

A New Twist to an Age-Long Friendship: The Role of Local Defence Groups in the Conflict Between Farmers and Herders

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Abstract

The relationship between farmers and herders, once characterised by symbiosis and mutual dependence, has undergone a profound transformation in many regions worldwide, marked by escalating tensions and violent conflicts over resources. This paper examines a new twist to the long-standing relationship, focusing on the emerging phenomenon of local defence groups and their impact on the dynamics of conflict between farmers and herders. Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach, this study explores the origins, motivations, organisational structures, and strategies of local defence groups operating within the context of farmer-herder conflicts using a qualitative approach that relies on secondary data from scholarly journals and newspaper editorials. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. The study established that historical grievances, socioeconomic factors, and environmental pressures fuel the emergence of these groups, often as a response to perceived failures of formal security mechanisms. This research assesses the implications of local defence groups for conflict escalation, peacebuilding efforts, and governance dynamics. While these groups may offer immediate security to communities vulnerable to violence and theft, their actions can exacerbate tensions, perpetuate cycles of revenge, and undermine prospects for long-term peace and stability. Additionally, their interactions with formal authorities, including the police and military, raise questions about state legitimacy, rule of law, and human rights protections. Through a nuanced analysis of case studies from diverse regions affected by farmer-herder conflicts, this study sheds light on the complexities of local defence dynamics. It offers insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars alike. It underscores the importance of holistic approaches that address underlying drivers of conflict, promote dialogue and reconciliation, and strengthen governance structures to foster sustainable peace and coexistence between farmers and herders in the face of evolving challenges.



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Introduction

The longstanding conflict between farmers and herders has been a persistent challenge in many regions around the world. Often rooted in competition over natural resources such as land and water, this conflict has led to violence, displacement, and economic loss for the communities involved. In response to the escalating tensions, local defence groups have emerged, purportedly to protect their respective communities and interests. However, the role of these groups in mitigating or exacerbating the conflict remains poorly understood. This study addresses the key issues surrounding the involvement of local defence groups in the farmers-herders conflict. In Africa, the relationship between farmers and herders has changed over the last three decades due to environmental and climatic changes. These changes have made it increasingly difficult for cattle herders to find grasslands, especially in the Sahel, forcing pastoralists to migrate southward and leading to competition with farmers. In the Nigerian context, the conflict between herders and farmers was primarily prevalent in the Middle Belt of Nigeria before the 20th century, specifically in Benue, Plateau, and Nassarawa States. In these regions, cattle herding was more common than crop cultivation, which was only practised during the brief rainy season (Umar 2002; Olabode and Ajibade 2010; Okolie and Atelhe 2014; Olaniyan and Yahaya 2016; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Violence resulting from the conflict between cattle herders and crop farmers in Nigeria has contributed to over 7,000 deaths in recent years and costs the Nigerian economy approximately \$13 billion annually (Harwood 2019). Furthermore, rural communities in Nigeria that once amicably shared natural resources are now violently competing for increasingly scarce land and water as climate change intensifies and people are compelled to migrate in search of available resources. Scholars and conflict analysts have researched the conflict between cattle herders and crop farmers over land and resources in the north-central states of Africa (International Crisis Group 2018a; 2018b; Harwood 2019). However, the literature has not sufficiently investigated tools for managing the incessant conflict and building peace in this scenario. Therefore, this article explores the efforts of local defence groups (LDGs), which are non-state actors, in managing and mitigating the conflict. When government security measures are inadequate due to ineffective actors, insufficient resources, or willful neglect of their primary duty, the public loses confidence in these measures, leading to the rise of local defence groups (LDGs) (International Crisis Group 2018a; 2018b). These groups, often organised along ethnic lines, rely on public support and frequently collaborate with state security forces or other armed groups. Therefore, the efforts of LDGs amid the conflict between crop farmers and cattle herders are central to security interventions in Africa, especially in Nigeria, where the violence not only threatens lives but also involves sexual and gender-based violence. Local defence groups (LDGs) protect communities from harm by reducing their exposure to threats and creating a safer environment (International Crisis Group 2017; 2018b). Since scholarly interest in the topic began, understandings of LDG activities have varied. However, there is a need to develop an

understanding of ethnic representation within the academic debate. This article presents findings from a desktop review of grey and academic literature on LDGs operating in violent situations. It aims to break down the ethnic representation silos that characterise discussions about the protection of communities suffering from violence due to the conflict between crop farmers and cattle herders.

Problem Statement

The conflict between farmers and herders is multifaceted, encompassing disputes over land access, resource scarcity, cultural differences, and government policies. In many regions, this conflict has escalated into violent confrontations, resulting in loss of lives, destruction of property, and disruption of social cohesion. Amidst this backdrop, local defence groups have emerged, often taking security matters into their own hands. However, the role and impact of these groups on the conflict dynamics are ambiguous and require further investigation. Understanding the role of local defence groups in the conflict between farmers and herders is essential for developing effective strategies to address and mitigate the underlying causes of violence and instability. By exploring the motivations, tactics, legal implications, and impact of these groups, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners can contribute to efforts aimed at promoting peace, security, and sustainable development in affected regions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is multifaceted and, therefore, seeks to understand the complex dynamics underlying the conflict between farmers and herders. By analysis, the study's intent encompasses several key objectives that include:

- Investigating the role of local defence groups (LDGs) in the conflict between farmers and herders, identifying the root causes, triggers, and escalating factors of the conflict.
- Assessing the effectiveness of local defence groups in providing security and protection to communities affected by the farmer-herder conflict.
- Examining the strategies, tactics, and outcomes of LDG interventions, as well as their impact on violence reduction and community resilience.
- Explores the perspectives and experiences of local communities living in conflict-affected areas. By understanding how communities perceive and interact with LDGs, researchers can gain insights into the factors influencing community support, cooperation, or resistance towards these groups, including identifying the strengths and weaknesses of local defence groups in addressing the farmer-herder conflict.

- Evaluating factors such as organisational capacity, legitimacy, accountability, and adherence to human rights principles and identify strengths and weaknesses, inform policy and practice, and promote conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Literature Review

The role of local defence groups in the conflict between farmers and herders is a topic of considerable scholarly interest, particularly in regions where such conflicts are prevalent, such as parts of Africa. These conflicts often arise due to competition over scarce resources such as land and water, exacerbated by factors such as population growth, climate change, and weak governance structures. Local defence groups emerge as a response to the perceived inability of formal security forces to protect communities from violence and theft adequately. In addition to the role of local defence groups in the conflict between farmers and herders, it is crucial to explore various dimensions such as historical context, socio-economic factors, political dynamics, and the impact of these conflicts on local communities and national stability.

Local defence groups, often formed in response to conflicts between farmers and herders, have garnered significant scholarly attention due to their role in addressing communal violence and maintaining peace in rural areas. Studies have shown that local defence groups can play a crucial role in mitigating conflicts between farmers and herders by providing a rapid response to incidents, mediating disputes, and establishing dialogue between conflicting parties. Research by scholars such as Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016) suggests that these groups, when properly organised and equipped, can help de-escalate tensions and prevent violence from escalating. Olabode and Ajibade (2010) emphasise the empowering effect of local defence groups on rural communities. By involving community members in security initiatives, these groups foster a sense of ownership and agency, which can lead to greater cohesion and resilience in the face of conflict.

However, scholarly literature also highlights the risks associated with local defence groups, particularly regarding vigilantism and human rights abuses. Researchers such as Okolie and Atelhe (2014) caution that in the absence of proper oversight and accountability mechanisms, these groups may resort to extrajudicial actions, exacerbating rather than resolving conflicts. A recurring theme in scholarly discourse is the importance of governance and regulation in ensuring the effectiveness and legitimacy of local defence groups. Scholars such as Kwaja and Yau (2021) argue that while these groups can fill gaps in state security provisions, they must operate within a legal framework and be subject to oversight to prevent abuses of power.

While research by scholars such as Tar and Bala (2023) and Kwaja and Emah (2023) underscores the significance of inclusivity and conflict sensitivity in the composition and activities of local defence groups. Efforts to ensure representation from both farmer and herder communities, as well as sensitivity to underlying grievances and power

dynamics, are crucial for fostering trust and cooperation. Scholars like Seddon and Sumberg (1997), Adisa (2011), and Abbass (2014) examine the role of external actors, including NGOs and international organisations, in supporting and capacitating local defence groups. While external assistance can enhance the effectiveness of these groups, it must be carefully coordinated to avoid unintended consequences and reinforce local capacities.

Scholarly research on local defence groups in the context of conflicts between farmers and herders highlights their potential as well as their challenges. While these groups can contribute to conflict mitigation and community empowerment, careful attention must be paid to governance, accountability, inclusivity, and external support to ensure their positive impact on peace and stability in rural areas. By synthesising findings from scholarly reviews on these topics, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can develop a nuanced understanding of the role and impact of local defence groups in farmer-herder conflicts and formulate evidence-based interventions to address underlying grievances and promote peacebuilding efforts.

Local Defence Groups

Communities that have been victims of the effects of crop farmer and cattle herder conflict are not dormant in terms of proffering solutions to the crisis. Indeed, they have LDGs, which use a range of measures to protect their communities. Moreover, LDGs not only manage threats but also actively struggle and resist any groups that attack the community. In addition to protecting the community in the form of prevention and direct resistance, LDGs adopt life-sustaining strategies to help people (Tar and Bala 2023; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Managing threats to local communities appears to encompass the widest range of LDG tactics. The most obvious are attempts to prevent all forms of conflict and violence. It is believed that LDGs are better equipped to identify the enemy. They know the terrain more and have a unique intelligence-gathering capability. Other avoidance tactics are related to gathering and circulating information through social networking. For example, LDGs use ethnic groups, such as families or other protective social networks, to spread information. These networks are referred to as stay- and pull-together security networks (Tar and Bala 2023; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Some communities may directly engage in the assistance and support of LDGs by using funds provided by government agencies for local security in the communities. Other communities gather money from community members to pay LDGs to protect them. Sometimes, the community negotiates with LDGs and cuts deals to ensure protection provision. In other situations, keeping silent or acquiescing to the LDGs' demands is the most viable strategy (Okoli and Atelhe 2014; Abbass 2014).

A series of factors, including LDGs' capacities and their perceptions of the atrocious perpetrators' tactics and motivations, influence the life-sustaining strategies that LDGs choose to protect communities (Abbass 2014). The range of sustenance measures (Fabusoro and Oyegbami 2009) is linked to local communities' security and livelihoods.

For example, LDGs might assist the community which has suffered harm to its property, businesses, farms, livelihood options, access to basic medical care, and use of social networks by taking on additional work.

Okoli and Atelhe (2014), Seddon and Sumberg (1997), Adisa (2011), Abbass (2014), Jonathan-Chaver, and Adamolekun (2019) document the holistic way in which LDGs and communities understand security as protection from physical harm, and the effects of conflict on people's livelihoods. Moreover, in the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria, LDGs and community members view security in terms of protection from violence and harm to their livelihoods and thus connect the sustaining of livelihood to their sense of security. In addition, Fabusoro and Oyegbami (2009) debate the close connections between security and livelihoods in the protected areas of the desert-prone north-central and middle-belt states of Nigeria (Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Nassarawa, Zamfara) where LDGs cite the rehabilitation and relocation of farmers expelled from their farmland as a central security issue.

Olaniyan et al. (2015) interrogated the connection between security and livelihoods in Ghana and Nigeria. The study revealed that farmers in Ghana chose to engage LDGs for security to maintain access to their farmland, while others chose to stay in communities away from their land because herder and ethnic insurgency seemed likely. Thus, life-sustaining LDG tactics address the threat to livelihoods due to armed herders' insurgency, which outnumbers the direct threat of injury and deaths due to battles (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Life-sustaining LDGs holistically understand protection by considering all the effects of the landowner-herder conflict (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Moreover, LDGs under siege due to armed herder insurgency in the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria live within their localities to protect themselves and their loved ones from harm resulting from attacks and other violence (Akov 2017; Bamidele 2017a). However, at times, LDG protection does not provide the degree of protection, security, and dignity that locals need (Bamidele 2017b; 2018a). Instead, the coping strategies of locals must complement the actions of LDGs.

Positive Effects of Local Defence Group Support

Owing to the protection provided by LDGs, many communities can declare themselves as free from herder insurgency (Seddon and Sumberg 1997; Adisa 2011; Abbass 2014; Bamidele 2018a; Jonathan-Chaver and Adamolekun 2019; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Moreover, LDG protection reduces sexual abuse, violence, and crop-farmer casualties (Kwaja and Yau 2021). In addition, Bamidele (2018a) shows the pragmatism of LDGs in the Sahel region due to their weighing up the risks of a particular action for one group over another. For example, LDGs may decide to protect farmers who stay on their farms despite the risk of torture being killed and sexual violence because the risk of the farmers losing their livelihood would be a greater risk to their survival.

Studies in Ghana on the farmers-herders crisis in the context of threats to locals in the communities have identified both the ethnic power struggle inherent in the conflict and the LDGs' security and livelihood-sustaining strategies (Olaniyan et al. 2015). Moreover, these studies have highlighted the ethnic diversity of LDG groups, which tailor their protection based on ethnicity. In other words, they reflect the tribal and ethnic groups of the communities in which they work (Bamidele 2020a; 2020b). Therefore, many LDGs see themselves as the eyes and ears of their ethnic groups, thereby not only providing protection but also being the agents and spies for their ethnic groups (Bamidele 2020a; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Negative Effects of Local Defence Group Support

Not all LDGs' local security strategies are successful or achieve positive results. For example, when seeking to expand their security coverage in rural communities, LDGs may resort to sexual abuse and violence (Bamidele 2018a; 2018b). In addition, they might destroy farmland and houses to deter attacks and prevent their exploitation and use by herders – a tactic referred to as scorching. Moreover, LDGs sometimes flee violent insurgency, thereby leaving locals without basic amenities and access to food, water, shelter, and clothing, which means that they also flee from the area (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). However, although the flight of locals may protect them from death due to conflict, it might expose them to different threats that could result in death from exposure or hunger in host communities (Hassan 2015). These negative strategies of LDGs result from choosing short-term gains, despite their high human cost (Bamidele 2017a; 2018b; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

LDGs may be distrusted by fellow members of their communities and, therefore, regarded as ineffective managers of protection and security. Likewise, LDGs' local security strategies may generate mixed results by exposing members to harm through allegiances with belligerents. Moreover, LDGs might provide a false sense of protection and security in situations where LDGs or locals overestimate the effectiveness of their self-protection strategies (Bamidele 2020a; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). In addition, LDGs' access to farms, knowledge, and their ability to mitigate threats might limit the extent of the threat posed by the insurgents (Bamidele 2018a; 2018b; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Roles of Local Defence Groups

LDGs in farmer-herder conflict insurgency play overlapping, multiple roles without always considering their ethnic representation as victims, witnesses, survivors, protectors, and enablers (Atitebi and Sikiru 2013). For example, often LDGs comprise various ethnicities when local communities consist of settled farmers of different ethnicities (Bamidele 2020a; 2020b; Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). However, because of multiple ethnicities, LDGs and locals in the communities might be both active protective and predatory agents, evolving from protectors to perpetrators of harm and security (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Due to the diverse ethnic connections and language skills within the local community, as well as their contextual knowledge, LDGs often have a good understanding of the dynamics of armed herders. As a result, they can identify and track herder insurgents for government security agencies (Bamidele 2018a). Therefore, LDGs can serve as valuable intermediaries between their communities and government security agencies (Bamidele 2018a; 2018b) and become part of government anti-herder surgency campaigns. Moreover, as mentioned above, LDGs in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, the Republic of Niger and Uganda serve as spies to protect the community from the herder insurgency, banditry and cattle rustlers. In addition, they not only serve as local security actors and defend the community against its enemies but also attack herder insurgents and kill suspected collaborators.

LDGs work alongside locals, the police, and military forces to identify and contain armed herders. As mentioned earlier, LDGs have been accused of committing atrocities and being rooted primarily in one ethnic group in Nigeria (Atitebi and Sikiru 2013). However, in some cases, LDGs are composed of multiple ethnicities (Atitebi and Sikiru 2013; Bamidele 2020a). Nevertheless, the dualism of LDGs as both a threat and a source of security is due to the exploitation of the uncertainty in the local community and the competition for economic and political (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

LDG protection can, however, lead to peace despite them being ethnically and deeply divided. LDGs still prevent herder threats and killings and mediate peace that fosters community cohesion (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Nevertheless, the LDGs should not be idealised since their ethnic ties with the insurgents can incite or perpetuate conflict. Thus, reliance on LDGs is a double-edged sword. It not only encourages herders' insurgency activities but also gives LDGs the space to block herder insurgency activities for opportunistic reasons (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Insight Into and Understanding of Local Defence Groups

The plethora of good and bad effects of LDGs shows that they cannot be idealised and that the protection and livelihood-sustaining roles depend on their context, the sources of risk and vulnerability and opportunities for or challenges to protection. When analysing threats to the protection of local crop farmers and their communities, LDGs must consider government security agencies and recognise that these change over time (Bamidele 2020a). Moreover, LDG members have a superior sense of when something is unusual, which can assist in prevention and response (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). However, an understanding of LDGs' provision of protection and security emerges from their context, which is usually rooted in traditional roles, cultures, values and circumstances (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). Studies of LDGs' security outfits in the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria have highlighted their access to information, their protection of locals' property and other identity markers as central to their conception of and approach to security.

In the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria, threats to LDGs and locals are linked to politics involving security and livelihoods, such as access to farmland, which is used as a reward or punishment, or the destruction of grazing settlements in different localities (Olaniyan et al. 2015; Bamidele 2020a). Furthermore, threats to LDGs are sometimes linked to socio-cultural and ethnic representation. Thus, ethnic representation by LDGs and local communities is integral to both defining threats and identifying survival and security strategies. As Bamidele (2020a; 2020b) observes, it is necessary to consider both imagined threats and real threats, as both can have protection implications. The fear of ethnic representation, even if it lacks rational justification, can have effects that are just as real as the fear of herders' insurgency in the local community and LDGs. Moreover, LDGs need to protect communities against what they do not necessarily recognise as threats but should. In addition, many of these threats and resultant protection strategies cut across ethnic boundaries.

Any harm caused by violent insurgency, abuse of human rights, torture, and sexual assault constitutes a threat to local farmers, which is not unique to any particular time, even though its specific manifestations may vary in different locations and times. In addition, those affected by herder insurgency often link their psychosocial health to protection and security. Moreover, in Benue and Plateau states, even if locals are forced to live in a rough environment, where they do not have enough food for their households and where they live in constant fear of the next bombardment, smelling pleasant, feeling clean and looking good becomes crucial to their self-respect and their ability to cope and survive (Bamidele 2018b; 2020a; 2020b). Re-establishing a sense of normalcy with the help of LDGs is often key to people's survival and coping with uncertainty and threats in their local community.

Many communities view the LDGs' provision of security as ethnically orientated protection of their survival and safety in the areas where they have settled to farm, which are threatened by armed herder insurgency (Bamidele 2020a). In addition, in studying the politics of the crop farmers-cattle herder conflict, Ganyi (2015) documents the causal link between religion and insurgency in the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria. Furthermore, Ganyi (2015) writes that the insurgents imagine a future back home in Nigeria, including a return to a long-time friendship with its inhabitants. This contrasts, however, with secular humanist framings of protection and security in farmers-herders conflict. Crucial here are the meanings and manifestations of ethnicity in context since ethnicity in local communities can play either a survival/coping or discriminatory role. For example, in the north-central and middle-belt regions of Nigeria, ethnic minorities experience discrimination and even blame from communities (Bamidele 2020a; 2020b). In addition, in many other herder insurgency settings, ethnic representations are used to justify violent herder insurgency.

A nuanced, contextual understanding of protection and security is essential to any effective security strategy. Paradoxically, however, a focus on the LDGs may also obscure a broader view. In their protection research, Bamidele (2020a; 2020b) and other

scholars observe, in the ethnic insurgency crises reviewed, that contextualised protection analysis has been atomised with only a few humanitarian institutions having a balanced overview of the evolving protection problems of insurgency crises. Moreover, a focus on specific geographical areas and vulnerabilities has masked the bigger picture. Understanding the specificities of context, therefore, must not inadvertently overlook broader trends and threats when investigating independent defence warriors (IDWs), which is another term for LDGs made up of farmers who are defending their crops and land from cattle herders and their livestock.

Strategies Adopted by Local Defence Groups

The literature on LDGs emphasises the centrality of local participation in identifying protection strategies and in making them effective against armed pastoralists (Ageyemn 2017; Ahmadu 2019; Gbaka 2014; Kaderi 2017; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Moreover, the literature on local protection strategies emphasises local engagement with and participation in LDGs whereby sustainable and appropriate protection strategies reflect the local people's lived realities, avoid inadvertent harm, and contribute to the LDGs' sense of agency (Ageyemn 2017; Ahmadu 2019; Kaderi 2017; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020; Kwaja and Emah 2023). However, understanding LDGs-based protection reflects different assumptions about the initiation and ownership of protection (Okolie and Atelhe 2014). International Crisis Group (2018) survey identified two understandings: one whereby protection is led by government security agencies and informed by LDGs, and another whereby LDG protection engages members in protecting themselves.

The engagement of government security agencies forces LDGs to hold their leaders accountable to the government, which can improve the protection and safety of crop farmers faced with attacks from armed cattle herders (Ageyemn 2017; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Moreover, an analysis of LDG protection in Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa states highlights LDGs' lack of knowledge about their legal rights, which hinders their ability to hold duty-bearers accountable for violations and harms (Ahmadu 2019; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Humanitarian agencies have supported local crop farmers in establishing LDG structures for the identification of threats and strategies for protection. In addition, these structures have engaged government authorities in positive and non-confrontational ways (Ageyemn 2017; Ahmadu 2019; Kaderi 2017; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Reflecting on their participation as displaced representatives in the middle belt region of Nigeria process, an informant observed that LDGs have the most to gain from peace and the most to lose from the continued violent insurgency of the cattle herders (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023).

Participation in and engagement with government security agencies allow local communities to hold them accountable for their actions, thereby contributing to positive protection outcomes. Moreover, the literature on LDG engagement points to the

responsibility of government security agencies to cooperate with LDGs in enabling local protection (Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Furthermore, studies on LDG protection emphasise the importance of strong leaders in determining the ability of LDG to negotiate effectively with the locals and government security agencies (Gbaka 2014; Ageyemn 2017; Kaderi 2017; Ahmadu 2019; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020).

A study in Benue state concluded that LDGs representing ethnic groups were better at managing, negotiating, and confronting threats because they had strong relations with other security agencies who had the financial resources they needed to respond (Bamidele 2020b). Moreover, LDG leaders can foment or discourage violence. In Plateau state, for example, LDG leaders forced members to obey authority and resist violent incursion. Based on Kwaja and Emah's 2023 submission, I summarised the situation as follows:

When there is cattle-herder violence against crop farmers, very few LDGs join in, and crop farmers attribute this to the security agencies, having prepared displaced people against the temptation towards violence and having inoculated them against participating.

LDGs often, however, exercise their power and can access limited resources in ways that exclude other groups. Moreover, gaining the trust of the community and government security agencies ensures the effectiveness of LDGs in ensuring security (George et al., 2020). For example, in contrast to the LDGs in Nasarawa and Zamfara states and the LDGs of the north-central and the middle belt regions of Nigeria, the protection outcomes of the LDGs in the south-western states are better because of the trust they have gained (Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Moreover, like the LDGs in the northeastern, central, and northwest regions of Nigeria, the composition of those in the southwestern states is multiethnic.

While a variety of considerations help to explain the differences in protection outcomes, trust in LDGs and oversight from government or other security agencies are central factors affecting the effectiveness of LDGs. Moreover, although some predation may still occur, it is less when these factors are at play (Kwaja and Yau 2021; Kwaja and Emah 2023). In addition, internal disciplinary procedures and shaming by local communities (Bamidele 2020b) limit abuses in the actions of LDGs. Furthermore, cohesion with the community drives the LDGs' to resist violent pastoralist insurgency (Ahmadu 2019; Harwood 2019; George et al. 2020). Case studies from Nigeria have shown that compliance with security agencies, cohesion with the community and following strategies collectively with the locals ensure the LDGs' democratic decision-making power to protect the settlers against header attacks (Bamidele 2018a). Moreover, ethnic representation insulates LDGs and communities from both the physical and psychological harm due to violent pastoralist insurgency.

Methodology

The study adopts a desktop research design using a qualitative method. While the desktop research approach seeks to discover facts, it also emphasises describing an event or phenomenon accurately as it exists or occurs in its natural setting. The study decided to embrace the qualitative method because it comprises the following characteristics that are attractive to the social scientist who engages in social and behavioural research: its ability to set the pace for the provision of answers to open-ended explanatory questions. Likewise, its systematic utilisation of predetermined procedures to respond to inquiries, collect data, generate findings that could not be determined in advance, and generate findings that apply beyond the immediate borders of the research study. Additionally, it seeks to recognise a given research problem from the point of view of the local populace within a given context.

Furthermore, the desktop research approach is generally more flexible and adaptable. The qualitative method enables the sampling of a significant number of secondary sources of opinions from writers/scholars who have worked or written on farmers and herders in the conflict-ridden sampled communities. In the context of this study, the major concern is the LDGs used in this study. This is because the state has experienced the highest number of clashes and confrontations between herders and farmers, leading to threats of insecurity. Hence, the data collection in this article would come from secondary sources. The secondary data was collected through journal articles, books, and documentary materials. The study analyses existing secondary data through textual analysis in terms of analysis.

Implication of the Study

A new twist in the age-long relationship between farmers and herders could involve innovative approaches aimed at fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence between the two groups. Rather than viewing each other as competitors, farmers and herders could explore collaborative approaches to manage shared resources such as land, water, and grazing areas. One potential solution could involve setting up joint committees or councils comprised of representatives from both communities to develop and implement sustainable resource management plans that benefit everyone. These joint efforts would ensure that both farmers and herders have a say in how resources are allocated and managed, promoting transparency and reducing conflicts. Farmers and herders could form economic partnerships aimed at mutual benefit. For example, farmers could provide surplus crops or agricultural by-products to herders as fodder for their livestock, while herders could reciprocate by providing manure for fertiliser or participating in joint marketing ventures for agricultural products. These partnerships would not only strengthen economic ties but also build a foundation of trust and interdependence between the two groups. By embracing collaborative and innovative approaches, farmers and herders can transform their relationship from one of competition and conflict to one of cooperation and mutual benefit, ensuring sustainable development and peace for their communities.

Local cultural exchange programs and events that bring farmers and herders together can indeed foster greater understanding and appreciation of each other's way of life. These initiatives, such as festivals, workshops, and community gatherings, provide valuable opportunities for members of both communities to share their traditions, stories, and culinary delights. By participating in these activities, individuals can learn from one another, break down stereotypes, and build meaningful connections. In addition to cultural exchange, establishing effective conflict resolution mechanisms is crucial for addressing disputes between farmers and herders peacefully and fairly. This could involve setting up mediation boards or local courts composed of respected members from both communities who are trained in conflict resolution techniques and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. These bodies provide a structured framework for resolving conflicts, ensuring that grievances are heard and addressed in a manner that respects the interests of both parties. By combining cultural exchange programs with robust conflict resolution mechanisms, communities can cultivate an environment of mutual respect, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders. This holistic approach not only promotes harmony within communities but also contributes to broader efforts for sustainable development and social cohesion.

Promoting education and awareness about the importance of coexistence and collaboration can indeed help change perceptions and attitudes among farmers and herders. This could involve implementing educational programs in schools, community outreach initiatives, and media campaigns highlighting successful examples of cooperation between the two groups. By showcasing the benefits of collaboration and mutual respect, these initiatives can foster a culture of understanding and cooperation. Collaborating on environmental conservation initiatives can provide a common ground for farmers and herders to work together towards shared goals. This could include tree-planting campaigns, watershed management projects, and efforts to combat desertification and soil erosion, all of which benefit both agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. Farmers and herders can strengthen their bonds by working together to preserve natural resources and contribute to sustainable development in their communities.

Furthermore, by embracing these new approaches, the age-long friendship between farmers and herders can be revitalised and strengthened, leading to greater harmony, prosperity, and resilience in rural communities. Local defence groups can indeed have significant implications in the conflict between farmers and herders, which often revolves around competition for land, water, and other resources. By promoting collaboration and dialogue, these groups can play a constructive role in resolving conflicts and building peace in affected areas. Some of the potential implications are:

- **Escalation of Violence:** Local defence groups, formed by either farmers or herders to protect their interests, can escalate the conflict through retaliatory attacks or preemptive strikes against the opposing group. This can lead to a

cycle of violence, with each side feeling the need to defend itself, resulting in increased casualties and destruction.

- **Polarisation of Communities:** The formation of local defence groups can further polarise communities along ethnic, tribal, or religious lines. This polarisation can deepen existing divisions and make it harder to find peaceful resolutions to the conflict. It can also lead to increased distrust and hostility between different groups within the affected communities.
- **Involvement of External Actors:** Local defence groups may seek support from external factors, such as government agencies, political parties, or even foreign interests, to strengthen their position in the conflict. This involvement can exacerbate tensions and complicate efforts to find a sustainable solution, as external actors may have their agendas and interests in the region.
- **Human Rights Violations:** In the absence of effective oversight and accountability mechanisms, local defence groups may commit human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, forced displacement, and looting. These violations can further exacerbate the suffering of civilians caught in the conflict and undermine efforts to promote peace and reconciliation.
- **Undermining State Authority:** The emergence of local defence groups can undermine the authority of the state and weaken its ability to maintain law and order. In some cases, these groups may challenge the legitimacy of government institutions and establish their systems of governance, leading to a breakdown of state authority and the rule of law.

Overall, the implication of local defence groups in the conflict between farmers and herders can be highly destabilising and prolong the cycle of violence, making it imperative for stakeholders to address the underlying grievances and work towards inclusive and sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

This study established that local defence groups (LDGs) have played a key role in the conflict between crop farmers and cattle herders, where armed herders no longer peacefully coexist with settled farmers and often launch violent attacks on their land. This new twist to an age-old relationship highlights the critical role of LDGs in protecting locals, thereby filling a gap in the literature that previously focused more on protection activities than their outcomes. Studies on local protection and LDGs often catalogue the various ways locals protect themselves, although the literature also acknowledges that local protection is not always effective. This article has explained what LDGs entail, their positive and negative effects, and their roles and strategies. It has clarified various insights and understandings concerning LDGs. However, as indicated in the section on the negative impact of LDGs, recent stories of abuse and

exploitation by these groups illustrate that sometimes LDGs themselves pose threats to local crop-farming communities.

Moreover, community-based local protection is often marginalised in favour of established, formal ethnic representation, highlighting a mismatch between the rhetoric and reality of local protection. However, progress is underway, with recent local security standards shifting from merely reducing the risks facing communities to improving rights and restitution for victims. Additionally, academic analyses of LDGs could benefit from identifying examples of effective local protection outcomes, not just the activities of a broad range of non-state actors. Future studies could investigate how locals and government security agencies have supported LDG operations, thereby advancing our understanding of how and why complementary approaches are effective.

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