

Structural Drivers of Farmer–Herder Conflict in Katsina State, Nigeria: Context, Dynamics, And Implications for State Response

Gideon Ogonna Ibeakuzie, MDM

Center for Peace Building and Development Studies, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 **Celestine Emeka Ekwuluo, MHRS**

Center for Peace Building and Development Studies, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Adaeze Janice Erondy, MIR

Department of Political Science, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 **Kennedy Oberhiri Obohwe, PhD**

Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 **Eddy Eidenehi Esezobor, PhD**

Department of Management Studies, Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (UCAM), Murcia, Spain; and PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

 **Oluwafemi Emmanuel Ooju, MSc**

World Health Organization, Abuja, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

 **Festus Ituah, PhD**

School of Health and Sports Science, Regent College, London, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

 Oladipo Vincent Akinmade, MPH

Digital Health and Rights Project (Center for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, CIM), University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

 Daniel Obande Haruna, MSc

Department of Psychology, St. Mary's University, London, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Solomon Atuman, MPH

FHI 360; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Perpetual Ogechukwu Nwankwo, PhD

School of Public Health, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

 Jennifer Adaeze Chukwu, PhD

World Health Organization, United Nations House, Abuja, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abba Sadiq Usman, MScPH

Nutrition and Health Department, Action Against Hunger, Maiduguri Field Office, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Studies & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Jerry Soni, MPH

United Nations World Food Programme, Damascus, Syria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Obioma Chidumaga Aririsukwu, MBBS

Department of Medicine, St. Francis Medical Center, Abuja, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Kennedy Oberhiri Obohjemu, Senior Researcher and Project Coordinator, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5175-1179>, Kenendy.Obohjemu@penkup.com

ABSTRACT

Farmer–herder conflict has become a defining feature of rural insecurity in northern Nigeria, shaping everyday life in ways that undermine livelihoods, weaken food systems, and strain long-standing social relations. This paper offers a detailed examination of the structural and contextual forces driving conflict in Katsina State, drawing directly on the conceptual foundations of the wider research. The analysis positions the conflict within a set of interlocking pressures that include rapid population growth, intensifying environmental stress, expanding land-use competition, and persistent governance challenges. These pressures have altered the conditions under which farming and pastoral communities interact, particularly as historical grazing arrangements lose credibility, institutional enforcement becomes inconsistent, and mobility patterns shift in response to ecological and security constraints.

The paper argues that farmer–herder conflict in Katsina cannot be understood as a series of isolated disputes or as a simple struggle over scarce resources. Instead, it reflects deeper forms of structural vulnerability that shape how communities perceive risk, negotiate access, and respond to threats. Institutional fragility, declining trust in state authority, and the erosion of customary mechanisms further compound these pressures, creating an environment in which minor disputes can escalate rapidly. By foregrounding these structural dynamics, the paper challenges narrow, security-led interpretations and highlights the need for integrated, preventive approaches that recognise the social, environmental, and governance dimensions of rural conflict.

The contribution of the paper lies in its grounded account of how local conditions in Katsina State shape conflict trajectories and influence the prospects for effective state engagement. The analysis establishes a conceptual platform for subsequent papers that investigate socioeconomic determinants and evaluate the performance of specific intervention mechanisms. In doing so, it supports a more comprehensive understanding of how farmer–herder conflict evolves and how policy responses might be designed to address its underlying drivers.

KEYWORDS

Farmer–herder conflict; Katsina State; rural insecurity; land-use competition; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Farmer–herder conflict has become one of the most persistent threats to rural stability and agrarian livelihoods across northern Nigeria. Katsina State has experienced a marked rise in tensions between settled crop farmers and mobile pastoralists, with many communities reporting recurrent clashes, loss of life, destruction of farmland, and widespread displacement. These incidents have disrupted agricultural cycles and weakened already fragile rural

economies that depend heavily on land, water, and seasonal mobility for survival (Lamidi, 2025). The scale of these disruptions has placed considerable strain on local households, whose resilience is often limited by poverty, environmental stress, and restricted access to state protection.

The wider research shows that the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Katsina cannot be understood solely as a series of isolated disputes over damaged crops or contested grazing access. Recent studies highlight the influence of deeper structural pressures, including demographic expansion, declining soil fertility, and the progressive degradation of rangelands linked to climate variability (Ajiye, 2020; Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). These pressures have intensified competition over land and water, particularly in areas where traditional institutions once mediated access to shared resources. Many of these customary arrangements have weakened over time due to changing settlement patterns, reduced authority of local leaders, and the erosion of grazing reserves that previously supported pastoral mobility (Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025).

Population growth and land fragmentation have further altered the landscape of rural Katsina. As farmlands expand into former grazing corridors, pastoralists face shrinking access to safe routes for seasonal movement. Farmers, in turn, experience heightened vulnerability to crop damage and insecurity. These shifts have reshaped everyday interactions between the two groups, increasing the likelihood of confrontation and reducing opportunities for peaceful negotiation. The wider research indicates that these tensions are compounded by limited state capacity, inconsistent enforcement of land-use regulations, and the absence of coordinated conflict-management mechanisms.

Policy responses have often prioritised short-term security interventions, including military deployments and ad hoc peace meetings. While these measures may reduce immediate violence, they rarely address the structural drivers that sustain conflict. Recent research argues that durable solutions require a clearer understanding of the socio-environmental and institutional context in which farmer–herder relations unfold (Lamidi, 2025; Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). This paper responds to that need by examining the historical, environmental, and governance factors that shape conflict dynamics in Katsina State. The analysis draws directly from the conceptual foundations of the wider research, while situating the discussion within contemporary debates on rural governance and resource management.

The paper pursues three objectives. The first is to explore the historical and socio-environmental context of farmer–herder relations in Katsina State. The second is to identify the structural drivers that contribute to conflict escalation, including demographic, ecological, and institutional pressures. The third is to consider the implications of these drivers for state engagement in conflict prevention and management. These objectives provide a conceptual platform for subsequent empirical analysis and support a more grounded understanding of how state and community actors might respond to the evolving challenges of rural insecurity.

Contextual Background: Farmer–Herder Relations in Katsina State

Katsina State has long been shaped by an agrarian economy in which crop farming and livestock rearing form the backbone of rural livelihoods. Farming communities cultivate millet, sorghum, maize, and legumes, while pastoral households depend on cattle, sheep, and goats for income, mobility, and social identity. Earlier generations experienced relatively stable relations between farmers and herders, supported by informal norms that governed access to land, seasonal movement, and the use of post-harvest fields. These norms enabled pastoralists to move livestock through farmlands after the harvest season, which provided manure that enriched soil fertility and supported local trade relations. Studies across northern Nigeria describe these arrangements as mutually beneficial systems that balanced ecological needs with social cooperation (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021; Hazama, 2021).

The wider research shows that these systems have come under increasing strain. Population growth has placed pressure on cultivable land, prompting the expansion of farms into areas that once served as grazing reserves or cattle routes. This pattern is consistent with broader land-use changes documented in northern Nigeria, where rising demographic pressure has intensified competition over shrinking natural resources (Ologunde et al., 2025; Sulieman & Momale, 2025). As farmlands extend into former grazing spaces, pastoralists face reduced access to safe mobility corridors, which heightens the risk of livestock straying into cultivated plots.

Environmental pressures have compounded these challenges. Soil degradation, declining vegetation cover, and increasingly unpredictable rainfall patterns have reduced the availability of pasture in many parts of Katsina. These ecological shifts have been linked to climate variability and long-term land degradation across the Sahelian belt, which push herders to travel further in search of fodder and water (Sanou et al., 2024; Sulieman & Momale, 2025). When grazing resources become scarce, pastoralists often enter cultivated areas earlier in the season or remain longer than customary norms once permitted. This narrowing of spatial and temporal buffers increases the likelihood of disputes, particularly during periods of crop maturation when farmers are most vulnerable to damage.

Administrative changes and evolving land-use policies have further complicated these dynamics. Weak enforcement of land regulations has allowed informal encroachment on designated grazing reserves and cattle routes, reducing the effectiveness of state planning frameworks. Recent analysis highlights how the erosion of traditional authority structures has diminished the capacity of local leaders to mediate disputes or enforce agreements that once regulated access to shared resources (Adeyemi & Olufemi, 2025; Ohadiugha & Gado, 2025). In many communities, the authority of village heads, ward leaders, and pastoral associations has weakened, leaving gaps in everyday conflict-management processes.

These governance challenges create conditions in which minor disputes escalate rapidly. Damage to crops, obstruction of movement routes, or disagreements over water points can trigger cycles of retaliation when grievance-resolution mechanisms are absent or ineffective. Research across northern Nigeria shows that the absence of trusted mediators and the fragmentation of regulatory authority contribute significantly to the escalation of farmer–herder tensions (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021; Nwaneri, 2024; Jev & Bongkisheru, 2025). In Katsina, these pressures intersect with broader insecurity in rural areas, further reducing

opportunities for peaceful negotiation and increasing the likelihood of violence.

This contextual background illustrates how historical patterns of cooperation have been disrupted by demographic, environmental, and institutional pressures. Understanding these shifts is essential for analysing the structural drivers of conflict and for shaping state responses that address the underlying conditions rather than only the symptoms of rural insecurity.

Structural Drivers of Conflict

Population Pressure and Land Scarcity

Population growth has reshaped rural land systems in Katsina State, creating conditions in which competition over space has intensified. As rural households expand, inherited plots are subdivided into smaller units, and this fragmentation reduces the availability of cultivable land. Studies on land dynamics in northern Nigeria show that farmers increasingly cultivate marginal areas and zones that historically served as grazing corridors, which narrows the space available for pastoral movement and increases the likelihood of livestock entering cultivated fields (Usman & Nichol, 2022; Etim, 2024). Pastoralists face shrinking rangelands and reduced access to safe mobility routes, particularly during the dry season when fodder is scarce. Research on agrarian change in the Sudano Sahelian region highlights how demographic pressure heightens competition between farmers and herders and increases the frequency of disputes over land use and access (Brottem, 2021; Ilboudo et al., 2025). These pressures create a landscape where routine interactions are more likely to generate tension.

Environmental Stress and Resource Degradation

Environmental stress has deepened the pressures created by demographic change. Declining soil fertility, vegetation loss, and irregular rainfall patterns have reduced the productivity of both farming and pastoral systems. Farmers experience shorter growing seasons and unpredictable yields, while herders contend with diminishing pasture and unreliable water sources. Research on climate impacts in northern Nigeria shows that prolonged dry spells and shifts in rainfall timing disrupt pastoral mobility and force herders to travel further in search of fodder and water (Akanwa et al., 2023; Duruji & Bella, 2024). These ecological pressures heighten vulnerability and reduce the capacity of households to absorb shocks. In such conditions, even minor incidents, such as livestock straying into a field or farmers blocking access to a water point, can be interpreted as direct threats to livelihood security. Studies across the region demonstrate that environmental degradation interacts with livelihood insecurity in ways that accelerate conflict escalation and reduce the effectiveness of informal coping mechanisms (Faustina et al., 2024; Kerry, 2024).

Institutional Weakness and Governance Gaps

Institutional fragility forms another critical structural driver of conflict. Local institutions responsible for land

management and dispute resolution often lack the authority or capacity to enforce agreements. Traditional leaders who once mediated relations between farmers and herders have seen their influence weakened by administrative restructuring, political interference, and shifting social expectations. Research on rural governance in northern Nigeria shows that the weakening of customary authority reduces the effectiveness of local conflict-resolution mechanisms and leaves communities without trusted intermediaries (Ugwueze et al., 2022; Bello, 2025). At the same time, state institutions struggle to maintain a consistent presence in many rural areas, which creates gaps in enforcement and oversight. When disputes arise, affected groups may feel compelled to protect their interests through self-help strategies, including the use of force. Studies on land governance across West Africa highlight how fragmented authority and inconsistent enforcement of land-use regulations contribute to conflict escalation (Akinwotu, 2021; Turner, 2022). These governance gaps create a climate in which conflict becomes more likely and more difficult to contain.

Changing Mobility Patterns

Shifts in pastoral mobility patterns have also contributed to conflict. Increased sedentarisation among some pastoral groups, combined with altered migration routes, has disrupted long-standing expectations about when and where herders will move. These changes are influenced by environmental pressures, insecurity along traditional routes, and the loss of grazing reserves. Research on pastoral mobility in the Sahel shows that altered routes often heighten tensions in areas where land-use systems are already under strain (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2025). Farmers who are accustomed to predictable patterns of movement may interpret earlier arrivals or new routes as deliberate encroachment. Herders, for their part, may view expanding cultivation or blocked pathways as intentional attempts to restrict mobility. Where communication and coordination are limited, these shifts generate mistrust and misinterpretation of intentions. The result is a more volatile environment in which routine interactions can escalate into conflict.

Implications for State Engagement

The contextual analysis highlights the importance of state engagement that tackles the structural foundations of farmer–herder conflict rather than relying on short-term security deployments. Research on rural governance in Nigeria shows that security-led interventions often suppress violence temporarily but fail to address the pressures created by land scarcity, environmental stress, and livelihood fragility (Ilesanmi et al., 2023). Effective state action requires an integrated understanding of how land use, environmental management, and rural livelihoods intersect. Strengthening land governance is central to this process, particularly in regions where informal encroachment on grazing reserves and fragmented land administration systems have weakened regulatory oversight. Studies on land governance reform in West Africa emphasise that clearer land-use planning, transparent allocation processes, and consistent enforcement reduce opportunities for contestation and help stabilise relations between resource users (Maringe, 2026).

Restoring credible dispute-resolution mechanisms is equally important. Many rural communities in Katsina have

experienced a decline in the authority of traditional institutions that once mediated relations between farmers and herders. Research on conflict management in Nigeria indicates that hybrid systems that combine customary structures with formal state mechanisms tend to be more effective, particularly when they are locally trusted and supported by clear procedural rules (Ogu et al., 2023). Strengthening these mechanisms requires investment in training, coordination, and institutional clarity so that communities have reliable avenues for addressing grievances before they escalate.

Supporting adaptive livelihood strategies is another critical area for state engagement. Environmental pressures and declining resource availability have reduced the resilience of both farming and pastoral households. Programmes that promote climate-smart agriculture, sustainable rangeland management, and diversified income sources can reduce vulnerability and lessen the likelihood that resource scarcity will trigger conflict. Research on livelihood adaptation in the Sudano Sahelian zone shows that households with access to extension services, credit, and environmental restoration initiatives are better able to manage shocks and less likely to engage in confrontational strategies (World Food Programme, 2024).

The wider research also underscores the need for state interventions that rebuild trust between communities and authorities. Where state actions are perceived as inconsistent, selective, or politically motivated, legitimacy erodes and compliance declines. Studies on governance and conflict in northern Nigeria show that perceptions of bias in security operations or land-allocation decisions can deepen grievances and undermine cooperation (Ilesanmi et al., 2023; Usman & Obi, 2024; Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025). Trust-building requires predictable state behaviour, transparent decision-making, and meaningful engagement with local stakeholders. Approaches that recognise historical arrangements, respect local knowledge, and involve communities in the design and monitoring of interventions are more likely to produce durable outcomes. Collaborative governance models, which bring together state agencies, traditional leaders, pastoral associations, and farming groups, have shown promise in improving communication and reducing tensions in similar contexts across West Africa (Bello, 2025).

These implications point to the need for a shift from reactive crisis management to proactive structural engagement. Addressing the drivers of conflict in Katsina State requires coordinated action across land governance, environmental management, institutional reform, and community relations. State interventions that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and grounded in local realities stand the best chance of reducing conflict risk and supporting long-term rural stability.

Conclusion

Farmer–herder conflict in Katsina State emerges from the interaction of several deep-rooted structural pressures. Land scarcity, environmental stress, institutional fragility, and shifting mobility patterns combine to reshape how farming and pastoral communities relate to one another. These pressures do not operate in isolation. They intersect in ways that heighten uncertainty, reduce trust, and increase the likelihood that everyday disputes will escalate into violent confrontation. The analysis presented in this paper has traced these dynamics carefully, drawing

directly from the conceptual and background foundations of the wider research.

Viewing the conflict through this structural lens reveals the limitations of responses that rely primarily on security deployments or short-term containment strategies. Such approaches may reduce immediate violence, but they do little to address the underlying conditions that sustain tension. A more effective path requires integrated and preventive engagement that recognises the connections between land governance, environmental management, and rural livelihoods. Strengthening institutions, restoring credible mechanisms for dispute resolution, and supporting adaptive livelihood strategies are central to reducing the risks that communities face.

Author Contribution

The study was developed through a collaborative process. G.O.I., C.E.E. and A.J.E. shaped the conceptual direction of the research, designed the methodological approach and coordinated the overall project. The theoretical framework was developed by F.I. and K.O.O., who also contributed to the initial drafting of the manuscript. All co-authors contributed to refining the research design and strengthening the theoretical foundations of the study. All authors were involved in reviewing, editing and refining the manuscript, and each author approved the final version and shares responsibility for its content.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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