



Narratives in the media often support a simplistic notion of farmer-herder conflicts.

Photo: Stevie Mann/ ILRI

## Farmer-herder conflicts in Africa – dynamics and potential solutions

Farmer-herder conflicts in Africa are receiving increased attention together with concerns over increasing and intensifying tension between the two groups. However, the question arises whether such concerns are really justified. A review of the literature suggests that there is indeed sparse robust evidence of such claims. This article presents the results of a systematic scoping literature review from the last two decades on that topic and develops a framework with concrete recommendations for future research.

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Conflicts between farmers and herders are increasingly coming under the spotlight. For example, in 2018, the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui stated that “conflicts between herders and farmers on the continent take more lives than terrorism”, while a 2021 news article in *The Guardian* describes “violence linked to conflicts between farmers and herders across West and Central Africa has led to more than 15,000 deaths ... half of those have occurred since 2018, most of them in Nigeria, which has created the country’s deadliest security crisis.”

Public domain literature often presents the topic with inflammatory language and labelling of particular groups. The Fulani, the largest pastoralist group in West Africa, are referred to as “strangers” or “aliens”, or as a public danger. Often, this group is conflated with known terrorist organisations. The Global Terrorism Index for 2015 claims that Nigeria is home to “two of the five most deadly terrorist groups in 2014; Boko Haram and Fulani militants”, using a catch-all term to describe the Fulani. Additionally, conflict

incidents are presented inconsistently, with what is often a cacophony of causes and the farmers referred to as the victims and herders, with their pastoral, mobile way of life, as the assailants. Descriptions of the conflicts can be selective and tailored to particular actions or interventions, such as passing grazing bans to reign in pastoralists’ “indiscriminate grazing”, using degradation narratives to “legitimise and pave the way for agricultural investments and environmental conservation”, using scarcity narratives to justify decisions taken to better manage “underutilised” resources, securitising and politicising climate change by linking climate change-driven migration with violence and insecurity and, perhaps most dangerously, extremist groups and politicians using and manipulating farmer-herder grievances to further their own territorial or political objectives.

### Digging to identify the root causes

From 2022, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent

and Protracted Crises (SPARC) project funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and the CGIAR Initiatives on Fragility, Conflict and Migration, and Livestock and Climate, have been digging deeper into these issues.

As a first step, and in order to better understand what research is saying about farmer-herder conflicts, a systematic scoping literature review was undertaken. The review explored academic and think-tank literature on the root causes of farmer-herder conflicts to uncover any trends and potential gaps in our current understanding. The review was first conducted in English and then in French to ensure the inclusion of as many studies as possible, and the results were combined.

### Overall trends in published research

The search in *Science Direct* showed a marked increase in journal articles produced between 2000 and 2021, with around 10 produced in 2000 and more than 70 produced per year

between 2019 and 2022. This confirms the general consensus that interest in farmer-herder conflicts has grown significantly over the last two decades. Ninety-eight per cent of reviewed studies report that farmer-herder conflict is increasing in frequency, intensity, or both. However, most studies mention this as a general statement, and few show it as a research finding. All identified studies concentrate on West Africa and the East Horn of Africa, with the majority focused on West Africa, particularly Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Mali.

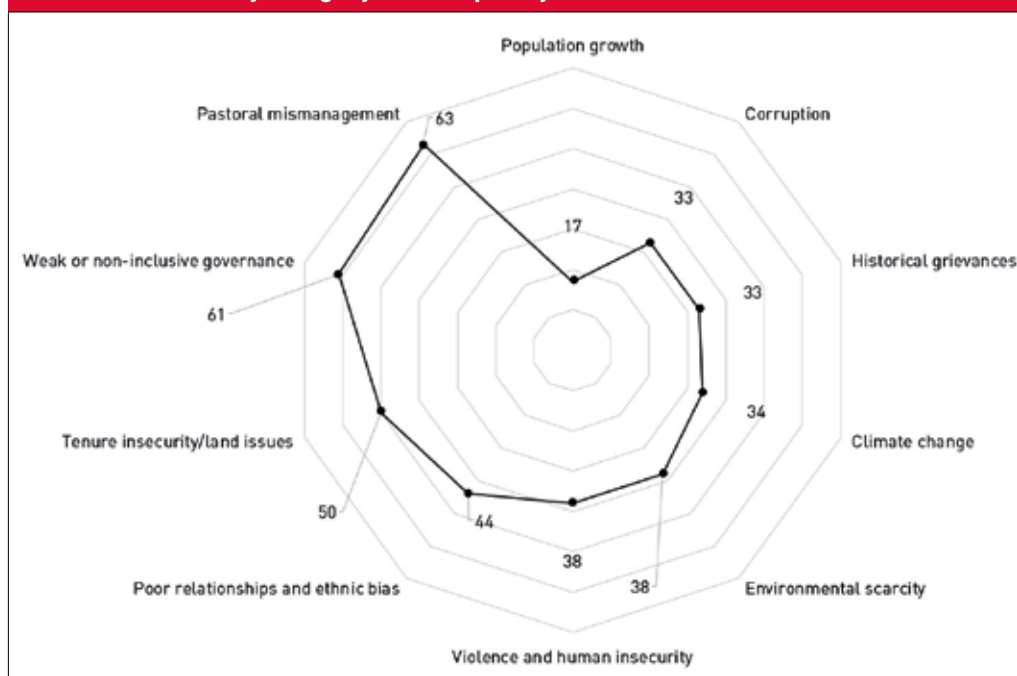
Neglect of the gender dimension of conflict has been acknowledged for some time, but still, nearly 20 years later, the role of women in conflict is not sufficiently discussed, particularly women's roles in promoting conflict or promoting peace. In this review, only 25 of the 88 articles and papers mentioned women in relation to the conflicts described. This suggests a continued gap in research.

Thirty-eight of the 88 publications mention youth, with 81 per cent of the articles/reports describing them as contributors to conflict, 50 per cent as victims and only 18 per cent as peacemakers. Although the studies did not emphasise the aspect, they explicitly referred to young men as being susceptible to recruitment into armed groups, forming vigilante groups for community protection, or tracking and returning stolen livestock, suggesting that the focus was on them and not on young women. No article included any specific description of youth indicating that they were talking about women or girls, pointing to a continued gap in the research. Additionally, we found no stand-alone research on the role of youth in conflict, indicating an area for further research.

While all studies reported land and natural resources conflict, most mention the link as a general statement like conflict or competition over land or water, a combination of the two. A handful of studies provided a deeper analysis. "Climate change" or "changing climate" was mentioned in 62 of the 88 papers (70 %).

All articles and papers identified multiple causes of farmer-herder conflict, with no paper citing a single cause. The most frequently cited cause categories were pastoral mismanagement, weak or non-inclusive governance, tenure insecurity, land issues, deteriorating relationships and ethnic bias. These were followed by environmental scarcity and violence (see Figure). Climate change, while a topic of general interest, did not feature in the top causes. While it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from these results, they do

**Causes of conflict by category and frequency of mention**



suggest that the causes most mentioned focus on governance, political and social factors of conflict rather than the more technical aspects of resource scarcity or climate change. This finding aligns with those from previous reviews. Additionally, the large number of articles that cite pastoral mismanagement as a cause of conflict (63 in all) suggest a simplistic reading of the conflicts that have deeper root causes found elsewhere, as well as likely influence of predominant narratives in the media.

### Conclusions and recommendations

While there has been a significant increase in attention given to farmer-herder conflicts over the last two decades, this review identified only a few primary studies. Though studies indicate increasing (or increasingly violent) tension between the two groups, most mention this as a general statement, and few provide robust evidence. This supports those researchers who refute the mantra of increasing conflict and call for more primary research and critical analysis. The review highlights the complex and multi-faceted nature of farmer-herder conflicts that cannot be simplified as one cause or another. Preliminary research from a Sudan local case study on farmer-herder conflicts in Gadarif State (see box on page 34) suggest similar conclusions.

The intricate web of causes suggests that researchers would benefit from a comprehensive framework in which to situate their research and better understand the underlying drivers

of specific farmer-herder conflicts. The core elements of this framework are:

1. **Interconnectedness of causes:** Farmer-herder conflicts are rarely driven by a single cause, but rather by a combination of factors that interact with each other at different levels. These causes range from governance issues to environmental changes, historical grievances and cultural biases. A well-structured framework would help researchers map these interconnected causes and visualise how they influence each other, aiding in identifying root causes and potential leverage points for conflict prevention and resolution.
2. **Contextual understanding:** Causes and their effects vary based on geographical, social, political, and cultural contexts. A robust framework would allow researchers to incorporate these contextual variables and develop a nuanced understanding of conflicts that goes beyond generalised narratives.
3. **Avoiding oversimplification:** Oversimplification causes, such as attributing conflicts solely to environmental scarcity or climate change, can hinder accurate analysis and effective solutions. A well-structured framework would discourage such oversimplification and encourage researchers to delve deeper into the underlying structural drivers of conflicts.
4. **Uncovering hidden stakeholders and causes:** There are clear gaps in the