



**POLAC MANAGEMENT REVIEW (PMR)  
DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCE  
NIGERIA POLICE ACADEMY, WUDIL-KANO**

**PEASANT-HERDER CONFLICT AND FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA**



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## Abstract

*The conflict between Peasants and Herders in Nigeria has received media attention in recent years. The concern about this conflict is the monumental loss of lives and property and the impact on food security. Many factors have been attributed to this crisis such as destruction of crops by the herders and encroachment on grazing routes by the farmers, the use of under-aged herders and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms amongst others. The study draws from Thomas Harold-Dixon's Environmental Conflict Theory which states that depletion and degradation of resources (Environmental Scarcity) is a motivating factor for conflict. It argued that desert encroachment in the North and the migration of herders to the South with the resultant struggle for agricultural resources by both parties is the primary trigger of the conflict. The study also identified the absence of strong political will by the government to effectively and decisively end the conflict as another causal factor for this crisis. The paper further observed that lack of access to farmland as a result of the conflict has threatened food security such as availability, accessibility, utilization and stability in Nigeria. To stem this crisis, the study recommends the assertion of coercive authority by the government over conflict zone and a strong government political will devoid of ethnic or religious consideration to end the conflict. It also recommends a concerted effort by the Nigeria government and other West African countries bordering the Lake Chad to implement a massive reforestation in the Northern region for grazing purpose. Finally, the paper emphasized the need for herders to embrace modern livestock management techniques.*

**Keywords:** Peasants Herders Conflict Food Security

## 1. Introduction

The conflict between the sedentary peasants and nomadic herders in Nigeria has received media attention in recent years. What started as a small-scale and localized conflict in the 'core' Northern part of Nigeria has spread to all the geo-political zones of the country. Today, the epicenter of this conflict is the North-central states especially the Benue-Plateau axis, with the crisis extending beyond struggle for resources such as water, land and pasture to assume an ethno-religious dimension.

The human and material toll from this conflict is unimaginable! Amnesty International (2018) reports that:

*at least 3,641 people have been killed between January 2016 and October 2018, 57 percent of them in 2018 alone.*

The conflict has also led to displacement of a large number of people from their ancestral homes. On the material side, many crops have been destroyed and

livestock killed, deepening the food crisis in Nigeria. This is because actors involved in this conflict are livelihood groups engaged in subsistence farming. Subsistence farmers in developing countries produce about 80% of the food they consumed (IFAD, 2013).

It is often stated that year-round migration of herders from the far North and other West African countries to other regions of Nigeria (especially the middle belt) due to desert encroachment and the resultant struggle for farming and grazing land in the host communities is a major cause of this crisis. Okoye (2018) noted that:

*drought and desertification are pushing the herders out of the Northern fringes; the availability of arable land and water attracts them to the Southern parts of the country in search of pasture and water for their animals.*

In response to this crisis, the federal government put in place measures to avert further bloodshed. These measures included, but not limited to a comprehensive livestock Transformation Plan which incorporated the implementation of modern livestock management

policies such as ranching and planned demarcation or re-opening of alleged historical grazing routes, establishment of Rural Grazing Areas (RUGA) etc. These policies have yet to be fully implemented because of opposition from groups in some parts of the country as well as conflicting interest from herders and farmers. It is on this background that this paper attempts to explore the peasant-header crisis and the effect on food security in Nigeria. It also seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on this very important but delicate topic and it is hoped that findings would be valuable to policy makers, researchers, the international community and all those interested in peace building.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To understand the dynamics and major triggers of the peasant-header conflict
- ii. To understand food security and determine the impact of the herders and peasants conflict on food security
- iii. To suggest policy options to end or minimize this crisis in order to improve food security

Herders and farmers have had a cordial social relation over the years before the current crisis. In the past, the interaction between both parties was symbiotic with both groups working to ensure the well-being of each other (Davidheiser and Lunar, 1996, cited in Njoku 2025). This complementary relationship ensures dung and stubble exchange, the entrenchment of a mutually agreed dispute resolution mechanism whereby both parties have structures to regulate grazing and farming activities to avoid potential conflict scenario and nip it in the bud at the initial stage.

This mutual understanding began to deteriorate as a result of urbanization with its resultant depletion of farming and grazing land, as well as migration of herders from the North to other parts of the country as a result of climate change. The effect of this was the struggle for limited resources explaining the principal causal factor for peasant-herder crisis. In addition, the presence of ungoverned space – a situation whereby the government is unwilling to assert coercive authority over a conflict zone because of political consideration – also created favourable environment for the conflict to thrive.

Today, this conflict has assumed an alarming dimension. It has resulted in the death and displacement of thousands of people including the destruction of properties worth millions of naira. Also, many have died or sustained injuries, properties damaged including crops and livestock, valuable man-hour lost, incomes of both farmers and herders reduced, number of orphaned children, widows and widowers increased as a result of this conflict.

Measures adopted by the government to address this issue such as the proposed demarcation of Rural Grazing Area (RUGA), enactment of anti-open grazing laws by some state governments, promotion of community dialogue, deployment of security agents to conflict zones and the production of a comprehensive livestock transformation plan failed to stem the crisis.

This study therefore examines the problem of Herder-Farmer conflict within the context of current realities in Nigeria and attempts to understand why measures implemented over the years to address this problem failed to achieve the desired result and propose measures to end this crisis.

## 2. Methodology

The research utilized and relied on secondary sources of data such as textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers, and materials from the internet. The time frame for this research paper spanned from 2015 – 2023, during the administration of former President Muhamadu Buhari. It is instructive to note that the peasant-herder crisis heightened during this period.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted Homer-Dixon's Environmental Conflict Theory to explain the crisis between herders and peasants and the implication for food security. This theory argued that depletion and degradation of resources (i.e. environmental scarcity) will lead to five general types of violence (in the developing countries). But the developing countries will not be able to adapt to environmental problem. Masara, (2021) summarized the five types of violence as follows:

- i. An upsurge in intensification of disputes arising from local environmental degradation
- ii. Ethnic clashes will manifest due deepened social cleavages, population migration and environmental scarcity. The scarcity of resources such as land and water provoked ethnic rivalries that jeopardize a country's stability.
- iii. Environmental scarcity leads to civil strife that directly affects economic productivity, threatens people's livelihoods, and affects the state's ability to adapt and address the challenges.
- iv. Scarcity will lead to interstate war over the fight for resources.
- v. Environmental scarcity will also lead to conflicts between developed and developing nations.

Although it is believed that resource conflicts in Africa is not due to scarcity but abundance (Masara, 2021), the theoretical framework analyzed above aptly explains the peasant-herder crisis in Nigeria. For instance, the climate change on the ecosystem of the northern region resulting from the shrinking of Lake Chad (a major source of water for livestock) forced the herders to migrate southward in search of favourable grazing land (Okoye, 2018). In other words, the motivating factor for this Southward movement of herders is environmental scarcity. Iro, 1994, cited in (Okeke & Nnamani, 2023) corroborated the environmental scarcity motive by asserting that:

*the herdsmen tendency to migrate is primarily due to the need to find region where the cattle can find plenty of grass and water. The herdsmen also travel to avoid tax collectors, dangerous insects, bad weather, and an unfavourable social climate.*

### Definition of Concepts

**Peasants:** The word Peasant has undergone some transformation since its original meaning in the medieval period. But the underlying meaning remains the same. Wikipedia.org defines peasants as a pre-industrial agricultural labourer or a farmer with limited land ownership, especially one living during the medieval age under feudalism and paying rent, tax, fees or services to the landlord. In this paper, the word peasant is used to

refer to a farmer and implies a smallholder farmer. In Nigeria, peasants are often found in the rural areas and they are engaged in subsistence farming. Britannica.com noted that:

*peasant families consume a substantial part of what they produce, and while some of their outputs may be sold in the market, their total production is generally not much larger than what is needed for the maintenance of the family. Both productivity per worker and yields per unit of land are low.*

While the smallholder farmer or peasant constitute the largest contributor to the food supply in Nigeria, smallholder farmers tend to exert an insignificant market share or contributor to the food supply in the industrialized countries due to mechanization of agriculture. This is because productivity per worker and yield of the peasant is low. When we use the term *peasant-herder conflict*, we mean farmer-herder crisis.

**Herders:** The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines herder as a person who manages, breeds, or tends to livestock while the Cambridge dictionary viewed a herder as a person who takes care of a large group of animals of the same type. While the Merriam-Webster dictionary is broad and all-inclusive, we align with the Cambridge definition because of its specificity. It effectively captures the attributes of West African herder especially from the Fulani stock. They move about with animals of the same stock (in this case Cattle) and often in large group seeking for pasture. These herders share the following characteristics in Nigeria:

- i. They are found predominantly in the North but can also be found in other parts of the country because of their migratory nature.
- ii. They move around in groups with large number of flocks.
- iii. They hardly interact with their host communities and bear sophisticated arms.
- iv. They are always in conflict with farmers due to competition over grazing land and such conflicts results in heavy human casualties (mostly from the sedentary farmers)
- v. They provide the major source of animal protein in the Nigerian market.

**Conflict:** Conflict is any situation that creates the atmosphere of tension, disruption or violence as a result of opposing interest or unhealthy competition for resources etc. (Michailof, Kostner, Devictor, 2002 cited in Nwabianke, (2018) characterized the causes of conflict as: (i) historical consideration such as religious, cultural, economic or geographical difference. (ii) Demographic changes such as increasing population or migration and the attendant struggle for resources (iii) Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment (iv) Public policies that influences or promotes suppression, oppression, exploitation and discrimination (v) Mismanagement of public funds (vi) Poor governance (vii) Accessibility to small arms (viii) Misuse of education as a violence crisis-resolution agent etc.

**Food Security:** The food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) define food security as:

*when all people, at all times, have physical or economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO, 2015)*

For Mojeed (2023) food security:

*is the state at which individuals have sufficient food to generate a calorie requirement of about 2,200 – 3,000 (about 8 – 10kg of maize flour) calories per day for adult males, while children require a lower calorie level to maintain adequate health*

The 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) published in 2022 ranked Nigeria 107<sup>th</sup> out of 113<sup>th</sup> countries globally in the food security index suggesting that 12.9% of the global population in extreme poverty was found in Nigeria. Some of the factors responsible for lack of food security in Nigeria include poverty, climate change, conflict and insecurity, increasing population, poor policy implementation, insufficient agricultural practices, and post-harvest losses and low budgetary allocation to agriculture among others.

In this paper, we conceptualize the term ‘food security’ to mean a situation when people have adequate, physical, social or economic access to healthy food or when food is abundant (available) and affordable. If food is

available but not affordable, then it represents food insecurity.

**Elements of Food Security:** Basically, there are four elements of food security which are availability, access, utilization, and stability.

**Availability:** The World Food Program (WFP, 2009) defines availability as the ‘amount of food that is present in a country or area through all forms of domestic production, imports, food stocks, and food aid. Availability is a supply-side aspect of food security. This yardstick for increasing food security is not relevant to the current food crisis in Nigeria. The current dimension threatening food security in Nigeria is not availability but affordability (President Tinubu broadcast, 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2024). Food is physically present in large quantity in Nigeria at every point of need but food expenditures consume about 80% of most family income.

**Access:** Another dimension of food security is access to food. Access means consumers have both physical and economic capability to acquire the food they need (Simmons, 2013). Accessibility is complete when its two components (physical availability and affordability) are present. Peasants and Herders crisis have impacted heavily on food accessibility because both livelihood agents cannot access the land for food production resulting to high cost of food. Resource constraints emanating from conflicts can limit heavily the peasant’s capacity to secure land and farming implements. In most cases, measures implemented to improve accessibility through food importation fail to achieve the desired result because the poor lack the financial capability to purchase such items.

**Utilization:** Another element of food security is utilization. Utilization implies actual consumption of the food produced. Utilization has two components – the physical means available to use the food such as cooking utensils, knowledge etc. and the biological utilization which involves the quality and the content of the food consumed and its ability to provide the needed nutrients and energy.

**Stability:** This means the other elements are present or remain stable to ensure food security at all time. Where stability is dislocated, that is where all the elements of food security (availability, access, and utilization) are absent, then food security is impacted negatively. Instances of this lag could be period of insecurity, natural disaster or climate change etc.

**Causes of Peasant-Herder Conflict:** Scholars have attributed many factors to the recurring peasant-herder crisis. In this study, we shall attempt to consolidate some of these factors for better understanding of the conflict. The factors are not exhaustive and include the followings:

**1. Migratory nature of herders due to climate change:** Herders often migrate from the North to South during dry season in search of pasture and water due to drought and desertification in the North. The International Crisis Group (2017) observed that:

*Nigeria's far North is arid and semi-arid with long dry season from October to May and low rainfall (600 to 900 mm) from June to September. In 2008, the National Metrological Agency reported that over the preceding 30 years the annual rainy season dropped from an average of 150 to 120 days. In the last six decades, over 350,000 sq km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions .... In Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara states, estimates suggest that 50 – 75 percent of the land area is becoming desert. These environmental changes have wrecked agriculture and human livelihoods, forcing millions of pastoralists and others to migrate to the south in search of productive land.*

The International Crisis Group continued that initially, this southward migration was seasonal (between December and May) but as available pastures continued to shrink in the far North, herders have been staying longer in the South (especially in the Middle Belt). This has resulted in disputes with the growing population of sedentary peasants and pastoral herders in the South over land and water use, triggering crisis between the two livelihood groups.

**2. Loss of Grazing Reserves:** The International Crisis Group (ICG) continued that most of the grazing reserves (about 415) established by the Northern Regional Government in the 1960s have been lost due to human activities such as urbanization and infrastructural needs. The effects of this scenario is a marked reduction of grazing reserves which in turn forced herders to seek pasture elsewhere which in most cases is the Middle Belt and the Southern part of the country. Other narratives also suggest that farmers encroached on historical grazing reserves or routes.

**Banditry and Cattle Rustling:** The activities of bandits and cattle rustlers in the North is another trigger for herders and peasants conflict. This phenomenon drove headers from the far North to the South. The inability of authorities in the North and the Federal Government to stem this trend means that the available option is for the herders to seek refuge in favorable environment, which in most cases is the South. But this has put pressure on the existing southern facilities such as land and water needed for pasture. The resultant competition for these resources manifested into the crisis between herders and peasants. Again, the International Crisis Group (ICG) documented that:

*Over the last decade, cattle rustling has grown in scale and organization in several Northern states, where large bandits operate with mounting audacity. While this occurs throughout the North, the main theatres have been the Kaduna forest in Kaduna, the Balgore forest in Kano, Dansadau forest in Zamfara and Davin Ruga forest starching through Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states. Vigilante groups formed to combat bandits have compounded insecurity in some areas where the arrest and summary execution of rustlers sometime have invited massive retaliatory violence. Elsewhere, Vigilantes have turned into predators themselves, extorting cash and cattle from herders as protection levy.*

**3. Activities of under-aged Herders:** A major and immediate cause of this crisis is destruction of crops by herders through encroachments into farmlands by their cattle. Herders (both adults and under-aged) often deliberately or unknowingly allow their cows to graze into farmlands. But the main culprit is the under-aged herder (aged between 8 – 16 years). The Centre for

Democracy and Development (2021) gave a perspective of under-aged herders and crop destruction thus:

*In some instances, the boys (i.e. under aged herders) are contracted from other families from within and outside the homestead settlement ... this is seen as part of the endurance training in accordance with pastoral culture canon. Unfortunately, the cattle overwhelm them..... and they stray where they often destroy crops.*

**4. Erosion of Alternative (Traditional) Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** At the initial stage, disputes over wandering cattle or damaged crops were resolved through strong traditional institutions e.g. village chiefs and herders' leaders. Any conflict beyond the herders/village chiefs or those who defy the outcome of mediation were referred to local authorities (ICG, 2017). However, this alternative dispute resolution mechanism began to crumble in the 1970s when the government law enforcement officers such as the police and the courts began to intervene in dispute resolution. The ICG continued that the pastorals hated these institutions because of corrupt practices such as extortion by the police and bribes.....and protracted court processes immobilized their herds.

**5. Lack of Political Will to Resolve the Conflict:** The current trend in this unresolved peasants and herders conflict is lack of political will and suspicions about government intention by the actors and other major stakeholders. For example, the stiff opposition by groups in certain parts of the country against the Livestock Transformation Plan is due to interest and lack of confidence on the government. Some groups believe that the Transformation Plan is designed to appropriate land for the herders. Reinforcing this political dimension and lack of political will, Jinadu (2021) threw more light that:

*Complicating the conflict is the fact that a proportion of the herdsmen keep cattle for powerful local actors such as public servants and politician, thereby generating conflicts of interest and leading to political inaction*

## **Implication of Herder-Peasant Crisis and Food Security in Nigeria**

The peasant-herder crisis has affected almost all segments of the society either directly or indirectly. For instance, (Ojelade, 2019) asserts that food shortages, lives and property, insecurity are two major fallouts of this conflict. However, our specific focus in this research is the implication of this conflict on food security. Some of the implications include:

**Reduction of Food Output (Food Availability):** The crisis has led to deaths, injury and displacement of many peasants and their loved ones. Many of the survivors have life-threatening injuries or permanently disabled, some have relocated to other states or in IDP camps. Similarly, others have changed occupation other than farming due to persistent attack by herders. The herders have sustained some losses also (although not on the same scale as the peasants). They (herders) have also lost numerous cattle to rustlers or poisoning and they graze in fear of attacks by farmers (Bassey & Ukpong, 2021). The implication from the scenario above is that peasants and herders are unable to access the land for farming and grazing and this will hamper food availability, which will in turn lead to food insecurity.

**Increase in Food Prices:** A major contributory factor to the prevailing high cost of food items is associated with the persistent conflict between peasants and herders. Herders now convey their cattle through trucks with the attendant freight charges whose cost would be transferred to the final consumer. The implication is that this will result to increase in the prices of cattle. It is instructive to note that movement of cattle through transhuman has no transportation costs.

On the part of the peasants, the crisis has limited their access to land. Even the available land is not fertile enough for agricultural purpose leading to low yield (low production of crops) and increase in food prices. Economic operations, particularly food production, are frequently threatened which results in widespread famine and malnutrition due to these disputes (Okoli et al., 2013).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In the course of discussing the Peasant-Herder crisis we have a deep understanding of the causal factors in this conflict. We identified the shrinking of the Lake Chad Basin in the North resulting from the massive migration of herders to the Middle Belt and the South as the principal cause of the crisis. Other triggers of the crisis include weak government political will, destruction of crops by the herders and alleged encroachment of historical grazing routes by farmers etc. We discovered that this crisis has impacted heavily on food security such as food availability, accessibility, utilization and stability. Measures identified to stem this crisis include a strong collaboration among West African countries bordering the Lake Chad by implementing policies to improve reforestation as well as putting in place a strong monitoring framework to prevent or minimize the inflow of small arms across the borders. It is hoped that this work would benefit the peasant-herder, the government and other peace builders as well as contributing to knowledge in this area of study.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

- i. **Assertion of coercive authority over ungoverned space:** The federal government has the capacity to enforce law and order over conflict zones. The problem is the political will to do so. Government must demonstrate a non-partisan approach devoid of ethnic or religious consideration towards enforcing law and order in these conflict areas. The government need to ensure that the perpetrators and sponsors of these violence are prosecuted and convicted if found guilty.
- ii. **Drought:** The Federal government should tackle the problem of drought and desertification around the Lake Chad Basin through collaboration with other West African countries. This will reduce the need for migration of herders from the North to the South.
- iii. **Sensitization and Town Hall meetings to promote community dialogue:** This must be done on regular basis to promote harmonious relation between the herders and farmers
- iv. **Border Control:** All foreign pastoralist entering the country should be properly monitored by the security agents and porous borders must be properly manned to prevent the herders from smuggling weapons into the country etc.

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