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DRIVING DESTRUCTION

Cattle rustling and
instability in Nigeria

KINGSLEY L MADUEKE

JANUARY 2023



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kingsley L Madueke is Nigeria Research Coordinator at the GI-TOC. He is also a lecturer at the Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies, University of Jos, Nigeria.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland

www.globalinitiative.net


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cattle recovered from rustlers in the Maru local government area, Zamfara State, July 2022. Cattle rustling is a driver of instability in Nigeria, particularly in the North-West and North-Central regions. © Shehu Umar



Cattle rustling in Nigeria has evolved from a sustainable community practice into a significant illicit economy, delivering material profits to conflict actors and multiplying harms. Since 2011, the country has experienced a surge in the number of rustling incidents, resulting in thousands of deaths, loss of livelihoods, widespread destruction and displacement of people.¹ This has had a debilitating impact on the country's stability, as explored in an earlier report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).²

In Nigeria's North-West and North-Central regions, in particular, cattle rustling has contributed to growing instability by increasing levels of violent crime. The Nigerian press is awash with stories of heavily armed groups raiding communities, killing people and stealing large herds of cattle. Also of note are the violent activities of the self-defence groups that have emerged in response.³ Additionally, in some of Nigeria's most volatile regions, including Northern Plateau and Southern Kaduna, cattle rustling has fed into longstanding conflicts between farmers and herders, fuelling violence and deepening polarization.⁴

Cattle rustling deserves attention because it is among the illicit economies most clearly driving instability in Nigeria, more so than others traditionally focused on as sources of instability, such as armed robbery and drug trafficking. The relationship between cattle rustling and instability is multifaceted: not only has the phenomenon been the cause of thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement of communities and destruction of livelihoods, but it has also repeatedly operated as a significant source of financing for armed groups, including regional insurgent groups operating in north-eastern Nigeria and northern and central Mali.⁵ Cattle rustling is also interwoven with longstanding tensions between ethnicities, amplifying these and catalyzing further conflict.

The GI-TOC's West Africa illicit hubs mapping initiative highlights cattle rustling's important role as a driver of insecurity in the region.⁶ That study identified 280 hubs of illicit economies across 18 countries in West and Central Africa. Then, to each hub it applied the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), a tool designed to assess the relative impact of the role played by illicit markets in fuelling conflict and instability. From this research, cattle rustling emerged as one of three accelerant markets – alongside arms trafficking and kidnapping for ransom – which appeared

far more commonly in hubs where illicit economies were identified to play a significant role as vectors of instability ('high-scoring hubs'), than in hubs where illicit economies did not play a significant role in driving instability ('low-scoring hubs'). Cattle rustling featured as a major market in high-scoring hubs three times more often than in low-scoring hubs.⁷

These findings also highlight how cattle rustling intersects with other organized criminal activities. The insecurity engendered by cattle rustling stimulates demand for arms, both from perpetrators and from communities seeking to defend themselves. Armed groups engaged in cattle rustling have repeatedly turned to other criminal activities, especially kidnapping for ransom, as cattle stocks deplete and opportunities for rustling narrow in the face of security measures and the displacement of herds due to insecurity.⁸

Importantly, cattle rustling is not a security concern only in Nigeria: its effects transcend national borders, with implications for regional stability in West Africa and the Sahel. Nigeria and Mali are the region's two largest producers of cattle, and the epicentres of cattle rustling. However, the supply chains of stolen cattle connect armed groups, criminal networks and actors across West Africa. For instance, Nigeria's cattle rustling networks operate

across the Nigerian border through Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto; the Chadian border through Borno; and the Beninese border through Kwara. Cattle rustled in Nigeria are often sold in markets in neighbouring countries, distorting the cattle market in these states. GI-TOC research has also shown that the supply chain of stolen cattle from central and northern Mali links to Burkina Faso, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire.⁹

This report focuses on Zamfara and Plateau states, where cattle rustling has fuelled large-scale violence and instability over the past decade. The report also explores the concerning southward diffusion of cattle rustling, with an emphasis on Kwara and Oyo states. While some underlying causes of cattle rustling cut across regions, this research highlights that local drivers of cattle rustling and instability are often distinct and therefore require context-specific responses.

Addressing cattle rustling should be a priority in mitigating insecurity and instability in Nigeria. Effective responses to cattle rustling and its destabilizing impacts at local, national and regional levels demand an in-depth understanding of the factors that drive it in different contexts, as well as the supply chains and networks involved in the market.

Key findings

- Cattle rustling and its impact on stability are conditioned by key local dynamics, including land management and distribution, longstanding conflicts and tensions, and national and local response strategies.
- The effects of cattle rustling are felt well beyond the contexts in which it occurs: expansive supply chains, itinerant cattle rustling networks and the emergence of self-defence groups all contribute to geographically diffuse harms.
- If not constructively addressed, cattle rustling could spread to other parts of the country, feeding into old tensions and fuelling new ones.
- The effectiveness of response strategies in Nigeria, and the region more broadly, should be enhanced – responses to date have largely employed uniform approaches, hindered by a lack of context-specific interventions.

Methodology

This research combined quantitative and qualitative data sources, including open-source intelligence (OSINT), data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), semi-structured key informant interviews and focus group discussions in selected sites. The research was conducted in four main phases: desk research and OSINT analysis, pre-field work consultations with key experts, qualitative fieldwork involving interviews, and a workshop to discuss the findings and implications. This was followed by a final set of follow-up key informant interviews.

The two pre-field research processes were complementary in helping to identify the geographic sites for data collection to assess the impact of cattle rustling on stability. Pre-fieldwork interviews underscored that cattle rustling is most prevalent in Nigeria's north, and is spreading southwards, a trend supported by open-source data collected before the research. The fieldwork sites were chosen in order to explore cattle rustling dynamics across areas that would likely demonstrate contrasting characteristics, and grant insights into this geographic diffusion of the practice.

The fieldwork was conducted in eight local government areas (LGAs) across four states in Nigeria: Zamfara State (Zurmi and Maru LGAs) and Plateau State (Jos South and Barkin Ladi LGAs), identified as having the highest prevalence of cattle rustling; and

Kwara State (Ilorin East and Baruten LGAs) and Oyo State (Orire and Ogbomosho North LGAs), identified to be key in the southward spread of cattle rustling. In addition, Oyo State was selected as a priority in part because this is where the regional vigilante force Amotekun was formed by state governors in the South-West in January 2020. The legislative bill establishing Amotekun highlighted cattle rustling, alongside kidnapping and armed robbery, as a main reason for the establishment of the security outfit.¹⁰

Around 80 in-person and remote interviews and eight focus group discussions were conducted across the eight fieldwork locations with a range of stakeholders connected to cattle rustling, such as community leaders; victims of cattle rustling, including herders and their families; those involved at other levels of the livestock supply chain (e.g. workers in cattle markets); individuals involved in the illicit economy around cattle rustling; and academics and journalists familiar with the local and regional dynamics of cattle rustling.

Afterwards, a workshop was organized to discuss preliminary findings and brainstorm implications. Gaps identified during the workshop were addressed through a set of follow-up key informant interviews. This multi-stage process, combining a wide range of data sources and inputs, provided an opportunity for triangulating information.



EVOLUTION OF CATTLE RUSTLING IN NIGERIA

A deserted village in Zurmi local government area, Zamfara, March 2022. Cattle rustling has caused large-scale displacement of communities and destroyed livelihoods. © Shehu Umar

The report highlights three phases in the evolution of cattle rustling in Nigeria. The dates identified for each phase are indicative, marking pivotal periods in what is often a fluid process rather than a definitive one. However, each of these phases has defining characteristics:



FIGURE 1 Evolution of cattle rustling in Nigeria.

Phase one (pre-2011): Culturally sanctioned communal cattle rustling

Before 2011, cattle rustling had long existed as a sustainable practice enjoying a degree of cultural legitimacy among Fulani pastoralist groups and communities. The main purpose of cattle rustling was to replenish depleted cattle stock. It typically involved stealing a relatively small number of cattle heads, and did not involve large-scale lethal violence or damage to livelihoods. Both perpetrators and victims were mainly members of the Fulani community. While there were incidents targeting non-Fulani, these were rarer, typically involved fewer cattle heads, and restitutions were often made when the culprits were caught.¹¹ Importantly, cattle rustling during this phase was largely sustainable, as it neither destroyed livelihoods nor engendered significant instability.

At this time, cattle rustling was quite common across Nigeria's North-West and North-East, where a large percentage of the country's pastoralists are based. In the North-Central region, cattle rustling was much less commonplace and, limited to Fulani pastoralist enclaves scattered across the region.

Phase two (2011–2018): Vast expansion of violence as armed groups become key players in northern Nigeria

In 2011, the form that cattle rustling took radically changed. In contrast to the first phase, cattle rustling started to involve the use of sophisticated weapons; the theft of hundreds, and in some cases even thousands, of cattle heads at a time; large-scale lethal violence; and extensive destruction of property.¹² Cumulatively, this has had a devastating impact on livelihoods and stability. This second typology – termed ‘destructive cattle rustling’ – is the focus of this report.

A Fulani leader, commenting on non-violent cattle rustling within Fulani communities in Plateau State, described the shift:

The practice of stealing cattle to restock depleted cattle stock happens anywhere, including among the Fulani in Plateau State. Many outsiders may not know about it, but it is a common practice that has been passed to us by our ancestors. It is very different from the cases you hear in the news where people are killed – this type of cattle rustling is pure criminality and different groups are involved in it.¹³

Pockets of destructive cattle rustling were witnessed in Southern Plateau, around Wase and Langtang, between 2002 and 2004.¹⁴ Destructive cattle rustling became more widespread from around 2010 in Northern Plateau¹⁵ and from 2011 in Zamfara.¹⁶

According to one analysis, the change from sustainable to destructive cattle rustling was driven by the emergence of an ‘underground economy’ that serves as ‘an outlet for stolen cows and brings in cash’.¹⁷ However, another key underlying factor in the shift is the proliferation of criminal and extremist groups who have turned to cattle rustling as a way of funding violent campaigns. Furthermore, banking sector reforms in the early 2000s contributed to the change from sustainable to destructive cattle rustling by reducing the need for traders to travel with cash, making highway armed robbery less lucrative and forcing many armed robbery networks to resort to cattle rustling as an alternative.

A multiplicity of armed groups, including bandit gangs, ethnic militias and jihadists, as well as opportunistic criminal networks, self-defence groups and vigilantes, have emerged across Nigeria since 2011. Cattle rustling represents a lucrative financing option for many of these groups, especially in northern Nigeria, one of the areas with the highest level of cattle production in West Africa and the Sahel.¹⁸ The purpose of cattle rustling is now predominantly economic. For example, since 2013, insurgents in North-East Nigeria have relied on cattle rustling as a major source of financing for jihadist campaigns.¹⁹

Phase three (2018–present): Southward geographic diffusion

Since around 2018, there has been an increasing southward geographic diffusion of cattle rustling, and associated violence, in Nigeria. During phases one and two, cattle rustling was most prevalent in Nigeria’s northern regions, and not a significant phenomenon in the south, largely because the Fulani herders there were primarily itinerant. However, cattle rustling has now spread towards Niger, Benue and Kogi states, penetrating the South-West through Kwara and Oyo, where violence between farmers and

herders has increased since 2018. According to Nigeria Watch data, deaths related to cattle grazing – a key factor in fuelling farmer–herder clashes – spiked from two deaths in 2017 to 15 deaths in 2018. This was followed by a major decline in 2019 and a sharp increase from four deaths in 2020 to 48 deaths in 2021.²⁰

Climate change, and particularly desertification in northern Nigeria, has pushed herders southwards towards the Benue valley, and further south towards

the forested areas of southern Nigeria in search of grazing land. At the same time, insecurity has also driven herders southwards. Cumulatively, this has depleted cattle stock in the north, while the southward migration has intensified competition and tensions between herders and farming communities.²¹ The latter was a key precursor to destructive cattle rustling in Zamfara State.

A resident of Zurmi LGA in Zamfara described the alarming depletion of cattle stock due to the activities of rustling networks:

Before this problem started in 2011, there used to be cows in every household. As you drove from this town to the next one, you would see hundreds or even thousands of cows on the side of the road grazing. But it is different now. Cattle rustlers have seized all the cattle. Nowadays, you will drive for several kilometres and still not see a single cow.²²

Cattle rustling has also contributed to fluctuations in cattle prices in Nigeria. For example, between 2016 and 2019, cattle prices dipped 20% in the north, partly due to the growing reluctance by buyers in the region to purchase what they knew were stolen cattle.²³ By contrast, across the rest of the country, but particularly in the south, cattle prices experienced a 30% increase between 2019 and September 2022.²⁴ This regional variation in cattle prices has implications for supply chains and market dynamics, with most cattle stolen from the north transported to the south, where they have more market value.

Size of cow	2019	2022
Small	N150 000–N250 000 (€350–€580)	N250 000–N350 000 (€580–€817)
Medium	N200 000–N400 000 (€465–€930)	N350 000–N450 000 (€817–€1 051)
Large	N300 000–N500 000 (€700–€1 160)	N700 000–N900 000 (€934–€1 869)

FIGURE 2 Prices of cattle in southern Nigeria, 2019 and 2022.

NOTE: Prices shown are estimates based on interviews with cattle dealers and online sources of cow prices in various cattle markets in Amansea (Anambra), Asaba (Delta), Ajase-Ipo (Kwara), Bodija (Oyo) and Oko Oba (Lagos) as of July and August 2022. Currency exchange rates are based on Central Bank of Nigeria rates for 8 August 2022.



KEY ACTORS AND SUPPLY CHAINS

A cattle market in Maiduguri, March 2022. While some rustled cattle are sold at markets close to the point of theft, many are moved to other states – for example, in the south, where they have a higher market value. *Photo: GI-TOC*

The actors within the supply chains can be divided into three broad categories: cattle rustlers, middlemen and intermediaries, and buyers. Cattle rustlers are those who carry out the theft; middlemen and intermediaries include individuals who facilitate the sale of the cattle and market operators who collude with perpetrators, as well as the transporters who convey the cattle on trucks to markets. Finally, buyers include local and international dealers as well as butchers who buy cattle at far cheaper prices from large markets, such as the Illela cattle market in Sokoto State or the many 'black cattle markets' in remote locations in Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina states.²⁵

Cattle rustlers

The first set of actors in the supply chain are the groups and networks directly involved in cattle theft, including ethnic militias, self-defence groups, jihadists, armed bandits and opportunistic criminal networks. Each region under study has a concentration of one type of armed group. For example, armed bandits are the main actors involved in cattle rustling in the North-West, insurgents dominate the North-East, while ethnic militias and criminal networks operate primarily in the North-Central region. For each type of armed group, cattle rustling offers a crucial channel for financing, especially for the procurement of arms and sustaining the loyalty of gang members.

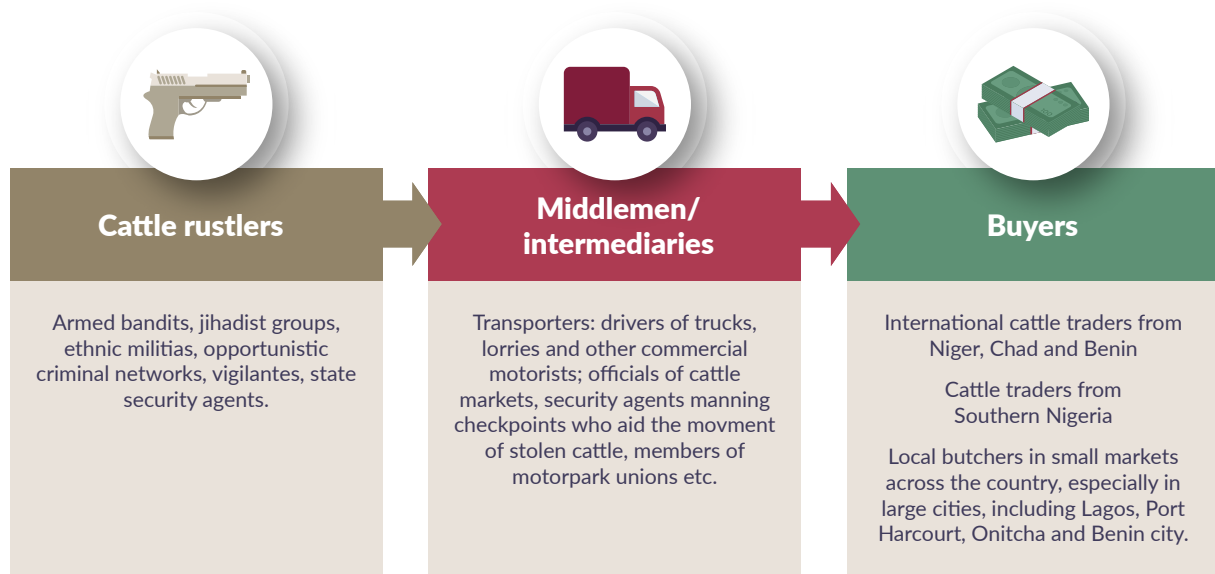


FIGURE 3 Key actors and supply chains.

SOURCE: Based on interviews with key stakeholders and actors, April–August 2022

Middlemen/intermediaries

The second set of actors are the middlemen and intermediaries who facilitate the sales of stolen cattle and the transporters who move the stolen cattle to markets, sometimes over significant distances. These middlemen work with transporters who are enabled by a range of intermediaries who facilitate the process of selling cattle through licit, and grey, markets. These intermediaries include road union workers, security agents who man checkpoints on highways, and cattle market officials who conduct spot checks at markets. Market officials and security agents are bribed either in advance or on the spot to turn a blind eye to stolen cattle. The amount given as bribes differs greatly, according to a cattle dealer: 'Sometimes it is as little as N10 000 [€23], but other times it can be as high as N100 000 [€230], especially when the number of cattle is large.'²⁶

The transporters are mainly commercial truck and lorry drivers who operate locally and across regions. The transporters are mostly engaged by the middlemen who hire them to convey the cattle from the points of theft (or locations nearby where they are being kept by the rustlers) to points of sale.

Buyers

The final set of actors are the local and international buyers. Local buyers of stolen cattle are cattle dealers located in different parts of the country. While some rustled cattle are sold at markets close to the point of theft, many are moved to other states. Cattle rustled in the north, for example, are predominantly transported and sold in the south, where they have higher market value.²⁷ Although a large percentage of the country's cattle is produced in the northern part, there is a higher demand for beef in the south because of the concentration of large cities (such as Lagos and Port Harcourt) with relatively higher standards of living.

One cattle dealer at the Kara cattle market in Jos South noted that the same large cow could sell for 'N300 000 at most in Plateau State, but N500 000 (€1 168) or more in the Amansea cattle market in Anambra' in the South-East, and for between N450 000 and N700 000 (€1 051–€1 365) in Lagos and Ibadan in the South-West. In this example, cattle prices more than double between cattle rustling epicentres in Plateau in the North-Central region, and key consumption hubs in the south of Nigeria.²⁸ This information was corroborated by other cattle dealers, who emphasized that the regional variation in prices is such that dealers transporting cattle from northern Nigeria southwards often double their profits.²⁹

STATE/REGION	PRICE OF COW		
	SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE
Plateau State/ North-Central	N150 000–N250 000 (€350–€580)	N250 000–N350 000 (€580–€817)	N350 000–N500 000 (€817–€1 168)
Anambra State/ South-East	N250 000–N350 000 (€580–€817)	N350 000–N450 000 (€817–€1 051)	N700 000–N900 000 (€1 365–€2 102)
Delta State/ South-South	N250 000–N350 000 (€580–€817)	N350 000–N450 000 (€817–€1 051)	N700 000–N900 000 (€1 365–€2 102)
Kwara	N200 000–N300 000 (€467–€700)	N300 000–N400 000 (€700–€934)	N400 000–N800 000 (€934–€1 869)
Oyo State	N250 000–N350 000 (€580–€817)	N350 000–N450 000 (€817–€1 051)	N700 000–N900 000 (€934–€1 869)
Lagos State/ South-West	N300 000–N450 000 (€700–€1 051)	N450 000–N800 000 (€1 051–€1 869)	N800 000–N1 million (€1 869–€2 336)

FIGURE 4 Price differentials of cattle in North-Central, South-East, South-South and South-West Nigeria.

NOTE: Prices are estimates calculated based on interviews with cattle dealers and online sources of cow prices in various cattle markets in Jos (Plateau), Amansea (Anambra), Asaba (Delta), Ajase-Ipo (Kwara), Bodija (Oyo) and Oko Oba (Lagos) as of July and August 2022. Currency exchange rates are based on Central Bank of Nigeria rates for 8 August 2022.

Another set of buyers are the butchers who sometimes buy directly from rustlers or from proxies who sell on behalf of rustlers. While some butchers may buy stolen cattle unknowingly, others pay below market rates and are fully aware of the illicit provenance of their purchases. The butchers sell to consumers who are mostly residents of large cities across the country. In the North-West, Kano and Kaduna are major beef-consumption hubs, while Abuja represents a large consumption point in the North-Central region. In the south, Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt and Aba are cities with above average beef consumption. Lagos is the largest beef-consuming city in the country, with an annual consumption rate estimated at N328 billion (€766 million).³⁰

Local traders and butchers buy and sell stolen cattle in both legal cattle markets and 'black cattle markets' – illegal cattle markets specializing in the sale and purchase of rustled cattle at cut-rate prices, which have since 2019 sprung up across the North-West, including in Zamfara,³¹ Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto states, and are concentrated in remote areas.³² These black markets emerged as authorities began implementing more stringent measures at cattle markets to prevent the sale of stolen cattle.³³

International dealers from neighbouring countries, including Niger and Benin, also buy stolen cattle. Although Nigeria is officially a major consumer hub, stolen cattle heads are sold and ferried to Niger through Zamfara and Katsina and to Benin through Kwara and Ogun.³⁴

A large photograph of a cattle market in Jos South, Nigeria. The scene is filled with many white and brown cows, some with horns, and several people. In the foreground, a man in a red hooded shirt is leading a white cow. To the right, a man in a blue jacket and brown shorts stands near a handcart loaded with food. The ground is muddy. In the background, there are some buildings and a cloudy sky. A stylized white geometric graphic, consisting of a central point with three lines radiating outwards, is overlaid on the top half of the image.

REGIONAL DEEP DIVES

A cattle market in Jos South, Plateau State, North-Central Nigeria, August 2022. In Jos, ethnic militias sell stolen cattle to buy arms. *Photo: GI-TOC*

While the above outlines key nationwide trends, and the overarching structure of the cattle rustling economy, there are important regional variations in market dynamics. In particular, the degree of violence changes significantly between regions, as does the trajectory of the development of the cattle rustling economy, with each region involving its own set of actors and dynamics. A key objective of this report is to underscore these regional differences, to underline the need for understanding the prevailing contextual factors in each case and, hence, the importance of context-specific responses.

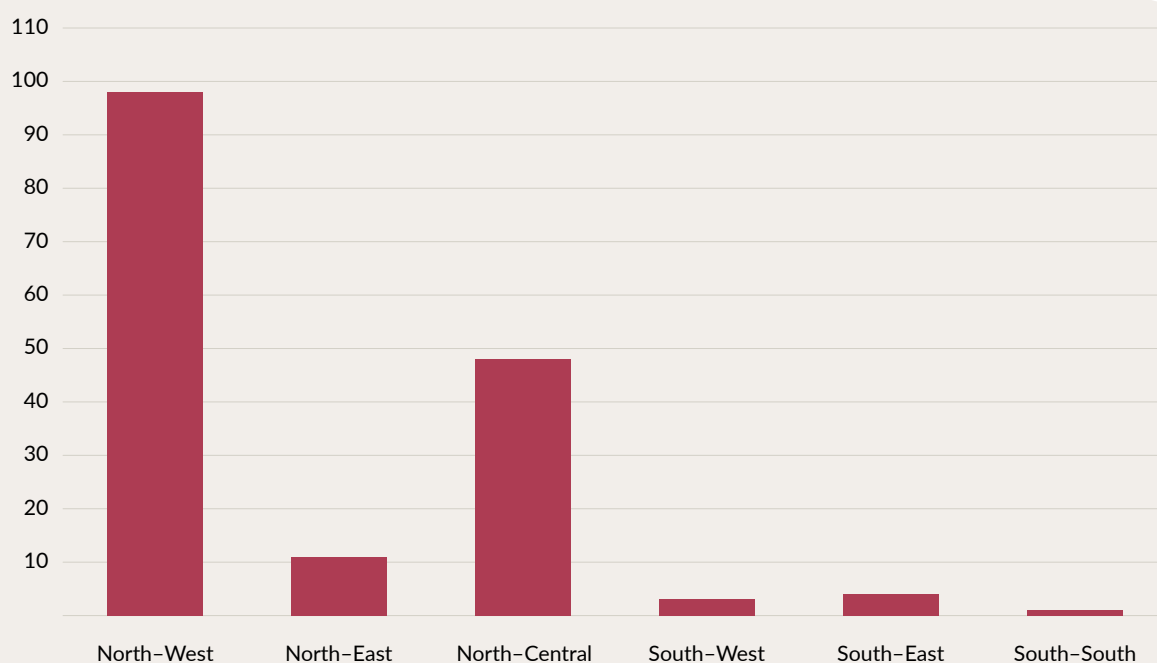


FIGURE 5 Cattle rustling incidents by region.

SOURCE: Based on ACLED data, 2012–2022

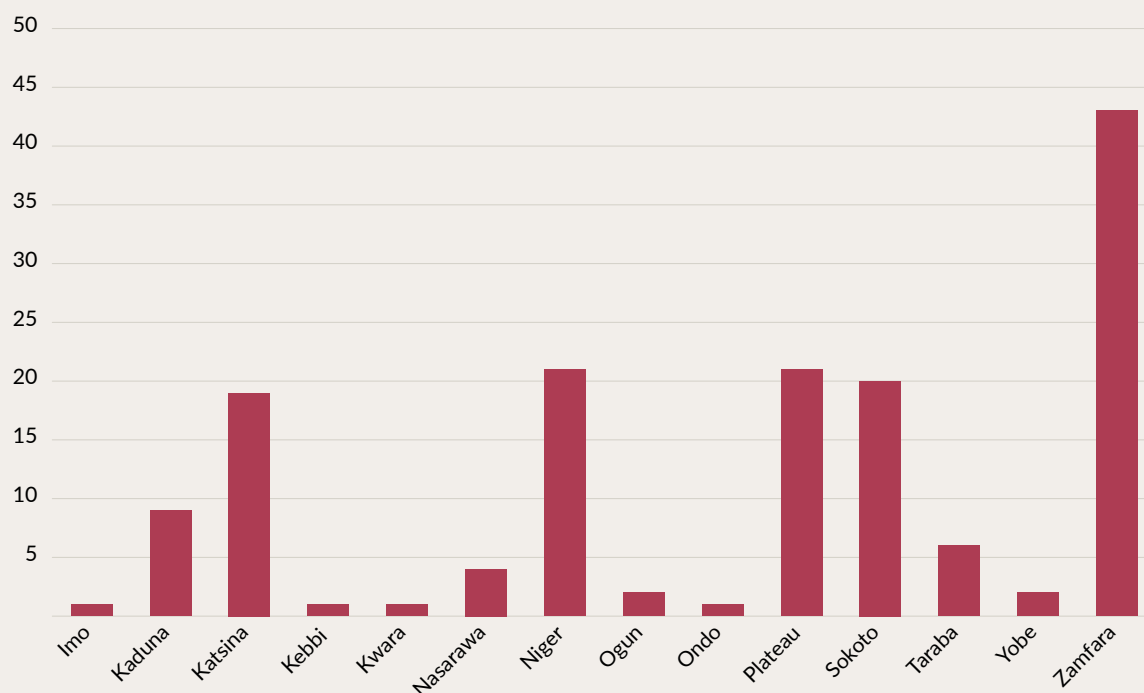


FIGURE 6 Cattle rustling by state.

SOURCE: Based on analysis of ACLED data, 2012–2022

Zamfara

Cattle rustling has a long history in Zamfara and other parts of the North-West. However, it has not always been violent as it is today and was previously, to some degree, culturally sanctioned as a means of restocking depleted cattle herds and demonstrating bravery among peers.³⁵ In Zamfara, it was common for young men to raid other communities and cart away up to a few dozen cattle. This type of cattle rustling did not involve heavily armed groups, large-scale lethal violence and the destruction of livelihoods.

However, from 2011, cattle rustling became associated with heavily armed groups, which, in the process of stealing cattle, also engage in large-scale killing and destruction. A major turning point was the 2011 murder of Alhaji Ishe by Hausa vigilantes. Ishe was a respected Fulani leader who was active in pursuing the interests of Fulani pastoralists and played a prominent role in resolving intercommunal and interpersonal disputes between members of the Fulani and Hausa communities.

The Fulani community in Dansadua and other parts of Zamfara and beyond was deeply upset by Ishe's murder, and many Fulani are said to have vowed to avenge his death. This incident was pivotal in shaping the transition from non-violent cattle rustling and low-intensity clashes between Hausa communities and Fulani pastoralists into full-blown armed banditry. Many Fulani vigilante groups originally established for purposes of self-defence, largely against Hausa vigilantes (Yan Sakai) and state security forces, metamorphosed into heavily armed bandit gangs that engaged in cattle rustling for



FIGURE 7 Nigeria, showing spread of cattle rustling, transit points and armed groups.

profit, accompanied by large-scale violence. This set off a vicious cycle of escalating violence: each incident of cattle rustling perpetrated against the Hausa triggered Yan Sankai attacks on Fulani communities, with each reprisal escalating harms and resulting in the deaths of community members.

Cattle rustling has contributed to a major rift developing between Hausa and Fulani communities in Zamfara, leading to pockets of intergroup confrontations in some areas. One resident of Maru noted that ‘the relationship between the Fulani and other Hausa residents has been seriously damaged’ by violence related to cattle rustling.³⁶ Another resident of Maru noted that cattle rustling has spiralled into major episodes of violence in his community, with a high death toll:

Cattle rustling has seriously harmed us, because the hitherto cordial relationship with our Fulani brothers is no longer. Suspicions leading to bloodbaths have taken over. We will never allow anybody from our community to have a relationship with armed groups.³⁷

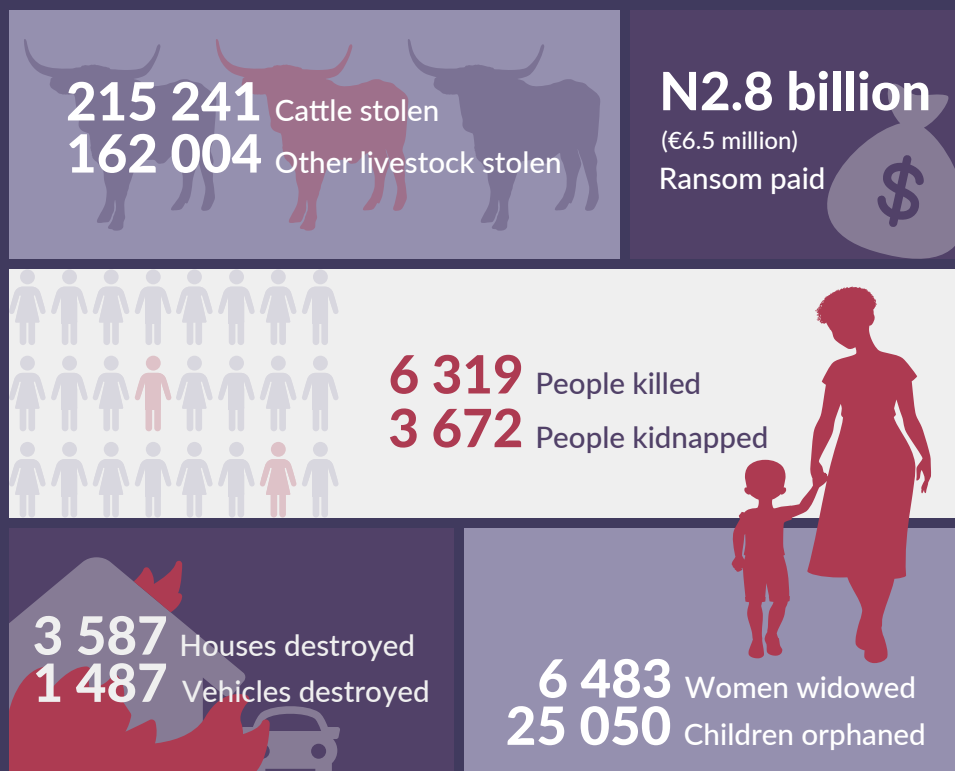


FIGURE 8 Impact of cattle rustling and associated violence in Zamfara, 2011–2019.

SOURCE: Based on figures from report of investigative committee constituted by Zamfara State government in 2019, see <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/10/banditry-panel-indicts-five-zamfara-emirs-soldiers>

Violence connected to cattle rustling has been one key driver of internal displacement, with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) having been forced to seek refuge in towns and cities in Zamfara and neighbouring states. Cattle rustling has also destroyed livelihoods, further driving displacement. One resident of Zurmi, who lost 18 cows and 21 goats to rustlers, said that his family has been rendered destitute and his children have resorted to begging.³⁸

According to Zamfara State's Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, about 184 000 households have been displaced since 2011.³⁹ Since January 2022, at least eight communities have been displaced as a result of the activities of armed cattle rustlers. According to a resident of Zurmi, one of the LGAs most heavily affected by cattle rustling:

There are thousands of internally displaced persons who are not in camps. They are scattered in towns and villages within and outside of the

state. Some of them have resorted to begging, while others are engaged in menial jobs.⁴⁰

The sale of stolen cattle provides a key source of financing for armed bandit groups in Zamfara. However, these groups also draw revenue indirectly from cattle herds, by imposing levies on communities in exchange for sparing their herds from rustling, or by demanding a portion of the herd as a protection tax. Yet, even when communities pay levies and taxes, there is no guarantee that they will be free of attacks. As a Zurmi resident noted:

If you want your animals to be spared by rustling gangs, you must make a peace arrangement with them. Part of this deal is that you must hand over a portion of your herd to a gang leader. But this is not a guarantee that your animals will not be rustled. Many residents who have made these local arrangements with bandits have ended up kidnapped and their cows seized.⁴¹

Unlike the situation in Yobe, where insurgents collect one cow per 40 cattle heads as tax from herders,⁴² there is no fixed number of cattle accepted as levy by bandits in Zamfara. This is because the Zamfara gangs are fragmented, lacking any unitary approach.

These bandit groups also impose wider taxation structures on communities, demanding money, foodstuffs, materials and recruits as a way of avoiding attack.⁴³ As a farmer in Zurmi explained:

Armed bandits sent us a threat and placed a levy on our communities. I was part of the team that took the N5 million [€11 682] levy to the bandits in the forest. We had to mobilize ourselves to go from house to house collecting money to meet the demand, as failure to do so would have been calamitous.⁴⁴

When communities fail to pay their levies, it usually ends in violence. For example, in early February 2022, armed bandits attacked a community in Tsafe LGA, killing 30 people, after residents failed to pay a N40 million (€93 457) levy.⁴⁵

Peace pacts involving levies and taxes are hardly sustainable, as the gangs are fragmented and an agreement with one bandit leader does not spare communities from attacks by the many other gangs operating in the region. The decentralized character of the bandits' governance in Zamfara has not only made it difficult to sustain peace pacts with communities, but it has also become impossible to adhere to ceasefire agreements with the state government.⁴⁶

Typologies of armed groups

In Zamfara, there are four main categories of actors that play pivotal roles in cattle rustling: armed bandits, vigilantes (Yan Sakai), jihadist groups and state security forces.

Armed bandits

Armed bandits are based mainly in the North-West. While Zamfara has traditionally been the stronghold of these groups, since 2018 their activities have extended to Niger, Kogi and Abuja in the North-Central region.

In Zamfara, there are an estimated 30 000 armed bandits operating in over 100 autonomous gangs,

each under a leader known as the 'Kachalla'. Many gangs have up to 2 000 members.⁴⁷ The gangs have a clear hierarchy, with each Kachalla allocated a deputy as well as a third in command (known as 'Smally'). When the Kachalla is not present on a particular operation, his deputy and Smally will lead the missions. For major operations, as many as three or four gangs might collaborate, with each Kachalla contributing men and motorcycles. To take Maru LGA as an example, armed bandit gangs in operation include: Black's gang, Damina's gang, Turji's gang, Buji's gang, Dogo Sule's gang, Shehu Rakeb's gangs, Yakubu's gang, Dogo Gide's gang, Dandela's gang, Adamu Aliero's gang and Mochoko's gang.⁴⁸ Some of the gangs are large, with more than 1 000 fighters, while others are relatively small, with as few as 10.⁴⁹ The bandits are usually armed with automatic rifles, rocket launchers and grenades, and they operate in large numbers using motorbikes.⁵⁰

These bandit groups have engaged in cattle rustling in Nigeria since 2011. However, cattle rustling has become less lucrative as herds have become depleted and owners have moved their livestock to safer areas. At the same time, buyers have grown reluctant to purchase what are known to be stolen cattle, which drove down prices in the North-West from 2016.⁵¹ In the face of the steady revenue decline in the North-West, bandit groups have increasingly turned to kidnapping for ransom since 2019, which generates more money and now serves as the most lucrative activity for nearly all groups. A review of cases in the North-West between 2019 and the first half of 2021 shows a clear upward trend in the number of people being kidnapped and a parallel increase in ransoms paid. More recently, particularly since March 2021, bandits have turned to levying taxes on farming activities. This is because revenues from kidnapping are reported to have dwindled, with victims now having fewer resources to pay ransoms after repeat targeting, and many wealthier targets having fled.⁵²

Yan Sakai

The Yan Sakai ('volunteers') are Hausa vigilantes mobilized to defend their communities against Fulani militias and armed bandits. The Yan Sakai first emerged in Zamfara, but later spread to other parts of the

North-West, including Sokoto, Katsina and Kaduna. While there is no exact data on the number of Yan Sankai, estimates suggest that there are as many as 100 000 Yan Sakai spread across the North-West, with 20% of them operating in Zamfara.⁵³

In Zamfara, Yan Sankai have engaged in lethal violence against Fulani communities and played a pivotal role in pushing many Fulani to take up arms and join the bandits. They have carried out extra-judicial killings of individuals alleged to be cattle rustlers. Their victims were primarily Fulani and many of these executions were public, some taking place in market squares.

The Yan Sakai have also been accused of corruption and extortion, seizing cattle from Fulani in the name of recovering stolen cattle. The activities of Yan Sakai are deeply polarizing and – along with severe responses by state security forces – have contributed to escalating the security situation in Zamfara and other parts of the North-West.⁵⁴



Members of the Hausa vigilante group Yan Sakai on patrol in Zamfara, March 2022. Yan Sakai have carried out extrajudicial killings of alleged cattle rustlers. © Shehu Umar

Jihadist groups

Several Jihadist groups – including Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram and Ansaru – have a presence in the north-west of Nigeria. ISWAP has established camps near territories associated with armed bandits in Zamfara.⁵⁵ Boko Haram has historically been a key perpetrator of cattle rustling in the North-East.⁵⁶ Similarly, although ISWAP does not directly engage in cattle rustling, it employs the levying of cattle herders as a key element of its governance strategy in the North-East.⁵⁷ Currently, there is no evidence of the degree to which these jihadist groups engage in cattle rustling in the North-West, whether operating independently or in conjunction with bandit groups; however, given their locations of operation and the clear role that cattle rustling plays in their tactics in the North-East, it is important to discuss their potential involvement.

Experts have noted that there is a degree of association between some armed bandit gangs and jihadists in terms of ‘weapons and tactical guidance’, but there is no clear evidence to suggest that armed bandits are embracing jihadist ideologies.⁵⁸ Recent attacks by armed bandits, such as the attack on a passenger train on the Kaduna–Abuja line in March 2022, strongly suggest that armed bandits are working with ISWAP, because the latter is known to use explosives – such as the ones used during the train attack – in most of its operations.⁵⁹ However, if there is collaboration taking place between bandits and ISWAP fighters, the extent of this remains unclear.

State security agencies

State security forces play an important role in shaping the dynamics of cattle rustling and instability, both through the apprehension of culprits and by restoring order, but also as alleged perpetrators. In 2019, an investigative report by the Zamfara State government indicted at least 10 security agents for their roles in aiding and abetting cattle rustling and other aspects of armed banditry.⁶⁰

The main security agencies involved in the response against cattle rustling and the associated violence include the police, the military, the Department of State Services (DSS), the Nigerian Immigration

Service (NIS) and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). A cross-section of residents and community members interviewed as part of field research in Zamfara shared allegations of collusion by officers in a range of security forces with armed bandits to facilitate cattle rustling.⁶¹ In Zamfara, and other parts of the North-West, military officers have been accused of intimidating and seizing cattle from pastoralists and keeping it for themselves in the name of recovering stolen cattle.⁶²

In Zamfara, cattle rustling has contributed to instability through three main mechanisms. First, the violence associated with cattle rustling has led to

thousands of deaths, large-scale displacement and the destruction of livelihoods. Second, it has polarized Hausa and Fulani communities, fuelling tensions and intercommunal violence. Finally, the growing sense of insecurity and fear generated by cattle rustling and the associated violence has led to the emergence of self-defence groups, forcing many communities to stockpile arms to defend themselves against armed bandits, thus fuelling arms trafficking supply chains. This has led to an increase in the availability of arms and multiplied the number of actors that can potentially engage in violence.

Plateau

The prevailing contextual factors and current dynamics of cattle rustling in Plateau State are distinct from those in Zamfara. While in both regions competition over land use between farmers and herders features prominently, the evolution of cattle rustling varies significantly between the two states.

Before 2002, culturally sanctioned cattle rustling was prevalent within pastoralist Fulani enclaves in Plateau State. The Fulani populations in Plateau were not as large, widespread or integrated as those in Zamfara, and they typically did not intermarry with farming communities because of religious differences. In mid-2002, amid violent clashes between Taroh farming communities and Fulani cattle herders in Wase in Southern Plateau, incidents of cattle rustling occurred beyond these enclaves. Armed men attacked several villages, killing people, destroying property and carting away cattle. At the time, media reports and expert analyses of the security situation focused primarily on the killings and destruction: cattle theft received minimal attention. Consequently, for many non-Fulani residents of Plateau State, cattle rustling has always been associated with violence (unlike in Zamfara). While isolated incidents of violent cattle rustling occurred from 2002 onwards, it was in 2010 that cattle rustling associated with large-scale violence started in earnest.

In 2010 – eight years after the Wase violence – major clashes between farmers and herders erupted between Berom farming communities and Fulani pastoralists in Northern Plateau. Although the Fulani own the larger share of herds, the Berom also own some cattle. Incidents of cattle rustling became an integral part of the cycle of violence between the two communities: ethnic militias from Berom and Fulani communities raided rival communities, killing people, destroying property and, in many cases, taking cattle.

Across Southern and Northern Plateau, cattle rustling incidents in rural areas perpetrated by ethnic militias are shaped by, and to a degree reflect, intermittent violent conflicts between indigenes and settlers in urban Jos. Important for understanding dynamics between herders and farming communities in Plateau – a key factor shaping cattle rustling and its impact on stability – is a popular narrative among Christians of an ‘Islamization’ agenda allegedly championed by the Muslim Hausa-Fulani. Fears of Islamization have their roots in the nineteenth century, when Fulani jihadists under Usman Dan Fodio made several attempts at invading Jos but were pushed back by indigenous fighters. Both the contestations over indigene rights in urban Jos and clashes over land between Fulani pastoralists and farmers in the rural areas of Plateau have been interpreted as ‘attempts

by the Hausa-Fulani to continue the jihad against Plateau indigenes'.⁶³ As a result, violent clashes in urban Jos often fuel attacks between the predominantly Christian farmers and Fulani pastoralists in the surrounding villages; in turn, violence in the rural areas often triggers retaliatory episodes in urban Jos.

There is no evidence to support claims of Islamization agendas, and Fulani representatives have always dismissed these as false. One Fulani leader noted the 'unfounded fear' among the communities that the Fulani have an 'agenda of political domination' and 'land grabbing', emphasizing that it is the same mindset that has fuelled clashes in the city centre of Jos since 2001.⁶⁴

Cattle rustling in Jos is deeply implicated in the tensions and violence between the Fulani and Berom in the rural areas of Northern Plateau, especially Jos South and Barkin Ladi, as ethnic militias raid cattle herds both as a means to finance the procurement of arms and, since 2021, as part of scorched-earth tactics. A Fulani leader in Barkin Ladi, one of the areas in Plateau most affected by cattle rustling and violence, explained: 'There are two reasons for cattle rustling in Barkin Ladi. The first is that these groups sell stolen cattle to buy arms to continue fighting. The second reason is not to sell but to kill the cattle. They just want to make sure that they harm the cattle owners economically.'⁶⁵

Scorched-earth policies are deployed by both Fulani and Berom communities. A resident of a farming community in Barkin Ladi described how herders destroy their farms:

Fulani herders have destroyed many farms in our community. They use machetes and cutlasses to cut down the crops, including some trees. But other times, they don't use cutlasses and machetes; they bring in their cattle to graze on our crops in the night when everyone is asleep. I can tell you that there is going to be a food shortage this year because of the destruction of farmlands.⁶⁶

Cattle rustling incidents trigger revenge attacks against communities where rustled cattle are suspected to have been taken. One resident of Barkin Ladi noted that cattle rustling results in 'reprisals or

counter attacks leading to a vicious cycle of violence, and as a result, more losses include lives, properties through destruction or looting, then silent killings and attacks in the bushes or farms are other negative experiences as a result of cattle rustling'.⁶⁷

Key actors

There are two broad categories of actors involved in cattle rustling in Nigeria's North-Central region: ethnic militias, and opportunistic criminal gangs and networks.

In addition, there is a growing presence of a network of heavily armed actors in Jos South, Barkin Ladi and Bassa in Northern Plateau and also parts of Wase in Southern Plateau. These armed actors, known locally as bandits, have been leading attacks against non-Fulani villages and killing individuals who speak out against them within Fulani communities.⁶⁸ There are some reports that these 'bandits' are also becoming involved in cattle rustling – however, given the difficulties in distinguishing between 'bandits' and the other actors, there is insufficient evidence to include these as a third category.

Ethnic militias

Ethnic militias, the most prominent perpetrators of cattle rustling, are loose networks of armed fighters mobilized by ethnic and religious identity to defend their communities and fight members of rival groups. In Northern Plateau, there are several ethnic militias, including Fulani, Berom and Irigwe militias. The Berom and Irigwe ethnic militias are predominantly Christian, while the Fulani militias are mainly Muslim. Members of these militias are mostly young males, often with a few women performing supportive roles. Most ethnic militias in Plateau State start out as self-defence groups, using low-grade weapons (such as sticks, cutlasses and hunting rifles), but over time they see the need to procure sophisticated weapons, including AK-47s. This becomes one driver of engagement in criminal activities, including cattle rustling, as sources of financing.⁶⁹

Criminal gangs and networks

There are two broad categories of criminal networks that engage in cattle rustling in Plateau State: ethnically homogeneous and ethnically heterogeneous.⁷⁰

The activities of ethnically homogeneous criminal networks further fuel intergroup tensions – when these groups steal cattle from members of the rival community, they are misconstrued for ethnic militias, sparking retaliatory attacks that target members of the entire group instead of responses that focus narrowly on the criminals.

Heterogeneous criminal networks strategically take advantage of ethnic segregation to elude local authorities. Knowing that the Fulani do not enter Berom communities and vice versa, networks hide or sell cattle stolen from Fulani communities in Berom communities, and cattle stolen from Berom communities in Fulani communities. This enables the criminal networks to evade authorities but also has implica-

tions for intergroup relations, and has contributed to deepening intergroup suspicion and fuelling violence in Barkin Ladi and Jos South, as well as other parts of Northern Plateau, such as Bassa and Riyom.⁷¹

In Plateau, cattle rustling has become implicated in intergroup tensions between farming communities and pastoralist Fulani, as well as longstanding communal conflicts with strong religious connotations. Cattle rustling has become a conflict strategy, both as mechanism for the procurement of arms, and – uniquely in this region – as part of scorched-earth tactics. While not yet at the scale experienced in the North-West, the dense intersection of cattle rustling with swelling ethnic tensions presents a significant risk factor for further violence.

Kwara and Oyo

Although cattle rustling is more prevalent in northern Nigeria, as explained there has been an increasing southward diffusion of cattle rustling since around 2017. One of the main reasons for the southward spread of cattle rustling is the overall dwindling of cattle stock in northern Nigeria. This is due in part to rustling itself (as herds are depleted or displaced), but also to the effects of climate change and, more specifically, desertification.

Most analyses of cattle rustling have focused on the North-West and North-Central regions, which have a longer history of cattle rustling, without paying adequate attention to its southward spatial diffusion. Furthermore, these have failed to capture the second-tier impact of cattle rustling.

First, cattle rustling and the violence it perpetuates predominantly in the northern regions has entrenched a deep sense of distrust against the Fulani living in other parts of Nigeria, with significant consequences for (in)stability.

Since 2018, the South-West has experienced a surge of violence between Yoruba farmers and Fulani pastoralists,⁷² a key risk factor linked to the emergence of large-scale cattle rustling in the North-West and North-Central regions.⁷³ Reports, fanned by sensationalist media coverage, of deadly attacks allegedly perpetrated in northern Nigeria by so-called

Fulani herdsmen are widespread, contributing to deepening intergroup suspicion and distrust towards Fulani cattle herders. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to such reports as one factor behind the increase in farmer–herder violence. In turn, this was a core motivation for the creation of Amotekun – a state-initiated vigilante group that operates across five of the six states in the South-West. One element of the mandate of Amotekun is to curb the violent activities of so-called Fulani herdsmen and other criminal gangs.⁷⁴

Secondly, the supply chain of stolen cattle extends southwards and over borders, particularly as regional price differences draw a significant proportion of cattle rustled in the north to markets in the south. The southern states that share boundaries with the North-Central region act as transit points for stolen cattle being transported southwards. For example, Oyo is a major transit point for cattle coming from Kaduna and Zamfara through Kogi and Kwara.⁷⁵ From Oyo, cattle are distributed to markets in Ogun and Lagos – states with above average beef consumption.

Thirdly, desertification and instability in parts of northern Nigeria traditionally home to the majority of the country's herds are driving displacement southwards, and this could precede an uptick in cattle



Internally displaced persons in Zamfara, North-West Nigeria, March 2022. The violence that surrounds cattle rustling has forced many people to flee their homes. © Shehu Umar

rustling. Currently, the south-west only experiences pockets of cattle theft, which remain rarer than in the north, and are typically associated with lower levels of violence. One community leader in Ogbomosho outlined typical rustling dynamics in the area: 'We are aware that people stealing cows here are not really members of this community but outsiders. They usually come at night. My brother almost caught one of them once, but he escaped. They steal cows when we are fast asleep.'⁷⁶ Although currently mostly non-violent, events in the North-Central region suggest that cattle theft in Oyo could feed into

existing grievances, and lead to a cycle of reprisal attacks.

Finally, the movement of IDPs forcibly relocated through instability and loss of livelihoods linked to cattle rustling, and the wider activities of bandit groups, in areas of the North-West is an important second-tier effect. IDPs from Zamfara, Kaduna and Niger states have predominantly sought refuge in Kwara – a state that is part of the North-Central region but serves as the gateway to the south-west. This is exerting pressure on resources.⁷⁷

Overlap between cattle rustling, arms trafficking and kidnapping

Cattle rustling is strongly linked to, and serves as a precursor to, other illicit economies in Nigeria, particularly arms trafficking and kidnapping for ransom. The GI-TOC illicit hub mapping initiative, launched in September 2022, identifies 10 illicit hubs that feature cattle rustling, arms trafficking and kidnapping for ransom as major markets. These three markets tend to cluster in illicit hubs that score high on the IEIM, including, for example, Dansadua in Zamfara and Jos South in Plateau.⁷⁸

Cattle rustling plays a prominent role in swelling the proliferation of arms. In both Zamfara and Plateau, for example, actors involved in cattle rustling procure arms to steal cattle, perpetrating violence and engendering insecurity in the process. Field research in Maru LGA further suggests that bandits also use stolen cows to directly pay for hired weapons. For example, a resident of Maru described how a victim of cattle rustling who was abducted by armed bandits heard them discussing that they would ‘give six cows to the person from whom they hired guns’.⁷⁹ In response to the growing threat of cattle rustling and the associated violence, self-defence groups have emerged to defend communities and, along with residents, stockpile arms. This has contributed to multiplying the number of actors buying weapons, swelling demand and creating a huge arms trafficking market.


The arms market plays a pivotal role in fuelling violence in Nigeria. The Organized Crime Index 2021 ranks Nigeria’s arms smuggling market far higher than the average for West Africa, scoring 8 in contrast to 5.5.⁸⁰

Cattle rustling is also linked to kidnapping for ransom because the actors involved in cattle rustling have typically resorted to kidnapping when cattle rustling proves less lucrative. For example, in Zamfara, a decline in incidents of cattle rustling amid depleting cattle stock and falling cattle prices has coincided with a sharp increase in incidents of kidnapping for ransom since 2019.⁸¹ Describing the shift from cattle rustling to kidnapping for ransom, a resident of Maru LGA in Zamfara – a zone ravaged by both crimes – noted: ‘When they felt that the number of cattle had sharply gone down, they resorted to kidnapping people for ransom.’⁸²



RESPONSES

Weapons recovered from armed bandits, May 2022. The sophisticated weaponry used by cattle rustlers has meant that the effect of anti-rustling taskforce activities has been limited. © Shehu Umar



The discussion below outlines several key initiatives highlighted by stakeholders close to cattle rustling dynamics across Nigeria. It does not purport to be a comprehensive assessment of all measures undertaken but provides a multi-perspective analysis of the current toolkit of responses.

State responses to cattle rustling in Nigeria fall into two broad categories:

- confrontational and military approaches, including crackdowns, arrests and prosecution; and
- non-confrontational approaches, including amnesties.

Federal government responses

The most comprehensive response to cattle rustling so far has been the Nigeria Police Force Taskforce on Cattle Rustling.⁸³ The taskforce was constituted in October 2014, and it remains the federal government's most coherent and expansive measure towards addressing cattle rustling. The mandate of the taskforce includes intelligence gathering, anti-cattle rustling and allied crime patrols and operations, as well as investigation and prosecution of cattle rustling incidents. The taskforce has a tactical unit in each of the country's six geopolitical zones.⁸⁴

While a laudable initiative, the efficacy of the taskforce has been hindered by acute resourcing shortfalls, of both staff and equipment.⁸⁵ This is a significant obstacle, partly due to the sophisticated weaponry leveraged by some cattle rustlers. The activities of the taskforce have therefore been limited, and it lacks the capacity to cover the six geopolitical regions.⁸⁶

Security agents in Zamfara and Plateau explained that the taskforce is a good initiative but has not received adequate attention since 2015.⁸⁷ A security agent in Zamfara noted that one of the main reasons the taskforce has not lived up to its mandate is that the Inspector General of Police who established it left the force in 2015: 'Since Suleiman Abba – then Inspector General – left in 2015, subsequent inspector generals have not given the taskforce the needed attention.'⁸⁸

State responses

In the North-Central region, Plateau and Benue states have taken some steps towards addressing both cattle rustling and violence between farmers and herders. In 2013, the Plateau State government constituted a committee on cattle rustling, drawing members from the 17 LGAs. The committee was made up of individuals who were familiar with the dynamics of cattle rustling, and its mandate included tracing the routes used by cattle rustlers and identifying rustled cattle.⁸⁹ However, a journalist in Plateau explained that the committee has not been active since 2015:

There were high expectations when the committee was set up because it drew people from all

the 17 local government areas. But the committee has not achieved much because it has been rendered inactive since the All Progressives Congress government took power from Peoples Democratic Party in Plateau in 2015.⁹⁰

Key stakeholders in Plateau, including academics and journalists, have noted that there is a pressing need for an inclusive strategy against cattle rustling in the state. One academic observed that responses to cattle rustling 'are not well coordinated and comprehensive', stressing that 'there is the need for the state government to understand that cattle rustling is a major source of insecurity and come up with a comprehensive and well-organized plan for tackling it'.⁹¹

Military and law-enforcement interventions

In addition to taskforces and committees, the Nigerian government has implemented a range of law enforcement and military responses designed to curb instability connected to cattle rustling, predominantly in the North-West. For example, Operation Thunder Strike – a counter-terrorism military operation initiated by the Nigerian air force in 2018 – launched major airstrikes against armed bandits, disrupting their activities, including cattle rustling. While often effective at disrupting the activities of armed bandits engaged in cattle rustling in the short-term, the order restored is usually brief, as the armed bandits are quick to regroup and even perpetrate more daring attacks on communities. As has been identified across West Africa, military responses to instability often create space for interventions to be deployed

targeting longer-term peace, but without follow-up often fail to engender lasting stability.⁹²

Furthermore, stakeholders interviewed as part of this research repeatedly shared allegations of collusion, bribery and corruption by military officers involved in the fight against cattle rustling.⁹³ For example, soldiers have been accused of harassing pastoralists unconnected to bandits, and seizing their cattle in the name of recovering stolen cattle. And it is claimed that there are also instances in which military officers have kept cattle recovered from rustlers for themselves.⁹⁴ These factors erode confidence and public trust, making it difficult for security agents to gain the support and cooperation of communities, and hampering law enforcement interventions.

Bans and prohibitions

States across the North-West have employed a series of bans and prohibitions to target cattle rustling, with a range of outcomes.

The Zamfara State government shut down 12 cattle markets in December 2018 and four others in August 2021.⁹⁵ Seven of the markets were reopened in November 2021 with the others following in January

2022.⁹⁶ Many residents feel that such measures have not addressed the problem of cattle rustling in any meaningful way. For example, one resident noted the ineffectiveness of closing down cattle markets in Maru LGA:

Drastic measures put in place by authorities, such as the closure of many livestock markets across

the state, taking a picture of every cow brought to the market for sale, and even the issuing and collection of a receipt for every cattle sold or bought, have not significantly tamed the tide of animal thefts in the state.⁹⁷

While these measures can make it difficult for cattle rustlers and middlemen to distribute stolen cattle, they can also harm the economy by grounding legitimate businesses. Market closures should instead target black cattle markets, where rustlers and their middlemen freely sell stolen cattle.

Significantly, bans have not only targeted markets – for example, in 2017, the Benue State government banned open grazing mainly as a move to curb violence between farmers and herders but also to halt cattle rustling. This sparked major backlashes from the Fulani community within and outside Benue State and contributed to escalating tensions and violence in certain parts of the state.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the ban remained in force at the time of writing.

In another move to curb cattle rustling, the Zamfara State government prohibited the transportation of sheep and cows into or outside the state.⁹⁹ To disrupt bandit supplies, the government also ordered that ‘no firewood or charcoal shall be transported from the bush to any part of Zamfara State’ by vehicle.¹⁰⁰ The first ban on motorcycles, announced on 29 August 2021, was a state-wide ban covering Zamfara’s 14 LGAs. The ban was instituted from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. in the state capital Gusau, and from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. in all other LGAs.¹⁰¹

Another ban on motorcycles was announced on 16 August 2022, prohibiting motorcycles from operating between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. in Gusau town and its outskirts, with a shoot-on-sight order against violators.¹⁰² The bans have had wide-ranging consequences and elicited mixed reactions. Commercial motorcycle operators have borne the economic brunt of the measure:

The ban is having a negative impact on our source of income, as we can only work in few places around the state capital once it is 8 p.m. For this reason, competition is stiff, and the space is oversaturated with many motorcycle operators chasing after a few passengers. What I make in a

day is far less than what I was getting before the ban.¹⁰³

In addition to these bans, the Zamfara State government has introduced a validation process to ensure that stolen cattle are not brought into the markets. This includes the presentation of receipts and proof of the source of the cattle by anyone taking cattle into or out of the market. A prominent member of Zamfara’s cattle dealers’ association described the process and its impact on theft:

We are complying with regulations brought up by the authorities to make sure that stolen animals do not flood our markets. Every animal brought to our markets must have an original payment receipt, and whoever brings it must explain the place he sourced it from. In the course of these rigorous checks, we are able to recover hundreds of stolen cows and arrest those behind the theft. We are still subjecting every potential buyer and seller to these scrutinies.¹⁰⁴

This process is perceived to have been somewhat successful in identifying stolen cattle, albeit not sufficiently to discourage their theft in the first place.

In an alternative approach, in 2021, several states, including Kaduna, Zamfara and Katsina, shut down mobile communications to disrupt the communication channels of the armed bandits, and restrict movement and large gatherings.¹⁰⁵ The shutdown lasted nearly three months, from 4 September to 29 November 2021, with a major toll on economic activities.¹⁰⁶ A resident of Gusau described the difficulties that residents faced as a result of the shutdown:

I had to travel to either Funtua in Katsina or Zaria in Kaduna to be able to make calls and receive SMSes. We were always afraid of travelling to Funtua or Zaria because bandits were carrying out attacks along the routes.¹⁰⁷

Shutting down mobile networks in Zamfara and other states in the North-West temporarily disrupted communication among armed bandit groups, giving the military an upper hand in rooting them out. However, the bandits managed to circumvent the shutdown by using satellite phones.

Amnesties and peace initiatives

Some state governments have explored non-confrontational approaches in response to armed banditry, which is closely connected with cattle rustling in the North-West. In 2019, Zamfara and neighbouring Katsina and Sokoto states offered amnesty to armed bandits. The state government released an unknown number of bandits who had been in custody and, in return, the bandits released 427 hostages and surrendered 216 rifles. However, the amnesty and ceasefire collapsed only two months later, when an armed group attacked a security post and killed nine soldiers in Anka LGA, following clashes between farmers and pastoralists.¹⁰⁸

A civil society actor who has carried out extensive work on dialogue and reconciliation programmes in communities affected by clashes between farmers and herders and violence associated with cattle rustling in the North-West and North-Central regions highlighted several reasons why these amnesties have not yielded results:

First, the bandits do not have a central authority. They are a large network of disconnected gangs that operate under different leaders. It is therefore difficult to get different bandit leaders to adhere to agreements. A ceasefire agreed with one leader is often disrupted by another leader. Secondly, the so-called amnesties do not have the backing of the office of the Attorney General of the Federation – the government official with the constitutional power to grant amnesties. The amnesties in Zamfara and other parts of the North-West have been announced by state governors without any pronouncement by the Attorney General to give it the constitutional backing required.¹⁰⁹

The Zamfara State government further initiated several peace talks with the bandits, but the calm that resulted from these initiatives was short-lived, as some of the armed bandits either reneged or other gangs that were not part of the ceasefire pact disrupted the process. Frustrated by the repeated

failure of these agreements, the governor of Zamfara announced in September 2021 that the state would no longer grant amnesty to armed bandits and that military measures were underway to ‘flush out bandits and their collaborators to restore peace in the state’.¹¹⁰

Deploying technology

Some states have explored the use of technology for tackling cattle rustling. For example, in December 2017, the state government of Katsina collaborated with a mobile network provider to launch an animal identification and management solution. The scheme embedded microchips in animals to help locate them in case of theft.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, at the time of writing, according to media reporting, no stolen cattle have been recovered through the scheme, whose implementation has been held up through contractual problems between the Katsina government and the mobile network provider.¹¹²

Enhancing deterrence and punishment through legislative reform

More recently, in June 2022, the Zamfara State government prescribed death sentences for people found guilty of armed banditry, with a bill titled ‘Prohibition and Punishment for Banditry, Cattle Rustling, Cultism, Kidnapping and Other Incidental Offences’ signed by the governor.¹¹³ The governor of Zamfara State said that the law forms part of new measures to curb cattle rustling, kidnapping and other offences related to armed banditry. The law also provides that persons found guilty of aiding and abetting cattle rustling, kidnapping and other crimes related to armed banditry would face life imprisonment, 20 years’ imprisonment or 10 years’ imprisonment, depending on the crime.¹¹⁴ The governor of Zamfara has expressed confidence in the change in legislation to curb armed banditry,¹¹⁵ but it is not clear whether the bill has had any immediate impact.

Community-level responses

Vigilantes

Both government and communities in states across the North-West and South-West have constituted vigilante groups as part of measures to tackle cattle rustling. For example, in July 2022, Zamfara State government launched the Community Protection Guards in an effort to curb armed banditry.¹¹⁶

However, cattle rustling has persisted in other states where similar initiatives have been implemented, such as in Kaduna, where the Operation Yaki Surveillance Patrol Team was formed in 2015.¹¹⁷

In the South-West, state governors jointly established Amotekun in 2020 – a regional vigilante with a presence in all south-western states, except Lagos. Part of the group's mandate is to apprehend criminals engaged in cattle rustling and kidnapping. Although there have been reports of human rights violations and extortion by operatives of Amotekun,¹¹⁸ the security network generally enjoys public trust across the region, as noted by a community leader in Ogbomoshoh: 'Men of Amotekun [...] are always on the ground to protect us.'¹¹⁹ Amotekun operatives also play a key role in resolving disputes between farmers and herders, especially in situations in which cattle destroy farmlands: 'Whenever our cows destroy a farm, they get the cows confiscated by the men of Amotekun. For you to get your cows bailed, you have to speak with the owner of the farm and pay a sum of N5 000 [€11] to the Amotekun as ransom.'¹²⁰

In addition to federal and state responses, many communities affected by cattle rustling have mobilized vigilantes and various informal security networks to address the security challenge. In the


North-West and North-Central regions, residents of various LGAs, including Zurmi and Maru in Zamfara, Birnin Gwari and Kajuru in Kaduna, and Barkin Ladi and Jos South in Plateau, have mobilized local vigilantes. Although local vigilantes are usually ill-trained, poorly armed and lack the capacity to tackle cattle rustling, they can often complement the efforts of state security, increasing the chance of success against criminals because of their understanding of the terrain.

The role of vigilantes is complex – contributing to apprehending cattle rustlers in some instances and being predatory in other instances. For example, a resident of Rukuduwa district of Zurmi LGA, Zamfara, described the positive role played by vigilantes in response to cattle rustling: 'In Rukuduwa district, some vigilantes have risen to the occasion and were able to make a huge recovery of the animals rustled in the district, even though the majority of them lost their lives in the process.'¹²¹ However, these groups have also been accused of corruption in Zamfara. As a resident of Maru noted: 'There have been cases of connivance between some security operatives, vigilantes and traditional rulers cornering stolen but recovered cows.'¹²² While vigilante groups are clearly an element of community resilience responses to cattle rustling, the intricate relationship of such groups with growing weaponization and the risks that they could become yet another violent actor are cause for concern.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

State responses to cattle rustling should consider its role in undermining livelihoods, already made scarcer in a context of growing unemployment and poverty levels. © Shehu Umar



This report has underscored the role of cattle rustling as an accelerant illicit economy, namely one that plays a significant role in fuelling instability, weaponizing existing conflicts and multiplying armed actors. Across Nigeria, a main characteristic of cattle rustling, central to its close relationship with instability, is how the practice feeds into deeply entrenched group grievances. Additionally, the evolution over time of sustainable cattle rustling into destructive cattle rustling has positioned the practice as a key phenomenon undermining livelihoods, already made scarcer in a context of growing unemployment and poverty levels, as well as intensifying competition over scarce resources. While these are structural challenges requiring long-term response strategies, they provide crucial framing for more immediate responses.

It is clear that the role of cattle rustling in fuelling instability means that finding sustainable responses must remain a policy priority. This research advances recommendations below to support efforts aimed at addressing cattle rustling, while recognizing that responses must be context-specific to succeed.

Address farmer–herder conflicts as a priority:

- Most of the communities in which cattle rustling has fuelled violence and instability are areas with a history of violent conflict between farmers and herders. Responses may include constituting a permanent standing committee in each LGA of the affected states to respond to disputes between farmers and herders as well as ensure that government officials do not sell off grazing routes and reserves.
- Addressing conflict between farmers and herders would require revisiting the idea of open grazing and extensive transhumance routes. In 1965, when many of these grazing routes were created, the population of Nigeria was slightly over 50 million. With a population now of roughly 200 million, there is far more pressure on and competition over land. Urban sprawl, climate change and the increase in human settlements have reduced the size of land available for both crop farming and pastoralism. The creation of grazing reserves and the promotion of intensive animal husbandry seem to be a viable options, but these must be well thought out and subjected to inclusive debates and wide consultations to arrive at a national consensus.¹²³ States could learn from Kano State’s ‘reactivation of

grazing reserves in Ajingi, Kiru, Doguwa, Gaya and Kunchi', a measure believed to be partially behind the relative calm in Kano.¹²⁴ Although this project is still underway, 'it has contributed to building confidence and improving intergroup relations between pastoralists and farmers', according to an official of the Kano State Agro-Pastoral Development Project – the agency coordinating the establishment of grazing reserves.¹²⁵

Whole of supply chain approaches:

- Government should consider complementing ongoing law enforcement and military interventions with approaches that target a range of entry points in the cattle rustling supply chain. To date, responses have focused on the first link in the chain – namely, the perpetrators (predominantly armed bandits). While this is laudable, engaging with other links in the supply chain could enhance their success. In order to target the transporters, middlemen and buyers facilitating the movement and resale of stolen cattle, government should engage motorpark unions, cattle dealers' associations and commercial truck and lorry drivers to identify those who conduct businesses with cattle rustlers.

Enhance legitimacy of state security personnel among communities:

- Military operations should be as targeted as possible, drawing on extensive intelligence-gathering (including from community engagement) and, where possible, in-depth investigation to understand the locations and movements of armed bandits. It is essential to avoid targeting pastoralist communities as a whole, as to do so could swell the pool of aggrieved people who can be potentially recruited into armed groups.
- To support the above, security agencies should work to boost their intelligence-gathering capacity among communities. To address cattle rustling, security agents need to work closely with communities, including Fulani pastoralists. An important step towards working with communities is gaining their confidence and trust. Corruption and abuse of power among security forces must be addressed to restore public confidence and trust.

Consolidate and harmonize ongoing state interventions:

- Cooperation and synergy between the various security agencies are essential. The police, military, DSS, NIS and NSCDC can benefit from information sharing and more structured strategic and tactical cooperation. In the long term, increasing the capacity of the police force, and its technical capability, should be a priority, enabling law enforcement rather than military responses to criminality.

Regulate vigilante groups:

- Government should establish a viable institutional framework for regulating both state-initiated and community vigilantes, such as the Community Protection Guards in Zamfara. This should also include training on human rights, abuse of power, and how to stick to their mandates and rules of engagement. The need for a regulatory framework for vigilantes is part of ongoing recommendations that have been echoed by different civil society stakeholders, including the GI-TOC in an April 2022 report titled 'The crime paradox: Illicit markets, violence and instability in Nigeria'¹²⁶ as well as in a report by International Crisis group titled 'Managing vigilantism in Nigeria: A near-term necessity'.¹²⁷

Development-focused responses:

- There is a pressing need to address the humanitarian dimension of cattle rustling and instability. Particular attention should be paid to the welfare needs of IDPs by providing safe shelter, food and sanitation as well as basic amenities such as water, electricity and healthcare. Responses to cattle rustling and armed banditry in general have prioritized securitization over addressing the fast-deteriorating humanitarian situation.

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