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Bridging Competency Gaps in Agricultural Extension for Sustainable Farmer-Herder Conflict Management in Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The recurrent farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has become a major threat to food security, livelihoods, and rural stability. This study examined the competency gaps among agricultural extension agents in managing such conflicts, focusing on Benue State. The study explored the social, economic, and psychological dimensions of the crisis. Data collected from extension agents were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the competencies required, and competencies possessed. Findings revealed that dialogue facilitation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80), negotiation ($\bar{x}$ = 3.70), and programme planning and evaluation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.62) were the most developed competencies, while empathy ($\bar{x}$ = 3.34), economic analysis ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32), and abstract thinking ($\bar{x}$ = 3.28) were least developed. The study concludes that although agents possess essential technical competencies, significant gaps remain in soft skills necessary for conflict mediation and peacebuilding. It recommends targeted training, institutional reforms, and curriculum improvement to strengthen extension agents' capacity for sustainable farmer-herder conflict management.

Keywords: Agricultural extension, Competency gaps, Farmer-herder conflict, Conflict management.

INTRODUCTION

Farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, especially in the Middle Belt (including Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kaduna, Taraba, and Adamawa States), have become a serious threat to rural livelihoods, food security, and stability. These conflicts are driven by multiple factors: competition over land that is declining in productivity, climate change, population pressure, and also political, ethnic, and religious tensions. Human Rights Watch. (2017, December 5); African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) (2021, August 11).Recent reports indicate that since 2019, more than 2.2 million people have been displaced due to farmer-herder clashes in Middle Belt states such as Benue, Plateau, and Nasarawa Business Day (2025, March 31).Also, between 2016-2018, Amnesty International estimates that about 3,600 people lost their lives in such conflicts, with many more displaced Al Jazeera News Agencies (2018, December 17). In addition, a study of the Benue Valley (which includes Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, Adamawa, Kaduna States) reported over 60,000 deaths and over 300,000 displacements from 2001 to 2018 (Al Jazeera 2018, December 17).

Government policy responses have included the creation of grazing reserves, anti-open grazing laws, stock route/demarcation, and more recently, the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP). While these are well-intended, implementation has been uneven, and political, social and community resistance often undermines effectiveness (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) 2021).

Agricultural extension agents who interact closely with farmers and herders hold the potential as mediators of peace. But their roles in conflict management require specific competencies such as dialogue facilitation, negotiation, cultural mediation and trust building that are often missing or weak (Engineering and US Institute of Peace, 2012). This gap limits their contribution to more sustainable conflict resolution and agricultural development outcomes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Hypothesis

There is no significant relationship between the conflict management competencies possessed by agricultural extension agents and their participation in farmer-herder conflict management.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Benue State, located in North Central Nigeria. The state covers about 30,782 km² with a population of approximately 6.14 million and a density of199.5 persons/km². Major ethnic groups include Tiv, Idoma, and Igede, alongside minority groups such as Etulo, Igbo, Jukun, and Iyon. Geographically, Benue lies between longitudes 7°47′-10°00′E and latitudes 6°20′-8°00′N. It shares boundaries with Nasarawa, Taraba, Kogi, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Cross River States, and with Cameroon to the southeast. The state comprises 23 Local Government Areas and derives its name from River Benue (Adamu & Ben, 2017). Benue experiences two distinct seasons: the rainy season (April-October) and the dry season (November-March). Vegetation ranges from rainforest and oil palm belt in the south and west to Guinea savannah in the north and east. Annual rainfall averages 1,500 mm, with temperatures ranging from 21°C-31°C in the rainy season and 16°C-37°C in the dry season, and relative humidity around 75%. The state is known for crop and livestock farming, producing yams, rice, cassava, soybeans, citrus fruits, and rearing cattle, goats, pigs, and poultry.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing both open- and closed-ended questions organized into three sections: respondents' socioeconomic characteristics, competencies required and competencies possessed for farmer-herder conflict management. In addition, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one in Katsina-Ala (6 extension agents) and another in Gbajimba (8 extension agents) using an unstructured guide. A few interviews were also conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Competencies required by agricultural extension agents for farmer-herder conflict management

The results presented in Table 1 show that dialogue facilitation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.78) were ranked as the most important competency required by agricultural extension agents for effective farmer-herder conflict management. This underscores the central role of dialogue management in fostering understanding among farmers, herders, and other stakeholders. Effective dialogue management enables agents to exchange ideas with farmers and herders and mediate discussions, thereby facilitating peaceful resolution of disputes.

Negotiation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.74) were ranked second, indicating the value of an agent's ability to engage tactfully in negotiations with individuals and groups. This competence enhances collaboration and mutual trust between conflicting parties. Cultural mediation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.72) ranked third, reflecting the importance respondents placed on cultural methods as a sustainable means of reducing conflict. Conversely, critical thinking skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32),

economic analysis skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32), empathy skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.24), and creativity skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.18) were rated lowest among the required competencies. Despite their relatively low ranking, these soft skills remain essential for effective conflict navigation, decision-making, and relationship building. The lower emphasis on these competencies may stem from limited awareness among extension agents of their relevance to conflict resolution.

These findings align with Chikaire *et al*. (2018), who emphasized that agricultural extension agents require both job-specific and soft skills including communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and time management to effectively provide advisory services and mediate crisis during service delivery. Overall, the results highlight that while extension agents recognize the importance of dialogue facilitation and negotiation skills, there remains a need for greater emphasis on developing analytical, emotional, and creative skills that enhance holistic conflict management capacities.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to competencies required by agricultural extension agents for farmer-herder conflict management

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	Rank
1	Dialogue mediation skills	39(78%)	11(22%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.78*	1st
2	Negotiation skills	37(74%)	13(26%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.74*	2nd
3	Cultural mediation skills	37(74%)	12(24%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	3.72*	3rd
4	Problem-solving skills	35(75%)	15(30%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.70*	4th
5	Communication skills	34(68%)	16(32%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.68*	5th
6	Open discussion skills	37(74%)	9(18%)	3(6%)	1(2%)	3.64*	6th
7	Programme planning and evaluation skills	32(64%)	18(26%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.64*	6th
8	Teaching skills	31(62%)	19(38%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.62*	8th
9	Technology skills	30(60%)	20(40%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.60*	9th
10	Problem-solving skills	30(60%)	20(40%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.60*	9th
11	Time management skills	31(62%)	17(34%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.58*	11th
12	Abstract thinking skills	29(58%)	19(38%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.54*	12th
13	Needs assessment skills	27(54%)	23(46%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.54*	12th
14	Patience skills	31(62%)	15(30%)	4(8%)	0(0%)	3.54*	12th
15	Guidance skill	31(62%)	15(30%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	3.50*	15th
16	Active listening skills	28(56%)	20(40%)	0(0%)	2(4%)	3.48*	16th
17	Interpersonal skills	26(52%)	21(42%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.46*	17th
18	Diversity and cultural competence skills	24%(48%)	25(50%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	3.46*	17th
19	Focus skills	21(42%)	26(52%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.368*	19th
20	Critical thinking skills	20(40%)	28(56%)	0(0%)	2(4%)	3.32*	20th
21	Economics skills	23(46%)	23(46%)	1(2%)	3(6%)	3.32*	20th
22	Empathy skills	22(44%)	22(44%)	2(4%)	4(8%)	3.24*	22nd
23	Creativity skills	20(40%)	23(46%)	3(6%)	4(8%)	3.18*	23rd

*mean values above the critical value of 2.5
Source: Field data, 2025

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Competencies possessed by agricultural extension agents for farmer-herder conflict management

The results in Table 2 reveal that dialogue facilitation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80) were ranked as the most critical competency possessed by agricultural extension agents in the study area. This indicates that most agents have developed strong dialogue facilitation abilities through their professional experience, which are essential for conflict resolution, and fostering understanding among farmers, herders, and other stakeholders.

Negotiation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.70) and programme planning and evaluation skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.62) were ranked second and third, respectively, suggesting that these competencies are also well-developed among extension personnel. Such skills are vital for managing community relations, implementing interventions, and evaluating conflict management programs.

Conversely, empathy skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.34), economic analysis skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.32), and abstract thinking skills ($\bar{x}$ = 3.28) were ranked lowest, implying that while these competencies exist, they are less developed among agents. These skills are often acquired progressively through experience in conflict mediation and field engagement, underscoring the importance of continuous capacity building.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to competencies possessed for farmer-herder conflict management

S/N	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	Rank
1	Dialogue facilitation skills	40(80%)	10(20%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.80*	1st
2	Negotiation skills	37(74%)	11(22%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.70*	2nd
3	Program planning and evaluation skills:	33(66%)	15(30%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.62*	3rd
4	Communication skills:	30(60%)	20(40%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.60*	4th
5	Trust building skills	24(48%)	28(56%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.60*	4th
6	Critical thinking skills	30(60%)	19(38%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	3.58*	6th
7	Focus skills	30(60%)	19(38%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	3.58*	6th
8	Patience skills	33(66%)	14(24%)	1(2%)	2(4%)	3.56*	8th
9	Needs assessment skills:	30(60%)	18(36%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.56*	8th
10	Program planning and evaluation skills	30(60%)	18(36%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.56*	8th
11	Problem-solving skills	27(54%)	23(46%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	3.54*	11th
12	Teaching skills	30(60%)	18(36%)	0(0%)	2(4%)	3.52*	12th
13	Open discussion	28(56%)	20(40%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.52*	12th

	skills						
14	Interpersonal skills:	28 (562%)	19(38%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.50*	14th
15	Technology skills	31(62%)	14(24%)	4(8%)	1(2%)	3.50*	14th
16	Diversity and cultural competence skills:	(54%)	21(42%)	2(4%)	0(0%)	3.50*	14th
17	Guidance counselling skills	33(66%)	12(42%)	2(4%)	3(6%)	3.50*	14th
18	Creativity skills:	24(48%)	25(50%)	1(2%)	0(0%)	3.46*	18th
19	Persuasion skills:	27(54%)	19(38%)	4(8%)	0(0%)	3.46*	18th
20	Time management skills	24(48%)	23(46%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.42*	20th
21	Empathy skills	20(40%)	28(56%)	1(2%)	1(2%)	3.34*	21st
22	Economics skills	19(38%)	28(56%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.32*	22nd
23	Abstract thinking skills	17(34%)	30(60%)	3(6%)	0(0%)	3.28*	23rd

*mean values above the critical value of 2.5
Source: Field data, 2025

These findings align with those of Aregaw *et al.* (2023), who reported that extension agents possess various competencies for managing farmer-herder conflicts, including communication, programme implementation, ICT, education, and evaluation skills. Similarly, Donaldson and Vaughan (2022) identified 15 core competency domains among extension professionals such as communication, leadership, programme planning, technology use, and problem-solving which correspond closely with the competencies observed in this study.

Overall, the results suggest that while extension agents possess key operational competencies, particularly in communication and planning, there is still a notable gap in soft skills such as empathy, abstract reasoning, and economic analysis that are equally important for holistic conflict management.

CONCLUSION

Agricultural extension agents play a crucial role in managing these conflicts, which negatively impact extension service delivery. Although agents possess and apply some conflict management competencies, there is no significant relationship between these competencies and their level of participation in conflict management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enforce the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranch Establishment Law (2017) established by the state to address the major causes of conflict such as crop destruction, land and water disputes, and free grazing.

2. Educate farmers, herders, and rural communities on the grave consequences of farmer-herder conflict.
3. Redesign government policies and programmes to effectively engage extension agents in conflict management.
4. Curriculum reform: agricultural extension curricula should include soft skills, conflict mediation and facilitation skills.
5. Training and in-service workshops: should be organized on modules like empathy, negotiation, and conflict mediation.

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