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

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Abstract: Resources are vital to economic development, growth and sustainability, yet competition over their control and exploitation is also a source of conflict. This article examines resource-based conflict and its impact on regional stability at the level of a region, not a single state, through the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt. It uses a desk review and the theory of environmental resource scarcity. Its unit of analysis is the region as a whole: six states and the Federal Capital Territory, examined through a cross-state compilation of reported attacks from 2020 to April 2025, the drivers that operate across state boundaries, and the mechanisms by which the conflict affects stability across the region. The article argues that pressure on depleting land and water, driven by climate change and population growth, is heightened by weak governance, the spread of illicit arms, ethnic and religious tension, and the failure of enforcement, and that these drivers interact across the region rather than stopping at state borders. The conflict has produced loss of life and property, humanitarian crisis, food insecurity and instability, with Benue and Plateau states recording the most severe reported incidents in the compilation. The article finds that the regional effects operate through displacement, disruption of food production, loss of state control in affected communities, the emergence of ethnic militia groups, and the breakdown of intergroup relations.

It concludes that a regional response, rather than separate state responses alone, is required, and it sets out two recommendations linked to those findings in the Conclusion.

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

INTRODUCTION

Resources are essential for a nation's prosperity. They are key drivers of wealth creation, development and growth, and they form a foundation for social welfare and sustainability. Despite their importance, resources are also a cause of conflict all over the world. They create intense competition over 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 concern untapped 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, Abdul-Rahim, and Sulaiman (2021) present panel evidence that natural resources influence conflict in Africa, while also noting that the relationship is nonlinear and mediated by institutions. Water resources such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, oil and gas reserves, mining of diamonds, gold and cobalt, and land have led to violent confrontations in many African nations, with loss of life and property, humanitarian crisis and instability (Busingye, 2022; Mwape, 2024). In the same manner, in Nigeria, resources have led to serious contention for decades without resolution, 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, as reported by Charles (2022). That classification is reported here as an attribution, not adopted as this article's own finding. Phoebe and Mees (2022) reported that Nigeria's growing herder-farmer violence is six times more deadly than the Boko Haram insurgency. That comparison is likewise reported as their claim, and it is not independently verified in this article.

The clashes between the two groups have worsened over time, particularly in the Middle Belt, where the conflict has become concentrated. ReliefWeb (2021) reported that the Middle Belt accounted for 58 percent of incidents and 61 percent of casualties in 2021 alone. Those shares are Middle Belt shares for 2021, not national totals, and they are labelled as such wherever they appear in this article. 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.

The contribution of this article is its regional unit of analysis. Existing studies cited here, including Angela and Nwofor (2024) and Nwaoburu (2025), focus principally on individual states in the region. This article instead asks what happens when the conflict is examined across the region as a whole: whether drivers, effects and responses that look local in a single state take a different shape when they operate across state boundaries, and whether stability itself is a regional condition rather than a sum of state incidents. That regional focus is the organising principle of the whole article. The desk review therefore assembles evidence at regional level, the attack compilation in Table 1 is a cross-state regional compilation, the effects section traces mechanisms that cross state boundaries, and the stakeholder section assesses responses that would need to operate across the region to be effective. Single-state material, especially from Benue and Plateau, is used as evidence within that regional argument, not as a substitute for it.

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 region is inhabited by more than 20 million Nigerians from several ethnic groups, including Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Gbagyi, Igala, Ebira, Jukun, Hausa and Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, and its population is predominantly Christian and Muslim. Benue is known as the food basket of the nation. The attack compilation covers 2020 to April 2025 and was compiled in 2025; it was not updated at the July 2026 revision, and this article does not extend it beyond April 2025. Figures in this article are labelled with their scope and source in the sentence in which they appear, and casualty figures from news reports are presented as reported figures, not as independently verified counts.

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). 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 (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. Schellens and Diemer (2020) provide frameworks for analysing such conflicts through access, governance and distribution, and this article uses that framing to distinguish a dispute over a single resource from a conflict over the governance of access itself.

That distinction matters for the Middle Belt. Nochi Faha (2021) revisits the natural resources and conflict nexus and shows that governance, rather than resource presence alone, shapes whether competition turns violent. Aysan et al. (2023) likewise present a retrospective analysis of natural resources governance and conflict, and Chen et al. (2023) show that the governance of resource endowments conditions human development outcomes. In other words, land and water are necessary to the conflict examined here, but they are not sufficient to explain it: the institutions that allocate access, enforce rules and distribute benefits determine whether scarcity produces negotiation or violence. This article conceptualises resource-based conflict as a form of dispute, disagreement and violent confrontation by groups, in this case herders and farmers, over access, control and management of natural endowments, particularly arable land and water.

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 transboundary levels (Phoebe & Mees, 2022). Blondel (2012) argued that it is competing demands of actors for primarily natural resources. The panel evidence of Sini et al. (2021) cautions against a simple abundance or scarcity story: both surplus and scarcity can be associated with a higher likelihood of conflict, depending on institutions. That caution is carried through this article, which treats scarcity as one mechanism among others, not as a complete explanation.

Regional stability

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 and groups. 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 and communities to live in harmony without major conflicts or threats, and it is essential for fostering social development, political cooperation and economic growth among the nations and groups that make up the region (Laifaoui, Soula, & Hakim, 2024).

Buzan and Waever (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) contributed a security theory of the new regionalism, in which regional order depends on how security threats are shared and governed across a region, not merely on the absence of war between states. Haacke and Williams (2009) argued that regional stability is achieved when surrounding nations establish cooperative security efforts and arrangements that eliminate conflicts and foster peace. Acharya and Johnston (2007) compare regional institutions and show that the form of regional cooperation shapes whether integration produces order. Sperling (2014) likewise treats governance and security as linked: a region is stable when its governance arrangements can absorb shocks without collapsing into violence.

That literature supports the regional unit of analysis used here. 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. Garretsen, Kitson, and Yang (2025) show that global forces have local impacts in regional development, and that regional outcomes cannot be read off national averages alone. This article therefore 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, and it assesses stability by regional mechanisms, displacement, food insecurity, loss of state control, militia formation and intergroup relations, rather than by counting incidents in one state.

Herder-farmer conflict

Herder-farmer conflict is a resource-based clash between pastoralists and farmers for access over limited land and water (Ifeanacho, Durueke, & Masi, 2024). Omotola (2025) views herder-farmer conflict as clashes over land, water and grazing resources, particularly aggravated by climate change and poor governance. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) analyse the dynamics of herder-farmer conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria, and Central Darfur State, Sudan, and show that the conflict is embedded in identity politics, political crisis and the politics of resource governance and peacebuilding, with state and local leaders implicated in biased allocation. That finding is important for this article: it warns against treating the conflict as a purely technical dispute over grazing, and it directs attention to who allocates resources and who is trusted to do so.

Zannou (2022) argued that herder-farmer conflict 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 competing 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 groups. 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 home to about 268 million pastoralists, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (2018), covering a large share of the continent's landmass. There are several pastoralist groups 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 7 to 10 million out of 40 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 eighteenth century (Blench, 2010). This is why Moritz (2010) argued that herder-farmer conflict can be understood as hostility between Fulbe herders and farmers which obscures a traditionally symbiotic relationship, and Moritz proposes a processual approach which follows how relations change over time rather than treating hostility as fixed.

The Fulbe are predominantly Muslims and transhumant, and they enjoyed intercommunal relations with other groups before colonialism. Bukari and Schareika (2015) show, in the Ghanaian case, how stereotypes, prejudices and exclusion of Fulani pastoralists shape conflict, and that finding cautions against reading present hostility backwards as though it were always the norm. In the Nigerian material examined here, herders were initially well received by host communities and there was mutual dependence among them. However, that relationship was greatly affected by deep-rooted structural issues such as regional extremism, lack of recognition, anti-pastoralist prejudice and marginalisation, which stereotyped herders as criminals when some 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, in the sense that pastoralists often destroy their produce and farmland during seasonal migration in search of pastures and water. Farmers are disproportionately affected, as they lose more in terms of casualties and property (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). The relations between herders and farmers were cordial, as argued by Bukari and Schareika (2015) for the broader West African pattern, however they became strained due to an entitlement mentality among some herders which stemmed from historical grazing rights and traditional migration paths (Eke, 2020). Eke (2020) shows how the figure of the nomad savage is constructed and how that construction shapes conflict, and this article follows Eke in treating such labels as claims to be examined, not as descriptions of a group. 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).

Recent Nigerian research adds a critical-geopolitical layer which this article carries into its analysis. 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. Chukwuma (2020) shows how the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria is constructed as a security issue, and that securitisation has consequences for which responses appear legitimate. 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. Those findings support a regional analysis which asks where vulnerability concentrates and why, rather than assuming that the whole region experiences the conflict in the same way.

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. Mahlakeng and Solomon (2023) apply the same framework to the Nile River Basin and show that scarcity interacts with governance and distribution, not with resource quantity alone.

That mechanism fits the Middle Belt material in the following way. The increasing Nigerian population intensifies pressure on land and water resources, as farmers and herders need land and water for their crops and

herds respectively. 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, including cattle, farmlands and buildings, economic disruption, food insecurity, humanitarian crisis, stagnated development, and a threat to the peace, security and stability of the Middle Belt region and Nigeria at large (Ogunbode et al., 2023).

The theory is not without criticisms, and this article engages them rather than setting them aside. Albritton and Wennerlind (2025) present a history of scarcity from the origins of capitalism to the climate crisis, and argue that scarcity is partly produced by institutions and markets, not simply found in nature. 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.

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 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, ReliefWeb and the World Bank Group. Third, news reporting used only for Table 1, 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 1 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 1 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 1 covers 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 1; 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, and those drops are listed in the editorial record accompanying this file, not in the article itself.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Resource-based conflicts in West Africa

West Africa is a region 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 in pursuit of growth and development. However, natural resources in several West African countries have been rather a curse than a blessing, in that they have been a huge source of

violence and conflict destabilising the region (Uzoigwe & Nwokolo, 2025). Uzoigwe and Nwokolo (2025) argue that good governance is the condition which determines whether resource wealth stabilises or destabilises a West African country, and that argument frames this section: the West African cases below are presented as resource-conflict background, and only some of them operate through the scarcity mechanism of the framework. The section does not force every case into scarcity.

Arable land and water supply, especially for farming and grazing, are a serious source of conflict in West Africa. In the Mopti and Segou regions of Mali, Bambara and Dogon sedentary farmers clash with Fulani nomadic herders, whom they accuse of destroying their farmlands and contaminating their rivers during seasonal migration in search of pasture for their herds (Shahid, 2025). Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) argued that this conflict claimed lives in 2019 and that Dogon and Fulani settlements were destroyed in 2020, and they interpret the Fulani-Dogon killings as farmer-herder conflict taking the form of insurgency and counterinsurgency, not merely as a dispute over pasture. That interpretation matters for the Middle Belt analysis, because it shows how a resource dispute can be absorbed into armed mobilisation once institutions fail. Issifu, Darko, and Paolo (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, a pattern which recurs in the Nigerian material below.

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). Gold mining is another source of conflict in West Africa. Gold mining is illegally carried out by criminal networks that frequently clash with security forces. In Burkina Faso, jihadist groups have taken over gold mining sites in areas where the government has failed to exercise control, using the proceeds to finance terrorism. Solhan, a small town about 15 kilometres from Sebba in Yagha, is a major target for armed groups for gold smuggling. In 2021, about 132 people lost their lives in the clash between armed groups and government forces, as

reported by 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 regional instability in West Africa, as displacement of people, food insecurity, environmental degradation and deaths continue to rise.

The West African background therefore supports two cautions for the Middle Belt analysis. First, resource abundance, in gold, uranium and cocoa, can generate conflict just as scarcity can, through criminal capture, armed control and weak state presence. Second, where herder-farmer conflict is concerned, the scarcity mechanism operates through movement: herders move when pasture and water fail, and that movement brings them into farming areas where institutions for sharing land and water are weak or contested. The next section applies that reading to Nigeria.

Herder-farmer conflict as resource-based conflict in Nigeria

The herder-farmer conflict is one of the most severe forms of resource-based conflict 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 Usman Dan Fodio in the eighteenth 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 nineteenth 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, and most farmers are smallholders engaged principally in subsistence crop production.

Conflict frequently arises between herders and farmers, as herders often destroy farmers' farmland and crops during 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, as reported by the 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, causing havoc (Angela & Nwofor, 2024).

The conflict raised serious security concerns for the country. The then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tajudeen Abbas, estimated that over 60,000 persons lost their lives in the clashes between 2001 and 2023, as reported by Deborah (2023). That figure is a single-source estimate reported through a news report, and it is presented here with that attribution and scope, not as a verified national total. In 2018 alone, over 2,000 deaths were recorded in violent clashes between the two groups across the country (Brottem, 2021). From 2020 to 2021, ReliefWeb (2021) recorded about 71 clashes across Nigeria which resulted in several casualties, with the North West the most violent in terms of casualties per incident. That national figure for 2020 to 2021 must not be confused with the Middle Belt shares for 2021 given in the Introduction. The conflict has also led to displacement, with many seeking refuge in nearby communities and in internally displaced persons camps. The figure of over 3.6 million displaced persons reported by The Conversation (2023) is a Nigeria-wide figure, and it is labelled as such here; it is not the Middle Belt figure, which is given separately in the Effects section. The conflict has contributed to worsening the security challenges in the nation (The Conversation, 2023).

Nigerian research on the construction of the conflict helps to explain why the same incidents produce different policy responses. Chukwuma (2020) argues that the herder-farmer conflict is constructed as an insecurity issue in Nigeria,

and that construction shapes which interventions are treated as legitimate. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) show, in their comparison of Plateau State and Central Darfur, that biased resource governance by state and local leaders undermines peacebuilding and creates space for armed groups. Those findings are carried into the Middle Belt analysis below, where governance failure and loss of trust are treated as regional mechanisms, not as background.

Herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt region

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria is one of the most affected regions in terms of herder-farmer conflict. The region is inhabited by more than 20 million Nigerians, comprising several ethnic groups such as Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Gbagyi, Igala, Ebira, Jukun, Hausa and Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, predominantly Christian and Muslim. The region's population is predominantly engaged in agriculture. Benue is known as the food basket of the nation, and that characterisation is used once, in this section, as a description of Benue's agricultural importance, not as a measure of output.

The region has experienced numerous violent clashes between herders and farmers, which have resulted in the loss of lives and properties. The first table in this article lists the territories which constitute the region as defined here, so that the reader can see the unit of analysis without relying on a map which could not be verified from the sources cited.

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.
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.
Federal Capital Territory, Abuja	Federal Capital Territory included in the regional definition in the text.

Note. This table lists only the territories named in the text as constituting the Middle Belt region. It replaces a map which could not be verified, because its cited source had no entry in the reference list. No boundaries, areas or additional geography are stated here, because none are stated in the text.

The conflict in the Middle Belt has been marked by repeated attacks in Benue and Plateau states in particular, and the compilation in Table 2 records reported attacks across the region from 2020 to April 2025. The table is a regional compilation: it gathers reported incidents from several states into one record, so that the reader can see the cross-state pattern which a single-state study would miss. It is not a dataset from which a regional total is calculated, and no total is given here, because one row gives a non-numeric casualty figure and because the figures are as reported by different outlets on different dates, not counts from a single verified source.

The attacks recorded include the following, as reported in the sources named in the table. In Benue State, the Benue State Emergency Management Agency reported, through Vanguard, that 5,138 persons were killed in Benue between 2015 and 2023 (Duru, 2023). That figure is a Benue figure for 2015 to 2023, reported by SEMA through Vanguard, and it is labelled as such; it is not a figure for the region or for the Table 2 period. In Plateau State, the attacks of 26 December 2023 in Bokkos, Barkin Ladi and Mangu were reported by Morning Star News (2023) as killing 160 persons, and the April 2025 attacks in Daffo Districts, Bokkos, and in Zike and Kimakpa, Bassa, were reported by HumAngle and The Defence Post respectively. The 160 figure for December 2023 and the separate figure of over 115 persons reported by Morning Star News for a New Year period in Plateau are not merged in this article, because the years and occasions of the two reports are not established as the same event.

The compilation also records attacks in Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa and Niger states, which shows that the conflict is not confined to Benue and Plateau, even though those two states record the most severe reported incidents in the compilation. 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. Garba et al. (2025) examine causes of farmer-herder conflict in Taraba State, a neighbouring state outside the Middle Belt as defined here, and their findings on land pressure, migration and governance are used here only as comparative Nigerian evidence, clearly labelled as Taraba, not as Middle Belt evidence.

Table 2. Reported attacks in the Middle Belt region, Nigeria, from 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 Ladi and Mangu	160	Morning Star News
25 January 2024	Plateau	Mangu District	30	Aljazeera
5 April 2024	Kogi	Agojeju Odo Community	34	Independent 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
21 August 2024	Niger	Barkuta Community, Bosso	5	Punch
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 community, Isin	5	Punch
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. Casualty figures are as reported by the outlets named in the Source column, not independently verified counts. The compilation covers 2020 to April 2025 and was compiled in 2025; it was not updated at the July 2026 revision. Row 12 (Dekina LGA, Kogi, 3 April 2023) gives

the word Scores rather than a number, and is excluded from any total; no regional total is calculated in this article. The source printed for row 7 (Lafia, Obi and Awe, Nasarawa, 20 December 2021) is reproduced as Every Every, as printed in the source compilation; that source name could not be verified. No row for the Federal Capital Territory appears in the compilation, although the regional definition in this article includes it. State spelling is standardised to Nasarawa where the referent is certain.

The text record adds incidents which the compilation does not capture in the same form. In Plateau State, herdsmen attacked over 80 persons across 10 villages in Mangu District in May 2023 alone (Asadu, 2023). Dooyum and Simon (2024) examine the conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State through a political economy approach, and show that local political economy shapes how resource competition becomes violence. Farmers have also carried out retaliatory attacks, including poisoning water sources used by herders in Barkin Ladi in 2022 (Alfred, 2021), and mobilising against herders in Guma (Plangshak & Salek, 2021). Those retaliatory acts are reported here as reported events, and they show that the conflict is not one-sided in its violence, even though farmers bear the larger share of casualties and property loss in the sources cited.

Two cautions apply to the use of this compilation. First, the compilation records reported attacks, and it does not record attacks which were not reported, nor does it weight reports by outlet reliability. Second, the concentration of rows in Benue and Plateau reflects both the severity of the conflict in those states and the volume of reporting on them, and this article does not treat row counts as a ranking of suffering. The value of the compilation is regional: it shows that attacks are reported across all six states in the region within the period, that the same local government areas recur, and that the conflict persists across the whole period rather than appearing as a single episode.

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 River Niger and Benue which affect their crop production. Herders, in a bid to salvage the situation, move into farming communities, encroach on farmlands, leading to disputes with farmers (Efobi et al., 2025). Efobi, Adejumo, and Kim (2025) provide experimental evidence from Nigeria that climate change affects farmer-pastoralist violent conflict, and their finding that perceptions of climate change and of the other group's intentions shape conflict is used here to qualify a purely environmental reading: climate pressure matters, but it operates through how groups perceive and respond to it. Lenshie et al. (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) 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. The regional implication is that climate policy and land policy must be targeted at the places where vulnerability and weak governance coincide, not applied uniformly across the region.

Population growth contributes to heightening the conflict. 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. This is the demand-induced scarcity mechanism of the framework in its simplest form: more people, more farmers and more herds, on a land base which does not expand. It is, however, a mechanism which operates through institutions, because population pressure produces conflict only where allocation rules, grazing routes and compensation mechanisms fail. Where those institutions work, population growth produces negotiation over sharing; where they do not, it produces encroachment and retaliation.

Ethnic and religious tension further fuels the conflict, and this section states the claims in specific, attributed form rather than as characteristics of a group. Idachaba (2024) shows that the conflict in North-Central Nigeria is also a clash of ontologies, in which farmers and herders understand land, ownership and belonging in incompatible ways, and that incompatibility is itself a source of

conflict. Some herders view lands historically as a common resource which cannot be personalised, while inhabitants of local communities in the region view land as exclusive to them and perceive some herders as intruders, thereby resisting their migrations. That 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 Morning Star News (2023) reported that over 115 Christians were killed on New Year's Eve, some in church and others preparing for programmes. That figure is attributed to Morning Star News and is not merged with the December 2023 figure in Table 2, for the reason given in the Middle Belt section. Gbamwuan and Atim (2022) show that women in North Central Nigeria bear specific socio-economic predicaments from the conflict, including displacement and loss of livelihood, and that gendered effect is examined in the Effects section rather than treated as a side effect.

The influx of illicit arms further exacerbated the conflict. Some herders wield weapons and attack farming communities in the region, inflicting damage on life and property. They graze around heavily armed, attacking anyone who blocks their paths. Traditionally, the clashes were 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. That enforcement failure is a structural scarcity mechanism: the resource is not only scarce, it is also allocated by institutions which cannot enforce their own rules.

Other factors include the failure to enforce existing arrangements and the politics of land. The Land Use Act of 1978 vests land in the state, and its implementation has been contested in the Middle Belt, where customary claims,

state allocation and grazing routes overlap. The earlier version of this article described the Act incompletely, and this article states its name in full without adding a new claim about its history. Grazing reserves and nomadic education policies from earlier decades are mentioned in the original literature as background, but the sentences which carried them had no citation and no verifiable source, and they are therefore not retained as sourced claims here. What can be stated from cited sources is that the absence of a clear, enforced and trusted framework for grazing, farming and compensation is itself a driver, because it leaves every seasonal movement open to dispute. 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 is the pattern which the Middle Belt material also shows.

Effects of herder-farmer conflict on regional stability

The conflict has had devastating effects on regional stability in the Middle Belt, and those effects operate through mechanisms which cross state boundaries. First, displacement. Jaiyesimi (2025) reported that farmer-herder clashes displaced 2.2 million people over seven years in the region. That figure is a regional figure, for the Middle Belt, and it is labelled as such here; it must not be confused with the Nigeria-wide figure of over 3.6 million displaced persons reported by The Conversation (2023), which is given in the Nigeria section. Ojenya, Obindo, Enejoh, and Mwueseter (2021) show that displacement in North Central Nigeria has a specific impact on the quality of life of women and girls in internally displaced camps, including loss of livelihood and exposure to insecurity. Displacement is a regional mechanism because displaced people move across state boundaries, strain host communities, and create new competition for land and water in the places to which they flee.

Second, food insecurity. Benue, as the food basket of the nation, produces a large share of the country's food, and disruption of farming in Benue and Plateau therefore affects food supply beyond those states. Sadiq, Singh, Ahmad, and Orifah (2021) show that farmer-herder conflict affects the livelihoods of farming households in the Middle Belt, through loss of crops, loss of labour and

abandonment of farms. Fadeyi and Abdulrahman (2021) show, for Benue and Plateau, that the conflict reduces agricultural output and increases food prices, which in turn affects urban consumers in the region. Food insecurity is therefore not only a local farming problem; it is a regional stability problem, because it links rural violence to urban prices and to migration.

Third, loss of state control. Kpilaakaa (2025) describes a silent emergency in the Middle Belt, in which ethnic and religious violence recurs without effective state response, and argues that the state's failure to arrest assailants and enforce its own rules undermines its authority. Ogbonnaya (2022) examines the changing dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding among farmer-herder communities in the Middle Belt, and shows that where state peacebuilding is absent, communities turn to self-help. When the state cannot protect farmers or herders, both groups arm themselves, and the region's stability is undermined not by a single attack but by the expectation that the next attack will also go unpunished.

Fourth, militia formation and intergroup breakdown. The conflict has contributed to the emergence of ethnic militia groups, as communities organise for self-defence and, in some cases, for retaliation. That process is described here as a mechanism reported in the sources, not as a claim about any named group, because the sources cited do not support a group-by-group account. The breakdown of intergroup relations is the counterpart of militia formation: where herders and farmers previously depended on each other, through grazing arrangements and markets, they now interact principally through suspicion and retaliation. Ojenya et al. (2021) and Gbamwuan and Atim (2022) show that women and girls bear a disproportionate share of that breakdown, through displacement, loss of livelihood and insecurity in camps.

Fifth, economic disruption and stagnated development. The conflict has led to loss of life and property, including cattle, farmlands and buildings, and to the abandonment of farms and markets. Vahyala (2021) examines management strategies for farmer-herder conflict in selected vulnerable states in North-Central Nigeria, and shows that management failure, rather than the absence of strategies, is the recurring problem. The regional character of these effects is the

point of this section: displacement, food insecurity, loss of state control, militia formation and intergroup breakdown do not stop at state borders, and they reinforce each other across the region. A state-by-state response which addresses one effect in one state will therefore miss the mechanisms which transmit the conflict across the region.

Stakeholders' efforts in curbing the conflict

Several stakeholders have made efforts to curb the conflict, and those efforts are assessed here at regional level, because the conflict itself is regional. The federal government has attempted several policies, including the establishment of grazing reserves, the National Livestock Transformation Plan, and the creation of a Ministry of Livestock Development, among others. Those policies have been poorly implemented, and their implementation has been contested in the Middle Belt, where state governments and local communities have resisted federal grazing arrangements which they perceive as favouring herders. Ewoh, Kieh, and Olonilua (2025) argue that governance failure, rather than resource scarcity alone, sustains the herdsman-farmers conflict in Nigeria, and that governance reform must therefore accompany any grazing or security measure. The International Crisis Group (2021) proposed a livestock reform plan for ending Nigeria's herder-farmer crisis, and argued that reform must combine grazing, farming and security measures rather than treating grazing alone as the solution. That proposal is the most fully developed regional policy document cited here, and it is assessed on its own terms below.

State governments in the Middle Belt have also taken measures, including anti-open grazing laws. In Benue State, the anti-open grazing law was resisted by some herders, as reported by Okon (2021), and the then Governor of Benue State, Samuel Ortom, reported an attack on himself by suspected herders, as reported by Olufemi (2021). Those reports are cited as reported events, not as findings of this article. The resistance to state laws shows a central problem for regional governance: where states legislate separately and the federal government legislates separately, herders and farmers face overlapping and contradictory rules, and enforcement becomes a matter of political contest

rather than of law. That problem is precisely why a regional arrangement, rather than a set of separate state laws, is proposed in the Conclusion.

Non-state stakeholders have also played a role. Traditional rulers, religious leaders and community associations have mediated disputes, and alternative dispute resolution has been used in several communities to settle grazing and farming disputes without recourse to violence. The International Crisis Group (2017) report on herders against farmers, which examined the expanding deadly conflict in Nigeria, argued that the conflict had already become a national security issue by 2017 and that local mediation, while valuable, could not by itself address the drivers of the conflict. That finding is used here to qualify the recommendation on alternative dispute resolution: mediation is effective where disputes are local and where both parties accept the mediator, but it cannot by itself resolve land allocation, arms proliferation or enforcement failure.

Regional and international stakeholders provide the 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 implementation across member states is uneven. That finding is directly relevant to the Middle Belt, where transhumance crosses state boundaries in the same way that it crosses national boundaries in the Sahel, and where a regional protocol without enforcement produces the same gap between rule and practice. Uzoigwe and Nwokolo (2025) argue that good governance in West Africa is a regional condition, and that regional institutions must be able to enforce rules if they are to stabilise a region. The stakeholder record therefore supports the article's framework criticism: scarcity creates pressure, but institutions determine whether pressure produces negotiation or killing, and the institutions which matter here are regional as well as national and local.

The stakeholder efforts recorded here have not resolved the conflict, for reasons which follow from the analysis. First, policies have been announced without enforcement, so that herders and farmers do not know which rules apply. Second, state and federal measures have contradicted each other, so that

compliance with one set of rules can mean violation of another. Third, mediation has been local where the conflict is regional, so that a settlement in one community does not bind the next. Fourth, arms proliferation has raised the cost of mediation, because armed groups have less incentive to negotiate. Those four failures are the basis for the two recommendations in the Conclusion, which are linked to them one by one.

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 2.2 million persons displaced in the region over seven years 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 they have been effective, to a large extent, in managing the conflict in the region. This recommendation follows from the findings on intergroup breakdown and on the limits of enforcement alone: mediation, compensation and community-based settlement can 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. Alternative dispute resolution is therefore proposed as a complement to, not a substitute for, the regional security agency, and its limits are stated plainly: it

cannot by itself resolve land allocation, arms proliferation or enforcement failure, and 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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