



Conflict risk and development challenges in West Africa

By

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Abstract

The proximity of the Sahelian countries to West Africa sub region does not only trigger spillover effects of terrorism and arms proliferation but has helped to sustain the sub region's nuances of diverse conflicts, ranging from inter-ethnic conflicts, inter-state conflicts, liberation conflicts, civil rights conflicts, annexationist conflicts, and political transition conflicts. These conflicts inadvertently spew up developmental challenges, of which forced migration and infrastructural destruction which negatively impacted on life expectancy and educational attainment, which is central to development. It was against this backdrop that this study employed Failed State Theory to examine conflict risk and development challenges in West Africa, drawing evidences from Burkina Faso and Mali. This study disintegrated development challenges into education attainment and life expectancy. The study engaged qualitative research design approach to elicit data with reliance on extant and related literature. Result that emanated from the study submitted that conflict risk in West Africa triggers forced displacement which negatively influence education attainment which is a major index for development. The study also established that conflict risk, as seen in West Africa, triggers food insecurity throwing the populace into decreasing life expectancy which is also central to development. The study therefore recommends that AU, ECOWAS, and other regional blocs, should provide a platform for learning outside the traditional classroom arrangement by adopting the UNICEF's education radio approach to assist education attainment. The study also recommends that enforcing good governance protocols across the sub region, will greatly increase life expectancy as such will reduce death by violence, hunger, and other preventable health conditions.

Keywords: Conflict Risk, Education Attainment, Failed State Theory, Life Expectancy

Introduction

Africa faces significant challenges related to conflict and development. The continent has experienced numerous conflicts over the years, including civil wars, Jihadism, military coups, and insurgencies. These conflicts have been fueled by various factors, including political instability, ethnic and religious tensions, poverty, and environmental degradation. The West Africa sub region has been largely subsumed by flood from torrential rainfall, pinned on climate change across Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Niger and Senegal, affecting over 5.5 million people. Same sub region became infamously known as the "Coups Belt" with coups trajectory in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea Bissau, Niger, and the Gambia (Adetayo, 2022).

Another challenge is the lack of effective governance. corruption, weak institutions, and a lack of accountability have hindered the development of many West African countries, and this has contributed to the spread of conflict. The lack of effective governance also makes it difficult to evolve poverty reduction

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strategies, and investment in education and healthcare. It is towards this end, that the world maintains a common front on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Addressing these challenges will require cooperation and collaboration among governments, civil society organizations, and international partners (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2022).

Conflict in the West Africa region has been largely driven by a jihadist insurgency centred in the states of Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and assisted by the proximity of the West African region to the Sahelian countries. Each of these countries experienced significant instability in their own ways. The spillover effects of the crisis in Sudan, as the paramilitary forces of Sudan Rapid Force (SRF); an extension of glorified Janjaweed militias engaged the mainstream Sudan Army for the rein of powers. Such crisis, triggers recruitment of many militias to assist SRF in winning the war and such further aggravate conflict risks of West Africa Sub region. Many Fragile States that have evacuated their citizens are also vulnerable to radicalisation problem and recruitment of other terror cells into the Sudan crisis (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), 2022). These conflict risk further endanger education attainment and life expectancy which are vital indicators of development.

Furthermore, low life expectancy in West Africa could be seen endangered by the conflict risk rating in West Africa. These conflict risks of violence extremism, forceful displacement, coups and counter coups and religious ethno violence aggravate many into the hunger and malnutrition basket which is also compounded with impact of climate change leading to drought, loss of livestock, food insecurity, poverty, malnutrition and spread of preventable diseases amidst weak health system. A low life expectancy can slow down development in Africa in several ways; a lower life expectancy means that a large proportion of the population may not be able to participate fully in the economy, which can slow down economic growth. This can also lead to social and emotional problems when children lose their parents at a young age, as families struggle to cope with the loss of income and support (Ogbu et al., 2025).

Another development challenges could be seen when conflict negatively influence education attainment thus denying the youthful population the opportunity to acquire the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes they need to become responsible, active and productive adults. Out-of-school children also face a present filled with dangers. Compared to their peers who are in school, they are at a much higher risk of recruitment by armed groups. Girls face an elevated risk of gender-based violence and are often forced into child marriage, with ensuing early pregnancies and childbirth that threaten their lives and health. Both boys and girls become easier targets for traffickers and are quicker to fall prey to recruitment into armed groups.

While not all wars result in violence, those that have affected West Africa on a local, state, and regional level have been marked by it. The low-intensity wars escalating within generally stable nations, such as the Casamance dispute in Senegal and Guinea Bissau (Ba & Foucher, 2025), the unabated Jihadism and Military Coup in Burkina Faso (Bøås & Haavik, 2025), the sporadic Dagbon chieftaincy problem in Ghana (Tseer et al., 2025), and the insurgency in Nigeria (Ishaku et al., 2025), to name a few, are even more crucial to mention. The devastation of lives and property, internal displacement of people, a regional refugee crisis, poverty and sickness, the growth of small guns and light weapons, human and drug trafficking, unlawful exploitation of natural resources, and banditry are all effects of these conflicts (Afolabi 2009), significantly crippling the development of the West African states. It is on this notion that this paper argues that development challenges in West Africa have persisted mainly as a result of avoidable conflicts. These conflicts have wreaked havoc in many West African states, thereby substantially slowing down the pace of development.

Objectives of the Study

To achieve the objective of this study, the following specific objectives were attended to:

- i. Investigate how conflict risk affects economic development in West Africa?
- ii. Interrogate extent to which conflict risk aggravate social development in West Africa?

The paper is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, section two is concerned with literature review. Section three discussed the methodology adopted for the study; section four discussed the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Conceptual Review

Conflict Risk

Conflict risk refers to the likelihood that a conflict or violent confrontation will occur between individuals, groups, or nations. It can be influenced by a variety of factors such as economic inequality, political instability, historical grievances, ethnic or religious differences, and resource scarcity. Conflict risk is often assessed by analyzing the underlying causes and identifying potential triggers that could lead to violence. Understanding and managing conflict risk is important for preventing or mitigating violent conflict and promoting peace and stability.

The Global Conflict Risk Index (GCFRI) under the European Commission uses four indicators to measure conflict severity; deadliness, danger, diffusion, and fragmentation. Countries and territories can rank high on

one or multiple indicators. Countries and territories that rank high on three to four indicators are experiencing the most severe and difficult-to-resolve conflicts. Conflict risk management evolves when efforts targeted at Conflict risk reduction is enable, which is the practice of reducing the risk of conflict through systematic analysis and management of the causal factors of conflict (Schvitz et al., 2022).

There is a significant nexus between conflict risk and development. In general, conflict risk can undermine development efforts and increase poverty, insecurity, and instability. At the same time, underdevelopment can also contribute to conflict risk. When conflict occurs, it can disrupt economic activities, damage infrastructure, displace people, and disrupt social systems, leading to significant economic and social costs. This can have long-term negative impacts on development, including reduced economic growth, increased poverty, and limited access to basic services such as healthcare and education.

Concept of Development Challenges

Development challenges refer to the obstacles and difficulties faced during the process of social, economic, or technological development. These challenges vary across the West African region; poverty, education, health and disease, infrastructure, governance and corruption, environmental sustainability, gender inequality, conflict and instability, and economic inequality. Most of these challenges are evidence of poor governance. Addressing these development challenges requires collaborative efforts from governments, civil society organizations, international institutions, and the private sector. Sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations provide a framework for global cooperation in tackling these challenges and building a more inclusive and prosperous future for all (The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2022).

Furthermore, conflict and political instability face constrict development challenges. These include displacement, destruction of infrastructure, disrupted economies, and the breakdown of social systems. Health challenges of limited access to healthcare services, high disease burdens, and inadequate infrastructure promotes malaria, tuberculosis, and emerging infectious diseases pose significant obstacles to life expectancy in West Africa sub region

Conflicts in Guinea and Developmental Challenges

Guinea, like many other countries in Africa, faces several developmental challenges that hinder its progress towards sustainable development (Okafor et al., 2025). The incessant incursion into governance by the military keep the country's development below expectation. These developmental challenges also increase the risk of conflicts in Guinea. For example, poverty and inequality can fuel social tensions and political

instability. The lack of access to education and healthcare can exacerbate grievances and create a breeding ground for extremism. The weak governance structures create opportunities for rent-seeking and corruption, leading to political instability and conflicts. Moreover, Guinea has a history of coups and political violence, which is a significant concern for stability and development. The government's ability to address the developmental challenges in the country and mitigate the risk of conflicts will be critical to promoting sustainable development in Guinea (Odeh et al., 2025).

Poverty: Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than half of its population living below the poverty line. Poverty is a significant barrier to development as it limits access to basic needs such as food, water, and healthcare (Dahlman, 2025).

Infrastructure: Guinea's infrastructure is underdeveloped, which limits economic growth and social development. Poor road networks, inadequate electricity supply, and limited access to clean water and sanitation are some of the challenges the country faces (Yangailo, 2025).

Education: Guinea has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with only 41% of adults able to read and write. Limited access to education limits human capital development and constrains the country's potential to compete in the global economy (Kandas et al., 2025).

Health: Guinea's healthcare system is underfunded, and there is limited access to healthcare facilities and medical professionals, particularly in rural areas. The country also faces challenges with infectious diseases such as malaria and Ebola (Grovogui et al., 2025).

Governance: Guinea has a history of authoritarian rule, and corruption is prevalent in the country. Weak governance structures limit the government's ability to implement policies and programs that could promote development (Onivogui, 2025).

Burkina Faso's Conflict Risk and Development Challenges

Burkina Faso, weak governance structures and wanton coups and counter coups create opportunities for rent-seeking and corruption, leading to political instability and conflicts. Moreover, Burkina Faso is facing a complex humanitarian crisis, with ongoing violence and displacement in the northern and eastern regions of the country (Janin & Chapus, 2025). The conflict involves armed groups, including Islamist militants, and has resulted in thousands of deaths and displacement of over one million people. Addressing the developmental challenges in Burkina Faso, particularly in the conflict-affected regions, and promoting sustainable development will be critical to mitigating the risk of conflicts and building peace in the country.

It will require a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the conflict, including poverty, inequality, and weak governance structures.

Infrastructure: Burkina Faso's infrastructure is underdeveloped, which limits economic growth and social development. Poor road networks, inadequate electricity supply, and limited access to clean water and sanitation are some of the challenges the country faces (Compaore-Bambara et al., 2025).

Governance: Burkina Faso has a history of authoritarian rule, and corruption is prevalent in the country. Weak governance structures limit the government's ability to implement policies and programs that could promote development (Akuche & Akindoyin, 2025).

Poverty: Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than 40% of the population living below the poverty line. Poverty is a significant barrier to development, limiting access to basic needs such as food, water, and healthcare (Agu & Agboeze, 2025).

Education: Burkina Faso has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, with only 36% of adults able to read and write. Limited access to education limits human capital development and constrains the country's potential to compete in the global economy (Barro, et al., 2025).

Health: Burkina Faso's healthcare system is underfunded, and there is limited access to healthcare facilities and medical professionals, particularly in rural areas. The country also faces challenges with infectious diseases such as malaria and cholera (Gatome-Munyua et al., 2025).

Empirical Review

Conflict Risk and Life Expectancy for Development

David and Eriksson (2025) interrogated the linkages between conflict intensity and health outcomes as accounted by the vulnerability and functioning of healthcare services. This study is based on panel data on conflict intensity, vulnerability, healthcare service functioning, and health outcomes in 42 conflict-affected countries between 2000 and 2019 and uses fixed-effects panel regression analysis to determine the associations between conflict intensity and health outcomes. Findings from the study opine that conflict intensity was positively associated with the health outcomes, such that as the conflict intensity increased, the mortality and prevalence of these outcomes also increased.

Boundioa and Thiombiano (2025) investigated threshold effect of governance quality in the relationship between public health expenditure and life expectancy at birth in the West African Economic and Monetary

Union. The data used come from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) database and the World Bank's World Development Indicators and cover the period 1996–2018. Threshold-effect analysis for Hansen (1999) was performed to assess the relation between governance quality (using the six (06) indicators and index of governance quality for robustness) and public health expenditure with life expectancy at birth. The results emerging from study revealed that governance quality is a transition variable at which public health expenditure affects life expectancy. Indeed, the effect of public spending on life expectancy at birth varies according to the thresholds reached by the different levels of governance on a 0–1 scale. The study submitted that Improving governance quality must be a prerequisite for any allocation of public resources in the health sector in WAEMU. This is largely because Public health expenditure (PHE) has long been viewed as having the potential to improve health.

Uchendu (2018) investigated in a cross country studies, life expectancy in war-torn Sub-Saharan African countries as driven by hunger. The study adopted mixed method research design on fourteen countries data population alongside food Security Index, corruption perceptions index, Global Hunger Index as obtained from global published data with T test, multivariate and Pearson correlation analyses to determine the relationship. Result from study revealed that global hunger index significantly influenced life expectancy in both male and female. Study was restricted to conflict on life expectancy while this study extends to education attainment as construct for development.

Sabahelzain et al. (2025). interrogated Implications of conflict on vaccination in the Sahel region, in an environmental characterised by challenging crises and conflicts. This study highlights the implications of conflict on vaccination across five Sahel countries, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Sudan, from 2019 to 2023. The study leverage on WHO Immunisation Data Portal to extract data about vaccination coverage and disease outbreaks. With the increasing complexity of humanitarian access in the Sahel, there has been an accumulation of the number of zero-dose and underimmunised children. In 2023 alone, most of these countries had a significant proportion of zero-dose children, particularly Sudan (43%), Mali (22%) and Chad (16%). Nearly half of children in Sudan (49%), 33% in Chad and 23% in Mali are underimmunised. Measles vaccine coverage was consistently below 90% in these countries, except for Burkina Faso. The trend of polio outbreaks (circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus) across these countries showed fluctuations in the number of cases, with Niger having reported several cases over this period, and Chad having 101 cases reported in 2020 alone. Despite relatively high coverage, there were significant outbreaks of polio in Burkina Faso, Sudan and Mali in 2020, which reflects the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lessons can be learnt from past diplomatic and programmatic successes, while investments in innovative and flexible approaches may help increase the reach of vaccination programmes in inaccessible areas

Osei et al. (2023) examined the nexus between flood occurrence on mortality rate and life expectancy amongst 53 African countries. Study engaged panel data from the period 2000–2018 with generalized method of moments for analysis. Result from analysis submitted that that flood occurrence causes the destruction of health facilities and the spread of diseases which reduces life expectancy. In addition, flood occurrence increases mortality rate amongst 53 African countries. The study was a continental study while this study is limited to West Africa subregional conflict risk aggravate development.

Guisan and Exposito (2016) employed econometrics model to analyse the relationship between life expectancy, education and development in African countries for the period 1980-2014. The study employed econometric models to analyze the positive impact of education and development in the evolution of life expectancy of African countries, having into account that there are also other factors related with geography, social features, health assistance, sanitation infrastructures and other factors that also explain differences among countries. The study include an analysis of several causes of death, with adjusted rates particularly high in many Sub-Saharan countries, in comparison with the World average of the Age Specific Death Rate (ASDR). The study submits that education is a main factors that might help to improve development, life expectancy and quality of life in Africa. The study was done in 2016 as a continental study while this study focuses on sub region of West African and considers education attainment variant as a measurement for development in the face of conflict risk in West Africa.

Conflict Risk and Education Attainment for Development

UNICEFCHILD ALERT (2019) in a cross regional studies interrogates education under threats in West and Central Africa region. The study engaged mixed method research design with reliance on in depth interview, focus and group discussion. Findings from the study showed that the number of schools forced to close due to rising insecurity in conflict-affected areas of West and Central Africa tripled within the end of 2017 and June 2019 totalled 9,272. Such closure endanger more than 1.91 million children and nearly 44,000 teachers. The increasing number of children forced out of school due to violence in West and Central Africa contributes translates to about one in four children globally who need humanitarian support – including education and other services critical to learning – live in just 10 countries in West and Central Africa. Nearly half of the schools closed across the region were due to attacks, threats of attack and increasing violence as found in Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mali pushing more children out of school, due to growing violence across both countries. This also goes for the four countries affected by crisis in the Lake Chad Basin – Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Study was a cross regional study and focused on education while this study considers life expectancy as development challenge to measure conflict risk in West Africa.

Bayoulou et al. (2025) interrogated gendered dimensions of conflict-driven displacement among Internally Displaced Persons in Burkina Faso, specifically emphasizing how ingrained social structures contribute to this problem. The study employed a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research design, conducted in Kaya city, a region heavily impacted by displacement. Data were collected through 58 focus group discussions, which included 352 participants. The data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 and the approach developed by Braun and Clarke, enabling a thorough identification of key patterns and themes. Result that emanated from the showed that GBV as deeply rooted in cultural and structural determinants, with gender inequality, power imbalances, and entrenched social constructs forming its primary foundations. Economic hardship, ignorance, behavioral issues like alcohol misuse, and institutional shortcomings were seen as contributors exacerbating GBV but not necessarily its root causes. Participants emphasized heightened GBV risks during humanitarian crises, manifesting in physical, sexual, and psychological violence linked to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriages, and the sexual division of labour.

Jabbarian (2022) deployed semi structured interviews to explore stakeholder perspectives on barriers to secondary education in rural Burkina Faso. Sample size of 49 participants were engaged alongside key informant interviews using snowballing technique and the diathesis-stress model in analysis. Results that emanated from the study showed that poverty is a major barrier amidst insecurity such that apparent lack of school infrastructure, resources, school-related expenses, and the low perceived economic benefits of investing in secondary schooling were reported as key barriers among young women. Result of the study, as done in Burkina Faso cannot not be generalised for the West African region hence the need for this study.

Research Methodology

The study employed a case study research design that involves focusing on the West African sub-region. The methodology employed in conducting this study largely relied on data that were generated from secondary sources such as official websites, journals, and published texts. Each of the data used to conduct this study is relevant to the study, in order to obtain the originality of the study, qualitative research design was adopted to review literatures and the numerous data gathered. This enabled the reliability and credibility of the study.

Discussion of Findings

The results that emanated from the review of literature showed that conflict risk in West Africa negatively affect life expectancy as the predominance of non state armed and violent actors spread across, high military spending outshine other social expenditures for health security that could increase life expectance and this further throw majority outside the health safety bracket into hunger and malnutrition in most Internally

Displaced Persons Camps across the region. This conflict window further aggravates food productivity which dropped and such could be seen impacting wrongly on productivity via the Human Development Index of the conflicts ridden states. This finding aligns with the previous works of Uchendu (2018); Osei et al. (2023); Guisan and Exposito (2016) that showed that conflict negative affect development

The result gotten from empirical literature established that conflict risk has a negative relationship with education attainment which is central to development. Many of the children thrown off of the education safety nets in West Africa are vulnerable and could be traced back into armed groups recruitment where young girls are taken up on sex slavery with early marriage and pregnancy. This could be translated to mean that a conflict ridden state cannot have developed human capacity to chart the way into development. This finding is consistent with the findings in the previous work of UNICEF CHILD ALERT (2019); Jabbarian (2022)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conflict in the region has shown that while traditional classroom is preferable, it is not the only place to provide learning activities hence the strategic approach of UNICEF and the Children's Radio Foundation which collaborated on designing and piloting the first-of-its-kind Radio Education in Emergencies programme. This study also concluded that for there to be any shadow of development in the West Africa subregion the need to arrest the declining life expectancy cannot be overemphasised

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. That AU, ECOWAS and other Intergovernmental bodies should provide a platform for learning outside the traditional classroom arrangement by adopting the UNICEF's education radio approach to assist education attainment. This measure will drastically reduce the number of children being recruited into violence extremism groups and also reduce girl child falling into early marriage.
- ii. That enforcing good governance protocols across the sub region, will greatly increase life expectancy as such will reduce death by violence, hunger, and other preventable health conditions

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