



**CONTRIBUTING TO THE MITIGATION OF CONFLICT
OVER NATURAL RESOURCES BETWEEN FARMER
AND HERDER COMMUNITIES IN ADAMAWA STATE,
NIGERIA (COMITAS)**



Impact Stories

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Background

While clashes are often understood in ethno-religious terms due to the spread of unreliable information, competing claims to land, water and other natural resources are at the root of growing tensions between farmer and herder communities in Nigeria. Indeed, pressure on natural resources has increased due to demographic growth, expanding human settlements, privatization of land, year-round farming practices, environmental degradation, and climate change.

In the absence of mutually agreed upon solutions, disputes over crop damage, livestock theft, and water pollution have increasingly turned violent. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have been pushed beyond their breaking point and trust in authorities is at an all-time low due to widespread inaction, impunity and a perceived bias.

About COMITAS

In order to contribute to the mitigation of conflict over natural resources, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Search for Common Ground (Search), and Mercy Corps designed a comprehensive and integrated approach entitled “Contributing to the mitigation of conflict over natural resources between farmer and herder communities in Adamawa state, Nigeria (COMITAS)”.

The project is funded by the European Union (EU) Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) that responds quickly and flexibly to conflicts and crises. The COMITAS project is empowering communities to prevent and respond to violence by strengthening collaboration on Natural Resource Management, foster trust through community dialogue, and promote positive perceptions through reliable information and peace messaging.

The 18 months project is currently implemented in five Local Government Areas in Adamawa state: Demsa, Numan, Lamurde, Girei, and Mayo Belwa, across 10 wards.



Natural resource mapping with male herders in Bille Ward 2, Adamawa state.



Participants during an action planning meeting in Borrong ward, Demsa LGA, Adamawa State

Program Impact

- › Mercy Corps has trained 124 local authorities on interest-based negotiation, mediation, and natural resource planning. Post training evaluations show increased knowledge of the participants is 34%.
- › Through interest-based negotiation and mediation training, program participants have contributed to an overall reduction in violent conflict **by 29%**.
 - 120 conflicts resolved between farmers and herders from June 2021 to March 2022.
- › The project natural resource management awareness-raising activities emphasizes how the diversity of perspectives broadens the methodologies for implementing and sustaining conflict mitigation solutions.
 - Farmers and herder's daily livelihood engagement has improved due to reduction in crop destruction, killing of cattle and contamination of watering points by using toxic pesticides.
- › The farmers and herders are visualizing the relevance of transformational approaches to conflict analysis and negotiation to enable them to see beyond the presenting impacts of resource conflicts. These approaches rely on the ability of resource-based conflict analysis, negotiation, and community action planning to not focus only on proffering rapid solutions but understand the impacts of other [external factors] such as climate change, changing community contexts and relational patterns, and transhumance activities on the natural resource conflicts.
 - Communities are now aware that climate change is not only "the act of God" but there are underlining human activities that activate it.
- › Communities also have access to seasonal climate predictions, flooding alert information and possible management practices both in English and local language with the support of **Nigeria Meteorological Agency (NIMeT) SCP Application**.
- › Local authorities have used knowledge and expertise through facilitated dialogues, to support the Natural Resource Management Committees (NRMCS) to **develop 10 concrete natural resource Quick Impact Projects (QIP)**. The QIPs have been identified, prioritized, validated, assessed and are being implemented one in each COMITAS implementing area.
- › COMITAS is fostering constructive relationships between communities and governance actors facilitates opportunities and platforms for meaningful community engagement.
 - 10 resource sharing agreements jointly developed and adopted by government and community stakeholders to promote more collaborative use of land and water resources.

One Body, Many Parts; farmer-herders forge a path for dialogue in Gengle Ward



*Leveraging on their unique and diverse composition to mediate between groups, to douse local tensions related to land, water and forest cover, NRMCM and CRN meet monthly in Gengle ward.
Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps*

The COMITAS project commenced its peace building activities in Gengle community, Mayo Belwa Local Government Area (LGA) of Adamawa State in April 2021. The COMITAS project aims to mitigate natural resource-based conflicts, primarily between farming and herding communities competing over water and land. Following extensive consultations with various community stakeholders, a “Natural Resource Management Committee” (NRMCM) was established, composing membership from the various community-based groups and associations.

The NRMCMs play essential roles within their communities like problem-solving, by leveraging on their unique and diverse composition to mediate between groups, to douse local tensions related to land, water and forest cover. As an influential convener of community dialogues, they also share early warning signs and information on impending natural resource issues to other groups like the Community Response Network (CRN) and local community leaders for action.

With the trust and responsibilities invested by the communities in the NRMCMs, they also realize that their success is dependent on collaboration, coordination and inclusion of

different stakeholders from governments, NGOs and community groups, all working together.

Encroachments into cattle routes due to development and farming activities remains a perennial issue for communities experiencing violence between farmers and herders, and Gengle community is also not exempted. In order, to address the challenge, a 7-man multi-stakeholder committee was established to solve the problem.

Oliver Timothawus sits as the chair of the 7-man committee looking into the issue of natural resource management. “I recall in 2018, the farmer-herder violence led to the relocation of herders out of my community. Before the coming of the COMITAS project, farmers and herders in my area did not see ‘eye-to-eye’ on how to use or share resources. This led to several losses of lives and properties, on both sides. We couldn’t even attend the same markets to transact our legitimate businesses. The various training and awareness activities have been an eye-opener for me and many others. It is in interest of all of us to coexist together to live in peace”.

Understanding that there is also an emotional side of the conflict, Oliver and his team support reconciliatory dialogues for farmers and herders to heal from years of violent conflict. Some of the agreements facilitated by the committee have led to reopening of scores of cattle routes previously blocked at the height of the conflict. Appreciative of this gesture from the farmers, the herders have also agreed to put a stop to young underage boys shepherding cattle, which is also a reason for the frequent encroachments into farmlands.

A delighted Oliver says “Our police station is now empty of the filing of cases between farmers and herders. The community now comes to us to settle disputes instead of taking revenge or going to court”.

Zakka Philemon, the NRMCA Secretary says, “We understand that so much needs to be done to build peace amongst us, and this will require the support of other agencies. We remain grateful for the strides we’ve made as a result of the contributions of COMITAS. The bitterness that existed between farmers and herders in Gengle is no more”.

Mightier than the sword: Restored to teach the dream again following resolution in Bille, Demsa LGA



*After COMITAS intervention in Bille, the farming community ensured Yahaya got restored to his teaching job, which he lost over 5 years ago due to a farmer/herder conflict.
Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps*

Yahaya Mohammed is a 34-year-old, ethnic Fulani herder and also a primary school teacher in Sabon Gari Primary School, Bille Ward, Demsa LGA of Adamawa State. Bille, traditionally consists of farming communities. To the bemusement of Yahaya's pupils he decides to conduct his class for the day using a combination both English and the Bille ethnic language. Yahaya's mastery of both languages brings out the occasional giggles and excitement from the pupils. For the pupils, beyond the sheer gratitude of being able to attend normal school classes after periods of violent conflict, they are even more excited to witness an ethnic Fulani, and a one-time "enemy" of their people communicating with them in their local language.

Yahaya's story is nothing short of the conflict transformation happening in the community of Bille. Just barely a year and a half (1 ½) ago, Yahaya was internally displaced from Bille, the place he called home to a neighboring community in Mayo Belwa LGA of Adamawa State. He is just one example out of thousands of victims who have been displaced by violent resource-based clashes between farmers and herders. The violent clashes between farmers and herders in Bille, beyond the internal displacements, led to

loss of lives, properties and livestock. This led to reprisals in the form of raids and ambushes which lasted for over 5 years.

“Before the crisis, I had lived in Bille for 20 years. I had friends amongst the farmers, and we played soccer together, ate together and even inter-married. Unfortunately, all these changed suddenly after the clashes. We became sworn enemies; when they met us, they killed us and when we met them, we killed them. We stopped attending the same markets and I eventually abandoned my primary source of livelihood, teaching. I did not step into this community until about 1 ½ years ago when the Fulani herders were invited to a reconciliatory activity under the EU-COMITAS project. At first, we all had hesitations and were afraid to come without weapons or security”.

Following the persuasion of the COMITAS team, Yahaya eventually attended the first activity along with some of his relatives due to aspirations for the peace they all longed for. According to Yahaya, “We, the herders had long desired reconciliation because we had lost grazing lands and adequate water for our animals which led to the death of many of them. So, we were extremely happy to sit and negotiate peace”.

Sitting on the protruding roots of a large tree, Yahaya says “COMITAS opened our eyes to the effects of crisis, mutual benefits of peace and led us through reconciliation; something I never thought was possible”. According to him, “COMITAS came in and without guns or the police, helped us to restore peace. The farming community embraced us at the meeting; we forgave one another, and they asked us to return to the community. I returned and was warmly welcomed. An old female farmer gave me a room to stay while the community joined us to rebuild our destroyed homes. They ensured I got restored to my teaching job, thereby helping me to restore the livelihood I lost over 5 years ago. I can now fulfill most of my primary responsibilities to my wife and children”.

Yahaya also shares another example of the renewed trust between farmers and herders. “After my return, a farmer who was a regular participant at the COMITAS activities called me and requested I help him purchase 4 calves from the cattle market. He transferred funds to my personal bank account without any hesitation and did not even accompany me to the market. Now that is trust! I even shed tears in amazement because even my own family member may not entrust me with this magnitude of responsibility. But here is someone once considered my “enemy”, now a trusted ally all because of the support from COMITAS”.

Connecting the dots amid conflict, “Mr. Tough Guy” becomes peace advocate



In a major behavioral shift, Ham has been transformed from an intolerant farmer to a community unifier after attending a COMITAS training in Numan LGA.

Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps

Ham Lot is a 48-year-old farmer and hunter, from the village of Kodomti, Numan LGA Adamawa State Nigeria. He is known as “Mr. Tough guy”, and like others in his village, there is general feeling of disdain towards the Fulani ethnic herders, a group which Ham’s village have been in protracted conflict with for decades, largely fuelled by competition over scarce natural resources like land and water. Ham in previous years was often considered as his village’s main linchpin. Ham’s legacy for engaging in violence transcends beyond the corners of his community, and often seized any opportunity to mete violence on any herder who he felt threatened the livelihoods of his people.

Ham’s position towards the herders was not without reason, which he explains, “Some years ago, herders grazed on a farmer’s cultivated farmland and shot him dead. The fight spread and escalated into a communal crisis. My elder brother, a father of 6 children and 2 grandkids was killed as a result of the crisis. His family is now my responsibility, plus the added responsibilities of catering for mine. I hated every herder and did not tolerate anything that had to do with them”.

Ham’s first encounter with the EU-COMITAS project was in June 2021, during the Mercy Corps organized Interest Based Negotiation (IBN) for farmers and herders in capital city

of Yola. According to Ham, this encounter was a turning point in how his relationship will be transformed towards the herders.

He continues “At the workshop, Mercy Corps trainer drew a diagram with 9 dots in a box and asked us to connect the dots. We all spent considerable time attempting to do that and eventually felt it was impossible. He later demonstrated that the only way to connect the dots is if you think outside the box.”

The simple analogy of connecting the dots was then likened to the conflict Ham and the other participants were experiencing. “The reflections on connecting the dots changed my life. I realized that the problems in my community could be resolved if we opened up to new and innovative ideas. In that workshop, the farmers and herders all reached a point where they could express their grievances towards the other. We were in agreement that we all were guilty of taking the laws into our hands because we were aggrieved that justice was not forthcoming in most cases between the farmers and herders”.

After the workshop, Ham returned to his community a transformed man. According to him, “My behavior towards herders and the factors driving the crisis in general, began to gradually shift because I learnt that we need to view this conflict from a range of perspectives, and constantly also test our assumptions and world-held views. I now have established better relationships with others through the negotiation skills I have learnt. I am no longer a difficult person and open to peace and tolerance. Now, I understand that everyone has an opinion, which is right in his or her eyes but with better information, we are in a better position to reach a consensus on what may seem non-negotiable”.

“I have been accused severally by my community members of being a “sellout” due to my collaborative stance to now work with the herders for mutual solutions on issues that impact on key resources like land and water, which are both important inputs for farming and livestock production. In the past, I would have allowed my emotions take control of me, but I see this as a unique opportunity to also educate my community members on how the IBN model can be used to reach win-win solutions”.

Ham currently serves as a liaison between farmers and herders for his village. As the acting Chair of his community’s COMITAS’s Natural Resource Management Committee (NRMC) his team works as community monitors, identifying early warning conflict signals, analyzing, resolving and reporting on conflict issues.

The “game changer”: Flipping the script for peace with; Hadiza’s story



After COMITAS intervention in her community, Hadiza is now a community mediator in addition to being a herder and housewife. Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps

Although Hadiza is an adviser in a female religious group in her community and a member of a herders’ group, she could not make contributions to the development of her community due to cultural and religious restrictions that impede women participation in community governance. However, overtime things began to change due to introduction of the EU-COMITAS peace building project in Kpasham community, Demsa LGA of Adamawa State.

The project advocates for women’s involvement in natural resource governance within the communities, due to the significant contributions they can make if they are given a chance. Aware of the deterrents for women involvement in governance, the EU-COMITAS project makes sure to work through identified male leaders who pave the way as “gender champions” to encourage more women involvement in decision making processes that impact on land and water resources, which are key to the survival of farmers and herders.

According to Abdulkarim Sabo, a male primary school teacher and secretary of Natural Resource Management Committee (NRMC) in Kpasham, “In the past, we did not allow our women to even come out; they just stayed home, taking care of the kids. Moreover, farmers and herders’ issues were seen as strictly male business until EU-COMITAS enlightened us that women could also contribute to peace building. We gave them a

chance and now we have 3 women on our community development committee which is made up of 8 members”.

Due to the 2018 crisis, the herders fled the community but now the COMITAS intervention is beginning to facilitate their return. “To facilitate the return of the herders, the trained female members of the NRMC held community enlightenment meetings on forgiveness and acceptance of the herders as they returned. They also solved issues between female herd owners and farmers and do go into private homes to resolve issues-something the men are not allowed to,” says Abdulkarim.

Hadiza, 35 years, mother of 4 and owner of 70 animals say her life was greatly impacted by COMITAS as she can now stand and speak in public, unlike before her involvement in COMITAS activities she would be frightened by the mere thought of that happening. “COMITAS has broadened my perspective on the farmer-herder conflict and provided me with the opportunities to also contribute to the solutions. With the permission of my husband, I left my village on an EU-COMITAS sponsored study visit to Kano State, where I saw how farmers and herders live in peace and how they are able to collaboratively work through the dry season to ensure there is constant fodder and water for both parties, thereby reducing conflict. With this new knowledge, we will bring it closer home. There is hope that we can also emulate this”.

According to Abdulkarim, Hadiza has been instrumental in solving conflicts between farmers and herders, especially where the parties are females. Speaking on this, Hadiza confirms that the use of these skills is an outcome of the support and guidance she has received through the training she has received under the EU-COMITAS project. “Recently, I came across a returnee male herder and a male farmer having disagreements on the farm. I applied the 7 elements of Interest Based Negotiation skills I was taught at a COMITAS training to resolve the conflict, which ensures that everyone wins and benefits”.

Being a herder and trained negotiator has not stopped her from playing her role as a wife and mother. In between interviews, she ensured she attended to her children, house chores as well as nursed 2 kids belonging to one of her goats that died at childbirth.

“Because COMITAS has empowered the women of Kpasham, we can now negotiate our rights. We recently approached the traditional leader to include women in the decision-making process of the chieftdom. We also negotiated farmlands for wives of herders, which in the past was unheard of. In the past, lands belonging to farmers or herders who died were not given to their wives to cultivate especially if their children were still under-aged but due to COMITAS training, we can now make demands on farmlands even when our husbands are still alive. Wives of herders can now engage in farming” says a fulfilled Hadiza.

Strange Bedfellows; Absalom & Hassan mending the broken fences in Gereng ward, Girei LGA



From begin adversaries, Absalom and Hassan became “peace ambassadors” after COMITAS intervention in their community. Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps

“There was a day the traditional leader called me to retrieve my cow that had strayed into Gereng community. I had to be rescued out of the village due to attacks by some farmer youth, who made it clear that herders were no longer allowed into the community”. This was the near-death experience of Hassan Yendu, a 27-year-old father of six, herder by trade from Gereng ward Girei LGA, in Adamawa State.

Absalom Agabus, a 36-year-old farmer and father of 3, also from Gereng recounts that “About 7 years ago, some herders let loose their cattle into a cultivated farmland, causing destruction. The farmers reacted aggressively, and things escalated into full blown crisis between farmers and herders. That incident led to the death of over 70 people on both sides and destruction of livestock, houses and other valuables. From that day forward, the farmers and herders of Gereng became sworn enemies and would never be caught within the same location”.

This was the situation of the conflict in Gereng community before the start of peace building activities supported by the EU-COMITAS project. Through their participation in EU-COMITAS activities, Hassan and Absalom have now forged a peace alliance, sharing

their ugly conflict experiences but also recounting times of peace. Peace is a situation both Hassan and Absalom yearn for, not only for themselves but also their communities. This is something, just a few years ago, each thought was impossible. “COMITAS sensitized us to collectively think of ways to peacefully and mutually share our depleting natural resources. We all have a collective responsibility of safeguarding these resources. We are now able to live together, transact business together and eat from the same bowl” says Absalom, who is also the Natural Resource Management Committee (NRMC) Chairman in Gereng.

Elaborating on some of the accomplishments of the NRMC, Hassan says “My 8-year-old brother was once kidnapped and we placed a call to the farmers in the village, who laid siege around exit points until we joined them from the fields. Because of the pressure, the kidnappers abandoned the boy and we rescued him. Also, members of NRMC have negotiated arrangements where legitimate and fair compensations were paid for damages realized as a result of cattle encroachments in farmlands. In the past, such cases mostly ended up in the courts. In the end, both the plaintiff and the accused both lost out on something of value. COMITAS helped us to realize this”.

According to H.R.H Lawan A. Shimiro, the Kpana of Gereng, who is the custodian of the traditional stool of the chieftdom, “Peace started returning after COMITAS came for reconciliatory meetings and now, peace has finally returned. I am grateful to Mercy Corps, IOM and Search for Common Ground as well as all Elected and Government officials who gave COMITAS the permission to intervene in our community”.

According to Absalom “When farmers and herders have issues, they call on NRMC to intervene. Usually Hassan, together with some members of the team and I investigate and ensure justice is eventually realized”. He believes the NRMC is capable of maintaining the peace and co-exist even when COMITAS project comes to an end. “We have witnessed the benefits that peace brings”. Absalom advocates to leaders to establish more water points to serve the needs of herder populations within their settlements. This will help to curtail some of the migration by the herders searching for water, which normally results in conflict with the farmers.

Daring to Dream for Gambo; Back to School to improve his communication skills



It is never too late for Gambo, as attending COMITAS activities challenged him to enroll into a lesson class to enable him read and write. Photo: Eno Jonathan for Mercy Corps

At the age of 44, in the confines of his home, Gambo Ibrahim studiously learns how to read and write. But it does not stop there for Gambo, he has a bigger ambition to further his education and enroll in a school to fulfill this goal.

While Gambo may be a student of western education, he is a leading advocate for peace within his community, in Demsa LGA in Adamawa State Northeast Nigeria. More so, Gambo has been delegated by his community to take a seat on the Natural Resource Management Committee (NRMC). The establishment of the NRMC in Gambo's community is one of the peace initiatives supported through the EU-COMITAS program, which seeks to improve collaboration between farmers and herders over natural resources like land and water. Like many others, Gambo still holds sad memories of the violence between farmers and herders from 2017, which swept throughout his community.

Gambo's conviction to fulfill his education dream is influenced by his participation in the EU-COMITAS peace building activities. This also comes from a sense of responsibility to his community for the trust imposed on him. By pursuing his education goal, Gambo can

effectively communicate across the conflict divide. At times, Gambo felt challenged by the fact that the dialogues between the farmers and herders usually do not meet his personal language preference and capabilities, thus hindering his effective participation. As a member of NRMC, Gambo attends COMITAS activities where he feels like the “odd one out” from the group due to his inability to read or write.

“I had to depend on translators. Also, I would look onto others to fill out my name on attendance sheets while I thumb printed on the signature column. I would store the writing materials I was given because I couldn’t use them myself. I felt really challenged so I approached a primary school teacher in my community to teach me the basics before I enroll into a formal school”.

50-year-old Aminu Bello, Gambo’s teacher said Gambo approached him in November 2021, asking him to teach him how to write his name, sign, count, read figures and signboards. “He has been active and is learning fast and takes his assignments seriously”.

According to Gambo, “I discovered a major reason for farmer-herder clashes is ignorance and lack of effective communication. When I acquire basic education, I would be able to communicate better and enlighten others, using the skills transferred to me through the COMITAS program. I would no longer require translations during the peace dialogues and probably someday, I would become a translator for others perhaps! This will also help me in my business and in life generally. This is an extra benefit I have gotten from COMITAS”.

Gambo, who said his kids jokingly make jest of him when he is studying at home., Gambo goes ahead to demonstrate this milestone by effortlessly writing out his name and signature on the consent for this interview and excitedly counted from 1 to 100.

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