ISSN: 2971-7760 | VOL 9, ISS 1 | 26 OCTOBER 2026
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23671706
NASARAWA STATE UNIVERSITY, KEFFI, NIGERIA

Anti-Grazing Law Enforcement and Armed Conflict in Benue State, Nigeria: Evidence on Enforcement Legitimacy and Regulatory Effectiveness

Akende Deyor Henry[1], Abdullahi N. Liman[2], and Abdullahi M. Abdue[3]

Institute of Governance and Development Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The relationship between anti-grazing law enforcement and armed violence remains a critical concern in conflict governance in Benue State, Nigeria. This study examined the association between enforcement practices and perceived escalation of armed attacks, as well as the relationship between perceived reductions in open grazing and improvements in security. A cross-sectional questionnaire survey yielded 382 valid responses from Guma, Logo, Katsina-Ala and Ukum Local Government Areas. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Goodman–Kruskal Gamma at a 5% significance level. Perceived biased or politicised enforcement was positively associated with perceived escalation of armed attacks ($\gamma = 0.319$, $p < .001$). In the reported bivariate analyses, incomplete enforcement across local government areas, insufficient government presence and perceived adequacy of Livestock Guard training were not statistically significant. Although respondents perceived that the law had reduced open grazing, perceived reduction in open grazing was negatively associated with perceived reduction in attacks ($\gamma = -0.134$, $p = .033$). Conversely, the belief that full enforcement would reduce violence was positively associated with perceived attack reduction ($\gamma = 0.320$, $p < .001$). These findings highlight the analytical distinction between regulatory compliance and security outcomes and underscore the relevance of perceived enforcement impartiality to conflict governance. However, the cross-sectional, perception-based design limits causal inference and does not establish changes in independently verified incident counts. The study recommends transparent enforcement procedures, independent monitoring of security outcomes and inclusive mechanisms for resolving farmer–herder disputes.

Keywords: anti-grazing law; farmer–herder conflict; enforcement legitimacy; armed violence; Benue State; security governance

1.0 Introduction

Farmer–herder conflict has escalated into one of the most acute rural security threats across Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly within Nigeria's Middle Belt region. While historically characterized by localized, seasonal frictions over crop damage, water access, and livestock transit corridors, contemporary dynamics exhibit unprecedented lethality, widespread population displacement, and structural disruption of rural agrarian economies (International Crisis Group, 2021; Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2020). Benue State, widely recognized as Nigeria's primary

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agrarian basket, occupies the epicenter of this security emergency. The intersection of demographic pressures, environmental degradation, transboundary pastoral movement, small arms proliferation, and state institutional fragility has transformed localized resource disputes into complex, asymmetric armed confrontations.

In response to mounting casualties and rural devastation, the Benue State Government enacted the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law in 2017. Designed as a transformative regulatory framework, the law sought to eliminate open livestock grazing, mandate the establishment of sedentary ranches, protect farming communities from crop destruction, and establish statutory enforcement bodies, notably the Benue State Livestock Guards. However, the operationalization of this legislative instrument has triggered intense academic and policy debate. Proponents emphasize its role in asserting state authority and safeguarding sedentary agrarian livelihoods (Nwosu, 2022). Conversely, critics argue that centralized statutory prohibitions without adequate infrastructural provisioning, cross-border coordination, or pastoralist inclusion risk alienating nomadic communities, delegitimizing state authority, and unintentionally aggravating conflict dynamics (Nnamani, 2024; IFPRI, 2023).

The central security dilemma lies in the persistent operational divergence between legal prohibition and conflict reduction. Despite active statutory enforcement and repeated federal security deployments, armed attacks on agrarian settlements have persisted, raising profound theoretical and empirical questions regarding statutory governance, enforcement legitimacy, and state capacity. Existing literature frequently treats statutory legislation as a monolithic variable, failing to disaggregate specific enforcement dimensions such as enforcement bias, institutional capacity, training adequacy, and rural state presence from broader socio-environmental drivers (Iortswam, 2024; SPARC, 2023). Furthermore, empirical studies rarely distinguish between

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regulatory compliance (e.g., reduction in visible cattle incursions) and human security outcomes (e.g., reduction in armed violent attacks).

To address these gaps, this study draws on primary fieldwork in four conflict-affected Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Benue State: Guma, Logo, Katsina-Ala, and Ukum. It pursues two aligned objectives: to examine the relationship between dimensions of anti-grazing law enforcement and perceived escalation of armed attacks, and to assess the law's effectiveness by distinguishing perceived reduction in open grazing from perceived improvement in security outcomes.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the formal establishment of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law of 2017 and the deployment of state and federal security formations, Benue State continues to experience recurrent armed attacks, mass displacement, and severe agrarian disruption. Much of the public and academic discourse frames the legislation in binary terms: either as an essential legal shield for agrarian populations or as an exclusionary policy that disenfranchises pastoralists. This binary framing obscures the nuanced mechanisms through which statutory enforcement interacts with security outcomes.

The fundamental problem is that legal enactment does not automatically confer operational efficacy or institutional legitimacy. Partial implementation, geographical enforcement gaps, insufficient rural policing capacity, perceived political bias, and the lack of viable ranching infrastructure may create systemic distortions in rural security governance. Moreover, structural drivers such as climate stress, land scarcity, population growth, cross-border mobility, and the erosion of traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms operate concurrently with legal

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frameworks. Without empirically disentangling regulatory compliance from actual conflict reduction, policy interventions risk misdiagnosing the drivers of violence and perpetuating cycles of armed instability.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

i. To examine the relationship between dimensions of anti-grazing law enforcement and the perceived escalation of armed attacks in Benue State.
ii. To assess the effectiveness of the anti-grazing law in addressing farmer–herder conflict by distinguishing perceived regulatory compliance from perceived security outcomes in Benue State.

1.3 Research Questions

i. What relationship exists between dimensions of anti-grazing law enforcement and the perceived escalation of armed attacks in Benue State?
ii. To what extent does perceived reduction in open grazing correspond with perceived reduction in armed attacks in Benue State?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between anti-grazing law enforcement dimensions and perceived escalation of armed attacks in Benue State.

H_{02}: There is no significant association between perceived reduction in open grazing and perceived reduction in armed attacks in Benue State.

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2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Anti-Grazing Legislation and Security Governance

Statutory regulation of pastoral mobility represents a significant shift in rural governance across West Africa. In Nigeria, state-level anti-grazing legislation emerged as a response to severe land-use friction and state institutional deficits. Nwosu (2022) highlights that the Benue State law was conceived primarily as a protective security measure to curb agricultural destruction and establish sedentarized livestock production. However, implementation challenges have been widespread. Nnamani (2024) emphasizes that top-down legislative interventions in centralized federal systems often suffer from enforcement asymmetries, as sub-national enforcement bodies (e.g., Livestock Guards) lack formal firearm authority and operational parity with federal security agencies.

Existing empirical studies demonstrate that legal compliance must be analytically separated from security outcomes. Iortswam (2024) observed that while anti-grazing legislation reduced open cattle incursions in specific localities, violent confrontations and tactical armed raids persisted. This suggests that statutory prohibition may alter the visible dynamics of pastoral movement without resolving underlying armed conflict structures or removing the incentives for asymmetric violence.

2.2 Structural Drivers: Environmental Stress, Demographics, and Institutional Erosion

The escalation of rural violence in Nigeria is driven by a complex matrix of structural pressures. Climate variability, desertification in northern migratory corridors, and shrinking water resources have amplified southbound pastoral movement (FAO, 2020, 2021). Concurrently, rapid demographic expansion and agricultural encroachment onto traditional transit corridors have intensified land competition (SPARC, 2023). These environmental and demographic stresses are

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further exacerbated by illicit small arms proliferation across porous regional borders (UNODC, 2022; Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2023).

Crucially, structural resource competition is mediated by local governance structures. Historical farmer–herder coexistence relied heavily on customary dispute-resolution institutions, local mediation councils, and traditional rulers. As formal statutory bodies marginalized these customary frameworks without establishing accessible legal alternatives, local dispute resolution collapsed, allowing minor resource frictions to rapidly escalate into fatal armed conflicts (Musa & Adamu, 2021).

2.3 Theoretical Synthesis: Social Conflict Theory and Institutional Legitimacy Theory

To robustly analyze these empirical dynamics, this study integrates Social Conflict Theory with Institutional Legitimacy Theory into a cohesive theoretical framework. Social Conflict Theory (Dahrendorf, 1959; Marx, 1867) posits that societal structures are defined by ongoing competition over scarce material resources and institutional power. In the Benue context, land, water, and forage represent vital economic resources contested by two distinct production systems: sedentary agrarian farming and mobile pastoralism. Legislative enactments alter the institutional rules governing resource distribution. When statutory law is perceived as institutionalizing the dominance of one economic interest over another, statutory regulation becomes an arena of political contestation rather than a neutral framework for public order.

Institutional Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006) complements Social Conflict Theory by explaining how target populations evaluate statutory authority. According to Tyler (2006), compliance with legal norms depends heavily on procedural justice—the perception that authorities exercise power neutrally, consistently, and without political bias. When legal

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enforcement is perceived as selective, politicized, or discriminatory, statutory legitimacy collapses. Sub-groups may view compliance as existential capitulation and resort to non-compliance, armed self-defense, or asymmetric retaliation. Integrating these theories demonstrates that the security outcomes of anti-grazing legislation depend not merely on statutory prohibition or formal coercive capacity, but on procedural fairness, institutional neutrality, and inclusive resource governance. Where legal enforcement lacks procedural legitimacy, statutory prohibition risks aggravating resource contestation and triggering further armed escalation.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This design is highly appropriate for examining complex security governance phenomena across diverse stakeholder groups at a specific point in time, enabling non-parametric statistical evaluation of ordered perception variables. The empirical field research was conducted in Benue State, North-Central Nigeria. Four Local Government Areas (LGAs) Guma, Logo, Katsina-Ala, and Ukum-were purposively selected as the study area. These LGAs represent the primary conflict hotspots along the Benue River basin and border corridors, characterized by high agricultural density, active pastoral movement, significant population displacement, and continuous security operations.

3.2 Target Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised adult residents (aged 18 and above), farmers, herders, security personnel (Nigeria Police Force, Civil Defence, Livestock Guards), civil servants, community

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leaders, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the selected LGAs. The combined population of the four LGAs is estimated at 662,914 (National Population Commission).

Sample size determination was guided by Taro Yamane's formula for finite populations:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2] \quad \text{(i)}$$

Where $N = 662,914$ and margin of error $e = 0.05$, yielding a theoretical minimum sample size of 400 respondents. Following questionnaire administration and rigorous data cleaning, 382 fully completed and validated instruments were retained for statistical analysis, representing a highly robust valid response rate of 95.5%.

i. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed:

   1. Purposive selection of 4 high-intensity conflict LGAs (Guma, Logo, Katsina-Ala, Ukum).

ii. Stratified random sampling across key stakeholder groups (farmers, herders, security agents, IDPs, community residents).

iii. Convenience and snowball sampling within IDP camps and remote rural communities where active security risks constrained formal random sampling.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument and Operationalization

Primary data were collected using a structured, close-ended questionnaire titled the Anti-Grazing Enforcement and Security Governance Questionnaire (AGESGQ). Substantive items were operationalized using a standard 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Key constructs measured included: legal enforcement dimensions (completeness, rural presence, guard training, perceived bias), structural conflict drivers (land scarcity, climate competition, population pressure, migration, traditional mechanism strength), security capacity (responsiveness, equipment, vigilante trust), and alternative strategy preference.

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3.4 Analytical Technique and Statistical Justification

Data were processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 23. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were utilized to profile demographics and summarize Likert items. To evaluate hypotheses involving ordinal variables, non-parametric Gamma (γ) statistics were computed at a significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Gamma statistics were specifically selected over standard Pearson correlation because Likert-scale responses represent ordinal data. Gamma measures the strength and direction of association between two ordinal variables by calculating concordant (P) and discordant (Q) pairs:

$$\gamma = (P - Q) / (P + Q) \quad \text{(ii)}$$

$$\bar{x} = \Sigma x_i / n \quad \text{(iii)}$$

$$s = \sqrt{[\Sigma(x_i - \bar{x})^2 / (n - 1)]} \quad \text{(iv)}$$

Where, n is the sample size; N is the estimated population; e is the margin of error; P and Q are the numbers of concordant and discordant pairs; x_i is an observed response; $\bar{x}$ is the sample mean; and s is the sample standard deviation. Gamma values range from -1.00 (perfect negative association) to +1.00 (perfect positive association). In accordance with non-parametric measurement standards, ordinal items were analyzed directly rather than collapsed into arbitrary composite interval scales, preserving granular item-level variation across distinct enforcement and security dimensions.

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4.0 Results

4.1 Profile of Respondents and Human Security Context

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Human Security Context of Respondents (n = 382)

Demographic Category	Classification	Frequency (n=382)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative %
Age Group	18–30 Years 31–45 Years 46–60 Years 61+ Years	72 126 108 76	18.8% 33.0% 28.3% 19.9%	18.8% 51.8% 80.1% 100.0%
Primary Occupation	Farmer Security Personnel Civil Servant / Trader Herder	146 102 88 46	38.2% 26.7% 23.1% 12.0%	38.2% 64.9% 88.0% 100.0%
LGA Residence	Katsina-Ala Ukum Guma Logo	134 120 69 59	35.1% 31.4% 18.1% 15.4%	35.1% 66.5% 84.6% 100.0%
Displacement Status	Living in IDP Camp Displaced in Host Community Non-Displaced Resident	127 149 106	33.2% 39.0% 27.8%	33.2% 72.2% 100.0%
Gender	Male Female	248 134	64.9% 35.1%	64.9% 100.0%
Education Level	Primary / None Secondary Tertiary	84 178 120	22.0% 46.6% 31.4%	22.0% 68.6% 100.0%

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Table 1 shows the sample profile. Respondents aged 31–45 years formed the largest age group (33.0%), followed by those aged 46–60 years (28.3%). Farmers accounted for 38.2% of the sample, while security personnel accounted for 26.7%. The displacement profile is important when interpreting the findings because many respondents had direct experience of insecurity and displacement. The human security profile reveals profound vulnerability: 149 respondents (39.0%) were internally displaced living within host communities, and 127 respondents (33.2%) were residing in formal IDP camps. Thus, a combined 72.2% of the sample lived under active displacement conditions, underscoring the severe operational reality of the conflict environment.

4.2 Enforcement Dimensions and Attack Escalation

Table 2. Gamma Associations Between Enforcement Dimensions and Perceived Attack Escalation

Enforcement Dimension	Mean	SD	Gamma (γ)	p-value	Statistical Decision
Incomplete enforcement across LGAs	3.70	1.08	0.032	0.604	Not Significant
Insufficient rural government presence	3.83	1.04	-0.103	0.057	Not Significant
Adequacy of Livestock Guard training	2.40	1.15	-0.052	0.380	Not Significant
Perceived biased / politicized enforcement	3.91	0.98	0.319	< 0.001	Statistically Significant
Regulatory Effect: Reduced open grazing	3.66	1.12	-0.134	0.033	Statistically Significant

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Table 2 examined the relationship between specific enforcement dimensions of the anti-grazing law and the perceived escalation of armed attacks. Descriptive results indicated broad agreement that the law had reduced visible open grazing (M = 3.66, SD = 1.12), but also strong agreement that government presence in rural enforcement zones was insufficient (M = 3.83, SD = 1.04) and that enforcement was incomplete across LGAs (M = 3.70, SD = 1.08). Livestock Guard training adequacy received a very poor rating (M = 2.40, SD = 1.15). As shown in Table 2, three implementation-capacity indicators were not statistically significant: incomplete enforcement across LGAs ($\gamma = 0.032$, $p = .604$), insufficient rural government presence ($\gamma = -0.103$, $p = .057$), and Livestock Guard training adequacy ($\gamma = -0.052$, $p = .380$). Perceived biased or politicised enforcement was significantly associated with perceived escalation ($\gamma = 0.319$, $p < .001$). This pattern indicates that respondents' perceptions of enforcement neutrality were more clearly associated with perceived escalation than the other measured items.

4.3 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Summary of Hypothesis Tests for the Two Objectives

Null hypothesis	Evidence	Decision
H_{01}: Enforcement dimensions are not associated with perceived escalation.	Biased/politicised enforcement: $\gamma = 0.319$, $p < .001$; other reported indicators were not significant.	Evidence is selective; association differs by enforcement dimension.
H_{02}: Perceived reduction in open grazing is not associated with perceived reduction in attacks.	$\gamma = -0.134$, $p = .033$.	Reject H_{02} for this bivariate association; the relationship is negative.

Table 3 summarises the hypothesis tests for the two research objectives. The findings provide differentiated evidence concerning the relationship between anti-grazing law enforcement and

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perceived security outcomes in Benue State. For the first hypothesis (H_{01}), perceived biased or politicised enforcement was positively and significantly associated with perceived escalation of armed attacks ($\gamma = 0.319$, $p < .001$). This result provides evidence against the null hypothesis for this particular enforcement dimension, suggesting that respondents who perceived enforcement as biased or politicised also tended to report greater escalation of attacks. However, the other reported indicators, including incomplete enforcement across local government areas, insufficient government presence and perceived adequacy of Livestock Guard training, were not statistically significant. Therefore, the evidence does not support a blanket rejection of H_{01} across all enforcement dimensions. Instead, the findings indicate that the observed association varies according to the specific dimension of enforcement examined. For the second hypothesis (H_{02}), the negative association between perceived reduction in open grazing and perceived reduction in attacks was statistically significant ($\gamma = -0.134$, $p = .033$). Accordingly, H_{02} is rejected for this bivariate relationship. The negative coefficient indicates that greater perceived reduction in open grazing did not correspond to greater perceived reduction in attacks. This finding highlights the distinction between regulatory compliance and perceived security improvement. Nevertheless, both results represent associations and do not establish causal relationships.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Procedural Legitimacy vs. Mechanical Enforcement

A primary contribution of this manuscript is the empirical refutation of the mechanical enforcement paradigm. Conventional security policy often operates under the assumption that conflict escalation is purely a function of enforcement deficits i.e., that increasing guard personnel, expanding patrols, or intensifying statutory arrests will automatically suppress

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violence. The empirical findings disrupt this assumption: incomplete LGA enforcement, rural state presence, and guard training adequacy showed no statistically significant relationship with perceived escalation. Instead, perceived biased or politicized enforcement was the single enforcement dimension positively associated with escalation ($\gamma = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$).

This finding strongly validates Institutional Legitimacy Theory (Tyler, 2006). When statutory enforcement is perceived as partisan or instrumentally aligned with one ethnic or socio-economic faction, state authority loses procedural legitimacy. Sub-groups interpret statutory enforcement not as neutral public governance, but as structural persecution. Consequently, statutory prohibition without procedural fairness incentivizes non-compliance, clandestine arming, and tactical violent retaliation (Nnamani, 2024; Nwosu, 2022).

5.2 Decoupling Regulatory Compliance from Security Outcomes

The second major empirical insight is the structural decoupling of regulatory compliance from security effectiveness. While respondents agreed that the law reduced visible open grazing ($M = 3.66$), this reduction was negatively correlated with perceived attack reduction ($\gamma = -0.134$, $p = 0.033$). Restricting open grazing successfully alters livestock mobility and reduces localized crop damage, but it does not eliminate armed security threats.

As Iortswam (2024) observed, anti-grazing prohibitions may suppress day-to-day pastoral movement, but well-armed non-state actors modify their operational tactics, shifting from opportunistic grazing frictions to planned, asymmetric night raids on rural settlements. Regulatory compliance is thus a necessary but insufficient condition for peace; treating statutory livestock control as a proxy for total security governance misdiagnoses the evolving asymmetric nature of rural armed violence.

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6.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the persistence and escalation of armed herdsmen attacks in Benue State cannot be resolved solely through statutory prohibitions or mechanical force deployments. While the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law of 2017 represents a significant attempt to regulate rural land use, statutory enforcement in the absence of procedural neutrality, institutional capacity, and stakeholder inclusion risks aggravating rural security tensions. True rural security governance requires moving beyond binary legislative debates. Statutory frameworks must be supported by transparent enforcement protocols, re-established customary dispute mechanisms, modern ranching infrastructure, hybrid security coordination, and structured pastoralist inclusion. Converting legal statutory mandate into durable human security requires an integrated governance framework that aligns regulatory authority with procedural justice and local institutional capacity.

7.0 Policy Recommendations

The findings point to three practical priorities. First, the Benue State Government should publish clear, consistent procedures for inspections, sanctions, livestock impoundment and complaints so that enforcement decisions can be reviewed. Second, security agencies should monitor verified attacks, fatalities, displacement and response times separately from compliance with grazing restrictions. Third, local authorities should support accessible farmer–herder dispute-resolution forums that include affected communities and relevant security actors.

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8.0 Limitations of the Study

i. Cross-Sectional Nature: The study relied on cross-sectional survey data representing respondent perceptions at a specific point in time, limiting causal inferences relative to longitudinal event-data tracking.

ii. Geographic Scope: Fieldwork was restricted to four LGAs in Benue State. While these represent primary conflict hotspots, caution should be exercised when generalizing findings to other Middle Belt states with differing socio-political contexts.

iii. High Displacement Context: Over 72% of respondents lived under displacement conditions, which may heighten perception sensitivity regarding security and enforcement agencies.

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