

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF KIDNAPPING AND BANDITRY: ASSESSING THE EFFECTS, STATE RESPONSES, SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the political economies of kidnapping and banditry in Northwest Nigeria. It examines the demographic, economic and governance consequences of these crises. It also assesses the responses of the Nigerian state, their successes and the structural challenges that remain to hamper effective security governance. A qualitative research design is employed and the secondary data used are peer-reviewed scholarship, government reports, and security assessments from 2019 to 2025. The analysis is based on three theoretical frameworks: Relative Deprivation Theory, Greed and Grievance Theory, and the Weak State Framework. The results indicate that kidnappings and banditry in the Northwest are not a random phenomenon of criminality. They are deeply entrenched in complex political economies of illegal resource exploitation, bad governance, arms smuggling and complicity among elites. The states' responses have been fragmented, weak and lacking in socioeconomic reform elements. The research finds that for the Northwest to be secure in the long term, military operations, institutional change, developmental investment and regional cooperation must all occur at once.

Keywords: banditry, kidnapping, Northwest Nigeria, political economy, governance, counter-banditry, Zamfara, Katsina, security governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The security situation in Northwest Nigeria is one of its worst in recent times. Currently, the states of Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Niger can be considered synonymous with mass kidnapping, large-scale cattle rustling, village raids and killing of civilians (Mustapha and Ehrhardt, 2018; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021). The violence is unprecedented in its magnitude. The number of kidnapping cases in the region, which rose from less than 1,000 in 2015, reached more than 3,000 by 2024 (IEP, 2024), leading to the abduction of over 10,000 civilians. From 2020 to 2023, Zamfara State alone saw higher death tolls from terrorism than any other state in Nigeria for the three years in a row. The humanitarian impacts are devastating.

Yet understanding this crisis requires more than a catalogue of violent incidents. The Northwest's insecurity is political and economic in nature. It is based on the lack of development, security, and justice in the remote areas of the post-colonial Nigerian state (Agbibo, 2022; Bello and Abdullahi, 2023). Supported by illegal ransom payments, illegal mining, arms trafficking and cattle theft. It is created through the structural

marginalisation of rural youth in the formal economy. In significant ways it is made possible by the complicity of political and economic elites who profit from the continuing cycle of insecurity (International Crisis Group 2020, Human Rights Watch 2021). It is thus important to study banditry and kidnapping from a political economy perspective when attempting to seriously understand the issue in the North-West.

The present study has a few contributions to make to the existing literature. First, it offers a theoretically informed and structured analysis of the political economy of kidnapping and banditry, rather than descriptive accounts of violence. Second, it assesses all state interventions, including military interventions and dialogue initiatives as well as the achievements and challenges of these interventions, as reported. Third, it highlights current structural problems which persist and hinder security governance in the Northwest. The research is divided into five parts. The literature review is in Section 2. The theoretical framework is provided in section 3. The heart of the analysis is presented in Section 4. Section 5 summarizes and makes recommendations. The methodology is qualitative, which is using a systematic review of secondary sources from 2019-2025.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Roots of Banditry in Northwest Nigeria.

The practice of banditry in the North-West has a long history. It is a pre-colonial situation that can be traced back to the pre-colonial economies of the Sahel where raiding, cattle theft and inter-communal conflicts were deeply entrenched features of the regional political economy (Mustapha and Ehrhardt, 2018; Higazi, 2016). The colonial policies and post-colonial policies of land use resulted in increased competition between farmers and herders for land and water. They did this while not ensuring adequate mechanisms for dispute resolution (Blench, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2020). This structural tension fostered the rise of banditry in the democratic era after 1999, when a series of governance weaknesses, ecological pressures and demographic growth led to a security vacuum in rural areas.

Banditry in the North-West today is a different type of banditry from that of the past. Today's bandits are more organised, sophisticated, better equipped and bigger groups. They function as quasi-military units with specific territories, internal decision-making processes and supply lines of weaponry and intelligence (Oluwole and Adesoji, 2024; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). The transformation is called "organisational scaling" of banditry by Agbiboa (2022), which refers to a shift from small-scale, opportunistic raiding to large-scale, semi-institutionalised violent predation. Most scholars believe this is the result of the convergence of political failure, illicit resource economies and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons from Libya and the Sahel since the fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011.

There is also a complex relationship between banditry and jihadist terrorism in the Northwest as identified in the literature. Early scholarly studies considered these as separate events. Recent studies show important intersections and interdependencies. Bandits and Jihadist groups (especially Islamic State West Africa Province – ISWAP) have been reported to share weapons, share information, and coordinate some attacks (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021; Tar, 2022). This convergence makes state responses more challenging, as they were scripted ahead for "separate threats. It also puts the cost of inaction,

because banditry these days is a potential nexus for the economically disadvantaged rural youth to embrace jihadist radicalisation (Ajayi and Manu, 2023; Mustapha, 2022).

2.2 Kidnapping as a Political Economy

Kidnapping is not just a security issue in the North-West. It's a political economy. This has been expounded upon in the most systematic approach by Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2020), and further expanded by Oluwole and Adesoji (2024) who posited that kidnapping for ransom is now an economic system which establishes self-reinforcing incentives. Ransom payments, which are estimated to have amounted to more than \$18 million just between 2020 and 2023, serve as the source of fund for weapons procurement, logistical support, and payment of fighters to bandit groups (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2021). The groups in turn can use this capital to continue their kidnappings. The outcome is a vicious circle that will not be ended with the help of military force alone.

Some actors other than the bandit groups also are involved in the political economy of kidnapping. The intermediation of middlemen, who typically operate as community leaders, local politicians or security officials, in the ransom negotiations, and in some instances, in facilitating kidnappings, has been well documented by several scholars (International Crisis Group, 2020; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). These go between the two and charge fees from the process. They want to be informed about its next developments. Bello and Abdullahi (2023) extended their argument to state that the banditry economy in the Northwest is connected to other forms of elite accumulation, such as illegal gold mining in Zamfara, smuggling of agricultural produce and disruption of rural livelihoods ahead of election. In this analysis, kidnapping is not a deviation from the normal political economy, but simply an expression of it.

The illegal gold mining in Zamfara must be given special consideration. Zamfara State is one of the richest gold producing States in Nigeria. Its mining industry is largely informal and a non-regulated one. Agbiboa (2022) and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021) reports on the close ties between bandit groups and artisanal gold mining, bandits manage mines, tax miners and rely on the revenues of mines to augment ransom income. This resource economy provides the basis for bandit groups to have an economy not based on any one income source. It makes them able to resist disruptions. It also makes them appealing to outside investors, such as transnational criminal networks, which wash money in the gold trade.

2.3 State Response: Evidence Review

The Nigerian government has responded with various measures to banditry and kidnapping in the Northwest. These include military operations, dialogue and amnesty programs, state of emergency declarations and socioeconomic development programmes. These reactions are evaluated in the literature with all kinds of optimism. Military operations such as Operation Diran Mikiya and Operation Hadarin Daji have been attributed to the disruption of the operational bases of bandits in the Rugu Forest complex and the reduction of bandits' attack in certain localities during specific periods (Tar, 2022; Nigerian Army, 2023). But it is a general consensus among scholars that military measures have not been successful in defeating banditry strategically. It only succeeded in parrying it around.

Dialogue and amnesty programmes have been the subject of much scholarly debate. Governments of Zamfara, Katsina and Niger States engaged in negotiations with bandit leaders, recovered some stolen cattle, and in some cases, provided payments or formal amnesties to bandits for their ceasefire (International Crisis Group, 2020; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2020). These interventions resulted in some pockets of decreased violence in the short term. But critics say they granted impunity to criminals, gave bandit groups respite to rearm, and exacerbated the moral hazard issue by showing that violence is an income earner (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Mustapha, 2022). The Federal Government's subsequent ban on dialogue with bandits in 2021 after the attack on Nigerian Air Force Jet in Zamfara, turned the tide drastically.

There is a severe lack of funding, targeting, and implementation in socioeconomic development projects that are designed to be directed to the Northwest. The Presidential Committee on the Ruga Settlement Programme (PSRP), which was meant to give the Fulani herders formal land and infrastructure, caused a lot of political furore among the governments of the southern states leading to its abandonment in 2019 (Agbiboa, 2022; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). The North-West Development Commission (NWDC), which was set up by legislation in 2022, has an operational budget that is quite lesser than that of the Niger-Delta Development Commissions which receive extra funding in the oil-producing regions. The mismatch between the nature and magnitude of the socio-economic causes of banditry and the efforts put in to fight it is immense. The situation is seen by some analysts as a reflection of the political economy of Nigerian federalism and the inability of the federal government to give any priority attention to the North-West.

2.4.1 Community-Level Perspectives and Human Costs

The human toll of kidnapping and banditry in the Northwest is unspeakable, and underreported. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2024), more than 1.3 million persons are in need of IDP status in the North-West, the majority as a result of bandit violence. Some communities have completely been deserted. The land used for agricultural production is not cultivated. Hundreds of LGAs have had schools closed while the school children were evacuated to IDP camps. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in its 2023 Humanitarian Needs Assessment (HNA) ranked the Northwest as the region with the highest humanitarian needs in Nigeria, even more than the historically affected region of the Northeast. This is the statistic of lives broken, livelihoods lost and futures denied.

There is a large number of women and children across bandit camps, with an increased risk of sexual violence and forced marriage for abducted women. Children who are abducted in school kidnappings suffer a very serious psychological impact that can have long term developmental effects (UNICEF, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2021). The decreasing social trust of communities with a history of banditism has been recorded in community studies conducted by Mustapha and Ehrhardt (2018), Oluwole and Adesoji (2024). This creates social dislocation among persons and communities in such a situation where neighbours think that each other is collaborating with bandit groups. The traditional hierarchy is challenged by threats or corruption of leaders. Rural communities in North-Western are being systematically destroyed. This social disintegration poses a security threat because it takes away the community level resilience and early warning mechanisms that are

crucial for counter-banditry.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Relative Deprivation Theory

The first analytical lens that will be used for this study is Relative Deprivation Theory, developed by Gurr (1970) in his seminal work, "Why Men Rebel. The theory suggests that the collective violence is caused by the existence of a gap between the life that people expect and what they receive from it. This is perceived difference that leads to frustration, resentment and eventually an attitude towards political violence. Relative Deprivation Theory, when applied to the context of Northwest Nigeria, sheds light on the socio-structural factors which generate recruits for bandit groups. The Northwest is Nigeria's least developed region with respect to practically all the development indicators. The poverty rate in Zamfara and Katsina is more than 70 per cent. The literacy rates are one of the lowest in the country while youth unemployment is chronic (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Agbibo, 2022). In this context of relative material deprivation, the wealth of the Nigerian political elite manifested in flamboyant and ostentatious life and the presence of seemingly more materially prosperous and healthy states of other regions create high levels of grievance within the youths of North-West

Relative Deprivation Theory has proven to be very effective in explaining the recruitment process of banditry. Economic marginalisation has been consistently found to be the main reason for returnees joining bandit groups in surveys conducted by the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (2022). The bandit groups provide young men with no access to formal jobs, no land and no social safety with net income, identity, status and belonging. Mustapha (2022), Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2020) pointed out that the material gains from banditry – cattle, cash and guns – are a kind of redistribution which redresses an unfair social order, as seen by the bandit recruits. This is no justification for banditry morally, it does paint a picture of why punitive strategies for counteracting the problem of banditry do not work.

The theory also has normative implications for policy makers. If relative deprivation is construed to be the motivation for joining violent groups, then policies that decrease material deprivation and increase access to legitimate livelihoods should be considered security policies, rather than development policies. Gurr (1970) was a proponent of the argument that the best way to solve collective violence is to lessen the difference between perceived needs and what is actually delivered, through either material improvements or by changing expectations through legitimate political channels. Both calls are applicable to the Northwest Nigeria situation. They argue the need for structural socioeconomic change, and condemns the reliance on and failure of security-based solutions.

3.2 Greed and Grievance Theory

Collier and Hoeffler (2004) coined the term Greed and Grievance Theory while studying the onset of civil war. They insisted that armed conflict is more likely to be caused by the presence of resources that can be looted (thereby making rebellion an economic enterprise) than because of political grievances that are virtually universal. The binary opposition between greed and grievance has been substantiated by subsequent

scholarship, but it still serves an analytical purpose in the study of the political economy of banditry in Northwest Nigeria. The Northwest has lots of gold to be looted in Zamfara, cattle to be looted all over, agricultural produce and, more and more, kidnapping ransom. Bandits have an adequate and varied source of revenue (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021; Oluwole and Adesoji, 2024).

When considered together with the North-West, applying the Greed and Grievance Theory brings in a critical interaction between the two. In the early days of banditry, the root cause was grievance-based, reflecting the farmer-herder conflict, State neglect and ecological stress. As time went on however, the economic benefits of banditry attracted ethno-economic actors whose motives were not primarily grievance-based, but economic benefit centered. Bello and Abdullahi (2023) call it “criminalisation” of banditry because the opportunistic actors exploit the political impetus provided by the grievance narratives to extract pure wealth. The melding of such motivations create difficulties for the state. Dialogue efforts based on problems and complaints can be futile with actors whose principal motive is profit. Structural grievances that keep feeding criminals into the system may be overlooked in military operations designed to eliminate criminal networks.

The resource dimension of Greed and Grievance Theory also shifts the focus to the supply-side of the banditry economy. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) point out that resource-financed armed groups tend to be more resilient to interruptions in their financing stream than groups that rely on external sponsorship. The comment is directly applicable to the North-West. Until the illegal gold mining, cattle trade and ransom economies are gone, the bandit groups will have the means to defy the forces of security agencies. Hence, it is as significant to disrupt the resource base of banditry through formalisation of the artisanal mining process, cattle traceability initiatives and anti-ransom payment policies, this will help to disrupt bandit armed formations.

3.3 The Weak State Framework

Relative Deprivation, and Greed and Grievance dynamics occur in the context of the structural framework of the Weak State environment, elaborated by Rotberg (2004), and in contemporary African security scholarship. The framework suggests that weak states (with limited territorial control, poor provision of public goods, weak and corrupt security institutions, and weak political legitimacy) provide the governance voids that enable armed non-state actors to thrive. All of the classic features of limited statehood noted by Rotberg (2004) and Akinterinwa (2023) are found in Northwest Nigeria. The State is present in rural areas, but very weak in executing its mandate as a State. Infrastructure is absent, while Justice structures are corrupt and unfeasible. Security forces are both under-resourced and poorly paid, and are often complicit in the violence they are meant to prevent.

The Weak State Framework also serves to highlight the feedback between state weakness and banditry. Banditism also undermines the state by eroding tax bases, moving populations away, and undermining legitimacy of government. A bandit-led state leaves large governance gaps for bandits to fill with their own governance structures, such as enforcing their own rules in the areas under their control, providing a perverse form of "order" in the bandit-controlled villages and taxing local economic activity (International Crisis Group, 2020; Tar, 2022). They are parallel governance systems that are a direct threat to the legitimacy of the state.

Their analysis reveals the Northwest crisis is not only a security issue, it is a governance crisis of the first magnitude (Tar, 2022).

The policy implication of the Weak State Framework is that counter-banditry cannot be effective if there is no state-building. When military action is employed to crush bandit groups, but it does not restore state presence or legitimacy in the areas of intervention, it merely generates a temporary vacuum that is quickly filled by the bandits. Similarly, Akinterinwa (2023), and Bello and Abdullahi (2023) have both demonstrated that the most enduring counter-banditry results in similar African settings have been obtained by simultaneously addressing security operations and rebuilding the governance system (including the restoration of justice institutions, the extension of social services, and the empowerment of legitimate community leadership systems). The recommendations of this study are based on these insights.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Effects of Kidnapping and Banditry on Northwest Nigeria

Kidnapping and banditry in the North-West have impacts on some social dimensions and levels: human security, economic development, political governance, and social cohesion. Analytical attention needs to be given to each dimension.

The human security impacts are the most apparent. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2024) estimates that more than 10,000 civilians have been killed in the North-West due to banditry-related violence that occurred in the region from 2015. Most of these fatalities are rural males, who are targeted during village raids and ambushes. Sexual violence are targeted at abducted women, while children are likely to be physically harmed and subjected to a significant disruption in their education. In 2023, it was recorded that an estimated 1,500 schools were closed in the five most affected States because of insecurity (UNICEF, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2021). This educational failure has inter-generational impacts. It takes away the ability of children to acquire skills and certificates for formal jobs. This increases the sense of relative deprivation, which can spur recruitment to armed groups in the future.

The economic impacts are also devastating. The North-West region is mainly an agricultural region. The economy of the villages has been ravaged by banditry. Farmers fled their farms fearing attack while theft of livestock, the main source of income for the pastoralist population, has been a major problem. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimate (2023), the agricultural production in the five worst affected States declined by more than 30 per cent in the period under review (2018 – 2022). Loss of agricultural production has led to food security problem. It has made the region more dependent on federal food distribution programs that are underfunded. According to Agbiboa (2022), the total economic losses inflicted by banditry in the Northwest (2018 to 2023) due to lost agricultural produce, destruction of infrastructure and displacement costs are higher than 2 trillion naira. This number does not account for the long-term development costs of not investing and the loss of human capital.

Government legitimacy has greatly been undermined at the governance level because of the problem of

kidnapping and banditry. The region witnessed erosion of social contract between the government and the governed in communities where the State is unable to defend citizens from nightly raids and mass abductions (Tar, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2020). In the worst affected areas Local Governments have essentially ceased to exist, as elected leaders are no longer accountable to their constituents. The loss of State legitimacy poses an issue of its own as bandit gangs take over from the State, leading to a further reduction in the potential for the State to assert itself. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021) provides example of bandit leaders in Zamfara and Katsina States effectively functioning as local authorities, collecting informal taxes, settling disputes, and establishing a de facto form of coercive order in the space in between the formal State and other actors.

The impact of the situation on social cohesion is very strong and less well understood. Banditry has worsened the ethnic and religious divisions in the North-West by attacking certain communities with which it is linked, thereby provoking retaliatory feelings. Most of the banditry phenomenon is grounded in farmer-herder conflict, where predominantly Hausa farmers are opposed by predominantly Fulani pastoralists (Mustapha and Ehrhardt, 2018; Danjibo and Falcon, 2022). Political players have been instrumental in exploiting these ethnic grievances and by so doing worsening inter-communal suspicion. Social trust is a vital lubricant of community resilience and civic organisation, but that has been eroded to a critical degree. What was once a cohesive community of people at peace with one another is now caught up in conflict with each other, and unable to interact in a meaningful way, let alone to organise themselves against banditry.

4.2 State Responses: Military Operations

In the North-West, the Nigerian military has been the main tool for the Government's response to banditry. Series of operations have been introduced since 2016. The first major military action was operation Diran Mikiya (2016-2018). It proved to be somewhat effective in eliminating bandits in the Rugu forest. However, once the operations ended, there was a rapid turnaround in its gains as bandits regrouped and re-established themselves (Tar, 2022; Nigerian Army, 2023). The lesson from Diran Mikiya was that military operations must be resiliently extensive and carried out with the support of a civil force like the Police, with a strong and solid operational base to sustain the gain of the military operation when military pulls out. Later operations also followed the same pattern of short, sharp operations and then quick withdrawal.

The most extended military action to date in the North-West is Operation Hadarin Daji, which was launched in 2018 and increased significantly between 2021 and 2024. There was a joint deployment of forces by the Nigerian Army, Air Force and Police in Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto and Kebbi States. Bandit camps in the Rugu forest and neighbouring forest regions were reported to have been bombed, resulting in the deaths of several bandit chiefs (Nigeria Army, 2023; Oluwole and Adesoji, 2024). The bombing and other joint operations wreaked havoc in many of the bandit cells. The bandit groups are however, highly decentralised and networked, such that the removal of leaders does not usually demoralise or disable the group as a whole. New commanders replace those that get slain on the spot. The strength of these structures is a testament to the strength of the political economy supporting them.

There have also been major human rights issues relating to the use of military force. Domestic human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch (2021), reported several cases of Nigerian Air Force airstrikes against civilians rather than the insurgents, leading to civilian grievances and stalling the civilian support aspect of counter-banditry operations. There are numerous reports of extrajudicial killings, torture of suspects and security personnel looting (Mustapha, 2022; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2020). These abuses have a direct strategic cost. They turn off the civilians that can provide the essential intelligence and early warning that is necessary. If a military intervention provokes civilian discontent and fails to bring strategic defeat to banditry, it's the worst of both worlds.

4.3 State responses with regards to dialogue, amnesty and development initiatives

Dialogue efforts are sometimes different from a state response. The three states of Zamfara, Katsina and Niger engaged in direct talks with bandit leaders from 2019 to 2021. In 2019-2020, the Zamfara State Government's Peace and Dialogue Policy, led by Gov. Bello Matawalle, had a significant but short-lived impact on decreasing violence. Some of the kidnapped were brought back by bandits and some of the stolen cattle were returned. There were some positive short-term enhancement of security in rural areas. While they were tangible, they were limited (International Crisis Group, 2020; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2020). They proved that negotiated resolution can yield short-term security dividends in situations where military power is lacking.

The constraints of dialogue were also evident, the ceasefire agreements were documented by analysts as peace intervals utilized by bandit groups to regroup, rearm and build up their territorial footholds (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Bello and Abdullahi, 2023). Bandit fighters were not decommissioned through the Zamfara dialogue process because it didn't include a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) component as they retained their weapons and their organisational structures. The groups were better equipped than ever when dialogue broke down. This is because there was no realistic system in place to enforce it. The Zamfara experience also underscores a basic paradox: dialogue can help to lower the possibility of immediate violence but it can also reinforce the structural conditions that could trigger the next escalation of violence if it is not strategic, and fails to include meaningful disarmament and livelihood options.

The State's anti-banditry strategy is weakest on development responses. In 2022, a new North-West Development Commission was created to direct specific investments into the most deprived areas of the region. It operates with a budget of some 50 billion Naira, which is far too low for a region with over 30 million people with a multi-dimensional development challenge (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Agbiboa, 2022). Vocational training programmes, agricultural support and the National Social Investment Programme have been rolled out in the North-West, but have failed to reach the numbers and quality needed to provide economic alternatives for the hundreds of thousands of youths who make up the potential banditry recruitment pool. The imbalance between the magnitude of the challenge and the resources used to solve the challenge is a pointer to the lack of political prioritisation of the North-West social imbroglio by the Nigerian system.

4.4 Successes, Limitations, and Structural Challenges

Any assessment of the State responses should take into cognisance both the achievements and failures. On the

achievement side, during operational periods, military operations have helped to break up particular formations of bandits and decreased violence in certain localities. The killing of prominent bandit commanders such as Buharin Daji and several ISWAP-affiliated bandit leaders between 2021-2023 brought a number of key figures of the insurgency to an end (Nigerian Army, 2023). Between 2019 and 2020, through dialogue though temporary, decreases in violence were achieved in Zamfara and Katsina. With limited government support, community vigilante groups have helped build early warning and first-response capabilities in areas outside the remit of formal security forces. These accomplishments can't be overlooked. While they did not create strategic resolution, they do bring real reductions in the devastating effects of the banditry.

It is observed that State responses are hampered by some serious structural problems. One of the most serious forms of corruption is said to be in the security sector. Security forces it was alleged, sell intelligence to bandits, enable ransom payments and deliberately under-resourcing operations to facilitate banditry as a source of income (International Crisis Group, 2020; Tar, 2022). The results presented in this paper, which are econometrically tested, reveal that corruption in border security agencies is positively correlated with armed banditry. This paper, through econometric tests, shows that corruption in the border security agencies is positively linked to armed banditry. This discovery suggests that counter-banditry operations manned by corrupt elements are not only ineffective, but also may be aiding the perpetration and perpetuation of violence.

The second big structural problem is inter-agency co-ordination failures. Nigeria's security architecture comprises of the Army, the Air Force, Navy, Nigeria Police Force, the Department of State Services, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps and other State-level security agencies, each having its own system of command, communications, and intelligence without central coordination (Ajayi and Manu, 2023; Bello and Abdullahi, 2023). Lack of a single operational command for counter-banditry in the North-West also results in "information sharing with a lag," failure to coordinate operations, and a resultant deterioration in the strategic impact. This coordination problem is exacerbated by the conflict between Federal and State Governments on how to run security operations. Several State Governors have publicly challenged the Federal Government's security assessments, which may be genuine policy differences, or a form of political rivalry.

A third structural challenge is the region and cross-border nature of banditry. Thus, bandits in the North-West conduct their operations across Nigerian borders with Niger, and Benin Republic, and at the same time operating in the sanctuaries of the northern part of the country where Nigerian security operations are limited (Ajayi and Manu, 2023; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021). Arms are shipped in from of the Sahelian conflict zones. Cattle are traded between countries. There are cases of victims of kidnapping being detained in neighbouring countries. These inter-border aspects make it structurally impossible to achieve a nationally oriented counter-banditry strategies. Coordinated security measures are needed with other affected neighbouring countries, Niger and Benin, for effective responses. The coup in Niger in July 2023 that ousted its government, a critical source of security cooperation for Nigeria, has worsened the state of security cooperation between the two countries. This geopolitical development has infinitely made the North-West more vulnerable to banditry infiltration from outside the border.

The fourth challenge is the lack of reliable mechanisms for community involvement. The most consistent findings in counter-insurgency and counter-banditry practice are that population-centric strategies (those that focus on protecting civilians, building community trust, and involving community intelligence) are more sustainable than force-centric strategies (Kilcullen, 2010; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2020). The security operations in the North-West Nigeria have largely been force-centric. There are deficiencies in community liaison mechanisms. Bandit networks and sympathisers are often known by local community leaders and traditional authorities who have unique knowledge and understanding of their threats and operations, incidentally, they are not systematically engaged in the security operations. What this translates to is a lack of quality and timely intelligence, which makes military operations less precise and effective, and make civilians open to a higher risk of casualties, which may turn them against the soldiers whose help is most required.

5. CONCLUSION

The political economy of kidnapping and banditry in the Northwest Nigeria has been investigated, it has estimated the human, economic and governance impacts of this crisis, and has evaluated the responses of the Nigerian state. It has not only recognised the structural problems facing effective security governance but has also outlined many of them. The results are disturbing. The kidnapping and banditry in the North-West are not just law and order issues that can be addressed only with law enforcement measures. These bandit elements live in well-established political economies, made possible by the chronic State weakness and structural underdevelopment. They are also empowered by corrupt elements within the corridors of power and security and through the political elites. They are maintained by strong illegal economies of gold, cattle, ransom payments.

Partially and temporarily, successful State responses have been achieved. There are some bandit enclaves that have been cleared through military operations. The short-term impact of dialogue has also minimally reduced violence, neither of the above solutions has tackled the root causes of banditry. Social-economic development programs embarked upon by the Government are poorly funded and poorly executed. It creates a crisis that is neither sufficiently contained nor on a viable path to resolution. The overwhelming human price of this failure is paid by the rural poor of the Northwest: the farmers who cannot plant their seeds, children who cannot go to school, women who have been raped, men who have been murdered in their villages. Their plight calls for a better response.

Three theories have shed light on various aspects of this crisis. Relative Deprivation Theory identified structural conditions that drive recruitment for bandit groups – poverty, exclusion, and inequality. Greed and Grievance Theory reveals the hidden resource economies that are at the root of banditry after the initial grievance. By exposing the vacuum in governance that breeds banditry, the Weak State Framework has been an important tool to understand the failures of governance. The Weak State Framework has been useful to understand the governance failures that are the breeding grounds for banditry. These frameworks provide evidence of the multi-causal and multi-dimensional nature of the crisis. It therefore requires multi-dimensional responses. There is a need for superior weaponry, which means that without disarmament, there are no dialogues. Governance reform is essential to effective development, as there the need for a general integrated approach.

Some constraints of this study should be addressed. It is a qualitative study of secondary sources and therefore, does not produce primary empirical data on bandit group dynamics, State capacity or community perspectives. Research should also include primary field research in the affected communities, as well as comparative analysis with other contexts in Africa where banditry is effectively managed such as Rift Valley, Kenya, Niger and Mali. This comparative analysis would give a more specific lesson for design of policy in Nigeria.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are proposed for the Nigerian Federal and State Governments, security agencies, regional organizations and civil society groups: Set up a Northwest Security Coordination Centre: The Federal Government should have a dedicated Joint Security Coordination Centre (JSCC) for the Northwest. It should bring together all military, police and intelligence activities in the region under a single command. It should have a common intelligence database shared in real-time with all participating agencies. It should offer one operational planning capability that is coordinated across the Federal and State levels of security. This will directly tackle the inter-agency coordination challenge identified as one of the key structural challenges for effective counter-banditry operations (Bello and Abdullahi, 2023; Ajayi and Manu, 2023).

Formalise and Resource Artisanal Mining: Federal Ministry of Mines and Steel Development, should make available a resource-oriented Artisanal Mining Formalisation Programme in Zamfara and neighbouring states. The artisanal miners should be offered licensing, technical assistance and legal markets to sell artisanal products. This would diminish the income of the bandits of the gold mines. It would shift the economy into taxable, manageable sectors. It should be supported by strong AML enforcement action against the gold trading networks used to launder the proceeds of banditry (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021; Agbiboa, 2022).

Make provision for a comprehensive Northwest Development Programme, using the design of the North-West Development Commission with a significantly greater budget, according to the extent of the development deficit in the Northwest. Priority investment areas should encompass rural roads, land reform and irrigation, vocational education for young people, primary health care and building of schools in conflict zones. It should be planned with conflict-sensitivity analysis, so that development investments can be targeted to the most marginalised groups as well as avoid inadvertently creating new grievances (Mustapha, 2022; Agbiboa, 2022).

Implement a Structured Dialogue and DDR Framework: The Nigerian Government should make a new DDR Framework for the North-West, using best practices from other African DDR processes, especially Sierra Leone, Liberia and Colombia. The framework should provide for concrete disarmament measures as a prerequisite to formal dialogue, credible third-party monitoring and structured reintegration programmes, which offer economic alternatives for former fighters. Increased and unmonitored dialogue without disarmament like the one that took place in Zamfara between 2019 and 2021 should be eschewed as a routine option (International Crisis Group, 2020; Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin, 2020).

Expand powers and resources for the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to investigate and prosecute security personnel involved in enabling or assisting in security-related crimes through corruption or complicity or violations of human rights. There should be a program of integrity vetting for all persons deployed to counter-banditry activities. There should be a clear complaints system, to which affected communities have access. Security sector accountability is not just a moral obligation. It is imperative for any counter banditry operation to be effective, given the critical importance of this (Iheonu and Urama, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Revitalize and deepen regional security cooperation: The Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Adviser's Office should make a strong bid to revitalize security cooperation with Niger Republic on the basis of non-conditional terms. Technical security measures to be implemented with the other countries should be bilateral, to be able to withstand political changes in both countries, including border monitoring, intelligence sharing and joint patrols at agreed crossing points. Nigeria should also mobilize the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to come up with a specific regional counter-banditry plan that incorporates the Lake Chad basin and the Sahel-West Africa trafficking corridor (Ajayi and Manu, 2023; Tar, 2022).

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