The Proliferation of Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel

Drivers, Ramifications and the Way Forward[1]

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Abstract:

The increase in the spate of insecurity in West Africa and the Sahel has assumed colossal proportions. Insecurity in the region is largely perpetuated by non-state actors that continue to rise in numbers and evolve in operations. Indeed, armed non-state actors pervade Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Nigeria. The proliferation of these armed non-state actors constitutes a bane to the development of the region as it further subjects the region to extreme poverty, unprecedented humanitarian crisis and state fragility. This paper, therefore, examines how the mutually reinforcing challenges of climate change, bad governance, local militias, ungoverned space and poverty have necessitated the polarization of terror networks. This is done through the adoption of a qualitative approach and reliance on secondary sources of data such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, newspaper articles, online newspapers etc. The paper finds that governance is a critical driver and predictive element in the understanding of the proliferation of ANSAs. It concludes that ANSAs take advantage of poor governance to establish an informal governance system that adopts violence to maintain control whilst encouraging a shadow economy characterized by terrorism, kidnap for ransom, rivalry attacks and illegal activities. The paper, therefore, recommends the adoption of a framework of local governance characterized by responsive institutions, inclusive politics and resilient society.

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Introduction

The proliferation of armed non-state actors [hereafter ANSAs] in the Sahel portends grave danger for human and national security. The phenomenon has assumed colossal proportions with knock-on effects on the spate of poverty, ethnic animosity, insurgency and insecurity in the region. In addition to undermining peace and progress, the menace has exacerbated carnage evidenced in the destruction of life and properties of thousands of people. It has further led to an increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing the affected regions thus creating a serious humanitarian crisis in the Sahel. The Sahel is a region in Africa that stretches across ten countries[3] and spans from the west to the east of Africa; from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. However, the use of the Sahel (or the region) in this paper is with particular reference to Niger, Mali, Chad, Nigeria and Burkina Faso where security situations continue to deteriorate.

Nigeria is threatened by the Boko Haram sect and its splinter group, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP). The group has been responsible for the death of thousands and the displacement of millions of people. It has also turned thousands into refugees, forced millions to flee their communities and increased the incidence of out-of-school children (Mohammed and Mohammed, 2015). The group has since its creation changed its tactics and scope by spreading to Niger, Mali, Chad and Cameroon. Meanwhile, other ANSAs in Nigeria include bandits, unknown gunmen and militant herders. Niger is endangered by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). The ISGS was responsible for the death of over 560 civilians in 2021 alone. The group's attack on civilians has sparked outrage in the affected communities and has led to the formation of militias for self-defence; a move capable of encouraging communal war. The JNIM on the other hand is responsible for sponsoring attacks against security forces, government facilities and schools close to the nation's capital (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2019). In Burkina Faso, JNIM; an affiliate of Al Qaeda whose attacks increased in 2021 to overtake Mali as the epicentre of conflict in the region, is responsible for the militant attack on state forces and civilians leading to high death tolls and destruction of government facilities.

The above-mentioned ANSAs continue to expand in scale and scope while the governments of the states in the region and other actors continuously decry the growing insufficient capacity and paucity of funds required to tackle the humanitarian crisis. This suggests a challenge to governance and internal security in these states. According to the World Internal Security and Police Index Report (2016), Africa, home to seven of the ten worst-ranked countries, performed worst in internal security. The index which 'measure the ability of the security apparatus within a country to respond to internal security challenges, both now and in the future' (p.6), takes a broader look at security issues such as insurgency, violent

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[3] The composition of states in the Sahel vary but it generally includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. The region stretches from Senegal through the aforementioned countries to the Red Sea Coast. It represents the site of interaction between the north and the south [see for example Suleiman, 2017; UN (n.d.)].

organized crime, climate change, civil unrest, terrorism and natural disasters. In the report, Nigeria scored 0.255 over 10 thus ranked 127 out of the 127 countries surveyed. Mali scored 0.489 while Burkina Faso scored 0.514.

This is supported by the report on internal security by the Legatum Institute (2021) which reveals that the region ranks low in terms of safety and security. Out of 167 countries surveyed for the prosperity index (safety, freedom, governance, living conditions, health etc.), Mali ranks 151 on the index and 158 in safety and security; Niger 148 and 143; Nigeria 143 and 153; Chad 164 and 141; Burkina Faso 134 and 142. The report further shows that except for Burkina Faso which had the same score in 2020 and 2021 (134), other countries in the region recorded a fall in rank between 2020 and 2021. Observably, the region not only performs poorly on the overall index rank but occupies the lower stratum in the safety and security band. Meanwhile, some of the world's poorest countries (Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria) are in sub-Saharan Africa and are found in the region. Of course, these poor governance indices have been linked to the security imbroglio in the region (Baudais, 2020). As Gorman (2019, p.1) puts it, "these development concerns add to the region's already precarious stability and, at times, compete with state-level security and economic issues".

The above view is corroborated by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (2020) that increased abductions, forced recruitment and terrorist attacks against civilians and security forces in the region reveal an area challenged by internal security. Although the reports present slight variations in the rankings of the countries of the region, this is not unexpected considering the different indices of analysis. Worthy of note nonetheless, is that the countries of the region are challenged by a governance crisis evidenced in poor internal security which gives impetus to the rise of ANSAs. Indeed, the proliferation of ANSAs has been attributed to several factors including government legitimacy, state-society relationship, weak states, weak security apparatus, arms proliferation, porous borders, poverty, colonial legacy, unemployment, illegal migration, climate change and most importantly, bad governance (Forest and Idler, 2015; Skretteberg, 2019). It is believed that ungoverned spaces in Africa create a power vacuum that is exploited by non-state actors to exert influence and authority. This is evidenced by the rise of the Berabiche and Tuareg groups which control a vast space of the Sahel (Forest and Idler, 2015). This has equally enabled the polarization of terror networks, an increase in attacks by ANSAs, arms proliferation, social fragility, extreme poverty and underdevelopment.

Arising from the above, this paper investigates the proliferation of armed non-state actors in the Sahel. It focuses on the issues necessitating the rise of ANSAs within the framework of bad governance. The paper also appraises the various ANSAs in the selected regions and the mutually reinforcing factors necessitating their proliferation and sustenance. In addition, the paper proffers policy recommendations as to the way forward from the quagmire. To address these central themes, this paper adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on the documentary review of secondary data available in textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, newspaper articles, government reports, internet sources etc. The paper is

therefore discussed under six distinct sub-headings. The first section presents an introductory overview of the phenomenon of armed non-state actors while the second part discusses the theoretical perspectives of the paper using bad governance as the frame of analysis. The third part presents an overview of ANSAs in the Sahel while the fourth part examines the mutually reinforcing factors that propel the proliferation of ANSAs and the resultant effects of the rise on the region and the continent. Thus, the fifth section recommends local governance as the panacea to discouraging the rise of ANSAs and helping the region to promote inclusiveness and resilience, while the conclusion of the paper is presented in the last part.

Theoretical Perspectives

The end of the Cold War has seen the notion of the state monopoly of power being weakened by the proliferation of ANSAs around the world (Darwich, 2021; Moderan, 2021). The state is becoming challenged in its sphere of governance due to limited attention paid to specific areas. The exclusive role of the government; governance, is being overtaken by non-state actors, who, through the provision of essential services, have taken over ungoverned spaces and areas with limited governance and rebranded themselves as local administrators. This paper argues that Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) are mostly products of bad governance and have in often cases secured their legitimacy by acting as [informal] governance providers to the local population. Thus, the central theme here is that governance is a critical driver and predictive element in the understanding of the proliferation of ANSAs. This is properly expressed in the words of Asaduzzaman and Virtanen (2016, p.2) that "the ground realities or country-specific contextual realities play a vital role in order to theorizing governance' and 'in order to cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century, to understand the relationship in-between the state and non-state agencies is thus important" (p.3).

Governance is defined as the instrument of governing which integrates the relationship between government, citizens and the role of the state (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1995). Asaduzzaman and Virtanen (2016, p.2) refer to governance as the responsibility of every government which includes the 'creation, execution, and implementation of activities backed by the shared goals of citizens and organizations, who may or may not have formal authority or policing power'. For Harmonie (2019, p. 4), governance is a 'set of practices and norms that govern daily life in a specific territory.' That is, governance is a space-bound activity that determines the course of action governing people's actions and way of life. The requisites of governance include the legitimacy of territorial control and the enforcement of rules guiding the affairs of the population in such a territory. Through governance, a legitimate armed actor exercises territorial control, regulates the population and provides essential goods and services. Governance, therefore, describes the model of the ruling, regulating and administering the affairs of people or a nation by the law. It is the interaction between power and responsibility and the ability to make decisions thereof.

Rockman and Hahm (2011) differentiate between good and bad governance and note that what distinguishes them is the quality of decisions and actions taken by government officials to gain people's trust; the failure of which creates a governance crisis. Governance crisis, inter alia, is not restricted to poor countries alone, but can also be found in economically advanced countries and precludes public trust in government and engenders instability. In this regard, fairness is an important element in the governance process. It emphasizes order, control, free choice, equity and the protection of human rights (Rockman and Hahm, 2011). For context, the Sahel performs poorly in terms of governance. Using the World Bank (2021) governance indicators, regarding the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations, Burkina Faso ranks 37 over 100; Mali 30; Niger 23; Nigeria 14; and Chad 11 in the year 2020 with an estimate of governance of less than -2.5 each. This indicates the prevalence of weak governance in the region.

The above submission is supported by the Chandler Good Government Index (2021) which includes only three of the countries in the region. The index, which measures indicators like leadership, strong institutions, laws and policies, among others, ranks Burkina Faso at 96 out of 104 countries with an index score of 0.347; Mali at 99 with a score of 0.329; and Nigeria at 102 with a score of 0.319. These rankings are an indication of the poor state of governance in the region and as this paper argues, this has necessitated the proliferation of ANSAs whose behaviour over the years can be described as dynamic and subject to evolvement.

Regardless of the change in tactic or aims, ANSAs have consistently been involved in governance, and recently, foreign policy (Darwich, 2021). The reasons for this, as argued by Harmonie (2019) are rooted in three factors: economic, political and institutional. The rewards of taxation and other levies are more satisfying economically just as ANSAs with secessionist plans often see themselves as shadow governments waiting to take over from the state actors. In the same manner, ANSAs may use governance as a means for securing legitimacy among the people or strengthening their organizational capability. According to Ruaudel (2013), when ANSAs sense the absence of government presence in an area, they assume the de facto role of shadow governance. Meaning, the presence of weak governance gives room for ANSAs to operate. They strive to fill a power vacuum, assume protective and governance roles and provide social services which earn them the communities' respect. Harmonie (2019) adds that some of the methods of providing governance services by ANSAs include violence and inducement. Of these, violence is the most preferred and could take the form of coercion, surveillance, threat or participation. Meanwhile, the use of violence is dependent on the prior governance structure in the area before the incursion of ANSAs; this determines the level of resistance or negotiation by the population, and the goals of the group which may [or not] require violence.

The guiding principle of ANSAs is less about replacing the state and more about creating a defying and contradictive political order against the state. This explains why ANSAs opt for replacing specific aspects of governance than attempting to undertake state functions or replicate themselves as state authority. The specific parts are either strategic or technical. The

strategic services offered by ANSAs include the provision of a judicial mechanism or security apparatus, while the technical services involve providing education and health services (Mampilly, 2007). By taking over these specific elements of governance, ANSAs create a shadow [or informal] form of governance that controls security, justice, economic resources and essential services of the local community. This view was substantiated by Harmonie (2019), who divided the governance activities of ANSAs into four parts: security, justice, political and economic administration; and social support and rules. Concerning security, ANSAs often maintain internal and external control. Their internal control is defined by their engagement in policing (informal, local and state) activities while their external control is characterized by territorial control (full or partial) and unrestricted access to travel routes. It is also not uncommon to have ANSAs establish a formal or informal justice system. The formal establishment involves the setting up of courts headed by a judge who is responsible for the adjudication of rules and settlement of disputes while the informal set-up does not give recourse to rules but enacts judgements based on sentiments. In the area of political and economic administration, ANSAs can enforce tax and provide humanitarian services (aid) such as cash, water, food and other developmental projects. Finally, as it concerns social support and rules, ANSAs also provide social services (education, health) and enforce social rules (culture).

Idler and Forest (2015, p.4) aver that "some forms of complementary governance among non-state actors – even violent ones – can result in higher levels of security than a government can provide". Meanwhile, the extent to which the government of a state is deemed illegitimate presents ANSAs with the opportunity to express grievance against the government and protest its bad governance. For example, government negligence in Mali led to the emergence of ANSAs in the country (Skretteberg, 2019). The lack of state legitimacy areas coupled with widespread poverty made the people vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. As a result, the groups have multiplied and continue to recruit rebels in various parts of the country and the region. Scholars claim that the relative deprivation and disparity between the north and south in Nigeria in terms of education, health care services and economic opportunities, fuels aggression and armed conflict (Mohammed and Mohammed, 2015). The north currently ranks low in the development index and is confronted with high levels of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment – which are indicators of bad governance. As a result, this perceived governance vacuum has given impetus to ANSAs. This is particularly true regarding the Niger Delta militant groups and the Independent People of Biafra of Nigeria that attribute their militancy and violence to perceived deprivation, marginalization and exclusion from governance.

Armed Non-State Actors in the Sahel: An Overview

ANSAs are defined as "organized armed entities that are primarily motivated by political goals, operate outside effective State control, and lack legal capacity to become party to relevant international treaties" (Ruaudel, 2013, p.5). They are "armed organizations motivated by

political or economic goals using violence either against the state, other armed groups, or civilians. They can include state- or internationally-designated terrorist groups, paramilitary groups in support of the state, and organized criminal gangs" (Harmonie, 2019, p.4). These definitions broaden the understanding of the composition of ANSAs according to their motivating factors. It suggests that ANSAs are motivated by different reasons which could be political or economic. When politically motivated, reference is often made to violent extremist groups, rebels, militias, or ethnic groups, while financially motivated ANSAs include bandits (Moderan, 2021). ANSAs have also been differentiated by objectives (clear-cut or not); territory control (structured or loose administration); location (rural or urban); composition (children, men or women); and membership (voluntary or forced recruitment). However, the dominant characteristics that differentiate them are territory control, identity/resources and relationship to the wider society (Sjöberg & Warner, 2015). Regardless of the distinction, ANSAs are generally rebellious groups whose agendas are at variance with the state and its citizens.

ANSAs are complex actors whose activities are characterized by violence, coercion and multilayered identities. Their activities have become recurring in the Sahel. Increased attention has been paid to this region in the last decade due to recurrent unrest and epidemic rise in insecurity, which has transnational consequences for neighbouring countries such as Cameroon, Benin and Ivory Coast.

The insecurity in Mali and other parts of the region has since festered given the prevailing structural challenges of underdevelopment and fragility in the region. This was alluded to by Gorman & Chauzal (2018, p.1) that "the Sahel is a region that has historically been troubled by weak governance, high levels of youth unemployment, porous borders, frequent drought, high levels of food insecurity and paltry development progress". Generally characterized by ungoverned spaces, the region is susceptible to insecurity. Gorman (2019) alludes that the Sahel countries are challenged by natural hazards, food insecurity, extreme poverty, lack of educational opportunities and high unemployment – all of which complicate stability and security. The activities of the armed groups in the region include trafficking, recruiting and using child soldiers, abduction, misusing small arms and light weapons, bombing, planting landmines, terrorism, and obstructing humanitarian activities (Sjöberg and Warner, 2015). According to Adama Dieng (2022), the former Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, Senegal, the conflict in the Sahel led to 4660 casualties of terrorist attacks in the second half of 2020 while between February 2021 and February 2022, over 2000 civilians had lost their lives in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

ANSAs have been in the Sahel since the collapse of the colonial system and have existed throughout the post-colonial state formation epoch. The limited government presence and governance that characterizes rural areas and remote cities have further given way to its rise. However, the security threat in the region became intensified following the regime change in Libya and unrest in northern Mali in 2012 and tensions in Algeria and Sudan. More so, the mutual suspicion that typifies the relationship between the Tuareg leaders and other ethnic

groups in the South has also necessitated resistance (Darwich, 2021; Harmonie, 2019; Skretteberg, 2019). According to Baudai (2020) and Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba (2022), the fall of Muammar Gaddafi of Libya in 2011 triggered a security crisis in Mali in 2012 when a loose alliance of Jihad fighters with ties to al-Qaeda and Tuareg separatist rebels seized control of Mali's three northern districts of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. The Jihadists who were concentrated in the north moved to the south of Mali – neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger – due to the military onslaught that began in 2013.

To be sure, the security threat in the Sahel is sponsored by different categories of groups including violent extremist groups, militias, self-defence groups and local vigilantes (Moderan, 2021). However, two separate groups have been identified in the Sahel: Tuareg rebels and violent extremist groups. The growth of the Tuareg rebels can be traced to the period following Mali's independence from France in 1960 and then to the period of establishing the Azawad state in 2012. Meanwhile, the inability to control the Tuareg rebels led to the proliferation of violent extremist groups with established links to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and al Qaeda. More so, the failed peace agreement between the Algerian government and its fighters led to an invasion of militants to the region, leading to the formation of al Qaeda in Islamic Magreb (AQIM) in Mali and the Sahel. The operations of ANSAs have no doubt been characterized by feuds and alliances – an element that has entrenched an asymmetrical war and doubts over who is fighting whom (Desgrais, Guichaoua and Lebovich, 2018).

These alliances have led to the recent formation of different groups: Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) – formed by the coalition of AQIM, al Murabitoun, Macina Liberation Front and Ansar Dine; responsible for about half of the violent incidents recorded in the Sahel in 2018. JNIM, founded in 2017 by Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Ansar Dine, consists of five groups: Ansar Dine – by Iyad Ag Ghaly; Katiba Serma – by Abu Jalil al Fulani; Al Mourabitoun – by Hasan al Ansari; Macina Liberation Front (FLM) – by Amadou Koufa; and AQIM Sahara – by Djamel Okacha. Each of these groups has its respective areas of operation. When the Ansar Dine operates around Kidal, Katiba Serma; Serma region, Al Mourabitoun; region surrounding Gao, FLM; Mopti region, and AQIM; Mali and southwest of Niger. Other groups include Ansaroul Islam – by Malaam Ibrahim Dicko and operating in the Soum Province of Burkina Faso; Islamic State in the Greater Sahara by Abu Walid al Sahrawi operating in the shared borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; and Katiba Salaheddine – by Sultan Ould Badi (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Meanwhile, the counterterrorist operations in Burkina Faso have led to an increase in the attacks by JNIM and ISGS. The clash between these groups and the Burkinabe armed forces led to the death of 70 militants on March 10 in Tasmakatt, Oudalan Province. On February 16, 2020, there were attacks on herders in the north region of the state by unknown armed groups leading to the death of 24 civilians in Pansi while on February 25, 39 civilians were killed in Silgadji and another 43 civilians in Barga and Dinguila. Also, on March 28, 15 civilians were

killed in Zitenga while the French military announced on March 12 that scores of attackers were killed in northern Burkina Faso in Operation Barkhane. To address these incessant attacks, the government of Burkina Faso on January 21, 2020 enacted a law to bolster the security forces by recruiting, training and arming civilians. Although, this action has been criticized as negatively impacting human rights practices and capable of engendering inter-communal violence (UNSC, 2020).

There is also the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) – based in Niger and responsible for 15 per cent of the violent incidents in the Sahel, and Ansar al Islam – based in Burkina Faso and responsible for 26 per cent of the violent incidents in the region. Meanwhile, these alliances have led to a dramatic increase in the number of violent incidents since 2016. The report shows that the number of violent incidents recorded between 2016 and 2018 far exceed those recorded between 2009 and 2015. These incidents have not only been linked to violent extremist groups, but they continue to increase and have also had a spillover effect on neighbouring countries such as Togo and Benin (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019). The security imbroglio in Tillaberi, Tahoua and Diffa regions of Niger is intractable as terrorist groups attack the Nigerien security forces and the Nigerien army leading to an increase in the number of offensive military operations by the latter – causing the death of 620 terrorists. The Nigerien army lost 174 soldiers between December 2019 and January 2020, while in one attack on January 9, 2020, the Nigerien army recorded 89 casualties in Tillaberi. Although this attack led to the death of 77 terrorists and another 120 lost to the Nigerien-French joint operation on February 21, 2020, the ISGS attacked the army on April 2 and killed 4 officers. In a counteroffensive, the army killed 63 attackers while another 50 Boko Haram fighters were killed on March 16 in Toumour (UNSC, 2020).

On the other side, the JNIM continues to ravage Mali and threaten its peace and security. The attacks by JNIM in Mali have continued despite President Keita's attempt at negotiating with the terrorists. The group however demanded that the government sacked the French troops. Also, there have been clashes between the JNIM and ISGS which led to the death of over 100 people on April 5, 2020. As a result, Operation Barkhane has received more international support (UNSC, 2020). The Malian government was forced to reduce its counterinsurgency and joint military operations due to the military coups it experienced in August 2020 and May 2021. As a result, the state lost control to JNIM which intensified its onslaught on the communities in Dan Na Ambassagou and Donso. Also, there is the issue of the strained relationship between the Malian government and the French forces. The relationship was severed by anti-French demonstrations against France's presence in the Sahel and the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. The reasons to worry also include the expansion of armed groups into other parts of West Africa such as the Ivory Coast and Benin. Multiple attacks on military forces were recorded in 2021 and in Benin and Togo. This is because some of these West African littoral states are often used as illegal trading routes by the JNIM to smuggle gold, supplies and arms (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project [ACLED], 2022).

In Nigeria, the security threat experienced is multipronged as the country contends with various ANSAs including ISWAP, Boko Haram, banditry attacks, farmer-herder crisis, communal violence and an upsurge in kidnap for ransom. Concerning Boko Haram, there was a clash over supremacy and territory control between Boko Haram and ISWAP in 2021, which led to the death of the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau. As a result, many Boko Haram fighters joined ISWAP while thousands surrendered to the Nigerian Army. ISWAP continues to grow its influence in the state and now controls Lake Chad. The terrorist attacks in the Northeast claimed the lives of 47 Nigerian soldiers and 98 Chadian soldiers in Gorgi, Borno and Boma, Lake Chad respectively on March 23 2020. The Chadian army claimed it had pushed Boko Haram factions in Chad across the border towards Borno state thus leading to an increase in the offensive by the Nigerian military – leading to the death of 1,609 terrorists and 375 security forces between February and April. In addition to the 240 civilian deaths attributed to the Boko Haram factions, there have also been deaths resulting from recurring banditry attacks and farmer-herder clashes, which led to the death of 431 civilians between January and April 2020 (UNSC, 2020).

Nigeria experienced a 30 per cent increase in violence in 2021 compared to the year before with insurgent attacks claiming 18 per cent. This increase in violence is attributable to the attacks by several ANSAs including bandits and the Independent People of Biafra. A surge in communal militia activity otherwise referred to as banditry has also increased drastically from 30 per cent in 2020 to 50 per cent in 2021. This group presently overtakes Boko Haram and ISWAP in the number of civilian fatalities caused by over 2,600 civilian deaths in 2021. Militant herders have also been warring against farmers over farmlands to feed their cattle. This attack and reprisal attacks have claimed the lives of many and led to the destruction of property. This militia continues to grow and evolve in tactics whilst enhancing its capability. The militia, which was responsible for shooting down a military jet in 2021, also has networks in other states which enables it to evade capture by the military (ACLED, 2022). ANSAs continue to take advantage of Nigeria's porous borders, vast ungoverned spaces and weak security apparatus and engage in kidnap for ransom, cattle rustling, arson, abduction and sporadic attacks (ACLED, 2022).

This view finds vivid expression in the submission of Akinyetun (2022) that Nigeria's porous borders play host to an array of criminal syndicates who use the forests of the country to promote terrorism, insurgency, kidnapping, abduction, cattle rustling, illegal mining and banditry. The reasons for this are explained in Idler and Forest's (2015) expression that ANSAs are popular in border regions for three reasons "first, their tendency for weak state governance systems; second, their low-risk/high opportunity environment arising out of their trans-nationality making illegal cross-border activities extremely profitable; and third, a proneness to impunity because they operate in spaces where two different jurisdictions and security systems meet" (p.6).

Although attempts have been made to counter the activities of ANSAs in the Sahel, these have proven ineffective. The Sahel is occupied by national armed forces (60,000), personnel of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (15,000) French troops (4,500) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force drawn from Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Mauritania (5,000) (Harmonie, 2019). Despite the presence of this estimated 84,500 armed personnel, the region is still challenged by the activities of ANSAs.

ANSAs in the Sahel: Drivers

This sector appraises the prominent factors that drive the proliferation of ANSAs in the Sahel.

Bad governance

As earlier put forward, a dominant factor necessitating the proliferation of ANSAs in the region is bad governance. In an interview with Boubacar Ba, an expert on governance and security in the Sahel, Gernigon & Cold-Ravnkilde (2022, p.1) report that "it is the bad governance, the poor application of laws and the unequal development of the agricultural and the pastoral production systems in the already existing conditions of economic inequality that have created the conflicts" in the Sahel.

An understanding of the proliferation of ANSAs can be aided by examining their role in governance as they have in recent times become collaborators and providers of public goods in a model described by the authors as complementary governance. This idea is rooted in the structure of authority distribution between states and ANSAs around the world. This is aptly captured in the Nigerian pre-colonial and colonial epochs. Local administration in pre-colonial Nigeria was centred on the traditional rulers (Emir, Shehu and Oba) while the advent of colonial rule altered this arrangement but ceded some level of power of cooperation to these rulers through the infamous indirect rule system. This led to the emergence of a mixed government in the post-independent era as the traditional rulers retained their influence and power whilst coexisting with the state (Idler & Forest, 2015). They are responsible for conflict resolution between warring identity groups, settling communal and family disputes, and acting as advisers to the government on several matters. This is also true of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya groups of Islamic West Africa whose leaders command respect and wield influence over their members. These cases are evidence of how authority is shared between state and non-state actors in society. ANSAs also seek to increase their international acceptance by communicating with other states and armed groups using rebel diplomacy (strategic communication with foreign agents or governments), protodiplomacy (gaining recognition, credibility and visibility at the international level), public diplomacy (targeting external public opinions) and rebel marketing (using social media for international branding) (Darwich, 2021).

Bad governance is a root cause of armed conflict as people who are left out of the dividends of governance are easily provoked into violence. This is exemplified in Africa where the general absence of good governance has birthed incessant conflicts (Yiew et al., 2016). For instance,

the politicization of the security architecture in Mali, coupled with bad governance has led to instability and pushed the state towards fragility. More so, the economic and political exclusion of significant parts of Mali necessitated grievances and became a crack that Islamist extremists exploited. This view is supported by Akinyetun (2020) that bad governance is at the core of intractable conflicts in Nigeria. In the words of the author:

> 'The challenges of identity politics, ethnic crisis, marginalisation, civil war, coups, countercoups, assassination, political instability, mutual suspicion, threats of secession, and national disintegration, as previously identified, are partly as a result of bad governance. A country enmeshed in bad governance is a breeding ground for poverty, armed robbery, kidnapping, militancy, insurgency, ethnic cleansing, and terrorism, as is currently being experienced in Nigeria' (p.123).

Ungoverned space

An equally motivating factor for the increase in ANSAs in the region is the ungoverned space that pervades it. An ungoverned space could refer to a physical territory or a non-physical policy space (Raleigh & Dowd, 2013). This territory or space is characterized by vast ungoverned areas that serve as a haven for criminal activities such as terrorism, insurgency, banditry, illegal mining and other emerging security threats. The term has attracted the attention of policy experts, security experts and researchers, and has become linked with insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa. Against popular opinion, Raleigh and Dowd (2013) argue that attributing the rise in ANSAs in the region to ungoverned space is 'theoretically thin, based largely on conjecture, and does not reflect the logistical realities and strategies of violent actors' (p. 2). Their argument rests on the notion that space can only be useful at a particular stage of conflict and that the region is effectively governed by multiple agents. They also agree that the states in the region are among the poorest in Africa and as such are bound to experience limited state presence. This view appears incoherent as admitting that multiple agents exercise governance is tantamount to agreeing that the state's authority is challenged by a group that provides informal governance.

Also rejecting the notion of 'terrorist haven' and 'ungoverned spaces', Harmonie (2019) argues that the areas captured by ANSAs are best described as "spaces of contested governance or shared governance between representatives of the state, local tribal leaders, self-defence militias, criminal gangs, and politically-motivated non-state armed groups" (p. 8). Idler & Forest (2015) also suggest that ungoverned spaces may not necessarily be a motivation for crime but agree that they play a major role as evidenced in the Berabiche and Tuareg groups that control a vast space of the Sahel. Akinyetun (2022) on the other hand argues that because vast ungoverned spaces in the north of Nigeria are secluded, under-governed and lack state presence, they present an opportunity for crime. Due to limited government authority, the forests have become a hideout for criminal gangs. More so, such space is often used to sustain an informal economy and acquire some form of legitimacy. In the words of the author, "in an ungoverned space, governance is outside the state's established authority. The illegal governance that brands an ungoverned space engenders non-state actors who claim to

provide succour and protection for the people or the provision of other services". Thus, because it sustains crime as a result of the opportunity presented by limited governance, an ungoverned space becomes an essential element in the crime of opportunity.

Local militias

There are also indications that some of the violent incidents in the Sahel are attributable to the existence of local militias, criminal gangs, illegal traffickers and ethnic-based armed groups who often work in synergy [for or] against the state on different occasions. Examples include Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and Plateforme. There is also the challenge of drug and weapons trafficking, terrorism, insurgency, drought, illegal migration, violent extremism, weak security forces, arms proliferation and climate change (Harmonie, 2019). As Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba (2022) claim, 'the widespread availability of weapons has intensified violence against civilians and left communities more exposed to inter- and intra-communal conflicts and relentless criminality'. Scholars opine that easy access to weapons also fuels the rise of ANSAs in the region. That is, the proliferation of arms makes it easy for aggrieved groups to lay hands on them and foment trouble (Moderan, 2021). Meanwhile, it has been established that security threats are common in authoritarian and hybrid regimes with smaller or challenged police forces in Africa (WISPI, 2016). This was supported by Akinyetun (2022) that despite having the monopoly of force, the often overstretched, weak and underfunded security forces in African states are unable to respond adequately to the security challenges in the state.

Climate change

There is a growing debate on the role of climate change in exacerbating armed conflicts in Africa. Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba (2022) argue that climate change is not necessarily responsible for an increase in conflicts in the region. In their words:

> "...violence and conflict in the Sahel are caused by the presence of armed groups with divergent political and ideological agendas, not climate change per se. In these circumstances, the absence of effective natural resource management has become a key conflict driver in the face of increased pressure on land and water, and of the aggravating factor of climate change." (p. 8)

As the authors would have us believe, the incidence of climate change alone does not account for armed conflicts in the region. Rather, it is the strain posed by the lack of adequate management of resources that stokes conflict and violence. However, considering that 'climate change remains one of the major challenges that Sahel's countries face' and that the 'UN estimates that 80 per cent of the agricultural areas in the Sahel belt are already affected by climate change' (Skretteberg, 2019, p.4), it is important to examine the role it plays in conflict escalation. This is imperative given that about 70% of Sahelians depend on pastoralism and agriculture for survival (Dieng, 2022) and considering the rising temperature; presently 35 ˚C and estimated to reach 38 ˚C by 2050, climate change will adversely impact cattle rearing and add to existing problems.

The phenomenon adds to the protracted conflict between herders and farmers on one end, and between competing herders on the other end. As Dieng (2022, p.1) submits, the resulting "farmer-herder violence has led to over 15,000 casualties, with half that number reported in the past three years alone". This has increased the spate of food shortage, food insecurity and led to decline in food production in the region. Scholars also opine that climate change increases the chances of fragility. In the year 2020 – one of the three warmest years so far (since 1850) – there were reported cases of bushfires, ice caps, floods and melting glaciers around the world, while the Sahel experienced an increase in temperature higher than the global average (Hartog, 2021). This has grave implications for the poor regions where the people are left further impoverished due to the decimation of their means of livelihood through environmental degradation. The result is a surge in hunger, poverty and unemployment which increases vulnerability to crime. It also increases the competition for scarce resources. For instance, the floods and droughts in Nigeria and Mali have contributed to the conflict between herders and farmers over resources.

The above was aptly captured in the literature that the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers in Nigeria is centred on economic resources. The pastoralist Fulanis, due to climate change are often forced to rove in search of water and farmlands to graze thus coming into confrontation with farmers who are protecting their crops and farmlands from encroachment. This clash of interest has led to dastardly attacks by the Fulanis in Zamfara, Plateau, Taraba, Benue etc. and has left thousands dead and many properties destroyed. The Fulanis were responsible for killing 200 people in a single attack in Zamfara in 2014 and the attacks have continued unabated while spreading to other parts of the country (Akinyetun, 2022). In addition, prevailing economic conditions have also been described as motivation for ANSAs seeing that poverty necessitates a shadow economy characterized by activities unregulated by the government. Thus, while catering to the needs of the people through a shadow economy, an ANSA can take advantage of the situation to expand its reach, grow its power, enjoy authority and command resources.

Poverty

Poverty is a serious socioeconomic challenge in the Sahel. According to the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports (2021), the multidimensional poverty index of Mali is 0.376, Chad 0.517, Nigeria 0.254, Niger 0.601 and Burkina Faso 0.574. To be sure, many African countries have medium human development while countries in the region have low human development. For instance, Mali scores 0.434 on the human development index, Chad; 0.398, Nigeria; 0.539, Niger; 0.394 and Burkina Faso; 0.452. There is therefore no gainsaying that using the indices of multidimensional poverty and human development as the basis of analysis, the Sahelian states are challenged in health, education achievements, human security, work and employment, human and capital mobility, well-being and fundamental human rights. Meanwhile, the multidimensional nature of poverty means that it affects different areas of society including security; particularly in the Sahel. This finds better

expression in Garrigue (2016, p.8) that the "majority of the world's poverty [is] concentrated in conflict-affected countries". Poverty in Africa is a complicated phenomenon that is linked to vulnerability, lack of social protection, gender issues, health challenges, poor government policies, poor standard of living, social exclusion, inequality, illiteracy, corruption, unemployment, bad governance and insecurity (Danaan, 2018). Poverty forces people to seek alternatives outside the acceptable societal precepts including forming or joining armed groups.

ANSAs in the Sahel: Ramifications

There is no gainsaying that the proliferation of ANSAs constitutes a bane to the development of the region and increases the incidence of humanitarian crises and state fragility. This section examines these reinforcing aftereffects of the proliferation of ANSAs in the Sahel.

Humanitarian crisis

The security conundrum in the region has led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the form of displacement. Gorman & Chauzal (2018, p.1) maintain that 'the violence has had overall negative effects on the movement of people and illegal goods throughout the Sahel, and many of the human security concerns are shared across state borders'. Although ANSAs are linked to displacement, the relationship between the two phenomena is intricate. Two trends are discernible:

a) displacement as an intentional outcome by ANSAs – whereby displacement is provoked by ANSAs to uproot and punish a population; control and maintain a support base in a population; control territory, and protect a population; and

b) displacement as a by-product of conflict and other drivers, such as natural disasters.

Nonetheless, there has been an internal displacement of over 4.2 million people in the region in 2019. Of this figure, over 133,000 people fled their homes in Mali in Q2 2019 alone (Ruaudel, 2013). This is also the case in Nigeria and Burkina Faso where insecurity has led to internal displacement.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram and its splinter group, IS West African Province (ISWAP) continue to attack civilians and security forces. The conflict which has persisted for over a decade has degenerated into a sub-regional crisis that has spread to Chad, Cameroon and Niger. While in Burkina Faso, the northern provinces have been faced with recurring attacks that have increased the incidence of displacement in the country. This humanitarian crisis has also led to an increase in the incidence of food insecurity, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health issues. As the UNSC (2020) notes, over 24 million in the region will need humanitarian assistance; 4.9 million are displaced, 870,000 are refugees; 6.5 million young people and women require sexual and gender-related humanitarian support; while 19.1 are food insecure – "a 77 per cent increase compared to 2019 and the highest in a decade" (p.7).

The crisis in the region has no doubt increased food insecurity, exacerbating the chances of poverty, hunger and starvation.

In Burkina Faso, 848,000 people had fled their homes as of April 2020 – a sharp 67 per cent increase compared to 2019. Schools (2,500) and health centres (135) have been shut due to the crisis – denying millions of people and 338, 000 children access to health services and education respectively. The case is similar in Mali where over 220, 000 displaced persons have been recorded with over 11,000 newly displaced from Mopti region. It is estimated that due to food insecurity, 1.3 million people will starve while over 4.3 million require humanitarian assistance. Niger has the same experience. Here, 441,000 people have fled their homes; 103,000, 109,000 and 12,000 are internally displaced in Diffa, Tillaberi and Tahoua and Maradi respectively; while 126,000, 55,000 and 36,000 have become refugees in the same respective regions. Unfortunately, humanitarian services in these regions have been limited by the state of emergency and military operations in the areas. Like the other countries in the region, Nigeria also experiences a worsening humanitarian crisis with an estimated 7.7 million people in need of assistance. A majority of the affected persons are women clustered in camps in Yobe, Borno and Adamawa states. The number of displaced persons; estimated to be 2.4 million at present, and refugees; 292,000, continue to increase as does the attacks by ANSAs (UNSC, 2020). Meanwhile, the conflict in the Sahel also limits access to humanitarian assistance with an estimated 1.5 million people living in areas inaccessible for provision of humanitarian aid and essential services (Dieng, 2022).

State fragility

The protracted conflict in the region also has serious implications for state fragility. Baudais (2020, p.1) avers that the Sahelian states "share common fragilities including increased tensions within the security apparatus, lack of means and equipment, and difficulties in controlling their territory". Hartog (2021), who examines how climate change leads to conflict and fragility observes that extreme weather destroys people's livelihood, threatens food insecurity and engenders social tension. The variability in weather leads to social mobility which upsets the social order of the new community by burdening its economy and limiting access to and increasing the competition for resources (water, land and forest) thereby creating conflicts. When the government is unable to respond swiftly to the local conflicts caused by competition for scarce resources, ANSAs take advantage of such a power gap to foster informal governance. This can sometimes be met with resistance by the defence or vigilante groups, leading to more conflict and loss of life.

For emphasis, a review of the Fragile State Index Report shows that out of the 179 countries surveyed, Chad is the 7th most fragile state in the world followed by Nigeria (12th), Mali (19th), Niger (21st) and Burkina Faso (36th) (Fund for Peace, 2021). The index was computed using several indicators which include security, group grievance, state legitimacy, refugees and internally displaced persons, among others. How badly the states in the region perform is a testament to the level of fragility arising from poor security and state legitimacy. For

instance, when using security as an indicator, the report shows that Chad scored 8.9 out of 10, Nigeria 8.8, Mali 9.6, Niger 8.9 and Burkina Faso 9.0. Whereas concerning state legitimacy, the countries scored 9.4, 8.4, 7.5, 7.1 and 5.9 respectively. This further supports the argument that the instability in the region is connected to bad governance and lack of state presence.

According to Garrigue (2016), a state of fragility is prone to incessant violent conflicts. As shown in figure 1, such a state is characterized by fragmented governance space (secessionist movements, disputed borders and antagonistic central-local relations); unmanaged expectations (heightened needs, lack of access to information and limited dialogue opportunities); increasing competition and marginalization (discrimination, increase in youth unemployment and unregulated use of public resources); and insecurity and failing rule of law (ANSAs vs. security forces, organized crime and local conflict). The devastating effect of these is the loss of trust in the state, rupture of social cohesion, ineffective public authority and horizontal inequalities which results in the breakdown of social contract and violence as experienced in the region.
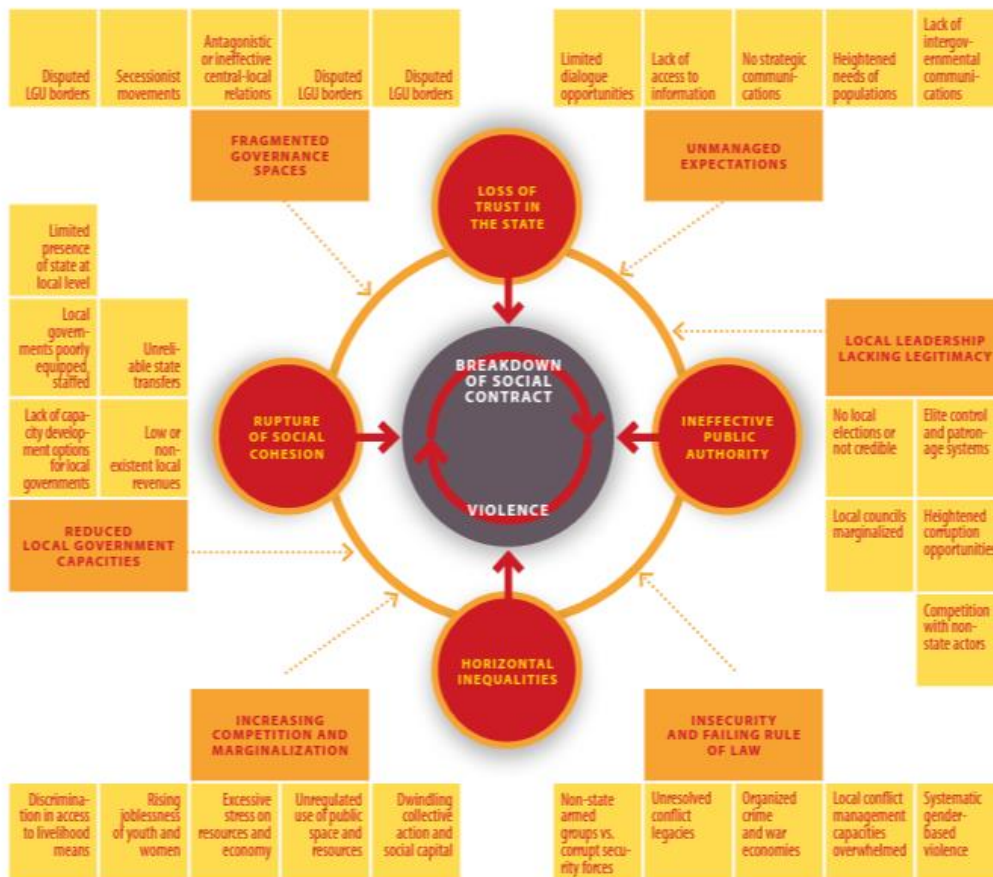

Figure 2: How fragility leads to violence. Source: Garrigue (2016)

Way forward: Local governance

As earlier argued in this paper, bad governance and lack of state presence are major factors necessitating the proliferation of ANSAs in the Sahel. Thus, it is simply instructive to proffer solutions that tackle the root cause of the menace through improved service delivery and enhanced governance practices. This paper thus recommends the promotion of local and rural governance that seeks to re-engineer the social contract between the community and the state at the grass-root level to strengthen the peacebuilding and recovery process. Local governance, according to Garrigue (2016) is defined as

> "combined set of institutions, systems and processes at the subnational level through which services, including security and welfare, are provided to citizens and through which the latter articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences and exercise their rights and obligations" (p. 3).

According to Wijn, Hartmann and Valente (2019, p.2), local governance refers to "the way local decisions are made and implemented. This includes decisions regarding the prioritization, availability and delivery of local goods and services and ultimately – whether explicit or implicit – who will benefit." Local governance provides citizens (including youth and women) with the opportunity to engage with decision-makers and be involved in the decision-making process. It helps to strengthen state legitimacy through improved state-society relations. It is a process that encourages participation and inclusion which gives communities an avenue to resolve conflicts amicably, particularly using religious and traditional structures – which evolve and complement political institutions.

Local governance is an open, evolving and multidimensional process that involves all stakeholders such as the citizen, private sector, civil society, development community and donors, political parties and local public authority (Garrigue, 2016). That is, it is a process that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interaction of various institutions and actors in ensuring service delivery to the citizens who are in turn able to advocate for their rights. It is a framework for governance based on the inclusiveness of concerned parties in a polity. As shown in figure 1, the local public authority is saddled with the responsibility of conflict management, contributing to local security, service delivery, managing local development and enabling representation. Civil society, on the other hand, enables participation, mediating conflicts, defending rights, enabling social accountability and engaging in service delivery and local development. Meanwhile, the private sector plans and invests towards local development, create jobs and deliver services and contributes to generating public revenue. Amidst this multidimensional governance framework is the citizen who interfaces with each of these stakeholders whose functions are also intertwined. In this regard, the citizen is caught up in a web of local governance and is actively involved in the processes.
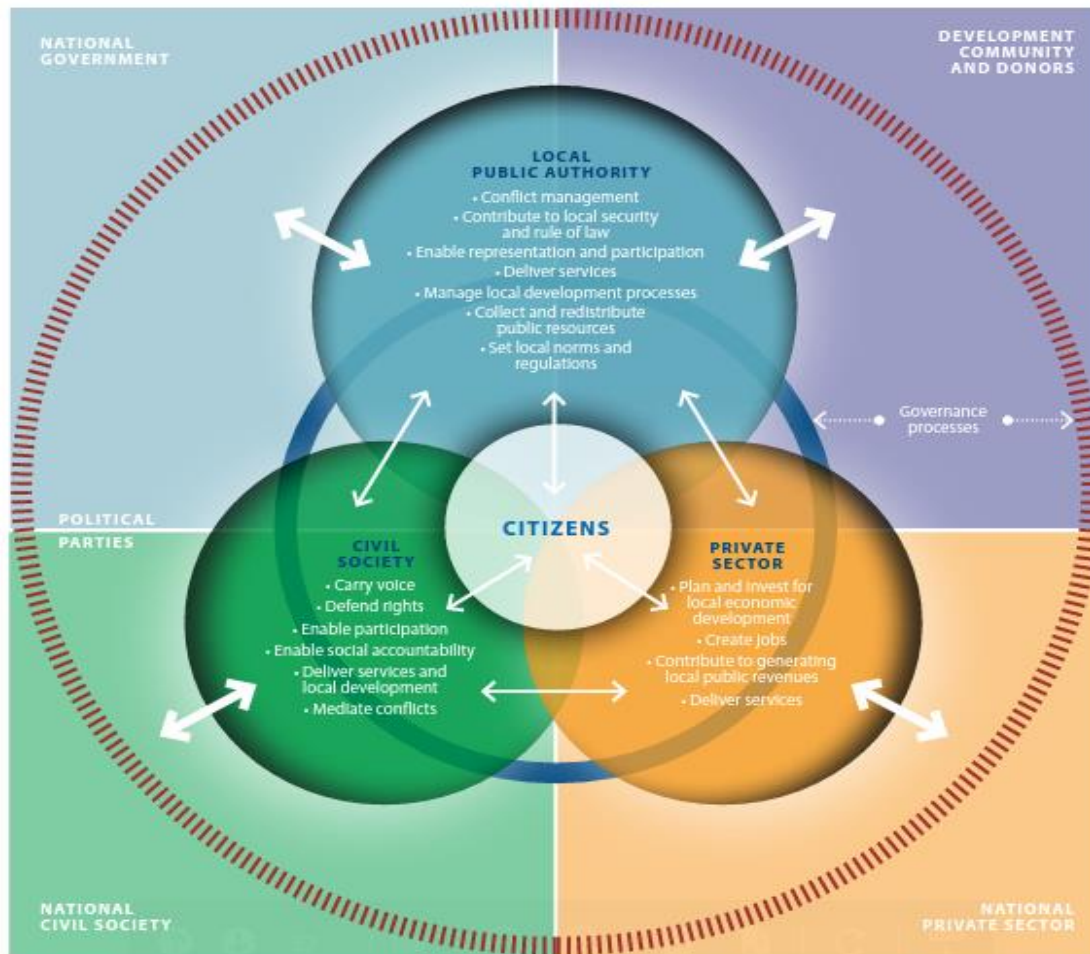
Figure 2: Concept of local governance. Source: Garrigue (2016)

The concept of local governance as expounded above is instrumental in addressing the menace of ANSAs as key players will become involved in nation-building and developmental process to create a society where, as Garrigue (2016, p.17) puts it, "all people, men and women, enjoy improved stability in their communities, urban or rural, can access better socioeconomic status and can overcome, individually, collectively and as a nation, the legacies of violence and conflict". More so, local governance can be used to create responsive institutions that ensure capacity building, improved service delivery, civic education, local finances and social accountability. It also seeks to engender inclusive politics (local parliamentary support, capacity building for local economic recovery, land use control and support to peaceful local elections) and resilient society that is characterized by access to justice, social cohesion, partnership building, central-local relations, local infrastructure for peace and community security. This is supported by Wijn, Hartmann and Valente (2019) that local governance can be used to include women, youth, traditional and religious leaders and minority groups in formal local governance and decision-making processes to strengthen their capacity and build cohesion. More so, infrastructure and development projects that connect the community and the state can be used to create a safe place and reduce conflict. Also, the setting up of vocational training centres can help to reduce exclusion, poverty and

unemployment and engender human capital development, job creation and improved capacity.

There is also the need to adopt digital technology in combating violent conflicts in Africa. Decrying the inadequacy of the conventional means, Falola (2021) aver that the use of surveillance systems, robots, and the strategic censorship of anti-state social media content is instrumental in addressing conflict and terrorism in Africa. Through the deployment of drones, the activities of violent groups can be monitored and disarmed before they degenerate into ANSAs. Artificial intelligence-powered robots can also be used to detect explosive devices used by ANSAs to destroy government facilities and other places. Also, by collaborating with technological and communication companies, states can design a system that tracks and monitors high-profile and security-risk individuals to foil their terrorist attempts. Cyberspace must be protected to discourage the rise of cyberterrorism in Africa while social media must be strategically filtered to discourage the spread of fake news that arouses tension and social unrest in the polity and to track conversations capable of promoting ANSA activities.

Final Thoughts

This paper examines the proliferation of ANSAs in the Sahel. The region is one of the most troubled areas in Africa due to the protracted conflict that has engulfed the various states in it. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria have been particularly affected by this security imbroglio. The effect has been devastating and is evidenced in the number of dead civilians, attackers and security forces. This suffices to reiterate that it has also led to widespread poverty, low development, famine, hunger and other socio-economic challenges. There has also been a surge in displacement and refugees while an extremely high number of people have been forced to flee their homes. The result of this is an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that threatens to deepen the fangs of state fragility and underdevelopment in the region. At the core of this security conundrum, and as shown in this paper, is an array of factors enwrapped in bad governance. ANSAs such as JNIM, ISGS, Boko Haram, ISWAP and militant Fulanis have taken advantage of the poor governance and vast ungoverned space in the region to establish an informal governance system that adopts a combination of violence, inducement, threat, complementary governance and protodiplomacy to protect or punish the population as well as control and maintain a support base, whilst encouraging a shadow economy characterized by kidnap for ransom abduction, counter attacks, illegal mining, illegal migration, banditry, terrorism and cattle rustling – among others. This heightened social unrest calls for a joint, yet eclectic approach from the concerned states in the region. Therefore, attention must be paid to local governance, capacity building, social inclusion, resilience, peace education, human capital development, improved economic conditions, technology and improved security.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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