

CATTLE RUSTLING AND INSECURITY

DYNAMICS IN THE TRI-BORDER
AREA BETWEEN BURKINA FASO,
CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND GHANA

FLORE BERGER

JULY 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to extend their sincere thanks to all those who took the time to share their knowledge to make this report possible. Given the sensitivity of the topic, co-authors and key contributors could not be named, in particular research leads for Ghana and Burkina Faso. In Côte d'Ivoire we thank Dr Fofana Moussa and Dr Alexis Koffi. This brief is produced in partnership between the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Equal Access International/ResilienceForPeace (EAI/R4P) and Acting for Life (AFL). The authors would also like to thank members of each organization, including Lucia Bird, director of the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, for her support and advice throughout the project, as well as Mirko Hoff and Abiba Diarrassouba at EAI/R4P, and Stéphane Pil at AFL for their collaboration throughout the project. Finally, we also wish to thank Clingendael and the International Organization for Migration for their collaborative approach and support, which made this project stronger.

The 'Support to the Mitigation of Destabilizing Effects of Transnational Organized Crime (M-TOC)' project is a project commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office, implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the GI-TOC, from 2024 to 2025.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Flore Berger is a senior analyst at the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa. She specializes in the dynamics of conflict in the Sahel, and in particular on issues relating to the governance of non-state armed groups and their involvement in transnational organized crime in the region.

© 2025 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime,
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means without permission in writing from the Global Initiative.

Cover: © Gilles Coulon

Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva

www.globalinitiative.net

CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
Methodology.....	3
Key findings.....	3
Cattle rustling as part of the conflict ecosystem	5
2018 to mid-2020: initial expansion and focus on resourcing	6
Mid 2020 to early 2022: expansion and loss in Côte d'Ivoire	7
Early 2022–March 2024: Sud-Ouest under pressure.....	9
March 2024 to March 2025: violence and rustling unleashed.....	11
Mapping the current market	14
Actors in the supply chain	14
The cattle laundromat: the pivotal role of Upper West and Bounkani	19
Tracing the value chain: who benefits?	21
Impacts on community resilience	26
Responses	28
State responses	28
Community responses.....	28
Conclusion and recommendations	31
Notes	



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have increasingly expanded their operations from the Sahel southwards into the northern areas of Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and – to a degree – Ghana. These are the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). These groups have complex supply chains that provide them with resources, with flows between coastal and Sahelian states facilitating resource distribution. While Mali and Burkina Faso form the epicentre of conflict and cattle rustling, the ecosystem crosses borders, with coastal states being key hubs for the laundering of stolen livestock.

The tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire (the Sud-Ouest, Upper West and Bounkani regions, respectively) is crucial to understanding the southwards expansion of Sahelian conflict actors and their resourcing mechanisms. The dynamics of cattle rustling vary across the tri-border region. In Burkina Faso's Sud-Ouest region, livestock looting is deeply tied to conflict dynamics, with all parties – JNIM and the security forces, in particular the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, VDP)¹ – using rustling as an economic tool and a means of coercion. These challenges have spilled over into Côte d'Ivoire's Bounkani region, which has experienced violence, livestock thefts and communal tensions due to armed actors from Burkina Faso operating within Ivorian territory. Ghana's Upper West region, and to a lesser degree Bounkani, have emerged as increasingly prominent zones for the sale of cattle rustled by conflict actors in Burkina Faso, with the proceeds flowing northwards.

In all regions, the cattle rustling market is closely linked to conflict, violence and economic interests. Cattle rustling not only propels violence but also inflicts harm on communities in the Sahel and West Africa. Unlike other criminal markets (such as narcotics), the livestock economy is essential to regional livelihoods. Cattle rustling undermines economic resilience, as herders can lose their entire livelihood in one incident. It also erodes trust between communities and state authorities, which are often perceived as ineffective in addressing thefts, leading to further social fragmentation and community tension.

This report assesses the intersection of the criminal economy of cattle rustling with the tri-border area's conflict dynamics, before tracing the illicit supply chain, showing how cattle is smuggled from rural conflict zones to major cattle markets in coastal states. It also maps the actors underpinning this market and analyzes the value chain, revealing which actors are profiting the most. Additionally, the report describes how cattle rustling undermines community resilience, and highlights key initiatives to combat this illicit economy by state and community actors (or the lack thereof). Finally, it provides

targeted recommendations for state, international and community actors involved in stabilization efforts in the region.

Methodology

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Equal Access International/ResilienceForPeace (EAI/R4P) and Acting for Life (AFL) collaborated on two studies on cattle rustling and its links with instability and violent extremism. This report focuses on the tri-border area between Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Ghana, while the second will address the tri-border area between Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Guinea. This partnership combines expertise in illicit economies, conflict analysis and extensive networks within the livestock trade, with significant experience in working to assess and build community resilience as part of stabilization programming.

The research project unfolded in three phases: scoping, data collection and analysis. Conducted from August to September 2024, the scoping phase involved reviewing existing literature, data and expert insights to identify geographical and thematic coverage gaps, which guided the selection of data-collection sites and development of questionnaires. A scoping report summarizing findings was shared with partner organizations and their field teams, and study locations in Bounkani, Sud-Ouest and Upper West were chosen based on vulnerability to armed groups, cattle rustling prevalence and the local significance of the livestock economy.

The data collection phase took place in October 2024. Field research was carried out by teams of consultants across all three regions. Between 50 and 60 stakeholders were interviewed in each region, and two focus groups per region were organized. Among those surveyed were livestock sector stakeholders: herders and herders' associations, market management committees, traders, transporters, brokers, intermediaries and informal money changers involved in the livestock economy. Other respondents were a range of authorities: traditional chiefs, members of the VDP, security forces, local and national authorities, and customs officers. Women, civil society actors, journalists and local experts were also surveyed. Remote interviews were conducted with experts and international organizations impacting the livestock economy.

Preliminary findings were shared at the Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique in mid-November 2024 in Senegal. An analysis of quantitative data on cattle rustling provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), EAI/R4P and AFL, as well as an analysis of pricing structure, served to complement the qualitative approach. This mixed methodology, combining in-depth interviews, focus groups and secondary data analysis, provided comprehensive insights into the dynamics of livestock theft and its broader implications.

Key findings

- The Upper West region of Ghana has emerged as a critical laundering hub for cattle rustled in Burkina Faso, facilitating financial flows to JNIM, the VDP and associated criminal networks. The Bounkani region of Côte d'Ivoire plays a secondary but still significant role in this ecosystem.
- The laundering function of these regions supports analysis suggesting that JNIM is able to secure resources in Upper West and Bounkani without resorting to violence, highlighting a strategy of non-violent extraction in key logistical corridors.

- Armed actors' involvement in the cross-border livestock market is distorting trade dynamics, generating doubled or tripled profits for intermediaries and livestock traders as they are able to purchase stolen cattle at cut-rate prices. This alignment of interests between powerful economic actors in coastal states and conflict-related actors entrenches the status quo and undermines peace-building efforts.
- Since 2024, the VDP have become central perpetrators of cattle rustling in the southern regions of Burkina Faso, weakening state legitimacy and blurring the lines between counterterrorism actors and criminal networks.
- The VDP are expanding their role in violent activities in the Bounkani region, extending beyond cattle rustling to a broader repertoire of threats, coercion and destabilization. Operations by Burkinabe state auxiliary forces in Côte d'Ivoire raise concerns about the role of such armed groups in intensifying violence, and the increasing autonomy of their operations.
- These trends reaffirm the centrality of the livestock economy in the conflict ecosystem across the Sahel and coastal West Africa. Cattle rustling remains one of the most resilient and lucrative sources of financing for armed groups operating in the region.



CATTLE RUSTLING AS PART OF THE CONFLICT ECOSYSTEM

Cattle rustling² is a critical and often under-reported aspect of the security crisis in the Sahel and northern coastal states. It acts as a driver of conflict, as a governance and intimidation mechanism for actors seeking to exert influence over communities, and as a critical source of revenue for armed actors, including those associated with the state, VEOs or bandits. Since 2020, as VEOs like JNIM expanded southwards, the tri-border area where the Sud-Ouest, Bounkani and Upper West regions meet has faced security threats that have shaped and been shaped by the stolen livestock market. From early 2024, the VDP have also emerged as a considerable armed threat to stability in the region.³

Both JNIM and the VDP use cattle rustling as a method of control and intimidation. By targeting herders and their livestock, they terrorize the population, forcing displacement or compelling communities to accept their authority. Such practices have bred long-standing anger among a range of herder communities, particularly in central Mali since 2015 and Burkina Faso since 2018, where grievances over cattle theft have contributed to cycles of violence. Reprisals linked to cattle theft have often escalated tensions, prompting herders to arm themselves or align with armed groups for protection, while other communities may respond by forming self-defence militias. Over time, these militias can become predatory actors themselves, further deepening the conflict.⁴

Cattle rustling is closely associated with the trajectory of violence in the region. Increases in rustling activities often precede or coincide with a deteriorating security situation, as armed actors intensify their operations. In particular, JNIM's involvement in cattle rustling varies depending on its level of territorial control. In areas where the group is still asserting itself, it resorts to violent theft as a mechanism for power assertion and revenue generation.

However, when these armed actors reduce their activities and consolidate their presence in a given territory, incidents of cattle theft tend to decline.⁵ Indeed, where JNIM has solidified its influence, it shifts to a more structured economic governance model. Instead of outright theft, JNIM imposes *zakat* (an Islamic tax on cattle owners), typically fixed at one bull calf for every 30 head of cattle and a heifer calf for every 40 head of cattle, which acts as both a revenue stream and a means of establishing legitimacy within the community. This transition shows that cattle rustling can also function as a tool for insurgent governance, reflecting the group's adaptive strategies in response to its control over territory.



JNIM's involvement in West Africa's cattle rustling market has been a crucial element of the group's resourcing since its emergence. © AFL/EAI

This pattern highlights how those driving broader conflicts also play significant roles in the illicit cattle economy.⁶ The development of cattle rustling in this context underscores its critical role amid the dynamic conflict landscape in the region.

2018 to mid-2020: initial expansion and focus on resourcing

JNIM has notably been active in the Sud-Ouest region of Burkina Faso, the most unstable region within the tri-border area, since 2018. The group's first attacks in the region primarily targeted security positions and forest guards' posts in areas between Batié, Nao, Loropéni and Galgouli.⁷ But by early 2019, JNIM's tactics had changed, shifting from direct confrontations to adopting a less visible presence, focusing on establishing themselves in strategic locations to facilitate further expansion and resourcing. This included localities along the Ivorian border between the Diéfoula and Dida forests, such as Mangodara (in the Cascades region) and Helintira (in the Sud-Ouest region). JNIM also focused on cultivating ties with existing contraband networks operating in these border areas to secure operational resources and financing streams.

A key figure in the region is Rasmane Dramane Sidibé, known as 'Hamza', who since 2019 has been overseeing the entrenchment and resource-mobilization efforts of his *katiba* (or 'battalion' in Arabic), initially known as Katiba Alidougou, but currently referred to by JNIM as the Katiba Banfora region. Hamza succeeded Ali Traoré, who led the *katiba* during its earlier operations in the Cascades and Haut-Bassins regions starting in 2015. Hamza's background as a student of Amadou Kouffa, the leader of the Katiba Macina (operating in central Mali), during his Koranic studies in Mali between 2010 and 2014 has forged significant links between the two *katibas*.⁸ Under Hamza's leadership, the Katiba Banfora has concentrated on resourcing itself while also supplying resources to other *katibas* in the region.

The structure of the Katiba Banfora reflects this operational focus. Hamza oversees two key figures: 'Jafar', the co-leader of the *katiba*, and Abou Moussa, the head of logistics and resourcing.⁹ Both individuals are Ivorians. Jafar comes from Govitan, a remote village in the Tehini department of Bounkani region – less than 10 kilometres away from the Burkinabe border. He also studied in central Mali with Hamza (2010–2015), and is thus also linked to Katiba Macina, and heads the training and recruitment operations. Abou Moussa comes from Ouangolodougou in the Tchologo region, about 20 kilometres away from the Burkinabe border.

It is slightly unusual in a *katiba* hierarchy to have such a direct relationship between the leader and the resource manager. This reflects not only the relatively limited size of the Katiba Banfora, but also its primary focus on resourcing and logistics, making Abou Moussa a central actor.¹⁰

Involvement in the livestock economy has been a crucial element of JNIM's resourcing networks since its emergence. The group's participation in the cattle trade serves as one of the earliest indicators of its operations in the tri-border area, particularly along the Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire border. As early as 2017, Ivorian investigations have linked to JNIM a figure known as Hadou, the head of a large cattle rustling network operating from Ouangolodougou. Intelligence sources believe that, between 2017 and Hadou's arrest in 2019, the network generated about CFA60 million (€91 400) from the illegal sale of about 400 cattle and 200 sheep in northern Côte d'Ivoire.¹¹ Given the links between JNIM and Hadou's network, it is believed that some of these revenues benefited the group.

The Sud-Ouest region has hence been acting from the beginning of JNIM's presence as a critical transit area for cattle, facilitating the movement of livestock stolen by JNIM in south-western Burkina Faso and further (Cascades, Hauts-Bassins, Boucle du Mouhoun) to Côte d'Ivoire.¹² JNIM did not create these networks and routing. Rather, the stolen cattle trade is intricately tied to the broader livestock ecosystem in West Africa, which sees livestock largely bred in Mali and Burkina Faso, and then moving towards consumption hubs in coastal states such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.¹³ In this context, Côte d'Ivoire, along with Ghana, relies heavily on imports from Burkina Faso, with the latter fulfilling up to 90 per cent of Ghana's livestock consumption needs.¹⁴

Mid 2020 to early 2022: expansion and loss in Côte d'Ivoire

Between mid-2020 and late 2022, JNIM executed a strategic expansion in Côte d'Ivoire while consolidating its operations in Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, by mid 2020, JNIM had established a stable albeit low-key presence in the Sud-Ouest region around the Dida Forest, in the strategic localities of Djigouè and Helintira. JNIM had also integrated itself in the criminal environment, operating on routes used by smugglers connecting the Sud-Ouest with the Bounkani region, and particularly from the Dida Forest to Comoé National Park (two corridors through the Ivorian localities of Tougbo and Tehini).¹⁵ This strategic positioning enabled JNIM to exploit the vulnerabilities of both national parks, using forested areas as logistical hubs, places of refuge and means to build legitimacy within the populations they interacted with.¹⁶ In 2020, only one JNIM attack was recorded in the Sud-Ouest.

In June 2020, the group used its strongholds in Burkina Faso to launch an offensive against Côte d'Ivoire. The Kafolo attack, the first major attack on Ivorian security forces, marked the beginning of the offensive. Following this attack, JNIM carried out over 20 violent operations in the Bounkani and Tchologo regions, employing various tactics such as direct assaults on security installations, the use of improvised explosive devices and intimidation tactics that included the seizure of mosques and villages.¹⁷

As JNIM escalated violence in Côte d'Ivoire, cattle rustling became a more overt aspect of its operations, and incidents increased in Bounkani and Tchologo regions.¹⁸ Areas with rising rates of cattle theft corresponded to those which JNIM was infiltrating. The rise in the scale of cattle rustling incidents during this period was especially telling, as reported thefts escalated from a few cattle to entire herds – a trend seen elsewhere in the Sahel, including in central Mali (since 2015) and northern Burkina Faso (since 2018), showcasing JNIM's entrenchment in the economy.¹⁹ This change indicated a clear shift, showcasing JNIM's deeper involvement into the livestock economy. Reports indicated that incidents of cattle theft became increasingly brazen, occurring during daylight hours and often involving armed perpetrators who threatened herders and cattle owners, including through kidnapping or murdering those who resisted or challenged them.²⁰ The dynamics of stolen cattle trade also shifted during this time; previously, stolen cattle were typically funnelled south towards larger regional markets such as Bouaké, Doropo and Bouna. However, from 2020 onward, this reversed direction, with stolen livestock increasingly trafficked up north towards Burkina Faso, to JNIM's strongholds.

As JNIM deepened its engagement in the livestock economy in the borderlands on both the Ivorian and Burkinabe side, it positioned itself as the protector of herds, and many herders and cattle owners were compelled to accept the group's presence and protection. Those who rejected JNIM's influence faced severe consequences, including the theft of their animals and forced displacement from their land. The group further facilitated its entry into the livestock sector by leveraging young local herders as intermediaries, persuading them to establish relationships with cattle owners and transporters. JNIM often incentivized cooperation by offering large sums of money to cattle traders and transporters, effectively weaving itself into the economic fabric of the region.²¹

The Ivorian state responded to JNIM's activities with a swift deployment of military force and the introduction of non-military resources, including development efforts aimed at bolstering community resilience.²² By the first quarter of 2022, this enhanced security presence appeared to have curtailed JNIM's more overt operations, as only three attacks against the Ivorian armed forces were recorded in northern Côte d'Ivoire, after which offensive operations largely ceased.²³ By 2022, it became clear that while JNIM might have once harboured aspirations of expanding its footprint in northern Côte d'Ivoire, the group now treated the region primarily as a fallback area and resourcing zone.

The increased security measures also reshaped JNIM's involvement in the livestock economy, and altered its relationships with herders, traders and transporters. Two key changes took place. First, the major cattle-smuggling corridor used by JNIM via Kafolo or Ouangolodougou became increasingly difficult to use. As a result, JNIM adapted its strategies, rerouting stolen livestock through Bounkani to reach new markets in Doropo and Bouna, where intermediaries played a crucial role in laundering the stolen animals.²⁴

Second, JNIM began leveraging connections to Ghana as a new avenue for livestock trade, indicating a move away from reliance solely on the Ivorian markets. The year 2022 was a milestone for JNIM's presence in Upper West, with the group increasingly using Ghanaian territory to rest, hide and find resources such as food, fuel and motorcycles.²⁵ Ghana remains the only coastal state in the central belt that has not been attacked by JNIM to date. JNIM's experience in Côte d'Ivoire, and its prioritization of key supply chains and hiding areas, has likely shaped this strategy.²⁶

Early 2022–March 2024: Sud-Ouest under pressure

From early 2022 to early 2024, the Sud-Ouest region of Burkina Faso witnessed a significant escalation and then decrease in violence and unrest, primarily driven by the activities of JNIM. Cattle rustling incidents followed the same trajectory.

Increased pressure from Ivorian authorities prompted JNIM to refocus its efforts back to Burkina Faso. This resulted in a marked rise in attacks on both state security forces and civilians. Despite the attempts of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) to dislodge the group from its strongholds, JNIM intensified its campaign.²⁷

By early 2022, JNIM had retained its strongholds and expanded further towards Kampti and Loropéni. The group restructured into a more organized formation, consisting of 5 *markaz* (zonal units), each comprising between 50 to 80 fighters. These units were based in Loropéni, Djigoué, Helintira, Balè Forest and Galgouli. Overall, the group had approximately 350 members, with about 60 per cent being Burkinabe, 20 per cent Ivorian, and the remainder hailing from neighbouring countries such as Ghana, Mali, Niger, Pakistan and Algeria.²⁸

The deployment of the VDP to the Sud-Ouest in 2022 marked a new watershed moment. VDP members became prime targets for JNIM's attacks, resulting in more than 50 recorded clashes between JNIM and military forces in 2022 alone.²⁹ Civilians often found themselves caught in the crossfire, leading to prolonged suffering and instability. Not only did violence increase, but so did cattle rustling incidents, as both groups looted livestock during armed confrontations. This is a trend experienced nationwide in Burkina Faso, with the deployment of VDP exacerbating the conflict, which in turn leads to an increase in cattle rustling incidents.³⁰

In areas where it was fighting the presence of the VDP, JNIM used cattle rustling as an intimidation tool. The targeting of villages by JNIM often coincided with the pillaging of livestock. Allegations of collaboration with the armed forces or hosting a VDP post made villages prime targets for JNIM raids. Targeted individuals and their families were typically forced to leave, or to ally with JNIM and receive protection. One marabout from Djigoué recalled an incident in mid-2022: 'One evening the terrorists took 400 heads of cattle from me on the pretext that I make *gris-gris* for people [cast spells] and that I'm not honest, I'm corrupt and therefore I deserve to die and since I have to be killed, my property is rightfully theirs.'³¹ The regional body of a herders' association reported that, between 2022 and 2023, over 2 000 heads of livestock were stolen in the south-western area of Burkina Faso (the Hauts-Bassins, Cascades and Sud-Ouest regions).³²

In localities where JNIM did not face competition from the VPD (Helintira, Djigoué, Loropéni and Kampti), the group imposed rules on local communities, collecting *zakat* and enforcing adherence to their interpretation of local governance. In the Sud-Ouest, the social contract implied by *zakat* payments was relatively loose, due to JNIM's more limited presence relative to other areas. But it was to some extent accepted by communities, who received protection from JNIM against increased targeting by security forces and the VDP. In the Sud-Ouest, JNIM's *zakat* on cattle owners claimed an estimated 400 cows in 2022, 250 in 2023 and fewer than 100 in 2024 – based on market prices, these hauls represented values of CFA160million (€243 920), CFA100 million (€152 449) and CFA40 million (€60 979), respectively.³³ The downward trend reflects the growing resistance to JNIM's influence across the Sud-Ouest from early 2024 (see next section).

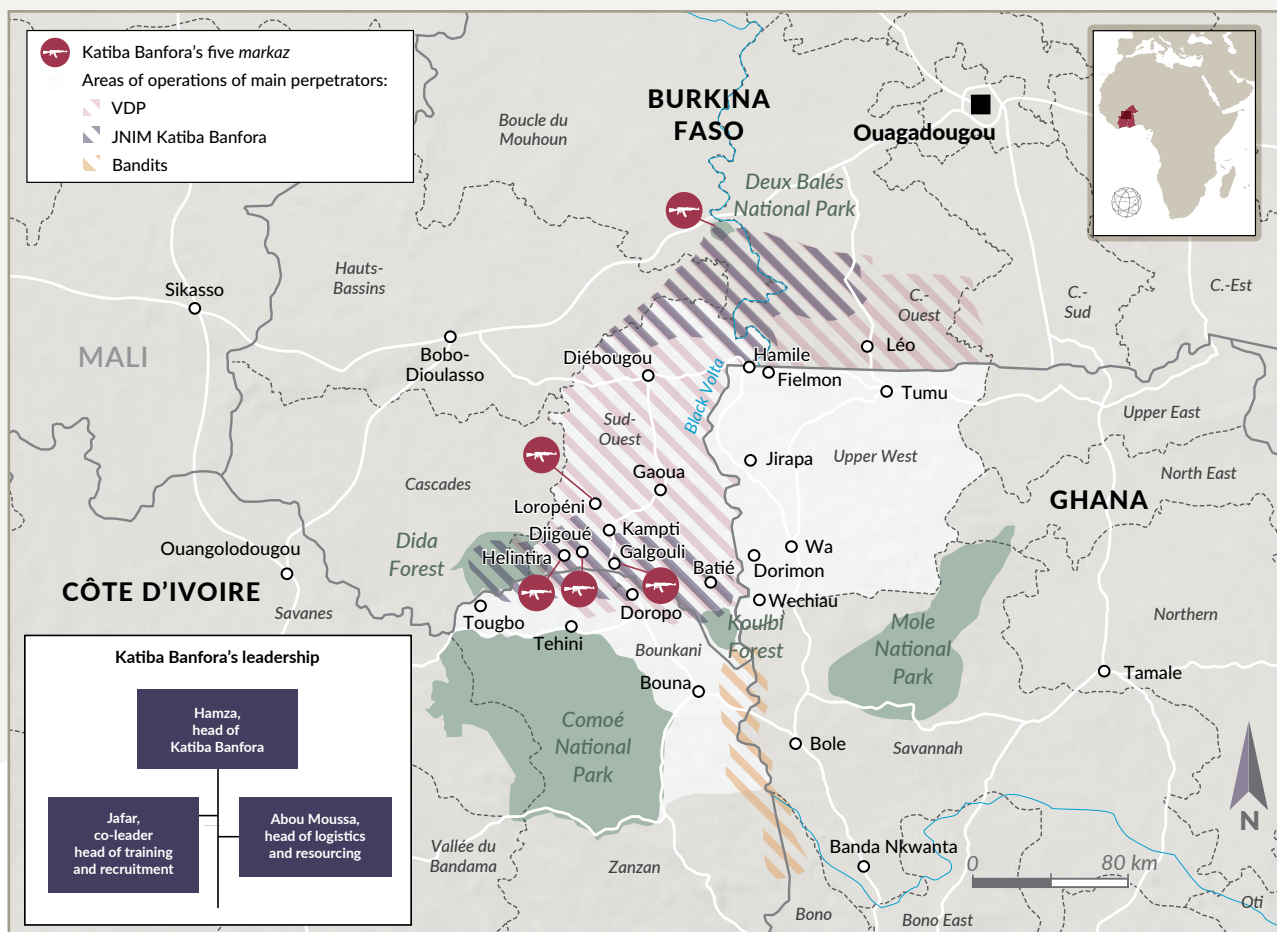


FIGURE 1 Armed group presence in the tri-border area of Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Ghana, and JNIM's leadership hierarchy.

SOURCE: GI-TOC research in the tri-border area, October 2024.

By early 2023, the operational focus of JNIM in the Sud-Ouest region of Burkina Faso shifted significantly as large-scale operations decreased, although sporadic clashes persisted.³⁴ This trend indicated a strategic recalibration; rather than pursuing aggressive territorial expansion, JNIM opted to consolidate its influence in established strongholds. This phase included ongoing *zakat* collection and deeper community engagement, reflecting a broader trend among VEOs in the Sahel, where violence gives way to engagement to secure territorial gains and develop financing streams.³⁵

Livestock stolen through *zakat* collection or raids were funnelled along established smuggling routes into Côte d'Ivoire (Bounkani) and Ghana (Upper West). By 2023, the increase in cattle laundering operations in Ghana was notable, driven by enhanced border surveillance in Côte d'Ivoire, which was largely a response to concerns there about cattle laundering operations linked to the influx of refugees from Burkina Faso. Reports from the security forces indicated a significant rise in the number of cattle being stolen and laundered through Upper West, now often reaching hundreds per incident. This escalation hinted at armed group involvement, suggesting that petty theft was overshadowed by organized operations requiring substantial capacity and control.³⁶ In the words of a security official from the Upper West: 'The quantity of cattle often stolen defies what petty cattle thieves can manage to escape with. If you are talking about two or three or even 10 cows, no armed groups will waste their time on that. But what we see lately is hundreds in some cases, which clearly requires a certain force and control to be able to escape and get them sold.'³⁷

Evidence of JNIM's alleged involvement in cattle rustling in Upper West itself (rather than merely using the subregion as a transit and laundering area) remains limited. Notably, a gang operating from a mountainous forest area in Kpari, near the Burkina Faso border, has emerged as a primary actor in the local cattle rustling scene.³⁸ The gang's leader, reportedly a herder himself with ties to JNIM, is suspected of orchestrating the movement of large herds across the border, eliciting concerns from local traders and victims.³⁹ While some have reported the gang's activities to the police, official responses have been scarce. Security officials, while acknowledging awareness of the gang, have remained reticent to comment.⁴⁰

March 2024 to March 2025: violence and rustling unleashed

In March 2024, a significant shift occurred not just in the conflict landscape of the Sud-Ouest region, but also within the cattle rustling market. A Burkinabe military offensive involving the VDP and the armed forces effectively expelled JNIM from its strongholds in Djigouè and Helintira.⁴¹ As counter-terrorism operations in Burkina Faso increased, so did the VDP's armed presence in Bounkani. The Gogo sub-prefecture in the Tehini department has been most severely impacted. Villages perceived to have been aligned with JNIM have endured numerous attacks, including lootings and cattle rustling, village chiefs have been kidnapped and others threatened,⁴² and community leaders have been summarily executed.⁴³ Community members widely report that the perpetrators are VDP forces, as asserted in the testimony below:

[In July 2024], the VDP wanted to settle in this village [Kohofi, Gogo sub-prefecture] to ensure the security of the people and their property, according to them. The village chief did not accept this proposal, as he felt that it was out of the question for the VDP, a militia group from another country, to settle in his village, which is an Ivorian locality. The village chief refused to collaborate with the VDP and alerted the prefectural and security authorities in Gogo to explain the situation. When they were informed, members of the Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire went on a mission to Kohofi. When they arrived, the soldiers found that the VDP had already left the area.

Later, the VDP returned to Kohofi and kidnapped the village chief, and two other people close to him. They accused the chief of being behind an attack by terrorist groups on their post, in which, according to them, one of their brothers in arms had been injured and their two-wheeled vehicle set on fire. The VDP blamed the village chief for allowing the terrorist groups to attack them. [...] The VDP then told the chief and the two other villagers that they would pay for the attack on them by the terrorist groups.⁴⁴

The VDP abducted the village chief and the two villagers, and they have not been heard from since. The above highlights not only violence committed by the VDP in Côte d'Ivoire but the alleged expansion of the VDP's mandate into the country. This research suggested that VDP predation was on an upwards trend, as further illustrated by a dramatic turn of events in late June 2025, when the VDP kidnapped five Ivorian gendarmes in Kalamon, a border community in Côte d'Ivoire.

Following the March 2024 offensive, JNIM restructured its operational strategies, particularly its supply chains. Previously reliant on local supplies procured from larger towns such as Gaoua or Kampti, the group shifted to dependency on intermediaries in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana for essential materials.⁴⁵ This strategic pivot underscores the group's adaptability under military pressure. JNIM retreated into the Dida Forest, used as a base to operate in rural areas around Helintira, Djigoué and Loropéni, especially impacting villages such as Yerefoula, Koro and Nambi.⁴⁶

Gold, cattle and cash: JNIM's wealth in Djigoué and Loropéni

Details from the March 2024 operation against JNIM in the Sud-Ouest reveal a number of key features of the group's resourcing dynamics. A source from within the FDS revealed the following:⁴⁷

It is important to understand that Djigoué was close to Côte d'Ivoire and is located in an area where the forest is very dense, which gives the terrorist groups an advantage. In this region, once we realized that this group was thriving, we began by identifying its bases, and some of our agents (...) were able to gain the trust of an element that was doing business with them. From this person we were able to identify their needs, and we offered to carry out these tasks, once delivering petrol, flour and sugar.

One time we came back but this time to fight them. We completely destroyed the bases and stayed for four days to search the forest. After this operation, there was a lull before they eventually returned to the area. We were able to do all this thanks to the cooperation of the local people. During the operation, we killed Abou Housseini al-Foulani, head of the Djigoué base, and Moktar, head of the Loropéni base. We arrested 20 terrorists in Djigoué and seven in Loropéni. We recovered 140 head of cattle in the two localities and a sum of money of CFA4 million [€6 098], as well as 1.5 kilograms of gold, and two vehicles they had stolen in an ambush near Niangoloko. ■

However, the impact of these operations appeared to be limited. According to a trader in Djigoué: 'We are under siege here in Djigoué. We cannot leave even 5 kilometres away from the town otherwise we will be attacked by the bushmen [referring to JNIM]. They attack us, and we traders can only move if we are escorted by the VDP and the army in a convoy.'⁴⁸ This contrasts with the government narrative that security forces are gaining territory from JNIM in the Sud-Ouest and elsewhere, with interim president Ibrahim Traoré claiming 70 per cent of Burkina Faso has been retaken.⁴⁹

As conflict parties fight to maintain their territory, cattle rustling incidents have also significantly increased in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. This is partly attributable to JNIM: the group's interactions with communities have become predominantly predatory as it faces competition for influence and pressure from the VDP.⁵⁰

However, another critical factor driving the uptick in these incidents is the VDP's growing involvement in cattle rustling.⁵¹ Many herders and cattle owners in the Sud-Ouest and in the Bounkani report that the threats they now face often originate from the VDP rather than JNIM.⁵² This situation reflects a troubling trend where self-defence groups, originally formed to protect communities, transition into perpetrators of violence and theft against those perceived as enemies.⁵³

The armed forces, particularly the rapid intervention battalions (*bataillons d'intervention rapide*, BIR), which are tasked with rapid response to threats, have also been implicated in cattle rustling activities. In the first three months of 2024, our data suggests that they have been reportedly involved in the rustling of up to 500 heads of cattle.⁵⁴ While comprehensive data on looting by the VDP or the FDS is not available, dozens of testimonies of herders were collected, pointing to several thousand

animals stolen by these quasi-governmental actors.⁵⁵ Some elements of the VDP and the BIR have been denounced, re-assigned elsewhere or charged, but legal due process remains rare.⁵⁶

Understanding the scale of cattle rustling in the Sud-Ouest is extremely difficult in the current information and conflict environment. Official figures drastically understate the scale of the rustling and most likely represent only those attributed to JNIM, as herders would not dare reporting looting by the VDP or the FDS to the authorities. From 2022 to September 2024, official data recorded 170 cases, ranging from thefts of a few animals to entire herds of up to 150.⁵⁷

Herders' associations have their own estimates, which most likely give a clearer idea of the scale, but also undercount it, as cases are not comprehensively compiled in each region. One herders' association in the Sud-Ouest reported 270 heads of cattle stolen between November 2023 and April 2024 alone, alongside over 1 000 goats or sheep. The same herders' association estimated that 70 per cent of the livestock of the Sud-Ouest had disappeared by late 2024, through theft and displacement.⁵⁸ Indeed, most herders have either fled to northern Côte d'Ivoire or sold their animals and relocated to larger cities where there is no fighting.⁵⁹

On the Ivorian side, the scale is clearer, as various organizations are able to operate and collect data, most notably EAI/R4P and AFL. In 2024, cattle rustling incidents doubled from 2022 and 2023 figures. There were 25 incidents in 2024, representing approximately 640 heads of cattle (this total includes both small-scale thefts and thefts of entire herds of up to 100 animals). This spike was reportedly driven both by VDP activity and escalating banditry.



MAPPING THE CURRENT MARKET

The above section highlights how cattle rustling has become increasingly entangled with broader instability, showing how violence and cattle rustling incidents increase and decrease together, as the main perpetrators of violence are the conflict parties. It demonstrates how security threats have shaped and been shaped by the stolen livestock market. Building on this, this section aims to map the current market, shifting the focus to the actors and dynamics beyond the initial thefts. It examines how stolen livestock is integrated into broader supply chains, how animals are laundered through markets and how different groups – including armed groups and livestock actors – profit from and sustain this illicit economy.

Actors in the supply chain

Armed group involvement in the cattle rustling market – JNIM, VDP and bandits – is primarily at the point of theft. However, a far broader set of ancillary networks underpins the subsequent transport and sale of the stolen livestock. Key actors can be understood to fall into the following categories: perpetrators, supporting networks and enablers.

Perpetrators

JNIM was the first large-scale perpetrator of cattle rustling in the tri-border area, particularly in Bounkani during 2020–2021, and in the Sud-Ouest in 2022–2023. The group systematically engaged in rustling as a revenue source, using the tri-border area as a transit zone for stolen cattle. They exerted control over rural communities by threatening rustling while imposing *zakat* on cattle owners for security guarantees. As of 2024, JNIM remained a significant player in this economy, but state-affiliated actors, notably the VDP, had become the main rustlers in the Sud-Ouest and Bounkani. Additionally, bandits and criminal groups have become prominent, especially in Upper West Ghana and along the Ivorian–Ghanaian border, operating either in cooperation with or independently from JNIM.

Supporting networks

Young herders

The first actors in the chain, often the closest to the perpetrators, particularly JNIM, are young herders (*bouvier*, in French) tending to livestock for various cattle owners. JNIM has approached and sometimes recruited young herders in Mali, Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire.⁶⁰ These herders provide crucial intelligence to JNIM, including information on herd locations, optimal times for theft and the movements of security forces.

These young herders are one of the most vulnerable links in the supply chain, and in particular to JNIM's narratives, because they are often marginalized, living a hard life in the bush. They receive a small salary (typically around CFA30 000, or approximately €45, in Bounkani) and often lack prospects of a better livelihood.⁶¹ These herders are sometimes made to pay for any damage caused by the herd (to a farmer's field for example). Such economic pressures can lead them to work with JNIM.

The *bouvier*s can also be a critical conduit between the armed group and cattle owners. One reported infiltration tactic by JNIM is to recruit young cattle herders and then send them to work for cattle owners, later enabling theft or extortion from the owner. This tactic is widely reported in northern Côte d'Ivoire, but has also been reported in other Sahelian-bordering regions of coastal states, including Kedougou region in Senegal.⁶² In Ghana, no such reports of JNIM recruiting and planting young herders among cattle owners came up during data collection, but media have reported that JNIM does recruit young herders in cattle markets in the Upper West.⁶³



A *bouvier* in Niamoué, Côte d'Ivoire. These young herders are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by JNIM.

© AFL/EAI

Cattle traders

The second key actors in the supply chain are the cattle traders, who can be divided into local agents and larger regional agents. Local cattle traders operate within their immediate areas, within Upper West or Bounkani, often straddling the licit and illicit markets. Their experience in the livestock economy and established relationships with key players – including larger livestock traders and transporters – enable them to efficiently negotiate and facilitate the movement and sale of stolen cattle.

Local agents travel to the rural areas and forested zones, negotiating with key perpetrators (whether VDP, JNIM or bandits) and arranging for transport. They may sell these animals to larger traders that operate regionally and nationally in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Alternatively, the local traders may directly transport the stolen animals to large intermediary markets for sale (in Bouaké and Banda Nkwanta, for example), where the local trade feeds into major urban consumption markets further south).

Larger cattle traders operate either across regions or nationally. They operate in both the licit and illicit markets, and will typically buy from the local agents, but may also buy directly from rustlers. A small number of traders based around Hamile reportedly travel into Burkina Faso to engage directly with JNIM.⁶⁴ While not all big traders cooperate with the perpetrators, most are aware that the animals they handle are likely to be stolen. Stolen animals are attractive because they are priced below their licit market value. Big traders will sometimes transport stolen animals alongside ones purchased in rural markets, filling trucks with up to 60 animals, before selling them to large markets in the centre or south of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

From mid 2024 onwards, small and larger cattle traders struggled to link up with rustlers, especially JNIM, because of the region's insecurity and increased pressure from the VDP against JNIM and anyone associated with them, including their traders. The VDP have, to some extent, replaced them. They diversified into dual actors within the cattle rustling supply chain: from being rustlers only to also operating as local agents. Since mid-2024, some VDP members have allegedly collaborated with rustlers, including JNIM, by buying livestock from them at extremely low prices, and then reselling the animals to butchers and traders across the Burkina Faso–Côte d'Ivoire–Ghana corridor. These activities have been facilitated by the VDP's continued freedom of movement between rural and urban zones, as well as across national borders. A similar dynamic developed further east, at the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, as early as 2023, and is even more entrenched there. In response, the Burkinabe government has taken a number of measures since mid-2024, including the arrest or abduction of several cattle merchants working with VDP or with JNIM, as well as conducting investigations of suspected rogue VDP members.⁶⁵

Transporters

The third category of actors are transporters. They are typically truck or trailer drivers who are largely active in both the licit and illicit sectors. They are contacted by the traders (either local or regional) and typically do not directly interact with the perpetrators. However, they may be aware that their cargoes are stolen, or have suspicious origins, especially when they are called to move stolen cattle from remote locations (including informal assembly points) to markets for sale – an assignment that should in itself raise red flags. Loading is often done at odd hours – another clear indication of stolen stock. However, when stolen livestock have already been laundered through a local or regional market, and transporters move them on to further markets, they are unlikely to know the origin of the animals.

Butchers

Butchers are key actors in the stolen cattle economy across the tri-border region, even though they can typically handle about five to 10 animals at a time, meaning only a minority of stolen animals move through local butchers. Their role in the illicit trade is well illustrated by the example of the locality of Piaye in Bounkani region, where five butchers serve a tiny village. These butchers use an illegal slaughter area on the outskirts of Piaye and supply markets in the area, particularly gold-mining sites in bordering areas between Bounkani and Upper West.⁶⁶ Community members have reported that the butchers are always extremely busy, even though the herder communities surrounding Piaye do not sell them livestock. These butchers are reportedly in direct contact with bandits operating along the border, but there were no links found between them and the VDP or JNIM.



Cattle meat hangs in a butcher's stall in Gogo, Côte d'Ivoire. © AFL/EAI

As in the case of Piaye, some butchers buy directly from perpetrators, be they armed groups, bandits or criminal networks. Others purchase stolen animals through a trader. Regardless, they would typically be aware that the animals are stolen because of the identities and reputation of the sellers, the unusual location of the sales, the urgency communicated and the below-market prices charged.

Enablers

These are actors who facilitate the passage of stolen cattle through the value chain, knowingly or unknowingly, but without direct contact with rustlers.

Colluding traditional chiefs or community leaders often intervene in cases of cattle rustling where arrests have been made, by seeking to prevent criminal prosecution and pushing for amicable settlements. This is often achieved through intimidation, such as threats of banishment or expropriation, to coerce the victim into dropping the charges.⁶⁷ Two community leaders in particular, in villages between Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, are widely reported to protect local thieves, allegedly using their influence, and even bribery, to persuade security forces to abandon prosecutions. In return, they are said to receive some of the stolen cattle.⁶⁸ Such cases were not described in Ghana, though traditional chiefs there do also resolve cattle-rustling cases in their territory, as reported in Côte d'Ivoire.

For example, one herder recounted the following, echoing reports from other stakeholders in Bounkani region:

The gendarmes from [one town] and the king of [another town] are openly working with the thieves. Just this year, some of our herder brothers caught four thieves. They were on the border with Ghana. They had already sold the stolen livestock when the herders caught them. The herders arrested them and even took photos of the young thieves with their cellphones, which they handed over to the gendarmes, who went to catch the thieves.

The herders thought that by handing the thieves over to the gendarmes, the latter would take them to [the town]. Later, they learned that the thieves had been freed by the gendarmes, after intervention by the king, because each thief had handed over the sum of CFA300 000 to the gendarmes.⁶⁹

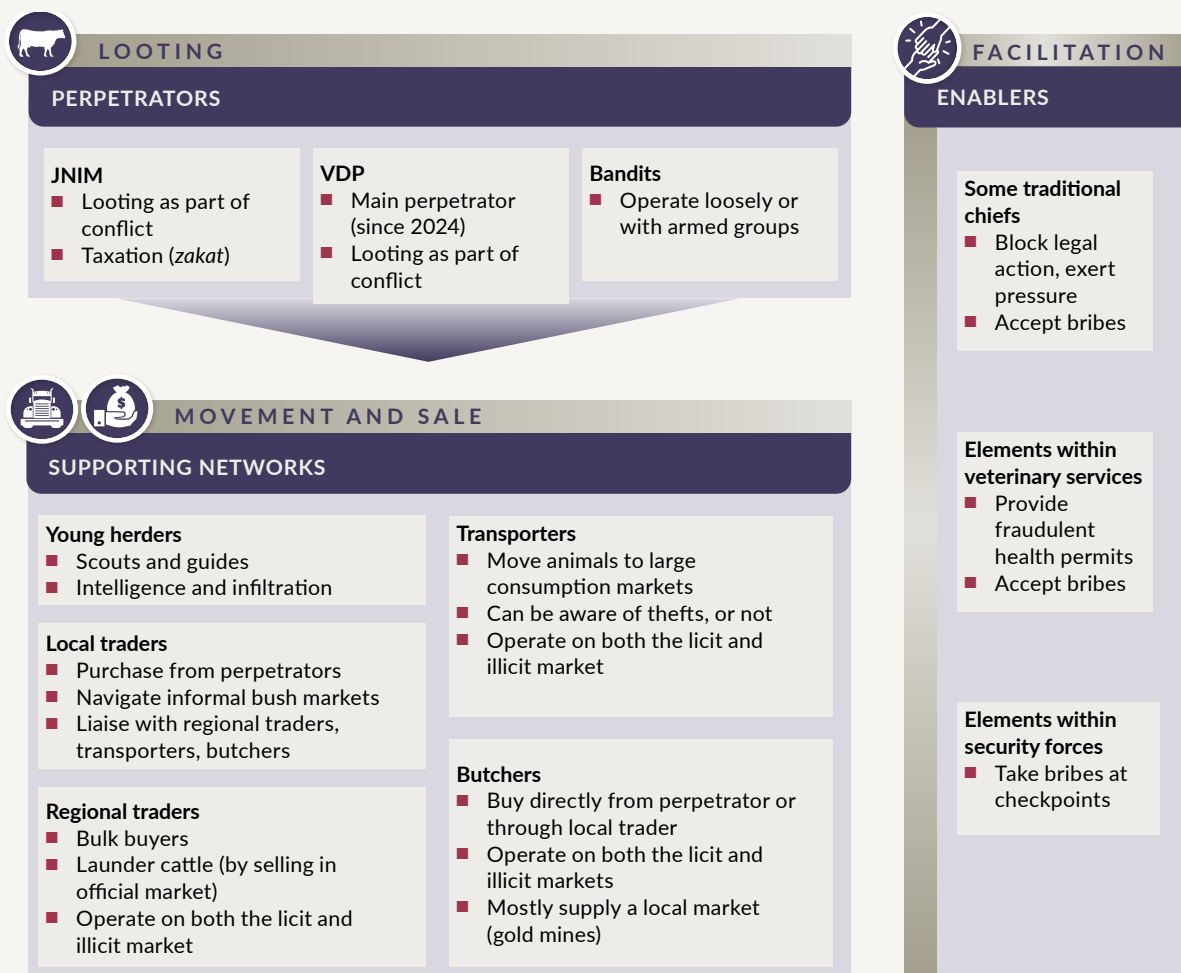


FIGURE 2 Key actors along the cattle-rustling supply chain

Other enablers include state veterinary services (attached to the Ministère des Ressources Animales et Halieutiques in Côte d'Ivoire and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana). Local representatives of both ministries are responsible for checking the health of animals and issuing a permit for them to be moved from a given district or department. Intermediaries were reportedly able to obtain these official permits for the transport of stolen animals, both in Ghana and in Côte d'Ivoire.⁷⁰

Finally, security forces are especially pivotal in the trade's dynamics in coastal states, particularly the police in Ghana and the gendarmerie in Côte d'Ivoire. Some officers stationed at border posts and road checkpoints accept bribes to turn a blind eye to faulty or missing clearance documents. This was particularly reported on roads connecting the northern regions of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire with markets in the centre or the south, which are key corridors in the illicit trade. In northern Côte d'Ivoire, the gendarmerie were commonly accused of taking bribes, both at road checkpoints and during investigations.⁷¹

As highlighted above, collusion by security officials is a key driver of tensions between communities and authorities, damaging the relationship and creating entry points that JNIM has proved skilled at exploiting elsewhere.

The cattle laundromat: the pivotal role of Upper West and Bounkani

In the tri-border area's stolen livestock ecosystem, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana operate most importantly as laundering areas for animals stolen in Burkina Faso, within the Sud-Ouest and beyond. As of April 2025, Ghana is the most important laundering zone by volume⁷² for stolen animals from Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.⁷³ Moving stolen animals across borders obstructs traceability and is therefore a favoured modus operandi for thieves.⁷⁴ When no border has been crossed, another key tactic used is to hide the stolen animals for a period. This was reported in all three regions of the tri-border area. Once perpetrators have stolen the animals, they themselves or their intermediaries drive them into forested areas; the Comoé National Park in Côte d'Ivoire, the Dida or Koulbi forests in Burkina Faso, or any forested areas where they can freely move. There, the animals are hidden and the herds divided, and sometimes also mixed with other herds stolen in other incidents. Temporary mobile pens are used to manage the herds during these periods. During the following days, weeks or months, the animals are removed from the forest and sold slowly by the three main ways described below.

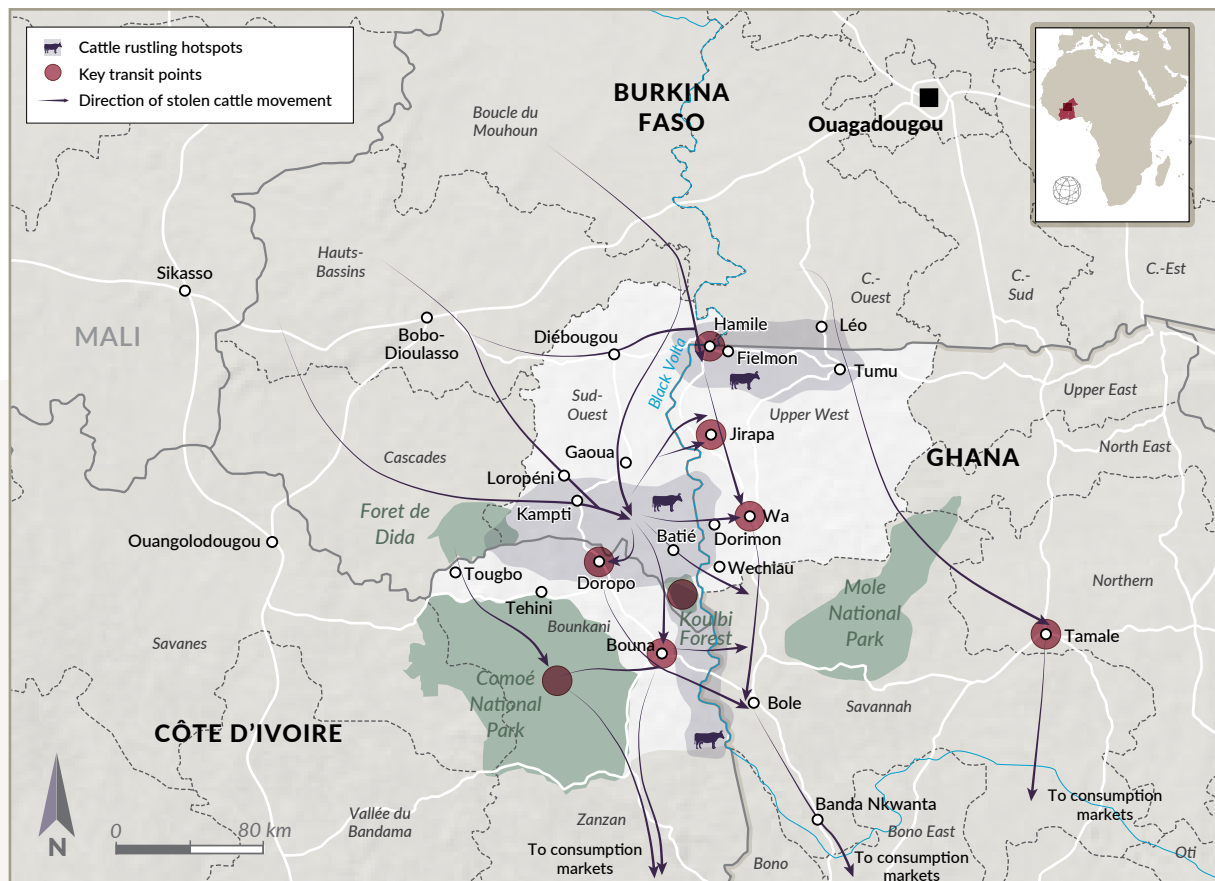


FIGURE 3 Stolen livestock routes and selling points in the tri-border area.

SOURCE: GI-TOC research in the tri-border area, October 2024.

Informal black markets

Informal black markets – where all animals are stolen and no licit trade is conducted – are the primary laundering hubs in Upper West Ghana. There is typically no permanent infrastructure in such markets, which usually consists of a cluster of large trucks waiting to move purchased animals, which is why they are also described as 'loading docks'. While such markets were also used in Bounkani until 2022,⁷⁵ the increased presence of state security in the region and initiatives by livestock actors to crack down on these have made them less common, although some continue to pop up in various localities and launder a small volume of animals.⁷⁶

In the Upper West, towns operating as key informal black markets typically share common characteristics that facilitate the smuggling and laundering of stolen cattle: they are close to the border (often along the banks of the Volta River), remote, with limited security presence, and they often host significant cattle-rearing operations. Black markets appear and reappear unpredictably in various places, a tactic that reduces the risk of detection.⁷⁷ But as of late 2024, Fielmon, a border town, was described as among the most active black markets within the Upper West. As one security official explained: 'Fielmon is a very serious black market. Hundreds of cattle are sold and bought in Fielmon week in and week out, but there is no established market there ... this town is also noted for arms proliferation and various smuggling activities including fuel and fertilizer.'⁷⁸

Ghanaian regional cattle dealers are called by intermediaries to informal black markets, where they buy and transport stolen animals for onward sale. The vast majority of the animals sold at black markets are typically sent to larger markets in the centre and south of Ghana, such as Techiman, Kumasi and Accra. Smaller numbers may be resold in official markets in the Upper West, such as Wa. Large numbers of stolen animals do not end up in cattle markets in the Upper West, as explained by a cattle market official: '... [T]hose who sell here are genuine cattle owners, and sometimes a few petty thieves. But big rustlers do not bring their cattle here because the numbers will raise suspicions. They take them to the south where the numbers are many thousands so that even if you send two truckloads of cattle at a time, it is normal due to the size of the market.'⁷⁹

Banda Nkwanta market, in the neighbouring Savannah region, near the border with Côte d'Ivoire, stands out as a key laundering hub in the northern areas. It is the biggest market close to the Upper West – it can transact over a thousand cattle during a market day – and is well connected to smaller markets of the Upper West.⁸⁰

Laundering in official regional markets

Stolen livestock is also laundered through official regional markets, concealed among legitimate livestock trades. While both Bounkani and the Upper West have regional cattle markets, those of the former are much bigger and are better connected to Burkina Faso, and as such play a more prominent role.

The markets of Doropo and Bouna, the two official cattle-trading centres in Bounkani, were repeatedly cited as laundering hubs, particularly by stakeholders in the Sud-Oest. Doropo is the most vulnerable to laundering activities due to its proximity to the border, to the provenance of the cattle sold there – over 90 per cent are from Burkina Faso – and to its size, with an average of 2 400 heads of cattle per month.⁸¹ While still secondary, Bouna market is increasingly vulnerable, as insecurity at the border with Burkina Faso since 2023 has displaced a significant proportion of trade away from Doropo to Bouna. Indeed, Bouna cattle market used to see on average 400 heads of cattle sold every month in 2019, and is up to more than 2 000 per month in 2024.⁸²

Once the cattle is laundered in Doropo or Bouna markets, it is either resold in the region or transported further south to major centres such as Bouaké, Abidjan, Yamoussoukro or San Pedro.

Meat on the street: the role of butchers

The vast majority of stolen animals will end up either being sold in informal black markets or regional markets and then resold further south. However, a smaller flow of stock is sold directly to butchers in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. This takes place with smaller consignments than the previous two methods – around five or six animals at a time. Butchers buy and quickly slaughter the animals to supply local demand, especially around artisanal gold-mining sites, where workforces are significant and demand is high.⁸³ Multiple sources have warned not to underestimate this phenomenon. Thanks to the hiding method described above, entire herds can be laundered through this route. In the words of a herder from Doropo: 'When a large number of cattle are stolen, they are temporarily hidden in the forests or the bush before being sold to the gold mining sites of Tanda, Bondoukou, or towards Galgouli, Boudara, Nansar or Kossami.'⁸⁴

Tracing the value chain: who benefits?

Profits shape interests, and tracing where the profits accumulate reveals how various actors' financial interests are aligned in the new structure of the cattle trade. Armed groups now play a key role at the start of the value chain.

The price of stolen livestock is consistently below that of livestock on the official market, sometimes as low as half the licit price. The faster the seller needs to get rid of the animals, the cheaper the price. Consequently, actors in the value chain who benefit from this price gap pocket the biggest profits.⁸⁵ Crucially, most of the profits accrue not at the point of theft – where armed groups predominantly operate – but at the point of laundering, to mostly small or large traders.



The Doropo cattle market, one of the official cattle-trading centres in Bounkani, Côte d'Ivoire, is known as a regional cattle-laundering hub. © AFL/EAI

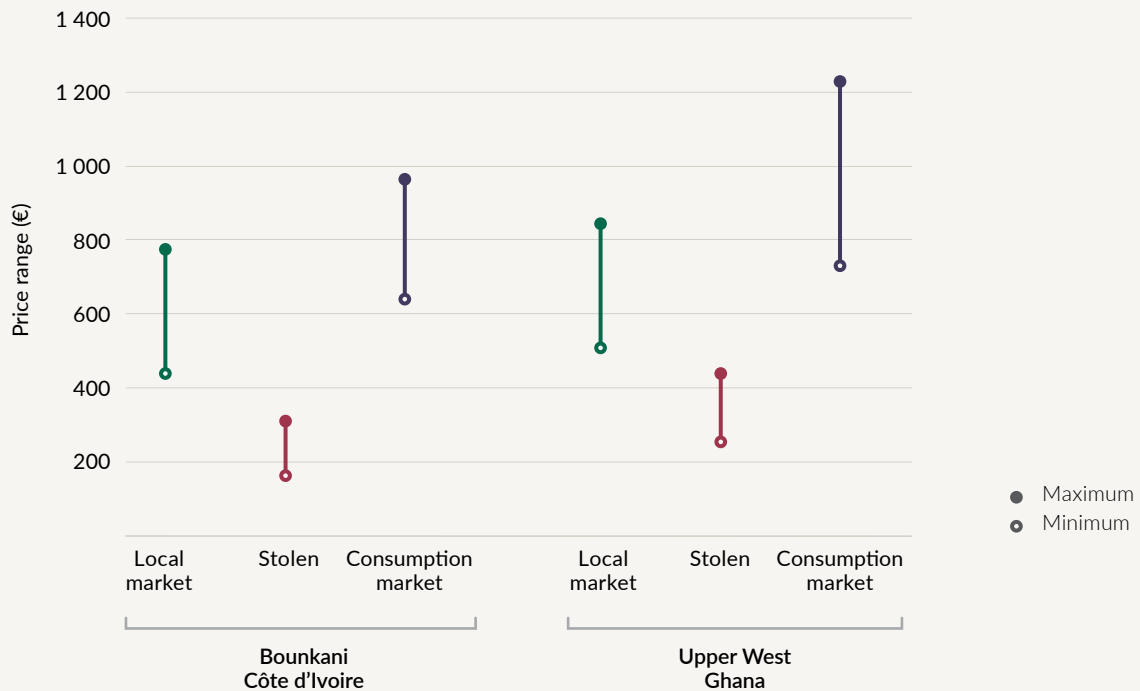


FIGURE 4 Price range for an ox on the licit and illicit markets, Bounkani and Upper West.

NOTE: The numbers provided in this figure offer a price range based on average data prices collected, but it is worth noting that there is a much wider total range of price on the market, depending on the season, for special circumstances such as when an animal is wounded or if an ox is particularly big and healthy. These figures can be used to give a sense of the prices of oxen in the tri-border area, but do not represent the variety of prices that exist in reality.

SOURCE: GI-TOC research in the tri-border area, October 2024.

Some negotiations between JNIM and Ghanaian or Ivorian traders might take place where animals are hidden, but they usually take place between JNIM-linked agents and their Ghanaian or Ivorian counterparts.⁸⁶ These transactions take place either in JNIM-controlled forests or, if trust is established, in Ghana: in suitable forested areas, or at informal black markets or assembly points. Sources have reported that JNIM does not try to bargain, and typically agrees a price for the entire herd, rather than per animal, resulting in very low prices, on the lower end of the range in the figure above.⁸⁷

Traders or agents who are able to launder stolen cattle through licit markets can then sell livestock at the official price, making a significant profit. An agent selling one stolen ox at the official market price in Bounkani or Upper West can make, on average, a gross profit of CFA236 145 (or €360). This does not factor in logistics and transportation costs, which vary,⁸⁸ but is significantly more than the average price of CFA180 400 (€275) paid to the armed group who rustled the animal. Laundering is particularly lucrative when the points of purchase and sale are relatively close, which reduces logistics and transport overheads. If the local trader works with a larger trader, the profit of the former is smaller, as the larger trader is interested in a cheap price: it averages CFA131 190 (€200) per head.⁸⁹

Regional cattle dealers will also accumulate significant profit. Not only do these dealers profit from price differentials between stolen and non-stolen animals, but also between pricing in the north (the

intermediary market) and in the south (the consumption market). Also, larger dealers cut down on logistics costs by transporting animals at scale, sending large convoys of multiple trucks each week southward. Taking average prices of a stolen ox bought by the cattle trader and average prices of animals sold in the south, the regional cattle dealer makes on average a gross profit of CFA305 000 (€465) per head of cattle, exceeding that of the intermediary.⁹⁰ The regional trader has to cover costs for transport – including bribes en route – which represent 10–20 per cent of the gross profit or between CFA30 174 (€46) and CFA61 000 (€93), leaving him with CFA262 380 (€400) on average.

In the supply chain for cattle rustled by JNIM, an additional actor must be taken into account: young herders who provide direct or indirect help in stealing the cattle are also paid, but the least in the supply chain, receiving only between CFA5 000 and CFA15 000 (€7.60 to €15) per cow.⁹¹ Payments to these young herders are even lower when set for an entire herd of between 40 and 50 animals. But JNIM does offer extra incentives to retain their loyalty, typically a motorcycle or some of the stolen animals so the young herders can start their own herds. For many young herders, this is their only viable chance to become cattle traders themselves over time.

Average profit estimates are more complex for supply-chain actors who are several steps away from the perpetrators. Profits accumulate across the point of laundering – actors involved after the laundering make no additional profit. For example, a butcher buying directly from an armed group would make the same profit that the intermediary makes in the scenario described above: CFA236 145 (€360). By contrast, if the butcher buys the ox after it has already been laundered into the licit economy, only the licit profits would apply.

One stakeholder explained that transporters in the licit market are typically paid between CFA450 000 and CFA500 000 (€686 to €762) to transport a full truck containing about 50 animals from Bouna to Abidjan. This reportedly can almost double to CFA800 000 (€1 220) when the transporter loads the animals from unofficial assembly points and are therefore clearly stolen.⁹²

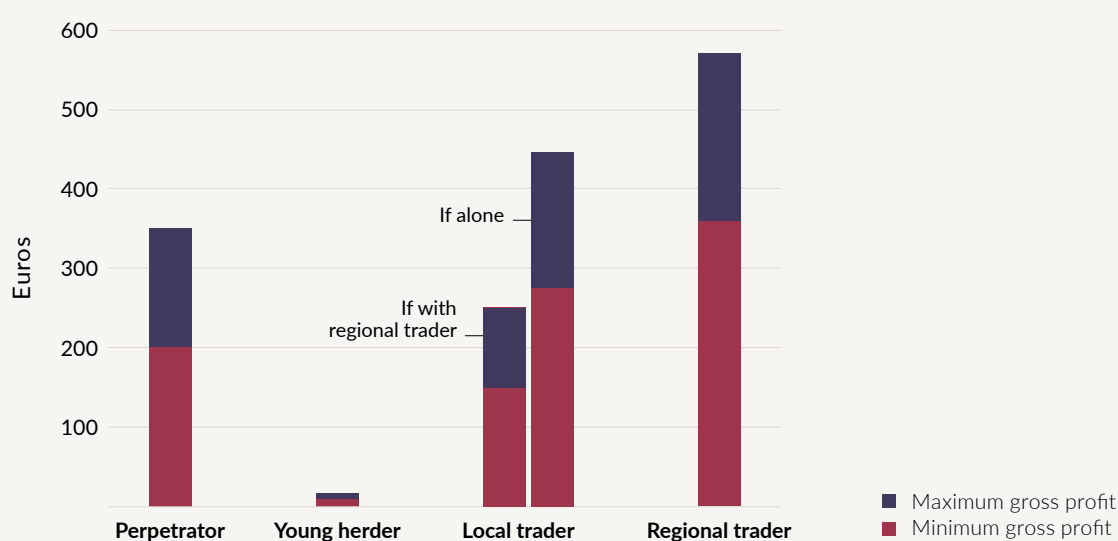


FIGURE 5 Gross profit per actor based on the trafficking of one ox in the tri-border area.

NOTE: These are indicative only and should be used carefully given the volatility of the livestock economy.

SOURCE: GI-TOC research in the tri-border area, October 2024.

Enablers – local authorities, traditional authorities, and defence and security forces – also benefit from the cattle laundering ecosystem, but it was not possible to estimate average gains. They can, however, be significant. For example, in Bounkani, a permit delivered by the technical services (sanitary authorization) reportedly costs CFA300 in the licit market. This increases by 33 per cent to about CFA400 (€0.61) per animal when one cannot prove its origin.⁹³

However, intermediaries can also bypass documentation requirements by driving the stolen livestock straight to the south. As a source working at the Wa market explained:

All cattle loaded from the Wa West district are supposed to be driven through Wa to go through necessary checks to acquire the documentation⁹⁴ before proceeding to the south. But they don't do it because there is a shortcut road, where they pass to join the main highway to the south without the checks. So the majority of the stolen cattle from Burkina Faso and other parts of the Upper West are smuggled out to the south from the Weichua and Dorimon areas.⁹⁵

The laundering ecosystem ties armed groups into local economies. Conflict distortions, such as steep drops in the prices of large numbers of stolen animals, have reshaped the livestock economies of the Upper West, and to a lesser extent Bounkani. The large profits of pivotal actors thus become contingent on the continuing operations of armed groups. This alignment of economic interests undermines the likelihood of actors within the ecosystem reporting JNIM movements, and instead shapes entrenched interests in the status quo. JNIM thus continues to pillage Burkina Faso's livestock trade, and to use Bounkani and Upper West as resourcing and laundering hubs.

Financial flows: tracing profits

The tri-border area's porous borders and informal trade networks deeply embedded in border communities serve to facilitate both legal and illegal cross-border financial flows. There were three main channels for financial flows linked to the cattle-rustling market: cash, Hawala transfers and mobile banking. A much smaller flow relates to cattle traders exchanging cattle for resources such as fuel, food or motorcycles, but these cases remain anecdotal and are not a widespread practice.⁹⁶

Between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, and between Burkina Faso and Ghana (except Hamile – see below), the vast majority of cattle transactions, whether on the licit or the black markets, are paid in cash. As the cattle trade is a capital-intensive business, carrying large sums of cash is not unusual, and does not constitute a red flag.⁹⁷

Where JNIM is the perpetrator, and sales are conducted in forested areas either in Burkina Faso or on the border, the sale and payment are typically made in two distinct phases. First, the price is agreed and the herd is taken by the agent, who will sell the herd in the following days or weeks. When the sale is done, a second meeting between JNIM and the agent takes place, in which the local agent pays JNIM with cash, denominated in CFA.⁹⁸ This demonstrates a typically high degree of trust between JNIM and the agent.⁹⁹

Another method consists of using money changers across the border, to avoid carrying cash, a process often referred to as Hawala. These transactions are very common, and are reportedly the prevalent payment method across the Ghana–Côte d'Ivoire border for cattle mostly sold in Bolé and Banda N'kwanta cattle markets. Here the illicit cattle ecosystem is largely disconnected from conflict parties (JNIM or VDP), and is instead supplied by bandits operating on both sides of the border.

Cattle dealers who want to move money across the border without carrying cash work with money changers. Money changers (mostly Ivorians) come into Ghana while working with partners in Côte d'Ivoire. The cattle dealer will give cedis to the money changer, and both will confirm and communicate with the money changer's agent across the border in Côte d'Ivoire, from whom the Ghanaian cattle dealer, now in Côte d'Ivoire, will receive the CFA equivalent of the cedis he deposited with the money changer in Ghana.

For conflict-linked cattle rustling, the cross-border town of Hamile on the border between Burkina Faso and Ghana stood out as a hub where licit and illicit cattle flows – and resulting financial flows – are particularly high, with payments often made on mobile money platforms.¹⁰⁰

Mobile money service providers in Hamile have reported unusually large transfers ranging from 150 000 to 300 000 Ghanaian cedis (€9 237 to €18 475), a trend that has increased since late 2023. Large-scale transactions typically exchange cedi for CFA, indicating financial flows from Ghana into Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁰¹ While some of these transactions are likely legitimate, many are believed to be linked to the illicit trade. The unusual size of transactions, and the consistent cedi–CFA exchange, were both perceived to be indicators of illicit deals.¹⁰²

The role of mobile money in facilitating informal trade should not be underestimated. It provides essential liquidity to small traders, enables efficient cross-border transactions, and fosters economic resilience. However, it also creates opportunities for criminality such as cattle rustling. Many mobile money agents and informal currency exchangers in Hamile either unknowingly engage in these transactions due to economic necessity or are complicit in the process. These findings align with broader studies on West African economies, which identify informal trade networks as critical channels for laundering the proceeds of illegal activities.¹⁰³



IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Ongoing insecurity and cattle rustling have negatively impacted the resilience of communities in the tri-border area, especially in Sud-Ouest and Bounkani regions, creating myriad entry points for JNIM, which has repeatedly proven adept at exploiting them.

Herders have lost entire herds overnight, losing their livelihoods in a single incident. Many also lose family members, as cattle rustling becomes increasingly violent. Herders in the Sud-Ouest have also been displaced from rural areas to cities, and struggled to recover an income. Others have sold their herds as the risk of losing it to cattle rustlers was too high.¹⁰⁴ The loss of licit livelihoods makes individuals vulnerable to VEO recruitment or to engagement in illicit activities.

Cattle rustling has also undermined the relationship between communities and the state. This is most drastic in the Sud-Ouest, where the VDP have become one of the main perpetrators. As one herder in the Sud-Oest said: 'I've lost my animals. These thefts are carried out by the VDP themselves, who are supposed to protect us. How can we trust them?'¹⁰⁵

In Bounkani, communities affected by rustling often perceived authorities as either corrupt or ineffective. Herders typically relied on their own networks and resources to try to recover stolen livestock, because authorities were perceived as unable or unwilling to help.¹⁰⁶ JNIM is skilled at exploiting this disillusionment to recruit collaborators.

The Development and Resilience Index against Violent Extremism (DRIVE), designed by EAI/R4P and implemented across northern Côte d'Ivoire, including Bounkani, reveals that pathways to recruitment by VEOs include the exploitation of socio-economic grievances to gain local support and the erosion of the legitimacy of state institutions. Perceived failures in fighting cattle rustling are a clear driver of diminished state legitimacy. For example, the Gogo subprefecture in Bounkani was among the most affected by cattle rustling in 2020 and 2021, and again in 2024. Gogo also stands out for the low levels of trust in the state and a resulting refusal to use government services. Gogo and the Tehini department are especially vulnerable to the influence of VEOs because of the lack of economic and community resilience.¹⁰⁷

The rustling economy also exacerbates intracommunal tensions across the tri-border area, particularly spurring anti-Fulani sentiment. Ethnically framed state or community responses – not only to rustling incidents – enable intracommunal tensions to flourish.¹⁰⁸ Communities in the area tend to discriminate against the Fulani community, and in Sud-Ouest anti-Fulani feeling is most developed, with security and defence forces targeting Fulani communities in large-scale extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and cattle rustling. This is also true for Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. According to DRIVE, 37 per cent of communities in Bounkani think that 'all Fulanis are allied with jihadists'.¹⁰⁹ This leaves Fulanis trapped between violent extremist groups and the security and defence forces, a position grimly echoed throughout the Sahel.¹¹⁰ Many have decided to flee from the Sud-Ouest to northern Côte d'Ivoire and northern Ghana. Cohabitation there has been difficult, with mutual resentment growing between these communities.¹¹¹ According to DRIVE, 42 per cent of the host communities attributed the increase in insecurity, banditry and cattle rustling to Fulani asylum seekers – largely without evidence – which reflects data collected in October 2024 for this report.



Cattle rustling and insecurity have negatively impacted the resilience of communities in the tri-border area.

© AFL/EAI



RESPONSES

State responses

In Burkina Faso, responses remain focused on counterterrorism rather than on addressing cattle rustling per se. These efforts have paradoxically strengthened the role of a new actor, the VDP, in cattle rustling, impacting Burkina Faso and northern Côte d'Ivoire as the VDP operate on both sides of the border. Meanwhile, Côte d'Ivoire has combined security measures targeting JNIM to secure the border and control the movement of animals and herds (though in practice it is only partially implemented), and to foster community resilience. These have yielded positive impacts, although significant cattle laundering continues to happen in the markets of Bouna and Doropo. Ivorian state responses are further undermined by strained political relations with Burkina Faso.

State responses to specific instances of rustling in the tri-border area were broadly perceived by communities to be limited. Where a link with JNIM was reported, especially in Côte d'Ivoire, the cases seemed to be generally taken more seriously, as the authorities are aware of the finances that cattle rustling brings to armed groups. It was not possible to establish if and how these cases were solved.

The limited effect of reporting cases also results in significant under-reporting. One herder in Côte d'Ivoire was representative of other testimonies heard in the tri-border area:

Pursuing cases [taking legal action for cattle theft] often ends up backfiring on the owner of the lost livestock. Often, when we talk about costs, administrative procedures and so on, you go back and forth... We found that all of this is just a waste of time. We don't like pursuing cases. It's also for protection. Because if someone gets arrested and put in prison because of you ... that exposes you even more, since most of these thieves today operate in networks... and we often work in the bush. Very often, you're alone at night, on your motorcycle, going to watch over your animals ... It's all these things that we consider, so we just decide to let it go.¹¹²

Community responses

The perceived inadequacy of state responses to livestock theft has led to a range of community initiatives.¹¹³ These initiatives often emerge independently or in collaboration with international partners and focus primarily on three key areas: preventing thefts, facilitating the tracing and recovery once the theft has happened, and making it more challenging to launder stolen cattle through markets in Bounkani and Upper West regions.

To prevent theft, communities have built cattle 'parks' within plots or on the outskirts of villages to prevent animals from wandering, especially at night.¹¹⁴ These enclosures enable better monitoring of cattle, thereby reducing the risk of theft. Other strategies include restricting the number of animals allowed to graze together (if they graze at all) and increasing the number of herdsmen responsible for overseeing them, which can diminish opportunities for large-scale rustling.

When rustling incidents do occur, communities have implemented various initiatives to locate and recover the stolen livestock. In the Sud-Ouest, herders have expressed their helplessness because even if they manage to locate their herd, they cannot recover it from armed actors, be they JNIM or the VDP. But the overall situation in the tri-border area remains somewhat less extreme than in conflict hotspots elsewhere in the Sahel. There remains some room for recovering stolen animals. The herder community is relatively well organized and networked, allowing them to rely on one another for assistance in recovering stolen animals. Numerous herders' testimonies indicate that stolen cattle have been retrieved through the use of social media (WhatsApp groups in particular) or through the vigilance of communities in different villages that will alert their *ruga* (the head of a Fulani community), or other herders or traders if they see animals wandering.¹¹⁵ This system works mostly locally, or across borders when communities on both sides are well connected. That said, rustlers and intermediaries know these community methods, and to evade capture they often move stolen cattle quickly away from border regions or conceal them in forested areas.¹¹⁶

Tracking stolen animals once they have crossed international borders is critical. Various initiatives in the Sahel and the tri-border area are addressing this issue.¹¹⁷ While there have been attempts to connect herders and local market systems across borders, these efforts so far have yielded limited outcomes, with herders and local authorities still perceiving the borders as a critical vulnerability. One herder from Bounkani aptly captured this sentiment: 'We search for our animals immediately. If they end up in Doropo or Bouna, we will find them. If they hide in the forests, maybe we will find some. If they cross the border, it is over.'¹¹⁸

Local initiatives also exist, such as when traditional authorities from border communities in Upper West and Sud-Ouest convened in October 2024 to establish a 'right of pursuit.' This agreement allows authorities from both countries to collaborate more effectively in tracking down thieves who operate across borders. However, a significant limitation of this mechanism is its exclusivity; it only involves traditional authorities without the inclusion of communities or administrative bodies.

To deter the sale of stolen cattle in official markets, management committees in the Upper West and Bounkani regions have introduced various safeguards that stakeholders perceive as (at least partially) effective. These measures are mostly about limiting the number of cattle markets and the number of cattle traders allowed to sell in each market. The idea behind it being that centralization fosters stronger control over livestock transactions. In Bounkani, for instance, safeguards have reinforced an older system where sales occur through intermediaries called *teiffas*.¹¹⁹ Under this system, all sellers must work with a *teiffa*, who acts as a guarantor for the sale. The *teiffa* is responsible for ensuring that the cattle sold come from legitimate sources as claimed by the seller. If there are doubts, the *teiffa* must conduct an investigation to determine their true origins. This traditional system adds a layer of scrutiny to the trade, routing it through trusted and accountable intermediaries. Moreover, the requirement for sellers or owners to be present at the market alongside their *teiffa* fosters transparency, preventing dubious actors from conducting transactions unnoticed.

While this system has occasionally enabled the identification of stolen animals, significant weaknesses exist. Some sellers have been able to corrupt certain *teiffas*, incentivizing them to facilitate more sales without adequate concern for the legitimacy of the cattle. Reports indicate that some *teiffas*, suspected of colluding with groups like JNIM or VDP, have mysteriously vanished from the market, indicative of their involvement in the laundering of stolen livestock. Others have been arrested.¹²⁰ This trend correlates with a shift in the profile of the *teiffas*. Historically, these intermediaries were older, trusted stakeholders within their communities. However, nowadays, many younger men, lacking the same level of respect and accountability, have taken on these roles, further compromising the system's integrity. According to an official from the Bouna cattle market: 'It is really the youth who complicate this *teiffa* system. They can no longer do without money. They are not wise enough to know whether the cattle entering the livestock market are stolen or not ... They buy everything and sell everything.'¹²¹

Moreover, a rival group of intermediaries known as the *boudouboudous* seems to have further destabilized this traditional system. These are young men who have imposed themselves on the market and started to sell cattle outside of the official rules, disrupting the functioning of the market and creating a leadership crisis in the management committee.¹²² The *boudouboudous* are seen by other market stakeholders to be motivated exclusively by financial gain; they are reported to pay no attention to the origin of the animals they sell, increasing the risk of laundering.

In Upper West and Sud-Ouest, there are only a few markets, if any, and with limited capacity. Livestock actors have highlighted the absence of markets in rustling-prone regions as a key vulnerability. In the Sud-Ouest, with no functioning cattle market, construction began in 2021, with a market in Kampti nearing completion and another one being built in Gaoua.¹²³ In Upper West, the establishment of local markets, with the rule that these outlaw the sale of cattle outside their confines, has brought positive results. This localized approach has contributed to lower rates of cattle rustling, particularly large-scale incidents.¹²⁴ Conversely, in areas such as Sissala West, Sissala East and Wa West, where markets are absent, cattle rustling is more common. This is because dealers are allowed to purchase cattle directly from communities, facilitating (licit and illicit) transactions between rustlers and buyers in remote areas.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cattle rustling in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire significantly contributes to regional instability. Armed groups such as JNIM and the Burkina Faso state-affiliated VDP utilize cattle theft to finance their operations and expand their influence within local communities. Fluctuations in the rate of rustling incidents closely follow shifts in security dynamics, with increased looting during periods of heightened armed conflict and relative declines when front lines stabilize.

In the stolen livestock trade across the tri-border area, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana are the main laundering hubs for livestock stolen in Burkina Faso and beyond. Since 2023, Ghana has become the largest laundering zone by volume for stolen cattle from both Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Moving livestock across borders hinders traceability and is thus a preferred strategy for traffickers.

Armed groups are only the first actors on the supply chain that enables stolen animals to be laundered and sold. Downstream actors – such as intermediaries and large buyers – make the largest profits, especially at the laundering stage. Profits are much smaller at the point of theft by armed groups.

The report identifies several critical gaps and challenges that impede effective responses to cattle rustling and its broader security implications. First, a lack of comprehensive data on cattle rustling makes it difficult to assess the full economic impact or trace stolen livestock effectively. Second, the enabling role of authorities undermines law enforcement efforts and fosters impunity, but most importantly weakens the resilience of communities and heightens their vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups. Third, existing community and cross-border initiatives aimed at tracking stolen cattle remain limited in scope and effectiveness, with inadequate coordination between state and non-state actors.

However, the tri-border area is not yet fully engulfed in conflict, and this means there remains a possibility to act and improve the situation. Without targeted interventions, the continued expansion of this illicit economy will only deepen instability. Key recommendations for each actor are provided below.

Recommendations for the authorities of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso

- **Place the protection of civilians at the core of security initiatives.** Security forces must address community perceptions of inefficiency and predation by effectively safeguarding communities. Patrols and counterterrorism operations must avoid turning into predation. Burkinabe authorities should ensure accountability for the VDP's involvement in cattle rustling and human rights abuses, with transparent judicial proceedings publicized to reinforce accountability narratives.
- **Increase cross-border security initiatives.** To combat cross-border security issues, particularly cattle rustling, a comprehensive collaboration framework is essential. Current efforts are hindered by porous borders and diplomatic tensions, notably between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. While frameworks exist (boundary commissions) and meetings are held, they lack actionable outcomes and specificity. A shift from passive or reactive approaches to proactive measures is necessary to effectively address insecurity and improve cross-border cooperation in the region.
- **Curb the corruption that allows the market to thrive.** State actors contribute (directly or indirectly) to the cattle-rustling economy by fostering impunity. This allows rustlers to evade consequences, leading to increased cattle theft and community resentment towards the state. Strengthening disciplinary actions against corrupt officials is essential to restore trust and combat this issue effectively.
- **Enhance synergy between actors.** Establish a coordinated framework between authorities, technical services and livestock stakeholders (such as herders' associations) to enhance information-sharing on livestock incidents. This will not only help to respond to cattle rustling incidents when they arise, but also to build information flows from the local level (such as village monitoring committees). A stronger understanding of the phenomenon is crucial to designing sensitive responses.
- **Strengthen the regulation of the livestock sector.** Strengthen the regulation and oversight of livestock markets and the actors operating in and around them, through, for example, clearer legislation, official registration of actors or professional IDs. This would improve traceability and help prevent the unchecked involvement of unscrupulous actors, including opportunistic youth.
- **Keep cattle markets open.** Although cattle markets have faced closures due to concerns about laundering and financing of armed groups, keeping cattle markets open is vital. The state should rather strengthen their regulations instead of closing them. These markets not only generate employment and revenue, but limit the sale of animals in black markets and foster community interaction.

Recommendations for international partners

- **Recognize the role of cattle rustling in instability.** International stabilization actors must better understand cattle rustling to design effective responses to this illicit economy. Cattle rustling, more than other illicit economies that receive more attention, significantly fuels conflict and violence. Despite its growing recognition and links to extremism, it remains largely overlooked in stabilization programming across the region.
- **Increase collaboration with other international partners.** More collaboration with donors or international organizations implementing programmes is necessary. For example, several organizations have started to collect data on cattle rustling as part of their wider programming (be it on the livestock sector, agro-pastoral mediation or community resilience) but most of the time in silos, despite their shared reliance on the same local partners (such as herders' associations at the local or national level, or regional organizations such as the Réseau Billital Maroobé).

- **Develop more livestock markets.** The construction of livestock markets in rural areas has proven to be beneficial in the Upper West. Therefore, international organizations should encourage and support the development of more local infrastructure, particularly markets, in areas where none currently exist and where most transactions occur outside of any formal framework. This initiative would help to channel transactions through legal markets, reduce direct sourcing and provide a response to local supply needs, including those related to artisanal mining sites.
- **Foster cross-border collaboration** among actors in the livestock sector by organizing regular workshops and meetings with representatives of herders' associations in border regions. Additionally, facilitate networking by bringing together livestock market actors across different countries to enhance communication and share best practices for mutual benefit.

Recommendations for actors in the livestock economy

- **Improve market oversight and transparency.** Enhancing market oversight and transparency is essential, particularly to curb the sale of stolen animals and avoid them being closed by authorities. Initiatives by market management committees are a positive step, but they need reinforcement, especially in regions such as Bounkani, where new actors disrupt traditional practices.
- **Enhance community-based security measures.** Livestock actors have put in place various platforms and networks to find stolen animals once a theft has occurred. These initiatives should become more structured. Social media groups are often open to anyone, meaning that rustlers or their accomplices can be part of them and can follow the investigations to escape recovery efforts, or feed misinformation to thwart them. A dedicated and trusted group should be formed in each community or market, to ensure reliable and secure information flows.
- **Avoid the marginalization of any actors along the supply chain, particularly young herdsmen.** This group of actors is one of the most vulnerable to armed groups' recruitment campaigns and efforts should focus on reducing their vulnerability. This can be done by enhancing their poor working conditions, by better integrating them into herders' associations and by building their loyalty into the community, for example by giving them one head of cattle for every 10 they breed.



NOTES

- 1 The VDP are a self-defence group created in January 2020 by the Burkina Faso government to mobilize, train and arm civilians to defend their communities and the country.
- 2 Cattle rustling is understood in this report to mean the whole range of livestock appropriation and is used interchangeably with other expressions throughout the report, such as livestock theft.
- 3 Daniel Eizenga and Amandine Gnanguenon, Recalibrating coastal West Africa's response to violent extremism, Africa for Strategic Studies, July 2024, <https://africa.org/publication/asb43en-recalibrating-multitiered-stabilization-strategy-coastal-west-africa-response-violent-extremism/>.
- 4 Flore Berger, Locked horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy, GI-TOC, March 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-mali-war-economy/>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 ACLED and GI-TOC, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: JNIM and Building armed group legitimacy, 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
- 7 Eight recorded attacks (five in 2018 and three in 2019). Analysis of ACLED data for the Sud-Ouest, 2018–2025.
- 8 Multiple reports have mentioned this *katiba*: Mathieu Pellerin, *Les pays côtiers d'Afrique de l'Ouest : Nouvelle terre d'expansion des groupes djihadistes sahéliens*, IFRI, February 2022, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/payscotiers-dafrique-de-louest-nouvelle-terre-dexpansion-groupes>; Crisis Group, Keeping jihadists out of northern Côte d'Ivoire, August 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>; Daniel Eizenga and Amandine Gnanguenon, Recalibrating coastal West Africa's response to violent extremism, Africa for Strategic Studies, July 2024, <https://africa.org/publication/asb43en-recalibrating-multitiered-stabilization-strategy-coastal-west-africa-response-violent-extremism/>.
- 9 Interview with JNIM members in Sud-Ouest, October 2024, as well as VEO experts remotely.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 GI-TOC Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Northern Côte d'Ivoire: new jihadist threats, old criminal networks, Risk Bulletin, Issue 1, September 2021, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-001/01-northern-cote-d-ivoire-jihadist-threats-criminal-networks.html>.
- 12 Interview with livestock association at the national level, remote, October 2024.
- 13 OECD, The structure of livestock trade in West Africa, West African Papers, September 2020, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/09/the-structure-of-livestock-trade-in-west-africa_5d479a14/f8c71341-en.pdf.
- 14 USDA, GAIN, Ghana Livestock Voluntary 2023, https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=Ghana%20Livestock%20Voluntary%202023_Accra_Ghana_GH2023-0003.pdf.
- 15 Flore Berger, North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire: Between illicit economies and violent extremism, GI-TOC, September 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/north-east-cote-d-ivoire-illicit-economies-violent-extremism/>.
- 16 National parks are often used for hiding, organizing logistics and resourcing, and building legitimacy among communities. In this case, JNIM mostly used these forested areas to hide and resource, as the group did not have a sufficiently stable presence to engage in legitimacy building. GI-TOC, Reserve assets: Armed groups and conflict economies in the national parks of Burkina Faso, Niger and Benin, May 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/armed-groups-conflict-economies-national-parks-west-africa/>; Crisis Group, Containing militancy in West Africa's Park W, January 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africa-park-w>; The Soufan, Jihadist spillover impact and deteriorating

- security in coastal West Africa, November 2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-november-20/>; GI-TOC, Community resilience to violent extremism and illicit economies, March 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/la-resilience-communautaire-face-a-lextremisme-violent-et-les-economies-illicites/>.
- 17 ACLED data, analyzed in Flore Berger, North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire: Between illicit economies and violent extremism, GI-TOC, September 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/north-east-cote-d-ivoire-illicit-economies-violent-extremism/>.
 - 18 Flore Berger, North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire: Between illicit economies and violent extremism, GI-TOC, October 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/north-east-cote-d-ivoire-illicit-economies-violent-extremism/>; Parfait N'Goran, Aziz Mossi and Bernard Bleou, *Étude sur les signes avant-coureurs de l'extrémisme violent dans les régions frontalières du nord de la Côte d'Ivoire*, Equal Access, January 2023, https://EAI/R4P1.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Early_Signs_Report_finalFRE_web.pdf.
 - 19 Flore Berger, Locked horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy, GI-TOC, March 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-mali-war-economy/>.
 - 20 ISS, Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Côte d'Ivoire, November 2023, <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/links-between-violent-extremism-and-illicit-activities-in-cote-divoire>.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 Crisis Group, Keeping jihadists out of northern Côte d'Ivoire, August 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/cote-divoire/b192-keeping-jihadists-out-northern-cote-divoire>.
 - 23 See ACLED data, <https://acleddata.com/>.
 - 24 Interview with security forces, Bounkani region, and security analysts, October 2024.
 - 25 See for example: NATO, The contagion of violent extremism in West African Coastal states, 2022, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/42293-doc-20220927_NU_JFCNP_NSD-S_HUB_REPORT_THE_CONTAGION_OF_VIOLENT_EXTREMISM_IN_WEST_AFRICAN_COASTAL_STATES.pdf; UNDP, Vulnerability assessment on the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation in northern regions of Ghana, June 2023, <https://www.undp.org/ghana/publications/vulnerability-assessment-threats-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-northern-regions-ghana>; Eliasu Tanko, James Courtright, Could Ghana be jihadists' next target?, *Foreign Policy*, 20 June 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/14/ghana-sahel-jihadist-burkina-faso-togo/>; Clingendael, Ghana: a beacon of democracy?, October 2024, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/ghana-beacon-democracy>.
 - 26 Ibid.
 - 27 Analysis of ACLED data and interview with VEO expert in Burkina Faso, remotely, November 2024.
 - 28 Interview with a Burkinabe expert in JNIM in the tri-border area, remotely, November 2024.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 James Courtright and Kars de Bruijne, Cattle Wahala: Addressing the political economy of cattle rustling and smuggling between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo, Clingendael, May 2025, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/cattle-wahala/>.
 - 31 Interview with a victim of cattle theft by JNIM, Djigoué, October 2024.
 - 32 Interview with a livestock association representative, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
 - 33 Data consolidated from interviews with cattle owners and livestock associations, for communities who lived in JNIM's strongholds. Note that this only constitutes data on cows, the most prominent livestock in the area.
 - 34 Only 12 clashes between the security forces and JNIM that year. Source: ACLED data, <https://acleddata.com/>.
 - 35 ACLED and GITOC, Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa: JNIM and Building armed group legitimacy, 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/non-state-armed-groups-illicit-economies-west-africa/>.
 - 36 Interview with a security official, Upper West, October 2024.
 - 37 Ibid.
 - 38 Interviews with five cattle dealers (unrelated), Upper West, October 2024.
 - 39 Ibid.
 - 40 Interview with security forces and police, Upper West, October 2024.
 - 41 Interviews with security analysts, remote, October 2024.
 - 42 Data collected by EAI/R4P as part of their resilience to violent extremism programme in northern Côte d'Ivoire.
 - 43 Ibid.
 - 44 Testimony collected by EAI/R4P as part of their resilience to violent extremism programme in northern Côte d'Ivoire.
 - 45 Interview with a member of the security forces, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
 - 46 Ibid.
 - 47 Ibid.
 - 48 Interview with a trader, Djigoué, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
 - 49 Sidwaya, *Lutte contre le terrorisme: 70,59% du territoire reconquis*, 1 January 2025, <https://www.sidwaya.info/lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-7059-du-territoire-reconquis/>.
 - 50 Interview with herders and security forces, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
 - 51 Interviews and focus group with dozens of herders, cattle traders and herders' association in the Sud-Ouest, October 2024.

- 52 Interviews with herders and herders' associations, cattle traders and village chiefs, Sud-Ouest and Tehini department, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 53 GI-TOC, Self-defence groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa: Learning from international experiences, November 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/self-defence-groups-as-a-response-to-crime-and-conflict-in-west-africa-learning-from-international-experiences/>.
- 54 Interview with security sources, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
- 55 Interviews and focus group with dozens of herders, cattle traders and herders' association in the Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
- 56 Interview with security sources, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
- 57 Interview with security sources, Sud-Ouest, October 2024. Cases are also recorded in the Tribunal de Grande Instance, which were consulted as part of the data collection.
- 58 Interview with livestock association representative, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
- 59 Clingendael, Between hope and despair: Pastoralist adaption in Burkina Faso, February 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/between-hope-and-despair.pdf>.
- 60 Flore Berger, Locked horns: Cattle rustling and Mali's war economy, GI-TOC, March 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cattle-rustling-mali-war-economy/>.
- 61 Interviews with cattle owners in the tri-border area, October 2024.
- 62 Interview with security officials in Kedougou region, December 2024.
- 63 BBC, Why some Ghanaians are fighting in insurgency-hit Burkina Faso, 11 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpdx3wj9dp2o>.
- 64 Interview with cattle traders and security forces, Upper West, October 2024.
- 65 James Courtright and Kars de Bruijne, Cattle Wahala: Addressing the political economy of cattle rustling and smuggling between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo, Clingendael, May 2025, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/cattle-wahala/>.
- 66 Interviews with security officials, cattle traders and herders in Bouna and Piaye, October 2024.
- 67 Ibid.
- 68 Interview with herders, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 69 Interview with a herder victim of the case, October 2024.
- 70 Interviews with herders, transporters and cattle traders, Bounkani and Upper West, October 2024.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 This is despite the continuous depreciation of the cedi (which so far has not resulted in diverting the market).
- 73 Interviews with herders and cattle traders, Sud-Ouest and Bounkani region, October 2024.
- 74 Koaci, *Ghana : le cedi en état de dépréciation*, May 2024, https://www.koaci.com/article/2024/05/08/ghana/economie/ghana-le-cedi-en-etat-de-depreciation-causes-et-impacts_177795.html.
- 75 Loading docks were reported until 2022 in Doropo and Bouna departments: Hangaye (Doropo), Saye (Niamoué, Doropo), Kodo (Bouna), Varalé (Bouna).
- 76 Interview with security forces, livestock actors at the Doropo and Bouna markets, as well as cattle traders and butchers, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 77 For example: a cattle dealer in Wa explained: 'Darigoyiri in the Wa West district linking to Batie in Burkina Faso used to be (around 2020/2021) a notorious black market with actors heavily armed such that if you lose your cattle and you go there in search of them you could get killed. However, since the area gained such notoriety, the security authorities increased patrols, paved the roads and extended electricity to the area to aid regular security presence over the area. In response, the black market shifted towards the Weichua side of the district.'
- 78 Interview with a security official, Upper West, October 2024.
- 79 Interview with a member of the management committee, Upper West, October 2024.
- 80 Interviews with security officials and cattle traders in the Upper West, October 2024. See also: DW, Jihadis selling rustled cattle in Ghana, 23 June 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/jihadis-selling-rustled-cattle-in-ghana/a-66012876>.
- 81 Market monitoring by AFL partners in Bounkani.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Interview with security sources, herders, traders operating at cattle markets and butchers, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 84 Interview with a herder heading a livestock association, Doropo, October 2024.
- 85 The financial proceeds of armed groups like JNIM, VDP and bandits could not be assessed due to several challenges: lack of reporting to authorities, absence of comprehensive data on cattle rustling, and uncertainty about which group is responsible for thefts.
- 86 Interviews with local traders and livestock actors, Upper West, October 2024; James Courtright and Kars de Bruijne, Cattle Wahala: Addressing the political economy of cattle rustling and smuggling between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo, Clingendael, May 2025, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/cattle-wahala/>.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Calculated as the difference between the average price of a stolen ox in Bounkani and Upper West, and the average price on the official market.
- 89 Using the average prices in Figure 4: big cattle traders will typically buy animals from intermediaries between €350 and 500.

- 90 See Figure 4 with average prices of stolen and non-stolen ox, and prices on local and consumption markets.
- 91 Payments can vary depending on whether the herder is working occasionally with JNIM, or is a full time recruit, but prices cited are the average band.
- 92 Interview with market committee members who investigated such cases, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 93 Interview with herders' association representatives and cattle traders, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 94 There are multiple documentations issued. One is a revenue ticket issued by the revenue authority at the district; a waybill by the assembly; another issued by the cattle dealers' association (for organized markets); and one is issued by a veterinary official after certifying the health of the cattle.
- 95 Interview with a member of a management committee at a market in the Upper West, October 2024.
- 96 Interview with cattle traders, Upper West, October 2024; James Courtright and Kars de Bruijne, Cattle Wahala: Addressing the political economy of cattle rustling and smuggling between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo, Clingendael, May 2025, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2025/cattle-wahala/>.
- 97 Interview with security officials, Upper West Ghana, October 2024.
- 98 Between Ghana and Burkina Faso, given the difference in currency, the Ghanaian agent will change cedis to CFA with informal money changers – there are no banks in many border communities – in order to bring CFA to Burkina Faso.
- 99 Interview with security official, cattle traders and herders, Upper West, Sud-Ouest, Bounkani, October 2024. Some sources reported that the transaction was done during the first meeting, when the herd is received by the agent, but it does not seem to be the most prevalent method.
- 100 Interview with informal money changers, Upper West, October 2024.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 Meagher, Smuggling Ideologies: Theory And Reality In African Clandestine Economies, *The Routledge Handbook Of Smuggling*, 2022, <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/51392>; Audra Grant, Cashing in on Fragility: Criminal Networks in the Sahel, 2018.
- 104 Testimonies include: 'I've lost my animals to the VDP. These thefts are carried out by the VDP themselves, who are supposed to protect us. How can we trust them?'; 'The VDP took 84 oxen and killed my brother in Bousoukoula. How can I rebuild after that?'; 'I left Loropéni for Gaoua in December 2022. The VDP took a good part of my herd. The atrocities were unbearable.'
- 105 Interview with a herder victim of cattle rustling, Sud-Ouest, October 2024.
- 106 See 'Enablers' section above.
- 107 EAI/R4P/R4P, Development and Resilience Index against Violent Extremism, July 2024, https://www.equalaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/IvoryReport_ENG4.pdf
- 108 James Courtright, Ghana accused of expelling Fulani asylum seekers from Burkina Faso, The New Humanitarian, 18 April 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/04/18/ghana-accused-expelling-fulani-asylum-seekers-burkina-faso>.
- 109 EAI/R4P/R4P, Development and Resilience Index against Violent Extremism, July 2024, https://www.equalaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/IvoryReport_ENG4.pdf
- 110 James Courtright, Fulani responses to pastoralist crisis and mass violence, Megatrends Afrika, February 2025, https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB32_Courtright_vers3.pdf
- 111 Danho Adjon Guy Ghislain, Côte d'Ivoire : enjeux et défis de l'accueil des réfugiés face à la crise au Sahel, FES, December 2023, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/elfenbeinkueste/21031.pdf>
- 112 Interview with a herder, Bounkani, October 2024.
- 113 There are also multiple initiatives that have wider aims that indirectly link to cattle rustling, such as social cohesion, community dialogues or livestock economy related (improvement of transhumance routes and water points). This section only focuses on initiatives specific to cattle rustling.
- 114 This has been done with the support of R4P: <https://www.equalaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Building-Cattle-Parks-and-Community-Resilience-2.pdf>
- 115 Interview with herders in all three regions, October 2024.
- 116 Interview with border communities, cattle markets actors and herders' association, Upper West, October 2024.
- 117 In the Liptako-Gourma, HD developed a manual with a comprehensive collection of all signs (*Répertoire des marques des animaux*) branded on livestock by each community – as well as the name and contact of the local focal points (called *médiateur agropastoral*) for each commune.
- 118 Interview with a herder, Bounkani, November 2024.
- 119 Agropasteur, *Les vols de bétail inquiètent aux frontières nord de la Côte d'Ivoire*, June 2024, <https://agropasteur.com/le-vol-de-betail-les-vols-de-betail-inquietent-aux-frontieres-nord-de-la-cote-divoire-revele-lenquete-sur-le-vol-de-betail-realisee-par-francois-mbra2-ouattara-alassane-dah-sie-et-he/>.
- 120 Interviews with stakeholders at the cattle markets of Bouna and Doropo, October 2024.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Implemented by SNV, local partners are APESS and RBM, funded by the Swiss Cooperation.
- 124 Interview with herders and markets' committees, Upper West, October 2024.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net