



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# A journalist's guide to the Farmer-Herder crisis in Northeast Nigeria

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# Introduction

What started as a village rumour grew into the biggest challenge my family has ever faced.

I was raised in Sabon-Gida Takai in the Gassol Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. It's a beautiful area, surrounded by a mixture of savannah and forest, and home to a diverse tapestry of a few hundred thousand Nigerians of various ethnicities. My father, Thomas Nyah, migrated there in the late 1980s because of the promise of fertile land.

Most folks in the locality came to the area for the same reason: farming. After Muhammadu Buhari toppled the democratically elected government of Shehu Shagari in 1983, my father recounts his family was at the point of malnourishment when he moved.

Our family thrived in Sabon-Gida Takai, with animals and abundant food to eat, but our fortune wouldn't last more than two decades.

I was still in primary school in 2001 when village chatter suggested the farmer-herder crisis had reached a nearby village. Within a few days, the whole village was filled with internally displaced persons (IDPs), most of whom were women and children. The men were said to have stayed back to secure their belongings.

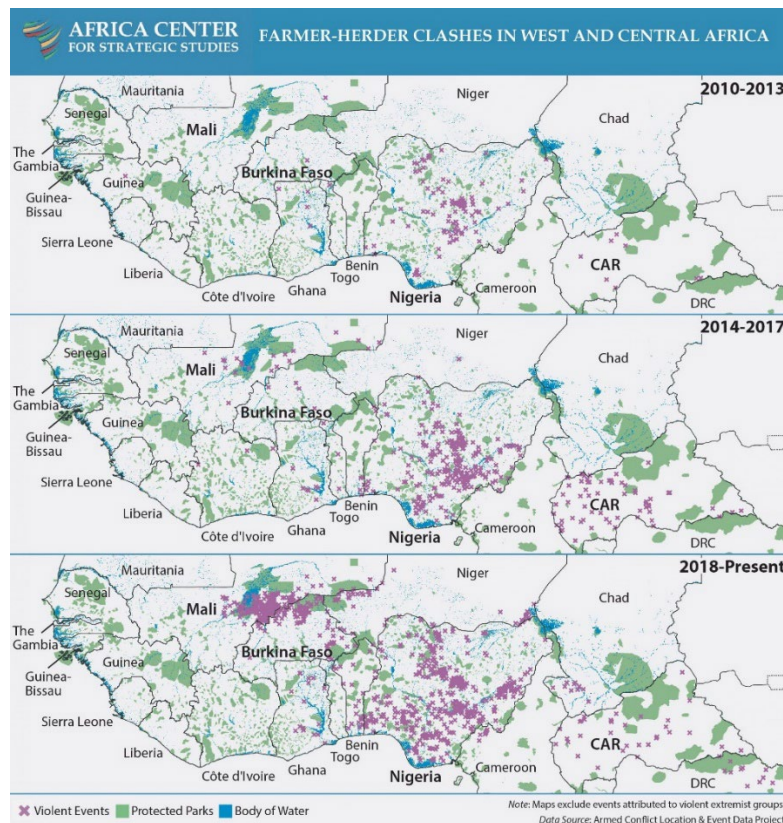
We were getting used to the idea of hosting these IDPs when herders struck a village just 30 miles away from us, and my father decided it was time to move to safety. We narrowly escaped to the state capital, where my uncle had to host us.

There were six in our family, and my uncle had a similar number; more than a dozen crammed into a single room-and-parlour apartment. I saw my mother cry every day. Deep within me, I too would always long to return to the freedom of life in Sabon-Gida Takai where I would join my friends to play on the field. Adjusting to city life and staying in the room all day was like being in prison.

The crisis lingered for many months. When normalcy was restored, my father took us back to see what remained. The once-bustling town was just a shadow of itself. Our house was burnt to ashes. No building's roof remained; typically made of grasses, they were quite easy to burn. Where there had been zinc roofing, it was

removed. My friends were all gone; our church was nearly empty. The few people around were all new faces.

Amnesty International [documented the impact](#) of the farmer-herder crisis from 2016 to 2018.<sup>1</sup> Their report found that the government's inaction to resolve disputes has fuelled impunity, resulting in attacks and reprisal attacks, with at least 3,641 people killed between January 2016 and October 2018 – 57% of them in 2018 alone.



Source: Graph by [Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#) shows in purple the spread of violent farmer-herder clashes across West Africa. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

The report found Taraba State had the fourth highest number of attacks. Other states have also been affected. In May 2021, a flash report by the International Organization for Migration found over 7,296 individuals, primarily from farming

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International. (2018) Nigeria: The harvest of death – three years of bloody clashes between farmers and herders in Nigeria. Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9503/2018/en/> (Accessed: 11 July 2024).

communities, were forced to flee their homes as violence erupted just before the planting season.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier this year, the speaker of the House of Representatives [Tajudeen Abbas said](#) over 60,000 Nigerians have been killed because of the constant clashes between herders and farmers.<sup>3</sup>

Farmer-Herder clashes, which hitherto were regarded as confined regional conflicts, he said, had taken on a sinister new dimension as they spread across the borders of many West African countries.

Another two decades gone since my family fled and Sabon-Gida Takai is still a shadow of the place it once was. My family has never recovered from the loss and upheaval caused.

Working now as a radio journalist, I carry this experience when I report on the crisis. When I cover health and environment issues, it is with the knowledge that Climate Change is further intensifying this crisis. What should journalists know and do to put an end to the violence?

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<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2021) Nigeria — North East Bali LGA — Taraba State Flash Report (24 May 2021). Available at: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-%E2%80%94-north-east-bali-lga-%E2%80%94-taraba-state-flash-report-24-may-2021> (Accessed: 11 July 2024).

<sup>3</sup> The Punch. (2023) Over 60,000 people killed in farmers-herders clashes – Reps. Available at: <https://punchng.com/over-60000-people-killed-in-farmers-herders-clashes-reps/> (Accessed: 11 July 2024).

# Putting the crisis in context

## Who are the herders?

Nigeria has diverse ethnic groups, broadly involved in various socio-economic roles, including farmers and herders. Herders predominantly keep animals and are mainly from the Fulani ethnic group, who include settled, semi-nomadic, and nomadic (Wodaabe) communities.

The history of the expansion of Fulani pastoralism into Nigeria is unknown. It is suggested that they began to settle on the plains of Bauchi Emirate before transcending onto the grassland of the Jos Plateau.

The Fulani people have made significant economic contributions to Nigeria through their nomadic pastoralist way of life and cattle herding activities, supplying a large portion of the country's meat, milk, and dairy products.<sup>4</sup> Their nomadic routes across West Africa facilitated economic and political ties between ethnic groups, enabling trade in dairy products, agricultural goods, and luxury items.

Fulani women oversee the production and sale of dairy products, crop farming, and other entrepreneurial activities, contributing to local economies. Some Fulani have settled among sedentary communities, providing skilled labour services like cattle rearing for local farmers, further integrating them into regional economies.

## Who are the farmers?

Herders are largely from the same ethnic nationality (Fulani), while most farmers are from Indigenous groups such as the Tiv, Jukun, and Chamba, among other tribes, who have a long history of living in fixed geographical locations.

Over 70% of Nigerians engage in agriculture, primarily as smallholder farmers at a subsistence level.<sup>5</sup> More than 80% of Nigeria's farmers are smallholder farmers, accounting for 90% of the country's agricultural produce.

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<sup>4</sup> Majekodunmi, A.O., Fajinmi, A., Dongkum, C. et al. Pastoral livelihoods of the Fulani on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria. *Pastoralism* 4, 20 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-014-0020-7>

<sup>5</sup> Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers' Clashes: Evidence from Nigeria" by Oluwafunmilayo Adeniyi. *South African Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2019.

These farmers grow varieties of crops, such as maize, cassava, sorghum, yam, beans, millet, and rice. Agriculture remains the largest sector in Nigeria. Over the past seven years (2013-2019), the sector has contributed an average of 24% to the nation's GDP. In the first quarter of 2020, the agricultural sector contributed approximately 22% to Nigeria's GDP, and as of 2023, it [accounts for 23.78%](#) of the country's GDP, according to the Minister of Agriculture.<sup>6</sup>

Crop production is the largest segment within agriculture, accounting for about 87.6% of the sector's total output and contributing nearly 19% to the GDP in 2023, while livestock, fishing, and forestry make up the remaining contribution to GDP from the agricultural sector, at 8.1%, 3.2%, and 1.1%, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

### **Why do they clash?**

Conflicts between settled agricultural communities and nomadic herders have existed around the world since the advent of farming. These conflicts have increased or decreased in intensity and frequency depending on the prevailing economic, environmental, and other conditions. For example, a good calving season might increase herd size, compelling herders to seek more grazing land in different areas.

In various parts of the world, different strategies have been employed to manage and mitigate these conflicts. In Kenya, for example, [community-based natural resource management](#) has been effective in bringing together farmers and herders to cooperatively manage resources and resolve disputes through dialogue and shared agreements.<sup>8</sup>

In Nigeria, land ownership and use are governed by the [Land Use Act of 1978](#), which vests all land in the hands of the government to be administered for the use and

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<sup>6</sup> Nigeria's Agriculture Sector Contributed 23.78% to GDP in 2023 – Minister" by Nairametrics, March 2023. <https://nairametrics.com/2023/03/14/nigerias-agriculture-sector-contributed-23-78-to-gdp-in-2023-minister/>

<sup>7</sup> Smallholder Farmers in Nigeria" by Mercy Corps, August 2022. [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Smallholder\\_Farmers\\_in\\_Nigeria\\_Aug2022.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Smallholder_Farmers_in_Nigeria_Aug2022.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ayoo, C. (2007), "Community-based natural resource management in Kenya", Management of Environmental Quality, Vol. 18 No. 5, pp. 531-541. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777830710778292>

benefit of Nigerians.<sup>9</sup> The state governors have the authority to allocate land for residential, agricultural, commercial, and other uses. They grant statutory rights of occupancy for urban land and customary rights of occupancy for rural land. In rural areas, traditional authorities often manage land based on customary laws, but these rights must also align with the Land Use Act.

The government can also acquire land for public purposes, such as infrastructure development, and compensate the land users.

The Act has often been criticized for exacerbating conflicts by not adequately addressing the needs of both farmers and herders. Issues such as unclear land tenure, lack of grazing reserves, and encroachment on traditional grazing routes lead to disputes over land access and usage, intensifying the farmer-herder conflicts.

The process of obtaining land rights is often bureaucratic and prone to corruption, making it difficult for many Nigerians to secure land tenure. There is a perception that the Act disproportionately benefits the elite and well-connected individuals who can navigate the legal and administrative hurdles to obtain land rights.

Competing claims to land, water, and other natural resources are at the root of growing tensions between farmer and herder communities in Nigeria.

Traditional methods like mediation by elders, village assemblies, and customary authorities were designed primarily to resolve small-scale disputes within communities, such as family disputes, petty crimes, and minor land conflicts. These mechanisms have been pushed beyond their breaking point, and trust in authorities is at an all-time low due to widespread inaction, impunity, and a perceived bias.

Journalist Isaac Abrak has covered several stories on the farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria, and believes the key issue lies in the deep-seated nature of these grievances and desire for revenge among affected communities. “When interviewing individuals impacted by attacks, their immediate response is often focused on seeking retaliation for past injustices,” he told me. “This cycle of reprisal attacks is

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<sup>9</sup> Government of Nigeria (1978). Land Use Act 1978. Available at: <https://www.lawglobalhub.com/land-use-act/>



fuelled by injustice and a lack of accountability for past crimes. There are hundreds of such stories from both sides”

A lasting solution to the crisis, he said, will have to address this. “I believe that the ultimate solution lies in forgiveness. Drawing inspiration from the reconciliation process in Rwanda, where forgiveness played a pivotal role in rebuilding society after the genocide, I advocate a similar approach in Nigeria. Both farmers and herders must be willing to forgive past wrongs and move towards reconciliation.

“However, achieving forgiveness requires addressing long-standing grievances and structural issues. The issue of indigenisation, where individuals are not recognised as indigenous to the communities where they have lived for generations, is a significant barrier to peace.”

### **How climate change is exacerbating the crisis**

Climate change is exacerbating the crisis by putting great pressure on the land. Northern Nigeria has experienced a significant [rise in average temperatures](#) over recent decades. This trend is contributing to more frequent and severe heatwaves, which affect both human health and agricultural productivity.<sup>10</sup> [Rainfall](#) has become increasingly erratic, with shifts in the onset, cessation, and intensity of the rainy season leading to flooding in the south and drought in the north.<sup>11</sup>

Pressure on natural resources has also increased due to population growth, expanding human settlements, privatisation of land, year-round commercial farming practices, and environmental degradation. In the absence of mutually agreed-upon solutions, disputes over crop damage, livestock theft, and water pollution have increased, and the nature of violence has become more extreme. If the government has lacked the impetus to act on this key rural issue before, perhaps they will adopt climate mitigation as a new, urgent driver to give the farmer-herder crisis the resource and attention it deserves.

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<sup>10</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022). The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/>

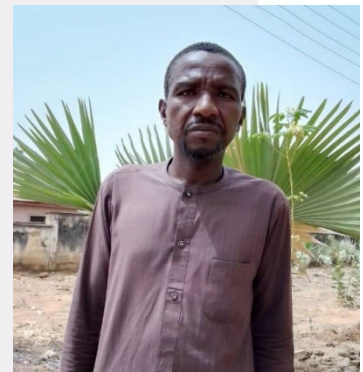
<sup>11</sup> World Bank (2022). Land, soil and climate change: How Nigeria is enhancing climate resilience to save the future of its people. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/10/18/land-soil-and-climate-change-how-nigeria-is-enhancing-climate-resilience-to-save-the-future-of-its-people>

## The human face of the crisis

When journalists commit to balance, fairness, and accuracy in reporting, and go out of their way to present diverse perspective, they can become part of the solution in conflict situations. For this reason, I present in this section a series of profiles that put a human face on the Farmer-Herder Crisis. Apart from Yohana Tafida, all images in this section are AI-generated. The depictions are intended solely to provide a conceptual understanding and do not reflect any specific person's likeness.

### **Yohana Tafida, a farmer in Lau local government area**

Yohana Tafida a native of Kutibu, a community in the Lau local government area of Taraba state. In 2017, the farmer-herder crisis came to his village. “I thank God that I escaped with my wife and children safely to Jalingo. But I lost six relatives to that crisis. I thank God because he saved us. But I lost everything; nothing was spared in the community – it was all destroyed. After we arrived in Jalingo we stayed in a public primary school because we had nowhere to stay.”



Taking refuge in the public school was tough, he told me. There was little support from the authorities, and what was provided was inadequate to meet the needs of the large number of people seeking shelter there.

Tafida is one of more than 263,000 people displaced by the farmer-herder crisis, according to researcher Elijah Elaigwu from the International Organization for Migrants. His 2023 report found IDPs living in “spontaneous camplike sites”.<sup>12</sup>

“[This is] in addition to the 1.3 million displaced population spread across 1,413 self-settled locations within host communities. These sites often lack proper

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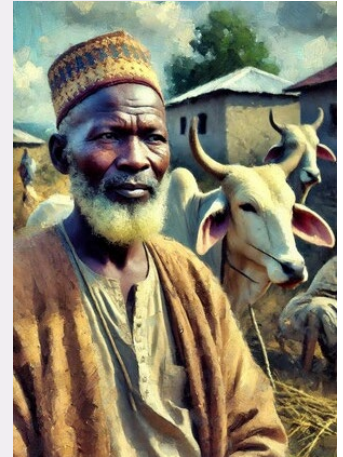
<sup>12</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2023). New IOM flagship report sheds light on displacement and data solutions in northeast Nigeria. Available at: <https://nigeria.iom.int/news/new-iom-flagship-report-sheds-light-displacement-and-data-solutions-northeast-nigeria>

infrastructure and access to humanitarian assistance, leaving IDPs exposed to hunger and disease.

**Magaji Adamu, herder in Manlun village, Ardo-Kola Local Government Area**

Adamu's community experienced the farmer-herder crisis three times, most recently in 2022. "The crisis has always been about grazing routes, which we need to graze our cows. The implication is that we have to take them out, but the routes are being taken over by farmers, leading to resistance," he said.

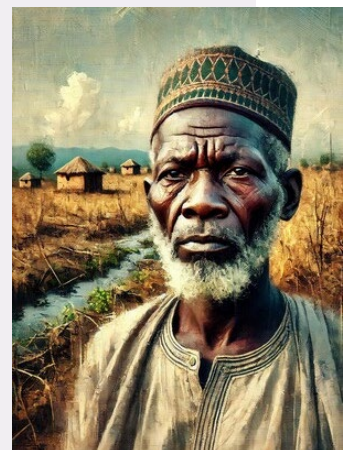
"We are not happy to see our lives disrupted and do not want to continue this way," he said. After a series of conflicts, leaders of both farmers and herders came together to find solutions. Farmers agreed to designate areas as grazing routes, and the herders consented not to trespass or graze on crops. According to Magaji Adamu, this agreement has been effective to date.



**Haggai Rimamnongkip, farmer from Ando Idi Community of Wukari Local Government**

"Last year, the crisis directly affected our livelihoods as farmers. The herders used our crops to feed their animals, resulting in significant losses for us. Tragically, the conflict also claimed the life of my younger brother's son, bringing immense sorrow and pain to our family.

"Specifically, the challenges we have faced as a result of the conflict include displacement from our homes and farms, increased food insecurity, and the loss of lives and property. The ongoing insecurity has made it unsafe for us to continue farming, forcing us to abandon our fields and seek refuge elsewhere. Our once-thriving community has been torn apart by violence and fear, and the social cohesion we once enjoyed has been shattered."

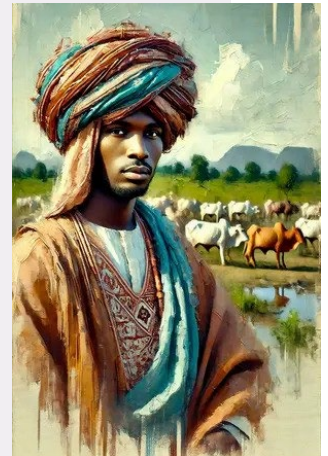


### **Abubakar Boboi, herder from Lau Local Government Area**

Boboi recounted his experience of the farmer-herder crisis in 2017, which forced him to flee with his family to Jalingo in search of refuge. “During the crisis, I lost five members of my family, and life in the IDP camp was extremely difficult as I struggled to provide for my family’s needs,” he said. He noted that they only received humanitarian aid once while in the camp.

He attributed the ongoing crisis to the belief that natural resources belong to a specific group of people. “The farmers believe the land belongs to them, which motivates them to chase away others they consider outsiders. As herders, we are only interested in the hay to feed our livestock, but this competition for resources is a driving factor in the crisis,” he explained.

To achieve lasting peace, Abubakar emphasized the need for a fair justice system, equal access to rights for all, and the empowerment of traditional institutions to resolve disputes.



There are two key unions that every journalist covering the farmer-herder crisis in Taraba State will be familiar with: Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, which represents the interests of herders in Nigeria, and the All-Farmers Association of Nigeria, which represents farmers.

### **Laraba Amina Abdul, Taraba State chairperson of the All-Farmers Association of Nigeria**

“You know, in the past, there were established cattle routes. However, most of these routes have been blocked by farmers. Even in rural areas, some level of demarcation was maintained for the sake of peace due to urban development.

“Many routes are now blocked, forcing herders to trespass onto farmlands or even use main roads, which is not ideal. This leads to conflicts as farmers understandably cannot accept such encroachments.”



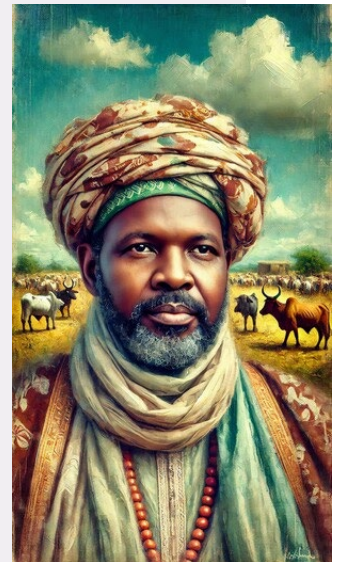
The AFAN chairperson said there's a need for better coordination and awareness among stakeholders to address the complexities of land access and resource management.

**Sahabi Mahmud Tukur, Taraba State Chairperson of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association**

“As the Taraba State Chairperson of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, I can confidently say that the ongoing crisis has had a devastating impact on our members.

“We have suffered significant losses, both in human and animal lives, and our livelihoods have been severely disrupted. Our main concerns are the availability of grazing areas and routes for our cattle, which have been affected by climate change and the increasing competition for resources.

“Unfortunately, the media has not been fair to us, often portraying us as the culprits in the conflict. This has led to a negative public perception of our people and has further exacerbated the crisis. We demand justice and the creation of designated grazing areas and cattle routes to alleviate the pressure on our herds and reduce the conflict with farmers.”



Tukur said the issue of cattle rustling needs to be taken seriously by the government. He stressed that it is a significant problem that has led to the loss of many lives and animals, yet not a single perpetrator has been brought to justice.

He said the government's promises to address the issue have been empty, with no concrete action taken to date. He urged the authorities to take concrete steps to address their concerns and work towards finding a lasting solution to the crisis.

**Security concerns**

A top security officer, who spoke to me on condition of anonymity, said the situation where he is based in Ussa remains tense – violence may erupt at any moment. The conflict in his locality began as a misunderstanding between farmers

and herders over damaged farmlands and stolen cattle. It quickly spiralled out of control as both parties took the law into their own hands.

The Kutebs, a local ethnic group in the areas, killed and fed on cows as spoils of war, while the Fulanis, a nomadic herder community, mobilised and launched attacks on vulnerable Kutebs – some completely unrelated to the original cattle theft – to avenge their stolen livestock. As the conflict escalated, both parties acquired prohibited firearms through illegal means and formed militias to prosecute the tribal war.

The Fulanis have vowed to wipe out the Kutebs from the map, while the Kutebs vowed to defend their land. The battle rages on, with no end in sight.

The impact on the local population has been devastating with many lives lost. The officer recounted collecting corpses, including those of women and children, from the bushes. Injuries from gunshots and sharp machetes have been widespread, and residents of the village have scattered to IDP camps.

Before this crisis, the relationship between the Fulanis and Kutebs was cordial, with good interaction between the two communities.

Similar clashes have been occurring in many parts of the country, with little to no action from the government to address the root causes. The constant blame-shifting, lack of political will, and corruption have further exacerbated the problem. The result is a powder keg of tensions, waiting to be ignited by the slightest spark.

## Non-state actors seeking solutions

Amid the protracted conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria's northern regions, non-state actors have been working to restore peace. One such actor is the Search For Common Ground (SFCG) an international non-governmental organisation that works to end violent conflict and build healthy, safe, and just societies. It is the largest non-state organisation dedicated to peacebuilding between the farmers and herders in Nigeria.

In the last few years, the organisation has recorded success across the country, particularly Adamawa state, through its [COMITAS project](#).<sup>13</sup> In partnership with International Organization for Migrant and Mercy Corps, SFCG reports that it has:

- Established an early warning system in 51 communities, preventing conflicts through 2,206 alerts
- Conducted 11 policy dialogues and over 300 community dialogues, building trust and social cohesion
- Provided 42 trainings on early warning and response
- Established the Adamawa Forum for Farmer and Herder Relations to promote sustainable peace
- Engaged the media in peace messaging and conflict-sensitive reporting

“The mission of Search for Common Ground is to empower grassroots communities to resolve conflicts peacefully,” explained Professor Joseph Lucas, who leads the organisation in Taraba. “To achieve this, we established committees at the local, state, and national levels to address issues between farmers and herders.”

Lucas said one of the main causes of conflict is the struggle over grazing routes that were initially demarcated by the government but have since been taken over by

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<sup>13</sup> Mercy Corps (2022). Peace in our cities: Empowering communities in Adamawa to prevent farmer-herder conflict. Available at: <https://nigeria.mercycorps.org/research-resources/peace-farmers-herders-adamawa>

farmers. Herders claim farmers are encroaching on their grazing areas, while farmers accuse herders of trespassing on their farmland.

Search for Common Ground has successfully brought the two parties together to reach an understanding and broker peace in several communities in Taraba State.

A notable achievement is the reopening of the cattle market in Mayolope in the Lau area of Taraba State. The market, a vital source of revenue for both parties, was shut down six years ago due to conflicts between farmers and herders. Now, a significant value chain has been restored. Lucas explained that livelihood was one of four key arms of their approach.



*SFCG model for community intervention in conflict zones*

“We believe that if people can agree to live harmoniously and respect each other’s rights, it can lead to sustainable peace,” said Prof Lucas. “We are working to reduce clashes to a minimum by setting up mechanisms for early response and conflict resolution.”

The successes of SFCG demonstrate the power of grassroots dialogue and building trust between communities. However, it’s important to acknowledge the limitations. SFCG’s achievements, while impactful, are localized solutions to a widespread structural problem. Addressing the root causes – climate change, resource scarcity, and outdated land-use policies – requires broader systemic changes.



Still, the agility and community focus of non-state actors can complement government initiatives. For example, SFCG's model of empowering communities through early warning systems can be replicated and scaled up by the state.

Given the right platform, non-state actors can be vocal advocates for policy changes. Their close work with communities equips them with firsthand knowledge of the challenges on the ground, which can be used to push for policies promoting sustainable grazing practices, resource management, and equitable access to land.

# Government efforts in containing the crisis

Several state governments attempted to address the conflicts by implementing legislation to ban open grazing and promote ranching. As of October 2021, 15 of the country's 36 states had adopted this law. Ekiti [was the first](#) in 2016, followed by Taraba State in 2017.<sup>14</sup>

Key provisions of the law include prohibiting open grazing, mandating herders to ranch their livestock instead of allowing them to roam freely. Violators face penalties such as imprisonment for up to six months without the option of a fine.

The law has been met with opposition from some herders and critics who argued that it discriminates against Fulani people and would escalate the costs of their livelihood. Taraba State government agreed to review the anti-open grazing law to address these issues in 2018, but no further action has been taken since then.

Government's failure to provide solutions has exacerbated tensions, inflaming retaliatory violence between farmers and herders. Politicians further aggravate the situation by taking sides and making empty promises during election campaigns. This has eroded confidence in the rule of law among both farmers and herders.

In December 2023, following a [deadly attack in Plateau State](#) that claimed over 140 lives, Nigeria's Vice President Kashim Shettima pledged to "deliver justice" but acknowledged the government's failure to protect victims.<sup>15</sup> And in May 2024, [President Bola Tinubu](#) urged state governors to allocate land for grazing reserves, claiming he could resolve the crisis within three weeks with their cooperation.<sup>16</sup> It remains to be seen what concrete action will be taken in response.

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<sup>14</sup> EAduloju, A. A. (2022). Analysis of climate change adaptation strategies in selected sub-Saharan African countries [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Houston Institutional Repository. Available at: <https://uh-ir.tdl.org/items/ba4adc99-b5ad-47d9-ae58-29c35f78b9a7>

<sup>15</sup> Africanews (2023). Vice President Shettima conveys solidarity and condemnation amidst tragedy. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/28/vice-president-shettima-conveys-solidarity-and-condemnation-amidst-tragedy/>

<sup>16</sup> Daily Trust (2024). Provide land for grazing, Tinubu tells govns. Available at: <https://dailytrust.com/provide-land-for-grazing-tinubu-tells-govns/>

I am a journalist, not a policymaker, but my time at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism exposed me to other government approaches to land rights and usage. [Port Meadow](#) in Oxford, for example, is an area of common land managed by the council, where horses and cattle may graze.

The Right to Roam in the UK is enshrined in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Similarly in Norway, there exists an ancient tradition known as “allemannsretten” that allows people to hike, camp, and forage on both public and private land, provided they respect nature and private property. In the UK, pathways across farmland are legally protected, and landowners cannot obstruct them. Outside of these designated paths, access to farmland is restricted to avoid disturbing crops and livestock.

None of these examples is the right solution for Nigeria’s problems, but it has made me question whether enshrining Nigerian traditional customs in law – granting clear rights and responsibilities – could help to ease the crisis.

# What is the role of journalism in the Farmer-Herder crisis?

The media plays a crucial role in disseminating information, especially during times of violent conflict. But journalists often face challenges in identifying and upholding the best practices in environments with limited resources, political interference, or security risks. Nigeria's media landscape is no exception, particularly when reporting on conflicts like the farmer-herder crisis.

The media's coverage of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria has been criticised for being reactive – focused primarily on reporting incidents of violence, rather than providing in-depth analysis or exploring potential solutions.

A [2020 study](#) by Dr Oliver Chuks Odiegwu-Enwerem et al. analysed 159 stories about the conflict from six newspapers.<sup>17</sup> It suggests journalists in Nigeria are expected to “support” government policies and convey a positive image of political leadership. Their analysis found that, when covering farmer-herder conflicts, journalists relied heavily on third party sources “whose views are likely to be biased”.

The paper further found there were six themes for conflict coverage: reports of offensive attacks,<sup>18</sup> reports of reprisal attacks, public condemnation of attacks, conciliatory efforts, and investigative work. The vast majority of coverage fell under the theme of public condemnation of attacks, while investigations accounted for just 2.5% of all coverage.

A [2022 study](#) by Sunday Ucha Aja et al looked at farmer-herder coverage in three major national outlets: *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, and *Punch*, between March 1, 2018–January 30, 2019.<sup>19</sup> It found that coverage was highly episodic (meaning it reported

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<sup>17</sup> Odiegwu-Enwerem, C., Oso, L., & Amodu, L. (2020). News Sourcing, Positioning and Thematic Focus: Examining Newspaper Portrayal of Herdsmen-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria. *Media Watch*, 11(2), 281-295. <https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2020/v11i2/195648>

<sup>18</sup> Offensive attacks refer to “the first offensive action, sometimes unprovoked, initiated by either of the parties”.

<sup>19</sup> Powers, S., & Ojebode, A. (2021). Communication and conflict: Theoretical and methodological directions for future research. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2049-2068. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/15591>

episodes of violence without reflecting the wider pattern of conflict), predominantly negative, often with a criminality framing (meaning those involved were depicted as criminal aggressors and blameless victims), and failed to grasp the principles of peace journalism. The researchers recommended “journalists be trained on [peace journalism skills](#) to facilitate resolution of the conflicts”.<sup>20</sup>

I polled 22 journalists for their views on Nigerian journalism about the farmer-herder crisis. I asked them to choose whether they would categorise it as “comprehensive”, “biased and sensational”, or “failing to address key issues”. In all, more than half felt we were failing to address key issues, while 18% said it was biased and sensational. Only 28%, less than a third, thought it was comprehensive.

It is important to recognise that journalists covering this crisis face several key challenges to undertaking in-depth investigation or peace journalism. Most notably, there are security risks and safety concerns when attempting to cover a violent conflict. Secondly, many of these conflicts take place in areas that are extremely difficult to reach due to poor infrastructure, and with poor internet and phone coverage. A third and somewhat related challenge is the difficulty in accessing accurate information and reliable sources – particularly when nomadic herders are on the move or when internally displaced persons (IDPs) are fleeing for their lives. Finally, some journalists also face political pressure or censorship from authorities.

Solutions to these problems may come in the form of community-based reporting, perhaps even in collaboration with Citizen Journalists. A third of the journalists that I polled mentioned town hall meetings as an effective way to gather first-hand information and build trust with sources. Partnering with NGOs, like SFCG, can also yield key insights and data that journalists might otherwise not have access to.

While the media alone cannot solve the farmer-herder conflict, it can play a vital role in promoting peace by:

- **Providing a platform for diverse voices:** Including perspectives from farmers, herders, community leaders, and peacebuilding organisations can promote understanding.

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<sup>20</sup> Access free training in Peace Journalism in the Nigerian context here: [https://issuu.com/cmpi/docs/pj\\_handbook](https://issuu.com/cmpi/docs/pj_handbook)

- **Investigating the root causes:** Reporting beyond episodic stories of violence and delve into long-term structural issues like climate change, land rights, and resource scarcity to spark necessary conversations.
- **Promoting peacebuilding efforts:** Highlighting success stories and initiatives aimed at building trust and cooperation can inspire hope and encourage others to get involved.

## Conclusion

The farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria is a multifaceted and deeply entrenched conflict that continues to wreak havoc on the lives of countless individuals, particularly in Taraba State. We have seen here the profound impact of this crisis on both farmers and herders, highlighting the loss of lives, homes, and livelihoods.

The root causes of this conflict are complex, involving historical grievances, competition for scarce resources, climate change, and ineffective governance.

The testimonies of individuals such as Yohana Tafida, Abubakar Boboi, and others vividly illustrate the human cost of this ongoing strife. Their stories of displacement, loss, and the struggle for survival underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Likewise, the perspectives of leaders from both the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association and the All-Farmers Association of Nigeria reveal the deep-seated frustrations and the need for justice, proper resource management, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Efforts by non-state actors like Search for Common Ground provide a glimmer of hope, demonstrating that peacebuilding and reconciliation are possible with persistent and targeted interventions.

However, for a lasting resolution, there must be a concerted effort from all stakeholders, particularly the government, to address the systemic issues fuelling the conflict. This includes implementing policies that ensure equitable resource distribution, promoting dialogue and understanding between conflicting communities, and establishing robust legal frameworks for justice and reconciliation.

Journalists have a key role to play in all of this. We can advocate for organisations like SFCG, and for the replication and expansion of some of their successful strategies like early warning systems and conflict resolution approaches. In doing so, we may find access to new data and voices that help us communicate the conflict more effectively to the wider public.

We can promote effective communication between non-state actors and policymakers by providing coverage that links key officials with effective programmes – simply by asking them to comment on the results. And we can

highlight areas that are underserved by both state and non-state actors, calling for humanitarian aid where needed.

Language is key: we can seek out training to frame our stories more sensitively, be less reactive in how we report on isolated incidents, and seek out diverse voices. There is value, too, in looking beyond our borders to consider how other approaches have worked.



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