UNIDIR

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

MEAC FINDINGS REPORT 36

# Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities

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July 2024

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This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.


**Citation:** Johanna Kleffmann, Swetha Ramachandran, Noah Cohen, Siobhan O'Neil, Mohammed Bukar, Francesca Batault, Kato Van Broeckhoven, "Banditry Violence in Nigeria's North West: Insights from Affected Communities," *Findings Report 36,* UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024, https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/24/05

# Key Findings

- The labelling of banditry as “organized crime,” “unknown gunmen,” or, more lately, “terrorists” has distorted this multi-faceted and still poorly understood phenomenon. Likewise, some of the frames that have been applied to banditry – particularly the farmer/herder conflict or Hausa/Fulani tensions – do not appear to fully align with local communities’ understandings of today’s evolution of banditry. Simplistic categorization and narrow lenses for understanding banditry may contribute to inappropriate or insufficient policy and programmatic responses. MEAC’s survey unearths some of the lived experiences with bandits and sheds light on the nuances of the phenomenon and its profound impact on communities.

- Community perceptions of bandit groups corroborate earlier research depicting them as comprised of largely distinct, organized groups, albeit with shifting configurations and subject to fragmentation. Bandit groups operate in highly mobile, armed, and largely forest-based units that use quick-strike attacks on motorbikes against communities. Their motivations are primarily perceived as economic/financial by victims, including the notable subsection of the sample of Fulanis who have been victimized by bandits.

- For the surveyed communities, weapons are the most recognizable feature of bandit groups. This bears critical implications for the potential for escalation of violence, further proliferation of illicit arms and ammunition including in the neighbouring regions, community violence reduction efforts and future DDR programming.

- Victimisation experiences differ considerably with gender, age, and location in the North West. While physical violence and killings disproportionately affect adult men, sexual violence appears to especially affect women and girls (although it likely remains underreported). Variations of victimization across states indicate the volatile and dynamic nature of overall banditry presence and violence.

- Banditry violence has profound and pervasive effects on the physical safety, access to income-generating activities, education, and mobility of residents in the northwestern communities surveyed. The perceived intensity and frequency of attacks are on the rise, with one in three respondents reporting experiencing weekly attacks in recent years. Close to two-thirds of respondents have family members who have been attacked by bandits.

# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; UNICEF; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

## About This Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

## About This Report

This report is based on quantitative survey data collected from January to March 2024 with 2,947 community members across the North West of Nigeria, mainly the states of Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto. This baseline constitutes the first part of a panel study on banditry and conflict to be conducted in the North West. The report examines victimization and the everyday impact of banditry violence and how the groups' presence manifests in northwestern communities to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and help identify more effective policy responses.

# Banditry Violence in the North West of Nigeria

While banditry has sporadically punctuated Nigeria's history, the contemporary wave[1] of banditry in the North West of the country has reached the level of a full-blown security crisis. Despite having received limited attention compared to the insurgency in the country's North East,[2] banditry violence in recent years has outweighed the violence perpetrated by groups like Boko Haram.[3]

Banditry today has come to be associated with its most common manifestations including "kidnapping, armed robbery, murder, rape, cattle-rustling, and the exploitation of environmental resources."[4] Typically, these acts are perpetrated by a loose collection of rural armed criminal groups. The explanations of the origins and motivations behind the contemporary semi-structured wave of violence differ, with analyses alternatively placing emphasis on rural organized crime, conflict over land use between farmers and herders, and violence between Fulani and Hausa, amongst other causes—all exacerbated by climate change and the lack of employment.

Owing to the escalating number of and violence associated with bandit attacks, banditry has become a significant political focus in recent years. The violence spiralled so high that, in 2022, the Nigerian government designated individuals engaging in select bandit groups as "terrorists."[5] According to ACLED data, bandit attacks on communities in the North West rose by 731 per cent between 2018 and 2022.[6] There are concerns that insurgent groups in Niger and bandit groups in the North West could start cooperating or even merge, potentially creating a "land bridge"[7] between jihadists in the North East of Nigeria and those operating in Niger, a

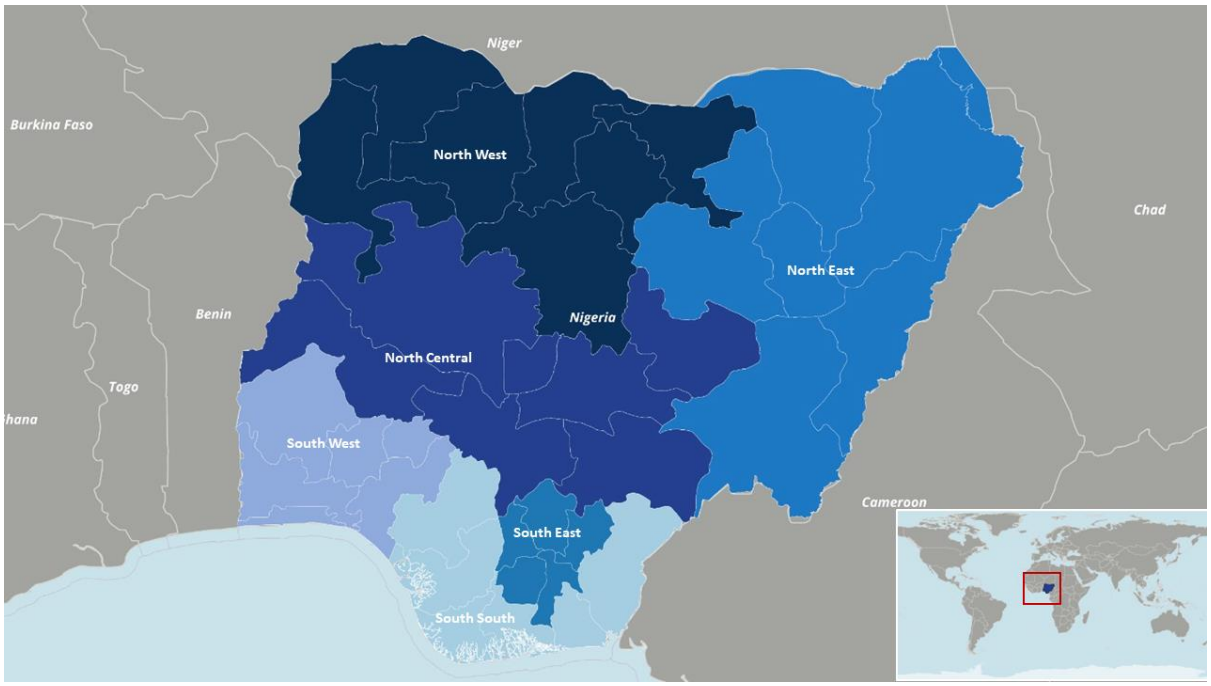
[1] It is widely accepted in the region that this wave or particular manifestation of banditry first appeared in Zamfara in 2011. UNIDIR, Interviews *with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)
[2] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja, 2022).
[3] International Crisis Group, "Halting the Deepening Turmoil in Nigeria's North West", 26 May 2021; Global Rights, "Mass Atrocities Casualties Tracking, 2020 Report", 28 May 2021; Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923* (June 2023); Fidelis Mac-Leva and Haruna Ibrahim, "Bandits Kill More Nigerians Than Boko Haram, Robbers, Kidnappers, Cultists, Others," *Daily Trust*, 22 September 2019.
[4] Claire Brenner, "Combating Banditry in Northwest Nigeria", *American Security Project*, 19 March 2021.
[5] Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923*, (June 2023)
[6] ACLED as cited in: Mahmud Malami Sadiq and Oluwole Ojewale, "Why Nigeria's bandits are recruiting women for gunrunning," *ISS Africa*, 14 August 2023.
[7] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).

development that many fear could destabilize an already fragile region entirely.[8] Banditry is the North West's greatest security challenge today, but despite the effects of banditry being widely felt across the region, there is still confusion as to what banditry is, and questions about what can be done to address it.

This report seeks to address this gap. Provided the manifold dimensions and fault lines the banditry phenomenon has been associated with in previous scholarly work and public discourse (Hausa/Fulani, farmer-herder conflicts, climate, socio-economic and land use issues), this report seeks to provide insights on banditry through the lens of those most affected by it. It interrogates survey data on personal victimization experiences as well as perceptions of bandit groups and the dynamics underlying bandit violence. These insights seek to contribute to a sounder understanding of banditry and try to identify entry points for policy and programmatic responses to address the issue.

The following literature review will summarize existing analysis of the evolution of banditry in Nigeria and the discussions around its contemporary manifestations, including the way bandits operate and potentially cooperate with insurgent groups as well as its impact on communities and the historical government responses to banditry.

## FIGURE 1 – MAP OF NIGERIA'S SIX GEOPOLITICAL ZONES




[8] Johanna Kleffmann, Francesca Batault, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Siobhan O'Neil, Jente Althuis, Rabby Shakur, Anna Hallahan, Hana Salama and Mohamed Coulibaly, *"Factors Driving Weapons Holding in the North East of Nigeria," Findings Report 33*, UNIDIR, Geneva, Switzerland, 2023; UNDP, "Conflict Analysis in the Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021: Trends, Developments and Implications for Peace and Stability," (N'Djamena, Chad: UNDP, 2022).

# Evolution of Banditry Violence

Armed banditry in the North West of Nigeria, as well as in other parts of the country, is not a novel phenomenon but dates back to pre-colonial and colonial eras. The antecedent of present-day banditry is thought to be traced back to the activities of cross-border criminals in West Africa during Nigeria's colonial period.[9] Banditry has sporadically flared up at moments throughout the country's history.[10] A confluence of conflicts, including between farmers and herders, different tribes, and tensions over land use, as well as exacerbating factors such as shifts in climate patterns, limited governance, and poverty, have all contributed to this multidimensional phenomenon currently understood as banditry.

Until the 2000s, the different tribes in the North West of Nigeria—as well as **farmers and herders**, whose professions, to a great extent, were once aligned with tribal identity with farmers being predominately Hausa and herders being predominately Fulani —largely coexisted in peace. There were strong economic and cooperative practices amongst farmers and herders, common social activities, and intermarriage between Fulani and Hausa was common, thereby blurring divisions between tribes significantly.[11] In small-scale instances of disputes between farmers and herders, community-level authorities usually mediated these successfully.[12]

Around that time, however, **shifts in land ownership**, notably through government and community sales and renting to farmers, started to undo the pre-existing system including a mixture of demarcation and informal but commonly accepted access to grazing land. The ensuing encroachment by farmers onto pastoralist routes and herders onto newly privatized farming land—both mistaken and intentional—led to rising tensions between still largely Fulani herders and predominantly Hausa sedentary farmers. Fulani pastoralists felt marginalized by land sales and government measures to regulate land ownership and access.[13]

**Changing climate patterns** further compounded these tensions by diminishing already contested land and water resources. Declining and erratic precipitation, rising temperatures,

[9] UNIDIR, Interviews *with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)
[10] Janet Roitman, "The Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin," in Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 247–72; Scott MacEachern, *Searching for Boko Haram: A History of Violence in Central Africa* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); Azeez Olaniyan and Aliyu Yahaya, 'Cows, Bandits, and Violent Conflicts: Understanding Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria', *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2016).
[11] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020. Note: the current ethical makeup of the northwestern population is unknown. Since questions around tribe, religion or language have grown in sensitivity, the last census in 2006 did not disaggregate by these markers. Another reason is the increasingly blurred line between Hausa and Fulani who are frequently also grouped together as "Hausa-Fulani" (Minority Rights Group International, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Nigeria," May 2018).
[12] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[13] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020; Jessica Caus, "Climate-driven Recruitment into Armed Groups in Nigeria," *Findings Report 1* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

and desertification intensified competition over water resources as well as arable land and pasture.[14] Ongoing population growth further aggravated this resource scarcity.[15] In a region that struggles with **poverty** (especially the rural population[16]), and where approximately 70 per cent of the population makes a living through agriculture,[17] climatic shifts put significant stress on livelihoods (and food security). Together with limited access to alternative economic opportunities and inadequate governmental support, these factors provided a fertile ground for the escalation of farmer-herder grievances while also increasing the attraction of ostensibly easy profits to be made with banditry.

In the mid-2000s, **criminality** including highway robberies—perceived to be largely perpetrated by Fulani men—rose in Zamfara state. Starting in 2009, cattle rustling increased.[18] As it spread, bandit groups grew increasingly militarized, using AK-pattern rifles and motorbikes, which enabled them to steal larger numbers of cattle at a time.[19] The following years also saw a greater incidence of village raids.[20] In 2015, banditry began to also appear in the neighbouring states of Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi as well as in the North Central zone, particularly Niger state,[21] and as far as the states of Nasarawa, Plateau and Benue.[22] While there is some evidence to suggest that the same groups have crossed from one state over to another (e.g., groups from Zamfara evading a peace dialogue by moving into Katsina),[23] that has not always been the case for all states in the North West. New groups have also started to replicate bandit methods in new places.

In the context of contested presidential elections in 2011, politicians used young Fulani men as "political thugs"[24] to disrupt and influence elections. This included snatching of ballot boxes, intimidation of voters, and physical attacks against opponents.[25] In response to the upsurge in

[14] Huma Haider, "Climate change in Nigeria: Impacts and responses." *K4D Helpdesk Report 675.* (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2019). For instance, correlations between both decreasing precipitation and rising temperatures on the one hand, and bandit attacks on the other have been found. See: Oluwole Ojewale, Tosin Osasona, and Yekeen Shamsudeen, "Climate Change and Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria: A Troubled Synergy of Insecurity," in *Armed Banditry in Nigeria*, pp 15–42.
[15] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[16] In Nigeria's rural areas 72 per cent of people are considered poor, compared to 42 per cent in urban areas. NBS Nigeria, "Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)," (National Bureau of Statistics of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, FCT Abuja, 2022)
[17] FAO, "Nigeria General Household Survey 2018–2019," *RuLIS COUNTRY BRIEF* (2022).
[18] Pastoral Resolve, Search for Common Ground and Terre des Hommes, *Zamfara Conflict Analysis and Multisectoral Needs Assessment* (2019).
[19] Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows somebody who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's banditry epidemic," *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.
[20] Pastoral Resolve, Search for Common Ground and Terre des Hommes, *Zamfara Conflict Analysis and Multisectoral Needs Assessment* (2019).
[21] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020); Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[22] Mohammed.J. Kuna and Jirbin Ibrahim, *Rural Banditry and Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (Abuja, Centre for Democracy and Development, 2016).
[23] UNHCR and Government of Nigeria, "Joint Protection Assessment Mission to Northwest Nigeria, 25 July – 4 August 2019," 9 September 2019; Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[24] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[25] International Crisis Group, "Lessons from Nigeria's 2011 Elections," *Briefing No. 81*, 15 September 2011.

election violence, and given **limited governance presence** in the North West,[26] Hausa communities mobilized community security groups called Yan Sakai or Yan Banga (in some places from partly pre-existing forces). These vigilante groups meted out harsh punishments, ranging from indiscriminate confiscation of cattle to extrajudicial killings in public spaces for both actual and perceived robberies and raids.[27] Town-dwelling Fulani were often treated as suspects and thought to be complicit with bandits, and they were particularly impacted by harsh Yan Sakai/Yan Banga sanctions.[28] To protect themselves, Fulani communities in turn took up arms as so-called Yan Bindiga—militias who quickly became equated with bandit groups.[29] The proliferation of small arms and ammunition in the region, facilitated by the porous national border to the north, enabled armament across all militia groups.[30] As hostilities amplified, bandit groups formed strategic alliances with either ethnic community.[31] By instrumentalizing tensions and recruiting from aggrieved communities, bandits further entrenched themselves in the area.[32]

Patterns of recruitment and community mobilization fed the mutual perception that all Fulani were bandits, and all Hausa were militia members. Bandits engaged in forced recruitment within Fulani communities. Most Hausa men of fighting age were expected to be involved in their community's vigilante group. This led to the perception that any male belonging to the out-group was a valid target,[33] and contributed to the narrative that the violence in the region was driven by inter-tribal competition. However, as the violence spread, also those communities who were not actively involved in any fighting were increasingly caught in the middle: being perceived to side with one group or having associated family members often meant to be attacked at some point. Those communities perceived as uncommitted to neither banditry nor vigilantism were sanctioned for their lack of commitment by their in-group too.[34] In fact, many argue that today, bandit victimization affects Hausa and Fulani alike.[35]

While a problematic analytical category, "banditry" has quickly become the most widespread term used by frontline communities, the media, academia, and policymakers.[36] As a catch-all

[26] National Investment Promotion Commission, *Nigerian States*, (2023)
[27] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020)
[28] Ibid.
[29] See : Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923*, (June 2023).
[30] Azeez Olaniyan, and Aliyu Yahaya. "Cows, bandits, and violent conflicts: Understanding cattle rustling in Northern Nigeria." *Africa Spectrum* Vol.51, No. 3 (2016).
[31] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020..
[32] Johanna Kleffmann, Francesca Batault, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Siobhan O'Neil, Jente Althuis, Rabby Shakur, Anna Hallahan, Hana Salama and Mohamed Coulibaly. "Factors Driving Weapons Holding in the North East of Nigeria," *Findings Report 33*, UNIDIR, Geneva, Switzerland, 2023.
[33] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[34] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[35] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja: 2022).
[36]Ibid.

term, it arguably falls short of clearly delineating a phenomenon. It is difficult to distinguish banditry from common crime. Having mentioned these limitations, the present study will use the term "bandits," but it makes a conscious effort to look beyond simplistic labels—often imposed from outside—to understand how local communities define and perceive banditry.

# Size of the Current Problem

While Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara are considered the most affected states in the North West, banditry has long impacted areas beyond their borders, particularly the North Central political zone. The number of armed bandits in the North West has been estimated at around 30,000, grouped into hundreds of small gangs ranging in size from just a few people to over a thousand.[37] While bandit groups consist mostly of men, some evidence suggests that women have also engaged in banditry, often in logistical or support functions.[38] Bandit groups have continuously changed leaders, and shifted in size and structure, also due to infighting. Intergroup fighting flares up in the shape of skirmishes over territory, intergroup cattle rustling as well as more minor issues such as setting up camp too close to another group.[39] The fractiousness and volatility of the groups also make them more difficult to interact or even negotiate with.[40]

A single cell called Kungiyar Gayu, founded by Kundu and succeeded by Buharin Daji, is thought to have started the contemporary wave of banditry. Buharin Daji is often credited with being the first to spread the activities of his group (and hence banditry violence) to the other parts of the North West.[41] Throughout recent years, there have been a few notable bandit groups that have held sway over large swaths of the territory, including those known as (or associated with) Alhaji Shingi, Doge Gide, Kachalla Turji, and Kachalla Halilu Sububu Seno,[42] holding power over communities and in some cases playing governing functions.[43]

[37] John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security*, (2023).
[38] PM News, "Police nab Kaduna Women Ferrying Girls to Bandits for Sex," 9 January 2022; Sahara Reporter, "Police Arrest 25-year-old Woman Supplying Logistics to Bandits in Katsina," 16 September 2021; Mahmud Malami Sadiq, "Why Nigeria's bandits are recruiting women for gunrunning," *ISS Africa*, 14 August 2023.
[39] Ibrahim Hassan Wuyo, "Bandits Fight Each Other in Kaduna Forest, Kingpin Nasiru Kachalla, Others Killed", *The Vanguard*, 28 December 2020; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Criminal Gangs Destabilizing Nigeria's North West," 14 December 2021; James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2022).
[40] Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923* (June 2023).
[41] UNIDIR, Interviews *with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)
[42] Daily Trust, "In Rare Access To Enclave: Bandits Speak On Ravaging Insecurity," 26 February 2021; James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel,* Vol.15, No. 1 (2022).
[43] Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows somebody who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's banditry epidemic," *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.

# Impact on Communities in the North West

The extent of bandit violence in the region has reached critical levels. Conservative estimates suggest that there were 8,300 banditry-related deaths between 2013 and 2022.[44] Between 2019 and the first quarter of 2024, in the North West, there were 9,527 people kidnapped, representing 62 per cent of Nigeria's overall abduction cases, with bandits being the primary culprits.[45] As many cases go unreported, the "data inevitably undercounts the true extent of the problem."[46] Between 2019 and 2023, kidnappings in the North West were 169 per cent more frequently reported than in the North East.[47] Numerous instances of sexual violence at the hands of bandits have been reported.[48] Sexual violence perpetrated by bandits is thought to mainly target women and girls, and is often used strategically to enforce communities' compliance, e.g. with demands for levies.[49] Many accounts of forced marriage also exist.[50] While the figures presented herein speak to the extent of banditry violence, because banditry disproportionately affects rural communities where there is little government presence, it is difficult to get a full picture of banditry-related violence.[51]

Banditry violence has also had numerous secondary effects. For example, more than 25,000 children have been orphaned in Zamfara alone[52] and over 200,000 people have been internally displaced in the North West[53] as a result of bandit violence. Across the North West and North Central zones, many individuals who flee the region find themselves in underequipped camps or unofficial settlements with irregular and inadequate access to basic necessities.[54] Those who remain in their communities, risk attacks on schools, further economic and educational disenfranchisement, kidnappings, and gender-based violence.[55] Banditry also has economic

[44] John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023).
[45] SBMintel, "Mass Abductions: The catastrophe of Nigeria's kidnap epidemic," 21 March 2024.
[46] Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows somebody who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's banditry epidemic," *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.
[47] Global Initiative, ACLED, "What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us?", 15 March 2024.
[48] It is expected that the actual number is exponentially higher, but instances of sexual violence are largely underreported. Human Rights Watch World Report 2024: Nigeria. Events of 2023 (2024)
[49]Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923* (June 2023); Oluwole Ojewale and Omolara Balogun, "Banditry's impacts on women and children in Nigeria needs a policy response," *LSE Blogs*, 10 January 2022.
[50] UNHCR and National Commission for Refugee, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, "Joint Protection Assessment Mission to Northwest Nigeria, 25 July- 4 August 2019," (2019); International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[51]Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923* (June 2023)
[52] Human Rights Watch. World Report, Nigeria: Events of 2022. (2023).
[53] UNHCR and National Commission for Refugee, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, "Joint Protection Assessment Mission to Northwest Nigeria, 25 July- 4 August 2019," (2019). About 60,000 fled into Niger in the 2010s. International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[54] Mas'ud Bello, and Ahmed D. Garba. "Gender Based Violence in The Light Of 21st Century Security Challenges In Zamfara State, Nigeria." *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research*, Vol 8, No. 7 (2022).
[55] Ibid.

costs. Over 3 billion Naira has been drained from the government coffers and local communities in Zamfara alone to pay ransoms to kidnappers.[56]

There are additional knock-on effects of banditry violence that raise serious concerns about the mid- and long-term impact it could have on Nigerian society and development. Abductions of school children have become a particularly heinous crime attributed to bandits. Between 2014 and mid-2023, an estimated 1,680 school children were kidnapped, with more than 180 of them killed subsequently.[57] The impact of this violence on school attendance has been drastic. A 2019 assessment in Zamfara found that "33 percent of children aged 5-17 had completely dropped out of school and a further 29 percent had never attended school" because of a "lack of money, destruction of classrooms, fears for safety, lack of teachers who have fled violence and the need to earn incomes."[58]

Next to education, banditry has directly impacted food insecurity. Nearly 2.6 million people in Sokoto, Zamfara, and Katsina were facing food insecurity in 2021,[59] numbers which were expected to double in 2023,[60] in part due to banditry. For example, 30 per cent of agricultural land in Kaduna State had been abandoned due to banditry violence by 2020. In Zamfara and Katsina restrictions in farming led to a decline in local food production by 60 per cent.[61] The humanitarian response to growing food insecurity in the region has been critiqued as "patchy and grossly inadequate."[62]

The impact of banditry in Nigeria's North West has been widespread and profound. To address the banditry problem, however, it is necessary to look at the illicit sectors that have financed bandit groups, funds which ultimately allowed them to conduct increasingly sophisticated and large-scale attacks.

[56] Human Rights Watch. World Report, Nigeria: Events of 2022. (2023).
[57] Joan Akpa-Achimugu and Chinyere Ibeh, "Implications of Armed Banditry for Education in Nigeria's North West Region," *GCSP Alumni Note*, (October 2023).
[58] Pastoral Resolve, Search for Common Ground and Terre des Hommes, *Zamfara Conflict Analysis and Multisectoral Needs Assessment* (2019), p.xi
[59] International Crisis Group, "Halting the Deepening Turmoil in Nigeria's North West," 26 May 2021.
[60] FAO and WFP, "Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity, June 2023 to November 2023 outlook." (Rome, 2023).
[61] WANEP, "Addressing Armed Banditry in the North-West Region of Nigeria: Exploring the Potentials of a Multi-Dimensional Conflict Management Approach," *WARN Policy Brief*, (2020).
[62] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).

# Illicit Sectors

The major motivation for the individuals engaging in banditry is thought to be financial.[63] There is a lack of income-generating opportunities in the region. This has particularly affected young people, with a youth bulge having translated into an estimated youth unemployment rate of 53 per cent in 2020.[64] Historic underground markets in the region, notably illegal gold mining[65] and cattle rustling,[66] preceded the banditry crisis but became more appealing as unemployment, particularly amongst youth, grew in the region. Banditry has also taken hold in the region as there are few guardrails against violent crime and illegal economic activities: there is minimal government presence, particularly with regard to law enforcement. In the region, pervasive corruption, illicit arms proliferation, and porous borders have created fertile ground for bandit groups.

While bandits long relied mostly on cattle rustling, over time, they have diversified their income-generating activities. When in cattle stocks were depleted and many pastoralists relocated to safer areas, which led bandits to shift to other tactics to raise funds, particularly abduction for ransom,[67] as well as illegal gold mining and extortion.[68] This diversity renders them more resilient to government crackdowns. Whenever the military or police curtail one illegal activity or certain illicit sources are depleted, the other illicit revenue streams can compensate for such shocks. These fundraising activities, particularly abductions for ransom and extortion of protection money from mining sites enabled bandits to expand their stocks of weapons,[69] thus facilitating more sophisticated and violent attacks.

A recent concern has been a trend towards more mass instead of individual abductions. The surge of mass abductions in early 2024 led analysts to suggest that individual kidnappings for ransom too might gradually decline as it becomes less lucrative.[70] Previous abductions have left communities impoverished since ransom payments are so high that they typically require

[63] Kelechukwu Charles Obi and Victor Chidubem Iwuoha, "Untold story of the expanding armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest: linking the communal-level collaborators," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No.7 (2023); Folahanmi Ainaa, John Sunday Ojob, and Samuel Oyewolec, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2023).
[64] NBS Nigeria, "Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022)," (National Bureau of Statistics of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, FCT Abuja, 2022). Note: the rate includes Nigerians aged between 15 and 24.
[65] Maurice Ogbonnaya, "Illegal Mining and Rural Banditry in North-West Nigeria." *Institute for Security Studies,* Policy Brief 19 (2020).
[66] Azeez Olaniyan and Aliyu Yahaya. "Cows, bandits, and violent conflicts: Understanding cattle rustling in Northern Nigeria." *Africa Spectrum,* Vol 51, No. 3 (2016).
[67] Global Initiative, ACLED, "What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us?", 15 March 2024; Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows someone who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's Banditry Epidemic." *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.
[68] Al Chukwuma Okoli and Mamuda Abubakar. "Crimelordism": understanding a new phenomenon in armed banditry in Nigeria." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* , Vol 56, No. 7 (2021)
[69] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[70] Global Initiative, ACLED, "What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us?", 15 March 2024,

family members to sell all their assets and means for making a livelihood (such as farms).[71] With many unable to pay subsequent ransom demands, and potential targets having also fled the region,[72] bandits have increasingly opted for mass abductions. Despite the difficulty of coordinating these attacks, mass abductions increase the possibility of government ransom payments, which are more substantial than what can be cobbled together by individual ransoms.[73] As profits from cattle rustling and individual kidnapping ransoms dwindle, another observed trend has been the imposition of levies on farmers and artisanal gold miners[74] well as forced labour on bandit-controlled farms.[75] Illegal taxation of farmers typically involves payments of anywhere from N10,000 to N600,000.[76] There are concerns that this coercive taxation could lead to a further entrenchment of bandit groups in these regions.[77]

# Bandits' Modus Operandi

Using the vast forests that intersperse the savannah in Nigeria's North West as their base of operations,[78] bandits can move undetected and conceal themselves from military forces who are often assisted by air support.[79] In their ventures out of the forests, bandits rely on quick-strike tactics utilizing motorbikes that ensure manoeuvrability in difficult terrain and the speed to conduct rapid attacks.[80] Motorbikes are typically not registered, which helps evade law enforcement tracking. Motorbikes often serve as transport vehicles for arms and ammunition as well as for attacks. Typical attacks can involve as many as 200 motorbikes, each with two armed bandits and space for one abductee.[81]

Whilst banditry has historically relied on simple tactics and is predominantly a rural phenomenon, bandit attacks are becoming more sophisticated, and groups have demonstrated the capacity to conduct complex attacks in urban areas. Examples include assaults on markets and schools and strikes against government facilities such as military

[71] Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows somebody who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's banditry epidemic," *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.
[72] In our survey sample nearly half of adult men mentioned to be displaced at the time of the survey. Amongst women, boys and girls' respondents this number was still high at between 29 and 37 per cent.
[73] Global Initiative, ACLED, "What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us?", 15 March 2024; Priya Sippy, "Nigeria's kidnap crisis: Inside story of a ransom negotiator," *BBC News*, 21 March 2024.
[74] Ibid.
[75] SBMIntel, "Mass Abductions: The catastrophe of Nigeria's kidnap epidemic," 21 March 2024.
[76] Global Initiative, "Armed bandits extort crop farmers amid dwindling alternative illicit revenue sources in Zamfara, north-western Nigeria," *Risk Bulletin #5*, (October 2022).
[77] Ibid.
[78] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[79] Azeez Olaniyan. "Foliage and violence: Interrogating forests as a security threat in Nigeria." *African Security Review*, Vol 27, No. 1 (2018).
[80] Promise Frank Ejiofor, "The Mobility of Terror: Motorcycle Bandits, Violence and Anarchy in Nigeria," *The RUSI Journal,* Vol 166, No. 6-7 (2022).
[81] Ibid; Daily Trust, "How Unregistered Motorcycles Aid Banditry, Other Crimes in North-West," 30 May 2021.

bases and airports. In 2021, for instance, bandits conducted large-scale attacks in the outskirts of Kaduna city.[82]

Owing to their loose structure and fragmentation, bandit groups also display frequent infighting, often over non-ideological issues such as inter-bandit cattle rustling or conflicts over turf.[83] Some have argued that the lack of any coordination across or structure connecting these disparate bandit groups, presents significant challenges to any attempt to approach them—let alone negotiate with them.[84]

# Potential Crime-Terror Nexus

As the toll of banditry has risen in the North West and the insurgency in the North East and armed group activity in the Sahel has continued on, there have been rising concerns over the phenomena merging as jihadists advance into the North West attempting to create a West African "arc of insurgency."[85] Any potential collusion or merging of insurgent and bandit groups would connect the crisis in the Lake Chad Basin to armed groups active in the North West and possibly to the wider Sahel regionand increase the prospects of destabilizing the region as a whole. While the implications of such a merger legitimate concern, the evidence so far points to mostly transactional and tactical rather than strategic collaboration between insurgents and bandits.[86]

There are some reports substantiating a certain level of operational collaboration between extremist groups (like Ansaru, which is already present in the North West,[87] and the factions of Boko Haram - Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (JAS) and the Islamic State West African Province/Sahel (ISWAP) in the North East), and bandit groups.[88] It has been reported that cooperation ranges from recruitment to training (e.g., on anti-aircraft guns or IEDs),

[82] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja: 2022); John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023)
[83] James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel,* Vol.15, No. 1 (2022).
[84] John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023).
[85] Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise," *Perspectives On Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No.5. (2021); James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 1 (2022); John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023).
[86] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[87] "Ansaru's Comeback in Nigeria Deepens the Terror Threat," ISS Today, 1 June 2022.
[88] ISS Regional Office for West Africa, The Sahel and The Lake Chad Basin,"Ansaru's comeback in Nigeria deepens the terror threat," *Institute for Security Studies*, 1 June 2022; HIIK, Conflict Barometer, 2022.

logistics, acquisition of weaponry, and community attacks.[89] However, it is thought that their fundamentally different incentive structures keep bandits and insurgents from more strategic collaboration or merging. Traditionally, banditry has been thought to be primarily driven by financial incentives, while the armed groups operating in the North East are seen as driven by their political ideology.[90] Some have raised concerns that given that bandits are mostly Sunni Muslims they could potentially be lured in by in-group insurgents, resulting in what some called a potential "jihadization of banditry."[91] Some sources, however, have suggested the opposite has happened. More fighters have left insurgent groups for banditry than vice versa, presumably due in part to the allure of profits to be gained,[92] and disillusion with their factions and conditions in the Sambisa forest and on the battlefield. Additionally, the structure and organization of banditry undermines an easy transition from the insurgency in the North East. Bandit groups abound; many of them are small and hard to identify, and there is rampant infighting between them, making a comprehensive co-optation by insurgent groups unattainable. Furthermore, scholars have underlined that "ISWAP and Ansaru have dramatically different approaches toward treatment of Muslim civilians than bandits" (and historically the JAS faction)."[93] ISWAP and Ansaru seek to abstain from harming Muslim civilians. On the contrary, bandits apply indiscriminate violence, which due to the North West's demographic, ends up harming mostly Muslims: precisely those amongst whom insurgent groups attempt to build popular support including through offering quasi-governmental services to communities.[94] This is at least true for ISWAP, which is known to harshly punish fighters for attacking Muslim communities[95] or having taken away weapons from the other Boko Haram splinter, JAS.[96] Since preying on and the treatment of Muslim civilians has been one of the major points of contention between both splinters, at least any sort of bandit-ISWAP alliance seems implausible at this stage.

With regards to Sahelian groups, there are multiple claims that they are already operating in Nigeria's North West. According to International Crisis Group, "Since 2018, Nigerian security sources say, Islamic State fighters operating in the Sahel have been trying to open a corridor

[89] James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel,* Vol.15, No. 1 (2022); John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023); Sahara Reporters, "Boko Haram Fighters Training Bandits In Northern Nigeria To Use Anti-aircraft Guns, Explosives—Report," 26 September 2021.
[90] Folahanmi Ainaa, John Sunday Ojob, and Samuel Oyewolec, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol. No.32, (2023).
[91] Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise," *Perspectives On Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No. 5. (2021).
[92] James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel,* Vol.15, No. 1 (2022).
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Francesca Batault, Malik Samuel, Celestin Delanga with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Fanna Abdu Muhammad, Fatima Ajimi, Sani Boubacar and Siobhan O'Neil, "Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiation to Address the Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin," UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.
[96] International Crisis Group, "JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters," 28 March 2024.

from northern Mali through Dogondoutchi town in Niger (Republic) to north-western Nigeria and, further west, northern Benin."[97] Other sources claim that Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) came from Niger to Sokoto State several years ago, but rather than work with bandits, initially the group ingratiated itself with local communities by providing protection *against* bandits.[98j] Ultimately, the relationship soured when ISGS imposed its harsh punishments for minor infractions against the group's rules, and it was later pushed back over the border by the military.[98j] Significant coordination between bandits and armed groups that originate from across the Nigerien border or the wider Sahel region has yet to be well documented. The potential alignment of violent actors across Nigeria's northwestern border remains a concern, but one subject to many of the same caveats outlined above for armed groups from within the country's borders.

# Government Response

Government responses to banditry have predominantly been militarised,[99] apart from some developmental and resettlement programmes. There have been localized negotiation attempts, both to release those abducted, as well as some strategic negotiations involving amnesties in return for weapons. However, these efforts have typically remained on the state level and lack coherence and coordination across the North West.

Overall, the federal government has relied heavily on the use of force to fight banditry. Military operations against bandits started as early as 2015.[100] Some notable operations to date included Operation Sharan Daji, Harbin Kunama, Thunder Strike, Sahel Sanity, and Hadarin Daji—all of which covered multiple northwestern states. Military operations have periodically been followed by periods of improved security, but they have usually been short.[101] Another shortcoming of the approach has been the overreliance on air strikes. The military, which the Senate already attested to be overstretched,[102] has not been able to couple air strikes with sufficient ground support.[103] Owing to bandits' high mobility, aerial bombardments and the disruption of some of their funding activities in one locality often simply led to a shift to nearby

[97] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem," REPORT 288 / AFRICA, 18 MAY 2020.
[98] *James Barnett & Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i*, "A "Sahelian" or a "Littoral" Crisis? Examining the Widening of Nigeria's Boko Haram Conflict," Hudson Institute website, April 5, 2023.
[99] Folahanmi Aina, John Sunday Ojo, and Samuel Oyewole, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol.32, No. 4 (2023) .
[100] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020; Folahanmi Aina, John Sunday Ojo, and Samuel Oyewole, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol 32, No. 4 (2023).
[101] Idayat Hassan, "Nigeria's rampant banditry, and some ideas on how to rein it in," *The New Humanitarian*, 8 November 2021.
[102] Vanguard, "Kidnapping: Military are overstretched — Senate," 25 March 2024.
[103] Sallek Yaks Musa, "Nigeria's banditry: why 5 government strategies have failed," *The Conversation*, 22 April 2022.

areas and other activities,[104] a dynamic elsewhere known as the "balloon effect."[105] Similar dynamics were observed in Kaduna in 2021, where 300 soldiers from the Nigerian Army Women Corps were deployed along the A2 Abuja-Kaduna highway. While abductions along the route declined, it soon became clear that bandits had simply moved operations to the A235 Kaduna-Kajuru-Kachia route and adjacent communities further east, which then reported an upsurge of kidnappings.[106] Attacks by the Nigerian military on bandit groups have further raised concerns about violations of international human rights law (e.g. in January 2023, killing 40 civilian herders in the North Central zone).[107] Aerial strikes have also been deployed in error.[108] For instance, in December 2023, an accidental bombing of Tudun Biri in Kaduna State resulted in 120 civilian deaths.[109]

Individual state responses to banditry generally differ in focus from the federal response as states lack the same military capacity. Yet, states in the North West have tried to limit bandits' ability to operate by using alternate, low-cost approaches, for example, by cutting communication lines.[110] However, these measures have at times been criticized for negatively affecting communities rather than constraining banditry activity.[111]

Multiple state governments and hyper-local initiatives have also sought to negotiate strategically with bandit groups in an attempt to convince them to lay down their arms. Seldom, however, are these processes comprehensive. They have failed to consult all those involved and affected by violence, nor have they sufficiently addressed root causes or helped bandits to fully transition to alternative livelihoods. These negotiations—some modelled after past peace deals in the Niger Delta, some using private mediation—awarded amnesty to bandits, offered them cash or ran cows-for-guns schemes had mixed results.[112] Typically however, negotiation attempts do not include local (farmer) communities, victims, or Yan Sakai. The fragmented bandit group landscape with volatile leadership structures has further complicated any negotiation attempts. Even if one group agrees to lay down their arms, so many others still engage in violence. Overall, the lack of a cross-state, coordinated approach (e.g. with Kaduna adopting a no-negotiation/no-amnesty approach) has also created gaps which some fear could

[104] Ibid.
[105] UNODC, "Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies," (UN, Vienna, 2021).
[106] Sallek Yaks Musa, "Nigeria's banditry: why 5 government strategies have failed," *The Conversation*, 22 April 2022.
[107] Statement by Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, on the worsening security situation in Nigeria, (New York, 2 February 2023)
[108] Freedom Onuoha, "Nigeria's military mistakes cost the country its civilians," *ISS Today*, 13 December 2023.
[109] Okechukwu Nnodim et al, "Kaduna village bombing: Death toll hits 120, villagers allege military bombed twice," *Punch*, 6 December 2023.
[110] Reuters, "Nigeria's Katsina state shuts some communications as bandit battle widens," 10 September 2021.
[111] Folahanmi Aina, John Sunday Ojo, and Samuel Oyewole, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2023).
[112] Idayat Hassan. "Nigeria's rampant banditry, and some ideas on how to rein it in," *The New Humanitarian*, 8 November 2021

be exploited by bandits (e.g. by groups benefitting from concessions in one state and then continuing to perpetrate crimes in another one).[113]

Dialogues on a tactical level, such as those initiated by the state governments of Katsina and Zamfara, remain similarly atomized and unconnected. They have yielded some positive outcomes, such as in Zamfara where the peace and reconciliation initiative led to the release of 525 hostages and the return of hundreds of displaced persons.[114] However, the new governors of Zamfara and Katsina who assumed office in May 2023, have both indicated they are either not willing to negotiate with bandits, or do not support any current efforts by the federal government to do so. [115]

Although historically, there has been little focus on addressing the underlying causes that are thought to contribute to banditry such as poverty, conflicts over land use, and tensions between Hausa and Fulani,[116] some state governments have adopted developmental or settlement initiatives. Soft-handed approaches have included resettlement policies like the 2018 Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) Policy as well as the National Livestock Reform Plan (NLRP). Both worked to resolve resource conflicts through resettlement of herders and livestock but had come under heavy scrutiny, and their respective impact was limited.[117]

Most recent efforts appear to work towards revamping some of these earlier resettlement policies. During his campaign, President Tinubu made promises to end banditry, with specific references to bolstering policing capacity and "promot[ing] inclusion and boost[ing] the economy of our local communities."[118] In February 2024, his administration launched the Pulaku Initiative, a large-scale resettlement programme seeking to address farmer-herder conflicts, which was rolled out in the states of Sokoto, Kebbi, Benue, Katsina, Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna. At the time of writing, an inter-ministerial Pulaku committee had been set up including participation from state governors and the ministries on housing and urban

[113] Defence Headquarters Nigeria, "Interstate Movement of Armed Bandits," 2022; Folahanmi Aina, John Sunday Ojo, and Samuel Oyewole, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol.32, No. 4 (2023).
[114] WANEP, "Addressing Armed Banditry in the North-West Region of Nigeria: Exploring the Potentials of a Multi-Dimensional Conflict Management Approach," *WARN Policy Brief*, (2020); Oladayo Jonathan, "525 kidnap victims regain freedom in Zamfara," *Premium Times Nigeria*, 31 December 2019.
[115] Daily Trust, "Why I Will Not Negotiate With Bandits – Gov Radda," 21 March 2024; Premium Times, "Insecurity: Zamfara governor accuses federal government agencies of negotiating with terrorists," 25 September 2023.
[116] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[117] Promise Frank Ejiofor. "Beyond ungoverned spaces: Connecting the dots between relative deprivation, banditry, and violence in Nigeria." *African Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2022).
[118] Abubakar Ahmadu Maishanu. "2023: How I'll tackle insecurity if elected president – Tinubu," *Premium Times*, 18 October 2022..

development and agriculture.[119] It remains to be seen whether the new Pulaku Initiative will address the shortcomings of earlier efforts (e.g., RUGA, NLRP).[120]

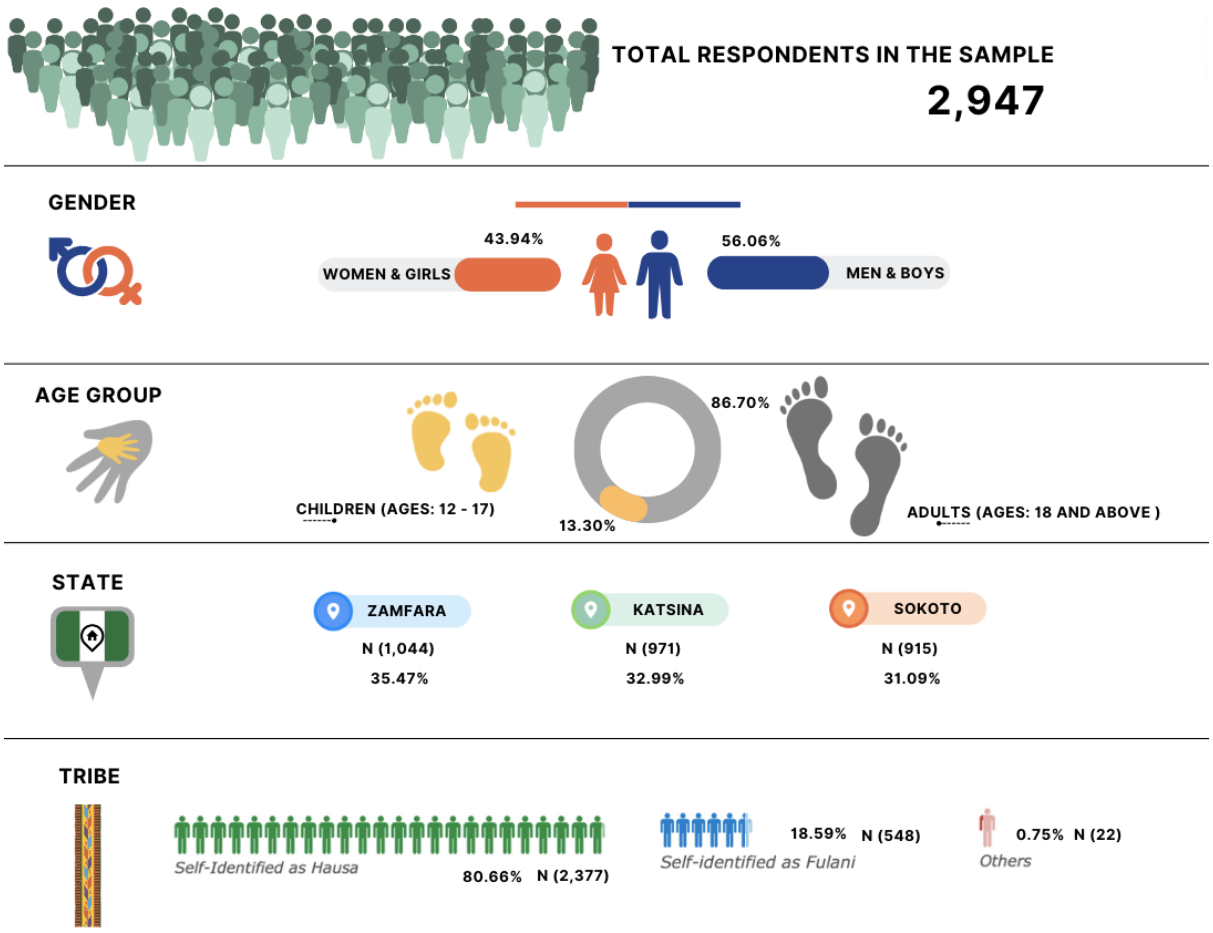
The existing research presented above shows that there is still a considerable dearth of information about banditry as a phenomenon, its impact on communities as well as potential underlying drivers and fault lines propelling this crisis. This survey shall shed more light on these aspects. The following section describes the methodological considerations and sampling that guided this survey, and the findings report at hand.

# Methodology and Sample

As part of MEAC's multi-year study of conflict trajectories into and out of armed groups in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region, the project expanded its data collection into the North West of Nigeria to study the dynamics of banditry. Banditry is typically categorized as "organised crime" or "terrorists", but this oversimplification leads to insufficient policy responses. Acknowledging this, the survey sought to understand the multi-faceted ways in which banditry attacks impact communities, how bandit groups operate in the region, and how they influence the overall conflict dynamics in the region. Through this bottom-up approach which centers around community voices, we hope that the findings contribute to an open-ended and evidence-based discussion on banditry.

[119] Premium Times Nigeria, "Nigeria commences initiative to end farmers-herders conflicts," 13 February 2024.
[120] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020; Idayat Hassan, "Nigeria's rampant banditry, and some ideas on how to rein it in," *The New Humanitarian*, 8 November 2021.

## FIGURE 2 – SAMPLE DESCRIPTION




The sample visualized above (Figure 1) was the result of MEAC's baseline survey conducted as part of a larger panel in the North West of Nigeria. It was administered by phone between January to March 2024 and captured perceptions of 2,947 community members mostly from three states in the North West (Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara), which are considered to be the most affected by banditry violence[121] in the region. Most respondents belonged to three local government areas (LGAs): Gusau (100 per cent of all Zamfara respondents), Jibia (96 per cent of all Katsina respondents), and Ilella (94 per cent of all Sokoto respondents).[122] These LGAs were prioritized because of their history of bandit attacks and the government's focus on addressing banditry in these communities.

To understand how tensions between Hausa and Fulani drove banditry, it was crucial to recruit a diverse enough sample consisting of both Hausa and Fulani respondents. However, respondent recruitment was limited to town centres owing to security considerations, which led

[121] John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023); Rosenje Musharafa Olapeju and Adeniyi Oluwatobi Peter, "The Impact Of Banditry On Nigeria's Security In The Fourth Republic: An Evaluation Of Nigeria's Northwest," *Zamfara Journal of Politics and Development* Vol. 2 No. 1, (2021).
[122] The sample is predominately (96 per cent) from these three LGAs.

to under-recruitment of Fulani respondents. To correct for this, a snowball recruitment effort of potential Fulani respondents via phone was conducted. Notably, several of these respondents self-identified as Hausa. Upon further investigation, it was found that: a) some respondents feared the stigma of self-identifying as Fulani, especially in light of the association made between bandit attacks and the Fulanis, and b) some respondents identified as Hausa-Fulani either because of parents who intermarried and/or the fact that they spoke Hausa as the primary language. Following this, checks were performed to ensure there were others who self-identified as Hausa respondents in the in-person recruitment who were not, in fact, Fulani or Hausa-Fulani. It was confirmed over 95 per cent of the respondents reported their tribal identity the same way each time, and the scale of variation was less than 5 per cent. This exercise confirmed that while tribe affiliations are fluid, they are nonetheless treated as mutually exclusive categories for the purposes of analysis.

It must be noted that only one person who took the survey reported having been with a bandit group. Hence, this survey is not able to provide first-hand insight into bandits' goals, motivations, or ways of operating. Instead, it presents how community members affected by banditry violence perceive it.

The following sections present summary statistics and more advanced regression results (wherever applicable) to make knowledge claims about banditry in the North West. Any claims of statistical significance and causal relationships are substantiated using relevant statistical tests (e.g., chi-square tests and multivariate regression analyses).

# Findings

In reaffirming banditry's devasting consequences on communities MEAC's survey in the North West of Nigeria, this survey also provides further nuance on its varying manifestations and framings. In doing so, it sometimes challenges the conventional explanations for the phenomenon.

In terms of top-level findings, respondents report a rise in the frequency and intensity of banditry attacks, which have far-reaching effects on their everyday lives including their health and safety, economic well-being, access to education, and their mobility. Reports of victimization experiences are especially prevalent amongst adult men, with physical violence, stealing (including cattle raids), and abduction being the most reported types of crimes. Sexual violence likely remains grossly underreported, but interestingly, as in the North East of Nigeria, men and boys are more likely to report knowing about instances of sexual violence relative to women and girls. In looking across MEAC surveys it is clear that for communities in the North West, banditry ranks as a far greater challenge than communities in the North East rank insurgent

violence from the Boko Haram factions. This is incongruous with the amount of international attention the latter crisis receives. Regarding bandits' appearance and modus operandi, the findings validate earlier research which notes bandits as mainly forest-based, criminal groups who move around on motorbikes, raiding communities in quick strikes. Results show that bandits typically represent several organized groups, instead of lone wolves.

The findings further challenge notions established by previous reporting and research. Respondents appear to see banditry as a distinct phenomenon disconnected from inter-sectoral (farmer/herder) and inter-tribal (Hausa/Fulani) fault lines. Similarly, respondents seem to perceive little connection between the insurgency in the North East of Nigeria and banditry. Potential explanations driving such framings, and other related themes are discussed in detail below.

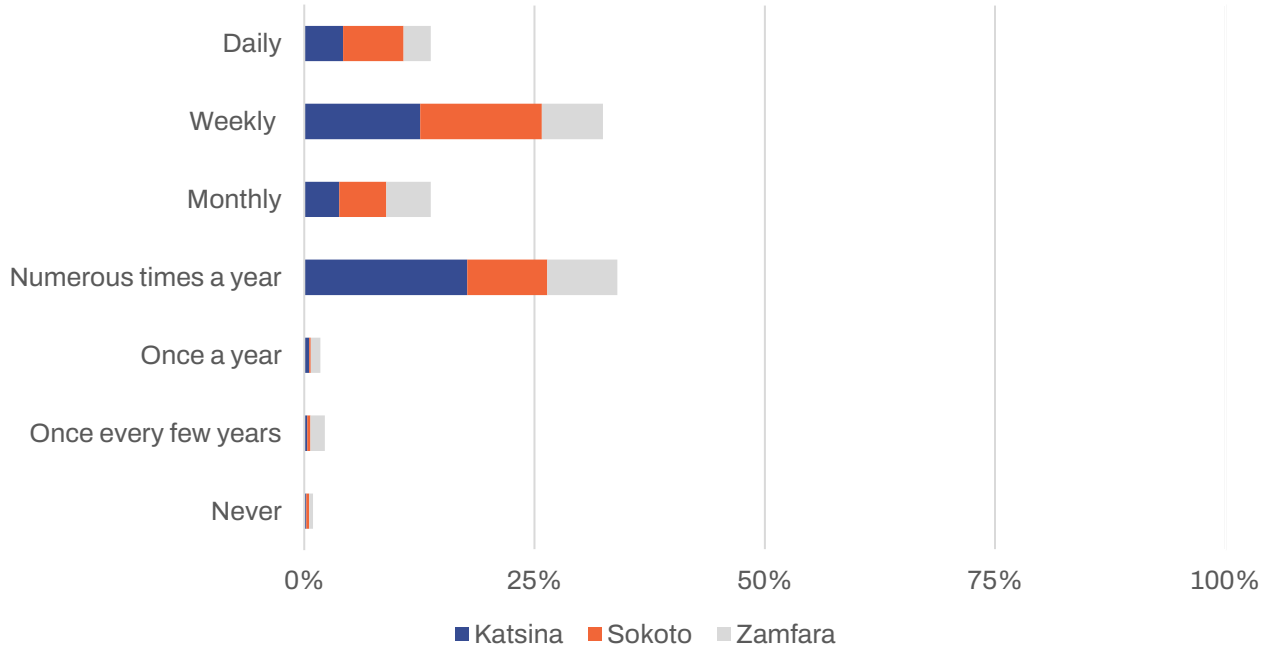
# Banditry's Impact on Communities in the North West

Banditry attacks pervade the daily lives of communities in the North West of Nigeria, with the frequency and intensity of attacks reported to be on the rise. These sub-sections look at the extent of victimization at the personal, familial, and community levels, as well as, at sexual violence in particular. They also analyze the ways in which the everyday lives of respondents are impacted by banditry violence—ranging from their mobility and ability to work to education access.

### I. Frequency and Intensity of Attacks by Bandit Groups

MEAC findings suggest that both the perceived frequency and intensity of attacks are on the rise with some variation across states. A staggering 72 per cent of respondents affirm there have been attacks and raids in the area where they live. Response patterns vary considerably across the three states: high rates of attacks in their community were reported in Katsina (87 per cent) and Sokoto (80 per cent) but were considerably lower in Zamfara (51 per cent). The lower rate in Zamfara is noticeable given the area is known as an early epicentre of banditry violence. Zamfaran communities' longstanding experience with the issue and perhaps fear of reprisal might have led to particularly cautious response patterns. Additionally, the survey was conducted in Gusau, the state's capital city and seat of the state government, both not the case with Illela and Jibia. The survey location is hence more protected than other parts of the state, where rates could possibly be much higher.

## FIGURE 3 – IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, HOW FREQUENTLY HAVE BANDITS CONDUCTED ATTACKS AND RAIDS HERE?




For many of those living in the North West, banditry is a near-constant threat. Of those that reported attacks, a third of respondents (32 per cent) live in areas with weekly attacks, and 14 per cent of respondents report daily raids. Of the three targeted survey locations, Sokoto appears the most attacked with respondents there reporting the greatest number of daily attacks, and a slightly higher frequency of weekly bandit attacks. Katsina's rates are not that far behind that of Sokoto.

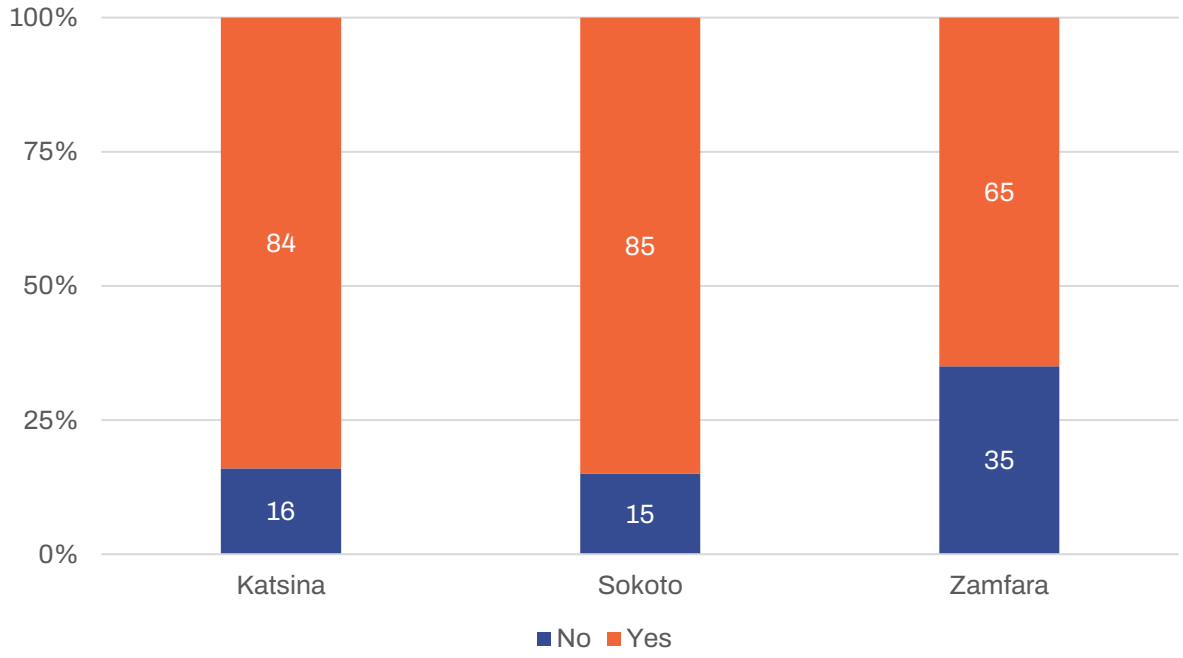
Banditry appears to have gotten more pervasive over time. 80 per cent of respondents affirmed that banditry raids in the last few years have increased in the area where they live. Respondents from Sokoto report greatest agreement to the fact that bandit attacks have increased (87 per cent), followed by respondents from Katsina (82 per cent) and Zamfara (69 per cent). Previous research had found a reported drop in the number of banditry attacks across the northwestern states between 2021 to 2022 and after attacks had steadily increased over several preceding years.[123] MEAC findings are not based on the same type of incident data as these earlier findings and cover only three instead of all states in the North West. However, the analyzed community reports of bandit attacks in the last few years imply that the frequency of banditry in the three states is in fact again on the rise.

[123] John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023).

In addition to the continued rise in attack frequency, the severity of the violence associated with bandit attacks also appears to increase. When asked about how "severe" the banditry violence had been in the preceding month,[124] answers varied considerably across states. While in Katsina, a sizeable portion of respondents said attacks there had been 'very severe' or 'severe' (29 and 34 per cent respectively), compared to somewhat lower response rates in Zamfara, (20 and 30 per cent respectively). This could for instance indicate both a perceived high number of casualties and/or destruction of property as a result of attacks. Interestingly, very few respondents in Sokoto reported that attacks had been 'very severe' (2 per cent) or 'severe' (6 per cent) in the last month.

When observing attacks across time, a large majority of respondents attested to a negative trend. When respondents who reported attacks in their area were asked whether the banditry attacks are becoming more violent, 80 per cent answered 'yes'. When analysed by state, 84 per cent from Katsina and Sokoto agreed, relative to 65 per cent from Zamfara. This could in part be due to a rise in kinetic action against bandit groups by security forces and Yan Sakai,[125] which bandits are known to respond to by inflicting even more attacks on civilians.[126]

### FIGURE 4 – OVER THAT PERIOD, HAVE THE BANDITRY ATTACKS AND RAIDS WHERE YOU LIVE BECOME MORE VIOLENT?




[124] Only those who had reported attacks in the area where they live over the last month received the question "In the last month, how severe was the banditry violence against your community?"
[125] ARISNEWS, "We'll Sustain Military Onslaught against Bandits in Zamfara, Tinubu Tells Governor Lawal," 14 April 2024; Folahanmi Ainaa, John Sunday Ojob, and Samuel Oyewolec, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol. No.32, (2023).
[126] UNIDIR, Interviews *with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)

Since in many locations, both the frequency and intensity of attacks appear to be on the rise having already reached concerning levels, this warrants a closer look at the extent and forms of victimization experienced by community members.

## II. Extent of Victimization

Those surveyed have not just observed bandit attacks, they have been directly impacted by them in notable numbers. Close to 15 per cent of all respondents stated that they had personally been attacked by bandits. Men in the sample were disproportionately impacted. Out of the victims, 74 per cent were men and 19 per cent of the victims were women. Children reported being attacked directly to a relatively lesser extent.[127] A statistically significant correlation is observed between gender and the likelihood of reporting having been attacked by bandits.[128] This correlation corroborates previous research which shows that bandit groups have particularly targeted men.[129] One reason could be men's broader presence and thus exposure in public spaces, roads and markets particularly, while women are more confined to their homes.[130] Additionally, it is known that at some point most men, and in fact also boys, of fighting age (as opposed to little to no women or girls) appeared to be involved either as Yan Sakai or as bandits. This has likely fuelled the broad perception on both sides, that men and boys are generally a threat to the respective in-group and therefore valid targets.[131] Additionally, women are traditionally seen as the "weaker sex" and are thus rarely perceived as a serious security threat, or at least not to the extent that men are.[132]

The banditry attacks reported by respondents included physical violence (50 per cent), theft (36 per cent), abduction (27 per cent), and extortion (22 per cent).[133] The fact that theft features high is understandable given that cattle rustling—one of bandits' originally most important criminal activities—is included in this category. On the contrary, it is surprising that abduction and extorsion do not rank higher, given that according to previous research, these crimes have grown significantly in recent years and are generally also the most lucrative.[134] One grim but simple reason could be that many of those abducted have not (yet) returned to their communities, hence, lowering the number of personal reports. The fact that the share of those reporting abduction cases amongst close relatives was a staggering 40 per cent higher (at 67 percent), could corroborate this explanation. Additionally, analyses have mentioned that

[127] This equated to 317 adult male victims and 82 adult female victims, out of a total of 431 victims
[128] The statistically significant correlation is confirmed through a chi-square test. The chi-squared statistic is 98.4034 and the p-value is < 0.00001. It must be noted that this result does **not** establish which gender is more likely to be attacked by bandits; it only confirms that the likelihood of reporting being attacked differs by gender.
[129] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[130] UNIDIR, *Interviews with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)
[131] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.
[132]UNIDIR, *Interviews with researcher/expert*, (Maiduguri, Borno State, July 2024)
[133] The total exceeds 100 per cent as the respondents could select multiple forms of victimizations that they suffered during the banditry attack.
[134] Global Initiative, ACLED, "What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us?", 15 March 2024; Obi Anyadike, "Everyone knows someone who has been kidnapped': Inside Nigeria's Banditry Epidemic." *The New Humanitarian*, 30 January 2023.

targets are often abducted for forced labour on bandit-controlled farms,[135] in which case bandits will likely have no interest in releasing their victims as long as their labour produces a steady flux of income.[136] Finally, abduction is a subtype of extortion, which might have influenced these results too.

Sexual violence is reported at very low levels, although likely being underreported. Given the sensitivity around sexual violence, the question was asked differently than other victimization metrics. Instead of asking about personal or familial experience, respondents were asked, "Do you personally know anyone in your community who experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar by an armed or criminal group like a group of bandits?"

Data from 2020-2023 showed that reports of conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated in Nigeria by non-state armed groups such as insurgent groups, bandits but also militia or security forces have increased from 12 reported cases in 2020 to 99 in 2022 with a subsequent drop in 2023 to 54. In the North West, 18 cases had been reported in 2021, 41 in 2022, and 6 in 2023, all perpetrated by either unidentified armed actors or militia groups.[137] It is thought that sexual violence is significantly underreported in the country.[138] In 2021, Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) in different Nigerian states, providing medical and counselling services but also support for reporting, were sparsely distributed. This effectively limits survivors' pathways towards reporting. At that time, Katsina had no SARCs, while Sokoto and Zamfara only had one each.[139] With severe limitations in mobility caused by the same banditry violence (see next section) and limited economic resources to travel, existing centres are likely out of reach for many. In 2022, the Nigerian government cut its funding for tracking and rehabilitating survivors of sexual violence by nearly half.[140]

The survey shows, that relative to female respondents (12 per cent), a slightly higher percentage of male respondents (15 per cent) report personally knowing[141] community

[135] SBMIintel, "Mass Abductions: The Catastrophe of Nigeria's Kidnap Epidemic," March 2024.
[136] Other reports speak of local villagers being forced to work on these farms, in which cases abduction would not be necessary. The same report from 2022 argues that this forced labour has become an even more reliable and lucrative source of income than abduction. GITOC, *Armed bandits extort crop farmers amid dwindling alternative illicit revenue sources in Zamfara, north-western Nigeria,* (October 2022).
[137] Insecurity Insight, "2020-2024 Nigeria Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV) Incident Data", 23 May 2024.
[138] Julius Gaiya "Nigeria Needs to Do More to Prevent & Respond to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," *CIVIC*, 19 June 2023.
[139] Nigeria Governors' Forum Digital Repository, "Directory of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) in Nigeria", March 2021.
[140] Osaretin Osadebamwen, "FG cuts funding to fight rape by 49% in 2022 fiscal year," *Nigerian Tribune*, 6 January 2022.
[141] MEAC asked respondents "Do you personally know anyone in your community who experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar by an armed or criminal group like a group of bandits?". MEAC's previous research has found that casting a wider net and asking about knowledge of sexual violence at a more anonymous, community level yields a higher readiness to respond. This is likely due to social stigma, feelings of shame and guilt as well as fear of reliving the situation associated with reporting own experiences of sexual violence.

members who have been a victim of banditry-related sexual violence. Earlier MEAC surveys conducted in the North East of Nigeria revealed similar gender patterns for the same question regarding knowledge of sexual violence cases.[142] It seems rather counter-intuitive that more male respondents are aware of sexual violence victims, especially when it is already known that women and girls are specifically targeted by sexual violence perpetrated by bandit groups.[143] The observed pattern could be driven by a few explanations: a) Men and boys are typically more present in the public sphere[144] and thus have generally more access to information about banditry attacks, or hold specific positions which could naturally expose them to more reports of sexual violence, notably, doctors, soldiers, community leaders, community security actors, or police. b) Additionally, there have been accounts of women[145] deliberately in front of their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons to humiliate them[146] or threats against fathers and husbands if they refuse to bring their daughters and wives to bandit camps to be raped.[147] In both cases, men and boys would be aware of cases of sexual violence, although its targets were women and girls. c) Given the extreme sensitivity, associated social stigma, and trauma linked to the question, victims of sexual violence themselves, more often women and girls, maybe especially hesitant to acknowledge knowing of sexual violence even in response to an indirect question. As highlighted by another study, and relayed by a displaced female interviewee, "Many women were raped but they don't want to narrate the story of what happened to them because of shame."[148] These dynamics could help explain the mechanisms guiding the statistical correlation between gender and their response to the question on sexual victimization.[149]

Notably, for other forms of victimization such as cattle raids, the gender of the respondent played an important role. Cattle raids were reported at higher rates by men and boys (23 per cent compared to 13 per cent of women and girl respondents). This aligns with expectations about gendered access to information in general and in particular, a pastoralist system that is

(See, Johanna Kleffmann, Francesca Batault, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Siobhan O'Neil, Jente Althuis, Rabby Shakur, Anna Hallahan, Hana Salama, Mohamed Coulibaly, "Factors Driving Weapons Holding in the North East of Nigeria," *Findings Report 33*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.)

[142] Respondents were asked "Do you personally know anyone in your community who experienced forced sex or non-consensual touching or something similar by an armed group, like Boko Haram or Yan Gora?". Eight percent of women respondents, 12 per cent of men, and 7 per cent of girls and boys each answered affirmatively as reported in Johanna Kleffmann, Francesca Batault, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, Siobhan O'Neil, Jente Althuis, Rabby Shakur, Anna Hallahan, Hana Salama, Mohamed Coulibaly, "Factors Driving Weapons Holding in the North East of Nigeria," *Findings Report 33*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

[143] Tosin Osasona, "The question of definition: Armed banditry in Nigeria's North-West in the context of international humanitarian law," *International Review of the Red Cross No. 923* (June 2023)

[144] The practice called "kulle" (seclusion) is still present in some communities, however, it is said to be practiced more fluidly and at a more moderate level, with presence of women and girls increasing in spaces like hospitals, schools and markets. Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.

[145] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020.

[146] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ahmed Rufa'i Usman, Yusuf Balaribah And Geno Ardo, "Armed Banditry and Sexual Violence Against Women in Zamfara State, Nigeria", *Benue Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 9 No. 2 (2023).

[149] Statistically significant association with gender, verified through a chi-square statistic which is 6.649. The p-value is < 0.00001.

"patently both masculinized and youth-dominated, with women relegated to the background and owning little stock,"[150] which results in men and boys being more aware of cattle rustling. These realities help explain gendered awareness of and experience with different crimes perpetrated by bandits.

In addition to personal victimization, respondents also reported family victimization. A staggering 63 per cent of respondents reported that their close relatives had been attacked by bandits.[151] The main forms of violence against close relatives included abduction and physical attacks (67 and 47 per cent respectively).

**III. Impact on Mobility, Work and Education**

Beyond physical violence, the survey data confirms the far-reaching effects of banditry on community members' everyday lives including their livelihoods, access to education, and their level of mobility. On the question of mobility, 46 per cent of respondents stated that they 'mostly' or 'sometimes' avoided travel due to the risk of banditry. Close to 1 in 5 respondents reported sleeping outside of their community in the past month due to banditry. Furthermore, a quarter (24 per cent) of the respondents had reported incidents where they were forced to leave their community because of banditry. Disaggregation of these respondents by gender and age reveals that 54 per cent of those who had ever been forced to leave their community were adult men, 36 per cent were adult women, and the remaining 10 per cent were children. Experiences of displacement due to banditry were reported at roughly similar levels across locations (Katsina (38 per cent), Zamfara (32 per cent) and Sokoto (30 per cent).

Banditry impacts the public's ability to work and participate in income-generating activities, including farming and herding. More than a quarter of respondents (27 per cent) stated that their work had 'sometimes' or 'most times' been disrupted by banditry. Amongst those who reported making money from farming (24 per cent of the sample), 51 per cent reported farming disruptions 'most times' or 'sometimes' due to banditry. Similarly, for those who reported making money from herding (25 per cent of the sample) from herding, 44 per cent reported herding disruptions 'most times' or 'sometimes' due to banditry.[152] When these[153] respondents

[150] Azeez Olaniyan and Aliyu Yahaya, 'Cows, Bandits, and Violent Conflicts: Understanding Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria', *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2016).
[151] Notably, a higher proportion of individuals report that their family members have been victims of banditry attacks compared to those reporting their own victimization. This could be influenced by several factors. One, respondents might be reluctant to share their personal experiences due to the emotional distress associated with recounting such traumatic events. Two, since bandits often resort to extreme physical violence and killings, only the surviving family members of the victims can report these incidents. Regardless of the specific reason guiding this pattern, it underscores the profound impact of banditry on community members across the three states of Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara. Additionally, how respondents answered this question varied statistically by gender, meaning that the likelihood of reporting a family member being attacked by bandits varies by gender. This association, however, does not translate to one gender reporting more than the other.
[152] Question posed to those who Identified as farmers or herders; or mentioned making money from farming or herding
[153] This question is specifically posed to those who identify as either 'farmer' or 'farmer and herder.' Additionally, those who make money by farming are also posed this question.

were asked whether banditry caused disruptions in their farming activities in the past month, roughly one in two (51 per cent) confirmed that this was indeed the case. 45 per cent of the herders also confirmed disruptions to their herding activities in the past month. This is noteworthy as, despite the common perception that bandits are mostly Fulani herders or affiliated with them in some way (including amongst 66 per cent of all respondents), herders themselves are heavily impacted by banditry.

Education in the North West is significantly disrupted due to banditry. Close to one in four respondents noted that in the past month, schools were 'sometimes' or 'most times' closed due to banditry. Schools in Zamfara state were notably the most impacted, followed by Katsina and then Sokoto. 36 per cent of respondents from Zamfara stated that schools were 'sometimes' or 'most times' closed due to banditry in the past month. MEAC's data corroborates other reports about how the banditry-related abductions have affected the educational sector. Past cases of mass abductions of students[154] and attacks on schools have instilled a common fear amongst communities that schools are no longer a safe place for their children. Many schools have closed at least temporarily, or parents avoid sending their children to class. Net attendance rates have traditionally already been low in the North West, however, banditry has significantly exacerbated the problem.[155]

# Community Perceptions About Bandit Groups

To better understand the workings of bandit groups, MEAC's survey sought to glean insights from local communities on how these groups operate, how they are organized, which common features identify them, and which type of individuals are associated with them. Provided the scarcity of information and analysis on the current banditry crisis, this data can prove useful particularly because many of the respondents have themselves been victimised by bandits. Those interactions – including those who were abducted – allowed respondents in this sample to gain an up-close perspective on how these groups operate and can provide invaluable insights which can inform future programming.

### I. How Are Bandits Organized?

Communities largely see bandits as several organized groups rather than a series of individual criminals working separately, although there are notable differences across states. Over half of respondents thought that bandits were organized groups while 20 per cent thought they were individuals who were not part of a group. Male respondents were more likely to report bandits

[154] In the North West, mass abductions led to at least 1,446 kidnapped schoolchildren in the last ten years, with the three surveyed states accounting for 831 kidnapped children alone. International Centre for Investigative Reporting, "TIMELINE: Over 1000 schoolchildren kidnapped since Chibok incident," 14 March 2024.
[155] Joan Akpa-Achimugu and Chinyere Ibeh, "Implications of Armed Banditry for Education in Nigeria's North West Region," *GCSP Alumni Note*, (October 2023).

are organized in groups than female respondents (55 versus 45 per cent respectively).[156] MEAC found a statistically significant relationship between those who reported having been abducted themselves and those reporting that bandit groups were organized.[157] The 119 abductees in the sample likely gained direct insights into some of the inner workings of bandit groups when they were held captive, which makes this noteworthy. Additionally, a significant statistical association between the state in which the respondents resided and their perception regarding how bandits are organized was observed.[158] 54 per cent of respondents from Katsina, 47 per cent from Sokoto and 50 per cent from Zamfara report perceiving bandits as organized groups. This could point to differences in the makeup and level of organization amongst the bandits operating in each state(s), and the extent of visibility that respondents have to these dynamics.

For respondents who reported that banditry attacks were driven by organized groups, they were asked a follow-up question of whether they think their community is attacked by the same bandit group or different ones. Broadly, most of these respondents[159] (57 per cent) said that different groups attacked their communities, while 24 per cent said that the raids and attacks were repeatedly conducted by the same bandit group.[160] The remaining 19 per cent said they did not know.

When it comes to the *number* of distinct groups targeting communities in the North West, there is only slight variation across states. Respondents in Sokoto reported an average of 5.5 distinct bandit groups targeting their communities, while those from Zamfara reported an average of 5.3 different groups, and the number slightly fell to 4.8 in Katsina.[161]

[156] Women and girls were also more likely to answer "I don't know" when asked how bandits were organized (37 versus 23 per cent for men and boys).
[157] This was observed in a logistic regression where the dependent variable was whether bandit groups were organized or individuals and the independent variables included whether or not someone had been abducted themselves, gender, state, tribe, and displacement status. The coefficient for being abducted was -0.68438, with a standard error of 0.22738. This means that being abducted decreases the log odds of reporting that bandits are singular actors (and thereby increasing the odds of qualifying them as organized groups) by 0.68438 units. The p-value (0.00261) indicates that this effect is statistically significant at the 0.05 significance level. Put differently, this means that being abducted decreases the odds of reporting that bandits are singular actors (and thereby increases the odds of qualifying them as organized groups) to approximately 0.5048 times what they were before the abduction.
[158] Significant statistical association between state that the respondent resides in and their perception about how bandits are organized is observed. The chi-square statistic is 26.15 and the p-value is < 0.00001.
[159] Owing to skip logic loops within the survey design, not all respondents were posed the question. A total of 1,071 respondents were asked this question since they had answered 'Organized groups' to the previous question 'Do you think these attacks or raids are mostly conducted by somewhat organized groups of bandits, or are they conducted by individuals who are not part of a group?'
[160] The patterns diverge slightly at the state level: 73 per cent of respondents from Katsina, 53 per cent from Zamfara, and 42 per cent from Sokoto indicated the presence of different groups.
[161] It is important to note, that only those who mentioned 'different groups' to be attacking their communities, where then also asked to estimate the number of groups.

## II. How Are Bandits Identified?

In the existing literature, bandits are often described as mainly forest-based, criminal groups who move around on motorbikes, raiding communities in quick strikes.[162] MEAC's survey findings confirm but give further nuance to these previous conclusions. When respondents were asked how they would identify individuals belonging to a bandit group, 51 per cent—unsurprisingly—cited the presence of weapons as an indicator and 35 per cent said motorbikes were a sign. Remarkably, 40 per cent said that they would *not* be able to identify them as the bandits blend in well with other community members. In a follow-up open-ended question asking how else respondents would know a certain person is a bandit, several answered that bandits dress as women e.g. with hijabs or niqabs, to conceal themselves. Some respondents mention that contrary to other community members, they appear at odd times of the day or night. Some highlight that they hide their motorbikes nearby and attack on foot to catch communities and security forces by surprise. The trappings that often characterize politically-motivated armed groups—such as uniforms and flags—feature low on the list of bandit signifiers (10 and 0.2 percent respectively), which may reinforce the claim that they are predominantly motivated by money. Ultimately, their demonstrated ability to blend in likely helps in evading law enforcement and has operational benefits for conducting attacks.

On the question of whether bandits who attacked communities lived within the community or came from elsewhere, 85 per cent of the eligible respondents[163] flagged that the bandits came from elsewhere. Ten per cent of the respondents did not know where they came from and only 0.7 per cent said that the bandits lived in *their own* community. In line with previous findings,[164] MEAC's research shows that many people in affected communities believe that bandit groups typically live in forests or other natural spaces such as among rock formations which serve as hideouts shielding them from law enforcement and the military.

While it is known that bandit groups typically use forests as hideouts, further information on their base of operations is often lacking. When respondents were asked an open-ended question about where they thought bandits were generally based, *'forest' [and 'the bush']* indeed emerged as the top response. As the word cloud below demonstrates, other prominent responses included 'Behind Bakalori Dam', 'Nearby villages', 'Batsari and Zamfara forest', 'Bush' etc. Indeed, Batsari, for instance, is known to have suffered a particularly high number of attacks.[165] It is notable, however, that respondents also name specific towns and villages as

[162] International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020); Promise Frank Ejiofor, "The Mobility of Terror: Motorcycle Bandits, Violence and Anarchy in Nigeria," *The RUSI Journal,* Vol. 166, No. 6-7 (2022).
[163] 2117 out of the 2947 respondents were asked this question owing to the skip logic design within the survey.
[164] Promise Frank Ejiofor, "The Mobility of Terror: Motorcycle Bandits, Violence and Anarchy in Nigeria," *The RUSI Journal,* Vol. 166, No. 6-7 (2022); International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, 18 May 2020).
[165] Ibid.

bandit bases. These responses highlight the potential that there is an over-emphasis on bandits existing in ungoverned bush areas to the detriment of recognizing other areas of operation that are more accessible and susceptible to leverage.

### FIGURE 5 – DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE BANDITS CAME FROM, OR WHERE THEY ARE BASED?

### III. Perceptions around 'Who' Is a Bandit and 'What' They Want

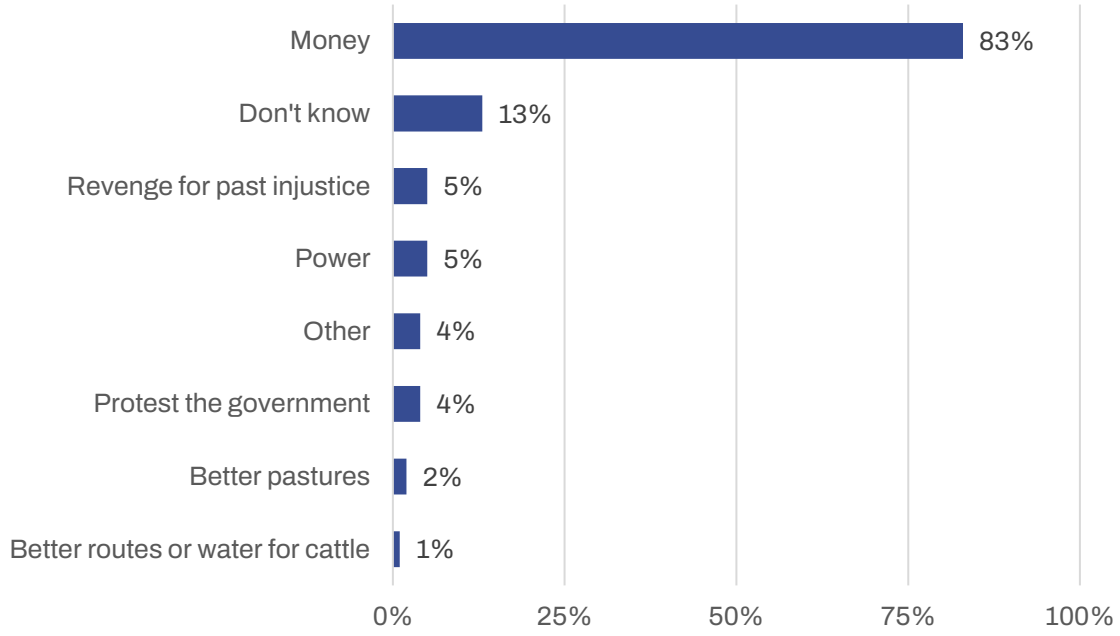
Community perceptions regarding *'who'* is a bandit vary based on demographic markers. Specifically, 66 per cent of all eligible respondents agreed that bandits are Fulani herders or affiliated with them.[166] When these respondents are disaggregated by tribe, 87 per cent of those who self-identified as Hausa agreed to this statement, while only 12 per cent of the self-identified Fulanis agreed[167].

How community members perceive the motivations of bandits also offers interesting insights. An overwhelming number of respondents (83 per cent)[168] stated that bandits primarily wanted money.[169] The economic motivation of bandits also aligns with the modalities of attacks as reported by respondents, which mainly involve abductions and stealing. Interestingly,

[166] It shall be noted that this question asks "Fulani herders" and as such, some respondents might focus in their answer predominantly on the question of tribe (Fulani) or professional association (herder). Others might understand "Fulani herders" as a compound, responding to both dimensions equally.
[167] A logistic regression was run to test whether tribe or other demographic factors including age, gender, displacement status, or location drive the perception that bandits are Fulani. The results show that gender and displacement status are statistically significant in influencing whether respondents perceive bandits as being Fulani herders, but not tribe. This does not mean that tribe is not contextually relevant but could simply be a statistical consequence of how the sample is split across the different tribe categories.
[168] 2932 respondents out of the total sample of 2947 respondents answered this select-multiple question. Since respondents could select more than one option, the total percentages exceed 100.
[169] A negligible number mentioned other factors like power (5 per cent), revenge for past injustices (5 per cent) and protesting the government (4 per cent).

motivations that could be associated with the farmer/herder dimension such as 'better pastures' and 'better routes or water for cattle' were mentioned rarely (by 2 and 0.6 per cent of respondents respectively). The fact that financial motivations are predominantly noticed by community members reinforces earlier research[170] that has argued that bandits seem to primarily be driven by monetary gains. In the past, bandit group leaders claimed in rare interviews[171] that their motivations are linked to either ethical grievances or protesting a government that has, in their view, consistently neglected them. Regardless of whether these accounts reflect the groups' genuine motivations or in fact an image they would like to convey to the public, it is apparent from the survey at hand, that this image is not shared by communities who have borne the brunt of banditry violence.

### FIGURE 6 – WHAT DO YOU THINK BANDITS WANT?




Unlike other armed groups that control or exert influence over territory, bandits do not appear to be engaged in governance functions. Almost all respondents (99 per cent) flagged that bandits do not do anything good to help their communities. The few respondents (0.6 per cent) who stated otherwise did so because of reports they had heard of bandits distributing food and cash in the community during times of need, although many flags that these are mostly hearsay in the open-ended responses.

[170]Kelechukwu Charles Obi and Victor Chidubem Iwuoha, "Untold story of the expanding armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest: linking the communal-level collaborators," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No.7 (2023); Folahanmi Ainaa, John Sunday Ojob, and Samuel Oyewolec, "Shock and awe: Military response to armed banditry and the prospects of internal security operations in Northwest Nigeria," *African Security Review*, Vol. No.32, (2023).
[171] BBC, "The Bandit Warlords of Zamfara," 25 July 2022; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Criminal Gangs Destabilizing Nigeria's North West," 14 December 2021.

# Contextualizing Banditry within the Broader Conflict Dynamics

In the North East, despite the longstanding Boko Haram insurgency, previous MEAC research has repeatedly found that poverty, food insecurity and lack of water to be the most prominent concerns in communities and that Boko Haram ranks lower on their list of concerns. Contrastingly, in the North West, banditry features second among the biggest perceived problems in communities (notably behind food insecurity).[172] In terms of safety threats more narrowly, communities by far viewed banditry as their biggest threat.[173] This contextualization—and comparison—of banditry vis-a-vis other humanitarian and security concerns in the region is crucial to better understanding the ground realities.

## I. Perceptions about Banditry Vis-a-Vis Other Humanitarian and Security Concerns

Banditry surpasses all other problems in the North West, barring food insecurity. When respondents were asked to identify the top three problems in their community, a striking 82 per cent cited 'lack of sufficient food' as the primary issue. 'Banditry' was a close second and mentioned by 70 percent of the respondents, followed by 'unemployment', 'lack of sufficient water', 'bad infrastructure' and 'limited presence of security actors'. Thus, the most pressing issues at the community level in the North West of Nigeria revolve around food security, banditry violence, and to a lesser degree factors of economic hardship and development. Notably in Katsina, banditry was mentioned the most frequently as a top problem in the community by nearly 90 per cent of respondents.

Banditry was the most frequently cited security threat across the surveyed communities in the North West. When asked 'Who presents the biggest threat to the safety of your community?'[174] nearly 80 per cent of the respondents, bandits emerged as the top security challenge, although with slight differences across states.[175] In Zamfara, bandits were reported as the biggest threat by 65 per cent of respondents.[176] Shares answering 'banditry' went up to 83 per cent in Sokoto and a striking 93 per cent in Katsina. Expectedly, more men (85 per cent) across all states identified banditry more often as a safety threat when compared to women (77 per cent), which

[172] Respondents were asked: “What are the three biggest problems in your community?”
[173] Respondents were asked: “Who presents the biggest threat to the safety of your community?”
[174] The question allowed for multiple answer options to be selected and included actors ranging from 'youths in the community' and people from within and outside of the community, to family, community security actors, security forces, and international actors.
[175] The answers 'none' (15 per cent) and 'youths in the community' (3 per cent) ranked second.
[176] Note, that in communities where bandits blend in well, as described earlier, some respondents might also be unable to identify them as bandit groups, then opting for more obvious traits such as their age (“youths in their community.”)

is likely due to their greater exposure to and victimization at the hands of bandits analyzed earlier.

These findings are interesting when compared to MEAC findings from the North East of Nigeria, where despite the international focus on the insurgency, humanitarian and developmental concerns such as the lack of food and water, and poverty trump Boko Haram-related violence as the biggest problems facing communities.[177] The fact that in the North West survey, banditry ranked second behind food insecurity, underscores the pervasive and significant impact that banditry appears to have on communities in the region.

While the international community has focussed predominantly on the longstanding Boko Haram insurgency, a more violent security crisis has been brewing next door. As the emerging findings underline, this crisis has already engendered profound and potentially long-term developmental setbacks: banditry has severely limited children's access to education potentially jeopardizing a generation's future, as well as impaired access to income-generating activities, health and mobility. Dealing with bandit groups—a hard-to-grasp actor, with neither discernible or volatile leadership and incentive structures nor clear kingpins to point at—is admittedly difficult. In consequence, communicating to decision-makers the need or feasibility of addressing the banditry crisis is equally hard, but in light of the pervasive impact it is having on communities searching for more effective responses seems imperative. Growing suspicion over potential links between insurgent groups and bandits in the North West has been another issue, which shall be examined in the following section.

## II. Possible Connections with the Boko Haram Insurgency

MEAC's findings also suggest banditry is perceived as unconnected to the Boko Haram insurgency. The communities surveyed do not report a crime-terror nexus[178]—or, at least, it is not apparent to them. When asked whether local bandits may have any connections to Boko Haram in the North East, only 5 per cent of eligible[179] answered affirmatively, 67 per cent said no and 28 per cent said that they 'did not know'. Thus, respondents in the North West view

[177] Sophie Huvé, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Dr Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
It must be noted that the 2022 survey was administered in communities which were not actively under assault or under the rule of an armed group. Hence, sources of insecurity might have been ranked differently in such communities.
[178]James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz. "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry or a "Banditization" of Jihad?." *CTC Sentinel,* Vol.15, No. 1 (2022); John Sunday Ojo, Samuel Oyewole, and Folahanmi Aina. "Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria." *Democracy and Security* (2023); Sahara Reporters, "Boko Haram Fighters Training Bandits In Northern Nigeria To Use Anti-aircraft Guns, Explosives—Report," 26 September 2021.
[179] 2287 respondents out of 2997 were posed this question owing to the survey's skip logic design, with only those respondents who answered "yes" to "Do you know about the Boko Haram conflict in the North East?" receiving the follow up question.

banditry and the Boko Haram insurgency as largely independent security issues.[180] Out of the minority of respondents who said that there was a link, many referred when answering a follow-up, open-ended question to parallels in "hit-and-run attacks," sophisticated weaponry used by both, and the simple fact that both insurgents and bandits kill innocent civilians. The latter responses appear to suggest a similarity of modus operandi rather than visibility on actual coordination between Boko Haram and bandits in the North West. While it is quite possible that a transactional relationship between insurgents and bandits could be mutually beneficial, the differences in motives—seen in the earlier finding that overwhelmingly bandits are believed to be motivated by money—somewhat dampens concerns about a strategic merger of these violent groups. Apart from the insurgency in the North East, the farmer/herder conflict has traditionally been seen as intertwined with banditry and will be examined in the next section.

### III. The Role of Farmer/Herder and Hausa/Fulani Fault Lines

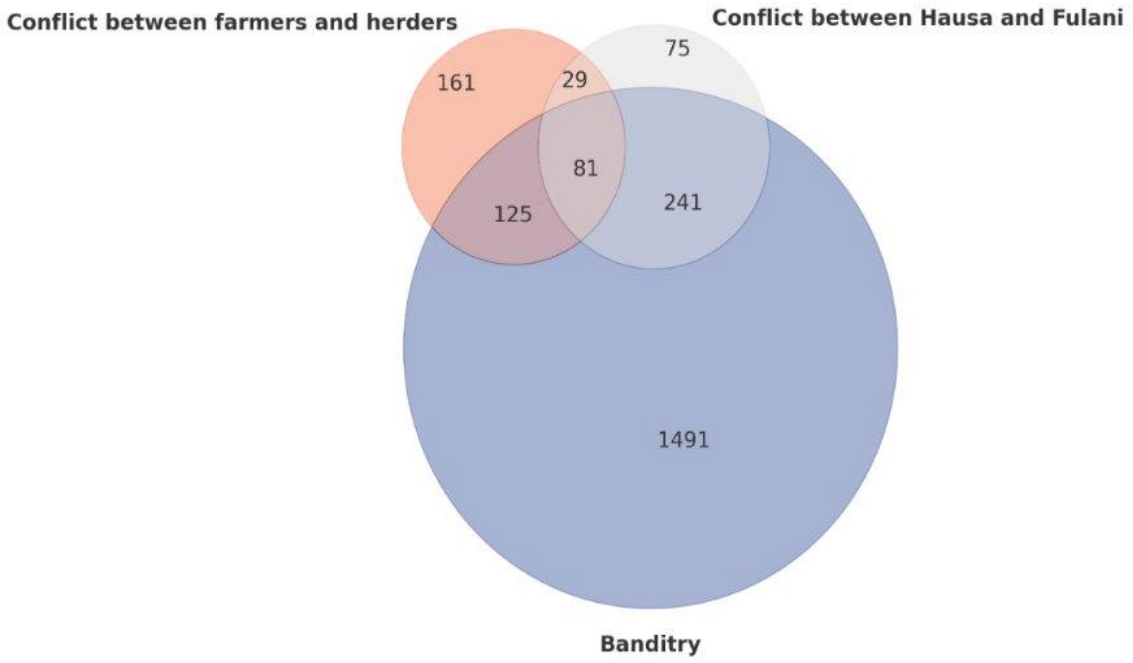
Amongst local communities, banditry may not align as neatly with farmer/herder or Hausa/Fulani fault lines, a perspective that sits in contrast to the conventional thinking and literature on banditry. [181] To dissect this issue and see which fault lines are most present amongst community respondents, MEAC posed the question: 'Today, what is the main cause of conflict in your community?' Respondents could select all answers that apply. What is notable is that a minority chose 'Banditry' and one or two of the cleavages are usually used to explain it. Respondents overwhelmingly cited banditry as the main cause of conflict (67 per cent), but interestingly, the conflict between Hausa and Fulani was only cited by 15 per cent of the sample and farmer/herder conflict was only named by 14 per cent of the sample.[182]

[180] Insight based on logistic regression implemented by testing the 'banditry connection' as the dependent variable and gender, state, age, tribe and displacement status as independent variables. No statistical significance is observed.

[181] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja: 2022); Kelechukwu Charles Obi and Victor Chidubem Iwuoha, "Untold story of the expanding armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest: linking the communal-level collaborators," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 7 (2023).

[182] 22 per cent saw no noteworthy conflict in their communities. However, this lack of reported conflict in communities could simply be driven by the respondents in urban areas/larger towns who may not be impacted to the same extent as other respondents, especially if they do not need to travel outside those centers on the roads often targeted by bandits.

## FIGURE 7 – TODAY, WHAT IS THE MAIN CAUSE OF CONFLICT IN YOUR COMMUNITY?




The Venn diagram in Figure 7 captures how community respondents view and frame the fault lines driving the conflict in the North West. It is notable that only a relatively small subset (17 per cent) answered both banditry and one of the other two cleavages. Eleven per cent (or 241 respondents) frame the main causes along the lines of banditry ***and*** Hausa/Fulani cleavages, while 7 per cent (125 respondents) frame the causes of conflict along banditry ***and*** farmer/herder cleavages. Only a small subset of respondents (81 or 4 per cent of the total sample) identifies all three - farmers/herder conflict, Hausa/Fulani conflict, ***and*** banditry - as the main sources of conflict in their community. It is possible that respondents have focused on the manifestation of the conflict (i.e., banditry) in their answers, and not mentioned what they see as causes, but the drastic falloff of response rates raises questions about whether a binary conceptualization of conflict (e.g., as a manifestation of farmer/herder or Hausa/Fulani tensions) does not afford banditry the nuanced introspection it deserves, and how it might exacerbate existing conflict dynamics. In light of this finding, and the others detailed in the report, the following section addresses how the overall presented findings should translate to the policy and practical levels.

# Policy and Practical Implications

While as a phenomenon, banditry is not new, its current manifestations constitute a full-blown security crisis of national and regional concern. Original MEAC survey data presented in this report underscore the pervasiveness of banditry violence and how it has drastically impacted the safety, health, livelihoods, food security, and mobility of the populations in the North West of Nigeria. Through the lens of affected communities, this report examines how bandit groups operate and how their activities affect local communities, perceptions of how they are organized, and where the issue sits in the wider context of conflict and violence in Nigeria.

## How We Typecast Violent Groups Shapes Response Strategies

As laid out in the report, banditry violence has been more pervasive, lethal, and impactful in the North West in recent years than insurgent violence has been in Nigeria's North East. Despite the pervasive and profound impact of banditry, the international focus in Nigeria has so far focused predominantly on the longstanding Boko Haram insurgency. The locus of international attention is likely driven not just by concerns about the reach of Boko Haram and its connections to other armed groups, but also by the politics of labelling.

Labelling and the imposition of a certain lens to understand banditry have also impacted the response to the issue. The predominant public framings of bandit groups have typically resorted to catch-all frames such as "bandits," "criminals," and sometimes "terrorists." While this search for a clear category is understandable, it also appears premature in light of the continued dearth of information, the geographical variation of banditry, and its evolution over time. Ostensibly applying clear labels to a messy phenomenon can contribute to the risk of prescribing ill-fitting policy and practical measures to address it. MEAC findings highlight how much herder-farmer violence and the Hausa/Fulani dimension align with response patterns around banditry, or are in fact directly associated with respondents, depending considerably on how MEAC asked those questions. Despite the common perception that bandits are mostly Fulani herders, MEAC findings highlight that herders themselves are in fact impacted significantly by banditry violence too. Here, targeted communication campaigns in communities could help break up existing stigma and unite communities against banditry which appears to affect people across tribal divides.

Additionally, communities largely perceive the insurgency in the North East and banditry violence to be distinct phenomena with no significant linkages. Simply conflating the phenomena or responding to the "terrorist" label would be short-sighted. To effectively address banditry violence, it is necessary to acknowledge it as a security crisis in its own right requiring specific policy and programmatic responses. Widening the lens requires taking a step back and looking at the humanitarian impact on communities, how they are victimized, and how bandits operate and are perceived in the eyes of affected communities—hopefully opening up the view for a broader and more nuanced set of policy and programmatic options to respond to banditry.

# Differentiated Victimization Requires Tailored Programming

Banditry violence affects women, men, boys, and girls differently, which indicates the need to carefully tailor the programmatic responses to it. Men suffer most from abduction and physical violence and many appear to have moved out of the area for security reasons (and to find jobs elsewhere). Better understanding the interplay of the lack of economic opportunities and insecurity is crucial when trying to tailor support to victimized communities.

Sexual violence, likely grossly underreported, needs to be addressed with sufficient resources, including a denser offer of referral pathways (including SARCs), to adequately assist survivors and to get a more complete picture of the situation. Men who seem to be more exposed to reports of sexual violence, could, if informed e.g., by targeted public campaigns, play a more pivotal role in assisting victims to be directed to the support they need.

Banditry violence has also drastically curbed people's mobility, access to education and ability to make a living. Further protection measures for schools and communities, particularly along frequented roads and on markets, coordinated between federal and state security forces to avoid blind spots, could help mitigate these effects. Where protection measures do not suffice or are absent, and peoples' ability to cover the most basic needs and access to education or health have been entirely curtailed due to insecurity, temporary support through humanitarian assistance is necessary—also to avoid long-term ripple effects.

Victimization also varies considerably across states and locations. For instance, the education sector has particularly suffered in Zamfara, while people in Sokoto seem to by far experience the most frequent attacks. This highlights the importance of locally adapted responses rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

This overall pervasive but at the same time differentiated impact of banditry on northwestern communities calls for policy responses and programming that is more carefully tailored. The

gender, age and location of beneficiaries and the local manifestations and experiences with banditry must play a role in crafting these responses.

# Importance of a Coordinated and Integrated Response

While tailored approaches are important, previous research has also outlined how coordinated approaches across states are necessary to avoid creating loopholes and inconsistencies that can be exploited by bandits. MEAC's evidence together with other data sets, suggests high volatility in bandit attacks across the three surveyed locations and over time. This may reflect—as others have argued—how periodic military campaigns in one state may temporarily dislodge bandits from the targeted locations, leading to more activity in other areas. Such an approach has not been successful in reducing banditry over the long term. A more sustained military campaign and enduring presence across the impacted states, coordinated with state- and community-level security actors, could be more effective. The latter have visibility on the local intricacies of specific bandit groups and better understand locally significant conflict dynamics. Importantly, such operations need to be integrated with stabilization efforts going beyond military and law enforcement measures.

Striking a balance between such localized, tailored programming on the one hand, which is embedded in an overall strategic response that is consistent across affected states on the other hand, is thus one of the larger challenges lying ahead if banditry is supposed to be tackled effectively.

# Role of Weapons

Bandit access to weapons bears critical consequences for communities' perceived and actual security and the potential for escalation of violence. Given the pervasive presence and proliferation of illicit arms and ammunition in the North West—a region known for sparse state governance—and given also bandit groups' high mobility, there is an increased risk of intensified illicit arms trafficking including across Nigeria's borders. In light of both frequent and increasingly violent attacks, with weapons being the most recognizable feature of bandit groups, concerted measures on the national, state, and local levels surrounding weapons and ammunition management (WAM) are essential. A UNIDIR-supported weapons and ammunition baseline assessment in 2016[183] suggested a total number of 55 measures to be taken to stem the flow of weapons in the region. To date, 38 per cent of those measures have been implemented. Remaining measures that have been highlighted and could help curtail

[183] UNIDIR, *Towards a National Framework on Weapons and Ammunition Management in the Federal Republic of Nigeria,* (Geneva, 2016). Implemented in cooperation with the Nigerian government, ECOWAS, BICC and CAR.

bandits' illicit access to weapons and ammunition include: under the guidance of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW) increasingly involve the state and local level in WAM-related processes and a further strengthening of common practices and coordination between different entities such as the Nigerian Armed Forces and the Nigerian Police Force on processing illicit arms and the treatment of ammunition recovered from the illicit sphere.[184] Strengthened coordination among arms control institutions such as the NCCSALW, border security and law enforcement in both Nigeria and neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad Basin would help address the illicit cross-border flow of weapons into, and out of the country.

This deep dive into banditry in the North West of Nigeria, as seen through the lens of affected communities, highlights the pervasive nature and profound, in part long-term impacts that banditry has had on Nigeria's northwestern population and their everyday lives. The emerging evidence calls for more international attention to this still-overlooked crisis. And it underscores the need for more integrated, tailored responses based on evidence of community impacts rather than the predominant public and political framings which often so insufficiently capture the messy and complex realities on the ground.

[184] Theò Bajon, "Weapons and Ammunition Management in Africa Insight: 2024 Update", UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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