



## **The Role of Criminal Gangs in the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Guma Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The study assessed the involvement of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict in the Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. The specific objectives of the study were to examine the extent of criminal gangs' involvement in the farmers-herders conflict, assess the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict and determine the impacts of these activities on the farmers' herders' conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. The explorative and cross-sectional designs were adopted for the study. The sample size for the study was made up of 368 respondents comprising victims of the conflict, security agencies, and traditional and religious leaders while questionnaires and key informant interviews were used as methods of data collection. Collected data was analyzed with the use of tables, frequencies, percentages and figures. The findings of the study revealed that criminal gangs are highly involved in the farmers-herders conflict in the study area. Cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and arms trafficking among others were found as the major activities engaged in by criminal gangs in the study area. These activities contribute to increased violence, fear and mistrust, and displacement of communities, impeding conflict resolution efforts, and exacerbating the existing tensions. Based on the findings, the study recommends a multi-faceted approach, including improved security measures, community engagement, and socio-economic interventions to address the root causes of criminal gangs' involvement in the conflict.

**Keywords:** Benue State, Criminal Gangs, Conflict, Farmers-Herders Conflict, Nigeria

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## Introduction

The farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria has been a longstanding issue that has caused widespread violence and displacement in various communities, especially since the last decade (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2017; Okoro, 2018; Bello & Abdullahi, 2021, Yamusa, 2022). Criminal gangs' involvement in the farmers vs. herders' conflict in Nigeria has exacerbated the situation, leading to increased violence and instability. These gangs exploit the conflict for economic gain, engaging in activities like mass kidnappings, stealing from locals, levying communities, and ransom payments (Africa Centre for Statistics, 2021). The criminal gangs have become entrenched within communities, making it challenging to eradicate them, even with past failed attempts at providing amnesty (Africa Centre for Statistics, 2021).

The rise of farmer-herder violence in Africa, including Nigeria, has been influenced by various factors such as population pressure, changes in land use, resource access, growing social inequalities, and declining trust between communities (Africa Centre for Statistics, 2021). Additionally, the surge in violence is linked to issues like growing land pressure, dispossession of pastoralists' rights to resources, and security forces exacerbating inter-communal relationships by acting against pastoralist communities (Africa Centre for Statistics, 2021). The complexity of the conflict is further compounded by the exploitation of tensions by militant Islamist groups to foster recruitment and conflate farmer-herder conflict with violent extremism (Africa Centre for Statistics, 2021). Largely, criminal gangs' involvement in the farmers vs. herders' conflict in Nigeria has deepened the crisis by introducing economic motivations and further complicating an already complex situation driven by historical disputes, environmental factors, and social dynamics.

This study investigates the role of criminal gangs in the entire conflict dynamics between farmers and herders in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. Therefore, it raises the following questions, and addresses corresponding objectives:



## Research Questions

- i. What is the extent of the Criminal Gangs' involvement and application of dangerous weapons in the farmers-herders conflict?
- ii. What are the specific activities of the criminal gangs?
- iii. How does the criminal gangs' role impact the farmers-herders conflict?
- iv. What measures are required to mitigate the influence of criminal gangs in the conflict?

## Objectives of the Study

- i. The extent of the criminal gangs' involvement and their use of dangerous weapons in the conflict in the farmers-herders conflict.
- ii. The activities of the criminal gangs.
- iii. The impact of criminal gangs' involvement in the farmers-herders conflict.
- iv. The measures required to mitigate the influence of the criminal gangs in the conflict.

## Literature Review

Farmers have been described as persons who work primarily on the farm for subsistence and self-sufficiency. In other words, they are individuals who engage in agriculture by raising field crops, orchards, poultry or similar livestock for self-sustenance or commercial purposes. However, for this research, farmers are those who cultivate the fields or lands for food production accordingly, they are called crop farmers (Bello & Abdullahi, 2021; Okoro, 2018).

Herders generally refer to a group of people who raise animals such as sheep, cattle, and goats, and may move around from one location to another in search of pastures for their livestock. According to Bello and Adbullahi (2021), they are persons who own a herd of domesticated animals. The Fulani are known for rearing large herds of these animals as their primary source of occupation and livelihood and are called herders or herdsmen (Okoro, 2018). The herders carry arms which they use to protect their livestock, but they also sometimes deploy it into robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and killings in their nomadic journeys. Consequently, they have been described as the world's deadliest militant group (Yamusa, 2022; Okoro, 2018).



Farmers-herders conflict essentially entails State, non-state, including institutional actors in an intricate relationship with competing interests that they seek to actualise through violent means (Ogbe & Iyiayaana, 2022). The conflict dynamics between and among the various actors, that was previously communal clashes, and resource-based, have in the last decade assumed a worrying dimension, affecting agricultural production, and farmers' and herders' self-sustenance (Ogbe and Iyiayaana, 2022). Consequently, there has been a barrage of accusations and counter-accusations on both farmers and herders' sides resulting in conflict escalation.

A definition of “criminal gangs” that can be said to fit in this study is the one provided by the General Secretariat of the Organisation of American States [GSOAS] (2007). It states that criminal gangs are groups organised for criminal purposes, having medium-sized to large (50-200 members), comprising mainly males but permitting a small number of female members; are homogeneous in terms of ethnic orientation (depending on the gang though), may age between 18-30 and over, involving youths and adults; operate within a specific territory, but may sometimes venture out into other areas under instructions from their leader.

Guided and directed by their leader, criminal gangs are known to use sophisticated weapons to perpetrate crimes including trafficking in drugs, arms, and persons; robbery, kidnapping, extortion, and murder (including by contract). In terms of operational tactics, criminal gangs are well-trained and disciplined and exhibit a high level of planning and organisation, along with logistics to aid their criminal activities. According to GSOAS (2007), criminal gangs have “a well-defined hierarchical organization and even units that specialize in certain types of crime. In several countries, they are well known by the police. Organized crime organizations frequently hire gang members to carry out contract killings” (p.11).

### **Criminal Gangs' Role in the Farmers-Herders Conflict**

While the conflict is primarily between farmers and herders over land and resources (Okoro, 2018), there has been increasing involvement of criminal gangs in perpetrating violence and exacerbating tensions between these communities. These gangs reportedly engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, and other forms of criminal activities that contribute to the attacks on farmers and herdsmen (Ojiah, 2022). Criminal gangs are often hired by one of the



two parties in the conflict to carry out attacks and counter-attacks, leading to an endless cycle of violence (Brottem, 2021). The gangs usually operate with impunity, as they are rarely arrested and prosecuted by law enforcement agencies (Okoro, 2018). The involvement of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict has resulted in the breakdown of the social fabric in the affected communities. This has led to deep-seated animosity between farmers and herdsman, with both groups now seeing each other as enemies (Ogu, n.d; Brottem, 2021); it has made the conflict more complex and created greater challenges in finding a lasting solution to the problem.

A study by Musa, Shehu and Igbawua (2014) focused on assessing the conflict between herdsman and farmers in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. They examined the impact of the conflict on agricultural development in the area and found that it constitutes a serious setback to agricultural development in the country, and recommended the creation of grazing reserves aimed at improving animal husbandry in tandem with global standard practices. A similar study conducted by Brottem (2021) revealed that the cycle of armed violence in the affected areas hinges on the non-provision of grazing fields for herds, arising from harsh policies that successfully reduced the grazing land available to pastoralists

Reacting to the farmer-herder crisis generally, Bagu and Smith (2017; Nkwede, Nwankwo, Aro, & Dauda, 2018) stressed that at its core this is neither a religious nor an ethnic conflict, but rather a resource-based conflict playing out on ethno-religious lines in a fragile country characterised by impunity and corruption. The statement attributed to the former governor of Kaduna State, Mallam Nasir El-Rufai, that “the killings in southern Kaduna by suspected herdsman is pure criminality and had nothing to do with ethnicity and religion” (Bagu and Smith, 2017) buttresses the point being made by Bagu and Smith, indicating that the farmer-herder conflict is neither ethnic nor religious based, rather it is simply for economic gains by a gang of criminals (otherwise referred to as bandits in certain quarters). They argued that even though the farmer-herder conflict had persisted for a long, it has however, currently assumed a violent dimension that is attributable to “brutal land disputes and attacks on livelihoods (crops



and cattle), often triggering self-perpetuating cycles of indiscriminate reprisal confrontations” (Bagu and Smith, 2017).

*Years of peaceful coexistence give way to violence*, the sub-title of an Amnesty International study, quotes a 65-year-old villager in Kaduna, Nigeria, who is perplexed by the recent uptick in violence between farmers and herders:

We still ask ourselves what happened. What have we done? We had no history of violence [with the Fulani], we never had any clashes with them. The 19 February attack was the first. My house is like a home for the Fulanis, they come to play or watch movies with me and my family. So I still don't know why it happened (Amnesty International, 2018).

The research points out that both sides profited because all impacted farming communities that had been decimated by the fighting had previously coexisted peacefully and harmoniously with Fulani herders. This made the rhetorical question stated by the elderly farmer above necessary and still relevant in many circles today, which raises the question of how the conflict has now been hijacked by criminal groups, increasing it and making it challenging to settle.

Criminal gangs consisting primarily of youth who live in farming and herding communities collaborate with local bandits and capitalize on the rising insecurity, fear, and recurrent attacks to steal from villages, commit highway robberies, and rustle cattle for personal gain (Bagu and Smith, 2017). Both communities are harmed by these crimes, including various degrees of fatalities in terms of death and loss of property, hatred, a hatred that may linger for generations down the line.



Figure 1 represents the pathways to the criminal gang's involvement in the stand-off between farmers and pastoralists.

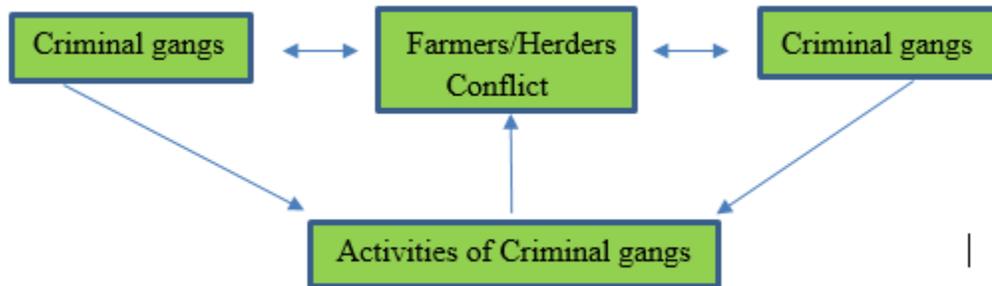


Figure 1: The conflict-criminal gang pathways. Source: Authors (2023).

Activities of the criminal gangs on both sides (farmers and herders) further exacerbate the unresolved conflict or simply reinforce it. The situation is increasingly made complex by the arms-bearing criminal gangs, who continually deploy such weapons in the conflict (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2017). This scenario has been reported by security agents mandated to quell the crisis in all of the communities affected by it. For example, an officer in an interview conducted in June 2015 by a researcher observed:

Some of the weapons which we have recovered from some of the criminals in the cause of our duty range from prohibited firearms, even AK-47 is prohibited, and we recovered some of these things from them. They are using it! ... All sorts of weapons are being used by these people who persistently refuse to listen to our calls to lay down arms so that peace can reign supreme (Ogu, 2020, p.118).

To demonstrate the level of and sophisticated application of dangerous weapons in the farmers/herders conflict, by both parties, another security personnel notes: “Sophisticated! Should I mention? They use AK-47, they use military weapons. Both sides; the indigenes (farmers) and the pastoralist, they all have these weapons” (Ogu, 2020, p.119).

The question that continually agitates the mind is, what informs the current level of violence between pastoralists and farmers in present-day Nigeria to the extent that it has been overrun by armed criminal groups? To answer this poignant question, research, as earlier indicated (Bagu and Smith, 2017; Amnesty International, 2018; Ogu, 2020) suggests that the present



deterioration of the relationship between pastoralists and farmers in almost all farming communities in the country, perplexes and troubles every concerned individual and group. International Crisis Group, notes that until the current crisis involving violent attacks, farmers and herders had shared a peaceful, harmonious and symbiotic relationship, supporting each other's farming and grazing needs (ICG, 2017). Further studies have shown that peaceful co-existence has been the bane of herders and farmers, such that even if there were any disagreements, there were mitigation and conflict resolution mechanisms put in place. Findings from some of the studies show that the spate of violent conflict being experienced nowadays is new and might be linked to political and community leaders who create and perpetuate the conflict (for economic gains?) (Nagarajan, 2019).

### **Impact of Criminal Gangs' Activities on the Farmers-Herders Conflict**

The farmers-herders crisis has had troubling impacts including a reduction in inputs and income for farmers and nomads, displacement of farmers, erosion, and loss of lives, arms running, destruction of properties, lost stored farm produce, including hatred and fear, increased unemployment and underdevelopment (Ofuoku and Isebe, 2017, 37). The impact of criminal gangs on the farmers-herders conflict in the Guma Local Government Area in Benue State is significant. The group have exploited the conflict to further their interests, thereby exacerbating the violence and insecurity in the area (ICG, 2017). These gangs engage in various criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and banditry, resulting in conflict escalation and reappraisal attacks, and deepening mistrust between farming and herding communities (Dauda and Davru, 2024).

The proliferation of arms in the area has also contributed to the escalation of the conflict, with criminal gangs using sophisticated weapons to carry out attacks (Bello and Abdullahi, 2021). Chukuebuka (2019) observed that criminal gangs have also destabilised the area, making it difficult for farmers and herders to carry out their legitimate activities and worsening the already tense situation between conflicting parties. Further, Amnesty International (2018) points to the Nigerian government's failure to investigate communal clashes and bring perpetrators to justice



as contributing to conflict escalation, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacement of thousands more.

The reviewed studies have made attempts to explicate the dynamics of the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria, and its impact on various fronts. Missing from the literature, however, are qualitative studies focusing on the roles of criminal gangs and armed bandits, who have added a different dimension to the conflict and continue to influence its trajectory. People – individuals and collectives – need to have their lived experiences heard and projected in studies such as the current one. It is hoped that by understanding the experiences of the people (victims), peace practitioners and other relevant stakeholders would be able to plan and execute programmes targeted at an amicable resolution of the conflict, particularly in terms of curtailing the overbearing influence of the criminal gangs in the entire conflict dynamics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study combines and adopts two related theories – frustration-aggression and relative deprivation. The former was initiated by Dollard, and later popularised by Miller and Berkowitz; and the latter by Runciman, Stack and Braithwaite (Omoroghomwan, 2020). In the context of the farmers/herders conflict in the Guma Local Government Area, the frustration-aggression theory and relative deprivation theory can help to explain the role of criminal gangs.

Frustration-aggression occurs when an individual's or group's efforts to attain a goal are hampered or blocked by others. This other action produces a feeling of anger and aggressive behaviour. Thus, the theory posits that aggression is the consequence of blocking people's opportunities. The frustration-aggression theory suggests frustration, such as the herders feeling deprived of grazing land, and the farmers feeling frustrated for having to constantly lose their farm produce to the herds, can lead to aggression, which may manifest in conflicts between farmers and herders (Omoroghomwan, 2020). This theory is relevant as herders facing restrictions on grazing land may become frustrated and resort to aggressive actions, contributing to the conflict dynamics and escalation in the Guma Local Government Area.



Relative deprivation theory posits that when an individual or group perceives that they are being denied something they believe to be rightfully theirs and which they desire, they seek out ways to achieve their goal usually by violent means (Omoroghomwan, 2020). The perceived deprivation is usually relative and not absolute. This is because not everyone who feels deprived of their desired object resort to violence. Therefore, relative deprivation theory highlights how feelings of deprivation or inequality, such as scarcity of resources and competition over land, can fuel conflict situations between farmers and herders (Ogbe and Iyiayaana, 2022). The theory is pertinent as it underscores the impact of resource scarcity on escalating tensions and violence between the two groups in the Guma Local Government Area, Benue State. By applying these theories, they explain how criminal gangs exploit this frustration and perceptions of deprivation to exacerbate the farmers' and herders' conflict in the study area.

## Methodology

The study was explorative and cross-sectional. The cross-sectional design allows a study to assess different groups of people who differ in the variable of interest but share other characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and ethnicity. It is a type of research design which also allows the study to collect data from many different individuals at a single point in time (Setia, 2016).

The study was conducted in Guma Local Government Area, located at 7°30'-8°03' E and longitude 8°04'-9°02' N. Guma Local Government Area was created out of the former Makurdi Local Government Area in 1987 by the then regime of Col. Fidelis A. Makka. The Local Government is named after 'River Guma' in Benue State with headquarters in Gbajimba town. The Local Government area is bounded to the East by the Logo Local Government Area, to the South by the Makurdi, Tarka, Buruku Local Government Areas, to the West, and by the Doma Local Government Area of Nassarawa State to the North and West (Amuta and Houmsou, 2014).

The Local Government area has a projected population of 280, 300 people (National Bureau of Statistics, [NBS], 2022). The Local Government Area is predominantly occupied by the Tiv people among other tribes such as Jukun, Hausa, and Kabuwa. Politically, Guma is divided into



10 council wards including Kaambe, Abinsi, Uvir, Saghev, Nzorov, Nyiev, Mbabai, Mbayer or Yandev, Mbawa, and, Mbadwen council wards. Regarding agricultural activities, the Local Government Area is known for livestock Farming and production of rice, other cereals and yams. Majority of the inhabitants are farmers (NBS, 2022).

The study population comprised victims of farmers-herders conflict, traditional and religious leaders, security agencies and other residents of Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), the Guma Local Government area has a projected population of about 280, 300 persons. However, due to the large nature of the population, the Taro Yamane (1969) sample size determination formula was used to arrive at the sample for the study.

A sample size of 400 respondents was used for the study. Multi-stage sampling procedure was used to arrive at the final unit of analysis for the study. Guma Local Government Area was clustered into 10 council wards including Kaambe, Abinsi, Uvir, Saghev, Nzorov, Nyiev, Mbabai, Mbayer or Yandev, Mbawa, and, Mbadwen council wards. Five (5) council wards were purposefully selected from the 10 council wards based on the level of farmers-herders conflict. Those selected were: the Mbadwem, Nzorov, Mbabai, Kaambe and Saghev council wards respectively. Furthermore, 80 respondents were selected from each council ward making a total of 400 respondents for the study. Snowball sampling was used to arrive at the individual respondents within the communities where a respondent was identified and directed the researcher to the next respondents, the cycle continued till the required sample size was captured. Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) were used as methods of data collection. SSIs were administered to victims of farmers-herders crises while KIIs were administered to traditional rulers, community heads and security agencies. Collected data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively in line with research objectives. Quantitative data was analyzed with the use of percentages, frequencies and figures while qualitative data obtained from KIIs were subjected to manual thematic analysis.



## Results and Discussions

This section presents the data obtained from the field and analysed in line with the stated objectives and respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex**

Sex	Frequency N=368	Percentage %=100
Male	262	71.2
Female	106	28.8

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 1 presents data on the sex distribution of respondents in the study area. The findings of the study revealed that 71.2% representing 262 of the respondents were male while only 28.8% (106) were female. From the data, it can be deduced that the views of men were obtained more than those of women chiefly because men were more available and accessible at the time of the study. As a crisis prawn area, the majority of women and children had fled the area and taken refuge with other relatives in safer areas for fear of being attacked while the men stayed behind to watch over the house

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age**

Age (in years)	Frequency N=368	Percentage %=100
18-30	86	23.4
31-45	134	35.8
46-55	62	16.8
56-65	58	15.8
65 Above	28	7.6

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Study findings on the age distribution of the respondents revealed that 23.4% (86) of the respondents were between the ages of 18-30 years, 35.8% representing 134 of the respondents fell in the age range of 31-45 years while 16.8% (62) of the respondents were of the ages of between 46-55 years, 15.8% (58) of the respondents were of the ages of 56-65 years and 7.6% of the respondents were of 65 years and above. The age distribution of the respondents shows that more youths were involved in the



study. This was not deliberate but goes a long way to show that youths are more involved in security issues. Most of them as much as it was a crisis area that could be attacked by enemies at any time, they were still seen hanging around and could easily escape in any eventuality as compared to women, children and the elderly.

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status**

Marital Status	Frequency N=368	Percentage %=100
Single	116	31.5
Married	181	49.2
Divorced	13	3.5
Widowed	58	15.8

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 3 distributed respondents based on their marital status. Study findings revealed that 31.5% (116) of the respondents were single, 49.2% (181%) were married 3.5% (13) of the respondents were divorced and 15.8% (58) of the respondents were widowed respectively.

**Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Occupation**

Occupation	Frequency N=368	Percentage %=100
Farming	248	67.4
Petty Trading	42	11.4
Artisan	18	4.9
Civil/Public Servant	32	8.7
Students	19	5.2
Others	9	2.4

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 4 presents data on the occupational distribution of the respondents. Study findings indicated that 67.4% representing 248 of the respondents were farmers, 11.4% (42) of the respondents were petty traders, 4.9% (18) were artisans 8.7% (32) of respondents were civil/public servants, 5.2% (19) of the respondents were students and 2.4% (9) of the respondents were of other occupations. The data shows that the majority of the respondents were farmers, this could also be one of the reasons for the incessant crises between the farmers and herders as both occupations involve the use of land which might be a source of dispute between the conflicting farmers and herders.

**Table 5: Distribution of Respondents by Educational Qualifications**

<b>Education</b>	<b>Frequency N=368</b>	<b>Percentage %=100</b>
No Formal Education	58	15.7
Primary Education	97	26.3
Secondary Education	138	37.5
Tertiary Education	66	18.0
Others	9	2.4

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 5 above distributed respondents based on their educational qualifications. According to data obtained, 15.7% representing 58 of the respondents had no formal education, 26.3% (97) of the respondents had primary qualifications, and 37.5% (138) of the respondents had secondary qualifications while 18% (66) of the respondents had tertiary education and 2.4% (9) had other qualifications. The data shows that the literacy level of respondents in the study area was low.

**Table 6: Distribution of Respondents by Religious Affiliations**

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Frequency N=368</b>	<b>Percentage %=100</b>
Christianity	316	85.7
Islam	24	6.5
Traditional	28	7.6

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 5 is on the religious affiliations of respondents. Data from the table indicated that 85.7% (316) of the respondents were Christians 6.5% (24) were of the Islamic religion and 7.6% (28) were traditionalists. The wide disparity in religious affiliation between Christians and other religious affiliations was because the study was carried out in a Christian-dominated area.

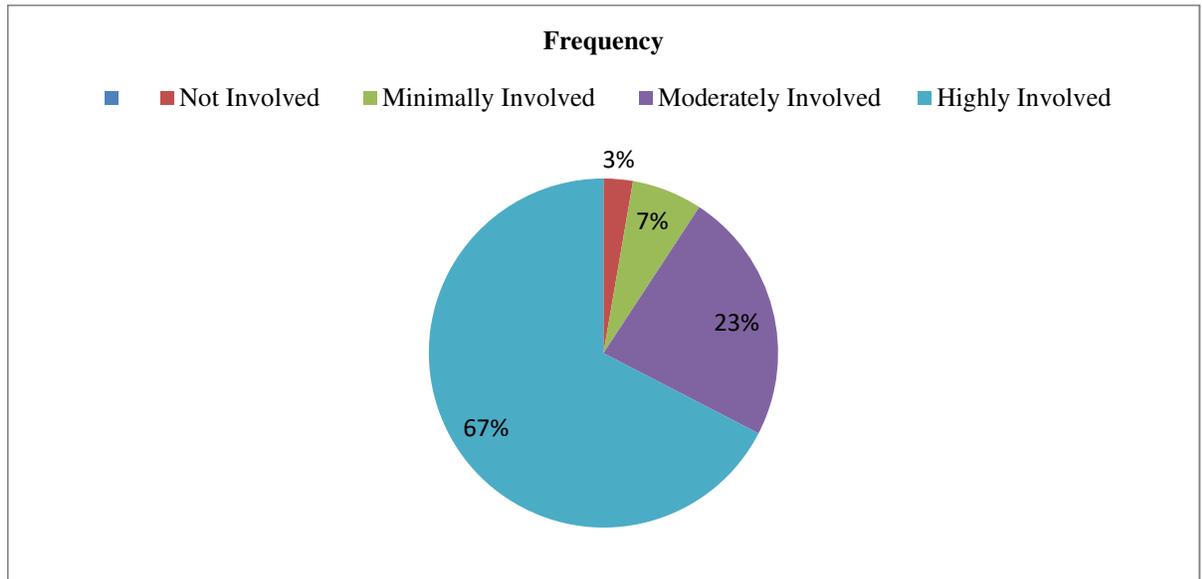


Figure 2: Extent of Criminal Gangs' Involvement in the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State

Figure 2 presents data on the involvement of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict in the study area. Findings of the study indicated that 67% of the respondents agreed that criminals are highly involved in the farmers-herders conflict in the study area while 23% of the respondents stressed that the involvement of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict is moderate. On the other hand, 7% of the respondents noted that the involvement of criminal gangs in the conflict between farmers and herders is minimal and only 3% of the respondents stressed that criminal gangs are not involved at all in the farmers-herders conflict.

From the above data, it can be inferred that criminal gangs are highly involved in the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in the Guma Local Government Area as stressed by the majority of the respondents. Key informant interviews with security agencies, traditional, and religious leaders also showed that the involvement of criminals in the conflict was high. They noted that the protracted nature of the conflict is basically caused by these criminals. The criminals according to respondents are found among both the farmers and herders. Respondents further maintained that these gangs are said to be involved in cattle rustling, kidnappings and other criminal activities that exacerbate the conflict. They take advantage of the conflict to further their criminal activities.



Responding, A police officer attached to Daudu Police Station had this to say:

We have many of these criminals among us, they are living among the people, and they are the ones causing problems between farmers and herders. Most times they will go and rustle the herders' cattle. When the herdsmen come for a reprisal attack no one is spared. They are involved in many criminal activities such as kidnappings and arms trafficking. This and many others have prolonged the conflict (KII, 2023)

Similarly, a traditional ruler in Jugudu village of Guma Local Government area reiterated:

These criminals sell information to either the herdsmen or farmers on the best time to attack. Recently we caught a Tiv boy who gives information to the Fulani people on the movements of the Tiv people and the best time they can come for attacks. When he was asked about the benefits attached to this criminal act, he said the Fulani people promised to get him a motorbike. You can imagine trading the lives of people for a motorbike. This is the situation we found ourselves (KII, 2023)

These findings on the extent of criminal gangs' involvement in the farmers-herders conflict corroborate the earlier findings of Aver (2018) who found that criminal gangs have taken advantage of the conflict, particularly in the form of cattle rustling and banditry. He further found that the gangs are often armed with sophisticated weapons, which they use to attack and intimidate communities.

**Table 8: Activities of Criminal Gangs in the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Frequency N=368</b>	<b>Percentage %=100</b>
Cattle rustling	248	67.4
Armed Attacks	42	11.4
Arms Trafficking	18	4.9
Kidnapping for Ransom	32	8.7
Exposing Confidential Information	19	5.2
Extortion and Protection Racket	9	2.4

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**



Table 4 presents data on the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict in the study area. The findings of the study revealed that 67.4% of the respondents pointed to cattle rustling as the major activity engaged by criminal activities which aggravates the farmers-herders conflict. 11.4% (42) of the respondents pointed to armed attacks by criminal gangs on both farmers and herders, 4.9% (18) of the respondents said arms trafficking by criminal gangs is the major activity influencing the farmers-herders conflict while 8.7 (32) of the respondents pointed to kidnapping for ransom, 5.2% (19) of the respondents maintained that exposing confidential information by criminal gangs to both warring parties have also aggravated the conflict between farmers and herders and 2.4% (9) of the respondents stressed that another activity of criminal gangs is the extortion and protection racket which they make both parties believe that they are protecting them.

Key informant interviews with security agencies, and traditional and religious leaders in the study area did not show any remarkable difference with that of the views of other respondents. They also pointed to similar activities including cattle rustling, exposing confidential information to the conflicting parties, kidnapping for ransom, attacking both farmers and herders, and arms trafficking among others as the major activities carried out by criminal gangs that are aggravating the unending farmers/herders conflict in the study area.

Most of the respondents stressed that the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict in Guma have exacerbated the already tense situation. These criminal gangs, often referred to as “bandits” or “armed militias,” have been involved in various illegal activities that further fuel the conflict. These criminal gangs according to respondents are found on both sides of the conflicting parties. One of the main activities of these criminal gangs is cattle rustling. They target the herders’ livestock, stealing them and causing significant financial losses to the herders. This not only disrupts the livelihoods of the herders but also escalates tensions and reprisal attacks between farmers and herders.

A 68-year-old district head in Daudu, Guma Local Government Area stated thus:

The issue of cattle rustling is the one disturbing us here, there are those boys among us that will go out there and steal Fulani cattle, and you know a Fulani man does not joke with his cattle, he values his cattle even more



than his child. There is no way you will take his cattle and he will keep quiet. He must come for you. So each time these criminals go out there to steal their cows, the message is that we farmers sent them since we are already not on good terms with them but these boys are simply criminals. The next thing the herders will do is to trace their cows and anywhere they see footprints they kill anybody at sight around those communities (KII, 2023)

Furthermore, respondents also lamented that these criminal gangs engage in armed attacks on both farmers and herders. They carry out raids on villages, burning houses, looting properties, and sometimes even killing innocent people. These attacks not only result in loss of lives but also create a climate of fear and insecurity in the affected communities. They take advantage of the porous borders in the region to bring in weapons, which are then used in the conflict. The availability of weapons further escalates the violence and makes it more difficult to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Responding, a Police officer posted to Yelewata police Station had this to say:

The activities of these criminals have made it difficult for this conflict between farmers and herders to end. These criminals are found on both conflicting sides and operate as if they are representing the interest of either the farmers or herders. They are the ones who often attack communities with the sole aim of looting properties and these attacks are credited to either the farmers or herders which create tension and reprisal attacks. They are also involved in kidnappings to collect ransom, smuggling arms and selling them to both sides of the conflicting parties and giving information about the activities of both the farmers and herders. All these activities have further exacerbated the conflict leading to more loss of lives and properties (KII, 2023)

The activities of these criminal gangs have made it challenging for the government and security agencies to effectively address the farmers-herders conflict. Their presence complicates the identification of the root causes of the conflict and hinders efforts to find lasting solutions. Findings on the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict are in line with the earlier findings of Ojiah (2022), and Okoro (2018) who found that the conflict between farmers and herders is primarily over land and resources, however, there have been increasing involvement of criminal gangs in perpetrating violence and exacerbating tensions in these communities. The gangs reportedly engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery and other forms of criminal activities that contribute to the attacks on farmers and herders.



**Table 9: The Impact of Criminal Gang Activities on the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Frequency N=368</b>	<b>Percentage %=100</b>
Increase Violence	128	34.8
Spread of Fear and Mistrust	82	22.3
Displacement of communities	68	18.5
Impeding Conflict Resolution Efforts	55	15.0
Exacerbating Existing Tensions	23	6.3
Others	12	3.3

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

The table above presents data on the impact of the activities of criminal gangs on the farmers/herders conflict in the study area. Study findings indicated that 34.8% representing 128 of the respondents stressed that the activities of criminal gangs have increased violence within communities in the study area, 22.3% (82) of the respondents maintained that the activities of criminal gangs spread fear and mistrust among and between the conflicting parties while 18.5% (68) of the respondents pointed to the displacement of communities as the major impact of the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict, 15% (55) of the respondents pointed to impending conflict resolution efforts, 6.3% (23) of the respondents said the activities of criminal gangs exacerbate existing tension and 3.3% (12) of the respondents pointed to other impacts of criminal gang activities in the farmer/herders conflict in Guma Local Government Area.

Respondents in key informant interviews collaborated on the views of the other respondents and stressed that the activities of criminal gangs in the conflict between farmers and herders have an enormous negative impact on the security situation of people and the communities involved. They lamented that the activities of these criminal elements are one of the major reasons why the conflict has become protracted.

The activities of these criminal gangs according to the respondents have rather increased the rate of violence in the conflict. They usually hide under the umbrella of helping either of the conflicting parties to perpetuate criminal activities that benefit their selfish interest. One of the respondents maintained that the incessant killings and snatching of bikes which is assumed to be carried out by



herdsmen are most times perpetuated by these criminal elements. They kill people collect their motorbikes and sell them in neighbouring Nassarawa state. The activities of these gangs according to respondents have also spread fear and mistrust among the people.

A Pastor with the NKST Church in Udei, Guma Local Government Area had this to say

The activities of these criminals always put much fear in us and people around the communities. You know anytime they rub and kill herdsmen or steal their cows, they will always come for reprisal attacks. Because of this, once we notice the movement of cows in an unusual manner that means the criminals have gone to rustle the herders' cow. We will have to run and take refuge in other places for some time because the Fulani people will always come in search of their cows and they come fully armed killing anybody at sight (KII, 2023)

Respondents further, the clergy man stressed that criminal gangs often have a vested interest in perpetuating conflicts as it allows them to continue their illegal activities with less interference. Their presence and involvement can hinder efforts to resolve disputes peacefully and find sustainable solutions

A community leader in Umenger Village stated thus:

Those criminal elements make their living out of the conflict so they are always against any efforts that will bring the crises to an end. I remember recently there was a peace meeting between farmers and herdsmen here in Daudu which was converged by Traditional rulers on both sides and security agencies to find lasting solutions to the conflict. It was a huge success and both parties agreed to seize fire and there was relative calmness that lasted over a month. There was no reported killing or destruction of properties on either side for a considerable period of time until some of these criminal elements went and rustled cattle from the herdsmen. The herdsmen believed that act was coming from the farmers which was a breach of the agreement. They however launched a reprisal attack and that was the re-emergence of the conflict (KII, 2023)

Ojo and Akinola (2020) earlier in their studies found that the criminal gangs' activities in Benue State have had a significant impact on the ongoing conflict between farmers and herdsmen. These activities have exacerbated the existing tensions and contributed to the escalation of violence in the region.



**Table 10: Measures that can mitigate the Activities of Criminal Gangs in the Farmers-Herders Conflict in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State**

Measures	Frequency N=368	Percentage %=100
Community Engagement and Dialogue	102	27.7
Strengthen Law Enforcement	96	26.1
Disarmament & Demobilisation	83	22.6
Economic Empowerment	31	8.4
Media and Public Awareness	38	10.3
Rehabilitation and Reintegration	18	5.0

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

Table 10 presents data on the measures that can be put in place to mitigate the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict in the Guma Local Government Area. Findings of the study revealed that 27.7% (102) of the respondents opined that community engagement and dialogue can help curtail the involvement of these criminal elements in the conflict, 26.1% representing 96 of the respondents pointed to strengthening law enforcement, 22.6% (83) of the respondents said disarmament and demobilization of the criminals will be the best approach while 8.4% (31) of the respondents suggested economic empowerment, 10.3% (38) of the respondents pointed to media and public awareness and 5% (18) of the respondents stressed that rehabilitating and reintegrating the criminal gangs into the society will be the best measure to stamp out the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict.

Interviews with security agencies, and traditional and religious leaders also had similar responses on the best measures that can stamp out criminal gangs in the study area. Most of the interviewees believed that community engagement and dialogue between the farmers and herders in fishing out these criminal elements would go a long way in addressing the problem. They also lamented the absence of security personnel in most of the crisis communities saying strengthening law enforcement by way of bringing in more security personnel to the affected communities will go a long way in mitigating the conflict.



## Conclusion

Criminal gangs play a significant role in exacerbating the conflict between farmers and herders in Guma Local Government Area. The research found that criminal gangs, often composed of armed individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, exploit the existing tensions between farmers and herders for their gain. These gangs engage in activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping, and extortion, which further escalate the conflict. The presence of criminal gangs has led to an increase in violence and loss of lives in the region. Farmers and herders, who were once able to peacefully coexist, are now pitted against each other due to the actions of these criminal elements. Additionally, the research highlighted that the involvement of criminal gangs has hindered efforts to find peaceful resolutions to the conflict. The gangs often operate with impunity, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to address the situation effectively. This lack of accountability further perpetuates the cycle of violence and exacerbates the conflict.

## Policy Recommendations

This study investigated the perennial and solution-defied, thus far, the crisis between farmers and herders in majorly central Nigeria, particularly in Guma Local Government Area in Benue State. The findings underscore the dynamics and complexity of the situation and the need to strategically evolve a holistic time-tested and sustainable solution. Therefore, it recommends the following measures to address the imbroglio:

- i. A multi-faceted approach is required, including improved security measures, community engagement, and socio-economic interventions to address the root causes of the conflict. Existing regulations on the possession of arms should be strengthened to prevent the acquisition of weapons by criminal gangs in Nigeria. The National Assembly should promulgate laws that should be implemented by statutory security agencies such as the police. The police should be adequately funded and provided with modern technology gadgets to enhance their performance in curbing the activities of criminal gangs in the farmers-herders conflict. For example, high-profile drones designed for rough terrains, including thick forests, hills and valleys must be deployed to facilitate the detection, neutralization and arrest of criminal gangs



masquerading as bandits, kidnappers, terrorists, and involved in the farmers-herders conflict.

Robust community engagement is also required to assist the police in tackling the menace of farmers-herders conflict, and the involvement of criminal gangs who take advantage of the crisis for economic gains. In other words, police-community relations should be strengthened to encourage people to volunteer information on the activities of criminal gangs, which would also help the police in preventing criminal elements from hijacking the volatile conflict situation. As the majority of those interviewed in the study pointed out, community engagement and dialogue between the Farmers and Herders would assist security agencies in detecting and arresting the criminal elements who engage in wanton property destruction, maiming and killings of innocent people on both sides of the conflict.

- ii. Socio-economic interventions and actionable steps are crucial to address the root causes of the farmers-herders conflict, both nationally and specifically in the Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The conflict between farmers and Fulani herders in Guma has led to various socio-economic impacts, including loss of lives, property destruction, and displacement of people. Therefore, efforts to address the farmers-herders conflict should focus on promoting peaceful coexistence through dialogue, supporting livelihoods through sustainable practices like ranching, and ensuring security for all involved parties, all aimed at individual and community empowerment and resilience.
- iii. To combat the issue of criminal gangs acquiring weapons, the Nigerian government could consider strengthening border controls, increasing penalties for illegal firearms possession, improving the efficiency of licensing procedures, and investing in better training and equipping security forces to detect and intercept illicit weapons shipments. Further, addressing the underlying socio-economic issues driving young people towards criminal activity would help reduce the demand for weapons among criminal gangs. Youth especially those living in rural communities should be given an enabling environment and a level-playing ground for skills acquisition, and supported



with soft interest-free loans to enable them to engage in any business or trade of their choice. As the theory anchoring this study demonstrates, deprivation or lack of access to incompatible interests leads to frustration and aggression resulting in violence. Therefore, youth empowerment, if genuinely and judiciously implemented would avert the propensity for criminality because it would enhance self-sufficiency and sustainability in the short and long-run.

- iv. It is worth noting that the unregulated trade in conventional weapons by governments has led to weapons finding their way into the hands of terrorist organisations, criminal gangs, and others. Therefore, the government and its agencies should do an in-house cleansing by ensuring that its activities are guided by the very laws they make as this would prevent others from flaunting the laws on the arms trade, acquisition and use in the country. The government should make deliberate and sustained efforts aimed at strengthening existing legal frameworks on the prohibition and use of illegal firearms. Those who flaunt the laws must be made to face its consequences regardless of their class and status within society.

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