

The Nexus of Banditry, Farmer-Herder Clashes and Insecurity in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and Policy Responses

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is grappling with a complex web of insecurity challenges occasioned by the dual factor of banditry and farmer-herdsmen clashes especially in the North East and North West of Nigeria. These dauntingly interconnected threats have resulted in hydra-headed consequences, such as loss of lives, displacement of communities, epileptic educational, socio-cultural and economic activities. While there have been age-long rifts between farmers and pastoralists, though their relationship is both symbiotic and competitive in nature; hence this has often times led to crises which heightened tensions, religious intolerance, marauding of villages, kidnappings, highway robbery and cattle rustling. Banditry on the other hand compounded the insecurity situations hovering around the country leading to humanitarian crises, food insecurity, and economic losses. These two interrelated issues have negatively affected the right to life, peace, freedom, and progress of people in Nigeria, resulting from the weak state security architecture. Individuals have been killed, exposed to psychological torture, displaced from their homes and subjected to harsh economic realities, as a result of banditry activities. It is against the backdrop that this paper seeks to interrogate banditry and farmer-herdsmen clashes, with particular reference to the causes, consequences and policy response. Some of the causes are attributed to various factors, including state weakness, poverty, inequality, and just to mention, but a few. Historical method was employed in the collection and analysis of data which were generated through secondary sources. Secondary data was generated from relevant textbooks, journal articles, and government publications.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges affecting Nigeria revolves around the spate of insecurity. This manifested itself in banditry, armed robbery, cybercrimes, terrorism and violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen. Of the above-mentioned issues, clashes between farmers-herdsmen and banditry are chief among the crises that have led to the death of many as well as displaced several others. In Nigeria, since the return to democracy in 1999 a major problem that contributed to insecurity relates to the activities of armed non-state actors which have repeatedly challenged the peaceful co-existence of Nigerians through warfare against the government and the civil populace, in pursuit of a particular agenda. Banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes have become prevalent across the country with most states in the North East, North West, North Central, South-East and some parts of the South-West the worst hit. Banditry, for instance is fast becoming alarming in Nigeria to the extent that it poses a serious security challenge not only to the region it nestled, but to the entire nation (Igiebor1, 2024). The level at which bandits operate within the precincts of the flash points in Nigeria has led to uninhibited activities such as kidnapping, maiming, killing, population displacements, cattle rustling, disruption of socio-economic activities in general. This situation has become worrisome to the government and the citizenry. These flourishing and marauding bandit groups, whose members in most cases display automatic weapons, terrorising herders' settlements, farms, villages and the highways with the mission of killing people, kidnapping and pillaging cows has made most parts of the country inhabitable and even those who choose to remain in the places where banditry is prominence sleep with one of their eyes opened (Abdulrasheed, 2021). Several reasons have been put forward for the causes and prevalence of banditry in Nigeria. Some these factors include, but not limited to the fragility of Nigerian state, weak state institutions, especially the security agencies, availability of grossly ungoverned

spaces, porosity of Nigeria's borders with its neighbouring countries and arms proliferation, weak leadership, corruption, unemployment, mass poverty and just to mention, but a few (Adegoke, 2019).

Trailing behind banditry is another precariously terrifying condition occasioned by the series of conflicts erupting between farmers and herdsmen especially in the Northern part of the country. There have been strong relationships between herdsmen and farmers in their respective communities over the years. Their relationship is said to be symbiotic rather than parasitic in some respects and competitive in others. Herdsmen take their cattle to the grassy farmlands and help farmers to fight weeds and get manure from cows on each other in the production of agricultural produce (Atobatele, & Moliki, 2022). In some instances, there has always been a competitive relationship between farmers and herdsmen which often leads to conflicts. Farmers' and herdsmen's relationships have also been seen as complementary in nature that in most cases have led to clashes. These clashes are devastating as the activities of bandits as most of their clashes are associated with negative consequences, destructing farming, business and socio-cultural activities in the places they rare their ugly heads. The causes of farmers-herdsmen aside dispute over farmland and cattle rustling are closely related to the causes of banditry. (Abada, Okafor, & Ofobuikwe, 2018). This paper is however divided into six parts, introduction, the driving factors of banditry, the driving factors of farmer-herdsmen clashes, banditry, farmers-herdsmen clashes and insecurity in Nigeria, policy responses and conclusion.

The Driving Factors of Banditry in Nigeria

Banditry which is not novel to Nigeria has several propelling factors for the prevalence of its activities in the country. The socio-existential conditions that characterised the region, including the frontiers of some parts of the country, especially the Northern parts of Nigeria have been identified as one of the causes of banditry. Most of the hinterlands, forestlands and borderlines of the region, especially in the Northern parts lack proper governing thereby creating room for criminally minded individuals to operate seamlessly. For instance, the northwestern hinterlands are known for their extremely dispersed rural settlements, separated by rangelands and farmlands that are susceptible to violent contestation (Okoli, & Okpaleke, 2014). Apart from being separated from each other, they are equally far separated from the centres of governance at the local and state levels. They are in most cases grossly under-policed to the point that renders them conducive for all forms of jungle criminality. As such, violent crimes, such as banditry, have festered and thrived in such forested regions, making insecurity level very high. Therefore, these prevailing conditions provide a potent avenue for bandits to create their stronghold in such areas. In addition, government insensitivity to insecurity but over concentration on how to acquire political power corresponds to increasing rate of banditry in Nigeria. Since government is a continuum, the state of insecurity in Nigeria is a build-up of government inaction to address core issues such as poverty, unemployment, declining income and low savings, high inflation rate, and just to mention, but a few.

The ambiguous nature of the country's constitution makes it difficult to swift security intervention in crisis situations in the country. Nigeria's security architecture since the incursion of the military in Nigeria's politics is contrived in such a manner that the control of every security outfit is husbanded by the President at the centre. It must be noted that, the governors at the state levels are recognised by Nigeria's constitution as the Chief Security Officers of their respective states, but in actual fact, they wield no power over the police that could be put to use in times of crisis. This frustrating situation places every governor at the mercy of the President in the period of crisis at the state level, denying him the opportunity to confront security challenges with expediency and expertise. This is one of the challenging issues prompting people to clamour for restructuring that will, among others, effect the creation of state police to meet the immediate and peculiar needs of every state. Banditry has also been linked to the dual factors of high rate of unemployment and abject poverty in the country. These two conditions have left many youths helpless in the country, living them with no option than to take up banditry activities to earn a living. To worsen the situation, unemployment continued to drastically increase yearly as Nigerian institutions keep graduating millions of youths with the predetermined expectation of getting better jobs and opportunities after graduating from the higher institutions of learning. The anxiety from Nigerian graduates that later turn to frustration, and then to aggression on the government is what has fuelled the emergence of most of these banditry activities and security threats in the country as it appears easy for the idle youths to engage in illegal activities in order to meet up with contemporary trends. It is therefore convenient to assert that the Nigeria's high rate of unemployment, especially the increasing rate of youth's unemployment

coupled with poverty hovering around most local communities collectively prompt the jobless youths in the country to resort to violent crime such as banditry (Ahmed, & Ahmed, 2021).

The above conditions would have been minimal provided the security fabric rise above the level the bandits are operating. Thus, weak security system complements the alarming rate of banditry in the region. This weak nature of the security architecture may perhaps be occasioned by the inadequate equipment for the security arm of government, both in weaponry and regular training in the art and science of curbing crimes. The poor attitudinal and behavioural disposition of some security personnel is also reinforcing the poor security posture. In some cases, security personnel assigned to deal with a given security situations lack the expertise and equipment to handle the situations in a way to prevent them from occurring and reoccurring. Even when these exist, some personnel got influenced by ethnic, religious or communal sentiment and are easily prejudiced by their personal interest conflicting with the national interest to serve their people, rather than the nation. Thus, instead of defending national interest and protecting people from being harmed by criminals as well as the territorial integrity of the country, they turned themselves to saboteurs of government efforts, by supporting and fuelling insecurity through either leaking vital security information or conniving with criminals to acquire weapons or to escape the long arm of the law. This is a serious security challenge the nation is grappling with futile efforts (Mustapha, 2019). Again, poor governance at all levels as also contributed significantly to the rising wave of banditry in Nigeria. The failure of successive administrations in Nigeria to address the challenges of poverty bedevilling the nation has made life unbearable. The country warehouses a large number of people living in extreme poverty with no hope as most of the efforts of the government at revamping the economy is not yielding any reasonable result. Hence, the failure of the government in rescuing the nation from economic crisis is closely associated with banditry in the country (Okoli, & Lenshie, 2018).

Banditry thrives with the instrumentality of lethal weapons as such arms proliferation is one of the driving conditions for banditry in the country. There has been a significant influx of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) into Nigeria from the neighbouring countries especially from the Sahel region since the fall of Ghadaffi's regime in Libya. These arms and weapons end up in the hands of non-state actors like terrorists, militants and bandits, who use them to terrorise individuals and communities. Thus, the massive influx of arms and gunmen from neighbouring countries has made it very seamless for local armed groups to purchase weapons with which they unleash terror on the Nigerian state. It is important to note that, this influx has been enhanced by the porous borders in Nigeria. This singular act has contributed immensely to the proliferation of lethal weapons among jobless and hopeless youths especially in the Sahel which has also affected the Northern part of Nigeria which proximity makes it easier for such arms to be imported into the country through that region (Gulbi, Ahmed, Rambo, Mukoshy, & Sani, 2024). It must be noted that, the delay in the full enforcement of the political will over bandits by government is partly why they are emboldened to continue with their onslaught on the Nigerian state. Today, no geo-political region in Nigeria is free of bandits' onslaught as many Nigerians have been killed, ransom collected, and many enslaved or forcefully married by bandits. This invariably has created the atmosphere of fear, danger, and threats in most part of the country. It has equally made many people lose confidence in government and made others to believe that Nigerian government lack of political will also contributes to the surge of bandits in the country.

The Driving Factors of Farmer-Herdsmen Clashes

Violence involving pastoralist herders-farmers in Nigeria over the years has not been greeted with positive nods across the country as their activities not only affect peaceful co-existence, but also constituted a growing threat to food security in the country. Several factors have been identified as the precipitated factors for the outbreak of farmers-herdsmen clashes in the country. Prominent among these driving factors for the prominence of these clashes is the lack of respect for custom as the herders have no regard for traditions and agreement. For instance, staying on the farmland without the consent of the farmers coupled with the belief that they had the right to grazing in any farm caused conflict. Also, the herders paid little respect for traditional grazing custom with the claim that land is a common property. Again, interference of livelihood such as burning of the farms that belong to their hosts and disrespect for traditional authorities, grazing on harvested crops, stealing of farmers harvest by herders and destruction of soil also form part of the causes of conflicts between farmers and herdsmen. Similarly, the variability of climate, which had led to the emigration of herders and their cattle from the North to South in search of grazing resources, further provoked incessant conflict between herders and

farmers in most host communities in the South West and South-East regions. In the face of the scarcity of grazing land, most herdsmen encroached into farmland thereby causing havoc in farmlands. This situation in most cases put the farmers in an offence situation, leading to frequent clashes (Ukamaka, Danjuma, Mbolle, Achonam, & Mbadiwe, 2017).

The growing land pressure in the country, especially in the northern part where pastoralism and farming are practiced among the dwellers and migrants also formed part of the causes of the clashes. The most common trigger of farmers-herdsmen conflict is crop damage caused by cattle. Following the increase in the population of the rural areas, many herders have seen their grazing lands put into cultivation to meet essential needs, making their livelihoods more challenging. As such, pastoral land scarcity pushes herders into protected areas, such as national parks and classified forests, and increases their dependence on nominally illicit practices such as tree branch lopping. Security and forestry agents responsible for enforcing these regulations are perceived as disproportionately targeting pastoralists in exacting fines and even committing violent abuses (Brottem, 2021). Likewise, counterinsurgency campaigns in Nigeria have worsened inter-communal relationships as security forces have at times acted against pastoralist communities seen to be supportive of violent extremist groups (Uwazie, 2011).

Closely related to the above is the land grabbing and conflicts over arable lands and encroachment of cultivated land into grazing areas which with its potential in deepening pastoralists' grievances that their rights to resources such as land, water, wood, are weaker than those of farmers and consequently have been ignored. Pastoralists typically only need seasonal access to resources, so their land rights are often treated as secondary to those of farmers. Similarly, land use decisions are often made when pastoralists are not present, effectively excluding them from the process. Even where laws aim to protect pastoral resource rights, they tend to go unheeded at the local level. In some instances, the lack of access to land has led young people to lose faith in their community elders who appear unable to protect their resource interests or are involved in land deals themselves. Livestock is the most valuable resource across many rural communities in Nigeria and as such is a common target of theft. Increased frequency and magnitude of cattle rustling is both a cause and effect of violent conflict. Armed groups use stolen cattle to fund their activities. The alarming rate of cattle rustling prompted the herders to arm themselves to protect their animals. The increased demand for arms enriches criminal syndicates involved in arms trafficking. All these factors raise the risk of violent altercation. Meanwhile, aggrieved groups may perceive stealing livestock from communities with which they have been in conflict as a form of justice. This has led to a rapid expansion in the number of community-based armed groups to ostensibly guard against livestock theft, though such groups can also be engaged in reprisal violence. In other instances, the herdsmen accused the farmers of cattle rustling. This is a common phenomenon between the farmers and the herdsmen (Tor, & Boubacar, 2019).

Social inequalities between the framers and herdsmen also fuel the already complicated issues surrounding their relationship. Recent shifts in livestock ownership in some locations from rural pastoralist communities to wealthy urban dwellers have generated perceptions that herders are representing elite interests. This has contributed to the breakdown of traditional systems of mutual dependence such as the sharing of crop residue. This reinforces other conflict triggers such as the likelihood that a farmer will demand exorbitant fees of a herder for any damage to his crop (Lamidi, Jura, & Taleat, 2014). Similarly, a herder who has the backing of political elites may refuse to participate in dispute resolution with local farmers on the assumption that the owners of the herds hold sufficient political sway to avert accountability. In another dimension, distrust in the mediation process between the framers and herdsmen, inhibits resolving little disagreements amicably without ruffling feathers (Abbass, 2014). Once mistrust, rumour and suspicion taint perceptions of the dispute settlement process, aggrieved parties and their allies are often quick to assume that corruption played a role. Conversely, if either party to a dispute rejects the involvement of authorities, confrontations may escalate into inter-communal standoffs that are quick to turn violent. This instance manifests itself in farmers-herdsmen conflicts in most cases, leading to full-scale violence (Abdullahi, 2019). Climate change and stealing of cattle under the care of hired Fulani herders have remained a source of insecurity concern in Nigeria. The inability of the hired Fulani herders to account for all the cattle under their care has made owners of these cattle to arm the hired Fulani herders against cattle rustlers. The clash between hired Fulani herders and cattle rustlers has severely threatened the security of the Nigerian state (Atobatele, & Moliki, 2022).

Banditry, Farmer-Herdsmen Clashes and Security treats in Nigeria

The effects of banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes in Nigeria have been devastating. For instance, banditry has spread across the country such that today, no geo-political region in Nigeria is free of bandits' onslaught as many Nigerians have been killed, ransom collected, and many enslaved or forcefully married by bandits. This invariably has created the atmosphere of fear, danger, and threats in most part of the country. The country has experienced the highest number of banditry and farmer-herder fatalities in West over the past decade. This ugly incidence has far reaching consequences on the security fabric in terms of lives, property and food across the country. They have hydra-headed security implications such that, areas where these issues are alien have spillover effects especially on the prices of foodstuffs and just to mention, but a few. One noticeable security implication is in the area of loss of lives. Thousands of people have died since the attacks began, with many more injured or displaced (Ismail, 1994). A lot of killings by the bandits and herdsmen took place as a result of the conflicts and in the cases of farmers-herdsmen, it led to the reprisal killings of herdsmen by the host communities, the herds of cattle belonging to the nomads were also killed (Brottem, 2021). Also, some of the victims were badly injured and others were maimed. This has reduced some women farmers to the status of widows. While the conflicts have resulted in a humanitarian crisis, with thousands of people killed, injured, or displaced, survivors have suffered psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Again, children have been orphaned as a result of the conflict, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The reduced access to food and increased food prices have led to increased malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable groups such as children, women, and the elderly. In some cases, the lack of access to food has led to hunger and starvation, particularly in displaced communities. The competition for scarce food resources has led to increased tensions between communities. In another dimension, bandits killed and maimed the people and raped the women before dispossessing them of their cows while in some instances, they also kidnapped girls or women in the process. Trailing behind the loss of lives is displacement and migration as a response to the daunting effects of these deadly militia groups. Many people have been forced to flee their homes. (Aniche, & Ngwu, 2019).

The economic implications of these crises are also significant as many communities got displaced; agricultural activities have been disrupted, leading to food insecurity and increased poverty. The nation's economy has been put to test as result of activities bandits and farmers-herdsmen conflict and this also had a significant impact on Nigeria's economy. The lack of economic opportunities has also contributed to the rise of unemployment, which in turn fuelled the growth of banditry. The persistence of banditry in Nigeria can be attributed to the country's weak security architecture. The government's efforts to curb banditry have been unsuccessful, and the lack of effective security measures has emboldened the bandits. The massive displacement of communities has put a strain on local resources and infrastructure, making it difficult for people to access basic necessities like food, water, and healthcare. The destruction of crops and livestock has led to food shortages, which have driven up prices and made it difficult for people to afford basic necessities, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. Beyond this, the effects of banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes have also led to a humanitarian crisis, with many people forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other parts of the country. This has put a strain on local resources, making it difficult for host communities to cope (Tukur, 2013).

In the socio-cultural milieus, the conflict has also had a profound impact on social and cultural relationships among different ethnic and religious groups. The violence has exacerbated existing tensions, making it difficult for people to coexist peacefully. Attacks and counter attack in the form of reprisal attacks especially among the farmers and herdsmen's communities has immensely strain relationship, thus breeds mutual suspicions among the cohabiting groups. In some cases, bandits were assumed to be unleash by a particular ethnic group and as such, there presence in the communities were greeted with dismay (Bello, Agunyai, & Amusan, 2022). The constant attacks have created a sense of fear and mistrust among communities, leading to the breakdown of social cohesion. The cultural heritage of affected communities has also been disrupted, with many traditional practices and customs abandoned due to insecurity. The devastating effects on the local ecosystem is alarming such that the conflict has led to deforestation and land degradation, as forests and other natural habitats have been destroyed in the fighting. This in effect led to the loss of biodiversity, as many plant and animal species have been threatened or destroyed in the fighting. The current climate change especially in the northeast and northwest has an indirect link to the effects of some of the conflicts. (Abdullahi, 2019).

Banditry, Farmers-Herdsmen and Policy Responses

One of the goals of government is to ensure peace, order and security within its sovereign territory. With adequate security, human lives and properties can be protected. The foregoing submission shows that a country can be rated as a failed state when it cannot manage internal security within its sovereign territory. Despite the scale of violence and significant toll on women and children, the government's response has been foot dragging and insufficient. The Nigerian government's response to banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes has been a challenging effort. Indeed, the Nigerian government has been responding to the onslaught of banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes. Recent attacks confirmed that despite intelligence reports about planned attacks from bandits in some parts of the country, the Nigerian government and its security agencies looked very docile and helpless. Bandits now operate with little or no counter attacks from the government partly due to the lack of political will. However, the majority of government's responses have been reactive than proactive; Nigerian government mostly take action after bandit attacks. This reactive nature of the Nigerian government has given more opportunities to bandits to perpetrate their deadly attacks unchecked. This does not necessarily mean that the Nigerian government cannot take proactive action or response, but the problem is that it has always been skewed against freedom fighters who expose the injustice in the Nigerian government. On the other hand, those who kidnap for ransom and kill after collecting ransom seem to be pampered by the Nigerian government. For instance, cases of the arrest of Sunday Igboho in Republic of Benin and Nnamdi Kanu in Kenya buttress the fact that the Nigerian government knows how to take proactive action or response to crush security threats.

The government, however, failed to take the same action in the case of some group of bandits who were terrorising the country. The government has proposed various initiatives, including the establishment of grazing reserves and the National Livestock Transformation Plan, aimed at promoting modern livestock production practices and reducing conflicts between farmers and herders. However, these initiatives have been met with criticism and skepticism, with many arguing that they do not address the root causes of the conflict (Adegoke, 2019). The government's response has also been hampered by inadequate security measures, lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and proliferation of small arms. Furthermore, the government's silence and inaction in the face of the crisis have been seen as emboldening the perpetrators and exacerbating the conflict. However, a number of policies have been initiated by Nigerian government to curb the activities of bandits and farmers-herdsmen clashes as well as mitigate the effects of these conflicts. Indeed, the Nigerian government has been responding to the onslaught of bandits and farmers-herders men clashes against the Nigerian state. It is important to note that policy response of the Nigerian government has been more of reactions and condolence messages to victims of bandits and farmers-herdsmen (Bello, Agunyai, & Amusan, 2022). This trend has continued despite numerous intelligence reports begging for pro-active response or action of the Nigerian government against banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes.

In 2029, as part of the efforts of government to curb the excesses of farmers-herdsmen clashes, the former President, Muhammadu Buhari proposed the creation of Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements, which would provide grazing areas for Fulani herdsmen. This proposal was met with fierce criticism from many Nigerians, who saw it as an attempt to favour the Fulani herdsmen over other groups. Again, the RUGA proposal was also greeted with disapproval for its potential to exacerbate land conflicts and create new social and economic tensions in the region, Adurogbangba, Akinbile, 2015). The 2021 Asaba Declaration by 17 Southern governors in Nigeria also formed part of government's policy response to the devastating effects of these conflicts. This Asaba Declaration (Ahmed, 2019) seeks to address the root causes of the farmers-herdsmen clashes. The declaration called for the establishment of ranches and grazing areas, as well as the creation of a National Livestock Transformation Plan. However, good as this policy appears, the implementation of the Asaba Declaration has been foot dragging, and many Nigerians have expressed skepticism about its effectiveness in addressing the conflicts. Ranching has also been proposed as a solution to the farmers-herdsmen clashes, as it would provide a designated area for Fulani herdsmen to graze their cattle. Unfortunately, ranching has proven to be highly unrealistic in Nigeria due to poor infrastructure and difficulties with land acquisition (Ibietan, Abasilim, & Ebhohimen, 2016).

National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), which aims to promote modern livestock production practices and reduce conflicts between farmers and herdsman, has also been proposed by the Nigerian government. Some states in Nigeria have established grazing reserves, which provide designated areas for Fulani herdsmen to graze

their cattle. Community-based initiatives, such as the establishment of community-based grazing areas, have also been proposed as a solution to the conflict. It must be noted that, the policy responses to the banditry and farmers-herdsmen clashes in Nigeria have been varied, and their effectiveness has been mixed. These policies have been frustrated by inadequate security measures, lack of effective conflict resolution mechanism and the influx of small arms. (Bello, Agunyai, & Amusan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

An assessment of the nexus of banditry, farmers-herdsmen clashes, and insecurity in Nigeria revealed that it is complex and multifaceted. Complex causes trigger bandits and farmers-herdsmen conflicts providing significant challenges to the security fabric of the nation. The conflicts have resulted in significant human suffering, displacement, and economic losses, and have undermined national security and stability. These are driven by a combination of factors, including environmental degradation, population growth, economic inequality and just to mention, but a few. The conflicts have been exacerbated by inadequate government policies, lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and proliferation of small arms. The Nigerian Federal government and various states government have initiated several initiatives to curtail the activities of the bandits and farmers-herdsmen clashes in Nigeria, but these efforts have been greeted with criticisms across the country for being inadequate and ineffective. Insecurity, a byproduct of banditry and farmer-herdsmen clashes, from all indications, is partly the reason for the failing status of Nigeria, both in Africa and in the international socio-political and economic systems. It must be noted that, insecurity is not novel to Nigeria, it exists in every country, the rate at which it occurs in Nigeria is worrisome and alarming.

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