

Resilience of the Rural Economy in North-West Nigeria amidst Banditry: Imperative for Government Economic Interventions

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Abstract

Over the past decade and a half, banditry in Nigeria's North-West has grown into a significant threat to the country's national security, worsening food insecurity through criminal acts such as arson, kidnapping for ransom, rape, and the displacement of millions of rural farmers who are essential to the agricultural economy. Numerous studies by scholars and security experts have examined various aspects of banditry in this geo-political area, including its origins, tactics, impacts, and government responses. Clearly, the existing literature provides valuable insights into how banditry endangers both human lives and the Nigerian state. However, this paper shifts focus from these broader discussions to examine how the rural economy demonstrates resilience amid banditry and how government economic interventions are necessary. Using a qualitative and descriptive approach that draws from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, this research advocates for more targeted, community-driven solutions that address the root causes of banditry and promote sustainable livelihoods. The findings have significant implications for policy and practice, guiding governments, policymakers, and development practitioners seeking to enhance rural economic resilience in conflict-affected areas.

Keywords: Banditry, Rural Economy, Resilience, Government Interventions, North-West Nigeria

Introduction

The North-West geopolitical zone in Nigeria consists of seven states: Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara, covering approximately 216,065 square kilometers, which accounts for around 25.75% of Nigeria's total land area.¹ The geo-political zone is home to the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, as well as several smaller ethnic groups, particularly in Kebbi and Kaduna states.² The majority of the population engages in farming, pastoralism, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Beyond agriculture, the region is rich in solid mineral resources, including gold, which has been mined by artisanal miners in pit mines for some time.³ The vegetation and environmental factors have shaped the occupational patterns of the population, with farming and pastoralism being the mainstay of the rural economy. Traditionally, there has been an occupational division between sedentary farmers, mainly the Hausa and smaller ethnic groups, and the nomadic pastoralists known as the Fulani. Though in some instances, occupational identities of pastoralists and many sedentary cultivators are blurred, as many sedentary cultivators are also 'stock breeders', and vice versa.⁴ For centuries, both farmers and herders have lived peacefully as neighbours and enjoyed interdependent and mutually beneficial relationships, until their relationship metamorphosed into a hostile one.⁵

The agricultural sector, particularly farming in the rural area, has long been the backbone of the North-West geo-political zone's economic base, providing livelihoods for millions and significantly contributing to the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, since 2010, the area has been plagued by the menace of banditry - a glut of armed gang criminal activities which constitute a violent threat to life and sources of livelihoods. In the last 10 years, a plethora of studies by scholars and security experts have explored various aspects of bandit activities in the zone, offering a deep insight into the menace as a huge security threat to human life and the

¹ David Ijaseun "The deepening despair of Nigeria's North-West amidst failed security strategies" *Business Day*, September 8, 2024

² In Kebbi State, aside from Hausa and Fulani, there are other ethnic groups, such as the *Kayanka* and *Dakarkari*, each with its own distinct language, cultures, and traditions. Similarly, apart from Hausa-Fulani, there are several groups in Kaduna State, popularly referred to as the Southern Kaduna people, including the *Gbagyi*, *Adara*, *Bajju*, *Jaba*, *Ikulu*, *Atyap*, *Ninxom*, *Kagoro*, *Kagoma*, among others.

³ *Maru*, *Anka*, *Talata Mafara*, *Bungudu*, and *Bukkuyum* are notable gold mining sites in Zamfara State, now under the control of bandits.

⁴ Shettima, A.G., and Tar, U.A., Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in West Africa: Exploring the Causes and Consequences. *Information, Society and Justice*, 2008. 1(2)163-184.

⁵ Shettima, A.G., and Tar, U.A., Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in West Africa: Exploring the Causes and Consequences. *Information, Society and Justice*, 2008. 1(2)163-184. See also, International Crisis Group, Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict. Report 252/Africa. September 19, 2017

Nigerian state. Notable among these studies include Abdullahi⁶, Adi and Onyebuchi⁷, Barnett, Rufa'i and Abdulaziz⁸, Kuna & Ibrahim⁹, Nwokoma¹⁰, Okoli¹¹, Rufa'i¹², Ojo, Oyewole and Aina¹³, Esamagu and Adeyinka,¹⁴ Lamidi,¹⁵ among others. These studies unanimously conclude that banditry has severely impacted the rural economy and disrupted economic activities, exacerbating food insecurity through relentless attacks on rural areas, kidnapping for ransom, and mass displacement of people. Federal government efforts to combat banditry have primarily relied on a military approach and kinetic warfare;¹⁶ however, these measures have been limited and ineffective, leaving the rural economy on the brink of collapse. Rural farming in North-West Nigeria, once a thriving backbone of the region's economy, has been severely devastated by the ongoing conflict. The large-scale displacement of rural populations has led to a significant reduction in the available labour force, while the destruction of farms and livestock theft have crippled agricultural production. The rural economy's survival hinged on the resilience of the people, whose livelihoods depended on it.

The paper focuses on the resilience of the North-West rural economy amidst banditry onslaughts and the need for government economic interventions. This paper adopts a qualitative and

⁶ Abdullahi, I. "Armed Banditry, Coercive Approach and Human Security in the Northwest Nigeria" *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)*: 2022. 4 (3) 329-338

⁷ Adi, I, and Onyebuchi, J. Banditry in Nigeria's Northwest: Alternative Perspective. *Covenant Journal of Science and Management Studies*. 2020. 5(1) <https://doi.org/10.26772/CJSMS2020050206> 198-213 | ISSN: 2504-9518

⁸ Barnett, J., Rufa'i, M A., and Abdulaziz, A. Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? 2022.15 (1). Available at <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/northwestern-nigeria-a-jihadization-of-banditry-or-a-banditization-of-jihad/>

⁹ Kuna, M.J., & Ibrahim, J. (Eds). *Rural Banditry and Conflicts in Northern Nigeria*. A Publication of Centre for Democracy and Development, Abuja, 2015.

¹⁰ Nwokoma, U. B. "Armed Banditry and Human Displacement in the Northwest Nigeria, 2017-2021" *International Hybrid Conference, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka*. 2021. 258-269

¹¹ Okoli, A. C. Of Banditry and 'Human Rustling': The Scourge of Kidnapping in Northern Nigeria. *African Journal on Terrorism*. 2021. 11(2)

¹² Rufa'i, M.A. "I am A Bandit: A Decade of Research in Zamfara State Bandits' Den" A Paper Delivered at the 15th University Seminar Series, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. September 9, 2021

¹³ Ojo, J.S., Oyewole, S, and Aina, F. Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria. *Democracy and Security*, 2023. (4) 319-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2023.2164924>

¹⁴ Esamagu, E. E, and Adeyinka, T. A Banditry Rethinking Nigeria's Security Threats: Armed Banditry and its Impacts on the People of North-west Nigeria, 2010-2025. *Agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*.2025. 13(1), 364-379.

¹⁵ Kanal Olaniyi Lamidi, K. O. Banditry and its implications on Food Security in Northwest, Nigeria: A Reflection on the Roles of the State. *Journal of Central and Eastern European African Studies* 5(2):196-213 DOI: 10.12700/jceas.2025.5.2.328

¹⁶ Aina, F., Ojo, J.S. and Oyewole, S. Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria. 2023 *African Security Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2023.2246432>

descriptive research design that synthesizes insights from a diverse range of primary and secondary sources. These sources encompass oral interviews, academic literature, official security reports, and credible media outlets, providing a comprehensive understanding of the damage done to the North-West rural economy. The paper is organized into eight sections. Following the introduction, Section Two conceptualizes the rural economy within the context of rurality, focusing on crop farming, pastoralism, and small-scale entrepreneurship. Section Three examines the nature of North-West's rural economy. Section Four analyzes the vulnerability of the North-West to banditry. Section Five highlights the impact of banditry on the rural economy as it affects livelihoods. Section Six discusses the resilience of the people in the face of these challenges. Section Seven highlights the imperative of government's economic policies in cushioning the effects of economic hardship, while Section Eight concludes the paper.

Conceptualization of 'Rurality' and 'Rural Economy'

In this study, key terms are conceptualized to provide clarity and precision in understanding the context and scope of the study. The conceptualization of terms is crucial in establishing a common understanding of the variables and concepts being investigated. It is on this basis that we conceptualized rurality and rural economy.

Rurality: There is no universally agreed-upon definition of rural areas, because the criteria keep changing across countries and over time. These criteria include demographic, economic, ecological and sociocultural aspects. Sorokin and Zimmerman¹⁷ provided one of the earliest comprehensive definitions of rural areas, accentuating differences in occupation, environment, and social organization between rural and urban areas. However, Pahl¹⁸ (1966) argued that the distinction between rural and urban areas is not just about occupation or geography but also about lifestyle and social relationships. Ekong¹⁹ sees a rural community as a group of families living in the same geographical location, sharing similar cultural beliefs and influencing one another socio-culturally. This definition highlights the importance of social and cultural factors in shaping rural identity and experiences. Halfacree²⁰ emphasized the importance of understanding rural areas

¹⁷ Sorokin, P.A. and Zimmerman, C.C. *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology*. Henry Holt, New York, 1929. 16.

¹⁸ Pahl, R. E The Rural-Urban Continuum. *Sociologia Ruralis*. Royal Van Gorcum, 1966

¹⁹ Ekong E. Ekong. *An Introduction to Rural Sociology*, Ile-Ife: Jumak Publishers. 1988

²⁰ Halfacree, K. "Rural space: constructing a three-fold architecture". In Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P., editors, *Handbook of rural studies*, London: Sage, 2006. 44-62.

beyond just economic or geographical definitions, highlighting the role of identity, culture, and social relations. Cloke²¹ contributed to the discussion on rurality and its complexities, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of rural areas that goes beyond traditional definitions.

Rural economy refers to the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services in rural areas. This encompasses the utilization of local resources, such as land, labour, and natural materials, to produce agricultural and non-agricultural goods. Rural economies are characterized by unique social relations and institutions that organize production, distribution, and exchange. The distribution of goods and services in rural areas often reflects the social and economic structures of these communities. Furthermore, rural economies are dynamic and evolve, influenced by historical, cultural, and external factors, leading to changes in the livelihoods and well-being of rural populations.

Nature of North-West's Rural Economy

The North-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria stretches across Sudan and the Sahel savannah, sharing borders with the Niger Republic, Mali and the Benin Republic. It is the second most populous region in the country, in terms of population density and agricultural activity. It covers an area of 216,065 sq. km or 25.75 per cent of the country's total land mass.²² The zone has an estimated population of 33 million, with about eighty per cent of the population being farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, or small-scale entrepreneurs living in the rural areas.²³ The people of the North-West, Nigeria, have a long history of agricultural practices and a wealth of indigenous knowledge related to farming techniques, crop varieties, and environmental management.²⁴ Farming knowledge and skills are often passed down through generations, with traditional methods being preserved alongside modern agricultural practices. The economy is largely driven by agriculture, with crop production being the primary occupation. The Hausa-speaking group dominates crop production in several states, including Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara, Jigawa, Sokoto, and Kaduna. However, other ethnic groups, such as those in Southern Kaduna, also

²¹ Cloke, P. "Conceptualizing rurality". In Cloke, P., Marsden, T. and Mooney, P.H., editors, *Handbook of Rural Studies*, London: Sage, 2006. 18–28.

²² David Ijaseun "The deepening despair of Nigeria's North-West amidst failed security strategies" *Business Day*, September 8, 2024

²³ Gadzama, I. U, Dukku, A. M and Tijjani, N. Z Banditry and Livelihood of Small-Scale Farmers in Northwestern Nigeria. *Awka Journal of International Relations (AJIREL)* 1(1) August, 2023. 288-317

²⁴ International Crisis Group, Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem. Africa Report N°288 | 18 May, 2020

actively engage in crop farming. The widespread practice of crop farming in these rural communities can be attributed to factors such as the availability of arable land, population density, and a liberal communal land tenure system that vests ownership in families and villagers, thereby facilitating access to land for farming.²⁵

In addition, the vegetation is an added advantage to crop farming among the people. The North West's vegetation is predominantly marginal or short grass savannah. The climate is tropical wet and dry, as well as semi-arid steppe types.²⁶ In the practice of crop farming, the primary crops produced include millet, sorghum, rice, cowpea, soya beans, wheat, groundnut, maize, cotton, and sesame.²⁷ These crops are well-suited to the semi-arid climate of the region and form the staple food for the people. Though there are other crops such as onions, vegetable leaves, tomatoes, ginger, pepper, okra, and among others, depending on the ecology. The rural farmers in the region practice intercropping, planting nitrogen-fixing crops like cowpeas and groundnuts among the grains.²⁸

Farming activities are seasonal, which could be categorized into rainy and dry. The rainy season begins with field preparation in April or May, where farmers clear shrubs and prepare fields for planting. Sometimes, grasses are burned to clear fields that have not been grazed by livestock.²⁹ Thereafter, planting begins in June or July with the onset of the rainy season. The harvesting of grain crops is done at different times depending on when it was planted, with maize being harvested in September, followed closely by beans, sorghum and millet in late October or November.

The dry season usually begins in December or January.³⁰ Through the irrigation system (Fadama), notable crops grown include maize, rice, tomatoes, vegetable leaves, okra, and onions.³¹ Dry season farming, assisted by irrigation, enables the availability of these crops when they are least expected.

²⁵ Oral interview with Mallam Awal Umar, 60+, Agricultural Extension Worker and Farmer, Zaria. July 18, 2025

²⁶ Suleiman, M. B., Ikpe, E. & Ariko, J. D. Appraisal of farmers' Utilisation of Weather Forecast Information for Climate Change Adaptation in north-western Nigeria. *Sokoto Journal of Geography and the Environment*, 2023. 5(1):131-141.

²⁷ Oral Interview with Alh. Bashir Abubakar, 70+, Farmer, Malumfashi, Katsina. July 24, 2025

²⁸ Mortimore, Michael. "Dryland Development: Success Stories from West Africa". *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*. 47 (1): 8–21. January, 2005

²⁹ Oral Interview with Alh. Bashir Abubakar, 70+, Farmer, Malumfashi, Katsina. July 24, 2025

³⁰ Mortimore, Michael. "Dryland Development: Success Stories from West Africa". *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*. January 2005. 47 (1): 8–21.

³¹ Interview with Mallam Dikko Barau, a Seasoned Farmer, 70+, Kaduna August 12, 2025

Farming activities in the region are a collaborative effort between men and women. While men typically handle land clearing and ridging, women and men jointly participate in other tasks such as weeding, planting, harvesting, processing, and marketing. Women's participation in farming activities is very common among the southern Kaduna people; they make ridges, weeding, harvesting like their men counterparts.³² This is common among the Hausa women, though some assist in farming activities, but some are forbidden from doing so due to the Purdah Islamic practice, which restricts them from appearing in public. After harvesting, grains and other crops are processed, packaged, and stored in barns or warehouses for future consumption or sale.

The rural market is an integral part of the local economy, because it is the platform for which most food and other household items are purchased.³³ Men dominate the markets in this region, largely due to Islamic religious beliefs that restrict women's movement outside the home. As North-West of Nigeria is predominantly Islamic, women are generally expected to focus on domestic affairs rather than engaging in market sales.³⁴ However, in Kano, Katsina, Zamfara and Jigawa States, some women, typically older Hausa women, young girls, and Fulani women, can be found in the markets. These women often sell traditional products such as locust bean spice (Daddawa), '*Fura da Nono*' (a popular Fulani drink), and local vegetable spices like *Zogale*, *Yadiya*, *Rama*, and *Lamsir*. Others sell food to marketers or specialize in groundnut oil and related products (Kuli kuli).³⁵

The markets offer a wide range of products, primarily agricultural produce and local farm implements. These include grains, cassava, chickens, livestock, milk (nono), butter (mai shanu), honey, and blacksmith wares. Additionally, manufactured goods such as textiles, beverages, confectionery, plastic products, and pharmaceuticals are also available. The product range varies across markets, with some specializing in foodstuffs, vegetables, or livestock. According to Mallam Abdulkarim, some urban dwellers and traders often patronize rural markets for cheap food items, which they in turn take to urban cities for sale.

There is a wide range of periodic markets in rural areas. These are daily, once or twice a week, depending on the location and commodity for sales. For instance, in Kano State, there are the

³² Oral Interview with Mrs Rifkatu Acham, +70, Farmer, Kachia, Kaduna State. July 14, 2025

³³ Abdulkarim I. A. "Rural Markets"; In *Kano: Environment, Society, and Development*. A. I. Tanko and S. B. Momale (Eds), Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd, London. 2013. 175-188

³⁴ Oral interview with Hajia Habiba AbdulRahaman, 60+ Trader and Housewife, Kaduna, August 20, 2025

³⁵ Abdulkarim I. A. Rural Markets; In *Kano: Environment, Society, and Development*....

Karaye (Wednesday), *Kiru* (Thursday), *Gwiwa* (Wednesday), *Furji* (Thursday), *Ajingi* (Tuesday), *Maraganta* (Saturday), *Maigatari* (Thursday), *Balare* (Sunday), and *Larabar Zango* (Wednesday), just to mention a few.³⁶ Similar periodic markets can be found in other North-West States, including Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. Notable markets include Giwa, *Kasuwa Magani*, and Birni Gwari in Kaduna State; *Talata Marafa*, *Shinkafi* Market (Thursday), and *Mada* Market in Zamfara State; Goronyo, Ungwar Lalle, Wurno, Sabon Birni, and Bafarawa in Sokoto State; Jibia and *Dandume* in Katsina. These markets attract buyers and sellers from far and near, depending on the location and commodities. A distribution chain exists for farm produce among these markets in such a way that commodities such as tomatoes, sorghum, cowpea, maize, onions, beans, rice, and groundnuts easily find their way from rural markets to urban markets and to the southern parts of Nigeria.

Livestock production is another significant aspect of the North-West rural economy, focusing on domestic animals like cattle, sheep, goats, and chickens. While goats and chickens are commonly raised by all ethnic groups, cattle rearing is predominantly practiced by the Fulani people. Breeds of cattle that are indigenous to northern Nigeria include: *White Fulani*, *Red Bororo*, *Sokoto Gudali*, *Adamawa Gudali*, *Wadara*, *Azawak*, *Muturu*, *Keteku*, *Ndama* and *Kuri*.³⁷ For most of the Fulani herders, cattle serve as a primary source of livelihood and measure of wealth, with individuals often owning large herds of over a hundred cattle. The tradition of cattle rearing is passed down through generations, with herds grazing on grasslands while moving from one location to another. Cattle rearing has contributed to the rural economy as a source of livelihood and wealth generation. Mallam Nasiru Ardo noted that there are numerous designated cattle markets across all the North-Western States. He identified Wudil in Kano State, SHEME in Katsina State, Maitagari in Jigawa State, Achida in Sokoto State, Magami and Danjibga in Zamfara State. It is from these markets that large numbers of cattle are transported to the southern part of Nigeria.³⁸ In Nigeria, at large, it has also led to increased production of meat (beef), dairy products, leather, and dung, which is used as manure or fuel.

³⁶ Abdulkarim I. A. "Rural Markets; *In Kano: Environment, Society, and Development...*

³⁷ Nwoga, Cornelius; Ikeh, Nnanna; Onodugo, Matthew; Baiyeri, Paul; Machebe, Ndubuisi. Assisted Reproductive Technologies as Veritable Tools for Improving Production Efficiencies of N'dama and Muturu Cattle Breeds in Nigeria- Review. December 24, 2021. Intech Open. ISBN 978-1-83969-509-4.

³⁸ Oral Interview with Mallam Nasiru Ardo, 70+, Fulani Cattle Herder, Katsina, July 24, 2025

In addition to farming and livestock rearing, small-scale entrepreneurship is a significant component of the rural economy in North-West Nigeria. Artisans such as cloth weavers, wood carvers, blacksmiths, mat makers, and petty traders contribute to the local economy. Findings on skills and specialization reveal that some communities in the North-West states concentrate on specific crafts, including blacksmithing, cloth weaving, and leatherwork, producing essential items like hoe blades, wooden handles, cutlasses, bows and arrows, knives, cloth, and household goods.³⁹ The skills are acquired through an apprenticeship system as practiced elsewhere in Nigeria. These artisans ensure the availability of these products, while professional traders facilitate their distribution by buying and selling them in various markets. Through these small-scale entrepreneurs, individuals earn a living and contribute to the rural economy.

Vulnerability of the North-West to Banditry and Criminality

Despite its agricultural potential, robust rural economy and mineral wealth, the North-West, Nigeria, paradoxically has one of the highest poverty rates in the country, severely limiting its economic potential. According to the Global Food Policy Report released in 2024, the rural populations are facing worse conditions than their urban counterparts, as evidenced by various development indicators, including extreme poverty, child mortality, access to electricity, and sanitation.⁴⁰ The 2022 MPI survey by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other partners revealed that 63% of Nigerians are multidimensionally poor. In the North-West, poverty levels are significantly higher than the national average, which was placed at 40.1 in 2019, with specific state data showing: Sokoto: 90.5%, Jigawa: 84.3%, Kebbi: 82.2%, Zamfara: 78% Katsina: 72.7%, Kano: 66.3% and Kaduna: 73.9%.⁴¹ The low level of education is a significant factor contributing to the high poverty rate in North-West Nigeria. This is evident in the large number of out-of-school children in the region. According to ICIR analysis in 2024, Kano has approximately 1.89 million school-aged children not receiving formal education (39.2% of its school-age population), followed by Katsina State

³⁹ Oral Interview with Alh. Bashir Abubakar, 70+, Farmer, Malumfashi, Katsina. July 24, 2025

⁴⁰Global Food Policy Report: The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2024. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/39dbc6d1-58eb-4aac-bd8a-47a8a2c07c67/content/state-food-security-and-nutrition-2024/ending-hunger-food-security.html#>

⁴¹NBS. Results of the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey. <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/news/78#:~:text=Highlights%20of%20the%202022%20Multidimensional,quarter%20of%20all%20possible%20deprivations.>

with 1.4 million out-of-school children (45.9%). Kebbi State has the highest percentage, with 67.6% of its school-age population out of school (over 1.06 million children).⁴² It is also alarming that Kano, Katsina, Bauchi, Sokoto, Jigawa, and Kebbi are the top states with out-of-school children in Nigeria, while Zamfara and Kaduna also feature in the top 15 in the federation. Several factors contributing to this issue include early/child marriage, economic barriers, conflict, socio-cultural norms, and lack of inclusive policies/practices in schools. These barriers can lead to delayed enrolment, non-attendance, or dropout, resulting in a large number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. The combination of these demand and supply barriers has contributed significantly to the complex challenges of unemployment and poverty, as they become the major drivers of insecurity in the region. As noted by an informant, the large number of youths in the North-West States who never received an education and who are in the nets of poverty are easily recruited as bandits.⁴³ This trend has far-reaching implications, affecting not only the individuals involved but also the overall socio-economic growth and stability of the region.

Another factor that makes North-West vulnerable to banditry is the vast forests, which Onwuzuigbo describes as ungoverned spaces.⁴⁴ The forest poses a considerable obstacle to security efforts in the region, enabling various forms of criminal activity, thereby exacerbating the region's security challenges. For instance, Balmo forest (stretching across Jigawa and Bauchi states), Falgore (Kano state), Kabakawa and Ruma/Kukar Jangarai (Katsina state), Kagoro/Kamuku, Kumuku, Kuduru, Kwaimbana, and Kachia (Kaduna state), Dansadau (Zamfara state), and *Davin Rugu* have become havens for criminals and bandits due to the lack of government presence.⁴⁵

The North-West of Nigeria is also vulnerable to trans-border criminality due to porous borders with the Sahel states. In the last two decades, there have been waves of violence in the States of Mali, the Niger Republic and Libya occasioned by Islamic extremists. Albert noted that the waves of violence in the Sahel have continued to have serious security implications for Nigeria's border

⁴²Mustapha Usman and James Emmanuel "School closure: Kano, Katsina, Bauchi, Kebbi among top 6 states with highest out-of-school children"- *The ICIR*. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/school-closure-kano-katsina-bauchi-kebbi-among-top-6-states-with-highest-out-of-school-children/#:~:text=Kebbi%20State%20has%2067.6%20per,M>

⁴³ Interview with Mallam Dikko Barau, a Seasoned Farmer, 70+, Kaduna August 12, 2025

⁴⁴ Onwuzuruigbo, I. Enclaves of Banditry: Ungoverned Forest Spaces and Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria. *African Studies Review* Cambridge University Press, 6-8. 2020.

⁴⁵ Ladan, S. Forest and Forest Reserves as Security Threats in Northern Nigeria. *European Scientific Journal*. 2014. 10(35), 120–142.

communities.⁴⁶ For instance, in 2013, many of the bandits arrested in Katsina, Zamfara, and Kaduna States by anti-banditry troops and the police were nationals of Mali and the Niger Republic.⁴⁷ These criminal syndicates are alleged to have facilitated the smuggling of illicit drugs and arms into Nigeria through the porous borders. The report also reveals that most of the illegal Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) were acquired from post-Gadhafi Libya and other parts of the Maghreb and the Sahel region.⁴⁸ The porous borders have undoubtedly enabled the smuggling of illicit weapons into the Northwest region by these criminal syndicates.

The presence of unregulated mining sites in some communities in Zamfara State has exacerbated banditry. These sites, operating with little to no government oversight, have become vulnerable to attacks by bandits. Taking advantage of the weak regulatory framework and poor security, bandits have targeted mining sites, killing miners, and stealing valuable resources, including precious stones, money, and equipment. For instance, in November 2016, approximately 50 illegal gold miners were brutally killed in an attack on a Bindim community mining site in Zamfara State, reportedly carried out by a group of 50 bandits seeking gold and money.⁴⁹ The stolen gold is often traded for money and arms in neighbouring countries, such as Mali and the Niger Republic.⁵⁰

The above highlighted issues provide a glimpse into the factors that have made the North-West States vulnerable to banditry over the last one and a half decades.

Impact of Banditry on the North-West Rural Economy

There is no gainsaying that banditry exacerbates the region's security challenges and threatens its socioeconomic stability. Peter Schouten and James Barnett noted that bandits have violently reclaimed and reshaped the governance of the bush, not only as a refuge but as a domain of coercive rule, imposing levies on farming and controlling access to land and cattle.⁵¹ It is no surprise that their deadly activities manifest in attacks and destruction of communities, carting away of food

⁴⁶ Albert, I. Emerging security threats in the Sahel region: Implications for Nigeria. *Academy of Letters*. Nigeria, Abuja. June 5, 2025

⁴⁷ Musa, S. "Border Security, Arms Proliferation and Terrorism in Nigeria" *Daily Trust* April 21, 2013

⁴⁸ Musa, S. "Border Security, Arms Proliferation and Terrorism in Nigeria" *Daily Trust* April 21, 2013

⁴⁹ Adepegba, A "Bandits kill 36 gold miners in Zamfara" *Punch*. November 9, 2016

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group. "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem" Africa Report No 288. Abuja/Brussels, 2020

⁵¹ Peter Schouten and James Barnett. Battle for the bush: Banditry and violent agrarian change in northwest Nigeria. Danish Institute for International Studies, Working Paper:12. 2025. 1-23

items in the barns, arson, abduction for ransom, animal rustlings, among others. The main victims of banditry include farmers, herders, villagers, commuters, vigilante groups, security forces, and school children.

Aside from the threat to human security, the activities of bandits have severely impacted farming and animal husbandry. Bandits engage in the destruction of farmlands, animal rustling, attacks on rural communities, killing and kidnapping of farmers, pastoralists, and agricultural marketers. The once-productive rural farms have been deserted due to attacks and farmers' kidnapping for ransom. In some Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara villages where farmers are resilient, bandits impose some levies on them as a precondition for accessing their farmlands. For instance, a 2023 report by SBM Intelligence titled "Levies or Lives – The Dilemma of Farmers in Northern Nigeria," said farmers in the North-West paid at least N139.5 million in protection fees to bandits between 2020 and 2023. The total amount demanded was N224.9 million.⁵² This was corroborated by some rural farmers interviewed in Kaduna and Katsina States, who stated that bandits impose heavy taxes on farmers, compelling them to pay substantial sums, often running into millions of naira, merely to access their own farmlands. Ejiofor remarks that the diversity of taxes imposed on farmers, herders, artisans and villagers has led to significant economic losses of around 43billion (US\$100 million) in potential revenue due to banditry.⁵³ To Oyewale and Utibe, these developments have adversely affected agricultural activities, crippling food production and exacerbating food insecurity in the region and beyond.⁵⁴

The North-West has the highest number of livestock due to the significant population of Fulani herders. But cattle rustling has become rampant, with reported cases of killing of Fulani herders and their families, and the theft of approximately four million cattle since the commencement of banditry in the North-West, Nigeria.⁵⁵ Cattle rustling has not only adversely affected people's livelihoods but also disrupted the chain of distribution of cattle to markets in southern Nigeria.

⁵² Buhari "Terror Tax: Bandits Impose N50m on Rural Farmers"- *Farmers Voice NG*. <https://farmersvoice.ng/terror-tax-bandits-impose-n50m-on-rural-farmers/#:~:text=This%20has%20deepened%20food%20insecurity,May%2022%2C%202025>

⁵³ Promise Frank Ejiofo; Accumulation by/for terrorism: the political economy of terrorism financing in Nigeria. *Small War and Insurgencies*. 2025. 36 (1). 120-159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2425181>

⁵⁴ Samuel Oyewole and Titus Utibe, "Armed Banditry and Food Security in Northwest Nigeria" in *Armed Banditry in Nigeria*. 2024. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-45445-5_7.

⁵⁵ Ismail Adebayo Birnin Kebbi "We lost over 4m cattle to banditry" – Miyetti Allah. *Daily Trust*. February 20, 2025. <https://dailytrust.com/we-lost-over-4m-cattle-to-banditry-miyetti-allah/#:~:text=We%20Lost%20Over%204m%20Cattle,Ne>

Though it is difficult to obtain accurate figures of the casualties, Table 1 shows the number of local governments deeply affected by bandits

No	North-West States	No of LGAs in the State	No of LGAs Affected by Bandits in each State	LGAs with Incidences of Bandit Activities
1	Kano	44	3	Shanono, Bagwai, and Tsanyawa
2	Katsina	34	18	Jibia, Batsari, Safana, Danmusa, Kankara Faskari, Sabuwa, Danja, Dandume, Kurfi, Kafur, Dutsinma, Malumfashi, Bakori, Matazu, Funtua, Kusada and Ingawa
3	Zamfara	14	14	Anka, Bakura, Bungudu, Birnin Magaji/Kiyaw, Maru Bukkuyum, Gusau, Gummi, Kaura Namoda, Tsafe, Maradun, Shinkafi, Talata Mafara, and Zurmi
4	Kaduna	23	17	Birnin Gwari, Chikun, Giwa, Igabi, Kajuru Kachia, Kauru, Sanga, Zangon-Kataf, Kaura, Jema'a, Kagarko, Zaria Kudan, Makarfi, Soba and Lere
5	Kebbi	21	8	Arewa-Dandi, Augie, Danko-Wasagu, Fakai, Sakaba, Donka/Wasugu, Yawuri, and Bunza
6	Jigawa	27	4	Jahun, Danmusa, Ringim and Guri
7	Sokoto	23	14	Isa, Sabon Birni, Rabah, Kebbe, Tangaza, Illela, Gudu, Binji, Silame, Goronyo, Gwadabawa, Tureta, Dange/Shuni and Shagari
		186	74	

Source: Reports from various Newspapers as gathered by the Researcher

The table above shows that 74 out of 186 local government areas in the North-West are severely affected by banditry, with Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Kebbi states having the highest number of affected local governments. Kano and Jigawa states have the lowest number of local government areas where banditry attacks occurred; the relative peaceful atmosphere in these States may be attributed to the formidable state security architecture and resilience of community policing (vigilante).

Banditry has also impacted markets, with several major local markets in North-West Nigeria being shut down by state governments due to constant attacks. At some points, bandits have demanded safety fees or taken control, forcing authorities to close markets for security reasons. On market days, scores of people are either gruesomely killed or kidnapped in broad daylight. Between 2021

and 2024, Zamfara State ordered the closure of 11 cattle markets,⁵⁶ while Katsina State shut down 14 cattle markets.⁵⁷ The intensity of bandit attacks in Kaduna led the state government to close markets in 5 local government areas.⁵⁸ The affected areas are Birnin Gwari, Chikun, Giwa, Igabi, and Kajuru Local Government Areas. Similarly, the Sokoto State Governor, Aminu Waziri Tambuwal, banned the sales of animals in 14 major markets across 13 local governments in the State.⁵⁹ The closure of these markets has had a significant impact on both the local economy and the bandits' operations, leading to instances where bandits reportedly started demanding food items as ransom instead of cash, as their access to markets for supplies was restricted.⁶⁰

The aforementioned markets have since been reopened by their respective state governments. It is important to stress that these markets played a vital role in the regional economy, acting as major trading centres for foodstuffs like maize, millet, guinea corn, and beans, with traders from across the country and beyond sourcing products from these locations. The strategic location of these markets, however, also made them vulnerable to attacks, given their proximity to forest reserves. The effects of insecurity have had a significant impact on trading activities, leading to decreased revenue generation and business sales/supplies.

The disruption of food supply chains affects local food availability and the national economy, as North-West Nigeria is a key contributor to the country's food basket. Road blockages, attacks, and transportation difficulties have exacerbated the crisis, leading to rising food prices and making basic items inaccessible to vulnerable households.

North-West Peoples' Resilience in the Face of Banditry

In response to the escalating banditry and violence in North-West Nigeria, local communities have taken matters into their own hands, forming vigilante groups called *Yan sa kai* to protect their

⁵⁶Maiharaji Altine "Zamfara shuts 11 markets where bandits sell stolen cattle" – Punch. December 27, 2023. <https://punchng.com/zamfara-shuts-11-markets-where-bandits-sell-stolen-cattle>

⁵⁷ Olaide Oyelude "Insecurity: Katsina shuts roads, bans sale of animals, inter-state cattle movement" -Punch. August 31, 2021. <https://punchng.com/insecurity-katsina-shuts-roads-bans-sale-of-animals-inter-state-cattle-movement/>

⁵⁸ Agency Report. "Insecurity: Kaduna govt suspends weekly markets in five LGAs" Punch. August 30, 2021 <https://punchng.com/insecurity-kaduna-govt-suspends-weekly-markets-in-five-lgas/>

⁵⁹ Banditry: Sokoto Governor Bans Sales of Animals in 14 Major Markets." VoN. September 1, 2021 <https://von.gov.ng/banditry-sokoto-governor-bans-sales-of-animals-in-14-major-markets/>

⁶⁰Dyepkazah Shibayan "Bandits 'hungry', demand food as ransom after governors shut markets in north-west" The Cable. September 11, 2021. <https://www.thecable.ng/bandits-hungry-demand-food-as-ransom-after-governors-shut-markets-in-north-west/>

villages and livelihoods.⁶¹ These groups, comprised of Hausa volunteers armed with locally-made weapons, have been instrumental in reporting attacks and, in some cases, repelling the armed groups. The *Yan sa kai* group has often been accused of targeting or arresting the Fulani indiscriminately, and in response, the Fulani too formed *Yan bin digga* to protect themselves.⁶² The conflict of interest between these two groups has, over time, worsened violent attacks between the Hausa and Fulani communities in Zamfara and Katsina States. As localized community policing initiatives, the state governments in the affected areas have acknowledged the efforts of these vigilante groups, approved their formation and provided monthly allowances to support their activities.⁶³ They complement the efforts of the formal security agencies, and their presence has helped to raise alarm, deter attacks in some instances, even with their locally manufactured dane guns, providing a sense of security for residents. The emergence of vigilante groups highlights the resilience and determination of communities in the face of adversity, as they strive to safeguard their ancestral lands and way of life. However, the absence of firepower that could match that of the bandits and inadequate tactical training have led to the deaths of scores of vigilantes in the course of defending their communities.

The economic adaptation of communities in North-West Nigeria to banditry is a testament to their resilience and resourcefulness, demonstrating the community's ability to cope amidst challenging circumstances. With farming becoming increasingly hazardous due to kidnappings and levies imposed by bandits, many have opted to switch to alternative livelihoods such as trading. This shift is understandable, given the risks associated with farming. The constant threat of abduction and extortion has made it difficult for farmers to access their land, leading to a decline in agricultural productivity and food security. As a result, several communities have continued exploring other economic opportunities, such as trading and artisanship, that are less vulnerable to bandit attacks. The diversification of livelihoods has helped to reduce dependence on farming and it provides a more stable income stream to some people; however, it is crucial to note that these

⁶¹ International Crisis Group. "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem" Africa Report No 288. Abuja/Brussels, 2020

⁶² International Crisis Group. "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem" Africa Report No 288. Abuja/Brussels, 2020

⁶³ Yusha'u A. Ibrahim, et'al. "Outcries over state-recognised vigilantes in North-West". *Daily Trust*. April 27, 2024. <https://dailytrust.com/outcries-over-state-recognised-vigilantes-in-north-west/>

alternative livelihoods also face challenges, such as limited access to markets, infrastructure, and resources.⁶⁴

Another resilience effort of the people is the negotiation and peace agreement strategy. The initiative to negotiate a peace agreement with bandits was first initiated by Zamfara and Katsina states, but this could not be sustained as both the government and bandit leaders accused each other of breaching the peace agreement.⁶⁵ Sheikh Ahmad Abubakar Gumi, a Muslim Cleric in Northern Nigeria, assumed the position of ransom negotiator between the bandits and kidnapped victims. He has continued to advocate for negotiation and a peace deal with the bandits as the only viable means for peace in the North-West States. The state government's peace deal efforts and the failure of the kinetic warfare approach in addressing bandits' violent attacks have made some communities and villagers, through their Village Heads, continue negotiating with the bandits' leaders, so that their communities wouldn't be attacked, but instead, they prefer to pay the levies imposed. This has yielded significant results in some Zamfara and Katsina villages where bandits have spared them from attacks.

As military efforts have yielded limited success, dialogue has emerged as a viable alternative to some communities and victims of abduction who often pay ransom before release. The Former Chief of Defence Staff, General Christopher Musa, has acknowledged the importance of non-kinetic approaches, noting that they now account for over 70% of the efforts required in modern asymmetrical warfare.⁶⁶ Though negotiations with bandits and peace agreements have raised concerns about legitimacy, accountability, and potentially emboldening perpetrators, the majority believe that bandits are criminals and should be decimated.

The Imperative of Government Economic Policies in Cushioning the Effects of Economic Hardship

The government's response to banditry in Northwest Nigeria has been two-pronged: deployment of security agencies and negotiation with bandits. The federal government's initial response to insecurity in the region involved deploying military and security agencies, relying on a kinetic

⁶⁴ Oral Interview with Alh. Bashir Abubakar, 70+, Farmer, Malumfashi, Katsina. July 24, 2025

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group. "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem" *Africa Report*. No 288. Abuja/Brussels, 2020

⁶⁶ Anyochukwu Agbo, "Nigeria Military Tackling Insecurity Through Kinetic and Non-Kinetic Dimensions says CDS. - Tell, June 25, 2025. <https://tell.ng/nigeria-military-tackling-insecurity-through-kinetic-and-non-kinetic-dimensions-says-cds/>

warfare approach.⁶⁷ However, this method has not yielded the desired results, as it often focuses on short-term gains rather than addressing underlying issues of poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural deficits, among others. Kinetic warfare, which emphasizes technological superiority, trained personnel, and sufficient resources, is inadequate or lacking. In addition, Nigeria's anti-terrorism kinetic warfare approach is often hindered by political manipulation, insufficient resources and insurgent groups' adaptability, hence the prolonged military anti-bandit campaign in the region.

In contrast, state governments like Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto have chosen to negotiate with bandits. Since 2016, multiple rounds of talks have taken place between these governments and bandit leaders. However, a recurring issue has been a lack of sincerity on both sides, with accusations and counter-accusations being traded. Both levels of government recognize that peace and stability are essential for development, whether through military action or negotiation.

Addressing the economic drivers of banditry is key to achieving lasting peace. In general terms, as policies to reduce poverty, the federal government has launched economic empowerment programmes, including the N-Power, Anchor Borrowers, skill acquisition initiatives, and a 150-day free import window for food commodities; all these have been inconsistent and often benefit the political elite, rather than reaching the intended rural populations. Despite being steps in the right direction, these programmes have been plagued by politicization and corruption, limiting their impact on the rural economy. Hence, these calls for reassessment or appraisal of the approach and its implementations.

Also, the federal government established the North West Development Commission (NWDC), aimed at driving economic growth and development in Nigeria's North-West region. Created under the National Development Commission Act of 2023, the NWDC is tasked with addressing the region's unique socio-economic challenges, including poverty, insecurity, and infrastructural deficits.

With farming being the primary source of livelihood for most residents, the disruption of economic activities has had far-reaching consequences. The effects on income and livelihood have been devastating, leaving many vulnerable to poverty. Poverty and banditry are intricately linked, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that is difficult to break. The intersections between poverty and

⁶⁷ Paul A. Irabor and Olu Awofeso, Analysis of Government Response to Curb Banditry in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Studies*. 2025. 31(6). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20428/jss.v31i6.2989>.

banditry include economic deprivation, limited access to resources, desperation and vulnerability, lack of alternative livelihoods, among others, all of which drive individuals to join bandit groups.

The first necessity of the government's economic policy, as a way of intervening in the rural economy, is agricultural support. The agricultural sector is the backbone of the rural economy in North-West Nigeria. Robust government agronomic policies, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, can provide support to farmers through subsidies, credit facilities, and infrastructure development. The creation of government-backed agricultural insurance schemes can protect farmers against crop failure, livestock loss, and other risks associated with banditry.

Secondly, establishing cattle ranching as an alternative to open grazing could help resolve the farmers-herders conflict. Initiatives like the agro-pastoral development project aim to support pastoral communities. Additional measures to curb cattle rustling include cattle branding, certifying cattle merchants, monitoring cattle markets, and regulating slaughterhouses, among others.

Thirdly, well-monitored government economic policies can provide alternative livelihood opportunities, such as vocational training, entrepreneurship development, and microfinance support. This will equip youths and women with skills to engage in alternative livelihood activities. In addition, the destruction of infrastructure, including roads, markets, and storage facilities, has hindered robust economic activities in the rural areas. Government economic policies can prioritize infrastructure development to improve access to markets, services, and economic opportunities.

The vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the elderly, require social protection support to mitigate the effects of economic hardship. Government economic policies can establish social safety nets, such as cash transfers, food assistance, and healthcare support, for vulnerable households, which can help alleviate poverty and stimulate local economic activity. Microfinance institutions can provide access to credit for small-scale entrepreneurs, farmers, and traders to support livelihood activities.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The ongoing banditry in North-West Nigeria has severely affected the rural economy, worsening poverty and food insecurity. The region's agricultural sector, once a strong pillar of the economy, has been wrecked by attacks, displacement, and livestock theft. Government efforts, including military action and negotiations, have seen limited success. Tackling the economic causes of

banditry is essential for lasting peace. Therefore, comprehensive strategies that include economic development, security, and social protection are needed to restore stability and prosperity in North-West Nigeria. To accomplish this, the following are recommended;

- i. Establishment of a Rural Economic Recovery Fund (RERF) to support rural economic recovery efforts, including agricultural support, livelihood development, and infrastructure development.
- ii. Implementation of a Social Safety Net Programme to support vulnerable populations, including cash transfers, food assistance, and healthcare support.
- iii. Government should encourage private sector investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and other sectors to stimulate economic growth and job creation.
- iv. Government should provide farmers with access to improved seeds, fertilizers, and extension services to improve agricultural productivity.
- v. Establishment of cattle ranching to resolve frequent farmer-herder conflicts.

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