

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

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**Insecurity** is a global challenge with transboundary implications. In the West African sub-region, insecurity takes many forms which vary from country to country. In Nigeria, there are Boko Haram attacks in the north, farmers-herdsmen clashes in the Middle Belt, and kidnapping for ransom with armed robbery in the south. In Ghana, chieftaincy and ethnic clashes, violent demonstrations, proliferation of arms, drug trafficking as well as sexual and gender-based violence are some of the notable threats to security. In Mali, there are frequent troubles with violent crimes such as kidnapping and armed robbery, especially by militia groups.

These are seen to be more prevalent during local holidays and seasonal events while in the Republic of Benin, transnational crimes such as trafficking in persons, drugs, Small Arms Weapons (SALW), and other illicit goods continue to undermine state-building and contribute to regional insecurity. Finding workable solutions to tackle human insecurity has never been more imperative as it will enable countries to shift focus towards other issues like tackling food insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic which also constitute human existential threats. Insecurity depicts "the state of fear and anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection."

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) divides human security and by extension human insecurity into seven components: economic, food,

health, environmental, personal, community, and political components. For proper identification and recommendation of ideal workable solutions to the problem of insecurity in the West African sub-region, it is necessary to outline the causes of the problem. First, the sequential deterioration of the macro-economy in West Africa since the 1980s has contributed to human insecurity.

In Nigeria, the rising external debt profile from \$7.9 billion in 2015 to \$27 billion in 2020 coupled with the increasing rate of inflation and Naira devaluation, has led to the struggle for economic resources. The impact of this on the labour market has been an increase in the rate

of unemployment, especially among youths. This has also fueled an increase in cases of armed robbery and illegal businesses such as human trafficking and kidnapping for ransom as it is often said that "an idle mind is the devil's workshop."

Secondly, the West African sub-region is bedeviled by systemic corruption, a lethal social evil manifesting in the political administration of West African states. The existence of systemic corruption in this region has caused mass poverty and a high level of unemployment over the years, the result of which has been political instability. Systemic corruption has also caused underfunding of public services, chief among which is security. In fact, since their independence from colonial rule, systemic corruption has caused a series of coups in Togo, Nigeria, and Ghana. It is also one of

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the causes of civil wars in the West African sub-region.

The weakness of the national security apparatus in West African states also plays a huge role in the problem of insecurity plaguing the region. Most West African countries have porous borders due to weak border control systems and poorly trained/funded police and customs officers. Added to this weak border policing is the problem of weak criminal justice systems. Evidence suggests that most criminal justice systems in West Africa do not follow the rule of law.

Internally, they lack effective coordination and information sharing among relevant agencies, and externally, there is evidence of limited institutional cooperation with neighbouring countries. This weak border management and transnational crime tracking have aided the rise in trans-border crimes, including the rapid spread of terrorist activities in border towns of West African countries.

According to the Institute for Security Studies, there is strong evidence suggesting that climate change is another driver of insecurity in the West Africa sub-region. In some parts of Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, many towns are in peril due to rising sea levels. In other places where erosion is not a problem, the shrinking of Lake Chad - a source of water for millions of people in West Africa, has repeatedly caused conflicts among nationals of West African countries who are struggling over access to water resources.

The International Crisis Group reports that in Nigeria, the farmers-herdsmen clashes have escalated drastically in recent years as climate change continues to drive herders toward the south into farmlands. Desertification, excessive flooding, landslides, drought, pollution, sandstorms, and the problem of pests have pushed many Fulani herdsmen into the south where

there is improved vegetation, good weather conditions, and market opportunities. The Global Terrorism Index also shows that farmers-herdsmen conflicts in the West African sub-region, which accounted for over 800 deaths in 2015, have since multiplied.

Another important factor contributing to the problem of insecurity in the West Africa sub-region is intra and inter-communal rivalry and conflicts. Often, these conflicts manifest in ethno-religious forms with their roots in cultural, ethnic, and religious divides, an example of which is the religious violence between Christian and Muslim communities.

In Nigeria, the most impacted states are Benue, Taraba, and Plateau. Ethnic violence in Nigeria often manifests as urban riots such as the Yoruba-Hausa disturbances in Lagos and clashes between the Itsekiri and Ijaw in Delta State. Also, the Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State has had communal wars, the most recent being the 2010 farmland tussle between the Nsadop and Boje communities. These conflicts have claimed about 400 lives and the displacement of up to 6000 persons. Boundary or border disputes have also been identified as a major threat to security in the West African region.

Empirical evidence suggests that boundary disputes do not only occur within West African states but also among them. In Nigeria for instance, the boundary disputes between the Annang people of Akwa Ibom state and their Igbo neighbour, particularly in Abia State have been one of the numerous protracted boundary disputes in the country. Over the years, countless lives have been lost to such conflicts with serious implications for national security.

In respect of boundary disputes between countries, the "Agacher Strip War" between Burkina Faso and Mali was over a

long strip of land in Oudalan. This dispute caused armed conflict on two occasions (1974 and 1985) which resulted in about 59 to 300 casualties.

Police brutality is also a major cause and form of insecurity in West Africa, especially in Nigeria. This is an oxymoron because it is expected that the function of the police is to enforce laws and protect citizens. However, this is not the case in many West African countries.

A report by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on April 16, 2020 indicates that security forces kill more Nigerians than COVID-19 and that Nigerian security forces have a reputation for brutality. The Council on Foreign Relations also stated that "At least 1476 people were killed by state actors in the country, over the past year."

The most implicated unit in the Nigerian police is the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and officers in the unit have been reported to be involved in extortion, harassment, intimidation, and extra-judicial killings. These misconducts sparked public outcry recently, which resulted in the popular #EndSARS campaign on social media.

Finally, the role of illiteracy and lack of quality education cannot be overemphasized in the rising insecurity across West African states. Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

Importantly, the article states that education "shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the promotion of peace." However, the lack of education or quality education owing to poor funding of the education sector has increased the level of poverty and unemployment in the West African sub-region.

The implication of this has been increasing cases of religious indoctrination, militancy, and terrorism which pose threat to national and regional security. Many people who are literate but lack the practical skills needed to secure employment or be self-employed end up in criminal activities. This suggests that quality education is essential, not only for regional security but also for regional security apparatus in

appraising situations and analyzing threats to peace and stability.

The deteriorating security in West Africa has resulted in developmental challenges such as endemic poverty, high rate of unemployment, low industrial output, unstable and deteriorating exchange rate, high inflation rate, inadequate physical and social infrastructure, large domestic debt, and rising external debt. These problems have generated responses from national, regional, and continental actors who are seeking workable solutions to the challenges.

As mentioned above, insecurity in the region differs from country to country. Thus, each country should create strategies that would suit their local problems and at the same time, complement the efforts of other countries.

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It is important to note that while the emerging security threats are imminent and have varied implications for the stability of West Africa, there are existing mechanisms that could be strengthened for mitigation. For instance, the National Peace Council in each West African country could be mobilized to support local peacebuilding efforts. Also, the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in Nigeria in 2003 is a federal law enforcement agency established by the government with the sole aim of investigating financial crimes and combating corruption.

Similar systems at the regional level should be empowered and mobilized, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which was created 40 years ago primarily as an economic organization but realized that insecurity is a major obstacle to economic development. It was this realization that led to the creation of platforms aimed at both conflict management and prevention such as the ECOWAS Conflict and Prevention Framework (2008).

To complement the above measures, I recommend the following additional strategies. Firstly, it is always said that "Prevention is better than cure." In this context, intra and inter-state conflicts should be avoided as much as possible. There should be peacebuilding activities to address issues that are likely to cause violent conflicts. These should involve political parties, religious groups, human rights groups, and regional organizations with representatives of states.

Third-party actors that have leverage over any conflicting parties in the region should also be allowed to participate in peacebuilding initiatives. Governments of West African countries should align their counter-terrorism strategies with that of regional organizations like ECOWAS in a bid

to enhance synergy in the prevention and mitigation of terrorism and other threats from extremists.

Secondly, West African countries experiencing insecurity should seek international assistance and partnerships in a bid to redress their security challenges. This is because regional bodies like ECOWAS have limited military capability needed to deal with terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and with political instability in member states. For instance, ECOWAS was militarily absent during the Mali crisis in 2012 due to the problem of finance and logistics. Significantly, West African countries battling terrorism have failed to request military support from certain countries due to national pride and reluctance to undermine their own sovereignty. As a corollary, terrorism continues to plague these nations. This indicates that there is an urgent need to improve foreign relations to allow for a more efficient response to future crises in the region. There should also be strong multi-lateral cooperation and intelligence sharing among the West African states.

Importantly, corruption - the bane of peace, progress, and development in West Africa - should be tackled with alacrity. For this to happen, West African people must be directly involved. Electorates should ensure they vote for politicians with the future of the country in their minds and not sell their votes to the highest bidder. This will ensure that trustworthy leaders with integrity are elected.

Also, Civil Society Organizations should serve as a watchdog by ensuring that honest, intelligent, and morally upright people are appointed or elected to public offices across the region. By fighting corruption and smuggling in the region, West African countries would benefit more from regional economic integration and rely less on external donors for economic development.

Regional and national governments should strengthen the protection of human rights. This should be done by empowering all the national human rights commissions to operate without the interference of the political class. The government should ensure that all barriers to freedom of expression and other inalienable rights are removed. This will ensure an independent and credible mass media. Members of the public should also be sensitized regularly on their rights as well as responsibilities, and they should be given information on how to seek redress for rights violations.

Importantly, national governments of West African countries should strengthen the capacity of security agencies through periodic training, good equipment, and encouraging remuneration. Efforts should also be made

to improve the relationship between police and their host community. In Nigeria, the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for the supervision of security agencies, should be equipped with quality human and material resources.

Anecdotal reports have shown that most Nigerians are unable to recall the eleven-digit security mobile numbers provided by the Nigerian Police and have advocated that the Nigerian Police should have a three-digit number for all emergencies, just like the 911 emergency telephone number in advanced countries. By providing this kind of functional helpline for members of the public, people would be empowered to report emergencies as well as give feedback on the services and conduct of security agencies. This will allow government to identify areas in need of improvement.

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Besides, the importance of education cannot be overemphasized as it is the most prominent factor in creating good citizens. Quality education should be given top priority in the budgets of West African countries. Governments at all levels should ensure that schools are equipped with adequate teaching and learning facilities to enhance the transfer of knowledge.

There should also be regular review and redesigning of the academic curriculum across all levels to incorporate technical skills. Civics education should be mandated in all schools in order to teach students the

importance of peace and religious tolerance as well as the consequences of conflict. National orientation should also be carried out through billboards, television, radio, and the internet on security and citizenship. This should be supported by the creation of skill acquisition centres that would provide job opportunities for the

economic empowerment of people.

One way of achieving this is by setting up youth welfare schemes. This state-led program should focus on providing grants to unemployed youths for self-employment. It should also provide financial assistance for youths aspiring to attend post-secondary institutions and technical training programmes.

Environmental protection should be explored as a key strategy to tackle insecurity, especially in Nigeria. The Federal government in collaboration with State and Local governments, community leaders, civil societies, and Non-Governmental Organisations should experiment with using ranches and grazing lands to end farmers-herdsmen clashes.



Furthermore, grazing should be limited to states that are more receptive to the herdsmen. In addition, the government should encourage cattle breeders to shift their focus from beef to milk production. This will contribute substantially to the national economy and considerably reduce ethnic clashes.

More so, with increased mobility of people and goods across borders facilitating the movement of criminals and weapons, there should be enhanced collaboration between border control agencies and law enforcement authorities in the sub-region. National systems of entry into and exit from countries should be integrated in ways that would improve the movement of goods and people.

Only officers with integrity should be placed at borders in order to ensure that all protocols are duly observed. Security checkpoints, widely known as 'stop and search' on major highways should also be made available and regulated to reduce multiple barricades and extortions.

In conclusion, since the world is now a global village by virtue of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), information related to security should be disseminated freely and quickly. For West Africa not to be left out in the ICT revolution, national governments in the region should embrace security digitization.

This involves the provision of CCTV cameras in strategic places such as government buildings, roads, important streets, offices, cinemas, schools, hotels, and restaurants. These will aid security surveillance and deter criminals. Footage from these technologies would also help to solve and prosecute crimes. Finally, tackling insecurity in West Africa starts with the local, national, and regional governments playing their parts, which include showing concern for the wellbeing of their people.

By following the above-listed approach in tackling the problem of insecurity in the West African sub-region, the governments would be able to create a safe environment for peace and economic development at the local and national levels.

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