

INSECURITY, CONFLICT AND NATIONAL STABILITY: EFFECT OF UNGOVERNED SPACES ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The persistence of ungoverned spaces as a structural governance failure has attracted growing scholarly attention globally, yet its specific manifestation in Nigeria's Northwest geopolitical zone and its cascading consequences for socio-economic development remain inadequately examined in the literature. Spanning seven states, namely Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, and Jigawa, the Northwest zone has emerged as the epicentre of a protracted security emergency characterised by armed banditry, mass displacement, agricultural collapse, and the systematic withdrawal of investment, all traceable to deepening governance vacuums across the region's vast ungoverned territories. This paper examines the nexus between ungoverned spaces, armed banditry, and socio-economic underdevelopment in Nigeria's Northwest, drawing on state fragility theory and relative deprivation theory as complementary analytical frameworks and employing a qualitative systematic review methodology with thematic content analysis of secondary data. The study interrogates how governance vacuums have enabled the proliferation of non-state armed groups whose activities have devastated agricultural productivity, education, healthcare, foreign direct investment, and livelihoods in the region. Empirical evidence reveals that bandit attacks escalated from 124 incidents in 2018 to 1,031 in 2022, resulting in 13,485 documented deaths and the displacement of over 1.08 million persons by December 2022. Agricultural income per hectare in Zamfara declined by approximately 57% relative to pre-conflict levels, while states such as Kebbi, Zamfara, and Jigawa attracted zero capital importation between 2019 and 2023. The paper argues that addressing the insecurity and underdevelopment nexus requires a comprehensive and integrated strategy that combines governance reconstruction, socio-economic empowerment, and community-centred security architecture. Evidence-based policy recommendations anchored in international development frameworks and context-specific interventions are advanced.

Keywords: Ungoverned Spaces, Insecurity, Armed Banditry, National Stability, Socio-economic Development, Northwest Nigeria, State Fragility, Governance Deficit

1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of ungoverned spaces has become one of the most consequential and widely debated governance problems in contemporary global security literature. Across the world, from the ungoverned border corridors of Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the lawless hinterlands of the Central African Republic, to the vast Sahelian territories exploited by terrorist organisations in Mali and Burkina Faso, the inability of states to assert effective authority over portions of their own territory has been identified as a principal structural condition enabling the emergence of armed non-state actors, transnational criminal networks, and protracted humanitarian crises (Rabasa et al., 2007; Keister, 2014; Menkhaus, 2007). Scholars have consistently demonstrated that where the state is absent or incapacitated, violence fills the vacuum, and the developmental consequences for affected populations are both immediate and generational (Patrick, 2007; Rotberg, 2004). It is within this global analytical tradition that the Nigerian experience must be situated and understood.

In Nigeria, the problem of ungoverned spaces has assumed a particularly acute and multidimensional character. Ungoverned spaces, understood as geographical territories and institutional domains in which state authority is absent, contested, or rendered ineffective, have proliferated across the country's northern region in ways that pose an existential challenge to national stability (Okoye et al., 2024; Wanan and Tavershima, 2024). The Northwest geopolitical zone, comprising Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, and Jigawa states, has become the most severely affected theatre of this governance crisis. Vast forest reserves, particularly the Rugu Forest spanning approximately 6,000 square kilometres across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states, expansive border territories adjoining Niger

Republic, and remote rural hinterlands beyond the effective reach of state institutions have been instrumentalised by armed bandit groups as operational sanctuaries, recruitment grounds, and logistics corridors (Ojo et al., 2023; Ejiofor, 2022). The result is a protracted security emergency whose scale and developmental consequences have yet to receive the integrative scholarly attention they warrant.

What distinguishes the ungoverned spaces crisis in Nigeria's Northwest from analogous situations elsewhere is the convergence of multiple structural vulnerabilities in a single geopolitical zone. The Northwest was already characterised by among the highest poverty rates in the federation, the lowest educational enrolment figures in the country, chronic underinvestment in rural infrastructure, and weak local government institutions long before the current security emergency intensified (Chibuzor et al., 2020; Akpa-Achimugu and Ibeh, 2023). These pre-existing structural conditions created the precise socio-economic environment that Gurr (1970) identifies as generative of relative deprivation and, ultimately, organised violence. When armed banditry escalated sharply from 124 documented incidents in 2018 to 1,031 incidents in 2022, an increase of over 730 percent within four years (IPI Global Observatory, 2024), it did so not in a governance vacuum that emerged suddenly, but in one that had been deepening over decades of institutional neglect and fiscal marginalisation. Between 2010 and May 2023, approximately 13,485 deaths were attributed to armed banditry in the zone, over 1.08 million persons were displaced from their communities by December 2022, and an estimated 30,000 armed bandits were operating across the region in groups ranging from ten to over one thousand fighters (IPI Global Observatory, 2024; ACAPS, 2025). In Zamfara State alone, which has borne the heaviest burden

of the crisis, bandit attacks resulted in the loss of an estimated NGN 43 billion, equivalent to approximately USD 100 million, in potential agricultural revenue in 2022 alone (Assessment Capacities Project, 2025). These figures represent not merely a security failure but a governance catastrophe with cascading socio-economic consequences for the entire national development trajectory.

The socio-economic implications of this crisis are both profound and far-reaching. Agricultural productivity, the primary source of livelihood for an estimated 80 percent of the Northwest's rural population, has been catastrophically disrupted through direct attacks on farmers, systematic cattle rustling, the burning of farmland and stored harvests, mass displacement from productive land, and organised extortion of farming communities (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Assessment Capacities Project, 2025). Household incomes among maize farmers in Katsina State fell by 30 to 40 percent relative to pre-banditry levels, while crop yields declined by more than half (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The deterrence of investment has been equally severe: states such as Kebbi, Zamfara, and Jigawa attracted zero capital importation between 2019 and 2023, even as peer states in more stable regions continued to attract domestic and foreign investment. Education and healthcare infrastructure have suffered systematic destruction and abandonment, contributing to the Northwest's position as the zone with the highest rates of out-of-school children in Nigeria, a structural human capital deficit whose consequences will extend across generations (Akpa-Achimugu and Ibeh, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). At the national level, these compounding effects are reflected in Nigeria's ranking of 33rd out of 54 African nations on the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance, with continued deterioration specifically in the security and rule of law dimension (Okoye et al., 2024), and in World Bank (2025)

projections that approximately 50.9 percent of Nigerians will be living below the international poverty line by 2025.

Despite the growing volume of scholarly attention on insecurity in Northern Nigeria, significant analytical gaps persist. Many existing studies approach the problem through either a narrow security lens or an exclusively economic frame, with comparatively few integrating both perspectives within a coherent analytical architecture that captures the structural relationship between governance failure, armed conflict, and developmental regression (Ejiofor, 2022; Wanan and Tavershima, 2024). Empirical reviews that synthesise recent micro-level field evidence with macro-level developmental indicators remain sparse, and theoretical frameworks capable of capturing both the governance and socio-economic dimensions of the crisis have been inconsistently applied. This paper addresses these gaps by providing an integrative analysis anchored on State Fragility Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory, examining how governance vacuums in the Northwest generate insecurity that in turn retards socio-economic development and undermines national stability.

It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to interrogate the relationship between ungoverned spaces, armed banditry, and socio-economic underdevelopment in Nigeria's Northwest geopolitical zone. The paper conceptualises and contextualises ungoverned spaces within the security and development nexus, examining how governance vacuums form, how armed non-state groups exploit them, and how the cumulative failure of state response has deepened insecurity across the zone. It further examines the socio-economic consequences of this insecurity across the interconnected dimensions of agricultural productivity, investment flows, access to education, healthcare delivery, and

gendered vulnerability. Building on these analyses, the paper articulates evidence-based policy recommendations for restoring governance, security, and sustainable development in the affected zone, with particular attention to the national stability implications of continued institutional abdication in the Northwest.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Ungoverned Spaces

The concept of ungoverned spaces has been subject to considerable definitional debate in the security studies literature. Rabasa et al. (2007) offer one of the most widely cited formulations, defining ungoverned spaces as areas of "contested, incomplete, or abdicated governance" — situations in which governments, either by choice or by incapacity, abandon effective control over portions of their territory. Keister (2014) broadens this conception to encompass a general condition of fragile or non-existent state authority in a geographical location, arguing that ungoverned spaces are not binary phenomena but exist along a continuum of governance effectiveness. Taylor (2016) further conceptualises ungoverned spaces as "anarchic zones" — territories characterised by a governance deficit or absence that creates enabling environments for criminal and insurgent activity and poses existential threats to referent objects of security.

Menkhaus (2007) enriches this definitional landscape by identifying specific conditions that generate ungoverned spaces. These include the "cosmetic and ineffective presence of the state in its frontier zones," the existence of large urban slums beyond effective government control, rapid population growth, urbanisation without commensurate governance capacity, globalisation, increasing wealth levels of non-state actors, and technological advancements that empower subnational actors relative to state institutions. In the Nigerian context,

Lenshie et al. (2021) and Sackflame and Omitola (2022) align with this reading, contending that the national security apparatus lacks the potency to secure the territory and fulfil governance functions in contested spaces, making governance in such areas highly contested and structurally weak.

It is important to distinguish between different types of ungoverned spaces as identified in the literature. Rabasa et al. (2007) and the Simons Center for the Study of Interoperability (2024) categorise these as: ungoverned territories (where the state has no physical presence), under-governed territories (where the state is present but ineffective), contested territories (where the state competes with non-state actors for authority), and exploitable territories (where governance gaps are deliberately exploited by armed groups). In Nigeria's Northwest, the prevailing conditions approximate a hybrid between under-governed and contested territories, as state institutions nominally exist but lack the capacity to impose order or deliver services (Okoye et al., 2024; Wanan & Tavershima, 2024).

The distinction between physical and non-physical ungoverned spaces is also analytically significant. While physical ungoverned spaces refer to geographical territories — forests, mountain ranges, border zones — non-physical ungoverned spaces encompass institutional, economic, and political vacuums in which the state fails to discharge its obligations (Ibrahim, 2021). The intersection of both types creates compounded vulnerabilities. In Northwestern Nigeria, the Rugu Forest (spanning Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states), the Kamuku National Park, and the extensive border areas with Niger Republic exemplify physical ungoverned spaces that have been instrumentalised by armed bandits for operational bases, arms smuggling, and kidnapping (Ojo et al., 2023; Ejiofor, 2022).

2.2 Insecurity: Conceptual Dimensions in the Nigerian Context

Insecurity, as a concept, encompasses more than the absence of physical safety; it denotes the subjective and objective vulnerability of individuals, communities, and states to various forms of harm, threat, and uncertainty (Buzan et al., 1998). In the Nigerian context, insecurity has assumed a complex, multi-layered character that defies simplistic categorisation. Okoye et al. (2024) enumerate its primary manifestations as: Boko Haram terrorism, Niger Delta militancy, unknown gunmen violence, armed banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling, oil theft, sea robbery, and herdsmen–farmer conflicts. In the Northwest specifically, armed banditry and kidnapping have emerged as the dominant security threats, with the former representing a composite crime that encompasses violent attacks, mass killings, cattle theft, rape, and the displacement of communities (IPI Global Observatory, 2024).

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project documents a dramatic escalation in bandit attacks in the Northwest, from 124 incidents in 2018 to 1,031 incidents in 2022 — an increase of over 730% within four years (IPI Global Observatory, 2024). The human cost has been staggering: between 2010 and May 2023, approximately 13,485 deaths were attributed to banditry, with an estimated 30,000 bandits operating across numerous groups ranging in size from 10 to over 1,000 fighters. The displacement of 1,087,875 individuals in rural communities as of December 2022 further illustrates the scale of the humanitarian emergency. Beyond these direct impacts, the pervasive sense of insecurity has generated secondary and tertiary consequences — school closures, hospital abandonment, agricultural disengagement, and mass migration — that constitute a structural threat to national development (ACAPS, 2025; Akpa-Achimugu & Ibeh, 2023).

Other scholars, including Zubairu (2020), Chibuzor et al. (2020), and Ofoma and Onwe (2023), situate the crisis within a broader framework that encompasses unemployment, elite manipulation of identity, and historical patterns of marginalisation in Northern Nigeria. The dominant "ungoverned spaces" thesis, as articulated by Ojo (2020) and Lenshie et al. (2021), attributes the phenomenon primarily to state failure and governance abdication. Ejiofor (2022), however, critiques this perspective for its neglect of the socioeconomic context — specifically relative deprivation, unemployment, and poverty — within which banditry is embedded. Other scholars, including Zubairu (2020), situate the crisis within a broader framework that encompasses unemployment, elite manipulation of identity, and historical patterns of marginalisation in Northern Nigeria. This paper engages with this multifactorial causation while foregrounding the role of ungoverned spaces as a structural enabling condition rather than a sole explanatory variable.

2.3 Conflict and National Stability

Conflict is broadly understood in peace and security studies as a condition of incompatibility between parties — whether individuals, groups, or states — that may or may not involve the use of violence (Galtung, 1996). In the context of this paper, conflict refers specifically to organised armed violence between state security forces and non-state armed groups, as well as among competing armed factions and between such groups and civilian communities. National stability, in turn, refers to a condition in which the state maintains effective sovereignty, the rule of law is upheld, social institutions function, and the population is able to pursue economic and social activity without existential threat (Patrick, 2007; Wanan & Tavershima, 2024).

The relationship between internal conflict and national stability is well-established in

both theoretical and empirical literature. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) demonstrate that countries with significant endowments of natural resources (like Nigeria's oil wealth) and high rates of youth unemployment face elevated risks of armed conflict that in turn destabilise governance structures. In Nigeria, the nexus of conflict and instability is further complicated by the federalist structure, the interplay of ethnic and religious identities, the legacy of military governance, and chronic fiscal mismanagement that concentrates resources in the federation account while leaving subnational governments unable to fund security and development (Zubairu, 2020; Wanan & Tavershima, 2024). The Northwest crisis thus represents both a symptom and a driver of national instability, feeding into a vicious cycle in which insecurity undermines development, which in turn reproduces the conditions for further insecurity.

The concept of hybrid conflict is also relevant to understanding the Northwest crisis. As ACAPS (2025) notes, the region is characterised by a hybrid conflict environment in which ideological insurgency, criminality, and communal violence intersect, making conventional security responses inadequate. The porous borders with Niger Republic, the proliferation of small arms across the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel, and environmental stressors such as desertification and competition over shrinking arable land all function as conflict multipliers that sustain instability despite periodic military operations. This convergence of factors undermines Nigeria's capacity to achieve the governance, security, and development objectives stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its own national development frameworks (Sackflame & Omitola, 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2024).

2.4 Concept of Socio-Economic Development

Socioeconomic development is a multidimensional concept that encompasses improvements in material living standards, human capabilities, institutional quality, and social equity (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2023). In the context of the Northwest Nigeria, the relevant dimensions of socioeconomic development include agricultural productivity and food security, access to education and health services, poverty reduction, employment generation, infrastructure development, and the attraction of domestic and foreign investment. The intersection of these dimensions determines the overall developmental trajectory of the zone and its constituent states.

The Northwest is predominantly rural and agrarian, with agriculture constituting the primary livelihood for the vast majority of its population. The zone has historically been characterised by high poverty rates, low literacy levels, limited industrialisation, and inadequate social service delivery — structural vulnerabilities that predate the current security emergency but have been dramatically exacerbated by it (Chibuzor et al., 2020; Ofoma & Onwe, 2023). In Zamfara State, for instance, one of the most severely affected by banditry, poverty rates stand among the highest in the federation, and educational enrolment — particularly for girls — remains critically low, a condition that the security crisis has further deepened through mass school closures (Akpa-Achimugu & Ibeh, 2023).

The socioeconomic impact of insecurity operates through multiple channels. Direct channels include the physical destruction of assets (farms, livestock, property, and infrastructure) and the loss of human life and productive capacity. Indirect channels include the displacement of populations from productive land, the diversion of public expenditure from development to

security, the erosion of social capital and trust, the psychological trauma that reduces economic participation, and the deterrence of both domestic entrepreneurial activity and foreign investment (World Bank, 2011; Nwankwor & Nkechukwu, 2023; Madume & Owulo, 2024). Empirical studies consistently document all these channels in the Northwest, painting a picture of cascading developmental regression attributable in large part to the insecurity generated by ungoverned spaces.

2.5 The Nexus between Insecurity, Ungoverned Spaces, and Development

The triangular relationship between insecurity, ungoverned spaces, and underdevelopment constitutes the conceptual core of this paper. *Disconnected Spaces* (2022), a policy analysis of Nigeria's territorial governance, characterises ungoverned spaces as "a breeding ground for underdevelopment and the spread of non-state armed actors" that engenders a fundamental disconnect between residents and the government. This disconnect is both a cause and a consequence of insecurity: the absence of governance enables violence, which further drives out state institutions, deepening the governance vacuum in a self-reinforcing feedback loop.

Sackflame and Omitola (2022) advance this analytical nexus by demonstrating that the atmosphere of insecurity created by NSAGs operating in ungoverned spaces directly threatens Nigeria's progress toward achieving the SDGs, particularly in the areas of education, health, and poverty reduction. Tafida et al. (2023) provide micro-level evidence, showing that in areas severely affected by armed group activity, access to critical services — healthcare, food, water, and finance — is systematically undermined. Enodien and Eze (2024) extend this analysis to examine the macro-level consequences of armed banditry, emphasising its evolution into a systemic threat with significant national

security implications and severe social and economic consequences including displacement and livelihood loss.

At the aggregate level, the insecurity–ungoverned spaces–development nexus manifests in Nigeria's broader developmental crisis. The agricultural sector, which accounts for approximately 25% of GDP and employs 45% of the workforce (Coface, 2024), is severely constrained by insecurity — particularly in the food-producing Northern states — resulting in significant agricultural import dependency and inflationary food prices that disproportionately burden the poor. The poverty rate stood at 46% in 2023, with projections suggesting further deterioration (World Bank, 2025), a trajectory that the persistence of insecurity in ungoverned spaces makes reversing exceedingly difficult.

3.1 Ungoverned Spaces and Insecurity in Nigeria

A substantial body of empirical work has examined the relationship between ungoverned spaces and insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in the Northern states. Ojo (2020), in a seminal study published in *African Security*, employs spatial network analysis and Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping to examine ungoverned territories across Nigeria's northern region. The study argues that the primordial negligence of ungoverned areas with limited state surveillance — areas controlled by informal networks and hybrid governance arrangements — creates an enabling environment for warlordism, religious fanaticism, and tribal self-defence forces. Ojo (2020) further demonstrates that these spaces facilitate the illegal movement of arms and ammunition, and serve as operational bases for Boko Haram jihadists and other armed groups.

Okoye, Gbekumo and Chikezie (2024), in an article published in the *International Journal of Research and Innovation in*

Social Science, provide a comprehensive survey of ungoverned spaces across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. Their study, anchored on State Fragility Theory, argues that the lack of capacity and authority on the part of the Nigerian state to assert sovereignty over its territory directly enhances the ability of criminals, dissidents, and belligerent groups to terrorise citizens. The authors document that ungoverned forests such as Sambisa, Rugu, and Kamuku have served as operational sanctuaries, training grounds, and logistics hubs for armed groups.

Wanan and Tavershima (2024), writing in the *Journal of Political Discourse*, investigate the impact of governance deficits on security challenges in Nigeria's ungoverned spaces using a qualitative systematic review. Their findings reveal a multifaceted relationship between institutional weaknesses, corruption, weak rule of law, service delivery failures, and security challenges including insurgency, communal conflict, and organised crime. The study employs State Fragility Theory to argue that governance deficits are not merely symptomatic of insecurity but are structurally constitutive of it.

At the cross-border dimension, Lenshie et al. (2021) assess the impact of ungoverned spaces on cross-border security management between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Their study demonstrates that porous borders across the northern frontier — particularly in Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto states — facilitate arms smuggling, illicit movement of armed groups, and transnational criminal networks. The study finds that the governance vacuum along the border belt has enabled bandits to leverage the Nigeria–Niger corridor for logistical support, reinforcement, and safe havens, thereby complicating domestic counter-insurgency operations.

3.2 Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria

The literature on armed banditry in the Northwest is extensive and rapidly growing. Ojo et al. (2023), in a study published in *Terrorism and Political Violence* through Taylor and Francis, document the historical evolution and current trajectory of armed banditry in the Northwest, identifying three categories of causal factors: background causes (poverty, ungoverned spaces, fragile security, weak border management), immediate triggers (climate change, resource competition, informal security, ethno-communal tensions), and crisis enablers (state complicity, foreign powers, weapon suppliers, and informants). Their ACLED data analysis reveals the staggering escalation from sporadic attacks before 2018 to over 1,031 incidents in 2022.

Ejiofor (2022), in a critical intervention in *African Security*, challenges the dominant "ungoverned spaces" paradigm by foregrounding the socioeconomic dimensions of banditry. Drawing on relative deprivation theory, Ejiofor argues that unemployment, poverty, and the exclusion of rural youth from the formal economy are primary drivers of recruitment into bandit groups, and that an exclusively security-focused response — as recommended by "ungoverned spaces" theorists — fails to address these structural causes. This critique has important implications for policy, as it suggests the need for integrated socioeconomic responses alongside security operations.

Chibuzor, Ibrahim and Paul (2020) examine the direct socioeconomic impacts of banditry through community-level field research. Their findings confirm that bandit activities — including kidnapping, cattle theft, and village attacks — have devastated average per capita income, compromised food security, and inflicted severe violations of human dignity, particularly against women. Similarly, a

2023 study by Yusuf and Abubakar on agricultural productivity in Zamfara State, using primary data from farmers, documents widespread loss of crops and livestock, curtailed market access, and systematic extortion, underscoring the agricultural dimension of the development crisis.

Enodien and Eze (2024) extend the empirical analysis to examine the rise of organised armed banditry as a "systemic threat" to national security and development. Their study traces the transformation of bandit groups from disorganised criminal clusters to structured organisations with ideological dimensions, territorial control, and political leverage — a development that significantly complicates both security and development responses. The study's findings on displacement and livelihood loss are corroborated by IOM (2025) displacement data showing over one million displaced persons in the Northwest.

3.3 Insecurity and Socio-Economic Consequences

The empirical literature on the socioeconomic consequences of insecurity in Northern Nigeria consistently points to cascading developmental regression. Tafida et al. (2023) examine the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on rural households in Adamawa State, providing localised evidence of how insecurity disrupts access to healthcare, food, water, and financial services. Their findings reinforce the conclusion that insecurity exacerbates poverty, deepens inequality, and marginalises already vulnerable groups — particularly women and rural communities.

On the investment dimension, a study published in the *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* by Rsisinternational (2025) — examining the effect of insecurity on foreign direct investment in Nigeria between 2002 and

2023 — employs econometric methods and finds that insecurity has negatively and significantly affected FDI growth. The study corroborates findings by Nwankwor and Nkechukwu (2023), who documented that insecurity has eroded investor confidence and impacted economic growth. Data from the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) confirms that states in the Northwest and Northeast with the highest insecurity indicators consistently attract the least capital importation, with Kebbi, Zamfara, and Jigawa recording zero capital inflows between 2019 and 2023 (Dataphyte, 2023).

The ACAPS (2025) conflict dynamics report for Northwestern Nigeria provides the most current and granular empirical evidence. The report documents that maize farmers in Katsina recorded a 30–40% decline in household income relative to pre-banditry levels, while crop yields fell by more than half. In Zamfara, crop income per hectare dropped approximately 57% compared to pre-escalation periods. Farmers across the Northwest collectively paid approximately NGN 139.5 million (approximately USD 96,996) in levies to NSAGs between 2020 and 2023, illustrating how insecurity erodes livelihoods through systematic extortion in addition to physical destruction.

Akpa-Achimugu and Ibeh (2023), in a policy report for the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, document the devastating educational consequences of armed banditry in the Northwest. Their analysis reveals mass school closures, teacher displacement, declining enrolment — particularly for girls — and the destruction of educational infrastructure. These findings align with UNICEF (2023) data showing that the Northwest has among the highest rates of out-of-school children in Nigeria, a structural development deficit that compounds inter-generationally.

On gender dimensions, Ojewale and Balogun (2022) document banditry's disproportionate impact on women and

children in the Northwest. Their analysis, published by the London School of Economics, reveals that the killing and kidnapping of men — who serve as household breadwinners in the region's conservative social structure — leaves women widowed and economically disempowered in communities with limited women's economic participation. The report calls for targeted policy responses that account for the gendered dimensions of insecurity-induced underdevelopment.

At the macro-level, Enodien (2024) traces the parallels between the Northwest banditry crisis and the Northeast Boko Haram insurgency in terms of developmental consequences, particularly the flight of investment and business closures. Capital flight has been especially pronounced in the Northwest, where the combined effect of physical insecurity, infrastructure neglect, and governance absence has rendered the investment environment among the most hostile on the continent. Multinational divestments from Nigeria — including Shell, GlaxoSmithKline, Procter and Gamble, and Unilever — while driven by multiple factors, are partly attributed to the broader security environment (International Trade Portal, 2024).

4.0 Theoretical Framework

4.1 State Fragility Theory

This paper is primarily anchored on state fragility theory, which provides the most analytically proximate framework for understanding how governance deficits enable the proliferation of ungoverned spaces, and how such spaces generate the insecurity that retards socioeconomic development. State fragility theory, as developed by scholars including Robert Rotberg (2004), Stewart Patrick (2007), and the OECD (2008), conceptualises fragility as a condition in which state institutions lack the capacity, authority, or legitimacy to perform core governance

functions — maintaining security, upholding the rule of law, delivering public services, and managing public revenues.

Okoye et al. (2024) and Wanan and Tavershima (2024) apply state fragility theory specifically to Nigeria's ungoverned spaces problem. In this application, the theory illuminates the structural mechanisms through which governance failure produces ungoverned spaces: when the state lacks the institutional capacity to project authority across its territory, peripheral areas are left without effective governance, security provision, or public service delivery. These governance vacuums are then filled by non-state actors — armed groups, criminal organisations, and even terrorist networks — that compete with or displace state authority. The resultant insecurity creates conditions profoundly hostile to development, completing the fragility–ungoverned spaces–underdevelopment cycle.

In Nigeria's Northwest, state fragility theory finds empirical resonance in the structural weaknesses of subnational governance. Local government institutions — the tier of government most proximate to rural populations — are chronically under-resourced, politically marginalised, and institutionally incapable of providing security or basic services to remote communities (Ibrahim, 2021; Reliefweb, 2022). This institutional vacuum at the local level creates the precise governance deficit conditions that State Fragility Theory identifies as generative of ungoverned spaces and the insecurity that accompanies them. The theory thus provides a strong explanatory framework for the situation in the Northwest while simultaneously pointing toward governance reconstruction as the primary locus of remediation.

4.2 Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative deprivation theory, initially formulated by Ted Robert Gurr (1970) in

Why Men Rebel, provides a complementary theoretical lens that addresses the socioeconomic dimensions of insecurity that State Fragility Theory tends to underemphasise. Gurr's theory posits that political violence and collective rebellious behaviour emerge when individuals or groups perceive a significant gap between their expected life conditions (the goods and opportunities they feel entitled to) and their achieved life conditions (what they actually obtain). This perceived discrepancy — relative deprivation — generates frustration that, under certain political conditions, translates into organised violence.

In the context of Northwest Nigeria, relative deprivation theory provides crucial explanatory traction for understanding the socioeconomic drivers of banditry. The Northwest has historically been characterised by high poverty, low educational attainment, limited formal employment, and stark inequality — conditions that generate acute relative deprivation, particularly among rural youth (Ejiofor, 2022; Zubairu, 2020). As the formal economy in the region has contracted further under the weight of insecurity, the relative deprivation of rural communities has intensified, creating a large pool of recruitable individuals for armed groups that offer material resources, group identity, and a form of quasi-economic participation.

The integration of state fragility theory and relative deprivation theory in this paper reflects the scholarly consensus that ungoverned spaces and the insecurity they generate are best understood as products of both governance failure and socioeconomic marginalisation. Neither framework alone is sufficient: the "ungoverned spaces" thesis without socioeconomic analysis misses the structural drivers of banditry recruitment, while socioeconomic analysis without governance analysis fails to explain why insecurity is spatially concentrated in

governance-absent territories. Their combination — as also applied by Ejiofor (2022) and Wanan and Tavershima (2024) — provides the most analytically robust framework for the study's research objectives.

Taken together, state fragility theory and relative deprivation theory form an interlocking analytical architecture that this paper deploys to explain the ungoverned spaces crisis in Nigeria's Northwest as a product of mutually reinforcing governance and socio-economic failures. State fragility theory accounts for the supply side of the crisis: it explains how the incapacity of state institutions to project authority, deliver services, and maintain security across the Northwest's vast territories creates the governance vacuums within which armed bandit groups establish operational bases and parallel structures of control. Relative deprivation theory accounts for the demand side: it explains why rural youth, confronted with chronic poverty, unemployment, and the systematic closure of legitimate economic pathways, become willing recruits into those armed groups. The two theories thus converge on the Northwest crisis from opposite analytical directions, with state fragility explaining the structural conditions that make ungoverned spaces possible, and relative deprivation explaining the human agency that fills and sustains them. Neither theory alone can account for both the spatial concentration of insecurity in governance-absent territories and the socio-economic drivers of banditry recruitment. Their triangulation in this paper produces an analytical framework capable of capturing the full causal chain, from institutional abdication and governance collapse, through the formation of ungoverned spaces, to the proliferation of armed groups and the cascading socio-economic consequences that constitute the core empirical concern of this study.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a systematic review methodology complemented by content analysis. The choice of this design is deliberate and epistemologically grounded in the nature of the research problem and the objectives of the study. The central concern of this paper, namely how governance vacuums generate insecurity and how that insecurity retards socio-economic development in Nigeria's Northwest, is a complex, context-embedded, and causally layered phenomenon that resists adequate examination through quantitative measurement alone. Quantitative approaches, while valuable for establishing statistical associations between variables, are limited in their capacity to capture the structural, institutional, and historical processes through which ungoverned spaces form, persist, and produce cascading developmental consequences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The qualitative systematic review is particularly appropriate here because the study draws on a diverse corpus of secondary sources, including policy reports, conflict datasets, institutional assessments, and peer-reviewed empirical studies, each requiring interpretive engagement rather than numerical aggregation. Furthermore, given that primary data collection in the affected Northwest communities is severely constrained by active insecurity, population displacement, and institutional inaccessibility, a systematic review of existing empirical evidence represents not merely a methodological preference but a practically necessary and intellectually rigorous alternative (Snyder, 2019). The systematic review methodology enables a transparent, reproducible, and analytically structured synthesis of what is known about the phenomenon, while thematic content analysis provides the interpretive

framework through which patterns, causal relationships, and policy implications are identified and organised across the reviewed sources.

5.2 Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from a diverse range of authoritative sources. These include: peer-reviewed journal articles published in indexed academic journals (including Taylor and Francis, Elsevier, Springer, and MDPI imprints); policy and technical reports from international organisations (ACAPS, IOM, World Bank, UNCTAD, UNICEF, and the United Nations); reports from reputable think tanks and research institutes (the IPI Global Observatory, London School of Economics, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Simons Center for the Study of Interoperability, and the ACLED Project); government and national statistics bureau publications (Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, NBS); and credible media organisations and data journalism platforms. Only sources published between 2018 and 2025 were prioritised, with foundational theoretical works from earlier periods included where indispensable for conceptual grounding.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through thematic content analysis, guided by the study's research objectives and theoretical frameworks. Following the established content analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytical process involved: (1) familiarisation with the data corpus; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes across coded data; (4) reviewing and refining themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the analytic narrative. The primary themes identified through this process were: governance vacuums and ungoverned space formation; insecurity escalation and armed group proliferation; agricultural and economic disruption;

human capital and social service deterioration; investment deterrence; and the nexus between insecurity and national stability. These themes structure the Findings and Discussion section of the paper.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1 Governance Vacuums and the Formation of Ungoverned Spaces in Northwest Nigeria

The findings presented in this section and Section 6.2 address the first objective of this study, namely the conceptualisation and contextualisation of ungoverned spaces and the examination of how governance vacuums form and are exploited by armed non-state actors in Nigeria's Northwest. The findings confirm that the Northwest geopolitical zone exhibits the defining characteristics of ungoverned and under-governed spaces as theorised in the literature. The region's seven states, particularly Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, and Kaduna, harbour vast territories that lie beyond the effective governance reach of state institutions. The Rugu Forest, spanning approximately 6,000 square kilometres across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states, represents the most prominent physical ungoverned space and has been consistently identified as the primary operational base for armed bandit groups (Ojo et al., 2023; Wanan and Tavershima, 2024). The forest's remoteness, combined with the absence of security infrastructure, road networks, and state presence, renders it effectively a sovereign territory of armed non-state actors.

Institutionally, local government councils in the affected states are characterised by chronic under-funding, political subordination to state governments, and institutional incapacity to deliver security or social services. Ibrahim (2021) observes that the most serious feature of the Nigerian state is that no institution currently has the mission and capacity to

monitor, track, and govern what is occurring in remote communities — an observation that finds acute expression in the Northwest. The Nigerian Senate and state assemblies have periodically acknowledged the severity of the governance deficit, yet structural reforms to address it have been episodic and insufficient (Reliefweb, 2022). The resultant governance vacuum fulfils the definitional conditions of ungoverned spaces across all theoretical frameworks reviewed.

The porous borders with Niger Republic constitute an additional dimension of ungoverned space formation. Nigeria shares approximately 1,497 kilometres of border with Niger, much of it ungoverned and unmonitored (Lenshie et al., 2021). ACAPS (2025) notes that environmental stressors — desertification, erratic rainfall, competition over natural resources — act as conflict multipliers in these border zones, where the proliferation of small arms facilitated by regional instability in Mali, Libya, and the Central Sahel further entrenches the operational capacity of armed groups. The governance deficit at the border thus creates a permeable membrane through which arms, personnel, and criminal networks flow with relative impunity.

6.2 Insecurity Escalation and Armed Group Proliferation

The escalation of insecurity in the Northwest has been dramatic and well-documented. The ACLED dataset, as analysed by Ojo et al. (2023) and the IPI Global Observatory (2024), reveals that bandit attacks increased from 64 incidents at their 2014 peak to 124 in 2018, before surging exponentially to 1,031 incidents in 2022. This escalation trajectory is consistent with the State Fragility Theory prediction that ungoverned spaces, once established, generate self-reinforcing cycles of insecurity: each attack that goes unanswered signals state incapacity, encourages further attacks, and deepens

the governance vacuum. The 13,485 deaths attributed to banditry between 2010 and May 2023 represent a humanitarian catastrophe whose scale rivals, in cumulative terms, many internationally recognised conflicts.

The organisational evolution of armed bandit groups constitutes a particularly alarming dimension of the escalation. Enodien and Eze (2024) document the transformation of bandit groups from loosely organised criminal clusters to structured organisations with territorial control, hierarchical command, and political leverage. Some groups have imposed taxation on farming communities, negotiated peace agreements with state governments, and leveraged their operational capacity to extract concessions — activities that represent a form of counter-sovereignty that directly challenges the legitimacy of the Nigerian state (Reliefweb, 2022). The emergence of this counter-sovereignty dynamic has significant implications for national stability, as it signals the displacement of the state's monopoly on violence — the foundational attribute of Weberian statehood — in significant portions of the Northwest's territory.

Gender dimensions of the insecurity crisis are equally significant. Ojewale and Balogun (2022) document that the mass killing and kidnapping of men — who function as the primary breadwinners in the Northwest's conservative social structure — has produced a wave of widowhood and female-headed households in communities with severely limited opportunities for women's economic participation. Women who survive direct violence face chronic food insecurity, healthcare denial, psychological trauma, and social stigma. The gendered impact of insecurity thus compounds existing structural gender inequalities, producing a multigenerational development deficit that standard economic indicators fail to fully capture.

6.3 Agricultural Disruption and Food Security

Agriculture represents the most directly and severely impacted sector of the Northwest economy. As the primary livelihood for the region's predominantly rural population, its disruption translates immediately into poverty escalation, food insecurity, and community disintegration. ACAPS (2025) provides the most granular recent evidence: farmers in Katsina experienced a 30–40% decline in household income relative to pre-banditry levels, with crop yields falling by more than half. In Zamfara, crop income per hectare declined by approximately 57% compared to production levels before the 2011–2018 escalation of violence.

The mechanisms of agricultural disruption are diverse. Direct violence — including attacks on farmers at their fields, the burning of farmland and the seizure of harvests — prevents agricultural activity during critical growing seasons. Cattle rustling, one of the defining activities of armed banditry has decimated livestock herds that constitute the primary wealth storage mechanism for rural households. The displacement of farming communities from productive land — over 1.08 million displaced persons by December 2022 (IPI Global Observatory, 2024) — removes human capital from agricultural production. And the systematic extortion of farmers, who collectively paid approximately NGN 139.5 million in levies to NSAGs between 2020 and 2023 (ACAPS, 2025), represents a direct extraction of economic surplus from already impoverished communities.

The aggregate macroeconomic consequences are equally stark. Zamfara's agrarian economy alone lost an estimated NGN 43 billion (approximately USD 100 million) in potential agricultural revenue in 2022 (ACAPS, 2025). Nationally, agricultural production (25% of GDP and employing 45% of the workforce) remains insufficient due to insecurity, contributing

to significant import dependency in wheat, rice, and sugar (Coface, 2024). This agricultural underperformance, substantially driven by Northwest insecurity, contributes to Nigeria's chronic food inflation — consumer food prices surging to historic highs — and the poverty escalation that the World Bank (2025) projects will push over 50% of Nigerians below the international poverty line by 2025.

6.4 Investment Deterrence and Economic Marginalisation

The deterrence of investment — both domestic and foreign — constitutes another critical channel through which ungoverned spaces and insecurity undermine socioeconomic development in the Northwest. Econometric evidence from Rsisinternational (2025) confirms that insecurity has negatively and significantly affected FDI growth in Nigeria over the 2002–2023 period. At the subnational level, the investment deterrence effect is even more pronounced. Data from the NBS shows that between 2019 and 2023, states such as Kebbi, Zamfara, and Jigawa — all in the Northwest — attracted zero capital importation (Dataphyte, 2023). This occurred despite significant infrastructure investments in some of these states, demonstrating that infrastructure provision alone cannot overcome the investment deterrence effect of pervasive insecurity.

The reputational risk associated with the Northwest's security situation extends beyond individual investment decisions to affect the entire northern corridor of Nigeria's economy. Madume and Owulo (2024) argue that reputational risks associated with insecurity deter potential investors, hindering the development needed to address the structural causes of that very insecurity. Major multinational companies — including Shell, GlaxoSmithKline, Procter and Gamble, Unilever Nigeria, Sanofi, and others — have divested from Nigeria in recent years,

partly due to the challenging business environment created by insecurity (International Trade Portal, 2024). While these divestments are nationally distributed in their effects, they disproportionately impact the already-marginalised northern states by foreclosing employment and supply chain opportunities that might otherwise have provided economic alternatives to armed group recruitment.

6.5 Human Capital Erosion: Education and Healthcare

The human capital consequences of insecurity in the Northwest are severe and multidimensional. The education sector has suffered devastating disruption, with banditry-induced school closures affecting hundreds of thousands of students. Akpa-Achimugu and Ibeh (2023) document that armed banditry has critically undermined educational development in the Northwest, contributing to school closures, teacher displacement, infrastructure destruction, and precipitously declining enrolment rates. The Northwest already had Nigeria's highest rates of out-of-school children before the security emergency, and the banditry crisis has dramatically worsened this structural deficit. The kidnapping of schoolchildren — directly mirroring the Boko Haram Chibok abduction template — has created profound parental reluctance to send children, particularly girls, to school.

Healthcare infrastructure has been similarly devastated. The absence of functional primary healthcare facilities in many rural communities — itself a product of the governance deficit that generates ungoverned spaces — has been compounded by the targeted destruction and abandonment of health facilities in conflict-affected areas. Tafida et al. (2023) document that insecurity severely undermines access to healthcare, food, water, and financial services for rural households in conflict-affected areas. Medical personnel, like teachers, are

disproportionately displaced from conflict zones, leaving communities without access to basic health services at a time when conflict-related trauma and injury demands are highest. The combined educational and healthcare deterioration constitutes an erosion of human capital with decades-long developmental consequences.

6.6 National Stability Implications

The preceding findings have profound implications for Nigeria's national stability. The cumulative effect of insecurity emanating from ungoverned spaces in the Northwest — displacement, agricultural collapse, investment deterrence, human capital erosion, and the proliferation of counter-sovereign armed groups — represents a multi-dimensional challenge to the state's core functions of security provision, economic management, and social service delivery. Nigeria's ranking of 33rd out of 54 African nations on the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance, with continued deterioration in the security and rule of law dimension (Okoye et al., 2024), reflects the systemic character of this challenge.

The national stability threat operates through both structural and dynamic channels. Structurally, the Northwest crisis contributes to a fiscal environment in which an increasing share of public expenditure is diverted to security operations, crowding out developmental investments in infrastructure, education, and social protection. Dynamically, the insecurity creates displacement flows that strain the absorptive capacities of urban centres, generates social tensions around resource competition, and produces grievances among affected communities that can be instrumentalised for further radicalisation. The potential convergence between Northwest banditry networks and ideological extremist organisations — given the Sahel region's documented proliferation of JNIM, ISWAP, and other entities — represents a particularly

alarming threat escalation scenario (ACAPS, 2025; Ojo, 2020).

Equally important is the erosion of state legitimacy that ungoverned spaces and the insecurity they generate produce. When communities negotiate peace deals with armed groups — as documented in Niger State, where some communities offered bandits motorcycles and cash in return for safety (Reliefweb, 2022) — or when armed groups impose taxes and provide makeshift governance, the functional legitimacy of the Nigerian state in those communities is supplanted. This legitimacy deficit, once established, is difficult to reverse and represents a fundamental threat to the social contract on which national stability ultimately rests.

7.0 Policy Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, this paper advances the following policy recommendations for addressing the insecurity–ungoverned spaces–underdevelopment nexus in Northwest Nigeria:

7.1 Governance Reconstruction and State Presence

The primary imperative is the reconstruction of effective governance in ungoverned and under-governed spaces. This requires substantial fiscal devolution to local government authorities in affected states, with dedicated funding streams for community security infrastructure, service delivery, and development programmes. The relocation of key government institutions and service delivery points from state capitals to smaller cities and towns in remote areas — as proposed by the Simons Center (2024) — would materially increase state presence and legitimacy in currently ungoverned zones. Traditional institutions and community leaders should be formally integrated into security governance architecture, leveraging their legitimacy and local knowledge.

7.2 Integrated Security and Development Strategy

Security responses to Northwest insecurity must be integrated with development programming rather than pursued in isolation. Military and police operations, while necessary, have proven insufficient as standalone solutions in the Northwest; they must be complemented by mass employment programmes, vocational training, agricultural support, and economic empowerment initiatives that address the relative deprivation conditions that drive banditry recruitment (Ejiofor, 2022; Zubairu, 2020). The Northwest Development Commission (NWDC), established to address the zone's developmental deficits, should be adequately funded and operationally empowered to lead this integrated strategy.

7.3 Border Security and Regional Cooperation

Effective management of the Nigeria–Niger border is essential for disrupting the transnational logistical networks that sustain armed banditry in the Northwest. This requires investment in surveillance technology, border patrol infrastructure, and — critically — regional diplomatic engagement through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Agreements with Niger Republic on joint border management and intelligence sharing would significantly constrain the operational freedom of armed groups that exploit the governance vacuum along the border corridor (Lenshie et al., 2021; ACAPS, 2025).

7.4 Agricultural Rehabilitation and Food Security

A targeted programme for agricultural rehabilitation in conflict-affected Northwest communities is urgently needed. This should encompass: secured

agricultural zones with dedicated security presence; livestock restocking programmes for communities devastated by cattle rustling; agricultural input subsidies and market access support; and crop insurance mechanisms that incentivise farmers to return to abandoned lands. Given that agricultural income losses represent the most direct and immediate channel through which insecurity produces poverty, agricultural rehabilitation offers the most proximate path to poverty reduction and community stabilisation.

7.5 Investment in Education and Human Capital

The educational emergency in the Northwest demands a comprehensive response that addresses both access and safety. A robust school infrastructure rehabilitation programme, accompanied by security guarantees for school premises and adequate teacher incentives to serve in conflict-affected areas, is essential. Conditional cash transfer programmes targeted at the families of out-of-school children — particularly girls — would address the demand-side barriers to educational participation. Community-based education initiatives that do not require the physical security of centralised school buildings offer an interim solution in areas where security cannot yet be guaranteed.

8.0 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that ungoverned spaces in Nigeria's Northwest geopolitical zone constitute a structural driver of insecurity that has devastating consequences for socioeconomic development and national stability. Through a systematic review of extant literature and empirical evidence, drawing on State Fragility Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory, the study has documented the escalation of armed banditry from a peripheral criminal phenomenon to a systemic security emergency characterised by 13,485

documented deaths, over one million displaced persons, catastrophic agricultural collapse, zero capital importation in key Northwest states, severe educational and healthcare disruption, and the emergence of counter-sovereign armed groups that challenge the Nigerian state's legitimacy.

The analytical framework of this paper emphasises that ungoverned spaces are simultaneously a product of state fragility and a generator of the conditions — insecurity, underdevelopment, displacement — that deepen that fragility. Breaking this self-reinforcing cycle requires an integrated response that simultaneously addresses governance reconstruction, security operations, economic empowerment, agricultural rehabilitation, human capital investment, and regional diplomatic engagement. Piecemeal approaches that prioritise security without development, or development without security, have consistently failed to produce durable change in the Northwest.

Nigeria's national trajectory — its capacity to achieve the SDGs, reverse poverty escalation, attract investment, and maintain territorial sovereignty — depends in substantial measure on its capacity to govern, develop, and secure its Northwest. The urgency of this challenge cannot be overstated: with over 50% of Nigerians projected to be living in extreme poverty by 2025, with armed group sophistication increasing, and with the Sahel region's security environment continuing to deteriorate, the window for effective intervention is narrowing. The findings and recommendations of this paper are offered as a contribution to the evidence base that must inform that intervention.

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