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Research Paper

Deep Dive Into Livestock Rustling: An Illicit Revenue Stream Fueling Under-Development, Animal Abuse and Terrorism in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin

Ekoja Akor Okewu

Independent Researcher, Educator, and Creative Writer, Benue State, Nigeria, ORCID: 0009-0003-7248-7268
Email: *ekojasolomon@gmail.com*

Abstract: This research paper explores the pervasive issue of livestock rustling in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, highlighting its profound implications for underdevelopment, animal welfare, and terrorism. It investigates the historical context and evolving nature of cattle rustling, transitioning from traditional practices to modern organised crime fuelled by economic desperation, climate change, and political instability. The proliferation of criminal armed gangs, herder-farmer conflicts, and the Boko Haram insurgency all contribute to the resurgence, creating a volatile security landscape. Traditional perceptions of cattle rustling among Fulani herders as a display of bravery are juxtaposed against the violent realities of modern rustling, driven by criminal elements using diabolical means. The analysis reveals how the Boko Haram insurgency has exacerbated the issue, with the group leveraging cattle rustling as a means of funding and control in the region. Through empirical data, the paper reveals the complicated relationship between cattle rustling and illicit financial flows, underscoring the economic ramifications of this crime. This significantly contributes to regional insecurity and hampers efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
The paper identifies key actors in the livestock rustling network, including cattle rustlers, intermediaries, and buyers, and delineates the socio-political complexities surrounding the issue. These include the involvement of foreign Fulani migrants and the implications of weak law enforcement. The findings illustrate the systemic violence associated with rustling, including the abuse of livestock and the socio-economic devastation faced by affected communities. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy reforms and collaborative security measures.

Keywords:

1. Livestock Rustling
2. Terrorism
3. Animal abuse
4. Illicit Financial Flows
5. Nigeria
6. Lake-Chad Basin

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1. Introduction

Livestock production is an important component of the agricultural sector. In Nigeria and around the Lake Chad Basin, it supports both rural and urban economies. This thriving industry is under threat due to the activities of rustlers. Historically, livestock rustling in the region has been associated with the cultural practice of pastoral groups. In recent times, it has evolved into an illicit financing enterprise for bandits, and terrorists who leverage small arms and light weapons proliferation, unemployment, and weak border control across the region to perpetrate their activities. While animals suffer abuses, affected communities suffer loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, forced displacement, poverty, and underdevelopment. Figure 1 shows a young armed herder, illustrating the militarization that increasingly accompanies livestock rustling in the region under study.

Figure 1. Picture of a young herder armed with a rifle (The New Humanitarian, 2007).

Since Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) through rustling threaten security, social cohesion, economic stability, and the actualization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this paper will examine my personal motivation behind this comprehensive research, define some terminologies, explore the history of rustling, discuss the motive behind the menace, state the methodology used, and give reasons why a study on rustling is necessary. It will also discuss the motives behind Boko Haram's involvement in the menace, consider the financial losses, explore the major perpetrators and mechanisms involved, examine how animals are abused, cite reasons why the practice persists, and recommend some reform proposals.

2. Personal motivation to explore the topic

After graduating from the university, I embarked on the National Youth Service Corps, a one-year scheme designed by the Nigerian government to encourage young graduates under 30 to serve the country. The purpose of the scheme is primarily to inculcate in Nigerian Youths the spirit of selfless service to the community, and to emphasize the spirit of oneness and brotherhood of all Nigerians, irrespective of cultural or social background (National Youth Service Corps, n.d.) As fate had it, I was posted to Katsina State in Northern Nigeria (See Fig. 2), where insecurity was at its peak.

> 'Not at all, my son won't be the victim of Boko Haram, rustlers, or bandits. You will have to reject that posting and relocate to a safer state closer to home,' said my mom.
>
> 'No, Mum, I have made up my mind to serve my fatherland even if it is in Northern Nigeria,' I replied. This left her in tears as I left for the motor park to embark upon this dangerous trip.

Figure 2. Picture of Katsina State, Northern Nigeria. Picture by Ekoja Okewu Akor.

As we proceeded, we passed through different landscapes and vegetative belts. Further into the voyage, as we approached the Sahara Desert, the region gradually became drier and dustier, and the absence of trees made visibility for kilometres ahead unobstructed. Upon arrival, I noticed that the climate was very dry, dusty, and sunny. This was at variance with that of my state of origin. Yet, I resolved to contribute my quota to the development of my adopted community.

After settling down at a temporary abode, great darkness accompanied by a sense of fear breezed in as I settled down for a night's rest. The sudden, thunderous sound of gunfire woke me from sleep. 'This must be the announcement of the arrival of armed men!' I exclaimed. With tension around, thoughts of escape through the ceiling or into a nearby bush came knocking, but the fear of a stray bullet hitting me would not permit me to fulfil them. With my heart racing, I got up in haste to view what was going on. Police vehicles moved to control the situation on the ground. Minutes later, news filtered in that bandits who specialized in carting away livestock were the august visitors in town.

As the cock began to crow, bulls were yoked for the day's farm work while calls for the Muslim prayers were offered over the conical Ahuja speaker on the mosque tower. As kettles

swung from hand to hand at ablutions' peak, the faithful congregated to make petitions to Allah for the security of the land.

After reporting to my place of primary assignment as a class teacher, I taught over 300 students in agriculture and computer studies. While I stood in the classroom delivering my lesson, some learners ran for cover. Confused over the situation, I summoned the courage to enquire, as their security rested on me. 'Mallam! Mallam! Yan fashi suna kusa' (Teacher! Teacher! 'Bandits are around), said Amira, a teenage female student in my class. Her response jolted me, sending shivers down my spine. This group of people has been inflicting harm on the people in northern Nigeria for decades. When they attack a community, countless livestock will be rustled from poor rural animal farmers, with the proceeds used to buy weapons and recruit more followers. This clique has been a driving force behind the escalating state of insecurity around the Lake Chad region.

'How do I escape this trouble? 'Maybe I should jump through the window,' I said to no one in particular. I summoned courage and asked my students to remain calm. Just like the good shepherd in Psalm 23, whose sheep do not lack and are protected, I must protect these young Nigerians who have found themselves in a situation they never wished nor prayed for. After observing the school surroundings, I returned to the class to calm the nerves of my perplexed students.

Although I am currently democratizing education as a mathematics teacher in geographically disadvantaged schools across Nigeria, my storytelling draws many learners and colleagues to my table during break periods to discuss about rustling, insecurity, and animal poaching.

During an interactive chat with a teaching colleague of mine, she told me that for years, she hasn't visited her village. When I prompted to know why, she said that over the last few years, armed men who rustle livestock, kidnap farmers, and steal farm produce have disrupted the peace of her community. This has caused villagers in her community, who are the predominant producers of yams, to flee for safety to the Internally Displaced Persons Camps scattered across Nigeria. It has hampered food security, stalled development, and facilitated the illegal movement of funds across borders among criminal gangs.

3. Definition of terms

Livestock or cattle rustling is defined as the stealing or planning, organizing, attempting, aiding, or supporting the stealing of livestock by any person from any country or community where the theft is accompanied by dangerous weapons and/ or violence (Abdul & Aliyu, 2017). It is increasingly becoming a very large-scale organized criminal gang activity where marauders move in their hundreds armed with sophisticated weapons to attack their victims and carry away their cows and other animals. The ruthless manner with which these cattle rustlers carry out these raids often leaves behind fatality, burnt houses, and wanton destruction of property (Olaniyan & Aliyu, 2016).

Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) are illegal movements of money or capital from one country to another for various reasons. By definition, this refers to funds illegally earned, transferred, or utilized within a country and across international borders, or money legally earned but moved wrongfully (Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission. n.d.).

4. Literature review

4.1. History of Cattle Rustling and its Evolution

Rangers and Osborne (2006) stated that over 7,000 years ago, livestock attacks were reported to have taken place. The Greek historian Herodotus reported livestock raiding by Scythian equestrians 2,500 years ago (Egwu, 2015:21).

Furthermore, in the American Old West, Mexican rustlers were a major concern during the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865. Likewise, Texans stole cattle from Mexico, swimming them across the Rio Grande; these cattle were called 'wet stock' (Egwu, 2015:22). Conflict over alleged rustling was a major issue in the Johnson County War, 1892, in the U.S. state of Wyoming (Weiser, 2021). Cattle rustling, however, became a source of concern at the end of the 19th century in Argentina, where cattle stolen during Malone's were taken through Rastrillo de los Chilenos across the Andes, where they were swapped for alcoholic drinks and firearms in Chile (Cattle raiding, 2022).

Coming down to Africa, cattle rustling among the Pokot of Kenya dates back to the 17th century when the Maasai roamed about with their livestock in Baringo (Julius, 2014). According to Triche (2014), 'Livestock raiding has been a source of conflict amongst and between pastoral societies for hundreds of years.' Pastoral communities raided each other as well as sedentary communities for livestock, mainly to replenish their herds depleted by severe droughts, disease, raiding or other calamities (Adan and Pkalya, 2005:16). Today, numerous pieces of literature pointed to the transformation of cattle rustling from petty theft and cultural practices into an organized crime (Maluleke, 2020; Gumba, 2020; Olaniyan et al., 2016).

In Nigeria and the borders of the Chad Basin, rustling is as old as pastoralism and was a traditional practice among the Fulani pastoralists. Their transhumance lifestyle ensured they moved from place to place as dictated by rainfall and pasture availability. The intention and dynamics of rustling remain traditional, primitively guided and regulated by the sanctity of culture and tradition of the Fulani pastoral communities. Cattle rustling among Fulani pastoralists, for instance, is regarded as a socio-cultural practice for exhibiting bravery, perseverance, and prowess regulated and sanctioned by their elderly kinsmen (Josiah 2000). Cattle rustling during the primitive days was localized, seasonal, customary, and non-militarized, using traditional spears with less associated violence (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). Even child teenagers among pastoral communities are obliged to embrace not only skills and bravery required for pastoralism but also to develop the courage and enthusiasm to aggressively defend their herds from raids and attacks (Ahmadu & Ayuba, 2018). The practice also promoted cultural bravery and warrior tradition, generational contests, and unforgiving revenge-seeking ventures of the Fulani tribe. (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). This helped in creating healthy competition among members of the Fulani tribe.

From the account of Ardo Nyori, an 82-year-old Fulani pastoralist:

> *Cattle rustling during the traditional days takes place at unique periods, especially after circumcision rites of young teenagers must have been completed, marking the age of their maturity. Newly inducted young men will have to engage in raids for purposes of not only fulfilling the traditional rites but also preparing them in terms of bravery and prowess. On the contrary, rustling is militarized using sophisticated weapons accompanied by violent brutality, killings, kidnapping, rape, and other nefarious atrocities that are inconsistent with extant traditional values of our people* (Ahmadu Hamman, 2019).

In modern times, however, livestock rustling is now a major crime in the Northern region of Nigeria due to the infiltration of criminals, terrorists, and militias. The activities of these criminal elements have led to the theft of much livestock, the death of farmers, and the destruction of property worth millions of dollars. More devastating in our contemporary time is the link between cattle rustling and terrorism. The involvement of 'Boko Haram' terrorists in cattle rustling has been economically motivated to improve their financial strength. For these terrorists to fund their deadly activities, they rely on proceeds gotten from the sale of rustled cattle (Ogbeche, 2016, cited in Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). It has also become a significant illicit economy that finances armed groups and contributes immensely to the growing instability of food security.

4.2. Factors responsible for cattle rustling in Northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin

The resurgence of cattle rustling and violence has been attributable to developments such as the proliferation of criminal armed gangs, armed banditry, Fulani herder-farmer conflicts, and the Boko Haram insurgency. All these have exacerbated the problem of cattle rustling as one of the causes of national security disequilibrium in recent times (Daily Trust, 2014; Ekekwe, 2015; Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016).

A traditional cause of cattle rustling among Fulani herders in Nigeria, and Borno State in particular, is that it was regarded as a show of wit among some of them. For those who are engaged in it, it is a show of bravery when they can steal cows and make away with them without being caught. Though a negative aspect of the Fulani culture undertaken by criminal elements, cattle rustling remains a vexed security problem and a most volatile source of violence. The criminal elements among the Fulani herders engaged in cattle rustling often employ diabolical means to ensure smooth and successful operations (Bello 2013; Bashir 2017).

Another cause of cattle rustling in the Lake Chad region is the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency, where some herdsmen are classified as Boko Haram collaborators by the Nigerian military and politicians.

This illustrates the increasingly complex conflicts between sedentary farmers and cattle breeders in various regions. Investigating the transnational and multifaceted causes is necessary, as is the politicization of the issue of cattle rustling with the alleged involvement of camel pastoralists from the Republic of Niger in shipping weapons and ammunition to Borno State for the Boko Haram insurgents.

Although the cattle eat agricultural waste, the once symbiotic relationship between Fulani herders and farmers, which included the provision of manure on arable land, access to local markets, and the commercial exchange of dairy products for grains, has been significantly disrupted. Additionally, the actions of foreign Fulani migrants from the Niger Republic and the larger Sahelian-Maghrebian regions of North Africa have shattered the once peaceful religious and cultural links amongst Nigeria's indigenous Fulani herders. During the 2011 Libyan crisis, the majority of these migrant foreign pastoral Fulani herders were either direct or indirect armed mercenaries or militias (Courtright, 2025).

The laissez-faire attitude of the Nigerian government towards restricting the entry of these migrant Fulani herders to Northern Nigeria and Borno State, in particular, has resulted in the growth of cattle rustling and other violent activities in the state (Adekunle & Solagberu, 2010).

Other causes of cattle rustling, such as trespassing on traditional cattle routes, climate change, the rise of agropastoralism, and the expansion of pasture farming, as supported by

some academics, are not supported by science and cannot, therefore, be trusted. According to some scholars, factors such as cattle invading farmlands, herders attacking non-Fulani women, freshwater scarcity, and bush burning cannot be the cause of cattle rustling; instead, they may contribute to conflicts or violence in Borno state (Bello 2013; Adegboyega & Saleh, 2017).

5. Methodology

This research is largely based on information from reputable secondary sources such as textbooks, journals, newspapers, and magazines. It does not overcome these sources' lack of reliable and precise quantitative data, specifically about the magnitude of the illicit financial flows (IFFs) related to rustling, which takes place in rural areas and is often left unreported.

6. Why is a research paper on Illicit Financial Flows through livestock rustling necessary?

What makes this work important is that from 1980 to 2018, for instance, sub-Saharan Africa lost a staggering $1.3 trillion to these flows (Signé, Sow & Madden, 2020), highlighting the scale and persistence of the problem. An article by the Africa Program and the Global Order and Institution Program, under the auspices of the Carnegie Working Group on Reimagining Global Economic Governance, reports that Africa's annual losses due to IFFs total around $88.6 billion, representing 3.7 percent of its GDP (UNCTAD, 2020), a severe leak in its economic bucket that exacerbates inequality and stifles growth.

A Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC's) West Africa illicit hubs mapping initiative study recently revealed that cattle rustling is driving insecurity. This was confirmed when 280 hubs of illicit economies across 18 countries in West and Central Africa were identified and studied. In each hub, the study applied the Illicit Economies and Instability Monitor (IEIM), a tool designed to assess the relative impact of the role played by illicit markets in fuelling conflict and instability. The result from the research showed that cattle rustling emerged as one of three accelerant markets – alongside arms trafficking and kidnapping for ransom (Bird & Tagziria, 2022).

Cattle rustling in Africa results in substantial economic losses, with estimates suggesting annual losses of at least US$27 million in East Africa (Bunei, McElwee, & Smith, 2016). In the past five years, an average of 1,600 cattle valued at more than E7-million have been rustled within eSwatini, while some 8,083 cattle have been moved across the eSwatini border with Mozambique and South Africa (Inhlase Centre for Investigative Journalism publication, 2021).
The problem of cattle rustling also affects other West African countries, with Mali experiencing annual losses of USD 32 million between 2016 and 2022. Senegal experiences a USD 3.2 million loss annually. According to Dr. Lionel Gbaguidi, Animal Health and Production Officer at FAO's Sub-regional Office for West Africa, annual losses due to cattle rustling are estimated at USD 432 million in Nigeria between 2016 and 2022 (FAO Regional workshop on cattle rustling in West Africa and the Sahel, 2024)**.**

7. Understanding the geography of Nigeria, Lake Chad Basin and adjoining borders

Nigeria is located on the west coast of Africa and is the most populous Black country in the world, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Benin and Cameroon. Nigeria covers 356,668 sq. miles (923,770 sq. kilometres), and it's about the same size as California, Nevada, and Utah combined. Nigeria is diverse in people and culture. The history of the country goes back to 500 BC, when the Nok people were the inhabitants. It was at the end of the 15th century

that European explorers and traders began their lucrative slave trade with the Yoruba and Benin people. In 1861, the British colonised Lagos, and by 1914, the entire country became the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Nigeria became independent in 1960 (Nigeria Embassy in Germany, n.d.). Figure 3 illustrates the geographical location of Lake Chad and the surrounding countries discussed in this research paper.

Figure 3. Map of Lake Chad and bordering countries (Wikimedia Commons, 2013).

The Nigeria-Niger border plays an important role in the pastoral system in Africa. The 1600-kilometre-long border runs through a zone of semi-arid savannah. Communities in the region share a similar history, culture, language, and family ties. This makes cross-border movement of livestock a seamless activity. In the Maradi region of the border, terrorists, bandits, and rustlers operating in Nigeria cross the border at night on motorcycles to rustle animals before retreating to the Baban Rafi Forest and other adjoining vegetation for safety.

Figure 4. Picture showing the shrinking of Lake Chad (1963–2024) (TDH [The Dragon Historian], 2024).

The Lake Chad basin, situated in Northern Central Africa, covers almost 8% of the continent and spreads over seven countries, namely, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Algeria, the Central African Republic, and Sudan (Food and Agricultural Organization, n.d.) Lake Chad is a vast area of fresh water located in the middle of dunes, which covers territories in four countries: Nigeria,

Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. The lake has been constantly evolving in response to the environmental conditions. Its geological variations as shown in figure 4, have been sparking numerous controversies lately, especially among farmers, anglers, and herdsmen who rely on the lake for their livelihood. With resources in the form of pasture, fish resources, and water for irrigation becoming scarce, the concentration of pastoralist scrambling for water and grazing reserves expose them to terrorist groups operating in the region, who rustle to fund their activities (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 2018).

8. Major causes of cattle rustling

8.1. Climate change

Climate change, which refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, is a leading cause of livestock rustling in the region (United Nations, n.d.) Due to the biting effects of climate change, Lake Chad, which has been sustaining the livelihood of millions, is becoming susceptible to desertification, land degradation, and water recession. This has created fierce competition over the available limited resources between farmers and pastoralists. With no alternative source of livelihood, people in the region seek alternative measures like rustling to make ends meet. This was the motivating factor that always made Nigeria's former president, Muhammadu Buhari, advocate for international support to restore the lake and mitigate future conflicts (S-Davies Wande, 2018).

8.2. Financial gains

Cattle are valuable assets, and with the exponential income one could generate from their illegal sale, many people are tempted to engage in rustling.

8.3. Availability of an unsatisfied black market

Due to the availability of a ready market for meat and leather, organized rustling networks are motivated to steal livestock indiscriminately for sale to unsuspecting buyers.

8.4. Social status

In Northern Nigeria, owning a large herd of cattle signifies wealth. This motivates young people to engage in rustling to sustain their social status.

8.5. Rising livestock prices

With the population increase in Nigeria and the accompanying inflation, the price of livestock is increasing daily. This has incentivized livestock theft within the Sahel region.

8.6. Political motives

An ENACT study reveals that during political seasons, corrupt politicians sponsor rustling activities to raise money for campaigns and discourage supporters of rival political figures from actively participating in the electioneering process (ENACT Observer, 2020).

8.7. Weak border and security systems

With the majority of pastoral activities taking place in rural areas where there are ungoverned spaces and porous borders, rustlers are given safe havens to perpetuate their illegal activities.

8.8. Weak legislation

Due to lax laws and insufficient punishments for rustling convicts, rustlers capitalise on deficiencies in the legal and market systems to profit from stolen cattle through deceptive practices like 'cattle round tripping' (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

8.9. Proliferation of illegal arms

The Small Arms Survey estimates that the worldwide tally of firearms exceeds one billion, with a substantial proportion being held by civilians (Global Firearms Holdings-Small Arms Survey, 2018). In West Africa, there is a paucity of current, accurate, and reliable data on the number of illicit arms in the hands of non-state actors due to conflicting data surrounding this matter. With the crisis in Libya and other Sahel regions stimulating the inflow of illegal arms through the porous borders around Lake Chad, more arms are getting into the hands of private individuals. According to the director of the UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa, there are around 500 million illicit weapons in circulation in West Africa, and Nigeria accounts for over 70% of them (Premium Times News, 2016). With these inflows coinciding with electioneering periods, corrupt politicians leverage on this to arm youths to swindle results in their favour. The inability of these weapons to be retrieved tempts many of these abandoned youths to turn to rustling for survival.

9. Key perpetrators and supply chain in the Livestock rustling network

9.1. Cattle rustlers

These are the first set of actors in the livestock-rustling network. Check figure 5 which illustrates the supply chain and the major actors involved in the livestock rustling network. They are made up of ethnic militias, self-defense groups, jihadists, armed bandits, and opportunistic criminals. While each of these groups wields influence from geographical zone to zone, they serve a common purpose: to rustle livestock, destabilize the security architecture, and unleash mayhem on resistant livestock owners.

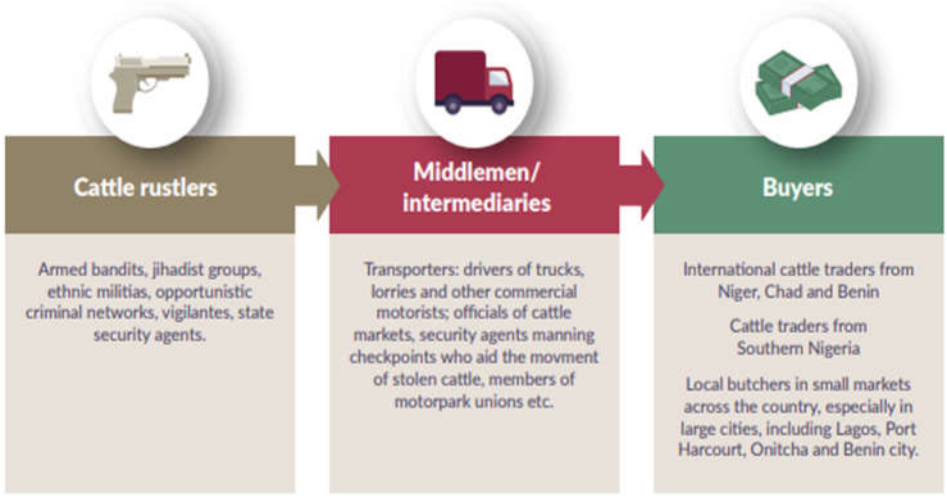

Figure 5. Chart showing the key perpetrators and supply chain in the livestock rustling network (Madueke, 2023, p.9).

According to their geographical distribution, armed bandits are the major actors domiciled in North West Nigeria. In the North Eastern part of the country, insurgents dominate the region, while the activities of ethnic militias and criminal networks, which have established dominance in the north central region, complete the network. For many of these rustlers, illicit financial flows obtained from this criminal venture are used to finance the procurement of arms and the sustenance of group members' loyalty.

9.2. Middlemen/Intermediaries

These are the second set of actors in the livestock rustling network, comprising groups that facilitate the sale of stolen livestock and the transporters who move the stolen cattle to markets in Southern Nigeria.

These intermediaries work with transporters who have a wide network of intermediaries that facilitate the movement and sale of stolen livestock illicitly in the market.

Some of these enabling intermediaries include corrupt Road Union workers, security agents operating checkpoints on major highways, cattle market officials, and security agents. On most occasions, when rustled animals, identified by distinct, often unnatural, differences in their physical identification marks, behaviour, and ownership documentation compared to legitimately managed are discovered in a truck, (Franklin County North Carolina Cooperative Extension, 2026) these enabling intermediaries are bribed to turn a blind eye.

9.3. Buyers

The final set of actors in the livestock-rustling network are the buyers who buy them for different purposes. These groups are divided into local and international buyers.

The local buyers are buyers who are domiciled within Nigeria. When rustlers rustle these livestock, local buyers like butchers, meat processors, and vendors buy these animals from markets that are near the point of theft. For crafty marketers who try to evade suspicion and gain greater profit from buyers, the rustled animals are transported to Southern Nigeria, where local buyers offer higher bids due to the unsatisfied demand for beef.

For the international buyers, they live in neighbouring countries like Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and the Niger Republic that share porous borders with Nigeria.

10. Why do rustlers focus on cattle?

One of the major reasons why rustlers focus on cattle is the large body size of the animal when compared to goats or sheep. This makes them a target for rustlers. Furthermore, while goats are stubborn and prone to wandering, cattle are easier to manage in large herds on open pastures. The less selective grazing habit of cattle is yet another. This makes it easier for them to be managed on large grazing pastures that characterize the vegetation around Northern Nigeria and the borders of the Lake Chad Basin. The large volume of meat, milk, and animal products that cattle produce is also a motivating factor. Although goat milk has nutritional advantages, cows produce higher volumes of milk during lactation.

Cattle are among the most expensive livestock in the region. At Abuja's Durumi livestock market and other major urban centres for instance, small cows were commonly priced between ₦500,000 and ₦600,000, while medium-sized animals sold for between ₦800,000 and ₦1 million. Large cows, particularly premium breeds such as Sokoto Gudali, were reported to be selling for as much as ₦1.5 million to ₦2 million (Essiet, 2026) This makes rustlers focus on cattle, considering the risky nature of the venture.

11. Products gotten from rustled livestock

11.1. Meat

This is the general term used to describe the edible portion of animal tissues and any processed or manufactured products prepared from these tissues (Brittanica, (n.d.). Meat processing). It's a good source of protein, vitamins, and minerals in the diet of human beings and comes in the form of beef, chevon, and mutton from rustled animals.

11.2. Milk

This is a white liquid food produced by the mammary glands of mammals (STORYMD Health Journeys, n.d.) Milks produced by goats, sheep, and cows are good sources of calcium, protein, and other important nutrients beneficial to human health. These products are also used in the food industry to produce cheese, butter, and baby food.

11.3. Pelts (Hides and Skins)

The terms 'hide' and 'skin' are often used as if they were interchangeable, but according to the British standard definitions, 'hide' is the raw skin of a mature or fully grown animal of larger kinds, e.g., cattle and horses, and also other large animals. 'Skin' is the skin of a mature or fully grown animal of smaller kinds, e.g., sheep, goats, pigs, reptiles, birds, and fishes, or of immature animals of the large species, e.g., calves and colts (Adem, M., 2019). These by-products gotten from rustled animals are valuable resources used for making shoes, bags, and belts.

11.4. Bone

Any of the pieces of hard tissue making up the skeleton in vertebrates (WordplaysIcom, n.d.) Bones obtained from rustled livestock can be used for the production of gelatine, glue, fertiliser, animal feed, ceramics, toothpaste, abrasives, and paints.

11.5. Wool

This is a natural fibre derived from the fleece of sheep, goats, camels, and rabbits (Braaten, 2005) Wool can be used to produce outerwear like coats, jackets, trousers, and garments usually suited for cooler climates. They can also be used for manufacturing car interiors, carpets, and insulation materials.

12. How animals are abused during rustling

With many animal abuse cases left unreported, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of animals that are abused globally. Statistics from some organisations, however, reveal that at least one animal is abused every 60 seconds (Sleight, Nyerges & McGinley, 2024). This figure may even be higher in the Lake Chad Basin region due to the presence of animal rustlers.

In this region, many herders use the daylight to guide their livestock to grazing pastures. When these animals return for rest at sunset after a long day's toil, rustlers attack in the dead of the night before forcing the animals to travel long distances across borders. In some situations, rustlers subject animals to poor handling without considering animal rights. For instance, rustlers use techniques like Anastasia to drug livestock and make them inactive during raids. This makes the animals inactive and speeds up quieter operations.

For others, they may decide to overload rustled animals into vehicles with limited carrying capacity. This subjects them to discomfort and suffocation during long hauls across the Sahel. Take a look at Figure 6, which presents an example of animal abuse, where a cow is transported in an inhumane manner.

In rare situations, rustlers physically attack livestock during raids, inflicting painful injuries and maiming them. To conceal rustling crimes, some rustlers keep rustled animals indoors for days without food. This is a form of animal abuse prevalent among rustlers. Sometimes, upon discovery that a rustled animal is sick and unable to keep pace with the healthy herd, it may be abandoned or killed.

Figure 6. Picture of an abused cow carried on a bike (Nairaland Forum, 2015).

13. Factors that inspired Boko Haram to rustle animals

One was the clampdown on their financial sources by governments around the Sahel region. Between 2006 and 2011, for instance, reports indicate that the group secured approximately $70 million from various illicit sources (Uche, 2021). The arrest of about 400 business men by the Nigerian government on suspicion of funding Boko Haram and the conviction and sentence of six Nigerians linked to a government official in Abu Dhabi by the United Arab Emirates is cutting off funding (Femi, 2021). This has motivated the insurgents to leverage local measures like rustling to perpetuate insurgency. Figure 7 maps the geographical spread of cattle rustling, transit routes, and armed groups across Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

Another is the predictable movement and concentration of herders and cattle in a contained area. Despite the shrinking of Lake Chad and other surrounding water bodies, they are still natural magnets for pastoralist communities during the dry seasons when other regions face water scarcity and grazing pastures. This large concentration of animals increases opportunities for terrorists to execute single raids on large number of animals (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

Figure 7. Map of Nigeria showing the border, spread of cattle rustling, transit points and armed groups (Madueke, 2023, p.15).

Furthermore, the porous border, difficult terrain, and weak security in the region is another source of inspiration. Since the basins marshy terrain is difficult to patrol by security forces, the area provides rustling groups with safe havens to operate freely (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024). The fourth is the proximity of the area to the terrorist group's base. This is backed by a recent field research which found that the closeness of the Chad and Cameroon common border areas makes it easier for Boko Haram to play a prominent role in cattle rustling activities (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

Finally, there is the need to exert dominance over the local population in the region. This is supported by the ENACT article, where it stated that where Boko Haram has established considerable influence, it employs direct violent raids for rustling and illegal tax imposition (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

14. How Boko Haram terrorists rustle animals

14.1. Violent tactics

The availability of water and grazing pastures in the Chad region makes the place attractive for pastoral settlements. The transhumance system of these pastoralists makes them move to basins with marshy terrains that are hard to patrol. Boko Haram terrorists, who have established control over some parts of the region, conduct violent raids to steal cattle and abduct herders. When this is achieved, the terrorists will demand ransom before the livestock and herders are released. This has made many communities submit to the illegal structure of paying protection fines to avert future attacks.

14.2. Illegal tax imposition

Another method Boko Haram uses to rustle livestock is the imposition of illegal tax in pastoral communities. Boko Haram has established a tax system. 'They say that each herder must pay such an amount of money. If the herders refuse to give them, they will kill them and take the

cattle. And give their livestock to another person to go and sell.' Butchers in Bongor, Chad, report to ENACT (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

14.3. Cattle round tripping

This is the last innovative method used to rustle livestock. Under this system, terrorists capitalize on deficiencies in legal and market systems to profit from rustled livestock. After executing a raid in a predominantly pastoral community with weak security, they will transport them with the help of intermediaries to distant locations where it will be difficult for security agents to track. 'Sometimes, they take cattle from Cameroon and go into Nigeria to exchange them for other cattle so that they won't be known. They would then bring them back (exchanged cattle) to markets in Cameroon for sale'-Anonymous Cameroon military official (Oluwole & Raoul, 2024).

15. Illicit financial flows and the negative effects of Livestock rustling

'The progressive occurrence of cattle rustling involving armed bandits in Nigeria has been a trigger in attacks by herders in farming communities. At the moment, Zamfara State in the Northwest region of Nigeria remains a hotspot for cattle rustling activities, despite the amnesty programme granted by the state governor in 2017 for cattle rustlers to lay down their weapons' - Osariemen Amas-Edobor (Programme officer for the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding-Nigeria). The chairperson of a local cattle association in Borno State, Nigeria, in 2016 estimated that about 200,000 head of cattle had been stolen through rustling, though not all were linked to Boko Haram. With overall estimates of Boko Haram's accumulation varying from a few million dollars to upwards of $20 million, one is tempted to ask if animal husbandry is a worthy venture to invest in (Enact Observer, 2017). See figure 8 which summarizes the impact of cattle rustling and violence in Zamfara State between 2011 and 2019.

Cattle rustling has been causing regional imbalance across West Africa. With Niger and Mali, the two largest producers of cattle and epicenters of cattle rustling, the supply chains of stolen cattle that connect armed groups, criminal networks, and actors across West Africa who transcend national borders have been destabilizing the security architecture of West Africa.
'Cattle rustling is a major source of funding for armed groups. If we say, for example, that a cow is worth 200,000 CFA, over a short period of time, a group that stole 25,000 head would have amassed 5 billion CFA' - Anonymous expert from the University of Maroua (ADF, 2025).

Figure 8. Impact of cattle rustling and violence in Zamfara State between 2011-2019 (Madueke, 2023, p.16).

Figure 9. Aftermath of an attack by Boko Haram (Idowu, 2018).

Figure 10. Picture of the bodies of innocent Nigerians gruesomely murdered by Boko Haram terrorists (News Agencies, 2024).

In the middle belt state of Plateau, eight out of seventeen local government areas have been ravaged by the activities of cattle rustlers. (Abimaje, 2014, cited in Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). Reports by a Security Special Task Force set up by the Federal government in response to the security challenges in the state reveal that 160 attacks by suspected gunmen led to the rustling of 2,501 cows and the death of 260 people (Ajijah, 2014). A devastating consequence of the Boko Haram attack is illustrated in Figure 9.

On the 11th of November 2018, Boko Haram insurgents attacked Bale Shuwa village in the Jere local government area of Borno State, where they burnt 65 houses and rustled 200 cows together with 300 sheep and goats before injuring and killing several people (Idowu, 2018).

The involvement of armed groups in cattle rustling stalls economic and agricultural activities in the Sahel region. This has made it difficult for Northern Nigeria to actualize the SDGs of zero hunger and no poverty. Take a look at figure 10 which shows the aftermath of a Boko Haram attack that claimed the lives of innocent civilians.

According to Ahmadu Suleiman, Chairman of the Kaduna State Chapter of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, between October 2013 and March 2014, approximately 7,000 cattle were rustled from commercial livestock farms and traditional herders in Northern Nigeria (Bashir, 2014).

Due to the activities of rustlers around Northern Nigeria, many livestock farmers have begun migrating to neighbouring countries where their animals can be safe. This drains GDP from Nigeria, uproots families from their ancestral homes, and makes the education of the Nigerian child disjointed. This was re-echoed when Dodo Oroji said, 'The migration of farmers and herdsmen affects the education of their children. When they migrate, their children will be out of school, and because parents spend more time rearing their animals, they have no time to enrol the children in another school.' Britain's Department for International Development estimates that the sale of Nigerian animal skins and meat amounts to more than $800 million in foreign revenue each year. With the majority of this money stolen through the activities of rustlers, people are afraid to venture into the cattle business across Northern Nigeria. 'If people don't want to venture into the business because they are not sure of getting good profits, it becomes a problem' - Abdiel Kude, Executive Director of the Global Community Prime Initiative (Reliefweb, 2015).

In Northern Nigeria, the livelihood of many people depends on animal husbandry, but rustlers are causing setbacks. A 40-year-old woman whose husband was killed when he tried to save his herd from rustlers who stole 48 cows during a raid became a widow. If the livelihood had not been tampered with, an average cow from the herd would have been sold for $500 each. Left with no source of livelihood, she now borrows milk from a neighbour's cow to sell and fend for her six children (Reliefweb, 2015).

Although accurate numbers are hard to gauge, as many rustling activities go unreported, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) estimates that Nigeria will lose about 40 million cattle to rustlers over the next few years if nothing is done to stop rustling (Reliefweb, 2015).

In a 2016 report, Boko Haram in Borno State killed 1,900 Shuwa Arab pastoralists (Conciliation Resources, 2024). The Shuwa Arabs are a nomadic/semi-nomadic, predominantly Muslim ethnic group of Arab descent located around the Lake Chad region, primarily in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, and the Central African Republic (Africa 101 Last Tribes, n.d.) These terrorists went further to destroy 363 villages before burning down 19,000 houses. This climaxed with the rustling of 160,000 cattle, 67,000 sheep and goats, and the theft of 400,000 sacks of grain.

An Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project reported that Boko Haram cattle rustling in the border areas of Cameroon and Chad rose from two incidents in 2015 to 131 between January and August 2024 (ADF, 2025).

In 2021, Le Souffle de Maradi, a news outlet in the Republic of Niger, reported that 2,735 cattle were stolen while terrorists abducted 91 people. The families of the hostages had to pay a ransom of over 51 million CFA Francs (over 77,500 Euros) to secure their release. By April 2021, people from the Nigerian-Nigerian border had fled from their ancestral homes for safer towns. When the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs took a census, over 25,000 Nigeriens had been displaced. Figures for Nigeria reveal that 81,000 Nigerians fleeing from rustlers in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina states also joined in seeking refuge in the Republic of Niger (Hassane, 2022).

According to ACLED, more than 37,000 people were killed in the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin between May 2011 and 31st July 2020. Between January and April 2019, the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) recorded 896 incidents in the Lake Chad Basin that included

kidnappings, attacks, roadblocks, and rustling. Since the beginning of the insecurity crisis in Northeast Nigeria, which is interwoven with rustling and terrorism, more than 360,000 people have been killed in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states, with thousands of girls and women abducted. Presently, over 1.9 million people are still displaced, with 80 per cent of them in Borno, the epicentre of the crisis (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022).

Rustling has left many people in the region in a mental crisis. In Chad, for instance, many people have been thrown into psychological trauma due to what they went through during attacks from armed men.

The rising insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin caused by terrorism and rustling has spiked the number of people facing food insecurity and malnutrition. According to OCHA, by 27 April 2020, 3.6 million people were food insecure around the region, 2.89 million of them in Nigeria alone (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022).

Due to the activities of rustlers, many people around the Lake Chad Basin have been forced to flee their houses to seek refuge in overcrowded shelters where the insufficiency of water and sanitation is stimulating disease outbreaks. The story is the same in the Republic of Niger, where more than 60% of the displaced and refugee populations living around Diffa have settled in informal sites where living conditions are harsh (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022).

16. Efforts made so far

The government of the Republic of Niger in 2020 launched operation “Faraoutar Bushiya”, which recruited over 1000 personnel from the army, gendarmerie, police, and National Guard to combat surging banditry, kidnappings, and terrorism along its south-central border with Nigeria, particularly in the Maradi region (Hassane, 2022).

Figure 11. Picture of a woman carrying away relief items
provided by MSF after an attack in Niger Republic (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022).

Since many of the rustlers causing insecurity alternate between Nigeria and Niger, a collaborative team of security forces from both countries has been instituted to enhance better communication and security coordination. Furthermore, Aminu Bello Masari, the Governor of Katsina State, announced the recovery of 30,000 cattle from rustlers within a few months of setting up a joint military operation against the menace (Daily Post Publication, 2016).

Officials from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger are actively collaborating to address the multi-faceted crisis of farmer-herder conflicts, cattle rustling, and shrinking grazing lands, particularly within the Lake Chad Basin region. Through the Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum, for instance, these nations are already implementing regional strategies to manage pastoral mobility, curb cross-border crime, and foster peace (Presidential Villa State House, 2025). See figure 11 which illustrates humanitarian assistance provided to victims of violence in the Republic of Niger.

17. Who has power to address the menace?

17.1. National Governments

The governments of Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad are responsible for enforcing laws about rustling and the movement of livestock across borders. By strengthening rustling laws, there will be a significant reduction in the menace. Officials in these countries, too, need to be held accountable by the populace to make them discharge their duties effectively.

17.2. Buyers, butchers, meat industries, and common people

Without the demand for rustled meat by these groups, the illicit financial flow through rustling will fade away. These groups should abandon the purchase of rustled meat from black markets and adopt sustainable purchasing practices that will make genuine meats available. Members of the wider society should also learn to report suspicious movements of rustlers to security agents for quick intervention.

17.3. International and non-governmental organizations

Through the large networks of these organizations, countries will be able to work together along the borders to curb the illegal movement of livestock for illicit financial gains. These organizations also have the capacity to raise awareness and conduct innovative research that will proffer sustainable measures to curb rustling across the Chad Basin.

17.4. Religious and traditional leaders

Religious leaders like pastors, priests, and traditional leaders, and imams also have a vital role to play in curbing the menace. When these clergymen start delivering fiery sermons that frown against livestock rustling, the conscience of perpetrators will be awakened to abandon the practice.

17.5. Security agencies

Due to corruption, many security agents saddled with the responsibility of preventing rustling receive bribes from rustlers to keep the practice ongoing. Frequent anti-rustling and corruption training courses should be incorporated into the security architecture to equip security personnel with the capacity to stop the menace.

18. Recommendations for reform

18.1. Public awareness campaigns

With rustling being a traditional means of displaying prowess being eroded by the recent infiltration of terrorist and armed groups, engaging traditional leaders to discourage the practice is an effective measure to tackle the menace at its root. This could be augmented with the adoption of educational campaigns that will enlighten the public on how to properly handle animals and deter potential buyers from purchasing rustled livestock.

18.2. Establishment of grazing reserves

Due to the lack of grazing pastures around the Lake Chad region during the dry season, herders move to isolated regions where they are exposed to rustlers. To curb the menace of rustling, governments of countries around the Lake Chad basin need to establish ranches that will provide a controlled environment and excellent pasture, facilitate the security of livestock, provide social amenities, and enable the marketing of genuine livestock. This will increase the GDP of countries through the creation of jobs for the unemployed that once engaged in criminal activities like rustling, reduce the spread of zoonotic diseases, improve the infrastructural landscape of rural communities, reduce farmer-herdsmen clashes, and limit illicit financial flows to criminal networks.

18.3. Livestock census and electronic identification

Recently, the Nigerian government established a National Animal Identification Traceability System (NAITS) meant to prevent cattle rustling and promote livestock production in the North, where more than 83% of livestock is concentrated (Shehu, 2024). Governments of countries around the region need to follow suit to tag all the livestock in their countries. This will discourage the rustling of livestock to satisfy the demand from the black market.

18.4. Amnesty programmes

'Small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the Lake Chad Basin are slowly becoming weapons of mass destruction. The proliferation of small arms in the Lake Chad Basin is a major security concern that has far-reaching consequences for the region. It has contributed to the escalation of conflict and violence and has impeded the economic and social development of the countries in the region. Their widespread availability has caused tremendous harm to communities and individuals, especially women and children.' - Boss Mustapha, former Nigeria's secretary to the Government of the Federation (ADF, 2023).

Although estimating the exact amount of illicit arms in the Lake Chad region is difficult due to the nature of the trade, which is often carried out through black markets and other illicit channels, Nigeria, according to most reports, accounts for at least 70 per cent of the illegal SALWs circulating within the West African sub-region (This Day Newspaper, 2023). With these weapons used to perpetrate criminal activities like rustling, banditry, and kidnapping, amnesty programmes that will help in the peaceful recovery of these arms are a necessity. See figure 12 which shows weapons recovered during operation Safe Haven, and highlights the importance of disarmament initiatives in combating livestock rustling and related crimes. This will help in stabilising the security of the region. The government also needs to equip repentant Africans who submit to these programmes with resources that will help them to be self-sufficient.

Figure 12. Picture of weapons recovered from bandits during Operation Safe Haven in north-central Nigeria are displayed before being handed over to the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (ADF, 2023).

18.5. Security reinforcement

Since many rustling activities take place in rural areas, security forces need to work with local security to develop early warning systems. Through this, they will be able to use traditional knowledge and communicate rustling activities using modern gadgets.

18.6. Strengthening border control

Many of the borders around the Lake Chad Basin are porous, making it easy for rustlers to perpetuate their activities without resistance. With human resources stretched beyond the elastic limit, more customs and border control officers should be recruited, trained, and equipped with drones to safeguard our borders against rustlers.

18.7. Legal reforms

From a legal perspective, livestock rustling is considered a theft under Nigerian law, punishable by imprisonment and fines. However, enforcing these laws in remote and under-resourced areas presents significant challenges. Weak law enforcement capacity, corruption, and the vastness of rural landscapes contribute to the impunity with which rustling activities are often carried out. To this end, the governments of Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad should impose stiffer and harsher penalties in the form of capital punishment or life imprisonment on perpetrators of cattle rustling to serve as deterrence to others. Rustling mobile courts should be situated along border communities to hasten the delivery of judgment for offenders. All forms of corruption among security agents should be checked through strategic monitoring and training.

18.8. Leveraging technology

With the current advancement in technology, the cattle breeders' association across the continent should supply advanced technology, like positioning system-tracking chips to livestock farmers. This will aid security forces in tracking the movement of cattle to prevent rustling. This should be augmented with the creation of security units in remote areas that will be equipped with modern tracking technology, satellite surveillance, and drones to monitor illegal livestock movement across borders. DNA testing kits need to be provided around the Sahel region. This will help in the rapid conviction of suspected rustlers caught with rustled animals. Finally, through the strategic placement of cameras with night vision capacity, rustling activities can be easily mitigated.

18.9. Partnership with transport unions

Experience has shown that when rustlers and intermediaries rustle livestock, they often transport them to distant locations where tracking by authorities is difficult. To this end, transport unions across the Lake Chad basin should enforce the use of digital cattle manifest by animal marketers to address cross-border rustling. In addition, trucks conveying cattle should be forced to show their loading and unloading permits through international and animal control borders to checkmate and strengthen measures to curb livestock theft in the region.

18.10. Increasing formal employment opportunities

According to Mrs. Zainab Salamiver, who is the Executive Director and Co-founder of MSwitch Creative Hub, 'over 53% of young Nigerians aged 15-24 are either unemployed or underemployed' (Nzor, 2025). For those living along the borders, they turn to pastoralism, which is currently hampered by climate change. The degradation of pasture due to disrupted rainfall patterns is driving many of these youths to join bandit groups in the region. To address this, employment opportunities should be provided for the unemployed around the border to prevent them from being wooed into rustling.

18.11. Research

The security agencies should conduct a thorough investigation to unravel the network of cattle rustlers, identify those behind the supply of arms, and determine the perpetrators of rustling who transport the rustled cattle to the markets, the markets where the rustled cattle are sold, and those buying and disposing of stolen cattle. Universities in the region should also allocate funds to conduct research that will strengthen sustainable livestock farming, with the capacity to deter rustling activities.

18.12. Livestock and border monitoring systems

Leveraging tags and implants with radio frequency identification chips is another effective way to track livestock movements and notify security authorities to speed up rescue. The government should also ensure that the demand and supply chains, as well as the operational routes, market networks, syndicates, and infrastructures of cattle rustling, are systematically identified and demolished to eliminate the illegal practice.

19. Conclusion

After completing my service year in Northern Nigeria, my family was delighted that I returned safely. Routinely, I get distress calls from past students of mine in the region, where livestock contributes up to 44% of agricultural GDP annually (Food Farm News, 2016). This makes me sad. The activities of these criminal networks that leverage rustling to finance their criminal activities continue to limit the capacity of these communities to actualize the Sustainable Development Goals. I am confident, however, that the adoption of the recommendations raised in this paper will curb the menace, encourage development, and limit illicit financial flows across the region.

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