

Understanding the drivers of herders-farmers' conflicts in West Africa – Part 1

The centrality of animal husbandry, especially nomadic and sedentary pastoralism, to economic sustainability and food security in West Africa cannot be over-emphasised. It provides about 44% of agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP), boasting of 60 million heads of cattle, 160 million small ruminants and 400 million poultry. [West Africa is host to 25% of the cattle, 33% of the sheep and 40% of the goats](#) in the entire sub-Saharan Africa. West African transhumant pastoralists and sedentary peasant farmers have long coexisted in mutually supportive relationships, although they have had occasional contentious encounters. They have had established practices of trade and symbiotic production that allows herders' cattle to fertilise the farmers' land in exchange for usufructuary rights over land and landed resources. Although the relationship between these two groups of land users in most jurisdictions outside Africa is not prone to widespread violence, Nigeria's case has become extremely conflictive and tension-soaked. The threat of nomadic pastoralism appears to have burgeoned and gained currency since 2015 mainly because of the dynamics of domestic politics in the country.

Transhumant pastoralism as a herding tradition is commonly associated with nomadic Fulani of Central, East, North and West Africa, particularly in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and South Sudan. Within the last two decades, violent conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and peasant farmers have been on the increase in Nigeria and other West African countries. Although the conflict started as mere land-use skirmishes between these agro-user groups, it has crystallised into internecine warfare, with attendant threats

to human security through [loss of lives and economic opportunities as well as the destruction of private and communal properties](#). As a consequence, the security situation in Nigeria and other West African states has become increasingly volatile and terrifying. Armed herdsmen of mainly Fulani ethnic nationality, who are widely regarded as the aggressors in this conflict, have been ranked [the fourth most dangerous terror group in the world](#) due to the scale of their offensives, especially in Nigeria. Although widely regarded as resource-use conflict in the [intellectual tradition of neo-Malthusianism](#), clashes between nomadic herders and peasant farmers in Nigeria have not only become very frequent, sophisticated and well-coordinated, they have also continued to acquire ethno-regional, religious and political tinges. In the Nigerian states of Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba, attacks by armed Fulani nomadic pastoralists have been focused rather selectively on [non-Muslim communities](#), while similar attacks in places such as Zamfara and Kebbi states have targeted [non-Fulani villages](#). Thus, most of the attacks would seem as if people are victimised on religious and ethnic grounds. In light of the foregoing, I intend to provide answers to the following questions: what are the causes of the conflict? What are the implications for regional security in Africa?

First, recurring violent conflicts between herders and peasant farmers have been attributed to [climate change and environmental scarcity](#). The discourse on the security implications of climate change in Africa gained popularity in 2007 following debates on the subject by the African Union, the United Nations Security Council, and the Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. Although climate change in itself cannot lead to conflict in the sense of direct violence, [environmental security experts](#) see causal links between climate change-induced environmental scarcity and violence. [The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)—the foremost global expert body on climate change—suggests that

climate change and global warming are not only increasing but are likely to translate into more frequent and severe weather-related shocks alongside rising temperatures and increasingly irregular rainfall in West Africa. Thus, the environmental impacts of climate change pose a challenge to vulnerable communities in Africa by reducing the availability of water and food both for humans and animals. [Experiences from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana](#) suggest that farmers and herders in West Africa belong to the most vulnerable groups because of their overwhelming dependence on natural resources, which makes them historically prone to come into conflict with each other.

The second driver of agro-land use conflict in West Africa is the Malthusian perspective that urbanisation and explosive growth in population relative to available resources are responsible for the clashes between peasant farmers and nomadic pastoralists. There has been an unprecedented expansion of public infrastructure and the acquisition of land by large-scale farmers and other private commercial interests. Thus, both population growth and increasing commodity production have led to the extension of farmlands to grazing reserves, thereby increasing the tension between these land users in many parts of the world. Within the context of the Lake Chad area, the surge in human and livestock populations has led to overgrazing, unhealthy agricultural practices, intense fishing and the pollution of the lake. This has significantly undermined the lake's carrying and replenishment capacity. Consequently, the receding water of the lake has accentuated the occurrence of violent conflict between different categories of agro-land users in Nigeria's Northeast and other parts of the country, as well as in other Lake Chad countries. Cattle herders have moved to more southerly parts of Nigeria, where they are competing for the available scarce resources such as fresh water and grazing lands with other economic groups and host communities. Overall, the explosive growth in human and livestock population, especially within

the context of shrinking Lake Chad water, has made the seasonal movement of the Hausa/Fulani cattle breeders to the southern parts of Nigeria more permanent. Many of them are now settled in some parts of southern Nigeria, such as Ilorin, Ogbomoso, Oyo, Shaki, Ubakala, Umuahia and Uzo-Uwani. Among others, the increased competition for landed resources by these agro-pastoralists and the sedentary farmers accounts for the frequent occurrence of clashes between them in various communities in the Middle Belt and Southern parts of Nigeria.

Third, insecurity within the Lake Chad area also contributes to the worsening relationship between transhumant herders and their host communities in the savannah belt of Nigeria. For instance, a [report](#) has shown that the members of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) lost over one million cattle and other livestock to Boko Haram insurgency and cattle rustling in the Northeast. The prevalence of the insurgency and cattle rustling in Lake Chad has forced nomadic herders into the savannah belt, where high population growth has already heightened pressure on farmlands, thereby increasing the frequency of disputes over crop damage, water pollution and cattle theft.

Lastly, the nature of [regional protocols and conventions in West Africa](#) weak enforcement, constitute a major driver of the conflict between these agro-land users. Such conventions, especially within the framework of the ECOWAS, including the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol of 1998, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Goods and Persons in West Africa, the Regulations of Transhumance between ECOWAS Member-States of 2003 and the ECOWAS Strategic Plan for the Development and Transformation of the Livestock Sector, are often leveraged by herders to move across national borders in search of pastureland upon fulfilling the conditions laid down in the [protocols](#). The tendency to exploit the loopholes in these protocols by the pastoralists has led to the continuous deterioration of human security in some pastoral economies in

West Africa, especially in Nigeria.

While the national responses to the menace of herders-peasant farmers conflict in Africa have been varied (as shall be seen in my next article on this subject) and often pander to the dynamics of local politics in a given state, the spate of casualties in human and material resources has continued to increase exponentially. This increase has occurred in frequency, intensity and geographical spread and has correspondingly exacerbated existing humanitarian and economic conditions in West Africa. For instance, an estimated [10,000 deaths](#) have been recorded since 2005 in different farming communities in West Africa. While the West African states of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal have had their fair share of the onslaughts, Nigeria has remained the epicentre of the attacks. Accordingly, the [2017 report](#) of the Global Terrorism Index shows that between 2010 and 2016, Fulani extremists, most of whom are herders, were responsible for 466 terrorist attacks and 3068 fatalities in four West African countries, with 92% of the fatalities taking place in Nigeria. In 2019 alone, these extremists were responsible for [26 per cent of terror-related deaths in Nigeria \(with 325 fatalities\)](#). Hence, the security predicament confronting the two agro-land user groups can only be dealt with by a deliberate form of interest-neutral public policy. In the interim, collective security, which requires the repudiation of unilateral use of force and coming to the aid of individual communities who are targeted for aggression in Nigeria and other related cases in Africa, should be prioritised in order to curb the prevailing humanitarian conditions occasioned by herder aggression.