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POLICY NOTE

The impact of climate change and natural resource management on livelihoods and conflict in northern Nigeria

Introduction

This policy note summarises the key findings from research into the pivotal issues around climate change and natural resource management in Benue and Sokoto states in Nigeria, and outlines the resulting recommendations for policy-makers at state and national levels to help address these challenges. The research examined the connection between climate change and conflict and the resulting adverse effects on livelihoods, particularly those reliant on agricultural and livestock production. It highlighted the impact of climate change on women, youth and other marginalised groups who are particularly vulnerable due to their limited access to education and employment, increasing susceptibility to climate-induced disruptions and resource competition. Women and other vulnerable groups reliant on agriculture face heightened risks from climate variability, compounded by limited access to crucial resources. Those dependent on rain-fed agriculture struggle with unpredictable weather patterns, limited access to finance, and heightened vulnerability to resource conflicts, driven by unfair and unsustainable resource management.

This policy note is targeted at the state and federal government of Nigeria, the Nigerian business sector, development and peacebuilding organisations, and international development partners. It aims to ensure that decision-makers and citizens have a clear understanding of the challenges related to climate change and natural resource management, facilitating the identification of practical interventions to mitigate negative effects. This is to ensure that expertise and action on climate security are driven and owned by key Nigerian stakeholders. All stakeholders are encouraged to identify and prioritise gender- and conflict-sensitive interventions to enhance community resilience, improve livelihoods, and facilitate the peaceful resolution of resource-based conflicts.

The research on which this policy note builds adopted a mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data to inform findings. The data was collected in eight different communities across the two case study states of Benue and Sokoto. Quantitative data was collected through a perception survey with 664 respondents.¹

Key findings

Finding 1: The perception of the adverse effects of climate change is high, but there is a lack of awareness on the numerous ways in which they interact with vulnerabilities and insecurity.

Nigeria is one of the countries most vulnerable to the impact of climate change and natural disasters.² Northern Nigeria is warming at a higher rate than the global average.³ In particular, the north of the country is already experiencing a large variation in rainfall, often resulting in flooding or drought. Climate change will lead to a rise in extreme heat in Nigeria and extreme weather events will increase in frequency and intensity.⁴

Respondents to the perception survey explained how the adverse weather conditions were negatively impacting on their livelihoods and other aspects of community life. Adverse weather conditions were being experienced by 89% of survey respondents based in rural areas. Of these respondents an average of 87% of female and 90% of male respondents revealed that they had experienced adverse weather conditions in the past three years. It is important to note that 78% of male and 47%



A woman in Benue uses an alternative fishing method in a natural pond that has dried up due to climate change. Changes in weather are directly affecting rural livelihoods and food security in Benue and Sokoto. © Imaobong Edukere/International Alert

of female respondents are farmers with 7% of male and 34% of female respondents being traders by profession. The most common adverse weather conditions reported by respondents were increased temperature, flooding, and unpredictable rainfall patterns, which have increased significantly in the past three years. In Benue, the most common climate extreme event experienced by respondents was flooding, while in Sokoto high temperatures were most prevalent. Drought and rainfall variability affect both states, but are most common in drier Sokoto, compared with Benue which is located in a tropical sub-humid region.

Despite community reporting on adverse weather conditions, there was a limited understanding of the linkages between climate change, conflict and security. In the case study states, community awareness, especially among farmers, pastoralists, and decision-makers at state and local-government levels, of the compounding effects of climate change and insecurity remains low. For example, despite crop and livestock production, mining and fishing in Sokoto state, it is still among the poorest states in the country, with 88% of the population living below the national poverty line.⁵ By comparison, in Benue state 33% of the population live below the national poverty line.⁶

The targeted communities highlighted how changes in the weather were directly affecting rural livelihoods and food security, threatening to make farming and rearing livestock more challenging due to the scarcity of arable land and water. Reduced productivity, coupled with poor infrastructure such as inadequate access to capital, transportation, and storage and processing facilities, leads to decreased incomes for farmers and negatively affects the food security of the rural population. This

demonstrates the interconnected impacts of climate change on the economy and livelihoods in the region, which are already being experienced today.

Finding 2: Climate change and poor resource management are contributing to vulnerability and loss of livelihoods, reinforcing the cycle of poverty.

Poor natural resource governance, particularly in land, water and forest use, enables the unsustainable exploitation of these resources and contributes to declining crop yields. In addition to the effects of climate change, harmful and unsustainable exploitation practices, including bush-burning, overgrazing and deforestation, reinforce agricultural losses and vulnerability to poverty. Responses from the focus group discussions (FGDs) indicated that in response to shrinking resources, poor crop yields and resulting food shortages, people turn to excessive tree cutting and burning for farming, charcoal and fuel as a coping strategy. This exacerbates biodiversity loss, soil degradation and the risk of erosion, and reduces biomass production crucial for feeding livestock. Additionally, temperature increases negatively affect crucial crops, particularly in farms reliant on rainfall, reinforcing the poverty cycle as production decreases.⁷ The survey revealed that communities are using fertilisers to supplement depleted nutrients due to soil fertility decline. The purchase of fertiliser reduces farmers' profit margins.

Climate and natural resource-related challenges are exacerbating high rates of youth unemployment, particularly in the agricultural sector. The climate security risks facing young people make them more vulnerable, including to criminality. Of households in the north-central region, 25% experienced conflict between 2010 and 2017, pushing them further into poverty.⁸ This was especially the case for those affected by conflicts between herders and farmers, due to this disrupting livelihoods, limiting resource access, increasing vulnerability, exacerbating psychosocial impacts, and disrupting markets and services. The FGDs indicated several communities in both states that were facing food shortages and malnutrition due to the changing climate and increased insecurity creating challenges in farming and livestock rearing amid land, water and associated constraints. The abandonment of the coordination of pastoralist migration by the government has added to the difficulties faced by communities in both states.

"In the past we used to harvest more, but now we don't, and this is due to the change in the climate and deforestation that has affected our level of production." FGD respondent, Obagaji, Benue

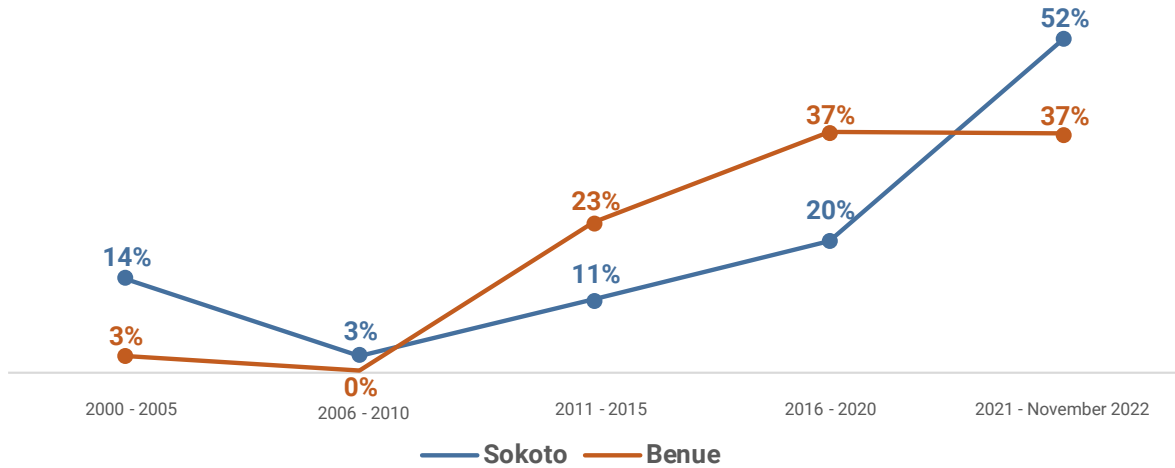
The findings highlight the interconnected pathways between livelihood dependency on natural resources and vulnerability to climatic pressures, contributing significantly to instability and insecurity in both states. Climatic conditions and poor natural resource management negatively impact on socio-economic and livelihood activities and fuel poverty, and expose vulnerable populations to increased risks.

Finding 3: Increased competition for natural resources is fuelling violent conflict.

Evidence from the research shows that communities are grappling with heightened insecurity and more frequent armed conflicts, significantly complicating the maintenance of livelihoods. Of respondents in Benue state 86%, and 91% of respondents in Sokoto, said that competition for natural resources led to conflict. A notable illustration of this is in the escalating competition for access

to grazing areas among pastoralists, a situation associated with the degradation of forests and designated grazing reserves. The scarcity of pasture leads pastoralists to encroach upon farming areas. Simultaneously, diminished crop and livestock yield is compelling farmers to extend cultivation into grazing and forest reserves. Weak or inappropriate land-use policies are driving conflict between farmers and herders.⁹

Figure 1: Timeline showing prevalence of conflicts over natural resources in Benue and Sokoto



Source: Based on International Alert’s primary research on the impact of climate change and natural resource management on livelihood, conflict and criminality in north-western and north-central states in Nigeria. Percentages refer to the proportion of respondents who reported experiencing violence over the years.

A consequence of these challenges is the desiccation of streams and rivers, exacerbating the overconcentration of irrigation activities on the limited available water sources. The intensifying competition, particularly between farmers and herders, is a key driver of resource-based conflicts, as evidenced in the survey report. Figure 1 further suggests a continuation in the rise of natural resource-based conflict. Of respondents 82% identified conflicts between farmers and herders as the predominant form of resource-based conflict in both states.

The compounding effects of climate change coupled with diminishing economic, livelihood and employment opportunities for youth, pastoralists and farmers have precipitated heightened societal tensions. These tensions frequently escalate into confrontations between farmers and pastoralists, disputes over farm and territorial boundaries, and an upsurge in criminal activities, notably banditry and cattle rustling. The interplay of these factors underscores the urgency of addressing the increasing level of violent conflict affecting communities. Furthermore, a continued rise in resource-based conflicts would mean that women, children, people with disabilities and other marginalised members of target communities may find it more challenging to access sources of water for cooking, cleaning and washing and or access farmland or forest to support their survival.

Finding 4: Traditional conflict management mechanisms are viewed as being most effective.

Research findings showed that the increase in violent conflict, including natural resource-based conflicts, is putting a strain on formal state institutions, particularly the judiciary, which face challenges in coping with the scale of disputes in many rural communities. This highlights the need for alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. In Benue state respondents viewed community



Zaki Mvihi, a village head, Tiv community chief and rice farmer in Benue, explains the negative impact that climate change has had on his farm. Climate change is threatening to make farming and rearing livestock more challenging in Benue and Sokoto due to the scarcity of arable land and water. © Imaobong Edukere/International Alert

leaders, faith-based organisations and youth groups as important stakeholders in managing and resolving conflicts. In Sokoto state respondents explained that elders in the community resolve conflicts and disputes and that members of the community are satisfied with the methods adopted in managing and resolving these conflicts.

Traditional conflict management mechanisms were seen as particularly effective, especially for farmer-herder conflict. Of respondents in Sokoto 69%, and 63% in Benue, stated that the mutual use of resources was the best approach for conflict resolution, followed by mediation by traditional rulers (51% in Sokoto and 66% in Benue). Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms include the traditional justice system (a system of justice guided by the norms and culture of the community), alternative dispute resolution centres, community leaders, sharia courts (in Sokoto), faith-based groups and commercial associations.

Finding 5: There is a need for inclusion and participation of vulnerable and marginalised groups in decision-making processes addressing climate change and natural resource management.

The research found that women and youth played a limited role in decision-making around community affairs and conflict management, unless they were the primary party of a dispute or conflict. In both Sokoto and Benue states and across Nigeria, older men dominate traditional and

religious authority roles, leaving little space for young men or women to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. For example, the research showed that, particularly in Benue state, men are the key actors and women are rarely invited to participate, except where the discussion relates to damaged crops belonging to them. At the same time, youth and women are vulnerable, facing high risks stemming from the effects of climate change and exploitation intersecting with existing patterns of marginalisation and neglect.

The research findings indicated that decisions made by male elders and male-dominated community leadership typically held significant authority, with parties usually adhering to these decisions. However, if either party expressed dissatisfaction with the decision, they had the option to escalate the matter to law enforcement. As explained above, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as mediation by community leaders are the preferred mechanism for managing conflicts. Enhancing these mechanisms will require capacity-building among community leaders to ensure that women and other vulnerable community members are able to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Interestingly, female community members (84% and 92% in Sokoto and Benue, respectively) were generally satisfied with decisions related to community resource management, but these figures may reflect their reduced expectations resulting from prevailing social norms. Increasing women's participation is important both from a rights and gender-equality perspective, especially given the high levels of violence against women and girls in the northern parts of Nigeria.

Finding 6: Strengthening civil society organisations and community-based organisations as agents is key to addressing the impact of climate change and poor natural resource management.

In the target states, there are limited numbers of community-based organisations (CBOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting peaceful coexistence between conflicting parties, providing support to women and youth, and engaging government to promote accountability. Specifically, there is no evidence of CSOs adopting multi-pronged approaches to address interconnected climate, environment and conflict issues. Although there are far more civil society groups in Benue than Sokoto, the contributions of these CSOs to peaceful coexistence between conflicting parties and addressing climate change issues are insufficient. Most of the local CSOs and CBOs do not have capacity to advocate around climate security risks. In the study, CSOs revealed that a key challenge was helping people move beyond simply understanding the science of climate change and its effects on livelihoods to adopting a conflict and security lens when discussing climate change issues. This limits CSOs' activities because they cannot convince relevant stakeholders of the interconnection between climate change, natural resource management and conflict, and cannot therefore mobilise resources to support their work.

Another major challenge is the lack of political support from the government for the interventions being implemented by CSOs to address climate change issues in the target states. The lack of political will also means that international agreements and national laws and policies on climate change (e.g. around adaptation or natural resource management) are not adopted at federal, state or local government levels. The research revealed that although thematic and issue-based CSO networks have been established, they are often unsustainable because such networks find it difficult to continue operations once the donor funds provided for their establishment are exhausted.

Recommendations

These recommendations are intended to help key stakeholders in target states and at federal level to understand the immediate actions required to address climate security risks. Key stakeholders include federal and state governments, as well as CSOs, private sector actors and community leaders. The proposed recommendations should be supported by Nigeria's development partners.

Recommendation 1: State and federal government need to increase public awareness (especially among crop and livestock farmers) of climate security risks.

Awareness of climate security risks can be raised through community-based sensitisation activities targeting youth, women and community leaders. These initiatives should be context sensitive and specific to different beneficiaries such as farmers, pastoralists, fishermen, youth and women. Awareness-raising should also focus on reducing dependence on charcoal and firewood as fuel and adopting safer and cleaner alternatives. Capacity-building should develop farmers' skills in crop and livestock production and ensure that beneficiaries understand that certain activities contribute to climate change, which in turn reinforces the cycle of marginalisation, environmental exploitation and poverty in the target communities. Citizens must also understand that sustainable, participatory and fair natural resource management is important for community security and peace. Key gaps in land management capacity identified in the research include land preparation, fertiliser and water application, seed selection, planting methods, harvesting and post-harvest thrashing and processing. There is a need for deviation from the traditional 'travel and visit' extension system, whereby experts carry out routine visits to support farmers to 'learn by doing' from lead farmers and other agricultural education professionals. At state and local levels, sensitisation should target government officials and key decision-makers to enhance understanding on climate security risks and how best to respond to the related issues of criminality, conflict and other security challenges. Staff at institutions such as the National Orientation Agency at the federal level and the ministries of information and agriculture and local government administrations at the state level should be trained so that they can provide information and training to citizens.

Recommendation 2: CSOs and CBOs should play a strong role in promoting integrated responses that meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations regarding climate change, natural resource exploitation and conflict.

CSOs need to be supported to strengthen their contributions to peaceful coexistence related to climate change and natural resource management. Effective advocacy skills are paramount for CSOs, serving as their most potent tool to demand services for their constituents, liaise with relevant ministries, departments and agencies at federal, state and local government levels, and engage with donor agencies and humanitarian organisations. To address this, all CSOs in target locations should register their organisation with the Nigerian Network of NGOs to enable donors to conduct a comprehensive mapping of all CSOs in target states, identify their skills gaps, and organise targeted training. In addition, CSOs in each state can form a network that can facilitate the connection of CSOs to the donor community.



Facilitators demonstrate sieving burnt agricultural waste into a powder for making charcoal briquettes in Agatu, Benue, as part of a shared plan for using resources more sustainably. This followed previous violent conflict between two communities over access to land and water. © Imoter Tarzaan/Angel Foundation

Recommendation 3: The government should support crop and livestock farmers with skills around improving soil fertility and livestock genetics to increase the output of agricultural produce to create more secure livelihoods and avoid the adoption of harmful coping strategies.

Coping strategies often lead to more environmental degradation and grievances between different users of natural resources. For crop farmers, government interventions should focus on activities that can help them determine soil fertility and the nutrient requirements for their crops, so that they can grow and harvest quality produce that can generate a good income. Interventions should also support the completion of harvests within the required timeframe before pastoralists arrive for grazing. This would reduce the chances of crop destruction and conflict between resource users. Interventions should focus on the acquisition of technical skills around improving soil fertility using locally available resources – for example, organic fertilisers such as manure, compost, crop residues and lime.

For pastoralists, improving the genetics of livestock will play a vital role in increasing the efficacy, sustainability and productivity of key livestock species, particularly cattle, sheep and goats. Interventions supporting farmers to learn better breeding and genetic techniques will provide high-quality livestock that will result in higher yields in milk and meat, while also utilising fewer resources. Genetic improvement will also create livestock that is less susceptible to environmental stressors such as heat, drought and disease. Over time, better management of the herds will reduce livestock migration, thereby minimising conflicts between farmers and pastoralists arising from competition over resources like grazing lands and water resources.

These interventions, such as training, mentorship and financial support, can be implemented through a government-donor partnership initiative. State governments must provide financial support and foster effective linkages with commercial input providers, ensuring timely access to quality inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, livestock breeds, pasture, feed supplements, and veterinary drugs. Farmers, through proactive initiatives such as forming producer organisations and cooperatives, can benefit from economies of scale and increased services from private sector providers. Conflict management and conflict-sensitivity skills should be mainstreamed into agricultural courses to help farmers address disputes before they escalate into violent conflict, and even prevent some conflicts from arising in the first place. A conflict-sensitive approach is essential in government interventions to enhance agricultural productivity due to the intricate interplay of climate, environment, conflict and insecurity. This requires a nuanced consideration of the exposure to climate change and vulnerabilities of diverse groups, acknowledging the potential risk of violence and conflict arising from inadequate natural resource management and agricultural policies. Conflict sensitivity extends to understanding and addressing the impact of support programmes on local power relations.¹⁰

Recommendation 4: Interventions to support crop and livestock farmers should promote forest conservation initiatives to reduce the loss of agricultural produce and promote sustainable practice for the future.

The respective Ministries of Water Resources, Environment and Agriculture should be mobilised to lead interventions aimed at training farmers and pastoralists to adopt conflict-sensitive, sustainable forest exploitation practices. In areas that have experienced erosion, for example, due to deforestation, soil conservation methods can be promoted to teach farmers how to use semi-circular contours to retain water, thereby rejuvenating the soil and encouraging vegetation growth that will stabilise surfaces over time. Adopting a conflict-sensitivity approach involves understanding and responding to the impact of forest conservation initiatives on local power relations for resource users, ensuring a comprehensive approach to address climate, environment, and conflict-related vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector.

Recommendation 5: Addressing conflicts and disputes arising from the use of natural resources requires a holistic and multi-sectoral approach that should involve capacity-building of formal, informal, state and non-state security and justice sector actors.

Donors and Nigerian peacebuilding actors need to identify and engage with key formal and state stakeholders in the justice sector who play a role in the management of climate and natural resource-related conflicts, including the Nigerian Police and Immigration Services, and the Ministries of Justice, Agriculture, Water Resources and Land Matters. These institutions and target individuals should be trained to sharpen their communication, conflict-analysis and conflict-sensitivity skills. This will help to enhance their roles in natural resource management in the target communities. Given the preference for traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, traditional rulers, religious leaders and representatives of youth and women associations should be trained in negotiation and mediation, including the adoption of a natural resource and climate lens in their peacebuilding approaches. The training should acquaint trainees with conflict and actor mapping, conflict sensitivity, mediation, human rights and other conflict management tools, with practical examples relevant to each state. It is important that training materials mainstream how to address climate security and conflict risks.

Recommendation 6: Traditional and community leaders need to reintroduce the coordination of migration using traditional governance methods to reduce conflict between farmers and pastoralists and the activities of bandits.

This strategic approach aims not only to reduce conflict between farmers and pastoralists, predominantly in Benue state, but also to address the challenges posed by the activities of bandits, particularly in Sokoto state, and attempts to support natural resource management in both states. By incorporating principles of natural resource management and recognising the impact of climate change, these leaders can contribute to sustainable practices that foster harmony between communities, mitigate resource-related conflicts, and enhance resilience in the face of evolving environmental conditions. The migration patterns of pastoralists were well known and coordinated by traditional leaders in the past. Coordination of migration was scheduled around the wet grazing season and the crop cultivation season (especially towards the end of the rainy season) to allow for safe harvesting of all crops, after which livestock could arrive to feed on the crop residue. Peace actors and traditional leaders need to revitalise the practice of traditional governance to help to reduce farmer-herder conflicts. This practice is where village leaders work with pastoralists' *ardos*¹¹ to guide both farmers and pastoralists on where they can graze and farm, especially at the onset of the dry season.

Lessons can be learnt from the experience in Katsina state where the Farmer-Herder Reconciliation Committee, formed by the state government, develops a calendar that indicates when farmers should complete harvesting and when herders (including those from neighbouring countries) can move into the farming areas for grazing on crop residues and access to water facilities along the rivers. In Benue state, the State Livestock Guard should be transformed to serve as peace actors rather than being confrontational with pastoralists. Members should be trained in using peacebuilding approaches rather than resorting to confrontation in their interactions.

Recommendation 7: The government needs to enhance livelihood options to ensure that income-generating activities do not reinforce harmful coping strategies, including creating better access to markets.

The National Directorate of Employment and the Ministries of Agriculture, Commerce and Trade, as well as the numerous poverty reduction programmes, can be mobilised to support the capacity-building of farmers around how to diversify their means of livelihood and engage in other income-generating activities that are not harmful to the environment or reinforce violent conflicts. Capacity-building initiatives must mainstream conflict and gender sensitivity and address climate change issues. Support should also help farmers understand the processes required for value addition through the agro-industrial processing of farm produce and using farm waste as a source of nutrition for the soil. Investors can also consider funding or investing in vocational centres to provide better training in various off-farm activities. Training delivered at these centres could be used to address holistically the multifaceted challenges of livelihood improvement, environmental sustainability, and conflict sensitivity.

Furthermore, to enhance farmers' livelihoods, it is imperative to improve access to markets and equip individuals, especially rural youth, with branding skills. This includes those participating in the agricultural value chain, encompassing agro-processing and packaging. Ensuring profitability requires providing farmers with market analysis capabilities through training to optimise their understanding of consumer demand. Improving market dynamics includes introducing e-commerce

and social media marketing, prioritising high-value produce, and fostering networking among youth producers and processors. Aggregation and partnerships with agro-industrial processing companies will enhance markets for cereals, tubers, fruits and vegetables, promoting sustainable natural resource management. Encouraging business investors to establish linked aggregation centres can address conflict sensitivity by minimising contamination and waste, particularly for perishables such as milk and vegetables. This will not only enhance income for producers but also contribute to overall social wellbeing and stability by addressing youth-related challenges. Essential support from private sector organisations, agricultural processing firms, and state chambers of commerce is crucial for effective conflict-sensitive intervention implementation.

Recommendation 8: Increase gender inclusion in addressing climate security risks to foster improved peace and social harmony in target communities.

Promoting gender inclusion through the lens of intersectionality and youth engagement in peacebuilding and natural resource management decision-making is critical for fostering sustainable peace and social harmony and good environmental practices. Acknowledging the pivotal roles of both genders and youth in climate and natural resource-related conflicts will help to shift perceptions towards positive contributions, avoiding violence and catalysing peace and stability. Stakeholders, including government institutions, justice systems and donors must prioritise the representation of women and youth in peace dialogue groups, offering equal participation in training activities. Overcoming cultural barriers, especially in Sokoto state, will require robust advocacy targeting community gatekeepers and religious leaders, emphasising the significance of women's involvement in natural resource management and conflict resolution. In Benue state, integrating women and youth into the State Livestock Guards can transform them into peace actors, fostering collaboration with pastoralists and mitigating conflicts related to natural resources such as land, water and forests.

Conclusion

Addressing the intricate interplay between climate change, natural resources and conflict is a multifaceted endeavour. State and federal governments need to take urgent actions to address the multiple effects of climate security challenges in target states and Nigeria at large. In addressing these challenges, the government should adopt a holistic approach ensuring that all stakeholders impacted by climate change and conflict are represented during the implementation of these different recommendations.

Endnotes

- 1 Structured questionnaires were administered in 24 study sites to a total of 1,328 people to collect qualitative data. Qualitative data collection methods also included focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs) and a literature review.
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- 11 The Fulani title for the chief of a band of wandering cattle-herders

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Cover: Japhet Torundu, a member of the Fiidi land cooperative in Benue, feeds fishes in a tarpaulin pond, as an alternative means of fishing in the face of the impacts of climate change. © Imaobong Edukere/International Alert