



COMMUNITY COLLABORATION FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE-BUILDING BETWEEN FARMERS AND HERDERS IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The persistent conflict between farmers and herders in Plateau State, Nigeria, has escalated into a major security and socio-economic crisis, driven by resource competition, historical grievances, religious polarization, and governance failures. This study examines community perspectives on reconciliation, confidence-building, and dispute resolution to identify viable strategies for fostering peace. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from farming and herding communities through structured surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal a significant disparity in willingness to engage in dialogue, with herders demonstrating a higher openness to reconciliation compared to farmers, who remain deeply distrustful due to past grievances. Land disputes (79.4%) and water scarcity (69.6%) emerge as the primary causes of conflict, while lack of trust (79.6%) and fear of attack (69.4%) are identified as major barriers to peace. Despite these challenges, there is strong community support for interfaith dialogues (79.8%), joint economic projects (70.2%), and hybrid dispute resolution mechanisms that integrate both traditional and formal legal systems. The study shows the need for trauma healing programs, youth engagement initiatives, and livelihood support as essential components of sustainable peacebuilding. The findings contribute to existing literature by providing empirical insights into grassroots attitudes toward reconciliation and highlight the importance of culturally sensitive, community-driven approaches in addressing farmer-herder conflicts. By prioritizing trust-building, inclusive dialogue, and economic cooperation, locally led peace initiatives can pave the way for long-term conflict transformation and coexistence in Plateau State.

Keywords: Farmer-herder conflict, Reconciliation, Trust-building, Dispute resolution, Plateau State, Peacebuilding initiatives

INTRODUCTION

The escalating conflict between predominantly Christian crop farmers and predominantly Muslim cattle herders in Nigeria's Middle Belt has become one of the country's most complex security threats. This violence, rooted in historical, socio-economic, and environmental factors, has resulted in thousands of deaths, massive displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods. The Middle Belt, a region spanning the central band of Nigeria from the Southwest to the Northeast, is characterized by its ethnic and religious diversity. For centuries, Fulani pastoralists have herded cattle through the region's fertile grazing lands, following seasonal migration patterns that often bring them into contact and conflict with farming communities such as the Berom, Mwaghavul, Ron, Irigwe, and Anaguta. British colonial policies exacerbated these tensions by restricting traditional cattle migration routes, favouring settled farming communities, and sowing seeds of inter-group rivalry (Abbass, 2020; Okoli & Atelhe, 2021). Since Nigeria's independence, rapid population growth, deforestation, and desertification have intensified competition over land and water resources, further fueling conflicts (Odoh & Chigozie, 2021; MercyCorps, 2022).

Religious polarization has added another layer of complexity to the conflict. The predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian indigenous farming tribes have found themselves increasingly divided along religious lines, with politicians and ethnic militias exploiting these divisions to escalate violence (ICG, 2020; Fasona, Olorunfemi, Elias & Igbokwe 2022). The proliferation of small arms and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have made disputes more violent and intractable (Saliu & Olawuyi, 2022). Plateau State, in particular, has witnessed several waves of violence since 2001, resulting in thousands of deaths

and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people (Ezeibe, 2019; Krause, 2021). Victims of these conflicts have described horrific atrocities committed by both sides, which have left deep psychological scars and threatened the social fabric of communities (Blench, Dendo, Hassan & Umar, 2022).

This study aims to explore community perspectives on establishing collaborative initiatives for farmer-herder confidence-building, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding in Plateau State. The study seeks to assess the attitudes, willingness, and approaches of both farmers and herders toward reconciliation, identify cultural norms and communication patterns that influence conflict, and explore their views on appropriate dispute-resolution processes. Additionally, the study aims to determine the capacity-building needs of communities for sustaining peacebuilding efforts and to develop a practical, community-led model for reconciliation and conflict transformation. The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide needed insights into grassroots perspectives on transforming farmer-herder conflicts. By illuminating the attitudes and needs of affected communities, the research can inform the design of culturally appropriate, community-driven models for reconciliation and peacebuilding. If effective confidence-building mechanisms can be established and sustained locally, this could provide a pathway to reduce violence, heal divisions, resolve resource conflicts, and build sustainable peace. The study will produce an actionable framework that communities can implement, adapt, and scale to other conflict-prone regions in Nigeria.

Nigeria's conflict between farmers and herders has a long history, deeply rooted in socio-economic, environmental, and political factors. Over the years, competition over land and water resources, demographic changes, colonial policies, and religious and ethnic differences have escalated tensions

between these groups. The conflict is particularly severe in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, including Plateau State, where it has led to loss of lives, displacement, and socio-economic instability.

The origins of farmer-herder tensions in Nigeria can be traced to pre-colonial times when pastoralist groups, particularly the Fulani, practised transhumant grazing—moving seasonally in search of pasture and water. These movements occasionally resulted in disputes with settled farming communities, but traditional mechanisms such as negotiations led by local leaders helped manage these tensions (Blench *et al.*, 2022). However, over time, factors such as population growth, expansion of farmlands, and climate change have intensified competition for resources, leading to more frequent and violent clashes (Abbass, 2020). During the colonial period, the British introduced policies that altered land use patterns and disrupted traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. British administrators implemented land tenure laws that favoured settled farming over nomadic herding, leading to increased pressure on pastoralists (Okoli & Atelhe, 2021). Additionally, traditional cattle migration routes were restricted, forcing herders to move into new territories where they encountered resistance from indigenous farming communities. This sowed the seeds of mistrust and competition, which persist today (Odoh & Chigozie, 2021). Environmental changes have played a crucial role in exacerbating the conflict. Desertification, deforestation, and decreasing rainfall in northern Nigeria have reduced available grazing lands, pushing herders further south into farming regions (Fasona *et al.*, 2022). This migration has led to frequent disputes over land ownership, crop destruction, and access to water sources. Studies indicate that land disputes and water scarcity are among the primary drivers of the conflict (MercyCorps, 2022).

Nigeria's complex ethno-religious landscape has further deepened the farmer-herder crisis. The predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and the predominantly Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt often view the conflict through religious and ethnic lenses, exacerbating hostilities (ICG, 2020). Politicians and ethnic militias have exploited these divisions, fueling cycles of violence and revenge attacks (Saliu & Olawuyi, 2022). Research by Ezeibe (2019) and Krause (2021) highlights how religious and ethnic mobilization has transformed local disputes into broader sectarian conflicts.

Another major factor contributing to the intensification of the conflict is the availability of small arms and the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Studies indicate that the proliferation of arms has increased the lethality of clashes (Saliu & Olawuyi, 2022). Additionally, the weakening of traditional authorities has left communities without effective mediatory structures, making disputes more violent and prolonged (Blench *et al.*, 2022).

The farmer-herder conflict has had devastating effects on communities, leading to mass displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and increased poverty. Reports indicate that thousands of people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced as a result of the violence (Ezeibe, 2019). The destruction of farmlands and cattle theft has also led to food insecurity, further straining Nigeria's agricultural sector (Krause, 2021).

Several initiatives have been proposed and implemented to address the conflict, including interfaith dialogues, joint economic projects, and hybrid dispute resolution mechanisms that integrate both traditional and modern legal systems (Malan *et al.*, 2022). Studies show strong community support for reconciliation efforts, such as interfaith dialogues and

shared economic projects (Ginifer *et al.*, 2022). However, significant barriers remain, including a lack of trust and fear of attacks (Lederach, 2022).

Ezeibe (2019), Blench *et al.* (2022), and other scholars document the immense human toll of protracted farmer-herder violence in Plateau State and the Middle Belt based on field research. Their work details massacre trauma, cycles of retaliatory attacks, grief, loss of livelihoods, and the deeply polarizing impact of conflict lines forming along religious divides. Krause (2021) and MercyCorps (2022) emphasize the need for reconciliation and healing initiatives to address communal trauma, grief, and loss as part of building pathways to peace. Transitional justice, truth-telling, and memorialization have roles to play in mending social fractures (Lederach, 2022). Writers like Meseko (2016), Olabisi (2022), and Abbass (2020) analyze conflict dynamics through a lens of competition over resources, security dilemma spirals, dehumanization biases fueling violence, and breakdowns in traditional dispute arbitration systems. They call for balanced conflict resolution and resource-sharing strategies.

Malan *et al.* (2022) advocate for collaborative natural resource management plans between farmer and herder communities. Ginifer *et al.* (2022) and Lederach (2022) propose community-based mediation systems blending traditional and modern peacebuilding approaches, emphasizing the essential roles of customary leaders (Fasona, 2022). Qualitative research by Saliu and Luqman (2016), Odoh and Chigozie (2021), and others reveal farmer and herder community attitudes, finding some openness to reconciliation but also lingering distrust and divisions. Capacity building for inter-group dialogue, mediation, and confidence-building is needed. The International Crisis Group (2020) and Abbass (2022) caution that external interventions, such as peace education or joint community projects, should be carefully designed based on local needs, culture, and context to have legitimacy. Sustaining peace requires inclusive grassroots participation and community ownership. While several studies analyze macro-level conflict drivers, trauma, and general resolution approaches, few deeply investigate local, micro-level perspectives on transforming inter-group relationships and establishing community institutions for confidence-building and sustainable reconciliation. This micro-level lens on rebuilding fractured communal ties at the grassroots represents a gap needing further scholarly examination, which this study aims to help address. By focusing on community-led reconciliation initiatives, this research seeks to fill this gap and contribute to the growing body of knowledge on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Questionnaires with closed-ended questions were administered to generate numerical data for statistical analysis. This allowed for the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, preferences and behaviours related to transforming farmer-herder conflicts across a sample population. The questionnaire contained questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale, multiple choice, and demographic questions.

Multi-stage random sampling was used to select a representative sample of households in 5 rural farming communities and 5 rural herding communities in Plateau State. These communities were randomly selected from high-conflict areas. Within each community, 50 households were randomly selected for the survey. With 10 communities, the total sample size was 500 respondents.

Data was collected through in-person paper questionnaire surveys administered to the head of each selected household. Respondents were briefed on the study and given instructions for completing the anonymous survey. Field researchers assisted those with low literacy. Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and cross-tabulations were used to analyze the relationships

between variables and compare groups. Demographic data was also analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the survey results shows an understanding surrounding farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria. The findings highlight the relationship between attitudes, barriers, and opportunities for peacebuilding within these communities.

Demographic Distributions

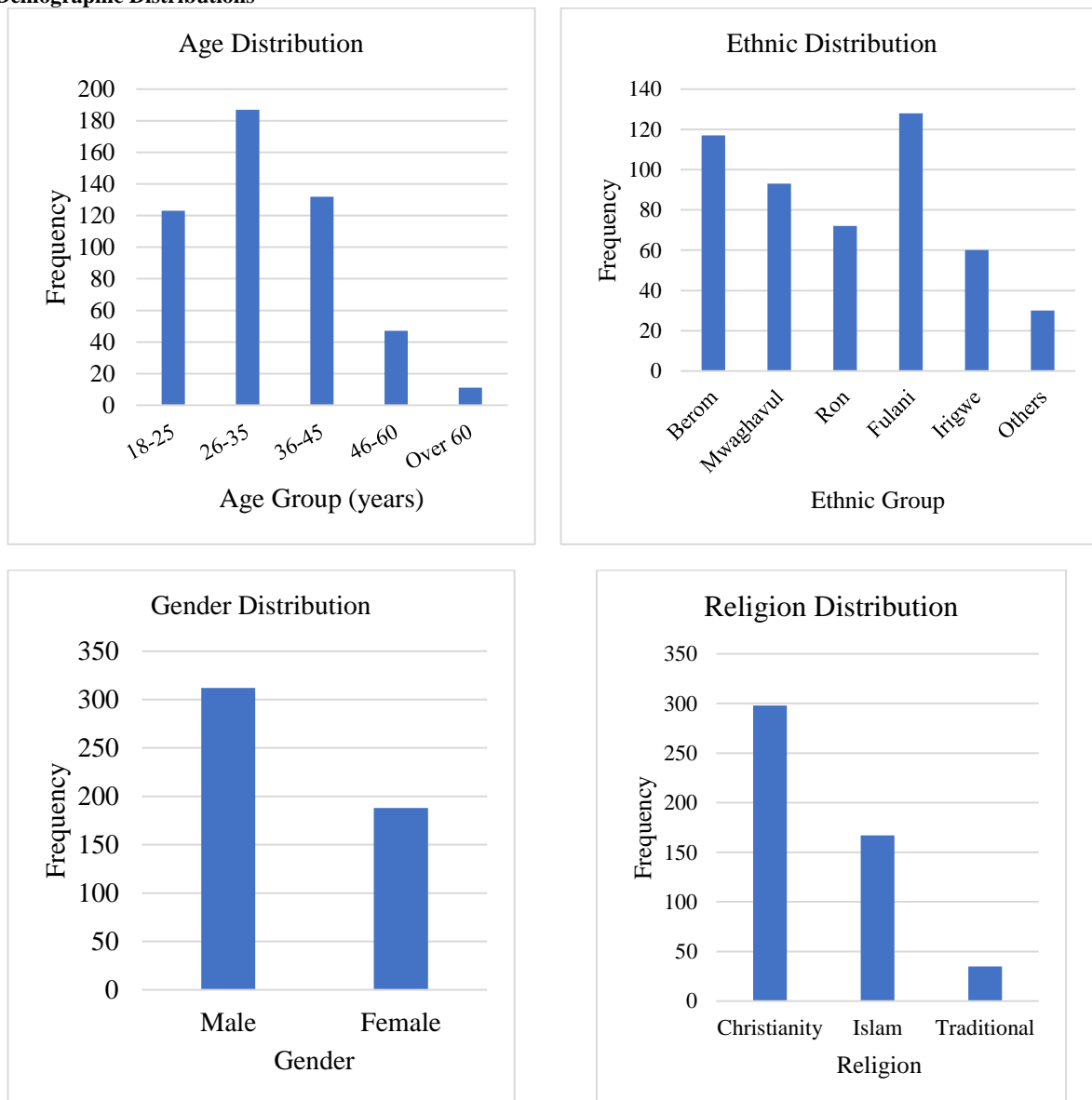


Figure 1: Demographic Distributions

Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the demographic distribution of respondents in the study. The graph illustrates the breakdown of participants by age, gender, religion, and ethnic group. The data shows that the majority of respondents fall within the 26-35 age group, reflecting a relatively young population. Gender distribution is slightly skewed, with males comprising a larger proportion of the sample compared to females. In terms of religion, Christianity and Islam are the

dominant faiths, with a small percentage adhering to traditional beliefs. The ethnic composition highlights the diversity of the region, with significant representation from the Berom, Mwaghavul and Fulani groups. The livelihood distribution indicates that crop farming and cattle herding are the primary occupations, with a smaller percentage engaged in other activities.

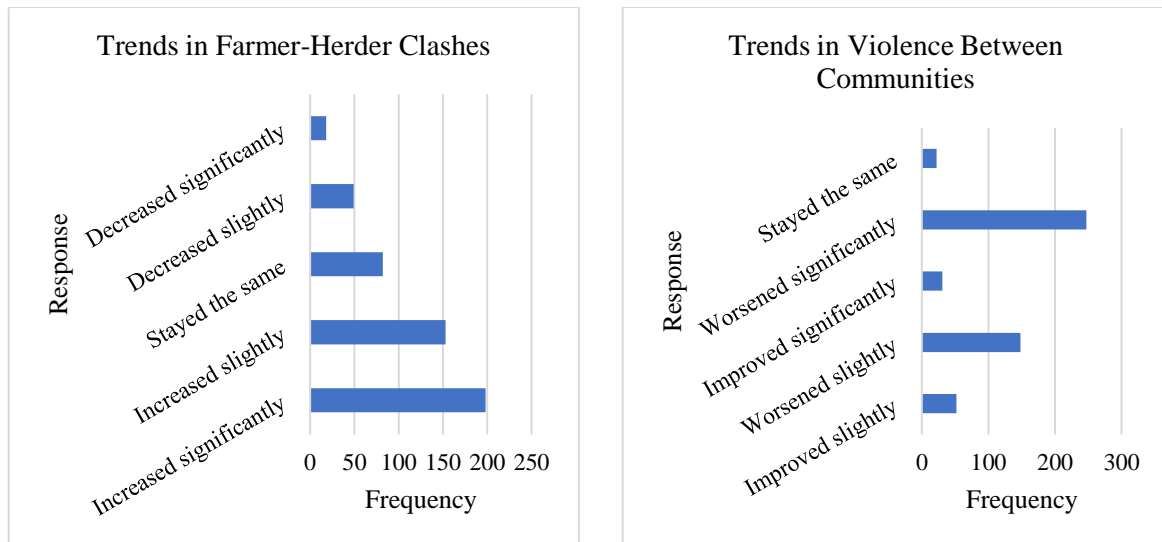


Figure 2: Conflict and Violence Trends from the year 2020 to 2024

Figure 2 represents the trends in conflict and violence within the years 2020 to 2024 as perceived by the respondents. The graph shows that a significant proportion of respondents believe that clashes between farmers and herders have increased, with a smaller percentage reporting a decrease or no change. This trend aligns with the broader narrative of

escalating violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, driven by factors such as land disputes, resource scarcity, and religious polarization. The graph also highlights the perceived impact of violence on communities, with many respondents indicating that the situation has worsened.

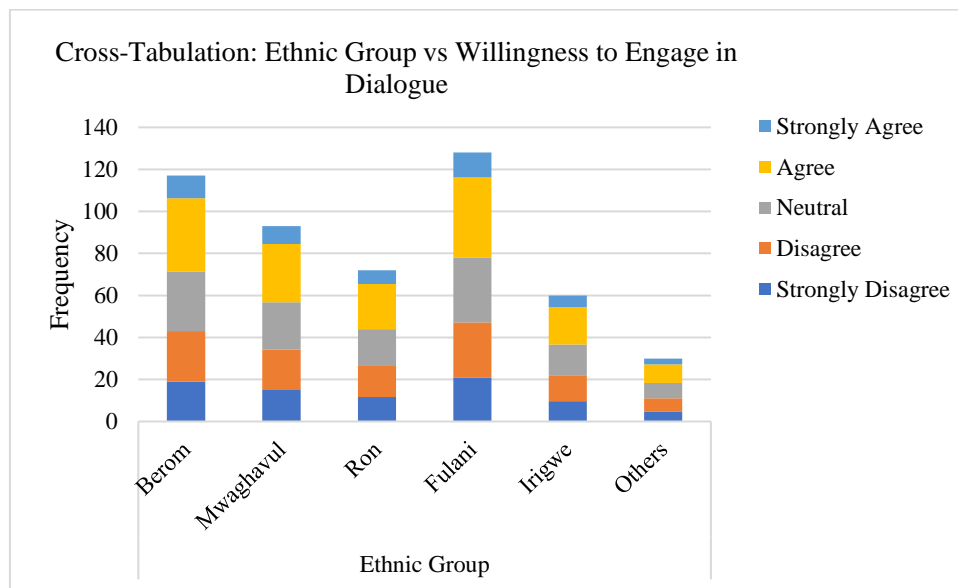


Figure 3: Cross tabulation of Ethnic Group versus willingness to engage in Dialogue

Figure 3 presents a cross-tabulation of ethnic groups and their willingness to engage in dialogue with the opposing community. The graph reveals differences in attitudes among ethnic groups. For instance, the Fulani community shows a higher willingness to engage in dialogue compared to the Berom, Mwaghavul and other groups. This disparity may reflect the Fulani's nomadic lifestyle, which necessitates

interaction with various communities, as well as their historical role as mediators in conflicts. In contrast, the other groups, who are primarily crop farmers, may be more cautious due to past grievances and the impact of violence on their livelihoods. This finding highlights the importance of tailoring reconciliation efforts to address the specific concerns and perspectives of different ethnic groups.

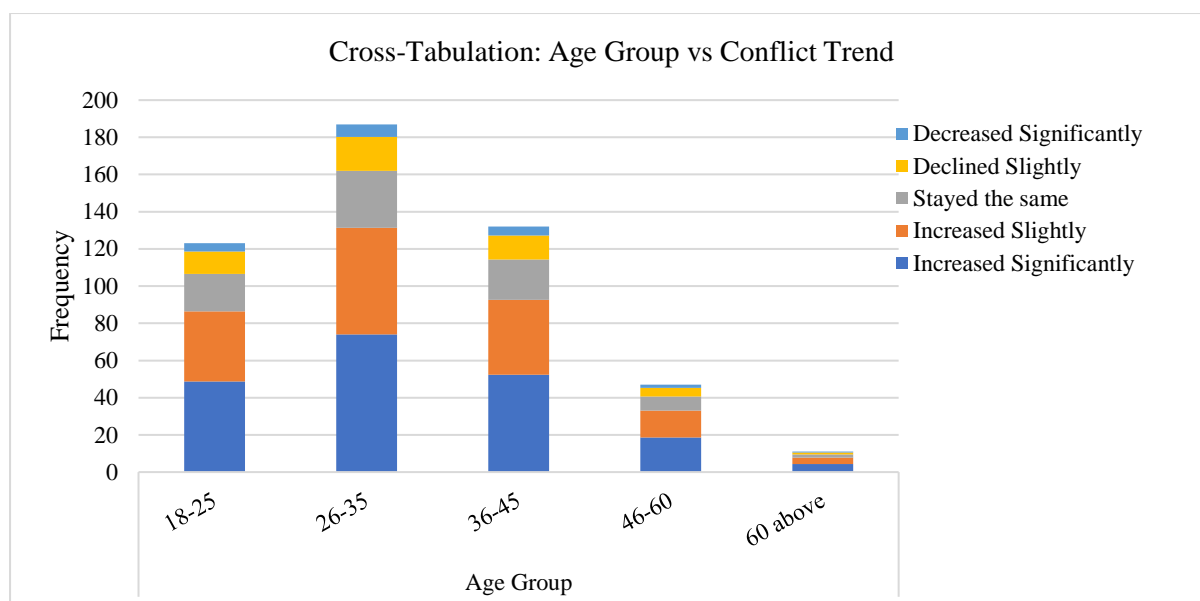


Figure 4: Cross-tabulation of Age Group versus Conflict Trends

Figure 4 shows the relationship between age groups and their perceptions of conflict trends. The graph indicates that younger respondents (18-35 years) are more likely to report an increase in violence compared to older age groups. This trend may reflect the heightened vulnerability of younger individuals to the impacts of conflict, such as displacement, loss of livelihoods, and recruitment into militias. Additionally, younger respondents may be more aware of recent escalations in violence due to their active participation

in community life. The graph also shows that older respondents (46 years and above) are more likely to report a decrease or no change in violence, possibly due to their reliance on traditional conflict resolution mechanisms or a more long-term perspective on the conflict. This finding shows the need to engage younger generations in peacebuilding efforts, as they are both disproportionately affected by violence and potentially key agents of change.

Table 1: Main causes of clashes between farmers and herders

Cause	Frequency	Percentage
Land disputes	397	79.4%
Water scarcity	348	69.6%
Cattle destruction of crops	302	60.4%
Proliferation of arms	251	50.2%
Breakdown of traditional authority	198	39.6%
Religious differences	183	36.6%
Criminality	152	30.4%
Ethnic differences	121	24.2%
Youth unemployment	97	19.4%
Political interference	83	16.6%

Table 1 shows the main factors contributing to farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State, reinforcing the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the crisis. The findings reveal that resource competition, governance failures, and socio-political dynamics all play significant roles in escalating tensions between the two groups. Among the listed causes, land disputes (79.4%) and water scarcity (69.6%) are identified as the most prominent drivers of conflict, reflecting the increasing pressure on natural resources due to population growth, climate change, and expanding agricultural activities. The competition for fertile land, which serves as both farmland and grazing areas, has intensified, leading to frequent clashes over access and ownership. This aligns with findings from Abbass (2020) and Mercy Corps (2022), which emphasize that shrinking natural resources are a major catalyst for violent confrontations in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The third most frequently cited cause, cattle destruction of crops (60.4%), further underscores the resource-based nature of the conflict. Farmers frequently report incidents where

herders allow their cattle to graze on farmlands, leading to significant economic losses and retaliatory actions. Conversely, herders argue that increased agricultural expansion has encroached upon traditional grazing routes, leaving them with limited options for feeding their livestock. This recurring cycle of grievances has deepened animosities, making reconciliation efforts more challenging. Similar patterns have been observed in other studies, such as Odoh and Chigozie (2021), who argue that the absence of well-defined grazing reserves and migration routes has exacerbated these disputes.

Beyond resource competition, other significant factors contributing to the conflict include the proliferation of arms (50.2%) and the breakdown of traditional authority (39.6%). The widespread availability of firearms has increased the lethality of clashes, transforming what were once localized disputes into large-scale violent encounters. Research by Saliu and Olawuyi (2022) highlights how the influx of small arms into the region has emboldened both farmers and herders

to resort to violence instead of dialogue. Additionally, the weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms has left communities without effective mediatory structures. Historically, disputes between farmers and herders were managed through customary institutions, where traditional rulers played a key role in resolving grievances. However, the erosion of these institutions due to political interference and declining legitimacy has created a vacuum, leaving conflicts unresolved and fueling further tensions.

Religious differences (36.6%) and ethnic divisions (24.2%) also contribute to the conflict, though they appear to be secondary compared to resource-based disputes. However, religious and ethnic identities often serve as underlying fault lines that exacerbate hostilities, particularly when violent incidents are framed in sectarian terms. The International Crisis Group (2020) notes that political actors and militia groups have exploited these divisions to mobilize support, deepening the fragmentation between communities. The data suggests that while religious and ethnic differences are not the primary drivers of conflict, they remain significant barriers to reconciliation, as they shape perceptions of victimhood and blame.

Criminality (30.4%) and youth unemployment (19.4%) further illustrate how economic and social factors contribute to the persistence of violence. The lack of employment opportunities for young people makes them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, increasing the likelihood of violent attacks and retaliatory raids. This finding aligns with Malan *et al.* (2022), who argue that addressing economic marginalization is key to reducing the appeal of violence as a means of survival. Similarly, political interference (16.6%) is recognized as a contributing factor, as local and national politicians have been accused of fueling tensions for electoral or strategic gains. By manipulating farmer-herder relations to secure votes or maintain power, political actors have, in some cases, obstructed peace initiatives and prolonged hostilities.

Another notable observation from the data is the difference in willingness to engage in dialogue between farmers and herders. The study reveals that a significantly higher proportion of herders (60.4%) are willing to participate in reconciliation efforts compared to crop farmers (29.4%). This suggests that herders, who often rely on mobility and interactions with different communities for their livelihoods, may be more open to dialogue as a means of securing peaceful coexistence. Conversely, farmers, who have experienced direct economic losses due to crop destruction and land disputes, may exhibit a greater degree of resistance to engagement, reflecting deeper grievances and distrust. These findings align with research by Abbas (2020), who emphasizes that sedentary farming communities often feel more vulnerable to external threats and thus show stronger reluctance toward conflict resolution initiatives.

Religious differences further compound the complexity of reconciliation. The data indicates that Muslims (33.4%) are more likely to perceive the other community as open to reconciliation compared to Christians (17.0%). This disparity shows the broader religious polarization in the region, where conflicts are frequently framed along religious lines, making it more difficult to foster mutual trust. As noted by the International Crisis Group (2020), religious identities in Nigeria's Middle Belt have been increasingly politicized, further exacerbating hostilities between communities. The influence of religion on conflict perception suggests that any peacebuilding initiative must incorporate interfaith dialogue to address underlying biases and misconceptions.

The study also identifies a series of barriers to reconciliation, with lack of trust (79.6%) and fear of attack (69.4%) being the

most frequently cited obstacles. These concerns are particularly pronounced among the Fulani community, which often perceives itself as marginalized and targeted. The entrenched nature of these animosities has been reinforced by cycles of violence, as well as narratives that portray one group as aggressors and the other as victims. Furthermore, trauma and grief, reported by 24.4% of respondents, show the psychological burden that decades of conflict have placed on affected communities. The role of trauma in prolonging conflict has been extensively documented by Lederach (2022), who argues that without addressing the psychological scars of violence, efforts toward reconciliation remain fragile. The study's findings reinforce the need for trauma healing programs as a core component of peacebuilding strategies.

In examining preferred dispute resolution mechanisms, the survey reveals a clear divergence in approach between farmers and herders. Crop farmers show a stronger preference for local government intervention (29.8%), likely due to their perception that formal institutions can enforce accountability and provide structured mechanisms for conflict resolution. In contrast, herders favour traditional leaders' arbitration (24.6%), reflecting the enduring influence of customary governance in pastoral communities. This divergence suggests that a hybrid approach, incorporating both formal legal frameworks and traditional mediation systems, may be the most effective means of addressing conflicts. Research by Fasona *et al.* (2022) supports this notion, emphasizing that culturally legitimate mechanisms are critical for ensuring compliance with conflict resolution decisions.

The study also highlights the capacity-building needs of these communities. The most frequently cited needs include dialogue facilitation training (79.4%) and access to mediation (70.4%), indicating a strong desire for structured processes that can help prevent and resolve disputes. Economic development (60.2%) and youth engagement (49.8%) are also identified as key priorities, reflecting a recognition that economic hardship and lack of opportunities contribute to the persistence of conflict. These findings align with Malan *et al.* (2022), who argue that sustainable peacebuilding must address the economic root causes of violence, particularly among young people, who are often drawn into conflict due to lack of employment opportunities.

Support for reconciliation initiatives such as interfaith dialogues (79.8%), joint community development projects (70.2%), and shared grazing reserves (60.6%) suggests that, despite existing tensions, there is a willingness to explore collaborative solutions. This aligns with previous findings by Ginifer *et al.* (2022), who emphasize that community-driven reconciliation efforts that address both economic and social concerns have a higher likelihood of success.

The findings of this study provide insights into the factors influencing farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State and highlight key areas for intervention. The high levels of distrust and fear reported among respondents reinforce existing literature that describes farmer-herder conflicts as being deeply rooted in historical grievances, resource competition, and weak governance structures (Abbas, 2020; Odoh & Chigozie, 2021). The identification of land disputes and water scarcity as the primary causes of clashes mirrors the findings of MercyCorps (2022), which shows how climate change and environmental degradation have intensified competition over scarce resources.

The study's observation that herders are more willing to engage in dialogue than farmers supports the argument made by Saliu and Olawuyi (2022), who note that sedentary farming communities often feel more exposed to threats and therefore approach reconciliation with greater scepticism. This

reluctance is further compounded by the religious polarization identified in the study. The International Crisis Group (2020) highlights how politicians and ethnic militias exploit religious and ethnic differences to fuel violence, leading to a highly fragmented society where reconciliation efforts face significant challenges. Addressing these divisions requires a multi-pronged approach that incorporates interfaith dialogues, community education, and mechanisms to counter misinformation and stereotypes.

The emphasis on trauma healing as a necessary component of reconciliation aligns with research by Krause (2021) and MercyCorps (2022), both of which stress that addressing the psychological impact of violence is critical for sustainable peace. The need for capacity-building in mediation and dialogue facilitation, as highlighted in this study, resonates with the recommendations of Ginifer *et al.* (2022), who advocate for localized mediation systems that blend traditional and modern peacebuilding approaches.

A very encouraging finding is the strong support for joint economic initiatives, such as shared grazing reserves and community development projects. This aligns with Lederach's (2022) argument that sustainable peacebuilding efforts must foster economic interdependence and shared prosperity among conflicting groups. Similarly, Malan *et al.* (2022) emphasize that economic development initiatives targeting youth can help break the cycle of violence by providing alternative means of livelihood.

This study reinforces the fact that farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State are driven by a combination of resource competition, governance failures, religious polarization, and deep-seated grievances. While significant barriers to reconciliation remain, the findings also point to potential areas for intervention, particularly through economic collaboration, trauma healing, and hybrid dispute resolution mechanisms that incorporate both traditional and formal legal structures. Addressing these issues holistically will be essential for fostering long-term peace and stability in the region.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the challenges and opportunities for reconciliation between farmers and herders in Plateau State. The findings showed the critical role of trust-building, cultural sensitivity, economic development, and youth engagement in designing effective peacebuilding initiatives. The disparity in willingness to engage in dialogue between farmers and herders, coupled with the deep-seated religious and ethnic divides, highlights the complexity of the conflict. However, the strong support for collaborative initiatives such as interfaith dialogues and joint community projects indicates a potential pathway for sustainable peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to mitigate the farmer-herder conflict should prioritize initiatives that foster dialogue, trust, and economic cooperation. Community dialogue platforms should be established to facilitate open discussions between farmers and herders, allowing them to air grievances and explore solutions together. Trauma healing programs must be incorporated into reconciliation efforts to address the psychological impact of violence. Additionally, hybrid dispute resolution mechanisms that integrate both formal government structures and traditional leaders should be developed to ensure that conflict resolution processes are both credible and culturally appropriate.

Economic interventions should focus on livelihood support programs that provide opportunities for both farmers and

herders, reducing the economic motivations for conflict. Engaging youth in peacebuilding initiatives and equipping them with skills training and employment opportunities will be crucial in preventing their involvement in violence. Finally, reconciliation efforts must be inclusive and community-driven, ensuring that all stakeholders are involved in shaping sustainable peace initiatives. Through these measures, the region can move toward lasting peace and coexistence.

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