From cooperation to contention
Political unsettlement and farmer-pastoralist conflicts in Nigeria
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Authors
Adam Higazi is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, and a research fellow at the Centre for Peace and Security Studies, Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola (Adamawa State), Nigeria. Zahbia Yousuf is Senior Advisor, Peace and Transition Processes at Conciliation Resources.

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www.politicalsettlements.org
Twitter.com/PolSettlements

Published by:
Conciliation Resources
Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL
www.c-r.org
Telephone +44 (0) 207 359 7728
Email accord@c-r.org
Facebook.com/ConciliationResources
Twitter.com/CRbuildpeace
Charity registered in England and Wales (1055436)
Company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (03196482)

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Cover photo: Fulani pastoralists with the Ardo (Fulani pastoralist leader) of Pinau, Wase Local Government Area (LGA), southern Plateau State, December 2016
Credit: Adam Higazi
Political unsettlement and farmer-pastoralist conflicts in Nigeria

Pastoralist livelihoods support millions of Nigerians and form an important part of the rural economy and society. There are different types of pastoralism in Nigeria ranging from nomadic to semi-settled and settled agro-pastoralism. This report looks at transhumant (or nomadic) pastoralism – the movement of livestock from one place to another between wet and dry seasons – and the dynamics of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, which have steadily increased in Nigeria in recent years.

While these two essential components of rural society have enjoyed cooperative relationships in many parts of the country, such coexistence is now strained or has broken down in many communities. The pattern and scale of farmer-pastoralist conflicts varies across Nigeria, and in some places the two groups do still accommodate each other. But in many states clashes have intensified – killing and destruction have reached unprecedented levels in major flashpoint centres in northern and central Nigeria, and tensions have now extended to the south. How such tensions are categorised – in particular perceptions of why violence happens and who is responsible – affects how responses are designed and implemented.

Pastoralists lack meaningful political representation or support at federal and state levels. Rural areas are generally lightly governed, and heavy dependence on the oil economy has led to the neglect and subsequent decline of the agricultural sector. The prominence of pastoralism as a political issue has grown alongside rising levels of pastoralist-farmer violence.

In particular, the politicisation of ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria, the intersection of rural violence with other forms of insecurity including urban riots, and the incorrect links made with Boko Haram activity in the north-east, have intensified the security and political profile of Fulani pastoralists.

There is an urgent need to clarify contemporary dimensions of pastoralist-farmer conflicts, and to identify ways to de-escalate this type of violence and prevent spillover into other forms of conflict. This report outlines the causes of increased pastoralist-farmer tensions as well as the position of pastoralists in Nigeria. It explores the challenges to developing conflict prevention mechanisms at local and national levels, and identifies potential entry points for doing so.

The report is primarily based on fieldwork conducted among pastoralists and farmers in Plateau, Kaduna and Nasarawa States in November and December 2016, and on individual meetings in Abuja with government officials and civil society representatives. The analysis also utilises data and insights from Zamfara State in January 2017 and from earlier fieldwork carried out in Plateau and Bauchi States since 2005, and Borno, Adamawa, and Taraba States in 2015–16. In addition, it draws on workshop discussions held by Conciliation Resources in Abuja in 2016 with representatives of government ministries, civil society organisations and relevant interest groups from across Nigeria.
Key findings

Options for conflict prevention and resolution exist, particularly at the local level. However, tensions between farmers and pastoralists have become increasingly dynamic: overlap with banditry and communal and religious violence in some areas has changed the scale of impact, requiring a broader set of responses. The issue is further complicated by discordant political settlements at federal, state and local levels, which inhibit coordinated approaches and distort appropriate analysis and responses.

Opportunities for conflict prevention and resolution at the sub-national level

- There are established practices for coordinating activities of farmers and pastoralists. For example, grazing reserves linked to transhumance routes provide a historical model for reducing pastoralist encroachment onto farmland, as does seasonal or periodic rotation of land, which also increases agricultural productivity. But such cooperation has broken down in many communities, or is now struggling to address heightened tensions resulting from intensified or new stresses: increasing competition for land and water due to demographic and ecological pressure; reduced availability of grazing land due to expansion of farmland; and blockages of transhumance routes.

- Current levels of cooperation between farmers and pastoralists vary across states. Existing good practices in some communities could be emulated in other parts of the country. Identifying where such approaches have developed and how, and the key actors involved, is an important starting point for any conflict prevention engagement on the issue. A better understanding of how and why historical cooperative relationships have broken down could also help to identify adaptive strategies for reducing tensions.

- The creation of new or the revival of existing coordination activities to manage and facilitate cooperation between farmers and pastoralists requires support at district and village levels. This could include special committees set up at the local government level to bring together respective leaders. It would necessitate engaging with the various forms of authority and governance that exist in rural areas including traditional institutions, pastoralist associations, farmers, local government officials, and the security agencies.

- To function effectively, sub-national arrangements should include genuine representatives of pastoralists and farmers from rural areas – those who have influence over participants in the conflicts or are themselves directly involved, rather than urban-based representatives who may have access to development discussions in federal and state capitals but have less influence over the conflicting groups.

Political unsettlements at the local, state and federal level

- The effectiveness of local initiatives would be enhanced by active federal and state policies to facilitate and support the management and allocation of land to farmers and pastoralists in rural areas. This could include a comprehensive assessment and mapping of the existing network of transhumance routes - the maintenance of which is a requirement of national governments in the 1998 ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol - including those that have been blocked. This could facilitate the reopening of blocked routes.

- Presently there is little political willingness to resolve pastoralist-farmer disputes, and in fact political discourse has contributed to an increased scapegoating of Fulani pastoralists. The conflation at state and national political levels of pastoralist-farmer conflicts with inter-communal tensions, and the activities and spread of Boko Haram, risks paralysing potential conflict resolution approaches.
The revival of grazing reserves and transhumance routes requires existing legislation to be updated by the federal government and implemented by states. It would also require taking land from farmers, which is likely to be met with concerted local opposition. With ethnic and religious politics a factor in some areas, and land tenure and customary rights expressed through ethnicity, few states are willing to take such a political risk.

**Entry points for coordinated response**

- Rural development – including education and employment opportunities – is an important part of ensuring that the diversification of livelihoods away from pastoralism is a viable option. This has important security implications as well, given the rise in young men turning to organised banditry and crime within pastoralist communities. Rebuilding the system of nomadic education, and education generally in rural areas, is key.

- As part of Nigeria’s development strategy, international donors should consider:
  i) Encouraging the Nigerian Federal Government to design and implement disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes among pastoralists and farmers in rural areas as a component of peace and security interventions;
  ii) Supporting and funding dialogue committees and reconciliation processes between pastoralists and farmers throughout Nigeria;
  iii) Supporting the Nigerian Government, particularly at state level, to discuss initiatives with target groups before implementation to ensure ownership of initiatives.
Pastoralism and rural conflict in Nigeria

Nomadic pastoralism has a long history in West Africa and the Sahel. It is a rational response to seasonal variations in pasture and water – one area of grazing land is usually unable to support a herd of animals for a whole year, and access to water sources can be limited, particularly during the dry season in the northern savannah and Sahel. Transhumance helps mitigate against climatic uncertainty and fluctuations in rainfall. This adaptation mechanism involves the seasonal migration of families and livestock over distances of up to hundreds of kilometres, and even across international borders. Transhumant pastoralism often occurs between ecological zones (see map 1 opposite) and is supposed to follow designated routes. Map 2 (p.8) shows the extensive network of transhumance routes, although some of these are currently blocked. The map is not comprehensive because records are incomplete and many local routes are missing. In addition, some routes already documented by the federal government are blocked in places. A detailed assessment is required to comprehensively map existing routes and their current status (open or closed), and where possible to reopen routes that have been cultivated. The maintenance of transhumance routes is a requirement of national governments in the 1998 ECOWAS (Economic Community of the West African States) Transhumance Protocol.

In recent years increased demographic and ecological pressure has created more competition for land and water in rural areas of the country. Throughout Nigeria, which has the highest population of any African country with an estimated 180 million inhabitants, demographic increase has led to an expansion in cultivated farmland and a reduction in available grazing land for pastoralists. In the far north, climatic uncertainty and lower rainfall have made it more difficult to sustain increasing populations, pushing many farmers and pastoralists with livestock southwards. This has happened gradually over a period of decades – with an apparent increase over the past decade – and has added to pressure on land and water in central and southern Nigeria. In many areas of the country, the blockage of transhumance routes and loss of grazing land to agricultural expansion, combined with increased southwards movement of pastoralists, has led to increased conflict with local communities. This is particularly the case along the central axis of Nigeria (also known as the Middle Belt) – notably parts of Plateau, Kaduna, Niger, Nassarawa, Benue, Taraba, and Adamawa States. In some of these states and in the north-west, including Zamfara State, rampant banditry has further inflamed farmer-pastoralist conflicts. The conflicts often have localised dynamics, but primarily involve Fulani pastoralists and local farming communities. Both sides are affected, leading to many fatalities, the destruction of livelihoods and property, and internal displacement.

Fulani pastoralists and identity politics

The majority of pastoralists in Nigeria are Fulani by ethnicity. The Fulani are predominantly Muslim and are the largest pastoralist group in Africa. While there appears to have been an increase in conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and farmers across West Africa, by far the highest levels of violence have been recorded in Nigeria. ‘Fulani herdsmen’ are often referred to in public discourse and in the media in Nigeria as a homogenous category, but there are real differences based on kinship, geographic origin, and mode of transhumance (for example, semi-settled or nomadic). There are also multiple clans and sub-clans. A key distinction among the Fulani is between pastoralists and non-pastoralists, and between nomadic and settled populations.

Outside pastoralism Fulani people work in a range of jobs – from traders in the informal sector to educated professionals. There is also a political class that can in part be identified as Fulani, including Muhammadu Buhari, the current President of Nigeria. Most of the emirs in northern Nigeria are also Fulani – a legacy of the nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate – but in

1. Other pastoralist groups include the Shuwa Arabs in Borno State and many ethnic minorities and individuals who either have their own livestock or obtained herds of cattle by working for Fulani pastoralists.
Political unsettlement and farmer-pastoralist conflicts in Nigeria

There remains a strong perception, voiced by civil society and government participants that Abuja-based political and military elites hold significant investments in cattle and arm Fulani pastoralists to protect their herds, with one participant remarking: “When will we unmask the employer?” Other participants also argued that farmer-pastoralist conflicts were purposefully characterised as locally driven violence in order to obscure or minimise the role of business interests.

Extract from participatory workshop, Abuja, April 2016

Most cases they have over generations lost the ability to speak the Fulani language (Fulfulde). Many have adopted Hausa language and culture, and have inter-married, producing the epithet ‘Hausa-Fulani’. The urbanised ‘Hausa-Fulani’ are distinct from Fulani pastoralists – known as Mbororo – who generally speak Fulfulde as their primary language and follow Fulani cultural norms. This distinction is important because conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and farmers are often politicised, especially in southern Nigeria and among some Christian minority populations in the north. They are often portrayed as being orchestrated by northern ‘Hausa-Fulani’ elites. In reality urbanised, sedentary Fulani and ‘Hausa-Fulani’ populations tend to have limited or no influence over nomadic Fulani pastoralists.

Map 1 Ecological zones of Nigeria and surrounding region

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For those who have left behind pastoralist activity for generations, the connection between urban and rural is generally weak, and understanding or sympathy for nomadic life is limited. It is a myth, for example, that President Muhammadu Buhari has control over the nomadic population in Nigeria. He did not grow up in a nomadic context and he reputedly does not speak Fulfulde with fluency. The president has taken some measures to try and resolve conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, but it cannot be said that he or other northern political elites represent Fulani pastoralists.

The extent to which urban Fulani elites fuel violence between pastoralists and farmers is equally exaggerated. While most cattle are owned and looked after by pastoralists themselves, in some cases Fulani people living in town have cattle that are looked after by their brothers or hired pastoralists in the countryside. Sometimes ‘big men’ in towns in northern Nigeria, including political elites and wealthy businessmen – who may or may not be Fulani – purchase cattle and hire pastoralists to look after them. ‘Big men’ are sometimes accused of stoking conflicts, either by protecting cattle rustlers and bandits or because the herdsmen they hire are not accountable and do not respect the communities they migrate through. There are examples of hired pastoralists moving southwards with other peoples’ cattle, often from the north-west, carelessly trespassing onto farms, behaving aggressively towards farmers and triggering conflict.

However this relates to a relatively small proportion of cattle being reared in Nigeria and does not explain all the current conflicts. In contrast Fulani families with long histories of transhumance in particular areas often have established and cooperative ties with local communities.
Escalating violence

The primary reasons for the rise in farmer-pastoralist conflicts in Nigeria are increased pressure on land and water in rural areas, combined with inappropriate, weak or non-existent state interventions to mediate and resolve growing tensions. Farmers in many parts of rural Nigeria have been experiencing significant crop damage due to the encroachment of Fulani cattle onto their farms. This reduces agricultural productivity and destroys livelihoods. At the same time Fulani pastoralists are experiencing widespread blockage of designated cattle routes and loss of grazing land as farmers cultivate these areas. In some cases, this pushes pastoralists to move their cattle across farms or rear their cattle on crops instead of grass.

Ownership of cattle is important as it forms the economic and social basis of pastoralist society. In zones of insecurity the theft or killing of cattle by villagers is often met with violent reprisal attacks by pastoralists. Rural conflicts in Nigeria are often compounded by opaque or poorly implemented government policy, inequitable allocation of diminishing rural resources by both state and traditional authorities, varied governance in rural areas, and poorly implemented conflict resolution policies.

The Nigerian state has a relatively weak rural presence and has neglected the agrarian sector since the 1970s, when oil revenues from the Niger Delta began to dominate the economy. There have been few improvements in agricultural productivity and livestock production as a result of the ‘oil curse’: dependence on oil revenues, which have not been reinvested in productive economic activities, has led to the deterioration of other sectors. Despite the trend towards greater urbanisation, about half the Nigerian population is still rural and dependent on agriculture and pastoralism. The prevalence of rural insecurity is therefore a national issue that, apart from the loss of life involved, has significant economic implications. The current administration led by President Muhammadu Buhari has stated that with the fall in oil revenues, due to the general decline in global oil prices and civil unrest in the Niger Delta, agriculture will be a priority for the Nigerian economy.

Pastoralists in Nigeria have few if any formal rights over land. Pastoralists interviewed in Wase Local Government Area (LGA), southern Plateau State, outlined that permission to occupy a piece of land or use it for grazing is normally sought from local traditional rulers – for example, village or district heads. This applies in most areas of Nigeria. Local accommodation of pastoralists is common, but depends on their relationship with local villagers and traditional authorities. Informal systems of land allocation have worked well in the past, particularly when there was less pressure on land. With increased pressure on land, access to grazing land is often subject to the discretion of local traditional rulers and farmers, and there are incidents of pastoralists no longer being given space for their livestock or to set up camps.

2. According to the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2013), the mean fertility rate in Nigeria in 2010–13 was 5.5 births per woman, with significant regional variations, rising to as high as 6.7 in north-west Nigeria. See https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR293/FR293.pdf [accessed 2 March 2017]
Farmers and pastoralists accuse each other of paying traditional rulers significant sums of money to access land. Farmers seeking new areas to cultivate are attracted to the fertile pastoralist land that has been heavily manured with cow dung; the fact that pastoralists usually lack title to land is often exploited if the traditional authorities support the farmers. In Bashar District, Wase LGA, southern Plateau State, Fulani representatives interviewed in several villages claimed farmers had paid for land, resulting in the eviction of people that had been settled there for decades. In this case the pastoralists had permanent abodes in Wase where children and older members of the communities stayed and often farmed, while a section of the household, normally young men, would take the cattle on transhumance to the River Benue during the dry season.

This pressure contributes to outbreaks of violence and the destruction of farms by pastoralists – by their livestock or the deliberate action of pastoralists themselves, such as hacking down crops with machetes. This is taking a heavy toll on farmers and reducing production. Both farmers and pastoralists have genuine grievances, but over many years disputes have accumulated without being properly addressed.

Participants representing pastoralist communities reiterated this point, arguing that traditional chiefs often allocated unoccupied communal land in exchange for money, only to evict the pastoralists when the land was ready to be farmed. A participant from the Confederation of Traditional Herder Organisations quoted a Fulani adage in response to this practice: “Duroobhe Ndewi Ndawadi, Ndeebhobe Ndewi Duroobhe” (The pastoralists drive away the wild animals and then the farmers come to drive away the pastoralists).

Extract from participatory workshop, Abuja, April 2016
Opportunities for sub-national conflict management

There are practical ways to manage many aspects of farmer-pastoralist conflicts. A starting point would be to ensure that cattle routes are open and maintained, and that pastoralists are given land on which to graze their livestock. Spaces along transhumance routes should be provided and protected, where pastoralists can rest or camp, and feed their livestock away from farms to prevent animals wandering onto farmland and destroying crops. If there are transhumance routes going through farms or along the edge of farms, farmers should be supported to use natural fencing to help prevent livestock from straying off routes and destroying crops.

The revival of grazing reserves linked by transhumance routes is also necessary. Grazing reserves were brought into law in 1965 but very few are now functional. Most have been cultivated by farmers or absorbed into Nigeria’s growing urban areas. The re-establishment of grazing reserves would also help reduce the encroachment of pastoralists onto farmland and improve pastoralist production. More than fifty years on, the law needs to be updated to reflect present conditions on the ground and enable the revival of specified grazing reserves and, as many probably cannot be revived, the creation of new ones. In practice such an initiative from the federal government would have to be implemented by the governments of Nigeria’s 36 states.

Competition for land is not inevitable. It is possible to rotate the use of land between farmers and pastoralists for the benefit of both. This is a long-established pattern in northern Nigeria and often still occurs, but there has to be trust and cooperation between communities for it to work. Local level ‘political arrangements’ are essential even if they are informal. Under such a system pastoralists would avoid farms before crops are harvested, but after the harvest they would be encouraged to take their cattle onto farmland to eat crop residues and manure the land, leaving the farm before the next planting season. The manure left behind increases crop yields the following year. Fallow land is given over to pastoralists for an agreed upon period, after which it is cultivated again and the farmers benefit from the manure. Another portion of land is then allocated for the pastoralists to graze their livestock on. This rotational system probably needs to be combined with dedicated grazing reserves to substantially reduce land disputes between farmers and pastoralists, but it shows how pastoralists and farmers could work together for each other’s benefit.

More structured and regular local dialogue is required to improve or help establish such cooperation. These measures would help prevent the outbreak of violence and destruction of farms, as well as increase agricultural and pastoralist production. Such conflict resolution initiatives need to be organised locally, in local government headquarters and villages, and not in state capitals such as Jos or Kaduna or in the federal capital of Abuja, which are often disconnected from sites of farmer-pastoralist conflicts. It requires bringing together those who are actually involved in conflicts at the local level, rather than urban-based ‘representatives’ who have little influence over the protagonists in the conflicts, and individuals linked to donors and NGOs.

This gap could be addressed by the identification of genuine representatives of pastoralists and farmers from rural areas, followed by the development of local agreements between farmers and pastoralists to regulate the relationship between them. Special committees could be set up at the local government level, to bring together leaders of pastoralists and farmers, with a mandate to help implement the peace agreements in their respective communities. Mediation and dialogue at state and local levels is also required to manage available land and resources. Currently, the weak capacity of the state in much of the countryside means that land disputes are often not resolved in a fair or judicious manner. The lack of governance also limits the legitimacy and capacity of local officials to play a conflict resolution role.

The main local power holders are principally local government councils, especially the chairmen, and traditional rulers. Both these institutions tend to be dominated by the majority ethnic group in their area of jurisdiction, and so decision-making tends to favour local ethnic majorities. State officials, especially governors, are also significant as they make decisions that affect the whole state, including local government areas. On security matters, Divisional Police Officers (DPO) play an influential role at the local level, often working with traditional leaders and local government officials. A good DPO can have a positive local impact, but their resources are limited, with too few police officers to provide a permanent security presence in all rural communities. The police tend to be lightly spread over a large area, which creates the need for local security actors (vigilantes), who are usually registered with the police and may work with them. In some cases vigilantes have local legitimacy and have been successful in reducing banditry and cattle rustling. Therefore leaders of vigilante committees, where they exist, are important to involve in conflict resolution processes.

Such practical conflict management approaches – building on existing mechanisms of cooperation between pastoralists and farmers, ensuring adequate grazing reserves and open passage on transhumance routes, as well as supporting platforms for dialogue between legitimate representatives – would be relatively cost-effective and help resolve the primary causes of tensions. Yet there are a number of administrative, political and security challenges that complicate the possibility of putting in place such resolutions. Firstly, opaque and dissonant political settlements at federal, state and local levels aggravate the problem and prevent coordinated responses. Secondly, farmer-pastoralist conflicts intersect with other forms of violence in Nigeria – ethnic and religious inter-group conflicts, and increased banditry within pastoralist communities. These exacerbate the impacts of farmer-pastoralist conflicts, intensify the politicisation of the issue, and encourage inappropriate policy responses.
Political unsettlement at federal, state and local levels

The ‘political settlement’ in Nigeria is based on compacts between rival political factions as well as the principle of ‘federal character’ – to incorporate elite representatives from different regions and states into the federal government. This power structure is not representative of pastoralists in rural areas. They have their own internal leadership arrangements and greater links to the parallel system of traditional institutions in Nigeria than to elite politics at state and federal levels. The under-representation of pastoralists in government is a problem for the nomadic population, given the increasing pressure on their livelihoods, and that issues such as access to grazing land and transhumance routes can only be solved through state intervention. Presently, there are few people in the corridors of power in Nigeria who support the interests of pastoralists and understand their needs.

Pastoralist associations do have a presence at federal, state, and local levels in Nigeria. The largest is the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), which primarily represents the pastoralist Fulani. There is some variation in the performance of MACBAN between states, depending on state level and local representatives. Some are effective and hard working, others less so. Reforms within MACBAN suggest it is starting to provide more effective representation for pastoralists at the federal level. The Shuwa Arab population, which is mainly found in Borno State, is represented by the Al Hayah Cattle Breeders Association. They work alongside MACBAN but it is a separate organisation. It would be a key point of contact for any work among pastoralists in Boko Haram affected areas.

Government committees of inquiry and livestock experts in the Federal Ministry of Agriculture have put forward recommendations, including how to safeguard or create grazing reserves and transhumance routes. Pastoralist groups themselves, notably Miyetti Allah and Al Hayah, have lobbied for such policies. The problem is one of non-implementation: for policies to be effective they require government approval and action at both federal and state levels. Presently, there is no political consensus to promote pastoralist development across the federation. The topic of Fulani pastoralism has become highly politicised, particularly with Buhari as president, as opponents of the government use the issue to attack his presidency. Any policy measures perceived to benefit pastoralists face strong political and popular opposition in many (though not all) states.

Different federal states are split on the issue, and the executive is at odds with the National Assembly, the majority of whose members appear to have taken a stand against the creation or revival of grazing reserves and transhumance routes. Interviews in Abuja in November 2016 confirmed that bills proposed by senators from Kano and Niger states to create grazing reserves and stock routes were thrown out of the National Assembly. Partisan politics has largely prevented any action or implementation of a practical solution. The general political alignment is against Fulani pastoralists, since most politicians are not from pastoralist backgrounds and they are more likely to have kin members or constituencies who are sedentary farmers. Opposition politicians promote the stereotyping and demonisation of Fulani pastoralists, reinforcing and exploiting anti-Fulani sentiments in the media, and in some instances have provoked attacks on pastoralists.
The inability of the Federal and State Governments to move beyond partisan politics constituted a deep source of frustration for participants. Some felt that significant stakeholder engagement had not translated into action, referencing commissions of inquiry called by successive presidents (Obasanjo, Yar’Adua and Jonathan) on issues of livestock management and rural economic development, none of which had led to the improved regulation of pastoralist-farmer interaction.

**Extract from participatory workshop, Abuja, April 2016**

Under the 1978 Land Use Act, land in Nigeria, unless proven to be in private ownership, belongs to the state. Customary land tenure is not recognised under the Land Use Act, such that the government has the legal power to take land from local communities if it needs to do so – for example, for oil exploration or mining. But it is in fact states, not the federal government, that exercise this control over land. If grazing reserves and transhumance routes were to be approved at the federal level, it would be state governments that would implement them. The 36 state governments in Nigeria have divergent views on the issue; some have shown a willingness to assist pastoralists in this way, while others have done the opposite and sought policies of exclusion.
The creation – or revival – of cattle routes and grazing reserves would require taking at least some land from farmers, which is likely to be met with concerted local opposition. Ethnic and religious politics become a factor in some areas, as issues of land tenure and customary rights to land come into play and are often expressed through ethnicity. This often precludes pastoralists from accessing land. Fulani pastoralists are now unpopular in many areas and there are rarely any political benefits in assisting them. On the contrary, populist politicians take a hard line on the issue, stoking tensions instead of seeking dialogue, and adopting policies that aggravate rather than resolve the conflicts. An example is the so-called ‘anti-grazing law’ that was introduced in Ekiti State by Governor Fayose in 2016. Fayose is a populist politician from the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the ruling party in Nigeria from 1999–2015, whose antagonism towards the Buhari administration is often expressed through anti-Fulani rhetoric. Fulani herdsmen are the target of his vitriol, which is implicitly a way to attack Buhari.

A spate of heavy attacks in different states by Fulani pastoralists on farmers has reinforced public and political opposition, and there is growing resistance to a potential settlement on cattle routes and grazing reserves that would appear to reward Fulani pastoralists for their violence. Media reporting tends to focus on attacks by pastoralists on farmers and villages, implying that these are unprovoked. While some may be and there have undoubtedly been many large-scale attacks involving pastoralists, pastoralists are often victims of attacks by villagers or bandits as well, such as in Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, and Zamfara States. The hardships faced by transhumant pastoralists, as well as their perspectives and concerns receive much less coverage. They do not have the same access to media as sedentary groups, they are generally not educated in formal schools, and can be reticent about communicating their perspectives to a wider public.

4. Attacks on villages include the Agatu massacre in Benue State in February to March 2016; attacks in Demsa LGA in Adamawa State, between January and June 2016; and Enugu April 2016. Interviews conducted by the author in Manchok, southern Kaduna State in December 2016 revealed that there had also been repeated attacks on villages in the area, including an attack on Manchok on 14 March 2014 in which 148 people were killed.

Participants acknowledged that poorly balanced media reporting of violent incidents failed to take into account those carried out against pastoralists, fuelling a popular perception of Fulani pastoralists as ‘militias’ or ‘invaders’. A representative of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria noted that, increasingly, “criminal behaviour is being defined by ethnicity and occupation, not by the act itself”. Civil society participants felt that their sector had done too little to provide a balanced explanation of the increase in pastoralist-farmer conflict in the face of such reporting.

Extract from participatory workshop, Abuja, April 2016
Nigeria is affected by various forms and magnitudes of conflict: from criminality, kidnapping and politically motivated violence in the oil-rich Niger Delta; to ethno-religious violence in central and northern Nigeria; periodic election violence; to the Boko Haram insurgency, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and mass displacement in the north-eastern states. In areas of weak state presence distinct forms of conflict can emerge which subsequently overlap, often obscuring understanding of the actors involved in and the causes of violence, and leading to inappropriate responses. The effects of pastoralist-farmer tensions in rural Nigeria have been aggravated by inter-communal conflict, increases in banditry, and the Boko Haram insurgency.

**Spill over of urban communal tensions**

Hotspots of pastoralist-farmer violence also tend to have a history of inter-communal conflict. In these areas, ethnic and religious differences intensify during periods of political tension and define the contours of violence and mobilisation. In Plateau and Kaduna States, for example, rioting in the cities of Jos and Kaduna has spilled over into rural areas and in some cases led to attacks on pastoralist communities. These initially urban outbreaks of violence split the population along religious lines – Muslim and Christian – and the predominantly Muslim pastoralists were targeted in some majority Christian villages. In Plateau State the escalation and spill over of urban violence in September 2001 and January 2010 destabilised rural areas for several years afterwards. The spread of violence from Jos to rural areas occurred with the mobilisation of youth from ethnic Berom populated areas against Muslims of different ethnicities, who lived in their midst. Fulani pastoralists were among those adversely affected, with loss of life and cattle; large numbers were displaced from Berom areas of Plateau into Bauchi State. The violence was partly politically motivated – so indigenous Berom elites could seize back control of land from economically dominant Muslim communities. There followed a sustained campaign of mass violence by Fulani pastoralists against Berom communities in Plateau.

In Kaduna State ethno-religious violence stems in part from a history of discrimination by the state’s Muslim majority and the emirate in Zaria against Christians and ethnic minorities in southern Kaduna. Post-election violence in 2011 against Christians in Kaduna and Zaria, led to reprisals against Muslims in Christian-majority areas of southern Kaduna. Fulani pastoralists were among those targeted, and many were displaced and lost their cattle. Pastoralists were subsequently suspected of carrying out attacks on villages in Kaduna State (as in Plateau) in areas where they had earlier sustained losses or been forced to flee from.

Many Fulani attacks reported in the media are motivated by vengeance – for the killing of family members and theft or loss of livestock suffered in previous conflicts. This cyclical dynamic does not necessarily explain all violence involving pastoralists, but it accounts for much of it in some of the major flashpoints. These are mutual conflicts that date back years or decades, yet reporting and political characterisation is often unbalanced, lacking any historical contextualisation or analysis of conflict dynamics. Attacks by pastoralists on villages are widely portrayed in the media and often by churches and politicians in central and southern Nigeria as unprovoked acts of aggression – other sides of the story are rarely heard.
Intra-group banditry and organised crime

Conflicts occur not only between communities, but within them as well. For example, much of the cattle rustling that affects Fulani pastoralists in north-central and north-west Nigeria is being carried out by Fulani rustlers. The pressure on pastoralists has led to a surge in criminality, banditry and lawlessness in some areas. There are cases of cattle rustlers forming armed groups and moving between nomadic communities to steal their livestock. It is so endemic that pastoralists have formed vigilante groups and proactively pursued the bandits. Banditry tends to be concentrated in areas where there is weak state security presence, for example, north-west Taraba State, south-east Plateau, southern Zamfara, and rural areas of Borno State. Bandits raid cattle but also threaten communities and demand money from them, including entering pastoralist camps and holding people hostage, demanding ransoms in the range of 1–3 million naira (at least US$2,000–$6,000).

The bandits form organised criminal networks, often relatively localised, but sometimes with wider influence and political connections – for example in Zamfara State. In southern Plateau State and Taraba State, banditry and cattle rustling fed on the collapse of security after communal violence along religious and ethnic lines – from 2002–2004 and again in 2013. After communal clashes subsided, and with some pastoralists having lost their herds, there was a surge in banditry that persisted for years afterwards. Some good grazing land became no-go areas for pastoralists due to the threat of roving bandits. The danger posed by bandits and armed robbers also affects farmers, and in Zamfara State banditry has greatly exacerbated conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and Hausa farmers (note that both groups are Muslim, indicating the marginal role of religion, at least in that farmer-pastoralist conflict).

In Plateau and Taraba States the formation of vigilante groups by Fulani pastoralists, often at the local government area level, led to decreased banditry from 2015–16. The groups generally work with the police and local traditional authorities to prevent and combat cattle rustling and other forms of banditry. There are allegations that in some instances traditional authorities and politicians, including at least one local Fulani leader in Wase [southern Plateau], were being paid off by bandits and were even supporting them. In the Wase case, a more coordinated local security effort involving vigilantes, the police, and the emirate in Wase, improved local security.

Cattle are a source of economic security and pride for herding communities, and both men and women contribute to deriving livelihoods from them. The increasing incidence of banditry and organised crime in the livestock sector undermine legitimate pastoralist activity and lead to violent responses. Such activities and the responses of vigilante groups mainly involve young men, but women are affected too. As more men carry arms and participate in violent conflicts, male dominance has deepened. If current dynamics continue so as to fuel opportunities for organised banditry, the gender as well as security implications should not be overlooked.

Boko Haram

North-east Nigeria, the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency, is a highly productive area for pastoralism. Interviews among Shuwa Arab and Fulani pastoralists in Maiduguri from 2015–16 indicate that pastoralist groups in Borno State have been very badly hit by attacks and cattle rustling by Boko Haram, leading to substantial depletion of herds and widespread loss of life. Cattle theft has helped sustain Boko Haram in parts of Borno State. Provisional data from 2011 to mid-2016 suggests that Boko Haram killed more than 1,900 Shuwa Arab pastoralists in Borno State. In the period up to December 2015 data suggests that Boko Haram destroyed 364 Shuwa Arab villages, burned down more than 19,000 houses, stole some 160,000 cattle, 67,000 sheep and goats, and more than 400,000 sacks of grain. Fulani communities in Borno, Yobe, and northern Adamawa States have also been hard hit by Boko Haram.

5. Preliminary investigations conducted by Al-Hayah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria on the loss of lives, livestock and properties of its members due to Boko Haram activities in Borno State, Nigeria – December 2015 [35-page summary document obtained by the author in Maiduguri, June 2016].
6. op cit
The insurgency has also severely disrupted agricultural production, as farmers have fled conflict, and villages and grain stores are raided by Boko Haram. This has created famine conditions in parts of central and northern Borno and severe acute malnutrition among many internally displaced persons (IDPs). As of February 2017, there are an estimated 1.7 million IDPs in north-east Nigeria, with the largest concentration in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital.\(^7\) IDPs are from rural and urban areas of Borno, but among rural dwellers who are now IDPs there is a mix of farmers and pastoralists.

While many pastoralists lost their lives and/or livestock in Boko Haram attacks, some escaped – to other parts of Nigeria or across international borders into Cameroon and Chad. Some remained in Borno where they are still susceptible to Boko Haram attacks. If and when pastoralists return to their areas of origin, they will need assistance to reconstitute their herds, as well as housing as many villages have been destroyed. The majority of pastoralists in Borno and surrounding areas had permanent dwellings, practising seasonal transhumance.

There are allegations that the apparent increase in attacks by pastoralists on villages in other parts of Nigeria is due to links to Boko Haram. Yet this runs counter to the dominant trend of pastoralists being attacked and displaced by Boko Haram. Boko Haram recruit from different communities, especially but not exclusively from the Kanuri population. A wide cross-section of people are implicated, and so the involvement of at least some pastoralists is probable. In some instances, cooperation with Boko Haram may have been a way to protect their herds. It is not clear if some of the same individuals have participated in conflicts in states such as Benue, Taraba and Plateau. It is possible, but the majority have been opposed to Boko Haram, and in the case of the Shuwa Arabs and some of the Fulani, in open conflict with them.

Despite evidence to the contrary, accusations persist – initiated by representatives of some communities in conflict with the pastoralist Fulani, and possibly some state governors/state-level politicians in the south. Some media reports also assert that there is a connection. International agencies and governments have also begun to raise concerns about radicalisation of Fulani pastoralists, because of their regional spread in West Africa. The fear is that they could coordinate a regional militant agenda. Events in central Mali, where there is a predominantly Fulani jihadi movement, reinforce this concern. There are presently no signs, in Nigeria or Mali, of Fulani militancy with regional ambitions.

Participants were largely sympathetic to the situation of pastoralists in Boko Haram-affected areas, arguing that they had had little choice but to arm themselves in the face of the insurgency, even though this would further compound the popular perception of pastoralists as militants amongst communities in central and southern parts of the country. A workshop participant also noted that widespread banditry, insecurity and reduced access to water and grazing land had long been a challenge for pastoralists in the north-east, but had gone largely unreported until the emergence of Boko Haram had brought national and international attention to the region.

Extract from participatory workshop, Abuja, April 2016

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Conclusion

While disputes between farmers and pastoralists have always occurred intermittently, in the past they were usually resolved through local dialogue and only rarely escalated into collective violence. This has now changed. Although many disputes are still frequently resolved without bloodshed, the number of violent conflicts has increased dramatically. There are several reasons for this, but fundamental is the pressure on rural populations from the reduction in available land, with competition especially intense along rivers and more fertile areas. Tensions resulting from these pressures are exacerbated by the spill over of other forms of violence, politicisation of ethnic and religious divides, and layers of ‘political unsettlement’ at the local, state and federal levels.

The report outlines a range of local-level agreements that could help address tensions, including the enhancement of existing sub-national arrangements between farmers and pastoralists – particularly within districts and villages. Details of such arrangements, by which land can be used on a temporary or permanent basis or rotated, need to be worked out in different communities at the local level. Platforms through which such arrangements can take place also need to be supported. Further research to identify other examples of conflict resolution and prevention methods, as well as why existing mechanisms are less able to respond to increased tensions, is a key starting point.

Federal and state-level political settlements are also required to facilitate and manage the allocation of land in rural areas, and should be coordinated so as to enable local conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms to function effectively. Yet there are sharp divisions over the issue at the federal level – it has become politicised in the national assembly, and the presidency and ministries have not yet been able to implement resolutions. There is also varied political appetite at the state level to support pastoralist development and balanced conflict prevention and resolution.

Further exploration of which state governments are more responsive to addressing tensions would be valuable. The extent to which local arrangements between farmers and pastoralists can be maintained without state sanction, if not active policies, also remains to be tested.

International actors can play a role in helping to clarify the nature and dynamics of farmer-pastoralist tensions, particularly where they are being conflated with and impacted by other forms of violence. Pastoralist-farmer violence is one of the conflicts facing Nigeria that could be managed through practical mechanisms and coordinated responses. Encouraging more accurate information on the issue at federal and state government levels, combined with support for practical and relatively cost-effective ways forward – such as consultation platforms, dialogue committees at the local level, and targeted reconciliation and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes in pastoralist and farmer communities – would be a timely conflict prevention strategy.

In the absence of such policies and arrangements, rural areas of Nigeria will likely see more conflict as pastoralists and farmers seek to resolve their disputes through force.
From cooperation to contention: political unsettlement and farmer-pastoralist conflicts in Nigeria

This paper examines the increasing incidence of violent conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria. It looks at how previous cooperative relationships have broken down in many communities resulting in unprecedented levels of killing and destruction.

The paper explores the challenges to developing conflict prevention mechanisms, including the layers of political unsettlement that exist at local, state and federal levels, and identifies potential entry points for local conflict resolution.

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies.

Accord spotlight presents focused analysis of key themes for peace and transition practice.