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Review Article

Herders–Farmers Conflict, Agricultural Livelihoods and Sustainable Food Security in Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Herders–farmers conflict poses a significant threat to agricultural livelihoods and food security in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State. This study examines its implications for agricultural production and sustainable food security between 2013 and 2023. An ex post facto design was adopted, using documentary and secondary sources analysed through descriptive and content analysis. The study was anchored on Eco-Violence Theory. Findings indicate that recurrent conflict caused farmer deaths and displacement, farmland destruction, restricted access to productive land and reduced agricultural activity. The source data report 63 violent clashes in Benue State, with substantial losses of farmers, displacement and farmland destruction. These disruptions contributed to reduced food availability, market shortages and rising food prices. The study concludes that herders–farmers conflict undermines sustainable food security by disrupting food production, availability and economic access. It recommends sustainable livestock-management systems, improved protection of farming communities, community-based conflict prevention, strengthened land-use governance and support for displaced farmers and agricultural recovery.

Keywords: Herders–farmers conflict; agricultural livelihoods; food production; food security; sustainable food security; Benue State.

Introduction

Food security depends substantially on the capacity of agricultural systems to produce, distribute and provide economic access to adequate food. In predominantly agrarian communities, the security of agricultural livelihoods is therefore closely connected to the availability of productive land, labour and stable conditions for farming. Where violent conflict disrupts these conditions, the consequences may extend beyond individual households to local markets and wider food systems.

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Benue State occupies an important position within Nigeria's agricultural economy because of its extensive arable land and large farming population. The state has consequently been described as the “Food Basket of the Nation.” However, the recurrence of violent herders–farmers conflict in several local government areas raises concerns about the ability of farming communities to maintain agricultural production and sustain food supplies [1,2].

Historically, interactions between pastoralists and farmers have included forms of economic interdependence, including the use of livestock manure on farmland and negotiated access to grazing areas. However, increasing competition over land and changing patterns of pastoral mobility have contributed to tensions and violent confrontations in different parts of Nigeria [3–5].

The food-security consequences of such conflict arise through several interconnected pathways. First, violence can result in the death or displacement of farmers. Second, insecurity can prevent farmers from accessing their fields, particularly fertile farmland located away from settlements. Third, destruction and abandonment of farmland can reduce the amount of land actively used for agricultural production. Finally, declining agricultural output may affect food availability and contribute to higher food prices, thereby weakening households' economic access to food [6,7].

Food security therefore needs to be considered not simply in terms of whether food exists in a particular market but also whether households can physically and economically access sufficient food. The Food and Agricultural Organization emphasizes access to adequate, safe and nutritious food, while USAID similarly highlights physical, social and economic access to sufficient food for a productive and healthy life [8,9].

The connection between violent conflict and food security is particularly important in Benue State because disruption of agricultural production in a major food-producing area may have implications beyond the directly affected communities. Reduced production can constrain supplies to rural and urban markets and contribute to higher prices of agricultural commodities [6,7].

Against this background, this paper examines the relationship between herders–farmers conflict, agricultural livelihoods and sustainable food security in Benue State between 2013 and 2023. Rather than focusing primarily on the environmental causes of conflict, this study concentrates on the consequences of conflict for agricultural production and the availability, accessibility and affordability of food.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What was the pattern of herders–farmers conflict in Benue State between 2013 and 2023?
2. What effects did the conflict have on farmers, agricultural land and farming activities?
3. How did displacement and insecurity affect agricultural food production in Benue State?
4. How did declining agricultural production affect food availability and accessibility?
5. What are the implications of conflict-related food shortages and price increases for sustainable food security?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Eco-Violence Theory as its theoretical framework. The theory is used in the original manuscript to explain how environmental resource pressures and unequal access to resources can contribute to competition, migration and conflict [3,10]. Within the context of the present study, the theory is relevant because changes in the availability of pasture and water may influence pastoral mobility and increase competition over land and other agricultural resources. Where such competition escalates into violence, farmers may lose access to their fields, while pastoral livelihoods may also be disrupted.

The significance of the theory for food security lies in the interconnected consequences that may follow resource-related conflict. Competition over land may generate violent confrontation, which can displace farmers and restrict access to agricultural land. Reduced access to farmland can subsequently limit agricultural activity and food production, with further implications for food availability and affordability.

Eco-Violence Theory therefore provides a useful analytical basis for understanding how environmental and resource pressures may contribute to conflict and how such conflict can disrupt agricultural livelihoods and food systems. The theory does not imply that environmental pressures automatically cause violence. Rather, resource pressures interact with social, institutional and livelihood conditions. The food-security consequences arise when conflict becomes sufficiently severe to disrupt the agricultural livelihood system.

Methodology

The study adopted an ex post facto research design based primarily on documentary and secondary data. The design was considered appropriate because the study examined herders–farmers conflict and its consequences over a period in which the events had already occurred and could not be manipulated by the researcher. Data were obtained from published books, peer-reviewed scholarly works, academic internet sources, journals, newspapers and official documents, as identified in the original study. The study focused on Benue State in North-Central Nigeria, a predominantly agricultural state that has experienced recurrent herders–farmers' conflicts. The original study identifies 14 of the state's 23 local government areas as particularly affected by violent clashes.

The study covered the period from 2013 to 2023, with its analytical focus restricted to the consequences of herders–farmers conflict for agricultural livelihoods and sustainable food security. Particular attention was given to reported farmer deaths and displacement, destruction of farmland, abandonment or restricted access to agricultural land, agricultural production, food availability and food-price pressures. Documentary data were organized and analyzed using descriptive analysis to present reported conflict events and associated deaths, displacement and farmland impacts. Content analysis was subsequently used to identify recurring themes relating to agricultural production, rural livelihoods, food availability and food security.

The original manuscript also reports responses attributed to farmers in conflict-affected local government areas. However, the available methodological account does not provide sufficient information on the sampling procedure, research instrument, interview protocol or ethical procedures used to obtain these

responses. Consequently, they are treated in this study as supplementary evidence rather than as a separately analyzed quantitative survey dataset. The methodological details relating to this component should be verified or supplied before final submission.

Results and Discussion

Pattern of Conflict and Its Implications for Agricultural Livelihoods

The documentary evidence demonstrates that herders–farmers conflict occurred repeatedly during the study period and affected agricultural communities in Benue State. The consequences relevant to food security included deaths, displacement of farmers, destruction of agricultural land and disruption of farming activities [5,11].

The source reports that between April 2013 and November 2023, 63 violent herders–farmers' clashes occurred in Benue State, resulting in the reported death of 2,869 active farmers, displacement of 111,730 farmers and destruction of 218 hectares of arable farmland. These figures illustrate the scale of disruption to the agricultural labour force and productive land base.

Farmers constitute a critical component of the food-production system, and their displacement can reduce the amount of land cultivated during subsequent farming seasons. The consequences are particularly serious where displaced farmers are unable to return to their farms or where insecurity persists over several agricultural seasons. Under such conditions, the effect of conflict extends beyond the immediate loss of life and becomes a structural constraint on agricultural production.

Farmer Displacement and Abandonment of Agricultural Land

One of the most important findings is the relationship between insecurity and farmers' ability to access their agricultural land. Responses reported from farmers in conflict-affected local government areas indicate that farmers remained dependent on agriculture but were increasingly unable to use their farmland as before.

The reported responses indicate that fertile farmland located in interior areas had become difficult to access because farmers feared attacks. Consequently, some farmers remained closer to safer settlements rather than risk travelling to their more productive fields.

This finding demonstrates that agricultural land can become effectively unavailable even when it has not been physically destroyed. In other words, insecurity can reduce the productive land base through restricted access.

This distinction is central to sustainable food security. A sustainable food system requires not only adequate quantities of land but also secure and predictable access to that land. Where farmers cannot safely cultivate available farmland, the productive capacity of the agricultural system is reduced. Similar concerns regarding the abandonment of agricultural activities and the resulting threat to food production have been documented in studies of herders–farmers conflict [6,12].

Effects on Agricultural Food Production

The displacement of farmers and abandonment or reduced utilization of farmland have direct implications for food production. The original study argues that the loss of active farmers and insecurity surrounding agricultural land contributed to declining agricultural production in affected areas.

The effect can be understood through three related mechanisms. First, the death and displacement of farmers reduce the agricultural labour available for cultivation. Second, insecurity restricts access to fertile farmland. Third, farmers who remain in affected communities may reduce the scale of cultivation because of the perceived risks associated with travelling to distant farms.

The combined effect is a reduction in the effective productive capacity of the agricultural system. Evidence from previous studies similarly associates violent communal conflict with disruption of farmers' livelihood activities and agricultural production [2,6,19].

This finding is especially important in Benue State because agricultural production serves not only farming households but also wider markets. A decline in production therefore has implications for consumers and traders beyond the immediate conflict-affected communities.

Food Availability and Market Supply

The reduction in agricultural production has implications for food availability. The original study reports noticeable shortages of agricultural produce in rural markets that traditionally attract buyers from across Nigeria to Benue State.

The reported shortages are significant because food availability depends partly on the continued production and movement of agricultural commodities from producing areas to markets. When conflict reduces production in a major agricultural region, fewer commodities may enter local and regional markets.

The commodities identified in the source include grains, root crops and legumes, including yam, cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, sesame and soybean.

The implication is that conflict can generate a food-security problem through disruption of the production base rather than through a complete physical absence of natural resources. Agricultural resources may remain available, but insecurity can prevent their effective use. This is consistent with broader evidence linking herders–farmers conflict with declining food availability and agricultural disruption [5,6].

Food Accessibility and Affordability

Food security also depends on whether households can obtain and afford available food. The original study reports that declining production and food shortages were associated with increases in the prices of agricultural commodities.

Duru [12] is cited in the original study in relation to disruption of agricultural activity, while Udosen [7] reports substantial increases in the prices of selected food commodities in states affected by herders–farmers conflict.

The original study reports that violent conflicts between herders and farmers in Benue, Gombe and Taraba States were associated with a 253% increase in the prices of food items such as beans and tomatoes, while root crops such as yam and cassava reportedly experienced a 123% increase from July 2020 [7]. These figures are presented here as reported estimates from the cited source rather than as independently verified estimates in the present study.

From a food-security perspective, rising prices are important because households with limited purchasing power may be unable to compensate for reduced local production by purchasing food from markets. Thus, conflict can simultaneously affect two dimensions of food security: availability, through declining agricultural production and market supply, and affordability or accessibility, through increases in food prices [6,7].

This creates a particularly difficult situation for vulnerable households because declining household income resulting from disrupted livelihoods may occur at the same time that food prices are increasing.

Conflict, Food Inflation and Sustainable Food Security

The original study links declining agricultural production and food shortages with broader increases in food prices. It reports a food inflation rate of 35.2% in March 2024, citing the National Bureau of Statistics [20]. This figure should be interpreted carefully because it falls outside the study's 2013–2023 analytical period. Nevertheless, it provides contextual evidence concerning the food-price environment following the principal study period.

The sustainable food-security implication is that recurrent conflict can weaken the resilience of food systems [21]. A food system becomes less resilient when its productive base is repeatedly disrupted, farmers are displaced, agricultural land is left uncultivated and market supplies become unstable.

Sustainable food security therefore requires more than emergency food assistance. It requires restoring the conditions that allow farmers to produce food consistently and safely over successive agricultural seasons. The relationship between agricultural production, household livelihoods and food security is also recognised in the wider literature [6–9].

The Food-Security Pathway

The findings support a pathway in which violent conflict affects food security through interconnected agricultural and economic mechanisms:

1. Herders–farmers conflict
2. Deaths and displacement of farmers
3. Restricted access to agricultural land

4. Farmland abandonment or reduced cultivation
5. Decline in agricultural production
6. Reduced food availability and market supply
7. Food shortages and higher prices
8. Reduced household food access and affordability
9. Threat to sustainable food security

This pathway demonstrates why the consequences of herders–farmers conflict should be considered within a broader food-system framework rather than being treated solely as a security issue. The relationship between conflict, displacement, agricultural disruption and food insecurity is consistent with evidence reported in the existing literature [5–7].

Conclusion

This study examined the implications of herders–farmers conflict for agricultural livelihoods and sustainable food security in Benue State between 2013 and 2023. The findings indicate that recurrent conflict disrupted agricultural production through farmer deaths and displacement, destruction of farmland and restricted access to productive agricultural areas. Insecurity also made some physically available farmland effectively unavailable for cultivation, thereby reducing agricultural output and disrupting food supply.

The resulting decline in agricultural activity has implications for food availability, market supply and food affordability. Conflict-related livelihood losses may further weaken the purchasing capacity of affected households, creating a cycle in which reduced production and rising food prices reinforce household food insecurity. The study therefore concludes that herders–farmers conflict constitutes a significant threat to sustainable food security in Benue State.

The study recommends an integrated approach to conflict management and agricultural recovery. Government should promote sustainable livestock-production systems, including ranching and other locally appropriate arrangements, while strengthening the protection of farmers and their safe access to productive farmland. Displaced farmers who can safely return should receive support for agricultural recovery, including farm inputs and rehabilitation of productive assets. Community-based conflict-prevention mechanisms involving farmers, pastoralists, traditional institutions, local authorities and security agencies should also be strengthened. In addition, rural markets and agricultural supply routes should be protected, while food-security interventions should address both declining production and food affordability. Climate-resilient agricultural systems and early-warning mechanisms that monitor conflict, displacement, agricultural disruption and food-price changes should be integrated into long-term agricultural and food-security planning.

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