. The Kaduna state governor, Malam Nasir el-Rufia, felt betrayed by the presidency and condemned the weak position always displayed by the presidency in the case of herders–farmers violent conflict in the state.

A shocking reality, though, has been the porous border of the Nigerian state and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. This reality has seen weapons like AK-47 and other assault rifles as common items with the herdsmen. The International Crisis Group (2018) was quick to observe that the porous nature of the Nigerian state enabled trafficking of weapons which came about as a result of the Libyan crisis. The herdsmen-killers, aside their nomadic duty, patronize arms dealers to keep up with their illegal attacks against farmers and their host communities. To be fair to the Buhari administration it should be mentioned that they have succeeded in introducing a bill before the National Assembly, known as the *Grazing Bill*, with the intention to set up grazing reserves across the states and to proactively monitor the activities of the herdsmen in the various corners of the state (Nwosu, 2017). Nigerians, on the other hand, see the *Grazing Bill* as a slap on the faces of the good people of Nigeria, whereby the presidency, instead of taking measures to strengthen the security in the rural areas and holding the herdsmen-killers accountable for their actions, are looking for an opportunity to reinforce the latter's hold on the people's land. This move greatly influenced Nigerian's mindset towards the president and encouraged them to affirm the rumours going round that the president displays a pro-herdsman attitude and is not disturbed by the heinous acts carried by the terrorist arm of the group.

Furthermore, the Buhari administration has been accused of poor intelligence gathering on the part of the law enforcement agency. This is attributed to the fact that the herdsmen-killers do return to communities where they had killed people and destroyed properties, yet nothing happens to them and they go with brute confidence even issuing threats to farmers who have reported their evil activities to the authorities (Omotosho, 2019). In the face of all these realities, the keen observers put forward a question what are the strategies deployed by the Buhari administration to contain the herders–farmers conflict and its impact on the economy of Nigeria.

### **President Muhammadu Buhari's strategies in addressing the herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria**

The Buhari's administration, trying to nip in the bud the herders–farmers crisis in Nigeria, was forced to come up with possible mechanisms to tackle the menace, to provide necessary aid to those in need and restore the Nigerian polity. The strategies adopted by the Buhari's administration include:

## The proposal of a cattle colony and National Livestock Transformation Plan

As a way of finding a lasting and practical solution to the herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria, the Buhari’s administration came up in January 2018 with a proposal tagged *cattle colony* as a way of reducing the incessant clashes between the affected parties. The proposal was to devote about 5,000 hectares of land to herdsman in each state of the Federation, where they would feed their cattle, reside, set up local market, educational centers, and primary health centers. The Federal Government will in turn cover the operating costs of the colony and ensure that proper documentation is maintained of all the activities undertaken in the colony. The Federal Government also vowed to ruthlessly deal with any herdsman who is not well documented in any of the cattle colony and consider them as a terrorist if caught (International Crisis Group, 2018). The states in Nigeria, Benue state leading and followed by the states in the south-western region, see the proposal as a neo-imperial penetration mechanism championed by the president to promote the enthronement of *Fulani empire*. Therefore, they strongly resist the grazing bill because it fails to satisfy other areas identified by the affected states in this attempt by the Federal Government to fairly and practically resolve the herders–farmers conflict in the country.

## Adoption of security and legal actions

In the wake of the heightened security crisis brought about by the herders–farmers conflict, the Buhari administration was quick to initiate two military operations in the affected states, code named *Exercise Cat Race*, which ran for about two months in 2018 and were continued as operation *Whirl Stroke*. The police force was also strengthened and a joint partnership with local vigilante groups was established to serve as a vital resource in gathering relevant information to forestall future invasion of herders-killers into farmlands and killing innocent farmers without them facing the inevitable consequences. In spite of all these security measures undertaken, the herders still continued to kill farmers and a more effective security action became urgently needed to stop the daily spill of local farmers blood across the states of the Federation.

## Dialogue and negotiations with key stakeholders

The Buhari administration, not relaxing in their oasis while innocent Nigerian farmers died silently, decided to initiate the key stakeholders’ dialogue and negotiations chaired by the Vice-President, Professor Yomi Osinbajo. The participants were the Minister of internal affairs, the Security Chiefs, the Commissioners of Police of the affected states, and the victims of the herders–farmers conflict. The committee was assigned the task, among others, to think up some possible ways to resolve the herder–farmers impasse, to compensate the victims of the conflict, and to rehabilitate the affected communities that have been reduced to rubrics. The committee traveled to all the affected states and discussed their peculiar problems. A full report was submitted to the National Economic Council for further deliberation.

## Comprehensive Livestock Development Plan

In order to boost the cultivation of crops and rearing of livestock in a more conducive and peaceful atmosphere, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) released the sum of N100 billion (about \$300 million) to the 36 states of the Federation for a harmonious livestock development plan, resolving the problems underlying the herders–farmers conflict undertaken (Kwaja, Ademola Adelehen, 2018).

### Impact of the herders–farmers conflict on the Nigeria Economy

The herders–farmers conflict has negatively impacted the Nigeria’s economy. It is also important to note that both the herders and farmers are integral to the survival of the economy and the quest to meet goals 1 and 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The two groups are essential to the agricultural sector which the Nigerian state is trying to develop in order to diversify her economy and break it away from its overreliance on crude oil. Agriculture, then, becomes one of the best alternatives. The herders–farmers conflict, therefore, causes great disruption to agricultural production, resulting in shortage of agricultural produce in the country, and enhances import of what ordinarily it has the ability to produce.

According to CBN (2018), the herders–farmers conflict, aside from negatively impacting agricultural produce in Nigeria, has also led to farmers’ poor productivity and massive discouragement of the young, able-bodied Nigerians from taking to farming out of the fear for safety. Consequently, an army of youth has also been led into cybercrime as a way out of unemployment and poverty. This reality, instead of improving the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), places Nigeria in a horrible position of enablers of internet frauds and all the related activities.

Egbuta (2018), looking at the devastating impact of the herders–farmers conflict, writes that the River Benue axis, that used to account for about 20,000 tons of grains annually, is now basking in its lost glory because the conflict has overtaken the productivity activities in this area and the best people can do now is to defend their lives and properties. A similar study conducted by Mercy Crops (2015) stated that Nigeria lost about US \$13.7 billion to herders–farmers conflict and these numbers have even tripled in the year 2021.

Furthermore, the herders–farmers conflict has resulted in a steady increase in number of Internally Displaced Person’s (IDPs) across the geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Farmers who survived the conflict have been resettled into holding camps as a temporary abode, pending the return of relative security to their community. The maintenance of these IDP’s camps across the states of the Federation costs a fortune which, if invested in a productive sector, would rebrand the face of Nigeria and improve her economy for the general good of the citizens.

### Conclusions

The herders–farmers conflict is primarily rooted in the contestation of arable land and water. The herders need these resources to keep their livestock alive, mostly during the dry seasons, while the farmers need to reap the harvest of their labour of planting on their farmlands.



The encroachment of these farmlands by the herders and the manner in which the event unfolds afterwards becomes the premise for the conflict. This paper examined the president Muhammadu Buhari's strategies for containing the menace, taking into account that the herders–farmers conflict gained more momentum in terms of escalation under his watch, and outlined the implication of this conflict for the Nigerian economy. The paper discovered that the Buhari's administration came up with a number of strategies to resolve the herders–farmers imbroglio but also observed that the same administration was tagged a *pro-herder's sympathizer* because of the non-verbal disposition of the presidency towards the alarming killings and wanton destruction of properties in the affected states of the Federation. It is on this note that the paper highlighted the economic effects of the impasse between herders and farmers. One of its major consequences is that it brings about disruption in the agricultural production and when this sector is affected in Nigeria, the nation's quest for achieving diversification of economy gets stuck. The state becomes also vulnerable to all manner of security challenges in the country because of food scarcity and other forms of agricultural constraints. To put Nigeria on the path of progress, therefore, the current administration of president Muhammadu Buhari should take steps to support the states of the Federation in their laws on grazing reserves. A legislation should also be passed to outlaw open bearing of assault rifles such as AK 47 by the herders. More importantly, the administration should further support the agricultural sector so as to liberate the country from overreliance on crude oil through friendly economic investments and offering loans to farmers both at the state and federal level. Such a move would reassure farmers of government support for farming while not totally neglecting the herders because both still remain integral to a sustainable agricultural sector in Nigeria.

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## Citation

- Chukwuemeka Chibuzo Ohajionu (2022). Herders-Farmers Conflict and the Nigerian Economy 2015–2020. *Acta Politica Polonica*, 2 (54), 55–65. DOI: 10.18276/ap.2022.54-04.