

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

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Since the mid-1990s, conflict and violent crimes account for the highest number of deaths in the West African sub-region. In fairness, this condition of insecurity is not unique to the West African countries but a problem that affects the entire world. To understand the concept of insecurity, it is pertinent to have a clear understanding of what constitutes security. According to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report from 1994, security is "the human survival and dignity through freedom from fear (violence) and freedom from want (poverty)".

The United Nations Commission on Human Security (UN-CHS) defines human security as "protecting the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance freedoms and human fulfillment". In this context, insecurity is a partial or total absence of human survival and dignity occasioned by fear (violence) and want (poverty). The need to confront the increasing level of insecurity stems from the fact that security is one of the basic human needs, a verifiable assurance of survival, progress, and prosperity. Accordingly, this essay examines the menace of insecurity in West Africa and proposes practicable ways of ending insecurity in the region.

Insecurity in the West African Sub-Region
Insecurity is a problem that has generated policy responses from local, regional, and international organisations. According to the 1994 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) yearly report, the basic seven areas of potential security concern are economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. The report also lists the primary dangers to

these areas, which include unchecked population growth, a discrepancy in economic opportunities, migration pressures, environmental degradation, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Sadly, the rising number of violent crimes in West Africa and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) areas have made countries like Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Liberia insecure.

In northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, a contention between Boko Haram and the Nigerian military has spread to other nations. This crisis is one of the world's greatest emergencies at present, with almost 20 million people affected. The Boko Haram terrorists have destabilized states in north-eastern Nigeria for some years now, particularly with the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014, bombing of the UN and other government buildings, kidnappings of people for ransom, and coordinated attacks on communities.

Since 2009, the sect has slaughtered a huge number of individuals and dislodged millions. It is estimated that about 2.5 million people have fled their homes in north-eastern Nigeria, creating a serious humanitarian crisis.

In other areas of Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region people have lost their sources of income to environmental pollution triggered by oil spills. This pollution of farmlands and water resources can be attributed to government negligence despite the huge revenue that the government is generating from the place.

The loss of jobs and pollution of the Niger Delta environment resulted in several conflicts between the federal government of Nigeria and the militant groups in the region. For some years, the conflict resulted in the kidnapping of oil workers, vandalization of oil pipes, the bombing of oil facilities, and oil bunkering. In the Middle-Belt area of Nigeria, Christian farmers and Muslim cattle herders are often clashing over access to grazing land and rights to water resources, which most times result in killings and maiming.

At the regional level, the presence of terrorist group such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) with its origin in Algeria (North Africa), and the various bombing in Mali, Niger and Mauritania led to the establishment of a joint command in April 2010 between Niger, Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria to tackling insecurity. Besides, the dramatic increase in terrorist activities led by Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso have caused several widespread violence and insecurity.

In addition, challenges of state-building, including electoral violence have caused insecurity in many West African states. For example, the dispute over the presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire prompted a four-month violent conflict in 2010 and similar events in other West African countries have projected election as a do or die affair. Moreover, the United Nations report on drugs and crime emphasized that West Africa is a major route in the smuggling of illegal drugs across the continent. Other causes of insecurity in West Africa, including porous borders, poor security system,

corruption, and illiteracy threaten West Africa's regional peace and stability.

According to the 2006 UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, poverty and youth unemployment make the spread of violent extremism easier. The estimated rate of unemployment among youths - the major perpetrators of violent acts - is estimated to be three times higher than among older adults. While some youths are unemployed, others engage in illegal migration in search of greener pasture in Europe and North America. The problem of unemployment directly affects security because unemployed youths are easy recruits for terrorist groups like Boko Haram.

Also, bad governance and political instability have been identified as major impediments to the efficient functioning of government institutions.

Furthermore, several studies have shown that insecurity in West African states is due to government ineptitudes and bad leadership. Bad governance in West African countries has manifested in the

government's inability to provide the basic amenities and social services for their people. This has produced a crop of bitter and frustrated citizens who are more likely to respond violently to any event. Under such conditions, there is a high propensity for criminal activities that are likely to result in the loss of lives and properties. The weak and corrupt judicial system also allows criminals to escape justice sometimes.

Besides, ethnic and religious clashes also cause insecurity across West Africa. This is common in places where the relationship between two or more ethnic and religious groups is characterized by mutual distrust, fear, and an inclination towards violence.

Governments should introduce welfare programs to support unemployed youth while efforts should be made to encourage local and foreign private investors to establish industries and other businesses that would employ people.

Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone are examples of West African countries that have experienced bloody civil wars caused by ethnicity.

Other countries with growing ethnic rivalries are Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Senegal. The regular and rampant ethnic conflicts and religious clashes between Muslims and Christians most times cause significant damage to the economy of these countries. Similarly, inter-group clashes in Northern Ghana between the Konkombas and the Nanumbas have been a recurring phenomenon since the 1990s with several people killed and many displaced. These conflicts are sometimes caused by claims and counter-claims to scarce resources and perceived unfairness in state allocation of financial and natural resources.

Poverty, which is another cause of insecurity is surprisingly more terrible in the resource-rich countries of West Africa such as Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. This is because a large portion of the mineral resources in these countries are exploited by the political elites without accountability.

The unequal distribution of state resources therefore exposes citizens of these states to hunger and starvation. While hunger has led many people into armed robbery and kidnapping, most West African countries have the lowest annual Gross Domestic Product in the world. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund statistics on Mali, 50.4% of the population are living below the poverty line of \$1.24 per day (UNICEF, 2015).

Workable Solutions to Tackling Insecurity in the West African Sub-Region

Drawing from the above causes of insecurity in the West African sub-region, there is the need for a consolidated effort in tackling the menace. Some workable solutions include eradication of corruption,

increase in employment opportunities, especially for youths, strengthening good governance, fostering unity among ethnic and religious groups, campaigning against illegal migration, and improving remuneration of security personnel across West African states.

Many West African countries are struggling to create employment opportunities for their citizens because their economic policies and programs are based on foreign economic strategies they could hardly comprehend or manage. This means that the countries in this category need to create their own economic policies that will address unemployment issues peculiar to their country. Governments could also introduce welfare programs to support unemployed youth while efforts should be made to encourage local and foreign private investors to establish industries and other businesses that would employ people.

Furthermore, by restructuring the education system in West African states, schools would be equipped to produce entrepreneurial and resourceful graduates.

Also, serious efforts should be made to end bad governance in West Africa. This is important because corruption would never allow security votes to be judiciously used. Therefore, West African people should strive to elect god leaders that will provide basic amenities like electricity, water supply, quality health facilities, and quality education that would help in ending insecurity.

Importantly, the political environment of all countries in the region should be free of violence and hate crimes. Periodic elections in West African states should be carried out in a civil manner in a bid to guarantee a smooth transfer of power and democratization. An end to bad governance should also include the equitable distribution of resources for the benefit of all citizens. The growing gap

between the rich and the poor in West African societies, should also be bridged.

Without any doubt, ending insecurity across the West African sub-region would be difficult without addressing ethnic and religious intolerance. The rising conflicts between religious and ethnic groups should be managed by charismatic leaders whose approach to national issues is known to be fair and unbiased. Religious and tribal leaders should also be encouraged to preach peace and harmony to their followers. Importantly, governments should be fair, and just in the treatment of all citizens and should discourage all forms of marginalization, discrimination, and nepotism in dealing with ethnic, religious, and political issues that may trigger conflict.

Poverty alleviation can also play important role in the promotion of peace and stability in the West African sub-region. Among other strategies, food security should be vigorously pursued by governments through improved funding of agriculture. For this to be successful, there is the need to train and equip farmers for mechanized farming.

Also, governments should collaborate with development and microfinance banks to provide loans, take-off grants and land to individuals who are interested in farming. All these are necessary to making agriculture a major tool in the eradication of poverty. In addition, social infrastructures should be made available in rural areas. These include a regular power supply, good roads, storage facilities, and potable water. With these basic amenities in place, the rural to urban drift will be reduced and agricultural production will increase. This will ultimately lead to a massive reduction in food scarcity and unemployment.

To end hunger and starvation, governments should invest in staple food crop production in the sub-region. One way to promote local food production is to reduce food importation in order to enable the effective utilization of locally-made goods. Bearing in mind that when there is food security, there would be economic, political, and social stability in the region. Hence, food security should be one of the priorities of governments in the West African region.

With regards to the industrial sector, peace and stability are important for foreign direct investment. Thus, efforts should be made to prevent political instability through good governance, transparency, and accountability. Worthy of mention is the need to train and re-train

security personnel in order for them to carry out their jobs effectively. Insecurity in West Africa can only be eradicated when security agents are well-equipped and adequately trained to combat crimes. Therefore, the welfare of security officials should be prioritized when security policies and budgets are finalized. Moreover, new, and enhanced technology should be acquired for security agencies so they can monitor security situations, analyze threats and inform the public on ways to advance national security.

Conclusion

The problem of insecurity is increasing in the West Africa sub-region, leaving many communities in a broken state. Nigeria, as well as other West African countries, have suffered greatly from terrorism and other criminal activities like kidnapping. Until the underlying causes of insecurity in West Africa are tackled, the sub-region will remain vulnerable. Accordingly, there is the need for a consolidated effort by regional,

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national, and local organizations and governments at all levels to address all problems that are causing the loss of lives and properties in the West African sub-region. In pursuant of this necessity, workable solutions to the problems include job creation, good governance, unity among ethnic/religious groups, and better training of security officers. Besides, the legal frameworks set up by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should be revised in ways that would accommodate the growing security challenges of the region. Thus, all hands must be on deck to end insecurity in the West African sub-region.

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