ANATOMY OF CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT ON FOOD SECURITY IN BENUE STATE, 2015-2023

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ABSTRACT
Benue State has recorded significant increase in farmer-herder conflict and major drawbacks in communal coexistence. This study examines the causes of the conflict and its effects on food security in the state. The structural conflict theory was used in analyzing the major variables while descriptive documentary design involving a mix of exploratory interview, Focus Group Discussion, observation, analyses of official documents and secondary data was utilized to triangulate evidence. Twenty (20) participants were purposively drawn from the population in the study area for interviews and focused group discussions and their responses were transcribed, presented and analyzed in a descriptive form using thematic headings. Deriving from the study findings, the results generated indicated that the underlying cause of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State is climate change with its attendant consequence of herders migrating from the north to the state in search of pasture and water points. However, trigger causes muted by respondents include but not limited to illegal invasion of farms and destruction of crops by cattle, cattle rustling and theft; passage of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017, among others. Effects of the conflict on food security include the destruction of human lives and animals, farmlands and properties, drop in food production, hike in food prices, and rise in poverty level among the people, social dislocation and population displacement, among others. Against this backdrop, the study recommends that aside intensifying campaigns and actions against climate change, the Benue State Government and its critical stakeholders should strengthen and improve local peace building and reconciliation systems, among others.

Introduction

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, conflicts between Fulani herders and local farmers in Nigeria have taken a new and dangerous turn in terms of frequency of attacks. It has become persistent in spite government and stakeholders' efforts, and violent due to increasing reprisal attacks and the degree of damage done to lives and properties. The farmer-herder conflict has resisted virtually all known conventional dispute resolution channels and mechanisms known to experts in the field of conflict management and dispute resolution in Nigeria. The deadly nature of the Fulani herders' violent attacks caused the Institute for Economics and Peace to label this group a "terrorist organization" and the fourth deadliest in 2014, with 1,229 deaths occurring especially in the north-central geo-political zone of Nigeria (IEP, 2015).

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2017) reported that 815 million people in the world experience one form of hunger or the other. Between 2020 and 2022, 828 million people faced hunger which was due to effects of social unrest in the world (World Health Organization, 2022). The fact remains that about 850 million populations are living in extreme poverty due to decrease in food production and disruption in food supply chain across nations. Some of the factors adduced for decrease in food production are conflicts, wars, climate variability and extreme economic slowdowns and downturns in the world today (FOA, 2022).

Food production is a vital factor that determines and influences food security in Benue State and by extension the nation, Nigeria. Adamu and Ben (2017) posits that Benue State accounts for over 70% of Nigeria's soya bean production including rice, yam, cassava, maize, guinea corn, potatoes, sesame, among others in large and commercial quantities. As such, the state is popularly known as the 'Food Basket of the Nation' because of its capacity to produce food in large quantities, its richly endowed arable land with rich foliage and having one of the longest stretches of river systems in the country – the River Benue. Hence, the fertility and rich natural endowment of the state attracts the presence of herders for grazing and watering.

Tor-Tsuwaand Odigbo (2019) estimated that in all the 23 Local Government Areas of the State, 80% of the rural dwellers are farmers, 15% are fishermen and the remaining 5% are urban or semi urban based civil servants and those who carry out small scale business. This account for why there are usually contestations over land and water resources in the state. These contestations in some cases lead to communal conflicts between communities and recently between farmers and herders in the state. Ofuoku and Isife (2009) avers that the major causes of conflict in the Benue valley is land related which accounts for the highest percentage (42.9) of conflicts followed by politics (32.08%) and chieftaincy matters (28.3%) respectively. For these scholars, the high percentage of conflicts arising from land related disputes comes from conflict between farmers and herders over grazing lands and water points. Incidentally, land and water are very vital to the sustenance of the Benue State economy. This is because Benue State indigenes are predominantly farmers. Agriculture contributes immensely to the growth and survival of the state and which supplies farm products to neighboring states across the country.

It is evident that resource use conflict particularly between farmers and herders is widespread in Benue State farming communities. The shrinking nature of life-supporting natural resources per person that comes with population growth is at the survival level. This may have led to significant conflict in most cases among the herders and farmers. Such conflict has risen from encroachment on cattle routes and sometimes watering points. The issue rests on the fact that the cows many times stray into the fields and eat the grain of local farmers. It has also been argued that the livelihood of some herders in Benue State is threatened by decreasing access to water and pasture-shortage linked to climate change. Due to climate change and massive land acquisitions by farmers, there has been a great increase in violence between farmers and herders in the State. Conflict between crop producers and Pastoralists has continued to assume a threatening dimension to human survival and economic livelihood in recent times.

Global Terrorism Index (2022) reports that 2,350 attacks associated with herder-farmer disputes have been documented in 16 states of the federation, including FCT. According to the source, Benue State led the list with 3,739 fatalities from 363 incidents. It is has been reported that the farmer-herder conflict in the

state has assumed devastating and widespread dimension affecting local government areas like Ado, Apa, Agatu, Buruku, Tarka, Kwande, Logo, Makurdi, Gwer West, Okpokwu, Guma, Ogbadibo, Oju, Ukum, among others which by implication may have serious negative effect on food security in the state and beyond. The Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA, 2023) reported that no fewer than 5,138 persons have been killed between 2015 and 2023. Notwithstanding the foregoing statistics, the killings are still ongoing. Therefore, this paper examines the reality in the concern expressed about the causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State and its resultant effects on food security and possible measures to turn around the situation.

Farmer-Herder Conflict

Farmer-herder conflict can simply be understood to mean a strong disagreement occurring between peasant farmers or subsistence cultivators and nomadic or transhumant live-stock keepers (Okoro, 2018).Simire (2018) defined farmer-herder conflict as the conflict between farmers and herders which can be understood as a problem of access to land. Hussein, Sumberg, and Seddon, (2019) see farmer-herder conflict as comprising different types of conflicts, including ethnic conflicts, interest conflicts, resource disputes, political action, evictions, killings, cattle raiding and cattle rustling. This definition further explained that the beginning of the 21st century witnessed an expansion of agriculturist population and cultivated land at the expense of pasturelands in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, particularly the Benue valley. In an already politically unstable region, it has never always been possible to ascertain a legal title to land for every farmer. As a result, transhumance routes of herders were no longer available especially in a context of global warming. This view incorporates the deteriorating environmental conditions, which have led to herders changing their transhumance routes, hence access to pastureland and watering points brings them in close confrontations and clashes with the already established farmers within the regions which subsequently results in conflicts.

The definition by Hussein, Sumberg, and Seddon, (2019) portrays the dynamics of the conflict but notwithstanding, what can practically be gleaned from all the definitions; first, that farmer-herder conflict is a conflict that usually occurs in the society between farmers and herders as the result of competitive interests or values. Second, it is a land use conflict usually caused by opposing forces or groups over grazing and water points in an agrarian society. As such, farmers-herder conflict is a multidimensional phenomenon that is influenced and driven by a variety of other factors, including ethnicity, interest, resource disputes, political action, evictions, killings, cattle raiding and cattle rustling. This invariably impacts variables like security of lives and properties, economic and political stability, poverty, peaceful co-existence, food production and food security, among others.

Food Security

Food security has been severally defined (World Food Summit, 1974; Food and Agricultural Organization, 1983; UNDP, 1994) but essentially, the most widely used definition of food security is that of the World Bank: 'Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life'. The term "access" here is inclusive of both the supply side (availability) and the demand side (entitlement) (Jonah, 2016).

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Ensuring food security entails meeting two conditions. One condition is ensuring that there are adequate food supplies available, through domestic production or imports. The other is ensuring that households whose members suffer from under nutrition have the ability to acquire food, either because they produce it themselves or because they have the income to acquire it (Moore, 2017).

Following from the above, the FAO (2008) identified four dimensions of food security to include:

1. Availability of food produced locally and imported from abroad.

2. Accessibility. The food can reach the consumer (transportation infrastructure) and the latter has enough money for purchase. To such physical and economic accessibility is added socio-cultural access to ensure that the food is culturally

acceptable and that social protection nets exist to help the less fortunate.

3. Utilization. The individual must be able to eat adequate amounts both in quantity and quality in order to live a healthy and full life to realize his or her potential. Food and water must be safe and clean, and thus adequate water and sanitation are also involved at this level. A person must also be physically healthy to be able to digest and utilize the food consumed.

4. The fourth domain of Stability, deals with the ability of the nation/ community (household) person to withstand shocks to the food chain system whether caused by natural disasters (climate, earthquakes) or those that are man-made (wars, economic crises). Thus, it may be seen that food security exists at a number of levels.

Generally, all four of these dimensions must be intact for full food security. More recent developments emphasize the importance of sustainability, which may be considered as the long-term time (fifth) dimension to food security. Sustainability involves indicators at a supra-national/regional level of ecology, biodiversity and climate change, as well as socio-cultural and economic factors.

A broader definition of food security incorporates the quality of life indicators such as improved access to balanced diet (improved nutrition), safe drinking water, environmental sanitation, primary education (especially education of women) and basic health care. It also visualized improved economic growth (especially access to resources), improved population programs, quality of the natural environment and peaceful coexistence, among others (Modibo, 2011). Therefore, a peaceful and prosperous environment is a sine qua non for productive agricultural engagement, which results in food security. However, a society ridden by a resource use conflict such as the farmer-herder conflict is a recipe for food insecurity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the structural conflict theory. The theory was developed and popularized by Johan Galtung, Ross, and Scarborough among others. It sorts to explain conflict as the product of the tension that arises when groups contend for scarce recourses. The main assumptions of the theory are that conflict is built into the particular ways by which a society is structured or organized. It identifies the condition of the society and how these conditions or environment creates conflict. It identifies these conditions as social exclusion, class inequalities, deprivation, political marginalization, injustice, economic exploitation, and racial segregation, among others. All of which often lead to conflict (Moritz 2010; Ogwola, 2014).

Structuralism as fondly called sees incompatible interests based on competition for resources (material and immaterial) which in most cases are assumed to be scarce, and being responsible for social conflict. Structuralists believed that conflict occurs because of exploitation of scarce resources by one group at the detriment of the others or because of dominance of one class by another. As such, conflict in human society stems from the observation that society is made up of people with different interests, and social arrangement which tend to benefit some group at the expense of the others (Abubakar, 2015; Moore, 2017).

The structural conflict theory is suitable for the analysis of this study because it offers a well-articulated approach to conflict escalation generally. The theory proved the fact that competition for access to natural resources between farmers and herders in the Benue valley gives rise to conflict. It sets the background for the origin of the conflict in the state in terms of access to the means of production. Thus, it emphasizes the conditions necessary for the society to remain at equilibrium or balanced position and stressed the need for interdependence of both the cattle herders and crop farmers on the use of common resources. According to Ogwola, (2014) the rural farmers live a sedentary life pattern; they are able to acquire land for farming and other purposes. The Fulanis or herders on the other hand live exclusively a nomadic life pattern, always on the move from one environment to the other as the climate or weather condition dictates. Conflict often emerges between local famers and the herders whenever their cattle strayed to farm lands, especially when the crops are growing and when cattle are rustled and herder's settlements invaded. Applied to the content of this study, it would suggest that farmer-herder

conflict in Benue State is driven by desperate struggles for economic survival and subsistence by one group over the other.

Furthermore, the goal or aim of every farmer during planting season in the Benue valley is to have a bountiful harvest, then sell the farm produce and make profits. On the other hand, the herders would always want to have well fed and healthy cattle and be able to make profits as well. When expectations are not met on either side due to encroachment on either side, conflict becomes inevitable. Either of the parties who feel deprived from achieving their economic goals may decide to reprise as to show displeasure (Abbass, 2009). The immediate consequence of this disagreement is the loss of lives and destruction of properties and its attendant implication on food production and security. For example, Agatu Local Government Area of the state is a farming community, when in 2016conflict between herders and crop farmers in July broke out in a very violent manner, over 2,500 farmers were displaced, while 28 people were killed in the process. A situation that led to many fleeing to Internally Displaced Persons Camps in Apa, Otukpo, Makurdi, among others for their safety. This impacted negatively on crop and animal production in the state. There is no gain saying that whenever loss of lives and destruction of properties are involved, farmers and herders alike flee their homes and farms, as such production of food suffers because there will be no one to till the soil or rear the cattle.

Methodology

The study utilized a descriptive documentary design involving a mix of exploratory interview, Focus Group Discussion, observation, analyses of official documents and secondary data to triangulate evidence. The essence of this approach was to enable the study to see the same thing from different perspectives and thus to be able to confirm or challenge the findings of one method with those of another. The approach is concerned with collecting and analysing information in chiefly non-numeric forms. The rationale behind adopting this research design was to get deep explanations on the causes and effects of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. Twenty (20) participants were purposively drawn from the population in the study area for interviews and focused group discussions and their responses were transcribed, presented and analyzed in a descriptive form using thematic headings.

Causes of Farmer-Herder Conflict in Benue State

Research objective one was aimed at finding out the causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. After in-depth interviews with key informants and extensive and intensive discussions with focused groups, it was found out that the devastating impact of Climate Change on farming communities and grazing lands (causing drought and desertification in northern Nigeria) was the major underlying or remote cause of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. However, factors deduced from the analysis of data for proximate or trigger causes of the farmer-herder conflict were due to many reasons including but not limited to: herders leaving their cattle unattended to and thus, wandering into cultivated fields; illegal invasion of farms and destruction of crops by cattle, particularly during the planting season and immediately after the harvesting period; expansion of cropped land due to population growth and technical changes; the expansion of farming activities into areas utilized by cattle herders for the purpose of livestock production; inadequate legal and regulatory instrument used in the implementation of resettlement. Others include cattle rustling and theft cited by the pastoralists; Boko Haram insurgency pushing herders moving southward to the Benue valley; passage of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017 by the Benue State Government; combination of ethnic, socio-economic, environmental and political factors, to indigene-settler dichotomy between the farmers and the herders, among others (Interviews with key informants and Focus Group Discussants, 2023). In order to ensure that the results from the interviews and Focus Group Discussions were accurate, we compared the results with findings from other sources of data collection. Results generated from official documents, reports, and other secondary sources also confirmed the findings from the primary sources.

Interviewees, discussants, Conflict analysts, researchers, scholars among others have all muted various causal factors to the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. These factors can be classified as underlying or remote causes and proximate or trigger causes as stated above. The first major underlying cause of the farmer-herder conflict in the state was attributed to climate change. A weather condition described by the Federal Ministry of Environment in International Crisis Group Report (2017) asa harsh reality that has caused

drought and desertification in Northern Nigeria. The federal ministry posited that in the last six decades, over 350,000 square km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions, a phenomenon progressing southward at the rate of 0.06km per year. This situation, no doubt, has led to the influx of Fulani herders into the Benue valley, thus, the contestation for scarce land and water resources. This position was corroborated by respondents who explained that climate change has caused decreasing access to water and pasture-shortage in Northern Nigeria. Consequently, the nomadic Fulani will naturally resort to migration into lowlands for available water and pasture. During migration, a typical herd consisting of several family units move in a column of up to five meters wide and kilometres long. And by the time it passes any given point or farming community, 'everything that stands at that point seem to be destroyed' resulting in hostilities between the farmers and herders.

Describing the situation further, respondents added that the herder's frequent visits to stable water sources further compound their relations with farming communities. The movement brings the herders into conflictive relations with the native farming communities, who are often bent on asserting their exclusive right to land tenure and inheritance in that context. Therefore, farmer-herder conflict becomes prevalent between the crop producers and pastoralists that have continued to assume a threatening dimension to human survival and economic livelihood in the state. Odoh and Chilaka (2012) and Audu (2014) are of the view that beyond the northern part of the country, climate change has also led to scarcity of water, more heat, less rain, as well as drought in the Benue valley. They however cautioned that "drawing lines of causation between climate changes requires caution. Every conflict has many causes. However, to understand the gravity of the security threat posed by climate change, Homer-Dixon (2007) cited in Odoh & Chilaka (2012) stated that climate change may well represent a challenge to international security just as dangerous and more intractable than the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War or the proliferation of nuclear weapons among rogue states nowadays. The import of this is that, though being neglected, drought and desertification caused by climate change is one of the major root causes of farmer-herder conflict, and may cause more harm than imagined, because it affects the very bases for survival (Land and water) for both farmers and Fulani herders (Focused Group Discussion, 2023).

The study found out that climate change has forced the Fulani herders out of their original homes in the north in search of greener pasture and water, due to the type of pasturage practice in Nigeria known as pastoral nomadism, which means: movement of herders and their flock from place to place in search of pasture and water. The herders move down southward in search of greener pasture and water, therefore exerting pressure on land. The entrance of herders with their flock into the region is added pressure on land that is fixed. The pressure is manifested on lack of natural grasses for the animals. During the dry season the few grasses are dried and can hardly sustain the cattle. This lead to struggle among the herders, but as the situation get worse and worst they form a common front and forcefully enter into farms, thereby using crops of farmers to feed their cattle to the detriment of the farmers. As a consequence, the farmers on the other hand will try all they could to protect their source of livelihood – the farm. The right to protect what belongs to each of these groups often lead to clashes, a struggle many have attributed to climate shift (Focused Group Discussion, 2023).

To a reasonable extent the climate shift has also affected the growth of grasses for animal consumption. The length and robustness of the grasses has dropped, because of scanty rainfall. As a consequence, farmable land is disappearing in Benue State. It is on record that about 10,000 hectares of forest are lost yearly in Benue State. This phenomenon has a double effect on the state and those that depend on land use. First, as farmable land is lost to urbanization, pressure on land increases. The farmers and the herders have relative small land area at their disposal. Secondly, deforestation affects the micro climate of an area. It can increase the rate of evaporation and reduce the rainfall of an area. These will affect the availability of water in a region, which in turn affect the activity of farmers and herders and their output (Idowu, 2017).

Findings for trigger causes also stems from resistance by farmers in disallowing herders from invading their farm lands. Respondents asserted that farmer's usual attempt to stop the herders from entering into their farmland is a

trigger. This effort is mostly resisted by the herders, who see themselves as the rightful owner of the entire bush. In some cases, farmers were killed and their houses burnt down. The farmers knowing that their livelihoods are at verge of destruction will naturally fight back with everything within their power. This is the common approach among the farming communities in Benue and by extension, the central region of Nigeria. This finding corroborates the position of Kriesberg (2017) who asserted that the conflict between farmers and herders in Benue state is not unconnected to herders leaving their cattle unattended to and thus making them wander into cultivated fields as the most frequent causes of the conflict. Cattle may go on the rampage and destroy seed crops or consume food items stored in barns. This is particularly the case during the planting season and the post-harvest period. In Many settlements, herders have their grazing areas near to fields reserved for farming thus raising the likelihood of cattle entering cultivated fields. The increasing cultivation of bush farms by migrant farmers has also contributed to the destruction of crops by cattle. During the farming season, herders have to meander through farms to obtain access to grazing fields and cattle are prone to tramping on farmers' crops. In the pre-harvest period, cattle frequently destroy or eat ripened crops as they are led from the fields into farm lands which constitute serious threat to food security.

In an interview with an official of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), Benue State Chapter, cattle rustling and theft are yet other trigger causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. This position aptly corroborates Olaniyan & Yahaya (2016) who posited that cattle rustling and theft is one of the manifest causes of the herders-farmers conflict in the Benue valley. Fulani herders have lost a lot of cattle and even human beings to the criminal activities of gangs engaged in cattle theft. According to Samuel (2015), more than 64,750 cattle were stolen and at least 2,991 herders killed in North-central Nigeria in 2015 alone. Similarly, respondents voiced the fact that lack of security presence in these forests and villages have encouraged these criminals. Idowu (2017) also corroborated this view that cattle theft and rustling is a major cause of reprisal killings by herders. In other words, the criminal activities of youths from both sides of the divide are fueling the conflict.

This also, can be seen as trigger cause rather than a root cause. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons, political, ethnic, religious, and socio-cultural conflicts in the state has also fueled the conflict. Other include the high level of poverty, lack of education, inequality and general underdevelopment are some of the proximate causal factors of these rising conflict. In terms of recent development bearing on security concerns responsible for causal factors, some respondents were of the view that, the Boko Haram insurgency is the main push factors for herders moving south, yet others attributed it to indigene-settler dichotomy, among others. (Interview, 2023).

By and large, most respondents in the study were of the view that the recent escalation in killings and destruction of homes and farm produce as well as the swirl in the figure of internally displayed persons across the state became intensified after the state government approved the anti-grazing law. The states security situation has become very acute and there is growing attention for incidents of incessant bloody clashes between the farmers and the herders in the state. This development has become a subject of security concern and public outcry, a situation that calls for urgent attention.

Effects of the Farmer-Herders Conflict on Food Security in Benue State

Research objective two was aimed at finding out the effects of the farmer-herder conflict on food security in Benue State. After in-depth interviews with key informants, observation and intense discussions with focused groups, it was found out that the effect of the conflict is multifaceted as it affects the social, economic, political and environmental spheres of the state with particular emphasis on decreasing output in food production. However, factors deduced from the analysis of data for effect of the conflict were due to many reasons including but not limited to: destruction of human lives and animals, farmlands and properties; drop in food production as a consequent of the herdsmen attacks; hike in food prices; rise in poverty level among the people in the state; disruption of family and communal life in the rural areas; social dislocation and population displacement (Internally Displayed Persons - IDPs). Others are that it drains the Benue State government of its scarce resources; inhibit the delivery of public services; unsettle the state government's strategies; discourage potential investors; affect rapid economic growth and hinder political

development, among others (Interviews with key informants and Focus Group Discussants, 2023). In order to ensure that the results from the interviews and Focus Group Discussions were accurate, we compared the results with findings from other sources of data collection. Results generated from official documents, reports, and other secondary sources also confirmed the findings from the primary sources.

Interviewees, discussants, Conflict analysts, researchers, scholars, development analysts among others have all muted various effects arising from the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. There is no gain saying the fact that food and other agricultural production is the mainstay of Benue State economy, even though there are other mineral resources. This sector has been negatively impacted according to findings in this study. The first major effect of the farmer-herder conflict is the destruction of lives, farmlands and properties in the state. Herdsmen attacks have raised security concern involving all the communities in the state. Benue has become a conflict stricken state and is regarded as the hotbed of killings in recent time. The conflict has become a major threat to the nation's food production and by extension, food security. Some ofthe food-producing communities in the state experiencing the clashes between the farmers and herders have experienced heavy loss of lives and properties. Such loss of lives has adversely affected farming activities and other related businesses and so cio-economic activities, resulting in a drastic reduction in farm outputs, and thus, heightening the fear of hunger. Already, most farmers in the affected farming communities of Ado, Apa, Agatu, Buruku, Tarka, Kwande, Logo, Makurdi, Gwer West, Okpokwu, Guma, Ogbadibo, Oju, Ukum, among others have abandoned farms and schools for the fear of being attacked by the Fulani herdsmen. For the once predominant farming communities, have now turn to other non-agricultural occupation. Too many farmers have been displaced and dispossessed of their farms by armed Fulani herdsmen. The table below shows an over view of death arising from the farmer-herder conflict in the state within the period under study.

Table 1: Statistics of Death Caused by Farmer-Herder Conflict in Benue State, 2015 – 2021

Year of Attacks	Number of Deaths
2015	1,177
2016	809
2017	43
2018	440
2019	174
2020	88
2021	2,131
2022	172
2023	104
Total	**5,138**

Source: *Culled from Benue State Emergency Management Agency Reports (SEMA, 2023)*

The table above shows the statistics of death caused by the farmer-herder conflict in the state between 2015 and 2023. The data shows increasing death tolls which portends serious danger for food security. The more the attacks, the more people are killed and the implication is that more hands are disengaged from farming and could negatively affect food production and added to the challenges of food insecurity. Respondents in the study are unanimous in their predictions that the gains recorded in the agricultural sector of the economy, especially in the area of food production, may suffer a serious setback as a result of the negative effects of clashes with Fulani herdsmen. Currently, virtually all the farming communities in the state have been affected by the rampaging Fulani herdsmen. The effects of the sustained farmer-herder conflict in the affected localities have led to farmers' reluctance to go back to their farms, even as the current farming season goes on. Local farmers have fled, leaving their farms unharnessed and fallow, thereby subjecting farms to unwarranted grazing by the Fulani herdsmen.

In all the clashes, heavy casualties in human lives and properties are recorded on both sides. While the local farmers count losses in terms of houses and farm produce, the Fulani herdsmen are counting theirs in terms of cattle rustled or killed. Farms and schools in the affected areas have been overtaken with weeds and those that were ready for harvesting have been left unattended to. According to discussants, "this will negatively affect food supply of local farmers to all parts of the country, since most of the local farmers have moved to safe places where they are not farming and are staying idle" (FGD, 2023). Incessant conflict between crop farmers and livestock herders in Benue State is threatening food and national security in Nigeria. In Benue State, most of its population resides in rural areas, communal violence or conflicts have serious implication on access and availability of food, since agriculture is the main preoccupation of rural population. This view corroborates the position of Audu (2014) who asserted that the production of crops and rearing of livestock is the main economic activity of the people. Therefore, communal conflicts have serious implication on food system. Often, warring communities or parties tactically resort to manipulation over access to food and livestock. Thus, food insecurity has become an effect of communal conflict.

Conflict is correlated to food security and, under most circumstances, depresses production and income from cash crops and livestock. This reduction in production and income has serious implication on food security with the capacity to reduce coping capacity of those depending on food resources for their livelihood. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (2004) communal violence costs Nigeria over $12 billion worth of agricultural production during the 20th century, given the importance of agricultural livelihood to overall economic wellbeing, especially in conflict prone areas of Nigeria like Benue State. Not only has communal conflicts limited production of food, it has the propensity to also deny people access to food and availability of food supply. According to the Food Research Policy Institute (2004) most conflicts and post conflict zones of north- central Nigeria are home to substantial numbers of food insecure people. Specifically, herders and farmers are critical to Nigeria's food security. The Fulani indisputably represent a significant component of the Nigerian economy. They constitute the major breeders of cattle, the main source of meat the most available and cheap source of animal proteins consumed by Nigerians. The Fulani own over 90% of the nation's livestock population which accounts for one third of agricultural GDP and 3.2% of the nation's GDP (Eniola, 2010).

Famers interviewed in the course of this research reported large drops in their average production of yam, maize, millet, rice and sorghum in the period 2015-2023. This reduction in the output of crops is due to a combination of factors. Essentially, it has been the reduction in the availability of labour due to loss of lives and the threat of attacks on farmers by herders. The foregoing no doubt could impact negatively on the four main pillars of food security as reported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (2006) which are; food availability, food accessibility, food utilization, and food stabilization. For the food availability dimension, the conflict reduces food security through it adverse impact on agricultural labor supply. Farmer-herder conflict affects the food accessibility dimension of food security in the state through it harmful impact on physical and economic access to food. For instance, the conflict has led to the destruction homes and properties, markets and farms, among others. For the food utilization dimension, the adverse impact of the conflict can be captured through anthropometric outcomes. And for the food stabilization dimension, the adverse effects of the conflict appear to be captured through its impact on variability of food prices and the value of food imports as is currently witnessed not just in the state but across the nation.

The killing of men, women, and children, and the destruction of farm crops and animals have become a trade mark of this conflict, which has chased people out of their ancestral abodes into intolerable situations. Also, the conflict has resulted in internal displacement of persons and farm labourers migrate from their farming communities to the urban areas for different opportunities and sometimes return after the planting season is over which negatively affect farm activities. Women who remain behind abandon their farms for fear of being attacked by the herders. The effect is a reduction in agricultural labour force resulting in food insecurity (Adamu and Ben, 2017). The table below highlights the demographic data of internally displayed persons across several troubled communities in the state.

Table2: Statistics of Internally Displaced Persons in Benue State as at 2023

IDP Camps	Women	Pregnant Women	Nursing Mother	Men	Children	Aged	Disabled	Ground Total
Daudu	5,065	304	226	3460	8,363	109	41	16745
TseGinde	3,404	532	581	2,304	7,847	241	167	15799
Gbajimba	5,020	349	131	2,558	5,972	480	68	14578
Abegena/ Agam	12,897	492	616	4,026	10,283	258	234	28806
Anyiin	4630	582	776	601	5,013	1,337	664	13603
Abede	2,230	104	165	660	3,719	96	38	7012
Ugba	5,874	79	271	3597	4880	331	35	15067
Ugbokpo	4352	48	199	2791	2324	281	19	10014
Obagaji	6432	127	203	3178	3621	413	67	14041
Otukpo	4211	78	92	2751	3638	376	39	11185
Oju	3987	102	138	2142	3002	468	46	9885
Total	58102	2797	3398	28068	58662	4290	1418	156735

Source: *Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA, 2023)*

The table above shows statistics of internally displaced persons that were sacked from their various homes, villages, communities and farms as a result of the raging farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. The implication of this on food security is that the farmers can no longer go to their farms and inadvertently, this will lead to fall in food production. Further implication for the state stems from the fact that the conflict has generated more dependents on the state and well-meaning citizens for relief items, shelter among others. Other implications for the state government cut across fending for the IDPs and injecting lots of resources into maintaining peace by cutting down its spending on vaccines for livestock, fertilizers and other agrochemicals for crop farmers. The result is food insecurity due to low yields or no production in areas where these conflicts are localized thereby leading to high food prices.

Conclusion

The underlying cause of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State has been attributed to climate change with its attendant consequence of herders migrating from the north to the Benue valley in search of pasture and water points for their cattle over the years. However, proximate or trigger causes of the conflictcut across herders leaving their cattle unattended to and thus, wandering into cultivated fields; illegal invasion of farms and destruction of crops by cattle, cattle rustling and theft; passage of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017 by the Benue State Government; combination of ethnic, socio-economic, environmental and political factors, to indigene-settler dichotomy between the farmers and the herders, among others. The farmer-herder conflict in the state has had and still having tremendous negative effect on food production and by implication, food security. Essentially, it is responsible for the massive destruction of human lives and animals, farmlands and properties; drop in food production; hike in food prices; rise in poverty level among the people; disruption of family and communal life in the rural areas; social dislocation and population displacement which has affected rapid economic growth and hinder political development, among others.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The Benue State government in collaboration with the federal government and other world and well-meaning stakeholders should intensify the campaign and action against global warming which is at the root of the problem of climate change responsible for herders migrating to the Benue valley in search of pasture and water points. A reverse in climatic condition to the normal will also lead to a reverse in the clashes between the herders and the farmers in Benue State.

2. In the interim, the Benue State government and its critical stakeholders should strengthen or improve local peace building

and reconciliation systems, including a communal conflict mediator among indigenous farmers and herders in Benue State despite the implementation of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017.

3. There is a compelling need for collaboration between law enforcement officials and the local populace in terms of intelligence gathering and dissemination. This will help to manage human and cattle movements across borders to curb the inflow of illicit mercenaries and weapons usually used during the conflict between the farmers and the herders in the state.

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