



## SOCIAL CAPITAL: A PANACEA FOR FARMERS AND HERDERS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines how social capital can be used to manage farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria. Farmers' and herders' conflict is exacerbated by climate change, disputes over land resources for farming and grazing, blocking of stock routes, and cattle rustling. The conflict has affected both the farmers' and herders' output, posing threat to household and national food security, and depletion of environmental resources. While state efforts towards mitigating the conflict have focused on the formal security networks, the study highlights the need to harness the inherent social capital within conflicting communities as avenues to managing farmers and herders' conflict in Nigeria. This paper uses secondary data sources to examine farmers' and herders' conflicts in Nigeria, the socioeconomic implication, and the role of social capital in managing the conflict. The study shows that social networks in conflicting communities could anticipate and dissipate conflict, given that most of the traditional conflict management approaches that are being used are flawed, hence, the persistence of the problem to escalating dimensions. The study concludes that farmers' and herders' conflict puts rural and national food security at risk and that the existing social structures in the communities should be considered as alternative means of managing farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria. The paper recommends that the dynamics of the social structures of conflicting groups and points of cohesion should be maximized given the implications of conflicts for the livelihoods and environmental sustainability of rural communities in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Social capital, Farmers and herders conflict, Social networks, Livelihood sustainability, Environmental sustainability

### INTRODUCTION

The need for a sustainable means of livelihood in the face of limited resources has been a trigger for conflict between farmers and herders in different parts of the world. In Nigeria, the conflict between farmers and herders has been a persistent problem with far-reaching implications for socio-economic development. The widespread tussle for land use for agricultural production by the farmers and animal grazing by herders has assumed national concern as it has resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and properties worth millions of naira (Assessment Capacity Projects, ACAPS, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017).

Conflict is a loss-loss situation for both the farmers and the herders. This is because both parties experience reduction of output in their livelihoods due to the ensuing conflict (Ofem and Inyang, 2014; Suleiman and Ja'afar-Furo, 2010). While several attempts have been made by the government and other development partners to manage the conflict, it has continued to escalate, with new narratives to the dimensions of destruction to lives and properties. Although the root causes of farmers' and herders' conflict are well-understudied (Blench, 2004; Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 2009; Olaniyan, Francis, and Okeke, 2015), the dynamics of the social systems in which they carry out their socioeconomic activities and the social structures that are inherent in the communities remain a major research gap. This is because understanding the social interactions of the conflicting groups will provide avenues for conflict management.

Social capital has been projected as a means of addressing various rural livelihood

problems, however, its potential as a tool for addressing conflict management has not been given serious attention in scholarly writings in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, argues that rural communities in Nigeria have established social networks that can be co-opted in conflict management systems through awareness creation, advocacy, mobilization, etc., to ensure mutual co-existence between farmers and herders.

Hence, the objective of the study is to analyse how social capital can contribute to farmers' and herders' conflict management in Nigeria. The specific objectives include to examine the causes of farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria, examine the socio-economic effect of farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria, analyse the approaches of the government in managing farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria, and to analyse the role of social capital in managing farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria.

The study uses documentary analysis to situate the farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria as a manageable social problem within the context of the social networks that exist among conflicting groups and communities. Secondary data sources such as journals, publications, internet sources, media reports, etc. are used for the study.

### Causes of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Nigeria

Farmers and herders have coexisted in the past in Nigeria, living in mutual understanding, trading their respective products with each other for economic gain in Nigeria. However, challenges to their socioeconomic survival have over time resulted in a state of intolerance displayed by the

level of damage caused by the ensuing conflicts over land and land resources. Some of the causes of the conflict are highlighted.

1. **Climate Change** - Climate Change is a global phenomenon that is threatening the livelihood of millions of families and seriously affecting the pattern of land use for both arable crop farmers and cattle rearers who depend on land for their livelihood survivals. Apart from the rapid desertification experienced in the northern part of the country due to climate change, a multiplier effect of desertification is the migration of herders, who predominantly occupy the region to the southern part of the country in search of foliage for their animals (Olaniyan, Francis and Okeke, 2015), a situation that is driving confrontations between farmers and herders in Nigeria (Nwosu, 2017). The competition for the limited land and water resources by farmers and herders triggers disputes between the groups (Ofem and Inyang, 2014).
2. **Population Growth** - The increasing population in Nigeria poses a challenge to land for settlements and urbanization, which is fast pushing into areas that were formally used for agricultural purposes and forest reserves. This has resulted in a tussle for land ownership and control. International Crisis Group (2017) reported that the growing population in Nigeria led to more demand for residential areas such that forest reserves are being destroyed for residential purposes. Population growth has also resulted in increased land use for agricultural activities for economic growth thereby contributing to the tussle over the dwindling land resources and resulting in conflict and violence in Nigeria (Blench, 2004; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014).
3. **Breakdown in cultural practices** - The collapse of the traditional conflict management mechanisms is a major contributor to the conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria. The deterioration of the cultural system is evident in the decline in social cohesion in farming communities, ethnic conflicts and religious intolerance that culminate in disputes between farmers and herders, and conflicts arising from cultural differences (Abass, 2012; Bello, 2013). The collapse in systems where dialogue was previously employed and the corruption of traditional gatekeepers who compromise the cultural heritage of their communities are also contributing to the conflict between farmers and herders in several communities in Nigeria.
4. **A Dysfunctional legal system** - The legal system in Nigeria, which was supposed to be the ultimate point of dispute management, has been ridden with corruption, and political and

ethnic manipulations. The poor performance of the legal system has resulted in situations where warring farmers and herders ignore legal procedures in venting their dissatisfaction. For instance, Tenuche and Ifatimehin (2009) observed that conflicts in Nigeria have been exacerbated by the State's inability to address the indigene and settler phenomenon in the Nigerian constitution. The International Crisis Group (2017) affirmed that the failure of the formal legal system, particularly in situations where crime is allowed to go unpunished has encouraged farmers and herders to take laws into their hands in Nigeria.

#### **Socioeconomic effects of farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria**

1. **Loss of livelihoods** - The contributions of farmers and herders to food security in Nigeria are enormous. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD, 2016) reported that livestock contributes between 20-30% of the total agricultural production to the Nigerian economy. In the 2019 report of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2019), agriculture contributed 21.91% to the GDP in 2019. However, the conflict is seriously affecting the livelihoods of millions of rural families in Nigeria, especially with the spate of killings that threatens livelihoods (ACAPs) (2017). These losses mean loss of income and reduced savings for farmers (Ofem and Inyang, 2014) and herders, as the reprisal attacks also lead to the loss of livestock.
2. **Food insecurity** - The growing levels of farmers and herders clashes have continued to pose a growing challenge to food security in the country. Food insecurity is particularly critical in the northern region which is ridden by insurgency, armed bandit attacks, farmers' and herders' clashes and communal clashes, destruction of farmlands, and the rustling of animals. PricewaterCooper's (PwC, 2020) report indicated that an estimated 5 million people in sixteen northern states were affected by food shortages in 2018. Where farmers abandon their farmlands as a result of clashes with herders, the agricultural output from the farmers' fields will be reduced, hence a reduction of harvested produce for marketability (Suleiman and Ja'afar-Furo, 2010). Herders also lose in the ensuing conflict as their cattle are either rustled or killed in the process of clashes. This will ultimately lead to food insecurity and hunger, especially for the rural poor who lack alternative means of livelihood capacities.
3. **Increased Poverty** - Destruction of farmlands and herds of cattle implies a reduction in the socio-economic well-being of the affected



families, thereby exposing them to poverty outcomes. Sulaiman & Ja'afar-Furo (2010) identified increased poverty as one of the effects of farmers' and herders' conflict within and among the conflicting communities. Evidence from NBS (2020) report showed that farmers and herders conflict is a contributor to rural poverty which is as high as 52%, compared to urban poverty which is as low as 18%.

4. **Loss of Lives and Properties** - Several thousands of lives have been lost to farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria, several women widowed, thousands of children orphaned, and properties worth billions of naira destroyed due to the frequent conflicts over land and water resources in conflicting communities. A report by ACAPS (2017) indicated that over 2,000 people were killed as a result of farmers' and herders' conflict with thousands of people displaced in Benue and Kaduna States alone. ACAPS (2017) report also indicated that an estimated 2,500 people were killed nationwide in 2016, which is higher than deaths resulting from the Boko Haram insurgency over the same period.

#### **Approaches to farmers and herders conflict management in Nigeria**

The Nigerian government, international partners, civil society groups, faith-based organizations, etc. have intervened in the conflict between farmers and herders over the years. Proactive measures, as well as resolute and conciliatory measures, have also been used to manage these conflicts periodically. Some of the measures of the government are highlighted.

1. **Grazing reserves** - The creation of grazing reserves was one of the earliest attempts to address the challenges of the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria. Accordingly, a law was created in 1965, the "Northern Region Grazing Reserve Law of 1965". The law was to create corridors for the passage of migrating livestock and 415 grazing reserves throughout Nigeria. However, the failure to properly demarcate the grazing routes and the influence of urbanization, industrialization, and population growth has hindered access and usage of these reserves by herders (International Crisis Group, 2017; Mustapha, 2019).
2. **Introduction of National Commission for Nomadic Education** - The Federal government established the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) in 1989 through Decree 41, which is presently known as the Nomadic Education Act, Cap No. 20 Laws of the Federation (Mustapha, 2019). The main goal of the programme was to economically and socially integrate nomadic pastoralists into the national life, through the provision of relevant, functional, and mobile basic education and provision of livelihood skills. The programme currently suffers from dilapidated infrastructure and human resource deficits, primarily due to a lack of adequate funding from the federal government, hence its ineffectiveness (Mustapha, 2019).
3. **Comprehensive Livestock Development Plan** - This plan was developed by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture to address the spate of farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria (Mustapha, 2019). The plan was established to review existing programmes on grazing and cattle routes in Nigeria. However, like post-policy measures in Nigeria, implementation of this policy is yet to materialize as a sustainable approach to ending the longstanding farmers and herders conflict in Nigeria.
4. **Security and Legal Action** - The government has responded to the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria through the deployment of police and army units. Special military operation and the joint task force have also been launched to foster security in affected zones. The Civilian Joint Task Force, for instance, is widely used to curtail the farmers' and herders' conflict and other security challenges in the Northeast and Northwest, respectively. Mobile police forces have also been used to quell clashes in states like Adamawa and other northern states (International Crisis Group, 2017). However, the security efforts have yielded minimal results, especially due to poor public perception and allegations that security officers connive with and abet some of the conflicts between the farmers and herders in Nigeria. The intimidating nature of the courts to farmers, most of whom are non-educated and the inaccessibility of most of the courts to rural communities contribute to the failure of the legal system to manage the ensuing conflict (Means, Josayma, Neilsen, and Viriyasakultorn, 2002).
5. **Organized dialogues** - The federal government has also used dialogue to bring an end to violent conflict between farmers and herders (Mustapha, 2019). Dialogue with concerned stakeholders has been carried out periodically, following clashes between farmers and herders in several states of the federation. The federal government has also set up a 10-man committee to address the conflicts and to come up with a long-term action plan to stem the situation (Mustapha, 2019). This method has also not been very effective because local political leaders have been accused of favouring farmers who they depend on for votes during elections

as herders, who are nomadic, may not be in the communities to support them during elections, a situation that breeds distrust of community leaders as agents of mediation (International Crisis Group, 2017).

### **Social Capital: A mechanism for farmers-herders' conflict management**

While most of the processes of managing the farmers' and herders' conflict create concerns about their effectiveness, alternative approaches to conflict management in Nigeria become imperative. It is because of this gap, that the social networks that exist between the farmers and herders, who have had points of cohesion before the spate of contestations became frequent, have to be looked into, as a panacea for managing farmers' and herders' conflict in Nigeria.

A nexus exists between social capital and conflict management. Aghajanian (2016) noted that conflict results when there is a disintegration of social capital that exists within a group of people. Societies with low features of social capital are characterized by social conflict with implications for socioeconomic livelihoods (Ashenafi, 2016). Social capital contributes to social cohesion or social solidarity within a community and drives stable development as it enhances the socioeconomic activities within a society (Ashenafi, 2016). The application of social capital in managing crisis has proven to be effective even more than state structures, leading to a growing interest in the concept in the field of conflict management (Sanginga, Kamugisha, and Martin, 2007).

Social capital entails values of social ties and bonds (Pretty and Ward, 2001) through norms, rules, trust, and networks (Putnam, 1993). As social networks, social capital enables the participation of members who derive support from one another to enhance their livelihoods. Social capital places emphasis on people and the way they interact with one another and with systems within their communities. It has been applied to a wide range of social issues, including participatory and rural development, and to problems that require group action (Ostrom and Ahn, 2009).

Social structures are set up for the common good of all members of the community and at the communal level, group interaction is an important component, especially for rural dwellers, who are known to interact cross-culturally, religiously, and ethnically. Social networks and connections (including patronage, neighborhoods, and kinship), relations of trust and mutual understanding and support, formal and informal groups, shared values and behaviours, common rules and sanctions, collective representation, mechanisms for participation in decision-making and leadership, etc. are entrenched social groups and processes that describe socio-cultural dynamics in communities.

These social networks can be harnessed to address the social and economic challenges emanating from conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria. This is because social capital allows community members to resolve their collective problems by proffering lasting solutions to them (Boyte, 1995; Sirianni & Friedland, 1997).

The opportunities that social capital that is embedded in a rich stock of social networks in the community are enormous. Communities that are endowed with a diverse stock of social networks and civic associations are in a stronger position to confront issues that threaten their collective existence (Varshney, 2008). Social capital is an important factor for rural communities; it facilitates their capacity to organize for development. Varshney (2008) also highlighted a benefit of social networks in conflict resolution, stating that latent communal conflict has few channels for peaceful resolution and periodically descends into violence and that in cities where association memberships overlap and everyday interactions are frequent, conflict is anticipated and dissipated.

Although herdsman are nomadic in practice; they, however, settle in communities where they engage in their livelihoods periodically. While they rear their cattle, they engage with the farmers, who purchase cattle, beef, or milk from them, while the farmers, on the other hand, sell fodders and other food items to the herders. Business linkages of farmers purchasing cattle which the herders fend for on their behalf also exist in several communities in Nigeria. These ties or bonds, between farmers and herders, are indicative of social networks that bind, which if properly explored, could provide insights into points of cohesion that could be leveraged for conflict management. Their grievances can also be identified through their social networks, and solutions proffered.

Where this is done, the collective association will be able to challenge issues that threaten their collective livelihood and existence and resolve issues of dispute amongst them. This becomes a necessary approach, taking cognizance of the fact that farmers and herders have co-existed in Nigeria before the challenging situations of limited resources that presently threaten their collective means of socio-economic livelihood.

Exploring the social capital and structures in conflicting communities for conflict management holds several benefits.

Firstly, communities are more efficient than formal legal structures in the management of conflicts resulting from resource utilization. In the view of Varshney (2008), in communities where association membership overlaps, with frequent daily interactions, conflicts are easily recognized and dissipated.

Secondly, the approach allows for a participatory process where the conflicting groups



are involved in the decision-making process of the identification of the problem and the desired solution. Whiteside, Michael, and Xavier (2005) noted that the adoption of social capital in conflict management is a participatory process that involves a bottom-up approach, unlike the conventional top-bottom approach that characterizes the formal conflict management processes. This implies that to adequately address the farmers' and herders' conflict that is fast eroding the livelihoods of rural households and national food security in Nigeria, the conflicting groups must be seen as critical stakeholders in decisions of conflict management as this will ensure their ownership of decisions reached and the sustainability of peace in the communities.

Thirdly, the approach ensures thrust among conflicting groups as they interact in their social spaces. Friend-Mensah (2004) noted that ending the conflict is not about preventing those who possess guns from using them but rather, improving or rebuilding social capital that exists within a group by ensuring that they trust each other and cooperate most efficiently.

A participatory system of authority where people come together to identify their problems, proffer solutions, and government also acts on such solutions by adopting them as policies point to an important perspective on farmers' and herders' conflict management in Nigeria. Conflicting groups have points of cohesion in the communities, other than the issues that divide them. Hence, given the communal lifestyle of the rural households in Nigeria with a rich array of social networks and associations, these social structures are pivotal to restoring the serene nature that characterized the rural areas before the sharp tussle for resources between farmers and herders became a frequent occurrence. Appropriating the social capital potentials in the conflicting communities will help to enhance social cohesion and curb or manage conflict to the barest minimum. Strong social ties with a mutual understanding of corporate benefits of societal resources will make people more responsive to the welfare of their neighbours.

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The practice of community efforts in resolving rural conflict has been widely used in traditional conflict management in societies, before the emergence of complexities of a changing climate and urbanization that paved way for competition over limited resources for farmers and herders' communities in Nigeria. With the extension of the conflict to all parts of the country and the associated loss of lives, livelihood, and properties with an attendant threat to rural livelihood and national food security, harnessing the social capital that is inherent in the rural communities in managing farmers and herders' conflict becomes a veritable alternative in Nigeria.

It is therefore, recommended that:

1. The dynamics of the social structures of conflicting groups and points of cohesion should be identified and explored as avenues for addressing the rising levels of conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria.
2. Communities that are vulnerable to farmers-herders conflicts need to be adequately sensitized on the need for amicable conflict management for the betterment of all concerned by tapping into the wealth of social ties that bind them, rather than focusing on their points of disagreement.
3. The government should carry out awareness and advocacy should be carried out from the national to community levels, to emphasize the cohesive structures and benefits of the conflicting groups.
4. Conflicting groups should be involved in decision-making aimed at resolving their disagreements at the communal levels, as this will create ownership of any avenue that is explored for managing conflict between farmers and herders in the community.

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