



CLIMATE CHANGE, HERDERS AND LAND CULTIVATORS' CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Conflict between herders and land cultivators' in Nigeria has become a major problem with catastrophic death toll. Millions of property have been destroyed and displacement of people particularly in the Middle Belt is becoming a daily occurrence. More often than not this conflict is climate change induced, motivated by competition over scarce resources like land, water, among others. The ugly situation consequently impact on national development negatively as it interrupts communities and displaced people. The paper employed secondary methods of data collection, sourced from text books, journals, internet for analysis. The objectives of the paper were to examine the linkages between climate change, herders and land cultivators conflict and displacement of victims and how their effects in turn impact on national development in Nigeria. Environmental Scarcity and Frustration-Aggression theories were used as the theoretical framework of the study. The findings revealed that climate change induces migration, unhealthy competition for scarce resources, conflict between herders and farmers resulting from frustration, exacerbates and hindering victims' inability to positively engage in agricultural activities, earn income, buy goods and invest in the socioeconomic development. The paper concludes that there is a link between climate change, migration, herders and farmers' competition for scarce resources, conflict and displacement of victims. The paper recommended grazing reserves and farmland protection which should be established through land use reforms and the security agencies need to be overhauled to control arms proliferation to curb the increasing accessibility of arms by unscrupulous elements.

Keywords: Climate Change, Conflict, Development, Displacement, Herder-farmer, National.

Introduction

Climate change is associated with the rise in average global temperatures coupled with ecological and human impacts. It is a grievous threat as it induces drought, flooding, erosion and desertification. The northern regions of Nigeria are faced with desertification problem that

affects the livelihoods of many people (Aisedion, 2022). The intensity of desertification and the drying up of the Chad Basin in the North, have forced herders to move elsewhere to the south for water and grasses for their herds (Aisedion, Oboh, & Agazuma, 2024). The migrations of herders has in turn generates farmers' displacement due to conflict generated from land use changes, population growth, leading to unhealthy increased and competition for natural resources (Adisa & Adenkunle, 2010). Climate change's effect has caused less utilization of land for farming and grazing purposes because of desertification and drought. These situations have eventually led to conflict. Several Nigerian states are highly susceptible to conflicts between herders and farmers; in certain cases, entire community is razed with fire, and members are displaced and rendered homeless mainly in Benue and Plateau states as well as in many southern states thereby threatening the corporate existence of Nigeria (Adisa & Adenkunle, 2010). The overall objective of this paper therefore, is to examine how climate change leads to herders and farmers' conflict and displacement of people in Nigeria. The specific objectives examined climate change and induced herder movement, conflicts with crops farmers and displacement of people, and effect on national development.

Literature Review

Climate Change: The unprecedented deteriorating environmental conditions, desertification and soil degradation have pushed herdsmen from Northern Nigeria to change their transhumance routes. Access to pasture land and watering points in the Middle Belt became essential for herdsmen travelling from the North to struggle for limited resources which consistently generate violent conflict (Ignatius, Nwankwo & Famous, 2020). The figure 1 below shows movement of herders across countries in West Africa but made worst by desertification and drought resulting in resource scarcity. Arisen from the environmental scarcity, conflict inadvertently dominates where scarcity of resources are predominantly present (Bond, 2014; Bottom, 2016; Krätli and Toulmin, 2020).



Source: Luis Tato/AFP Published On 19 Apr 2025

Government's Responses

According to Onyedika (2025) the implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) and anti-open grazing laws introduced by the government as solutions has met with brick

walls. This is because not all states embraced the policies with equal keenness as some states in the northern region, had doubts and actively opposed the measures. Their reservation to the idea can be adduced to poor information and intelligence-sharing (Onyedika (2025)). In spite of the fact that the human toll of these attacks is overwhelming, the Nigerian government has been unwilling to address the causes of the conflict. The accessibility to arms by both herders and farmers has fiercely led to vicious cycles of bloody dispute among them (Blench, 2010). Since 2012, there have been government's intentions to create transhumance corridors through the Middle Belt, which was supported mostly by Northern lawmakers but opposed by their Southern counterparts (The Punch 2012). In 2019, former President Muhammadu Buhari tried to create Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements. His proposal was criticized ferociously by some northern governors. On the contrary, the 17 Southern governors in Nigeria, on 17 May 2021, issued the Asaba Declaration, by calling for national dialogue, a ban on open grazing and the movement of cattle by foot within and into southern region to curb herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria (Idowu, 2021)

Climate Change Induced Conflict

Nigeria is vulnerable to a wide range of climate hazards and is highly exposed to herders invasion. Nigeria exemplifies an African country faced with increasing climate risk and intensifying competition over natural resources (Uchenna, Oluwabunmi, & Jiyoung, 2025). The struggle between herders and farmers in Nigeria over farmland and pasture is a serious and escalating conflict registering huge casualties and raising tensions particularly in the country's Middle Belt. More worrisome are the vulnerable groups such as old men and women, children and youths internally displaced (United Nation Trust Fund for Human Security 2022). The conflicts have been especially prominent in the Middle Belt (North Central) since the return of democracy in 1999. More recently, despite the conflict fundamentally being a land-use conflict between farmers and herders across the Nigeria's Middle Belt, it has taken on government's failure to take firm decision, dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions (International Crisis Group 2020)

Displacement

Siegfried (2024) examined the connection or meeting point between climate change, conflict and forced displacement. Meanwhile, extreme weather events such as floods and drought are compounding the threats faced by people already displaced by conflict and violence. Over the past decade conflict between communities has claimed countless lives in the Middle Belt region and displaced an estimated half a million people in Benue State alone. It is also disrupting traditional livelihoods and intensifying competition for dwindling supplies of water and productive land (Jaiyesimi, 2025). Over 2.2 million Nigerians in middle belt states have been rendered homeless in the space of seven years on violent farmers and herders' clashes. These violent clashes have caused farmers and herders heavy losses on farmers' productivity, food production and the overall increased in food prices (Jaiyesimi, 2025). On the part of the displaced people Achem and Aderinto (2023) highlighted that food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, poor living conditions, high number of out-of-school children, emotional difficulties, lack of employment opportunities, water and sanitation problems are the challenges faced by the displaced people. Therefore, the presence of the above conditions in any society makes national development difficult to achieve.

National Development

Development policies are required to meet the needs and yearnings of the people without mounting protest to get them. Therefore, national development can be seen as the ability of a

county to improve the living standard of its citizens such as the provision of quality education, potable water supply, safe and efficient transportation, adequate road infrastructure, reduction of inequality, medical care, employment, availability of food and the safety of lives and property (Aisedion & Omoregie, 2021b). Unfortunately, most children are out of schools roaming the streets, unemployment biting hard on Nigerian graduates, inability to access health services, hunger ravaging everywhere, diseases spreading like never before among others inciting migration and conflict in Nigeria (Aisedion & Omoregie, 2021b). According to Imobighe (1998), development must be relevant to the basic needs of the people, which make the life of the individual better, freer and more fulfilling. But a development that promotes elitist divisiveness, economic disparities and lack of political will to put an end to herders and farmers conflict cannot promote national development.

Theoretical Framework

The Environmental Scarcity Theory and Frustration-Aggression Theory are used to analyze the link between climate change, conflict, and displacement in this study. The primary advocate of the Environmental Scarcity Theory is Thomas Homer-Dixon (1994). The environmental scarcity theory posits that climate change exacerbates resource scarcity (like water, land, and arable land), leading to competition, elsewhere for resources which generate conflict, and displacement. Climate change impacts like droughts, floods, and sea-level rise or reduction affect the availability of crucial natural resources, leading to dwindling resources scarcity and thereby triggering conflict, between herders and farmers in Nigeria. He revealed that there is a connection between environment, migration, scarcity, conflict and displacement of people. He explores how resource scarcity in connection with other factors like migration and unequal access to resources contribute to conflict and instability leading to displacement of people (Madu & Nwankwo; 2021; Olumba, 2024; Olumba, Nwosu, Okpaleke & Okoli, 2022).

Furtherance of the above analysis, John Dollard and his associate developed frustration-aggression theory in 1939 and expanded by Berkowitz (1962) and Yates (1962), who gave an explanation for violent behaviour stemming from inability to fulfill desired needs. For instance, climate change with its effects of protracted drought and desertification reduces the availability of grazing land and water. Consequently creates frustration among herders and farmers due to competition and resource scarcity. Herders require large areas of land and water for their herds and farmers essentially need water and pasture for farming and resource scarcity often exacerbate frustration and aggression leading to conflict between them. From the turn of events, frustration is both experienced by both herders and farmers, but more on the side of farmers as cattle are often deployed by herders to graze their crops. At the sometime, aggressive behavior is often unleashed on farmers by herders as suggested by AK47 riffles they carry about to mayhem leading to displacement of farmers. In this regard, the dimension and intensification of pastoralists and farmers, conflicts in Nigeria have posed unbearable threat to national development, given the fact that thousands of farmers have been killed; communities rendered desolate, property destroyed, among others as a result of herders' aggression. For example, aggression ventilated by herders on farmers in Benue and Plateau states has taken the lives of 56 people (Algazeera, 2025).

In the light of the foregoing, the disproportionate accumulations of frustration occasioned by climate change have resulted in herders' aggression leading to wanton destruction of lives and property. Conflict of this nature has taken the lives of 542 civilians across the country since 2019, while no less than 2 million have been displaced by it (Olayide, 2025). For instance, Daily Post (2022) reported that herdsman had killed twenty-three (23) people with

several others sustaining gunshot injuries during separate attacks in some villages in Giwa Local Government Area, Kaduna State. The same report noted the attack of nine (9) villages in the same LGA where fifty (50) people, mostly farmers were killed, many were displaced and property worth millions of Naira lost. This is the height of frustration and aggression as most people were killed, property destroyed and many displaced in separate attacks. These attacks were driven by unhealthy competition for resources for grazing and crops farming.

Gap in Existing Knowledge

The farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria has recently being in the front burner, and enough researches and literature are comprehensively developed in this area. Most of the research work ever conducted took investigative perspectives, leaving only a few to establish a correlation between the different variables in the body of knowledge. Some studies have spoken about addressing the underlying grievances while also promoting innovative solutions such as sustainable cattle-rearing practices and collaborative land-use policies. According to Ruqayyah and Baderinwa (2019) empirical studies carried out by various authorities across Nigeria point to the fact that the destruction of crops is the major igniter of the conflict among the farmers and herders. However, others for example drew divergent positions; for example, Ojeifo (2020) explained the climate change dimension as the cause of herdsman and farmers' conflicts in Nigeria, while canvassing strict border surveillance by security agencies. Aisedion and Omoregie (2024) analyzed the connection between environmental security and sustainable development, by recommending the promotion of healthy environment for future generations. Finally, Aisedion, Oboh, and Agazuma (2024) explored climate change and migration in Sahel region as the cause of food insecurity in Nigeria, by advancing alternative adaptation measures by migrants. Nevertheless, none of these authorities pursued the frontal of knowledge to advance the linkage between climate change; herders and farmers' conflict and displacement and examine how their impact national development in Nigeria. It is this area the paper contributes to the body of knowledge.

Material and Methods

This study employed secondary of data collection sourced from various outlets, such as research agencies, policy papers, newspapers, books, Internet. This forms the data historically analyzed in the paper.

Data Analysis

The Implication of Climate Change, Conflict and Displacement for National Development:

According to Abah (2025) 23 persons were reportedly killed in several attacks in Guma, Logo, Ukum and Kwande LGAs in Benue state. The attacks of almost daily occurrences have forced many to flee their communities. As of May 10, 2025, the killing of 23 people in fresh attacks across the four LGAs brought the total number of people killed recently in the state by armed attackers to 159, within 40 days. In the words of Onyedika (2025), saying the escalating crisis of pastoral violence in Nigeria, have led for over 2.2 million Nigerians forcibly displaced in the last six years due to conflict. Out of this number, more than 300,000 people have been forced into improvised camps in Benue State alone. Such massive internal displacement resulted in a severe humanitarian and economic downturn. The situation has spiraled out of control as frustration and aggression combined to fuel violence, food shortages, and widespread insecurity. One of the most alarming consequences of the ongoing violence is its impact on Nigeria's agricultural sector, and hence food security. The persistent conflict has drastically reduced agricultural output, leading to inflation in food prices and worsening Nigeria's economic struggles.

The figure 2 of an armed herder with AKA 47 riffle shows the readiness to unleash violence with the slightest provocation. This is not an isolated case of what is happening in Nigeria. It is a threat to national development. This is what Nigerians are experiencing on a daily basis as a clear explanation of what the conflict is about.



Source: Olayide, S, (2025 March 30). 542 killed, 2 million displaced in farmer-herder conflicts – Report. The Guardian

Onyedika (2025) observed that Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, and parts of Kaduna, has borne the brunt of violent conflict in Nigeria. According to him, the conflict have graduated from cattle rustling and kidnapping to killing residents, destroying homes, and setting farmland ablaze. The humanitarian impact of this crisis has been catastrophic as displaced persons in Benue, Nasarawa, and Taraba are living in squalid conditions in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where food, water, and medical supplies are scarce. The overwhelmed camps are struggling to provide even basic necessities, leading to malnutrition, disease outbreaks, and severe psychological trauma among the displaced population. It is estimated that over 10,000 people have been killed over the past decade (Kwaja; Ademola & Adelehin, 2018; Ilo, 2019). To underscore the lethality of the herders, it is reported that the death toll resulting from conflicts between herders and farmers in 2016 alone was about 2,500 persons and that between 2011 and 2015 fatalities averaged have risen to 2,000 deaths (International Crisis Group, 2017). The data from the Nigeria Security Tracker document cited by Akpensuen and Foreman (ND) shows most fatalities from herders-farmers conflicts in 2017 and 2018 were 1,041 and 2,037 deaths, respectively.

Since human beings are agent of development, the death of a person is a colossal loss to national development as manpower or labour force of the country is depleted. This is because the importance of human resources in the management of material resources is indispensable since machines cannot be operated without human manipulations. Baran (1978) opined that actual economic surplus and potential economic surplus are indices of development. This implies that violent conflict affect the actual and potential economic surplus of a country. This is because violent conflict affects the generating capacity of the people as the ultimate basis of wealth of a nation revolves around the abundance of its sound and useful human resources.

Displacement has diverse implications for society and individuals affected. It is more serious particularly with regards to the threats posed to the forcibly displaced facing insecurity and denial of other basic conditions of existence. This is more worrisome due to the loss of

convenience and rights to shelter, lands and jobs as a result of being forced from their homes. Displacement also affects girls, women and men in different ways in terms of protection and their rights (United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1998) Displacement affects people's safety and security; adequate standard of living; access to livelihoods; housing, land and property; access to documentation in civic activities; family unification; participation in public affairs; and access to justice with collective impact on development at local and national levels (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2010). The flight of capital and human resources including lands, support networks, businesses, among others emanating from displacement destabilizes development. It is a difficult task to quantify changes in population distribution due to internal displacement. This of course, poses a challenge for development planning that is based on population and demography. Finally, internal displacement may accelerate other processes of social change such as urbanization, shift in gender values, inter-ethnic mixing among others that can shape long term development (Harild, 2016). The ongoing pastoral conflict in Nigeria has had devastating consequences, affecting lives, the economy, security, and social cohesion. The crisis is threatening Nigeria's unity, food security, and democratic foundation. The findings of this paper point that climate change induced conflict particularly herders and farmers crisis, displacement of people and scarcity of crops-land leading to inability to engage in agricultural activities to advance economic development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Farmer-herder conflict is one of the Nigeria's gravest challenges in recent years. At the core of the conflict is an unhealthy claim over land and water resources and other related issues such as: obstruction of traditional migration routes and crop damage (Adeniyi, 2025). The foundation of this conflict lies in environmental pressures in Nigeria's northern regions, where progressive desertification and shrinking grazing reserves caused by climate change have forced pastoralists to move their cattle southward into the fertile Middle Belt. This migration brought them into inevitable conflict with farming communities, especially in states like Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa (Addeh, 2025). Therefore, mitigating the impacts of climate change must be of utmost importance, requiring collective commitment to address its dreadful implications. Greenhouse gas emissions that result from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels are major contributors to both climate change and air pollution. Coordination and consistency in policy approaches have been missing in combating conflict in the Middle Belt region. Many states and the federal government are yet to agree on the right approach to issues like open grazing and ranching.

The ongoing conflict has led to reduced agricultural production, supply chain disruption, food inflation and a higher risk of food insecurity across the country. Despite government efforts, gaps in policing and law enforcement have contributed to the nerve of the attackers. Government interventions, like the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) and anti-open grazing laws in several states, appear not to be sustainable solution. The displacement of people has kept food insecurity worsened, with the geographical spread of attacks now reaching southern states, like Edo and Ondo for demonstrating the conflict's relentless expansion. Unless decisive action is taken, more communities will be lost, and millions more will be forced to flee their homes turning Nigeria into a land of refugees within its own borders. Addressing this crisis requires coordinated, multi-faceted approaches such as:

- i. The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) must be fully enforced, ensuring the transition to ranching-based livestock farming for effective implementation of anti-open grazing laws.

- ii. The establishment of clear guidelines for grazing reserves and farmland protection by Land use reforms.
- iii. The security sectors should be overhauled to control arms proliferation
- iv. Herders should adopt other climate adaptation programmes for alternative livelihoods to reduce resource competition
- v. Genuine political will must be garnered by the government to address root causes of crisis including ethnic divisions and governance failures.
- vi. Military patrols should be intensified and the disarmament of armed herders and criminal groups must be prioritized,
- vii. Adequate resources such as food, shelter, healthcare, and security should be allocated to displaced persons.
- viii. Intelligence gathering and border security should be improved to prevent the influx of illegal weapons exacerbating violence.
- ix. There should be sincere peace resolution community engagement between farmers and pastoralist groups to foster peaceful coexistence.

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