

# **FOREST GOVERNANCE, UNGOVERNED SPACES AND CATTLE BANDITRY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA**

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The past two decades have witnessed the adoption of democratic governance in several African nation-states. While few state institutions and sectors are reaping the dividends of democracy, many are yet to do so. Forest and natural resource sectors have, so far, not benefited from the democratisation process. Indeed, terminologies like ‘blood diamond’ and ‘resource curse’ have been used to describe forest governance as well as the stewardship of the continent’s rich natural resources. Mainly because much of African forests have been poorly and defectively governed, they have transformed to ungoverned spaces appropriated and converted to criminal arena by terrorists and criminal gangs who have emerged as their invincible custodians. This paper explores the interface of poor forest governance and the upsurge in cattle banditry in northern Nigeria.

It first critiques the emerging literature on cattle banditry in Africa and identifies defective forest governance as critical but missing in the academic literature and popular conversation on cattle banditry in Nigeria. Drawing on primary and secondary sources of information, it then demonstrates the ways in which weak forest governance yields ungoverned forest spaces that currently provide safe haven for cattle bandits in Nigeria’s northern flank. The paper further explains why existing policy initiatives at mitigating cattle banditry have failed and concludes by proffering ‘evidence-informed decision-making’ (EIDM) policy options that might retrieve control of the forests and natural resources from their criminal lords and ultimately curb cattle banditry in northern Nigeria.

Three clusters of conventional explanatory frameworks have been dominant and influential in explaining cattle rustling in Africa. They hold culture and tradition; population pressure and environmental scarcity as well as state failure and the proliferation of small arms responsible for cattle rustling. First, pastoral culture and tradition is one of the major reasons for cattle rustling in Nigeria. It encourages cattle theft as a way of replenishing stock after losing herds to drought. Some traditions exclusively confer cattle husbandry to nomads and recommend rustling against non-pastoral groups who dare to rear cattle. The second is climate change. Researchers confirm that climate change has triggered the shrinking of Lake Chad. This has furthered the desertification of northern Nigeria. As herders migrate from the north in search of greener pastures in the Middle Belt and Southern regions their herds are often plundered by bandits and marauding Boko Haram militants. Thirdly, cattle rustling is attributed to state failure, intra-state wars and the proliferation of light weapons in Africa. This leads to countries becoming what’s described as fragile states. Nigeria is no exception. In addition to its internal political, economic, and domestic terrorism challenges, the country is geographically located in the conflict-ridden Sahel region. Weapons and arms flowing from these war zones are ferried through Nigeria’s unmanned borders into the hands of criminal groups, which include cattle rustlers.

These three factors are rightly cited as facilitating the cattle rustling scourge. But, based on my research, I’d argue that the main reason for the continued existence of cattle bandits is the lack of

effective governance of Nigeria's forests. Northern Nigeria covers about 60% of Nigeria's land area and hosts a large expanse of forest land. The government has designated one-third of the region's land mass as official forest reserves. With a rich repertoire of plants, animals, streams, river tributaries, and waterfalls, the forests crisscross rural communities and towns in the region. Boko Haram terrorists operate the most clandestine and sophisticated network of cattle rustlers and sellers within these forests. They have taken control of the Sambisa forests, a land mass which is estimated to be the size of Lagos.

They have been able to do this because the forests have been neglected for years. They are unmanned, unpoliced, acutely underfunded and poorly managed. Like other government agencies, forestry departments are hugely understaffed and operate on lean budgets that are often mismanaged. Forestry policy also adopts a top-to-bottom approach that disregards host communities. When these communities are alienated they are less inclined to take "ownership" of the forests. So, the forests become a hotbed of criminals and safe haven for cattle bandits. Boko Haram's seizure and subsequent occupation of Sambisa forests, for instance, has been blamed on years of government neglect and community apathy.

The Nigerian government only started to respond to cattle rustling in 2014. Yet the plague has been on a steady rise for more than 10 years. Government response has been slow and lethargic and policy discussions have not yet translated into concrete policy actions. Its strategies for combating cattle banditry have either involved uncoordinated police action or un-sustained military exercises. For instance, Operation Ayem Apatuma, organised in 2018 to tackle cattle rustling in Nigeria's north-central region, was too short to make any lasting impact. It ended after three months.

The government must review its approach to cattle banditry. It needs a clear and specific policy. One aspect of this should be an effort to move herders away from open grazing and encourage them to embrace modern ranching practices. Confining the movement of cattle to ranches ensures a higher level of security and reduces their nuisance value. The government must also reassess forest governance so that the management of forests becomes an inclusive practice that takes people's needs into account. In addition, forest guards need to be empowered and equipped to discharge their duties effectively. The government will also need to liberate the Sambisa forests from Boko Haram's control. This would allow for the establishment of cattle colonies within the forests lands. Restricting the movement of herders to colonies within their cultural communities could go a long way in reducing their perennial conflict with farmer communities. More importantly, the establishment of cattle ranches and colonies would promote the development of associated industries such as dairy, leather and shoe industries, and the long-awaited revolution of meat production in northern Nigeria.