

Struggles over critical land in the Nigerian Benue Valley: accumulation by dispossession and farmer-herder conflict

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Abstract

Conflicts between farmers and pastoralists have had devastating consequences in Nigeria's Benue Valley. While previous studies have emphasized environmental resource scarcity arising from population growth, environmental degradation, and climate change as the main sources of scarcity engendering conflicts, the social production of scarcity through accumulation by dispossession has received limited attention. This paper fills that gap by investigating the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley and highlighting how scarcity of critical land is socially produced through capitalist accumulation by dispossession. This scarcity leads to tensions between pastoralists and farmers, underscoring the relevance of accumulation by dispossession in this specific context.

Keywords: *accumulation by dispossession, environmental scarcity, environmental security, farmer-herder conflicts, land*

Introduction

This article concerns how accumulation by dispossession contributes significantly to escalating conflicts between farmers and herders in the Benue Valley of Nigeria's North Central Region. The article is relevant because environmental-related conflicts are critical issues of concern on the African continent and of interest to conflict, security and development policy experts, governments and international organisation. In parts of Africa, conflicts between resource users have evolved in the last three decades, especially in West Africa, where conflicts between farmers and pastoralists have caused deaths and displacement of rural communities across many countries, Ghana, Cameroon, Mali, and Nigeria, among others, since the last two decades. Explanations of the farmer-herder conflict in Central Nigeria have been based on the popular eco-violence or eco-scarcity model of climate change and desertification (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Adibe, 2020; Ani & Uwizeyimana, 2022; Lenshie et al., 2021; Madu & Nwankwo, 2021). The conflict has also been linked to identity politics involving ethnic and religious crisis (Akov, 2017; Nwankwo, 2024a; Nwankwo & Okafor, 2022) and perceptions of identity differences as threat (Nwankwo, 2024b).

According to environmental security theory, resource scarcity is produced by three main sources: population growth, environmental degradation and climate change and structural issues of inequalities in the distribution of resources (Out & Impraim, 2021). Most of the studies examining how environmental scarcity engenders

conflicts between farmers and herders in West Africa (Cabot, 2017; Otu & Impraim, 2021; Otu, Impraim & Twumhene, 2020; Issifu, Darko & Paalo, 2022) and especially Nigeria (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018; Adibe, 2020; Lenshie et al., 2021; Nwankwo, 2024b; Olumba et al., 2022; Olumba, 2024) often emphasises the first and second sources of scarcity: population growth and environmental degradation. How scarcity is socially produced through accumulation by dispossession in the Benue Valley has yet to be given much attention in the literature. This paper bridges this gap in the literature. The paper is derived from a larger study investigating the farmer-herder conflicts in North Central Nigeria. Using an ethnographic approach, the research question for this specific paper is "How does resource scarcity engender the farmer-herder conflict in the study area?"

Some studies have critiqued environmental security conclusions that resource scarcity, population growth and climate change cause conflicts (e.g., Akov, 2017; Walwa, 2020). They generally emphasise how access to and control over resources produced conflicts from varying contexts. Rejecting the scarcity explanation, Akov's (2017, p. 288) study in Central Nigeria identified a bunch of issues "including elite land grabbing, ethno-religious identity construction, weak state capabilities, the citizenship question, corrupt traditional institutions, the lack of an effective land tenure system and a widespread culture of impunity". Others focused on "the complex relationships between political interests, moralities, and resource access" (Turner, 2004, p. 863) and how moral transgressions heighten exclusion because of indigenous status (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021; Nwankwo, 2023). Another set of literature shows how state land use and

tenure marginalisation engender farmer-herder conflicts (Nwankwo, 2024d; Nwankwo, 2025; Walwa, 2020).

This paper argues that the scarcity explanation is still relevant to explaining the conflict in this region in a specific context. It shows how scarcity of critical land is socially produced through capitalist accumulation by dispossession engendered by policies encouraging capitalist subsumption of critical lands (floodplains and surrounding lands). Accumulation by dispossession typically involves expanding capital accumulation mechanisms through “*the control and extraction of commons*” (Rincón & Fernandes, 2018, p. 2086). This defines land privatisation, the deterritorialisation of rural communities, and the elimination of rights to natural goods” (Rincón & Fernandes, 2018, p. 2086). Accumulation by dispossession is accomplished via the state’s institutional and policy pipelines, such as the agriculture policies and market institutions (Harvey, 2003). Thus, it intensifies powerfully local-level processes of marginalisation of poorer farmers and pastoralists, especially through facilitation, institutionally mediated processes of exploiting lands that were previously considered environmentally unsuitable for development (Harvey, 2003), such as floodplains for private gain, which has created scarcity for powerless groups like pastoralists and subsistence farmers.

This paper shows that critical land scarcity is essential to the emergence of the farmer-herder conflict in the Benue Valley, which is the hub of the conflict in North Central Nigeria. It argues that scarcity is socially produced. State-led policies favouring large-scale capitalist agricultural investments are responsible for the inflow of large-scale companies and the expansion of commercial farms that have acquired significant lands, specifically floodplains that pastoralists rely on in this area. The privatisation of the critical lands by the companies thus produces scarcity that pushes pastoralist and subsistence farmers into small spaces leading to competitive struggles for land and engenders conflict. Thus, this process represents how accumulation by dispossession produces scarcity. The paper contributes to the literature about the farmer-herder conflict by documenting this social production of scarcity in this unique and exciting world region. The next section discusses the study’s theoretical perspective; the methods are followed by the thematic presentation of the results before the discussion and conclusion.

Theoretical approach

This study examined how accumulation by dispossession contributes significantly to escalating conflicts between farmers and herders in the Benue Valley of Nigeria. The theoretical approach used is the social production of scarcity approach which emphasizes that neoliberalism and the expansion of capital accumulation mechanisms underpin resource scarcity for local communities (Harvey, 2003; Rincón & Fernandes,

2018). The scarcity theory is associated with the environmental security or “*evo-violence*” (Homer-Dixon, 1994; 1999) tradition of the farmer-herder conflict literature (e.g., Cabot, 2017; Nwankwo, 2024b; Out & Impraim, 2021; Issifu, Darko & Paalo, 2022). The environmental scarcity theory assumes that scarcity arises from three main factors. The first is demand-induced scarcity, which occurs when population growth and increased per capita resource consumption levels reduce the natural resources available to each individual (Nwankwo, 2024b; Olumba, 2024; Olumba et al., 2022). The second is supply-induced scarcity, which arises from environmental changes caused by the depletion or degradation of natural resources that occur faster than natural processes can renew them (Nwankwo, 2024b; Olumba, 2024; Olumba et al., 2022). The third is structural-induced scarcity, which refers to the uneven distribution and access to natural resources where influential and powerful groups marginalise other groups from accessing particular resources (Ide, 2015; Out et al., 2020). The interactions between these sources create a social effect that results in lowered agricultural productivity, leading to socio-economic deprivation and conflicts between competing groups. However, the paper shows that the structural-induced scarcity adequately explains the farmer-herder conflict in the Benue Valley.

The vast majority of studies exploring how environmental scarcity engenders conflicts between farmers and herders in West Africa (Cabot, 2017; Otu & Impraim, 2021; Out et al., 2020; Issifu, Darko & Paalo, 2022) and especially Nigeria (Adibe, 2020; Ani & Uwizeyimana, 2022; Lenshie et al., 2021; Madu & Nwankwo, 2021; Okoli & Ogayi, 2018; Olumba, 2024; Olumba et al., 2022) often emphasises the first and second sources of scarcity: population growth and climate change related environmental degradation. For example, Otu, Impraim and Twumhene’s (2020) study in the Afram Plains of Ghana illustrated how the increased number of humans and animals led to farmers cultivating right up to the banks of Volta Lake all year round, thus barring access for herds to watering sources. The consequence is mainly that cattle damage harvests on farms when they go to drink water, thus creating a disagreement between farmers and herders. Okoli & Ogayi (2018) argued that the increasing surge of militancy among the Fulani pastoralists in Nigeria is mainly driven by a fight for survival in a degraded ecological environment that jeopardises their source of livelihood. Cabot (2017) suggests that climate change could worsen land degradation, resulting in more frequent droughts making Common-Pool Resources increasingly scarce and putting pressure on the relationship between farmers and herders. Some studies focus more specifically on how climate change and associated desertification induce pastoralists migration and associated rivalry for limited resources between

farmers and herders (Adibe, 2020; Lenshie et al., 2021; Issifu et al., 2022).

How scarcity is socially produced is equally important but has been given lesser attention by most studies championing the scarcity tradition of the farmer-herder conflict literature. The argument that this paper will demonstrate is that: first, is the emphasis on the capitalism with attendant large-scale agricultural investments on peasants that has implications for resources-related conflicts. The second, related to the first, is how state-led policies create a scarcity of lands for pastoralists (Nwankwo, 2024c) because of large-scale crop farming encroaching on commons such as floodplains (Nwankwo, 2025). Turner (2006) indicated that immediately after the rainy season ends, the herders move their livestock herds onto the floodplain and typically remain there for seven to eight months until the early rains of the next rainy season. The large-scale acquisitions of land, especially floodplains in Nasarawa State, have forced many pastoralists to cross over to Benue State, where they are faced with land tenure insecurity (Nwankwo, 2025) leading to clashes with farmers there. A study by White et al. (2012) indicated that these large land deals now account for 4.8 per cent of Africa's total agricultural land, which is similar to the landmass of Kenya, with DR Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia being the most affected. These land deals may not involve outright sales in most cases but rather long-term concessions and rents by governments to domestic and foreign corporations. Despite claims that several of these lands are "empty", the leading focus is major agricultural land used by several small farmers who do not have legal but customary land rights (White et al., 2012). Hartmann (2014, p. 777) argues that in the end, the actual conflicts and migrations linked to climate change may emerge from "state policies that use the imperative of climate adaptation" as a rationale for the dispossession of poor rural folks of their land for "elite economic and political gains".

Therefore, despite criticism of the scarcity perspective, it is still relevant to clarify the farmer-herder conflict in the Benue Valley from the perspective that large-scale capitalist agricultural investments are responsible for the scarcity of natural resources pastoralists depend on for their livelihood. In the Benue Valley, the processes through which state-led policies have made it harder for pastoralists to access pasture and water, leading to conflict with farmers (Nwankwo, 2024d; 2025), is explained by notion of capitalist accumulation by dispossession is derived mostly from David Harvey's (2003) work. It is argued that neoliberalism and the expansion of capital accumulation mechanisms had been a function of "the control and extraction of commons" (Rincón & Fernandes, 2018. p. 2086). This defines land privatisation, the deterritorialisation of rural communities, the elimination of rights to natural goods,

the transformation of the labour force, and the suppression of alternative production and uses" (Rincón & Fernandes, 2018. p. 2086). Accumulation by dispossession is accomplished via the state's institutional pipelines, such as the agriculture policies and market institutions, such as the commercial and central banks that subsistence farmers and herders do not have access to regarding accessing credits able to compete with commercial and capitalist farmers. Thus, it intensifies powerfully local-level processes of marginalisation of poorer farmers and pastoralists, especially through facilitation, institutionally mediated processes of exploiting lands that are considered environmentally unsuitable for development, such as swamps for private gain, which has unjust socio-environmental penalties for powerless groups.

Methods

The study investigated the how scarcity of critical lands underpinning the farmer-herder conflicts in the study developed through the framework of accumulation by dispossession contributes. The study uses qualitative methods to achieve this goal. Qualitative research explores subjective experiences and the "how" or "why" of phenomena using methods like interviews and observations (Nwankwo, 2025). Quantitative research, in contrast, deals with measurable data, addressing the "when" or "where" using tools like surveys and experiments (Nwankwo, 2025). Mixed-methods research combines both for comprehensive insights. This study primarily used a qualitative approach to understand how critical land scarcity underpins the farmer-herder conflicts developed in the study area. The quantitative approach is appropriate for this study because it aims for depth and context rather than hypothesis testing and generalizability offered by quantitative methods (Nwankwo, 2025). However, it draws on numerical data from secondary sources to further evidence the findings.

The research was conducted in three neighbouring states in North Central Nigeria, namely Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa (Fig. 1), where conflicts have occurred the most. These are the border areas of these states within the confines of the lower Benue Valley. These areas fall within each state's local government areas (LGAs). The LGAs in Benue State are Guma, Gwer West, Logo and Agatu; in Nasarawa State, they are Doma, Nasarawa, Keana and Awe; and in Taraba, they are Wukari, Takum and Donga. Ninety-three interviews were conducted with participants from various backgrounds, mostly farmers and pastoralists. This study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research does not use probability sampling, which is used to determine the sample size for the study given the study area population (Nwankwo, 2023). Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. Saturation is when additional interviews do not review new information about the conflict (Nwankwo, 2023).

Traditional rulers, village chiefs, security officers, NGOs and social groups were also interviewed. The study lasted for six months, from January to July 2022. The communities where the conflicts manifest and intensify are at the boundaries between the states and fall within the area called the Benue Valley or Benue Trough in Nigerian geography. The researcher visited the communities several times between January and July 2022 to observe and conduct interviews.

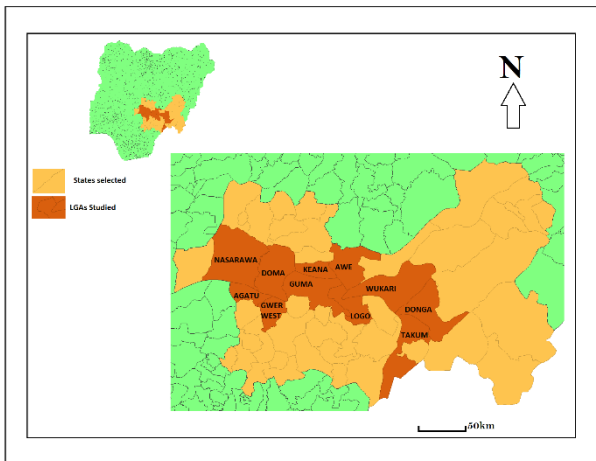


Figure 1: LGAs studied in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States

The study from which the data for this paper was derived used an ethnographic study involving systematic data collection and analysis concurrently through unstructured interviews with participants and filed observation. Observation is a critical aspect of ethnography. The kind of observation used for this study parallels Anna Tsing’s (2015) multi-sited ethnography in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, wherein the idea of noticing is critical as the researcher used it to trace the impact of commercial agriculture and capitalist formations in the Benue Valley even though interviewees scarcely mention it. This approach involves tracing sites and situations (Baker & McGuik, 2017). Tsing (2015, p. 37) writes that “[t]o learn anything we must revitalise arts of noticing and include ethnography and natural history”. Thus, in addition to interviews, observations and noticing ethnographies help to deeply explore the root of the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley. Through this ethnographic approach, the study found how capitalist large-scale agricultural investment was accelerated by state-led policies that encouraged commercial crop production in the floodplains pastoralists and subsistence farmers had relied on for centuries creating land scarcity.

Unstructured interviews were used to investigate the conflict, which allowed the research as much freedom as possible. The interviews were conducted with all participants’ full understanding and consent, who were made aware of the research goals, methods, and

procedures. Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and withdrawal were ethical practices adhered to during the study. Purposive random sampling was employed in interviews with key informants. The sample size was determined as the point of saturation where new data collected offer no new insight into the conflict (Thornberg, 2017). The data analysis involved coding the transcript of the interviews and field observation noted into meaningful themes and constantly comparing the themes and patterns emerging from the stories to find connections and divergences from which explanation of the conflicts is made (Nwankwo & Ayadiuno, 2022). Based on themes identified, the most suitable conceptual framing that encapsulates how resource scarcity engenders the farmer-herder conflict in the study area is accumulation by dispossession within the eco-violence theoretical framework.

Pertinent is the fact that the scarcity of uncultivated land is not the root of the conflict, but the scarcity of critical lands, which means the conflict is grounded in specific places with specific characters. These places have non-seasonal natural freshwater resources, specifically rivers and their associated floodplains, tributaries and streams. This finding vitalises the essentials of deploying the notion of “doings” in studying conflicts. Doing stresses, we identify the agency of place “as a conscious being” (Barker & Pickerill, 2020, p. 641). Recognising the agency of place is pertinent to identifying the critical lands, such as the floodplain (*fadama*) and its immediate environs, that influence the formation of capitalist agricultural investments that perpetuate accumulation by dispossession affecting subsistence farmers and pastoralists, causing farmer-herder conflicts. The next sections discuss the findings beginning with how large-scale companies and expansion in commercial farming create the scarcity of critical lands.

Large-scale agricultural investment and critical land scarcity

In this section, how large-scale acquisition of critical lands (floodplains) contributed to the scarcity of land underpinning the farmer-herder conflict in the study area will be discussed. Although population growth is often assumed as the cause of land scarcity leading to conflicts between farmers and herders, it is pertinent to state it cannot be solely attributed to the growth of the human population. A recent study by Njoku et al. (2023, p. 1) examined the effects of “climate and land-use change, population density, economic development” on farmer-herder conflicts in “Nigeria’s Mid-Benue trough” specifically within Benue and Taraba States from the year 2000–2020 showed that “63% of the conflict occurred in croplands which increased the most (25.7%)” and “79.3% of the conflicts occurred in low population density areas (3–8 persons per 30 m²)”. The findings by Njoku et al.

(2023) corroborate the researcher's observations that there is a significant expansion of cultivated areas because of the expansion of commercial agriculture. There is a significant shift from subsistence farming towards commercial farming in the Benue Valley, especially in communities straddling the banks of the rivers in the Benue Valley. Agricultural policies have contributed to the large-scale floodplain acquisition in the study area. Two national policies and the Nasarawa State Government's plan to make the state produce 25% of Nigeria's total rice production are responsible for this development. The two national policies are Agriculture Transformation Agenda (ATA) and the Agricultural Promotion Policy (APP).

The Nigerian Federal Government's agricultural policies that aim to encourage people to produce more crops since 2011 led to the surge in medium to large-scale agricultural investments and, in turn, increased cultivation of lands in the study area. In 2012, the Agriculture Transformation Agenda of President Goodluck Jonathan came into force. The ATA policy was launched to open Nigeria to great agricultural production and marketing and was expected to create over 3.5 million jobs. As part of the plan, the Nigeria Incentive-Based Risk Sharing System for Agriculture Lending (NIRSAL) was introduced *"to leverage N450 billion from banks into agricultural value chains"* (Vanguard Newspaper, 2015). The policy was expected to enable banks to lend N3.5 billion to seed and fertiliser companies in 2012 which increased to over N20 billion in 2013 (Vanguard Newspaper, 2015). Citing the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the then Minister of Agriculture, Femi Adesina, indicated that the policy made Nigeria the *"world's largest producer of cassava with an output of over 45 million metric tonnes in 2014"* (Vanguard Newspaper, 2015).

After taking office in 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari *"launched the Agricultural Promotion Policy (APP), which expired December 2020 to succeed"* the ATA policy (Premium Times, 2021). The APP policy was designed like the ATA *"to ensure the provision of the required legislative and agricultural framework, macro policies, security, infrastructure and institutional mechanisms to allow farmers access essential inputs, finance, information, agricultural services and markets"* (Premium Times, 2021). However, contrary to the Buhari administration's claim that the policy succeeded, it has been indicated that it achieved the least growth in agriculture since 1999 (Premium Times, 2021). The ATA and APP policies have also been leveraged to support international agricultural development collaborations. For instance, the Nasarawa State Government built on the ATA policy to further boost its partnership with the Japanese government that began in 2011 to improve the quality of the crop production in the state, especially rice, to achieve 25% of Nigeria's total rice production (This Day Newspaper, 24 September 2019). Their partnership

started with a pilot project focusing on post-harvest and marketing-related activities. This project enabled 442 rice farmers to strengthen their parboiling, milling, marketing and business management skills. Thirty-five extension agents were trained in disseminating good agricultural practices, while 11 were educated in Japan on improved cultivation technology and research methods. Many of these rice production development efforts were concentrated in farming communities in Awe, Doma, Obi and Keana LGAs (This Day Newspaper, 24 September 2019), which became the hub of the conflict in Nasarawa State (Nwankwo, 2025).

The policies described above have contributed to growth of agroindustry businesses in Nigeria and some have been particularly found the Benue Valley to be perfect location for their investments. Benue Valley is attractive to agricultural investors for two essential reasons. First, it is drained by three major rivers: Benue, Katsina-Ala, and Donga, and their tributaries and associated streams. These rivers have meant that the area namely a hotbed for year-round agro-pastoral production. It has large floodplains suitable for rice and sugarcane production. A fadama is a Hausa word for *"floodplains and lowland areas underlined by shallow aquifers and found along Nigeria's rivers system"* (Blench & Ingawa, 2004 cited in Adesoji, Farinde & Ajayi, 2006, p. 3082). Secondly, the fadama has alluvial soils with heavier textures than the adjoining upland soils but are heterogeneous (Ojanuga & Ekwoanya, 1994). Hence, fadama soils have superior quality to the upland soils that are derivatives of sandstones (Ojanuga & Ekwoanya, 1994). Their greater water and nutrient retentive abilities make the floodplain areas suitable for cultivation. These physical geography properties and agricultural policies since 2012 encouraged capitalist subsumption of the fadama that has contributed to the intensification of the farmer-herder conflicts. These physical geography properties have made this area endearing to the pastoralists as it provides them with water and pasture in the dry seasons. Thus, it has attracted many herders now confronted by expanded crop fields, many of which obstruct livestock passage to watering points.

Large-scale agricultural investment in the Benue Valley started in 2011, and some medium-scale farms also moved into the area. However, commercial farming companies are generally developing in other areas outside the Benue Valley. For instance, in 2019, Azman Rice Mills and Farms Limited, which has its roots in Kano State, established a new farm to grow rice on 20,400 hectares of land in Toto LGA (Economic Confidential, 2019). Similarly, Flour Mills in Nigeria have taken 20,000 hectares in Toto LGA. In addition to these, in 2021, the Nasarawa State government had designated 270,000 hectares of land, 10% of 27,000 km² of Nasarawa State's landmass, specifically for commercial agriculture to generate foreign exchange through the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Ukumba, 2021). The

government had already allocated 100,000 hectares out of their targeted 270,000 hectares across the state and sought investors to take up the remaining 170,000 (Ukumba, 2021). The Nasarawa State Government is also negotiating with the Dangote Group to acquire 50,000 hectares of land in each of the Doma and Nasarawa LGAs to grow more rice (This Day Newspaper, 24 September 2019).

However, large-scale companies that impact the farmer-herder conflicts are those close to major rivers, especially the Benue River. This area has greatly increased medium to large-scale agricultural investments since 2011. Large companies have acquired many lands, including a significant part of the floodplain that herders rely on in the dry season. Large-scale companies, such as the Olam Farms, Kereksuk Rice Farm and Dangote Sugar Company, have reduced the areas herders would normally graze freely and pushed subsistence farmers and pastoralists into smaller spaces. Established in 2012, Olam Rice Farm, officially known as Olam Agri, is one of the biggest rice farms in West Africa. Olam Agri partners with the Thai Rice Department and the German Development Agency GIZ (Olam Agri, 2022), creating a multi-scalar network of actors. Located in Rukubi village, close to the bank of the Benue River in Doma LGA, Nasarawa State, the farm sits on 10,000 hectares of the fadama with an extension in Awe LGA (Olam Agri, 2022). While the farm has opened job opportunities for some people, it has also taken away livelihood sources for fishers, farmers and pastoralists. The land used to be fishing grounds for many people because it contained many ponds (see, e.g., Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Fadama in Obagaji community of Agatu LGA, Benue State

In 2012, Rotimi Williams founded Kereksuk Rice Farm, Nigeria’s second-largest commercial rice farm by land size. Situated in Awe LGA at the border of Nasarawa and Taraba, it covers 45,000 hectares of the floodplain (Akinkuotu, 2020); the farm leased 45,000 hectares for 50 years with a promise to give 20% of their profits back to the communities, making them stakeholders in the

business so that it will prosper. This model allows them to move from one farm or location even during conflict, minimising risks (Flora IP, 2020). In the Tunga District of Awe LGA in Nasarawa State, the Dangote Sugar Project sits on 78,000 hectares along the lands adjoining the Benue River (Fig. 3). The Dangote’s Nasarawa Sugar Company Limited “is one of Dangote Sugar Refinery Plc’s Backward Integration Projects (Dangote Industries Limited, 2020). According to the Dangote’s website, the “Memorandum of Understanding with the Nasarawa state government was signed in June 2017, and the compensation for the land in the sum of N3.25 billion was fully paid to the landowners” (Dangote Industries Limited, 2020). In Taraba State Dangote’s Lau/Tau Sugar Project sits on 30,000 hectares “on the south bank of the Benue River about 30 km Northeast of Jalingo” (Dangote Industries Limited, 2020).

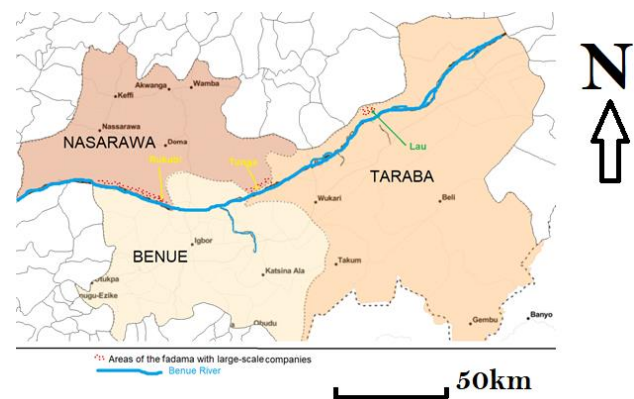


Figure 3: Studied states showing areas with large-scale agricultural companies

In the Geographical Regions of Nigeria, Udo (1970) states that the Benue River has a total drainage area of 130,000 square miles, with 90,000 in Nigeria. The Benue Valley in Nigeria spreads across more than 22,000 square miles. It is divided into two physical regions: the river, associated floodplains, and the lowlands higher than the flood levels (Udo, 1970). The River Benue floodplains, which occupy an area of 1,179,400 hectares or 1.3% of Nigeria’s total land mass (Akpan-Idiok et al., 2013), are among the main active rivers in West Africa where 47% of the soils have been used for rice production (Wakatsuki, 2004). As of 2003, 65,783 hectares of the Benue River floodplains have been cultivated for rice production, making up 7.2% of the entire land area (Ojanuga et al., 2003). Of the 1,179,400 hectares, Nasarawa State has access to about 140,000 hectares of floodplains suitable for growing rice, which could yield up to 350,000 metric tons per annum (This Day Newspaper, 24 September 2019).

Of the 140,000 hectares, Olam Agri acquired 10,000 hectares (Nwankwo, 2025). The Dangote Sugar sugarcane farm and sugar refinery project sit on 78,000 hectares adjoining the Tunga, Awe LGA floodplain (Nwankwo,

2025). Kereksuk Rice Farm sits on 45,000 hectares scattered across villages adjoining the floodplain in Awe at the border of Nasarawa and Taraba (Nwankwo, 2025). These companies sit on 133,000 hectares of the 140,000 hectares of the floodplain in Nasarawa State, representing 95% (Nwankwo, 2025). Therefore, this practice reflects capitalist accumulation by dispossession, which often engenders conflicts between resource users (Arrighi et al., 2010; Levien, 2011; Cáceres, 2015). The accumulation by dispossession is accomplished via the state's institutional pipelines, such as the agriculture policies that intensify powerfully local-level processes of marginalising poorer farmers and pastoralists.

The transformation of subsistence farming

In addition to acquiring a significant part of these large-scale companies' floodplains for rice and sugarcane production, there are expanding medium-scale commercial farms in the surrounding upland areas. This transformation of preciously subsistence farming further reduced space for grazing, creating land scarcity for pastoralist grazing. Previously, subsistence farmers and herders had a mutual tenure arrangement whereby the farmers would cultivate the floodplains in the rainy season when the water levels were not conducive for livestock grazing. In the dry season, the farmers harvest their crops and allow the herders to use the fields. The privatisation of the floodplains and other lands in the surrounding areas has reduced herders' access to grazing spaces, which means that they struggle to access the land. The transformation of subsistence to medium-scale farmers in areas close to the floodplains has further engendered between these farmers and pastoralists. A key informant noted that:

"Farmers who were [subsistence] farmers before now, a lot of them are now engaging in commercial farming. Commercial farming also contributes to it. So, in those days, people always cultivated subsistence farming where a little space would be okay for a family. However, because of economic influence, people are now trying to expand the land. So because of this, the land available for farmers becomes limited, so they will start struggling to own the land; this also brings conflict (Interview B28, Divisional Police Officer)."

As one informant argued, this situation has made herders *"feel that they are being oppressed, that the people take over the bushes"* (Interview B25, military commandant). It is particularly painful to pastoralists because such transformed subsistence farmers further encroach on areas close to streams that they would rely on during the rainy season. Cattle routes (labi) are particularly blocked by expanded farms. It is similar to what Otu, Impraim, and Twumhene's (2020) study in the Afram Plains of Ghana found about how farmers cultivating right up to the banks of Volta Lake all year round, thus barring access for herds to watering sources

led to the conflict. As a subsistence farmer indicates, the tension developed because *"Most of the areas that had been left for them [herders] for many years", "this Olam [Agri] has taken over 200 hectares of land"* in Nasarawa. Hence, *"they descended on us because we were nothing"* (Participant III, Interview, A44, Idoma, farmer). The farmer suggests that large companies like Olam Agri have occupied most of the floodplains left for the herders for dry season grazing, although the correct size of land acquired by Olam is 10,000 hectares. Thus, the floodplains that farmers mostly allow herders to use in the post-harvest period have been occupied by large-scale companies that have prevented herders from grazing on floodplain pastures.

Thus, companies' occupation of the floodplains has created tension between pastoralists and farmers, transforming their production. The transformation from subsistence to medium-scale farming is extensive in that a small village of about 100 cultivated a large area. A key informant who has interacted with the herders in Keana, Nasarawa State, corroborated this finding when he stated that in small villages where subsistence farming was the norm and where ten households cannot cultivate more *"than ten to twenty hectares"* or *"approximately fifty hectares"* have now learnt to borrow monies from elites in the town to grow crops on *"more than 200 hectares"*. Thus, *"herders feel there is no space for them"* (Interview B25, Army Commandant). Some of the subsistence-turned-medium-scale commercial farmers scaled up their production because of the demand for rice paddies by the rice companies and maize for poultry feeds by other companies. Many farmers were particularly engaged by the companies such as Olam Agri, which engaged over 3000 rice farmers to supply rice paddies to its factory to augment production. Such farmers got credit facilities to boost their production scales. Subsistence farming households of about three can cultivate a maximum of 15 hectares. For instance, a farmer interviewed in the Guma area of Benue State noted, *"I [can] farm like ten hectares, five hectares, 11 hectares, 15 hectares"* (Interview A23, Tiv farmer). The medium-scale farmer can cultivate about 20 times the subsistence level on average.

However, not all subsistence farmers can access credit facilities to transform their production to a commercial scale. Their poor economic situation disadvantages the majority. The economic disparity between medium-scale commercial and subsistence groups means that the subsistence farmer cannot compete to access lands and agricultural inputs. Still, many medium-scale farmers and most subsistence farmers in the study area lament the difficulty in accessing loans and fertilisers from the ATA and APP schemes. According to medium-scale farmers in Awe, Nasarawa State, *"because of the conditions that the Federal Government and Nigerian banking programme, the average farmer will not go to CBN [Central Bank of Nigeria] or commercial bank to get a loan and go to the farm"* (Interview B31, farmer). This challenge meant

many medium-scale farmers and most subsistence farmers and herders could not access the loans, whereas capitalists had access to these loans and institutional backing. Thus, the ATA and later APP policies encouraged some people who did not farm before but have access to credit facilities to pay for rents for lands available for leasing and continue to expand farmlands, constantly reducing grazing spaces. Pastoralists are the most affected as they cannot maintain access on a large scale to sustain their livelihood.

Pastoralists’ Reactions and Pattern of Conflicts

Subsistence farmers have not attempted resistance against the companies because they see it as a development of their areas. The companies employ locals in various capacities. Initially, pastoralists attempted to resist the companies by grazing in their rice fields, but they were repelled by enlisting soldiers to guard the farms. Pastoralists who trespass into the companies’ lands are arrested and prosecuted for trespass through court cases and made to pay huge monetary compensation both to the state government and to the farmers, which shows how the government policy backs the capitalist farmers marginalising pastoralists:

“After my judgement, I have nothing to do with that man again because he was compelled to compensate the state government and the farmer. At least he has learnt his lessons. He has to pay; that is the court rule because it will serve as a deterrent for others. If you are passing through farmland, make sure you carry your cattle in the right way, make sure you do not allow them to enter somebody’s farmland and destroy somebody’s crops because that person has suffered a lot, he has maybe hired people to work on the farm, so, he has spent money, how can you come and destroy his crops? (Interview B29, Magistrate Court Judge).”

Pastoralists have also reacted to the encroachment by smaller commercial farms through night grazing on the farms as a resistance. Such farmers have also hired guards to arrest such pastoralists. Thus, the subsistence and poor farmers mostly bear the brunt of the pastoralists’ reaction to the grazing land scarcity. Most of such villagers have been displaced with many finding other occupations, such as working as labourers, and others perpetually displaced and remained in internally displaced person camps. Thus, the pressure on the fadama caused by their acquisition and privatisation by the large-scale companies perpetuates accumulation by dispossession and explains the farmer-herder conflicts in the study area.

Critical lands are thus essential to understanding the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley. Critical land is near large freshwater bodies such as rivers and large streams, which explains the conflict pattern. The data on the conflict incidence and fatality in the study area was explored for more insights. In Benue State (Table 1), the

LGAs with higher incidence and fatalities are those within major river valleys, specifically the Benue River, namely Agatu, Guma, Gwer West, Makurdi and Logo, which are all close to the river. Water is the critical resource that determines where pastoralists will operate.

Similarly, in Nasarawa State (Table 2), the LGAs with higher incidence and fatalities, including Obi Keana, Awe and Doma, are closer to the Benue River. In Taraba State (see Table 3), the story is the same with Wukari and Ibi (close to the Benue River), Donga (close to Donga River), Gassol (close to the Taraba River, a tributary of the Benue River) having higher incidence and fatalities. In Takum, the conflict is occurring in Kashimbila near the Nigerian-Cameroon border because of the Kashimbila River, in Lau because of its closeness to the Benue River and in Bali, close to Katsina-Ala River near its border with Donga and Takum.

Table 1: Incidence and Fatality of farmer-herder Conflict in Benue

LGAs	Incidence	Fatality
Ado	2	13
Agatu	13	126
Apa	0	0
Buruku	3	40
Gboko	0	0
Guma	73	549
Gwer East	5	75
Gwer West	16	149
Katsina-Ala	5	152
Konshisha	0	0
Kwande	9	54
Logo	51	259
Makurdi	15	58
Obi	1	13
Ogbadibo	1	2
Ohimini	1	13
Oju	1	6
Okpokwu	6	49
Oturkpo	2	6
Tarka	2	18
Ukum	3	101
Ushongo	0	0
Vandeikya	0	0

Table 2: Incidence and Fatality of farmer-herder Conflict in Nasarawa

LGAs	Incidence	Fatality
Akwanga	2	20
Awe	10	85
Doma	15	174
Karu	0	0
Keana	24	132
Keffi	0	0
Kokona	4	25
Lafia	5	99
Nasarawa	8	45
Nasarawa-Eggon	1	5

Obi	13	151
Toto	5	38
Wamba	1	5

The author used tracing as an ethnographic observation approach to understand this pattern. The researcher moved from village to village across the study areas observing the pattern of conflict, evidenced by the displacement of farming villages along and close to the rivers. The accounts of the herders show that they prefer where there is an uninterrupted freshwater supply which the rivers provide, than areas farther from freshwater resources: *“Even if there is a lion in the bush there, and there is water there, they will go there and deal with the lion, but if there is no water no matter the grasses there, they cannot go that place”* (Interview B16, Fulani herder, interpreted from Hausa).

Table 3: Incidence and Fatality of farmer-herder Conflict in Taraba

LGAs	Incidence	Fatality
Ardo-Kola	2	12
Bali	5	25
Donga	4	50
Gashaka	0	0
Gassol	6	43
Ibi	4	35
Jalingo	3	19
Karim-Lamido	2	20
Kurmi	0	0
Lau	7	126
Sardauna	2	20
Takum	8	42
Ussa	2	24
Wukari	6	83
Yorro	1	6
Zing	0	0

The accounts of many herders interviewed indicate that they have migrated from northern Nigeria into the Benue Valley because of the scarcity of pasture and water resources which is not surprising because of the copious documentation of this spatiotemporal patterns of herd movements in the literature (Cabot, 2017; Otu & Impraim, 2021; Otu et al., 2020; Issifu et al., 2022; Okoli & Ogayi, 2018; Adibe, 2020; Lenshie et al., 2021). However, within adjoining areas of the Benue Valley, water resources such as streams are drying up because of intensive cultivation and deforestation, which has increased evaporation from streams during the dry season. This situation has pushed herders further closer to the banks of these rivers.

Therefore, herders talk about the scarcity of land in the context of their immediate surroundings near the rivers. Explaining the problem of grazing scarcity in critical land in Nasarawa State, one of the leaders of the herders explains that *“in the bush, there is no water, that*

is why herders are packing their cows to the Benue side take water before coming back” (Interview, B19, herder). A leader of the pastoralists in Loko, a town in Nasarawa State opposite Agatu LGA close to the fadama, stated that *“farm covered all the places. That is the major problem here in our area here. In Benue State, there is bush, and the grass is available there”* (Interview, A30, Fulani herder). The herder implies that, comparatively, the Benue side of the fadama has more space than the Nasarawa side, and their effect of grazing brings disagreement with the mostly subsistence farmers on the Benue side. There is no scarcity of uncultivated land in northern Loko, for example, which is a part of Nasarawa LGA. As the researcher moved from Loko to Nasarawa Township, over 120 km, there were vast uncultivated areas. There is a similar pattern across Benue and Taraba States. However, these areas lack a critical resource essential to pastoral production-freshwater bodies. Thus, when herders talk about the scarcity of land, it should be understood in the context of uncultivated lands where freshwater resources are available and accessible. The communities where the most farmer-herder conflicts have occurred are those close to rivers, especially the Benue River and its fadama, which are critical lands. As farmers indicated, critical lands are the prime resources that herders are fighting to maintain access to:

“The conflict comes between the farmers and the herders. It was on the course that they wanted to collect our farms and lands and own them as their own. It was the main cause of the destruction and the conflict between the farmers and Fulani. We have been hearing about this conflict from years back, 2011 and 2012, from our neighbouring local government from Otukpo, Agatu and the rest of the places, and this has been coming on the riverbanks. You know we are here close to the riverbanks, this River Benue. So, they want to do away with us to collect the land and keep it for their cattle; that is the main cause of the farmer and herders (Participant II, Interview A18, Tiv farmers in Arufu, Wukari).”

The intensive cultivation of the floodplains and lands close to the floodplains critical to pastoral production by the companies and medium-scale farmers forced many pastoralists to cross over to neighbouring states of Benue and Taraba to graze in communities at the border that is also straddling the river where they clash with Tiv and Idoma farmers and well as Tiv and Jukun farmers respectively in the struggle to have better access to land and water. The result of this is the clash with farmers in riverine communities of the Benue Valley in neighbouring states of Benue and Taraba because of cattle destruction of crops and farm produce since 2012: *“Since 2012, these people came, you know, they came at times when they meet us on the farm or in our absence; they begin to damage our farm products. We normally keep our farm products on our farm, like yam seedlings. They will come there and remove those seeds covered, allow their cattle*

to begin to eat it, and they will beat you if you are not fortunate when you meet them. That was how this thing started. (Interview A41, Agatu farmer).”

Expanding commercial farms and capitalist agricultural and land investments in the study area is essential. Pastoralists rely on the fadama for grazing at the peak of the dry season because of fresh pasture and water availability. As Figure 4 shows, rainfall increases from April and peaks in July to September, and the incidences increase in March, April and May when farmers begin cultivation. However, as rainfall peaks in June, July, August and September, the conflict incidence decreases and remains low throughout the dry season when no crops are on the fields. Thus, the reduction of spaces because of commercial farming and the subsumption of the fadama puts pressure on spaces used by pastoralists that engender these clashes between the pastoralists and subsistence farmers because of crop damage. Conflicts will develop in the early rainy season (March to April) when farmers begin cultivation.

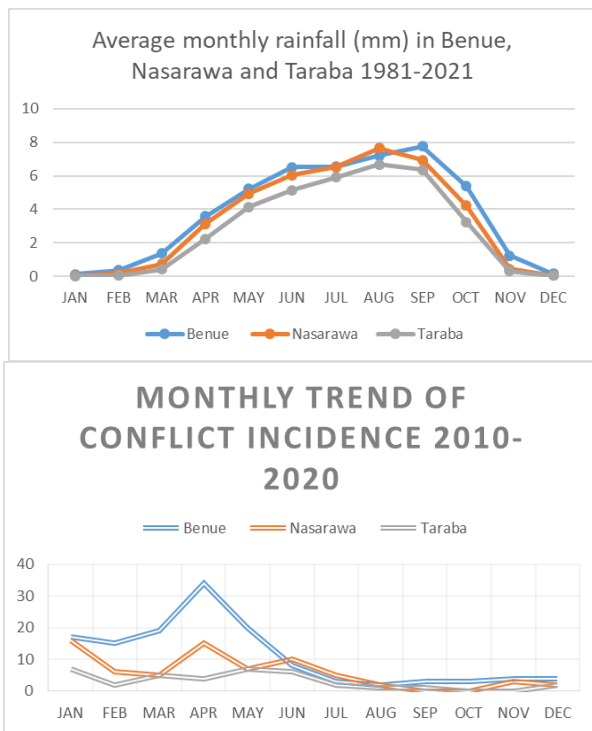


Figure 4: Average monthly rainfall distribution and incidence of the farmer-herder conflicts in the study area

Discussion

The article has explored the nature of the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley of North Central Nigeria. Specifically, it shows how scarcity of critical land is socially produced. The Benue Valley’s physical geography attributes, such as rivers, other freshwater bodies, and floodplains, make it suitable for year-round pastoral production. In addition, these attributes and the

agricultural development policies encouraged capitalist accumulation by dispossession in the area, typified by privatising critical lands essential for pastoral production for commercial crop production. Thus, commercial crop farming and land privatisation by large-scale multinational companies are responsible for critical land scarcity for grazing. Thus, this finding reflects how herders are confronted with significant land tenure insecurity in the Agogo area of Ghana as farmers and landlords transfer lands to large agro-companies (Bukari & Kuusaana, 2018, p. 748). These various land ventures have led to contests for land and water resources and have expanded land tenure insecurity for marginal groups. The large-scale land acquisitions by Olam Agri and Dangote in the Benue River fadama and surrounding areas pushed subsistence farmers and pastoralists into smaller spaces, especially as the affected herders crossed Nasarawa State to Benue State beginning in 2011. The herders that had relocated then lacked tenure security in the Benue and Taraba States side of the fadama, causing tensions with the local farmers. The struggles that ensued strained the relations between farmers and herders there. Existing studies of the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley have yet to acknowledge the impact of these land acquisitions by these companies on farmer-herder relations there and in the environs. There is a significant reduction in uncultivated lands from the bank of the Benue River up to 5-10 km into the hinterland—a zone of pastoral production that herders would do everything possible to have access to or maintain their access to because of the freshwater resources.

Hartmann (2014) argued that land grabs in Africa with attendant agro-extractivist patterns prioritise the incorporation of territories into global capitalism through policies and programs designed to draw foreign investors in agriculture (Hartmann, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014; Benegiamo, 2020). The ATA and APP and the Nasarawa State Government’s plan of turning the state into an agro-industrial hub are examples of such policies because they attracted Olam Agri and Dangote, among others, into the Benue Valley. This finding differs from existing literature championing the environmental scarcity tradition of the farmer-herder conflict (e.g., Cabot, 2017; Out & Impraim, 2021; Issifu et al., 2022). Most of the studies examining how environmental scarcity engenders conflicts between farmers and herders in West Africa (Cabot, 2017; Otu & Impraim, 2021; Otu et al., 2020; Issifu et al., 2022) and especially Nigeria often emphasises population growth and environmental degradation (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018; Adibe, 2020; Lenshie et al., 2021). How scarcity is socially produced through these policies is equally important but has yet to be given attention by these studies championing the scarcity tradition of the farmer-herder conflict literature. The findings do not corroborate studies of the farmer-herder conflicts which critique scarcity narratives as irrelevant

explaining the roots of the conflicts (e.g., Turner, 2004; Walwa, 2020). The paper argues that despite the criticism of the scarcity perspective, it is still relevant to clarifying the farmer-herder conflict in the Benue Valley from the perspective that large-scale capitalist agricultural investments are responsible for the scarcity of natural resources pastoralists depend on for their livelihood which created tensions between subsistence farmers and them as they struggle for gaining or maintaining access to critical lands. This process is explained by notion of capitalist accumulation by dispossession.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley of North Central Nigeria and highlighted the social production of land scarcity. The physical geography of the Benue Valley, including its rivers, freshwater bodies, and floodplains, has made it suitable for pastoral production throughout the year. However, capitalist accumulation by dispossession, driven by agricultural development policies and the privatisation of critical lands for commercial crop production, has resulted in the scarcity of land for grazing. The findings of this study align with similar cases in other regions, such as the Agogo area of Ghana, where land tenure insecurity arises due to the transfer of lands to large agro-companies. Consequently, the land and water resources contest, exacerbated by large-scale land acquisitions by multinational companies in the Benue Valley, has intensified land tenure insecurity for marginalised groups. Due to these acquisitions, subsistence farmers and pastoralists have been forced into smaller spaces, leading to strained relations between farmers and herders.

Interestingly, previous studies on farmer-herder conflicts in the Benue Valley have overlooked the impact of these land acquisitions by multinational companies on farmer-herder relations. This paper argues that reducing available uncultivated lands, particularly in the pastoral production zone near the Benue River, has significantly contributed to tensions between farmers and herders. Such conflicts challenge the prevailing environmental scarcity tradition often attributed to population growth and environmental degradation. Moreover, this study challenges the notion that scarcity narratives are irrelevant in toto in explaining the farmer-herder conflicts. While some studies criticise the scarcity perspective (e.g., Turner, 2004; Walwa, 2020), this research asserts that large-scale capitalist agricultural investments are responsible for the scarcity of natural resources that pastoralists rely on for their livelihoods. This process can be better understood through capitalist accumulation by dispossession.

In light of these findings, it is crucial to consider the social production of scarcity and the role of capitalist

agricultural investments in addressing farmer-herder conflicts. Policies and programs prioritising the incorporation of territories into global capitalism should be critically evaluated, considering their impact on land access, tenure security, and the livelihoods of marginalised groups. By recognising the underlying dynamics of land scarcity and promoting equitable resource management, mitigating conflicts and fostering peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders in the Benue Valley and beyond may be conceivable.

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Author contribution

Only one author listed conceptualized and produced the entire manuscript.

Availability of data and material

The interview data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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