

Cattle Wahala

Addressing the political economy
of cattle rustling and smuggling
between Ghana, Burkina Faso
and Togo

Clingendael Report

James Courtright
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Executive summary

Cattle rustling and smuggling play a significant but often overlooked role in fuelling the conflict in the central Sahel. In the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, cattle rustling finances extremist insurgent groups and supports recruitment.

This political economy analysis (PEA) of cattle rustling in the tri-border region examines how the trade is organised, who benefits and how it intersects with broader patterns of insecurity. The report is part of a broader study on the economic, social and political dynamics of communities in the borderlands between the Sahel and coastal West Africa that rely on fluid cross-border trade and movement for their livelihoods.

For decades, local networks of butchers and bandits have trafficked livestock across borders. The expansion of militant extremist groups into Burkina Faso's Est region in 2018 and later into the Centre-Est region in Burkina Faso and northern Togo in 2022, has sharply increased the scale and impact of cattle rustling.

This study finds that rustled cattle from the Sahel ends up in Ghana, where insurgents increasingly rely on trusted intermediaries, such as butchers and traders, to sell livestock into Ghana's licit markets. This extends the insurgent conflict economy into Ghana.

The research findings presented here are based on the available literature and primary interviews with people involved in the trade in nineteen communities in Ghana's Upper East and North East regions.

Key findings

At present, cattle rustled on the Burkinabe side of the border are moved into Ghana, where they enter regular trade flows, effectively extending the conflict economy into Ghana. **Evolving cattle rustling and smuggling dynamics have empowered three groups of actors in the cattle value chain:**

- **Cattle rustlers form one group (Group A). A key entity is Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), insurgents who hold the majority of stolen cattle,** but due to limited mobility they sell them for low prices through

intermediaries. Small groups of bandits also conduct opportunistic cattle rustling, but most of the bandits in Burkina Faso and Togo have either joined the insurgents or, in some cases, a government-supported force, the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie – VDP).

- **Group B** are the **intermediaries** who purchase stolen livestock and mix them into the licit system. They are the largest group of benefactors in the cattle value chain. **The most important intermediaries are Burkinabe and Ghanaian cattle dealers and butchers, and rogue VDP members**, who all buy directly from insurgents or through a third party. The rise of these intermediaries in Ghana is extending the conflict economy into coastal West Africa.
- **Group C** is a set of **smaller facilitators such as chiefs, local security services and veterinarians** who – sometimes unknowingly – play a facilitating role in the stolen cattle markets. By enmeshing more Ghanaians in conflict through trade, indirectly aiding insurgents fighting on the country's borders, and undermining state capacity and legitimacy, they constitute a threat to Ghanaian and Burkinabe security.

Policy recommendations

1. **Countering this threat provides opportunities for the new administration in Accra and its Burkinabe and Togolese neighbours to address shared security concerns.** Variations in how insurgents operate in the three territories mean each country will need to pursue slightly different policies to achieve the same goals.
2. For the Ghanaian government, **intercepting stolen cattle, prosecuting intermediaries and reforming Ghana's livestock system** provide a way to protect the country from insurgents, and build regional unity and sovereignty alongside Burkinabe and Togolese authorities.
 - **Intercepting stolen livestock and prosecuting Ghanaian intermediaries** would make it more difficult for insurgents to sell stolen cattle, eroding their capabilities without directly confronting them.
 - **Prosecuting intermediaries** will help raise awareness about the indirect participation in the war economy of violent extremism to the wider public and signal **that impunity will not be tolerated**. Authorities should focus their efforts on individuals engaged at the higher end of the business instead of more-easily intercepted drivers, which will likely be difficult.
 - **Longer-term, investment and development in Ghana's domestic cattle system** would spur local development and reduce the demand for foreign beef that incentivises transnational cattle rustling and smuggling.

1 Introduction

Since 2012, at least 57,000 people have been killed as insurgents aligned with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have waged a bloody campaign across northern and central Mali, swathes of Burkina Faso and Niger's border regions. They are now expanding into northern Benin and Togo.¹

Behind these grim statistics, livestock,² a key economic and cultural resource for rural communities, have long been integral to conflict dynamics and the war economy.³ Some of the first people to join militant groups in northern and central Mali in 2012 and 2013 were pastoralists who sought to protect themselves from armed cattle rustlers.⁴ As the war has evolved and expanded, livestock have served as war booty for anyone who takes up arms and provides financial resources for non-states groups to continue fighting.⁵ Smuggling cattle far from where they were stolen and mixing them into licit livestock flows extends the war economy into neighbouring countries, potentially eroding stability far from the front line of the conflict.

Among the actors associated with livestock and cattle⁶ rustling in the Sahel today are affiliates of JNIM and the Islamic State. These insurgents are reported to acquire livestock, then sell them into the livestock market system.⁷ According

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- 1 The figure was calculated using data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project. It includes all fatalities by jihadist insurgents, state forces and anti-insurgent civilian militias in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (not including Diffa region), northern Benin and Togo.
 - 2 For the purposes of this paper, livestock refers to cattle, sheep and goats.
 - 3 Stealing of one to three cattle within or between families is accepted, in some places even encouraged, among some semi-nomadic pastoralists. This cultural practice is different from the large-scale organised and for-profit rustling described in this paper.
 - 4 Benjaminsen, T. A, and Ba, B. (2019, 2 January), "Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1: 1-20; Boukary, S. (2016, 20 May), *Le Centre du Mali: Épicentre du Djihadisme?*, Brussels: Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security.
 - 5 Berger, F. (2023, March), *Locked Horns: Cattle Rustling and Mali's War Economy*, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 10; Ani, N. C. (2023, November), *Economic Warfare in Southern Mali: Intersections between Illicit Economies and Violence Extremism*, ENACT.
 - 6 The vast majority of rustled livestock are cattle, but not exclusively so.
 - 7 Berger, *Locked Horns*; Ani, *Economic Warfare*.

to a 2023 report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Katiba Macina, a JNIM affiliate in central Mali, is estimated to have collected CFA 440 million per year (around GBP 572,000) in one district under its control through livestock theft. Similarly, Ansaroul Islam, a JNIM affiliate in Burkina Faso, was reportedly making between CFA 25 million and 30 million (between GBP 32,500 and 39,000) per month from cattle rustling in the north of the country.⁸

However, cattle rustling in the Sahel is not only the prerogative of violent extremists. Communal militias and even national armies have been accused of stealing livestock (often from the pastoralist Fulbe community, an ethnic group that is frequently scapegoated for jihadist violence).⁹ Meanwhile, bandits across the region have taken advantage of insecurity to engage in cattle rustling, either coexisting, cooperating or in some cases merging with extremists or communal militias.¹⁰

Methods and the extent of cattle rustling vary considerably. For example, in areas controlled by governments, *rugas*¹¹ and police track down and prosecute cattle rustlers. Meanwhile, in the Niger delta in central Mali, JNIM insurgents also track down cattle rustlers and return stolen cattle – in exchange for organised payments of what they refer to as “*zakat*” (a form of Islamic charity but in this context a form of Islamic tax) – as part of their governance strategy. As a result, cattle rustling in the sense of armed ambushes or attacks on herders, is relatively rare in these zones.

However, in other areas, generally where armed groups and governments contest territory, the same actors are accused of engaging in cattle rustling or collaborating with cattle rustlers.¹² Thus, while JNIM affiliates guard against bandits engaged in cattle rustling in central Mali, in areas where they are actively fighting the government and civilian auxiliaries, such as in eastern and southern

8 Berger, *Locked Horns*, 21.

9 Faivre, A. (2025, 25 March), “«Ils Portaient des Treillis et des Bérets Rouges, Ils Nous Ont Vus et Ont Commencé à Tirer» : À Solenzo, l'Armée Burkinabè Accusée d'une Nouvelle Tuerie”, *Libération*.

10 Berger, *Locked Horns*, 26-27.

11 *Ruga* in the Fulfulde language has a slightly different meaning in different Fulbe communities across West Africa. In Ghana, it is usually used to describe a member of the community who has deep expertise taking care of livestock and participating in migratory movements. They advise on pasture conditions, cattle raising practices and, in some cases, track down stolen cattle.

12 Berger, *Locked Horns*, 21.

Burkina Faso, they are known to collaborate with bandits engaged in cattle rustling.¹³ Given the range of contexts and actors, it is difficult to draw more than general conclusions about cattle rustling and smuggling, and what can be done.

The political economy of cattle rustling in the tri-border area

This paper focuses on cattle rustling and smuggling in the tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo (Figure 1). The area comprises Centre-Est region in Burkina Faso, Savanes region in Togo, and Upper East, North East and Northern regions in Ghana. The paper addresses a key knowledge gap: how has the evolution of the conflict in the Sahel affected the cattle supply chain to coastal states and impacted actors in the value chain?

The tri-border region has long been an important trade node connecting the arid Sahel with coastal West Africa. Given limited development and relatively high poverty in these largely rural areas, trade includes both licit and illicit flows.¹⁴ Similar border zones in northern Benin and eastern Burkina Faso have served as staging grounds for insurgents to tap into illicit economies and co-opt bandits, smugglers and other outlaws.¹⁵

Reports indicate that JNIM operatives were engaging with bandits, hunters, herders and artisanal gold miners in Centre-Est (Burkina Faso) at least four years before they began their active campaign.¹⁶ Rising illicit cross-border trade, banditry and cattle rustling in northern Togo were reported before attacks

13 International Crisis Group, February (2020), *Burkina Faso; Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, Dakar/Brussels, 14-15; International Crisis Group (2023, January), *Containing Militancy in West Africa's Park W*, Dakar/Brussels, 9.

14 De Haan, L. (1993), *La Région des Savanes au Togo. L'État, Les Paysans et l'intégration Régionale (1885-1985)*, Paris, France: Karthala; Tonah, S. (2000, November), "State Policies, Local Prejudices and Cattle Rustling Along the Ghana-Burkina Faso Border", *Africa* 70, no. 4: 551-567; De Bruijne, K. and Bernard, A. (forthcoming), *Life on the Line; Stability and Livelihood Challenges in the Borderlands of Coastal West Africa*, XCEPT/Clingendael/ELVA.

15 Thurston, A. (2021, June), *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung; Beevor, E. (August 2022), *JNIM in Burkina Faso: A Strategic Criminal Actor*, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime; De Bruijne, K. (2021, June), *Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover*, Clingendael Institute and ACLED.

16 Oxford Analytica (2023, 14 December), [JNIM May Expand in Burkina Faso's Centre-East Region](#).

increased there.¹⁷ In northern Ghana, there are indications that insurgents are involved in illicit cross-border trade between Ghana and Burkina Faso on the Burkinabe side of the border, including stolen livestock.¹⁸

Figure 1 Research area



However, the scale of the Burkina Faso-Ghana illicit cattle trade, the value chain (where profits are made) and the wider political economy (who benefits) of this illicit industry remain unknown. Figures from Ghana's Veterinary Services Directorate show that imports of cattle from Ghana's neighbours tripled between 2016 and 2019.¹⁹ Moreover, the escalation of the conflict in south-eastern Burkina

17 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Promediation (2022, March), *The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and Prospects for Containing the Expansion*, 29.

18 Salifu, A. Z., Walther, O. and Tanko, E. M. (2023, 20 December), "[Jihadists Threaten Informal Trade between Burkina Faso and Ghana](#)", *Mapping Territorial Transformations in Africa*; De Bruijne, K. and Bernard, A. *Life on the Line*; Courtright, J. and Tanko, E. (2024, 14 May), "[Could Ghana Be Jihadists' Next Target](#)", *Foreign Policy*; Suuk, M. (2023, 23 June), [Jihadis Selling Rustled Cattle in Ghana](#), Deutsche Welle.

19 Taylor, J. (2023, March), *Ghana Livestock Voluntary 2023*, Accra, Ghana: United States Department of Agriculture – Foreign Agriculture Service, 2.

Faso (and to a lesser extent, Togo) in 2022 led to more cattle rustling, largely by JNIM militants, but also by bandits and a small number of rogue elements of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie – VDP), a government-supported militia intended to act as auxiliaries to the military.

Little is known about how insurgents and other violent actors participate in illicit economies in this area, where they sit in longer supply chains, and which other actors are knowingly or unknowingly contributing to insurgent financing. This report seeks to fill this gap.

The right moment for a joint response by West African states

The knowledge gap is hampering Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo from confronting cattle rustling in a sustainable way. However, there are also other reasons why a response has not gained momentum.

Political relations in the region over the last few years have temporarily made confronting this dire security situation more difficult. Public allegations by Ghana's former president Nana Akufo-Addo regarding Russian private military company Wagner Group's presence in southern Burkina Faso soured personal relations with Burkinabe President Ibrahim Traoré until the end of Akufo-Addo's term.²⁰ The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States regional grouping and the creation of the Alliance of Sahelian States (Alliance des États du Sahel – AES) have further complicated matters.

The election of John Mahama as Ghana's new president in December 2024, however, opened a new chapter in relations between the two countries. Mahama, who hails from the northern border with Burkina Faso, has signalled a desire to reset and deepen engagement through a visit to Ouagadougou and the appointment of an ambassador to the AES.²¹ Meanwhile, Togo's president, Faure

20 Reuters (2022, 16 December), [Burkina Faso Summons Ghanaian Ambassador over Wagner Allegations](#).

21 Mensah, K. (2025, 13 January), "[Is Ghana Warming up to Burkina Faso despite ECOWAS Tension and Strained Ties?](#)", *The Africa Report*.

Gnassingbé, already enjoys good personal relations with both President Traoré and President Mahama.

This report details how livestock are stolen in Burkina Faso and Togo by conflict actors and smuggled across the border into Ghana where they are laundered into the licit cattle market system. Beyond providing income to extremists, the report finds that evolving cattle rustling and smuggling dynamics have also empowered a range of intermediaries such as cattle dealers and butchers, who reap even larger benefits from cattle smuggling than rustlers. This enmeshes more actors in the trade dynamics fuelling the conflict, including Ghanaians, and constitutes a threat to all three countries' security.

The countries share an interest in dismantling insurgent networks that operate on their territory, and advancing regional unity and sovereignty. The variations in how insurgents operate mean that each country needs to pursue slightly different policies to achieve the same goal. In Ghana, for example, intercepting stolen cattle, prosecuting intermediaries and reforming the livestock system present opportunities for the government to ensure security, foster development and build regional unity. Such policies to address cattle rustling could allow the Ghanaian government to tackle JNIM funding without directly confronting the group militarily and risking further escalation. Reforming the livestock system and investing in domestic production could spur development and disincentivise cross-border smuggling.

In brief, by pursuing their own objectives, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo alike will help one another's shared security concerns.

Data and methodology

The paper is based on three iterative rounds of data collection. The first, in mid-December 2023, consisted of 32 qualitative interviews and six focus group discussions with Ghanaian and Togolese respondents in northern Ghana on the political economy of the cattle market. The second was a household survey, in January and February 2024, in Ghana's North East and Upper East regions of 150 Ghanaian and 150 Togolese respondents on cattle markets and local authority structures. The third was an additional round of qualitative data

collection, in October 2024, involving 30 one-on-one interviews with cattle market actors in north-eastern Ghana.²²

Due to the illicit, fragmented and volatile nature of the market, reliable figures on flows and prices of cattle rustled and smuggled are difficult to ascertain, including on the relative importance of Ghana in the West Africa cattle market. The figures presented in this paper reflect an average of the prices presented at the time of the research.

22 See Methodology section at the end of this paper for more details.

2 The livestock market network along the Ghana-Togo-Burkina Faso border

Stolen cattle from the Sahel are just one small, albeit growing, element of West Africa's wider livestock market. Multiple studies over the past decades have shown that most livestock are raised in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and northern Nigeria, and either owned and traded as capital in those countries or sent to markets in population centres along the coast for consumption.²³

Ghana, with a population of 34 million people, has one of the highest levels of gross domestic product per capita in the region. The country has long been a net importer of live animals, mostly from Burkina Faso. Indeed, Ghana imports more than 90% of its consumption requirements of livestock.²⁴ Within Ghana, livestock are raised in rural communities in the north (usually by hired Fulbe herders), then either transported to urban areas in the north or sent further south.

The domestic and international trade in livestock in Ghana occurs largely through a network of cattle markets, ranging from small weekly markets in rural communities in the north to bustling entrepôts in the south. Rural northern markets sell between 90 and 600 head of cattle every week; the busy Ashaiman market in the capital Accra handles an estimated 1,200 to 3,000 cattle every week.²⁵

Connecting these two poles are a network of intermediary markets, mostly in the centre and north, which attract livestock from across northern Ghana but also for export.²⁶ Cattle at smaller markets are purchased either by local butchers for slaughter or by cattle dealers who will either raise the cattle further or transport

23 Valerio, V. (2020, September), *The Structure of Livestock Trade in West Africa*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 17; Williams, T. O., Spycher, B. and Okike, I. (2006), *Improving Livestock Marketing and Intra-Regional Trade in West Africa: Determining Appropriate Economic Incentives and Policy Framework*, Nairobi: International Livestock Research Institute.

24 Taylor, *Ghana Livestock Voluntary* 2023, 4.

25 Courtright, J. and Salifu, A. Z. (2024, March), *Cash Cow: The Fulbe Role in Ghana's Cattle Markets*.

26 Courtright and Salifu, *Cash Cow*; the figures for the north are from Fumbisi and Gushiegu.

them to intermediary markets such as Tamale, Techiman or Buipe for resale; or, in a smaller number of cases, directly to Kumasi or Accra. Cargo trucks are the most common means of transporting cattle (rather than on foot as pastoralist do).²⁷

Figure 2 Cattle markets in the tri-border region²⁸



27 Key informant interviews in Bakwu (subjectnr. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6), Chereponi (2, 3, 4), Garu (2) and Pulmakom (1, 2) in Ghana collected in December 2023.

28 Authors' own, based on data derived from an overview of Tabital Pulaaku Ghana, a pastoralist organisation, in November 2023 (20 markets); Key informant interviews in December 2023 and October 2024 (16).

Ghana's north-eastern tri-border area sits at the “origin” of the country's developing livestock market network. Bawku,²⁹ Pusiga, Widana, Garu, Paga and Bolgatanga in Upper East; Gbintiri, Bunkpurugu, Chereponi, Tessa and Walewale in North East region; and Gushiegu in Northern region all have markets that source livestock from surrounding rural communities (Figure 2).

Pre-conflict cattle market dynamics

The tri-border region has historically been a hub for cattle rustling and smuggling.³⁰ Over the past decade, cattle rustling and smuggling networks in the tri-border region have become enmeshed in the war in the Sahel. Following the ousting of Blaise Compaoré as president of Burkina Faso in 2014, bandits, smugglers and cattle rustlers who had profited from the forests and porous borders in the country's Centre-Est region grew bolder and more active, leading to a gradual increase in stolen livestock entering north-eastern Ghana.³¹ Further east, groups of Ghanaian butchers would pre-finance bandits to steal livestock in Togo – sometimes opportunistically poaching stragglers from semi-nomadic herders, and at other times tracking and ambushing herders and seizing whole herds – and smuggling them into Ghana.³²

Once in Ghana, stolen cattle from Burkina Faso and Togo were either distributed among butchers locally at the border or transported to intermediary markets deeper in Ghana (Figure 2).³³ Generally speaking, smaller numbers of cattle (under 20 head) were kept in forest areas or in private domiciles in towns and

29 Bawku, which along with the nearby town of Bittou in Burkina Faso and Cinkassé in Togo, has for decades served as an important trade node connecting the three countries. However, since the reignition of the town's chieftaincy conflict in November 2021 – in which control of market spaces is a key area of contestation – trade, including in livestock, has been diverted to other markets (although some cattle trade continues). For more on contested market spaces in Bawku, see Courtright, J. (2023, 12 October), “[Market Wars in Ghana](#)”, Institute of Current World Affairs.

30 In the 1950s, it was even described as a “local sport”; de Haan, *La Région des Savanes au Togo*; Tonah, *State Policies*; United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (2018, August), *Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Coexistence*, 28.

31 Interview with a cattle dealer (P5) in northern Ghana in October 2024; Author interview with Tenkodogo journalist in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in October 2023.

32 Interview with Veterinary medicine vendor (C3) in northern Ghana in October 2024; Interview with a butcher (S5) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

33 Interview with a herder (S1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

slaughtered over a period of days. Their meat was often sold to local restaurants or individuals. If the livestock numbered between 20 and 50, butchers would sell or trade them with other butchers in nearby towns. If there were over 50 head of cattle, which was more often the case when the cattle rustling was pre-financed, they would be loaded onto a truck either at the border or outside a border town and sent directly south to markets and abattoirs in Kumasi, Techiman or in the Volta region.³⁴

The expansion of the Burkinabe conflict and changing dynamics in Togo have resulted in important changes, which we consider below.

Expanding Burkinabe conflict (2018–2022)

The steady escalation of the war in south-eastern Burkina Faso has led to an explosion of cattle rustling. As insurgents gradually expanded from the north into the country's east in 2018, they used the forested border areas in Centre-Est region as a rear base – and a pipeline for moving stolen livestock south.³⁵ They embedded themselves in the area by tapping into smuggling networks and recruiting from among bandits, hunters, herders and artisanal gold miners.

Insurgents also engaged directly in cattle rustling in Burkina Faso. Interview respondents indicated that initially insurgents would steal whole herds from isolated herders in forested areas. They collaborated with cattle rustling gangs, but were not yet using cattle rustling as a tool of war to target specific villages.³⁶ This more opportunistic cattle rustling reportedly intensified in early 2022 when the insurgents began an active offensive in Centre-Est, destroying phone towers, setting up roadblocks, and attacking rural police stations and mayoral offices.³⁷

34 Interviews with a herder and a ruga (C5, C2) in northern Ghana in October 2024, Ghana; Follow up interview with research assistant in February 2025.

35 Oxford Analytica, *JNIM May Expand*; Follow-up interview with a research assistant in February 2025

36 Interview with cattle dealer (P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024; Interview with herder (K1) in northern Ghana in October 2024

37 Interviews with herders and cattle dealers in (W1, W3, W2, W4) in northern Ghana in October 2024; Oxford Analytica, *JNIM May Expand*.

Insurgents' and bandits' cattle rustling tactics fundamentally changed in late 2022. Across Burkina Faso, including in Centre-Est, the government actively recruited thousands of civilians into the ranks of the VDP, which enforced government control over urban areas and mounted roadblocks outside towns. A small number of individual rogue VDP members have also been accused of engaging in cattle rustling, sometimes as part of a strategy to displace communities suspected of supporting insurgents.³⁸

Meanwhile, the insurgents responded to the VDP's expansion by escalating their attacks on communities where VDP members had been recruited, including stealing their cattle.³⁹ The insurgents also reportedly began to demand what they referred to as *zakat* in the form of livestock from communities under their control, albeit in a disorganised and haphazard fashion not comparable to their practices in places such as Youwarou in Mali's Inner Niger Delta.⁴⁰ While most bandits either joined the insurgents or the VDP, small groups of bandit cattle rustlers continued to operate by rounding up livestock that had wandered away from villages as populations fled.⁴¹

In Ghana, although cattle rustling occurs, it is not as organised or on the same scale as in Burkina Faso (Figure 3). The household survey in early 2024 of 150 respondents in Upper East Ghana close to Paga on the border with Burkina Faso, found that 34% of respondents perceived cattle rustling as the most important threat to their community (followed by 12% who identified 'food shortage' due to

38 Interviews with Tenkodogo journalist and humanitarian worker in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in October 2023; Interviews with Burkinabe asylum seekers in northern Ghana, in August 2023 and February 2024; Interview with a cattle dealer in Pusiga, Ghana, in October 2024; International Crisis Group (2023, December), *Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?*, Dakar/Brussels, 16-17.

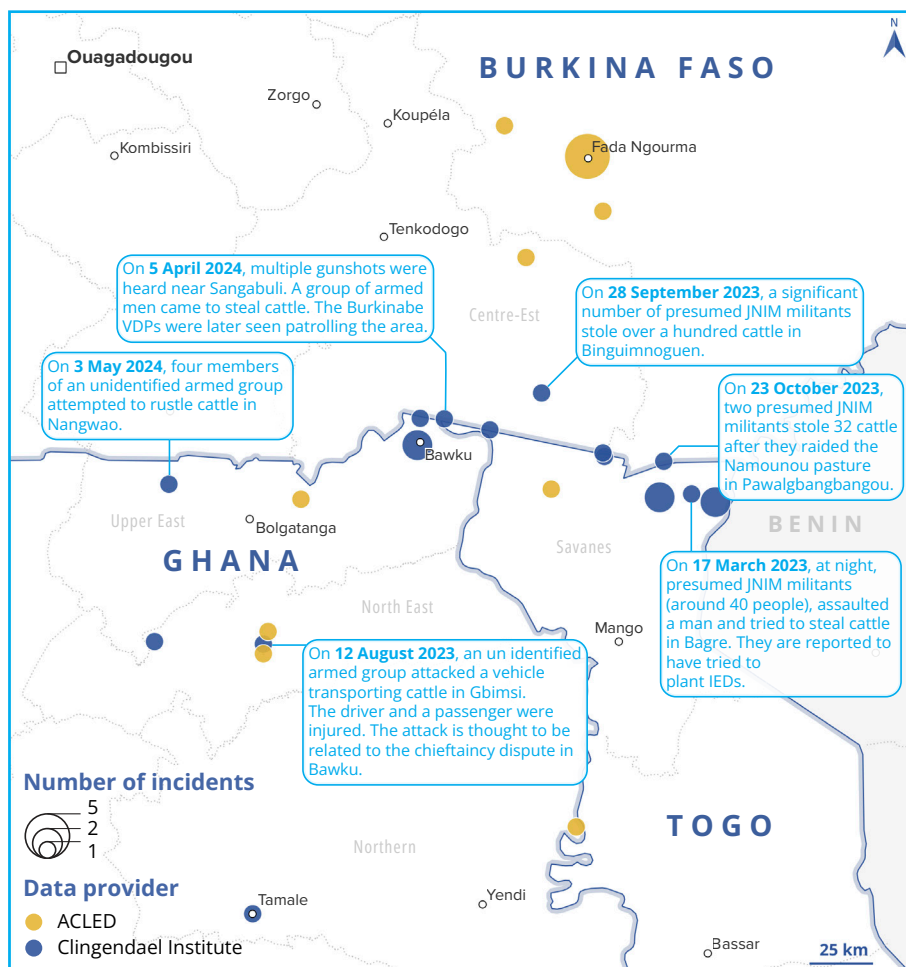
39 This dynamic is described in great detail in Amnesty International (2023, November), *Burkina Faso: "Death Was Slowly Creeping on Us": Living under Siege in Burkina Faso*.

40 In Youwarou district in central Mali, JNIM member Katiba Macina imposes regular *zakat* on all livestock owners (a one-year-old bull calf for every 30 head of cattle, and a heifer calf for every 40 head of cattle). In exchange, the group tries to retrieve stolen livestock and punishes bandits accused of cattle rustling; Berger, *Locked Horns*, 21, 23; Interview with a herder in Gushiegu, Ghana, in October 2024; Follow-up interview with a research assistant in February 2025 indicated that in Centre-Est JNIM makes no effort to intercept bandits or return stolen livestock.

41 Interview with herder (K1) northern Ghana in October 2024.

banditry as the primary threat).⁴² While bandit groups operating on the Ghanaian side of the border are likely to be responsible, one should not rule out the possibility that other armed groups from Burkina Faso might occasionally cross the border to steal cattle disguised as bandits.

Figure 3 Cattle-related incidents in the tri-border area (January 2023–November 2024)



42 Question 41 of the household survey: “What is the biggest threat to your municipality?”, January and February 2024.

Togo's trajectory: Rising insurgent presence and cattle rustling

The situation has evolved differently in north-eastern Togo. After suffering its first JNIM attack in late 2021, attacks became more frequent in mid-2022. While insurgents ambushed Togolese security forces and killed civilians they accused of working with the military, they also engaged in opportunistic cattle rustling, stealing from herders they encountered in forested areas or from communities following an attack (see cattle rustling incidents in Figure 3).

JNIM attacks and the government's response, moreover, have changed cattle routes to and from Togo. Koudjouaré was once one of Togo's largest livestock markets and an important place to sell stolen cattle. But after the Togolese military deployed in 2018, and as the conflict in Burkina Faso intensified, most cattle were moved to Cinkassé and Mango.⁴³ Insecurity also depressed the Cinkassé market, which went from selling between 500 and 750 head of cattle per market day to between 250 and 400.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, evidence of a (temporary) insurgent presence in the area between Chereponi in Ghana and Mango in Togo also appears to have affected local cattle rustling dynamics.⁴⁵ Respondents in Chereponi and Saboba reported that the Ghanaian butcher-financed bandits who operated in Togo (mentioned above) had since disbanded following the killing of well-known bandits since mid-2023.⁴⁶

Respondents gave different reasons for the killings but assessed that JNIM-linked insurgents were responsible. Household survey findings on the border between Mango (Togo) and Chereponi (Ghana) also indicated that 25% of the sample population had concerns about the extremist presence in the area. The reasons why insurgents killed these bandits are not clear, however. Some

43 Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Promediation, *The Jihadist Threat*.

44 Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (2020, November), *La Situation Pastorale En Afrique de l'Ouest*, 7.

45 In July 2022 JNIM began a recruitment campaign in the border area of Chereponi and Mango led by one "Zouyedin". In mid-2023, Togolese security forces intensified their operations in Tandjouare (Savanes) by installing checkpoints on roads, establishing a military post in the Doung basin and conducting raids in Nali, Koumoungo and Takamba (Kpendjal, Savanes). In March 2024, insurgents attacked Tambinamone and Nagouni (Savanes). Information drawn from interview with a security expert in March 2024.

46 Interview with herder (C5) and veterinary medicine vendor (C3) and a herder (S1) northern Ghana in October 2024.

claimed the victims were tracked and killed by the insurgents in an attempt to regulate and reduce cattle rustling.⁴⁷ Others claimed that the victims had run into insurgents in the forest and had been killed to prevent them from revealing the insurgents' position.⁴⁸

One should not conclude that insurgents in Togo were attempting to reduce cattle rustling, as they have done in Mali's Inner Niger Delta.⁴⁹ There was only one incident. Moreover, as of early 2024, participants in focus groups in Chereponi argued that cattle rustling was still continuing, while the household survey in the same area found that over 35% of respondents felt their households continued to be affected by the theft of "crops and livestock".⁵⁰

47 Interview with herder (S1) northern Ghana in October 2024.

48 Follow-up interview with a research assistant in November 2024.

49 Berger, *Locked Horns*, 23.

50 Focus group discussions with Ghanaian and Togolese participants in Chereponi (North East) on 6 and 7 January 2024; Question 34 of the household survey: "How much have you been affected by the theft of crops and livestock?", January and February 2024.

3 Supply lines connecting Ghana with Burkina Faso and Togo

As cattle rustling has expanded in Burkina Faso and Togo since 2018, supply chains connecting cattle rustlers and merchants in the tri-border area to merchants and markets in Ghana have also developed. This section details these supply chains. However, before doing so it is important to note that the intensification of cattle rustling in Burkina Faso and deeper connections with Ghana's economy coincided with the depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi (GHS). This depreciation has had the effect of making cattle imported into Ghana from Burkina Faso, Togo and even Côte d'Ivoire relatively more expensive for Ghanaian traders and merchants. Indeed, multiple respondents, particularly near the border with Togo, indicated in late 2023 that transactions from cedis to CFA francs had become far less lucrative, causing some to temporarily stop trading between the two countries.⁵¹

However, despite the negative effect of depreciation, we find that Ghana has remained the destination for stolen cattle for three reasons. First, the cattle trade is sometimes conducted in CFA francs; larger Ghanaian traders hold and trade in

51 For example, "people stopped bringing their animals [to Ghana] because the exchange rate meant they weren't making enough of a profit" (6 February 2024, Ahmed Barry, Tabital Pulaaku); or how it became "increasingly harder to bring livestock in through the normal corridors, so regular prices experienced inflation" (5 February 2024, General Secretary Sulemane Abdulai, youth chief Accra region Zakaria Saeed Barry). As one respondent in north-eastern Ghana put it: "the exchange rate is the determiner of which market to buy from and sell in" (Interview 30 with Togolese livestock trader in Pulmakom, 18 December 2023). For Ghanaian traders who used to travel to Togo to buy cattle and sell them in Ghana, the loss of the cedi's value matters because they are now "not able to buy anything" (Interview 14 with Ghanaian cattle dealer in Garu, 19 December 2023), because any transaction from Ghanaian cedis to CFA francs to purchase goods "now becomes debt" (Interview 21 with Togolese cattle dealer in Chereponi). Numerous other respondents referred to cattle trading becoming a loss-making now (see interviews 14, 15, 21, 24, 30). The key observation, however, is that many of these traders appear to be small-scale traders.

foreign reserves, which means that their purchasing power in Ghana increases.⁵² Second, the relatively high profit margins from trading stolen livestock mean that while margins have shrunk, the trade remains relatively profitable.⁵³ Third, security considerations seem to trump financial considerations. As insecurity makes exporting to Togo, Benin and (to a lesser extent) Côte d'Ivoire more difficult, Ghana is the only country where stolen cattle can be mixed relatively easily with licit trade flows.⁵⁴ Traders seem to have accepted that their profits are slightly smaller than they could theoretically be.

Post-2022: Insurgents' reliance on butchers and traders in the cattle supply chain

Initially, insurgents in Burkina Faso brought stolen livestock to cattle markets in that country and sold the cattle themselves. Over time, they developed relations with Burkinabe (and later Togolese) butchers and cattle dealers who bought directly from them in forested areas, sometimes even exchanging livestock for crucial supplies such as fuel and food. Reports of insurgents selling directly to Ghanaians were rare.⁵⁵

Following the expansion of the VDP in late 2022, the supply lines in Burkina Faso changed. Unable to visit urban areas now patrolled by the VDP, insurgents relied more on butchers and merchants willing to visit them in the forest.⁵⁶ Furthermore, respondents indicated that a handful of rogue VDP were also part of the supply chain, engaged in cattle rustling.⁵⁷ In addition, since mid-2023, a small number of individual VDP members have been accused of collaborating with insurgents by buying their livestock at very low prices and selling them to butchers and

52 Interview with a West African cattle expert, December 2024; this also means that smaller Ghanaian buyers are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the bigger buyers.

53 Follow-up interview with a research assistant in March 2025.

54 Interview with a West African cattle expert, December 2024.

55 Interviews with butchers (P2, W5) and a herder (We1) in northern Ghana suggest that Ghanaians never dealt directly with insurgents. However, interview with a cattle dealer (W2) indicated that Ghanaians dealt directly with insurgents.

56 Interviews with herders and cattle dealer (W2, W1, W3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

57 Interviews with cattle dealers and herders (We1, We2, We3), butchers (P2) and herders (K1, G2) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

merchants across the tri-border area.⁵⁸ This has been facilitated by the continued ability of rogue VDP members to travel between rural and urban areas in Burkina Faso, as well as to Togo and Ghana.⁵⁹ The Burkinabe government appears to be aware of these developments, and since mid-2024 has reportedly intercepted multiple cattle dealers, investigated rogue VDP units, and temporarily closed cattle markets in Bittou and Cinkassé, leading to further ruptures in the supply chain.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, northern Togo has also taken on a more prominent role in regional cattle supply chains, despite a ban on transhumance in 2021. Both rogue VDP members and insurgents are keen to move livestock far from where they were stolen, which has led to an increase of stolen Burkinabe livestock entering northern Togo.⁶¹ While much of the trans-border trade is focused on Cinkassé (following the deployment of Togolese counter-insurgency operations in the once-large cattle market of Koudjouaré), respondents indicated that stolen cattle were also directed further south through intermediaries in Mango and Kuka (a small village near Saboba).⁶² As insurgents have infiltrated northern Togo, in some communities they appear to have forged relations with butchers and, to a lesser extent, cattle dealers. For example, one respondent indicated that Togolese butchers in Mango and Kuka buy directly from insurgents and slaughter cattle locally or sell them into Ghana.⁶³

58 Interviews with herders and butcher (W2, W5) and cattle dealer and herder (P3, P5) in northern Ghana in October 2024. Similar accusations have been made in the Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso; Personal communication with Burkinabe journalist in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso November 2024.

59 Interviews with herders and butcher (W5, W1) and cattle dealer (P5) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

60 Interviews with butcher (W5) and butchers and a herder (P2, P1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

61 Interviews with herders (W2, W3) a butcher (Y1)-and a cattle dealer (P3), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

62 Key informant interview with Togolese in Chereponi (9 and 10), Ghana, in December 2023.

63 Interview with butcher (Y1), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

Current supply chains overlap with pre-war routes

While the escalation of the war has exacerbated cattle rustling and transformed the value chain in Burkina Faso and Togo, in Ghana stolen livestock still generally move along the same pathways as they did before the war.

Once a deal is made, Burkinabe or Togolese traders bring cattle to a pre-arranged location on the border.⁶⁴ They are met by herders or cargo tricycle drivers who bring the livestock into Ghana through forests and hills on the Burkinabe border or over the Oti River on the Togolese border, usually under the cover of darkness.⁶⁵ If the cattle have been purchased by a large-scale dealer, they will be loaded into a large truck and taken further south for slaughter in places such as Accra, Wa, Techiman or Kumasi. However, if the livestock have been purchased by a smaller dealer or butcher, they may be sent to an intermediary cattle market in the north such as Bolgatanga or Tamale; or otherwise sold to local butchers or restaurant owners where they will be slaughtered individually.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Interview with cattle dealer (We3), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

⁶⁵ Interview with herder (W1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

⁶⁶ Interviews with herder and cattle dealer (W1, W2), a herder (G2), and livestock dealer (P5), northern Ghana in October 2024.

4 The political economy of the cattle rustling market

Generally, three roles can be discerned on the pre-abattoir side of the cattle market: cattle rustlers (insurgents, bandits and to a lesser extent rogue VDP members); intermediaries (consisting of cattle dealers, butchers and some rogue VDP members and small and large buyers such as butchers and dealers); and those who – often unknowingly – facilitate the trade in stolen cattle.⁶⁷

A political economy analysis of the roles of specific actors in the market yields three key insights summarised best as the development of – frequently inadvertent – symbiotic relationships between insurgents and commercial actors.

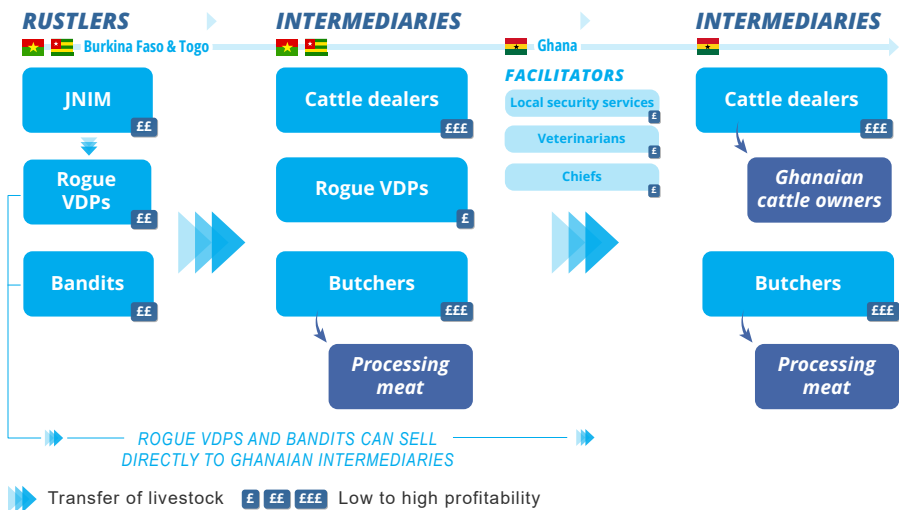
First, the cattle rustling value chain moves from an illicit to a licit market the further along the value chain one goes. This means a variety of licit actors in the market (including consumers) are unknowingly contributing to the market for cattle rustling. For example, a veterinary officer who provides a “movement permit” for a truck loaded with cattle may inadvertently facilitate the trade in stolen cattle.

Second, somewhat surprisingly, the actors who stand to gain most from the present cattle rustling trade are not the insurgents. Although JNIM generates income from cattle rustling, those who are already embedded in local society – such as butchers or experienced cattle dealers – gain the most from the present organisation of the illicit livestock trade.⁶⁸ Such actors might pose obstacles if Burkina Faso and Ghana were to jointly increase their efforts to counter the illicit cattle market.

67 For other roles in the cattle value chain, see Aboah, J. et al. (2021), *System Dynamics Modelling of the Cattle Value Chain in Nigeria*, International Livestock Research Institute; Ameleke, G. Y. et al. (2020, June), “The Nature and Drivers of Contracts in Cattle Herding and Management: The Case of Ghana”, *Pastoralism* 10, no. 1: 13.

68 See also de Bruijne, K., Molenaar, F. and Cottyn, I. (2021, February), *Pastoralist Adaptation in Burkina Faso: Between Hope and Despair*, Clingendael Institute.

Figure 4 Actors in the cattle rustling value chain⁶⁹



Third, those who gain the most from the trade in stolen cattle leverage their wider authority and legitimacy in the local context to gain an advantage in the cattle market. Two groups that fit this description are the Ghanaian butchers mentioned above who organise cattle rustling in Togo, and rogue VDP elements who engage in rustling and trading. These positions provide structural advantages to these groups but may also generate obstacles to implementing policies that aim to address the illicit cattle trade.

Below we discuss three separate ‘groups’ of actors in the cattle value chain from the moment cattle is rustled to the moment it enters licit trade: Group A includes an array of actors involved in cattle rustling, Group B specifies a set of intermediaries and Group C finally points at different facilitators.

⁶⁹ Figure 4 was developed by the authors based on the data collection for this project.

Group A.1 Rustlers: Insurgents

Insurgents are reported to hold and sell the majority of stolen cattle in the tri-border area.⁷⁰ Their primary motivation for stealing and selling livestock appears to be to fund their war effort.⁷¹ Two respondents indicated that, for a while, trusted cattle dealers who sold stolen livestock for insurgents brought critical resources such as fuel and food directly to insurgents in their forest camps.⁷² While insurgents have been known to demand *zakat* in the form of livestock in Burkina Faso's Centre-Est region since early 2022, JNIM has not tried to curb banditry or track down stolen livestock in areas under its influence in the tri-border areas.⁷³ This differs from parts of Mopti and Ségou regions in central Mali, where JNIM's governance model is more developed.⁷⁴ This suggests that, at this point, guarding against cattle rustling is not a component of the group's legitimisation strategy in the area.

However, as the war escalated in late 2022 and movement to government-controlled urban areas became harder, insurgents narrowed the pool of trusted cattle dealers who could sell their stolen livestock in the market.

In response, insurgents have increasingly sold livestock directly to buyers who visit them in their forest camps. According to multiple respondents, in these settings insurgents often do not price each individual cow. Instead, they pick one they perceive as average, assign it a price (between GHS 3,000 and 5,000, equivalent to between GBP 163 and 273), multiplying this by the number of cattle they are selling to arrive at a total amount.⁷⁵ This often means that JNIM sells cattle far below the estimated market price (depending on season, size and location GHS 6,400 to 17,000, equivalent to GBP 384 to 1026). While insurgents have told buyers this pricing method reflects their religious ideology against

70 Interviews with a herder (W1), a herder and a cattle dealer (We2, We3), and butchers (P2, P4) in northern Ghana in October 2024. This matches the findings of Berger in Mali.

71 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E. and Berger, F. (2024, December), *Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: JNIM*, 25-26.

72 Interviews with butchers (P2, P4, W5), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

73 Interview with herder and livestock dealer (G1, G2) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

74 Berger, *Locked Horns*, 23.

75 Interviews with butchers, cattle dealers and herders (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, W1, W2, W3, W4, W5, G2) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

overcharging in business, merchants and butchers suspect it also helps them to sell large numbers of cattle quickly.⁷⁶

Group A.2 Rustlers: Bandits

Bandits, on the other hand, over time have lost the independence they previously enjoyed in Centre-Est region. Before the war, small groups of young men with weapons were the main actors involved in cattle rustling in the tri-border area. Initially, those who collaborated with JNIM gained access to weapons and larger markets, while operating without significant oversight.

However, particularly since early 2022, bandits in Burkina Faso have either been forced to merge with JNIM or, in a smaller number of cases, have opted to join the VDP.⁷⁷ In other areas – for example, on the Togo-Ghana border near Chereponi – some non-aligned bandits have abandoned cattle rustling, viewing it as too risky given the mysterious killing of bandits in 2023 (see above). Respondents indicated that a small number of bandits still operated independently in Burkina Faso, although they largely limited themselves to rounding up livestock from communities that had fled, taking the livestock into Ghana.⁷⁸ Even this carries great risks. One respondent detailed how insurgents ambushed a group of bandits and took their livestock.⁷⁹ In other cases, they have been cheated by butchers or cattle dealers.⁸⁰

However, the situation is slightly different on the Ghana-Togo border. By the end of 2023, interviewees in two focus groups in Chereponi with Togolese and Ghanaian respondents, respectively, pointed out how cattle rustling remains a reality in their communities. They argued that “cattle rustling has been a age-old business” and that groups of bandits still “rob people of their cattle”.⁸¹ Although the covert presence of insurgents was reported in 2024, bandits are most likely the primary group still operating in this area.

76 Follow-up interview with a research assistant in November 2024.

77 Interviews with herder and cattle dealer (W1, W4) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

78 Interviews with a cattle dealer (We3) and butcher (W5), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

79 Interview with a butcher (P2), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

80 Interview with a cattle dealer (We3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

81 Focus group discussion with Ghanaian participants in Chereponi, North East, on 6 January 2024 and with Togolese participants in Chereponi, North East, on 7 January 2024.

Group B.1 Burkinabe intermediaries: VDP members

The VDP, on the other hand, occupies a more complicated position in the illicit cattle trade. Our research revealed that a small number of individuals who are enrolled in the VDP in Centre-Est region also engage in cattle rustling and smuggling. These rogue individuals are illegally leveraging their position as state-sanctioned militia to move between the rural front line of the war and urban areas where the government remains in control and where cattle can be sold into the wider, licit market system.⁸²

Several respondents also claimed that since mid-2023 a small number of rogue VDP members have operated as intermediaries for the insurgents. These individuals are alleged to transport cattle from insurgent camps in forested areas and bring them directly to trusted merchants or regular livestock markets.⁸³ Two respondents specifically noted that rogue VDP members who engage in smuggling are keen to move cattle from the area where they were stolen. In some cases, the rogue VDP members themselves travel to Togo or Ghana; in other cases they instruct merchants to sell the stolen cattle over the border.⁸⁴ These rogue individuals take on significant risk in dealing with insurgents, and are reportedly so keen to offload cattle quickly that they sell below market prices (although not as low as the insurgents do). One respondent indicated that when rogue VDP members act as intermediaries, it eats into the profits of merchants who previously purchased directly from insurgents in their forest camps.⁸⁵

However, respondents in northern Ghana indicated that in late 2024 Burkinabe officials began to investigate and arrest individuals – both private citizens and rogue VDP members – alleged to be helping insurgents sell cattle. The government also temporarily closed cattle markets in Bittou and Cinkassé. As a result, a few (former) VDP members fled to Ghana to avoid arrest and prosecution.⁸⁶

82 Interviews with herders (W1, W3) and a cattle dealer (P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

83 Interviews with herder, cattle dealer and butcher (W1, W2, W5), cattle dealers (We3, We4), and a herder (P1), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

84 Interviews with a herder (W1) and a cattle dealer (P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

85 Interviews with cattle dealers (We3, We4, P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

86 Interviews with a herder, cattle dealer and butcher (W1, W2, W5) and a cattle dealer and herder (P1, P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

Fieldwork for this study also revealed allegations that specific individuals within the VDP participate in cattle rustling. These individuals have access to a broader distribution network than their insurgent competitors – in many cases working directly with butchers and cattle dealers in neighbouring countries – but deal in smaller quantities.⁸⁷

Group B.2 Burkinabe and Togolese intermediaries: Cattle dealers

Intermediaries – mostly cattle dealers or butchers from any of the tri-border countries – buy stolen cattle from insurgents, and to a lesser extent from bandits and rogue VDP members, and smuggle them into the licit market.

As rustling increased and the war complicated the supply chain, the number of intermediaries has grown as more people seek to profit from the mass theft of Burkinabe livestock.

Intermediaries who buy directly from the insurgents stand to gain the most from this trade. The insurgents tend to sell cattle in bulk at cut-rate prices (between 3,000 and 5,000 Ghanaian cedi per head which is between GBP 164 and 273). But according to respondents, intermediaries can sell livestock purchased for the previously cited cut-rate prices for between GHS 7,000 and 10,000 (equivalent to between GBP 382 and 546) a head. Indeed, many suggested that while insurgents are turning a profit selling stolen livestock, intermediaries are collecting a larger share of the profit.⁸⁸

While this pricing structure and the difficulty insurgents face finding buyers have empowered a range of intermediaries, they have also likely changed dynamics within insurgent groups by empowering individuals with previous connections to cattle markets, merchants and butchers. Without speaking directly to the insurgents, it is difficult to gather further insight into who specifically may have been empowered within insurgent organisations.

87 Interviews with a herder and cattle dealer (G1, G2, P3) and a herder (K1), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

88 Interviews with herders (W1, W3) and a cattle dealer (P3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

Group B.3 Burkinabe, Togolese and Ghanaian intermediaries: Butchers

The next step in the cattle value chain is small and large buyers, including both butchers and cattle dealers. While butchers usually purchase between five and 20 head of cattle at a time, cattle dealers tend to move between 30 and 60 in large lorries.⁸⁹

Butchers are a professional caste whose status is passed down through families; they represent a tight-knit community that straddles the tri-border region.⁹⁰ They come from all ethnic groups except the Fulbe. With local knowledge on informal routes that cross the borders, as well as relationships with meat vendors in the markets, butchers are important facilitators for transhumant, pastoralist and general cattle movements.⁹¹

Butchers from all three countries were directly involved in cattle rustling and smuggling long before the current war. This was not uncontroversial; a butcher from Chereponi referenced a meeting of butchers in 2017 where one group tried to convince the others to abandon pre-financing cattle rustling.⁹² Butchers' other role, however, has been as small buyers. They were among the first to take advantage of the influx of stolen livestock into Ghana by relying on cross-border relationships with other butchers, as well as with herders, drivers, veterinarians and police to facilitate transport or ease transport burdens.⁹³ These small buyers maintain networks of clients to distribute the livestock outside of the licit market system.

Respondents claimed that butchers who purchase stolen cattle can make a profit of between GHS 2,000 and 5,000 (equivalent to between GBP 109 and 273)

89 Interview with a herder (W1), northern Ghana in October 2024.

90 Similarly in Accra, researchers found that nearly 70% of butchers were brought to the trade by an immediate family member; Asuming-Bediako, N. et al. (2018, July), "Challenges in the Butchery Industry: Potential Opportunities for Business in Ghana", *Ghana Journal of Agricultural Science* 52: 121-29.

91 Interview with a leader of a Fulbe association in Accra, Ghana, in February 2024 and a security expert in Bawku, and Small Arms Northern Office in Tamale, August 2024. See also Kendie, S. B. et al. (2023, April), *Analysis of Social Network Dynamics of Fulbe Communities in Northern Ghana*, University of Cape Coast and Elva Community Engagement.

92 Interview with butcher (C1), northern Ghana in October 2024.

93 Interviews with a butcher (C1) and a cattle dealer (P3), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

per head of cattle after reselling them in the licit market in Ghana.⁹⁴ Since the escalation and expansion of the war in 2022, however, butchers now find themselves in a complicated, yet still profitable, position. Many butchers in Ghana were already purchasing stolen livestock from Burkinabe butchers or cattle dealers, but the increase in intermediaries following the escalation of the conflict has eaten into the butchers' profits.⁹⁵ However, their relative distance from the actual cattle rustlers – whether insurgents, bandits or rogue VDP members – and plausible deniability in the trade have protected their access to livestock amid a crackdown on the illicit aspects of the trade in Burkina Faso.

Group B.4 Ghanaian intermediaries: Large cattle dealers

Cattle dealers have extensive contacts with police, herders, drivers and veterinarians to facilitate the movement of large numbers of cattle across Ghana. Some of the larger cattle dealers have more capital and broad networks that stretch into the most lucrative markets in Accra and Kumasi.⁹⁶ While all roles in the market have evolved amid the regional conflict, cattle dealers have experienced particularly pronounced changes.

In the early stages of the war in Burkina Faso, cattle dealers could deal directly with insurgents without going through intermediaries. However, the escalation of the war has made it more dangerous for dealers to purchase directly from insurgents, thus incentivising them to buy through intermediaries, with whom they share the profits.

Cattle dealers in northern Ghana alleged that some of their Burkinabe colleagues had recently “disappeared”.⁹⁷ This has led some respondents who are cattle dealers in border towns to stop travelling to Burkina Faso to buy cattle. As a result, only those Ghanaian dealers with long-standing relations who are able to conduct business from afar are currently buying cattle from Burkina Faso.⁹⁸ Finally, amid the slump in cross-border trade and Ghana's general economic

94 Interviews with butchers (P2, P4, W5), in northern Ghana in October 2024.

95 Interview with a cattle dealer (We4) in Northern Ghana in October 2024.

96 Interviews with herders (W1, W3, P1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

97 Interviews with herders and cattle dealers (W1, W3, W2, W4, P1, P3, P5) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

98 Interview with cattle dealer (W2) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

downturn (which is particularly acute in neglected border communities), businesspeople working in border areas in other commercial sectors (such as electronics, used clothes or non-perishable foods) have noticed the burgeoning livestock trade and entered into the market. Given, their greater access to capital and connections in southern Ghana (where they sourced their previous goods), in some places, they have pushed out smaller cattle buyers.⁹⁹

Respondents estimated that by selling stolen livestock dealers could make between GHS 4,000 and 12,000 profit per head of cattle (equivalent to between GBP 218 and 655).¹⁰⁰ This means that cattle dealers, alongside intermediaries, profit the most from cattle rustling.

Group C.1 Facilitators: The role of veterinary officers

The escalation in cattle rustling has also implicated local authorities in northern Ghana. The main government body responsible for regulating the trade and slaughter of livestock is the Veterinary Services Department, which operates under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. Each district has at least one veterinary officer who is tasked with inspecting livestock leaving the district for any health concerns before issuing a movement permit that indicates the livestock are in good health. Cattle traders entering a livestock market or abattoir from another district are supposed to present this document. Veterinary officers also regularly inspect abattoirs to issue slaughter permits for each butcher, inspect livestock destined for slaughter and issue receipts to indicate that meat came from a healthy animal.¹⁰¹

Veterinary officers were not previously implicated in cattle rustling and smuggling as stolen cattle entered Ghana in smaller numbers and were usually sold or consumed locally. However, as the numbers of stolen cattle entering the country have increased, respondents reported that cattle dealers are increasingly paying veterinary officers between GHS 10 and 30 (equivalent to

99 Interview with leaders of a Fulbe associations in Accra in February 2024 and a cattle dealer (We3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

100 Interviews with herders and cattle dealers in Widana (W1, W4, W2, W3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

101 Phone interview with a veterinarian (T1) in northern Ghana, in November 2024.

between GBP 0.54 and 1.63) per head of cattle to issue permits that allow them to move the livestock out of the district.¹⁰²

Group C.2 Facilitators: Local security services

Historically, a small number of police in border areas have also played a peripheral yet important role in cattle smuggling. In the Chereponi area, respondents alleged that in the past police would sometimes escort stolen livestock from the border with Togo to intermediary markets in Ghana.¹⁰³ While these specific cattle rustling networks have been disrupted by insurgents' infiltration deeper into Togo, respondents indicated that police along different Ghanaian borders pretended not to notice, despite the clear increase in the numbers of cattle entering the country. Some respondents suggested that the police know the livestock are stolen; even if a transporter has a valid movement permit, the police will hold the cargo truck at a barrier until they are paid between GHS 5 and 15 (equivalent to between GBP 0.27 and 0.82) per head of cattle.¹⁰⁴

Group C.3 Facilitators: Chiefs

Traditionally, chiefs have played an important role in the cattle trade.¹⁰⁵ Moving cattle through a chief's territory (including stolen cattle) required transhumant populations to obtain permission to move across the chief's land. Those who negotiated the transit were often paid in cattle.¹⁰⁶ In the past, groups of young

102 Interviews with butchers (P3, W5) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

103 Interviews with herders (S1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

104 Interview with leader of Fulbe associations in Accra, Ghana in February 2024; interviews with herders and cattle dealers (W1, W2, W3, W4, We3) and a veterinary medicine vendor (C3) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

105 Bukari, K. N., Sow, P. and Scheffran, J. (2018, July), "Cooperation and Co-Existence Between Farmers and Herders in the Midst of Violent Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Ghana", *African Studies Review* 61, no. 2: 78-102.

106 "The porosity of borders means to him that the Fulbe are moving vis-à-vis intermediaries and brokers through those borders without being interdicted" (6 February 2024, Ahmed Barry, Tabital Pulaaku); Key informant interviews with Ghanaian in Bakwu (5) and Togolese in Chereponi (14), Ghana, in December 2023.

men from local communities would sometimes team up with either the transit negotiators or the chiefs and steal cattle from the transhumant herders.¹⁰⁷

Some chiefs tax transactions taking place in their territory, including at cattle markets.¹⁰⁸ They are also responsible for adjudicating cases involving stolen cattle – so much so that butchers have been known to gift cattle to a chief’s advisors to shift decisions in their favour – and for tracking down cattle.¹⁰⁹ However, as the war escalated in Burkina Faso and expanded into Togo, communities affected by cattle rustling stopped looking for their stolen cattle, depriving chiefs of a source of income and legitimacy.¹¹⁰ In some places respondents indicated that chiefs were unaware of stolen cattle passing through their territory.¹¹¹ However, in other places, respondents reported that chiefs were aware, but pretended not to notice – sometimes after being gifted cattle.¹¹²

107 Youth groups are empowered to monitor the area and charge any newcomers for access to land. They may demand that they make a payment of two head of cattle to pass. If herders refuse to pay in kind, the youth groups may later steal the cattle. Such activities are organised specifically around the pastoral season when herders move their livestock across the land (6 February 2024, Ahmed Barry, Tabital Pulaaku); in the case of Zebilla, youth watchdogs were set up, to which the authorities granted permission to take action to stop cattle rustling; Key informant interview with a security expert (phone), November 2023.

108 Key informant interview with Togolese in Chereponi (9), Ghana, December 2023. Interview with a herder (S1), northern Ghana, in October 2024. One interviewee noted: “sometimes, the chiefs have their own byelaws that they task the animals’ market to generate revenue”; Key informant interview with a Ghanaian in Bawku (6), Ghana, in December 2023.

109 Interviews with a butcher (S5) and herders (C4, C5), northern Ghana, in October 2024; most interviews in Bawku, Ghana, conducted in December 2023 highlighted the role of chiefs as mediators.

110 Interviews with a cattle dealer (W2), herder (G2) and a butcher (S5) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

111 Interviews with cattle dealers (W2, W4, G1) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

112 Interviews with a butcher (S5) and with butcher and a herder (P2, P1), Ghana in October 2024.

5 Policy implications

Cattle rustling's role in the regional war economy represents a threat to stability and security in Ghana, Togo and Burkina Faso's. The proceeds from the trade help JNIM continue its war in southern Burkina Faso and northern Togo, fuelling instability in northern Ghana in a circular manner through refugee flows and market closures, and by providing cover for violent actors.¹¹³ Meanwhile, cattle smuggling into Ghana is empowering criminals who facilitate local corruption, eroding state capacity and legitimacy. Finally, JNIMs penetration of Ghana's illicit markets provides the group with a foothold in the country, which could be used to its strategic advantage should the group decide to openly attack Ghana.

To counter this threat, the governments of Ghana and Burkina Faso should seize the opportunities that improved political relations offer by jointly dismantling the cattle rustling supply chains in their territories. This would have the added benefit of eroding some of JNIM's supply lines without directly confronting the group militarily.

On a macro level, Ghana could also seek to decrease the demand for stolen livestock by raising awareness of the problem among traders and consumers, investing in border communities to promote licit cross-border trade and, most importantly, by building its domestic livestock industry to reduce demand for smuggled cattle. Working with Burkina Faso (and Togo) will be essential to the effectiveness of these approaches; it would also provide an opportunity for Ghana's new leadership to further improve regional ties.

113 While some asylum seekers have been welcomed, others have been spurned, leading to communal tensions and further displacement see Courtright, J. (2024, 18 April), "[Ghana Accused of Expelling Fulani Asylum Seekers from Burkina Faso](#)", *The New Humanitarian*; Interviews with a butcher and a cattle dealer (P2, P3), and a herder (W1) in northern Ghana, in October 2024; while there are still no proven ties between JNIM and belligerents in the Bawku chieftaincy conflict, the instability in Burkina Faso has facilitated easier access to weapons and contributed to the "fog of war" in rural communities; Interviews in Bawku and Pusiga, Ghana, in August 2023.

Policy considerations for Ghanaian, Burkinabe and Togolese authorities: Coordinate, prosecute, reform and invest

- 1. Coordinate the Ghanaian response with the Burkinabe and Togolese authorities.** Disrupting the supply chain for stolen cattle could be an opportunity for the new administration in Accra to deliver on its goal of forging better relations with its neighbours. This could take place at local level, with **workshops building connections between veterinary services, municipal authorities and security services** on both sides of the border. At a higher level, **increased coordination between intelligence services** around this shared goal could also develop trust and improve outcomes.
- 2. Investigate and prosecute Ghanaians and Burkinabes for smuggling and selling stolen livestock.** In investigating and prosecuting Ghanaians and Burkinabes for this crime, authorities should **focus their efforts on individuals engaged at the higher end of the business** instead of more-easily intercepted drivers and herders. Targeting well-connected and wealthy cattle dealers would likely be more difficult politically but would **send a message that impunity will not be tolerated** to other participants in the system and undermine the networks that facilitate rustling in Burkina Faso and Togo. Both countries have a joint interest in reducing illicit cattle rustling.
- 3. Raise awareness in Ghana about the public's indirect participation in the war economy.** Ghanaian consumers of beef are largely unaware their eating habits may be fuelling conflict in neighbouring countries. Respondents indicated that even Ghanaians who trade stolen livestock do not see the practice as problematic.¹¹⁴ The government should **engage local authorities, security services and the public** by appealing to their patriotism and **warning that trading and consuming stolen livestock contribute to the illicit conflict economy** and threaten Ghana's stability, with the goal of shaming intermediaries and buyers, and dampening the demand for stolen livestock in Ghana.
- 4. Invest in border communities and promote licit cross-border trade.** Respondents indicated that the slump in the Ghanaian economy has contributed to cattle dealers, butchers, herders and drivers entering the trade in stolen cattle.¹¹⁵ Efforts to **create employment opportunities and stimulate**

¹¹⁴ Interview with a butcher (P2) in northern Ghana in October 2024.

¹¹⁵ Interview with a leader of a Fulbe association in Accra, Ghana, in February 2024; interview with cattle dealer (We3), Ghana in October 2024.

licit local businesses with subsidies and investments in infrastructure

may go some way towards convincing businesspeople to return to the commodities they previously traded, thus limiting the options for who cattle rustlers can sell to.¹¹⁶

5. **Invest in and reform Ghana's domestic livestock market.** The smuggling of stolen cattle into the licit supply chain thrives in an opaque domestic livestock sector. Initially, Ghanaian authorities could aim to **better document the movement of cattle into and through the country**. There may be scope to reform the system of veterinary movement permits and explore schemes such as certificates of origin or microchipping animals.¹¹⁷ Second, authorities could **support smaller and medium-sized livestock markets** by building the managerial and accounting capacity of market management committees, as well as investing in basic infrastructure. These measures would help authorities prevent stolen cattle being smuggled into the licit value chain.
6. **Invest in domestic livestock rearing.** Cattle rustlers and intermediaries bring stolen livestock into Ghana partly because of the unmet demand for beef in Ghana (and Côte d'Ivoire). The government should **explore innovative schemes for raising cattle in Ghana, looking to successful models that allow for transhumance** in countries such as Senegal, for example, instead of turning to capital- and land-intensive sedentary ranching.¹¹⁸ Investing in producing meat and dairy domestically would contribute to national development and undermine armed rustlers' and intermediaries' business models. It is important that this is done in ways that are complementary with the interests of pastoralists in the Sahel (for example, through specialisation of parts of the supply chain).

¹¹⁶ For more suggestions, see: de Bruijne and Bernard, *Life on the Line*.

¹¹⁷ For an example from East Africa, see: Furness, D. (2018, 8 February), [Cattle Theft in Kenya is Being Tackled with Remote-tracking Chip Technology](#), Quartz.

¹¹⁸ For decades, the government of Senegal has protected a series of pastoral reserves in the Ferlo Desert of north-central Senegal by enforcing bans on for-profit agriculture and drilling wells for semi-nomadic herders. Meanwhile, decades of attempts at intensive ranching in Nigeria have yet to turn a profit or ameliorate conflicts between herders and farmers. For more on the evolution of the Ferlo Desert and some of the challenges faced there, see Ka, A. et al. (2021, October), "Mieux Comprendre la Complexification de l'Occupation de l'Espace Pastoral au Ferlo. Un Prérequis pour une Bonne Gestion des Ressources Naturelles", *VertigO – La Revue Électronique en Sciences de l'Environnement*, no. 21-2; For a nuanced discussion of ranching in West Africa, see Thébaud, B. and Corniaux, C. (2019, February), *Ranching in West Africa: Issues and Challenges*, Acting for Life.

International partners: Complementary support if requested

Ghana's and Burkina Faso's international partners – who have shared national security interests related to curbing the expansion of militancy in the region, and economic interests in bolstering Ghana's economy as a regional trading partner – can play a complementary, if modest, role supporting Ghana to address cattle rustling in the tri-border area:

- Regionally, international partners could help **facilitate trainings in investigative techniques and non-lethal assistance** to Burkinabe, Togolese and Ghanaian law enforcement investigating cattle rustling and smuggling networks. These could build on ongoing projects in the tri-border region related to migration and prevention of violent extremism.¹¹⁹ Moreover, they could consider supporting systems that better organise registration of cattle.
- Western donors could **build the capacity of Ghana's wider livestock industry** through economic development assistance programmes. Improving domestic infrastructure and building the capacity of livestock market managers would strengthen the trading system and help market managers guard against smuggling, while improving the productivity of the market. Moreover, there is scope to support policies that address livelihood constraints at the border through socio-economic programmes that provide viable alternative livelihoods.
- The research community should also **deepen understanding of how Ghana's wider livestock economy is structured, and how stolen cattle are sold along the supply chain**. While this paper focuses on the tri-border region, many of the larger economic actors involved in the cattle trade are based in southern Ghana. Understanding the interconnected interests of abattoirs, trucking syndicates and political figures, to name just a few stakeholders, is crucial to wholesale reform.

119 International Organization for Migration (2021, 24 December), [IOM and Ghana Immigration Service Launch Project to Reinforce Border Security along Northern Frontiers](#); International Organization for Migration (2021, 29 May), [IOM and Ghana Immigration Service Launch Project to Strengthen Border Security](#); International Organization for Migration (2024, 19 February), [Prevention of Violent Extremism: IOM and Its Partners Support a Cross-Border Programme in Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo](#).

Methodology

This paper is based on three iterative rounds of data collection. First, 32 qualitative interviews and six focus group discussions were conducted with randomly selected Ghanaian (16) and Togolese (15) respondents in Bawku (5), Chereponi (16), Garu (5) and Pulmakom (5) between 13 and 18 December, 2023. Interviews concentrated on the political economy of the cattle market by asking respondents how important the cattle trade is to the community, who is involved and what role these actors play.

Second, a household survey was conducted in Ghana's North East and Upper East regions among 150 Ghanaian and 150 Togolese respondents in January and February 2024. The Ghanaian respondents were randomly sampled, whereas the Togolese respondents were identified by randomly selected villages in Ghana with large Togolese populations. The survey sought to understand the cattle markets and place them in the wider political economy and local authority structures of the area.

Third, an additional round of qualitative data collection took place from 6 to 20 October 2024, involving 30 one-on-one qualitative interviews in north-eastern Ghana. The interviews specifically focused on actors in the cattle markets: butchers, *rugas*, hired herders and cattle dealers in Tamale, Chereponi, Saboba, Karaga, Gushiegu, Yendi, Widana, Pusiga and Walewale. The goal of these interviews was to fill knowledge gaps identified in earlier rounds of data collection.