

The Role Of Traditional Rulers In Curbing Farmer Herder Conflict In Ukum Local Government Area Of Benue State, 2011-2023

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Abstract

This study interrogates the role of traditional rulers in the management of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue state, 2011-2023 with the aim of unfolding the persistent incursion on the farming communities of Ukum LGA by the herders and the task of traditional rulers in managing it. Using Eco violence theory the study explained the inextricable link between the environment and violent conflicts between the herders and farmers in Ukum LGA. The study used the descriptive survey design. Qualitative method of data collection was adopted and the instruments for data collection were key informant interview and focus group discussion. The secondary data were gathered from text books, and journals. The method of data analysis was the explorative as the data were descriptions, accounts and experiences or feelings of the respondents. The study found that the nature of farmer herder crisis is the conflict between the economic activities of human beings for survival and the effect of the survival on the ecosystem.. the effect is the intolerable experience the indigenes are passing through as the idle youths have turned the conflict as a means of livelihood. Though the traditional rulers have been trying to curb the situation, there are challenges that are rooted in politics. The study concludes that government must be careful in selecting the traditional rulers and give them a free hand in managing the affairs of their communities. The study recommends majorly that Government must embrace the modern system of livestock farming to reduce competition over scarce environmental resources.

Date of Submission: 28-08-2024

Date of Acceptance: 08-09-2024

I. Introduction

The return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 was greeted with a lot of challenges prominent of which is the security ranging from election violence, inter-communal/inter-ethnic clashes, disputes over land, boundary conflicts between indigenous people and settlers, communal and ethno-religious clashes. The highest recorded number of security challenges in the last decade however, was due to the Boko Haram insurgency in the north-eastern part of the country, banditry and kidnapping in the northwest, resource-based conflict in the south-south, identity-based conflict in the southeast and farmer-herder crisis in the southwest and particularly in the north-central geopolitical regions of the country (Apinean, 2023).

These skirmishes create politically volatile environments difficult for exploiting the agricultural production and investment potential. This is particular of the farmer herder crisis as it cuts across all regions. Effort to curb the incursion has degenerated to more violence as the local militia that has been formed by the victims to deter the attacks turned the whole exercise into a business venture by arresting and marketing the herds of cattle thus creating tension for the local communities on two fronts- from the herders because of their invasion and the trigger from the militias whenever they steal cattle from the herders. In a number of cases however the Fulani cattle rustlers negotiate with the indigenous militia to sell the cattle on their behalf which creates tension for the unsuspecting farmers and herders.

Several studies have analysed the impacts of these crises and unstable political climate on the various sectors of an economy. For example Kwaja and Ademola- Adelehin, (2018) estimated that during periods of conflicts agricultural production drops an average of 12.3 per cent each year. The conflicts which were low

intensity skirmishes have however taken new dimensions for more than a decade now as they have increased in numbers and intensity. According to Abu (2019, p.9) “The reasons for the conflict are not far-fetched and the scramble for pasture and water against a shrinking ecosystem”. The socio-economic upheavals cause by the security issues arising from clashes between herdsmen and crop farmers are unnecessary, if we properly modernize agriculture and adopt best practice these clashes will ease. It is noted that Benue is an agrarian state with over seventy per cent of her population living in the rural areas who are engaged in agriculture to feed the nation. Again, it is utterly impossible for Nigeria to feed the growing population without subsidising the agricultural sector. This implies that protecting the agricultural sector should be at the core of every government. Benue state is not an exception as governments have been making efforts to support the sector to strive. Agricultural improvement experts have argue that what Nigeria achieved in the area of food production may suffer a great setback in the near future setting in food insecurity incomparable to the present situation if the crisis is not controlled (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014).

In Benue State, what started in 2008 in Gwer west and Guma local governments of the State as displacement as a result of violent attack on the farming communities by the herdsmen spread to Makurdi, Katsina-Ala, Kwande, Logo, Ukum, Tarka and Buruku. Other local government areas of the State that have been affected include; Agatu, Okpokwu and Gwer East (Apinean, 2023). In reaction to the increasing crisis and mass killings occasioned by the seasonal pastoral movements, the government embarked on the enactment of Open Grazing Prohibition and Cattle Ranching Law in 2017 (Kwaja & Ademola- Adelehin, 2018; Alli, 2018). Again, traditional institution has been engaged to resolve these conflicts. Those attempts have not been able to quell the incessant crises between farmers and herdsmen. It is in the light of the above that this paper tries to assess traditional institution’s role in the management of the farmer herder conflict in Ukum local government area as to why it has persisted over time. Ornstein and Ganzer (1997, p 33) maintains that traditional “culture, in turn, influences the social, governmental, and hierarchical structures of society which, in turn, influence the individual and a people’s day-to-day activities” To prosecute this topic, the paper is divided into sections beginning with the on-going introduction while section two is the literature review and theoretical framework. Section three discusses the methodology and section four focuses on the discussion of findings. While section five draws the conclusions and section six the recommendations.

Statement of the Problem

The farmer herder conflict has caused a lot of problem to the people of Benue state most especially to the farming communities who are the largest group of people in the state and whose occupation provide food for the state and beyond. This has affected virtually all sectors of life as schools are closed down in many rural areas as the inhabitants are displaced from their ancestral homes and their livelihood destroyed. There is high level of insecurity and high cost of living as food production is reduced.

To curb the menace, government at all levels and other stakeholders like the civil society organisations, traditional institution, the youths and politicians among others have been making efforts to manage the conflict. The security forces have been deployed to repel the attacks, local security outfits have been set up by the state government to protect and report advances by the invaders, meetings have been called by the traditional institutions and politicians to discuss the peace process and to cap it up a law banning open grazing has been enacted. Yet, the conflict persists attracting the attention of scholars to unravel the way out of the problem. For instance, Agbese (2019) advanced the impacts of farmer herder crisis and why the conflict persists identifying the role of government, Vanger and Nwosu (2020) identified the institutional arrangements perpetrating the crisis with no focus on traditional institution, Apinean and Gever (2020) probed the causes of farmer herder crisis but do not appreciate the role of traditional institution among others. This study interrogates the role of traditional institution in managing the farmer herder conflict in Benue state with a focus on Ukum local government area.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were as follows:

- i. To identify the causes of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area.
- ii. To outline the effects of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area.
- iii. To analyse the role of traditional rulers in curbing farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area.
- iv. To explain the challenges of traditional rulers in managing farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- i. What are the causes of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area?
- ii. What are the effects of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area?

- iii. What is the role of traditional rulers in curbing farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area?
- iv. What are the challenges of traditional rulers in managing farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area?

Significance of the Study

This study will be significant to the Benue state government as it will help in charting a path of conflict management especially by engaging the traditional rulers and allowing them a free hand without interference by individual interest from the stakeholders. It will also be of benefit to the traditional institution to step up their duty and respect their stool against all odds and avoid politicking in order to be neutral to uphold the demands of the institution.

II. Literature Review

The nature of the farmer herder conflict especially in Nigeria has its origin from the environment. According to Francis (2006, p. 20) "conflict is defined as the pursuit of incompatible interest and goals by incompatible groups. The unavoidable natural dynamics of the eco-system regulates the activities of rustic and sedentary production process. The availability of fertile land attracts the attention of both farmers and herders for agricultural production and; deteriorating and unfavourable climatic conditions such as desert encroachment, deforestation, water shortage and population growth, singularly or in combination induce movement of groups and migrant groups in particular, often triggering conflicts when they advance to new areas (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Genyi, 2014). In Nigeria, North-East and North-West have over the years suffered loss of water as a result of drought which hampered grazing activities of the herders. This scarcity of water in the northern part of Nigeria prompted the movement of herders South ward. Thus, has always reinforced ecological scarcity and entailed unhealthy competition among groups and, hence the contemporary armed conflict between the farmers and the herders.

Changes in climatic conditions led to a drop in rainfall, increase in drought, desertification and land degradation (Okoli & Atelhe 2014). This led to prolonged inclement weather in the far-northern regions of Nigeria, which made the herding season to now become an all year-round activity. The herdsman leave with their cattle and do not return according to season. As the rains dried up in the far-northern areas of the country, different herding groups continued to spread out further in the north-central parts of the country. Others found their way to different parts of southern Nigeria. This increased presence of the herders and their cattle in the hitherto non-pastoral areas of the country has produced wide-ranging conflicts in the areas. The nature of conflict between farmers and herders was largely seasonal as the cows move in large numbers; they sometimes trample on the farmers' crops. According to Bello (2013) herders move in columns of about five meters wide and two kilometres long with an ensued tendency to stray into a crop farm

Also population growth became a factor in the nature of the conflict between farmers and herders. With the increase in the population of both farmers and herders led to a corresponding increase in the size of farm land for cultivation for personal consumption and for commercial purposes. The herders also had to increase the number of their herds to attend to their survival needs which required more space for grazing. This arrangement brought pressure on the land that has been fixed or at most reduced by climate. Closely following this is the the development projects that has put a lot of pressure on land. With the increase in population there has been an increase in facilities like residential houses and infrastructures like roads, schools, hospitals and commercial buildings which according to Olayoku (2014) has resulted to scramble for crop farming and grazing space in almost all the states of the federation including the Federal capital Territory.

The above development has also altered the nature of conflict from being seasonal to a constant and regular phenomenon. This is because the core concern of the herders has become the occupation of any available land and permanently control it even outside their states of origin and no notice has ever been taken on the fact that no farmer can move and occupy a farm land outside his state against the wishes of the indigenes in the name of freedom of movement. A singular protest by an indigenous farmer usually prompt crisis leading to killing and destruction of properties as has happened in Benue, Kogi, Niger, Nassarawa, Ondo, Oyo, Cross River, Abia, Imo, Enugu, Anambra among others (Obaji, 2016).

At this point it has become the struggle for livelihood with no end in sight as neither the farmers who have moved away from seasonal farming to all year round farming to prevent food insecurity and in its place supply enough food at affordable prices nor the herders could survive without their daily chores in as much as there are more killings and destructions on either side of the divide. To prosecute their survival, both sides resort to self-help by hiring and equipping their legionnaires for protection and the fact that those mercenaries are not professionally trained, their actions have changed the nature of the conflict slightly into cattle rustling. This is essentially the stealing of cattle by outsiders which hitherto has been a predominant problem in the far north that pushed some herders to scamper to other parts of the country for safety (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). In the course of prosecuting their assignment, the mercenaries indulge into stealing cattle for sale at a cheaper

rate. For instance, when the farmers' militia run into a herd of cattle they make away with the number they can afford in the same way the herders' militia would rustle the cows from the herders. This has been successful as they have agents who were bringing ready buyers for them. However, anytime cattle are rustled the herders accuse the farmers and come for retaliation which usually resort to killing of many farmers and destroying properties especially in the area where such cattle were rustled (Apinean, 2023). For instance the attack on Agatu community of Benue State in 2016 among several other attacks in southern Kaduna and Plateau has been retaliatory attacks owing to cattle rustling (Obaji, 2016).

The effects of these crises are vast cutting across insecurity, hunger economic instability among others. The conflict between farmers and herders has brought a lot hardship to the citizens. For example, "the herders attack on the Agatu community of Benue State in March 2016 alone claimed the lives of over 300 inhabitants" (Olaniyan & Yahaya 2016 p.101). Obaji, (2016) avers herders' attacks on farmers claimed 6,000 lives between 2010 and 2016. Related to the above is the effect of displacement as over thousands of people have been displaced from their homes in Benue state. Ofem & Inyang (2014, p.517) stated that "some people become widows, widowers and orphans during the conflicts, while other victims of the conflict are maimed or injured".

Theoretical Framework: Homer-Dixon's Eco- violence Theory

The link between ecological or environmental resources and conflicts has engaged the mind of many scholars as Collier and Hoeffler (1998), Baechler (1998), Homer-Dixon (1999) and Genyi (2014). These scholars in their separate researches, attempt to link violent conflicts to ecological factors such as global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, pollution, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, water shortage, and degradation. Against this background, Homer-Dixon (1999) articulated the ecological violence theory, which generally seeks to explain the inextricable link between the environment or ecology and violent conflicts. The theory has two major strands: the "Shrinking Resource Pie" and the "Honey Pot". The former maintains that a "shrinking resource pie" is supposedly fueling violent civil conflict by aggravating strained social relations (Homer-Dixon, 2000). The latter, however, argues that an abundance, not scarcity of natural resources spawn conflict by providing a "honey pot" over which to fight. (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998). For the purpose of this study, the shrinking resource pie variant of the eco-violence theory will be used.

The underlying theoretical assumption of the theory is that "resource scarcity is the product of an insufficient supply, too much demand or an unequal distribution of a resource that forces some sector of a society into a condition of deprivation" (Onuoha, 2010, p.42) which in turn, trigger off violent clashes. Clearly, from the arguments of ecoviolence scholars, the theory identifies three types of environmental scarcity as follows:

- (i) Supply-induced scarcity: It results from degradation and depletion of an environmental resource such as an erosion of cropland;
- (ii) Demand-induced scarcity: It is caused by population growth within a region or increased per capita consumption of a resource;
- (iii) Structural scarcity: It arises from an unequal social distribution of a resource that concentrates it in the hands of relatively few people at the expense of the vulnerable majority.

These three sources of scarcity are in turn, caused by variables such as population growth, economic development and pollution (Onuoha, 2010). Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998) argue that two patterns of interactions among these three types of scarcity are common namely: (a) resource capture and (b) ecological marginalisation. Whereas, the former has a direct effect on conflicts and violence, the latter indirectly affected violent conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Resource capture occurs when increased consumption of a resource combines with its degradation as well as depletion forces powerful groups (elites) to corner resources distribution in their favour, while subjecting the powerless (masses) to scarcity. Ecological marginalisation occurs when increased consumption of a resource combines with structural inequalities in distribution, thus, denying the weaker groups access to the resource and in turn, forcing them to migrate to ecologically fragile regions that subsequently become degraded. This is what Homer-Dixon (2000) termed "ingenuity gap" that develops within poor countries because of scarcity. He argues that the lack of ingenuity apparently prevents economic and institutional change, which is required in turn to overcome the debilitating effects of environmental scarcity.

The theory further holds that environmental resource scarcity and its interactions produce several common social effects, including lower agricultural production, further inducing disruption of economic livelihoods, hunger, poverty, migrations, and weakened institutions (Homer-Dixon, 2000). Migration can occur either because the environmental quality of a habitat has become uninhabitable/unliveable or, more commonly, because the migrant's economic outcome is likely to be better in areas with greater resource availability.

The crux of the ecological theory is that competition over environmental scarce resource in the face of growing population and degradation as well as depletion provokes or is likely to precipitate violent conflict. This assumption is relevant to the study since it has focused on the issues which connect with those of the

violent conflict between the farmers and herders in Nigeria. To sum up, therefore, the Homer-Dixon's ecoviolence theory has made a significant contribution to this paper by establishing an inextricable link between ecological cum environmental resources and violence, demonstrating clearly that shrinking of these resources will trigger off conflicts. The theory's postulation that "decreases in the quality and quantity of renewable resources, population growth, and unequal resource access act singly or in various combinations to increase the scarcity, for certain population groups of cropland, water, forests, and fish... (Homer-Dixon 1999, p.30).

III. Methodology

The study used the descriptive survey design. The population of the study was derived from eight council wards in Ukum local government area namely: Uyam, Tyuluv, Ugbaam, Kundav, Borikyo, Torov, Kendev and Tsaav council wards. Using purposive sampling as the instrument of non-probability sampling technique, forty respondents were selected, five each from a council ward. The characteristics of the respondents were traditional rulers, farmers, Civil Society Organisations, Government officials and politicians. Qualitative method of data collection was adopted and the instruments for data collection were key informant interview through face to face and telephone discussion as well as focus group discussion. The secondary data were gathered from text books, and journals. The method of data analysis was the explorative as the data were descriptions, accounts and experiences or feelings of the respondents.

IV. Discussion Of Findings

Based on the data gathered from the field, the findings are presented below.

The nature of farmer herder crisis in Ukum LGA

The conflict history generally has been ecological in nature and represents a common crisis to humanity. According to Bakut (2006) ecology has been a relatively constant background factor in conflict. This ecology gives rise to how long a dry season or wet season will last. As the population of Ukum increases over time, there has been a corresponding increase in the socio-economic activities of the people, but for the lack of government policy on dry season to manage the ecology, crops like cassava survive the dry season. It is also clear that grazing activities are also not modernized and both the government and the herders have not shown interest in transforming livestock grazing.

The activities of both crop farmers and livestock reeler have a cause and effect relationship in each of their attempt to survive. By implication the nature of farmer herder crisis is the conflict between the economic activities of human beings for survival and the effect of the survival on the ecosystem. For instance, the long dry season and the desertification in the far northern Nigeria have reduced the space and period of grazing in the area resorting to the pursuit of space in the Benue valley where Ukum happens to be located.

The indigenes of Ukum were known to be friendly with the Fulani herders who use to come during dry season and usually go back when the rain sets in even though they share no borders with the Fulani tribe. The fact that the land is very fertile for crop farming it also grows the bushes the livestock farmers need for grazing the relationship between the visiting herders was cordial with their hosts the crop farmers who used to give the herders yams, dry cassava in exchange for cow milk and sometimes when their cow die the herders will give the dead cows to community elders where they graze their cattle (focused group discussion on 14th April, 2024). As the population started growing and poverty as a result of poor government policies, attention was directed to the land as an economic activity for survival The erstwhile relationship between the two groups was fast becoming monetize as the herders could not just graze on a piece of land without first paying homage to the community leader which to the Fulani herder was explained as payment for the grazing land from the gifts they usually present to the community leader though not explicitly explained to the leader the intention of the gifts. The activities of the herders started going beyond mere grazing to strangling into crop farms though, there was no conflict of high magnitude, there were little skirmishes especially when the herds strangled into the farm while they are grazing (Interview on 16th April, 2024).

The continued increase in population with increased economic activities, the space has reduced as there are more famers trying to earn a living at the same time, the herders have also increased their herds bringing about competition for the available space for farming activities and grazing. The natives who are famers have nowhere to go and have to resist the intruding Fulani herders who are insisting they must graze on the farm land. This led to the crisis that engulfed the area over time and to tame the tide of this conflict the government of Benue state enacted the law prohibiting open grazing in Benue state (focused group discussion on 16th April, 2024). This finding is in tandem with the theoretical assumption of Homer Dixon (2000) that demand-induced scarcity is caused by population growth within a region or increased per capita consumption of a resource that usually resorts to conflict Demand-induced scarcity: It is caused by population growth within a region or increased per capita consumption of a resource that usually resort to conflict.

Effects of farmer herder conflict in Ukum Local Government Area

Benue state is one of the states that suffer from activities of bandit attacks in Nigeria who have been kidnapping and requesting for ransom and the fact that once a conflict erupts, independent dynamics arise from the initial triggers with the perpetrators having so much benefits which they would not wish to lose if the crisis ends. It has become a very serious effect on the lives of the inhabitants of Ukum local government area as the bandits found leverage on the anti-open grazing law by dragging the Fulani herders out of Benue state. Though safe employed, the bandits were charging the local communities some amounts of money as their allowances to protect the locals from the herders. This process of taxing the locals continues even in the raining season when the Fulanis might have left (interview on 27th March, 2024). The Fulani herders often saw the bandits as agents of the farmers such that whenever the bandits attack them at a point, the herders must revenge by attacking the farmers who live around the area that the herders were attacked. This usually results to killing of the innocent farmers and the destruction of properties.

The process of pursuing the herders sometimes leads to arrest of some cattle that strangle into farm crops which are then sold by the bandits and the proceeds used for their upkeep. Sometimes it may be conspiracy between the banditry and Fulani cattle rustlers who rustle the cattle from the Fulani herders and give to the bandits who sell the cows to the unsuspecting buyers and share the money with the Fulani cattle rustlers. Unknown to the Fulani herders, they come and attack the villagers claiming villagers have stolen their cattle (interview on 27th March, 2024). This has given rise to an un-ending conflict between the herders and the farmers as it has become a source of income for the bandits and Fulani cattle rustlers. According to a respondent in an interview at Kyado on 19th March, 2024:

The bandits have found a source of revenue through taxing the rural inhabitants to contribute a certain sum of money to give them before any person can cultivate on the land they have been protecting. The sharing formula usually gives rise to disagreements among the bandits and the possible breakout. Right now there are many divisions among them fighting to take control of the bandits' leadership, the recent killings and destruction of properties in Torov council ward was not a pure farmer/herder crisis but a struggle for leadership among the bandits in Ukum local government area who invited the Fulani herders to help them weaken the stronghold of the opponent.

The Fulani herders were happy to use the opportunity to graze and possibly take over the land from the natives by such invitation. As the tussle ensued according to the focused group discussants on 29th April, 2024:

The leader of one of the group collected money from the Fulani herders and leased out the territory under the control of his opponent to the Fulanis to graze on all the crops. This was an arsenal to weaken the opponent who reacted by arresting four Fulani herders and sixty-one cows. When ransom was paid, only two herdsman were released. The Fulanis who were angered by this attack mobilised with the group that leased the land to them for retaliation. Though, a farmer herder attack, it was more of a third party conflict.

It should be noted that the government of Benue state is fighting bandits and the bandits are also making efforts to frustrate the government so they have been leasing land to the herders and standing behind them to graze freely on anything they see. This is most especially in Ukum and Katsina-Ala local government areas.

The interviews with the traditional rulers at various points on the matter indicated their subjects can neither cultivate their crops nor sleep with their families as their ancestral homes are destroyed and the aged as well as the younger ones are camping without food in schools, churches and dilapidated shops and market stalls. With this large chunk of the displaced idling around with nothing at sight to engage in to eke-out a living, the vulnerability of women and girls has been exacerbated by the sustainability of the predisposing conditions.

It is clear that farmers have been displaced and dispossessed of their farms by armed herdsman. In most of the rural communities that the herders invaded and caused forceful displacement, such communities have been taken-over by the herdsman, with land and other assets of the displaced under the invaders seizure. There are cases where the Fulani herders have not only occupied the natives' homes and are feeding on their food stuff with their cattle, they have also taken the natives' wives and daughters to be cooking for them and the natives cannot complain as the bandits are behind such dastard acts (interview on 4th April, 2024). As long as the land keeps producing green vegetation (which is the main reason for the invasion), the herders are not willing to evacuate from these communities. This has made it hard for the indigenes to return back to their ancestral homes, even at places that the attacks have been relatively brought under control by the security forces. A student in a focused group discussion on 23 March, 2024 said "I lost my father in the attack after we fled the invasion; he went to see if there is a way to get food from our farm only to be killed by the invaders who are staying in our own houses. The herders are using our houses for accommodation and feeding on our farms with their livestock the last attack on Gbagir community claimed not less than fifty-six lives. Imagine how a Fulani herder is able to draw a boundary line between Kendev and Torov council wards in Ukum LGA and be ordering the people to demarcate the councils by tying pieces of red clothes on the rope separating them from their enemies". This effect has been confirmed by researchers on farmer herder crisis like Ajibefun,

(2018), Okoli & Atelhe (2014). The theory further holds that environmental resource scarcity and its interactions produce several common social effects, including lower agricultural production, further inducing disruption of economic livelihoods, hunger, poverty, migrations, and weakened institutions (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

Attempts to manage the conflict

The devastating effects of the conflict prompted the government, civil society organisation and the traditional institutions to resolve it. For instance, government has been engaging both the farmers and the herders on a round table discussion to find solution to the menace. The security has always been deployed to quell the crisis and amnesty has been given to the bandits on many occasions. The long lasting solution was the promulgation of a law banning open grazing and encouraging ranching in Benue state.

The traditional rulers have been engaged at different levels to identify the bandits and talk to them to know their demands with the aim of arriving at a consensus on resolving their differences which will further resolve the farmer herder conflict. According to the respondents in an interview at Uyam the bandits compelled the traditional rulers to tax their subjects and pay them a certain amount of money before they will lay down their arms. All these have not achieved good result.

The civil society organisations have also mobilized the communities at the instance of traditional rulers where they call on the bandits to come out of their hidings and embrace peace so as to bring about development. The government in conjunction with the traditional rulers and the civil society organisations have set up security outfits like the Hunters association and the Community Volunteer Guards whose membership are drawn from those who accepted the amnesty offered by the traditional rulers in all the communities and the community heads agree with them. Those volunteer guards have been equipped with sharp cutlasses to apprehend and arrest the bandits and their informants as well as destroy their hide outs. Prayers have been organised by the religious bodies in the area to seek God's face on how to end the conflict for a peaceful coexistence. The traditional rulers administered the *Swem* deity, the supreme sacred power of the Tiv tradition that is believed to bring bad luck, punishment and even death to those that go against its pronouncements.

In some places the traditional rulers have directed that shops where gin of any brand is being sold be closed down to prevent the bandits and their informants who come on the pretext of relaxing but with a motive to gather information and prepare for further attack. This has prevented the youths from gathering unnecessary in those areas prone to attacks (Interview on 23rd March, 2023). The traditional rulers have also called on the stakeholders especially the politicians to chart a way forward on how to end the conflict.

Challenges in Conflict Management

The facts that the livelihoods of the people have been affected seriously by these conflicts; the aforementioned attempts have been put forward to find a lasting solution to the problems. As lofty as the attempts appears, they are not without challenges. One of the major challenges is conflict prevention that involves the explanations of the causal mechanism by which the particular case evolve into a conflict situation. The challenge of conflict prevention in Ukum LGA revolves around insecurity. There is the proliferation of small arms into the hands of private individuals with the zeal for their own protection which has resorted into heightened insecurity for the indigenes and the state. For instance, the traditional rulers who are bent on resolving the conflict are not safe. Those rulers live in communities that bandits and herdsmen are terrorising and for them to declare authoritatively their decision on the bandits in public may mean they will not sleep with their two eyes closed in their houses if at all they are able to access their hideouts without being kidnapped or killed. For instance some traditional rulers in Ukum cannot go to their places now because of the open declaration of their decision to see that all those who engage in the bad act under their watch will not have luck as they will be arrested and possibly killed. To worsen the situation some traditional rulers were accused of either having ties to the Fulani herders or the bandits and cannot come up openly to denounce their action. Again, the Tiv Traditional Council condemned its own tradition and cultural belief by speaking against the use of *Swem* as a means of ending violent conflict in Ukum LGA thus rendering it ineffectual (interview on 23rd March, 2024).

Perception of the actors in the conflict also has been a challenge as the assumed situation is most times more effective than reality. Fear of the unknown has been the cause of many conflict in Ukum LGA as each group is prepared to strike first thinking that before the opponent prepares for a reprisal government action might have prevented it. But most times reprisals are more cruel leading to high tension conflict situation. Though the Volunteer Guards are willing to do their jobs but the fact that they are not well equipped compared to the bandits who have sophisticated weapons. Most of the Volunteer guards lost their lives in the cause of fighting the criminals. Some of the killings were avoidable if the Volunteer Guards were well equipped. This has discouraged a good number of them and has withdrawn from the exercise which is another threat to the guards as they may have exposed the secrets to the bandits. The fact however remains that the Volunteer guards

were directly selected by the traditional rulers and they give the traditional rulers privilege information on the security situation in their localities which the traditional rulers advise the government appropriately.

However, the lack of institutional capacity of the traditional rulers, climate of mistrust among politicians that is characterised by suspicion among political actors usually creates hostilities among their subjects who eat from the “goodwill” of their masters. When this happens, the institutional capacity of the traditional institution is weakened. In most cases some traditional rulers cannot call neither the politicians nor the bandits to order because they were part of the system so they are afraid the bandits will expose them. The grievances arising as a result of the denial of access especially critical resources in most cases, political and economic can be harmonized by the traditional institution. In this case political and economic resources are critical as both farmers and herders scramble for land while politicians use this avenue to out win their opponents without consulting the traditional rulers who should be making attempts to fight sources of insecurity, inequality and discourage the combatant group to pave way for peaceful settlement of disputes.

The above trend rendered the role of traditional rulers on early warning which is done by collecting and analysing information together with the sole aim to discover the trends of an emerging crisis before it explode into full conflict with the help of civil society organisation, youth, security apparatus and the politicians. These are usually based on political indicators which are the dynamics of political actors, political institutions in terms of their processes regarding inclusivity or exclusivity in decision making. Politicians in Ukum generally are no performers and are not prepared to have competitors because they have no achievement to speak for them. Thus, they plant the thugs whom they use against anybody standing on the way of the leaders. Those thugs are given arms and ammunition to silence anyone that would want to oppose their boss. This has become the trend for any one that wants to have a say in the affairs of the council.

Again, the economic indicators like the cost of living, unemployment, scarcities especially of critical resources as a result of the population growth and the need for survival is very critical in Ukum LGA. The local government has a vast population and since there are no companies to take care of the youth population, survival of the fittest has become the norm and conflict is a sure way for the youth to use their pranks for survival.

The general challenge raised by a good number of interviewees and the focus group discussants’ has been that the only people to resolve this conflict are the traditional rulers because they live in the communities and culture and tradition has given them the authority to denounce evil in their kingdoms. However, most of the traditional rulers have enmeshed themselves in politics and politicians have connections to the bandits in the bush. As a result they lack the power to talk to the bandits on the other side of the divide as the boys see them as ‘partners in business’. This has given the Fulani herder the guts to declare that until banditry is prosecuted, they cannot stop coming to Benue state because the bandits are the only group the herders respect as they know the terrain better and have sophisticated weapons to repel them.

Despite this, there are traditional rulers with clean hands that can come up to negotiate peace deal with the bandits but the bandits are not willing to come out for any discussion leading to amnesty because politicians who were using them as their instruments to win elections later fall apart with them and the traditional rulers and religious leaders were used by that same government to make a caricature of the amnesty process giving it a death knell in the State. This has rendered the traditional institution’s role in conflict resolution fruitless.

Although, much have been achieved in conflict resolution between the herders and farmers in Ukum LGA. For instance, the early pronouncements by some traditional rulers that they do not want the Fulani herders to graze the cattle within their kingdoms were followed by instructing the youth to repel them whenever the herdsman make advances. Also, many traditional rulers warned their subjects not to collect gifts from the Fulani to avoid what the herders later termed it as payment for grazing land. The government has also been responding to the conflict by sending the security to protect lives and property of the farmers who are always attacked in their native homes and as well enforce the law banning open grazing in the State. The livestock guards and volunteer guards have pushed the Fulani herders to the level their weapons can take them to.

V. Conclusion

The farmer herder conflict in Ukum local government area has over the years caused a lot of destructions to lives and properties. This has left the casualties with a strenuous life ranging from hunger, homelessness and a bleak future for the children. Though attempts have been made to resolve the conflict, concrete solution has not been found because those institutions which are supposed to be at the fore front of resolving the conflict are the bane of conflict resolution. For the traditional institution to effectively manage the farmer herder crisis attention should be directed to the fact that once a conflict erupts, independent dynamics arise from the initial triggers with the perpetrators having so much benefits which they would not wish to lose if the crisis ends. The government must be careful in selecting the traditional rulers and give them a free hand in managing the affairs of their communities.

VI. Recommendations

1. Government must embrace the modern system of livestock farming to reduce competition over scarce environmental resources.
2. Proactive steps should be taken by government to protect life and properties of the indigenes by repelling the attacks.
3. The role of traditional rulers in conflict management should be clearly spelt out in the constitution of the country.
4. Traditional rulers must be neutral and those found wanting must be punished and possibly dethroned.

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