

# **Latent causes and magnitude of Farmers-Herder agricultural resource conflicts that has formed the new wave of conflict in Nigeria**

## **Abstract**

The research paper analysed the fine causes of farmer herder conflicts in Nigeria and also examined the magnitude of the conflict in terms of its evolution from an agricultural resource conflict to a less definable crisis that threatens to tear down the fabric of national unity. Continual misconceptions and misinterpretations of causes and motives of the conflict project further the polarized nature of Nigerian inter-ethnic interactions and the gradual diminishing of national identity. Greater incidence and intensity of the farmer-herder conflict has given rise to more violent herders and a tribal militia movement seeking to match the aggression. Analysts have expressed fear of these conflicts spiralling into a complex civil war and the need for the government to grab a hold of the conflicts for the sake of the parties involved. A total of 384 farmers and herders from conflict prone areas have been used for this study. The results and transcripts of the FGD were collated and summarised, they formed the substance of the tables developed. The key objective of the study is to arrive at some of the less empirical but silently impactful causes and magnitude of the farmer-herder conflicts which has been declared the deadliest conflict form in Nigeria. Developing a long-term, far-reaching and all-inclusive framework for the mutually beneficial use of land resources by all factions embroiled in this conflict is a first step to resolving the conflicts has been recommended.

**Keywords:** Conflict, agricultural resource, farmer-herder, cause, magnitude.

## **Introduction**

Most conflicts in Nigeria occur in the rural areas. Ever-increasing population, a climate change causing significant desertification in the far north and conflicting definitions of limited resources, are some remote causes of the farmer-herder crises that are more predominant southerly of Nigeria. Once the agriculture economy in Nigeria is threatened, conflict is a definite consequence because the lowest layer of poverty is supported by agriculture. The farmer-herder conflict reached a climax in 2018, it was said that the conflict was six times more deadly than the Boko Haram insurgency as over 1,300 people were killed in the first half of the year (International Crisis Group, 2018). This is why the crisis is dangerous because it is stealth, occurs at different places and at different times, and is never a full-scale war unlike the case with the Boko Haram insurgency. It is a resource conflict between sedentary farmers and pastoralists that has lasted generations. The surge of violence is concentrated in Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa states in the North Central geopolitical zone and in the adjoining Adamawa and Taraba states in the North East zone.

In starting and prosecuting violent conflicts, herders are not always the ones to draw first blood nor the ones at fault at all times. Militarization of civilians has been on in Nigeria and militia groups are becoming more widespread and equally violent as the days go by. Since the 1990s, militia groups have become subjects of hot debate due to the proportion and significance of their activities (Ahmadu, 2003; Ann, 2010). Ethnic militias, according to Olukotun (2003), are paramilitary units that conduct policing functions within their

communities, but the government views militias as insurgent groups engaged in subversive actions against the state. Militias are usually made up of young men from impoverished rural areas. Ethnic militias are not new in Nigeria's middle belt; most ethnic groups have one, which they conceal under the guise of taking up arms to defend themselves (International Crises Group, 2018).

### **Conceptual framework**

A militia is an armed force of ordinary persons, engaged in combat or fighting or resort to violence to attain certain objectives (Dahida, 2014). Vaaseh (2010a) corroborates this definition, averring that ethnic militias are an assemblage or organization of enlisted or conscripted individuals who are mobilized in times of necessity. It can also be defined as a collection of individuals who are not professional soldiers but have received some type of military training and are capable of acting as an army. Ethnic militias are irregular or paramilitary groups made up of people who have received some type of informal military training and are armed with potentially lethal weaponry such as large, small, light, or chemical weapons (Ahmadu, 2003). Their goals are not to seize political power, but rather to bring the government's attention to their demands, which are frequently based on cries of marginalization, injustice, and official indifference, among other things. It is also seen as a militant organization, established mostly illegally to protect and project the interest of a particular nationality within the Nigerian federation (Vaaseh, 2010b). The purpose of other militia groups is simply to police a native territory they traditionally identify as owners of. This occurs when the trust and efficacy of the state forces become wavering.

In Nigeria, land disputes are a major source of conflict (Nigeria Watch, 2014). Land access has been proved to be critical to poverty alleviation, economic growth, and poor empowerment (Fabusoro *et al.*, 2008). The importance of territory may explain why land conflicts are so common and more difficult to resolve than other types of conflict (Olabode and Ajibade, 2010). Competition for finite resources, notably land and water, is either the underlying cause or a complicating factor that exacerbates communal strife (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Ban, 2007).

Another layer to perpetuation and increased incidence of violent conflicts in Nigeria is the availability and access to small arms and light weapons by civilians and civil militia groups. Of the 50 or so conflicts fought since the end of the Cold War up to 2017, the vast majority of them have been fought predominantly with small arm” (Soetan, 2017). Of the approximately 500 million illicit weapons in circulation worldwide, it is estimated that 100 million of these are in sub-Saharan Africa with eight to ten million concentration in the West African sub-region alone (Bah, 2004). Over 70% of the total illegal weapons in the West African sub region are estimated to be in Nigeria (Abdullahi, 2010). You may have begun to see the picture as to why peace in Nigeria is scarce and why occupation of one location by members of another group is so easy.

The ethnic diversity of the middle belt has resulted in a long history of violent conflicts between farmers and herders, which have claimed countless lives and cost millions of dollars in property, livestock, and agricultural products each year, with violent conflict recurrences reaching double digits in some areas. The cost of the periodic violent crises in four middle-belt states (Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Kaduna) was estimated to be 1.25 billion naira (about \$7.6 million USD) (McDougal *et al.*, 2015). On average, household members in the

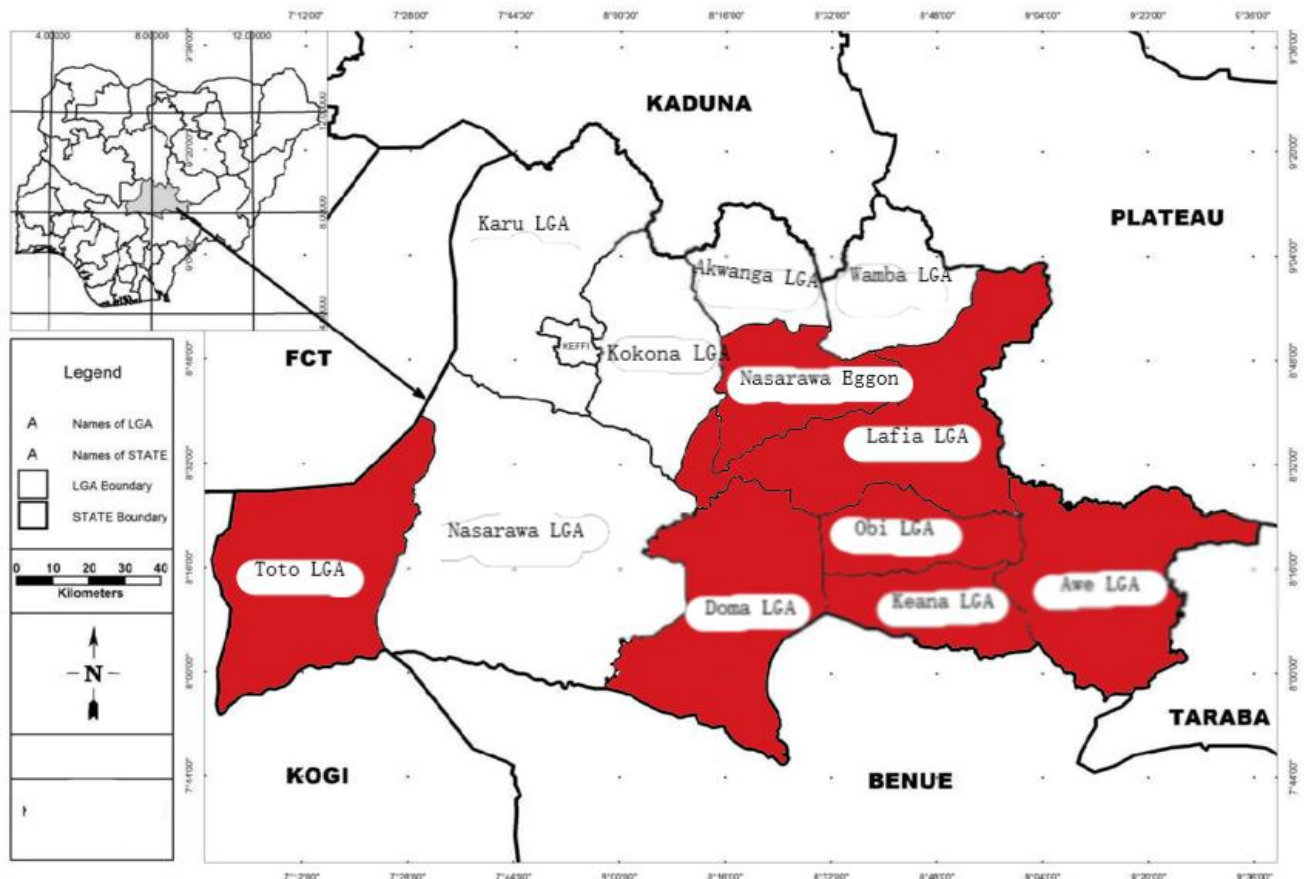
impacted areas were willing to contribute up to 15% of this money in order to avoid disputes - this illustrates their level of desperation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Description of the study area**

The study was carried out in Nasarawa state, Nigeria. Nasarawa state is one of the thirty-six states in Nigeria. Nasarawa state was created out of the former Plateau state of Nigeria on the 1st of October, 1996 by the Abacha government. It lies within Latitudes  $08^{\circ}31'N$  of the equator and Longitudes  $08^{\circ}34'E$ . The state has interstate boundaries with Kaduna state to the north, in the south by Kogi and Benue states, in the west by the Abuja, Federal Capital Territory and in the east by Taraba and Plateau states. A network of roads exists within the state, linking most of the rural areas and major towns (<http://www.nasarawastate.gov.ng/about.php>). The state covers an area of 28,735sq km and has a population of 2,040,097 (NPC, 2006). The state is composed of different ethnic groups each with its own distinct local dialect but Hausa language is common among the people. Some ethnic groups in Nasarawa state are the Afo, Rindre, Nyankpa, Alago, Agatu, Bassa, Ebira, Eggon, Gbagyi, Gwandara, Mada and Tiv.

The state has a wealth of solid mineral resources, as well as the potential for petroleum in areas of its sedimentary basin (Obaje *et al.*, 2007). Coal, barytes, salt, limestone, clays, glass sands, tantalite, columbite, cassiterite, marble, iron ore, and gold are among the state's mineral reserves. In Nasarawa State, the three rock types that make up Nigerian geology, namely the Basement Complex rocks, Younger Granites, and Sedimentary rocks, are all exposed (Ekwe *et al.*, 2011). The climate of the state is tropical sub-humid, with two distinct seasons — the wet season and the dry season. The rainy season begins in May and finishes in October, whereas the dry season lasts from November to April. Climate variability and erratic rainfall patterns characterize the Sahelian region, with rainfall ranging from 200 to 600mm with a coefficient of variation of 15–30%. (Mitchell *et al.*, 1966; Kandji *et al.*, 2006). After reviewing daily rainfall records from 1998 to 2015, Agidi *et al.* (2018) found that the averages of commencement, cessation, and length of rainy season dates across the State were not uniform.



**Fig 1:** Map of Nasarawa State showing study areas

### **Analytical technique**

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyse text data. Content analysis describes a family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses (Rosengren, 1981). Data were collected primarily through interviews; open-ended questions were used. Open-ended probes were also used rather than preexisting theory. Codes derived from transcripts were then sorted into categories based on how different codes were related and linked. Definitions for each category, subcategory, and code were developed (Morse and Field, 1995) and findings were discussed.

### **Sampling Technique and Sampling size**

The population for the study consists of returnees and survivors of the conflict who did not leave the area during the conflict. The study took place in 7 Local Government Areas, LGAs (Keana, Obi, Nasarawa Eggon, Toto, Lafia, Doma and Awe) of Nasarawa State where significant violent conflicts have occurred in recurrent trend. Sample size of 384 respondents was decided by Rao-soft digital sample size calculator. A cluster sampling of high intensity zones within the conflict communities was done to capture interest groups involved in the conflicts.

### **Result and discussion**

#### **Causes of farmer-herder conflicts**

Population explosion has been fingered as a salient cause of farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria. This is especially true as Nigeria's population is very youthful, a youthful population always has a higher proclivity for violent conflicts. Caldeira (2000) averred that insecurity associated with youth violence is not limited to economic crisis, unemployment rates, urbanisation or even state expenditures on public security at which we must look in order to understand contemporary violence. The everyday functioning of institutions of social order, the continuous pattern of abuses by the police forces, their disrespect for rights and routine practices of injustice and discrimination are also culpable for youth violence. Cincotta (2018), based on an analysis of the International Crisis Group's 2018 list of '10 conflicts to watch,' concluded that conflicts were primarily intra-state in nature, with 70% of these conflicts occurring within youthful countries.

With vast populations come the need for meaningful employment that is very much lacking in Nigeria. Onwuka *et al.* (2015) have found a relationship between unemployment and violent conflicts. The presence of social injustice in securing jobs in Nigeria is also a cause of violence. The relationship between unemployment and insurgency or civil war has been theorized by Cincotta *et al.* (2003) and Henrik (2014). An educated population is less likely to engage in violent conflicts intra-population but inter-society conflicts are not necessarily decreased by education or employment for that matter (Davies, 2005).

Herd sizes have also increased with the rise of agro-pastoralism and breakthroughs in veterinary medicine (Blench, 2010). The sudden rise in number of cattle in a herd and the geographical reach given advances in medicine has coincided with expansion of farmlands to grow more food amid a rising population and marked decrease in soil fertility. This has given rise to fierce resource competition. Perspectives also differ in the causes of conflicts, while farmers have cited destruction of cropped fields and other infrastructure as a cause of conflicts, pastoralists have pointed at burning of rangelands and Fadama and blockage of stock routes and water points by crop encroachment (de Haan, 2002).

The way land is viewed has been altered owing to the more and more polarized nature of interactions between Nigerians across ethnic and regional divides. There is currently a greater tendency to distinguish than to unite among Nigerians especially at resource level. According to Adisa (2011) inequitable access to land, diminishing land resources, antagonistic values among user groups, policy contradictions, and non-recognition of rights of indigenous people are causes of conflicts from a fierce resource competition perspective.

As pastoralists have begun to practice more sedentarism than ever before, territorial claims have begun to arise leading to scathing violence between pastoralists and indigenous peoples. The palpable fear that pastoralists may make already declining resources even more scarce is a cause of provocations. Much as pastoralists destroy cropped fields and other facilities, cattle theft has been on the rise especially with the economic downturn in the country. Indigenous people have carried out reprisals on cattle as repercussion for destroyed fields and property. This has only exacerbated the animosity between farmers and herders.

Climate change is a global phenomenon, although the tropical regions of the world are expected to experience greater increase in temperature and a consequence on crop, fisheries and animal production (USDA, 2014). The effects of climate change may be more detrimental on food production in warmer regions; Africa is expected to experience 30% decrease and Latin America and the Caribbean 26% (Ortiz-Bobea, 2021). The consequences

of climate change and global warming have caused a more southerly movement of herders, lower soil fertility and sustained decline in agricultural production have contributed in increasing the competition for resources that continue to thin. The effects of climate change and global warming leave only a small land resource that is useful for most of the opposing resource use that it is supposed to be put to.

Faulty policy issues are a root cause of conflict from a more systemic perspective. National stock routes have disappeared and there is no comprehensive, elaborate and truly fair national agricultural plan that properly incorporates the interests of all groups in the agriculture value chain. State laws are overly weak especially in rural areas. The presence of the government is hardly felt and people tend to govern themselves, protect themselves while still paying taxes and levies to the government. This makes people hurry to take laws into their own hands due to the already established fact that the government may never act. Patronage systems in Nigeria are extremely discriminatory. Governance is often traded off for politics and the spoils of a political victory are shared among supporters and proponents of political actors causing deep-rooted dissatisfaction among other people that are not in that circle of benefit.

Security issues in Nigeria have a long history of political characterization. This is not even rooted in the conflicts themselves but in the political and ethnic structure of Nigeria. The Nigerian situation is one of tribalized politics. A person's ethnicity and their political identities are unfortunately and inextricably intertwined. Each political actor believes that insecurity is used to either remove them from power or make their government unbearable. There appears to be a lack of political will to follow an elaborate and comprehensive pathway towards peace between farmers and herders. The problem is that simple policies and urgent pronouncements are dead on arrival. Every single social group and interest needs to be represented in the elaborate policy design to curb farmer-herder and ensure that resource use is equitable as well as sustainable.

The Nigerian government and other governments in West Africa have to pay greater attention toward the achievement of full implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel. The original proposal recommended a 15-kilometer-wide tree belt to be planted that would stretch 7,775 kilometres over nine African countries, from Senegal to Djibouti. Later, it was expanded to include the construction of water-retention ponds and other basic infrastructure, as well as the establishment of agricultural production systems and the promotion of other revenue-generating activities.

As proliferation of small arms and light weapons has made them readily available, the consequences of their availability are the confidence to invade peoples home towns and leave death and horror in the wake. There are more guns in the hands of citizens (an extrapolated 6,322,702 small arms and light weapons) than in the hands of law enforcement agents (an extrapolated 586,400 small arms and light weapons) in Nigeria (Small arms survey, 2018).

The availability of these arms has given rise to what is referred to in Nigeria as 'killer herdsmen.' The opposite of this is the militarization of tribal militia groups who are ostensibly performing policing activities of their community. Small arms and light weapons (SALW) have caused herders to invade rural communities where state and police presence are very limited. Herders raid communities and farmlands causing havoc. What is very much underreported is the fact that these tribal communities also attack herders. These attacks can be in the form of trying to claim territory or reprisals over damaged property or previous

attacks on the communities. The most important thing to note is that the Fulani herdsmen are also victims of violent conflicts.

**Table 1:** Causes of farmer-herder conflicts

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Manifestations</b>
Population explosion	Continuous rise in Nigeria's population, geometric increases in population especially in rural communities, vast youth population, larger herd sizes, infrastructural deficit stemming from population rising faster than rural development, unemployment.
Competition over scarce resources	Land and water are the major resources in contention by farmers and herders, extended sedentarism, territorial claims and migrations, destruction of crops by herders, theft and destruction of cattle.
Environmental issues	Global warming, desertification especially in the far north of Nigeria, low soil fertility, higher temperatures, sustained fall in agricultural productivity, smaller geographical space amid greater demand.
Policy issues	Absence of comprehensive national agricultural plan, Inconsistency of implementing regional policies such as the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel, weak state laws, discriminatory patronage systems.
Complexities of power	Politicizing security issues, not considering all actors in the resolution of resource contention, lack of political will to find a holistic solution to farmer-herder conflicts, lack of justice.
Illegal small arms and light weapons	Increased incidence of violent conflicts, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, presence of tribal militias in different areas of the country, invasion of indigenous farmers by herdsmen.

**Source:** Focus Group Discussions and KII, 2021

### **Magnitude of farmer-herder conflicts**

The farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria are usually underrated. The latency of these conflicts is often attributable to the fact that they take on a form of communal conflicts and not an all-out war. There can be a number of farmer-herder conflicts going on at the same time in different rural communities in Nigeria which may not seem to be huge incidences on their own but the combined effects of these conflicts make them the deadliest conflict in Nigeria even more deadly than the Boko Haram insurgency (International Crises Group, 2018).

The gradually transforming nature of herdsmen sedentarism has impacts on the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria. In the past herders were seen only during dry seasons as they migrate from the north southerly in search of pasture for their cattle. That has change now. Pastoralists now take on the pattern of sedentarism naturalizing with the indigenous peoples of the localities they used to only come to graze. Extensive sedentarism changes the dynamics of power and resource sharing in these localities that already have a deficiency of these resources. More so, Fulani herders naturalizing in certain localities come with their traditional leadership hierarchy that are always parallel to those of the local peoples.

With sedentarism, competition over scarce resources is fierce and more long-term than seasonal nomadism. This means that the new cohabitants of the community need to be

included in every possible sharing formula. This has not gone as it is assumed it will go. There is a lot of resistance by the indigenous peoples and a lot of insisting by the Fulani herders, this pushing and pulling effect is a root cause of conflict but the magnitude of the conflict is beyond just competition for land as an agricultural resource. It has metamorphosed into competition of land as an abode. Polarization of ethnicity has become the bane of nationality, people are becoming more aware of their ethnic identity and aligning to them than their national identity. This is amplified in the farmer-herder conflicts that takes the shape of ethnic cleansing sometimes.

Farm systems support the poorest of the poor in Nigeria and there are theories that once the agricultural economy is disturbed, violent conflicts follow. This is true for the farmer-herder conflicts. Some researchers say that the Boko Haram crisis is further aggravated because desertification has destroyed the agricultural economy in Nigeria's north east among other reasons. Nonetheless, farmer-herder conflicts give rise to extreme food insecurity and accompanying economic challenges. The farmer herder conflict is so significant that it has the potential of disrupting economic, religious, social and political balance (Kasarachi, 2016).

The peace and social equilibrium of affected communities are always disturbed as locals are forced to evacuate their homelands; some displacements are permanent. The sociopsychological consequences of these conflicts are so terrible that they affect the mental balance of survivors indefinitely. Often, today's survivors are tomorrow's perpetrators. Everybody is looking to settle an all-elusive score.

The magnitude of farmer-herder conflicts has taken it to the very top of violent conflicts in Nigeria. It is now deadlier than the Boko Haram crisis. Nigeria is a wealthy country. Much wealthier than most of its West African neighbours. As the farmer herder conflicts continue to evolve, herders from other countries have been implicated in causing most of the mayhem in Nigeria including arbitrary kidnapping and banditry. Seeing that borders are porous and there is money to be made from ransom and pillaging, foreign elements ride on the crest of a poorly managed internal conflict to inflict carnage on communities in Nigeria. Once the news goes around those countries about a money well, deadlier groups make their way to Nigeria.

With the many complications of the farmer-herdsmen conflict and the recent international attention they have been receiving, the Global Terrorism Index named Fulani militants operating in Nigeria and parts of the Central African Republic the fourth deadliest terror group in the world as far back as 2014 although moved out of the notorious ranking in the 2020 ranking (GTI, 2020). The conflict is already one of the world's deadliest conflicts and the highly polarized nature of the conflict threatens a civil war according to analysts (The Observers, 2021).

The conflict between farmers and herders that began as a resource conflict is gradually deteriorating into a full-scale armed battle for geographic space and little is done to deescalate the tensions. The saddest part of the conflict is that it is gradually becoming the norm for the two factions to war and spill blood to their satisfaction without being interrupted by state elements. The conflict is taking a suspicious turn as most Fulani herdsmen are Muslim and most farmers in the Middle Belt are Christian. However, completely Muslim communities in far northern states of Zamfara, Katsina, Jigawa and the likes have also had attacks from Fulani herdsmen.

The theories of ethnic cleansing and a possible claim of genocide have been pursued by several analysts of the situation due mainly to the magnitude of the violence in recent years and the sheer volume of fire power employed to prosecute the conflict. As the conspiracies continue to grow, the incessant attacks continue to fan these claims. The magnitude of farmer-herder violent conflicts is no longer just a case for national emergency but a matter of global notoriety.

**Table 2:** Magnitude of farmer-herder conflicts

<b>Violence</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Typology of invasions and occupations	The new phenomenon of occupation and extensive sedentarism rather than pastoralism, forced change of indigenous ethnicity, incidence and intensity of conflicts between farmers and herders, worsening case of polarization of ethnic identity rather than national identity.
Destruction of farm systems and facilities	Food security and Economic challenges, forced evacuation of local residents from their communities, destabilization of peace and the equilibrium in society, long-term displacements.
The status of new wave of conflict	More deadly than the Boko Haram insurgency, foreign herders have been implicated in other violent crime forms like kidnapping and banditry, terror ranking of Fulani herders on global watchlist, civil war potential.
Evolution of conflicts	Farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria are sadly becoming the norm, conflicts are gradually leaving the rurality to suburbs and urban communities, what was formerly born out of competition for agricultural resource is evolving into a more consistent armed conflict.
Complicated colouration of the crisis	Ethnic and religious suspicion, suspicion of the government and military, conspiracy theories about ethnic cleansing and genocide, the herders are becoming infamous and always associated with violence.

**Source:** Focus Group Discussions and KII, 2021

### **Conclusion**

The farmer-herder conflict is a significant socioeconomic phenomenon occurring in Nigeria and an increase in incidence and magnitude of the violence has been observed over the years. The conflict is multigenerational and has significant economic and social consequences. The conflicts are transforming from the agricultural resource conflict that they are to a more violent and recurrent phenomenon with concomitant impacts. The farmer-herder conflict has merited its new status as the deadliest form of conflict in Nigeria as well as being a new wave of conflict in the country that threatens to evolve into something else such as the banditry that is slowly becoming predominant in the far northern states of the country. The conflict further compounds the narrative of ethnic coloration of killings and arguments around a genocide. The discussions unfold the possible situations and factors that complicate cohabitations among farmers and herders. The key factors identified have been population explosion, aggravated competition over limited resources, environmental concerns, policy errors and the balance of power.

### **Recommendations**

1. A first step to curbing this recurrent conflict is developing a long-term, far-reaching and all-inclusive framework for the mutually beneficial use of land resources by all factions embroiled in this conflict.
2. Two contributing factors that further escalate the conflicts are the porous borders in Nigeria and the easy proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the country. The Nigerian government, and in deed, the West African regional government need to work together in controlling arms proliferation.
3. Fast implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan will help reduce the incidence of violent confrontation between farmers and herders and even held the nomadic system into a more economically viable enterprise where the country can gain from.
4. Longer and further reaching solutions would be the full implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel. The project recommended planting a 15km wide belt of trees, running 7,775km across nine African countries from Senegal to Djibouti along with building water-retention ponds and other basic infrastructure.
5. In dealing with incidences, justice and equity should always be done to both parties and a standard punishment for infractions should be established so that no party will feel cheated or marginalized.

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