

Managing Conflict Between Farmers And Pastoralists In Benue State, Nigeria

Ephraim Gbaka

Benue State Coordinator of the National Peace Summit Group (NPSG)

Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers are not restricted to Benue State, Nigeria.

These conflicts occur in several other sub-Saharan Africa Countries. Significant loss of lives and property has occurred in many parts of Nigeria including Katsina, Plateau, Taraba, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Adamawa, Gombe, Yobe, Kebbi, Zamfara and Sokoto States in the North; Oyo State in the South West; Abia State in the South East; and Delta and Edo in the South South. Managing the crisis between herdsmen and farmers is both a national and a regional challenge.

Nigeria has an estimated population of over 15 million cattle domiciled in the country. Apart from these, several thousands of cattle migrate annually into the country from neighboring countries. In recent years, the increase in violent clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Benue State and in Nigeria has been attributed to the influx of foreign cattle from Niger, Cameroon and Chad. *The herdsmen often own sophisticated weapons.* It is important to note that over 90% of livestock holding is found in the Northern part of Nigeria. There are two pastoral corridors (transhumance routes) in Nigeria. These include the North-West corridor which runs from Benin Republic

and Niger through Sokoto, Zamfara, Borno, and Kwara States, terminating in the South-West.

The second route in the North-East which runs from Niger, Chad and Cameroon Republics through Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Jigawa, Kano, Plateau, Nasarawa and terminates in the Niger-Benue Basin. This is the route that poses threat to peace between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State.

Apart from the route, there are three pastoral groups, namely the Core-nomadic pastoralist, that roam about and do not have a permanent abode. The semi-nomadic that are partially settled and the Agro-pastoralist with a permanent settlement. In the Benue valley it is the activities of the core-nomads and the semi-nomads which constitute the problem.

Factors that Encourage Nomadism

The herdsmen often search for a near-ideal condition for raising their herds. While continually moving toward pasturage, water sources, salt licks, livestock market, the nature of the terrain that allows for an impeded movement, protective mechanisms for their livestock against the vagaries of nature, they sometimes avoid the tsetse flies, harsh weather, tribal enemies, livestock bandits, tax assessor, and hostile social environments. Apparently, the Benue Basin has a number of advantages that attract the movement of transhumance population into Benue State.

The following resources are available according to the needs of the herdsmen:

- There is abundance of rainfall
- The vegetation cover of the state is made up of mostly grasses and tree shrubs that are palatable to livestock
- There is a network of rivers Benue, Katsina-Ala and their tributaries, which provide available water all year round
- Low population of tsetse fly compared to areas further south of the country
- A burgeoning International Cattle Market in the centre of the country
- Traditional play-mate relationship between the dominant native Tiv and the migrating Fulani ethnic groups, in spite of the recent odds.

Causes of Conflicts

The causes of conflicts between farmers and herdsmen can be viewed under two perspectives. They are the farming activities and the activities of herdsmen.

Farming Activities

The land crises between herdsmen and farmers in Benue State can be attributed to farming activities. Benue State is the *Food Basket of the Nation* both in diversity and quantities of produce. Its location in Central Nigeria endows it with ideal climatic and soil conditions for the

production of arable crops namely yam, cassava, maize, rice, soybean, groundnut, tree crops-citrus and mango. The state is the largest producer of yam, cassava, mango and citrus in Nigeria.

Over 70% of the population is engaged in arable farming. Few people indulge in livestock farming such as pigs, sheep, goats and the *Muturu cattle*. The economy of Benue State is driven by agriculture. Most families depend on the revenue earned from crop production for their livelihoods.

Annual farming activities involve the clearing of vegetation, which is made up of “grasses and tree shrubs that are palatable to livestock”. Improved crop varieties are rare and the use of fertilizers is minimal. Consequently, the soil becomes impoverished and fields are abandoned for new ones (shifting cultivation). Similarly, the fallow period which was 5 to 10 years in the past, is now only 2 years in some cases. The quest for farmlands leads to communal conflicts between neighboring communities.

No doubt, the massive traditional farming activities in Benue State are bound to have direct consequence on cattle rearing in the State. According to the National Livestock Project Division (2008) there are 10 Grazing Reserves in the State. None of which have been gazette, and there are several incidences of encroachment due to shortage of farmland. Similarly, designated livestock routes have disappeared also for reason of land shortage and encroachment.

Activities of Herdsmen in Benue State

Benue state lies along major International Livestock Routes that run through the North-East and North Central all through to the South-East. These routes record very high population of pastoralists during the seasonal North-South annual migration. In the past, the roaming pastoralists merely passed through Benue State. However, this has changed with time as they now come and tend to settle by not going beyond the state. They settle in the dry season in order to harness the waters of River Benue and its tributaries and the palatable vegetation in the *fadamas* throughout the season (November-March). Consequently, several permanent and semi-permanent pastoralist settlements have emerged in many parts of the state. This development is another source of friction between herdsmen and farmers during the cropping season. The migrating cattle sometimes trespass on crops and rural water sources thereby igniting conflicts between farmers and herdsmen.

Managing Conflicts between Herdsmen and Farmers

The increasing population and farming activities in Benue State have aggravated the problem of land shortage. It is apparent that grazing land in the state is a limiting factor. The situation is further provoked by annual influx of herdsmen into the state. With the Sahel region experiencing dramatic droughts over the years coupled with worsening desert encroachment, courtesy of global warming, Benue will continue to be at the receiving end of the effects of these challenges. Most of the

cattle crossing the borders into Nigeria from Niger, Chad and Cameroon will end up in Benue State. The difficult situation requires sustainable conflict management strategies which should include:

Streamlining of Herdsmen Leadership:

The leaders of pastoralist groups in Benue State should be appointed at all levels of governance where applicable. The leaders should be acceptable to both the herdsmen and the host community. Consequently, the authority of the leaders should be recognized and supported by the host traditional councils, the state and local governments as well as security agencies. The leaders should be held accountable for the actions of their members.

Monitoring of the Influx of Herdsmen into Benue State:

The leadership of the pastoralist groups and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) should always notify traditional rulers of the host community, law enforcement agencies, and governments of the arrival of foreigners in their various domains.

Monitoring the Activities of Traditional Leaders:

Pastoralists are sometimes misled by some village heads and community leaders to buy grazing land in their communities. There is the need to sensitize nomads to understand the traditional land holding and ownership systems of the host communities. In Tiv areas, for example, village and community leaders have no absolute rights to sell land to individuals for grazing. No sooner is such grazing right sold and bought than the

rightful land owners raise violent objections. In some cases, the land is owned by the government. Conflict sensitive measures by the Benue State Government will ensure that traditional rulers who once engaged in these corrupt practices will desist from it and allow peace to reign between farmers and herdsmen in their domains.

Security Agents must operate Within the Law: They are tasked with the mandate to enforce law and order whenever and whenever there is violence. In doing so, they are dealing with communities with different value systems and way of life. Regrettably, some security agents overtly or covertly contribute to causing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen by extorting huge sums of money from one or both parties to the conflict with the promise providing a lasting solution. When patience runs out, the conflicting parties take law into their hands. This trend must be stopped for peace to prevail between communities in Benue State.

Development of Pastoralists' Permanent Settlement: Government should facilitate the development of permanent settlement for herdsmen in designated areas with social amenities such as water, health and educational facilities. Some of the existing grazing reserves in Benue State should be upgraded to permanent settlements.

Identification and Demarcation of Intra and Inter-State Livestock Routes: This exercise is particularly important for free movement pastoralists. In most cases, highways have replaced livestock routes and cattle are sometimes forced to trespass

into adjacent farms. Livestock routes are also needed within the state to forestall trespass by cattles.

Provision of Agricultural Inputs to Farmers: Farm inputs like improved seeds and fertilizers should be provided to farmers to encourage intensive rather than the current extensive agricultural activities which are characterized by aggressive land acquisition and are prone to communal conflicts between farmers on one hand and between farmers and herdsmen on the other.

Formation of Farmers/Pastoralists Conflict Resolution Committee: The formation of these committees at the state and Local Government levels will promote peace through early warning systems and dialogue platforms. The national Joint Peace/Conflict Resolution Committee that is tasked with resolving land and pasture crises between Tiv crop Farmers and Fulani Pastoralists should be strengthened. Known as **His Eminence Sultan of Sokoto's Committee on Tiv Farmers/ Fulani Cattle Rearers Relationship**, the Joint Peace/Conflict Resolution Committee was formed at the instance of the Executive Governor of Benue State, Rt Hon. Gabriel Torwua Suswam in 2008. The committee has completed its findings and made far-reaching recommendations, which are capable of mitigating conflicts between farmers and herdsmen nationwide. The office of the Special Adviser to the Governor of Benue State on Conflict Resolution has taken steps towards the successful implementation of

the findings of the committee. This is evident in the reduction in cases of violent conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in the state.