

They have taken our farmlands! Examining the impact of herdsmen and farmers conflict on farming communities in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State

Perpetua L. Tanyi, Uche L. Nwatu, Paul B. Ugwu, Anthonia Amadi & Joseph E. Idongesit

Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu, Nigeria

Abstract

The operations of nomadic herdsmen in recent years have posed security threats not just to lives and property, but also to families in Nigeria. For a long time, violent clashes between Fulani herders and farmers have been a typical occurrence in Nigeria, wreaking havoc on human and animal lives, property and peaceful coexistence. This paper examines the impact of herdsmen and farmers' conflict on farming communities in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State. Qualitative data were collected from 15 farmers through the use of in-depth interviews. Data collected was translated and transcribed, coded using Nvivo12 and analyzed thematically. Findings show that this persistent unrest or clash between the herdsmen and farmers has brought about hunger and starvation among the people. The study further revealed psychological trauma as another effect of these conflicts due to incessant killings and the destruction of property. The study also suggests anti-crazing policies to curtail the killings, secure property, and restore peace and serenity in the area. The study while exploring the implication of findings for social work practice in Nigeria recommends that social workers should advocate for the promulgation and implementation of anti-grazing policies in the country and assist victims through counseling and psychotherapy.

Keywords: Herdsmen, farmers, conflicts, social-work, Enugu state, Nigeria

Introduction

Efforts made to provide pasture and water for cattle, and the persistent movement that follows it have resulted in dangerous conflicts between Fulani herders and many farmers in their communities (Ogbeide, 2017). In the first half of 2018, more than 1,300 Nigerians had lost their lives to herders-farmers conflicts, while an estimated 300,000 people had fled their homes and became displaced (International Crisis Group, 2018). This conflict is rooted in the land use policy, ethnic relations in Nigeria, and the struggle for resources, which are intensified by ethno-religious lines in a country with a host of political challenges like Nigeria (Olugbenga, 2017; Chom & Smith, 2017). Environmental dynamics, political instability, and insecurity leave the Fulani herders no option than to move from one area to the other, in search of pastures needed to sustain their cattle (Chom & Smith, 2017). Recently, farmers and herders conflict has spread from the Middle Belt and now affect communities in the North-East, South-East, and South-South geopolitical zones of Nigeria. To the host communities,

cohabiting with these herders is strange, but now, they are forced to deal with living together with them and the attendant land disputes introduced by their coming (Ugwu & Ogba, 2018).

Nigerian farmers grow a wide range of crops to sustain themselves and as well generate income. They majorly grow crops such as pepper, yam, beans, cassava, millet, sorghum (Anderson, Marita, Musiime & Thiam, 2017). As noted by Fayinka (2004), agricultural production in Nigeria is mostly sustained by small-scale crop producers, who make up 80% of the total food production required to feed the country. Unfortunately, the rate of crop production and livestock rearing among these subsistent farmers has reduced to a regrettable extent, owing to the Fulani herdsman and farmers' conflicts.

The careless attitude of the Fulani herders affects almost every citizen of Nigeria. The economic, social, political, religious and legal systems of the country are at stake, and the untold spilling of blood, especially of the rural farmers has resulted in distrust, suspicion and fear among citizens of our country (Ajibefun, 2018). Ever since the herders/farmers conflict started in the country, the pace of economic development has been altered negatively; just within three years, \$14 million was lost to the conflict, a host of persons have been internally displaced (IDP), and both private and public property has been destroyed (Ogundipe & Oluwole, 2016; Suleiman & Ja'afar-furo, 2010; Kyari, 2017). So far, the relationship between the major ethnic and religious groups in the country has suffered, and the psychological wellbeing of people displaced by the incessant conflicts is threatened (Morina, Akhtar, Barth, & Schnyder, 2018). To Nwabueze (2018), the activities of the Fulani herders are a strategy to perpetuate the supremacy of the Fulanis as initiated by Usman Dan Fodio. As a result of this, the two major religions of the country; Christianity and Islam keep on suspecting each other, the fundamental human rights of citizens to freedom of worship, and freedom of movement have been thwarted, and the idea of creating cattle colonies that resulted from the conflicts has raised more dust and left many Nigerians confused as to who will be the rightful owner of the land should the colonies be given to the Fulani herders (Madumelu, 2020).

Conflict theory was adopted as the study's theoretical framework in a bid of unfolding the dynamics of the clashes between the farmers and herdsman in Nigeria. Karl Max propounded Conflict Theory. In general, conflict perspective views society as made up of individuals competing for limited resources and competition over scarce resources is at the heart of all social relationships. The theory sees social life as a competition and focuses on the distribution of resources and power which are not evenly endowed by nature. Proponents of the theory view society as a gathering of people of diverse needs and interests with limited resources to meet their needs (Mitchell, 1981; Pruit and Kim, 2004). The conflict theory offers an explanation that, despite the fact that the conflicts between herdsman and farmers have taken the religious, political and ethnic dimensions, and land remains the limited resource in this case. Since lack of resources due to climate change and environmental degradation and depleting arable land for farming, Fulani herders have continued in their constant search for resources to sustain their livestock, hence encroaching on the farmlands in the South-East part of Nigeria. The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has made efforts to check the herders-farmers conflicts. In 1978, the Land Use Act was promulgated, through which

the government instructed that people must apply for a certificate of occupancy to their land of origin. The Fulanis failed to apply for the certificates but kept on trespassing on unauthorized land, which engendered the present-day conflicts (Kure, 2011). In 2019, Nigerian authorities proposed a ten-year National Livestock Transformation Plan in a bid to minimize the movement of cattle, boost livestock production, and remedy the persistent herder-farmers conflict, but while the plan has been supported by some state governments, it faces challenges of popular misinterpretation about its purpose, and budgetary constraints worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Several factors influenced our decision to carry out this study. One of such factors is the outcry of rural farmers in Nkanu East local government area of Enugu State about the growing subjugation of their arable lands by the Fulani herders, evidenced by the constant crises experienced in that area. A second motivating factor was the need to engage in research and be able to come up with findings on approaches to checking the rapidly spiraling insecurity in the country, and as well provide adequate evidence for the practice of social work in a multicultural and problem-ridden nation like Nigeria.

Some studies have been carried out on the trending herders/farmers conflict in Nigeria. Ugwu and Ogba (2018) and Madumelu (2018) among others have carried out studies in this area. However, none of these studies was focused particularly on the effects of herders-farmers crisis on farming communities in Nkanu East local government, especially from the perspective of social work in Nigeria. Thus, this study seeks to unravel how the herders/farmers crisis has impacted farming communities in the East of Nkanu Local government area of the state and to proffer professional social work solutions to the problem.

Methodology

Research design

This study is qualitative. The rationale for adopting this method is because qualitative studies provide an opportunity for exploring diverse experiences and opinions of individuals (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Bryman, 2016). Also, the qualitative inductive approach will enable the findings of the study to emanate naturally from thematic data (Bryman, 2016; Gobena & Hean, 2019). The in-depth interview facilitated our clear understanding of the context and the dichotomous opinions and plights of individual farmers in the community under study.

Study population and sampling

This study was focused on farmers resident in Nkanu East, Enugu State, Nigeria. As such, empirical data was collected from 15 farmers in Amagunze community in Nkanu East Local Government Area. We adopted simple random sampling to select four villages (Osu-ene, Isie-enu, Umuopkala and Ndiagu) out of the 9 villages (Osu-ene, Umunevo, Isi-enu, Enuvu-uno, Umuopkala, Ndiagu, Ukwokani, Okeani-Aniyi and Onicha-agu) which make up Amagunze community. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select farmers that were available and willing to share in detail, their experiences with the Fulani nomads in recent times (Bryman, 2016). The socio-demographic features of these participants such as gender, age, place of residence, and level of education were taken into account. The justification for our

choice of 15 participants for the interviews was that since we are conducting a small-scale qualitative study, that sample size allowed for saturation and manageable data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nelson, 2017), and the differences in the socio-demographic features of the participants enabled us to get divergent views and experiences from them. Recruitment of participants did not pose much difficulty since the study area is one of the researcher's communities of origin. They consulted as many farmers as possible, and explained to them what the study entails, and asked if they were willing to partake. The demographic features of the participants are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Demographic features of participants

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Level of education
Ekene	Female	55	Primary education
Elizabeth	Female	39	Primary education
Uche	Female	40	BSc
Ebere	Female	37	Secondary education
Janeth	Female	60	Secondary education
Mary	Female	62	Secondary education
Ukwaba	Female	47	No formal education
Felix	Male	45	No formal education
Okafor	Male	50	Primary education
Leonard	Male	35	Primary education
Ikeme	Male	45	Secondary education
Ejike	Male	38	Secondary education
Anthony	Male	48	Secondary education
John	Male	58	No formal education
Francis	Male	44	Secondary education

Source: *Data collected on the impact of farmers-herders conflict on farming communities in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State.*

Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. We chose interviews because they suit studies aimed at ascertaining the views and understanding of participants on a given subject, situation, or phenomenon (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Since the study was designed inductively, the semi-structured nature of the interviews made for flexibility of the discussion, giving room for the discussion to shift towards issues of interest raised by participants in the course of their response to the interview questions. Based on the demographic features of the participants, especially educational qualification, we conducted the interviews in the Igbo language and recorded them with a smartphone. Notes were also taken during and after the interview sessions. Taking cognizance of the COVID-19 safety measures, adequate social distancing was maintained right from the onset of recruitment, and everybody wore face masks while the interviews lasted.

Prior to data collection, participants were given detailed information on what they were about to do and their consent sought, interviews were carried out in open and calm space, their safety, full participation and comfort were guaranteed, and the anti-

infection guidelines were maintained, all in line with the ethical mandates of qualitative research (Bryman, 2016; Pittaway et al., 2010).

Data analysis

We adopted the denaturalized transcription method in transcribing the data we recorded from our participants since the study was focused on views created and shared (Oliver et al., 2005) by rural farmers about the persistent conflicts between them and the Fulani herdsmen in their community. The denaturalization method enabled us to focus the transcription on the main content of the participants' responses, rather than on linguistic features, phonological interference, grammatical errors, and verbal peculiarities (Oliver et al., 2005). Since the interviews were conducted in the Igbo language, we employed the parallel transcription framework, and transcribed the data in the English language, such that the transcribed data were as close as possible to the participants' original statements in the Igbo language (Nikander, 2008). Thereafter, the transcribed data versions were compared with the originally recorded data to ensure that there are no alterations in meaning, which makes for the validity of data (Kalof et al., 2008).

After the data were transcribed, participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. For instance, the label 'Felix, M, 55' represents a fifty-five-year-old male participant with the pseudonym 'Felix'. We adopted the thematic method of analysis, which entailed using data to discover, interpret, and report patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data were coded with the Nvivo 12 software and shared with other researchers by one of the researchers who is an expert in that area. The researchers conducted multiple reads of both separate transcripts and the entire interview, and compared them with the Nvivo coding to reflect on the interviewee's narratives, and as well identify emerging themes, and ensure validity and reliability of results. We engaged in thorough and attentive multiple readings of the transcripts until we identified emerging codes and patterns, which we then organized in themes and used as quotes while presenting our findings.

Results

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nkanu East has affected the rural farmers adversely. There is a high level of insecurity in the community, and the community is starving, due to the significant decrease in the farm produce and income level of individual families. From the findings of the study emerged three major themes; the first theme is concerned with the starvation, and feeling of insecurity orchestrated by the conflicts while the second theme illustrates the psychological trauma resulting from loss of life and property and restrictions in free movement of the community members. The first two themes illustrate the impacts of the conflict on the farmer, then the third theme is concerned with addressing the problem.

Starvation and insecurity due to the conflicts

The residents of Amagunze in Nkanu East Local Government Area depend a great deal on their subsistent farming to sustain themselves and their families. They consume part of their agricultural produce and sell the rest to generate income to solve other problems. The conflicts between them and Fulani herders have caused disarray in their way of living and thwarted their agricultural output. As a result, there is hunger and

starvation in the land since they no longer have enough food to eat, let alone to sell. Everybody is afraid of going to their farms due to fear of being attacked or killed by the nomads, who habitually stay in bushes around the farms, grazing their cattle.

The conflict has affected my family and others greatly. These Fulani herders, their activities are lawless. They have dominated our farmlands and we no longer have farms where we cultivate the food we eat and the ones we sell. Our people are hungry and you can imagine that a cup of garri is hundred naira right now. They have chased away our farmers from the farms. Even the ones we cultivated earlier, their cattle ate them up [**Ebere, F, 55**]

There is a strong feeling of insecurity among the farmers of Amagunze community. Knowing that the herdsman might even attack them at home, they sleep with one eye open and are scared of the slightest movement around their neighborhood. Sometimes, they are even afraid of going to their market to buy food. Elizabeth shared her experience thus:

These days, we stay at home all the time. We lock our doors very early and go to sleep on time. Even in the day, my husband no longer goes to farm because he does not want to be killed. Even to go out and buy food for my children is a big problem [**Elizabeth, F, 39**]

Psychological trauma due to loss of lives and property

Death and bereavement affect the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the bereaved. The herders-farmers clash has claimed lives and wasted properties. These harsh and unprecedented experiences leave the community's farmers quite traumatized. Many of them suddenly lost their loved ones such as spouses, parent (s), children, family friends, and other people that are significant in their lives. As a matter of fact, the death of some of the community members plunged so many older adults into a state of incapacitation, as many of them were depressed, developed one sickness or the other, or started showing signs of mental disturbances. A number of women have fallen victims to rape in their farms. If you do not consent to the sexual harassment, they might just stab or shoot you. Mr. Felix, a farmer in Amagunze community expressed his grievances thus:

They have killed and wounded many people in our farms. I remember the time they killed one guy and it was said that the guy was the only child of his parents. They had killed a lot of people in the farmlands, they keep on killing people. I remember a man they killed, killed his wife and the only daughter they came to farm with. If you are a lady, if they do not kill you, they rape you [**Felix, M, 45**]

A lot of farmers have died in an attempt to resist the Fulani herders from grazing their cattle on their farmlands. Yet, these pastoralists are still living in the community without fear or remorse. Findings also revealed that the farmers of this community live like strangers in their land. The herders order them on what to do and what not to do. From time to time, these herders send threatening messages, notifying the community to get ready as they are coming for them, which leaves the entire community dreading, and some people even flee their homes for that moment. Each time they have a clash with the youth, they send threats to the community members, and actually launch an attack on them "there was a time we ran to the neighboring community and stayed

there for some days” [Okafor, M, 50]. Still expressing the unrest and persistent attacks, which make the community members run away from their homes, Leonard shared his plight

It makes me angry that as a man I am, I run away from my father’s house because of another man. Not once, not twice, sometimes I run to my friends’ place and stay there like a homeless person. It makes me want to cry but I must save my life o [Leonard, M, 35].

Addressing the problem

The present conflicts demand urgent attention. Sustainable efforts are not made to curtail it, more lives will be wasted and property destroyed. We sought to know from the participants what they think can be done to return peace and serenity in their community, and there where diverse opinions and ideas. To some, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should ban the herders from grazing in their community while others held that the herders should be strictly restricted to grazing in the bushes and not in farms. Yet, others think that laws should be enacted to guide grazing in the whole of Enugu State, and Nigeria in its entirety. However, since findings have shown that the conflict has drastic effects on the farmers, the situation has to be given serious and urgent attention so as to spare lives and property.

What I think should be done is that local government authorities and the rulers of our community should gather and discuss peace, and bring rules to guide this cattle rearing of a thing. They should call on the government to come and help us all [Uche, F, 40].

A male respondent made a suggestion on what could be done thus:

The government should compensate those families that their members were killed. Most importantly, the leaders and chairmen should make anti-grazing rules that will manage the way these Fulani people go about with their cattle. There should be boundaries they should not cross [Ikeeme, M, 45].

One good measure to minimize this conflict is the enactment of policies that will help specify what the herders and farmers should do and should not do. If policies already exist in this regard, efforts should be made to ensure they are duly implemented. Attention should be paid to the weapons these herders carry about. Wielding machetes is part of their culture but cultures should not actually be used against other cultures. The caliber of riffles these people carry about is scary. One would wonder what Fulani herders would be doing with such dangerous guns, and even where they got it from in the first place. A couple of years ago, it was confirmed by the Enugu State army that the caliber of rifle found in possession of a 17-year-old Fulani herder cannot even be found in the Nigerian army’s arsenal of weapons. If nothing is done about these weapons, they might kill all the community members, given that they are fortified and formidable. As noted by one of the community members; “the government should do something about these cutlasses they carry. They have guns, very big guns. I don’t know when herdsman have turned to soldiers or police” [Ejike, M, 35].

Discussion

This study examined the views of 15 farmers in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu state, on the impacts of the crisis between community members and the Fulani herders, aimed at contributing to the already existing body of knowledge and literature on herders-farmers conflicts in Enugu State and in Nigeria at large, and standing as the first empirical study carried out to unravel the effects of these crises on communities in Nkanu East. Data collected from the in-depth interviews we conducted revealed after analysis that these communities suffer hunger and starvation due to decreased agricultural production for food and income (Anderson, Marita, Musiime, & Thiam, 2017).

The community members cannot sustain themselves with their present agricultural outputs, and neither have the money to buy food to augment the little they have, this is because the lawless activities of these herders have gotten to the extent that farmers in the community no longer go to farms due to their constant clash between them and these migrant armed Fulani cattle nomads. It is a situation where these nomads lead their cattle to graze in the farms, thus destroying all their farmlands and this has resulted in decreased productivity and high cost of agricultural produce. Consequently, community members are left at the mercy of hunger and starvation. Studies by Fayinka (2004); Awotokun et al., (2020) and Chukwuma and Ateli (2014) are consistent with our findings on the socio-economic (hunger and starvation) impact of Fulani herders-farmers conflict on commuters.

It was equally discovered that a lot of persons have been killed since the onset of the crisis. Many families had lost their fathers, mothers, children, or external relations. It has resulted to incessant killings and wanton destruction of properties that had left community members shattered (Ajibefun, 2018; Campbell, 2018; Ilo, et al., 2019; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2017). The attack on the Okapi Nimbo community is exemplified by this. On April 25, 2016, after midnight, a party of Fulani herders numbering around 500 individuals stormed Okapi Nimbo community in Enugu state's Uzo-Uwani Local Government and killed over 46 people while destroying over 11 houses (Igata, 2016). The bloodshed has had a drastic effect on the mental health of the community at large, especially rural farmers whose only source of livelihood is farming. The maiming and annihilation of community people had left many families traumatized, and there is the danger of such trauma deteriorating to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Morina, Akhtor, Barth, & Schnyder, 2018). The psychological trauma the community members suffer does not just result from the killings. The wanton loss of property, with no hope of having then replaced equally threatened the psychological wellbeing of the community farmers (Ogundipe & Oluwole, 2016; Suleiman & Ja'afar-furo, 2010; Kyari, 2017). The community members feel so insecure and are afraid of going about their daily businesses. Many people are afraid of buying and selling in the local markets as nobody knows when the herders would attack. This has affected the overall psychological, social, religious, and economic lives of the community members to a great negative extent.

To address the problem, we highly recommend that collective efforts must be made by the community members and the Federal Government. The traditional stakeholders must make efforts to ensure that the Federal government is aware of these tragic events,

and not just be aware but device measures to put an end to it. Policies should be implemented and physical force should be used on the Fulani herders when necessary, especially when they attack the farmers.

Implications for social work practice

The social work profession has a place in ameliorating this crisis that claimed lives and wasted property. This study found that one of the major impacts of the conflict on the farmers is the psychological trauma and feeling of insecurity that results from persistent bloodshed and unrest emanating from the conflict. Professional social workers are trained and skilled in providing emotional support to persons experiencing shock (General Council of Social Work, 2014; International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2016). Social workers can provide psychotherapy to the farmers in Amagunze community. Based on the profession's knowledge of group dynamics and processes, the findings of the study are indicative that there is a need for social workers to be actively engaged in group work with these local farmers, to help them overcome their psychological challenges.

The study equally recommends social work support services for these farmers; media activism is needed to notify the government of Nigeria of the plight of these farming communities in Nkanu East. Although some persons take to social media, mass media and even print media to announce deaths and destructions resulting from these crises, a body of professionals like the social work profession needed to engage tirelessly in media publicity to speak on behalf of these vulnerable populations (Kelly, 2014). Though the social work profession is yet to gain legal recognition in Nigeria (Okoye, 2013), the government of the country should at least take a conscious look at the situation of the people when professional social workers speak.

The impacts of the crisis as revealed in this study make it obvious that anti-crazing policies are needed to curtail the killings, secure property, and restore serenity in Nkanu East. In line with the major purpose of the social work profession, social workers are concerned with influencing and promoting policies that are favorable to the aspirations of individuals (IASSW & IFSW, 2016). Social workers should work towards influencing anti-grazing policies to ensure that the interest of both the Fulani herders and the rural farmers are protected. Social workers can advocate (Mayer, 2013) for policies that specify a win-win situation for both parties, such that cattle are grazed, but not at the expense of the farmers' agricultural products. Social workers can network with the grass-root government of this local government area to see to the promulgation of local policy guidelines, endorsed by the state, which would strike a balance between farming and grazing in their communities. Additionally, social workers in mediation and conflict resolution are trained in identifying and underlying interests, developing resources and generating options or alternatives (Kelly, 2014).

Conclusion

This study has examined the impacts of the farmers-herders conflicts on farming communities in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State. The study found that the herdsmen and farmers' conflict has drastic effects on the farmers and the community at large. Just as many participants lamented, the study found that persistent unrest has brought about hunger and starvation among the people. This is because the

Fulani herders have taken over major lands, and had left the farmers with no land to cultivate. Even the little they manage to cultivate are either eaten up or destroyed by the cattle.

It was equally revealed that the loss of lives and property has caused many of the community members, especially the older adults some emotional and psychological trauma. The sudden and violent killings of loved ones that the community members experience often, encroach on their mental wellbeing and has placed many of them at a high risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Enugu State is a part of Nigeria that is not used to violence and constant bloodshed, so, the sudden experience of a huge crisis left many of these communities traumatized. Yet, part of the consequences of the conflict discovered in this present study is a strong sign of insecurity in the communities and among the farmers.

However, it must be noted that this study experienced some limitations. The sample size of the study (n=15) may not be a true representation of the entire population of farmers in these communities, but because people were not very willing to participate due to the current insecurity they are experiencing, and because the researchers were also being careful of their movements since they were in a conflict zone, the 15 participants were utilized. Besides, because this is a qualitative study that was not designed to generalize but to get in-depth views on the subject matter, we adopted a standard methodology to conduct the study, such that there were no predetermined findings and the focus was not on generalization.

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