



HUMAN SECURITY AS A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S FARMERS-HERDERS CRISIS ZONES

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Nigeria's farmers-herders crisis represents one of the most acute manifestations of insecurity, where resource competition, climate variability, and governance failures intersect to produce persistent violence and human insecurity. Despite sustained policy attention, including militarized interventions and land-use reforms, the crisis continues to deepen poverty, disrupt livelihoods, and erode institutional capacity across crisis zones. This article argues that prevailing approaches remain insufficient because they prioritize territorial security over human security. Drawing on the human security paradigm, conflict theory, and political ecology, the study conceptualises the farmers-herders conflict as a multidimensional development challenge rather than a purely security problem. It examines the structural drivers and socio-economic consequences of the conflict and demonstrates how displacement, environmental degradation, and institutional fragility collectively undermine progress toward sustainable development. Using qualitative doctrinal research methodology, the article found out that conventional state-centric and militarized responses have proven insufficient in addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict. It revealed how human security framework offers a comprehensive alternative that places individuals and communities at the center of policy and practice. It noted that sustainable development in Nigeria's farmers-herders crisis zones cannot be achieved without integrating peacebuilding, livelihood protection, and environmental sustainability into a unified policy framework. It concludes that sustainable development in Nigeria's conflict-affected regions requires a shift toward "anti-fragile" systems capable of functioning under conditions of instability, thereby aligning development practice with the realities of contemporary African crises.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of sustainable development across Africa is increasingly confronted by complex and overlapping crises that defy conventional policy responses. While global and regional frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 envision inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and socio-economic transformation, their realization remains uneven, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings¹. Across the continent, the intersection of environmental stress, demographic pressures, weak governance, and protracted insecurity continues to erode development gains². These challenges underscore the growing recognition that sustainable development cannot be achieved in isolation from peace and security. Rather, it requires integrated approaches that address the root causes of vulnerability and instability. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in Nigeria, where the farmers–herders conflict has emerged as a critical barrier to development, particularly in the country's Middle Belt and northern regions³.

Historically, agrarian and pastoral communities in Nigeria maintained a relatively stable and mutually beneficial relationship. Pastoralist groups, particularly the Fulani, engaged in seasonal migration patterns that allowed them to access grazing lands and water resources. At the same time, farming communities benefited from manure and, in some cases, trade relations⁴. These interactions were regulated through customary institutions and local governance systems that facilitated negotiation, conflict resolution, and resource-sharing arrangements⁵. This symbiotic

1 United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

2 African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2015).

3 International Crisis Group, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, Africa Report no. 262 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017).

4 Michael D. Turner, 'Conflict, Environmental Change, and Social Institutions in Dryland Africa: Limitations of the Community Resource Management Approach' (2004) 40(3) *Journal of Development Studies* 1.

5 Abubakar I. Abbass, 'No Retreat No Surrender: Conflict for Survival between Fulani Pastoralists and Farmers in Northern Nigeria' (2012) 8(1) *European Scientific Journal* 331.

relationship contributed to agricultural productivity, enhanced food security, and fostered social cohesion across diverse communities. However, over the past few decades, this delicate balance has eroded, giving way to increasingly frequent and violent confrontations that have resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of livelihoods, and large-scale displacement⁶.

The transformation from cooperation to conflict reflects a convergence of structural and proximate factors. Rapid population growth has intensified competition for increasingly scarce land and water resources, particularly in rural areas where livelihoods depend directly on natural resources. Climate change has further exacerbated these pressures by altering rainfall patterns, increasing the frequency of droughts, and accelerating desertification in northern Nigeria, pushing pastoralists southward into more densely populated farming zones. At the same time, institutional weaknesses—manifested in ineffective land tenure systems, inconsistent policy implementation, and the declining authority of traditional governance structures—have undermined mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons, coupled with the politicization of ethnic and religious identities, has escalated localized disputes into broader, more lethal security crises, often with regional implications.

Despite the scale and persistence of the conflict, policy responses have largely remained reactive and security-driven. Government interventions have primarily focused on military deployments, law enforcement operations, and, in some cases, the creation of grazing reserves or anti-open-grazing laws. While these measures may yield short-term reductions in violence, they often fail to address the underlying drivers of the conflict, including livelihood insecurity, environmental degradation, social exclusion, and governance deficits. Moreover, heavy reliance on coercive approaches can, in some instances, exacerbate tensions, deepen mistrust between communities and the state, and further entrench cycles of violence. This limitation underscores the inadequacy of state-centric

6 Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Farmer-Herder Violence Escalates* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2018).

security paradigms for addressing complex, multidimensional conflicts such as the farmers–herders’ crisis.

In this context, the concept of Human Security provides a useful analytical and policy framework. Unlike traditional approaches that prioritize territorial integrity and state sovereignty, human security shifts the focus to the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities⁷. It encompasses multiple dimensions, including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security⁸. By emphasizing the interdependence of these dimensions, human security offers a more holistic understanding of the drivers of conflict and underdevelopment. In the case of Nigeria’s farmers–herders crisis zones, this approach enables a more nuanced analysis of how insecurity, poverty, environmental stress, and weak governance interact to produce and sustain violence.

This article argues that sustainable development in Nigeria’s farmers–herders crisis zones cannot be achieved without adopting an integrated human security approach. Such an approach requires moving beyond fragmented and sectoral interventions toward coordinated strategies that simultaneously address security, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. It also necessitates the inclusion of local communities, traditional institutions, and other non-state actors in the design and implementation of peacebuilding and development initiatives. By situating human security at the center of policy and practice, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on peace, security, and development in Africa, while offering practical insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars working in conflict-affected contexts. This article proceeds in nine (9) sections. The introductory section is seconded by conceptual and theoretical framework. The third section outlines the methodology. The fourth section discusses the structural drivers of the farmers–herders’ conflict in Nigeria. The fifth section analyses the consequences for sustainable development in Nigeria’s farmers–herders

7 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

8 Caroline Thomas, ‘Global Governance, Development and Human Security: Exploring the Links’ (2001) 22(2) *Third World Quarterly* 159.

crisis zones. The sixth section underlines the limitations of existing policy responses to Nigeria's farmers-herders' crisis. The seventh section proposes the human security framework for sustainable development in Nigeria's farmers-herders conflict. The eighth section makes recommendations towards anti-fragile development in Nigeria's farmers-herders crisis zones. The ninth section is the conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Human Security

The concept of Human Security emerged in response to the limitations of traditional, state-centric security paradigms that prioritize territorial integrity and sovereignty over individual well-being. Its modern articulation is widely traced to the 1994 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which reframed security as a people-centered concern focused on protecting individuals from pervasive and critical threats to their survival, dignity, and livelihoods⁹. This shift marked a significant departure from conventional security thinking by recognizing that threats such as poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and violence are as consequential as military threats.

Human security is commonly conceptualized through three interrelated pillars: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity¹⁰. These dimensions collectively encompass a broad spectrum of insecurities, including economic vulnerability, food insecurity, health risks, environmental stress, personal violence, community fragmentation, and political marginalization. Importantly, the human security framework emphasizes both protection and empowerment—protecting individuals from immediate threats while also strengthening their capacity to cope with and recover from shocks.

In the context of Nigeria's farmers-herders' conflict, human security provides a particularly valuable analytical lens. For example, recurring

9 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report: New Dimensions of Human Security* (1994).

10 United Nations, *Human Security Handbook* (New York: United Nations, 2016).

violent clashes in Benue State—particularly the 2018 attacks in communities such as Guma and Logo—illustrate how insecurity extends beyond physical violence to include displacement, food insecurity, and loss of livelihoods¹¹. Thousands of farming households were forced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water became severely limited. Similarly, attacks in Plateau State have resulted in cycles of retaliatory violence, destruction of crops, and disruption of local economies. These cases demonstrate how the erosion of “freedom from fear” is closely linked to the erosion of “freedom from want” and dignity.

By foregrounding the lived experiences of affected populations, human security highlights how these multiple dimensions of insecurity interact to produce compounded vulnerabilities. It also underscores the need for integrated and preventive policy responses. In Nigeria’s farmers–herders crisis zones, this implies interventions that simultaneously enhance physical security, restore livelihoods, and promote environmental sustainability, thereby aligning peacebuilding efforts with broader development objectives.

Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory provides critical insights into the structural dynamics underpinning the farmers–herders crisis. Rooted in the works of Karl Marx and later scholars, conflict theory posits that social conflict is an inherent feature of societies characterized by inequality and competition over scarce resources¹². It emphasizes that power differentials and structural inequalities shape access to resources, often resulting in tensions and, in some cases, violent confrontations.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria supports this perspective. In Nasarawa State, recurrent clashes between farmers and pastoralists have been linked to disputes over land ownership and grazing routes, exacerbated by

11 Amnesty International, *Harvest of Death: Three Years of Bloody Clashes between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria* (London: Amnesty International, 2018).

12 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin Books 2002); Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Stanford University Press 1959).

unclear land tenure systems and weak institutional mediation¹³. Similarly, in Kaduna State, violent conflicts—particularly in southern Kaduna—have reflected not only resource competition but also deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions, which are often mobilized during periods of political contestation.

These examples illustrate that the farmers–herders crisis is not merely a product of resource scarcity but also of structural inequalities and governance failures. Institutional weaknesses, including ineffective legal frameworks and limited access to justice, contribute to the escalation of disputes¹⁴. In many cases, affected communities resort to self-help measures, including armed retaliation, due to a lack of trust in formal institutions.

Conflict theory also draws attention to the role of structural violence—forms of harm embedded in social, economic, and political systems. In Nigeria, rural communities in conflict-prone areas often face chronic underdevelopment, limited access to infrastructure, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These conditions create a fertile ground for recurring conflict, suggesting that sustainable peace requires addressing both immediate triggers and deeper structural drivers.

Political Ecology

Political Ecology offers a complementary perspective by examining the complex interactions between environmental change and socio-political processes. It challenges purely ecological explanations of environmental problems by demonstrating that issues such as resource scarcity and environmental degradation are deeply embedded in political, economic, and institutional contexts¹⁵.

In Nigeria, climate change has significantly altered ecological conditions, particularly in the northern regions. For instance, in Borno State and Yobe State, desertification and declining rainfall have reduced the availability of

13 International Crisis Group (n 3).

14 Ibid

15 Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (Methuen 1987); Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (2nd edn, Wiley-Blackwell 2012).

pasture and water, compelling pastoralists to migrate southward¹⁶. This southward movement has increased pressure on land in the Middle Belt, intensifying interactions with farming communities and heightening the risk of conflict.

A concrete example can be observed in parts of Taraba State, where competition over fertile riverine land has led to repeated clashes between farmers and herders. These conflicts are often exacerbated by weak land-use policies and the absence of effective mechanisms to regulate seasonal migration¹⁷. Political ecology highlights that such conflicts are not simply the result of environmental scarcity but are shaped by governance failures, policy gaps, and unequal access to resources.

Furthermore, political ecology underscores the role of state policies in either mitigating or exacerbating environmental stress. Inadequate investment in climate adaptation strategies—such as irrigation systems, grazing reserves, and sustainable land management—has limited the capacity of both farmers and pastoralists to cope with changing environmental conditions¹⁸. As a result, environmental pressures are translated into social tensions and, ultimately, violent conflict.

By integrating environmental and political analysis, political ecology provides a nuanced understanding of the farmers–herders crisis. It demonstrates that sustainable solutions must address not only ecological challenges but also the institutional and political factors that shape resource access and conflict dynamics. Together with human security and conflict theory, this framework strengthens the analytical foundation of the study by linking empirical realities to broader theoretical insights.

16 KO Lamidi and OI Olaleye, ‘Critical Analysis of the Contemporary Role of Traditional Institutions on Intra-Communal Conflict Resolution in Southwest Nigeria’ (2023) *African Identities* <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2227353>.

17 Amaka Nnaji and others, ‘Farmer–Herder Conflicts and Food Insecurity: Evidence from Rural Nigeria’ (2022) 51(2) *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review* 391.

18 Ibid

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal research methodology to examine the relationship between human security and sustainable development in Nigeria's farmers–herders crisis zones. The doctrinal approach is appropriate because the study seeks to analyse existing concepts, theories, policy frameworks, and empirical literature relating to conflict, human security, environmental governance, and sustainable development¹⁹. Data for the study were obtained from secondary sources, including academic journal articles, books, government policy documents, reports of international organizations, publications of development agencies, and relevant literature on the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria. Particular attention was given to materials addressing human security, conflict theory, political ecology, climate change, displacement, resource governance, and peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions.

The study employs a thematic content analysis technique to review and interpret the collected literature systematically. Through this approach, recurring themes and patterns relating to the structural drivers of the farmers–herders conflict, its implications for sustainable development, and the limitations of existing policy responses were identified and analysed. The analysis was further guided by the human security framework, conflict theory, and political ecology, which provided the theoretical lens for understanding the multidimensional nature of the conflict and its development consequences. In addition, the study utilizes illustrative evidence from selected conflict-prone states, including Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Taraba States, to demonstrate how issues of insecurity, environmental stress, governance deficits, and livelihood disruption interact to undermine sustainable development outcomes²⁰. These examples are not intended as case studies in the strict empirical sense but serve to contextualize the broader analytical arguments advanced in the article. The qualitative and interdisciplinary nature of the methodology enables a holistic assessment of the farmers–herders crisis by integrating insights from security studies, development studies,

¹⁹ Robbins (n 15).

²⁰ Thomas (n 8).

environmental governance, and peacebuilding literature²¹. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex socio-political phenomena where multiple factors interact across different levels of analysis.

4. STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF THE FARMERS–HERDERS CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

The persistence and escalation of the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood without examining its underlying structural drivers. These drivers are deeply embedded in socio-economic, environmental, and institutional contexts, and they interact in ways that reinforce cycles of violence. Empirical evidence from key conflict zones such as Benue State, Plateau State, Kaduna State, and Nasarawa State demonstrates that the crisis is not driven by a single factor, but rather by a convergence of structural pressures²².

One of the most prominent structural drivers is competition over natural resources, particularly land and water. In Nigeria’s Middle Belt, increasing agricultural expansion has reduced the availability of grazing land, while traditional cattle routes have been encroached upon by farms and urban development. Empirical studies show that disputes over crop damage, grazing rights, water access, and livestock theft are among the most immediate triggers of violence²³. In states such as Benue and Plateau, these tensions have translated into recurring attacks and reprisals, with devastating consequences for rural livelihoods. For instance, research indicates that conflicts in these regions have significantly disrupted agricultural production and weakened food security systems²⁴. This aligns with broader findings that resource competition remains central to the conflict’s dynamics.

21 Blaikie and Brookfield (n 15).

22 Search for Common Ground, ‘Responses to Farmers and Herders Conflicts in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria’, as cited in Daily Trust, ‘Farmers/Herders Crisis: 62,000 Displaced in 4 States – Report’ (Daily Trust, 2017).

23 A Abubakar and others, ‘Governance Challenges and Policy Implementation in Nigeria’s Rural Conflict Management’ (2026) 4(1) *FUDMA Journal of Politics and International Affairs* 35.

24 Ibid

Closely linked to resource competition is the impact of climate change and environmental degradation. Northern Nigeria has experienced increasing desertification, erratic rainfall patterns, and declining soil fertility, all of which have reduced the viability of pastoral livelihoods. As a result, pastoralists—particularly the Fulani—are compelled to migrate southward in search of pasture and water. Empirical evidence confirms that climate-induced migration is a key factor intensifying contact between herders and farmers, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict²⁵. In states like Benue and Taraba, this southward movement has placed additional pressure on already scarce land resources, leading to frequent clashes. The environmental dimension of the conflict underscores the relevance of political ecology in explaining how ecological stress translates into social tensions.

Another critical structural driver is weak governance and institutional failure. Effective management of land and resource disputes depends on clear policies, functional legal frameworks, and credible enforcement mechanisms. However, in many conflict-affected areas of Nigeria, land tenure systems remain ambiguous, and formal institutions lack the capacity or legitimacy to resolve disputes. Empirical studies highlight that weak policy implementation, poor conflict resolution mechanisms, and limited state presence have contributed to the escalation of violence²⁶. For example, in Nasarawa and Kaduna States, the absence of effective mediation structures has often resulted in disputes escalating into armed confrontations. Furthermore, policies such as anti-open-grazing laws, while intended to address the crisis, have sometimes generated new tensions due to perceived bias and inadequate stakeholder consultation.

The proliferation of small arms and militarization of local conflicts further exacerbates the situation. What were once low-intensity disputes have increasingly become deadly encounters involving sophisticated weapons. Recent reports from conflict-affected communities in Benue State indicate large-scale attacks resulting in significant casualties and displacement,

25 Blaikie and Brookfield (n 15); Robbins (n 15).

26 Abubakar and others (n 23).

reflecting the growing lethality of the crisis²⁷. The availability of arms has not only increased the scale of violence but has also emboldened non-state actors, including militias and criminal groups, thereby blurring the line between communal conflict and organized insecurity.

In addition, identity politics and socio-cultural divisions play a significant role in shaping the conflict. While the crisis is fundamentally rooted in resource competition, it is often framed along ethnic and religious lines, particularly between predominantly Muslim pastoralists and largely Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt. Empirical studies from Plateau State reveal that political actors and local elites have, at times, instrumentalized these identities, deepening divisions and fueling cycles of retaliation²⁸. This politicization of identity transforms localized disputes into broader communal conflicts, making them more difficult to resolve.

Economic marginalization and livelihood insecurity also constitute key structural drivers. Rural communities in conflict-prone areas often face high levels of poverty, limited access to infrastructure, and inadequate social services. The destruction of crops, loss of livestock, and displacement of populations further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Evidence from Benue State shows that insecurity has led to measurable declines in agricultural output, with increases in violence directly correlating with reductions in both crop and livestock production²⁹. This not only undermines household livelihoods but also contributes to wider economic losses, with some estimates suggesting that affected states lose a significant proportion of internally generated revenue due to the conflict³⁰.

Finally, demographic pressures and population growth have intensified competition over land and resources. As Nigeria's population continues to

27 Associated Press, 'Mass Killings and Displacement in Benue State Linked to Farmer-Herder Violence' (AP News, June 2023).

28 Chibuike Victor Obikaeze and others, 'Herders-Farmers Conflicts over Farmlands: Implications for Human and Food Security in Nigeria' (2023) 4(2) *ABUAD Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 10.

29 Ifeoma Vivian Nwankwo and others, 'Farmer-Herder Conflict and the Agricultural Livelihood Activities of Farmers in Ebonyi State, Nigeria' (2023) 8(2) *Journal of Community and Communication Research* 45.

30 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *The Impact of Conflict on Agricultural Livelihoods in Nigeria* (Rome: FAO, 2019).

grow rapidly, the demand for arable land increases, leading to the expansion of farming into areas traditionally used for grazing. This encroachment disrupts established patterns of resource use and heightens tensions between communities³¹. Combined with urbanization and infrastructure development, these demographic changes have significantly reduced the availability of open grazing routes, thereby exacerbating conflict dynamics.

In sum, the farmers–herders crisis in Nigeria is driven by a complex interplay of structural factors, including resource scarcity, environmental change, governance deficits, identity politics, and economic marginalization. Empirical evidence from key conflict zones demonstrates that these drivers are mutually reinforcing, creating conditions in which violence becomes recurrent and difficult to resolve³². Addressing the conflict, therefore, requires comprehensive, integrated approaches that go beyond immediate security responses to tackle underlying structural challenges.

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S FARMERS-HERDERS CRISIS ZONES

The farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria has generated a severe and protracted humanitarian crisis characterized by widespread internal displacement. Empirical evidence indicates that states in the Middle Belt—particularly Benue State, Plateau State, and Nasarawa State—have recorded large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a result of recurring violent clashes.³³ In Benue State alone, hundreds of thousands of individuals have been displaced and are currently residing in formal IDP camps or informal settlements.

Displaced populations often face acute shortages of basic services, including healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation. Overcrowding in camps increases the risk of disease outbreaks, while

³¹ Abubakar and others (n 23).

³² Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (n 30).

³³ International Crisis Group (n 3).

limited access to livelihoods exacerbates economic vulnerability. Furthermore, displacement disrupts traditional social networks and coping mechanisms, weakening community resilience. Women and children are particularly vulnerable in these contexts, facing heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and child labor. The protracted nature of displacement also means that many households remain in a state of dependency, unable to rebuild their lives or return to their original communities due to persistent insecurity.

The conflict has had profound implications for livelihoods, particularly in rural communities where agriculture and pastoralism constitute the primary sources of income. In conflict-affected areas such as Kaduna State and Benue State, farmers have been forced to abandon their farmlands due to fear of attacks, while pastoralists have lost significant numbers of livestock to theft, killings, or forced migration³⁴. Empirical studies show that these disruptions have led to sharp declines in household incomes and increased levels of poverty. In many communities, the destruction of crops and loss of livestock represent not only immediate economic losses but also long-term setbacks, as these assets are critical for future production³⁵. Additionally, the breakdown of local markets and trade networks further constrains economic activity, limiting opportunities for income diversification. As a result, affected populations experience reduced resilience and an increased reliance on humanitarian assistance. The cumulative effect of these livelihood disruptions is the deepening of rural poverty, which in turn reinforces the conditions that sustain conflict. Households facing economic hardship may be more likely to engage in negative coping strategies, including migration, resource overexploitation, or participation in violence.

Food insecurity is one of the most significant consequences of the farmers–herders conflict. The disruption of agricultural activities, combined with the displacement of farming populations, has led to a decline in food production in key agricultural regions. For instance, in Benue State—often referred to as the “food basket” of the nation—violent

34 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Community-Based Approaches to Conflict Prevention in Nigeria* (Abuja: UNDP, 2020).

35 Ibid.

conflict has significantly reduced crop yields and farming activities³⁶. This decline in production has broader implications for food supply chains, leading to shortages and rising food prices both locally and nationally. Markets in conflict-affected areas are frequently disrupted, with traders unable to access certain regions due to insecurity. Consequently, food becomes less accessible and less affordable, particularly for vulnerable populations. Empirical evidence also indicates that malnutrition rates are higher in conflict-affected communities, especially among children and pregnant women. Limited access to nutritious food, combined with poor healthcare services, exacerbates health risks and undermines human development outcomes³⁷. Thus, food insecurity not only reflects the immediate impact of conflict but also contributes to long-term developmental challenges.

The farmers–herders conflict has also contributed to significant environmental degradation, further complicating efforts toward sustainable development. Displacement and population concentration in host communities and IDP camps place additional pressure on already scarce natural resources. In states such as Taraba State and Plateau State, increased demand for firewood, water, and arable land has led to deforestation, soil erosion, and depletion of water sources³⁸. Moreover, the abandonment of farmlands due to insecurity can result in land degradation, as unattended land may become overgrown or susceptible to erosion. At the same time, the concentration of livestock in limited safe areas can lead to overgrazing, further degrading the environment. These environmental impacts create a feedback loop: as natural resources become scarcer, competition intensifies, thereby increasing the likelihood of further conflict.

This dynamic highlights the interconnected nature of environmental sustainability and peace, reinforcing the need for integrated approaches that address both ecological and socio-economic dimensions of the crisis³⁹.

36 World Bank, *Nigeria Food Security and Conflict Assessment* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018).

37 International Crisis Group (n 3).

38 Ibid

39 Federal Government of Nigeria, *Policy Reports on Grazing Reserves and Livestock Transformation Plans* (Abuja: Government of Nigeria, 2020).

Persistent conflict has significantly weakened governance structures and undermined public trust in state institutions across affected regions. In many parts of Kaduna State and Plateau State, repeated violence has exposed the limited capacity of government agencies to prevent or effectively respond to crises⁴⁰.

Institutional fragility manifests in several ways, including weak law enforcement, ineffective judicial systems, and limited delivery of public services. Communities often perceive state institutions as biased or incapable, leading to a loss of confidence and, in some cases, the emergence of alternative forms of authority, such as vigilante groups⁴¹. This erosion of trust further complicates peacebuilding efforts, as cooperation between communities and the state becomes increasingly difficult.

Additionally, institutional fragility constrains long-term development planning and implementation. Resources that could be invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare are often diverted toward security responses. As a result, development initiatives are either delayed or rendered ineffective, perpetuating cycles of underdevelopment and instability.

6. LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING POLICY RESPONSES TO NIGERIA'S FARMERS-HERDERS CRISIS

Policy responses to the farmers–herders' crisis in Nigeria have largely been dominated by security-centric strategies, particularly the deployment of military forces and law enforcement agencies to conflict-affected areas. Operations such as military task forces in the Middle Belt and internal security deployments in states like Benue State and Kaduna State have been aimed at restoring order and deterring violence. While these interventions have, in some instances, reduced the intensity of attacks in the short term, empirical evidence suggests that they have not produced sustainable peace⁴².

40 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (n 30).

41 Ibid

42 Federal Government of Nigeria, *National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) 2019–2028* (Abuja: Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2019).

One major limitation of these approaches is their failure to address the root causes of the conflict, including competition over land, environmental degradation, and livelihood insecurity. For example, despite repeated military interventions in Benue State following the 2018 attacks, violence has continued to recur, indicating that coercive measures alone are insufficient⁴³. In some cases, heavy military presence has also been associated with human rights concerns and strained relations between local communities and security forces. Moreover, security-driven responses tend to be reactive rather than preventive. They are often deployed after violence has already escalated, rather than addressing early warning signs or underlying grievances. This reactive posture allows cycles of retaliation to persist, as communities perceive state responses as inadequate or delayed⁴⁴. Consequently, while security interventions remain necessary for immediate stabilization, their overreliance without complementary socio-economic and environmental strategies limits their long-term effectiveness.

Another significant limitation of existing policy responses is the fragmentation of institutional and policy frameworks. In Nigeria, policies related to land use, agriculture, livestock management, environmental protection, and security are often developed and implemented in isolation, with limited coordination across sectors and levels of government⁴⁵. This lack of integration undermines the effectiveness of interventions and contributes to policy inconsistencies. A clear example is the tension between anti-open grazing laws enacted in states such as Benue State and Ekiti State, and federal initiatives such as the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP). While state-level laws aim to restrict open grazing to reduce conflict, they have sometimes been implemented without adequate provision of alternatives such as ranching infrastructure⁴⁶. At the same time, federal programs designed to modernize livestock production have faced challenges related to funding, coordination, and local acceptance.

43 International Crisis Group (n 3).

44 Federal Government of Nigeria (n 42).

45 Ibid

46 International Crisis Group (n 3).

This fragmentation creates policy gaps and contradictions that can exacerbate tensions. For instance, pastoralists affected by anti-open grazing laws may perceive these policies as exclusionary or discriminatory, particularly when alternative livelihoods are not readily available. Similarly, the absence of a coherent national land-use policy contributes to overlapping claims and disputes over land ownership. Empirical studies indicate that such inconsistencies weaken policy effectiveness and hinder the development of sustainable solutions to the conflict.

A further limitation of existing policy responses is the inadequate inclusion of local communities in the design and implementation of interventions. Many government initiatives adopt a top-down approach, with limited consultation of the farmers, pastoralists, and community leaders who are directly affected by the conflict⁴⁷. This exclusion reduces the legitimacy, acceptance, and sustainability of policy measures. Empirical evidence from conflict-affected areas such as Plateau State and Taraba State shows that local communities often possess indigenous knowledge and conflict resolution mechanisms that are overlooked in formal policy processes⁴⁸. Traditional institutions, including community elders and local mediators, have historically played a critical role in managing disputes over land and resources. However, their marginalization in contemporary governance structures has weakened local capacity for conflict resolution.

The exclusion of communities also contributes to mistrust between citizens and the state. Policies that are perceived as imposed or biased are less likely to be complied with and may even provoke resistance. For example, some pastoralist groups have resisted settlement or ranching initiatives due to concerns about loss of mobility, cultural identity, and economic viability⁴⁹. Similarly, farming communities may view certain government interventions as insufficient in addressing their security concerns. Inclusive approaches that actively engage stakeholders in dialogue, decision-making, and implementation are therefore essential for

47 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Environmental Impacts of Conflict and Displacement in Nigeria* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020).

48 World Bank (n 36).

49 Ibid

building trust and ensuring the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts. Without such participation, policy responses risk being ineffective or counterproductive, further entrenching the cycle of conflict.

7. HUMAN SECURITY FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S FARMERS-HERDERS CONFLICT

A human security approach offers an integrated and people-centered pathway for addressing the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria. Unlike conventional security strategies that emphasize coercive state responses, the Human Security framework prioritizes the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities by addressing the interlinked drivers of insecurity, poverty, and environmental stress. Empirical evidence from conflict-affected regions such as Benue State, Plateau State, and Nasarawa State demonstrates that where holistic, community-centered interventions have been attempted, levels of violence and social tension have shown relative reduction compared to areas relying solely on militarized approaches⁵⁰.

Strengthening peacebuilding and social cohesion is a central pillar of the human security approach. Empirical evidence shows that community-based dialogue platforms, mediation committees, and intergroup reconciliation initiatives can significantly reduce mistrust between farmers and pastoralists. In parts of Kaduna State, for example, peace committees supported by civil society organizations and traditional rulers have facilitated negotiated access to grazing routes and farming areas, reducing the frequency of violent clashes in some communities⁵¹. Similarly, in Plateau State, inter-communal dialogue initiatives have helped rebuild fractured relationships following cycles of retaliatory violence. These mechanisms are particularly effective when they involve respected traditional leaders, religious figures, women's groups, and youth representatives. Evidence suggests that locally driven peacebuilding initiatives are more sustainable because they reflect shared norms and are

50 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (n 34).

51 Ibid

perceived as legitimate by all parties involved⁵². However, their effectiveness is often limited when they are not supported by formal state institutions or when underlying structural issues remain unresolved.

Climate-resilient resource governance is essential for reducing competition over land and water resources. Empirical studies indicate that investments in sustainable land management, reforestation, irrigation systems, and regulated grazing corridors can significantly reduce resource-based tensions⁵³. In northern Nigeria, where desertification has reduced available grazing land, initiatives promoting ranching and controlled grazing have shown potential in reducing farmer–herder interactions that often lead to conflict. For instance, pilot ranching schemes and livestock transformation initiatives in parts of Ekiti State and Nasarawa State have demonstrated that structured livestock systems can improve productivity while reducing environmental degradation⁵⁴. However, implementation challenges—including inadequate funding, resistance from pastoralist communities, and weak institutional coordination—have limited their scalability.

From a human security perspective, climate-resilient governance requires not only technical solutions but also inclusive policy design that takes into account the socio-cultural and economic realities of both farmers and pastoralists. Without such inclusivity, well-intentioned environmental policies risk deepening existing inequalities and tensions. Livelihood protection is a critical dimension of human security, as economic insecurity is both a driver and consequence of the farmers–herders conflict. Empirical evidence shows that households engaged in diversified livelihoods are more resilient to shocks associated with conflict and environmental change. In conflict-affected areas of Benue and Kaduna States, reliance on a single livelihood source—such as rain-fed agriculture or pastoralism—has increased vulnerability to displacement and income loss⁵⁵. Programs that promote alternative livelihoods, such as agro-processing, small-scale trading, vocational training, and cooperative

⁵² Thomas (n 8).

⁵³ Kazeem Lamidi, ‘Local Institutions and Peacemaking in Southwest Nigeria’ (2021) 11(1) *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 55-79

⁵⁴ United Nations (n 10).

⁵⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (n 30).

farming, have been shown to reduce economic pressure on contested land resources. For example, development interventions supported by international agencies in parts of the Middle Belt have provided youth with skills training and microcredit schemes, contributing to reduced participation in violence and improved household resilience.

However, empirical evidence also suggests that livelihood interventions are most effective when combined with security guarantees and market access. Without stable security conditions, economic programs alone are insufficient to break the cycle of poverty and conflict⁵⁶. Displacement-sensitive development is essential in addressing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. The large-scale displacement observed in states such as Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa has created significant pressures on host communities, including increased demand for housing, food, and social services⁵⁷. Integrating displaced populations into local economies and development planning is therefore critical for both humanitarian relief and long-term stability.

Empirical evidence from internally displaced persons (IDP) settlements in Benue State shows that where displaced populations are provided with access to farmland, vocational training, and local markets, they are more likely to achieve economic self-reliance and less likely to engage in secondary displacement. Conversely, exclusion from local economic systems often leads to prolonged dependency and heightened social tensions with host communities⁵⁸. A human security approach emphasizes the need for inclusive policies that recognize displaced populations not merely as beneficiaries of aid but as active contributors to local development. This includes ensuring access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, as well as fostering social integration between displaced and host communities.

56 Kazeem Lamidi, 'Conflict Analysis in Peacebuilding: A Review' (2022) 31(4) *African Security Review* 399-414.

57 Mikail Babatunde Atolagbe, 'Causes and Consequences of Farmer-Herder Conflict on Food Production in Selected Agricultural Zones of Kwara State, Nigeria' (2024) 6(2) *Al-Hikmah Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 120.

58 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (n 34).

Institutional strengthening is a foundational requirement for the effective implementation of human security-based interventions. Empirical studies consistently show that weak governance structures, limited state capacity, and lack of coordination among agencies have undermined conflict management efforts in Nigeria⁵⁹. In many conflict-prone areas, delays in response, inconsistent enforcement of laws, and perceived bias in state institutions have eroded public trust. For example, in Kaduna and Plateau States, communities often report limited confidence in security agencies due to delayed responses to early warning signals of violence. This institutional weakness allows conflicts to escalate before intervention occurs⁶⁰. Strengthening governance capacity therefore requires improving early warning systems, enhancing inter-agency coordination, and ensuring accountability in conflict response mechanisms.

Additionally, integrating traditional institutions and community-based organizations into formal governance structures can enhance legitimacy and effectiveness. Evidence from local peace committees in Nasarawa State demonstrates that hybrid governance arrangements—combining state authority with customary leadership—are more effective in mediating disputes and sustaining peace. From a human security perspective, strong institutions are not only those that enforce law but also those that are responsive, inclusive, and trusted by the communities they serve.

8. TOWARD ANTI-FRAGILE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA'S FARMERS-HERDERS CRISIS ZONES

Sustainable development in conflict-affected regions such as the farmers–herders crisis zones in Nigeria requires systems that go beyond resilience and stability toward adaptability under conditions of repeated shocks⁶¹. In contrast to fragile systems that break under stress and merely resilient systems that return to a previous state, anti-fragile systems evolve, improve, and become stronger through exposure to disruption⁶². In the context of the Human Security framework, anti-fragility implies designing

59 International Crisis Group (n 3).

60 Ibid

61 Lamidi (n 56).

62 International Crisis Group (n 3).

governance and development systems that learn from conflict dynamics and transform them into opportunities for institutional strengthening and social innovation.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria's Middle Belt demonstrates that areas with rigid governance structures and reactive security responses tend to experience recurrent cycles of violence. For example, in parts of Benue State and Plateau State, repeated farmer–herder clashes continue despite periodic military interventions, indicating that static policy responses are insufficient in dynamic conflict environments⁶³. Conversely, communities that have adopted adaptive mechanisms—such as early warning systems, negotiated grazing arrangements, and locally monitored resource-sharing agreements—have shown relative reductions in violent incidents. These cases suggest that flexibility and learning-oriented governance structures are critical for managing recurring conflict.

Adaptive governance is a core pillar of anti-fragile development. It emphasizes decentralized decision-making, real-time learning, and institutional flexibility in responding to emerging risks. Empirical studies from conflict-prone areas in Kaduna and Nasarawa States show that local peace committees, when empowered and linked to formal security institutions, can respond more quickly to early warning signals of violence than centralized state systems⁶⁴. For instance, community-based conflict monitoring networks supported by civil society organizations have helped identify potential flashpoints between farmers and pastoralists before they escalate into violence. These systems rely on local knowledge, trust networks, and rapid communication channels, enabling more timely interventions. However, their effectiveness depends on institutional recognition and sustained support from government agencies.

Inclusive policy design ensures that all stakeholders—farmers, pastoralists, traditional rulers, women, youth, and displaced populations—are actively involved in shaping policies that affect their livelihoods. Empirical evidence shows that exclusionary policies, such as

63 Ibid

64 Lamidi (n 56)

poorly implemented anti-open grazing laws or unilateral land-use regulations, often intensify tensions rather than resolve them⁶⁵.

In contrast, participatory approaches, such as stakeholder consultations conducted during the development of livestock transformation initiatives, have shown greater potential for acceptance and sustainability. For example, pilot ranching programs in parts of Ekiti State and Nasarawa State demonstrated that when pastoralists are involved in site selection, infrastructure planning, and compensation frameworks, compliance and cooperation improve significantly⁶⁶. This highlights the importance of co-ownership in policy formulation as a mechanism for reducing resistance and enhancing legitimacy.

Continuous learning and innovation are essential for building anti-fragile systems capable of responding to evolving conflict dynamics. In Nigeria's farmers–herders crisis zones, conflict patterns are not static; they shift in response to climate variability, population movements, and policy changes. Empirical evidence suggests that interventions that incorporate monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms are more effective in reducing violence over time⁶⁷.

For example, early warning and early response systems supported by regional organizations and NGOs in Plateau and Benue States have improved the ability of communities and authorities to anticipate and mitigate violence. These systems integrate data from local informants, security agencies, and community leaders to identify emerging threats. Similarly, agricultural innovation programs promoting climate-smart agriculture and drought-resistant crops have helped some farming communities adapt to environmental stress, reducing dependence on contested land areas⁶⁸. However, the scalability of such innovations remains limited by weak institutional coordination and inadequate funding. Strengthening learning systems requires not only technological

65 Federal Government of Nigeria (n 42).

66 Kazeem Lamidi and Ify Igbokwe, 'Social Investment Programmes in Nigeria: Impact and Challenges' (2021) 11(1) *African Journal of Social Work* 1.

67 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Climate-Smart Agriculture and Conflict Mitigation in West Africa* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020).

68 Lamidi (n 56).

tools but also institutional cultures that value experimentation, feedback, and adaptation.

In sum, moving toward anti-fragile development in Nigeria's farmers–herders conflict zones requires a fundamental shift from reactive, static interventions to dynamic, learning-oriented governance systems. Empirical evidence from conflict-affected states such as Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and Nasarawa demonstrates that where governance structures are flexible, inclusive, and adaptive, communities are better able to manage and transform conflict pressures. By integrating adaptive governance, inclusive policy design, and continuous learning, development systems can evolve in ways that not only withstand shocks but also transform them into opportunities for peacebuilding and sustainable development.

9. CONCLUSION

The farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria represents one of the most persistent and multidimensional threats to sustainable development in contemporary Nigeria. Its impacts extend far beyond localized violence to include widespread displacement, livelihood collapse, food insecurity, environmental degradation, and institutional weakening across affected regions such as Benue State, Plateau State, Kaduna State, and Nasarawa State. Empirical evidence presented in this study demonstrates that the crisis is not merely a security problem, but a complex development challenge rooted in structural inequalities, environmental stress, governance deficits, and competing livelihood systems.

The analysis has shown that conventional state-centric and militarized responses, while necessary for immediate stabilization, have proven insufficient in addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict. Similarly, fragmented policy interventions and limited community participation have constrained the effectiveness and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts. These limitations underscore the urgent need for a paradigm shift toward more integrated and people-centered approaches to conflict management and development planning. This study has demonstrated that the farmers–herders conflict in Nigeria is fundamentally a human security and sustainable development challenge rather than merely a law-and-order problem. The analysis reveals that the persistence of the conflict is driven

by a complex interaction of structural factors, including competition over land and water resources, climate change-induced environmental degradation, weak governance institutions, demographic pressures, livelihood insecurity, and the politicization of ethnic and religious identities. These interconnected drivers have transformed what were once localized disputes into a protracted crisis with significant implications for national development.

The findings further show that the consequences of the conflict extend far beyond physical insecurity. Recurrent violence has generated widespread displacement, undermined agricultural productivity, deepened poverty, exacerbated food insecurity, accelerated environmental degradation, and weakened state institutions across conflict-affected regions. These outcomes collectively threaten progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals and Nigeria's broader development aspirations by eroding both human welfare and institutional capacity. The study therefore establishes a clear linkage between insecurity and underdevelopment, demonstrating that sustainable development cannot be achieved in contexts where human security remains fragile. A key finding of the study is the inadequacy of existing policy responses. While military deployments, anti-open grazing laws, and livestock transformation initiatives have sought to address aspects of the crisis, their effectiveness has been constrained by fragmented implementation, limited stakeholder participation, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient attention to the root causes of conflict. The predominance of reactive and security-centred approaches has produced only temporary gains while leaving underlying grievances and vulnerabilities largely unresolved.

The study consequently argues that a human security framework provides a more comprehensive and sustainable pathway for addressing the crisis. By integrating peacebuilding, climate-resilient resource governance, livelihood protection, displacement-sensitive development, and institutional strengthening, the human security approach addresses both the immediate manifestations and structural drivers of conflict. Evidence reviewed in the study suggests that interventions grounded in community

participation, inclusive governance, and local ownership are more likely to promote durable peace and sustainable development outcomes than coercive measures alone.

The article also advances the concept of anti-fragile development as a strategic framework for conflict-affected regions. Rather than merely restoring communities to pre-conflict conditions, anti-fragile systems emphasize adaptability, learning, and institutional innovation in the face of recurring shocks. The study finds that development systems that incorporate adaptive governance, participatory decision-making, early warning mechanisms, and continuous learning are better positioned to manage uncertainty and transform conflict pressures into opportunities for resilience and growth. In consonance with recent insurgence occurrence in Oyo State, sustainable development in Nigeria's farmers-herders crisis zones requires a fundamental shift from state-centric security responses toward people-centred approaches that prioritize human dignity, livelihood security, environmental sustainability, and inclusive governance. Addressing the conflict through a human security lens offers not only a pathway to reducing violence but also an opportunity to build more resilient communities, stronger institutions, and a more sustainable foundation for peace and development. The future of Nigeria's development agenda will depend significantly on its ability to address the human security deficits that continue to fuel the farmers-herders crisis and other forms of contemporary insecurity.