

Banditry, Insecurity and Development in Benue State

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ABSTRACT: This paper examined the impact of banditry and insecurity on development in Benue State. Specifically, the paper interrogated the causes of and various forms of banditry and insecurity, as well as the implications of the security challenges on development in Benue State. To this effect, the paper relied on secondary sources of data collection and Routine Activity Theory as a framework for analysis. Findings from the paper show that several factors are responsible for the state of banditry and insecurity in Benue State. These causes include youth unemployment and poverty, the desperation of politicians to capture political power, the proliferation of small and light weapons, a weak security system, and pervasive material inequalities and injustices, among others. Insecurity in Benue State has negatively affected development in Benue State. This has led to the loss of over 28,997 lives and properties, with 54,476 houses and farm produce valued at over N21 billion destroyed. Conflict between farmers and herders has caused displacement, leading to food insecurity. Violence between farmers and herders, and other forms of communal conflicts have destroyed infrastructure, forcing many children out of school. The burning down of police stations and 33 markets has intensified poverty and pauperization among the Benue people. The paper recommended, among others, addressing the root causes of banditry and insecurity: poverty, unemployment, and social marginalisation can contribute to the rise of banditry and insecurity. Also, addressing banditry, insecurity, and development challenges in Benue State requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders, including the government, local communities, and international partners.

KEYWORDS: Insecurity, banditry, development, conflicts, infrastructure and food insecurity

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that Nigeria is going through severe security challenges. The country's security challenges are most apparent in the torrential spate of armed violence and criminality in various parts of the country (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). The catalogue of these security challenges ranges from violence, armed robbery, kidnapping, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and militancy, among other acts of criminality that undermine national security. Internal security has been significantly undercut by the violent activities of civilians in arms against the Nigerian State (Olanrewaju, Folarin, & Folarin, 2017). These security challenges cut across all the regions of the country. For instance, the southern part of the country is home to radicalised groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the south-eastern part of the country is home to the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and IPOB, while the activities of herders' militias are pronounced in north-central Nigeria. Northeastern Nigeria is still patently under the Boko Haram terrorist scourge, amidst the precarious counter-insurgency endeavours of the government. In the past ten years (2010–2022), terrorism has become a major security threat to Nigeria.

Benue State has experienced a lot of security challenges. The most recent source of insecurity involves conflict between Benue farmers and herders. There have been fierce and bloody attacks and reprisal attacks between these two groups. Apart from farmers and herders' conflicts, other forms of insecurity in Benue State include the rising incidence of banditry. Banditry in Benue State is more pronounced in the Benue North East Senatorial District (Zone A). This zone is notorious for banditry. For instance, the gang kidnapped sixteen (16) persons, robbed them of their vehicles, motorcycles, and other belongings, killed their victims, buried the corpses, and planted cassava on the graves as a way of covering the crime, according to sources (Kwanga, Iormanger, Udoo, & Shabu, 2022). Further investigation led to the discovery of 16 shallow graves. Eleven corpses were exhumed and identified by their family members in the Ushongo Local Government Area. The zone has also experienced a lot of kidnapping. Kwanga, Iormanger, Udoo, and Shabu (2022, p. 5) provide a lucid incidence of kidnappings to include: Sgt. Abraham Ihom, a police officer serving under the Katsina-Ala division, and his wife Bridget were killed and buried by unknown gunmen; Democratic Party (PDP) chieftain Ben Akile was kidnapped by gunmen along Zaki-Biam-Katsina-Ala Road in Katsina-Ala LGA.

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These security challenges have a lot of impact on socio-economic development in Benue State. Most residents and traders alike no longer feel secure in what used to be a conducive environment for businessmen, farming, and other socio-economic activities. Also, farming activities in some parts of the state have been put to a standstill. Farmers within affected areas find it hard to go to their farms as well as to get enough food crops to the market, resulting in issues of food insecurity and a probable unprecedented hike in the prices of farm produce in the markets. The activities of these kidnappers have the potential to cripple the economy and breakdown the social and economic activities of the people. Traders, also for fear of becoming the next victims, have decided to sort for alternative options. All these seem to have affected the economy of the area. It is against this background that this paper examines the impact of banditry, insecurity, and development in Benue State.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Insecurity

This paper therefore seeks to examine the concept of security to facilitate a good understanding of the concept of insecurity. Security needs were the basis of the social contract between the people and the state, in which people willingly surrendered their rights to an organ (the government) that oversees the survival of all. In this light, security embodies the mechanisms put in place to avoid, prevent, reduce, or resolve violent conflicts and threats that originate from other states, non-state actors, or structural socio-political and economic conditions (Stan, 2004). For decades, issues relating to security were on the front burner in the development discourse. Several attempts have been made since the Cold War ended to redefine the concept of security from a state-centric perspective to a broader view that places a premium on individuals, in which human security, which embodies elements of national security, human rights, and national development, remains a major barometer for explaining the concept. At the heart of this debate, there have been attempts to deepen and widen the concept of security from the level of states to societies and individuals, and from military to non-military issues.

According to Nwanegbo and Odigbo (2013), the divergent approaches to the conceptualization of human security in the theoretical literature can be categorised into two major strands. One is a neo-realist theoretical strand that conceptualises security as the primary responsibility of the state. The second strand, a postmodernist or plural view, conceptualises security as the responsibility of non-state actors and displaces the state as a major provider of security. Proponents of this approach argue that the concept of security goes beyond a military determination of threats. They are of the view that the government should be more concerned with the economic security of individuals than the security of the state because the root causes of insecurity are economic in nature.

Some scholars, in conceptualising security, placed emphasis on the absence of threats to peace, stability, national cohesion, and the and the political and socio-economic objectives of a country (Igbuzor, 2011; Oche, 2001; Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013). Thus, there is a general consensus in the contemporary literature that security is vital for national cohesion, peace, and sustainable development. It is therefore apparent that national security is a sine qua non for the economic growth and development of any country (Oladeji & Folorunso, 2007). In the intelligence community, there is a consensus that security is not the absence of threats or security issues but the existence of a robust mechanism to respond proactively to the challenges posed by these threats with expediency, expertise, and in real time.

From the foregoing, the concept of insecurity connotes the absence of safety, danger, hazard, uncertainty, lack of protection, and lack of safety. According to Ali (2010), insecurity is a state of fear or anxiety due to the absence or lack of protection. Achumba, Ighomereho, and Akpan-Robaro (2013) define insecurity from two perspectives. Firstly, insecurity is the state of being open or subject to danger or a threat of danger, where danger is the condition of being susceptible to harm or injury. Secondly, insecurity is the state of being exposed to risk or anxiety, where anxiety is a vague, unpleasant emotion that is experienced in anticipation of some misfortune. These definitions of insecurity underscore a major point: those affected by insecurity are not only uncertain or unaware of what would happen, but they are also vulnerable to the threats and dangers when they occur. In the context of this paper, insecurity is defined as a breach of peace and security as a result of banditry.

Banditry

Conceptually, banditry is a derivative of the term "bandit," meaning an unlawful armed group terrorising people and confiscating their properties (Adegoke, 2019). It is synonymous with the establishment of gang groups that use small and light weapons to carry out attacks against people. In this regard, banditry could mean a set-up criminal activity deliberately designed and carried out for personal gain. Due to the complex nature of bandits' activities, Egwu (2016), in a restricted manner, described banditry as the practice of stealing cattle and animals from herders or raiding cattle from their ranches. In the same vein, banditry is reflected in criminal escapades like cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, drug abuse, arson, rape, and the brazen and gruesome massacre of people in agrarian communities with sophisticated weapons by suspected herdsman and reprisal attacks from surviving victims, a development that has been brought to the front burner of national security (Uche & Iwuamadi, 2018).

In another sense, banditry refers to the incidence of armed robbery or allied violent crimes, such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, and village or market raids. It involves the use of force, or a threat to that effect, to intimidate a person or a group of persons in order to rob, rape, or kill (Okoli & Okpaleke 2014). Economic or political interests motivate banditry. The former refers to

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banditries motivated by the imperative of material accumulation, while the latter has to do with those driven by the quest to rob, assault, or liquidate a person or a group of persons based on political or ideological dispositions.

According to Okoli and Ugwu (2019), banditry can be 'social banditry' that is generally motivated by the intent to protest social inequality and redistribute wealth within a locality. Likewise, one could talk of other forms of banditry that are principally motivated by political or economic reasons. When 'location' of occurrence is the underlying index, one can speak in terms of 'rural vs. urban banditry' or 'frontier vs. countryside banditry', as the case may be. Similarly, banditry can be 'mercenary' or 'autonomous' depending on how the actor of agency is played out. Mercenary banditry is perpetuated by auxiliaries or mercenaries working for a principal in a sort of principal-agent relationship, while autonomous bandits are self-motivated and personally commissioned (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Organised banditry thrives on a network of actors that are syndicated and coordinated, while petty banditry is perpetrated by individual or group actors that are not so organized. Roving bandits are more or less mobile or itinerant, while stationary bandits are settled or sedentary (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). Lastly, maritime banditry refers to offshore robberies (piracy) as compared to those that occur on the coast or mainland.

The above indicates that banditry is a criminal activity characterised by kidnappings, armed robberies, cattle thefts, and village raids. It is important to note that these bandits are not complete strangers, as some of them are known to members of the community who have been victims of suffering and injuries as a result of their actions. Banditry is a form of crime that can pose a serious threat to communities in the affected areas. The criminal activities associated with banditry include various acts of violence and theft that cause physical and economic harm to local residents.

Development

Development is a multi-dimensional process or phenomenon; it is the whole gamut of quantitative and qualitative change that occurs at the levels of the individuals and social groups. Barder (2018), argued that to define development as an improvement in people's well-being does no justice to what the term means. Development also carries a connotation of lasting change. That is, development consists of more than improvements in the well-being of citizens. To him, it conveys something about the capacity of economic, political and social systems to provide the circumstances for that well-being on a sustainable long-term basis. Thus, for development to make an impact in the lives of the masses, it has to be sustained for present and future generation to benefit.

Development is "both a physical reality and a state of mind in which society have secured the means for obtaining a better life" (Ogundiya, 2019, p.12). Through this process the society ensures growth in wealth acquisition and mental enrichment and the betterment of a qualitative quality living conditions for all the people. The society uses a combination of social, economic and institutional processes as the means to acquire better living conditions. This definition of development generated the following development objectives:

- i. To increase the availability and distribution of basic goods needed for human life-sustenance. Such basic goods include food, shelter, health and security.
- ii. To improve the level of living in respect of social aspects such as household and national income, education, and human cultural values for the enhancement of individual and national material well-being and self-esteem.
- iii. To expand the range of the available individual and national economic and social choices by freeing them from servitude by forces of ignorance and human misery on the one hand, and dependence from other people and national states on the other (NEPAD, 2003, p.54).

Development is concerned with wellbeing of the people as it relates to security, and sustainability. In this paper, development entails a process by which an individual develops self-respect, and becomes more self-confident, self-reliant, cooperative and tolerant to other through becoming aware of his/her shortcomings as well as his/her potential for positive change. This takes place through working with others, acquiring new knowledge, and active participation in the economic, social and political development of their communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts Routine Activity Theory as a framework for analysis. Routine activity theory, first formulated by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979). The theory focuses on crime as an event, highlighting its relation to space and time and emphasising its ecological nature. According to Routine Activity Theory, the likelihood of crime increases if all three components: a suitable target, the absence of an appropriate guardian, and a probable motivated offender are present. If one of these components is missing, the likelihood of a crime decreases.

Cohen and Felson (1979) argue that guardianship by ordinary citizens during routine activities may be one of the most neglected elements in sociological research on crime. The theory emphasises that people put themselves in situations throughout their daily activities that either increase or decrease their likelihood of becoming victims of crime. The theory combines time and space as an essential function of criminal understanding of sites of crime, particularly to conceptualise the situational features of crime. Crime is not inescapable even when there is a motivated criminal, a good target, and no guardianship. Instead, the presence or absence of these three factors determines whether crime is more likely to occur or not. A crime scene is composed of three distinct

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aspects: a prime candidate for attack, the lack of a capable protector, and a likely perpetrator. A good target is something that gives exploiters an immediate gain while disregarding the law.

The straightforward and insightful Routine Activity Theory sheds light on the root causes of crime issues. Its fundamental tenet is that, in the absence of efficient regulations, criminals will prey on appealing targets. The spatial and temporal organisation of normal activities should have a significant influence in determining the location, kind, and quantity of illicit acts because illegal activities like banditry must feed upon other activities. By using an ecological perspective, theorists hope to illustrate how humans interact with their surroundings. It is a social strategy as well.

Routine Activity Theory offers a useful framework for examining the crime of banditry in Nigeria in connection with this paper. It is important to note that rural banditry is a crime that has been sparked and maintained by the socio-existential climate that now prevails in the rural sector and is distinguished by a high tendency to criminal indulgence. Additionally, the existence of a resilient but vulnerable rural economy that is mostly dependent on animal husbandry and crop production also makes for an abundance of convenient criminal targets, including cattle, money, and treasure, among others. Given this situation, criminal opportunism and impunity are also encouraged by the virtually non-existent presence of governmental security apparatus in most rural villages.

The activities of the bandits have negative implications for the economy of the state. For instance, these bandits destroy farms and storage homes, thereby undermining food security in the state. In addition, the killing of innocents, the destruction of livelihoods, and critical infrastructure like schools and hospitals have adverse effects on the economy of the state and the country at large.

The Causes of Insecurity and Banditry in Benue State

The reasons for the prevalence of insecurity in Benue State include the following:

i. Youth Unemployment and Poverty: Benue State occupies the 21st position out of the 36 states of the federation, with a poverty rate of 32.9%. The indices for measuring poverty by the NBS are based on access to education, health and basic services, employment, assets, and income (NBS, 2023). The rising rate of youth unemployment is one of the causes of social crimes like prostitution, armed robbery, oil bunkering, internet fraud, drug addiction, trafficking, rape, kidnapping, and all facets of violence. Unemployment is associated with economic deprivation, frustration, and helplessness, which lures many youths into violent crimes, which is not only a criminal act but a dangerous misadventure.

Youth unemployment in Benue State is attributed to factors such as the growing urban labour force, outdated school curricula, and a lack of employable skills. Rural-urban migration is driven by push-pull factors, such as man-land ratio pressure and climate underemployment. Infrastructural facilities and social amenities in urban centres make rural life unattractive. Nigeria's liberal bias in education contributes to the lack of entrepreneurial skills among graduates. Rapid expansion of the educational system also increases the supply of educated manpower, further contributing to youth unemployment.

ii. The Desperation or 'do or die' Politics among Benue Politicians: Youth unemployment in Benue State is attributed to politicians' desperation to win elections and occupy political offices, leading to violence in the political landscape. This "do or die" politics, which became more concerning after the return to civil rule in 1999, has been exemplified by thuggery, violence, blackmail, and vendetta. Politics is seen as a lucrative business in Nigeria, and some politicians use violence to maintain power and influence. This do-or-die policy has resulted in numerous politically motivated assassinations.

iii. Proliferation of Small and Light Weapons: The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is adjudged to be the most immediate security challenge to individuals, societies, and states worldwide, fueling civil wars, organised criminal violence, insurgency, and terrorist activities that pose great obstacles to sustainable security and development. The lengthy and porous borders across Nigeria make the country both an entry and exit route for small arms and light weapons proliferation, including countries like Benin, Cameroun, Chad, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, and Togo, among others. There are enough weapons to be shared around, and people therefore tend to make use of them for their own personal gain.

Apart from the porous borders, some respondents also accused the security personnel of selling arms to criminals. For instance, the Department of State Security (DSS) blamed the worsening insecurity in the country on corrupt members of the Armed Forces and other security agencies, who allegedly sell arms to criminals (Abagen & Tyona, 2018). Yesufu (2017, p. 78) also buttresses this argument, thus:

We have conducted more than 27 operations and arrested more than 30 people involved in the supply of arms and ammunition, and some of them are serving security men. There was a case in one of the armouries belonging to one of the Armed Forces where many pistols went missing with quantities of ammunition, and all the pistols were new. The armoury was broken into, but the weapons were missing.

In Benue State, there are ample records to demonstrate that the rate of small and light weapons is high. For instance, Abagen & Tyona (2018) report that "Gana" and his gang are fully and well-armed with sophisticated weapons and are still terrorising the Sankera axis of Benue State, Nigeria.

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iv. Weak Security System: This is a major contributor to the level of insecurity in Nigeria, and this can be attributed to a number of factors, which include inadequate funding of the police and other security agencies, a lack of modern equipment both in weaponry and training, poor welfare of security personnel, and inadequate personnel (Achumba et al. 2013). According to Olonisakin (2008), the police-population ratio in Nigeria is 1:45, which falls below the standard set by the United Nations. The implication of this is that Nigeria is grossly underpoliced, which partly explains the inability of the Nigerian Police Force to effectively combat crimes and criminality in the country.

v. Pervasive Material Inequalities and Injustices: A major factor that contributes to the security challenge in Nigeria is the growing awareness of inequalities and disparities in life chances, which lead to violent reactions by a large number of people. There is a general perception of marginalisation by a section of the people in areas of government development policies and political patronage, and these are triggers of disaffection, resentment, and revolt (Achumba & Akpor, 2013). The incessant strikes by labour and professional groups and demonstrations by civil society groups are mainly due to pervasive material inequalities and unfairness. Their agitations are aimed at drawing public sympathy for their struggle for just and fair treatment by the government.

The Forms of Insecurity and Banditry in Benue State

Benue state has experienced a lot security challenges, in this article, the forms of insecurity will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

POLITICAL THUGGERY

In Benue State, there are pockets of youth anti-social practices and militia activities that evidently commenced in 1998 and are gradually enlarged. Benue State is characterised by high levels and uncontrolled consumption of gin (ogogoro), an increased level of social sex workers, increased armed robbery, increased kidnapping, increased thug actions, increased militia practices, and uncontrolled drug addicts, especially among her youth. These groups are already out of the way in terms of any tangible mental reasoning for pro-social behaviours but are quick to adapt to anti-social activities. The Kwande political killing in 2002; the Jato-Aka political mayhem of 2003; the Asukunya political killing of 2011; and other sporadic political killings of individuals and groups—property destruction worth billions of naira—were carried out by unemployed youth in Benue State and seemed sponsored by high-flying politicians (Akuhwa, 2015).

The present state of Benue youth is highly questionable, as the unemployment rate is on the rise and the state seems not to have come up with any effective public plan for youth development. Therefore, the youth militia in Benue State has entered a different phase since its inception. It seems as if there is a link between the leaders of youth militia groups and top politicians or even government agents (bureaucrats and the police). Youth militia groups and some political extractions abound and are present in every local government headquarters and prominent villages and hamlets in Benue State. In the 2015 and 2019 general elections, almost all leading politicians in Benue State had at least one youth group or another. For example, there were the “Bai boys,” and every prominent politician has this type of youth boys’ group in their respective camps, etc. Some youths engage in these actions because of poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and frustration. There are still other youth militia groups, such as the “Gana group” in Sankera, the “Aondonengen and Saasaa groups” in Gboko, and the “Sparko G group” in Makurdi, among other groups spread sporadically in the state (Akuhwa, 2015). They are very ruthless, tactical, and dogged; some are even educated but unemployed, and painfully, most of them engage in these illicit acts for nothing more than pastry sums, red wine, and spirits. Over six brutal political killings, including the killing of a prominent Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) faithful, Chief Atoza Hindan, have already been recorded in Benue State between May 29, 2015, and July 5, 2015.

FARMERS-HERDERS CONFLICTS

The farmer-pastoralist conflict in Nigeria remains the most significant resource-use conflict, with the intensification of land use due to the need for food crops, animal origin, and raw materials for industry and export. This competition has often led to hostilities, social friction, exacerbated insecurity, and food crises, particularly in rural communities. Economically viable land has been a major cause of conflict, particularly in the Benue Valley region. The conflict, which began in 2001 when unarmed Tiv farmer Mr. Iortim Umande was killed by Fulani cattle, has escalated into a full-blown war, involving sophisticated assault weapons and frequent killings of people, women, children, and animals (Hagher, 2014).

Farmers and pastoralists face conflict due to geographical, political, and socio-cultural conditions. Prior to 2001, conflicts were usually peaceful, with Fulani pastoralists requesting permission to camp and graze. However, the collapse of traditional conflict resolution methods led to longer-lasting conflicts, resulting in reprisal attacks. This period marked a change in migration trends, with Fulani herds arriving with sophisticated weapons, causing conflict between these two natural resources to take on a dramatic dimension (Genyi, 2014).

The causes of conflict between farmers and herders in Benue State have been interrogated by several scholars (Hagher, 2014; Genyi, 2014; Tsuwa, Kwaghchimin, & Iyo, 2015; Genyi, 2017; Abughdyer, 2016; Geve, 2018; Nomor & Ikyoyer, 2022). These authors are of the view that these conflicts stem from the influx of herdsmen, the destruction of crops without compensation, the perception of vigilantes, encroachment on traditional livestock routes, the cultivation of grazing areas, and land grabs by wealthy

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elites. Remote causes include the use of weapons and violence against Fulani herdsmen. Misguided cattle in Guma Local Government contribute to misalignment and aggression, particularly among those entering Guma and Makurdi Local Governments from Nassarawa State.

In the last decade, the conflict between farmers and herders has taken on a dangerous dimension. Nigeria's animal husbandry methods are changing due to social, economic, and environmental changes. Sedentarization of pastoralist households has led to increased livestock migration, affecting social construction and discipline. Cattle rustling has exacerbated the conflict between farmers and pastoralists, with Fulani mercenaries using sophisticated weapons to attack. The current situation has escalated, with well-trained fighters forcefully moving into areas, targeting farming communities, killing farmers, and burning villages (Genyi, 2017).

Activities of Militia Groups (Ghana group" in Sankera)

This militia group is named after the founder of the group, Late Terwase Akwaza popularly known as (sometimes spelt Ghana). The activities of the group are more pronounced Sankera geopolitical axis comprising Katsina Ala, Ukum, and Logo local governments' area, for more than a decade. Ghana was accused of massacres, kidnappings, assassinations, robberies, cattle rustling, terrorism and murders. He levied farmers, traders, and prominent people. Hagher (2019, p.18) captures the nature and character of the Ghana militia group thus:

Ghana group is today a fearful criminal hegemon. He has an elaborate security network that traverses the whole Benue State. His network has continued to look out for him and provide elaborate intelligence, which he buys from corrupt government security agents and enforcers. Furthermore, he has established a quasi-fascist criminal government. At the apex of this strange contraption is Terwase Akwaza (Ghana) himself who has all the trappings of a Head of State. He is the Commander-in-Chief and his headquarters is at Gbishe. His brother, Aondofa Akwaza is in charge of revenue, Suku Oraondo is a Defacto-Chief Justice and combines the roles of the Head of the Pagan Religion that Akwaza is re-introducing.

Recruitment into this Ghana group is by force. In fact, Hagher (2019) stated that, apart from the ward commanders and kindred commanders who oversee recruitment of foot soldiers from villages to homestead, refusal to be recruited is a capital offence. It is estimated that Ghana has about three youths under his power and under the gun. Adults are obliged to enroll as members and pay membership fees. It is estimated that over 75% of the adult population of Shitile land either sympathizers, sponsors or informants. All motorcycle riders are recruits in the militia group (Hagher, 2019).

The security implications of the activities of this militia group are glaring. For instance, Jibo (2021) argued that the large ungoverned spaces in the area have made it easy for this group to operate easily. Not only have the people under this bandit's rule become 'non-people' they are impoverished and terrorized all the time and, therefore, live a wretched life (Jibo, 2021, p.180). In addition, as a result of the "ungoverned space", the government is unable to provide basic amenities such as schools, hospitals among others. Even some of the amenities in the affected areas were closed down for years.

The Gbatse Kidnap Gang

This group was led by one Iorwuese Ikpila in Ushongo Local Government of the State (Jibo, 2021). This gang was mainly involved in armed robbery and kidnapping in some Local Government Areas such as: Ukum, Logo, Kastina-Ala, Ushongo and Kwande. The activities of this group came limelight in 2019, when the gang leader along with five others were arrested in Gbatse, Ushongo by the Men and Officers of Nigerian Police, Benue State Command on the 21st September, 2019 (Nigeria Oracle, 2019). According to the statement released by the then Commissioner of Police, Benue State Command Mukaddas Garba:

Intelligence was gathered that a kidnap gang within Ushongo Local Government of Benue State and consequent upon the receipt of this information, a crack squad was deployed to the area for investigation. On the 21 September, 2019, the gang leader Mr. Iorwuese Ikpila with five others were arrested. During investigation, the suspects confessed that they have been arm robbers operating within Zone A who opted for kidnapping as a result of tight deployment of security operatives on the highways. The gang also confessed to the kidnapping of sixteen (16) persons, robbed them of their vehicles, motorcycles and other belongings, killing the victims, buried the corpses and planted cassava on their graves as a way of covering the crime (Nigeria Oracle, 2019, p.1-2).

The corpses of the victims of this group were exhumed and identified by their family members.

As demonstrated above, Benue State is under serious security threats. Some like the farmers-herders are part of the general security problems confronting the Nigerian state while others are a creation of our political elites. Again Jibo (2021, p.200) eloquently captures this thus: "Tiv politicians have been less focused since the return of democracy in 1999. Many of them see politics as the capture of state power to enjoy themselves at the expense of the development of the larger society".

The Impact of Banditry and Insecurity on Development in Benue State

The various forms of insecurity discussed above have negative implications for development in Benue State. The impacts of insecurity on development in the state will be interrogated under the following themes: destruction of lives and properties, destruction of sources of livelihoods (income) of victims, destruction of infrastructural facilities, food insecurity, reduction of internal revenue for the state, and disruption in economic activities, among others.

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Loss of Lives and Properties: According to Gisaor (2023), no fewer than 28,997 people are reported to have lost their lives to insecurity in Benue State, even as over 54,476 houses and farm produce valued at over N21 billion were also destroyed in the state. Some deaths have not been officially reported. The conflict between farmers and herders' conflict has resulted in displacement. According to a report by the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) (2024), there are 14 camps in five LGAs housing internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the state. These camps are in Makurdi, Guma, Gwer West, Logo, and Agatu LGAs. The report further states that only six IDP camps shelter over two million people. These IDPs totally depend on the government and other non-governmental organisations for their survival.

Food Insecurity: According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (2019), communal violence cost Nigeria over \$12 billion worth of agricultural production during the last third of the 20th century, given the importance of agricultural livelihood to overall economic wellbeing, especially in conflict-prone areas of Nigeria. Abughdyer (2016) stated that a total of 664.4 hectares (56.4%) of farmland were destroyed in Benue State from 2010–2014 in the three local government areas of Agatu, Guma, and Logo as a result of farmers and herdsman crises. This situation has led to a reduction in output due to inadequate availability of labour due to fear of death threats or violent attacks on farmers on their way to their fields or on their farms. Owners of farms and those working for them are perpetually afraid of attacks from Fulani herdsman. The whole scenario has deterred farm labourers and affected productivity due to inadequate and improperly timed weeding and harvesting. The fear of death has psychological effects on the soldiers, who are more or less uncertain of future occurrences. Due to the activities of Fulani herders, farmers have experienced a situation where they were forced to abandon their farmlands, leaving them overgrown by weeds. This resulted in low productivity. This development portends a great danger for food production in Nigeria since the state is the hub of the nation's food security.

The activities of militia groups have a profound impact on food security in Zone A of the state. For instance, the chairman of the Farmers Association of Nigeria, Benue State Chapter, Saaku Aondongu, stated that about 40 percent of farmers in the zone had been displaced in the state since the crisis escalated in 2018. The chairman further lamented that:

Farmers in so many local government areas of Benue State are not able to cultivate crops. Half of Logo Local Government Area is left to insecurity. Farmers are all in IDP camps. So many farmers are being killed. There are no farms. In Kwande LGA, the majority of the people are not farming because most of the farmers were chased out of their homes by the herdsman conflict. So, there is a real food shortage in the state. That is why the prices of garri, cassava, and yam are so high. There used to be a glut of these products (Kwanga, Iormanger, Udoo, & Shabu, 2022, p. 20).

Farmers within this area may find it hard to go to their farms as well as to get enough food crops to the market, resulting in issues of food insecurity and a probable unprecedented hike in the prices of farm produce in the markets. The activities of these kidnappers have the potential to cripple the economy and breakdown the social and economic activities of the people. Traders, also for fear of becoming the next victims, have decided to sort for alternative options. All these seem to have affected the economy of the area.

Reduction of Internal Revenue for the State: Insecurity has affected economic activities like trading. In 2021, Ugba International Yam Market completely closed down for months due to the herdsman-farmers crisis. The Chairman of Ugba Yam Market remarked that “the Ugba International Yam Market in Logo Local Government Area of Benue State used to be a beehive of activities. As a weekly market that holds Wednesdays, with traders mostly from the south-east travelling to buy truckloads of yams there, farmers used to assemble their products ahead of the market day” (Kwanga, Iormanger, Udoo, & Shabu, 2022, p. 18). The officer in the yam market stated that “farmers from all council wards in Logo would bring their yams here, especially in September. A day after the market day, lorries numbering between 45 and 48 would load yams from Ugba International Market and head to Southern Nigeria. Now that is no longer possible. Now we barely get up to 10 truckloads on a market day. This has a lot of implications for the internal revenue of the state.

Destruction of Infrastructural Facilities: Violence between farmers and herders, intra-ethnic or communal misunderstandings, and attacks by bandits, militants, and other criminals in local communities in Benue State have destroyed hospitals, markets, and schools' infrastructure and forced many children out of school after displacing their parents. According to UNICEF (2022), over 260, 000 children have left school due to unabated violence in villages in Guma, Gwer-West, Makurdi, Logo, Katsina-Ala, Agatu, Ukum, parts of Kwande, and Buruku local governments of Benue State. School enrollment has dropped significantly due to assaults by attackers as teachers and students fled for their lives, abandoning the structures as the violence persists in their communities. In Gwer-West Local Government Area, at least 66 primary and junior secondary schools out of the 140 have been either destroyed or abandoned and left to rot in rural communities, leaving 12,507 children out of school (SUBEB, 2022).

Furthermore, insecurity has led to the burning down of five police stations and 33 markets in parts of the state; “and the burning of police stations and markets further entails the suspension of law and order and all economic activities relevant to production, distribution, and exchange; hence, the net effect has been the intensification of poverty and pauperization among the Benue people (Gisaor, 2023).

Disruption in Economic Activities: Farmers and herders' conflict and other forms of insecurity has resulted to disruption of economic activities such as farming and trading. The destruction of lives, homes, crops, farms, domestic trees, seeds and seedlings makes it difficult for the affected people to restart their life supporting activities. This has resulted to the total collapse of farming and other economic activities has raises the prospect of rural unemployment, farming and starvation in the affected communities.

Banditry, Insecurity and Development in Benue State

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Insecurity in Benue State has negatively affected development in Benue State. This has led to the loss of over 28,997 lives and properties, with 54,476 houses and farm produce valued at over N21 billion destroyed. Conflict between farmers and herders has caused displacement, leading to food insecurity and a real food shortage. Militia groups' activities have affected economic activities, with the Ugba International Yam Market closed down. Violence between farmers and herders, intra-ethnic misunderstandings, and attacks have destroyed infrastructure, forcing many children out of school. The burning down of police stations and 33 markets has intensified poverty and pauperization among the Benue people.

To address these challenges, a comprehensive strategy involving the following steps can be implemented:

- i. Enhance law enforcement and security: Strengthening the capacity of local police and security forces to effectively combat banditry and prevent conflicts between farmers and herders is crucial. This may involve better training, equipment, and intelligence-sharing among different agencies.
- ii. Invest in infrastructure and economic development: Developing the state's infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and electricity, can create job opportunities and improve access to markets for local farmers. Additionally, promoting small and medium-sized enterprises and attracting private investments can contribute to economic growth and development.
- iii. Address the root causes of banditry and insecurity: Poverty, unemployment, and social marginalization can contribute to the rise of banditry and insecurity. Implementing policies that address these issues, such as creating job opportunities, providing education and skills training, and promoting social inclusion, can help prevent individuals from turning to criminal activities.
- iv. Addressing banditry, insecurity, and development challenges in Benue State requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders, including the government, local communities, and international partners. By implementing a comprehensive strategy that focuses on law enforcement, conflict resolution, infrastructure development, essential services, and addressing the root causes of these issues, the state can work towards a safer and more prosperous future for its residents.

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