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COMMUNITY AND VIGILANTE RESPONSES TO THE HERDER–FARMER CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
The herder–farmer conflict remains one of the most persistent threats to peace, food security, and national cohesion in Nigeria, and existing scholarship has concentrated overwhelmingly on its violent dimension: reprisal attacks, vigilante militarization, and the erosion of state authority. Far less attention has been paid to a parallel, less-examined dimension: the range of constructive, community-driven efforts that vigilante groups and local populations have devised to manage, de-escalate, and prevent the conflict. This gap matters because policy responses built only on an understanding of the conflict's destructive side risk overlooking mechanisms that are already working at the community level and that could be strengthened rather than replaced. This paper addresses that gap by documenting and analysing these constructive efforts, including indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, interfaith and interethnic peace committees, inclusive community policing, joint farmer–herder vigilante arrangements, and regional security networks such as Operation Amotekun, through a qualitative review of secondary literature, government and civil society reports, and reputable news sources. The review finds that community-based responses, when inclusive and properly coordinated with formal security institutions, have demonstrated real capacity to reduce violence and rebuild trust between farming and herding communities, although these efforts remain constrained by weak funding, politicization, ethnic bias, and the absence of a coherent legal framework. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening the positive, peace-building functions of community vigilante structures while checking their potential for abuse.

Keywords: herder–farmer conflict, community vigilante, peacebuilding, Amotekun, community policing, Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria's herder–farmer conflict has evolved over the past two decades from sporadic, localized disputes over land and water into one of the deadliest sources of internal insecurity in the country. Competition between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farming communities over dwindling arable land and grazing routes has been worsened by desertification, population growth, the proliferation of small arms, and the loss of grazing reserves to expanding settlements (International Crisis Group, 2017). Estimates from the mid-2010s suggested that the conflict had claimed thousands of lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people across the Middle Belt and beyond, at a human cost that in some years rivalled or exceeded that of the Boko Haram insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2018).

In the face of this escalating insecurity and the visible incapacity of federal and state security agencies to protect rural communities, many localities have turned to self-organized community vigilante groups. Public discourse on these groups has tended to emphasize their role in reprisal killings and the further militarization of the conflict (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2021). This framing, while accurate as far as it goes, captures only one side of a more complex picture. Alongside and sometimes growing out of armed vigilante responses, Nigerian communities have also developed a range of other, less violent efforts aimed at managing the conflict: traditional peace councils, interfaith dialogue platforms, joint farmer–herder security arrangements, community policing schemes, and formally recognized regional security outfits such as Operation Amotekun in the South-West.

This paper sets out to document and analyze these constructive, non-violent responses, the order-restoring and trust-building activities that community vigilante structures and associated civil society actors have undertaken in response to the herder–farmer conflict. It argues that understanding these efforts is essential both for appreciating the full range of community agency in the conflict and for designing policies that can strengthen the positive functions of local security structures while minimizing their capacity for harm.

Specifically, this paper aims to (1) identify the range of constructive, non-violent mechanisms that Nigerian communities and vigilante-linked structures have used to manage the herder–farmer conflict; (2) analyse the conditions under which these mechanisms succeed or fail, drawing on the theoretical framework and literature reviewed below; and (3) recommend specific policy and institutional measures for strengthening their peace-building functions while guarding against the risk of bias and unchecked force.

Conceptual Clarification

1 The Herder–Farmer Conflict

The herder–farmer conflict in Nigeria refers to the recurring violent competition between predominantly Fulani pastoralists and largely non-Fulani agrarian communities over access to land, water, and grazing corridors. Although the conflict is rooted in resource competition, scholars note that it has increasingly acquired ethnic and religious colouration, with herders widely associated with Islam and the Fulani ethnic group, and farmers with Christianity and a range of other ethnicities, particularly in the Middle Belt (Chukwuma, 2020). This has made the conflict more difficult to resolve through resource-sharing arrangements alone, since grievances are now filtered through group identity and mutual suspicion.

2 Community Vigilantism

Vigilantism, in the Nigerian context, refers to the organization of ordinary citizens (often young men, farmers, or ex-servicemen) into informal or semi-formal groups that provide security functions which the state is perceived to have failed to deliver. Vigilante groups may act

defensively, to protect lives, farmland, and livestock, or offensively, in retaliation for prior attacks. Nwozor et al. (2021) describe the emergence of vigilante security measures as a direct consequence of the failure of formal security institutions to fulfil their constitutional mandate to protect citizens. Bella and Olanrewaju (2024) extend this analysis by identifying a trend toward "supra-vigilante" structures (larger, more organized, and sometimes state-backed security formations) that go beyond the traditional, small-scale local vigilante group.

These conceptual distinctions, between the conflict itself, ordinary vigilantism, and the more constructive variant of community action this paper is concerned with, set up the theoretical explanation, developed in the next section, for why communities turn to self-organized security and dispute-resolution structures in the first place.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Frustration–Aggression Theory and the Social Contract Theory.

The Frustration–Aggression Theory was propounded in 1939 by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears, and later refined by Berkowitz (1989). Its central tenet is that aggression is not an automatic drive but a response to the blocking, or frustration, of an expected goal; the greater the perceived frustration, the stronger the likelihood of an aggressive response, particularly where the source of frustration cannot easily be confronted directly. Applied to the herder–farmer conflict, the persistent destruction of farmland by straying cattle, the killing of livestock in retaliation, and the general absence of timely government protection generate cumulative frustration among both farmers and herders. In the theory's own terms, this frustration predisposes affected communities toward self-help and, in some cases, violent vigilante responses; but its later refinements, which allow for displaced and instrumental, and not only immediate, aggression, equally accommodate the more constructive, self-organizing responses documented in this paper: where a direct outlet for retaliation is blocked, for instance by community elders or by fear of escalation, the same frustration can instead be channelled into dispute-resolution and preventive structures.

The Social Contract Theory, most closely associated with Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762), holds that citizens surrender certain freedoms to the state in exchange for protection of life and property. Its core tenet is that state authority is conditional: legitimacy flows from the state's continued performance of its protective obligation, not from coercion alone. Where the state is unable to fulfil this obligation, as has repeatedly been the case in rural farming and herding communities, citizens may reclaim elements of that surrendered authority by organizing their own protective and dispute-resolution structures. Nwozor et al. (2021) make a similar argument, framing the rise of vigilante security measures as symptomatic of a widening gap between the state's constitutional security obligations and its practical capacity to meet them.

Read together, the two theories operate at different points in the same causal chain rather than as two separate explanations placed side by side: social contract theory explains the institutional opening, the state's failure to hold up its side of the bargain, into which community action expands, while frustration–aggression theory explains the psychological trigger that turns that opening into actual mobilization. Schematically, the sequence runs: state failure to protect (a breach of the social contract) → accumulated frustration among farmers and herders → community self-organization, which then bifurcates into either retaliatory vigilante violence or the constructive, peace-building mechanisms that are the subject of this paper, depending on factors such as leadership, inclusiveness, and the presence of a legitimate channel for grievance. Applied to this study's empirical material, the combined framework explains both why community

vigilante action arises and why some of it takes constructive rather than purely retaliatory forms: the same communities that organize for self-defense often have the strongest incentive to prevent conflict from recurring.

Literature Review

A substantial body of literature documents the scale and drivers of the herder–farmer conflict, but comparatively less attention has been paid to the constructive, non-violent efforts of the communities most affected. International Crisis Group (2017) was among the first major reports to recommend strengthening community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, arguing that forums bringing together farmers, pastoralists, community vigilantes, and state security agencies had proved effective both in averting violence and in helping communities recover after conflict. A follow-up report (International Crisis Group, 2018) reiterated the urgency of these measures amid a fresh wave of killings in Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Nasarawa, and Taraba states.

Okpeh et al. (2021) examine the human security implications of the conflict in North Central Nigeria and call for remedies that integrate both formal and informal security actors. Similarly, Muhammed et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence that community policing, neighbourhood watch schemes, and the joint identification of security "dark spots" by community members significantly predict the likelihood of de-escalating herder–farmer conflict and building peace in rural grazing areas. Their study, however, cautions that the deployment of untrained youths into community policing roles can just as easily reignite tension if not carefully managed. Read alongside each other, the two studies agree that informal, community-driven mechanisms matter, but they diverge in emphasis: Okpeh et al. call chiefly for better integration of formal and informal security actors without specifying what makes such integration succeed, whereas Muhammed et al. supply much of the missing operational detail, showing statistically that community policing works only when its youth participants are trained and drawn evenly from both sides of the conflict.

On the specific question of regional and supra-local security responses, Bella and Olanrewaju (2024) trace the emergence of formations such as Operation Amotekun in South-West Nigeria as a response to the inability of federal policing structures to contain herder–farmer violence and related rural crime. Journalistic accounts corroborate this scholarly assessment: TheCable (2025) situates Amotekun within a broader trend of state governments legislating for internal security under their constitutional powers over law and order, in the face of a federal government considered slow to act. At the same time, field reporting complicates the more institutional, scholarly account: HumAngle (2022) shows that the same formalized structures can themselves become parties to violent confrontation with herders, reproducing rather than resolving the violence they were created to contain, a tension that Bella and Olanrewaju's (2024) largely institutional framing does not fully address.

A recurring theme across this literature is the importance of inclusiveness. Paquette (2018), reporting for The Washington Post on vigilante groups in Barkin Ladi, Plateau State, documents a model in which the vigilante corps deliberately recruits both farmers and herders, and both Christians and Muslims, precisely so that no single ethnic or religious group can be accused of bias. This inclusive design is credited with earning the trust of the wider community and enabling the group to mediate disputes that would otherwise escalate into violence. Jibrin and Gayam (2025), studying displacement arising from the conflict in Keana Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, similarly note that community-driven mediation structures, where genuinely representative of both parties, have helped some displaced farming households negotiate a return to their land.

Taken together, the literature suggests that community vigilante and allied structures occupy an ambiguous position: they are simultaneously a symptom of state failure, a potential driver of further violence, and, under the right conditions of inclusiveness, accountability, and coordination with formal security agencies, a genuine resource for conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding. What existing studies have not done, however, is systematically compare these mechanisms against one another to identify the specific conditions (inclusiveness, leadership continuity, legal backing) that determine whether a given community effort de-escalates or re-escalates conflict; this is the gap the present review seeks to fill by treating these mechanisms as a single, comparable set rather than as isolated case studies.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design. Thirteen sources published between 2017 and 2026 were reviewed in depth, comprising international and regional reports (International Crisis Group, the European Union Agency for Asylum), peer-reviewed journal articles on the herder–farmer conflict and community security responses, and reports from reputable news outlets documenting specific community initiatives. Sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar and JSTOR, and through the archives of the news organizations cited, using the search terms "herder-farmer conflict Nigeria", "community vigilante", "Operation Amotekun", and "community policing Nigeria", restricted to material published from 2017 onward to capture the period since Operation Amotekun and comparable state-level responses emerged. A source was judged sufficiently credible for inclusion where it was peer-reviewed, published by an established international or regional organization, or produced by a news outlet with an identifiable editorial process and named authorship. Sources were then analyzed thematically to identify recurring categories of community effort. It should be noted that several sources drawn on in the discussion below are journalistic accounts (Guardian, HumAngle, TheCable, Washington Post) rather than peer-reviewed research; these were used because scholarly publication on specific, recent local initiatives typically lags several years behind events on the ground, and because in each case the journalistic account was corroborated by at least one scholarly or institutional source discussed alongside it. The paper does not claim to be exhaustive of every local initiative across Nigeria's thirty-six states; rather, it aims to illustrate the range and character of such efforts through documented, verifiable cases.

Efforts of Communities and Vigilantes in Managing the Conflict

Beyond the widely reported cases of reprisal violence, communities affected by the herder–farmer conflict have developed several distinct categories of constructive response. These are discussed in turn below.

1 Indigenous and Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

In many rural Nigerian communities, traditional rulers, elders' councils, and clan heads continue to serve as the first line of response to disputes between farmers and herders, often long before any formal government or police involvement. These indigenous mechanisms typically work by summoning both parties before a council of elders, assessing the extent of damage, such as destroyed crops or lost livestock, and negotiating compensation, restitution, or reconciliation between the affected parties.

International Crisis Group (2017) identifies these local, community-based dispute resolution mechanisms as having repeatedly proved effective both in averting violence and in helping communities recover after conflict has occurred. Their value lies particularly in creating a recognized, socially legitimate channel through which grievances can be raised and addressed before they harden into demands for revenge.

Their effectiveness stems largely from social legitimacy rather than legal authority: because they are administered by elders, chiefs, and clan heads whom the community already respects and defers to in everyday life, their rulings often carry more immediate weight and quicker compliance than a formal court judgment, which may take years to resolve and lacks the same social buy-in from disputants. This effectiveness has a structural limit, however: it depends on both parties being rooted in, and accountable to, the same local community. It works reasonably well when a dispute involves a farmer and a herder who both reside in, or regularly pass through, the same area and recognize the same traditional authority, but it becomes far less effective when disputes involve itinerant, non-resident herders who move seasonally across multiple communities and do not consider themselves bound by any single locality's customary institutions, a growing feature of the modern conflict as herders travel further south in search of grazing land (International Crisis Group, 2017).

2 Interfaith and Interethnic Dialogue and Peace Committees

Because the herder–farmer conflict has increasingly acquired a religious and ethnic dimension (Chukwuma, 2020), a number of civil society organizations and community coalitions have established interfaith and interethnic peace committees specifically to keep communication channels open between Christian farming communities and Muslim herding communities. These committees typically bring together religious leaders, women's groups, youth representatives, and local government officials to hold regular dialogue sessions, issue joint statements condemning violence regardless of which side commits it, and organize peace rallies after outbreaks of tension. International Crisis Group (2017) notes that civil society groups and non-governmental organizations have played an important role in promoting such dialogue, citing collaborative reconciliation and stability projects undertaken with state-level peace and conflict management bodies.

Where such committees are sustained over time, they help to prevent the "ethnicization" of what may otherwise be a localized, resource-based dispute, and they create informal early-warning networks: because members are drawn from both communities, rumours of an impending attack can sometimes be intercepted and defused before they translate into actual violence.

3 Inclusive, Joint Farmer–Herder Vigilante Arrangements

Perhaps the most striking category of constructive effort documented in the literature is the emergence of vigilante groups that deliberately include members from both the farming and herding communities, rather than being organized exclusively along ethnic or occupational lines. The most widely documented example is the vigilante corps operating in Barkin Ladi, Plateau State, described by Paquette (2018). This group, drawn from ordinary community members (mechanics, bricklayers, and other tradespeople), includes both Christians and Muslims, and both the Berom (predominantly farmers) and Fulani (predominantly herders) ethnic groups. According to the group's local leader, this composition allows the corps to command a level of trust in the wider community that a purely partisan force could never achieve, because no single ethnic or religious constituency can credibly accuse it of favouritism. State government officials in Plateau have cited this model as one they wish other vigilante groups across the state would emulate (Paquette, 2018).

This kind of joint arrangement performs several peace-building functions simultaneously. It provides a security presence in areas the police cannot adequately cover; it mediates everyday disputes, including non-violent conflicts such as disagreements within women's economic collectives, before they escalate; and, critically, its mixed composition reduces the likelihood that

its own actions will be read as one-sided aggression by either community, which in turn limits the risk of the vigilante group itself becoming a trigger for further reprisals.

4 Community Policing and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes

A further set of community efforts centres on structured community policing and neighbourhood watch schemes that operate in coordination with, rather than as a substitute for, state security agencies. Muhammed et al. (2024), in a survey-based study of herder–farmer communities, found that the use of community policing, neighbourhood watch arrangements, and the cooperative identification of insecure locations ("dark spots") by community members were all statistically associated with a greater likelihood of de-escalating conflict and building peace in rural grazing areas. Their study also found that the nature of inter-ethnic relations and the frequency of interethnic marriage between herder and farmer communities were significant predictors of successful peacebuilding, suggesting that community policing works best where it builds on, rather than replaces, existing social ties between the two groups.

At the same time, Muhammed et al. (2024) caution that the indiscriminate deployment of youths into community policing roles carries its own risk of igniting rather than calming tension, particularly where such youths are poorly trained, unsupervised, or drawn disproportionately from only one of the two conflicting communities. This finding underscores a theme that recurs throughout the literature: the peace-building potential of community security structures depends heavily on how and by whom they are constituted.

5 Regional Security Networks: The Case of Operation Amotekun

At a more formalized level, several state governments have responded to the limitations of federal policing by establishing regional security outfits with an explicit mandate to address, among other things, herder–farmer contentions. Operation Amotekun is a regional security outfit launched on 9 January 2020 by the governors of Nigeria's six South-Western states (including Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, and Ekiti) in response to rising insecurity, including kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, and herder-farmer contentions in the region (TheCable, 2025). Bella and Olanrewaju (2024) classify it as a "supra-vigilante" security measure, a formation that sits between informal community vigilante groups and a full statutory police force, backed by state legislation and expected to coordinate with the Nigeria Police Force and traditional rulers.

Proponents argue that state governments are constitutionally entitled to legislate for internal law and order, distinct from national defence, making Amotekun a lawful response to a security vacuum left by an overstretched federal police force (TheCable, 2025). In practice, Amotekun operatives have responded to distress calls arising from herder-farmer clashes, providing rapid local intervention that federal police often struggle to match in rural areas (HumAngle, 2022).

However, its record is mixed: operatives have themselves been drawn into violent confrontations with herders resulting in fatalities (HumAngle, 2022), and the outfit continues to face funding and logistical shortfalls that limit its overall effectiveness (Guardian, 2026). This suggests that formalization alone does not resolve the underlying risks associated with community-based armed responses; it merely relocates them within a more structured, state-sanctioned framework.

6 Advocacy for Grazing Reserves, Ranching, and Land-Use Reform

A final category of community effort operates less at the level of direct security provision and more at the level of policy advocacy. Farmer associations, herder associations, and community coalitions in several states have engaged in dialogue aimed at persuading state governments to establish designated grazing reserves, promote ranching over open grazing, and clarify land-use

arrangements between the two groups. In some cases, vigilante-adjacent groups have participated directly in these efforts. International Crisis Group (2017) identifies the reform of grazing arrangements and the establishment of grazing reserves as an urgent structural remedy, arguing that community-level security responses alone cannot substitute for a durable settlement of the underlying resource competition. Where local vigilante or community leaders have participated in negotiating such arrangements, for instance, agreements on cattle routes or seasonal grazing corridors, these efforts address the root economic driver of conflict rather than only its violent symptoms.

Taken together, these six categories of community effort, indigenous dispute resolution, interfaith and interethnic dialogue, inclusive joint vigilante arrangements, structured community policing, formalized regional security networks, and policy advocacy for land-use reform, have filled a protection vacuum that formal policing has been slow to address, demonstrated that inclusive, mixed-composition models such as the Barkin Ladi vigilante corps can earn cross-communal trust that partisan forces cannot, and begun, through outfits such as Operation Amotekun, to bring informal community security impulses under a more accountable, state-backed legal framework. None of these mechanisms is sufficient on its own, however, and the following section considers the limitations that cut across all six.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite these contributions, community-based efforts face significant limitations. Ethnic and religious bias remains a persistent risk: vigilante groups organized exclusively along the lines of one community can easily be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as instruments of that community's interest against the other, which can itself become a driver of further conflict rather than a solution to it (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2021). Funding and logistics constraints also limit the effectiveness even of formally constituted outfits like Amotekun, whose operatives have been reported to lack adequate equipment and resources relative to the scale of the security challenge they face (Guardian, 2026).

A further challenge is the absence, in many cases, of a clear legal framework governing the powers, training standards, and accountability of vigilante and community policing structures, which raises the risk of human rights abuses and unchecked use of force. Nwozor et al. (2021) argue that the very rise of vigilante security measures, however necessary a response to state failure, is itself evidence of weakened formal security institutions, and that vigilante structures cannot be a permanent substitute for constitutionally mandated policing. Finally, several of the mechanisms discussed (indigenous councils, interfaith committees, joint vigilante corps) depend heavily on the personal credibility of specific local leaders; where such leadership is absent, contested, or compromised, the mechanism itself tends to lose effectiveness.

The Barkin Ladi model, held up elsewhere in this paper as an example of good practice, is itself not without risk. Because it depends on the sustained goodwill and personal standing of specific local leaders, a change in leadership, a single controversial ruling, or a shift in the composition of the corps over time could just as easily tip the same structure toward the ethnic or religious partisanship it was designed to avoid. Its reputation for inclusiveness has also not been independently verified through systematic data on case outcomes, which means it currently rests more on the testimony of local officials and journalistic reporting than on rigorous evaluation.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the paper offers the following recommendations. First, state and local governments, through State Ministries of Agriculture and the Federal Ministry of Livestock Development's National Livestock Transformation Plan, should actively support and

formalize inclusive, mixed-composition community security models on the pattern documented in Barkin Ladi, rather than tacitly allowing single-community vigilante groups to dominate local security provision. Second, indigenous dispute resolution councils and interfaith peace committees should be integrated into a broader early-warning and early-response architecture coordinated by the Nigeria Police Force Community Relations Committee and state-level ministries responsible for internal security, with formal linkages to state security agencies so that intelligence gathered at the community level can trigger timely official intervention. Third, regional security networks such as Amotekun require clearer legal frameworks, through full implementation of the enabling state laws already passed by the six South-West governments, defining their jurisdiction, training standards, and mechanisms of accountability, together with adequate and sustained funding, to reduce the risk that they become an additional armed party to the conflict rather than a neutral peacekeeping presence. Fourth, government at all levels, working through the National Livestock Transformation Plan and state Ministries of Agriculture, should accelerate the establishment of grazing reserves, ranching schemes, and clear land-use agreements, since community security efforts alone cannot resolve a conflict whose roots lie substantially in resource competition. Finally, continued research and monitoring of community-level interventions, led by university-based conflict research centres in partnership with bodies such as the International Crisis Group, is needed to identify which local models are genuinely reducing violence, so that successful practices can be documented and replicated in other affected states.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the herder–farmer conflict in Nigeria cannot be fully understood through the lens of reprisal and armed vigilantism alone; a fuller picture must also account for the range of constructive efforts, indigenous dispute resolution, interfaith dialogue, inclusive joint security arrangements, structured community policing, formalized regional networks, and land-use advocacy, that communities have built in parallel. These efforts have, in documented cases, reduced violence and rebuilt trust, but their success depends on inclusiveness, adequate resourcing, clear accountability, and genuine coordination with formal state institutions rather than occurring automatically.

This review has two specific limitations that should qualify how its findings are used. First, it is a desk-based synthesis of secondary literature, government and civil society reports, and news sources; it does not draw on original fieldwork, interviews, or survey data, and so cannot independently verify claims, such as the degree of inclusiveness within the Barkin Ladi vigilante corps, that rest on the testimony of local officials or journalists. Second, because it is a review, it necessarily privileges community initiatives that have already attracted scholarly or media attention, and may therefore underrepresent smaller or less-publicized local efforts. Future research should address both gaps directly, through comparative field studies, combining household surveys, interviews with vigilante leadership, and administrative data on incident rates, across a sample of both inclusive and non-inclusive community security structures, in order to test empirically whether inclusiveness and formal-informal coordination actually produce the peace-building outcomes this review has attributed to them.

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