



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Carol Kerven,
Odessa Centre Ltd., United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Emmanuel Ojo,
✉ oemmanuel@vt.edu

RECEIVED 20 October 2025
REVISED 24 March 2026
ACCEPTED 25 March 2026
PUBLISHED 23 April 2026

CITATION
Ojo E, Crowder V, Moore A and Isola O
(2026) Pastoralists as peacebuilders:
lived experiences from conflict-affected
communities in northern Nigeria.
Pastoralism 16:15770.
doi: 10.3389/past.2026.15770

COPYRIGHT
© 2026 Ojo, Crowder, Moore and Isola.
This is an open-access article distributed
under the terms of the Creative
Commons Attribution License (CC BY).
The use, distribution or reproduction in
other forums is permitted, provided the
original author(s) and the copyright
owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is
cited, in accordance with accepted
academic practice. No use, distribution
or reproduction is permitted which does
not comply with these terms.

Pastoralists as peacebuilders: lived experiences from conflict-affected communities in northern Nigeria

Emmanuel Ojo^{1*}, Van Crowder¹, Austen Moore² and
Olusola Isola³

¹Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community Education, Virginia Tech, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA, United States, ²Catholic Relief Services - United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Baltimore, MD, United States, ³Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

This study explores the lived experiences of herders in Adamawa State, Nigeria, who participated in peacebuilding interventions implemented by Catholic Relief Services in response to recurrent farmer-herder conflict. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research centers herders' voices to examine how they interpret, negotiate, and internalize peacebuilding efforts within their socio-cultural and relational contexts. Data were collected through focus group discussions across Shelleng and Yola South Local Government Areas. Findings indicate that herders perceive peacebuilding not merely as the cessation of violence, but as an ongoing process of restoring dignity, gaining social recognition, and reducing the fear of exclusion. Participants emphasized community dialogues, symbolic inclusion by local leaders, and the rebuilding of intergroup trust as crucial indicators of meaningful peace. Importantly, these narratives reveal how pastoralists challenge dominant, sedentary-oriented intervention models by redefining peace as relational and embedded in everyday agrarian life. By foregrounding the agency of a historically marginalized group, this study contributes to pastoralism and peacebuilding scholarship, underscoring the need for development strategies attuned to the realities of mobile pastoralist communities and the power relations that shape their inclusion and exclusion.

KEYWORDS

communitytrust, herders, pastoralists, peacebuilding, phenomenology

Introduction

In many agrarian societies across sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture is both an economic foundation and a way of life. This is particularly true in Nigeria, where a large proportion of the population depends on agriculture and livestock production for their livelihoods, especially in rural areas where farming and pastoralism remain central to household survival (FAO, 2021). However, these vital livelihood systems have come under increasing threat due to the intensifying conflict between farmers

and herders. This conflict, driven by environmental degradation, weak governance, and changing patterns of land use, has become one of the most persistent and deadly sources of violence in the country (Blench, 2004; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014).

Historically, cooperation defined farmer–herder relations, with herders grazing livestock on post-harvest fields and farmers benefiting from the manure provided (Moritz, 2010). In recent decades, however, that harmony has eroded due to desertification, erratic rainfall, and the shrinking of grazing reserves, forcing herders southward into densely populated farming regions (Akinyemi and Olaniyan, 2017). In states such as Adamawa, these changes have triggered violent clashes, displacement, and food insecurity, threatening social cohesion and rural stability (Dimelu et al., 2017; International Crisis Group, 2018).

The broader implications are profound. Beyond economic losses, the conflict undermines long-standing intergroup relationships and disrupts essential agricultural systems. The loss of livelihoods, market access, and trust exacerbates poverty and widens ethnic and religious divides (International Crisis Group, 2018). Despite various government interventions, such as grazing reserves and anti-grazing laws, many responses have been top-down, poorly implemented, and lacked the trust of the affected communities (Ibeh and Ijioma, 2021).

In response to the escalating violence, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increasingly taken on peacebuilding roles to fill gaps left by ineffective or mistrusted government interventions. Among these, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has implemented integrated peacebuilding initiatives that embed dialogue, mediation, and trust-building within agricultural and livelihood programs (Catholic Relief Services, 2020). These interventions emphasize inclusive participation, engaging women, youth, and religious leaders, and aim to rebuild disrupted social networks while strengthening food and income systems. A more detailed description of these initiatives is provided in the [Supplementary Material](#).

However, despite the growing presence of such NGO-led efforts, there remains limited understanding of how peacebuilding interventions are actually experienced by the people they are intended to support. Much of the existing literature assesses programmatic outputs, such as the number of trainings or community meetings, rather than the lived experiences of local actors. Yet in fragile rural contexts like Shelleng and Yola South Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Adamawa State, peace and social cohesion are not only political or technical goals; they are lived realities shaped by memory, identity, gender, and daily survival strategies (Pretty, 2003; Ramsbotham et al., 2012).

This study addresses this gap by using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how herders in Shelleng and Yola South Local Government Areas (LGAs)

of Adamawa State experience, interpret, and make meaning of peacebuilding efforts led by Catholic Relief Services. As a group often portrayed primarily through the lens of insecurity and mobility, herders' voices and lived realities remain underrepresented in both policy responses and academic discourse. The research examines how herders navigate post-conflict environments, re-establish intergroup relationships, and engage with interventions aimed at fostering social cohesion and mutual trust. By centering the perspectives of pastoralist communities, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of mobility, identity, and marginalization in grassroots peacebuilding. It emphasizes that peace is not merely received but negotiated, felt, and redefined through everyday practice and shifting relational dynamics.

Farmer–herder conflict represents one of the most persistent and destabilizing crises in Nigeria's rural landscape. Historically, interactions between sedentary farming communities and nomadic pastoralists were characterized by mutual dependence: herders relied on post-harvest residues for grazing, while farmers benefited from manure deposited by livestock. Over time, however, this interdependence has increasingly deteriorated due to population pressure, agricultural expansion, and climate-induced scarcity of grazing land and water resources (Blench, 2004; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014). These pressures have intensified competition over land and mobility corridors, transforming historically cooperative relationships into sources of tension and periodic violence.

As resources become increasingly scarce, competition between the two groups has intensified, resulting in frequent clashes, displacement, and destruction of property. Climate variability has played a significant role in shaping these dynamics, pushing herders southward into settled farming territories (Abbass, 2012). These migrations are often perceived as invasions, fueling fear and tension between groups. In regions such as Adamawa State, where agriculture and livestock are interdependent, such clashes directly threaten food security, market systems, and community cohesion.

The deterioration of traditional conflict resolution structures and the rise of ethno-political narratives have further complicated the situation. The proliferation of small arms, weak local governance, and inadequate security responses allow local disputes to escalate into broader ethno-religious violence (International Crisis Group, 2018; Benjaminsen et al., 2012). Addressing farmer–herder conflict therefore requires interventions that are not only protective and immediate but also restorative and inclusive, focusing on rebuilding relationships and strengthening community-level mechanisms for cooperation.

Within this context, social cohesion has emerged as a critical foundation for sustainable peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. Social cohesion encompasses trust, belonging, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among community

members (Chan et al., 2006). In fragile settings such as Nigeria, where violence fractures communal bonds and undermines everyday cooperation, rebuilding social cohesion is essential for restoring livelihoods and reconstituting social order (Pretty, 2003). Communities lacking cohesion are more vulnerable to recurring conflict and less capable of collective problem-solving.

Efforts to restore peace must therefore go beyond top-down reforms and address the relational dimensions of recovery. Scholars such as Lederach (1997), Mac Ginty (2014) emphasize participatory, locally grounded, and emotionally resonant approaches to peacebuilding. These frameworks view peace not as a technical outcome but as a lived and relational process shaped by culture, memory, and everyday interaction. Programs that promote inclusive dialogue, collaborative livelihood activities, and leadership development are widely recognized as important for rebuilding trust and reducing intergroup tensions, particularly when they address the relational and human dimensions of recovery (Lambourne, 2004; Mercy, 2015). When such efforts also address gender exclusion, historical grievances, and power imbalances, social cohesion becomes both the pathway and the outcome of sustainable peacebuilding in agrarian and pastoral settings (Catley et al., 2013; Flintan and Eba, 2023).

In contexts where state responses are limited or inconsistent, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increasingly played a central role in facilitating localized peacebuilding initiatives. Their operational flexibility allows them to adapt to cultural contexts, build trust with local communities, and implement community-based dialogue and reconciliation processes (Goodhand, 2006). In Nigeria, organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) have implemented integrated peacebuilding programs that combine livelihood recovery, mediation, and social cohesion training to address the structural and relational dimensions of farmer–herder conflict (Catholic Relief Services, 2020; Mercy Corps, 2015).

NGO-led peacebuilding typically focuses on facilitating dialogue between farmers and herders, strengthening community leadership, and creating inclusive decision-making spaces. These interventions have reduced violence and helped rebuild intergroup trust. By promoting joint economic ventures and reviving indigenous conflict resolution systems, NGOs provide critical bridges between divided communities.

Nevertheless, a persistent gap in the literature concerns how peacebuilding interventions are experienced by those they target, especially herders in conflict-affected communities. While existing studies often measure reductions in violence or improvements in cooperation, few explore the subjective, emotional, and relational dimensions of peace. Understanding how herders internalize, interpret, and navigate peacebuilding efforts within their socio-cultural and mobility-based realities (Mohammed and Yalwa, 2018; Krätli and Toulmin, 2020) requires an approach that centers lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. Addressing this gap is

essential to designing interventions that reflect the complex identities, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of pastoralist populations. This study therefore examines how pastoralist herders in Adamawa State interpret and experience peacebuilding interventions aimed at fostering social cohesion and coexistence.

Materials and methods

Study area

This study was conducted in Shelling and Yola South Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Adamawa State, northeastern Nigeria, both significantly affected by recurrent farmer–herder conflict. Agriculture and livestock rearing are the primary livelihoods in these regions, where Fulani pastoralists and sedentary farming communities depend on shared land and water resources. Climatic variability, the shrinking of grazing reserves, and population growth have intensified competition over natural resources, resulting in periodic clashes that disrupt social and economic stability.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in collaboration with local partners, has been active in these LGAs through its Stabilization and Reconciliation (STaR) and Social Cohesion programs, which integrate livelihood recovery, mediation, and community dialogue to rebuild trust among conflict-affected groups. Pastoralists who participated in this study reside in communities where these peacebuilding initiatives are implemented, including dialogue platforms, community peace committees, and capacity-building activities designed to foster trust, communication, and collaborative problem-solving among community members. The study area therefore provides a meaningful context for examining how herders interpret and experience peacebuilding interventions aimed at restoring coexistence in mixed farming-pastoral systems. Further details on the key components of the CRS Stabilization and Reconciliation (STaR) programme are provided in [Supplementary Material S1](#).

Research design and philosophical orientation

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of pastoralist herders participating in community peacebuilding contexts. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990), making it particularly appropriate for examining how herders perceive and navigate peacebuilding processes within their socio-cultural and livelihood environments. Following the hermeneutic tradition (c), interpretation was understood as a reflexive and co-

constructed process between researcher and participants, shaped through dialogue, context, and reflective analysis.

This approach aligns with the study's central aim: to explore not merely what peacebuilding interventions entail in pastoral settings, but how they are experienced, interpreted, and given meaning by pastoralists living within conflict-affected environments.

Analytical and theoretical lenses

Two analytical frameworks informed the interpretation of participants' narratives. The Human Security Framework (UNDP, 1994), further elaborated in subsequent scholarship (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, 2007), emphasizes the protection of individuals from fear, want, and indignity, highlighting dimensions such as livelihood security, community security, and dignity. In parallel, CRS's Social Cohesion Framework emphasizes trust-building, intergroup cooperation, and collective resilience as pathways to peaceful coexistence.

These frameworks were used as interpretive lenses to help contextualize how participants described experiences of inclusion, safety, and intergroup relations within their communities. They did not serve as causal explanatory models but rather as conceptual tools for understanding how pastoralists themselves interpret social cohesion and security in everyday life.

Sampling and participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants who self-identified as herders and resided in communities where CRS-facilitated peacebuilding initiatives had been implemented. Community leaders and CRS field staff assisted in identifying individuals familiar with local conflict dynamics and community dialogue processes. Participants were drawn from pastoral communities with varying levels of exposure to CRS peacebuilding initiatives, ranging from direct participation in dialogue meetings and community activities to indirect awareness of programme efforts through broader community engagement. This variation reflects the uneven geographic reach of interventions across pastoral settlements and provides insight into how peacebuilding initiatives are interpreted differently within pastoral communities. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were informed of the purpose of the discussions before contributing their perspectives.

The study conducted nine focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 6-8 participants, across the two LGAs, yielding a total of approximately 60 participants. FGDs allowed participants to share experiences collectively, revealing relational dynamics around trust, cooperation, and perceptions of inclusion.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured FGDs conducted in Hausa or English, depending on participant preference. Discussions were held in neutral, community-based locations considered safe and accessible. Each session lasted 60–90 min and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Field notes were taken to capture group dynamics, tone, and environmental context.

Facilitators were trained in conflict sensitivity and cultural competence to ensure an atmosphere of respect and trust. Questions focused on herders' experiences of peacebuilding, perceptions of safety, and evolving intergroup relations.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed following interpretive phenomenological procedures. Transcripts were read repeatedly and coded line-by-line. A codebook was developed iteratively, combining inductive codes emerging from participants' narratives with sensitizing concepts derived from the Human Security and Social Cohesion frameworks (e.g., trust, belonging, recognition, agency, exclusion).

A second cycle of pattern coding grouped related codes into broader themes capturing shared meanings. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained reflexive memos and analytic notes to document interpretive decisions and enhance transparency. This phenomenological analysis made it possible to understand peacebuilding as an experienced, negotiated, and relational process.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

The study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for ensuring trustworthiness:

1. Credibility through triangulation across sites and member checking of emerging themes;
2. Dependability via a documented audit trail and iterative peer debriefing;
3. Confirmability through reflexive journaling that tracked the researcher's assumptions and positionality; and
4. Transferability by providing thick descriptions of the study setting and participants.

The researcher engaged in continuous reflexivity regarding positional dynamics, language use, and interpretation when working across cultural and occupational boundaries with mobile pastoralist groups.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from [Institutional Review Board name, protocol number], and permission to engage participants was granted by local authorities and CRS program leads. Informed consent (written and verbal) was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any point. All personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and digital files were stored securely on encrypted drives to protect confidentiality.

Results

Field data were collected through focus group discussions with pastoralist participants in Shelling and Yola South Local Government Areas of Adamawa State, Nigeria, two zones deeply affected by recurrent farmer-herder conflict. The analysis follows a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, examining how herders interpret and make meaning of peacebuilding interventions implemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) within their everyday lives and mobility systems. The findings are presented thematically to reflect how participants understand peace, coexistence, and social change as lived experiences within pastoral livelihoods. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on participants' interpretations of peacebuilding processes rather than evaluating the effectiveness of specific programmes. Participants' narratives are therefore presented as subjective accounts of how peacebuilding initiatives are experienced within their everyday lives.

Rather than concentrating solely on programmatic outcomes, the analysis moves beyond descriptive reporting to explore how herders experience, internalise, and embody peacebuilding within the broader dynamics of livelihood restoration, displacement, and intergroup relations. Participants' narratives illuminate peace not as a fixed endpoint but as a continuous process of rebuilding dignity, trust, and belonging amid structural marginalisation.

The findings also highlight herders' active engagement in social repair, often expressed through restraint, dialogue, and informal mediation. Their testimonies reveal a nuanced understanding of coexistence grounded in local moral economies and shared livelihood dependencies. These insights challenge dominant narratives that portray pastoralists primarily as drivers of insecurity, instead demonstrating their role as agents of relational peacebuilding within fragile rural systems.

For analytical clarity, the results are organised around three thematic areas that correspond to the study's guiding research questions:

1. Experiencing Peacebuilding: how herders encounter and interpret interventions within their communities.

2. Understanding Agency and Social Cohesion: how they view their own role in promoting intergroup trust.
3. Interpreting Inclusiveness and Recognition: how they assess participation, fairness, and belonging in peacebuilding processes.

Each theme integrates direct quotations from participants, followed by interpretive commentary that situates these insights within the broader socio-political and pastoral context of northern Nigeria. The aim is to amplify herders' voices and situate their lived experiences at the centre of peacebuilding discourse in pastoral systems.

Research question 1: how do herders experience peacebuilding interventions in their communities?

Theme 1: peace as relational transformation - "we now call each other brothers"

For many herders, peacebuilding reshaped the way they viewed farmers and their shared environment. What once was hostility evolved into cautious friendship and respect.

"Before now, we always had conflicts about trespassing farmlands ... since CRS enlightened both farmers and herders together, we don't have those conflicts anymore ... when they do, we settle them amicably amongst ourselves." - R5, Tallum

"We not only better understand our problems and have found solutions to them, we now care and support one another ... If I see a herd straying into my farmland, I would simply redirect them and report it. The owner will apologize and adjust." - R8, Tallum

These narratives reveal peace as relational, reflecting a gradual transformation from fear and suspicion to familiarity and mutual recognition. From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, these accounts illustrate how herders reinterpret formerly adversarial relationships with farmers through everyday encounters such as apology, negotiation, and mutual assistance. Peace therefore emerges not simply as the absence of conflict but as a lived process through which participants renegotiate trust and responsibility within shared landscapes.

Theme 2: peace as social visibility and inclusion - "now we are not forgotten"

A recurring interpretation of peace was being seen, acknowledged as full members of their communities after years of marginalisation.

“We attend each other’s ceremonies, create social gatherings to celebrate our community . . . religion, tribe, occupation or social status did not matter.” - R10, Tallum

“The peace training made us feel like part of the community . . . people see us differently now.” - R6, Jamali

For herders, inclusion was embodied through everyday gestures: shared meals, greetings, participation in ceremonies. Through participants’ narratives, peace is experienced as recognition, being seen and acknowledged as legitimate members of the community after years of marginalisation. From a phenomenological perspective, such gestures restore dignity and belonging in spaces where pastoralists previously felt socially invisible. Social recognition, as Fraser (2000) suggests, thus becomes a foundation for justice and parity in participation.

Theme 3: peace through shared livelihoods - “we work and eat together now”

Peace was also understood in economic terms, through cooperative livelihood projects that bridged divisions.

“CRS has done a lot . . . peacebuilding, SILC, boreholes, and roads . . . people come together, work, get paid . . . it has strengthened relationships amongst us.” - R4, Tallum

“We no longer argue at watering points or markets . . . now, we even trade together.” - R2, Ngurore

Joint economic activity became a mechanism of peace. By working side by side, herders and farmers reconstructed trust through mutual dependency in water access, markets, and seasonal trade. Participants’ accounts suggest that cooperation in livelihood activities enables peace to be experienced materially and relationally, as trust is rebuilt through shared economic survival rather than external mediation alone. In this sense, everyday labour becomes a site where coexistence is continuously negotiated.

Theme 4: uneven access and exclusion - “we’ve not seen what others are seeing”

While many experienced transformation, others expressed exclusion from programmes due to geography or communication barriers.

“We don’t know CRS . . . the programs you mentioned are not known to us at Rugage. We heard news of road repairs, water, school intervention being done in other places but not ours.” - R4, Wuro-Yanka

“When we hear of peace meetings, they are far . . . we don’t even get the message.” - R2, Wuro-Yanka

These testimonies reflect the spatial inequality of intervention reach, revealing how exclusion reinforces feelings of invisibility. For these herders, the absence of programme engagement shapes their interpretation of peacebuilding as distant and unevenly distributed. From a phenomenological standpoint, peacebuilding is experienced not only through participation but also through the lived consequences of exclusion, highlighting how geographical distance and communication barriers influence perceptions of belonging and recognition.

Theme 5: peace as everyday safety - “we move freely now”

Perhaps the most visceral indicator of peace was the return of safety in daily life, the freedom to move, trade, and graze without fear.

“Before, our children were afraid to go to the stream . . . now they go freely. Women go to the market with no fear.” - R3, Jamali

“If someone had a problem, it could lead to many deaths . . . now, with what we learned, we talk and understand each other.” - R7, Tallum

Safety was not defined by the absence of violence alone but by the predictability and freedom that make mobility possible. Participants’ narratives show how peace is embodied in everyday movement, the ability to walk, graze livestock, trade, and access markets without fear. For mobile pastoralists, peace is therefore experienced physically and spatially, through the restoration of mobility across landscapes once marked by danger.

Synthesis: peace as lived, practiced, and negotiated

Across all sites, herders interpreted peace not as a technical achievement but as a relational process, a reweaving of everyday life through apology, restraint, and shared livelihoods. Their language of peace is grounded in tangible interactions, livestock, greetings, markets, and forgiveness. These narratives reveal how pastoralists interpret peace through the ordinary practices of pastoral life, where coexistence is continually enacted and reaffirmed through daily encounters.

Herders do not passively receive peace; they practice it, negotiate it, and embody it. Through their lived experiences, peace becomes inseparable from the rhythms of pastoral life. The findings thus highlight that pastoral inclusion is central, not peripheral, to achieving sustainable coexistence in agrarian frontiers of conflict.

Research question 2: how do herders understand their role in promoting social cohesion?

Theme 1: conflict resolution as daily practice - "we talk before we act"

Herders emphasized that peacebuilding interventions gave them the confidence and moral grounding to address conflict directly through dialogue rather than retaliation.

"Now if there's a problem, we go and talk. We ask questions first. We don't carry sticks immediately. That's peace." - R3, Jamali

"We tell our young people to be patient. Even if a farmer insults you, walk away and come report. That's what we teach now." - R5, Ngurore

Conflict resolution has become a routine social practice rather than an institutional procedure. Herders understand peace as proactive communication, a learned moral discipline expressed through restraint. Participants' narratives suggest that dialogue has become an internalised response to conflict, shaping how herders interpret responsibility in moments of tension. In this sense, peace is experienced not only as the absence of violence but as the conscious decision to pause, question, and negotiate before reacting.

Theme 2: modeling restraint and leadership - "we now teach others"

Herders viewed themselves as informal leaders and moral exemplars, shaping the community's tone through behavior rather than authority.

"I used to react angrily . . . now I try to listen. Others watch me. If I'm calm, they will be calm." - R2, Tallum

"Sometimes younger herders want to fight. I gather them and say, let's talk. We've seen war. Let's try peace." - R7, Shelleng

These accounts reflect a form of embodied leadership rooted in self-control and mentorship. Participants interpret their own behavior as a signal that guides others within their peer networks. By modelling patience and restraint, herders perceive themselves as shaping the emotional climate of their communities. Social cohesion, therefore, emerges through everyday acts of moral guidance rather than through formal authority.

Theme 3: protecting communal harmony - "if there is peace, we all benefit"

Peace was perceived not as an individual possession but as a shared public good.

"If we allow fights again, nobody gains. The roads CRS gave us, the boreholes, they help all of us. We can't spoil that." - R6, Tallum

"If you settle a fight, you protect everyone . . . not just yourself. That's how we think now." - R4, Jamali

Herders equated peace with community prosperity, more access to land, water, and markets. Participants' narratives reveal how maintaining peace is understood as safeguarding shared resources and collective stability. Social cohesion is therefore experienced as a practical necessity embedded within pastoral livelihoods, where conflict threatens not only relationships but also the economic foundations of community life.

Theme 4: interfaith and interethnic bridges - "we greet and eat together"

Participants described new patterns of intergroup interaction that blurred ethnic and religious divides.

"Now I can visit a farmer's home. We greet, we talk. Before, we avoided each other. Now we're neighbors." - R1, Ngurore

"Even in marriage ceremonies, we invite each other. Our children play together now." - R8, Tallum

These small gestures, visiting, sharing meals, attending ceremonies, function as everyday rituals of cohesion that normalize coexistence across ethnic and religious boundaries. Participants interpret these interactions as signs that previously rigid divisions are becoming permeable. Through repeated social encounters, relationships that were once defined by suspicion are gradually reimagined as neighborly familiarity.

Theme 5: feeling trusted and responsible - "they listen to us now"

Many herders emphasized a shift in perception: from being viewed as security threats to being recognized as contributors to peace.

"Before, we were blamed for every problem. Now we are called to talk, to plan, to decide. That gives us power to maintain peace." - R3, Jamali

"People now see that we can help solve problems, not just cause them." - R2, Shelleng

Recognition reinforced herders' sense of moral accountability within the community. Participants' narratives indicate that being invited into dialogue and decision-making spaces reshaped how they perceive their social position, from marginalised actors to legitimate

contributors to peace. This recognition strengthens their commitment to maintaining trust and sustaining cooperative relationships.

Synthesis: herders as custodians of everyday peace

Through participants' narratives, herders perceive themselves not as passive recipients of peacebuilding but as custodians of everyday peace. Social cohesion, in their view, is practiced through restraint, dialogue, caregiving, and apology. Leadership is expressed not through formal authority but through everyday moral example within pastoral communities. These accounts reveal how participants interpret their role as sustaining coexistence through patience, mentorship, and relational responsibility. Their moral agency challenges prevailing deficit narratives about pastoralist groups, demonstrating that peace is not delivered to them but continually nurtured through daily practices of coexistence.

Research question 3: how do herders interpret the inclusiveness of peacebuilding efforts?

Theme 1: inclusion as recognition - "they now see us as part of the community"

For many herders, inclusion was not about being formally invited to workshops but about being seen, consulted, and trusted as full community members.

"Before, we were blamed for everything. But now, they invite us to meetings, hear our side. It makes us feel human again."
- R6, Jamali

"Even when there's a problem, we don't get chased away. They call us, we speak. They listen."
- R3, Tallum

Inclusion was interpreted as recognition, an acknowledgment of humanity and belonging. Participants' narratives suggest that being invited to meetings and consulted during disputes reshaped how herders understood their social identity within the community. From a phenomenological perspective, these moments of being heard and acknowledged represent lived experiences of dignity and legitimacy. Through such encounters, herders reinterpret their place in the social landscape, moving from marginal outsiders toward recognized members of the community.

Theme 2: exclusion by distance and silence - "we were not part of anything"

Some herders, particularly in remote settlements such as Wuro-Yanka, reported being unaware of or excluded from peacebuilding activities.

"We don't know CRS . . . the programs you mentioned are not known to us at Rugage. We heard news of road repairs, water, school intervention being done in other places but not ours."
- R4, Wuro-Yanka

"When we hear of peace meetings, they are far . . . we don't even get the message."
- R2, Wuro-Yanka

Their exclusion was experienced not merely as a lack of participation but as erasure, a painful reminder of historical marginalization. Participants' accounts reveal how geographic distance and communication gaps shape the lived experience of exclusion, reinforcing feelings of invisibility within broader peacebuilding efforts. For these herders, peacebuilding is interpreted less as an ongoing process and more as something happening elsewhere, beyond the boundaries of their daily lives.

Theme 3: participation through shared projects - "we work side by side"

Where inclusion did occur, it was described in practical, tangible ways. Herders equated participation with joint livelihood activities rather than formal dialogues.

"When we farm together, do SILC together, it makes us feel we are one. That's when we believe peace is real."
- R5, Tallum

"They gave us boreholes. We all use them. There is no fight. That's inclusion too."
- R2, Ngurore

Inclusion was material and experiential, embedded in shared outcomes such as water access, market cooperation, and collective work. Participants interpret these practical collaborations as tangible evidence that relationships are changing. Through everyday cooperation around resources and livelihoods, peace becomes visible and credible, experienced not as an abstract concept but as a shared condition of working and living together.

Theme 4: fragile inclusion - "we are included, but it can change quickly"

Even where inclusion was achieved, herders expressed unease about its durability. Their acceptance felt conditional, vulnerable to shifting politics or the withdrawal of external actors.

“Now, things are good . . . but what if the NGOs go? Will they still listen to us?” - R7, Jamali

“We are trying. But if something small happens, old suspicions can return.” - R3, Tallum

Inclusion was thus perceived as precarious, a fragile achievement that requires continual reinforcement through trust-building and accountability mechanisms. Participants’ reflections reveal an awareness that social acceptance remains conditional, shaped by political dynamics, community tensions, and the continued presence of external facilitators. From their perspective, peace and inclusion must be constantly nurtured to prevent the re-emergence of earlier suspicions and divisions.

Theme 5: inclusion as emotional safety - “we are no longer afraid to speak”

The deepest form of inclusion, according to participants, was psychological, feeling safe to speak and to be heard without fear of ridicule or retribution.

“Before, we kept quiet in meetings. Now we raise hands, we give opinions, even disagree . . . they don’t insult us.” - R1, Ngurore

“When they see us not as herders, but as fathers, neighbors, people with good hearts - that is peace to us.” - R6, Shelleng

This emotional inclusion represented recognition of moral worth and equality of voice. Participants’ narratives suggest that psychological safety, the freedom to speak openly without fear of ridicule or reprisal, signals a deeper transformation in community relationships. For many herders, the ability to express opinions, disagree respectfully, and participate in discussions reflects a profound shift in how they experience belonging within the community.

Synthesis: inclusion as belonging and affirmation

Herders interpret inclusion not as a procedural checkbox but as a lived transformation in how they are perceived, heard, and valued within their communities. Participants’ narratives reveal that inclusion becomes meaningful when pastoralists experience recognition, participation, and emotional safety in everyday interactions. When they are acknowledged and integrated into community life, peace becomes tangible; when they remain excluded, it reinforces longstanding experiences of marginalization and distrust.

For herders, inclusion signifies affirmation, the restoration of dignity, visibility, and moral standing within shared social spaces. Their experiences suggest that

peacebuilding achieves authenticity only when pastoralists are not merely invited to participate but are recognized as co-authors of community life, shaping decisions, relationships, and shared futures.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of herders in Shelleng and Yola South Local Government Areas of Adamawa State, Nigeria, focusing on how they interpreted and embodied peacebuilding interventions led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). Guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, it examined how peace was experienced in relation to livelihoods, social inclusion, and moral transformation. Interpreting these findings through the lenses of the Human Security Framework and social cohesion theory highlights how peacebuilding in pastoral contexts extends beyond the prevention of violence to include livelihood security, community trust, and the restoration of social relationships. The findings reframe pastoralists not as passive recipients of externally driven interventions but as moral agents who negotiate peace through daily practices of care, restraint, and cooperation. The discussion below situates these insights within broader theoretical and policy debates on relational peace, inclusion, and pastoral livelihoods.

Relational peace

Herders in this study described peace as a deeply relational and experiential condition, grounded in apology, trust, and mutual recognition rather than institutional or legal markers of stability. Their reflections, such as “we now call each other brothers,” illustrate what Lederach (1997) terms the moral imagination of peace, where transformation begins through empathy and relationship-building. This aligns with Mac Ginty’s (2014) concept of everyday peace, emphasizing the informal interactions and subtle gestures that sustain coexistence amid fragility.

In the context of farmer–herder conflict, such relational rebuilding is critical. Decades of mistrust and retaliatory cycles have fragmented communities (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014). The herders’ emphasis on everyday reconciliation shows that peace cannot be reduced to ceasefires or policy frameworks; it must be felt, practiced, and performed through shared routines. As Chan et al. (2006) argue, social cohesion rests as much on emotional proximity and mutual obligation as on institutional capacity. These everyday acts of reconciliation illustrate how trust and mutual recognition are gradually rebuilt through routine interaction. From a social cohesion perspective, such practices reflect the rebuilding of horizontal relationships between groups and the strengthening of shared norms that enable communities to manage conflict collectively.

Herders as everyday peacebuilders

A major contribution of this study is the reframing of herders from conflict actors to moral agents and informal peacebuilders. Their daily acts of restraint, patience, and mentorship, such as “walking away from insult” or “teaching youth to be calm,” reflect a moral economy of coexistence. These findings affirm Mac Ginty’s (2021) argument that everyday peace emerges from below, often enacted by marginalized actors through micro-gestures of negotiation.

This challenges dominant securitized narratives that cast herders primarily as perpetrators or victims of violence (Benjaminsen et al., 2009). Instead, they appear as custodians of moral order and community wellbeing. Through their own agency, herders shape the texture of coexistence, offering a form of vernacular peacebuilding that complements, rather than opposes, formal interventions. This insight has significant implications for policy: it suggests that pastoral communities should not merely be targeted as beneficiaries of peacebuilding, but recognized as partners and co-producers of it.

Lived inclusion

Herders interpreted inclusion not as formal participation but as recognition and emotional safety, being greeted, consulted, and heard. This mirrors feminist and decolonial critiques of participation (Cornwall, 2008), which stress that inclusion must be experienced as dignity, not documentation. Their statements, “They now see us as part of the community,” reflect the affective dimension of belonging that underpins durable peace.

At the same time, the study revealed spatial and institutional inequalities in access to peacebuilding initiatives. Communities such as Wuro-Yanka were excluded entirely, revealing how geography and mobility intersect to shape marginalization. This mirrors Richards’ (2005) critique of uneven NGO reach, where logistical or administrative limitations create “zones of invisibility.” As Krätli and Toulmin (2020) note, most peacebuilding models assume sedentary populations, rendering pastoral mobility an obstacle rather than an adaptive livelihood strategy. Such bias perpetuates both physical and epistemic exclusion, herders are left unseen and unheard in policy frameworks designed for fixed settlements. Recognizing mobility as a productive, not disruptive, social reality is essential for inclusive peacebuilding.

Livelihood and peacebuilding

For herders, peace was inseparable from their livelihood systems and mobility practices. Shared grazing, freedom of

movement, and secure access to markets and water points were all cited as evidence of peace. This confirms findings by Benjaminsen et al. (2012) that livelihood security and social stability are mutually reinforcing.

Peace, therefore, is not an abstract condition but a lived and negotiated process, continuously enacted through mobility, cooperation, and ecological stewardship. Viewed through the Human Security Framework, these experiences highlight how community security and livelihood security are deeply intertwined in pastoral contexts, where access to grazing land, water, and markets directly shapes perceptions of safety and stability. In this sense, the CRS peacebuilding interventions were not simply reducing violence, they were rebuilding the moral and material foundations of pastoral life.

Theoretical and practical contributions

This study contributes to the emerging scholarship on phenomenological peacebuilding, which emphasizes subjectivity, affect, and meaning in post-conflict recovery (Millar, 2016). By examining pastoralists’ lived experiences through the Human Security and social cohesion frameworks, the findings demonstrate how peacebuilding processes are interpreted at the intersection of livelihood security, social recognition, and relational trust. By centering herders’ narratives, the study demonstrates that peace must be understood through lived experience, how people interpret recognition, belonging, and dignity within their everyday environments.

It also expands inclusion theory by showing that participation extends beyond gender or ethnicity to include occupational and mobility-based identities. Herders’ sense of belonging was shaped not by formal roles but by how their livelihoods and knowledge were respected within community processes. This insight invites a reorientation of agricultural and peacebuilding policy toward recognizing pastoralists as legitimate social actors whose ecological and moral labor contributes directly to stability.

Ultimately, the herders’ voices in this study reaffirm that peacebuilding becomes meaningful only when it touches identity, alters relationships, and restores belonging. Sustainable peace in pastoral regions therefore requires approaches that recognize pastoralists not only as stakeholders in conflict management but as central actors in the production of social cohesion and human security within rural landscapes.

Policy implications

Translating these insights into policy requires designing inclusive, mobility-sensitive peacebuilding frameworks. Programs should:

- Integrate pastoral associations and women's cooperatives into community dialogue and local governance.
- Extend peacebuilding infrastructure, such as boreholes, grazing corridors, and SILC groups, to transhumant routes.
- Train local extension agents and mediators in participatory methods that emphasize recognition and emotional safety.
- Embed social cohesion indicators (trust, inclusion, cooperation) into agricultural development metrics.

By institutionalizing pastoral participation, peacebuilding can evolve from a temporary project to a durable system of coexistence rooted in justice, equity, and shared livelihoods.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, participants represented pastoral communities with varying levels of engagement with CRS peacebuilding initiatives. While some participants had direct involvement in dialogue platforms, livelihood activities, or community peace processes, others described more indirect exposure or limited awareness of programme activities. In this study, participants' narratives were analysed collectively rather than as analytically distinct groups based on their level of engagement with specific interventions. While this approach aligns with the hermeneutic phenomenological aim of exploring shared meanings and lived experiences, it limits the ability to examine how differing levels of programme exposure may shape participants' interpretations of peacebuilding processes. As a result, the analysis cannot determine how varying degrees of programme exposure may have shaped participants' interpretations of peacebuilding processes. The findings should therefore be understood as reflecting shared experiential narratives of peace and coexistence within the broader community context rather than evidence of differential programme effects.

Second, although the study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the use of focus group discussions may have limited the depth of individual experiential narratives that are typically associated with phenomenological inquiry. Group dynamics can shape how experiences are expressed, and the interpretations presented here reflect the researcher's analytical engagement with shared accounts rather than exhaustive exploration of individual lifeworlds. These limitations highlight the value of future research using longitudinal or in-depth individual interviews to further explore pastoralist experiences of peacebuilding.

Concluding reflection

This discussion underscores that peace among Nigeria's pastoralist communities is not simply the outcome of external

intervention but the reconstruction of moral, social, and ecological relationships. Herders in Adamawa State described peace as something lived and negotiated daily through care, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Their narratives suggest that peacebuilding in agrarian conflict zones must begin with the communities who already practice these forms of coexistence in their everyday lives.

Drawing on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study explored how herders interpret peace, inclusion, and their evolving social roles within conflict-affected rural environments. Participants described peace not through institutional frameworks or project indicators, but through relational transformation, emotional safety, and the restoration of dignity within community life. Inclusion, in their accounts, was experienced through recognition, dialogue, and participation in shared livelihoods rather than through formal representation in governance structures.

At the same time, the findings revealed uneven access to peacebuilding interventions. While many herders reported increased trust and cooperation with neighboring farming communities, others, particularly those in geographically peripheral or mobile settlements, remained excluded from intervention activities. These patterns highlight how spatial marginalization and pastoral mobility continue to shape access to peacebuilding opportunities.

These insights carry important implications for peacebuilding policy and practice. First, interventions should move beyond technical outputs and engage with the relational and experiential dimensions of peace, supporting everyday practices of dialogue, cooperation, and mutual care that already exist within pastoral communities. Second, inclusion frameworks should extend beyond gender or ethnic representation to recognize occupational and mobility-based identities, particularly those of transhumant pastoralists. Third, peacebuilding programs must address the structural biases that often privilege sedentary populations by adopting mobility-responsive approaches such as decentralized dialogue platforms, community-based mediators, and outreach mechanisms that reach pastoral settlements along transhumance routes.

More broadly, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on phenomenological approaches to peacebuilding by demonstrating how lived experience and meaning-making shape how communities interpret inclusion, belonging, and security in post-conflict settings. By centering pastoralist voices, the findings challenge dominant narratives that portray herders primarily as drivers of insecurity and instead highlight their role as active agents in rebuilding social cohesion.

Future research could further examine pastoral peacebuilding dynamics through longitudinal and comparative studies across pastoral regions, particularly exploring how mobility, generational change, and shifting ecological pressures influence experiences of inclusion and coexistence. Recognizing and amplifying the everyday practices through which pastoral communities cultivate dialogue, restraint, and cooperation offers an important pathway toward more inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding in agrarian frontiers of conflict.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical restrictions related to participant privacy and consent. The data contain sensitive qualitative information from participants in conflict-affected communities and cannot be shared beyond the approved research team. Summarized or anonymized excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and with institutional ethics approval. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to EO, oemmanuel@vt.edu.

Ethics statement

This study was reviewed by the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), which determined that it did not constitute research involving human subjects under U.S. federal regulations (IRB Determination Number: 24-1136). Although formal IRB approval was not required, ethical protocols were rigorously followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent (written or verbal, depending on participant preference and literacy) was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Focus group discussions were conducted in safe, neutral settings to ensure participant comfort. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms, and particular attention was paid to conflict sensitivity to minimize any potential risk to participants in these fragile contexts.

Author contributions

EO conceived and designed the study, conducted fieldwork and data analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. VC and AM

provided conceptual guidance, supervised the research design, and contributed to the interpretation of findings. OI assisted in data validation, contextual analysis, and literature review. All authors critically revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was not received for this work and/or its publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontierspartnerships.org/articles/10.3389/past.2026.15770/full#supplementary-material>

References

- Abbass, I. M. (2012). No retreat no surrender: Conflict for survival between Fulani pastoralists and farmers in northern Nigeria. *Euro. Sci. J.* 8 (1), 331–346.
- Akinyemi, T. E., and Olaniyan, A. (2017). Nigeria: climate war. Migratory adaptation and farmer-herder conflicts. *Confl. Stud. Q.* 21, 3–21. doi:10.24193/csq.21.1
- Benjaminsen, T. A., Alinon, K., Buhaug, H., and Buseth, J. T. (2009). Does climate change drive land-use conflicts in the Sahel? *J. Peace Res.* 46 (6), 673–690. doi:10.1177/0022343309343566
- Benjaminsen, T. A., Alinon, K., Buhaug, H., and Buseth, J. T. (2012). Does climate change drive land-use conflicts in the Sahel? *J. Peace Res.* 49 (1), 97–111. doi:10.1177/0022343311427343
- Blench, R. (2004). *Natural resource conflicts in north-central Nigeria*. London: Mandarax.
- Catholic Relief Services (2020). *STaR project annual report*. CRS Nigeria.
- Catley, A., Lind, J., and Scoones, I. (2013). Pastoralism and development in Africa: dynamic change at the margins. *Routledge*. doi:10.4324/9780203105979
- Chan, J., To, H.-P., and Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 75 (2), 273–302. doi:10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1
- Cornwall, A. (2008). Unpacking ‘participation’: models, meanings and practices. *Community Dev. J.* 43 (3), 269–283. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsn010
- Dimelu, M. U., Salifu, D. E., Enwelu, A. I., and Igbokwe, E. M. (2017). Challenges of herdsmanfarmers conflict in livestock production in Nigeria: Experience of pastoralists in Kogi State, Nigeria. *Afr. J. Agric. Res.* 12 (8), 642–650. doi:10.5897/AJAR2016.11740
- FAO (2021). “Nigeria at a glance,” in *FAO in Nigeria, food and agriculture organization of the united nations*. Available online at: <http://www.fao.org/nigeria/fao-in-nigeria/nigeria-at-a-glance/en/> (Accessed February 2, 2024).
- Flintan, F., and Eba, B. (2004). Participatory rangeland management: A vehicle for pastoralist women’s empowerment in Ethiopia. *Pastoralism* 13, 23. doi:10.1186/s13570-023-00286-4
- Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review* 3, 107–120.

- Goodhand, J. (2006). *Aiding peace? The role of NGOs in armed conflict*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ibeh, C. E., and Ijioma, E. C. (2021). *An interrogation of government interventions policies on farmers-herders violence in Nigeria*. A Publication of the Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution Faculty of Social Sciences National Open University of Nigeria, 170.
- International Crisis Group (2018). Stopping Nigeria's spiralling farmer-herder violence (Africa Report No. 262). Available online at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigeria-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence> (Accessed February 2, 2024).
- Krätli, S., and Toulmin, C. (2020). Farmer-herder conflict in sub-Saharan Africa? *International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)*. Available online at: <https://pubs.iied.org/10208IIED>.
- Lambourne, W. (2004). Post-conflict peacebuilding: Meeting human needs for justice and reconciliation. *Peace, Conflict and Development* 4, 1–24.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington, DC: USIP.
- Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2014). Everyday peace: bottom-Up and local agency in conflict-affected societies. *Secur. Dialogue* 45 (6), 548–564. doi:10.1177/0967010614550899
- Mac Ginty, R. (2021). *Everyday peace: how so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oso/9780197563397.001.0001
- Mercy, C. (2015). The economic costs of conflict and the benefits of peace in Nigeria's middle belt. Available online at: <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Mercy%20Corps%20Nigeria%20State%20Costs%20of%20Conflict%20Policy%20Brief%20July%202015.pdf> (Accessed February 2, 2024).
- Millar, G. (2016). *An ethnographic approach to peacebuilding: understanding local experiences in transitional states*. Routledge.
- Mohammed, G. D., and Yalwa, L. M. (2018). The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in post-conflict peace building in North-Eastern Nigeria. *Arts Soc. Sci. J.* 9, 395. doi:10.4172/2151-6200.1000395
- Moritz, M. (2010). Understanding herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa: outline of a processual approach. *Human Organ.* 69 (2), 138–148. doi:10.17730/humo.69.2.aq85k02453w83363
- Okoli, A. C., and Atelhe, G. A. (2014). Nomads against natives: a political ecology of herder/farmer conflicts in Nasarawa state, Nigeria. *Am. Int. J. Contemp. Res.* 4 (2), 76–88.
- Pretty, J. (2003). Social capital and the collective management of resources. *Science* 302 (5652), 1912–1914. doi:10.1126/science.1090847
- Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., and Miall, H. (2011). *Contemporary conflict resolution*. (3rd edn.) Polity Press.
- Richards, P. (2005). *No peace, no war: the anthropology of contemporary armed conflicts*. James Currey.
- Tadjbakhsh, S., and Chenoy, A. M. (2007). *Human security: concepts and implications*. (1st edn.) Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203965955
- UNDP (1994). *Human development report 1994: new dimensions of human security*. Oxford University Press.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.