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Exposure, Not Identity? Understanding Victimization by Bandits in Nigeria's North West

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This 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 report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Key Findings

- **While banditry in the North West of Nigeria is often portrayed as being closely aligned with conflict between Hausa farmers and Fulani herders, delineation between farmers and herders and amongst tribes is much less clear cut than typically portrayed.**

- **Tribal identity in the region is more fluid than often appreciated (e.g. due to mixed families and bilingualism). Many people change how they describe their tribal affiliation depending on context.** However societal stigma around Fulani being associated with bandits has increased, leading many Fulani individuals to conceal their heritage (or part of it) and present themselves as Hausa.

- **Despite common narratives framing Fulani as perpetrators, Fulani respondents report high levels of victimization, displacement and attack rates.**

- **Banditry violence seems to affect societal groups differently depending on their level of exposure to rural and less governed spaces where bandit groups tend to operate.** Farmers and herders, when compared to those with other or no professions, reported higher rates of victimization 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); the Government of Norway; Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM);

UNICEF; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience in the Lake Chad Basin; 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 overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses of their political or practical implications for the United Nations and its partners.

About this Report

This report analyses common assumptions about the banditry conflict in the North West of Nigeria and how it maps onto other societal fault lines between farmers and herders and Hausa and Fulani communities. To test whether these assumptions hold up, quantitative data collected in two rounds of a panel survey between January and March 2024 and January and February 2025 was analysed. Survey participants include community members recruited in three states affected by banditry violence: Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. In questioning certain narratives around banditry, livelihoods, and tribal affiliation, this report aims to inform a more nuanced approach to the conflict and responses to violence.

Introduction

In recent years, the North West has rapidly become Nigeria's new violence hotspot, with a security crisis of dimensions that exceeds the Boko Haram conflict in the North East of the country. Aside from frequent attacks on communities, more than half a million people have been displaced across the three states of Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara alone, largely due to banditry violence.[1]

In the media and in policy discussions the crisis has overwhelmingly been framed as a manifestation of farmer-herder tensions, with Fulani herders perceived to be associated more closely with bandit groups and opposing Hausa farmers.[2] Based on surveys conducted with community members across Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara in 2024 and 2025, this report sets out to test these common conceptions and provide a more nuanced picture of the reality on the ground. It unpacks whether the risk to be victimized by bandit groups does in fact unfold along the lines of occupation and tribe identity, information that could help inform targeted and evidence-based policy making and programming in the region.

To do so, the report first provides an overview of how banditry in the North West has evolved as well as how the banditry crisis is currently framed. After laying out the methodology and describing the sample, the report presents the main findings. It first examines livelihood and tribal dynamics in these three locations and then explores potential relationships between farming and herding and tribal affiliation. Finally, it analyses how victimization at the hands of bandits maps onto these different groups before reflecting on policy and practical implications which flow from these findings.

Common Conceptions of Banditry and their Evolution

Analyses of the banditry phenomenon in Nigeria's North West have typically focused on the tribal fault lines between Hausa and Fulani and portrayed ethnic divisions – as well as occupational frustration between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders – as the main

[1] Close to 80 per cent of those surveyed say they were displaced due to banditry. International Organization for Migration, "IDP Atlas Mobility Tracking – North-Central and North-West Nigeria (as of February 2025)", (March 2025).

[2] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja, March 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 (April 2023); Oluwole Ojewale, "Northwest Nigeria Has a Banditry Problem. What's Driving It?" IPI Global Observatory, 22 May 2024; Dyepkazah Shibayan, "Attack by gunmen leaves at least 40 people dead in Nigeria, the country's president says," AP News, 16 April 2025; 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*, vol 105, No. 923 (June 2023).

cleavages along which banditry violence unfolds. According to these predominant narratives, bandit groups are largely comprised of Fulani herders, who – lacking land for their cattle and marginalized by policies that have predominantly favoured Hausa farmers – started targeting these. As a result of that victimization, Hausa famers have formed vigilante groups (e.g. Yan Sakai) against bandits.[3]

A closer look at the beginnings of banditry reveals that in fact these assumed dividing lines between apparent perpetrator and victim communities have always been much blurrier than presumed. Banditry as a phenomenon flared up and resurfaced during different times in Nigerian history.[4] It commonly occurred along transnational trading routes connecting coastal West Africa with regions farther north. In Zamfara state and the Borgu area bandits presented a threat as far back as 1911, with raids targeting traders but interestingly also herders.[5] Later one of bandit groups' most important sources of income, cattle rustling existed already during this period as a culturally accepted and sustainable but intra-group practice among Fulani pastoralists. It neither entirely depleted stocks nor involved serious violence or destruction of livelihoods. When in rarer cases non-Fulani were targeted, fewer cattle were stolen, and restitutions were made.[6] Up until the early 20th century, tribal and occupational divisions aligned more or less, although there were economic and social ties between them (e.g. cooperative grazing and farming practices or inter-marriage). Relations between Hausa farmers and Fulani pastoralists were overwhelmingly peaceful.[7]

In the years following Nigeria's transition to democratic governance in 1999, however, shifts in land ownership and more severe competition over land brought rising tensions between Hausa farmers on the one hand, and Fulani herders, on the other, who felt disadvantaged by the new land use policies. Clashes between both groups increased and were often addressed by heavy-handed government responses,[8] which Fulani felt were targeting their tribe in particular. Fulani herders who suffered from rising loss of cattle, livelihoods and sometimes lives, started to turn

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[3] Center for Democracy and Development, "Multiple Nodes, Common Causes: National Stock take of Contemporary Insecurity and State Responses in Nigeria," (Abuja, March 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 (April 2023); Oluwole Ojewale, "Northwest Nigeria Has a Banditry Problem. What's Driving It?" IPI Global Observatory, 22 May 2024; Dyepkazah Shibayan, "Attack by gunmen leaves at least 40 people dead in Nigeria, the country's president says," AP News, 16 April 2025; 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*, vol 105, No. 923 (June 2023).

[4] Daily Trust, "How banditry started in Zamfara", 10 September 2021; For a more detailed, introductory overview of the evolution of banditry see: 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.

[5] Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, ""I am a bandit": A decade of research in Zamfara State bandit's den", Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto seminar series, 9 September 2021; Kingsley L. Madueke, et al., "Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria", Global Initiative and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), (Geneva, July 2024).
The exact makeup of these early bandit groups is not well documented.

[6] Kingsley L. Madueke, "Driving Destruction: Cattle rustling and instability in Nigeria", Global Initiative, (Geneva, January 2023).

[7] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020; International Crisis Group, "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem", Africa Report, No. 288 (Brussels, May 2020).

[8] Kingsley L. Madueke, et al, "Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa. Armed bandits in Nigeria", Global Initiative, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), (Geneva, July 2024).

more often to bandit groups for self-protection and to compensate for the losses by engaging in their criminal activities.[9] In the years that followed, these common associations between Fulani herders and bandits were also further cemented and reinforced in the media which "homogenized ethnic and professional categories creating the 'Fulani herdsmen', as the new menace to stability".[10] While conflicts between Hausa farmers and Fulani pastoralists and banditry violence have two distinct origins, over the years, they have become conflated and mutually reinforced and grew into each other.[11]

Interestingly, recent MEAC research suggests that there is a much more complex relationship between farmer/herder and Fulani/Hausa tensions and banditry violence than the merged narrative that has become commonplace. Indeed, in MEAC's most recent survey, banditry-affected communities in the North West often did not frame banditry, farmer/herder, and Hausa/Fulani conflicts as part of the same problem.[12] This warrants a closer look at the persisting predominant framings that often neatly associate banditry violence with cleavages between tribes and occupations. Questioning such narratives is relevant beyond academic debates, since conflict narratives, which reduce complexity and flourish on binaries, can ultimately influence the conceptual design and even resource allocation of policy and programmatic responses.[13]

This report will thus zoom in on the role that occupational and tribal fault lines play in the banditry crisis. It will shed light on how occupations and tribal affiliation are distributed in communities in the North West of Nigeria and examine how banditry violence affects these different groups.

Methodology and Sample

The findings presented in this report are based on data collected in a panel phone survey conducted by MEAC in January – March 2024 and January – February 2025, respectively. Statistics are mainly derived from the 2024 baseline survey, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Surveys were conducted with community members in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara States in the North West of Nigeria, with most respondents recruited in and around Jibia (Katsina), Illela

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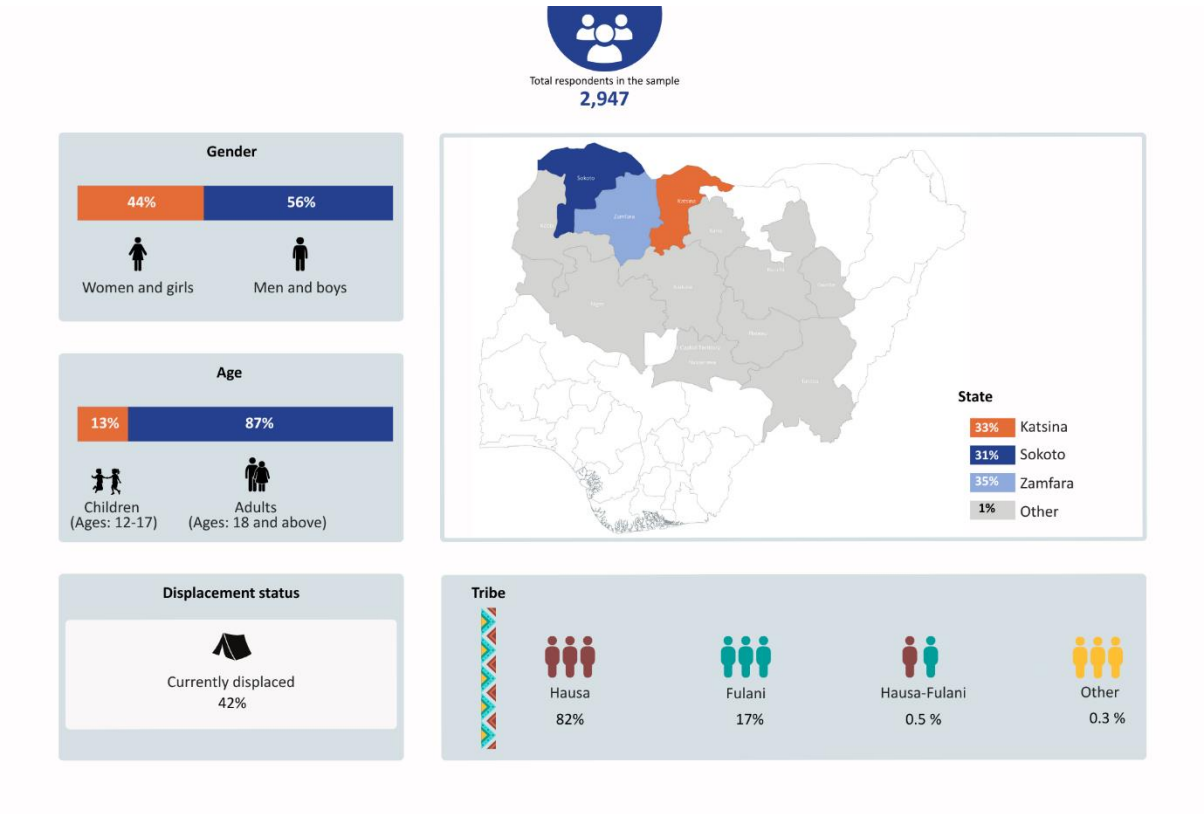
[9] Chitra Nagarajan, "Analysis of Violence and Insecurity in Zamfara", February 2020; Kingsley L Madueke, et al, "Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa. Armed bandits in Nigeria", Global Initiative, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), (Geneva, July 2024).
[10] Alessio Iocchi, "Nigeria's "Wild West": Insecurity, Pastoralism and Banditry in the Muslim North", Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 23 February 2023.
[11] Claudia Wiehler "In the Shadow of Civil War: The interdependence of civil wars and conflicts between informal armed groups", ETH Zurich, (2024), p. 184.
[12] Instead, more than two thirds of respondents identified only banditry as the main cause of conflict in the region and did not conflate that conflict with either tribal or occupational dimensions of conflict. 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.
[13] Tiffany Fairey, "Peace is possible: The role of strategic narratives in peacebuilding." *Media, War & Conflict*, vol 17, No. 1 (March 2024), p. 3-22.

(Sokoto), and Gusau (Zamfara).[14] In total, 2,947 respondents were interviewed for the 2024 baseline survey, of which 2,236 respondents were also interviewed for the 2025 endline survey. Some baseline respondents could not be reached for the endline survey due to changes in phone numbers or phones being turned off, and some chose not to participate in the follow up survey, thus resulting in a lower number of respondents for the endline survey. A summary of the 2024 baseline survey sample is visualized in Figure 1.[15]

FIGURE 1 – OVERVIEW OF THE 2024 BASELINE SAMPLE[16]



[14] Within Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara a small number of respondents resided outside the main survey locations at the time of the survey. A small number of respondents also reported living in another state.

[15] MEAC strives to conduct gender-sensitive and gender-responsive research and assessments in line with evolving best practice. MEAC collects data that can be disaggregated by gender (amongst other demographic features) to compare the experiences of men, boys, women, and girls. MEAC also uses targeted and responsive questions to examine the particular experiences of certain groups. Local variation requires that MEAC adapt its approach to gender to each of the local contexts where it works. Due to cultural sensitivity around asking a person about their gender in this socially conservative context, enumerators were asked to make an assumption about a respondent's gender based on visual, audio, and social identity indicators. Although self-identified data on gender would be preferable and would allow for the inclusion of non-binary answer options, the practical limitations imposed by the need to conduct culturally sensitive, ethical, and safe research necessitated this trade-off. Ultimately, the intent is not to oversimplify the complexities of gender but rather to present an analysis grounded in the information available and consistent with the limitations imposed by the data collection process.

[16] The 2025 endline survey had a similar distribution of most key demographics. However, the share of respondents who said they were currently displaced dropped considerably to 9 per cent (this could be due to a slight improvement in the security situation since late 2024). Further, the share of women and girls dropped slightly to 40 per cent (and the share of men and boys increased slightly to 60 per cent). In the 2025 endline, children only made up 9 per cent of the sample.

Most baseline survey respondents were recruited through an in-person participation recruitment survey. Since this initial sample included only a small Fulani population, additional Fulani respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. It must be noted that snowball sampling could affect the composition of the final sample, in particular regarding the respondents' occupations.[17]

After the endline survey was completed, it was observed that many respondents who had reported being Fulani in the 2024 baseline no longer reported Fulani as their tribe in the 2025 endline. There was also a smaller number of respondents who reported being Hausa in the baseline and mentioned a different tribe in the endline. Therefore, callbacks were conducted for all respondents whose tribe differed between the two surveys to confirm their tribes and understand the reasons behind the change in responses. Explanations for why this change occurred will be discussed in more detail further on. All tribe-related data is based on the tribal identities confirmed in these callbacks.

A regression analysis was run to test common conceptions on the relation between occupation and tribe, and banditry victimization.[18] The results of this regression were statistically insignificant. A subsequent analysis of summary statistics investigating these dynamics indicated that the relationship is more complex than often portrayed. Findings presented in this report are derived from these summary statistics.[19]

Findings

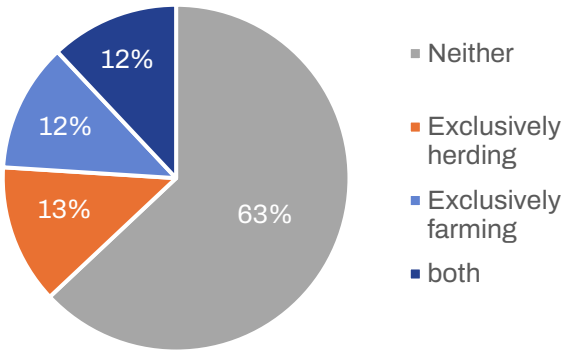
Farming and Herding

Against common conceptions suggesting a clear-cut distinction between farmer and herder groups, MEAC data from both survey rounds shows that farming and herding are not mutually exclusive. Lines between the two groups are much blurrier than often portrayed. The MEAC surveys ask about farming and herding not only as sources of income but also as aspects of identity, in order to capture the full range of ways in which people consider themselves farmers, herders, or both. In the 2024 baseline survey, a similar share of respondents reported making an income from farming and not herding (12 per cent) or from herding and not farming (13 per cent) to those saying they made an income from both (12 per cent), as shown in Figure 2. This

[17] For instance, if a Fulani respondent engaged in farming or herding and referred several contacts for participation, they too may be engaging in farming or herding, thus some groups may be overrepresented.
[18] A logistic regression was run on the relationship between farming, herding, tribe, age, and gender and the likelihood of personal victimization by bandits using data collected in the 2024 baseline survey.
[19] Respondents always have the option to refuse to answer (i.e. skip) a survey question, which could happen for various reasons (e.g. lack of knowledge or not wanting to answer). In this report, unless explicitly mentioned, 'refused to answer' rates below 5 per cent are excluded from the calculation and analysis of summary statistics. All statistics reported are rounded to the nearest whole number. Disaggregations by percentage thus do not always add up to 100 per cent.

remained similar in the 2025 endline survey.[20] Even when asked about their identity, a substantial share of respondents identified as both farmers and herders.[21] This shows how there is considerable overlap both in terms of occupation but also professional identity, likely also stemming from the history of interconnectivity between the groups.

FIGURE 2 – "DO YOU MAKE MONEY BY FARMING?", "DO YOU MAKE MONEY BY HERDING?"



Ethnic identity and livelihoods are often viewed as static but the evidence from the North West suggests that occupations – and how local people identify – are fluid. When comparing the 2024 baseline and 2025 endline surveys, it appears that many respondents changed their answers to both the income and identity questions between the two survey rounds. Although overall shares of those reporting to make an income from farming, herding, both, or neither remained almost the same across surveys, when tracing individual response patterns, around two thirds gave a different answer in the 2025 endline survey.[22] Similar changes where observed on the identification question.[23] Changes in survey response went in different directions (e.g. some respondents moved from farming or herding to other income sources, while others who had not engaged in these activities in the baseline did so in the endline), indicating general movement across categories, indicative of diversified livelihood strategies.

These findings indicate considerable mobility between different occupational groups. Indeed, agro-pastoralism as a mixed livelihood system as well as permanent or temporal shifts between farming and herding are common livelihood strategies in the North West. Facing climate variability, economic instability and a volatile security situation, many people in the region

[20] In the 2025 endline survey, 11 per cent of respondents said they made money from both herding and farming, with 13 per cent reporting making money from farming and not herding and another 13 per cent reporting making money from herding and not farming. The remaining 63 per cent said they did not make money from farming or herding.
[21] "Do you identify as a herder or a farmer?". Answer options: Neither, Farmer, Herder, Both. 9 per cent of respondents identified as both, 18 per cent identified as farmers, 11 per cent identified as herders, and the remaining 62 per cent identified as neither.
[22] 40 per cent changed their answer from saying yes to making an income from farming, herding, or both to neither, while 27 per cent changed their answer to a different answer option out of farming, herding, or both than they had previously answered. Only 33 per cent of respondents who said yes to making an income from farming, herding, or both in the 2024 baseline gave the same response in the 2025 endline.
[23] Of those who identified as a farmer, herder, or both in the baseline, in the endline survey: only 36 per cent gave the same answer in the endline; 24 per cent changed to a different answer option out of farmer, herder, or both than previously given; and 41 per cent no longer reported to identify with either of those options.

alternate between occupations or use mixed incomes to diversify and manage risks to their livelihoods.[24]

Tribe, Conflict, and Associated Stigma

A similar fluidity is seen in how people in the North West identify with the two predominant tribes. A closer look at who identifies as Fulani and who identifies as Hausa in surveys and why they do so, reveals that societal stigma related to tribal affiliation and related fears run deep in the North West. When surveyed for the endline in 2025, only 5 per cent of respondents said they were Fulani (compared to 17 per cent in the initial baseline survey a year earlier). While the drop off rate between surveys could have partially contributed to this difference, it was clear that many Fulani respondents had changed their tribe between 2024 and 2025. The subsequent callbacks conducted to investigate this shift found that 85 per cent of those who had initially reported a different tribe in the endline ultimately confirmed they were indeed Fulani. There was no such shift among Hausa respondents.

The callbacks found that tribal identity is more fluid than often appreciated, and in many cases, Fulani present themselves as Hausa in order to avoid stigma or out of fear. First, some respondents mentioned having parents or other family members from both tribes and therefore used the tribal identities interchangeably depending on the context (e.g. parent with whom they were currently staying). This points towards a general fluidity when it comes to tribal identity. Secondly, during these callbacks, Fulani respondents frequently mentioned increased stigmatization and growing fear in the year between the two survey rounds. Fulani respondents reported growing distrust towards their tribe and the growing perception that Fulani are associated with bandits. For instance, one respondent told MEAC researchers: “People in my community often mistake Fulani people for bandits. It's safer to say you are Hausa and I can pass as one.”[25] Another reason mentioned by survey participants was the increased presence of the military and militia groups such as the Yan Sakai in their communities which led to more people reporting each other as alleged bandit associates, even if this was not true. These security considerations seemed to be particularly relevant for those Fulani respondents who lived in majority Hausa communities where the need to blend in was greater. All these factors contribute to fears among Fulani to identify as such.

There are other indications that binary and stigmatizing narratives against Fulani seem to be widespread in the North West. In the 2025 endline survey, MEAC asked “From what you know about bandits, do you think they are mostly Fulani herders or are affiliated with them?” 76 per cent of Hausa respondents and surprisingly even 69 per cent among Fulani respondents

[24] Ayodele O. Majekodunmi et al, “Shifting livelihood strategies in northern Nigeria - extensified production and livelihood diversification amongst Fulani pastoralists”, *Pastoralism*, vol 7, No. 19 (July 2017); International Crisis Group, “Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict”, Africa Report No. 252, (Brussels, September 2017).
[25] MEAC, callback interview with a Fulani respondent (North West Nigeria, March-April 2025).

themselves (up from 45 per cent of Fulani respondents in 2024) answered affirmatively.[26] This points towards a generally heightened stigma around identifying as Fulani. Moreover, this is concerning in light of criminological research that has found that increased stigma can lead to internalization of ascribed criminal identities and create a self-reinforcing cycle that can drive individuals to eventually engage in criminal activity[27] – a risk that has already been raised in the context of Fulani discrimination.[28] In parallel, there is a similar and growing binary narrative about the community groups that have taken up arms against bandits. In the 2024 baseline, 72 per cent of respondents believed the Yan Sakai to be mostly Hausa farmers or affiliated with them, which increased in the 2025 endline to 88 per cent.[29]

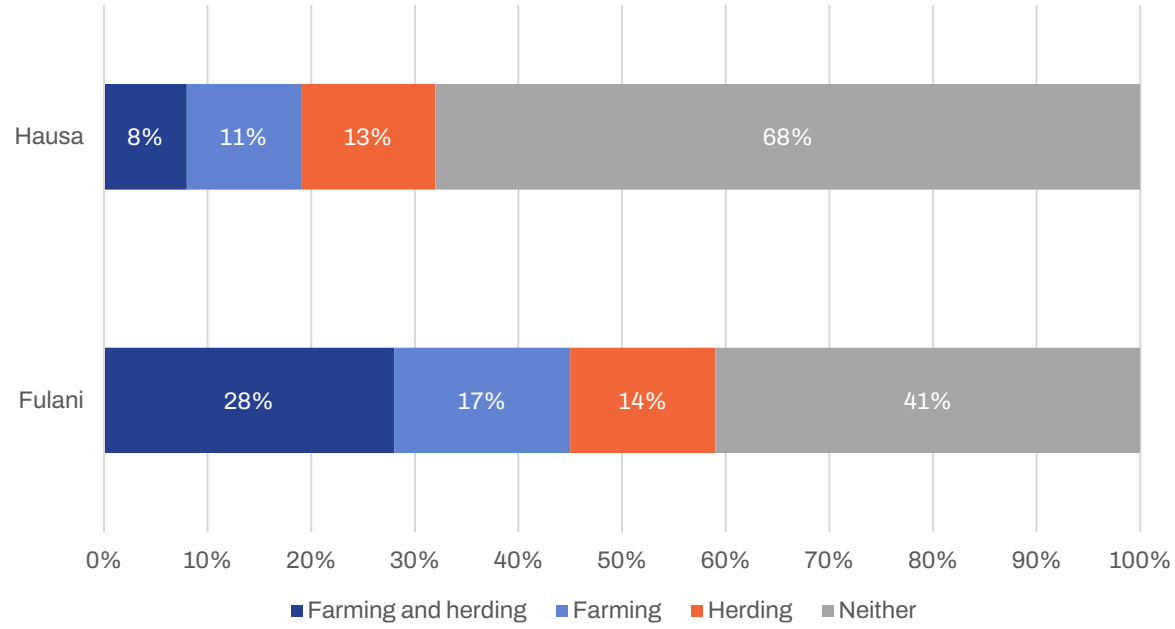
These common conceptions about different societal groups' affiliations and associated stigma against Fulani seem to affect every day behavioral patterns too. For example, Fulani reported being treated disrespectfully twice as frequently as Hausa respondents.[30] Concerningly, 20 per cent of Fulani respondents even indicated to have sometimes or most times been threatened during the last month, compared to 13 per cent among Hausa respondents.[31] Higher shares of Fulani than Hausa respondents also reported being treated poorly in public or called names.[32] When MEAC asked the same survey participants to reflect about why people had called them names, treated them poorly or threatened them, occupation (mainly among Hausa) and tribe (mainly among Fulani) were the two most frequent answers.[33] Notably, 42 per cent of Fulani respondents said that it was because of their tribe, while only 3 per cent of Hausa participants mentioned this as the perceived reason.

[26] 16 per cent of Hausa respondents and 23 per cent of Fulani respondents said No to the question, while 8 per cent of Hausa and 7 per cent of Fulani respondents said they did not know.
[27] Becker, Howard S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: Free Press; Jón Gunnar Bernburg, Marvin D. Krohn, and Craig J. Rivera, "Official Labeling, Criminal Embeddedness, and Subsequent Delinquency: A Longitudinal Test of Labeling Theory," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, vol 43, No. 1 (February 2006).
[28] Yusuf Anka, "Analysis: Stereotype And Stigma May Drive More Fulani Herders To Crime – Experts", HumAngle, 22 June 2020.
[29] Respondents answering "yes" to the question "From what you know about the Yan Sakai, do you think they are mostly Hausa farmers or are affiliated with them?".
[30] "In the last month, how often were you treated disrespectfully compared to other people?". Answer options: Most times, Sometimes, Never. Among Fulani respondents, 27 per cent answered Most times or Sometimes. Among Hausa respondents, 13 per cent answered Most times or Sometimes.
[31] "In the last month, how often were you threatened?". Answer options: Most times, Sometimes, Never.
[32] "In the last month, how often were you treated poorly in a shop or market?". Answer options: Most times, Sometimes, Never. 18 per cent of Fulani respondents answered Most times or Sometimes compared to 10 per cent of Hausa respondents.
"In the last month, how often were you called names?". Answer options: Most times, Sometimes, Never.
15 per cent of Fulani respondents answered Most times or Sometimes compared to 8 per cent of Hausa respondents.
[33] N = 637 "When you think about ways you have been treated poorly, why do you think people did that to you?". Answer options (select multiple): Your tribe, Your occupation, The place you come from, Your gender, Your race, Your age, Your marital status, Your religion, Your physical appearance, Your sexual orientation, Your education, Your income level, Your previous association with bandits, Other. Only asked of those who reported being treated poorly in a shop or market, called names, or threatened.

Mapping Occupation and Tribe

The common narrative associating the Hausa tribe primarily with farming and the Fulani tribe primarily with pastoralism is challenged by MEAC findings that look at tribe and occupation in conjunction. As shown in Figure 3, similar numbers of Hausa respondents said that they made an income from herding as from farming. Among Fulani respondents, a considerable share engages in farming (indeed at higher rates than Hausa respondents, although this could have been influenced by the snowball recruitment of Fulani respondents).

FIGURE 3 – FARMING AND HERDING INCOME BY TRIBE



Among both tribes, diversified livelihood strategies that involved both farming and herding are common.[34] Fulani respondents even said they made a living through both farming and herding more frequently than farming or herding alone.

Overall, these findings continue the pattern identified in previous sections, namely that tribe and occupation are less fixed than often described. It is therefore not surprising that they also do not map as neatly onto each other. The next section examines how tribal identification and occupation relate to victimization experiences at the hand of bandit groups.

[34] It is important to note that respondents might have additional sources of income aside from herding and farming.

Victimization Experiences Across Societal Groups

Despite reports of a decline in banditry violence across the North West since the end of 2024,[35] MEAC's research suggests a more mixed and complicated reality. Indeed, many respondents in early 2025 told MEAC that attack rates had in fact decreased in their community, as one respondent describes: "Before, the bandits attacked us twice a month. They came into our community to kill and kidnap people. But now they have stopped attacking us and even the nearby villages."[36] Nevertheless, recent victimization at the hands of bandit groups is high across communities in the North West. In 2025, 35 per cent of respondents indicated their close relatives had been attacked by bandits in the last year[37] and 7 per cent reported being personally attacked.[38] While the share of respondents who reported to be displaced at the time of the 2025 endline survey reduced drastically when compared to a year prior (from 42 per cent to 9 per cent) 8 per cent of respondents had still been forced to leave their community due to banditry in the previous year.[39] These findings suggest that despite some improvements – perhaps localized or time bound – banditry was still driving people away from their homes and related violence is impacting families.

The following sections will examine how victimization experiences map onto different community or population groups, specifically farmers and herders as well as Hausa and Fulani, to better understand differentiated impact of banditry violence.

Age and Gender

MEAC research finds men to be especially at risk of banditry attacks. In the 2024 baseline survey, 20 per cent of men and boys reported ever experiencing banditry victimization compared to 7 per cent of women and girls.[40] Although men and boys are still at higher risk of being attacked, women and girls are also being targeted by bandits. Previous MEAC research conducted in the Cameroon and Chad found women and girls often taking over high-risk livelihood activities from men and boys who feared attacks from former comrades, exposing those women and girls to higher risks of violence instead.[41] In the North West, one respondent highlights how certain livelihood activities – here water collection, typically the responsibility of women and girls – overlap with security risks: "We are seriously facing water scarcity. We spent

[35] Peoples' Gazette, "North-West Bandits: Improved security has brought hope to northerners, northern elders say", 2 April 2025.
[36] 2025 endline survey " "How has it changed? "(open-ended follow-up question if respondents said banditry activity had changed since the last survey).
[37] "Since we last talked, were any of your close relatives ever attacked by bandits?".
[38] "Since we last talked, were you ever attacked by bandits?".
[39] "Since we last talked, were you ever forced to leave your community because of bandits?".
[40] "Were you ever attacked by bandits?".
[41] Chitra Nagarajan, Francesca Batault, Siobhan O'Neil and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Survival and Struggle: The Experience of Women and Girls With and After Boko Haram," Findings Report 39, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024, p. 28.

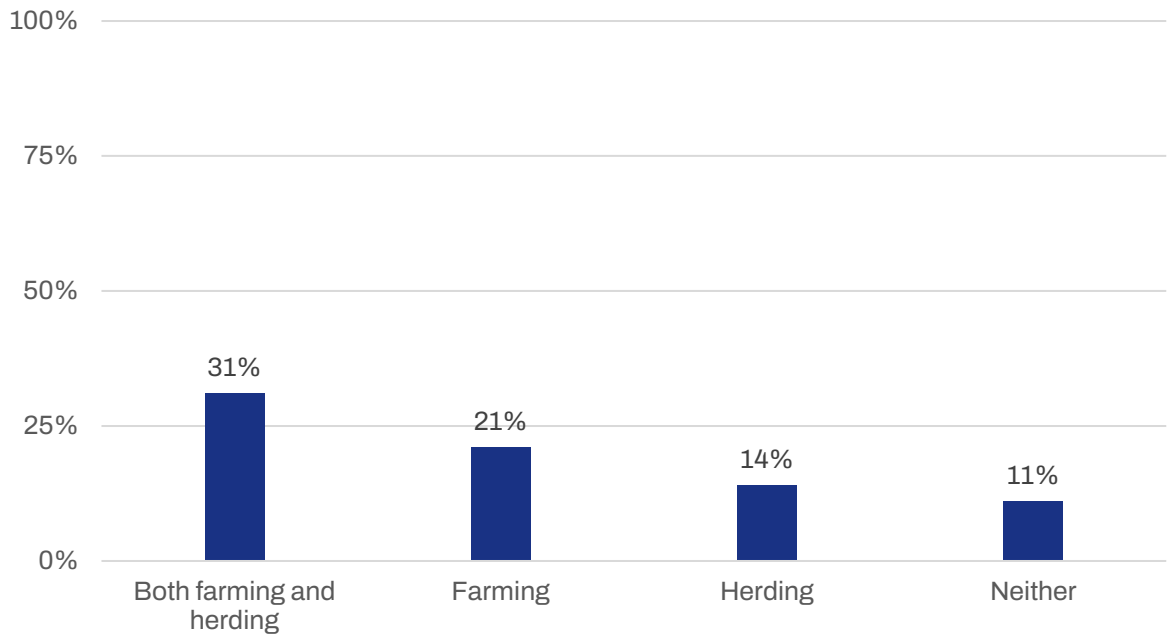
almost a week without tap water. [The] water station is located far away from our community and people are too afraid to go there because of bandits."[42] Such evidence highlights how exposure risks might unfold differently for women and girls and men and boys. It also underscores the importance of gender-sensitive monitoring and responses to banditry. Additionally, age appears to play a role in experiencing banditry violence. Among all respondents, the share of adults reporting personal banditry victimization is twice as high as among children.[43] One potential explanation for this finding could be that adult men are more exposed – they are more present in public spaces[44] and engage in farming and herding at higher rates than women and children. Since cattle rustling remains one of the income generating strategies of bandit groups, those engaging in herding are more exposed to attacks. In addition, herding – as with farming – requires work outside towns and cities where security actors are concentrated, potentially leaving farmers and herders vulnerable to attack.

Victimization Experiences amongst Herders and Farmers

Gainful involvement in farming or herding seems to be a substantial risk factor for victimization at the hands of bandits. In the 2024 baseline, respondents who engaged in farming or herding reported being personally victimized by bandits at higher rates (21 and 14 per cent respectively) than respondents engaged in other livelihoods (11 per cent), as seen in Figure 4.[45] When respondents reported earning income through *both* farming and herding the rates of victimization grew substantially (31 per cent).

[42] 2025 endline survey: "Can you tell me more about what the conflict is about, who is involved, and how it impacts you?" (open-ended follow-up question if respondents said to have experienced disputes over water).
[43] 16 per cent of adults reported ever being personally attacked by bandits compared to 8 per cent of children. In the 2025 endline survey, 8 per cent of adults reported personal attacks in the past year compared to 4 per cent of children.
[44] 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.
[45] While in the past, traders have also been frequent targets of bandit attacks, earlier research found that following the banking sector reform implemented in the early 2000s, traders increasingly transitioned to no longer travelling with cash. This made roadside robberies a far less lucrative undertaking for bandits, which eventually led them to turn towards cattle rustling (Kingsley L. Madueke, et al., "Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Armed bandits in Nigeria", Global Initiative and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), (Geneva, July 2024)). At the same time, curfews and road-use restrictions in many parts of the region have reduced road traffic, and traders may have opted to avoid roads and thereby extortion and abduction, leading to less attacks on traders (Ofoma Valentine Chinedu and Sunday Onwe. "Effect Of Banditry On Socio-Economic Development Of North-West Geopolitical Zone Of Nigeria" *International Journal of Public Administration Studies*, vol 3, No. 1 (April 2023).

FIGURE 4 – SHARE OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING PERSONAL VICTIMIZATION BY OCCUPATION



One explanation for the above findings could be that farmers and herders who work in rural spaces are more exposed to bandit groups who mostly operate in those areas. Likewise, security forces are less present in rural areas and thus there are not sufficient resources to deter or intervene in bandit attacks. Across Nigeria, a large share of military resources was allocated to fight Boko Haram in the country's North East, so the military and police have until recently been more absent in the North West, where this has contributed to tangible disparities between government presence in rural and urban areas.[46] Even when in September 2024 the military relocated to Sokoto to combat banditry in the wider North West region,[47] after initial, promising security improvements, bandit groups were quick to adapt their operations, for instance, by temporarily shifting their activities into semi-urban and urban settings.[48] As an additional strain on coercive government resources, a re-emerged militant group called the Lakurawa – active again since 2024 and early 2025 – have further challenged effective coverage by security forces in the North West.[49] Consequently, community members who farm *and* herd and thus spend even longer periods of time in rural areas where security forces are typically less present, may experience a kind of compounded exposure to banditry activity. This could explain their still higher rates of victimization.

[46] Claudia Wiehler, "In the Shadow of Civil War. The interdependence of civil wars and conflicts between informal armed groups", ETH Zurich, (2024), p. 179.
[47] Nigerian Tribune, "Insecurity: FG directs Minister, Defence Chiefs to relocate to Sokoto", 13 February 2025.
[48] Global Initiative, "Bandits shift kidnapping focus in Nigeria's north from rural areas to cities", October 2024.
[49] For a detailed overview of the group, see: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, "The Lakurawa: North West Nigeria's 'Newest' Threat", UNIDIR, Geneva, 2025.

The increased exposure to banditry violence affects farmers and herders in various ways beyond the immediate impact of physical attacks. Several respondents told MEAC researchers that banditry has impacted their ability to make a livelihood. Accessing their farmland has become more difficult due to the presence of bandit groups operating in the area. Some respondents said that bandit attacks were particularly feared on more remote farmlands, which leads many to only farm on smaller lands with less yield, but which are closer to town. Others reported that bandits actively bar them from accessing their lands. One respondent who used to herd and farm explained the knock-on effects of banditry on his mixed agrarian livelihood: "In the past, livestock was kept at home, providing cow dung as a natural fertilizer. However, keeping cattle has become risky as they attract bandits. As a result, I can no longer rely on animal manure and lack the money to purchase fertilizer".[50]

Victimization amongst Hausa and Fulani

MEAC evidence highlights Fulani are at least as affected by banditry violence as Hausa are, running counter to common assumptions that portray Fulani mostly as perpetrators of banditry violence. In the 2024 baseline survey, Fulani respondents reported victimization of any kind by bandits at considerably higher rates than Hausa respondents. Notably, one in three Fulani MEAC interviewed had personally been victimized by bandit groups.[51] In comparison, roughly one in ten Hausa respondents personally experienced banditry violence.[52] Fulani respondents were displaced due to banditry at higher rates too (42 per cent versus 14 per cent amongst Hausa respondents).[53] The difference in victimization experiences could be due to different sample makeup within each tribal subsample. As shown in Figure 3, a considerably higher share of Fulani respondents engages in farming or herding (compared to Hausa respondents), and a larger share does both, which may increase their exposure and thus their risk of victimization.

Victimization rates at family level were also slightly higher for Fulani respondents than Hausa respondents (40 per cent compared to 35 per cent respectively).[54] Overall, the higher rates at which Fulani respondents reported having been victimized by bandits questions the common narrative that Fulani perpetrate banditry violence against Hausa victims. Rather, MEAC data underlines that Fulani community members are likely as vulnerable to banditry violence – if not more – as their Hausa peers, even when taking into account that some of the Fulani victimization is likely explained by exposure.

[50] 2025 endline survey: "What were these difficulties caused by?" (open-ended follow-up question if respondents experienced difficulties making a living from farming, herding or fishing).
[51] It should be noted that this indicated being victimized at the hands of bandits at least once, but many of the respondents reported having been victimized more than once.
[52] 33 per cent of Fulani respondents reported personally being attacked by bandits compared to 11 per cent of Hausa respondents.
[53] "Were you ever forced to leave your community because of bandits?".
[54] Differences in personal victimization rates across tribes in the 2025 endline survey were negligible.

Policy Recommendations

Nigeria's banditry violence has deeply affected communities across its North West region. While common conceptions about this crisis have tied it closely to tensions between farmers and herders and the Hausa and Fulani, original MEAC data debunks some of these binary narratives. MEAC surveys suggest that aside from Hausa and farmers, Fulani and herders are also attacked by bandits at high rates. This undermines the predominant narrative that banditry violence is primarily fueled by conflict between Fulani herders on the one hand – typically cast as bandit associates – and Hausa farmers on the other. The findings suggest that exposure to rural and remote areas, where bandits operate frequently, plays a critical role for victimization risk. In turn, this raises the question whether bandit groups – rather than narrowly following a Fulani agenda – are driven by a different set of goals and/or economic opportunism instead. Debunking the still predominant binary narrative will be critical for effective and nuanced policy making and programming.

MEAC findings carry a series of programmatic and policy recommendations:

- **Avoid perpetuating common misconceptions about who is affected by banditry violence in communications, policy, and practice.** This might be particularly relevant for programmes focusing on climate-security dynamics targeting rural populations including farmers and herders. Programmes should also integrate mechanisms for continuous data collection and feedback (e.g. community surveys or participatory monitoring) to better understand how livelihood and identity patterns evolve and adjust interventions if necessary.

- **Promote awareness of differentiated risks in order to better tailor support programming and cater to protection needs in banditry affected communities.** Banditry violence seems to affect societal groups differently depending on the level of exposure they have to rural and less governed spaces where bandit groups operate more frequently (e.g. farmers, herders, adult men). While women and girls also suffer from banditry attacks, more fine-grained analysis is needed to better understand how exposure risks unfold differently for women and girls to ultimately ensure tailored programming.

- **Recognize the fluidity of involvement in farming and herding (and other sectors).** Microfinance and other livelihood programmes that adapt to recognize mixed agrarian livelihood strategies can bolster communities' already existing capacity to diversify income streams and manage risks.

- **Review the way support programmes are communicated and labelled to avoid perpetuating misconceptions about banditry that have real implications for**

community security and cohesion. The fluidity of identity demonstrated in MEAC's research suggests that community members conceive their tribal identity in diverse ways, depending on context, family, language and increasingly also driven by the fear of stigmatization and resulting security concerns. The use of tribe-associated language when discussing banditry reinforces a binary narrative that is not born out in the data. It promotes the stigmatization of the Fulani community having implications for personal safety and access to victim support. Providing needs-based support on the ground without tying it to the overarching and often sensitive categories such as tribe or occupation can be conflict-sensitive ways of optimizing outreach and making responses more effective. This also underlines a need for inter-group peacebuilding and trust-building initiatives, encouraging cohesion across communities rather than reinforcing identity divides.

- **Recognize and address the heightened stigmatization around being Fulani.** The widespread perception that bandits are associated with Fulani, even among Fulani respondents themselves, leaves the population vulnerable to psychological distress resulting from feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and stigma. Additionally, such perceptions carry potential risks for a self-reinforcing cycle of internalization of stigma which can ultimately lead to more of these individuals actually joining bandit groups. Community dialogues, leaders publicly providing the needed nuance to the crisis at hand, and visible inclusion of Fulani voices in peacebuilding and livelihood programmes can help mitigate these risks.

- **Avoid poorly targeted responses that can be stigmatizing and counterproductive.** Heavy-handed measures that are perceived to target certain groups in particular can contribute to overall community tensions by fueling existing stigma against particular groups, create fears of incrimination and ultimately present a risk to social cohesion and prospects for long-term societal reconciliation.

- **Promote a holistic approach to the banditry crisis that seeks to both reduce violence and address its impacts.** Gaining a better understanding of nascent, local peace efforts and how to best support them, examining how to tailor defector programming to the North West context if indeed expanded to the region, and considering mediation efforts in such settings are some possible ways of addressing banditry violence with non-kinetic measures. Displacement support, infrastructure reconstruction (e.g. markets), and livelihood restoration programming whose design is sensitive to inter-group conflicts and addresses underlying factors such as food insecurity and climate change, are some examples of responses that seek to ensure long-term stability rather than short-term containment.

MANAGING EXITS
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