Resource- Based Conflict and Rural Poverty in Benue State

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Abstract

Central Nigeria is a region blessed with a rich physical environment that offers several opportunities for man to exploit. The natural environment of the region provides several resources including mineral resources, vegetal resources, water resources, agricultural lands resources among others which have been extensively exploited by man in the course of his economic activities. Consequently, the struggle over some of these resources in the region especially agricultural land and water resources between Farmers and Pastoralists in the last two decades has led to a sustained violent conflict in the area leading to a large displacement of farmers, damage to infrastructure, institutions, production and brake up of communities and social networks therefore exacerbating poverty in the region. It is against this background that the paper examines the Farmers and Pastoralists violent conflict in Benue State and its devastating effects on rural farmers in the area. The paper identifies factors such as climate change, the influx of foreign pastoralist into the country and lack of government decisive policy action on resolving the conflict among others as being responsible for the lingering conflict. It finally submits that everything should be done by government and other concerned stakeholders towards timely resolution of the conflict. The methodology adopted for the study is a historical methodology, utilizing materials from both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Farmers, Pastoralists, Conflict, Poverty and North Central.

[1]Introduction

Conflicts among farmers and pastoralists in Africa and by extension Nigeria is an age-old phenomenon. Unlike in the past when such conflicts were resolved amicably, today's conflicts are often violent and protracted. They involve very sophisticated weapons and the use of even mercenary elements making it very difficult to resolve. Central Nigeria, which is one of the six Geopolitical zones in the country today, has had enough of its own share of these violent conflicts between pastoralists and farmers. In the last one decade, it has become very glaring that Central Nigerian region has become the epicenter of this conflict certainly due to the geographical attributes of the region which support a wide range of agricultural practices such as crop farming and animal husbandry. For instance it was reported that the pastoralists – farmers violent conflict claimed an estimated 8,000 lives from 2011 to 2019 in Nigeria based on a 2019 joint assessment by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Migrant and Internally Displaced Persons.[1] Similarly, the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict is also alarming with an estimated 620,000 people that have been displaced in states such as Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau where the conflicts have been prevalent. In Benue, over 180,000 people were internally displaced living in at least eight Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps.[2]

In Benue state, the pastoralists-farmers conflict has been a frequent occurrence but there was a sharp rise in the rate of occurrence from 2014 with a crescendo of escalation in 2018 following the state government commencement of the implementation of 'Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017' which made a large number of pastoralists to emigrate from the State into neighbouring states like Nasarawa, and Taraba.The 'Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017' that came into effect in Benue state itself was as a product of the continues escalation of violent conflict against Benue farmers perpetrated by pastoralists (herdsmen) which began to take a worrisome dimension as far back as 2011. In February 2016, for instance, Agatu Local Government Area of Benue state was attacked by armed herdsmen leaving over 300 people dead with property amounting to billions of naira destroyed[3]. The herdsmen later claimed responsibility for this attack through a press conference but none of them was arrested for questioning by the security agencies.[4]

1. The Center for Democracy and Development House Abuja, 'Local Learning: Ideas for Reducing Farmers- Herder Conflict in Nigeria'. Policy Brief. www.cddwestafrica.org, November, 2020.
2. The Center for Democracy and Development House Abuja…
3. Peter Duru, '7,000 Persons displaced in Fulani Herdsmen, Agatu Farmers clash in Benue', www.vanguardngr.com, 29th February, 2016. Retrieved 2/8/2021.
4. Peter Duru, 'Why we attacked Agatu-Fulani Herdsmen' www.vanguardngr.com, March 4,2016

The largest number of pastoralists that left Benue state following the commencement of the implementation of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017 eventually moved into Nasarawa state. Consequently, from the beginning of 2018 to date (2023), the farming communities of Benue state along Benue – Nasarawa border have experienced violent attacks from pastoralists more than other parts of the state. Several villages along Nasarawa – Benue state border in Guma, Makurdi and Gwer West Local Government Areas of Benue state have been terribly affected by this conflict in recent time. The most complicated part of the conflict since 2018 is that, most of the pastoralists have actually moved out of Benue state but they come from Nasarawa state to launch violent attacks on unsuspecting members of these border communities either at nights or in the day time. The strategy being used is the guerrilla warfare tactics. Many farmers have been killed either on their farms or in their sleep at night. Consequently, many of these villages have been abandoned for some years now as most of the people are now staying in Internally Displaced Camps and few others with their relations.[5] This conflict has brought very devastating effects on these communities leading to continues rise in rural poverty among the people which pose a very serious danger for the future survival of the rural farmers in the area.

As observe by Mullen, there is a persuasive case for a correlation between violent conflict and poverty. In rural environment, conflict leads to the destruction of basic food crops; the undermining of social capital; ethnic dissent and community disruption; the spread of AIDS, which debilitates the workforce and increases the dependent rates, and the rape and kidnap of young women.[6] It is against this background that the paper examines the violent conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Benue state and its effect on rural poverty with the aim of charting a way forward towards resolving the conflict.

Major Causes of the Conflict

A lot of factors have been identified by researchers as being responsible for the continuous rise in the wave of conflict between pastoralist and farmers in Central Nigeria and by extension, Benue state. For the purpose of this paper, we shall consider few of those causes. According to Idyorugh,[7] the following are the causes of migration and conflict between the pastoral Fulani and the crop farmers in central Nigeria:

a. There is desert encroachment in the far North that makes open grazing difficult during the dry season from November to May.
b. There is environmental pollution and degradation in the far North caused by overgrazing.
c. There is global warming and it affects rainfall and resulting into high temperatures in the north.
d. There is poor maintenance culture in the provision of social services such as water, health clinics and schools on the grazing reserves that were established in the past under Grazing Reserve Act of Northern Nigeria 1965.

e. There is cattle rustling by thieves and armed bandits on open grazing in the far North.
f. Herdsmen's cultural believe that when their cattle are introduced into crops and they consume of it, they become more fertile.
g. Ethnocentric behavior of the nomads to retain nomadic culture even though it is an obsolete way of raising animals.
h. Herdsmen's constant introduction of their herds into crop farms to destroy crops thereby instigating crisis.
i. Lack of effective border control and immigration services leaves Nigeria with a porous border through which foreigners, especially herdsmen so easily cross into Nigeria at will, criminals and legitimate visitors alike.

Similarly, International Crisis Group Report 2017 on Pastoralists/Farmers violent conflict in Central Nigeria[8] identifies key drivers of the conflict as thus:

Drought and Desertification: Nigeria's far north is arid and semi-arid with a long dry season and limited rainfall. There are sufficient evidence that the amount of rainfall in the region has continued to decrees in the last few decades compared to what was obtainable in the past. In the last six decades, over 350,^{2}000 sq km of the arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions. This condition is progressing southward at the rate 0.6km per year. These adverse environmental conditions have negative effect on agriculture and human livelihoods, pushing millions of pastoralists to migrate south in search of productive land therefore putting undue pressure on Central Nigeria. This development has sparked off increasing crisis over land and water use with central Nigeria's growing population of sedentary crop farmers.

Loss of Grazing Reserves: Most of the grazing reserves established by the northern regional government in the 1960s have been lost to increasing development in human activities.Even the only few reserves that were formally documented, the government failed to back these agreements with appropriate legislation to prevent encroachment. Today most of what was intended to serve as grazing reserves has been taken over by rapid population growth and its demand for farm land as well as urbanization. This in the end has significantly reduced the availability of designated grazing reserves, compelling herders to look for pasture elsewhere.

***Changes* in Pastoralism and Farming Practices:** Changing practices among both farmers and pastoralists have also created tension between them. Over the last three decades, some cattle herders have gradually adopted sedentary life styles, leaving

5. International Crisis Group: Report 252/ Africa 19th September, 2017. https://www.crisisgroup.org. retrieved 17/9/2021

cattle herding increasingly to young men or boys who often lack the maturity to resolve dispute amicably. Meanwhile crop farmers have continued to expand into hitherto uncultivated areas following new agricultural policies and programmes such as National Fadama Development Projects (NFDPs) which encouraged dry season farming along most of the wetland that were not utilized during dry season before. Also the general increase in the number of large scale farmers in the country to cater for the teeming population has actually brought a lot of land which used to undergo fallow under cultivation. As a result, herders have lost access to a lot of grass wetlands which they had previously used with little risk of livestock straying into farms. In this changed environment, relations between pastoralists and farmers have become more competitive and aggressive leading to violent conflict.

Rural Banditry and Cattle Rustling: Rural banditry and cattle rustling have been going on in large scale in many states across northern Nigeria. While several states particularly in the north western Nigeria are home to this crime, cattle theft has also been a major source of funding for Boko Haram in the north east. The activities of Vigilante groups formed to combat bandits in some of these areas where the arrest and summary execution of rustlers sometimes has brought about massive retaliatory violence on communities. The above scenario has continued to push more pastoralists down to the south which has accounted for the crisis in the North Central Nigeria which as a transition zone.

Rising Conflicts across Northern Nigeria: In the last two decades, emerging conflicts in northern Nigeria have displaced many pastoralists southwards. These conflicts are linked to poverty, inequality and religious extremism which have devastated local economies, livelihoods including cattle rearing. In Borno state, the north east chairman of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) Alhaji Mafindin Danburam, claims the association members lost over one million cattle to the Boko Haram insurgency. The losses and insecurity have forced many herders to move southwards. Also easy access to small arms including assault rifles has compounded the situation. Weapons come from various sources, some local others from black markets across West and Central Africa. Pastoralists say they carry weapons to defend themselves and their herds against heavily armed rustlers and other criminal gangs in farming communities. This situation has given enough clues as regard the increasing tension between the gun bearing pastoralist and the poor farming communities in central Nigeria in recent times.

Erosion of Traditional Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution: A few decades ago, herders and community chiefs used to resolve disagreement between their subjects without much difficulty. Disputes over wondering stock or damaged crops typically were resolved by village chiefs and herders leaders. Those that could not be resolved were referred to higher authorities. This system started collapsing in the 1970s, undermined by the involvement of the police and courts. Thus the absence of effective mediation mechanisms, as well as sustained

community-level dialogue has created room for more violence between pastoralists and farmers.

Most of the reasons outlined above constitute the push factors that are forcing the pastoralists to move toward the central Nigeria region. But it is also proper to identify the pull factors in the Benue Valley that are attracting them to the area. It is very clear to every sane mind that Benue Valley has a good rainfall and greener pastures with a lush vegetation that is very good for grazing of cattle. Thus Benue state being at the centre of Benue Valley, populated by a large number of rural farmers has eventually become the major theatre for this conflict between pastoralists and rural farmers. This is a conflict over land and water, the two resources that are very important to the survival of both farmers and pastoralists.

A Synopsis of Pastoralists-Farmers Violent Conflicts in Benue State before 2018

At the beginning, herdsmen attacks to Benue farmers came in trickles and many people regarded them as isolated cases that would soon come to an end. After all, the Fulani Pastoralists and Benue farmers had lived peacefully together for several decades. Violent confrontations seemed rare because, the pastoralists apparently appreciated their guest status. They normally negotiated their entry into communities through legitimate gatekeepers, and were allocated grazing and residential spaces. If their cattle strayed and ate up someone's crops, the herdsmen negotiated and paid compensation where demanded. Communities on their part ensured that herdsmen who lost their cattle or were assaulted by anyone were fairly treated and compensated. Today, the seemingly orderly and peaceful disposition of the herdsmen has disappeared. In its place we now have pastoralists who carry AK47 and other automatic rifles which they have used to kill and maim hundreds of unsuspecting farmers and driven them out of their lands and homes.[9] Thus there is a huge reduction in crop production as a result of the destruction of crops by cattle and displacement of farmers on their ancestral lands. This translates into a low income and a deepening of poverty among rural farmers.

This dramatic change of attitudes by the hitherto friendly pastoralists to hostile herdsmen toward their hosts, the Benue crop farmers around 2011/20112 marked a turning point in the cordial relationship that both parties had enjoyed many decades ago. This also buttress the point earlier made that the hostilities in the far north between the herdsmen on one hand, and cattle rustlers and bandits on the other has provided an excuse for the former to acquire sophisticated fire arms and migrate with same to the North central and in this case Benue state to use it against the poor rural farmers. The moment the people of Benue state became convinced that the pastoralists are now carrying sophisticated fire arms, the level of suspicion and mistrust between the people and the herdsmen became very serious. The pastoralists on their own side too did not pretend. The moment they arrived with AK47 and other similar guns, grazing on un-harvested farms became very common and any attempt by villagers to go after them was paid back by series of

attacks mostly at nights against such communities leaving behind many casualties with many properties destroyed.

Even though the scope of the paper is for the entire Benue state, most of the incidents of this violent conflict shall be taken from those few local Government Areas that witnessed more frequent and most devastating attacks within the period under consideration. The origin of violent conflict between pastoralists and rural farmers in Benue state is not precisely known, however, some sources consider the period from 2011 as the beginning of the rise in pastoralists violent attacks on farmers in Benue state. For example, in Gwer -West Local Government Area, the first noticeable attack took place on the 8th of February, 2011 in which nine Tiv farmers were murdered in cold blood while several properties and homes were destroyed by armed herdsmen.[10] Similarly, on the 23 of March, 2013, Fulani herdsmen on a mass exodus from Makurdi Local Government Area, forcefully invaded Gbgaange village in Tongov District of Gwer-West LGA. They were alleged to have destroyed many houses and displaced many families including Tse-Ankye, Tse- Gbali, Tse-Uhembe, among others while using Tse-Ankye as a war camp.[11]

Collaborating the preceding argument, Terkula Suswam also submitted that from 2011 onwards, violent herdsmen attacks had started gaining ground across Benue state particularly in local governments such as Guma, Gwer-West, Gwer-East, Makurdi,Logo among others.[12]The killings took systematic and methodical pattern that increasingly became suggestive of a deliberate plan to wipe out the indigenous groups either by annihilation or displacement in order to take control of lands and fields in the Benue Valley Region.[13]In Guma LGA, the family of Tse-Iordye experienced such attack in August, 2012. Gbajimba, the headquarters of Guma LGA, witnessed a brutal attack on the 26th of March, 2013 in which heavily armed herdsmen ran-sacked and displaced the residents of the town. The attacked witnessed the killing of over 130 people and the destruction of St. Athanasius Catholic Church.

In Gwer-East LGA, of Benue state, the first noticeable violent attack by herdsmen occurred in Mbamar Clan of Mbasombo Council Ward on the 20th of June, 2012. This was followed by attack on Mbatsenda in Mbalom Council Ward on the 25th of March, 2014 during which 17 farmers were killed. Again, Mbalom area of Turan-Ayar witnessed another attack in the early hours of April 24th, 2018 in which 16 people were killed at St. Ignatius Catholic Mission Ukpor, including two Catholic Priests (Rev. Fr. Joseph Gor and Rev. Fr. Felix Tyolaha). This wicked act was widely condemned by local, national and international community.[14]

In Logo Local Government Area of Benue State, the history of noticeable violent attacks against farmers by pastoralists can be traced to 2014[3] in Marchwhen suspected herdsmen numbering

6. M.M Kembe, etal *Tiv Displacement in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States…p.15*
7. M.M Kembe, etal *Tiv Displacement in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States…p.16*
8. Benue State Government 'Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017',

more than 100 reportedly stormed the Tombo community at night in the early hours of 7th March, 2014, carrying guns, machetes, swords, bows, arrows and knives to execute their evil plan. This attack marked the beginning of herdsmen open violent attacked in Logo LGA. So far, 3 council wards in the Local Government have been on continuous attacks from the Fulani herdsmen. These are: Tombo, Mbagber and Ukemberagya council wards.[15]

Another terrible violent attack by herdsmen against Benue farmers that deserved to be reiterated here briefly was the Agatu attack in 2016 which has been mentioned earlier. This was one attack too many which claimed over three hundred lives with billions of property lost. By 2016/2017, more than halve out of the 23 local government areas in Benue state had received their own share of violent attack from the herdsmen in a manner similar to what has been highlighted above. By the beginning of 2017, the level of apprehension and frustration in the state occasioned by these herdsmen attacks became extremely high. This was compounded by the fact that all attempt made by the state Governor who was even a member of the ruling party at the center (APC) to get help from the federal government to salvage the situation had proved abortive while the attacks were on the rise. It was in the mist of all these that the Benue State House of Assembly proffered a solution by passing into law the 'Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranching Establishment Law of 2017'.[16] This law came into effect on the 1st of November, 2017 with the hope of bringing these conflicts to an end. But even before the bill was signed into law by the Executive Governor of Benue state, Samuel Ortom, there were threats from different Miyetti Allah socio-cultural groups on how they will oppose the law. For instance, both the *Miyetti* Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) and the *Miyetti* Allah *Kautal Hore*, the two most prominent Fulani and herder socio-cultural associations had expressed different public positions on the Open Grazing Prohibition Law. On the one hand, the MACBAN expressed its willingness to obey the law, but requested that the implementation date be shifted to allow sufficient time for sensitization of herders on alternative to open grazing.[17]On the other hand, the Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore openly opposed the Law and threatened to prevent its implementation on the ground that it contradicts the constitutional provision for freedom of movement.[18]

In its response, the State government maintained that the Law is made by the Benue State House of Assembly which has been empowered by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to make laws for the good governance and peaceful running of the state just like every other state house of assembly in the country. It further challenged *Miyetti* Allah 'to

Director, Printing Services Benue State Government, Makurdi, Nigeria. 2017.

9. Orowayino Warami, 'Anti Open Grazing Law: Herders Appeal for FG's Intervention' *Vanguard*, 29 October, 2017 *www.vanguard.com/2017-anti-open grazing law-herders-appeal-for-intervention*.

bring any better or superior solution that will restore lasting peace between farmers and herdsmen to the table rather than issue threats that will compound the problem.[19]While this argument was going on between the State government and the Miyetti Allah groups, the implementation of the Law commenced on the 1st of November, 2017.

New Pattern of Pastoralists attacks on Benue Farmers from 2018

Following the commencement of the implementation of the Law, a large number of herdsmen moved out of Benue especially between November and December, 2017 as if they were peacefully complying with the Law. Unfortunately on the 1stand 2nd of January, 2018, the herdsmen began massive attacks on the Benue communities in fulfillment of their earlier threats. These attacks left over 70 people dead. Following this development, the Benue State Government decided to give the bodies of the victims a mass burial, on 11th, January, 2018, an action which did not go down well with the Federal Government of Nigeria.[20] After these new year attacks, Benue State has continued to receive several attacks from herdsmen across some local government areas in the state in a manner that signify their resistance to the Law.

It is important to note that the pastoralists refused to apply for acquisition of land in Benue state for ranching in line with the new law. Majority of them moved into Nasarawa state and as if it was well planned, from 2018 to date, the boundary between Benue and Nasarawa state has not known peace. There is a new pattern of attacks against those border communities that has displaced many of them from 2018 to date. The local government worst affected are Guma LGA, (which has the highest number of IDPs camps), Gwer-West, Makurdi, Logo and Agatu LGAs of Benue state. From 2018 to date, many IDPs camps have been set up in these local governments and many people who were displaced by this new wave of attacks have been living there without any hope of return to their ancestral homes. Every year, the magnitude of the attacks increases and the number of IDPs has continued to swell up. It appears the pastoralists using Nasarawa state as their comfort zone have vowed to continue to unleash violent attacks on the border communities of Benue state to ensure that the land is not cultivated which allows them to graze in and out of the large stretch of fertile land of lush vegetation along Benue - Nasarawa border. So far this has worked effectively in their favour.

Providing insight into the origin of the crisis, Emmanuel Igyande, kindred head of Mbabegha village, Mbabai council ward of Guma LGA, said:

> Both groups used to live peacefully until herders began to encroach on farms. The traditional ruler said the situation became worse after the state government signed the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law in 2017, which mandated ranching for herders. The basis of this crisis is encroaching. Before this insecurity started around 12 years back, we have been living peacefully with herdsmen.

> The law was made that everyone should adopt ranching, but they (herders) have refused to accept the law. We have lost lives; we cannot visit the farms; schools and even parts of the markets are closed because of insecurity.[21]

The lamentation and frustration expressed above by one of the traditional rulers who is affected by the new wave of attacks against farmers following the implementation of the Open Grazing Prohibition Law has captures the vulnerable situation that the rural farmers in the affected communities have found themselves.

It is pertinent to point out here that the pastoralists explore different patterns to attack the rural farmers as the findings have shown. For instance, the herdsmen would appear in the night around 10-11pm or midnight around 12-2am or early day hours of 5-7am like spirits using motorbikes. To keep their attacks secret to others neighbouring households, the attackers quietly move from door to door in killing their victims with machetes, daggers and knives.[22]

In certain instances, it was gathered that the armed herdsmen disguised as military officers by putting on military camouflage during the attacks. After the attacks, they were said to have always changed into their traditional clothes. This information was provided by a local farmer in Gwer- West LGA named as Anjov. According to him, the attackers sometimes come in through t[4]he River Benue using speed boats and usually returned to the neighbouring Nasarawa state using the same boats in military uniforms.[23]

Another strategy of attacks as reported by the farmers is that the herdsmen sometimes barricade major roads linking other communities at strategic locations such as sharp bends or bridges. Major victims of such attacks are unsuspecting motor vehicle drivers, motor cycle riders as well as other road users. They often kill such victims and either destroyed the vehicles or take away new ones with them for further operations. In some instances, many farmers were silently killed on their individual farms in broad day light with spears, knives, bows and arrows. Such victims were quietly buried to ensure that other farmers were kept in confusion.[24]

There are also instances of kidnap and rape of women and children. An eye witness account has it that the armed herdsmen disemboweled pregnant women to ensure that both mother and baby are killed. On other occasions it has been reported that those caught, their limbs were cut off and they

10. Haleem Olatunji, 'Inside the Story: How insecurity is turning Benue farmers into IDPs and Causing spike in price of Garri'. Special investigative Project by *Cable Newspaper* Journalism Foundation, 18 September, 2021.
11. Oral Interview with Terkura Suswam, 50+ Anyiin, Logo Local Government Area, 13/9/2018
12. M.M Kembe, etal *Tiv Displacement in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States…*p.41

were then shot in the presence of their family. Sometimes family member were made to run and they short at and those lucky enough to escape the bullets were pursued.

Some of these testimonies of the killings were obtained from some of the inmates at the various IDPs camps in Guma, Gwer-West, and Makurdi LGAs in the state. It is certain that these various horrifying methods of killing these farmers is meant to traumatize the victims in such a way that they would not wish to return to their homeland after fleeing.[25]

Gwer-West is one of the worst hit Local Government Areas in Benue State during the new pattern of attacks against Benue rural farmers by the pastoralists. Investigation has revealed that following the commencement of the implementation of 'Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranching Establishment Law' in Benue state on November, 1st, 2017, all the herdsmen that were residing in the Local Government Area left for Nasarawa state. By the beginning of 2018, it became clear that the Fulani pastoralists have conspired to make the entire northern part of Gwer-West, which is more of riverine area inhabitable by continuous attacks using guerrilla tactics. This part of the Local Government extends to the southern bank of River Benue while the northern part of the River is Nasarawa state. Herdsmen therefore cross over at any convenient time mostly at nights and launch attacks on the poor farmers and cross back to Nasarawa state. The farmers find it difficult to defend themselves because apart from their scattered settlement pattern which makes them very vulnerable to these attacks, they cannot even withstand the sophisticated weapons used by the pastoralists.

For instance, along Naka- Agagbe Road, settlement like Nagi-Camp, Gbagi (a riverine fish market), Ibiam, have been attacked severally and many people lost their lives in some of these attacks. These settlements have public facilities like schools, churches, clinics and markets that have been razed down completely. Many farms have been destroyed and many houses set on fire destroying whatever food stuff or seeds and seedling that might have been stored there. Hence most of these attacks take place during dry season or at the resumption of raining season, most of the food stuff, seeds and seedlings are burnt down in the stores. The same fate had befallen villages along Agagbe-Tseukighir-Icheku Road and Tse-Achile that were terribly affected. Along Naka-Makurdi Road, villages like Imande, Jimba, Ahume were severally attacked between April and June this year (2021). These attacks were targeted at the beginning of cropping season and all the farmers deserted their homes to seek refuge in IDPs camps while others were squatting with their relations where there was relative peace. Along this high way, many unsuspecting motorists, motorcyclists and pedestrians were ambush and slaughtered or shot dead.[26]

Most of these affected communities completely missed out on this year's farming season as they had abandoned their villages due to herdsmen attacks during the planting season. This is the root of deepening poverty among these poor farmers as their

major means of production is their farm land. The two official Internally Displaced Persons Camps in Gwer-West Local Government are LGEA Primary School, Naka and St. Francis Zavia Secondary School Agagbe. Apart from these two official IDPs camps, there are always many other unofficial IDPs camps any time the conflict is at its peak.[27]

Guma LGA of Benue state has received the highest number of herdsmen attacks in the state since the commencement of the implementation of Open Grazing Prohibition Law. At least, three factors may have been responsible for this. One, the Local Government shares a very large land boundary with Nasarawa state unlike Gwer-west which is separated from Nasarawa by River Benue. Also Guma has a large Land mass toward Nasarawa axis which is very rich in vegetation. Thirdly, the current Governor of Benue state, Samuel Ortom, who is a strong proponent of ranching, is also from Guma LGA of Benue state. It is certain that the aforementioned factors may havebeen responsible for the magnitude of violent attacks directed against the communities by the herdsmen.[28]

Some of the areas and villages that are frequently attacked in Guma LGA include but not limited to, Yelwata a Benue border community along Lafia - Makurdi express road. Other places seriously affected in the Local Government are: Yogbo village, Tse-Torkula village, Kaseyo village, Ortese village, Ivokor village and many more. All these villages have a combined population running into hundreds of thousands. Most of these villages are no longer accessible by farmers due to repeated attacks they have suffered from herdsmen.Many people have been killed and maimed, houses have been razed down, churches, schools, markets; farms among others have been destroyed. Most of the victims are now living in the various IDPs camps scattered all over Guma and Makurdi LGAs. Some of the IDPs camps housing these communities include: Abagena near Makurdi town, Daudu IDPs camp, Tse Yandev IDPs camp, Gbajimba IDPs camp, among many other unofficial IDPs camps.[29] These IDPs camps are the biggest in Benue state because the level of attacks and displacement in Guma LGA from 2018 to date is extremely high. Thus the combined number of inmates in these IDPs camps was estimated at over a million as of September 2021 due to renewed attacks on the three Local governments of Gwer-west, Makurdi and Guma LGAs.

Makurdi, the state capital is also not insulated from this new wave of attacks due to its proximity to Nasarawa state. Villages like Anter, Nyijir, Agom, Abagena, among others have been hit by the conflict. Many people lost their lives in the attacks. Just like in other attacks earlier highlighted, the Makurdi Local government attacks led to loss of lives, farms, destruction of schools, churches, markets, farms businesses and many more. Most of the IDPs in Makurdi LGA share IDPs camps with Guma LGA earlier discussed.

The Deepening level of Poverty among Benue Rural Farmers as a Result of the Conflict

Poverty is a concept that is very broad and complex in nature. However according to Sen in 2001 in his well-known book *"Development as Freedom",* he considered poverty as deprivation of several forms of capacity or "freedom" comprising both economic (income) and non-economic aspects such as political, social, mental and cultural. Thus, people are considered poor when they are incapable to dismiss barriers confronted in reaching their own happiness. This definition seems to capture vivid picture of what poverty is about since different people in different places have distinct terms of happiness and freedom as well as dissimilar interpretation of poverty discourse.[30]

Todaro and Smith in 2003, avers that the rural poor mainly consist of low paid farm labourers or small farmers who heavily rely on agriculture as subsistence and 55% of the total number of rural poor are women.[31]Another key factor of rural poverty is unequal access to land or concentration of land ownership. As DFID captures in 2009,"land is a fundamental asset of rural livelihoods and affordable, secure, and safe land is necessary to increase income especially in agrarian rural societies".[32]

Considering the views of some renowned scholars above on what constitute poverty and by extension rural poverty, it is very clear that poverty itself has to do with some form of deprivation. In rural areas the greatest asset for farmers is land and the deprivation of their access to this land will imply further poverty for them which will deepen their already vulnerable situation. Thus this is the fate that has befallen Benue farmers in the last few years as a result of series of attacks from pastoralists.

Land which is central to the economic survival of Benue farmers which they have been tilling for centuries has all of a sudden become a subject of contest between herdsmen and farmers. As pointed out in the paper earlier, the new pattern of attacks adopted by militia herdsmen against Benue farmers is to concentrate unprovoked attacks against farming communities along Benue – Nasarawa border to ensure that the farmers do not cultivate the land again. From 2018 to date, this has been working effectively hence many farmers have deserted their ancestral homeland for fear of attacks. As stated earlier, the militia wing of the pastoralists cross from Nasarawa state, launch attacks on Benue farmers and retreat back to Nasarawa. Since the farmers have lost their land and many of them are still in IDPs camps, their level of poverty have continued to worsen hence they do not have any opportunity to engage in any productive venture to earn some income.

The displacement of the farmers on their ancestral land by the pastoralists has brought other debilitating consequences on them. The farmers have lost all the life-supporting structures that exist in their environment. They have lost their farms, small businesses, livestock, food stuff, seed and seedlings, and small entrepreneurial opportunities like thrift cooperatives. They have also lost other social institutions like markets, schools, churches and other social cultural institutions that are important to their survival. For anyone who has ever experienced life in the village, this description is enough to

convince one that these farmers have no future again except the day they are able to return back to their ancestral land.

Another aspect of the deepening poverty among these farmers is their children who are out of school for some years now. We all know that education is the greatest tool used in fighting poverty. But for these farmers, their children have been out of school for many years now. For the primary school category, the children who are in IDPs camps have some make-shift schools there to enhance their learning which is grossly inadequate. However, for the secondary and tertiary school category, many who were displaced have lost the opportunities to further their education. Farmers plant their cash crops harvest and sale to raise money to train their children in secondary and tertiary institutions. But with all these gone to the conflict, the future is bleak and it is a time bomb for the future generation.

For the girl child, the situation is even worse. Many are being married off at IDPs camps, while some are being exploited due to their vulnerable condition. This early marriage also is a very fertile ground for breeding of poverty in future. They will continue to procreate in large numbers without the capacity to train their children. This will continue to spread poverty and ignorance. These and many more are the plights of the displaced Benue farmers that have continued to deepen their poverty conditions.

The way forward

The way forward on the issue of pastoralists- farmers' conflict in Nigeria at large and Benue state in particular rest on the shoulders of the Federal Government of Nigeria. This might sound strange to some but it is a statement of fact. If one looks at the key drivers of this crisis as highlighted earlier in the paper, most of the issues fall under the capacity of the Federal Government to resolve. For instance, the issue of transhumance activities of herdsmen in West Africa, desert encroachment, banditry in the North -West and Boko Haram activities in the North- East and massive migration of pastoralists to the North-Central and beyond are issues that only the Federal Government can take the initiative to be followed by the various state government toward finding a lasting solution.

From all the intent and purposes, it is clear to all sane minds that the state government sought solution on the issue of herdsmen-farmers conflict in Nigeria might not bring the desired solution to the crisis as the experience in Benue state has shown. The implementation of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranching Establishment Law in the State since 2017 has not brought the conflict to an end. It has rather led to a change in the strategy of attacks against farmers in the state as the herdsmen have relocated to Nasarawa state where they come to kill maim and displace farmers along the Benue – Nasarawa border. From all indications, this is a deliberate strategy to ensure that the law does not succeed. Speaking during a programme on Arise Television onSeptember 2nd 2021, about the implementation of Anti-open Grazing Law in

Ondo state, the Secretary General, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breaders Association (MACBAN) Usman Baba Ngelzerma said:

> Akeredulu should learn from Benue where the same law has not brought peace to the state four years after it was signed… go and appraise the Benue law, has it succeeded in bringing peace to Benue? It has never succeeded in bringing peace to Benue. Rather, it has further aggravated the situation to becoming worse.[33]

This statement implies that there is a deliberate plan by the herdsmen to frustrate the implementation of Anti-Open grazing law in every state across the country. But it should however be noted that in Benue state, the Law has succeeded in confining the menace of the herdsmen against Farmers to only the border communities of neighbouring states, particularly, Nasarawa.

Thus the Federal Government has to rise to the occasion of taking the bull by the horns and stop speaking from both side of the mouth as if it is in support of ranching or against it. Instead of trying to work out modalities for the establishment of ranches across the country as a permanent solution to Farmer – herdsmen conflict, the Federal government is rather trying to recover the old un-gazetted grazing reserves which have been overtaken by development and new constitutional provisions which have placed lands within the jurisdiction of a state in the hands of Governors in trust for the citizens. The federal government should not allow this matter to snowball into a bigger crisis that will eventually become too complex to resolve. As some public commentators have observed, if the problem eventually degenerate into inter-ethnic wars against the pastoralists, there is a strong possibility of other pastoralists in other West African states and Central Africa to invade the country from all sides. If this happens, the entire West Africa and indeed the African continent will be in turmoil.

The state governments also need to initiate and implement strategies that will address the contending issues from both sides. There is need for inter-state cooperation in working towards resolving this unending violent conflict.

Thus the Federal Government should mobilise State government, international community, development partners, civil society and NGOs to work toward finding lasting solution to this lingering pastoralist –farmers conflict in the country as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Escalating conflicts between herders and farmers are among Nigeria's most pressing security challenges. This could potentially generate bloodshed on an even wider scale unless Federal Government makes ending this violence a national priority. State governments also need to formulate and implement steps to address the needs and grievances of all sides transparently and equitably. In the case of state Government looking for solutions, their positions might differ from one another depending on the local peculiarities of each state. Strengthening law enforcement, supporting local conflict

prevention and resolution mechanisms, establishing and protecting ranching and grazing reserves where applicable would all make a significant and immediate difference. In the longer term, the greater challenge will be curbing the arms influx and, crucially, addressing the environmental trends that are forcing herders south. Failure would spell greater danger for a country already battling other severe security challenges and, potentially, for the wider West and Central African region.