



Banditry and Agricultural Displacement: Examining the Collapse of Food Systems in Kaduna State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Kaduna State in north-western Nigeria has experienced an escalating wave of armed banditry since 2015, with devastating consequences for agricultural production and rural food systems. This paper examines the nexus between banditry, agricultural displacement, and the systemic collapse of food security in Kaduna State. Drawing on a synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and field-based studies, the paper argues that organised armed banditry has rendered vast farmlands inaccessible, displaced hundreds of thousands of farming households, disrupted rural supply chains, and precipitated acute and chronic food insecurity across the state. The paper adopts the conflict theory and the sustainable livelihoods approach as complementary theoretical frameworks. Key findings indicate that Kaduna State recorded numerous bandit attacks, leading to the abandonment of thousands of hectares of arable land, particularly in Birnin-Gwari and kajuru local government areas. The collapse of food systems is traced through four interrelated dimensions: production disruption, supply chain breakdown, market dysfunction, and nutritional vulnerability. The paper concludes with policy recommendations emphasising integrated security-agriculture frameworks, community-based early warning systems, and IDP livelihood rehabilitation.

Keywords: Banditry, agricultural displacement, food security, internally displaced persons, food systems collapse

1.0 Introduction

The agricultural sector remains the backbone of Nigeria's rural economy, employing an estimated 38 percent of the country's labour force and contributing an average of 26 percent to gross domestic product between 2013 and 2024 (Oderinde et al., 2024). Northern Nigeria, including Kaduna State, has historically served as the nation's primary food production zone, accounting for over 70 percent of national agricultural output (PreventionWeb, 2022). However, since the mid-2010s, the north-western and north-central senatorial zones have been engulfed in a crisis of armed banditry that has fundamentally disrupted the rural economic order. What began as localised cattle rustling has metamorphosed into organised, large-scale criminality involving kidnapping for ransom, mass killings, arson, and the systematic occupation of farming communities.

Kaduna State occupies a particularly alarming position within this crisis. Data from the Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) dataset, as analysed by Ojo, Oyewole, and Aina (2023), reveal that out of 909 documented bandit attacks in north-western Nigeria between January 2013 and March 2022, Kaduna State alone recorded 342 incidents. This disproportionate exposure to violence has generated cascading effects on farming, food distribution, and the nutritional welfare of Kaduna's predominantly rural population. The state's local government areas of Birnin-Gwari, Giwa, Chikun, and Kajuru have witnessed repeated raids on farming communities, the destruction of grain stores, the rustling of livestock, and the forced abandonment of hundreds of thousands of hectares of arable land.

The humanitarian consequences have been severe. The Internal Organisation for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM-DTM) identified over 20,766 displaced households in Kaduna State as of August 2024, with the majority unable to return to their places of origin due to sustained insecurity (IOM-DTM, 2024). These displacements have severed the productive relationship between farming households and their lands, creating conditions for both acute food crises and the structural disintegration of Kaduna's food systems. Concurrently, food prices have escalated sharply, malnutrition indicators have worsened, and humanitarian dependency has deepened among affected communities.

This paper is structured to address a central research question: How has the escalation of armed banditry in Kaduna State precipitated the collapse of agricultural systems and food security? The paper proceeds as follows: Section two reviews the conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

Section three presents an overview of banditry in Kaduna State. Section four examines the mechanisms through which banditry disrupts food systems. Section five analyses the consequences for food security and displacement. Section six evaluates existing policy responses. Section seven offers conclusions and recommendations.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification

Banditry

Rural banditry in Nigeria has been variously described in the literature as cattle rustling, armed robbery, kidnapping, and organised criminality. Abdullahi (2019) defines rural banditry broadly as a practice encompassing cattle theft, kidnapping, armed robbery, and violent raids on communities, noting that its motivations have shifted from survival-driven opportunism to profit-oriented organised crime. Ojo et al. (2023) provide a more expansive conceptualisation, describing armed banditry as a composite crime that includes armed robbery, kidnapping, murder, rape, village raiding, cattle rustling, and the illegal possession of firearms.

Food Security

Food security denotes the condition in which all individuals within a community, region, or nation have consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life. It encompasses four key dimensions; availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability. Achieving food security requires robust food production systems, equitable distribution networks, economic access to food, adequate nutritional knowledge, and social safety nets to safeguard vulnerable populations against hunger, malnutrition, and food-related crises (Oderinde et al., 2024).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the conflict theory is a sociological perspective that views society as a constant struggle between groups for power, resources, and social status. The theory views society as characterized by various forms of inequality and social conflict. Conflict theory, from a sociological perspective, is not attributed to a single individual. Instead, it represents a body of work developed by multiple scholars over time. However, one of the key figures associated with the development of conflict theory is Karl Marx (1818), a 19th-century German philosopher, economist, and political theorist. Conflict theorists emphasize the role of competition and struggle in shaping social dynamics,

and they analyze how dominant groups maintain control while marginalized groups seek to challenge and change existing structures. Conflict theory, emphasizes the role of power, competition, and social inequalities in shaping societal dynamics, it provides a valuable means for understanding the effects of banditry on food security in Kaduna State. Banditry, is view as the phenomenon of armed groups operating outside the law, engaging in activities such as theft, extortion, and violence against civilian populations. These groups often emerge in contexts characterized by weak state authority, poverty, and social marginalization. In the context of Kaduna State, the withdrawal of the Nigerian state from vast ungoverned spaces, particularly in forest-adjacent communities, has enabled bandits to establish parallel governance structures, impose levies on farming communities, and appropriate farmlands.

The SLA, developed within the development studies tradition and operationalised by Badewa and Dinbabo (2023) in the context of food security in complex emergencies, provides a complementary analytical tool focused on the disruption of livelihood assets and strategies. The SLA disaggregates livelihood assets into five capitals; human, social, natural, financial, and physical and examines how shocks and stressors erode these assets and undermine households' ability to pursue sustainable livelihood strategies. Armed banditry in Kaduna State simultaneously erodes all the five capitals: it destroys human capital through killing and maiming, disrupts social capital through community fragmentation and displacement, diminishes natural capital through farm abandonment and livestock rustling, depletes financial capital through property destruction and extortion, and damages physical capital through infrastructure destruction.

1.3 Armed Banditry in Kaduna State: Origins, Evolution, and Scale

Historical Origins

The roots of armed banditry in Kaduna State are traceable to the long-standing farmer-herder conflicts that intensified during the 1990s and early 2000s as desertification, climate variability, and population pressure reduced available grazing lands and water resources (Oderinde et al., 2022). Gadzama, Saddiq, Oduche, and Dariya (2018), identified multiple drivers of rural banditry including poverty, unemployment, greed, and the proliferation of small arms. The Kamuku Forest in Birnin-Gwari Local Government Area of Kaduna State and adjacent ungoverned spaces provided natural cover for bandit groups that initially specialised in cattle rustling before evolving into multi-dimensional criminal enterprises.

Ojo et al. (2023) situate the escalation of Kaduna's banditry crisis within a broader regional dynamic, noting that farmer-herder conflicts provided a significant fuel to the rise and spread of armed criminality. In Kaduna specifically, a history of ethno-communal and religious conflicts. Ojo et al. (2023) estimate that between 10,000 and 20,000 people died in Kaduna's ethno-communal conflicts prior to the emergence of large-scale banditry, leaving behind communities traumatised, impoverished, and vulnerable to criminal recruitment.

Scale and Patterns of Violence

The scale of bandit violence in Kaduna State has been staggering. Data from the NST dataset indicate that between January 2013 and March 2022, Kaduna State recorded 1,917 deaths attributable to armed banditry the second highest in the north-western region after Zamfara (Ojo et al., 2023). At the national level, Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023) documented that between 2016 and 2021, Kaduna State experienced sustained bandit attacks encompassing killings, kidnappings, and the wholesale destruction of farming communities. The implications for rural livelihoods have been catastrophic: tens of thousands of farming households have been forcibly displaced, and vast stretches of previously productive agricultural land have been rendered inaccessible.

The modalities of bandit violence in Kaduna are diverse and have become increasingly sophisticated. Beyond cattle rustling and armed robbery, bandit groups have targeted schools with seven attacks recorded in Katsina, Kaduna, and Zamfara between 2019 and 2021, resulting in the abduction of 519 students and staff (Ojo et al., 2023). The March 2022 attack on the Abuja-Kaduna train, which claimed eight lives and resulted in the kidnapping of dozens of passengers, demonstrated the growing capability of bandit groups to strike at critical infrastructure. These attacks have compounded insecurity for farming communities by closing off key transportation corridors, effectively severing rural communities from urban markets and humanitarian supply lines.

IOM-DTM data from 2024 indicate that as of April 2024, Kaduna State was among the ten states in north-western and north-central Nigeria with the highest concentrations of internally displaced persons, with 1,302,443 IDPs recorded across the region (IOM-DTM, 2024). The IOM's August 2024 Intentions Survey in Kaduna identified 20,766 displaced households, many of whom expressed an unwillingness or inability to return home due to continuing insecurity and the fear of renewed attacks (IOM-DTM, 2024). This sustained displacement has

profoundly disrupted agricultural production cycles and reduced the available rural labour force.

1.4 Mechanisms of Food System Disruption

Farm Abandonment and Land Inaccessibility

The most direct mechanism through which banditry disrupts food systems is the physical abandonment of farmlands. Oyewole and Utibe (2024) document that thousands of farmlands across north-western Nigeria have been destroyed or rendered inaccessible as a consequence of bandit activity, while farming communities have been emptied by displacement. In Kaduna State, this phenomenon has been most acute in the agricultural zones of Birnin-Gwari, Giwa, Igabi, and Kajuru local government areas. Bandit groups have established territorial control over forest belts and their adjacent farmlands, imposing levies on farmers who seek to continue cultivation and launching lethal raids on those who refuse or resist.

The Birnin Gwari Emirate Progressives Union (BEPU) has consistently documented the devastating impact on farming in the Birnin-Gwari corridor. Community reports from 2025 indicated that even after government-backed negotiations led to a fragile peace in 2024 that allowed some farmers to return to their lands, renewed bandit attacks quickly undermined this recovery, with farmlands again destroyed and farmers displaced (George & Adelaja, 2026). This cyclical pattern of partial recovery followed by renewed violence reflects the structural inability of the state to provide durable security guarantees to farming communities. Adeyemi and Badewa (2023) identify this governance deficit as a fundamental driver of insecurity, arguing that persistent poverty, unemployment, and inequitable resource distribution create the permissive conditions for armed criminality.

Livestock Rustling and Pastoral Displacement

Livestock constitutes a vital component of both the food production system and the livelihood portfolio of rural households in Kaduna State, where cattle, goats, and sheep serve as both protein sources and stores of value. Oyewole and Utibe (2024) report that thousands of cattle and sheep have been rustled by bandit groups across the north-west, representing a direct assault on agricultural livelihoods. For pastoral households, the loss of livestock is catastrophic: it eliminates their primary source of income, destroys their food security buffer, and forces them into displacement and dependency on humanitarian assistance.



The synergies between cattle rustling and organised banditry have transformed a once-resilient pastoralist economy into a landscape of impoverishment. Furthermore, the displacement of pastoralists southward in search of security and new grazing resources has intensified farmer-herder conflicts in communities further south, generating a secondary layer of agricultural disruption (Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, 2022).

Disruption of Agricultural Supply Chains

The systemic disruption of supply chains represents a critical but often overlooked dimension of banditry's impact on food systems in Kaduna State. PreventionWeb (2022) notes that conflicts in core maize-producing states have stifled the distribution of maize to markets, resulting in huge post-harvest losses and waste and prompting maize supply shortages across Nigeria. In Kaduna State, key highways that connect farming communities to urban markets including the Kaduna-Birnin Gwari highway and the Kaduna-Abuja corridor have been repeatedly targeted by armed bandits, making the transportation of agricultural produce dangerous and economically prohibitive. Farmers who manage to cultivate their lands therefore face the compounded problem of being unable to bring their harvests to market safely.

The UMYU Journal of Accounting and Finance Research (2022) documents that banditry has truncated agricultural supply, creating food crises and inflated prices of agricultural produce. This supply-side shock is compounded by demand-side effects: the displacement of large farming populations from agricultural zones to urban and peri-urban areas transforms former food producers into food consumers, shifting the demographic balance of food systems and placing additional stress on already strained urban food markets. PreventionWeb (2022) characterises this as a fundamental alteration of Nigeria's food system geography, as conflict-induced migration to largely consumer-based urban settlements in Southern Nigeria has significantly changed the patterns of food production and distribution.

Grain Store Destruction and Post-Harvest Losses

Bandit raids in Kaduna State have frequently targeted grain stores and granaries, the primary mechanism through which farming households buffer against seasonal food shortages. UMYU Journal of Accounting and Finance Research (2022) documents that among the impacts of banditry on food security are the burning and raiding of grain silos, which eliminates the household-level food reserves that sustain families between harvests. The destruction of these reserves converts seasonal vulnerability into year-round food insecurity, leaving displaced

households entirely dependent on market purchases or humanitarian assistance. For poor households whose market purchasing power has already been eroded by displacement and livelihood loss, this creates conditions of acute food deprivation.

The convergence of production loss, post-harvest destruction, and supply chain disruption generates a compounding effect on food availability. Oderinde et al. (2022) observe that the appalling security situation in conflict-affected areas limits households' opportunities to earn income, while the shortage of supplies increases food prices, thereby reducing the population's access to food. In Kaduna State, this dynamic has been observed in the escalation of food prices in markets serving displaced communities, as reduced supply meets increased demand from displaced populations who can no longer produce their own food.

1.5 Food Security Consequences and Displacement Dynamics

Food Insecurity Classifications

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system has consistently identified northern Nigerian states, including Kaduna, as experiencing food security crisis conditions. Ikenna (2024) reports that Nigeria's far northern states, including Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara, and Adamawa, are projected to remain at food security crisis levels (IPC Phase 3) due to consistent armed conflict increasing insecurity and waning livelihoods. The periodic escalation to IPC Phase 4 (emergency levels) in some localities represents a humanitarian emergency that threatens lives and livelihoods on an acute scale.

Adeyemi and Badewa (2023) identify sustainable livelihoods as the foundational enabler of food security and note that this can be severely constrained by climate variability and violent conflicts. In Kaduna State, the simultaneous operation of both stressors climate-induced desertification and rainfall variability in the north, combined with the physical insecurity generated by banditry creates a double burden on farming households that undermines their resilience. The result is a systemic food security crisis that is neither purely climatic nor purely security-induced but emerges from the interaction of both drivers within the context of pre-existing structural vulnerabilities including poverty, weak institutions, and limited access to agricultural inputs and extension services.

Malnutrition and Vulnerability of Women and Children

The nutritional consequences of food system collapse in Kaduna State are most acutely borne by women and children. The Conversation (2023) reports that more than 5.9 million children in north-western and north-eastern Nigeria experienced acute malnutrition between May 2022 and April 2023, with more than 1.6 million suffering from severe acute malnutrition. Displacement significantly exacerbates nutritional vulnerability: displaced households typically lose access to the diverse food sources available on their farms, subsisting instead on limited, often nutritionally inadequate rations available in IDP camps or from humanitarian distributions.

The National Population Commission estimate that women and children constitute 80 percent of Nigeria's displaced population (Iorbo et al., 2024). Displaced women face compounded deprivation: they are simultaneously more likely to have been widowed by bandit violence, carry disproportionate caregiving responsibilities for children and the elderly, and face barriers to accessing the economic opportunities available in displacement settings. The corrosion of women's agricultural roles as primary food producers, processors, and managers of household nutrition in rural Kaduna represents a critical loss of capacity that is difficult to compensate for in displacement settings.

Internal Displacement and Livelihood Collapse

'We have lost everything' is the lament that characterises the testimonies of displaced persons in Kaduna State, as documented by field research conducted by Springer Nature (2025) at IDP camps including the Shehu Lawal Secondary School Camp in Giwa LGA and the Unguwar Mai Alewa Camp in Birnin-Gwari LGA. These testimonies reveal the totality of loss experienced by displaced farming households: land, livestock, shelter, social networks, and productive assets have all been surrendered in flight from bandit violence. The IOM-DTM (2024) Intentions Survey in Kaduna indicates that a significant proportion of displaced households remained unwilling to return home even when conditions partially improved, reflecting the depth of the trauma and insecurity that characterise this crisis.

Internally displaced persons in Kaduna State face acute humanitarian challenges in displacement settings. The African Journal of Law and Human Rights (2024) documents that by 2023, more than 2.9 million Nigerians had been internally displaced, with the majority in violence-torn northern regions, and that IDP camps are congested and lack basic needs. In

Kaduna, displaced farming households have lost the agricultural assets and productive relationships that constituted the foundation of their food security. Study by Adeyemi and Badewa (2023) in the context of north-eastern Nigeria's food emergency indicates that IDPs in formal camps and informal settlements are largely dependent on petty trading and casual labour, with limited or no access to land and farming opportunities a characterisation equally applicable to the displaced populations of Kaduna's banditry crisis.

The economic dimensions of displacement compound food insecurity. Owolabi, Oladimeji, Ojeleye, and Omokore (2018), using cross-sectional data from 1,488 respondents across Kaduna State's local government areas, documented significant food security deficits among conflict-affected households and identified their reduced access to productive land as a primary causal factor. Chikwendu (2023) similarly finds that conflict-induced migration significantly reduces household dietary diversity by approximately 12 percent, as displaced households lose access to the variety of food sources available in their home communities and substitute lower-quality market purchases for own-produced food.

1.6 Government and Institutional Responses: An Assessment

Security-Focused Interventions

The Nigerian federal and Kaduna State governments have pursued predominantly security-focused responses to the banditry crisis. Aina, Ojo, and Oyewole (2023) document that the Nigerian military has deployed multiple internal security operations across the north-west, including Operation Harbin Kunama and Exercise Sahel Sanity, which has been headquartered at the Special Army Super Camp IV in Faskari. These operations have led to the killing of hundreds of bandits and the rescue of kidnapping victims, but have not produced durable security in affected communities. The Kaduna State government has implemented additional measures including the embedding of security agents among herder communities, the tightening of state borders to prevent trans-border bandit infiltration, and the use of technology-based animal monitoring systems (SASPJ, 2022).

Aina et al. (2023) observe that military operations have sometimes pushed bandit groups into neighbouring states rather than eliminating their capacity for violence. Furthermore, the reactive and episodic nature of security operations has meant that farming communities are unable to return permanently to their lands even after temporary military clearance, as bandit groups reconstitute and re-infiltrate areas once military pressure is relaxed. The March 2022

Abuja-Kaduna train attack, which occurred in an area supposedly under enhanced security surveillance, exemplifies the continued capacity of bandit groups to conduct devastating operations despite sustained military engagement.

Humanitarian and Agricultural Responses

Humanitarian responses to Kaduna's displacement crisis have been largely reactive and underfunded. The IOM-DTM (2024) have conducted population tracking, camp management, and humanitarian needs assessments, but the scale of displacement has overwhelmed available response capacity. The African Journal of Law and Human Rights (2024) notes that humanitarian assistance is grossly inadequate relative to the needs of displaced populations in northern Nigeria. President Bola Tinubu's July 2023 declaration of a state of emergency on food insecurity, which included the immediate release of fertilisers and grains to farmers and households and the creation of a National Commodity Board for price assessment (Ikenna, 2024), represents a recognition of the food crisis at the national level but has not been matched by the specific agricultural rehabilitation interventions required in Kaduna's banditry-affected communities.

The gap between the scale of agricultural disruption and the scope of official agricultural rehabilitation responses is significant. Chikwendu (2023) observes that efforts to assist IDPs have shifted from settling them in camps to providing opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, but that the implementation of these approaches remains limited. Community-based early warning systems, which have been identified in the resilience literature as effective tools for enabling farming communities to take prompt action to safeguard their livelihoods (Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems, 2024), remain largely underdeveloped in Kaduna State's conflict-affected areas.

1.7 Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that armed banditry has precipitated a multi-dimensional collapse of food systems in Kaduna State, Nigeria. The mechanisms of disruption operate at every node of the food system: farm abandonment and land inaccessibility eliminate production capacity; livestock rustling destroys pastoral livelihoods; supply chain disruption prevents the movement

of agricultural goods from producing to consuming areas; and the destruction of grain stores eliminates household-level food security buffers. These mechanisms interact synergistically to generate a food security crisis that manifested in immediate hunger and malnutrition and chronically expressed in the structural displacement and livelihood collapse that prevents recovery even during temporary security improvements.

Kaduna State's food system crisis is embedded within a broader governance deficit characterised by the state's inability to maintain territorial control, provide durable security, or restore the productive conditions that farming communities require. The conflict framework illuminates how the erosion of state capacity creates permissive conditions for bandit consolidation, while the sustainable livelihoods approach reveals the totality of loss experienced by displaced farming households across all five capitals. The crisis disproportionately affects women and children, who bear the highest nutritional burden of displacement and the most severe erosion of productive capacity.

1.8 Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are advanced:

- i. The Nigerian federal and Kaduna State governments should pursue an integrated security-agriculture strategy that moves beyond reactive military operations to provide durable territorial security as a precondition for agricultural recovery. This requires sustained military presence, community-based intelligence networks, and the engagement of local vigilance actors within a governance framework that rebuilds state legitimacy in affected communities.
- ii. The rehabilitation of displaced farming households should be treated as a priority within Kaduna's humanitarian and agricultural policy agenda. This requires targeted livelihood restoration programmes that provide land access, agricultural inputs, and extension support to returning IDPs, alongside measures to address the legal and security barriers that currently prevent return. Incorporating food voucher and cash transfer programmes will address immediate nutritional needs while supporting market recovery in affected communities.
- iii. The development and deployment of community-based early warning systems for bandit activity is essential for enabling farming communities to make timely protective decisions about their farm operations and livestock management. These

- systems should be integrated into a broader agro-security framework that includes mobile agricultural advisory services capable of operating in conflict-affected zones.
- iv. The federal government should address the structural drivers of banditry including youth unemployment, land tenure insecurity, and the exclusion of pastoralist communities from formal economic and political systems through sustained social investment that reduces the conditions of grievance and desperation that encourage criminal recruitment. Failure to address these structural dimensions will ensure that security-focused interventions remain temporary and that farming communities remain perpetually vulnerable.
 - v. Stronger coordination between security agencies, humanitarian actors, agricultural ministries, and community organisations is essential. This recommendation is particularly applicable to Kaduna State, where the intersection of banditry, displacement, and food insecurity demands a whole-of-government, whole-of-society response.

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