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THE BANDITRY CRISIS IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA: BEYOND CRIMINALITY TO A COMPLEX CONFLICT

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Abstract

The spiraling violence of rural banditry in Nigeria's Northwest - encompassing states such as Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Sokoto - is predominantly framed in media and state discourse as a matter of criminality driven by criminal opportunism. This article challenges this reductive narrative. It argues that Nigeria's banditry, now legally classified as terrorism, is a protracted insurgency driven by political exclusion, ecological collapse, resource competition, and broken rural governance. Yet this security label obscures more than it clarifies, as the violence remains inseparable from elite political manipulation that weaponises religious identity to exploit these grievances for regional control. Employing a political economy and historical-structural analysis, the paper traces the transformation of localised cattle rustling into a widespread syndicated insurgency. It examines how failed governance, corruption in security responses, and the proliferation of small arms have created a permissive environment for violence to metastasise. Furthermore, it analyses the convergence of interests between bandit warlords, compromised elites, and informal economies, illustrating how the conflict has become economically rational and politically entrenched. This study finds that Northwest Nigeria's protracted banditry is less a product of conflict complexity than a testament to the profound failure of reactive interventions - kinetic militarism and unstructured amnesty - which have proven counterproductive and self-perpetuating. The paper concludes that effective peacebuilding requires a fundamental shift from militarised suppression to governance-focused political settlement. By re-theorising banditry as a complex conflict, this study contributes to broader debates on non-conventional armed groups, the fragility of the postcolonial state, and the limitations of criminalised approaches to deep-seated political and economic crises in Africa.

Keywords: Banditry, Complex Conflict, Farmer-Herder Crisis, Nigeria, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Nigeria's security landscape in the 21st century is often characterised by the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast and the Niger Delta militancy in the South. However, a more lethal and geographically expansive crisis has emerged in the country's Northwestern region, namely, rural banditry. Characterised by mass abductions for ransom, village raids, cattle rustling, and sexual violence, this violence has resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of over a million people (ICG, 2021). The dominant statistics and media narratives consistently label perpetrators as

"armed bandits" or "criminals," framing the crisis as a spike in organised crime to be met with robust police and military action.

This article contends that such a criminality paradigm is analytically flawed and strategically myopic. It obscures the historical, economic, and political complexities that have fuelled the violence, leading to cyclical and counterproductive state responses. While criminal motives are present, reducing the conflict to mere banditry ignores its function as a mode of primitive accumulation, a form of communal warfare, and a symptom of state unravelling in peripheral regions (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). The crisis represents not a breakdown of order but the emergence of a violent, alternative order governed by warlords and sustained by a thriving war economy.

The existing literature provides partial explanations. Some studies focus on the environmental scarcity thesis, linking desertification and shrinking Lake Chad resources to competition between farmers and herders (Maiangwa et al., 2012). Others highlight the proliferation of small arms across the Sahel. A critical strand examines the failure of the state's monopoly on violence and the rise of vigilante groups (Yarwood, 2022). However, few works have synthesised these threads into a coherent framework that treats the Northwest crisis as an unconnected complex conflict, distinct from, though related to, the farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt or the jihadist insurgency in the Northeast.

This paper seeks to fill that gap. Its fundamental argument is that the banditry crisis is a complex conflict born from the intersection of decades of agrarian stress, deliberate political marginalisation of the Northwest, the commercialisation of cattle rustling, and the state's abdication of its basic functions, creating a vacuum filled by violent entrepreneurs. The conflict is complex because it involves multiple, shifting actors (ethnic Fulani pastoralists, Hausa farmers, unemployed youth, security forces, vigilantes, traditional rulers, and political sponsors), is driven by a composite of motives (economic survival, revenge, political leverage, resource control), and has generated its own internal logic of reproduction. Methodologically, this paper draws on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including reports from international crisis groups (ICG), Nigerian security studies scholars, journalistic investigations, and official documents. It employs historical tracing to map the conflict's evolution and political economy analysis to unpack the interests sustaining it.

The Historical Genealogy: From Pastoralism to Syndicated Insurgency

To conceptualise the banditry crisis as a complex conflict, one must first transcend the ahistorical narrative of sudden criminal emergence. Its roots are embedded in the longue durée of state-society relations, agrarian change, and the deliberate marginalisation of Nigeria's pastoralist periphery. These are elucidated further below:

Pre-Colonial Symbiosis and Colonial Disruption: The Foundations of a Contemporary Crisis

A comprehensive understanding of the contemporary banditry crisis in Northwest Nigeria necessitates a critical excavation of its historical roots. The region's current instability is not an aberration but the culmination of a protracted process of religion, political and economic marginalisation that systematically dismantled historically functional, though imperfect, systems of

coexistence (Okoli, 2022). This section argues that the colonial administration initiated a structural re-engineering of state-pastoralist relations, a process that was cemented and exacerbated by post-independence land law, thereby creating the foundational grievances and institutional vacuum that violent entrepreneurs would later exploit.

Pre-Colonial Symbiosis and Regulated Flexibility

Contrary to narratives of perennial ethnic conflict, the pre-colonial Hausa-Fulani socio-ecological system in the region was characterised by a dynamic, interdependent relationship. The economy was integrated: pastoralist Fulani (*Fulbe*) provided manure for farmlands and livestock for trade, while agrarian Hausa communities supplied grains and market access. This interdependence was managed through a complex, customary governance framework designed for flexibility. Key institutions included *burtali* (recognised grazing corridors), *haraji* (a tax on agricultural produce), and *jangali* (a cattle tax), which were negotiated through community elders and pastoralist leaders (*Ardos*) (Fiki, 2019; Usman, 2021). Conflict resolution mechanisms, such as *sulhu* (mediation), prioritised restitution over punishment, often involving compensation for crop damage or stolen cattle. This system did not eliminate tension but embedded it within a regulated, adaptable socio-political order that recognised the seasonal mobility of pastoralism as an economic asset rather than a security threat (Higazi, 2023).

Corruptive Disruption: The Imposition of a Settled-State Logic

The British colonial project fundamentally disrupted this equilibrium by imposing a governance model predicated on territorial control, fixed settlement, and taxable agrarian surplus - a logic inherently hostile to mobile pastoralism. As Aweto (2018) meticulously documents, the policy of Indirect Rule empowered settled Hausa elites as native authorities, deliberately sidelining the decentralised, lineage-based authority structures of the Fulani. Pastoralists were administratively categorised as "strangers" or "non-indigenes" within newly demarcated districts, severing their political voice from their economic livelihood. The colonial state's primary interest in pastoralism was extractive - maximizing *jangali* revenue - without corresponding investment in veterinary services, water points, or the protection of grazing reserves it ostensibly created (Bello, 2022).

Independence failed to reverse this trajectory; instead, it was crystallised in law. The Land Use Act of 1978, a centerpiece of the military government's centralisation drive, stands as the single most consequential legal instrument exacerbating pastoralist marginalisation. By vesting all land in the state, held in trust by the Governor, the Act abolished customary land tenure without providing a viable alternative for mobile livelihoods (Bello, 2022; Mashi, 2023). As Ejiogu and Chukwu (2024) argue, the Act converted land access from a customary right to a political privilege, making pastoralists perpetually dependent on the patronage of state and local elites who were often hostile to their interests. The promised grazing reserves, already degraded, were never legally secured or developed, leaving pastoralists legally vulnerable to encroachment by expanding farmland and government projects. This legal precarity was compounded by rapid population growth and climate change, intensifying competition for dwindling arable land and water. Consequently, the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, already weakened by colonialism, collapsed under the weight of this state-sanctioned resource squeeze, giving way to a zero-sum struggle where the state's law was seen not as a protector but as an instrument of dispossession (Higazi, 2023).

Neoliberal Reforms and the Rural Economic Crisis: Fabricating a Criminal Economy

The structural marginalisation initiated by colonial and post-colonial land policy was catastrophically accelerated in the late 20th century by the imposition of neoliberal economic reforms. These reforms did not merely neglect the rural Northwest; they actively dismantled the remaining public infrastructure that sustained agrarian and pastoral livelihoods, transforming economic stress into systemic criminal opportunity. This section contends that the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s acted as a force multiplier for instability, deliberately withdrawing the state from its developmental and regulatory roles, commercialising land relations, and creating the perfect conditions for localised theft to evolve into a transnational, syndicated criminal enterprise.

The implementation of SAPs under the military regimes of the 1980s, mandated by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, represented a paradigmatic shift from a (however flawed) developmental state to a minimalist one. As Okoli and Okpaleke (2014) establish, the slashing of public expenditure decimated the very services that facilitated coexistence. Veterinary clinics shuttered, leading to uncontrolled livestock disease outbreaks. The maintenance of designated cattle routes (*burtali*) and grazing reserves ceased, allowing farmers to encroach upon them with impunity. Boreholes and earth dams fell into disrepair, funneling competing communities into violent conflict over fewer functional water points (Ekesiobi et al., 2023). This withdrawal was not passive but an active policy choice that, as Onah (2023) argues, "commodified vulnerability," pushing pastoralist households into debt and making them susceptible to recruitment by criminal networks as scouts or informants in exchange for survival.

Commercialisation, Climate Stress, and the Collapse of the Moral Economy
Concurrent with state withdrawal was the aggressive commercialisation of agriculture and land. Supported by World Bank-led "market-oriented" policies, land increasingly became a privatised commodity for commercial farming ventures, further alienating pastoralists without capital or title deeds (Ibrahim, 2022). This economic shift destroyed the remnants of the pre-colonial "moral economy" - the unwritten social contract of reciprocity and shared risk. Relationships once mediated by elders became purely transactional and adversarial. This transformation occurred against the backdrop of intensifying climate volatility. As research by the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NiMet) and scholars like Ekesiobi et al. (2023) confirms, the Northwest has experienced a marked decline in predictable rainfall and a southward creep of desertification. This environmental stress acted as a "threat multiplier," squeezing populations onto a diminishing productive landscape, where the logic of competition utterly overwhelmed any remaining ethic of cooperation (Saferworld, 2023).

From Rustling to Syndicate: The Birth of a Trans-Sahelian War Economy
It was within this vacuum of state authority, economic desperation, and environmental pressure that cattle rustling underwent its fundamental transformation. No longer a culturally embedded act of young men or a form of inter-community raid with established protocols for restitution, it became a highly organised, capital-intensive criminal industry. Akinola's (2020) work on arms proliferation is critical here. The collapse of Libya in 2011 flooded the Sahel with advanced weaponry, which syndicates acquired to militarise their operations. Rustling became "ranch-robbing," involving dozens of motorcycles and AK-47s to steal hundreds of heads of cattle in a single raid.

These syndicates, as detailed in recent field research by the Conflict Research Network West Africa (CORN West Africa, 2022), operate as networked franchises. They involve financiers in urban centers, corrupt security officials who provide intelligence and safe passage, traditional rulers who are coerced or complicit, and a vast logistics chain for moving stolen cattle across borders into markets in Niger, Chad, and beyond. The porous, securitised borders of the Sahel, designed to stop "terrorism," proved ineffective against this organised commerce in livestock, thereby regionalising the crisis (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2023). This evolution marks the pivotal moment: what was a local dispute over resources became integrated into a transnational war economy, where the profit motive entrenched violence as a rational, even preferred, mode of accumulation. The stage was now set for the final mutation: the diversification of these criminal syndicates into the polyvalent bandit groups specialising in kidnapping and extortion that plague the region today, a direct response to state militarisation and the lucrative model of ransom economies.

The Genesis of Violent Entrepreneurship

The early 2000s marked a critical turning point. The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), fuelled by the fallout from the Libyan civil war and regional conflicts, dramatically increased the lethality of raids (Onuoha, 2022). Localised self-help militias, such as the *Yan Sa Kai* (Hausa expression for "those who kill at sight"), emerged among farming communities, initiating cycles of retaliatory violence that blurred the lines between victim and perpetrator (Yarwood, 2022). The state's response was typically episodic and brutal, often targeting entire Fulani communities through collective punishment, thereby deepening grievances and fuelling recruitment into nascent bandit groups (ICG, 2022). By the 2010s, what began as rural crime had metastasised into a full-blown hybrid conflict, with warlords establishing quasi-administrative control over ungoverned forests, taxing communities, and dispensing their own brutal form of justice.

A Political Economy of Conflict: Drivers, Actors, and the War Economy

The intractability of Northwest Nigeria's banditry crisis can only be fully comprehended through a political economy lens that moves beyond symptom-based analysis to interrogate the structures, incentives, and actors that profit from sustained violence. This framework reveals the conflict not as a state of anarchy, but as a complex, self-reinforcing system where disorder has been harnessed for accumulation and political leverage by a diverse network of beneficiaries. This section delineates the core structural drivers that perpetuate the system, maps the key actors within it, and analyses the economic circuits that make violence a rational, lucrative enterprise.

Core Structural Drivers: The Triad of Entrenchment

Three interdependent drivers form the bedrock of the conflict's political economy, ensuring that superficial interventions consistently fail.

1. **The Institutionalisation of Land Tenure Insecurity:** The failure of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) exemplifies the state's inability to resolve the fundamental issue of resource access. As Bello (2022) argues, the NLTP's collapse was not merely administrative but political, reflecting a lack of genuine commitment from state governments and federal agencies beholden to agrarian and land-owning interests. This leaves the more contentious and divisive Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements proposal lingering in

public discourse, further polarising communities. Consequently, pastoralists remain in what Mashi (2023) terms "legal precarity" - formally recognised as citizens yet economically and spatially criminalised by land laws that favour sedentary cultivation. This institutionalised insecurity transforms land access from a right into a commodity obtainable only through wealth, political connection, or, as has become prevalent, force.

2. **Corruption as a Conflict Enabler:** The security response itself has been co-opted into the war economy, fundamentally undermining its legitimacy and efficacy. Research by Onuoha (2023) and investigations by organisations like the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022) document a pattern of systemic corruption. This includes the alleged sale of intelligence and operational schedules to bandits, the leasing of government-issued weapons and ammunition, and the direct "taxation" of ransom money by security personnel manning checkpoints. This creates a perverse incentive structure: certain elements within the security apparatus have a financial stake in the conflict's continuation at a manageable level of intensity. The violence is not an existential threat to be eradicated but a resource stream to be regulated and exploited, a dynamic that explains the puzzling ineffectiveness of well-resourced military deployments.

3. **The Political Instrumentalisation of Identity:** Elite manipulation provides the political logic for the conflict's persistence. Ejiogu and Chukwu (2024) posit that in Nigeria's patronage-driven democracy, bandit groups are sometimes weaponised as tools of electoral politics. Politicians may leverage them as enforcers to intimidate opponents, suppress voter turnout in rival strongholds, or protect their own canvassing activities. Furthermore, by framing the conflict in simplistic ethnic terms - Hausa farmers versus Fulani herders - these elites divert public scrutiny from their own governance failures and the complex, criminal syndicate nature of the violence. This deliberate "criminalisation of ethnicity," as noted by Higazi (2023), hardens communal identities, legitimises vigilante reprisals, and ensures a steady supply of aggrieved youth for recruitment by all sides, thereby perpetuating the cycle.

The War Economy: Circuits of Accumulation

The transformation of banditry in Northwest Nigeria into a persistent conflict is fundamentally underpinned by its economic institutionalisation. Violence has evolved from a tactic into a business model, creating a war economy - a self-sustaining system of production, exchange, and profit derived from predation. This economy operates through three primary, interlocking circuits of accumulation: kidnap-for-ransom, illicit livestock markets, and arms trafficking coupled with protection rackets. Together, they generate immense, decentralised revenue streams that create powerful vested interests in continued instability, rendering conventional military suppression strategically futile. Violence has been commodified into three primary, interlocking economic circuits:

Kidnap-for-Ransom: The commercial Abduction Industry
This has evolved into a highly efficient, financialised market. Rates are negotiable, payments are made via digital transfers to anonymous accounts, and specialised negotiators act as intermediaries. It is a low-risk, high-reward enterprise for syndicates (ICG, 2022). Kidnapping has metastasised from isolated incidents into a highly systematised, financialised industry. Recent analyses by

security researchers like Onuoha (2023) detail its operational sophistication. Ransom amounts are no longer arbitrary but are negotiated based on a victim's perceived socioeconomic status, with standardised rates often communicated through intermediaries. The integration of digital finance is critical; ransom payments are frequently made via anonymous mobile money transfers or through a network of complicit Point-of-Sale (PoS) agents, making fund tracing exceptionally difficult for authorities (Nextier SPD, 2023). This circuit creates a low-risk, high-reward dynamic. In the words of Olatayo (2026), in Nigeria, kidnapping for ransom has transformed from an occasional security threat into a fully-fledged criminal enterprise, generating a self-sustaining vortex of violence and economic exploitation. At its core, this act is a severe assault on personal liberty and an outright breach of the constitution, given that it fundamentally negates the victim's right to free movement (Olatayo, 2026).

The Illicit Livestock and Arms Market: Stolen cattle are rapidly moved along established corridors into neighbouring countries, where they are laundered into legal markets. This circuit is symbiotic with the inflow of sophisticated small arms, purchased with proceeds from rustling and kidnapping, creating a feedback loop of militarisation (Akinola, 2020). The Traditional Economy Criminalised Cattle rustling constitutes the historical core of this war economy but now operates on an industrial, transnational scale. Raids are no longer small-scale thefts but militarized operations resulting in the seizure of hundreds of cattle at once. The critical innovation lies in the laundering process. As documented by CORN West Africa (2022), stolen livestock are rapidly moved along established corridors into neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Within days, the cattle are rebranded, integrated into legitimate herds, and sold in regional markets. This process involves a sophisticated network of transporters, corrupt border officials, and cross-border traders who provide falsified documentation. The proceeds are then used to procure more advanced weaponry from regional arms markets, creating a direct feedback loop between rustling and militarisation (Akinola, 2020).

The Extraction of Protection Rents: Beyond ransoms, bandits and even some vigilante groups systematically tax farming activities, livestock movement, and community markets. This establishes a parallel, coercive system of taxation and governance, directly competing with and undermining the formal state (CORN West Africa, 2022). The Taxation of Insecurity
The third circuit involves the symbiotic trade in violence itself. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is both a cause and a consequence of the conflict. The porous Sahelian borders, awash with weapons from Libya and other conflict zones, provide a ready supply. Bandit groups use profits from kidnapping and rustling to continuously upgrade their arsenals, creating a perpetual demand that fuels a thriving black market (Onuoha, 2022). Concurrently, these weapons enable the imposition of protection rackets. Bandit factions now routinely levy taxes - euphemistically called *haraji* or "levies" - on farming communities, markets, and transport routes. Payment guarantees temporary safety from attack; refusal guarantees violence. On this note, this paper submits that the political economy of banditry reveals a conflict that is economically rational for its principal actors and politically useful for certain elites. Any effective peacebuilding strategy must therefore begin with the deliberate dismantling of this war economy and the restructuring of the perverse incentives that sustain it.

Vigilante Groups: From Defense to Predation
The proliferation of vigilante groups like the *Yan Sa Kai* is a direct response to state failure, but they

have become a central and destabilising actor in their own right. Initially formed for community defense, many have undergone a troubling evolution. As Yarwood (2022) maintains, their mandate has expanded from policing to include extrajudicial killings of suspected Fulani herders - often based on ethnicity rather than evidence - thereby fuelling devastating cycles of reprisal. Some factions have become predatory, engaging in cattle rustling, extortion, and participating in the very criminal economy they were formed to combat. This transformation illustrates how non-state security provision, in the absence of accountability and formal oversight, can readily morph into a source of insecurity and profit.

Traditional Rulers and Political Sponsors: The Interface of Power
Traditional institutions (*masu sarauta*) and political elites operate at the critical interface between the formal state and the illicit ecosystem. Their roles are deeply contradictory. Some emirs and district heads risk their lives as vital mediators, leveraging their cultural authority to negotiate ceasefires or ransom releases (ICG, 2022). Others, however, are accused of complicity - providing intelligence, logistical cover, or political protection to bandit factions in exchange for financial gain or electoral advantage. The allegations of politicians using bandits as enforcers during elections, as noted by Ejiogu and Chukwu (2024), point to the instrumentalisation of violence for political capital. This complicity corrupts traditional authority and directly undermines state security efforts, embedding the conflict within the fabric of local politics.

The Shadow Economy Network: The Glue of the Ecosystem
Underpinning this entire social field is a robust shadow economy network that provides the financial and logistical glue binding disparate actors together. This network is multifaceted, comprising:

Corrupt Security Agents: Who sell intelligence, lease weapons, and facilitate the movement of illicit goods (Onuoha, 2023).

Informants and Negotiators: Who operate in both rural and urban centers, brokering ransom deals and communications.

Illicit Livestock Traders: Who launder rustled cattle into regional markets across West Africa (Akinola, 2020).

Arms Suppliers: Who feed the conflict with weaponry from regional stockpiles. This network ensures that the economic value generated by violence - through ransoms, rustling, and extortion - is efficiently captured, distributed, and reinvested, making the conflict a self-financing enterprise (Nextier SPD, 2023).

Succinctly put, this paper submits that Northwest's conflict ecosystem is a resilient, adaptive network where violence is commodified and governance is contested. Bandit warlords, persecuted communities, predatory vigilantes, ambivalent traditional authorities, and a sprawling shadow economy are linked in a symbiotic relationship that thrives on the absence of accountable statehood.

Evaluating Responses and Pathways to Transformative Peacebuilding

The protracted nature of the banditry crisis in Northwest Nigeria is as much a testament to the failure of interventions as it is to the complexity of the conflict itself. State and non-state responses have predominantly been reactive, fragmented, and grounded in a superficial understanding of the

crisis as either a law enforcement problem or a communal feud. A critical evaluation of the dominant paradigms - kinetic militarism and unstructured amnesty - reveals their profound limitations and counterproductive consequences. This analysis underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards a transformative peacebuilding approach that addresses the conflict's political economy and governance roots.

The Failure of Kinetic Approaches: Militarisation and Its Discontents

The Nigerian state's default strategy has been the deployment of large-scale military operations, such as *Operation Hadarin Daji*. Kinetic military operations like Operation Hadarin Daji fail because conventional tactics are mismatched against unconventional, diffuse bandit networks that evade direct confrontation. The strategy's effectiveness is further undermined by poor inter-agency coordination, community distrust stemming from civilian casualties, and a failure to address root causes like poverty and unemployment. Ojo, Aina, and Oyewole (2023) argue that this unconventional warfare poses significant challenges to a conventional fighting force, consequentially contributing to the conflict's protractedness. Ultimately, airstrikes and ground assaults often prove counterproductive, as civilian deaths generate resentment that fuells recruitment into criminal networks, perpetuating the very violence they aim to suppress.

Tactical Inefficacy and Corruption: Operations are frequently undermined by systemic weaknesses. Poor, non-localised intelligence leads to raids on wrong targets, while a lack of coordination among the army, police, and air force results in operational dissonance and friendly fire incidents (Onuoha, 2023). More destructively, deep-seated corruption within the security architecture actively sabotages missions. Documented cases include the sale of operational plans, the leasing of government weapons and ammunition to bandits, and the collusion of security personnel at checkpoints in ransom collection (ICG, 2022). This creates a perverse economy where elements within the security sector have a vested financial interest in sustaining a manageable level of violence rather than ending it.

Civilian Alienation and Human Rights Abuses: The operational philosophy is often one of collective punishment. Communities suspected of harboring bandits face reprisals: forced displacement, the destruction of property, and extrajudicial killings. Organisations like Amnesty International (2022) have extensively documented these violations, noting that such tactics radicalise populations, erode the legitimacy of the state, and provide a powerful recruitment narrative for bandit groups. When the state is perceived as another predatory actor, communities withdraw cooperation, intelligence dries up, and the military operates in a hostile informational vacuum.

The Pitfalls of Amnesty Programmes

In recognition of the military's limitations, some Northwest state governments have intermittently pursued amnesty and dialogue programmes. However, these have largely been politically expedient, poorly designed initiatives that fail to meet basic standards of transitional justice.

Lack of Transparency and Elite Capture: These programmes are typically shrouded in secrecy, negotiated behind closed doors between state officials and bandit leaders. The terms, benefits (often including cash payments and promises of integration), and criteria for inclusion are rarely made

public, fostering public distrust and perceptions of elite collusion. As Ejiogu and Chukwu (2024) argue, such opaque processes are easily hijacked by political actors seeking to co-opt bandits as electoral enforcers or to claim short-term "peace" victories without sustainable commitments.

Victim Exclusion and the Deficit of Justice: A fundamental flaw is the near-total exclusion of victims from the process. Programmes focus on incentivising perpetrators to disarm while offering nothing to communities that have suffered killings, sexual violence, displacement, and economic ruin. There are no provisions for truth-telling, reparations, or psychosocial support. This "peace without justice" model entrenches impunity, deepens communal grievances, and makes social reconciliation impossible. Victims see perpetrators rewarded, which can fuell support for vengeful vigilantism (Higazi, 2023).

Neglecting the War Economy: Amnesty deals that offer cash payments or vocational training to a few hundred fighters do nothing to dismantle the underlying war economy - the kidnapping networks, cattle rustling syndicates, and arms trafficking circuits that employ thousands and generate billions of Naira. Without parallel, robust efforts to disrupt these economic systems, disarmed individuals are easily drawn back into criminal networks, or new entrepreneurs quickly rise to fill any void (Perouse de Montclos, 2021).

Towards a Transformative Peacebuilding Framework

The entrenched nature of the banditry conflict in Northwest Nigeria necessitates a fundamental reimagining of intervention strategy. Prevailing approaches have treated the symptoms - violence and criminality - while ignoring the pathogenic conditions of governance failure, economic predation, and political exclusion. A transformative peacebuilding framework must, therefore, aim not merely to suppress violence but to dismantle the system that produces and commodifies it, thereby rebuilding a legitimate social contract. This requires a simultaneous, multi-track engagement with the conflict's core pillars: resource governance, economic incentives, community security, and political architecture.

1. Addressing the Land Question: From Legal Precarity to Secure Tenure
Contemporary scholarship frames Northwest Nigerian banditry not as random criminality but as a violent manifestation of what Schouten and Barnett (2023) term the "battle for the bush" - a protracted struggle over land, governance, and livelihoods where state authority is fragmented. This crisis is ecologically driven: cropland expansion (5,700 km² annually between 2000–2020) has systematically encroached on grazing corridors, creating precarity for pastoralists who were increasingly criminalised and excluded from formal land governance (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2021; Oyedele et al., 2022). Sustainable solutions require moving beyond failed state initiatives like the RUGA scheme, which Olaniyan and Yahaya (2022) found collapsed due to top-down design, ethnic politicisation, and lack of local consultation. Bandits, emerging from marginalised communities, have imposed a parallel coercive order or "bush government" - that collects levies, adjudicates disputes, and dictates rural production (Okoli & Agada, 2022). Crucially, Okonkwo and Eze (2024) demonstrate that banditry now reproduces the conditions that gave rise to it, reversing agricultural expansion and deepening precarity for both farmers and herders, while Akinwale and Ibrahim (2023) note this parallel system directly challenges state sovereignty.

Any transformative peacebuilding framework must therefore address the land question through participatory, legally coherent tenure reform that recognises mobile pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood system rather than an archaic threat. Ibrahim and Bello (2023) and Ogunleye (2024) identify the governance deficit at local government levels as the primary driver of sustained banditry, suggesting that reform must be embedded within a broader reconstruction of the social contract between the state, rural communities, and mobile livelihoods. As Bello (2022) argues, and as Adebisi (2023) and Muhammad and Suleiman (2024) affirm, land rights must be not merely granted but negotiated and guaranteed through accountable local institutions. Substantiating Bello, Adebisi, Mohammed and Suleiman, this paper submits that; addressing the land question in Northwest Nigeria requires moving from legal precarity to secure tenure via genuine multi-stakeholder processes that rebuild legitimate governance and restore the state's capacity to mediate resource competition without criminalising entire livelihood systems.

2. Dismantling the War Economy: Financial Counter-Insurgency

Contemporary scholarship frames the financial architecture of Northwest Nigerian banditry not as an incidental feature of rural criminality, but as a sophisticated political economy that actively sustains and reproduces violence. Ameh (2026) contends that banditry must be understood as a "changing violent economic and political system" wherein violence is deployed as a deliberate tool for wealth accumulation and power projection, leading to what he terms "unofficial state-building" by armed groups. Schouten and Barnett (2025) similarly conceptualise banditry's spatial logic through a system of concentric circles - heartlands marked by cohabitation and governance, tribute zones where communities pay levies for security, and volatile raiding frontiers - demonstrating how extortion has become a de facto taxation system that mirrors and challenges formal state authority. This financial infrastructure has diversified considerably: cattle rustling now involves hundreds of thousands of livestock worth billions of naira ; illegal mining, particularly gold, has emerged as a critical revenue stream, with bandit leader Kachalla Mati reportedly extracting gold worth between N200 million and N300 million weekly, much of it smuggled through the Sahel to Dubai ; and kidnapping for ransom has evolved into a structured enterprise - SBM Intelligence data cited by the NCTC indicates kidnappers collected at least N2.57 billion in ransom between July 2024 and June 2025. Ojewale (2025) adds a crucial dimension by exposing elite collusion: political and economic elites weaponise access to gold, co-opting bandits for informal security provision and patronage networks that actively sustain the violence.

A transformative financial counter-insurgency campaign must therefore move beyond military targeting to systematically dismantle these diversified revenue streams. Scholars converge on several strategic priorities. First, disrupting illicit financial flows requires addressing the formal financial sector's infiltration: the NCTC has documented how Point-of-Sale (PoS) terminals are now routinely used to collect ransom, turning financial inclusion tools into instruments of terror. Second, the gold-arms nexus demands regulatory intervention - Nigeria loses over $9 billion annually to illegal mining, with gold directly bartered for weapons across porous borders. Third, the ransom economy must be aggressively targeted through intelligence-led financial tracking, asset seizure, and prosecution of both kidnappers and complicit financial intermediaries. Crucially, as Zagazola Makama (2026) argues, any framework must differentiate between low-level defensive armed actors and entrenched profit-driven criminal networks; blanket responses and indiscriminate dialogue offers allow high-value leaders to exploit negotiations to regroup and rearm.

3. Community-Centred Security and Justice: Legitimacy over Force

It is worthy of note that security interventions that bypass or alienate local communities are not merely ineffective but actively counterproductive, often deepening the very grievances that fuel violence. The prevailing military-centric approach - characterised by aerial bombardments, mass arrests, and collective punishment - has eroded trust in the state while failing to degrade bandit capacity, as communities increasingly view security forces as indistinguishable from the armed groups they purportedly combat (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2021). This has created what scholars term a "legitimacy vacuum," wherein bandits have successfully positioned themselves as alternative providers of dispute resolution, protection, and even rudimentary justice, filling the void left by a state perceived as predatory, absent, or complicit (Okoli & Agada, 2022; Ibrahim & Bello, 2023). As Usman and Mohammed (2023) demonstrate, the collapse of traditional conflict-resolution institutions such as the *Jangali* and *Ardo* systems - once effective mechanisms for mediating farmer-herder tensions - has been exacerbated by state neglect, leaving communities with no trusted forum for addressing grievances outside the coercive order imposed by bandits. Ogunleye (2024) further argues that the state's reliance on militarised responses has inadvertently legitimised bandit governance, as communities, facing extortion from both soldiers and bandits, often calculate that bandits offer more predictable and locally accountable governance than the distant and extractive state apparatus.

A transformative peacebuilding framework must therefore pivot from force to legitimacy, grounding security and justice in community-centred, locally accountable institutions. Recent scholarship identifies several pathways for this recalibration. Adebisi (2023) and Muhammad and Suleiman (2024) advocate for the revitalisation and adaptation of traditional governance structures, not as romanticised relics, but as dynamic institutions that can be formally integrated into state security architecture through co-management agreements, joint community-police oversight committees, and customary court reforms that respect both local norms and human rights standards. Usman and Mohammed (2023) emphasise that this process must be genuinely participatory, involving women, youth, and pastoralist representatives who are often excluded from traditional male-elite decision-making, thereby broadening legitimacy and ensuring that security arrangements reflect the diverse needs of affected communities. Significantly, Olaniyan and Yahaya (2022) caution against top-down imposition of community policing models, which have historically failed when they merely replicated state-centric hierarchies under a local guise; instead, they recommend "hybrid security governance" that formally recognises community self-defense groups (*Yan Sakai*), regulates them through accountable local oversight, and gradually integrates them into a broader state-sanctioned framework.

4. Political Inclusion and Accountability: Disrupting the Patronage Nexus

Contemporary scholarship increasingly frames the instrumentalisation of violence for political gain not as a peripheral corruption issue, but as a core driver sustaining the banditry crisis in Northwest Nigeria. The literature reveals a deeply entrenched patronage nexus wherein political elites actively manipulate insecurity for electoral advantage, resource access, and power consolidation. Mahmud and Maigari (2024) document how some politicians covertly finance or arm bandit organisations to threaten rivals or influence electoral outcomes in areas beyond the reach of legitimate state institutions. Similarly, Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023) demonstrate how political interference routinely undermines military operations, steering security forces away from politically sensitive

areas or impeding forceful actions against bandits with whom elites are connected. This politicisation of security responses - characterised by selective intervention, strategic inaction, and backdoor deals offering immunity in exchange for political loyalty - transforms governance into a transactional system where violence functions as political currency.

Disrupting this patronage nexus requires institutional reforms that make the instrumentalisation of violence prohibitively costly. Scholars converge on several strategic priorities. First, the depoliticisation of security operations is essential, security deployments must be guided by strategic necessity and threat assessment rather than elite preferences, with transparent oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability. Second, elite complicity must be aggressively prosecuted: the cases of traditional rulers deposed in Zamfara State for turbaning wanted bandit leaders demonstrate that political accountability is possible but remains exceptional rather than systematic. Third, the gold-arms-patronage nexus; wherein elites weaponise access to illicit mining and co-opt bandits for informal security provision demands regulatory intervention and financial investigation. Jinadu (2025) argues that addressing this crisis requires a fundamental reinvention of politics as a public trust, with enforceable constitutional principles on social and economic rights, genuine local government autonomy, and strengthened oversight institutions operating without political interference.

Conclusion

The crisis of banditry in Northwest Nigeria exemplifies the perils of institutional failure and strategic misdiagnosis, revealing a conflict far more complex than mere criminality. This analysis has traced its genealogy from pre-colonial symbiosis through colonial disruption and neoliberal neglect to its current form as a hybrid political economy, demonstrating that the violence is sustained by a self-reinforcing ecosystem: historical land grievances cemented by the Land Use Act and climate stress, a sophisticated war economy fuelled by kidnap-for-ransom and arms trafficking, and a social fabric woven from violent entrepreneurs, compromised elites, and alienated communities. State responses - oscillating between counterproductive militarism and opaque amnesties - have consistently treated symptoms while leaving this underlying architecture intact, perpetuating the instability they seek to quell.

Achieving sustainable peace demands a paradigm shift from a security-centric framework to a transformative peacebuilding project that dismantles structures of violence and reconstructs a legitimate social contract across four simultaneous pillars: legally secure land reforms recognising pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood, intelligence-led disruption of the war economy through ransom flows and livestock market regulation, community-centered justice reforms that legitimize vigilantes and reintegrate low-level combatants, and an uncompromising assault on elite impunity through independent judicial panels. This case offers critical insights for 21st-century hybrid conflicts across the Sahel, where state weakness and globalised illicit economies converge. Ultimately, peace will not be achieved by a larger army or a more generous amnesty, but by a state that chooses to govern through legitimacy, fairness, and equity - transforming this security challenge into a profound opportunity to forge a new social contract from the ashes of a failed one, lest violence remain the final arbiter of all disputes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are germane to this paper on the premise of the elicited information:

1. Enact a Pastoralist Rights & Land Use Charter: Create a binding legal framework that secures grazing corridors and reserves. Establish state-level Pastoralist Commissions to implement it. This directly addresses the core grievance of land tenure insecurity and reduces resource competition.

2. Launch a Financial Disruption Task Force: Form a multi-agency unit to trace, freeze, and confiscate assets from ransom and rustling. Collaborate with financial institutions to halt illicit cash flows. This strategy directly attacks the economic engine and profitability of the banditry enterprise.

3. Formalise Vigilantes via a Community Security Charter: Legally recognise and regulate community protection groups under strict rules. Provide standardized training and embed them within a formal oversight chain. This converts predatory militias into accountable, local security partners.

4. Appoint an Independent Judicial Commission on Sponsor Networks: Empower a special prosecutorial body to investigate and try the political, economic, and security sponsors of banditry. This action targets the elite impunity and patronage that sustain criminal networks.

5. Initiate a Regional Compact on Cross-Border Crime: Forge a treaty with neighbouring nations for joint livestock tracking and border patrols. Harmonise laws to prosecute trafficking of arms and stolen cattle. This disrupts the transnational logistics essential to the war economy.

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