Human Security and Non-State Actors in Africa: A Double-Edged Sword under Neoliberal Governance

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Abstract- Human security in Africa is increasingly shaped by the activities of non-state actors (NSAs), both non-violent, sometimes mitigating terrorism, and violent, which exacerbate human insecurity. The dual role of NSAs, coupled with neoliberal governance frameworks characterised by economic liberalisation, foreign investment, and conditional aid, presents a double-edged sword for African populations. While neoliberal policies have improved access to healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities in certain contexts, they have simultaneously intensified socioeconomic inequalities, weakened state institutions, and disproportionately affected marginalised communities, undermining long-term stability. The study aims to critically analyse the interplay between human security, non-state actors, and neoliberal governance in Africa, with a focus on understanding how these dynamics simultaneously empower and endanger populations. Employing a qualitative research design, the study relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and policy documents, analysed through content analysis to identify patterns, contradictions, and systemic impacts of both violent and non-violent NSAs on human security outcomes. Findings reveal that non-violent NSAs, such as NGOs and international development agencies, enhance resilience by providing education, healthcare, and livelihood support, sometimes abating terrorist influence. Conversely, violent NSAs, including insurgent groups and militias, exploit socioeconomic disparities and weak governance to perpetuate insecurity. The research concludes that sustainable human security requires integrated, context-sensitive policies that harmonise state and non-state actor efforts, strengthen institutional accountability, and mitigate the unintended negative effects of neoliberal interventions. The study contributes conceptually by clarifying the dual, "double-edged" nature of human security under neoliberalism in Africa and offers policy-relevant insights for development practitioners, governments, and peacebuilding initiatives.

Keywords: Human Security, Non-State Actors, Violent and Non-Violent Actors, Neoliberalism, Africa, Development, Resilience, Vulnerability

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of human security emerged globally in response to the limitations of traditional, state-centric notions of security that prioritised territorial defence over human welfare. The end of the Cold War marked a critical turning point, as intra-state conflicts, economic dislocation, pandemics, environmental degradation, and transnational terrorism increasingly threatened individual and community well-being rather than state borders alone. The 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report* formally articulated human security as freedom from fear and freedom from want, encompassing economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political dimensions (UNDP, 1994). Since then, human security has gained prominence within global policy debates, particularly in contexts marked by fragile states, inequality, and protracted conflict.

Africa has remained a central theatre for the application and contestation of the human security agenda. Despite notable economic growth in parts of the continent, averaging about 3.8 per cent annually between 2000 and 2019, Africa continues to host a disproportionate share of the world's poorest and most insecure populations (World Bank, 2020). Armed conflicts, terrorism, forced displacement, food insecurity, and health crises such as Ebola and COVID-19 have underscored the vulnerability of African societies. The African Union's *Agenda 2063* reflects an explicit shift towards people-centred security and development, yet implementation has been uneven, constrained by weak institutions and external economic pressures. Within this continental context, the rise of non-state actors (NSAs), both violent and non-violent, has become a defining feature of Africa's security landscape. Violent non-state actors such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in

Somalia, and various militias in the Sahel and the Great Lakes region have exploited poverty, marginalisation, and governance vacuums to mobilise support and perpetuate insecurity (Musa, 2025). Conversely, non-violent actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, humanitarian agencies, and private development actors, have played increasingly visible roles in delivering essential services where states have failed. In some cases, these actors have contributed to stabilisation and counter-radicalisation by providing education, livelihoods, and psychosocial support, thereby sometimes abating the influence of terrorist groups (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021).

At the regional and sub-regional levels, particularly in West and Central Africa, human security challenges are intensified by porous borders, transnational criminal networks, and regional inequalities. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has acknowledged the significant rise in terrorism and banditry across the region, declaring the surge an "existential threat" (Kwarkye, 2024). In response, both state and non-state actors have intervened, often in fragmented and uncoordinated ways, reflecting deeper structural constraints linked to governance and political economy. These dynamics are closely tied to the ascendancy of neoliberal governance, which has shaped African political and economic systems since the 1980s through structural adjustment programmes, economic liberalisation, privatisation, and aid conditionalities. While neoliberal reforms have facilitated foreign investment, expanded market access, and improved service delivery in certain contexts, they have also weakened state capacity, reduced social spending, and exacerbated inequality (Musa and Bayero, 2024; Harvey, 2005). In countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, reductions in public welfare provision have created governance gaps increasingly filled by non-state actors, with mixed implications for human security. At the national and sub-national levels, particularly within fragile states like Nigeria, the contradictions of neoliberal governance and non-state intervention are stark. Despite being Africa's largest economy, Nigeria hosts over 133 million multidimensionally poor people, with the highest concentrations in the North-East and North-West (NBS, 2022). At the level of senatorial zones, states,

and local government areas (LGAs), insecurity manifests unevenly: while NGOs and humanitarian agencies provide education, healthcare, and livelihood support in LGAs such as Maiduguri, Damaturu, and Jalingo, violent non-state actors continue to recruit from marginalised communities affected by unemployment, displacement, and weak local governance (Onuoha, 2014).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the contradictory roles of violent and non-violent non-state actors in shaping human security in Africa under neoliberal governance. It interrogates how neoliberalism functions simultaneously as an enabling and constraining framework, empowering certain actors and communities while deepening vulnerability and exclusion for others. The study seeks to address the persistence of human insecurity despite decades of development aid, humanitarian intervention, and security reforms. Specifically, the study examines the role of non-state actors in shaping human security outcomes, analyses neoliberal governance as both a facilitator and inhibitor of security and development, and assesses the implications of these dynamics for sustainable peace and security in Africa. It is guided by the questions: *How do violent and non-violent non-state actors affect human security in Africa?* and *In what ways does neoliberal governance shape these outcomes?*

Significance, Scope and Structure of the Paper
The study is academically significant as it bridges gaps between human security scholarship, non-state actor literature, and political economy analyses of neoliberalism. Policy-wise, it offers critical insights for governments, development partners, and security practitioners seeking to design people-centred, context-sensitive interventions. Developmentally, it underscores the necessity of aligning security, governance, and socioeconomic policies to address the root causes of insecurity. Geographically, the study focuses on Africa, drawing illustrative examples from West, East, and Central Africa. Thematically, it centres on human security, non-state actors (violent and non-violent), and neoliberal governance. The paper is structured into sections covering the literature review, conceptual clarification, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis and discussion,

findings, implications, conclusion, and contribution to knowledge.

Literature Review
This section critically engages existing scholarship on human security, non-state actors, and neoliberal governance in Africa. It situates the study within broader theoretical and empirical debates, while identifying gaps that justify the present analysis.

Human Security in Africa: Conceptual Debates and Evolution
Scholarly discourse on human security has largely emerged as a critique of traditional state-centric security paradigms that prioritised territorial integrity and regime survival over human welfare. The foundational articulation by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994) reframed security around the protection and empowerment of individuals, introducing multidimensional threats including poverty, disease, environmental degradation, and political exclusion. Subsequent scholars such as Buzan (1991) and Acharya (2001) have debated the scope of human security, questioning whether its broad conceptualisation risks analytical dilution or enhances its policy relevance.

In the African context, proponents argue that human security offers a more accurate framework for understanding insecurity in societies where threats are primarily internal and structural rather than external and military (Kaldor, 2013). Empirical studies demonstrate that chronic poverty, youth unemployment, and weak service delivery are more significant drivers of violence than interstate conflict (World Bank, 2018). However, critics contend that the adoption of human security in Africa has often remained rhetorical, with limited translation into effective policy due to institutional weakness and external economic constraints (Mkandawire, 2001). This tension underscores the need for deeper analysis of how human security is operationalised within Africa's political economy.

Non-State Actors and Security Governance in Africa
The rise of non-state actors (NSAs) has fundamentally reshaped security governance across Africa. Violent non-state actors, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and militias in the Sahel, have been widely studied as products of state fragility, social exclusion, and economic marginalisation (Onuoha, 2014; Musa, 2025). These actors exploit governance vacuums, provide alternative sources of authority, and often frame violence as a response to injustice, thereby deepening human insecurity. Conversely, non-violent non-state actors, including NGOs, international humanitarian agencies, and private development actors, have increasingly assumed roles traditionally associated with the state. Studies show that NGOs have improved access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods in conflict-affected regions, particularly in northern Nigeria, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). Some scholars argue that these actors contribute positively to human security by addressing immediate needs and reducing vulnerability to extremist recruitment (Duffield, 2007). However, others caution that excessive reliance on non-state actors can undermine state legitimacy, create parallel governance structures, and entrench dependency (Chandler, 2010).

Neoliberal Governance and Security Outcomes
A growing body of literature links Africa's human security challenges to neoliberal governance frameworks imposed through structural adjustment programmes, economic liberalisation, and aid conditionalities. Harvey (2005) and Musa and Bayero (2024) argue that neoliberal reforms have reduced state capacity by shrinking public expenditure on social services, thereby exacerbating inequality and insecurity. While economic liberalisation has attracted foreign investment and improved service delivery in select urban centres, it has simultaneously marginalised rural and peripheral communities, where violent NSAs often flourish. Empirical evidence from West and Central Africa shows that austerity measures and privatisation have weakened public institutions, forcing communities to rely on non-state actors for survival (World Bank, 2020). This has produced uneven human security outcomes, reinforcing the "double-edged" nature of neoliberal governance in Africa.

Empirical Studies and Identified Gaps
Despite extensive scholarship, two critical gaps remain. First, existing studies tend to examine violent and non-violent non-state actors separately, failing to

analyse their interconnected roles within the same security ecosystem. Second, there is limited systematic analysis of neoliberalism as a structural driver that simultaneously empowers certain non-state actors while generating conditions for insecurity. This study addresses these gaps by integrating violent and non-violent NSAs within a single analytical framework and situating their activities within the broader political economy of neoliberal governance.

Conceptual Clarification

Clear conceptual clarification is essential to avoid ambiguity and ensure analytical rigour, particularly in a study that engages with contested ideas such as human security, non-state actors, and neoliberal governance. This section defines and interrogates each concept as employed in this study.

Human Security

The concept of human security gained global prominence with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), which defines it as freedom from fear and freedom from want, emphasising the protection of individuals rather than the state. Buzan (1991) views security as a multidimensional condition but cautions against excessive conceptual expansion, arguing that security must retain analytical clarity. Acharya (2001) advances a people-centred interpretation, stressing context-specific threats and the relevance of local agency, particularly in the Global South. Kaldor (2013) conceptualises human security as protection from organised violence and structural harm, linking it closely to governance and globalisation. Similarly, Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) frame human security as a normative and operational framework that integrates development, human rights, and peacebuilding.

Critically, while the breadth of human security enhances its relevance in contexts such as Africa, where insecurity is driven by poverty, disease, and political exclusion, it has been criticised for conceptual vagueness and policy overstretch (Paris, 2001). Nevertheless, empirical evidence shows that its multidimensional focus captures lived insecurities more accurately than state-centric models. This paper adopts a multidimensional and people-centred understanding of human security, recognising

economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security as interdependent. Human security is treated not merely as protection from violence, but as the fulfilment of basic human needs and dignity within specific political and economic contexts.

Non-State Actors

Non-state actors (NSAs) are broadly defined as organised entities that operate outside formal state structures while exercising influence over political, economic, or security outcomes. Rosenau (1990) conceptualises NSAs as transnational actors whose authority rivals that of the state in global governance. Keohane and Nye (2001) emphasise their role in shaping international outcomes through networks and soft power. In the African security context, Clapham (1996) identifies non-state actors as key agents operating within weak or fragmented states. Schneckener (2006) distinguishes between violent and non-violent NSAs based on their methods and objectives. Duffield (2007) further argues that non-violent actors, particularly NGOs and humanitarian agencies, increasingly function as governance substitutes in fragile states.

Violent non-state actors, including terrorist groups, insurgents, and militias, are widely associated with human insecurity through violence, displacement, and economic disruption (Onuoha, 2019). However, non-violent actors such as NGOs and humanitarian agencies often enhance human security by providing education, healthcare, and livelihoods, sometimes mitigating radicalisation and community vulnerability. Yet critics argue that excessive reliance on non-violent NSAs can undermine state legitimacy and entrench dependency (Chandler, 2010). This paper conceptualises non-state actors as a heterogeneous group comprising both violent and non-violent entities whose actions can either undermine or enhance human security. Their impact is context-dependent and shaped by governance structures, particularly under neoliberal conditions.

Neoliberal Governance

Neoliberal governance refers to a policy framework that prioritises market mechanisms, reduced state intervention, and private-sector-led development. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a political–

economic project aimed at restoring class power through market dominance. Williamson (1990) conceptualises it operationally through policy prescriptions such as privatisation, devaluation of currency, deregulation, and fiscal austerity. Musa and Bayero (2024) and Mkandawire (2001) critiques neoliberal governance in Africa for weakening state capacity and social welfare systems. Peck (2010) highlights its uneven and crisis-prone implementation, particularly in developing regions. Similarly, Stiglitz (2002) argues that aid conditionalities and austerity measures under neoliberal regimes often exacerbate inequality and social vulnerability. In Africa, neoliberal reforms have produced mixed outcomes. While economic liberalisation and foreign investment have improved service delivery and growth in some sectors, austerity measures and privatisation have reduced public access to health, education, and welfare, creating spaces increasingly occupied by non-state actors (World Bank, 2020). This paper conceptualises neoliberal governance as a double-edged framework that simultaneously enables development initiatives and generates structural vulnerabilities. It treats neoliberalism as a key contextual force shaping the roles and impacts of non-state actors on human security in Africa.

Taken together, these conceptual clarifications establish the analytical foundation of the study. Human security is understood as people-centred and multidimensional; non-state actors as diverse and influential agents with both constructive and destructive capacities; and neoliberal governance as a structural context that mediates these interactions. This integrated conceptual approach allows for a nuanced examination of human security outcomes in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Human Needs Theory and Structural Violence Theory, which together provide a robust analytical lens for examining the complex interactions between human security, non-state actors (violent and non-violent), and neoliberal governance in Africa. While Human Needs Theory foregrounds the centrality of basic human needs in shaping security outcomes, Structural Violence Theory exposes the deeper political–economic structures that systematically produce deprivation and insecurity.

Human Needs Theory is most prominently associated with scholars such as Abraham Maslow (1943), John Burton (1990), and Johan Galtung (1980). Maslow's hierarchy of needs conceptualises human motivation as progressing from physiological needs and safety to belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Building on this psychological foundation, Burton (1990) extends the theory into conflict and security studies, arguing that unmet fundamental needs, such as security, identity, recognition, and participation, inevitably generate social tension and violent conflict. Galtung (1980) further links unmet needs to broader structures of power and domination.

The core assumption of Human Needs Theory is that security is inseparable from the fulfilment of basic human needs. Where states or governing systems fail to provide access to livelihoods, education, healthcare, and political inclusion, individuals and groups seek alternative means, sometimes through violent non-state actors, to secure these needs. In Africa, this assumption is empirically supported by evidence showing strong correlations between youth unemployment, poverty, and recruitment into violent groups. For instance, the World Bank (2018) reports that areas with high unemployment and limited service provision are significantly more prone to insurgency and communal violence.

The strength of Human Needs Theory lies in its people-centred orientation, which aligns closely with the human security framework. It explains why non-violent non-state actors such as NGOs and humanitarian agencies can enhance security by meeting basic needs, as seen in northern Nigeria where livelihood and education programmes have reduced community vulnerability to extremist recruitment (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). However, critics argue that the theory underplays power relations and structural inequalities, often treating unmet needs as neutral deficits rather than outcomes of political and economic systems (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). In the African context, Human Needs Theory is particularly relevant for explaining why insecurity persists despite military interventions. It helps to understand how both violent and non-violent non-state actors emerge as alternative providers of security and welfare in contexts of state failure and neoliberal retrenchment.

Structural Violence Theory, pioneered by Johan Galtung (1969), shifts attention from direct physical violence to the systemic and institutional arrangements that prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs. Galtung defines structural violence as harm embedded in social, political, and economic systems that produce inequality, deprivation, and exclusion. Later scholars such as Farmer (2004) and Žižek (2008) extend this framework to analyse global political economy and neoliberal capitalism as sources of enduring violence. A central assumption of Structural Violence Theory is that inequality and deprivation are not accidental but structurally produced. In Africa, neoliberal governance, characterised by privatisation, austerity measures, and aid conditionalities, has often weakened state capacity to provide social services, thereby institutionalising insecurity (Musa and Bayero, 2024; Musa, 2014). Data from the World Bank (2020) indicate that despite periods of economic growth, inequality has widened in many African countries, with marginalised regions experiencing persistent poverty and exclusion.

The theory's strength lies in its ability to explain why insecurity endures even in the absence of open conflict. It reveals how neoliberal reforms can constitute a form of structural violence by systematically disadvantaging rural communities, informal workers, and displaced populations. For example, reductions in public spending on health and education under structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to long-term human insecurity across Sub-Saharan Africa (Stiglitz, 2002). Critics, however, contend that Structural Violence Theory can be overly deterministic, sometimes downplaying local agency and resistance (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Nonetheless, when combined with Human Needs Theory, it provides a more balanced framework that accounts for both structural constraints and human responses. Structural Violence Theory is particularly useful for analysing neoliberalism as a structural driver of human insecurity, explaining how both violent and non-violent non-state actors operate within, and are shaped by, unequal political–economic systems.

Justification of Theoretical Choice
Together, Human Needs Theory and Structural Violence Theory offer a complementary framework for this study. While Human Needs Theory explains *why* individuals and communities gravitate towards non-state actors to meet unmet needs, Structural Violence Theory explains *how* neoliberal governance structures systematically create the conditions for such needs to remain unmet. This integrated framework is therefore well suited to analysing the double-edged nature of human security in Africa under neoliberal governance, capturing both agency and structure in shaping security outcomes.

The selection of Human Needs Theory and Structural Violence Theory as the guiding theoretical frameworks for this study is informed by their complementary explanatory power in accounting for both the convergence and divergence in human security outcomes across Africa. Together, these theories move beyond narrow, state-centric interpretations of security and offer a holistic lens capable of capturing the lived realities of insecurity, particularly in contexts characterised by weak state capacity, neoliberal governance, and the expanding influence of non-state actors.

Human Needs Theory is particularly suited to explaining convergent outcomes in human security where the actions of non-violent non-state actors align with the fulfilment of basic human needs. By foregrounding access to livelihoods, education, healthcare, identity, and participation as fundamental to security (Burton, 1990; Galtung, 1980), the theory clarifies why development-oriented interventions by NGOs and humanitarian agencies often enhance community resilience and reduce susceptibility to violent extremism. Empirical evidence from conflict-affected regions of Nigeria and Somalia shows that programmes combining vocational training, psychosocial support, and education have reduced youth vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021; World Bank, 2018). In such contexts, the convergence between human security and development outcomes becomes visible through improved welfare and social stability. Conversely, Structural Violence Theory provides a critical explanation for divergent human security outcomes, particularly where neoliberal governance frameworks reproduce inequality, exclusion, and deprivation. Galtung's (1969) conception of structural violence highlights how harm is embedded within

political and economic systems rather than solely in direct physical violence. Neoliberal reforms, manifested in austerity measures, privatisation, and aid conditionalities, have weakened state institutions and reduced social protection across many African states, thereby creating structural conditions conducive to insecurity (Musa and Bayero, 2024; Musa, 2014; Stiglitz, 2002). These conditions are frequently exploited by violent non-state actors, who mobilise marginalised populations by framing violence as a response to injustice and exclusion.

The integration of these two theories is especially effective in linking non-state actors, neoliberal governance, and insecurity. Human Needs Theory explains *why* communities turn to both violent and non-violent non-state actors as alternative providers of security and welfare, while Structural Violence Theory explains *how* neoliberal political-economic structures systematically generate unmet needs and governance vacuums. Together, they illuminate the paradox whereby non-violent non-state actors can mitigate insecurity by meeting immediate needs, even as the broader neoliberal framework continues to reproduce structural vulnerabilities that sustain long-term instability.

In sum, the combined application of Human Needs Theory and Structural Violence Theory offers a robust, multi-layered analytical framework capable of explaining the double-edged nature of human security in Africa. It enables a nuanced understanding of convergence and divergence in security outcomes, while situating the roles of non-state actors within the deeper structural forces shaping insecurity under neoliberal governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as human security, non-state actors, and neoliberal governance in Africa. Qualitative research allows for a context-sensitive analysis of both structural and agency-driven factors shaping security outcomes, capturing the nuanced experiences of communities, institutions, and actors across diverse African contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative approaches that rely on numerical generalisations, qualitative methods enable in-depth

understanding of the interactions between violent and non-violent non-state actors, structural conditions, and policy frameworks that influence human security outcomes.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data, which provide rich historical, empirical, and policy-relevant insights. These sources include academic journal articles, books, policy reports, United Nations and World Bank publications, and credible NGO and governmental reports. For example, Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021) and World Bank (2018, 2020) provide data on human security interventions, livelihood programmes, and the impacts of structural reforms in conflict-affected regions such as northern Nigeria and the Sahel. Secondary sources are particularly valuable for examining long-term patterns of neoliberal reforms, structural inequalities, and the evolving role of non-state actors across different African regions (Onuoha, 2014; Mkandawire, 2001). Data collection involved a systematic review of relevant literature and policy documents, guided by predefined thematic areas aligned with the research objectives. Key themes included human security, violent and non-violent non-state actors, neoliberal governance, and the nexus between development and security outcomes. Online academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and AJOL, alongside institutional repositories of the UNDP, World Bank, and African Union, were extensively consulted to ensure the inclusion of both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The study employs content analysis as the primary analytical method. Content analysis allows for systematic coding, categorisation, and interpretation of textual material to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and thematic linkages (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how different types of non-state actors operate within neoliberal governance frameworks and how their activities converge or diverge in promoting human security. By examining policy documents, empirical reports, and scholarly debates, content analysis enables the study to synthesise qualitative evidence across multiple levels; global, continental, regional, national, and local, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under

investigation. Although the study does not involve primary human participants, ethical rigor is maintained through careful selection and citation of credible sources, ensuring transparency, accuracy, and avoidance of misrepresentation. All secondary data are properly referenced in accordance with APA 7th edition standards, and the study respects the intellectual property of original authors. Additionally, the analysis critically evaluates sources for bias, reliability, and contextual relevance, particularly in relation to politically sensitive subjects such as violent non-state actors and neoliberal policy reforms in African countries.

Analysis and Discussion

This section provides an in-depth examination of the interplay between non-state actors (NSAs), neoliberal governance, and human security outcomes in Africa, with particular reference to contemporary and historical experiences in Nigeria and other African contexts. The analysis focuses on the differential roles of non-violent and violent NSAs and the dual impact of neoliberal governance on security and development.

Non-Violent Non-State Actors and Human Security

Non-violent non-state actors (NSAs), including NGOs, international humanitarian agencies, and private development organisations, play a critical role in enhancing human security across Africa. By providing access to education, healthcare, livelihoods, and psychosocial support, these actors often fill gaps left by weak or overstretched state institutions. In northern Nigeria, for example, UNDP-supported programmes have combined vocational training with education and local governance reforms, leading to measurable reductions in youth vulnerability to extremist recruitment (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). Between 2018 and 2020, over 45,000 youths in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states benefitted from skills acquisition and microcredit schemes, significantly increasing their resilience to Boko Haram influence (World Bank, 2020). According to GIZ (2022), its multi-component programme directly reached approximately 657,736 individuals, including 40,909 children and youths participating in education-focused initiatives and 517,673 people accessing completed infrastructure interventions. These included newly constructed and furnished primary and secondary schools, rehabilitated school facilities, boreholes, health centres, warehouses, and vocational training facilities (GIZ, 2022). Such interventions enhance human capital development and provide critical services in post-conflict contexts.

Community participation has also been central to these efforts. A total of 9,170 community members engaged in 90 community development sessions across Adamawa and Borno states, culminating in the formulation of 90 Community Development Plans (CDPs), one for each ward. Community-based committees were established to oversee implementation and advocate for the integration of these plans into state budgets, successfully aligning local priorities with formal governance structures. Engagement of 1,204 political, traditional, and religious leaders further strengthened participatory governance. Collectively, over 2.1 million people benefit indirectly from improved service delivery, governance, and community-state linkages. In 2025, 1,033 children (567 boys and 366 girls) accessed vocational training and child protection services across six government institutions in Maiduguri, Bama, Biu, Damboa, and Konduga (Omirin, 2025).

Non-violent NSAs also contribute to peacebuilding, community policing, early warning systems, and advocacy for inclusive governance, thereby promoting both short-term security and long-term resilience (Duffield, 2007). However, excessive reliance on these actors may risk undermining state legitimacy, creating parallel governance structures that challenge formal institutional authority (Chandler, 2010).

Violent Non-State Actors and Human Insecurity

Violent non-state actors (NSAs), including insurgent groups, militias, and terrorist networks, remain significant drivers of human insecurity across conflict-affected regions in Africa. In Nigeria, Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have inflicted devastating human, social, and economic consequences. According to Ukoji and Ukoji (2023), over 50,252 people were killed in northeastern Nigeria in 2014 alone due to insurgency-related violence. More recent data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) places Nigeria in the 'extreme' conflict category, ranking fifth globally in the latest Conflict Index. Between December 2023 and November 2024,

over 4,000 political violence events caused 9,355 fatalities, including 2,127 attacks targeting civilians, making Nigeria the sixth deadliest country for civilian populations. In the first six weeks of 2025, 805 people were killed, while more than 2.7 million individuals were internally displaced. Many of the displaced reside in overcrowded camps with limited access to food, clean water, healthcare, and education, compounding malnutrition and disease outbreaks. UNICEF (2025) reports that Nigeria is facing escalating humanitarian needs amid declining resources. Over 400,000 children in Northeast and Northwest are at risk due to imminent nutrition stockouts. This is inclusive of 4.9 million children who lack access to basic services due to the impact of floods, disease outbreaks, and conflict-related displacement in the northeast and northwest.

In the Lake Chad Basin, spanning Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, Boko Haram and ISWAP have created a protracted humanitarian crisis affecting over 10 million people, with 7.5 million requiring food assistance (World Bank, 2018). The insurgency has destroyed schools, health facilities, and markets, undermining livelihoods and social cohesion. Similarly, in the Sahel region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), Islamist insurgencies and militia violence have displaced over 2 million people, with December 2023 alone witnessing 79 armed confrontations and more than 550 fatalities (Serwat, Birru, & Bofin, 2024). Attacks by al-Qaeda's Sahelian branch, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), in Solle and Fada N'Gourma reportedly followed military offensives that led to over 300 civilian deaths. In Mozambique, Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) operations in Cabo Delgado have killed hundreds and displaced over 900,000 people between 2017 and 2023, disrupting livelihoods, education, and health access (Serwat et al., 2024). In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), militia violence has displaced over five million people, with civilians and humanitarian actors often targeted (ACLED, 2025).

Violent NSAs exploit state fragility, socio-economic inequality, and governance gaps to recruit followers, creating cycles of violence that undermine human security. Vulnerable regions are characterised by poverty, weak educational infrastructure, and limited state presence. Climate-induced resource scarcity and austerity in social services further exacerbate local grievances, particularly in the Lake Chad Basin (Ehiane & Moyo, 2021). The cumulative effects of violent NSAs extend beyond immediate physical harm, resulting in mass displacement, economic precarity, and increased dependency on humanitarian aid, all of which erode resilience and hinder sustainable development.

Neoliberal Governance as a Double-Edged Sword
Neoliberal governance, encompassing market-driven reforms, privatisation, and conditional aid programmes, has a paradoxical impact on human security. On one hand, neoliberal policies can enhance human security by stimulating economic growth, foreign investment, and service delivery. In Ghana and Rwanda, for example, privatisation coupled with targeted development interventions has expanded healthcare coverage and educational access in previously underserved regions (Mkandawire, 2001; Stiglitz, 2002). Similarly, foreign aid conditionalities in Nigeria have occasionally incentivised local governments to implement vocational training and microfinance programmes, improving livelihoods and community resilience (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). On the other hand, neoliberalism can intensify structural vulnerability, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited. Austerity measures, reductions in public spending, and market liberalisation have often exacerbated inequalities, leaving rural and marginalised populations exposed to insecurity. In northern Nigeria, reduced government investment in schools and health facilities in the 1980s and 1990s under structural adjustment programmes created gaps that were subsequently exploited by violent NSAs (Stiglitz, 2002; World Bank, 2020). This duality, where neoliberalism simultaneously empowers development actors and creates conditions for insecurity, underscores its double-edged nature in shaping human security outcomes.

The interplay between non-violent and violent NSAs under neoliberal governance produces both convergent and divergent human security outcomes. Convergence occurs when development-oriented NSAs operate effectively to meet basic needs, strengthen community resilience, and complement state functions. Divergence emerges where violent NSAs exploit structural vulnerabilities created or

exacerbated by neoliberal reforms, undermining long-term stability. Empirical evidence from Nigeria, the Sahel, and the Lake Chad Basin illustrates that human security outcomes cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political-economic context, including both structural constraints and local agency (Duffield, 2007; Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021).

Findings

The findings of this study emerge from a comprehensive content analysis of secondary sources, including scholarly articles, policy reports, and international datasets. The analysis reveals several empirical and thematic patterns, as well as notable contradictions and trends, in the interactions between human security, non-state actors, and neoliberal governance across Africa.

Major Empirical and Thematic Findings

One of the key findings is the dual role of non-state actors in shaping human security outcomes. Non-violent NSAs, such as NGOs, humanitarian agencies, and private development organisations, have consistently contributed to enhancing human security by providing education, healthcare, and livelihood programmes. For instance, UNDP-supported interventions in northeastern Nigeria between 2018 and 2021 reached over 45,000 youths with vocational training and psychosocial support, resulting in measurable reductions in vulnerability to violent extremism (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). Similar programmes in northern Ghana and Rwanda have demonstrated improvements in community resilience, social inclusion, and access to basic services (World Bank, 2020). Conversely, violent non-state actors, including Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and various militias in the Sahel, continue to drive chronic human insecurity. In the Lake Chad Basin, spanning Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, Boko Haram and ISWAP have created a protracted humanitarian crisis affecting over 10 million people, with 7.5 million requiring food assistance (World Bank, 2018). The insurgency has destroyed schools, health facilities, and markets, undermining livelihoods and social cohesion. Similarly, in the Sahel region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), Islamist insurgencies and militia violence have displaced over 2 million people, with December 2023 alone witnessing 79 armed confrontations and more than 550 fatalities (Serwat,

Birru, & Bofin, 2024). These actors exploit structural inequalities, marginalisation, and weak state institutions, demonstrating that insecurity persists not merely because of direct violence, but also due to underlying systemic vulnerabilities (Musa and Bayero, 2024; Musa, 2025; Onuoha, 2014).

A third major finding concerns neoliberal governance as a double-edged sword. Market-driven reforms, foreign investment, and aid programmes have occasionally enhanced human security by improving access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas (Stiglitz, 2002; Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). However, austerity measures, privatisation, and conditionalities have disproportionately affected rural and marginalised populations, exacerbating vulnerability and undermining long-term stability. Historical evidence from Nigeria's structural adjustment period in the 1980s shows that cuts to public expenditure in health and education widened inequalities and indirectly facilitated the emergence of violent NSAs in peripheral regions (World Bank, 2018).

Patterns, Contradictions, and Trends

Several patterns emerge from the analysis. First, regions with coordinated engagement by non-violent NSAs exhibit greater resilience, even in the face of violent insurgency. Second, inequalities created or amplified by neoliberal reforms are consistently associated with heightened human insecurity, highlighting the structural drivers of conflict. Third, there is a persistent contradiction: while neoliberal policies promote economic liberalisation and service delivery, they simultaneously weaken state capacity and entrench social exclusion, creating conditions that both empower and undermine human security.

Trends indicate that the interplay between NSAs and neoliberal governance is increasingly defining human security trajectories in Africa. Non-violent NSAs are expanding their roles in governance and service provision, while violent NSAs continue to exploit systemic gaps. This convergence of agency and structure suggests that sustainable peace and security cannot be achieved without simultaneously addressing structural inequalities, governance deficits, and the

fulfilment of basic human needs (Duffield, 2007; Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021).

Implications for Sustainable Peace and Security

The interplay between non-state actors and neoliberal governance in Africa has profound implications for sustainable peace and security, both in the short term and the long term. Understanding these implications is crucial for formulating strategies that mitigate vulnerability while promoting resilient, inclusive societies.

Short-Term vs Long-Term Security

In African contexts, short-term security outcomes are often achieved through military interventions, emergency relief programmes, and targeted humanitarian aid. These measures are designed to immediately contain violence, protect civilians, and restore minimal stability in conflict-affected areas. For instance, counter-insurgency operations in northeastern Nigeria have successfully recaptured territory from Boko Haram, disrupted attacks, and temporarily reduced the operational capabilities of insurgent groups. However, recent data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) categorises Nigeria in the 'extreme' conflict bracket, ranking fifth globally in the latest Conflict Index, indicating that insurgent attacks and civilian displacement persist despite these interventions. UNICEF (2025) further highlights that over 400,000 children in Northeast and Northwest are at risk due to imminent nutrition stockouts. This is inclusive of 4.9 million children who lack access to basic services due to the impact of floods, disease outbreaks, and conflict-related displacement in the northeast and northwest.

over one million children in northeastern Nigeria continue to require urgent humanitarian assistance due to conflict-induced displacement, underscoring the limited and often temporary impact of short-term security responses. Such evidence suggests that while emergency measures can mitigate immediate threats, they rarely address the underlying structural causes of insecurity, including poverty, weak governance, and socio-economic marginalisation.

Long-term security, by contrast, relies on integrated approaches that combine human security interventions, socio-economic development, and inclusive governance mechanisms. Initiatives that improve access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods are critical for building community resilience and reducing vulnerability to violent recruitment. In northern Ghana and Rwanda, development-oriented programmes have demonstrably strengthened local communities' capacity to withstand security threats and enhance social cohesion (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Institutional Legitimacy

Institutional legitimacy is central to sustainable peace. Where state institutions are perceived as transparent, accountable, and responsive, communities are more likely to cooperate with government authorities and participate in peacebuilding initiatives. Non-violent NSAs can bolster legitimacy by complementing state functions, particularly in fragile or peripheral regions. In contrast, when neoliberal reforms weaken social welfare provision or marginalise certain communities, institutional trust erodes, creating vacuum spaces exploited by violent non-state actors (Musa and Bayero, 2024; Stiglitz, 2002). For instance, structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s reduced public spending on health and education in rural northern Nigeria (Musa and Bayero, 2024), which contributed to long-term disenfranchisement and facilitated insurgent recruitment.

Community Resilience

Community resilience emerges as a critical determinant of sustainable human security. Communities that can mobilise local resources, participate in governance, and access social protection are less vulnerable to violence and displacement. Empirical evidence from rehabilitated communities in Yobe State demonstrates that combining livelihood programmes, psychosocial support, and local governance reforms significantly strengthens resilience and reduces dependence on violent NSAs (Hanna, Bohl, Rafa, & Moyer, 2021). Conversely, neglect of human security considerations—such as inequitable access to education, healthcare, or livelihoods—undermines community resilience, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and conflict.

The Nigerian and broader African experience illustrates that sustainable peace and security are contingent upon addressing both immediate threats and structural inequalities. Human security and socio-economic development must converge to create resilient institutions and empowered communities, while divergences between neoliberal policy priorities and local needs can exacerbate vulnerability and prolong instability. This analysis underscores the necessity of integrated, people-centred strategies that harmonise development and security objectives, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and foster community resilience.

Conclusion and Recommendations
This study has examined the complex relationship between human security, non-state actors (violent and non-violent), and neoliberal governance in Africa, demonstrating that this relationship operates as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, non-violent non-state actors, often operating within neoliberal policy environments, have contributed significantly to improving access to education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, and livelihoods, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. On the other hand, violent non-state actors have capitalised on structural inequalities, weak institutions, and socio-economic exclusion—conditions often intensified by neoliberal reforms—to perpetuate insecurity, displacement, and social fragmentation.

The analysis reveals that neoliberal governance frameworks simultaneously enable empowerment and exacerbate vulnerability. While market-driven reforms and aid regimes have expanded service delivery in some contexts, austerity measures, privatisation, and reduced state welfare provision have undermined institutional capacity and public trust. Consequently, sustainable peace and security remain elusive where human security is treated as a secondary outcome rather than a central policy objective. The study therefore concludes that sustainable peace in Africa is contingent upon aligning security, development, and governance within a people-centred human security framework.

Policy Recommendations
First, African governments and development partners should integrate human security into national security and development strategies, ensuring that policies address economic, food, health, environmental, and political insecurities simultaneously. Security responses must move beyond militarisation to include poverty reduction, youth employment, education, and social protection.

Second, there is a need to recalibrate neoliberal policy prescriptions to reflect local realities. Aid conditionalities and economic reforms should prioritise social investment, inequality reduction, and inclusive growth rather than fiscal austerity alone. Development interventions must be conflict-sensitive and aligned with peacebuilding objectives.

Institutional Reforms
Institutional legitimacy must be strengthened through transparent governance, decentralisation, and accountability mechanisms. States should reclaim their coordinating role in security and service delivery, while constructively engaging non-violent non-state actors as partners rather than substitutes. Strengthening local government institutions and community-based governance structures is essential for restoring trust and preventing the exploitation of governance vacuums by violent actors.

Human-Security-Centred Strategies
Human-security-centred strategies should emphasise community resilience, social cohesion, and local ownership of peacebuilding processes. Programmes combining livelihoods, psychosocial support, and civic participation have proven effective and should be scaled up across vulnerable regions. Investing in human security is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for long-term stability.

Contribution to Knowledge
Conceptually, this study advances the human security discourse by integrating violent and non-violent non-state actors within a single analytical framework, highlighting their contradictory yet interconnected roles under neoliberal governance in Africa. It reframes human security as both an outcome and a contested space shaped by global political economy forces.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates the complementary explanatory power of Human Needs

Theory and Structural Violence Theory in understanding insecurity in Africa. By linking unmet basic needs with structural inequalities produced or reinforced by neoliberal governance, the study deepens understanding of convergence and divergence in human security outcomes.

From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence-based insights for designing integrated security and development interventions. It underscores the limitations of militarised and market-centric approaches and offers a strong justification for adopting people-centred, institutionally grounded strategies for sustainable peace and security in Africa.

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