

Exploring the Impact of the Benue Herder-Farmer Crisis on Basic Mathematics Education: Parents' and Teachers' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The Benue herders-farmers crisis is an enduring conflict primarily between nomadic Fulani herders and indigenous farming communities over access to land and water resources. Rising competition, environmental pressures, and inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms have intensified violence, resulting in displacement, loss of lives, and property destruction. This crisis has significantly disrupted livelihoods, social cohesion, and access to essential services, particularly education. Existing research on the crisis has largely focused on socio-economic indicators, often overlooking the direct impact on basic mathematics education. The scale and complexity of the crisis demand a more holistic research approach to understand its effects on school closure and the lived experiences of displaced parents, pupils, and teachers. This study employed document analysis and phenomenology within a qualitative research framework, guided by an interpretivist approach and post-positivist philosophy, to examine the experiences of internally displaced parents and public primary school teachers regarding school closures caused by the ongoing herders-farmers conflict in Benue State, Nigeria. Using thematic analysis to interpret interview transcripts and documents, five major themes emerged: psychological trauma, economic hardship, social upheaval, educational delay, and health challenges. These themes highlight the critical ways the crisis has affected basic mathematics education in the region. The study offers recommendations for targeted interventions and psychosocial support for affected pupils, teachers, and parents, particularly addressing issues such as forced early marriage and child labor. By combining document analysis with phenomenology, this research uncovers dimensions often overlooked in recent studies on the Benue herders-farmers crisis. The firsthand accounts of public primary school teachers and parents provide nuanced insights that should not be generalized or overlooked in scholarly discussion.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, education's role in responding to crisis and supporting early recovery has gained increasing recognition, establishing it as the fourth pillar of humanitarian aid alongside food, water, shelter, and health (Machel, 2001). Schools and teachers can be used to provide safe space and sense of normality during situations of instability, and can contribute to the physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection of children, adolescents and adult learners (Barakat *et al.*, 2013). Education has also become a social process in the maintenance of society since creation hence the Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument to lead to nurturing productive citizenry and fostering national development (FRN, 2004).

Education is the conscious effort of the society to inculcate her existing body of knowledge, values, norms, science and technology into the young generation for the purpose of active participation in the society (Iji, Abah & Anyor, 2017). Education is a key to achieving many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When people get quality education, they can break from the cycle of poverty. It also empowers people everywhere to live more healthy and sustainable lives. Education is more crucial to fostering tolerance between people and contributes to more peaceful societies (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2023). A pivotal subject in education is mathematics.

Mathematics plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals navigate various spheres of private, social and civil life. The knowledge and application of mathematics made it fundamental to all facets of human endeavour. Mathematics is a body of knowledge centred on such concepts as quantity, structure, space and change, and the academic discipline that studies them (Osafehinti, 2015). The relevance of the subject has positioned it as a compulsory subject in Basic Education and a fundamental course in virtually all professional fields of study. Mathematics is one of the school subjects that any nation needs for industrial and technological advancement, useful for most vocation and higher specialized courses of learning (Odili, 2006; Sidhu, 2006). Mathematics is an excellent vehicle for the development and improvement of a person's intellectual competence in logical reasoning, spatial visualization, analysis and abstract thought (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007). Students who study mathematics, therefore, develop numeracy skill, reasoning, thinking skills and problem-solving skills through the learning and application of mathematics.

Mathematics education is a field of study concerned with the tools, methods, and approaches that facilitate the practice of teaching and learning mathematics (Iji & Abah, 2018). Simply stated, its main goal is to develop the cognitive processes of students in mathematics (National Council of Educational Research and Training – NCERT, 2006). Central to this field is the pursuit of clarity in thought and the systematic approach to solving problems, which is essential to the mathematical enterprise. It is evident that mathematics education is indispensable, even in times of emergencies. Disruptions brought about by the Benue herders-farmers crisis hampers smooth progress in the development of sound mathematical literacy required for critical thinking, sound reasoning and problem solving. Although general educational advancement is stagnated by the crisis, the specific grinding to halt of mathematics teaching and learning in schools could be of immeasurable future consequences to pupils from the affected area (Geary, 2011; Bruce *et al.*, 2016; Pinto & Jones, 2020).

The ongoing herder-farmer crisis in Benue State has implications for basic mathematics education that are both similar to and more pronounced than its effects on general education. Like other school subjects, mathematics learning is disrupted by school closures, displacement, teacher shortages, irregular attendance, and the destruction of educational infrastructure, all of which reduce instructional time and contribute to long-term learning losses. Pinto and Jones (2020) argue that prolonged educational disruptions have enduring academic and socioeconomic consequences, with interrupted schooling lowering students' learning trajectories and future educational attainment. However, mathematics is particularly vulnerable because it is cumulative in nature, requiring continuous mastery of foundational concepts before learners can successfully progress to more advanced topics. Geary (2011) emphasizes that persistent interruptions in mathematics instruction can exacerbate learning difficulties, widen achievement gaps, and lead to sustained low performance, especially among young learners who miss critical stages of numeracy development. Bruce *et al.* (2016) further note that early mathematics learning depends on consistent, high-quality instructional experiences that build conceptual understanding, problem-solving skills, and mathematical reasoning over time. Evidently, while the Benue herders–farmers crisis undermines general education by reducing

overall access to schooling and limiting cognitive and social development, its impact on basic mathematics education is often more severe because missed foundational mathematical competencies are more difficult to recover, potentially resulting in long-term deficits in numeracy that extend beyond the broader educational setbacks experienced across other subject areas.

An educational emergency is a crisis-situation created by conflicts or disasters which have destabilized, disorganized or destroyed the educational system, which require an integrated process of crisis and post crisis response. For UNICEF, emergencies include natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, and human-made crises such as civil unrest and war, as well as silent emergencies such as HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty and children living in the streets (Pigozzi, 1999). For several decades, the international community has recognized the importance of providing educational opportunities to all children, whether they are the victims of armed conflict, natural disasters or other emergency crisis situations. Therefore, the concept of education in emergency (EiE) has gradually emerged as a sector for humanitarian aid as well as for development cooperation. It therefore mitigates the marginalization sometimes observed with education in crisis situations (Taftaf & Williams, 2019).

There is no precise definition as to what insecurity is, but there is a general agreement that insecurity is linked to chronic traumatic challenges such as threats of disease, hunger, terrorism and poverty. Therefore, insecurity and poverty cannot be divorced from each other (Abeshi & Haruna, 2022). Nigeria, in the current democratic dispensation, is faced with different kinds of traumatic situations such as armed robbery, kidnapping, political thugs, ethno-religious conflicts, organized violent groups, economic-based violence, gender-based violence, sexual abuse, trafficking and recently the menace of Boko Haram and herders-farmers conflict constituting a danger to students, parents and teachers (Ibrahim, 2002), the last kind being synonymous with Benue in recent times.

Farmers and herdsman's relationships have also been seen as complementary in nature that in most cases have led to chaos (Mwamfupe, 2015). Udosen (2021) identified the root causes of the crisis to include land security, climate change impacts, demographic pressures, poor governance, and weak law enforcement. These factors have created a volatile environment where clashes between herders and farmers occur frequently, resulting in loss of lives, displacement of communities and economic and educational disruptions. The conflict resonates around deep-rooted causes that contribute to the escalation of violence. Egbule and Okonta (2024) highlight that land disputes, competition over natural resources, environmental degradation, demographic pressure and ethnoreligious factors are among the key drivers to the crisis. The impact of the herder-farmer crisis on security in Benue state has been profound which resulted in a significant loss of lives, destruction of property and internal displacement of communities whose people now live as internally displaced persons (IDPs) across several towns and cities in the state (Dauda & Davru, 2024). The reoccurring escalation of the crisis has been blamed on ethnic militias and community vigilante, impunity and poor response to early warnings, and anti-grazing laws (International Crisis Group, 2018). This has not only disrupted social cohesion but also negatively impacted economic activities, including agriculture, which is the primary livelihood for many in that region.

However, much of the existing research has largely concentrated on the socio-economic consequences of the Benue herders-farmers conflict (Mbah, Jiriko & Amah, 2020; Kwanga *et al.*, 2021; Ekperechukwu & Carla, 2021; Ifedayo, 2023; Ilim, Amali & Lawal, 2021; Atobatele & Moliki, 2022), with limited attention given to its long-term implications for education. There is a notable lack of comprehensive, research-based statistics on the number of educational institutions, teachers, and students affected by the crisis, alongside persistent challenges in justifying prolonged school closures. Within the educational dimension of the conflict, Abeshi and Haruna (2022) explored its effects on students' emotional behaviour using samples drawn from schools that remained operational. Ibrahim and Adebayo (2021) assessed teachers' perceptions of the conflict's impact on school infrastructure and enrolment, though without providing quantitative data on affected enrolment figures. Similarly, Adejo and Gbough (2019) found that the herders-farmers conflict significantly affects school facilities as well as the wellbeing of teachers and students in secondary schools across Benue State, Nigeria.

Terlumun (2019) examined the broader implications of the clashes for rural development, incorporating qualitative responses from affected students alongside media reports indicating that sustained herdsman attacks disrupted the academic calendar and forced approximately 300,000 children out of school, 200,000 at the secondary level and

100,000 at the primary level, across three local government areas (p. 97). Given the scale and complexity of the crisis, as well as its evolving dynamics, there is a clear need for a more holistic research approach that captures the lived experiences of displaced parents and teachers. This study therefore adopts an interpretive approach to critically examine the impact of the ongoing Benue herders–farmers crisis on its primary stakeholders, parents and teachers, thereby addressing an existing gap in the literature.

In Benue State, Nigeria, the crisis has been particularly severe, resulting in extensive loss of lives and destruction of property due to attacks attributed to Fulani herdsmen in local government areas such as Agatu, Guma, Gwer West, Makurdi, Kwande, Katsina-Ala, and Logo (Ifedayo, 2023). Indeed, these communal conflicts have claimed numerous lives over the years (Nte, 2016). In light of the persistent threats to peaceful coexistence, ongoing destruction, repeated school closures, loss of lives, and the conversion of public-school facilities into displacement camps, this study is crucial for assessing the impact of the Benue herders–farmers crisis on basic mathematics education in Benue State, Nigeria.

1.1 Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of ongoing Benue Herders-Farmers crisis on Basic Mathematics Education in Benue State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to explore the lived experience of IDP parents and public primary school teachers about school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria.

1.2 Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the study:

- i. How are IDP parents affected by school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria?
- ii. How are IDP public primary school teachers affected by school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria?

2. Method

2.1 Research Philosophy, Paradigm, Methodology and Design

This study is grounded in a post-positivist research philosophy, which seeks to derive objective insights from available data while acknowledging that knowledge can be constructed in multiple ways. The post-positivist paradigm recognizes the active roles of both the researcher and participants, positioning them as integral to the research process rather than detached observers. It emphasizes inductive reasoning to generate new insights, aiming to explain human behavior, interpret social realities, and uncover underlying power structures. Within this framework, research is understood as inherently value-laden, subjective, and shaped by shared human perspectives. Typically conducted in natural, real-life settings, post-positivist inquiry focuses on identifying patterns, interpreting meanings, understanding lived experiences, and revealing social relationships, belief systems, and structures of power (Thorne, 2000).

Operating within this paradigm, the study adopts an interpretive methodological approach. Interpretivism highlights the social dimension of research, acknowledging that interaction between the researcher and participants can influence findings (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). It assumes that reality is constructed through individuals lived experiences, leading to the acceptance of multiple realities rather than a single objective truth. Consequently, knowledge is shaped by people's interpretations, perceptions, and meanings, making the research process deeply influenced by values, emotions, and expectations.

A qualitative research methodology is employed, with a primary focus on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences. Rather than evaluating the correctness of participants' views, qualitative research seeks to explore their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations within specific contexts (Cole, 2006). It is concerned with capturing meaning and understanding as expressed by those directly experiencing the phenomenon (Shank & Brown, 2007).

The study specifically utilizes document analysis and phenomenology as its research designs. Document analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of both printed and digital materials to generate meaning and empirical understanding (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These documents, considered “social facts” (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997), include a wide range of sources such as reports, records, publications, and archival materials. For this research, key data was drawn from public and institutional records provided by agencies such as the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), and National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), alongside reports from international organizations and media sources.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, focuses on understanding lived experiences from the perspective of those directly involved. Rather than beginning with external realities, it centers on individuals’ conscious experiences and interpretations (Abakpa *et al.*, 2017). The approach requires the researcher to adopt a “bracketing” stance, setting aside prior assumptions and biases, to engage fully with participants’ experiences as they are presented. Phenomenological analysis is descriptive in nature, aiming to uncover the structures and meanings that shape how individuals experience and interpret their world.

2.2 Sample

A total of three (3) parents and five (5) teachers directly affected by the Benue herders-farmers crisis constitute the primary sample of this qualitative investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants based on their direct experience of the crisis. The participants are from different rural areas affected by the crisis. In addition, extracts from existing documentary sources complement the voices of the parents and teachers.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in the predominant languages of the affected areas. For instance, where the participant cannot communicate in English or Pidgin English, his or her mother tongue (Idoma or Tiv) is used as the interview language. The research team comprises members that are fluent in the four languages. The duration of the interviews is generally brief (10 to 20 minutes) with the questions narrowed to participants’ experiences and perception of the impact of the crisis. The document analysis focused on online documentaries and official reports established national and international organizations that have consistently covered the Benue herders-farmers crisis.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data collected through recorded interviews was transcribed into English (or Pidgin English depending on the form of code-switching used by the participant) and analyzed using thematic analysis, specifically following the six-step framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining those themes, defining and naming them, and ultimately producing a coherent report. The approach is flexible and widely applicable across qualitative studies, with an emphasis on the researcher’s active role in interpreting and constructing themes rather than passively discovering those (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Extracts from the documentaries and other existing platforms were reported directly to reflect the original form.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the study’s purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by anonymizing and aggregating participant data. Access to the collected data was limited to the research team, and all information was securely stored in line with data protection standards. Additionally, all documentary sources used were either publicly accessible or obtained through appropriate authorization.

3. Results

The results of this study are presented according to the stated research questions.

3.1 Research Question One

How are IDP parents affected by school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria?

The interview response of parent affected by the ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria, are transcribed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Transcript of Parents' Responses

Participant	Lived Experience
Parent 1 (Father)	<i>"It (the crisis) affected me, but, you know in our place we always use farm, we sustain our lives with farm, so when the crisis started, we leave our lands, we lost many lives. Like me, I loose like two of my sons to the crisis."</i> <i>"(On relocation) its not easy for us o. like me, I get married to two wives, so its not easy for me. The transport is too much, so we got to trek from the village to the IDP camp, where they keep helpless people."</i> <i>"I stayed there (at the IDP camp) for some months, then I started pushing wheelbarrow in the market. Now from the wheelbarrow pushing I now get something doing, then I now rent a little shop where I use to sell some drinks"</i> <i>"(On kids returning back to school) I admit the male ones to get to school, while the female ones to get married. The female ones dropped out of school, then get to their new husbands' houses"</i>
Parent 2 (Mother)	<i>"It (the crisis) affected me in so many ways. Like, as a mother with many kids, how to carry my kids along with me, all those things were not funny at all."</i> <i>"We spent, on the road, like two to three weeks, looking for a place to stay. We now finally saw a man that helped us, took us to his house."</i> <i>"My children could not school in the new location. It was difficult. Like I said, the man that helped us, he just picked my son – my elder son – he took him and he started working, not schooling. He started working with him as a sales boy."</i> <i>"My children were just hawking and hustling for money."</i>
Parent 3 (Father)	<i>"Even we, the parents cannot afford anything. ... if you want to assist your brother or your sister, who is a victim of the crisis, no way. Our family members, hence we are no longer farming, life became very difficult for us to cope. And you can look at the hardship of this economy, even myself, I was unable to cope with is this present economic situation. Yes."</i> <i>"For me myself, sponsoring my children became a problem. Because, like the time I was there, sometimes we use to farm. And when we farm, we get something from the farm. That is the food, we will be eating the food. When I get the salary, I now do other things with it. The food was henceforth not coming. Even the salary was henceforth not coming (at a point). Even myself, it was God that helped us. My children would have suffered. I was just managing myself in some other ways."</i> <i>"For people who did not have the opportunity to swap their children's schools, their children are there at home. Like somebody I know from home, he told me that if the school reopens, they will be happy, because like his children, since the crisis of 2021, they are still at home (out of school). None of them is in school. There was no way. They don't have any other way."</i> <i>"Other children in my extended family stopped schooling."</i> <i>"In my village, I know two to three girls of school age who got married. It wasn't their will. They used to be in school. Since there was no way to sponsor themselves, they have to get married to someone. Even the parents cannot even afford food to eat, talk more of paying school fees."</i> <i>"Some became beggars. They go from house to house to beg for food."</i>

"They are many children who watched their parents being killed. Some the Fulanis killed their parents. These children are still traumatized by the crisis. They could not further their education at all"

Emerging themes from Table 1 are discussed in the Discussion section.

Other documentary sources attest to the plight of parents in the ongoing herders-farmers crisis. African Digital Democracy Observatory – ADDO (2024, January 31) has this report:

Those caught in the crosshairs of the decades-old herder-farmer conflict in Benue state, central Nigeria, often have their lives upended. Augustine Ikwulono, a victim of the conflict, bears the weight for years. After sustaining a bullet injury, he struggles to muster the strength to provide for his family's needs. Ikwulono was shot during an attack on his village, Imana Ikobi, in Apa local government.

The tranquillity of his once-happy homestead was shattered when men dressed in army camouflage and carrying 'sophisticated weapons' attacked him and destroyed his house. They also stole yam and other crops from his farm. The men who attacked him were alleged members of a Fulani herders' militia.

Just like Ikwulono, many residents are in the perennial tit-for-tat, herder-farmer conflicts in Benue State.

Further explication of the crisis by ADDO (2024, February 1) indicated thus:

Impact of the Anti-Open Grazing Law: This law, enacted in November 2017, aimed to address the escalating tensions between herders and farmers. However, data reveals that incidents of conflict and casualties have increased since its implementation.

With more than 80% of the population engaged in farming, the state's status as the 'food basket of Nigeria' is under threat. Attacks on farmers have led to displacement, hindering agricultural activities and contributing to increased food insecurity.

The security situation has led to a significant rise in the number of children no longer attending school in Benue, with more than 200,000 reported as of March 2023.

Philip Itodo, a once-prosperous farmer, lost everything to suspected Fulani herders' attack in the Apa local government area.

Patrick Ochukwu, an educator in Akpete, Apa, witnessed a 90% drop in school enrollment due to herders' invasion and looming threats. His last interaction with students was in April 2023, as insecurity disrupts education.

Medicins Sans Frontieres (2020) has the following report from a parent affected by the crisis:

"I've been here since January 2018 with my family. Including my extended family, 12 people are depending on me. We lived in Guma before; we left because of the crisis. We started to hear reports of the neighbouring villages being attacked, so we sent the women and children from our community to this old market. We [the men] stayed to continue farming. When the herdsman arrived, they shot my brother dead. That was the day we decided to leave. When we left, we had no food – so we kept sneaking back to the farms. But by June [2018] it was just too dangerous to keep going back.

"Now we either work on other people's farms for food or money, or we try to find other jobs so we can buy food. But there are few jobs and a lot of competition. There isn't enough shelter here – for the shelter that we do have, we need more mosquito nets for the windows. Some people just sleep outside in the open, but that's impossible in the rainy season.

"We get assurances about the future – we hear that the crisis will end and we'll be able to go home. But in reality, we don't even think about going home; we know we need to make the best of it here. Only God can decide if we will be able to return to our ancestral homes. I hope that people will hear my voice; I am not loud enough when I speak alone."

Another parent narrates his experience this way (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2020):

"I've been here since January 2018, with my wife and three children. We come from a village called Kasayo in Guma. It was New Year's Day when the herdsman attacked; many of our relatives were killed

and we narrowly escaped with our lives. It was around seven in the evening, and people were still drinking and celebrating the New Year when the shooting began. People died; women and children died. Even before the attack, the herdsmen would graze their cattle on our crops, but we didn't know it would become violent.

"When we left, there was no displacement camp set up, so we found shelter in a nearby school as the children and teachers were on a break. When it re-opened, we came here and built tukuls – that was before MSF built the shelters we live in today.

"Food is still a major challenge for us – there's also no school for our children to go to. Some people go to the market and scoop up the grains that fell to the ground, then they sieve them to remove the dust and earth. Other people sell firewood or work on other people's farms for money or food. We know about the coronavirus, but social distancing is hard with limited space.

"Some rooms accommodate two families. There are still people arriving. Even last week there was another attack that forced people to leave home and come here. When I think about going home, I remind myself that a live dog is better than a dead lion. There have been others who tried to return to their villages and were killed. We have no hope for now, but perhaps one day."

A mother also narrated her experience to Medicins Sans Frontieres (2020):

"We arrived here in March of this year. We left our community in Guma and it took us three days to walk here. My husband and I were farmers, but we were not poor. We had crops to sell, crops to eat, and money to buy things. We were comfortable enough to invite others over to share our food and to give food to others when they needed it. Now we don't even have enough for ourselves. We don't have cooking utensils, or even mats to sleep on here – the bugs bite you if you lie on the sand. MSF gave us the shelters and takes care of our health, but that doesn't mean things are easy.

"The close confines of the camp also create tension, there are a lot of people here, and a lot of children too. Sometimes conflicts between children become conflicts between adults. It's not a comfortable place to live. We have nine children, but when my cousin saw us suffering, they suggested to look after some of the kids for us.

"Emotionally this was a difficult decision to make, but now my husband is away working on someone else's farm, and I just can't feed all of them, so I had no choice. I know that we can't go home yet – we would die. If you refuse to leave home, you'll be killed, but if you run then there's always hope you might be able to return one day."

Premium Times investigator, Ibanga Isine reports the pathetic and heroic account of a widow group affected by the Benue herdsmen-farmers crisis (Isine, 2016):

In tear-filled eyes, Mrs. Iyande recounted how over 300 women, mostly widows formed a cooperative known as Moon Displaced Women Organisation and through it, empowered their members to meet some of the needs of their families.

"Most of our members lost their husbands during the war by the so-called herdsmen, who have also taken over our properties," she recounted.

"In the heat of the crisis, many of us escaped to Jato Aka and neighbouring communities while others scaled the mountains to Cameroon."

On arrival in Jato Aka, Mrs. Iyande said they kept roaming from one part of the town to another, begging for food and shelter.

According to her, neither the state nor the federal government created a camp to accommodate thousands of people, who escaped the onslaught.

However, some residents of Jato Aka accommodated some of the displaced families while majority slept with their children in the market square, churches and school premises.

Apart from accommodation, Mrs. Iyande said it was difficult to feed and pay for treatment when members of their families became ill.

Another Moon widow, Dooshima Samuel, said she nearly lost her children shortly after they escaped to Jato Aka.

"My husband was killed in an ambush while returning from the farm on the first day the herdsmen attack our village," she said.

"My three children and I ran to Jato Aka before they took over and burnt down the entire village. Not long after that, two of the children came down with high fever."

Unable to pay for their treatment in the local clinic, Mrs. Samuel said she used herbs and local concoctions to treat the children.

"When our children fall sick, we treat them with herbs because we don't have money to take them to the hospital. Those who cannot look after their children send them away to live with relations in other towns," she said.

"We also give out our children to Igbos so they could learn trading. We approach the traders and beg them to connect us with their colleagues, who would be interested in taking our children as apprentice shopkeepers.

"That is why many of our children now live with Igbo traders in Jato Aka, Gboko and even in Makurdi," she narrated.

Those who abhor begging among the displaced women go around Jato Aka and neighbouring areas, doing menial jobs like weeding, washing clothes and dishes and babysitting for well-off families.

The cooperative was to take care of the Moon women. Mrs. Iyande said she rallied the displaced women and together floated a cooperative society.

"After seeing the suffering of our women, I called some of them one day and said that the begging thing wasn't helping us," she said.

"That was how we established the Moon Displaced Women Organisation. We have up to 300 members."

3.2 Research Question Two

How are IDP public primary school teachers affected by school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria?

Transcripts from interview with public primary school teachers affected by school closure due to ongoing herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Transcript of School Teachers' Responses

Participant	Lived Experience
Teacher 1	<i>"My experience is this, I was facing a lot of problems, that is, in terms of being financially handicapped. And then, there was no food. Sometimes, some of my relatives were seriously sick and there was no way to take them to the hospital. Even some of them have resulted in death."</i> <i>"One of my brother had to force her daughter to marry because of this crisis. And she was going to school before they just forced her to get marry because there was no money to train her."</i> <i>"Some of them become beggars, even teachers, moving from office to office to beg just to see food."</i> <i>"There are children who are traumatized by the death of their parents at the hands of the invading herdsmen. But some of them are getting better with the assistance of their relatives. Some of the children still act normal."</i>
Teacher 2	<i>"There are situations where affected children are forced to get into marriage, because the crisis has made their parents destitute, they don't have anything to sustain their lives. As a result, they force their children into early marriage so they can get a little money to sustain their lives. I also experience such a thing in my community."</i> <i>"Begging has become a source of concern in such situation, because the parents cannot access their farms. So eating is cumbersome. Children are then prone to begging."</i> <i>"In my community we recorded so many deaths, a source of trauma for everybody. I cannot exactly approximate the number of deaths including colleagues who lost their lives. And it is still going on in our community. It has not stopped."</i> <i>"Not only children went into begging. Parents went into begging too. Parents went about begging. Some men used to send their wives out to go and look for food, not minding if they go and sleep with</i>

	<i>somebody or not. As far as she comes back with food, there is no need of asking how. That is it. It's what I experience in my community."</i>
Teacher 3	<i>"Some girl children were taken advantage of by would-be helpers, as result of the hardship inflicted by the crisis. Some parents forced their daughters to get married, so that at least they can get what to eat."</i> <i>"Some wives and children were forced to watch how the assailants killed their husbands and fathers. It was very traumatic."</i>
Teacher 4	<i>"My students were also driven away. I myself, it has been for over a year now, I have not been to my school. It was a period when salaries were not being paid, and we faced a lot of difficulties during that particular time. Moving to the city from my village was something not easy. To feed was a problem, because salaries were not paid on time and the food stuff that we normally have in our own village was burnt by the Fulani crisis. So, we suffered a lot. Even my students, sometimes I see them in the town, and things were not really easy."</i> <i>"Some of us have to trek for days in the bush and it was not an easy task. There are children who even died on the way."</i> <i>"As a teacher, getting a new accommodation in a new environment was not easy. In the first place I have to get to the IDP camp. I stayed in the IDP camp for over five months before I now get an accommodation in the town."</i>
Teacher 5	<i>"We were driven away by the Fulani crisis. It affected me in so many ways. My salary, I didn't collect it so that I will be able to feed my family. My children dropped out of school because I don't have money to pay their fees. I felt pain in so many ways. We don't have food to eat, no place to stay."</i> <i>"We lived in an uncompleted building because we don't have money to rent any apartment. We lived in that place for a long time, to the extent that my children and husband were sick, and we don't have money for their treatment."</i> <i>"I don't have any money to put my children back in school. They actually dropped out of school for a long time."</i> <i>"All my children got married because I need the money to start up a business. So that's the reason all my female school age children got married."</i>

Emerging themes from Table 2 are discussed in the Discussion section.

The *TRT World* (Unah, 2017) has this report:

"It is very painful," Uдах Enoch, the headteacher of a primary school near Guma local council, says of schools slowly turning to camps. "When schools have no children, what would teachers be doing there?"

Enoch believes children affected by the conflict would have setbacks whenever they resume learning and might not make much progress even when teachers teach them in camps. Even when normalcy returns, he argues, enrolment rates would be "low" because some people have "completely" left their villages and might not return.

Though Ternege's smiles belie his inward feelings, he says, "(I) really miss going to school to learn and meet with my friends."

"Without our school there is nobody to teach me very well like my teachers in our village," the teenager adds.

A special investigation by *Premium Times* (Isine, 2016) reported the following:

A former teacher at the Local Government Education Authority Primary School, Tse Maduku, Gabriel Wende, said on March 14, 2014, heavily armed herdsmen laid siege on Moon communities.

At the time the assailants arrived the area, Mr. Wende said the people had eaten the evening meal and were ready to go to bed.

"As the sound of gunfire rang out across the villages, people started running aimlessly and at that time, the herdsmen had laid ambush in some of the escape routes to the community and were firing at everything in sight," he recalled.

"Children, old men and women and all those who couldn't escape on time were massacred in their numbers. Many people who were unlucky ran into ambushes and were gunned down or butchered." Under one week, locals said the herdsmen killed 72 people.

"We recorded the names of all those who were killed and identified their corpses. Unfortunately, we could not account for everybody because, many people were killed in the bush and we couldn't recover their corpses," said Mr. Otah.

"We share common boundaries with Taraba State and the Republic of Cameroon, so some of our people fled across the hills to Cameroon. We cannot tell the exact number of our people who have died.

"The herdsmen have occupied our communities for three years now and our people cannot farm. Many of those who survived the invasion have died either from disease or hunger. We have never experienced that kind of brutality since the days of our forefathers."

The attackers set fire on 18 primary schools, four junior secondary schools, two senior secondary schools, four healthcare facilities and all the worship centers and markets in Moon.

4. Discussion

The combination of document analysis and phenomenology in this study has thrown up key issues that are often overlooked in recent research investigations into the multifaceted dimensions of the Benue Herders-Farmers crisis. The fear of future attacks discourages parents from sending their children to school, especially in regions where educational facilities remain unprotected or are situated near areas of frequent conflict. The economic impact of the crisis has also played a role, as families facing loss of livelihoods may no longer afford school fees, uniforms, or learning materials. Girls are particularly affected, with a higher likelihood of being kept at home to help with domestic responsibilities or forced into early marriages (Theophilus, 2020). Overall, the crisis has created a volatile environment that undermines educational continuity and limits children's access to foundational learning opportunities in Benue State, Nigeria.

The lived experiences of public primary school teachers and parents have provided deeper insights that must not be contextually lumped together. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) framework for thematic analysis, generic explication of interview transcriptions in Tables 1 and 2 points to five (5) major themes around the impact of the ongoing herders-farmers crisis on the basic mathematics education in Benue State, Nigeria. The emerging themes include psychological trauma, economic hardship, social upheaval, educational delay, and health issues. These themes are further discussed here.

4.1 Psychological Trauma

The herders-farmers crisis in Benue State has left deep psychological scars on pupils, many of whom have witnessed or experienced violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. Teachers, too, have been deeply affected by the crisis. Many have lost their homes, relatives, or colleagues to the conflict, leading to emotional distress and burnout. This is exactly the experience teachers shared in Table 2. Teacher 2 specifically narrated thus: "In my community we recorded so many deaths, a source of trauma for everybody. I cannot exactly approximate the number of deaths including colleagues who lost their lives. And it is still going on in our community. It has not stopped." Some have been displaced and must now teach in unfamiliar or under-resourced environments, often while coping with their own trauma. The psychological burden of working under constant fear, coupled with the challenge of supporting traumatized pupils, has significantly affected teachers' mental health and job performance. For instance, Ochepo (2025) reports that there was a significant influence of crop farmers-herders' conflict on primary school teachers' job satisfaction. In extreme cases, some educators have abandoned their posts entirely, unable to continue working in dangerous or emotionally overwhelming conditions. Brophy *et al.*, (2015) attested that expansion of teacher roles during such crisis in providing mental health interventions leaves some teachers feeling reluctant to serve in these expanded positions during crucial times.

Parents carry a dual burden of coping with their own trauma while trying to provide stability for their children. Many have experienced the destruction of their homes and livelihoods, witnessed violence first-hand, or lost family

members in the conflict. The voices of parents in Table 1 attested to deep pain left by the brutal killing of close family members and the horror of picking up the pieces of mutilated body parts (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2020). These traumatic experiences create a persistent sense of fear and hopelessness, which affects their ability to make decisions about their children's education. In some instances, parents may keep their children at home due to safety concerns, further isolating them and limiting their access to essential psychosocial support that schools can sometimes provide (Anhange *et al.*, 2022).

The erosion of traditional community bonds during the crisis has intensified the trauma experienced by students, educators, and parents alike. As local support networks fail, many are forced to process their distress in isolation (Morris & Arbuckle, 2024). Although schools have the potential to provide stability and healing, they frequently lack the professional mental health resources necessary to support their communities. If left unaddressed, this deep-seated trauma threatens to cause lasting psychological damage, undermining both academic performance and personal health.

Effectively addressing the psychological impact of the Benue herder–farmer conflict requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach. This includes integrating mental health services into schools and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to provide accessible support, as well as equipping teachers with trauma-informed skills to better respond to the needs of affected learners. It also involves rebuilding safe environments and restoring stable daily routines, which are essential for helping children regain a sense of security and normalcy. Furthermore, supporting the mental health of parents and teachers is vital, as their stability is the foundation for the well-being of the children in their care (Ajibo *et al.*, 2020). Breaking the cycle of trauma requires a long-term commitment to these comprehensive interventions, which are essential for community recovery and resilience (Appiah-Boateng & Bukari, 2023).

4.2 Economic Hardship

The herders-farmers crisis in Benue State, Nigeria, has had far-reaching socio-economic consequences, particularly for teachers, and parents. One major impact is the disruption of agricultural activities, which are the primary source of livelihood for many families in the region (Tanyi *et al.*, 2021). When farmlands are destroyed or abandoned due to insecurity, parents lose their means of income, making it difficult to afford school fees, uniforms, textbooks, and other educational necessities for their children. This economic strain has led to a decline in school enrolment and increased dropout rates, especially among children from rural communities most affected by the crisis. The outcomes of this study, displayed in Tables 1 and 2, and associated document analysis, attest to the heightened economic crisis resulting from the instability brought about by the marauding herdsman.

Teachers have also been deeply affected by the crisis. With many schools either shut down or operating under emergency conditions, teaching staff face job insecurity or irregular salary payments (see account by Teacher 5). In rural schools, some teachers have been displaced themselves and now struggle with transportation costs or are unable to return to their postings. In addition, the lack of teaching aids and the burden of managing overcrowded or under-resourced classrooms in IDP camps diminish their professional effectiveness and morale (Okwori & Angenyi, 2019). These challenges make it difficult to attract and retain qualified educators in the affected areas, resulting in attendant dissatisfaction with the teaching profession (Ochepo, 2025).

Parents, who are often subsistence farmers, bear the brunt of economic displacement. Many have lost their farms and livestock, plunging them into poverty. With little or no alternative sources of income, some are forced to withdraw their children from school to engage in menial labour or hawking in order to support the family (see account by Parents 2 and 3, and Teacher 5). This shift contributes to a cycle of poverty and illiteracy, weakening the future prospects of affected communities. Furthermore, the financial burden of relocating and rebuilding homes after attacks adds to their economic woes, leaving little room to invest in their children's education. Similar outcomes were expressed in the study by Awotokun *et al.* (2020) which observed that herders-farmers conflicts have inflicted serious costs on the Nigerian economy in terms of loss of resources and human lives, jeopardizing the prospects of meeting the global goals of poverty eradication and zero hunger. Awotokun *et al.* (2020) equally maintained that the government has no specific set of strategies to contain the conflicts and that its equivocation and unwillingness to

prosecute the architects and perpetrators of the conflicts has emboldened them, with severe implications in displacement and disruption of people's livelihood patterns and the exacerbation of poverty.

The herders–farmers crisis in Benue State has significantly affected the educational and economic well-being of teachers and parents. Persistent violence has resulted in widespread displacement, loss of livelihoods, and a deterioration in both the quality and accessibility of education (Iorbo, 2024). Without targeted interventions and sustained peacebuilding efforts, the future of many children and educators in the region remains uncertain. Addressing this crisis requires not only improved security but also broad socio-economic support to rebuild communities and restore educational systems (Ajibefun, 2018). The economic hardships described by parents and teachers in this study align with earlier findings by Yaro and Tobias (2019) and Apenda (2023), which highlight coping strategies such as menial labour, child labour, and forced marriages. The study further shows that begging or panhandling often becomes a necessary means of survival for individuals and families displaced by crises, including conflict, natural disasters, or economic instability. Displacement disrupts traditional livelihoods, leaving people with little or no income or access to basic resources. In such circumstances, begging provides an immediate, though precarious, way to secure food, shelter, and other essential needs (Malaina, 2024).

More broadly, the partial or total breakdown of government structures, such as observed in the Benue herders–farmers conflict, undermines institutional effectiveness and creates serious challenges for international aid delivery. As reflected in the lived experiences of participants in this study, affected communities often resort to self-reliance despite limited resources, as seen in refugee camps, displacement settlements, and makeshift shelters. In the face of adversity, communities frequently demonstrate resilience through initiative, solidarity, and innovative problem-solving (Bensalah *et al.*, 2001). For external assistance to be effective, it must recognize and build upon this local capacity. Without such alignment, gaps or inconsistencies in support may have severe consequences. Therefore, active community participation in the educational process is critical to the success and sustainability of any intervention.

4.3 Social Upheaval

The herders-farmers crisis in Benue State has triggered significant social upheaval, deeply affecting teachers, and parents. For pupils, the crisis has disrupted the normal structure of their lives. Displacement from home communities due to violent attacks has forced many children to relocate to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where social networks such as peer groups and extended families are broken. The loss of familiar environments and routines leads to a sense of instability and emotional distress, which can hinder their social development and sense of identity. In this regards, the findings of this study support the earlier characterization by Ajibefun (2018) who reported that the social effect of the menace of Fulani herdsmen are loss of human life, sexual harassment of human life, acquiring of weapons/arms, reduction in quality of social relationship, reduction of social support and high cases of rape while the economic effect of the menace of Fulani herdsmen are reduction in output and income of farmers/nomads, loss of produce in storage, displacement of farmers, scarcity of agricultural products, loss of house and properties and infrastructural damages.

In crisis, such as the Benue herders-farmers conflict, teachers are often positioned as frontline workers serving the community's needs. The emotional work of teaching is widely recognised, an acknowledgement that teachers mediate emotionally loaded relational dynamics (Hopman & Clark, 2023). Teachers have also been thrust into a state of social instability. Many have been displaced from their communities, leading to strained professional relationships and separation from their families. The narratives of the teachers in Table 2 attest to a precarious point in their professional career. The pressure of teaching in emergency settings, such as makeshift classrooms in IDP camps or under-resourced schools, reduces their ability to engage meaningfully with students and colleagues. In some cases, teachers are compelled to take on new social roles beyond education, such as acting as counsellors or community organizers, to support traumatized pupils and parents. This additional burden contributes to professional burnout and weakens the overall support system in education (Flores, 2023). In the view of Hopman and Clark (2023), teaching is, of its nature, an emotionally taxing role, and this is heightened in crisis, highlighting the importance of teachers finding a way toward self-care that is nested within an institutional culture of collective care.

Parents, particularly those from farming communities, have experienced the erosion of traditional communal structures. Displacement has scattered families, weakened cultural practices, and disrupted community-based support systems that once provided social cohesion and safety nets. The breakdown of these structures has left many parents feeling isolated and disempowered. In IDP camps, the loss of status and roles, especially for men who were once breadwinners, has led to tensions within families and communities. This social dislocation affects not only the adults but also the behavioural patterns and emotional stability of their children. As recounted by the participants of this study, the herders-farmers crisis resulted in many unplanned early marriages and adolescent pregnancies (see Tables 1-2). Rafaeli (2020) observed that in similar emergencies there has been a rise in gender-based violence and unwanted pregnancies of adolescent girls. The rise in teenage pregnancy is attributed to several causes, including increased sexual exploitation, sexual violence and transactional sex, as well as a rise in consensual sexual activity and enhanced barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services (Rafaeli, 2020). These causes stand out in the stories of the victims of the Benue herders-farmers crisis uncovered in this study, with participants confirming that “some girl children were taken advantage of by would-be helpers, as result of the hardship inflicted by the crisis. Some parents forced their daughters to get married, so that at least they can get what to eat”. Teacher 5 (Table 2) admitted that “all my children got married because I need the money to start up a business. So that’s the reason all my female school age children got married.”

Girls who marry in childhood are highly vulnerable to being left behind, as they are often deprived of the choices and opportunities needed to actively participate in and benefit from development, thereby hindering progress toward achieving SDG target 5.3, which seeks to eliminate harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriage, as well as female genital mutilation (Hamad *et al.*, 2021). The findings of this study are consistent with those of Mieth *et al.* (2025), whose participants largely reported an increase in child marriage following conflict and displacement. Similar to the present study, this rise is linked to multiple factors, including concerns about safety, economic hardship, limited access to education and employment, and a perceived relaxation of legal marriage age norms within displaced communities (Mieth *et al.*, 2025). Such unplanned early marriages often have serious consequences. Mesbah *et al.* (2025) found that women in unwanted marriages frequently experience psychological challenges such as anxiety, depression, obsessive thoughts, low self-worth, pessimism, distrust, internalized shame, emotional emptiness, and sexual dysfunction, as well as interpersonal difficulties like violence, dependency, isolation, and lack of social support.

The crisis has also reshaped social priorities, with immediate concerns for safety and survival overshadowing education and social engagement. Fear of violence and widespread insecurity discourage parents from sending their children to school, even when schools remain operational (Ambreen & Hussain, 2020). As communities become increasingly fragmented, trust among different ethnic groups erodes, intensifying social divisions. This fragmentation reinforces stereotypes, fuels social polarization, and, in some cases, fosters retaliatory attitudes among young people, posing a threat to long-term peace and social cohesion (Mwaghogho, 2015).

Overall, the evidence from this study confirms that the Benue herders–farmers crisis has triggered extensive social disruption affecting all levels of the educational community. Pupils face trauma and strained relationships, teachers encounter instability and increased role pressures, and parents struggle with the breakdown of traditional social systems. Together, these challenges contribute to a fragmented society where education, once a driver of unity and development, is weakened by ongoing conflict. Addressing these issues requires more than rebuilding physical infrastructure; it calls for restoring social cohesion and trust through community-based interventions, psychosocial support, and inclusive dialogue.

4.4 Health Challenges

The herders-farmers crisis in Benue State has created severe health challenges for pupils, teachers, and parents, many of whom have been displaced from their homes and now live in overcrowded and under-resourced internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Teachers, who are also affected by displacement and insecurity, face their own set of health challenges (Emerald & Nwafor, 2024). As observed from Table 2, Teacher 1 recounted thus: “My experience is this, I was facing a lot of problems, that is, in terms of being financially handicapped. And then, there was no food. Sometimes, some of my relatives were seriously sick and there was no way to take them to the hospital. Even some of them have resulted in death.” Many live in the same poor conditions as their pupils, with limited access to medical

care. The stress and trauma of living in a conflict zone, combined with the demands of teaching in harsh conditions, have contributed to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and burnout. Without access to counselling or adequate rest, many educators are struggling to maintain their physical and emotional well-being, which in turn affects the quality of education they can provide. These outcomes corroborate the findings of Papadeli *et al.* (2022) which affirms the appearance and deterioration of physical health problems that are normally associated with chronic stress and a general deterioration in physical health was also evidenced in crisis situation. The significance of this outcome is that the findings are indicative of the total effects of burnout, that correlate psychological and health issues.

For parents, especially mothers, the health challenges are both physical and psychological. The loss of homes, farms, and loved ones has led to deep emotional trauma, which is often unaddressed due to the absence of mental health services. Women face increased risks during childbirth due to the lack of access to maternal healthcare, while both parents face the daily stress of trying to keep their families safe and fed under dire conditions (Ogunnowo & Olajide, 2024). These health burdens are compounded by the constant fear of renewed attacks, making recovery and stability extremely difficult. The transcription of the plight of families in terms of health challenges agrees with broad observation in other crisis situations. For instance, Lee *et al.* (2021) reports that in times of crisis, women's health is particularly at risk due to limited access to health care, economic hardships, and damaging social norms. Emergencies often heighten existing challenges, making it harder for women to obtain maternal, contraceptive, and abortion services, thereby deepening reproductive health disparities. Economic instability also tends to worsen, with women disproportionately affected due to their concentration in low-wage jobs, making it difficult to afford basic living costs and secure health insurance. Globally, while women provide most health care and unpaid caregiving, they continue to face financial and systemic barriers (Lee *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, gender-based social expectations increase women's vulnerability to issues such as displacement and poverty. Rates of violence against women tend to rise during emergencies, while options for seeking safety and support may be limited. Addressing these challenges requires not only improved access to health care, economic resources, and social support, but also proactive strategies such as trauma-informed care, promoting women's leadership, expanding educational opportunities, and mobilizing health professionals as advocates for gender equity and women's well-being (Sami *et al.*, 2014).

The crisis has significantly disrupted access to healthcare services and infrastructure. Numerous clinics and hospitals in the affected areas have either been destroyed or rendered inaccessible due to insecurity, leaving many communities without vital medical care. In internally displaced people (IDP) camps, the limited health services available are often overwhelmed and under-resourced. Prolonged waiting times, shortages of essential medicines, and an insufficient number of trained health personnel result in many preventable illnesses going untreated. This collapse of the healthcare system disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, particularly children and the elderly, thereby intensifying the humanitarian situation (Kirschner & Finaret, 2021).

Findings from this study reveal that the health challenges arising from the herders–farmers crisis in Benue State are extensive and closely linked to the displacement, insecurity, and poverty triggered by the conflict. Pupils experience malnutrition and heightened exposure to diseases, teachers endure both mental and physical strain, and parents face a dual burden of physical ailments and psychological distress. Without deliberate efforts to rebuild healthcare systems and deliver psychosocial support, the long-term health implications of the crisis will continue to threaten the well-being and future prospects of affected populations.

4.5 Educational Delays for Learners

Educational institutions have been a target in armed conflict, although this is contrary to humanitarian law. In times of conflict and emergency they have been used for shelter and purposes other than education. Teachers have been sometimes targeted for assassination in times of internal conflict. In all too many countries and regions, like the Benue Valley, education systems have been destroyed or have collapsed (Bensalah *et al.*, 2001).

The herders-farmers crisis in Benue State has significantly disrupted the education system, causing widespread delays in learning for pupils. Many schools in conflict-affected areas have been destroyed, closed, or repurposed as shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs), making it impossible for students to continue their education uninterrupted.

As a result, pupils have experienced prolonged periods without access to classrooms, learning materials, or qualified teachers. These interruptions have caused many children to fall behind in their studies or abandon school entirely, delaying their academic progress and limiting future opportunities (Nwokocha *et al.*, 2022). Pupils often express their dissatisfaction with the unwarranted delays brought about by the crisis. Many eventually drop out of the school system to serve as sales boys to earn a living for themselves and their families. For instance, the Women Leader in the *Premium Times* investigation has this to say (Isine, 2016): “We also give out our children to Igbos so they could learn trading. We approach the traders and beg them to connect us with their colleagues, who would be interested in taking our children as apprentice shopkeepers. That is why many of our children now live with Igbo traders in Jato Aka, Gboko and even in Makurdi.”

One of the most severe consequences of the crisis is the loss of instructional time. Insecurity and violence have forced repeated school closures, with some institutions shut down for months or even years. Even when schools are reopened, fear of renewed attacks keeps attendance low, as parents are hesitant to send their children back to unsafe areas. These inconsistencies in the school calendar make it difficult for teachers to follow a structured curriculum, resulting in gaps in knowledge and reduced learning outcomes.

Teachers also face challenges that contribute to educational delays. Many educators have been displaced or are unable to reach their schools due to security concerns. In Benue State, this situation continued until recently when the displaced public-school teachers were reposted to new locations. Others are overwhelmed by large class sizes in IDP camps or lack the materials needed to teach effectively (International Crisis Group, 2018). The stress of working in uncertain and often dangerous conditions reduces teacher morale and effectiveness. Without proper training and support, teachers struggle to help pupils catch up on lost learning, further widening the educational gap caused by the conflict.

Parents, too, play a role in the delays, not by choice but by circumstance. Economic hardship and displacement have made it difficult for many families to prioritize education (see transcriptions of parents’ interviews in Table 2). Some children are forced to engage in petty trading or labour to support their families, delaying or ending their schooling (Mbou, 2025). In other cases, the emotional and psychological toll of the crisis on both parents and children makes returning to school difficult. Without stable homes or financial resources, parents cannot provide the support their children need to succeed academically (Bennouna *et al.*, 2018).

It is clear that the herders–farmers crisis in Benue State has caused significant setbacks in pupils’ education, largely due to insecurity, displacement, and the collapse of educational infrastructure. Teachers struggle to provide consistent instruction, pupils are frequently absent or forced to drop out, and parents face intense economic and emotional pressures. These factors not only hinder immediate academic progress but also jeopardize the long-term development of both individuals and their communities. Addressing these setbacks requires coordinated efforts to improve security, rebuild school facilities, and offer targeted support to teachers, learners, and affected families (Jones, 2008).

There is growing acknowledgment that a gap often exists between the formal resolution of a crisis, such as the signing of peace agreements or the return of displaced populations, and the full restoration of access to functional education systems (Bensalah *et al.*, 2001). In many instances, ongoing insecurity continues to obstruct reconstruction efforts. Reestablishing education frequently involves rebuilding and strengthening national and local administrative structures before community-level initiatives can be effectively supported through the provision of learning materials, teacher training and supervision, and, ultimately, the reinstatement of a complete school curriculum.

4.6 Recommendations

By 2018, the escalating clashes between herders and farmers in Nigeria had become far more lethal, reportedly six times deadlier, than the Boko Haram insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2018). Addressing this violence requires decisive federal action to strengthen security, ensure accountability for perpetrators, and accelerate reforms in the livestock sector. At the same time, the Benue State government must develop and enforce locally driven security strategies, particularly in implementing open grazing bans and safeguarding farming communities. Preventing

conflict remains the most effective approach in vulnerable areas, which calls for inclusive and participatory frameworks involving government, civil society, and international partners. While external assistance can support these efforts, it is often less costly to sustain peace than to manage the consequences of war. In this regard, education stands out as a critical investment in long-term security, stability, and development, provided it is treated as a genuine priority.

Drawing from the lived experiences presented in this study, there is a pressing need for both governmental and non-governmental organizations to implement comprehensive “supporting the supporters” initiatives for affected teachers. These programmes should combine professional development opportunities with measures that address teachers’ emotional and psychological well-being. Educators providing psychosocial support (PSS) to children in displacement settings often face secondary trauma themselves, especially when helping children process distressing experiences related to the Benue crisis. Supporting the well-being of these caregivers is therefore essential.

Humanitarian and development actors must also strengthen educational support systems and ensure that learning materials reach conflict-affected populations. Efforts to rebuild and redesign damaged education systems should actively involve the affected communities to ensure relevance, ownership, and sustainability. Although emergencies are typically disruptive, they can also create opportunities for innovation within rigid education systems. In some cases, crises provide a unique opening to introduce new teaching approaches and rethink traditional models of schooling.

Current evidence suggests that most emergency education programmes still prioritize conventional forms of instruction. However, there are emerging, though limited, initiatives that address broader needs such as functional literacy, youth engagement, psychosocial support, community participation, and socio-economic reintegration. Given the recurring nature of the Benue herders–farmers crisis, there is a need for more coordinated and large-scale efforts that mobilize expertise and resources effectively. This includes integrating themes such as human rights, peacebuilding, democracy, and tolerance into education programmes.

Regarding the link between the crisis and early marriage, findings from existing programmes (Rafaeli, 2020) indicate that life skills interventions for adolescent girls in emergency contexts can help reduce early marriage and unintended pregnancies, while also supporting their return to education. The study underscores the importance of multisectoral and relationship-based interventions that promote healthy development across the life course. Since caregivers play a central role, the household becomes a critical platform for integrating support strategies. This calls for stronger coordination in designing interventions that combine traditional sectoral approaches with innovative tools such as cash transfers and parenting support (Bennouna *et al.*, 2018). These household-level strategies should also be embedded within broader community systems to ensure a more cohesive and holistic response.

Evaluating the impact of the ongoing Benue crisis on basic mathematics education requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach. First, further field-based research, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, is necessary to better understand the scale of educational disruption. Surveys and interviews involving students, teachers, parents, and school administrators can shed light on issues such as attendance, school closures, and academic performance. Data collection should also examine displacement trends, access to learning resources, and levels of psychological distress, all of which influence students’ ability to learn mathematics. Second, longitudinal research designs are essential for tracking changes in educational outcomes over time. Comparing performance in mathematics before, during, and after periods of conflict can help establish patterns and causal relationships. Particular attention should be given to gender and socio-economic inequalities, as these factors often shape vulnerability. Including comparison groups from less affected regions can further help isolate the specific effects of the crisis.

Finally, effective collaboration with local education authorities and non-governmental organizations is crucial for accurate data collection and the implementation of evidence-based interventions. These stakeholders can help identify the most affected schools and support targeted remedial programmes. Policy responses should prioritize conflict-sensitive education planning, teacher training in trauma-informed approaches, and the integration of emergency education services, as outlined in this study’s theoretical framework. Through such comprehensive

evaluation and coordinated action, it becomes possible not only to address immediate disruptions but also to build a more resilient and adaptive mathematics education system.

5. Conclusion

From an educational perspective, the persistent herders–farmers conflict in Benue has placed the greatest burden on schoolchildren, their parents, and teachers. Findings from this study indicate that children affected by the crisis in the Benue Valley have significant psychosocial support (PSS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) needs, most of which are not adequately addressed by the current education system (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2022). Both human-induced and natural disasters have increasingly become major obstacles to achieving universal education and other education-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Therefore, it is essential to prioritize the rapid restoration of education during emergencies, not only to ensure learning continuity but also as a key strategy for addressing the psychosocial needs of children and adolescents affected by trauma and displacement. Such efforts should recognize that education in emergencies also contributes to sustainable development by fostering peace, stability, and resilience, rather than perpetuating cycles of conflict and insecurity (Bensalah *et al.*, 2001).

The study also highlights the connection between the crisis and the rise in early marriage and child labour, helping to fill existing data gaps on child, early, and forced marriage in humanitarian contexts (Mazurana & Marshak, 2019). Consistent with previous research, the findings show that child labour has wide-ranging implications for human security. It affects not only the immediate welfare of children but also the broader stability of communities and societies (Mbou, 2025). Key dimensions of human security, such as education, health, and economic well-being, are significantly compromised, leading to long-term effects including the reinforcement of poverty cycles, limited opportunities for socio-economic advancement, and setbacks in building resilient and prosperous communities.

Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in Benue State has severely disrupted basic mathematics education. Repeated episodes of violence have displaced thousands of school-aged children, many of whom have been forced to drop out of school entirely. The destruction of schools and restricted access due to insecurity have caused prolonged interruptions in learning, particularly in mathematics, which depends on consistent practice and structured progression. Teachers are also affected, as many flee to safer areas, resulting in shortages of qualified personnel and overcrowded classrooms. These challenges contribute to learning gaps, declining enrolment, and poorer academic performance in mathematics among affected students.

In addition to these physical disruptions, the psychological toll of the conflict is profound. Experiences of violence, displacement, and loss expose children to trauma and anxiety, which negatively affect concentration, memory, and motivation, critical components for learning mathematics (Abah *et al.*, 2022; Asanre, 2024). Economic hardship further compounds the situation, as families struggle to afford school-related expenses such as materials and transportation. In many instances, children are compelled to work or take on additional household responsibilities, leaving them with less time and energy for education. Consequently, the herders–farmers crisis in Benue not only limits access to schooling but also significantly undermines the quality and continuity of mathematics education.

Declaration

Competing Interests

None.

Ethical Approval

The research followed all national rules and institutional policies, and it was approved by the authors' institutional review board. The Helsinki Declaration's tenets guided all investigations involving human

subjects. The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board and equivalent committee.

Author's Contribution

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Data Availability

Due to the nature of the study, the data is not available in any external database.

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