TACKLING INSECURITY IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION: FINDING WORKABLE SOLUTIONS

GEORGINA OBEHI OAIKHENA

Like all other regions in Africa, West Africa has faced a series of security challenges since the end of European colonization in the early 1960s. The problem of insecurity poses a great threat to the corporate existence of countries in this region. Examples of violent crimes threatening the security of West African states include ritual killings, kidnapping, religious killings, suicide bombing, and ethnic clashes. People have not only been living in fear but exercising their right to freedom of movement has also become difficult since human rights violations have continued in the face of insecurity.

Discussing the problem of insecurity, Fawole and Ukeje (2005) argue that "West Africa perhaps more than any other sub-region in Africa, has acquired the unenviable notoriety as a veritable theatre of violent conflict, political instability, and state explosions". Other scholars concur with this characterization by categorizing West Africa among the world's most unstable regions in the world. Insecurity has not only threatened national integration in West Africa, it has also dealt a deadly blow or what Imhonopi and Urim (2012) call, "spectral bite" to economic development in the region. In particular, infrastructures meant to make life easier and better for people in the region have been vandalized. In this essay, I will examine this problem of insecurity and suggest possible strategies to solve them.

Evaluation of Insecurity in West Africa
To properly define insecurity, it is important to know what security is. Security refers to all measures that are taken to protect a place. It is taken to be about the pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change that they see as hostile. Security may be considered as assured freedom from poverty or want, and as precautions that are taken against theft, espionage (Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 1992).

Conversely, insecurity is a state of being subject to danger or injury. Anxiety is experienced when one feels vulnerable and insecure. The feeling of lack of confidence and not being sure of one's abilities (Cambridge Dictionary). Biland (2005) defines insecurity as the state of fear or anxiety stemming from perceived or confirmed lack of protection. It refers to a state of danger. According to Ezeoha (2011:38), insecurity is the antithesis of security.

Some of the common descriptions of insecurity include want of confidence, want of safety, fear of danger, hazard, uncertainty, doubts, lacking stability, troubles, lack of protection to mention a few. All these have been used to define insecurity and all share a common reference to a state of vulnerability to harm. It is therefore important to discuss its causes.

One of the causes of insecurity in the West African sub-region is the weak judicial system. West African countries have a poorly conceived judicial structure that often supports the repressive and hegemonic agendas of dominant political parties. In situations like this, political elites often make effort to consolidate political power, sometimes by eliminating perceived and real oppositions through extra-judicial

killings. In the late 1960s and 70s when countries like Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Togo and Sierra-Leone were just coming out of colonial rule, many citizens lived in fear and some countries experienced coup plots. The first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah is an example of political elites who used his powers to oppress his opponents in the name of national security. The other arms of government - the legislature and the judiciary – were too weak to stop the excesses of the president. A similar condition exists today as the level of corruption in government has gotten worse.

It has penetrated the government institutions to the point that government officials act despicably. The former Chief Justice of Nigeria, Walter Onnoghen agreed to this when he noted that, "Corruption in the judiciary is not limited to taking a bribe but includes giving judgment or orders based on any consideration rather than merit". While defaulters and offenders go unpunished, the rich and wealthy also buy their way out of the rule.

Another major cause of insecurity is poverty. The increasing rate of poverty in most West African countries is alarming.

What birth this poverty, on the one hand, is illiteracy, which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the region and has produced hungry and ignorant citizens. On the other hand, poverty in West Africa is a product of corruption - the diversion into private pockets, the funds meant for public developmental projects. In Nigeria for instance, it is estimated that more than $100 billion was stolen from the treasury by politicians, GDP per capital fell from $1010 in the early 1980s to $300 in 1999 (Okaduwa, 2007).

The problem of poverty is also compounded by capital flight, which is prevalent in the region due to the reluctance of local and foreign businesses to invest in the region based on fear of being duped. In many parts of the West African region, the destruction of business and infrastructures have reduced the standard of living for many people and even make them poorer.

In addition to poverty as a cause of insecurity is unemployment. Given that "an idle hand is the devil's workshop," the lack of employment opportunities for able-bodied people in West Africa has pushed many citizens into notorious behaviours and criminal activities. To make ends meet, many West Africans engage in armed robbery, electoral violence and vote-buying, and ritual killings. The "One Million boys" raid in parts of Lagos and its environs in April 2020 shows the extent to which unemployment can breed insecurity.

Even before 2020, the problem of unemployment in Nigeria had once made pushed many youths into armed conflicts with Multinational Oil companies in the Niger Delta area and many of such youths are also members of the Boko Haram sect in the northern part of Nigeria.

Religious and ethnic intolerance are also some of the causes of conflicts that produce insecurity in the West African region of Africa. Major religious groups in the region are Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) worshipers. Regrettably, the three religious groups, especially Islamic and Christian worshipers, are often at war with each other.

The Tuareg conflict in Mali and Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria are good examples of

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religious conflicts in West Africa. The rebellion of 2012 began in the early 1960s with a demand for independence by the Tuareg. They justified their demand based on ethnic differences between them and the Bambara groups who controlled the government of Mali. This ethno-religious conflict has led to massive loss of lives and properties. Likewise, the Boko Haram crisis has been explained as part of the ploy by the Northern elites to control Nigeria's polity through sustained violence by capitalizing on the difference between Muslim and Christian beliefs. Over the year, terrorist groups have invaded churches, bombed government buildings, and killed villagers, and kidnapped school children.

The problem of insecurity has also gotten worse over the years as a result of the proliferation of Arms in the West African sub-region. While the proliferation of arms and light weapons may not directly cause conflicts and criminal activities, their availability and flow through the region's porous borders have escalated minor conflicts, undermines peace processes, increased violent crimes, and hindered the development of the region. In March 2018, the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy (CISLAC) noted that Nigeria accounts for about 70% of illegal arms in West Africa. This shows that security would continue to be endangered.

Recently, scholars have demonstrated that climate change is another cause of insecurity in the West African region. The 2019 US Intelligence Community's Worldwide Threat Assessment broadly identified climate change as a driver of conflict. It stated that "Global environmental and ecological degradation as well as climate change are likely to fuel competition for resources, economic distress, and social discontent through 2019 and beyond." This is evident in the conflict between Dogon and Fulani ethnic groups in Africa, which is majorly fueled by food and water scarcity.

The Dogon people are known for their agricultural practices while the Fulani, whose Muslim population are a semi-nomadic group. This conflict started with the accusations that Fulani brought their cattle to Dogon Farms and destroyed the farmland. The movement of these Fulani herders from the grassland of the Sahel where they lived, to other places was due to the lack of food and water for their animals. The impact of climate change in the Sahel has led to population movement as well as food/water scarcity, leading to serious competition for resources that would guarantee human security.

Workable Solutions
In ending insecurity across West Africa, local, regional and international organizations such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations need to analyse the situation critically. The way forward on security issues must be based on facts, its acceptance no matter how bitter it might be, and the collective will of the majority to improve security. On the part of the government, the support and cooperation of the people must be backed up by a robust system of reward for virtue and punishment for social vices and criminality (Brigadier- General Adeka during his lecture at LEMU workshop).

Among other measures, the West African governments should take democratization seriously. The electorate body in each state should ensure that participatory governance is established and engaged in all public institutions, including the judiciary, the legislature, the electoral commission, the press, and within political parties. Governments should engage the public in discussing and creating laws that would ensure accountability and monitoring of every public office-holder.

While anecdotal evidence suggests that some politicians are culpable in the problem of insecurity, there should be a

national summit on security for all politicians/ political parties across West African states. In this summit, politicians must find a way to end insecurity as the sincerity of purpose on the part of the leaders is highly necessary for policies on security to be successful. They should also make laws to guide the interests of the minorities whose rights are likely to be ignored by the majority parties and ethnic groups.

The security system in each West African state should be strengthened in ways that would prevent and combat violent crimes. One way to achieve this is through enhanced transnational boundary collaboration among West African states and the Sahel region. To curb the cross-border crimes, effective legislation, enforcement of laws, and diligent prosecution of criminals must be ensured in a bid to reduce the high influx of small arms and weapons. Importantly, the number of security personnel at the borders should be increased. They should not only be equipped with appropriate technology for combating crimes, they should also undergo regular training in a bid to equip them with skills to gather and share actionable intelligence in a timely manner. Moreover, the welfare of security personnel should be taken seriously in order to encourage them and foster a commitment to their work.

The need for public enlightenment and awareness on security matters cannot be overemphasized. Discovering that one of the major causes of insecurity in West Africa is ethnic conflicts, people should be educated on the impact of violence and how to promote peaceful co-existence. The major ethnic groups in each country

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should be encouraged to co-exist with the minorities in order to promote equality and peace for development. People should also be enlightened on respect for human rights and how to protect the rights from abuse. Knowledge is power, thus, the government should invest in public enlightenment campaigns.

Broad-base education should be encouraged in every country in the region. It is disheartening that governments in most West African countries pay less attention to basic primary and secondary education. In places where students still sit on the floor to receive lectures, adequate classrooms and chairs, well-trained teachers, and modern teaching/learning facilities should be made available. The government should increase the education budget in order to make adequate funds available to pay teachers, build and maintain infrastructures. Also, efforts should be made to monitor school management in a bid to promote accountability. It is believed that empowering people through education will lead to human capital development and this will reduce unemployment and ignorance that are causing insecurity.

The importance attached to the exportation of cash crops by the West African governments should be adjusted to eradicate hunger in the sub-region. To make a difference in the lives of the people, food security should be prioritized as this will bring about political, economic, and social stability. In areas where the tension between farming and herding communities is rampant, adequate lands should be provided along with reliable water supplies through dams and boreholes.

Agriculture should be encouragement and farmlands should be protected. One major role of the government in this area is to promote agricultural investment through tax relief for commercial food crop farmers who are moving from rain-fed agriculture to irrigation farms. De-emphasizing cash crop production will not result in loss of foreign exchange but will establish a balance between food and cash crop production, thereby improving prices. This will bring both revenues to the region's economy and also curb poverty.

Furthermore, the number of unemployed people is alarming and job creation is a major solution. To create employment opportunities for people, capital in form of soft loans should be made available to empower unemployed people. Money should not only be provided to start small-scale businesses, adequate measures should be in place to ensure the loans are judiciously used for investment purposes. Government regulatory and legislative frameworks on economic policies and programs should be revised in West African countries to promote gender equality, especially in areas where women have been marginalized. Also, the government of each state should diversify the economy and revive the neglected sectors.

West African government should budget more funds for infrastructural development. Since new public works like roads and railway construction, as well as new hospitals and school building projects, are labour intensive projects, employing young people to execute them would reduce unemployment. By implication, this project will keep unemployed people occupied and reduce their availability for criminal activities. In Senegal for instance, the government has created many jobs in rural areas for many years through small-scale projects like tree planting. This has not only been used to reduce unemployment, but it has also helped in combating

desertification. The national governments in West Africa in partnership with development agencies and civil society organizations should expand projects in this field. This will keep many youths busy and reduce conflicts resulting from idleness and indoctrination.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that insecurity is retarding the growth and development of economies in the West African region. Given that insecurity kills all that is beautiful and renders society unsafe, tackling the problem requires government commitment and consistency in all areas. Therefore, governments' approach at all levels must be elaborate and strategic to be successful.

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