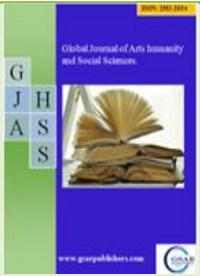
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ARMED BANDITRY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN NORTHERN NIGERIA. A POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper examines the political economy of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria, framing it as an industrial complex driven by economic incentives, state complicity, and globalized illicit markets. Drawing on Marxist theories of primitive accumulation and neoliberal dispossession, the study analyzes historical roots, contemporary dimensions, and socio-economic impacts. Data from government reports, media, and scholarly sources reveal a lucrative shadow economy fueled by kidnapping, cattle rustling, and resource extraction, with annual revenues rivaling formal sectors. The paper concludes with recommendations for integrated policy responses.

Keywords: Banditry, Political economy, Northern Nigeria, Kidnapping, Neoliberalism

1.0 Introduction

To say that the Nigeria State is facing existential crises of enormous proportion from numerous fronts, is to state the obvious. Multipartite fratricidal conflicts seem to have engulfed the nation and are threatening to wipe the State from the control of the geographical territory known as Nigeria. Different criminal groups have taken over vast swathes of land in the northern part of the country and have established themselves as authorities within the areas they control, all sorts of taxes are imposed on the locals, kangaroo courts are established and leaders of communities installed by these criminal gangs (BBC Hausa 2024, Daily trust, 2021, Bukarti 2021).

The thesis of this paper is that armed banditry in northern Nigeria is motivated by economic gains, and it has grown into a complex industry, with returns of over 2.2 trillion naira between May 2023 and April 2024 in kidnap ransom money only as reported by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2025) and 5.6 trillion-naira in illicit trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons (GRIN, 2019, NFIU 2022), as well as 4.6 trillion naira in security budget provisions by the Nigeria State in 2023. These figures rival the telecom sector's

contribution to Nigeria's GDP, underscoring the economic scale of banditry.

The study employs a political economy framework, emphasizing material conditions and capitalist exploitation (Ake, 2001; Ezeibe and Eze, 2012). It explores how poverty, unemployment, and state complicity sustain banditry, challenging conventional security-centric analyses.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Armed Banditry Industrial Complex

Industrial complex is a concept developed to explain the interconnectedness of businesses within the social or political system through their interrelations in production, marketing, and distribution, wherein they create huge profits and in turn creating an astonishing economy for the system. The term armed banditry industrial complex is coined from the popular concept of Military Industrial Complex which was popularized by former US President Dwight Eisenhower (Ritter and McLauchlan, 2008).

The armed bandit industrial complex is maintained by illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, Bukarti (2021), Campbell (2001) posit that there are over 4 million AK 47 and 49 assault rifles in



circulation in Nigeria, while more current information puts the numbers much higher, GRIN (2019) puts the figures at 7 million, this figures supports the reports from the National Financial Intelligence Unit (NFIU) and from several interviews conduct by Nigerian Police investigator DSP Gimba Mohammed in 2021 with arrested armed bandits, it was revealed that an AK 47 cost about 700,000 naira while an AK 49 cost about 900,00 naira.

There are many factors that fuel banditry in northern Nigeria, prominent among which are poverty, unemployment and inequality, these issues propel citizens to collude with non-Nigerians to hunt easy ransom money (from kidnapping), robbery, cattle rustling and looting.

According to Nwanze (2021) the kidnap industry rest on five (5) pillars on which it flourishes, these are ungoverned space, gang formation, weapons acquisition, communication, and collusion.

Several reports by numerous intelligence organizations have it that huge sums of money are paid to bandits by Nigerians, SIM intelligence for instance, in 2020 (Nwanze, 2021), stated that about twenty 20 million dollars was spent by Nigerians in ransom payments to kidnappers between 2011 and 2020. This figure is actually the official figure given by the State, in reality the monies paid to the bandit are a hundred times higher. Unofficial ransom payment by even the State, such as the nearly one billion naira the government paid to Buharin Daji, a prominent militia leader who operated in Zamfara in Northwest Nigeria was not captured (Nwanze, 2021). Many communities in Northwest and Northcentral Nigeria are forced to contribute to either pay ransom money or protection money to bandits. Poor rural dwellers in northern Nigeria are forced to contribute money for protection, many villagers are killed in their farms, so for them to be allowed to engage in their means of livelihood, that is farming, they are forced to pay millions of Naira to the bandits, in mafia style protection payments (BBC Hausa service news 11/11/2024).

Through this means a giant shadow economy is created by the crime industry of banditry. Many commentators have accused the top echelon of the military as being part of the problem because of the corruption surrounding defense budget.

2.2 Banditry

A bandit is a person who methodically acquires capital through the process of robbing others, typically within a gang or an organization that distributes wealth within its own internal structure (Gustafson, 2017 as cited by Okoli and Abubakar, 2021). Armed Banditry, therefore, implies the actual or threatened use of arms/force to dispossesses people of their material belongings. It is essentially, a gang phenomenon.

Banditry can stem from various socio-economic factors that contribute to the rise of criminal activities. One of the primary drivers is poverty, as individuals with limited access to basic necessities may resort to banditry as a means of survival. Economic disparities within a society can create an environment where some individuals feel marginalized, leading them to engage in criminal acts. Campbell (2021) observes that kidnapping by

“Bandits” in Northern Nigeria appears to be different from Boko Haram attacks in the past decade where the goal was to kill those who are benefiting from western education, in the case of the bandits the goal was purely the ransom, and they appear to try keeping their victims alive.

Similarly, Nwanze (2021) posits that many things fuel the kidnap economy, chief of which are poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Campbell (2021) also asserts that kidnapping in Nigeria and across the Sahel can be an extraordinarily lucrative enterprise in what is one of the poorest regions in the world.

Furthermore, political instability can also play a significant role in fueling banditry. In regions where governance is weak or corrupt, criminal organizations can thrive due to the absence of law enforcement and accountability mechanisms (Campbell 2021). This allows them to establish their own rule of law and exploit vulnerable communities for their gain.

For example, Egwu (2015) as cited by Muhammad and Abdullahi (2021) gave another perspective of banditry, he contextualized banditry as a form of identity politics and inter group relations, which includes relationship between pastoralist group on the one hand and the Nigerian system on the other. The pastoralist group whom he described as transhumant (nomadic group) is seen by local farmers as naturally violent and deliberately armed to deal with innocent and unsuspecting farmers. Impliedly is the believe by the local farmers that the destruction and killings carried out by herders are deliberate, while the herders believe that their situation is manipulated to make them look like the aggressors.

Egwu also notes an important characterization of the bandits by the locals, especially in Benue State-as the attribution of religion by a segment of the Nigerian population who wish to inflict havoc on the Christian society. They also perceived the herders as recruiting foreign mercenaries to do their dirty job.

Essentially, Egwu (2015) as cited by Muhammad and Abdullahi (2021) and many others see banditry as stealing cattle and animals from herders or the process of raiding of animals from ranches, in short, extensive cattle rustling involving armed robbery and invasions of villages. The rise of these activities is deeply intertwined with economic motivations, reflecting a complex relationship that both fuels and undermines local economies.

At the heart of banditry in Northern Nigeria is the struggle for economic survival. Many areas in the region are plagued by poverty, unemployment, and a lack of access to education and resources. In such environments, individuals, particularly youth, may turn to banditry as a means of generating income. The theft of livestock, a vital asset for many rural communities, not only provides immediate financial gain for bandits but also destabilizes livelihoods for countless families, thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

Banditry also poses a threat to national security and stability. Criminal organizations often have deep networks and connections, allowing them to traffic drugs, weapons, and even people across

borders (Burkati, 2020). This undermines the integrity of the state, as well as regional and international relations.

2.3 Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria is a geographical and cultural region located in the northern part of Nigeria, comprising nineteen states Adamawa, Borno, Benue, Bauchi, Gombe, Taraba, Niger, Nasarawa Plateau, Kogi, Kwara, Kano, Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara. The region is characterized by its predominantly Muslim population, distinct cultural practices, and historical significance as a centre of Islamic scholarship and trade (Salawu, 2010). Geographically, Northern Nigeria is marked by the sahel and savannah zones, which influence its climate, agriculture, and settlement patterns. Historically, it has been the seat of powerful empires, including the Sokoto Caliphate, which played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of the area (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The region is also notable for its diverse ethnic groups such as the Hausas, Fulanis, Kanuris, and Tiv, each contributing to the rich cultural tapestry that defines Northern Nigeria. Socio-economically, Northern Nigeria faces challenges of underdevelopment, poverty, and insecurity, which are compounded by issues of religious and ethnic diversity (Adewale, 2023). As such, Northern Nigeria is a complex socio-cultural entity with a unique historical legacy, religious orientation, and developmental trajectory that significantly influences Nigeria's national dynamics.

2.4 Political Economy Analysis

The analytical framework utilized for this paper is the political economy approach. The approach is based on dialectical materialism also known as economic determinism. It is premise on the belief that man is dominantly motivated by economic needs (Akpuru-Aja 1998, Ake 2001). The approach gives primacy to material conditions, particularly economic factors in its analysis of social life. It holds that man's most fundamental needs are those that hinges on reproducing himself, for example food, shelter and clothes. Once those needs are overcome the urgency of economic needs loses its edge, but that does not negate the importance of economic needs. In this connection, since economic need is the primary need of man, it therefore follows that economic activity is man's primary activity.

Political economy main argument as propounded in its earliest form by Karl Marx, in the preface of his work *A Contribution to the Critique of political economy* as cited by Ezeibe and Eze, (2012), is thus:

In the social production of their existence men inevitably enter into definite relations, namely relations of production appropriate to a given state in the development of their material productive force. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of the society, the real foundation, on which raises legal and political structure, and to which then correspond definite forms of social consciousness

An essential element of this method is the need to pay attention to the economic structure of society. The history of traditional and even contemporary societies suggests that those from economically

privileged groups tended to be more cultured, better educated and are more successful in political and professional careers (Ake 2001).

Again, those from the economically privileged group tend to want to maintain the existing social order, while those in the disadvantaged group are interested in changing the social order, particularly its distribution of wealth.

Political economy expresses the clear reality of the economic basis of the political behaviour of the State and its people (Uke, 2006). Marxist political economy posits that societal organization revolves around modes of production, where ruling classes control surplus extraction.

In post-colonial contexts, imperialism and neoliberal policies intensify exploitation, while incomplete transitions from feudalism to capitalism generate hybrid contradictions. Northern Nigeria is the poorest region in the country, its political economy is shaped by pre-colonial feudalism, the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903) established a feudal system with aristocratic control over land and peasant labor (Mustapha, 2003).

British indirect rule preserved feudal hierarchies but integrated the region into a cash-crop economy, entrenching dependency and post-independence governments prioritized oil extraction in the South, neglecting Northern agriculture. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s dismantled rural subsidies, deepening poverty.

Environmental crisis also shapes Northern Nigeria's economy, desertification and climate change have reduced arable land, intensifying herder-farmer conflicts (Abubakar, et al, 2018).

Central to the argument of this paper is that banditry is a consequence of capitalist and dispossession. Banditry in Northern Nigeria reflects Marxist dialectics in three ways:

- i. Primitive Accumulation and Land Alienation: Capitalist encroachment, via agribusiness and mining, displaces rural communities. Herders and farmers, stripped of livelihoods, resort to cattle rustling and extortion. Bandits, akin to Marx's lumpenproletariat, exploit chaos for survival, mirroring primitive accumulation's violence (Abubakar et al, 2018, Okeke, 2002, Watts, 2004).
- ii. State complicity and elite exploitation: The Nigerian state, serving bourgeois interests, enables elite land grabs and resource extraction. Militarized responses to banditry protect capitalist ventures (e.g., mining concessions) rather than civilians. Corruption ensures impunity for colluding elites, while impoverished youths are criminalized.
- iii. Neoliberalism and Social reproduction crisis: SAPs privatized communal lands and defunded social services. Unemployment rates exceeding 50% in states like Zamfara and Katsina push youths into banditry as a "profession." Ransom economies exemplify capitalist commodification, where human life is traded for profit (Watt 2021, Okeke 2002, Abubakar et al 2018).

An example of capitalist commodification of security is the Zamfara State Gold Rush. Zamfara's gold reserves highlight capitalist-banditry nexuses. Artisanal miners, displaced by corporate mining, form syndicates battling State and foreign firms. Bandits levy taxes on mining sites, while elites launder conflict minerals into global markets. This "resource war" epitomizes how capitalist accumulation fuels violence (Okoli & Abubakar 2021, Daily Trust, Rufai 2021).

While banditry is not a revolutionary movement, it embodies fragmented resistance to dispossession (BBC documentary, 2023). Attacks on highways and schools symbolize rejection of State neglect. However, lacking class consciousness, bandits replicate exploitative hierarchies, exploiting peasants they claim to represent. Celebrated Bandits like Bello Turji, Alhaji Alero and late Turji Sububu have on several occasions claimed to be fighting for their oppressed Fulani kinsmen (Rufai 2021).

2.4 The Concept of the "Banditry Industrial Complex": An Academic Explanation

The "Banditry Industrial Complex" is a hypothetical framework that describes the systemic entanglement of banditry, state power, capitalist accumulation, and globalized markets in a mutually reinforcing cycle of violence and profit. Drawing inspiration from Eisenhower's notion of the "military-industrial complex," the concept posits that banditry in contexts like Northern Nigeria is not merely a localized criminal phenomenon, but a structured economy sustained by intersecting interests of armed groups, state actors, corporate entities, and transnational networks. This complex thrives on the commodification of insecurity, where violence becomes a lucrative industry, and its suppression is paradoxically exploited for further economic and political gain.

The concept builds on Marx's analysis of capitalism's reliance on primitive accumulation, the violent dispossession of land and resources to create exploitable labor. David Harvey's extension, "accumulation by dispossession," highlights how neoliberal policies (privatization, deregulation) deepen inequality, pushing marginalized populations into informal or illicit economies.

Banditry, in this view, emerges as both a resistance to dispossession and a byproduct of capitalist exploitation, as communities stripped of livelihoods turn to raiding, kidnapping, or resource extraction for survival.

Scholars like Hall and Winlow argue that "crime" is socially constructed to legitimize state violence against marginalized groups. The Banditry Industrial Complex reveals how state actors criminalize banditry while covertly benefiting from its economic spillovers (e.g., ransom payments, resource monopolies, state defence budgets).

Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial violence underscores how systemic oppression breeds reactive violence. Banditry here mirrors the lumpen proletariat's fragmented resistance—a disorganized yet economically motivated rebellion against state neglect.

2.4.1 Core Elements of the Banditry Industrial Complex

i. Symbiotic State-Bandit Relations:

State Complicity: Government elites may tacitly permit or actively collude with bandits to destabilize regions, justifying militarized budgets or suppressing political rivals. Security forces often profit from bribes, protection rackets, or diverted ransom funds (Desert Herald).

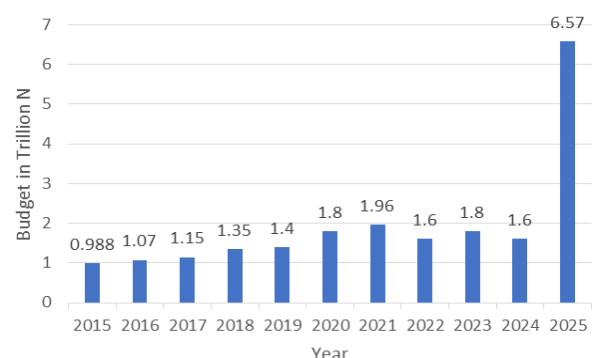
The ever increasing defence budgets in Nigeria without corresponding reduction in banditry activities in the Country, was a source of concern to the former Nigerian Vice-President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo who decried the non-transparent manner of military spending (Daily Trust, 2021). While the Federal Government has been budgeting billions of naira on defence and security, experts believed the manner the resource are being spent is questionable and they called for transparency.

The table below shows Nigeria's defence budgets for 7 years 2015 to 2021.

Table 1: Nigeria's Defence Budgets 2015 – 2021

S/NO	YEAR	BUDGET Trillion N
1	2015	.988
2	2016	1.07
3	2017	1.15
4	2018	1.35
5	2019	1.4
6	2020	1.8
7	2021	1.96
8	2022	1.6
9	2023	1.8
10	2024	1.6
11	2025	6.57
	Total =	21.288

Nigeria's Defence Budgets 2015 - 2025



Source: Daily Trust Newspaper August 5, 2022, improved by the author (2025).

The complicity of the Nigeria state was further buttressed by a story on Wall street Journal an American credible newspaper which reported that in July 2021 a Nigeria fighter Jet was shot down by bandits between the border of Zamfara and Kaduna states in northern Nigeria. On October 7, 2021 the Journal reported that the Nigerian Air force paid 20 million naira to bandits to buy back "an anti-aircraft gun" that the bandits had seized from the Nigerian military in a clash (Kperogi, 2021). The Nigeria security agencies perceived the anti-aircraft gun a threat to the then President, Muhammadu Buhari, who had been planning to fly to his hometown.

Kperogi (2021) reported that on October 20, 2021, the bandits, whom the Wall Street Journal says have collaborators inside the army and who are better equipped with larger-capacity advanced weaponry than national security agencies, detonated explosives on the Abuja-Kaduna rail tracks and caused the indefinite suspension of rail transportation between Abuja and Kaduna.

Similarly, Daily Trust newspaper of July 28, 2021 reported that bandits have started collecting ransoms through banks. One Mrs Aminat Adewuyi was kidnapped and her abductors asked her relatives to deposit 5 million Naira into an Access Bank account with account number 1403762272 and the name Badawi Abba Enterprise. The ransom was paid and reports were made authorities yet no action was taken.

The Nigerian State's failure to protect citizens' fuels demand for private security firms, mercenaries, and vigilantes, creating a profitable "security market" intertwined with banditry.

ii. Commodification of Violence:

Kidnapping Economies: Ransom networks generate vast revenues, with payments often laundered into formal sectors (real estate, banking) or recycled into arms purchases. Recent report from NBS indicated that over N2.23 trillion was paid by Nigerians as ransom money in one year (BBC Pigin 2025). Furthermore, Bandits control illegal mining sites (e.g., gold in Zamfara) or smuggling routes, feeding minerals and cattle into global supply chains. Corporate actors may indirectly source conflict materials, sustaining demand (Nwanze 2021).

iii. Global-Local Nexus:

Locally extracted resources (gold, timber) enter global markets via intermediaries, linking banditry to international finance and trade. Global arms flows (often illicit) equip bandits, while structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and climate crises exacerbate rural deprivation, ensuring a steady supply of recruits (Rufa'i, 2021).

Unfortunately, Media and state discourses frame bandits as "apolitical savages," obscuring their roots in systemic dispossession. This legitimizes militarized repression over structural reforms.

Crisis Capitalism: Corporations and politicians exploit insecurity to justify land grabs, mining concessions, or counterinsurgency contracts, echoing Naomi Klein's "disaster capitalism."

3.0 The Economic and Social Dimensions of Banditry in Northern Nigeria

Banditry in Northern Nigeria has evolved beyond a mere criminal enterprise into a complex socio-economic phenomenon with profound implications for regional stability, economic development, and social cohesion. This section explores the economic incentives that sustain banditry, the social structures that facilitate their operations, and the broader societal impacts of this form of organized crime.

One of the primary drivers of banditry in Northern Nigeria is the pursuit of economic gain. The region's arid and semi-arid lands, which are traditionally used for agriculture and livestock grazing, have become lucrative targets for bandits who exploit these resources for profit. As Ojo (2020) notes, the disruption of formal economic activities, such as farming and commerce, has driven many local populations into vulnerability, making them susceptible to banditry's coercive tactics for survival.

Bandits typically engage in kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and extortion of local communities and traders. The lucrative nature of these activities is amplified by weak law enforcement and inadequate state presence in remote areas, creating a conducive environment for organized criminal groups to operate with impunity. According to Adegbe (2021), the economic dimension of banditry in Northern Nigeria is characterized by a symbiotic relationship between criminal groups and local economic actors, often involving illicit trade and smuggling networks that operate across borders.

Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has facilitated the expansion of banditry into an "industrial" enterprise. These weapons are often acquired through illegal arms markets, further fueling violence and territorial control. The economic dimension thus extends from individual criminal acts to a broader network of illicit economic activities that sustain the banditry industry.

The social fabric of Northern Nigeria plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of banditry. Traditional social structures, including kinship ties, community allegiances, and local leadership systems, influence both the recruitment into bandit groups and the community responses to their activities. While some local communities are victims of banditry, others have been accused of complicity or collusion, either due to coercion or economic benefits.

The phenomenon of "self-defense" groups, such as the so-called "Vigilante" or "Yansakai" groups, illustrates the complex social responses to banditry. These groups often emerge in response to security lapses but sometimes operate outside state authority, engaging in retaliatory violence, which further destabilizes social cohesion (Onuoha, 2019). The social dimension is also characterized by a pervasive culture of mistrust, as communities

grapple with issues of loyalty, betrayal, and the moral ambiguity surrounding banditry.

Additionally, the socio-economic marginalization of pastoralist and farming communities contributes to their vulnerability. Limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities creates a fertile ground for recruitment into banditry, especially among youths seeking livelihood alternatives (Yakubu, 2022). This cyclical relationship between socio-economic deprivation and criminality underscores the importance of addressing underlying social issues to curb the persistence of banditry.

The presence of banditry severely undermines social cohesion and hampers development efforts in Northern Nigeria. The recurrent violence and insecurity lead to displacement of populations, destruction of infrastructure, and disruption of economic activities. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020), thousands of people have been displaced, leading to a humanitarian crisis that affects access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and food security.

The disruption of agricultural cycles due to insecurity has dire consequences for food production and rural livelihoods. As noted by Akinwale (2021), the agricultural sector, which is the backbone of Northern Nigeria's economy, suffers significant setbacks because farmers are unable to access their lands or harvest crops safely. This not only leads to economic losses but also exacerbates poverty and food insecurity.

Furthermore, the societal impacts extend to the psychological realm, with communities experiencing trauma, fear, and loss of trust in government institutions. The persistent insecurity erodes social capital, which is vital for community resilience and development. The social fabric is further strained by internal divisions, as different ethnic and religious groups interpret banditry differently, often leading to ethnic tensions and conflicts (Ibrahim & Musa, 2022).

An important aspect of understanding the social and economic dimensions of banditry is recognizing the role of informal economies and local power structures. In many Northern Nigerian communities, informal economic activities such as cross-border trade, livestock markets, and barter systems operate parallel to formal institutions. These informal networks often provide opportunities for illegal activities, including the financing and logistical support of banditry.

Local power dynamics, including the influence of traditional rulers, clan leaders, and political figures, also shape the landscape of banditry. In some cases, these local elites are accused of colluding with bandit groups for personal or political gain, thus complicating efforts to curb the menace (Adewale, 2023). The intertwining of political, social, and economic interests creates a complex web that sustains and perpetuates banditry as an industrial enterprise.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes that the scourge of banditry represents a fundamental threat to Nigeria's sovereignty, economic stability,

and social cohesion. The conflict has crippled agrarian and commercial activities in northern Nigeria, creating a humanitarian crisis while simultaneously giving rise to a perverse and booming criminal industry. Applying a political economy framework, the analysis has uncovered a symbiotic relationship between certain state actors and bandit groups, wherein violence is not merely a tool of coercion but a commodified asset within a shadow economy. Evidence from diverse sources confirms that this economy is propelled by vast proceeds from kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and illegal resource extraction.

To effectively counter this multi-faceted challenge, a holistic strategy beyond kinetic military engagement is essential. The following recommendations are critical:

- i. The Federal Government must exhibit unambiguous political will by holding security commanders accountable for performance and alleged collusion. Security operations must be consistent, intelligence-driven, and measured by clear metrics of success, not just public statements.
- ii. Invest in modernizing the police and military in the Country, providing them with advanced surveillance technology, adequate mobility, and improved welfare to boost morale and effectiveness.
- iii. A multi-agency task force involving the EFCC, NFIU, and Central Bank should be mandated to disrupt the financial infrastructure of banditry. This includes systematic tracking of ransom payments, freezing assets of known kingpins, and prosecuting their financiers and collaborators.
- iv. Formalize and secure the region's key economic sectors (especially mining and livestock) through digital registration, licensing, and monitoring to cut off illicit revenue streams.
- v. Launch a comprehensive development program focused on education, vocational training, and job creation for youth to provide alternatives to criminality.
- vi. While maintaining a security presence, support credible, locally-led mediation and disarmament initiatives that address legitimate grievances related to land, ethnicity, and resource sharing.

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