INFLUENCE OF HERDERS-FARMERS CONFLICT ON PUPILS' ENROLMENT, RETENTION, AND COMPLETION OF BASIC EDUCATION IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Recently, farmers-herders in Benue state had a sour relationship with persistent conflict. The conflict erupted in the state at intervals with varying gravity, such as displacement of people, destruction of houses, schools, deaths, and loss of valuable items worth several million. The study examined the influence of herders-farmers conflict on pupils' enrolment, retention, and completion of basic education in Benue State, Nigeria. The study adopted descriptive survey method. The population of the study comprised all 4,486 basic school pupils in Benue State, Nigeria. A sample of 30 from 438 basic schools in three (3) local government areas under study was selected using a multistage sampling technique. A period of 10 years was used for the collection of data. The data collected from this study were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings of the study revealed, among others, that enrolment dwindled with increasing conflict, retention also declined with severity in conflict, as well as completion rates across three local government areas, especially in the years 2014, 2018, and 2020. The study concluded that the farmers-herders conflict in Benue State has influenced enrolment, retention, and completion of basic education. The study recommended, among others, that the international communities and the federal/state government should serve as an intermediary to resolve the continuous conflict.

Introduction

The world at large, and the African continent in particular, has long been characterized by recurring conflicts that date back to time immemorial. In recent decades, however, the nature and dynamics of these conflicts have evolved significantly. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly driven by factors such as greed, struggles for political dominance, competition over scarce resources, and the defense of cultural or ideological values. As a result, achieving peaceful coexistence within and among nations has become more complex and challenging than ever before. Nigeria serves as a prime example of a nation deeply affected by persistent and multifaceted conflicts. These conflicts are often rooted in ethnic diversity, religious differences, political rivalries, and economic interests. Historical records indicate that Nigeria experienced numerous ethnic and communal conflicts even before gaining independence; however, the frequency and intensity of these conflicts have escalated dramatically over the past six decades (Adegbami & Uche, 2015; Nwankwo, 2015).

The evolution of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria can be traced from internal rivalries

among groups to more overt and violent external confrontations. These conflicts are closely linked to struggles over political power, access to economic resources, land ownership, and socio-cultural dominance (Egbefo & Salihu, 2014). Ethnic and communal violence has had far-reaching consequences on the nation's economic stability, physical infrastructure, and human well-being. Despite numerous interventions by government agencies, community leaders, and private organizations, these conflicts have persisted, often yielding little or no lasting solutions (Joshua, 2017). The diversity inherent in many African states, rather than serving as a source of strength, has frequently manifested as a source of division and conflict, leading to the characterization of Africa as the "Problem Child of the World" (Onuoha, 2012).

Globally, many nations continue to grapple with different forms of conflict, resulting in significant loss of lives, destruction of property, and widespread insecurity. While it is noteworthy that the total number of war-related deaths has declined globally—from over 200,000 annually in the mid-20th century to about 84,000 between 1946 and 2016 (United Nations, 2020)—violent conflicts remain a persistent challenge. These conflicts are increasingly characterized by the involvement of non-state actors such as ethnic militias, insurgent groups, and terrorist organizations. Such groups often operate against state authority, contributing

to widespread destruction, displacement of populations, and breakdown of law and order. Furthermore, violent conflict has been identified as a major driver of terrorism, with over 90% of terrorism-related deaths occurring in countries experiencing ongoing conflict (UN Report, 2020).

In Nigeria, one of the most pressing contemporary conflicts is the recurring clash between farmers and herders, particularly involving cattle rustling and disputes over land use. These conflicts have significantly undermined community security and stability (Aun, 2019). They have also contributed to food insecurity and the displacement of large populations, thereby affecting various sectors, including education. The most prominent of these conflicts involve Fulani pastoralists and farmers from different ethnic backgrounds such as the Zarma, Hausa, and Mawri groups, especially in northern Nigeria. While some disputes within agro-pastoral communities are resolved peacefully through local authorities, others escalate into violent confrontations with devastating consequences (Blench, 2010).

Benue State, located in North-Central Nigeria, has been particularly affected by these conflicts. Historical records reveal that no decade since Nigeria's independence has been free from conflict in Benue State (Aun, 2022). The state has witnessed numerous tragic events stemming from ethnic tensions, political disagreements, and religious differences.

Created in 1976 during the military regime of General Murtala Muhammed, Benue State derives its name from the River Benue, the second-largest river in Nigeria. It shares boundaries with several states, including Nasarawa, Taraba, Kogi, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Cross River, and also has an international border with Cameroon. With a population of over 4.2 million people as recorded in the 2006 census, the state is predominantly agrarian and is widely known as the "food basket of the nation." Its major ethnic groups include the Tiv, Idoma, and Igede, alongside several minority groups (National Human Development Report, 2018).

Despite its agricultural richness, Benue State has been severely impacted by farmer-herder conflicts, which have disrupted farming activities and threatened livelihoods. One of the most significant consequences of these conflicts is the alarming rise in the number of out-of-school children. Globally, UNESCO (2018) reports that over 258 million children are out of school. In Nigeria, this figure has risen dramatically, reaching approximately 40.8 million, up from earlier estimates of 10 to 20 million (Akinpelu, 2021). Benue State alone accounts for about 603,803 out-of-school children, representing 29% of the affected population, placing it among the top ten states with the highest rates in the country (Akinpelu, 2021).

This situation has been partly attributed to the implementation of the anti-open grazing law in 2017 by the Benue State House of Assembly. The law, which restricts open grazing by herders, has been met with resistance, leading to increased violence, destruction of property, and loss of lives. These conflicts have disrupted communities, destroyed schools, and forced families to flee their homes, thereby limiting children's access to education.

The factors contributing to the rise in out-of-school children in Benue State are multifaceted. While the farmer-herder conflict plays a significant role, other contributing factors include poverty, child labor, early marriage, kidnapping, natural disasters, teenage pregnancy, long distances to schools, insecurity, gender inequality, disability, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. These factors collectively create barriers to education, making it difficult for children to enroll in and complete their schooling.

Education remains one of the most effective tools for reducing poverty and inequality in any society. It provides the foundation for sustainable development and economic growth (Domikel & Edward, 2014). Primary education, in particular, is critical as it equips individuals with basic literacy and numeracy skills, which are essential for personal and societal development (Bruns et al., 2003). It is the most accessible level of education globally and serves as the cornerstone for lifelong learning and development.

However, conflict has a direct negative impact on school enrolment, retention, and completion. In areas affected by violence, parents often prioritize the safety of their children over education. In Benue State, particularly in local government areas such as Guma, Logo, and Ukum, school attendance has been severely disrupted due to ongoing conflicts. Many children are forced to relocate, while others are kept at home for safety reasons, leading to low enrolment and high dropout rates (Ololo, 2017).

School enrolment refers to the number of pupils admitted into schools within a given period (Oguche et al., 2016). It is a key indicator of the viability and sustainability of educational institutions. Declining enrolment rates can lead to the closure of schools, particularly in rural areas where resources are already limited. In conflict-affected regions, the situation is even more dire, as existing students withdraw and new admissions decline drastically.

Retention, on the other hand, refers to the ability of schools to keep students enrolled until they complete their education. High retention rates indicate stability, while high attrition rates signal systemic challenges. In Benue State, many parents are forced to transfer their children to safer areas or withdraw them entirely due to insecurity. This disruption not only affects academic progress but also undermines the overall educational system.

Statement of the Problem

The herder-farmer conflict remains one of the localized conflicts that has existed and distorted the peace of people for years in Nigeria, having it source from land resources. Despite many years of efforts to resolve the conflict through corporate social organizations and government mediation, committees of enquiry, law courts, decrees and peace enforcement, the conflict still remains to be resolved. Traditional peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers has recently turned into quarrels and fights, resulting in mistrust and suspicion. Accordingly, both herders and farmers have lived together for decades, with issues bordering land resource amicably resolved. The process of ensuring peace was built on traditional rulers and institutions. The prolonged nature of the conflict and the frequent eruption of violent conflict in this area questioned the state and nature of education in the area. That is, with the conflict, it is possible that the state and nature of education in the area are interrupted, given that families/children are displaced along with their parents or relations and teachers. Despite the use of several indigenous and other methods to resolve the conflict, it remains unresolved, and this is observed to have negative consequences on the basic schools in the Benue state, particularly in areas like Guma, Logo, and Ukum, which serve as the study area.

The peaceful coexistence and harmonious inter-group relations between the herders-farmers in the past have intensified with increasing escalation of violence due to cutthroat competition for land and water resources which are central to the socio-economic survival of both parties. The specific farmers' populated towns and villages with intense herder-farmer conflict include Jootar, Vaase, Ayilamo, Anyiin, Sev-av, Gbajimba, Agasha and Iorza where some schools have been closed permanently while others open only when the conflict subsides. The persistent violent conflicts between farmers and herders in Benue state have led the conflicting parties to acquire arms and recruit ethnic militias for self-defence. The use of sophisticated firearms makes the conflicts more dangerous with the unimaginable destruction of the affected communities, particularly in Anyiin, Ayilamo, Sev-av, Jandekyula, Iorza, Agenke, and Agasha, among others, with the death of about 3,000 people between 2014 and 2018 in all the aforementioned communities.

Accordingly, there are different academic works on conflict and farmer/herder conflict (David, 2010; Blench, 2010; & Nwanko, 2015), but none of these works have focused on the variables of the present study, namely enrolment, retention and completion in Benue state. For instance, David (2010) conducted a study on grading Nigeria's progress in education, where some states,

including Benue were affected by conflict in recent days. Blench (2010) studied pastoralists and cultivators in Nigeria to be broad but not specific to education, and the findings revealed that traditional methods of conflict resolution are more effective. Nwankwo (2015) carried out a study on rhetoric and realities of managing ethno-religious conflict: the Nigerian experience also pointed out consequences of conflict and emphasized that all parties must discourage the primordial sentiments in communities expressed by ethnic and religious groups. However, none of the above studies focused on school enrolment, retention and completion in the Benue state, which is a gap this study intends to fill. This study, therefore, examines enrolment, retention, and completion of basic school pupils over a period of 10 academic sessions in Benue state, using Guma, Logo and Ukum local government areas that have the highest occurrence of herders-farmers conflict in the state.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated the influence of herder-farmer conflict on pupils' enrolment, retention, and completion of basic education in Benue State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study;

➢ assessed the influence of herders-farmer conflict on pupils' enrolment in basic education in Benue state, Nigeria.

➢ examined the influence of herders-farmer conflict on pupils' retention in

basic education in Benue State, Nigeria.

➢ investigated the influence of herder-farmer conflict on pupils' completion of basic education in Benue State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study provided answers to the following questions:

➢ What is the influence of herders-farmer conflict on pupils' enrolment in basic education in Benue State, Nigeria?

➢ How does farmer–herder conflict influence pupils' retention in basic schools in Benue State, Nigeria?

➢ How does herder-farmer conflict affect pupils' completion of basic education in the Benue State, Nigeria?

Methodology

The research design for this study was an ex-post facto design (causal comparative). Bello (2016) sees ex-post facto research as non-experimental research in which pre-existing groups are compared to see whether independent variables have caused a change in the dependent variable. The population of this study comprised 4,486 basic schools in Benue State, Nigeria (UBEC, 2019). Multi-stage sampling procedure was used to sample the population required for this study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select three local government areas, Guma, Logo and Ukum, where conflicts between farmers and herders are

predominant and incessant. There were 438 public primary schools in the three local government areas. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 10 schools from each local government, resulting in a total of 30 schools sampled for the study. The research instrument used in this study was a Proforma. The researcher went to the Benue State Ministry of Education Board to get data on "Pupils' Enrolment, Retention and Completion of Basic Schools in Benue State, Nigeria". The profoma was used to collect year-by-year data for the duration of the study (2012-2021), showing the rate of enrolment, retention and completion of basic education in the state before, during and after the conflict. Based on the information gathered about each of the basic schools from the State Ministry of Education regarding the concerned basic schools. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data and the results are presented in tables and graphs for easy interpretation and presentation of the data.

Results

Number of pupils enrolled in Basic schools in Guma, Logo, and Ukum local government areas of Benue State, Nigeria, from 2012/2013-2021/2022.

From the figure, it is evident that the number of basic school pupils' enrolment in Guma, Logo and Ukum fluctuates with the conflicting years. Overall, the conflict affected the enrolment of basic school pupils in 2014, 2018, and 2020, with all

three local governments suffering a significant decline in enrolment in the above-mentioned years.

Number of pupils retained in Basic schools in Guma, Logo, and Ukum local government areas of Benue State, Nigeria, between 2012 / 2013 – 2021 / 2022 Academic Sessions

From the figure above, it can be seen that the retention level fluctuates, especially for the 2014/2015, 2018/2019, and 2020/2021 academic sessions, with the figures decreasing to as low as 2451, 3577 and 2892 respectively.

Number of pupils who completed Basic schools in Guma, Logo and Ukum local government areas of Benue State, Nigeria between 2012/2013—2021/2022

As seen above, the information on the completion of basic schools in the 30 selected basic schools in the three local government areas of Guma, Logo, and Ukum fluctuates at yearly intervals, especially in the conflict persistent years of 2014/2015, 2018/2019, and 2020/2021.

Discussion

The first finding of the study revealed that the number of basic school pupils' enrolment in Benue State decreases in proportion to the conflict severity years, especially in the years 2014/2015, 2018/2019, and 2020/2021. This is in tandem with Aun (2021), who stated that school enrolment depends on certain factors such as availability, accessibility and affordability. This implies that if there are schools in an area void of conflict, such schools will become inaccessible as the school facilities may be destroyed, burnt down and inhabited by bandits or refugees. This finding also agrees with Avav (2002), Igudia (2018), Pev (2014), Orunoye (2014), and Varella (2020), who found that conflict, be it ethnic, communal, or whatsoever, affects enrolment by causing displacement of learners from their locations that are near the school communities and the schools themselves been shut down temporarily or converted to homes to house displaced citizens.

The second finding of the study revealed that the retention of basic school pupils decreased in line with the years of conflict severity in the study area as was evident in years 2014, 2018 and 2020. This finding corroborates the studies of Alubo (2006), Oguche, Haruna, and Ikanni (2016), Aluaigba (2012;2015), and Akinpelu (2021) who in different studies but with similar findings affirmed that conflict brings untold hardship to people that some have to relocate to nearby cities, withdraw their children or wards to other schools due to fear of the unknown and even if others insist on staying, the schools may not be accessible hence some teachers may have been killed or seek transfer to other schools or locations on the basis of insecurity. That is, some of the pupils who were enrolled in the basic schools in Benue State have left the schools on the basis of insecurity or on

account of losing their sponsors or transfer of parents from the said areas to other locations that are devoid of conflict. In addition, this finding is in agreement with the findings of Shamyekina (2006) and UNECO (2010) that conflict increases the rate of dropouts and reduces academic survival or attainment due to displacement, death, hardship, looking for or engagement in work, joining military or militancy, and other challenges that may accompany the conflict. Accordingly, it is believed that this situation may be applicable to the farmer-herder conflict in the study area of Benue state.

The last finding of the study revealed that the number of basic school pupils who completed basic education in Benue fluctuated, as they dwindled during the years when the conflict was more severe. This finding is in agreement with Bolarinwa, Oluwakemi and Folorunso (2012), Opiki and Adeleke (2015) Shakya (2011) Ukertor (2016) Ololo (2017), and Aun (2020) who stated in separate studies that conflict results to denied or decreased to schools by prevents opening of schools, threatening children's security which led some to refuse to return to school or education, damaging or destroying educational infrastructures, increasing teachers and learners absenteeism, destruction of learning facilities, killing of parents and or teachers, increased poverty rate, dwindled economy, and what have you. These factors contribute

to the inability of pupils to complete their basic education within the stipulated time or throughout their lifetime since some of their sponsors may have been killed or their sources of income or livelihood destroyed. In contrast, this finding contradicts the studies of Miguel and Roland (2016) and Swee (2019), who stated that there was no significant difference in the completion of basic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that even the bombed areas were not found to have low levels of literacy but claimed that, this was attributed to aid and resources distributed after the conflict.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of herders-farmers conflict on pupils' enrolment, retention and completion of basic schools in Benue State, Nigeria. Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that herders-farmers conflict influences school enrolment, retention and completion as was evident in this study, especially in the persistent years of 2014/2015, 2018/2019, and 2020/2021. The data gathered revealed fluctuating figures on enrolment, retention, and completion in the study area, especially in the three years mentioned above. Some of the schools in the conflict-affected communities shut down, pending the return of peace and normalcy, while others moved to nearby areas, thus not allowing them to access education the way they should. Other areas saw total destruction of their homes and schools as

well as killing their parents or sponsors who made it impossible for them to enroll or become unable to complete their basic education.

Accordingly, it can be deduced or inferred that the herders-farmers conflict in the Benue state, just like every other conflict, has had grave consequences on the enrolment, retention, and completion of basic education of learners, as as evident in the study area. The plethora of studies shown above proved that conflict of whatever form has a negative impact, as was the case with the Benue state of Nigeria for the herder and farmers conflict where houses, schools and school properties, farmlands, and even lives were destroyed, and some teachers sought transfer to other locations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that;

➢ There should be ways of stopping or reducing the influence of the herders-farmers conflict by the state government by providing a lasting solution to the conflict that has taken a new dimension and is on the verge of poisoning the harmonious and smooth relationship between the herders-farmers in the state through intervention by international communities, federal and the state government as an intermediary so as not to allow the continuous decline in the number of basic school pupils.

➢ There should be strategies for retaining basic school pupils to ensure they are safe and willing to remain in school, even if they are relocated or moved to refugee camps. Other places where refugees camp during conflict are provided with educational facilities or educational aids to help school-age children not miss out on the teaching-learning process just like their counterparts in the non-conflict areas of the state or the nation at large so that their enrolment would not be affected.

➢ The pressing issues that always result in conflict should be urgently addressed by the state government and well-meaning individuals to ensure the successful completion of basic education by the basic school pupils who were enrolled and retained, regardless of any situation.

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