Journal of Scientific Reports 2026, 15(1), 258-282
ISSN: 2708-7085 (Online) & 3079-9317 (Print)
Journal: ijsab.com/jsr

Leadership Styles and the Management of Pastoralist–Farmer Conflict in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan

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Abstract

Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers remain a major source of insecurity and socio-economic disruption in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan. These conflicts are driven largely by competition over land, water and grazing resources. Past research has focused mostly on environmental and institutional factors. It has not examined how leadership styles shape conflict management outcomes. This study addresses that gap. It examines how authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire leadership styles influence conflict dynamics and resolution among pastoralists and farmers in Central Equatoria State. The study is grounded in Lewin's leadership styles theory, conflict theory and transformational leadership theory. It adopts a pragmatic mixed-methods approach. Data were collected from 293 respondents, including pastoralists, farmers, local leaders, traditional authorities and government officials. Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression in SPSS Version 21. Qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. The results show that authoritarian leadership sometimes suppresses violence temporarily. Yet it often fails to address root causes and can contribute to escalation over time. Democratic leadership emerges as the most effective style. It is significantly associated with inclusive dialogue, trust-building and sustainable conflict resolution. Laissez-faire leadership is widely perceived as inadequate. It contributes to governance gaps, weak regulation and more conflict incidents. Key qualitative themes highlight inclusion, trust, hybrid leadership models and the intersection of climate and resource pressures with leadership practices. The study concludes that leadership style is a decisive factor in managing and resolving farmer–pastoralist conflicts.

ARTICLE INFO

Research paper
Received: 18 July 2026
Accepted: 28 October 2026
Published: 29 October 2026
DOI: 10.58970/JSR.1250

CITATION

Balli, N. P. & Adea, M. (2026). Leadership Styles and the Management of Pastoralist–Farmer Conflict in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan, *Journal of Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 258-282.

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***Keywords**: Leadership Styles, Conflict Management, Pastoralist–Farmer Conflict, Participatory Leadership, Peacebuilding, Resource Competition, Central Equatoria State, South Sudan*

Introduction.

Introduction

The farmer–pastoralist conflict in Central Equatoria, South Sudan, reflects a broader pattern of land-based disputes. These disputes are intensifying under the combined pressures of climate change, migration and food insecurity. Globally, climate-induced displacement, especially among pastoralist populations in arid zones, has heightened competition over land, water and grazing resources (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2023). International agencies, including the FAO and the United Nations (UN), highlight how transhumance, or seasonal livestock migration, often leads to resource-based conflicts. They stress the urgent need for climate adaptation, land tenure reforms and peacebuilding strategies (United Nations, 2022; FAO, 2023).

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change further emphasizes that land degradation and natural resource disputes constitute major risks to peace and stability (UNFCCC, 2023). Adding to these environmental and demographic pressures, the proliferation of small arms has transformed local disputes into violent confrontations (Small Arms Survey, 2023). The global arms trade fuels this proliferation. As a result, the farmer–pastoralist conflict in regions like Central Equatoria is now recognized as both a security challenge and a humanitarian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2024). Across Africa, especially in conflict-prone areas such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and East Africa, similar dynamics are evident. They are driven by rapid population growth, recurring drought, political instability and the expansion of agriculture into traditional grazing corridors (African Union [AU], 2023). Recent studies confirm this pattern. Drew and Knutsson (2025) show how land commodification, demarcation and formalisation in East Africa's pastoralist rangelands are reshaping tenure security and conflict dynamics across Karamoja in Uganda and West Pokot in Kenya. Tarimo et al. (2026) report similar trends in Tanzania. In Mvomero district, land tenure transformation has converted village tenure to state and private tenure. Land use changes have favoured agriculture and biodiversity conservation over pastoral land use. These transformations promote the separation of land uses. They undermine coexistence and perpetuate land use conflicts (Tarimo et al., 2026). Regional organizations have responded by developing early-warning and conflict-prevention mechanisms. The AU's Continental Early Warning System and the African Peace and Security Architecture actively monitor resource-based violence (AU, 2023).

The Kampala Declaration on Pastoralism (2010) and ongoing efforts by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development reflect a growing consensus on coordinated responses. These responses include harmonizing livestock movement policies, mapping peace corridors, and strengthening market and veterinary services (IGAD, 2023). These initiatives aim to address immediate security concerns. They also target longer-term issues of pastoral sustainability and food security. South Sudan's internal governance challenges further complicate the situation. The government has made efforts such as Presidential Orders (2017, 2024) removing cattle from Equatoria, national dialogues and new commissions. Yet enforcement remains inconsistent. It is often hampered by accusations of ethnic favoritism and weak legal frameworks (Government of South Sudan, 2024). National peace agreements, including the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, have not sufficiently addressed the farmer–herder divide. The divide continues to generate displacement and instability (United Nations Mission in South Sudan [UNMISS], 2023). Locally, the conflict is highly personal and cyclical. It involves ethnicized disputes among communities such as the Bari, Pojulu, Kakwa and Mundari. Key drivers include cattle-driven crop destruction, youth militarization, a lack of demarcated grazing routes, and weakening traditional leadership structures (Logan & Ryle, 2023). Peacebuilding efforts by UNMISS, civil society and religious leaders have produced temporary reductions in violence. However, limited resources and a weak security apparatus constrain the implementation of sustainable solutions (Community Empowerment for Progress Organization [CEPO], 2023). The resulting insecurity disrupts education, access to water and general livelihoods. It deepens rural poverty and fuels demands for land justice and stricter enforcement of livestock regulations. Ultimately, the farmer–pastoralist conflict in Central Equatoria is deeply rooted in overlapping environmental, political and social crises (Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021; Bromwich, 2018). The

conflict is often framed in ethnic terms. Yet its underlying causes are structural. They centre on competition over land, water and grazing, compounded by climate shocks and weak institutions. Recent evidence from West Africa supports this view. Krendelsberger et al. (2025) show that negative out-group perceptions and resource constraints, particularly those created by climate change, put farmer–herder relations under pressure in Senegal. Priming out-group membership reduced cooperation towards out-group members, especially among farmers. Collective risks, such as those resulting from climate change, worsened in-group–out-group biases (Krendelsberger et al., 2025). Effective solutions demand multi-level action. Locally, mediation and law enforcement are needed. Regionally, policy harmonization and cross-border cooperation are required.

Globally, climate adaptation and arms control are essential (International Crisis Group, 2024; FAO, 2023). Only holistic, sustained and inclusive strategies can break the cycle of violence. Such strategies can promote sustainable coexistence between farmers and pastoralists in Central Equatoria and beyond. Recurring conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Central Equatoria State has created significant humanitarian and developmental challenges. These include loss of life, property destruction, widespread displacement and eroded social cohesion (International Crisis Group, 2024; UNMISS, 2023). Despite various interventions, violence remains cyclical. This reveals fundamental weaknesses in the leadership approaches adopted to manage the conflict. Authoritarian tactics may impose short-term stability. Yet they often fail to address root grievances. Laissez-faire leadership enables escalation through regulatory gaps and weak enforcement (Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021). Democratic leadership holds promise for inclusive conflict management. Yet it is implemented unevenly and is often undermined by entrenched power asymmetries and fragile institutions (Logan & Ryle, 2023). As a result, existing efforts have not produced sustainable peace or durable solutions for the affected populations. Compounding these challenges is a notable gap in empirical research. Few studies systematically examine how different leadership styles influence conflict management between pastoralists and farmers in Central Equatoria State. The absence of context-specific, evidence-based studies limits the capacity of policymakers, peacebuilders and local leaders. It prevents them from designing and implementing leadership strategies that can effectively address the complex dynamics at play (FAO, 2023; AU, 2023). This study addresses this gap by examining how leadership styles shape conflict management and resolution. It focuses specifically on authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire styles. By analysing the effectiveness and limitations of these approaches empirically, the study generates evidence to inform more effective, leadership-driven conflict management strategies. The study makes several contributions. First, it moves beyond environmental and institutional explanations of farmer–pastoralist conflict. It places leadership at the centre of analysis. Second, it provides context-specific evidence from Central Equatoria State. This evidence is scarce in the existing literature, which draws mainly on West and East African cases (Bukari et al., 2022; Schilling et al., 2024). Third, it integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence. This integration captures both the breadth of patterns and the depth of lived experiences. Fourth, it identifies hybrid leadership arrangements that combine customary and formal authority. These arrangements offer a practical pathway for improving conflict management. The study has three objectives. The first is to examine how authoritarian leadership influences conflict management outcomes between pastoralists and farmers in Central Equatoria State. The second is to assess the influence of democratic leadership on these outcomes. The third is to evaluate how laissez-faire leadership shapes conflict dynamics and resolution processes. A fourth objective is to identify the qualitative mechanisms and contextual factors that explain these relationships.

Literature Review

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework to analyse the relationship between leadership styles and conflict management within pastoralist–farmer dynamics in Central Equatoria. The framework integrates Lewin et al.'s leadership styles theory as the principal theory. Conflict theory and transformational leadership theory support it. Together, these theories provide a

comprehensive analytical lens. Lewin's leadership styles theory, developed by Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White in 1939, represents a foundational approach in the study of leadership behaviour and group dynamics (Lewin et al., 1939). The theory classifies leadership into three distinct styles. These are authoritarian (autocratic), democratic (participative) and laissez-faire (delegative). Authoritarian leaders exhibit high levels of control and centralized decision-making. They often dictate tasks and expect compliance from group members. Democratic leaders emphasize shared decision-making, open communication and active participation. They foster a sense of involvement and collective responsibility. Laissez-faire leaders take a hands-off approach. They provide minimal direction and allow group members significant autonomy in their actions and decisions (Northouse, 2022). This tripartite framework is particularly relevant in contexts where group cohesion, conflict resolution and organizational effectiveness are at stake.

In volatile environments such as Central Equatoria State, competition over resources often triggers conflict between pastoralists and farmers. Understanding how different leadership styles operate can help explain why some interventions succeed while others fail. Lewin's theory allows researchers to dissect leadership mechanisms, such as the degree of participation and the nature of authority. It offers a structured lens through which the impact of leadership on conflict dynamics can be systematically explored. In this study, the theory provides the basis for operationalizing leadership as an independent variable. It also guides the evaluation of leadership effects on social relationships, trust and conflict outcomes (Northouse, 2022). One of the primary strengths of Lewin's theory is its empirical grounding and intuitive clarity. Lewin and colleagues' experimental studies provided direct evidence of how different leadership styles influence group morale, productivity and conflict. This makes the framework highly accessible and adaptable across diverse organizational and cultural contexts (Lewin et al., 1939).

The clear distinctions among leadership styles facilitate comparative analysis and practical application. They enable leaders and policymakers to identify which approaches may be most effective for specific goals or challenges. The theory's longevity and continued relevance in contemporary leadership literature further attest to its foundational value. Nevertheless, Lewin's leadership styles theory has been critiqued for its simplicity. It overlooks contextual and cultural variables that may shape leadership effectiveness (Northouse, 2022). By categorizing leaders into just three types, the theory may miss the nuanced, situational and hybrid approaches that often characterize real-world leadership. This is especially true in multicultural or rapidly changing environments. These limitations can be addressed by integrating Lewin's framework with more context-sensitive models. Such models recognize the role of environmental, social and cultural factors (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). In this study, Lewin's theory serves as the principal analytical framework. Yet its application is enriched by attention to local realities and by considering adaptive and blended leadership models. These models respond to the complexities of conflict management in Central Equatoria State. Conflict theory originated with the seminal works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They argued that society is fundamentally shaped by ongoing struggles over scarce resources and unequal distributions of power (Marx & Engels, 1848/1977). Subsequent theorists such as Lewis Coser (1956) and Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) expanded on this idea. They examined the functions and dynamics of conflict within social institutions. Conflict theory holds that dominant groups use their power to control resources and maintain social order. They often do so at the expense of marginalized or subordinate groups. This persistent competition for resources, whether economic, political or social, leads to ongoing tension, social change and, at times, overt conflict (Collins, 2022). Applied to pastoralist–farmer relations, conflict theory offers a powerful lens for understanding the structural roots of disputes over land, water and grazing rights. It highlights how unequal power relations and historical grievances shape both the emergence and persistence of conflict in resource-scarce settings like Central Equatoria. Leadership styles mediate this dynamic. They either reinforce existing inequalities or provide avenues for redress and inclusive governance. For example, authoritarian leadership

may perpetuate exclusion. Democratic approaches can help redistribute power and facilitate fairer resource allocation (Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021).

Recent evidence from Ghana supports this view. Yeboah et al. (2023) show that traditional authorities allocated land to outside cattle owners without effective institutions to guide cattle herding. This created conflicts between traditional farming and new herding interests. The key driver of conflict was political, not simply absolute scarcity. Scarcity was produced by local-level traditional authorities and small-scale enclosures (Yeboah et al., 2023). This finding illustrates how leadership decisions shape resource access and conflict outcomes. Conflict theory's strength lies in its capacity to reveal the deeper, often hidden, drivers of conflict. This is particularly valuable in societies stratified along economic, ethnic or political lines. By focusing on macro-level structures and the interplay of power, it helps explain why certain groups remain marginalized and why grievances can escalate into violence. This explanatory power is especially valuable in understanding persistent and recurrent disputes. It makes conflict theory a vital supporting framework for research on farmer–pastoralist conflict (Collins, 2022).

However, conflict theory has its limitations. It tends to overemphasize antagonism and neglect the possibilities for cooperation, negotiation and peaceful settlement. It sometimes portrays social actors as passive victims of structural forces. Critics also note that it may underplay the influence of local agency, cultural norms and micro-level interactions in shaping conflict outcomes (Folger et al., 2021). To address these weaknesses, this study integrates conflict theory with micro-level frameworks and qualitative perspectives. This integration recognizes the agency of local actors and the potential for leadership to transform adversarial relationships into collaborative ones. Garfield and Glowacki (2023) provide relevant evidence. Their study of 160 inter-individual conflicts in an agro-pastoralist community in southwest Ethiopia found that third-party mediation often occurred in social conflicts and in conflicts between clan members and friends. More than 80% of conflicts were resolved. Social conflicts were more difficult to resolve than conflicts over resources (Garfield & Glowacki, 2023). This finding shows that local mediation and relational factors matter. It supports the view that leadership and third-party intervention can transform conflicts. Transformational leadership theory was first articulated by Bernard Bass in 1985. He later refined it with Bruce Avolio and Ronald Riggio (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The theory emphasizes leaders' role in inspiring and motivating followers. It encourages followers to transcend self-interest for a higher collective purpose.

Transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to articulate a compelling vision, cultivate trust, encourage innovation, and demonstrate genuine concern for the individual development and well-being of their followers. These attributes are particularly significant in divided and post-conflict societies, where rebuilding trust, bridging social divisions, and fostering a shared sense of purpose are essential for sustainable peace and social cohesion. In this regard, the findings of Chol, G. M., and Adea, M. (2025), as well as Apet, D. A., and Adea, M. (2025), in their respective studies on leadership styles, strongly corroborate the findings of the present study. Their findings highlight the critical contribution of transformational leadership to creating an enabling and supportive work environment through strengthening organizational trust, enhancing employee motivation, promoting team cohesion, and ultimately improving organizational productivity and service quality. Within the context of this study, transformational leadership theory provides a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding why democratic and participatory leadership approaches can be particularly effective in promoting reconciliation and sustainable peace among conflicting groups. Transformational leaders inspire trust, motivate stakeholders, and facilitate collective action, all of which are essential for addressing longstanding divisions between pastoralist and farming communities. By emphasizing shared vision, inclusivity, empowerment, and mutual understanding, transformational leadership transcends conventional approaches based primarily on authority, control, or coercion. Instead, it promotes meaningful participation, constructive engagement, and collaborative conflict transformation (Northouse, 2022).

Furthermore, the theoretical and empirical relevance of transformational leadership is supported by extensive scholarly literature demonstrating its positive relationship with organizational effectiveness, group cohesion, and follower satisfaction (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2022). Transformational leadership is also associated with increased employee engagement, innovation, and organizational resilience. These attributes make it particularly relevant to complex and dynamic environments characterized by farmer–pastoralist conflicts, where sustainable solutions require trust-building, inclusive dialogue, collective responsibility, and cooperation among diverse stakeholders. Consequently, its emphasis on shared values, visionary leadership, empowerment, and relational trust provides a valuable framework for understanding how leadership can facilitate conflict transformation, strengthen peaceful coexistence, and advance sustainable peace and community development.

Despite its strengths, transformational leadership theory faces criticism. One key concern is the potential for leader dependency. Followers can become overly reliant on a single leader's vision or charisma. This can undermine long-term sustainability if leadership changes. Additionally, sustaining transformational practices can be challenging in hierarchical or resource-constrained settings. Institutional barriers and power dynamics may limit the scope for innovation and participation (Tourish, 2019). These weaknesses can be mitigated by promoting distributed leadership, building local capacity and encouraging shared leadership structures within communities. In this study, transformational leadership theory serves as a valuable supporting framework. It highlights the importance of vision-driven, inclusive and empowering leadership practices for effective conflict management. In summary, Lewin's leadership styles theory is the principal theory guiding this study. It offers the core framework for analysing how different leadership approaches impact conflict management. Conflict theory and transformational leadership theory serve as supporting theories. They enrich the analysis by situating leadership within broader social dynamics. They also highlight the mechanisms through which leaders can inspire cooperation and peace. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding the complex interplay between leadership, power, resource allocation and conflict outcomes in Central Equatoria. The empirical literature on farmer–pastoralist conflict has grown considerably. Yet it remains fragmented. Most studies focus on causes and consequences. Few examine leadership as a central explanatory variable. This review organizes the evidence thematically around the three leadership styles and their relationship to conflict outcomes. It also identifies what prior studies have not tested. This thematic approach justifies the variables tested in this study.

The first theme concerns authoritarian leadership and its limits. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) conducted an in-depth qualitative case study in Mali's inland Niger Delta. They investigated the roots and dynamics of farmer–herder conflicts. They used semi-structured interviews with pastoralists, farmers, local leaders and government officials, along with document analysis. The study explored how governance and leadership styles shape conflict outcomes. The authors found that authoritarian leadership, characterized by top-down directives, tended to worsen tensions and facilitate corruption. Laissez-faire approaches, where officials abdicated responsibility, had similar effects. Community-based, democratic forums showed promise for conflict resolution. Yet they were rarely prioritized or adequately resourced (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). This finding suggests that authoritarian leadership may suppress conflict in the short term. It does not resolve underlying grievances. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) provide further evidence. They examined how state and local actors involved in resource management and peacebuilding are implicated in farmer–herder conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria, and Central Darfur State, Sudan. Drawing on field studies, the authors show that state officials, traditional chiefs and security agents intensified the conflict. They perpetuated the inequitable distribution of resources needed for the survival of farmers and herders. They also promoted a peacebuilding process that empowered some groups and disempowered others. The divisive role of state and local actors accentuated socio-political

grievances. It also enervated the peacebuilding process (Babatunde & Ibnouf, 2024). This evidence shows that authoritarian and exclusionary leadership practices can deepen conflict. Oyeniyi (2025) offers related insights from southwest Nigeria. The study examines how government policies, particularly Nigeria's Land Use Act and the establishment of exclusive grazing reserves, have shaped Fulani–Yoruba relations, identity constructions and security challenges. The analysis is grounded in relative deprivation theory. It draws on conflict models that emphasize grievance, shifting opportunity structures and political liberalization. Findings reveal that escalating farmer–herder conflict is driven less by environmental resource scarcity than by shifting opportunity structures and policy neglect.

These dynamics have catalysed armed militancy among Fulani herders. Policies intended to mitigate conflict have instead exacerbated identity contestations and impunity (Oyeniyi, 2025). This finding underscores the limits of top-down policy and authoritarian enforcement. The second theme concerns democratic and participatory leadership. Bukari et al. (2022) employed a mixed-methods approach in Ghana. They combined household surveys, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. They examined how different leadership strategies influence the security and well-being of communities embroiled in farmer–herder conflicts. Their findings show that participatory, inclusive leadership at the community level played a significant role in reducing violence, strengthening trust and enhancing the resilience of local livelihoods. These leadership approaches fostered dialogue and cooperation between groups. They helped to de-escalate tensions and manage disputes over land and resources more effectively (Bukari et al., 2022). However, the study also identifies a gap in understanding the long-term sustainability of such community-based leadership initiatives. External factors, including political interference, environmental shocks and limited resources, threaten to undermine these local gains.

The authors call for longitudinal research to track the evolution and scalability of successful leadership models (Bukari et al., 2022). Logan and Ryle (2023) conducted ethnographic research in South Sudan. They focused on the role of customary authority and local governance in managing pastoralist–farmer conflicts. Through interviews and observation, they found that democratic, consensus-based decision-making by traditional chiefs and elders was often more effective in resolving disputes than interventions imposed by external, often authoritarian, authorities. Local legitimacy and adherence to customary norms enabled these leaders to mediate grievances, prevent violence from escalating and support reconciliation efforts (Logan & Ryle, 2023). Despite these strengths, the authors note a lack of empirical comparison between customary and formal leadership structures. They highlight the need for systematic research on hybrid governance arrangements that combine traditional authority with modern state institutions (Logan & Ryle, 2023). Omotola (2023) provides further evidence on traditional institutions. The study interrogates the changing roles of traditional institutions in conflict management and peacebuilding regarding herder–farmer conflicts in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project recorded at least 107 incidents of pastoralist conflicts with 539 fatalities between 1997 and 2020 in the state. The study reveals that traditional institutions, particularly the chieftaincy variant, have been playing conflicting roles. This is due to several factors. These include a lack of clarity in the constitutional roles of traditional institutions, undue politicization, commercialisation and judicialisation of traditional institutions, and declining state capacity with attendant expansion in ungoverned spaces (Omotola, 2023). Despite these challenges, traditional institutions remain relevant in managing herder–farmer conflicts. Repositioning them for greater productivity demands attention to critical elements of continuity and change in their structure and organisation. It also requires attention to how such changes have affected their legitimacy, capacities and effectiveness (Omotola, 2023). Adebajo and Adebajo (2023) assessed the conflict management mechanisms adopted by community leaders in Benue and Nasarawa states. Conflict transformation theory anchored the paper.

A validated questionnaire was used to collect data from non-governmental organisations and victims of the conflict. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with farmers, pastoralists,

community leaders, NGO officials and law enforcement agents. The study found that pastoralist–farmer conflict was managed by community leaders using negotiation, mediation and alternative dispute resolution. However, the management of the conflict was characterized by extortion, erosion of traditional authorities and lack of skills by community leaders. The paper concluded that the management of pastoralist–farmer conflict by community leaders has not been effective due to a lack of traditional integrity and conflict management skills (Adebajo & Adebajo, 2023). This finding points to the importance of leadership capacity and integrity, not simply leadership style. Okpara et al. (2020) explored the linkages between environmental issues, vulnerability and conflict around Lake Chad in Nigeria. The study focused on water disputes between farmers and herders. Using surveys, interviews and participatory mapping, the researchers found that transparent, accountable and participatory local leadership was crucial to managing and mitigating water-related conflicts. In contrast, areas with weak or exclusionary leadership saw greater escalation of disputes and insecurity (Okpara et al., 2020). The study's central research gap concerns the lack of integrated analysis on how different leadership styles interact with environmental stressors and security challenges. The authors recommend more interdisciplinary empirical work to better understand and address the complex interface between leadership, environmental management and conflict prevention (Okpara et al., 2020).

Mbah and Nzeadibe (2021) conducted qualitative interviews in Nigeria with farmers, herders, officials and NGO representatives. They assessed how leadership shapes climate adaptation and peacebuilding amid farmer–herder conflict. Their findings indicate that leadership practices that prioritize inclusion, such as joint planning, participatory forums and open dialogue, are associated with lower levels of violence and more adaptive, resilient communities. These inclusive approaches foster mutual understanding and collective action. These are essential for sustainable climate adaptation and peaceful coexistence (Mbah & Nzeadibe, 2021). Nevertheless, the researchers observed a gap in the institutionalization and scaling of inclusive leadership practices. While successful in localized settings, little empirical evidence shows how these practices can be embedded across broader governance systems or sustained over time (Mbah & Nzeadibe, 2021). The third theme concerns laissez-faire leadership and governance gaps. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) found that laissez-faire approaches, where officials abdicated responsibility, tended to worsen tensions and facilitate corruption. This finding is echoed by Bello (2025). The article examines the extent to which collaborative environmental governance is incorporated into managing the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria. It is a mixed-method, descriptive desk research that employs collaborative governance theory. It obtains secondary data from books, periodicals and the internet.

The article concludes that establishing collaborative environmental governance for peaceful intervention requires addressing the inherent challenges of limited community-based participation, poor inter-agency collaboration and corruption (Bello, 2025). These challenges reflect governance gaps that laissez-faire leadership tends to produce or exacerbate. Tseer et al. (2026) provide further evidence on exclusionary practices. The study investigates how farmer–herder conflicts prompt exclusionary practices that can foster radicalisation among both smallholders and Fulbe herders. It employs a narrative design, utilising interviews and focus group discussions. Data were collected from smallholders, Fulbe herders, traditional leaders and members of the National Security Service in Agogo, Central Ghana. Findings revealed discriminatory practices experienced by both groups. The study contends that exclusionary practices are associated with extremist views and could generate violent reactions, including radicalisation, among belligerent groups (Tseer et al., 2026). This evidence shows that governance failures and exclusionary practices, which characterize laissez-faire and authoritarian approaches, can have severe consequences. Achem and Aderinto (2026) examine the anti-open grazing law in Benue State, Nigeria. The law was enacted in 2017 to curb violence. Yet its implementation has generated polarised reactions. The study examines how victimised farmers and representatives of herder communities perceive the law and its implications for livelihoods, security and governance. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through 40

interviews and discussions across two local government areas. Findings reveal that farmers largely frame the law as a protective intervention. They credit it with reducing crop destruction. Herders perceive it as an exclusionary policy that threatens their livelihoods and cultural identity. The study highlights implementation gaps, weak enforcement mechanisms and political contestation between state and federal authorities. These undermine the law's effectiveness and reinforce intergroup tensions (Achem & Aderinto, 2026). This finding shows that policy interventions without inclusive and adaptive enforcement risk entrenching grievances. The fourth theme concerns hybrid leadership and integrated governance. Schilling et al. (2024) carried out a qualitative comparative study in northern Kenya. They used interviews and focus groups with local leaders, government officials and community members in pastoralist areas. They found that transformational and participatory leadership increased trust, legitimacy and the success of conflict transformation initiatives. Communities led by such leaders experienced better cooperation, more effective dispute resolution and less violence than those governed by authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian leadership often led to resistance and renewed hostility (Schilling et al., 2024).

The authors identify a research gap in measuring the concrete outcomes of different leadership styles. They also highlight the need to understand the local factors that enable or constrain transformational leadership. They emphasize the importance of developing robust assessment tools and conducting further research into the contextual interplay between leadership, local institutions and peacebuilding (Schilling et al., 2024). Yeboah et al. (2023) show how traditional authorities can be part of the problem when they allocate land without effective institutions. This finding implies that hybrid arrangements must include clear rules and accountability. Omotola (2023) and Logan and Ryle (2023) both point to the potential of hybrid governance. They also note the need for empirical evidence on how hybrid models function in practice. This study responds to that need. It examines how customary and formal authority can be integrated to improve conflict management. The fifth theme concerns the broader political economy of farmer–pastoralist conflict. Recent studies show that conflict is not simply a product of resource scarcity. Oyeniyi (2025) shows that shifting opportunity structures and policy neglect drive conflict more than environmental scarcity. Yeboah et al. (2023) show that political scarcity, produced by local-level traditional authorities and small-scale enclosures, is a key driver. Tuki (2025) examines support for an open grazing ban policy in Kaduna, Nigeria. The study finds that victimization by herders increases the likelihood of supporting the policy.

On average, Muslims are more supportive of the policy than Christians. The higher support among Muslims is surprising because most respondents who have been victimized by herders are Christians. Muslims might be more supportive due to a contagion effect. The common religion of Islam that they share with nomadic herders could lead to the attribution of blame for farmer–herder conflicts to Muslims. This may make them more eager to see an end to the conflict (Tuki, 2025). This finding shows that identity, victimization and religious affiliation shape policy preferences. Leadership must therefore navigate these identity dynamics. Lanyasunya (2025) examines livelihoods vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya. The study used in-depth interviews with 30 elderly participants aged between 60 and 79 years. Findings reveal several signs of vulnerability, including physical weakness, hunger, displacement and identity crises. Vulnerable groups include orphaned children, expectant and nursing mothers, the elderly, persons with disabilities, widows, and individuals with no livestock or social support. Key risk factors include old age, childlessness and social exclusion. Causes are multifaceted. They encompass man-made factors such as cattle rustling and irresponsible resource management, natural factors like droughts and floods, and economic challenges stemming from the shift towards a cash economy (Lanyasunya, 2025). This evidence shows that pastoralist vulnerability is multidimensional. Leadership responses must address these underlying vulnerabilities, not only immediate conflict incidents. Krendelsberger et al. (2025) show that negative out-group perceptions and climate risks affect farmer–herder relations. The study conducted a public good experiment with 332 farmers and herders in Senegal. It compared

in-group and out-group identity priming effects under individual and collective risks. The experiment was paired with 14 in-depth focus group discussions. The results show that priming out-group membership reduces cooperation towards out-group members, especially among farmers. Herders reduced cooperation in response to in-group primes, likely due to rivalry between local and mobile herders. Focus group discussions revealed that negative perceptions of mobile herders drive this behaviour. Collective risks, such as those resulting from climate change, worsen in-group–out-group biases (Krendelsberger et al., 2025). This finding highlights the need to address negative stereotyping. It also shows that leadership must manage identity dynamics alongside resource competition. Sowale (2025) argues that identity conflict is the root cause of Fulani herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria.

The study uses a conceptual-theoretical nexus framework and draws from secondary sources. It contends that dealing with factors such as weak security institutions, ungoverned spaces and climate change is insufficient without dealing with identity conflict. The psycho-social disposition, beliefs and stereotypes instigate Fulani herder–farmer clashes to the extent of threatening Nigeria's nationhood. The study affirms that identity conflict is a long-term neglected social issue of discrimination and structural exclusion of the Fulani group. It concludes that identity conflict, though the root cause, is more for economic survival than ethnic affiliation (Sowale, 2025). This argument reinforces the need for leadership that addresses inclusion and recognition. The literature reveals several gaps. First, most studies examine causes and consequences. Few systematically test how leadership styles influence conflict management outcomes. Second, studies that do examine leadership focus on single styles or single cases. They rarely compare authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire styles within the same context. Third, much of the evidence comes from West Africa (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; Bukari et al., 2022; Yeboah et al., 2023) and East Africa (Schilling et al., 2024). Central Equatoria State, South Sudan, remains understudied. Fourth, prior studies have not tested the mediating role of trust, inclusion and hybrid governance in the relationship between leadership style and conflict outcomes. Fifth, prior studies have not measured the concrete outcomes of different leadership styles using both quantitative and qualitative data. Sixth, the long-term sustainability of community-based leadership initiatives remains untested. Seventh, the interaction between leadership style and environmental stressors has not been systematically examined. This study addresses these gaps. It compares three leadership styles within the same context. It uses mixed methods to capture both breadth and depth. It measures outcomes using correlation and regression. It identifies qualitative mechanisms that explain the quantitative patterns. It also examines how climate and resource pressures interact with leadership practices.

Hypothesis Development

The first hypothesis concerns authoritarian leadership. Prior studies show that authoritarian leadership can suppress violence temporarily. Yet it often fails to address root causes. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) found that authoritarian leadership, characterized by top-down directives, tended to worsen tensions and facilitate corruption in Mali's inland Niger Delta. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) show that state officials, traditional chiefs and security agents intensified conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria, and Central Darfur, Sudan. They perpetuated inequitable resource distribution and promoted a peacebuilding process that empowered some groups and disempowered others. Oyeniyi (2025) shows that top-down policies in southwest Nigeria exacerbated identity contestations and impunity. These findings are consistent with conflict theory. Authoritarian leadership reinforces existing inequalities. It excludes marginalized groups from decision-making. It may produce compliance in the short term. Yet it does not resolve grievances. Over time, suppressed grievances can escalate into renewed violence. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H1: *Authoritarian leadership is negatively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and positively associated with conflict escalation and unresolved disputes.*

Prior studies show that participatory and inclusive leadership is associated with better conflict outcomes. Bukari et al. (2022) found that participatory, inclusive leadership at the community level reduced violence, strengthened trust and enhanced livelihood resilience in Ghana. Logan and Ryle (2023) found that democratic, consensus-based decision-making by traditional chiefs and elders was often more effective in resolving disputes in South Sudan. Okpara et al. (2020) found that transparent, accountable and participatory local leadership was crucial to managing water-related conflicts around Lake Chad. Mbah and Nzeadibe (2021) found that leadership practices prioritizing inclusion were associated with lower levels of violence and more adaptive communities. Schilling et al. (2024) found that transformational and participatory leadership increased trust, legitimacy and the success of conflict transformation initiatives in northern Kenya. These findings are consistent with Lewin's theory and transformational leadership theory. Democratic leadership fosters participation, trust and collective responsibility. It provides avenues for redress and inclusive governance. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H2: *Democratic leadership is positively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and negatively associated with conflict escalation and unresolved disputes.*

The third hypothesis concerns laissez-faire leadership. Prior studies show that hands-off leadership produces governance gaps and weak regulation. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) found that laissez-faire approaches, where officials abdicated responsibility, tended to worsen tensions and facilitate corruption. Bello (2025) identifies limited community-based participation, poor inter-agency collaboration and corruption as inherent challenges in managing farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria. Tseer et al. (2026) show that exclusionary practices are associated with extremist views and could generate violent reactions. Achem and Aderinto (2026) show that implementation gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms undermine the effectiveness of the anti-open grazing law in Benue State. These findings are consistent with conflict theory and Lewin's theory. Laissez-faire leadership leaves a vacuum. It allows powerful actors to pursue their interests unchecked. It fails to regulate resource access. It weakens accountability. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H3: *Laissez-faire leadership is negatively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and positively associated with conflict escalation and unresolved disputes.*

Prior studies suggest that democratic leadership is more effective than authoritarian and laissez-faire styles. Schilling et al. (2024) found that communities led by transformational and participatory leaders experienced better cooperation and less violence than those governed by authoritarian leaders. Bukari et al. (2022) found that participatory leadership reduced violence and strengthened trust. Logan and Ryle (2023) found that democratic decision-making by traditional chiefs was more effective than external authoritarian interventions. These findings suggest that democratic leadership should be the strongest predictor of peaceful conflict resolution. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H4: *Democratic leadership is a stronger predictor of peaceful conflict resolution than authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership styles.*

Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods research design. It integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyse how leadership styles influence conflict management among pastoralists and farmers in Central Equatoria State. The mixed-methods strategy aims to capture the breadth of patterns and the depth of lived experiences related to leadership and conflict resolution. By converging evidence from multiple sources, this approach strengthens the validity and reliability of the study's findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative component targets all registered pastoralists, farmers, local leaders and government officials residing in the three most conflict-affected counties of Central Equatoria State: Juba, Terekeka and Yei. According to recent census and administrative reports, the estimated combined population of these groups in the selected counties is approximately 15,000 individuals (Government of South Sudan, 2024). Using

Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the study obtained a sample size of 375 respondents. The study used stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation. The strata were 150 pastoralists, 150 farmers, 50 local leaders and 25 government officials. Identifying and sampling pastoralists and farmers required careful procedures. Pastoralists are mobile. Many are not formally registered. Farmers are more settled. Yet registration is also weak in rural areas. The study addressed these challenges in several ways. First, the research team worked with local leaders and traditional authorities to identify pastoralist and farmer communities in the selected counties. Second, the team used community lists maintained by local councils and farmer associations. Third, for pastoralists, the team identified seasonal grazing routes and water points. They sampled respondents at these locations during periods when pastoralists were present. Fourth, the team used snowball referrals to reach pastoralists who were not on community lists. Fifth, the team verified eligibility through self-reported occupation and community confirmation. These procedures follow approaches used in prior studies of mobile pastoralist populations (Lanyasunya, 2025). They also respond to the mobility and weak registration challenges noted in the literature (Drew & Knutsson, 2025). The study administered structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data. The questionnaires measured perceptions of leadership, types and frequency of conflict, and outcomes of conflict interventions. Leadership style was measured using items adapted from Lewin's framework (Lewin et al., 1939; Northouse, 2022). Conflict management outcomes were measured using items on peaceful resolution, escalation and unresolved disputes. Respondents rated each leadership style as effective, ineffective or neutral. They also reported the frequency of conflict resolution outcomes associated with each style. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 20 respondents. Minor wording changes were made based on the pilot results. The qualitative component used purposive sampling to select 40 key informants for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. It also conducted 8 focus group discussions, each with 8–10 participants. Interviewees included traditional chiefs, community elders, women's leaders, youth representatives, civil society actors and local government officials. The focus group discussions were conducted separately with groups of pastoralists, farmers and mixed community members. They explored experiences with leadership and conflict management.

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework, was used to code and interpret the qualitative data. The analysis emphasized patterns related to leadership effectiveness, legitimacy and conflict transformation processes. Several procedural remedies were used to reduce common method variance. First, the questionnaire used different response formats for predictor and outcome variables. Second, items were ordered so that leadership style items appeared before conflict outcome items. Third, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Fourth, the study collected data from multiple source groups, including pastoralists, farmers, local leaders and government officials. Fifth, the study triangulated survey data with interview and focus group data. Harman's single-factor test was conducted as a statistical remedy. The test extracted multiple factors with eigenvalues greater than one, and no single factor accounted for the majority of variance. This indicates that common method variance is not a serious concern in this study. To ensure methodological rigour, the study triangulated findings across quantitative and qualitative data sources. It used member checking to validate key themes. It maintained a reflective journal to account for researcher bias. The University of Juba Ethical Review Board granted ethical approval. All participants gave informed consent. The integration of quantitative breadth (293 completed questionnaires) and qualitative depth (40 interviewees and 8 focus groups) provides a robust empirical foundation for understanding how leadership styles affect conflict management in Central Equatoria State.

Results and Discussion

Data were collected from a target sample of 375 respondents. The response rate was 78%, resulting in 293 completed questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics summarized the distribution of respondents' perceptions and experiences.

Inferential analyses, including correlation and regression, examined relationships between leadership styles and conflict management outcomes.

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by group. Pastoralists and farmers were equally represented, each comprising 117 respondents (39.9% of the sample). Local leaders accounted for 39 respondents (13.3% of the total). Government officials constituted the smallest group, with 20 respondents (6.8%). This balanced representation between pastoralists and farmers ensures that the analysis equally weighs the perspectives of the two primary stakeholders in the conflict. Including local leaders and government officials provides important insights into the roles of authority and policy in conflict management. The proportional sampling strengthens the validity of the study's findings by capturing the diversity of experiences and viewpoints needed for a comprehensive assessment. The relatively smaller proportion of local leaders and government officials reflects their numbers within affected communities. This ensures the sample mirrors the real-world stakeholder landscape. It allows nuanced interpretation of power dynamics and leadership efficacy in conflict management.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Group (n = 293)

Category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Pastoralists	117	39.9
Farmers	117	39.9
Local Leaders	39	13.3
Govt. Officials	20	6.8
Total	293	100

Table 2 summarizes respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of different leadership styles in conflict management. Respondents overwhelmingly viewed democratic leadership as effective. Sixty-six percent rated it positively. Eighteen percent found it ineffective. Sixteen percent were neutral. In sharp contrast, only 17% of respondents deemed authoritarian leadership effective. A significant majority (63%) considered it ineffective. Twenty percent remained neutral. The laissez-faire style received the lowest effectiveness rating. Only 13% found it effective. Sixty-nine percent found it ineffective. Eighteen percent were neutral. These results clearly indicate a strong preference for democratic leadership in managing farmer–pastoralist conflicts. They suggest that participatory and inclusive decision-making is seen as most conducive to peaceful outcomes. Conversely, both authoritarian and laissez-faire approaches are widely regarded as inadequate. The latter is viewed as particularly ineffective due to its lack of direction and control. The implications are significant for policy and practice. Leaders and institutions aiming to resolve such conflicts should prioritize democratic, participatory approaches. These are most likely to gain community trust and produce sustainable peace. They should minimize reliance on top-down or hands-off leadership styles that most stakeholders perceive as ineffective.

Table 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Leadership Styles in Conflict Management

Leadership Style	Effective (%)	Ineffective (%)	Neutral (%)
Authoritarian	17	63	20
Democratic	66	18	16
Laissez-faire	13	69	18

Table 3 shows the frequency of conflict resolution outcomes associated with each leadership style, as perceived by respondents. Democratic leadership stands out. Sixty-eight percent of respondents linked it to peaceful conflict resolution. Only 13% associated it with escalation. Nineteen percent associated it with unresolved disputes. In contrast, only 21% of respondents link authoritarian leadership to peaceful outcomes. A majority (54%) report it leads to escalation. Twenty-five percent see it resulting in unresolved issues. The laissez-faire style fares even worse. Only 14% associated it with peaceful resolution. Fifty-six percent linked it to escalation. Thirty percent linked it to unresolved conflicts. These findings underscore the effectiveness of democratic leadership in fostering constructive and lasting solutions to farmer–pastoralist

conflicts. It is overwhelmingly associated with positive outcomes. Meanwhile, both authoritarian and laissez-faire styles are perceived as contributing to the persistence or worsening of conflict. They contribute either through escalation or failure to resolve disputes. The clear implication for policy and intervention is that promoting democratic, participatory leadership is critical for achieving peaceful conflict resolution. Strategies relying on autocratic or passive leadership models are likely to be counterproductive. They may perpetuate cycles of violence and instability within affected communities.

Table 3: Frequency of Conflict Resolution Outcomes by Leadership Style

Leadership Style	Peaceful Resolution (%)	Escalation (%)	Unresolved (%)
Authoritarian	21	54	25
Democratic	68	13	19
Laissez-faire	14	56	30

Table 4 presents the main qualitative themes that emerged from interviews and focus group discussions involving 40 interviewees and 8 focus groups. The most frequently mentioned theme was inclusion and participation. It was cited by 33 participants (82.5%). This emphasizes the widespread belief that effective conflict management relies on engaging all stakeholders in decision-making. Climate and resource pressure as a conflict driver was cited by 31 respondents (77.5%). This underscores the significant role that environmental stress and resource scarcity play in fuelling farmer–pastoralist tensions. Trust in leadership was mentioned by 28 participants (70%). This indicates that confidence in leaders' intentions and abilities is critical to achieving peaceful outcomes. Other important themes included perceived impunity for violence, raised by 25 respondents (62.5%). This reflects concerns that lack of accountability perpetuates cycles of conflict. The need for hybrid or integrated leadership was identified by 23 participants (57.5%). This points to the value of combining customary and formal authority structures for more effective governance. Collectively, these qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative findings. They highlight the need for inclusive, trusted and contextually adapted leadership approaches to resolve farmer–pastoralist conflicts. They also draw attention to persistent challenges around resource stress and impunity that must be addressed for sustainable peace.

Table 4: Qualitative Themes from Interviews and FGDs

Theme	Frequency (n)	% of Respondents Mentioning
Inclusion and Participation	33	82.5%
Trust in Leadership	28	70%
Perceived Impunity for Violence	25	62.5%
Need for Hybrid/Integrated Leadership	23	57.5%
Climate/Resource Pressure as Conflict Driver	31	77.5%
Note: The qualitative sample comprised 40 interviewees and 8 focus groups.		

Table 5 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis. The analysis assessed the relationships between leadership styles and conflict management outcomes. Democratic leadership had a strong positive correlation with peaceful conflict resolution ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that as democratic leadership increases, the likelihood of peaceful resolution also rises significantly. Authoritarian leadership had a strong negative correlation with peaceful resolution ($r = -0.56$, $p < 0.01$). Laissez-faire leadership also had a strong negative correlation with peaceful resolution ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.01$). Both authoritarian and laissez-faire styles had strong positive correlations with escalation. Authoritarian: $r = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$. Laissez-faire: $r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$. Both also had positive correlations with unresolved outcomes. Authoritarian: $r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$. Laissez-faire: $r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$. These findings suggest that democratic leadership is closely associated with effective and peaceful conflict management. Authoritarian and laissez-faire approaches are linked to negative outcomes such as escalation and unresolved disputes. The statistically significant correlations at the 1% level reinforce the importance of leadership style

in shaping conflict trajectories. They provide robust empirical support for promoting participatory and inclusive leadership in managing farmer–pastoralist conflicts. This evidence highlights the critical need for leadership development policies that favour democratic practices to achieve sustainable peace in conflict-prone areas.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Leadership Styles and Conflict Management Outcomes

Leadership Style	Peaceful Resolution (r)	Escalation (r)	Unresolved (r)
Authoritarian	−0.56**	+0.53**	+0.44**
Democratic	+0.68**	−0.49**	−0.39**
Laissez-faire	−0.61**	+0.57**	+0.46**

Note: **p < 0.01 (all correlations are statistically significant at the 1% level)

Table 6 presents the multiple regression analysis. Peaceful conflict resolution was the dependent variable. The three leadership styles were the independent variables. The regression model was statistically significant ($F(3,289) = 42.15$, $p < 0.001$). It accounted for approximately 35% of the variance in peaceful resolution outcomes ($R^2 = 0.35$). Democratic leadership emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). Authoritarian leadership was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.27$, $p = 0.002$). Laissez-faire leadership was also a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.32$, $p = 0.001$). These statistical results reinforce the descriptive findings regarding the effectiveness of different leadership approaches in conflict management.

Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Peaceful Conflict Resolution

Predictor (Leadership Style)	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t	p-value
Authoritarian	−0.24	−0.27	0.07	−3.24	0.002
Democratic	+0.52	+0.59	0.08	6.50	<0.001
Laissez-faire	−0.28	−0.32	0.09	−3.11	0.001
Constant	2.15	—	0.19	11.32	<0.001

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.35$, $F(3,289) = 42.15$, $p < 0.001$

The results support all four hypotheses. H1 predicted that authoritarian leadership is negatively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and positively associated with escalation and unresolved disputes. The correlation results support this. Authoritarian leadership had a negative correlation with peaceful resolution ($r = -0.56$) and positive correlations with escalation ($r = 0.53$) and unresolved outcomes ($r = 0.44$). The regression results also support this. Authoritarian leadership was a significant negative predictor of peaceful resolution ($\beta = -0.27$, $p = 0.002$). H2 predicted that democratic leadership is positively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and negatively associated with escalation and unresolved disputes. The correlation results support this. Democratic leadership had a strong positive correlation with peaceful resolution ($r = 0.68$) and negative correlations with escalation ($r = -0.49$) and unresolved outcomes ($r = -0.39$). The regression results also support this. Democratic leadership was a significant positive predictor of peaceful resolution ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). H3 predicted that laissez-faire leadership is negatively associated with peaceful conflict resolution and positively associated with escalation and unresolved disputes. The correlation results support this. Laissez-faire leadership had a negative correlation with peaceful resolution ($r = -0.61$) and positive correlations with escalation ($r = 0.57$) and unresolved outcomes ($r = 0.46$). The regression results also support this. Laissez-faire leadership was a significant negative predictor of peaceful resolution ($\beta = -0.32$, $p = 0.001$). H4 predicted that democratic leadership is a stronger predictor of peaceful conflict resolution than authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership. The regression results support this. Democratic leadership had the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.59$) compared with authoritarian ($\beta = -0.27$) and laissez-faire ($\beta = -0.32$). The model explained 35% of the variance in peaceful resolution outcomes. This indicates that leadership style is an important factor. Yet other factors also matter. These include environmental pressures, institutional capacity and historical grievances.

The analysis, supported by a strong 78% response rate, reveals that democratic leadership is consistently rated as the most effective style for conflict management. This finding is substantiated by both descriptive and inferential statistics. Correlation and regression analyses demonstrate that democratic leadership is strongly associated with peaceful conflict resolution. Authoritarian and laissez-faire styles are linked to escalation and unresolved disputes. These quantitative results align with Bukari et al. (2022) in Ghana and Schilling et al. (2024) in Kenya. Both studies found that participatory and inclusive leadership fosters trust, dialogue and reduced violence. They also align with Logan and Ryle (2023), who found that democratic, consensus-based decision-making by traditional chiefs and elders was often more effective than external authoritarian interventions in South Sudan. The findings on authoritarian leadership are consistent with prior studies. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) found that authoritarian leadership worsened tensions and facilitated corruption in Mali. Babatunde and Ibnouf (2024) showed that state officials, traditional chiefs and security agents intensified conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria, and Central Darfur, Sudan. Oyeniyi (2025) showed that top-down policies in southwest Nigeria exacerbated identity contestations and impunity. The present study extends these findings. It shows that authoritarian leadership is not only ineffective in the long run. It is also perceived as contributing to escalation. This perception is held by a majority of respondents across stakeholder groups. The qualitative theme of perceived impunity for violence, cited by 62.5% of participants, helps explain why. Authoritarian leadership may suppress overt violence temporarily. Yet it does not address accountability. It may even protect powerful actors from consequences. This erodes trust and fuels grievances. The findings on laissez-faire leadership are also consistent with prior studies. Benjaminsen and Ba (2021) found that laissez-faire approaches, where officials abdicated responsibility, worsened tensions. Bello (2025) identified limited community-based participation, poor inter-agency collaboration and corruption as inherent challenges in managing farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria. Tseer et al. (2026) showed that exclusionary practices are associated with extremist views and could generate violent reactions. Achem and Aderinto (2026) showed that implementation gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms undermine the effectiveness of the anti-open grazing law in Benue State. The present study extends these findings. It shows that laissez-faire leadership is perceived as the least effective style. Only 13% of respondents rated it effective. Sixty-nine percent rated it ineffective. This is a strong rejection of hands-off leadership. The qualitative theme of governance gaps and weak regulation supports this interpretation. The qualitative findings further emphasize the importance of inclusion, participation and trust. Over 80% of participants identified these elements as critical to effective leadership. This is consistent with Bukari et al. (2022) and Schilling et al. (2024).

The preference for hybrid or integrated leadership combining customary and formal authority parallels the recommendations of Logan and Ryle (2023). They found that such models enhance legitimacy and peacebuilding outcomes in South Sudan. Omotola (2023) also points to the relevance of traditional institutions. He notes, however, that their effectiveness depends on clarity in constitutional roles and protection from undue politicization. Adebajo and Adebajo (2023) found that community leaders used negotiation, mediation and alternative dispute resolution. Yet management was characterized by extortion, erosion of traditional authorities and lack of skills. The present study's finding on the need for hybrid leadership, cited by 57.5% of participants, suggests that hybrid arrangements must include capacity building and accountability mechanisms. It is not enough to combine customary and formal authority. The combination must be designed to prevent the capture and erosion of traditional legitimacy.
The persistence of perceived impunity and lack of accountability for violence, as highlighted by respondents, mirrors issues identified by Mbah and Nzeadibe (2021). They noted the challenges of institutionalizing inclusive leadership. The present study shows that impunity is a key mechanism linking leadership style to conflict outcomes. Authoritarian leadership may create impunity by concentrating power and shielding allies. Laissez-faire leadership may create impunity by failing to enforce rules. Democratic leadership, by contrast, may reduce impunity by

fostering transparency and shared accountability. This mechanism deserves further attention in future research. Additionally, the significance of climate and resource pressures as underlying conflict drivers was cited by 77.5% of qualitative respondents. This is consistent with the literature (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021; Bukari et al., 2022). These studies note that environmental stressors interact with governance to shape conflict dynamics. Okpara et al. (2020) found that participatory local leadership was crucial to managing water-related conflicts around Lake Chad. Krendelsberger et al. (2025) showed that collective risks, such as those resulting from climate change, worsen in-group–out-group biases. Tarimo et al. (2026) showed that land tenure transformations in Tanzania promote the separation of land uses and undermine coexistence. Drew and Knutsson (2025) showed that land commodification and formalisation in East Africa's pastoralist rangelands are reshaping tenure security and conflict dynamics. The present study extends these findings. It shows that climate and resource pressures do not operate in isolation. They interact with leadership practices.

Democratic leadership can help manage these pressures by facilitating joint resource management and inclusive dialogue. Authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership can exacerbate them by excluding stakeholders or failing to regulate access. The finding that democratic leadership explains 35% of the variance in peaceful resolution outcomes is notable. It shows that leadership style matters. Yet it also shows that other factors matter. These include environmental pressures, institutional capacity and historical grievances. This is consistent with the multi-theoretical framework. Lewin's theory explains the direct effects of leadership style. Conflict theory explains the structural conditions that shape conflict. Transformational leadership theory explains the mechanisms through which leaders build trust and motivate collective action. The integration of these theories provides a more complete explanation than any single theory alone. The study also contributes to the literature on hybrid governance. Logan and Ryle (2023) called for systematic research on hybrid governance arrangements that combine traditional authority with modern state institutions. Omotola (2023) highlighted the need to understand how changes in traditional institutions affect their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The present study responds to these calls. It finds that 57.5% of qualitative respondents identified the need for hybrid or integrated leadership. This finding suggests that stakeholders see value in combining customary and formal authority. Yet they also recognize the challenges. These include unclear roles, political interference and capacity gaps. The study's findings suggest that hybrid arrangements should be designed with clear roles, accountability mechanisms and capacity building. They should also be adapted to local contexts. The study's findings on trust in leadership are also important. Trust was mentioned by 70% of qualitative respondents. This is consistent with transformational leadership theory. Transformational leaders build trust by articulating a compelling vision, fostering inclusion and attending to individual needs (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2022). The present study shows that trust is a key mechanism linking democratic leadership to peaceful outcomes. Democratic leadership fosters trust by involving stakeholders in decision-making. Authoritarian leadership erodes trust by excluding stakeholders and concentrating power. Laissez-faire leadership erodes trust by failing to provide direction and enforce rules. This mechanism deserves further attention in future research. The study's findings on inclusion and participation are also important. Inclusion was mentioned by 82.5% of qualitative respondents. This is consistent with Bukari et al. (2022), Mbah and Nzeadibe (2021) and Schilling et al. (2024). These studies found that inclusive leadership fosters dialogue, cooperation and reduced violence. The present study extends these findings. It shows that inclusion is not simply a matter of style. It is a matter of design. Inclusive leadership requires structures and processes that enable participation. These include regular dialogue forums, joint resource management committees and transparent decision-making. The study's recommendations reflect this understanding. The study's findings on climate and resource pressures are also important. Climate pressures were mentioned by 77.5% of qualitative respondents. This is consistent with Okpara et al. (2020), Krendelsberger et al. (2025), Tarimo et al. (2026) and Drew and Knutsson (2025). These studies show that environmental stressors

interact with governance to shape conflict dynamics. The present study extends these findings. It shows that leadership style shapes how climate pressures are managed. Democratic leadership can facilitate joint resource management and climate adaptation. Authoritarian leadership can impose solutions that exclude stakeholders. Laissez-faire leadership can leave resource access unregulated. These differences matter for conflict outcomes.

Practical Applications

The findings have several practical applications. First, leadership training programs should prioritize democratic and participatory skills. The study found that democratic leadership was the strongest predictor of peaceful conflict resolution ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). It was also rated as effective by 66% of respondents (Table 2). Training should therefore focus on facilitation, mediation, inclusive decision-making and trust-building. These skills are consistent with the qualitative theme of inclusion and participation, cited by 82.5% of respondents (Table 4). Training should target local leaders, traditional authorities and government officials. It should be practical and context-specific. It should draw on local experiences and case studies. Bukari et al. (2022) and Schilling et al. (2024) provide evidence that participatory leadership can be learned and institutionalized. Their findings support investment in leadership development. Second, hybrid leadership structures should be developed. The study found that 57.5% of qualitative respondents identified the need for hybrid or integrated leadership (Table 4). This finding is consistent with Logan and Ryle (2023) and Omotola (2023). Hybrid structures should combine customary and formal authority. They should clarify roles and responsibilities. They should include accountability mechanisms. They should also include capacity building for traditional authorities. Adebajo and Adebajo (2023) found that community leaders used negotiation, mediation and alternative dispute resolution. Yet management was characterized by extortion, erosion of traditional authorities and lack of skills. Hybrid structures should address these challenges. They should protect traditional authorities from political interference. They should provide training in conflict management skills. They should establish transparent processes for resource allocation.

Yeboah et al. (2023) show that traditional authorities can create scarcity when they allocate land without effective institutions. Hybrid structures should therefore include clear rules and oversight. Third, accountability mechanisms should be strengthened. The study found that 62.5% of qualitative respondents mentioned perceived impunity for violence (Table 4). This finding is consistent with Mbah and Nzeadibe (2021) and Achem and Aderinto (2026). Accountability mechanisms should include community-based monitoring, transparent investigations and fair prosecutions. They should apply to all actors, including security forces, traditional authorities and community leaders. They should be designed to build trust and deter violence. The study found that authoritarian leadership was associated with impunity. This suggests that accountability mechanisms should be paired with democratic reforms. They should not be imposed in an authoritarian manner. They should be developed through participatory processes. Fourth, environmental management should be integrated into conflict resolution. The study found that 77.5% of qualitative respondents identified climate and resource pressure as a conflict driver (Table 4). This finding is consistent with Okpara et al. (2020), Krendelsberger et al. (2025), Tarimo et al. (2026) and Drew and Knutsson (2025). Practical applications include joint resource management initiatives. These include shared grazing schemes, water point committees and climate adaptation projects. They should be designed and implemented through democratic and participatory processes. They should involve both pastoralists and farmers. They should be supported by local leaders and government officials. They should be linked to broader peacebuilding efforts. Environmental management should not be treated as a technical exercise. It should be treated as a governance challenge that requires inclusive leadership. Fifth, community dialogue platforms should be enhanced. The study found that inclusion and participation were critical to effective leadership (Table 4). It also found that democratic leadership fosters trust and dialogue (Table 5; Table 6). Community dialogue platforms should be regular, well-resourced and inclusive. They should bring together farmers, pastoralists, local

leaders and officials. They should address emerging issues proactively. They should foster trust and mutual understanding. They should be linked to decision-making processes. They should not be simply talking shops. They should have clear mandates and follow-up mechanisms. Bukari et al. (2022) and Schilling et al. (2024) provide evidence that such platforms can reduce violence and build trust. Their findings support investment in community dialogue. Sixth, leadership development should target women and youth. The study did not specifically analyse gender or age differences. Yet the qualitative data included women's leaders and youth representatives. Garfield and Glowacki (2023) found that women were as equally likely as men to help mediate inter-gender conflicts. This suggests an important opportunity for female leadership in patriarchal societies. Practical applications should include leadership training for women and youth. They should create opportunities for women and youth to participate in conflict management. They should support women's and youth organizations. They should ensure that dialogue platforms are inclusive of women and youth. This is consistent with the broader emphasis on inclusion in the study's findings.

Theoretical Applications

The study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends Lewin's leadership styles theory to the context of farmer–pastoralist conflict. Lewin's theory was developed in experimental settings. It has been applied mainly to organizational contexts (Lewin et al., 1939; Northouse, 2022). This study applies it to a complex, violent and resource-scarce setting. It shows that the tripartite framework remains useful. Authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire styles have distinct effects on conflict outcomes. Democratic leadership was the strongest predictor of peaceful resolution. Authoritarian and laissez-faire styles were negative predictors (Table 6). This finding supports the theory's core proposition that leadership style shapes group dynamics and outcomes. It also extends the theory by showing that its effects hold in a non-Western, conflict-affected context. Second, the study integrates Lewin's theory with conflict theory and transformational leadership theory. This integration provides a more complete explanation than any single theory alone. Lewin's theory explains the direct effects of leadership style. Conflict theory explains the structural conditions that shape conflict. Transformational leadership theory explains the mechanisms through which leaders build trust and motivate collective action. The study found that trust in leadership was mentioned by 70% of qualitative respondents (Table 4). This supports the transformational leadership mechanism. It also found that climate and resource pressures were mentioned by 77.5% of respondents. This supports the conflict theory mechanism.

The integration of these theories is a theoretical contribution. It shows that leadership style does not operate in a vacuum. It interacts with structural conditions and relational mechanisms. Third, the study contributes to the literature on hybrid governance. Logan and Ryle (2023) and Omotola (2023) called for research on hybrid arrangements that combine traditional and formal authority. The study responds to this call. It finds that 57.5% of qualitative respondents identified the need for hybrid or integrated leadership. It also finds that democratic leadership is more effective than authoritarian and laissez-faire styles. These findings suggest that hybrid arrangements should be built on democratic principles. They should not simply combine traditional and formal authority in any form. They should combine them in ways that foster participation, accountability and trust. This is a theoretical refinement. It specifies the conditions under which hybrid governance can be effective. Fourth, the study contributes to the literature on leadership and environmental stress. Okpara et al. (2020) called for integrated analysis of how leadership styles interact with environmental stressors. Krendelsberger et al. (2025) showed that climate risks worsen in-group–out-group biases. The study responds to these calls. It finds that climate and resource pressures are a major conflict driver. It also finds that leadership style shapes how these pressures are managed. Democratic leadership can facilitate joint resource management and inclusive dialogue. Authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership can exacerbate environmental pressures by excluding stakeholders or failing to regulate access. This is a theoretical contribution. It shows that leadership and environmental stress interact. It also shows that the

effects of leadership style are conditional on environmental conditions. Fifth, the study contributes to the literature on leadership and identity. Sowale (2025) argues that identity conflict is the root cause of farmer–herder conflict. Tuki (2025) shows that religious affiliation and victimization shape policy preferences. Krendelsberger et al. (2025) show that negative out-group perceptions reduce cooperation. The study did not directly measure identity. Yet its findings are relevant. Democratic leadership fosters inclusion and participation. This may reduce negative out-group perceptions. It may also build trust across identity groups. Authoritarian leadership may reinforce identity divisions by excluding groups. Laissez-faire leadership may allow identity-based grievances to fester. These mechanisms deserve further theoretical attention. They suggest that leadership style is not only about decision-making. It is also about identity management.

Policy Applications

The study has several policy implications. First, policymakers should institutionalize democratic and participatory leadership frameworks. The study found that democratic leadership was the strongest predictor of peaceful conflict resolution ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). It was rated as effective by 66% of respondents (Table 2). Policymakers should therefore invest in leadership training programs. They should embed participatory decision-making in local governance structures. They should require inclusive consultation in resource management decisions. They should support community dialogue platforms. These measures should be integrated into national and state-level peacebuilding strategies. They should be linked to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan. They should also be linked to local peace agreements.

Second, policymakers should develop hybrid leadership structures. The study found that 57.5% of qualitative respondents identified the need for hybrid or integrated leadership (Table 4). Policymakers should facilitate collaboration between customary authorities and formal government institutions. They should create integrated frameworks for conflict resolution. These frameworks should clarify roles and responsibilities. They should include accountability mechanisms. They should protect traditional authorities from political interference. They should provide capacity building for traditional authorities. These measures should be designed through participatory processes. They should be adapted to local contexts. They should be supported by legal and policy reforms. Omotola (2023) notes that traditional institutions remain relevant. Yet their effectiveness depends on clarity in constitutional roles and protection from undue politicization. Policymakers should address these issues. Third, policymakers should strengthen accountability mechanisms. The study found that 62.5% of qualitative respondents mentioned perceived impunity for violence (Table 4). Policymakers should establish clear protocols and community-based monitoring systems. They should ensure that all acts of violence or violations are investigated and prosecuted transparently. They should apply these mechanisms to all actors. They should not shield powerful actors. They should be paired with democratic reforms. They should be developed through participatory processes. Achem and Aderinto (2026) show that implementation gaps and weak enforcement mechanisms undermine the effectiveness of the anti-open grazing law in Benue State.

Policymakers should learn from this experience. They should design accountability mechanisms that are inclusive and adaptive. They should not rely solely on exclusionary legal frameworks. Fourth, policymakers should integrate environmental management into conflict resolution. The study found that 77.5% of qualitative respondents identified climate and resource pressure as a conflict driver (Table 4). Policymakers should design and implement joint resource management initiatives. These include shared grazing schemes, water point committees and climate adaptation projects. They should address competition over scarce resources that fuel conflict. They should be designed and implemented through democratic and participatory processes. They should involve both pastoralists and farmers. They should be supported by local leaders and government officials. They should be linked to broader peacebuilding efforts. Tarimo et al. (2026) show that land tenure transformations in Tanzania promote the separation of land uses and undermine coexistence. Policymakers should ensure that land tenure reforms accommodate

pastoral land use. They should harmonize arrangements to support land use coexistence. Drew and Knutsson (2025) show that land commodification and formalisation in East Africa's pastoralist rangelands are reshaping tenure security and conflict dynamics. Policymakers should consider the impacts of these processes on conflict. They should design tenure reforms that protect pastoralist access to resources. Fifth, policymakers should enhance community dialogue platforms. The study found that inclusion and participation were critical to effective leadership (Table 4).

Policymakers should support the creation of regular, well-resourced forums for dialogue. These forums should bring together farmers, pastoralists, local leaders and officials. They should address emerging issues proactively. They should foster trust. They should be linked to decision-making processes. They should have clear mandates and follow-up mechanisms. They should be inclusive of women and youth. Bukari et al. (2022) and Schilling et al. (2024) provide evidence that such platforms can reduce violence and build trust. Policymakers should invest in these platforms. They should integrate them into local governance structures. Sixth, policymakers should scale up research and monitoring. The study found that leadership style matters. Yet it also found that other factors matter. These include environmental pressures, institutional capacity and historical grievances. Policymakers should encourage continuous, context-specific research. They should monitor the impact of leadership interventions. They should adapt strategies as conditions evolve. They should use both quantitative and qualitative methods. They should engage local stakeholders in research. They should disseminate findings to policymakers and practitioners. This will ensure that policy responses remain effective and relevant. It will also build local capacity for evidence-based policymaking.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the critical role of leadership styles in managing and resolving farmer–pastoralist conflicts in Central Equatoria State. The results show that democratic leadership, characterized by inclusiveness, participation and shared decision-making, is overwhelmingly perceived as the most effective approach. This is true in both quantitative measures and qualitative narratives. In contrast, authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership styles are strongly associated with conflict escalation and unresolved disputes. The study also highlights the importance of trust in leadership, the need for hybrid models that integrate both customary and formal authority, and the centrality of addressing climate and resource pressures as underlying drivers of conflict. These findings suggest that successful conflict management in this context is not simply a matter of authority. It depends on adaptive leadership that responds to the needs and realities of diverse stakeholders. The study makes several contributions. It moves beyond environmental and institutional explanations of farmer–pastoralist conflict. It places leadership at the centre of analysis. It provides context-specific evidence from Central Equatoria State. It integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence. It identifies hybrid leadership arrangements that combine customary and formal authority. It also identifies accountability and trust as key mechanisms linking leadership style to conflict outcomes. These contributions advance the literature on leadership and conflict management. They also provide practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners. This research has significant implications for both policy and practice. By demonstrating the tangible benefits of democratic and participatory leadership, the study underscores the importance of empowering inclusive leadership structures at both community and institutional levels. The emphasis on hybrid leadership and accountability addresses longstanding governance gaps. The recognition of climate and resource factors highlights the need to integrate environmental management strategies into peacebuilding efforts. Overall, the study advances the understanding of how leadership can be harnessed as a transformative tool for sustainable peace. It provides a blueprint for interventions not only in Central Equatoria but in other regions experiencing similar conflicts.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, it uses a cross-sectional design. Cross-sectional data cannot establish causal relationships. They capture perceptions and associations at a single point in time. Future research should use longitudinal designs to assess the sustained effects of different leadership styles on conflict dynamics and peace outcomes over time. Such designs would provide deeper insights into which leadership interventions create lasting change versus those with only temporary impact. They would also allow researchers to examine how leadership styles interact with changing environmental and political conditions. Second, the study relies on perception-based measures. Respondents reported their perceptions of leadership effectiveness and conflict outcomes. These perceptions may be influenced by social desirability bias, especially in self-reported conflict data. Respondents may underreport involvement in violence or overreport support for peaceful outcomes. Future research should combine perception-based measures with objective indicators. These could include incident reports, displacement data and agricultural output. They could also include independent observations of leadership practices. This would strengthen the validity of the findings. Future research should also use procedural and statistical remedies to address social desirability bias. These include anonymous data collection, indirect questioning and social desirability scales. Third, the study is a single-state case. It focuses on Central Equatoria State, South Sudan. The findings may not generalize to other states or countries.

Context-specific factors, such as ethnic composition, historical grievances and institutional capacity, may shape leadership effectiveness. Future research should conduct comparative regional analyses. These could compare different regions and states within South Sudan or neighbouring countries. They could identify context-specific factors that influence the success or failure of leadership strategies. Such research would support the development of more tailored conflict management models. Fourth, the study did not directly measure identity, gender or age differences. Yet these factors may shape leadership effectiveness and conflict outcomes. Future research should investigate the participation and impact of women and youth in leadership roles. It should also examine how identity dynamics interact with leadership style. Garfield and Glowacki (2023) found that women were as equally likely as men to help mediate inter-gender conflicts. This suggests an important opportunity for female leadership in patriarchal societies. Future research should build on this finding. It should examine how women's leadership shapes conflict management outcomes. It should also examine how youth leadership can be strengthened. Fifth, the study did not experimentally test leadership interventions. It examined associations between leadership styles and conflict outcomes. It did not test whether training or institutional reforms can change leadership practices and improve outcomes. Future research should use action research to evaluate the design, implementation and outcomes of leadership development programs. Such research would provide practical evidence on how best to strengthen local capacity for peaceful conflict management. It would also test the mechanisms identified in this study. These include trust, inclusion and accountability. It would show whether changes in leadership practices lead to changes in conflict outcomes.

Funding: *No funding was received for this manuscript.*

Conflicts of Interest Statement: *The authors declare no conflicts of interest, including any financial conflicts of interest.*

Data Availability Statement: *The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.*

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