Governance and Resilience: Enhancing Community-Based Strategies to Combat Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper presents a contextually grounded analysis of governance and community-based strategies for preventing violent extremism and terrorism in Ghana, a country situated at the intersection of regional insecurity and democratic stability. Unlike prior studies that take a generic policy view or ignore local dynamics, this paper integrates governance theories with empirical evidence drawn from Ghana's high-risk border regions. It employs qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse range of stakeholders, including policymakers, security professionals, community leaders and civil society actors. The findings reveal how entrenched governance challenges, such as resource and capacity deficits, political interference and weak inter-agency collaboration intersect with acute socio-economic vulnerabilities to undermine effective prevention efforts. Notably, the study highlights the pivotal yet underacknowledged role of community engagement and grassroots participation in fostering resilience, while identifying deficiencies in existing counter-terrorism frameworks, particularly the lack of an operational definition of violent extremism and the top-down implementation approach. By bridging theoretical models with on-the-ground realities, the paper advances a multi-level framework for policy and practice that foregrounds community agency, inclusive

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governance and context-driven responses. It concludes with concrete, tailored recommendations to enhance both state and societal resilience, setting it apart from previous, less integrative approaches to extremism prevention in West Africa.

Keywords: governance, violence extremism, terrorism, community-based strategies, counter-terrorism frameworks, Ghana.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, extremist violence and terrorist threats present urgent and complex challenges that extend beyond national borders, undermining security and social cohesion globally. These threats often arise from deep-seated socio-political grievances, economic inequalities and governance deficits, which militant groups exploit to mobilise support and legitimise violent acts (Bak et al., 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa has become a critical hotspot in this regard, with groups such as the Islamic State and its affiliates intensifying violent activities in the Sahel and neighbouring regions (IEP, 2024).

Historically regarded as one of West Africa's stable democracies, Ghana faces growing security challenges due to its proximity to conflict-ridden neighbours such as Burkina Faso and Mali (Prah and Chanimbe, 2021). Ghana is not facing any form of terrorist attacks. However, its proximity to Islamist insurgency groups in the Sahel region makes it vulnerable to their expansion activities. Additionally, conditions that have given rise to terrorism in other parts of West Africa exist in Ghana (Darkwah, 2023). This evolving security landscape presents Ghanaian policymakers with a challenging task as they strive to strike a balance between safeguarding civil liberties and implementing effective countermeasures against radicalization and terrorist acts (Prah and Chanimbe, 2021). The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2008 provides a foundational legal framework for addressing terrorism within Ghana, yet its success relies heavily on factors such as public awareness, proactive community engagement and robust inter-agency cooperation (Adarkwah, 2020).

The patterns of extremist mobilisation in Ghana are deeply intertwined with structural inequalities, including persistent unemployment and perceptions of marginalisation, especially in its northern and border areas (UNDP, 2023). These conditions create fertile ground for violent groups to recruit and radicalise individuals by capitalising on feelings of exclusion and injustice (Agyemang, 2022). Understanding the interplay of these socio-economic factors with

governance and security challenges is, therefore, essential to designing effective strategies that resonate with local realities and foster sustainable resilience against extremism.

This paper addresses three core questions: First, what are the principal governance and socio-economic challenges that impede Ghana's capacity to prevent extremist violence and terrorist activities? Second, in what ways do community-based approaches contribute to building resilience against such threats? Third, what deficiencies exist in the current counter-terrorism frameworks, and how might these be addressed to strengthen their impact? By focusing on these questions, this study aims to illuminate the specific dynamics influencing violent extremism in Ghana and to support the development of tailored, actionable responses.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Governance as a concept encompasses complex institutional arrangements, actors and processes through which public decisions are made and strategies are implemented. It is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing from political science, economics, sociology and management studies. The foundational contributions of Ronald Coase's 1937 seminal work, 'The Nature of the Firm' provide an essential economic lens into governance, particularly regarding transaction costs and the structural role of institutions. Bevir (2016) critiques governance as an abstract coordination theory involving the formation and maintenance of formal and informal organisations across contexts, emphasising legitimacy, accountability, and efficiency. Coase's insights on how institutions organise activities to reduce transaction costs illuminate, however, how governance structures might reduce inefficiencies and conflicts in managing public goods, including security in vulnerable border regions of Ghana (Parisi, 2005). This perspective highlights the significance of clear property rights and institutional arrangements in better coordinating anti-extremist efforts.

Oliver Williamson advanced these ideas by emphasising the critical role of organisational structures and governance mechanisms in mitigating conflicts of interest and opportunism (Williamson, 1985). Williamson's work on governance through contracts and formal-informal controls informs understandings of how security agencies and communities might cooperate under resource constraints and trust deficits common in Ghana's security governance. Similarly, Elinor Ostrom's (2002) analysis of how communities sustainably govern shared resources

offer profound insights for decentralised, community-based counter-extremism measures. Ostrom's principles – such as collective choice arrangements, clearly defined boundaries and congruent rules – apply directly to Ghana's border communities facing spillover violent extremism, where local inclusion and self-governance bear on resilience (Ostrom, 2002).

Institutional governance theories broadly focus on the norms, rules and organisations that shape political and social outcomes (North, 1990). They highlight the importance of institutional quality and legitimacy in ensuring cooperation and compliance. The pluralistic nature of governance theories spans numerous variants (Asaduzzaman and Virtanen, 2016). These theories, which include institutional, network, collaborative and regulatory governance, collectively underscore the dynamic interaction of state and non-state actors within governance regimes – a core theme in understanding Ghana's multifaceted counter-terrorism context.

Network governance theory, pioneered by Provan and Milward (1995), examines the effectiveness of inter-organisational networks in delivering complex services and policy goals through collaboration among public, private and civil society actors. Sørensen and Torfing (2005) further developed this approach by analysing how governance networks can be anchored democratically and be accountable, an important dimension for Ghana, where balancing security with civil liberties remains a sensitive issue. Rhodes (1997) and Kohler-Koch (1999) elaborated on these notions by emphasising the shift from traditional hierarchical state governance to meso-level networked policymaking that addresses legitimacy and accountability issues in complex governance environments.

Collaborative governance complements this by focusing on inclusive, participatory processes that foster stakeholder alignment, conflict resolution and risk assessment (Maesschalck, 2017). It recognises the challenges posed by new public-private relationships and the flexible, often contentious nature of collective action in security governance (Stoker, 1998). These governance models are particularly salient for Ghana, where a cooperative approach involving security agencies, traditional authorities, civil society and local communities is essential to thwarting violent extremism in a socio-politically fragmented environment. Governance, distinct from government, encompasses a complex web of actors with blurred responsibilities that address social and economic problems (Stoker, 2018). In this

vein, governance frameworks in Ghana must navigate these complexities to build trust and effectiveness in countering violent extremism and terrorism.

3. Definitions and conceptual clarifications

Violent extremism and terrorism are conceptually related but distinct phenomena with overlapping and evolving definitions. The literature recognises the contested and context-dependent nature of both terms. Bak et al (2019) define violent extremism as a form of mobilisation that elevates one group's status by excluding or dominating 'others' based on ethnicity, religion or culture. Extremist groups seek to dismantle pluralistic political institutions, replacing them with restrictive, often totalitarian governance systems. This understanding is broad, capturing both ideological violence and threats to societal pluralism. The Australian Government (2022) characterises violent extremism as the willingness to use or support unlawful violence for political, ideological or religious goals, including terrorism and other politically motivated violence. Nasser-Eddine et al. (2011) caution that 'violent extremism' is often employed without a clear definition, risking conceptual ambiguity that impairs policy clarity.

Terrorism similarly resists a universal definition, partly due to its politicisation. The United States Department of State defines terrorism as premeditated, politically motivated violence targeting non-combatants to impact an audience (Rogers, 2018). Lutz and Lutz (2022) identify the following core elements of terrorism: organised group involvement, political aims, civilian targeting and asymmetry of power, among others.

Ghana's Anti-Terrorism Act (2008, amended in 2012) provides a detailed legislative definition linking terrorism to violence or acts causing bodily harm, damage to property or threats to public safety, motivated by political, ideological, religious, racial or ethnic causes (RoG, 2008, 2012). Despite legislative clarity, enforcing this definition within Ghana's socio-political diversity remains challenging (Aubyn, 2021).

Violent extremism and terrorism have evolved in method and scope, with transnational and local dynamics involving media-savvy attacks, suicide bombings and ideological targeting (Rogers, 2018). The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2024) reports a 22% increase in global terrorism deaths in 2023, with Sub-Saharan Africa as a persistent epicentre, accounting for nearly half of global terrorism mortality.

3.1. Regional and Ghanaian context

The Sahel and West Africa's increasingly volatile security environment has a profound impact on Ghana due to its geographical, political and socio-economic proximity. Terrorist groups such as Daesh affiliates and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) have intensified violent activities in Sahelian states like Burkina Faso and Mali, instigating spillover threats for Ghana (IEP, 2022, 2024; UNDP, 2023). The Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) is recognised as the world's deadliest terrorist group, further highlighting regional volatility (IEP, 2024).

Rising insecurity in border regions, combined with weak state presence and porous borders, exacerbates Ghana's vulnerability (Agyemang, 2022). Cross-border crimes, illicit arms proliferation and militant infiltration complicate governance challenges (UNDP, 2023). Other studies stress national drivers, including youth unemployment, ethnic tensions, weak rule of law and governance deficits (Adarkwah, 2020; Aubyn, 2021). For example, the UNDP (2023) links social exclusion and poverty in northern Ghana with recruitment vulnerabilities. The National Security Strategy (RoG, 2020) similarly identifies internal socio-economic inequalities and external pressures from neighbouring conflicts as key risk factors. While Ghana's Anti-Terrorism Act provides a framework for legal and operational responses, critiques highlight limitations in capacity, political will and socio-political legitimacy (Aubyn, 2021; Norman et al., 2014).

3.2. Drivers of violent extremism

The drivers of violent extremism and terrorism are multifaceted and interrelated, spanning structural, psychological and rational choice perspectives. Structural factors include socio-economic deprivation, political marginalisation, ethnic and religious divides, weak governance and historical grievances (Bak et al., 2019; Noricks, 2009; Ross, 1993). These create an enabling environment for extremism and conflict (UNDP, 2023). Psychological drivers focus on individual motivations and group dynamics, such as identity seeking, social alienation and perceived injustices (UNDP, 2023). Rational choice theories contend that actors engage in terrorism after weighing costs and benefits, often influenced by political or ideological objectives (Agyemang, 2022; Crenshaw, 1981).

Specific to West Africa and Ghana, factors such as youth unemployment, insecurity, resource competition, weak institutional presence and ethnicity intersect to heighten vulnerabilities (Aubyn, 2021; UNDP, 2023). Climate change-induced resource conflicts further exacerbate tensions (Haruna, 2022). The UNDP's 2023 'Journey to Extremism in Africa' report underscores childhood adversity, government distrust and socio-economic injustice as key recruitment factors. Religious and ethnic narratives have been potent mobilising tools historically, as seen in violent Islamist groups that use victimisation narratives to justify violence (Allan et al., 2015). However, recent trends indicate a diversification into socio-political grievances and economic incentives shaping recruitment and violent acts (Agyemang, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

3.3. Governance response and effectiveness

Governance responses to violent extremism in Ghana must navigate formal legal frameworks, institutional capabilities and community relations. The Anti-Terrorism Act (RoG, 2008) as amended in 2012 (RoG, 2012) legally empowers agencies to address terrorism. However, scholars argue that implementation gaps exist due to limited resources, capacity deficits, political interference and corruption (Aubyn, 2021; Norman et al., 2014).

Governance theories elucidate how these challenges manifest in institutional fragility. Coase's framework suggests that high transaction costs in poorly coordinated security operations impair responsiveness. Ostrom's community-based governance principles advocate for empowering local actors to manage shared risks, an approach increasingly incorporated in Ghana's counter-radicalisation strategies (Adarkwah, 2020).

Network governance offers a vital conceptual lens to understand collaborative security involving state actors, civil society and local communities. Sørensen and Torfing (2005) stress network democracy and accountability, relevant for Ghana's need to ensure legitimacy and inclusivity in counter-terrorism. Collaborative governance, with its emphasis on participatory decision-making and stakeholder alignment, addresses the interaction complexities between diverse actors, including traditional authorities and security agencies (Maesschalck, 2017). Recent policy documents and expert interviews emphasise that addressing these challenges requires not only legal reform but also investments in capacity building,

cross-sector collaboration and social development programmes aimed at addressing root causes (UNDP, 2023).

3.4. Gaps in the literature

Despite extensive theoretical and empirical contributions, the literature often suffers from fragmentation and limited contextual application to Ghanaian realities. Many governance theories remain abstract without adequate empirical linkages to frontline security challenges in Ghana's border and marginalised areas. While Coase, Ostrom, and Williamson's works are foundational, few studies concretely apply these frameworks to Ghana's unique socio-political and economic context beyond general assertions (Parisi, 2005).

Furthermore, much research privileges global or Sahel-centric perspectives, with limited incorporation of local scholarship, policy evaluations and indigenous knowledge systems that influence resilience (Adarkwah, 2020). The multidimensional drivers of violent extremism, particularly the interplay of socio-economic conditions, identity politics, climate change and governance deficits, require richer interdisciplinary integration and longitudinal study. Also, critical evaluations of counter-terrorism law effectiveness and the unintended consequences of stringent security measures remain thin (Donkin and Bronitt, 2013; Norman et al., 2014).

Therefore, future research must deepen analytical frameworks linking governance theories with grounded empirical data, focusing on measurable governance outputs such as transparency, accountability, community trust and inter-agency effectiveness. This study employs an integrated framework combining institutional theory, network governance and collaborative governance to critically assess how governance shapes Ghana's capacities and vulnerabilities in preventing violent extremism and terrorism.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the challenges Ghana faces in preventing violent extremism and terrorism through governance frameworks and community-based strategies. The qualitative approach was selected due to the complex and multifaceted nature of violent extremism, which intertwines socio-political, economic and cultural factors, requiring a nuanced, in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2013). A descriptive research design was adopted

to provide a comprehensive examination of existing governance structures and their influence on counter-terrorism efforts, as well as to capture community dynamics critical for resilience against radicalisation.

The research was conducted primarily in Ghana's northern and border regions, notably areas adjacent to Burkina Faso and Mali, which are considered high-risk zones for spillover extremist activities. These regions are characterised by socio-economic vulnerabilities, high youth unemployment and weaker state presence, making them crucial contexts for studying violent extremism and the efficacy of governance frameworks (Agyemang, 2022; UNDP, 2023). The contextual relevance of these locations lies in their exposure to both regional security threats and long-standing developmental challenges, which increase susceptibility to radicalisation and insurgent recruitment (Adarkwah, 2020). Focusing on these areas enabled the study to capture the lived realities of communities at the frontline of prevention efforts and the operational challenges faced by security actors.

Data collection for this study was conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a purposefully selected and diverse group of stakeholders integral to Ghana's efforts in preventing violent extremism and terrorism. Thirty-nine semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants drawn from various professional sectors to ensure a comprehensive understanding of governance and community resilience dynamics. The participants included four academics specialising in governance, security and peace studies, each with 10 to 15 years of relevant experience. Five seasoned legal experts, with 18 to 25 years of practice in national security law and anti-terrorism policy, contributed critical insights into the legislative and regulatory frameworks. Nine military officers with experiential backgrounds ranging from five to 25 years provided perspectives on operational security and defence matters. Six senior officials from Ghana's security services, averaging eight to 18 years in law enforcement and intelligence, offered frontline views on counter-terrorism implementation. Four government policymakers from the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council, with five to 20 years of experience in strategic decision-making, enriched the policy discourse. Additionally, four civil society actors engaged in peacebuilding and community outreach, with seven to 18 years of experience, illuminated grassroots challenges and successes. Finally, four private individuals with seven to 18 years of experience and three intelligence officers, possessing five to 15 years of service, provided specialist input on intelligence

coordination. Complementing these interviews, focus group discussions were held with community leaders, youth representatives and local peace committees in northern Ghana, ensuring inclusion of grassroots perspectives and enhancing data triangulation. This diverse participant composition allowed for a robust, multidimensional exploration of governance and socio-political factors affecting extremism prevention.

Participants were identified and recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure they possessed relevant expertise and experience in counter-terrorism and community engagement (Etikan et al., 2016). The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of direct involvement in initiatives related to violent extremism, prevention or security policy implementation in Ghana. Exclusion criteria entailed individuals lacking operational knowledge of Ghana's governance framework or those whose roles were peripheral to the counter-extremism agenda. This selection process ensured that informed perspectives were obtained, reflecting diverse institutional and community actors.

In addition to individual interviews, four focus group discussions were held with community leaders, youth representatives and members of local peace committees in northern Ghana. Each focus group comprised between six and eight participants, providing a platform for interactive dialogue and collective reflection on community-based strategies and governance challenges. This method complemented interview data by highlighting grassroots experiences and perceptions of governance efficacy.

Document analysis constituted a vital component of the methodology to contextualise qualitative findings within Ghana's established legal and policy frameworks. The study reviewed key governance frameworks and community-based strategies designed to prevent violent extremism and terrorism, including the Ghanaian Anti-Terrorism Act (2008), as amended in 2012 by the Anti-Terrorism (Amendment) Act (2012), the National Security Strategy (2020), the Community Policing Policy and relevant action plans from the National Security Council. Additionally, policy documents and reports from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the IEP and major Ghanaian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focused on counter-extremism and social cohesion were examined. These documents were selected based on their direct relevance to governance and counter-terrorism in Ghana, published within the

past 10 years to ensure contemporary validity. Exclusion criteria omitted documents lacking specificity to Ghana, outdated policies superseded by recent frameworks and materials not subjected to institutional approval or peer review, thus maintaining analytical rigour.

Qualitative data from both interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. The coding process involved the identification and categorisation of recurrent themes related to governance challenges, inter-agency coordination, community participation, resource constraints and policy implementation gaps. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the interplay between formal governance frameworks and community resilience in the Ghanaian context.

Ethical approval for the study was secured from the National College of Defence Studies, Ghana, which ensured compliance with rigorous ethical standards in research involving human subjects. Before data collection, all participants were fully briefed on the study's aims, assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant, aligning with ethical protocols for research integrity and respect for individual autonomy (Israel and Hay, 2006).

5. Data presentation

This section presents the key findings derived from the qualitative data analysis concerning the study's central research questions: the principal governance and socio-economic challenges impeding Ghana's capacity to prevent extremist violence and terrorist activities; the contributions of community-based approaches towards resilience building; and the deficiencies in the current counter-terrorism frameworks alongside strategies for strengthening their impact. Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed nuanced insights into these areas, reflecting the complex interplay between governance, community dynamics and security challenges in Ghana.

5.1 Participants' demographics

The study involved 39 participants from diverse professional backgrounds, including academia, the legal profession, the military, security services, government officials, private individuals, intelligence and civil society. The

participants' years of experience varied from five to 25 years in their respective fields. Table 1 provides a summarised view of the demographics.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Professional background	Number of participants	Years of experience
A: Academia (e.g., A01, A02, A03, A04)	4	10–15
L: Legal (e.g., L01, L02, L03, L04, L05)	5	18–25
M: Military (e.g., M01, M02, ..., M09)	9	5–25
S: Security service (e.g., S01, S02, S03, S04, S05, S06)	6	8–18
G: Government official (e.g., G1, G2, G3, G4)	4	5–20
P: Private individual (e.g., P1, P2, P3, P4)	4	7–18
I: Intelligence (e.g., I1, I2, I3)	3	5–15
C: Civil society (e.g., C1, C2, C3, C4)	4	7–18

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2025.

5.2 Governance and socio-economic challenges impeding prevention capacity

A dominant theme emerging from participant narratives concerns the multifaceted governance and socio-economic impediments that constrain Ghana's ability to effectively prevent violent extremism and terrorism. Financial constraints surfaced repeatedly as a critical barrier. Participants emphasised that insufficient funding significantly limited the operational capacity of security agencies and related institutions. One respondent noted, "Our budget is often insufficient to cover all the necessary measures to prevent violent extremism and terrorism effectively" (MO2, 2024). Another participant observed, "Without adequate funding, we struggle to maintain essential operations and acquire advanced technology" (SO2, 2024). These financial inadequacies hinder efforts not only in frontline security measures but also in longer-term capacity building and technological upgrades essential for contemporary counter-terrorism.

Capacity constraints are closely linked to financial limitations. The lack of trained personnel with expertise in countering violent extremism was a common concern. Several participants underscored the urgent need for continuous and advanced training programmes. As one security official expressed, "We lack the trained personnel to implement sophisticated counter-terrorism strategies … there is a need for continuous training and development to keep up with evolving threats" (LO5, 2024). The demand for skills development highlights gaps in human capital

that impede the effectiveness of governance structures in adapting to the evolving nature of extremist tactics.

Political interference emerged as another significant challenge affecting governance efficacy. Participants revealed that security operations and policy implementation are sometimes compromised by political considerations, which can undermine professionalism and coherence. A respondent stated, "Political motives sometimes override security considerations, leading to interference in professional operations" (CO4, 2024). This intrusion often results in fragmented strategies and erodes the operational independence required for efficient counter-terrorism.

Corruption within the system was also frequently cited as a barrier that exacerbates governance challenges, eroding trust and weakening institutional effectiveness. Participants articulated how corrupt practices create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by extremist actors. One participant lamented, "Corruption within the system can lead to leaks, compromises and inadequate funding and resources, which undermine our efforts" (MO6, 2024). Another respondent added, "Bribery and corruption weaken our resolve by allowing violent extremists and terrorists to exploit our vulnerabilities" (CO3, 2024).

The issue of intelligence deficits and poor inter-agency collaboration further compounded these governance challenges. Respondents reported fragmented intelligence systems and limited cooperation as critical gaps that impede a coordinated response. A security expert remarked, "Deficiencies in intelligence, inter-agency collaboration, and inadequate community engagement create implementation gaps for violent extremists to exploit" (IO2, 2024). Respondents therefore underscored the need for more synchronised information sharing and joint operations among security entities.

Socio-economic factors were also intricately linked to Ghana's vulnerability. Many respondents highlighted youth unemployment and social exclusion as fertile grounds for extremist recruitment. One community leader pointed out, "The large number of unemployed youths is a ticking time bomb; extremist ideologies easily sway them due to their economic hardships" (IO1, 2024). This observation aligns with wider findings in Ghana's National Security Strategy (RoG, 2020) and UNDP (UNDP, 2023) reports that associate youth marginalisation with increased radicalisation risks. Additionally, unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes were

identified as localised sources of instability that extremists potentially exploit. A participant emphasised, "Unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes create pockets of tension, which extremists can exploit … social discontent emanating from disconnection between government and people contributes to vulnerability" (MO3, 2024).

Lastly, regional insecurity was recognised as a compounding factor. Ghana's porous borders and proximity to conflict-prone neighbours such as Burkina Faso and Mali raised concerns over spillover violence. A government official reflected, "We are constantly on edge because the activities in neighbouring countries can easily inspire similar movements here" (GO1, 2024). This regional dynamic underscores the transnational challenges Ghana faces and highlights the complexity of preventing violent extremism within a highly interconnected security environment.

5.3 Community-based approaches and resilience building

The findings demonstrate that community-based approaches form a critical pillar in Ghana's resilience to violent extremism. Participants widely agreed that prevention efforts must be inclusive of a broad range of societal actors. Many emphasised the roles of traditional authorities, local peace committees, civil society organisations and grassroots leaders in fostering awareness and early warning.

One participant explained, "Engaging local communities in prevention efforts creates a more inclusive and effective approach. Community leaders and influencers help build trust and cooperation" (CO3, 2024). This local engagement enables communities to identify and address early signs of radicalisation, thus acting as a bulwark against extremist penetration. Moreover, focus group discussions revealed that community vigilance and ownership of prevention efforts have led to improvements in intelligence gathering and public sensitisation.

Awareness campaigns and educational programmes were frequently cited as essential tools. Participants noted that public understanding of governance frameworks and threats is uneven but can be enhanced through targeted outreach. As one respondent stated, "We should team up to intensify awareness of the frameworks and the threat posed by violent extremism" (IO2, 2024). Further,

respondents highlighted community-based peacebuilding initiatives as vital for addressing grievances that fuel extremism, especially when state presence is weak.

The principle of a whole-of-society approach was consistently emphasised. Participants reflected that no single institution can prevent violent extremism independently; rather, multi-sectoral collaboration underpinned by community participation is key. A military officer noted, "The approach is whole-government, whole-society. Everyone should get on board. No individual stakeholder can prevent violent extremism alone" (AO1, 2024). This inclusive approach aligns with governance theories emphasising network and collaborative governance, wherein multiple actors share roles and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, community engagement faces obstacles, including mistrust between communities and security agencies and limited resources to support grassroots programmes. These gaps often curtail the full potential of community resilience efforts. Participants stressed the need for ongoing capacity building at the local level and more structured inclusion of community voices in policy formulation.

5.4 Deficiencies in counter-terrorism frameworks and recommendations for strengthening

Participants acknowledged that Ghana's existing counter-terrorism frameworks provide a critical legal and operational foundation, citing the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (RoG, 2008) as amended in 2012 (RoG, 2012) as a cornerstone. However, they also identified significant deficiencies limiting their comprehensive impact.

One commonly cited deficiency is the top-down nature of policy implementation. Several respondents argued that initiatives often lack grassroots ownership, limiting their effectiveness in rural and marginalised regions. A participant illustrated this by stating, "Implementation should have been bottom-up, not top-down. For example, the 'See something–say something' campaign was launched in Accra first instead of starting in rural areas where the risk is higher" (IO1, 2024). This disconnect can alienate local communities and undermine prevention efforts.

Another gap identified is the absence of a clear, operational domestic definition of violent extremism to guide policy and practice. While terrorism is well-defined legally, as one interviewee noted, "It is not clear what Ghana's definition of violent extremism is, and this creates ambiguity for stakeholders" (AO4, 2024). This conceptual ambiguity complicates unified responses and measurement of prevention outcomes.

Inter-agency coordination, while improved in recent years, remains imperfect. Respondents cited instances of duplication, communication breakdowns and territorialism among agencies, which reduce efficiency. One participant noted, "There are turf wars that affect cooperation. Agencies need to improve coordination and share intelligence more effectively" (MO6, 2024). Calls for a centralised command centre or a coordinating body were frequent, positing that such measures could optimise resource use and harmonise efforts (GO3, 2024).

The scarcity of resources and technical infrastructure also undermines framework implementation. Participants advocated for increased funding to enhance personnel training, technological capabilities and operational readiness. One security official suggested, "More investment in technology and regular joint training exercises will enhance our capacity to respond to emerging threats" (SO1, 2024). These enhancements would align with best practices for adaptive governance and network effectiveness.

Addressing political interference and corruption was another imperative raised to preserve operational integrity and legitimacy. Legal reforms to protect the independence of security agencies and stringent anti-corruption measures were seen as essential components for trustworthy governance.

Importantly, participants advocated embedding social development components within counter-terrorism frameworks. They stressed that frameworks must go beyond security-centric approaches to include socio-economic development, conflict resolution and empowerment of vulnerable groups. One participant emphasised, "Fighting extremism requires addressing root causes like unemployment and social exclusion alongside security measures" (AO1, 2024). This holistic approach would foster sustainable resilience by mitigating drivers of extremism.

Regular review and adaptation of frameworks were also identified as crucial. Participants recommended periodic evaluations to ensure frameworks remain responsive to shifting threats and emerging trends. A participant highlighted, "Our frameworks must evolve to address the complex and ever-changing tactics of extremists. Continuous evaluation is necessary" (MO9, 2024).

6. Discussion

6.1 Governance and socio-economic challenges impeding Ghana's capacity

The findings highlight a nexus of governance and socio-economic challenges that collectively undermine Ghana's effectiveness in preventing violent extremism and terrorism. Financial constraints emerged as a core impediment, echoing extant literature that underscores inadequate funding as a key limitation in security governance, particularly in resource-constrained developing countries (Arthur, 2016; Khan et al., 2023). The insufficient allocation of funds not only affects frontline security operations but also limits essential investments in capacity building and technology – elements critical to adaptive and responsive governance, highlighted in network governance and institutional governance theories (North, 1990; Provan and Milward, 1995).

The burden of capacity constraints identified, particularly regarding skilled personnel shortages, concurs with Ostrom's (2002) observations on institutional robustness in managing shared resources. Effective governance requires not only formal structures but also skilled and empowered actors within those structures. Ghanaian security agencies' struggle to maintain advanced counter-terrorism competencies suggests a governance failure in institutional capacity development. Such deficits challenge the government's ability to fulfil the transparency and accountability pillars vital for public trust and legitimacy, as emphasised by Brunet and Aubry (2016).

Political interference, as echoed by several participants, further complicates governance efficacy. This aligns with critiques in governance literature describing how politicisation undermines institutional autonomy and operational coherence (Bekuma and Ukawuilulu, 2023; Stoker, 1998). The empirical evidence that political motives sometimes override security imperatives calls attention to the need for insulated governance frameworks, reaffirming Bevir's (2016) suggestion of governance as coordination involving legitimacy and accountability beyond mere administrative functions. Such interference risks fragmenting governance networks, contradicting the collaborative governance mechanisms required to harness the potential of multi-actor coordination (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Corruption, highlighted in the findings, compounds these governance deficiencies by eroding institutional integrity and public confidence, which are vital for

collective action (Maesschalck, 2017). The invocation of corruption's role reflects findings from other Sub-Saharan contexts, where it facilitates extremist infiltration and operational weaknesses (Mutisya, 2023). This resonates with North's (1990) institutional theory, emphasising that institutions' formal and informal rules shape governance outcomes. Corruption represents a breakdown of these rules, weakening the effectiveness and coherence of institutions.

The deficiencies in intelligence capacity and inter-agency collaboration revealed in the data underscore chronic coordination challenges inherent in complex governance environments (Rhodes, 1997). Network governance theory emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness and effective communication channels among autonomous yet interdependent actors (Provan and Milward, 1995; Sørensen and Torfing, 2005). The fragmented intelligence apparatus in Ghana highlights a rupture in this network governance framework, limiting the capacity to pre-empt threats and respond cohesively.

Socio-economic factors – primarily youth unemployment and social exclusion – are portrayed as fertile grounds for extremist recruitment, confirming the structural drivers discussed comprehensively in the literature (Bak et al., 2019; UNDP, 2023). The empirical portrayal of young people's vulnerabilities echoes Crenshaw's (1981) structural and psychological framework, which links socio-economic deprivation with susceptibility to radicalisation. This association strengthens the argument for governance frameworks that integrate socio-economic development and participation, in line with Ostrom's (2002) community resource management principles, which highlight the value of inclusive stakeholder participation and local empowerment.

Unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes vividly underscore localised governance failures that exacerbate vulnerabilities. Such traditional governance conflicts reflect institutional fragility and the blurred boundaries of authority described in governance theory (Stoker, 2018). The exploitation of these grievances by violent extremists confirms the interconnectedness of governance and socio-political stability that collaborative and institutional governance theories advocate (Asaduzzaman and Virtanen, 2016).

Proximity to conflict-prone neighbours further complicates Ghana's security environment by introducing cross-border risks and spillover effects. This regional dimension aligns with findings by the IEP (2024) regarding the transnational

nature of contemporary terrorism threats. It illustrates the necessity of governance models that extend beyond the nation-state, encompassing multi-level, regional cooperation mechanisms consistent with network governance theory's emphasis on inter-organisational cooperation across borders (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005).

6.2 Community-based approaches to building resilience

The study establishes community-based approaches as a pivotal component in Ghana's defence against violent extremism, reflecting the theoretical and empirical literature that emphasises granulated, bottom-up governance processes (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Ostrom, 2002). The engagement of traditional authorities, civil society groups and grassroots leaders illustrates how localised governance can facilitate early-warning systems, social cohesion and preventive vigilance, consistent with network governance and collaborative governance frameworks that emphasise inclusivity and trust-building (Maesschalck, 2017; Provan and Milward, 1995).

The emphasis on awareness campaigns and educational initiatives correlates with the literature's call for public sensitisation to combat extremist narratives (Bak et al., 2019; UNDP, 2023). These programmes extend governance beyond formal government action, reflecting Bevir's (2016) argument that governance includes informal organisations and civil society actors, essential for legitimacy and effectiveness. The evidence that community vigilance enhances intelligence gathering and public cooperation aligns closely with institutional governance principles advocating adaptive and inclusive institutional arrangements to foster credible governance and social stability (North, 1990).

The reported challenges of mistrust between communities and state security agencies highlight persistent governance gaps, particularly in transparency and accountability, which are cornerstones for effective collaborative governance (Brunet and Aubry, 2016). This mistrust underscores the difficulties in establishing democratic anchorage within governance networks – a concern central to Sørensen and Torfing's (2005) model, requiring political actors to legitimise and anchor networks within democratic frameworks.

The 'whole-of-society' approach identified by participants exemplifies a shift from traditional top-down governance to networked, multi-actor governance structures. This approach aligns with Rhodes (1997) depiction of governance as a complex system involving diverse actors cooperating beyond hierarchical state

frameworks to address wicked problems such as violent extremism. The comprehensive inclusion of actors – government, civil society, religious bodies and community groups – demonstrates the theoretical shift towards pluralistic governance models essential for tackling multifaceted security challenges.

However, the findings also recognise resource limitations at the community level, evidencing potential disconnects between theoretical ideals of collaborative governance and practical realities (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005). Capacity building at the grassroots level is necessary to equip communities as effective governance agents, reinforcing Ostrom's principle of building institutional capacity through participatory governance.

6.3 Deficiencies in current counter-terrorism frameworks and opportunities for strengthening

The empirical findings reveal notable deficiencies in the existing counter-terrorism frameworks, particularly their overly top-down nature and lack of localised implementation. This revelation echoes critiques in the literature regarding the shortcomings of centralised security strategies that fail to adapt to local contexts or incorporate community ownership (Demirovski, 2021; Faure-Walker, 2019). The disconnect between national policy and grassroots realities reflects a governance misalignment, underscoring the relevance of collaborative governance theory, which posits that inclusive, bottom-up participation is essential for policy acceptance and effectiveness (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

The ambiguity around Ghana's operational definition of violent extremism, as noted by participants, exposes gaps that weaken policy coherence and implementation. Conceptual clarity is fundamental in ensuring effective governance responses, as definitional inconsistencies can generate confusion and impede coordinated action (Bak et al., 2019). This finding aligns with theoretical positions emphasising the importance of shared meanings and conceptual frameworks in institutional governance to enable unified action (North, 1990).

Persistent challenges with inter-agency coordination and communication fragmentation corroborate the literature emphasising that network effectiveness hinges upon seamless collaboration and shared information systems (Maesschalck, 2017; Provan and Milward, 1995). The call for centralised command and improved communication networks reflects practical needs to operationalise network governance and institutional governance principles, which demand formalised

coordination mechanisms to overcome fragmentation while preserving network flexibility (Rhodes, 1997).

The inadequacy of resources and technological infrastructure mirrors global observations about the difficulties faced by developing governance systems in matching the pace of rapidly evolving extremist tactics (Arthur, 2016; UNDP, 2023). The literature stresses the importance of investments in training and modern technology to enhance the reflexivity and adaptive capacity of governance regimes (Stoker, 1998). Such capacity-building efforts resonate with Ostrom's (2002) emphasis on institutional learning and adaptation as central to sustainable governance.

Political interference and corruption, identified as major obstacles, undermine the governance qualities of legitimacy and accountability that are crucial for maintaining public trust and institutional efficacy (Brunet and Aubry, 2016). These governance deficits support earlier research suggesting that non-politicised, transparent institutions are better positioned to implement sustainable counter-extremism policies (Bekuma and Ukawuilulu, 2023).

Finally, the critical recommendation to embed socio-economic development within counter-terrorism frameworks highlights the necessity of integrated approaches that confront not only security threats but also their root drivers (Agyemang, 2022; UNDP, 2023). This integrative approach is consistent with the rational choice and structural theories of violent extremism, which emphasise addressing underlying grievances and socio-economic exclusion to reduce recruitment (Crenshaw, 1981; Ross, 1993). Incorporating development initiatives aligns well with network and collaborative governance frameworks, whereby multi-sectoral collaboration enables comprehensive responses to complex social challenges.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the principal governance and socio-economic challenges that hinder Ghana's capacity to prevent violent extremism and terrorism, assess the role of community-based approaches in building resilience, and identify deficiencies within the current counter-terrorism frameworks while proposing ways to strengthen them. Through qualitative inquiry involving key stakeholders across government, security agencies, civil society and local

communities, the research illuminated the complex interplay of institutional, social and economic factors shaping Ghana's security landscape.

Findings reveal that Ghana faces significant governance challenges, including financial constraints, insufficient capacity, political interference, inadequate inter-agency collaboration and corruption. These barriers undermine the operational effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies and weaken institutional legitimacy, complicating efforts to address evolving extremist threats. Socio-economic vulnerabilities, particularly youth unemployment, social exclusion, unresolved land and chieftaincy disputes and regional instability arising from the proximity to conflict zones in neighbouring countries, further exacerbate the risk environment. This confirms the necessity of adopting holistic governance frameworks that integrate not only security measures but also development-oriented and inclusive strategies targeting underlying drivers of radicalisation.

The research also underscored the crucial contribution of community-based approaches in enhancing Ghana's resilience to violent extremism. Engagement of traditional authorities, local peace committees, community leaders and civil society organisations fosters trust, promotes early detection of extremist activities, and enhances public awareness and vigilance. However, challenges such as mistrust between communities and security agencies and limited resources for grassroots programmes hamper the potential of these approaches, indicating room for strengthening community participation within governance frameworks.

Regarding existing counter-terrorism frameworks, while foundational legal instruments such as the Anti-Terrorism Act and National Security Strategy provide essential guidance, their predominantly top-down implementation and conceptual ambiguities – especially the lack of an operational domestic definition of violent extremism – reduce their effectiveness. Coordination deficits among agencies and resource limitations also curtail responsiveness and adaptability. This highlights the critical need for improved inter-agency collaboration, capacity building and more locally tailored approaches to complement national frameworks.

Integrating these findings within the theoretical frameworks of governance theory, network governance, institutional theory and collaborative governance offers valuable insights. These perspectives emphasise the importance of inclusive, transparent, accountable and networked governance processes that engage

multiple stakeholders across formal and informal institutions. Applying Coase's analysis of transaction costs helps understand coordination challenges, while Ostrom's principles underline the necessity of empowering local communities as autonomous yet cooperative actors in governance. Collaborative and network governance models spotlight the importance of multi-actor partnerships and democratic anchorage in policy implementation – elements currently underutilised in Ghana's counter-extremism efforts but essential for sustainable resilience.

Overall, this study confirms that preventing violent extremism and terrorism in Ghana requires adaptive governance frameworks that balance security imperatives with socio-economic development and community involvement. It further suggests that sustained investment in institutional capacity, better coordination mechanisms and inclusive strategies that reflect local contexts are key to strengthening Ghana's resilience and security architecture in an increasingly complex regional environment.

7.1 Recommendations for policy considerations

The following recommendations are made:

- *Increase and prioritise funding for security and prevention initiatives*: Adequate and sustained financing should be allocated by the Ghanaian government to security agencies for technology upgrades, personnel training and resource provision to enhance operational capacity and long-term strategic planning.
- *Enhance inter-agency coordination through a centralised command structure*: The government of Ghana should establish a centralised coordinating body or command centre to facilitate seamless information sharing, reduce duplication and streamline joint operations among security, intelligence and law enforcement agencies.
- *Develop and codify a clear domestic definition of violent extremism*: The government of Ghana should formally adopt an operational, context-specific definition of violent extremism within national legal and policy frameworks to ensure conceptual clarity and improve policy coherence across stakeholders.

- *Strengthen community engagement programmes and capacity building*: The government of Ghana should expand and institutionalise community-based initiatives involving traditional leaders, youth groups, religious bodies and civil society by providing resources and training to enhance early-warning capabilities and public trust.
- *Institutionalise regular training and continuous professional development*: The government of Ghana should implement ongoing, standardised training programmes for security personnel and community actors to keep pace with evolving extremist tactics and improve collaborative governance in counter-terrorism efforts.
- *Implement transparent anti-corruption measures and political insulation for security agencies*: The government of Ghana should enforce rigorous anti-corruption policies and legal safeguards to insulate security agencies from undue political interference, thereby enhancing institutional credibility and operational independence.
- *Integrate socio-economic development into counter-terrorism frameworks*: Ghana's government should align security policies with poverty alleviation, youth employment, education, dispute resolution and social inclusion programmes to address structural drivers of extremism holistically.
- *Facilitate cross-border collaboration and regional security partnerships*: Ghana's engagement in regional cooperation mechanisms to manage transnational threats from neighbouring conflict zones effectively, leveraging network governance principles.
- *Establish a centralised information repository and communication platform*: Create a secure, accessible database for inter-agency use containing intelligence, policy updates and best practices to support unified action and evidence-based decision-making.
- *Mandate periodic review and adaptive management of counter-extremism policies*: Institutionalise regular evaluations of counter-terrorism frameworks to ensure responsiveness to emerging threats, incorporating feedback from frontline actors and community stakeholders.

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