

Desertification and Its Implications On farmers-Herders Conflicts in Nigeria: An Analytical Appraisal

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Abstract: The paper appraised the scourge of farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria. The growing desertification and the effects of climate change have further increased the drive for the herdsmen to move further southward in search of grazing land and pasture for their livestock. The conflict has been one of the thorny security issues encroaching the corporate existence of the country particularly due to an aborted attempt by the federal government to establish the 'RUGA' settlement as a panacea. The paper used documentary sources to discuss and analyse the issues surrounding the causes and solutions to the problem. It was found that unless the federal government and other stakeholders make necessary steps especially reviving, reforming and remodelling the 1965 Northern Region Government's Grazing Reserve System as well as afforestation programs, the menace would continue to remain a threat to the corporate survival of the country.

Keywords: Climate Change, Desertification, Farmers, Herders, Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the major tragedies threatening the peaceful and corporate existence of Nigeria as a country is the conflict between the farmers and the herdsmen. For centuries, Arab nomads and African farmers alternately clash as the former raised livestock while the later cultivate land under resourced constrained conditions (Schilling, Scheffran & Link, 2010; Akujobi, Ebitari & Amuzie, 2016). It is interesting to note that herders-farmers conflict has become more pronounced in recent years. Even though, government had in the past taken some measures to address the problem, the growing rate of desertification and the effects of climate change have further increased the drive for the herdsmen to move to the southern part of Nigeria in search of greener pasture for grazing. These southward movements generated crises between the herders and the host communities whose crops were regularly invaded and destroyed by the cattle movement. Indeed, famers and herders in Nigeria frequently experienced series of devastating conflicts which destroyed lives and properties worth billions of Naira. Though, since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has been grappling with diverse security challenges but herders and famers clashes has been one of the more vulnerable one shaking its unity. This was vividly seen when the northern youth groups felt they could not resist the humiliations meted against the fulani herdsmen in Southern Nigeria. In fact, even within the northern states, these crises had taken place with devastating impact. The north central states of Benue, Plateau and Nasarawa among others had experienced conflicts that led to thousands of deaths and many

displaced. In January 2018 Amnesty International reports that over 168 people were killed due to farmers-herdsmen clashes (Oyama, 2018). In addition, News Agency of Nigeria had reported the displacement of over 18,000 people in Nasarawa State.

Undoubtedly, out of the 909,890 km² of the country's land area, about 580,841 km² accounting for 63.83% of total land is threatened by desertification (Ebenezer, 2015). It was deduced that desertification is one of the major challenge which triggers conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria and sub-Saharan African continent at large. It is a process which occurs through a fusion of natural (irregular rainfall, drought, and poor soil fertility) and anthropogenic factors (over cultivation, overgrazing, and firewood collection) (Akujobi, Ebitari & Amuzie, 2016). The United Nations Convention (1994) on fighting the threat simply defined desertification as land degradation (Oyama, 2018). It is observed by many researchers that inappropriate cultivation, grazing, firewood collection, and urbanisation are some of the major causes of desertification (Anderson & Fishwick, 1984; Dregne, 1986; Turner, 1999; Gonzalez, 2001; World Bank, 2012). Indeed, the rapid increase in population of the Saharan Africa, particularly in its urban population, is a major driving force in desertification and land shortage (Reenberg et al., 1998; Wezel & Haigis, 2002, Oyama, 2018). This trend had significantly become one of the root causes of the crisis between the two groups' farmers and herders. The conflict has evolved from reckless reactions to provocations and now to deadlier planned attacks, particularly in Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Nasarawa and Taraba States (Crisis Group, 2018). This has been the trend in Nigeria, which made the aborted 'RUGA' settlement proposal attempted by the Federal government necessary to curb the menace of farmers-herdsmen conflict. However, the initiative generated serious uproar between the south and northern part of the country. This made the objective of the paper to tilt towards examining the implications of desertification on farmer-herders conflict in order to proffer a solution to the menace. In view of this objective, the paper is sub-divided into the following categories. Thus, the introduction, the methodology aspect, and then a portion was allocated to appraise the causes of farmers-herder's conflicts in the country. It continued with the government's responses on the subject matter, recommendations and finally the concluding part.

II. METHODOLOGY

As an unempirical paper, the ideas gathered in this discourse were secondarily generated from relevant materials in reputable journals, newspapers, textbooks and online materials.

Appraising the Causes of Farmers-Herders Conflict in Nigeria

Without an iota of doubt, struggle over grazing and limited resources have over the years resulted in perennial and growing violent conflicts in terms of frequency, intensity and geographic scope. Undoubtedly, the escalation in frequency of the conflicts in Nigeria is a convergence of environmental and demographic forces, especially desertification caused by climate change and population explosion. Expectedly, with the deterioration of the arable land for farming due to urbanization and the adverse effect of climate change, especially along the Lake Chad basin, there was an increased struggle between herdsmen and farmers which led to violent conflicts. These persistent attacks are being witnessed in Benue State which spilled to Nasarawa, Zamfara, Katsina and Niger among other states of the Federation (Bello, 2015).

The causes and effects of farmers-herders conflict have attracted considerable theoretical and empirical analyses, but conflicting actors and victims' coping mechanisms have not received sufficient attention in the literature (Adisa, 2012). It was argued by Akujobi, Ebitari and Amuzie (2016) that in Sub-Saharan Africa, the vast majority of the black population have limited access to land ownership and related natural resources, resulting in high level of vulnerability and resultant conflicts over land. In addition, the pastoralists usually graze over areas outside farm lands, and these have been accepted to be the norm from time immemorial. Thus, their movements were opportunistic and follow pasture and water resources in a pattern that varies seasonally or year-to-year according to availability of resources (FAO, 2011). The patterns of movement may be controlled by seasonal climate variations. However, increase in population, drying of waterholes, shifting in rainfall pattern leading to drought as a result of the changing climate affects both sectors of agriculture. At the same time, household agricultural production systems are becoming more and more integrated into the global economy, thereby increasing the demand and pressure needed for arable land values. These, coupled with the ineptitude of arable land governance and the increase widespread of economic hardship creates avenue for resource conflicts. Both customary and statutory land management systems were often not responding adequately to the tenure of insecurity these changes bring (Djire et al., 2014).

Indeed, destruction of crops by cattle and other property (irrigation equipment and infrastructure) by the pastoralists themselves were the main direct causes for conflicts mentioned by the farmers, whereas burning of rangelands and *fadama* and blockage of stock routes and water points by crop encroachment are important direct reasons advanced by the

herdsmen. Akujobi, Ebitari and Amuzie (2016) argued that the key underlying causes of farmer-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria included:

- *Changing resource access rights, whereby traditional access rights to communal grazing and water resources are being obstructed by the individual tenureship of arable farmers. This is particularly severe on the traditional trek routes, which become favourite cropping sites because of their better soil fertility resulting from the concentration of animal manure from the trekking herds in these areas. Within the Fadama areas, this is exacerbated by the fragmented nature of the crop plots, which makes prevention of animals straying in the crop plots difficult.*
- *Inadequacy of grazing resources, as increasing crop cultivation (and increasing commercialization of the crop-residues) and poor management of the existing grazing reserves have resulted in a significant reduction in available livestock feed resources, in particular in the Northern States. Moreover, the high value crops introduced by NFDLP (tomatoes and onions) produce almost no crop-residues for livestock feeding. Finally, the regulation that twenty percent of the Fadama would need to be set aside for grazing (National Agricultural Policy, 1988) has not been adhered to.*
- *Decline in internal discipline and social cohesion, as the adherence to the traditional rules regarding grazing periods, and the authority of the traditional rulers is breaking down. This is exacerbated by increased rent seeking of the formal and traditional authorities in managing resource access (Akujobi, Ebitari & Amuzie, 2016: 41).*

In effect therefore, it could rightly be concluded that competition over insufficient environmental resources has been aggravated in the modern-day owing to the shocks of climate change, which has increased ecological shortage across the globe thereby causing violent conflicts (Blench, 2004; Onuoha, 2007 & Akujobi, Ebitari & Amuzie, 2016).

Similarly, scholars such as McGregor (2014); Bello (2013); Adisa (2012); Blench (2010) among others provided the following as some of the factors responsible for farmers-herders conflict in remote villages of North-western Nigeria. They attested that, climate change was the root cause which resulted to migration further southward, the expansion of farming on pastures, blockage of stock routes, the growth of agro-pastoralism, cattle theft, the invasion of farmlands by cattle, assault on non-fulani women by herdsmen, fresh water scarcity, burning of rangelands, overgrazing on the limited available land and extensive sedimentation. In view of this,

Suleiman; Victor and Binta, (2017) added that ineffective coping strategies, ethnic stereotyping and absence of long lasting conflict intervention mechanisms were also responsible for farmer-herders conflict in the affected states of north-western part of the country. In a related development, Abbas (2012) stressed that, the major source of the conflict was basically an economic one with the land related issues setting the pace for most of the conflicts. This can be situated within the context of land struggle, traceable to a burgeoning demography in which there was free competition for fixed space to meet the demands of the growing population (Solagberu, 2012 cited in Suleiman; Victor & Binta, 2017).

Added to the foregoing was the fact that, the UN Environment (n.d) found that the conflict between farmers and herders was shaped by two different interests: the farmers and the herders. The Fulani (herders) group has a long history of migrating as a result of which relationship was established between the farmers and the herders. Therefore, it is important to note that, conflict is unavoidable whenever relationships exist. However, the conflict between the two groups was necessitated by the fact that the available grazing land was decreasing, pathways blocked in most of the areas, only a small portion of the grazing reserves was acquired and they were poorly managed. Baidoo (2014) noted that “the pressures that have led to herders encroaching into farming areas and farmers moving into herding areas often result in violent conflict”. In a similar vein, it was captured that land and livestock played an essential role in the development of society in Nigeria, and resource ownership was a significant cause of this conflict for a long time. Increasing human and animal population has exacerbated the conflict between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers for the use of agricultural land. The conflict affected the stability of the local economy and environment (Adisa and Adekunle, 2010).

To address some of the foregoing challenges of farmers-herders conflict, in 2018, the Environmental Law Institute, UN Environment launched the environmental peace building Association which provides a multidisciplinary forum to handle and address environmental challenges and bring a lasting solution. From the foregoing, it is observed that, the conflict between herders and farmers has a long history with devastating impact; it has affected the political economy of the people in particular and the country in general.

Government Response to the Situation

The imperative of national security to the socio-economic development of Nigeria has necessitated the government to respond to the increasing escalation of the conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. It is on this note that in 2008, the government through the National Assembly proposed to introduce a Grazing Commission Bill (GCB) for managing the conflict. The bill intended to empower the commission to acquire land in any part of the country for the sole reason of establishing grazing reserves and cattle routes, but unfortunately, the empowerment of the commission to do so

was tantamount to violation of the subsisting Land Use Act and land tenure system (Guilbert, 2016). In line with this, the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2017) reported for example that, the Yoruba Afenifere completely disagreed with the proposed bill, alleging that the bill if enacted, would favour the business of the Fulani herdsmen at the expense of the crop producers; whose farms were continuously destroyed by the Fulani cows. It was further observed that the bill if enacted would rob the local people of the rightful possessions to the settlers, who have no land initially (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Similarly, in 2014 President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan formed an Inter-Ministerial Technical Committee to look into the issue of grazing reserves with the hope of bringing a lasting solution to the conflict. At the same time, a political committee chaired by Governor Gabriel Suswan of Benue State was also set up to look at the same issue. This committee had resolved to mobilise a sum of 100 billion from the government through the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) to construct ranches across the 36 states of the country (Eramo, 2016). However, the defeat of the Jonathan administration interrupted the continuation of the implementation of the initiative (Eramo, 2016).

On assumption of office, President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 directed the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) to come up with a comprehensive livestock development plan that contain measures to put an end to recurrent conflict between the two groups. Therefore, in August 2015, the ministry developed short, medium and long-term strategies, which included the development of cattle routes and grazing reserves (ICG, 2017). Also, in 2019, the President proposed to create Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlement in order to cater for the need of stock production without undermining the crop cultivation effort; but unfortunately, the aforementioned efforts came under severe criticisms from the public (Sahara Reporter, 2019). The criticisms mostly came from some state Governors which was said to have varied from state to state (ICG, 2017). For example, Ekiti state government and FCT have come up with laws regulating grazing activities. Taraba and Benue states enacted laws prohibiting open grazing in their borders. The government of Edo state proposed to create fenced grazing areas where water could be provided for the cattle and would require token payment from the pastoralists. In addition, Abia and Cross River State governments trained local vigilantes and Homeland Security Service to provide information on the movement of herders within their states for necessary action (ICG, 2017). However, in spite of all these responses by the federal and state governments, the conflicts between the two groups continue to escalate with even more violent proportion. It was as a result of this lacuna that climate change, which is given less attention by the government, is thought to be part of the main cause of the conflict and should be given utmost priority.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

In Nigeria, afforestation is of critical importance as most part of the country has been ravaged by many environmental problems which can be managed through afforestation. The numerous benefits of afforestation's would not only greatly help in reducing the farmer-herders conflict in Nigeria, it would also address environmental degradation, more especially desertification and deforestation, erosion and flooding as well as reducing the effects of climate change which were among the factors fuelling the skirmishes (Ibrahim & Muhammad, 2015). Moreover, it is pertinent to note that, desertification control is important not only for decreasing the level of poverty and improving the condition of life but also for achieving peaceful coexistence particularly as it affects the relationship of farmers-herders in sub-Saharan areas of Africa including Nigeria.

Similarly, the Federal government should revisit the 1965 Northern Region Government's Grazing Reserves System and reform it to deal with the present threats. The grazing reserves and livestock routes have also been encroached by farmers and the activities of urban developers. The abandoned grazing reserves system operated in the 1960s has to be revisited. Again, a holistic campaign to seek the support of herders and farmers as well as the relevant stakeholders to agree with the concept of 'RUGA' initiative as a substitute to pastoralists' migration to the south is critically important.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it could be seen that the paper has objectively highlighted the probable dangers that awaits the country in as much as the problem of farmers and herders has not been squarely addressed. This is because; the menace has unquestionably proven to be adequately capable to tear apart the already fragile unity of the country if taken lightly.

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