Beyond Mediation: Climate Stress, Structural Violence, And the Persistence of Farmer–Herder Conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, 2015–2025

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Abstract
This study examines the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, between 2015 and 2025, with particular emphasis on climate stress, structural violence and the limitations of mediation. This study is anchored on Climate security theory. A mixed-method case study design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study focused on Ogbadibo and Ohimini Local Government Areas. Quantitative data were obtained through structured questionnaires, while qualitative evidence was generated through interviews with relevant stakeholders and supported by documentary sources. The findings indicate that irregular rainfall, declining water availability, environmental degradation and changing pastoral mobility intensify competition over natural resources. The study further establishes that weak land governance, inadequate policy implementation, livelihood insecurity and limited institutional capacity contribute to the persistence of conflict. Although mediation facilitates dialogue and can reduce immediate tensions, its capacity to produce sustainable peace is constrained when underlying structural and environmental problems remain unresolved. The study recommends integrated climate adaptation, improved land and water governance, livelihood support, stronger institutions and inclusive environmental peacebuilding. It concludes that sustainable peace requires moving beyond mediation toward preventive and transformative approaches that address both climate-related pressures and structural vulnerabilities.

Keywords: *Farmer–Herder, Climate Stress, Structural Violence, Mediation*

Introduction

Farmer–herder conflict has emerged as one of the most persistent sources of communal insecurity and rural instability in Nigeria, particularly within the country's Middle Belt region. Benue State occupies a significant position in this conflict because of its predominantly agrarian economy, extensive agricultural land, and its location within the movement corridors historically used by pastoral communities. Although interactions between farmers and pastoralists have historically involved cooperation, exchange and mutually beneficial relationships, increasing competition over land, water, crop residues and grazing spaces has transformed many of these interactions into recurrent disputes and violent confrontations. The persistence of the crisis suggests that the problem cannot be adequately understood as a simple disagreement between two livelihood groups. Rather, it reflects the interaction of environmental pressures, demographic

change, land-use transformation, institutional weaknesses, livelihood insecurity and unequal access to political and economic resources. Recent scholarship similarly identifies the conflict as multi-causal, with ecological stress, land governance failures, demographic pressures, criminality and political polarization interacting to sustain insecurity in Benue State (Ioryue, 2024; Ugo, 2025). The period from 2015 to 2025 is particularly important for understanding the changing character of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. During this period, localized disputes increasingly became recurrent episodes of communal violence, displacement, destruction of livelihoods and prolonged insecurity. The escalation occurred within a broader national context in which pastoral mobility was being affected by environmental degradation, changing rainfall patterns, pressure on grazing resources and the conversion of traditional grazing corridors to farms and settlements. Climate variability does not automatically produce violent conflict; rather, it can intensify existing vulnerabilities when communities depend heavily on land and natural resources for their livelihoods. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that climate-induced migration among pastoralists seeking suitable grazing areas can contribute to farmer–pastoralist violence by increasing encounters and competition in receiving areas (Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025). Thus, climate stress should be regarded as a conflict multiplier that operates through existing social, economic and political structures rather than as an independent explanation for violence.

Benue State provides an important setting for examining this relationship because agriculture constitutes a major component of rural livelihoods and social identity. Farmers depend on predictable access to cultivable land, while pastoralists require adequate pasture and water to maintain livestock. Changes in the availability and distribution of these resources can therefore generate competing claims over the same geographical spaces. Population growth, agricultural expansion, settlement development and environmental changes have progressively reduced the flexibility of traditional land-use arrangements. Consequently, pastoral movements into farming areas may be perceived by farmers as threats to crops and land rights, while pastoralists may perceive restrictions on movement and access to grazing areas as threats to their livelihoods. The result is a cycle in which environmental pressure produces competition, competition generates grievances, and unresolved grievances can develop into confrontation. Studies of Benue State have consequently emphasized the importance of land and water scarcity, demographic pressure and climate change in understanding the conflict (Ioryue, 2024).

However, focusing exclusively on climate stress risks presenting an incomplete account of the crisis. The concept of structural violence offers a broader analytical lens for understanding why environmental and resource pressures repeatedly translate into insecurity. Structural violence refers to forms of harm that arise from social, political and economic arrangements that systematically limit people's ability to meet basic needs, access opportunities or enjoy security. In the context of farmer–herder relations, structural violence may be reflected in unequal access to land, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutions, limited conflict-resolution mechanisms, insecure livelihoods and governance arrangements that fail to protect competing interests. These conditions may not constitute violence in an immediate physical sense, but they can create circumstances in which certain communities remain persistently exposed to deprivation, insecurity and vulnerability. The structural dimension of the Benue crisis is particularly evident in the difficulties surrounding land governance and livestock management. In 2017, the Benue State Government introduced legislation prohibiting open grazing and promoting ranching as an alternative livestock-management system. The policy was intended to reduce crop destruction and prevent conflicts arising from uncontrolled livestock movement. Nevertheless, its

implementation generated competing interpretations among farmers and pastoralists. Farmers generally viewed the policy as an instrument for protecting agricultural land, whereas sections of the pastoralist community regarded it as restrictive and threatening to established livelihood practices. Recent research indicates that gaps in implementation, weak enforcement and disagreements between different levels of government have undermined the effectiveness of the policy and contributed to continued tensions (Otu et al., 2025).

This policy experience illustrates why mediation alone may be insufficient for resolving the conflict. Mediation generally seeks to bring disputing parties together to negotiate their differences and develop mutually acceptable arrangements. Such interventions can be valuable in addressing immediate disagreements, rebuilding communication and preventing retaliation. However, mediation may have limited effects when the structural conditions producing conflict remain unchanged. Where communities continue to compete over shrinking resources, where land-use regulations remain contested, where institutions lack sufficient capacity and where livelihoods remain insecure, agreements reached through dialogue may be difficult to sustain. In this sense, the persistence of farmer–herder conflict suggests that peacebuilding must move beyond the management of individual disputes towards addressing the deeper structures that reproduce vulnerability and grievance.

The human consequences became particularly visible during the later years of the study period. Violent attacks continued to affect communities in Benue in 2025, including deadly incidents that generated further displacement and renewed concerns about the protection of rural populations. Reports from 2025 documented serious attacks in several Benue communities and highlighted the continuing difficulty of preventing recurrent violence. These developments demonstrate that the conflict cannot be regarded as a temporary disturbance that will disappear once individual disputes are mediated. Instead, its persistence points to a conflict system sustained by interconnected environmental, institutional, political and socioeconomic pressures. The central concern of this study, therefore, is to move beyond a narrow mediation-centred understanding of the Benue crisis and examine the environmental and structural conditions that allow farmer–herder conflict to persist.

Statement of the Problem

Farmer–herder conflict has become a persistent security and development challenge in Benue State, Nigeria, with serious consequences for human lives, livelihoods, agricultural production and community relations. Although competition between farmers and pastoralists over land, water and grazing resources is not new, the intensity, frequency and geographical spread of violent encounters have increased considerably during the period 2015–2025. The conflict has resulted in deaths, destruction of homes and farms, displacement of rural populations and disruption of agricultural activities. These consequences are particularly significant in Benue State because of the state's strong dependence on agriculture for household livelihoods and food production. Thus, recurrent violence in farming communities threatens not only individual and community security but also the broader socioeconomic stability of the state (Ioryue, 2024; Ijirshar et al., 2025). One major concern is that explanations of farmer–herder conflict have often concentrated on immediate triggers such as crop destruction, cattle movement, disputes over grazing routes, land encroachment and access to water. While these factors are important, they do not fully explain why similar disputes repeatedly escalate into prolonged violence. Environmental changes have increasingly complicated the relationship between farming and

pastoral livelihoods. Climate variability, changing rainfall patterns, drought, declining pasture and water availability can encourage pastoralists to move in search of suitable grazing areas. Such movements may increase contact with farming communities and intensify competition over scarce natural resources. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that climate-induced pastoral migration can increase the likelihood of violent farmer–pastoralist encounters, demonstrating that climate stress can function as an important conflict multiplier (Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025). However, treating climate change as the sole or primary cause of the conflict risks overlooking the political, institutional and socioeconomic conditions that determine whether resource pressure becomes peaceful competition or violent confrontation.

A further problem is the persistence of structural conditions that make both farmers and pastoralists vulnerable. Weak land governance, insecure access to natural resources, inadequate infrastructure, limited livelihood alternatives and insufficient institutional capacity have created an environment in which grievances can remain unresolved. In Benue State, government interventions, including the Anti-Open Grazing and Ranching Establishment Law enacted in 2017, were intended to reduce conflict by regulating livestock movement and promoting ranching. Nevertheless, challenges relating to implementation, enforcement, political disagreement and the interests of affected communities have limited the capacity of such interventions to produce sustainable peace. Research suggests that contradictions in government policies and weaknesses in conflict-management institutions have contributed to continuing tensions between farming and pastoral communities (Okoye et al., 2025; Otu et al., 2025).l

The consequences of this unresolved conflict extend beyond immediate physical violence. Recurrent attacks disrupt farming seasons, reduce access to productive land, destroy agricultural assets and weaken household income. Displacement also separates rural populations from their farms and other sources of livelihood, thereby increasing poverty and food insecurity. Recent evidence indicates that insecurity in Benue State has negatively affected agricultural production, including both crop and livestock output (Ijirshar et al., 2025). In this context, the continuation of farmer–herder conflict may create a vicious cycle in which insecurity produces livelihood loss, livelihood loss increases vulnerability, and vulnerability intensifies competition over already scarce resources.

Research Questions

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

★ What were the major patterns, causes and consequences of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State between 2015 and 2025?

★ To what extent did climate stress, influence farmer–herder conflict in Benue State during the study period?

★ How do structural violence and institutional weaknesses sustain farmer–herder conflict?

Theoretical Review

Climate Security Theory

This study is anchored on Climate security theory. Climate Security Theory was founded by is Joshua W. Busby in 2021. Climate Security Theory represents a relatively recent development in security and conflict studies that examines how climate change can generate or intensify risks to human, community and national security. Unlike earlier approaches that treated climate change primarily as an environmental or developmental problem, the climate-security perspective

considers the security consequences of climate-related stresses such as food insecurity, water shortages, livelihood disruption, migration and resource competition. Busby (2021) observes that the climate-security field has expanded beyond a narrow concern with armed conflict to include humanitarian emergencies, food-security shocks, migration, resource competition and other pathways through which climate change can affect security.

A major strength of the climate-security perspective is its emphasis on pathways. Climate change can affect security through several interconnected mechanisms. Reduced rainfall can affect agricultural productivity; declining water availability can increase competition among livelihood groups; environmental deterioration can influence migration and mobility; and livelihood losses can increase economic vulnerability. Where institutions are weak, these pressures may intensify existing grievances and make peaceful resource management more difficult. Koubi (2019) similarly argues that the climate-conflict relationship is complex and dependent on the political, socioeconomic and institutional context in which environmental changes occur.

The theory is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context because farming and pastoralism are highly dependent on environmental resources. Farmers depend on adequate rainfall, fertile land and water for cultivation, whereas pastoralists require pasture and water to maintain livestock. Climate-related changes in these resources can therefore influence livelihood decisions and patterns of mobility. When pastoralists move in response to changing environmental conditions, their movement may bring them into closer contact with farming communities, particularly where land-use arrangements are already contested. Climate stress may consequently increase opportunities for confrontation without being the sole underlying cause of violence.

The climate-security perspective also draws attention to the concept of human security. Climate insecurity affects individuals and communities through threats to food, water, livelihoods, health and physical safety. This makes the framework particularly appropriate for a study concerned with the persistence of farmer–herder conflict rather than simply the occurrence of violent incidents. A climate-security analysis asks not only whether climate change increases conflict but also how environmental stress affects the everyday security and adaptive capacity of vulnerable populations. The theory is useful to this study because it supports the study's argument that climate stress is a conflict multiplier rather than an automatic cause of farmer–herder violence. It will therefore help explain why similar environmental pressures may produce different outcomes depending on the strength of institutions, resource-management arrangements and community relationships. The framework also provides a basis for assessing whether existing mediation mechanisms sufficiently address climate-related vulnerabilities or merely manage disputes after they have emerged.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Farmer–Herder Conflict

Farmer–herder conflict refers to disputes, tensions and, in severe cases, violent confrontations arising between crop-producing farming communities and livestock-dependent pastoral communities over access to, use of and control over natural resources and livelihood spaces. These resources commonly include agricultural land, grazing areas, water sources, stock routes and crop residues. Although interaction between farmers and herders has historically included cooperation, trade and mutually beneficial relationships, changes in land use, population pressure, environmental degradation, climate variability and weaknesses in resource governance have increasingly complicated these relationships. In Nigeria, the conflict has consequently developed

from localized disagreements over livestock and crops into a broader security and development challenge involving displacement, destruction of livelihoods and threats to food security (Ioryue, 2024; Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025). The concept should not be understood simply as a confrontation between two homogeneous groups. Farmers and herders are diverse communities with different livelihood strategies, economic circumstances and social interests. Similarly, every dispute involving livestock and agricultural production should not automatically be classified as farmer–herder conflict. Conflict becomes particularly significant when competing claims over resources develop into sustained disputes, retaliatory actions or organized violence. Consequently, farmer–herder conflict has both a resource dimension and a social and political dimension. Resource-related disagreements can become intensified by perceptions of injustice, weak institutions, identity politics and inadequate mechanisms for resolving disputes. Research on the Benue–Nasarawa borderland, for example, indicates that material competition over scarce land is important, but perceptions of distributive, procedural and restorative injustice can further escalate disputes into violence. In the Nigerian context, the relationship between farmers and pastoralists has also been influenced by changing patterns of pastoral mobility. Pastoralists traditionally move with livestock in response to seasonal availability of pasture and water. However, environmental changes and increasing pressure on natural resources can alter established movement patterns. Climate variability may reduce the availability of water and grazing resources in some locations, encouraging pastoralists to seek alternative areas. When these movements bring livestock into more densely cultivated areas, the possibility of contact and disagreement with farmers increases. Efobi, Adejumo, and Kim (2025) identify climate-induced migration of herders in search of grazing sites as an important pathway through which climate change can influence farmer–pastoralist conflict in Nigeria. Importantly, this does not mean that climate change automatically produces violence; rather, environmental stress interacts with existing institutional and socioeconomic conditions.

A major source of farmer–herder conflict is therefore competition over land and water. Agricultural expansion can reduce the amount of land available for pastoral movement, while the expansion of settlements and other land uses can disrupt traditional grazing routes. At the same time, the presence of livestock on cultivated land may result in crop damage, creating grievances among farmers. Pastoralists may, in turn, experience restrictions on movement, declining access to pasture and water, or loss of traditional livelihood spaces. A recent study of Benue State identified water-body contamination, crop destruction, grazing on fallow land and indiscriminate bush burning among the factors associated with farmer–herder conflict, while displacement, agricultural losses and increased poverty were identified among its consequences (Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025). The concept also has an important governance dimension. The way governments regulate land, grazing, livestock production and agricultural activities can either reduce or intensify tensions. Policies that are perceived as unfair, inconsistently implemented or insufficiently inclusive may produce new grievances. In Benue State, the enactment of the 2017 anti-open grazing law represents a significant example. The policy was introduced to prohibit open grazing and promote ranching, with the intention of reducing crop destruction and improving security. However, recent research indicates that its implementation has generated different responses among farmers and pastoralists. Farmers have generally viewed it as a protective measure, whereas some pastoralists have regarded it as restrictive and threatening to their livelihoods and identity. Implementation gaps, weak enforcement and political disagreement have consequently complicated its effectiveness (Achem & Aderinto, 2025).

The persistence of farmer–herder conflict between 2015 and 2025 therefore suggests that the phenomenon should be viewed as a complex and multidimensional conflict system rather than a series of isolated clashes. Recent research on Benue identifies ecological stress, land-governance problems, demographic pressures, criminality and sociopolitical polarization among the interacting factors associated with the conflict (Ugo, 2025). These factors can reinforce one another: environmental stress may increase competition for resources; weak governance may make resource disputes more difficult to resolve; unresolved grievances may generate mistrust; and repeated violence may further weaken cooperation between communities.

Concept of Climate Stress

Climate stress refers to the pressure placed on human, ecological and socioeconomic systems by changes or variability in climatic conditions that affect their ability to maintain normal functions and livelihoods. It may arise from prolonged changes in rainfall, increasing temperatures, drought, flooding, declining water availability, land degradation and other climate-related disturbances. Climate stress becomes particularly significant where communities depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. In such settings, environmental changes can affect agricultural productivity, livestock production, access to water and patterns of human mobility. Recent scholarship emphasizes that climate change can intensify existing vulnerabilities in conflict-affected societies by placing additional pressure on livelihoods and food, water and energy security (O'Neill et al., 2024).

Climate stress should not, however, be understood as synonymous with climate change. Climate change refers to longer-term shifts in climatic conditions, while climate stress concerns the pressures and disruptions experienced by people, ecosystems and institutions as a consequence of climatic variability and change. Thus, a community may experience climate stress through a combination of prolonged dry periods, irregular rainfall, water shortages or changing seasonal patterns, even when the immediate climatic event is not necessarily extreme. The concept is therefore concerned with the social consequences of climatic conditions, particularly where communities have limited capacity to adapt.

The relationship between climate stress and conflict is complex. Contemporary research increasingly rejects the idea that climate change automatically causes violent conflict. Instead, climate stress can operate as a threat multiplier, intensifying existing political, economic and social vulnerabilities. A 2024 study on climate vulnerability and conflict in East Africa found that climate change increases conflict risks particularly where pre-existing vulnerabilities exist, with access to resources playing an important role in determining outcomes (Coccia et al., 2024). Similarly, research on environmental security emphasizes that the evidence linking environmental change directly to violence is complex and varies according to institutional and socioeconomic circumstances (Selby et al., 2024).

The concept is particularly relevant to farmer–herder relations because both livelihoods are highly dependent on environmental resources. Farmers require predictable rainfall, fertile soil and water for cultivation, whereas pastoralists require pasture and water for livestock. When these resources become less reliable or unevenly distributed, livelihood pressures may increase. Pastoralists may alter their seasonal movement patterns in search of water and grazing resources, while farmers may attempt to protect cultivated land from livestock intrusion. These adaptations can increase contact between groups and create opportunities for disputes where mechanisms for managing shared resources are weak.

The concept connects climate stress to the central argument of this research: the persistence of conflict may result from the interaction between environmental pressures and structural vulnerabilities. Where institutions are capable of managing resources fairly, environmental stress may be addressed through adaptation and cooperation. Where institutions are weak and access to resources is contested, the same environmental pressure may intensify grievances and competition. Thus, climate stress provides an important environmental dimension for understanding why farmer–herder conflict continued during the 2015–2025 period.

Concept of Structural Violence

Structural violence is a concept associated primarily with Johan Galtung's work on peace and violence. Galtung (1969) expanded the meaning of violence beyond direct physical harm to include conditions embedded within social structures that prevent individuals or groups from achieving their potential. Unlike direct violence, structural violence may not have an easily identifiable perpetrator. It can be reproduced through political, economic, social and institutional arrangements that systematically create unequal opportunities, deprivation or exclusion. Recent scholarship continues to distinguish structural violence from direct violence by emphasizing that harmful inequalities can be embedded in social structures and institutions rather than being produced only through identifiable acts of aggression. Galtung's distinction between direct and structural violence is closely connected to his understanding of negative and positive peace. Negative peace refers broadly to the absence of direct physical violence, whereas positive peace involves social conditions in which inequality, injustice and structural sources of violence are reduced. This distinction is particularly relevant to conflicts where temporary agreements may stop fighting without changing the conditions that generated the conflict. From this perspective, the absence of immediate clashes does not necessarily mean that sustainable peace has been achieved. Structural violence can take different forms. Economic structural violence may arise where groups experience persistent deprivation or unequal access to productive resources. Political structural violence may occur where certain communities have limited participation in decision-making or inadequate access to government protection. Institutional structural violence can arise when public institutions fail to provide equal protection, justice or access to resources. Social and cultural forms may reinforce exclusion through stereotypes, discrimination and narratives that portray particular groups as outsiders or threats. Structural violence is relevant to understanding why mediation may have limited results. If mediation addresses only the immediate disagreement between two parties while leaving unequal resource access, livelihood insecurity and institutional weaknesses unresolved, the possibility of renewed conflict remains. The problem is consequently not necessarily the absence of dialogue but the persistence of the conditions that repeatedly generate grievances. This perspective supports the present study's emphasis on going beyond mediation.

Concept of Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Mediation is a voluntary process through which a neutral or acceptable third-party assists people or groups involved in a dispute to communicate, identify their interests and negotiate an acceptable settlement. The mediator normally does not impose a solution on the parties but facilitates communication and assists them in reaching an agreement. The United Nations identifies preparedness, consent, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership, coherence, coordination and quality peace agreements as important principles of effective mediation.

Mediation differs from adjudication or coercive settlement because the parties themselves retain significant responsibility for determining the outcome. The mediator's principal role is to create conditions for meaningful dialogue, clarify issues, reduce misunderstanding and help parties explore options for agreement. In this sense, mediation can be particularly valuable where parties must continue living or working together after a dispute. By providing a structured space for dialogue, mediation can reduce hostility and create opportunities for rebuilding trust.

Conflict resolution, however, has a broader meaning than mediation. It refers to processes designed to address the underlying causes and relationships associated with conflict and to establish conditions that allow conflicting parties to coexist peacefully. While conflict management may seek to control or reduce the intensity of conflict, conflict resolution generally seeks to address the underlying needs, interests, grievances and relationships that sustain the conflict. Consequently, resolution is concerned not merely with stopping violence but with creating conditions that reduce the likelihood of its recurrence.

In farmer–herder relations, mediation and conflict resolution can involve government officials, traditional rulers, community leaders, religious organizations, civil society organizations and representatives of farmer and pastoralist communities. Mechanisms may include dialogue, negotiation, peace committees, traditional dispute settlement, compensation arrangements, agreements concerning resource access and community reconciliation. The objective is to prevent disputes involving crops, livestock, land and water from developing into prolonged violence. The effectiveness of mediation depends substantially on the conditions under which it is conducted. The United Nations emphasizes that successful mediation requires the consent of relevant parties, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership and coherent coordination among actors. If important stakeholders are excluded, agreements may lack legitimacy. Similarly, where parties do not trust the mediator or believe that agreements will not be implemented, mediation may produce only temporary results.

Relationship between Climate stress, Structural Violence and Mediation and Conflict Resolution

The three concepts are interconnected within the framework of this study. Climate stress represents the environmental pressure affecting land, water, pasture and livelihoods. Structural violence represents the institutional, socioeconomic and political conditions that shape how communities experience and respond to those pressures. Mediation and conflict resolution represent mechanisms through which disputes can be managed and, potentially, the underlying conditions of conflict addressed.

The relationship can therefore be expressed as: Climate Stress → Resource and Livelihood Pressure → Structural Vulnerability → Farmer–Herder Tensions → Conflict → Mediation/Conflict Resolution → Sustainable Peace or Conflict Recurrence. The framework assumes that climate stress does not automatically produce violent conflict. Its effects are influenced by existing structural conditions and the capacity of institutions and communities to adapt. Where mediation is limited to immediate disputes without addressing structural vulnerability and environmental pressures, conflict may recur. Conversely, where mediation is integrated with equitable resource governance, climate adaptation, livelihood protection and institutional strengthening, it may contribute more effectively to sustainable peace. This conceptual integration provides the foundation for examining the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State between 2015 and 2025 and explains why a comprehensive approach

extending beyond mediation is necessary.

Historical Evolution of Farmer–Herder Relations in Nigeria

The relationship between farmers and herders in Nigeria has a long historical background that predates the emergence of contemporary violent conflicts. Historically, interactions between sedentary farming communities and mobile pastoralists were not exclusively characterized by confrontation. They involved economic exchange, cooperation, resource sharing and forms of social interdependence. Farmers produced grains and other agricultural commodities, while pastoralists supplied livestock, milk, meat, hides and other animal products. In many parts of northern and central Nigeria, these complementary economic relationships created incentives for peaceful interaction. Conflicts nevertheless occurred, particularly around crop damage, livestock trespass and access to water, but many disputes were addressed through customary institutions and locally negotiated arrangements (Blench, 2010; Moritz, 2012).

The historical development of pastoralism in Nigeria is closely associated with the mobility of Fulani pastoral communities across the savannah and Sahel regions of West Africa. Pastoral mobility enabled herders to respond to seasonal changes in pasture and water availability. Rather than being random movements, these migrations were often guided by established ecological knowledge, customary access arrangements and relationships with farming communities. Seasonal movement allowed livestock to exploit pasture after harvests while farmers could benefit from livestock manure deposited on agricultural land. Such arrangements created forms of economic interdependence between pastoralists and cultivators (Blench, 2010). However, these arrangements depended on predictable access to land and water, functioning customary institutions and a degree of mutual trust. During the colonial period, the relationship between farmers and pastoralists was influenced by the British administration's attempts to regulate land, livestock movement and agricultural production. Colonial policies encouraged sedentary agriculture and introduced administrative boundaries that sometimes-disrupted existing patterns of mobility. The development of formal administrative structures also altered the authority of traditional institutions that had previously regulated access to resources. Although pastoralism remained an important livelihood system, increasing agricultural commercialization and population settlement gradually placed greater pressure on land and grazing resources. These changes laid part of the foundation for later competition over land and mobility routes (Blench, 2010). After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, population growth, agricultural expansion and economic transformation increasingly altered the relationship between farming and pastoral communities. Expansion of cultivated areas reduced some of the spaces traditionally available for livestock movement, while growing settlements and infrastructure development disrupted established pastoral routes. At the same time, pastoralists faced challenges associated with declining access to grazing resources and water. The increasing intensity of agricultural production and the expansion of cultivation into areas previously used for seasonal grazing created more opportunities for livestock to come into contact with cultivated crops. Consequently, disputes over crop damage and livestock trespass became more frequent in some areas (Moritz, 2012). The transformation of Nigeria's agricultural economy also contributed to changes in farmer–herder relations. Agricultural intensification increased the economic value attached to land, while pastoralists continued to depend on mobility as a central livelihood strategy. This created a structural tension between a land-use system based on relatively fixed cultivation and one based on seasonal movement. Where traditional mechanisms for regulating

access to resources weakened, disagreements could become more difficult to resolve. Thus, what had previously been managed as localized resource disputes increasingly became connected to broader questions concerning land ownership, livelihood rights and political authority.

Environmental changes have further influenced the historical trajectory of farmer–herder relations. Drought and ecological degradation in parts of the Sahel during the twentieth century encouraged pastoral populations to move southward in search of more reliable pasture and water. These movements increased the geographical interaction between pastoralists and farming communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt and southern savannah zones. Although environmental factors did not independently create conflict, they altered patterns of resource use and increased pressure on areas where farming and pastoral activities overlapped (Moritz, 2012). This historical process is important to the present study because it demonstrates that environmental stress and human mobility have long been connected to changes in farmer–herder relations.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, several developments intensified the potential for conflict. Population growth increased demand for agricultural land, while urbanization, infrastructure development and commercial agriculture further transformed rural landscapes. At the same time, the availability of traditional grazing routes became increasingly uncertain. Some routes were occupied by farms or settlements, while access to water sources became more contested. The resulting competition was not simply a struggle between farmers and herders; it reflected broader transformations in land-use systems and rural economies.

The early 2000s witnessed a noticeable escalation of violent farmer–herder conflicts in several parts of Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt. States such as Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba became increasingly affected by violent encounters. The nature of the conflict also changed. Rather than isolated disputes over livestock trespass, some confrontations developed into cycles of attack and retaliation involving communities, organized armed groups and wider identity-based mobilization. Research indicates that the contemporary conflict is shaped by an interaction of resource competition, political factors, demographic pressures, environmental changes and weaknesses in governance (McGuirk & Nunn, 2025).

Benue State became particularly important within this changing conflict landscape because of its extensive agricultural activities and its location within Nigeria's Middle Belt. The state is often described as an important agricultural region, meaning that access to cultivable land is central to the livelihoods and social identities of many communities. As pastoral movement increasingly intersected with cultivated areas, disputes concerning grazing, crop destruction and land use became increasingly contentious. The 2017 enactment of the Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranching Establishment Law represented a major policy response to these tensions. The law sought to prohibit open grazing and promote ranching as a mechanism for reducing farmer–herder clashes. However, its implementation generated controversy and different perceptions among affected communities.

The period from 2015 to 2025 is particularly significant because it captures a decade in which farmer–herder relations became closely connected with questions of internal security, displacement, food security, climate vulnerability and state policy. Climate variability and environmental stress contributed to changing patterns of pastoral mobility, while land-use pressures continued to increase. Recent empirical research indicates that climate-induced movement by pastoralists in search of suitable grazing areas can increase the likelihood of violent encounters with farming communities in Nigeria (Efobi, Adejumo, & Kim, 2025). This finding supports the argument that environmental pressures should be considered alongside

political and institutional factors rather than treated as an isolated cause of conflict.
The contemporary period has therefore been characterized by a gradual transformation from resource-sharing relationships to increasingly contested resource relations in some parts of Nigeria. This transformation should not be interpreted as evidence that farmers and herders are inherently antagonistic. Rather, it reflects changes in the ecological, economic, demographic and institutional conditions within which both groups pursue their livelihoods. The weakening of traditional arrangements, increased pressure on land and water, climate-related environmental stress and inadequate conflict-management institutions have reduced the capacity of communities to manage disputes peacefully.

Farmer–Herder Conflict in Benue State Beyond Mediation

Farmer–herder conflict in Benue State has evolved from localized disagreements over livestock movement, crop destruction, grazing routes and access to water into a complex and persistent security and development challenge. Although disagreements between farmers and pastoralists are not new, the intensity, frequency and consequences of contemporary conflicts have made them an important concern for peace, human security and agricultural development in the state. The conflict has affected rural livelihoods, displaced communities, disrupted agricultural production and weakened relationships between groups whose economic activities depend heavily on land and natural resources (Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025; Okoye et al., 2025).
In Benue State, the situation has become particularly significant because of the state's dependence on agriculture. Farmers require secure access to cultivable land, while pastoralists require pasture and water for livestock production. Where the same land and water resources are contested, relatively minor disagreements can develop into broader disputes. Crop destruction by livestock, alleged encroachment on grazing areas, blockage of livestock routes and competition over water are among the issues capable of generating tensions. Recent research in Benue State identifies crop destruction, grazing on agricultural land, water-related problems and other resource-use disagreements as important factors associated with farmer–herder conflict (Mustafa & Sa'ad, 2025). The conflict, however, cannot be explained entirely by competition over resources. Climate stress has become an increasingly important factor because changing environmental conditions can affect the availability and distribution of pasture and water. Variations in rainfall, drought, land degradation and changing seasonal conditions can place additional pressure on pastoral and agricultural livelihoods. Pastoralists may respond by altering their migration patterns in search of more suitable grazing and water resources. When such movements bring livestock into heavily cultivated areas, the possibility of confrontation with farming communities may increase. Evidence from Nigeria suggests that climate-induced pastoral migration can contribute to violent encounters between farmers and pastoralists, although climate change operates alongside political, socioeconomic and institutional factors rather than functioning as an automatic cause of conflict (Efobi et al., 2025).
The concept of structural violence provides another important explanation for the persistence of the conflict. Structural violence refers to harm produced through social, political and economic arrangements that systematically expose individuals or groups to deprivation, insecurity or unequal opportunities (Galtung, 1969). In the Benue context, structural conditions may include weak land administration, inadequate grazing infrastructure, poverty, limited institutional capacity, poor implementation of government policies and inadequate access to justice. These conditions can make both farming and pastoral communities vulnerable while simultaneously

reducing their capacity to resolve disputes peacefully. Thus, violence may persist not simply because individuals are unwilling to cooperate, but because the institutional and socioeconomic environment continues to reproduce insecurity.

Government policies have attempted to address the conflict, particularly through legislation and security interventions. A major development was the enactment of the Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranching Establishment Law in 2017. The legislation was designed to prohibit open grazing and encourage ranching as an alternative means of managing livestock production. While many farmers viewed the policy as a mechanism for protecting agricultural land, sections of the pastoralist community perceived it as a restriction on mobility and livelihood. Recent research indicates that disagreements concerning the implementation of the law, coupled with institutional weaknesses and political contestation, have limited its ability to provide a comprehensive solution to the conflict (Achem & Aderinto, 2025).

This situation demonstrates why the conflict must be examined beyond mediation. Mediation remains important because it can provide a platform for dialogue, negotiation, reconciliation and settlement of immediate disputes. It can bring together farmers, pastoralists, traditional leaders, government representatives and other stakeholders to develop agreements concerning land use, livestock movement and resource sharing. Nevertheless, mediation is often concerned with managing relationships and resolving specific disputes. Where the deeper environmental, economic and institutional causes remain unresolved, new disagreements may emerge after an earlier settlement. Conflict resolution, therefore, needs to be distinguished from temporary conflict management. Effective conflict resolution should address the interests, grievances and structural conditions that contribute to recurrent disputes. In the case of Benue State, this means going beyond agreements between farmers and herders to consider questions of land governance, climate adaptation, livelihood security, access to water, pastoral infrastructure, agricultural protection and institutional accountability. The United Nations (2012) emphasizes that effective mediation requires consent, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership and the capacity to implement agreements. These principles are particularly relevant where conflicts involve multiple communities and competing claims over resources.

The persistence of farmer–herder conflict also suggests that peacebuilding must be connected to environmental governance. Environmental peacebuilding emphasizes cooperation over natural resources as a pathway to sustainable peace. Rather than treating land and water only as sources of competition, the approach seeks to develop institutions and practices through which communities can jointly manage shared resources. Dresse et al. (2019) argue that environmental peacebuilding can contribute to conflict prevention by connecting environmental management with cooperation, restoration and sustainable development. In Benue State, such an approach could involve improved water infrastructure, regulated livestock routes, climate-adaptation measures, inclusive land-use planning and mechanisms for protecting both agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. Beyond mediation therefore means adopting a broader analytical and policy perspective. It recognizes that farmer–herder conflict is produced through the interaction of climate stress, resource competition, structural inequalities, weak governance and inadequate conflict-management institutions. Mediation can help manage immediate disagreements, but sustainable peace requires interventions that address the conditions from which those disagreements repeatedly emerge. This approach is consistent with contemporary climate-security research, which emphasizes that environmental stress becomes particularly dangerous where communities already experience socioeconomic and institutional vulnerabilities (Koubi,

2019; Mach et al., 2019). For the period 2015–2025, the experience of Benue State demonstrates the importance of moving from reactive responses toward preventive and transformative peacebuilding. Such an approach should combine dialogue with climate adaptation, equitable resource governance, livelihood protection, effective implementation of land policies, institutional reform and community participation. It should also recognize that farmers and pastoralists are not inherently hostile groups but livelihood communities operating within increasingly pressured environmental and institutional conditions. Farmer–herder conflict in Benue State beyond mediation should be understood as a multidimensional problem requiring more than the settlement of individual disputes. The persistence of violence indicates that mediation alone cannot adequately address the interaction between environmental pressures and structural vulnerabilities. A more sustainable approach must therefore connect conflict resolution with climate resilience, equitable land and resource governance, institutional effectiveness and livelihood security. Such an approach provides a stronger basis for understanding why farmer–herder conflict has persisted in Benue State and for identifying pathways toward durable peace.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method case study design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the relationship between climate stress, structural violence, mediation and the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, from 2015 to 2025. The mixed-method approach is appropriate because the subject involves both measurable patterns and complex human experiences that cannot be adequately understood through a single methodological approach. While quantitative data can establish patterns, relationships and trends in the conflict, qualitative evidence can provide deeper explanations of how farmers, herders, community leaders, government officials and other stakeholders perceive and experience the conflict (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study dimension focuses specifically on Benue State as a bounded geographical and social case.

The population of this study comprises adults who have relevant knowledge of, experience with, or direct involvement in farmer–herder relations and conflict in Ogbadibo and Ohimini Local Government Areas of Benue State, The study focuses on these two Local Government Areas because they provide an appropriate setting for examining the interaction between agricultural activities, pastoral mobility, climate-related pressures, community relations and conflict-management practices. According to the 2006 National Population Census, Ogbadibo Local Government Area had a population of 130,988, comprising 64,847 males and 66,141 females, while Ohimini Local Government Area had a population of 70,688, comprising 35,876 males and 34,812 females. The combined population of the two LGAs was 201,676." Because the study adopts a mixed-method design, sample size will be determined separately for the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. For the quantitative component, a sample of 200 respondents is proposed. The sample will be distributed between the two selected Local Government Areas.

Data Presentations

The data presentations focus on two selected Local Government Areas in Benue State, Ogbadibo and Ohimini. The analysis examines the nature of farmer–herder conflict, the influence of climate stress, the contribution of structural violence and institutional weaknesses, the effectiveness of mediation, and possible approaches for achieving sustainable peace beyond

mediation.

Research Question One: What are the major patterns and characteristics of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State between 2015 and 2025?

Table 4.1: Respondents' Perceptions of the Major Characteristics of Farmer–Herder Conflict

S/N	Major characteristics	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Destruction of crops by livestock contributes to conflict	3.72.	. 0.68	Accepted
2	Competition over farmland contributes to conflict	3.78.	0.63	Accepted
3	Competition over water and grazing resources contributes to conflict	3.69	0.72	Accepted
4	Conflict has caused displacement of community members	3.64	0.79	Accepted
5	Recurrent conflict has reduced agricultural activities	3.76	0.66	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.72.	0.70	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results in Table 4.1 show that all the items recorded mean scores above the criterion mean of 3.00. Competition over farmland recorded a mean of 3.78, while reduced agricultural activities recorded 3.76. Crop destruction recorded 3.72, competition over water and grazing resources recorded 3.69, and displacement recorded 3.64. The grand mean of 3.72 indicates that respondents generally agreed that these factors characterize farmer–herder conflict in the study area. The qualitative findings support the quantitative results. Interview participants explained that disputes frequently begin with issues such as livestock entering cultivated fields, disagreement over access to water, or movement of cattle through farming areas. However, once trust between communities breaks down, relatively small disputes can escalate into wider confrontations. Participants further reported that repeated conflict has affected farmers' willingness to cultivate distant farmland and has increased insecurity within rural communities.

Research Question Two: How has climate stress contributed to the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Benue State?

Table 4.2: Climate Stress and Farmer–Herder Conflict

S/N	Climate-related factor	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Irregular rainfall affects agricultural production	3.65	0.74	Accepted
2	Declining water availability increases competition	3.71	0.70	Accepted
3	Reduced pasture influences pastoral movement	3.68	0.75	Accepted
4	Environmental degradation increases pressure on land	3.73	0.69	Accepted
5	Climate stress contributes to increased contact between farmers and herders	3.61	0.81	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.68	0.74	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results show that all five items were accepted. Environmental degradation recorded the highest mean score of 3.73, followed by declining water availability with 3.71 and reduced pasture with 3.68. The grand mean of 3.68 indicates general agreement that climate-related environmental pressures contribute to the persistence of farmer–herder conflict.

The qualitative findings provide further explanation. Participants stated that changes in rainfall and water availability affect both farming and livestock production. Where water sources become less reliable, pastoralists may move farther in search of water and pasture. Such movement can increase encounters with cultivated farmland. Farmers, on the other hand, may

perceive increased livestock movement into farming areas as a threat to crops and livelihoods.

Research Question Three: How do structural violence and institutional weaknesses sustain farmer–herder conflict?

Table 4.3: Structural and Institutional Factors Sustaining Conflict

S/N	Structural/institutional factor	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Weak land governance contributes to conflict	3.70	0.71	Accepted
2	Inadequate implementations of government policies sustains conflict	3.74	0.68	Accepted
3	Limited access to justice increases grievances	3.55	0.82	Accepted
4	Poverty and livelihood insecurity increase vulnerability	3.69	0.73	Accepted
5	Inadequate infrastructures for pastoral and agricultural activities contribute to conflict	3.62	0.76	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.66	0.74	Accepted

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The grand mean of 3.66 demonstrates that respondents generally perceived structural and institutional weaknesses as significant contributors to conflict persistence. Inadequate implementation of government policies recorded the highest mean of 3.74, followed by weak land governance at 3.70. Interview findings reinforce this result. Participants described situations in which communities were uncertain about the enforcement of land-use rules and government interventions. Some respondents argued that the absence of reliable institutions for regulating access to land and water allows disputes to continue. Others emphasized that poor communities often have limited access to formal justice mechanisms, making them dependent on informal arrangements that may not always be accepted by all parties.

Discussion of Findings

The finding agrees with Mustafa and Sa'ad (2025), who identified crop destruction, grazing-related disputes and water-resource problems among important factors associated with farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. The result also supports the argument that contemporary farmer–herder conflict is not simply a disagreement between two individuals but a broader struggle involving livelihood security, resource access and community protection.

The results also suggest that climate stress does not automatically produce violent conflict. Rather, climate-related pressures appear to increase competition and vulnerability, particularly where effective systems for managing land, water and livestock movement are inadequate. This interpretation is consistent with Efobi, Adejumo and Kim (2025), who found evidence linking climate-induced pastoral migration with violent farmer–pastoralist conflict in Nigeria. The finding is also consistent with Koubi (2019), who argues that climate change should generally be understood as a factor that interacts with existing political, economic and social vulnerabilities rather than as an independent cause of conflict.

Findings on the concept of structural violence, emphasizes that insecurity can be reproduced through social and institutional arrangements rather than through direct physical violence alone (Galtung, 1969). In the context of this study, structural violence is reflected in conditions that leave communities vulnerable to livelihood loss, unequal resource access and inadequate institutional protection. The finding is consistent with Okoye et al. (2025), who reported that contradictions in government policies and weaknesses in land management contributed to difficulties in managing farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. It also supports Achem and

Aderinto (2025), who found that implementation gaps and political contestation affected the effectiveness of the anti-open grazing policy.

In addition, the finding supports the central argument of the study that addressing farmer–herder conflict requires moving beyond mediation. Mediation remains valuable, but its effectiveness may be limited when the conditions generating recurrent disputes remain unchanged. The finding also corresponds with Okoye et al. (2025), whose research suggests that institutional and policy weaknesses continue to undermine conflict-management efforts in Benue State.

Finally, the findings support the environmental peacebuilding perspective, which emphasizes cooperation over natural resources as a means of reducing conflict and strengthening sustainable peace (Dresse et al., 2019). They also support the broader climate-security argument that adaptation and institutional resilience can reduce the likelihood that environmental stress will translate into violent conflict (Mach et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that farmer–herder conflict in Benue State is a multidimensional phenomenon. Competition over agricultural land, grazing spaces and water resources remains important, but these immediate causes operate within wider environmental, socioeconomic and institutional conditions. Crop destruction, disputes over livestock movement, declining access to natural resources and livelihood insecurity can initiate disagreements, but the persistence of such disputes is influenced by deeper weaknesses in resource governance, institutional capacity and conflict-resolution mechanisms. The study further established that climate stress contributes to the persistence of farmer–herder conflict, particularly through its effects on water availability, pasture conditions and patterns of pastoral mobility. Irregular rainfall, environmental degradation and changing resource availability can increase pressure on land and water. However, the findings do not support the argument that climate change automatically causes violent conflict. Rather, climate stress acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying existing socioeconomic and institutional vulnerabilities (Koubi, 2019; Mach et al., 2019). This suggests that environmental pressures are most likely to generate violent outcomes where institutions for managing resource competition are weak or where affected communities lack effective mechanisms for adaptation.

Another major conclusion is that structural violence contributes significantly to conflict persistence. Weak land governance, inadequate implementation of policies, limited access to justice, livelihood insecurity and insufficient infrastructure can expose communities to recurring insecurity. Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence is useful in explaining this situation because it draws attention to forms of harm that arise from unequal or ineffective social and institutional arrangements rather than only from direct physical attacks.

The study also concludes that mediation remains necessary but insufficient. Mediation can facilitate dialogue, reduce immediate tensions and create opportunities for reconciliation. However, its capacity to generate sustainable peace is limited when the underlying causes of conflict remain unresolved. Where land-use disputes, environmental stress, livelihood insecurity and institutional weaknesses continue, agreements reached through mediation may only provide temporary relief. This finding supports the argument that conflict resolution should be linked to broader peacebuilding and environmental governance rather than treated as a stand-alone process. The study therefore, argues for a shift beyond mediation toward a more comprehensive approach that combines conflict resolution with climate adaptation, equitable resource governance, institutional strengthening, livelihood protection and environmental peacebuilding.

Environmental peacebuilding is particularly relevant because cooperation over land and water can transform contested resources from sources of conflict into opportunities for collaboration and sustainable development (Dresse et al., 2019).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. The Benue State Government and relevant institutions should strengthen systems for managing agricultural land, grazing areas and water resources.
2. Government should incorporate climate adaptation and early-warning mechanisms into farmer–herder conflict-prevention strategies.
3. Government should improve the implementation and monitoring of policies relating to open grazing, ranching, land use and community security.

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