



SPARC

Supporting Pastoralism
and Agriculture in Recurrent
and Protracted Crises

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Nigeria. Photo: Mercy Corps

RESEARCH BRIEF

CONFLICT IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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Introduction

Farmers and pastoralists in the Nigerian Middle Belt states of Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Kogi and Plateau are living with conflict, such as between farmers and farmers or criminal gangs who engage in kidnapping for ransom. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, media and some experts warned that it might 'wreak havoc in fragile states and trigger widespread unrest' ([International Crisis Group, 2020](#)). We wanted to hear from farmers and pastoralists in these states about how Covid-19 measures like

lockdowns were impacting social relationships and incidences of conflict: what, if any, changes in social cohesion and conflict were they experiencing against the backdrop of pandemic control measures and the other shocks they routinely deal with?

We interviewed 62 individuals across these states in September 2020 to get a snapshot of social cohesion and conflict experiences since April 2020. The interviews were nearly evenly split between herders and farmers.

Conflict contexts before Covid-19

Conflict in pastoral and agro-pastoral areas varies in terms of causes, type, participants and duration. While issues of land tenure and control over access to and use of natural resources influence many forms of conflict, roots also lie in governance, unequal socioeconomic development, ethno-political marginalisation and histories (Peters et al., 2020).

Conflict or fear of it are significant factors that have internally displaced thousands across the north-west, central and east of the country since 2014 (IOM, 2020), including in the states where we conducted interviews. An estimated 2.14 million people in the northeast of the country (including Adamawa state) and 575,000 in the northcentral and northwest (including Benue, Kaduna and Plateau states) have been internally displaced by conflict or fear of insecurity since the last quarter of 2020 alone, according to the IOM's [Displacement Tracking Matrix](#).

Insecurity across the Middle Belt of Nigeria is driven by a myriad of conflict actors (OSJI, 2010; Taft and Haken, 2015):

- farmer–herder and farmer–farmer conflict and subsequent establishment of vigilante groups to protect communities;
- criminal actors linked with cattle-rustling, armed robbery and, more recently, kidnap for ransom;
- elements of the Nigerian security and police forces, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), with histories of extrajudicial killings and human rights violations since the 1990s.

Violent conflict is fuelled by the wider availability of arms, arriving through regional and international smuggling networks (Freeman, 2020; Mangan and Nowak, 2019). In Adamawa, Benue and Plateau States, the violence is abetted through handmade 'craft' weapons (Nowak and Gsell, 2018).



Source: SPARC

Despite conflict challenges, a number of security and mediation efforts are underway. Before 2015, Boko Haram had a significant presence in the northeast of the country; regional military cooperation under the Multinational Joint Task Force has since reduced its range. Conflict mediation committees are being established by state and local governments to augment traditional community practices of conflict mediation; some are supported by [international initiatives](#) such as the [Managing Conflict in Nigeria Programme](#).

Government responses to Covid-19

The Nigerian government recognised the severity of Covid-19 early on, establishing the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 on 9 March 2020. The federal and state governments began containment and economic relief measures a few weeks later (see the timeline). The containment measures included market closures and bans on public gatherings and interstate travel; security agencies were granted the ability to enforce lockdowns. The federal government announced food aid and cash transfer measures to households on the National Social Registry and set up warehouses in different states to disperse food aid ([Dixit et al., 2020](#)).

Excessive force by security agencies during lockdown

Against the backdrop of Covid-19, there were incidences of excessive force by federal and state security agencies while enforcing lockdown measures. Extrajudicial killings, torture and unlawful detentions were reported between late March and early April; 10 of the 18 reported national extrajudicial Covid-19 enforcement killings were in Kaduna State ([NHRC, 2020](#)).

While the earlier incidences of security-force violence did not lead to protests during lockdown, widespread peaceful protests erupted on 7 October 2020 after reports of a murder by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was a unit of the Nigerian Police Force implicated in violence against civilians for a number of years ([Nairametrics, 2020](#)). Pockets of violent protest emerged as other perceived injustices against government handling of Covid-19 were raised, including around extent of aid delivery. Warehouses were broken into after reports that local politicians were hoarding food or giving it only to certain groups. The continued protests triggered new curfew measures in some states ([Al Jazeera, 2020](#)).

Experiences of social cohesion and conflict during Covid-19

Covid-19 lockdown measures and conflict incidence

"In our community we call it 'Covid-19' and 'Covid-20'. Covid-19 is the virus while Covid 20 is the war [community violence relating to land disputes within the Tiv tribe]. Both of them are wars and we are fighting against both." (Farmer, Benue State)

We asked interviewees how or if Covid-19 or government control measures were impacting social relations and incidences of conflict. Some interviewees said that social distancing rules and movement restrictions had disrupted both farming and trading; others perceived little impact. However, others accepted the measures as necessary: 'Government took measures that were effective and thank God, things are coming back to normal now' (Pastoralist, Kaduna State). None of the interviewees reported having direct experience with anyone in their social circle as contracting Covid-19. In general, people were more concerned with the longstanding challenges they faced rather than with the disease or Covid-19 measures themselves. Interviewees' perceptions highlight the importance of contextualising a single shock in areas where crises on top of crises are placing pressures on inter- and intra-group relations and livelihoods.

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Farmer, Benue State

In interview locations in Benue State, respondents highlighted two key longstanding conflict types: farmer–farmer conflicts between Tiv groups over land ownership, and conflicts between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders. Tiv–Tiv violence has been disrupting farming for a while, which some interviewees referred to as the 'crises'. Through farmer–farmer conflict, farming activities have suffered due to fears of attack, destruction of farm property and produce looting; some have been displaced. Tiv farmers in Benue also highlighted longstanding challenges with Fulani herders. Interviewees highlighted that these farmer–farmer and herder–farmer tensions had continued unchanged during Covid-19 and did not believe that these tensions could be resolved.

In Adamawa State, some land-owners had mixed perceptions about lockdown measures. One land owner thought that movement restrictions might have played a bit of a role in reduced farmer–herder interactions, and therefore conflict incidence, but that the relative peace might depend more on seasons than lockdown measures:

“Most of the conflicts are not experienced now, meaning this season. They start late October when farmers are harvesting. That’s when most of these conflicts occur. For now, there is no issue, but I can’t tell what will happen during harvest.” (Tailor and farmer, in Adamawa State)

Vigilante groups, armed groups and the pandemic

Vigilante groups, whether formed by a tribe or a town for protection, or external to an area, can play significant roles in security. We asked interviewees if/how vigilante group(s) activities had changed during the pandemic. Vigilante groups’ actions between April and September 2020 had mixed impacts on interviewees’ lives, even within the same location. Some interviewees perceived their local vigilante group in Makarfi, Kaduna, as providing protection and enforcing lockdown measures:

“They [vigilante groups] really played a vital role that deserves commendation. The police and vigilante groups did an impressive job. They were in charge of border protection and checkpoints mounted within communities. They protect people from entering or leaving Makarfi and its communities.” (Herder, Makarfi, Kaduna State)

Others in the same area did not have such good impressions of vigilante groups (which may not be the same groups referred to above):

“We suffered a lot in the hands of those vigilante groups... [t]hey insisted on the use of facemask, imposing curfew and restricting movements and punishment of offenders in the form of extortion because if you have money, just give them and pass... the lockdown order paved way for them to extort people.” (Farmer, Makarfi, Kaduna State)

Perceptions of aid on social cohesion

We also gauged perceptions around government response measures and aid. When it came to receiving government Covid-19 assistance, some of the interviewees’ responses resonated with media reports on the limited extent of food aid. Some in Benue

perceived inequalities in aid disbursement between conflicting Tiv groups:

“We have never received help from the government during this Covid-19 era, even when palliatives are provided, the people we are in conflict with divert goods to themselves... The indigenous people fighting us over land benefit more from any palliatives given by the government than we, the other people residing in the community.” (Farmer, Tiv community, Benue State)

“We have never received help from the government during this Covid-19 era, even when palliatives are provided, the people we are in conflict with divert goods to themselves...”

Farmer, Tiv community, Benue State

Other interviewees were less concerned with reports of unequal aid distribution, noting that no one in their area had received any external aid. More concerning to some was the general lack of assistance on longstanding issues:

“I can say that some farmers received palliatives like fertilisers while others did not. Like we Fulani here didn’t receive any palliative. What we are more concerned about is the health of our animals, then fertiliser for our farming practices and education of our children – we are still struggling to acquire a school here. We haven’t received any of the things I just mentioned.” (Fulani Herdsman, Kaduna State)

Other impacts on social cohesion

Beyond potential impacts on conflicts or vigilante-group activities, we wanted to know what other types of impacts the pandemic measures might be having on social relationships. Across the interview sites, people reported that social distancing measures had reduced their ability to gather for weddings or funerals, important social activities that build cohesion. Traditional meeting points such as markets and places of worship were also closed. In both Adamawa and Benue States, some interviewees reported that youths who were either unable to attend school due to closures, or unemployed due to curfews, had begun to engage in criminal activity.

However, where intra- or inter-group relationships had been strong before the pandemic, movement restrictions seem to have had little impact on social cohesion. The farmers and herders interviewed in Kogi State indicated that local elders and faith leaders were active in helping to resolve disputes and preached against violence

regardless of religious background. They noted that social cohesion between April and September had not been impacted by Covid-19 measures:

"We have been living peacefully all this while and relations have got better between us, not worse. We attend each other's social functions and try to assist each other by lending a helping hand wherever possible, be it financial, giving food to those in need or loaning cattle to a family member." (Herder, Kogi State)

Where conflict mediation programmes had been instituted before Covid-19, some interviewees noted their role in promoting peace during the pandemic. In Adamawa State, for example, the governor established a number of conflict mediation committees prior to the pandemic to bolster ward-level mediation committees:

"As of now, there are changes for the better because of the committee I mentioned before. Before, there was so many conflicts between herders and farmers... and farmers and farmers. But with the inauguration of the Governor's committee, a dialogue was reached and these conflicts seem to be down lately." (Farmer, Adamawa State)

"We have been living peacefully all this while and relations have got better between us, not worse."

Herder, Kogi State

Lessons for reducing conflict risk

The general sense among interviewees was that Covid-19 had not created new tensions. Where conflict was occurring, it had existed before the pandemic and was not perceived to have increased or decreased specifically due to pandemic measures. Longstanding

feelings of land tenure disadvantage and ethnic tension, and/or conflict mediation efforts, were deemed more important in shaping conflict during additional shocks such as Covid-19 than the shock itself. Our interviewees' different experiences resonate with early expert caution: '[It is not] guaranteed that the pandemic's consequences will be entirely or uniformly negative for peace and security' ([International Crisis Group, 2020](#)).

Non-governmental organisations, government and donors can more successfully reduce conflict risk regardless of shock by understanding background conflict contexts and supporting livelihoods, land tenure clarification and conflict mediation. Aid actors need steady approaches to conflict mediation that work to address longstanding concerns and bolster local mediation efforts, not reactive approaches.

Next steps

We will repeat the interviews with these individuals at regular intervals throughout SPARC, and expand the number of people interviewed to hear how they are experiencing social cohesion and conflict in the face of other shocks and understand what resilience actions they are taking to maintain their livelihoods. As we speak with more people, we will capture the different experiences of women and men and a broader range of age and ethnic groups. More diverse voices are necessary in order to capture the perspectives that shape and are shaped by wider contexts.

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