

# Policy Briefing

## Climate Change and Migration

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# Climatic Factors in Nigeria's Farmer–Herder Conflict

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## Executive summary

Although skirmishes between land-owning farmers and Fulani herders in Nigeria are not uncommon, the dynamics of recent outbreaks, with both cross-border and environmental connotations, call for in-depth scrutiny. Among other factors, the increasing deforestation and steady drop in water levels in the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah of West Africa contribute to Fulani herders' southward migration and, by implication, the perennial violent conflicts between Fulani herders and land-owning communities, especially in the North-Central region. As a short-term measure, the Nigerian government should devise a participatory approach, which should provide the necessary platform for an effective peacebuilding process between the herders and land-owning communities. For a more sustainable intervention, however, the proven Gansu-modelled water conservation project in Kano, Nigeria, should be replicated in the increasingly arid Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah.

# Introduction

Changing climatic conditions have profound implications for sustainable livelihoods in all the states that fall within the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah zones of northern Nigeria (namely Borno, Kebbi, Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa and Yobe). Significantly, the rate of desertification and reduction in water levels in these states has worsened over the past two decades and continues to do so. The Sahara Desert presently accounts for more than 35% of land space in these zones and is encroaching at an estimated rate of 0.6km per year, while deforestation is taking place at the rate of 3.5% per year.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, the Fulani ethnic group, whose grazing routes cross the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah zones of northern Nigeria (and traverse the northern borders of the country), faces serious challenges. With land in these zones impoverished owing to deforestation and dropping water levels, primarily as a result of climate change,<sup>2</sup> the Fulani herders have had no choice but to move southward within the Nigerian federation. Although, initially, movement towards the North-Central and Southern regions of the country was short-term and fluid, for the past two decades this migration has become more long-term and permanent. In both instances, the movement has caused intermittent conflict between the herders and landowning communities.

The changing climatic conditions in the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah has therefore contributed to Fulani herders' forced migration southward and to recurrent conflict between these Fulani herders and their host landowners, who are mostly farmers, particularly in the North-Central region of Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> Connecting this to the primary tenet of the theory of environmental determinism – which postulates the centrality of such physical variables as climate change to understanding associated processes of social change – it seems likely that deforestation in the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah zones will continue to spur forced migration and, indeed, violent conflict across the length and breadth of the country in the foreseeable future. Already, research in Benue and Nasarawa states in the North-Central region and in Kaduna in the North-West has shown that the cultivation and destruction of farmland routinely foments conflict between the Fulani herders – who come from northern Nigeria and neighbouring West African countries – and the host farming populace. While the conflict between herders and farmers exposes underlying crises, this policy briefing argues that the actual determinants are the changing climatic conditions in the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah zones of West Africa, as well as the continued porosity of Nigeria's borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

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1 Mayowa Fasona and Ademola Omojola, "Climate Change, Human Security and Communal Clashes in Nigeria" (paper, International Workshop on Human Security and Climate Change, Asker, Oslo, June 21-23, 2005).

2 Adebuseyi Isaac Adeniran and Kabran Aristide Djane, *ICT and Food Security in Africa* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

3 Jude Okwudili Odigbo, "Grazing Conundrum: Herdsmen–Farmers Conflict and Internal Security in Nigeria", in *Internal Security Management in Nigeria: Perspectives, Challenges and Lessons*, eds. Oshita O Oshita, Ikenna Mike Alumona and Freedom Chukwudi Onuoha (Berlin: Springer Nature, 2019), 99–121.

# Addressing symptoms, neglecting causes

Politicisation of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has kept the crisis at fever pitch, whereas the underlying context of the crisis, that is, the changing climatic conditions, has been neglected by the Nigerian government at both the federal and state level. Other roots of the problem, such as mechanised farming, population growth and poor regulation of land acquisition and usage, have also been ignored. At the same time, a number of the Nigerian states implementing the 'anti-open grazing policy' are predominantly Christian (and non-Fulani), while most of the actors at the federal level, perceived by many to be promoters of the 'cattle colony' policy, are both Muslim and of Fulani extraction. As such, the Fulani herders (and their assumed backers in political circles) believe the 'anti-open grazing policy' is merely a well-structured agenda to limit their right to make a living in any part of the country. At the same time, the indigenous landowners (and their respective state governments) feel that the federal government has devised the 'cattle colony' policy as a subtle move to advance an intrinsic hegemonic Fulani agenda within the larger Nigerian federation. This is a point of conflict.

As could be expected, this conflict has had a negative impact on the plans and activities of both government and non-governmental actors, who are either keen on enhancing the liveability of Nigeria's devastated Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah or want to modernise the business of cattle rearing in the country via training and funding support. Of major significance in this regard is the Gansu-model experimental water conservation project in Kano, northern Nigeria, which is a joint initiative between the UN and the Chinese government. While related interventions have been popular at the state level, the national government has only paid lip service to such interventions.

Following the massive destruction of human and material assets, notably towards the end of 2016 and through the first quarter of 2017, in various states that are farmer-herder conflict hot spots in Nigeria,<sup>4</sup> there have been various processes of dialogue instituted at both governmental and non-governmental levels. These have focused on peacebuilding by means of confidence building among participants, and transformation of the business of herding from the traditional itinerant pattern to a modern mechanised one. While such efforts in the non-formal realm (through non-governmental organisation advocacy) have taken place in a few of the hot-spot states (for instance, in Adamawa and Kaduna), the government, especially at the national level, has remained unenthusiastic about related initiatives. This is another point of conflict, both at the institutional level (between state governments and the national government) and at the individual/group level (ie, between the farmers and herders). Since the intrinsic problem of intergroup mistrust remains largely attitudinal, tracking the associated crises has been daunting.

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4 Othniel Consulting, "Qualitative Research Report of Farmers-Herders Conflict in North-Central Nigeria", May 2018, <http://www.othnielconsultingltd.com>.

On the part of the federal government, actions that would be relevant in engendering sustainable peace between the farmers and herders could be contextualised into two frameworks; that is, a non-material and a material framework.

Actions within the non-material framework would address largely attitudinal issues and would entail confidence and peacebuilding by means of value re-orientation. A participatory approach, which would encourage communal ownership of related interventions, is imperative in this respect. Crucially, the farmers and herders are just representative sub-sets of larger systems of ideas, beliefs and cultures that structure intergroup relationships within the Nigerian context. More specifically, they stand for the subjective constructions of groups' worldviews.

In terms of the material efforts that the government could make to ensure the sustainable mitigation of the perennial farmer-herder crisis, it is imperative to modernise the business of cattle rearing in Nigeria. Itinerant herding can no longer be justifiable in a modernising society. While the anti-open grazing policy, which is presently in effect in some states, is a commendable starting point, it cannot enable the peaceful co-existence of farmers and herders because of the conditions that have necessitated its emergence. It primarily sets out to defend the rights of farmers by ensuring that the Fulani herders are not welcome in their communities. This is at outright odds with the Nigerian constitution, which guarantees freedom of movement and of establishment for all Nigerians in the country.<sup>5</sup>

While modernising cattle rearing seems to be the easiest way to solve the current crisis, both forced migration and the accompanying intergroup conflicts across the country can be addressed sustainably by acting on the threat climate change poses to livelihoods in most states in northern Nigeria. As noted above, the Gansu-modelled experimental water conservation project in Kano has offered a reliable lead in this regard.

## **Gansu-modelled experimental water conservation project as a sustainable solution**

The Gansu-modelled water conservation project focuses on sharing best practices in water management by applying the knowledge gained from similar anti-desertification efforts in Gansu, northwest China. It appears to be one mechanism for sustainably addressing the impacts of climate change in northern Nigeria and, by extension, the problem of forced migration in the region. Water conservation in this regard has entailed a reduction in water usage for agricultural activities. The experimental project involves the entire Guinea and Sudan-Sahel zones of Kano State – an area that has been ravaged by climate change, overgrazing, drought and violence (by the relatively active Boko Haram insurgents in the region). The project applies techniques related to sand dune stabilisation using nylon nets,

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<sup>5</sup> Nigerian Constitution (1999, as amended), Chapter 4, Section 41, "Right to Freedom of Movement".

and rainwater is stored in underground tunnels – for ‘sandy days’ – to prevent the onset of drought. ‘Sandy days’ in this context imply sunny days, which are routinely accompanied by dust storms moving from the Sahara Desert to northern Nigeria. This experimental agricultural/water conservation project has ensured the transfer of crucial skills to the indigenous farming populace, which has enhanced livelihood outcomes for participating households.<sup>6</sup>

If the outcomes of the Gansu-modelled experimental project in Kano could be built upon by the Nigerian government, it would be possible to ensure a much broader impact. In addition, the culture of tree planting in the country could be sustainably resuscitated, especially in the northernmost parts of the country. If the unbridled internal migration by herders could be discouraged, the perennial farmer-herder conflicts in the country would also be curbed.

## Recommendations

- The Nigerian government should take a participatory approach to resolving farmer-herder conflict, encouraging peaceful co-existence through communal ownership of interventions. To ensure sustainability, such processes should be inclusive innovative platforms, acceptable to all parties in the crisis (ie, the herders and the farmers).
- As a long-term strategy, the Nigerian government should build on the relative progress that has been made in the Gansu-modelled experimental water conservation project in Kano, developed on the basis of a shared ecological interface between China and Nigeria. With the efficient replication of this initiative across northern Nigeria, the challenge of desert encroachment and receding water levels could be addressed sustainably.
- The culture of tree planting in Nigeria should be revitalised; particularly in northern Nigeria, which is relatively more vulnerable to desert encroachment and water insufficiency as a result of changing climatic conditions in the Guinea and Sudan-Sahel savannah zones of West Africa.

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<sup>6</sup> Adebunsi Isaac Adeniran, “Repository Africa in the Evolving ‘Chinese Century’: The Uneven Sino-Nigerian Water Conservation Partnership”, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 46, no. 3 (2017): 33-52.

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## Cover image

Fulani herdsman Yusuf Ibrahim sets a bonfire to keep his cattle warm before nightfall at Kachia Grazing Reserve, Kaduna State, Nigeria, on 16 April 2019. Kachia Grazing Reserve is an area set aside for the use of Fulani pastoralists and it is intended to be the foci of livestock development. The purpose for the grazing reserves is the settlement of nomadic pastoralists and inducement to sedentarisation through the provision of land for grazing and permanent water as way to avoid conflict. (Luis Tato/AFP via Getty Images)

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