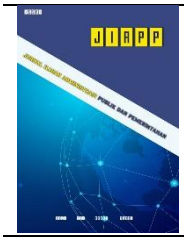

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Beyond State-Centric Security: Rethinking Human Insecurity in Africa through a People-Centred Lens

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Abstract

Human (in)security in Africa is a multidimensional challenge influenced by political, economic, social, and environmental factors. Despite various security interventions, the continent continues to face armed conflicts, terrorism, weak governance, poverty, climate change, and forced displacement. This study examines the root causes and consequences of human insecurity in Africa and evaluates the effectiveness of shifting from state-centric to people-centred security approaches. Using a qualitative research design, the study applies human security theory and analyses case studies from the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes region. Data were obtained from documentary sources, reports, and scholarly literature to identify insecurity and governance deficits. Findings reveal that state-centric security frameworks have largely failed to address the lived realities of affected populations. Persistent vulnerabilities manifest in mass displacement, food insecurity, economic underdevelopment, and social fragmentation, further fueling cycles of violence and instability. The study advocates a people-centred security paradigm prioritising inclusive governance, economic resilience, and regional cooperation. It contributes to ongoing debates on African security governance and calls for policies emphasising human dignity and well-being over militarised responses to achieve sustainable peace and development.

Keywords: Conflict and Displacement; Governance Deficit; Human Security; People-Centred Security; Sustainable Peace in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Human insecurity in Africa remains one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, characterised by persistent threats to life, livelihood, and dignity. From protracted armed conflicts and terrorism to poverty, food crises, forced displacement, environmental shocks, and public health emergencies, the continent grapples with multidimensional insecurities that undermine human well-being and sustainable development (Abasilim, Akortha & Suharyanto, 2025). While African societies have historically experienced conflicts, evidenced by pre-colonial disputes over farmland, succession, and tribal boundaries (Bujra, 2002), these early conflicts were predominantly localised, less intense, and contained. In contrast, contemporary conflicts have become more frequent, protracted, and complex, often involving state and non-state actors and destabilising entire regions (Taiwo, 2009).

Since the 1970s, Africa has experienced more than 30 wars, the vast majority being intra-state in nature. In 1996 alone, fourteen African countries were engulfed in armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and producing over eight million refugees, returnees, and internally displaced persons (Tusan, 2021). By the early 2000s, violent crises had affected approximately 30% of the continent's population, leaving millions dead and countless others trapped in cycles of insecurity and poverty (Jackson, 2000). Countries such as Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Central African Republic have endured prolonged conflicts that have not only devastated local communities but also spilt over into neighbouring states, threatening regional stability.

Despite decades of international interventions, peacekeeping efforts, and security reforms, insecurity persists and, in some cases, has intensified. One critical reason for this enduring challenge lies in the predominance of state-centric security approaches. Rooted in the traditional Westphalian model, these frameworks prioritise sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime survival over protecting individual lives and livelihoods. In many African contexts, governments have relied heavily on militarised responses to address insecurity, deploying troops, strengthening borders, and increasing defence budgets (Ajayi, Iyamah & Abasilim, 2025). However, these strategies have failed to address the structural drivers of human insecurity, such as weak governance, economic deprivation, environmental vulnerabilities, and the marginalisation of local communities (Aning, 2003; Cilliers, 2004).

Nowhere is this failure more visible than in regions such as the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes. In the Sahel, insecurity has been exacerbated by the destabilising aftermath of the 2011 Libyan crisis, which led to increased arms proliferation and insurgent activities across Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. The Horn of Africa, encompassing countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, continues to experience cycles of violent conflict, terrorism, famine, and mass displacement. At the same time, the Great Lakes region, particularly the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda, remains plagued by ethnic tensions, resource-based conflicts, and governance crises. These cases underscore the inadequacy of conventional state-led security responses and the urgent need to rethink prevailing paradigms.

At the same time, Africa faces interconnected challenges beyond armed conflict. Chronic poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality, climate change, and public health crises amplify vulnerabilities and fuel instability. For instance, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for more than 400 million people living below the international poverty line (Aduloju & Adedoyin, 2024). It hosts nearly 70% of the world's HIV/AIDS burden (Payagala & Pozniak, 2024). In regions with fragile livelihoods, climate-induced droughts, floods, and resource scarcity exacerbate competition, driving violent clashes and forced migration. These realities reveal that the threats confronting Africans today are not limited to territorial disputes or cross-border aggressions but are deeply embedded in socio-economic, political, and environmental structures.

Against this backdrop, human security offers an alternative framework for understanding and addressing Africa's persistent insecurities. Unlike traditional, state-centred models, human security prioritises the protection of individuals and communities from chronic threats and sudden disruptions in their daily lives. It emphasises freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity as fundamental security components. While global policy discourses have increasingly embraced the human security paradigm, its practical integration into African

security governance remains limited. State institutions often adopt militarised solutions while neglecting inclusive governance, social protection, and economic empowerment, resulting in the reproduction of vulnerability and instability (Aslam, 2025).

This study addresses this critical gap by rethinking human insecurity in Africa through a people-centred lens. Drawing on human security theory, it analyses case studies from the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes region to investigate the structural drivers of insecurity and evaluate the effectiveness of alternative security approaches. The research argues that resolving Africa's security crisis requires shifting the analytical and policy focus from protecting states to protecting people. The study demonstrates that a people-centred paradigm offers a more sustainable pathway to peace and development by emphasising inclusive governance, economic resilience, environmental sustainability, and regional cooperation.

The novelty of this study lies in its cross-regional comparative analysis and its application of the human security framework to African contexts. While previous research has examined individual conflicts or countries, few studies adequately assess how governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, and environmental stresses interact to shape human insecurity across multiple regions. By filling this gap, the study contributes to broader debates on security governance, development policy, and peacebuilding strategies on the continent.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the complex dynamics of human insecurity in Africa and examine how state-centric and people-centred security approaches influence the lived experiences of affected populations. The qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of social realities, perceptions, and patterns of insecurity across different contexts. The research relied primarily on multiple case studies from the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes region. These were selected due to their prolonged exposure to diverse security challenges, including armed conflicts, terrorism, forced displacement, and climate-induced vulnerabilities. These regions provide rich contexts for understanding the interplay between governance deficits, socio-economic inequalities, and the persistence of insecurity.

Data for the study were obtained from documentary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy briefs, and publications from international organisations such as the United Nations, African Union, and regional bodies. Additional secondary data were drawn from reputable research think tanks, human rights reports, and field-based assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies operating within the selected regions. This extensive use of multiple data sources ensured triangulation, improved the reliability of findings, and provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The sampling procedure involved purposive selection of case studies and documentary sources based on their relevance to the research objectives. Cases were chosen according to the severity of insecurity, multidimensional threats, and the availability of comprehensive data for meaningful analysis. Within each regional context, thematic patterns were extracted to identify recurring drivers of human insecurity and evaluate how governance frameworks either mitigated or exacerbated these challenges. This purposive approach enabled the study to focus on cases that best illustrated the consequences of failed state-centric security frameworks and highlighted the potential benefits of adopting a people-centred paradigm.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, which involved systematically reviewing and coding the collected documents to identify emerging patterns and dominant themes. These themes were organised around the key dimensions of human insecurity: political, economic, social, and environmental. They were used to evaluate the interconnections among the root causes, consequences, and governance responses to insecurity. Special attention was given to analysing policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and regional cooperation efforts, as these factors significantly influence security outcomes across the continent.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Although the study relied primarily on secondary data, all sources were properly acknowledged and cited in line with academic standards to avoid plagiarism and ensure intellectual integrity. Where reports

contained sensitive information regarding affected populations, care was taken to present the findings respectfully, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding the exposure of vulnerable individuals or communities. Additionally, selecting data sources prioritised credibility and objectivity to ensure that the study's conclusions were drawn from verifiable and ethically sound materials.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that human insecurity in Africa remains pervasive, multidimensional, and deeply entrenched, shaped by complex intersections of political, economic, social, and environmental factors. Case studies from the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions show that state-centric security models prioritising sovereignty and regime survival have largely failed to address the lived realities of vulnerable populations. Instead, human insecurity persists, manifesting through mass displacement, food crises, protracted conflicts, and socio-economic exclusion.

These findings corroborate earlier research highlighting the limitations of traditional security paradigms, which focus on protecting states rather than safeguarding individuals (Aning, 2003; Cilliers, 2004). In regions such as the Sahel, the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan crisis intensified arms proliferation, insurgencies, and terrorism, creating cross-border insecurities that militarised state responses have been unable to resolve (Woodward, 2003). Similarly, in the Horn of Africa, fragile state institutions, recurrent famines, and armed insurgencies continue to perpetuate cycles of conflict despite decades of international interventions (Hersi & Akinola, 2024). The Great Lakes region provides further evidence that resource-driven conflicts, coupled with ethnic polarisation, require more than military containment; they demand governance reforms, equitable development, and inclusive participation (Meredith, 2005; Gordon, 2007).

While earlier studies have documented Africa's chronic security challenges, this study demonstrates that insecurity is not merely the outcome of localised conflicts but the product of structural governance deficits, historical marginalisation, and external dependencies (Musa, Awudu & Elijah, 2025; Kuttu, Soku, Amidu & Coffie, 2024). For instance, the persistence of violent extremism in Mali, Somalia, and Nigeria is often attributed to insurgent strategies. However, this study shows that these movements thrive primarily because of state failures to provide basic services, equitable resource distribution, and social inclusion (Kieh, 2007). By applying the human security framework, the analysis shifts the focus from regime protection to the multidimensional risks individuals and communities face.

A key theoretical insight from this study is the inadequacy of the state-centric paradigm in addressing contemporary African insecurities. While the Westphalian model emphasises sovereignty and territorial integrity, human security theory, as advanced by the UNDP (1994), advocates for a broader understanding of security encompassing "freedom from fear," "freedom from want," and "freedom to live in dignity." The findings demonstrate that without addressing structural inequalities, environmental vulnerabilities, and governance failures, militarised interventions remain insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive (Henderson, 2000).

For example, large-scale military operations like France's Operation Barkhane temporarily suppressed insurgent advances in the Sahel. However, they failed to resolve underlying grievances concerning land dispossession, youth unemployment, and political exclusion (Woodward, 2003). Comparative analyses of counterterrorism operations elsewhere, including in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, demonstrate that sustainable security emerges where governments integrate inclusive governance strategies rather than relying solely on coercive measures (Kuttu, Soku, Amidu & Coffie, 2024; Hersi & Akinola, 2024). This highlights the need for African states to complement military operations with policies to address socio-economic disparities, expand educational opportunities, and foster regional cooperation.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the interconnected nature of African insecurities. Environmental shocks, including droughts and floods, increasingly interact with poverty and governance failures to fuel conflict and displacement. For example, climate-induced livelihood losses in the Horn of Africa exacerbate competition for scarce resources, driving communal clashes and forced migration. These findings align with Castellano's (2025) environmental security thesis,

which argues that resource scarcity multiplies conflict in fragile states. By linking ecological vulnerabilities to human security, this study broadens the analytical framework beyond conventional conflict studies and integrates insights from environmental governance literature.

The comparative cross-regional approach also highlights that Africa's insecurities cannot be adequately understood through isolated national case studies. Instead, the continent's security crises are shaped by interconnected dynamics, including colonial legacies, neo-colonial dependencies, and global economic structures (Meredith, 2005; Kuttu, Soku, Amidu & Coffie, 2024). These findings support earlier calls for more systemic approaches to African security governance (Musa, Awudu & Elijah, 2025; Bradshaw & Huang, 1991). However, this study advances the debate by illustrating, through empirical analysis, how people-centred security policies can address these structural risks more effectively than conventional militarised strategies.

Importantly, the findings also have policy implications. Shifting from state-centric to people-centred security requires prioritising inclusive governance, economic empowerment, and regional cooperation over purely militarised responses. Regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should strengthen early-warning systems, cross-border development projects, and grassroots participation in decision-making. Lessons from countries such as Rwanda, which successfully integrated local reconciliation processes into national security strategies, demonstrate the value of aligning formal governance frameworks with community-based mechanisms (Meredith, 2005).

DISCUSSION

The Colonial Legacy and Its Enduring Impact on Human Security in Africa

The persistent human insecurity in Africa cannot be fully understood without reference to its colonial past and the disruptions created by European imperialism. The carving up of African territories during the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 laid the foundation for most of the continent's contemporary socio-political and economic challenges. The artificial partitioning of Africa disregarded existing ethnic, cultural, and political boundaries, forcing disparate groups into centralised colonial structures that undermined traditional governance and conflict resolution (Meredith, 2005). By imposing foreign administrative frameworks, European powers created fragile states with weak legitimacy, institutional incapacity, and persistent intergroup tensions.

Colonial rule was exploitative by design, prioritising the extraction of natural resources and wealth for metropolitan economies while systematically excluding Africans from political participation and socio-economic development (Kieh, 2007). European powers pursued divergent administration strategies, indirect rule in British colonies and assimilation in French territories, but both approaches shared common traits: authoritarianism, coercion, and disregard for human rights (Henderson, 2000). In both cases, colonial governments imposed harsh taxation, forced labour systems, and discriminatory policies, creating deep social cleavages that extended beyond independence.

Furthermore, colonial administrations entrenched ethnic and regional divisions by favouring particular groups over others, fostering long-standing inequalities and grievances that continue to fuel contemporary conflicts. Examples include Britain's preferential treatment of northern elites in Sudan, exacerbating decades of North-South hostilities (Woodward, 2003), and Belgium's divide-and-rule policies in the Congo, which left behind fragile institutions and entrenched polarisation (Gordon, 2006). The imposition of European cultural and religious values further alienated Africans from their indigenous heritage, replacing communal governance systems with Western individualism, thereby weakening social cohesion (Nanthambwe, 2025).

Economically, the colonial state was extractive and exploitative. Land expropriations and plantation economies prioritised European markets, while Africans were subjected to restrictive labour policies and denied opportunities for economic empowerment (Ayano, 2024). Minimal investments were made in education, healthcare, and infrastructure for Africans, further marginalising local populations and limiting postcolonial development prospects (Young, 1994). Consequently, colonialism laid the groundwork for underdevelopment, weak governance, and socio-economic disparities that remain central to Africa's human security crisis today.

In essence, colonialism not only imposed exploitative political and economic structures but also dismantled indigenous systems of governance and social organisation. It generated fragile states, fragmented societies, and deep-rooted inequalities, leaving unresolved grievances that continue to drive conflicts and insecurity in the post-independence era.

Neo-Colonialism, Neo-Liberalism, and Postcolonial Insecurities

While African nations formally attained independence in the mid-20th century, colonial dynamics persisted through new forms of domination, often called neo-colonialism. Musa, Awudu, and Elijah (2025) define neo-colonialism as a situation where states appear politically independent but remain economically and strategically dependent on external powers. This phenomenon has significantly shaped Africa's post-independence security landscape, perpetuating political instability, economic dependency, and social fragmentation cycles.

In Francophone Africa, France maintained profound political and economic influence through policies called Françafrique, characterised by preferential trade agreements, military interventions, and continued resource control. French troops often intervened to sustain friendly regimes, while French corporations monopolised foreign investment, particularly in resource-rich states such as Gabon, Chad, and Côte d'Ivoire (Sylla, 2024). Similar dynamics occurred in British former colonies, where strategic interventions and economic ties were leveraged to safeguard Western interests, exemplified by Britain's involvement in Sierra Leone's civil war.

Beyond direct state influence, global financial institutions have significantly shaped Africa's postcolonial security environment. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank during the 1980s and 1990s required currency devaluations, privatisation, and public sector cuts in exchange for loans. While intended to stabilise economies, SAPs often deepened poverty, weakened state capacity, and eroded social services such as health and education, exacerbating human insecurity (Bradshaw & Huang, 1991). As Jeffrey Sachs argued, Africa's persistent debt crisis, where debt repayments exceeded aid inflows, effectively trapped many states in perpetual dependency, undermining their capacity to invest in sustainable development.

Additionally, neo-liberal globalisation has facilitated exploitative trade relations and resource extraction by transnational corporations, often at the expense of local communities. Wealth generated from Africa's natural resources disproportionately benefits external actors, while weak regulatory frameworks and corruption undermine inclusive development (Kuttu, Soku, Amidu & Coffie, 2024). These economic dependencies limit state sovereignty and create structural vulnerabilities that fuel political tensions and conflicts, particularly in resource-rich regions such as the Niger Delta, Katanga, and Darfur.

The Cold War further complicated Africa's postcolonial security environment. Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported authoritarian regimes aligned with their strategic interests, often at the expense of democratic governance and human rights. Proxy wars in Angola, Mozambique, and the Horn of Africa illustrate how external interventions intensified intra-state conflicts, militarised politics, and weakened national institutions (Hersi & Akinola, 2024). The consequences of these interventions remain visible today, with fragile states grappling with unresolved grievances, weak governance structures, and ongoing cycles of violence.

Culturally, neo-colonialism has also perpetuated a "colonial mentality," where Western values, languages, and governance models are privileged over indigenous traditions and knowledge systems (Ouma, 2025). This cultural dominance has contributed to social alienation and identity crises, further destabilising societies and weakening communal resilience to conflict.

Ultimately, neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism have sustained the structural conditions of vulnerability established during the colonial era. Through external economic domination, political manipulation, and cultural subordination, Africa's sovereignty has been compromised, hindering effective state-building and sustainable security governance. The result is a postcolonial order characterised by persistent poverty, fragile institutions, and cycles of violence that continue to undermine human security across the continent.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that human insecurity in Africa is not simply a byproduct of localised conflicts but a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by deeply embedded structural, historical, and governance-related factors. Drawing on insights from the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions, the findings show that state-centric security frameworks, rooted in the Westphalian emphasis on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regime survival, have consistently failed to address the lived realities of affected populations. While military operations and border defence strategies remain prominent in African security policy, they have proven insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive, as they often neglect the underlying drivers of vulnerability, such as poverty, political exclusion, climate-induced livelihood losses, and weak institutions.

By applying a human security framework, this study shifts the analytical focus from protecting states to safeguarding people. The findings underscore that sustainable peace and development require prioritising "freedom from fear," "freedom from want," and "freedom to live in dignity," as articulated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994). In particular, the results highlight that African conflicts and insecurities are interconnected, transcending national borders and manifesting as regional crises exacerbated by colonial legacies, neo-colonial dependencies, global economic inequalities, and environmental stresses. Addressing these challenges demands policies that are people-centred, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experiences of vulnerable communities.

From a policy and practice perspective, the study makes several recommendations. First, governments should complement security operations with inclusive governance reforms that ensure equitable resource distribution, social justice, and community participation in decision-making. Second, regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should strengthen collaborative security frameworks, including early-warning systems, cross-border development initiatives, and locally driven conflict resolution mechanisms. Third, development partners and international actors should recalibrate interventions to focus less on militarised solutions and more on economic empowerment, climate adaptation, and institution-building, collectively strengthening community resilience. Countries like Rwanda demonstrate that integrating local reconciliation processes and community-driven approaches into national security strategies can yield positive outcomes and offer valuable lessons for broader application across the continent.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The analysis is primarily based on qualitative data from secondary sources, which, while comprehensive, may not fully capture the nuanced experiences of affected populations at the grassroots level. Additionally, the focus on three subregions, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes, limits the generalizability of findings to other African contexts with distinct security dynamics. Future research should incorporate field-based ethnographic studies, longitudinal data, and participatory approaches that foreground local voices, especially those of marginalised groups, women, and youth. Comparative analyses involving regions outside Africa could also deepen understanding of how people-centred security paradigms are implemented globally and inform best practices tailored to African realities.

In conclusion, this study advances theoretical and practical debates on African security governance by demonstrating the inadequacy of state-centric frameworks and advocating for a transformative, people-centred paradigm. To break the cycles of violence, displacement, and poverty, security strategies must move beyond territorial defence and militarisation to embrace inclusive governance, socio-economic justice, environmental resilience, and community-driven peacebuilding. Ultimately, sustainable human security in Africa will depend on policies that uphold human dignity, empower local actors, and foster regional solidarity, which are indispensable principles for achieving lasting peace and development.

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