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Review Article

Environmental Resource Competition and Herders–Farmers Conflict in Benue State, Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Herders–farmers conflict has become a persistent challenge to rural livelihoods, environmental resource governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. In Benue State, competition over land, grazing spaces, water resources and agricultural landscapes has increasingly generated tensions between pastoralists and farming communities. The situation is particularly significant because Benue State possesses extensive arable land and is widely recognized as the "Food Basket of the Nation." This study examines the environmental and resource-related drivers of herders–farmers conflict in Benue State between 2013 and 2023 and evaluates their implications for sustainable development. The study adopts an ex post facto design and draws on documentary evidence, published literature, reports, newspaper accounts and empirical studies, supplemented by qualitative evidence contained in the original study. Data are analyzed using descriptive table and percentage analysis. The study is anchored on Eco-Violence Theory, which explains how resource scarcity, unequal access to environmental resources and population movement can intensify competition and violent conflict. Findings indicate that destruction of crops, farmland invasion, disputes over grazing rights, reprisal attacks, communal clashes, cattle rustling and broader resource competition were important triggers of conflict. The evidence further shows substantial loss of lives, displacement of rural populations and destruction of agricultural land across conflict-affected communities. Climate change, desertification and changing pastoral mobility patterns have increased pressure on available grazing resources, while competition over land has intensified tensions between pastoralists and farmers. The study argues that the conflict represents not merely a security challenge but also a resource-governance and sustainable-development challenge, with implications for Sustainable Development Goals 13, 15 and 16. The study recommends improved land and grazing-resource governance, ranching, community-based conflict prevention, strengthened rural security and climate-resilient resource management.

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Keywords: Herders–farmers conflict; environmental resources; land competition; grazing rights; climate change; resource governance; sustainable development; Benue State.

Introduction

Conflict over natural resources is a recurring feature of societies where different livelihood groups depend on the same limited environmental resources. Land, water, pasture and other natural resources constitute important foundations of rural livelihoods, but competition over access, ownership and control can generate tensions where mechanisms for managing competing interests are weak. In Nigeria, the relationship between pastoralists and crop farmers has historically included forms of economic interdependence, including the use of livestock manure on farms and access to grazing areas. However, these relationships have increasingly been disrupted by population growth, agricultural expansion, environmental degradation, climate variability and changing patterns of pastoral mobility [1–3].

Herders–farmers conflict has become particularly pronounced in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Available records indicate that conflicts between herders and crop farmers have occurred in many states of the federation. Benue State has been among the most affected because of the importance of agriculture to the state's economy and the concentration of farming communities in areas also used or sought by pastoralists. Nedozie [4] reported that thousands of rural farmers had been killed and tens of thousands displaced in Benue State during the period examined by that study.

The environmental dimension of the conflict is particularly important. Changes in rainfall patterns, desertification and the degradation of grazing resources in parts of northern Nigeria have been associated with increased movement of pastoralists in search of suitable pasture and water. Bolarinwa et al. [5] linked pastoral migration to environmental pressures including desertification, population growth and climate change. Amusan et al. [3] similarly identified the relationship between climate change, pastoral migration, resource governance and security as central to understanding the conflict.

The resulting pressure on land resources has created overlapping claims between farmers seeking land for crop production and pastoralists seeking pasture and water for livestock. Where livestock enter cultivated farms, crop destruction may occur; where farmers restrict access to traditional grazing routes or water sources, pastoralists may perceive such restrictions as threats to their livelihoods. These competing interests can escalate into violent confrontations, displacement and destruction of productive assets [1,6].

The environmental resource dimension of the conflict is therefore consistent with the logic of Eco-Violence Theory. The theory proposes that declining availability of environmental resources, unequal access to those resources and population movement can increase competition and contribute to conflict. Blench [2] similarly emphasizes competition over natural resources as an important component of resource-related conflict.

The problem extends beyond immediate violence. Destruction of farmland, displacement of rural populations, insecurity of agricultural areas and the abandonment of productive land weaken the capacity of rural communities to sustain their livelihoods [7,8]. The resulting disruption undermines sustainable

development by affecting agricultural productivity, rural employment, local economies, community stability and environmental governance.

This study therefore reframes herders–farmers conflict as an environmental resource-governance problem as well as a security problem. Its principal concern is to examine how competition over environmental resources contributes to conflict in Benue State and how these conflicts undermine sustainable development.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major environmental and resource-related causes of herders–farmers conflict in Benue State?
2. What patterns of herders–farmers conflict associated with environmental resource competition occurred between 2013 and 2023?
3. How have disputes over land and grazing rights contributed to violent conflict?
4. How has climate change, desertification and pastoral migration influenced competition over environmental resources?
5. What are the implications of herders–farmers conflict for sustainable development in Benue State?

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Eco-Violence Theory. The theory is associated with the resource-conflict perspective developed in the work of Homer-Dixon and other scholars concerned with the relationship between environmental scarcity and violent conflict.

The central argument is that declining availability of environmental resources, unequal access to resources and population movement can increase competition among groups. Where the competing groups depend on the same resource for their survival, the resulting pressure can contribute to social tension and violent confrontation.

The original study considered several theories of conflict, including Frustration–Aggression Theory, Intractable Conflict Theory, Structural Conflict Theory and Eco-Violence Theory. Eco-Violence Theory was considered the most appropriate because the conflict examined in the study is strongly connected to competition over land and other environmental resources.

The theory provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the movement of pastoralists into areas where environmental resources are relatively more favourable. In the context of Benue State, availability of agricultural land, pasture and water creates a resource environment attractive to both farmers and pastoralists. However, because these resources are finite and their uses can overlap, competition can escalate where mechanisms for regulating access are ineffective.

Blench [2] argues that struggles between groups over natural resources can contribute to conflict. The theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between environmental pressure, resource competition, migration and violent conflict.

The application of Eco-Violence Theory in this study does not imply that environmental scarcity alone causes conflict. Rather, environmental pressures interact with institutional weaknesses, resource-governance arrangements, historical grievances, population movement and livelihood interests to create conditions under which conflict can become more likely.

Methodology

The study adopted an ex post facto research design to examine herders–farmers conflict and environmental resource competition in Benue State, Nigeria, from 2013 to 2023. The design was considered appropriate because the conflict events examined had already occurred and the conditions associated with them could not be manipulated by the researchers. Benue State was selected because of its predominantly agricultural economy, where access to farmland and related environmental resources is central to rural livelihoods. The study focused on major episodes of herders–farmers conflict involving crop destruction, farmland invasion, grazing-right disputes, reprisal attacks, communal clashes and cattle-related disputes. Although the geographical focus was Benue State, evidence from other parts of Nigeria was used where necessary to provide national context. Data were obtained primarily from documentary and secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed publications, research reports, newspapers, official documents and other relevant published materials. The study also utilized qualitative responses from farmers in conflict-affected Local Government Areas and interviews with community-level actors. Data were organized according to the major conflict triggers and analysed using descriptive techniques, including frequencies and percentages where applicable, alongside qualitative interpretation of documentary and interview evidence. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and explaining the relationship between environmental resource competition and herders–farmers conflict rather than treating reported incidents as isolated security events.

Results and Discussion

Major Environmental and Resource-Related Drivers of Conflict

The findings indicate that herders–farmers conflict in Benue State is driven largely by competition over land and other environmental resources, compounded by historical distrust, population pressure, climate-related changes, pastoral migration and weak mechanisms for managing competing livelihood interests. The major conflict drivers identified in the study include destruction of crops and farmlands, disputes over grazing rights, reprisal attacks, communal clashes and cattle rustling, competition for land resources, reactions to the Anti-Open Grazing Law, and the broader effects of climate change and desertification. These factors are interconnected and often reinforce one another, making the conflict multidimensional rather than attributable to a single cause [2,3,5,9].

Crop destruction and farmland invasion constitute important dimensions of the conflict because agricultural land is both a productive asset and a source of livelihood for farming communities. The study records several violent incidents associated with destruction of crops and farmlands between 2013 and 2023, with substantial deaths, displacement and loss of cultivated land. Such incidents directly reduce farmers' ability to cultivate their fields and may discourage continued investment in agricultural production. The destruction of farms therefore extends beyond immediate material losses, as repeated attacks can weaken rural livelihoods and undermine the productive capacity required for sustainable food production [1,7].

Disputes over the destruction of farmlands and crops further demonstrate the importance of access to agricultural resources in the conflict. The study identifies several major incidents involving destruction of farms, deaths and displacement. These conflicts are associated with issues such as bush burning, encroachment and deliberate grazing on cultivated land [1]. Where livestock movement overlaps with cultivated farmland, competition over access and use of land can easily develop into confrontation. Consequently, the protection of farmland and the establishment of predictable arrangements for agricultural and pastoral activities are central to reducing conflict and protecting food production.

Grazing-right disputes also constitute a significant source of tension. The study documents violent confrontations associated with disagreements over access to grazing areas and competing claims to land. An interview with a Fulani herder in Agatu indicates that some herders regarded particular grazing spaces as areas for which they had obtained access, whereas members of the host community disputed such claims. This illustrates how unclear, contested or differently understood land-access arrangements can generate conflict between pastoralists and farming communities. Effective land and resource governance is therefore important for reducing uncertainty and preventing disputes from escalating into violence [3,10].

Reprisal attacks represent another important mechanism through which local disputes escalate and become prolonged cycles of violence. The study records several violent confrontations involving substantial loss of life and displacement. Reprisals can transform an initial dispute over land, crops or livestock into wider communal confrontation, particularly where communities perceive that previous attacks have not been adequately addressed. In such circumstances, distrust increases and each new incident may be interpreted within the context of earlier grievances. The persistence of reprisal attacks therefore indicates the importance of effective conflict-resolution institutions capable of addressing grievances before they develop into recurring violence [11].

Communal clashes and cattle rustling further contribute to insecurity and agricultural disruption. The study identifies several violent incidents associated with cattle rustling and communal conflict, involving significant deaths, displacement and destruction of farmland. Cattle-related disputes can intensify existing tensions between communities, particularly where livestock ownership, movement and access to land are already contested. The resulting insecurity can restrict farmers' access to their fields and reduce their willingness to maintain agricultural activities in areas perceived as unsafe [6,12].

Climate change, desertification and pastoral migration provide an additional environmental context for understanding the conflict. The study associates changing environmental conditions with migration and

increasing pressure on available land resources. Climate-related pressures may reduce the availability of pasture and water in some areas, encouraging pastoral mobility and increasing contact between pastoralists and farming communities. However, environmental pressure should not be regarded as an automatic cause of violence. Rather, it can intensify competition where institutions for managing land, water and grazing resources are weak or where communities already have a history of distrust. This interpretation is consistent with the Eco-Violence Theory adopted in the study and with studies linking climate change, pastoral migration, resource governance and conflict in Nigeria [3,5,13].

Historical distrust and competition over land also shape the conflict dynamics. Although farmers and pastoralists have historically maintained forms of interaction and coexistence, increasing pressure on land and changing livelihood conditions have contributed to tensions between the groups. The study identifies climate change, global warming, urbanization and deforestation among factors associated with increasing competition for environmental resources. Where communities lack trust in one another or in institutions responsible for regulating access to resources, relatively localized disputes can develop into wider communal violence [9,10].

The reaction to the Benue State Anti-Open Grazing Law further illustrates the interaction between resource governance and conflict. The law, enacted in 2017, was opposed by the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), and subsequent tensions were associated with violent incidents in parts of the state. The study therefore suggests that policy interventions affecting established livelihood practices can become additional sources of tension when affected groups perceive them as restrictive or inadequately negotiated. This highlights the importance of inclusive governance and dialogue when designing policies intended to regulate competing uses of natural resources [3,10].

Effects on Agricultural Production and Food Security

The cumulative effect of these conflicts is particularly significant for agricultural production and food security in Benue State. The study reports substantial deaths among active farmers, displacement of rural populations and destruction of farmland between 2013 and 2023. It further reports that many farmers were displaced from fertile interior farms and that insecurity contributed to declining agricultural production. Where farmers are unable to access their farms because of insecurity, the immediate consequence is reduced cultivation, while repeated displacement may result in abandonment of farming activities altogether [7,14].

The reduction in agricultural production has implications beyond individual households because Benue is an important agricultural-producing state. Conflict-related displacement, destruction of crops and abandonment of farmland can reduce the supply of food available to local markets. Reduced supply may subsequently contribute to scarcity and higher food prices, thereby affecting household access to food. The study links the conflict to increasing food scarcity and price pressures and cites food-security concerns associated with farmer–herder conflict [1,8,14].

The food-security implications are also consistent with the broader understanding that food security depends not only on food availability but also on physical and economic access to sufficient food. Conflict can therefore affect food security through several pathways: destruction of agricultural assets, displacement of farming households, reduced production, disrupted markets and declining household income [15].

From the perspective of sustainable development, the findings demonstrate that herders–farmers conflict is not solely a security issue but also a challenge to the sustainability of agricultural livelihoods and natural-resource governance. Destruction of farmland undermines productive assets, displacement weakens rural livelihoods, and insecurity reduces the capacity of farming communities to sustain agricultural production. These effects have implications for food security and for the broader pursuit of sustainable development, particularly where rural communities depend heavily on land-based livelihoods.

Environmental Resource Competition as a Conflict Pathway

The findings suggest a sequential pathway through which environmental pressures may contribute to herders–farmers conflict in Benue State. Climate change and desertification can reduce the availability of pasture and water, encouraging pastoral migration and increasing pressure on available land resources. Increased competition for land may create greater overlap between grazing and agricultural activities, which can result in crop destruction, farmland invasion and disputes over access to resources. Where such disputes are inadequately managed, they may escalate into reprisal attacks and communal violence, leading to displacement, destruction of productive assets and the weakening of rural livelihoods and sustainable development [3,5,13].

This pathway illustrates the relevance of Eco-Violence Theory to the Benue context by showing how environmental pressures can interact with livelihood competition and resource-access disputes to create conditions conducive to conflict. However, the pathway should not be interpreted as deterministic. Environmental scarcity does not inevitably produce violence; rather, outcomes depend on the effectiveness of resource governance, the existence of legitimate access arrangements, institutional capacity, conflict-resolution mechanisms and the level of trust between affected communities.

Conclusion

This study examined environmental resource competition and herders–farmers conflict in Benue State between 2013 and 2023 within the broader context of sustainable development. The findings indicate that competition over land and grazing resources, manifested through crop destruction, farmland invasion, grazing-right disputes, cattle-related disputes, reprisal attacks and communal clashes, is central to recurrent conflict. Climate change, desertification and pastoral migration further intensify pressure on environmental resources, although these factors interact with livelihood interests, resource-governance challenges and institutional weaknesses rather than acting as direct causes of violence.

The study therefore concludes that herders–farmers conflict should not be treated solely as a security problem but as an interconnected challenge of environmental governance, land-use management, rural livelihoods and sustainable development. Sustainable peace in Benue State requires an integrated approach that combines effective land and grazing-resource governance, sustainable livestock production and ranching, community-based conflict prevention, improved rural security, regulated livestock movement, climate adaptation and stronger institutional coordination. These measures should be participatory and responsive to the livelihood needs and rights of both farming and pastoral communities.

The study contributes to knowledge by repositioning herders–farmers conflict as an environmental resource-governance and sustainable-development challenge. Through the application of Eco-Violence Theory, it demonstrates how resource scarcity and pressure, population movement, livelihood competition and institutional weaknesses can interact to create conditions for violent conflict. It further establishes the need to integrate environmental management and peacebuilding into responses to resource-based conflict, providing a basis for aligning interventions with SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Durable conflict resolution in Benue State therefore depends not only on responding to violence but also on addressing the underlying environmental and institutional conditions that sustain competition over resources.

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