



FROM NOMADISM TO RANCHING: DRIVERS, IMPACTS AND POLICY PATHWAYS FOR OPEN GRAZING IN NIGERIA

Oluwayemisi Bukola **OMOSUYI PhD**

Department of Geography,

Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Email: yemipaul2004@yahoo.com

Tel: +2348034986122

Abstract

Open grazing in Nigeria has evolved into a multidimensional policy, environmental, and security challenge, with implications for food security, land degradation, and farmer–herder conflict. Open grazing practices have come under intense criticism as they threaten various aspects of national development in contemporary times. This paper examines the drivers sustaining open grazing, the ecological and socio-economic problems associated with it, and policy pathways for transitioning toward a more sustainable livestock system. The literature indicates that open grazing persists because of climate stress, population pressure, weak land governance, and the socio-economic constraints facing pastoralist households. Recent mitigation efforts have shifted from coercive state-level bans toward a federally coordinated transition strategy centred on rehabilitating gazetted grazing reserves into Renewed Hope Livestock Villages. The strategy emphasises improved livestock productivity, breed enhancement, infrastructure provision, and social institutional support rather than an abrupt prohibition of pastoral mobility. Sustainable mitigation requires alignment between pastoralist livelihoods, inclusive governance, and practical livestock management reforms.

Keywords: Open grazing; farmer–herder conflict; ranching; pastoralism; land governance; Nigeria



Introduction

For many years, cattle pastoralism in Nigeria has represented both an age-old livelihood system and a mode of production increasingly under pressure from ecological change and land-use competition. Open grazing, which allows livestock to roam freely across communal or unfenced areas, has long underpinned pastoral livelihoods in the Sahel and savannah regions. However, relations between pastoralists and sedentary farmers have become a major security and governance concern in Nigeria (Ogbonnaya et al., 2024)

This shift is linked to several structural pressures: rapid population growth, conversion of grazing corridors to farmland, climate-related desertification, and weak land governance that has left many grazing reserves degraded or encroached upon (Azomani & Egwunatum, 2026; Ogbonnaya et al., 2024). The resulting conflict has contributed to deaths, displacement, and politicised narratives of ethnic and religious persecution that threaten national cohesion (Achem, 2025).

In response, several state governments have enacted anti-open grazing laws aimed at encouraging a transition from open grazing to ranching. Benue State's 2017 anti-open grazing law is a prominent example of this approach. However, evidence suggests that while the law may have reduced crop destruction in some areas, it has also heightened distrust between pastoralists and farming communities (Achem, 2025;). The government has developed an alternate plan through the newly formed Ministry of Livestock Development (2024), and this involves a phased process of moving from open grazing practices to ranching, with an emphasis on restoring the 417 grazing reserves to "Renewed Hope Livestock Villages" (Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, 2025; Maiha, 2025c).

This paper addresses three questions: Why does open grazing persist despite its unsustainability? What ecological, socio-economic, and security challenges does it generate? What policy measures could support a sustainable livestock sector? To answer these questions, the paper synthesises relevant policy documents and scholarly literature.

Causes of Open Grazing Persistence

Ecological and Demographic Drivers

The continued practice of open grazing within the country would not be comprehensible without considering the ecological setting which previously facilitated the logic of pastoral mobility. The Sahel/Savannah zones are known to have great variability both in space and time with regard to the occurrence of rain and pasture. For years, the practice of transhumance facilitated this through its ability to utilize such variability effectively (Iro, 1994). However, two intersecting trends have transformed this adaptive strategy into a source of conflict.

First, desertification caused by climate change is on the rise in northern Nigeria. Evidence indicates that the Sahara Desert continues to advance toward the south at different speeds within the range of 5 km and 48 km annually, thereby causing the desertification of 3,150 square kilometers of land annually (Azomani & Egwunatum, 2026). Consequently, pastoralists who depend on these lands for dry season pasture have been compelled to move southwards from the northern region, leading to conflicts with sedentary farmers.

Secondly, the increasing pressure on land has been fueled by population growth. With Nigeria's fast-growing population comes the destruction of grazing reserves and livestock trails to create farmland. In a country that has over 273 grazing reserves encompassing over 4.5 million hectares, many of these grazing lands have been overtaken and even left behind altogether (Ogbonnaya et al., 2024). There is a true tragedy of the commons where none of the stakeholders own any form of tenure and all strive for resource access.

Governance and Policy Failures

The governance dimension of the open grazing crisis is equally significant. The Nigerian land administration regime comprises an inconsistent jurisdiction system wherein land utilization comes within the purview of state government policy, whereas livestock policy-making is at the federal level. Inconsistency in policies has emerged due to the fact that although state governments have established policies against open grazing, there is a lack of federal support that

could make the implementation process successful, whereas federal policies such as RUGA have been opposed by southern states due to land and security issues (Achem, 2025; Ogbonnaya et al., 2024).

Historical policy interventions have also failed due to design errors that ignored pastoralist knowledge and constraints. As Iro (1994) documented, ranching schemes in the 1960s and 1970s collapsed because they were based on the assumption that pastoralists would abandon their traditional systems without provision of adequate support for transition. The same pattern has repeated: policies that mandate settlement without providing the capital, training, and infrastructure necessary for viable ranching operations are destined to fail (Achem, 2025).

Socioeconomic Constraints on Pastoralists

The pastoralist community is under structural constraints that perpetuate open grazing. Difficulties are clearly stated by Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) President Othman Ngelzarma: “Most pastoralists are herders and small-scale farmers who cannot meet the financial requirements of modern ranches; their kids have no opportunities for education due to their nomadic lifestyle; and their indigenous breeds have very little capacity; an indigenous cow weighs 300kg with an average of three litres of milk per day, whereas exogenous breeds weigh one thousand kg with fifty litres of milk production per day” (Ngelzarma, 2025, cited in Maiha, 2025d). In such cases open grazing is not a cultural choice freely made, but an economic necessity for households without alternative routes to livelihood security.

Problems Generated by Open Grazing

Environmental Degradation

Uncontrolled grazing brings about environmental degradation which may be difficult to repair. Research findings indicate that uncontrolled grazing results in more than a third (35%) of vegetation loss in Nigeria. Uncontrolled grazing is responsible for 35% more vegetation loss than deforestation and farming, which lead to 30% and 27% vegetation loss, respectively (Azomani & Egwunatum, 2026). Overgrazing results in vegetation degradation, soil erosion, soil baking, and lack of vegetation regeneration. Another important consequence associated with uncontrolled grazing is biodiversity loss. There are over 5,000 species of flora and over 22,090 species of fauna found in Nigeria. However, uncontrolled grazing poses threats to the usefulness, aesthetics, and biological value of such richness (Azomani & Egwunatum, 2026). Uncontrolled grazing breaches the Precautionary Principle set by the Convention on Biological Diversity which Nigeria is signatory to, due to lack of regulations regarding uncontrolled grazing at the federal level (Azomani & Egwunatum, 2026).

Farmer-Herder Violence and Insecurity

The most obvious and political implication of open grazing is the growing farmer-herder conflicts. This conflict has cost thousands of lives and forced about two million individuals to flee their homes, leading to a perception of religious or ethnic persecution that endangers Nigeria’s federal identity (Achem, 2025). Even as the mass media and global bodies view such conflicts through the prism of religion, with the US declaring Nigeria as “a Country of Particular Concern” with respect to religious freedom, sociologists reveal another picture. “Conflict over access to land, the practice of herding and poor governance intersects with religious divides, yet is driven by other factors like scarcity, climate stress, and poor governance,” writes Achem (2025, p. 2).

The instrumentalization of religious identity in land disputes has dangerous consequences. In light of the framing of farmer-herder conflict in terms of “Christians under attack” and “Muslim herders as invaders,” attempts at regulation take the form of symbols of exclusion rather than tools for resolution (Achem, 2025). This has been especially true in the case of the Benue State anti-open grazing law, seen as discriminatory on one side and protective on the other (Achem, 2025).



Economic Inefficiency

From an economic perspective, open grazing represents a suboptimal utilization of Nigeria's livestock potential. The sector currently contributes approximately 32 billion to the economy, but the Ministry of Livestock Development has set a target of 74 billion within five years through modernization (Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, 2025; Maiha, 2025d). Current productivity metrics are strikingly low: Nigeria imports 65% of the milk consumed locally, and per capita consumption stands at 8.7 liters of milk, 9kg of meat, and 45 eggs annually far below global averages (Maiha, 2025d).

The inefficiency stems directly from open grazing practices. Low-yield cattle breeds, exposure to disease and theft, lack of access to veterinary services, and the opportunity costs of mobility (including education forgone for pastoralist children) all constrain productivity. As Ngelzarma (2025, cited in Maiha, 2025d) notes, "Instead of 100 cows producing a combined 300 liters of milk, six exotic cows can give the same amount." Transitioning to settled ranching would allow for genetic improvement, controlled breeding, disease management, and value-added processing all impossible under current conditions (Maiha, 2025b; Ngelzarma, 2025).

Mitigation Strategies

Federal Transition Framework

The creation of the Ministry of Livestock Development in 2024 marks an important change in policy. Previous policies ranged from forceful bans to inadequate livestock ranching initiatives. However, the existing strategy is anchored on a gradual and incentives-driven transition process. As stated by Minister Idi Mukhtar Maiha, "the government is taking a systematic approach of phasing out open grazing to ranching" instead of implementing an outright ban in the entire country (Maiha, 2025a, para. 3).

Key to the strategy is the rehabilitation of 417 grazing reserves into "Renewed Hope Livestock Villages. The revitalized wildlife reserves will be the economic hubs with better grazing lands, animal hospitals, irrigation facilities, schools, health facilities, biogas facilities, milk collection centers, and meat processing factories (Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, 2025; Maiha, 2025c). The National Livestock Growth Acceleration Strategy (NL-GAS) is the plan that will help boost the livestock sector from 32 billion to 74 billion in five years by improving genetics and investing along the value chains with private sector collaboration (Maiha, 2025d).

State-Level Innovations and Challenges

There has been a huge difference in the state-level policies adopted by different states in Nigeria, which offer vital lessons for the formulation of the national policy. The most coercive method has been that of Benue State, which came up with an anti-open grazing law in 2017 where open grazing was banned in the region. However, studies have found out that "the problem was with the expectation of the law, which expected herders, many of whom were nomadic, landless and low capital to invest in ranches with minimal assistance," which made its implementation difficult due to conflicts over federal-state jurisdiction (Achem, 2025, p. 4).

Other states are trying the method of partnerships, as the states of Adamawa, Nasarawa, Katsina, Ekiti, Kano, and Kaduna are ready to work together with the federal government for the transition where they can allot land to the pastoralists who would ranch their cattle (Maiha, 2025b).

Ranching as the Definitive Solution

The federal government has identified ranching as the definitive modern solution. Minister Maiha has articulated the rationale clearly: "Ranching provides security of tenure, allows for investment in feed and water, animal health, and fosters a settled, prosperous community, thereby eliminating the root causes of farmer-herder conflicts" (Maiha, 2025d, para. 6). Critically, the ranching model being promoted is not the capital-intensive feedlot system of industrialized countries, but a graduated approach that accommodates pastoralists' current asset constraints while providing pathways to intensification (Maiha, 2025b; Ngelzarma, 2025).

Key components of the ranching transition include: genetic improvement programs using artificial insemination to introduce high-yield dairy breeds; education and skill development for pastoralist children and adults; cooperative formation and financial literacy training; and security provisions that isolate criminal elements from legitimate herders (Maiha, 2025d; Ngelzarma, 2025). Eight pasture crops are registered for the first time in about half a century by the ministry, but also increase the number of vaccine production per year in NVRI Vom from 120 million to 850 million (Federal Ministry of Livestock Development, 2025).

Inclusive Governance and Narrative Framing

In addition to technical measures, effective mitigation necessitates correcting past problems of poor governance and biased narratives that have fueled the conflicts. As per Achem (2025), there are four key recommendations: inclusive policy-making that involves pastoralists in the process; closer collaboration between the federal and state governments in enforcing measures; and avoiding framing land disputes in terms of religious warfare.

The international dimension matters as well. Nigeria's conflict situations being framed externally as religious persecution through, for instance, the US government's threats to use military force to "stop the killing of Christians" is likely to exacerbate the internal division and reduce the possibility of compromise (Achem, 2025). The mitigation approaches employed need to be sensitive to the local conditions.

Conclusion

Open grazing in Nigeria has become unsustainable because of climate pressure, demographic change, weak land governance, and the rising costs of conflict. The Federal Government's phased transition toward ranching, including the rehabilitation of grazing reserves into livestock villages, offers a more viable policy direction than coercive bans, but its success will depend on financing, institutional coordination, and genuine pastoralist participation. Without these conditions, the reforms may reproduce the weaknesses of earlier livestock policies. Future research should assess pilot ranching models, tenure arrangements, and the socio-economic effects of transition at state level.

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