

# **A Theoretical Framework for Human Security in West Africa: An Assessment of the Critical Human Security Theory**

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## **Abstract**

The study of human security in West Africa requires an appropriate theory to properly interpret the various components at work so as to arrive at conclusions that can be used in addressing the challenges effectively. This paper examines perspectives on the concept of human security and assesses the critical human security theory and its suitability studying and understanding the concept. It concludes that critical security theory is most appropriate because on the one hand, it combines the strength of human security with its emphasis on policy relevance and yet addressing its analytical weakness which exists regarding the scope and nature of security, and the means of achieving security by the critical security approach. On the other hand, it employs the advantage of critical security to address the excessive focus of human security on the manifestations of insecurity which can be misleading and paying attention to the underlying structural causes.

**Key words:** human, critical, security, theory, West Africa.

**Un cadre théorique pour la sécurité humaine en Afrique de l'Ouest: évaluation de la théorie critique de la sécurité humaine**

## **Abstrait**

L'étude de la sécurité humaine en Afrique de l'Ouest nécessite une théorie appropriée pour interpréter correctement les différentes composantes à l'œuvre afin de parvenir à des conclusions utilisables pour relever efficacement les défis. Cet article examine les perspectives sur le concept de sécurité humaine et évalue la théorie critique de la sécurité humaine et son adéquation à l'étude et à la compréhension du concept. Il conclut que la théorie critique de la sécurité est la plus appropriée car, d'une part, elle combine la force de la sécurité humaine à l'importance de la politique, tout en apportant une solution à la faiblesse analytique qui existe quant à la portée et à la nature de la sécurité et aux moyens de réaliser la sécurité par l'approche de sécurité critique. D'autre part, il utilise l'avantage de la sécurité essentielle pour s'attaquer à

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la focalisation excessive de la sécurité humaine sur les manifestations de l'insécurité, ce qui peut induire en erreur et prêter attention aux causes structurelles sous-jacentes.

**Mots-clés:** humain, critique, sécurité, théorie, Afrique de l'Ouest

## **Introduction**

For a proper study of human security in West Africa, it is necessary to identify a theoretical framework that best suits the discourse considering the issues as well as the sub-regional organisation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and its supranational role in engaging the Member states with regards to its objectives as well as the challenges in the sub-region. The theoretical framework is what guides the entire process of a study making it an aspect that cannot be missing. Understanding the security situation in West Africa will help situate the variables in a manner that gives meaning to the relationship that exist and how the challenges that bedevil the sub-region can be effectively addressed. Lack of a proper theory will be a limitation to such a study. The paper identifies the critical human security theory and discusses why it is the most appropriate theoretical framework for the study of human security in West Africa.

## **The West African Sub-region**

West Africa is one of the five sub- regions in the African continent. It covers an area of about 4.7 million square Kilometres with a coastal area of some 6,000 kilometres stretching from the upper reaches of Angola in South-West Africa to the lower reaches of Western Sahara to the north and washed by the Atlantic Ocean. It is made up of 16 countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Cape Verde, Guinea and Mauritania with a population of about 381 million with a growth rate of 2.69% (Western African Population Review, 2018) of which about 65% live in rural areas. According to the most recent estimate (2013), 43% of the population live below the international \$1.90 per day poverty line which is an indication of high prevalence of poverty (African Development Bank, 2018).

The sub - region which has a long stretch of coastal area is rich in natural resources including timber, fish and oil. Unfortunately these assets have become a great source of insecurity largely due to the activities of criminal individuals and groups who have not been curbed as a result of weak security and judicial institutions. The Gulf of Guinea which is largely unprotected has become a route for arms, drugs and human traffickers and smugglers. Similarly, its northern frontiers which stretch from north-western Chad through northern Niger and Mali to Mauritania epitomises the rising challenges of complex emergencies in West Africa. It serves as a route for such cross border crimes like human trafficking, drug trafficking and arms trafficking especially as a fallout of the uprising in Libya when several of them who fought on the side of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi left with their arms after his fall (Onoko, 2017). The situation also created a deficit in governance that leaves space for non-state actors to operate freely.

West Africa was engulfed in a spade of violent conflicts for a period of about fifteen years after the end of the cold war. Except for Nigeria which has been experiencing the scourge of violence from the Boko haram insurgency and the violence occasioned by conflicts between

farmers and herders for almost a decade now, there has been a lull in active widespread violence in the region. Nevertheless, West Africa has been facing several other security challenges that have greatly impacted negatively on the wellbeing of its people. Just like the conflicts in other parts of the region, there are genuine grievances but these have been adulterated with banditry, terrorism, and trafficking in humans, drugs, and cigarettes which has turned it into a most insecure zone for human habitation (Musah, 2009).

## **Human Security**

The concept of human security was first put forward in 1994, when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published the Human Development Report that systematically expounded this idea (UN Human Development Report, 1994). It represents a paradigm shift in thinking about security which has traditionally centred on the security of the state instead of people. The reason for this, according to the report, being that the world will never be secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and in their jobs. It stressed that the two fronts in the battle for peace are ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom from want’ which the report considered to be the core of the human security agenda (UN Human Development Report, 1994, p.3)

MahbubulHaq, the Special Adviser to the UNDP Administrator, had generalized the concept in the following four sentences, “Human security: is not just security of land, it is security of people; is not just security through arms, it is security through development; is not just security of nations, it is security of individuals in their homes and in their jobs; is not just a defense against conflicts between nations, it is a defense against conflicts between people (MahbubulHaq as cited in Zhijun 2005, p.4). Beebe and Kaldor (2010, p.5) put it succinctly when they stated that “it is about the security of Angolans, not the security of Angola.”

Considering human security as the right of people to live in freedom and equity, free from poverty and despair, Tanaka (2015) outlines the types and sources of threats to human security to revolve around physical (natural disasters), living (biological disasters such as epidemics) and social systems (war and displacement). He goes on to assert that it is the interactions between these systems that pose a threat to human security. Tanaka suggests two ways to handle human security threats by either reducing the causes or to ameliorate the consequences.

Human security is inherent to human life bearing in mind the incoherence of the worlds’ insecurities as Gasper and Gomez (2014) question the degree of attention that is given to what they consider less significant threats (perceived threats) such as terrorism and conflicts. Rather they believe that much more critical attention should be placed on the salient real threats like human trafficking, social exclusion (psychological insecurity), adaptation to climate change and so on. They stated an instance where more people have died from tobacco than from bombs in 2003. Singh (2014) alludes to this point when he mentioned that after the fall of the Berlin wall, it became clear that despite the stability created by the East-West balance of power, the citizens were not necessarily safe as they suffered from environmental disasters, poverty, disease, hunger, violence and human rights abuse even though they were said to be safe from nuclear and outright attacks. Gasper and Gomez (2014) believe that over the past 20 years, human security has made much progress in diminishing the incoherence mentioned above.

The UNDP Human Development Report of 1994 particularly emphasises that “human security means safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression”. It

also means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our daily lives: whether in our homes, in our jobs, in our communities or in our environment” (UNDP, Human Development Report, 1994, p.23). In practical terms “human security” means that children will not die, diseases will not transmit, jobs will not be lost, and communal tensions will not translate into violent conflict and dissenters will not be forced to silence (UNDP, Human Development Report 1994, pp.22-24)

The report identifies four essential characteristics of human security which are:

- i. Human security is a *universal* concern. It is relevant to people everywhere, in rich nations and poor nations.
- ii. The components of human security are *interdependent*
- iii. Human security is *easier to ensure through early prevention* than later intervention. It is less costly to meet these threats upstream than downstream.
- iv. Human security is *people-centred*. It is concerned with how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities – and whether they live in conflict or in peace.

This implies a change in the concept of security in two basic ways: (i), from an exclusive stress on territorial security to a much greater stress on people’s security; and (2), from security through armaments to security through sustainable human development. The seven categories of human security threat listed by the Human Development Report (1994, pp.22-24) include:

- a), Economic security threatened by persistent poverty, unemployment;
- b), Food security threatened by hunger and famine;
- c), Health security threatened by deadly infectious diseases, unsafe food, malnutrition, lack of access to basic health care;
- d), Environmental security threatened by environmental degradation, resource depletion, natural disasters, pollution;
- e), Personal security threatened by physical violence, crime, terrorism, domestic violence, child labour;
- f), Community security threatened by inter-ethnic, religious and other identity based tensions; and
- g), Political security threatened by political repression, human rights abuses, etc.

From an operational perspective, human security aims to address complex situations of insecurity through collaborative, responsive and sustainable measures that are (i) people-centred, (ii) multisectoral, (iii) comprehensive, (iv) context-specific, and (v) prevention-oriented. In addition, human security employs a hybrid approach that brings together these elements through a protection and empowerment framework. The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, (2009, p.7) report noted that:

The concept of security must change-from an exclusive stress on national security to a much greater stress on people’s security, from security through armaments to security through human development, from territorial security to food, employment and environmental security.

That security must not only be addressed in terms of defending territory but also in terms of protecting people has been emphasised severally in current discourse on the concept of security (Imobighe, 2001; Seo-Hang, 2005; Nnoli, 2006; Obi, 2007; Essien, 2012). Obviously sticking to the traditional notion of security is no longer tenable in the light of emerging threats, not only to the state but individuals, ethnic groups, nations, various social groups, minorities,

regions, and the global system. The environment itself, which sustains human life, is also under threat (Mesjasz, 2004). Donnelly (2011, p.7) in this regard notes that:

For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has been equated with the threats to a country's borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security. For most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime- these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world.

Human security has been severally criticised for its conceptual ambiguity (Tanaka, 2015), arbitrariness, vagueness and broadness of its epistemology of threats void of the necessary precision for a useful theoretical construct (Paris, 2001 & Singh, 2014). While Newman (2001, p. 358-359) tags it as 'a Normatively Attractive but Analytically Weak Concept', Buzan (2004, p. 3,370) dismissed it as 'a reductionist, idealistic notion that adds little analytical value.' Paris, Fukuda-Parr and Messineo are particularly critical of the breadth of the concept and argue that it lacks the analytical and descriptive power of a robust theoretical construct to identify causal relationships and define appropriate responses (Paris, 2001; Fukuda-Parr & Messineo, 2012). It is unlike the traditional state security paradigm with clear core values such as the notion of wealth which is measured in terms of the amount of a nation's material possessions, and power measured in terms of its ability to control the actions of others. Security here, in an objective sense, is measured by the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, it measures the absence of fear that such values (wealth, power) will be attacked. Such specificity is lacking in human security because of the difficulty of determining what constitutes core values for the wide range of individuals and communities globally since human security is not limited to any state (Goetschel, 2005).

In response, exponents of human security not only cite the substantive importance of a wider range of issues (such as poverty, disease, and environmental disasters), but also by arguing that in shifting the referent of security, these issues necessarily fall under the human security umbrella. They posit that the subsequent analytic and normative difficulties are unfortunate but unavoidable consequences of broadening the security paradigm beyond threats to the state (Owen, 2004).

The debates among proponents of human security have focused on two perspectives: the broad versus narrow conceptualisation. The narrow concept of human security includes only threats related to violence citing pragmatism, conceptual clarity, and analytic rigor as their reasons for doing so (Krause, 1998 & Mack, 2004). Krause argues that the broad concept of human security is a potential laundry list of 'bad things that can happen' and points to the danger of including the lowest common denominator of individual vulnerability and well-being under the rubric of security thus securitising everything including education which can have few benefits (Krause, 1998). Mack stresses that lumping together dependent and independent variables renders causal analysis virtually impossible thus the need to identify what really constitutes security threat and what is not (Mack, 2004).

On the other hand, there are scholars who advocate a broadening of human security to include poverty, disease, and environmental disasters as well as social, psychological, political, and economic aspects of vulnerability (Alkire, 2003; Axworthy, 1977; Bajpai, 2000). Alkire's

definition includes all critical and pervasive threats to the vital core ‘consistent with long term flourishing’ captured in the Report of the Commission on Human Security (2002).Thakur includes floods, famine, and massive refugee flows which present a crisis scenario requiring exceptional policy response as issues that warrant the security label. Although Bajpai’s Human Security Audit is broad in scope, it only includes threats with ‘identifiable human agents’ (Bajpai, 2000). Despite the endless debate between proponents and critics and the lack of a firm definition of the concept of human security, it does not bring down its utility as a concept (Singh, 2014).

### **Towards a Theory of Human Security for West Africa**

Theoretically, the profiling of human security in policy and academic discourse is embedded in the questioning of the International Relations theory assumptions (realist and neo realist approaches to security) (Ismail, 2011). Ismail (2011) goes on to state that the notion of human security has been fraught with serious definitional and ideological contestations at the level of theory and policy. Tanaka (2015) offers an interdisciplinary approach in theorising human security using the three systems of human security mentioned earlier in this paper which comprise the physical, living and social systems. He thus presents the tripartite differentiation of the sources of threats to human security to correspond to relative groups of academic disciplines linking the physical system to sciences and engineering based on physics and chemistry; living system to biological and ecological sciences; and the social system to social sciences and the humanities. Tanaka argues that a good theory of human security should revolve around these disciplines when looking into the causative factors of human security threats along with the interactions between the systems. Approaching the concept of human security from the constructivist perspective, Tsai (2009) notes that it offers insight into additional dimensions that encompass human consciousness, national identity and interest formations. He believes that when people start to think of a common interest derived from the values of a collective identity, the definition of security will become people centred.

The debates surrounding human security regarding its seeming ‘over inclusiveness’: that it is so broad that it becomes ‘borderless’ and apparently vague making it difficult for scholars to cage it in a definable frame has made its development as a theory slow. This is because of the lack of a clear focus and direction necessary to construct well developed theoretical debates leading to evolving the concept into a theoretical framework for analysis of the international system (Jones, 2005). Ohta (2009, p.22) for instance argues that “certainly, IR theory has to be able to address the issues of the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor nations, world hunger, and various aspects of human rights, but it is not appropriate for IR theory to address issues such as domestic violence, suicide, and traffic accidents”. Jones (2005) has noted, nevertheless that the width and breath of human security is such that most theoretical frameworks can accommodate it.

From the foregoing, it appears that the best theory to adopt as the framework for evaluating ECOWAS responses to human security challenges in the sub-region for understanding human security in West Africa is critical human security, a hybrid of critical security theory and the concept of human security especially enunciated by Newman (2010). It is a combination of the strengths of critical security theory and the concept of human security as outlined below.

Critical security studies input into building a theory for human security is rooted in its interrogation of the assumptions of the prevailing understanding of the concept of security especially in the cold war era. Sheehan (1999, p. 3) for instance, raised three basic questions that critical security posed:

- i. What is security?
- ii. Who is being secured by the prevailing order and who or what are they being secured against?
- iii. With whose security should we be concerning ourselves and through which strategies should this security be attained?

These questions seek to highlight the inadequacies of traditional security with its focus on the state and to even expose the state as a source of insecurity than security. It has also served the purpose of opening up new horizons of security including environmental security, economic security and societal security as well as exploring the purpose of security at the individual, state and global levels.

Two schools of critical security have emerged in the field of critical security studies: the Copenhagen school led by Barry Buzan and the Welsh or Aberystwyth School (relying on insights from the Frankfurt school) championed by Ken Booth among others (Nunes, 2007). The Copenhagen school queries the militaristic definition of security by realists and widens the landscape to encompass environmental, economic, political and societal security categories. However, it remains within the realists' paradigm regarding the primacy of the state in issues of security. Buzan for instance insists that security is still a state issue because it is the state that copes with all security problems (Sheehan, 1999). Since the state is the central actor in international politics and the principal agent for addressing insecurity, the state and not the individual must remain the referent of security discourse.

On the other hand, the Welsh school promotes an emphasis upon the individual human being as the ultimate referent object of security and to make human emancipation the goal of security policies. It draws attention to the poor and disadvantaged people who need to be "free from those physical and human constraints which stop them from carrying out what they would freely choose to do" (Booth in Alberth & Carlsson, 2009, p. 9). These include war and the threat of war together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on.

Booth's thesis on security as emancipation nuanced on a holistic and non-statist approach to security discarding realist emphasis on use or threat of force found a common chord with the idea of human security enunciated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994 arguing for a shift of the referent object of security from the state to the individual human being (Gaan, 2010). However, critical security theory alone is not adequate as a framework for human security because human security does not subscribe to the state as the referent of security as does the Frankfurt school but rather the individual. It is also not suspicious of the state as the Copenhagen school because human security is pragmatic about finding solutions even using the state. In this regard, Newman (2010, p.87) notes concerning human security that:

It challenges the primacy of the state but is willing to concede the reality of state power and to work with the state to find solutions. Indeed, human security scholarship tends to be essentially open-minded in a liberal sense regarding the state; it believes that the state, if properly constituted, can work in the interests of people.

In fact, Newman further notes that human security scholarship, whilst promoting the individual as the referent object of security even when this is in tension with the state, is more likely to see a strong state as a necessary requirement for individual security. He therefore sees human security as primarily consequentialist and less structurally revisionist than critical security studies. Thus while human security challenges orthodox neorealist conceptions of international security as does critical security, its approach is different. Human security acknowledges that apart from problems of deprivation that many people grapple with in several parts of the world, the greater threat may come from their own state itself, rather than from an 'external' adversary. The solution is to challenge attitudes and institutions that privilege so-called 'high politics' above individual experiences of deprivation and insecurity so that the managers of the state can take responsibility to address these challenges. It draws attention to the fact that while the state remains the central provider of security in ideal circumstances its territorial integrity does not necessarily correlate with human security, and that in fact, an over-emphasis upon state security can be to the detriment of human welfare needs. In this case then, traditional conceptions of state security are a necessary but not sufficient condition of human welfare (Newman, 2010). This is related to the concept of conditional sovereignty where the international legitimacy of state sovereignty rests not only on control of territory, but also upon fulfilling certain standards of human rights and welfare for citizens. This way, the state works for the people (citizens) from whom it draws its legitimacy.

Since basically the concern of human security scholarship is about repositioning people as the referent of security, it focuses on evolving policies that will lead to such change as it envisages. It is in this regard that human security engages a wide range of challenges and issues such as the environment, migration, development, health and medical epidemics, etc which affect people in the hope that states will channel more resources to them as issues of security. However, this has posed a weakness to human security in terms of the theoretical and practical relationship between the state and the individual in the provision of security as many threats to individual security emanate from predatory and abusive states, or state weakness and failure. This has raised what Newman refers to as the central paradox of human security "challenging as it does the structures and norms that produce human insecurity, yet in many ways reinforcing these structures and norms" (2010, p. 17). How to engage human security as a theoretical framework for security while at the same time addressing this paradox led to what Newman has evolved as critical human security insisting that neither critical security nor human security alone is adequate as a framework of analysis for the new thinking in security.

Similarly, Omeje (2010) came to the conclusion, after a survey of the mega theories and perspectives in the field of security studies (realism, liberalism, the securitisation thesis, critical security studies, and the environmental theories) that none of them particularly suits the African milieu. He considered that African scholars and policy makers will have to develop more suitable, context-specific and medium range alternative theories that explain security issues on the continent and offer some solutions. He is of the opinion that a monolithic referent for security is perhaps not the best and would rather suggest the possibility of a multi-referent approach at both the theoretical and practical levels if security is not to be lopsided and truncated (Omeje, (2010).

Whatever the approaches are, there is no doubt, especially concerning human security in Africa that although the focus is the individual, his/her security cannot be realised exclusive of



the state. Effective national security becomes a *sine quanon* for the security of individuals and communities in the broad sense of the term. Tanaka (2015) argues that the state has a major role to play in ensuring human security and he ardently advocates for cooperation with other stakeholders such as international organizations, civil society organizations, academic institutions and other nations in the struggle to effectively stamp out the threats to human security. In a study of human security in West Africa, it will be necessary to look at efforts of ECOWAS as a regional body, its institutions and the various attempts it has made to ensure the security and stability of its member states and how this has impacted on the wellbeing of its citizens. Specific threats such as Small Arms and Light Weapons proliferation, Trafficking in Persons and Drug Trafficking and their direct effect on personal and community security which affect all the other aspects of human security and in turn impinge on national and international security are particular issues in the sub-region. Human security in West Africa is therefore extended in various directions – forth and back, up and down- and across institutions and organisations.

## Conclusion

This paper submits that the critical human security theory is most appropriate as a theoretical framework for studying the human security situation in West Africa. This is because it draws from the strength of human security with its emphasis on policy relevance and yet addresses its analytical weakness which exists regarding the scope and nature of security, and the means of achieving security by the critical security approach. Employing the advantage of critical security also addresses the excessive focus of human security on the manifestations of insecurity which can be misleading and paying attention to the underlying structural causes. This will suit the study of the subject of human security in the West African context in view of the determination of ECOWAS for a paradigm shift from an ECOWAS of states to an ECOWAS of the people based on its vision 2020. It recognises that although ECOWAS is a supranational organisation comprising of States with their territories and authorities who can drive the process of achieving the goals of the organisation, the citizens of West Africa must be the focus and not the states so that the region's integration and development process becomes people-centered and people-driven which is the thrust of the human security drive.

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