



NO TRIBE IN CRIME

Changing Pastoralism and Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt

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Research and Policy Brief

Farmer-pastoralist conflict in Nigeria has attracted increased media attention both locally and internationally, though its main actors, causes, and consequences are often the source of speculation and rumors. This lack of understanding of conflict dynamics is largely driven by limited evidence on pastoralist groups and practices, particularly as gathered directly from pastoralists themselves. As part of the USAID-funded Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria program, Mercy Corps conducted a study to develop a deeper understanding of the changing dynamics among pastoralist groups, relationships between farmers and different pastoralist groups, and the ways in which these complex dynamics and relationships affect and are affected by conflict. We spoke with pastoralists across the spectrum of movement, farmers, government officials, and civil society representatives, with the aim of informing policymakers, practitioners, and donors on best ways to address conflict.

This qualitative study is based on interviews with 70 people from Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba states, of whom 44 were pastoralists and 21 were farmers. Forty percent of respondents were women. We define a pastoralist as someone whose economic system or way of life is based on the raising and herding of livestock. While other ethnic groups pursue pastoralism in other parts of Nigeria, all pastoralists present in research locations were Fulbe, while farmers came from a variety of ethnic groups.

Key Findings

Pastoralists face increasing challenges and threats to their way of life and security, and they struggle to adapt to these challenges. Pastoralists cited the expansion of farming areas into grazing routes and reserves and insufficient pasture as their primary challenge, in addition to changing weather patterns, causing them to move their cattle to new places with more fertile ground, which exposes herds to new diseases. They also spoke of decreased social cohesion with farmers and increasing fears of violence. To cope with and adapt to these challenges, pastoralists reported changing grazing patterns, shifting to settlements, and seeking new feed for their cattle. These strategies are both caused by and contribute to increased tensions among pastoralist groups and with farmers, as highlighted in these key findings.

Movement of pastoralists from other parts of West Africa is not a key driver of violence.

While there is cross border movement of those who come to parts of Nigeria to support their fellow pastoralists in what is seen as self-defense or revenge actions, the notion of “sudden influx” of herders from other parts of West Africa for livelihood reasons is implausible. Pastoralists have a particular zone of migration as cattle adapt to the ecology of the areas in which they live. If pastoralists move to a new area suddenly, it is likely that many of their cattle will sicken and die due to diseases present in the area and different types of pasture, both of which they have not had the time to adapt to. Movement to a new area altogether is done slowly from location to location over the years so cows can slowly adapt to changing ecology. It can take 10 to 15 years to permanently migrate to a completely new location.



“I lost almost everything. I lost family members, friends, cattle and other property as we tried to escape from the Anti-Grazing Law enforcers in Benue in January 2018,” says Mubaba, a displaced Pastoralist now living in Nasarawa state.

Photograph by Ezra Millistein for Mercy Corps

The shift from whole families to largely young men alone migrating with cattle is both a consequence and cause of conflict.

Long periods of family separation affect family dynamics and relationships between husbands and wives and across generations. It also increases burdens on both the men who migrate and the women who stay behind, as both groups bear family responsibilities that previously would have been shared. Partially to protect themselves through strength in numbers, and partially to share tasks such as cooking and setting up camp, young migrating men are traveling in larger groups.¹ Stresses related to intense pressure to protect the (cattle) wealth of their families and the lack of family support in a time of declining pasture, water and increasing violence combine to intensify conflict dynamics and make violence more likely. The communities through which they pass see these male only groups very differently from pastoralists families migrating, viewing them with increased suspicion and hostility. Isolated from parents, wives, and other family members, these young men no longer have access to the advice of elders, female and male, who used to caution against violence. Respondents linked increasing numbers of fights, encroachment onto farmland, and involvement in criminality with this change.

Trust, social cohesion and strength of relationships between Rindobe (migratory pastoralists) and Jodibe (settled pastoralists) is decreasing as a result of increased farmer-pastoralist violence, intolerance to different gender norms and other factors.

Even though considered as one by many people, pastoralists are highly diverse with levels of movement/settlement being a major difference. While some respondents from both groups had positive things to say about the other, the Jodibe expressed superiority over the Rindobe due to self-perception of being better educated and more religious. Jodibe respondents criticised Rindobe women for dressing in ways they said were not allowed by Islam and Rindobe men for not living up to ideals of Islamic masculinity of men providing for the family as women's milk sales tend to provide for the family's daily needs. These gulfs in gender norms contribute to decreased social cohesion between groups, fewer interactions to avoid 'bad' habits, and conflict along settled/ migratory lines. The Rindobe, on the other hand, reported feeling stigmatised and discriminated against, and stressed their higher level of knowledge of cattle and exposure from living in different places. Whereas both groups used to cooperate with each other and with farmers, these relations have been frayed over time. Rindobe identified 'territories of aggression' where they believe they are likely to be cheated or their property stolen. They reported passing through communities silently, minimising contact with both farmers and Jodibe, as these groups are seen as close to each other.² These tensions contribute to broader conflict between farmers and all types of pastoralists. Non-pastoralist respondents varied in whether they distinguished between different pastoralist groups. They showed less ability to differentiate in areas of greatest tensions and conflict where they were more likely to state that 'Fulani are Fulani' and all the same. Whether this tendency to generalize is a cause or effect of conflict, it is clearly part of the cycle of mistrust between farmers and pastoralists and perpetuates a lack of understanding.

Conflict encounters often occur between women farmers and young male pastoralists and spread to the broader community and to other locations.

¹This shift is also discussed in Saleh Momale, 'Changing Methods of Animal Husbandry, Cattle Rustling and Rural Banditry in Nigeria,' in Mohammed Kuna and Jibrin Ibrahim (eds), *Rural Banditry and Conflicts in Northern Nigeria*, (CDD, 2016), pp. 69-110.

²Ibid.

While violence is popularly understood as taking place between (young) men, crisis points often occur between young male pastoralists and women farmers on farmland and at water points. Women who protest animals eating crops or polluting water are harassed, chased and threatened with rape. Indeed, both farmer and pastoralist men have perpetrated sexual violence against women of the other group. Women have also physically driven away pastoralist men. In both cases, injured masculinity escalates tensions as men in farming communities feel compelled to avenge the attacks on 'their' women or young pastoralist men want to prove their masculinity after being chased away by women.

Political and media narratives often exacerbate tensions, making violence more likely.

Respondents felt conflict and its causes and impacts were not well understood. They said politicians and journalists did not have basic knowledge about Fulbe communities, let alone know the differences between different groups and their ways of life. Media coverage was seen as full of negative reporting with attacks reported as being carried out by Fulbe groups based on little evidence and no corrections issued when subsequent investigation uncovered perpetrators were actually armed gangs or from another group. Reprisal attacks against Fulbe communities are linked to this inaccurate, misleading and biased reporting which triggered cycles of reprisals and counter-reprisals. Lack of impartial justice and rule of law were seen as key drivers of conflict. In many research locations, politicians were seen as key actors driving conflict and violence with policies implemented by federal and state governments often having unintended consequences of decreasing social cohesion, increasing tensions and driving violence.



Respondents identified water as a major driver of conflict. Long early morning walks to the streams leaves women susceptible to attacks.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, governments, donors and practitioners should:

- 1. Facilitate genuine intergenerational dialogue that helps pastoralist families and communities adapt to changes, supports young male pastoralists with pressures they face, addresses the impacts of shifts in livelihood patterns on women and girls, and improves relations.** Dialogues need to be facilitated in ways sensitive to hierarchies of gender, age and power and institutionalized as part of long-term processes which enables the voices of young women and men to be heard on a regular basis.
- 2. Foster peace education, intercultural tolerance, social cohesion, and communication to reduce discrimination, change attitudes on gender equality, shift norms of masculinity, and help farmers and pastoralists control anger and learn peaceful methods of resolving conflict.** Interventions should aim to enhance understanding, tolerance and respect for ethnic, cultural and religious diversity between different groups of pastoralists and between pastoralists and farmers. Spaces for constructive contact with those considered different need to be created and maintained, including through bringing together pastoralists across the nomadic/ sedentary spectrum to share challenges, realities and experiences, repair relations and develop common solutions. At the same time, ways to strengthen relations between migratory pastoralists and farmers and pastoralists settled on lands through which they pass need to be explored, including through discussions between leaders of migratory groups and settled communities.

3. **Encourage farmers and pastoralists to rediscover complementary livelihood modalities, drawing on past practice for example grazing on farmland after harvest to increase soil fertility.** It will also be beneficial to peace to facilitate the opening up of lines of communications where the migratory pastoralists inform local leaders of their presence and movements from the sedentary pastoralist also known as the Ardos and traditional leaders from the farming communities
4. **Jointly map and strengthen existing conflict management, governance and peacebuilding mechanisms to improve inclusiveness, effectiveness, coordination, responsiveness, and accountability.** At present, these mechanisms tend to be uncoordinated, ineffective, unsupported by federal and state governments support, lacking adequate resources and not enabling meaningful participation of particularly excluded groups including women of all ages, young men and migratory pastoralists.
5. **Build the capacity of influencers among pastoralists and farmers, taking an evidence-based and inclusive approach to defining who has influence, to promote intercultural understanding.** Actors should support the strengthening of networks of influential leaders and organizations to identify and mobilize existing social cohesion resources and work collaboratively with each other and the government. Those seen as influencers should not be limited to elite, older men but rather consider who has influence over which groups of people and be inclusive of women of all ages and younger men who often hold great sway not only over members of their own group but others in the community also. Supporting a range of influencers in this manner will facilitate increased knowledge, skills and networks to enhance dialogue, advocate successfully to policy-makers and improve social cohesion in gender transformative and socially inclusive ways.
6. **Work with community-based and civil society organizations towards inter-cultural dialogue, cultural diversity, non-discrimination, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding objectives based on principles of genuine partnership and mutual learning.** Doing so will embed in sustained local capacity, bring together coalitions for advocacy including to challenge conflict insensitive and otherwise harmful government policies and strengthen networking at and between local, state and national levels. These organizations should include pastoralist groups and non-pastoralists associations should be supported to reach out to pastoralists across the settled to migratory spectrum.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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