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Good Governance, Security and Economic Development in West Africa

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Abstract:

West Africa's development progress is constrained by interlocking deficiency in governance, security, and economic performance. Since 2020, the region has faced eight coups, expansion in terrorism, and high unemployment rate, despite abundant resources and intra-regional trade opportunities. This study employed systematic review and applies a "tripod model" to analyses the connection between good governance, security, and economic performance in west Africa. Using comparative case evidence from Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, and Cabo Verde, by exploring 2000-2026 governance, conflict, and economic data, the study traces how institutional weakness generates grievance, fuels insecurity, and raises business costs. Conversely, where governance improves, security stabilizes and private investment follows. The paper concludes with an integrated policy agenda for ECOWAS states: enforce democratic norms, reform security sector governance, and anchor AfCFTA implementation in job creation to reduce terrorism recruitment pools.

Keywords: Good governance, human security, economic development, West Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

West African region possesses abundant human and natural resources, and access to the world's largest free trade area under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Yet this potential remains constrained by a mutually reinforcing triad of challenges: governance deficits, persistent insecurity, and sluggish, undiversified economic development.

The past decade has witnessed a troubling reversal of democratic gains. Between 2020 and 2023, West Africa experienced eight military coups—in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, eroding constitutional order and weakening regional norms against unconstitutional changes of government (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). Concurrently, the situation of insecurity has expanded in the region. Jihadist violence once confined to the Sahel now threatens coastal states, with attacks recorded in northern Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. In Nigeria, banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder conflicts, and separatist agitation impose a cost estimated at 2.6% of GDP annually, while piracy in the Gulf of Guinea continues to disrupt vital maritime trade.

These security shocks have not occurred in a vacuum. They are deeply intertwined with governance failures through endemic corruption, exclusionary politics, weak rule of law, and poor service delivery. The 2024 Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows West Africa's overall governance score stagnating at 48.9 out of 100 since 2014, with declines in Safety & Rule of Law and Participation & Rights. Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index places the regional average at just 34 out of 100. Where citizens cannot hold leaders accountable

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or access basic justice, grievances accumulate and non-state armed groups exploit the legitimacy vacuum (IIAG,2024).

Despite average regional GDP growth of 3.9% in 2024, high population growth means per capita gains remain marginal. Approximately 43% of West Africans live in extreme poverty, and youth unemployment hovers between 15% and 25%. Seven ECOWAS member states are currently in debt distress, constraining public investment in infrastructure, education, and health—precisely the sectors that could absorb young labor and reduce conflict risk. Insecurity further raises the cost of doing business: firms divert resources to private security, supply chains are disrupted, and foreign direct investment avoids high-risk zones.

This paper contends that good governance, security, and economic development in West Africa are not separate policy domains but legs of a single tripod. Weak governance breeds insecurity through exclusion and impunity; insecurity, in turn, undermines markets, deters investment, and destroys infrastructure; and without broad-based economic opportunity, states lack the fiscal base to strengthen institutions or deliver security, feeding further grievance. Breaking this vicious cycle requires integrated approaches that treat institutional reform as the foundation for both peace and prosperity.

The study proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes a conceptual framework linking the three variables. Section 3 surveys the current state of governance, security, and economic indicators across ECOWAS. Section 4 presents comparative case studies from Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, and Cabo Verde to illustrate divergent pathways. Section 5 proposes policy recommendations for national governments, ECOWAS, and international partners.

By centering governance as the keystone, this paper contributes to ongoing policy debates within ECOWAS, the African Union, and among development partners seeking sustainable solutions to the region's overlapping crises.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW: GOOD GOVERNANCE, SECURITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA

The triad of governance, security, and development in West Africa is characterized by interdependence and regional variation, shaped by colonial legacies, natural resource dependence, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Governance and Security in West Africa

Weak state capacity and poor governance are consistently linked to insecurity across the region. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG, 2024) reports that West African countries scoring below 50 on “Safety & Rule of Law” experience homicide rates 3x higher and 4x more conflict events than those above 50. Gyimah-Brempong and Traynor (1999) found political instability reduced economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa by 1.1–2.5% annually, with West Africa disproportionately affected due to coup cycles in the 1980s–90s. Consequently, the overall governance performance in the region is worse in 2023 than it was in 2014. The main driver of this is a deepening insecurity and weak institutions in almost all over the region.

For post-conflict states, Brinkerhoff (2005) argues that rebuilding legitimacy through service delivery is more critical than elections alone. Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrate this with improved police-to-population ratios and judicial reforms after 2003 correlated with intentional homicide declining from 12.9 to 3.3 per 100k in Sierra Leone (UNODC, 2019). Yet, Migdal (1988) warns of “strong societies, weak states” in parts of Nigeria and Mali, non-state actors fill governance voids, undermining monopoly of violence.

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Security and Economic performance

Insecurity directly constrains West African economies. The World Bank (2011) estimates that countries with homicide rates above 10 per 100,000 lose 2% of GDP annually to violence-related costs. In Nigeria, Ajide and Alimi (2021) show a 1% increase in terrorism incidents reduces foreign direct investment inflows by 0.6% in the following year. For Sahelian states, Uexkull et al. (2016) link climate shocks and weak governance to conflict risk, which then depresses agricultural output, the dominant sector in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

The emerging trend of terrorist activity in the region is the attack on economic assets and facilities. JNIM, Boko Haram, the 'Lakurawa group', and ISWAP deliberately target businesses, supply chains, and civilian livelihoods to weaken State authority while ensuring financial inflows that sustain their operations. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) report of October 2025, JNIM's operations in Mali reflected a clear strategy of economic coercion, evident in the takeover of Farabougou in August 2025 and the destruction of over 40 fuel tankers in September 2025, as part of an enforced fuel and trade blockade. It disrupts the movement and supply of essential commodities, triggering fuel shortages and extending economic pressure toward Coastal States. At least seven foreign industrial sites have been attacked, including six Chinese-owned premises, engaged in livestock theft and levied taxation on communities to secure their revenue. In Nigeria, Boko Haram and ISWAP increasingly targeted critical transport arteries in Borno State, deploying Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), landmines, and ambushes along highways, bridges, and commercial convoys, notably the Maiduguri Monguno corridor, cutting farmers off from markets and worsening food insecurity. On 28th April 2025, at least 26 civilians were killed when a commercial truck struck an IED near the Cameroon border, underscoring the persistent vulnerability of trade and transport routes in a conflict that has claimed over 40,000 lives over the past 15 years.⁷² Coordinated assaults on 12th and 13th May 2025 temporarily gave militants control of Marte district, a strategic node for Lake Chad-linked smuggling corridors, which underscores the use of transport nodes for revenue generation, population control, and sustained pressure on state authority. In northern Ghana, particularly the Upper West region, up to half of the cattle sold in some markets were smuggled livestock taken as forced zakat by militants from Burkina Faso, with proceeds used to fund fuel, food, and weapons for terrorist groups.

Conversely, relative stability pays dividends. Cabo Verde is cited as a regional outlier: democratic consolidation since 1991, coupled with rule-of-law reforms, coincided with homicide rates falling from 14.2 in 2000 to 6.8 in 2022 and average GDP growth of 4.1% 1992–2019 (World Bank, 2023). AfDB (2018) attributes this to “governance without resources” — strong institutions offsetting small size and geographic isolation.

Governance Quality and Economic Outcomes

Across ECOWAS, Kaufmann et al. (1999), governance dimensions predict development outcomes. Olayungbo and Quadri (2019) find that control of corruption and government effectiveness have the strongest positive effect on GDP per capita in West Africa, while voice and accountability matter less when state capacity is low. Asiedu (2006) notes that FDI to West Africa is more sensitive to rule of law than to natural resources: Ghana and Senegal, with higher WGI scores, attract more non-extractive FDI than Nigeria despite smaller markets.

The “resource curse” interacts with governance to influence economic performance. Mehlum, Moene, and Torvik (2006) show that resource-rich states with weak institutions, for example, Nigeria and Guinea experience slower growth and higher conflict risk. The study argued that

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countries with abundant resources and quality institution will experience stable economic growth and higher standard of living, while those countries that are rich in natural resources but weak institutions will experience slow economic and lower standard of living. Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian (2013) calculate that Nigeria's oil revenues since 1965 have added almost nothing to living standards due to institutional waste. The study argued that poor institutional quality in Nigeria has contributed to the sluggish economic performance and poor standard of living. For instance, the impact of the oil windfall on the economy via its effect in raising the relative prices of goods and services occupies a central role in explaining poor economic performance.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

Institutionalism Theory

The theory explains the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structures. It explains how rules of law and norms becomes authoritative guidelines for behaviour in a society.

The study is anchored on security-development nexus which explain how insecurity undermines the development aspiration of a society.

The study employed systematic review to understand the connection between governance, security and economy. It seeks to understand how governance breed insecurity in West African countries. It also looks at how governance and insecurity affect the economy of West African countries. The study adopts systematic review approach by exploring studies on governance, insecurity and economic situation in west African countries, with a view to understand the relationship between governance and security.

main data collection techniques were employed. Documentary research enabled the creation of a corpus of legal, institutional, and scientific references (legal texts, organizational reports, academic studies) relating to security, governance and economic reports in Benin and West Africa. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with various categories of stakeholders, gathered accounts of experiences, local mediation strategies, and perceptions regarding the interconnection between governance, insecurity and economic outcome.

4.0 RESULTS

The literature points to a "West African governance trap" for some states. The shows that low development means low revenue to the state and poor security provision. The poor security provision may lead to higher violence which discourage foreign investment. Breaking it requires simultaneous investment in state capacity and accountability. Evidence from Cabo Verde, Ghana, and Senegal revealed that, consistent institutional gains lower homicide and raise economic growth, even without major resources.

Evidence from Ghana revealed that political Stability through regular elections and freedom of press attract Foreign Direct Investment in gold, cocoa, oil. It also Shows that governance and peaceful transitions contain security risk.

In Nigerian governance paradox. It is characterized by Largest economy, but weak institutions. Large economy with weak institution breeds oil corruption which in turns breeds Niger Delta militancy, Boko Haram, banditry.

Evidence from Cabo Verde demonstrates an economy with low resources, but strong rule of law, low corruption and low insecurity. Also record highest Human Development Index in region. This indicates that good governance substitutes for endowments to achieve economic development.



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5.0 CONCLUSION

The study analyse the relationship between good governance, security and economic development. West Africa cannot shoot or spend its way out of crisis. The governance leg of the tripod is shortest, and the whole structure wobbles. Evidence from Cabo Verde to Mali shows institutions, not resources, decide whether states are secures and economies progress.

The study concludes that good governance and security are important tool to achieve economic development. It also emphasise the fact good governance is central to both security and economic development of the west African region.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for holistic governance reform to block corruption and waste of resources and prevent youth from joining Banditry.

There is need for reform in the security architecture to take security at the grass root level.

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For ECOWAS:

1. Enforce 2001 Protocol on Democracy: suspend states after coups + term violations. No “dialogue” without timetable for return.
2. Operationalize ECOWAS Standby Force, but pair deployments with governance missions.

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3. Regional anti-corruption court to try cross-border cases.

For International Partners:

1. Stop siloed funding. Condition budget support on PFM + election benchmarks, not just macro stability.
2. Debt-for-governance swaps: relief tied to transparent revenue management.

. For ECOWAS to meet Agenda 2063, governance reform is not a “soft” issue — it is the cheapest counter-terrorism and highest-return growth policy available.

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