



The Threats of Insecurity and Climate Change on Farming and Livestock Economy in the Northern Districts of Zamfara State, Nigeria

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<p>Abstract: The conditions of farmers and the state of the livestock economy in Zamfara State call for a very serious concern because of their spillover effects on the neighbouring states of Kebbi, Sokoto, Katsina and Kaduna and, by extension, the implications on food security in Nigeria. This study examined the travails of insecurity, its dimensions, and the threats it poses to livelihood, peace, and economic development. This phenomenon has grossly affected the scale and stability of agricultural and livestock production in the state. The paper appraised, in depth, the causes of insecurity in the study area and how it has impacted on the livelihood of the people, particularly farming and livestock production. The article also highlighted the connection between artisanal gold mining and acts of banditry, among others. The paper adopted a mixed research methodology of literature review and field interview with a view to marrying the data collected from the field with the literature to arrive at some findings that may be useful for future planning with a view to managing the conflict, mitigating its consequences, and averting future reoccurrence.</p> <p>Keywords: Insecurity, Climate Change, Farming, Livestock Economy, Northern Districts, Zamfara State.</p> <p>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p>	<p>Review Paper</p>
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	<p>How to cite this paper: Mas'ud Bello <i>et al</i> (2026). The Threats of Insecurity and Climate Change on Farming and Livestock Economy in the Northern Districts of Zamfara State, Nigeria. <i>Middle East Res J. Humanities Soc. Sci.</i> 6(2): 39-49.</p>
	<p>Article History: Submit: 11.02.2026 Accepted: 13.03.2026 Published: 16.03.2026 </p>

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural production and livestock economy have supported livelihood in the northern districts of Zamfara State. (Bello, *et al.*, 2017 - ii). The livestock economic sub-sector plays a significant role in supporting households in the area because of its important value chain that creates daily income through the sale of dairy products amongst rural and semi-urban households, as most poor people live in the rural areas. Other groups of beneficiaries in the value chain are: livestock marketers, buyers, sales agents, merchants, commissioned agents, butchers, transporters, rope makers, domestic and modern tanneries, animal feed sellers, etc. (Bello, 2018)

Livestock trade had enjoyed a very liberal climate because government regulation of the trade had been formally limited to the requirements for health certificates in rare circumstances, and the regulation of grazing and trade routes (Bello, *et al.*, 2017 - i), most of which have been in existence since before the colonial period. These liberal trading atmospheres have

immensely promoted the growth of livestock marketing in the area, except for the taxation policies in the colonial period to the early 1970s which posed some constraints to livestock commerce because of their effects on trade profit margins and pastoral movements (Anka 2019).

Peace and stability have been essential strategic components for development at all levels and stages in human history. Insecurity has caused stagnation and devastating setbacks to all forms of development (Bello & Garba 2022). The impact of insecurity in the northern districts of Zamfara State borders on economic decline, social disintegration, demography, decline in school enrolment, psychological trauma, enmity and rivalry, sexual assaults, increase in crime rates, illicit sale of drugs among several other vices. In the early years of the 19th century, records have shown that bandits adopted the use of cavalry as a means of movement, riding on horseback from one location to another, attacking villages and using natural features as their hideouts. On a larger note, bandits are found in different parts of the world (Asiwaju, 2014) operating through different forms of strategies (Usman & Bello, 2022).

In Zamfara State, there are several forms of security challenges; however, banditry has emerged as the most dominant crime with devastating and multiplying consequences on the society, economy and the state for more than a decade. Unprecedented forms of crimes against humanity were recorded in Zamfara and are still ongoing in different dimensions. The nature and frequency of banditry-associated crimes committed cannot be equated to the types and nature of atrocities committed prior to the Sokoto Jihad (Bello & Garba 2022). There have been several cases of cattle rustling, terrorism, and gender-based violence associated with the act of banditry. In more elaborate detail, the rustling of cattle refers to the act or practice of stealing cattle and other domestic animals from herders, relatively driven by varying factors; it has increasingly become an economically based form of criminality (Kwaja, 2013). Aminu and Bello (2020) further lamented that armed banditry is synonymous with the establishment of gang groups who use small and light weapons to carry out attacks against innocent people.

In another dimension, banditry is a set-up of criminal activity deliberately designed and carried out for personal gains. The convoluted nature of banditry activities prompted Okoli and Ugwu (2019) to describe banditry as a practice of stealing cattle and animals from herders or raiding cattle from their ranches. Similarly, armed banditry is a reflection of criminal escapades associated with cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, drug abuse, arson, rape, and the brazen and gruesome massacre of people in agrarian communities with sophisticated weapons by suspected herdsmen and reprisal attacks from surviving victims, a development that has been brought to the front burner of national security (Mburu, 1999).

There are four (4) Local Government Areas and more than forty (40) districts in Zamfara North. All the districts have a significant number of thousands of hectares of arable land used for agricultural and livestock production. The predisposing forces of banditry have been attributed to the fragility of the governance system, excruciating poverty, sophisticated corruption, a high level of ignorance, illiteracy, cattle rustling, terrorism-related crimes, neglect of youths, among several other factors (Bello, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The acts of banditry have spread to different parts of the North-West states from 2011 to the present, with devastating consequences on human survival, and the menace has continued to defile all security mechanisms of kinetic and non-kinetic strategies. Agriculture and the livestock economy have been serving the needs of the teeming population of the state and beyond. The catastrophic banditry has emerged as one of the most challenging problems that has lingered for a long period of time, with devastating consequences on farming, local trade, livestock production and

marketing. Most of the contributions from other extant studies were too generalistic in their findings on the impact of insecurity on agriculture, trade and the growth of the livestock economy. This study is an attempt to provide the specific impact of this menace using the northern districts of Zamfara State as a sample. It will also contribute value to the existing scholarly productions on the state and dimensions of insecurity in Zamfara State and North-Western Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a mixed research methodology for its literature review and field interviews with key stakeholders with a view to marrying the data collected from the field with the literature to arrive at overwhelming qualitative data and findings that may be useful for future planning to salvage the sector. More explicitly, the study will be based on qualitative research; additional relevant information will be collected through dissertations, theses, books, academic journals, special reports, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, seminar papers, and print and electronic media.

The State, Northern Districts and Early Security Threats

Crimes have been prone in the rural and urban communities in Zamfara State and have climaxed into an unimagined breakdown of law and order, and massive displacement of people and farmers who have been cultivating varied significant types of agricultural produce. Again, in Zamfara State, up to early 2023, banditry has remained the most troubling organised crime committed by outlaws typically involving threats such as forceful extortion, rustling, robbery and murder either as an individual or a group (Bello, 2018). Its negative impact has devastated enormous farmers' hamlets, villages, and communities in Zamfara State, radically culminating in the decimation of able-bodied farmers (men and women); most prominent among the consequences is the shortage of varied food supplies, and the redirection of government policies on agriculture, among others. At the height of banditry activities in 2015, many thousands of farmers from Zamfara State were displaced and re-established themselves elsewhere in Kaduna, Niger, Katsina, Sokoto and Kebbi States. The displacements have dire consequences on agriculture as most indigent farmers and people in a number of communities improvised new foods by feeding on any available leaves (Bello, 2018). The shortage in supplies of cereal crops and others associated with their agricultural production henceforth resulted in a hike in prices of goods as farmers could not bear the brunt of the intensity of banditry in Zamfara State.

As part of its impacts, it could be reiterated that the incursion and precursor of armed banditry in Zurmi in 2011 erupted over the number of animals rustled; the incident played its toll, and the spill-over effects were felt all over Zamfara State (Ibid). It is observed that banditry,

through its impacts as an organized crime, is committed in predominantly agricultural production areas such as Zurmi, Dansadau, Maru, Maradun, Tsafe, Dangulbi, Bindin, and Bingi in Zamfara (Nige'i, 2020; Sarkin Gulbi, Ahmad, Karofi, Rambo & Sani, 2024). However, the most disturbing negative impact of banditry is the unsettled pastoralists' transhumance activities, accompanied by rape, kidnapping, organized attacks on villages and communities, and looting of agricultural produce. Furthermore, banditry promotes cattle rustling and thus appears to be tied to the incessant conflicts between Hausa farmers and Fulani herdsmen, which are connected to the wider circumstance of identity politics and intergroup relations (Sani & Bakura, 2025).

Albeit, livestock production is not only a significant aspect of agricultural practice in Zamfara State, but pastoralist communities, particularly the nomadic Fulani herders, also assist the farmers in manuring their farmlands. The extant challenges of climate change coupled with banditry conundrums on agricultural practices equally exacerbate the impact on food insecurity in the study area (Bello & Anka, 2026a). Zamfara North, as part of the wider region of the Rima Basin, has been famous for its vast agricultural lands and rich forest reserves such as Katuru/Sububu, Dagwarwa,

Shamushalle/Dunburum and Jaja Forest Reserves. The existence of these forest reserves and grazing routes have largely supported livestock production in the area (Ragamza, 2025).

Vast segments of the population of Zamfara are largely settled in agrarian enclaves and are predominantly farmers, livestock raisers and traders. The study area covers the worst affected districts in Kaura-Namoda (Sakajiki, Kurya, Kungurki, Dogon Kade and Gabake). In Zurmi (Mayasa, Mashema, Kwashabawa and Zurmi), Birnin-Magaji and Shinkafi (Kware, Jangeru, Galdi and Shinkafi). These locations are sampled because they were worst affected by the disaster for a long period of time. Zurmi, for example, recorded the first case of mass cattle theft prior to the widespread cattle rustling in 2011. Zamfara North has large, small and medium-scale markets that flourish in trading activities, with considerable inflow of agricultural and animal supplies. It is in view of the importance of the livestock economy, production and trade in agricultural produce that this study attempts to examine the impact of the travails of insecurity and the impact of climate change on agricultural production and livestock economy in the northern districts of Zamfara State, Nigeria.

Table 1.1: The Communities and Some Major Livestock and Agricultural Production and Marketing Centres in the Northern Districts of Zamfara State

S/N	Name of town, village, or area, and the major livestock production and marketing centres	Location of the areas	The People	Major Livestock Markets & Market Days	Present Local Government Area
1.	Zurmi (Dauran, Gurbin Bore, Gidan Jaja, Dunburun, Mashema, Kwashabawa, Tungar Fulani, Garkuwa, Kuturu, Tunfa, Yanbuki, Kadamutsa, Labande)	Northern parts of Zamfara/high plains of the Sokoto Rima Basin	Zamfarawa, Fulani, Katsinawa, Bugaje, Alibawa	Dauran (Sunday), Gurbin Bore (Saturday), Mayasa (Wednesday) Moriki (Friday)	Zurmi
2.	Birnin Magaji, (Nasarawa Godal, Ajja, Shamushalle, Gusami, Tsabre, Cigama)	North-Eastern part of Zamfara	Hausa, Fulani, Bugaje	Nasarawa Godal (Sunday), Shamushalle (Tuesday) and Gusami (Friday), and Birnin Magaji (Wednesday)	Birnin – Magaji
3.	Kaura-Namoda (Kasuwar Daji, Dogon-Kade, Dayau, Bunaje, Rututu, Sakajiki, Walo, Salbore, Tafasiya, Kasara, Kurya, Banga, Dokau, Gidan Daji, Tullukawa)	High plains of the Sokoto Rima Basin and the Northern parts of the Zamfara area	Alibawa, Hausa, Gobirawa, Zamfarawa	Kasuwar Daji (Saturday), Kaura (Friday /Monday) Dogon Kade (Tuesday)	Kaura - Namoda
4.	Shinkafi - Fadama (Gangara, Kuryar dambo, Jangeru, Badarawa, Kware, Galadi, Katuru)	High plains of the Rima Basin and the extreme part of Northern Zamfara	Gobirawa, Hausa, and Fulani	Shinkafi Market (Thursday)	Shinkafi

Sources: Field works, Bello 2018, 2025), *A Survey of Settlement in Sokoto State* 1981, *Sokoto State in maps; An Atlas of Physical and Human Resources* 1982, P.D.A Padera *et al*; *A Survey of Settlements in Sokoto State* 1981, E.J Arnett, ESQ; *Gazetteer of Sokoto Province*.

Table 2.1 provides a description of the geographical locations, the people, and the major

agricultural and livestock production and marketing centres in Zamfara and the market days. In situations

where some markets operated on different days in the past, all the days they operated have been stated in the table.

Shinkafi in the extreme northern part of Zamfara is also surrounded by small farming and pastoral settlements like; Mazuga, Rijiyi, Girmashe, Battoli, Kuryar Dambo, Shanawa, Galadi, Katuru, Maberawa, Jangeru, Badarawa, Bazai, and Kware. While Kaura-Namoda's major settlements are located along River Gagare in the west and south-eastern parts. The extreme northern part is a forest reserve. The second largest village, older and second to Kaura-Namoda, which is Kungurki, has no market.

In Zurmi, the major settlements are located in the western parts along River Gagare and the eastern parts of River Bunsuru. Zurmi town is located in an area with a large forest leading to the Niger Republic. It has a significant number of agro-pastoral communities namely; Mashema, Garkuwa, Jena, Tungar Fulani, Bare-Bari, Kwashabawa, Mayasa, Labandi and Dunburum (Bello, 2018).

Birnin-Magaji shares similar features with Zurmi; its famous Tsabre and Cigama forests lead to the Niger Republic. It has the most spacious cattle tract in Zamfara next to Zurmi and Maru. For example, a grazing route in Birnin Magaji starts from Dirau - Duhun Biri - Dunburun - Mashema - Gurbin Bore which links the Niger Republic. The grazing route from Modomawa links Garin Marafa - Gora - Mailayi - Gusami Hayi - Yandoto - Tsabre - Faskari in Katsina up to Birnin Gwari - Ilorin and other parts of south-western Nigeria.

General Overview and the Genesis of the 21st Century Security Challenges in Zamfara

The historical development of banditry has been changing over time, space and circumstances. A bandit in 19th-century Europe and the Americas was a freedom fighter whose aim was partly to ensure the emancipation of the downtrodden from the upper class or the colonized from the colonizer (Warto, 1994). Furthermore, bandits like Chucho el Roto, Heraclio Bernal and Santanon were often celebrated as heroes of Mexican independence (Robinson, 2009). Therefore, Mexicans have warm regard and respect for those social workers termed "bandits", while on the contrary, the state often considered them a nuisance and outlaws that need to be eradicated (Watts, 1987). Therefore, in some pre-industrial societies, peasants see bandits differently from the state, not as outlaws, hoodlums and miscreants but as avengers and breadwinners. However, a bandit in the traditional African setting is entirely opposite to that of America and Europe. The former specialized in armed robbery and other related crimes (Curott & Fink, 2008).

The most common feature of banditry in Africa has been maiming, killing and wanton destruction of property; hence, it has a direct relationship with cattle

rustling (Rufa'i, 2018). Since most herdsmen could do anything possible to prevent the rustling of their herds, then the bandit also applies force with the aid of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) to execute the stealing of livestock (Addo, 2006). Hence, the application of force during livestock theft is what is herein considered cattle rustling and armed banditry (Murtala, 2018).

From a historical perspective, however, banditry is not something novel to West Africa. Its origin and development are as old as the sub-region itself, dating back to inter-tribal periods characterized by conflicts and wars over scarce economic resources and territorial expansion for political influence (ICG, 2020). Most parts of Africa experienced these forms of conflicts during the slave trading, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Though there have been remarkable changes in the nature and pattern of banditry and other forms of conflicts in West Africa, the socio-economic and political reasons remain significant in explaining the prevalence of the phenomenon in the sub-region (Abdullahi, 2019).

In the Zamfara region, banditry is not a new phenomenon because it had historical antecedents in the area. Traditional praise singers and oral historians spoke about how the activities of the bandits affected trade and other economic pursuits in the pre-colonial period (Bello, 2016). The Azbenawa, Tuaregs, Fulani and Gobirawa from both British and French territories formed the major culprits (NAK/Sokprof. No. 41). Communities around Kwatarkwashi, Mada, Chafe and Dansadaw were direct accomplices to the crime. The hills of Kwatarkwashi and Chafe, for instance, provided shelter to the criminals from where they organized and executed their unwholesome activities, which often resulted in serious casualties. The difficult nature of the terrain contributed to this development by making the perpetrators untraceable. In fact, a considerable part of the rustled livestock and stolen goods were usually taken to the Niger Republic and Mali during this period (NAK/Sokprof. No. 42).

During the colonial period, the region was also confronted with a situation where bandits killed about 210 traders and made away with goods worth £165,000.00. As reported, this onslaught occurred in the Zamfara axis to victims from Kano on their way to the French territory (NAK/PRO/FO/403-316). The attendant constant harassment, intimidation and raids on herdsmen and traders continued unabated around Kwatarkwashi as far back as 1911. These raids, as reported by the Resident of Sokoto Province McAllister, caused immeasurable damage to the economy of the province (NAK/Sokprof. No. 41). The colonial government responded to this widespread menace of rural banditry by stationing armed policemen in all the strategic routes across Sokoto Province, tasking them with the responsibility of ensuring security, as well as the inventory of goods and livestock, with a view to also generating revenue through

the collection of caravan tolls (E. A. Speed, 1910). Such cross-border disturbances had not been peculiar to only Zamfara State or Nigerian areas alone but were common to most colonial territories in West Africa.

Records have shown that the history of armed banditry in Zamfara State started around 2009, but it became out of control in 2011 especially after the general elections. The causes of these unending conflicts are many, even though people disagree on the causes to a varying extent. Several hypotheses, theories and schools of thought have evolved as to the reason for the rise of the criminal gangs in the area (Sarkin Gulbi, Ahmed, Rambo, Mukoshy & Sani, 2024). These armed groups first emerged around Dansadau District, Maru Local Government Area in Zamfara State.

Initially, there was the speculation that politicians in the state sponsored and armed some youths as political thugs to achieve their ambition in 2011. The youths were abandoned after winning the elections, and they then went into drug abuse, cattle stealing, robbery and later transformed into armed gangs attacking villages on motorbikes. The first motorbikes used in the attacks were donations from politicians during election campaigns. This explains the nexus between bandits and politicians in the state. Secondly, many link the scenario to long-term human conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers due to the struggle for ownership of farmland and grazing areas; others see it as a direct effect of reaction against socio-political and economic marginalization of the Fulani by their Hausa counterparts (Bello, 2018).

From 2011 to date, no accurate statistics could be provided as to the number of people killed through this act of armed banditry. Tukur (2017) opined that people are killed in communities that are not even known to the security agencies and, because of the nature of our community settlements, not all cases are reported, especially those that involve Fulani herders. Although banditry is as old as Nigeria, it has nevertheless gradually transformed in scope and dimension (Rufa'i, 2023).

The Challenges Posed by Lawless Zones

The north-western hinterlands are marked by extremely dispersed rural settlements, separated by rangelands and farmlands that are susceptible to violent contestations (Gaye, 2018). They are also interspersed by diverse forested landscapes, some of which are dotted by wetlands, rocks, and caves. Apart from being separated from each other, they are equally far separated from the centres of governance at the local and state levels. The forestlands of the region are vast, rugged, and hazardous. Most importantly, they are grossly under-policed to the point that they are conducive to all forms of jungle criminality. In view of this, violent crimes, such as banditry, have festered and thrived in such forest areas. Most attacks occur in remote villages, close to forested regions in the north-west where there is little security

presence (Gaye, 2018). In a like manner, banditry occurs in large swathes of forest reserves that are generally out of the reach of the Nigerian security operatives. Most of the bandit activities take place in state-owned reserves such as the Kamuku, Kuyanbana, and Falgore forests in Northern Nigeria. The forests offer perfect locations as hideouts for the criminals to evade arrest by security forces. The reluctance of the Nigerian security operatives to penetrate these forest areas seems to be largely due to inefficiency, conspiracy of the local people, lack of sophisticated equipment, and poor motivation of the Nigerian security forces (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016).

The Security Rules of Engagement and Poor Arms

There are several reports from the affected communities, including traditional rulers, that security personnel hardly visit scenes of attacks whenever they are called using the circulated rescue call numbers given by the security operatives themselves. In situations where security personnel visit scenes of attacks at the right time, they do not have much impact in solving or alleviating the fears of the common people. Most of the common reasons advanced have been the restrictions of security rules of engagement which border on lack of authorisation from their high command to act or shoot at the sight of security threats (Bello & Garba, 2022).

This could also have been possibly caused by inadequate equipment for the security arm of government, both in weaponry and training (Achumba, Ighomereho, & Akpor-Rabaro, 2013). This is in addition to the poor attitudinal and behavioural disposition of security personnel. In many cases, security personnel assigned to deal with given security situations lack the expertise and equipment to handle the situations in a way that prevents them from occurring. Even when these exist, some personnel get influenced by ethnic, religious or communal sentiments and are easily prejudiced by their personal interest to serve their people rather than the nation (Achumba, Ighomereho, & Akpor-Rabaro, 2013; Shehu & Sani, 2019). Thus, instead of being national watchdogs and defending national interest and values, and protecting people from being harmed by criminals, they soon become saboteurs of government efforts by supporting and fuelling insecurity through either leaking vital security information or conniving with criminals to acquire weapons or to escape the long arm of the law (Offem & Ichoku, 2015).

Bad Governance

Nigeria is one of the endowed nations whose citizens wallow in abject poverty and corruption. The scourge of poverty and the fragility of governance have contributed significantly to the rising wave of banditry in Nigeria. Adeolu (2018) noted that the failure of successive administrations in Nigeria to address the challenges of poverty bedevilling the nation has made life so burdensome and lonely that only the fittest survive. In concurrence with Adebayo's (2018) perception, Adeolu (2018) noted that Nigeria has

overtaken India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians, or around half of the country's population, estimated to be living on less than \$1.90 a day. Alao, Atere and Alao (2015) linked banditry, terrorism and other criminal acts to poverty. Although not all forms of criminal acts could be linked to poverty, it has been contended that economic deprivation influences people to resort to illegal means of meeting their daily needs. It was discovered that because of the attractive benefits accruing from banditry activities, most people, especially the youths, tend to join the bandit gangs in the Northwest of Nigeria (Epron, 2014; Adegoke, 2019; Bello & Anka, 2026b).

Unemployment and Underemployment

Another factor that promotes banditry in Nigeria is the high level of the unemployment rate. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in 2019 put Nigeria's unemployment rate at 23.1%, of which youth unemployment was 55.4%. Equally, the poverty index in the Northwest is 77.7% (NBS, 2012; Rosenje & Moliki, 2016). These figures have continued to drastically increase yearly as Nigerian institutions keep graduating batches of youths with the prior impression of getting better jobs and opportunities after graduation (Adegoke, 2019). The anxiety from Nigerian graduates that later turns to frustration, and then to aggression against the government, is what has fuelled the emergence of most of these bandit attacks and security threats in the country (Suleiman, 2017; Mustapha, 2019).

In addition, Kilishi, Mobolaji, Usman, Yakubu and Yaru (2014 as cited in Abdulkabir, 2017) argued that the rising wave of crime in Nigeria has been blamed on the increasing level of unemployment. Thus, the idle youths tend to engage in illegal activities in order to meet up with contemporary trends. Suffice it to say that the youths easily get enticed by riches as a result of the prevailing "get rich quick syndrome" that pervades the country. Hence, they tend to do whatever it takes to get rich quickly. Therefore, Nigeria's high rate of unemployment, especially the increasing rate of youth unemployment, is what majorly prompts the jobless youths in the country to resort to violent crime like banditry (Adagba, Ugwu, & Eme, 2012; Epron, 2019).

Other Narratives on the triggers of Banditry in Zamfara State

As noted earlier, contemporary armed groups first emerged around Dansadai District, Maru Local Government Area in Zamfara State. Several hypotheses, theories, and schools of thought have evolved as to the reason for the rise of the criminal gangs in the area. The first is the speculation that politicians in the state sponsored and armed some youth as political thugs to achieve their ambition in 2011. The youth were abandoned after winning the elections, after which they went into drug abuse, cattle stealing, robbery, and later transformed into armed gangs attacking villages on

motorbikes. The first motorbikes used in the attacks were donations from politicians during election campaigns. This explains the nexus between bandits and politicians in the state. Many link the scenario to long-term human conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers, while others see it as a direct effect of reaction against socio-political and economic marginalization of the Fulani by their Hausa counterparts. At the onset of conflict in 2011, authorities in Zamfara remained adamant, confused, and unresponsive, thus adding weight to the politicians' connection to the conflict. Instead of strengthening the formal and informal security architecture in the state, the conflict was "sedated" and armed groups were lulled into inactivity through amnesty and state pardon (Moses, 2021).

The second narrative emphasized social grievance arising from the perceived deep-rooted injustice against pastoral communities. The first armed group emerged with the name Kungiyar Gayu in Zamfara towards the end of 2011. Its initial aim, as claimed by some of the founding fathers, was to ensure the unity of pastoralists and the struggle for social justice (Buharin daji, 2016). Their perception was that pastoral communities in the state were subjected to all forms of extortion, exploitation, and deprivation by different agencies. They were denied justice, mostly in the lower courts. When a pastoralist was involved in any squabble with a farmer, the case would usually be delayed unnecessarily. The accused Fulani, known to have a phobia of courts and their unwarranted justice delays, would be ready to bribe his way out of the court. Cases involving the police were the worst, according to an informant who said that both the judges and police were "birds of the same feather" (Buba, 2017). The Fulani man, according to the narrative, had become a source of income for law enforcement agents (Jabaka, 2018). Allegations of extortion extended to hospitals, where access to healthcare was often accompanied by extortion and exorbitant charges (Jangebe, 2014). Added to these were lack of access to education, veterinary services, and animal feeds. Grazing routes and reserves were mostly shared amongst politicians and traditional rulers in the state (Bello, 2016).

The third hypothesis is the illicit mining argument, which sees the rise of the conflict from the perspective of struggles among miners, each aiming to gain an upper hand in the competition (Bello). Zamfara State is one of the few states in the Northwest blessed with huge gold deposits, mostly exploited by foreign illicit miners (Chinese, Russians, and South Africans) in collaboration with local artisanal miners (Anka, 2017). The foreign firms were accused of supplying arms to the locals against their rival groups. There were reported cases of raiding and killings around some of the mining sites in the state around 2014/2015, implying that they were sponsored by competing groups. These atrocities were allegedly committed with the support of some

traditional and political leaders within and outside Zamfara State (Haidara, 2014).

Following this line of argument, the first set of armed groups, according to sources, were young boys from the forests of Dansadau, Dan-Gulbi, and Bagega, the major mining areas of Zamfara State (Anonymous, 2021). Helicopters were often seen in these areas exchanging weapons for gold. Whenever and wherever these helicopters were spotted, bloodshed soon followed. This is why observers pointed at the “politics of gold mining” as a factor in the rise of the groups (Anka, 2012). Another source claimed that there is “cut-throat competition” amongst miners. Some of the attacks were partly instigated by traditional rulers involved in illicit mining, with a view to displacing their subjects (Anonymous, 2016). According to the Desert Herald Newspaper:

The solid mineral resources in the state have been hijacked by highly placed people in the state, including traditional rulers. Mining has continued to arouse and attract local and international attention regarding the exploration of these vast deposits in the state...considering the fact that illegal mining is the main business of the traditional rulers and highly placed people in the state...who are always at loggerheads with other artisanal miners (Desert Herald Newspaper, 2016).

On the other hand, some people see the armed groups–illicit miners’ alliance as “protective” (Umar, 2014). Mining is naturally a peaceful economic venture. The miners could hardly operate under conflict situations; therefore, the miners pay money as a “protection levy” to the armed groups in return for protection and continued exploitation of the resource. At the peak of the conflict in 2018, local and foreign miners were still found peacefully operating in the various deadly forests. There has never been a record of either abduction or killing of these foreign illicit miners in the state. This is one of the reasons why the locals see the conflict as nothing but an international conspiracy to displace them and deny them access to their “God-given” natural resources (Anonymous village head, 2016). The Federal Government’s ban on all mining operations in the state since 2018 could probably be in response to this concern. The State Government, on its own part, suspended some traditional rulers for allegedly supporting the armed groups and engaging in illicit mining activities (Desert Herald Newspaper, 2019).

Whether or not any or all of these hypotheses hold, one factor that contributed to the escalation of the conflict was the activities of non-state security operatives like the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), Yan-Banga, and Yan-Sa-kai. The operations of VGN pushed the armed groups out of towns and villages into highly ungoverned spaces, where they established different camps in the numerous forests across the state. The VGN attacked, maimed, and even engaged in extrajudicial

killings of accused persons. Most of their victims were, unfortunately, Fulani, leading to ethnic profiling of the pastoralists (Rufa’i, 2018). The Yan-Sakai are believed to have committed more atrocities than the vigilante groups. The memory of how the Yan-Sakai used to storm Shinkafi market to gruesomely kill suspected bandits is still fresh in people’s minds (Abdullahi, 2016). An informant confirmed that they had never seen a worse insecurity situation, where Yan-Sakai cut human beings into pieces in the market square and burned the pieces into ashes without any fear. It was only after the first and second public execution of the suspected bandits that the entire community frowned upon the act (Mai Dawa, 2016). Therefore, both the VGN and their Yan-Sa-kai supporters contributed to the escalation of the conflict.

Proliferation and Widespread Use of Small and Light Weapons (SALWs)

Also fundamental to the causes of armed banditry in north - western Nigeria, worthy of mentioning is the issue of proliferation of arms and ammunition arising from the unbridled control of Nigeria’s border as well as spillover effects of violent conflicts in the Sahelian region in West Africa. There has been an incremental influx of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) into Nigeria from the Sahel since the fall of Gaddafi’s regime in Libya (Gaye, 2018). These arms and weapons end up in the hands of non-state actors like terrorists, militants, and bandits, who use them to terrorise individuals and communities (Nganga 2008). In September 2018, military troops in joint operations with personnel of the Department of State Service (DSS) arrested two suspected illicit arms dealers along Funtua-Gusau road with 1,479 rounds of 7.62mm (special) ammunition, on their way to deliver the weapons to armed bandits (Adeniyi 2018). Incidents such as this have been prevalent in the various states of north-western Nigeria, where banditry has become the order of the day (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Security Infrastructure in the State

The limited security infrastructure in Zamfara state has been another key factor in the rise of armed banditry. Nwosu (2020) argues that the concentration of security forces in urban centres has left rural areas, where banditry is most prevalent, poorly protected. In many cases, security agencies are understaffed, poorly equipped, and lack the necessary resources to mount an effective response to banditry. The lack of proper coordination among security agencies further exacerbates the problem, as each agency works in isolation, often without clear communication or a unified strategy. As a result, bandit groups can operate with relative ease, exploiting the weaknesses in the security system to continue their attacks.

Climate Change

Environmental factors, particularly the effects of climate change, have also played an indirect but significant role in exacerbating the rise of banditry.

Desertification, deforestation, and the depletion of natural resources have forced many herders to migrate in search of grazing land, often leading to violent clashes with farming communities. Bello (2014) highlights that these environmental changes have worsened socio-economic tensions, particularly in the context of the ongoing resource-based conflicts. The migration of herders in search of grazing land often brings them into direct competition with farmers over limited resources, further escalating the potential for violence. These environmental factors create conditions that are conducive to the spread of banditry, as individuals and communities struggle to adapt to the changing landscape.

In essence, the rise of armed banditry in Zamfara State is a multifaceted issue that cannot be attributed to a single cause or explanation. Instead, it is the result of a complex interplay between weak governance, economic hardship, cultural shifts, political manipulation, demographic pressures, environmental challenges, and the proliferation of small arms. As the literature demonstrates, addressing the underlying factors that contribute to banditry requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach that includes strengthening governance, addressing economic inequalities, improving security infrastructure, and resolving conflicts over resources. Failure to address these challenges will only perpetuate the cycle of violence, undermining the security and stability of Zamfara State and the wider region.

In a more elaborate discourse, an extensive land-based livestock production system like the one in Zamfara has been severely affected by the factor of climate change. These climatic variations affect the level of rainfall and the density of moisture in the air, which affects crop cultivation, production of animal feeds from plants, development of pasture and water reserves for livestock management. Climate change has caused shorter farming seasons, leading to reduced crop yields and a decline in the production of livestock feed resources in the rangelands for livestock management. Over the years, farmers have found it very challenging to evolve some sustenance mechanisms to cope with these difficulties in adapting to changing environmental conditions in livestock production, eg, very high temperatures, which in turn reduces moisture in the air, causing plants and the soil to dry up. The worst-affected areas in Zamfara are: Magari, Kwashabawa, Shamushalle, Gabaken Gigiya, Madira, Gabaken Mesa, Bula, Kagara Falau, Tudun Wadar Rahazawa, Kamarawa, Gusami, Galadi, Tsibiri, Cigama, Tsabre, Billashe, etc. in the extreme northern parts of Zamfara, sharing a common boundary with the Republic of Niger (Bello *et al.*, 2017).

In the dry season, pastoralists trek along with their herds to distant areas in southern Nigeria; sometimes, animals trek out of the West African sub-region. Therefore, the problem of sustainable sources of

water for livestock has been a very serious problem in the dry season in the extreme northern parts of Nigeria, where Zamfara is located.

Conflicts over land resources because of the diminishing environmental resource base have been common in areas that provide seasonally critical resources for livestock production, like rich pasture (water and grass). These critically limited resources have competitive uses amongst farmers, herders, and hunters, especially in the seasons when rainfall becomes very low. Consequently, the free and peaceful access to communal grazing land, which is essential for livestock production, has been eroded by the bloody history of conflicts between pastoral groups and farmers (Bello *et al.*, 2017).

Deforestation, as one of the principal causes and key drivers of desertification, has been identified as a common practice in the Zamfara areas of Gurbin Bore, Dagwarwa, Mashema, Walo, Kyasgyera, Disko, Mailido, Madira, Gabake, Kuturu, Galadi, Tubali, Cigama, Rijiyar Ladan, Yanbuki, Magami, etc. These changing environmental conditions have drastically affected pasture resources in the grazing reserves of Zamfara, such as the Dunburum - Shamushalle - Tsabre - Ajja Forests, among several others (Bello *et al.*, 2017).

Cultural Factors and Community Relations

Cultural and societal dynamics also play a crucial role in the perpetuation of armed banditry. Adewale (2016) suggests that the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which once helped maintain peace within communities, has contributed to the rise of banditry in the region. In the past, traditional leaders played an important role in mediating disputes between various groups, whether they were related to land, resources, or inter-community relationships. However, the politicisation of these traditional roles, as well as the decline of community cohesion, has weakened these mechanisms, making it more difficult for communities to manage conflicts peacefully. Additionally, practices such as cattle rustling, which were once viewed as traditional or culturally accepted activities, have evolved into more organised and violent forms of criminal activity. As these practices have become increasingly militarised, the line between cultural practices and organised crime has blurred, contributing to the normalisation of violence and further emboldening armed groups.

Land Cultivation and Livestock Economy amidst Insecurity

The challenges posed by insecurity have resulted in the neglect of hundreds of acres and hectares of arable land in the northern districts of Zamfara State. In Zurmi Local Government Area, where the first incidence of armed banditry was recorded in 2011, bandits have threatened the lives of farming communities in Labandi, Dumburun, Tudun Bugaje, Zango, Billashe,

Kwaddi, Magarya, Rukudawa, Birane, and Da'da. In addition, there are large semi-forest belts where bandits have threatened the lives of farmers cultivating lowland rice and related crops, whose owners have abandoned these vast land resources for fear of being kidnapped. These include Kwazo Forest in Dumburun, Kabiru Kwaddi Forest in Kwaddi, Ayake Forest in Labandi, and Mustapha Isa Forest in Billashe (Jibril, 2026). Other locations include Mashema, Rukudawa, Mayasa, Birnin Tsaba, Jabanda, Katuru, Magarya, among others.

The actions of the bandits in preventing these farmers from cultivating these lands are due to several factors: first, strategic privacy advantages, because the forests are used as their hideouts; second, kidnapped and freed citizens are coerced to cultivate these lands for the bandits; and third, sheer wickedness of the highest magnitude. In these forests, quite a number of people were kidnapped on their farmlands. Examples include Malam Fadal Bello in Dolen Moriki and Yusuf Aliyu in Nasarawar Zurmi and his family (Shinge, 2025).

In Kaura Namoda, the worst-affected locations are the farming communities in the western districts of Kungurki, Sarkin Yamma district, Sakajiki, Walo, Dayau, Daba, Madira, Tudun Madira, Kyesgera, Tafashiya, Karada, Jan-Zakawa, Dagwarya Forest, Dokau, and other neighbouring areas of Maradun light forest, from where miscreants infiltrate into Kaura Namoda (Bube, 2025).

In Shinkafi, the phenomenon affects the farming enclaves of Galadi, Ajiyawa, Shanawa, Sububu, Badarawa, Kware, Jangeru, Maberiya, Kamarawa, among others. In Birnin Magaji, the worst-hit communities are Tsaabre, Cigama, Usu, Modomawa, Gora, Kiyawa, Shamushalle, Billashe, Nasawar Godal, Kannu, and surrounding villages. Consequently, these year-in, year-out threats have resulted in a decline of about one-third of annual food and cash crops produced in the affected zones, coupled with an unprecedented compulsory levy imposed by bandit groups on innocent farmers in the area. This has further weakened the economic productivity of the people and has further impoverished the communities (2022).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the travails and dimensions of different types of threats posed by insecurity on farming and livestock production in Zamfara State. The paper has provided a background for understanding the communities and their major occupations. It appraised in depth the causes of insecurity in the study area and how it has impacted the livelihoods of the people. It also highlighted the nexus between artisanal gold mining and acts of banditry. The paper recommended that technology be employed in the

fight against insecurity, that the authorized Civilian Joint Task Force be equipped with adequate arms and equipment to fight criminals, that ungoverned spaces be gazetted and monitored, and that existing virgin, uncultivated arable land be opened and made safe for cultivation.

The need to fence critical borderlines and conduct constant border patrols to check infiltration of criminal groups into Nigeria is inevitable. This can be achieved by integrating accredited community-based vigilante groups. Pastoral groups also require new grazing routes through the delineation of new cattle paths, provision of additional grazing reserves with all-season fodder, and harvesting rainwater to serve as reserves for livestock. These measures will reduce pastoral movements during the dry season.

The safety of grazing land is key to the sustenance of livestock production. Therefore, there is a need to encourage afforestation to mitigate the dangers of fast-approaching desertification, challenges posed by erosion, and climate change-related threats. Additionally, rainwater harvesting can improve crop and animal feed production and support the development of pastures.

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