

Governance Deficit and the Proliferation of Armed Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria: Evidence from Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricate nexus between governance deficit and the persistent rise of armed banditry in three of Nigeria's most affected states: Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara, over the period from 1999 to 2021. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative data collected from over a thousand respondents with qualitative insights from focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews involving community members, government officials, and security actors. The research investigates the historical emergence, structural drivers, and operational dynamics of banditry, highlighting the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators. The findings reveal a compelling correlation between governance failures, characterized by widespread poverty, systemic corruption, weak institutional capacity, political exclusion, and neglect of rural communities, and the proliferation of non-state armed groups that have undermined state authority and eroded human security. The study further documents the devastating socio-economic impacts of this insecurity, including mass displacement, collapse of rural livelihoods, destruction of infrastructure, and growing state fragility. In evaluating the responses of state and federal authorities, the study finds that existing strategies, often militarized and reactive, have failed to address the structural roots of the crisis. It argues for a paradigm shift toward a governance-centered and human security-oriented framework that emphasizes inclusive development, accountability, institutional reform, and community engagement. The paper concludes that sustainable peace and development in Nigeria's northwestern region can only be achieved through the restoration of state legitimacy and the strengthening of governance mechanisms capable of addressing structural inequalities and delivering public goods effectively.

Keywords: Governance Deficit; Armed Banditry; Northwestern Nigeria; State Fragility; Human Security

INTRODUCTION

The Northwest geopolitical zone of Nigeria, once considered one of the most stable and peaceful regions of the country, has in recent years become a flashpoint of insecurity marked by pervasive armed banditry, widespread displacement, and socioeconomic decline. Traditionally agrarian, the region—comprising states such as Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara—benefitted from relative tranquility and intercommunal coexistence throughout the post-independence era. However, beginning in the early 2010s and escalating significantly from 2015 onward, the region has experienced a surge in violence perpetrated by armed non-state actors engaging in kidnappings, cattle rustling, village raids, arson, and extortion. The situation has grown so dire that rural communities have been overrun, local economies devastated, and the legitimacy of the Nigerian state increasingly questioned.

Despite various state-led interventions—including the deployment of military personnel, establishment of joint security task forces, and initiation of amnesty or negotiation programs—the crisis remains intractable. Billions of naira have been spent on security operations, yet the violence

persists, often escalating in brutality and geographic spread. These policy failures have drawn attention to deeper structural and institutional dysfunctions within the Nigerian state, particularly in its governance framework. Scholars, civil society actors, and affected communities increasingly point to "governance deficit" defined as the inability or unwillingness of government institutions to fulfill their core responsibilities of providing security, justice, basic services, and inclusive development—as the primary driver of the insecurity plaguing the region.

This study therefore seeks to interrogate the triadic relationship between governance, insecurity, and development, with a specific focus on armed banditry in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States between 1999 and 2021. The central thesis is that the proliferation of armed violence in these states is not merely a security problem but a symptom of long-standing governance failures. These include widespread poverty and unemployment, corruption and elite impunity, exclusion of rural populations from decision-making processes, and the collapse of local institutions and security infrastructure. Banditry in this context is both a manifestation of state fragility and a driver of underdevelopment, as it disrupts agriculture, displaces populations, undermines trust in authority, and deters investment in affected communities.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to generate empirical evidence on how governance failures have fueled the rise of banditry and to assess the impact of this violence on communities and the developmental trajectory of the region. By combining statistical survey data with qualitative narratives from key informants and community members, the research captures both the macro and micro dimensions of the crisis. Its unique contribution lies in providing new, multi-state empirical evidence that links governance deficit directly to the evolution and persistence of armed banditry, while advancing a governance-centered analytical framework that bridges the gap between security and development studies. In doing so, the study contributes fresh conceptual and policy perspectives to ongoing debates on addressing insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria—not through military responses alone, but through inclusive, accountable, and development-oriented governance reforms that restore state presence and public trust. This paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews existing literature on banditry, governance, and security in Nigeria and introduces the theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the study's methodology. The subsequent sections present and analyze the empirical findings, and the paper concludes with key policy recommendations aimed at fostering sustainable peace and development in Northwest Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in the Northwest, has been extensively discussed across academic, policy, and media circles. Existing literature identifies a wide array of factors responsible for the current wave of violence, including ethnic tensions, climate change, farmer-herder conflicts, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), and the decline of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. While these explanations offer valuable insights, a growing body of scholarship argues that they often treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of insecurity. Notably, few studies adopt a comprehensive governance framework that situates banditry within the broader context of state failure and systemic governance deficiencies.

Ethnic and Communal Conflict

Many studies on banditry in Northern Nigeria frame the violence within the context of ethnic and communal tensions, particularly between sedentary farming communities (mostly Hausa) and nomadic pastoralists (predominantly Fulani). These conflicts are often triggered by competition over dwindling natural resources, especially arable land and water. For instance, Okoli and Atelhe (2014) argue that clashes between farmers and herders, although historically manageable, have evolved into organized violence due to increasing ethnicization and politicization of resource competition. Similarly, Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2018) note that long-standing inter-group mistrust has been exploited by criminal elements, thereby escalating localized conflicts into regional security threats.

Climate Change and Environmental Stress

Environmental degradation—especially in the form of desertification, erratic rainfall, and deforestation—has pushed herders further south, intensifying conflict with farming communities. Blench (2010) traces the increased frequency of these encounters to ecological stress, which has rendered traditional migratory patterns untenable. The inability of the state to manage this transition has contributed to lawlessness in frontier regions. The International Crisis Group (2020) also identifies climate-induced displacement as a factor that has destabilized community relations and contributed to the rise of rural banditry.

Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons

The proliferation of SALWs, facilitated by Nigeria's porous borders and weak regulatory frameworks, has played a crucial role in escalating rural violence. According to the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP, 2020), armed groups in the Northwest are increasingly sophisticated, possessing weapons such as AK-47s and RPGs, which were once exclusive to formal security forces. The influx of arms has emboldened bandit groups to challenge state authority and dominate ungoverned spaces. Okoli and Abubakar (2021) argue that arms trafficking and weak border control are integral to the entrenchment of banditry as a profitable enterprise.

Collapse of Traditional Governance and Vigilantism

The weakening of traditional authority systems and the rise of informal security outfits, such as the *Yan Sakai* vigilantes, have further complicated the security landscape. While initially formed to protect communities, these groups often act with impunity and have been accused of extrajudicial killings and ethnic profiling. According to the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2022), this has exacerbated tensions and deepened cycles of revenge and retaliation. Higazi and Hassan (2022) contend that the erosion of traditional conflict resolution structures has left a vacuum that state institutions have failed to fill effectively.

Governance Deficit: An Overlooked Nexus

Despite the richness of existing literature on the immediate drivers of banditry, relatively few studies adopt a governance-focused lens that examines the structural failures underpinning the crisis. Where governance is addressed, it is often in passing or reduced to issues of corruption and inefficiency. Yet, the governance perspective offers a more holistic understanding of the origins, persistence, and implications of insecurity. Governance, in this context, encompasses the state's capacity to deliver public goods, enforce the rule of law, and ensure accountability and inclusion (Fukuyama, 2013; Kaufmann, Kraay & Zoido-Lobaton, 1999).

According to Yiew et al. (2017), the incidence of armed conflict in developing countries is closely tied to poor governance, characterized by exclusionary politics, weak institutions, and social injustice. This is echoed by Nay (2013), who links the prevalence of conflict to state fragility, emphasizing that countries with low governance capacity are more vulnerable to insurgency and organized crime. Rahman (2016) similarly argues that insecurity is not merely a consequence of economic deprivation but a reflection of a deeper legitimacy crisis rooted in governance failures.

Within the Nigerian context, scholars such as Akinola (2018) and Adebajoko & Okorie (2014) have called attention to the corrosive effects of corruption, elite capture, and institutional decay on national cohesion and development. However, there remains a dearth of empirical studies that systematically examine how governance deficit—measured in terms of regulatory failure, distributive injustice, and lack of institutional responsiveness—directly fuels insecurity, especially in the rural peripheries of Northern Nigeria. This gap underscores the need for context-specific, evidence-based studies that bridge the analytical divide between governance and security.

Conclusion of the Review

While prior scholarship has illuminated important aspects of the banditry phenomenon, there is a compelling need to move beyond mono-causal explanations and adopt a multidimensional framework that foregrounds governance quality. The present study contributes to this growing but underexplored area by empirically investigating how governance failures have enabled the rise and entrenchment of armed banditry in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States. It seeks to demonstrate that without addressing the structural roots of state fragility—such as political exclusion, corruption, and the collapse of rural infrastructure—any solution to the insecurity crisis will be temporary and unsustainable.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Good Governance Theory, Dudley Seers' Development Indices, and Subcultural Theory. Each of these frameworks provides valuable insight into the complex relationships between governance failure, youth marginalization, violence, and the broader crisis of development in Northwestern Nigeria.

1. Good Governance Theory

At the heart of this study lies Good Governance Theory, which emphasizes the role of state institutions in promoting peace, security, and development through transparency, accountability, participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness to the needs of citizens (Fukuyama, 2013; Kaufmann, Kraay & Zoido-Lobaton, 1999). Governance is conceptualized not merely as a system of rule, but as the effective management of a nation's affairs in a manner that is just, equitable, and responsive to the aspirations of the people (Stoker, 2019).

A governance deficit, therefore, is manifested in the state's inability or unwillingness to deliver basic services, maintain law and order, ensure public safety, and promote social justice. In the context of Northwestern Nigeria, such deficits are evidenced by widespread poverty, high levels of youth unemployment, systemic corruption, a weak institutional framework, and the breakdown of trust between the government and local communities (Muhammad, 2024). This absence of functional and accountable governance structures has led to a vacuum filled by non-state actors, including armed bandit groups.

As Rahman (2016) and Yiew et al. (2017) argue, insecurity is likely to emerge or worsen when governments are non-participatory, opaque, unaccountable, and fail to meet the core mandates of service provision and justice. The Nigerian state's failure to secure rural areas, protect lives and property, or mediate communal conflicts in the region has thus created the conditions for the emergence and consolidation of banditry.

2. Dudley Seers' Indices of Development

To assess the developmental crisis in Northwestern Nigeria, the study also draws upon the analytical model proposed by development economist Dudley Seers (1972). According to Seers, the fundamental questions that must be asked to determine whether a society is truly developing are:

1. What has happened to poverty?
2. What has happened to unemployment?
3. What has happened to inequality?

If all three of these are on the decline, then development is underway. However, if any of them is worsening—especially in the presence of increasing national income—then the country is not truly developing.

In the case of Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States, poverty, unemployment, and inequality have all worsened in the context of persistent insecurity and state neglect. These conditions have created a breeding ground for violent behavior and antisocial activities. Youth who are denied access to employment, education, and social mobility increasingly turn to banditry and criminality as coping mechanisms or forms of resistance to exclusion and deprivation. This reflects Seers' broader contention that underdevelopment is not merely about low income but about unfulfilled human potential and unaddressed structural inequalities.

3. Subcultural Theory

While Good Governance Theory and Seers' development indices explain the structural and institutional causes of insecurity, Subcultural Theory, developed by Albert K. Cohen (1955), helps explain the behavioral dimension—how and why marginalized youth turn to deviant subcultures such as banditry.

Subcultural theory posits that deviance arises from the formation of group norms that emerge in response to social inequality, status frustration, and exclusion from mainstream opportunities. In societies marked by deep class divisions and limited access to legitimate means of success, alternative value systems develop within marginalized communities, especially among youth. These subcultures reward behaviors—such as violence, theft, and territorial control—that are condemned by wider society but are seen as rational or even honorable within the subculture (Cohen, 1955).

In Northwestern Nigeria, many bandits are young males, often between the ages of 18 and 35, who have grown up in impoverished, ungoverned, and conflict-ridden environments. With limited education, few job prospects, and alienation from formal governance systems, these youth find status, income, and identity within armed groups. Their criminal behavior, while reprehensible to outsiders, is viewed within their subculture as adaptive and necessary for survival (Muhammad, 2024).

Subcultural theory thus complements the governance and development perspectives by offering a micro-level understanding of the motivations and identities of those who participate in banditry. It illustrates how structural inequalities produce deviant norms that are self-reinforcing, making it more difficult to reintegrate bandits into lawful society without transformative intervention.

Synthesis and Application

Together, these theories illuminate the multidimensional nature of the crisis in Northwestern Nigeria. Good Governance Theory explains the systemic failures that create insecurity; Seers' framework underscores how underdevelopment fuels frustration and desperation; and Subcultural Theory elucidates how marginalized youth construct alternative norms that sustain cycles of violence. This integrated theoretical lens is critical for understanding not only the root causes of banditry but also for designing holistic, evidence-based interventions that promote peace, security, and inclusive development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between governance deficit, armed banditry, and development crises in Northwestern Nigeria. This triangulated design allowed for the convergence of numerical data and narrative insights, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

Study Area and Scope

The research focused on three states in Northwestern Nigeria—Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara—which are among the most affected by armed banditry. Within each state, one Local Government Area (LGA) was selected from each senatorial zone based on the prevalence of banditry-related incidents. This yielded a total of nine LGAs, forming the primary geographical focus of the study. The areas selected included Birnin-Gwari, Giwa, and Zangon-Kataf (Kaduna); Faskari, Kankara, and Jibia (Katsina); and Anka, Shinkafi, and Tsafe (Zamfara).

Quantitative Component

A total of 1,155 respondents were surveyed across the nine LGAs, with 385 respondents per state. The sample was derived using a multi-stage cluster sampling technique designed to ensure representativeness and reliability across the selected states. Each state was stratified into its three senatorial districts, from which one LGA per district was purposively selected based on the prevalence and severity of banditry. Within each LGA, three wards were randomly selected, and respondents were then chosen through random household sampling to minimize selection bias and enhance the validity of responses.

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire administered electronically using the CPro-based CSEntry application. The tool was pre-tested and validated to ensure internal consistency, clarity, and cultural appropriateness before full deployment. Data collection was conducted by trained field enumerators who were fluent in English, Hausa, and local dialects and were sensitized on research ethics, confidentiality, and neutrality. Continuous field supervision and daily data checks were implemented to ensure data quality and accuracy.

Qualitative Component

To complement the survey data, extensive qualitative data were collected through:

- i. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Conducted with youth, women, and elders, separated by gender and age to ensure cultural appropriateness and openness in responses.
- ii. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Conducted with state and local government officials, security operatives, and civil society representatives.
- iii. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs): Held with religious leaders, traditional rulers, and community leaders.

In total, 63 qualitative sessions were conducted across the selected LGAs. Participants were recruited through community entry facilitated by traditional authorities and local guides. All sessions were audio-recorded (with informed consent), transcribed, and subjected to rigorous content analysis.

Data Analysis

- i. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 23. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were used to present respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and responses.

- ii. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using content analysis techniques. Key themes and patterns were identified and supported with verbatim quotations from participants to reflect community-level narratives. Triangulation between the quantitative and qualitative datasets strengthened the validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

All research activities were conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose, and their voluntary participation and confidentiality were ensured. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Sensitive interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure comfort and honesty. Ethical clearance was granted by relevant institutional and community authorities.

Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

The study encountered several challenges, including insecurity in field locations, reluctance of participants, and logistical difficulties. These were mitigated by:

- i. Coordinating with local leaders to ensure safe access and community support.
- ii. Using flexible schedules to accommodate respondents' availability.
- iii. Ensuring the anonymity of participants to foster openness.

In sum, the study's mixed-methods approach enabled a nuanced and empirically grounded exploration of the dynamics between governance failure, the rise of banditry, and underdevelopment in Northwestern Nigeria. By integrating statistical trends with lived experiences, the study offers both breadth and depth in its analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Nature and Dimensions of Governance Issues and Challenges that Explain the Rising Tide of Armed Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria

The study finds strong and consistent evidence that governance deficit—characterized by weak institutional capacity, neglect of rural development, corruption, and exclusion—is a key driver behind the emergence and intensification of armed banditry in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States. The findings are drawn from both quantitative survey results and qualitative data collected through FGDs, KIIs, and IDIs.

1. Origin and Emergence of Banditry Linked to Governance Failure

Quantitative data (see Table 1) show that the majority of respondents—313 in Kaduna, 336 in Katsina, and 246 in Zamfara—believe that – coinciding with increased perceptions of state failure and political volatility. Only a small minority traced the problem to 1999, indicating that the phenomenon is largely a post-2015 development, linked to a worsening governance environment.

TABLE 1. Origin and Nature of Banditry

	Kaduna				Katsina				Zamfara			
	Birnin-Gwari	Giwa	Zango-Kataf	Total	Faskari	Kankara	Jibia	Total	Anka	Shinkafi	Tsafe	Total
Q8: For how long has the phenomenon of banditry been in this State?												
Before 1999	23(0%)	3(0%)	3(0%)	29(0%)	0(0%)	3(0%)	5(0%)	8(0%)	0(0%)	7(0%)	16(0%)	23(0%)
Since 1999 to 2015	32(0%)	8(0%)	3(0%)	43(0%)	7(0%)	34(0%)	0(0%)	41(0%)	47(0%)	31(0%)	38(0%)	116(0%)
Since 2015 to date	74(0%)	117(0%)	122(0%)	313(0%)	122(0%)	91(0%)	123(0%)	336(0%)	81(0%)	91(0%)	74(0%)	246(0%)
Q9: Who is a bandit?												
Kidnapper	129(100%)	128(100%)	65(50%)	322(83%)	99(76%)	124(96%)	128(100%)	351(91%)	128(100%)	127(98%)	127(99%)	382(99%)
Cattle	125(96%)	85(66%)	121(94%)	331(85%)	68(52%)	121(94%)	127(99%)	316(82%)	82(64%)	127(98%)	125(97%)	334(86%)
Thief	104(80%)	74(57%)	90(70%)	268(69%)	57(44%)	59(46%)	115(89%)	231(60%)	5(3%)	123(95%)	85(66%)	213(55%)
Armed robber	109(84%)	72(56%)	92(71%)	273(70%)	60(46%)	55(42%)	116(90%)	231(60%)	45(35%)	117(90%)	95(74%)	257(66%)
Others (Please specify)	0(0%)	0(0%)	8(6%)	8(2%)	5(3%)	1(0%)	1(0%)	7(1%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Q10: Where do you think the bandits can be located?												
In the bush	129(100%)	128(100%)	123(96%)	380(98%)	115(89%)	119(92%)	127(99%)	361(93%)	118(92%)	121(93%)	127(99%)	366(95%)
A nearby Village	28(21%)	58(45%)	74(57%)	160(41%)	8(6%)	92(71%)	59(46%)	159(41%)	53(41%)	83(64%)	27(21%)	163(42%)
A hideout	42(32%)	78(60%)	65(50%)	185(48%)	22(17%)	111(86%)	64(50%)	197(51%)	20(15%)	113(87%)	36(28%)	169(43%)
Others	0(0%)	0(0%)	2(1%)	2(0%)	6(4%)	1(0%)	1(0%)	8(2%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Q11: What do you think is the ethnic identity of the bandits?												
Hausa	8(6%)	54(42%)	52(40%)	114(29%)	37(28%)	96(75%)	79(61%)	212(55%)	36(28%)	66(51%)	101(78%)	203(52%)
Fulani	129(100%)	128(100%)	128(100%)	385(100%)	115(89%)	126(98%)	128(100%)	369(95%)	128(100%)	128(99%)	128(100%)	384(99%)
Kanuri	0(0%)	7(5%)	7(5%)	14(3%)	2(1%)	50(39%)	3(2%)	55(14%)	0(0%)	4(3%)	1(0%)	5(1%)
Others	0(0%)	1(0%)	0(0%)	1(0%)	11(8%)	1(0%)	0(0%)	12(3%)	0(0%)	2(1%)	2(1%)	4(1%)
Q12: How do the bandits move?												
On foot	62(48%)	100(78%)	108(84%)	270(70%)	35(27%)	100(78%)	59(46%)	194(50%)	19(14%)	80(62%)	44(34%)	143(37%)
On bike	129(100%)	116(90%)	98(76%)	343(89%)	119(92%)	127(99%)	106(82%)	352(91%)	128(100%)	129(100%)	78(60%)	335(87%)
Motor Vehicle	1(0%)	31(24%)	73(57%)	105(27%)	4(3%)	58(45%)	3(2%)	65(16%)	0(0%)	25(19%)	50(39%)	75(19%)
Others	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	6(4%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	6(1%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)

A participant from a focus group in Shinkafi LGA (Zamfara) noted:

“The banditry became intense during the first tenure of former Governor Abdulaziz Yari... They [bandits] started coming to kidnap and collect levies.”

This suggests that governance inaction, weak local security presence, and political complacency enabled the spread and normalization of violence.

2. Dimensions of Governance Deficit

The research identifies four interrelated dimensions of governance deficit that are central to the rise of banditry:

i. Failure of State Protection and Security Infrastructure.

Approximately 68% of respondents expressed no confidence in government security interventions, citing delayed responses, absence of security forces in rural areas, and poor coordination among agencies. Focus group participants described entire communities being left to defend themselves or negotiate directly with bandits.

“We only see police after the attacks. Even then, they don’t do anything. It’s like we are on our own.” — FGD, Giwa LGA (Kaduna)

ii. Institutional Neglect of Basic Services and Development.

Respondents cited the absence of government presence in rural communities, especially in areas of education, healthcare, roads, and employment. This neglect creates both grievances and opportunities for bandit groups to assert control and legitimacy.

“There are no schools, no water, no roads. If a boy grows up seeing nothing from the government, what do you expect him to become?” — KII, Traditional Leader, Kankara LGA (Katsina)

This aligns with Seers’ framework (1972) where rising poverty, unemployment, and inequality indicate underdevelopment, which in turn fuels social unrest and violence.

iii. Corruption and Impunity.

Respondents and interviewees frequently mentioned that state resources allocated for security were misappropriated, and that local officials collude with criminal networks. In some cases, the communities reported that ransom negotiations were facilitated by intermediaries close to politicians or security personnel, eroding trust in state actors.

“Some of these bandits work with politicians. They are used during elections, then forgotten.” — FGD, Zangon Kataf (Kaduna)

This affirms scholarly assertions (Yiew et al., 2017; Rahman, 2016) that corruption weakens governance legitimacy and emboldens armed actors.

iv. Exclusion from Governance and Justice.

Over 70% of respondents felt excluded from decision-making processes, especially in matters of security and development planning. This marginalization breeds resentment and alienation, particularly among youth and Fulani pastoralist communities, who often claim they are targeted by vigilantes and ignored by authorities.

“If you go to complain, they will arrest you or do nothing. That’s why the people have no hope.” — IDI, Youth, Faskari LGA (Katsina)

The governance approach used in the study (Stoker, 2019; Fukuyama, 2013) supports the view that a state’s inability to ensure participation, inclusiveness, and justice contributes to violent backlash from excluded groups.

3. Thematic Analysis of Drivers of Banditry from Governance Perspective

TABLE 2. Thematic Analysis of Drivers of Armed Banditry

S/NO	Theme	Sub-Theme	Remarks	ID of Respondents
1	Governance deficit	Prevalence of high poverty rate in community	Failure of government to tackle poverty means that high poverty rate is prevalent in communities which drives the youth into criminality.	KDN:(FGD)BNG:M1,M2,M3,M5 KTN: ZMR:
		Prevalence of high unemployment rate in community	Government officials have failed to provide job opportunities for the teeming youth resulting in high unemployment rate which facilitate youth involvement in armed banditry.	
			Lack of economic opportunities due to absence of skills among community members leads to desperation among the youth as they are unable to gain legitimate employment.	
		Lack of provision of quality education	The government has failed to do what is expected by the governed. Lack of quality education means that governments contribute to banditry by allowing the existence of large number of out of school children who are recruited into banditry.	
		Lack of provision of quality healthcare	There has been an acute shortage in provision of health care services.	
		Lack of provision of potable drinking water	Water supply is hard to come by in communities especially in rural areas.	
2	Dynamics of farmer-herder conflicts	Loss of grazing reserve	Areas that are designated as grazing reserves have been encroached upon and taken over by farming and other structures which leaves that herders stranded and liable to trespass into farmlands.	
		Loss of grazing routes	Cattle routes which are utilized by herders in moving their animals from one location to another have been disrupted by farming activities and road construction, thereby jeopardizing the nomadic lifestyle of the herders.	
		Loss of farm produce	Farmers suffer loss of farm produce owing to trespassing by herders into farmlands resulting to retaliatory violence.	
3	Artisanal gold mining	Attack on communities in mining areas	Bandit groups attack mining sites in order to loot gold and other valuables. Communities are attacked in order to dislodge them from mining areas to enable unhindered access to mining sites.	

		Proliferation of small arms and light weapons	Proceeds of mining activities are used to procure sophisticated weapons which are used to perpetrate criminal activities.	
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Table 2 presents a thematic synthesis of governance-related drivers of banditry as derived from qualitative data. These include:

- i. Lack of effective policing and judicial redress
- ii. Weak community engagement in security planning
- iii. Erosion of traditional authority and informal dispute resolution
- iv. Political patronage and monetization of insecurity
- v. Perceived abandonment of rural populations by the state

The data suggests that these governance-related issues are not incidental but systemic, pointing to a pattern of state withdrawal from rural development and protection, which has created ungoverned spaces filled by violent actors.

4. Regional Variation in Governance Failures

Although all three states reported high levels of governance failure, Zamfara State emerged as the most severely affected, both in the early onset of banditry and the depth of institutional collapse. Qualitative responses from Zamfara were especially stark, highlighting the complete erosion of state presence in many rural areas, which were effectively colonized by armed groups.

“Even the government pays taxes to the bandits here. They are the ones in control.” — FGD, Shinkafi LGA

This finding aligns with academic literature (e.g., Higazi & Hassan, 2022; CDD, 2022), which identifies Zamfara as the epicenter of Nigeria’s banditry crisis, due in part to decades of environmental degradation, local corruption, and political complacency.

Synthesis and Interpretation

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the rise of banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is rooted in chronic governance failure. The state’s inability to secure lives, deliver services, enforce justice, or build trust with its citizens has created the conditions for armed violence to flourish. This governance gap has been filled by non-state actors who, in some cases, provide security, extract resources (through taxation), and adjudicate disputes—thus functioning as *de facto* authorities in areas where the state is absent.

The study validates the governance theory proposition that insecurity is not just a law enforcement issue, but fundamentally a failure of state-society relations. It also supports Seers’ development indicators which assert that no true development can occur amidst poverty, exclusion, and inequality—all of which are rampant in the study area.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the nature and dimensions of governance-related challenges that have contributed to the proliferation of armed banditry in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States between 1999 and 2021. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data converge to reveal a troubling picture of systemic governance failure—manifested in weak state institutions, ineffective security provision, widespread corruption, rural neglect, and political exclusion.

These governance failures fuel banditry through three interrelated mechanisms. First, the failure of state protection creates ungoverned spaces where non-state armed groups thrive by filling the security vacuum, imposing their own order, and extracting resources from vulnerable communities. Second, institutional neglect and corruption weaken public trust, delegitimize state authority, and push marginalized youth toward violent survival strategies and informal economies of crime. Third, political exclusion and distributive injustice breed resentment and alienation, particularly among rural and pastoralist populations who perceive the state as distant, biased, or predatory. Collectively, these mechanisms transform governance deficit from a structural weakness into a direct catalyst for violent mobilization.

The study thus reinforces the argument that banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is not merely a product of lawlessness but a systemic outcome of long-standing governance dysfunction. It underscores that the durability of armed banditry is sustained by the same institutional weaknesses that perpetuate underdevelopment and inequality.

Policy-wise, addressing this crisis requires rebuilding state capacity from the bottom up—not only by expanding security operations, but by restoring legitimacy through inclusive governance, social justice, and equitable service delivery. Strengthening local government institutions, ensuring transparent resource management, and empowering community-based structures are essential to reversing the governance vacuum that armed actors exploit.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following governance-focused recommendations are proposed to address the structural roots of armed banditry:

1. The capacity of Local Government Authorities (LGAs) should be strengthened to effectively deliver public services and maintain security, particularly in rural areas. Abandoned public infrastructure such as schools, clinics, and police posts in communities vulnerable to bandit attacks should be reopened and secured. Rural development task forces comprising local leaders, civil society organizations, and security actors should be established to coordinate, plan, and monitor interventions aimed at restoring state presence and rebuilding community trust.
2. Formal community engagement frameworks should be created to ensure the inclusion of traditional leaders, women, youth, and pastoralist groups in security and development planning. Ward-level security forums should be institutionalized to provide residents with regular platforms to voice concerns, identify threats, and participate in decision-making processes that affect their safety and welfare.
3. Rigorous oversight mechanisms should be instituted to monitor the disbursement and utilization of security and development funds at both the state and local government levels. Citizen feedback systems such as toll-free numbers and digital reporting platforms should be established to enable individuals to anonymously report cases of security lapses, corruption, or public service failures, ensuring that such complaints are transparently addressed.
4. Targeted rural infrastructure programs focusing on roads, irrigation, solar energy, and mobile clinics should be launched in banditry-prone areas to bridge the long-standing development gap. Agriculture-based livelihood support programs should be prioritized

- for vulnerable youth populations as a means of reducing unemployment, poverty, and the incentive to engage in armed criminality.
5. Local policing structures should be reformed to make them community-oriented, intelligence-driven, and culturally sensitive. Cases involving human rights abuses, vigilante excesses, or corruption by security agents should be subjected to independent investigation and prosecution to enhance accountability and rebuild public confidence in law enforcement institutions.
 6. Localized early warning and rapid response systems should be developed and managed by community stakeholders to detect and mitigate emerging tensions or potential security threats. These systems should be embedded within existing governance frameworks to ensure coordination between local actors and formal state security agencies.

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