

Implementation of open grasing prohibition policy and management of farmers/herdsmen conflict in Ebonyi state: Troubles and solutions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the issues confronting how implementation of open grasing prohibition policy affects the management of farmers/herdsmen conflict in Ebonyi state. The study adopted cross sectional and explorative research design using questionnaire (140) and Key Informant Interviews with farmers and herdsmen as participants. Anchored on Frustration-Anger-Aggression theory, the study identified some issues as reasons for the escalation of the conflict and its effect on social economic development of the people. While the state government strategies in managing the conflict was applauded by the both parties, implementing the open grasing prohibition policy of the state government was challenged by allegations of partiality, violence and reprisal attack and poor attendance of the herdsmen to peace committee dialogue meetings. To manage the situation, the study recommended that there is the need to expand the composition of the arbitration team to include representative of other associations, interest groups and institutions to be able to determine adequate compensation value for damages done to both parties. Again, the herdsmen should be restricted to grasing at a designated area with, adequate notice of meeting been provided for the herdsmen to enable them regularly attend meeting of peace committee to be able to know the decisions of government.

Keywords:

Conflict, Farmers, Herdsmen, Peace-building, Economic Wellbeing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ebonyi State is primarily an agricultural region, blessed with abundant mineral resources, a leading producer of rice, yam, potatoes, maize, beans and cassava and one of the states in Nigeria that welcome both foreigners, locals etc (Okutu, 2020). The habitation pattern and vastness of land in rural communities in the state provides arable land for agriculture and gave the people the luxury of allowing some land to fallow and regain soil nutrient (Uwakwe, 2019). The fertile soil and temperate climate offer a favorable environment for farmers and herders to thrive through all the year season (Muoneke and Okoli, 2020). This condition according to Okutu (2021) explains the reason why the Fulani pastoralist is littered all over farmlands in the state with their herds. Traditionally, Fulani pastoralists herd their cattle by taking them round in large numbers to feed in open spaces and uncultivated grass land in a migratory or nomadic style otherwise referred to as open grasing (Muoneke and Okoli, 2020). Undeniably, both the sedentary crop farmers and the herdsmen benefits from this practice of open grasing of cattle's because it affords the pastoralist the availability of crop residues particularly during the dry season to feed their livestock while farmers took advantage of the availability of the livestock to enrich their crop using their dung (Okwor cited in Muoneke and Okoli, 2020). This symbiotic practice tied the wellbeing of the herder and allowed for most disputes between the two groups to be resolved non-violently, through traditional mediation mechanisms.

However, with the collapse of traditional methods of conflict resolution, these conflicts seem to linger longer times creating a series of reprisal attacks. Okoli & Addo cited in Adie, Idagu, Nwokedi, Obiageli, Adeboye, Idowu and Marwash (2021) attributed the rise to unhealthy relationship between the farmers and the herdsmen which often result in violence, loss of lives and property to the audacity with which the herders shepherd their flocks to graze on available vegetation on their route. The problem has caused a major decline in farming activities as the dare-devil marauders have taken over the available farmlands. For instance, on 20th April, 2021, Fulani herdsmen attacked four communities of Egedege, Umuhuali, Obegu and Amaezu in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi State and 17 innocent rural dwellers were reportedly killed (nnachi, 2021). This conflict has become an annual ritual and a threat to peace with far

reaching implication on established friendship, farming activities and family means of livelihood. To manage the concomitant consequences of these conflicts, the government enacted law on Anti-open grasing in 2018 referred as "Law No. 010 of 2018: Prohibition of Open Rearing and Grasing of livestock Law and assented to by the Governor David Umahi (Abati, 2021). The law stipulates that:

Herders are not allowed to migrate at night. Again, they are also not allowed to migrate on foot to any place at all in the state. If you are coming into the state you will have to notify the state government and security agencies that you are coming to settle at designated place..., the farmers are warned not to kill the cows of the Fulani's; the same way the Fulani's are warned not to destroy the crops of our farmers because if you kill a Fulani cow, you would be arrested and made to pay damages, vis-a-vis when a Fulani allows their cattle to destroys the farm of a farmer.

To implement the ban, the state government appointed a conflict resolution committee to settle any disputes or misunderstanding arising from the relationship between farmers and herders. But, with recent cases of the Fulani herdsmen terrorising rural communities in the state and series of protests by the local people demanding the herdsmen and their cattle to relocate, it appears that the committee is not effective in managing the situation. It therefore becomes very necessary to study issues confronting how implementation of the policy affects the management of farmers/herdsmen conflict in Ebonyi state. To address this matter, the following questions will be answered.

- What are the effects of the conflict on social economic development of the people of Ebonyi State?
- Challenges facing implementation of the open grasing prohibition policy in the Ebonyi State?

2. METHODOLOGY

Ebonyi State is in southeastern Nigeria. It is inhabited and populated primarily by the Igbo with the city of Abakaliki as its capital and largest city. It is one of the six states created in 1996 by the Abacha administration. The state is nicknamed the salt of the nation due to its huge deposit of salt. It is a leading producer of rice, yam, potatoes, maize, beans, and cassava,

and has a notable basket market in Nigeria. Rice is predominantly cultivated in Ikwo, yams in Izzi, with other regions in the state such as Amasiri, Edda and Ezillo making notable contributions, Effium and Ezzangbo taking the top spots in cassava production, and basket production in Ntezi.

2.1 Population and Sampling Method

The data for this study was collected through structured questionnaire from the target populations who are the local farmers and Fulani's. An interview was also employed to compare with the information received using the questionnaire instrument. The study employed a multistage sampling technique because the target population and the study area are large for the selection of respondents for the administration of questionnaire. The first stage involved the purposeful selection of Local Governments areas in the three senatorial zones of the state which included Ebonyi Local Government Area, Afikpo South, Ishielu, Izzi and Onicha Local Government. The selection was based on the frequent occurrence of farmer-herder conflicts in the study area. The second stage involved the random selection of three communities in the selected LGAs; giving three (3) communities per local government amounting to twelve (12) communities in all. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select five (5) villages from each of the selected communities to give total of (60) villages. From each village, five (2) arable crop farmers were systematically selected to give a total of one hundred and twenty (120) farmers while twenty (20) pastoralists contained in the list of pastoralist in Ebonyi state were purposively sampled. The individuals that can provide the utmost insight into the issue are generally those who have had understanding and who can offer rich data needed for the research work. For this reason, this study selected respondents who were either involved, affected or who witnessed the conflict.

2.2 Method of Data Analysis

Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Mean was computed on a 4-point Likert type rating scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree assigned weight of 4, 3, 2, and 1 to capture the socio-economic effect of the conflicts on the people (objective 1). Again, mean was computed for objective 2 & 3 which looked at state government strategies in managing farmers/herdsmen and Challenges facing implementation of the open grazing prohibition policy in the State on a 3-point Likert type rating scale of very serious, serious, and not serious assigned values of 3, 2, and 1. The values were added and divided by 3 to obtain a discriminating mean value of 2.0. Any value with mean equal to or >2.0 was considered very serious and vice versa.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of analysis for this research work is anchored on the Frustration-aggression theory. The hypothesis is drawn from the frustration-aggression theory propounded by Dollard and Doob, *et al.* (1939), and further developed by Miller (1948) and Berkowitz (1969) as cited in Fasona and Omogbola (2015). Frustration-Anger-Aggression hypothesis of conflict posits that it is natural for man to react to unpleasant situations particularly when his effort to attain a goal is frustrated. The goal or aim of every farmer during planting season is to have bountiful harvest, then sell the farm produce and make profits. On the other hand, the herdsmen would always want to have well fed and healthy cattle and be able to make profits as well (Oli, Ibekwe, and Nwankwo, 2018). When any of these expectations fails to meet attainment, the tendency is for people to confront others they can hold responsible for frustrating their ambitions or someone on whom they can take out their aggression. Once one's access to means of livelihood (farming or grazing as the case may be) is being thwarted by another or possibly by particular circumstances and that one's reaction to this thwarting phenomenon is that of annoyance which oftentimes result to conflict. In Ebonyi and other nearby states, herdsmen have clashed with farmers and their host communities over cattle destruction of crops; farmers' encroachment on grazing reserves or use water reserved for cattle to irrigate their farms and indiscriminate bush burning by nomads resulting to loss of lives and crops, destruction of properties, displacement of persons, decline in income/savings; as well as threat to food and internal security causing the farmers frustration. Because they are frustrated, they become aggressive and channel their aggression to the herdsmen and their cows. Just like Marx (1818-1883 cited in Omokugbo, 2021) had argued, once the economic base of a society is being threatened, it affects the entire well-being of that society.

2.4 Effects of the conflict on social economic development of the people

According to Kasarachi (2016), violence in Nigeria resulting from farmers and cattle herdsmen conflicts have disrupted socio-economic, religious, educational and political activities in the country which has threatened the national unity. Okoli & Atelhe (2014, p.84) submitted that natives-nomads conflict results in loss of life, population displacements, human injury and livelihood crisis. In this regard, the conflict does not only lead to the killing of people, but also people become homeless, displaced and destitute. Elaborating further on the consequence of the conflict, Ofem & Inyang (2014, p.517) asserted that apart from the killings by nomads and reprisal attacks by the indigenes, some people become widows, widowers and orphans during the conflicts, while some farmers are driven out of their villages, ultimately becoming refugees in neighboring towns or states. Such displaced farmers have become a source of liability to other farmers whom they have to beg for food for themselves and their families. This has created a vicious cycle of poverty in such communities. This effect tends to negatively affect their savings, credit re-payment ability, as well as the foodsecurity and economic welfare. It also discourages agricultural development by driving away potential investors from coming to the country.

Osimen, Edokpa, Daramola and Oluwatobi (2019) reported that in the case of Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State consisting of more than forty communities, the aggression and violent activities of Fulani herdsmen have grounded agricultural and economic activities in most of the communities. The superior arms wielded by the invading herdsmen render the local vigilante group helpless. The herdsmen are armed with AK47 raffles and the government is obviously not doing enough to checkmate the trend. People no longer go to the farm nor sleep well at night for fear of aggressive attacks in Ezeagu community by the herdsmen. The herdsmen combat readiness and sophistication gives them the impetus to harass farmers with their cattle destroying cash crops and food crops in the farms. In many of the affected rural communities, farmers are driven out of villages, ultimately becoming refugees in neighboring states. Those that remain in the villages are afraid to travel to farms in remote locations due to fear of violence from herdsmen. The implication of this situation is ominous on food production. Already, there are reports that prices of foods have increased in some of the affected states while refugee problems have escalated. Another effect of the conflict is the death and injury that is experienced by either or both party during the conflict. Each of the party tries to defeat the other by maiming or exterminating it during conflict. They therefore do anything they will make them defeat others, including the use of dangerous weapons and charms. During the conflict so many lives as been lost while many others have sustained different degrees of injuries. For fear of being attacked, those that remain in the villages are afraid to go to farms in remote locations resulting in low agricultural productivity during harvest season. This has a far reaching implication on agricultural production which invariably affects socio-economic activities and livelihoods of the people living in the affected areas (Bello, 2013). In a study conducted by Umeh and Chukwu (2016) in Ebonyi State, it indicated that the economic loss on both conflicting parties was huge and that the herders seemed to have incurred more in monetary terms than the farmers. Ofuoku and Isife (2009) maintained that more than 40 million worth of crops are usually lost annually due to invasion of cattle in the South-South region of Nigeria, especially Delta and Edo States. This has not only created an impediment to the survival of the host communities but has forced many crop-farmers to abandon farming for lesser occupations like Okada (commercial motor cycling) riding and other artisan work

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines the issues that led to the escalation of the herdsmen/farmers conflict, effect of the conflict on social economic development of the people, state government strategies in managing the conflict and x-rays the challenges in implementing the policy. However, the section begins with demographic characteristics of the respondents.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Frequency & percentage distribution of the respondents profile in terms of age

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid			
20-39	50	22.2	22.2
40-59	70	58.3	80.6
60 and Above	20	19.4	100.0
Total	140	100.0	

Source: Field survey, 2023

The result in table 1 above show that majority of the farmers are middle aged, that is between 40-59 years. This shows that the respondents are old enough to comprehend the issues under investigation and to contribute meaningfully to the overall aim and objectives of the research.

Table 2. Level of Educational attainment by the respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No formal Education	0	27.8
	Junior Sec. School	20	13.9
	Senior Sec. Sch	70	13.9
	Total	140	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2023

Figure 2 above revealed that majority of the respondents are well educated and this implies that their opinion was based on understanding of the situation. It also implies that their views can be relied upon taking into consideration their level of literacy, experience and comprehension of the subject under consideration.

Table 3. Respondents major sources of income

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	farming only	100	44.4
	farming and trading	30	19.4
	farming and tailoring	10	6.9
	Total	140	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2023

Figure 3 above revealed that 100 respondents which represent 58.3% of the population depend on farming for their livelihood, which does not require formal certificate as argued by the respondents. This makes land for cultivation a very hot commodity in the district and as expected, crop farming is the most agricultural activity practiced in the communities.

Table 4. Farmers: length of stay in the community

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	since birth	70	44.4
	21-30 years	40	18.1
	31-40 years	20	13.9
	41-above	10	1.4
	Total	140	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2023

It can be deduced from the data presented above that the respondents sampled for this study are long-time dwellers in the villages. Apart from the majority (44.4%) who had resided there since birth, more than half of the remaining respondents have resided in the rural communities for over 20 years (18.1%). This means that, well experienced and knowledgeable respondents were sampled

3.2 Effect of the Conflict on Social Economic Development of the People

Table 5. mean rating of the respondent on the extent the conflict effect on the social economic development of the people (= 140)

Item statement	N	Mean	Interpretation.
The conflict have made the people to become homeless, displaced and destitute	140	2.55	Strongly agreed
Displaced farmers have become a source of liability to other farmers	140	2.89	Agreed
The conflict have resulted to food scarcity due to destruction on farmlands and migration of the people away from communities to neighboring villages	140	2.50	Agreed
Dwindling food supply and rising cost	140	2.55	Strongly agreed

Source: Field survey, 2023

Table 5 shows that violent conflict over resources such as farmer-herder conflict has an unwelcome result on the economic fortunes of individuals, directly and indirectly. Encroachment of farmlands by herdsmen has displaced farmers and herdsmen alike making the environment unsafe for farming activities. Such displaced farmers have become a source of liability to other farmers whom they have to beg for food for themselves and their families. This has created a vicious cycle of poverty in such communities. In an interview with the Coordinator of the Afikpo North Development Centre, Mrs Amuche Otunta, she narrated her experience as; “the herdsmen’s cattle are really destroying our farmlands here and this May likely cause hunger among the people”. Just recently,

women from four communities of Nkpoghoru, Ugwuogu, Ohaisu and Enohialtim, in the Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, marched through the streets of Afikpo to protest the destruction of their farm produce by herdsmen. According to OgwuIdume, their rice and cassava farmlands, including streams that serve as source of drinking water in the communities, have been destroyed and polluted and this May likely cause hunger among the people. The above discussion reaffirmed the economic effects reviewed in Udeagbala (2018) that because of the destruction on the farms the people do not have enough money to execute their family demands, paying the school fees of our children, which made most of their children to stay at home without going to school. The findings is in line with Ajibefun (2018) in their postulation that the killings as a result of Fulani herdsmen and agriculturalist clashes in later times have disorganised most communities in this manner uprooting them of their farmland and misfortune of their source of business.

Table 6. Respondents’ Opinion on Challenges facing implementation of the open grazing prohibition policy in the State

Item statement	N	Mean	Interpretation
Allegations of partiality	140	2.15	very serious
Uncontrollable attitude of the youths	140	2.09	very serious
Absence from peace meeting	140	2.22	very serious
Refusal to pay compensation	140	2.06	very serious
Inaction of the police to provide sufficient protection	140	2.00	Very serious
Lack of fund to maintain the local management committee	140	2.05	Very serious

Source: Field survey, 2023

The findings from table 3 above affirm that allegations of partiality, Uncontrollable attitude of the youths and Refusal to pay compensation were very serious challenge encountered in the course of implementing the open grazing prohibition policy in Ebonyi state. In Igbegu and Nkalaha communities in Izzi and Ishielu LGA, traditional rulers have played a vital role in managing and resolving the conflict since both parties involved in the conflict reverses them. Nonetheless, in a number of places in the state, the traditional rulers and their cabinet have shown that they lack capacity to resolve conflicts. This explains why only a small proportion of the conflicts are resolved at this level. Murithi cited in Chikaire, Ajaero, Ibe and Onogu (2019) noted that inadequacy of capacity of local institutions to resolve the farmer-herder conflicts is further compounded by the mistrust that exists between the conflicting parties.

On the other hand, the farmers too do not trust district level officials whom they accuse to favour the herdsmen. Farmers complain that when disputes are taken to the authorities, the compensation offered does not cover the cost of the farmlands destroyed. This discovery agrees with Tonah cited in Ofuoku (2009) submission that the determination of compensation is often a major source of contention between aggrieved parties. Cattle owners always claim that farmers have the tendency of exaggerating the extent of crop damage in order to attract higher compensation than they deserve. Another claim by the respondents is the fact that the herdsmen usually absent themselves from regular peace meeting. Investigation shows that it has been difficult to embark on a dialogue with them. Egwuagha (2019) narrates that

It is not easy to deal with this people because whenever you call for such meetings, it is always their leader that would come and we have been emphasising it that whenever we call such meeting, they should equally go and call meeting of their people, the laborers and tell them the decisions of government.

The current situation had made life hard for farmers and the herdsmen alike. Again, Because of the perceived inaction of the police and other state security apparatuses to provide sufficient protection for farmers and residents of rural communities, youth in these communities have grouped themselves as vigilantes and have lynched herdsmen who are seen as security threats, sacking them and destroying their properties. In retaliation, these herdsmen have mobilised militias to attack villages and rural communities, leading to the death of citizens. The above reveals the inadequate capacity of the local institutions to completely handle conflict situation which presents a big challenge to the implementation open grazing prohibition in the State.

4. CONCLUSION

The conflict between farmers and Fulani’s in Ebonyi State affects the ability of farmers and herdsmen to execute their daily activities. To manage

the conflict, the government has adopted the strategy of prohibiting the herdsmen from migrating on foot with their cattle to any place at all in the state, payment of damages when a Fulani allows their cattle to destroy the farm of a farmer and Registration of Fulani herdsmen upon arrival into a state. However, implementation of these strategies is been challenged by allegations of partiality and problem of determination of adequate compensation value and absenteeism of herdsmen from regular peace meeting where government decisions are made consequently making it difficult to embark on a dialogue with them.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made

1. There is the need to expand the composition of the arbitration team to include representative of other associations, interest groups and institutions to be able to determine adequate compensation value for damages done to both parties
2. The security agencies, especially the police need to be fair and firm and deal decisively with perpetrators of violence.
3. Adequate notice of meeting should be provided for the herdsmen to enable them attend the regular meeting of peace committee to be able to know the decisions of government. This will enhance the management of farmer-herder conflicts in the future

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data is not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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