

BORROMEAN CONFLICT MODEL:  
ANALYSING AND RESOLVING HERDERS-FARMERS CONFLICT IN  
NIGERIA'S MIDDLE-BELT REGION

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Herders-farmers conflict is one of the longest running and most active conflicts in Nigeria's restive Middle-Belt region. Given its protraction and the failure of previous interventions to bring about resolution, this paper explores how an assets-based approach such as dovetailing can bring about resolution and transformation. After a brief explanation of the Borromeam conflict model as a construct of three interacting rings, the Nigerian conflict is described as driven by three interfacing forces—economic, structural, and sociocultural. First, environmental changes led to land scarcity, creating economic uncertainty for both groups and competition between them. Second, previously existing indigeneship policy which limits access of herders—typically settlers—to land, created a sense of relative deprivation. Third, identity differences interfaced with scarcity and structurally imposed inequality, leading to confrontation and counteraction. However, guided by the philosophy that underpins the Borromeam Conflict Model, the paper asserts that a key to resolution and relationship transformation lies in an approach that dovetails the resources of both groups to satisfy their respective needs jointly.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this research paper, I explore the potential of dovetailing the resources of settler herders and indigenous farmers to resolve the conflict between both groups in Nigeria's Middle-Belt region and elsewhere. The paper is founded

on three related assumptions. First, our ability to successfully intervene in complex conflict environments is determined by whether or not the strategy employed flows from an assessment of the “actors, issues and dynamics” of the particular conflict.<sup>1</sup> Second, the way resolution is pursued and the eventual outcome achieved is conditioned by how the conflict is understood and the accuracy of this understanding.<sup>2</sup> Third, because violent conflicts result from a complex interaction of factors, our understanding of conflict eruption is best served by an “ecological framework” which demonstrates how several forces interface to produce a particular conflict environment.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, to adequately capture the complex mix of forces that drive the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria, I developed the Borromean Conflict Model (BCM). The BCM model is derived from Buddhist Borromean Rings (BBR), a work of art which comprises three equal sized rings that intermingle and depict interconnectedness or strength in unity. Despite the apparent connectedness of the three rings, the unity between them is dismantled when one of the rings falls apart. The dismantling of the rings also implies the erosion of strength.<sup>4</sup> Thus, borrowing the notion of interconnectedness from the BBR, the BCM model explains the herders-farmers conflict as driven by an interplay of structural, sociocultural, and economic factors. Borrowing the notion of strength, the BCM model explains how these forces interface to produce a complex conflict milieu that has resulted in decades of conflict. And just as dismantling the rings reduces the potency of the relationship between them, addressing one of the factors of the herders-farmers conflict has the potential to de-escalate and eventually lead to a resolution. This philosophy finds empirical support in Kenneth Cloke’s conflict resolution experience which teaches that in each issue lies the opportunity to transform an entire conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, I argue that targeting the economic ring would reduce the potency of the other factors, thereby increasing the prospects for peace. And the approach to employ in targeting the economic factor of the conflict is dovetailing available resources in a way that transforms the relationship of herders and farmers. As processes of dovetailing persist, relational empathy is likely to emerge, thereby changing perceptions about structurally imposed inequalities and negative notions of the Other. However, through community-engaged peacebuilding, we can also target the economic factor of the conflict, and in the process of doing so, demobilize the sociocultural component and create a milieu which increases the prospects that structural

changes will be effective when they are implemented.

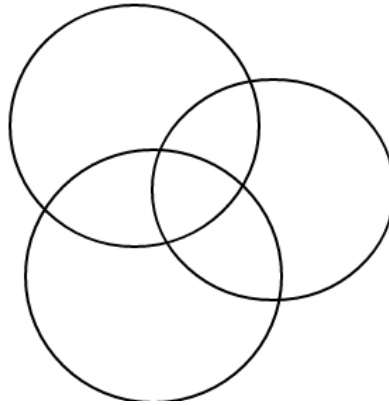
The paper is made up of three sections. In the first, I employ the BCM model in mapping the complex conflict environment. In the second, I demonstrate that targeting the economic factor through dovetailing existing resources can lead to resolution and relationship transformation. In the third, I show how the same outcomes can be achieved through a community-engaged approach to peace.

## THE BORROMEAN CONFLICT MODEL EXPLAINED

The holistic nature of peace and conflict has long been the subject of scholarly interest and inquiry. Susan Nan provides a review of such works that adopt a systems view of conflict and of its resolution.<sup>6</sup> Louise Diamond views the environment of conflict as systemic in nature, such that changes in one aspect alters the overall conflict dynamics. In the same vein, she sees intervention in the initial stages of transforming a conflict as affecting the dynamic of subsequent phases.<sup>7</sup> Dennis Sandole's metaphor of pillars also describes conflict as systemic in nature. Sandole considers the conflict, its causes and conditions, and intervention as three different, but inseparable pillars. Similar to the notion of interconnection which underlies Diamond's theorizing, Sandole contends that changes in any of the first two pillars would ultimately necessitate a shift in the third—intervention.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Kenneth Cloke, conflict is seen as holographic in nature, explaining why intervention in one area can catalyze transformation of the entire conflict.<sup>9</sup> These ideas are made clearer in the work of Abdulaziz Said, in which it is assumed that each part of a phenomenon carries in it the entirety of the phenomenon's existence.<sup>10</sup>

The BCM model is situated within the above body of literature that treats both the causes and conditions of conflict, and the processes of conflict resolution, as interconnected. The Model provides a framework for analyzing and intervening in the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria's Middle-Belt. It is also potentially useful for the same purposes in other theatres of herders-farmers conflict, especially where the conflict is driven by structural, sociocultural, and economic forces, with the understanding that the third factor is the immediate driver or what Lisa Schirch refers to as the centre of gravity.<sup>11</sup> As noted above, the underlying philosophy of the Model is derived from the Buddhist Borromeo Rings.

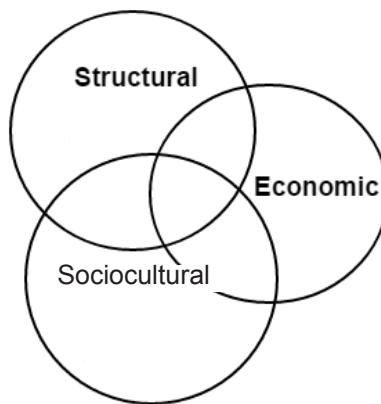
Figure 1: The Buddhist Borromeo Rings Demonstrating Interconnection



Source: “Borromean Rings,” accessed November 23, 2016, <http://www.ancient-symbols.com/symbols-directory/borromean-rings.html>.

As shown in Figure 1, BBR consists of three interconnected rings. The interconnection is such that no two rings can stay connected without being intertwined with a third ring. In terms of the BCM model and its application to herders-farmers conflict in the Middle Belt, each of the rings represents the structural, sociocultural, and economic drivers of the conflict. This is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Image Demonstrating the Interconnectedness of the Conflict Drivers

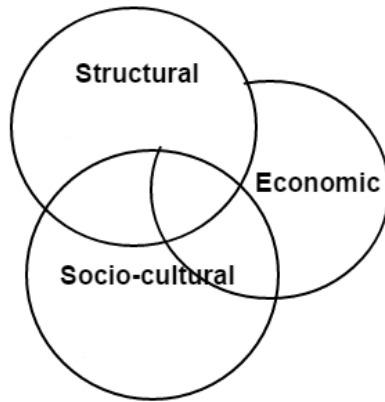


The structural dimension of the conflict environment is explained by state policy which benefits one group to the exclusion of the other. In colonial Nigeria, the herders found themselves among the group of the privileged. However, post-colonial politics has led to a loss of privilege for herders, while the opposite is the case for the region's farmers. The social-cultural aspect is that both groups belong to different ethnic and religious groups. The economic basis can be explained by the scarcity of land, which is a vital resource to both herders and farmers. The interconnection of these factors as depicted in Figure 2 also represents the complexity of the conflict. The complexity derives from the fact that each factor of the conflict contains elements of the other two drivers. In other words, the whole conflict ecology is contained in each of the three factors. During colonial rule, state policy (structural) favoured the herders, who are ethnic Fulanis and predominantly Muslims (sociocultural), and whose occupation is dependent on land which is now scarce (economic).

In post-independence Nigeria, the farmers in the Middle Belt are favoured by state policy, are non-Fulanis and mostly Christians, and are involved in an occupation which is also land dependent. The individual factors on their own do not explain the emergence of the conflict, and without the interface, it is unlikely that conflict will arise. Figure 2 illustrates this interface, showing how one part contains the elements of the whole. For example, if we examine the nature of the structural ring, we will find socio-cultural and economic elements. State policy is affecting identity groups differently, hence is perceived as producing differential occupational outcomes for these groups. If we carry out a similar x-ray of the sociocultural and economic factors individually, the same interconnection will be observed.

Given that each factor of the conflict contains the elements of the other two factors, it follows that if one dimension is addressed, an opening for the transformation of the entire conflict is created. To varying degrees, this idea is supported by the works of Kenneth Cloke and Abdulaziz Said as discussed above. In terms of the BCM model, the opening for transformation arises when the economic factor is addressed. Figure 3 provides a pictorial illustration of such opening.

Figure. 3: Image Demonstrating the Demobilization of other Conflict Drivers through the Unbinding of the Economic Factor



The underlying philosophy of the Buddhist Borromean Rings also provides a basis for this conclusion. Because no two of the BBR rings can stay linked without the connection of the third, disentangling the economic ring provides the opportunity for transforming the current conflict. This is so because it is the interplay of the factors that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, not the individual forces. As part of the herders-farmers conflict in the Middle Belt, it is my belief that the economic dimension, being the immediate driver of the conflict, holds the key to transformation. To be sure, the resolution of the economic basis alone does not automatically amount to transformation of the whole conflict. It only provides an opening for demobilizing the other factors. Ultimately, the application of the BCM model and the determination of which aspect of a conflict is the most viable route to transforming the whole should be determined by the characteristics of the conflict's unique ecology.

In the subsequent sections, the Borromean Conflict Model is used to analyze the ecology and propose an intervention in the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria's Middle-Belt region.

## EXPLAINING THE CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF THE CONFLICT

At the root of the conflict are structural, sociocultural, and economic forces that interface in complex ways. To unpack the environment of the conflict, the BCM model combines the theory of protracted social conflicts by

Edward Azar and John Burton, Karina Korostelina's 4-C model of identity conflict dynamics, and Celia Cook-Hoffman's theorizing about the impact of sociocultural characteristics in conflict settings. As noted by Burton,<sup>12</sup> when human needs such as security and personal development are left unsatisfied, conflict is likely to strike. The inevitability of conflict in such situations derives from the belief that such needs are non-negotiable. The idea of non-negotiability also explains why traditional settlement methods, such as interest-based negotiations, seldom lead to sustainable resolution.<sup>13</sup> Burton's contention is as true for the herders-farmers situation as for any other. In the Sahelian region, changes in environmental conditions created land and water scarcity.<sup>14</sup> Note that both resources are indispensable to herders and farmers. Thus, environmental insecurity created economic uncertainty for herders and farmers who both depend on these resources to sustain their livelihoods.

These resources are so important to pastoralists to the extent that trekking routes are chosen based on expectations of easy access to water, rangeland, and cheap crop residues from farmers.<sup>15</sup> However, finding cheap crop residues are not always a given, especially in the face of dwindling resources. Because farmers are not able to maintain soil fertility with the manure from the livestock which they rear on their lands, they too rely on crop residues for improved soil conditions. They either allow crop residues to decompose and boost soil nutrients, or sell residues to herders at a high cost in order to be able to purchase organic fertilizers.<sup>16</sup> The movement of herders through other routes exacerbates the situation of farmers, as dung supply becomes reduced.

The sense of despair which economic insecurity brings about for pastoralists is accentuated by the feeling of systematic oppression arising from their settler status. Here, Edward Azar's theorizing presents a useful way to understand how the appearance of structural imbalance enables the festering of the conflict. As Azar notes, when the structure of power is dominated by one group, and if this imbalance in relationship to the state produces disproportionate benefits, then conflict is likely to arise, and if it does, will be protracted.<sup>17</sup> The obvious privileging of indigenous farmers and discrimination against settler herders in land allocation under Nigeria's indigeneship policy creates little confidence among herders that state institutions can be unbiased arbiters.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when disputes arise, herders are most likely to resort to self-help. In this way, the actions of the state create the conditions

that make conflicts likely to occur, and that also undermine its ability to moderate intergroup competition as the legitimacy of its institutions becomes eroded.

The above handicap of the state is an important factor in explaining the escalation of competition between herders and farmers over scarce resources and the outbreak of violent confrontation. Devoid of legitimacy among herders, state institutions lose the capacity to moderate inter-group competition, and a shift to violent confrontation—as in Korostelina’s model of conflict dynamics—becomes more likely.<sup>19</sup> Korostelina’s 4-Cs conflict model encompasses comparison (a situation where the relative assessment of in-group and out-group leads to the underestimation of the economic and social position of the in-group and perception of relative deprivation); competition (when conflict of interests over issues such as land, water, or other properties arise between groups of different status within a community); confrontation (when the in-group mobilizes to violently engage the out-group in pursuance of in-group interests); and counteraction (which signifies the willingness and eagerness to defend one’s own group in situations of real or perceived threat).<sup>20</sup>

The history of relations between the Fulani herders and settler communities, especially in the Middle Belt region, fits all four phases of the 4C model. However, given the focus of the section on the causes of the conflict, only the first two levels—comparison and competition—are to be considered. It is within these phases that perceived incompatibility of values, goals, or interests exists.<sup>21</sup> The forces behind the initial comparison produce a particular perception of “otherness” to the extent that when scarcity occurs, the incompatibility of interests becomes a natural expectation. Thus, the belief of non-negotiability interfaces with the perception of incompatibility to produce intractable conflict.

The colonial and post-colonial governments in Nigeria both shaped the relations between herders and farmers and, through their actions, helped frame the perception of one group about the other. During colonial rule, the northern Fulanis, most of whom are pastoralists, attained privileged status in government.<sup>22</sup> However, after independence, and especially since the return to civil rule in 1999, the group’s political clout has plummeted, resulting in a reversal of status for Nigeria’s Fulani pastoralists.<sup>23</sup> The indigeneship policy, which privileges indigenes over settlers, has further exacerbated the Fulanis’ loss of fortune since the policy took effect in the mid-1970s. As nomads, the



Fulanis' occupation is dependent on the degree to which host communities are willing to have them settle and gain access to land. Unfortunately, the indigeneship policy hinders Fulani access to land as they are, more often than not, settlers in areas where they reside.<sup>24</sup> Changes in land distribution laws in the late 1970s made it easier for indigenous farmers to acquire land through state and local governments, while the access of Fulani herders became more constrained due to their status as settlers.<sup>25</sup>

In some cases, the settler Fulanis have to secure land use permits from the indigenous ethnic groups.<sup>26</sup> The cumulative effect of all of this is that, while ethnic minorities in the Middle Belt perceived the Fulanis as being favoured by colonial policies, the Fulanis now see the scales tilted in favour of these minorities on account of the indigeneship policy, and the indigene-settler dichotomy which it engenders. Resulting from the apparent imbalance in the structure of resource distribution is the creation of the feeling of relative deprivation. The emergent environment is one where competition over scarce resources, such as land and water, easily escalates into full-blown confrontation. Thus, while increased population density and the resulting competition over land resources may be intermediate factors in explaining specific outbreaks of violence,<sup>27</sup> factors like structurally imposed inequality lie in the roots of such conflicts.<sup>28</sup>

The above analysis of the role of the interface between the feeling of relative deprivation and land scarcity in herders-farmers conflict finds credence in Richard Rubenstein's contention that the interface of resource scarcity with relative deprivation can lead a group to take collective action against the perceived masterminds of their exclusion.<sup>29</sup> The condition of limited access to land (or artificial scarcity) produced the perception of deprivation among settler herders. Subsequently, environmental changes led to natural scarcity of land, thus, exacerbating the situation of herders. Thus, it is the interface of artificial and natural scarcity of land that ultimately leads herders to act violently. The only complication in applying Rubenstein's contention here is that it leaves unanswered why the violence is targeted at indigenous farmers, and not institutions of the state—i.e., the real masterminds of deprivation. The next paragraphs attempt to account for the apparent disjuncture.

Although significant, the structural and economic underpinnings of herders-farmers conflict do not portray the whole gamut of forces that drive the wedge between both groups in Nigeria. The sociocultural differences between both groups add another useful dimension to understanding the

conflict. As is often acknowledged, sociocultural differences between groups do not suggest the inevitability of conflict. However, it is safe to say that when such differences interface with the feeling of relative deprivation and competition over scarce resources, conflict is more likely to occur. When a particular interaction undermines the self-image of a group whose members share certain characteristics in common, identity issues that can lead to conflict are stirred up.<sup>30</sup> The outbreak of conflict due to an undermined self-image is driven by the feeling that such identity need is non-negotiable, and that any concession will lead to a loss of face.<sup>31</sup> How is this relevant to the discussion here?

The conflict's structural dimension has been explained in terms of inequalities produced by the indigeneship policy; economically, resource scarcity has led to competition, and the perception of structural bias has influenced confrontation. The conflict environment is made more complex because farmers and herders are of different identity groups. Thus, we have one identity group feeling that state power is exercised in favour of a different identity group(s) with whom they are in competition for scarce resources. In Nigeria, the migrating herders are predominantly, if not exclusively, Fulani by ethnicity and have seen their fortunes diminish since the demise of colonial rule. The herders are northerners and constitute the majority in the region, meaning that they are also predominantly of the Islamic faith. On the other hand, most of the farmers encountered by herders belong to indigenous minority ethnic groups in the Middle Belt and other southern areas, many of whom are Christians and have privileged access to resources under extant indigeneship laws.

These sociocultural differences between both groups cannot be ignored if we are to gain a nuanced and accurate understanding of the forces that are behind the confrontation and counteraction that have defined herders-farmers relations for decades. So, it is not only an economic issue when Fulani herdsmen cannot gain access to land resources after enjoying favouritism under colonial rule. Their status as a privileged ethnic group has also come under attack through structurally imposed inequality. This attack is likely to challenge their perception of self, thus leading to a confrontational response, as Korostelina contends.<sup>32</sup> The same goes for farmers of the various indigenous minority groups. Although the desire to protect their livelihood may create the eagerness to fight back (counteraction)<sup>33</sup>, this is only one aspect of the motivation. The feeling of privileged access to land which

indigeneship laws have bestowed on them may be seen as the real targets in herders' violent confrontation. So, for them, counteraction might also be a play for group status. The eagerness to retaliate may also be borne out of the desire to maintain the status quo by ensuring that herders' confrontation neither undermines "in-group" status nor enhances the posture of the "out-group."

The question which arises at this juncture is: if the conflict is this complex, how can resolution be pursued? The answer lies in a simple approach which aids the groups to co-create the means to satisfy their occupational needs, creating relational empathy on the way, thereby changing existing perceptions and transforming their relationship. Such intervention is possible in the light of the fact that there are usually years of lull in fighting. In such periods, the intensity of the conflict ranges from low to moderate. Therefore, the existence of an opportunity for constructive interaction whenever there is a lull in fighting, is a plausible expectation.

#### DEMobilizing THE STRUCTURAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL FORCES THROUGH THE UNBINDING OF THE ECONOMIC RING

We can pursue conflict resolution through one of the following two ways or both. One recommendation comes from community-engaged peacebuilding approaches which advise that our analyses of the conflict be based on the meaning which parties make of it.<sup>34</sup> Another option is to employ relevant social science knowledge to get at the root of the conflict.<sup>35</sup> As an asset-based approach to peace, community-engaged approaches use available community knowledge, experience, skills, and other resources at a community's disposal to transform a destructive relationship into a constructive one.<sup>36</sup> Knowing the goals of conflicting parties enhances our understanding of the type of conflict and how its resolution can be pursued.<sup>37</sup> Community-engaged research is one way by which we can discover the goals of warring groups, and conflict resolution practitioners and governments should strive to explore this approach. The use of relevant social science knowledge, in combination with the history of relationship between conflicting parties, is also a useful means of mapping the environment of a conflict.

The previous section was based on the above assumption, and the discussions here are founded on the same premise. As noted earlier, using the Borromeo Conflict Model, we can resolve seemingly complex conflicts

by demobilizing the immediate driver, which in this case, is economic. If economic, then we can assume that the goal of herders is a future in which their livestock have access to sufficient feeds, while farmers are desirous of optimum yields every harvest season. Corrupting community-engaged peacebuilding, I draw on the resources and knowledge of both herders and farmers to advance a collaborative approach to resolution. It is true that in history lie tales of injustice and hurt.<sup>38</sup> Previous episodes of conflict may be handed down to younger generations through tales of elders.<sup>39</sup> For varied reasons, witnesses of past relationships may choose to remember only the stories of hurt and pain, thereby reinforcing the existing sense of victimhood.<sup>40</sup> But in the same memory, stories of peaceful relationships are buried and can be resurrected; some of these are documented and can be retrieved. Thus, I look into the history of interaction between herders and farmers to identify resources that can serve as mechanisms of transformation. I do so by asking the following question: how did herders and farmers seek the satisfaction of their respective needs in the past?

The history of relations between both groups shows a sort of symbiosis in the process of needs satisfaction.<sup>41</sup> Before land scarcity created tension between herders and farmers, the latter sustained land fertility and were guaranteed of optimum yields by having the livestock of herders graze on their fields before each planting season.<sup>42</sup> Another account reports the same exchange slightly differently. Hoffman and Mohammed note a direct exchange of crop residue for cow dung. The former ensured that the settler herders had sufficient feeds for their livestock, while the latter guaranteed steady supply of manure to indigenous farmers.<sup>43</sup> According to Moritz, the relationship between both groups grew sour as population and commodity production growth rates increased the need for more farming fields, meaning less land was available for grazing.<sup>44</sup> Bear in mind that the indigeneship policy inadvertently makes access to land easier for farmers than herders. Does the increase in population growth and commodity production make the previously existing symbiotic relationship less viable now than it was in the past?

Putting on the hat of a peace worker, I argue that land scarcity does not fundamentally undermine the ability of herders and farmers to continue to exchange what they have but do not need, for what they lack and are desperate to have. In other words, land scarcity only created desperation and led to comparison and competition, and later, confrontation and counteraction.<sup>45</sup>

In proposing an approach to transforming the conflict between both groups, I consider adjustments to the symbiotic exchanges mentioned earlier, taking into account the nature of the respective occupations. The scarcity of land is unlikely to be a problem for Fulani herders, as long as they have access to food and water for their livestock. One way to ensure this is to map and demarcate trekking routes close to farmlands, and farmers can leave their crop residues along the trekking paths. The steady flow of pastoralists through the trekking routes will ensure that when the farmers drop off residues beside their farmland, they are able to collect cow dung to enrich soil nutrients.

The system described above can help minimize fierce competition between both groups. Within the above exchange system lies the key to eliminating negative perceptions of the Other. If herders and farmers are assisted by non-governmental organizations (or some other bodies perceived as fair and unbiased) in designing the exact mode of the exchange system, relational empathy is likely to arise. The emergence of relational empathy is not on account of third party involvement, but the facilitated collaboration which creates a system that meets not their individual needs separately, but their collective needs jointly.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the process of co-creating the system and the actual exchange can facilitate the development of relational empathy. And if the exchange system is sustained over a reasonable period of time, relational empathy will be strengthened. If this happens, then the unbinding of the economic ring would have provided the groundwork for demobilizing the structural and sociocultural aspects of the conflict.

It is uncommon for conflicts to be based entirely on either objective or subjective factors. Conflicts are most often than not a combination of both.<sup>47</sup> Scarcity may produce conflict between groups that require the same resources for personal development and economic security. However, the conditions which give rise to conflict also include such factors as “misperceptions and unwitting commitments.”<sup>48</sup> Ingroup members may develop an opinion on the motives of the outgroup and relate with them on the basis of the emergent belief. And the outgroup, through their actions, may inadvertently reinforce formed notions of their otherness. Unsurprisingly, such subjective elements of a conflict are the harder nuts to crack, because they are largely perceptual. However, the task of cracking such nuts is made easier when the objective aspects are addressed, as is achieved through the dismantling of the economic element of the herders-farmers conflict. The exchange system restores some stability to the livelihoods of herders and

farmers but it also strengthens relational empathy. This, in turn, is required for changing negative perceptions of the Other. As farmers and herders work collaboratively, they would become reoriented about themselves. Previously held assumptions about the otherness of the Other will change. The first opportunity for change exists within the facilitated collaboration, as each group listens to the story of the other.

As stories about the past and the envisaged future are shared, similarities between needs may become obvious.<sup>49</sup> The process of designing the actual form of the exchange system may lead both groups to activate knowledge of how the system was employed in the past. The memory recovery which is likely to occur will lead to the realization that the objective of both groups is to be secured economically. The process of memory recovery and sharing will also demonstrate that their economic interests are not mutually exclusive. In other words, gains for herders do not amount to loss for farmers. This is a realistic expectation, given that herders do not need as much land as farmers do. And despite farmers' need of more land, not all of its produce are of direct benefit to their economic progress. The realization of the members of both groups that their goals are compatible is likely to create an environment amenable to the emergence of relational empathy. Then, the emergent relational empathy is strengthened through the designed exchange system, which is founded on a collaborative spirit as well. These processes can enable both farmers and herders to see themselves as having similar interests, and that these are distinct from those of political leaders who occupy positions of authority and institute skewed policies.

#### SIMULTANEOUSLY UNBINDING THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL DRIVERS THROUGH THE PRIVILEGING OF ASSETS

In the alternative, we do not have to corrupt the assumptions that underlie community-engaged approaches in pursuing resolution. We can simply adopt one. Still relying on the BCM model's assumption on resolving complex conflicts, this section demonstrates that by directly engaging the pastoral and farming communities, hidden knowledge, experiences, and skills can be uncovered to create a need-satisfying system, while simultaneously transforming destructive relationships. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides an appropriate design for uncovering such resources and designing such a system. The proposal of an intervention based on AI is informed by theory

and history.

Theoretically, the contact hypothesis suggests that when groups in conflict are encouraged to come together and dialogue about their future, new perceptions of the Other are likely to emerge, thereby fostering new relationships.<sup>50</sup> The nature of this conflict calls for the co-creation of needs satisfying practices; and the proximity of both groups to each other require that existing relationships are transformed. Based on these, AI provides an appropriate framework for intervention, especially so because it is founded on the notion that since the outcome of any AI programme is conditioned by the relational quality of its process, the “inquiry” must be collaborative.<sup>51</sup> In other words, while theory shows the efficacy of contact in transforming conflict, and the nature of the herders-farmers conflict calls for a collaboratively designed solution, collaboration is part of the essence of Appreciative Inquiry. Because it is also theoretically proven that contact’s transformational quality is contingent upon equality of status among interacting participants,<sup>52</sup> Circle values such as sharing and inclusivity can be invoked as guarantors of equality; the former value implores participants to equitably share power over the creation of outcomes, while the latter calls for the respect and incorporation of the views of everyone.<sup>53</sup>

Like the Circle, Appreciative Inquiry is an asset-based approach to peacebuilding. But, unlike the former, which proceeds from making sense of dysfunctionalities, AI exclusively focuses on creating the desired future by building on existing strengths of a community.<sup>54</sup> This provides an extra incentive to apply AI to the herders-farmers conflict. As revealed in the previous section, although the history of relationship between herders and farmers in Nigeria’s Middle-Belt region indicates profound strife, it also shows intriguing cordiality. The existence of a collaborative system which satisfied the respective needs of herders and farmers in the past points to the possibility that there are other practices which could be developed to meet the needs of both groups on a more sustainable basis. Appreciative Inquiry provides a design which makes it possible to uncover such systems.

If it is agreed that Appreciative Inquiry is an appropriate community-engaged approach for resolving the conflict based on theoretical and historical evidence, the next unresolved question is: how can its process lead to the simultaneous unbinding of the economic and sociocultural rings? Based on the foregoing discussion, applying AI to the herders-farmers conflict would require a three-phased process. In the first phase, where each



group meets separately, the objective will be to stimulate memory recovery by asking questions which direct people to think about the past. Such questions will seek to motivate participants to talk about their knowledge of past practices and systems through which their occupational needs were satisfied. Such knowledge may be based on personal experiences or tales of elders, as is common in African communal settings. An example of such positive questioning is: "how was the need to replenish soil fertility satisfied in your community in the past?" The same question can be modified and directed at the herders as follows: "in the past, how did herders obtain sufficient feeds for their cattle?"

Through the nature of questioning and in the course of uncovering knowledge of how their needs were satisfied in the past, participants will come to the realization that the process is a forward-looking one. This way, at the point when both groups meet jointly, they would be able to view themselves more as co-inventors than as adversaries. The second phase, which follows the separate gathering format involves the thematic threading together of all shared knowledge by participants. Here, the Circle value of inclusivity will ensure that everyone's contribution is included. The outcome of the first two meetings, referred to as statements of ideal possibilities in the AI process,<sup>55</sup> will constitute the working resources for the third phase. In other words, the ideal opportunities constitute the raw materials for unbinding the economic and sociocultural forces of the conflict. The ideal possibilities will be re-presented in the third phase, and the authors of specific ideas/knowledge will elaborate on their propositions for the benefit of participants from the other group.

When ideas of certain participants from both groups begin to intersect, it is possible that such individuals would become identified with the practices they introduced, rather than just being settler herdsmen or indigenous farmers. At this point, re-categorization or change in perceptions of the otherness of the Other is likely to occur. After every participant becomes familiar with all the ideal possibilities, and related practices and systems are stitched together, the focus of this phase will shift towards prioritizing practices and adopting a particular system(s) based on consensus. This is the last stage of the AI process.<sup>56</sup> Because of the Circle principles of sharing and inclusivity, it is almost entirely certain that if a system is adopted, it will be one which incorporates initiatives from both groups. If this would be the case, then the future satisfaction of their respective needs would be



guaranteed through collaborative effort. And because it is likely to involve some form of exchange, the emergent system also provides the basis for “contact” to be continuous. In this way, the opportunity for the further development of relational empathy would be created, rather than just being a one-off experience.

To be sure, while interactive problem-solving and community-engaged peacebuilding have the capacity to restore stability and peace to the relationship between herders and farmers, policy changes will be needed to produce long-lasting or durable peace. Changes may entail repealing or amending the indigeneship policy, so that everyone can feel a sense of belonging in their own country, irrespective of their ancestral home or state of origin.

## CONCLUSION

The complexity of the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria’s Middle-Belt calls for a nuanced understanding of the environment of the conflict. As stated, economic uncertainty, policy induced divisions, and sociocultural differences make up the ecology of the conflict. However, we cannot gain a comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape the conflict unless we pay attention to the interface between them. The Borromean Conflict Model provides a framework for understanding this interface. The Model demonstrates the complexity of the conflict by showing that each of the causal factors embody elements of the others. It shows that the economic factor of the conflict cannot be understood independently of the structural determinant and sociocultural forces. For example, environmental changes caused land shortage, but Nigeria’s indigeneship policy (structural) ensured that settler herders were affected more by land scarcity than indigenous farmers. And herders and farmers, whose experiences of land scarcity are different, also do not belong to the same sociocultural groups, thus creating a feeling of relative deprivation.

The BCM Model, which explains the complexity of the conflict environment, also offers a strategy of intervention that targets the immediate cause of herders-farmers conflict in a way that can potentially reduce the potency of the remaining causal factors. I have argued that structural imbalance or sociocultural differences alone will hardly lead to conflict, except if the satisfaction of human needs is threatened or perceived as such. In other words, institutional changes will seldom lead to resolution if the primary cause of the conflict, in this case, economic insecurity, remains. Although

structural changes are important, they would require long term effort through legislation. Based on these assumptions, the focus of resolution in this paper was on targeting the economic driver through problem-solving or community-engaged peacebuilding. The approaches may not be new but are the best available alternatives, using existing resources of herders and farmers to satisfy their needs, strengthen relationships, and bring about transformation. The employment of any of these approaches to resolve herders-farmers conflict would ultimately depend on the level of conflict intensity, the willingness of both communities to participate, and the amount of time both groups can commit to the process.

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