

Farmer–herder conflicts in northern Ghana amid climate change: causes and policy responses

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Violent confrontations between farmers and herders in northern Ghana are becoming increasingly politicised. In the absence of well-regulated land use regimes, competition over resources has become an antagonistic conflict between ‘autochthonous’ farmers and ‘foreign’ herders. Climate change has acted as a further exacerbating factor. The increasing intensity and varied forms of farmer–herder conflicts threaten human security and increase the vulnerability of local communities to external threats. New approaches are needed to reverse this worrying trend. They could include greater co-ordination between member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to develop livestock corridors and grazing reserves, as well as introducing by-laws at the local level to guide relations between farmers and herders. In addition, German development cooperation could support participatory approaches to the establishment of cattle ranches and help improve local capacity for alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

Northern Ghana is a microcosm of the dynamics that have driven farmer–herder conflicts in the dryland of West Africa, where since the early 1990s such confrontations have become markedly more frequent and violent. While they are rooted in practices such as cattle rustling and the destruction of crops,¹ farmer–herder conflicts have increasingly come to encompass crimes including rape and armed robbery.² In Gushegu district alone, one of the hotspots of farmer–herder conflicts in northern Ghana, between 2010 and 2021, there were 16 cases of farmer–herder conflicts, 17 cases of armed robbery and 22 cases of rape involving herders as both victims and perpetrators, according to local police reports.³ In the same area, records from the local chief indicated 102 cases of farmer–herder conflicts and 17 cases of rape involving herders between 2016 and 2022⁴. Between 2001 and 2016, over 68

¹ Bukari, Kaderi Noagah, and Nicholaus Schareika. 2015. “Stereotypes, Prejudices and Exclusion of Fulani Pastoralists in Ghana.” *Pastoralism* 5 (1): 1–12.

² Bukari, Kaderi Noagah. 2016. “Farmer–Herder Relations in Ghana: Interplay of Environmental Change, Conflict, Cooperation and Social Networks.” Georg-August University of Göttingen.

³ Records from Gushegu Police Station

⁴ Interview with Chief of Zanteli Community

herders have been killed in these attacks and several displaced in Gushegu.⁵ However, the actual number of cases could be far higher, as many instances are not reported to the local chief or the police.

Notable recent such events were recorded in 2011⁶, 2013 and 2019.⁷ For example, on 7th December 2011, at midnight, a group of youth in Gushegu armed with machetes attacked Fulani herders resulting in several deaths, the burning of houses, the loss of properties and the rustling of cattle.⁸ A few weeks before the attack, farmers had reported to the local chief that herders had devastated several plots of farmland. The chief determined some compensation to be paid by the herders, but they reportedly refused to follow suit. The farmers' sentiment was that the chief had taken a bribe from the herders. Other farmers alleged that the herders are migrants of a Fulani tribe who are not welcomed in their communities.⁹ In addition, local communities tended to attribute rape and armed robbery cases primarily to Fulani herders. The herders, in turn, justified not paying the compensation by claiming that youth from the farming communities had stolen their cows after the herders had failed to compensate for the damage they did to the farmland.

This example shows that multiple dynamics are at play in such an event, including the role of chiefs as arbitrators and bribe takers, common crime, cattle rustling as a form of counterresistance, non-payment of compensation and identity discrimination of the Fulani tribe as aliens. These factors triggered more violent confrontations in the same community in 2013 and 2019 as leader of the Fulani people indicated that cattle rustling and crop destructions triggered these attacks respectively.¹⁰ Of note, Fulani children and women are often particularly vulnerable in such confrontations.¹¹

Another example illustrates additional aspects: rape, armed robbery, and the social marginalisation of Fulani herders in access to social services such as education and healthcare.¹² In August 2020, local communities in Mamprugu attributed several cases of robbery and rape to Fulani herders. In response, over two days, Fulani herders saw their houses burned and cattle shot. More than 15 houses were destroyed, 150 cows were killed, and over 120 disappeared.¹³ A Fulani association called Tabital Pulaaku disputed that herders had been responsible for the initial incidents, insisting instead that ethnic stereotyping was the reason for the attack on its members.¹⁴

This Policy Brief examines the causes of farmer-herder conflicts in northern Ghana and evaluates the role of climate change in this regard. It then draws conclusions for more effective policy responses to contain such conflicts.

⁵ Ahmed, Abubakari and Elias Danyi Kuusaana. 2021. "Ranches won't solve farmer-herder conflicts in Ghana if they don't deal with root causes". *The Conversation*, 3 October 2021.

⁶ Olaniyan, Azeez. 2015. "The Fulani-Konkomba Conflict and Management Strategy in Gushegu, Ghana." *Journal of Applied Security Research* 10(3): 330-40.

⁷ Interview with leader of Fulani people in Gushegu

⁸ Olaniyan, Azeez. 2015. op. cit.

⁹ Interview with Assembly member of Zanteli Community

¹⁰ Interview with leader of Fulani people in Gushegu

¹¹ Bukari, Kaderi Noagah, and Nicholaus Schareika. 2015. op. cit.

¹² Bukari, Kaderi Noagah, and Nicholaus Schareika. 2015. op. cit.

¹³ Interview with leader of Fulani people in Gushegu

¹⁴ Tabital Pulaaku. 2021. "Ghana: About 400 cattle belonging to Fulani herdsmen have been senselessly decimated in the area of Gbangbil Kura." Accessed 2 December 2022.

Analysing the causes of farmer-herder conflicts

The drivers of violent confrontation between farmers and herders in northern Ghana are diverse and context-specific. They are rooted in political and sociocultural factors, with climate change acting as an exacerbating element.

The politics of farmer-herder conflicts

Farmer-herder conflicts are embedded in socio-political systems governing access to resources.¹⁵ As numerous studies have shown, competition over the distribution, access, use and control of natural resources is frequently politicised along the lines of identity, and enmeshed in local struggles for power.¹⁶ In northern Ghana, these conflicts are embedded in the institutional arrangements shaping land tenure and water rights. The decentralised land use decisions have tended to favour crop farming over livestock rearing.¹⁷ The absence of clear land allocation for livestock, coupled with the discriminatory nature of access to land and water, has served as a recipe for farmer-herder conflicts, with herders being perceived as violating the property rights of farming communities.

Over time, competition over land use along these lines has become intertwined with communal divides and contests over citizenship.¹⁸ In Ghana, herders are mostly members of the Fulani ethnic group who originated in present-day Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and migrated to Ghana in the early 20th century.¹⁹ The first post-independence census in 1960 recorded 25,050 Fulanis in Ghana.²⁰ The first migrations were initially seasonal, and hence herders were often seen as nomadic pastoralists who move along the aridity gradient. Today, migrant Fulani fall into two main categories. The first category are herders who came with their cattle and have stayed permanently, although locally they are still perceived as seasonal pastoralists. The second category are migrants who came without cattle and have taken up the rearing of Ghanaian-owned cattle as a source of livelihood. Herders of the latter category are locally perceived as non-violent, and often have social ties through marriages with locals, thereby improving coexistence. Overall, Fulanis have coexisted with communities that see themselves as autochthonous to northern Ghana for decades, and many speak native languages. In the context of competition over land use, however, farmers have increasingly framed Fulani herders as ‘foreigners’ whom they accuse of vices such as rape and armed robbery (see info box on page 4).

¹⁵ Penu, Dennis Amego Korbla, and Sebastian Angzoorokuu Paalo. 2021. “Institutions and Pastoralist Conflicts in Africa: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16 (2): 224–41.

¹⁶ Paalo, Sebastian Angzoorokuu. 2020. “The Politics of Addressing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Ghana.” *Peacebuilding* 9 (1): 79–99.

¹⁷ Interview with Lands Commission of Northern Region, 2022

¹⁸ Bukari, Kaderi Noagah, and Nicholas Schareika. 2015. *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Tonah, Steve. 2002. “Fulani Pastoralists, Indigenous Farmers and the Contest for Land in Northern Ghana.” *African Spectrum* 37 (1): 43–59.

²⁰ Ibrahim, Abubakar. 2016. “Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities in Ghanaian Newspapers: A Case Study of the Fulani.” University of Ghana.

Ethnic stereotypes and nativism in farmer-herder conflicts

“My problem with Fulani herders in this community is that they are not natives of this community... Yet, Fulani herdsmen are involved in armed robbery and rape case each time. Once they are not natives, they should leave the community.

In 2020, a farmer's wife was raped on her way to the farm, and the woman identified the suspect as a Fulani herdsman. As if that was not enough, the same week, cattle belonging to a native were all stolen by his own Fulani herder. Increasingly, there is no trust and safety.

It is true that natives also steal cattle from herders, but only one, two or three at most. However, if herders want to steal, they take the entire herd.”

Interview with a local farmer in Gushegu, 2022

The stigmatisation of Fulani herders as ‘foreigners’ is rooted in heavy-handed state policies dating back to the Aliens Compliance Order in 1969.²¹ The order classified Fulani herders as aliens and non-citizens who had to be expelled from the country. In 1988–89, herders were again given a 14-day ultimatum to leave Ghana, and several were expelled by a military task force.²² The process was characterised by mass cattle rustling and migration of herds through northern Ghana. However, the campaign largely failed to achieve its aims due to a lack of local support. For example, livestock traders hid some Fulani herders, fearing negative consequences for their business if the herders were expelled.²³

As the impasse continued, the political pressure on the government to act intensified in the 1990s. In 1989, a joint military and police task force was formed under Operation Cow Leg (OCL).²⁴ OCL was mandated to shoot and kill cattle belonging to Fulani herders, to drive them out of Ghana. Similar campaigns followed after OCL under the name Operation Livestock Solidarity.²⁵ Again, they faced obstacles from critical stakeholders such as livestock traders and landlords, who did not support the operations because they benefited from herding activity in cash or kind.²⁶ For example, landlords who kept these herders by allocating land would forgo their rent payment in cash or kind. Herders who had paid rent for land use in advance demanded to be reimbursed before leaving. The operations also found it difficult to differentiate between ‘Ghanaian’ and ‘foreign’ Fulani cattle, and also ended up targeting the cattle of Ghanaian citizens.²⁷ Moreover, expulsion made it more difficult for Ghanaian cattle owners to find herders for their cattle; as a result, such businessmen also opposed the operations. Finally, veterinary workers and livestock traders also saw expulsion as threatening their livelihood, and therefore failed to support the campaigns.²⁸

The politics of framing farmer-herder tensions as conflicts between ‘citizens’ and ‘non-citizens’ has come to infuse power struggles among local actors such as chiefs, landowners, and police that have further contributed to escalating violence. Both cattle owners and migrant herders emphasise that politicians stigmatise herders as ‘non-citizens’ to mobilise

²¹ Ahmed, Abubakari, and Elias Danyi Kuusaana. 2021. “Cattle Ranching and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the Conditions for Successes and Failures in Northern Ghana.” *African Security* 14 (2): 132–55.

²² Agyemang, Emmanuel. 2017. “Farmer-Herder Conflict in Africa: An Assessment of the Causes and Effects of the Sedentary Farmers-Fulani Herdsmen Conflict. A Case Study of the Agogo Traditional Area, Ashanti Region of Ghana.” University of Agder.

²³ Adomako, Margaret. 2019. “Addressing the Causes and Consequences of the Farmer-Herder Conflict in Ghana.” Policy Brief. Accra.

²⁴ Ahmed, Abubakari, and Elias Danyi Kuusaana. 2021. op. cit.

²⁵ Ahmed, Abubakari, and Elias Danyi Kuusaana. 2021. op. cit.

²⁶ Interview with Divisional Police Officer, Gushegu, 2022; also see Adomako, Margaret. 2019. op. cit.

²⁷ Olaniyan, Azeez, Michael Francis and Ufo Okeke-Uzodike. 2015. “The Cattle are “Ghanaians” but the Herders are Strangers: Farmer-Herder Conflicts, Expulsion Policy, and Pastoralist Question in Agogo, Ghana”. *African Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 2: 53-67.

²⁸ Adomako, Margaret. 2019. op. cit.

political support from ‘citizens’. For farmers, politicians’ claims that they will resolve farmer-herder conflicts in favour of the former have become key in voting decisions. For example, in his campaign for the 2016 general election,²⁹ a member of parliament mobilised support from local farming communities by insisting that if voted into power, his administration would prioritise farmer-herder conflicts. Thereafter, however, farmers are often disappointed with politicians failing to deliver on such promises, accusing them of corruption and of enjoying support from herders, whether in cash or kind.

Most recently, the framing of farmer-herder conflicts by local actors has taken an even more worrying turn. As jihadist groups have expanded from the Sahel to the northern parts of the coastal West African states, including Ghana, some Ghanaians have come to equate Fulani herders with jihadists. This reflects prevailing stereotypes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, where Fulani herders are often collectively stigmatised as jihadists. These stereotypes also increasingly appear in local Ghanaian media coverage. Such stigmatisation has affected Fulani people's access to some social services, especially health care and education.³⁰

Climate change and resource scarcity as exacerbating factors

While the above political dynamics are clearly at the core of farmer-herder conflicts, global climate change has acted as an exacerbating factor.³¹ Historically, resource scarcity induced by climate change along the dry-wet gradient of West Africa has been an underlining exacerbating factor in farmer-herder conflicts.³² Aside from climate change, resource scarcity is also influenced by the confluence of population growth, rapid urban expansions into farmlands or grazing areas, and the growing intensity of agricultural land use. Between 1960 and 2021, population density in Ghana increased from 26 to 129 persons per square kilometre, putting pressure on natural resources, peri-urban farmlands and ecosystems such as pasture, grazing land and freshwater availability.³³ Similarly, the increasing expansion of farmlands through plantation agriculture, including large-scale land acquisitions, has affected grazing land and water availability due to irrigation.³⁴ Statistics in Ghana have shown that these acquisitions amount to 404,000 hectares, representing 8.6 per cent of arable land in the country.

Evidence from Nigeria also supports the assumption that climate change, through its effects on the availability of water, pasture and heat stress, contributes to the perpetuation of farmer-herder conflicts.³⁵ In Ghana, the temperature has risen by 1°C, rainfall has reduced by 2.4 per cent, and the number of hot days (i.e. days with temp. > 25°C) has increased by

²⁹ Interview with Assembly member of Zanteli Community

³⁰ Atuguba, Raymond A., Francis Xavier Dery Tuokuu, and Vitus Gbang. 2020. “Statelessness in West Africa: An Assessment of Stateless Populations and Legal, Policy, and Administrative Frameworks in Ghana.” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 8 (1): 14–31.

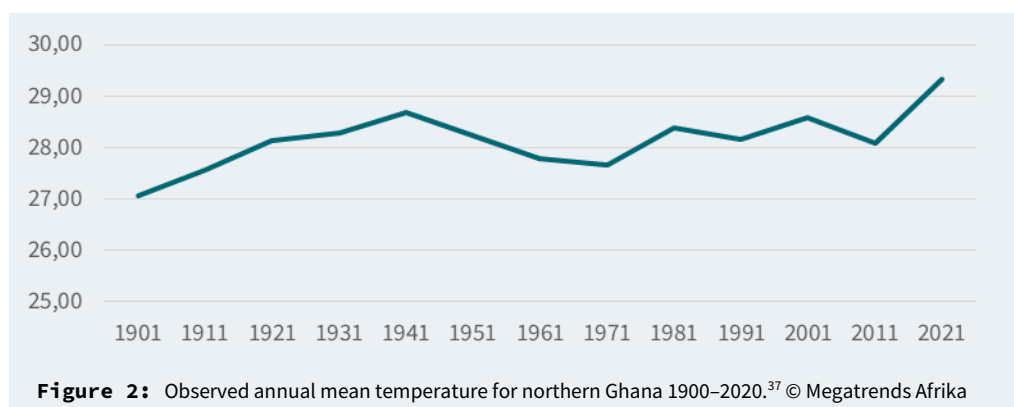
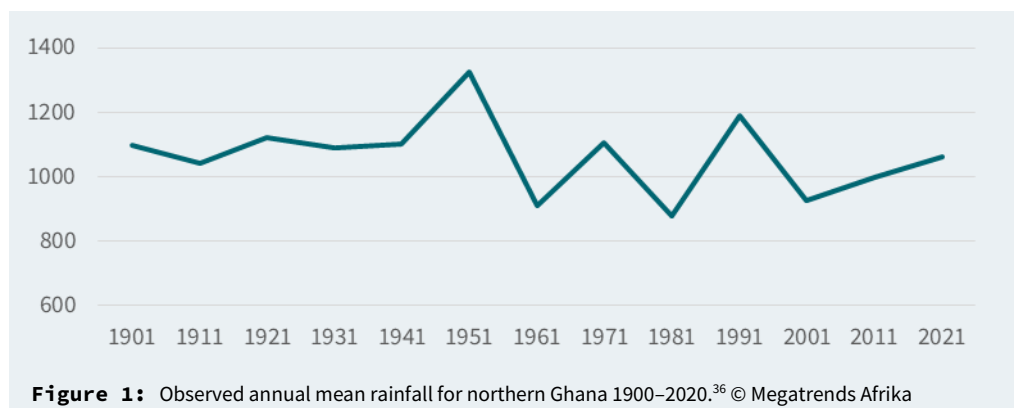
³¹ Brottem, Leif V. 2016. “Environmental Change and Farmer-Herder Conflict in Agro-Pastoral West Africa.” *Human Ecology* 44 (5): 547–63.

³² Issifu, Abdul Karim, Francis Diawuo Darko, and Sebastian Angzoorkuu Paalo. 2022. “Climate Change, Migration and Farmer–Herder Conflict in Ghana.” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 39 (4): 421–39.

³³ Ghana Statistical Service. 2022. “General 2021 Population and Housing Census.” Accra.

³⁴ Ahmed, Abubakari. 2021. “Biofuel Feedstock Plantations Closure and Land Abandonment in Ghana: New Directions for Land Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Land Use Policy* 107 105492.

³⁵ Alaanololuwa Ikhuoso, O., M. J. Adegbeye, M. M.Y. Elghandour, M. Mellado, S. N. Al-Dobaib, and A. Z.M. Salem. 2020. “Climate Change and Agriculture: The Competition for Limited Resources amidst Crop Farmers Livestock Herding Conflict in Nigeria – A Review.” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 272: 123104.



13 per cent since 1960, with a more rapid increment in northern Ghana.³⁸ Since the 1980s, rising temperatures and rainfall variability (see Figures 1 & 2) have escalated water scarcity and fodder, thereby exacerbating competition for resources.³⁹ Recent analysis shows 34 more hot days now in northern Ghana compared to 2000.⁴⁰

Hot weather and heat stress affect water availability and fresh fodder, compelling Fulani herders to adopt new adaptation strategies that increase the likelihood of farmer-herder conflicts. In Gushegu, for example, mobility and feeding patterns as adaptation strategies to climate change have resulted in crop destructions and disregard for tree tenure rights. Such acts, in turn, are likely to cause conflict with farmers (see info box below).

Climate adaptation strategies and how they can influence farmer-herder conflicts

(...) Some years back, the sun was not as hot as now. As a result, the young calves easily get weak due to heat stress and long-distance walking to search for food and water. To adapt to the increasing heat from the sun in Gushegu, I usually allow the cattle to rest in the daytime. At night, I start moving in search of food based on my local knowledge of the landscape. However, sometimes it is challenging at night as my vision is poor. On two occasions, I unintentionally entered a maize and cassava farm with over 400 cattle (...). The farmer traced the footsteps of the herd to my house, and we had a verbal exchange (...). Also, in the daytime, when the sun is too hot, the animals are heat stressed and require fresh fodder with moisture (...). To overcome this, I often prune fresh tree branches. However, on three occasions, I had verbal confrontations with farmers who claimed I did not have the right to cut trees to feed my animal without their permission.

Interview with Fulani Herder, Gushegu, 2022

³⁶ World Bank. 2022. "Ghana – Climatology | Climate Change Knowledge Portal." 2022.

³⁷ World Bank. 2022. "Ghana – Climatology | Climate Change Knowledge Portal." 2022.

³⁸ World Bank. 2021. "Climate Risk Country Profile – Ghana." Washington D.C.

³⁹ Issifu, Abdul Karim, Francis Diawuo Darko, and Sebastian Angzoorokuu Paolo. 2022. op. cit.

⁴⁰ Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. 2021. "Climate Risk Profile: Ghana." Potsdam.

Approaches to farmer-herder conflicts and their limits

Following the failure of successive operations aimed at expelling herders, the Ghanaian government has more recently opted for dialogue and mediation by organising different fora for addressing farmer-herder conflicts.⁴¹ Through these discussions and expert advice, the government in 2017 adopted a national cattle ranching project. The rationale behind this initiative was that creating ranches could restrict movement induced by climate change and provide a sustainable supply of food and water, thereby reducing the risk of violent confrontations between farmers and herders. The policy has been met with mixed reactions. In southern Ghana, some ranches were indeed established, despite challenges with regard to the supply of feed and veterinary services. In northern Ghana, by contrast, implementation has largely failed to follow because of the complexities of land tenure, tree tenure and the nomadic lifestyle of herders that is wary of restrictions to movement.⁴² In addition, some herders believe a ranch will not provide space for mobility strategies⁴³ used by herders during dry and raining seasons. Others criticise the lack of participation and consultation in the process. Farmers and herders highlight several other concerns, including obtaining local support for large-scale land acquisition and ensuring a sustainable supply of fodder, water, as well as animal healthcare.

Meanwhile, local-level responses have centred on alternative dispute resolution mechanisms (ADRM). At the community level, there are three levels of ADRMs.⁴⁴ Firstly, there is direct negotiation between the herder, cattle owner and farmer to determine the damage and necessary compensation. But such negotiations often fail, and herders usually prefer the second level.⁴⁵ This is a local committee set up by the local chief, but it is neither statutory nor formalised or registered. Membership includes representatives from interest groups such as landlords, youth, cattle owners, and resident Fulani herders.⁴⁶ This committee will listen to the two parties and arrive at a decision such as compensation. The committee usually meets parties several times depending on the issue. However, farmers are often unhappy with committee members' actions (or absence thereof) and often accuse them of favouring herders due to bribery and corruption. Moreover, the committee lacks the legal mandate to enforce its decisions, such as compensation payment or expulsion of herders from the community.

Thirdly, if decision-making at the committee level fails, the matter is forwarded to the local chief to render a judgement. Decisions by the chief are customarily binding, and both the farmer and herder are compelled to obey. Failure to comply with the chief's directives can provoke banishment from the community or sanctions. However, similar to the committee, there is often a high level of mistrust in the chief's adjudication.⁴⁷ Given this mistrust, if all these local measures fail because parties fear that they are being treated unfairly, the issue is then transferred to the local police. However, seeking police determination is often the last option for herders because of their citizen status and fear of negative repercussions.

⁴¹ Interview with member of the national committee on cattle ranching project, 2022

⁴² Ahmed, Abubakari, and Elias Danyi Kuusaana. 2021. *op. cit.*

⁴³ There are movement patterns used by herders to navigate their environment in search for food and water. Some herders believe a ranch will not provide space for the movement of herds during dry and raining seasons.

⁴⁴ Interview with Chief of Zenteli community in Gushegu, 2022

⁴⁵ Interview with Herder, Gushegu 2022

⁴⁶ Interview with Chief of Zenteli community in Gushegu, 2022

⁴⁷ Interview with farmer, Gushegu, 2022

Policy implications

Measures to contain farmer-herder conflicts can be adopted at several levels. At the regional level, the International Transhumance Certificate (ITC) and free movement protocol of the ECOWAS have proven insufficient. As herds move from one country to another, regional corridors for livestock movement, grazing and water are necessary. The ITC only grants access to borders, but not to grazing fields and water. Regional states could work to develop grazing corridors in ways that tackle the challenges associated with such corridors, such as border insecurity. This would require a participatory process with herders, land-owners, and traditional authorities, as well as operational guidelines, education and awareness raising.

At the national level, the National Association of Cattle Farmers and the Fulani Association have long advocated for sustainable cattle ranches in Ghana. As land access is a significant challenge to establishing ranches in Ghana, local approaches to consolidate land are imperative to overcome land tenure impediments. Local communities could be persuaded to allocate land for ranches by the potential benefits of the ranching policy in reducing the risk of farmer-herder conflicts. The process of establishing ranches should be participatory and allow for diverse knowledge systems including both traditional and modern science. Herders can contribute crucial knowledge that can address possible operational challenges of ranches in the project design, and promote co-designing and co-production, thereby fostering a sense of local ownership. The government, in turn, could mobilise international support to set up the necessary infrastructure: a sustainable supply of water, fodder and veterinary services. Germany and other international partners could support the promotion of cattle ranching through development cooperation.

At the local level, the lack of legitimacy and formalisation of ADRMs has tended to compromise their effectiveness, as decisions are not binding and members lack basic dispute resolution skills. A first step would be to register, formalise and institutionalise ADRM committees with operational guidelines. Such guidelines and protocols would increase transparency in the dispute-resolution process and avoid excessive discretion. In addition, formalisation could increase the legitimacy of these structures. Formalisation should come with guidelines on the composition of membership, tenure of office, meetings and grievance redress systems. Germany could support local dispute resolution with capacity building measures similar to those provided through the Local Governance Platform (LoGoP), which worked with both formal and informal stakeholders and later led to the passing of the Petroleum Bill to protect community rights and transparency.⁴⁸ A similar approach could be adopted to boost the capacities of existing local ADRM structures.

In the absence of long-term measures such as ranches and formalisation of ADRMs, immediate actions necessary at the local level can include registration of cattle and herders, demarcation of farming zones and grazing areas, as well as water rationing. The participatory process of demarcating grazing areas with herders and joint decision-making on water use rights could reduce the risk of farmer-herder conflicts. This participatory process

⁴⁸ Embassy of Federal Republic of Germany 2022. "Ghana & Germany: A strong partnership for the future", Accra.

would raise awareness of the interventions, solicit social acceptability and improve sustainability during implementation. In addition, registration of any herder who enters the community could help determine if they have a history of social vices such as rape and armed robberies in the community or not when they are arrested.

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