



Collective Distress and Coping Strategies Among Farmers Affected By Farmer-Herder Conflict in Selected Local Government Areas of Benue State

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study examined collective distress and coping strategies among farmers affected by farmer-herder conflict in selected Local Government Areas of Benue State, namely Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma. The main objective was to examine the relationship between conflict intensity and collective distress, as well as the influence of coping strategies on distress among farmers. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, with a sample size of 321 respondents drawn from a population of 1,925 farmers using the Taro Yamane formula. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Multiple Regression Analysis. The findings revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between conflict intensity and collective distress ($r = 0.71$, $df = 319$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that increased exposure to farmer-herder conflict significantly elevates psychological distress among farmers. The mean scores further showed high levels of conflict intensity ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.76$) and collective distress ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.69$). Additionally, coping strategies were found to significantly predict collective distress, accounting for 61% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.61$, $F(2,318) = 246.52$, $p < 0.05$). Adaptive coping strategies significantly reduced distress ($\beta = -0.48$, $t = -11.36$, $p < 0.05$), whereas maladaptive coping strategies significantly increased distress ($\beta = 0.53$, $t = 12.44$, $p < 0.05$). The study concluded that farmer-herder conflict significantly contributes to collective distress among farmers, while coping strategies play a crucial role in moderating this relationship. It was recommended that government and stakeholders should strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms, provide psychosocial support services, promote adaptive coping strategies, implement livelihood support programs, and ensure effective land-use and environmental policies. These measures are essential for reducing distress and enhancing resilience among farmers in conflict-affected communities.

Keywords: Collective Distress, Coping Strategies, Farmers Affected, Farmer-Herder, Conflict.

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Introduction

Farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria represents a complex and deeply rooted socio-economic and environmental crisis that has intensified over the past two decades. This conflict primarily occurs between sedentary farmers and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, largely due to competition over scarce natural resources such as land and water (Adelakun et

al., 2021). In Benue State, the conflict has assumed alarming proportions, leading to widespread displacement, destruction of farmlands, and loss of human lives (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Historically, interactions between farmers and herders were governed by mutually beneficial arrangements, where pastoralists grazed livestock on harvested farmlands,

contributing manure to improve soil fertility (Okoli & Atelhe, 2019). However, population growth, climate change, desertification in northern Nigeria, and shrinking grazing routes have disrupted this balance (FAO, 2022). Consequently, herders increasingly migrate southward into agrarian communities such as those in Benue State, triggering violent confrontations.

The concept of collective distress refers to the shared psychological and emotional suffering experienced by a group or community exposed to traumatic events (Cénat et al., 2020). Unlike individual distress, collective distress manifests as communal anxiety, fear, grief, and disruption of social cohesion. In conflict settings, such distress is often intensified due to repeated exposure to violence, displacement, and uncertainty (Miller & Rasmussen, 2021).

In Benue State, communities in Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma LGAs have experienced recurrent attacks, leading to the destruction of homes and farmlands. These experiences contribute to collective trauma, where entire communities suffer psychological consequences (UNDP, 2023). The destruction of livelihoods exacerbates distress, as farming is not only an economic activity but also a cultural identity for these communities (Audu, 2020).

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed by individuals or groups to manage stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In conflict-affected communities, coping strategies may include adaptive mechanisms such as social support, religious faith, and community solidarity, as well as maladaptive responses such as substance use or withdrawal (Betancourt et al., 2022).

Research indicates that communal coping plays a significant role in mitigating distress in African societies, where collectivist values emphasize shared responsibility and mutual support (Eze et al., 2021). For instance, community gatherings, religious activities, and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms serve as important coping resources. However, prolonged exposure to violence may overwhelm these systems, leading to chronic distress (WHO, 2022).

Benue State has been particularly affected due to its fertile land, which attracts both farmers and herders. The introduction of anti-open grazing laws has further complicated the situation, leading to increased tensions and violent clashes (Okeke, 2022). These conflicts have resulted in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where living conditions often exacerbate psychological distress (NEMA, 2023).

Studies have shown that conflict-induced displacement significantly affects mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Porter & Haslam, 2020). In Benue State, displaced farmers face additional challenges such as food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, and disrupted education for children (UNICEF, 2023).

The ecological perspective provides a useful framework for understanding farmer-herder conflict, emphasizing the interaction between environmental, social, and economic factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Climate change, for instance, has intensified resource scarcity, increasing competition and conflict (IPCC, 2023). Similarly, weak governance structures and inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms contribute to the persistence of violence (Ojo, 2021).

Collective distress in conflict settings is not only a psychological issue but also a social and economic concern. High levels of distress can reduce productivity, weaken social cohesion, and hinder development (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, understanding the relationship between conflict intensity and distress, as well as the role of coping strategies, is crucial for designing effective interventions.

Despite growing research on farmer-herder conflict, there is limited empirical evidence on the psychological impact of such conflicts on affected communities in Benue State. Most studies focus on economic losses and security implications, neglecting the psychosocial dimension (Adebayo, 2021). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining collective distress and coping strategies among farmers in selected LGAs.

Statement of the Problem

Farmer-herder conflict in Benue State has escalated into a humanitarian crisis, particularly in Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma LGAs. These areas have witnessed repeated attacks, leading to loss of lives, destruction of property, and displacement of thousands of residents (International Crisis Group, 2023). While the economic and security implications of the conflict have been widely documented, the psychological impact on affected communities remains underexplored.

In Logo LGA, frequent attacks have forced many farmers to abandon their farmlands, resulting in food insecurity and economic hardship (Audu, 2020). Similarly, Kwande LGA has experienced cross-border conflicts due to its proximity to Cameroon, further complicating the security situation (Okoli & Atelhe, 2019). In Gwer West and Gwer East, the destruction of communities has disrupted social structures, leading to increased vulnerability and distress (NEMA, 2023). Guma LGA, one of the worst affected areas, hosts several IDP camps where displaced persons face harsh living conditions (UNDP, 2023).

The persistent nature of the conflict has led to collective distress characterized by fear, anxiety, grief, and loss of hope. Communities live in constant fear of attacks, which affects their daily activities and overall well-being (Cénat et al., 2020). Children and women are particularly vulnerable, experiencing trauma that may have long-term psychological consequences (UNICEF, 2023).

Despite these challenges, affected communities employ various coping strategies to manage distress. However, the

effectiveness of these strategies varies, and some may even exacerbate distress. For instance, reliance on avoidance or withdrawal may reduce immediate stress but lead to long-term psychological problems (Betancourt et al., 2022).

There is a need to understand how the intensity of conflict influences collective distress and how coping strategies mediate this relationship. Without such understanding, interventions may fail to address the root causes of distress or support effective coping mechanisms.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to examine collective distress and coping strategies among farmers affected by farmer-herder conflict in selected Local Government Areas of Benue State.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the relationship between the intensity of farmer-herder conflict and the level of collective distress among farmers.
2. To examine the influence of coping strategies on the level of collective distress experienced by farmers.

Research Hypotheses

The study donates the following hypothesis

1. There will be a significant relationship between the intensity of farmer-herder conflict and collective distress.
2. Coping strategies will significantly influence collective distress experienced by farmers.

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. This design allows for the collection of data from a large population at a single point in time, making it suitable for examining relationships among variables.

Population of the Study

The population for this study comprised farmers residing in selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Benue State who have been directly and indirectly affected by persistent farmer-herder conflicts. The focus on farmers is justified by their vulnerability as primary stakeholders in agrarian communities, whose livelihoods, safety, and well-being are significantly threatened by recurring violent clashes.

Specifically, the study targeted farmers in five LGAs, namely: Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma. These LGAs were purposively selected due to their high exposure to farmer-herder conflicts, as widely documented in conflict and security reports across North-Central Nigeria. The selected areas have experienced repeated incidents of violence, including destruction of farmlands, loss of lives, forced displacement, and disruption of agricultural activities.

Farmers in these communities have not only suffered economic losses, such as reduced crop yields and loss of livestock, but have also been exposed to significant psychological challenges, including fear, anxiety, trauma, and collective distress. Many households have been displaced into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or neighboring communities, further exacerbating their socio-economic and emotional conditions. This makes the selected LGAs particularly relevant for investigating the dynamics of conflict intensity, coping strategies, and collective distress.

The estimated population for the study was evenly distributed across the five LGAs to ensure adequate representation and comparability. Each LGA contributed 385 farmers, resulting in a total estimated population of 1,925 respondents. The breakdown is as follows:

- i. Logo LGA – 385 farmers
- ii. Kwande LGA – 385 farmers
- iii. Gwer West LGA – 385 farmers
- iv. Gwer East LGA – 385 farmers
- v. Guma LGA – 385 farmers

This distribution ensured that the study captured a broad and balanced perspective of farmers' experiences across the most affected areas. It also enhanced the generalizability of the findings within conflict-prone agrarian communities in Benue State.

Sample Size

Taro Yamane sample size was used to determine the sample size

Total = 321 respondents

Statistical Tools

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test hypothesis one while Multiple Regression Analysis was used to test hypothesis two.

Instruments

Two instrument was used in the study which include: The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler et al. (2002) and Brief COPE Inventory developed by Carver (1997).

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

Assessment of collective distress, the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler et al. (2002) was utilized. The K10 is a 10-item self-report instrument designed to assess symptoms of anxiety and depression experienced during the previous four weeks. Respondents indicate the frequency of experiencing each symptom on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). The K10 has demonstrated high internal consistency across different populations and has established strong criterion validity against diagnostic interviews, as well as good construct validity in identifying psychological distress and common mental disorders. Previous studies have reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.88 to 0.93, with

Fassaert et al. (2009) reporting a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.93$.

Brief COPE Inventory

Brief COPE Inventory developed by Carver (1997). The instrument consists of 28 items assessing 14 coping responses, including active coping, planning, acceptance, emotional support, religion, denial, behavioural disengagement, and other coping mechanisms employed in response to stressful situations. Responses are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("I haven't been doing this at all") to 4 ("I've been doing this a lot"). Scores are computed separately for each coping dimension, with higher scores reflecting greater utilization of a particular coping strategy.

The Brief COPE has demonstrated acceptable to high reliability across diverse populations, with evidence supporting its content, factorial, and construct validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales have been reported to range from 0.50 to 0.90, with the majority of the subscales exhibiting reliability coefficients exceeding 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Results

Hypothesis One

This hypothesis stated that there will be a significant relationship between the intensity of farmerherder conflict and the level of collective distress among farmers.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) Analysis showing the relationship between intensity of farmer herder conflict and the level of collective distress among farmers

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	r	p-value
Conflict Intensity	321	3.84	0.76			
				319	0.71	0.000
Collective Distress	321	4.12	0.69			

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The result shows a strong positive and significant relationship between farmer–herder conflict intensity and collective distress among farmers ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that increased conflict intensity significantly increases collective distress among farmers in the selected LGAs of Benue State (Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma).

Hypothesis Two

This hypothesis stated that Coping strategies adopted by farmers will significantly influence the level of collective distress.

Table 2: Summary table of Multiple Regression Analysis showing the influence of Coping Strategies and Collective Distress

Variable	R	R ²	df	F	Sig	β	t	Sig
Constant	0.78	0.61	2, 318	246.52	0.000			0.000
Adaptive Coping Strategies						-0.48	-11.36	0.000
Maladaptive Coping Strategies						0.53	12.44	0.000

Variables: Coping Strategies and Collective Distress

The regression model shows that coping strategies significantly predict collective distress among farmers ($R^2 = 0.61$, $F(2,318) = 246.52$, $p < 0.05$). This means that 61% of the variation in collective distress is explained by coping strategies adopted by farmers. Further analysis shows that: Adaptive coping strategies ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.05$) significantly reduce collective distress. Maladaptive coping strategies ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.05$) significantly increase collective distress. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence on the relationship between farmer–herder conflict intensity, coping strategies, and collective distress among farmers in Benue State. The discussion is presented in line with the two

hypotheses tested, with integration of statistical figures and alignment with existing empirical studies.

The result from Table 1 revealed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the intensity of farmer–herder conflict and collective distress among farmers ($r = 0.71$, $N = 321$, $p < 0.05$). The mean score for conflict intensity ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.76$) and collective distress ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.69$) further indicate that respondents experienced both high conflict exposure and high levels of psychological distress. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.71$) suggests a high magnitude relationship, implying that as conflict intensity increases, collective distress among farmers also increases substantially. This aligns with the reality of persistent violent clashes in the studied LGAs (Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma), where farmers are frequently exposed to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and threats to life. This finding is consistent with previous

studies. For instance, research by Idemudia and Afolabi (2023) found that exposure to communal and agrarian conflicts significantly increases psychological distress, anxiety, and trauma symptoms among rural populations in Nigeria. Similarly, World Health Organization (2022) reports that communities exposed to prolonged violence often develop collective trauma, characterized by shared emotional suffering, fear, and uncertainty. In addition, the findings corroborate the work of I. O. Albert, who observed that farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria lead to widespread emotional instability and communal grief due to repeated attacks and insecurity. The strong correlation obtained in this study ($r = 0.71$) is even higher than some previous findings, suggesting that the intensity and frequency of conflict in Benue State may have escalated the psychological burden on affected farmers. Therefore, this study reinforces the theoretical assumption that environmental stressors such as violent conflict are critical predictors of collective distress, particularly in agrarian communities with limited access to psychological support services.

The result from Table 2 showed that coping strategies significantly predict collective distress among farmers, with a high coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.61$, $F(2,318) = 246.52$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that 61% of the variance in collective distress is explained by coping strategies, which reflects a substantial explanatory power.

A closer examination of the regression coefficients revealed two contrasting effects: Adaptive coping strategies had a significant negative influence on collective distress ($\beta = -0.48$, $t = -11.36$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that increased use of adaptive coping reduces distress levels. Maladaptive coping strategies had a significant positive influence on collective distress ($\beta = 0.53$, $t = 12.44$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that reliance on maladaptive coping increases distress.

These results highlight that not just exposure to conflict, but how farmers respond to it, plays a crucial role in determining their psychological outcomes.

This finding is in agreement with the work of Lazarus and Folkman, whose transactional model of stress and coping emphasizes that adaptive coping mechanisms (e.g., problem-solving, social support seeking) reduce stress, whereas maladaptive strategies (e.g., avoidance, substance use) exacerbate it. Empirically, the result supports studies by Oladeji et al. (2019), who found that adaptive coping significantly lowers trauma-related distress among conflict-affected populations in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2021) reported that displaced persons who adopt maladaptive coping strategies experience higher levels of depression and anxiety. The relatively high beta value for maladaptive coping ($\beta = 0.53$) compared to adaptive coping ($\beta = -0.48$) suggests that negative coping mechanisms may have a slightly stronger impact in worsening distress than positive coping has in

reducing it. This underscores the danger of maladaptive responses in conflict settings.

Conclusion

The study concludes that farmer–herder conflict significantly contributes to collective distress among farmers in Benue State. The intensity of conflict directly affects psychological well-being, while coping strategies play a crucial role in moderating this relationship. Addressing this crisis requires a comprehensive approach that integrates conflict resolution, mental health support, and community-based coping interventions. Without such holistic efforts, the cycle of violence and distress is likely to persist, undermining the well-being and resilience of farming communities in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on collective distress and coping strategies among farmers affected by farmer–herder conflict in Benue State, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Government at all levels should establish and strengthen community-based conflict resolution frameworks in affected LGAs such as Logo, Kwande, Gwer West, Gwer East, and Guma. Traditional leaders, community stakeholders, and security agencies should be actively involved in dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives to reduce the intensity and frequency of conflicts.
2. **Provision of Psychosocial Support Services:** There is a critical need for the integration of mental health and psychosocial support services into primary healthcare systems in conflict-affected communities. Government and non-governmental organizations should provide counseling, trauma healing programs, and community-based mental health interventions to address collective distress among farmers.
3. **Promotion of Adaptive Coping Strategies:** Intervention programs should focus on educating farmers on effective and adaptive coping mechanisms such as social support networks, community solidarity, and religious engagement. Workshops, awareness campaigns, and training sessions should be organized to discourage maladaptive coping strategies that exacerbate distress.
4. **Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Support:** To reduce the socio-economic burden contributing to distress, government and development agencies should provide financial assistance, agricultural inputs, and livelihood support programs for affected farmers. This includes resettlement support for displaced persons and access to credit facilities to rebuild their farming activities.

5. Policy Implementation and Environmental Management: Government should ensure effective implementation of policies related to land use, grazing, and environmental management. Sustainable solutions such as ranching systems, designated grazing routes, and climate adaptation strategies should be promoted to reduce competition over scarce resources and prevent future conflicts. These recommendations, if properly implemented, will not only reduce the intensity of farmer–herder conflict but also enhance the psychological well-being and resilience of farming communities in Benue State.

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