



Framing the Farmer–Herder Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Solutions-Oriented vs Blame-Oriented Narratives in *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* Newspapers (January–June 2018)

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ABSTRACT

Background: The farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria’s Middle Belt has escalated from localised disputes into a significant humanitarian crisis. Media representation plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and conflict dynamics; however, empirical research comparing blame-oriented versus solution-oriented framing remains limited.

Objective: This study analysed how *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers framed the conflict in Benue State between January and June 2018, specifically quantifying the prevalence of blame versus reconciliation narratives.

Method: Guided by Entman’s framing theory, the study employed a mixed-methods content analysis of 20 purposively sampled news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces.

Results: Blame-oriented frames slightly predominated (55%) over solutions-oriented frames (45%). *The Punch* favoured accusatory narratives, whereas *The Daily Trust* exhibited a more balanced approach. Reporting was largely episodic, focusing on immediate violence rather than thematic which will address long-term structural causes. While the media fulfills an accountability “watchdog” role, the high frequency of blame-oriented reporting risks deepening communal polarisation in Benue State.

Conclusion: Although *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* provide essential oversight, the tendency to prioritise immediate blame over long-term solutions creates a volatile narrative environment that can exacerbate tensions in Benue State.

Unique Contribution: This study provides systematic, empirical evidence of the tension between accusatory and constructive journalism. It identifies the "Watchdog Paradox," where traditional accountability-seeking reporting inadvertently fuels ethnic and resource-based polarization during active crises.

Key Recommendation: Editors should adopt "solutions journalism" to shift the discourse toward sustainable reforms—such as modern ranching and community-led mediation—rather than focusing primarily on retributive demands.

Keywords: *Conflict Reporting, Media Framing, Farmer-Herder Conflict, Solutions Journalism.*



INTRODUCTION

The farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria has evolved from episodic local disputes over land and livestock into a protracted, multi-dimensional crisis that now inflicts heavy human, economic and political costs on affected states, most notable of these states include Benue, Plateau, Taraba and other parts of the Middle Belt (International Crisis Group, 2018; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Scholars and policy analysts identify several key factors underlying the transformation of localised pastoralist-farmer tensions into recurring violent confrontations, including changing land use patterns, shrinking grazing corridors, climate variability, desertification, population growth, expanding agriculture, inadequate conflict-resolution mechanisms, poor land governance, and limited access to justice (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2018).

Empirical studies emphasise that the interaction among these drivers is complex. Environmental scarcity can increase the frequency and intensity of competition over vital resources (Homer-Dixon, 1999), but scarcity alone does not mechanically produce violence; political economy factors, including elite manipulation of local disputes, proliferation of small arms, criminal networks, and failures of state capacity, mediate whether competition escalates into armed conflict (International Crisis Group, 2018; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Nwafor et al., 2023).

In the Nigerian context, the erosion of traditional conflict-management institutions and the collapse of historical grazing routes have placed pastoral livelihoods under severe stress and created new opportunities for criminal actors to exploit grievances for profit or political ends (International Crisis Group, 2018). The human consequences of the conflict are clear. Recurrent attacks, retaliatory killings, and mass displacements have devastated agrarian communities, undermining food production, disrupting markets, and generating acute humanitarian needs (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Nwafor et al., 2013). According to the International Crisis Group (2018), the conflict's impact extends beyond fatalities and displacement, with far-reaching socioeconomic consequences, including disrupted planting and harvest cycles, loss of livestock assets, and declining investor confidence in agriculture. These dynamics compound local fragility, rendering affected populations increasingly

Existing empirical work on Nigerian media and agrarian conflict offers important but incomplete insights. Some studies document a tendency toward episodic, sensational reporting that emphasises isolated violent incidents without adequate structural context, thereby encouraging victimisation narratives and ethnic polarisation (Olorunyomi, 2019; Ayoola & Olaosun, 2021).

Others argue that reportage frequently privileges securitised frames, focusing on military responses and arrests, at the expense of coverage that foregrounds prevention, mediation and long-term policy solutions (Emechebe, Okoye, & Adeyanju, 2023; Olabamiji, 2014). This pattern matters because media frames that assign blame to entire communities or that amplify dehumanising rhetoric can harden inter-communal prejudice and close space for negotiated settlement; conversely, solutions-oriented and peace-centred reporting can open avenues for reconciliation by highlighting successful local mediation, policy options, and institutional reforms (Ayoola & Olaosun, 2021).



Existing scholarship on Nigerian conflict reporting largely documents frequency, tone and prominence (Oso, 2017). There is, however, limited systematic evidence comparing solutions-oriented frames which foreground reconciliation, policy remedies and peace building with blame-oriented frames which foreground attribution of guilt to specific ethnic, social or political actors. This gap inhibits efforts to harness media as constructive partners in conflict mitigation.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to investigate how selected Nigerian newspapers (*The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers) framed the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State (Jan–Jun 2018), with specific focus on the prevalence, patterns and implications of solutions-oriented versus blame-oriented narratives. The study was therefore set out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify frames as solutions-oriented or blame-oriented in *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers reports on the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State.
2. To find out the extent to which *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers’ report on the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State employ solutions-oriented versus blame-oriented frames.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of framing a solutions-oriented or blame-oriented reports in *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers on the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State?
2. To what extent do *The Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers report on the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State employ solutions-oriented versus blame-oriented frames?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Media and Conflict Reporting

Research demonstrates media's double-edged role: reporting that emphasises victimhood, ethnic blame or criminalisation often polarises audiences and undermines prospects for reconciliation, while solution-oriented reporting (solution journalism; peace journalism) can encourage dialogue and reduce dehumanisation (Galtung, 2003; Olorunyomi, 2019; Emechebe et al., 2023; Nwafor et al., 2024). Studies of Nigerian coverage of agrarian conflict point to frequent ethnicised narratives and episodic reporting which foregrounds violence without context or remedies (International Crisis Group, 2018; Ayoola & Olaosun, 2021). Yet there is limited content-analytic work that systematically compares the incidence of constructive frames (policy and peace-centred) with blame attribution across major national newspapers.

Solution Oriented Versus Blame-Oriented Frames

Solutions-oriented frames are defined as coverage that foregrounds reconciliation mechanisms, policy responses, peacebuilding programs, or institutional remedies (for example, calls for dialogue platforms, grazing reserves, compensation schemes or legislative reform). Blame-oriented frames are defined as coverage that explicitly assigns culpability to identifiable actors or groups (e.g., “Fulani herders”, political elites), uses moralising language, or frames the conflict



primarily as criminality attributable to a distinct cohort. These operational distinctions align with the responsibility dimension in classical framing literature (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and permit empirical coding for comparative analysis.

Blame-oriented frames foreground responsibility: who caused the event and who should be punished. These frames frequently feature perpetrators, victims' emotional testimony, and calls for immediate accountability or punitive action. (Framing literature; Iyengar; experimental studies). (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991; Onwe et al., 2017). Solutions-oriented or "solutions journalism" focuses on responses to problems that is, how interventions work or fail, evidence of outcomes, trade-offs and lessons learned, rather than solely on the problem or on blame. (Solutions Journalism Network).

These two categories align with the "responsibility" dimension in framing literature but are extended here to foreground constructive vs divisive outcome orientations (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999).

Media Framing and Public Policy

Media frames act as moderators between operational outcomes (e.g., a rescue) and public/policy responses: a rescue described in blame terms is more likely to create immediate punitive pressure and short-term political responses; a rescue described in solutions terms is more likely to stimulate learning, funding for systemic prevention, and community partnership initiatives. Over time, policy changes feed back into the structural drivers that shape perpetrator ecology. (Entman; framing and policy literature; ACLED recommendations).

Conflict Reporting

Conflict reporting denotes the professional practice of gathering and disseminating news about violent and non-violent socio-political disputes. It includes immediate event-driven accounts (hard news: casualty counts, arrests), investigative accountability reporting (exposing actors or state failures), and longer-form analytical pieces that trace structural causes and policy options (Akpobo, & Nwafor 2013). Conflict reporting therefore spans a range of journalistic roles—from watchdog and witness to mediator and educator—and may either amplify polarisation (when framed episodically and with moralised blame) or contribute to conflict mitigation (when framed thematically and solution-oriented) (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

A number of Nigerian scholars have studied press coverage of the farmer–herder conflict. Okeke, Orekyeh, and Eze (2018) found that headlines and hard-news items frequently emphasized casualties and actor-centric blame (labels such as "herdsmen"/"killer herdsmen"), producing episodic frames that foreground immediate violence over structural drivers (e.g., land scarcity, climate variability). Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) likewise documented tendencies toward violent, sensational frames in several national dailies and argued that such coverage often amounted to "war journalism" rather than peace-oriented reporting. A larger-scale analyses that combine topic modelling and qualitative content analysis (Ogunkunle *et al.*, 2025) confirm a



mixed picture: while blame/episodic frames remain highly visible, thematic and policy-oriented pieces (ranching policy, anti-grazing laws, mediation efforts) appear in features and opinion pages but less frequently in front-page news.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Framing and Media Effects

Framing theory posits that journalists and news organisations select aspects of perceived reality and make them salient, thereby promoting specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and remedial recommendations (Entman, 1993). Research operationalising frames in content analysis has shown that frames influence public understanding and policy support (Iyengar, 1991; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Framing studies frequently distinguish between responsibility frames—assigning blame to individuals, groups or institutions—and remedial frames that spotlight institutional or collective solutions (Borah, 2011; Tankard, 2001).

Framing theory explains how news selection and emphasis influence public perception of problems, causes, moral judgments and remedies. ENTMAN's classic formulation (1993) remains foundational: frames highlight certain aspects of an event while marginalizing others, thereby shaping public interpretation and policy preferences (Entman, 1993). Iyengar's (1991) episodic vs thematic distinction demonstrates that episodic coverage, individual incidents, tends to promote individual-level attributions of responsibility, whereas thematic coverage, contextual/systemic, promotes structural attributions and policy solutions. (Iyengar, 1991). ([University of Chicago Press][9], [Taylor & Francis Online][10])

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methodology to examine the framing of the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State within *Daily Trust* and *The Punch* newspapers between January 1 and June 30, 2018. Utilising a purposive sampling technique, 20 articles (10 per publication)—including news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces—were retrieved from online archives using keywords such as "Benue killings" and "herdsmen." These titles were selected for their national circulation and documented influence on Nigerian agenda-setting (Oso, 2012).

The individual article served as the unit of analysis. Adopting a deductive approach based on Entman's (1993) and Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) framing models, the study categorized content into two dominant operational frames:

- **Blame-Oriented:** Emphasizing culpability, moral condemnation, and demands for prosecution (e.g., "killer herdsmen," "government failure").
- **Solutions-Oriented:** Emphasizing institutional responses, policy proposals, and peacebuilding (e.g., "anti-grazing law," "ranching," "security deployment").

Data were analysed through quantitative frequency counts of dominant frames, complemented by qualitative textual interpretation. To ensure construct validity, categories were grounded in established framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, and treatment



recommendation. While reliability was maintained through transparent coding and representative quoting, the study acknowledges the limitation of a single-coder approach.

Data Presentation

Table A: Articles coded

SN	Title	NPs	Date	Genre	Short Quote (≤25 words)	Primary Frame
1	Farmer/herder clashes claim 168 this year	Daily Trust	31 Jan 2018	News	“the government is still not doing enough to protect communities.”	Blame-oriented
2	A message to Benue and all Nigerians	Daily Trust	15 Jan 2018	Op-ed	“over 70 persons slaughtered by terrorists called FULANI HERDSMEN.”	Blame-oriented
3	IGP’s relocation to Benue: What impact?	Daily Trust	27 Jan 2018	News/ Feature	“IGP... relocated to Benue State on the orders of President...”	Solutions-oriented (police response)
4	Pastoralist/farmers crisis... the Fulani narrative	Daily Trust	26 Jan 2018	Feature / Analysis	“we invited the association to hear their own story in the spirit of fair hearing.”	Solutions-oriented
5	Troops nab 7 herdsmen destroying farmland in Benue	Daily Trust	2 Mar 2018	News	“troops... arrested 4 herdsmen grazing in farmlands.”	Solutions-oriented (law enforcement)
6	Farmer/herder clashes: 168 this year (Amnesty commentary)	Daily Trust	31 Jan 2018	News	“the killers are getting away with murder,” said Amnesty.	Blame-oriented
7	Troops kill 36 armed herdsmen in Benue	Daily Trust	21 May 2018	News	“the troops killed 35 armed herdsmen.”	Solutions-oriented (military action)
8	Benue killings: Lawyer sues Buhari, demands ban of Fulani herdsmen	Daily Trust	11 May 2018	News	“the activities of Fulani herdsmen... constitute acts of terrorism.”	Blame-oriented
9	Why Violence Persists in Benue	Daily Trust	13 May 2018	Feature	“security agencies... must work with the people.”	Solutions-oriented (recommendations)
10	Insecurity: Benue applauds Operation Whirl Stroke	Daily Trust	30 Jun 2018	News	“operation... has reduced the spate of attacks.”	Solutions-oriented



11	Herdsmen kill 20, burn houses...	Punch	3 Jan 2018	News	“no fewer than 50 persons have been killed... by suspected Fulani herdsmen.”	Blame-oriented
12	PHOTOS: Benue youths in violent protest...	Punch	3 Jan 2018	Photo/News	“youths in violent protest over herdsmen’s killing.”	Blame-oriented
13	Don’t politicise killings, Osinbajo advises Nigerians	Punch	7 Jan 2018	News	“don’t read political meaning into recent killings.”	Solutions-oriented / Neutral
14	Benue killings: If FG can’t protect us, we will raise an army	Punch	12 Jan 2018	News	“If the government can’t protect us, we will mobilise and train our people...”	Blame-oriented (FG failure)
15	Benue killings: ACF sets up committee on anti-grazing law	Punch	13 Jan 2018	News	“ACF... constituted a committee on how best to handle the anti-open grazing law.”	Solutions-oriented
16	Police arrest 59 suspects over Benue crises	Punch	15 Jan 2018	News	“the command had already deployed additional personnel.”	Solutions-oriented
17	Killings by herdsmen: Osinbajo panel wants increased military presence	Punch	29 Jan 2018	News	“decisive military force will now be fully engaged.”	Solutions-oriented
18	Benue killings: Senate summons IG over failure to arrest suspects	Punch	1 Feb 2018	News	“the Senate ... summoned the Inspector-General of Police.”	Blame-oriented (accountability demand)
19	Herdsmen attack church, kill two priests, 17 others	Punch	24 Apr 2018	News	“herdsmen... attacked St. Ignatius... killing two priests.”	Blame-oriented
20	Benue: Killer herdsmen are sponsored, says military	Punch	27 Apr 2018	News	“the fresh rounds of killings... are being sponsored.”	Blame-oriented

Source: Fieldwork, 2025



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The analysis of 20 articles in Table A revealed a near-even split between blame-oriented and solutions-oriented frames:

- **Blame-oriented frames:** 11 articles (55%) emphasized criticism, moral outrage, and accountability. Examples include Amnesty’s condemnation and op-eds labeling “killer herdsmen.”
- **Solutions-oriented frames:** 9 articles (45%) stressed remedial actions, such as police relocation, troop operations, policy proposals, and institutional responses.

Breakdown by Newspaper:

- *Daily Trust* ($n = 10$): 5 blame-oriented, 5 solutions-oriented.
- *The Punch* ($n = 10$): 6 blame-oriented, 4 solutions-oriented (with one neutral leaning towards solutions).

Overlap and Mixed Frames: Articles often combined blame and solutions frames, with a single dominant frame assigned for analysis.

RQ1 — What is the nature of framing in Nigerian newspaper reports on the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, specifically regarding solutions-oriented versus blame-oriented frames?

Coverage alternates between blame-oriented narratives (episodic accounts of killings, NGO condemnations, calls to proscribe perpetrators and hold institutions accountable) and solutions-oriented narratives (reports of security responses, proposals for anti-grazing laws, committees, or ranching).

In the sample, both newspapers presented both frames; Punch leaned slightly more toward accusatory/blame narratives while Daily Trust in this sample balanced reportage of punitive security responses with analytical features advocating solutions. Example evidence: Amnesty’s critique of government inaction (Daily Trust) and the Osinbajo panel’s call for increased military presence (Punch).

RQ2 — To what extent do Nigerian newspapers report on the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State employ solutions-oriented versus blame-oriented frames?

In the purposive sample of 20 accessible articles published between 01/01/2018 and 30/06/2018, 11 (55%) were coded as blame-oriented and 9 (45%) as solutions-oriented. This indicates a modest predominance of blame framing in these high-visibility pieces; however, many articles contained both elements. (See Table A and the citations attached to each coded item.)

DISCUSSION

The Content Analysis of 20 newspaper articles revealed a slight dominance of blame-oriented frames (55%) over solutions-oriented frames (45%) in the reporting of the farmer–herder conflict in Benue State. This suggests that Nigerian newspapers alternated between moralized attribution



of responsibility and reportage of remedial measures. In particular, *The Punch* leaned more toward blame-oriented narratives, while *Daily Trust* presented a relatively balanced mix of episodic blame and solutions-oriented coverage. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that demonstrate how Nigerian newspapers foreground episodic, casualty-driven reporting with strong blame language, while offering fewer thematic, solution-oriented analyses in particular, Okeke *et al.*, (2018) observed that farmer–herder conflicts were often framed in a sensational manner with blame narratives dominating, particularly through the use of emotive labeling such as “killer herdsmen.”

Similarly, Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) found that Nigerian newspapers’ framing strategies leaned more toward episodic descriptions of violence, which tended to exacerbate hostility between communities rather than fostering peace. At the same time, the current study identified a meaningful presence of solutions-oriented frames (45%), mostly in features, opinion pieces, or reports tied to policy or security interventions. This resonates with Ogunkunle’s (2025) findings, which emphasized that although blame narratives dominate in news coverage, Nigerian newspapers do intermittently include constructive frames such as policy advocacy, recommendations for ranching, and calls for peacebuilding. Such solutions-oriented frames were evident in this study’s data through reports on anti-open grazing legislation, security operations like “Operation Whirl Stroke,” and committees formed to address the crisis.

Research has shown that responsibility frames influence public perception of conflict and policy. When media coverage emphasizes individual or group culpability through episodic reporting, the public tends to demand punitive measures and retribution (Temmann, 2021). Conversely, when coverage adopts thematic or solutions-oriented frames, the public is more likely to support collective, structural remedies such as institutional reform or land-use policy (Zhang, Shao, & Bowman, 2016). Thus, the predominance of blame-oriented coverage in this study suggests that Nigerian newspapers may be reinforcing cycles of polarization and demands for heavy-handed security responses, while underplaying longer-term policy solutions.

Empirical Nigerian research strengthens this inference. Nwakpu, Ezema, and Ogbodo (2020), examining framing in Nigerian newspapers, argued that episodic and blame-heavy reporting tends to amplify fear, anger, and distrust of institutions, while thematic frames increase public understanding and support for policy solutions. Gana (2019) similarly noted that peace-oriented journalism remains underdeveloped in Nigerian press practice, with most reporting prioritizing the immediacy of violence over reconciliation or governance responses. In line with this, the present study’s results illustrate that *Daily Trust* incorporated more solution-oriented pieces than *The Punch*, reflecting editorial choices that partly mitigate the dominance of blame.

Two methodological insights reconcile these findings with the diversity of results in other studies. First, the time window matters: this study’s data (January–June 2018) covered a particularly violent period, making episodic blame coverage more salient. Studies that span longer periods tend to find slightly higher proportions of thematic or solution frames (Ogunkunle, 2025). Second, the type of article sampled influences results: hard news is typically episodic, while features and editorials are more likely to include solutions (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu,



2017). These differences explain why solutions-oriented frames, though present in nearly half the sample, remain underrepresented compared to blame-oriented narratives.

The findings of this study confirms that Nigerian newspapers serve a dual role in the farmer–herder conflict: documenting violence and holding actors accountable through blame frames, while simultaneously presenting pathways for remediation through solutions frames. However, as Entman’s (1993) model of framing emphasizes, editorial choices in highlighting either “problem definition” or “treatment recommendations” influence public and policy responses. Increasing the weight of thematic, solutions-oriented reporting could help reorient public discourse away from polarized blame and toward durable policy reforms such as ranching, mediation, and climate adaptation measures.

CONCLUSION

During the January-June 2018 period, the sampled coverage of farmer-herder violence in Benue by Daily Trust and The Punch exhibited both blame-oriented and solutions-oriented frames. In this purposive sample, blame frames were slightly more prevalent (55% vs. 45%). Notably, the papers reported concrete responses, such as military operations, police actions, and committee formations, alongside moral condemnation. Increasing the space for systematic solutions journalism could enhance public understanding and contribute to long-term conflict mitigation. Editors should adopt "solutions journalism" to shift the discourse toward sustainable reforms - such as modern ranching and community-led mediation—rather than focusing primarily on retributive demands.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors’ Contributions.

Inuwa and Aremu conceived the study, including the design and collated the data. Inuwa and Aremu handled the analysis and interpretation, and also the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.



Data availability statement.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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