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Pills, substances and brigandage: Exploring the drug factor in Nigeria's banditry crisis

Al Chukwuma Okoli^a and Folahanmi Aina^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, Lafia, Nigeria; ^bSchool of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of drugs in the prevailing banditry crisis in Nigeria. It does so against the deteriorating trajectory of the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria in which the issue of drugs and substances has been implicated. Existing studies on the subject matter have variously considered the ramifying dimensions of the banditry question, especially its complex nexuses to other organised crimes, such as terrorism, arms trafficking, illicit mining and mercenary militancy. Evidently, the linkage between banditry and illicit drug proliferation and (ab)use has been scarcely explored, hence the need for the present discourse. Using a qualitative method that relies on desk research and key informant interviews, the paper posits that the (ab)use of drugs and toxic substances by bandits has been a critical catalyst for the banditry crisis in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Nigeria's banditry crisis has come full circle. The crisis, which crystallised in the early 2010s, has escalated into a dire national security emergency. Events in recent years indicate that bandits have surpassed insurgents and terrorists in terms of criminal sophistication and efficiency.¹ In the north-western region, which is the epicentre of the crisis, bandits are engaged in mutually reinforcing pragmatic alliances with jihadists, thereby engendering a convoluting crime-terror conundrum.² The crisis has been one of the principal causes of human mortality in Nigeria. It is estimated that 1742 Nigerians were killed in banditry-related attacks in the various parts of Nigeria in the first quarter of 2022.³

The phenomenon of banditry has received significant scholarly attention and traction over the years. While a lot has been said concerning its nature, causes and ramifying consequences, much still needs to be said on some emerging issues on the subject. One such issue is the banditry-drugs nexus.⁴ The nexus between drugs and banditry resonates prominently within the prevailing public discourse in Nigeria and beyond.⁵ Extant commentaries and narratives have variously surmised that there is a reinforcing linkage between drug proliferation/consumption and the incidence of banditry, especially in northern Nigeria.⁶ Existing accounts,

CONTACT Folahanmi Aina  fa58@soas.ac.uk  Department of Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 10 Thornhaugh St, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

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however, are policy-cum-advocacy narratives that are bereft of deep and robust analytical rigour. According to the Director of Media in Nigeria's National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), Mr Femi Babafemi, 'insurgents and bandits arrested often show withdrawal symptoms after days in custody of law enforcement agents'.⁷

Although the prevailing accounts have clearly underscored the role of drugs in fuelling and catalysing the banditry crisis, they have largely stopped short of explaining how this role plays out within the criminogenic dynamics of banditry. In other words, while it has been established that there is a nexus between drugs and banditry, how such a nexus forms and manifests has not been adequately articulated by organised scholarship. The need to therefore contribute towards filling this epistemic gap is what has informed this paper.

This paper examines the role of drugs in the prevailing banditry crisis in Nigeria. The paper posits that the (ab)use of drugs and allied substances by bandits has been a critical catalyst of the banditry crisis in Nigeria. The remainder of the paper is broadly considered under the following sub-themes: conceptual and theoretical framework; the evolutionary dynamics of the banditry crisis in Nigeria; drugs and banditry: insights from northern Nigeria; implications for counter-banditry; and conclusion.

Drug (ab)use, criminality and terrorism: A conceptual/theoretical discourse

Over the years, following the proliferation of illicit drugs and substance abuse, various studies have sought to establish the linkages between narcotics and organised crime. This phenomenon, which is popularly known as narco-terrorism in the literature and was first used as a terminology in the United States, has been defined as the nexus between narcotics and terrorism.⁸ Its first use has been attributed to Peruvian President Belaunde Terry by Jonas Hartelius in 1983.⁹ This linkage has been exploited by violent non-state actors in areas such as financing, towards the perpetuation of their nefarious activities, which includes acts of terrorism. As Björnehed (2004) rightly notes, the concept of narco-terrorism, despite being a complicated one, is situated in the understanding that narcotics trafficking and terrorism are interconnected, which has been acknowledged for several decades.¹⁰ Narco-terrorists or narco-guerrillas could therefore be understood as violent non-state actors (VNSAs) whose acts of terrorism derive significant benefit from the illicit drug underworld.

Clarke (2016) therefore contends that this remains one of the most lucrative forms of criminality relied upon by terrorist groups such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Afghan Taliban, to mention a few, to finance their criminal enterprise through illicit drug trafficking.¹¹ The illicit trade in and trafficking of drugs remains a major contribution to terrorist financing across the world. These realities amplify the interconnectedness of the global war on drugs and the war on terrorism.

Drugs are defined in this paper as pharmacological substances composed of chemical derivatives and consumed for medical purposes towards providing relief from pain and other forms of illnesses. Their abuse reflects the unwarranted use of such products other than for the purpose for which they were originally manufactured. In many instances, this also includes obtaining these substances without appropriate medical prescription, or from unauthorised sources. The illicit trade in, trafficking and use of 'hard drugs', identified as narcotics such as opiates, cocaine, cannabis, ecstasy, heroin, hashish, marijuana, methamphetamine, amongst others, have tended to enable their users in the form of a catalyst. The manifestations of drug dealing amongst criminal organisations and terrorist groups therefore

poses a real and existential threat to the peace and security of lives and livelihoods. This is in addition to having serious consequences for global counterterrorism efforts. It is also pertinent to note that drug trafficking has the potential of generating criminal violence not only in conflict settings, but in times of peace, as well (Stepanova, 2012).¹²

This understanding has attracted both scholarly and policy attention towards the ever-burgeoning crime terror continuum across the globe. It is important to note that narcoviolence has also been used interchangeably with narcoterrorism, with similar meanings. Pacheco (2009) defines narcoviolence as any violence that is related to drug organisations aiming to subvert or eliminate targets through the threat or, when necessary, use of, force. Terrorist organisations that are heavily reliant on illicit drug use could be categorised for the purpose of analysis as being drug organisations.¹³ These have also been empirical queries on the extent to which drug trafficking contributes towards terrorism. As Omelicheva and Markowitz argue, the relationship between the two remains a contentious one. In contributing to the drug-terror thesis, they contend that drug trafficking serves as a major source of income for insurgent and terrorist groups, fuelling their ability to carry out deadly attacks.¹⁴

Furthermore, they identify three ways in which drugs have a direct impact on crime and terrorism. The first is the relatively low risk associated with drug trafficking, which criminal and terrorist groups exploit to their advantage. The second is the exertion of political violence against uncooperative government officials and the third is the formation of strategic alliances between criminal and terrorist organisations.¹⁵ Similarly, Cornell (2007) argues that armed conflict is deeply affected by the narcotics industry, resulting in the capacity of insurgent groups being strengthened on the one hand, and the capacity of the state being weakened on the other hand.¹⁶ In addition, the conditions of armed conflict tend to boost, exacerbate, transform and sometimes contribute towards shifts in the pre-existing patterns of narcotics production.¹⁷

Broader social and clinical theories have attempted to explain the relationship between drugs and crime. Some of these theories include the subcultural, role and ecological theory, which posit that both the use of drugs and crime may emerge from the same etiological variables, resulting in them becoming an integral part of what has been referred to as a street-drug-using, as well as subculture. Others such as the radical theory suggests that the existing relationship between drugs and crimes is reflective of social policy which illegalises drugs. The effects of this were the creation of a subculture that spurred an increase in the price of drugs which subsequently served as an economic incentive for drug-related crime.¹⁸ A major flaw with this perspective as propounded by radical theorists is that by decriminalising drug (ab)use, while restricting it to the realm of public health, the issue of the drug-crime nexus could potentially be addressed. However, this tends to oversimplify the dynamics associated with the drug-crime relationship, in addition to negating its inherent complexities within the generalised scope of criminality, whereas other forms of criminality such as terrorism might often require a multifaceted approach. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge that the relationship between drugs and crime, and by extension terrorism, is both conceptually and empirically complex.

Therefore, in establishing a conceptual framework on illicit drugs and banditry, it is pertinent to note that bandits rely on the illicit drug market to maintain their access to drugs and substances which offer them a sense of superiority and invincibility when perpetuating violent acts against vulnerable communities. Such has been the case across Nigeria. The utility of illicit drugs by bandits reflects a direct source from which these criminal organisations become emboldened, while perceiving themselves to be unstoppable in the face of imminent force, such as from the Nigerian military and other security forces. The continued

reliance on drugs therefore provides further motivation for bandits to execute their operations, which also partly accounts for kidnappings for ransom, whereby proceeds obtained from victims are used to guarantee the steady and uninterrupted access to illicit drugs.

Several other theories have been propounded seeking to explain the relationship that exists between drug dependency and crime, such as the ego/self theory of substance dependence, which explains psychoanalytic perspectives on individuals' attempt to cope with their internal emotional and external social and physical environment.¹⁹ This research, however, adopts the existential theory of drug dependence as a theoretical anchor. Derived from the broader framework of existential psychology, this theory represents an attempt to understand and account for destructive patterns of drug use. The theory posits that the failure to secure basic needs and self-enhancing aspirations produces a sense of distress and despair, thereby resulting in both productive and destructive activities aimed at mitigating these feelings.²⁰ This theory hinges on the understanding that the specific range of variables lies at the personality and emotional core of all substance abusers, as argued by George Greaves.²¹ The perpetration of criminal activities as a result of terrorists' and bandits' dependency on drugs is rooted in the need to mitigate the despair stemming from perceived feelings of marginalisation and social injustice, which they try to give expression to through their destructive activities, which includes pillage, killings, kidnappings and sexual violence such as rape. As Hochhauser rightly notes, dependency may develop where there are no other effective coping mechanisms available.²²

Perspectives on drugs and armed violence: A literature review

The discourse on the relationship between drugs and terrorism is significant in offering insights into the operational strategies of terrorist groups even though most of them would rather not be associated with drug dealings in the eyes of the public, given that this could potentially affect their quest for influence as well as their intention of winning 'hearts and minds' in their areas of influence. This, however, does not negate the violent effect that drug trafficking by terrorist groups has on drug-transit states or territories. The 'rebels-turned-narcos', which is yet another popularised perspective, holds that insurgent and terrorist groups tend to lose sight of their political objectives at the expense of profit making, as they become further entrenched in the illicit drug industry.²³ It is important to point out that this does not necessarily hold true with all terrorist groups. In other instances, the monetisation of the illicit drugs industry as a criminal enterprise has resulted in the emergence of kingpins who often yield significant control over the production, transportation and distribution of illicit drugs in large quantities.²⁴

A part of the discourse on drug abuse and crime points to how perpetrators of income-generating crimes provide the impetus for easier purchase of drugs.²⁵ This position reiterates the assumption that the cheap availability of drugs through the illicit market contributes towards their proliferation and abuse. McBride and McCoy rightly contend that, despite a wide body of research which points to the complex recursive nature of the relationship between drugs and crime, the former should not be entirely viewed as a direct and simple cause of crime.²⁶ Amongst other reasons, this is essentially because this relationship is more complex than it appears to be, given that there are several other underlying factors which trigger crimes, including armed conflict due to pre-existing socio-economic conditions, political factors, environmental factors and ethno-religious factors, particularly in fragile settings. It is significant to note that the ecological theoretical analysis hinges on the perspective that the

relationship between drugs and crime is a result of poverty and the absence of economic opportunity.

McBride and McCoy therefore advocate for a more holistic approach towards the analysis of the relationship that exists between drugs and crime. These include the following: the historical underpinnings of current perspectives, types of drugs and types of criminal behaviour, the statistical relationship between both, the etiological nature of the relationship, the theoretical interpretations of the relationship and the policy implications of research conclusions. Others, such as Quinn and Sneed, have argued that the innate factors that contribute towards vulnerability to drug use are also conceptually like those that predict criminality.²⁷

While the literature on the drug-crime nexus has tended to attribute criminal activity, including armed violence, to drug abuse, this may not always be the case, as the propensity to perpetuate armed violence might differ across individuals. Menard et al. therefore argue that drugs and crime are related by mutual causation, as crime affects drug use and drug use also affects crime.²⁸ They further contend that the 'drug use causes crime' hypothesis is untenable, given that crime frequently takes place before substance use.

There are also psychopharmacological perspectives that offer insights into how drug use could trigger certain behaviours which often manifest in criminogenic ways, thereby resulting in armed conflict as well. Quinn and Sneed contend for instance that stimulant use and opiate withdrawal tends to impair judgment in users, thereby inflaming emotions in criminogenic ways.²⁹ Their research further suggests that the internal mental controls that would normally inhibit acts of criminality are mostly affected by psychoactive substances. Echoing this position on the drug and armed conflict perspective, Deitch et al. postulate that, despite the most common stereotype regarding the use of stimulants being violent behaviour, primarily due to the neuropharmacological mechanisms in action, there are several other factors that play a role in combined crime and drug use.³⁰

These perspectives offer significant insights into the nature and causes of the drug and armed violence conundrum, which has received wide attention in recent times, especially given the rise in terrorism across the world. It also depicts the complexity of this relationship considering that illicit drug ab(use) has had the potential effect of serving as a catalyst in fuelling armed conflict and thereby leading to its protractedness.

The evolutionary dynamics of the banditry crisis in Nigeria

The contemporary banditry conundrum in Nigeria crystallised in the early 2010s, mainly as a rural phenomenon in northern Nigeria.³¹ It originated in Zamfara state in 2011, when a tribe of nomadic militants were commissioned to fight in defence of the herding communities in the context of their land-based conflicts with the predominantly Hausa crop farmers.³² The mercenary militants fought a localised tribal war with clans of vigilantes (Yan Sakai) established by the native farming communities in the area to protect their farmlands and agrarian livelihoods from the incessant trespassing of the herders.³³

Subsequently, these same militants were hired to fight for different herding communities in Kaduna, Nasarawa, Benue and Plateau between 2012 and 2014.³⁴ They raided farming communities in the hinterlands of the aforementioned states in scorched-earth attacks that resulted in multiple casualties.³⁵ By the mid-2010s, some of the militants had started switching to localised cattle rustling, highway robbery and allied rural violence.³⁶ They also fought as mercenary militants in communal conflicts in Nasarawa and Plateau states.³⁷

By the late 2010s, highly organised and sophisticated clans of bandits had emerged in some parts of Zamfara, Katsina and Kaduna states. These groups of bandits engaged in arms trafficking, kidnapping and transnational cattle rustling.³⁸ In Zamfara state, they were implicated in the illicit mining activities and violence as well.³⁹ One significant trend associated with the manifestation of the banditry crisis in this era was its transformation from roving to stationary criminality.⁴⁰ In some localities of Zamfara, Katsina, Kebbi and Kaduna states, bandits lived in settled communes where they exercised some level of criminal sovereignty.⁴¹ In these criminal fiefdoms, bandits established a regime of underworld governance that enabled them to tax and fine their subjects at whim. Locals were forced to pay 'a protection fee' in order to live and farm in their communities.⁴² This era saw the emergence of powerful bandits who reigned as crime lords in enclaves where they exercised quasi-territorial control.⁴³ Equally associated with this period is the transformation of banditry from a predominantly rural phenomenon to one that was also evident in the peri-urban areas.

Between 2019 and 2021, the banditry crisis in Nigeria had escalated to the level of a national emergency. Bandits in this era had moved effectively from 'cattle rustling to human rustling'.⁴⁴ They orchestrated the mass abduction of women, commuters and school-children in Katsina, Kaduna, Zamfara and Niger states. This period also witnessed the conflation of banditry and jihadism in a manner that complicated the scourge of banditry in more radicalised manner.⁴⁵ The emerging pragmatic alliance between factions of bandits and jihadists operating in north-western Nigeria has been one of the most intricate threats to Nigeria's national security in contemporary times.⁴⁶ The proscription of bandits as terrorists in late 2021 by the Nigerian state adds to the perception of the prevalent threat.

Essentially, Nigeria's banditry crisis has shown a clear pattern and trajectory of a complex emergency with dire humanitarian implications.⁴⁷ Today, the crisis has reached a scale of low-level insurgency, as evidence points to bandits colluding with terrorists to plot daring attacks on critical symbols and institutions of national security. The recent attacks on the Nigerian Defence Academy Kaduna, as well as those on the advanced Presidential Convoy in Katsina and the Guard of Brigade in Abuja point to this troubling trajectory.⁴⁸

The evolutionary patterns and dynamics of the banditry crisis in Nigeria have indicated that banditry is a dynamic phenomenon. In its criminogenic metamorphosis over the years, banditry has been associated with herder militancy, cattle rustling, illicit mining, arms trafficking, kidnapping for ransom and terrorism. These dimensions of the banditry challenge resonate in the existing literature on the subject. The present discourse is an attempt to add to the prevailing episteme by introducing a narrative that makes the drug dimension a point of departure.

Drugs-banditry nexus: Insights from northern Nigeria

Drugs are some of the critical drivers and catalysts of the banditry crisis in Nigeria. Although science-based empirical finding on the nexus is scant at the moment, extant authoritative personal accounts as well as other corroborated personal accounts present a sufficiently valid ground to affirm this nexus. This analysis relies on insights from desk sources as well as select repentant bandits, freed kidnap victims, conflict researchers, security operatives and undercover negotiators to advance a *prima facie* argument that such a nexus exists.

To begin with, it is pertinent to clarify the kind of nexus that the analysis seeks to establish. There are two possibilities in this regard, namely: (i) that drugs have something to do with the banditry crisis (ii) that banditry affects illicit drugs in certain ways. The analysis herein is

concerned with the former (i). Hence, it is argued in the analysis that drugs (their circulation and consumption among bandits) are a critical driver and catalyst of the banditry crisis in Nigeria. This argument is pursued in the empirical narrative that follows.

According to the chairman of Nigeria's anti-drug body (NDLEA), Rtd General Buba, there is a clear linkage between drugs and banditry.⁴⁹ The linkage is to the effect that 'drug money funds' banditry, much as the 'abuse of drugs and substances' by bandits motivates and catalyses their violent escapades.⁵⁰ This paper's analysis focuses on the latter submission. Bandits depend on drugs to boost their psycho-emotional mood in a bid to achieve and maintain a high level of lethal efficiency in their operations. Official statements of the NDLEA have confirmed that arrested bandits have often shown 'withdrawal symptoms', which are an after-effect of drug intoxication.⁵¹ This position was validated by a freed kidnap victim in Nasarawa state who revealed that the bandits who kidnapped him were 'feasting with alcohol and drugs' in the camp where he was held captive.⁵²

Concerning the influence of drugs on the bandits during their operations, the media reportage of an account by one of the abducted students of Kankara Science Secondary School in Katsina would be instructive:

One of the abductors of Kankara (boys) got an injury and was profusely bleeding when they were foot-trekking with the students. When one of the students called his attention to look over (and observe the bleeding spot), the criminal replied to the boy that he was aware of that and went further telling the kid that they took hard drugs that make them go out of their senses and never feel hurt if they are injured.⁵³

Some repentant or captured bandits have confessed to regular use of drugs in their camps and operational stations. One of them was quoted as saying during interrogation that they desired drugs more than they needed food.⁵⁴ Some revealed that they had often acted under the influence of drugs and substances, including pharmaceutical opioids. Such revelations were corroborated by military personnel who was involved in counter-banditry operations in parts of northern Nigeria. According to the personnel, some of the bandit camps cleared by troops were found to be littered with packs of used and unused psychotropic substances.⁵⁵

Information obtained from select conflict researchers, investigative journalists, security spies and undercover negotiators in the course of the study offered credible insights regarding how drugs are sourced and couriered from city centres to the bandit enclaves through a vicious chain in which both security operatives and members of local communities play some mercenary roles geared towards profiteering (see [Table 1](#)). There was a report of a 90-year-old former military personnel who was involved in drugs dealing with a cell of bandits in Sokoto

Table 1. Some arrests relating to bandit drug dealings in northern Nigeria (2021/22).

Date	Incident	Remark(s)
30/01/2021	NDLEA arrested two suppliers of drugs to bandits in Gwagwalada area of Abuja. ⁷²	The culprits were also found to be impersonating military personnel
19/03/2021	Police paraded suspected drug dealer involved in supplying drugs to bandits in Zamfara. ⁷³	He was arrested alongside some suspected bandits.
02/10/2021	Police in Zamfara state arrested drug supplier to bandits. ⁷⁴	The culprit was also an informant of the bandits.
5/09/2021	NDLEA arrested two suppliers of drugs to bandits in Kwara, Niger state. ⁷⁵	The drugs were being smuggled to bandits in the Shiroro area of Niger state.
7/08/2022	90-year-old man was arrested by NDLEA in Sabon Birni Local Government of Sokoto state ⁷⁶	The culprit was an ex-soldier.

state.⁵⁶ Corroborating such a claim, a conflict researcher⁵⁷ who has had the rare opportunity of visiting some of the bandit camps revealed that bandits maintain robust undercover mercenary ties with some security personnel with whose collaboration they transport some of their essential supplies from cities or frontiers to the hinterlands. Drugs and allied substances count among these essential supplies.

It was also revealed that bandits, or agents running drugs for them, bribe security personnel at borders and checkpoints to evade arrest.⁵⁸ According to an informant,⁵⁹ the bulk of such drugs originate from the neighbouring countries of Benin and Niger while others are sourced from the city centres of northern Nigeria. In 2021, NDLEA intercepted a disguised consignment of Captagon (also known as Jihad Drug), which was imported into the country from Lebanon, on its way to one of the bandit camps in northern Nigeria.⁶⁰ Common drugs trafficked by and to bandits include diazepam, captagon, codeine, cocaine, tramadol and a host of other pharmaceutical opioids. Table 1 shows instances of arrests related to bandit drug dealings/supplies by security operatives in various parts of northern Nigeria.

In addition to the non-pharmaceutical consumption and (a)use of drugs, bandits who engage in kidnapping have in rare instances demanded drugs in lieu of money as ransom. A freed abductee in Kaduna state confirmed this development thus:

My case is a bit different. We did not pay in cash. We gave them GSM recharge cards and select drugs worth about three hundred thousand Naira altogether in three instalments. This is according to their request.⁶¹

Some bandits have ventured into drug trafficking themselves. They source drugs from dealers and commission agents in the cities and sell them to other bandits or jihadists in their common operational areas.⁶² By so doing, they generate money to fund and sustain their activities. In this regard, the postulation that 'drug money aids banditry' is validated.⁶³

The flourishing illicit drug economy in the Sahel has created an enabling market for the proliferation of drugs and allied substances.⁶⁴ The market drives a demand-and-supply chain along which many actors play various roles in self-regarding pursuit of drug money. Among the actors are established dealers, traffickers and local peddlers. Rich and powerful men have been in the illicit drug enterprise.⁶⁵ In some instances, disgruntled public security personnel and local businessmen are involved in the organised illicit drug dealings. Women and girls disguised as food vendors have been involved in peddling drugs and substances to the bandits.⁶⁶

The illicit drug enterprise ensures that bandits get their drug supplies sustainably through a subterranean clientship system that is highly rewarding. Essentially, bandits spend the bulk of their ransom proceeds on arms and drugs. Drugs constitute a routine and essential need in the bandits' camps and operational stations. The demand for, and spending on, drugs by bandits has created a thriving black market where illicit drugs and drug money are circulated in a fashion that supports the banditry enterprise.

Bandits do not consume drugs for medical purposes. They depend on drugs and substances to attain, boost and sustain a high level of psycho-emotional detachment from the significance and probable consequences of their cruel acts. This enables them to engage in utmost brutality without any sense of compunction. Hence, in some of their attacks, they have killed many vulnerable and defenceless persons, such as pregnant mothers and babies, in the most gruesome and ruthless manner.⁶⁷ The drugs also enable them to remain in a state of 'spiritual and physical impregnability'⁶⁸ during their operations. This explains the reason for their daredevil risk-taking in the face of mortal threats.

Table 2. Drug cases across Nigeria's geopolitical zones between 2018 and 2019.

Geopolitical zone	2018	2019
North-east	1608	4491
North-central	1311	517,712
North-west	2809	11,969
South-east	1022	13,234
South	1821	28,886
South-west	1260	44,744
Total	9831	621,035.46

Source: NBS.⁷⁷

The crux of the drugs-banditry challenge is that powerful drug merchants are involved with the bandits in mercenary ties that are mutually reinforcing and rewarding. By supplying the bandits with drugs and substances, the merchants profit from the illicit economy of organised crime, and the rewards provide an incentive for repeated transactions. This way, the political economy of the drugs-banditry conundrum is established and consolidated.

The drug factor in Nigeria's spiralling banditry crisis has been substantiated by both anecdotal and empirical evidence. This claim is supported by the available records on the trend and trajectories of drug cases in northern Nigeria over the years.⁶⁹ Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicate that there has been a significant rise in the incidences of drug cases in northern Nigeria in recent years following the escalation of the banditry crisis. For instance, statistics from 2016–2017 showed a higher past-year prevalence of drug use among the southern geopolitical zones (ranging from 13.8%–22.4%) compared to the northern geopolitical zones (ranging from 10%–13.6%).⁷⁰ By 2019, these figures had drastically shifted, with the northern region taking a clear lead in terms of incidences of drug seizure and arrest. [Table 2](#) is instructive in this regard.

[Table 2](#) shows that there were a total of 9831 drug cases in Nigeria in 2018, spread across the six geopolitical zones, with the most cases reported in the north-west zone. This is significant because the north-west zone was the epicentre of the banditry crisis in the country during the time under review. In 2019, the figures show the north-central zone maintained a disproportionate lead with 517,711.69 cases. This is also significant considering the fact that the incidences of banditry in Nigeria had shifted considerably from the north-west zone to the north-central zone by 2018–2019, with Niger state in the north-central region becoming one of the worst-hit locations. Part of the reason for this shift was the sustained land and aerial bombardment of the bandit camps and safe havens in the north-west region in the run-up to the 2019 general elections.

Drugs and brigandage: Implications for Nigeria's counter-banditry drive

There are two critical catalysts to the banditry crisis in Nigeria: arms proliferation and drugs proliferation. The reinforcing interplay of the two presents a complex problem regarding banditry in the country. The arms borne by the bandits are, objectively, the physical instruments of their violence. The use of these instruments is reinforced by the psychotropic effects of drugs which serve to sustain aggression.⁷¹ The psychoactive influence of drugs on bandits complements the unwavering courage and confidence they derive from arms, rendering them impervious to fear and pain and driving them to habitual cruelty and lethality. In effect, the functional but toxic synergy between drugs and arms constitutes the crux of the bandits' wanton violence.

Hence, any meaningful endeavour to fight banditry must recognise the relevance of drugs and devise a pragmatic means of tackling the threat they pose. The concerns of drug proliferation and (ab)use, therefore, must be part and parcel of Nigeria's counter-banditry drive. There is a need for an operational collaboration between the NDLEA and other security and intelligence agencies in the fight against banditry. The need to address the drug dimension of the banditry challenge highlights the imperative of a non-kinetic approach to counter-banditry in Nigeria. Hitherto, the abiding tradition of counterterrorism/banditry in the country had prioritised, rather disproportionately, military-oriented strategies and tactics. This has been largely inadequate in bringing about the expected outcome, in addition to contributing towards the protractedness of Nigeria's war on banditry.

Effective mitigation of the drug dimension of the banditry crisis, however, requires a pragmatic framework that can identify and eradicate the enabling structures of the illicit flow of drugs and other psychoactive substances in open as well as black markets of the cities and hinterlands. Denying the bandits access to the illicit drug market will not only stop them from consuming and abusing drugs, it will also help to decrease their huge spending on drugs which provides an incentive for their routine practices of kidnapping for ransom.

Conclusion

Scholarship on banditry in Nigeria is nascent but burgeoning. In the existing literature on the subject, a lot of emphasis has been placed on the nature, causes and consequences of banditry, both as an organised and as a random crime. Emerging studies are seeking to probe more elaborately into the contextual dynamics of the banditry phenomenon, especially its ramifying nexuses to other patterns of violence and organised criminality. This is where this paper finds its focus.

The paper thus examines the linkages between banditry and drugs with a view to establishing how illicit drugs fuel the incidence of banditry. With reference to northern Nigeria, the paper highlighted the role of illicit drugs as a critical driver and catalyst of banditry and submitted that any meaningful efforts to tackle this problem must recognise, among others, the aggravating role that drugs and other psychoactive substances play in the prevailing banditry crisis in Nigeria. Indeed, Nigeria's banditry crisis has a lot to do with drug proliferation and (ab)use, and more empirical studies are needed to unravel the salient facets of this ominous drugs-banditry conjuncture.

Notes

1. WANEP, 'Addressing Armed Banditry in the North-West Region of Nigeria'; Barnett, 'The Bandit Warlords of Nigeria'.
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Notes on Contributors

Al Chukwuma Okoli is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Federal University Lafia, Nasarawa state, Nigeria. His research interests include peace and security.

Folahanmi Aina is a lecturer at the Department of Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, United Kingdom. His research interests include peace, security and development.

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