



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disconnected Defences: Evaluating the Efficacy of State-Imposed Telecom Shutdowns in Northwest Nigeria (2021)

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In the autumn¹ of 2021, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the National Communications Commission (NCC), as part of its counter-terrorism operations against banditry, shutdown telecommunications services in four Northwest states - Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. This report critically explores the rationale, impact, and consequences of these shutdowns, questioning their effectiveness as a counter-terrorism strategy and emphasizing their detrimental effects on community security and human rights. It draws on crime statistics and security reports with insights from surveys, focus group discussions with local opinion leaders and in-depth personal interviews with diverse stakeholders. It argues that while the telecommunications shutdown was a 'success' from a government/military-tactical point of view, their broader impact proved detrimental - angered citizens and engendered negative opinions toward the state and its shutdown policies. Disruptions to daily life, communication difficulties, economic losses, and infringement on fundamental human rights paint a stark picture of communities disconnected, silenced, and burdened by the state-imposed shutdown. The article casts doubt on the shutdowns' effectiveness in curbing banditry, exposing alternative explanations for any temporary decrease in attacks. It questions the legitimacy of justifying these shutdowns as effective counter-terrorism measures, advocating for alternative approaches that prioritize community engagement, human rights, and development initiatives to address the root causes of insecurity and foster lasting peace in Northwestern Nigeria and Nigeria at large.

1. Introduction

Northwest Nigeria has faced a brutal and evolving security challenge in recent years. Armed groups, often labeled as bandits, terrorize vast swathes of the region, perpetrating kidnappings, cattle rustling, and violent attacks on communities. In response, governments

of Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna states implemented a controversial measure in 2021: state-imposed shutdowns of all telecommunication services across their territories. These drastic actions aimed to disrupt the communication networks and coordination capabilities of these armed groups, ultimately curbing their activities and enhancing community security.

However, the efficacy and consequences of these shutdowns

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remain hotly contested. This research delves into the complex issue of state-imposed telecommunication shutdowns in Northwest Nigeria, specifically focusing on the measures undertaken in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna states. Driven by the question of whether these shutdowns effectively curtail banditry and terrorism, or rather, primarily inflict detrimental effects on community security and human rights, this research interrogates the rationale behind the shutdowns, analyzes their impact on various socio-economic and security indicators, and ultimately, challenges their justification as a viable counter-terrorism strategy.

By employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data analysis of surveys, crime statistics and security reports with qualitative insights gleaned from interviews and focus group discussions with diverse stakeholders, this research aims to paint a comprehensive picture of the shutdowns' multifaceted impact. Moving beyond the surface-level narratives of success or failure, this research endeavors to expose the intricate web of consequences – intended and unintended – that reverberate through communities silenced by the shutdowns.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing debate surrounding the use of state-imposed telecommunication shutdowns as a security measure. By shedding light on the detrimental effects these shutdowns have on communities, their infringement on fundamental human rights, and their questionable effectiveness in combating banditry and terrorism, this research advocates for alternative approaches that prioritize community engagement, human rights, and sustainable development in fostering lasting security in Northwest Nigeria.

2. Background

This section aims to provide a contextual backdrop to the phenomenon of banditry in Northwest Nigeria, including its historical roots, its ideology, and their interactions with mobile phone technology. Additionally,

it discusses the context context of mobile phone usage in Nigeria, contending that mobile telecommunication has integrated into societal norms, reshaping interpersonal dynamics and granting even rural communities the agency to redefine what Giddens (1981) termed as time-space distantiation, according to their own preferences.

2.1 Concept of Banditry

Conceptually, banditry is a derivative of the term bandit meaning an unlawful armed group terrorising people and confiscating their properties. It is synonymous with the establishment of gang groups who use small and light weapons to carry out attacks against people. In this regard, banditry could mean a set-up criminal activity deliberately designed and carried out for personal gains. Due to the complex nature of bandits' operations, Egwu (2016) delineated banditry as primarily involving the theft of livestock from herders or the plundering of their ranches. Additionally, banditry encompasses criminal activities such as cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, drug trafficking, arson, rape, and the brutal massacres of rural communities with advanced weaponry by suspected herdsmen, along with retaliatory strikes from surviving victims. This phenomenon has significantly elevated concerns regarding national security (Uche & Iwuamadi, 2018).

According to Shalangwa (2013), banditry entails the act of ambushing and assaulting individuals by members of an armed faction, whether planned or spontaneous, utilizing offensive or defensive weapons, particularly in semi-organized groups, with the aim of subduing the victim and acquiring plunder or advancing certain political objectives. These bandits are typically viewed as renegades, driven by desperation and disregard for the law, lacking a fixed abode or destination as they traverse forests and mountains to evade identification, detection, and apprehension.

However, when the term banditry is associated with rural areas, it suggests a group of rural outlaws engaged in unlawful activities such as village raids, kidnappings, and cattle rustling, aimed at primitive accumulation of wealth.

Consequently, bandits are criminal gangs that terrorize and strip local residents or travelers of their valuables, including goods, money, livestock such as cattle, camels, and sheep, among other items. Operating within and along rural boundaries, they often receive support from local collaborators, including, in some instances, state agents tasked with ensuring the safety and security of the populace (Abdullahi, 2019).

In another context, banditry encompasses instances of armed robbery or related violent crimes, such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, and attacks on villages or markets. These acts involve the use of force, or the threat thereof, to coerce individuals or groups into surrendering their possessions, committing acts of sexual assault, or inflicting harm (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). Banditry can be motivated by economic or political interests. The former pertains to criminal activities driven by the desire for material gain, while the latter involves actions aimed at robbing, assaulting, or eliminating individuals or groups based on ideological or political beliefs (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Therefore, in the context of this paper, banditry is defined as a collection of armed robbery incidents or related violent crimes, such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, village raids, and highway robberies, involving the use of force or the threat thereof to intimidate individuals or groups for the purpose of robbery, sexual assault, kidnapping, or murder.

2.2 Evolution and Historical Development of Banditry

The concept of banditry has undergone evolution across different times, regions, and circumstances. In 19th-century Europe and the Americas, a bandit was perceived

as a freedom fighter, partially driven by the goal of liberating the oppressed from the upper class or colonizers (Warto, 1994). Notably, figures like Chuchó el Roto, Herachio Bernel, and Santanon were revered as heroes of Mexican independence (Robinson, 2009), earning admiration from the Mexican populace while often being deemed nuisances or outlaws by the State (Watts, 1987).

Conversely, in certain pre-industrial societies, peasants viewed bandits differently from the State; rather than seeing them as criminals, they were considered avengers and providers. However, in traditional African settings, banditry took on a starkly contrasting form compared to America and Europe. In Africa, banditry primarily revolved around armed robbery and associated crimes, often characterized by violence, including maiming, killing, and property destruction, with a particular emphasis on cattle rustling (Rufa'i, 2018). This form of banditry was fueled by the desire to steal livestock, prompting bandits to resort to force, often utilizing Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) (Addo, 2006), thus leading to what is termed as cattle rustling and armed banditry (Murtala, 2018).

From a historical perspective, banditry is deeply ingrained in the fabric of West Africa, dating back to inter-tribal conflicts and wars over scarce resources and territorial expansion during periods such as slave trading, colonialism, and post-colonialism. Although the nature and patterns of banditry have evolved over time, socio-economic and political factors remain pivotal in explaining its prevalence in the sub-region (Abdullahi, 2019).

The struggle for political independence and the subsequent establishment of post-colonial states in West Africa significantly influenced the trajectory of banditry in the region, highlighting the role of socio-economic and political realities in shaping its intensity and dynamics. For instance, in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of Niger Republic, banditry, such as cattle

and sheep rustling and the killing of innocent citizens in border communities, is closely linked to widespread poverty resulting from poor governance (Abdullahi, 2019).

In Mali, banditry has evolved alongside religious extremism propagated by sectarian religious groups, exacerbated by weak state institutions and inadequate service delivery. Weak governance, insurgency, and lawlessness have driven pastoralists towards religious extremism, fueling an increase in banditry activities in northern Mali (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel report, 2018). This surge in banditry has fueled tensions between farmers and herders and contributed to the proliferation of armed groups in various regions of Mali (Abdullahi, 2019).

Similarly, in Mauritania, trans-border banditry and challenges related to resource management and distribution of pastoral lands have shaped rural banditry in the country. Competition over resources, particularly water resources, pasture, and animal feed, has led to a surge in banditry in Mauritania (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel report, 2018). Likewise, livestock theft has become a trans-border criminal activity affecting movement and relations along the Burkina Faso and Ghana border, with local bandit groups collaborating with traditional elites to carry out rustling and share the proceeds (Abdullahi, 2019).

In Nigeria, banditry is not a new phenomenon, with historical records dating back to colonial times, such as instances of banditry recorded in the 1930s (Jaafar, 2018). Providing a historical context to this assertion, Jaafar elaborates:

In those days, wayfarers and merchants travelling along our local economic roads usually faced the threats and dangers of ambush from nondescript bandits. Armed bandits and criminals were known to be targeting goods ferried on the back of donkeys, camels and ox carts. Those bandits on our trade

routes would forcefully take those goods and disappear into the bush. That is just one dimension of the problem then. In other instances, the bandits would sometimes raid farming communities and villages with the intent of willful killing and wanton destruction of property. During such raids, the bandits would destroy virtually everything in their path, including valuables, farm produce, etc. This subculture has been in existence even before the coming of colonialists to the territories of northern Nigeria (Jaafar, 2018, p.2)."

In the northwestern region of Nigeria, banditry has deep historical roots, with the first recorded case occurring in 1901 between western Hausaland and the Niger border, signifying a long history of banditry in the region (The Humanitarian, 2018). Over time, banditry has evolved from its rudimentary phase to a more complex pattern of criminality (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2015; Egwu 2016).

The modern transformation of banditry in Nigeria can be attributed to prevailing security challenges, with criminal gangs, often composed of youth from farming and herding communities, exploiting insecurity to engage in looting, highway robbery, and cattle rustling for personal gain. Consequently, both farming and herding communities bear the brunt of this criminal activity (Bagu and Smith, 2017; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

2.3 Factors Promoting Banditry in Nigeria's Northwest Region

Numerous factors contribute to the prevalence of banditry in Nigeria, particularly in the northwest region. A significant driver of banditry in this area stems from socio-economic conditions that characterize both the interior and the borders of the region. One prominent factor is the existence of sparsely governed spaces, including hinterlands, forestlands, and border areas. These

hinterlands are characterized by dispersed rural settlements, separated by vast rangelands and farmlands, creating an environment prone to violent conflicts (Gaye, 2018). Additionally, the region is dotted with diverse forested landscapes, often containing wetlands, rocks, and caves. These forestlands, being far removed from governance centers at the local and state levels, are vast, rugged, and largely under-policed, providing ideal conditions for various criminal activities, including banditry. Consequently, banditry thrives in these forested areas, where security presence is minimal, and attacks on remote villages are common (Gaye, 2018).

Similarly, banditry occurs extensively in large forest reserves that are generally inaccessible to Nigerian security forces. These reserves, such as Kamuku, Kiyambana, and Fagore forests, serve as ideal hideouts for criminals to evade law enforcement. The reluctance of security operatives to enter these areas is often attributed to inefficiencies, collusion with locals, inadequate equipment, and poor motivation (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016).

Another significant factor contributing to banditry in Nigeria is the high unemployment rate, particularly among youths. With Nigeria's unemployment rate at 23.1% and youth unemployment at 55.4%, coupled with a poverty index of 77.7% in the Northwest, many graduates face uncertainty and frustration upon graduation (NBS, 2012; Rosenje & Moliki, 2016). This frustration often leads to aggression towards the government and can fuel involvement in criminal activities like banditry (Suleiman, 2017; Mustapha, 2019). Moreover, economic deprivation and the allure of quick wealth drive many unemployed youths to engage in illegal activities, further exacerbating the problem (Adagba, Ugwu, & Eme, 2012; Epron, 2019).

Weaknesses in the security system also contribute to the proliferation of banditry in the northwest region of Nigeria. Inadequate equipment, insufficient training, and poor

attitudes among security personnel hamper their effectiveness in combating banditry. Additionally, ethnic, religious, or communal biases among security personnel can undermine efforts to address security challenges, with some individuals prioritizing personal interests over national security (Achumba, Ighomereho, & Akpor-Rabaro, 2013; Offem & Ichoku, 2015).

Furthermore, poverty and poor governance play significant roles in the rise of banditry in Nigeria. The failure of successive administrations to address poverty has left many Nigerians struggling to survive, with a large proportion living below the poverty line. Banditry, terrorism, and other criminal acts have been linked to poverty, as economic deprivation often drives individuals to resort to illegal means to meet their needs (Adeolu, 2018; Adebayo, 2018). Additionally, the influx of small arms and light weapons from the Sahel region, particularly since the fall of Ghaddafi's regime in Libya, has contributed to the proliferation of banditry in Nigeria. These weapons end up in the hands of non-state actors like terrorists, militants, and bandits, facilitating their ability to terrorize communities (Gaye, 2018). Incidents of arms smuggling, as evidenced by arrests of illicit arms dealers further highlight the severity of the issue (Adeniyi, 2018).

2.4 Bandits' Communication Capabilities and Government Response

The communication capabilities of bandit groups operating in Northwest Nigeria play a pivotal role in their ability to orchestrate attacks, coordinate movements, and evade law enforcement agencies. Similar to other insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram in the Northeast, bandits leverage modern communication technologies to maintain operational effectiveness and adapt to changing security dynamics.

2.4.1 Bandits' Utilization of Communication Technologies

Bandit groups operating in Northwest Nigeria extensively utilize mobile communication to facilitate their criminal activities. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria had over 198 million active mobile phone subscriptions as of December 2021, highlighting the widespread adoption of mobile technology across the country. This ubiquitous connectivity provides bandits with a means to coordinate attacks, gather intelligence, and communicate with collaborators across vast distances.

The rugged and often remote terrain of Northwest Nigeria provides ideal conditions for bandits to exploit mobile communication networks while evading detection. With a plethora of mobile phone towers scattered throughout the region, bandits can establish communication links even in areas with limited infrastructure, enabling them to maintain operational connectivity and respond rapidly to changing circumstances.

Drawing on the concept of "simultaneity" in mobile communication, as elucidated by Giddens and Thompson, bandits leverage the instantaneous nature of modern communication to coordinate attacks with precision timing. This allows them to overwhelm security forces, exploit vulnerabilities in defensive measures, and maximize the element of surprise during raids on communities and highways.

2.4.2 Government Response to Bandits' Communication Capabilities

In response to the challenge posed by bandits' communication capabilities, the government of Nigeria has implemented various strategies aimed at disrupting their networks and limiting their operational effectiveness. These strategies encompass both regulatory measures and targeted enforcement actions designed to degrade bandits' communication infrastructure and capabilities.

One key regulatory measure undertaken

by the government is the mandatory registration of all mobile phone users in Nigeria. The National Communications Commission (NCC) oversees this registration process, requiring individuals to provide valid identification documents before activating a SIM card. This initiative aims to enhance accountability within the mobile telecommunications sector, mitigate the misuse of unregistered SIM cards by criminal elements, and facilitate law enforcement efforts to track and apprehend suspects involved in illicit activities.

Furthermore, security agencies have intensified efforts to dismantle illegal SIM card registration operations and crack down on unregistered mobile networks used by bandits to evade detection. By disrupting illicit communication channels and targeting the infrastructure utilized by bandits for communication purposes, law enforcement agencies seek to degrade their operational capabilities and disrupt their criminal activities.

2.4.3 Adapting to Technological Disruptions

However, bandit groups have demonstrated adaptability in response to government efforts to disrupt their communication networks. Tactics such as the destruction of telecommunication infrastructure, the use of encrypted messaging applications, and the establishment of clandestine communication networks have enabled them to circumvent government-imposed restrictions and maintain operational capabilities.

Moreover, the proliferation of small-scale radio communication devices and satellite phones among bandit groups poses additional challenges for law enforcement agencies seeking to monitor and disrupt their communication networks. These devices provide bandits with alternative means of communication, allowing them to coordinate activities and evade detection in remote areas where mobile phone coverage is limited or non-existent.

In light of these challenges, the government of Nigeria must adopt a multifaceted approach that combines regulatory measures, targeted enforcement actions, and technological innovations to effectively disrupt bandits' communication networks and degrade their operational capabilities. Collaboration between government agencies, telecommunications providers, and local communities is essential to develop comprehensive strategies that address the evolving threat posed by bandit groups in Northwest Nigeria.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed for this report was designed to achieve a holistic understanding of the nature of impacts of the telecommunications shutdowns on citizens and on the banditry and insurgency itself and allowed for triangulation of findings. The methodology included a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Data was gathered through focus group discussions, surveys, interviews with stakeholders, analysis of government documents, and review of media reports.

To gain insight into the effects of the telecom shutdown on local communities, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with key stakeholders in the affected areas. The study was carried out over a period of five weeks between December 2023 and January 2024, and involved five FGDs conducted in Kaduna (Igabi), Katsina (Funtua, Musawa), and Zamfara (Tsafe, Anka).² Due to security and logistical constraints, FGDs were not conducted in all the seven northwest states or in all the local governments affected by banditry and the shutdowns. However, participants from these locations shared similar demographic characteristics with residents in neighboring areas, including religion, occupation, ethnicity, and education levels. The smallest group had 8 participants while the largest had 12,

for a total of 57 participants.

Participants for the FGDs were selected based on their status as local influencers or opinion leaders within their communities. Drawing from the concept of opinion leadership proposed by Keller and Berry (2003), individuals were identified based on their information-seeking and -giving behavior, as well as their social embeddedness and community participation. Specifically, participants were chosen if they demonstrated ownership and consistent use of mobile phones, engagement with local media, and involvement in community activities.

To refine the selection process, Nisbert's (2006) adaptation of Keller and Berry's engagement model was employed. This model identifies opinion leaders based on various indicators, including civic engagement, political activism, and social embeddedness. Participants were selected if they indicated involvement in specific activities within the previous 12 months, demonstrating their engagement and influence within their communities.

The activities were adapted into checklists (**Table 1**) and randomly distributed to respondents within the selected towns in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states. Respondents were asked if they had engaged in any of 8 activities within the previous 12 months. Any respondent that answered 'yes' to activities one and two and to at least one of the other six engagement activities was pre-selected within their contexts for the focus group discussions.

The objective of using influentials with these characteristics was to ensure that opinions gathered from the focus groups represented individuals who would typically utilize mobile phones not only for personal purposes but also for community-related endeavors.

By employing a methodology rooted in opinion leadership and engagement, the study aimed to capture nuanced perspectives on the impact of telecom

1. Have a mobile phone and use it consistently.
2. Have been a resident continually in their community in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states respectively for the past three years (including the period of the mobile phone disruption).
3. Attended a political rally, speech, or organized protest of any kind.
4. Been an active member of any group that seeks to influence public policy or government.
5. Held or ran for political office.
6. Been a member of a Community Peace Initiative or attended a public meeting on community peace-building or reconciliation matters.
7. Served on a committee for a local organization.
8. Met secretly or openly with other members of their network to seek the interests of the community.

Table 1: List of Engagement Activities.

shutdowns from individuals deeply embedded within their communities. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the implications of such shutdowns on both personal and communal levels.

4. Findings

This section presents the primary findings of the study. Initially, it examines the perspective of the military/government regarding the effects of the shutdown. Subsequently, it evaluates citizens' perceptions of the shutdown's impacts based on focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, and interviews. The analysis suggests that while the military perceived the shutdown as effective in maintaining state authority and legitimacy, citizens considered it an ill-advised and 'imprudent' strategy with severe social and economic consequences.

4.1 Military Impacts and Government/Military Opinion of Shutdown

The decision to implement telecom shutdowns in the northwest was primarily driven by the belief among authorities that

mobile communication facilitated the activities of criminal elements, such as bandits and insurgents. Interviews with government officials and security personnel conducted as part of this research consistently indicated that the shutdowns were perceived to have achieved their intended objective. A Brigadier General³ in the Nigerian Army regarding the telecom shutdowns in the northwest said:

When we looked at the situation on the ground, it was clear that the insurgents were using mobile phones to their advantage. They were coordinating attacks, spreading fear, and making it seem like they were everywhere at once. We knew we had to disrupt their communication network to have a chance at stopping them. So, we made the tough call to shut down the mobile networks. And you know what? It worked.

In a separate interview, a Deputy Director of the State Security Service (SSS) in one

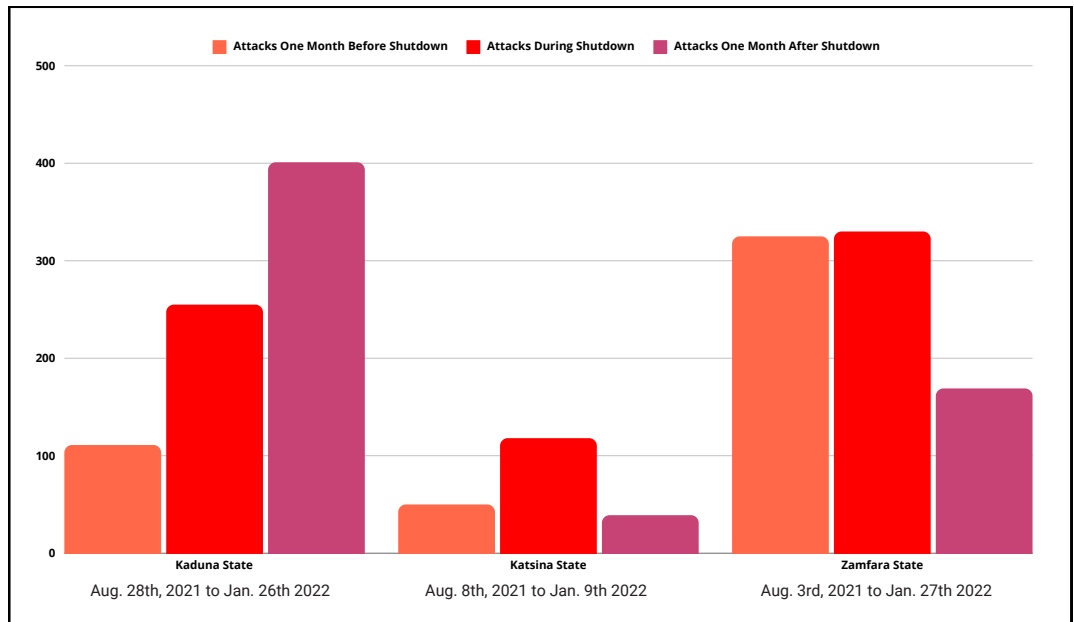


Figure 1: Bandits attacks (raids, killings and abductions) before, during and after the telecom services shutdown in Northwest Nigeria (Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States). Source: The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)'s Nigeria Security Tracker (NST)

of the Northwest states, emphasized the significance of the telecom shutdowns in the Northwest region. He stated:

The manner in which the insurgents utilized mobile phones necessitated the shutdown. It disrupted their communication channels, leading to arrests and instilling fear among their ranks. Many retreated and were unable to call for reinforcements when confronted by security forces. The shutdown was a well-considered strategy to weaken the insurgents' momentum.

Furthermore, corroborating these statements, a Director General of a state Information Technology Development Agency, emphasized:

While the shutdowns undoubtedly caused inconvenience, they were a crucial step in safeguarding our communities from imminent threats.

We had to make tough decisions to ensure the safety of our people, even if it meant temporary disruptions to daily life.

The stance presented herein reflects the prevailing attitude among Nigerian security forces and government authorities. While recognizing the importance of ICTs, human rights, and personal freedoms in fostering development and democracy, the state has shown a readiness to compromise these values in the pursuit of maintaining its authority.

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However, data sourced (see **Figure 1** above) from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)'s Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) databases presents a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of the shutdowns in mitigating unrest and

insurgent activities. Analysis reveals a notable increase in reported incidents of unrest during the period of the telecommunications blackout compared to the preceding months.

In Kaduna, for instance, there was a 229.73% increase in attacks during the shutdown compared to the month before the shutdown. Similarly, Katsina experienced a 236% increase in attacks during the shutdown compared to the month before, while Zamfara saw a 101.54% increase. These findings suggest that the shutdowns may have inadvertently exacerbated the security situation, contradicting assertions of their efficacy in curbing insurgent activities.

While acknowledging the disruptive impact of insurgent communications, it's essential to recognize the broader implications of telecom shutdowns on society. The reliance of social and economic sectors on mobile telephony underscores the need for security agencies to explore alternative strategies that balance security imperatives with the protection of human rights and civil liberties.

4.2 Social Impacts and Citizens' Opinion of shutdown

The telecommunications shutdown did not significantly disrupt social relationships, as people developed coping and circumventing strategies; however, it did alter and impact the patterns in which those relationships were expressed. The primary source of frustration for many individuals during the shutdown was the disruption of their daily interactions with close contacts, leading to a perceived separation of space and time. While business interactions were affected, participants in focus group discussions expressed greater concern about the disruption's impact on their personal interactions.

The FGDs revealed unanimous agreement among participants regarding the negative

repercussions of the telecom shutdown. A prevailing sentiment from these discussions was a heightened sense of insecurity due to the mobile phone outage, with many participants feeling that the shutdown only increased their vulnerability to risk. Shamsu Abubakar, a nurse, highlighted the profound negative impact:

The telecom shutdown impacted me negatively and my life changed. There was no means of communication, I couldn't call my friends or relatives. Couldn't perform any bank transaction. We were in constant fear as no news of how the security situation is around the area and neighbouring towns. Because, if there was a sign of them (bandits) coming towards towns and villages, people used to call and inform the towns ahead, but during that shutdown, they owned the area with no help because there was no means of communication. (FGD GRP 2.3)

Another participant, Yakubu Lawan, a traditional leader echoed similar sentiments, emphasising how the absence of communication networks hindered their ability to stay informed and connected:

We felt isolated and powerless during the shutdown. The lack of communication meant we couldn't receive timely warnings about security threats or coordinate responses during emergencies. (FGD GRP 2.2)

Regarding the effectiveness of the telecom shutdown as a counter-terrorism strategy, participants expressed scepticism. Despite the government's intentions to disrupt banditry operations, many participants questioned the rationale behind the shutdown and its impact on addressing insecurity. Maryam Sa'eed, a teacher and nursing mother considered it

'ill-advised' and 'imprudent' strategy:

The shutdown was ill-advised which made it to be imprudent as it didn't seem to deter the bandits or improve security at that time. If anything, it only made us more vulnerable by cutting off our means of communication. (FGD GRP 5.2)

Zakariyya Sada, a politician feels that the shutdown didn't help the security situation in his community, stating: 'The shutdown didn't help anyone, because even during the shutdown period, they (bandits) come to the town to threaten the residents and go scot-free, but when there was network, if they come to the door of your house, you can sneak inside and call the security agencies to ask for help. However, when there was no network, you just had to sit and wait for God's miracle to save you.' (FGD GRP 3.8)

Hamza Dahiru Inuwa echoed similar sentiments in another focus group, noting that the absence of telecom services made the security situation the worst as it couldn't stop the bandits from attacking his community:

During the telecom shutdown was the worst time in terms of security, the bandits didn't stop their operation. There was no means to alert the security forces when we were attacked. It also affected my businesses by creating a communication gap between me and the clients. (FGD GRP 4.1)

Another participant, Muhammed Maina, a community leader highlighted the adaptability of the bandits:

Despite the shutdown, attacks persisted, the bandits used walkie-talkie to communicate and launch an attack on communities suggesting that the bandits found alternative ways to communicate and coordinate their activities while we don't have any means of communication This really calls

into question the effectiveness of the shutdown as a counter-terrorism measure. There is a village under Sabuwa Local Government Area called Inono that they (bandits) attacked during a Subh (dawn) prayer; gathered all the villagers from mosque, took them to outskirts of the village, and killed all of them, more than 30 people that day, no help as there was no means of communication. It was terrible. (FGD GRP 3.5)

Sada Shehu believed that the shutdown only punished innocent people as the bandits adapted to the shutdown:

Shutting down the network did not help because innocent people were sanctioned, and not bandits because the bandits have a way of communicating with each other through their (radio) mobile phones. (FGD GRP 2.7)

The shutdown also reverberated across commercial sectors, dampening the pace of business operations that had come to rely heavily on mobile technology. One focus group participant, Aisha Adamu Sadiq, a business owner voiced her profound dismay over the disruption:

The telecom shutdowns had a significant impact on my business operations and profitability. Since 95% of my customer base relies on online interactions, the complete shutdown resulted in a halt to my business activities. With a dependency on online marketing, the lack of telecom services led to financial losses during this period. Facing the limitations imposed by the shutdowns, I resorted to travelling out of town to communicate with customers and secure small deals. However, this approach proved to be tiresome and unfortunately, there were no

significant adaptations or innovations implemented due to the constraints of the situation. (FGD GRP 2.9)

Another business owner, Hauwa Abubakar described the shutdown as a nightmare for her business:

I run a small business, and not having access to phone services was a nightmare. I couldn't communicate with suppliers or customers, and it severely impacted my ability to earn a living. (FGD GRP 5.9)

While citizens believed that their personal security and safety over temporary disruptions in their social and business communications, widespread resentment and frustration lingered regarding the execution of the telecoms shutdown.

We understand the need for security, but the way they shut down the phones was just wrong. They could have communicated better and given us some warning. It made us feel like our safety wasn't a priority. (FGD GRP 1.1)

One participant in the focus group expressed a sense of estrangement and vulnerability, stating that she felt the region seemed detached from the rest of Nigeria:

The shutdown disrupted everything. During that time, it felt like we were cut off from the rest of Nigeria. We couldn't reach anyone outside, and it felt like the world forgot about us. It made me realise how much we rely on our phones for communication and how vulnerable we are without them. (FGD GRP 1.5)

Another participant in a separate focus group, Aminu Aminu was even more critical of the telecoms services blackout.

During the shutdown, I felt helpless. I couldn't contact anyone in case of emergencies, and it made me anxious all the time. It was a constant feeling of being disconnected and unprotected. The blackout was just a disaster. It made us feel abandoned and ignored by the government. They need to do better in the future. (FGD GRP 4.4)

4.3 Field Research

To further assess the impact of the shutdown directives on telecommunication operations on residents in the affected states and to also assess how the lawyers and CSOs in the states have approached the shutdown, we conducted a survey. Over the course of working on the project, our volunteer researchers have made multiple trips between all three states with relative ease even though some of the surveys were electronically conducted. The research findings are highlighted in the following sections:

4.3.1 Respondent Pool

A total of 198 people across the target states were surveyed during the course of the study. The breakdown of respondents is as follows:

- 63 respondents were resident in Kaduna
- 70 respondents are resident in Katsina
- 65 respondents in Zamfara

Of the total responses received, all Zamfara respondents had lost phone services in their area within the first two weeks of the shutdown. Curiously, 13% of respondents in Kaduna lost access to telecommunications services even before the blackout was announced in neighbouring Zamfara. Since the blackout, a further 4% lost access, making 17% of Kaduna respondents without access to mobile telecommunication. For comparison, 53% of Katsina respondents



Picture 1: Community residents gather on a mountain, risking bandit attacks, in search of mobile network signals.



Picture 2: Students queue at a point-of-sale terminal for cash transactions amidst network disruptions.

no access to telecommunication services.

For the purpose of this study, our analysis will focus on the impact of the telecom shutdown activities on respondents who have lost telecommunication services in their area:

4.3.2 Survey Analysis:

The survey conducted as part of the field research aimed to gauge the impact of the telecommunications shutdown directives on residents in the affected states. A total of 198 individuals were surveyed from Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara States.

a. Access to Phone Service

The analysis focused on respondents who reported losing telecommunication services in their areas. In Zamfara, all respondents experienced the loss of phone services within the first two weeks of the shutdown period. Specifically, 75% lost mobile services within the first week, indicating prompt implementation following the shutdown announcement. In Kaduna and Katsina, prior to the official shutdown directive, some areas had already experienced service disruptions for

more than two weeks. 80% of Kaduna respondents and 31% of Katsina respondents noted this disruption, although the cause, whether government/military action or bandit attacks, remained uncertain.

Also, one of the most significant findings from our field research was the extent to which communities relied on mobile network services for communication and essential transactions. Visual evidence captured residents in Katsina congregating on a mountain, situated on the outskirts of the town, in search of mobile network signals. Despite the inconvenience and risks posed by bandit attacks, community members frequented this location daily, highlighting the critical need for connectivity. See **Picture 1** above.

b. Impact on the Security Situation:

Contrary to the intended effect, respondents generally believed that the shutdown directive did not significantly improve the security situation. In Zamfara, 39% of respondents perceived an improvement in security, possibly

indicating a slowdown in bandit attacks or a lack of information due to the communications blackout. However, in Kaduna and Katsina, only 14% and 10% of respondents, respectively, felt that security had improved following the shutdown directives.

c. Impact of Military Operations

The military justified the shutdown as necessary for targeted operations against bandits reliant on telecommunication services for communication. Respondents reported military activity in their areas following the shutdown, primarily occurring at night. However, some respondents did not observe military operations despite experiencing the shutdown, suggesting variability in the military's presence across affected areas. Overall, the survey findings suggest that while the shutdown directives were implemented with varying degrees of immediacy across states, they did not significantly improve the security situation as perceived by respondents. Moreover, uncertainty persists regarding the efficacy of military operations conducted in conjunction with the shutdown, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to addressing insecurity in the region.

d. Familiarity with Network Measurement and Circumvention Tools

During the survey, respondents were queried about their familiarity with network measurement tools and circumvention tools, given that some respondents, particularly those from Kaduna and Katsina who began experiencing the shutdown even before the government directive, might have sought alternative means to regain access to communication services. However, the results revealed a notable lack of familiarity among respondents with such tools. Only 22% of respondents expressed familiarity with network measurement tools, while a mere 15% were aware of circumvention tools. Particularly striking was the disparity between urban and rural respondents, with urban dwellers displaying slightly higher awareness levels

at 28% for network measurement tools and 20% for circumvention tools, compared to their rural counterparts, where only 18% and 10% were familiar with network measurement and circumvention tools.

4.4 Analysis of Interviews with Legal Professionals and CSO Leaders

The interviews (10) conducted with legal professionals and Civil Society Organization (CSO) leaders provided valuable insights into the challenges and concerns surrounding the telecommunications shutdown imposed in several states in Nigeria. Legal professionals highlighted the obstacles they faced in challenging the shutdown in court, including limited training, resources, and documented evidence. Conversely, CSO leaders emphasized the detrimental impact of the shutdown on civil liberties, human rights, and their organizations' advocacy efforts. This analysis sheds light into the key findings from these interviews.

4.4.1 Interviews with Legal Professionals

Human Rights Lawyer, Gloria Ballason, who sued the Kaduna State governor, the Nigerian Communications Commission, and five telecommunications companies over the shutdown, articulated profound concerns regarding the legality and implications of the shutdown. In her legal challenge, she argued that the action taken by the governor was not backed by law and violated her rights, emphasizing that it did not satisfy the constitutional provision of any law:

The government does not satisfy the constitutional exception of any law reasonably justifiable in a democratic society in the interest of defence, public safety and public order.

This assertion underscores the fundamental legal principles at stake and highlights the potential violations of

constitutional rights inherent in telecom shutdowns.

Moreover, the interviews revealed broader challenges encountered by legal professionals in confronting telecom shutdowns in court. Many lawyers expressed frustration over the lack of legal infrastructure and resources dedicated to addressing digital rights issues in Nigeria. As one legal professional lamented:

It was a difficult moment as there are no laws that specifically make provisions for digital rights of Nigerians, and honestly, we lacked the necessary training and resources to effectively challenge the shutdown in court.

This candid admission underscores systemic deficiencies in legal frameworks and capacity-building initiatives, hindering legal efforts to contest telecom shutdowns effectively.

Furthermore, concerns were raised regarding the absence of documented cases and research to support legal advocacy against telecom shutdowns. Lawyers highlighted the challenges of building compelling cases without adequate evidence and research on the detrimental impact of telecom shutdowns. As one legal professional noted:

The absence of documented cases and research on the detrimental impact of telecom shutdowns made it challenging to build a strong legal case against the government's directive.

This underscores the critical need for comprehensive documentation and research initiatives to bolster legal advocacy efforts and uphold digital rights in Nigeria.

Overall, the interviews underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by legal professionals in confronting telecom shutdowns and advocating for digital rights. Addressing systemic deficiencies in

legal frameworks, enhancing capacity-building initiatives, and fostering collaboration between legal professionals and other stakeholders are imperative to strengthen legal strategies and safeguard human rights in the face of telecom shutdowns.

4.4.2 Interviews with CSO Leaders

Conversely, the interviews with CSO leaders revealed concerns primarily centered around the shutdown's implications for civil liberties and human rights. The sentiment was echoed by one CSO leader who stated:

The shutdown was a violation of the fundamental human rights of all the communities affected, with a chilling effect on freedom of expression, assembly, and association.

Moreover, CSO leaders expressed frustration over the shutdown's adverse impact on their organizations' work, with one leader noting:

The shutdown exacerbates existing challenges in addressing social issues and promoting civic engagement.

Additionally, concerns were raised regarding CSOs' knowledge and actions in response to the shutdown, with one CSO leader highlighting:

There's a concerning lack of knowledge among CSOs, especially community organizations in affected areas, regarding internet shutdown issues and documenting human rights violations.

This underscores the critical need for capacity-building initiatives to enhance CSOs' understanding of telecom shutdowns and equip them with the tools to effectively advocate for digital rights.

4.5 Lawsuits Filed Against the Shutdowns

4.5.1 Kaduna State Lawsuit

Background: In response to the shutdown of telecom services and the internet, Human Rights Lawyer Gloria Ballason initiated legal proceedings against the Kaduna State governor and telecommunications companies.

Allegations: Ballason alleged that the governor's action lacked legal basis and infringed upon citizens' rights, particularly their right to access telecommunication services.

Legal Argument: The lawsuit contended that the shutdown violated constitutional provisions and failed to improve the security situation in Kaduna, thus warranting legal intervention.

Impact: Ballason emphasized the adverse effects of the shutdown on businesses, livelihoods, and emergency response capabilities, highlighting its detrimental impact on the affected populace.

4.5.2 SERAP Lawsuit in Katsina & Zamfara

Background: Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) initiated legal proceedings against the federal government, challenging the shutdowns of telecommunication networks in Katsina and Zamfara states.

Allegations: SERAP accused the government of unlawfully restricting citizens' rights to access correspondence, freedom of expression, and information through the shutdowns.

Legal Argument: The lawsuit argued that the shutdowns were disproportionate, inconsistent with constitutional and international legal standards, and undermined democratic principles and human rights.

Impact: SERAP highlighted the adverse consequences of the shutdowns on democratic participation, access to information, and economic activities, particularly in conflict-affected areas.

4.5.3 Zamfara State Lawsuit

Background: Zamfara Circle, a civil society organization, pursued legal action against the state Governor and telecom network providers, seeking redress for the closure of mobile networks in the state.

Allegations: The lawsuit accused the defendants of causing suffering and losses to subscribers without obtaining a court order, thereby breaching contractual terms [between the telecom service providers and their subscribers] and violating citizens' rights.

Legal Argument: They argued that the shutdown constituted an unlawful interference with citizens' right to communication and impeded efforts to address the security challenges in the state.

Impact: It emphasized the detrimental impact of the shutdown on citizens' ability to communicate, access information, and conduct daily activities, exacerbating the security situation in affected areas.

4.5.2 MRA Lawsuit in Zamfara State

Background: Media Rights Agenda (MRA) filed a lawsuit against the Zamfara State governor and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), challenging the shutdown of mobile telecommunication services.

Allegations: MRA alleged that the shutdown violated citizens' rights to freedom of expression and access to information, constituting an unjustified restriction on fundamental rights.

Legal Argument: The lawsuit argued that the shutdown was disproportionate, unjustified under constitutional and international legal standards, and undermined democratic principles.

Impact: MRA highlighted the adverse effects of the shutdown on citizens' rights, emphasizing its chilling effect on free expression, access to information, and civic participation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research shed light on the complex dynamics surrounding the government-imposed shutdowns as a strategy to combat banditry and terrorism in Northwest Nigeria, particularly in states affected by bandits and insurgent activities such as Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara. The discussion encompasses various dimensions, including the perspectives of the military and government, the impacts on citizens, and the challenges faced by legal professionals and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in responding to the shutdown directives.

The decision to implement telecom shutdowns was primarily driven by the belief among authorities that mobile communication facilitated the activities of criminal elements, such as bandits and insurgents. Military and government officials perceived the shutdowns as effective measures to disrupt insurgent communication networks and gain operational advantages in counterinsurgency efforts. Their assertions underscore the strategic rationale behind the shutdowns, emphasizing the imperative of safeguarding state security and protecting citizens from imminent threats.

However, the research findings reveal a stark contrast between the perceptions of security agencies and the lived experiences of citizens in the affected regions. While the military and government officials highlight the purported successes of the shutdowns in curbing insurgent activities and enhancing security, citizens express profound concerns about the adverse impacts on their daily lives, security, and socio-economic well-being.

The state-imposed shutdowns telecom services served as a stark reminder to citizens that despite the liberalization of the ICT sector, the state retains the authority to control and withhold communication technologies in the interest of national security. While many opposed the shutdown, security agencies defended it as necessary to safeguard the state's

stability, particularly in the face of banditry and insurgency threats.

From this perspective, the existence of new ICTs in Nigeria is linked to their alignment with state security objectives. The shutdown of telecom services across a vast region, encompassing a population of about 49 million, underscored the government's assertion that ICTs deemed to support insurgency or anti-state activities would not be tolerated, regardless of their societal benefits. With over two decades of integration into daily life, individuals and organizations found themselves heavily reliant on these technologies, necessitating measures to mitigate the impact of the shutdown, such as resorting to face-to-face communication or traveling to neighboring states for essential communication needs.

The telecommunication shutdowns had profound implications for citizens' freedom of expression, access to information, and ability to engage in socio-economic activities. Participants in focus group discussions voiced frustration over the disruption of personal and business communications, highlighting the challenges of staying informed, connected, and secure during the shutdown periods. The absence of timely warnings about security threats and the inability to coordinate responses during emergencies exacerbated feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness among residents.

The shutdown also prompted bandit groups to adapt their communication strategies, resulting in a temporary reduction in attacks followed by a strategic relocation to remote strongholds. This shift toward more centralized communication methods highlighted the unintended consequences of disrupting telecom services on security dynamics, underscoring the need for a meticulous approach to security interventions.

Moreover, data sourced from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)'s Nigeria Security Tracker (NST) databases

presents a contradictive perspective on the effectiveness of the shutdowns in mitigating unrest and insurgent activities. Analysis reveals a notable increase in reported incidents of unrest during the period of the telecommunications blackout compared to the preceding months.

In Kaduna, for instance, there was a 229.73% increase in attacks during the shutdown compared to the month before the shutdown. Similarly, Katsina experienced a 236% increase in attacks during the shutdown compared to the month before, while Zamfara saw a 101.54% increase. These findings suggest that the shutdowns may have inadvertently exacerbated the security situation, contradicting assertions of their efficacy in curbing insurgent activities.

The shutdown directives also posed significant challenges for legal professionals and CSOs seeking to address human rights violations and advocate for policy reforms. Legal professionals lamented the lack of specific laws and resources dedicated to digital rights issues, hampering their ability to challenge the shutdowns effectively in court. CSO leaders highlighted gaps in knowledge and capacity among community organizations, hindering their efforts to document human rights violations and mobilize against the shutdowns.

Furthermore, deployment of new ICTs presupposes that the technologies will be used ethically to fulfill desirable objectives. However, technology on its own is value neutral. While it may be used by bandits to plan and execute attacks, it fulfills various other praiseworthy purposes in society. While the government decision of shutting down mobile telecommunication services was ostensibly meant to disrupt bandits' communication capabilities, it was seen by Nigerians primarily as another form of state disruption of their means of communication and private lives to fulfill short-term political exigencies. It is not surprising that Nigerians felt that the decision to shut down telecom services

just to check banditry was 'ill-advised' and 'imprudent'.

This underscores the urgent need for a meticulous approach to addressing security challenges in conflict-affected states while safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. Rather than relying solely on blanket shutdowns, policymakers should explore alternative strategies that balance security imperatives with respect for human rights and democratic principles. This could involve targeted interventions, such as enhancing intelligence gathering, improving coordination between security agencies, and investing in community-based initiatives to address root causes of conflict and violence.

Efforts to strengthen legal frameworks, build capacity among legal professionals and CSOs, and promote evidence-based advocacy are essential for upholding digital rights, combatting internet shutdowns, and holding authorities accountable for their actions. Collaborative initiatives involving government agencies, civil society, and international partners can foster dialogue, transparency, and accountability in addressing the complex challenges posed by banditry, terrorism, and insurgency while upholding human rights standards and democratic values.

In conclusion, the findings of this research underscore the multifaceted nature of the telecommunications shutdowns as a counter-terrorism strategy and highlight the importance of balancing security imperatives with respect for human rights and democratic principles. Moving forward, policymakers, security agencies, civil society organizations, community based organisations and initiatives, and other stakeholders must work collaboratively to develop comprehensive and inclusive approaches that address the root causes of conflict, mitigate the impacts of violence on affected communities, and uphold the rule of law and human rights.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Develop Comprehensive Policy Frameworks:

The government must prioritize the establishment of robust policy frameworks that offer clear directives for implementing telecom shutdowns as a counter-terrorism strategy. These frameworks should integrate principles of proportionality, necessity, and legality, ensuring that shutdowns are employed only as a measure of last resort and are narrowly targeted to minimize unintended harm to citizens' rights and liberties. They should delineate the circumstances warranting shutdowns, institute oversight mechanisms to prevent abuse of authority, and safeguard citizens' entitlement to due process and judicial review. Legal experts and civil society organizations should actively campaign for the enactment of such legislation and endeavor to hold officials accountable for any infringements on citizens' rights.

6.2 Foster Dialogue and Consultation:

Policymakers should prioritize fostering dialogue and consultation with relevant stakeholders, including civil society organizations, legal professionals, telecommunications providers, and affected communities. By engaging in meaningful dialogue, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the diverse perspectives and concerns surrounding telecom shutdowns and work collaboratively to develop more effective and inclusive approaches to addressing security challenges while upholding human rights.

6.3 Alternative Security Measures: Rather than depending exclusively on blanket telecom shutdowns, authorities should allocate resources to alternative security strategies that mitigate the adverse effects on citizens' basic rights and liberties. This may involve targeted measures such as enhancing cooperation and synergy among

security forces and implementing community-driven programs to tackle the underlying factors contributing to banditry and broader conflicts and violence. Embracing this security approach enables authorities to address security concerns effectively while upholding citizens' fundamental rights and fostering lasting peace and development.

6.4 Strengthen Capacity Building Initiatives:

- **Provide Strategic Litigation Training for Legal Professionals:** Relevant stakeholders should prioritize the provision of strategic litigation training programs for legal professionals, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to challenge telecom shutdowns in court effectively. These training programs should focus on legal strategies, case preparation, and advocacy techniques tailored to digital rights issues, enabling legal professionals to uphold constitutional principles and protect citizens' rights in the face of government-imposed restrictions on telecommunications services.
- **Conduct Training Workshops for CSOs on Documentation of Human Rights Violations:** Training workshops should be organized for CSOs how to document human rights violations during telecom shutdowns. These workshops should provide CSOs with guidance on data collection methodologies, documentation techniques, and the use of technology tools for evidence gathering. This will strengthen accountability mechanisms and facilitate advocacy efforts aimed at addressing human rights abuses perpetrated in the context of telecom shutdowns.
- **Facilitate Community and CSO Training on Network Measurement and Circumvention Tools:** Relevant stakeholders should facilitate training

- programs for communities and CSOs on network measurement and circumvention tools, empowering them to navigate and mitigate the adverse effects of telecom shutdowns. These training sessions should offer practical guidance on identifying network disruptions, accessing alternative communication channels, and utilizing circumvention tools to bypass restrictions on internet access. By fostering digital literacy and resilience among communities and CSOs, it can enhance their ability to withstand the impact of telecom shutdowns and safeguard their rights to freedom of expression and information.

6.5 Promote Local Community Networks:

Recognizing the lasting impact of telecom infrastructure destruction on communities affected by conflict and insurgency, relevant stakeholders should prioritize community building initiatives focused on establishing and sustaining local community networks. These projects should prioritize the participation of local residents in the design, implementation, and management of communication networks tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of their communities.

6.6 Assist in Restoring Telecom Infrastructure:

Government entities and service providers should allocate resources to aid in the rehabilitation of infrastructure, aiming to restore telecommunication services in areas affected by conflict-related damages or disruptions. This effort may entail offering financial support, technical expertise, and logistical assistance to telecommunications firms and community stakeholders involved in reconstructing impaired infrastructure and establishing robust communication networks resilient to potential future disruptions.

6.7 Promote International Cooperation:

Given the cross-border impact of terrorism and the worldwide integration of telecommunications infrastructures, it is imperative to bolster international cooperation in tackling security threats while safeguarding human rights. Decision-makers should actively participate in discussions and partnerships with international counterparts, including regional bodies, multilateral organizations, and foreign governments, to establish common standards and effective strategies for handling telecom shutdowns in a manner consistent with human rights and democratic principles.

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The statements made and views expressed in this research article are solely the responsibility of the author.

Notes

- ¹ Shutdown was first announced for the whole of Zamfara state on 3rd September, 2021 and lifted on 27th November, 2021. It was announced in Katsina state on 10th September, 2021 and lifted on 9th December, 2021. For Kaduna state, it was announced on 29th September, 2021 and lifted on 26th November, 2021.
- ² Although FGDs were conducted about two years after the telecom services shutdowns, participants still had a strong recollection of the kind of impact the shutdown had on their daily living and how it made them feel. Eich, Macaulay and Ryan (1994) have observed that when people encode a memory, they not only record the visual and other sensory data, but also store their mood and

emotional state in the process. This helps in recollection.

- ³ The Brigadier General interviewed preferred not to be named, as he was not officially directed to speak. He is based in the operational environment and has been directly involved in leading operations in Zamfara state.

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About Author:

Muhammed Bello Buhari is a digital rights activist, award-winning fact-checker, and researcher in multiple fields within digital rights, internet governance, disinformation, and media freedom ecosystems. Muhammed-Bello has a keen interest in the intersection of human rights, social justice, and technology. That is why he has focused his professional career on advocating for strategies, policies and measures that make the Internet accessible, open, and affordable to improve lives and enhance democracy.

Currently, he works as an Administrative and Advocacy Lead for Digital Grassroots, a youth-led non-profit working to increase digital citizenship on Internet governance and digital rights among youth from underrepresented communities globally. He's a recipient of multiple reputable fellowships among which are the Digispace Africa Research Fellowship, Innocent Chukwuma Social Impact Fellowship - Lagos Business School, Journalism for Liberty Fellowship, Digital Rights in Africa Fellowship, TALKAM Human Rights Advocacy Fellowship, Open Minds - Young Voices (FES OMYV) Fellowship etc. In 2022, he was recognized among the '100 Most Influential Young People' in 2021 for his 'Call A Lawyer Nigeria' project he co-founded - a nonprofit network of more than 100 lawyers that provides pro bono services for persons whose rights were infringed upon when they were targeted based on their use of digital platforms or for joining the #EndSARS protests against police brutality.

This research is his project as a Fellow of the 2023 Advocacy Assembly's Internet Shutdown Activism Fellowship. It's part his action plans he developed during the fellowship to fight internet shutdown in his community.

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About the Fellowship:

The Internet Shutdown Activism Fellowship, offered by Advocacy Assembly, addresses the widespread challenges posed by internet shutdowns worldwide. These shutdowns, often occurring without warning, severely hinder individuals' access to information and their ability to engage in democratic processes. Through this fellowship, fellows gain the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to prepare for and respond to internet shutdowns proactively. The fellowship provides a unique opportunity for individuals in at-risk countries to become champions in the fight against internet shutdowns, empowering them to advocate for a free and open internet and safeguard fundamental rights.