IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
https://irasspublisher.com/journal-details/IJAHSS
ISSN *(Online) 3049-0170*

Herder–Farmer Conflicts in Nigeria, 2015–2025: Historical Drivers, Socioeconomic Consequences, and Policy Responses

Dr. Valentine Obiajulu[1], Opara, Uche Andrew PhD[2*] & Onyejela Paul Chimankpa, Esq PhD[3]

[1-*2-3]Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

Corresponding Author: Opara, Uche Andrew PhD

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri

Article History

Received: 11 / 09 / 2026

Accepted: 26 / 10 / 2026

Published: 12 / 11 /2026

Abstract: This paper examines herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria from 2015 to 2025 through a historical and political-economy lens. It argues that the conflict cannot be explained adequately as a simple contest between two occupational groups, nor as an inevitable consequence of climate change. Rather, it has developed through the interaction of changing land use, pressure on agricultural and pastoral resources, insecure livestock mobility, demographic and commercial change, weak dispute-resolution institutions, the circulation of small arms, criminal violence, and political narratives that recast local disputes as collective ethnic or religious antagonisms. The article situates the period within a longer history of farmer–pastoralist relations and analyses the changing forms of violence and state response under the administrations of Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu. It reviews the Land Use Act, grazing-reserve policy, state anti-open-grazing laws, security operations, peacebuilding initiatives, and proposals for ranching and livestock-sector reform. The analysis draws on a qualitative historical approach to secondary literature, policy documents, and documented events; it does not present original interviews or claim a new casualty dataset. Evidence from research on rural food insecurity and political framing indicates that violence has consequences beyond immediate deaths and property destruction, including farm abandonment, reduced cultivation, displacement, disrupted markets, and household food insecurity. The study concludes that durable mitigation requires impartial protection of civilians, accountability for attacks, negotiated and lawful land-use arrangements, accessible local mediation, livestock-sector investment, and systematic monitoring of agrarian impacts. It cautions against policies that presume collective guilt or impose land-use changes without credible consultation, enforceability, and protection of the rights and livelihoods of both farmers and pastoralists.

Keywords: *Nigeria; herder–farmer conflict; pastoralism; land governance; food security; internal displacement; conflict resolution.*

How to Cite in APA format: Obiajulu, V., Opara, U. A. & Chimankpa, O. P. (2026). Herder–Farmer Conflicts in Nigeria, 2015–2025: Historical Drivers, Socioeconomic Consequences, and Policy Responses. *IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(11), 37-43.* http://doi.org/10.67564/IRASSJAHSS.v3.i11.0272

Introduction

Herder–farmer conflicts have become one of Nigeria's most persistent challenges of both rural and urban insecurity, agricultural production, and national cohesion. Violent incidents have been reported across the North-Central and North-West zones and, increasingly, in some parts of southern Nigeria. The term "herder–farmer conflict" is useful as a broad description of disputes involving livestock mobility, crops, land, water, and access to local resources, but it can obscure important differences among incidents. Some disputes concern accidental crop damages or blocked routes; others involve cattle theft, reprisals, organised armed attacks, kidnapping, communal mobilisation, or criminal opportunism. Treating these events as one uniform conflict risks misidentifying causes and recommending ineffective responses.

The years 2015–2025 provide a significant period for historical examination. The interval begins with the election of Muhammadu Buhari and a change in federal political leadership, continues through the enactment and contestation of state anti-open-grazing laws, overlaps with the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened economic pressure, and ends in the first years of Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration. Across this period, the conflict remained connected to wider insecurity, including banditry, kidnapping, communal violence, and disputes over land and local authority. The period should not, however, be treated as the origin of farmer–pastoralist tensions. Relations between mobile livestock keepers and cultivators have a longer history, including cooperation, trade, negotiated access, seasonal movement, and conflict management through customary institutions.

This study advances three related arguments. First, contemporary violence emerged from the interaction of structural pressures and political choices, rather than from environmental scarcity alone. Second, the consequences are agrarian as well as security-related: insecurity affects planting decisions, farm size, labour, transport, food prices, and household livelihoods. Third, state policy has been inconsistent where security operations, land-use laws, and livestock reforms have not been accompanied by reliable implementation, impartial accountability, and meaningful engagement with affected communities. The article does not assume that all herders or all farmers share the same interests, nor that ethnic or religious identity is a sufficient explanation for individual acts of violence.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC license

The study has four objectives: to place the 2015–2025 period in historical context; to assess the interaction of land, environmental, economic, security, and political drivers; to examine the socioeconomic consequences, especially for agriculture and food security; and to evaluate the strengths and limitations of major policy responses. It contributes to historical and diplomatic studies by connecting local agrarian relations to federalism, state capacity, public narratives, and Nigeria's broader challenge of governing a diverse federation under conditions of insecurity.

Conceptual clarification and historical context

Pastoralism refers to livelihood systems organised partly or substantially around livestock keeping. It includes diverse patterns of mobility, settlement, herd management, trade, and adaptation; it should not be equated with violence or with a single ethnic identity. Farmers likewise vary by crop, land tenure, scale of production, access to capital, and relationship to local authorities. The terms "farmer" and "herder" therefore describe broad livelihood categories rather than internally uniform communities.

The historical relationship between crop cultivation and livestock production has often been interdependent. Livestock provide meat, milk, hides, manure, and marketable assets; crop production supplies residues and agricultural products that may enter livestock economies. In many settings, seasonal movement and negotiated access made coexistence possible. Conflict could arise when cattle entered cultivated plots, when farmers blocked established routes, when water or grazing access narrowed, or when compensation was contested. Customary authorities, local intermediaries, market relationships, and informal agreements sometimes helped resolve such disputes. These arrangements were neither universal nor always equitable, but their presence demonstrates that tension was not necessarily destined to become large-scale violence.

The conditions governing mobility and cultivation have changed over time. Population growth, expansion of cultivated land, urbanisation, commercial agriculture, infrastructure development, and changing land values have altered the spaces available for grazing and passage. Some traditional routes and grazing areas have become obstructed, converted, or contested. At the same time, pastoralists face changing rainfall patterns, pasture conditions, livestock disease risks, insecurity, and the costs of moving herds. These pressures affect different regions and communities unevenly; they should be assessed with local evidence rather than assumed to produce the same outcome everywhere.

The Land Use Act of 1978 remains an important part of Nigeria's land-governance framework because it placed land administration within a statutory structure involving state governors and local government authorities. It did not, by itself, resolve the practical questions of access, tenure, compensation, grazing corridors, or competing claims. The subsequent history of grazing reserves and livestock policy illustrates a persistent implementation problem: formal policies can have limited effect when land is not clearly demarcated, financing is inadequate, public trust is weak, or communities perceive decisions as imposed. The relevant historical issue is not that one statute alone caused contemporary violence, but how successive governments managed land access and dispute resolution under changing demographic, economic, and security conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Eco-Violence Theory, complemented by Political Ecology Theory, as its theoretical framework for examining herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. Eco-Violence Theory, associated with the works of Thomas Homer-Dixon (1994, 1999), explains how environmental degradation, population pressure, climate change and competition over scarce natural resources can generate violent conflicts among groups whose livelihoods depend on such resources. The theory maintains that the depletion or unequal distribution of essential resources, particularly land, water and grazing areas, increases competition and social tensions, especially where effective institutional mechanisms for managing disputes are absent. In the Nigerian context, the increasing pressure on agricultural land, the disappearance of traditional grazing routes, desertification and changing rainfall patterns have intensified competition between pastoralists and farming communities. These conditions provide an important theoretical explanation for the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts during the period under investigation (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Olumba, 2024).

Political Ecology Theory provides an additional perspective by examining how political power, economic interests, environmental changes and institutional arrangements influence access to and control over natural resources. Rather than interpreting herder-farmer conflicts exclusively as consequences of climate change or resource scarcity, political ecology emphasises the unequal distribution of land, the politics of resource ownership, government policies and the historical relationships between pastoralist and farming communities. It also examines how colonial and postcolonial land administration, agricultural expansion and changing land-use policies have transformed traditional systems of resource management. Nwankwo (2024) argues that understanding farmer-herder conflicts requires an integrated examination of environmental security and political ecology because environmental pressures interact with political and socioeconomic structures to produce conflict. This perspective is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where disagreements over grazing rights, land ownership, cattle routes and government intervention have contributed to the persistence of violence.

Furthermore, Eco-Violence Theory provides a useful explanation of the socioeconomic consequences of the conflicts. Recurrent attacks, destruction of farmlands, cattle rustling, displacement of rural populations and loss of human lives have weakened agricultural production, disrupted local markets and undermined rural livelihoods. The conflicts have also contributed to food insecurity, unemployment, poverty and the diversion of government resources towards security operations and humanitarian interventions. Efobi et al. (2025) demonstrate the relationship between climate-induced pastoral migration and violent confrontations with farming communities in Nigeria. Their findings suggest that climate-related vulnerability and migration are important factors in understanding the conflict and the possibilities for peaceful coexistence. Consequently, the theoretical framework provides a basis for examining how environmental pressures and competition over productive resources have generated wider economic and social instability between 2015 and 2025.

The study also recognises the importance of governance and institutional responses in explaining the continuation or reduction of herder-farmer conflicts. Although environmental

pressures and competition over resources provide important explanations for the emergence of tensions, ineffective security arrangements, inconsistent land policies, political interference and inadequate conflict-resolution mechanisms have contributed to their escalation. Olumba (2024) demonstrates how political developments and changes in political opportunity structures have influenced the intensification of farmer-herder violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Similarly, Okoye et al. (2024) identify weaknesses in government policies and land administration as significant factors affecting conflict management in Benue State. Therefore, combining Eco-Violence Theory with Political Ecology provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for investigating the historical drivers, socioeconomic consequences and policy responses to herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025.

Methodology and sources

The study adopts a qualitative historical approach. It synthesises peer-reviewed research, policy and legal materials, and credible institutional reporting on farmer–herder conflict, land governance, food insecurity, and security policy. The analysis is organised chronologically and thematically: the period is divided into 2015–2018, 2019–2021, and 2022–2025, while cross-cutting themes include land access, environmental pressures, political framing, security, agriculture, and policy implementation.

Historical source criticism informs the analysis. Published accounts differ in their geographical scope, definitions of conflict, time periods, and methods of counting deaths or displacement. The article therefore avoids presenting a single cumulative casualty figure as definitive. Where a study provides a clear method and relevant finding, it is used for the claim it can support; where evidence is incomplete or contested, the discussion identifies the limitation. Academic studies are used to assess causal explanations and household consequences, while policy documents and institutional reports are treated as evidence of official positions or documented conditions rather than as neutral accounts of all events.

The study is based on secondary sources and does not report original interviews, archival discoveries, or a newly assembled event dataset. Consequently, it cannot establish the precise contribution of each driver in every state or locality. Its findings are interpretive: they identify patterns supported across the reviewed literature and indicate where further state-level and community-level research is needed. This limitation is especially important for 2024–2025, when incidents and policy developments continued to evolve and some information remains unevenly documented.

Historical analysis, 2015–2018: escalation and policy contestation

The 2015 election marked a change in federal leadership but not the beginning of the conflict. By this stage, farmer–pastoralist tensions were already connected to land-use change, resource competition, insecurity, and the weakness of mechanisms for resolving disputes. The political significance of the period lay partly in expectations that a new federal administration would improve security and partly in the growing public debate over the government's capacity to protect rural communities.

In affected localities, crop damage and disputes over routes could interact with cattle theft, reprisal attacks, and communal mobilisation. Once a dispute was interpreted as an attack by one group on another, the prospects for individualised investigation and negotiated settlement diminished. The presence of weapons and the participation of armed actors could turn a local grievance into a broader cycle of violence. The historical point is not that every incident followed this sequence, but that escalation was more likely where institutions could not quickly establish facts, compensate losses, protect threatened communities, and prosecute perpetrators.

The Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law of 2017 became a major point of national controversy. Supporters viewed the law as necessary to protect farms and reduce uncontrolled movement of cattle through cultivated areas. Critics, including pastoralist representatives, raised concerns about livelihoods, access to land, consultation, and whether alternatives were practically available. The law illustrates the challenge of designing a state-level response to a mobile livelihood that crosses local and state boundaries. A prohibition may be intended to reduce crop damage, but it cannot succeed sustainably if implementation is weak, if suitable alternatives are unavailable, or if enforcement is perceived as selective.

The period also revealed a mismatch between the scale of the problem and the institutional tools used to address it. Security deployments can interrupt immediate violence but do not automatically resolve competing land claims, establish trusted early-warning systems, or restore livelihoods. Conversely, mediation without credible protection and accountability may leave vulnerable communities exposed. Effective response therefore requires both security and governance: lawful enforcement against violence alongside accessible mechanisms for resolving routine disputes.

2019–2021: insecurity, pandemic pressures, and competing policy approaches

From 2019 to 2021, farmer–herder conflict continued within a wider environment of kidnapping, banditry, communal violence, and rural insecurity. In some locations, the boundaries between resource-related conflict and organised criminal violence became difficult to distinguish. This complicates the use of a single label and underscores the need to investigate each incident rather than infer the identity or motive of perpetrators from a broad group category.

The COVID-19 pandemic added economic and logistical pressures to an already fragile situation. Restrictions and disruptions affected markets, movement, household incomes, and public services, although the magnitude of these effects varied by place. Pandemic-era hardship did not independently explain the conflict, but it interacted with existing vulnerabilities. Where farming was interrupted by insecurity, households could lose both current harvests and the capacity to prepare for the next planting season. Livestock keepers also faced risks associated with movement, access to markets, and the maintenance of herds.

Federal policy debates increasingly included livestock transformation, ranching, grazing reserves, and the regulation of open grazing. These approaches are not interchangeable. Ranching involves a different production model and requires investment, land access, water, veterinary services, feed, transport, and markets. Grazing reserves require credible demarcation, governance, funding, and safeguards against dispossession. Open-grazing restrictions depend on clear legal rules, fair enforcement, and feasible transition arrangements. None can be evaluated only by its stated objective; implementation, affordability, consultation, and distributional effects are central.

The period also sharpened the conflict's representational dimension. Public discussion sometimes framed violence through ethnic or religious categories, while other accounts emphasised land, criminality, political protection, or environmental pressure. Such explanations may each illuminate part of the picture, but none should be accepted without evidence. A sound historical approach asks who carried out a particular attack, what was the immediate trigger, what prior grievances existed, how authorities responded, and whether political actors amplified the incident. Collective attribution is analytically weak and can create further insecurity by treating entire communities as responsible for acts committed by particular individuals or armed groups.

2022–2025: continuity, adaptation, and unresolved governance

The final phase of the period did not produce a single national settlement. Violence and insecurity continued in multiple locations, while governments and communities pursued a mix of security measures, legal restrictions, mediation, humanitarian assistance, and livestock-sector reform. The persistence of conflict suggests that no one intervention has been implemented consistently enough to address all the relevant drivers.

The change of federal administration in 2023 created an opportunity to review earlier policy, but a change in leadership alone could not remove longstanding institutional weaknesses. A sustainable response requires coordination between federal and state authorities, local governments, traditional institutions, security agencies, farmers' organisations, pastoralist representatives, and civil society. Federalism makes this coordination difficult because land administration, policing, livestock movement, agriculture, and emergency response are governed through different institutional arrangements and political interests.

Research published in 2024 and 2025 reinforces several themes relevant to the period. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) show the importance of examining state and local actors in conflict and peacebuilding. Ohabuenyia and Anichebe (2024) question the assumption that anti-open-grazing laws can resolve the crisis through prohibition alone. Efobi et al. (2025) examine how framing climate-induced migration affects attitudes toward policies for peaceful coexistence, suggesting that how the causes of conflict are communicated can influence public support for integration-oriented responses. Nnam's 2025 study foregrounds the implications of violent conflict for human security and food security. These studies do not establish a uniform national outcome, but they demonstrate that contemporary analysis increasingly connects policy design, public perceptions, and livelihood consequences.

The period 2015–2025 should therefore be understood as one of continuity and change. Continuity lies in recurring disputes over land and livestock movement, weaknesses in dispute settlement, and the difficulty of

coordinating policy. Change lies in the greater visibility and politicisation of violence, the intersection with other forms of insecurity, the prominence of state anti-grazing legislation, and growing attention to food security and human security. The evidence does not support a claim that the conflict has one cause or one solution. Instead, it points to a layered problem requiring differentiated responses across regions and incident types.

Principal drivers of conflict

1. Land access and changing land use. Land is not merely a physical resource; it is also a basis of livelihood, identity, authority, and political power. The conversion of grazing areas, blocked livestock routes, expansion of cultivation, and unclear boundaries can increase contact between herds and crops. Where land records are weak or access depends on informal arrangements, disputes may become difficult to resolve fairly. Usman and Nichol (2022) demonstrate the relevance of changes in agricultural and grazing land to understanding conflict in West Africa. Yet land scarcity should not be treated as a fixed or purely natural condition: planning, tenure, infrastructure, and political decisions shape how land is allocated and used.
2. Environmental variability and climate stress. Rainfall variability, drought, heat, degraded pasture, and changing water availability can affect livestock mobility and agricultural production. Climate stress may increase pressure to move or change livelihood practices, but it does not mechanically produce violence. Institutions and markets can either reduce or intensify the consequences of ecological change. Climate explanations are most useful when combined with evidence on routes, land tenure, local negotiations, and security.
3. Livelihood insecurity and market incentives. Farmers and livestock keepers both face volatile prices, limited credit, uncertain access to land, animal disease, crop losses, and transport costs. Cattle theft and crop destruction can trigger retaliation, while weak market and justice systems make it harder to recover losses. In some settings, armed actors exploit insecurity for kidnapping, extortion, or control of territory. The presence of criminal incentives means not every violent incident should be categorised as a direct resource dispute.
4. Weak institutions and impunity. When police or local authorities respond slowly, investigate unevenly, or fail to protect communities, residents may lose confidence in official channels. If perpetrators are not held accountable, revenge becomes more likely. Traditional mediation can be valuable for resolving crop damage or negotiating access, but it cannot substitute for criminal investigation in cases of murder, rape, kidnapping, or organised armed attacks. The challenge is to combine local legitimacy with constitutional rights and equal protection.
5. Political framing and identity. Identity can shape how grievances are interpreted and mobilised. Leaders, media outlets, or political actors may portray an incident as proof of a general threat from an entire community. Such narratives can simplify a complex conflict and encourage collective blame. Chukwuma (2020) shows why security framing itself requires scrutiny. Responsible analysis distinguishes the conduct of specific perpetrators from the identities of broader populations and examines the incentives that make polarising narratives politically useful.
6. Arms and wider insecurity. The availability of firearms raises the lethality of disputes and reduces the time available for mediation. The conflict also overlaps in some areas with broader insecurity, including banditry and kidnapping. The appropriate response is not to assume that every armed group has the same organisational structure or motive, but to improve investigation, weapons control, intelligence, protection of civilians, and cooperation across jurisdictions.

Socioeconomic consequences

The consequences of herder–farmer conflict extend far

beyond immediate casualties. Death, injury, destruction of homes, and displacement are the most visible harms, but agricultural and livelihood losses may persist for years. Households that flee during a planting season may lose access to land, seed, tools, stored food, and labour. Even after an incident subsides, fear can discourage return or reduce the area cultivated.

Food production is affected through several channels. Farmers may cultivate smaller plots, switch to less labour-intensive crops, avoid distant fields, delay planting, or abandon land considered unsafe. Transporters and traders may avoid insecure roads and markets, raising transaction costs and reducing the flow of produce. Livestock owners may lose animals, face higher costs for feed and veterinary care, or be unable to reach grazing and market areas. These effects can reduce supply, income, and the diversity of food available to households.

Nnaji et al. (2022) provide empirical evidence that the incidence and severity of farmer–herder conflict are associated with rural food insecurity. Their findings support a distinction between the direct destruction of crops and the broader erosion of food access. A household may experience food insecurity even where its own crops have not been destroyed, if income falls, prices rise, markets become inaccessible, or relatives are displaced. For this reason, the effects should be measured through multiple indicators, including cultivated area, crop choice, harvest volume, market access, household food consumption, and displacement.

Women, children, older people, and people with disabilities may face distinct burdens during displacement and recovery. Women may lose access to farms, petty trade, water, fuel, and informal support networks, while also assuming greater care responsibilities. Children's education may be interrupted, and displacement can weaken access to health services. These effects vary by context and should be documented rather than presumed. Humanitarian response should therefore include protection, education, psychosocial support, livelihoods, and safe access to essential services, not only emergency food distribution.

The conflict also damages trust and social relations. Communities may withdraw from trade, intermarriage, shared labour, and local cooperation. Where rumours spread rapidly, a single incident can prompt fear beyond the area directly affected. The social costs can outlast the immediate violence and make future mediation more difficult. Recovery policy must address these relational harms through credible fact-finding, community dialogue, reparations where appropriate, and consistent enforcement of the law.

Evaluation of policy responses

1. Security operations and civilian protection. Security forces are necessary to prevent imminent attacks, protect threatened settlements, secure roads, and investigate serious crimes. Their effectiveness should be measured by civilian safety, response time, impartiality, and the ability to reduce recurrence—not simply by the number of deployments or arrests. Operations that are poorly coordinated or perceived as biased can worsen distrust. Security agencies should publish clear operational standards, investigate allegations of abuse, preserve evidence, and work with local early-warning networks while protecting informants.
2. Anti-open-grazing laws. State legislation, including Benue's 2017 law, reflects demands for stronger protection of farmland and a shift toward more controlled livestock management. Yet legal prohibition cannot by itself create viable ranches, feed supplies, water systems, veterinary services, or market access. If implementation is selective or alternatives are inaccessible, the law may displace rather than resolve conflict. A credible framework requires consultation, clear regulations, transparent land acquisition where relevant, compensation, and legal safeguards for all parties. The impact of a law should be evaluated using evidence on violence, crop damage, pastoral livelihoods, compliance, and enforcement.
3. Ranching and livestock transformation. Ranching and other more settled systems may reduce some forms of uncontrolled livestock movement, but they involve substantial capital and organisational change. They require access to land, water, feed, veterinary services, finance, and markets. A transition policy should be realistic about the diversity of pastoral households, including differences in wealth, herd size, mobility, and willingness or capacity to settle. The government should avoid treating ranching as an immediate universal solution without assessing costs and distributional effects. Pilot programmes, voluntary transition incentives, producer cooperatives, and transparent evaluation are more credible than unfunded announcements.
4. Grazing reserves and corridors. Existing reserves and corridors can form part of a negotiated land-use framework where they are legally established, environmentally appropriate, and accepted by affected communities. However, mapping alone does not guarantee access or peace. Governance arrangements must define responsibility for maintenance, water, security, dispute resolution, and compensation. Local farmers must not be dispossessed without due process, and pastoralists must not be promised access that cannot be protected. Any corridor policy should be based on verified historical use, contemporary land conditions, consultation, and enforceable safeguards.
5. Traditional and community mediation. Traditional rulers, community leaders, farmers' associations, pastoralist representatives, and civil-society organisations can help resolve crop-damage claims, negotiate seasonal access, and identify early signs of tension. Their legitimacy depends on inclusiveness, transparency, and fair treatment. Women, youth, displaced people, and less powerful households should be represented, not merely consulted symbolically. Community mediation is best used for disputes amenable to negotiation; it should not replace formal accountability for serious crimes.
6. Humanitarian and agricultural recovery. Emergency assistance should be linked to recovery of livelihoods. Support can include seeds, tools, livestock services, cash assistance, market rehabilitation, safe transport routes, and restoration of access to farmland. Aid distribution must be transparent and conflict-sensitive so that it does not reinforce local patronage or create new grievances. Programmes should assess whether return is safe and voluntary and should not pressure displaced households to return before security and basic services are restored.

A framework for more effective policy

A more coherent response should integrate five mutually reinforcing components.

First, establish a civilian-protection and accountability

compact. Federal and state authorities should clarify operational responsibilities, improve rapid response, investigate attacks irrespective of the identity of perpetrators, and provide accessible channels for reporting threats. Public communication should distinguish verified facts from allegations and avoid collective attribution. Accountability must include crimes against farmers, pastoralists, and other civilians.

Second, develop participatory land-use planning. States and local governments should map current land use, documented routes, water points, farms, settlements, and areas of seasonal pressure. Mapping should be transparent and subject to community review. Any land acquisition or restriction must comply with applicable law and due process. Local arrangements should be designed to prevent crop damage while preserving lawful livelihoods and access to markets.

Third, strengthen local dispute-resolution systems. A standing mechanism in high-risk areas could include representatives of farmers, pastoralists, traditional authorities, local government, women, youth, and security agencies. It should record complaints, assess crop damage, set time limits for mediation, and refer serious crimes to formal authorities. Written records and appeal procedures would reduce arbitrary decisions. Early-warning information should lead to timely action rather than merely being collected.

Fourth, invest in resilient agriculture and livestock systems. Agricultural extension, irrigation where appropriate, improved storage, veterinary services, fodder production, water management, and accessible finance can reduce vulnerability. Livestock policy should be tailored to regional ecology and household capacity. The objective is not to privilege one livelihood but to reduce avoidable contact and make both crop and livestock production safer and more productive.

Fifth, measure outcomes transparently. Government and research institutions should agree on definitions for conflict incidents, casualties, displacement, crop damage, and livelihood recovery. Data should be disaggregated by location and type of incident, while respecting privacy and avoiding the publication of information that endangers communities. Evaluation should track whether violence declines, whether farmers return safely, whether livestock keepers retain viable livelihoods, and whether food-security indicators improve. Independent researchers and civil society should be able to scrutinise the evidence.

Discussion: continuity, change, and the historical argument

The evidence reviewed here suggests that the 2015–2025 period is best understood through the interaction of continuity and change. The continuity lies in the centrality of land access, livestock movement, crop protection, and the role of local authority. The conflict did not begin in 2015, and neither environmental variability nor cultural difference alone explains its development. The long-term problem has been the difficulty of governing shared and changing landscapes through institutions that are trusted, adequately resourced, and capable of responding to disputes before they escalate.

The change lies in the greater entanglement of resource disputes with wider insecurity and political communication. Where violence overlaps with banditry, kidnapping, arms circulation, and communal mobilisation, the distinction between local dispute and organised crime can become blurred. Public narratives may then harden identities and encourage collective blame. This does not mean identity is irrelevant; it means identity operates through political and institutional processes rather than serving as a complete explanation.

Policy responses have often been divided between coercive security measures and major structural proposals such as ranching or grazing restrictions. Both address real dimensions of the problem, but neither is sufficient in isolation. Security without fair land governance may suppress incidents temporarily without resolving underlying disputes. Legal restrictions without feasible alternatives may impose costs on vulnerable households and generate resistance. Mediation without accountability may normalise impunity. The more credible approach combines immediate protection with institutional reform, livelihood investment, and local participation.

The historical argument also has implications for diplomatic and national-cohesion studies. A federation's legitimacy depends partly on whether citizens believe public institutions protect them fairly across ethnic, religious, and occupational lines. When security and land policies are perceived as selective, local grievances can become national controversies. Conversely, transparent investigation, consistent enforcement, and inclusive negotiation can reduce the space for polarising narratives. The conflict is therefore not only a rural resource problem but a test of state capacity and the credibility of Nigeria's federal institutions.

Conclusion

Herder–farmer conflict in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 cannot be reduced to a simple struggle between two homogeneous groups or to a single environmental cause. The historical evidence points to an interaction among changing land use, insecure mobility, ecological pressure, livelihood vulnerability, criminal violence, weak dispute-resolution mechanisms, small arms, and politicised identity narratives. These factors vary by locality and must be examined through incident-specific and regionally grounded research.

The socioeconomic consequences are substantial. Violence threatens lives and property, displaces households, restricts access to farmland, alters cropping decisions, disrupts markets, and increases food insecurity. Its effects may continue after immediate attacks have ended because fear, lost assets, broken social networks, and uncertain access make recovery difficult. The evidence on rural food insecurity reinforces the need to assess conflict through livelihood and human-security indicators as well as security incidents.

Policy responses have included security deployments, anti-open-grazing laws, ranching proposals, grazing-reserve planning, mediation, and humanitarian assistance. Each has potential value, but each is limited when poorly funded, imposed without consultation, inconsistently enforced, or disconnected from accountability and recovery. A durable response should protect civilians, investigate crimes impartially, create lawful and participatory land-use arrangements, strengthen local mediation, support viable farming and livestock systems, and monitor outcomes transparently.

The principal recommendation is to move from episodic reaction to coordinated, evidence-based governance. National and state authorities should avoid collective blame and should distinguish pastoral livelihoods from the actions of particular perpetrators. Equally, appeals to coexistence must not excuse

attacks or deny farmers' rights to safety and cultivated land. Peace requires equal protection, enforceable rules, credible remedies, and practical alternatives. Future research should combine state-level historical studies, oral testimony, incident data, agricultural surveys, and policy evaluation to establish more precisely how conflict patterns and interventions vary across Nigeria's regions.

Notes

1. This article uses "herder–farmer conflict" as an umbrella term while recognising that incidents may involve resource disputes, communal violence, banditry, kidnapping, or other crimes. These categories should not be conflated without incident-level evidence.
2. The Land Use Act was promulgated in 1978. Its relevance here is as part of the institutional history of land administration; it should not be treated as the sole cause of conflict.
3. The article does not supply a cumulative national casualty figure for 2015–2025 because reported totals vary according to source, time period, geographical coverage, and definitions. A publishable event-level estimate would require a transparent dataset and stated inclusion rules.
4. The discussion of the Benue anti-open-grazing law distinguishes the stated policy objective from questions of implementation, consultation, enforceability, and livelihood effects.

References

1. Babatunde, A. O., & Ibnouf, F. O. (2024). The dynamics of herder-farmer conflicts in Plateau State, Nigeria, and Central Darfur State, Sudan. African Studies Review. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.45
2. Benue State Government. (2017). Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017
3. Chukwuma, K. H. (2020). Constructing the herder–farmer conflict as (in)security in Nigeria. African Security, 13(1), 54–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2020.1732703
4. Efobi, U., Adejumo, O., & Kim, J. (2025). Climate change and the farmer-pastoralist's violent conflict: Experimental evidence from Nigeria. Ecological Economics, 228, 108449. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2024.108449
5. Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1978). Land Use Act, Cap. L5, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria.
6. Homer-Dixon, T. F. (1999). Environment, scarcity, and violence. Princeton University Press.
7. Nnaji, A., Ma, W., Ratna, N., & Renwick, A. (2022). Farmer-herder conflicts and food insecurity: Evidence from rural Nigeria. Agricultural and Resource Economics Review, 51(2), 391–421. https://doi.org/10.1017/age.2022.9
8. Nnam, M. U. (2025). Violent herder–farmer conflicts and human security in Nigeria: A focus on food security.Development in Practice. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2573963
9. Nwankwo, C. F. (2024). Assemblage thinking and actor–network theory: Reconciling the perspectives of environmental security and political ecology for improving the understanding of farmer–herder conflicts in Africa. Progress in Environmental Geography, 3(2), 160–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/27539687241236803
10. Ohabuenyia, J., & Anichebe, O. J. (2024). Open grazing prohibition law, political economy of centralized law enforcement mechanism, and nomadic pastoralist-sedentary farmer relations in Nigeria. Cogent Social Sciences. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2414869
11. Ohadiugha, C. J., & Gado, N. D. (2025). The farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria: A quest for appropriate policy.International Journal of Business and Management Review, 13(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.37745/ijbmr.2013/vol13n1115
12. Okoye, K. E., Ezeani, E. O., et al. (2024). "When we believe in state power, it tends to fail us": Insights into the management of herder-peasant farmer conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. Journal of Asian and African Studies. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241243052
13. Olumba, E. E. (2024). The politics of eco-violence: Why is conflict escalating in Nigeria's Middle Belt? Terrorism and Political Violence, 36(2), 180–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2129015
14. Usman, M., & Nichol, J. E. (2022). Changes in agricultural and grazing land, and insights for mitigating farmer-herder conflict in West Africa. Landscape and Urban Planning, 222, Article 104383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2022.104383