



Simon Richards/Mercy Corps



# CONFLICT, LIVELIHOODS, AND RESILIENCE: Community Capacities in Nigeria's Middle Belt

## OVERVIEW

Violent conflict between farmers and pastoralists over scarce natural resources in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria has trapped communities in a cycle of insecurity and underdevelopment. For decades, conflict has impeded the economic growth of the region and the country, as well as the financial health of households. As our recent study showed, households would increase their income by at least 64%, and up to 210%, if farmer-pastoralist violence were to reduce to near zero.<sup>1</sup> Conflict destroys livelihoods and leads to displacement; conversely, livelihood insecurity induces migration, which in some cases creates disputes over land and leads to violent conflict.

<sup>1</sup> See The Economic Costs of Conflict and the Benefits of Peace: Effects of Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt on Households. Accessible at <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/economic-costs-conflict-nigeria>.

## Key Findings

- Existing coping strategies of pastoralist communities experiencing farmer-pastoralist conflict can be counter-productive to long-term growth. Pastoralists tend to cope with conflict by altering their movement patterns, which can reduce their ability to earn a living.
- Some livelihoods improvement strategies may fuel conflict. Income diversification efforts often require increased settlements for pastoralists, so they can adopt farming and other livelihood approaches. In some cases this increases their social bonds with neighboring groups, but in other instances leaves them more vulnerable to attack over land conflict.
- For both farmers and pastoralists, conflict gradually erodes a household's or community's ability to support itself in the future, reducing both their livelihood capacities and their resilience to future stresses and shocks.
- Communities tend to adopt reactive dispute resolution mechanisms—short-term responses to an incident to prevent it from escalating—rather than develop long-term transformative mechanisms to address the roots of conflict or provide a system for future dispute resolution.

This study explores one relationship in this web: specifically, the types of economic impacts of violent conflict on community livelihoods, and the strategies communities adopt in response to these impacts. We set out to learn about communities' capacities to respond to conflict, both in terms of improving their livelihoods and in terms of preventing conflict from occurring or recurring.

The research confirms that conflict is the most significant factor affecting the livelihoods of both farmers and pastoralists, and households and communities enduring conflict stresses over time experience a gradual erosion in their ability to support themselves. Apart from reactive coping strategies such as livelihood diversification, farmer and pastoralist communities demonstrate few adaptive strategies to improve their livelihoods in the long term, with pastoralist communities particularly limited in their diversification strategies. Furthermore, some of the coping strategies that communities do use, such as changes in pastoralist migration or settlement, were shown to instigate further conflict. Finally, transformative peacebuilding capacities—which would prevent violent conflict—across communities and states need significant further support and development.

These findings indicate that key policy changes and multi-sector, resilience-building interventions focused on reducing or preventing conflict and improving livelihoods are urgently needed for sustainable development in the region.

## BACKGROUND

This study is part of a larger effort to understand the economic costs of farmer-pastoralist conflict and the potential benefits of peace in the Middle Belt, in order to inform evidence-based policy recommendations that promote long-term peace in the region. Since December 2012, Mercy Corps has implemented a conflict management program in Nigeria's Middle Belt, Conciliation in Nigeria through Community-Based Conflict Management and Cooperative Use of Resources (CONCUR), funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). CONCUR seeks to reduce violent conflict between farmer and pastoralist communities by developing local leaders' dispute resolution skills, increasing cooperation around economic activity and natural resource management, and collaborating with business leaders to promote long-term policy solutions through research and advocacy. To learn more about the specific effects of conflict on communities and how to reduce violence while promoting long-term livelihood development in this context, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What livelihood capacities do farmer and pastoralist communities demonstrate in response to inter-communal violence? How do these capacities affect community economies, well-being outcomes, and resilience to future stresses?
2. What peacebuilding capacities do farmer and pastoralist communities have in the Middle Belt to prevent future inter-communal conflict?

The research team collected qualitative data through focus group discussion (FGDs), direct observation, semi-structured individual interviews, and key informant interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including community members, community leaders, local government officials, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in each study area. This study does not attempt to be statistically representative, but rather attempts to add nuance and depth to the quantitative findings from other Mercy Corps studies on the economic costs of conflict.<sup>2</sup> In all, more than 400 people participated in 31 focus groups across Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Plateau states; an additional 93 key informants were interviewed at the local, state, and national levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Research and policy briefs around the economic costs of conflict at the state and national level, as well as at the household level, can be found here: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/economic-costs-conflict-nigeria>.

## CHANGING IMPACTS OF CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE BELT

This study first explored how the conflict dynamics and their effects on livelihoods are evolving. Evidence continues to identify competition for scarce natural resources, such as land and water, as the key driver of conflict in this region. Across all of the communities that participated in the study, conflict is seen as the most significant factor that affects their livelihoods, through displacement, increased prices of goods, reduced mobility and access to natural resources, and reduced trading. Even relatively low-level violent events cost communities significant economic losses. One household reported losing up to 75% of their assets, with crop damage and cattle raiding costing farmers and pastoralists, respectively, millions of Naira in a single incident. These findings confirmed our understanding that security is the top priority of communities in the Middle Belt and should be treated as urgent by policymakers and donors.

**Trauma and Retaliation:** Through this study we learned more about how conflict is exacerbated by trauma and transmitted to neighboring communities, continually expanding the circle of violence. This growing retaliation cycle manifests itself in two ways: farmer-pastoralist conflicts and broader tensions across identity groups. In general, some communities experiencing violence retaliate against communities that did not perpetrate the attack but that are part of the same ethnic and livelihood group as the alleged attackers. For example, one scenario reported is that if a member of the pastoralist community allows animals to destroy crops in a farming community and does not take responsibility for the damage, the owner of the crops from the farming community becomes angry. If the pastoralist responsible for the damage has by that time moved on with his livestock, the farmer may take this anger out on the next pastoralist who happens to come near his lands. The reverse of this example was also reported. A pastoralist who has been mistreated in one farmer community may become less concerned if his cattle feed on harvested yams or stray into crops as he moves through another location. As a common example of this, a pastoralist respondent reported being beaten badly and chased away from village water sources even though he had never been there before. Thus, trauma and pain contribute to increased conflict through retaliation across identity groups, expanding the group of actors affected by, and participating in, conflict.

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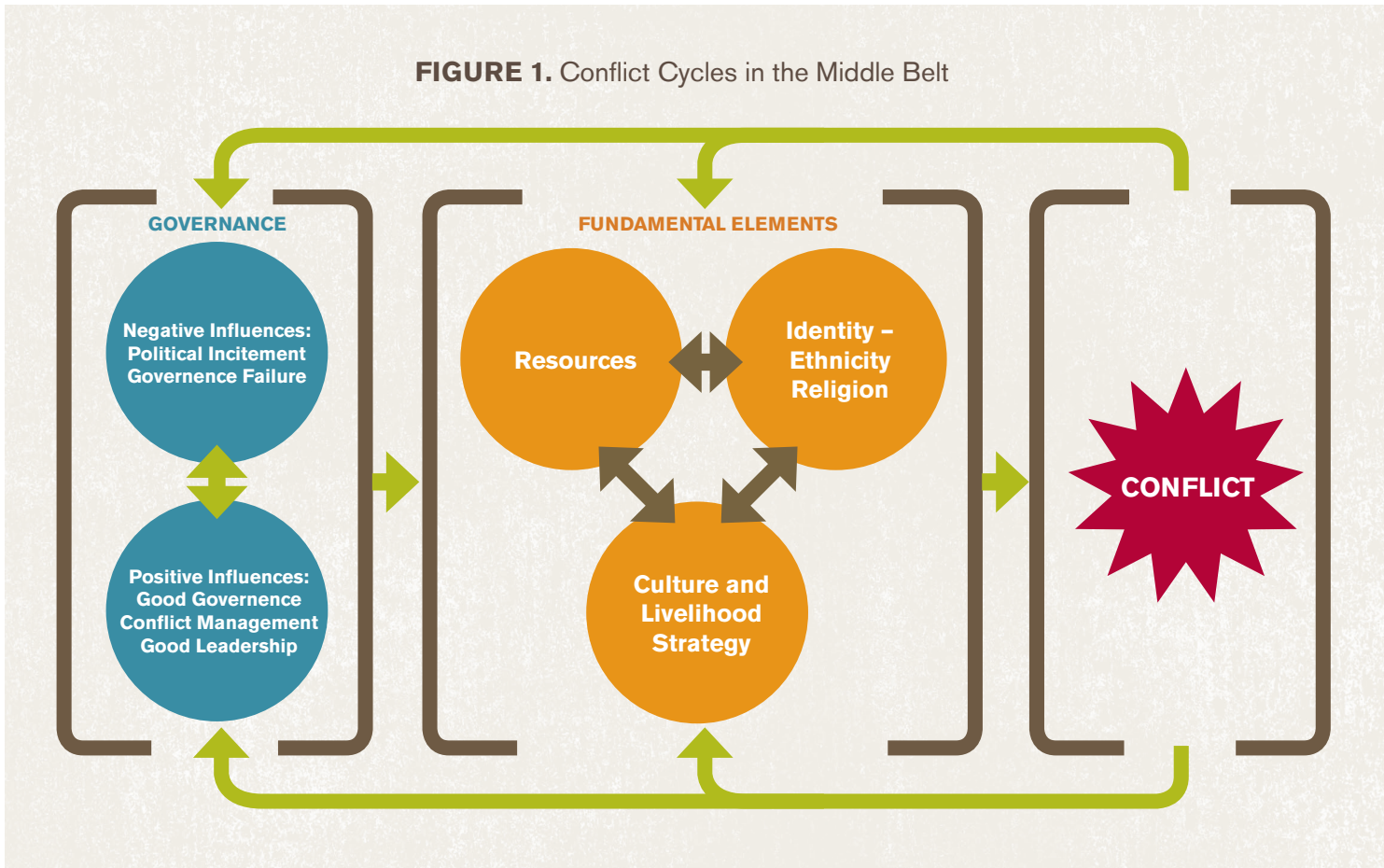
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**Identity, Culture and Resources:** These retaliation cycles tend to converge with identities, broadening the conflict further as revenge occurs along ethnic, religious, and political lines. Even though livelihood strategies across different groups have somewhat merged over time, with growing numbers of community members engaging in both farming and pastoralist activities, the discrete identity markers of 'farmer' and 'pastoralist' persist over time, reinforcing perceived group differences. For example, some groups of people participating in the study who have been settled in one place for generations and whose livelihood is based primarily on farming, still consider themselves and are considered by others as pastoralists because of identity factors such as their Fulani ethnicity and Muslim heritage. Similarly, the majority of the settled communities identifying as farmers are Christian from various ethnic groups. Thus, these different livelihood groups have become synonymized with religious and/or ethnic groups, and violence over time results in the erosion of trust, tolerance, and social and economic exchange across religious, ethnic, and livelihood groups.

**Governance and Security:** The challenges for the state security sector in tackling conflict are immense. For small incidents, security agencies reportedly lack transportation and human resources to police large areas. They experience difficulty in responding to conflict due to a lack of witnesses to events occurring in remote rural locations, sometimes at night and far from urban-based police resources. For serious, larger-scale conflict events that involve organized, mobilized, and well-armed groups, security forces were reported to lack resources to mount an appropriate response. The study finds that communities' trust in state justice institutions has seriously deteriorated due to perceived biases in how different ethnic groups are treated, as well as a simple lack of justice administration. As a result, communities may be less likely to engage with security forces, thereby leading to conflict escalation as communities attempt to manage justice processes on their own. The overall ethnic-based political environment also creates a context in which politicians exploit tensions across identity groups to their advantage in mobilizing support in their political campaigns.

The study finds that the fundamental elements driving conflict behaviors include the protagonists' identity, livelihood priorities, and competition over natural resources. Where governance and security mechanisms are unable to manage, contain and resolve the violence, and traditional and community-led responses are not equipped to prevent conflict, a mutually reinforcing and intensifying cycle emerges. These interactions are reflected in the diagram below.

**FIGURE 1.** Conflict Cycles in the Middle Belt



## COMMUNITY CAPACITIES FOR RESPONDING TO THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT

The study also explored how communities respond to conflict, in terms of conflict prevention and livelihood development. We saw four ways, all related to short-term coping: reactive dispute resolution mechanisms, livelihood diversification, migration, and settling. While these coping strategies help people manage the onset of conflict and its effects, without the use of more adaptive or transformative strategies they do not constitute evidence of long-term resilience in these communities. Below we describe these four areas.

**Reactive Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** Communities tended to adopt reactive dispute resolution mechanisms—short-term responses to an incident that prevents it from escalating—rather than develop long-term transformative mechanisms to address the roots of conflict or provide a system for future dispute resolution. For example, conflict management strategies reported involve leaders urging peace when conflict arises, or seeking to settle a dispute through traditional authority structures. Communities reported that in a best-case scenario, following an incident in which pastoralists' cattle have caused extensive damage to the crops of a farmer community, the local farmer community chief and the local ardo (pastoralist community leader) will contact each other and attempt to resolve the dispute. On occasion, religious leaders were reported to play a role, such as preaching peace, patience and restraint in their respective communities, in preventing communal violence from escalating. Even these reactive strategies are limited, however, as traditional mechanisms are mainly aimed at addressing issues within their homogeneous communities; respondents indicated these mechanisms are not effective or compatible across identity groups, except at the relatively trivial level, and so they cannot ensure appropriate compensation or reconciliation to resolve intergroup disputes sustainably. Importantly, cross-community efforts to build peace and encourage a transformation in relationships in the long-term are relatively scarce.

### Income Source Diversification:

Communities experiencing ongoing conflict stresses were likely to adopt only reactive coping mechanisms in response to economic loss. Documented coping mechanisms include livelihood diversification, which was particularly a key strategy of farmers linked to, but not exclusively caused by, conflict. Diversification,



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both in terms of crop production and other strategies such as trading or beekeeping, helped farmers recover from large-scale and frequent crop damages. However, farmers facing significant losses due to crop destruction as part of the broader conflict cycles did not demonstrate many examples of deeper adaptation, such as changing their farming strategies. These strategies might include devising more efficient land use approaches, building fences to protect crops, or working jointly with the pastoralists and government to delineate the migration corridors to prevent land encroachment on either side.

**Migration:** Pastoralists reported profound shifts in their movement patterns as a way to prevent conflict while maintaining their lifestyle as closely as possible in the immediate term. First, pastoralists reported increasingly moving along major highways rather than through traditional cattle routes, which reduces vulnerability to attack from farmers but increases vulnerability to motor vehicle accidents. Pastoralists said they are more likely to graze in coordination with other families, rather than travel within smaller family units. While this

strategy increases their protection, these groups also move more quickly to avoid conflict, which negatively impacts cattle health. Pastoralists are also engaging less with farmer communities as they graze their cattle; this reduces their immediate vulnerability to conflict by decreasing interaction, but it damages relationships in the long term. Lastly, pastoralists are also grazing more at night in order to avoid confrontation with farmers, which increases the risk of crop destruction, a key trigger for conflict.

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**Settling:** One of the most significant coping mechanisms that pastoralists reported is settling. Settling is a strategy some pastoralists reported using in order to diversify their livelihoods and increase their economic security. The study finds that settlement reduces the risk of attacks and violence for pastoralists on a daily basis by limiting exposure to disputes around crop damage and cattle routes, and reducing vulnerability to attacks on migrants in transit. However, settlement shifts the type of risks that households may face, and the vulnerabilities to which a family is exposed, over different periods of time. For example, members of a farmer community in Kaduna noted that they had ‘more trouble’ with the settled, local pastoralists than the mobile groups; the latter only passed by occasionally whereas farmers reported issues with the settled pastoralists year-round. Settlement in a vulnerable context may mean households still face a more organized and concerted attack in the community. Such attacks tend to arise as a result of the convergence of identity factors noted above, which leads to broad, large-scale violence aimed at the group identity level.

## MANAGING LONG-TERM RISKS

Beyond the immediate impacts from discrete conflict events, our analysis indicates that conflict gradually erodes a household’s or community’s ability to support itself in the future, reducing both their livelihood capacities and their resilience to future stresses and shocks. This erosion occurs through multiple channels, including the weakening of social bonds across groups, undermining the ability of households to contribute to social insurance safety networks or offer support to other community members experiencing shocks or losses. Social safety networks are disrupted within pastoralist communities in particular, as communities become more dispersed to reduce risks associated with conflict. For instance, in one scenario reported frequently, part of the family migrates with cattle to one area, another takes cattle to a different area far away, while still other members of the extended families settle in urban centers.

In addition, conflict was reported to reduce productive assets such as vehicles needed to transport goods, along with households’ wealth and assets—either looted or destroyed through conflict—thereby affecting the inheritance of future generations. The following scenarios were reported across a plurality of communities participating in the study: For pastoralists, cattle—usually households’ most significant assets—are killed by farmers during conflict incidents. For farmers, entire harvests can be lost in one event as a herd passes through their land. During



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community-level, organized violence, houses and shops are burned to the ground and assets looted during the event. Victims then become limited in their ability to contribute to social safety nets such as community mutual support systems to assist one another in times of crisis, thereby reducing the wider community's capacity to recover from shocks. For example, pastoralist respondents explained that when livestock levels were severely depleted from conflict, they are not in a position to give or loan animals to destitute families as per their tradition.

The ongoing stress of conflict—and fear of conflict—impedes livelihoods as it reduces investment and levels of economic risk-taking that might, under normal circumstances, provide much needed enterprise. That conflict also reduces resilience capacities is understandably a grave concern for policymakers, as the impacts of conflict go beyond the immediate effects of income loss and actually weaken the abilities of communities to bounce back from stressful events.

As noted above, the reactive, short-term strategies communities reported adopting for livelihood preservation and conflict prevention were not always compatible, as livelihood diversification for one group may incite conflict through immediate increased competition for resources. For example, expansion of agricultural land by farmers to increase their harvests and so reduce vulnerability from crop damage by pastoralists also exacerbates conflict by reducing available grazing land.

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The study found few strategies designed to prevent or transform conflict in these areas. First, we saw few adaptive strategies such as organized conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms. More fundamentally, communities generally lacked conflict management mechanisms and transformative strategies aimed at addressing the fundamental structural issues driving the conflicts. In no communities did respondents report organised, participatory and formal local reconciliation processes after the resolution of a dispute. This demonstrates the need for proactive programming that can help communities not only respond to losses, but also lay the groundwork for preventing conflict in a sustainable way and for managing resources in a way that will promote peace, rather than conflict. Such proactive programming can prevent the deterioration of household assets and community bonds that help communities withstand the stresses of conflict.

## **STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS**

Among the many available options for reducing conflict and increasing resilience in Nigeria's Middle Belt, government and international actors can focus on four general areas for long-term conflict reduction:

**Peacebuilding Mechanisms:** The need for systematic, comprehensive and strategic peacebuilding programs that address chronic, resource-driven, community-level conflicts, as well as identity-based conflict dynamics at the state level, is overwhelming. Government can support improved peacebuilding through harmonizing potential gaps between security agencies and the justice sector at the federal and state levels; providing resources to interstate coordination efforts to holistically address cross-border conflict systems;

and establishing or strengthening early warning and response mechanisms that are integrated with federal security objectives and community approaches.

**Sustained, Multi-sectoral Programming:** International actors can ensure livelihood strategies and conflict management strategies positively reinforce each other. Multi-sectoral, multi-year programming structures offer the best opportunity to address interrelated conflict and livelihood issues simultaneously. Social and trauma healing should be incorporated carefully in conflict management activities to reinforce structural improvements in peace mechanisms and joint livelihoods development. Trauma healing and reconciliation programming can address some of the proximate drivers of conflict and reduce the transmittance of conflict from one community to another.

**Livelihoods Development:** Improved provision of government livestock extension services and facilities, in areas such as crop productivity, improved land quality, animal healthcare and disease management, and diversification of the agricultural sector will bring benefits to all stakeholders and simultaneously reduce vulnerability for farmers and pastoralists.

**Land Use Planning:** Given the ongoing encroachment of farming, settlement, urban expansion, and other large scale development activity on both pastoralist rangelands and migration routes, states should implement prior recommendations around land use planning. These prior recommendations include revisiting land tenure and land use policy nationally (and addressing disparities between groups considered “indigenes” and “settlers” in their ability to access to political office and land ownership); ensuring availability of pasture and water through expanding grazing routes and reserves; and compensating current landowners of reserves. These policy changes will be critical to reducing farmer-pastoralist conflict in the long term.



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