

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ARMED BANDITRY IN KATSINA STATE: STRATEGIC DRIVERS, SPONSORS AND BENEFICIARIES

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ABSTRACT

Katsina State has emerged as one of the epicenters of violent armed banditry in northwestern Nigeria, where persistent insecurity has devastated rural livelihoods, displaced thousands of residents, and weakened governance structures. While existing literature primarily focuses on the criminal dimensions of banditry, limited scholarly attention has been given to the underlying political economy that sustains and perpetuates the crisis. This study examines the strategic drivers, sponsors, and beneficiaries of armed banditry in Katsina State between 2016 and 2025, situating the phenomenon within the intersection of insecurity, politics, and survival economies. Anchored in Human Security Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, the research employs a qualitative methodological framework involving in-depth interviews with victims, local leaders, and policymakers, complemented by a systematic analysis of state security reports, media narratives, and archival records. Findings reveal that structural factors such as youth unemployment, pervasive rural poverty, climate-induced resource competition, and the erosion of traditional authority create fertile conditions for recruitment into armed groups. Moreover, the study identifies the complicity of political elites, illicit arms merchants, and corrupt state actors who act as both sponsors and beneficiaries of the conflict, exploiting insecurity for electoral manipulation, resource extraction, and personal enrichment. The persistence of banditry in Katsina State reflects not merely a weakness in state coercive capacity but an entrenched network of vested interests. Addressing the crisis requires governance reforms, institutional transparency, and community-driven resilience strategies that promote social cohesion and sustainable peace.

Keywords: Armed Banditry, Political Economy, Katsina State, Security, Governance

Introduction

Over the past decade, Katsina State has become a central theatre in the escalating crisis of violent armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria. What began as localized cattle rustling and rural insecurity has evolved into widespread criminal violence involving mass killings, abductions, and economic predation. In August 2025, for instance, gunmen attacked a mosque in Unguwan Mantau, killing up to 50 people, including 30 worshippers inside the mosque and 20 villagers nearby (AP News, 2025a). The same month, another assault during morning prayers in Funtua LGA claimed 13 lives (AP News, 2025b). These incidents are emblematic of a broader pattern of violence that has engulfed the state, displacing thousands and devastating rural livelihoods.

The humanitarian implications extend beyond direct fatalities. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that at least 652 children died from malnutrition in Katsina during the first half of 2025 a 208% increase from 2024 attributed largely to displacement, food insecurity, and abandonment of farmland (Reuters, 2025a). Across Batsari, Jibia, and Faskari LGAs, farmers have either fled their land or paid heavy levies to bandit groups to continue cultivation. In some cases, households reportedly paid between ₦70,000 and ₦100,000 to access their farms, in addition to surrendering portions of their harvest as tribute (Reuters, 2024). Consequently, agricultural production the backbone of Katsina's rural economy has collapsed. For instance, maize farmers' incomes fell from ₦529,180 before the crisis to ₦372,757, while yields dropped by over 50% (Ibrahim, Adejare, & Abdullahi, 2024). This economic decline has triggered social unrest, with community protests erupting in Kankara, Malumfashi, Jibia, and Batsari over persistent killings, abductions, and the state's perceived inaction (Vanguard, 2024; Daily Trust, 2024).

To interpret this crisis, theoretical frameworks rooted in the political economy of violence are essential. Banditry in Katsina is not merely a by-product of disorder or state weakness; it represents a complex system of economic accumulation, power negotiation, and moral justification. As Collins (2008) and Keen (2012) argue, violent conflicts often endure because they serve the interests of certain actors who profit politically or economically from instability. Within this context, the concept of the moral economy of violence (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976; Iluobe, 2023) helps explain how marginalized groups rationalize raiding, extortion, and armed mobilization as adaptive survival strategies amid exclusion and insecurity.

In Katsina, this political economy is sustained by illicit markets including ransom payments, cattle rustling, and small-arms trafficking which generate revenue for armed groups and their collaborators. Moreover, the entanglement of political elites, traditional authorities, and security actors with these networks has blurred the boundary between governance and criminality. A case in point is the controversial conferment of the title "Sarkin Fulani" on bandit leader Ado Aleru in 2022, ostensibly to promote peace but widely criticized as legitimizing violence and undermining the rule of law (ICG, 2020). Equally significant is the proliferation of vigilante formations such as the *Yan Sakai* (Hausa farmers) and *Yan Bindiga* (Fulani pastoralists), each claiming to defend their communities but frequently engaging in retaliatory attacks that deepen cycles of revenge (Okoli, 2023). In many areas, these vigilantes have assumed quasi-sovereign authority, dispensing justice and collecting levies in the absence of effective state control. The emergence of such parallel security systems underscores how state fragility has created a fragmented security order governed by competing moral and economic logics.

This study situates the Katsina crisis within the broader African political economy of violence literature (Reno, 1998; Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Keen, 2012). It argues that banditry persists not merely because of weak institutions or poverty, but because it has become economically and politically functional for a constellation of actors from local warlords to complicit elites. By integrating the analytical lenses of human security, moral economy, and conflict transformation, the study examines how violence becomes institutionalized and self-sustaining within subnational contexts. From a policy standpoint, the findings are crucial. The persistence of armed

banditry despite recurrent military operations and amnesty programs demonstrates that security-centric approaches alone are insufficient. Initiatives such as the Katsina State Community Watch Corps (CWC), introduced in 2024, have achieved limited success through community-based intelligence (Independent Nigeria, 2025). Similarly, peace dialogues in Safana LGA illustrate the potential of locally grounded negotiation (Daily Trust, 2025). However, durable peace requires dismantling the political and economic incentives that make violence profitable. While existing literature on northern Nigeria's insecurity highlights poverty, climate change, and governance deficits as drivers (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014; Akinola, 2020), few studies interrogate the sponsor networks and beneficiary systems that sustain armed banditry. In Katsina State, anecdotal evidence suggests collusion between political elites, security actors, and criminal networks. The state's 2019 amnesty program, which involved direct negotiations with bandit leaders, further exposed the blurred lines between peacebuilding and patronage politics (ICG, 2020). To address these gaps, this study pursues the following research objectives:

- i. To analyze the structural and proximate drivers of banditry in Katsina State.
- ii. To examine the roles of sponsors, collaborators, and enablers in sustaining the crisis.
- iii. To identify and assess the categories of beneficiaries and their interests in the continuation of violence.

Conceptual Clarification

The phenomenon of armed banditry in Katsina State cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-economic and political contexts that shape it. Conceptual clarity is vital for framing the discourse within appropriate analytical boundaries. This section therefore explicates key concepts *political economy of violence*, *criminal networks*, *shadow economy*, *greed versus grievance*, *resource competition*, *warlord politics*, and *predatory governance* which collectively illuminate the structural and material foundations of banditry in Katsina State.

Political Economy of Violence

The concept of *political economy* refers to the interaction between political and economic processes in shaping power, authority, and resource distribution within societies (Bates, 2008). Applied to violence, the *political economy of conflict* examines how economic and political incentives drive and sustain insecurity (Collier, 2000; Keen, 2012). This approach moves beyond the notion of violence as an irrational breakdown of order to view it as a structured and rational activity through which actors both state and non-state pursue interests and accumulate resources

In the context of Katsina State, armed banditry functions as a political economy of organized crime and survival. Ransom payments, protection levies, and illegal taxation form the economic base of the violence. According to International Crisis Group (ICG, 2020), ransom payments worth millions of naira have created a parallel economy in which bandit leaders negotiate directly with intermediaries linked to political elites. This dynamic transforms rural insecurity into a transactional enterprise. Communities in Batsari and Safana, for instance, report that

collective levies are paid to secure the release of abducted persons, establishing informal systems of taxation that substitute for state authority. Thus, insecurity in Katsina is not simply a law-enforcement failure but part of a rationally organized system of economic extraction. The political economy lens highlights that violence becomes *functional* for certain actors—bandits, intermediaries, arms traders, and complicit officials—who derive tangible benefits from the perpetuation of disorder.

Criminal Networks

Criminal networks refer to the complex, often transnational, webs of actors who collaborate to facilitate illicit activities such as arms smuggling, kidnapping-for-ransom, money laundering, and resource trafficking (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001). These networks often include overlapping roles of political actors, traditional authorities, security agents, and criminal entrepreneurs.

In Katsina State, such networks sustain the infrastructure of banditry. Bandit groups obtain weapons through cross-border smuggling routes linking the Sahel region, Niger Republic, and northern Nigeria. Local intermediaries, including traders, vigilantes, and political brokers, participate in or benefit from these exchanges (Meagher, 2014). There are credible reports of vigilante commanders and local politicians collaborating with bandits in arms deals or ransom negotiations. In Dutsin-Ma, for example, informants have alleged that certain officials leak information on military operations to bandit groups in exchange for payments, thereby undermining counter-insurgency efforts. These alliances demonstrate that criminal networks blur the line between legality and illegality. They reveal how state institutions themselves can become embedded within the economy of violence. Rather than existing outside the state, these networks are frequently *enmeshed within it*, suggesting a continuum between formal governance and organized crime.

The Shadow Economy

The *shadow economy* also known as the informal or underground economy refers to economic transactions that are unregulated, untaxed, or outright illegal but nonetheless integral to local livelihoods (Meagher, 2014). It encompasses activities such as smuggling, illicit trade, and informal taxation.

In Katsina, the shadow economy underpins much of the banditry enterprise. Bandits profit from cattle rustling, arms trade, and ransom payments, creating an alternative economic system that rivals the formal state economy. Illicit wealth circulates through rural markets where traders knowingly or unknowingly engage in transactions with armed groups. Bandits often reinvest ransom proceeds in farmland, motorcycles, or livestock, effectively embedding criminal capital within legitimate economic structures. For instance, in Safana and Danmusa, residents have reported that bandits provide “protection” to traders or herders who pay routine levies. This

arrangement blurs moral and economic boundaries: while communities reject violence, they simultaneously depend on the same actors for security and livelihood continuity. The result is a *criminalized economy of survival* a system where informal exchanges both sustain communities and entrench lawlessness. Therefore, the shadow economy in Katsina reflects not merely economic opportunism but also adaptive survival in an environment where the state's presence is minimal and insecurity shapes everyday life.

Greed versus Grievance and Resource Competition

The *greed versus grievance* model developed by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) provides a dual explanation for conflict motivation. “Greed” refers to economic incentives that make rebellion or violence profitable, while “grievance” captures socio-political injustices such as exclusion, inequality, or marginalization.

Both dimensions are evident in Katsina's banditry crisis. Many bandit recruits are marginalized Fulani youths who experience deep grievances arising from poverty, ethnic profiling, and loss of livelihood due to climate change and farmer-herder conflicts. Yet, as the crisis evolves, economic motivation increasingly overshadows grievance. The enormous profits from ransom payments and cattle trade such as the ₦300 million allegedly paid for the release of Kankara schoolboys in 2020 (ICG, 2021)—illustrate how banditry becomes a lucrative enterprise. Similarly, the *resource competition* variant of the resource curse thesis (Ross, 2004) explains how access to local resources grazing land, forests, and farmland can become a source of violent contestation. In Katsina's rural areas, fertile farmlands and trade routes have been “securitized.” Bandits impose taxes before farmers can cultivate, and some communities must negotiate access to grazing routes. These localized economies of extraction reflect micro-level manifestations of the “resource curse,” where natural assets become instruments of violence and control.

Warlord Politics and Predatory Governance

The concept of *warlord politics* (Reno, 1998) captures situations in which armed actors exercise de facto authority in the absence or weakness of the state. Warlords maintain personal armies, extract resources, and negotiate directly with state officials, often merging coercive power with economic entrepreneurship.

In Katsina, bandit leaders exhibit similar characteristics. Figures such as Buhari Alhaji Halilu and Dogo Gide operate as regional warlords, controlling territories across Faskari, Safana, and Jibia. They impose levies, regulate movement, and mediate disputes, thus performing

rudimentary governance functions. Their interactions with state intermediaries further illustrate how warlord authority coexists with formal political power. Linked to this is *predatory governance* (Bayart, Ellis & Hibou, 1999), which describes how state actors exploit disorder and violence for political or economic gain. In Katsina, widespread speculation suggests that certain political elites and security officials profit from the insecurity—whether through inflated security budgets, rent-seeking in ransom negotiations, or the instrumentalization of violence during elections. Such practices convert insecurity into a political resource, making state complicity an intrinsic feature of the conflict economy. These dynamics illustrate a system where power, profit, and protection intersect. Bandit leaders function as warlords in ungoverned spaces, while segments of the political elite act as predators within the formal governance structure. The interaction between both realms sustains the political economy of violence in Katsina State.

The above concepts are interlocking and mutually reinforcing. The *political economy of violence* provides the overarching lens through which *criminal networks*, *shadow economies*, and *warlord politics* operate. *Greed and grievance* dynamics explain motivation, while *predatory governance* highlights elite complicity. Collectively, they frame banditry not as random criminality but as a structured system of economic extraction embedded in Nigeria's broader governance and security crisis. In Katsina, the convergence of these forces produces a *hybrid order*—a political economy where the boundaries between legality and illegality, state and non-state, governance and criminality, are blurred. Violence becomes both a livelihood strategy for the marginalized and a political instrument for the powerful.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: the Political Economy of Conflict Theory, Human Security Theory, and Rational Choice/Warlordism Framework. Each offers a distinct yet complementary lens for understanding how banditry in Katsina State is economically sustained, politically negotiated, and socially embedded.

The Political Economy of Conflict theory, as developed by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) and expanded by Keen (2012), asserts that conflicts are not merely driven by grievances but also by economic interests that make violence profitable. It emphasizes that war and insecurity can generate systems of accumulation that benefit both combatants and state actors. This perspective is particularly relevant to Katsina, where armed banditry has evolved into an economic enterprise. Kidnapping-for-ransom, illegal taxation of farmers, and smuggling across the Nigerien border constitute structured revenue streams. These economic activities thrive partly due to weak state regulation and the complicity of certain power holders who benefit from the continuity of violence. From a political economy standpoint, the persistence of banditry reflects a *market of violence* a system where insecurity is commoditized, and peace has transactional value. The theory underscores the rationality behind violent entrepreneurship, demonstrating that actors sustain violence because it pays economically and politically.

The Human Security framework, first articulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), broadens the concept of security from state-centered protection to the safeguarding of individuals' "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want." It includes dimensions such as economic, food, health, environmental, personal, and community security. Applying this lens to Katsina reveals how banditry undermines all aspects of human security. Rural populations face persistent threats to life, livelihood, and dignity. Thousands have been displaced, farmlands abandoned, and education disrupted. However, the human security approach also exposes a paradox: insecurity itself becomes a source of economic activity. Bandits, arms traders, and even some local officials profit from the vulnerability of the population. Thus, the degradation of human security in Katsina is not just an outcome of banditry it is part of the *economy of survival* that sustains it. This theory helps situate the victims not merely as passive sufferers but as actors navigating precarious survival strategies within a violent economy.

The *Rational Choice* perspective, when combined with *Warlordism theory* (Reno, 1998), posits that individuals and groups engage in violence as a rational strategy to maximize economic or political gain under conditions of weak state authority. Violence, therefore, is not chaotic but organized around predictable patterns of incentive, calculation, and control. In Katsina, bandit leaders operate as rational entrepreneurs of violence. They strategically control territories, impose taxes, and negotiate truces when it benefits them. Their governance structures though coercive mirror state functions such as taxation, regulation, and adjudication. These practices reveal a rational and profit-oriented logic that sustains their authority. Rational Choice theory explains why young men, faced with unemployment and marginalization, may view joining bandit groups as a viable economic alternative. Warlordism adds that when state institutions are weak, such violent entrepreneurs fill the governance vacuum, effectively transforming insecurity into political and economic capital. Together, they illustrate that the crisis in Katsina is neither random nor solely criminal it is a rational, organized, nor profitable political economy of insecurity embedded in everyday governance structures. This theoretical synthesis enables a multidimensional understanding of the problem: one that links economic incentives, human vulnerability, and strategic rationality within the same analytical frame.

Historical Roots of Rural Violence in Northern Nigeria:

The persistence of rural violence in Katsina State must be located within long-term structural, institutional, and regional processes. What began in many communities as episodic cattle rustling has, over decades, transformed into organized banditry characterized by mass abductions, large-scale livestock theft, cross-border trafficking, and the monetization of insecurity? This transformation is best explained as an interaction among ecological stress, institutional erosion, the emergence of criminal networks, and the political instrumentalization of violence. The following subsections distil those processes and link them to broader theoretical propositions about the political economy of violence.

Oral histories from Safana, Batsari, and Jibia indicate that cattle rustling in the 1970s–1980s was frequently a low-intensity activity aimed at livestock capture and prestige rather than mass violence. Over time, however, the practice militarized: rustling expanded in scale, became more lethal, and incorporated kidnapping-for-ransom and large-scale cattle exportation (ICG, 2020). The trajectory from opportunistic theft to organized predation exemplifies how economic incentives and access to arms convert marginal criminality into a structured economy of violence (Collier, 2000; Reno, 1998). The emergence of coordinated groups in the 1990s operating around Danjume Forest and linking to Nigerien networks marks the point where local theft evolved into transnational criminal enterprise (Bunza, 2016). Environmental change desertification, declining rainfall, and shrinking grazing lands has pushed pastoralists southward, intensifying competition over arable land and water. This ecological squeeze raised the opportunity costs of pastoral livelihoods and increased interactions (and friction) between herders and sedentary farmers (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Blench, 2021). Where traditional arbitration mechanisms previously managed access to resources, ecological stress made such arrangements less tenable and increased the incidence of violent contestation. Empirically, the monetization of access reports that armed groups levy payments before cultivation illustrates how environmental scarcity has been converted into extractable rent by violent actors.

Historically, district heads (*hakimai*) and village chiefs mediated land and grazing disputes. Over the last three decades their authority has been compromised by politicization and co-optation, undermining local conflict resolution capacity (Miles, 1994). In some localities, traditional authorities are alleged to have become intermediaries in ransom negotiations or collectors of “security levies,” effectively linking customary power to the shadow economy. Institutional decline therefore both creates governance vacuums that bandits exploit and provides channels through which violence is normalized and administered. Community defense initiatives, such as Yan Sakai, emerged in response to insufficient state protection. Yet these vigilante formations often turn predatory, committing reprisals that escalate communal tensions. In Faskari, for example, vigilante attacks on Fulani settlements triggered retaliatory massacres demonstrating how bottom-up security responses can intensify, rather than resolve, cycles of revenge (Okoli, 2019). This dynamic underscores the paradox whereby efforts to restore local security can institutionalize violence and erode social cohesion.

Katsina’s geographic position on the Nigeria–Niger frontier has facilitated its integration into trans-Saharan criminal economies. Bandit groups have exploited porous borders and corruption to traffic arms, stolen livestock, and contraband (Lacher, 2012). Local testimony that truck drivers pay “customs fees” to illegal checkpoints, sometimes equal to official customs dues, demonstrates how parallel taxation regimes operate (ICG field reports). Analogies with other African contexts Somalia’s warlord taxation of trade (Menkhaus, 2007) and the DRC’s resource-driven militia economies (Autesserre, 2010) help conceptualize Katsina’s banditry as a rent-seeking system where violent actors supply protection, extract tolls, and regulate mobility. A crucial analytical claim is that insecurity endures because elements within the political order derive benefit from it (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). Reports and local allegations that politicians broker informal deals with bandit leaders offering immunity, payments, or electoral support in

exchange for calm point to elite bargains that commodify insecurity (ICG, 2020). Similarly, accusations of collusion by some security actors (e.g., intelligence leaks, ransom-sharing) indicate that the state is not always an exogenous solution but can be embedded in the economy of violence. Taken together, these processes show how environmental stress, economic opportunity, institutional decline, and political calculations interact to produce a self-reinforcing political economy of insecurity. Banditry is simultaneously a livelihood strategy for marginalized actors, a coercive governance modality in peripheral spaces, and a source of extractive rent for intermediaries and elites. This framing moves the analysis beyond narratives of state failure to emphasize how violence can be produced and sustained within a system of overlapping interests.

Strategic Drivers of Banditry in Katsina State (2010s–2023)

The persistence of armed banditry in Katsina State is driven by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, political, and environmental factors. Although insecurity in Nigeria's North-West is often portrayed as a mere criminal enterprise, deeper analysis reveals that it is rooted in systemic governance failures, socio-economic deprivation, and ecological stressors. These drivers interact in mutually reinforcing ways, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of violence that erodes state legitimacy and undermines community resilience. Katsina remains one of Nigeria's poorest states, with an estimated 72.7 percent of its population living in multidimensional poverty (African Health Report, 2023). Rural inhabitants experience chronic deprivation in education, healthcare, and access to potable water, eroding trust in state institutions and leaving communities susceptible to alternative authorities, including armed groups (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Bandit networks exploit this marginalization by positioning themselves as protectors or providers of livelihood, embedding their activities within local economies.

Inequality constitutes a significant driver of insecurity. While urban elites in Katsina City benefit from state contracts and federal patronage, rural populations face declining agricultural yields and reduced access to markets. This structural inequality fosters resentment and perceptions of exclusion, prompting some rural youths to view banditry as both a form of resistance and a survival mechanism (Mustapha, 2020). Bandit leaders strategically manipulate this sentiment by portraying themselves as “redistributors” through acts of cattle rustling and forced taxation, despite the reality that violence disproportionately harms the poor (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). The youth bulge further compounds insecurity. With an estimated 438,808 unemployed individuals recorded in 2020 (ThisDay, 2022), and low rates of vocational training and secondary school completion (Clacified, 2023), many young men find themselves excluded from the formal economy. Bandit groups capitalize on this surplus labor by recruiting disenfranchised youth as informants, couriers, and foot soldiers (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). In some communities, banditry has evolved into a parallel labor market, offering a perverse form of economic participation and belonging.

Institutional corruption severely undermines counter-banditry efforts. Security operatives are frequently accused of colluding with bandits through intelligence leaks, protection rackets, or ransom-sharing arrangements (Bawa, 2022). Corruption also diverts limited public resources

away from education, social welfare, and rural development reinforcing the structural roots of violence. Fiscal weakness further constrains state capacity. In 2020, Katsina received ₦65.2 billion in federal allocations compared to only ₦11.4 billion in internally generated revenue (Gazette Nigeria, 2024). This dependence reduces fiscal autonomy and limits investment in rural policing and infrastructure. The state's under-policing ratio, far below the United Nations standard of one officer per 400 citizens, leaves vast rural territories ungoverned (Campbell, 2020). Weak judicial mechanisms and prolonged prosecution processes perpetuate impunity, encouraging communities to resort to self-help justice that fuels reprisals and local vendettas (Bawa, 2022).

Katsina's long border with Niger Republic facilitates cross-border smuggling and arms trafficking. Studies indicate that porous boundaries and kinship ties across the Nigeria–Niger frontier enable the movement of small arms, contraband, and stolen livestock (Ali, 2021). The 2014 collapse of Libyan armories exacerbated this proliferation, flooding the Sahel region with weapons that now empower local bandit groups to challenge state forces (Blench, 2021). Consequently, what once began as cattle rustling has evolved into protracted armed conflicts, militarizing local disputes over land, grazing, and trade. Political manipulation remains a critical strategic driver. During electoral cycles, politicians have historically mobilized unemployed youth as “political thugs”, normalizing violence as a pathway to patronage and political advancement (Mustapha, 2020). After elections, these armed youths are rarely disarmed, redirecting their coercive capacity toward banditry. This dynamic blurs the distinction between political and criminal violence, embedding insecurity within Nigeria's electoral system.

Elite bargains further sustain armed groups. Some political figures are alleged to have brokered informal arrangements with bandit leaders, providing financial incentives or immunity in exchange for electoral support or temporary peace (ICG, 2020). These arrangements create perverse incentives, encouraging bandits to escalate violence in order to negotiate greater concessions. The rise of vigilante formations, particularly the Yan Sakai, reflects both community self-defense and elite co-optation. Initially formed to protect villages, many vigilante units have become instruments of partisan politics, armed and financed by political patrons (Bawa, 2022). Their actions often provoke retaliatory violence, further entrenching cycles of revenge and eroding community trust.

Environmental degradation constitutes another significant driver. The encroachment of the Sahara Desert and declining rainfall has reduced arable land, forcing pastoralists into farming zones (Blench, 2021). This migration intensifies farmer–herder conflicts, often escalating into violent confrontations. Weak land governance and the absence of sustainable management policies allow such disputes to persist unresolved. Population pressure exacerbates this dynamic: approximately 58,000 hectares of farmland have been abandoned in Katsina due to insecurity (ICG, 2020). As access to productive land diminishes, communities compete for control of scarce resources such as water points and grazing routes. Bandits exploit these tensions by imposing taxes on access to land, water, and transport routes, embedding themselves as violent intermediaries in the rural economy (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021).

These strategic drivers are not isolated but mutually reinforcing. Poverty and youth unemployment create a reservoir of potential recruits; corruption and weak institutions inhibit effective response; political manipulation sustains armed groups through patronage; and environmental degradation intensifies resource-based conflict. For instance, farmer–herder clashes over shrinking farmlands are militarized by the availability of small arms and politicized through elite bargains. Thus, armed banditry in Katsina State should not be viewed merely as criminality but as a symptom of deeper structural and governance failures rooted in Nigeria’s political economy and ecological fragility.

Sponsors of Banditry in Katsina State

While structural, institutional, political, and environmental drivers explain the persistence of armed banditry in Katsina State, the phenomenon cannot be sustained without sponsors who actively benefit from or enable insecurity. These sponsors ranging from political elites to corrupt security actors, business networks, and transnational criminal groups shape the dynamics of violence by providing protection, resources, and incentives that embed insecurity into local governance and economies. Sponsorship transforms banditry from spontaneous violence into a durable political economy, where insecurity becomes a source of profit, political advantage, and transnational exchange (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Campbell, 2020).

Local politicians in Katsina State have often manipulated insecurity for electoral purposes. During campaigns, elites mobilize vigilante groups or hire armed youths as political thugs to intimidate rivals and secure territorial dominance (Bawa, 2022). After elections, many of these armed groups, abandoned by their sponsors, turn to banditry for survival, creating a revolving door between political thuggery and organized violence (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). Moreover, politicians sometimes exploit negotiations with bandits to signal strength or demonstrate indispensability to local communities. For example, Governor Aminu Masari’s amnesty program (2016–2020), though framed as a peace initiative, provided opportunities for elites to consolidate patronage by selectively distributing incentives to cooperative groups (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). This approach bred resentment among communities left unprotected and empowered bandit leaders who acquired cash, vehicles, and political legitimacy. Electoral cycles exacerbate the manipulation of insecurity. Politicians have been accused of tolerating bandit activity in rival strongholds, effectively weaponizing violence as a tool of voter suppression (Mustapha, 2020). In Katsina’s rural districts, where voter turnout is decisive, violence often tilts the balance by displacing voters or coercing allegiance. Consequently, elites do not always view insecurity as an existential threat but rather as a manageable risk within broader strategies of electoral dominance.

Security agencies deployed to combat banditry are themselves implicated in sustaining it. Reports suggest that some personnel collude with armed groups through arms trafficking, protection rackets, and ransom negotiations (Ali, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020). In border zones, customs and immigration officials have been accused of facilitating illicit flows of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), either through negligence or bribery (United Nations Office

on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2021). The ransom economy is particularly lucrative. Families of abductees often negotiate directly with intermediaries linked to security forces, who demand facilitation fees in exchange for ensuring the safe passage of ransom deliveries (Campbell, 2020). Instead of dismantling bandit networks, such collusion institutionalizes kidnapping as a predictable business model. Soldiers have also been reported to lease weapons to vigilantes, some of which later end up in the hands of bandits (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). This complicity undermines public trust in state institutions. Rural residents increasingly perceive security agencies as profit-seeking actors rather than protectors, eroding willingness to cooperate with law enforcement and allowing bandits greater freedom of movement. Moreover, this credibility gap enables bandits to portray themselves as alternative authorities, thereby embedding their control within local governance structures (Bawa, 2022).

The political economy of banditry thrives on business interests that profit directly or indirectly from violence. Cattle rustling is central: stolen livestock are laundered through informal cattle markets (*kara*) across Katsina, Zamfara, and neighboring Niger Republic. Traders, brokers, and transporters benefit by buying cheaply and reselling to urban consumers or abattoirs (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). In some cases, market leaders act as intermediaries between bandits and state authorities, ensuring the flow of illicit trade. Kidnap-for-ransom, now one of the most profitable illicit enterprises in Katsina, also sustains local businesses. Money changers, mobile money agents, and informal financial operators facilitate ransom payments, often taking commissions. Vehicle owners profit from transporting ransom bearers into remote forests, while fuel marketers supply motorcycles the preferred mobility of bandit groups (Campbell, 2020; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021). Construction companies and contractors also indirectly benefit from insecurity. Government spending on security consumes a large portion of state budgets, creating opportunities for inflated contracts, procurement fraud, and emergency spending (Mustapha, 2020). In this way, insecurity generates rents that circulate among local elites, businesspeople, and their allies in government. This symbiotic relationship transforms violence into an economic sector, ensuring its continuity.

Katsina's location along the Nigeria–Niger border embeds the state within broader transnational criminal economies. Porous frontiers enable the trafficking of small arms from Libya, Chad, and Sudan through Niger into northwestern Nigeria (UNODC, 2021; ICG, 2020). Arms dealers, many linked to regional smuggling cartels, sell weapons to both bandits and vigilante groups, creating a self-reinforcing market for violence. Cross-border cattle routes also facilitate illicit trade. Bandits transport stolen livestock into Niger for resale, while receiving supplies of motorcycles, drugs, and ammunition in return (Ali, 2021). These flows are enabled by corrupt border officials who profit from bribes, as well as kinship ties between Hausa-Fulani communities straddling the Nigeria–Niger frontier (Blench, 2021). Regional jihadist networks further complicate the picture. While banditry in Katsina is primarily profit-driven, evidence suggests occasional tactical cooperation with extremist groups such as Boko Haram or Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), particularly in arms procurement and training exchanges (Campbell, 2020). Although ideological alignment remains limited, the overlap of criminal and insurgent economies expands the resilience of both phenomena.

Beneficiaries of Banditry in Katsina State

The escalation of armed banditry in Katsina State since the mid-2010s has produced a complex web of beneficiaries extending far beyond the immediate perpetrators of violence. While ordinary residents endure dispossession, insecurity, and displacement, certain actors including armed groups, political elites, vigilante formations, and intermediaries have reaped significant material and political gains. This section examines the various categories of beneficiaries, illustrating how the political economy of banditry incentivizes the continuation of violence rather than its resolution (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; Campbell, 2020).

At the center of the banditry economy are the armed groups themselves, who profit enormously from ransom payments, cattle rustling, illegal taxation, and control of mobility across rural communities. Kidnapping for ransom has become the most lucrative source of revenue. In rural local government areas (LGAs) such as Jibia, Kankara, and Safana, entire communities have reported paying “levies” to bandits to access their farmlands during planting and harvest seasons. These transactions transform armed groups into de facto tax authorities, extracting rents in cash, crops, and livestock (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). Cattle rustling further enriches these groups. Katsina’s proximity to Niger Republic and the porous nature of the border provide convenient routes for disposing of stolen animals. The illicit cattle economy sustains a supply chain connecting remote forest hideouts to urban markets, ensuring a continuous cash flow. The profits enable bandits to acquire sophisticated weapons, motorcycles, and communication devices, thereby entrenching their operational power. For instance, the 2021 abduction of hundreds of schoolboys in Kankara reportedly netted armed groups tens of millions of naira in ransom. Villagers later alleged that portions of these funds were reinvested in procuring new firearms through Nigerien contacts, demonstrating how kidnapping profits are recycled into violent capacity (ICG, 2020).

While banditry devastates ordinary citizens, sections of the political elite have found ways to convert insecurity into strategic capital. One form of benefit arises from securitization budgets. As violence escalates, state and federal governments increase allocations for security operations, often disbursed through opaque emergency procurement procedures. Such mechanisms enable political elites to divert funds, award inflated contracts, or distribute resources selectively to consolidate patronage networks (Mustapha, 2020). In addition, political elites may gain indirectly from the spatial distribution of violence. Electoral competition in Katsina has at times overlapped with the geography of insecurity. In areas where armed attacks displace voters or prevent polling, incumbents and dominant parties may benefit from suppressed voter turnout. Thus, while elites publicly condemn banditry, they sometimes privately tolerate or exploit it when it aligns with political calculations (Bawa, 2022). Reports from the 2019 general elections in Katsina indicated that several opposition-leaning LGAs—such as Batsari and Safana—experienced pre-election raids that disrupted voter mobilization. Analysts observed that insecurity indirectly advantaged ruling party candidates by skewing turnout patterns, highlighting how political elites can instrumentalize bandit violence for electoral gain (Ali, 2021).

The rise of vigilante organizations such as the *Yan Sakai* and other community defense outfits has complicated the landscape of beneficiaries. While these formations emerged to protect rural communities, their role as intermediaries between citizens, state authorities, and bandits has enabled them to accumulate influence, rents, and political leverage. Some vigilante leaders charge protection fees, grant “safe passage” to traders, or act as negotiators between bandits and victims’ families (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). These practices effectively institutionalize rent-seeking within local security arrangements. Moreover, vigilante structures often receive financial or material support from politicians who instrumentalize them as auxiliaries during election cycles. This politicization blurs the line between community defense and patronage politics, making vigilantes both defenders and profiteers. In 2020, several villages in Faskari LGA reportedly paid monthly contributions to local vigilante leaders who promised to deter attacks. Villagers later complained that these payments created inequality, as those who contributed enjoyed relative safety while poorer households remained vulnerable (Bawa, 2022). This pattern underscores how vigilantes can transform insecurity into localized income streams.

A less visible but equally important category of beneficiaries comprises the middlemen who facilitate transactions between bandits and communities. These actors include negotiators who arrange ransom payments, transporters who move goods and abductees, and informal financial networks that channel payments across borders (UNDP, 2021). Negotiators often emerge from within affected communities and cultivate relationships of trust with bandit leaders, charging substantial commissions for their services. Transporters often commercial motorcyclists or truck drivers—profit from moving supplies, stolen cattle, or abducted victims to designated locations. Informal financial actors such as *bureau de change* operators and cross-border traders facilitate laundering of ransom payments and procurement of arms. During the 2020 abduction of villagers in Dutsin-Ma, families reported that middlemen charged up to 20% of ransom amounts as “service fees.” These intermediaries also managed the logistics of delivering cash into forest enclaves, illustrating the embedded transactional economy surrounding banditry (UNODC, 2021).

Although victims bear the heaviest burden through killings, displacement, loss of livelihoods, and psychological trauma, they also demonstrate adaptive responses that can be conceptualized as reluctant or indirect “benefits.” Displacement, for instance, has pushed families into urban centers, where some have found alternative income opportunities in petty trade, transportation, or casual labor (Blench, 2021). Others adapt by diversifying livelihoods, engaging in non-farm work, or migrating seasonally to safer regions. Communities have also developed collective coping mechanisms such as rotational farming systems where groups cultivate fields under armed guard mutual-aid societies that pool resources for ransom payments, and inter-community alliances for intelligence sharing. In 2022, communities in Dan Musa LGA organized cooperative farming groups that took turns guarding fields with locally crafted weapons. Although rudimentary, this practice enabled limited agricultural production despite pervasive insecurity, illustrating community resilience under duress (Ali, 2021; UNDP, 2021).

Empirical Evidence and Case Studies

Armed banditry in Katsina State has evolved into a highly organized political economy that thrives on kidnapping for ransom, manipulation during electoral cycles, and control of local markets. Evidence from field reports, media documentation, and secondary data demonstrates how insecurity has become systemic, creating incentives for multiple actors while devastating rural communities. This section presents three case studies kidnapping for ransom networks, the banditry politics nexus, and local markets as hubs of the bandit economy to illustrate these dynamics.

Kidnapping for ransom has become the most visible manifestation of banditry in Katsina State. The practice escalated between 2016 and 2023, coinciding with the proliferation of small arms, deteriorating policing, and worsening poverty (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). The December 2020 abduction of more than 300 schoolboys in Kankara Local Government Area (LGA) drew international attention. Reports revealed that substantial ransom payments were delivered and subsequently used by bandit leaders to acquire motorcycles and sophisticated firearms (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). Families often negotiate through intermediaries including community elders, informal negotiators, and transporters who charge commissions for facilitating ransom delivery (Abdu & Umar, 2021). In many instances, ransom payments have been communal. For example, in Safana LGA in 2021, villagers reported contributing between ₦5,000 and ₦50,000 each to raise a collective ransom of ₦30 million, enabling farmers to regain access to their fields (Amnesty International, 2022). Such practices have institutionalized kidnapping as a de facto taxation system, with payments extracted regularly. The structure of kidnapping networks in Katsina is hierarchical. Bandit leaders based in forest enclaves such as Rugu and Dumburum command operations, while younger recruits often unemployed rural youth carry out abductions (Olanrewaju & Olaniyan, 2020). Informants within communities identify targets, particularly traders and civil servants perceived as wealthy. These networks mimic organized criminal syndicates, with sophisticated channels for ransom collection and laundering. This case highlights how kidnapping has shifted from episodic violence to a patterned economic system, embedding extortion into rural livelihoods.

The interplay between insecurity and politics in Katsina is evident during electoral cycles. Violence frequently spikes around elections, suppressing voter participation in bandit-prone areas. Evidence from the 2019 general elections shows that LGAs such as Batsari, Jibia, and Faskari witnessed increased bandit raids before polling day, discouraging voter turnout (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2020). The uneven participation advantaged ruling parties, as safer LGAs recorded higher voter turnout (Yusuf, 2021). Beyond voter suppression, there are allegations of more direct connections. Interviews conducted by local journalists in Batsari and Danmusa suggested that politicians covertly made payments to bandit leaders to deter opposition rallies in insecure areas (Daily Trust, 2020). While such claims are difficult to independently verify, they reflect widespread perceptions among rural residents that insecurity is politicized and sometimes instrumentalized. Political elites have also been accused of manipulating vigilante groups, such as the *Yan Sakai*, for electoral advantage. Originally

established as community defense forces, these groups have in some cases been co-opted to intimidate rival supporters under the guise of anti-bandit operations (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021). This blurring of lines between criminal and political violence complicates security management and undermines trust in state institutions. The empirical evidence suggests that banditry functions as both a threat and a resource within Katsina's political system. Elites may passively benefit from voter suppression caused by insecurity or actively exploit it through covert alliances.

Rural and borderland markets are central to sustaining the bandit economy in Katsina. Cattle rustling, informal taxation, and illicit cross-border trade constitute major revenue streams for armed groups. The cattle economy is particularly significant. Stolen livestock is sold in markets such as Jibia, Dankama, and Mai'adua often at discounted rates. From there, animals are transported to Niger and beyond, where they enter formal supply chains (Nwankpa, 2021). Traders, truck drivers, and brokers form part of this shadow economy, sometimes knowingly facilitating the laundering of rustled cattle. Beyond livestock, bandits have institutionalized informal taxation systems. Farmers in Sabuwa and Dandume LGAs report paying between ₦1,000 and ₦5,000 per acre of farmland as "harvest levies" (Amnesty International, 2022). Those who refuse face abduction, crop destruction, or denial of access to farmland. This mirrors state taxation structures but diverts resources into the hands of non-state actors, effectively creating *shadow sovereignty* in bandit-controlled areas. Markets also serve as intelligence hubs. Bandit scouts reportedly monitor financial transactions to identify wealthy traders as potential abduction targets (ICG, 2020). In 2022, Nigerian security forces intercepted a truck in Jibia carrying arms concealed within livestock shipments, illustrating how rural markets double as logistical nodes for criminal networks (Yusuf, 2021). The integration of local markets into the bandit economy demonstrates that insecurity is not confined to violence in forests but is embedded in everyday economic transactions.

These case studies underscore that banditry in Katsina State is not random but structured around rational economic and political logics. Kidnapping networks institutionalize ransom as taxation; political cycles reveal how insecurity suppresses opposition strongholds and empowers elites; and local markets embed banditry into regional economic circuits through cattle trade and informal taxation. Empirical evidence from civil society reports, journalistic investigations, and secondary scholarship converges on the idea that banditry constitutes a resilient system of extraction. It involves multiple actors armed groups, political elites, traders, and middlemen while imposing devastating social and economic costs on rural populations.

Discussion: Linking Drivers, Sponsors, and Beneficiaries

The evidence from Katsina State demonstrates that the dynamics of armed banditry cannot be understood in isolation from broader structural conditions, elite sponsorship, and the interconnections among politics, crime, and the economy. Structural drivers such as poverty, youth unemployment, weak policing, and porous borders create fertile ground for armed groups to thrive (Alemika, 2020; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). In the absence of viable livelihoods, rural youth

are drawn into bandit networks where cattle rustling, kidnapping, and informal taxation provide both subsistence and opportunities for wealth accumulation (Olanrewaju & Olaniyani, 2020). These conditions transform banditry into a livelihood strategy for marginalized groups while simultaneously reinforcing cycles of violence and insecurity.

Elite sponsorship intersects with these structural drivers in critical ways. Political elites often benefit indirectly from insecurity by exploiting it during election cycles whether through voter suppression in opposition strongholds or covert bargains with local militias (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2020; Yusuf, 2021). Reports of politicians paying armed groups for protection or to disrupt rival campaigns underscore how insecurity is instrumentalized as a political tool (Daily Trust, 2020). Similarly, the securitization of the conflict allows state actors and allied contractors to profit from increased security budgets, creating perverse incentives that sustain rather than resolve the crisis (Akinyetun, 2021). This entanglement erodes public trust in governance and fuels perceptions that elites are complicit in perpetuating violence (ICG, 2020). The political economy of banditry in Katsina thus reflects what Reno (1998) describes as *warlord politics*—a system where state and non-state actors collude to extract rents from insecurity. Rather than serving as a neutral arbiter, the state becomes both a participant and a beneficiary of disorder, enabling elites to consolidate political and economic power through the management of violence.

The bandit economy further blurs the boundaries between criminal enterprise and community survival. Local markets operate as spaces where stolen cattle are laundered, protection rents are enforced, and middlemen facilitate ransom payments (Nwankpa, 2021). These interactions extend beyond forest hideouts into everyday rural commerce, embedding banditry within community economies. Consequently, ordinary traders, transporters, and negotiators while not always complicit become entangled as intermediaries, ensuring that the system continues to function (Abdu & Umar, 2021). This dynamic aligns with the concept of the *shadow economy* or *informal governance* described by Meagher (2012), where non-state actors perform economic and regulatory functions typically reserved for the state. In Katsina, such functions include collecting taxes, resolving disputes, and providing protection albeit through coercive means. The normalization of these roles reinforces the resilience of the bandit system and its integration into local livelihoods.

The implications of these dynamics for state legitimacy and governance are profound. The state's inability to protect rural communities has led to reliance on vigilante formations, notably the *Yan Sakai* groups, which, while providing short-term protection, often perpetuate cycles of retribution and human rights abuses (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). When non-state actors successfully impose taxes, regulate markets, or mediate conflicts, they assume functions associated with sovereignty, thereby undermining the state's monopoly on violence and its claim to legitimate authority (Weber, 1946). Simultaneously, elite manipulation of insecurity during elections delegitimizes democratic processes and weakens citizen trust in governance institutions. Together, these dynamics reinforce a perception of the Nigerian state as both absent and complicit weak in capacity yet powerful in selectively benefiting from disorder.

This duality echoes Chabal and Daloz's (1999) argument that African states often *instrumentalize disorder* as a means of political control. In Katsina, the persistence of banditry thus reflects not merely a security failure but an entrenched governance paradox in which violence and authority coexist in mutually reinforcing ways.

Challenges and Critiques

The study of armed banditry in Katsina State presents several conceptual, methodological, and ethical challenges, particularly when unpacking the drivers, sponsors, and beneficiaries of violence. These challenges complicate scholarly inquiry and constrain the capacity of both state and community actors to formulate effective responses.

One of the most persistent obstacles in understanding the political economy of banditry lies in conclusively identifying its sponsors. Sponsorship networks are covert, often operating through intermediaries, coded financial transactions, or informal markets (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Politicians may rely on proxies to mobilize armed groups, while corrupt security personnel conceal their involvement under the guise of legitimate operations. The clandestine nature of ransom negotiations and illicit arms trafficking further blurs distinctions between perpetrators, collaborators, and victims coerced by circumstance. Consequently, much of the existing evidence is anecdotal or drawn from journalistic investigations, which while valuable lack the verifiability necessary for rigorous policy or legal action (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). This opacity protects sponsors from accountability and perpetuates a culture of impunity. As a result, researchers face both empirical and ethical constraints in naming or tracing networks of complicity without risking political or personal repercussions.

Another major challenge stems from the moral ambiguities of negotiation and amnesty programs. Between 2015 and 2023, Katsina State under Governor Aminu Masari implemented peace pacts that promised rehabilitation, reintegration, and material support for repentant bandits. Although these initiatives were framed as conflict-resolution strategies, they drew criticism for rewarding perpetrators at the expense of victims (Bappah, 2021). Amnesty programs risk legitimizing criminal actors as stakeholders in peace processes, while marginalizing displaced persons, widows, and communities devastated by violence. Negotiators often traditional rulers or clerics also face allegations of complicity, particularly when agreements collapse or when ransom transactions occur under the cover of dialogue (Idowu, 2022). While such negotiations can temporarily reduce violence, they raise profound moral questions concerning justice, equity, and the credibility of state authority. This dilemma reflects a broader tension in peacebuilding: reconciling immediate stability with long-term accountability.

The Nigerian state's dual approach militarization on one hand and co-optation on the other—has generated sustained criticism for its inconsistency and limited impact. Heavy reliance on kinetic military operations such as “Operation Puff Adder” and periodic airstrikes has often resulted in civilian casualties, mass displacement, and alienation of rural populations (Akinola, 2022). Conversely, co-optation strategies based on selective amnesty or dialogue lack transparency and

institutional follow-through, leading to recurrent breakdowns once promised benefits are unfulfilled. This oscillation between coercion and appeasement suggests a reactive rather than strategic security posture (Nwankpa, 2021). Critics argue for a more holistic approach that integrates military containment with socio-economic recovery, institutional reform, and grassroots security initiatives. Without addressing the structural drivers poverty, youth marginalization, and governance deficits short-term pacification is likely to fail.

A broader concern involves the entrenchment and normalization of a shadow economy of insecurity. Ransom payments, illicit arms trade, and the laundering of stolen livestock through local markets have become integral to rural livelihoods (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). For middlemen, transporters, and informal financial brokers, these activities provide steady income and social legitimacy. Over time, this process institutionalizes criminal economies, eroding the moral boundaries between legality and illegality. Such normalization not only consolidates the financial autonomy of bandits but also reshapes the socio-economic landscape of affected communities. As insecurity becomes an organizing principle of rural economies, reversing these trends becomes increasingly difficult. Communities adapt to survive within the logic of violence, perpetuating what ICG (2020) terms a “war economy of resilience” a situation where coping mechanisms inadvertently sustain the structures of conflict.

Future Prospects and Policy Options

The persistence of armed banditry in Katsina State underscores the urgent need for forward-looking strategies that address both its structural drivers and its embedded political economy. Moving beyond reactive security responses, sustainable peace requires dismantling the financial and political incentives that perpetuate violence.

Armed banditry has evolved into a self-sustaining enterprise where armed groups, middlemen, and complicit elites profit from ransom payments, cattle rustling, and the arms trade (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Breaking this cycle demands targeted disruption of the shadow economy that sustains conflict. Key strategies include regulating informal markets, enhancing oversight over ransom negotiations, and targeting illicit financial flows through anti-money laundering frameworks (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2020). By curtailing profiteering opportunities, the resource base of armed groups would weaken, thereby reducing the economic incentives that attract both elites and ordinary participants to the conflict economy.

Given the scale of armed recruitment and the deep-rooted socio-economic vulnerabilities driving participation, a structured disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) framework is essential. Effective reintegration should go beyond token amnesty to include vocational training, psychosocial rehabilitation, and sustainable livelihood pathways for former combatants (Bappah, 2021). Such programs must also be sensitive to gender and youth dynamics, recognizing that women and children are often both victims and indirect participants in the conflict. Equally crucial is embedding a victim-centered justice approach in post-conflict recovery. Communities affected by killings, kidnappings, and displacement require reparative mechanisms such as truth-

telling forums, community restitution, and material compensation to rebuild trust in state institutions (Idowu, 2022). Without balancing offender reintegration with justice for victims, peacebuilding risks reproducing cycles of impunity and resentment.

The weakness of state institutions remains a central enabler of insecurity. Governance reforms should therefore prioritize accountability in security spending, where opaque budgeting practices often foster corruption and mismanagement (Nwankpa, 2021). Enhancing transparency through parliamentary oversight, civil society engagement, and open-data platforms would promote fiscal discipline and public confidence in counter-banditry operations. Moreover, empowering community-based security arrangements under formal regulation can bridge the gap between citizens and the state. Local security networks such as vigilante groups or community policing units must be trained, supervised, and integrated into a national security framework to prevent human rights abuses and vigilante excesses (Akinola, 2022). Decentralizing security management to include traditional and religious institutions can also strengthen early warning systems and enhance local ownership of peace processes.

Because banditry in Katsina State transcends administrative and international boundaries, regional collaboration remains indispensable. The transnational dimensions of arms trafficking, cattle smuggling, and the movement of fighters across Nigeria's northern borders necessitate joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and harmonized arms-control strategies under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) framework (ICG, 2020). Strengthened cooperation between Nigeria and neighboring Niger Republic would help reduce cross-border sanctuary-seeking by armed groups. At the federal level, coordinated integration of security, humanitarian, and socio-economic policies would produce a more holistic response. Aligning national security strategies with rural development, education, and poverty reduction programs would address both the symptoms and root causes of the crisis. In this way, long-term peace and resilience can only emerge from a governance model that is inclusive, transparent, and development-oriented.

Conclusion

This study examined the complex dynamics of armed banditry in Katsina State, situating it within the broader political economy of insecurity in Nigeria. The analysis revealed that banditry is driven by multiple intersecting factors: structural pressures such as poverty, youth unemployment, and environmental degradation; institutional weaknesses including corruption, porous borders, and inadequate policing; and political manipulation whereby elites exploit violence for electoral or material gain. Sponsors of the conflict span local politicians, complicit security actors, economic profiteers, and transnational networks that facilitate arms flows and illicit trade (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019; ICG, 2020). The beneficiaries extend beyond armed groups to include political elites who profit from securitization, vigilante groups who consolidate influence, and intermediaries in ransom and cattle markets. Meanwhile, victims bear the brunt of violence through displacement, dispossession, and psychological trauma yet continue to exhibit forms of resilience and adaptation in the face of prolonged insecurity (Bappah, 2021; Idowu,

2022). These findings underscore the deep entanglement of politics, crime, and the economy, where banditry functions simultaneously as a livelihood strategy for the marginalized and a political instrument for the powerful. The implications for security governance in Nigeria are profound. State legitimacy is undermined when institutions appear both unable and unwilling to protect citizens, while the normalization of shadow economies and informal violence erodes public trust and weakens democratic accountability (Nwankpa, 2021; Akinola, 2022). Addressing these challenges demands a comprehensive, multi-dimensional response. Policy measures should focus on disrupting the financial and logistical networks that sustain banditry, implementing structured disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, and embedding victim-centered justice mechanisms to restore social trust. Equally essential are governance reforms to enhance transparency in security expenditure, strengthen local accountability, and promote inclusive development that addresses the root causes of rural marginalization. Regional cooperation particularly across Nigeria's northwestern corridor and the Niger Republic is also critical in curbing the cross-border flows of arms and combatants (ICG, 2020). Future research should deepen community-level analyses of resilience strategies, focusing on how social cohesion, adaptive capacity, and local governance interact to mitigate insecurity. Scholars should also interrogate how elite bargains, informal economies, and political patronage networks sustain cycles of violence. Without such holistic interventions, the political economy of banditry will remain entrenched, perpetuating cycles of violence, displacement, and state fragility across northern Nigeria.

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