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ADDRESSING FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

By Christine Li

INTRODUCTION

At only the young age of thirteen, Mustapha Abubakar had a bright future ahead—she was about to graduate from primary school and was a great mathematician (Olufemi 2021). However, this future was tragically cut short in 2020 after a brutal attack on his life while tending to his family’s cattle. His ancestors and their livestock had grazed in Nigeria’s Plateau State for centuries (Olufemi 2021). His suspected killer was a close neighbor, a local Irigwe farmer. In his grief, his father emphasized a broader question at both the crux of Mustapha’s death and the deaths of thousands of others across Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, “If someone destroys your farm, is it justice to kill the cow and the owner?” (Olufemi 2021).

Farmers and pastoralists in Africa have existed together for thousands of years, and tensions between the two groups are far from a new phenomenon. In recent years though, concerns surrounding the long-term impact of the escalating conflict have grown. West and Central Africa are hotspots of farmer-herding conflict, leading many political leaders and academics to voice concerns that these conflicts could further exacerbate economic instability in the region. The rise in violent farmer-herder conflicts is partially driven by explosive population growth and accelerating climate change, two factors that contribute to farmer-herder conflicts. Therefore, it is critical that policymakers address this violence now before it spirals out of control.



*A billboard
welcoming visitors
to Jos, the capital of
Nigeria’s central
Plateau State*

*Council on Foreign
Relations*

Pastoralist –
*someone who grazes
animals for their
livelihood, sometimes
living nomadically
(interchangeably used
with herder)*

EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

Historical Development

Conflict between farmers and herders is not a new phenomenon. Records from pre-colonial Africa suggest that it was common for neighboring kingdoms and various groups to raid one another and damage property (Kratli and Toulmin 2020). In the colonial era, competition for land access and natural resources strained relationships between farmers and herders. Herders also resisted against colonial authorities, which often wanted to constrain their grazing ranges and establish stricter property boundaries so that colonizing countries could more effectively exploit natural resources and administrate the region.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts within Independent Africa

Even after many African nations gained independence from European colonial empires, farmer-herder conflict continued both within early independent African states and across borders. These conflicts intensified as post-colonial Africa turned to agriculture as an engine of economic growth, transitioning away from pastoralism (Kratli and Toulmin 2020; Benjaminsen and Ba 2009). The first president of independent Mali, Modibo Keita, sought to convert herders into farmers. The government, thus, had grown to favor farmers over pastoralists, sparking a new wave of conflict (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009).

Despite this escalation of conflict, coexistence and peace do exist between farmers and herders (Moritz 2010). For example, in Ghana, herders and farmers often trade and intermarry with each other (Bukari et al. 2018). This relationship in Ghana shows that conflicts over land use are reconcilable (Brottem 2021). In recent years, local conventions have emerged as the predominant form of conflict resolution.

However, reliance on traditional methods like local conventions to resolve land conflicts means that governments have been left out of the picture (Okibe 2022). This lack of local government involvement has led to issues with accountability and enforcement. Many farmers and pastoralists feel that they have been neglected by political forces — neither group collectively holds significant wealth or political influence. As farmer-herder conflicts grew more violent in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many people began to view them as the product of ethnic differences. One group especially embroiled in conflict is the Fulani of West Africa, which often finds itself at odds with less pastoral groups (Kratli and Toulmin 2020).

Both farmers and pastoralists feel as if they have been abandoned and slighted by political forces

Scope of the Problem

In a single attack in central Nigeria this year, more than twenty people died when gunmen attacked a village, mainly killing children and women.

Proliferation –the rise and increase of a phenomenon, usually used in reference to weapons



The cracked ground of Northern Chad demonstrates the devastating impacts of drought and desertification.

Al Jazeera

Burti system – historical systems that would determine grazing and migration paths for pastoralists

When discussing the deteriorating security situation in Central and West Africa, most international conversations center on other sources of instability, such as violent attacks by religious extremist groups like Boko Haram or more formal insurgencies like the Biafran Civil War. However, the laser focus on violence driven by these organized groups has overshadowed the importance of addressing farmer-herder conflicts. In 2018, farmer-herder conflicts were over six times more deadly than the extremist group Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. These conflicts killed over 1,300 people in the first half of the year (International Crisis Group 2018).

Current State of Conflict

The most concerning part of farmer-herder conflicts is how quickly they are spreading and intensifying. Though data is somewhat limited, there has been a significant increase in the number of violent incidents reported over the last ten years, with over 15,000 people killed in that time frame (Brottem 2021). A single attack in central Nigeria this year left more than twenty people dead, most of whom were women and children (Reuters 2023). The geographic range of farmer-herder conflicts has also grown. Traditionally, farmer-herder conflicts were largely contained within Nigeria (Higazi and Ali 2018). While Nigeria remains the country with the greatest number of fatalities, conflict has spread to neighboring countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Brottem 2021). In 2019 and 2020, fatalities in Mali and Nigeria were almost equal (Brottem 2021).

Another trend fueling the intensity of modern farmer-herder conflict is the proliferation of more deadly weapons, such as firearms, that have been smuggled from all over the world, including China, the United States, Europe, and other Africa nations (Petesch 2020; Conflict Armament Research 2020). Previously, with fights using artisanal, locally made firearms or other weapons, conflicts would still occur; however, they were significantly less fatal. This access to illicit weapons is likely also influenced by the proliferation of other insurgent groups in the region that have both connections to global firearm networks and a significant demand for these weapons. While governments have started efforts to crack down on this proliferation, illegal firearms continue to circulate among both farmer and herder communities (International Crisis Group 2018).

Connections to Climate Change and Population Growth

Beyond the increasing presence of dangerous firearms, there are multiple systemic factors that drive the trend of increasing farmer-herder conflict in West Africa. Climate change is an especially destructive factor. Less desirable environmental conditions and

water scarcity drives farmers and herders to compete for a smaller pool of natural resources.

It is no coincidence that levels of violence spiked sharply after the Sahelian drought of the 1970s and 1980s (Daniel 2021). The mobility patterns of pastoralists have long been shaped by access to water. As climate change renders the Sahel hotter and drier, some pastoralists have migrated into areas populated by farmers (Benjaminsen et al. 2012). In Nigeria, for instance, herders traditionally occupied more northern parts of the country, while farmers largely settled in the country's Middle Belt region. However, in recent years, the expanding Sahara and intense droughts have driven pastoralists southward into the Middle Belt, fueling more conflicts (Eberle 2021).

*Insurgency –
organized, often
violent, revolt against
the current powers in
place*

The issue of farmer-herder conflict is not as simple as herders migrating to lands historically inhabited by farmers. Under pressure to increase crop yields on increasingly unfavorable land, many farmers have resorted to growing on land that has traditionally been protected for pastoralists under the burti system (Daniel 2021). A recent study examining climate shocks over 1997-2014 finds that conflict increases by 54% in areas inhabited by both farmers and herders when the temperature increases by 1°C (Eberle et al. 2020).

With climate change unlikely to slow down or stop in the near future, these conflicts will likely only continue to escalate. In addition, West Africa will suffer some of the most intense climate change in the world. Countries in this region are also some of the least equipped to deal with the economic and social consequences of climate change (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative 2020). As a result, farmer-herder conflicts will not only continue into the future but accelerate in frequency.

Population growth has also further exacerbated conflicts as both groups need more natural resources to produce more food for their growing communities (Nnaji et al 2022). The expansion of agriculture coupled with shrinking arable land.

Broader Regional Instability

Aside from farmer-herder disputes, West Africa has also faced a significant increase in other forms of violent conflict. These armed insurgencies are primarily organized around political, ethnic, or religious lines (Boukhars and Pilgram 2023). However, farmer-herder conflicts are not often associated with these more organized groups, and both farmers and herders are also often subjected to the terror and violence inflicted by these insurgent groups (Brottem 2021). However, the presence of multiple conflicts has made it especially difficult for governments to clearly discern whether conflicts are the result of competition over resources or other flashpoints. Furthermore, these insurgencies have exacerbated

feelings of economic instability that further drive farmer-herder conflict.

Other conflicts in the region have also made it simple for some commentators to characterize farmer-herder conflict as intractable. Some leaders pin these farmer-herder conflicts on innate characteristics, such as ethnicity or religion. However, this briefing seeks to emphasize the influence of natural resources and economic interests in driving conflict, moving beyond traditional Western narratives of Africa that use ethnicity and “tribalism” as the driving reason for all phenomena.

US Interests in the Region

While these conflicts are far from US soil, the US has several strategic interests in the region. Firstly, ensuring stability, especially economic stability, in the region can help defend against the rise of extremist groups that could one day grow strong enough to bring harm to US citizens (Devermont 2021). The US also has a significant military presence in West Africa and instability could greatly harm their current and future operations (Hussein and Haddad 2021). Furthermore, with Russia and China expanding activities in the region, the US may find this to be a useful area to build rapport with these nations and maintain positive relationships (Yabi 2023; Devermont 2021).



Burkinabe forces train to respond to extremist attacks.

The Washington Post

Congressional Action

Farmer-Herder conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa have received very little political attention in the US. These conflicts are often grouped under specific bilateral relations, such as US-Nigeria policy or US-Cameroon policy (U.S. Congress H.R. 5564 2021; U.S. Congress S.Res.292 2019; U.S. Congress H.Res 421 2017). However, Congress did pass the landmark 2019 Global Fragility Act that provides for a substantial increase in US conflict prevention activities in West African countries, including Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo (USAID 2022). Given both the lack of historical action and the current funding commitment to prevent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, there is substantial room for further legislative action on farmer-herder conflicts.

Other Policy Action

While Congress has been relatively quiet on farmer-herder conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, other agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have been implementing pre-emptive programs that intend to prevent conflict from breaking out. Beginning in 2014, USAID has mediated constructive and peaceful dialogue between local leaders (USAID 2017). Since then, these peace talks have even expanded to the

Sovereignty –the idea that governments of legitimate countries have the right to attend to affairs within their borders with limited influence from other states and institutions



American Special Forces in West Africa.

The New York Times

the U.S. has taken substantial steps to strengthen the country’s relationship with African states, in what commentators have dubbed as the “Pivot to Africa,” recognizing the substantial geopolitical and economic interests the U.S. has in a peaceful and prosperous Africa.

national level. Nevertheless, the conflict has continued, signaling the need for further action (USAID 2017).

Under the Biden administration, the US has taken substantial steps to strengthen the country’s relationship with African states in what many have dubbed the “Pivot to Africa” (Akinwotu 2022; Cohen 2021). In addition to hosting the US-Africa Leaders Summit, the White House also announced the Digital Transformation with Africa Initiative and a commitment of \$55 billion in funding to Africa over the next three years (The White House 2022; Reuters 2022). In the words of a Biden adviser, “What we have tried to focus on in this administration is to treat African countries as major geopolitical players, not the subject of geopolitics or some sort of junior partner” (Akinwotu 2022).

IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

As coverage of African farmer-herder conflicts in Washington is relatively low, many liberals and conservatives have not made their exact stances on this precise issue known. However, their broader foreign policy principles and previous voting patterns on engagement in West Africa can help inform their views on farmer-herder conflicts.

Conservative View

Conservatives, more broadly, are skeptical of using US financial resources and political capital to support a broad range of activities abroad—especially those that may not present an imminent threat to US national security. Especially as the farmer-herder conflict does not directly threaten the US, many conservatives feel that the best action is no action at all. From a conservative standpoint, West Africa should also focus more on addressing insurgent groups rather than these more sporadic conflicts. Conservatives generally believe that the US must fix the issues within its own borders before devoting significant resources to helping those abroad (Pena 2017). Many conservatives do not feel comfortable with US efforts to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, even if they may involve US interests to some extent.

However, many conservatives will likely be able to find a compromise with smaller or less costly programs. The conservative viewpoint does not minimize the importance of international affairs. The 2019 Global Fragility Act, which focused on conflict prevention investments abroad, received significant bipartisan support. The sentiment behind this act could also fuel bipartisan discussion when it comes to farmer-herder conflict (Yayboke et al. 2021).

Liberal View

On the other hand, liberals are generally in favor of robust development and stabilization programs abroad. Especially with the recent focus among liberals to address the consequences of climate change, resolving farmer-herder conflict is an opportunity for liberals to demonstrate how dangerous climate change can be in the future. Furthermore, liberals are more interested in actively promoting Western value systems abroad.

However, it is important to note that conservatives are not the only ones questioning whether the US should continue a strong level of engagement abroad (Bokat-Lindell 2021). Progressives, for example, generally are skeptical of US involvement abroad due to the risk of advancing neo-colonialism. Therefore, plenty of common ground to be found across the political spectrum when it comes to addressing farmer-herder conflict.

AREAS OF DEBATE

Providing Greater Security Aid

A significant factor fueling these conflicts is the limited capacity of many governments in the region to monitor ongoing conflict levels, arrest perpetrators, and keep the peace (Crisis Group 2018). With greater aid, perhaps, governments could more effectively enforce their own laws and bring justice. Monitoring these conflicts is especially difficult due to their sporadic and remote nature. There are rarely any long-term hotspots or regular attacks on a specific target. Consequently, security aid that focuses on stationing patrolmen in many communities would be ineffective and costly. Investing in technologies that help monitor outbreaks of conflict, investigate perpetrators, and control the firearm supply chain would be more cost-effective.

This solution has a few drawbacks. While investments in security and enforcement would likely be the quickest way to quell violence, these initiatives would only be addressing the symptoms of conflict—instead of root causes. In many West African nations, there is also a significant distrust surrounding the biases of security forces and abuse of force (Harkness 2022; Human Rights Watch 2021). Human rights groups have found that security forces in Nigeria have notoriously stood idle after receiving warnings or notices of imminent farmer-herder conflict and tips on perpetrators (Amnesty International 2018). Many security forces have faced reports of corruption, and the infusion of large amounts of foreign cash could worsen this problem (Transparency International 2021).

A significant factor fueling these conflicts is the limited capacity of many governments in the region to monitor ongoing conflict levels, arrest perpetrators, and keep the peace

Realist –a viewpoint associated with the international relations ideology of realism, which views states as the fundamental unit of organization and emphasizes rational decision-making and competition among states.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Reforestation –
rehabilitating an
environment, often
with vegetation and
other practices to
encourage growth of
vegetation that
previously existed

Liberals would likely understand the need for greater security aid; however, they would likely be apprehensive about providing a substantial amount of money to security forces that have a significant record of human rights abuses. Furthermore, they would likely prefer more peaceful solutions that focus on the fundamental factors that are driving the conflict. Nevertheless, liberals could be convinced of this solution if paired with other policies and significant guardrails against corruption and human rights abuses. Conservatives generally would not prefer to provide substantial amounts of aid abroad, but they could be amenable to this targeted form of aid—especially as it would be one of the quickest ways to provide security.

Targeted Reforestation

In contrast to the previous solution, target reforestation addresses farmer-herder conflict on the level of climate change and land loss. Much of the land that herders previously used for their animals has suffered from desertification. Estimates suggest that the desert encroaches southward by 5km each year (Down to Earth 2016). With these estimates in mind, local governments are under pressure to revitalize the region and slow down, and even reverse, the growth of the Sahara. For example, the African Union proposed the Great Green Wall Initiative in 2007, which involves improving soil quality, planting new vegetation, and implementing sustainable forest management practices (Schleeter 2022). Currently, the Great Green Wall is currently run by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and is scheduled to continue through 2030. Despite significant progress, the Great Green Wall is facing significant financial challenges. The project has relatively low and uneven donor commitment—especially in the nations that currently have the highest levels of farmer-herder conflict (Nature 2023). This financing gap is one opportunity for the US to address climate change and farmer-herder conflicts.

One reason that previous reforestation efforts have struggled is the poor implementation of previous plans. In particular, efforts that did not actively involve the communities they were placed within have often failed (Petesch 2021). Reforestation could also benefit from the implementation of cutting-edge technologies, such as satellite imaging, to effectively target the areas that would benefit most from reforestation efforts (International Fund for Agricultural Development 2013). Given the United States’ strength in providing technical expertise, these reforestation initiatives could be an especially unique avenue to pursue.



*The proposed path
for the Great Green
Wall.*

National Geographic

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Liberals are generally great advocates for this solution as it also advances principles of environmentalism. Furthermore, it generally affirms their significant domestic efforts to combat climate change. Conservatives, on the other hand, may be skeptical of these solutions, as they often cost a significant amount of money and have not always shown the most consistent results. Furthermore, conservatives may find it a bit futile to attempt to turn the tide of climate change and may advocate for other solutions that seek to help farmers and herders find a solution that can still stand as the climate continues to change.

Land-Reform Conditional Investment and Aid

Many experts have emphasized that a key strategy to address farmer-herder conflict is land tenure policy reform (Ero and Obasi 2021; Ahmed 2022). Both farmers and herders expressed insecurity regarding legally recognized property rights. Herders feel particularly threatened, such as in Nigeria, where governments have implemented open grazing bans in Nigeria that heavily restrict the activities of herders (Kabir 2021). The perception of favoritism when establishing property rights only worsens tensions, as herders could feel that attacks are the only way to get their interests represented (Brottem 2021). Beyond Nigeria, favoritism benefiting farmers has been a relatively common trend in other parts of West Africa (Ahmed 2022). It may be beneficial to find a middle ground that allows herders to continue their traditional practices.

However, land reform has been historically difficult for domestic governments to accomplish as these debates have often been co-opted to represent larger ethnic, religious, or political conflicts. Therefore, it may be especially helpful to pursue land reform policies with the help of third-party arbitrators, whether that be local NGOs, the African Union, or the United Nations. Given the difficulty of pursuing land use reform, the US incentivizes land reform by providing a conditional investment that depends on local efforts to reform land use policy.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives are more skeptical of efforts like these, as foreign governments may ask for a large amount of aid to yield these reforms. In addition, conservatives may be skeptical of spending large amounts of money abroad for a result as uncertain and intangible as peace. Such policies could fall apart without proper enforcement and oversight from both the US government and foreign governments. However, conservatives are generally in favor of attaching strings to foreign aid and investment. Liberals likely support this effort, as long as they have the opportunity to monitor

Land Tenure – laws that dictate what land can be used for and by who

Land reform until this point has been especially difficult for domestic governments to implement as these debates have often been co-opted to represent larger ethnic, religious, or political tensions.

the exact implementation process. Progressives may advocate for providing aid without any strings attached and instead hope to steer US involvement abroad in a more humanitarian direction.

Supporting Greater Research and Monitoring

Gathering data on and monitoring conflicts is a significant challenge in the fight to end farmer-herder conflicts. Due to their geographically diverse nature, many conflicts go unreported. Even with reported conflicts, there is little objective information on how they broke out. Furthermore, there is still limited understanding of how exactly factors, such as population growth or climate change, will impact conflict frequency in the future. Thus, there is room for greater investment in research surrounding both the onset of conflict and potential solutions.

The US could work with African governments to establish a research network of local academics working on the issue to share and collaborate. Another option is to establish a research center that will have a full-time focus on addressing farmer-herder conflict.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Of all solutions, this strategy is likely to garner the greatest amount of bipartisan support, as both liberals and conservatives see the significant value of evidence-based policy. However, conservatives especially may be concerned that this policy is not the best place to spend limited funds, as the return on investment will likely take a number of years. Furthermore, they may be skeptical about supporting research initiatives for issues that take place outside of the US, when there are a number of domestic national security issues that could also use more research funding.



*The proposed path
for the Great Green
Wall.*

National Geographic

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Given President Biden's most recent commitment to commit an additional \$55 billion in funding for Africa over the next three years and an additional \$1.15 billion available in funding from the first five years of the Global Fragility Act's implementation, there is substantial funding and political capital available to support policy action on this topic (Reuters 2022; Yayboke et al. 2021). Furthermore, any action will likely involve executive agencies, such as USAID, which had over \$26 billion in total budgetary resources for international security assistance in FY 2023 (Bureau of the Fiscal Service 2023). Nevertheless, while these numbers represent substantial swaths of funding, it is important to remember that there are a number of competing interests for the U.S. that will also be vying for the money. Any resources allocated to address farmer-herder conflicts will likely be a small fraction of this funding. A four-

year UN program to address farmer-herder conflict in the Benue and Nasarawa states of Nigeria cost \$5.3 million (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2023).

CONCLUSION

Without action, the violence from farmer-herder conflicts will only escalate. With the amount of arable land in Africa shrinking and the continent’s population rapidly growing, farmer-herder conflicts have emerged as an urgent problem. As insurgent groups expand operations in West Africa, dangerous weapons will continue to circulate.

Though farmer-herder conflicts occur abroad, the US has substantial economic and political interests in the West. Furthermore, with few other international actors operating in the space, this could be an especially advantageous avenue for the US to strengthen relationships with the African continent—especially as China and Russia both expand their foreign aid programs.

However, as legislators, you will face a series of tough decisions surrounding the conflict. Even Western African governments that have greater knowledge surrounding these conflicts have struggled with policymaking. As policymaking, your primary focus should be on helping to reduce the ongoing conflicts—not to eradicate them completely.



*A herder in central
Nigeria.*
National Public Radio

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

As you begin further research, you should seek out African voices to inform your understanding of farmer-herder conflicts, whether it be African academics, NGOs, or politicians. Furthermore, many of the news stories related to farmer-herder conflict are not often covered by many US news sources, and thus, it may be necessary to look at African newspapers. Other important sources often include reports done by various state-led international development agencies, such as USAID and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German International Development Agency).

When researching potential solutions, I also encourage you to engage with successful strategies implemented to address other forms of local conflict.

GLOSSARY

Burti system – historical systems that would determine grazing and migration paths for pastoralists

Instability – a state in which the security situation of a community is not consistently peaceful

Insurgency – organized, often violent, revolt against the current powers in place

Land Tenure – laws that dictate what land can be used for and by whom

Pastoralist – someone who grazes animals for their livelihood, sometimes living nomadically (interchangeably used with herder)

Proliferation – the rise and increase of a phenomenon, usually used in reference to weapons

Realist – a viewpoint associated with the international relations ideology of realism, which views states as the fundamental unit of organization and emphasizes rational decision-making and competition among states

Reforestation – rehabilitating an environment, often with vegetation and other practices to encourage the growth of vegetation that previously existed

Sovereignty – the idea that governments of legitimate countries have the right to attend to affairs within their borders with limited influence from other states and institutions

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