

Original Research Article

FARMERS-HERDSMEN CONFLICT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON FOOD SECURITY IN BENUE STATE, 1999–2024

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Abstract: This study examines the farmers-herdsmen conflict in Benue State between 1999 and 2024 and its implications for food security. Benue is widely regarded as the “Food Basket of the Nation” because of its extensive production of yams, rice, cassava, sorghum, millet, sesame, fruits and other food crops. For many years, pastoralists moved seasonally into the Benue Valley in search of pasture and water and maintained generally workable relationships with farming communities. From the late 2000s and especially from about 2011/2012, however, disagreements over land use, crop destruction, grazing routes, cattle rustling and access to water increasingly assumed violent dimensions. The resulting attacks, killings, displacement and destruction of farms have weakened agricultural production, disrupted rural markets and reduced the movement of food from producing communities to consumers. Using qualitative historical methodology, the study draws on published literature, government materials, field notes and oral interviews conducted in selected communities and markets in Ukum, Gwer West and Agatu Local Government Areas. The analysis is anchored on Eco-violence Theory, which explains how competition over shrinking ecological resources can generate violent conflict. Evidence from the study shows that insecurity has reduced farmers’ access to ancestral land and disrupted the production and marketing of yams, rice and fish, among others. The paper argues that the food-security consequences extend beyond immediate shortages to loss of income, displacement, livelihood disruption and weakening of local food-supply chains. It recommends improved intelligence gathering and preventive security, consistent enforcement of law, strengthened local conflict-resolution mechanisms, land-governance reforms, and a transition toward modern livestock management, including ranching where appropriate.

Keywords: Farmers-Herdsmen Conflict; Food Security; Benue State; Ecological Scarcity; Displacement; Agriculture; Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria's contemporary security challenges have increasingly affected the ability of rural communities to sustain livelihoods and food production. Among the most consequential is the farmers-herdsmen conflict in the North-Central region. Benue State occupies a particularly important position in this crisis because its fertile plains and river valleys support extensive cultivation and livestock activity. The state produces large quantities of yams, rice, cassava, guinea corn, millet, sesame, ginger, melon, fruits and vegetables, thereby earning the popular designation "Food Basket of the Nation." Consequently, prolonged insecurity in Benue has implications not only for the affected communities but also for food distribution and prices in other parts of Nigeria.

The relationship between farmers and pastoralists was not always characterized by sustained violence. Pastoralists traditionally moved into the Benue Valley during the dry season in search of pasture and water and returned northward during the rainy season. In many communities, the relationship was supported by economic exchanges: farmers obtained manure and other benefits from cattle while herders obtained grain and farm products. Over time, however, agricultural expansion, population growth, environmental degradation, changing pastoral practices and the increasing demand for land altered this relationship. The cultivation of areas that previously served as grazing spaces, including portions of the riverine environment, intensified competition over land and water. The weakening of customary mechanisms for managing disputes further increased the possibility that disagreements would become violent.

The conflict became more visible in Benue from the late 2000s. Idyorough (2017) observes that early skirmishes occurred in Guma and Gwer West and subsequently spread to several local government areas, including Ukum, Agatu, Logo, Kwande, Katsina-Ala, Tarka, Buruku and Gwer East. What initially appeared as localized disputes increasingly involved killings, destruction of crops and settlements, displacement and the occupation or abandonment of farming communities. Wegh (2017) similarly notes the deterioration of relations and the severe consequences for the survival and well-being of Tiv farming communities. The significance of these developments is that agricultural production cannot continue normally where farmers are unable to cultivate, harvest, store and market their crops safely.

The food-security dimension of the conflict, therefore, deserves specific attention. Food security is broader than the physical existence of food. The Food and Agriculture Organization defines it in terms of people having physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Sen's (1981) entitlement approach reinforces the importance of access: hunger can occur even where food exists if people lack the economic or social means to obtain it. In a predominantly agrarian state such as Benue, violence can undermine both production and access. When farmers abandon fields because of attacks, when markets lose supplies, when roads become unsafe, and when displaced households

lose productive assets, food insecurity can increase even if the wider region retains substantial agricultural potential.

Previous studies have made important contributions to understanding the conflict. The International Crisis Group (2017) identifies drought, desertification, loss of grazing reserves, changes in pastoral and farming practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, insecurity and the erosion of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms as important drivers. Ikezue and Ezeah (2017) examine recurrent conflicts involving migrant Fulani herders and indigenous communities and raise questions about the effectiveness of security agencies. Mailafia (2017) links the crisis to historical relations, identity, politics, social injustice, insecurity, institutional failure, climate change and competition over land. SBM Intelligence (2015) also documents changing patterns of violence in North-Central Nigeria. These studies provide useful explanations of causes and dynamics, but the present study places the consequences for food availability, production, distribution and access at the centre of analysis.

The central argument of this paper is that farmers-herdsmen violence has become a major food-security problem in Benue because it disrupts the entire agricultural chain. The consequences begin in the field, where insecurity prevents cultivation and destroys crops, and continue through harvesting, processing, transportation, marketing and household consumption. The study focuses particularly on Ukum, Gwer West and Agatu Local Government Areas, representing the three senatorial zones of the state. It uses changes in the supply of yams, rice and fish in selected markets as practical indicators of the disruption of local food systems. The period 1999–2024 captures the return to democratic rule and the subsequent intensification of the crisis, while also allowing the study to examine the longer historical transformation of farmer-herder relations.

Nature and Causes of the Farmers-Herdsmen Conflict

The farmers-herdsmen conflict should be understood as a complex interaction of environmental, demographic, economic, institutional and political factors rather than as a simple struggle between two occupational groups. Historically, pastoralists and farmers in some places depended on one another in several ways. Cattle provided manure and, in some settings, transportation, while herders acquired grains and other agricultural products from farming communities. This interaction created forms of economic interdependence that could reduce friction.

The expansion of cultivation changed the balance. As the population increased and demand for farmland grew, spaces that had previously been available for grazing were progressively cultivated. At the same time, pastoralists faced pressures associated with drought, desertification, shrinking grazing reserves and declining availability of water and pasture in the northern parts of Nigeria. The movement of larger herds over longer distances brought pastoralists into closer contact with intensively cultivated farmland. Cattle entering farms could destroy crops, while farmers sometimes reacted by preventing access to fields or water. Cattle rustling and the theft or killing of livestock could also produce retaliation.

The International Crisis Group (2017) emphasizes the interaction of drought and desertification, loss of grazing reserves, changing pastoral and agricultural practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, wider insecurity and the erosion of traditional mechanisms for conflict management. These factors are particularly important because they demonstrate that environmental pressure alone does not automatically generate violence. Conflict becomes more likely when institutions for regulating access to resources are weak and when actors possess the capacity and incentive to resort to violence.

The Benue case also demonstrates the importance of historical and identity dimensions. Mailafia (2017) situates the crisis within longer histories of relations between communities in the Middle Belt and argues that questions of identity, political exclusion, social injustice, institutional weakness and insecurity intersect with competition over land. The conflict may therefore be interpreted differently by the parties involved. For farmers, the destruction or loss of cultivated land is a threat to livelihood, identity and community continuity. For pastoralists, restrictions on movement and access to pasture can threaten the viability of a mobile livestock economy. Such competing perceptions can deepen mistrust.

The conflict has also been aggravated by the weakening of traditional mechanisms of negotiation. Earlier disagreements could often be addressed through community leaders, local elders and informal arrangements. As the scale and organization of violence changed, these mechanisms became less capable of managing disputes. The reliance on security forces after attacks has often been reactive rather than preventive. Commissions of inquiry and mediation efforts have not always translated into sustained implementation of recommendations. The resulting perception of impunity can encourage further violence.

In Benue, the return to democratic governance in 1999 forms an important contextual starting point for the study. The movement of pastoralists and the expansion of agricultural activity continued under the new political environment. By the late 2000s, localized disputes were becoming more violent, and by the early 2010s, the attacks had become increasingly frequent in some parts of the state. The introduction and enforcement of the Open Grazing Prohibition Law further intensified political controversy. Whatever the interpretation of the law, the evidence presented in this study indicates that insecurity persisted after 2023 and continued to disrupt farming communities.

Historical Transformation, 1999–2024

The period 1999–2024 captures a significant transformation in farmer-herder relations in Benue State. The early years of the period were characterized by seasonal movement and local accommodation, although disagreements over crop damage and access to resources were not absent. During the 2000s, however, demographic growth, expansion of cultivation and environmental pressures increased contact between pastoralists and farming communities. The early skirmishes identified by Idyorough (2017) in Guma and Gwer West were followed by the spread of violence to other local government areas.

From roughly 2011/2012 onward, the character and frequency of violence changed in several communities. Disputes increasingly involved attacks on settlements, killings and

displacement rather than being resolved only through negotiation. By 2018/2019, parts of Gwer West had experienced extensive displacement, while Agatu had already suffered severe episodes of violence. In Ukum, more recent attacks have further weakened farming communities and the supply of yams to Zaki Biam.

The introduction of the Benue Open Grazing Prohibiting Law represented an attempt to regulate livestock movement and protect agricultural land, but its enforcement generated additional tensions. The persistence of violence after 2023 indicates that legislation alone cannot resolve the problem, where enforcement, intelligence, land governance and livelihood alternatives remain inadequate. By 2024, the cumulative effect of repeated attacks was visible in displaced populations, abandoned farms, weakened markets and declining local food supplies. The historical trajectory, therefore, demonstrates a movement from manageable resource competition toward a protracted security and food-security crisis.

Research Gap and Contribution

The existing literature establishes that farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria has multiple causes and severe humanitarian consequences. Idyorough (2017) examines the invasion and occupation of farmland in Benue, while Wegh (2017) emphasizes the implications of herdsmen attacks for Tiv survival and well-being. The International Crisis Group (2017) provides a broader analysis of the drivers of the Nigerian conflict, including environmental stress, changing pastoral practices, banditry and weakened conflict-management institutions. Ikezue and Ezeah (2017) review recurrent conflicts involving migrant Fulani herders and indigenous communities, and Mailafia (2017) places the crisis within wider historical, political, social and environmental processes. SBM Intelligence (2015) provides evidence of changing patterns of violence in North-Central communities.

Despite these contributions, the food-security consequences of the conflict require closer, localized examination. A discussion of deaths, displacement or land occupation does not by itself explain how insecurity changes the quantity and movement of food. This paper contributes by connecting violence to concrete food-supply chains in three different parts of Benue State. It examines issues in Ukum, rice in Gwer West and fish in Agatu, thereby showing how conflict affects crop production, processing, fishing, trading and household livelihoods. The approach also brings together documentary evidence and oral accounts from people familiar with the selected markets and communities.

The contribution is consequently both empirical and analytical. Empirically, it demonstrates the relationship between insecurity and declining market supplies in selected food-producing locations. Analytically, it applies Eco-violence Theory to show how ecological pressure becomes a food-security crisis when combined with weak institutions and violent competition. The study thus moves the discussion beyond the question of why farmers and herders fight to examine what prolonged conflict does to the food system on which both local communities and wider Nigerian consumers depend.

Food Security and the Conflict

Food security has four closely related dimensions relevant to this study: availability, access, stability and utilization. Availability concerns whether sufficient food is physically produced or supplied. Access concerns whether households can obtain food through production, purchase or other legitimate means. Stability requires that availability and access be maintained over time rather than interrupted by shocks. Utilization relates to the ability to obtain and consume food in ways that support a healthy life.

The farmers-herdsmen conflict affects all four dimensions. At the production level, farmers who fear attacks may reduce the area cultivated, delay planting, abandon fields or harvest prematurely. Destruction of crops and farm infrastructure reduces output directly. Displacement separates households from their farms and productive assets. At the marketing level, insecurity can prevent traders from reaching producing communities and can reduce the volume of agricultural products entering markets. At the household level, the loss of crops and income reduces purchasing power and may force displaced families to depend on assistance.

Sen's (1981) argument is particularly useful because it shifts attention from aggregate food supply to the capacity of people to command food. A community may be agriculturally productive while particular households experience hunger because they have lost land, income, livestock or access to markets. The conflict in Benue illustrates this problem. Farmers displaced from fertile areas may move to urban centres or camps, where they have limited productive opportunities. Some may become casual labourers rather than independent producers. Thus, conflict creates a cycle in which loss of land leads to loss of income, which reduces access to food and further weakens household resilience.

The broader Nigerian context reinforces the significance of the problem. FAO reports cited in the original study identify conflict and climate-related shocks among the factors undermining food security in Nigeria. The North-Central region is especially important because of its role as a major food-producing zone. Consequently, continued disruption of agricultural production in Benue has implications for markets beyond the state.

Theoretical Framework: Eco-violence Theory

This study adopts Eco-violence Theory, associated with Thomas Homer-Dixon, as its principal analytical framework. Homer-Dixon (1999) argues that environmental scarcity can contribute to violent conflict when populations depend heavily on renewable resources such as fresh water, cropland, forests and fisheries. Scarcity may result from population growth, resource degradation, overuse, unequal access or environmental change. Under conditions of weak institutions and competing demands, groups may compete for the remaining resources, creating conditions conducive to conflict.

The theory is appropriate to the Benue case because land and water constitute essential resources for both farming and pastoralism. Farmers require land for crop cultivation, while pastoralists require land, pasture and water for livestock. Expansion of

cultivation, environmental degradation and changes in rainfall patterns can reduce the amount of accessible land and water. At the same time, population growth increases demand for these resources. Competition is therefore intensified.

Eco-violence Theory does not imply that environmental scarcity inevitably produces violence. Institutions, laws and social relationships mediate the effect of scarcity. Where effective rules regulate grazing, protect farms, resolve disputes and punish violations, competition may remain peaceful. Where such mechanisms are weak, actors may resort to self-help. The theory, therefore, provides a useful bridge between environmental pressures and the institutional failures that allow resource disputes to become violent.

In this study, the theory is used not to reduce the Benue crisis to climate change but to explain one important structural dimension of it. Environmental pressure interacts with changing agricultural practices, livestock mobility, land governance, insecurity, cattle rustling and weakened conflict-resolution mechanisms. The result is a conflict whose consequences are felt most directly by rural producers and whose effects spread through food-supply chains.

Methodology and Study Area

The study employs qualitative historical methodology. Evidence was drawn from published books, journal articles, reports, government materials, field notes and oral interviews. The study also uses market and community observations to examine changes in the supply of key food commodities. Oral interviews were conducted in 2026 with respondents in Zaki Biam, Makurdi, Naka and Oweto. The respondents included farmers, traders, civil servants and a fish seller with knowledge of local agricultural and market conditions. The interview evidence is used alongside documentary sources rather than treated as statistically representative of the entire state.

The study area is Benue State in North-Central Nigeria. For closer examination, three Local Government Areas were selected, one from each senatorial zone: Ukum in Benue North-East, Gwer West in Benue North-West and Agatu in Benue South. The selection reflects the severity of conflict in these areas, their agricultural significance and their different livelihood systems.

Ukum is located in the eastern part of Benue and includes Zaki Biam, home to the well-known Zaki Biam International Yam Market. Gwer West, with headquarters at Naka, contains fertile agricultural land, including rice-producing areas along the River Benue. Agatu, in Benue South, has a mixed economy based on farming and fishing; Oweto is an important market for fish and agricultural products. These three locations, therefore, provide useful cases for examining the effects of conflict on different components of the food system.

Findings and Discussion: Ukum and the Yam Economy

Ukum provides a clear illustration of the relationship between insecurity, displacement and food-market decline. The local government contains extensive

yam-producing communities, and Zaki Biam International Yam Market functions as a major point of aggregation and distribution. Before the recent escalation of insecurity, the market attracted buyers from different parts of Nigeria and, according to field evidence, traders from neighbouring countries also participated in the wider commercial network.

Field evidence indicates a substantial decline in yam supplies associated with insecurity and the displacement of farming communities. Agerwua (2026), interviewed at Zaki Biam, reported that weekly yam supplies during the harvest period had fallen from more than 1.5 million tubers to about 800,000 or fewer in the period beginning with the 2024 harvest. This evidence is important because it illustrates the food-security consequences of conflict through the market rather than only through reports of individual farm destruction.

The decline is linked to the abandonment of farming settlements and the disruption of the agricultural cycle. Farmers who leave their communities cannot cultivate or harvest normally. Even where some farmers remain, fear of attack may reduce the amount of land they are willing to cultivate. The destruction of houses, crops, seedlings, farm equipment and livestock also reduces productive capacity. Consequently, the problem is not limited to a single harvest. The loss of seed and productive assets can affect subsequent agricultural seasons.

The displacement of farmers also alters the local economy. Zaki Biam and other settlements receive people seeking safety, but displaced households require food and income while having reduced access to their own productive assets. Traders experience reduced supplies, while consumers may face higher prices or reduced choice. A food-producing area can therefore become increasingly dependent on food coming from elsewhere. This demonstrates Sen's point that food insecurity is closely related to access and entitlement, not merely aggregate production.

The evidence from Ukum further suggests that food security and security are mutually reinforcing. When agricultural production falls, incomes decline and poverty increases. Reduced livelihood opportunities may, in turn, deepen social frustration and vulnerability to further insecurity. The destruction of rural production, therefore, has consequences beyond hunger: it weakens the economic foundations of communities.

Findings and Discussion: Gwer West and Rice Production

Gwer West demonstrates the effects of conflict on rice cultivation, processing and marketing. The local government is endowed with fertile land suitable for a range of crops, particularly in areas around the River Benue. Naka market and the local rice-processing economy historically linked farmers to traders and consumers within and outside the state.

According to the evidence gathered for this study, the relationship between farmers and herders in northern Gwer West became increasingly violent from about 2011. From 2018/2019, displacement became more pronounced in several communities along the River Benue, including Sengev, Mbakyoondo, Onovmba-Agbe and Agberagba. Farmers who previously cultivated the riverine and swampy areas were forced to abandon their ancestral

homes and farms. Nyiuma (2026) links this displacement to the decline in rice cultivation and the reduced supply of rice to the Naka market and rice mill.

The impact extends beyond farmers. Traders, processors, transporters and consumers depend on the continued movement of rice through the market. When production falls, processors operate below capacity, and traders have less produce to sell. Buyers from outside the state are less likely to travel to the area when supplies become uncertain or when insecurity raises transaction costs. Thus, conflict disrupts the value chain from production through processing and marketing.

An especially important finding concerns the changing economic position of displaced farmers. Some have temporarily lost access to family land and now work as labourers for commercial farmers who can afford private security arrangements. Terfa Tyover (2026) reported that commercial farmers may produce rice for off-takers outside Benue, meaning that a larger share of their harvest leaves the state rather than circulating through local markets. This contrasts with the earlier pattern in which local farmers supplied the Naka market and contributed directly to the local food-supply chain.

The implication is that displacement can change not only the quantity of food produced but also the structure of agricultural production. When smallholders lose access to land, commercial production may expand while local food availability remains constrained. The benefits of production are therefore unevenly distributed. For food security, the issue is not simply whether rice is produced somewhere, but whether households in affected communities can access sufficient quantities at affordable prices.

Findings and Discussion: Agatu and the Fish Economy

Agatu presents a different dimension of food insecurity because fishing is an important component of local livelihoods and diets. The local government is predominantly agricultural, but many communities depend heavily on rivers, fishing ponds and river channels. Oweto market is a major commercial centre for fish and agricultural products such as rice, yams, cassava and sorghum.

The conflict has repeatedly affected riverine and border communities. Field evidence identifies communities, including Okoklo, Aila and Odugbeho, among those affected by attacks and displacement. Other settlements have also experienced recurrent insecurity. The 2016 violence in Agatu and subsequent episodes are remembered locally as particularly severe. The International Crisis Group (2017) also documents protracted violent conflict and its effects on displacement, agriculture, fishing and rural markets.

The consequences for food security are significant. Fishing provides both protein and income. When insecurity prevents fishermen from reaching fishing grounds, the supply of fish declines and household incomes fall. Displaced families may also lose boats, fishing equipment and access to water resources. The decline in fish supply, therefore, affects both availability and access. Consumers lose an important source of animal protein, while producers lose an important source of livelihood.

The evidence gathered at Oweto indicates a decline in fish supply over the study period. Although market figures should be interpreted as field-based indicators rather than comprehensive statistical series, the trend is consistent with interview accounts of displacement, insecurity and livelihood disruption. Aboje Godwin (2026) and Olekwugoco Ocoje (2026) provided information from the Oweto area concerning the local commercial environment and fish trade. Their accounts reinforce the conclusion that insecurity has weakened the market system.

Agatu demonstrates why the food-security consequences of the conflict should not be measured only through crop production. Fishing communities can experience food insecurity through the destruction of access to aquatic resources. The loss of fish production simultaneously affects nutrition, income, trade and local market activity. The crisis, therefore, undermines multiple livelihood systems within the same state.

Cross-cutting Implications for Food Security

The three case studies reveal several common pathways through which conflict produces food insecurity.

First is the direct destruction of agricultural production. Crops may be eaten or destroyed, farms may be abandoned, and farm settlements may be occupied or rendered unsafe. This reduces the quantity of food entering the market.

Second is displacement. Farmers and fishers who flee violent communities lose access to land, water, livestock, equipment and social networks. Displacement converts producers into consumers at a time when their purchasing power is weakest. It therefore increases pressure on markets and humanitarian systems.

Third is the disruption of food distribution. Food does not become available to consumers simply because it has been harvested. It must move from farms to aggregation points, processors, markets and households. Insecurity raises the risks and costs of transportation and discourages traders from entering affected communities. The decline of Zaki Biam, Naka and Oweto market activity illustrates this problem.

Fourth is the loss of income and purchasing power. Farmers, traders, processors and other rural workers depend on continuous production and trade. When these activities stop, households lose income and may reduce food consumption or sell remaining assets. This deepens poverty and vulnerability.

Fifth is instability. Even where production recovers after an attack, repeated violence prevents households from planning confidently for future seasons. Farmers may reduce investment in seeds, fertilizer and equipment because they fear losing their farms. Such uncertainty can produce a persistent decline in productive capacity.

Finally, the conflict has implications beyond Benue. Because the state supplies food to other parts of Nigeria, reduced production and market disruption can affect regional food availability and prices. The crisis should therefore be regarded as a national food-security issue as well as a local security problem.

Implications for State and National Development

The food-security consequences also have broader developmental implications. Agriculture in Benue supports employment, household income, transportation, processing and commerce. When insecurity interrupts these activities, the effect is multiplied across the rural economy. Declining production can also increase dependence on food imported from other states, while displaced households place additional pressure on host communities. The resulting cycle of reduced production, weakened purchasing power, and rising vulnerability can undermine poverty reduction and rural development. For this reason, agricultural recovery should be treated as part of the security response rather than as a separate development programme.

Government Response and the Way Forward

The government response to farmers-herdsmen conflict has included military and police deployments, mediation, peace committees and commissions of inquiry. These measures have sometimes helped to contain immediate violence, but the recurrence of attacks indicates that containment has not addressed the structural and institutional dimensions of the crisis.

The first priority should be preventive security and intelligence. The evidence in the study suggests that government responses have frequently occurred after serious attacks rather than before them. Intelligence institutions and law enforcement agencies need to improve early-warning systems, community information networks and rapid response. Information supplied by communities should be evaluated and converted into actionable intelligence capable of preventing attacks.

Second, perpetrators of violence should be arrested and prosecuted through transparent legal procedures. Farmers and herders should both understand that disputes over crops, cattle or land cannot justify armed attacks or private punishment. The rule of law should replace self-help. Consistent prosecution can also reduce the perception of impunity that encourages repeated violence.

Third, land governance requires reform. The central problem is not simply that land is scarce, but that rules governing access to land and water are contested or inadequately enforced. Federal, state and local authorities should work with traditional institutions and communities to establish clear, locally appropriate mechanisms for resolving disputes over land, water, grazing routes and crop damage.

Fourth, livestock production should be modernized. The study supports renewed attention to ranching and other forms of settled or controlled livestock management where they are environmentally, economically and legally appropriate. Such reforms should be implemented through consultation, investment and clear regulation rather than through coercive measures alone. States should retain the authority to enforce laws regulating land use within their jurisdictions.

Fifth, traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms should be strengthened rather than discarded. Community leaders, farmers' associations, pastoralist representatives, religious

leaders and civil-society organizations can provide channels for negotiation before disputes become violent. These mechanisms, however, must operate within the framework of the law and should not substitute for formal justice where serious crimes have been committed.

Sixth, displaced agricultural households require support to return safely to productive livelihoods. Assistance should include access to seeds, tools, land, credit and agricultural extension. Rebuilding markets, storage facilities and processing centres is equally important. Food-security policy should therefore integrate security, agricultural recovery and livelihood reconstruction.

Finally, the government should avoid treating the crisis through a single explanatory lens. Environmental scarcity, climate change, pastoral mobility, land-use competition, criminality, institutional weakness and historical mistrust can interact. Effective policy must therefore combine environmental management, security, justice, agricultural development and local peacebuilding.

Conclusion

The farmers-herdsmen conflict in Benue State has evolved from localized disagreements into a prolonged security and livelihood crisis with serious implications for food security. The evidence examined from Ukum, Gwer West and Agatu shows that violence affects more than individual farmers. It disrupts agricultural production, displaces rural populations, weakens markets, reduces household income and interrupts the movement of food from producing communities to consumers.

The study also demonstrates the value of Eco-violence Theory in explaining the structural role of competition over land, water and other ecological resources. However, environmental pressure alone does not explain the persistence of violence. Weak institutions, inadequate conflict management, changing livelihood systems, insecurity and perceptions of impunity have allowed resource competition to become increasingly destructive.

In Ukum, insecurity has contributed to declining yam supplies at Zaki Biam; in Gwer West, displacement has reduced rice cultivation and disrupted Naka's agricultural economy; and in Agatu, insecurity has constrained fishing and reduced supplies to Oweto market. Together, these cases show that food insecurity is produced through the disruption of an interconnected food system.

The crisis requires a response that is preventive, lawful and development-oriented. Government at all levels should strengthen intelligence and rapid response, prosecute offenders, improve land governance, support modern livestock management, revive effective local conflict-resolution institutions and assist displaced producers to return to productive livelihoods. If insecurity continues to drive farmers from fertile land and

disrupt rural markets, the consequences will extend beyond the immediate victims to the wider Nigerian food system. Protecting farmers, pastoralists and rural markets is therefore not only a security responsibility but also a fundamental component of achieving sustainable food security in Nigeria.

Oral Interviews

S/N	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Date and Place of Interview
1	Udoji Agerwua	58	M	Businessman	20/7/2026 – Zaki Biam
2	Paul Ayati	56	M	Civil servant/farmer	15/7/2026 – Makurdi
3	Vitalis Nyiuma	48	M	Civil servant	28/7/2026 – Naka Town
4	Aboje Godwin	55	M	Businessman	25/6/2026 – Oweto Town
5	Terfa Tyover	47	M	Farmer/businessman	28/7/2026 – Naka Town
6	Terlumun Bossua	45	M	Businessman/farmer	20/7/2026 – Zaki Biam
7	Olekwugoco Ocoje	50	F	Fish seller	25/6/2026 – Oweto Town

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