RESEARCH ARTICLE

Breaking the Cycle: A Study of the Causes and Motivations of Banditry in Sankera, Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Banditry has become a major security and development challenge in Nigeria's North Central region, with the Sankera axis of Benue State, comprising Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum Local Government Areas, severely affected. Although existing studies have documented the consequences of banditry for rural communities, less attention has been paid to the conditions that enable its emergence, the motivations of those involved and the processes through which violence persists. This study examined the structural and situational causes of banditry in Sankera, the motivations for participation, its effects on affected communities and possible interventions. The study adopted a qualitative case study design, drawing on interviews with 33 participants, nine focus group discussions and document review. The data were analysed using content and narrative analysis. The findings indicate that banditry is sustained by interacting factors, including poverty and youth unemployment, weak and distrusted security institutions, political patronage and corruption, the circulation of arms from earlier conflicts, the weakening of traditional authority and the militarisation of herder–farmer disputes. Reported motivations for participation include livelihood pressures, abandonment by political patrons, perceived impunity, income from coerced farming and distrust of government commitments. The findings further suggest that banditry creates a reinforcing cycle: violence disrupts livelihoods, displaces households and interrupts schooling, deepening socioeconomic vulnerability and weakening confidence in public institutions. The study argues that disrupting this cycle requires coordinated interventions that combine civilian protection and accountability with livelihood-based reintegration, youth employment, responsible community-based security, arms control, stronger traditional dispute-resolution institutions and sustained partnerships with religious organisations and civil society. It concludes that durable progress depends on addressing both the conditions that enable banditry and the consequences through which it may reproduce itself.

Keywords: banditry; causes; motivations; Sankera; Benue State; rural insecurity

1 Introduction

Banditry has become one of the most complex and persistent security challenges in Nigeria, with serious consequences for rural livelihoods, governance and human security. Armed banditry has spread from the north-west into parts of the north-central zone, appearing as violent village raids, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling and other crimes that disrupt social and economic life (Mikail et al., 2025; Rufus and Ogbe, 2025). Bandit groups operate across poorly policed rural landscapes and exploit weak institutions and fragile local economies. The consequences go beyond deaths and destruction to include trauma, persistent fear and social dislocation (Zubairu and Bashar, 2025).

Benue State shows how heavily this burden can fall on an agrarian economy. Food inflation in the state reached 51.8 per cent year on year in April 2025, well above the national food inflation rate of about 21.26 per cent, a gap that has been linked to insecurity-induced disruption of farming, transport and rural markets (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). A survey in conflict-affected parts of the state found that about 72 per cent of households had experienced at least one form of insecurity within a year, that 68 per cent of respondents had abandoned farmlands and that 59 per cent reported restricted market access (Tersoo and Iorhen, 2024). Econometric work also finds statistically significant declines in crop and livestock output as insecurity rises (Ijirshar et al., 2025).

Within Benue, the Sankera axis has become a centre of the crisis. Reports by the Coalition of Sankera Elites, cited by Haazande (2026), put the number of people killed since 2023 at more than one thousand and the number of settlements deserted at more than two thousand. Gunmen attacked Gbagir community in March 2024, killing dozens of residents, and later attacks in places such as Mbacher pushed more families into displacement. Yet the literature on Benue largely documents effects. It says much less about what drives individuals into banditry and how structural conditions and personal motivations combine. That gap matters because policy responses have remained mostly reactive and militarised, and interventions that do not address causes tend to treat symptoms. This paper responds by examining the causes and motivations of banditry in Sankera, its effects on communities and the interventions that could break the cycle.

2 Statement of the problem

Nigerian scholarship identifies poverty, unemployment and social marginalisation as drivers of rural banditry (Dangiwa, 2022; Nwankpa, 2024), and shows that weak governance and limited rural policing allow bandit groups to operate with relative impunity (Adegbami and Kugbayi, 2025). However, most studies treat community impacts, victimisation and structural explanations in isolation. Very few examine how structural pressures connect with the decisions, networks and grievances of the people who take part in violence (Yunusa and Dawakin Tofa, 2024). Without this insight, interventions risk targeting visible symptoms while the conditions that reproduce banditry remain in place.

The Sankera axis has faced this problem over time. Repeated attacks have disrupted farming, displaced households, closed schools and weakened social cohesion, while government responses, mainly joint task force deployments and police operations, have brought temporary relief but no lasting peace (Haazande, 2026). This study therefore asks what structural and situational conditions produce banditry in Sankera, what motivates individuals to join it, what it does to communities, and what could break the cycle.

3 Objectives of the study

The study aimed to:

1. investigate the structural and situational causes of banditry in Sankera;
2. explore the motivations of individuals involved in banditry;
3. assess the impacts of banditry on local communities, livelihoods and social cohesion; and
4. propose evidence-based interventions to break the cycle of violence in Sankera.

4 Literature review and analytical framework

4.1 Banditry in Nigeria

Banditry in Nigeria is now understood as a pattern of organised armed violence in rural areas, involving village raids, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, extortion and the destruction of livelihoods. These activities are rarely isolated incidents. They tend to follow recurring patterns of attack on farming communities, travellers and herders, with the aim of seizing assets, extracting payment or forcing people off their land. Studies link the increasing frequency and sophistication of attacks to forced migration, disrupted local economies and deep human insecurity (Rufus and Ogbe, 2025; Zubairu and Bashar, 2025). As villages are abandoned and farmland is left uncultivated, the displacement that violence causes can in turn weaken the local economies and social networks that once held communities together.

Much of this work, however, describes general national trends rather than particular states or the motives of perpetrators. Because the literature often treats banditry as a single national phenomenon, it pays limited attention to how local conditions shape its form, such as land use, settlement patterns, ethnic and occupational relations, and the strength of local security arrangements. It also says little about why individuals join armed groups or how those groups are organised and sustained. This leaves an important gap for state-level analysis, since the experience of banditry in one part of the country may differ considerably from that in another.

4.2 Structural drivers

A central theme in the literature is structural poverty and unemployment among rural youths. Dangiwa (2022) argues that rural poverty, lack of jobs and social marginalisation create environments in which criminal networks flourish, and Mikail et al. (2025) show that economic deprivation and limited livelihood options increase young people's susceptibility to recruitment. Where legitimate sources of income are scarce, armed groups can offer money, status and protection that young people cannot easily obtain elsewhere. Rural underdevelopment, including poor infrastructure, limited schooling and weak social services, intensifies this vulnerability (Nwankpa, 2024). Together, these studies suggest that the conditions that produce recruits are built into the everyday realities of rural life rather than being merely temporary shocks.

A second theme is weak governance. Limited law-enforcement capacity, ineffective rural policing and fragile state structures erode public trust and allow armed groups to act with impunity (Adegbami and Kugbayi, 2025). When communities cannot rely on the state to protect them or to punish offenders, perpetrators face fewer consequences and violence becomes easier to repeat. In this literature, banditry is both a criminal enterprise and a survival strategy rooted in economic desperation. This dual reading is important because it frames the problem as one of livelihoods and institutional failure as much as of crime, and it suggests that security responses alone are unlikely to address the underlying causes.

4.3 Banditry and insecurity in Benue State

Studies of Benue State document measurable economic effects. Beyond the food inflation and household survey evidence cited above, Utobo et al. (2025) report rising household food insecurity, greater reliance on negative coping strategies and declining market access in affected areas. These findings show that the consequences of insecurity reach well beyond direct casualties. They disrupt

farming cycles, reduce household incomes and make it harder for families to sell produce or buy essential goods, with effects that can persist long after an attack has ended.

Fiase and Gbaden (2024) connect banditry and insecurity to the state's development prospects. Because Benue depends so heavily on agriculture, the developmental cost of insecurity is amplified, since attacks on farming communities strike directly at the economic base of the state. What these studies share is a focus on victims and outcomes, with little first-hand evidence on the motivations of those who commit violence. This imbalance means that current knowledge describes the damage done to communities more fully than it explains the incentives, pathways and circumstances that lead people to take part in banditry, which is the gap that further empirical work on perpetrators could help to fill.

4.4 Analytical framework

Two perspectives guide the analysis. Merton's (1938) strain theory holds that deviance arises when a society promotes culturally approved goals, such as material security, but denies some groups the legitimate means to reach them. Young people in Sankera who face unemployment and decayed rural economies are in this position, and the theory helps to interpret why some turn to illegitimate means. Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) distinction between greed and grievance as sources of organised violence draws attention to the profit opportunities that armed groups see, such as ransom, cattle and extortion, and to the grievances that make recruits willing, such as exclusion and betrayal. Taken together, the perspectives allow the study to treat banditry as the product of both pressure and opportunity, and to explain why motivations that appear personal are patterned by structure.

The literature establishes drivers and impacts but offers little Benue-specific evidence that links structural conditions to the lived reasoning of participants and communities. This study contributes such evidence for Katsina-Ala, Ukum and Logo.

5 Methodology

The study used a qualitative case study design, which suits an in-depth investigation of banditry as a socially embedded and context-specific phenomenon. The design permits attention to both remote structural factors and immediate personal circumstances, and it captures lived experiences, perceptions and meanings that surveys would miss. The study was conducted in the Sankera axis in the north-eastern part of Benue State, comprising Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum Local Government Areas, a contiguous socio-cultural and economic zone. The area is predominantly agrarian, with yam, cassava, maize, rice, soybeans and sesame as the main crops, alongside livestock rearing. It is characterised by rural poverty, youth unemployment, limited infrastructure and restricted access to formal education and social services. Social organisation is largely communal, with traditional institutions and kinship networks playing a role in conflict management, although prolonged insecurity has strained these structures. The area was chosen for the intensity and persistence of banditry, the diversity of affected populations across three local government areas and the availability of institutions that support safe fieldwork.

The population comprised community members affected by banditry, key informants including traditional rulers, religious leaders, security personnel and civil servants, and other residents with relevant knowledge. Purposive sampling was used to select 33 respondents drawn from farmers, traders, civil servants, teachers, youth leaders, vigilante members, displaced persons, pastors, priests and traditional rulers, with attention to gender, religion and community role (Table 1). Interviews

were held between 2024 and 2025 in homes, parish houses, mosques, markets and informal gathering points for displaced families, and were conducted in forms suited to respondents' literacy levels. Nine focus group discussions were held, three in each local government area, each with six to twelve participants and moderated by a trained facilitator with a note taker. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Document review of books, journal articles, government and NGO reports and media sources supplied context and supported triangulation.

Table 1. Distribution of interview respondents and focus group discussions.

Local Government Area	Respondents	Towns/villages covered	FGDs held
Ukum	14	12	3
Logo	9	8	3
Katsina-Ala	10	10	3
Total	**33**	**30**	**9**

Source: Field survey, 2024 to 2025.

In the findings, accounts of motivation are drawn from community members, religious leaders, security personnel and others in close contact with armed actors, as well as from public statements by repentant fighters recorded in interviews and media reports.

5.1 Data analysis and trustworthiness

Transcripts and field notes were coded and grouped into themes through content analysis, namely structural and socio-economic drivers, immediate motivations and recruitment, impacts on livelihoods and social life, and responses and gaps. Narrative analysis was then used to attend to how respondents framed and told their experiences. Themes were compared across interviews, group discussions and documents to triangulate, and checked against existing literature. Interviewees are identified in the text by surname, place and date. Full details are available in Haazande (2026).

6 Findings

6.1 Structural and situational causes of banditry

Poverty and unemployment: Respondents repeatedly named poverty and joblessness as the soil in which banditry grows. A farmer in Afia explained that poverty reduces the ability of young people to resist recruitment because desperation overrides moral scruples (Tyonyion, interview, Afia, March 2024). A businessman in Tordonga observed that where a significant share of the population lives below the poverty line, the struggle for daily sustenance pushes some to illegal means (Tarhembe, interview, Tordonga, October 2024). Respondents linked unemployment to frustration, alienation and resentment (Tombu, interview, Atoo Mbaahan, March 2024; Shieza, interview, Ugbaam, April 2024). A trader in Zaki-Biam added that unemployed youths are more likely to take high-risk options (Iwan, interview, Zaki-Biam, March 2024). Bandit leaders were said to exploit this by presenting their activities as a form of economic redistribution to young men who feel neglected by government and society.

Weak security infrastructure: Interviewees described police who are under-resourced, poorly motivated and slow to respond. A businessman in Anyiin said rural police lack equipment and personnel to respond quickly, allowing bandits to act with impunity (Nyor, interview, Anyiin, May 2025). A

teacher in Akaa Akundo pointed to low morale caused by poor pay and support (Ukur, interview, Akaa Akundo, April 2024). Respondents also cited rugged terrain that gives armed groups hideouts (Icheren, interview, Afia, November 2024), bureaucratic delay in security decision-making (Vendega, interview, Kyado, July 2024) and reports of collusion with bandits or bribery of security personnel (Ujege, interview, Ugbaam, November 2024). The result is distrust between communities and security forces, which weakens the flow of intelligence and leaves community policing underdeveloped (Alom, interview, Ukum, December 2024).

Political patronage and corruption: A recurring account was that political godfathers arm young people to intimidate opponents and win elections, then abandon them once the polls are over and make no attempt to disarm them. Many of the weapons now in bandit hands were supplied in this way. Left without patrons or income but still armed, these groups turn to banditry for a livelihood. Respondents also described diverted security funds, underpaid police and politicised vigilante groups (Shabem, interview, Kpanenge, March 2024), delayed or dismissed prosecutions of those linked to banditry, and amnesty programmes that were largely symbolic and marked by favouritism (Haazande, 2026). A businessman in Kpanenge said traditional institutions had been politicised, with some chiefs accused of shielding sponsors (Ushageri, interview, Kpanenge, March 2024). The effect is a climate of impunity in which banditry becomes an attractive option for disenfranchised youths.

Breakdown of traditional authority: Elders and chiefs once settled disputes and enforced communal norms. Respondents and documents described how state encroachment, poverty, political co-option, intergenerational disrespect and the arrival of firearms have weakened these institutions, creating a vacuum that criminal elements exploit (Haazande, 2026). Armed groups now target traditional rulers who try to enforce norms. A retired civil servant in Kyado said that traditional mechanisms for resolving farmer-herder disputes were once sufficient but have broken down as both sides resort to force (Ukumaga, interview, Kyado, July 2024). Respondents also reported that some traditional rulers connive with bandits and provide them with safe haven, so that institutions meant to guard communal order become enablers of violence and ordinary people lose faith in them.

Proliferation of arms: Respondents traced the weapons in circulation to several sources: arms left unrecovered after earlier conflicts such as the Tiv-Jukun crisis and the Zaki-Biam events, trafficking across porous borders (Ubwa, interview, Shitile, December 2024), local manufacture by blacksmiths (Saave, interview, Tordonga, December 2024), and weapons distributed by politicians during elections and never collected (Adingir, interview, Tordonga, December 2024). A farmer in Katsina-Ala said the availability of arms had turned disputes that could have been settled by dialogue into deadly confrontations (Begha, interview, Katsina-Ala, December 2024).

Militarisation of herder-farmer conflict: Respondents described competition over land and water, shrinking grazing routes and encroachment on farms, which together moved a once manageable dispute toward armed confrontation (Ukumaga, interview, Kyado, July 2024; Kpamnende, interview, Kyado, July 2024). As both herders and farmers armed themselves for protection, trust collapsed and each side came to see the other as a threat to survival (Tyough, interview, Mbadyul, May 2025). Respondents said bandits infiltrate these conflict zones and pass as farmers or herders (Adema, interview, Abeda, May 2025), and that they profit from the chaos through cattle rustling, kidnapping and extortion (Hur, interview, Anyiin, May 2025; Ajai, interview, Mbakyongo, March 2024). The roots in earlier violence are also clear. The militia activity during the Tiv unrest and the Zaki-Biam crisis of 2000 and 2001 left behind arms and armed men who did not demobilise, and later evolved into organised bandit groups (Haazande, 2026).

Table 2. Structural and situational causes of banditry and how they operate.

Cause	How it contributes to banditry
Poverty and unemployment	Reduces resistance to recruitment; offers armed groups a pool of idle, aggrieved youths
Weak security infrastructure	Slow response, low morale and corruption lower the risk of capture; trust and intelligence flow erode
Political patronage and corruption	Godfathers supply weapons then abandon the youths after elections; impunity for sponsors; symbolic amnesty
Decline and complicity of traditional authority	Customary dispute resolution weakens; some rulers shield bandits and provide safe haven
Circulation of arms	Leftover, trafficked and locally made weapons raise the capacity for violence
Militarised herder-farmer conflict	Self-defence turns into armed confrontation and cover for criminal gangs

Source: Field interviews and focus group discussions, 2024 to 2025.

6.2 Motivations of individuals involved in banditry

The motivations of individuals involved in banditry in Sankera are inferred from the accounts of respondents who live and work alongside armed actors and from statements attributed to repentant fighters. These accounts provide insights into the perceived incentives and circumstances associated with participation in armed violence, although they should not be taken to represent the motives of every individual involved. Five interconnected factors emerge from the evidence: livelihood pressures, political abandonment and grievance, economic opportunity and perceived impunity, the pursuit of protection and group belonging, and distrust of government commitments.

Livelihood and survival constitute one of the principal motivations identified in the accounts. Respondents described banditry as an alternative source of income in an environment where insecurity has made farming increasingly difficult and unprofitable. Evidence from reintegration initiatives further suggests that material assistance can influence whether former fighters establish civilian livelihoods. According to Haazande (2026), fighters who received vocational training or start-up capital tended to remain in their communities, whereas the withdrawal of support was associated with some returning to violence. Church members in Logo reportedly pooled offerings to purchase motorbikes for repentant fighters willing to work as commercial riders, while parishes in Ukum raised funds for sewing machines and goats for widows and former militia members (Haazande, 2026). These examples suggest that viable livelihood alternatives can support disengagement from armed activity by reducing the economic pressures associated with returning to violence. They do not, by themselves, establish that poverty was the original or sole motivation for participation. A farmer captured the tension between moral appeals and material circumstances when he observed that people might agree with sermons on forgiveness but still recognise that forgiveness does not plant yams (Ihungwa, interview, Kyado, December 2024). His observation illustrates why appeals for peace may have limited effects when the economic conditions of rural households remain unresolved.

Political abandonment and grievance constitute a second motivation. Respondents described young men who had been armed during election campaigns and subsequently left without political patrons, income or clear prospects after the elections. Such accounts suggest that political mobilisation may create relationships, expectations and access to weapons that persist beyond the immediate electoral purpose for which they were established. When political sponsorship ends without effective demobilisation or alternative livelihood opportunities, some former recruits may

remain connected to armed networks or seek other means of sustaining themselves. This interpretation is consistent with Merton's (1938) strain theory insofar as restricted legitimate opportunities may encourage the pursuit of alternative means, while the grievance dimension of Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) framework helps explain how perceived abandonment and injustice can be used to justify continued violence. Resentment towards a state perceived as neglectful or corrupt may reinforce these grievances, particularly when armed leaders portray violence as a means of redistributing resources or resisting exclusion. Such narratives, however, should be distinguished from evidence that the stated grievances are the actual motives of every participant or that the benefits of violence are distributed equitably.

Economic opportunity and perceived impunity provide a third explanation for participation. Respondents associated the continuation of banditry with slow policing, poorly remunerated security personnel, alleged corruption within judicial processes and the absence of significant legal consequences for influential individuals implicated in serious offences. Haazande (2026) reports that respondents believed some influential figures associated with cattle rustling and armed robbery had escaped meaningful legal action. Where perpetrators expect limited punishment and anticipate material gains, the perceived risks of criminal activity may decline relative to its potential rewards. Respondents also described armed groups compelling farmers to cultivate land and subsequently taking a share of the produce or the proceeds from its sale. Ransom, cattle rustling, extortion and coerced agricultural production represent different sources of material benefit and may allow armed groups to sustain their activities beyond individual attacks. These practices indicate that banditry can develop into an organised economic activity rather than remain an occasional response to deprivation. In this respect, the findings are consistent with the incentive-based dimension of Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) framework. The significance of material gain, however, lies not only in the income it offers but also in the institutional conditions that allow armed actors to obtain and retain those gains with limited accountability.

Protection and group pressure constitute a fourth factor, particularly where insecurity encourages communities and individuals to organise for self-defence. Respondents described circumstances in which young men entered militia or vigilante structures in response to perceived threats and subsequently became involved in activities extending beyond community protection. This suggests a possible transition from defensive mobilisation to predatory violence, especially where weapons become normalised, group loyalties intensify and oversight is weak. In the context of farmer–herder tensions, the circulation of arms and the expectation that communities must defend themselves can blur distinctions between protection, retaliation and criminal activity. Terfa (interview, Kyado, December 2024) alleged that vigilante groups had committed extrajudicial killings and mistakenly identified civilians as bandits, citing an incident in Zaki-Biam in 2022. If substantiated, such incidents illustrate how unaccountable security practices can generate further grievances and cycles of retaliation. Nevertheless, participation in community defence should not be equated automatically with banditry; the analytical issue is how defensive mobilisation may, under particular conditions, develop into violence against civilians or become incorporated into wider networks of criminal activity.

Distrust of government commitments constitutes a fifth factor, particularly in relation to surrender and disengagement. Respondents referred to the case of the militia leader Terwase Akwaza, known as Gana, who they said was killed while travelling to surrender under a government amnesty, accompanied by religious leaders. A farmer in Ukum explained that this experience had weakened young people's confidence in government assurances, adding that the church retained a voice where state

institutions had lost credibility (Udeh, interview, Ukum LGA). These accounts suggest that the perceived risks of surrender can influence decisions to remain armed, even where peace overtures are made. Where combatants believe that surrender will expose them to harm or that government commitments may not be honoured, the immediate risks of disengagement may appear greater than the risks of continuing armed activity. Religious and traditional intermediaries may help address this problem by providing trusted channels of communication and facilitating contact between armed actors, communities and public authorities. Haazande (2026) describes such efforts in Sankera, while the public renunciation of violence and handover of weapons by former militia leaders before congregations and traditional councils in November 2024 indicate that disengagement has been possible in some cases. These events provide grounds for examining the role of trusted intermediaries, although the sustainability of disengagement must be assessed separately from the initial surrender of weapons or public renunciation of violence.

Taken together, the findings suggest that participation in banditry in Sankera cannot be explained by a single motivation. Livelihood pressures and material incentives interact with political grievances, opportunities created by weak accountability, social relationships formed through armed mobilisation and distrust of the institutions responsible for security and reintegration. These factors may influence individuals differently and at different stages of their involvement. Some may initially enter armed groups in search of protection or income, while others may be drawn by political connections, grievance or the prospect of material gain. Continued participation may then become sustained by the economic benefits of violence, group ties and uncertainty about the safety of surrender. This interpretation underscores the need to distinguish the circumstances that lead individuals into armed groups from the mechanisms that sustain their participation and the conditions that make disengagement possible.

6.3 Impacts of banditry on communities, livelihoods and social cohesion

Lives and property: Beyond the toll reported by the Coalition of Sankera Elites, respondents spoke of daily fear. Families sleep in the bush, travel is avoided and residents describe being unable to move freely without risk of attack (Haazande, 2026). Farmlands have become battlegrounds in Katsina-Ala, and farmers are killed or too afraid to return (Veor, interview, Katsina-Ala, March 2024). Kidnapping for ransom drains already poor households.

Displacement and humanitarian conditions: Thousands live in informal camps or with host families in overcrowded conditions with limited food, health care and schooling. Respondents reported cholera and malaria in camps and described children in camps showing signs of post-traumatic stress and adults displaying symptoms of anxiety and depression, with almost no mental health services available (Terfa, interview, Kyado, December 2024). Churches and mosques have converted parish halls, classrooms and compounds into shelters.

Economic decline: Farming and trade have contracted. Zaki-Biam International Market now operates at a minimum because of insecurity and bandit taxation, and small enterprises have closed under extortion and theft (Haazande, 2026). Roads linking communities to markets were repeatedly attacked in 2023 and 2024. Respondents added that bandits force farmers to farm for them and take a share of the harvest or of the proceeds from its sale, which turns the farmer's labour and land into a source of bandit income and leaves farming households with less. These local accounts are consistent with the state-level evidence on food inflation, abandoned farmland and falling output.

Education and health: Schools have been targeted, with several closing in 2023 after students and staff were abducted, and others reduced their activities (Haazande, 2026). Interviewees said school attendance fell significantly and that thousands of children lost access to education (Chiahemba, interview, Logo LGA, October 2024). The General Hospital in Anyiin was attacked and left non-operational (Agena, interview, Ikyoo, March 2025). Respondents warned that children out of school are more easily drawn into crime, which links this impact directly to the supply of future recruits.

Social cohesion and governance: Displacement has scattered families, weakened traditional support networks and ended many ceremonies that reinforced solidarity (Haazande, 2026). Mistrust within and between communities has grown, including suspicion about who may be an informant or collaborator. Militarised responses have added to the strain. Farmers said they fear retaliation from both bandits and the military and are caught in the crossfire (Ayilamo, interview, Kpanenge, March 2024).

6.4 Existing responses and their limits

The government has relied mainly on the deployment of security forces under operations such as Whirl Stroke and Ayem Akpatuma, and the Army expanded its presence in 2022 with new bases at Katsina-Ala and Zaki-Biam (Dzuanah, interview, Ukum, March 2024). These deployments neutralised some bandit leaders and recovered some territory, but respondents reported human rights abuses and a lack of long-term community engagement, so that banditry resurfaces when operations ease. Vigilante groups respond quickly but raise concerns about methods and accountability. Dialogue and peacebuilding, particularly by religious and traditional leaders, have produced the most visible examples of disarmament and reintegration, but these efforts are under-resourced, fragmented across denominations and vulnerable to political interference (Haazande, 2026).

7 The reproduction of banditry and the conditions for disruption in Sankera

The findings suggest that banditry in Sankera is better understood as the product of interacting structural, institutional and political conditions than as either criminal opportunism or a direct consequence of deprivation alone. Poverty, unemployment and restricted livelihood opportunities may generate pressures that increase the vulnerability of some young people to recruitment, but these conditions do not automatically translate into participation in armed violence. Their effects depend partly on the opportunities available through armed networks, the perceived risks of participation and the availability of alternative sources of income and security. Weak law enforcement, impunity and the circulation of small arms may reduce the constraints on violent activity, while the legacies of communal conflict, undemobilised militias and broken political relationships may supply networks, grievances and justifications for continued violence. Banditry therefore emerges from the interaction between the pressures that make recruitment possible, the opportunities that make armed activity feasible and the historical relationships through which violence is organised and sustained. This interpretation is consistent with Merton's (1938) strain theory and Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) analysis of the relationship between economic opportunities and grievances in organised rebellion. It also accords with studies linking poverty, youth unemployment and weak governance to rural banditry in Nigeria (Dangiwa, 2022; Mikail et al., 2025). The implication is that deprivation should not be treated as a sufficient explanation for banditry; rather, its significance lies in how it interacts with institutional weaknesses, armed networks and the perceived rewards and risks of violent participation.

A more consequential finding is that the relationship between banditry and its underlying conditions is recursive. Violence does not merely arise from insecurity and economic hardship; it can intensify both. Attacks, threats and restrictions on movement disrupt farming, trade and access to markets, reducing household income and weakening the economic foundations of rural communities. Displacement can further undermine livelihoods by separating households from farmland, social networks and productive assets. Where insecurity interrupts schooling, the effects extend beyond immediate educational losses: prolonged disengagement from education may narrow future employment opportunities and weaken young people's access to legitimate routes into economic and social life. These consequences do not make subsequent recruitment inevitable, but they may increase vulnerability where armed groups offer income, protection, status or access to resources that are otherwise difficult to obtain. In this way, the consequences of violence can reproduce some of the conditions that make continued recruitment possible. The cycle is also institutional and political. Security responses perceived as indiscriminate, unaccountable or ineffective may deepen distrust between communities and state authorities, weakening cooperation and the flow of information needed for effective protection. Similarly, failed or poorly supported amnesty initiatives may undermine confidence in surrender arrangements and discourage other combatants from disengaging. Banditry is therefore sustained not only by the circumstances preceding violence but also by the economic losses, social disruptions and institutional failures generated during its continuation. This feedback mechanism helps explain why interventions focused exclusively on military pressure may suppress armed activity temporarily without necessarily addressing the conditions that enable its recurrence.

The findings concerning traditional and religious intermediaries point to a possible mechanism for disrupting this cycle. Their influence appears to derive partly from relationships of trust with community members and, in some cases, armed actors who may be reluctant to engage directly with state institutions. Such relationships can create channels for negotiation, communicate assurances and make surrender arrangements more credible. However, the distinction between securing surrender and achieving sustainable reintegration is essential. Disengagement from armed activity may be temporary if former combatants return to communities where livelihoods remain insecure, social acceptance is uncertain and the prospects of civilian employment are limited. Practical assistance, including vocational training, tools and modest start-up capital, may help address these constraints by creating alternatives to participation in the conflict economy. The apparent erosion of gains where such support was absent suggests that dialogue and moral authority, although potentially valuable, may be insufficient without sustained material and institutional backing. This interpretation also raises questions about the state's role: community intermediaries may facilitate engagement, but their efforts require credible security guarantees, transparent reintegration arrangements and continuing support if local agreements are to endure.

These findings indicate that disrupting banditry in Sankera requires interventions that address the conditions sustaining violence at several interconnected levels. Security provision is necessary to protect communities and constrain armed groups, but its effectiveness may be limited where enforcement is inconsistent, accountability is weak or public confidence has deteriorated. Livelihood recovery, access to education and credible opportunities for civilian employment address some of the pressures that armed groups may exploit, while dialogue and reintegration programmes can help reduce the supply of recruits and facilitate disengagement. These interventions are complementary rather than interchangeable: livelihood programmes cannot substitute for protection, military operations cannot by themselves restore trust, and negotiated surrender cannot guarantee lasting

peace without viable reintegration pathways. The central analytical implication is that the persistence of banditry reflects a self-reinforcing relationship between insecurity, socioeconomic disruption and institutional distrust. Breaking that relationship requires not simply suppressing violence, but reducing the capacity of violence to reproduce the conditions on which its continuation depends.

8 Breaking the cycle of banditry in Sankera: Policy and community-based strategies

The findings suggest that disrupting banditry in Sankera requires coordinated interventions addressing the economic, institutional, political and communal conditions that sustain violence. The following recommendations translate the study's findings into practical measures for improving security, restoring livelihoods and strengthening community resilience.

Livelihood-based reintegration: State and local governments, development partners, non-governmental organisations and faith-based institutions should provide vocational training, start-up capital and agricultural inputs for repentant fighters participating in credible reintegration programmes. Support should also extend to widows, displaced households and other conflict-affected groups whose livelihoods have been undermined by insecurity. Such assistance can improve the prospects of sustainable civilian reintegration by providing alternatives to participation in armed groups.

Youth employment and agricultural recovery: The Benue State Government, local governments and development partners should expand rural employment opportunities through agricultural support, agro-processing, vocational training and improved access to markets. Measures to restore safe access to farmland should accompany these initiatives. These interventions would help rebuild productive livelihoods and reduce the economic vulnerabilities that armed groups may exploit for recruitment.

Accountable community-based security: The police, relevant security agencies, local governments and community leaders should strengthen community-based early-warning systems, improve police response times and establish reliable channels for reporting threats. Any authorised community policing or vigilante arrangements should operate under appropriate police oversight, clear legal authority, human-rights safeguards and mechanisms for investigating misconduct. These measures would strengthen civilian protection while encouraging cooperation between communities and security agencies.

Accountability for sponsors and perpetrators: Security agencies, investigative authorities, prosecutors, the judiciary and civil society should strengthen efforts to investigate credible allegations that individuals or institutions finance, arm or protect bandit groups. Prosecutions should be based on admissible evidence and due process, irrespective of the political or traditional status of those implicated. Amnesty and reintegration arrangements should also have transparent eligibility criteria, clear obligations and effective monitoring to reduce impunity and strengthen public confidence.

Control of illegal arms: Federal and state security agencies, relevant regulatory bodies and community leaders should intensify intelligence-led efforts to disrupt illegal arms trafficking and production. Lawful disarmament initiatives should be coordinated with the appropriate authorities and supported by community engagement and safeguards against exposing vulnerable populations to further attacks. Reducing the availability of illicit weapons would constrain the capacity of armed groups to sustain violence.

Strengthening traditional dispute-resolution institutions: Traditional councils and local governments should support chiefs and elders in mediation, community consultation and early-warning activities while reducing partisan interference in their responsibilities. These institutions should work with public authorities and community organisations to resolve disputes before they escalate into violence. Their effectiveness will depend on public trust, impartiality and inclusive representation of affected groups.

Protection of farmers and agricultural livelihoods: The police, relevant security agencies, local governments and agricultural authorities should improve protection around farming areas and access routes, particularly where insecurity restricts cultivation or exposes farmers to coercion. Confidential reporting channels should enable farmers to report threats, forced cultivation and produce extortion, while witnesses and complainants should receive appropriate protection against retaliation. These measures would support agricultural recovery and strengthen food and livelihood security.

Farmer–herder conflict prevention: The state government, local governments and representatives of affected farming and herding communities should facilitate locally negotiated land-use arrangements, lawful grazing access, water-point management and accessible mediation mechanisms. Such arrangements should respect applicable law and the rights of affected communities rather than presume that all banditry originates in farmer–herder disputes. The objective should be to resolve resource-related disagreements peacefully and prevent their escalation into wider violence.

Faith-based and civil society partnerships: Churches, mosques, non-governmental organisations and interfaith bodies should strengthen their contributions to mediation, reconciliation and community recovery. Training religious leaders in conflict mediation, referral procedures and trauma-informed support, alongside coordination across faith communities, could improve access to trusted channels for dialogue and early warning. These initiatives should be supported with adequate resources and linked to appropriate professional services where necessary.

Educational and psychosocial recovery: Ministries responsible for education and health, local governments, schools and development partners should rehabilitate damaged schools, improve school security and support displaced and conflict-affected children to resume their education. Psychosocial support should also be made accessible to children, families and communities affected by violence and displacement. These measures would address immediate recovery needs while helping to reduce the longer-term educational and social consequences of insecurity.

The field findings give particular importance to practical reintegration support and credible community intermediaries. Where material assistance accompanied disengagement from armed activity, the prospects for sustained reintegration appeared stronger; where support was absent, gains were more vulnerable to reversal. Reintegration programmes should therefore extend beyond initial surrender to include livelihood assistance, community engagement, appropriate accountability and follow-up to assess whether participants remain disengaged from violence. The findings also suggest that community radio, mobile-phone alert networks and youth peace clubs could provide accessible channels for early warning, information sharing and reconciliation. Respondents identified these approaches, while church-based initiatives offered a foundation for community engagement (Haazande, 2026). Their effectiveness would depend on reliable responses from the relevant authorities, responsible verification of reported threats and protection for those who provide information. Communication systems that fail to generate timely responses could deepen rather than restore public distrust.

Government credibility is equally important. The Gana case illustrates the potential consequences of broken or contested commitments in negotiations involving armed actors. Authorities should communicate the terms of surrender and reintegration arrangements clearly, honour lawful commitments and establish transparent procedures for monitoring implementation. Credibility, however, should not mean unconditional amnesty or immunity from accountability for serious offences. Rather, it requires consistency between public commitments, lawful procedures and actual implementation.

Implementation should prioritise immediate civilian protection, safe access to farmland, reliable threat-reporting channels and timely security responses, while strengthening accountability and credible reintegration arrangements. Longer-term efforts should focus on livelihood recovery, education, employment, local dispute resolution and psychosocial support. Progress should be assessed through indicators such as response times to reported threats, access to farmland, school attendance, livelihood recovery, sustained reintegration and the recurrence of attacks. Disrupting banditry in Sankera therefore requires a coordinated response in which security, accountability, livelihood recovery and community-based conflict prevention reinforce one another. The effectiveness of these interventions will depend not simply on their adoption, but on their consistent implementation and their ability to restore civilian security, rebuild public trust and reduce the conditions that sustain armed violence.

8.1 Limitations

The study covers three local government areas, so its findings may not apply elsewhere. Accounts of motivation come mostly from people in contact with armed actors and not from systematic interviews with active bandits, whose safety and security risks limit access. Respondents' accounts may reflect fear or bias, which the study tried to manage through triangulation. Future research could build on this baseline with longitudinal tracking of reintegrated fighters and a quantitative assessment of recruitment pathways.

9 Conclusion

The findings indicate that banditry in Sankera is sustained by the interaction of socioeconomic deprivation, institutional weaknesses, political patronage, the proliferation of illicit arms and unresolved communal grievances. Participation in armed activity is associated with livelihood pressures, grievances arising from broken political relationships, perceived impunity, income from coerced farming, armed self-defence and distrust of government commitments. The findings also suggest that the weakening of traditional authority and its alleged involvement in, or inability to prevent, some forms of violence may further complicate local conflict management. The consequences of banditry, including loss of lives, disruption of farming and markets, educational interruption, displacement and declining social cohesion, can deepen the vulnerabilities and institutional distrust that sustain insecurity. Banditry in Sankera is therefore not merely a consequence of existing deprivation and weak governance; its effects can also reinforce these conditions and undermine prospects for recovery. The study consequently argues that a durable response requires more than security operations. Effective interventions should combine civilian protection and accountability with livelihood recovery, credible reintegration arrangements, strengthened community institutions and trusted mediation. The reported experience of practical support accompanying engagement with former fighters suggests that dialogue and moral authority are more likely to contribute to sustained reintegration when they are connected to viable livelihood

opportunities and continuing community support. Such efforts require credible government commitments, appropriate safeguards and follow-up to establish whether disengagement from armed activity is sustained. Breaking the cycle of banditry in Sankera therefore depends on addressing both the conditions that enable violence and the socioeconomic and institutional consequences through which it may reproduce itself.

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