

Facilitating Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts Over Land and Water Use in Kano State

Background

Longstanding conflict between Pastoral and Farming groups over land and water resources has continued to pose major threat to peace and security in Nigeria. Between June 2006 and May 2014, land-related conflict accounted for 2,846 deaths in the country¹. Prevalent in Northern Nigeria, the incessant clashes between pastoralists and farmers have been caused by struggle for access to land and water. The following words from Hame Saidu, a pastoralist in North-central Nigeria depict the desperation underlying this competition for access to increasingly scarce natural resources:



Cattle trample on farmlands in search of pasture

"Our herd is our life because to every nomad, life is worthless without his cattle. What do you expect from us when our source of existence is threatened? The encroachment of grazing fields and routes by farmers is a call to war!"

Over the years, peace and security in Bichi Local Government Area (LGA) of Kano State has been undermined by conflicts between farming and pastoral groups over land and water. As a result of migration and population growth, Bichi has recorded increased land cultivation with consequent reduction in available pasture for cattle grazing. Frequent reported incidences of herds of cattle grazing on farmlands have sparked violent confrontations resulting in significant loss of lives and property.

Building Peace through Cooperative Mediation

Recognising the urgent need to stem the perennial conflicts over land and water use in Bichi LGA, the Vulnerable Child Support Initiative (VUCSI) in partnership with the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) instituted community mediation platforms across five communities in the LGA. Yar-Gwarzo, Sanakur, Tinki, Malikawar-Garu and Chiromawa communities were selected based on the history of violence in their localities.

¹ Nigeria Watch (2014) cited in 'Land conflicts and Lethal Violence in Nigeria: Patterns, Mapping and Evolution (2006 - 2014)' Ifra-Nigeria Working Paper Series No. 38, P.19

² IRIN(2009) cited in Abass M.I (2012) 'No Retreat No Surrender': Conflict for Survival Between Fulani Pastoralists and Farmers in Northern Nigeria – (http://www.abu.edu.ng/publications/2012-06-07-133920_5712.pdf assessed 15.10.2015)

The initiative began with advocacy and sensitisation visits to the Interim Management Officer (IMO) of the LGA, the District Head (Hakimin Bichi), community heads and other key stakeholders in each of the five focal communities. The objective of the visits was to intimate the major stakeholders on the goals of the initiative and elicit their cooperation for its success. Voluntary Community Mediation Centres (VCMC) were established in each of the communities comprising farming groups, pastoral groups, community leaders, women groups, youth groups, persons living with disability, religious leaders and vigilante groups. Capacity building workshops on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms, mediation and dialogue were organised for members of the VCMC in affected communities. The workshops employed interactive methodologies in line with adult learning principles and explored real life scenarios using role plays to promote de-escalating actions in situations of conflict.

The media was also used to promote non-violent conflict resolution. The initiative employed 180 slots of radio drama jingles which were aired by Freedom Radio – a station whose listenership spans the entire Kano population. As a result of the wide reach enjoyed by the radio station, many residents became aware of and resorted to VCMCs in quests for addressing conflicts over land and water use.

Results

The advocacy and sensitisation engagements at the outset of the initiative served to facilitate the buy-in and commitment of key stakeholder groups in focal communities. For instance, the Hakimin Bichi (District Head of Bichi) responded to the visits by designating one of the community heads as a member of the project implementation team. The presence of Alhaji Muktar Bichi (community head of Dutse) on the project team served to provide the much-needed trust that facilitated access of the project team to relevant stakeholders.

The capacity building workshops contributed to attitudinal changes amongst members of the VCMC as their identities as peace makers influenced them to be proactive in seeking non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. Kabiru Ismail is a case in point. A farmer and member of the VCMC in Chiromawa community, he narrates how the training has influenced his approach to conflict resolution:

“What we used to before is that when we see any animal in our farm, we go and catch it and break its leg...and this would usually bring quarrel and fight. But because of the training we received, we now realise that what we have been doing is bad...Since we were trained, we have not wounded any animal that we catch on our farm. The community leader can bear witness. There was a time we saw some animal on our farm, I just sent my children to go and chase them away. But I also found a way to resolve the issue with the owner of the animals. Things have been okay since then”

Members of the VCMC have employed their newly acquired conflict resolution skills to mediate in conflicts over access to resources. Their activities have also encouraged coordinated responses to early signs of conflict amongst community members who are now quick to alert members of the VCMC at the earliest sign of trouble.

The VCMC has influenced the institution of conflict-prevention strategies in focal communities. Heads of the five focal communities have reached an agreement to demarcate and expand cattle routes to avail pastoralists a greater expanse of land for herding and grazing their cattle. The community heads have also strengthened previously existing restrictions on cattle roaming around the community in rainy season. Community members believe that the ability of the leadership institutions to ensure there is compliance with this regulation shows that all groups agree it is necessary for peaceful co-existence.

The successes of the VCMC have further attracted the attention and interest of groups in neighbouring communities. There is growing request for adoption of similar frameworks and structures in other communities as evidenced in the following feedback from Musa Yakubu, member of Malikawar-Garu Community VCMC:

"... I was at the market when conflict broke out between a pastoralist and a trader/farmer; the Pastoralist was threatening to use his machete on the man and immediately I came in between and by God's grace, I was able to mediate and resolve the matter. When I was leaving a man tapped my shoulder and asked me which community I was from, then I told him Malikawar – Garu, and immediately he said he remembered hearing we have a trained dialogue group that assists in resolving conflict issues in our community, to which I said yes and without hesitation, he requested me to link him up with VUCSI so that they can be trained as well on how to establish dialogue platforms to promote peaceful coexistence in their own community..."

Challenges

The main challenge encountered at the onset of the initiative was the late/inconsistent attendance of VCMC members at the training sessions. The onset of the farming season meant that a significant number of farmers were unable to arrive early for the trainings and missed out on some of the sessions. This prolonged the capacity building component of the initiative as some sessions had to be repeated to ensure that all VCMC members benefitted fully from the trainings.

Lessons Learned

A key discovery during implementation of the VCMC initiative was that traditional definitions of conflicting parties as Pastoralists on the one hand and farmers on the other are too simplistic and fail to present a complete picture of realities on the ground. In reality, several farmers own cattle that have been found encroaching on other farmlands resulting in conflict between farmers. Similarly, the academic depiction of Pastoralists as nomads was found to be less than accurate as several Pastoralists are bona fide residents of some of the communities owning small parcels of land for subsistence farming. The implication of this is that initiatives aimed at resolving resource-based conflict may require in-depth studies to unearth local dynamics if efforts at engendering sustainable peace are to be successful.