

Armed Banditry and Challenges of Governance System: Implications for National Development in Nigeria

Ahmodu Alhassan

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, The Federal Polytechnic Idah, Kogi State,
Nigeria

ahmodualhassan4@gmail.com

Abstract

Every society aims to develop its citizenry without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations. One of the challenges to national development is banditry. The criminal act leads to loss of lives and property, the disintegration of national unity or cohesion, the destruction of critical infrastructure, and the loss of investors. The dearth of literature on banditry as an obstacle to governance systems and development motivated this paper. Hence, the study examines the nexus between governance and armed bandits' activities, as well as its effects on the people and national development. The study is theoretically anchored in frustration-aggression theory to examine the growth and flourishing of armed banditry as obstacles to governance and its consequences for national development. The study employs secondary data sources, including a review of related literature, journals, write-ups, and textbooks. Findings show that banditry involving kidnapping, armed robbery, and theft is a threat to governance and national development. These violent crimes aggravate unemployment, food shortage, loss of lives, and property. This aggravates crime rates in Nigeria. The paper recommends intelligence security measures to counter the rising incidents of kidnapping in the country. Banditry is perpetrated with sophisticated weapons, and the source of those weapons should be investigated and blocked accordingly by the Federal Government of Nigeria. All illegal routes to the country should be thoroughly monitored by the Nigeria Customs Service. The unscrupulous members of the public who are smuggling weapons into the country should be arrested and brought to book. Their foreign accomplice should be handed over to Interpol for further investigation.

Keywords: Armed Banditry, Crimes, Development, National Development, Governance, Unemployment, Violence.

Introduction

National development is the harnessing of societal resources towards achieving social goals. As the present goals are being realized, efforts are being made to safeguard the future. There is no social commitment without inherent challenges; one of the obstacles to the attainment of national development goals is criminality. The crimes are manifested in different forms or dimensions. Presently, Nigerian society is bedeviled by banditry (Wallace & Silander, 2018). This is a violent crime whereby perpetrators take up arms and ammunition against innocent citizens. Examples of banditry are armed robbery, kidnapping, theft, and other related violent crimes. These violent crimes resulted in loss of life and property. Armed robbery is one of the organized crimes, whereby many people have lost their lives; for instance, the armed robbery incidents in Offa in Kwara State, Oye-Ekiti in Ekiti State, and Ikire in Osun State. Also, Aja in Lagos State and Akure in Ondo State have had their own banditry records. Many innocent souls have fallen victim to armed banditry, and properties worth millions of Naira have been lost. Some financial institutions have resorted to sketchy service to avert this menace (Hunter, 2013).

Kidnapping is another aspect of banditry. This is a violent crime whereby people are adopted, transported, and incarcerated. Nigeria has been battling banditry for a long time (Neack, 2017). The adoption of 276 girls from Chibok Secondary School in 2010 marked the beginning of mass adoption in Nigeria (Usman, 2021). Kidnapping is rampant in the North-Central Nigeria. There are traces of kidnapping in other geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Armed robbery is another form of banditry that undermines peace and development in Nigeria. Every geopolitical zone has its peculiarity of banditry. In the Southwest Nigeria, armed robbery is a criminal offence that undermines peace and stability in Southwestern Nigeria. Places such as Osun, Ogun, Ondo, and Ekiti recorded a high frequency of armed robbery. Underreporting of violent crimes is another challenge in getting reliable statistics on banditry in Nigeria. There are other cases of the kidnapping of students in Igbonla in Ikorodu, Lagos. Kidnappers extended nefarious acts to Offa, in Kwara State, whereby more than 20 persons were killed in a robbery operation. In the incident, police officers and pregnant women were gunned down. In Ondo State, there are reports of bullion van hijackings in Akure. On Thursday, May 6, 2021, the suspected armed robbers attacked bullion vans conveying money to Akure (Agency Report, 2021). Kidnapping leads to the suspension of telecommunications service in some parts of the North. Similarly, kidnapping in the North led to the closure of schools and banks, and it culminated in the suspension of economic activities.

However, despite twenty-five years of uninterrupted democratic governance in Nigeria, the country continues to experience poor-quality governance, manifested in persistent challenges such as unemployment, widespread poverty, low standards of living, and pervasive insecurity arising from insurgency, Boko Haram activities, banditry, and related criminalities (Adegbami & Kugbayi, 2024). The apparent inability of successive governments in Nigeria's Fourth Republic to effectively address these challenges has contributed to the emergence and deepening of other socio-political and economic problems. These challenges have increasingly undermined peace and national stability, impeded socio-economic development, and constrained the growth and performance of key sectors of the Nigerian economy.

One of the fundamental responsibilities of government is the maintenance of law and order. In response to the rising waves of banditry and other forms of criminal activity, the Nigerian government and relevant authorities have adopted various measures, including increased security votes, the establishment of special task forces, the implementation of community policing initiatives, and the creation of informal security arrangements. Despite these interventions, banditry has persisted, thereby undermining peace and frustrating social and economic development efforts. Existing literature has examined different dimensions of banditry in Nigeria. For instance, Chukwuna and Abdubakar (2021) explored crime-lordism in their analysis of banditry as an emerging phenomenon, while Abdul-Rashid (2021) focused on armed banditry and human security in North-West Nigeria. Similarly, Chukwena, Fruna, and Okpaleke (2014) investigated banditry and the crisis of public safety in Nigeria. Building on these studies, the present research examines the nexus between governance and armed banditry, and assesses its implications for citizens and national development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Banditry

Banditry refers to a form of organized criminal activity perpetrated by outlaws and characterized by the threat or use of violence. Individuals engaged in such acts, commonly referred to as bandits, commit crimes such as extortion, robbery, kidnapping, and murder, either individually or collectively. Conceptually, banditry is a broad and fluid category of criminality and, in

contemporary usage, is often used interchangeably with terms such as gangsterism, brigandage, marauding, terrorism, piracy, and theft (Moore, 2007). Armed banditry, in particular, denotes organized violent criminal operations carried out by groups primarily for economic gain. It is prevalent in rural areas and typically involves attacks on civilians, cattle rustling, property theft, rape, and kidnapping for ransom. Unlike terrorism, armed banditry is not driven by political or ideological objectives but by material acquisition and opportunistic violence. These activities frequently target local communities and travelers, resulting in widespread insecurity and socio-economic disruption.

Crime

Crime is an act or omission that violates a law, harms society, and is punishable by the state, involving an illegal action or failure to act that results in legal consequences such as fines or imprisonment.

Crime refers to actions or activities that break the law and are punishable by the state. It's an act that harms society, individuals, or the state and can lead to penalties such as fines, imprisonment, or even death in some countries.

Types of crimes include:

- I. Violent crimes (e.g., assault, murder)
- II. Property crimes (e.g., theft, vandalism)
- III. White-collar crimes (e.g., fraud, corruption)
- IV. Cybercrimes (e.g., hacking, online scams)

Crimes are typically investigated by law enforcement, prosecuted by the state, and punished in accordance with the law.

Development

Scholars have conceptualized development from diverse perspectives. Sapru (1997) describes development as a process aimed at enhancing the well-being of the people through improvements in standards of living, education, health, and the expansion of equal opportunities for richer and more fulfilling lives. Similarly, Akanji and Akosile (2001) view development as a multifaceted concept encompassing the attainment of self-governance, the provision of essential infrastructure, access to quality education and communication systems, and the creation of a conducive business environment for citizens. In another perspective, Naomi (1995) argues that development extends beyond economic growth to include equitable distribution of resources, access to healthcare, education, housing, and other basic social services, all geared toward improving both individual and collective quality of life. Chisman (as cited in Lawal & Abe, 2001) conceptualizes development as a process of societal advancement driven by improvements in human well-being through strong partnerships among government, corporate institutions, and other societal groups. Overall, development is not merely an economic endeavor; it also encompasses social, political, and institutional dimensions that permeate all aspects of societal life.

National Development

Building on the broader concept of development, national development refers to the comprehensive improvement of a nation across socio-economic, political, technological, and religious dimensions in both collective and tangible terms. Such development is most effectively pursued through deliberate strategies articulated by government within national development plans (Akindele, Ogin

& Agada, 2013). In a similar vein, Oluwatoyin (2001) defines national development as the overall advancement of a country's socio-economic, political, and religious spheres, achieved primarily through systematic development planning that reflects a coordinated set of government-driven strategies.

Governance

Governance encompasses the frameworks, processes, and mechanisms through which decisions are made, authority is exercised, and accountability is ensured within organizations, states, or networks. It relates to the manner in which power is utilized to guide, coordinate, and regulate activities, emphasizing strategic direction rather than routine administrative management. Central to effective governance are the principles of transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law.

Types of Governance

Corporate Governance: Directs and controls companies to ensure compliance, foster competitiveness, and enhance market confidence for stakeholders.

Public Governance: Focuses on how governments manage resources, implement policies, and interact with society.

International/Global Governance: Manages issues that cross borders, often involving international organizations.

Unemployment

Unemployment refers to the condition in which individuals of working age are without paid employment, are willing and available to work, and are actively seeking job opportunities but are unable to secure them. It serves as a key indicator of a nation's economic health and is commonly measured as the proportion of unemployed persons relative to the total labour force, which includes those who are employed and those actively seeking work. Individuals who are not seeking employment such as retirees, full-time students, or others outside the labour market are classified as being outside the labour force rather than unemployed. To be counted as unemployed, individuals must meet specific criteria, including being of working age, available for work, and having made active efforts to find employment within a recent reference period.

Violence

Violence is commonly defined as the use or threat of force capable of causing injury, harm, deprivation, or death, and it may manifest in physical, verbal, or psychological forms. From a legal perspective, violence does not have a singular or fixed definition; rather, it is generally understood as a category of behaviour involving the deliberate use of physical force or power to inflict harm, instil fear, or cause damage.

Theoretical Framework

The role of theory in academic discourse is indispensable, as it provides empirically grounded, scientifically informed explanations by synthesizing data to generate coherent and generalizable insights. The frustration-aggression theory, first proposed by Dollard and colleagues in 1939, suggests that when individuals or groups encounter frustration—defined as the blocking of goals or the perception of unfair obstacles to desired outcomes—it can lead to aggression. Aggression, in

this framework, is understood as a behavioural response to the feelings of anger and helplessness arising from unmet expectations or thwarted desires. Subsequent refinements of the theory clarified that frustration does not invariably result in direct aggression; rather, it creates a predisposition toward aggressive behaviour, particularly when situational cues encourage it (Berkowitz, 1989).

In the Nigerian context, armed banditry can be interpreted through the lens of the frustration-aggression theory. The country's history of ethno-religious and politically motivated conflicts, driven by socio-political and economic factors, generates widespread frustration among its population. Key sources of frustration include: (i) perceived marginalization in employment, appointments, infrastructural development, and resource allocation, which can prompt violent protests or demonstrations against those seen as responsible; (ii) Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, where groups that feel disadvantaged may resort to aggression during elections or political contests to address historical grievances; and (iii) the dominance of political elites perceived to perpetuate inequality through corruption, fostering resentment among citizens who feel excluded from the system, sometimes manifesting as attacks on polling stations or electoral officials (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The frustration-aggression theory thus provides a useful framework for understanding the underlying drivers of armed banditry in Nigeria. Various forms of frustration-political, ethnic, or economic can push individuals and groups toward aggressive behaviours, which in turn undermine national development by weakening institutions, eroding public trust in governance, and perpetuating cycles of insecurity and instability.

Armed Banditry in Nigeria

The precise origins of banditry in Nigeria remain difficult to pinpoint. Some scholars trace its emergence to around 2011, when violent clashes erupted between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary Hausa farmers in the northwest (Brenner, 2021). Prior to this period, incidents of armed banditry were largely unnoticed, underreported, or ignored. However, by 2011, organized gangs specializing in armed banditry became increasingly visible, carrying out ruthless attacks that involved killing, robbery, and the seizure of property (Rufa'i, 2018).

According to the International Crisis Group (2020), the security crises in Nigeria's northeast and northwest are rooted in longstanding competition over resources, particularly land and water. Over time, both Fulani herders and Hausa farmers mobilized armed groups commonly referred to as "bandits" and "vigilantes" to protect their respective interests.

Scholars have offered multiple perspectives on the evolution of banditry in Nigeria. Some argue that it emerged from the opportunism of certain politicians who, seeking power during the 2011 general elections, armed and sponsored youth groups to secure electoral victories. After these politicians attained office, the youths left without means of livelihood converted the weapons they had been given into instruments of crime to sustain themselves (Gadzama et al., 2018).

Other scholars view banditry as a response to historical injustices against agro-pastoral communities. Shettima and Tar (2008), Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016), and Okoli and Abubakar (2021) suggest that bandits initially arose from mercenary groups formed to defend herders against farmers. While these groups were originally intended to foster unity and cohesion among the herders (Rufa'i, 2021), they eventually transformed into criminal gangs perpetrating violence against communities and the state (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The informal gold economy in northern Nigeria has also been linked to the proliferation of banditry. Bandits are believed to collaborate with artisanal miners, exchanging illegally mined gold for weapons, particularly in border areas. Some analysts argue that the rise of banditry reflects the ambitions of warlords seeking a share of the country's wealth (Ogbonnaya, 2020; GI-TOC, 2021). Mukhtar (2021), in an interview with *Daily Trust*, noted that banditry evolved from ordinary criminal activities such as cattle theft into a lucrative enterprise, exploiting Nigeria's weak security environment.

Unemployment and poverty are additional key drivers of banditry. Tade (cited in Remi, 2021) highlights the northeast and northwest as regions with the highest unemployment rates, which fuel criminality. According to statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics for the last quarter of 2020, Katsina recorded 25.5% unemployment (438,808 people), Jigawa 38.69% (565,978), Kaduna 44.35% (1,111,091), Kano 25.5% (717,086), and Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara 17.25%, 14.48%, and 12.9%, respectively. These figures, coupled with high poverty levels, underscore systemic failures in governance and leadership. High unemployment, particularly among youth, is strongly correlated with the incidence of criminality (Adegbami & Uche, 2016).

Other factors contributing to banditry include expansive and unregulated forested areas that provide concealment for criminal activities, under-policed borders allowing the influx of unmonitored individuals, and the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons. Collectively, these economic, social, and structural conditions have created an environment conducive to the persistence and growth of armed banditry in Nigeria.

Armed Banditry and Its Implications on Governance and National Development in Nigeria

The persistent proliferation of banditry in Nigeria reflects critical weaknesses in the country's governance system. The activities of armed bandits have had severe and far-reaching consequences, both tangible and intangible, many of which are difficult to quantify in monetary terms. Beyond undermining the nation's political and socio-economic stability, banditry profoundly affects human survival and well-being. Maltzan (1998) notes that, "For individual victims, the psychological effect is devastating. But once crime reaches endemic levels, it inflicts severe strains on the social fabric and ultimately leads to moral decline and disintegration of society."

Since 2011, when banditry became widely documented, approximately 200,000 people have been displaced, with many fleeing their homes, and around 77,000 Nigerians have sought refuge in neighboring countries (Brenner, 2021). Zamfara State, the epicenter of these activities, exemplifies the human cost: between July and October 2021, nearly 495 violent deaths were reported (Hassan, 2021). In addition, Ojewale and Balogun (2022) recorded 1,126 killings between January and June 2020. Specific attacks include the killing of 23 travelers on a Sokoto–Kaduna bus in December 2021, the massacre of 200 villagers in Zamfara in January 2022—described as one of the region's worst atrocities—and the March 2022 attack on a commercial train from Abuja to Kaduna, which resulted in multiple deaths, injuries, and abductions (Egobiambu, 2022). Banditry has also contributed to a rise in widows, widowers, and orphaned children, as well as leaving many victims permanently incapacitated (Yahaya & Bello, 2020).

Women and children remain the most vulnerable to bandit attacks. In 2021, of over 780 children abducted for ransom, 61 remained in captivity months later. Repeated assaults on schools have forced many closures, exacerbating the growing number of out-of-school children. Women and girls are frequently subjected to sexual violence, including rape, and are sometimes commodified or coerced into complicity with bandit operations. For example, Ojewale and Balogun (2022)

reported at least 30 cases of rape across five communities in Niger State, and similar atrocities occurred in Tsafe, Zamfara, where bandits targeted communities that refused to pay levies.

Banditry has also triggered a food crisis in northern Nigeria. Around 450,000 people abandoned farms and rural markets, as farmers were either forced to pay extortionate levies or flee their lands, compromising both subsistence and commercial food production. Consequently, projections of food insecurity for approximately 38 million Nigerians between June and August 2022 (WFP, 2022) became reality. Humanitarian responses are overstretched, leaving many displaced persons without essential resources.

The economic cost of banditry is equally substantial. In July 2021, bandits shot down a Nigerian Air Force Alpha Jet along the Zamfara–Kaduna border. In October 2021, ₦20 million (~\$14,000 USD) was paid to recover an anti-aircraft gun seized by bandits (Kperogi, 2021). Similar incidents included ransom demands of ₦20 million from five villages (Ojewale & Balogun, 2022), and over the past decade, Nigeria reportedly spent around ₦6 trillion (~\$4.5 billion USD) on security efforts with limited results (Ibemere, 2020). In June 2021, the then Finance Minister disclosed plans to borrow ₦722.53 billion (~\$1.76 billion USD) from domestic markets to combat insecurity (Jimoh et al., 2021). These resources, under effective governance, could have been deployed for development projects to improve citizens' quality of life.

Banditry has also tarnished Nigeria's international image. Indicators such as human security, political stability, and citizen welfare are negatively impacted, prompting travel advisories from several countries. Domestic businesses, agro-allied industries, and other sectors have been disrupted, leading to reduced industrial competitiveness, higher unemployment, and decreased foreign investment (Wuyo, 2021).

The severity of the security crisis raises questions about Nigeria's governance system. President Buhari's 2021 appeal for U.S. assistance in relocating AFRICOM headquarters to Africa, and former President Olusegun Obasanjo's 2022 statement acknowledging the administration's inability to contain insecurity, underscore systemic governance failures (Ogundele et al., 2021; Akhaine et al., 2022). Similarly, former Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai threatened to employ foreign mercenaries to protect citizens, highlighting the government's incapacity to ensure security (Daily Trust, 2022). Such interventions signal potential threats to national sovereignty and illustrate the erosion of state authority.

Since the assumption of office of President Bola Tinubu in May 2023, insecurity persists. While some criminal gangs have been disrupted, the overall situation remains fragile, with northeastern conflicts and widespread banditry continuing to destabilize communities. In the first quarter of 2024, notable incidents included: a January attack on a military camp in Nahuta, Katsina, involving property theft and livestock looting (Umar, 2024); a February attack in Kufana, Kaduna, resulting in twelve deaths (Adekunle, 2024); and March assaults on villages in Zamfara, causing ten deaths and multiple abductions (Salaudeen, 2024). These recurring attacks exacerbate instability, disrupt livelihoods, and make peaceful existence difficult.

Rotberg's (2003) observation that "nation-states fail because they are convulsed by internal violence and can no longer deliver positive political goods to their inhabitants" aptly describes Nigeria's current predicament. From banditry and Boko Haram insurgency to kidnappings, farmer-herder conflicts, and recurrent communal clashes, insecurity remains pervasive. Simultaneously, the government's capacity to deliver essential social services has steadily declined, raising concerns about the effectiveness and legitimacy of Nigeria's governance system.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The study explores the nexus between armed banditry, governance challenges, and the implications for national development in Nigeria. Sustainable national development and effective governance cannot be realized in an environment dominated by killings, destruction of property, and widespread insecurity. Banditry has significantly contributed to Nigeria's persistent developmental challenges, exacerbated by weak governance structures. Based on the findings, the study recommends the following measures:

1. **Enhanced intelligence and security coordination:** Robust intelligence measures should be implemented to curb the rising incidents of kidnapping and armed attacks. This requires inter-agency collaboration, systematic intelligence gathering, and efficient information-sharing mechanisms.
2. **Control of sophisticated weapons:** Given that banditry often involves advanced weaponry, the Federal Government should investigate the sources of these arms and take decisive action to block their entry into the country.
3. **Monitoring of illegal routes:** All illicit entry points should be thoroughly secured and monitored by the Nigeria Customs Service. Individuals involved in smuggling weapons must be apprehended and prosecuted, while any foreign collaborators should be handed over to Interpol for further investigation.
4. **Security of major transit corridors:** International and high-risk routes, such as the Lagos-Badagry Expressway, should receive targeted security patrols. Suspects apprehended along these routes should face justice, and those convicted should undergo rehabilitation under the Nigerian Correctional Service.
5. **Strengthening Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) operations:** The police should support and expand SWAT operations, ensuring proper electronic surveillance and accountability to prevent misconduct similar to the activities that led to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).
6. **Youth empowerment and social safety nets:** Social safety programs should be restructured to discourage youth involvement in criminal activities. Governments and private organizations at all levels should actively participate in comprehensive youth empowerment schemes, providing alternative livelihoods and reducing incentives for engaging in banditry.

Effectively addressing armed banditry is a critical prerequisite for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria, as insecurity remains a major barrier to economic growth, social stability, and national progress.

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