

RESOURCE-BASED CONFLICTS AND REGIONAL STABILITY IN WEST AFRICA: AN ASSESSMENT OF HERDER-FARMER CONFLICT IN NIGERIA'S MIDDLE-BELT REGION

Sunday Toyin Omojowo, Aderayo Adeola Adebajo

Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author Email: omojowost@tasued.edu.ng

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Abstract: Resources are vital to a nation's economic development, growth and sustainability. However, resources are also sources of conflict as a result of intense competition over their control and exploitation. The situation is grave in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where herders and farmers continue to clash over arable land and water. This article examines resource-based conflicts and their impact on regional stability, focusing on herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. It adopts a desk review research method and the theory of environmental resource scarcity as its theoretical framework. It argues that the conflict was triggered by pressure on depleting land and water in the region as a result of climate change and heightened by factors such as weak governance, illicit arms, and ethnic and religious tensions, among others. The conflict has led to loss of lives and property, humanitarian crises, food insecurity and instability in the region. The region has continued to experience a cycle of violence, particularly in Benue and Plateau states, which are the hotbeds of the conflict. The article's unit of analysis is the region as a whole, not a single state. It concludes that continued violence risks further destabilisation of the region, and recommends that a regional security agency should be created by state governments in the Middle Belt to strengthen the formal security architecture, and that alternative dispute resolution methods should be highly encouraged as a complement to enforcement.

Keywords: Conflicts; Herder-Farmer; Middle Belt; Regional Stability; Resource Based Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Resources are essential for a nation's economic prosperity. They are key drivers of wealth creation, development and growth, and serve as a foundation for social welfare and sustainability. Despite their importance in the survival and sustainability of nations, resources are also a cause of conflict all over the world. They create intense competition among nations over their control and exploitation, leading to clashes (Nochi Faha, 2021; Chen et al., 2023). For instance, the protracted Israel-Palestine war is due to control over land areas such as the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem (Stern-Weiner, 2024); also, the South

China Sea disputes are over untapped billions of barrels of oil involving China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Although developed nations are less predisposed to conflict over resources, developing nations, especially in Africa, suffer grave destruction and casualties owing to such conflicts (Aysan et al., 2023).

The competition over resources is a major source of violent conflict in Africa. Sini et al. (2021) argued that resources are more of a curse than a blessing on the continent. Water resources such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), oil and gas reserves, mining of diamonds, gold and cobalt, land, among others, have led to violent confrontations in many African nations which have led to loss of life and property, humanitarian crises and instability (Busingye, 2022; Mwape, 2024). In the same manner, in Nigeria, resources have led to serious contentions for decades without resolve, particularly the Niger Delta crisis and, importantly, herder-farmer conflicts. The competition between herders and farmers for arable land and water has become one of the most destructive conflicts in Nigeria in recent times. In 2022, Genocide Watch classified the conflict as a genocide attempt perpetrated particularly by the herders (Charles, 2022). Phoebe and Mees (2022) affirmed that Nigeria's growing herder-farmer violence is now six times more deadly than the Boko Haram insurgency.

The clashes between the two groups have worsened over time, particularly in the Middle Belt, where the conflict has become a hotbed of the crisis, accounting for 58% and 61% of incidents and casualties respectively in 2021 alone (ReliefWeb, 2021). The conflict has led to loss of life and property, humanitarian crisis, economic downturn, stagnated development and regional instability (Ogunbode et al., 2023). In spite of government efforts, the conflict remains unresolved. It is against this background that this article examines resource-based conflict and its impact on regional stability, focusing on the herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Though extant studies (Angela & Nwofor, 2024; Nwaoburu, 2025) have been carried out on the discourse, much attention has not been given to the regional impact of the conflict, as most studies have particularly focused on individual states in the region. This article therefore contributes to deepening the subject matter with its focus on the effect of the conflict on the region.

The contribution of this article is its regional unit of analysis. Existing studies cited in this article examine individual states in the region; this article examines the region as a whole, across its six states and the Federal Capital Territory, and assesses drivers, effects and responses at that regional level. The scope of the article is stated plainly. The Middle Belt region, as defined in this article, comprises six states, Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau, together with the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The analysis covers the period from 2020 to April 2025 for the attack compilation in Table 2, and the wider literature and documentary record cited throughout.

This article asks three research questions, which are answered one by one in the Conclusion. RQ1: What drives herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt, and how do the scarcity

mechanisms of environmental resource scarcity operate across the region? RQ2: How does the conflict affect regional stability, through which mechanisms, and at what scale? RQ3: How have governments and other stakeholders responded, and what regional arrangements follow from the findings? The article is structured as follows. The Literature Review clarifies resource-based conflict, regional stability and herder-farmer conflict, and sets out the theoretical framework. The Method describes the desk review. The Result and Discussion examines resource-based conflict in West Africa, the conflict in Nigeria, the conflict in the Middle Belt, its drivers, its effects on regional stability, and stakeholder efforts. The Conclusion answers the three research questions and sets out two recommendations linked to the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource-based conflicts

Resource-based conflicts are struggles and contentions for access, control and use of natural resources. They are disputes that arise from competition over natural resources which frequently lead to economic instability and armed hostilities (Bannon & Collier, 2003). Schellens and Diemer (2020) view resource-based conflicts as violent struggles connected to the exploitation and governance of natural resources, shaped by environmental, economic and political factors. Resource-based conflicts occur as a result of the availability of valuable commodities like land, oil and diamonds, among others, and instigate rebellion and violence (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005). It is a social or political clash influenced by disagreements over access, management and distribution of natural resources (Schellens & Diemer, 2020). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2012) defined resource-based conflict as a dispute that is frequently violent and is sparked, exacerbated, or maintained by competition over access, control or use of naturally endowed possessions.

Resource-based conflicts are violent disputes which arise due to competing interests and grievances over natural resources. Numerous stakeholders, including communities, governments, and business players, are involved in these disputes, which can arise at local, national, and trans-boundary levels (Phoebe & Mees, 2022). Blondel (2012) argued that it is competing demands of actors for primarily natural resources. This article conceptualises resource-based conflict as a form of dispute, disagreement and violent confrontation by groups (herders and farmers) over access, control and management of natural endowments, particularly arable land and water.

Regional stability

The term regional stability describes a situation of peace and order in a particular geographic area marked by the lack of conflict and the existence of good relations among surrounding nations. It suggests an atmosphere in which there is little conflict, strain, or disturbance, promoting collaboration, economic expansion and general regional well-being. It entails the

ability of nations to live in harmony with one another without major conflicts or threats, and it is essential for fostering social development, political cooperation and economic growth among the nations that make up the region (Laifaoui et al., 2024). Buzan and Wæver (2003) stated that regional stability is a security dynamic in which a geographically defined area is free from shared threats and vulnerabilities, forming a security complex. Regional stability is a condition in which economic and political integration brings about security and order (Kelly, 2007).

Sperling (2014) argued that it is the steadiness in a region which is determined by geopolitical and strategic approaches, particularly by dominant powers to shape security governance and order. Regional stability is achieved when surrounding nations establish cooperative security efforts and arrangements that eliminate conflicts and foster peace (Haacke & Williams, 2009). It is perceived as the ability of nations in a geographic area to maintain peace and security through governance, diplomacy and conflict prevention. Regional stability relates to a situation in which a specific geographic area does not experience major political, economic or social turbulence that interrupts regular functioning and can lead to conflict or crises (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; Garretsen et al., 2025).

In regions where there is stability, there often exist economic growth, government effectiveness and relative peace among citizens, which are highly maintained through strong governance, economic development and international cooperation to handle security issues such as border disputes and environmental concerns. There is an absence of tensions, weak institutions and external interference (Garretsen et al., 2025). This article conceptualises regional stability as the condition of peace and order in which there are no threats, dangers, vulnerabilities and violent competition for resources among groups in a geographical area. Obamamoye (2020) examines trans-state security complexes and security governance in West Africa, and shows that threats which cross state boundaries require governance which also crosses them. That literature supports the regional unit of analysis used here.

Herder-farmer conflict

The concept of herder-farmer conflict is as old as nature itself. It is a resource-based clash between pastoralists and farmers for access over limited land and water (Ifeanacho, 2024). Omotola (2025) is of the view that herder-farmer conflict refers to clashes over land, water and grazing resources particularly aggravated by climate change and poor governance. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) opined that the conflict between herders and farmers is a struggle for resource use (land and water) often heightened by local actors and state officials through unfair policies. Zannou (2022) argued that it is an intergroup relation characterised by violence and aggression with competition over land and water as the basis. Pastoralists and agrarians are often hostile as a result of selfish interests and goals. Herder-farmer conflict is also called 'nomadic conflict' as it refers to a form of environmental conflict in which agricultural and herding populations coexist in an antagonistic relation. It connotes struggles

between herding and farming tribes. The conflicts typically arise when livestock destroy crops and are worsened by shortage of water and grazing areas (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024).

Though there are hundreds of millions of pastoralists in the world, Africa is reported to be home to about 268 million pastoralists (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2018). There are several pastoralist tribes in Africa such as the Maasai, Boran, Rendile, Somali, Berbers, Turkana and Fulbe, among others. However, the Fulbe are the largest group, with an estimate of about 7-10 million, mostly scattered across West Africa (Appiah & Gates, 2010). While their origin remains unclear, some historians argued that they migrated from North Africa (Newman, 1995), while others believed they originated from Senegambia and spread to other parts of West Africa through jihadist war in the 18th century (Blench, 2010). This is why Moritz (2010) opined that the herder-farmer conflict simply connotes the hostility between Fulbe and farmers, obscuring their traditionally known symbiotic relationship. The Fulbe are predominantly Muslims, transhumant, and enjoyed inter-communal relations with other tribes before Africa's colonialism. Bukari and Schareika (2015) argued that herders were well received by their hosts and there was mutual dependence among them. However, this was greatly affected by deep-rooted structural issues such as regional extremism, lack of recognition, anti-pastoralist prejudices and marginalisation which stereotyped them as criminals when herders began to show jihadist ideology. This strained the existing symbiotic relations, deteriorating into a series of clashes.

Farmers are perceived as victims in the conflict, with herders as pastoralists often destroying their produce and farmland during their seasonal migration in search of pastures and water. They are disproportionately affected as they lose more to the crises in terms of casualties and property (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). The relations between herders and farmers were cordial, as rightly argued by Bukari and Schareika (2015); however, they became strained due to the 'entitlement' mentality of herders which stemmed from their historical grazing rights and traditional migration paths (Eke, 2020). The migrations of herders create intense competition for resources available to farmers, leading to conflicts which have worsened terribly over the past two decades (Omotola, 2025).

Theoretical framework

This article adopts the theory of environmental resource scarcity by Homer-Dixon (1999) as its theoretical framework. The basic assumption of the theory is that competition among groups over limited resources, especially land and water, often leads to tensions, disputes and violence. The theory emphasises that resources deplete, making them limited in availability, which significantly triggers conflicts in society. When vital resources are few, tensions and competitiveness between groups increase, resulting in conflicts over control and access (Mahlakeng & Solomon, 2023). Homer-Dixon (1999) argued that population growth (demand-induced scarcity), environmental degradation (supply-induced scarcity) and

unequal resource distribution (structurally induced scarcity) remain the major causes of resource scarcity which often lead to conflict.

The framework is operationalised in this article through three indicators, each traced in the analysis. Demand-induced scarcity is traced through population growth and expanding land use, which increase demand for arable land and grazing (Dominic, 2024; Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025). Supply-induced scarcity is traced through drought, desertification and drying water sources, which reduce available land and water and push herders southwards (Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025; Lenshie, Okengwu, Ogbonna, & Ezeibe, 2020). Structurally induced scarcity is traced through weak governance, poor enforcement, contested land allocation and the spread of illicit arms, which determine whether pressure produces negotiation or violence (Dominic, 2024; Fadeyi & Abdulrahman, 2021). Madu and Nwankwo (2020) show that climate vulnerability is spatially uneven in Nigeria, which means that the same climatic pressure produces different levels of conflict risk in different places; that unevenness is why this article assesses drivers at regional level rather than assuming a uniform national pattern.

As population grows, consumption increases, which necessitates higher demand for resources and aggravates their depletion. Resource depletion impacts availability due to factors such as overuse, degradation and severe climatic conditions, which intensifies competition among groups. The competition restricts other groups' access to and control over resources, which fuels grievance and social unrest, and is eventually worsened by structural scarcity, in the form of unequal distribution and weak governance. This is exactly the case of herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria. The increasing Nigerian population intensifies the pressure on land and water resources, as farmers and herders need land and water for their crops and herds respectively. The herders are forced to migrate southwards in search of grazing land and water for their cattle due to environmental degradation and severe climate change in the northern part of Nigeria, which increases competition to access and control land and water in the Middle Belt region, leading to clashes. The clashes become more intensified as a result of structural scarcity in terms of weak governance and policies which have deteriorated over time without a lasting solution. The conflict has led to loss of life and property (cattle, farmlands and buildings), economic disruption, food insecurity, humanitarian crisis, stagnated development and threatened the peace, security and stability of the Middle Belt region and Nigeria at large (Ogunbode et al., 2023).

The theory is not without criticisms, especially from scholars such as Albritton and Wennerlind (2025). Critics of the theory argued that scarcity does not often lead to conflicts, as societies adapt through cooperation and technological innovations. They also contended that it is overly materialistic and fails to adequately capture the role of institutional arrangements, social norms and cultural values which influence economic decision-making even in times of shortage. More so, the critics argued that environmental resource scarcity is an artificial capitalist creation to concentrate resources in the hands of the elites rather than reflecting true shortage. That criticism is taken seriously here: where the analysis finds

cooperation, mediation or institutional responses, it treats them as evidence which qualifies a simple scarcity story, and the Stakeholders section is read in that light. The framework is therefore used in this article as an explanatory lens with a stated limitation: it explains how pressure on land and water, population growth and unequal distribution create conditions for conflict, but it does not by itself explain why some pressures produce negotiation and others produce killing. Institutions, identities and enforcement fill that gap, and they are examined as part of the analysis, not as an afterthought. Nwankwo (2019) argues that farmer-pastoralist conflicts in West Africa must be read through critical geopolitics, in which the framing of the conflict itself shapes responses to it; that argument is used here to qualify a purely environmental reading, since climate pressure matters, but it operates through how groups perceive and respond to it.

The theory is useful for this study as it explains a major cause of the herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt. It establishes the nexus between limited resources (land and water) and the herder-farmer conflict with its attendant triggers. This position is corroborated by Yusuf, Audu, and Akuva (2020), who found that the herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt, especially in Benue State, resulted from competition between the two groups for scarce arable land and water resources, fuelled by environmental, social, economic and political factors, which resulted in regional instability. Yusuf and Umoru (2022) likewise interrogate the challenges of managing resource conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, and show that management failure, not resource absence alone, sustains the conflict.

METHOD

This article uses a desk review research method and applies the theory of environmental resource scarcity as its theoretical framework. The review examines resource-based conflicts in West Africa and Nigeria, with particular emphasis on herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt. It organises the discussion around the drivers of conflict, the consequences for regional stability, and stakeholder responses, drawing on the scholarly works, institutional reports and documentary sources cited in the manuscript.

The corpus is defined as follows. First, scholarly works on resource conflict, environmental scarcity, regional stability, pastoralism and herder-farmer conflict in West Africa and Nigeria, including the works cited throughout this article. Second, institutional and documentary sources, including reports and statements by the International Crisis Group, the Centre for Democracy and Development, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the United Nations Environment Programme and ReliefWeb. Third, news reporting used only for Table 2, where each row names its outlet, and for specific attributed claims in the text, where the outlet and the attribution are stated in the sentence. Inclusion criteria are relevance to the three research questions, coverage of the Middle Belt region or of West African resource conflict as regional context, and availability in a form which can be cited and checked. Sources which could not be identified or verified were excluded from the final reference list, and claims

which depended entirely on them were removed or rewritten using cited sources. The limitations of that rule are stated in the final paragraph of this section.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, concepts are clarified from the literature: resource-based conflict, regional stability and herder-farmer conflict, and the three scarcities of the framework are defined. Second, the West African and Nigerian material is read as regional context, to establish which features of the Middle Belt conflict are specific to that region and which are shared across West Africa. Third, the Middle Belt material is analysed by driver, by effect on regional stability, and by stakeholder response, with the cross-state attack compilation in Table 2 used as a regional record of reported incidents, not as a sample from which trends are inferred. Fourth, the findings are assessed against the framework and its criticisms, and the two recommendations are derived from the stakeholder analysis. No fieldwork was undertaken for this article, no interviews or surveys are claimed, and no new casualty data were collected.

The limitations of the method must be stated plainly. First, casualty figures in Table 2 and in the text are as reported by the named outlets; they are not independently verified counts, and this article does not sum them into a regional total, does not infer a trend from them, and does not compare states by totals derived from them. Second, Table 2 covers January 2020 to April 2025 and was compiled in 2025; it does not cover the period after April 2025, and it contains no row for the Federal Capital Territory, although the regional definition in this article includes it. Third, several figures in the text come from single sources and are presented with their attribution and scope in the sentence; they should not be read as corroborated totals. Fourth, the desk review cannot establish causation for any single attack in Table 2; it can establish patterns of drivers, effects and responses at regional level, which is the level at which this article's questions are pitched. Fifth, where a source could not be verified, the claim was dropped rather than retained on an unverified citation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Resource-based conflicts in West Africa

West Africa is an epicentre of the African continent as it is expansively endowed with numerous natural resources, from gold, diamonds and timber to land, crude oil and cocoa, among others. These resources have been explored for decades to strive for growth and development of nations in the region. However, natural resources in several West African countries have been rather a curse than a blessing, owing to the fact that they have been a huge source of violence and conflicts destabilising the region (Uzoigwe & Nwokolo, 2025).

Arable land and water supply, especially for farming and grazing, is a serious source of conflict in West Africa. In the Mopti and Segou regions of Mali, the Bambara and Dogon sedentary farmers clash with Fulani nomadic herders whom they constantly accuse of destroying their farmlands and contaminating their rivers during their seasonal migration in

search of pastures for their herds (Shahid, 2025). Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) argued that this conflict claimed the lives of 179 persons in 2019, and that 90 Dogon and 212 Fulani settlements were destroyed in 2020. Tension between herders and farmers in Senegal is another point of reference, as Fulani herders in dry seasons move southwards in search of favourable pastures and often destroy farmlands, leading to clashes (Ferro, 2025). Issifu, Darko, and Paalo (2022) examine climate change, migration and farmer-herder conflict in Ghana, and show that migration driven by environmental change interacts with local institutions to produce conflict; that interaction is directly relevant to the Middle Belt, where southward movement meets contested land allocation.

Gold mining is another source of conflict in West Africa. As a matter of fact, gold mining is illegally carried out by criminal networks that frequently clash with security forces. In Burkina Faso, jihadist groups like al-Qaeda have taken over gold mining sites in areas where the government has failed to exercise control, using the proceeds to finance terrorism in the state. Solhan, a small town about 15 km from Sebba in Yagha, is a major target for armed groups for gold smuggling. In 2021, about 132 people lost their lives in the brawl between armed groups and government forces (Coulibaly, 2021). Similarly, in Ghana, illegal gold mining popularly called 'galamsey' has been a root of tensions in Prestea, where rivers have been contaminated. The illegal mining contributed to environmental pollution and opened opportunities for land grabbers (Lawal, 2025). Uranium in Niger continues to spur terrorist attacks, especially around the Somair mine. The mine has caused a serious crisis among al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Islamic State in the Greater Sahel and Niger security forces. The crisis drew the interest of Boko Haram and Tuareg separatist forces in the Sahel to mining uranium as a source of funds (Parens, 2023). These resource conflicts continue to contribute to the regional instability of West Africa, as displacements of people, food insecurity, environmental degradation and deaths continue to rise significantly.

Herder-farmer conflict as resource-based conflict in Nigeria

The herder-farmer conflict is one of the most ruthless forms of resource-based conflicts in the history of Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2021). Idachaba (2024) identified two leading perspectives on the origin of herders in Nigeria. First, herders migrated to Nigeria through the jihadist war led by Utman Dan Fodio in the 18th century and established a caliphate in present-day Sokoto State. Second, herders migrated from the Senegambia confederation in search of pastures and settled in the northern part of the country in the 19th century (Idowu, 2017). While the modes of their origin differ a little, herders often migrate seasonally across several states in Nigeria, creating intense competition for available land and water. Though herders are from the same ethnic group, farmers are from several indigenous ethnic groups across the country, many of them smallholders producing mainly at subsistence level.

Conflict frequently arises between herders and farmers, as the former often destroy the latter's farmland and crops during their seasonal migration across the country in search of

pastures and water. The clashes between the two groups have constantly led to loss of life and property and other humanitarian crises. Over the decades, the conflict has assumed different dimensions, such as rape, kidnapping for ransom and extortion, coupled with religious coloration and ethnic cleansing (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). Although herder-farmer conflict was initially predominant in the northern part of Nigeria, it has also become more prevalent in many states in the southern part of the country, wreaking havoc (Angela & Nwofor, 2024). Chukwuma (2020) shows that the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria is constructed as a security issue, and that construction shapes which interventions are treated as legitimate; that framing helps to explain why the same incidents produce different policy responses in different states.

The conflict raised serious security concerns for the country, as the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tajudeen Abbas, estimated that over 60,000 persons had lost their lives in the clashes between 2001 and 2023, as reported by Deborah (2023). That figure is the Speaker's estimate as reported in the press, not an independently verified count. In 2018 alone, over 2,000 deaths were recorded in the violent clashes between the two warring groups across the country, as reported by Brottem (2021). From 2020 to 2021, ReliefWeb (2021) recorded about 71 clashes across Nigeria which resulted in several casualties, with the Northwest the most violent in terms of casualties per incident. The conflict has also led to the displacement of over 3.6 million persons nationally, with many seeking refuge in nearby communities and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. The conflict has contributed to worsening the security challenges in the nation (The Conversation, 2023).

Herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt region

Herder-farmer conflicts have been more prevalent in the Middle Belt, as the region remains the hotbed of the conflict, with high incidences and casualties, possibly as a result of its history of civil unrest (ReliefWeb, 2021). The Middle Belt region is located between the northern and southern parts of Nigeria and spans six states, Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau, together with the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The region is inhabited by over 20 million Nigerians from several ethnic groups, including Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Gbagyi, Igala, Ebira, Jukun, Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, among others, with the majority of them predominantly Christians and Muslims. It is the home of fertile agricultural land, as states such as Benue are known to be the food basket of the nation. The indigenous population is mostly involved in agriculture (crop production and livestock rearing); other occupations such as fishing and blacksmithing are also prevalent (Gbamwuan & Atim, 2022).

Table 1. Territories in the Middle Belt region as defined in this article

Territory	Position in this article
Benue	One of the six states in the region; described in the text as the food basket of the nation and, with Plateau, a hotbed of the conflict.
Kogi	One of the six states in the region.
Kwara	One of the six states in the region.

Nasarawa	One of the six states in the region.
Niger	One of the six states in the region.
Plateau	One of the six states in the region; described in the text with Benue as a hotbed of the conflict.
Federal Capital Territory, Abuja	Federal Capital Territory included in the regional definition in the text.

The region also boasts of the Rivers Niger and Benue with their tributaries, which serve as a great source of constant water supply for humans and animals (Fadeyi & Abdulrahman, 2021). Despite the natural endowments, the region has been crisis-ridden for the past two decades. The herders, upon entry into Nigeria through the northern regions, slowly moved south into the Middle Belt in continuous search of grazing lands and water. The rivers Niger and Benue, with their tributaries and greener pastures, attracted herders to graze frequently in the region. At first, several communities in the region extended a hand of friendship to them. However, due to stern pressure on the available resources and other factors such as destruction of farmlands during grazing hours, the relations became hostile. While Fulani herders have a connection of reciprocity and equality with their cattle, the Middle Belt farmers hold their land in the same manner (Idachaba, 2024). The hostility worsened, led to several attacks between the two groups, and became more violent over time, making the region the epicentre of herder-farmer conflict. Although the conflict first featured spontaneous attacks, it snowballed into premeditated ones, as herders stormed communities heavily armed in a 'commando style', killing and destroying farms (Fadeyi & Abdulrahman, 2021). In Benue State, for instance, about 5,138 farmers lost their lives between 2015 and 2023, as reported by Duru (2023). In the same manner, in Plateau State, herdsmen attacked over 80 persons across 10 villages in Mangu District in May 2023 alone, as reported by Asadu (2023). The recurring cycle of violence in the region has turned the region into a bloodbath, as thousands of lives have been lost to the deadly resource-based conflict. Table 2 corroborates the killings, showing the latest casualties.

Table 2. Reported attacks in the Middle Belt region, Nigeria, January 2020 to April 2025

Date	State	Location	Casualties	Source
30 January 2020	Plateau	Riyom and Mangu	32	Morning Star News
20 August 2020	Kogi	Agbadu-Daruwana	14	Evangelical Focus
21 August 2020	Plateau	Rukuba, Jos	22	Punch
31 May 2021	Benue	Ado Local Council	12	The Guardian
9 June 2021	Kwara	Faje and Ballah communities, Asa	7	Vanguard
10 June 2021	Kwara	Faje community, Asa	4	The Guardian
20 December 2021	Nasarawa	Lafia, Obi and Awe	52	Every Every
7 April 2022	Nasarawa	Obi and Awe	45	Foundation for Investigative Journalism
13 August 2022	Kwara	Ajase Ipo	4	Foundation for Investigative Journalism
7 March 2023	Benue	Kwande	50	EONS Intelligence

2 April 2023	Kogi	Edede Community	10	AIT Live
3 April 2023	Kogi	Dekina LGA	Scores	Wikki Times
15 May 2023	Nasarawa	Takalafiya	40	The Guardian
26 December 2023	Plateau	Bokkos, Barkin	160	Morning Star
		Ladi and Mangu		News
25 January 2024	Plateau	Mangu District	30	Aljazeera
5 April 2024	Kogi	Agojeju Odo	34	Independent
		Community		Newspaper Nigeria
7 April 2024	Benue	Kwande	46	Punch News
1 May 2024	Kogi	Ajokpachi Odo	3	Ebira Reporters
24 June 2024	Niger	Kadna Village, Shiroro	2	Daily Trust
2 July 2024	Plateau	Miango District and Bassa	8	Morning Star News
28 August 2024	Niger	Barkuta	5	Punch
		Community, Bosso		
15-26 September 2024	Plateau	Miango District, Bokkos County and Daffo Town	9	Christian Daily
27 December 2024	Benue	Kwande	11	Punch
30 December 2024	Benue	Kwande	33	Christian Daily
8 January 2025	Plateau	Bokkos County	8	Christian Daily
13 January 2025	Nasarawa	Karu	9	Daily Trust
16 January 2025	Kwara	Odo Eku	5	Punch
		community, Isin		
13 March 2025	Nasarawa	Farin Duse	11	Daily Trust
4 April 2025	Plateau	Daffo Districts, Bokkos	40	HumAngle
5 April 2025	Kogi	Agojeju, Omala	21	Reuters
15 April 2025	Plateau	Zike and Kimakpa, Bassa	52	The Defence Post
18 April 2025	Benue	Logo and Ukum LGAs	17	Punch
19 April 2025	Kwara	Kemaanji, Tenebo, Nuku, Yashikira	17	Punch
20 April 2025	Benue	Otukpo	56	DW
30 April 2025	Nasarawa	Angwan Doka II, Karu	2	Daily Post

Note. Figures are as reported by the outlets named in the Source column, not independently verified counts. The table was compiled in 2025 and it was not updated at the April 2026 revision, so it does not cover the period after April 2025, and no regional total is calculated from it. The row for 3 April 2023 (Dekina LGA, Kogi) gives the word 'Scores' rather than a number, and it is excluded from any total. The row for 20 December 2021 reproduces the source name 'Every Every' exactly as printed in the original article; that source could not be verified. State spelling is standardised to Nasarawa where the referent is certain. The table contains no row for the Federal Capital Territory, although the regional definition in this article includes it.

The conflicts also assumed dimensions like ambushes and highway attacks. Herders often target unsuspecting farmers and other community members in their homes, places of worship and on roads. They also carry out armed raids on villages across several communities in the region, sexually assaulting women and hounding them like dogs (Ojenya et al., 2021). Farmers, on the other hand, also carry out retaliatory attacks. They often mobilise themselves to poison water sources used by herders and set up road blocks to prevent movements into

their communities (Alfred, 2021). For instance, farmers in Barkin Ladi in 2022 poisoned the water used by herders, which led to the death of dozens of cows. Also, in Guma Local Government Area, farmers mobilised themselves, attacked herders and burnt down their temporary structures close to the community (Plangshak & Salek, 2021). The clashes between herders and farmers have terribly contributed to insecurity in the region. Odoemene (2025) examines incidents of farmer-herder conflict in Benue State and shows how incidents in one state are embedded in a wider pattern of contest over land and authority; that chapter is used here as Benue evidence within a regional argument, not as evidence that the conflict is a Benue problem alone.

Factors fuelling herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt

Several factors have continued to fuel the intense competition for resources between herders and farmers in the region. Climate change is a major factor fuelling the conflict. It terribly affects the depletion of water and land, especially through increased drought and desertification, which creates scarcity and forces herders to move southwards into the Middle Belt. Farmers are also faced with reduced rainfall and drying tributaries of the Rivers Niger and Benue, which affects their crop production. Herders, in a bid to salvage the situation, move into farming communities and encroach on farmlands, leading to disputes with farmers (Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025). Lenshie, Okengwu, Ogbonna, and Ezeibe (2020) argue that desertification and migration interact with the ungoverned spaces thesis in Nigeria, in which areas where state presence is weak become sites where migration and conflict coincide. Madu and Nwankwo (2020) map the spatial pattern of climate change and farmer-herder conflict vulnerability in Nigeria, and show that vulnerability is unevenly distributed rather than uniform across the country. Also, population growth contributes to heightening the conflicts. Dominic (2024) claimed that as the population in the region increases, land usage also increases and overstretches. Farming activities expand and herders need more grazing lands, making encroachment inevitable and leading to conflicts.

Furthermore, the conflict is highly fuelled by ethnic and religious tensions. Some accounts portray Fulani herders as aggressive, and note that many are Muslims who view land historically as a common resource which cannot be personalised, while inhabitants of local communities in the region, who are predominantly Christians, treat land as exclusive to them and perceive the former as intruders, thereby resisting their migrations. This resentment continues to colour and intensify hostilities between the two groups (Idachaba, 2024). The conflict has strained Muslim-Christian relations due to attacks on Christian communities, particularly in Plateau State, where over 115 Christians were killed by herdsmen on New Year Eve while some were in church and others preparing for programmes, as reported by Morning Star News (2023).

Likewise, the influx of illicit arms has further exacerbated the conflicts. Herders wield weapons and attack farming communities in the region, inflicting damage on life and

property. They graze heavily armed, attacking anyone who blocks their paths. Traditionally, the clashes are usually settled through mediation and compensation; however, the widespread availability of arms has given a twist to the confrontations, increased lethality and casualties (Fadeyi & Abdulrahman, 2021). More so, weak governance structures and ineffective law enforcement have contributed to intensifying the conflict. Most government policies expected to regulate grazing and farming activities are poorly implemented, often leading to disputes (Dominic, 2024). Kpilaakaa (2025) argued that law enforcement personnel have not been effective in ensuring peace, as many of them usually refuse to arrest assailants due to lack of orders. Garba et al. (2025), in their Taraba study, likewise find that causes of farmer-herder conflict include land pressure, migration and governance failure together, not any one factor alone, and that combination matches the pattern found in the Middle Belt.

Additionally, some traditional rulers in the region, who are supposed to mediate and fight for their community members, engage in dubious acts and receive bribes from herdsmen associations, promising grazing lands in their territories (Gbamwuan & Atim, 2022). In Guma, Benue State, the late Tor Tiv, HRH Alfred Alkwe Torkula, was accused of receiving cows and cash from herdsmen, promising to settle land owners to allow them to graze on their land. Also, Zaki Gbogyo and Zaki Nege in Makurdi LGA were accused of collecting bribes from herdsmen in exchange for grazing rights (Dooyum & Simon, 2024). The conflicts are intense in areas where the traditional rulers have received bribes and failed to settle land owners, as herdsmen see such acts as betrayals when the land owners do not allow them to graze on their land.

Effects of herder-farmer conflicts on regional stability in the Middle Belt

The conflict has had serious implications for the regional stability of the Middle Belt. The clashes between the two groups have created serious humanitarian crises in the region. They have led to loss of life and property. It is important to note that there are no official records for the total lives lost in the region. However, about 2.2 million people have been displaced in the region and are seeking refuge in IDP camps, as reported by Jaiyesimi (2025). In Benue State particularly, over 300,000 persons were displaced in 2023 (The Conversation, 2023). Many inhabitants fled from the region to neighbouring towns and states that are more peaceful and stable. Frequent attacks by the two warring groups have contributed to the disruption of economic activities and heightened food insecurity in the region. The food basket of the nation has become unstable for food production. The prices of staple foods have increased outrageously, as many farmlands have been destroyed by herders, coupled with decline in agricultural output as a result of inadequate monitoring and abandonment of farmlands. This has affected the annual income of inhabitants of the region, which is more pronounced on farm income, as several valuable able-bodied people have been killed, threatening the survival of many families (Sadiq et al., 2021).

State governments in the region have also failed to protect the life and property of their citizens. Security forces and law enforcement agencies have often failed to prevent attacks and enforce sanctions on warring parties, which has demonstrated that the government is either inept or reluctant to end the conflict. This has led to loss of trust in government, thereby making conflict resolution more difficult. The farmers in Benue and Plateau states accused the government of supporting herdsmen, which is why they carry out impunity without fear. Herders have grown more ruthless, while the law enforcement agencies are ineffective in subduing the attacks, making farmers and other citizens question the legitimacy of government and its institutions (Nwaoburu, 2025).

Governments have found it difficult to exercise control in several communities, and attacks have become persistent. Many communities are being abandoned and overrun by malevolent groups as a result of the conflict. State governments have demonstrated limited capacity to control these local areas as a result of failure to resolve the conflict, which has opened up those territories for malignant non-state actors to enter the region and wreak havoc. Communities in Guma, Logo and Agatu in Benue State, Bassa and Riyom in Plateau State, and Awe and Kdarko in Nasarawa State are greatly affected by the conflict and are now being overrun partly by criminals, as reported by Jaiyesimi (2025). In 2021, Olufemi (2021) reported that herders attacked Benue State Governor Samuel Ortom while on his farm in Tyo-mu along the Makurdi-Gboko highway. This shows the extent of the threat in the region. If the Governor, who is supposed to ensure the safety of life and property, is not safe, then the whole state is under threat.

Additionally, several ethnic militia groups have emerged in response to the conflict, which has compounded the crises in the region. Many of these groups were formed for self-defence as a result of failure of security agencies to protect the communities and the loss of faith in government. However, these groups sometimes unleash violence on their communities and citizens in the name of security, creating fear and hostility in the region (Angela & Nwofor, 2024). The conflicts have created tense and hostile intergroup relations among various people in the region. The peace and security of the region is in shambles, the cycle of bloodbath lingers due to an atmosphere that kills cooperation and economic exchanges. The region continues to know no peace; it is destabilised, insecure and regarded as one of the unsafe regions in the country to live in currently, owing to persistent attacks.

Stakeholders' efforts in resolving herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt

Governments in the region, alongside the federal government and other stakeholders, have intervened in managing and resolving the conflict. One of the first attempts in resolving the conflict was in 1965, when the federal government created grazing reserves, routes and laws which established 415 grazing reserves. Also in 1989, the federal government established the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) to integrate herders into national life and modernise their breeding techniques. However, this was eroded as a result of

environmental degradation and population explosion (Yusuf & Umoru, 2022). In 2015, the Goodluck Jonathan administration created an inter-ministerial committee to revive the grazing reserves and laws, and also to proffer viable solutions to ending the conflict. The initiative failed woefully to resolve the conflicts in the Middle Belt region due to non-compliance (International Crisis Group, 2017). In May 2015, the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari designed a Comprehensive Livestock Development Plan (CLDP) to appropriate grazing lands across the country, but it was strongly rejected in the Middle Belt, as the Land Use Act of 1978 gave such responsibility to state governments. In 2015 also, the Great Green Wall Initiative (GGWI) was introduced as a measure to counter the effects of climate change on the environment via planting 8,000 km of trees from the Sahel to the Middle Belt region of the country, but it was affected by poor funding. In 2018, the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) was introduced by the federal government as a possible solution to the conflict, which received much uproar as it opposes the nomadic nature of herders (Ewuh, Kieh, & Olonilua, 2025).

State governments have also put certain measures in place to curb the raging conflict. Several states adopted Open Grazing Prohibition laws to curb the unchecked and unregulated movement of herders across the region. For instance, the Benue State government adopted it in 2017 under the leadership of Governor Samuel Ortom, but it was not that effective, as it was resisted by herders who continued to graze openly. Attacks persisted even after the law was signed (Okon, 2021). Several committees and dialogue groups were formed to also address the menace. In 2016, for instance, Plateau State established the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA) to promote peace and intergroup harmonious living between herders and farmers (Ogbonnaya, 2022); however, this has failed to resolve the conflicts due to disagreement over major resolutions. More so, several civil society organisations such as Community Security Architecture Dialogue (CSAD), Local Peace Committees, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), and religious and traditional community leaders have also collaborated with governments in Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa states to mediate, dialogue and see to the psycho-social and trauma healing among the distressed parties of the conflicts, which have shown considerable successes. However, their efforts are not enough to resolve the conflicts, as attacks persist in several communities across the region (Vahyala, 2021). Regional and international stakeholders provide a third layer. Ohiri and Kazeem (2024) examine the ECOWAS transhumance protocol and human insecurity in the Sahel, and show that transhumance across national borders is governed, in principle, by a regional protocol, but that the protocol's enforcement depends on national governments which do not always cooperate.

CONCLUSION

This article examined resource-based conflict and its impact on regional stability, focusing on herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, at regional level. The Conclusion answers the three research questions one by one, and then sets out two recommendations linked to the findings.

RQ1: What drives herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt, and how do the scarcity mechanisms operate across the region? The drivers are climate change and population growth, which create demand-induced and supply-induced scarcity, operating through southward migration of herders into farming areas, and structural scarcity, in the form of weak governance, poor enforcement, contested land allocation and the spread of illicit arms. Those mechanisms operate across the region because migration, markets and displacement cross state boundaries, and because the institutions which should govern sharing are weak in the same places across the region. The framework is therefore supported as an explanation of pressure, but it is qualified by the finding that institutions, identities and enforcement determine whether pressure produces negotiation or violence.

RQ2: How does the conflict affect regional stability, through which mechanisms, and at what scale? The conflict affects regional stability through five mechanisms which operate at regional scale: displacement, with about 2.2 million persons displaced in the region as reported by Jaiyesimi (2025); food insecurity, through disruption of farming in Benue and Plateau and its effects on regional food supply; loss of state control, where failure to arrest assailants and enforce rules undermines state authority across the region; militia formation and intergroup breakdown, where communities organise for self-defence and retaliation; and economic disruption and stagnated development, through loss of life, property, farms and markets. Those mechanisms reinforce each other across state boundaries, and that reinforcement is why stability must be assessed regionally rather than state by state.

RQ3: How have governments and other stakeholders responded, and what regional arrangements follow from the findings? Governments have responded with federal policies, state anti-open grazing laws and, in some communities, mediation, but those responses have failed for four reasons: lack of enforcement, contradiction between state and federal measures, local mediation for a regional conflict, and arms proliferation which raises the cost of negotiation. The regional arrangements which follow from those findings are therefore twofold, and they are set out as recommendations below, each linked to a specific failure identified in the analysis.

Recommendation 1: A regional security agency should be created by state governments in the Middle Belt to strengthen the formal security architecture. This recommendation follows from the findings on loss of state control and on contradiction between state and federal measures: a regional agency, created by the Middle Belt states themselves, would provide a single enforcement framework across the region, rather than separate state arrangements which herders and farmers can play against each other. It would also address the enforcement failure identified in the stakeholder analysis, by giving the region a body whose mandate is regional, not confined to one state.

Recommendation 2: Alternative dispute resolution methods should be highly encouraged as a complement to enforcement, not as a substitute for it. This recommendation follows from the findings on intergroup breakdown and on the limits of enforcement alone: mediation,

compensation and community-based settlement can help to restore the symbiotic relations which the conflict has strained, where they are supported by a clear framework for land allocation and by enforcement which backs settlements. The limits of this recommendation are stated plainly: mediation and dialogue efforts in the region have shown only partial successes so far (Vahyala, 2021), and alternative dispute resolution cannot by itself resolve land allocation, arms proliferation or enforcement failure; it must be paired with the regional arrangement in Recommendation 1.

The article's contribution is therefore to show that the herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt is a regional conflict, not a collection of state conflicts, and that its drivers, effects and responses must be understood and addressed at regional level. Future research should examine the regional mechanisms identified here with primary data, including interviews with herders, farmers and officials across several states, and with a verified and updated compilation of incidents which covers the Federal Capital Territory and the period after April 2025. Until such data are available, the findings here should be read as the findings of a desk review, with the limitations stated in the Method, and not as findings from fieldwork.

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