

AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE TO OPEN CATTLE MOVEMENT AND GRAZING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A healthy environment is crucial to the well-being of any nation. Open cattle movement and grazing remains a serious problem in Nigeria in the light of ethical concerns, and is a threat to a healthy environment. It poses many challenges and issues for the country, such as health hazards, and environmental damage. If the environment suffers from degradation and pollution, human and public health are endangered. The issue of open cattle grazing and movement should not only be discussed in economic, political, or cultural terms. It should also be examined from an ethical perspective. Ethics concerns human behaviours regarding other humans and non-human beings. Open grazing and movement of cattle in Nigeria pose serious risks, and endanger human welfare and wellbeing. This paper examines open cattle movement and grazing in Nigeria. The paper argues that the open movement of cattle and grazing threaten the environment and all that is related to environmental well-being. The paper finds that open grazing and cattle movement is common in Nigeria, and this has destroyed lives and properties, and endangered the society. The paper concludes that alternative cattle grazing methods that do not endanger society can boost and enhance social welfare and well-being.

Keywords: Open grazing, Cattle movement, Ethics, Nigeria, Environment, Well-being, Welfare.

Introduction

Environmental public health is important for every society. Without environmental public health, people cannot live meaningful and productive lives and their welfare/well-being is endangered. It is important for human beings and the well-being of ecosystems and non-human lives on Earth. Whatever threatens environmental public health threatens all life. Human food and sustenance all come from the earth and its resources. When the earth and its resources are gravely degraded and polluted, human beings run the risk of being affected by sicknesses and diseases. The habitat of non-human organisms and the food chain are affected also. This is why it is imperative to discuss the issue of environmental public health, environmental health, and environmental health ethics. Ethics is concerned with human behaviours concerning other human beings and the entire environment. Environmental public health is an ethical issue, for many causes of ill health arise from human activities on earth, such as the activities of extractive industries, industrialization, urbanization, overpopulation, agriculture, etc.

This paper examines the widely debated issue of open grazing and cattle movement in Nigeria in the light of environmental public health ethics. One finding that became evident from the research for this paper is that the environmental public health ethical implication of this issue is given very little attention. Many issues can be discussed regarding the issue of open grazing and cattle movement in Nigeria, such as the cause, the

consequences, the solutions, etc. Because of the problems consequent on open grazing at the time of writing, there is a proposed bill in the Senate to ban open grazing that has passed the second reading. This is a serious national issue that threatens peace and social order, health, and environmental well-being that should not be ignored. Open grazing with the movement of cattle is one of the greatest challenges that Nigeria is facing. It has irreparable consequences. Okoli et al (2024) cite one Chief Johnson Okolo a farmer and industrialist who has been a victim of herdsmen activities at his farm in Amofia Agu, Enugu State, and lost many cash crops saying that herdsmen are responsible for cattle rustling, clashes, kidnapping, banditry, maiming people and some of these herdsmen are often violent. The havoc that herdsmen have caused in Nigeria is incalculable. This issue should be examined.

Conceptual Clarifications

Nnoruga (2021) defines open grazing as the roaming of animals and the human person caring for the animals in the open fields, bushes, and ways in search of water, food, pasture, and shelter. Chukwuemeka, Aloysius and Eneh (2018) have a similar idea when they define: "...open grazing to mean the age-old practice of roaming about with animals in open fields, plains and nearby bushes in search of pasture or food for the animals. It is mostly practiced in Nigeria by Fulani herders who move for days on foot with their herds from the north to the more rain-fed southern parts of the country, pasturing their flock as they go" (p.3).

Open grazing cannot take place without the open movement of cattle or livestock. Aligba, Omanchi and Gbakighir (2020) quote section 2 of the 2017 Open-Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, in defining open grazing as: 'the act of pasturing livestock to feed on dry grass, growing grass, shrubs, herbage, farm crops, etc. in open fields without any form of restriction' (p. 173). Muoneke and Okoli (2022) note that: "Open grazing is the age-old practice of roaming about with the animals in open fields, plains, and nearby bushes in search of pasture or food for the animals" (p.67).

Having defined the concepts of open grazing and by implication open movement, attention is now focused on environmental public health ethics. World Health Organization (1946) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of diseases or infirmity." Dzurgba (2005) writes that health is physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being, and freedom from stress, disease, depression, frustration, maladjustment, and emotional disorder. Odimegwu (2006) writes that health is a positive condition of well-being, wholeness, absence of sicknesses and impairments, and is also inclusive of the ability to function well as a human being. Bellamy (2007) writes that health is a "condition of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease"(p. 211). Health is well-being, welfare, peace, goodness, favourable conditions, mental stability, etc. Whatever makes life meaningful and purposeful are all aspects of health. This is why health is seen not just as physical wellbeing, but also emotional, psychological, spiritual, family, social well-being, etc. If someone suffers from any abnormalities in any of these dimensions of life, then the person is not healthy.

Concerning the environment, Dzurgba (2005) states that it can be defined as influences and circumstances that affect the lives of people. According to Allison (2009), the term environment comes from the French word (*environner*) and it means surrounding. Environment refers to all factors and things that surround an organism, thing, being, reality, etc. Everything that you see is in an environment. Land, water, streams, oceans, mountains, trees, birds, animals, etc are all part of the environment and each of these is surrounded by

an environment. Bellamy (2007) writes that the environment is that which surrounds a community, and an individual in the life cycle, including physical and cultural surroundings.

It is necessary to define the term, ethics, here. Elegido (2020) writes that ethics, which can be used interchangeably with morality, comes from the Greek word (ethos), meaning custom, manners. Ethics is concerned with human behaviour in terms of right and wrong. Right, and wrong are determined by the particular standards that a group of people is informed by different ethical theories such as consequentialism, deontologism, virtue consideration, natural law, intuitionism, etc. Taking public health, for instance, a consequentialist would say what is right depends on its consequences on people or society. A deontologist would say what is right is in the action itself, not the consequences. Omoregbe (1993) writes: "Ethics is concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour. It deals with how men ought to behave, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways and right to behave in certain other ways"(p.ix).

Bryant and Rhodes (2024) write that public health is: "the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical and mental health, sanitation, personal hygiene, control of infectious diseases, and organization of health services"(p.1). UT Health Houston (2019) cites the American Public Health Association as saying that public health is "promoting and protecting the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play."(p.1). Public and environmental health are interrelated. Public health depends on the health of the environment. This is the basis for speaking of environmental and public health. World Health Organization describes environmental health by stating that a healthier environment protects from diseases and things like a stable climate, clean air, sanitation, adequate water, safe workplace, good built environment, etc, are all necessary for good health. American Public Health Association (2024) writes that: "environmental health centers on the relationships between people and their environment. When people are exposed to hazards like polluted air and lead in their drinking water, they can develop serious conditions, such as asthma, heart disease, cancer, and dementia. Both public health and environmental health are almost co-terminus. Whatever endangers the environment and by extension environmental health negatively impacts public health. It is within the environment that the public exists, what impacts the environment necessarily affects the public. The term public is used here to refer to the collectivity of the people in an organized social space. The public is different from the personal or individual. Environmental health is an aspect of public health, though today, the domain or discipline of environmental health has gained independence and has become a large field in its own right.

It is based on the vital link between public health and environmental health that this paper discusses environmental public health, instead of just public health or environmental health. National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) (2014) state that: "environmental public health focuses on protecting groups of people from threats to their health and safety posed by their environments." Environmental public health ethics refer to norms, rules and regulations, laws that govern human behaviours about what is to be done to keep the environment safe and healthy to ensure that people live in well-being and wellness. Ortunaya (2022) writes that public health issues are also shaped by norms, values, and professionalism; and those who work in the health profession need to be responsible and accountable so they should be guided by a code of conduct. Like every other field of human endeavour, every behaviour cannot be accepted. Any behaviour that does not promote life is unethical and immoral. Environmental public health ethics implies human behaviours

concerning the environment should promote the peace, security, well-being, and wellness of people in the public or social space. A clean environment helps people to be healthy, but dirty and unhygienic surroundings can cause sickness and illness. DEOHS of the School of Public Health of the University of Washington (2024) notes that: "Environmental public health focuses on the ways the natural and built environments affect human health. Specialists in this field identify, evaluate and control exposures to chemical and microbial contaminants in air, water, soil and food to improve health and health equity."

The Situation of Open Grazing and Cattle Movement in Nigeria

Open cattle movement with grazing is a common occurrence in Nigeria. The fact is that it occurs almost daily in Nigeria. It is a common sight to see cattle being driven to the slaughter in Nigerian open markets daily. One often sees cattle being led in the open streets and roads for grazing. Many Nigerian forests, especially in the southern parts of the country, are transversed by cattle and their herdsmen. As one drives on the road from one town or city to another, especially in the morning or evenings, one is likely going to see cattle crossing the road. On a journey to Ekpoma sometime in May 20024, this writer ran into cattle crossing the road somewhere before Ekpoma. On another journey on the way to Abraka after Eku, this author has occasionally run into cattle crossing the road. The fact is that many adult Nigerians and youth have seen cattle moving on roads and grazing openly in people's farmlands. Nkemjika and Arinze-Umobi (2017) indicate that conflicts caused by herdsmen are common in Taraba, Benue, Kwara, Abia, Adamawa, Kogi, Anambra, Imo, Enugu, and Ekiti States; and the situation has made Ekiti, Taraba, and Benue to promulgate anti-grazing legislation. Muoneke and Okoli (2022) cite the April 2021 Premium Times that reported that on May 11, 2021, the 17 Southern Governors of Nigeria banned open grazing to abate conflicts among herders and farmers.

Many factors and causes have been presented for cattle movement and open grazing. Udeagbala (2020) cites the Vanguard in 2018, which opines that the core cause is climatic changes from around 1999 and that climate change has resulted in less pasture in the north and so the nomadic cattle herders move towards the south encroaching on people's farmlands. Udeagbala (2020) quotes Oli, Ibekwe, and Nwankwo from their 2018 work that cattle rearing was mainly done in the periods before the 20th century in the Sudan, Guinea, and Sahel Savannah during the short rainy season; but as a result of pasture challenge, they have moved southward searching for fresh water and pasture. Udeagbala (2020) cites Olaniyan, Francis, and Okeke-Uzodike who state that the herdsmen in the process of grazing now began to intrude into farmlands and this led to conflicts. It is generally known that the Fulani people are a nomadic ethnic group that herds and trades in cattle and so this is crucial to their survival and well-being. Nnoruga (2021) writes that initially, open grazing was not a problem, but when the herders began to kill, destroy crops, and cause disease to others, there was an outcry against the practice. Nkemjika and Arinze-Umobi (2017) write that some persons have opined also that during the President Buhari era, his ethnic politics, because he is a Fulani man, could not allow him to encourage anti-open grazing laws and this encouraged Fulani herdsmen to continue their rampage. It should be noted that in mentioning Fulani herdsmen, not all of them are violent or encourage clashes. Hufschmidt and Ume (2023) state that the armed conflicts arising from pastoralist and farmer clashes are driven primarily by competition over scarce resources of land and water.

Sheidu and Patrick (2023) propose that there should be appropriate measures on the part of the government and other institutions to create modern ranching systems, instead of

open grazing. There are states in Nigeria such as Benue States that have made laws against open grazing. But another issue is that very often the herdsmen don't obey the laws. They are willing to force themselves into people's farmlands. Nnoruga (2021) writes that ranching can curb farmers' and herders' conflicts, foster healthier animal production, provide employment, provide food, and help in a peaceful existence. There should be stricter immigration regulations for those entering Nigeria. While it is true that ECOWAS citizens can enter Nigeria without a visa for 90 days, they should still be subjected to immigration control at Nigeria's borders, especially in the North. Chukwuemeka, Aloysius and Eneh (2018) write that in the past open grazing was appropriate as a result of the small human population, shifting cultivation of crops, and favourable weather conditions but not today; and so the old culture of open grazing should be changed. The place of government in ensuring the consequences of open grazing and the movement of cattle are mitigated should not be underestimated. As the paper has noted, open grazing threatens and negatively affects the health of people. When the human right to health of people is endangered it should be the concern of the government and all stakeholders. Olomojobi (2019) writes that the government has to ensure that people ensure their right to health and anything that endangers this right should be curbed. Open grazing is a threat to environmental public health. It should be noted that banning open grazing is not enough. The government should put in place measures that ensure that herdsmen have access to basic socio-economic and cultural rights that accrue to all people.

Environmental Public Health Ethical Issues on Open Grazing and Cattle Movement

Herdsmen and others indeed argue that there is a right to freedom of movement. This is a basic human right. The right belongs to all people no matter their ethnicity, sex, occupation, religion, and political affiliation. The United Nations (1948), and the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2023) have all affirmed this right. It is a right that states have a responsibility to safeguard. But the reality is that no human right is an unlimited or absolute right. If rights are absolute, it will give a base for some people to violate the rights of others. Society will become a place of survival of the fittest or the wealthiest. Your right to movement does not mean you trespass into another person's property and forcefully take the property of the other or trample upon his/her property. Your right to movement has a boundary. It is ethically wrong for a herdsman or any other person to argue that his right to movement means he can enter other people's farmlands without consent and harvest their crops or use them to feed his cattle. What if the person whose property is threatened also claims that his right to movement confers on him moving into a ranch where the cattle are kept and forcefully taking the cattle? One's right to movement in a country does not mean the person can enter a road anytime without considering that a vehicle may be coming and thus endanger other lives. You are not the only road user. Other citizens also have a right to use the roads. This is why there are various traffic signs to direct people on their movements, and when it is proper to cross a road, bridge, or hill. Public safety is of paramount concern to government and public authority. Your right to movement does not mean you enter other people's neighbourhoods at night and disturb their sleep time. Herdsmen move at night into villages and people's neighbourhoods. The movement of cows at night causes a nuisance at night. When people's night rest is interfered with, it can affect their health and well-being. People are battling health challenges who are on medication and need a good night's sleep. Aligba., Omanchi, and Gbakighir (2020) rightly note that the right to freedom of movement is not absolute and does not override public safety, order, and peace, and even the rights

listed in Chapter IV of the Nigerian constitution can be curtailed for public interests. Muoneke and Okoli (2020) write that open grazing was appropriate when the population was small and there was enough land, but today globalization and population growth now make open grazing outdated and pose a serious threat to national security. Open grazing and cattle movement is a threat to environmental public health. While it can be right in some limited circumstances, especially in times past, today, because of the hazards it poses, it should no longer be acceptable. A particular community can accept open grazing and cattle movement, but it should not be imposed on all, especially in a federation. It is unethical to impose open grazing and cattle movement on people who do not want it.

There is the question of food security. This is also an environmental public health issue and an ethical one for that matter. Without food, people's lives are endangered and subjected to ill-health. Human beings cannot survive without food. Food also needs a healthy environment. In a degraded environment, food security and systems are endangered. A polluted environment will produce poisonous food. Ensuring that people have food is the right thing to do. It is not right to deprive other people of their rights to secure your rights unless in self-defence, or to secure the public good. So, for instance, a person can be kept in a correction facility to protect him from harming the public and for his reformation. There is a fundamental human right to food and water. The first human instinct is survival. Open movement of cattle and grazing has gravely impeded food security and threatened public health. Many farmers can no longer access their farmlands because of violent herdsmen. Herdsmen brazenly enter into people's farmlands and water supplies and harvest the products for their cattle and themselves. This has contributed to food insecurity and the rising cost of food products. There are people, especially in rural places and semi-urban areas, who cannot safely move through the roads to their places of work because of herdsmen. Some of the herdsmen who move their cattle through the roads have also turned themselves into bandits and kidnappers, killers and rapists. When human beings are deprived of access to food and water, it amounts to an unethical thing. The behaviour of herdsmen who cause food insecurity is unacceptable. It is not the right thing to do. The health and well-being of people matter. The government exists to ensure a good and optimal life for the people. Government loses its essence when it cannot provide a good life for the people. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Locke, and Hobbes all opine that government exists for the good of the people. The activities of herdsmen in violating and degrading people's farmlands make it difficult for the government to provide a good life for the people. It should be an issue of serious concern for the government. It should not be politicized. This is not an ethnic, tribal, or religious issue that people have to see curbing open grazing as persecution. Open grazing endangers human security and national security. Sheidu and Patrick (2023) state that the forced migration of herders from the North into the Middle Belt and the South has led to herder-farmer conflicts, depleted food supply in Benue State and other states, etc. It is an environmental public health concern. Ayayi, *et al* (2023) state:

Findings further revealed the possible consequences of the free-range system if left unchecked, one of which could gradually affect the country's adequate food supply. Farmlands are gradually abandoned for fear of possible attacks. Some states, particularly known for farming, are now plagued with hunger and poverty among farmers in rural areas. The consequence of unregulated open grazing could impair the possibility of attaining sustainable development goals of zero hunger and eradication of poverty (p. 1).

Open movement of cattle and open grazing is a serious issue in security ethics. The lives of people are not secure when they are endangered as a result of food insecurity. Many have lost their lives and belongings to violent herdsmen who move their cattle through people's farmlands. Traditionally, a nomadic lifestyle is indeed part of Fulani culture. But culture is dynamic and the realities of a globalized world are different from those of yesteryears. Chukwuemeka, Aloysious and Emeka (2018) note that many experts have shown that because of encroachment on development projects, desertification, and overgrazing, the nomadic approach is no longer sustainable. Open grazing is an issue that impinges on environmental public health and personal health. As previously noted open grazing pollutes the environment and creates health hazards such as diseases and ill-health. Olomojobi (2019) writes that:

To every human being, a positive health is the basis for long life and it is a matter of immense concern. This is so regardless of age, socio-economic status, gender or ethnicity. A positive and stable health status is a very basic and essential asset to any man; ill health on the other hand would impede productivity and embarking on responsibilities or from full participation in daily obligations (p.1).

The violence from open grazers has maimed, injured, and wounded many farmers. These farmers have to battle for their health and life. Some herders have also been injured in the process of clashes between pastoralists (herders) and arable farmers. It is widely acknowledged today and enshrined in human rights instruments that there is a right to health. By implication, there is an environmental public health right. If environmental public health is endangered, then it is difficult to enjoy the right to good health. Environmental public health is seriously endangered by open grazing activities. The United Nations (1948) asserts that states are responsible for providing adequate standards that guarantee healthy living and wellness. United Nations (1966) in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health."

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2023) and the Organization of African Unity (1981) acknowledge a human right to health. Human health, whether personal health or environmental public health, is an issue then that borders on ethics. The various human rights instruments mentioned above all place an obligation on states to guarantee and safeguard their rights. Promoting and advancing environmental public health is the right thing to do. When the government fails in this obligation, it becomes an injustice. Not only the government, but individuals also must protect their health from being harmed and degraded. Open grazing is a threat to the right to health and a suitable environment to enjoy one's life.

The value and priority of human labour and work are also an important consideration in discussing open grazing and cattle movement. Labour and work are crucial to human society. Without labour, in this case, agricultural labourers in agriculture will lose their source of livelihood and income. Open grazing is a threat to the value of human labour. While the herdsmen value their labour and their cattle, they are carrying it out in a fashion that destroys the productivity of others. In the theory of curriculum, there is the null or hidden curriculum. Even by what is not taught, something is taught. To neglect the threat posed by open grazing and open movement of cattle as some government officers do is to

say that the agricultural labours of some do not matter. The only one that matters is that of the herdsmen and their cattle. Udeagbala (2020) reports that in the Anambra South Senatorial zone, herdsmen in the process of carrying out open grazing use AK47 rifles to threaten and even kill farmers, and intrude into areas cultivated by others by force. Chukwuemeka, Aloysius and Eneh (2018) write that: “pastoralists perceive cattle breeding as government business which should take pre-eminence over other agricultural activities in Nigeria. Any slightest attempt to manhandle their cattle leads to violent conflict between herders and farmers”(p. 1).

There is also the issue of environmental health, security, and ethics. In open grazing, cattle damage the natural environment through which they move. They destroy plants, trees, crops, and the habitat of other organisms. It is not only human beings who are affected. Non-human lives are also seriously impacted. When cattle openly move through people's farmlands and forests, birds are driven out of their habitats, animals escape from their wild shelter, and micro-organisms are killed. The waste and dump of cattle find themselves in the water bodies, contaminating the water. There are many health hazards associated with open movement and grazing. Some of the water sources polluted by waste from cattle are drunk by humans, especially those in rural areas. These make them susceptible to health problems. The environmental impact of open movement and grazing of cattle is indisputable. Ukhurebor and Adetunji (2020) write that there is a lack of adequate governance of livestock. Because of this, open grazing depletes the water, land, and biodiversity, pollutes the environment, causes desertification, destroys soil quality, causes soil erosion, causes ecological imbalance, and global warming. Nnoruga (2021) writes that in Nigeria, open grazing has caused loss of lives, environmental depletion, destruction of fertile lands and forests, and extinction of biodiversity. Aligba, Omanchi and Gbakighir (2020) write that between 2013 and 2017 there were many clashes between farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State in which many innocent persons were killed, properties were destroyed, including social disruptions, breakdown of order and law. Open grazing not only causes environmental degradation, it can also lead to the spread of diseases. The Benue State Anti-Grazing law states clearly that one reason for the law is to manage, prevent, and control the spread of diseases. From what is being argued in this paper, it is clear that open grazing and movement of cattle affect nature and cause diseases.

Recently, an issue was raised on making cattle citizens in the country. Even if cattle are made citizens of Nigeria, that does not mean they have the same rights as human beings. It does not mean they can be allowed to roam in the open streets causing a nuisance to people. As citizens, they still have to be restricted by laws and the human beings in charge of them have responsibility. In many countries where animals are revered, venerated, or given special status, the animals are not allowed to cause harm to humans or their properties. These animals have lived in relationships with humans for centuries and see humans as friends. Humans also protect these animals from harm and destruction.

Unless one is a vegan, one needs animal meat. Ethical treatment of animals requires that animals be treated humanely and in a friendly manner. Even if an animal is to be used for food, it should be killed humanely without animal suffering. Animals, including cows, suffer pain. The way that cows are treated in Nigeria, such as when they are flogged by herdsmen, driven with force, and flogged to the abattoir, leaves much to be desired. Cows are made to move in the open roads in the heat of the sun or rain. These are causing unnecessary suffering to these animals. There is a vital need for Nigeria to move from the

culture of open movement and grazing of cattle. It is rife with many public health and environmental dangers.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of this paper is not to propose again solutions that people have proposed to the problem of open grazing and movements. Tersely, these solutions include ranching, enforceable public laws on open grazing and cattle movement, peacebuilding and public enlightenment on the dangers of open grazing, humane treatment of animals, respect for property rights, proper understanding of the right to freedom of movement, and education on the importance of environmental public health. The concern here is essentially ethical or moral. What can be done ethically to curb the challenge of open grazing and movement? As noted clearly, open grazing and movement of cattle cause a lot of ethical problems. The paper has clearly shown that in many different ways, open grazing and open cattle movement endanger environmental and public health and are not good for individuals and the public, unless communities willingly accept it, so long as it does not endanger human freedoms, rights, and public health and the environmental good.

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