

Strategic Communication and Responsive Governance in Curbing Herdsmen-Farmers Crisis in Nigeria

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Abstract

The issue of Herdsmen- Farmers' crisis has become worrisome in Nigeria. This issue has continued to occupy front burners of national issues and media spaces for years now, generating subjects for discussions at different fora. This study examined how strategic communications and responsive governance is instrumental to curbing the recurring herdsmen-farmers crisis in Nigeria. The study was anchored on twin theories of Social Responsibility and Conflict Resolution. Using analytic approach, the study found that the major causes of Herdsmen-Farmers' crisis in Nigeria include destruction of crops and contamination of streams by herders' cattles, inadequate grazing of land, disregard for local traditional authorities, female harassments by herders, harassment of nomads by host communities youths, indiscriminate bush burning by herders, defecation of cattle on roads, cattle theft by cattle rustlers, and straying of cattles. The study recommends that in reporting a serious national security issues such as herdsmen-farmers' crisis, professionalism, high level of ethical standard and discipline on the part of the media are sine qua non; they must be used to douse and defuse tensions in the land. Images of damages and destructions of lives must not take prominence to forestall escalations. Also, both the states and Federal Governments must learn to be more responsive and proactive in tackling herdsmen-farmers crisis.

Keywords: Communication, governance, herdsmen, farmers, crisis

Introduction

The issue of Herdsmen- Farmers' crisis has gained worrisome dimension in Nigeria and it is as old as Nigeria as an entity. The upsurge in population, geographical expansion, rapid development and increasing environmental degradation and pollution has to a large extent heightened the intensity of the crisis from its national level to international concern. Historically, the herdsmen before now were harmless set of farmers in Nigeria who move piously and use to go about their normal businesses without fear of killings and destructions of property. But that is no longer the case today, as there is now recurring clashes between herds and farmers in many states of the federation, predominantly in Benue, Taraba, Plateau, Kaduna, Zamfara, Adamawa, etc. Such crises have continued to degenerate widely, posing a serious threat to national security. *Prime Times* (2018) reveals that, "Thousands of people have been killed, communities have been destroyed and so many farmers and pastoralists have lost their lives and property in an extended orgy of killings and destruction that is not only continuously destroying livelihoods but also affecting national cohesion".

According to the Global Terrorism Index (2014), Fulani militants were the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world using machine guns to launch attacks on villages, assault and intimidate farmers. According to the report, these terrorists have indeed become a deadly group in Nigeria that at present, security agencies, especially the police are seemingly avoiding encounters with them.

Akinkuolie [2018, p.3] agrees that the tension in the country is now so high that grazing should be limited to states which are more receptive to the Fulani people or are of predominantly Fulani ethnic group. Akinkuolie [2018, p.3] confirms that:

The clashes between herdsmen and farmers in some states in Nigeria, especially in Benue, Taraba and Kaduna states should not be allowed to generate further by incitement and intemperate statements. The committee set up by the government to solve this problem must come out with a holistic solution which will deal with the problems of encroachment into farmlands, incitement and credible plans to integrate the herdsmen fully into the Nigerian society. The grazing of animals on cattle trails in the 21st century is to say the least antiquated.

To manage the frequency and magnitude of clashes between Fulani Herdsmen and host communities or farmers requires high level of deliberately planned communication efforts to avoid escalation and incitement, and douse the already existing tension in the country.

Meanwhile, not many studies exist on how strategic communication and responsive governance is used in curbing the recurring herdsmen-farmers crisis in Nigeria. Attempt at filling this knowledge gap and intellectual lacuna has prompted this study.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to determine how strategic communication and responsive governance contribute to curbing herdsmen-farmers crisis in Nigeria. Specifically, the the study was meant to:

1. Ascertain the major causes of herdsmen- farmers crisis in Nigeria
2. Analyse the place of strategic communication in curbing herdsmen and farmers crisis in Nigeria.
3. Identify the place of responsive governance as in engendering peace-building process in the crisis.

Conceptual Discussions

Since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1998, according to *The Foreign Policy* report of 23 January 2019, herdsmen-farmers' crises have claimed over ten thousand lives and displaced hundreds of thousands others. The majority of farmer-herder clashes have occurred between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers, exacerbating ethno-religious hostilities (*Time*. 28 June 2018). *IPI Global Observatory*, 16 July 2015 also reported that after killing around 80 people in total from 2010 to 2013, the Fulani herdsmen killed 1,229 in 2014 and most deaths occurred in the Nigerian Middle Belt in particular, in the states of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau, which recorded 847 deaths.

In addition to terrorist attacks, Fulani militants were also involved in non-state armed conflicts with groups from Eggon, Jukun and Tiv farming communities and these conflicts resulted in over 800 deaths by 2015(*IPI Global Observatory*,16 July 2015). In 2016 more incidents occurred in Agatu, Benue and Nimbo, Enugu State according to Morning Star News of April 27, 2016 and Thandiubani, Tue 26th Apr, 2016).

In April 2018 Fulani gunmen killed 19 people during an attack on the church, after which they burnt dozens of nearby homes (Tue 26th Apr, 2016). In June 2018, *Site admin* of 9th April 2018 reported that over 200 people were killed and 50 houses were burnt in clashes between farmers and Fulani cattle herders in Plateau State. In October 2018, Fulani herdsmen killed at least 19 people in Bassa (25 June 2018 – via www.bbc.com). By 2018, over 2000 people were killed in those conflicts (*Information* 25 June 2018). On 16 December 2018, Militants believed to be Fulani Herdsmen attacked a village in Jema'a, killing 15 people and injuring at least 24 others, the attack occurred at a wedding ceremony (*Siteadmin* 9 April 2018).

There has been occurrences of retaliatory violence (www.dailytrust.com.ng. Retrieved 2018-12-18). Critics and media have accused Fulanis of trying to Islamize the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Miyetti Allah stated that the June 2018 massacre was a response to killing of over 70 herders and theft of over

500 cows since April 2018 (www.thisdaylive.com. Retrieved 2018-12-18). Journalist Tunji Ajibade in a column in the Punch News paper, has accused the media of promoting ethnic hatred, by often attributing killings to Fulani herdsmen even when the police themselves haven't confirmed so or any suspect has been arrested. In contrast, ethnicities of attackers targeting Muslim or Fulani communities are often unidentified by the media despite being arrested (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018>).

Media of all forms and sizes have primary roles to inform, educate, sensitize and entertain the masses and bring to the knowledge of the public what goes on in all areas of life in the right dosages and proportion. The media also have the power to fast-track peace building process, crisis management and a ready tool to instigate crisis, depending on which sides of the coin the media managers and gatekeepers decide. Crisis could be contained through the help of the mass media and at other times it could assist in escalating it due to misinformation, misinterpretation and misguided utterances in the media.

The roles of communication in resolving issues in the society cannot be overemphasized; it had played pivotal roles in pacifying situations from generating and degenerating into violence. Strategic communication can be successfully replaced with hate speech which becomes the order of the day in crisis periods. *Prime Time* (2018) agrees that:

Hate speech has now become a generator and accelerator of violent conflicts and the phenomenon of fake news is worsening its negative impact, there is need for the development of a media code to be used in sensitizing the media on the relevant international standards on reporting issues of conflicts and banditry. This process should involve conflicts sensitivity and safety training and it should be based on very strict journalistic standards. Appropriate laws and regulations should be developed at both the federal and state levels towards ensuring that the margin of what is seen as free speech in the media will be effectively regulated.

Similarly, Eddah and Ayantu (2013, p.183) observe that, "in post conflict settings, most efforts to bring communities together tend to look at the role of communication, culture and women in the reconciliation and reconstruction process". This idea was supported by Moemeka (1996, p.197) when he says that, "in African cultures, communicative acts are engaged in fundamentally to confirm, solidify and promote communal social order". The supposed relationship between community relations and strategic communication cannot be overemphasized; hence the successful community relation is dependent to a large extent on the amount of communication deployed in the community.

One of the cardinal constitutional responsibilities of every government no matter the level, is to protect life and property of the citizens. According to section 12, sub-section two (b) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government and the participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. The Federal Government of Nigeria, in recognition of this Constitutional duty had made some efforts to quell the recurrent herders-farmers crises in the country. For instance, on the 19th of May, 2018, the FG organized a town hall meeting in Abuja to brainstorm on possible ways to end the clashes. Despite this and other efforts, the federal government has been frequently accused of not paying much attention to the menace and for failure to demonstrate enough political will to savage the trend of herdsmen/farmers clashes despite the security mercenaries at its disposal.

Some state governments on the other hand, had taken drastic measures towards curtailing the menace in their respective states. For instance, the *News Express* (2018) reports that, Abia State House of Assembly passed into law, the control of Nomadic Cattle Rearing and Prohibition of Grazing Routes/Reserve Bill, 2016, which sought to control nomadic cattle rearing and prohibition grazing routes in Abia and for other matters. By the Anti-Open Grazing law, Abia State becomes the second state in the country to initiate such law. NAN (2018) quotes the Speaker, Abia State House of Assembly, Mr.

Chikwendu Kalu as saying that, the law was not only important to farmers, but also to the entire people of the state. However, News Express (2018) notes that, the Minister of Defence called for the suspension of Anti-Open Grazing Law.

Open grazing has become a major factor to worry about in the persistent conflicts between the herdsmen/farmers crisis in Nigeria. Nworie (2018) reiterates that, Ebonyi State Governor, David Umahi warned that the excesses of Open Grazing, movements and brazen destruction of farmlands by Fulani herdsmen in the state would no longer be tolerated, Governor Umahi further frowned at the level of destructions of food crops and farmlands by the cattle and impunity with which the herders move with it around all the communities in the state.

A non-governmental organisation, Save Humanity Advocacy Centre (2018) says the conflicts between the herders and the farmers had a political undertone. Similarly, the Civil Society Group had in her 2018 Mid Term Report threatened to drag the perpetrators of the herdsmen/farmers crisis across Nigeria to the International Criminal Court, (ICC). Makinde and Nnodim (2019) agree that, the needless loss of lives and property caused by open grazing of cattle is said to be one of the effects of poor leadership, which is seen as a major problem in the country.

On the other hand, the Federal government efforts at curtailing the clashes have generated mix feelings from different segments of the country. Some believe that the government had not done enough to resolve the problem. Others believe that the federal government was playing the silence in the matter that should be treated with utmost seriousness it deserves. There have been alleged diversionary roles in explaining the compromise of National Security Heads who they say have refused to arrest, prosecute and punish the perpetrators of the violent clashes in the country. Others say that the federal government is complacent in ensuring that the issue is brought to an urgent end. United Nations (2018) report agrees that, herdsmen/farmers violence in the Northern Nigeria constituted a major food security threat.

The socio-economic effects of the conflicts include: reduction of crop yields and income of farmers/nomads, loss of lives and properties and loss of products in the storage, hunger and starvation. The United Nations (2018) report concurs that, herdsmen/farmers violence in the Northern Nigeria constituted a major food security threat. Supporting this view, VON (2018) quotes, the Head, Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Environment, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Dr. Awoteim George as saying that the clashes between herdsmen and farmers across the country constitute a setback to agriculture. In the same vein, Ejembi (2018) quotes the Benue State government as saying that it has lost over four hundred billion naira worth of property to renewed militia attacks on communities in the state between 2015 and 2018. Ortom (2018) laments that continued herdsmen attacks on the state had caused untold hardship on every resident of the state either directly or indirectly, justifying that the Benue Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law 2017 was the peoples' legislation. The Eggon Cultural and Development Association (2019) has also been frequently quoted in one of its reports as urging farmers and herdsmen to maintain peaceful existence in order to boost food production in the country.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on twin theories of Social Responsibility and Conflict Resolution. The two theories were found suitable because of the interdisciplinary nature of the study. Social Responsibility theory postulates that the media must stand for the people and social order in order to ensure peace, tranquility and decorum in the society. Applied to this study, the theory explains that the media should assume greater responsibility in reducing the proliferation of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria, promote peace-building process and engender social cohesion.

The conflict resolution theory on the other hand, was developed in the early twentieth century when the European society was theoretically identified as dominated by a small number of interconnected elites who control the conditions of life of many simply by controlling means of production. The theory was modernized by and espoused by Wright Mills who argued that social structures are created through conflict between people with differing interests and resources. Nwamuo (2012, p.13) says that, "Individuals and resources in turn are influenced by these structures in the society". Applied to this study, the theory better explains that the media must as a matter of necessity be socially responsible in their reportage and presentation of facts concerning the crisis.

Methodology

The paper is an analytical study. It adopted the qualitative research method. Corpus analysis of secondary data sources guided the study. This is to say that it made use of secondary sources of data which included text books, academic journals, the Internet sources, newspapers and magazines that relate to the subject-matter.

Findings

The study found that the major causes of Herdsmen-Farmers' crisis in Nigeria include destruction of crops and contamination of streams by herders' cattles, inadequate grazing of land, disregard for local traditional authorities, female harassments by herders, harassment of nomads by host communities youths, indiscriminate bush burning by herders, defecation of cattle on roads, cattle theft by cattle rustlers, and straying of cattles.

Recommendations

The study recommends that in reporting a serious national security issues such as herdsmen-farmers' crisis, professionalism, high level of ethical standard and discipline on the part of the media are sine qua non; they must be used to douse and defuse tensions in the land. Images of damages and destructions of lives must not take prominence to forestall escalations. Also, both the states and Federal Governments must learn to be more responsive and proactive in tackling herdsmen-farmers crisis.

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