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Beyond Ungoverned Spaces: Connecting the Dots between Relative Deprivation, Banditry, and Violence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of criminal groups—“armed bandits” in the local parlance—in the northwest geopolitical zone has compounded the security conundrums in Nigeria. The dominant explanation for the ongoing banditry draws on the “ungoverned spaces” theoretical framework to contend that the phenomenon is a by-product of the state’s abject failure to monopolize violence over its territory. The failure on the part of the state to impose order on its territory leaves much room for loosely organized vicious armed groups to wreak havoc on local communities in the northwest region. The proponents of this perspective inevitably recommend a military solution to the security problem. In this article, I take a different position that counteracts the “ungoverned spaces” thesis. I argue that the “ungoverned spaces” thesis blatantly ignores the socioeconomic context within which banditry is embedded and how such context nurtures crime and deviance. Drawing on the relative deprivation theory, I contend that banditry owes not so much to “ungoverned spaces” but to the ethnic cum material grievances of some pastoralists who have taken to criminality for survival and who pinpoint discrepancies between what they had, what they have, and what they think they should have. I argue that resolving banditry would require attending to pastoralists’ grievances through apposite socioeconomic interventions.

KEYWORDS

Ungoverned spaces; relative deprivation; poverty; banditry; terrorism; Nigeria

A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirement for a residence. But let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut.

—Karl Marx

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most insecure states in the world with varied security conundrums—namely, terrorism by non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the northeast;

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street gangs in the southwest; Biafran separatists in the southeast; farmer-pastoralist conflicts in the northwest and Middle Belt; oil militancy in the Niger Delta; and maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea. Amid the economic ravages of the coronavirus pandemic, Nigeria's security challenges have been compounded by the rise of armed groups—"armed bandits"¹ in local parlance—that terrorize citizens in the northwest and, increasingly, in the northcentral geopolitical zone through criminal activities such as kidnapping, looting, and cattle rustling. As of 2019 "more than 8,000 people have been killed—mainly in Zamfara state—with over 200,000 internally displaced and about 60,000 fleeing into Niger Republic"² as a consequence of the activities of bandits in the northwest. Armed bandits have also killed more Nigerians than Boko Haram, robbers, kidnappers, and cultists combined, and were responsible for 47.5% of killings in 2019.³ Due in large measure to the apparent inability of the state to provide peace and stability to its citizens in the midst of these internal security conundrums, it is quite unsurprising that Campbell and Rotberg regard Nigeria as a failed state akin to fragile polities such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, and Somalia.⁴ Authors like Campbell go as far as positing that Nigeria is neither a state nor a nation because of the internal contradictions embedded in it evident not only in its ethnoreligious cleavages but also in its copious "ungoverned spaces" that pose serious challenges to internal stability.⁵

In the context of the ongoing banditry in the northwest geopolitical zone, the thesis of "ungoverned spaces"—that is, areas where "territorial state control has been voluntarily or involuntarily ceded in whole or part to actors other than the relevant legally recognized sovereign authorities"⁶—has been invoked to explain the rise and persistence of such criminal gangs and criminal activities. The contention is that banditry is the consequence of the inability of the Nigerian state to govern bushes, forests, and rural areas wherefrom criminal gangs operate.⁷ To curb banditry, then, the proponents of the "ungoverned spaces" thesis recommend that the state must assert its authority over forests, bushes, and rural areas. For example, Ojo posits that "establishing a functional state institution in the remote environments, as well as reinforcing the institution by empowering the vulnerable local dwellers who are currently governed by informal institutions remains fundamental in safeguarding human security in the country."⁸ Similarly, Olaniyan and Yahaya maintain that "[t]he forests must be governed and the illegal users must be dislodged and permanently prevented from controlling the spaces."⁹ These views entail a military approach to quashing armed banditry.

While banditry in northern Nigeria is obviously not unconnected to weak state capacity to govern territorial spaces and a military approach is required to curb criminality in general, the socioeconomic context within which bandits in the northwest geopolitical zone are embedded has been given less scholarly attention. Understanding the socioeconomic context would mean paying

attention to a nonmilitary approach to banditry through apposite socioeconomic interventions. Departing from the “ungoverned spaces” thesis, therefore, I contend in this article that banditry is a lucrative criminal industry for former pastoralists in the northwest whose lives are invariably situated between criminality and everyday survival in the context of socioeconomic deprivation which, in turn, breeds grievances and perceptions of ethnic exclusion. I argue that a military approach alone cannot quell criminal gangs in the northwest devoid of concomitant socioeconomic interventions by states in the northwest geopolitical zone in collaboration with the federal government. Because armed banditry is the product of relative deprivation, social interventions such as the provision of social amenities, educational facilities, youth employment, ranches, and grazing areas to nomadic pastoralists in the northwest would largely address the multifarious socioeconomic concerns of the ferocious criminal gangs as well as prevent the recruitment of impoverished youths (men and women) from local communities in the northwest region.

This article is divided into six sections. First, I discuss the author’s positionality in the context of the research conducted as well as the methodology employed to address the conundrum. Second, I explicate the relative deprivation theory and some criticisms of the framework. Third, I demonstrate how relative deprivation largely explains varied security conundrums in different parts of Nigeria from the northeast and northcentral to the southeast and southsouth geopolitical zones. Fourth, I delve into the roots of armed banditry focusing on the discrimination and dispossession of nomadic pastoralists in the northwest geopolitical zone. In the fifth section, I assess the modus operandi of the armed bandits focusing on kidnapping, cattle rustling, and looting. Finally, I explore state responses to the criminal gangs and the possibility of employing nonmilitary—that is, socioeconomic intervention—measures to eradicate it. The conclusion will suggest practical policy recommendations to stamp out criminality in the northwest as well as in neighboring states in northcentral and northeast regions where the armed conflict is gradually gaining a foothold.

Author positionality

Before I delve into the research and present the findings, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge my standpoint as an educated man from southeastern Nigeria who has no dog in the ongoing armed conflict in northwestern Nigeria—other than explaining the security issues in the region in an objective manner with a view to resolving the conundrum. Due to the security challenges in the northern region coupled with the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, it was practically impossible for me to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for this research article. For this reason, I relied on secondary sources such as newspapers, television interviews, radio broadcasts, political

commentaries, scholarly books, and journal articles that analyze armed banditry and varied forms of armed conflict in Nigeria. The information presented here were analyzed in the context of the theoretical work and extant knowledge on armed conflicts in northern Nigeria.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

The term “relative deprivation” was first coined by the American sociologist Samuel Stouffer who is also the developer of survey research techniques. In *The American Soldier*¹⁰—a survey of American soldiers in World War II—Stouffer discovered that even though the US Army corpsmen got promotions relatively quickly compared to the military police, they were a more frustrated bunch. The research explained that the relevant comparison which caused frustration among the airmen was not the military police but their own peers. The airmen compared promotions with their peers such that many felt aggrieved when they noticed a discrepancy between anticipation and attainment. Stouffer’s unique observation was later taken up by other sociologists to explore varied sociological problems. Robert Merton, for example, drew on the relative deprivation theory to advance the “reference group theory” which posits that individuals and groups define themselves and assess their opinions by comparing themselves to others.¹¹ Reference groups are an individual’s frame of reference which is used to order the ideas of self, role performance, aspirations, ambitions, experiences, and cognition—in short, they are largely determinant of a person’s social ties, attitudes, and self-identity. But such comparisons could breed frustration especially when one feels that one’s peers earn or fare better than one. Relative deprivation can thus be defined as “wanting what one does not have, and feeling that one deserves whatever it is one wants but does not have.”¹² Walter Runciman specifies the relative deprivation theory in the following formal manner:

A is relatively deprived of X when (i) he does not have X, (ii) he sees some other person or persons, which may include himself at some previous or expected time, as having X (whether or not this is or will be in fact the case), (iii) he wants X, and (iv) he sees it as feasible that he should have X.¹³

Runciman broadens the meaning of relative deprivation by highlighting two different senses of the concept: egoistic (individual) relative deprivation and fraternal (group) relative deprivation.¹⁴ With egoistic relative deprivation the individual feels personally deprived as one unfavorably compares one’s social position or situation to better off members of a specific group of which one is a member. For example, a high school teacher who believes she should have been promoted faster than her peers would feel personally deprived and may take action to address the issue within the school where she teaches. Conversely, fraternal relative deprivation has to do with the unfavorable

comparison of one's social position or situation to better off members of another social group of which one is not a member. This is axiomatic from racial discrimination where members of a particular racial group feel marginalized in comparison to the privileges enjoyed by another racial group: such perception of marginalization ossifies into the formation of social movements—like the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s—to counter perceived social inequality. Individuals and groups compare themselves with others in society but also with their own past status as well as their expectations for the future. In this sense, relative deprivation has a “time component” as individuals and groups make comparisons across time. The conjunction of egoistic and fraternal relative deprivation leads Smith and Pettigrew to underline four basic components of relative deprivation without which the theory does not operate—namely, that individuals and groups who experience relative deprivation

- (1) first make cognitive comparisons, (2) then make cognitive appraisals that they or their in-group are disadvantaged, (3) perceive these disadvantages as unfair, and finally
- (4) resent these unfair and undeserved disadvantages.¹⁵

Relative deprivation must be understood in the context of absolute deprivation. This is because absolute deprivation affects the comparisons or cognitive appraisals that individuals and groups make with one another and across time. As Paolo Verme explains:

When a society is doing better because GDP is growing and because this growth is equally benefitting everyone in society, mean income and welfare are moving upwards. This may not affect my position in society (everyone moves up by the same degree and my relative position does not change) but affects the comparison of my present status with my past status: I feel better because I'm doing better. Hence, absolute gains affect relative gains . . . and if we really wish to measure the importance of relative deprivation in explaining happiness and satisfaction we need to take absolute deprivation into account.¹⁶

It was due in large part to the influence of the American political scientist Ted Gurr that the theory of relative deprivation was imported into political science and used to explain varied forms of political violence. In *Why Men Rebel*, Ted Gurr defines relative deprivation as “actors’ perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities” where “Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of getting and keeping.”¹⁷ Gurr’s central argument is that collective violence—coup, riot, protest, revolution, rebellion, terrorism—occurs when there is a discrepancy between what people have and what they think they should have as perceived abjection breeds frustration which, in turn, leads to aggression. Consider, for instance, welfare values such as food, shelter, physical comfort, and health services: when people feel they have less

of these than they should have then they are prone to engage in criminal activities or other forms of collective violence. This is specifically why Gurr holds that structural inequality is a breeding ground for incidents of social and political disorder like looting, armed insurgency, armed robbery, civil wars, and terrorism.

The significance of the relative deprivation theory is that it does not focus on absolute deprivation alone but rather shows that social judgments are shaped by standards set by social comparisons.¹⁸ The theory sees relative and absolute deprivation as intimately intertwined. But like all theories that are essentially “idealizations”¹⁹ the relative deprivation theory has been criticized on at least three grounds. The first criticism leveled against it is that it generalizes from macro-phenomena to micro-level phenomena without being cognizant of the fact that “macro units are usually too broad to determine individual data, and individuals have unique properties that cannot be inferred from macro data.”²⁰ This criticism thus suggests that the theory is implicated in ecological fallacy. But this criticism does not differentiate between individual relative deprivation and group relative deprivation—a distinction that is so central to the study of collective violence. Reviews of the theory often neglect this aspect. When Gurr discusses collective violence, he uses the group relative deprivation variant which applies to group behavior. This distinction is significant because “[f]eeling deprived may inspire participation in collective behavior, but only if the person feels deprived on behalf of a relevant reference group.”²¹ Second, relative deprivation has been criticized on the ground that it cannot explain why some people who are deprived of rights and resources do not rebel or protest. In other words, grievances are ubiquitous but not everyone acts on their grievances. A related criticism is that relative deprivation cannot explain why some persons join social movements that do not directly benefit them. For example, McCarthy and Zald are of the view that “the heavy focus upon the psychological state of the mass of potential movement supporters within a collectivity has been accompanied by a lack of emphasis upon the processes by which persons and institutions from outside of the collectivity under consideration become involved; for instance, Northern white liberals in the Southern civil rights movement, or Russians and Cubans in Angola.”²² The combination of these criticisms has led some scholars to conclude that the theory’s findings are either contradictory or inconclusive,²³ that the focus should be on social and political structures,²⁴ and that the rational actor model should be used in place of relative deprivation to explain all forms of political violence.²⁵

While the above criticisms of relative deprivation theory are quite cogent, they do not necessarily rule out Ted Gurr’s theoretical import. The above criticisms of the theory utilize indicators of *absolute* deprivation instead of *relative* deprivation when these concepts are not the same: individuals and groups may not suffer from absolute deprivation but may still feel

discriminated and marginalized. Indeed, the relative deprivation theory is about “people’s perceptions rather than actual deprivations, yet critics tend to focus on the actual instead of the perceived deprivations.”²⁶ Perceptions of deprivation may or may not be congruent with actual material deprivations. Moreover, the theory is not oblivious to the social and political structure; rather, it embeds individual and group dissatisfaction within the larger social, political, and economic structure and encourages the analyses as much of individuals’ and groups’ opinions as of other variables such as the political environment, culture, and social norms.

Notwithstanding the potent criticisms leveled against the relative deprivation theory, it has strong explanatory power and relevance in predicting, explaining, and understanding collective violence. Accordingly, rather than discard relative deprivation as if it could not be employed to expound upon political phenomena, we would be better off with seeking potential areas where it could be used to explicate collective violence. In the next section, then, I shall explain how Nigeria’s myriad security issues stem from relative deprivation before turning to the connection between banditry and relative deprivation in Nigeria.

The connection between relative deprivation and security issues in Nigeria

It seems to me that it is quite difficult to understand armed banditry without an apposite grasp of the connections between relative deprivation and other security conundrums in the Nigerian state. It is no coincidence that much of the perturbations and devastations perpetrated by non-state actors in Nigeria have occurred in contexts of relative deprivation. Ekpenyong’s profiling of the socioeconomic background of incarcerated armed robbers in cities within southern Nigeria shows that “almost all had a low-status background, coming from the group that bears much of the burdens of the depressed and mismanaged economy.”²⁷ Most of the prison inmates who were interviewed resented the state and political actors for making life comfortable for a privileged few and extremely hard for the masses—and they did not regret indulging in criminal activities. Indeed, the armed robbers were dissatisfied by the discrepancies between what they had and what they think they should have.

Similarly, oil militancy beginning in the 1990s in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria occurred in a context of economic disempowerment and environmental degradation that drove young people to take up arms in rebellion against the state.²⁸ Omeje posits that “[i]n the face of protracted grievances of neglect and injustice, compounded by the inability of the rentier state to make significant sacrifices to uplift the Niger Delta region, the oil-bearing communities are compelled to resort increasingly to the use of violence. The state’s frequent use of military action to suppress local anti-oil protesters has

certainly created more aggravation than solution.”²⁹ The oil militants felt that oil companies and politicians were living large while the oil-producing communities did not receive much economic benefit from the state despite the wreckages of oil exploration in the Niger Delta that destroyed the waters of fishing communities. For this reason, the Niger Delta militants engaged in criminal activities such as abductions, pipeline vandalizations, car bombings, and extortions in order to attack the Nigerian government and its oil infrastructures. This compelled the government to make concessions by granting amnesty to the oil militants in 2009. Though the amnesty has brought some relief to the Niger Delta region, it is a “fragile peace” which has neither addressed environmental degradation nor poverty in oil communities. According to Daniel Agbibo “cash pay-outs to armed militants and proposals to give oil-bearing communities a 10% stake in state oil revenues fail to seriously address the underlying issues of ‘government corruption, political sponsorship of violence, and environmental degradation’ that continue to fuel resistance in the Niger Delta.”³⁰ The continuous neglect of oil-producing communities has produced what Oriola calls “resource frustration”³¹ which provokes “criminal resistance” in that militant youths in the Niger Delta region see kidnapping and piracy as a political project aimed at redressing the gross inequalities produced by the Nigerian state in collaboration with varied multinational corporations like Shell and British Petroleum.

Like oil militancy in the Niger Delta, radical Islamic terrorism found a place in northeast Nigeria which is one of the poorest geopolitical zones in Nigeria with high unemployment, low literacy, and poor infrastructures.³² This absolute deprivation in a state which has enormous resources stimulated perceptions of injustice among radical Islamists in the northeast. Mohammed Yusuf—Boko Haram’s founder—commanded a huge following because he provided his followers with material and financial resources to weather the storm. So convincing was his message about the depravity of the Nigerian political system that he ultimately founded Boko Haram in 2002—a terrorist group that has gone transnational, wreaking havoc not only in Nigeria but in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, thanks to its connection to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Yusuf and his extremist followers were brutalized by the military—and he was eventually killed in 2009. News of his demise radicalized his followers who took up arms to contest the corrupt Nigerian state. Abubakar Shekau—Yusuf’s successor—reformed the terrorist group. He condemned what he saw as the federal government’s neglect of the abject condition of Muslims. In one of his many vitriolic speeches, Shekau stated that “Everyone knows how they killed our leaders, and everyone knows how they treat us. Everyone knows what they have been doing to Muslim people in this

country for some time. For example, in the town of Kaduna, in Zangon Kataf, in the villages, they did many things to the Muslim community of this country, and these things happened without a fight.”³³

Likewise, the resurgence of Biafra secessionism in the southeast after Nigeria’s democratic transition in 1999 owes to the Igbos’ perception of marginalization and political exclusion³⁴ which has seemingly worsened during Muhammadu Buhari’s tenure as president. What the Igbos of diverse ideological persuasions aspire to is an independent Biafran state which takes them out of the sphere of perceived ethnic marginalization by Hausa and Fulani northern leaders who ostensibly do not have the interests of the Igbos at heart.³⁵ Igbo civic groups—Ohanaeze Ndigbo and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)—feel that Igbos lack political representation at the center relative to other ethnic groups. This perception often combines with memories of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967–1970) to generate a narrative of persistent exclusion of ethnic Igbos. The sentiment of relative deprivation among Igbos is implicit in the statement of Chief Nnia Nwodo, the President-General of Ohanaeze Ndigbo:

Under the current Federal government, Igbo representation is abysmal and falls extremely short of the constitutional provisions for the reflection of federal character in the appointment into important government positions. No arm of government namely, the executive, judiciary or legislature is headed by an Igbo. No section of the armed forces or paramilitary organization is headed by an Igbo. Neither the Supreme Court, Court of Appeal nor the Federal High Court is headed by an Igbo.³⁶

In the Middle Belt and southern states where predominantly Christian peasants and Fulani pastoralists increasingly clash, the former have persistently rejected government initiatives like the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlement policy and the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) which are geared toward reducing the conflicts between farmers and pastoralists because they perceive the policies as a strategy to favor the Fulani and to institutionalize Fulani domination throughout Nigeria. As one writer puts it: “No matter how it is dressed, Ruga connotes no other thing than a measure in ethnic domination and conquest as it seeks to create territories for Fulani people all over the country.”³⁷ Like RUGA, the NLTP has also failed to gain traction because “[e]thnic groups in the southern and Middle Belt states remain wary of the initiative, which they view as favoring Fulani herders over other ethnic and occupational groups.”³⁸ This is not aided by the fact that President Muhammadu Buhari—Nigeria’s current president—is a Fulani so that the notoriously fraught political histories among the various ethnic groups tend to bring back memories of Islamic jihadi conquest and Fulani domination under the auspices of Usman dan Fodio (and the Sokoto Caliphate) in the 1800s which subjugated non-Fulani ethnic groups.³⁹ Such perceptions of a Fulani conspiracy to marginalize non-Fulani—and

predominantly Christian—ethnic groups have led to policymakers in the Middle Belt and southern states imposing anti-grazing laws to stem open grazing of cattle by pastoralists.⁴⁰ These draconian laws have not only limited the economic opportunities of Fulani pastoralists in the Middle Belt and southern states but also fanned ethnic hostilities against Fulani pastoralists. As a Fulani pastoralist resident in the Igbo-majority Anambra State noted: “We are hunted by everyone, including the military, the police, the bandits and vigilante groups. When people see us in town, they try to call vigilante leaders who will hardly listen to you, once you are Fulani they execute you.”⁴¹ From the various cases of relative deprivation in the Nigerian state one would be hardly mistaken to contend that its varied security challenges are the consequence of perceptions among different groups of discrepancies between what they have and what they should have in the federation. In the next section I shall explain how armed banditry equally derives from the perception of relative deprivation among former pastoralists many of whom are of Fulani extraction.

Relative deprivation and banditry in Nigeria

Historians, political scientists, and anthropologists have shown that armed banditry has existed in the northern region of Nigeria as well as the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) since the precolonial and colonial eras so that it is not really a novel phenomenon in Nigeria.⁴² However, with the advent of new resources such as mobile phones, Kalashnikovs, and motorcycles, the vicious activities of armed bandits—the *coupeurs de route*—have intensified in the northern region of Nigeria where there are scarce opportunities for economic emancipation. But the ongoing crisis of banditry cannot be understood devoid of the skirmishes between farmers and pastoralists over land in the northwest geopolitical zone which intensified after 2011.⁴³ First, I should start out by explaining the lifestyle of the pastoralist Fulani many of whom constitute the armed bandits in the northwest geopolitical zones.⁴⁴ The Fulani are one of the largest nomadic groups in the world.⁴⁵ The origin of the Fulani is somewhat obscure though a common assumption—or myth—is that they were all nomads from Egypt and Sudan who then migrated to Senegal, and from there they spread eastwards with their cattle in search of grazing lands, finally arriving in Hausaland in the thirteenth century in what would later become a part of Nigeria.⁴⁶ Lambrecht elaborates on the various hypotheses regarding the origin of the Fulani:

The origin of the Fulani people is shrouded in mystery. Theories about their relationship to other people are numerous and wide-ranging. They are generally described as “Hamites” of [N]ilotic origin, which would explain the possession of longhorned cattle. Their language, however, is related to that of people from coastal Senegal, the land of the Wolof and the Serer, a thousand miles away from the Nile. East or West? Several

romantic suggestions have been put forward: for instance, their relationship to Phoenician crews left behind in coastal settlements during Pharaoh Necho's expedition that sailed around Africa in the 7th century B.C. Another fanciful hypothesis claims their relation to the Malaysian seafarers who landed along the eastern shores of Africa before settling in the Island of Madagascar. Generally well accepted is the suggestion that they migrated from the Nilo-Sudanese areas at a time coinciding with the expulsion from Egypt in 1570 B.C. of the Hyksos, pastoral kings of Asiatic origin. Those who support the theory of western origin postulate that the Fulani lived in the region of the Tekrur where they are still known under the name of "Tukuror," and that at one time they lived in close association with Berber pastoralists who visited the Senegal Valley seasonally with their cattle herds. The intermarriage between Phoenician colonists from Syria and Sudanese Uragara of Berber origin in the region of Fezzan has also been suggested.⁴⁷

What is incontrovertible amid the speculations regarding the origin of the Fulani in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular is that the successful jihadi conquest (1804–1808) of Usman dan Fodio—a Fulani revolutionary—against Hausa kings produced distinctions within the Fulani ethnic group in Hausaland: the sedentary Fulani (those who gave up nomadism) and the pastoralist Fulani (those who maintained nomadism). Whereas the sedentary Fulani "settled permanently in the cities where they attained a position of great influence and of such importance that they became the accepted rulers of several Emirates previously under the jurisdiction of Hausa families"⁴⁸ the pastoralist Fulani neither integrated politically, culturally, and socially with other ethnic groups. Similarly, Reed posits that "there are many small groups of settled Fulani who have forgotten their tribal origin and call themselves simply Fulani or, if pressed, will say they are Hadeijah Fulani or Burmi Fulani or Gombe Fulani and so on, giving the names of places with which they have recently been associated."⁴⁹ What binds the sedentary and pastoralist Fulani is not just the identification with the Fulani culture (*pulaaku*) but also the ability to speak and comprehend the Fulani language (Fulfulde).⁵⁰ However, criticisms of the sedentary Fulani for having abandoned pastoralism are not uncommon among the pastoralist Fulani who tend to see nomadic pastoralism as constitutive of *authentic* Fulani identity. The sedentary Fulani are equally critical of nomadism and tend not to subscribe to it even though they may own some cattle.⁵¹ The sedentary Fulani are largely Muslim and educated while the pastoralist Fulani fuse bits of Islamic practices with traditional beliefs and are generally uneducated. The pastoralist Fulani are a minority in Nigeria. This distinction between the sedentary and pastoralist Fulani is significant because the focus of this article is the latter many of whom have taken to armed banditry.

Reflecting on the culture of the pastoralist Fulani, Loftsdottir asserts that "they base their ethnic identity strongly on livestock holdings and the mobility intrinsic to their economy."⁵² Abandoning the nomadic lifestyle is tantamount to a loss of identity as the pastoralist Fulani "regards cattle as the all-in-all of his life. To him cattle rearing is a way of life rather than an economic activity;

cattle are an end in themselves as much as a means to an end.”⁵³ Even when the pastoralist Fulani abandon their cattle to look for economic opportunities in the urban spaces they do not see staying in the city as abandonment of mobility or an attempt at sedentarization but instead as an “ongoing journey that will eventually lead them back to the bush.”⁵⁴ The pastoralist Fulani’s lifestyle has been—for centuries before the foundation of modern African polities in the Sahel and West Africa—adapted to fit variable environmental and climatic conditions. When the environmental conditions are unfavorable the pastoralist Fulani move in search of greener pastures for their cattle. Movement is the pastoralist’s survival strategy.

The constraints on pastoralism in the context of farmer-pastoralist conflicts in northwestern Nigeria are at the heart of perceptions of relative deprivation among the armed bandits many of whom are former Fulani pastoralists. Two main perspectives have been employed to explain the peasant-pastoralist conflicts: (1) environmental scarcity, and (2) political ecology. The environmental scarcity argument draws on Thomas Homer-Dixon’s environment-conflict linkage model⁵⁵ to argue that the scarcity of land due to population pressures, climate change, and urbanization engenders peasant-pastoralist conflicts.⁵⁶ Olaniyan and Okeke-Uzodike observe that “about 35% of land areas that were cultivable before the 1960s are increasingly getting arid in 11 of Nigeria’s northernmost states of Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Yobe, Zamfara, Sokoto, and Kebbi”⁵⁷ leading to violent conflicts between pastoralists and peasants. By contrast, the political ecological framework holds that the politicization of space—land and territory—explains peasant-pastoralist conflicts.⁵⁸ Benjamin Maiangwa asserts that it is the “idealization of a strong sense of belonging to the land and space in which both groups (farmers and herders) carry out their everyday activities that undergird most incidents of farmer–herder conflicts in Nigeria and parts of West Africa.”⁵⁹

These two explanations for the farmer-pastoralist conflicts apply, in my view, in northwest Nigeria where Fulani pastoralists and Hausa peasants increasingly clash. The Fulani and Hausa are the two major ethnic groups in the northwest geopolitical zone and—owing to more than a century of contact due, as I have earlier explained, to the myth of the Fulani’s migration to Hausaland in the thirteenth century as well as the Sokoto Jihad of Usman dan Fodio in the 1800s—share strong cultural ties. Other ethnic groups in the region include the Kanuri, Zuru, Bajju, Jaba, Tuareg, Zabarmawa, and Gwari. While the Fulani are predominantly pastoralists, the Hausa are typically farmers. According to the International Crisis Group, “[t]he region’s estimated population of 33 million (based on figures from the contentious 2006 census) is predominantly Muslim (Sunni). Most of the population (about 80%) are farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists or small-scale entrepreneurs. The region has substantial solid mineral deposits,

including gold exploited by artisanal miners in open pit mines.”⁶⁰ As the two dominant groups—the Hausa and the Fulani—in the region share strong religious and cultural ties, one may perhaps expect that violent confrontations between them would rarely occur. But the inverse is the case as Hausa peasants and Fulani pastoralists struggle over access to land and other resources in the context of environmental scarcity due to population pressures, urbanization, and climate change in the northwest region. Many Fulani pastoralists could hardly find fertile land to graze their cattle: this meant that their cattle oftentimes encroached on the farmlands of Hausa peasants and destroyed crops. The Fulani’s cows were usually killed on most of these occasions. Besides, because of the widespread belief that the Fulanis migrated to Hausaland in the distant past, Fulani pastoralists are considered non-natives—or, “non-indigenes”⁶¹ in the local parlance—by the Hausa peasants. This politicization of land denied Fulani pastoralists the right to graze cattle on lands. Such claims of autochthony also saw some Hausa peasants connive with traditional authorities in the northwest region to take over the pastoralists’ grazing areas for agricultural expansion purposes. Fulani pastoralists faced invidious discrimination from law enforcement agencies especially tax agencies; some were brutally murdered whenever confrontations over land rights occurred between peasants and pastoralists. As a result, the nomadic lifestyle and the economic livelihood of the pastoralists were both existentially threatened. The concatenation of these environmental and political ecological factors, so it seems to me, led, and still lead some pastoralists into armed banditry primarily for economic survival and secondarily for physical safety and ethnic revenge against Hausa peasants.

As Hausa peasants and Fulani pastoralists increasingly competed over scarce resources, they both mobilized vigilante groups for protection. This created chaos as reprisal attacks became the norm. With arms proliferation and porous borders in the Sahel region, organized criminal gangs composed of pastoralists who felt socially, economically, and politically excluded—due in large part to the decline of available grazing lands for cattle herding, the excessive brutality of the vigilante groups that attacked pastoralists, and the perceived corruption that saw pastoralists’ grazing areas handed over to peasants—exploited the politically unstable environment to engage in nefarious criminal activities.⁶² These criminal gangs neither engage in farming nor in traditional pastoralism. Rather, they conduct myriad criminal activities to earn a living as the society and government in the northwest region are perceived as incapable of protecting Fulani pastoralists’ interests and providing them with alternative economic opportunities as nomadism is increasingly under threat from the forces of modernization and industrialization. This perception of relative deprivation among some pastoralists is the root of ongoing armed banditry in the northwest region. The armed bandits compare

their previous situation when they could graze cattle on lands and maintain their nomadic identity to the present condition when they can no longer do so. These discrepancies coupled with their future expectations of a better life for Fulani pastoralists relative to Hausa peasants also generate ethnic grievances. Thus, it is against this background of perceptions of exclusion, dispossession, and marginalization among some Fulani pastoralists that we must comprehend banditry in northwest Nigeria.

The British historian Eric Hobsbawm avers that banditry tends to become “epidemic in times of pauperization and economic crisis.”⁶³ As I have noted in the theoretical framework, relative and absolute deprivation intimately intertwine. The armed bandits’ relative deprivation must be situated in the context of absolute deprivation in Nigeria in general and in the northwest geopolitical zone in particular. For, as I say, the absolute deprivation in Nigeria and in the northwest impacts on pastoralists’ relative deprivation and opportunities for socioeconomic emancipation in the absence of the nomadic occupation. Despite being the largest economy in Africa, Nigeria is the “poverty capital of the world”⁶⁴ with 40.1% of the total population classified as poor which translates to 82.9 million Nigerians out of an approximately 190 million population who live on less than \$1 a day and \$381.75 a year. During the coronavirus pandemic—the period when abductions of schoolchildren in the north-west by armed bandits increased—unemployment reached a record high of 33.3%.⁶⁵ These are rough estimates given that ordinary Nigerians generally believe that the “official data” do not reflect the “real data”—the lived experiences of people. In other words, there are more unemployed Nigerians than is formally reported given the prevalence of the informal economy. In addition, many of those formally employed are underemployed, working jobs that do not reflect their actual skills and financial needs. The “social indicators in Nigeria are among the worst in the whole world. In every five children, one dies at the age of five. Over 12 million children are out of school and there are about two million AIDS orphans.”⁶⁶ Nigeria’s condition is one of “growth without development” not least because its stature as Africa’s largest economy does not translate to poverty alleviation for its citizenry. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Nigeria has been called the “crippled giant.”⁶⁷

While poverty at the national level is extremely high, there are notable discrepancies in the levels of poverty regionally as the poverty rate differs from one geopolitical zone to another. Nigeria is divided into six geopolitical zones: northcentral or the Middle Belt (Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Abuja); northeast (Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, Yobe); northwest (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara); southeast (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo); southsouth or the Niger Delta (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Rivers, Delta, Edo); and southwest (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo). According to geopolitical zones, the northwest—wherefrom the armed bandits originate and operate—is the most

impoverished with a poverty rate of 77.7%.⁶⁸ And, generally, the northern geopolitical zones are poorer relative to the southern geopolitical zones. This is worsened by the fact that “the wealthy elite throughout the country tend to be Christian, while the most impoverished communities in the country are found among the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and other northern groups—all of them primarily Muslim.”⁶⁹ With regard to the northwest geopolitical zone, the International Crisis Group state that:

As of 2019, all seven states in the zone had poverty levels above the national average of 40.1 per cent, led by Sokoto (87.7 per cent), Jigawa (87 per cent) and Zamfara (74 per cent). Millions lack access to basic health care and clean water, and immunization coverage is far below national goals. While the region has a long and proud history of Islamic and Arabic scholarship, apathy toward, and inadequate investment in, formal education over the decades have contributed to a literacy rate of 29.7 per cent. The zone currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. On top of those who do not attend school at all, millions of children are in the poorly resourced and ill-supervised Quranic school system, or *almajiranci*, which produces cohorts of unskilled youth.⁷⁰

The Action on Armed Violence’s report on poverty across Nigeria further clarifies the socioeconomic condition in the north-west as follows:

Across a range of poverty measures, the north-west performs very poorly. The north-west region has an infant mortality rate of 91 (compared to a national average of 87). The north-west has the second highest rate in the country of male respondents who reported having no educational attainment whatsoever (at 48.8%) and the highest rates of female respondents reporting they had no educational attainment (at 67.5%) . . . Many factories in the region (particularly in Kano) are either closed down or operating at loss—a result partly of inadequate power supplies that leave many youths unemployed and vulnerable to violence.⁷¹

Unemployed, unskilled, young people who feel betrayed by a politically corrupt system that does not provide resources and social amenities are quite vulnerable to criminality and political violence.⁷² It is no coincidence that the armed bandits in the northwest region emerge from a condition of absolute deprivation which—combined with dispossession and marginalization of Fulani pastoralists by peasant communities in collaboration with traditional local authorities—predisposes them to perceptions of exclusion by the Nigerian state.⁷³ Consider, by way of example, the following report:

In Zamfara state, the government decided to clear large forests and grazing reserves in the Kuyambana forest and in parts of the Maru and Zurmi local government areas. This action disrupted life in Fulani hamlets, some centuries old, limiting the availability of pasture for their livestock. The allocation of land to farmers also resulted in encroachment on, and blockage of, livestock grazing routes, and created conditions for increased trespass on farmlands by herders and more demands for compensation for damaged crops. While farmers complained of herders trespassing on their farms and damaging

crops, herders protested the compensation they had to pay for damaged crops, and complained that farmers, district heads, police and courts were colluding against them in a corrupt process.⁷⁴

Indeed, there is the sense of relative deprivation, a sense of injustice, among the armed bandits—the perception of discrepancies between what they had, what they have, and what they think they should have. The armed bandits most of whom are former pastoralists feel marginalized in a state which has so much resources but nothing to give them as an alternative to nomadic pastoralism, a cultural and economic practice that has proved impossible to sustain due to environmental and political ecological factors. A paradigmatic example of the connection between relative deprivation and armed banditry in the northwest region is axiomatic from a journalist's interview conducted with one group of bandits in the Sububu Forest: the bandits contended that banditry is their only means of economic survival as grazing lands have been taken over by farmers and cattle herding has become extremely unprofitable. One bandit retorted that the reason for resorting to armed banditry is their sense of neglect by the government which does not treat ethnic Fulanis like every other ethnic group in Nigeria: "The reason is neglect. We have been neglected. This country is a rich nation with natural resources, but we (the Fulani) have not been educated." Furthermore, the bandits emphasized that,

We [the Fulani] are deprived of keeping cattle because of lack of grazing areas. They have taken over the grazing areas, even the grazing routes are no longer there. Soldiers would take over (our) cattle, vigilante would confiscate and gunmen would rustle. We have been rendered poor.⁷⁵

The above response shows the connection between relative and absolute deprivation among the bandits. Indeed, it is their absolute deprivation—their present condition of material lack—which impacts on their feeling of being deprived relative not only to their past situation but also with regard to other ethnic groups. If the nation is endowed with oil and gas—so the armed bandits' sentiments go—how come we (the Fulani) have been deprived of land, grazing areas, and resources to maintain not just the nomadic lifestyle but also our means of economic livelihood compared to other ethnic groups? Why can't members of the Fulani ethnic group—especially the pastoralists among them—be as educated as other ethnic groups? The response from the bandits of Fulani extraction regarding why they engage in criminal activities like kidnapping, cattle rustling, and looting corroborates the interactions of relative and absolute deprivation among pastoralists:

We took up arms because we are herders and despite this country's wealth, we are not carried along, we are not educated, we do not know anything. We do not have security, we do not have any benefit. We are the ones being killed, but are always seen as the

aggressors. We don't have anything. Wherever a herder is, he is uneducated and has nothing. In this country, there is everything but we are not carried along. It is as though we do not exist. We are just being killed.⁷⁶

Amid the security panic created by armed bandits in the northwest, a “controversial” Muslim cleric has emerged who negotiates ransom payments for families and friends of the armed bandits’ victims: Sheikh Ahmad Gumi. In his several negotiations to free captives, Gumi has equally highlighted the relative deprivation among the armed bandits: the criminal gangs feel excluded not only because of lack of economic opportunities for them in the northwest region but also due to the marginalization of nomadic pastoralists of Fulani extraction and unfair treatment by the military and law enforcement agencies.⁷⁷ For Gumi, armed banditry is a strategy to draw the attention of the government to the existential neglect of Fulani pastoralist communities: what the bandits yearn for is socioeconomic justice. Gumi has recommended negotiating with the armed bandits to address their myriad grievances rather than expending copious resources through military warfare.⁷⁸ References are made to the amnesty program in the Niger Delta which saw the demise of oil militancy in the region. As he put it: “There is nowhere that peace can reign without justice and if there is justice, the federal and state governments would not have been wasting huge amounts of money to quell banditry in the state.”⁷⁹ But Gumi’s remarks have been lambasted by various regional, religious, and ethnic groups, for backing bandits and encouraging criminality in Nigeria.⁸⁰ If everyone took the same route—so the counterargument goes—would that not embolden rather than stem banditry and other criminal activities?

Whatever the case, it seems to me that the primary motive of banditry is socioeconomic emancipation which, in turn, derives from the structural inequality, poverty, and perceived marginalization of pastoralists in the northwest geopolitical zone. For the armed bandits and their herder-allied groups, banditry is a form of socioeconomic emancipation from the ravages of material deprivation haplessly bequeathed to nomadic Fulani communities by a predatory political system that alienates them. Banditry is an emancipatory enterprise, albeit criminal. It is an illicit industry geared toward enriching the thousands of unemployed youth—mainly from nomadic pastoralist communities—who perceive a discrepancy between what they had, what they have, and what they should or could have in terms of the provision of welfare values. Such criminality is the soul of a soulless milieu that nurtures misery, illiteracy, hopelessness; it is the anguish of the precariat over their torturous socioeconomic condition.

Economic precarity is not a “given” but the deliberate construction of political actors who demarcate lives between the desirables and undesirables—that is, between those who must live and those who must die.⁸¹ There is no

doubt that banditry mirrors the condition of some Nigerians for whom criminality of sorts is an effective means to rebel against abjections manufactured by the state through its political elites' crass mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds. Indeed, the problematic of banditry in the northwest region lends significance to the observation that “[m]ost Nigerian practices of organized crime, including document fraud, embezzlement and large scale smuggling, originate in politics and the state itself, or at least have important and durable connections to the state.”⁸² One would not be mistaken, then, to describe the Nigerian state as a “colossal collection of impoverished masses, a crumbling Tower of Babel built on the rickety foundations of oil rents collected and squandered by its leaders.”⁸³ In the next section, I delve into the activities of bandits in the northwest geopolitical zone so as to make sense of the appeal of criminality in the context of relative deprivation.

The criminal activities of bandits

Though criminality of sorts has existed in the northwest region for decades, banditry became a national issue since 2011.⁸⁴ The first major attack from the bandits occurred on 5 April 2014 in ‘Yar Galadima—a village in Maru local government of Zamfara—where over 200 people were slaughtered as the criminals carted away with monies and several valuable resources.⁸⁵ The bandits carry out attacks from forests and bushes in rural areas and typically wield AK-47s, machetes, G3s, and AK-49s on motorcycles.

As I have noted in the previous section, the primary motive of the bandits is socioeconomic emancipation, so they engage in lucrative—though, by every means, illicit—activities: kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and looting. Kidnapping is quite lucrative in Nigeria. An SB Morgen report on the kidnap-for-ransom economy in Nigeria notes that “between June 2011 and the end of March 2020, at least \$18.34 million has been paid to kidnappers as ransom. Even more frightening is that the larger proportion of that figure (just below \$11 million), was paid out between January 2016 and March 2020, indicating that kidnapping is becoming more lucrative.”⁸⁶ The bandits’ victims are forced to pay between \$2,000 and \$20,000 for the release of captives.⁸⁷ One victim in Gidan Goga in Zamfara narrates that “[b]efore Ramadan, the bandits called . . . and said that if we didn’t pay them ₦500,000 (USD \$1,400), they would come and kidnap me or the village head.”⁸⁸ The bandits have informants in local communities who keep them posted about the whereabouts of potential victims. The bandits sometimes send letters to victims before attacking them. Captives whose relatives do not comply with the demands or deadlines of the bandits are potential victims of gruesome massacres. Sunday posits that “the kidnappers are open to negotiating the ransom money but if the victim’s family refuses to pay or fails to raise the money, they show no remorse in killing and dumping the body in the forest. There are places of torture too,

where victims are pressured with cruel punishments to comply.”⁸⁹ Since December 2020, kidnapping—especially of schoolchildren, health workers, and university students—has become one of the most lucrative sources of the bandits’ income.

Beyond kidnapping, cattle rustling is also lucrative as the economic value of cattle has increased over the years. Examining the cattle business, for example, Olayinka Ajala asserts that an “adult cow in Nigeria could cost as much as ₦350,000 (US \$1,000), and this makes it lucrative for potential investors.”⁹⁰ For the bandits of Fulani extraction, cattle represent “social-security guarantee and inheritable assets for the herder’s family, particularly for his offspring. So central is the herd as pastoral capital that, aside from functioning as a means of production, storage, and transport, and a way to transfer food and wealth to the Fulani, its size indicates the social status of the individual or family and evokes an unspoken dictum to strive to increase the herd.”⁹¹ It is unsurprising, then, that given the lucrateness of cattle and the social status they confer on pastoralists, criminal gangs made up of former herders engage in cattle rustling. Precisely because not every pastoralist is a bandit or indulges in such criminal activities, pastoralists who are not part of one of the criminal gangs in the northwest region are also victims of banditry.

It is worthy of note that states in the northwest region—especially Zamfara—are specially endowed with large deposits of mineral resources like gold, gypsum, emerald, sapphire, lead, tourmaline, silver, barite, silica sand, granite, clay, and sandstones. It is estimated that “80% of mining in these areas is carried out illegally and on an artisanal basis, involving over two million people who depend on illegal mining activities for survival.”⁹² The illegal miners in the region are mostly the poor and unemployed living in rural areas. The bandits profit from illegal mining by attacking villages and local communities where local artisanal miners live and carting away with gold and precious mineral resources.⁹³ Revenues derived from the sale of stolen gold and precious mineral resources are used to purchase arms including motorcycles that are readily available in the region. These weapons are used to further unleash mayhem on communities in the north-west. With the presence of mineral and natural resources, armed bandits have incentives to continue their criminal activities, thereby rendering the conflict intractable. As Lujala notably underscores: “[i]f resources are located inside the actual conflict zone, the duration of conflict is doubled.”⁹⁴ In this sense, the concatenation of illegal mining and banditry produces a seemingly unending cycle of violence.

The bandits’ activities have had a plethora of social, economic, and humanitarian consequences for citizens and the state. Victims’ families have had to relocate or shut down their businesses after paying hefty ransom fees; victims experience physical, sexual, and psychological abuse during captivity; several

schools in the northwest region have been shut due to anxiety that the bandits may attack them; internally displaced persons (IDPs) and camps have skyrocketed as has human trafficking; and, of course, resources that could have been invested in building requisite infrastructure and improving educational and medical standards—areas in which the Nigerian state is extremely deficient—are diverted to military and defense expenditures. Food insecurity in the northwest region is a “coming anarchy”⁹⁵ as farmers have abandoned farming activities and their communities for security reasons. As one farmer in Kaduna noted:

Now, we are here living like refugees in our own state begging for food. Meanwhile, just like many others you are seeing here, we have our farms; we are not liabilities, but these people have prevented us from going to our farms. I invested about N2million [\$4,886] on my farm but now I can't go there. Even before our coming here, I couldn't visit the farm anymore because of the bandits; they kidnap people on their ways to farm. In fact, I have spent about 30 days now without visiting my farm and you know what that means for a farmer, who is supposed to be harvesting by now.⁹⁶

Amid these uncertainties, the Nigerian government and state governments in the northwest region have responded in various ways, too. In the next section, I explore state responses to, and the future of, banditry in the northwest geopolitical zone.

State responses to banditry

Because banditry has been considered a problem of “ungoverned spaces” the federal government and state governments in the northwest region have largely employed military measures to curb it in addition to some ineffective nonmilitary measures. This could be divided into carrots and sticks. The sticks are mainly military and airforce operations as well as legal measures. Military and airforce measures include Exercise Harbin Kunama III, Operation Puff Adder, Diran Mikiya, Sharan Daji, Hadarin Daji, and Thunder Strike.⁹⁷ These measures entail that the military raid forest enclaves where bandits operate from. Whereas the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) neutralize bandits through aerial surveillance missions, the Nigerian Army use soldiers on the ground to identify the bandits' hideouts in forests and to prevent abductions, looting, and cattle rustling.⁹⁸ Legal measures include passing laws to stem whatever fuels the violence such as the use of commercial motorcycles and illegal mining. For example, in early April 2019, the Nigerian government—convinced that illegal mining drives banditry—banned mining in Zamfara and other states in the northwest where mining activities are conducted.⁹⁹ This neither prevented illegal mining nor looting, cattle rustling, and kidnapping by the criminal gangs. Of course, banning artisanal and small-scale miners from mining would not resolve banditry; rather it would serve as the breeding

ground for poor residents to engage in criminal activities in collaboration with foreign nationals as is already evident in Nigeria.¹⁰⁰ As I see it, the interdiction of illegal mining does not mean much as socioeconomic opportunities are not created for young people—especially the youth in nomadic communities—in the northwest. And although commercial motorcycles have been banned in some states in the northwest geopolitical zone, the criminal gangs have enormous ties to motorcycle vendors who supply them with unregistered motorcycles.¹⁰¹

The carrot includes negotiating with the criminal gangs and offering them amnesty or pardon. For example, the governors of Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto negotiated with some of the bandits in 2019 but the peace deal was rather short-lived as the bandits returned to their criminal activities some months after they were granted amnesty. The failure of the amnesty program has been attributed to the fact that the bandits “lack central command and a common goal, so it has been difficult to bring them all to a common negotiation. Moreover, agreements with one group are not binding on others”¹⁰² In other words, the bandits are not a monolithic group but a conjunction of many different unorganized or loosely organized criminal gangs. Treating them as a single group with one leader has been profoundly counterproductive. But there are as well concerns that most of the recalcitrant criminals never gave up their arms and that the guns-for-cash program emboldened bandits with more money to purchase more arms and more motivation to raid villages with gross impunity. Rewarding bandits who surrendered their arms with money and cars caused panic among residents that banditry may be indirectly legitimized as a means of earning a living. Anyadike intimates that “[t]he money incentivized gun ownership, creating more criminals, which a negligent state government then failed to pay. Some bandits—being bandits—also cheated and only pretended to quit, returning to crime full-time when the cash ran out.”¹⁰³

All these approaches have so far failed because, in my view, they are focused on short-term fixes devoid of long-term solutions through socioeconomic interventions. The military might succeed in quashing the myriad criminal gangs but not the ethnic grievances or material frustrations of the pastoralist communities wherefrom thousands of the armed bandits are recruited. It seems to me that—given the roots of armed banditry in ethnic grievances and material deprivation—neither the military approach nor amnesty programme proposed by Gumi for bandits will effectively curb the menace in the northwest region. This is largely because the problem requires long-term fixes possible through socioeconomic interventions that address the bandits’ relative and absolute deprivation. This is comprehensible from an interview with one of the bandits who was asked why the peace deals with the state governments failed to gain traction. The bandit underlined that: “[t]he people you see

here, some have spent up to 10 years away from their homes. They are only in the forests with guns. You say you have made peace with him but left him in the bush with a gun and ammunition. What do you expect from him?”¹⁰⁴ The bandit noted the relative and absolute deprivation of Fulani communities and called for Fulani pastoralists to be treated the same way as other ethnic groups like the Hausa and the Yoruba:

There was a peace accord and we stated our grievances and what should be done, but we were abandoned. An agreement was reached but you left that person in the forest with a gun and nothing to substitute. What do you expect? How do you want that person to survive? All the promises made to us none of it was fulfilled. What we demand is that the way they give jobs to their children and enroll the young ones in schools, we [the Fulani] should be treated the same way. The Hausa, Yoruba and the Fulani should be treated equally. The president should personally come and preside over the talks.¹⁰⁵

The bandits further underlined their sense of relative deprivation across time—that is, how the Fulani pastoralists were treated well under previous administrations and how they have now been excluded and denied access to education, social amenities, and lands and forests for cattle grazing:

There is no day that someone is not killed in Zamfara, Niger, Kaduna, Sokoto and Katsina. No two days pass without someone getting killed in these places. There is no tribe that is spared, gunmen kill, soldiers kill, vigilantes kill. Whoever you see with a gun today in Nigeria, he uses it to kill peopleWe supported this administration and accepted dialogue because we thought Buhari will fix this country, but he won't fix this countryDuring Abacha, there was allocation in the budget for the nomadic communities. There was no such thing again since Obasanjo became president. They stopped looking after the Fulanis. Their forests and grazing areas were taken over.¹⁰⁶

Some other groups of bandits who reneged on the peace deal, nay amnesty, noted their absolute deprivation and do not wish to accept peace deals if they do not come with socioeconomic interventions for Fulani pastoralists: “[i]n some of our communities, there is no potable drinking water, no accessible road, no good health care delivery service or any form of social facility and until the state government addresses these problems, we will not embrace the peace accord and reconciliation.”¹⁰⁷ What is incontrovertible from these interviews is that the national wealth does not trickle down to the poorest of the poor—and this makes the bandits perceive themselves as marginalized Fulani pastoralist communities as they see other ethnic communities faring better than theirs. Their absolute deprivation impacts on their perception of being deprived relative to other ethnic communities. Without socioeconomic interventions, banditry will continue in the foreseeable future and perhaps evolve into a more lethal force by allying with Boko Haram and global jihadi forces in the Sahel. In fact, collaboration between Boko Haram terrorists and the bandits has been underlined by some analysts who consider the bandits as the “financial wing of Boko Haram”:

Bandits are now members of Boko Haram. The only avenue left for Boko Haram to raise funds now is banditry. Bandits are occupying Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Niger, and Kaduna States to raise funds for Boko Haram. Boko Haram is using banditry to infiltrate all parts of Nigeria. Banditry represents the financial wing of Boko Haram to raise funds to finance terror activities. Bandits are terrorists who can raise funds for Boko Haram across Nigeria.¹⁰⁸

The danger of banditry evolving into terrorism and insurgency is, I think, that the criminal gangs would have a moral and religious justification—beyond perceptions of material deprivation—for their vicious crimes. This would make the insecurity profoundly difficult to curb. This has been underlined by Bukarti who posits that “[t]hrough partnering with Boko Haram, gangs stand to gain a moral justification for their crimes by framing their actions as part of a jihad approved by Allah and their gains as booty of war permitted by Islam. This may make them more vicious and allow them to recruit more young people.”¹⁰⁹ This might be the case if the Nigerian government invests more in military measures than in socioeconomic intervention programs that address pastoralist Fulanis’ grievances and material deprivation as well as the longstanding material deprivation in the northwest region. John Campbell is thus right to assert that to truly achieve peace in the northwest region, the state must address structural inequalities like poverty, government mistreatment, unemployment, and lack of education.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The argument from “ungoverned spaces” assumes that a military approach is necessary and sufficient to curb banditry in the northwest region. While this measure is obviously imperative to eradicate criminality anywhere, it is not sufficient as it does not address the root causes of banditry—youth unemployment, dispossession, mistreatment, poverty, and illiteracy—which make some pastoralists take up arms for economic survival and ethnic revenge. If military measures reign supreme, there is the tendency that the bandits will find ways of persisting: this could mean liaising with transnational terror groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, al-Qaeda, and al-Shabaab. Military warfare is a short-term fix that does not consider the perspectives of the Fulani pastoralists turned armed bandits who are themselves victims of an exploitative political system. Rather than work toward the provision of socioeconomic goods—education, healthcare, good roads and social amenities, youth employment, and equitable judicial services—for pastoralist communities in the northwest geopolitical zone, the state has invested copious resources on defense, banning motorcycles and artisanal mining, and criminalizing ransom payments to the armed bandits as if these were the real sources of the problem. The amnesty program is also a short-term fix that does not address the underlying ethnic grievances and material deprivation of pastoralists. All these strategies are

somewhat misguided. This is not aided by the fact that the bandits have been labelled as terrorists. This would, in my view, make little or no impact on curbing banditry in the long-term. Making a “suspect community”¹¹¹ out of an entire ethnic community would only provide grounds of legitimation for young nomadic Fulanis’ radicalization.¹¹² Because “ungoverned spaces” need not be dangerous, banditry will decline when the state addresses relative deprivation among pastoralists and provides plausible alternatives to wealth acquisition and socioeconomic emancipation beyond criminality for young people in the northwest region. This could be achieved in at least four ways. First, the state must invest in education, healthcare, and social amenities in the northwest geopolitical zone which happens to be the most impoverished zone in Nigeria. Pastoralist communities should have access to education, healthcare, and other necessities of life. Second, the state must provide ranches and restore grazing areas for pastoralists some of which have been taken over by agriculturalists. Third, the state must address ethnic grievances by prosecuting abuses and extrajudicial killings by the police, the military, and vigilante groups. The criminal justice system is critical in that regard. Finally, extensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs must be established by the state to aid the transition and reintegration of repentant combatants of the various armed groups in the north-west and north-central geopolitical zones. To accomplish these, Nigeria needs the support as much of its African allies as of the international community.

Notes

1. Because the motive of the criminals is primarily economic, the Nigerian populace normally use the term “armed bandits” to describe the non-state armed groups. However, since 18 July 2021 when some of the criminal gangs shot down one of Nigerian Airforce’s Alpha Jet Aircraft, there have been calls by local analysts to classify the bandits as “terrorists.” See Jonathan Nda-Isaiah, “Bandits are terrorists,” *The Cable*, July 21, 2021. <https://www.thecable.ng/bandits-are-terrorists> (accessed July 25, 2021). In January 2022, following the lethality of the armed groups’ attacks on civilians and the military, bandits were classified as terrorists by the Nigerian government. In this research article, I use the term “armed bandits” for purposes of distinguishing them from Boko Haram, Ansaru, and ISWAP terrorists. Hence, my choice of terminology is for technical and analytical reasons.
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