

FARMERS-HERDERS CRISIS AND HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES IN LAFIA, NASARAWA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The persistent conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central region, have led to significant humanitarian challenges. Using both primary and secondary data carefully selected and analyzed by the author, the study examines the specific manifestations of this crisis and its humanitarian consequences in Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. It analyzes the historical context, drivers, and dynamics of the conflict, highlighting its impact on displacement, food security, health, and social cohesion within Lafia's urban setting. The paper argues that the conflict led to an influx of displaced populations into Lafia and has created a complex humanitarian emergency that requires urgent attention and multi-faceted interventions. The paper, therefore, suggests that the federal, state, and international community should increase funding for the humanitarian response in Lafia, improve coordination among actors, build capacity, address protection gaps, promote durable solutions for internally displaced persons (IDPs), strengthen security and rule of law, and address the root causes of the conflict through sustainable policies and conflict resolution mechanisms. These measures will ensure adequate assistance, support the return and reintegration of IDPs, facilitate local integration, and explore resettlement options in other parts of Nigeria.

Keywords: Farmers-Herders, Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis, Lafia, Urbanization, Displacement.

Introduction:

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria has evolved into a complex and protracted crisis with devastating consequences for human security and socio-economic stability. While the clashes were initially localized and sporadic, they have escalated in recent years, spreading across several states, including Nasarawa. The increasing frequency and intensity of these conflicts have resulted in widespread displacement, loss of life, destruction of property, and disruption of livelihoods.¹ Nasarawa State was created on October 1, 1996. The state is situated in the North Central region of Nigeria. Its capital is Lafia, and its terrain is characterized by savannah vegetation. The state shares borders with Kaduna State to the north, Taraba and Plateau States to the east, Benue and Kogi States to the south, and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) to the west.

Agriculture is the primary economic activity in Nasarawa, with crops like sesame, soybeans, groundnuts, millet, maize, and yams being cultivated. The state is rich in solid mineral resources, earning it the nickname "Home of Solid Minerals."² The state is also home to diverse ethnic groups, including Eggon, Alago, Gwandara, Tiv, and Idoma, and has a mix of religious affiliations.³ The state also harbors Fulani herders whose history within the state is complex as a result of gradual migration and periods of significant settlement. It has been established that before the 19th-century Fulani jihad, nomadic Fulani pastoralists moved across the region in search of grazing lands, often following seasonal patterns.⁴ The 19th-century Fulani jihad, led by Usman dan Fodio, significantly impacted the region, leading to the establishment of Fulani emirates across Northern Nigeria, including areas that later became part of Nasarawa State today. This period saw increased Fulani political influence and settlement. Modern movements, such as desertification, climate change, and population growth, have driven increased southward migration of Fulani pastoralists, leading to increased contact and conflict with settled farming communities in Nasarawa State.⁵ Today, Fulani populations are dispersed throughout Nasarawa State, particularly in areas with available grazing land. Their presence fluctuates depending on the time of year and grazing lands availability. Thus, Fulani people have become integrated into many towns and cities within Nasarawa State.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the humanitarian challenges arising from the farmer-herder crisis in the Lafia urban settlement. Lafia, like many urban centers in Nigeria, has experienced rapid population growth, driven by rural-urban migration and, more recently, the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing conflict in rural areas. The urbanization of the farmer-herder crisis presents unique challenges, as displaced populations seek refuge in urban centers, placing strain on existing infrastructure, resources, and social services. Thus, the paper examines the historical context, drivers, and dynamics of the farmer-herder conflict in Nasarawa State, with a specific focus on its humanitarian impact on Lafia. It also analyzes the consequences of displacement, food insecurity, health challenges, and threats to social cohesion in Lafia's urban setting.

Historical Context of the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Nigeria

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. It has deep historical roots, dating back to pre-colonial times, when nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists coexisted, albeit with occasional tensions.⁶ For instance, within the ambit of the pre-colonial era, the relations between farmers and herders were largely symbiotic. Herders provided manure for farmers' fields, while farmers provided grazing land and water for livestock. Although conflicts were limited and mostly localized and resolved through traditional mechanisms.⁷ This is because farmers and herding communities often had mutual dependence, engaging in trade and seasonal movements for grazing lands and water. These movements were governed by local customs and agreements, which helped manage potential conflicts. Localized disputes over access to grazing lands and water resources were typically managed through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, with local leaders and elders playing a crucial role in mediating disputes and maintaining peaceful coexistence. While certain factors like lower population densities and the prevalence of certain diseases, such as those transmitted by the tsetse fly, limited the scale and intensity of conflicts.

During the colonial period, there was a gradual shift in this practice. This is because colonialism brought significant changes to land tenure systems and resource management practices.⁸ The introduction of private property rights and the establishment of grazing reserves disrupted traditional patterns of land use and migration, leading to increased competition for resources. This created confusion and resentment, as herders found their traditional grazing routes blocked, and farmers felt their lands were being encroached upon. Colonial powers also imposed arbitrary boundaries, cutting across herders' seasonal movements and forcing them into closer contact with farming communities. These boundaries also disregarded existing ethnic and cultural boundaries, causing more conflict.⁹ Besides, colonial policies often prioritized settled agriculture for cash crop production, leading to the expansion of farmland and marginalization of the herding lifestyle. This created an imbalance, where herders felt increasingly marginalized and their traditional livelihoods threatened. Also, the weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms was another consequence of colonialism. The introduction of their own legal systems often undermined the authority of traditional rulers and elders, leading to a breakdown of conflict resolution mechanisms. Lastly, colonialism introduced new economic pressures, such as the development of a market economy and the introduction of taxation, which intensified the struggle for survival and increased tensions and conflicts.¹⁰ Overall, colonialism disrupted the delicate balance between farmers and herders in Nigeria, creating conditions that fostered increased conflict.

The aftermath of colonialism saw many factors that exacerbated the existing tensions between farmers and herders. One of such factor was population growth, whereby the population of Nigeria kept increasing rapidly, leading to a higher demand for land for both farming and grazing. This results in a direct competition for increasingly scarce land resources, fueling clashes between farmers and herders.¹¹ Population growth also increases the demand for water for both agricultural and domestic use. This, coupled with climate change and desertification, leads to water scarcity, further intensifying competition between farmers and herders who rely on these resources for their livelihoods. Besides, there is increasing climate change, desertification, and drought in northern Nigeria, which forced herders to migrate southward in search of grazing land, leading to clashes with farmers in the more fertile Middle Belt region. Amidst this is the issue of economic changes.¹² Lastly, political and ethnic factors have exacerbated the conflict, with some politicians exploiting the tensions between farmers and herders for their own gain. Thus, the easy availability of firearms has made the conflicts more deadly, as both farmers and herders increasingly use sophisticated weapons in their clashes.

Drivers and Dynamics of the Conflict in Nasarawa State

Farmer and herder conflicts in Nigeria are driven by a good number of factors. Primarily, the conflict is a land resource war where competition for land and water resources are the main issues. As we noted, as the population grows and urbanization expands, the demand for land for farming, grazing, and settlement increases, leading to clashes between farmers and herders. For instance, in Nasarawa state alone, the total population of the people in 2022 stood at 2,886,000, which is approximated to be 3.1 million people in 2025.¹³ While the agricultural sector accounts for about 70% of employment in Nigeria amidst a teeming population of over 198 million people in 2018.¹⁴ With the influx of herders from other parts of West Africa into Nigeria in the face of daunting challenges like desertification and Boko Haram terrorism, the Benue Valley has become a hotbed for competition and struggle, as Charles Darwin rightly postulates in the 'survival of the fittest' thesis, and in this case, struggle over the existing fixed land and water resources. It has been observed that before the eruption of these violent conflicts, Fulani herdsmen were known for the tradition of carrying sticks and homemade rifles to defend themselves and cattle against wild beasts.¹⁵ But competition over land and water resources has intensified; herdsmen carry along with them assault rifles and sophisticated small arms and also leave their families behind in their home states. Although

herders have anchored their defensive mechanism on deteriorating security situation in rural areas which led Fulani men to begin migrating alone with their herds, leaving women and children behind in towns for their safety.

Another crucial factor that led to farmer-herder conflicts in Nasarawa is linked to the dubious activities of some traditional rulers who received money from herdsmen on a promise to give them grazing rights in their territory.¹⁶ The Fulani people have this misconception because it is a common practice in Northern Nigeria, where traditional rulers have rights over land in their territory. Whereas, in the Benue Valley and Nasarawa State specifically, land is the private property of family groups, which traditional rulers have no exclusive rights over. It is strongly noted that:

There are indications that many of the new-breed Fulani herdsmen typically do not know the lay of the land and assume that the structure of land ownership is the same as in the North, where land belongs to the traditional rulers ... The native farmer ethnic groups cultivate their lands—these lands and the crops on them constitute one of their most important assets as a people. Working on the assumption that the land belongs to traditional rulers, these new-breed herdsmen come in and pay some traditional rulers for leave to graze on lands, and some of the chiefs take money without informing their people. There are allegations that some of the Fulani herdsmen have given some of the indigenous chiefs money to allow them to graze.¹⁷

The situation whereby traditional rulers receive money and give grazing rights to Fulani herdsmen to intrude on natives' farms, who in the first instance are not beneficiaries of the stipends collected by their rulers, is an invitation for war. The herdsmen also alleged cattle rustling in some parts of Nigeria as an important factor for reprisal attacks. Alhaji Sale Bayari, the then National Secretary of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), in an interview with Tajudeen Suleiman captioned 'The Cattle Mean More to the Fulani,' justifies such attacks arising from cattle rustling by saying that:

This is a hostile environment in which the Fulani man lives. You have to be as hostile as your environment for you to survive. There must be a balance of terror for you to survive in the jungle. The Fulani herdsman is a man that believes the entire world is after him and what he has. He believes he has to arm himself to the teeth...¹⁸

Such brutal words that come from a very standing man like Alhaji Sale Bayari are a strong indication that the Fulani herdsmen, wherever he suspects theft, attack, and death of his cattle in any community, must come back for the brutal attack; hence, he feels everyone is against him in the society.

Furthermore, Nigeria's far north is experiencing arid and semi-arid conditions, with a long dry season from October to May and low rainfall from June to September. Over the last six decades, over 350,000 sq km of the region has turned to desert-like conditions, forcing millions of pastoralists and others to migrate south in search of productive land.¹⁹ Migration initially was seasonal, but over the last two decades, herders have been staying in the central zone longer, and some have chosen to graze their herds there permanently, thus creating constant squabbles between farming communities and the herders. Compounding this fight is the issue of grazing reserves. It has been argued by many scholars that grazing reserves have been lost, with most of the 415 established by the northern regional government in the 1960s while Changes in pastoralism and farming practices have also strained relations between farmers and herders. Some cattle herders have adopted sedentary lifestyles, leaving cattle herding increasingly to young men or boys, who often lack the civility and maturity to resolve disputes amicably.²⁰ While rural banditry and cattle rustling have grown in scale and organization in several northern states, large bandit groups are operating with mounting audacity. Thus, the environmental changes in Nigeria's far north have led to a shift in farming practices, resulting in increased conflicts and displacement of herders.

And lastly but not least, the lack of political will by the government to arrest and punish the offenders of crimes adequately is one of the factors fueling farmer-herder conflicts in contemporary Nigeria and Nasarawa State also. This challenge has been compounded by the inability of the government at national, state, and local levels to respond quickly to distress calls and early warning signs. This negative attitude has made it difficult to stop crises that would have been prevented if the government had responded quickly and had taken action to nip the conflict in the bud.²¹ While the conflict is primarily driven by economic factors, ethnic and religious differences between predominantly Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim herders have added another layer of complexity to the crisis.

Urbanization of the Conflict and its Impact on Lafia

Lafia, as the capital of Nasarawa State, has been significantly affected by the urbanization of the farmer-herder conflict. The city has become a major destination for people fleeing violence in rural areas, leading to a rapid increase in its population. This influx of IDPs has placed enormous strain on Lafia's infrastructure, resources, and social services, creating a complex humanitarian emergency.²² For instance, thousands of people from rural

communities in Nasarawa State in areas of Doma, Obi, Keana, and Awe have taken refuge in Lafia since 2017. This is because the conflict flared up after a new grazing regulation law took effect in neighboring Benue State. Nasarawa, where the main economic activity is growing cash crops, received an influx of thousands of herders and about 2 million cows from Benue thus increasing the intensity of the conflict.²³ Thus, many of the IDPs have sought refuge in Lafia, overwhelming the city's capacity to accommodate them. A few instances are significant here for the purposes of illustration. Shinge Road IDP Camp, Lafia, as of 2019, has about 200 households and 750 individuals. The Almajiri School IDP Camp, Lafia, as of 2019, has 8 households and 33 individuals. The Filin Kura, Lafia, has numerous households with many people.²⁴ Thus, as of December 2023, the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) identified a total of 20,613 IDPs in Nasarawa State. This figure includes those living in camps and host communities, and Lafia was one of the most hard-hit camps. For instance, in October 2022 another DTM report listed Lafia as hosting 4,174 IDPs at that time. Thus, the rapid population growth in Lafia has put pressure on housing, water supply, sanitation, and other essential services and this had implications in many folds.²⁵

First, women and children in IDP camps and conflict-affected areas face increased risks of sexual violence and health complications. They are faced with the rigors of long journeys, psychological trauma, safety challenges, harassment, frequent sexual abuse, child molestation, forced labor, poor sanitation that exposes members of the camps to infectious diseases. They also face poor medical facilities that accommodate the growth of infectious bacteria, fungi, and viruses in their bodies, poor feeding that exposes them to malnutrition, and poor conditions of infrastructure such as power, water, roads, lack of healthcare, security, and education, among other basic amenities.²⁶

Second, the influx of IDPs has placed a significant strain on Lafia's already inadequate infrastructure and resources. The city's housing, schools, hospitals, and other public facilities are struggling to cope with the increased demand. While the conflict has disrupted agricultural production and trade, leading to food insecurity in Lafia.²⁷ This is as a result of the fact that many IDPs have lost their farms and livelihoods and are dependent on humanitarian assistance for food. Thus, the increased population in Lafia has put pressure on food supplies, driving up prices and making it difficult for many residents to afford adequate food. In terms of health challenges, the displacement and overcrowding in Lafia have created significant health challenges, as observed by the researcher.²⁸ IDPs often lack access to healthcare, making them vulnerable to diseases such as malaria, typhoid fever, and respiratory infections. Added to the above, the influx of IDPs strained social cohesion as long-term residents and newcomers struggled to adjust to the changing demographics of the city. Differences in ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status create barriers to integration and lead to social tensions. There is also the issue of security challenges, whereby it is observed that the presence of large numbers of displaced and unemployed youths has contributed to increased crime rates and security challenges.²⁹ Thus, the conflict has led to a breakdown in law and order in some areas, making it difficult for the police to maintain security.

Third and very significant to this study is the issue of humanitarian crisis stemming from loss of life and injury. It has been established that the conflicts have led to numerous deaths and injuries among farmers, herders, and other community members. For instance, one report noted that at least 130 people were killed in Nasarawa State between 2011 and 2013 due to these clashes.³⁰ In November 2024, three people were killed in a clash in the Dogon Duste community. A significant consequence is the displacement of populations. People are forced to flee their homes due to violence, seeking refuge in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps or with relatives.³¹ It's estimated that over 2.2 million people have been displaced in the Middle Belt states (including Nasarawa) between 2019 and February 2025 due to these conflicts. In March 2012, about 5,000 residents fled the Kadarko community to Lafia following a clash, and some of these people have found themselves in Lafia permanently, where the settlement is overstretched with a teeming population.³² Besides, the conflicts disrupt agricultural activities, leading to the destruction of crops and livestock, which are the primary sources of livelihood for both farmers and herders. This can result in food insecurity and economic hardship for the affected communities. A study in Nasarawa State indicated that a 1% increase in human insecurity could lead to a 17% decline in agricultural activities. This, in the final analysis, led to pauperization of the mass of the people and heightened crimes in Lafia.

Humanitarian Responses to Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nasarawa State

Various actors have been involved in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Lafia; among them are the government agencies. For instance, the Nasarawa State government and federal agencies, such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), have provided relief assistance to IDPs, including food, shelter, and basic services. However, their response has often been inadequate to meet the scale of the crisis. Also, international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), have provided support to IDPs, including protection, shelter, and assistance

with resettlement.³³ On their part, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) cannot be left out. For instance, local and international NGOs have played a crucial role in providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs in Lafia as well. They have provided food, healthcare, WASH services, and psychosocial support. Specifically, the Nigerian Red Cross Society, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC),³⁴ United Nations agencies, international NGOs, and local NGOs all worked to provide emergency relief, health services, and support to vulnerable populations in the country. These organizations often work with local partners, including NGOs, to address humanitarian needs and provide assistance to displaced persons. Some local NGOs, such as the Centre for Women, Youth, and Community Action (NACWYCA) in Lafia, Nasarawa State, focus on community development and conflict resolution, while others, like the Source of Hope Foundation, provide community support and assistance to vulnerable populations.³⁵ These organizations may also be involved in conflict-related aid. While the religious organizations and civil society groups were also deeply involved in providing assistance to IDPs, mobilizing resources, and advocating for their needs. FBOs have structures and networks in Lafia that are involved in assisting affected populations.³⁶ The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), while initially focused on Kaduna State, has expanded its work to address farmer-herder conflicts and may have activities or partnerships extending to Nasarawa State. On the other hand, host communities in Lafia played a significant role in providing shelter and support to internally displaced persons (IDPs), often sharing their limited resources with the displaced population.

Despite these efforts, there are glaring gaps in humanitarian responses. One such issue is adequate funding that is sufficient and significant to respond to the quantum of this humanitarian crisis, making it difficult to provide adequate assistance to all those in need. Also, humanitarian organizations often face challenges in accessing IDPs in Lafia due to security concerns, logistical constraints, and bureaucratic obstacles.³⁷ There is often a lack of coordination among the various actors involved in the humanitarian response, leading to duplication of efforts and gaps in service delivery. These problems have been compounded by insufficient capacity. That is to categorically say that local organizations and government agencies often lack the capacity to effectively respond to the scale of the crisis.³⁸ It should also be noted that there are significant protection gaps, particularly in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities. The continued stay of the IDP also shows the great dearth of duration gaps where many living in protracted displacement, unable to return to their homes or find sustainable livelihoods in Lafia, are left at the mercy of their fate.³⁹ Thus, many people living in IDPs, especially the youths, indulge in criminal activities, while young women and girls turn to prostitution and other menial jobs for sustenance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The farmer-herder crisis has led to a complex humanitarian emergency in Lafia, with significant consequences for displacement, food security, health, and social cohesion. The urbanization of the conflict has placed enormous strain on the city's resources and infrastructure, creating unique challenges for humanitarian response. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated and multi-faceted approach, involving government agencies, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities. In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, it is crucial to address the root causes of the conflict and promote durable solutions for IDPs to ensure long-term peace and stability in Lafia and the wider region. Thus, to address the humanitarian challenges in Lafia and promote durable solutions for IDPs, the following recommendations are made. First, the federal government, state government, and international community should increase funding for the humanitarian response in Lafia to ensure that adequate assistance is provided to all those in need, and this would go a long way toward reducing crimes that have become rife in the Lafia metropolis.

Second, there is a need to strengthen coordination among government agencies, international organizations, NGOs, and other actors involved in the humanitarian response to ensure efficient and effective service delivery. Third is the idea of building the capacity of local organizations and government agencies to respond to humanitarian crises through training, technical assistance, and the provision of resources, which would go a long way in reducing the suffering of the IDPs. Fourth, as we have observed in this study, there are protection gaps that need to be strengthened to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and people with disabilities. Thus, the study suggests durable solutions for the above isolated gaps, including the development and implementation of strategies to promote durable solutions for IDPs like return and reintegration. That is to say that there should be support for the safe and voluntary return of IDPs to their communities of origin, where conditions allow.

Furthermore, it is essential to facilitate the integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into Lafia by ensuring access to housing, employment, and social services. For those unable to return to their original communities or integrate locally, resettlement options in other parts of Nigeria should be explored. In addition, improving security

and the rule of law in Lafia and surrounding areas is crucial to creating an environment conducive to the safe return and reintegration of IDPs. Finally, the federal and state governments must address the root causes of the farmer-herder conflict—including land disputes, climate change, and competition for resources—through sustainable policies and effective conflict resolution mechanisms.

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