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The Trends and Dynamics of Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Conflicts (2014-2019)

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Abstract

This study analyses the trends and dynamics of Nigeria's farmer-herder conflicts between 2014 and 2019. Relying on Nigeria Watch and Nigeria Security Tracker databases, the study found out there is a steady increase in the incidents of farmer-herder violence in Nigeria. There are new triggers to the conflicts including: local politics, poor implementation of anti-grazing laws, and fake news. Also, the temporal analysis did not find any indication of climate hazards has causative factors in the farmer-herder conflicts. The study points to local political actors and vested interests that appear to be more active and interested in shaping the outcomes of the conflicts.

Keywords: farmer-herder conflicts, anti-grazing laws, land disputes, climate change, food security, conflict triggers

Introduction¹

The conflicts between Nigeria's sedentary farmers and pastoralists have generated serious interest among policy-makers and academics in recent times. This has manifested in the forms of full-scale violence between communities of farmers and herders, cattle rustling, displacements, land grabbing, and food insecurity. Interestingly, media attention and discussions have focused largely on the clashes between the farming communities and herders. Does this, therefore, mean that the incidents involving pastoralists (IIPs) or herders are on the increase as the newspaper headlines and discussions suggest? Are there credible data to support this? Are there new triggers to the IIPs?

While there is a growing body of literature on other aspects – cattle rustling, land grabbing, etc - of the farmer-herder conflicts in other African countries, little has been done by scholars to provide eco-friendly solutions to the perennial farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria in recent years. Most of the studies and discussions have been dedicated to the clashes between herders and farming communities with associated problems like predatory cattle rustling yet to receive adequate scholarly or media attention (Olaniyan and Yahaya 2016). Even the few studies carried out have done little has been done to illuminate the issue. Some of the studies seem to portray one party to the conflict in certain lights. Also, there is also the challenge of distinguishing between cases of farmer-herder conflicts and other acts of violence over issues relating to land, communal frictions etc in Nigeria which often take place mostly at the rural areas. Despite this, the current level of violence associated with cattle rustling is still something begging for consideration

¹ This paper was developed from the lessons learnt from data collection and analysis of a study titled "Dissection of Hazardous Climate and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria" co-authored with Professor Oluyemi Fayomi, Dr. Audu Bako, and Dr. Tolu Bamidele-ifedayo in *African Journal of International Affairs and Development* 25 no. 1 (2021) 17-46 cited in the body of this work. I wish to thank the Lead City University Press for the publication of the work. This paper also have some imprints of my forthcoming study on the trends of Nigeria's communal violence titled: *Communal violence in Nigeria (2014-2021): mapping, modeling and trends*.

especially in Northern Nigeria. In this paper, we shall be considering the clashes between communities of farmers and herders in Nigeria by probing the data, trends, and dynamics. While there has been an overall increase in incidents of violence across the country, a recent study carried out in sub-Saharan Africa found no credible evidence to support the narrative that farmer-herder conflicts are increasing at a faster rate than any other forms of violence since 2014 (Krätli and Toulmin 2020). The study observed that the “[Nigerian] media jumping to conclusions before any investigation has taken place” (Ibid, 19).

To understand the trends, we shall be looking at the temporal and geographical patterns of the conflicts. This also reflects the dominant narratives in the media and academic literature that the conflicts manifest climate change (Fayomi, Adigun, Bako, and Bamidele-Ifedayo 2021), ethno-religious polarisations (Bamidele 2020), weak state capacity (Genyi 2019), land dispute (Feldt, Karg, Kadaouré, Bessert, Schlecht 2020) etc.

Methods and Analysis

This study is based on basic framework which guides data collection, research design, and analyses. For data on farmer-herder conflicts, I relied on two databases which are: [*Nigerian Security Tracker*](#) (NST) and [*Nigeria Watch*](#) (NW). The NST is a [Council on Foreign Relations](#)' Africa program. It records and tracks variety of social and political violence in Nigeria. NST codes incidents with their locations, weapons, date, identity of the actors, and weapons deployed. In essence, NST tracks events that are purely motivated by political, economic or social considerations. In doing so, the database codes different events ranging from sectarian, political, religious, or gang violence in Nigeria.

The NW database records all kinds of lethal violence ranging from crimes, road accidents, fire explosion, natural disasters, and sorcery. Unlike NST, it doesn't record incidents but deaths, duration, time, and locations of events. It also does not report weapons deployed. I also relied on media reports from where a rich data on current state of communal conflicts and socio-political affairs of the country was mined. I understand media reports may not be fully accurate as there is the tendency to either take sides or under or over-

report certain aspects². To overcome these limitations, the author took extra steps to independently verify claims, positions, and reports. For instance, we observed that, in April 2018, there were multiple media reports of herdsmen killing 2 clergymen and 17 parishioners at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Ukpok–Mbalom community in Gwer East Local Government of Benue state³ which were later found to be untrue months after the perpetrators were arrested and prosecuted⁴. By this time, most online platforms that reported this have deleted it from their websites either quietly or with apologies.

The author’s choice of the timeframe 2014 to 2019 also needs explanation. His choice was largely based on the fact that the period covers two election cycles (2015 and 2019) in Nigeria. This is significant because of the fact that both are the two most recent elections. This also gives us ample opportunity to understand the significance of local politics on farmer-herder conflicts.

Another way we overcame these limitations was to restrict ourselves to *verifiable* cases of farmer-herder disputes. In doing this, we took notes of some keywords used in the online media space such as “suspected”, “genocide”, “invasion” etc which tend to point at partisanship in the reports. While we may not be able to totally eliminate issues of biases, we tend to take reports from credible media platforms with reputations for some degree of objectivity. We also watched out for official confirmation of the reports from security agencies and other sources.

The author’s choice of these sources of data is well founded. First, since its commencement in 2006 for *Nigeria Watch* and 2011 for *Nigerian Security Tracker*, they

² Toulmin, C. and Krätli, S. (2020) Farmer-herder conflict: Open your eyes, change the narrative, find solutions International Institute for Environment and Development. London, UK <https://www.iied.org/farmer-herder-conflict-open-your-eyes-change-narrative-find-solutions>

³ Fresh bloodbath in Benue, 2 Catholic priests, 17 others killed by herdsmen (2018, April 25) The Vanguard Accessed on <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/04/fresh-bloodbathbenue-2-catholic-priests-17-others-killed-herdsmen/> (Date accessed: 8 April 2018)

⁴ Obiejesi, K. (2018) Court remands six suspects over murder of two catholic priests in Benue International Centre for Investigative Journalism <https://www.icirnigeria.org/court-remands-six-suspects-over-murder-of-two-catholic-priests-in-benue/> (Date accessed: 8 July 2021)

have been known to be credible and well cited in scholarly circles. Second, the databases generate their data from known, credible sources with multi-level quality assurance mechanisms.

Results

With the increasing interest in the farmer-herder conflicts in recent times, generating data on IIPs can really be daunting. While an issue as old as Nigeria's farmer-herder conflicts could have developed criminal aspects like kidnapping, armed robbery, cattle rustling, and the likes, reporting all as relating to the farmer-herder conflicts will amount to gross exaggeration.

According to the *Nigerian Security Tracker* (NST)⁵ - there were a total of 6274 cases of violence from January 2014 to December 2019 out of which 309 relate to the farmer-herder conflicts leading to 3087 deaths which represent about 5 per cent of violent conflicts in Nigeria. These lethality figures also nearly correspond with the *Nigeria Watch* (NW)⁶ database in the period under review. The durations of these conflicts last between a few hours and about 273 days as the case of 2018 as records from the NW database show. The period under review also show that 2015 witnessed the lowest incidents while the conflicts reached the peak in 2018. The NW database shows that the farmer-herder conflicts spanned 534 days in the years under review. Conservative estimates show the country records 13.7 billion dollars losses annually (*Vanguard* 2017a) to the conflicts.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts: Analysis of Trends Across Nigeria (2014-2019)

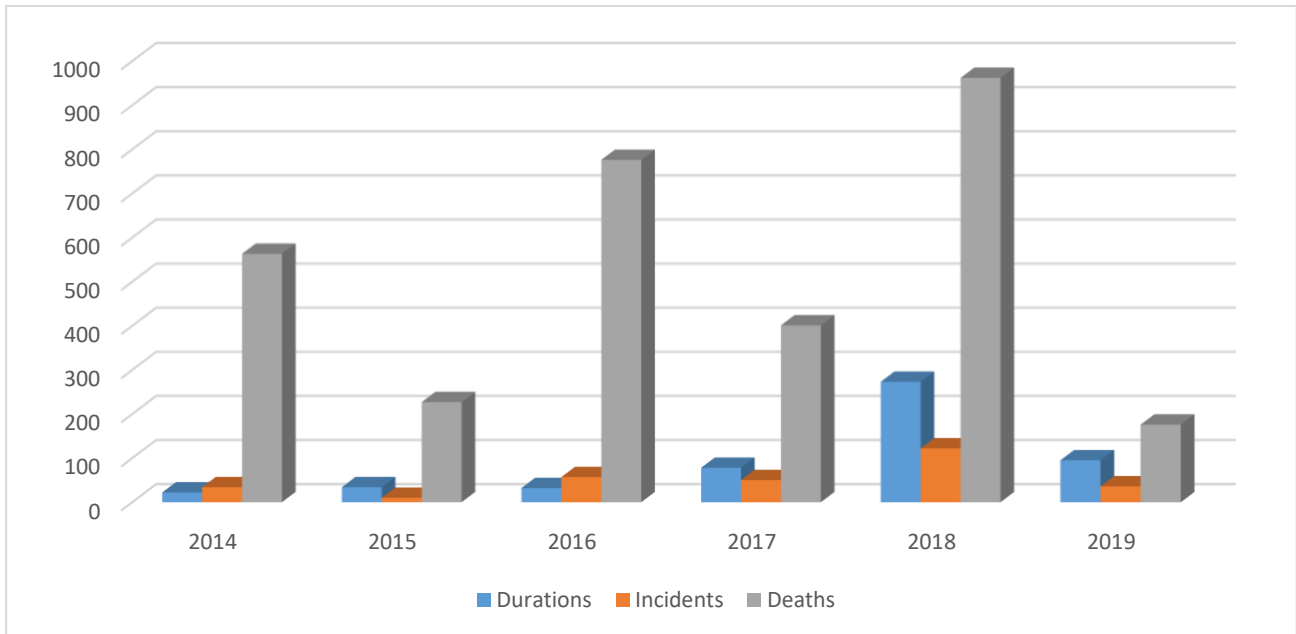
According to the NST database, there were a total of 6274 cases of violence from January 2014 to December 2019 out of which 309 relate to the farmer-herder conflicts leading to 3087 deaths which represent about 5 per cent of violent conflicts in Nigeria. The NW

⁵ NST database catalogues and maps political violence based on a weekly survey of Nigerian and international press. It can be accessed on <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>

⁶ Nigeria Watch is a platform which records lethal violence, conflicts, and human security in Nigeria. More information of Nigeria Watch can be found on <http://nigeriawatch.org/index.php?html=10>

database shows that the farmer-herder conflicts spanned 534 days in the period. This paper seeks to analyse the intensity, dynamics, and spatial distributions of the conflicts based on the reports of 34 cases in 2014, 10 in 2015, 57 in 2016, 50 in 2017, 122 in 2018, and 36 in 2019.

Figure 1: Incidents, Deaths, and Durations of Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria (2014-2019)



Source: Author's compilation from NW and NST databases

In 2014, most of the incidents reported took place in Benue state with 11 cases leading to 157 deaths lasting over 24 hours or 1 day according to NW database. Taraba state followed closely with 8 cases leading to 206 deaths lasting over four days cumulatively. Kaduna state followed with 3 incidents and 73 deaths which lasted 2 days from Figure 1. Most of the actors identified in these cases are political gangs, mercenaries, and communities with victims recorded on all sides. The several attempts on the life of Benue State Governor, Gabriel Suswam, point clearly to political actors interested in issues around the 2015 elections. The assailants attacked the Governor on two occasions within a week killing 22 persons in his village, Anyii in Logo Local Government Area (Duru 2014).

In 2015, the fatality figures were 227 with Benue state recording 121. Data for Benue state showed the month of March had the highest fatality figure, 96, followed by July, 40, and May, 35. The months of June and October recorded 8 and 7 deaths respectively. For most cases, guns were the main weapons used by the perpetrators (*AllAfrica* 2015). In

June and November, the conflicts spanned four days for each month. In January 2015, a group of heavily armed herdsmen invaded and razed the Miza community in Kupaland, Lokoja Local Government Area of Kogi State, destroying homes and other buildings over allegations of cattle rustling by residents (Isine 2015). On 16 March 2015, suspected herdsmen attacked Egba village in Agatu Local Government Area of Benue state from neighbouring Nasarawa leading to 45 deaths (Tukur 2015). Several incidents involved cattle rustling as the case of attacks on two communities in Birnin-Magaji local government area of Zamfara state on 5 July 2015 leading 30 people dead shows (*Premium Times* 2015). Most of the reported cases had to do with grazing rights, cattle rustling, and political thuggery.

In 2016, there were 57 cases with 776 deaths spanning about 32 days. Benue recorded 17 of the incidents with 436 deaths including the aghast attacks on several communities including Okokolo, Akwu, Ocholonya, Adagbo, Ugboku and Aila in Agatu Local Government on 26 February leading about 300 people dead (Duru 2016). Kaduna state recorded 13 cases leading to 141 people dead. Taraba state recorded 6 incidents with 79 deaths. Delta and Enugu states recorded 3 cases each. In all these cases, the herdsmen were portrayed as the aggressors mindlessly attacking villages without provocation. All the cases feature the use of guns and other dangerous weapons.

In 2017, there were 50 incidents with 401 casualties. The months of January (7 cases and 49 deaths), March (11 cases, 41 deaths), May (8 cases, 79 deaths), and December (6 cases, 19 deaths) recorded the most activities. All through the year, Benue state recorded the highest number of incidents and deaths – 17 incidents and 125 deaths. This was followed by Plateau state with 7 cases and 67 deaths. Delta followed with 5 incidents and 28 deaths. Niger state recorded 3 cases with 32 deaths. Anambra and Adamawa states recorded 3 incidents each. Most of the cases reported were reprisal attacks like those on the Gereng community of Girei Local Government Area of Adamawa State (*Vanguard* 2017c). There were reports of neighbouring communities that herdsmen are mobilising and marching towards their community for attacks (ibid).

The farmer-herder conflicts peaked in 2018. The year recorded 122 cases with 962 deaths lasting 273 days. The months – January, February, March, April, May, and June – recorded 24 cases and 194 deaths, 17 cases and 68 deaths, 23 cases and 179 deaths, 21 cases and 273 deaths, 11 cases and 85, and 11 cases and 74 deaths respectively making it

the bloodiest first half of the year in recent history of the conflicts. Benue state led with 46 cases and 404 deaths including the New Year day attacks in communities in Logo and Guma Local Government Areas over the commencement of implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law killing 30 people in the state (Kazeen 2018). Plateau state recorded 18 incidents with 101 deaths. Taraba state recorded 11 incidents with 138 deaths including the incident that led to the death of 20 persons and the theft of 300 cows following an outbreak of violence on the Mambilla Plateau of Taraba state by some state-sponsored militia⁷. Adamawa and Nasarawa states recorded 10 incidents each with 103 and 137 deaths respectively. The year saw the full implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law by Benue and Taraba states which were perceived as partisan or attempts to marginalize the herders (Tade 2020). The implementation of the laws saw the herders either migrating in large numbers into neighbouring states (from Benue to Nasarawa/Plateau/Kogi or Taraba to Adamawa) or resorting to self-help as means of coping with the new situation (ibid).

In 2019, there were 36 incidents with 176 deaths which show a significant decline from 2018. The first half of the year also shows the patterns in 2019. Adamawa state recorded 6 incidents with 33 deaths during the year. Benue state recorded 7 incidents with 39 deaths. Kogi, Plateau, and Ondo states recorded 3 incidents with 26, 5, and 6 deaths respectively. Kaduna and Taraba states recorded 2 incidents each with 22 and 12 deaths respectively. There were no clear patterns and dynamics for the conflicts in 2019. This may be due to the elections and the relaxation of the implementation of the Anti-Open Grazing Law in some states like Taraba as part of measures to resolve the conflicts. The conflicts in Adamawa and Kaduna states seem to take ethno-religious turns in the buildup to the elections.

From our geographical and temporal analysis, we found out that Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Kogi, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Taraba states account for 77 per cent of the incidents of farmer-herder conflicts leading to 71 per cent of the deaths in the period. The

⁷ Iro Dan-Fulani, "Mambilla: 20 Reported Killed, 300 Cows Stolen in Fresh Taraba Violence." *Premium Times*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/260665-mambilla-20-reported-killed-300-cows-stolen-fresh-taraba-violence.html>

locations of these states are in an area where religious identities get complicated with ethnicity (Dayil 2015). Most of these states have a history of ethno-religious conflicts (ibid). This seems to explain why the conflicts have often been tagged “Fulani herdsmen killings” “invasion”, “attacks” etc in the media (Adigun 2019) which appears to complicate the problems.

Temporal analysis shows that the first four months of the year – which records the least amount of rainfall and often the hottest in many states (according to [Climate-Data.org](https://climate-data.org)) – tend to have the most prolonged conflicts. With averages of 15, 8, 10, and 15 days of farmer-herder conflicts in January, February, March, and April respectively, NW data show that these months may not only be climatically volatile, but the spark of conflicts may be longer than every other month in the year.

Discussions

Nigeria’s farmer-herder violence has series of interrelated causative factors which include – enforcement of anti-grazing laws, local politics, and fake news. The presence of enforcement of anti-grazing laws as a trigger of communal conflicts looks tempting an argument on the surface but the data does not strongly point to this direction. On a deeper look beyond the surface, there seem to be an interesting connection.

Our data shows strongly that the conflicts intensity is in the Northern part of the country. Some of the worst-hit states include: Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba, and Adamawa. In the South, the worst hit states are: Cross River, Delta, Anambra, and Ebonyi states. A cursory look at these states shows that they have history of ethno-religious conflicts and are prone climate volatility. The Benue State House of Assembly, in 2017, hurriedly passed Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (or the Anti-Grazing Law). This development had serious implications on the farmer-herder relations and the conflict dynamics in neighbouring states (Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin 2017). The Law was passed despite heavy protests by herders. With the commencement of the implementation of the Law, herders reportedly moved to the neighbouring states, Nasarawa, Taraba, and Plateau for instance, in large numbers. This migration had serious consequences on the dynamics of the conflicts. This also partly explains why the conflicts peaked in 2018 with the herders’ little lag or time for adaptability to the new situation. The enforcement of the Law saw the establishment of the Livestock Guards or state-

sanctioned militia reportedly hostile to the herders fuelled by local politics. There were also allegations that there has been a significant increase in cases of cattle rustling (Dan-Fulani 2018) and other acts of criminality under the guise of farmer-herder conflicts since the implementation of the law.

While the farmer-herder conflicts in Benue and Taraba states could be interpreted in the light of ethnic conflicts, in states like Plateau and Kaduna appear to be more complex due to the “indigene-settler” dichotomy in Nigeria.

In their study of the farmer-pastoralist relations in Nasarawa state since 2017, Tade & Yikwabs (2020) observed that among other things that political factor played decisive roles in triggering conflicts between the two parties. The events of the epic pre and post-2019 elections in the state seem to attest to this. Key politicians have been fingered in the state for seeking political capital from the conflicts. A former Governor of the state reportedly used the conflicts to his electoral advantage in the 2019 elections (Tade, 2020). According to this perspective, if the crisis persists and voters from unfavourable locations are internally displaced, electoral victory is sealed (Ibid).

Tade & Yikwabs (2020, 103) records that the tussle for electoral victory in 2019 and the bitterness that ensued were major issues shaping the conflicts. According to them, some farmers accused the Governor of “sponsoring the conflict or reluctantly responding to it because the scenarios are playing out to his own advantage Nigeria” (ibid).

One of the biggest triggers of the clashes in recent times is the challenges of fake news and misinformation. This led the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also to do a study in 2018 that confirmed that most of the tensions arising from farmer-herder conflicts were fuelled by fake news circulation on social media (BBC 2018). In many cases, minor disagreements between members of the herding and farming communities get spread as rumours before turning to full-scale communal violence for matters which could have been easily resolved. The fact that many online news platforms rush to publish social media rumours as “Breaking News” has further compounded these problems. In 2017, there was the widely-circulated story of five students of the [Kaduna State College of Education](#), Gidan Waya, were ambushed and murdered by Fulani herdsmen in Kaduna (*Vanguard* 2017b). The story was later confirmed to be untrue as the president of *Chocolate City* music label, Audu Maikori, who earlier circulated the news which he

claimed he got from his driver later retracted saying he was misled (*Premium Times* 2017).

We observed that the farmer-herder conflicts tend to manifest in various acts of criminality in dynamics in recent times. Our search on the NW and NST databases for events relating to “farmer-herder conflicts”, “communal” did not yield results. NW has a dataset for conflicts relating to “cattle grazing” but not NST. The NST database did not state the patterns of events relating to the communities of farmers and herders. The NST database records incidents of farmer-herder violence under “Sectarian Actor” columns.

Also, we observed there are instances of partisanship in the reportage of farmer-herder conflicts in the media. This pattern portends serious threats to state and national security. The narrative shaped in the media show the conflicts as ethno-religious disputes, rather than an issue that may be communal in nature.

The rise in incidents in the North-West region of the country is rather unfortunate but most of the reports indicate they are associated with some violent bandits. In the South-West, some states established regional security network, known as *Operation Amotekun*, as one of the measures to curb communal violence with specific instance of farmer-herder conflicts.

Suggested Solutions

The patterns of the conflicts show that local politics, access to small arms, ethno-religious narratives (Tade 2020), Anti-Open Grazing Law, are issues prolonging the conflicts. The seeming reliance on security forces to deal with either actor – when both parties may be equally guilty - is counter-productive and a clear waste of resources.

The state should be fair to all parties – avoid the perception of taking sides – as this has been shown to aggravate the conflicts. Since both parties often conflict over resources – government-funded irrigation systems and ranches in rural areas will go a long way to solve the problems amicably. Also, State Governments that have passed the anti-grazing laws like Benue, should consider incorporating the interests of herders by amending objectionable or contentious provisions in those laws as it was done in Taraba state. Ranching or grazing reserves appear to remain the most effective and workable solution to these conflicts as advocated by scholars (Bello and Abdullahi 2022).

The media should also de-escalate the conflicts. They should endeavor to carry out proper investigation before reporting the incidents. There appears to be so much sensationalism and less of investigative journalism as regards the reportage of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria in recent times fueled by conspiracy theories. The media seems to be more interested in the narrative of “ethnic” conflicts rather than helping to understand the issues⁸. For instance, several media stations reported the killing of 2 clergymen and 17 parishioners at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Ukpor–Mbalom community in Gwer East Local Government of Benue State by “suspected herdsmen” in April 2018⁹ but later found out the killers were, in fact, not in any way ethnic Fulani nor herdsmen upon their arrests and prosecution some months later¹⁰. By this time, most online platforms that reported this have deleted it from their websites either quietly or with apologies. This was also manifested when 20 persons were reportedly killed and 300 cows stolen following a fresh outbreak of ethnic violence on the Mambilla Plateau of Taraba state¹¹.

Also, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should be part of the peace-building, especially in the rural areas through sensitization, public education, and mass enlightenment of the populace on the fact that both farmers and herdsmen need each other in the agricultural ecosystem.

The herdsmen or pastoralists who feel genuinely shortchanged by the anti-grazing laws by some state governments should approach the courts and discourage their members from

⁸ Adekola, O. (2018) Nigeria’s conflict is a result of environmental devastation across West Africa The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/nigerias-conflict-is-a-result-of-environmental-devastation-across-west-africa-91694> (Date accessed: 8 July 2021)

⁹ Fresh bloodbath in Benue, 2 Catholic priests, 17 others killed by herdsmen (2018, April 25) The Vanguard Accessed on <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/04/fresh-bloodbathbenue-2-catholic-priests-17-others-killed-herdsmen> (Date accessed: 8 April 2018)

¹⁰ Obiejesi, K. (2018) Court remands six suspects over murder of two catholic priests in Benue International Centre for Investigative Journalism <https://www.icirnigeria.org/court-remands-six-suspects-over-murder-of-two-catholic-priests-in-benue/> (Date accessed: 8 July 2021)

¹¹ Iro Dan-Fulani, “Mambilla: 20 Reported Killed, 300 Cows Stolen in Fresh Taraba Violence.” Premium Times, March 4, 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/260665-mambilla-20-reported-killed-300-cows-stolen-fresh-taraba-violence.html>

seeking self-help or retaliatory attacks. There is ample evidence to show that most of the attacks between the actors are retaliatory.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the trends and patterns of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria from 2014 to 2019. Relying on data from *Nigeria Watch* and *Nigeria Security Tracker* databases, we noticed incidents involving pastoralists account for about 5 per cent of total cases of organized violence in the country in the period reviewed. This, in our opinion, has serious implications on food security and poses serious threats to the nation's rural population and by extension increasing rural-urban migration.

Our analysis of data points to local politics, poor implementation of anti-grazing laws, and fake news are some of the biggest triggers of the violence in the country. Though the data is not sufficient enough to explain the trend of farmer-herder violence, there are indications of other elements such rise in the use of sophisticated weapons like guns also explains the increase in the incidents of the conflicts. While it may be concluded that access to sophisticated weapons is fuelled by organized crime with heavy syndicates, I did not find a uniform pattern for this across the country.

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