

RURAL KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM: TRENDS, CAUSES AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Over a decade, kidnapping for ransom (KFR) has emerged as one of the most disruptive security challenges that Nigeria faces in the 21st century. Once localised to oil-producing regions in the Niger Delta, KFR has spread to rural hinterlands in Nigeria, thereby engulfing rural agricultural communities in the North-West, North-Central, North-East, and, more recently, the South-East geopolitical regions. The goal of this study is to produce a holistic description of trends in rural kidnapping for ransom, causal predictors, and the community response process taking place in Nigeria. The methodology used for this study is based on documentary analysis, utilising primary sources of data, including government reports, international organisations' categories, media monitoring databases, evaluations of non-governmental organisations, and peer-reviewed academic literature published between 2014 and 2024. The study shows that there is a clear indication of a sharp increase in the number of kidnapping incidents directly related to rural areas over the last ten years. On the one hand, in the 2018-2019 biennium, they reached about 1,008 cases; on the other hand, 3,533 were reported in the 2022-2023 period. The cumulative ransom paid is estimated at 141.9 million US dollars during the study period.

Keywords: Rural Kidnapping, Kidnapping for Ransom, Nigeria, Security, Banditry.

Introduction

The Upsurge in kidnapping for ransom is a profound geographic and sociological transformation in Nigeria over the past decade. It is traditionally linked to the militia and criminal gangsters standing in the oil-producing city of the Niger Delta, where foreign oil workers were the major victims, and access to petroleum infrastructure was the key strategic driver (Asuni, 2009; Ikelegbe, 2010). Furthermore, kidnapping for ransom has gradually moved into the vast rural interiors of Nigeria, where farming households, schoolchildren, local traders, and community leaders were the primary targets in an ever-growing geographical area of predatory violence (Onuoha, Freedom Chukwudi, and Joseph Chukwunonso Akogwu, 2022). This territorial dispersion indicates a profound structural transformation of Nigeria's security environment, including the development of armed groups financed by diversified criminal sources, the breakdown of rural policing infrastructure, and the existence of ransom-funding networks supported by mobile telephony. The magnitude of the phenomenon is horrifying. Documented reports about kidnapping in rural areas has shown that such incidents have grown by about 250 percent between 2018 and 2023, as indicated by the analysis of information presented by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, the Nigeria Security Tracker, SBM Intelligence and media

monitoring reports that were compiled in order to conduct this study (ACLED, 2023; SBM intelligence, 2023). According to the kid bronze intelligence firm Control Risks, the proportion of kidnappings in sub-Saharan Africa was the highest in Nigeria in 2021 and 2022 (Control Risks, 2022).

Also, numerous reports estimate the ransom payments to be more than several billion US dollars per year, along with security costs, agricultural losses, and displacement of agricultural communities and psychological injuries to survivors, and many reports estimate the economic costs to be in the billions of dollars annually (SBM Intelligence, 2023; Mercy Corps, 2020). Although rural kidnapping for ransom is severe and large in extent in Nigeria, the phenomenon has had little scholarly work addressing it as an integrated phenomenon, taking a closer look at the trends, causes and responses. The recent literature on kidnapping has mostly discussed it in the context of the Niger Delta (Asuni, 2009; Idemudia, 2010), or it has covered banditry and mass abduction in the North-West and North-East, but not within the context of the rural Kidnapping for ransom (Thurston, 2018; Mustapha & Meagher, 2020); or limited research has been conducted on the high-profile kidnappings of schoolgirls in Chibok (Matfess, 2017).

Conceptual Clarifications

2.1 Rural Kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping for ransom is operationally defined as the unlawful abduction and detention of an individual against their will, to secure financial remuneration, goods, or other concessions from the victim, their kin, employers, or local community as a precondition for release (Shortland, 2019; UNODC, 2014). Within the present inquiry, the qualifier ‘rural’ denotes incidents of kidnapping for ransom occurring beyond the urban centres of Nigeria, predominantly targeting agrarian and pastoral populations situated in districts that possess limited security infrastructure. This geographical demarcation presupposes analytical salience where rural kidnapping for ransom experiences unique features in comparison to its urban counterpart in activities that have set in place more intense security vacuums, populations with lower relative mean income but effective communal solidarity imperatives as well as takes advantage of the geographic isolation of rural farming villages to extend the period of detention and make rescue missions more demanding (Schroeder & Lamb, 2006). There is a critical analytical distinction to be drawn between KFR as a commercial and criminal activity and KFR as a by-product of politically motivated armed warfare. Hoffman (2006) argues that terrorism uses violence in achieving political goals, but organised crime strictly uses violence to achieve financial results. This dichotomy is useful when applied to kidnapping for ransom since it can be used to set apart the politically motivated mass abductions of Boko Haram and ISWAP who use captivity as a chief means to popularize political messages, recruit followers, and generate propaganda, and the commercially driven activities of the bandit groups in the North-West, which is mostly organized as a source of revenue (Thurston, 2018; Waterman, 2015). However, empirical evidence shows that many kidnapping activities in rural settings in Nigeria are adopting hybrid features that incorporate political, ideological, and economic factors, and hence are not easily divided into distinct categories (Schmid & Jongman, 1988).

Theoretical Framework

The rational choice theory provides a key conceptualisation for understanding how kidnapping for ransom, as a crime strategy, is developed and continues (Clarke & Cornish,

1985). In this light, kidnapping organisations will weigh the expected payoffs of kidnapping for ransom against the costs of abduction, such as interdiction risk, prosecution risk, or the risk of a counter-force response, and choose to engage in kidnappings whenever expected payoffs exceed presumptive costs. The sharp strengthening of the rural kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria in the last decade is indicative of a reassessment of this calculus: the reduced security institutions reduce interdiction risk; the mobile money systems facilitate the logistics of ransom payments; the economic marginalisation of the rural poor reduces alternative sources of legitimate income; and the spreading of kidnapping expertise among armed group networks reduces the barriers to organisational entry (Shortland, 2019). The conflict trap theory, developed by Collier (2009), is also relevant to explaining the self-enhancing nature of the KFR economy in the rural region. The armed group expansion through kidnapping revenues contributes towards the worsening insecurity problems, worsening livelihoods, creating a state of economic desperation that induces the need to work in kidnapping activities, and thereby increasing the revenue streams as well. Any attempt to disrupt this cyclical nexus would require actions that immediately target a variety of nodes, a challenge that uni-domain security measures have consistently been unable to overcome (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Situational crime prevention theory (Clarke, 1997) offers an alternative analytical framework for understanding crime, focusing on environmental, institutional, and situational factors that create opportunities for kidnapping for ransom. This construct guides the level of analytical attention to the inadequacy of competent guardianship within the rural Nigerian security structure; the accessibility and vulnerability of target groups within rural farming communities, following foreseeable daily action patterns; and the lack of concern risk that characterises rural operating milieus for kidnapping syndicates. The community's responses to kidnapping for ransom, such as vigilante mobilisation and early-warning systems, can also be viewed within this framework, since it aims to increase guardianship capacity and reduce the targets (Felson & Clarke, 1998).

Community Resilience as a Lens to Rural Kidnapping for Ransom

The community response analysis to rural KFR is based on community resilience theory, as embedded in the literature of conflict studies and disaster risk reduction (Manyena, 2006; Paffenholz, 2010). Community resilience refers to the ability of social groups to absorb, adapt to, and recover from hardship without fundamentally altering their functioning or the circumstances that give rise to vulnerability (Norris et al., 2008). In the context of the KFR, resilience is more than the ability to survive one or two instances of kidnapping through ransom transactions, negotiations, or rescue efforts; it also includes the capacity to reduce susceptibility to further kidnappings through deterrence and prevention (Lederach, 1997). Additional analytical tools to explain why some rural communities are more resilient to KFR than others can be provided by social capital theory, in particular, the dichotomy between bonding social capital within communities and bridging social capital between communities and external institutions (Putnam, 2000). A community with strong bonding social capital can assemble communal resources to pay a ransom and build a vigilant network that provides specific forms of deterrence. A community endowed with bridging social capital has the opportunity to access security intelligence, institutional support, and a channel for political advocacy that the isolated community network cannot access (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Methodology

The methodology used for this study is based on documentary analysis, where primary sources of data were utilised, which include government reports, international organisations' categories, media monitoring databases, evaluations of non-governmental organisations, and peer-reviewed academic literature published between 2014 and 2024

Results

Trends in Rural Kidnapping for Ransom: A Panorama of the Incidents Observed in the Past Few Years

National Incident Trajectory

The secondary data analysis establishes a drastic and sustained increase in rural KFR across Nigeria during the period analysed. The 2014 year is a pivotal point, because the security issue of mass kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, staged by Boko Haram in April 2014 caught the entire world by storm and proved the fact of the ability of armed actors to execute mass exploitations in Nigeria without being caught and contributing to the subsequent rise in the publicity regarding the problem of kidnapping victims (Matfess, 2017; Amnesty International, 2015). Though Chibok was mainly politically and ideologically motivated, it nonetheless spurred a wider spread of the kidnapping concept as a strategy across a wide array of armed within-group typologies, demonstrating its practicality and the strategic benefits it offered.

The data on incidents of rural KFR registered during 2018-2023, provided by ACLED, Nigeria Security Tracker, and SBM Intelligence, show a near 350 per cent rise in such incidents between 2018 and 2023 (ACLED, 2023; CFR, 2023; SBM Intelligence, 2023). The curve is described by an annually growing trend, with a steep turn in 2020-2021, not out of the line with studies that attribute the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic to the surge of the activities of armed groups because of the redistribution of security forces, the disruption of the economy, and the lack of international regulation capacity (Pettersson et al., 2021). The total amount of reported people abducted in rural areas during the entire 2014-2024 timeframe, combining all the available source estimates, suggests that the number of individuals who were abducted was more than 30,000 in total, with a significant yet uncertain percentage still unreported since community members are reluctant to report the case to the security agencies or media (OCHA, 2023).

Geographic Distribution and Dynamics of Space

The spatial distribution of rural kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria has undergone a notable transformation throughout the study period, mirroring the diffusion of organised armed groups beyond their traditional bastions. Since around 2018, the North-West geopolitical region has become the epicentre of rural KFR, surpassing the North-East, where Boko Haram's actions had traditionally caused the most deaths (International Crisis Group, 2020; Onuoha, Freedom Chukwudi, and Joseph Chukwunonso Akogwu, 2022). In the North-West, they were highest in Zamfara State, then in Katsina, Kaduna, and Sokoto states. The accumulation of artisanal mining towns that dealt in gold in these jurisdictions, and the complementary nature of mineral trafficking and kidnapping as the two revenue streams of the bandit groups, partly explain the severity of the occurrences in the North-West (Global Financial Integrity, 2023). Cases of practised KFR in the South-East have also increased in

pace since 2021, when the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), rose in prominence, with opportunistic criminal groups recognising this security gap created by an ongoing political conflict (HRW, 2021).

According to data provided by SBM Intelligence, rural KFR in Anambra, Imo, and Ebonyi states increased threefold between 2020 and 2023, making it one of the fastest-growing trends in the region (SBM Intelligence, 2023). The least-affected region historically, the South, has reported an increase in rural KFR along the Ogun and Oyo state borders, which is attributed to the expansion of Northwest-based bandit networks along known forest corridors (Agbiboa, 2020).

Seasonal and Temporal Patterns

There are strong seasonal trends in rural KFR that not only reflect the agricultural cycle but also the rhythms of the kidnapping group's work. Several of them record peak KFR activity during agricultural harvest periods, such as October-December, in the North-West and North-Central zones, since farming populations are often engaged in group outdoor activities at consistent times and places. At the time, the relatively fresh harvests represent available wealth that can be exchanged for ransom, and more frequent market journeys make people more susceptible (Mercy Corps, 2020; SBM Intelligence, 2023). This seasonal cycle has significant consequences for agricultural output, as farmers in high-KFR areas report intentionally not identifying crops or forgoing access to distant farms when they are more vulnerable, thereby incurring major production expenses (OCHA, 2023).

Time-of-day analysis of existing incident reports shows that most KFR incidents are reported during daylight hours, with the majority occurring in the morning (6:00-10:00 AM), which is the period of greatest incidence (CFR, 2023). The trend is opposite to the urban criminal kidnapping, which happens more often at night, and the specifics of rural kidnappers' work using motorcycles and a clear understanding of the forest trails to ambush their victims on their morning commute to agriculture or the marketplace. Mass abduction operations that are typical of bandit group activity in the North-Western regions are more closely linked with kidnappings at night, often of sleeping households.

Causal Drivers of Rural Kidnapping for Ransom

Economic Marginalisation/Structural Poverty

According to secondary data analysis, structural poverty is always positioned as enabling rural KFR, but causality operates through a mediational process rather than directly (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). The rural population in Nigeria faces some of the worst multidimensional poverty status in sub-Saharan Africa. In its survey (National Bureau of Statistics Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, 2022), the Ministry of Statistics revealed that 63 per cent of Nigeria's rural population lived in multidimensional poverty, with states in the North-West and North-East recording a poverty incidence of more than 80 per cent. Poverty contributes to KFR in a variety of ways: it creates groups of economically desperate young men who can be recruited into criminal business ventures which promise them income, it undermines the ability of the community to fund countermeasures, and it creates grievance that the recruiters of armed groups can channel to justify crime action as a form of redistribution or resistance (Blattman & Annan, 2010; Sen, 1999). Opportunity mediates the poverty effect on KFR participation: the opportunity to enter the kidnapping business through personal approaches works best in communities where other income-earning sources have been destroyed or never

existed. Climate change, conflict between farmers and herders, and even the insecurity KFR itself leads to have an agricultural disruption resulting in the vicious cycle where communities are increasingly economically desperate and, hence, vulnerable to victimisation, as well as to recruitment into kidnapping activities (Mueller, 2013; Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012).

Unemployment and Demographic Pressure in the Younger Age

Unemployment among the younger generation becomes the most immediate personal factor in participation in kidnappings-for-ransom (KFR). The estimates recently released by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics suggest that the overall youth unemployment rate in the nation is 42.5 per cent, which is exceptionally high in rural areas, where employment is primarily agricultural and has plummeted (NBS, 2021). According to UNESCO data, Nigeria has the highest number of children who are out of school, that is 20.2 million, which is the largest number in the world, with a significant proportion of this number existing in the rural areas of northern states (UNESCO, 2022). With no formal education, viable job opportunities and viable land availability, the poor young men face labour markets that give meagre economic chances, and this exposes them to a situation of desperation that the criminal recruiters capitalise on systematically. According to empirical research conducted by Mercy Corps on the motivation of the youth to join armed groups in the conflict areas in Nigeria, the main factor was cited as economic incentives, i.e. the need to earn income and material goods, social belonging, identity, and avenge the wrongful deeds of the community, followed by coercion (Mercy Corps, 2020). This finding is consistent with a seminal study on armed group recruitment across various African conflicts by Blattman and Annan, who showed that economic opportunity is a stronger recruitment motive than ideological commitment in non-ideological armed groups (Blattman & Annan, 2010). Unless they are to have a specific impact on the KFR recruitment process, policymakers have to focus on delivering credible and legitimate income options rather than on blunt kinetic suppression of extant kidnapping networks, simply because this is what it will take to have an impact on the KFR unit.

Failure of Rural Security Infrastructure.

In Northwest Nigeria, the police to population ratio in Nigeria can be as low as one police officer per 15000 in rural local government areas (LGA) in 2020, as illustrated by an assessment of the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2020), which is a very low ratio when compared with the recommended ratio of 450 population to one police officer. In most communities, police posts are only on paper; no physical building exists, officers are assigned to urban posts, and, in general, operational budgets are minimal. There is a structural inadequacy of the military to counter-terrorist operations, the strategic orientation of the Nigerian military is further contributing to the security void, and the force structure is ill-equipped to suppress rural crime. Although the routine use of deployments is useful in routine engagements, Agbiboa (2020) affirmed that it cannot sustain an able, community-based, integrated presence that prevents criminal kidnapping. In the case of Northwest Nigeria, military intervention under Operation Hadarin Daji and other operations has had no effective impact on achieving sustainable security, and it is conceivable that replaced networks reemerge or move to neighbouring regions with less military security (ICG, 2020). The community's intelligence is very low. Neither the National Intelligence Agency nor the Department of State Services has the rural networks and local linguistic capabilities needed to produce community-level intelligence, which is required to carry out an effective counter-KFR operation (Tar & Bala, 2018). Consequently, the security forces will respond reactively

to KFR rather than preventively, which reduces interference in the operation and, consequently, the level of rescue. Human Rights saw many reports during these days and weeks where security troops did not make any visits, and kidnappers transported victims from one state to another or over the borders to another country (HRW, 2021).

Small Arms Proliferation and Weapons Market in the Region

The widespread availability of low-cost, military-grade small arms is an important enabler of rural KFR escalation, as shown in various secondary sources (Lacher, 2012; UNODC, 2021). Since the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011, small arms and light weapons (SALW) have been carried into the circulatory system with an estimated 1520 million in the region, with Nigeria (Shaw & Mangan, 2014) as the destination country through the Sahelian pathways. The United Nations Panel of Experts on West Africa documented individual supply chains of access to Libyan weaponry deposits in armed forces in the Nigerian Northwestern region, through the extension of its main supply chains in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and transactions of gold and drugs on the recognised trafficking routes (United Nations Panel of Experts, 2023). There are direct and indirect measures of small-arms availability on KFR. The direct impact is substantial cost and risk reductions for the operation of kidnapping activities; armed groups armed with AK-47 and RPG can literally break down the barricades of communities and other security checkpoints to ultimately thwart the attack. It thus renders the advantage of the armed groups over the security forces that should normally secure the rural areas. It reduces the security forces' deterrent effect in these areas while enhancing the mobility and scale of operations of armed groups there, previously considered risky (Agbibo, 2020; ICG, 2020). Conflict over resources and climate change

Climate change is now a salient determinant of rural KFR, not only because of its ability to threaten agricultural livelihoods, but also because of its impact on the relationship between farmers and herders (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019; Hsiang, Burke & Miguel, 2013). Lake Chad, though, has been contracting by over 90 per cent since the 1960s due to a combination of reduced rainfall, more evaporation and huge irrigation withdrawals, which have resulted in millions of people being forced to move away from the lake, and greater pressure on scarce fertile land and water resources at the heart of the basin states (Blench, 2010). The OCHA humanitarian situation report of 2023 attributed the origin of the large number of economically marginalised and socially displaced young men in the Lake Chad Basin as the main source of recruitment by jihadist outfits and criminal kidnapping networks (OCHA, 2023). The escalation of farmer-herder conflict amid environmental pressures lends a tangible dimension to KFR: resource-related communities can gain armed capabilities for self-defence.

At the same time, criminal businesses can lure them into kidnapping (Botte, 2021). Records in the literature showed how the farmer-herder conflict groups had evolved into a kidnapping business because they realised they would get more money from ransom than from cattle or land theft (Olayoku, 2014). This remaking involves criminal enterprise rather than ideological transformation: groups of conflict gain operational competencies in a contested resource setting and then use those competencies in a more lucrative endeavour, KFR.

Professionalisation of the Business Model of Kidnapping

The most noticeable trends identified during secondary data analyses are the gradual professionalisation of rural KFR, which evolves into an organised criminal business, and the replacement of the opportunistic approach to the crime (Shortland, 2019; Control Risks,

2022). According to evidence presented in the form of SBM Intelligence security reports, the International Crisis Group (ICG) assessments, and investigative journalism, substantial kidnapping operations in the North-West are organized by teams with established operational structures such as scouts that identify potential marks, teams that carry out the kidnapping, guards that ensure the custody of victims, negotiators that handle the ransom messages, and financial experts that handle the logistics of payment. The use of mobile telephony and mobile money platforms has been proven to transform KFR's operations into a professional model (SBM Intelligence, 2023). Attackers use encrypted chat programs to communicate with victims' families, masking their physical locations, demanding ransom payments via mobile money transfers that are hard to trace, and conducting phone-based market surveys to identify the economic status of particular families or communities and make appropriate ransom demands. This computer-savvy has increased the geographical limits of KFR operations and reduced the geographical risks of ransom collection procedures that required face-to-face transactions, making the three-way interdiction vulnerable (Waterman, 2015).

Community Response to Rural Kidnapping for Ransom

The numerous response mechanisms that are displayed by rural communities facing kidnapping and ransom (KFR) challenges have been the result of interaction between resources of traditional governance, community social capital, external assistance, and pragmatic adjustment to the specifics of the operational behaviour of the kidnapping threats in their areas (Paffenholz, 2010; Manyena, 2006). The various sources of assessment indicate that the most popular response mechanism is community vigilante organisation, practised by about 68% of the surveyed high-KFR communities (Agbiboa, 2020; HRW, 2021). The other important mechanisms are early-warning systems, mediation by traditional rulers, intervention by religious institutions, restrictions on movements, and dialogue by non-governmental organisations.

Response Mechanism		Adopting Communities (%)	Perceived Effectiveness (1–5 Scale)	Primary Limitations
Community Groups	Vigilante	68.4%	3.4	Under-equipment; risk of abuse; poor coordination
Early Networks	Warning	54.7%	3.7	Communication infrastructure gaps; low state support
Traditional Mediation	Ruler	47.2%	3.1	Limited authority over armed groups; resource constraints
Religious Intervention	Council	41.9%	2.9	Non-universal acceptance; limited leverage
Community Curfews / Movement Restrictions		38.3%	2.4	Economic disruption; unsustainable long-term
Relocation / Displacement		29.1%	N/A	Permanent livelihood loss; overcrowding in host areas
Crowd-funding Ransom Payments		21.6%	N/A	Rewards criminal behaviour; impoverishes communities

NGO / CSO-Mediated Dialogue	14.8%	3.9	Limited geographic reach; insecurity for facilitators
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Note: Adoption rate data compiled from Agbiboa (2020), HRW (2021), Mercy Corps (2020), and OCHA (2023) community assessment surveys across Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger, and Borno states. Effectiveness ratings represent community-assessed scores from available assessment instruments; N/A indicates that effectiveness is conceptually inappropriate for that mechanism (displacement and ransom payment address consequences rather than future risk). Limitations are synthesised from multiple sources.

Self-Defence by Vigilante Groups and Communities

Community Vigilante Groups are the most entrenched and institutionalised response to kidnap for ransom (KFR) in rural areas of Nigeria; they operate across the country's high-incidence regions (Agbiboa, 2020). They have various names, such as Yan Sakai in the Northwest, Hunters Groups in the North-Central region, Amotekun in Southwest Nigeria, and Ebubeagu in the Southeast, which refer to groups that provide security services at the local community level that the official security apparatus cannot provide (Olonisakin, 2008). They base their efficiency on the ability to mobilise on localised knowledge, community trust, and an immediate mobilisation response to an incident, aspects that the traditional security forces deployed to foreign lands prove deficient in. There are substantive issues regarding the role of vigilante groups that need to be addressed before that can happen. The numerous cases of extortion, illegal detention, torture and even summary executions of the alleged kidnappers and their alleged accomplices have been reported by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2021) and Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2020).

The absence of legal structures, a common training process, and the holding of activities by vigilantes makes community self-defence vulnerable to turning into vigilante violence, thus generating additional grievances and insecurity. Vigilante funding brings about additional threats to the political economy. In most instances, local politicians, wealthy community members, or, in some cases, extractive industry players try to assist vigilante groups, which may result in a conflict of interest between the security agenda of the active groups and the sponsors' interests (Jennings, 2008).

This has been noted to occur in Nigeria's competitive political climate, where political actors on the ground have access to vigilante infrastructure to perpetrate electoral violence and intimidation, thereby obscuring the concept of vigilantism as community self-defence, as found in Tar & Bala (2018): Information Networks and Early Warning Systems. Although relatively few are implemented, early warning systems are the most evaluated community response mechanism and the most effective (Nyheim, 2009). These models use mobile telephony, community radio networks, and traditional signalling, such as drums, horns, and messenger systems, to spread warnings about suspicious movement, known positions of kidnapping groups, or threats to communities within community networks (SBM Intelligence, 2023). Their efficiency relies on the time benefits they bring to the kidnapping operation, with some extra temporal resources used in the identification and transportation of the kidnapping victims; with early forecasts, the community members will be able to avoid some dangerous paths or operations, and no abduction will take place. The most advanced early warning systems are both digital and traditional, combined into structured information-

sharing procedures that connect community-level intelligence with rapid-response departments within security agencies (Nyheim, 2009).

Studies have found significant declines in effective KFR operations within the covered area in pilot implementations supported by organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme and Mercy Corps (Mercy Corps, 2020). The sustainability of these systems, however, depends on the availability of dependable mobile network coverage (which is often lacking in most rural areas), community confidence, security forces' confidence (which is often lacking as well), and the persistence of organisational backing that NGO programme cycles tend to lack—institutional, Traditional, and Religious as Mediators.

Traditional leaders and religious leaders have been known to act as mediators between kidnapping groups and affected communities that the formal institutions have failed to mediate, where they have, for example, facilitated the release of victims, negotiated localised ceasefire settlements, and, in a few incidents, helped to bring back former kidnappers into civilian life (Okafor, 2006; Loimier, 2012). These actors' success as mediators can be attributed to their moral authority in the various communities where they have a better understanding of the social networks they need to communicate with the leadership of armed groups, and they will be perceived as neutral by the many members of the communities who have poor opinions of the state security apparatus.

As reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2022), when traditional rulers are involved, traditional ruler mediation is more effective at recovering victims than security-force rescue in rural areas, with a success rate of 30-40 per cent in cases where it has been implemented. However, mediation cannot replace prevention, and in most communities, the power of traditional rulers over armed groups has been gradually diminished by the latter due to their greater military strength and access to resources unmatched by traditional governance (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018).

Discussion of Findings

The given analysis indicates that a sharp and consistent increase has characterised the rural KFR. The recorded cases have increased by about 350 per cent between 2018 and 2023, signifying its decentralisation out of its historical concentration in the Niger Delta to the rural hinterlands of all six geopolitical zones, and having disastrous economic, psychological, and social impacts on the rural populations (ACLEDE, 2023; SBM Intelligence, 2023; ICG, 2022). The causal graph indicates that poverty, unemployment among the youths, breakdown of the rural security system, spreading of small arms, and conflict over natural resources due to the effects of the climate environment and professionalisation of KFR into a criminal operation interact in a multilayered structure to create and perpetuate a self-reinforcing system of insecurity (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Shortland, 2019). The communities in Nigeria with the most significant burden of rural KFR are among the most economically marginalised and under-represented groups in the country (Sen, 1999; Mustapha & Meagher, 2020). It is thus not only a matter of security, but equally a matter of justice that the Nigerian state has been unable to ensure that rural populations are safeguarded against predatory violence

The numerous response mechanisms that are displayed by rural communities facing kidnapping and ransom (KFR) challenges have been the result of interaction between resources of traditional governance, community social capital, external assistance, and pragmatic adjustment to the specifics of the operational behaviour of the kidnapping threats in their areas (Paffenholz, 2010; Manyena, 2006).

Also, the creation of self-defence mechanisms, such as vigilante groups, early-warning information networks, and negotiation intermediaries, is among the responses developed by communities (ACLED, 2023; SBM Intelligence, 2023; ICG, 2022). However, while the study noted the short-term deterrence provided by vigilante groups as a community response, it also pinpointed the contradiction embedded within it. There have been documented cases of infiltration of criminal elements, while engaging in extrajudicial violence and exacerbating inter-communal tensions, most especially in ethnically heterogeneous communities like Benue, Jos and so on (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Conclusion

The study shows that there is a clear indication of a sharp increase in the number of kidnapping incidents directly related to rural areas over the last ten years. On the one hand, in the 2018-2019 biennium, they reached about 1,008 cases; on the other hand, 3,533 were reported in the 2022-2023 period.

It is thus not only a matter of security, but equally a matter of justice that the Nigerian state has been unable to ensure that rural populations are safeguarded against predatory violence: the inability of the state to fulfil the social contract responsibilities of democratic governing must be viewed as a structural failure on the part of the state. To undo this debacle, there must be political goodwill, sustained investment and actual responsibility over the structural neglect and institutional corruption that have enabled the transformation of the rural KFR from a localised criminal issue to a national security issue.

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