

## Original Research Article

Addressing Banditry in Nigeria's North West: Excerpts from the Actors<sup>1</sup>Dr. Abdullahi Sarkin Gulbi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Umar Ahmed<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Rabi'u Aliyu Rambo<sup>1</sup>, Jamilu Ibrahim Mukoshy<sup>1</sup>, Abu-Ubaida Sani<sup>3\*</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Nigerian Languages, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria<sup>2</sup>Department of Linguistics, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria<sup>3</sup>Department of Languages and Cultures, Federal University Gusau, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study explores strategies to address banditry, a critical security challenge in Northwestern Nigeria. This phenomenon significantly hampers the country's development across economic, political, social, educational, and other human development sectors. The primary objective is to investigate the bandits' perspectives on combating insecurity in the region. The research utilizes Participatory Research (PR) theory, incorporating research designs, methods, and frameworks that engage with those directly impacted by the issue for actionable change. This approach involves analyzing inputs from various sources, including interviews with active and repentant bandits, victims of banditry, and media content such as video clips, audio recordings, telephone conversations, and online and published media. The study concludes that eradicating armed banditry is achievable with genuine commitment. It recommends that the government should effectively evaluate and implement proposed strategies to curb this threat in the region and nationwide. Additionally, the government should heed the populace's voices, considering the demands of both bandits and victims. Establishing robust mechanisms for reintegrating bandits into society, including creating a welcoming environment for their return, is also crucial.

**Keywords:** Banditry, Bandits, Kidnapping, Nigeria's North West, Actors.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is grappling with severe internal conflicts marked by violent extremism, insurgency, and a range of criminal activities. Daily reports of killings, armed robbery, terrorism, and banditry underscore a deep-rooted sense of injustice and inequity both within and outside the government.

Historically, terrorism and kidnappings were primarily concentrated in the oil-rich Niger Delta and the northeastern regions, driven by groups claiming to fight for improved living conditions and conducting disorganized religious uprisings (jihad). However, a worrying trend has recently emerged in the northwest, manifesting as 'banditry' – a term for violence typically involving armed gangs on motorbikes, launching attacks on villages, indiscriminately killing residents, and looting valuables (Hassan, 2021).

This wave of terrorism, kidnapping, and banditry has hindered the development of the rural northwest, displacing communities, restricting access to farmlands, and disrupting daily life. Concurrently, Nigeria faces developmental challenges that threaten its socio-economic progress.

In the north, mismanagement of human and natural resources has exacerbated challenges, shifting the nature of banditry from urban to rural settings (Onifade and Aderiye, 2022). Rural banditry poses significant threats to security, peace, and development across Nigeria. Moreover, corruption, wealth distribution inequality, ineffective government policies, and socio-economic issues such as endemic poverty, high unemployment, food shortages, low industrial output, unstable exchange rates, high inflation, inadequate infrastructure, and substantial debt have further destabilized the country (Ewetan, 2013).

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\*Corresponding Author: Abu-Ubaida Sani ([abu-ubaidallah@fugusau.edu.ng](mailto:abu-ubaidallah@fugusau.edu.ng) | [official@amsoshi.com](mailto:official@amsoshi.com))  
Department of Languages and Cultures, Federal University Gusau, Nigeria

This paper argues that rethinking the approach to combat armed banditry is crucial. The over-reliance on military solutions and the ambiguous role of amnesty policies require a more robust and nuanced strategy. By incorporating perspectives from the bandits themselves, this study aims to propose solutions for enhancing peace and security in the region. The persistence of banditry in Nigeria is likely as long as the government overlooks the insights of those involved in these activities. This research aims to dissect the current security challenges and offer recommendations for addressing the scourge of banditry that impedes the development of the northwest.

### Conceptual Clarification

The surge of banditry is particularly pronounced in the rural expanses of the northwest region, as noted by Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016). This phenomenon is intricately tied to several contributing factors, notably the presence of ungoverned forests, a decline in moral values, rampant youth unemployment, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the repercussions of civil wars in neighboring countries bordering Nigeria, as highlighted by Nahuche (2022). Banditry, as Nahuche emphasizes, results in the upheaval and displacement of lives and properties, instigating a constant state of fear and undermining people's ability to organize, pursue livelihoods, and maintain human dignity.

Egwu's perspective (2015) characterizes banditry as the act of stealing cattle and animals from herders, portraying it as a form of raiding cattle from ranches. He interprets banditry as a primitive means of accumulating cow herds within the contexts of subsistence and commercial pastoralism. In a parallel vein, Momale (2015) defines banditry as a process of cattle rustling, encompassing various criminal activities such as highway robbery and gang-like invasions of settlements to confiscate wealth and properties. He posits that these criminal endeavors are closely tied to societies experiencing social and economic turmoil, particularly in regions lacking adequate structures and functional governance, such as rural communities.

Examining the nature and modus operandi of armed banditry in the northwestern region of Nigeria, Nahuche (2022) illustrates that the bandits frequently target individuals on highways, dispossessing them of their possessions before making a swift escape on foot into the bush. These bandits exhibit a proclivity for extreme violence, often resorting to lethal force. The motivations behind such acts can be categorized into social, political, or economic reasons, as suggested by Tahir and Bernard (2022). The demographic profile of the bandits reveals a predominance of males between the ages of 18 and 45 years.

The repercussions of armed banditry on the socio-economic fabric of victims and the affected communities are multifaceted. This includes the

disruption of farming and commercial activities, the instillation of fear and psychological trauma among victims and their relatives, disruptions to religious and social activities, such as school attendance and festivals, the destruction of social amenities like schools and hospitals, as well as other government-owned structures, and the widespread destruction of houses. The far-reaching consequences of armed banditry underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address this menace and restore stability to the affected regions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study identifies and reviews the most important and related literature within the reach. The accessible articles chiefly dealt with identifying ways or means for curbing the decade-long banditry menace within the northwestern part of the country. Some of the relevant literature includes:

Mungadi *et al.*, (2020) highlight the escalation of violence in the North West region, evolving into a veritable theater of wars that extends its reach into the North Central. This escalating threat compels herders to migrate southward into the Middle Belt, exacerbating tensions between herders and farmers. The paper identifies crucial catalysts for insurgency in the region, including abysmal literacy levels, an unskilled labor force, ungoverned spaces, stretched poverty indicators, expansive porous borders, and intense competition for land and water resources between predominantly Fulani herders and largely Hausa farmers. Employing a thematic study approach, the research delves into a comprehensive assessment of the roadmap to counter insurgency, armed banditry, and kidnapping in the affected region. The study's findings underscore the effectiveness of techno-driven surveillance, achieved through collaboration between security agencies and telecommunications operators. Additionally, the importance of strengthening governance structures and adopting community participatory policing emerges as pivotal strategies to mitigate the menace.

Furthermore, the research advocates for a comprehensive, multipronged approach involving collaboration among states, federal entities, and international communities. This approach aims to quell armed groups, safeguard communities spread across vast ungoverned territories, and dismantle the intricate networks of the perpetrators. The study thus serves as a call to action, emphasizing the urgency of collaborative efforts in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by insurgency and armed banditry in the region.

Abdullahi (2021) observed that the insecurity issue in Zamfara State stems from the government's failure to fulfill its constitutional responsibilities crucial for its existence. This encompasses, among other things, the provision of a sense of belonging to all major segments within the state and ensuring basic social amenities for all citizens. Employing qualitative

methods, including in-depth interviews, and drawing on the human needs theory, which posits that government neglect of its responsibilities leads to conflicts, the paper concludes that without both state and central governments addressing these crucial responsibilities, banditry will persist, causing continued displacement of people from their original places of residence. This, in turn, will have detrimental effects on the sustainable development of both the people and the state.

Nahuche (2022) investigates the origins and ramifications of banditry in northwestern Nigeria, with a focus on the states most affected—Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, and Katsina. Utilizing a survey methodology, the study conducted in-depth interviews with selected community leaders, police officers, and victims of banditry. Employing a descriptive survey analysis employing percentages and frequencies, the paper supplements its quantitative findings with transcribed qualitative data. The study reveals that banditry, functioning as a societal scourge, results in injury, rape, loss of lives and properties, prolonged grief, fear of victimization, and overall anguish among citizens. Contributing factors include the influx of ex-combatants with firearms from neighboring conflict-ridden nations, escalating unemployment, and the use of inadequate and outdated weapons by security operatives. The paper advocates for solutions such as state policing, the training of local vigilante groups, the provision of modern security gadgets, and addressing poverty through job creation to effectively counter the persistent security threat in the country.

Tahir and Bernard (2022) concentrate on the challenge posed by armed banditry, emphasizing its adverse impact on Nigeria's development in economic, political, social, and educational realms over recent years. The study utilizes a descriptive survey within a qualitative research framework, gathering data from the field. The findings underscore that the mitigation or eradication of armed banditry is imperative for Nigeria's development. Consequently, the paper recommends a collective responsibility to eliminate armed banditry, emphasizing the creation of employment opportunities for youth as a crucial step to curb the menace and foster an environment conducive to good governance.

Faruk and Abdullahi (2022) highlight the recent surge in armed banditry and kidnapping across multiple North-West states in Nigeria, inflicting significant harm on the lives and properties of the region's inhabitants. The study aims to scrutinize the socio-economic impact of armed banditry and kidnapping, focusing on six local governments in Katsina State. Employing a survey research design, 430 respondents from various communities in the selected local governments received structured questionnaires. Results were analyzed using tables and percentages.

The findings reveal that armed banditry has substantial adverse effects on poverty, unemployment, food security, education, health, income, and the overall standard of living for people in the state. It also disrupts various socio-economic activities in the region. The study advocates for stringent border security patrols to curb the proliferation of illegal arms and ammunition, proactive measures by security agencies, and an extension of universal basic education programs to remote Fulani settlements, accompanied by the establishment of skills acquisition centers. Additionally, the establishment of Fulani settlements in under-governed forests with basic amenities, and the provision of farming inputs to revive agricultural production for enhanced food security, are recommended.

Aina (2023) argues that banditry poses a severe threat to lives and livelihoods in Nigeria's Northwest and North Central regions, resulting in thousands of deaths and displacements. Governments, both federal and subnational, have responded with various measures, including the controversial approach of granting amnesty to 'repentant' bandits—a strategy that has consistently failed. While many works explore the origins, nature, and trends of banditry, Aina's essay uniquely focuses on the contentious issue of amnesty in Nigeria's Northwest region. The article questions the rationale behind granting amnesty, emphasizing the absence of three crucial components for its success: individual risk assessment for 'repentant' bandits, the support of affected local communities throughout the process, and the inclusion of the voices of victims, including women and girls. Without these elements, attempting to reintegrate 'repentant' bandits in Northwest Nigeria is likely to result in repeated failures of such initiatives.

In summary, the literature review on banditry in Northwestern Nigeria presents a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted nature and impact of this issue. Studies by Mungadi *et al.*, (2020) and Abdullahi (2021) delve into the root causes of insurgency and insecurity, highlighting factors such as poor literacy levels, ungoverned spaces, and governmental neglect. Nahuche (2022) and Tahir and Bernard (2022) further explore the devastating effects of banditry on the social fabric and economic development of the region, emphasizing the need for modern security measures and job creation. Faruk and Abdullahi (2022) examine the socio-economic impacts in Katsina State, suggesting solutions like tighter border security and educational programs for Fulani communities. Aina (2023) critically analyzes the policy of granting amnesty to bandits, underlining its repeated failures due to the lack of risk assessment, community involvement, and victim representation. Collectively, these studies underscore the complexity of the banditry crisis and the urgent need for multifaceted, well-thought-out strategies to address it.

## Theoretical Framework

Participatory Research (PR) emerges as a pertinent framework for this paper, as it epitomizes a research-to-action approach that actively involves local priorities and perspectives (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995, as cited in Vaughn and Jacquez, 2020). PR, broadly defined, encompasses various research designs, methods, and frameworks that engage in systematic inquiry through direct collaboration with individuals directly impacted by the subject under investigation, emphasizing a focus on action or change (Cargo and Mercer, 2008). The theory underscores the importance of co-constructing research through partnerships between researchers and stakeholders, community members, or individuals possessing insider knowledge and lived expertise (Jagosh *et al.*, 2012).

Originating from the innovative work of Richard Theodore Tarnas, a Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and a renowned cultural historian and astrologer, Participatory Research (PR) theory has found widespread use across diverse fields of study. Recognized for its collaborative inquiry process that not only achieves research goals but also generates real-world impact, PR aligns seamlessly with the goals of this research. Despite its diverse applications, PR employs various frameworks, approaches, and orientations, several of which prove particularly relevant to the objectives of this study. They include:

- a. **Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR):** This orientation to participatory research often focuses on health-related issues that equally involve all partners, including researchers and community members, in all phases of the research process, from study design to dissemination. The target of this approach is mainly concerned with community capacity, participatory health research, and community-based participatory action research. Amongst the proponents of this approach include Wallerstein, Duran, Oetzel, and Minkler (2018).
- b. **Community-Engaged Research (CErR):** This model represents a broad array of participatory research approaches that emphasize academic-community partnerships focused on issues that affect the well-being of the community in focus. This approach deals rapidly with community engagement in research. Some proponents of the model include Ahmed and Palermo (2010).
- c. **Participatory Action Research (PAR):** The model combines participation and action to understand and address societal issues. It also emphasizes democratic processes in participation with others rather than research for research's sake conducted on people or communities. This approach is majorly concerned with participatory research; and youth participatory action research. Some of the known proponents of this model are Baum, MacDougall and Smith (2006).
- d. **Participatory Evaluation:** This is an approach that shares decision-making with stakeholders in the evaluation of a program or service at some point in the process. The model aims at empowerment evaluation; participatory or democratic evaluation. Proponents of this model include Whitmore (1998).
- e. **Participatory Health Research (PHR):** It is a model of participatory research which centrally values participation from stakeholders in the research process in specific ways to improve the quality and relevance of the research. The model focuses more on community-based participatory research. Proponents of this model include Wright and Kongats (2018).
- f. **Participatory Rural Appraisal:** This is another model that focuses on community development in which rural people share decision-making in programs and policies affecting them. The model is often used by non-governmental organizations to focus on rapid rural appraisal. Chambers (1994) is one of its proponents.

The Participatory Research (PR) theory, grounded in its foundational assumptions, is applied in this study to examine the activities and atrocities of bandits, which are both precipitated and sustained by the prevailing socio-existential environment in rural and urban societies of northwest Nigeria. Given the ongoing and uncurtailed situation in this region, the adoption of the PR model offers a promising approach. By utilizing insights directly from the bandits themselves, this study aims to identify effective strategies for addressing the persistent insecurity in Nigeria's Northwest. It is anticipated that leveraging the PR model in this context will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the situation and contribute to the development of practical solutions within a relatively short timeframe.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing insights from both primary and secondary sources to comprehensively understand and address the complex issue of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. Primary data is qualitatively collected through a combination of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The participants include both repentant and active bandits, as well as victims of armed banditry, selected from Sokoto and Zamfara states. This approach aims to capture firsthand perspectives, experiences, and insights from those directly involved in the banditry phenomenon. The study involves twenty in-depth interviews, with ten participants each from the active and repentant bandit groups, along with an additional ten interviews conducted with victims of banditry. These interviews provide a nuanced understanding of the motivations, operational dynamics, and potential solutions as perceived by individuals actively engaged in or affected by banditry.

Complementing the primary data, secondary data is sourced from relevant literature published on the subject, offering a comprehensive review of existing knowledge. The methodology is designed to assess the current situation, identify potential interventions, and explore feasible strategies for addressing banditry directly from the individuals immersed in these activities. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources is rigorously analyzed, with a specific focus on excerpts derived from various media assessments, including verbal and written accounts of security challenges. The analysis involves transcription, categorization, and in-depth scrutiny, particularly of interviews conducted through diverse mediums such as video, audio, telephone conversations, radio, television, and internet platforms, as well as published media. These comprehensive data sources serve as a robust foundation for conducting a detailed case study, allowing for a thorough exploration of the operational aspects and underlying factors contributing to the persistence of banditry in the region.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings of the research study will be elucidated in alignment with the objectives outlined in the paper. The discussion will interpret and analyze the collected data, exploring how these findings align with, contrast, or expand upon existing literature and theories related to banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. This comprehensive analysis aims to provide insights into the current state of banditry and contribute to a deeper understanding of its underlying causes, operational dynamics, and potential solutions as perceived by various stakeholders involved. Through this examination, the study aims to offer meaningful contributions to both academic discourse and practical approaches to addressing the challenges of banditry in the region.

### The Affected Areas

The research reveals that banditry remains a significant issue in Nigeria, predominantly in the northwest region, affecting states such as Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Kebbi, and Kaduna, among others. In Zamfara State, the areas most impacted include Anka, Birnin Magaji, Kauran Namoda, Maru, Shinkafi, Tsafe, and Zurmi. Sokoto State's Goronyo, Gudu, Illela, Isa, and Sabon Birni have also been heavily affected. In Kebbi, regions adjacent to Zamfara and Niger States, particularly Sakaba, Zuru, and Danko/Wasagu, face significant challenges. Katsina State's border regions with Kaduna State, notably around Mairua, Dandume, and Faskari, are similarly afflicted. Within Kaduna State, the areas of Birnin Gwari, Chikun, Kachia, Kagarko, Kajuru, and Zangon Kataf have been identified as highly impacted.

Extending to the north-central region, Niger State suffers notably in areas bordering or linked to the ungoverned forests of Kaduna State, specifically Muya,

Rafi, Shiroro, and Mariga. Additionally, there are indications of banditry activities in Bauchi State, especially in the Tafawa Balewa, Bogoro, and Alkaleri LGAs, which are adjacent to Plateau State. This extensive geographical impact highlights the widespread nature of banditry across several Nigerian states, underlining the urgency and complexity of addressing this issue.

### The Yet to be Successful Approaches

Numerous and persistent kinetic approaches have been employed to counteract the scourge of banditry, encompassing both formal military operations and informal civilian efforts. The military strategy entails extensive army and air force raids on suspected terrorists' hideouts, yielding marginal success, yet falling short of the anticipated outcomes. Simultaneously, informal initiatives involving Vigilante groups and the 'Yan Sakai have been deployed in security-prone areas, only to face challenges in achieving desired results. Regrettably, these offensives often result in collateral damages, provoking aggressive reprisals by the bandits, thus leaving helpless civilians increasingly vulnerable to both military and informal interventions.

Furthermore, the study uncovers the existence of a peace agreement initiated by the Zamfara State government in 2016. Although initially successful in attracting a considerable number of bandits who disarmed and pledged to renounce their criminal activities, the Amnesty Programme's long-term success remains elusive. Neighboring states such as Sokoto, Kaduna, and Katsina have made similar attempts to negotiate peace with bandits in local communities. However, these states have abandoned their amnesty programs, citing a lack of purpose and structure. Some repentant bandits have returned to criminal activities due to the program's perceived failures from both sides. Moreover, it was discovered that some individuals joined the amnesty program insincerely, seeking government funds to acquire more arms and resume banditry activities. Additionally, there were instances where the government discontinued its mandate to reintegrate repentant bandits, creating skepticism among bandits who feared participating in peace dialogue initiatives as potential government deceit that might ultimately fail.

### Yearnings of the Actors

Irrespective of the involvement of various ethnic groups and foreign militias in the upsurge of banditry in the northwest, the Fulanis remain prominent key actors, evident in the names and faces identified in the study's excerpts and the expressed aspirations of these actors. Proper identification and addressing the concerns and aspirations of these actors may hold the key to bringing an end to the menace.

Highlighted below are some of the grievances and agitations of the Fulanis, the resolution of which could potentially alleviate tensions in the region:

- i. Grievances of significant neglect by government interventions and projects, with respondents expressing the view that Fulanis are marginalized in terms of benefiting from government projects directly impacting their lives. This perceived marginalization needs correction.
- ii. The activities of local vigilante groups and extra-judicial killings by the 'Yan Sakai, under the guise of community policing, exacerbate the situation. This has prompted some Fulani pastoralists to take up arms for self-defense against the actions of local vigilantes.
- iii. Denial of the Fulani's rights to attend and sell their cattle at open markets in certain localities in the region. A respondent from Zamfara cited the killing of his two brothers in broad daylight at one of these markets as the catalyst for joining a group for revenge.
- iv. The belief that banditry can be curtailed if Fulani individuals are allowed to move freely without intimidation from local communities. Respondents express the view that banditry can be effectively controlled if their people can interact freely with others at any time.
- v. A plea for the general public to refrain from labeling them as terrorist groups since not every Fulani is a registered member of the bandits.
- vi. Government should proactively provide social amenities such as access roads, quality education, and grazing reserves for Fulani livestock.
- vii. Criticism of the kinetic approaches adopted by the government, particularly air strikes against their settlements. Some actors expressed significant losses, including family members, due to army bombardments and call for the immediate suspension of this strategy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative for the government, across all levels, to earnestly confront and resolve the challenges arising from pastoralist encroachments on farmlands and farmer encroachments on grazing lands. To effectively address this complex issue, the establishment of robust laws regarding reserves is essential, encompassing provisions for fundamental needs such as water points, veterinary services, schools, and other essential amenities. A comprehensive approach to addressing the conflicts between pastoralists and farmers requires the implementation of stringent regulations.

Furthermore, the government should consider designing and implementing a well-structured compensation strategy to alleviate the losses incurred during these conflicts. This strategy should be meticulously crafted to ensure fairness, transparency, and promptness in providing compensation to affected individuals and communities. It is crucial to recognize and compensate for the economic, social, and emotional

toll that such conflicts inflict on the lives and livelihoods of those affected.

Lastly, the government should actively engage with and study the agitations and perspectives of the actors involved in these conflicts. By carefully examining and understanding their grievances and aspirations, the government can explore the possibility of incorporating relevant insights into policymaking and its subsequent implementation. This inclusive approach is essential for crafting sustainable and effective solutions that address the root causes of the conflicts, fostering lasting peace and harmony among different communities in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the current approaches, encompassing both military action and amnesty programs, have been insufficient in effectively addressing the issue of banditry in the northwest. In light of this, the article suggests that the government should consider incorporating the perspectives and demands of the bandits themselves into their strategies. This approach could be augmented by the engagement of sincerely repentant bandits, who might offer valuable insights and assistance. To achieve lasting peace, it is crucial to address the underlying causes of conflict, particularly those between pastoralists/herders and farmers. The paper concludes that the eradication of armed banditry is feasible with a committed and strategic approach. It recommends that the government thoroughly evaluate and implement effective strategies to combat the issue regionally and nationally. Additionally, the government should attentively consider the needs and grievances of all parties involved, including both the bandits and their victims. Establishing robust reintegration programs and fostering an environment conducive to welcoming former bandits back into society are also vital steps toward a sustainable resolution.

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