

## Policy pointers

### Interventions to address

conflict involving herders should draw on an up-to-date understanding of pastoral systems and their economic and ecological foundations. Current negative narratives are outdated and should move beyond an assumption of farmer–herder conflict, and engage with the actual dynamics of conflict on the ground.

### Politicians, government

and fieldworkers should recognise pastoralism's value in building more climate-resilient livelihoods and landscapes.

### National and local

authorities must invest in intangible infrastructure, such as traditional institutions and local platforms, where people can voice their positions and be heard, and where situations of conflict can be understood and negotiated.

### Improving local

livelihoods and creating economic opportunities will help restore government legitimacy and the rule of law, especially where vested interests have used resentments to stoke conflict.

## Farmer–herder conflict in Africa: re-thinking the phenomenon?

Since 2012, the West African Sahel has been drawn into a spiral of ever-growing violence, fuelled by jihadist groups and long-standing resentments amongst rural people. The cost in human lives lost, people displaced and military operations is vast. The media, policy and academic circles increasingly blame ‘farmer–herder conflict’, but neither recent history nor surveys of armed violence actually support this simplification. Pastoralism is seen as disruptive and backward, fighting an unwinnable battle for scarce resources. Yet in truth it is an under-valued adaptation to variability that can make livelihoods and landscapes more climate-resilient. Understanding the roots, dynamics and meaning of conflict, providing space for listening and negotiating, and supporting livelihood and economic opportunities are key to mapping out pathways to peace for the whole region. For the large majority of people, these steps would go a long way to restore the state's legitimacy.

Violent conflict is escalating across rural Africa, especially in the West African Sahel. In the 12 months to May 2020, more than 10,000 people died in violence in the five worst affected countries (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Cameroon), up 44% on the previous year. Military operations cost over US\$2 billion a year — an enormous sum that could be better invested in economic development. Analysts have pointed to ‘farmer–herder conflict’ as the root of such crises. Yet, two important international political declarations in 2013, one from the High Level Forum on Pastoralism in the Sahel (the Nouakchott Declaration)<sup>1</sup> and the second on pastoral livestock's contribution to security and development (the N'Djamena Declaration),<sup>2</sup> made no reference to ‘farmer–herder conflict’. Conversely, the N'Djamena Declaration noted

“many mafia-like and terrorist groups” were destabilising the entire region.

‘Farmer–herder conflict’ is often assumed to be a fundamental problem, based on age-old enmity and competition for scarce resources, now aggravated by climate change. But the evidence does not support the view of farming and livestock systems as inescapably opposed. Understanding how different livelihood systems have intertwined, evolved and transformed is key to building new ways of sharing common resources for the whole region (see Box 1 for methodology used).

### A distorting lens

Looking at insecurity and violence in rural sub-Saharan Africa through the lens of ‘farmer–

## *The evidence does not support the view of farming and livestock systems as inescapably opposed*

herder' conflict is overly simplistic and misleading. For a start, the terms 'herder and 'farmer' are not simple, watertight categories. Policy and interventions over decades have encouraged

farmers to acquire their own herds, and herders to settle and turn to crop farming. This has reduced complementarity between the two groups, resulting in new dynamics of competition for land and grazing. This is aggravated

when customary collaborative mechanisms are replaced by new, market-based cash substitutes. For example, herders traditionally exchanged manure and milk for access to crop-residues and water facilities in villages. But that has become monetised, so now herders must pay for both.

The growing insecurity in many rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa relates to very diverse geographic and political settings. Neither local specificities nor broader political and economic processes are adequately captured by looking through the lens of 'farmer–herder conflict'. Historical legacies, institutional failures to prevent or resolve conflicts, cultural differences between communities, and failing networks of traditional interdependence all play their part. Many areas have also suffered long-term neglect by government, and lack access to health and education services. Both herders' and farmers' livelihoods have been damaged by governments taking grazing and farmland for commercial agriculture, irrigation schemes and large dam projects.

### **A cooperative history undermined**

The common assumption that farmers and herders have inescapable clashing identities and compete fiercely for resources misses a history of cooperation. In many parts of Africa there has been strong complementarity

between such groups and forms of land use for generations. It is this complementarity that has been disrupted. For example, animal damage to crops is commonly accepted as **causing** conflict. But it may itself be the **effect** of a previous transgression, such as farmers cutting new fields in grazing areas or along established livestock passages, themselves the consequence of short-sighted or misguided land-tenure policies and poor governance.

Charismatic political leaders and jihadist groups have successfully manipulated ethnic identities and local grievances to mobilise support. For example, in central Mali the radical Fulani cleric Amadou Kouffa has built up a big following from certain Fulani groups who feel excluded from economic and political power. In a number of states in Nigeria, pre-election violence between herders and farmers has been whipped up to generate support for particular candidates.

A largely negative narrative surrounding pastoralism persists in policy circles and many national media, despite decades of research that demonstrates its lack of foundations.<sup>3–6</sup> How government administrations represent rural space in terms of natural resources has affected pastoral and farming systems very differently. Pastoral land use and how regular grazing re-shapes vegetation patterns across the landscape have never received legal recognition, in stark contrast to farming and the rights associated with the marks of the plough and hoe. Government attitudes towards mobile people hold them to be anti-modern (traditional) and associated with disorder (irrational, ecologically disruptive, 'wandering about in search of water and pasture'). By relying on simplistic categories, the term 'farmer–herder conflict' feeds on this toxic legacy.

### **An emphasis not supported by the numbers**

The ACLED data set does not support the recent political emphasis on violent conflict between farmers and herders. While the data show high and rising violence in a few countries, these are overall figures for the whole population. There is no evidence that farmer–herder conflict has grown at a faster rate than other forms of conflict. Indeed, within ACLED's records, the proportion of country-wide incidents and fatalities associated with farmer–herder conflict is often lower than the proportion of pastoralists in the national population. However, when incidents happen, they are often shocking in their brutality and get wide exposure in the media.

The ACLED data also tell us that, while there are significant conflict hotspots at country and

### **Box 1. Methodology**

This briefing draws from a research report *Farmer–Herder Conflict in sub-Saharan Africa?*<sup>15</sup> prepared for the French Development Agency (AFD).<sup>16</sup> It responded to heightened concerns over rising conflict and antagonism between predominantly herding groups and more settled farming peoples across a wide band of semi-arid Africa. Our analysis is based on a combination of sources. Quantitative data for the period 1997–2017 for 16 countries in west, central and east Africa are drawn from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project.<sup>17</sup> We assessed geographical distribution, trends, seasonal peaks, and the frequency of farmer–herder conflict within all violent events recorded in ACLED. Qualitative evidence has been drawn from media reports, government and academic documents, as well as interviews with people professionally engaged with conflict issues.

regional level where unresolved disputes fester, peaceful relationships and cooperation continue over much larger areas. Even within the hotspots, violent conflict is usually punctuated and intermittent, and occurs alongside ongoing cooperation. Most rural conflict is managed peacefully through traditional leaders and local institutions. The current focus on escalating violence overlooks this reality, and therefore precludes the chance of learning from it.

However, the effectiveness of local mechanisms for resolving conflict has been greatly damaged where communities are drawn into a 'war economy' dominated by politicians, commanders and fighters whose interests lie in generating new forms of power, profit and protection, such as smuggling, kidnap and trade in weapons.<sup>7,8</sup>

### Between violence and vilification

In Nigeria, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), there has been a marked increase in violence involving ethnic militia and organised militant groups. Violent conflict has spilled over from these groups into bordering countries, particularly Niger, Cameroon and Burkina Faso. In Nigeria, the conflict generated by Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions in the north-east of the country. In the rest of the country, much of the conflict between herding populations and settled farmers has taken on an ethno-political quality, with the vilification of Fulani herding people by local and national politicians, and both farmers and herders now arming themselves heavily. Four Nigerian states have introduced 'anti-open-grazing laws' which make it illegal for herders to move their cattle from one grazing site to another. Pastoralists who have been living in the country for decades are now represented as alien or illegal immigrants,<sup>9,10</sup> and 'Fulani' has become a category in a classification of terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup>

Data on violent conflict in West Africa today highlight the rising toll of jihadist activities, especially in the region around Lake Chad and the borders between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. But the violence in this region is not about climate change and farmer–herder conflict. Rather, it is a struggle for power between opportunistic Islamist movements and states that, over decades, have been unwilling to meet their obligations to citizens, whether those obligations are a fair judicial system, investment in social services, or access to economic opportunities. Heavy-handed military interventions have aggravated the sense of injustice and grievance at local levels, while the spoils of war provide revenues and status to corrupt politicians and leaders of militant groups.

### Conflict as 'message', not 'noise'

Some anthropologists urge that violent conflict be recognised as an organised action and form of communication.<sup>12,13</sup> This implies the best response would be to build on a participatory approach and to 'Listen, listen, listen'. In other words, politicians and government need to acknowledge the 'meaning' of conflict, rather than representing conflict as an interruption of meaning to which the only possible action is a muscular military response. Perhaps asking 'What do you mean?' offers more mileage than asking 'How do we get this to stop?'

Doing this requires acceptance of instability and variability, and recognition that it is the rule rather than the exception. Government must learn to engage with instability, rather than hoping that some new equilibrium will emerge. In this light, conflict management is not so much about eliminating conflict — which is not possible — as about keeping it within bandwidths of acceptability by **listening and making sense of it.**

### Contradictions between state and customary authority

Confusion between 'customary' and state procedures has created fertile ground for growing conflict. These different power structures (customary institutions such as traditional leaders and village councils, and state institutions such as administrative officials, the police and the judiciary) often have contradictory and inconsistent rules for accessing resources and managing conflict.

Building bridges between these two structures would foster a common understanding and better accountability. Ensuring governments play a constructive impartial role is crucial: there are many good approaches to community engagement in conflict management, but these gains are fragile and at risk of government interference unless a consistent approach is followed.

### Recommendations

Everyone designing and implementing policies and interventions related to 'farmer–herder conflict' should ground their work in a sound, up-to-date understanding of pastoral systems. This should recognise the economic and ecological logic behind mobility, pastoralism's potential complementarity with cropping, and the contribution pastoral livestock make to GDP and exports. Africa's drylands should be understood as regions where variable, but high value, resources can be harvested by mobile livestock keepers, whose expertise also plays a

valuable role in maintaining resilient landscape systems. Such a marriage between resilience and variability is especially relevant given that climate change disruptions are bringing more uncertain rainfall.

The narrative around insecurity and pastoralism needs to change at all levels. Theorists and decision makers must stop representing pastoralism as an unproductive system locked in the past and battling against the odds in a hostile, resource-scarce environment. Instead, drylands need to be seen as an environment in which variability is the rule, and where pastoral systems have specialised to make such variability work for food production. Far from living in the past, pastoralists are amongst the most avid adopters of new technology, such as solar panels and mobile phones.

Government and administrators must shift from thinking in terms of 'inevitable competition for natural resources' to seeing the interconnections between people's livelihoods, and their need for equitable access rights. Rather than contenting themselves with explanations based on 'clashing identities', they should try to recognise why different groups have powerful, unresolved grievances. Interventions must start from a wider viewpoint of the context: broadening from a technical interpretation of how natural processes trigger conflict over resources into acknowledgment of the wider insecurity and political context. Rather than representing violent conflict as disrupting society, governments must listen to its meaning and communicate with the involved parties.

Public authorities should establish local platforms to listen, negotiate and resolve conflict. They have a critical role to play in providing an impartial, fair platform where rival groups can negotiate and resolve their problems. These local platforms need recognition and connection into the wider architecture of state institutions, strengthening consistent approaches to resolving conflict.

Government must also recognise the need to invest in 'intangible infrastructure', alongside physical works. Customary institutions may lack buildings and titled officials, but their strength can make a big difference in how societies cope with disruption. People need credible and legitimate organisations through which to structure management of space and relations between different interest groups. For example, in northern Kenya, investment in the traditional Boran organisations known as *dedha* greatly improved grazing management during droughts and led to lower herd mortality and higher milk production than in neighbouring areas.<sup>14</sup>

Such actions will all help restore government legitimacy and the rule of law where jihadist groups have successfully mobilised local resentments. For the large majority of people, improving livelihoods and creating economic opportunities — above all for young people — would go a long way to restore the state's legitimacy.

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## Knowledge Products

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/433331468007201906/pdf/840310v20WP0P10Box0382094B00PUBLIC0.pdf> /

<sup>2</sup> [www.pasto-secu-ndjamena.org/classified/N\\_Djamena\\_Declaration\\_eng.pdf](http://www.pasto-secu-ndjamena.org/classified/N_Djamena_Declaration_eng.pdf) / <sup>3</sup> Important exceptions are the African Union Pastoral Policy Framework in Africa (2010) and the National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands (2012). For a clear statement of the science, see Behnke, R, Scoones, I and Kerwen, C (1993) *Range Ecology at Disequilibrium*. ODI, London. /

<sup>4</sup> Krätli, S (2015) *Valuing variability: new perspectives on climate resilient drylands development*. IIED, London. / <sup>5</sup> Rota, A (2018) *How to do. Engaging with pastoralists – a holistic development approach*, IFAD, Rome. / <sup>6</sup> Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (forthcoming). *Making Variability Work*. / <sup>7</sup> International Alert (2004) *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding*. A resource pack. [www.international-alert.org/publications/conflict-sensitive-approaches-development-humanitarian-assistance-and-peacebuilding](http://www.international-alert.org/publications/conflict-sensitive-approaches-development-humanitarian-assistance-and-peacebuilding) / <sup>8</sup> De Waal, A (2015) *The real politics of the Horn of Africa. Money, war and the business of power*. Polity Press. / <sup>9</sup> Bukari KN (2017) *Farmer-herder relations in Ghana: Interplay of environmental change, conflict, cooperation and social Networks*. PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Social Sciences Georg-August University, Göttingen. / <sup>10</sup> International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (2016) *Tanzanian pastoralists threatened. Evictions, human rights violations and loss of livelihoods*. IWGIA Report 23. [www.iwgia.org/images/publications//0727\\_Report\\_23\\_Tanzania\\_for\\_eb.pdf](http://www.iwgia.org/images/publications//0727_Report_23_Tanzania_for_eb.pdf) / <sup>11</sup> Since 2015 the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) has included 'Fulani militants' as a category. The GTI is produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace, a think tank with offices in Sydney, New York, Mexico City, and The Hague (<http://globalterrorismindex.org>). / <sup>12</sup> Cramer, C (2006) *Civil war is not a stupid thing*. Hurst, London.

/ <sup>13</sup> Richards traces this approach back to the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) and his definition of war as 'the continuation of politics by other means'. Richards P (2005) *New War. An Ethnographic Approach*. In: Richards P (ed.) *No Peace No War. An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*. James Currey, Oxford. / <sup>14</sup> Toulmin, C, Hesse, C, Tari, D and King-Okumu, C (2015) *Investing in institutional 'software' to build climate resilience*. *Angle Journal*. [anglejournal.com/article/2015-06-investing-in-institutional-software-to-build-climate-resilience](http://anglejournal.com/article/2015-06-investing-in-institutional-software-to-build-climate-resilience) / <sup>15</sup> Krätli, S Toulmin, C and Hesse, C (2020) *Farmer-Herder Conflict in sub-Saharan Africa? A working paper for AFD*. IIED, London. / <sup>16</sup> A second Briefing in this IIED-AFD series examines institutional resilience in the face of change and will be published in June 2020. / <sup>17</sup> [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com)