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**Research Report**

## West Africa security perspectives: Kwesi Aning explains

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# WEST AFRICA SECURITY PERSPECTIVES

Kwesi Aning explains

This report is written by Professor Kwesi Aning of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, Peter Albrecht, senior researcher at DIIS, and Anne Blaabjerg Nielsen, communications officer at DIIS. The publication is part of the Defence and Security Studies at DIIS, funded by the Danish Ministry of Defence.

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# WEST AFRICA



# INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2020 Kwesi Aning came to the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) as a guest researcher. Aning is a professor and director of research at Ghana's Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). He has had a long career in both academia and policymaking with the African Union and the United Nations, and he has written extensively on security dynamics and politics across West Africa. This report is the product of several structured conversations between Aning and researchers at DIIS in Copenhagen, which have been edited into eight texts that discuss key security challenges and megatrends in contemporary West Africa.

The significance of the report is that its content is based on the insights of a key expert on the history and politics of West Africa. Aning speaks as someone from the region, from Ghana, who is deeply committed to and engaged in regional conversations, debates and knowledge production. This makes the report a statement on representation and positionality when it comes to social science analysis, and the voices that dictate how a region is debated. In short, who is looking, and from where, shapes what is emphasised in the ensuing analysis. As a member of the intellectual elite in West Africa, Aning points out that there is reason to be deeply critical of the external, often normative, gaze on practices and institutions in West Africa that are labelled 'illegal', 'criminal' and 'fragile'. Indeed, what is in fact being discussed here are people's strategies to survive and create new response mechanisms and structures in often difficult circumstances. But, as Aning also notes, there is also good reason to be critical of – and to critically engage – governments and elites across the region.

This manifests in a deliberate tension that runs uneasily through the report. On the one hand Aning takes a decisively anticolonial approach, whereby tactics and strategies of the general population are taken seriously as forms of agency and resistance to abuses and exploitation flowing from the state and international political interests. On the other hand, Aning also makes several claims that divert from approaches that lean towards critical theory and insists on the failure of West African leaders to address or pre-empt fundamental challenges that the region faces. While global solutions are needed to deal with climate change, for instance, it is also fundamentally the case, as Aning points out, that appropriate responses must be found within the region by the region's leaders and populations. They can neither be externally produced nor applied.

There is no doubt that West Africa has faced its fair share of challenges since the end of the Cold War. While the early 1990s were characterised by considerable optimism about what would come in the aftermath of a bipolar world, it is undeniably the case that from the west coast to the Sahel the region has experienced and continues to experience instability and ever widening and more violent conflict. In the 1990s and early 2000s Sierra Leone and Liberia went through decade-long wars, during which the exploitation and weakening of central governments led to bureaucratic collapse and large-scale violence. Meanwhile, Côte d'Ivoire went through a civil war between the north and the south of the country, and in north-eastern Nigeria Boko Haram, a jihadist terrorist organisation, emerged. Despite these developments, the countries on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea achieved increasing stability in the first decade of the 21st century. However, the 2010s have been defined by conflict in the Sahel and the rise of violent extremism, which threatens to engulf West Africa as a whole. Mali's collapse, and a military coup d'état in 2020, as well as the strengthening of jihadist factions in Niger and Burkina Faso, are notable examples. The question is how far south this instability will travel, including into Ghana, which until now has been one of the region's most stable countries.

For the past 30 years, international responses to these conflicts have centred on a variety of interventions. A host of peacekeeping and stabilisation missions have been established, including by the United Nations in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and, more recently, Mali. Moreover, regional responses have been made by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), most consistently in Liberia. A range of interventions with mixed results have also taken place in the civilian domain, all aiming to establish or consolidate democratically accountable state institutions and open a space for economic development. While the West

African economies were projected to expand by 4% in 2020 prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, now they are expected to contract by 2% instead. Moreover, the growth of the past decades has not been distributed evenly. Rather, what is characteristic of contemporary West Africa is 'a sharpening but widening disparity between those who reap the profits of economic growth and those who feel excluded', as Aning expresses it (DIIS 2020). The shock of Covid-19, and how it will be felt and shape developments in the region, remains an important question.

Each conversation with Aning was structured around a particular theme in the context of security in West Africa, which is reflected in the eight following sections that centre on: the state, organised crime, illegal mining, climate change, demographics and urbanisation, security, piracy, and interventions. This list may not be exhaustive, and indeed each topic is explored from one specific perspective, that of Kwesi Aning. But combined they provide a political, historical and cultural context to understand developments in West Africa. The message that lingers on the pages of this report is that countries from outside the region that make the decisions to intervene, and that design the interventions, must have a fundamental understanding of the contexts in which they intervene and of their own limitations. Only then will external actors be able to support further steps taken in the region to mitigate some of the challenges that West Africa faces, challenges which have led to conflict in the past, and may presently lead not just to new and renewed conflicts, but also to the spread of existing ones.

As our conversations for the report progressed it became evident how normative many of the concepts are that policymakers and a wide range of academics use in analysing, and more importantly, responding to developments in the region. Hence, apart from containing a discussion of contemporary West Africa, the report takes its point of departure in and discusses the terminology used to analyse the challenges faced by the region. Often, what is discussed as 'illegal' or 'failed' lacks a historical foundation, and more importantly, such labels rarely take ordinary people's lived experience into account. As a result, attempts by external actors to deal with particular issues are seen as both intrusive and a violation, whether those external actors are represented by the state or by organisations representing the international community – or both. These tensions can, to a large extent, be directed back to how the state was founded in West Africa: created by colonial powers to exploit the region's resources, and how, in general, the political elites that took over after independence have exploited those same institutions and their own citizens, primarily for private gain (Babatola, 2013; Kofi, 1973: 97ff).



The main point made in this report is that the West African states are in crisis – more so than in the early years of the post-Cold War era. According to Aning this is because of popular disappointment in the face of economic inequality; reversals in the application of democratic principles; a demographic boom; and climate change resulting in environmental disasters and degradation, which all together compound the failure of states to maintain optimism and meet the expectations of the independence struggles. The different sections of the report discuss these challenges and provide an overview of megatrends in West African security.

Peter Albrecht

Copenhagen, 11 April 2021

**BIO: KWESI ANING**

Professor Kwesi Aning is Director of the Faculty of Academic Affairs & Research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Accra and Clinical Professor of Peacekeeping Practice at Kennesaw State University, Atlanta.

He completed a doctorate in political science at the University of Copenhagen in 1998. He served with the African Union from 2005 to 2007 as the first continental expert on the common African defence and security policy (CADSP) and counterterrorism located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with responsibility for the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT). He has served on the World Economic Forum's council on conflict prevention since 2007.

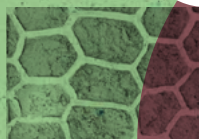
In 2006 he was appointed as the first independent evaluator of the UN's global programme on strengthening the legal regime against terrorism, and between 2015–18 he served on the UN Secretary-General's advisory group for the peacebuilding fund.

Kwesi Aning has over 150 publications to his name including books, book chapters, journal articles and policy briefs.



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# THE STATE

When I arrived in Denmark in 1986, and started university, there was a lot of talk of the non-performing state, and shortly the label “fragile” was applied. For a long time, I did not know what people were talking about. Yes, I had seen economic difficulties, tensions, military excesses, but I had also managed to live in Ghana for 23 years and did not feel a sense of collapse

Kwesi Aning

West African states – from Sierra Leone or Liberia on the coast, to Mali or Niger in the Sahel – have all faced considerable political, economic, and social challenges since the end of the Cold War. This has often confirmed a dominant view, especially arising from countries in the Global North, that states in the region are ‘failed’ or ‘fragile’. Indeed, in the 1990s, the journalist Robert Kaplan infamously described West Africa as ‘reverting to the Africa of the Victorian Atlas. It consists now of a series of coastal trading posts, such as Freetown and Conakry, and an interior that, owing to violence, volatility and disease, is again becoming, as Graham Greene once observed, “blank” and “unexplored”’. (Kaplan 1994: 8). Such biased and normative analyses give us no greater understanding of the contemporary West African state system – its enduring emergence and struggles. Yet, they have dominated external perceptions of the region and consequently the way external actors have sought to intervene in various conflicts within it.

In this section Kwesi Aning touches on the very nature of West African states as well as the challenges that they face. How may they be characterised and how do the populations residing within these political entities perceive them? How have they

been presented or misconstrued analytically? How have politicians and civil servants administered them? And what developments can explain the current challenges that West African states face?

### **The state of the West African state: between modernity and tradition**

To make sense of West African states, Aning argues, the relationship between the different types of state systems evolving before, during and after the colonial era needs to be examined. In short, the experience of colonialism in Africa led to what Ekeh (1975: 91) refers to as 'two publics', and like Ekeh, Aning considers many of the region's current tensions and challenges to emanate from the relationship between the two. For Ekeh (1975: 82) the civic public signifies a political community that comes with certain rights, privileges, duties, and obligations (citizens). In the other traditional – or 'primordial' – public that claims to protect customary rights, the individual sees their duties as a moral obligation to benefit and sustain a purported primordial or traditional sphere. Mamdani (1996: 18) argues along similar lines that the separation of civil and customary power, of rights and duty, and of modernity and tradition, are the dichotomies at stake. Aning explains these differentiations empirically:

'In the 1960s, there was a strong movement of newly independent states seeking to rediscover their identities by asking: who are we? How do we project ourselves? Though these questions on the surface may seem basic, they encapsulated quarrels and misunderstandings among the elites, on the one hand, and the "traditionalists", on the other. These contestations, following in the wake of independence, were reflected in the governance of the state, moving between the ideals of more tolerant societies and the establishment of authoritarian means of governance. This resulted in an identity crisis of the West African state that has been a feature of the postcolonial period, culminating in increasing violence following the Cold War. The 40–50 years after independence up until the 1990s saw a contentious struggle to understand – both ideationally and identity-wise – who we are, what the state must do, and what political power and public office must be used for'.

As the struggles to forge a clearly articulated identity unfolded, the 1990s especially proved to be a period of optimism as African states succeeded in encouraging democratic processes and promoting degrees of accountability and transparency. In the early 1990s democratic elections ushered numerous civil society leaders into political office. However, the promises of democracy and prosperity turned into disappointment, to a large extent reflecting the quality of leadership. Aning explains:

'The problem is that those who took over state institutions in the post-independence period were themselves unprepared to lead. The institutions over time developed a dynamism and a culture of their own. As a result, you now have judiciaries across West Africa that apply the law differently, based on social status and judgements are given that are biased, corrupt, and not predicated on the law. You have access to education and health spread unevenly. You have roads built purely for political purposes, that could and ought to have been placed in other areas to generate economic growth. It is not the institutions themselves that have failed to deliver, but those who run those institutions who have failed to run them'.

According to Aning, whatever gains were made during the 1990s and early 2000s now appear to have come undone:

'After two decades of positive democratic and financial development we are now beginning to see serious reversals that must be responded to very quickly. Recent examples are the coup d'état in Mali, a government under threat in Burkina Faso and a president in Benin who is tweaking the constitution to be re-elected for a third term. Ghana went through a voter registration process in 2020 that was unnecessarily violent. These are not cases associated with strong democratic processes'.

### **Young, frustrated, angry and educated**

After more than five decades of independence, West Africa has experienced some gains in health, education and democratic institutionalisation. However, these developments have resulted in populations that are increasingly dissatisfied with being excluded from politics and the benefits of economic growth that many countries in the region have seen. Populations have grown increasingly impatient for change and for a more equal distribution of resources:

'Whilst African politicians experimented with how their states could serve citizens, they forgot that society is not static. Experimental interventions tinkered with but hardly resolved the daily problems of citizens. In the meantime, external influences were starting to make themselves felt in the form of political, social and religious movements, and groups that sought to capitalise on the widening chasm between rulers and ruled. African governments have been fairly conservative, tentative and cautious in their policy interventions, while their societies have appropriated new ideas



that could give them hope, sometimes falsely. As a result, African leaders suddenly woke up to a realisation that they did not know or recognise their populations: young, frustrated, angry, educated, and ready to strike a blow against the state’.

The deliberate theft and looting of state resources by those in power sends dangerous signals and challenges the legitimacy of the elite in the eyes of the population. Aning says:

‘Until the 1990s there was an aura of respectability around the elite class in the eyes of ordinary people, because they had won independence for their country. But this aura of respectability shifted dramatically, starting in the late 1970s and early 80s and subsequently gathering pace as the Cold War came to an end. What was becoming evident was the inability or unwillingness of elites across West Africa to deliver inclusive economic growth and political engagement, resulting in disaffection and the emergence of increasingly radicalised, revolutionary rhetoric. As a result of these developments, violence broke out in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire in the 1990s, aiming to tear down the elites and their aura of invincibility’.

The political elite’s unwillingness to listen, and the fact that the popular challenges to state authority were often successful, have served as inspiration and triggered widespread violence. Twenty to thirty years on from the coup in Liberia in 1989, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and north-east Nigeria are facing considerable challenges. Such problems may be on their way to Ghana, which has until now been one of the most stable countries in the region. As a response to their threatened position in a quest for power in West Africa and the Sahel, political parties and politicians began establishing political vigilante groups, and now the very elites that established the vigilante groups can no longer count on them for their own safety:

‘Violence has become a legitimate form of political discourse. Across West Africa, political vigilantes – usually recruited, funded, trained and encouraged by political parties to provide security and intimidate opponents – are rife. This is not a matter of youth “gone wrong”. It is a matter of youth negotiating within a limited space and with few opportunities available to them. Having been pushed to the margins of society, one sure way of surviving is to exploit what they have in abundance: physical strength and numbers.

Vigilantes and vigilantism have become part of the democratisation of violence, where institutions have been hollowed out over time. It started with Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone and Charles Taylor in Liberia. Their successes, albeit leading to very violent destruction of their societies, sent a clear message to the frustrated youth of the region: if we mobilise enough and threaten, the elites will give in. That struggle is and will be long and ongoing, while the state is being increasingly challenged as its institutions and territories in some cases are overtaken. We see this in south-eastern and north-eastern Nigeria, the Diffa region in Niger, the northern territories of Mali and in Burkina Faso with respect to almost 75% of the territorial space’.

### **The traditional state**

As another response to the state's inability to meet the daily needs of people, citizens have turned to traditional ways of living because it makes more sense to their daily experiences, argues Aning:

‘The post-independence state project has failed to deliver the public goods and security that it promised to people. Because of this, citizens have reverted to systems they know to be functioning, systems they trust. The political science and international relations literature that talks about this process of people recreating structures for their survival call it the “re-traditionalisation” of the African state. But that is not what it is. West Africa is not being re-traditionalised. Rather, as the modern state grows weaker, the traditional state is beginning to play the role that it has always played in ordinary people’s lives – by being present, inclusive, and run according to rules that people understand’.

While the ‘modern’ West African state has failed to deliver on its promises, the state as a whole has not. There is an interface between the traditional and modern state that must be understood, Aning suggests:

‘In almost all post-independence state constitutions, in the attempt to modernise the structures inherited from the colonial era and build a unified state, there were attempts to ensure that traditional authorities were not active players within the political space of the modern state. But when I went back to Ghana just before the elections in 2000 after being away since the 1980s – and I have seen it in Nigeria and Liberia as well – no contemporary political actor organises anything such as a political rally in a village, town, or city, without also paying homage and allegiance to traditional authorities.

At the same time, there has been, and continues to be, a profound disconnect between the modern, independent, sovereign African state with a parliament and all the symbols of modern statehood and the traditional state. People recognise that: “Yes, we have a flag, a national anthem; yes, we hold elections every four years, but the modern state does not speak to my daily life and experience”. After more than 50 years of independence, this project of minimising the role of the traditional state – its structures, rules and mechanisms of governance and leadership – has failed, and it is pertinent now to question the kinds of governance mechanisms present in traditional states; and why and how such traditional states are governed differently. However, more important are the questions about what analytical tools are available in contemporary social sciences to properly engage the reality of these traditional states.

The existing literature on statehood basically argues that because they did not follow how the European states developed, nor how the North American or Asian states developed, spaces and territories in West Africa are in a certain sense all ungoverned. However, until we recognise the multiple forms of governance that exist, and the way they interact in a cooperative manner, sometimes in a conflictual manner, we will not understand how these relationships are leading to new forms of more cooperative and collaborative governance and co-existence’.

### **At a crossroads**

West Africa’s challenges are historically deep-rooted, revolving around inequalities and promises and hopes that have neither been realised nor kept. As we move into the third decade of the 21st century, West Africa finds itself at a crucial moment in time according to Aning:

‘African states are now at a crossroads where most things must be done differently, and sooner rather than later. We need to answer some tough questions in the near future. How do we get the majority of our citizens to have some hope that a system will be established within which they can see themselves? How can they contribute to transforming their societies?

Most of the states are locked into a system where there is a tiny elite that gets access to the little that the state is producing. It means that there is a large and widening gap between the elite and those who are governed. The state of

the state is that if we don't see a change in how it is managed, making it more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the majority of people, we will see more societal upheavals, with ordinary people saying "no, we won't accept this" – and it will not necessarily be peaceful'.

However, suggests Aning, there are possible avenues to follow to break with the past:

'Civil society is still active in West Africa – vocal, engaged, and in most West African countries, unlike in East Africa, many of its participants have stayed out of active frontline politics. There is a lot of intellectual engagement across West Africa that is collaborative, dialogic and supportive. A response to the lack of institutions is that civil society groups have become a critical sparring partner to government. Progressively, as the official arms of government shirk their responsibilities of checks and balances, civil society is becoming a fourth arm of government: bringing knowledge, activism, and consistent engagement in trying to shape the public debate and inject alternative views into the policy space. Gambia, for example, got a new government, which brought about much needed optimism after the expulsion of former president Yahya Jammeh after the 2016 elections. But the deal among political parties in Gambia that whoever they chose would only serve one term has been overturned by President Barrow who is seeking to continue in office in the December 2021 elections with a new political party. In Benin, we see a president, who is running for a third term, irrespective of what the constitution says, and here too, the only organised groups talking are civil society. In Côte d'Ivoire, people spoke against president Ouattara for trying to stand in elections for a third term. And a similar dynamic is happening in Guinea'.

The overarching struggle across West Africa that Aning describes is between political elites that are concentrating and monopolising resources, and populations who have been excluded from the benefits. Out of this tension have grown a number of responses, both in the form of violence against the political elite and of a turn to alternative forms of governance, captured by the notion of a traditional state. How this tension evolves will continue to define the states of West Africa.

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# ORGANISED CRIME

Who defines crime? What becomes crime at what time? And what are the processes and mechanisms that result in the characterisation of something as criminal? The answers to these questions are all products of highly politicised and long-term historical processes

Kwesi Aning

For a while now, the international community has considered transnational organised crime a key challenge for West Africa – and by extension a key challenge for Europe, as Africa's neighbour to the north, in terms of trafficking goods and people. This emphasis has primarily come from the increasing flow of one particular contraband – cocaine – so considerable that its value on arrival in Europe exceeds the national security budgets of several countries in West Africa. Meanwhile, there are many other forms of organised crime that affect countries in the region like Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone: human and arms trafficking, internet fraud, diamond smuggling, forgeries relating to currencies and pharmaceuticals, for instance, and the theft and smuggling of oil.

According to Aning, in dealing with this type of crime analysts need to fully grasp what transnational organised crime means in the context of West Africa. It is therefore important to look at the concept itself, what it means as an integral part of the region's history, and within people's everyday lives. Certainly, organised crime is at best a relative term that means radically different things to different people, be they Western policymakers or villagers in Niger engaged in activities that from



the outside are defined as such. Having a common definition, approach and understanding of the issues at stake is an important step in aligning policies and actions that deal with the negative consequences of what is defined as organised crime.

### **Continuity and change in the West African narcotics trade**

According to Aning the concept of transnational organised crime should be viewed in the historical and social context of West Africa. This will more often than not reveal that what external observers deem criminal, organised and transnational are in fact small groups of individuals making a living through trade as they exploit historically established trading routes:

‘The expression “transnational crime” is normally defined as involving three or more people operating over several years, crossing two or three borders. However, what is referred to as transnational in the sense of interaction among states and kingdoms, has taken place in West Africa for centuries. And to understand the extent to which a certain action or form of trade is defined as a crime by ordinary people, we also need to look at the historical context’.

For example, there is a tendency to see the narcotics trade as something new says Aning:

‘Yet marijuana, for instance, has always been a natural part of agricultural practices, particularly in the forest belt across West Africa. It became part of the agricultural production, and with respect to social use, there is an acceptability about it. Kola, with the expansion of Islam across the Sahara, became extremely attractive as a mild stimulant. In the 70s, women were the main couriers of narcotics across the coastal states and into Europe, trafficking primarily hemp. The point here is that there has always been an acceptability, tolerance and use within the West African community when it comes to production – and attempts to send the crop to Europe. Most of the early traffickers used the profits and incomes accruing from the export to establish a trade and be able to survive. The shift and transformation came with the arrival of cocaine and heroin. The demand and the recognition in the 1950s that cocaine, heroin and marijuana could generate economic spinoffs that were considerably larger, started the more organised aspects of this transnational trade’.

While the arrival of these narcotics was a novelty, the way they moved across the sub-region was built on pre-existing, pre-colonial trading routes:

'There is a false perception that these huge ungoverned spaces exist across West Africa where crime and disorder reign. But in fact, the networks and routes that were and are being used to move the new types of narcotics, follow already existing patterns. For example, the routes used for the smuggling of the local brews made of palm wine and sugar cane that were banned by the British and French in the 1940s and 1950s, because these domestically produced goods competed with imported drinks, are still in use. So, there is, to a large extent, nothing new in how goods are moved across the region. What is new are the types of products, the volumes, the multiplication of actors involved, the profitability of the goods and the violence that accompanies the transportation'.

The same misunderstanding is seen when it comes to the perception of these types of crimes as being effectively organised:

'When we talk about transnationality, it creates the image of something that must be exceedingly well planned to move across state borders. In fact, it is the creation of states along with border posts that brought about the perception that people have to go through formalities to do what they have done all along. These traders just exploit existing knowledge and networks to avoid border posts'.

A further aspect of this discussion is that what, to the external observer, may be considered a crime is to those involved a way to make a living, and therefore not only accepted but encouraged.

### **Societal respect and organised crime**

While the question of organised and transnational crime relates to those who have the power to define an act as such, crime is at the same time defined according to the distribution of power and wealth. Organised crime is thus related directly to how the state is governed, and the services it provides. As Aning argues:

'If people live in a state that is unable to generate welfare goods, and feel left out of the spinoffs of economic growth from which only a narrow elite has benefitted – where do they turn to for alternatives for their survival? While there are triumphalist expressions about growth in West Africa, these figures hardly translate into development for the broader population'.

This means that organised crime is, in fact, a survival strategy to many of those involved:

'Societies, precisely because they are left alone to fend for themselves, consistently find alternatives to survive. These include activities labelled as criminal by the state, but for ordinary people these are activities and trades that are using pre-existing knowledge that people have followed for generations'.

Moreover, local communities depend on these trading activities and celebrate those individuals who bring prosperity through what is defined extra-locally as organised crime. Aning explains:

'The individuals or groups of individuals, who provide these support mechanisms are not necessarily perceived as criminals by the communities that benefit from the spinoffs of such activities. On the contrary, across West Africa and the Sahel, those who commit these supposed crimes are honoured by their societies. Amongst the Yoruba and Igbo, people criminalised by the state are given chiefly titles. It is the same in Mali and Liberia – in Ghana, they are given the title of mpuntuohene or mpuntuohemaa, or "development chiefs and queens". In other words, many of the activities that we label as organised crime are what keep these communities going. In Mali, for instance, the transshipment of narcotics, petrol and cigarettes from Bamako and Gao across the desert to Libya and Algeria transforms lives in local communities, where they are now able to dig new boreholes, and to provide microcredit and basic amenities where the modern state has failed to extend such basic services'.

The integration and general societal acceptance of what external observers refer to as organised crime is also reflected in the limited levels of violence that are seen in the West African trade as compared to Latin American countries such as Mexico, Colombia or Peru where cocaine-related violence is rampant. Therefore, says Aning, we need to acknowledge that these activities, dismissed by and looked down upon from the outside, play important roles in some societies.

There is no denying the possible detrimental impacts of some of these activities, both within and beyond the region. Yet, Aning continues, the general popular acceptability of those involved in such activities means that we need to find new ways of thinking about the role of the state and its ability to counteract the attractions of what we characterise as organised crime.

'When we discuss transnational crime, or organised crime, it is not about the little person in the small town, who is happy the hospital is painted. The people on the second and third tiers are seen as modern-day Robin Hoods – they are adored, and people look up to them. What young people aspire to is "easy money" and this means the mixing of dirty and clean money'.

### **State collusion as the centre of gravity**

Even as organised crime reflects the absence of public services provided by a centrally governed state, its institutions, and the processes and practices that such institutions represent, remain crucial, says Aning:

'There needs to be an institutionalised form of order, meaning that there are formal institutional expressions of the state, such as law courts, police and hospitals, that create a veneer of normalcy and acceptability within the international system. In essence, these institutions are hollowed out so that they deliver minimal regulatory functions'.

By extension, the role of state bureaucrats and political elites in what is referred to as organised crime is both complex and intimate. Networks exist across the divide between state and non-state actors, and this has obvious consequences when it comes to dealing with what is considered criminal activity:

'Many agreements have been signed in international forums relating to organised crime, but when the time comes to translate the documents into national legislation, nothing happens – the signatures on these documents, not their implementation, are the end result. There is a need to revisit the instruments that are supposed to be used to confront transnational crime. States are active participants in the design, establishment, and promulgation of international instruments on transnational organised crime issues. But state actors are either unwilling or incapable of dealing with these crimes – or complicit in facilitating them. A typical example is the multiple cases of statutory security forces providing protection for criminal gangs in mining activities, rosewood logging and the transportation and storage of narcotics.

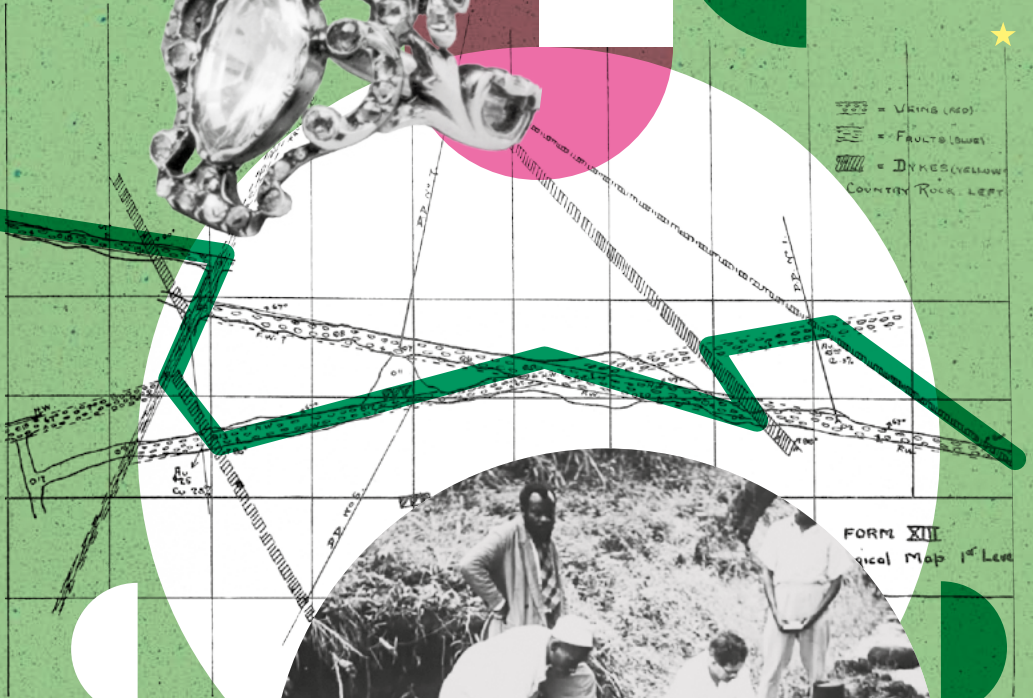
It is therefore important to bring ordinary voices and other experiences into the narrative. It is their lived experiences we are describing, but when UNODC [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime] member states meet and discuss, those experiences are often simply dismissed and criminalised. We need new categories to understand what is going on at the most local level; the culture, tradition and other drivers of why people behave the way they do'.

' Many agreements have been signed in international forums relating to organised crime, but when the time comes to translate the documents into national legislation, nothing happens – the signatures on these documents, not their implementation, are the end result'.





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# ILLEGAL MINING

‘These activities were criminalised and made illegal when in fact they should be seen more as endeavours to survive’

Kwesi Aning

When mining in West Africa is discussed, the narrative is often centred on how it has been infiltrated by both small and large-scale criminal organisations and structures, and encompasses smuggling, child labour, and rule by fear. Indeed, attacks on mining fields in Burkina Faso, Mali and Ghana by organisations which have been branded by international bodies as terrorists or criminals are causing alarm, because it is believed that gold reserves, which are relatively easily accessible, can fund the activities of these organisations (Sandner 2019; Mednick 2020). At the same time, and as in the case of organised crime, defining mining as illegal ignores the history of an activity that has been going on for centuries with unwritten rules and regulations of its own, as Kwesi Aning explains:

‘When we prefix our conversations about mining with the word “illegal”, it takes away the traditional aspect, or the longstanding livelihood aspect of this economic activity as an individual but also as a communal activity. What has become characterised as illegal was long ago guided by rules established by strong precolonial states. In fact, the salt trade emanating from the coast, or the gold, cattle or cola trade from the forest regions – had regulations around what was found on somebody’s private or communal land, and what portion should go to the chief, the king. These were rules and regulations that existed in precolonial kingdoms like Mali, Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, Northern Nigeria as well as the larger empires further afield in East Africa’.

Mining had, in other words, long been a daily economic activity for a substantial number of Africans. Therefore, when these rules were changed by the colonial powers such as Britain, France and Portugal, the mining communities experienced a disenfranchisement from their long-existing economic activities. Aning says:

‘With time, community engagement in these activities was criminalised and made illegal, when in fact they should be seen more as livelihood endeavours to survive’.

### **Applying a historical lens**

Once again it is important to take a look at the colonial history in order to fully grasp the complexities surrounding small-scale mining in West Africa, and how the fundamental question of land played into the issue.

‘Part of the colonial struggles revolved around appropriating more land. This was related to a desire to not only grow cash crops, but also control salt and gold mines. Diamonds came considerably later in the early 1900s. Mali became a gold trading empire in the 15th and 16th centuries and formed an important centre of the West African gold trade. Gao and Timbuktu in Mali and Agadez in Niger became centres where gold was exchanged and carried much further afield to the east. By the time the French, Portuguese, British and Danes decided to establish their castles and forts on the west coast, it was not just about slaves. In fact, the construction of these major castles from Arguin in Mauritania to Mozambique was driven by the gold trade, or the mining of gold’.

Between 1471 and 1880 the total production of gold among the Danes, British, Portuguese, and local traders, represented close to 400 tons that in turn led to the introduction of more mechanised forms of mining. Denmark had left West Africa by 1850, but France, Portugal and Great Britain passed rules and regulations that sought to regulate access to the land where the goal was, to define who could mine, what the tax regime should be, and how the gold could be taken out of the colonial territories. And therein lies the contestation between those who could make rules, and those who felt that their livelihoods were undermined and threatened. As Aning puts it:

‘Contemporary struggles over mining are in other words deeply entrenched in the colonial systems of trade and labour’.

### **Mining as resistance to state authority: Sierra Leone and Liberia**

In this light, mining and the exploitation of timber, for instance, are at the centre of a struggle for resources. At the same time, the very act of small-scale mining can be seen as a rebellion against the state. Aning explains:

‘There is a need to appreciate the tensions between state and miners in West Africa because of the historic relationships between those with power – chiefs, colonialists, landowners – and those who sought to use the land for subsistence. What policy implementers label as illegal mining is, in the miners’ consciousness, resistance to those who they perceive to have taken their legitimate communal property or who are limiting access to the use of such property. This is the context in which mining – or what is termed illegal mining – and the violence and resistance surrounding this activity should be understood. Any attempt to overlook these longstanding and simmering tensions will be fraught with misinterpretation. The fights have been fairly low key from the 1950s until the early 2000s, but their dynamics have now changed’.

Mining and its role in the wars in both Liberia and Sierra Leone epitomises the threat that the unrestrained exploitation of, and contestations over, minerals creates. The history of these two countries was different from the rest of West Africa in terms of colonisation due to the central role played by Americo-Liberians in Liberia and Creoles in Sierra Leone – descendants of slaves from abroad. Aning explains:

‘In both cases, people that were now defined as illegal miners struggled to understand how their brothers and sisters could make laws against them. Local people and communities who had used simple techniques to mine realised that they could neither mine nor compete with their colonial masters anymore. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, resistance to the regulations that were being issued by the state, and transition to widespread violence, was a consequence partially of the deliberate manipulation of this history by the Americo-Liberians, Creoles and local elites. But it was also a result of the guarantees from those who sought to challenge this domestic hegemony that people could go back to their communities and do what they had, historically, always done’.

Liberia's Charles Taylor was a brutal warlord who spoke in the language of a freedom fighter:

'Charles Taylor, as an Americo-Liberian, articulated indigenous narratives against a power and resource grabbing economic and political elite who "took away livelihoods": "I will give you back your rights to this livelihood". Taylor's selection of Nimba county in north-eastern Liberia to launch his rebellion in December 1989 was in this regard very symbolic. Nimba had been raided over time by sympathisers of French colonisers, the citizens had become poor, and been prevented from mining. Most of the Americo-Liberians came from southern plantations in the United States. They took a caricature of the life their previous masters lived, and transplanted it into Liberia, so people who had been domestic slaves and farmhands came to behave as superior masters. When African Americans arrived in Liberia in 1848, they established their thirteen original towns along one river after signing the Ducor Contract. The indigenous Liberians came from the bush to work, and at 5pm they had to leave town. It was black-led apartheid'.

This separation between newcomers – Americo-Liberians – and indigenous Liberians was intertwined with the control of mining, explains Aning,

'...and closely backed by religion with its inherent mission to civilise. Already at this point in time, one could sense the tensions and conflicts that would define relations between the new elites and the owners of the land. It was these tensions that Charles Taylor eventually exploited to launch his war. In traditional Liberian society, taxes were hardly ever paid, but the freed slaves from America moving to Liberia demanded taxes from agriculture and mining.

The political class was so successful in controlling Liberia that by the 1970s it was the fastest growing economy in the world, making money from flags of convenience, a considerable timber industry, gold and diamonds. But the Liberian economy was an extractive economy. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was something called "growth without development" – there were no roads, hospitals, and hardly any jobs. You had an elite class, who formed 4% of the population, who used all types of control mechanisms to keep the remaining 96% of the population poor, uneducated and servile. In 1989, Taylor was able to tap into these gross inequalities and the grievances that they produced, consolidating a narrative of "us" and "them": "Americo-Liberians have taken



over your mines, lands, timber and turned you into slave labour". It was Taylor's ability to harness this frustration and pent-up anger that made him so successful at mobilising and unleashing terror and destruction.

So, the point I am trying to make here is that the concept of illegal mining that we are struggling with now has a long history. As the state gets weaker and weaker, its regulatory strength also weakens, and people return to what they know how to do to survive, including mining. What we consider to be illegal from the point of view of state institutions is one thing. That does not touch the lives of ordinary people, who think they have a legitimate right to mine. Once more, we have a negative word attached to an economic activity that reflects ordinary people's livelihoods, and a word that contributes to tensions and anger among mining communities because their livelihood activities are misrepresented as criminal. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, this representation of mining by people as an illegal activity contributed to fuelling the violence and sustaining the war over a long period of time'.

### **When small-scale mining becomes illicit and turns violent**

Small-scale mining has, since then, continued to be, and expanded as, a source of livelihood across the region. Moreover, the label illegal has helped to establish a lawlessness around mining activities, including corruption, violence, state collusion and links to extremist groups says Aning:

'By the time young combatants returned from the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, they had multiple skills. They knew how to fight, use guns, engage in surface mining, use basic tools, and apply mercury in the extraction of precious metals – and they decided to do the same thing in their own countries. Although small-scale mining certainly had been an ongoing activity prior to the year 2000, the end of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars shows a direct correlation with the explosive expansion of illegal, small-scale mining in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Niger. These are activities that in the case of Ghana today probably support 1/5 or 1/6 of the whole population.<sup>1</sup> This makes mining a substantial source of income. Such large numbers raise questions about how and why this activity continues on a large scale. And the answer is located within the state, whose agents across the region collude with miners by purchasing gold and diamonds for export'.



The increasing activity around this kind of small-scale mining contributes to violence, weapons proliferation, environmental degradation, and the presence of narcotics. Moreover, people or groups related to violent extremism have realised the profitability of providing protection for miners, explains Aning:

‘Expansion in such activities is resulting in communal violence, and the willingness to challenge the authority of the state when it does try to control mining activities. In Burkina Faso and Mali extremist groups are providing protection and taking a percentage from the gold. This causes all kinds of challenges and begs the question of what the abiding effects of this illicit mining activity might be. Indeed, in some cases, extremist groups become the state and provide social welfare. Ghana has become the single largest importer of industrial explosives, and with it, triggers and detonators are stolen, sometimes by violent groups to manufacture IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. Such stolen materials from places like the Shanxi mine in northern Ghana are showing up in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. If you look at Ghana in the last 24 months, four mining facilities have had storage facilities broken into. What on the surface looks like ordinary theft is now perceived by the police and the Ghana National Commission on Small Arms to be linked to the wars in the Sahel’.

In sum, these are the consequences of ineffective stockpile management.

### **The future**

In answer to the question of how the mining sector will develop in the coming years, Aning predicts:

‘It is going to get considerably worse for various reasons. First are the demographics: with an increasingly youthful population, people need to find a livelihood, and because the region’s governments cannot create enough new jobs for them, the alternatives are to farm or to mine. Farming is not an attractive economic activity for young people. Mining, with its easier and potentially considerable but dangerous pickings, will continue to expand and unfortunately create more violence, environmental harm, drugs use, and small arms acquisition. As these trends develop, things will continue to get much, much worse’.

Closely related to the question of demographics is how electoral politics work in West Africa. In almost all countries across West Africa large numbers of people are involved in mining, so when a government intervenes, people threaten not to vote for them. In short, there is a recognition of the power that block votes create:

'Representatives from political parties come back to the communities to solicit people's votes, give them assurances and promises about provision of equipment, and also to change the law to "legalise" what is now being termed "illegal". The elite political class also encourages the counterculture that exists among miners. Like the political vigilante groups, "illegal" miners realise that they have power, in terms of their numbers and of their relationship to elites and politicians, which they willingly exploit'.

The bottom line is that we know little about current mining communities and the extent of their activities. In the new, illicit mines the presence of small arms and of extremist sentiments creates the basis for considerably more violence, and by extension considerably less access to information:

'There is a Wild West feel to these settlements that are becoming increasingly difficult to research'.

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Source des énergies  
de l'Univers

ROOG

SOLEIL

Energies de l'Univers  
Energie de l'Univers  
Les vents

OKIIN  
(l'homme)

PANGOOL

PANGOOL

LES DÉFUNTS  
nourris des sacrifices,  
ils émettent des énergies

PANGOOL

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Rôle de la lune  
dans le monde nocturne  
\* L'homme nocturne \*

ANCÊTRES

Toujours vivants

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VILLAGE DES MORTS  
Honolu  
JANIB

YIO en voie d'incarnation

Adna Kumba NJAY

SIELE

Autels sacrés

Retour des énergies vers les vivants

Energies de l'Univers  
Mythe du SASS

La pluie

# CLIMATE CHANGE

‘I see a strong positive correlation between growing tensions, instability and climate change. In West Africa, ordinary people are experiencing the changes in the climate in frequently extreme, dangerous ways’

Kwesi Aning

The consequences of climate change are being felt particularly strongly in West Africa and the wider Sahel. From what we know, any continuation of increased warming (1.5–6.5°C) will lead to extreme heat and drought as well as floods in the region (Sultan & Gaetani 2016). With the present trends in rainfall patterns, the Sahel is the most sensitive to this, and will be affected the hardest within Africa. However, the rest of West Africa will also experience more intense climate extremes and varying temperatures, and very hot and dry, arid, and semi-arid conditions will extend further south towards the coastal areas. Such conditions will produce significant stresses on farming, access to water resources and their management, urban planning, and people’s everyday lives and security (Connolly-Boutin & Smit 2016; Henderson et al. 2017). Aning sees a strong connection between climate change and insecurity in West Africa:

‘In West Africa, ordinary people are experiencing the changes in climate in very extreme, dangerous ways. Along the coastal belt of West Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the southern part of Côte d’Ivoire are areas that have always experienced predictable rains because of their vegetation. Now they, together with Ghana, Benin and Togo, are beginning to have flash floods. The rains are torrential, and so heavy that they threaten communities’ survival as they wash away the fertile topsoil. These shifts in climate patterns have been worsening

for a couple of years, but they have accelerated in the last decade. In more predictable, earlier times, by the end of the rainy season in August came the main agricultural season. September–October formed the lean season that allowed farmers to plant their crops, with enough rain to grow food. However, for the past five years or more the west coast up to the savannah has been experiencing unpredictable rainfall patterns, followed by heat that is much more intense and that stretches over months. This has had, and will have, a massive impact on food security’.

A 1.5°C rise in temperature means that food production in the region will reduce dramatically, leading to migratory movements, urbanisation, tension and insecurities, says Aning:

‘We know that in almost all West African and Sahelian states, there have been food-related insecurities, for instance in the production of maize and other staples. Reduced production results in price increases, which means that people’s ability to survive in the rural areas is becoming more precarious. A corollary to this development is that it is driving more and more people into urban spaces such as Dakar, Accra, Lagos, Lomé, Abuja and Bamako – putting even more stress on the environment and leading to more public health challenges’.

As such, what we are seeing in West Africa is a reflection of the experience across the whole continent.

### **Farmer–herder conflicts: when resources are scarce, tensions rise**

Climate change not only affects people’s ability to access food and water, Aning points out, but also intensifies already existing tensions and conflicts between communities. One clear example of how climate change translates into a security concern is the case of the herder–farmer conflicts spreading across West Africa. The Fulani are one of the last great nomadic peoples in the world, numbering some 35 million, scattered across 15 countries in West Africa from the arid Sahel to the lush rainforests near the coast. Historically, they are pastoral herders who migrate with their cattle, goats and sheep following the seasonal changes, while some are semi-nomadic and settled. The booming population growth of the West African countries has intensified contestations and by extension conflicts over land. This has been exploited and compounded by religious extremism that threatens and

shatters social bonds. Moreover, these conflicts have been worsened by climate change which is driving the herders on an ever more desperate search for pasture, water and accommodating communities, as Aning describes:

'The drought is leading to massive migratory movements, both laterally across states, and vertically towards the coast. Pastoralists such as the Fulani are moving hundreds of thousands of cattle and people from Chad, Niger, and northern Mali, through Burkina Faso, to Côte D'Ivoire and Ghana. This poses considerable challenges for the communities through which they transit, but also for the communities where they settle. Beyond the infrastructural challenges, the culture and practices of these groups may be different, which constitutes an additional challenge'.

In sum, climate change is not an abstract concept for West Africa. It translates into day-to-day challenges in the region and, says Aning, leads to a narrative that is being instrumentalised politically. For instance, abuse and resistance from non-pastoralist communities are leading to counter-narratives among the Fulani of being victims in the places where they settle, of being dispossessed of their livelihoods and of being excluded from economic life in almost every country along the coast:

'We are seeing a climate change-driven narrative of victimhood, exclusion, and dispossession. The more violent responses to these dynamics have led to the establishment of the Fulani-centred Macina Liberation Front, built around a narrative of the Macina Empire of the early nineteenth century. The liberation group is seen by the US as a terrorist group, but beyond that somewhat limited narrative, the Macina Liberation Front is expressing a wider, pan-African, Fulani consciousness of who they are, how they can organise themselves and how they can use that re-organisation'.

While these tensions certainly have not escaped the politicians' attention, regional actors such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have failed to successfully deal with them. Aning adds:

'With the worsening tensions among communities, and the killings and destruction of properties, ECOWAS has noted the need to make rules about how people with cattle and their movements are managed. But these rules are, in fact, already in place. In 1986 ECOWAS introduced regulations on



transhumance, which recognise that there are traditional ways of how we handle cattle. It was agreed that during the dry season the cattle would move from the Sahel down south to the coast. During these periods of migration, member states should provide waterholes, veterinary services and plunge dips for the cattle. The regulation also stated that the herders should leave 10% of the cattle down south when they leave for the north. None of this has ever been followed through on’.

Most member states in ECOWAS see these transient migrants such as the Fulani herdsmen as a distraction – a very irritating distraction. And therein lies the danger according to Aning:

‘Because of ECOWAS’ failure to grasp the regional security implications of these massive movements of humans and cattle, the governments comprising ECOWAS consider them to be domestic security problems. And they deal with them that way. In Nigeria, in the plateau state area around Jos and Abuja, several murders take place each month, which are the result of clashes between farmers and herders. They all revolve around access to grazing rights, access to settlements and water. Negative changes in the climate are reinforcing these tensions, which is obvious not just in Nigeria, but also in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin, Liberia and Senegal’.

### **The missing link**

While the consequences of climate change are, as we have seen, clearly being felt in West Africa, conversations about its multiple and complex impacts are almost absent in the sub-regions. Those conversations are the missing link, according to Aning. They are presently, however, tangential at best to what are generally perceived as the critical questions of the day:

‘The terminology – climate change – is seen as an imposition on the public conversation, because in the national discourse in West African and Sahelian states, climate change is not being discussed. From April to July, citizens and their governments will talk about floods, but not in terms of the higher volumes of rain. Rather, the discussion about floods relates to the destruction caused. Then after respite from the floods, from November to April, the conversation will turn to the fierce heat and the consequent drought. But there are no real conversations about why the excessive floods or heat occur’.

When floods or droughts occur and communities are affected and agricultural output destroyed, governments respond to them as single, aberrant incidents – the same goes for the farmer–herder conflicts. In other words, the missing link is a conversation about the multiple implications of climate and environmental change between the people who are most affected and their leaders. Aning says:

‘A journey along West Africa’s largest rivers such as the Volta, the Niger and the Gambia, shows that they have all reduced dramatically in volume, but the political discourse does not use climate change and demographic pressures as explanatory factors. Though ECOWAS countries have signed up to instruments relating to the environment and other resources, they are hardly able to translate them into domestic policies. As a result, West Africa and the Sahel are seeing the dwindling of lakes and other water bodies.<sup>2</sup> All this is not just translating into confrontations between farmers and herders, but also affects the ability to produce clean water for people to use’.

### **Changing the conversation**

Ordinary people are often the first and primary victims of climate change, but also the source of change, says Aning. Their role in understanding, practicing, and ensuring that their own livelihoods are protected and improved is crucial in transforming and shifting the debate from a higher, abstract to a lower, tangible level. But there is still a long way to go:

‘Farmers and herders can sense that there is a change in climate patterns, drying up of grazing grounds and rivers, but this has still not generated the mass concern that is necessary to engender elite action. And this is expressed in the political discussions and ideas about the types of response mechanisms that should be initiated. In terms of this phenomenon, how many political parties in states such as Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali and Niger have sections in their manifestoes on climate change? None. In 2020, six West African states had crucial presidential and parliamentary elections, namely Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Niger. Hardly any discussions relating to climate change took place’.

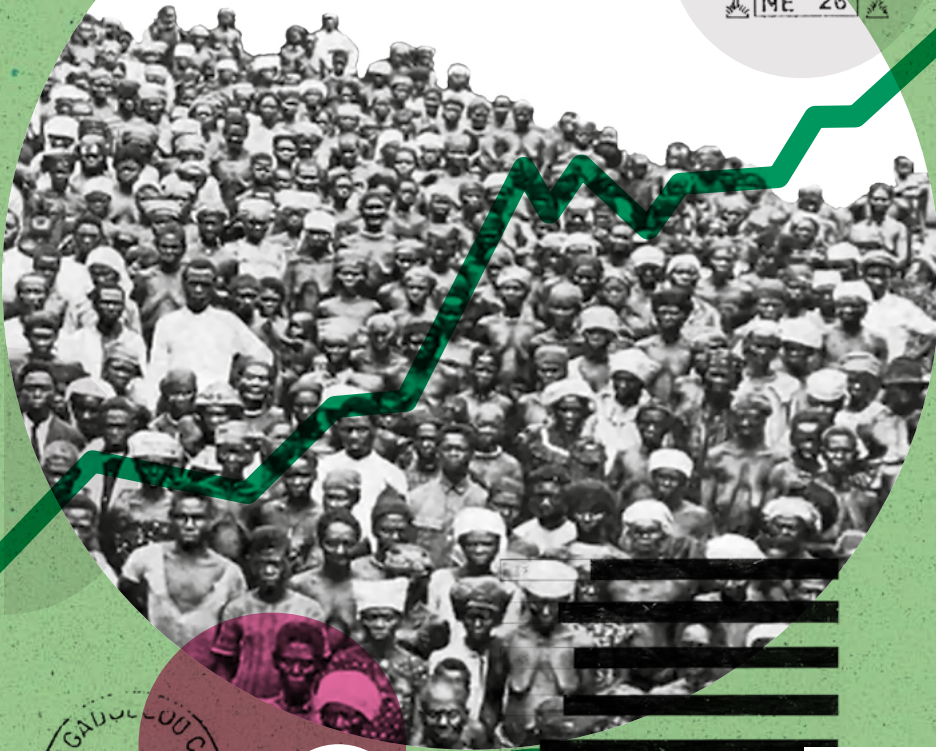
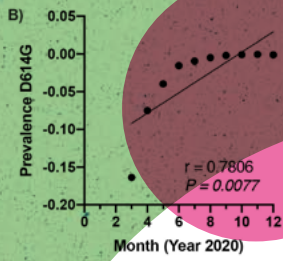
There is no doubt that the knock-on effects of climate change have direct consequences for regional security, as Aning concludes:

‘Underlying all these points about climate change is the capacity of state security agencies to respond to and prevent seemingly unrelated crises from spreading and growing. National security frameworks have not yet properly assessed how vulnerable populations will respond to these changing conditions, especially if there are external stimuli. People are tense, insecure about their livelihoods. The coming years will see massive shifts of people – herders and pastoralists among others – seeking fertile land for farming and grazing purposes. This will lead to more tension and unplanned urban spaces because surviving in the rural areas becomes increasingly difficult. This will make law enforcement increasingly difficult’.

' We are seeing a climate change-driven narrative of victimhood, exclusion, and dispossession'.



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# DEMOGRAPHICS AND URBANISATION

While there might be positive spin-offs of demographic growth for the economy, one independent variable must be factored into the argument: the quality of political leadership. The positive effects of West Africa's demographic growth must be captured and transformed if they are to boost the economy, create jobs and educational opportunities – and in the longer run transform urban and rural spaces

Kwesi Aning

In 1950, five million people lived in Ghana – in 2020 the number was 33 million. The same development is seen across all of West Africa; in total, the population in West Africa has grown by 400% during this period. At the same time, there is a considerable influx of mostly young people into urban spaces in search of opportunities (Sommers 2010). These two demographic shifts pose a security challenge to the region that, according to Aning, is yet to be addressed by those in power (Goldstone 2002; Marc et al. 2015: 61).

**The figures below demonstrate the demographic challenge that West Africa faces.**

| Year | Population  | Density (km <sup>2</sup> ) | Growth rate |
|------|-------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| 1960 | 84,941,697  | 13.83                      | 1.96%       |
| 2000 | 234,742,573 | 38.22                      | 2.68%       |
| 2020 | 401,855,177 | 65.43                      | 2.70%       |
| 2060 | 948,920,920 | 154.51                     | 1.70%       |

Source: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/western-africa-population>



Whether population growth is a positive or negative development can be discussed. Aning notes:

'In southern Africa, several institutions and scholars take a more positive stance towards population growth than I do. The Brenthurst Foundation and Greg Mills, for example, see the increase of a vibrant, youthful, and entrepreneurial population as a positive development. They argue that sub-Saharan Africa faces three big, interrelated challenges over the next generation. It will double its population to two billion by 2045. By then more than half of Africans will be living in cities. And this group of mostly young people will be connected with each other and the world through mobile devices. Properly harnessed and planned for, this is a tremendously positive force for change, they say. However, my fear is that without economic growth and jobs this could prove a political and social catastrophe. As much as there might be something to the potentially positive spin-offs of demographic growth, one variable must necessarily be factored into the argument: the quality and diversity of political leadership and its ability to capture and transform demographic growth to boost the economy and create jobs'.

### **Pressures on urban space**

While demographic growth puts pressure on states that already struggle to deliver public services, this pressure is further compounded by the size, density, and inequality that characterise cities. One of the consequences, Aning explains, is the loss of encompassing markers of identity:

'The demographic growth is directly related to the stresses and expansion of African urban spaces. We see people as young as 10–11 years of age heading towards the large cities of Accra, Lagos, Dakar, Kinshasa and Abuja. These large groups of people are creating new settlements where traditional conceptions of ethnic identity do not matter. In these large urban spaces, people have been born and socialised who do not know which ethnic group they belong to; they don't know where they are from and only have a peripheral idea of who they are'.

In this regard the discussion of demographic growth is about considerably more than numbers.

'We are talking about identities, and what the next generation will look like, how they will think, and the kinds of societies they are going to create. When you have a critical mass of people with no particular identity, the bonds that bind communities together also do not exist. Try for a split second to imagine a situation where the concept of national loyalty, regional loyalty, community loyalty – all these interwoven, intersectional loyalties – do not exist. What it means is that societies' capacity to create boundaries and norms gradually becomes undermined and eventually destroyed. Without these more or less informal frameworks that normally regulate conflicts and violence I foresee more challenges for law enforcement'.

One consequence, according to Aning, is the monetisation of violence:

'Already, there are terminologies and descriptions characterising these huge groups of people with no particular identity who you can rent or hire to do anything: the Raray boys and girls in Sierra Leone, the Jaguda boys and girls in Nigeria and the 32 or so vigilante groups in Ghana with their flamboyant names: Pentagon, Al Qaeda, Al Jazeera and NATO Forces. When you have these big shifting populations, who owe little or no allegiance to anybody – and these numbers are growing beyond those who can be identified as part of a group – the potential for violence, and how to control it, becomes a pressing issue'.

With demographic growth, the pressures on urban spaces multiply and intensify beyond questions of identity and increasing violence. Indeed, there is a wide range of ways, Aning suggests, in which the rapidly expanding contours of West African cities pose a challenge. Levels of environmental degradation are growing, in part because of the stress placed on limited public infrastructure by population growth. Another challenge relates to the unplanned nature of urban spread. Haphazard, limited potable water, electricity theft, limited health facilities, no educational institutions. Aning even suggests that:

'...these types of urban spaces often have their own version of justice: quick, violent, unforgiving and with little chance for suspects to explain themselves. Across Africa, there is an underbelly of millions of people who are not recognised, who lack identity documents, whose lives do not intersect with the rest of the population, who are documented, and employed. They leave these unplanned spaces, come and work in our homes, drive our cars – we don't know where they live, because we don't visit them. Occasionally, in these

cities, this teeming population gets frustrated, and they riot. It's spontaneous, uncontrollable, and it shows us the depth of the frustrations of anger, of pain and exclusion that a very large segment of the population experiences'.

Politicians and policymakers see these developments, not in consonance with population growth, but as isolated, yet increasing, instances of lawlessness. However, this is not the case according to Aning:

'I link it directly to the population explosion, and the end result is that when teeming populations are pushed into limited spaces and left on their own, they create their own laws, unwritten rules, to govern this space. Identity, and relating to a fixed place where you come from, generates forms of boundaries and a sense of containment and norms that can determine and regulate one's behaviour. But in these unregulated urban spaces there are no checks and balances apart from the rules they have made for themselves'.

### **The politics of demography**

The threat to stability that demographics represents to West Africa is undeniable. On the one hand, it is unmanageable because public services do not expand and transform accordingly. On the other hand, it is politicised and instrumentalised to serve narrow ends, says Aning:

'There is an unwillingness, but also an unease about discussing, understanding, and responding to demographics and urbanisation, and the relationship between the two. Until recently, there was no conversation about the increase in population and how it might impact on urban landscapes, public health, housing, jobs and, underlying all of this, the provision of law enforcement and security. Demographics, specifically, of Sahel–Sahara and West Africa, are not something that is on the official agenda. I doubt that ECOWAS has discussed it, and equally, if we look at political party manifestos, I doubt that urban space management is in there'.

However, even though population growth is not managed, it remains both deeply political and sensitive – and has been for more than 50 years:

'In 1970, Ghana had a prime minister, Kofi Busia, who thought, even in 1970 when the population was just six million, that there should be family planning. He established a department for rural development, which partially sought to use development interventions, health, education and low-cost housing, as part of the interventions to raise standards of living, but with the ultimate aim of reducing and controlling growth of the population. This intervention brought severe opposition from ordinary people; songs were written against the PM, his wife was attacked – his wife's family was ostracised. His political opponents turned his family policy against him – insinuating that he had gotten his children, and he did not want others to have any. In the Ghana case, that was the end of any concerted effort to consistently talk about controlling growth of the population'.

Another example is Nigeria, and the northern part of the coastal states, where polio is still a problem. Here, the introduction of polio vaccination schemes was presented as a Western strategy to prevent women from having children, says Aning:

'Islamic clerics preached against women getting the vaccines. In sum, talking about demographics in all its forms is extremely sensitive, and potentially dangerous, because people misconstrue the intentions of that discussion. The real challenge that we have now is how to create the balance between the numbers and be able to manage them in such a manner that they do not become an inverse security threat to the region. We need to have those discussions, while recognising the ethical issues involved'.

Indeed, Aning concludes, the bottom line should be the region's ability to survive as a collective.

Because of the extreme sensitivity of the issue, politicians are not showing concern about these sprawling, heavily populated, unregulated spaces – but they serve two key political purposes:

'One is that most politicians see the constituencies in unplanned urban spaces for the value they bring in terms of numbers. They will be needed – to register and vote, and precisely because of the disorder in these areas, underage children manage to register and get voter ID cards. The second critical aspect relates to their easy mobilisation for political action, and here I am talking about political violence. Because of the high levels of unemployment and the

limited education, it is easy to mobilise, recruit, and send them out to perform political action. I am not just talking about the more organised forms of political vigilantism, but also about very small groups: two–three people hired to perform threatening or violent acts. This may include tearing down or destroying an opposition member's billboard or campaign poster, trying to disrupt rallies or physically assaulting and threatening people'.

The increasing role of violence in politics in West Africa is widespread and according to Aning there is a need to understand and appreciate the various manifestations of political violence in the region and consider the main explanatory factors for their occurrence and escalation.

'Where I teach, my classes at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), I once had a student, a deputy minister. We spoke about these groups in Teshie in Accra. Stocky young men, unemployed, are ready to sell their masculinity to whoever can pay. This deputy minister raised his hand and said: "you don't understand – when I walk the street, these men will protect me, because we cannot trust the police. All my opponents are doing the same thing". In other words, during the political season this is an opportunity for people to earn an income and be seen as important'.

At the same time, there is something to be gained from providing security for someone who comes to power, Aning suggests:

"I will invest in your strength, and if you are lucky to win, you will give me a little contract to clean the street, provide guarding services or undertake any activity that will give me a livelihood". This is the politics of survival – and not just in Ghana. Youth activism that manifests in their engagement in the politics of survival and violence is well known in Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal'.

Demographic expansion, including how it changes and transforms urban spaces in West Africa, is a considerable challenge – and inevitable. As the number of people grows, the region's governments must also provide public services and opportunities. Indeed, wars in the region have started due to a sense of exclusion among the youth, and young men especially. In other words, demographic growth is not by default a positive development, but potentially a considerable and destabilising force.



' Identity, and relating to a fixed place where you come from, generates forms of boundaries and a sense of containment and norms that can determine and regulate one's behaviour. But in these unregulated urban spaces there are no checks and balances apart from the rules they have made for themselves'.



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# ARMED ROBBERY AT SEA AND PIRACY

Armed robbery at sea and piracy actually reflect problems on land and not problems at sea

Kwesi Aning

For the last decade and a half, there have been considerable domestic and international concerns about armed robbery and growing piracy off the West African coast (Denton & Harris 2019). Among shipping companies, there is a perceived deteriorating security situation in the Gulf of Guinea, with a sharp increase in the number of attacks on ships, currently accounting for around 90% of maritime kidnappings worldwide (Okafor-Yarwood 2020). Previously, attacks were mainly motivated by the intention to steal cargo. However, Kwesi Aning notes, the conversation reflects our unwillingness to look long-term at some of the structural causes, and some of the historical drivers leading to what we are seeing today:

‘If we go back 30–40 years, armed robbery at sea was equated with young people, poorly educated, unemployed, and often desperate to travel to Europe in the hope of a better life. This was linked with another development, where piracy was seen by the public as a sign of boldness and daring – to try to steal goods from ships when they were laid at anchor or much further out at sea, loot goods, and bring them to shore and sell them. Those who engaged in such activities were never reported to the police – and I am explicitly talking about 30–40 years ago here. So, in places like Dakar, Freetown, Lagos and Accra, there has always been a degree of societal acceptance of such activities’.

Whether we talk about armed robbery at sea, occurring within the 12-kilometre economic zone or piracy that occurs further out at sea – it is just the escalation of something that has been going on for a long time, says Aning:

‘Local communities have found these activities acceptable because they offered them goods at affordable prices. Therefore, we need to look at the social underpinnings that support armed robbery at sea and piracy. And let me make this point very clear: armed robbery at sea and piracy actually reflect problems on land and not problems at sea. This makes it important to digress a little bit into how some of the structural factors on land have contributed to the challenges that we are experiencing at sea. Just as is the case with the illicit, small-scale mining that is destroying the environment, people do not want to tackle the root causes. It is the same bureaucracy that I see when we talk about piracy and armed robbery at sea. Navies ask for shiny new vessels, new communications gadgets, but they know themselves that the problem lies in the corruption on land, and theft of public funds that ought to be used to create opportunities for the youth. The navy itself, as an institution, cannot criticise their commander-in-chief’.

Aning highlights three ways in which crime on land and at sea are connected: the first relates to oil, the second to issues of corruption in law enforcement mechanisms, and the third to fishing.

### **Petro-piracy**

‘Piracy and armed robbery at sea will get considerably worse before it gets better. In the Gulf of Guinea, we are looking at 6,000 kilometres of coastline, involving 22 sovereign countries that are proud and protective of their sense of sovereignty. The Nigerians will never allow armed foreign vessels in their territorial space. That makes our capacity, or the international community’s capacity, to respond to piracy much more difficult. Every time we celebrate that more oil has been found, that Gulf of Guinea countries are going to pump more oil and gas, they do not deal effectively with how to protect the production. By extension, oilfields have become a very stable source of income for pirates and for armed robbers. What we are beginning to see across the west coast – or more accurately from Senegal to Angola – is the concept of petro-piracy, the deliberate attacking of oil tankers.

We are seeing oil tankers being attacked, the oil is stolen, brought ashore and refined, however crudely, in makeshift refineries. There is a willing and expanding market on land for those resources that are sold at a slightly lesser price than the final oil product. Moreover, there is a cyclical pattern to this: when the oil is brought on shore it is refined. The process leads to leakages, environmental degradation, farmlands are destroyed, people get hungry, they get poorer, and they decide to join the process of stealing more crude oil'.

It is commonly – and logically – assumed that maritime insecurity should be dealt with at sea. However, there is the need for a wider, more critical analytical lens to capture the networks that support armed robbery at sea and piracy – from bankers and lawyers to warehouse facilities and transportation providers all play a role, as does the political elite.

### **Corruption as the protective veneer**

A key driver of piracy is the political and law enforcement elites that provide a protective infrastructure, allowing business to thrive, says Aning:

'While we may think about these people as poorly educated and probably heavily armed, we rarely make the connection to the politicians, securocrats or the people who sit in the boardrooms, who provide the protection for these criminal groups, and provide intelligence about where a military operation might take place. People within the industry itself are actually the ones who provide some of this information. In the port city of Tema near Accra, there is a growing piracy stock exchange, where you can invest in those who go out to sea to steal and loot, and then you get a share in the profit. This is a booming business and part of the boom relates to the supportive structures from politicians and securocrats to the industry personnel who provide information. Levels of collusion, corruption and poor law enforcement all combine in very disturbing ways to allow this business to continue'.

Although there is a lot of attention on piracy and armed robbery at sea, in all the Gulf of Guinea countries, except for Côte d'Ivoire, none have specific regulations related to piracy and armed robbery at sea. Aning notes:

'In both Nigeria and Ghana, the criminal code is applied in dealing with these issues. Technically, this means that a very smart lawyer will always be able to get a pirate off the hook, and this is reflected in the fact that although since 2000, and until 2019, close to 900 cases of piracy occurred, probably fewer than five or ten pirates have been put in prison. In other words, the judicial sector itself is incapable of using existing legislation to punish these people'.

### **From fishing to piracy**

Another important aspect to consider relates to the fishing industry, where industrial vessels are destroying the livelihoods of local fishing communities, forcing them to look elsewhere for ways to make a living:

'What we have seen in the last couple of decades is an exponential rise of industrial vessels plying the Gulf of Guinea coast; China alone has more than 30 of them. These are huge ships, basically scraping the bottom of the sea and making it almost impossible for artisanal fishermen to make a living. From Senegal all the way to Cameroon, the number of boats and canoes used for artisanal fishing has dropped by between 50-60%. When people's livelihoods have been destroyed, they need to look for alternatives and that leads to other activities, including crimes at sea. In Senegal for example, boats that were meant for fishing are now being used to transport human beings to the Canary Islands'.

Another element of the negative impact of fishing opportunities is what we call the saiko business across the Gulf of Guinea. Saiko is the process where industrial vessels use the wrong nets and catch fish that ought not to have been caught, because of their size. Instead of throwing them back into the sea, they are frozen into 30-40 kilo blocks and then sold off.

'From Senegal to Angola, fishermen who cannot fish are increasingly becoming involved in saiko fishing. The Chinese vessels will call their contacts on land, who send their canoes out to go pick up these blocks of fish from the Chinese'.

In this case corruption also plays a role, says Aning:

'The fact that these vessels are operating in this way is also related to the corruption that underpins fishing license regimes. These vessels cannot work in the territorial waters of the Gulf of Guinea countries if they are not issued with fishing licenses. What we know is that these fishing licenses are routinely given to people who front for the Chinese companies. We have seen this in Mauritania, Senegal, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon: locals will register a company and get a fishing license, which they then sell or subcontract to a Chinese company'.

This is not a question of condemning Chinese business practices alone, as efforts to circumvent formal state institutions and regulation have a long history in West Africa. Nevertheless, the dynamic described speaks to the depletion of a resource that is vital to local communities along the West African coast.

When asked about the future, Aning predicts more violence on land and more attacks at sea because people are coming under increasing pressure:

'If the population is growing exponentially, and the reduction in fishing is more than 50% in a country, this obviously accentuates unemployment and poverty, and heightens people's aspirations to look for alternative sources of livelihood. And with hundreds of ships lined up out in the sea, 3–4 kilometres from port, armed robbery becomes a very attractive option, and even more so because of heightened levels of corruption, a law enforcement team or security team that is not professionally competent and a judicial service that does not have the tools and the implements to work'.

Underlying these reflections is a simple message to the international community's focus on piracy:

'If you accept that what is happening out there is a reflection of the insecurities and bad governance on land, then simply trying to solve the problem at sea is not a solution. In fact, it is becoming more attractive to continue investing in the piracy stock exchange in Tema and other coastal cities dotted along the Gulf of Guinea, which means that people's capacity to engage in these criminal acts has become more effective. Last year, a piracy group in Nigeria managed

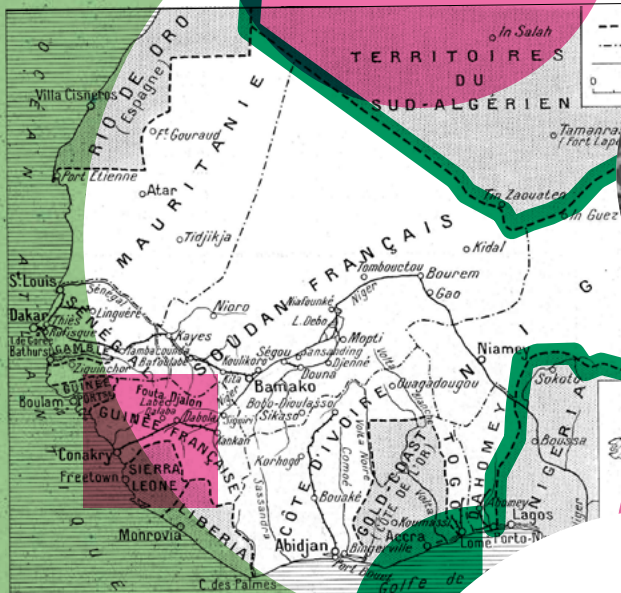


to successfully attack a vessel around 40 kilometres out at sea, with well-armed, fast boats. That sends a positive signal to all these criminal gangs. The international community and shipping companies spend close to a billion dollars per year trying to protect their ships, keep their lanes clear, and engage the states along the coast in terms of information-sharing, capacity-building and training. But if you train the navy alone, you do not deal with the Chinese who are overfishing and making people's livelihoods insecure'.<sup>3</sup>

' Because security is so tightly controlled from the centre, and because of the history of how security and intelligence have been used by the centre, there is a tense, suspicious, fraught relationship between those who provide security and intelligence on one hand and those who ought to be the recipients of such services on the other'.



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# SECURITY

There are fairly standard understandings of what the word security means, but it is in its application to improve and protect lives that the distortion appears. And it is that lacuna between what state institutions and its representatives perceive as security or insecurity and how they deliver or respond to it that often leads to misunderstanding and a sense of tension that, if not managed well, creates confrontations

Kwesi Aning

Like 'organised crime' and 'illicit mining' already discussed in this report, the notion of 'security' is a historically embedded concept that transcends different meanings and emphases depending on the position from which it is seen (Stritzel & Vuori 2016). By extension, this has implications for how security as a profession is practiced. Security thus becomes a very loaded word, Aning notes, and to understand its loaded nature, it is important to consider the discrepancy between 'how security is understood in the lived experiences of ordinary people, and how it is practiced by professional security personnel'.

## **Between securocrats and the population: what does security mean?**

'Several years ago, as part of our research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, we asked ordinary people about what security meant to them. The answer we got was to be able to go to the farm and come back, having a sense that if there were any difficulties, someone somewhere would come to their aid. Then we asked those who were empowered to provide security – the police mainly – how do you understand your role as provider of security? And they gave us a long list of what they had to do in their

work in terms of logistics, a long list of new rules and regulations needed, and a list about their working conditions. These two interpretations – from the public and the police – were almost opposite. In their actual practice and discourse, security professionals hardly mention the human beings that they should be protecting. Not only that: to the practitioners, security has come to represent a weapon of intimidation’.

As these interviews allude, there is a pronounced subjectivity to what is perceived as an issue relating to security. This creates dangerous misunderstandings that lead to excessively violent state security responses – legitimate agitation is responded to as a threat to national security:

‘In countries that experience political or democratic transitions, and where institutions are neither independent nor strong, the decision on what is a security threat is not usually subjected to the technical evaluation and analysis that you would expect. In Mali, after Gaddafi’s fall in Libya, tens of thousands of Tuaregs moved into the Sahel and Mali, and the inability of the state security apparatus to understand their frustrations caused the mayhem that we now see. The point is that blaming the Tuaregs for the Malian debacle does not recognise the complexities of the Malian crisis that have to do with how the state has responded. In Burkina Faso, the inability of security operatives to recognise legitimate agitations for water, food and protection has resulted in gross human rights abuses. It has contributed to the escalation of the conflict that has now seeped into communities, turned inter-religious and created a humanitarian crisis. Similar security mismanagement of a technical issue around citizenship took place in Côte d’Ivoire in the early 2000s, resulting in a decade-and-a-half of war, and a heightened ethnic identity crisis. Finally, a small secessionist group formed in Ghana in 2020 has just started to use violence against the government and it has been dismissed by securocrats as anarchists, rebels and criminals’.

These examples of security situations and state responses buttress the argument that there is a need for a much more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the insecurities that people feel. In all these examples, Aning argues:

‘State interpretations of the agitations by segments of their populations were misunderstood, misconstrued, and have resulted in even more insecure contexts’.

### **Internal colonisation: take power and concentrate it at the centre**

Part of this inability to provide security in a manner that responds to ordinary people's expectations is emblematic of an earlier historical period. An overlooked issue when we discuss security and interventions is that in the 1940s and 1950s, a movement of so-called internal colonialism and violent intervention started on the continent:

'The colonial struggle was a struggle for internal domination amongst the different groups – cutting across ethnic and class cleavages – and this internal colonialism or interventionist approach was as violent and destructive as external colonial practices. Security forces and operatives were almost given carte blanche authority to brutalise the population.

More often than not, internal colonial strategies of the newly independent states were presented as strategies of integration, meaning that the different groups of people with diverse ethnicities, needed to become one functional, coherent group. It did not always take place through military means, but different groups were forced to adhere to new policies, new rules that they found equally as alien as when external colonialism took place', Aning says.

In other words, the understanding of the state and its institutions and of what, who and how they should serve, is the product of a long history of suspicion and antagonism. This history is first and foremost based on having inherited the structures, approaches, processes and mechanisms of colonial security policy, which have been translated into and taken forward by the postcolonial state (Chatterjee 2004). Security in the postcolonial state was motivated by protecting those in power and not the populations that inhabited it, says Aning:

'The provision of security is understood as a matter of "us" and "them". You either follow the policies, the ideals, the instructions from the centre or you are characterised and perceived as someone whose actions and words contribute to insecurity. That has empowered the state to use any form of extraordinary measure of violence to respond to instances of popular criticism or uprising. Because security is seen in this very narrow sense – as a matter of taking and concentrating power at the centre – it will never be broadened out to incorporate environmental, societal, political or economic security. States in West Africa and the Sahel will only expand their conception of security – even when we talk about the environment – when it concentrates power right at the



heart of government. So, government attempts, across the West African zone, to respond to environmental security for example, are militarised, first and foremost targeting those who have raised their voices about environmental degradation in their communities, especially when such concerns are related to the extraction of mineral resources.

In Nigeria, the billion-dollar oil and gas industry has, over time, undermined local communities, culminating in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, a Nigerian writer and activist who spoke out forcefully against the Nigerian military rule of Sani Abacha and the Anglo–Dutch petroleum company Royal Dutch/Shell for causing environmental damage to the land of the Ogoni people in his native Rivers State’.

In other words, according to Aning, even when the state has a chance to provide security in a manner that ordinary people will find beneficial, representatives of the state will still try to practice it in a way that is perceived to be beneficial to the centre. One example of where excessive security measures are applied by the state is that of illegal, small-scale mining that is creating environmental insecurity and leading to public outcry in countries such as Ghana, Liberia, Burkina Faso and Niger (e.g. Aryee et al. 2003).

‘This is a fairly routine challenge that governments are facing’, Aning explains. ‘In Ghana, the government has militarised the response by establishing a joint military–police operation called Operation Vanguard. The aim is not a clean environment, but to control illegal mining activities. However, there is increasing resistance by the miners to armed police officers and soldiers. Furthermore, personnel that have been sent on internal operations to control the exploitation of resources have themselves become corrupt and now the public sees the direct engagement of security personnel in illegal mining.

The authorising institutions, the Ghanaian ministries of defence and the interior, have responded to this failure of military–police involvement by withdrawing the military from the joint operation, leaving the police to continue on its own. Why did the government and armed forces perceive environmental insecurity as a problem or as a threat? What did they try to achieve with Operation Vanguard? And why the sudden decision to pull out the army? These questions remain unanswered’.

It is not only in the provision of formal and informal security vis-à-vis extractive industries that needs to be interrogated. According to Aning, the core debate should be about how the choices and decisions on what are perceived as threats are arrived at.

### **The personalisation and politicisation of security**

People feel insecure because they find that those who are mandated to provide security are either failing to do so or creating a sense of mistrust between the population and the security providers:

'The individual must more often than not expect that his or her perception is subsidiary to the understanding of the state and its agents. Because security is so tightly controlled from the centre, and because of the history of how security and intelligence have been used by the centre, there is a tense, suspicious, fraught relationship between those who provide security and intelligence on one hand and those who ought to be the recipients of such services on the other. In all the countries in West Africa, the concept of the "national security operative" designates an individual who works for one of the security agencies, and often ends up being given inordinate powers to intimidate, abuse the rights of people, and in some cases extort money'.

Moreover, there is a politicised dimension of security that fundamentally shapes the professionalism of security provision, says Aning:

'Because of the way that politics plays out in West Africa, there is intense mistrust and suspicion between political parties when they are in opposition, and state security agencies. The day they come to power, politicians and the political class infiltrate security agencies with their own political allies. This undermines the professionalism and esprit de corps as well as institutional cohesiveness. What it means in practice is that such politically recruited individuals are not subjected to the routine administrative rules of the security agencies. So, when an individual is critical of government policies, this might not be formally illegal, but it is embarrassing to the government. Therefore, while the government might not be able to act against this individual, politically recruited security operatives can be sent to undertake such operations, because they are taking instructions outside the formal structure of command and control'.

An important dimension of how politicised security works relates to the weakness of – and inexperience with – oversight, says Aning:

‘Public involvement and engagement in how security is and should be provided is very new in West Africa. We have only been talking about this for the last 20 years, so the inbuilt control mechanisms are still weak. Moreover, the deliberate quandary in what security is, how it can and should be provided for communities, and who can and ought to discuss security is part of the history of West Africa and the Sahel. Until 20 years ago, around the year 2000, nobody spoke about security in public discourse. Security as a subject was not taught in West African universities. If you mentioned “security”, it was tantamount to plotting a coup d’état, so there is a lacuna between the oral discussion and understanding of the technical content, and how to design security policy to manage security forces, design doctrine, allocate resources, understand and respond to public needs and play an oversight role. These are extremely opaque technical subjects for the civilian elite, and the result is very dangerous when politicians attain power, and retired military personnel who are members of the party, are given senior positions. A couple of examples. In Nigeria, the former national security advisor under president Goodluck Jonathan, a captain in the armed forces, Sambo Dasuki, was found to be hoarding money in several places around Nigeria to the sum of close to a quarter of a billion dollars. The same lack of appropriate oversight occurs in the Gambia and Senegal. In Mali, a long-retired colonel is now the civilian president.

When it comes to security, anyone who is seen to be acting in a brutal manner and instils fear has a high probability of being made either an interior or defence minister. A position that should, rather, be filled by a person who generates trust, a sense of openness, a sophistication to smoothen the rough edges of civil–military relations. But, in this sense, we are failing’.

At the same time, there are also changes across the sub-region, that give cause for optimism, concludes Aning:

'The old history of excessive, opaque behaviour is beginning to give way. This first relates to the civilian infiltration of the military institutions and provision of oversight. But more importantly, in all the security agencies, you cannot be a senior officer without a university degree. You cannot hold command positions without one. Whilst traditionally, in the early 50s and 60s until the late 1970s, going into the uniformed services was perceived to be for people who could not make it in civilian life, in the last 40 years or so security institutions across the sub-region have deliberately sought to recruit better-educated people, and created opportunities for advanced education. This is bringing a shift, albeit very gradually, to how security is communicated, to how the institutions seek to project themselves, and how security must be provided'.

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# INTERVENTIONS

‘The interventions that we have seen in the post-independence period can very simply be defined as an extra-African power or force coming to the continent, invited or uninvited – and here I choose my words carefully – to attempt to resolve a problem. Yet, there are unstated, unspoken interests from the intervening force ,

Kwesi Aning

Few regions of the world have experienced more continued external interventions, militarily and otherwise, than West Africa. Apart from development aid that represents a significant share of government budgets in the region, comprehensive peacekeeping missions have intervened in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. According to Aning it is necessary to discuss interventions in West Africa for three reasons. First, because the capacity of West African states to protect themselves and to intervene in other West African states has reduced in the last 30 years. Second, because we need to understand the geopolitical shifts that have changed the rationalities for intervention in West Africa. And third, because we need to start thinking more carefully about what types of intervention are needed in West Africa from 2021 onwards.

## **Can West Africa protect itself?**

According to Aning, West Africa’s political and security situation is getting worse:

‘West Africa today is probably more unstable, and potentially more violent, with armed forces and security institutions that have been hollowed out over time, because politics has divested security personnel of their core mandate



of keeping people safe. This is not just about demographics, but about the failure of governance processes that we see in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Leaders in West Africa and the Sahel need to consider how to respond to what I perceive to be the potential social conflagration that could hit West Africa. That is one part of the intervention that we need to be looking at, one which will undermine our self-conception as it will question how we have used the independence period and pose the question of why we still cannot protect ourselves'.

Another question relates to how external actors use the intervention narrative for their own self-interest.

'Here I want to focus on France, and the behaviour of France, especially in Mali. From 2013 until now, France has introduced several intervention groups such as Serval and Barkhane. Those forces are not under UN control, and raise fundamental questions about what the ultimate aim of France is, over and above what the UN's stabilisation forces are trying to achieve in Mali. Those suspicions and questions around such interventions raise concerns and anger from the domestic populations, and unsurprisingly, we have seen demonstrations against France's operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger'.

In the 1960s to 1980s, interventions were interpreted not as interventions on their own terms, but through the lens of bipolarity between East and West. But the underlying rationale then, as now, is the same, according to Aning: to use the narrative of altruistic intervention to mask exploitation and looting.

'The narrative of the interventionist rationale changes, but the underlying national interests that drive the willingness to risk lives has not. Between the 1960s and late 1980s and up until today for those of us who are victims of the interventions nothing has really changed'.

That these interventions led to public protests and suspicion directed towards the intervening nations is understandable, says Aning:

'Up until around 1992, until the second democratic wave in Africa, most of the interventions were on behalf of nasty dictators, like Mobutu, or Nguema, asking for foreign help because their citizens had risen up and requested democratic rights. During this phase, there was rising disappointment with the end result of the independence movement, which led increasingly to public

agitations for change and then for a much more inclusive political space. Therein lie some of the challenges of the mistrust that is now prevalent with respect to the United States, France, and Britain. These states intervened on behalf of the dictators who were interested in repressing domestic agitation for more inclusive politics’.

The post-1992 phase did not see interventions that were qualitatively different, but intervening required many more arguments, and different ones to those that could be generated during the bipolar world. Aning says:

‘More often than not, we saw the request for external forces, because people had taken up arms against the central authority, and this goes back to the fact that African governments, post-independence, had not invested in public institutions, and therefore the states were incapable of protecting themselves when the time came, as it were. First, the narrative was: “oh, there is a group of ethnic people who have come together, and they want to challenge the central state”. That has now changed to: “oh, there is a group of violent extremists”’.

As during the Cold War, two things continue to determine the likeliness of an intervention, says Aning:

‘One is the extent to which the recipient state of the intervening force is willing and prepared to allow itself to be pushed around. The second relates to whether the intervening state has an economic and strategic interest. And in cases where those two interests are limited, the appetite for intervention is low.

When Mali collapsed in 2012 and the French government intervened on behalf of the Malian government with Operation Serval in 2013, French president François Hollande boldly told all that the terrorists had been driven out of Mali. Now, he did not say that the terrorists had been killed. He said they had been driven out of Mali, which meant that one little problem had now been dispersed across the sub-region. But of course, in terms of French interests, France succeeded in expelling them out of the portion of Mali that they were interested in for economic and geostrategic reasons – namely its exploitation of the gold and uranium mines in the region. Since then, there has been an increasing terrorist threat across the West African sub-region’.

But what is the alternative to external forces? Aning says that as long as African countries act only according to narrow national interests there is none:

‘The intervention in Liberia in 1990 made ECOWAS and its integration of West Africa a liveable, tangible political project. However, since 1990, or probably since the middle of the 1990s when Liberia was stabilised and a comprehensive peace agreement signed, West Africa has not been able to mount any intervention force again. And the question is why? The answer is lack of appropriately sophisticated political leadership. When Côte d’Ivoire collapsed, and there was a discussion about the need to bring forces to intervene, Ghana was adamant that Ghana only intervenes when its self-interests are at stake’.

Therefore, interventions from outside the region will continue, Aning predicts.

‘From the 1950s and early 60s, when African states actively intervened in other African conflicts, to the successful ECOWAS intervention in Liberia in 1990, to what we are seeing in 2020, there has been an unsatisfactory shift. From engaging, when European countries and the UN failed to intervene themselves, there is now always an expectation that France, the EU or the UK will intervene. That does not help the African integration project. An activist interventionist policy by African states themselves, or West African states, would have gone a long way towards helping with the AU integration schemes, but unfortunately, this has not happened. I am not arguing that there is a need for interventions from outside; I am arguing that the failure of the state, the post-independent state, to change the manner in which it has built its institutions has meant that the West African state’s capacity to protect itself is limited’.

### **The link between colonialism and intervention**

According to Aning, present-day interventions can be seen as a business with a direct line to the colonial empires that centred on exploiting the territories they controlled:

‘There are two aspects to colonialism. On the one hand, we need to see the colonial project as a globalising project in terms of language, identity and sense of belonging. On the other hand, it was also an interventionist project that sought not to build states, but to open markets, basically to do business. The stabilising projects of France and the UK today are still meant to create an

enabling environment for business and for businesses to move in. So, in my analysis, colonialism as an aggressive intervention that creates stable environments for business extraction is not different from what is happening today'.

If you look at colonialism as a globalising interventionist endeavour, there has been a strong ideational dimension to it, aiming to change the people under the colonisers' control to think and act in a manner that made it easier to control them. Aning says:

'Along these lines, we see the French policy of assimilation as a deliberate process that sought to turn black Africans into black Africans with white minds. While France had a policy of assimilation, the British were driven by much more econometric thinking, and invested much less in education, for instance – but the aim was the same: “how do we ensure that people in the colonial territories begin to think and behave, mimic and imitate the ways that the colonial masters behave?”. To this end, Nigerians talk about “black people with white minds”, and those people are still there, they prioritise performing and masquerading to please the metropole much more than their own citizens. Both the French policy of assimilation and the British policy of indirect rule had the same result in mind: for their previously colonised elites to see the metropole as the most attractive, more developed and richer place. So, when Bamako began to fall, the first call was not to the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, but to Paris'.

### **The future of interventions**

Interventions have shaped West Africa in different ways and according to Aning, the colonial legacy means that 60 years after independence the former metropole is still the place to turn to, but how will future interventions be received by the growing population?

'The message is very simple: the metropole is still important and in times of need, we will go there. And when, as metropolises, you continue to send intervening forces, then we will walk across the desert and come to you, because you are the ones who can solve our problems. In addition, the willingness of the metropole to intervene every time it is invited means that the West African governments do not have an interest in equipping their own domestic forces.

When we talk about the future of interventions in West Africa, we should focus on the next three years, because developments are currently taking place at a fast pace. There are forces beginning to move and shift in ways that make it very difficult to predict long term. What I can foresee for the next two to three years is that government failure to respond to the demands and the sense of exclusion and anger of the youth will lead to more instability. I am not sure how this incensed, organised youth will take an external intervention. However, if that intervention is presented as coming to protect the government that also brutalised them, then the interveners will be seen as enemies'.



' If people live in a state that is unable to generate welfare goods, and feel left out of the spinoffs of economic growth from which only a narrow elite has benefitted – where do they turn to for alternatives for their survival?'



## CONCLUSION

The point of departure for writing this report has been to discuss a number of the security challenges that West Africa faces today with a key expert from the region, Kwesi Aning. This has been done by exploring the nature of West African states, security, and interventions as well as by honing in on specific issues that are often emphasized when the region is being discussed, including organised crime, illegal mining, climate change, demographics and urbanisation, and armed robbery at sea and piracy. Doing so is important, not just from a general educational perspective, but also for policymakers within and outside West Africa. For European policymakers, specifically, this is particularly acute given the proximity of West Africa to Europe, and the trafficking in drugs, people, vehicles and arms from the former to the latter. One modest step closer to dealing more robustly with these phenomena is to better understand why they take place, how they take place, and whose interests they serve. Certainly, as discussions with Kwesi Aning progressed, it quickly became clear that the report would become a challenge of how West Africa is analysed, and the concepts that are often used to do so. In other words, how we discuss the region's security questions not only shapes how it is understood, but also how it is acted upon.

The underlying narrative of the report is how the region today struggles with the ideational and structural legacy of the colonial era. Against that backdrop, institutions and governments of postcolonial states have found it inherently difficult to fully embrace and live up to the expectations of large segments of the West African populations that see themselves as marginalised with respect to accessing resources and opportunities. In turn, alternative means of living that people seek out are often criminalised. On the one hand, organised crime and illegal mining pose a challenge to state authority and the state's ability to accumulate resources to invest

in the provision of public services. On the other hand, what we define as illegal or failing can as well be turned upside down and seen in a different, more pragmatic light: as people's strategies to make a living. Questions of illegal mining, organised crime, robbery at sea and piracy are to a large extent precisely that. However, even as the colonial relationship of exploitation that West Africa emerged from after World War II is acknowledged, the region's postcolonial leaders cannot be exempted from responsibility, according to Aning. Throughout the conversations with Aning it was clear that the states of West Africa, and the people who represent the state, can and should be challenged on their ability to provide public services for their populations.

Aning's ability to capture the tensions between people's lived experience, the inability of current governments to provide public services, and often destructive interventions from within and outside the region, is a critique of both the state of the West African state and of attempts by foreign governments to fundamentally transform its security dynamics. It is in this light that the report should be read. It is also an invitation to start rethinking, in novel ways, what engagement between governments and populations inside and outside West Africa should look like in the future.

#### NOTES

- 1 It is projected that about 85% of small-scale miners in Ghana operate on an illegal basis. By 2017, a conservative figure of 200,000 Ghanaians – indirectly supporting up to three million people – were believed to make their living from artisanal, small-scale mining (Abdulai 2017).
- 2 According to Oli Brown and Janani Vivekananda (2019) in the Guardian 'the prevailing narrative about Lake Chad is that it has been in inexorable decline as a result of the over-extraction of water and climate crisis. A much-repeated factoid is that the lake shrank by 90% between the 1960s and the 1990s'.
- 3 A fisheries committee for the west central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC) has been established as part of plans to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in West Africa.

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