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Herders-Farmers Crisis and Farming Livelihoods in Conflict-Ridden Communities in Ibarapa North Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study assessed herders-farmers crisis and farming livelihoods in conflict-ridden communities of Oyo State, Nigeria. Eight (8) focus group discussions comprising sixty (60) men and thirty-six (36) women were conducted to generate data on the drivers of conflict, the endogenous coping strategies used, and the effects of the conflict on farming livelihoods. Data generated were recorded verbatim, transcribed, and later converted into written form. Atlas-Ti software was used to analyse the data. The conflict affected food production and security, as communities experienced food shortages, rising food prices, and the destruction of their farm produce. The crisis also led to the physical destruction of food reserves, the displacement of farmers from their farms, a reduced agricultural labour force, and a decrease in agrarian produce supplied to urban centres. The study concluded that the herder-farmer crisis affected farmers' economies in the communities, as their displacement from farms led to a low standard of living, limited access to healthcare facilities, and limited access to quality education for their children. Adoption of modern grazing practices would help reduce future tensions.

Keywords*:* Herder-farmer crisis, conflict-ridden communities, farmers' livelihoods.

Introduction

Agriculture is crucial for rural livelihoods in Nigeria, providing food, income, and employment for many smallholder farmers. These smallholders cultivate small plots using family labour, producing food for their households and selling surpluses to meet needs such as education and healthcare (Gali et al., 2024). As a result, land remains one of the most vital productive assets and a key means of livelihood for rural families. However, the patterns of crop cultivation and livestock rearing often overlap because both livelihood activities heavily depend on access to land and other natural resources (Christiana, 2021; Makinde et al., 2025). Consequently, farmers and pastoral herders often compete for the same limited resources (Oladosu et al., 2025). Additionally, cultural, linguistic, and customary differences, as well as differences in livelihood

practices, frequently hinder effective interaction and mutual understanding between these groups, thereby heightening the risk of conflict (Soomiyol and Fadairo, 2020).

Conflicts between crop farmers and herders in Nigeria have increased, threatening agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. Traditionally, pastoralists migrate seasonally in search of pasture and water, while farmers cultivate the land (Kipterer et al., 2026). Growing pressure on natural resources, like land, water, and grazing routes, intensifies interactions, leading to disputes. Herders' cattle often damage crops, causing tensions. Competition for scarce resources heightens stress within communities, increasing the risk of conflicts where livelihoods overlap (Ikhuoso et al. 2020). Small disputes over crops or grazing land have escalated into prolonged confrontations, resulting in property damage, loss of life, and displacement. This insecurity disrupts farming, discourages investment, and threatens the stability of communities reliant on agriculture. Population growth, land expansion, and environmental changes such as desertification and climate variability have greatly reduced grazing areas and water sources for pastoralists (Ayele, Dedecha and Duba, 2020) leading to escalated conflicts in Oyo State (Soomiyol and Fadairo, 2020).

Evidence of the crisis's escalating severity is apparent in national reports of clashes between farmers and herders. In 2023, the death toll from these conflicts in Nigeria increased to 860, up from 579 the previous year (Nigeria Watch, 2023). The highest number of fatalities occurred in March, April, and May, coinciding with the beginning of the rainy and planting seasons, when crops attract grazing livestock (Nigeria Watch, 2023). Multiple violence incidents have been reported in Oyo State. For instance, a village called Oke-Orogun in Saki West Local Government Area was reportedly attacked by suspected herdsmen, during which a young farmer was tied to a tree and killed with a cutlass. In reaction, angry youths burned some herders' settlements. Similarly, Oyekola et al. (2023) noted about seven deaths when herdsmen invaded the Igangan community in Oyo State, believed to be a retaliation for their earlier forced evacuation by locals. These events reveal the recurring and retaliatory cycle of farmer–herder conflicts and their destructive impact on rural communities.

In response to the escalating crisis, the Federal Government of Nigeria has implemented several policy measures to reduce farmer–herder conflicts and enhance livestock management systems. These measures include the creation of grazing reserves, the establishment of the National Commission for Nomadic Education, the deployment of security agencies, the Great Green Wall Initiative, and the Comprehensive Livestock Development Plan (International Crisis Group, 2021). Additional actions involve using Radio Frequency Identification Devices for livestock tracking and encouraging community-based conflict resolution and cooperative resource management strategies. Under the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), various policy proposals, such as cattle colonies, Rural Grazing Areas (RUGA), and the reclamation of abandoned grazing routes and reserves, were introduced to address ongoing conflicts between farmers and herders. At the regional level, the Amotekun Corps was formed in 2020 as a security initiative across the six states of Southwestern Nigeria, including Oyo State, aiming to address rising insecurity and enhance community safety (Makinde et al, 2025). Despite these federal and regional interventions, several communities within Oyo State, particularly in the Ibarapa region, continue to experience recurrent episodes of violence, loss of lives, destruction of property, and disruption of livelihoods arising from farmer–herder conflicts.

Existing studies on farmer–herder conflicts in Oyo State mainly focus on causes, damages, and casualties (Mofaratoluwa et al., 2024; Oladapo, 2022; Olatinwo et al., 2025). Folaranmi and Balogun (2025) examined the effects on rural land planning, while Ukpong (2021) studied land conflicts in Iwajowa, and Aroyewun (2023) examined social costs in Iseyin. Despite these works, research on how conflicts affect farmers' livelihoods in conflict-ridden communities in Oyo State remains limited. Understanding this is vital for shaping policies and community strategies for peaceful coexistence and sustainable agriculture. Based on this background, this study aims to explore herders-farmers crisis and farming livelihood in conflict-ridden communities in Oyo State. Specifically, the study sought to: 1) identify the conflict drivers in the study area; 2) determine the endogenous approaches used to curb conflicts; 3) assess farmers' level of satisfaction with government interventions in addressing the conflict; and 4) examine the coping strategies adopted by farmers during the period of conflict.

Methodology

The study was carried out in Oyo State, Nigeria. which is located in the southwestern part of Nigeria. Oyo State lies between latitudes 7°N and 9.03°N of the equator and between longitudes 2.50°E and 5°E of the prime meridian. The state borders Kwara State to the north, Osun State to the east, and Ogun State to the south. To the west, it borders Ogun State and the Republic of Benin. The state comprises 33 local government areas and has a land area of about 35,743 square kilometres. Ibarapa is one of the local governments in Oyo State. Igangan, Ayete, and Tapa communities within the Ibarapa North Local Government Area were purposively selected for the study because they were the most affected by farmer-herder conflict in Oyo State (Adewale et al., 2023). Ibarapa North Local Government is bounded by Iwajowa Local Government to the South, Egbado to the North, Benin Republic to the West and Ibarapa East/Iseyin Local Government to the East. According to the 2006 census, the Local Government has a total population of about 101,092. The landmass of the Local Government is 427,857 hectares (Jurisdictional Area of Authority). The communities in the area are known for farming, and the crops commonly grown are cassava, maize, yam, melon, and vegetables. The availability and willingness of farmers to participate in the study were considered when determining the number and size of focus group discussions. This was achieved by identifying a pool of potential participants among the farmers using a short survey.

> *Would you be open to taking part in a focus group discussion on your experience of farmer-herder conflicts and farming livelihoods in this community? On..... (day), the conversation would last for roughly 1-2 hours, and you would be compensated for taking part. The conversation will be recorded on audio for the researchers' review. Yes [ ] No [ ]. Name…… Phone no. ……*

A total of 96 farmers (60 male and 36 female) identified through the short survey were included in the study. During the study, eight focus group discussions (two male and one female group in each community) with 10 to 12 participants per group were held. Data were collected using a discussion guide, which elicited responses on the major drivers of farmer-herder conflicts in the communities, the endogenous approaches used to manage conflict situations, farmers' satisfaction with government efforts and

the influence of farmer-herder conflict on their farming livelihoods. Information obtained in the Yoruba language was audio-recorded and later transcribed into English. The transcript was analysed using Atlas-Ti software. The transcripts were coded separately for each specific objective based on the corresponding interview questions. Open coding was used to assign labels to relevant text segments, after which similar codes were merged into categories. These categories were further refined into themes that addressed each research objective, namely: conflict drivers; endogenous approaches to conflict resolution; farmers' satisfaction with government interventions; coping strategies during the conflict; and livelihood security indicators. The resulting themes were interpreted and supported with verbatim quotations from participants. In the results section, figures generated using Atlas-Ti software and illustrative comments in quotes for the various themes were included.

Table 1: Measurement of variables

Objective	Theme	Questions asked during FGDs
Identify the conflict drivers in the study area	Conflict drivers	What are the major causes of farmer-herder conflict in your community? What events or activities usually trigger these conflicts? Who are the major actors involved?
Determine the endogenous approaches used to curb conflicts	Endogenous conflict management approaches	How does your community resolve farmer-herder conflicts? What roles do traditional rulers, community leaders, vigilantes, or other local groups play? How effective are these approaches?
Assess farmers' level of satisfaction with government interventions	Satisfaction with government intervention	What interventions has the government introduced to address the conflict? How satisfied are you with these interventions? What challenges have affected their effectiveness?
Identify the coping strategies adopted during the period of the conflict	Coping strategies	How has the conflict affected your farming activities and livelihood? What strategies have you adopted to cope with these effects?
Examine the influence of farmer-herder conflict on livelihood security	Livelihood security	How has the conflict affected your economic, food and health securities

Results and Discussion

Conflict Drivers in the Communities of Ibarapa North Local Government

Figure 1 illustrates the drivers of conflict within the communities. According to the farmers, the destruction of farmland by herdsmen, water contamination by cattle, overgrazing, poisoning of drinking water sources and cassava processing centres, disregard for the traditional authority of host communities, and indiscriminate

defecation by the cattle were the major drivers of conflict between farmers and herders in the communities. They argued that herders were involved in raping and harassing women farmers as well as stealing and destroying farmers' produce. According to them, the herdsmen are mostly migrants who transit through the area, and their movements often involve cattle entering farmers' land, sometimes causing serious damage, which eventually leads to conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. This aligns with the findings of Gwade and Inuwa (2022), who identified sexual harassment, cattle theft, and crop destruction, among other issues, as causes of farmers-herders' conflicts in the Hong and Gombi Local Government Areas of Adamawa State. Since this study also revealed similar causes, it indicates that these are the main reasons for conflicts. Unless these issues are addressed, farmer-herder conflicts will remain a persistent problem.

> *Many herders have been allowing their cattle to overgraze our farmland. They have caused destruction of the land by the cattle, making farming activities difficult. Therefore, the ongoing conflicts between farmers and herders can be attributed to farmland destruction, water contamination, overgrazing, and indiscriminate defecation by cattle. (Groups 1 & 2/FGD/Ibarapa North and Ibarapa East).*

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> *The herdsmen's Seriki, Iskilu Wakilu, shows a serious disregard for the traditional authority of their host communities. They lack respect and often assume that all land belongs to them. They enter people's land with their cattle and cause various damages. (Baale Agbe of Ayete/farmer/KII/Ibarapa North).*

> *The herdsmen do not respect authority; they do not believe in it and seek to control as they wish. The host communities expect them to graze in harmony, but their lack of respect often leads them to overstep bounds, even entering people's farms without fear. (Akowe Agbe of Igangan/farmer/KII/Ibarapa East).*

Participants confirmed that ethnicity and religious sentiments have nothing to do with the conflicts between farmers and herders. This contradicts Nlewem and Akhagba (2024), who argue that ethnicity and religious sentiment are major drivers of crisis and instability in Nigeria.

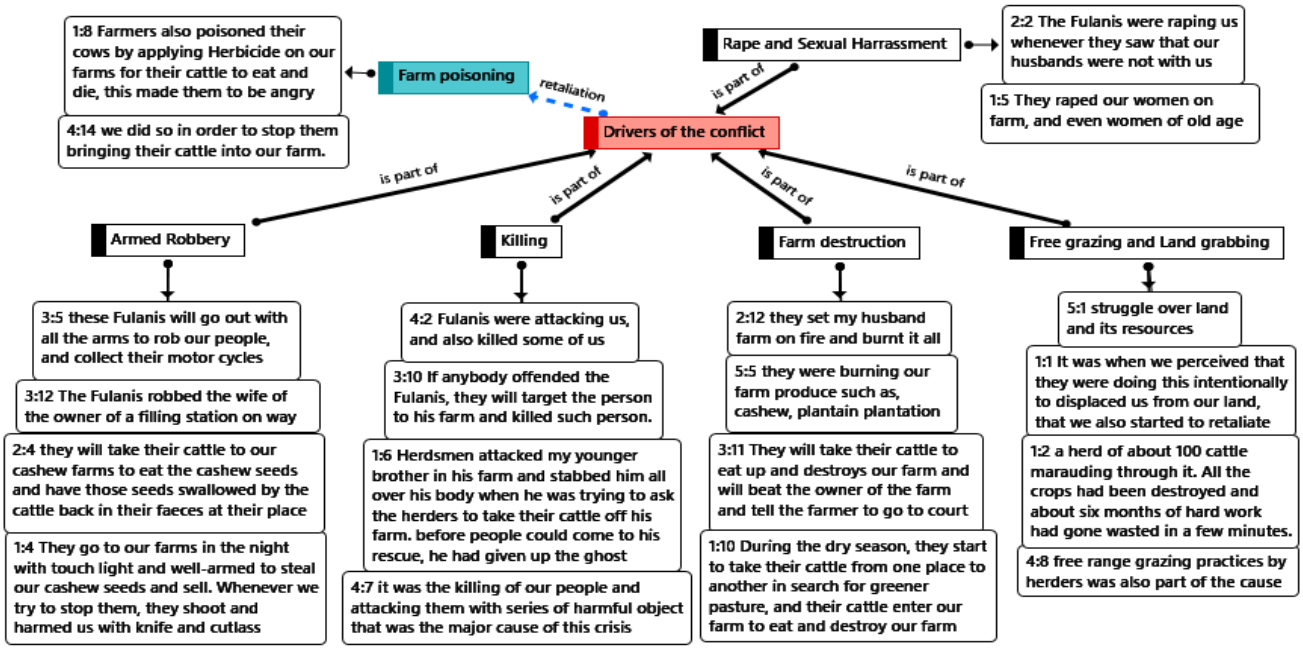

Figure 1: Conflict drivers in the communities of Ibarapa North Local Government

Endogenous Approaches Used to Curb Conflict

Figure 2 presents participants' views on endogenous approaches to reducing herder-farmer conflict in their communities. They stated that mediation and dialogue were considered options, but they were only semi-effective as they work for a short period; afterwards, the conflict escalates and worsens. The herder's leader known as Seriki acts as a mediator between Fulani, traditional rulers, and farmers. However, it was reported that this leader becomes a key figure who escalates and encourages conflict. He allegedly uses this as an opportunity to terrorize and oppress the communities, as well as to enrich himself. Additionally, he supplies the herdsmen with arms and local guns to threaten and intimidate the communities. The participants further explained that traditional rituals were used for indigents who were compromised by giving herdsmen details of people to be kidnapped, which caused them to swell to death or die by accident. The participants reported that the traditional leaders instructed all local security personnel, such as vigilantes, hunters, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), and the Agbekoya group, to be present at every point in the community to safeguard its people. These findings indicate that although endogenous mechanisms play an important role in conflict management, they are constrained by weak leadership, mistrust, and the persistence of the conflict (Vesco et al., 2025).

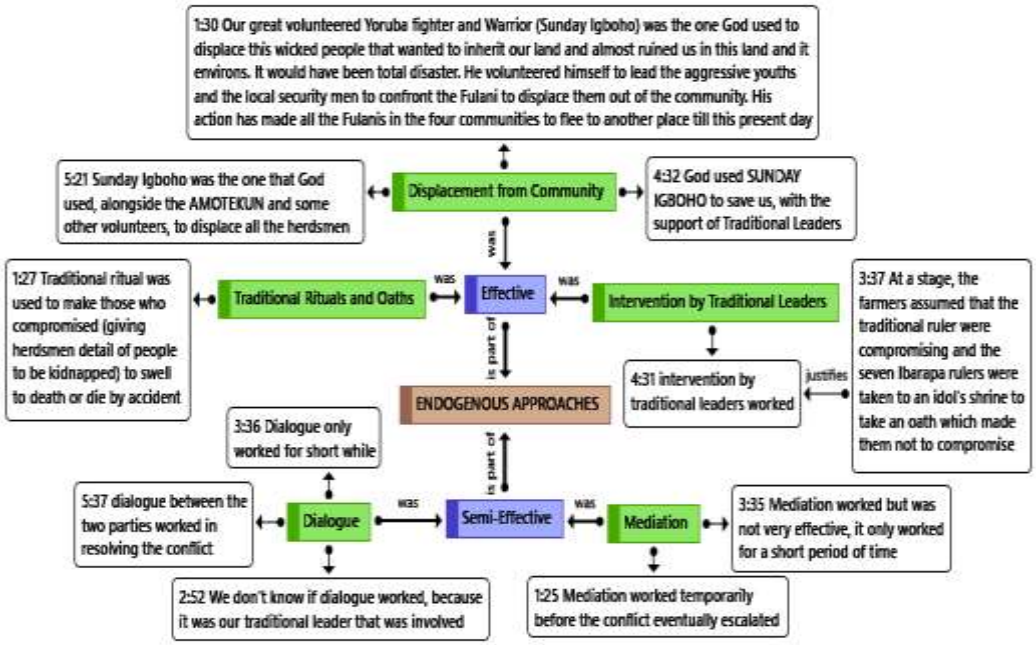

Figure 2: Endogenous approaches used to curb conflict

Farmers' Level of Satisfaction with Government Intervention

Figure 3 illustrates the level of satisfaction among community members regarding government interventions. They alleged that police and soldiers deployed to the communities were being bribed, including the police chief, by the herdsmen leaders. It was also reported that pressure from higher authorities to act in favour of the herdsmen was significant on security personnel. The participants stated that the state government responded slowly because incorrect situation reports were given directly to the State Governor. Furthermore, the participants indicated that court verdicts did not favour the communities but favoured the herdsmen. It was reported that the court rulings were exploited to benefit the traditional rulers, families, and relatives of those involved, eventually leading community members to contribute funds to hire lawyers to handle their cases. The participants further explained that the government facilitated the establishment of a NIRSAL Bank branch, enabling farmers to access agricultural loans to recover losses on their farms. However, it was reported that the NIRSAL Bank project was abandoned due to insufficient resources to complete it.

These findings indicated that community members were generally dissatisfied with government interventions aimed at addressing the conflict. Although the government initiated measures, the effectiveness of these interventions depends not only on their implementation but also on transparency, accountability, timeliness, and sustained institutional support (Li et al., 2024).

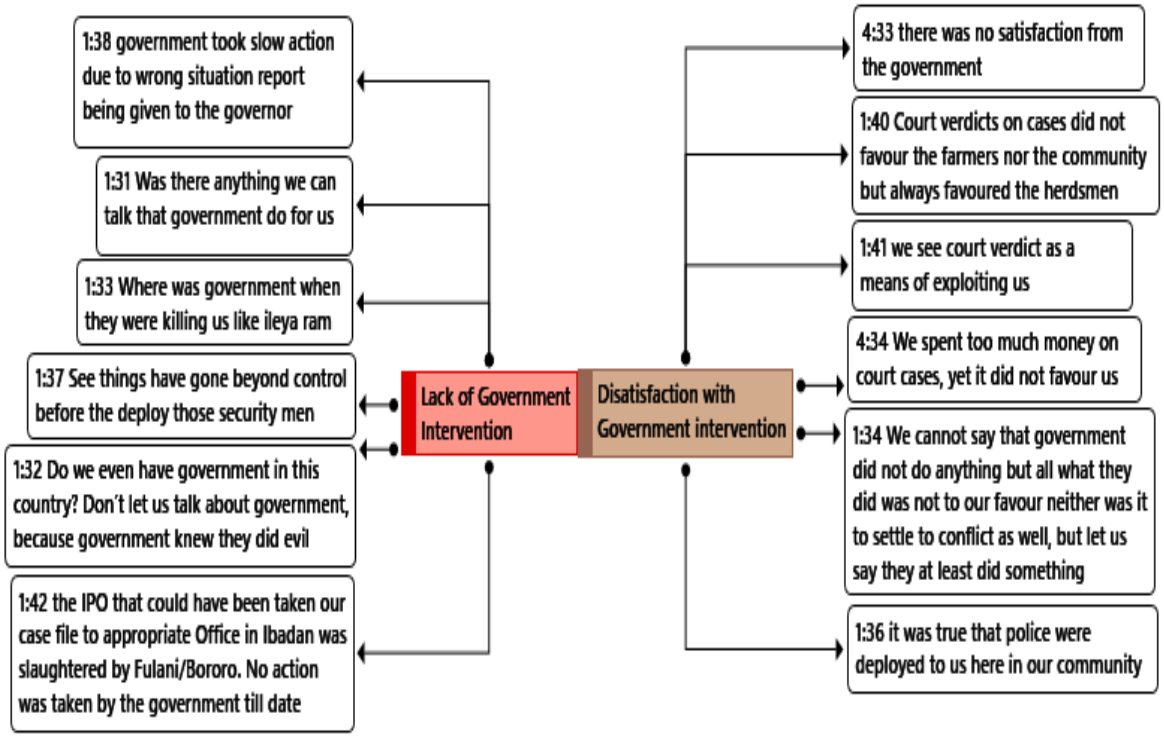

Figure 3: Level of satisfaction with government interventions

Coping Strategies Adopted by Farmers during the Period of the Conflict

Figure 5 illustrates the coping strategies employed by farmers during the conflict period. The participants indicated that purchasing foodstuffs from the market and relocating farmland to nearby communities were among the strategies utilized to cope with the situation. Reports from women through focus group discussions in the Igangan communities also confirmed that farming in groups with their husbands, neighbors, and friends was part of the coping mechanisms adopted during the conflict. Engaging in collective farming helped deter herders from attacking their farms. Additionally, praying for peace was practiced as an emotional coping strategy within the communities. This is unsurprising, as it reflects the strong religious affiliation of the communities studied and their belief that only divine intervention can halt conflicts and that God possesses the extraordinary power to restore peace to any community or village Obaniyi et al. (2020).

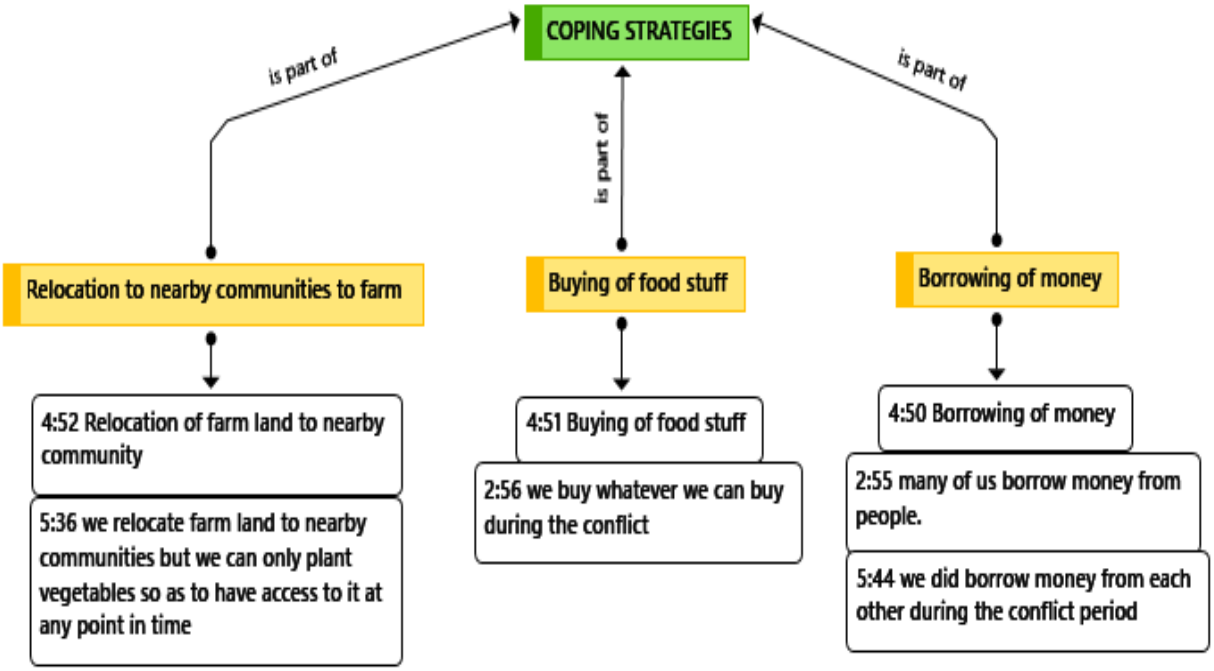

Figure 4: Coping strategies adopted by farmers during conflict

Influence of Conflict on Farmers' Livelihood

Figure 5 illustrates that the participants reported a loss of properties, such as houses and vehicles, which has rendered some farmers' households homeless. They further explained that many farmers lost their lives, while others became disabled as a result of the conflict. Reports indicated that the displacement of farmers from the affected communities has significantly reduced agricultural production, as evidenced by the relative shortage of farm produce in rural and urban markets across Central Nigeria (Umeoka and Sakurai, 2025). Additionally, many farmers incurred debt due to the destruction of their farms and crops by herdsmen, as well as threats to access their farms. These circumstances have ultimately led to a scarcity of agricultural produce and resources, resulting in increased costs, reduced farmers' income, and subsequent poverty. Participants explained that fear, animosity, and hatred contribute to the loss of farmers' employment and the migration from rural to urban areas. This research contradicts the position that Fulani herders' attacks on farmers cannot be true, as the conflict has persisted since the 1980s, as observed by Nduka (2021), and has escalated notably from 1999 with the resurgence of democratic governance.

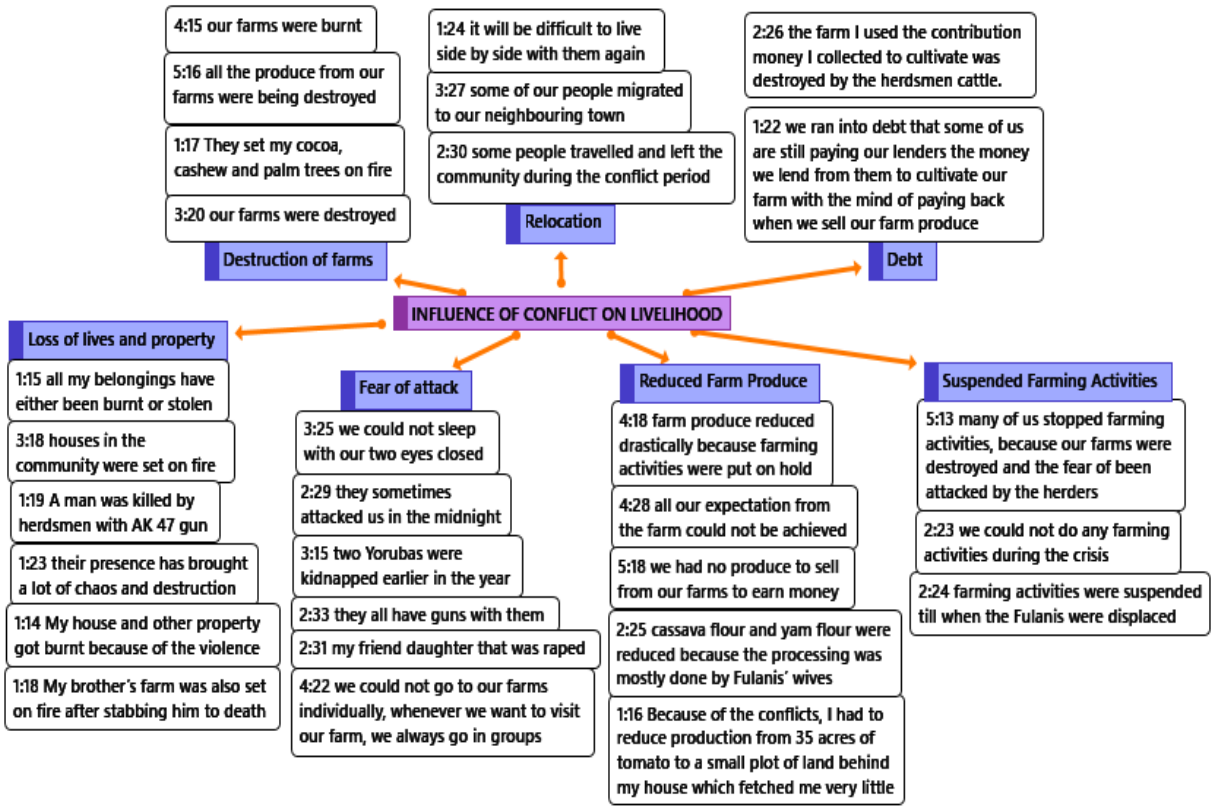

Figure 5: Influence of conflict on farmers' livelihood in the study area

Livelihood Security Indicators

Food security

Participants reported that community members regularly consumed a limited variety of foods due to resource scarcity. They often resorted to eating foods they would normally avoid because of insufficient household supplies. The participant further clarified that households sometimes experience complete food shortages due to resource constraints. This situation indicates that conflicts between herders and farmers pose an obstacle to food security, as herders' displacement of farmers from their agricultural lands in affected communities has significantly reduced agricultural yields and production (Adewale et al., 2023). Consequently, this has substantially contributed to their concerns regarding food consumption. Such circumstances tend to adversely impact their livelihood security, given that food security is a key indicator of overall livelihood stability (Ukpong, 2021).

Economic security

Figure 6 illustrates that participants explained their economy was entirely disrupted during the conflict, as most community members are farmers whose primary occupation and source of income is farming. This income is utilised to improve and maintain their standard of living and to meet their basic needs. This aligns with the findings of Sambo and Sule (2020), which indicate that the farmers-herders conflict has multiple dimensions and implications for the state, including economic insecurity. This also suggests that their earnings from their main economic activity have not significantly improved their living standards. Moreover, this situation exacerbates the

negative impact of financial inadequacy on their livelihood security, given that economic security is a critical indicator of livelihood security.

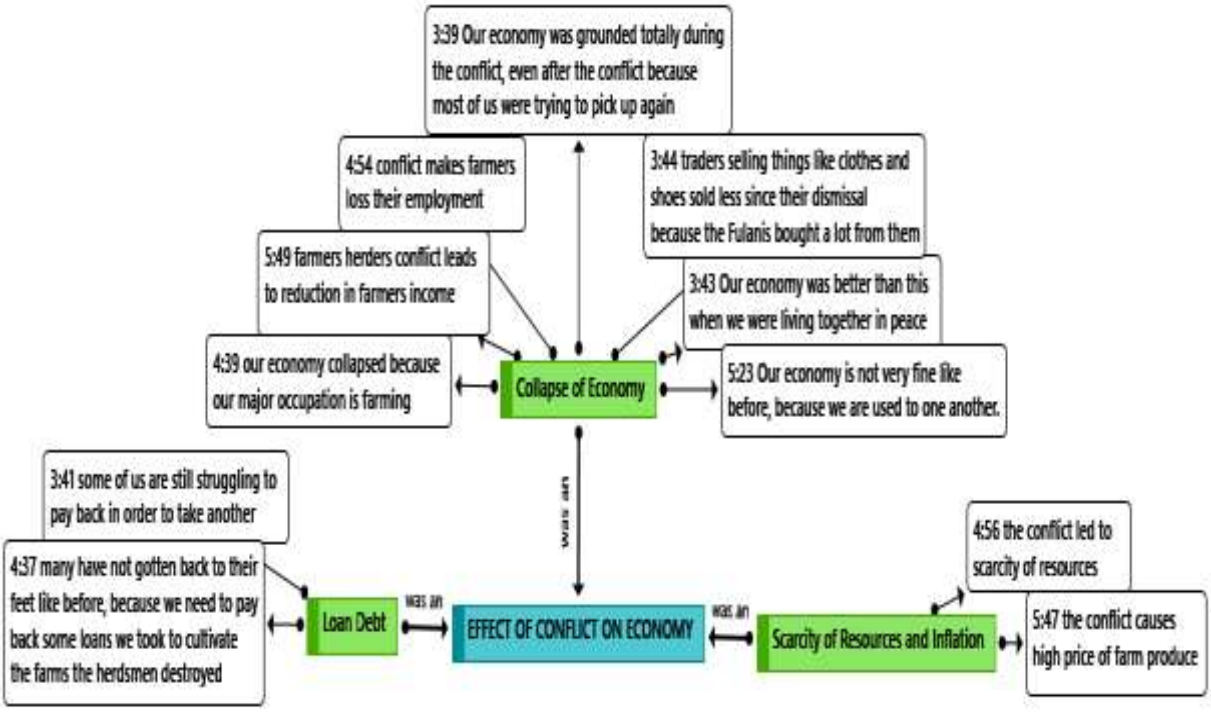

Figure 6: Economic security

Health security

Figure 7 shows that participants reported primary health care was average, not free as claimed by the government. Facilities lacked the necessary inputs for treatment and drugs. Private hospitals were available, but few could afford them and get better treatment due to low income during the conflict. Most community members accessed traditional health care because it is affordable. Pharmacies were accessible only to those who could afford prescriptions and better treatment. There were no general hospitals in the community; complex cases, such as surgeries, were taken to Ibadan. This made households vulnerable during the farmers-herdsmen conflict, risking death when seeking urgent treatment. The conflict threatens lives and economic activities, leading to low income, inadequate savings, poor health, and livelihood insecurity, since health security is vital for stable livelihoods.

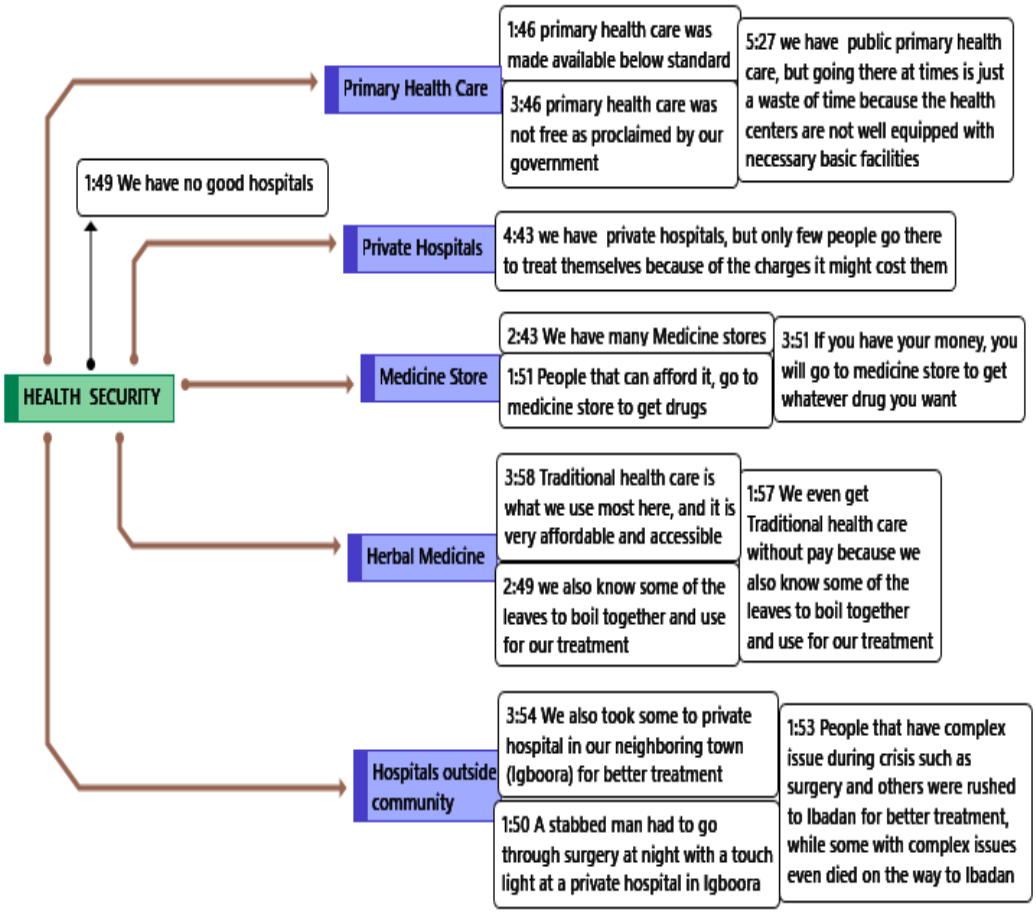

Figure 7: Health Security

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the farmer-herder conflict has evolved into a persistent crisis across many rural communities in Nigeria, particularly in Oyo State. The conflict is largely driven by intense competition over limited land resources, heightening tensions between crop farmers and pastoral herders. The findings reveal that the crisis has severe, multifaceted impacts. These include destruction of crops due to cattle grazing, loss of life, sexual harassment and assault of rural women, and widespread insecurity within affected communities. Consequently, these challenges have led to reduced agricultural productivity, declining farming activities due to farmland abandonment, and the displacement of farming households from their communities. The study further establishes that the conflict's recurrent nature has significantly undermined rural livelihoods. Farmers' incomes have declined, while their food and health security and overall economic stability have been adversely affected.

To address the underlying causes and adverse effects of this conflict, the Nigerian government should adopt modern livestock systems, especially controlled ranches, to regulate grazing, reduce farmland encroachment, and reduce crop destruction, a major driver of conflict. Regular dialogue between local farmers and migrant herders through structured associations will foster constructive engagement and mutual solutions. Conflict resolution must be strengthened with better coordination among federal, state, and local governments. While the federal government handles security,

local and state governments should be more active at the grassroots level, supported by funding and oversight. Traditional rulers' roles should also be revitalised and integrated into formal conflict resolution processes, given their influence within communities.

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