Pathways to Peace: Rethinking Conflict Resolution Strategies in Benue State

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Abstract

Benue State, Nigeria's "Food Basket," faces persistent violent conflicts, exemplified by the 2025 Yelewata killings, which highlight the devastating impact of herder-farmer clashes driven by resource competition, climate change, and weak governance. These conflicts have displaced over 500,000 people, disrupted food systems and eroded human security. The 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition Law, despite being a significant policy effort, has failed to curb violence due to poor enforcement and the exclusion of pastoralist perspectives. Traditional and community-based mediation efforts, alongside security interventions, have been undermined by limited inclusivity, inadequate funding, and the failure to address structural issues such as land tenure and environmental pressures. This study examines the Yelewata killings to analyze the shortcomings of existing conflict resolution strategies in Benue State. Drawing on frameworks such as the Pathways for Peace model, it proposes a multidimensional approach that emphasizes inclusive governance, community-based reconciliation, peace education, and technology-driven solutions. By centering local voices, integrating traditional practices, and addressing systemic drivers such as resource scarcity and climate change, sustainable peace can be achieved. This study underscores the critical roles of diverse stakeholders local communities, traditional leaders, government, civil society, and international partners in fostering resilience and reconciliation. Recommendations include establishing transhumance corridors, investing in climate resilience, developing early warning systems, and promoting trauma healing to break the cycle of violence and foster lasting peace in the region.

Keywords: Herder-farmer conflicts, peacebuilding, inclusive governance, resource competition, community-based reconciliation,

Introduction

Benue State, often referred to as the "Food Basket of the Nation," occupies a vital place in Nigeria's socio-economic landscape due to its agricultural dominance and cultural diversity. However, it has been beset by frequent conflicts over resources, communal boundaries, and farmer-herder violence over the last ten years (Adefolalu et al., 2024). These conflicts result from a complex interaction between shifting pastoralist mobility, uncertain land tenure, resource competition, and weak governance structures (Aweda et al., 2024; Adefolalu et al., 2024). As of mid-2025, the state continues to grapple with these issues, with reports indicating over 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps as of December 2024, a figure likely to be higher following subsequent attacks. This violence is exacerbated by factors such as climate change, resource scarcity, population growth, and weak governance structures, which fuel competition over land and water resources between indigenous farmers and nomadic herders, predominantly from the Fulani ethnic group.

Policy initiatives aimed at tackling these crises, especially the 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, have sought to limit open grazing and promote ranching. While this law has potential, research indicates that its implementation has been uneven, often characterized by weak enforcement and an inability to prevent violence in regions lacking institutional support or adequate compensation systems (Ngar et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2024; BSUM, 2024; IJAAR, 2024).

Additionally, new insights highlight that achieving lasting peace in Benue requires more than just top-down security measures. Conflict resolution must be inclusive, sensitive to climate issues, and rooted in local governance that involves everyone. Honouring traditional practices, actively involving women and youth, ensuring fair land and water management, and providing support for livelihoods are all essential for building resilience (Mohammed 2024).

According to the Vanguard Newspaper, dated July 9, 2025, the Benue State Emergency Management Agency reported that about 380 pregnant women displaced from the Yelewata community in the Guma Local Government Area of the state are currently taking refuge at the Makurdi Ultra Modern International Market. The manager of the camp, Robert Nyom, who made this known in Makurdi, also disclosed that the facility is home to approximately 2,536 children. Additionally, they have registered more than 2,336 households in the camp, comprising 5,294 individuals. The figure is made up of 2,536 children, 389 pregnant women, 233 aged women, and 181 aged men. These incidents, though not isolated, have sparked national outrage and rekindled the debate over the failure of existing security and peacebuilding mechanisms in the region. As families buried their dead and survivors struggled to rebuild their lives, Yelewata became a symbol of the human cost of unresolved conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The State, often referred to as the "Food Basket of the Nation," has become a flashpoint for violent conflicts over land use, identity, and survival. These tensions, primarily between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders, have evolved over decades, intensified by climate-induced migration, dwindling grazing resources, and the absence of effective conflict resolution frameworks in Nigeria. The human and economic costs of ongoing violence, evident in disrupted food systems, internal displacement, and ongoing insecurity, make it crucial to urgently rethink peace strategies in Benue (Omonona et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

The ongoing conflicts in Benue State, fueled by competition for land and resources, political rivalries, and weak governance, have created a vicious cycle of violence that stifles sustainable development and jeopardizes human security. Traditional methods for resolving conflicts, such as mediation and dialogue, often fall short of addressing the complex mix of structural, environmental, and social factors that drive these disputes. For example, farmer-herder clashes, worsened by climate change and dwindling resources, have not been effectively addressed by current frameworks, resulting in ongoing violence and displacement. Additionally, the legal system's failure to provide justice, especially for low-income communities, has led to a greater reliance on alternative dispute resolution methods, which unfortunately lack proper enforcement and comprehensive involvement from all

stakeholders. Initiatives such as the Benue State Peace Commission struggle to incorporate conflict sensitivity, maintain dialogue platforms, and manage tensions within diverse groups such as farmers, herders, and fishers. If Benue State does not adopt a more holistic, inclusive, and adaptable approach to conflict resolution, it risks further violence, increased social fragmentation, and prolonged economic stagnation.

Despite legislative reforms and peace initiatives, violent conflict continues in Benue. This ongoing instability suggests that current strategies often only scratch the surface of violence, focusing on reactive security measures or temporary fixes rather than addressing the deeper systemic causes of conflict: unclear land tenure, resource scarcity due to climate change, questionable enforcement of grazing policies, and exclusionary governance (Adefolalu et al., 2024; Aweda et al., 2024). This study aims to identify the shortcomings of existing strategies and propose a peace roadmap that emphasizes local ownership, systemic reforms, and resilience to emerging challenges. These gaps contribute to a protracted conflict trap characterized by cyclical violence, persistent displacement, and degraded agricultural productivity, which jeopardizes livelihoods and regional food security (Omonona et al., 2025).

The killings in Yelewata underscore the urgency of reevaluating the strategies deployed to manage and resolve such violence. This study uses the Yelewata attacks as a point of departure to explore the broader structural and immediate factors driving the Benue conflict. It argues that sustainable peace is achievable only through a comprehensive, multidimensional approach that centers on local voices, addresses historical grievances, and integrates both traditional and modern conflict resolution practices. In doing so, it offers practical pathways to peace not only for Benue State but also for other regions facing similar communal strife. Hence, this study proposes to rethink conflict resolution pathways in Benue via an integrative framework that centres on Inclusive mediation processes.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes scholarship on farmer–herder conflict, state and community responses in Nigeria's Middle Belt, and recent reporting on mass

killings in Benue State, most notably the Yelewata attacks, to draw lessons for redesigning conflict-resolution strategies. It focuses on structural drivers (land tenure, climate, governance), policy responses (open grazing prohibition, security interventions), the limits of existing peace architectures, and the implications of the Yelewata massacre for future pathways to peace.

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Historical Context and Conflict Dynamics

Scholars have traced the roots of Benue's conflicts to colonial-era policies that disrupted traditional land-use patterns and created artificial boundaries between ethnic groups (Best, 2018). Post-independence, the politicization of ethnic identities and weak governance structures have exacerbated these tensions (Olayoku, 2019). The Yelewata attack followed a familiar pattern of retaliatory violence, with eyewitness accounts describing it as part of an escalating cycle of revenge attacks between the farming communities and herders (Adetula et al., 2022). This pattern underscores the failure of conventional security responses to address the underlying grievances.

Understanding the Yelewata Killings and the Conflict Dynamics in Benue State

Recent media coverage of the Yelewata killings highlights a troubling aspect of the ongoing herder-farmer conflicts in Benue State. These conflicts are largely fueled by competition for land and water resources, a situation worsened by climate change, population growth, and poor governance. According to Okoli and Ogayi (2023), the roots of these conflicts lie in deep-seated structural inequalities, including disputes over land tenure and the marginalization of pastoralist communities, which contribute to the ongoing cycles of violence. They point to specific incidents, such as the tragic 2025 killing of a woman and her son on a rice

farm, as examples of retaliatory attacks driven by feelings of injustice. Adebayo and Ibrahim (2024) also note that the rise of small arms and the lack of effective security measures have intensified these clashes, rendering traditional conflict resolution methods insufficient. The socio-economic aspects of this conflict are further complicated by ethnic and religious divisions. Ilo and Aondowase (2022) argue that framing the herder-farmer conflicts as merely ethnic or religious struggles oversimplifies the situation, overlooking economic factors such as cattle rustling and land grabbing. They contend that the absence of inclusive governance, where both farmers and herders have a fair voice, fosters mistrust and obstructs peacebuilding efforts in the region. These insights resonate with broader discussions on conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where historical land disputes and colonial legacies continue to influence current tensions (Mustapha & Meagher, 2021).

Existing Conflict Resolution Strategies in Benue State

Conflict resolution strategies in Benue State have largely depended on state-led initiatives, such as the 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law. This law was designed to regulate grazing and minimize conflict. However, Egwu (2023) points out that the law fell short because it did not involve consultations with herder communities, leading to pushback and increased violence. The critique highlights that top-down policies often overlook the real issues at play, such as access to grazing routes and water sources for livestock. Instead of solving problems, they tend to deepen divisions, fueling the "indigene versus settler" narrative. On the other hand, community-based methods, including dialogue forums and peace committees, have been tried, but with mixed outcomes. Nwankwo and Eze (2024) note that while local peace committees in Benue have managed to broker temporary truces, they lack the power to enforce these agreements or tackle deeper issues such as land reform. The authors argue that these efforts often stumble because of insufficient funding, elite control, and the sidelining of marginalized groups, including women and youth. This is especially pertinent in light of the Yelewata killings, where community trust in both state and local mechanisms has dwindled due to repeated failures to curb the violence. External actors, such as NGOs and international organizations, have played a role, but their impact has been limited. The "Pathways for Peace" report by the United

Nations and World Bank (2018) calls for inclusive conflict prevention strategies, stressing the importance of addressing grievances tied to exclusion from power, resources and justice. However, in Benue State, the implementation of these ideas has been hampered by a lack of localized strategies and poor coordination between international and local players (Ojo, 2023).

Pathways to Peace

The idea of peacebuilding, as explained by Pathways to Peace (PTP), takes a comprehensive approach that weaves together governance, education, economics and cultural diplomacy. PTP's Peace Wheel model, featuring eight interconnected pathways (such as governance, education, and environment), serves as a guide for viewing peace not just as a static goal but as a lively, evolving process. This model is especially pertinent for Benue State, where various interventions are essential to tackle the complex social, economic, and environmental issues fueling the Yelewata killings. Kiniger-Passigli (2025) presents the "Peace Offensive," a strategic framework that emphasizes proactive de-escalation, building trust, and empowering communities. This approach suggests using cultural and educational diplomacy to change narratives and promote understanding among diverse groups. In Benue, this could mean involving traditional leaders, religious figures, and youth in conversations to mend the rift between herders and farmers. The focus on local ownership resonates with the insights of Okeke and Uzochukwu (2023), who contend that achieving lasting peace in Benue hinges on community-led initiatives that emphasize reconciliation and social unity. Gulzar (2023) highlights the significance of inner peace and emotional intelligence in resolving conflicts. The author posits that nurturing personal peace through mindfulness and empathy can help diminish reactive hostility, paving the way for constructive dialogue. This viewpoint is crucial for Benue, where emotional and psychological hurdles such as fear and mistrust continue to fuel cycles of violence. Incorporating these ideas into peace education programmes, as PTP suggests, could empower local leaders to handle conflicts more adeptly and effectively.

Rethinking Conflict Resolution Strategies

Recent literature suggests several innovative strategies for rethinking conflict resolution in Benue State, particularly in response to the Yelewata killings.

Inclusive Governance and Policy Reform**:** The UN-World Bank report highlights the need for inclusive policies that address exclusion and inequality. In Benue, this could involve revising the anti-grazing law to incorporate herder perspectives, establishing joint land-use committees, and ensuring equitable access to resources (Ojo & Adebayo, 2024).

Community-Based Reconciliation**:** Strategies that focus on gender and social justice, as highlighted by different literature which are essential for mending relationships in post-conflict environments. In Yelewata, this could involve initiatives led by women for peace and programmes that engage youth to address grievances and foster social unity in the community.

Peace Education and Cultural Diplomacy: The emphasis on peace education by PTP provides a valuable opportunity to shift perceptions and build trust. Programs that equip community members with conflict resolution skills, such as those from George Anthony's Global Leaders Institute, should be expanded in Benue to nurture a culture of peace. Technology and AI in Peacebuilding: Kiniger-Passigli (2025) highlights the exciting potential of AI and social media to boost peacebuilding efforts. In Benue, digital platforms can serve as a means to spread peace messages, combat misinformation, and enable virtual discussions between conflicting groups.

Addressing Root Causes: The literature consistently underscores the importance of addressing structural issues, such as land tenure and resource scarcity (Mustapha & Meagher, 2021). By implementing sustainable land management practices and strategies for climate adaptation, we can help reduce competition and lessen the triggers for conflict.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the wealth of research, several gaps still remain. First, there is a lack of local studies specifically addressing the Yelewata killings, with most literature focusing on the broader herder-farmer conflict. Second, the role of women and youth in peacebuilding is underexplored despite their potential to drive transformative change. Third, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of

technology-driven peacebuilding in rural contexts, such as Benue. Finally, the intersection of climate change and conflict requires further investigation to develop effective adaptive strategies.

Over the years, a range of conflict resolution strategies have been implemented in Benue State to curb the recurring violence between herders and farmers. These strategies, though well-intentioned, have produced mixed outcomes owing to implementation challenges, limited inclusivity, and failure to address the structural root causes.

Legislative Approaches –Anti-Open Grazing Law (2017): The most prominent legal intervention is the Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, enacted in 2017. This law prohibits open grazing and encourages ranching as an alternative. While it was designed to prevent clashes between farmers and herders, its enforcement has been uneven and has sparked backlash from pastoralist communities who view it as exclusionary. The absence of sufficient infrastructure and support for herders to transition to ranching has also weakened its impact.

Military and Security Interventions: The federal government has deployed various security operations, such as Operation Whirl Stroke, to quell violence in the region. These measures have occasionally restored temporary calm but have not addressed the root causes of conflict. Moreover, allegations of human rights abuses and lack of neutrality have undermined public trust in these interventions.

Peace building by NGOs and Religious Institutions: Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based institutions, and international agencies have played a significant role in fostering intergroup dialogue and promoting peaceful coexistence. Initiatives such as community peace forums and conflict-sensitive livelihood support have helped reduce tensions in some areas. However, these efforts often lack scalability and consistent financial support.

Traditional and Community-Based Mediation: Traditional rulers and community leaders have historically mediated disputes using indigenous mechanisms to

resolve conflicts. These methods are culturally grounded and have proven effective in specific contexts. However, the weakening of traditional authority, political interference, and the absence of legal reinforcement have diminished their overall effectiveness.

Humanitarian and Relief Efforts: Several humanitarian agencies have provided relief to victims, especially Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). While crucial in alleviating suffering, these efforts are reactive rather than preventive and do not substitute long-term peacebuilding.

Overall, these conflict resolution strategies reflect a fragmented approach characterized by reactive enforcement, exclusion of key stakeholders, and limited integration of formal and informal systems. This paper argues for a rethinking and reconfiguration of these strategies to be more inclusive, preventive, and locally anchored.

However, these strategies have largely failed because of poor implementation, lack of political will, and exclusion of key stakeholders.

Stakeholders in Conflict Resolution

Achieving sustainable peace in Benue State requires the active participation of diverse stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict or its resolution. These stakeholders play critical roles in shaping interventions, fostering dialogue, and implementing long-term solutions. They include:

Local Communities (Farmers and Herders): These are the primary actors in the conflict and must be central to any resolution strategy. Their lived experiences, grievances, and ideas for peace are essential for crafting context-specific and acceptable solutions.

Traditional Rulers and Community Leaders: As custodians of cultural norms and mediators of local disputes, traditional leaders hold the trust of their communities. They can facilitate dialogue, monitor peace agreements, and reinstate Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms.

Benue State Government: The state government plays a key role in enacting and enforcing laws (e.g., the anti-open grazing law), coordinating interventions, and providing infrastructure and institutional support for peace-building.

Federal Government of Nigeria: Through its security and policy frameworks, the federal government must ensure the equitable enforcement of the law, provide funding for peace and development initiatives, and support the peaceful resolution of inter-state and ethnic tensions.

Security Agencies (Police, Military, and Civil Defence): These bodies are responsible for protecting lives and property. Their role must shift from reactive operations to community-oriented policing that builds trust and ensures justice for women.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): These groups facilitate grassroots peace building, community sensitization, humanitarian relief, and advocacy for inclusive dialogue. Their neutrality often makes them trusted mediators.

Faith-Based Organizations: Churches, mosques, and interfaith coalitions often command moral authority and can serve as platforms for reconciliation, healing, and values-based peace messaging.

Youth and Women Groups: Youths are often both perpetrators and victims of violent conflict. Engaging them in peacebuilding provides sustainable alternatives to violence. Women, as nurturers and peace advocates, offer critical perspectives and contributions that are often ignored in male-dominated dialogue spaces.

Academia and Researchers: Universities and research institutes can provide evidence-based insights, conflict analysis, policy recommendations, and monitoring frameworks for peace-building interventions.

Media Organizations: The media can influence public opinion and must play a constructive role in accurate reporting, promoting tolerance, countering hate speech, and supporting peaceful narratives.

International Partners (UN, AU, ECOWAS, Donor Agencies): These actors can provide funding, technical support, and pressure for reforms. Their involvement is vital for capacity building, coordination, and monitoring of long-term peace programs.

Conclusion

The Yelewata killings in Benue State highlight the urgent need for innovative, inclusive, and context-specific conflict-resolution strategies. By drawing on frameworks such as PTP's Peace Wheel and the Peace Offensive, stakeholders can address the root causes of conflict, foster reconciliation, and build sustainable peace. The integration of inclusive governance, community-based reconciliation, peace education, and technology offers a multifaceted approach to transforming the conflict landscape in Benue. Future research should focus on localized interventions, the role of marginalized groups, and the impact of environmental factors to ensure comprehensive pathways to peace.

For peace to be sustainable, all stakeholders— governments, traditional leaders, civil society, security actors, faith-based institutions, international partners, youth, and women—must overcome existing challenges and work collaboratively. Central to this is a paradigm shift from reactive responses to proactive engagement, structural reforms, and community empowerment. Addressing structural violence, inequality, and environmental pressures must be at the heart of future strategies. Only through consistent, coordinated, and inclusive efforts can Benue State transition from a cycle of violence to a future of stability, coexistence and development.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Rethinking of conflict resolution strategies through a multidimensional, community-centered approach that empowers local stakeholders
2. The establishment of transhumance corridors, investment in climate resilience
3. The development of early warning systems, inclusive peace building mechanisms that involve women and youth
4. The promotion of trauma healing initiatives that would help victims who due to the crisis have developed mental health issues, and
5. Finally, by prioritizing grassroots engagement and long-term reconciliation, and the need to transition from reactive and militarized approaches to proactive, culturally sensitive, and inclusive peace-building models.

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