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FULANI MILITANCY AND HUMAN SECURITY IN NIGERIA: RETHINKING SECURITY RESPONSES TO PERSISTENT RURAL CONFLICT

Idris Abubakar
INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION, ABUJA NIGERIA.
DEFENSE AND SECURITY STUDIES DIRECTORATE.
Idrisabubakar2015@gmail.com
08065919099
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Abstract
Nigeria continues to face complex security challenges, including insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, and communal violence. Among these threats, attacks attributed to armed Fulani militant groups have emerged as a significant source of insecurity, particularly in the North Central region. According to recent editions of the Global Terrorism Index, violence linked to Fulani militants has contributed substantially to fatalities, displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and heightened tensions between farming and pastoral communities. Despite sustained military operations and security interventions, these attacks persist, raising concerns about the effectiveness of conventional state-centred security approaches. This study examines the drivers and implications of Fulani militancy in Nigeria through the lens of Human Security Theory, which emphasises the protection of individuals and communities beyond traditional military responses. Using a qualitative research design, the study relies on secondary data drawn from academic literature, policy documents, government reports, conflict databases, and publications by international organisations. The findings reveal that the persistence of violence is driven by a combination of resource-based conflicts, weak governance, climate-related livelihood pressures, proliferation of small arms, inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms, and socio-economic exclusion. The study argues that military responses alone are insufficient to address the underlying conditions that sustain violence. It therefore advocates a comprehensive human security approach that incorporates inclusive governance, community-based conflict resolution, livelihood protection, early warning systems, and strengthened justice institutions. The paper concludes that addressing structural vulnerabilities affecting both farming and pastoral communities is essential for reducing violence and promoting sustainable peace and security in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Fulani militancy, human security, Nigeria, farmer-herder conflict, governance deficit, small arms proliferation, North Central Nigeria*

Introduction
Nigeria's security record sits uneasily alongside its regional standing: as the continent's largest economy and most populous state, it commands considerable geopolitical weight, yet it has struggled for decades to secure its own territory and protect its citizens from recurrent armed violence (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2025). Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has confronted a widening range of internal security threats that have, over time, shifted from discrete regional crises into overlapping national emergencies. The northeast has been ravaged by the Boko Haram insurgency and its more lethal successor, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP); the northwest is besieged by armed

banditry and mass kidnapping; the Niger Delta continues to experience resource-linked militancy; and the North Central region has become an arena of persistent violence rooted in competition over land, water, and grazing corridors between farming and pastoral communities (Adeyemo & Lawal, 2021).

Within this landscape of compounding insecurities, the activities of armed Fulani militant groups have received growing attention from researchers, policymakers, and international organisations. The Fulani, one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa, are historically a predominantly pastoral people whose seasonal migration patterns have brought them into contact, and often into conflict, with sedentary farming communities across Nigeria's Middle Belt. While herder-farmer tensions are not new, the scale, lethality, and apparent organisation of attacks attributed to Fulani militants since the mid-2010s appear to represent a shift toward more organised and more lethal violence than earlier, more localised resource disputes. Between October 2019 and September 2024, the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa documented 66,656 deaths across Nigeria, of which 36,056 were civilian deaths. According to the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (2024), Fulani Ethnic Militias were associated with approximately 47 per cent of recorded civilian killings during that period, more than five times the combined civilian death toll attributed to Boko Haram and ISWAP.

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2025 ranked Nigeria sixth among countries most affected by terrorism, with a score of 7.658, up from eighth position in the two preceding years. Nigeria recorded 565 terrorism-related deaths in 2024, continuing an upward trend from 392 in 2022 and 533 in 2023 (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2025). ORFA data documenting Fulani Ethnic Militias as responsible for approximately 47 per cent of civilian killings in Nigeria between 2019 and 2024 establishes the scale of the challenge with a clarity that official security discourse has not acknowledged (ORFA, 2024). While Boko Haram and ISWAP remain prominent threats in the northeast, violence in the North Central region, driven in substantial part by armed pastoral militias, has emerged as a distinct security challenge that has received comparatively less scholarly and policy attention.

The Nigerian state has responded primarily through conventional security measures: military deployments, joint task forces, and special operations in affected states. These responses follow the logic of state-centric security, which locates threats in identifiable armed groups and addresses them through superior force. However, the persistence of violence despite sustained operations raises serious questions about the adequacy of this approach. Communities continue to be attacked, displaced, and impoverished; livelihoods are systematically destroyed; and the structural conditions that drive both communities to violence remain largely unaddressed (Ehiane & Moyo, 2022).

The central problem this paper addresses is the disconnect between Nigeria's prevailing security responses to Fulani militancy and the structural conditions that sustain it. Conventional security approaches treat the violence primarily as a public order problem to be managed through law enforcement and military force. This framing tends to give limited attention to the economic, environmental, and governance dimensions that drive communities to armed conflict in the first place. As a result, security interventions may suppress particular episodes of violence without reducing the underlying conditions -- governance deficits, environmental stress, economic exclusion, and the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms -- that generate new ones. Communities in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, and

Niger States remain trapped in cycles of attack, displacement, and retaliation that state security forces have been unable to break.

This paper argues that the persistence of this violence may be better understood not as a security failure in the narrow sense, but as a human security crisis rooted in governance deficits, environmental stress, economic exclusion, and the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms. Addressing it requires a fundamentally different analytical frame and a correspondingly different policy response.

Existing studies tend toward one of three approaches: descriptive accounts of the conflict, analyses focused on a single driver (typically climate change, poverty, or arms proliferation), or policy prescriptions not grounded in systematic analysis. Although several studies have examined the conflict through environmental, governance, and socio-economic lenses, comparatively fewer apply Human Security Theory as a structured analytical framework to Fulani militancy specifically, or use it to argue that conventional security responses leave most dimensions of human security unaddressed. This paper seeks to contribute to addressing that gap. It does not merely invoke human security as a framework; it uses the framework's seven dimensions as an organising analytical structure and demonstrates why each dimension matters for understanding both the drivers of violence and the design of an effective response.

This study asks three related questions: what drives Fulani militancy in Nigeria's North Central region, how Human Security Theory accounts for the persistence of this violence in ways that conventional state-centric approaches do not, and what policy responses follow from a human security framework. It pursues these questions by examining the nature, dynamics, and drivers of the conflict, applying Human Security Theory to assess the multi-dimensional threats facing farming and pastoral communities in the region, and proposing policy responses grounded in that analysis. The study makes two contributions in doing so: it demonstrates the analytical value of Human Security Theory for a form of conflict that conventional security discourse has inadequately theorised, and it links specific structural vulnerabilities to specific policy recommendations at a time when Nigeria continues to rely on military responses that leave many of those vulnerabilities unaddressed.

Conceptual Review

The Concept of Security

The meaning of security has been contested across disciplines. In its traditional formulation, security refers to the protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity from external military threats. This Westphalian conception, articulated through the doctrines of realism and neorealism in international relations, dominated security thinking through most of the twentieth century. The state was the primary referent object; the military was the primary instrument; and external actors were the primary sources of threat (Buzan, 1991, as cited in UNDP, 1994).

Challenges to this state-centric conception emerged from multiple directions in the post-Cold War period. Critical security studies, feminist security studies, and the Copenhagen School each argued, from different premises, that the state was an inadequate referent object because states could themselves be sources of insecurity for their own populations. The concept of "societal security" acknowledged threats arising from within the social fabric, while the Copenhagen School's sectoral approach expanded the meaning of security beyond the military domain to encompass political, economic, environmental, and societal dimensions (Buzan et al., 1998, as cited in Ehiane & Moyo, 2022).

Human Security

The most influential reconceptualisation of security came with the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, which introduced the concept of human security. The Report shifted the referent object from the state to the individual, arguing that "the concept of security must change, from an exclusive stress on territorial security to a much greater stress on people's security" (UNDP, 1994, p. 24). Human security was defined as freedom from fear and freedom from want, operationalised through seven dimensions: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (UNDP, 1994).

The Commission on Human Security (2003) built on this framework, distinguishing between protection (top-down institutional responses) and empowerment (building individuals' and communities' capacity to act on their own behalf). This dual emphasis, on institutional accountability and community resilience, is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context. The UNDP's 2022 Special Report on Human Security further developed the analytical value of the framework, noting that it "provides a way to survey the whole spectrum of human development" and helps to identify priority risks and their intersections (UNDP, 2022, p. 3).

Scholars have noted that human security's breadth is both its strength and its limitation. Its strength lies in its capacity to integrate threats that conventional security analysis treats as separate: poverty, environmental degradation, political exclusion, and armed violence are revealed as interconnected rather than discrete. Its limitation is that the breadth of the concept can undermine policy specificity. This paper addresses that limitation by using the seven dimensions of human security as an analytical structure applied to a specific conflict context, not as a general development inventory.

Security Governance in Fragile States

Security governance refers to the structures, institutions, and processes through which security is provided and regulated. In stable states, the security sector operates under civilian oversight and rule of law. In fragile or weak states, governance deficits produce security gaps that non-state armed actors fill, often violently. Aning and Edu-Afful (2021) identify three dimensions of security governance failure particularly relevant to sub-Saharan Africa: the inability of the state to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; the absence of effective accountability mechanisms for security sector actors; and the failure to address the socio-economic conditions that generate demand for non-state armed groups.

Nigeria exhibits all three dimensions. The proliferation of vigilante groups, ethnic militias, and community self-defence organisations is a direct response to the state's perceived failure to provide security in rural areas (Olabisi & Oke, 2024). This, in turn, creates conditions in which arms circulate more freely, conflict escalation is more likely, and the state's capacity to monitor and respond to emerging threats is further diminished.

Insecurity in Nigeria: An Overview

Nigeria's security landscape is characterised by the simultaneous operation of multiple conflict systems, each with distinct drivers but overlapping geographies and populations. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009 in Borno State, continues in a reduced form, while ISWAP has become the dominant jihadist threat in the northeast (IEP, 2025). Banditry in the northwest, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kebbi States, has produced mass displacement, widespread kidnapping, and the effective collapse of rural livelihoods in affected areas. In the South-South, resource conflicts over oil revenues and environmental damage persist despite successive amnesty programmes (Nextier SPD, 2024).

The North Central region, comprising Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the Federal Capital Territory, presents a distinct security profile. Conflict here is primarily driven by competition over land and water resources between sedentary farming communities and mobile pastoral communities, predominantly Fulani. This competition has intensified as climate change reduces the availability of pasture and water in the Sahel, pushing herders further south, and as the demand for agricultural land increases with population growth. Olawale et al. (2024) and Atidoga et al. (2024) both document a pattern of attacks on farming settlements accompanied by systematic destruction of food stores and displacement of communities, patterns that go beyond ordinary resource conflict.

Literature Review

Recent empirical studies have examined Fulani militancy from environmental, governance, identity, and food security perspectives. Ogunbode et al. (2023) document the breadth of environmental consequences of herder-farmer clashes, including destruction of farmland, water source contamination, and loss of livestock. They emphasise that both communities bear the costs of conflict, a point often obscured in framing that presents herders as perpetrators and farmers as victims.

Ayodele et al. (2024) examine the conflict through the lens of identity politics, arguing that weak security institutions, ungoverned spaces, and ethnic stereotyping have allowed what were originally resource disputes to assume an ethnic character that makes them harder to resolve (Ayodele et al., 2024). This finding has direct implications for any conflict resolution strategy: interventions that ignore identity dimensions will fail to address a significant driver of violence escalation.

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data analysed by Fadare et al. (2023), herder-farmer conflicts in the North Central region have resulted in systematic food insecurity, as displaced communities abandon farmland and food prices rise sharply in affected areas. This link between conflict and food insecurity is a central human security concern and one that state-centric security responses do not address.

On small arms proliferation, Olawale et al. (2024) and Atidoga et al. (2024) both identify the availability of light weapons as a key enabling factor in the escalation of pastoral conflicts from low-intensity clashes to organised attacks on communities. Afolabi and Ayeye (2024) specifically document the institutional constraints that limit Nigeria's capacity to regulate SALW flows, noting that Nigeria's principal legislation in this area, the Firearms Act of 1959, remains unamended and inadequate to the scale of the challenge.

On the governance dimension, Sule et al. (2024) find a statistically significant negative correlation between governance deficits and security outcomes across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. Their analysis confirms that poor governance is not merely associated with insecurity but is a structural cause of it through specific mechanisms: it reduces the legitimacy of state institutions, encourages communities to seek armed protection, and creates the impunity that allows violent actors to operate without accountability.

Theoretical Framework

Human Security Theory

The concept of human security was introduced in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 Human Development Report, which redefined security by shifting attention from the protection of states to the protection of individuals, emphasising freedom from fear and freedom from want. Subsequent scholarship developed these

principles into what is now commonly referred to as Human Security Theory (UNDP, 1994). The framework rests on several key assumptions. First, the appropriate referent object of security is the individual human being, not the state. Second, threats to security encompass not only armed violence but also poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and political exclusion. Third, security and development are interdependent: sustainable security cannot be achieved without addressing the structural conditions of vulnerability (Commission on Human Security, 2003).

The UNDP identified seven dimensions of human security: economic security, which requires assured basic income; food security, meaning physical and economic access to basic food; health security; environmental security; personal security, which includes protection from physical violence; community security, encompassing protection of group identity and cultural practices; and political security, which guarantees basic human rights and freedom from political repression (UNDP, 1994). Later scholarship, including the 2022 UNDP Special Report, extended the framework to address cascading and intersecting threats, noting that insecurities rarely occur in isolation but tend to compound each other, particularly in contexts of weak governance (UNDP, 2022).

Critique and Qualification

The framework has attracted criticism on several grounds. Paris (2001) argued that its breadth makes it "analytically bankrupt" as a tool for policy because it fails to distinguish security threats from development challenges. This criticism has merit when human security is used as a synonym for human development, but it does not apply when the framework is deployed as a structured analytical instrument to examine specific intersecting threats in a specific context. This paper uses the framework in the latter way: the seven dimensions provide a diagnostic structure, not a policy shopping list.

A further qualification concerns the relationship between the state and individual security. Human Security Theory does not imply that state security is irrelevant; it implies that state security is insufficient and, in some contexts, actively harmful to individuals. In Nigeria, the state's failure to provide economic opportunity, environmental governance, and justice creates the conditions in which armed violence becomes a rational option for some actors. The theory is not anti-state; it is an argument for a state that governs comprehensively rather than merely militarily.

Relevance to Nigeria and Analytical Application

Human Security Theory is particularly suited to the analysis of Fulani militancy in Nigeria for three reasons. First, the conflict is multi-causal: no single driver, such as climate change or poverty, is sufficient to explain it. The theory's multi-dimensional framework accommodates this complexity without reducing it. Second, the primary victims of the conflict, farming and pastoral communities in the North Central region, are precisely the individuals whose security the theory is designed to address. They are not party to a conventional inter-state conflict; they are civilians caught between structural pressures and armed actors that the state has failed to govern. Third, the theory provides a direct critique of the Nigerian state's predominant policy response. Conventional military operations primarily address immediate personal security concerns in a reactive manner, while giving comparatively less attention to the economic, environmental, food, and community security dimensions that contribute to the persistence of the conflict. The framework suggests that such responses are unlikely to reduce violence sustainably, a view the evidence so far supports.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for this inquiry because the research questions concern interpretive and explanatory matters, specifically why conventional security responses have been insufficient, and what kind of response a human security framework would recommend. These questions require analytical engagement with complex causal processes rather than statistical measurement. The study draws exclusively on secondary data. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2020 to 2025; reports from international organisations including UNDP, the Institute for Economics and Peace, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), and the International Crisis Group; policy documents from the Nigerian federal and state governments; and data from the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa. The study does not rely on newspaper sources for evidential claims, though media reports are referenced where they reflect documented events cited in academic literature. Several limitations apply to this paper. First, secondary analysis depends on the quality and completeness of primary data. Conflict data from rural areas in Nigeria is often underreported due to access constraints facing researchers and journalists. Second, the study focuses on the North Central region, and its findings may not generalise directly to other theatres of conflict in Nigeria or to herder-farmer conflicts in other countries without modification.

Nature and Dynamics of Insecurity in Nigeria

Insurgency

The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009 under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, Borno State, has been the most internationally recognised security threat in Nigeria. Following Yusuf's extrajudicial killing in 2009, the group escalated its campaign of violence against the Nigerian state and civilian populations. A factional split in 2016 produced ISWAP, which has since become the dominant armed group in the Lake Chad Basin. The GTI 2025 documents 16 ISWAP attacks in Nigeria in 2024 alone (IEP, 2025). While the insurgency is geographically concentrated in the northeast, its consequences in terms of displacement, food insecurity, and the militarisation of civilian life, have national implications.

Banditry

Armed banditry in the northwest, particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi States, has produced one of the most severe humanitarian crises in Nigeria. Bandit groups numbering in the thousands control large stretches of territory, levy taxes on local communities, and carry out attacks on villages, schools, and transport routes. The Nextier SPD Conflict Data Project (2024) documents a continuation of this pattern through the first quarter of 2024, with kidnapping-for-ransom remaining the primary income stream for bandit organisations. The line between banditry and Fulani militancy is contested; some analysts argue that displaced pastoralists, unable to sustain livelihoods through herding, have migrated into bandit groups, while others distinguish armed pastoralists from criminal organisations with different organisational structures and motivations.

Kidnapping

Kidnapping for ransom has expanded beyond the Niger Delta, where it was historically concentrated, into every region of Nigeria. High-profile mass kidnappings, including school abductions in the northwest, have attracted international attention, but routine kidnapping of farmers, traders, and travellers in rural areas represents a more pervasive and economically damaging pattern. The Nextier SPD (2024) Conflict Data Project documents hundreds of

kidnapping incidents in the North Central region, with farming communities particularly vulnerable during planting and harvest seasons when people move through areas of limited security coverage.

Communal Conflicts

Communal violence in Nigeria encompasses a range of disputes rooted in competition over land, water, chieftaincy, and political representation. In the North Central region, conflicts between Fulani herding communities and Tiv, Berom, Jukun, Tarok, and Adara farming communities have recurred with increasing lethality since the early 2000s. Herder-farmer conflicts in Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau States have been characterised by attacks on settlements, destruction of farmland and food stores, and mass displacement (Nwosu & Obi, 2025). The dynamics of these conflicts are examined in greater detail in Sections 6 and 7.

Arms Proliferation

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is a cross-cutting enabler of all forms of armed violence in Nigeria. A 2021 report cited in recent scholarship estimated that approximately 6.4 to 6.5 million firearms may be in civilian hands in Nigeria, and that Nigeria may account for approximately 70 per cent of the 500 million illicit SALWs circulating in West Africa (Senate Committee on National Security and Intelligence, 2022). Nigeria's primary legislation on firearms, the Firearms Act of 1959, has not been updated to address the contemporary scale of illicit arms circulation. Afolabi and Ayeye (2024) document the institutional constraints that prevent effective implementation of even the existing legal framework, including coordination failures between federal and state security agencies and Nigeria's non-domestication of the ECOWAS Convention on the Proliferation of SALW.

Drivers of Insecurity

Governance Deficits and Weak Institutions

Poor governance is both a proximate and structural driver of insecurity in Nigeria. Sule et al. (2024) demonstrate a statistically significant negative correlation between governance quality and security outcomes across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. The mechanisms through which governance deficits drive insecurity are specific and traceable. When the state fails to adjudicate land disputes, communities escalate from litigation to self-help. When security forces fail to protect communities from attack, those communities arm themselves or organise militias. When justice systems fail to hold violent actors accountable, impunity becomes a signal that violence is a viable strategy. Each of these mechanisms operates independently of poverty; they can be observed even in communities that are not among the most economically deprived. Governance failure does not merely correlate with conflict; it creates the institutional vacuum that conflict fills.

Nigeria's formal conflict resolution institutions, including customary courts, state mediation structures, and inter-community peace committees, are inadequately resourced, inconsistently applied, and subject to political interference. The absence of reliable institutional mechanisms for resolving disputes over land and water access means that conflicts that begin as civil matters escalate into criminal ones. Traditional institutions of conflict management, including the roles of traditional rulers and community leaders in mediating between herding and farming communities, have been weakened over time by urbanisation, the politicisation of traditional authority, and the demographic changes that have introduced new actors who do not participate in established dispute resolution processes (Olabisi & Oke, 2024).

Poverty and Economic Marginalisation

Poverty and economic marginalisation are structural drivers of conflict when they operate through specific mechanisms. In the North Central region, the primary mechanism is livelihood insecurity. Pastoral communities whose herds are reduced by drought or disease, and whose traditional migration routes are blocked by expanding farmland or urban development, face the loss of their primary productive asset. This livelihood crisis does not automatically translate into violence; most communities affected by poverty do not turn to organised armed action. The key intervening variables are the absence of economic alternatives, the absence of institutional mechanisms to resolve livelihood disputes, and the availability of weapons. When all three conditions obtain simultaneously, violence becomes more likely.

Similarly, farming communities whose land is invaded or whose crops are destroyed face immediate food insecurity without legal recourse or state protection. Fadare et al. (2023) document the displacement of entire farming communities from productive land in Benue and Plateau States, with cascading effects on food availability and prices across a wider region. The economic dimensions of this conflict are thus not background conditions; they are the direct stakes over which violence is waged.

Youth Unemployment

Nigeria has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in sub-Saharan Africa. While aggregate data is contested, there is consistent evidence that unemployment and underemployment are more severe in rural areas, where agricultural livelihoods are under stress from multiple directions, and among young men with secondary but incomplete tertiary education. This demographic is particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, militia leaders, and criminal organisations. The mechanism is not simply that unemployed young men are desperate and therefore violent; it is that without productive economic engagement, young men lack the social and economic stakes in stability that make non-violence rational (Sule et al., 2024; Olabisi & Oke, 2024).

Social Exclusion and Identity Politics

Ayodele et al. (2024) argue that the identity dimension of Fulani militancy is analytically distinct from its economic dimensions and cannot be reduced to them. The framing of herder-farmer conflict in predominantly ethnic and religious terms, reinforced by political actors, media coverage, and community leaders, has produced a dynamic in which violence is not merely a response to resource scarcity but an expression of group threat perception. Communities that perceive themselves as ethnically or religiously targeted respond with greater collective organisation and willingness to employ lethal force. Conversely, communities that are systematically excluded from political representation and government resource allocation develop grievances that fuel solidarity with armed actors who claim to represent their interests.

Corruption

Corruption in the security sector and in the judiciary undermines the state's capacity to provide security and justice. Reported incidents in which security personnel extort money from communities, fail to respond to attacks that have been anticipated and reported, or release arrested suspects without charge, are documented in multiple empirical studies (Sule et al., 2024). This corruption operates as a direct driver of conflict escalation: when communities conclude that the state will not protect them and will not punish those who

attack them, the rational response is to take security into their own hands, which introduces new armed actors and reduces the prospects for negotiated resolution (Olabisi & Oke, 2024).

Human Security Perspective on Nigeria's Security Challenges

This section constitutes the analytical core of the paper. Each dimension of human security is examined as both a driver of the conflict and a site of harm. The objective is to demonstrate why the conflict cannot be fully understood and is therefore unlikely to be resolved through a single-dimensional analytical or policy approach, through a single-dimensional lens, and why the conventional security response, which addresses at most one dimension (personal security, reactively), is structurally inadequate.

Economic Security

Economic security, as defined by the UNDP, requires an assured basic income from productive and remunerative work. Both farming and pastoral communities in the North Central region are economically insecure in ways that are causally connected to the conflict. For pastoral communities, the loss of cattle to disease, drought, or theft constitutes the loss of their primary productive asset and store of wealth. For farming communities, the destruction of crops and the displacement from farmland represent immediate economic collapse without the prospect of state compensation or credit access to restart production.

The economic security dimension explains a feature of the conflict that the conventional security frame cannot: why the conflict persists even in periods of reduced direct violence. Economic insecurity is a chronic condition that does not require an immediate trigger to produce social tension. Communities living under conditions of persistent economic insecurity remain in a state of latent conflict readiness, in which any provocation, however minor, can trigger organised violence. Addressing the economic security dimension therefore requires structural interventions in rural livelihoods, including livestock insurance schemes, agricultural credit access, and investment in rural infrastructure, not simply the deployment of more security forces.

Political Security

Political security encompasses the protection of basic human rights and freedom from political repression. In the context of herder-farmer conflict, political security failure operates through two mechanisms. First, communities in the North Central region, particularly Indigenous farming communities in states such as Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa, report a persistent perception that the federal government's security responses are asymmetric, that herding communities benefit from political protection at the federal level while farming communities bear the costs of attacks without redress. Whether or not this perception accurately characterises policy, it generates a grievance structure that intensifies conflict motivation and reduces willingness to engage with state-mediated resolution processes.

Second, the absence of political security for pastoral communities produces a mirror-image problem. Fulani communities that are subject to collective punishment following attacks attributed to armed Fulani groups, and that are subjected to eviction orders or ethnically targeted policing, develop their own set of grievances about political exclusion. Ayodele et al. (2024) document incidents in Ghana and note parallels with the Nigerian North Central region, where punitive collective responses to attributed attacks have displaced thousands of Fulani community members who had no involvement in the original violence. These displacement dynamics expand the pool of actors with grievances against the state and against local farming communities, thereby sustaining the conflict cycle.

Community Security

Community security, defined as the protection of group identity and cultural practices, is directly threatened by the conflict from both sides. For farming communities, repeated attacks that destroy villages, displace populations, and kill community leaders represent an existential threat to the social fabric that has sustained those communities for generations. The displacement of entire communities from ancestral land, documented by Nwosu and Obi (2025) in Benue and Nasarawa States, is not merely a housing and livelihood crisis; it is the destruction of community identity and social networks that cannot be reconstituted simply by returning people to a rebuilt village.

For Fulani pastoral communities, the erosion of traditional migration routes and grazing lands threatens the pastoral way of life itself. Climate-induced range contraction forces herders into territories where they have no historical relationships with local farming communities and therefore lack the social capital that traditionally mediated resource competition. The loss of community security for pastoral groups is thus both a consequence of the conflict and a cause of its escalation, as communities stripped of customary land use rights and social recognition become more susceptible to violent mobilisation.

Food Security

The impact of herder-farmer conflict on food security in the North Central region is extensively documented. Nwosu and Obi (2025) document the displacement of millions of farmers from productive land in North Central states beginning in 2022 and continuing through 2024. In Kogul Community, Mangu Local Government Area, Plateau State, attacks on 6 July 2023 killed five people and resulted in the destruction of houses and farms across the community (Nwosu & Obi, 2025). These incidents are not exceptional; they represent a recurring pattern that has produced chronic food insecurity across the region.

Displaced farmers do not simply move to new farmland; they move to internally displaced persons camps or to urban areas where they have no productive capacity. The abandonment of farmland reduces overall food production in affected states, tightens food markets, and pushes prices up for the broader population. Fadare et al. (2023) demonstrated through ACLED data analysis that conflict in the North Central region has produced measurable price increases in food staples in affected states, extending the food security impact well beyond the immediate conflict zones. This food security dimension of the conflict is entirely invisible to a security response that focuses on identifying and neutralising armed actors.

Environmental Security

Environmental security connects the conflict to larger-scale processes of climate change and ecosystem degradation. Lake Chad has contracted by more than 90 per cent since the 1960s as a result of overuse, mismanagement, and climate change (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018). This dramatic reduction in a resource on which millions of people depend has displaced large numbers of pastoralists from their traditional range areas in the Lake Chad Basin and pushed them south into Nigeria's North Central region. Ehiane and Moyo (2022) apply human security theory to the Lake Chad region specifically and find that reduced access to fertile land, water, and pasture is the primary mechanism linking climate change to recurrent conflict. These findings are directly applicable to the dynamics of herder-farmer conflict in Northern Nigeria.

Desertification and irregular rainfall in northern Nigeria have reduced the carrying capacity of land available for both agriculture and pastoralism (Ojewale, 2022). The livestock sector contributes approximately 1.7 per cent of Nigeria's GDP and approximately 9 per cent of

agricultural sector output, while pastoralists contribute up to 15 per cent of the Sahel region's GDP (Ojewale, 2022). Environmental security failure therefore represents an economic emergency for pastoral communities even before any particular conflict incident occurs. The environmental dimension of the conflict is also structural and long-term: it will not be resolved by military operations, and it will worsen as climate change accelerates, making early investment in environmental security the most cost-effective security intervention available.

Personal Security

Personal security, the protection of individuals from physical violence, is the dimension most directly addressed by conventional security responses, and yet it remains severely compromised for both farming and pastoral communities in the North Central region. Farming communities face lethal attacks on settlements, often at night, by armed groups using military-grade weapons. Pastoral communities face retaliatory attacks, evictions, and collective punishment. Both communities experience chronic fear that restricts movement, limits economic activity, keeps children out of school, and degrades physical and mental health across generations.

The critical insight from the human security framework is that addressing personal security through military means alone cannot produce durable safety. Personal security that depends on the constant presence of armed security forces is inherently fragile: forces are redeployed, operations are suspended, and armed groups adapt. Sustainable personal security requires the elimination of the conditions that make armed violence an attractive option for the communities and actors involved. This means addressing the economic, political, environmental, and community security deficits that the preceding sections have outlined. The conventional security response addresses personal security as if it were independent of these other dimensions; the human security framework demonstrates why it is not.

Policy Implications

The analysis in Section 7 generates a set of policy implications that are directly derived from the findings. Recommendations not connected to this analysis are avoided.

Community Policing and Local Security Architecture

The distance between formal security forces and rural communities in the North Central region is both physical and relational. Communities affected by herder-farmer conflict frequently report that security forces arrive after attacks have occurred rather than preventing them, and that when forces are present, they respond inconsistently and sometimes exploit their presence for extortion (Sule et al., 2024). Community policing models that embed locally recruited, trained, and accountable officers within communities, and that build operational links between community leaders and state security forces, have been associated with positive outcomes in other conflict-affected contexts and are worth piloting in the North Central region.

A critical condition for community policing to work in this context is that it must be ethnically inclusive. A community policing structure that is perceived to serve one community against another will deepen rather than reduce conflict. Governance of any community policing initiative must include both farming and pastoral community representatives, operate under civilian oversight, and be subject to regular accountability review.

Intelligence-Led Security and Early Warning

Attacks on farming communities in the North Central region are rarely without warning. Community leaders, traditional rulers, and local contacts often have advance information about impending attacks that does not reach formal security structures in time, or that is ignored when it does. Building structured early warning systems that systematically gather and act on community-level information requires investment in communication infrastructure, standardised reporting protocols, and trained personnel with a mandate to act on warnings received.

The National Early Warning System, which exists in a limited form within the Office of the National Security Adviser, requires substantial expansion and decentralisation to function effectively in rural areas. Any early warning system must also be capable of identifying threats to pastoral communities, not only threats from them, if it is to reduce violence rather than simply displace it.

Youth Empowerment and Economic Diversification

The structural connection between youth unemployment, economic marginalisation, and susceptibility to armed recruitment documented in Section 6 points directly to the need for rural youth employment programmes. These programmes should be designed around the specific economic context of the North Central region: agribusiness, livestock value chain development, environmental service provision, and rural infrastructure construction are sectors with genuine employment potential that are also relevant to the conflict dynamics. Generic urban-oriented skills training programmes have not been effective in reaching the rural youth populations most affected by conflict.

Pastoral communities specifically require investment in livelihood diversification. Programmes that provide training in agro-pastoralism, livestock health services, and market access for pastoral products reduce the total dependence of Fulani households on unrestricted access to large grazing areas, making negotiated solutions to land use conflicts more achievable.

Conflict Prevention and Institutional Mediation

The failure of institutional conflict resolution mechanisms documented in Section 6 argues for significant investment in functional mediation structures. These should operate at three levels: the local level, through traditional institutions and community dialogue platforms; the state level, through adequately resourced state conflict management bodies with genuine authority to enforce agreements; and the federal level, through a national pastoralism policy that clarifies land use rights, migration corridor arrangements, and compensation mechanisms.

The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), launched in 2019 and revised under President Tinubu's administration, represents a policy framework for this transition, but its implementation has been uneven and has faced resistance from pastoral communities that perceive it as an attempt to confiscate their way of life rather than support it. Effective implementation requires genuine consultation with pastoral communities, not merely notification of decisions already made. The newly established Federal Ministry of Livestock Development (FMLD) now holds total ownership over the sector's policy implementation.

Security Sector Reform and Justice Institutions

The corruption, impunity, and ethnic bias documented in Nigeria's security sector responses to herder-farmer conflict do not merely reflect individual misconduct; they reflect

institutional cultures and incentive structures that have not been reformed. Security sector reform that addresses the specific dysfunctions identified in this analysis, accountability for failure to respond to reported threats, prohibition of collective punishment, transparent investigation of atrocities committed by both communities, and prosecution of perpetrators regardless of ethnic affiliation, is essential to restoring the minimal legitimacy that the state requires to play a constructive role in conflict resolution.

The justice system's failure to prosecute perpetrators of attacks on farming and pastoral communities in the North Central region has created an impunity environment in which armed actors face no deterrent costs. Investment in mobile courts, legal aid services, and evidence-gathering capacity in rural areas is required to convert that impunity environment into one in which accountability is real and visible.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Fulani militancy in Nigeria's North Central region through the analytical lens of Human Security Theory. It has argued that this violence is best understood as a multi-dimensional human security crisis in which economic insecurity, food insecurity, environmental degradation, community security threats, political exclusion, and the absence of personal security interact and reinforce each other in ways that conventional security responses do not address and are unlikely to resolve on their own.

The paper's primary theoretical contribution is its demonstration that Human Security Theory provides a broader analytical framework for understanding dimensions of insecurity that conventional state-centred security approaches often do not fully capture. The conventional framework can identify armed actors and authorise force against them; it cannot explain why new armed actors continue to emerge from communities that have been subjected to military operations for years. The paper offers a useful explanation for the actions, consequences and way forward, showing that the structural conditions from which violence emerges, economic deprivation, environmental stress, governance failure, and political exclusion, are untouched by military responses.

Recommendations

On the basis of the analysis, the following recommendations are made to the Nigerian government:

i. Develop and implement a comprehensive North Central Regional Security and Development Strategy that integrates the seven dimensions of human security and assigns responsibility for each dimension to a designated ministry or agency with accountable performance targets.
ii. Establish ethnically inclusive community policing structures in the five most conflict-affected states (Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, and Niger), with civilian oversight mechanisms and transparent accountability frameworks.
iii. Invest in an early warning system that is operationally connected to state and local government security responses, with clear protocols for acting on community-level threat information within defined timeframes.
iv. Amend the Firearms Act of 1959 and domesticate the ECOWAS Convention on the Proliferation of SALW, and resource the relevant enforcement agencies accordingly.
v. Redesign the National Livestock Transformation Plan through genuine consultation with pastoral communities, with provisions for livelihood diversification support and legally enforceable land use agreements.

vi. Establish fast-track mobile courts in conflict-affected Local Government Areas with a specific mandate to prosecute perpetrators of attacks on both farming and pastoral communities, and provide legal aid services for victims of both communities.

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