

REPORT



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CROSS-BORDER TRANSHUMANCE IN CENTRAL AFRICA: OVERCOMING ARMED VIOLENCE AND CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

Implications for regional security

Natali Kossoumana Liba'a



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Acronyms and abbreviations

3R	<i>Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation</i>
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
CAR	Central African Republic
CCMSR	<i>Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la République</i>
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FACT	<i>Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad</i>
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
MINUSCA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
MLC	<i>Mouvement pour la Libération du Cameroun</i>
MONUSCO	UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UFR	<i>Union des forces de la résistance</i>
UPC	<i>Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique</i>
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



Executive summary

Cross-border pastoralism is integral to the economies, communities and landscapes of central Africa, particularly between Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), and, to a lesser extent, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This seasonal movement of livestock shapes regional trade, supports the livelihoods of many rural communities and helps supply markets in urban areas and border regions.

The report argues that the current crisis affecting cross-border pastoralism extends beyond agropastoral tensions, climate change and armed violence. Rather, it reflects the progressive capture of pastoral corridors, livestock markets and trade flows by armed groups, criminal gangs and transnational predatory networks. In areas where state authority is weak, livestock has become a readily transportable store of value, while transhumance routes and pastoral markets have become points of illegal taxation and hubs for livestock laundering, resale and the extraction of illicit profits.

These dynamics are fundamentally reshaping traditional pastoral systems. Shrinking grazing land, increasing pressure on land resources, conflicts over land use between herders, farmers and fishing communities, and the proliferation of illicit weapons have allowed armed groups and criminal networks to consolidate their control over border areas. As a result, migration routes, livestock herds and markets are no longer simply components of the pastoral economy; they now play a strategic role in war economies and predatory criminal systems. This criminal capture takes the form of livestock theft, raiding, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, illegal taxation, arms trafficking and the control of pastoral corridors.

The predatory economy is sustained by a diverse network of armed groups, roadside bandits, traffickers, traders, transport intermediaries, local accomplices and corrupt officials. Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin, armed groups operating in the CAR, criminal gangs active in rural areas and informal taxation networks all contribute to the long-term disruption of pastoral corridors linking Cameroon, Chad, the CAR and the DRC. The scale of the problem is considerable. Between 2010 and 2020, agropastoral conflicts and violence linked to livestock rustling claimed more than 15 000 lives across West and Central Africa. Along the Chad–Cameroon border alone, 230 deaths associated with livestock theft were recorded between 2015 and 2024.

Chronic insecurity is profoundly transforming pastoral practices. In the absence of effective state protection and robust regulatory mechanisms, many herders have taken precautionary measures, including carrying weapons, altering traditional migration routes, splitting their herds and even abandoning cross-border movements altogether. These responses further militarize pastoral areas while deepening the stigma faced by herding communities, who are increasingly associated with armed groups and criminal networks. As a result, pastoralism is caught in a dual process of growing vulnerability and increasing criminalisation.

These findings fundamentally reshape our understanding of pastoralism in Central Africa. The sector is no longer shaped solely by climate shocks, competition over land and natural resources, and local conflicts; it has also become a barometer of shifting security, economic and criminal dynamics across the region. Weak land governance, inadequate security along transhumance routes, poor livestock traceability and limited cross-border cooperation have enabled armed groups and criminal networks to levy illegal taxes, control pastoral corridors and appropriate a growing share of the value generated by the pastoral economy.

The report's recommendations stem directly from this analysis and clearly distinguish pastoral communities from the organized criminal networks that exploit their vulnerability. They are built around five priorities: securing pastoral corridors; improving the traceability of livestock and trade flows; disrupting the criminal economies linked to transhumance; reinforcing local mediation and land governance mechanisms; and strengthening regional security, administrative and operational cooperation.

The challenge is therefore not only to protect pastoral communities and mitigate agropastoral conflict. It is also to protect pastoral corridors from criminal capture by enhancing the ability of states and regional institutions to regulate and secure these routes more effectively. Only then can transhumance once again reclaim its role as a driver of economic opportunity, peaceful coexistence and regional integration, rather than serving as a conduit for predatory economies and growing insecurity.

Methodology

This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. It draws together economic, geographical, socio-political, security, institutional and operational perspectives to examine the interactions between pastoralism, armed violence and cross-border crime. The documentary review is based on a wide range of institutional, operational and academic sources. Key references include publications by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on pastoralism, transhumance and agropastoral resilience, notably reports produced by the FAO (2019, 2022–2024); the FAO and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) (2018); and the FAO and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (2021). It is further informed by humanitarian reports produced by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2022–2025) and analyses by the International Crisis Group (2014, 2020, 2021 and 2024). The evidence base is supplemented by data and reports produced by the REACH Initiative, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the ISS and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED), as well as publications by national ministries, United Nations agencies, international NGOs and the wider academic literature.

In addition, the methodology incorporates field research and source triangulation, including field missions conducted in several strategically important border areas. The main period of observation

covers 2023–2025, while field research undertaken in 2015 and 2020 provides a longer-term perspective for the analysis.

Key findings and recommendations

Key findings:

- Cross-border transhumance corridors are no longer simply seasonal migration pathways; they have become hotspots of criminal activity marked by livestock rustling, raids, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, illegal taxation and coercive control.
- Livestock, markets and mobility corridors now play a strategic role in predatory economies exploited by armed groups, criminal gangs, traffickers, economic intermediaries and transnational organised crime networks.
- Chronic insecurity, inadequate state protection, corruption, the lack of livestock traceability and the proliferation of arms trafficking have facilitated the criminal capture of pastoral value chains and prompted some pastoralists to take precautionary measures, including carrying weapons.
- Climate change, growing pressure on land and the depletion of natural resources are intensifying local conflicts among herders, farmers and fishing communities, while making pastoral corridors increasingly likely to fall under the control of armed groups, roadside bandits and extortion networks.
- The current crisis facing pastoralism exposes structural weaknesses in land, security, commercial and regional governance. It also demonstrates that inadequate coordination between national, local and regional authorities has allowed parallel systems of illegal taxation, armed protection and illicit financing to flourish.

Priority recommendations:

- Increase security for transhumance corridors, water points, grazing areas and livestock markets, with priority given to areas most exposed to theft, extortion, kidnapping for ransom and illegal taxation.
- Step up efforts to combat arms trafficking, livestock rustling, smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, illegal taxation and the criminal financing networks associated with the cross-border pastoral economy.
- Establish livestock traceability mechanisms, secure transhumance permits and herd movement monitoring systems to curb the resale of stolen livestock and prevent illicit supply chains from infiltrating markets.
- Promote inclusive land governance bringing together governments, local authorities, traditional leaders, local peace committees, pastoral organisations, farmers, fishing communities, women and young people to prevent disputes over land and natural resources and rebuild trust.
- Strengthen regional cooperation among states, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the LCBC, United Nations agencies, peace missions, technical and financial partners, and local organisations in order to remove livestock production from the grip of cross-border crime, armed violence and predatory economies.



Introduction

Across Central Africa, cross-border pastoral mobility plays a central role in shaping patterns of land use, trade and social relations. These movements between Chad, Cameroon, the CAR and, to a lesser extent, eastern DRC, map out an interconnected regional space through which not only livestock, but also people, capital, rules governing access to natural resources and forms of authority circulate. Far from a marginal practice, seasonal livestock migration connects the Sahelian, Sudanian and forest zones, while helping to supply urban centres and border markets.

These movements have evolved over centuries through continual adaptation to environmental constraints, customary rules, and local and state regulatory frameworks. Pastoral mobility relies on specialised knowledge, a detailed understanding of seasonal cycles, grazing lands and water points, and negotiated arrangements that enable herds to move across territorial boundaries. Cross-border pastoralism is therefore much more than just an economic activity; it is a way of occupying and managing space, a practical system for governing mobility, and a framework for relations between communities, public and local authorities.

Contemporary dynamics have, however, fundamentally reshaped this environment. Pastoral areas are now affected by pressures that extend far beyond competition over natural resources. The weakening of mediation mechanisms, the fragmentation of state authority in outlying areas, the illicit circulation of weapons, the proliferation of armed groups and the expansion of criminal economies are all redefining the factors governing pastoral mobility. In this context, borders are no longer merely state boundaries; they have become sites of competition, opportunity and, at times, confrontation, where security, economic activity and territorial control increasingly intersect.

This report seeks to reframe the way cross-border pastoralism in central Africa is understood by analysing it not only as a system of production and mobility, but also as a lens through which to examine broader regional transformations. Focusing on the pastoral corridors linking Cameroon, Chad, the CAR and the DRC, it explores changes in the groups operating along these routes, the resilience or erosion of local regulatory arrangements, and the emergence of new forms of territorial control.

The analysis does not attribute pastoral insecurity solely to the activities of armed groups. It also shows that pastoral corridors have become important hubs for a range of forms of organised cross-border crime, including theft, the resale of stolen livestock, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, illegal taxation, arms trafficking, smuggling and the laundering of proceeds from the pastoral economy. Those involved, ranging from armed groups, criminal gangs and roadside bandits, to traders, transport networks, local accomplices and corrupt officials, exploit livestock mobility, the remoteness of pastoral areas and porous borders to appropriate part of the value generated by pastoralism.

The report therefore pursues two objectives. First, it demonstrates how seasonal migration areas play a strategic role, at the meeting point of economic interests, social tensions, criminal dynamics and power relations. Second, it identifies how to ensure the long-term security of pastoral mobility. Achieving this will require stronger links between local governance, cross-border cooperation, efforts to combat organised crime and policies that reflect the realities faced by pastoral communities. In this sense, pastoralism provides a unique vantage point from which to understand the spatial, economic, criminal and security transformations reshaping Central Africa.



Herders and livestock cross the Semliki bridge alongside military personnel in North Kivu, DRC. Against a backdrop of persistent insecurity, measures are needed to support safe pastoral mobility along strategic border routes. © Philemon Barbier/AFP via Getty Images



Geography and economics of pastoralism

Mapping cross-border seasonal migration corridors in central Africa

The transhumance corridors linking Cameroon, Chad, the CAR and eastern DRC form a vital network for millions of pastoralists. Mapping these routes makes it possible to identify areas of friction, high-risk crossing points and the distribution of essential resources. While these corridors remain vital for seasonal livestock movements, they have also become hotspots for conflict, illicit flows and growing insecurity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 highlights Cameroon's central role as the hub of cross-border transhumance in central Africa. It shows a dense network of corridors linking the Sahelian zones of Logone and Chari with the grasslands of the Adamawa plateau, extending into the forested regions of Gabon, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and the DRC.

In the Far North region, the Waza–Kousséri–N'Djamena and Maroua–Yagoua–Bongor corridors are vital routes for cross-border seasonal migration. However, they remain highly vulnerable to climatic hazards, especially flooding and droughts, as well as incursions by Boko Haram fighters. Further south, in the Adamawa and North regions, the Ngaoundéré–Toubooro–Moundou and Tcholliré–Moundou–Béalelem corridors highlight the strategic importance of the highlands as grazing areas, pastoral transit zones and key centres for trade with Chad. To the east, the Ngaoundéré–Ngaoui–Bocaranga and Tignère–Ndélé–Bira corridors highlight the importance of trade with the CAR, where the presence of armed groups and systems of illegal taxation, known as *tchoffal*, have undermined security. Further south, the Ambam–Kye–Ossi and Yokadouma–Moloundou routes reflect how pastoralists have adapted to environmental pressures by extending transhumance into forested areas. Taken together, the map illustrates the interconnection between climate, security, economic and political dynamics, underscoring the need for integrated and coordinated regional governance.

Market dynamics and pastoral value chains

The transhumance corridors linking Cameroon with its neighbouring countries (Nigeria, Chad, the CAR, the DRC, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea) support both seasonal livestock movements and vital cross-border trade. They form an integrated livestock value chain, linking the livestock-rearing areas of Adamawa and the Far North with urban centres and cross-border markets through the production, processing and trade of meat, milk, hides and skins.

From herd to primary market

Around 60 per cent of Cameroon's cattle population, estimated at 7.4 million, is concentrated in the highland areas of Adamawa, the North and the Far North.¹ Herds leave these areas along major seasonal routes, including Ngaoundéré–Toubo–Moundou (300–450 kilometres) and Maroua–Yagoua–Bongor (180–200 kilometres). These routes pass through primary markets such as Toubo, Meiganga and Yagoua, where livestock is first traded, often while the animals are still underweight after transhumance. Prices are relatively low at this stage, ranging from CFAF 200 000 to CFAF 250 000 per head of cattle.²

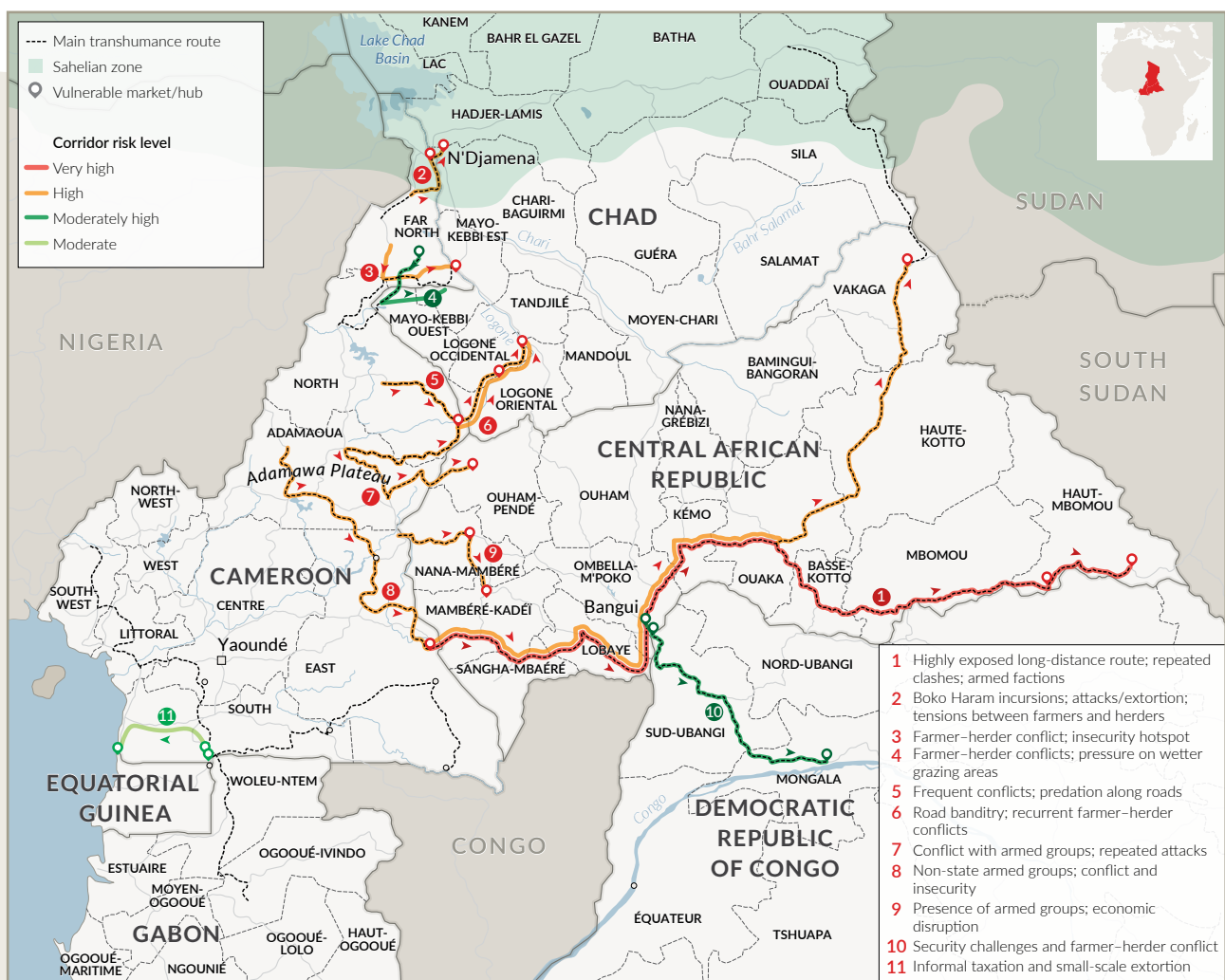


FIGURE 2 Pastoral economy and cross-border livestock markets.

Secondary markets and redistribution

Most livestock is then driven to secondary and cross-border markets in Chad (Moundou, Bébaïem, N'Djamena and Bongor) and the CAR (Bouar, Birao and Bambari). These markets provide access to a broader customer base, including traders from Nigeria and the CAR. At this stage, prices rise, reaching up to CFAF 350 000 per head in Chad and the CAR. Routes such as Waza–Logone Birni–Kousseri–N'Djamena and Moulvoudaye–Léré–Fianga are particularly busy. However, insecurity due to attacks by Boko Haram, roadside bandits and illegal taxation by armed groups disrupts the smooth flow of cross-border trade.

Processing: meat, milk, hides and skins

Some livestock is taken to urban abattoirs in Maroua, Garoua, Ngaoundéré, Douala and Yaoundé for slaughter. Cameroon's cattle sector produces around 80 000 tonnes of red meat each year.³ Milk, long regarded as a by-product, is becoming an increasingly important source of value, driven by the development of small-scale dairies. However, national production remains limited at around 170 000 tonnes per year, meeting only 40 per cent of domestic demand.⁴ Hides and skins follow a separate value chain: they are collected in rural markets, supplied to local tanneries in Maroua and Garoua, and some are then exported to Nigeria and Sudan.

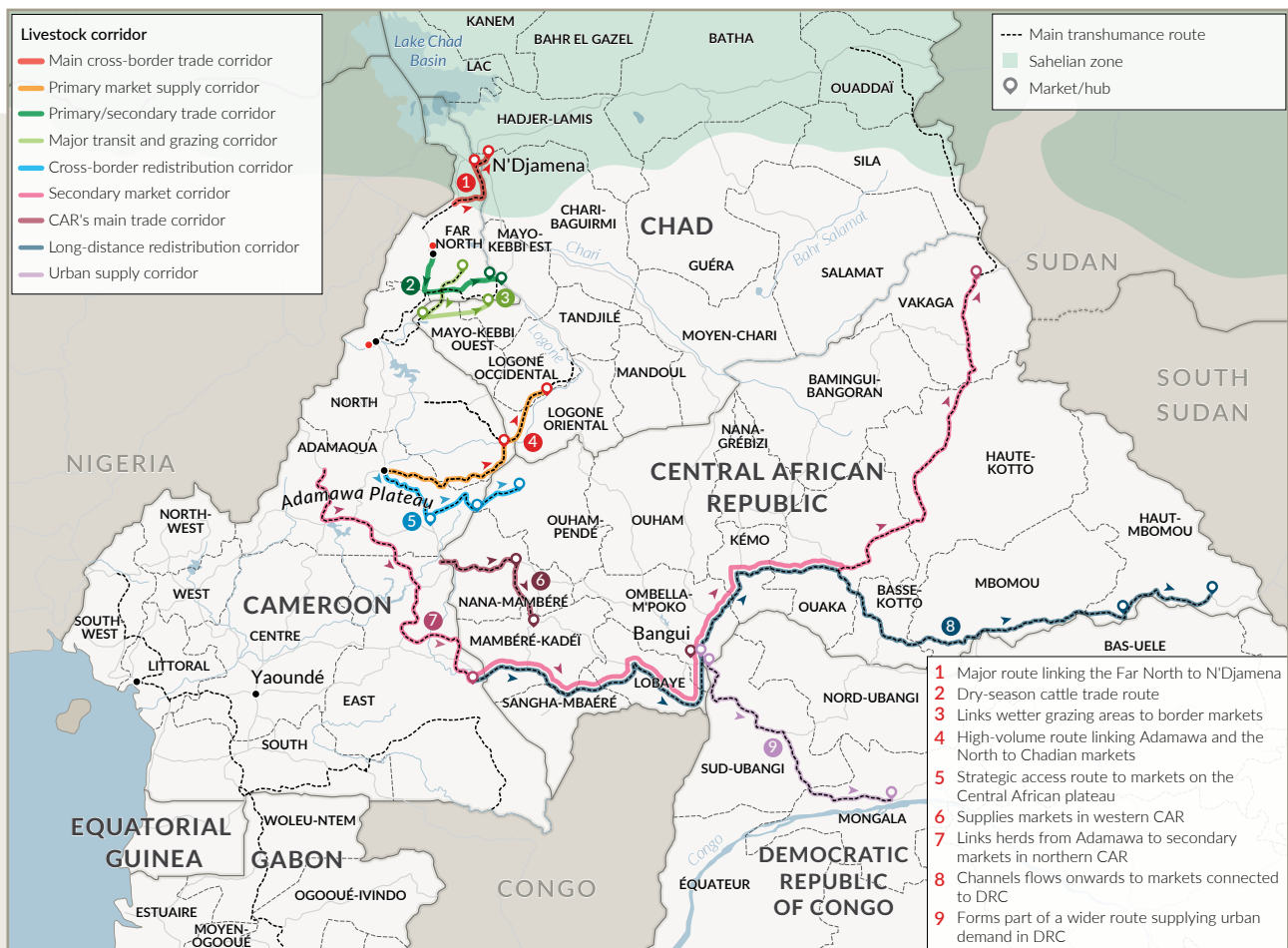


FIGURE 3 High-risk areas and hotspots along pastoral corridors.

Final distribution and regional markets

Cross-border trade is a defining feature of the sector. According to the LCBC and the FAO, more than 500 000 head of cattle move through the Lake Chad basin each year as part of commercial transhumance.⁵ Cameroon supplies Nigeria, the region's largest consumer of red meat, as well as the CAR and the DRC, where urban demand, particularly in Bangui and Kinshasa, is growing rapidly. The dairy sector remains in its infancy and continues to rely heavily on imported milk powder. According to the latest report by the National Institute of Statistics, Cameroon imported 20 596 tonnes of milk and dairy products worth CFAF 40.6 billion in 2023, together with a further 17 217 tonnes of powdered and concentrated milk valued at CFAF 35 billion.⁶

Economics of pastoral corridors and criminal capture

The routes linking Cameroon with Nigeria, Chad, the CAR and the DRC serve not only as livestock migration corridors but also as major economic arteries. They underpin livestock supply chains and sustain a cross-border pastoral economy. In the Lake Chad basin alone, annual livestock movements are estimated at more than 500 000 head of cattle.⁷ These routes, however, are increasingly affected by insecurity and the associated illicit flows that undermine local communities and fund armed groups (see Figure 3).

- **Northern Cameroon–Chad corridors:** the Waza–Kousseri–N'Djamena and Maroua–Yagoua–Bongor routes are vital for supplying Chad's capital and markets in the Mayo-Kebbi region. As some of the busiest livestock corridors in the region, they are also among the most exposed to attacks and extortion. According to ACLED, incidents involving livestock rustling increased from 117 in 2023 to 158 in 2024, with 230 fatalities recorded between 2015 and 2024.⁸ Cumulative losses are estimated at 25 000 head of cattle between 2014 and 2021, representing a market value of around CFAF 5 billion.⁹ In addition, illegal taxes levied at checkpoints range from CFAF 2 000 to CFAF 10 000 per head, generating an estimated CFAF 800 million to CFAF 1 billion annually along the Kousseri–N'Djamena corridor.¹⁰
- **Adamawa–Chad routes:** the Tcholliré–Touboro–Moundou–Bébaïem and Ngaoundéré–Belel–Touboro–Moundou routes (300–450 kilometres) are strategic corridors for moving Cameroonian livestock to the more lucrative Chadian markets. However, they are regularly disrupted by raids carried out by roadside bandits.¹¹ Herds using these routes may be subjected to multiple illegal levies, imposing annual losses of several hundred million CFA francs on pastoralists.¹²
- **Cameroon–CAR corridors:** the Ngaoundéré–Meiganga–Ngaoui–Bocaranga, Tignère–Bétaré Oya–Ndélé–Birao and Garoua–Boulai–Bouar–Carnot routes provide strategic access to the Central African highlands and the markets of Bouar, Carnot and Bangui. They are, however, subject to *tchoffal*, an illegal taxation system enforced by armed groups, notably 3R and ex-Seleka. These levies amount to CFAF 8 000–10 000 per head each season; 80 to 100 times higher than the former official municipal tax of CFAF 100 per head.¹³ In some areas, armed groups instead demand two head of cattle per herd each month. For large-scale livestock keepers, this represents annual losses of 30 to 50 animals, equivalent to CFAF 7.5–12.5 million. These practices have severely disrupted livestock markets in Bocaranga, Birao and Bouar.
- **CAR–DRC corridor:** the Ndélé–Zémio–Obo route (up to 1 500 kilometres) and the Bangui–Zongo–Lisala route extend seasonal livestock movements into the DRC. Their length and remoteness create numerous opportunities for extortion, with cumulative payments for a herd of 300 ranging from CFAF 1.8 million to CFAF 15 million per journey.¹⁴ Some of these livestock flows ultimately supply the

urban markets of Kinshasa and Kisangani, where retail prices are artificially inflated by the impact of these illegal levies.

- **Corridors to the south, and towards Gabon and Equatorial Guinea:** smaller-scale routes linking Adamawa and southern Cameroon with border markets in Kye-Ossi, Ambam, Mamfé, Campo and Ebebiyin are used primarily by family-run herds and support relatively modest cross-border trade. Although livestock volumes are lower, these routes are not immune to informal taxation, with cumulative small-scale extortion estimated to generate several tens of millions of CFA francs each year.¹⁵

Transhumance routes are therefore far more than pastoral corridors: they function as major financial networks which, through the interweaving of licit and illicit flows, help shape the regional economy. While livestock value chains generate essential income for rural communities, illegal revenues derived from rustling, ransom payments and illegal taxation are estimated to amount to several billion CFA francs each year in the Lake Chad basin and the CAR. These revenues directly finance the logistics and military capabilities of armed groups such as Boko Haram, 3R and the ex-Seleka, while impoverishing pastoralists and undermining food security in urban markets by driving up the price of meat and dairy products.



Conflict along transhumance routes

Conflict along transhumance routes in Cameroon, Chad, the CAR and the DRC stems primarily from growing competition among pastoralists, farmers and fishing communities for access to water and grazing land. Intensified by climate change, increasing pressure on land and weak governance, this competition erodes social cohesion and fuels cycles of armed violence that threaten regional stability. These dynamics underscore the need for coordinated regulation and integrated natural resource management to support lasting peace.

Intensifying tensions between farmers and pastoralists

Between 2008 and 2025, the escalation of conflict between pastoralists and farmers across central Africa reflected a marked deterioration in the region's socio-economic and security conditions. IOM data for 2021 shows that 20 per cent of recorded disputes in the North, Adamawa and East regions of Cameroon involved transhumant herders, affecting a large majority of both pastoralists (71%) and farmers (89%).¹⁶ As early as 2015, disputes over access to water and grazing land in Cameroon's North region were already fuelling growing agropastoral tensions, although the total number of people affected during that period is difficult to verify. Studies conducted in 2016 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Lutheran World Federation found that these recurring conflicts, exacerbated by mounting pressure on natural resources, were already having a significant human impact in these regions.¹⁷

In the Far North, the decline in available grazing land is largely the result of agricultural expansion and the settlement of farming communities in areas previously used for seasonal grazing and livestock movements. In some areas, these changes have been associated with the migration of Toupouri communities and their cultivation of land formerly used as pasture or livestock corridors. This growing pressure on land has intensified tensions between farmers and pastoralists, as illustrated by the protests in Moulvoudaye in April 2025.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in the North-West, Mbororo pastoralists continue to face persistent hostility, compounded by the Ngarbuh massacre in 2020, in which 23 people were killed. The

South-West has also witnessed several mass killings, including those in Bakinjaw in 2022 (32 deaths) and Akwaya (32 victims).¹⁹

In Chad, recurrent clashes have continued to exact a heavy human toll, from Balwaï (42 deaths in 2019)²⁰ and Lac Iro (19 deaths in 2021)²¹ to the Mandakao massacre in 2025 (42 deaths).²² In 2024 alone, 26 incidents resulted in more than 100 deaths and the displacement of 2 700 people.²³ These conflicts, rooted in competition over water and grazing land, are further aggravated by ethnic divisions and weak governance. In the CAR, agropastoral violence in the north and south-west regions is frequently linked to the presence of armed groups. Between 2022 and 2023, communities in places such as Gadzi, Yaloké and Nzakoundou recorded dozens of deaths and saw large-scale displacement.²⁴ More recently, this pattern was illustrated by the violence in Nzoroh, where in 2025 nine people were killed and 700 homes destroyed.²⁵

Once serving as corridors for economic, commercial and social exchange between pastoral, farming and trading communities, transhumance routes have increasingly become flashpoints for violence. This is particularly true of the Waza–Logone–Birni–Kousséri–N'Djamena corridor, which is now affected by intercommunal tensions, extortion, armed attacks and restrictions on movement. Used by Arab, Kotoko, Mousgoum and Massa communities, this corridor has witnessed repeated tragedies, from the Kousseri massacres in 1992 (68 deaths)²⁶ to the 2021–2022 crisis, which claimed more than 60 lives and forced 44 000 refugees to flee to Chad.²⁷ This escalation continued in 2025: during the first half of the year alone, Chad's Lac province and southern Chad recorded 25 clashes, resulting in 136 deaths, 166 injuries and the displacement of thousands of people.²⁸

In the DRC, the eastern provinces of Ituri, South Kivu and Tanganyika remain highly unstable. The Hema–Lendu and Twa–Luba conflicts alone have resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.²⁹ This insecurity has been compounded by attacks carried out by the Islamic State-affiliated Allied Democratic Forces, including the raid on Komanda in January 2025, which killed 40 people.³⁰ At the same time, the civil war that has gripped the CAR since 2013 has had a particularly severe impact on Fulani pastoralists. Marginalized and systematically targeted by armed groups, they have borne the brunt of a conflict that, between 2013 and 2023, claimed more than 13 500 lives, forced 1.2 million people to flee their homes and left 2.4 million in need of humanitarian assistance.³¹

Today, the pastoral routes that were once drivers of trade and prosperity have been profoundly destabilized by insecurity, illicit trafficking and the erosion of local governance. Addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts to strengthen pastoral governance, support intercommunal mediation and improve security in order to restore peaceful coexistence between communities and promote lasting regional stability.

Intensifying tensions between pastoralists and fishing communities

Conflicts between pastoralists and fishing communities along seasonal migration routes are a major source of instability in central Africa. They reflect intensifying competition for access to shared natural resources, particularly water points and fishing grounds, which are essential to the livelihoods of local communities. In the Logone floodplain (Cameroon–Chad), Mayo-Kebbi (Chad) and the Benoué valley, herds encroaching on fishing areas damage aquatic habitats and disrupt fishing activities. Across these areas, 51 incidents have been recorded, resulting in 39 deaths and 91 injuries.³² These patterns illustrate

the complex nature of shared resource management among communities which depend on them for their livelihoods. In Pala, Bongor and Kousseri, conflicts specifically linked to access to water points led to 38 incidents, leaving 26 people dead and 63 injured.³³

The Benoué Valley, Lagdo and Zina have also experienced recurring cycles of violence, with 24 incidents resulting in 15 deaths and 34 injuries.³⁴ These clashes have been exacerbated by armed groups and criminal networks seeking to control fishing grounds. In Logone-et-Chari (Cameroon), Lac Iro (Chad) and Ouaka (CAR), 42 similar incidents were reported, causing 33 deaths and 48 injuries.³⁵

The situation is particularly severe in Logone-Birni, Waza, Zina and Bogu, where intercommunal clashes over the use of fishing channels have, for several decades, pitted Fulani and Arab pastoralists against Kotoko and Mousgoum fishing communities. These conflicts have resulted in 61 incidents, claiming 176 lives and injuring 401 people.³⁶ What happened in Logone-Birni on 10 August 2021 provides a stark illustration: at least 45 people were killed, 74 injured, 40 villages set alight and 50 000 people displaced, including 30 000 who fled to Chad.³⁷ These conflicts stem from competing uses of pastoral and fishing areas, where channels dug by Mousgoum communities have caused fatal accidents involving livestock.³⁸

Elsewhere, areas such as Sarh, Koumra and the outskirts of N'Djamena in Chad, as well as Ketté in eastern Cameroon, are subject to illegal levies and extortion targeting livestock and fisheries. These predatory practices have been linked to 27 incidents, resulting in 11 deaths and 21 injuries.³⁹

These figures point to a structural regional crisis driven by competition over access to water and fisheries resources, and exacerbated by climate change, population growth and the erosion of state institutions. The human consequences are considerable, including loss of life, mass displacement and the destruction of livelihoods. Addressing this destructive dynamic requires coordinated governance of natural resources involving governments, local communities and international partners. Such an approach is essential to reducing these tensions over the long term and restoring peaceful coexistence between pastoralists and fishing communities.



A herder brings his cattle to a water point in a drought-affected pastoral area of the Lake Chad region. Across the region, competition for water and resources is being exacerbated by climate change, population pressure and institutional decline.

© Philippe Desmazes/
AFP via Getty Images



Interaction between armed groups and pastoralism

The traditional pastoral economy has become deeply intertwined with the activities of armed groups, which exploit livestock, transhumance routes and informal trading networks as strategic resources. Along cross-border corridors linking Cameroon, Chad, the CAR, the DRC and Nigeria, the increase in arms trafficking, coercive levies, livestock rustling and extortion has profoundly transformed pastoral areas. Once corridors of mobility and regional integration, these areas have become hotspots of violence and predatory economic activity. The growing influence of armed groups is disrupting transhumance cycles, eroding the resilience of pastoralist communities, destabilizing livestock markets, and posing a lasting threat to both food security and regional stability.

Boko Haram: the impact of insecurity on the pastoral economy

Founded in 2002 in Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria, Boko Haram initially emerged as a religious movement advocating a strict interpretation of Islam while rejecting Western-style education and state authority. The extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009 marked a decisive turning point. Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, the movement evolved into an armed insurgency and became a major driver of regional insecurity, combining ideological violence with predatory economic strategies.

From 2010 onwards, Boko Haram escalated its campaign through bombings, massacres of civilians and large-scale kidnappings, including the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014.⁴⁰ The insurgency quickly spread beyond Nigeria's borders into neighbouring areas of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and, on occasion, the CAR. The group established a strong presence in pastoral areas and along transhumance corridors, which became strategically important to its operations.

Between 2013 and 2020, more than 200 attacks were recorded along the Cameroon–Chad corridor, transforming pastoral routes into hotspots of criminal activity.⁴¹ Livestock rustling, extortion, targeted

killings and the imposition of illegal taxes disrupted transhumance cycles, undermined pastoral livelihoods and destabilised local markets.

The group's financing relies heavily on the direct exploitation of the pastoral economy through livestock theft and the resale of stolen animals via parallel trading networks. Sustained by informal networks of butchers, transporters and suppliers, this war economy has helped to prolong the conflict while posing a lasting threat to food security and the stability of border regions.

The following table illustrates the scale of the losses directly attributable to the predatory strategies employed by armed groups (see Figure 4).

Data compiled by the French Institute of International Relations highlights the scale of Boko Haram's livestock raids against pastoralists in Cameroon's Far North region.⁴² The theft of 22 430 cattle and 16 529 goats between 2014 and 2021 demonstrates the considerable economic impact of these attacks on local pastoral systems. Far from being isolated incidents, these repeated thefts form part of a sustained pattern of violent appropriation of livestock resources.

The period from 2016 to 2017 was the most critical. Losses rose sharply, with over 4 000 cattle stolen annually. The theft of goats also increased significantly, highlighting the deliberate targeting of pastoral livelihoods. This trend reflects both an escalation in the group's predatory practices and its growing entrenchment in areas of pastoral production and mobility.

From 2018 onwards, livestock theft declined but did not cease. Annual losses remained substantial, with more than 2 000 cattle stolen each year until 2021. This demonstrates that insecurity continued to sustain a persistent predatory economy. Although thefts became less frequent, they remained a structural feature of the conflict, placing pastoral livelihoods under sustained pressure.

Year	Number of cattle stolen	Number of goats stolen
2014	2 160	1 813
2015	2 345	2 125
2016	4 250	1 926
2017	4 350	2 647
2018	2 236	2 235
2019	2 256	1 845
2020	2 458	1 758
2021	2 375	2 180
Total	22 430	16 529

FIGURE 4 Trends in livestock looted by Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North region, 2014–2021.

SOURCE: Moussa Bobbo, Boko Haram in the Far North of Cameroon: The Tree Hiding the Forest, Papers, Ifri, 8 June 2022.

Taken together, these findings confirm that livestock has become a strategic target for armed groups. Beyond the immediate economic losses, repeated livestock raids have a lasting impact on pastoral households, disrupt local trading systems and increase the vulnerability of communities living under chronic insecurity. Figure 5 shows that livestock rustling is not evenly distributed, reflecting how armed groups adapt their operations on the ground.

According to Figure 5, in Fotokol subdivision, the 2017 pattern of theft points to a deliberate concentration of Boko Haram's predatory activities in selected locations. Some areas were far more heavily affected than others, suggesting that attacks were carefully targeted rather than randomly distributed. Sagme was the hardest hit, with 648 cattle and 85 small ruminants stolen, while Madina also suffered heavy losses, with 487 cattle stolen compared with just 30 small ruminants. In both localities, the predominance of cattle theft suggests that priority was given to animals with the highest market value and the greatest resale potential through cross-border networks.

By contrast, Fadji Halt displays a different pattern, with a disproportionately high number of small ruminants stolen; 400 head, compared with just 18 cattle. This distribution suggests more opportunistic raids, shaped by the local composition of herds, access to villages and the speed with which raids could be carried out. Worogadi presents an intermediate profile, with 329 small ruminants and 286 cattle stolen, indicating a more balanced pattern of predation across different categories of livestock.

Elsewhere, thefts occurred on a smaller scale, underscoring the selective nature of this predatory violence rather than a generalised pattern of attacks. This geographical variation is due to several factors, including accessibility, herd composition, proximity to transport routes and the foothold established by armed groups in the area. Taken together, these trends show that pastoralism is exploited in a highly targeted manner, according to the market value of livestock and opportunities created by the local security environment.

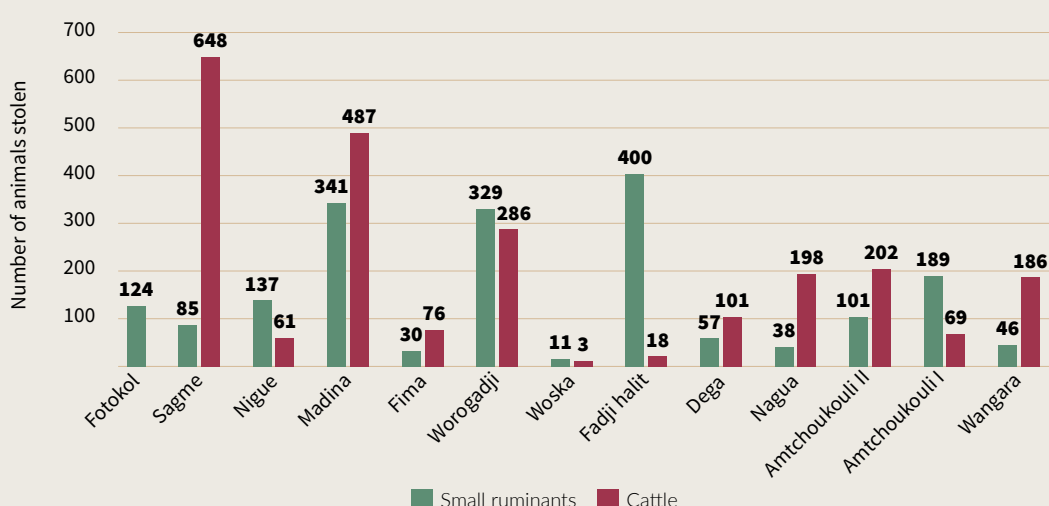


FIGURE 5 Cattle and small ruminants stolen by Boko Haram in Fotokol, 2017.

SOURCE: Data from the Fotokol Zootechnical and Veterinary Centre, compiled by Sylvain Baizoumi Wambae, unpublished field research (2025).

Figure 6 shows the distribution of cattle and small ruminant theft carried out by Boko Haram in the Makary subdivision between 2016 and 2017.

As shown in Figure 6, livestock rustling in the Makary subdivision between 2016 and 2017 predominantly involved cattle theft. This pattern points to a strategy focused on animals with the highest market value. Sambai recorded the heaviest losses (537 cattle), followed by Koko (400), and Kenkan and Afdanam (151 cattle each). Wachoma and Amado also experienced significant losses. This focus on cattle theft suggests that attacks primarily targeted the most valuable assets, which could be channelled into cross-border resale and financing networks.

Small ruminants were generally less heavily targeted across the area, although some localities stood out, particularly Gouba (133 head), Andjire Gane (46) and Yobo (33). Rather than following a uniform pattern, this uneven distribution suggests that predatory activities were adapted to local herd compositions, ease of access and tactical opportunities. Where cattle predominated, armed groups appear to have prioritised the most valuable livestock. By contrast, where small ruminants were more heavily targeted, raids seem to have been more opportunistic, taking advantage of whatever livestock was readily available.

This pattern confirms that the Makary subdivision forms part of a structured predatory economy in which livestock constitutes a strategic resource. The predominance of cattle theft indicates that armed groups prioritise livestock offering the greatest economic return, consistent with the financing mechanisms that sustain conflict in the Lake Chad basin. Livestock theft is therefore not merely a consequence of violence; it also contributes to its perpetuation by undermining pastoral livelihoods while generating revenue through conflict-related economic networks.

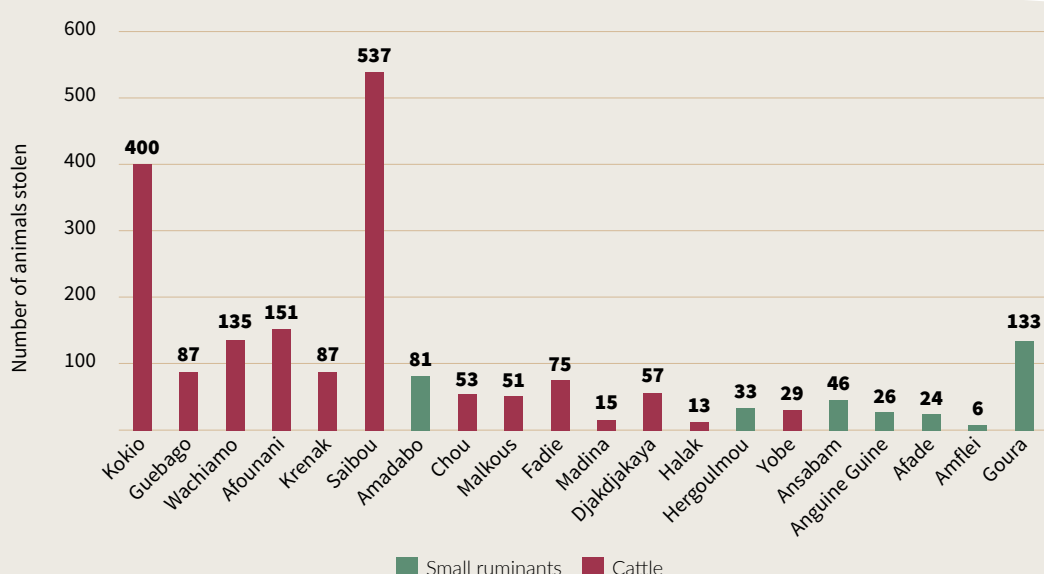


FIGURE 6 Cattle and small ruminants stolen by Boko Haram in Makary, 2016–2017.

SOURCE: Data from the Makary Zootechnical and Veterinary Centre, compiled by Sylvain Baïzoumi Wambae, unpublished field research (2025)

Armed groups: livestock theft and raids

Across central Africa, livestock theft and raids have become a structural component of armed group activity, extending well beyond isolated opportunistic acts. Driven by persistent insecurity, political instability and increasingly powerful economic incentives, these practices form part of an organised predatory economy that directly targets the traditional pastoral sector. They exacerbate intercommunal tensions, undermine local social structures and inflict lasting damage on the livelihoods of rural communities.

ACLED data⁴³ reveals a marked increase in livestock-related incidents, rising from 117 in 2023 to 158 by August 2024. Between 2015 and 2024, these attacks claimed at least 230 lives, including 60 in 2023 alone, highlighting the growing role of armed groups as key drivers of rural insecurity. At the same time, OCHA estimates that almost 30 000 cattle were lost across the Lake Chad basin between 2014 and 2021. This underlines both the regional scale of the phenomenon and its direct impact on food security.

Analysis by ENACT Africa⁴⁴ confirms that raids have become both persistent and highly organised, carried out by heavily armed groups with the support of logistics networks, cross-border resale channels and local accomplices. This reflects the increasing professionalisation of livestock theft, which has become fully integrated into the financing mechanisms of armed groups and criminal networks.

In Cameroon, the Adamawa region is particularly vulnerable. Armed groups, known locally as *zaraguinas*, have stepped up attacks on pastoralists. In Bélel, the theft of 513 cattle in 2018, followed by a further 90 in March 2019, illustrates the sustained pressure on pastoral areas.⁴⁵ These repeated raids have forced communities to flee, weakened the social fabric and, in some areas, driven pastoralists to abandon their livelihoods.

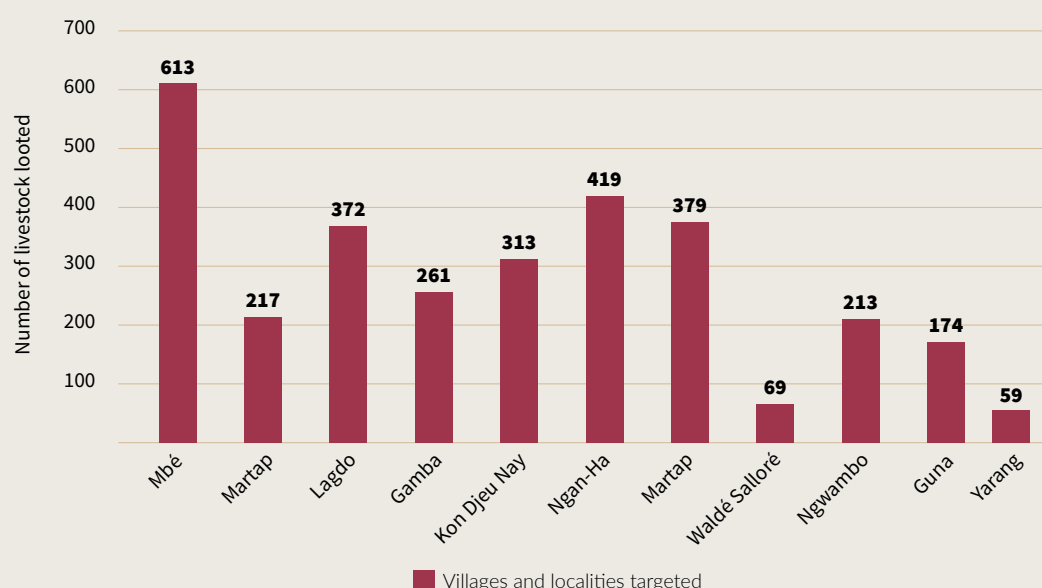


FIGURE 7 Livestock losses resulting from theft in the Adamawa and North regions of Cameroon, 2016–2018.

SOURCE: Data from Zootechnical and Veterinary Centres (Mbé, Martap, Gouna) and reports by the Association for the Pro-motion of Livestock Farming in the Sahel and Savanna Regions (2017, 2018), compiled by Sylvain Baizoumi Wam-bae, unpublished field research (2025).

These findings confirm that the pastoral economy is no longer merely affected by insecurity; it has become both a strategic target and a key economic asset for armed groups. This shift has made the pastoral economy central to contemporary dynamics of violence and instability in central Africa. Figure 7 shows the distribution of livestock raids across the Adamawa and North regions of Cameroon between 2016 and 2018.

Data on livestock raids in the Adamawa and North regions compiled by Baïzoumi⁴⁶ reveals marked geographical variation in the losses recorded between 2016 and 2018. The disparities observed from one locality to another indicate that these raids were not evenly distributed but instead reflected the selective targeting of pastoral areas. The heaviest losses were recorded in Mbé (613 animals stolen), followed by Ngan-Ha (419), Martap (379), Lagdo (372) and Kon Djeu Nay (313). This pattern suggests that armed groups favoured areas with large livestock populations where security measures were weakest.

Other localities, including Gamba (261 animals stolen) and Ngwambo (213), were moderately affected, indicating sustained but less intense predatory pressure. By contrast, Yarang, Waldé Salloré and Gouna recorded lower levels of theft. This is likely to reflect less frequent attacks or fewer opportunities for livestock raiders, rather than an absence of risk. The geographical distribution of raids suggests that armed groups took into account a combination of factors, including livestock density, accessibility of different areas, available escape routes and the presence of security forces.

Overall, this pattern confirms that livestock theft has evolved far beyond opportunistic rural crime. It forms part of a structured predatory economy in which livestock serve as a source of revenue, a means of exerting pressure on local communities and an instrument of territorial control. By systematically targeting the most productive or vulnerable pastoral areas, armed groups undermine local livelihoods, perpetuate insecurity and tighten their grip in areas where state authority remains limited.

The FACT: insecurity, illegal levies and constraints on pastoral mobility

The Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) emerged in April 2016 following a split within the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD).⁴⁷ Led by Mahamat Mahdi Ali,⁴⁸ the movement has gradually established itself as one of Chad's principal armed groups operating from southern Libya, particularly in the Fezzan, Sebha and Al Jufra regions.⁴⁹ Its presence in these borderlands has enabled it to extend its reach into northern Chad, as demonstrated by its April 2021 offensive.⁵⁰ Estimates of its strength vary by source. The United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya documented at least 700 fighters, while other assessments suggest considerably higher numbers. The FACT's influence lies less in documented control over pastoral routes themselves than in its control of cross-border corridors, armed trafficking routes and illicit Saharan–Sahelian economies.

In April 2021, the FACT launched an offensive from its bases in southern Libya into northern Chad, advancing through the border regions of Tibesti and Kanem. According to available estimates, the attacking force comprised around 500 fighters supported by between 70 and 100 vehicles.⁵¹ During the fighting in Kanem, President Idriss Déby Itno was fatally wounded while visiting the front line. His death was announced on 20 April 2021.⁵² This marked a major turning point in Chad's security landscape, triggering increased militarisation along transport routes into the north of the country and disrupting movement through several strategically important transit areas.⁵³ These developments can also be linked to the growing vulnerability of pastoral corridors, as routes used by armed groups, smugglers and herders increasingly intersect across the Saharan–Sahelian region.

Since the FACT's April 2021 offensive from southern Libya, the routes linking northern Chad with Libya and Niger have become increasingly insecure. The offensive led to tighter controls, additional checkpoints, restrictions on movement and prolonged disruption to travel into northern Chad. These developments form part of a broader pattern of criminalisation along trans-Saharan routes, characterised by extortion, illegal levies, trafficking and the presence of armed groups in the Chad–Libya–Niger borderlands. This insecurity directly undermines pastoral mobility by restricting access to grazing land, water points and livestock markets, thereby threatening the viability of the region's pastoral economy.⁵⁴

The FACT also operates in an environment shaped by the proliferation of weapons trafficked from Libya. These flows fuel cross-border criminal economies, intercommunal conflict, armed banditry and, more broadly, livestock raids across the Saharan–Sahelian region.⁵⁵ The scale of the problem is illustrated by figures released in August 2021 by Chad's Joint Security Commission, which reported that the defence and security forces had recovered 1 309 weapons of various calibres, including heavy weapons.⁵⁶ Likewise, clashes in Kouri Bougoudi on 23 and 24 May 2022, against a backdrop of trafficking, competition over artisanal mining and the circulation of weapons, left almost 100 people dead. The incident illustrates the close links between armed violence, criminal economies and insecurity in areas used for pastoral mobility.⁵⁷

Faced with these pressures, pastoralists have adapted their migration routes, avoiding areas where the FACT is active, taking more hazardous routes or abandoning cross-border transhumance altogether. By reshaping patterns of pastoral mobility in this way, the FACT's activities have undermined pastoral production systems and increased the vulnerability of rural communities, thereby deepening regional instability.

The UFR: security challenges and the forced transformation of pastoralism

Founded on 18 January 2009 under the leadership of Timan Erdimi, the Union of Resistance Forces (UFR) is a coalition of eight Chadian rebel groups that has established itself as one of the country's principal politico-military opposition movements to the regime of Idriss Déby. Its bases and rear positions have long been located in the cross-border areas of Darfur, eastern Chad and, more recently, southern Libya, contributing to insecurity along the country's northern and eastern borderlands.⁵⁸

In the border regions of northern and eastern Chad, particularly around Borkou, Ennedi and Wadi Fira, insecurity is fuelled by the presence of armed groups, roadside bandits, trafficking networks and cross-border militias. Sources including the Small Arms Survey and the United Nations have documented instances of UFR involvement in the war economies of southern Libya and Darfur, including the operation of checkpoints, trafficking activities and the collection of illegal levies from travellers.⁵⁹ Such armed extortion is a common feature of conflict economies across the Saharan–Sahelian region.

At the same time, the socioeconomic marginalisation of young people in Chad's Sahelian and border regions has increased their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, particularly in areas linked to southern Libya. As a result, pastoral corridors have come under increasing pressure from the combined effects of insecurity, competing land uses and weak governance.⁶⁰

The scale of the economic impact can be quantified. In Wadi Fira, insecurity-related disruption resulted in the annual loss of more than 8 000 head of livestock between 2018 and 2021, representing a 10–15 per cent drop in herd numbers.⁶¹ This trend reflects the forced transformation of pastoralism, characterised

by reduced mobility, the gradual abandonment of long-established migration routes and increasing household vulnerability.

Overall, the example of the UFR demonstrates that changes in pastoral systems are driven less by climatic pressures than by the control exercised by armed groups over land, transport routes and natural resources. As a result, pastoralism now lies at the heart of the insecurity dynamics affecting Chad and its border regions.

The CCMSR: control of pastoral corridors and coercive levies

The Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR) is a Chadian rebel movement that emerged in 2016 following a split from the FACT. The movement was initially led by Mahamat Hassan Boulmaye until his arrest in Niger in 2017 and subsequent extradition to Chad.⁶² Based primarily in southern Libya and northern Chad, particularly in the Tibesti region, the CCMSR has established itself as one of the principal Chadian rebel groups operating on both sides of the Chad–Libya border.⁶³ The group has been active in the Wour, Kouri and Wouri areas, strategic locations in Tibesti where military activity, artisanal gold mining, trafficking and cross-border movements converge.⁶⁴ In these areas, the presence of armed groups and recurring clashes have made movement through the region increasingly unsafe, including for pastoralists whose seasonal migration routes follow or intersect the same corridors.

The CCMSR's activities directly disrupt seasonal pastoral movements by delaying, diverting or blocking migration between northern and southern Chad, as well as towards Cameroon and the CAR. These systematic disruptions place established patterns of transhumance under strain and undermine pastoralists' ability to cope with climatic pressures.⁶⁵ According to the FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP), insecurity linked to the CCMSR has reduced the use of cross-border corridors connecting Chad, Niger and Libya by 45 per cent, illustrating the regional scale of its impact.⁶⁶

This territorial control is underpinned by a structured predatory economy based on large-scale livestock theft and illegal levies. Between 2019 and 2023, more than 20 000 animals were stolen, resulting in estimated losses of CFAF 2.3 billion.⁶⁷ In addition to these predatory activities, the CCMSR imposes illegal levies ranging from CFAF 10 000 to CFAF 50 000 per herd, with at least 38 documented cases in 2022.⁶⁸

The human consequences have been considerable. Between 2020 and 2023, around 12 500 pastoralists fled the localities of Miski, Yebibou and Zoumri for Kanem and Hadjer Lamis, increasing pressure on local resources and giving rise to new socio-environmental tensions.⁶⁹

Overall, the CCMSR's activities illustrate how armed control of pastoral corridors and illicit taxation transform pastoralism into a strategic resource within the war economy, resulting in economic losses, forced displacement and the long-term destabilisation of Chad's rural areas.

The ex-Seleka: armed control and forced reconfiguration

The Seleka, a coalition of predominantly Muslim rebel groups that emerged in north-eastern CAR in 2012, gradually evolved into an alliance of several politico-military movements, notably the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP-Fondamentale), the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), the Patriotic Convention for the Salvation of Kodro (CPSK), together with other more loosely affiliated groups, including the Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC) and the Alliance for Revival

and Rebuilding (A2R).⁷⁰ By overthrowing President François Bozizé on 24 March 2013 and bringing Michel Djotodia to power, the Seleka profoundly reshaped the political, military and territorial landscape of the CAR.⁷¹

These events intensified intercommunal tensions. Fulani and Mbororo pastoralists, who are often perceived as Muslim, were associated by some communities with the Seleka or its allied groups, exposing them to targeted reprisals, particularly by Anti-balaka militias.⁷² Faced with growing insecurity, many Central African Fulani pastoralists, together with transhumant herders from Chad and Cameroon, were forced to leave parts of the CAR, causing severe disruption to cross-border pastoral movements.⁷³

Ex-Seleka factions, particularly the Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (FPRC) and the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), subsequently extended their control over several strategic transport corridors, livestock markets and key crossing points in the east and centre-east of the country, notably in the regions of Ouaka, Haute-Kotto, Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou.⁷⁴ This control was reflected in the proliferation of checkpoints, coercive levies and other forms of armed taxation imposed on commercial and pastoral movements.⁷⁵ These developments highlight the strategic importance of pastoral and trade routes in armed groups' efforts to consolidate territorial control, although reliable quantitative data remains difficult to obtain.

The ex-Seleka imposed a system of coercive taxation, charging between CFAF 15 000 and CFAF 50 000 per herd, or CFAF 500 per animal, increasing the cost of transhumance by 30–40 per cent.⁷⁶ Between 2013 and 2021, more than 15 000 animals were stolen,⁷⁷ and around 60 000 herders ceased cross-border migration into the CAR. By 2020, some 1 200 families remained stranded in the localities of Kabo, Birao and Ouadda.⁷⁸

Overall, the ex-Seleka reduced pastoral incomes by around 30 per cent and severely disrupted cross-border pastoral mobility. These patterns have transformed pastoralism into both a strategic resource for the war economy and a key instrument in the reconfiguration of movement corridors across the CAR.

The UPC: the coercive reshaping of cross-border pastoral systems

The Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), established in September 2014 by Ali Darassa, is an ex-Seleka faction that has emerged as one of the principal armed groups controlling pastoral areas in the CAR. While claiming to defend the interests of the Muslim Fulani community and opposing the FPRC, the UPC operates along strategic transhumance corridors, particularly around Bambari, Alindao and the Mbomou region, at the heart of the routes linking the CAR with Chad and Cameroon.

Pastoral routes crossing these areas have been profoundly disrupted by armed violence, livestock theft, kidnapping and extortion, forcing many herders to alter their routes, break their seasonal migration into shorter stages or cease cross-border transhumance in some areas.⁷⁹ These practices demonstrate how pastoral mobility has been directly instrumentalized as a means of territorial control.

According to ISS Africa and International Crisis Group, the UPC systematically imposes coercive taxation, charging illegal levies ranging from CFAF 25 000 to CFAF 100 000 per herd at between two and four armed checkpoints located in Bambari, Grimari, Kouango and Alindao.⁸⁰ Between 2020 and 2022, the group was involved in more than 65 incidents of armed predation directly targeting nomadic herders.⁸¹ The FAO⁸² estimates that more than 2 000 animals were stolen over the same period.

By erecting roadblocks and controlling bridges and major transport routes, the UPC restricts free movement, prompting nearly 60 per cent of herders to alter their migration routes. This forced reconfiguration has disrupted transhumance between Vakaga, Salamat and Cameroon, while also intensifying intercommunal tensions, as illustrated by the 15 deaths recorded in Alindao in 2021. Overall, the UPC has actively reshaped transhumance routes, timing and costs, undermining regional food security and disrupting cross-border pastoral systems.

The LRA: long-term disruption of pastoral mobility

Since the late 1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has been a major driver of chronic insecurity in the border regions between the CAR, South Sudan and the DRC. Through repeated atrocities, including abductions, looting and targeted attacks against civilians, the LRA has caused lasting disruption to seasonal migration, particularly in Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou, key transit areas for Chadian and Cameroonian herders.⁸³

According to the Resolve LRA Crisis Initiative, between 2010 and 2016 the LRA stole more than 8 000 animals around Rafai, Zémio, Obo and Djemah, illustrating how livestock raiding became an integral part of the group's survival and financing strategies.⁸⁴ More than 30 attacks directly targeted herders in the borderlands between the CAR, the DRC and South Sudan, underscoring the disproportionate vulnerability of pastoral communities.

This persistent insecurity led to the collapse of transhumance on several key routes. Along the Obo–Mboki–Bambouti corridor, pastoral movements declined by almost 60 per cent between 2012 and 2015, as these routes became the scene of repeated abductions and looting.⁸⁵ Between 2008 and 2020, more than 1 000 civilians, including many pastoralists, were abducted, forcing almost 5 000 herders to retreat towards Cameroon and Chad. As a result, transhumance routes became almost 300 kilometres longer.

Annual economic losses are estimated at between CFAF 250 million and CFAF 400 million, while the number of pastoral markets fell from 12 to four across Haute-Kotto and Mbomou.⁸⁶ Although the LRA has lost much of its military capacity, it continues to disrupt pastoral systems, demonstrating that the impact of armed groups extends beyond the battlefield and has lasting consequences.

The Anti-balaka: intercommunal violence, armed predation and the collapse of pastoral mobility

Formed in 2013, the Anti-balaka are predominantly Christian and animist paramilitary militias, drawn mainly from rural areas of the CAR. Set up in response to the ex-Seleka coalition, these groups rapidly developed a pattern of targeted intercommunal violence, systematically portraying Muslim Fulani herders as supporters of the rebel groups.⁸⁷ This stigmatization turned pastoral communities into primary targets in a cycle of armed reprisals.

The Anti-balaka's activities have severely disrupted cross-border transhumance into Cameroon and Chad, forcing herders to take lengthy detours lasting several weeks or even to abandon certain migration routes altogether.⁸⁸ This has resulted in forced displacement, often on a permanent basis, thereby fundamentally reshaping regional pastoral movements.⁸⁹

Between 2013 and 2020, violence attributed to the Anti-balaka caused transhumance from the CAR to decline by 60–80 per cent.⁹⁰ More than 15 000 Fulani herders fled the western part of the country,

particularly Nana-Mambéré, Ouham-Pendé and Mambéré-Kadéï, leading to a collapse of pastoral activity in these areas.⁹¹

Alongside physical violence, the Anti-balaka also institutionalised a system of extortion, demanding CFAF 50 000–200 000 per herd in the form of ransoms or transit fees between 2015 and 2020.⁹² The conflict between the ex-Seleka and the Anti-balaka gave rise to more than 200 violent incidents, resulted in the deaths of over 300 herders and led to around 45 per cent of pastoral routes into Cameroon being abandoned.⁹³ Between 2014 and 2019, more than 30 000 animals were lost.⁹⁴

The Anti-balaka have thus emerged as one of the principal drivers of the breakdown of pastoral systems. Through the combined use of identity-based stigmatization, armed predation and coercive control of movement along pastoral routes, they demonstrate that pastoral insecurity in the CAR stems above all from the direct actions of armed groups.

Zaraguinas: armed criminality, predation against pastoral communities and the breakdown of transhumance corridors

Transhumance routes across central Africa are now being profoundly disrupted by the activities of *zaraguinas*, armed roadside bandits made up of former rebels, ex-soldiers and heavily-armed civilians. Far from being isolated incidents, their actions form part of a pattern of organised criminality that specifically targets herders on the move. Through repeated ambushes, livestock raiding, kidnapping for ransom and systematic extortion, these groups have turned the pastoral corridors linking Cameroon, Chad and the CAR into areas of persistent predation.

The consequences of this violence are wide-ranging and particularly damaging for pastoral communities. The *zaraguinas* are responsible for widespread herd losses, a sharp decline in household income, disruption to livestock markets and forced displacement. These attacks have also exacted a heavy human toll, resulting in deaths, injuries, sexual violence and the forced displacement of entire families, further increasing vulnerability and disrupting established patterns of pastoral mobility.

This criminal activity has proved both persistent and highly adaptable. As early as 2004, around 300 Mbororo children were abducted in Cameroon, Chad and the CAR, and more than CFAF 490 million demanded in ransom payments.⁹⁵ At the local level, the Touboro area was the scene of repeated attacks between 2021 and 2022, while in 2023 two kidnappings near Mbaïboum resulted in ransom payments totalling CFAF 4 million. At the regional level, CFAF 86 million was stolen in northern Cameroon over a period of just four months in 2023, while ransom payments in Mayo-Kebbi Ouest amounted to CFAF 52.4 million.⁹⁶

These attacks have also triggered large-scale population displacement. Between April and July 2005, nearly 20 000 Mbororo fled to Cameroon and Chad after being forced to sell their livestock to pay ransom demands.⁹⁷ Since the early 2000s, insecurity linked to the *zaraguinas* has profoundly destabilised the Touboro–Ngaoui–Meiganga pastoral corridor, driving households deeper into poverty and further weakening the cross-border cattle sector between Cameroon and the CAR.⁹⁸

The *zaraguinas* have thus emerged as key drivers of rural insecurity, through armed violence, criminal enterprise and coercive control over patterns of pastoral movement. Their activities demonstrate that the breakdown of pastoral systems in central Africa stems primarily from the growing hold that armed and criminal groups exert over transport routes, natural resources and local communities.

The MLC and the FDP: the convergence of armed violence

Beyond the abuses committed by roadside bandits, organised armed groups have become firmly embedded in the criminal economy of the pastoral borderlands spanning Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad and the CAR. The Cameroon Liberation Movement (MLC) and the Fulani Defence Force (FDP) have been particularly active in the Adamawa region, especially in Faro and Déo, turning these areas into hubs of violent predation and coercive control over pastoral mobility.

Both groups number several thousand members according to local estimates, and have institutionalised kidnapping, extortion and looting practices, increasingly blurring the line between armed pastoralism and organised crime. Opportunistic alliances between armed herders, traffickers and rebel groups, combined with the growing militarisation of local communities and the erosion of state authority, have fuelled a self-perpetuating cycle of violence, mistrust and social fragmentation.

These dynamics are particularly evident in the Cameroon–Chad–CAR ‘triangle of death’, where transnational trafficking thrives amid a chronic security vacuum. In 2022, 46 kidnappings, 12 deaths and CFAF 42.9 million in ransom payments were recorded in Logone Oriental. In 2023, Mayo-Kebbi recorded 41 kidnappings and CFAF 52.4 million in ransom payments, illustrating the profitability of this criminal economy. Over the past two decades, more than 1 500 kidnappings have been documented.⁹⁹

Although the MLC was officially dismantled in 2021, the legacy of violence has endured, notably through the FDP, whose raids in Menchum between 2019 and 2020 caused death, widespread destruction and displacement. At the same time, jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have established sophisticated extortion systems around Lake Chad, while in the CAR, 3R has institutionalised *tchoffal*, demanding one bull for every 30 to 50 head of cattle.¹⁰⁰

These developments reflect the growing convergence of local armed criminality, rebel movements and jihadist groups. Pastoralism is no longer merely subject to predation; it has become a central strategic resource within regional war economies.

Ambazonian groups: destabilising pastoralism

In the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon, Ambazonian separatist groups have emerged as major drivers of rural insecurity. They increasingly rely on pastoralism to finance their activities and strengthen their territorial control. As illustrated in Figure 8, kidnapping, livestock theft, the targeted killing of herders and the destruction of pastoral property have become recurring tactics, used both to finance their illicit activities and to undermine the local economy.

The data presented in Figure 8 reveals a systematic campaign of violence by Ambazonian separatists against pastoral communities. The attacks directed at these populations form part of a deliberate strategy: of the more than 300 households targeted, 290 derive most of their income from livestock rearing. This demonstrates that these communities are deliberately and systematically targeted as part of the coercive strategies employed by armed groups, rather than being affected incidentally or on the margins of the conflict. The violence has impacted a total of 2 306 people, illustrating the scale of the crisis and the extent to which it has undermined the social fabric of pastoral communities.

Women and children are among those most severely affected. With 312 women and 1 398 children caught up in the violence, these abuses extend well beyond material losses, striking at the very foundations of

No.	Targeted populations and crime types	Number/amount
1	Households	306
2	Women	312
3	Children	1 398
4	Pastoralist families	290
5	Total impacted people	2 306
6	Fatalities	103
7	Kidnappings	39
8	Ransoms paid	47 176 500 FCFA
9	Camps, shelters and homes burnt down	168
10	Animals killed or seized	429
11	Sheep and goats slaughtered	59

FIGURE 8 Types and scale of separatist acts of violence against pastoral communities in Donga-Mantung, 2024.

SOURCES: Justice and Dignity Campaign, 2024, monthly reports, January–August 2024, translated and compiled by Sylvain Baïzoumi Wambae, unpublished field research (2025).

family life. This has created deep and lasting vulnerabilities, including long-term trauma, school dropout and family disruption, creating an enduring intergenerational divide within the affected communities.

The human and financial toll further underscores the scale of this predation. A total of 103 people were killed, and a further 39 kidnapped for ransom, generating payments totalling CFAF 47 176 500. These ransom kidnappings demonstrate that armed violence has become embedded in a war economy in which coercion directed at families serves as a direct source of income. At the same time, the burning down of 168 camps and homes, together with the loss of 488 animals (429 cattle seized or killed and 59 sheep and goats slaughtered), points to a deliberate effort to erode the material foundations of pastoral livelihoods over the long term.

Taken together, these findings show that the documented abuses are intended both to terrorize communities and to destroy the economic foundations on which their livelihoods depend. By simultaneously targeting people, homes and herds, armed groups have laid the foundations for structural impoverishment, increased dependence and forced displacement. The violence documented in Donga Mantung extends well beyond armed confrontation, driving profound social disruption and the coercive reshaping of pastoral landscapes.



A woman and child walk past the wreckage of a vehicle near Buea. Armed violence is disrupting life across these areas and turning pastoral and other transit routes into spaces marked by fear and control. © Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images

Armed groups linked to sections of the Mbororo population: armed raids and the breakdown of community relations

Violence attributed to certain armed groups associated with Mbororo pastoralist communities stems from a complex interplay of security, land and political factors, all of which have been significantly exacerbated by the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. Since 2016, this crisis, which originated in professional and political grievances in the North-West and South-West regions, has gradually evolved into an armed conflict between the defence and security forces and separatist groups. In this context, the weakening of state authority, the proliferation of weapons, forced displacement and the emergence of local militias have all contributed to the militarisation of intercommunal relations. The raids attributed to certain armed groups linked to Mbororo pastoralists therefore do not reflect traditional patterns of pastoralism, rather an environment shaped by local reprisals, competition over land and the long-term erosion of security governance in many rural areas.

The Mbororo have lived in Grassfields for several decades and had long been embroiled in land disputes with indigenous farming communities before the 2010s. The Anglophone crisis acted as a catalyst, reigniting and intensifying these underlying tensions. Some separatist movements subsequently accused sections of the Mbororo community of colluding with the Cameroonian state, notably through their alleged links with the security forces and the emergence of local militias such as the FDP, thereby reinforcing stigmatisation and identity-based polarisation.

According to Amnesty International, several deadly attacks in Menchum, Boyo and Donga-Mantung have been attributed to armed groups from the Mbororo community, in some cases carried out with impunity or with the tacit acquiescence of the security forces. These attacks illustrate the progressive criminalisation of parts of the pastoral economy, which have become increasingly drawn into cycles of armed violence, reprisals and territorial control.¹⁰¹

In Nwa, on the Nigerian border, clashes between Mbororo pastoralists and Yamba, Mbaw and Mfumte farming communities have been intensifying since 2016. Between February and March 2021, 18 villages were attacked, resulting in the deaths of 17 people and the destruction of around 100 homes, fields and granaries. These attacks forced more than 4 200 people¹⁰² to flee their homes, illustrating the collapse of traditional mechanisms for mediating land disputes.

Fuelled by competition over access to natural resources, the militarisation of local communities and survival strategies in the context of a protracted conflict, this violence has profoundly undermined community relations. More broadly, it forms part of a wider pattern of regional instability, marked in particular by Boko Haram's attacks in the Lake Chad basin. These developments confirm that the interaction between armed groups and pastoralism has become a major, cross-cutting security challenge in central Africa.

Economics of pastoral corridors: legitimate trade under criminal capture

Estimating both the licit and illicit flows associated with cross-border pastoralism is essential to understanding the economic and security dynamics shaping central Africa. Legal livestock trade supplies regional markets, supports local economies and sustains the livelihoods of millions of pastoral households. Alongside these formal trading networks, however, operate parallel channels based on smuggling, customs fraud and livestock trafficking. Increasingly, these illicit flows have become embedded in criminal and conflict economies, contributing directly to the financing of armed groups. Their expansion deprives the state of public revenue, distorts prices, disrupts regional markets and fuels insecurity along cross-border pastoral corridors, further weakening state governance over the long term.

Analysis of the main transhumance routes highlights the coexistence of two closely interconnected dynamics: on the one hand, a large-scale formal pastoral economy centred on the legal movement of livestock; on the other, an illicit economy that captures a significant share of the value generated along these same corridors. Legal trade demonstrates the pivotal role that several pastoral routes play in promoting regional economic integration. Among the most strategic corridors are:

- Waza–Kousseri–N'Djamena corridor: approximately 100 000 head of cattle per year, with an estimated value of CFAF 20–25 billion.¹⁰³
- Ngaoundéré–Belel–Toubo–Moundou corridor: 80 000–100 000 head per year, generating an estimated CFAF 20–25 billion.¹⁰⁴
- Toubo–Moundou–Bébalem corridor: 50 000–60 000 head per year, with an estimated value of CFAF 12–15 billion.¹⁰⁵

These corridors are essential for supplying urban markets and supporting the livelihoods of large numbers of pastoral households and livestock traders.

Alongside this legitimate trade, however, these corridors are subject to persistent forms of criminal predation. Illicit activities take many forms, including extortion, coercive taxation, livestock theft, roadside banditry, ransom demands and informal payments levied at multiple checkpoints. Corridor-by-corridor analysis illustrates the scale of this shadow economy:

- Waza–Kousseri–N'Djamena corridor: one of the worst-affected routes, with annual extortion estimated at CFAF 0.8–1 billion, in addition to livestock theft often exceeding CFAF 100 million per year.¹⁰⁶
- Toubo corridors: illicit levies along the Toubo–Moundou–Bébalem and Ngaoundéré–Belel–Toubo–Moundou corridors are estimated at CFAF 200–500 million¹⁰⁷ and CFAF 300–600 million per year respectively.¹⁰⁸
- Cameroon–CAR corridors: along the Ngaoundéré–Ngaoui–Bocaranga route, *tchoffal* is estimated to generate CFAF 120–200 million annually, while the Tignère–Ndélé–Bira corridor is subject to systematic armed taxation amounting to an estimated CFAF 200–400 million per year.¹⁰⁹

The scale of the illicit economy varies considerably from one corridor to another, depending on traffic volumes, local security conditions, the extent to which state authority has broken down, and the presence of armed groups or other coercive intermediaries. The busiest corridors, and those most closely integrated into cross-border trade, are often the most vulnerable to organised forms of predation. Even secondary routes are not immune:

- Southern corridors (Kye-Ossi, Ambam, Campo, Ebebiyin): although traffic volumes remain more modest (5 000–10 000 head per year, with an estimated value of CFAF 1–2 billion), these routes are still affected by informal levies amounting to several tens of millions of CFA francs annually.¹¹⁰
- Bangui–Zongo–Lisala corridor: the cumulative cost of successive informal payments is estimated at around CFAF 100 million per year.¹¹¹

Taken together, these findings show that transhumance routes serve not only as channels for moving livestock, but also as arenas of economic competition, financial extraction and territorial control. Across the principal corridors examined, legal pastoral trade generates substantial financial flows, while the proceeds from extortion, livestock theft, armed taxation and ransom payments likewise reach significant levels. Predation along pastoral corridors should therefore not be viewed as a marginal by-product of the livestock trade. In areas characterised by insecurity, the breakdown of state authority and weak regulatory mechanisms, it is increasingly becoming a structural feature of the way this trade operates.



Herders drive cattle through the Lake Chad region. The concentration of livestock and clouds of dust reflect the scale of pastoral movements and the growing pressure on access to water and grazing land. © Philippe Desmazes/AFP via Getty Images



How insecurity is reshaping pastoralism

The arming of herders and pastoral communities: causes and consequences of militarisation

In central Africa, persistent insecurity, escalating land conflicts and a lack of effective state protection have encouraged herders to carry weapons, initially as a means of self-defence. Today, however, this militarisation of pastoralism is increasingly drawing pastoral communities into criminal activities, intensifying intercommunal tensions and undermining mediation, peaceful coexistence and wider efforts to promote regional stability.

Drivers of the shift towards individual armament

The growing militarisation of herders and pastoral communities in central Africa is primarily driven by the intensification of armed group activity and the proliferation of arms trafficking, both of which have profoundly reshaped the pastoral landscape. Rather than simply reflecting an accumulation of vulnerabilities, it stems from a direct interaction between armed violence and the pastoral economy, in which herds, transhumance corridors and livestock markets have become strategic targets. Between 2010 and 2020, agropastoral conflicts and violence linked to livestock theft claimed more than 15 000 lives across West and central Africa.¹¹² Along the Chad–Cameroon border, 230 deaths linked to cattle rustling were recorded between 2015 and 2024.¹¹³ Meanwhile, in the Lake Chad basin, the number of incidents attributed to Boko Haram rose from just two in 2015 to 131 in 2024, illustrating the swift militarisation of pastoral areas.¹¹⁴

Faced with mounting insecurity and the absence of credible state protection, many pastoralists have come to view carrying weapons as a necessary response to an increasingly predatory environment. In the CAR, armed groups, in particular 3R, have incorporated pastoralism into their financing strategies. Nearly half of all herders are subjected each year to illegal taxation, violent attacks and other coercive measures,

including *tchoffal*, which may require the payment of one bull for every 30 to 50 head of cattle.¹¹⁵ This system of armed taxation is turning livestock production into a wartime resource, prompting some pastoralists to take up arms or align themselves with armed groups for protection.

Although structural factors, including land pressure, climate change and poverty, have exacerbated these dynamics, their effects have been systematically exploited by armed groups. The stigmatisation of pastoralists, who are increasingly associated with armed groups due to the weapons they carry, fuels a vicious cycle of mistrust and violence. At the same time, weak land governance and ineffective mediation mechanisms have created an institutional vacuum that armed groups exploit by imposing their own rules. The growing use of weapons by herders is therefore driven less by cultural practices than by the expanding grip of armed networks and arms trafficking on the pastoral economy. Breaking this cycle will require an integrated approach centred on securing pastoral corridors, dismantling systems of armed taxation and strengthening inclusive land governance.

The extent of weapon carrying among transhumant pastoralists

Over the past two decades, weapon carrying by transhumant pastoralists in central Africa has evolved from a marginal response to widespread insecurity into a direct consequence of the growing influence of armed groups and the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons. According to International Crisis Group¹¹⁶, around 60 per cent of Fulani pastoralists moving between Chad, Cameroon and the CAR now carry military-grade weapons, including AK-47 and M14 rifles. This figure shows how widespread militarisation has become in cross-border pastoral areas.

In northern Cameroon, more than half of all transhumant pastoralists are now armed, primarily to ward off attacks by bandits, rebel groups and local militias, which systematically target livestock as a source of revenue.¹¹⁷ The Small Arms Survey¹¹⁸ estimates that 40–70 per cent of Mbororo pastoralists moving between Logone Oriental (Chad) and northern CAR carry weapons, helping sustain the flow of small arms between herders, armed groups and criminal networks.

The types of arms carried reflect the close links between pastoralism and regional war economies, ranging from automatic weapons and 12-gauge shotguns to improvised weaponry and traditional bladed weapons.¹¹⁹ Supply chains are closely tied to regional armed conflicts, drawing on black markets in the CAR, the DRC and Sudan, weapons recycled from conflicts involving the ex-Seleka, the Anti-balaka and the LRA, as well as local complicity and corruption within the security forces.

According to the United Nations, Ali Darassa's UPC acquired around 2 000 AK-47 rifles through trafficking routes operating via Chad and Sudan in 2020. Between 2015 and 2020, more than 100 000 weapons were in circulation across Chad's pastoral areas, of which an estimated 20–30 per cent originated from serving or former members of the armed forces.¹²⁰ In addition, investigations conducted between 2021 and 2023 confirmed that some military officers had sold weapons directly to pastoralists in the Adamawa and North regions of Cameroon.¹²¹

The high proportion of armed pastoralists should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of an inherent propensity for violence. Rather, it reflects the way pastoralism has been drawn into ecosystems increasingly dominated by armed groups and arms trafficking. In turn, this imposed militarisation fuels the criminalisation of pastoral communities and reinforces cycles of violence that undermine traditional pastoral systems.

The consequences of herders carrying weapons

The growing militarisation of transhumance is not simply a matter of self-defence. Rather, it reflects the way pastoral communities are increasingly being drawn into war economies under the influence of armed groups, organised criminal networks and political and military collusion. This dynamic is exacerbating tensions and seriously undermining stability across central Africa.

- **Escalating conflict:** the arming of herders, encouraged or exploited by armed groups, has transformed local disputes into deadly confrontations. Between 2010 and 2022, conflicts linked to transhumance increased by 250 per cent.¹²² Since 2012, almost 3 500 fatalities have been recorded in Chad and the CAR.¹²³ In eastern Cameroon, 70 per cent of violent incidents now involve weapons sourced through military or state networks.¹²⁴
- **Political and security instrumentalisation:** weapons circulating in pastoral areas serve political and security agendas, ranging from the coercive control of transhumance corridors to electoral manipulation and local geopolitical objectives. According to OCHA, 35 per cent of armed groups in Logone Oriental have received weapons or military training.¹²⁵ In addition, the UN Panel of Experts highlights the role of officers linked to the UPC and the ex-Seleka in supplying equipment and logistical support.
- **A worsening humanitarian crisis:** violence involving armed pastoralists in areas under the control of rebel or criminal groups has contributed to the worsening humanitarian crisis. In the CAR, 1.9 million vulnerable people required humanitarian assistance in 2024, while more than 1.1 million people were forcibly displaced.^{126,127} These dynamics disrupt both pastoral and agricultural livelihoods, particularly in transhumance areas, and place further strain on rural communities already beset by local armed conflict.
- **Criminalisation and cycles of violence:** corruption within the security sector has fuelled arms trafficking and contributed to the growing criminalisation of pastoral communities. In Cameroon, according to MINAT, 60 per cent of roadside bandits are believed to come from pastoral communities, while in Chad the DGSSIE has seized more than 1 200 weapons from herders.¹²⁸ Rather than indicating a shift towards criminality, these figures reflect the growing capture of pastoralism by armed and criminal networks.

Instead of providing security, the proliferation of weapons perpetuates cycles of violence, marginalisation and the criminalisation of pastoral communities, while strengthening the economic and territorial control of armed groups. The militarisation of transhumance has thus become a major driver of regional instability, threatening both the traditional pastoral economy and peaceful coexistence.



A herd is driven by pastoralists in the Lake Chad region. The density of livestock and limited visibility reflect the intensity of pastoral movements and constraints on access to water and grazing land. © Sia Kambou/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

The growing division and armed control of pastoral areas

The growing militarisation of pastoral areas in central Africa is driven above all by the expanding grip of armed groups – including national armed forces, rebel movements, local militias and criminal networks – over grazing areas. Against a backdrop of persistent insecurity and weak state protection, pastoral areas no longer simply serve livestock production; they have become arenas of confrontation and predation. Livestock, transhumance corridors and herders themselves have become strategic assets. Caught in the middle, pastoralists find themselves subjected to systemic violence and, in some cases, forced into militarised systems, further blurring the line between pastoralism and insecurity.

This trend became much more pronounced between 2021 and 2024. In Cameroon, nearly 9 000 soldiers and police officers, including Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) units, were deployed to the northern regions at an estimated cost of CFAF 32 billion. Although these operations were officially intended to combat banditry, they have often involved arbitrary livestock seizures, extortion and violence, further eroding pastoralists' trust in the security forces.¹²⁹

In Chad, around 8 500 troops have been deployed across Batha, Salamat and Ouaddaï at an estimated cost of CFAF 104 billion. According to OCHA, 60 per cent of pastoralists report that their mobility is constrained by military operations, the proliferation of armed checkpoints and the imposition of informal taxes.¹³⁰ In the CAR, around 4 000 soldiers, supported by Wagner mercenaries and local militias, control approximately 30 per cent of pastoral corridors, where they impose illegal levies and restrict movement.¹³¹ In the DRC, nearly 3 000 members of the armed forces and armed groups – sometimes operating alongside the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) – engage in extortion, forced displacement and livestock confiscation.¹³²

Although governments justify these measures as part of efforts to combat banditry and terrorism, the growing tendency to equate herders with armed groups further criminalises pastoral communities. In some contexts, local authorities and militias have deliberately supplied herders with weapons. In Chad, the privatisation of grazing security has encouraged the emergence of 'private pasturelands' protected by armed herders. These practices have major humanitarian and institutional consequences. According to Amnesty International, 60 per cent of Chadian pastoralists report that their mobility is severely restricted.¹³³ Moreover, the involvement of security forces in forced evictions and the protection of private interests – estimated at 42 per cent according to some public sources – has further fuelled tensions.¹³⁴ As a result, the militarisation of pastoral areas is fuelling a livestock-centred war economy that continues to undermine local governance and regional stability.

Climate as a catalyst for armed violence

The increasing frequency of climate-related hazards, including droughts, extreme rainfall and heatwaves, is not, in itself, the primary driver of pastoral insecurity in central Africa. Rather, it acts as a powerful threat multiplier, intensifying existing patterns of armed violence. By disrupting transhumance calendars and reducing the availability of natural resources, climate change forces pastoralists to concentrate their herds along fewer, more predictable routes, making them more vulnerable to extortion and coercive taxation by armed groups. Water points and pastoral corridors have consequently become militarised strategic assets. Although the IPCC projects that extreme weather events will become more frequent, it is when these pressures interact with armed violence and weak governance that they give rise to chronic insecurity.¹³⁵

The floods that affected the Chari–Logone and Niger basins between 2022 and 2024 illustrate this dynamic. They disrupted key routes such as the Waza–Kousseri–N’Djamena and Maroua–Yagoua–Bongor corridors, forcing costly detours and concentrating herds along high-risk routes. In 2022, the floods displaced 254 483 people in N’Djamena.¹³⁶ By 2024, the situation had deteriorated further in Chad, with almost two million people affected, 218 000 homes destroyed and 576 deaths.¹³⁷ Across the region as a whole, the 2024 rainy season disrupted the lives of 3.5 million people and claimed nearly 900 lives.¹³⁸

At the same time, recurring droughts have intensified pressure on resources in the Logone, Mayo-Kebbi and Benoué areas, increasing tensions between pastoralists, farmers and fishing communities.¹³⁹ The resulting scarcity has enabled armed groups to tighten their grip on access to water and grazing land through coercive control and illegal levies.

The forced concentration of herds has also led to a rise in livestock theft. For example, raids attributed to Boko Haram along the Cameroon–Chad border increased from just two incidents in 2015 to 131 in 2022,¹⁴⁰ with cumulative losses exceeding CFAF 5 billion. At the same time, systems of armed taxation have become institutionalised along the region’s main pastoral corridors, including *tchoffal* in the CAR. The repercussions extend further afield, contributing to price rises of 20–30 per cent in several urban centres.¹⁴¹

There are three major hotspots: Mayo-Kebbi Est and Logone in Chad; the Far North region of Cameroon and Nigeria’s Borno State; and western and northern CAR. Across these areas, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, restricting pastoral mobility and exposing it to exploitation by armed groups, thereby continuing to undermine regional stability.



People travel by boat through floodwaters in western Niger after heavy rains damaged National Road 25 on 20 August 2024. Climate shocks are putting infrastructure under strain and causing lasting disruption to the movement of people, goods and livestock. © Boureima Hama/AFP via Getty Images



Conclusion

Looking beyond the specific case of cross-border pastoralism in central Africa, this report highlights a broader structural trend: in fragile border areas, a lack of credible governance leaves mobile economies vulnerable to forms of criminal capture. In this context, the role of livestock, pastoral markets and transhumance corridors is being reshaped. No longer simply the economic and social infrastructure that enables mobility, they have also become strategic assets within predatory economies where armed groups, criminal networks, traffickers, roadside bandits, economic intermediaries and corrupt officials converge. Violence is therefore no longer peripheral to the pastoral system. It is redefining routes, costs, regulatory mechanisms and the balance of power.

The findings also highlight structural governance challenges that go beyond local clashes among pastoralists, farmers and fishing communities. Institutional shortcomings are wide-ranging: weak territorial control, inadequate security provisions, poor coordination between government bodies, corruption, a lack of livestock traceability and the inability of states to regulate access to grazing land, water points and markets effectively over the long term. At the same time, the report shows that the lack of effective regional coordination creates fertile ground for parallel systems of taxation, armed protection, extortion and the capture of trade flows. Against this backdrop, the militarisation of some herders stems less from ideological allegiance than from a need for protection in the face of inadequate public security and growing threats from armed and criminal groups.

Beyond the local level, the documented practices form part of a broader pattern of illicit flows, financial crime and informal cross-border economic activity. Without seeking to assign a formal legal classification, the patterns observed display several characteristics commonly associated with money-laundering and the financing of violent activities: systematic extortion, illegal taxation, opaque cross-border trade, cash payments, the reinvestment of illicit proceeds in apparently legitimate commercial activities and the capture of rural supply chains by coercive groups. These dynamics echo concerns raised by the Financial Action Task Force regarding informal economies and porous borders, particularly in relation to cash flows, smuggling, trade fraud and coercive territorial control.

The policy implications are clear: treating this crisis solely as a pastoral, agricultural or humanitarian problem is not enough. Ensuring the long-term security of transhumance requires an integrated

approach combining land governance, mobility regulation, corridor protection, livestock traceability, efforts to combat arms trafficking, the dismantling of extortion networks and cross-border cooperation. Removing the criminal dimension from pastoralism does not mean ignoring the criminal activities that have become associated with it. On the contrary, it means drawing a clear distinction between pastoralists and pastoral communities, on the one hand, and the organized networks that exploit their vulnerability, capture the value generated by livestock and turn mobility corridors into sites of predation, on the other.

From this perspective, the response cannot simply be to increase the military presence in pastoral areas. It must involve rebuilding trust among communities, strengthening local mediation mechanisms, improving the administrative presence in border areas and developing regional tools capable of tracking livestock flows, identifying illicit networks and protecting legitimate mobility. Only then can transhumance corridors once again become places of trade, production and regional integration, rather than sites of criminal capture and fragmented control.

Recommendations

The findings presented in this report underscore the need for an integrated response combining rural security, land governance, trade regulation, anti-corruption measures, cross-border cooperation and the monitoring of illicit financial flows. Restoring peaceful and productive pastoralism means not only protecting communities and transhumance corridors, but also dismantling the economic mechanisms that enable armed groups and criminal networks to turn livestock, mobility and fear into sustainable sources of revenue.

To ensure clear lines of responsibility, the recommendations are grouped by stakeholder.

National governments and administrations

The governments of Cameroon, Chad, the CAR and the DRC should harmonise the legal and administrative frameworks governing cross-border transhumance to clarify access rights to grazing land, water points, transit corridors and livestock markets. Such harmonisation would help reduce the grey areas exploited by armed groups, criminal networks and corrupt officials.

Livestock traceability should be strengthened through identification systems, secure pastoral permits and, where technically feasible, digital livestock tracking systems. This would help curb the resale of stolen livestock, improve oversight of cross-border movements and prevent illicit flows from entering legitimate trade channels.

States should also step up efforts to tackle corruption within government and the security sector by ensuring transparency in official levies, establishing complaints mechanisms that are accessible to pastoralists and sanctioning officials involved in extortion, illegal taxation or collusion with armed and criminal groups.

Defence, security, customs and intelligence services

Defence and security forces should strengthen joint arrangements to secure pastoral routes, livestock markets, strategic water points and vulnerable border areas. Patrols should focus primarily on high-risk corridors, markets infiltrated by criminal networks, informal crossing points and areas where extortion, livestock theft, kidnapping and illegal taxation are most widespread.

Closer coordination is also needed among the police, the armed forces, customs and intelligence services to track livestock flows, identify illicit resale networks and combat arms trafficking, smuggling and mechanisms used to finance armed groups through the pastoral economy.

Specialist pastoral security units should also be established or strengthened, by building capacity through training in human rights, community mediation, responsible conduct and distinguishing pastoralists, pastoral communities and criminal networks.

Local and regional authorities and traditional leaders

Town and regional councils and traditional leaders should play a central role in local pastoral governance. Their close ties with local communities make them well placed to mediate land disputes, support the joint management of natural resources, monitor incidents, prevent conflict and provide early warning.

They could also help demarcate and maintain transhumance corridors, manage water points locally, oversee livestock markets and organise regular dialogue among pastoralists, farmers, fishing communities, young people and women.

Greater financial, technical and institutional support should be provided, including through dedicated local budgets, partnerships with donors and better integration of local peace mechanisms into national policies.

Regional organisations and cross-border mechanisms

The Economic Community of Central African States, the LCBC, the African Union and joint cross-border commissions should step up regional cooperation along the main Cameroon–Chad, Cameroon–CAR, Chad–CAR and CAR–DRC corridors. This could include harmonising pastoral regulations, sharing information, coordinating patrols and preventing criminal networks from redirecting their activities to other corridors.

A regional observatory on pastoral flows, conflict and illicit economies should be established to centralise data on livestock movements, security incidents, livestock theft, ransom payments, illegal taxation and areas vulnerable to criminal exploitation.

A regional fund for secure transhumance could also provide sustainable financing for corridor demarcation, pastoral infrastructure, early-warning mechanisms, cross-border mediation and traceability systems.

UN agencies, peacekeeping missions and humanitarian partners

UN agencies, particularly FAO, IOM, the United Nations Development Programme, WFP and UNHCR, together with peacekeeping missions such as MINUSCA and MONUSCO, should bolster their support for safe pastoral mobility, civilian protection and intercommunity mediation.

In the CAR, MINUSCA could continue supporting efforts to secure pastoral routes, particularly through joint patrols, mediation between pastoralists and farmers, support for local monitoring committees and coordination with the CAR authorities and neighbouring countries.

In eastern DRC, MONUSCO should continue to support civilian protection mechanisms, community dialogue and efforts to combat illicit trafficking, especially in areas where pastoral movements intersect with the activities of armed groups and criminal networks.

Technical and financial partners

Bilateral and multilateral donors and partners (including the European Union, World Bank, African Development Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development, French Development Agency, German Agency for International Cooperation, USAID, Japan International Cooperation Agency and others) should support integrated programmes combining pastoral security, infrastructure, land governance, livestock traceability, climate adaptation and efforts to tackle criminal economies.

This support should focus primarily on high-risk border areas, vulnerable livestock markets, unmarked corridors, strategic water points and locations where pastoral communities face extortion, theft, ransom demands and illegal taxation.

Funding should also be accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms to prevent the capture of funds, corruption and misappropriation.

Civil society organisations, pastoral associations and local NGOs

Civil society organisations, pastoral associations and local NGOs should receive support for their work providing mediation, legal assistance, awareness-raising on pastoral regulations, community-based monitoring and information in local languages.

They could also help prevent conflicts from being exploited along identity lines by organising intercommunity forums bringing together pastoralists, farmers, fishing communities, women, young people, traditional leaders and local state representatives.

Their role is crucial in drawing a clear distinction between pastoral communities and the criminal networks that exploit their vulnerability, and in rebuilding trust among communities, authorities and security forces.

Universities, research institutes and centres of expertise

Universities and research institutes should contribute to the production of reliable data on transhumance flows, agropastoral conflict, criminal networks, livestock markets and illicit financing patterns.

They could contribute to mapping corridors, analysing high-risk areas, evaluating public policy, training decision-makers and developing digital monitoring, traceability and early warning tools.

Stronger links between research, policymaking and local action would help ensure that pastoral policies are based on empirical, up-to-date and geographically specific data.

Community stakeholders

Peacekeeping committees, religious leaders, customary authorities, pastoral monitoring committees and community representatives should be fully integrated into mechanisms for conflict prevention and the protection of pastoral mobility. They continue to play a crucial role in early warning, dispute mediation, corridor monitoring and the dissemination of prevention messages.

Where armed community protection groups exist, they should be subject to strict oversight by legitimate authorities to prevent them from evolving into militias, being exploited for political purposes or becoming involved in extortion and armed violence.



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