

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN FARMER-HERDER CRISES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL AND STATE-LED APPROACHES IN NASARAWA STATE, 2015-2023

\*Moses Samuel Adigizi<sup>1</sup> & Abubakar Musa Agwai II<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>*Department of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State*  
*Correspondent's Email: mosesadigizi413@gmail.com*

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined conflict management strategies in farmer-herder crises through a comparative analysis of traditional and state-led approaches in Nasarawa State between 2015 and 2023. The study adopted a qualitative research design and relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were obtained through twenty-four (24) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) purposively conducted across nine Local Government Areas of Nasarawa State, namely Lafia, Doma, Keana, Keffi, Karu, Toto, Akwanga, Nasarawa Eggon, and Wamba. Respondents comprised traditional rulers, community leaders, farmer association leaders, pastoralist representatives, security personnel, local government officials, members of peace committees, and officials of relevant government ministries. Thematic saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, while three additional interviews were conducted to validate emerging themes and ensure data reliability. Secondary data were sourced from textbooks, journal articles, government publications, policy documents, reports of international organisations, conference papers, and credible media sources. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa State are primarily driven by competition over land and water resources, population growth, climate change, destruction of farmlands by cattle, cattle rustling, weak enforcement of grazing regulations, and the proliferation of small arms. The study further found that traditional approaches such as mediation by traditional rulers, community dialogue, customary arbitration, and reconciliation mechanisms enjoy greater local legitimacy and acceptance among disputing parties. The study concluded that neither traditional nor state-led approaches alone can effectively address farmer-herder conflicts. Rather, a complementary and integrated framework that combines the legitimacy of traditional institutions with the enforcement capacity of the state offers the most sustainable pathway for conflict management and rural peacebuilding in Nasarawa State.

**Keywords:** Farmer-herder conflict, conflict management, traditional institutions, state-led approaches, conflict transformation theory

## Introduction

Farmer-herder conflicts have emerged as one of the most persistent and violent forms of communal conflict in Nigeria, particularly in the North-Central region where Nasarawa State is located. These conflicts are largely driven by competition over scarce natural resources such as land and water, exacerbated by climate change, population growth and changing patterns of land use. Traditionally, pastoralist herders and sedentary farmers coexisted through mutually beneficial arrangements; however, increasing environmental pressures and socio-political dynamics have intensified tensions, leading to frequent clashes, loss of lives, displacement of communities and destruction of livelihoods (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Between 2015 and 2023, Nasarawa State witnessed recurring farmer-herder crises, making it a critical case for examining conflict management strategies.

Conflict management in this context has taken two major forms: traditional approaches rooted in indigenous institutions and customs, and state-led approaches driven by formal government structures and security agencies. Traditional mechanisms involve the roles of community leaders, traditional rulers and elders who mediate disputes using culturally accepted norms and practices. These approaches are often valued for their accessibility, legitimacy and emphasis on reconciliation. On the other hand, state-led approaches include interventions by security forces, government policies, judicial processes and formal peacebuilding initiatives. While these approaches are designed to enforce law and order, they are sometimes criticised for being reactive, bureaucratic and disconnected from local realities.

Farmer-herder conflicts in North-Central Nigeria have increasingly been linked to environmental pressures, resource scarcity, and contestations over access to land and water resources. Recent evidence suggests that addressing these underlying structural drivers can significantly reduce the incidence of violent confrontations. For instance, the implementation of the Agro-Climatic Resilience in Semi-Arid Landscapes (ACReSAL) Project in Nasarawa State has demonstrated the importance of resource-based interventions in conflict mitigation. Through the provision of solar-powered boreholes and improved water infrastructure across several conflict-prone communities, the project enhanced access to water for both farming and pastoral activities, thereby reducing competition over scarce resources. Community leaders in beneficiary communities reported that improved water access contributed substantially to peaceful coexistence, with some communities describing 2024 as a relatively conflict-free period compared to previous years (Vanguard, 2024). This development reinforces the argument that many farmer-herder conflicts are not merely ethnic or cultural disputes but are rooted in competition over essential livelihood resources. Consequently, sustainable conflict management requires not only security responses but also investments in rural infrastructure, environmental management, and climate adaptation programmes.

Similarly, recent scholarship has drawn attention to the complex interplay between territorial claims, indigeneity politics, and resource competition in shaping farmer-herder conflicts within the Benue-Nasarawa axis. Nwankwo (2024) argues that beyond environmental pressures, conflicts are increasingly fuelled by competing claims of belonging, territorial ownership, and political exclusion among different communities. According to the study, the construction of indigene-settler identities often transforms resource disputes into broader political conflicts, thereby complicating efforts at peaceful resolution. This perspective is particularly relevant to Nasarawa State where questions of land ownership, community boundaries, and political representation frequently intersect with disputes between farmers and pastoralists. The implication is that effective conflict management must address both the material causes of conflict, such as

access to land and water, and the socio-political factors that shape group relations and perceptions of exclusion (Nwankwo, 2024).

These contemporary developments underscore the need for a comparative assessment of traditional and state-led conflict management approaches in Nasarawa State. While traditional institutions continue to provide locally accepted mechanisms for mediation and reconciliation, state-led interventions remain important for enforcing legal frameworks and addressing structural drivers of conflict. Understanding the relative strengths and limitations of these approaches is therefore critical for developing sustainable peacebuilding strategies in the state.

Despite numerous interventions, the persistence of farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa State raises critical questions about the effectiveness of existing conflict management strategies. There appears to be a gap between policy responses and the realities on the ground, particularly in terms of coordination, sustainability and community acceptance. Moreover, limited comparative analysis exists on how traditional and state-led approaches interact, complement or contradict each other in managing these conflicts. This gap necessitates a systematic investigation into the relative effectiveness of these approaches.

The broad objective of this study is to comparatively examine traditional and state-led conflict management strategies in addressing farmer-herder crises in Nasarawa State between 2015 and 2023. Specifically, the study seeks to: examine the nature and causes of farmer-herder conflicts in the study area; analyse traditional conflict management mechanisms and their effectiveness; assess state-led conflict management strategies and their outcomes; and compare both approaches to determine their strengths, weaknesses, and implications for sustainable peace.

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **Farmer-Herder Conflict**

Farmer-herder conflict refers to violent or non-violent disputes between sedentary agricultural farmers and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists over access to natural resources such as land, water and grazing routes. These conflicts are often rooted in competition over scarce resources, environmental degradation, population pressure and breakdown of traditional resource-sharing arrangements (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). In Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts have intensified due to climate change, desertification in the northern regions and the southward movement of pastoralists in search of pasture and water (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). These conflicts are not merely economic but are increasingly shaped by ethnic, religious and political dimensions, making them more complex and difficult to manage. The consequences include loss of lives, displacement, food insecurity and disruption of rural livelihoods.

#### **Conflict Management**

Conflict management refers to the processes and strategies employed to limit, contain, or resolve conflicts in ways that reduce violence and promote peaceful coexistence. It differs from conflict resolution in that it does not necessarily eliminate the root causes of conflict but seeks to control and mitigate its negative effects (Jeong, 2008). Conflict management involves a range of approaches, including negotiation, mediation, arbitration, peacekeeping and institutional interventions. In the context of farmer-herder crises, effective conflict management requires both preventive and reactive measures, addressing immediate tensions while also tackling underlying structural causes such as resource scarcity and governance failures.

Recent studies have introduced important distinctions in the understanding of conflict management interventions in farmer-herder relations. One notable contribution is the study conducted by the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) in 2025, which examined the effectiveness of dialogue-based interventions in communities affected by farmer-herder tensions in Nigeria. The

study distinguished between inter-dialogue workshops, which involved explicit discussions about intergroup grievances, tensions, and conflict resolution, and health workshops, which served as control interventions by bringing participants together around common public health concerns without directly addressing conflict issues. Interestingly, the findings revealed that both intervention types contributed to reductions in hostility and improved intergroup relations, albeit through different mechanisms. While inter-dialogue workshops promoted trust-building through direct engagement with contentious issues, health workshops fostered cooperation indirectly by creating opportunities for positive social interaction and collective problem-solving. This finding suggests that conflict management can be achieved not only through direct mediation and negotiation but also through broader community engagement initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and interpersonal trust. The implication for Nasarawa State is that effective conflict management may require a combination of explicit dialogue mechanisms and developmental interventions that encourage sustained interaction between farmers and herders.

### **Traditional Conflict Management Mechanisms**

Traditional conflict management mechanisms are indigenous methods of resolving disputes based on customary laws, cultural practices and community norms. These mechanisms often involve the roles of traditional rulers, elders, religious leaders and community-based institutions. According to John Paul Lederach (1997) local actors and indigenous systems play a crucial role in sustainable peacebuilding because they are deeply rooted in the social fabric of communities. Traditional approaches emphasise reconciliation, restoration of relationships and communal harmony rather than punishment. In many African societies, rural Nigeria inclusive, these mechanisms are valued for their accessibility, legitimacy and cost-effectiveness. However, they may face limitations such as lack of formal enforcement power, gender bias and reduced influence in modern state systems.

The significance of dialogue-based approaches further reinforces the relevance of traditional conflict management institutions in Nasarawa State. Traditional rulers, community elders, religious leaders, and local peace committees often create platforms where disputing parties engage in face-to-face discussions, clarify grievances, negotiate compensation arrangements, and rebuild fractured relationships. Such processes resemble the inter-dialogue mechanisms identified by the IPA study and demonstrate why locally driven approaches often enjoy greater legitimacy and acceptance among rural populations. At the same time, the findings suggest that developmental initiatives such as water projects, agricultural support programmes, and community health interventions can also serve as indirect conflict management tools by reducing competition over resources and encouraging cooperative interactions among previously antagonistic groups.

Empirical evidence from other parts of Nigeria also provides useful comparative benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of traditional and state-led interventions. A 2025 study on third-party intervention in farmer-herder conflicts in Kwara State found that community-led mediation was perceived as fairly effective by 48.7 per cent of respondents, whereas government peace committees were considered ineffective by 47.6 per cent of respondents. More strikingly, 59.3 per cent of respondents viewed security-based interventions as ineffective in producing sustainable peace. The study attributed the relative success of community-led mediation to its cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and reliance on local knowledge, while the poor performance of government and security interventions was linked to bureaucratic delays, inadequate trust, political interference, and weak implementation mechanisms. These findings provide quantitative support for arguments frequently advanced in the literature that locally embedded conflict management structures often command greater public confidence than externally imposed state mechanisms.

The Kwara findings are particularly relevant to the Nasarawa context because they mirror patterns observed across many farmer-herder conflict zones in North-Central Nigeria. Traditional institutions tend to emphasise reconciliation, restitution, and relationship rebuilding, whereas state-led interventions frequently focus on law enforcement, military deployment, and judicial processes. While security deployments may be necessary during periods of acute violence, their effectiveness is often constrained by limited local legitimacy and an inability to address the underlying socio-economic and environmental drivers of conflict. Consequently, the growing body of empirical evidence suggests that sustainable conflict management is more likely to emerge from hybrid approaches that combine the enforcement capacity of the state with the legitimacy, flexibility, and community acceptance of traditional institutions.

### **State-Led Conflict Management Approaches**

State-led conflict management refers to formal interventions by government institutions aimed at preventing, managing or resolving conflicts. These include the use of security agencies (such as the police and military), judicial processes, policy frameworks and peacebuilding initiatives. In Nigeria, state-led approaches to farmer-herder conflicts often involve the deployment of security forces, establishment of judicial panels, enactment of anti-open grazing laws and creation of peace committees (International Crisis Group, 2018). These approaches are essential for maintaining law and order and enforcing legal frameworks. However, they are often criticised for being reactive, bureaucratic and sometimes lacking local legitimacy. In some cases, excessive use of force or perceived bias by state actors can exacerbate tensions rather than resolve them.

### **Theoretical Framework: Conflict Transformation Theory**

The study is anchored on Conflict Transformation Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing protracted social conflicts such as farmer-herder crises. The theory is prominently associated with scholars such as John Paul Lederach, Johan Galtung and Hugh Miall, who emphasized the need to move beyond short-term conflict resolution toward long-term structural and relational change. The central idea of Conflict Transformation Theory is that conflicts are not merely problems to be resolved but social phenomena that can be transformed into opportunities for constructive change by addressing underlying causes, relationships and systemic inequalities (Lederach, 1997). Rather than focusing solely on ending violence, the theory seeks to transform the attitudes, behaviours and structures that sustain conflict.

The basic assumptions of the theory are the notion that conflicts are inevitable and often rooted in deep-seated structural, cultural and relational factors; that sustainable peace requires addressing these root causes rather than just managing symptoms; and that local actors and indigenous mechanisms play a critical role in transforming conflicts. The theory also assumed that effective conflict management must be inclusive, participatory and sensitive to the socio-cultural context of the affected communities.

Although Conflict Transformation Theory has gained considerable acceptance in peace and conflict studies, several scholars have criticised its practical application in highly volatile and deeply polarised conflict environments. Critics argue that the theory tends to be overly idealistic in its assumption that conflicting parties are willing to engage in sustained dialogue and relationship-building processes. In contexts characterised by recurring violence, weak institutions, widespread mistrust, and the proliferation of arms, creating the conditions necessary for meaningful transformation can be extremely difficult. Furthermore, the long-term nature of conflict transformation often conflicts with the immediate security demands of communities

experiencing violent attacks, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. As a result, some scholars contend that the theory may underestimate the importance of coercive measures and state security interventions in restoring order before transformative processes can take place.

Recent empirical evidence from Nigeria both supports and refines this critique. A 2025 study on herder-farmer conflict management in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State found that the erosion of traditional conflict resolution institutions and the limitations of state-led interventions significantly contributed to the persistence of insecurity in the area. The study observed that traditional institutions that previously mediated disputes and facilitated reconciliation had gradually lost influence due to political interference, changing social structures, and declining community trust. At the same time, state responses were largely reactive, focusing on military deployments and emergency interventions rather than addressing the structural causes of conflict. The authors concluded that neither traditional nor state-led approaches alone were sufficient to achieve sustainable peace and advocated a hybrid framework that combines community-based mediation with formal state mechanisms. This finding strongly reinforces Lederach's argument that sustainable peace requires the transformation of relationships and institutions rather than the mere suppression of violence.

Similarly, a 2025 study on third-party interventions in farmer-herder conflicts in Kwara State provides additional support for the theoretical assumptions of Conflict Transformation Theory. The study found that although interventions by traditional rulers, peace committees, security agencies, and government institutions contributed to reducing the intensity of violence, they did not fully resolve the conflict because the underlying issues driving the disputes remained largely unaddressed. Problems such as competition over land, access to water resources, identity-based tensions, livelihood insecurity, and mutual distrust continued to persist despite repeated interventions. The study therefore concluded that third-party interventions had succeeded in managing conflict symptoms but had fallen short of transforming the structural and relational conditions that sustain conflict. This finding aligns closely with Lederach's contention that genuine peacebuilding requires addressing root causes, rebuilding relationships, and creating institutional arrangements that promote long-term coexistence.

The relevance of Conflict Transformation Theory to this study is therefore strengthened by these contemporary findings. The farmer-herder crisis in Nasarawa State is not merely a dispute over land and grazing routes but a complex conflict involving environmental pressures, economic competition, identity politics, governance challenges, and historical grievances. Consequently, approaches that focus exclusively on security enforcement or temporary dispute settlement are unlikely to produce sustainable peace. The theory provides a useful framework for understanding why conflict management efforts must extend beyond crisis response to include reconciliation, trust-building, institutional reform, and socio-economic interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict.

The application of the theory to this study further highlights the necessity of integrating traditional and state-led approaches in conflict management. Traditional institutions possess local legitimacy, cultural authority, and intimate knowledge of community dynamics, while state institutions provide legal authority, enforcement capacity, and access to broader policy resources. Evidence from both the Katsina-Ala and Kwara studies suggests that sustainable conflict management is most likely to emerge when these complementary strengths are combined within a coherent and collaborative framework. Such a hybrid approach reflects the central proposition of Conflict Transformation Theory that durable peace can only be achieved through the simultaneous transformation of relationships, structures, and institutions that perpetuate conflict.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine conflict management strategies in farmer-herder crises through a comparative analysis of traditional and state-led approaches in Nasarawa State between 2015 and 2023. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in conflict management processes. Qualitative research enables the exploration of social realities within their natural contexts and provides rich insights into complex phenomena such as communal conflict, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution mechanisms (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were obtained through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), while secondary data were sourced from textbooks, scholarly journal articles, government publications, policy documents, reports of non-governmental organisations, conference proceedings, newspaper publications, and relevant online materials relating to farmer-herder conflicts and conflict management in Nigeria and Nasarawa State in particular.

The study was conducted in five Local Government Areas of Nasarawa State that have experienced recurring incidents of farmer-herder conflicts. These include Lafia, Keana and Doma in Nasarawa South Senatorial District, Keffi, Karu and Toto in Nasarawa West Senatorial District, and Akwanga, Nasarawa Eggon and Wamba in Nasarawa North Senatorial District. These areas were purposively selected because of their long history of interactions and conflicts between farming and pastoral communities as well as the presence of both traditional and state-led conflict management interventions.

A total of thirty (24) Key Informant Interviews were conducted. The respondents were selected purposively based on their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in conflict management processes within their respective communities. The interview participants comprised four traditional rulers, four community leaders, four security personnel, four government officials involved in peacebuilding and rural administration, four representatives of farmers' associations, and four representatives of pastoralist groups. This distribution was designed to ensure that diverse perspectives on the causes of conflict and conflict management approaches were adequately captured.

The selection of respondents followed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify key stakeholders occupying strategic positions in conflict management processes, while snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional knowledgeable respondents through referrals from initial participants. This approach was particularly useful in accessing pastoralist leaders and community actors who possessed extensive knowledge of conflict dynamics but were not easily identifiable through official channels.

Data collection was undertaken between January and March 2025. Semi-structured interview guides were used to facilitate discussions while allowing respondents the flexibility to elaborate on issues they considered important. The interviews were conducted primarily in English and Hausa languages, depending on the preference of respondents. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. With the consent of participants, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of information. In situations where respondents preferred not to be recorded, detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews.

The study adhered to ethical principles governing social science research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation was sought before

interviews commenced. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and respondents were informed that information provided would be used solely for academic purposes. To protect identities, respondents were referenced in the study using generic identifiers such as "Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025" rather than personal names.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The first phase involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts. The second phase involved generating initial codes from meaningful segments of text. The third phase focused on searching for themes by grouping related codes into broader categories. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and consistency. The fifth phase consisted of defining and naming themes, while the sixth phase involved producing and presenting the final analysis.

The coding framework incorporated both a priori and emergent themes. A priori themes were derived from the study objectives and included the nature and causes of farmer-herder conflicts, traditional conflict management strategies, state-led conflict management approaches, and comparative effectiveness of traditional and state-led mechanisms. Emergent themes that arose during analysis included climate-induced migration, political interference, declining authority of traditional institutions, youth involvement in violence, and challenges of policy implementation.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several measures were adopted. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of primary and secondary data sources. Member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of key findings with selected respondents to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was enhanced through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. Peer debriefing was also undertaken with colleagues knowledgeable in peace and conflict studies to review coding decisions and thematic interpretations. Furthermore, thematic saturation was reached after the twenty-seventh interview, indicating that no substantially new information was emerging. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and strengthen the reliability of the findings.

The methodological approach adopted in this study provided a rigorous framework for understanding the complexities of farmer-herder conflicts and assessing the relative effectiveness of traditional and state-led conflict management strategies in Nasarawa State. Through the integration of multiple stakeholder perspectives and systematic thematic analysis, the study generated rich empirical evidence capable of informing policy and practice in conflict management and peacebuilding.

### **Nature and Causes of Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nasarawa State**

The nature of farmer-herder conflict in Nasarawa State is complex, protracted and increasingly violent, characterised by recurrent clashes between sedentary farming communities and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists. The conflict has evolved from what was historically a manageable resource-based dispute into a multidimensional crisis involving economic, environmental, ethnic and political dimensions. One of the dominant features of the conflict is its cyclical nature, often intensifying during the dry season when pastoralists migrate southward in search of pasture and water, thereby encroaching on farmlands. A community leader interviewed in Doma Local Government Area emphasised that; "These conflicts are no longer like before when elders could settle them easily. Now, they come with weapons and once crops are destroyed, it turns violent immediately. Every farming season, we expect clashes" (Key Informant Interview, Doma, 2025). This is in line with the argument of Okoli and Atelhe (2014) that farmer-herder

conflicts in the region have transformed into violent confrontations due to the breakdown of traditional conflict regulation mechanisms and the proliferation of arms.

A major cause of the conflict is competition over land and natural resources, which has intensified due to population growth and agricultural expansion. As farming communities expand cultivation into previously designated grazing routes, pastoralists are left with limited access to pasture, leading to frequent encroachments and disputes. A pastoralist leader in Keana noted that; “The grazing routes we used before have been taken over by farms. We have no option but to pass through these areas, and when animals destroy crops, conflict becomes inevitable” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025). This observation corroborates the political ecology perspective advanced by Benjaminsen and Ba (2019), which links resource scarcity and environmental pressure to the escalation of farmer-herder conflicts in Africa.

Closely related to resource competition is the role of climate change and environmental degradation. Desertification and declining rainfall in northern Nigeria have forced herders to migrate southward into the Middle Belt, Nasarawa State inclusive. This ecological pressure has increased the frequency and intensity of interactions between farmers and herders. A government agricultural officer interviewed stated; “What we are seeing is largely environmental. The north is drying up, and herders are moving downwards. But the land here is already under pressure, so conflicts are unavoidable” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). Scholars such as Adisa (2012) argued that climate-induced migration is a key driver of farmer-herder conflicts, as it disrupts traditional patterns of coexistence and intensifies competition for limited resources.

Environmental degradation and climate variability emerged prominently from both the interviews and documentary evidence as important drivers of farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa State. Respondents consistently linked declining access to water resources, shrinking grazing lands, and changing rainfall patterns to increased competition between farmers and pastoralists. However, recent developments in the state also demonstrate that addressing resource scarcity can significantly reduce the incidence of violent conflict. A notable example is the implementation of the Agro-Climatic Resilience in Semi-Arid Landscapes (ACReSAL) Project in several communities across Nasarawa State. Through the provision of solar-powered boreholes and improved water infrastructure in seventeen rural communities, the project reduced pressure on scarce water sources that had historically generated tensions between farming and pastoral communities. Community leaders reported that the improved access to water substantially reduced disputes over watering points and contributed to peaceful coexistence, with some beneficiaries describing 2024 as one of the most peaceful years in recent memory (Vanguard, 2024). This finding lends support to the argument that many farmer-herder conflicts are rooted in livelihood insecurity and resource scarcity rather than purely ethnic or religious differences. Consequently, sustainable conflict management requires greater attention to environmental governance, climate adaptation, and rural infrastructure development alongside conventional security responses.

This perspective was echoed by a community leader in Keana who stated:

Many people talk about ethnicity and politics, but in reality most conflicts start when resources become scarce. During the dry season, both farmers and herders struggle for access to the same water points. Since the new boreholes were provided in some communities, tensions have reduced considerably because people are no longer competing for every available source of water. When resources are available, there is less reason for conflict. (KII, Keana, 2025)

The testimony reinforces broader scholarly arguments that environmental scarcity and climate-induced resource competition constitute significant underlying drivers of communal conflicts across Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

Beyond environmental factors, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of territorial politics and boundary disputes in shaping the dynamics of farmer-herder conflicts. While competition over land is often presented as an economic issue, evidence suggests that disputes over territorial ownership frequently intersect with questions of identity, indigeneity, and political representation. Nwankwo (2024), in a study of the Benue-Nasarawa region, found that informal boundary disputes between communities often escalated and were themselves intensified by farmer-herder conflicts. The study argues that competing claims to land ownership and community boundaries transform resource disputes into broader political contests over belonging and territorial control. This finding is particularly relevant to Nasarawa State where several communities along the Benue-Nasarawa axis have experienced recurrent disputes over farmland, grazing routes, and settlement rights.

A government official interviewed in Doma observed that:

Some of the conflicts we witness are no longer simply between farmers and herders. Communities now dispute where boundaries begin and end, who owns certain lands, and who has the right to settle in particular areas. Once these issues become linked to ethnic identity and political representation, the conflict becomes much more difficult to resolve because it is no longer just about cattle destroying crops. (KII, Doma, 2025)

The implication is that farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa State should be understood not only as struggles over economic resources but also as contests over territory, identity, and political inclusion. Such complexities require conflict management approaches that address both material and socio-political dimensions of the crisis.

The findings also revealed that the gradual weakening of traditional conflict management institutions has contributed to the persistence of farmer-herder conflicts. Several respondents lamented the declining influence of traditional rulers, elders, and customary authorities who historically mediated disputes and enforced local agreements. The erosion of respect for traditional authority was frequently attributed to youth militancy, political interference, changing social values, and the proliferation of arms. As one traditional ruler in Lafia noted, "many youths no longer respect traditional authority as they used to in the past" (KII, Lafia, 2025). This observation is consistent with findings from a federally reviewed doctoral thesis at the Federal University of Technology Minna, which identified distrust, leadership challenges, and socio-political factors as major obstacles to the effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in managing farmer-herder disputes.

Similarly, recent evidence from Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State indicates that farmer-herder conflicts have evolved from seasonal disagreements over resource use into systemic and often deadly confrontations due in part to the weakening of traditional conflict resolution structures. Aondohemba, Ugbede, and Shawa (2025) found that the erosion of customary institutions reduced the capacity of communities to resolve disputes before they escalated into violence. This development mirrors experiences in many parts of Nasarawa State where traditional mechanisms that once regulated access to land, grazing routes, and water resources have become less effective. The convergence of these findings suggests that rebuilding the legitimacy and capacity of traditional institutions should form an important component of future conflict management strategies.

Another significant cause is the breakdown of traditional conflict management institutions, which historically regulated interactions between farmers and herders. In the past, traditional rulers and community elders played a central role in mediating disputes and enforcing agreements. However, these institutions have weakened over time due to modernisation, politicisation and loss of authority. A traditional ruler in Lafia remarked that; “Before, once we called both sides, they would listen and settle. Now, many youths do not respect traditional authority, and conflicts escalate beyond our control” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This agrees with Lederach’s (1997) who argued that the erosion of local peace structures undermines sustainable conflict management and contributes to the persistence of violence.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has further intensified the violent nature of the conflict. What were once minor disputes have now escalated into deadly confrontations due to the availability of firearms among both farmers and herders. A security official interviewed in Wamba Local Government Area observed that; “The presence of weapons has changed everything. Disputes that should be resolved peacefully now result in killings because both sides are armed” (Key Informant Interview, Wamba, 2025). This finding is consistent with the work of the International Crisis Group (2018), which highlighted the role of arms proliferation in escalating communal conflicts across Nigeria.

In addition, ethnic and identity tensions have increasingly shaped the conflict, transforming it from a purely economic dispute into a socio-political crisis. Farmer-herder conflicts are often framed along ethnic and religious lines, which deepens mistrust and complicates resolution efforts. A youth leader in Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area stated that; “It is no longer just about cows and crops. People now see it as one ethnic group against another, and that makes reconciliation very difficult” (Key Informant Interview, Nasarawa Eggon, 2025). This supported the argument by Abbass (2012) that identity politics plays a significant role in the escalation and persistence of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria.

Again, weak governance and inadequate state response have contributed significantly to the persistence of the conflict. Delayed or ineffective interventions by government authorities often allow conflicts to escalate before any meaningful action is taken. A local government official noted that; “Government usually reacts after violence has already occurred. There is little effort in prevention, and that is why the problem keeps recurring” (Key Informant Interview, Nasarawa Eggon, 2025). This is in agreement with the view of Adebayo (2020) that weak institutional capacity and reactive governance approaches undermine effective conflict management in Nigeria.

#### **Traditional Conflict Management Strategies in Farmer–Herder Crises in Nasarawa State**

Traditional conflict management strategies in Nasarawa State constitute a vital component of local peacebuilding efforts, rooted in indigenous institutions, customs and socio-cultural norms. These mechanisms are primarily community-driven and involve the active participation of traditional rulers, elders, religious leaders, and other respected figures who mediate disputes between farmers and herders. One of the defining features of traditional approaches is their emphasis on dialogue, reconciliation, and restoration of social harmony rather than punitive measures. A traditional ruler in Keffi opined; “When conflicts arise, we call both parties and listen to them carefully. Our aim is not to punish but to restore peace so that they can continue living together” (Key Informant Interview, Keffi, 2025). This is in line with the argument by Lederach (1997) that indigenous conflict resolution systems prioritise relationship-building and long-term peace over short-term settlements.

One of the most prominent traditional strategies is mediation by traditional rulers and council of elders. These actors serve as neutral arbiters who facilitate dialogue between conflicting

parties and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions. Their authority is derived from cultural legitimacy and community trust, which often enhances compliance with agreements reached. A respondent who is a community elder in Akwanga Local Government Area noted that; “People respect the decisions of the elders because they know we understand the history of the land and the relationship between the groups” (Key Informant Interview, Akwanga, 2025). Scholarly studies such as Adebayo 2020, affirmed that traditional institutions often possess contextual knowledge and moral authority that enable them to manage conflicts more effectively at the grassroots level.

Another important traditional mechanism is the use of customary arbitration and compensation systems, where disputes particularly those involving crop damage or loss of livestock are resolved through agreed compensation rather than escalation into violence. This approach helps to de-escalate tensions and maintain social balance. In this regard, a farmer in Doma stated that; “If cows destroy crops, the elders assess the damage and ask the herder to compensate. Once that is done, the matter is settled” (Key Informant Interview, Doma, 2025). This agreed with the findings of Okoli and Atelhe (2014), who noted that compensation-based systems have historically been effective in preventing escalation of farmer–herder disputes.

Traditional strategies also involve the use of dialogue forums and community peace meetings, where both farmers and herders engage in open discussions to address grievances and agree on rules governing resource use. These forums often serve as preventive mechanisms by fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. A respondent who is a Fulani leader in Awe Local Government Area remarked that; “We have regular meetings with farmers to discuss grazing routes and farming boundaries. When there is communication, conflicts reduce” (Key Informant Interview, Toto, 2025). Lederach (1997) averred that such participatory approaches are consistent with community-based conflict management models that emphasised inclusiveness and local ownership of peace processes.

Religious leaders and institutions also play a complementary role in traditional conflict management by promoting messages of peace, tolerance and coexistence. Given the strong influence of religion in rural communities, religious leaders often act as mediators and moral guides during conflicts. A key informant who is a religious leader in Lafia noted that; “We preach peace and bring both sides together because religion teaches us to live in harmony. People listen when it comes from a spiritual perspective” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This agrees with the argument put forward by Adebayo (2020), that faith-based interventions can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of conflict resolution efforts in deeply religious societies.

While the findings of this study indicated that traditional conflict management mechanisms enjoy considerable legitimacy and acceptance among rural communities in Nasarawa State, it is important to recognise that these mechanisms are not without limitations. Empirical evidence from a doctoral thesis conducted at the Federal University of Technology, Minna on farmer-pastoralist conflicts in North-Central Nigeria found that traditional conflict resolution (TCR) mechanisms such as mediation by elders were generally perceived as effective, with mediation by elders recording a mean effectiveness score of 2.57. However, the study also identified significant challenges undermining the effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution systems, including distrust among conflicting parties, leadership-related problems, political interference, cultural differences, and declining confidence in traditional authorities. The study concluded that although traditional institutions continue to play important peacebuilding roles, their effectiveness is increasingly constrained by changing socio-political realities and the complexity of contemporary farmer-herder conflicts.

These findings resonate with observations from several key informants interviewed during this study. A traditional ruler in Keana remarked that:

In the past, when elders summoned both parties, they usually respected the decision because traditional authority was widely recognised. Today, the situation is different. Some groups question the neutrality of traditional leaders, while others believe political interests influence local decisions. This has reduced the effectiveness of some traditional interventions compared to previous decades. (KII, Keana, 2025)

The statement highlights one of the major challenges facing traditional conflict management institutions, namely the erosion of trust and authority that once enabled them to resolve disputes quickly and effectively.

Similarly, comparative evidence from a 2025 study on third-party interventions in farmer-herder conflicts in Kwara State suggests that community-based mediation, although valuable, should not be romanticised as a complete solution to the conflict. The study found that only 48.7 per cent of respondents perceived community-led mediation as fairly effective, while many respondents expressed concerns about the inability of local mediation processes to address deeper structural issues such as land scarcity, livelihood insecurity, political manipulation, and environmental pressures. The researchers concluded that community-led interventions often succeed in de-escalating immediate tensions but frequently struggle to produce lasting resolutions where underlying grievances remain unresolved. This finding suggests that traditional approaches should be viewed as important components of conflict management rather than standalone solutions.

Another emerging issue identified in recent discussions among pastoralist communities is the role of education in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Leaders of pastoralist associations in Nasarawa State have increasingly advocated the revival and strengthening of nomadic education programmes as part of broader efforts to address the root causes of farmer-herder conflicts. According to these leaders, ignorance, illiteracy, misinformation, and limited awareness of legal regulations governing land use and grazing often contribute to misunderstandings and hostility between farmers and herders. The call for the revitalisation of nomadic schools reflects a growing recognition that conflict management requires not only mediation and reconciliation but also long-term investments in education, awareness creation, and social integration.

A pastoralist leader interviewed in Akwanga explained that:

Many conflicts occur because people do not fully understand one another. Some young herders have little access to formal education and are unaware of laws relating to grazing routes, land rights, or peaceful dispute resolution. Reviving nomadic education would help build understanding, improve communication with farming communities, and reduce the ignorance that often fuels conflict. (KII, Akwanga, 2025)

This perspective demonstrates that even proponents of traditional conflict management increasingly acknowledge the need to complement customary mechanisms with formal educational and developmental interventions.

The growing advocacy for nomadic education therefore points towards a hybrid conflict management framework that combines the strengths of traditional institutions with formal state-supported programmes. While traditional leaders can facilitate mediation, reconciliation, and community dialogue, educational initiatives can address knowledge deficits, promote intergroup understanding, and equip younger generations with skills necessary for peaceful coexistence.

Consequently, sustainable conflict management in Nasarawa State is likely to require a combination of traditional authority, state support, educational interventions, and socio-economic development programmes rather than reliance on any single approach.

### **State-Led Conflict Management Strategies in Farmer-Herder Crises in Nasarawa State**

State-led conflict management strategies in Nasarawa State involve formal interventions by government institutions aimed at preventing, controlling and resolving farmer-herder conflicts. These strategies are typically implemented through security agencies, policy frameworks, administrative mechanisms and judicial processes. One of the most prominent features of state-led approaches is the deployment of security forces, such as the police, military and other paramilitary agencies, to restore law and order during violent outbreaks. An informant who is a security official in Lafia noted that; “Whenever there is a crisis, we are deployed to separate the groups and stabilize the area. Our primary role is to stop the violence and prevent further escalation” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This supports the argument of the International Crisis Group (2018) that state security interventions in Nigeria are often reactive, focusing on immediate containment of violence rather than long-term prevention.

Another important strategy is the establishment of government-led peace committees and conflict resolution panels at state and local government levels. These committees typically comprise government officials, traditional leaders, security representatives and community stakeholders who work together to mediate disputes and propose solutions. A respondent who is a local government administrator in Keffi explained that; “We have peace committees that bring together farmers and herders to discuss issues and find common ground. These committees help to reduce tensions when they are properly supported” (Key Informant Interview, Keffi, 2025). Adebayo (2020) asserted that such institutional arrangements reflect formalised efforts to incorporate dialogue into state-led conflict management, although their effectiveness often depends on political will and resource availability.

State governments have also introduced policy and legislative measures aimed at regulating interactions between farmers and herders. These include policies on land use, grazing reserves, and, in some cases, anti-open grazing laws. Although Nasarawa State has explored the development of grazing reserves and ranching initiatives, implementation has been inconsistent. A government official from Karu stated that; “Policies exist on paper, but implementation is the main problem. Without proper funding and monitoring, these policies cannot achieve their objectives” (Key Informant Interview, Karu, 2025). This observation supported scholarly arguments that weak policy implementation and institutional capacity are major obstacles to effective conflict management in Nigeria (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

Again, the judicial system serves as a formal mechanism for resolving disputes arising from farmer-herder conflicts. Cases involving destruction of property, loss of lives, or criminal activities are expected to be handled through courts of law. However, access to justice is often limited due to delays, costs and lack of trust in the legal system. Another key informant who is a farmer in Doma remarked that; “Taking cases to court takes too long, and sometimes justice is not served. That is why many people prefer to handle issues themselves” (Key Informant Interview, Doma, 2025). This highlighted a key limitation of state-led approaches, as noted by scholars who argued that weak judicial systems can undermine conflict resolution efforts and encourage self-help measures (International Crisis Group, 2018).

The government has also employed security surveillance and early warning mechanisms, like collaboration with local vigilante groups and community policing initiatives, to detect and prevent potential conflicts. In an interview with the vigilante member in Karu Local Government

Area noted that; “We work with security agencies to monitor movements and report suspicious activities. This helps to prevent attacks before they happen” (Key Informant Interview, Karu, 2025). While such initiatives can enhance local security, their effectiveness is often constrained by limited resources, inadequate training and lack of coordination among security agencies.

Despite these efforts, state-led conflict management strategies face several challenges. One major issue is their reactive nature, as interventions are often implemented only after violence has occurred. Additionally, there are concerns about perceived bias and politicisation, which can reduce public trust in government actions. A community leader from Keana observed that; “Sometimes people feel that the government is not neutral, and this makes it difficult for them to accept its decisions” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025). This perception of bias can exacerbate tensions and hinder effective conflict resolution.

Furthermore, limited resources and logistical constraints significantly affect the capacity of state institutions to manage conflicts effectively. Inadequate funding, poor infrastructure and insufficient personnel often delay responses and weaken the impact of interventions. As noted by Adebayo (2020), institutional weaknesses and governance challenges remain critical barriers to effective conflict management in many African countries.

Although the findings of this study highlight several limitations associated with state-led conflict management approaches, particularly in terms of coordination challenges, bureaucratic delays, and occasional lack of local legitimacy, it is important to recognise that not all state interventions are reactive or ineffective. Recent developments in Nasarawa State demonstrate that certain state-led initiatives, particularly those focused on infrastructure provision and resource governance, have contributed meaningfully to conflict prevention and reduction.

A notable example is the Agro-Climatic Resilience in Semi-Arid Landscapes (ACReSAL) Project implemented by the Federal Government in collaboration with development partners in Nigeria. The project provided solar-powered boreholes in seventeen communities and installed over four hundred solar-powered streetlights across eighty-three communities between March and May 2023. These interventions significantly improved access to water resources and enhanced rural security by reducing night-time vulnerability and competition over scarce water points. Importantly, local leaders in beneficiary communities reported that the improved availability of water and lighting infrastructure contributed to a noticeable reduction in tensions between farmers and herders, with some communities describing 2024 as a relatively conflict-free period compared to previous years (Vanguard, 2024). This evidence suggests that state-led interventions can be preventive in nature when they address structural drivers of conflict such as resource scarcity and infrastructural deficits, rather than merely responding to outbreaks of violence.

A community leader in Keffi emphasised this preventive impact:

Before the installation of boreholes and streetlights, we used to experience frequent disputes around water points, especially during the dry season. Now, with better access to water and improved lighting at night, there is less suspicion and fewer confrontations between farmers and herders in this area. (KII, Keffi, 2025)

This observation highlights the importance of distinguishing between different categories of state intervention. While security-based responses such as military deployments and policing operations often appear reactive and short-term in nature, development-oriented interventions such as infrastructure provision can play a preventive and stabilising role by addressing the root causes of conflict.

It is also important to note that conclusions regarding the effectiveness of state-led interventions should not be uncritically generalised across different contexts. For instance, the

2025 study conducted in Kwara State, which reported that government peace committees were perceived as ineffective by 47.6 per cent of respondents and that security interventions were viewed as ineffective by 59.3 per cent of respondents, provides useful comparative insight. However, these findings are context-specific and cannot be automatically extrapolated to Nasarawa State without empirical validation. Differences in institutional capacity, community relations, historical conflict patterns, and implementation quality may produce varying outcomes across states.

Furthermore, ongoing empirical work, such as the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) evaluation of dialogue-based interventions in farmer-herder communities in Nasarawa State, may provide new evidence that could refine or even challenge existing assessments of state effectiveness. Preliminary indications suggest that structured dialogue interventions, when properly implemented, may enhance trust and reduce intergroup tensions, although final results are still forthcoming. This underscores the importance of maintaining analytical caution and openness to emerging evidence when evaluating the effectiveness of state-led conflict management strategies.

Overall, a more accurate interpretation is that state-led conflict management in Nasarawa State is heterogeneous, comprising both reactive security operations and proactive developmental interventions. While the former often faces challenges of legitimacy and coordination, the latter particularly infrastructure-based initiatives such as ACREsAL demonstrate significant potential for preventive peacebuilding when effectively implemented and sustained.

### **Comparative Analysis of Traditional and State-Led Conflict Management Strategies in Farmer-Herder Crises in Nasarawa State**

The comparative analysis of traditional and state-led conflict management strategies in Nasarawa State revealed vital differences and complementarities in their structure, legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability in addressing farmer-herder conflicts. While both approaches aim to manage and resolve disputes, they differ significantly in their methods, underlying principles, and outcomes. Traditional mechanisms are largely informal, community-based and rooted in cultural norms, whereas state-led approaches are formal, institutionalised and guided by legal frameworks.

Before examining the differences between traditional and state-led conflict management strategies in Nasarawa State, it is important to highlight the areas where both approaches converge, as these similarities provide a foundation for integrated and more effective conflict management. Despite operating within different institutional frameworks, both traditional and state-led approaches share common objectives, methods and underlying principles in addressing farmer-herder conflicts.

One major area of similarity is their shared objective of maintaining peace and social order. Both traditional institutions and state authorities are fundamentally concerned with preventing violence, restoring stability, and ensuring coexistence between farmers and herders. A local government official in Keana noted that; “Whether it is the government or traditional leaders, the goal is the same to stop the fighting and ensure people live peacefully” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025).

Similarly, a traditional ruler in Keana emphasized that; “Our responsibility, like that of the government, is to maintain peace in our communities because without peace, there can be no development” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025). This convergence reflects the broader understanding that conflict management, regardless of the approach, is ultimately geared toward achieving stability and social harmony (Jeong, 2008).

Another area of similarity lies in the use of dialogue and mediation as central tools for conflict resolution. Both approaches recognise the importance of communication and negotiation in resolving disputes. Traditional leaders often convene community meetings, while state-led mechanisms such as peace committees also facilitate dialogue among stakeholders. A member of a state peace committee in Lafia observed that; “We bring farmers and herders together to talk through their issues. This is similar to what traditional leaders do at the community level” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This in line with Lederach’s (1997) assertion that dialogue-based approaches are fundamental to sustainable conflict management across both formal and informal systems.

Both approaches also demonstrate a preventive and reactive dimension in managing conflicts. Traditional systems engage in preventive measures such as community sensitisation and early mediation, while state-led strategies incorporate early warning mechanisms and security surveillance alongside reactive interventions such as deployment of security forces. A security officer in Keffi opined that; “We try to prevent conflicts through intelligence gathering, but when violence occurs, we respond immediately to contain it” (Key Informant Interview, Nasarawa Eggon, 2025).

Sharing a similar view point, a community elder in Keffi noted that; “We try to settle disputes early before they escalate, but when they do, we still intervene to restore peace” (Key Informant Interview, Keffi, 2025). This demonstrates that both systems operate along a continuum of conflict prevention and management.

Furthermore, both traditional and state-led approaches involve multi-stakeholder participation in conflict management processes. Traditional systems engage elders, religious leaders and community representatives, while state-led approaches involve government officials, security agencies and sometimes traditional rulers themselves. A respondent highlighted this overlap by saying that; “In many cases, traditional leaders are part of government peace committees, so both systems actually work together in some situations” (Key Informant Interview, Karu, 2025). This reflects the interconnected nature of formal and informal institutions in conflict management, as noted by Adebayo (2020), who emphasised the importance of collaboration between state and non-state actors.

One of the key areas of comparison is legitimacy and community acceptance. Traditional conflict management strategies enjoy a higher level of legitimacy among local communities because they are embedded in indigenous institutions and reflect shared values and customs. A respondent who is a traditional leader in Keana emphasized that; “People trust the traditional system because it is part of our culture. When elders intervene, both farmers and herders are more willing to listen and comply” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025).

In contrast, state-led approaches often face skepticism due to perceptions of bias, politicisation or lack of understanding of local dynamics. A key informant who is a community member in Lafia noted that; “Government interventions sometimes feel distant. People do not always trust that the authorities are neutral in these conflicts” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This supports scholarly arguments that local legitimacy is a critical factor in the success of conflict management strategies (Lederach, 1997).

Another major point of comparison is effectiveness in conflict resolution and prevention. Traditional approaches tend to be more effective in preventing conflicts and resolving minor disputes through dialogue, mediation and compensation mechanisms. A key informant who is a farmer in Doma observed that; “When issues are handled early by the elders, they do not escalate. It is only when they are ignored that violence occurs” (Key Informant Interview, Doma, 2025).

On the other hand, state-led strategies are more effective in managing large-scale violence and restoring order through the deployment of security forces. A security official in Wamba responded that; “When conflicts become violent, only the government has the capacity to intervene and stop the fighting” (Key Informant Interview, Wamba, 2025). This highlighted the complementary roles of both approaches, as noted by Adebayo (2020), who argued that combining preventive and coercive measures is essential for effective conflict management.

In terms of approach and orientation, traditional mechanisms emphasise reconciliation, relationship-building and long-term peace, while state-led strategies often focus on enforcement, control and short-term stability. A respondent who is a traditional ruler in Akwanga remarked that; “Our goal is to make sure both sides can live together peacefully after the conflict. We focus on restoring relationships” (Key Informant Interview, Akwanga, 2025).

Conversely, a government official from Keana noted that; “Our priority is to stop the violence immediately. Long-term peacebuilding is often secondary due to urgent security concerns” (Key Informant Interview, Keana, 2025). This contrast agrees with Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasizes the importance of addressing underlying causes and relationships rather than merely managing symptoms (Lederach, 1997).

Another area of comparison is enforcement and sustainability. State-led approaches have the advantage of legal backing and enforcement capacity, enabling them to impose sanctions and ensure compliance. However, their sustainability is often limited by weak implementation, resource constraints and lack of follow-up. Traditional mechanisms, while lacking formal enforcement power, tend to produce more sustainable outcomes because they are based on mutual agreement and social cohesion. A community elder in Lafia shared that; “When people agree through dialogue, they are more likely to keep the peace because it is their own decision” (Key Informant Interview, Lafia, 2025). This supports the argument that locally owned solutions are more sustainable in conflict management (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

The argument for a hybrid and integrated conflict management framework combining traditional and state-led approaches is not entirely novel within the existing literature on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria. Recent scholarship has consistently emphasised that the complexity and interrelated nature of farmer-herder crises require multi-layered and coordinated responses rather than reliance on a single institutional mechanism. For instance, a 2025 ScienceDirect study on conflicts in the Benue Valley conceptualised the situation as an interconnected web of environmental, socio-political, and economic crises that reinforce each other in a cyclical manner, thereby necessitating comprehensive and multi-pronged interventions that cut across institutional boundaries. In a similar vein, the Federal University of Technology Minna doctoral thesis (2023) recommended stronger integration between agricultural extension agents, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), and pastoralist communities, particularly through increased sensitisation on compensation mechanisms for crop damage and improved extension services for farmers. These recommendations underscore the importance of bridging formal state structures with informal community systems in addressing the root causes of conflict.

Similarly, a 2025 study on farmer-herder conflicts in Kwara State recommended the adoption of ranching systems as a long-term solution to reduce open grazing pressures, although this approach remains contested due to its limited alignment with traditional pastoral livelihoods. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the idea of integration between state-led reforms and community-based mechanisms has already gained wide scholarly acceptance.

However, the specific contribution of this study lies not in restating the need for a hybrid framework, but in contextualising the practical barriers to its implementation in Nasarawa State

between 2015 and 2023. The findings of this study reveal that while both traditional and state-led mechanisms exist side by side, their integration is often constrained by institutional fragmentation, weak coordination between agencies, declining authority of traditional rulers, political interference in peace processes, and limited trust between farmers and herders. These barriers explain why hybrid approaches, though theoretically sound, remain unevenly implemented at the local level.

In addition, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of education as a bridging mechanism between traditional and formal systems. Evidence from key informant interviews indicates that initiatives such as nomadic education programmes have the potential to serve as a critical interface between pastoral communities and state institutions by improving awareness of land-use regulations, enhancing communication between groups, and reducing misinformation that fuels conflict. This dimension is less developed in existing studies but emerges strongly from the Nasarawa context as a practical entry point for operationalising hybrid conflict management.

Therefore, while the hybrid framework is well established in the literature, this study advances the discourse by identifying context-specific implementation constraints and locally grounded bridging mechanisms that shape the effectiveness of such an approach in Nasarawa State. This shifts the contribution from conceptual advocacy to empirical grounding and policy-relevant refinement of the hybrid model.

### **Conclusion**

The study revealed that farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa State between 2015 and 2023 are deeply rooted in a combination of environmental, socio-economic and institutional factors, such as competition over land and water resources, climate-induced migration, weak governance structures and the erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Evidence from key informant interviews showed that these conflicts have evolved from localised disputes into more violent and complex crises, often influenced by identity politics and the proliferation of small arms. The study further ascertained that traditional conflict management strategies such as mediation by traditional rulers, community dialogue and compensation systems remain highly relevant and effective at the grassroots level due to their legitimacy, accessibility and emphasis on reconciliation. However, their effectiveness is increasingly constrained by declining authority and inability to handle large-scale violent conflicts.

In contrast, state-led conflict management strategies such as deployment of security forces, establishment of peace committees and policy interventions play a crucial role in restoring order and addressing large-scale violence. Nonetheless, these approaches are often reactive, bureaucratic and limited by inadequate resources, weak implementation and perceived bias. The comparative analysis showed that while both traditional and state-led approaches share common goals and occasionally overlap in practice, they differ significantly in structure, legitimacy and operational effectiveness. Importantly, the study discovered that neither approach is sufficient on its own; rather, a coordinated and integrated framework that combines the strengths of both systems is essential for sustainable conflict management.

This study concluded that the effectiveness of conflict management strategies in farmer-herder crises in Nasarawa State is highly contingent on the nature, intensity, and structural drivers of the conflict. Evidence from both primary data and recent empirical literature indicates that traditional conflict management mechanisms are most effective in situations involving low-intensity, resource-based disputes where social relationships between farmers and herders remain intact and where traditional authority structures retain legitimacy. In such contexts, mediation by elders, customary arbitration, and community dialogue remain important tools for de-escalation

and reconciliation. However, their effectiveness declines significantly when conflicts become politicised, weaponised, or embedded in broader ethno-political tensions, particularly where there is declining respect for traditional authority, youth mobilisation into violence, and the circulation of small arms.

Conversely, state-led interventions demonstrate greater effectiveness in restoring order during periods of acute violence, particularly through security deployments and emergency responses. However, the study finds that these measures are often insufficient in addressing the structural causes of conflict, including competition over land and water resources, climate-induced scarcity, weak governance structures, and contested territorial claims. Empirical evidence from the Katsina-Ala axis of Benue State further shows that farmer-herder conflicts have increasingly evolved into more complex and systemic forms driven by weak institutions and the proliferation of small arms, thereby limiting the effectiveness of purely reactive state responses.

A critical dimension emerging from this study is the role of territorial and boundary politics in sustaining conflict dynamics. Findings align with recent scholarship indicating that disputed administrative boundaries between communities in the Benue Valley, including areas adjoining Nasarawa State, generate competing indigeneity claims that intensify farmer-herder tensions. These boundary-related disputes elevate local resource conflicts into broader political struggles over land ownership, identity, and belonging, thereby complicating local-level conflict resolution efforts. This suggests that sustainable peacebuilding in Nasarawa State cannot be fully achieved without addressing higher-level structural and political grievances, including unresolved inter-state and inter-community boundary questions.

The study therefore concludes that a more context-sensitive and differentiated conflict management framework is required. Specifically, traditional institutions are best suited for resolving low-intensity disputes rooted in everyday resource competition, while state-led security institutions are necessary for stabilising high-intensity or violent phases of conflict. However, neither approach is sufficient in isolation for achieving long-term peace.

An effective hybrid framework in Nasarawa State must therefore integrate four critical components. First, infrastructure-based interventions, such as the ACREsAL water projects, are essential for reducing competition over scarce resources and addressing environmental drivers of conflict. Second, education-based interventions, particularly the revival and strengthening of nomadic education programmes, are necessary to bridge knowledge gaps, improve awareness of land-use regulations, and reduce misinformation among pastoral communities. Third, institutional and territorial governance reforms, including the resolution of formal and informal boundary disputes between Nasarawa State and neighbouring states such as Benue, are crucial for addressing the political dimensions of conflict. Fourth, community-based dialogue mechanisms, as supported by recent IPA evaluations, remain essential for fostering trust, communication, and reconciliation at the grassroots level.

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