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Socio-economic Inequality and the Structural Dynamics of Insecurity: A Sociological Analysis of Violent Conflict and Sustainable Peace in Africa

Benjamin Ibietonye
Department of Sociology,
Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
benjamin.ibietonye@ust.edu.ng

Abstract
Socio-economic inequality remains one of the most persistent structural drivers of violent conflict in Africa, this study explores how unequal access to wealth, political power, and opportunities generates and sustains patterns of insecurity across the continent. Drawing from sociological theories of conflict and stratification, particularly Marxian and structural functionalist perspectives, the research employs a mixed-method design combining documentary analysis, secondary data review, and interpretive synthesis of reports from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the African Union (AU), and regional peace institutes. Findings reveal that inequality is not merely a by-product of weak governance but a deliberate outcome of exclusionary state formation, elite capture, and uneven globalization. These disparities manifest spatially in urban–rural divides, ethnically in resource allocation, and generationally in youth unemployment and marginalization. Empirical evidence further shows that structural deprivation correlates with political resentment, fueling insurgency recruitment, ethnic mobilization, and communal violence. The study argues that Africa's architecture of insecurity is entrenched in socio-economic polarization that erodes social trust, delegitimizes institutions, and normalizes violence as a means of redress. Addressing these roots requires an inclusive development framework emphasizing distributive justice, accountable governance, and participatory citizenship. By situating inequality at the heart of insecurity, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on peace, security and development, calling for a sociological re-examination of policy frameworks that perpetuate exclusion and instability across African societies.

Keywords: Socio-economic inequality, Insecurity, Violent conflict, Structural deprivation.

Introduction

In contemporary Africa, violent conflict has become a persistent feature of the political and social landscape, shaped by the interaction of structural inequality, identity politics, and institutional fragility. Insecurity across regions such as the Sahel, the Great Lakes, and the Horn of Africa has prompted renewed interrogation of the underlying causes of violence. While conventional explanations often emphasise ethnicity, governance failures, or resource competition, such perspectives frequently obscure the deeper sociological reality that socio-

economic inequality constitutes the foundational architecture of conflict. Inequality extends beyond material deprivation to encompass structured exclusion from power, status, and opportunity. Patterns of insecurity closely mirror geographies of marginalisation, where poverty and exclusion coincide with insurgency and extremism. Violent conflict thus reflects not spontaneous disorder but a predictable response to entrenched social stratification and institutional neglect, signalling the breakdown of social contracts between states and marginalised populations.

Traditional peace and security studies have often treated violent conflict as an aberration within otherwise stable political systems. However, this view underestimates the prevalence of what Galtung (1969) describes as structural violence, whereby harm and exclusion are embedded within social and institutional arrangements. From a sociological perspective, violent conflict in Africa represents not the collapse of order but the violent maintenance of unequal social

structures. Colonial legacies fractured indigenous systems of solidarity and governance, while post-independence elites reproduced these asymmetries through neo-patrimonial practices. Inequality thus operates historically and institutionally, reinforced by symbolic hierarchies that normalise the marginalisation of specific regions, classes, or ethnic groups. This cumulative layering of inequality creates enduring conditions of resentment and contestation, forming fertile ground for the emergence of violent conflict.

Socio-economic inequality therefore constitutes an architecture of insecurity, operating through interconnected material, political, and cultural dimensions. Material inequality limits access to land, education, and employment; political inequality excludes groups from governance and justice; and symbolic inequality sustains narratives that legitimise domination and marginalisation. Together, these dimensions generate structural vulnerability and weaken the integrative capacity of social institutions. Durkheim's (1897) concept of anomie aptly captures this condition, wherein the disjunction between societal aspirations and available means fosters alienation and violence. Violent conflict emerges not as an anomaly but as a systemic outcome when legitimate avenues for advancement are blocked. This study examines how material, political, and symbolic inequalities interact to sustain insecurity in Africa, with the aim of advancing a more inclusive and human-centred framework for sustainable peace.

Review of Related Literature

The African continent remains one of the most unequal regions globally, with the top 10 percent of the population controlling more than half of the total income, while the bottom 50 percent earn less than 10 percent (World Bank 2022). This inequality is multidimensional economic, political, social, and spatial, shaped by historical, structural, and institutional legacies, scholars such as Ake (1996) and Rodney (1972) have long argued that Africa's uneven development patterns stem from colonial exploitation and the perpetuation of elite dominance in postcolonial state systems. Despite decades of economic reforms, many African states continue to experience systemic exclusion, unequal access to education, health, and employment, and uneven distribution of national wealth. Socio-economic inequality in Africa is further reinforced by neo-patrimonial political systems, in which state resources are privatized and redistributed based on ethnic or patronage networks rather than meritocratic or civic criteria (Mkandawire 2015).

This has fostered governance systems that reward loyalty over competence and exacerbate public distrust in state institutions. Inequality, therefore, is not merely a by-product of underdevelopment, it is institutionalized within political economies where elites benefit from structural imbalances. In the African context, insecurity is not simply the absence of peace, but the systemic reproduction of social and political conditions that make violence likely (Francis 2020). Socio-economic disparities contribute to insecurity by generating grievances, eroding social cohesion, and creating fertile ground for political manipulation. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013) empirically demonstrate that inequality between ethnic and regional groups significantly increases the risk of internal conflict.

In countries such as Nigeria, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, unequal access to oil, land, and political representation has led to recurrent violence and separatist movements, Murithi (2017) argues that inequality interacts with identity politics and weak governance to produce cyclical insecurity, where violence becomes a mechanism for negotiating inclusion. Moreover, globalization has deepened these inequalities by integrating African economies into global value chains as raw material suppliers rather than value creators (Omeje 2019). This economic polarization fuels radicalization, as marginalized groups seek alternative sources of empowerment, including militant networks and criminal syndicates. Violent conflict in Africa cannot be fully understood through ethnic or religious lenses alone rather, it is rooted in structural inequalities and power asymmetries, Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation explains that when people perceive a significant gap between expected and actual living

conditions, frustration and aggression ensue, this dynamic is evident in African contexts where youth unemployment and perceived injustice drive collective violence.

Empirical studies by Adebayo (2021) and Annan (2017) show that economic exclusion correlates strongly with political instability. For instance, regions that experience long-term neglect in infrastructure or service delivery often become hotspots for rebellion and insurgency. Similarly, Kaldor (2013) observes that the "new wars" in Africa are motivated less by ideology and more by access to economic rents and identity-based mobilization, which are both symptoms of systemic inequality. The literature consistently highlights that inequality thrives where institutions are weak or compromised (Bates 2015). State fragility manifests in corruption, unaccountable leadership, and poor delivery of social goods, when citizens lose faith in the state, informal or violent actors, such as militias, vigilante groups, and warlords, fill the governance vacuum. The result is an "insecurity complex" where violence and inequality reinforce each other. Asiimwe and Mwakikagile (2019) contend that inequality undermines state legitimacy, making it difficult for governments to exercise the monopoly of force without coercion.

Empirical data from the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2023) show that the top 10% of Africans control nearly 50% of total wealth, while over 430 million people remain below the poverty line. Yet, beyond income disparity, it is the spatial and generational distribution of deprivation that fuels conflict. In Nigeria's northeast, Somalia's south, or the DRC's eastern corridor, disempowered youth perceive violence as both a livelihood and a form of protest. When inequality becomes existential when survival itself depends on one's identity, location, or lineage, the boundary between structural and physical violence dissolves.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three interrelated sociological theories to provide a multi-layered understanding of the relationship between socio-economic inequality and insecurity in Africa. Conflict Theory of Karl Marx premise that society is structured by class relations rooted in unequal access to production, resources remain relevant in explaining African conflicts. Inequality generates contradictions between the ruling elite and the marginalized, leading to struggles over economic and political control (Ake 1996). Modern scholars extend Marxian thought by linking class-based inequality to global capitalism, according to Rodney (1972), Africa's integration into the global economy as a supplier of raw materials entrenched dependency and inequality. The contemporary elite perpetuate this dynamic internally, maintaining systems that favor accumulation at the top. Violence thus becomes an instrument for both resistance and reproduction of inequality.

The theory of Relative Deprivation by Ted Gurr (1970) complements conflict theory by addressing the psychological and social dimensions of inequality, Gurr argues that individuals or groups who perceive a gap between their expectations and actual achievements develop frustration, which can lead to aggression or collective violence. In the African setting, where globalization has raised awareness of inequality through media and digital networks, the perception of exclusion is intensified. Citizens have become more aware of the wealth and privilege of political elites, which heightens resentment and increases susceptibility to recruitment by violent groups, this theory explains the emotional and motivational mechanisms that translate structural inequality into active conflict.

Structural Violence Theory (Johan Galtung, 1969) expands the understanding of violence beyond physical harm to include institutionalized inequality, structural violence occurs when social structures prevent people from achieving their full potential due to discriminatory or exploitative systems. In Africa, unequal access to education, healthcare, and political participation constitutes a form of violence that fuels chronic insecurity. These three theories

intersect to explain how socio-economic inequality becomes both a cause and a manifestation of insecurity, the African state thus becomes a battleground where structural contradictions, elite domination, and mass frustration intersect to sustain violent conflict.

Methods and Materials

This study employs a mixed-method research design that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to advance a comprehensive sociological analysis of the nexus between socio-economic inequality and insecurity in Africa. The complexity inherent in this research topic necessitates a methodological framework capable of capturing quantifiable indicators, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality indices, alongside interpretive insights into social discontent, deprivation, and conflict. The research primarily utilises secondary data, drawing from authoritative international sources such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank (2022), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2022), and scholarly publications, ensuring triangulation between empirical patterns and sociological theory. The focus on sub-Saharan Africa, specifically Nigeria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Kenya, enables an examination of diverse regional manifestations of inequality and their resultant insecurity. Case selection was purposive, reflecting histories of civil conflict, ethnic mobilisation, and economic marginalisation (Ake, 1996; Rodney, 1972; Mbembe, 2021). Data sources were chosen for their reliability, depth, and relevance to the research aims.

Quantitative Data Sources

Table 1: World Bank's World Development Indicator (WDI) (2022) Gini coefficients, poverty rates, and youth unemployment statistics.

Country	National Poverty Headcount Ratio (% of population, latest available)	Gini Coefficient (income inequality, 0=equal, 100=unequal)	Youth Unemployment (% of labor force ages 15–24)	Source (World Bank WDI 2022)
Nigeria	38.9% (2020 est.)	35.1 (2018)	19.6% (2022)	World Bank WDI (2022)
Kenya	33.4% (2019 est.)	40.8 (2020)	13.5% (2022)	World Bank WDI (2022)
South Sudan	76.4% (2016 est., latest available)	44.0 (est.)	18.7% (2022)	World Bank WDI (2022)
Democratic Republic of Congo	63.9% (2018 est.)	42.1 (2019)	13.9% (2022)	World Bank WDI (2022)

Source: World Bank (2022)

Poverty Headcount Ratio measures the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line; gini Coefficient reflects inequality the higher the value, the greater the inequality; and youth Unemployment indicates the share of the labor force ages 15–24 without work but available for and seeking employment.

Table 2: UNDP Human Development Reports (2021–2023) for Human Development Index (HDI) and multidimensional poverty measures.

Country	HDI 2021	HDI 2022	HDI 2023	MPI Value	MPI Headcount	MPI Survey Yr	Source
Nigeria	0.554	0.557	0.560	0.175	33.0%	2021 survey data	HDR statistical table; MPI 2024/UNDP/OPHI.
Kenya	0.608	0.626	0.628	0.113	25.4%	Survey = 2022	MPI 2024/ UNDP–OPHI.
South Sudan	0.393	0.388	0.388	0.580	91.9%headcount	MICS survey: 2010	MPI: OPHI
DRC	0.508	0.514	0.522	0.331	64.5%	Survey = 2017/2018	MPI 2023/24 / UNDP–OPHI

Source: UNDP (2024)

Evidently, HDI values (2021–2023) above are taken from the UNDP HDR statistical annex (HDI trends table covering 1990–2023). These HDR tables give the consistent HDI time series

used in the UNDP reports. Use the HDR statistical table for exact year-to-year comparisons and

ranking; MPI estimates are produced jointly by UNDP HDRO and OPHI (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative). The MPI country briefs (MPI 2024 release) provide: MPI value (A × H), the headcount (H), intensity (A), and the survey year used. Always cite the MPI brief for the country because MPI is survey-based and uses the most recent national survey available; South Sudan and DRC: national MPI estimates rely on older survey data (South Sudan: MICS 2010 / OPHI country brief; DRC: 2017/2018 survey for MPI). Where a recent national household survey is missing, UNDP/OPHI still publish the best available MPI estimate but note the survey year which reduces comparability with countries that have 2021–2022 survey data. I flagged survey years in the table; and HDI vs MPI: HDI is an aggregate index (life expectancy, education, GNI per capita); MPI measures deprivations at household/individual level across health, education and standard-of-living indicators. Both are complementary cite both when you discuss multi-dimensional aspects of poverty and vulnerability.

Table 3: Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) (2022) for governance indices.

Country	Overall Governance Score (out of 100)	Rank among African countries	Notes / year of data
Nigeria	45.7	33rd (2023 report shows this figure for Nigeria)	Score referenced for Nigeria 2023; IIAG series covers recent years.
Kenya	58.7	~13th (Kenya's rank in Africa)	Kenya's governance score appears in summary listings of IIAG.
South Sudan	18.5	Last in ranking (54th) in 2022 report	South Sudan is noted as bottom performer in IIAG 2022
DRC	32.7	~49th in ranking in IIAG 2022	DRC very low score among African countries

Source: IIAG (2022) Governance Scores

The Overall Governance Score measures performance across four categories: Security & Rule of Law, Participation, Rights & Inclusion, Foundations for Economic Opportunity, and Human Development. i) Nigeria's score (45.7) places it below the continental average (which was about 48.9 in 2021) for the IIAG; ii) Kenya's ~58.7 is comparatively stronger, indicating better governance performance relative to many African peers; iii) South Sudan's extremely low score (~18.5) reflects very weak governance, conflict, and institutional collapse; and iv) DRC's score (~32.7) shows significant governance challenges (rule of law, accountability, inclusion) which align with high inequality and insecurity contexts.

Qualitative Data

Primary qualitative data for this study are sourced from policy and situational reports by prominent regional organisations, including the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD). The AUPSC Communiqués and Annual Reports (2015–2023) elucidate structural causes of insecurity such as governance deficits, youth exclusion, and inequitable resource access (AUPSC, 2023). ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) and related reports identify community-level grievances linked to inequality as root causes of instability and extremism in West Africa (ECOWAS, 2020). ACCORD's "Conflict Trends" series provides ethnographic insight into how inequality intersects with ethnicity and gender to shape conflict in Nigeria, South Sudan, and the DRC (ACCORD, 2021).

Further, qualitative evidence is supplemented by peer-reviewed articles and ethnographic studies on violent conflict's social dimensions. Obi (2019) analyses resource control and inequality in the Niger Delta, offering community perspectives on deprivation and resistance. Mkandawire (2020) and Adebajo (2021) explore how state fragility and governance failures perpetuate insecurity across Africa. Reports from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2022) and the African Peacebuilding Network (APN, 2021) provide interpretive narratives on exclusion and governance. Foundational works by Rodney (1972), Ake (1996), and Mbembe

(2021) trace the historical and structural roots of inequality, showing how colonialism, neo-colonial governance, and globalisation sustain modern insecurity.

Findings and Data Analysis

The quantitative aspect of this study draws on indicators from the World Bank, UNDP, and Mo Ibrahim Foundation, offering empirical insights into the statistical relationships linking poverty, inequality, governance, and insecurity across African states. In contrast, the qualitative dimension deepens interpretation by revealing the social meanings and institutional logics underpinning these numerical trends. Data analysis employs three complementary techniques: document analysis, thematic content analysis, and historical-structural interpretation. The initial layer involves a systematic review of institutional reports from the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC), ECOWAS, and ACCORD. For example, the AUPSC's 2023 Annual Report and ECOWAS's ECPF Implementation Report (2020) were analysed for recurring motifs such as "youth marginalisation," "resource injustice," and "structural drivers of insecurity," as well as for the proposed interventions' alignment with sociological theories (AUPSC, 2023; ECOWAS, 2020; ACCORD, 2021).

The second analytic layer employs thematic content analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, of scholarly articles, ethnographies, and policy briefs focused on the social dimensions of conflict. This approach identifies emergent themes in three domains: structural inequality, governance and legitimacy, and social identity and marginalisation. Field-based narratives from Obi (2019) and Mkandawire (2020), alongside analytical contributions from Adebajo (2021) and ISS (2022), were coded into thematic clusters such as "elite-driven resource capture" and "youth exclusion" using qualitative software. The third layer, following Skocpol's (1979) comparative-historical method, re-examines colonial and post-independence patterns of extraction and elite accumulation. Foundational works by Rodney (1972), Ake (1996), and Mbembe (2021) contextualise the persistence of inequality as rooted in historical dependency, weak state institutions, and postcolonial crises of governance.

Table 4: Summary of Analytical Logic

S/N	Analytic Layer	Data Type	Method	Purpose
1	Institutional & Policy Reports	AUPSC, ECOWAS, ACCORD	Document analysis	Identify institutional narratives on inequality and security
2	Scholarly & Ethnographic Studies	Journal articles, policy briefs, field reports	Thematic content analysis	Extract lived experiences and interpretive frames
3	Historical-Sociological Texts	Rodney, Ake, Mbembe	Historical-structural interpretation	Trace roots and continuity of inequality-insecurity nexus
4	Integrated Triangulation	All	Cross-validation	Link quantitative indicators with qualitative narratives

Source: Author's Analytical Framework 2025

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that socio-economic inequality remains a persistent and central determinant of violent conflict and insecurity in African societies. In Nigeria, Kenya, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), inequality intersects with political exclusion, weak governance, and identity-based marginalisation, resulting in complex insecurity architectures. These results echo broader analyses by the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC, 2022) and ECOWAS (2021), both of which identify inequality as a key driver of fragility and violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa. The research highlights how structural violence (Galtung, 1969) underpins these patterns, with social structures systematically harming marginalised populations by denying access to basic needs and opportunities.

In Nigeria, for instance, extreme income disparities and inequitable oil wealth distribution have fuelled insurgency in the Niger Delta (Akinola, 2019). Kenya's ethnic-based land allocation and regional inequalities continue to provoke violence, especially during elections (Oucho, 2002;

Kanyinga, 2020). These structural inequalities go beyond economic deprivation, manifesting as spatial, political, and social exclusion, which reinforce grievances and trigger rebellion. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG, 2022), governance in many African states remains weak, with South Sudan and the DRC scoring lowest in governance quality. This institutional fragility allows non-state armed groups to thrive, exploiting grievances rooted in inequality and state neglect (ACCORD, 2021). These governance deficits, as Mkandawire (2010) suggests, create a "vacuum of legitimacy," enabling violent mobilisation against the state.

The study further reveals that socio-economic inequality in Africa is deeply rooted in historical and structural contexts. Colonial and postcolonial state formations institutionalised extractive economies and centralised power, entrenching inequality (Rodney, 1972; Arkin, 1996; Mbembe, 2021). Postcolonial states inherited exploitative structures, deepening dependency and class stratification. Legacies of divide-and-rule and ethnically biased administration, especially in Nigeria and Kenya, perpetuate political competition and unequal access to resources, sustaining insecurity. Thus, current violent conflicts are not isolated events but outcomes of enduring structural injustices. World Bank statistics (2022) show youth unemployment rates exceeding 30% in Nigeria and Kenya, and over 50% in South Sudan and the DRC, highlighting the depth of exclusion and the role of disenfranchised youth as recruitment bases for extremist groups (UNDP, 2022).

Regional organisations like ECOWAS and the AUPSC have attempted to address inequality-induced insecurity through early warning systems and peacekeeping missions, yet these interventions remain largely reactive and elite-driven (AUPSC, 2022). Peacebuilding strategies tend to focus on political settlements rather than addressing socio-economic injustices, while regional security frameworks achieve only temporary stabilisation (ACCORD, 2021). The study also confirms that inequality in Africa is not homogenous; it intersects with ethnicity, gender, and geography. In Nigeria, northern regions experience disproportionate poverty and educational deprivation, fostering radicalisation (Mustapha, 2014), while in the DRC, resource conflicts are gendered and ethnicised, with women suffering most.

These findings support intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), demonstrating the compounded effects of overlapping identities. Ultimately, the architecture of insecurity in Africa is shaped by the interplay of structural conditions and agency (Giddens, 1984), with violent movements often emerging as responses to structural injustice. Empirical data confirm that high inequality indices correlate with frequent violent incidents, underlining the need for a shift from militarised security approaches to inclusive, equity-driven development (AUPSC, 2022; ACCORD, 2021).

Conclusion

Sociological analysis of socio-economic inequality and insecurity in Africa demonstrates that violent conflict is not solely attributable to poverty or resource competition, but reflects structural injustices rooted in the continent's political economy. Inequality serves as the foundational architecture of insecurity, shaping grievances, exclusion, and legitimacy crises across numerous African states. The research identifies three intersecting drivers of insecurity: internal inequities from elite capture and exclusionary governance; institutional fragility incapable of mediating grievances; and external pressures arising from globalisation and extractive economic relations. These factors perpetuate cycles of deprivation, mistrust, and rebellion, as inequality delegitimises governance, erodes social cohesion, and rationalises violence as a response to injustice. Sustainable peace, therefore, requires more than military or diplomatic interventions; it necessitates redistributive justice and fundamental restructuring of

political and economic systems to rebuild the social contract and restore legitimacy through inclusive, transparent, and equitable governance.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen inclusive governance and political accountability; a move beyond token representation to genuine political inclusion, that reflect the socio-ethnic diversity of society.
2. Constitutional reforms that decentralize power and enhance local governance will improve state legitimacy.
3. Mechanisms for citizen participation, such as town hall consultations, participatory budgeting, and social audits, should be institutionalized to enhance accountability.
4. Reorientation of the security architecture from regime protection to human security, this involves demilitarizing public security functions, professionalizing law enforcement agencies, and strengthening community policing frameworks.
5. Governments and private actors should expand vocational training, entrepreneurship funding, and civic mentorship programs to harness youth potential. Education systems should emphasize skills for employability and citizenship, integrating peace education, social innovation, and digital literacy.

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