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POLICY BRIEF

DEEP-ROOTED CAUSES OF FARMER–HERDER CONFLICTS AND IMPACT ON LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Case studies from Sudan, Nigeria and Mali

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Key messages

- **Complex root causes:** Farmer–herder conflicts are deeply rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political and economic factors. They are driven by diminishing pastoral mobility, contested land and water access, agricultural expansion and climate change. These factors exacerbate tensions between farming and pastoralist communities.
- **Impact on livelihoods and food security:** The ongoing conflicts significantly disrupt livelihoods, leading to decreased agricultural productivity, loss of access to essential resources and increased food insecurity. Vulnerable groups, particularly youth and women, suffer most from these disruptions, as they often have limited economic opportunities from other livelihoods beyond traditional farming or herding.
- **Gender dynamics in conflict:** Women and youth are frequently marginalised in conflict resolution processes. While the literature often presents them as victims, their potential as peace-makers and active participants in conflict resolution is largely unacknowledged. Gender roles shape experiences and responses to the conflicts, with differing impacts based on gender and age.
- **Polarisation and violence:** Conflicts lead to increased animosity between groups, resulting in repeated outbreaks of violence that can spiral out of control. This enmity is often passed down to younger generations, perpetuating cycles of distrust and hostility that hinder peace-building efforts.
- **Need for inclusive governance and solutions:** Effective resolutions to farmer–herder conflicts require inclusive governance approaches that actively involve women and youth in decision-making. There is a strong need to address land allocation and resource management collaboratively, ensuring that both farmers and pastoralists can co-exist sustainably.

Introduction

Farmer–herder conflicts in Africa have received increased attention in recent years in the media, academic circles and policy-making contexts, with attendant concerns over growing and intensifying levels of conflict within and between groups (Flintan et al., 2021). However, despite this, a systematic literature review of farmer–herder conflicts identified only a few primary in-depth studies. The review also found that both women and youth are underrepresented in these studies. Key hotspots for farmer–herder conflicts include Sudan, Nigeria and Mali, where the literature suggests that causes are many and complex (Nassef et al., 2023). In response, the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) initiated a series of in-depth studies to explore these issues. This brief summarises the reports of these studies, the full versions of which can be found at Sulieman (2024), Momale (2024) and Ba and Ba (forthcoming).

Case studies on farmer–herder conflicts

This series of studies sought to understand the root causes and impacts of farmer–herder conflicts through a food production system and political economy lens, emphasising relations to and impacts on food systems while recognising the politicised nature of these conflicts (Flintan et al., 2023).

The studies combined focus group discussions (FGDs) with key informant interviews (KIIs), allowing for the triangulation of perspectives, identification of underlying factors and detailed analysis of conflict dynamics. Research was undertaken between 2023 and 2025. In Sudan, the study took place in Azaza Sogora Village, Gadarif State; in Nigeria, in Jangargari Ward, Awe Local Government Area, Nasarawa State; and in Mali, in Sio Commune, Mopti Region. All were chosen for their known history of farmer–herder conflicts.

Twenty-four group discussions of between 6–15 people were undertaken in Nigeria, and ten in Sudan and six in Mali due to security issues. At least eight mixed KIIs were also conducted in each country. Participatory research appraisal tools were used to initiate and frame the discussions, including stakeholder relationship mapping, timelines and conflict trees.

Drivers and conflict dynamics

Across all case studies, farmer–herder conflicts are driven by shrinking pastoral mobility, contested land and water access, agricultural expansion, livestock corridor obstruction, and climatic and demographic pressures. Structural, circumstantial and climatic factors fuel a complex conflict dynamic, with profound consequences for local

At the Niamana Livestock Market, in Bamako, Mali.
Photo credit: ILRI/Stevie Mann.

production systems and livelihoods in a context marked by multiple vulnerabilities. Far from being merely resource-use tensions, these conflicts are rooted in historical, institutional, economic and security dynamics, with one root cause being the tenure insecurity and political marginalisation of pastoralists. The erosion of local governance, the limited effectiveness of state justice, the weakening of traditional authorities, and the growing influence of armed groups all contribute to maintaining conflict, as one respondent in Mali described:

> 'Rural areas used for farming and pastoralism used to be very large in the past, and there were not as many people. Some household heads could have two or even three fields. Today, the available space has significantly decreased due to family growth and the arrival of outsiders. Even the village chief's clan, which used to allocate land, now finds itself facing a shortage.' (Mali - KII_MF_H)

In Azaza Sogora village, Sudan, core structural drivers have transformed seasonal disputes into year-round conflicts between smallholder farmers and Fallata pastoralists settling near farms and in forests such as Wed Daffta. These drivers are large-scale agricultural expansion, land grabbing, inadequate livestock corridors, loss of communal rangelands, deforestation, climate variability, increased livestock, inflows of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and deteriorating security since 2023. Farmers and herders have differing opinions about the root causes of the conflict (Figure 1 and 2). Conflict triggers are livestock trespassing on fields before crops are harvested, blocked access to water and grazing areas, and deliberate field encroachment on livestock routes and in forests, as one group discussion participant said:

> 'The main problem is that the Wed Daffta Forest, which is a natural pasture area, has been cultivated. Agriculture has expanded at the expense of natural pasture. The forest is a resting place and considered as a small butana [grazing land]. The pastoralists were staying the entire rainy season period around Azaza Sogora and some of them went to the butana. Now the resting place has been cultivated, which is the reason for the narrowing of the pastoral area, so there is a lot of encroachment and friction.' (Sudan: FGD_FM_M)

FIGURE 1. CONFLICT TREE DRAWN IN AN FGD IN AZAZA SOGORA VILLAGE (FGD_FMF_Y)

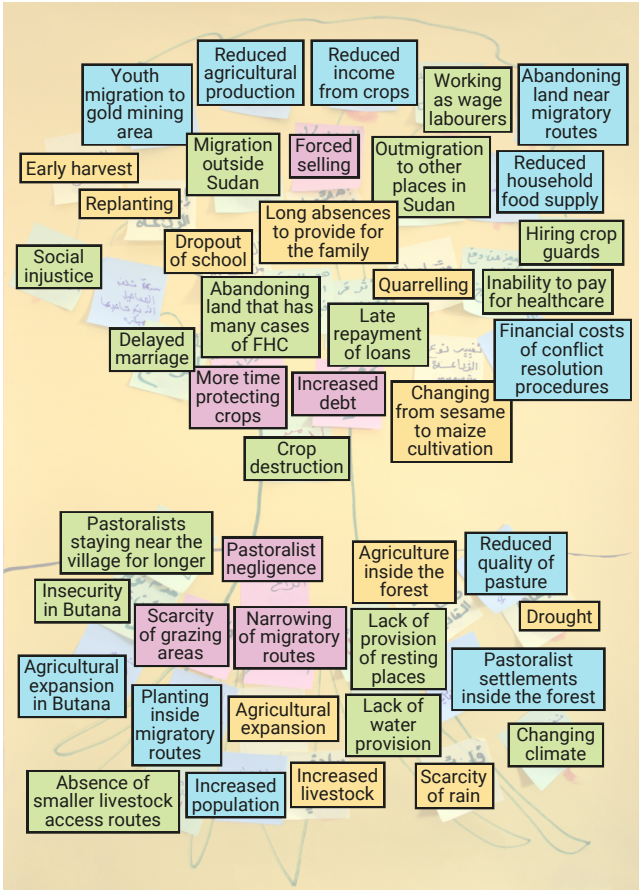


Photo credit: Hussein M. Sulieman

In Jangargari Ward, Nasarawa State, Nigeria, the root causes of the underlying contested access to grazing routes are new or fallow lands and floodplains, farmland expansion, weak governance, boundary disputes, criminality and climate change. There were cyclical conflict spikes in the 1980s, a sharp escalation around 2013–2015, a further surge during the 2017–2023 'open-grazing' enforcement in Benue, and relative calm from mid-2023 as politics shifted (Figure 3). Farming and herding have resumed in Jangargari but tensions persist. The conflicts are mainly disputes over land and water resources, with triggers including the destruction of crops by livestock and the blocking of herders from stock routes and grazing areas. If left unresolved, these disputes have the potential to escalate into violent conflicts.

FIGURE 2. CONFLICT TREE DRAWN BY FALLATA PASTORALISTS IN AN FGD (FGD_PM_M)

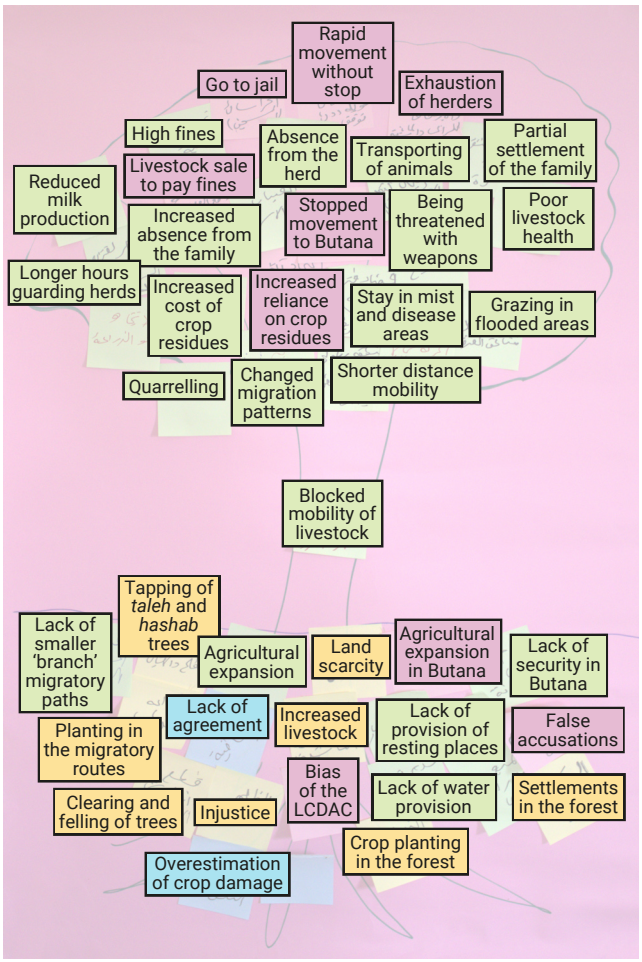
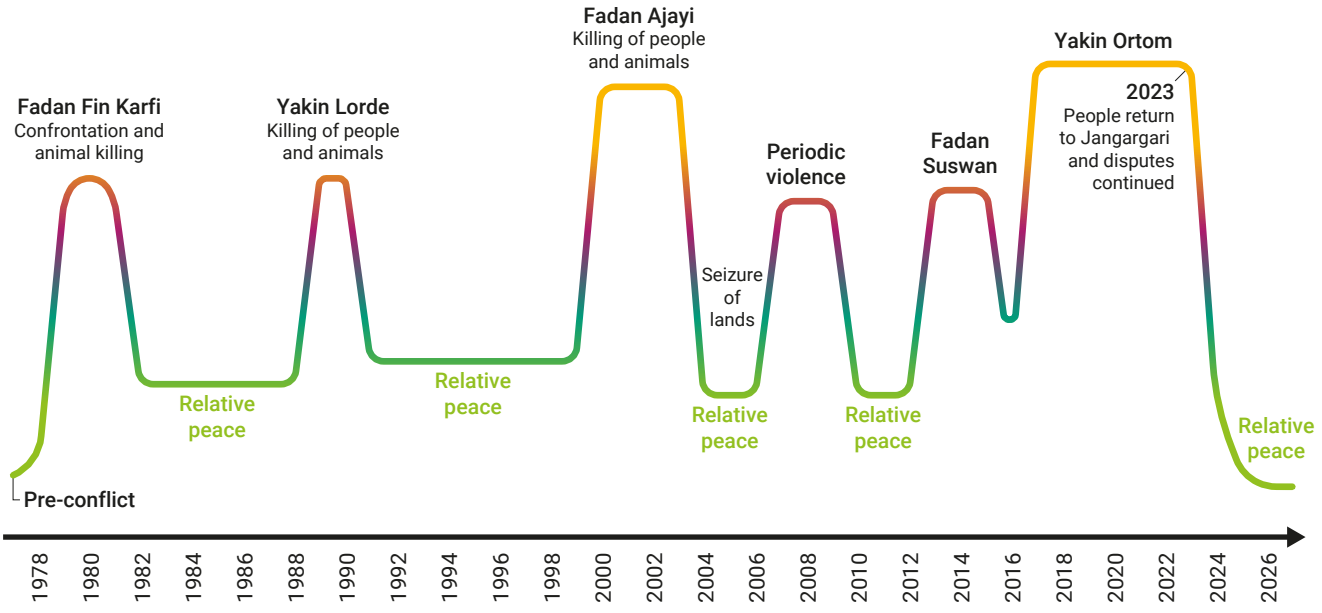


Photo credit: Hussein M. Sulieman

In Sio Commune in Mali, we studied a set of nine conflict cases. These found interactions at various levels feeding off and influencing each other resulting in a highly complex, constantly changing, unsettled and insecure situation. Disputes are militarised and prolonged by a series of factors that include reduced regular flooding, soil degradation, fewer water points, progressive obstruction of transhumance corridors by rice schemes, contested informal land access, and weakened customary governance combined with institutional failures and a persistent security crisis, including the influence of jihadist groups and self-defence militias. With the absence of state justice rules and weak coordination and administrative structures, it is the jihadist groups that maintain territorial, political and religious control over agro-pastoralist areas and exploit pastoralist resources.

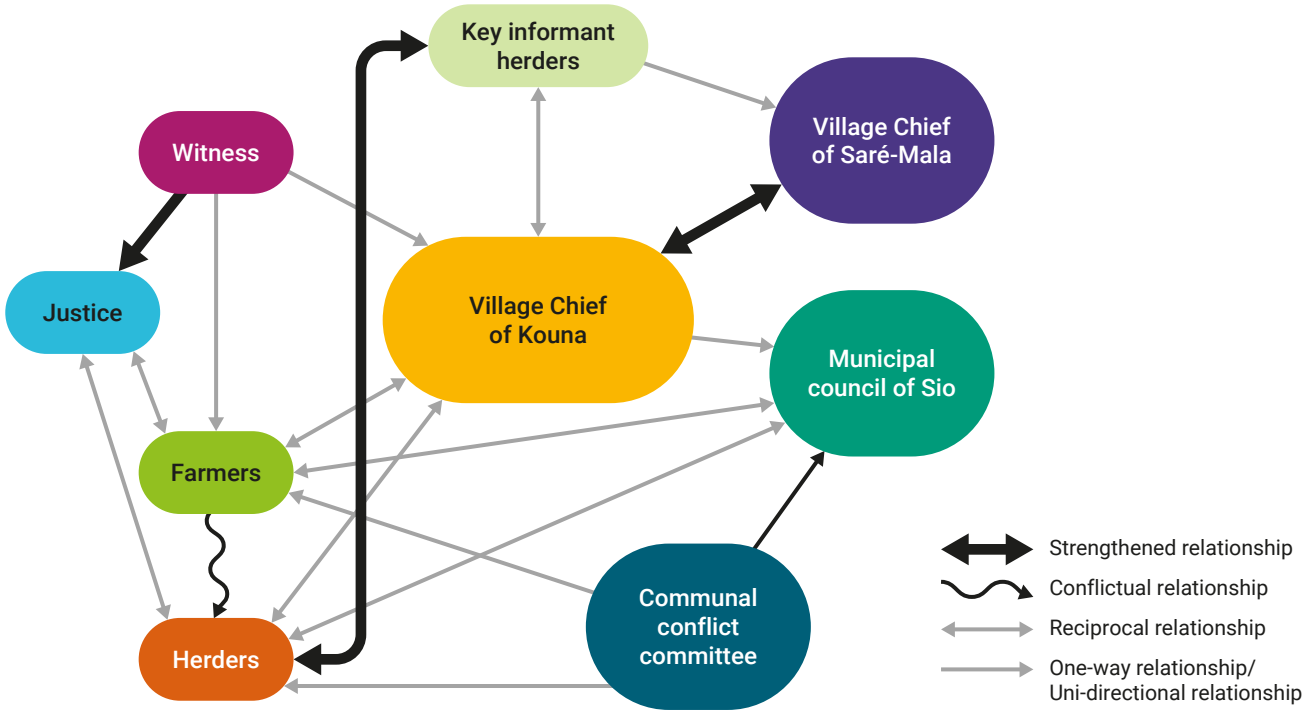
Structural pressures are compounded by the erosion of traditional mediating institutions, perceived biases or capture of state services and the judiciary, and the exploitation of local grievances by jihadist groups and self-defence militias. These factors militarise disputes, impose parallel rules and enforce access restrictions. The entanglement of land tenure issues, socio-spatial changes, environmental transformations, persistent insecurity, and the weakening of customary authorities sustains a climate of tension among natural resource users. As observed in Sio, this reflects broader conflict dynamics throughout the Inner Niger Delta.

FIGURE 3. CONFLICT AND PEACE IN JANGARGARI, 1978–2023



Source: Generated from FGDs with Hausa, Tiv and Fulani herders in Jangargari, 2024

FIGURE 4. STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SARA-MALA CONFLICT, SIO COMMUNE, MALI AND RELATIONS BETWEEN THEM



Source: Authors' data from FGDs and KIIs

Impacts on food security, livelihoods and the environment

Conflicts produce multi-dimensional losses for both farmers and pastoralists and erode ecosystems and markets, resulting in food and human insecurities.

In Azaza Sogora, Sudan, farmers reported crop destruction, forced early harvesting, higher production and guarding costs, loan defaults, asset sales and food insecurity, while pastoralists faced heavy fines, forced sales of productive animals, imprisonment of herders, reduced herd productivity (milk and births) and, increasingly, a greater reliance on crop residues and wage labour. As one pastoralist said:

> 'The conflict affects our livelihoods by selling a large number of animals to pay the fines. We consider our livestock belong to farmers and we are only hired shepherds, as we sell livestock and pay fines.' (FGD_PF_Y)

In Jangargari Ward, Nigeria, repeated displacement of both the Fulani pastoralists and farmers and livestock losses have resulted in loss to milk, local market collapse, falling crop yields, deforestation, soil degradation, rising poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and loss of women's income from the milk and ghee trade. Other effects on women include loss of income, increased dependency, loneliness, displacement, malnutrition in children, and mental health problems. As one young farmer said:

> 'Before there was food in abundance for the family and for sale and we experienced bumper harvests, but because of the conflicts there is an issue of food security. I was harvesting more than 10 bags of maize, but since the conflict I barely get enough to feed my family.' (MF_FGD_Jangargari_FMY)

In Sio, Mali, we recorded violent incidents, arrests and legal costs, deaths, displacement of thousands of households, dramatic rice yield declines (a reported fall from ~60 to 10–15 rice bags/ha), reduced pastoral mobility, market disruptions, and large-scale field abandonment under armed control. These factors further increase pressures on accessible land and push land users together, creating tensions.

Gender and youth

Within these contexts, conflicts affect women and youth differently.[1] In Sudan's Azaza Sogora, both pastoralist and farmer women tend to be excluded from public decision-making processes and have less information about what is going on. Conflict increases their daily workloads forcing them to seek day-wage work and suffer reduced food security. Youth, especially young men, face out-migration, prolonged guarding duties, delayed marriage and psychosocial strain.

In Jangargari in Nigeria, women are losing income from dairy trade, youth unemployment and psychosocial trauma alongside harmful coping strategies that include relocation and environmental degradation. The youth are the most affected in terms of loss of life as they are most engaged in farming activities and moving with animals. However, youths are rarely involved in conflict management and decision-making processes, except where they are cooperating across ethnic and socioeconomic divides.

In Mali's Sio Commune, women and youth face increased economic insecurity, recruitment risks, displacement, and a severe erosion of trust between communities and with state institutions. Local agreements are fragile and lack legitimacy. In all areas, social cohesion is undermined and rivalries between land users and within groups has increased.

Governance, mediation and coping strategies

Formal institutions are seen as slow or biased, while customary mechanisms and ad hoc coping strategies persist. Customary institutions have always played an important role, but they have weakened due to external and internal influences, including challenges from government and youth keen to find respect and authority in rapidly changing and increasingly exposed societies.

In Azaza Sogora, customary mediators (*ajawid, omdas*) remain central because they are relatively quick and inexpensive, whereas the local crop damage assessment committee and the police are perceived to be slow and biased towards farmers.

Ways to avoid conflict include night-guarding livestock, hiring transport to bypass agricultural zones, moving herds, changing cropping calendars, and limited diversification into microfinance or mechanised inputs.

The existing land administration in the Jangargari community in Nigeria is generally informal, with the village and district heads exerting substantial influence. Even though the leaders claim they do not sell land, this is rapidly changing and even the traditional leaders are implicated in direct land sales. The authority of the village and district head over land transactions is currently being challenged: many youths are beginning to sell land and carry out transactions as a source of income, with land being sold to commercial farmers from Awe and Lafia. There is also growing discord among the Tiv and Fulani communities over the monopoly of land transactions by Hausa leaders.

In Sio, Mali, the gradual erosion of traditional authority in land governance and the declining legitimacy of community-based mediation mechanisms further complicate conflict resolution. Some armed groups have exploited local grievances to present themselves as alternative sources of protection and justice. Thus, they undermine social cohesion and destabilise long-standing community agreements. Local peace initiatives led by actors such as the non-governmental organisation Humanitarian Dialogue have produced several agreements and monitoring committees since 2020. These give examples of local mediation but without broader institutional legitimacy and security this is fragile.

Implications for prevention and resolution of farmer–herder conflicts: (re)strengthened governance is key

Based on these findings, we can see the prerequisites for sustainable conflict prevention and restored social cohesion as being hybrid, context-sensitive governance approaches that combine: revived and inclusive dialogue spaces, strengthened local institutions and customary forums, impartial state support (administration, justice, technical services), and development assistance to bolster the resilience

1 Deeper discussion on women and youth can be found in Nassef et al. (2025a) and Nassef et al. (2025b).

of both farming and pastoral systems. Recognition and strengthening of legal pluralism that allows those seeking land and resource access or tenure security protection or recourse can provide options in the ever-changing political contexts in which land and other resources are negotiated. In particular, women and youth need to be part of these structures and dialogue.

In Sudan, national government is neither paying enough attention nor giving serious consideration to farmer–herder conflicts, leaving their resolution to local actors. The state government, local government administrations and traditional rulers need to take a more proactive role. They need to focus on addressing the current levels of poverty and promoting peaceful co-existence by strengthening conflict resolution interventions and ensuring a more equitable distribution of land and other resources.

Respondents in Jangargari, Nigeria, highlighted the need to clarify land boundaries and land rights, and improve land governance, demarcating grazing reserves and stock routes, restoring markets and infrastructure (roads, bridges, boreholes), reviving veterinary and extension services, providing livelihood alternatives and youth training, including women and youth in peace processes, and strengthening justice and accountability.

In Sio, Mali, fractured and weakened administrative and political structures have created a space for jihadist groups to step in and take control of land and pastoralist resources, with this likely to lead to further fracturing. Since 2020, strengthened customary forums, technical services and development assistance to restore resilience of both farming and pastoral systems, proven local mediation efforts (e.g. local conventions) and monitoring committees remain fragile in the absence of either impartial state support or revived inclusive dialogue.

Without holistic governance-focused interventions, the frequency, severity and socioeconomic consequences of farmer–herder conflicts will only worsen. Across all case studies the responses that are recommended involve hybrid, inclusive governance that recognises customary land rights, participatory land use planning, strengthened pastoral representation, inclusive conflict resolution, and investment in pastoral and agricultural climate resilience. This will require collaboration across stakeholders, and co-designed complementary interventions.

While governments have a clear role in such interventions, the relational interfaces between government and others building on existing efforts need to be strengthened. Furthermore, for the exclusion of women and youth from conflict resolution and decision-making bodies to be addressed, it will be crucial to promote their participation in such processes, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed.

Nomads with herd of camel, sheep and goats pulling out water of a deep fountain in the desert, Bayuda, Sudan, 2017.
Photo credit: Claudiovidri/shutterstock

Policy recommendations

Based on the case study findings, policy-makers should look to:

1. **Implement inclusive land governance and resource management:** Design and enforce inclusive land allocation systems that consider the needs of both farmers and pastoralists. This includes recognising the need for grazing areas and water resources while promoting gender-sensitive land rights initiatives to empower women in land ownership and decision-making.

2. **Enhance collaboration between farmers and pastoralists:** Foster community-based initiatives that encourage resource sharing and cooperation. Establish community forums to build trust and facilitate dialogues that include women's voices, ensuring equitable representation in discussions about land use and conflict resolution.

3. **Support livelihood opportunities and economic resilience:** Invest in skill-building and provide access to resources for women and youth, expanding opportunities beyond subsistence agriculture. This effort should include creating pathways for diverse income sources, thus enhancing economic stability, reducing vulnerability to conflict and building greater economic resilience.

4. **Promote youth inclusion in conflict resolution:** Establish formal and informal platforms that include young men and women in conflict resolution processes. This involvement ensures that their unique perspectives, experiences and grievances can be addressed in community dialogues, enhancing the overall effectiveness of conflict management strategies.

5. **Leverage digital technologies for engagement:** Utilise digital platforms to amplify the voices of youth in decision-making and peace-building efforts. These technologies can provide innovative ways for youth to participate actively in governance and community initiatives, thus integrating modern communication strategies into traditional conflict management processes.

These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and sustainable approach to resolving farmer–herder conflicts by actively engaging youth and women, enhancing economic stability, and fostering cooperative governance structures.

Conclusion

The reports on farmer–herder conflicts reveal the urgent need for inclusive and sustainable solutions that recognise the unique experiences of women and youth. Despite their critical roles, these groups are often marginalised in both conflict dynamics and resolution processes. The complexity of conflicts necessitates a nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic, environmental and historical factors at play. Engaging women and youth in governance and decision-making can enhance community resilience and foster more effective conflict resolution strategies. Prioritising their involvement will lead to a sustainable co-existence and better management of resources, ultimately addressing the root causes of farmer–herder tensions.

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agropastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, nongovernmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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