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# The Role of Political Instability and Poor Governance in Fueling Poverty and Insecurity in Developing Countries: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the interrelated dynamics of political instability and poor governance as key drivers of poverty and insecurity in developing countries. Drawing on the literature published between 2005 and 2023, this review examines how systemic governance failures such as, corruption, weak institutions, a lack of accountability, and exclusionary political practices, undermine socioeconomic development and foster environments where insecurity and poverty persist. This study synthesizes empirical and theoretical insights, including, the Failed State Theory, Institutional Theory, and Human Security Framework, to provide a multidimensional understanding of these complex linkages. Evidence from regions such as sub-Saharan Africa reveals that political instability disrupts public service delivery and displaces populations, whereas poor governance exacerbates economic marginalization and fuels violent conflict. The review identifies a cyclical relationship in which weak governance contributes to political instability, which in turn exacerbates poverty and insecurity. The study concludes that breaking this cycle requires comprehensive reforms focused on strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, enhancing transparency, and adopting human-centered development policies.

Keywords: political instability, poor governance, poverty, insecurity, fragile states, institutional reform, Sub-Saharan Africa

## Introduction

Political instability and poor governance have long been recognized as significant impediments to socioeconomic development, particularly in developing countries. These two interrelated challenges undermine institutional frameworks, weaken state capacity, and erode public trust, ultimately contributing to deepening of poverty and insecurity (Collier & Rohner, 2008; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In many fragile states, governance structures are often characterized by corruption, weak rule of law, a lack of accountability, and inefficient service delivery, all of which create fertile ground for poverty to persist and insecurity to thrive (Rotberg, 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2010).

For Example, the African continent, for example, has faced decades of political instability manifesting in civil wars, coups, electoral violence, and state capture. These forms of instability have contributed significantly to socioeconomic backwardness in many countries, where millions of people remain trapped in extreme poverty and live under constant threats of violence and insecurity (OECD, 2015; World Bank, 2017). Political instability disrupts economic activities, displaces populations, discourages investment, and diverts public resources away from essential services such as healthcare and education, towards security apparatus and crisis management (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Ucha, 2010).

The Brookings Institution's annual report (2018) classifies Nigeria as one of the poorest countries globally, surpassing India. Before Nigeria's independence in 1960, its poverty level was notably low. Sixty years post-independence, Nigeria transitioned from a low poverty level to being among the nations with the highest global incidence of poverty. Nigeria failed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) poverty targets by 2015,

despite efforts by successive administrations to mitigate poverty since 1980. Despite efforts by successive military and democratic governments to alleviate poverty, these attempts have proven ineffective. Poverty constitutes a significant barrier to Nigeria's socioeconomic development and has persisted despite numerous interventions (Danaan, 2018).

Poor governance, often indicated by rampant corruption, lack of transparency, and weak institutional oversight, exacerbates these conditions by limiting the government's ability to provide basic public goods and services. It also distorts policy priorities and undermines inclusive development strategies, leading to the marginalization of vulnerable groups and the entrenchment of poverty (Transparency International, 2020; UNDP, 2022). Consequently, a vicious cycle emerges, in which poor governance fuels poverty and insecurity, which in turn reinforces political instability (Alesina et al., 2006; Fukuyama, 2011).

### ***1.2 Statement of the Problem***

Despite numerous policy interventions and international support aimed at promoting good governance and political stability, poverty and insecurity persist in developing nations. In countries where governance systems remain fragile and political institutions are weak, citizens experience limited access to justice, poor service delivery, and exclusion from decision-making processes, all of which increase their vulnerability to economic deprivation and violence (World Bank, 2019; Ibrahim Index of African Governance, 2021).

While past studies have independently examined the relationship between governance, poverty, and conflict, there remains a need for an integrated understanding of how political instability and poor governance jointly fuel poverty and insecurity. Failure to address these root causes not only hampers national development but also contributes to regional instability and migration crises (UNHCR, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to review existing body of literature on this nexus to highlight the extent and dynamics of this issue.

### ***1.3 Objectives of the Study***

The main objective of this study was to review the literature on how political instability and poor governance contribute to poverty and insecurity. Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Examine the conceptual and theoretical linkages between political instability, governance, poverty, and insecurity.
2. Analyze empirical findings on the impact of poor governance and political instability on socioeconomic outcomes.
3. Identify knowledge gaps in the existing literature for future research and policy development.

### ***1.4 Research Questions***

1. What are the theoretical and conceptual foundations linking political instability and poor governance to poverty and insecurity?
2. What does empirical evidence suggest about the relationship between governance failures and socioeconomic challenges?
3. What gaps exist in the current literature on this topic?

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## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Conceptual Review***

#### ***2.1.1 Political Instability***

Political instability refers to the propensity of a government or political regime to be threatened by internal or external forces, including coups, civil unrest, electoral violence, and social upheavals (Alesina et al., 2006). In regions plagued by instability, the lack of consistent political direction leads to the breakdown of institutional continuity, which hinders effective policy implementation and deters investment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2007). Political instability often emerges when governance institutions are weak or when there is competition for power among fragmented groups (UNDP 2021).

#### ***2.1.2 Poor Governance***

Governance encompasses the traditions and institutions by which authority is exercised, including the capacity to formulate and implement policies as well as respect for institutions that govern economic and social interactions (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Poor governance is characterized by corruption, weak rule of law, lack of transparency, and ineffective public service delivery. According to Transparency International (2020), poor governance erodes public trust and leads to widespread inequalities, particularly in fragile states where elites easily manipulate public institutions.

### **2.1.3 Poverty**

Poverty is a multidimensional condition characterized by a lack of income, access to education, healthcare, and other essential services (World Bank, 2018). Political instability and poor governance create environments in which the state is cannot to provide essential services, thereby increasing poverty rates. Studies have shown that unstable governance contexts are less likely to invest in long-term poverty alleviation programs (Ajakaiye & Ncube, 2010).

### **2.1.4 Insecurity**

Insecurity refers to the absence of peace, protection, and safety from threats, whether physical (such as violence and conflict) or economic (including unemployment and inflation) (OECD 2015). Poor governance enables the proliferation of violent actors, and where political systems are unstable, the rule of law collapses, giving rise to insurgency, terrorism, and banditry (Chandler, 2010; UNODC, 2022).

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.2.1 The Failed State Theory**

Failed State Theory posits that when states lose the ability to perform core functions such as maintaining security, delivering public services, and enforcing laws they become fragile or fail to function effectively. These states often become breeding grounds for poverty, criminality, and insurgency (Rotberg, 2003; Fukuyama, 2011). Political instability and poor governance are key characteristics of state failure, which resulted in socioeconomic collapse and widespread human suffering.

### **2.2.2 Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory emphasizes the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping economic performance and social order. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), strong institutions foster inclusive development, whereas, weak institutions, often a product of poor governance, hinder growth and promote inequality and insecurity.

### **2.2.3 Human Security Framework**

The human security framework shifts its focus from state-centric to people-centered security. It argues that threats to individual well-being such as poverty, hunger, disease, and violence are as critical as military threats (UNDP, 1994; Ogata & Cels, 2003). Political instability and poor governance heighten these threats, exposing populations to compounded vulnerabilities.

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## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to investigate the relationship between political instability, poor governance, poverty, and insecurity in developing countries. The SLR method was chosen to synthesize empirical and theoretical evidence from multiple peer-reviewed sources published between 2005 and 2023. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

### **3.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy**

A comprehensive search was conducted across reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect to identify relevant studies.

Keywords and Boolean operators were used to refine the search, such as:

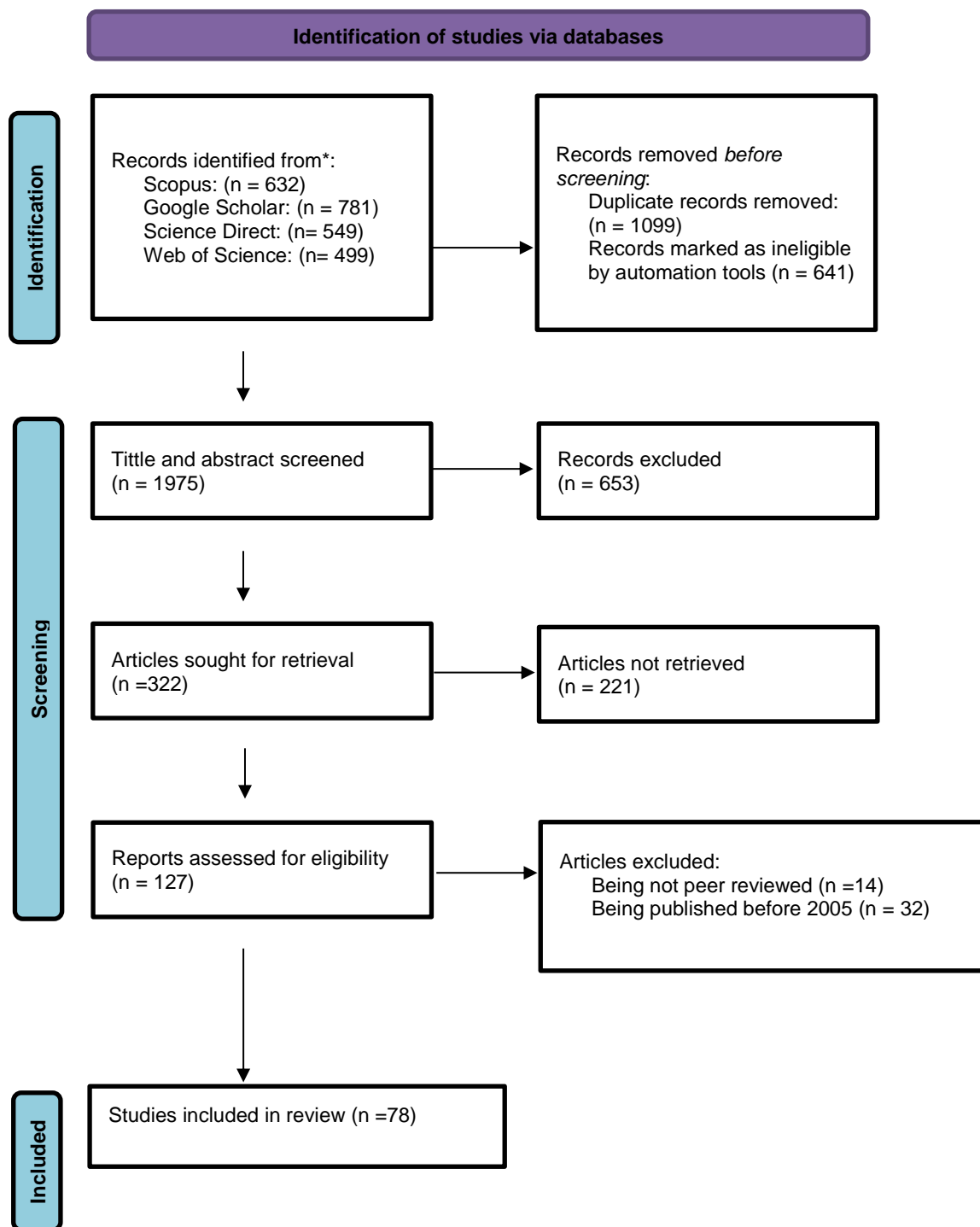
- "political instability" AND "poor governance" AND "poverty" AND "insecurity"
- "institutional failure" AND "developing countries"
- "corruption" AND "conflict" AND "Sub-Saharan Africa"

### **3.3 Exclusion criteria**

- Unrelated research work;
- Studies with insufficient data;
- Duplicate sources;
- Non-peer-reviewed research articles;
- Articles with limited access;

- Articles published before 2005.

Prisma Flow Diagram



Source: Moher et al. (2020)

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1 Summary of Findings

The following table summarizes the main findings of the reviewed studies, highlighting recurring themes and critical insights related to the nexus between political instability, poor governance, poverty, and insecurity.

| Author(s)                  | Year | Focus                               | Key Findings  |
|----------------------------|------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Acemoglu & Robinson        | 2012 | Institutional Theory and Governance | Weak institutions drive poverty and instability.                              |
| Collier & Rohner           | 2008 | Democracy and Conflict              | Political instability disrupts economic growth.                               |
| Ucha                       | 2010 | Poverty in Nigeria                  | Poor leadership and mismanagement sustain poverty.                            |
| Transparency International | 2020 | Corruption and Governance           | Corruption diverts resources and undermines development.                      |
| Collier, P., & Rohner, D.  | 2008 | Conflict and Economy                | Political instability leads to reduced economic growth and increased poverty. |
| Adebayo et al.,            | 2022 | Governance and Institutions         | Weak governance structures perpetuate political instability and poverty.      |
| Ucha                       | 2010 | Poverty Causes                      | Poor leadership and mismanagement are primary drivers of poverty.             |
| Ajakaiye & Ncube           | 2010 | Infrastructure & Development        | Improved governance reduces poverty through better infrastructure.            |
| Transparency International | 2020 | Corruption                          | Corruption erodes trust and hinders poverty reduction efforts.                |
| Adebayo & Olayode          | 2022 | Insecurity & Governance             | Corruption and weak governance exacerbate violent conflicts.                  |

#### ***4.2 Political Instability as a Driver of Poverty and Insecurity***

A consistent theme across the reviewed literature was the disruptive effect of political instability on national development and human security. Unstable political environments weaken government institutions, disrupt economic planning, and erode investor confidence, resulting in reduced economic growth and increased poverty (Collier & Hoeffler, 2007; OECD, 2015). For instance, in many sub-Saharan African states, frequent coups, election-related violence, and civil unrest have led to chronic underdevelopment, food insecurity, and mass displacement (Alesina et al., 2006; UNHCR, 2020).

Instability also weakens law enforcement and security agencies, allowing non-state-armed groups, insurgents, and criminal networks to thrive (Chandler, 2010; Adebayo & Olayode, 2022). In countries like Nigeria, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, political instability has created power vacuums exploited by violent actors, further endangering civilian populations and exacerbating poverty through the loss of livelihoods and forced migration.

#### ***4.3 Poor Governance and Its Role in Deepening Socioeconomic Vulnerability***

Poor governance manifests itself through corruption, misallocation of resources, lack of accountability, and weak public institutions. These features create an environment in which essential services such as healthcare, education, and social welfare are underfunded or mismanaged, thus exacerbating poverty (Kaufmann et al., 2010; Transparency International, 2020). For example, in settings where public funds are diverted for personal gain, infrastructure decays, and development project stall widening the gap between the elite and the impoverished.

Governance failure also undermines public trust and weakens social contracts, creating fertile ground for instability. Marginalized populations, excluded from policy processes, often resort to protests or are co-opted by extremist groups, fueling insecurity and undermining national cohesion (Fukuyama, 2011; UNDP, 2022).

#### ***4.4 The Interdependence between Poverty, Insecurity, and Governance***

The literature reveals a circular relationship between the three key variables—poor governance, political instability, and poverty—in what many scholars describe as a "vicious cycle" (Rotberg, 2009; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Weak governance causes political instability, which leads to poor socioeconomic outcomes. These outcomes, in turn, increase public dissatisfaction and civil unrest, further weakening state institutions and reinforcing instability.

This cycle is especially evident in fragile states, where the lack of inclusive governance, poor economic planning, and ethnic or religious polarization have entrenched poverty and fueled conflicts (World Bank, 2019; Ibrahim Index, 2021). Failure to break this cycle results in repeated crises, humanitarian disasters, and underdevelopment.

#### Vicious Circle



#### How the Cycle Works

- **Poor Governance:**

Corruption, mismanagement, and a lack of accountability lead to poor service delivery and misallocation of resources. Citizens lose trust in state institutions, which weakens social contracts (Transparency International, 2020).

- **Political Instability:**

Weak governance fosters political unrest, including coups, protests, and violent conflict. This instability diverts resources from development to crisis management (Collier & Hoeffler, 2007).

- **Poverty and Insecurity:**

Instability damages economic structures, reduces job opportunities, and worsens living conditions, thereby leading to widespread poverty. Insecurity (terrorism, crime, and violence) arises when people and communities compete for scarce resources (Ucha, 2010).

- **Weak Institutions:**

Poverty and insecurity undermine institutional capacity. Courts, law enforcement, and administrative agencies have become ineffective or corrupt, leading to poor governance and restarting the cycle.

#### 4.7 Regional Illustrations and Country Experiences

##### Summary Table

| Country     | Poverty Rate (%) | Insecurity Rate (%) |
|-------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Nigeria     | 38.9%            | 13.8%               |
| South Sudan | 76%              | 57%                 |
| Zimbabwe    | 85%              | 60%                 |

**Nigeria:** The Boko Haram insurgency and banditry in northern Nigeria illustrates the convergence between poor governance and political instability. Corruptions in the military, neglect of the northeast region, and failed public service delivery have helped create conditions for violent extremism (Adebayo & Olayode, 2022).

**South Sudan:** Following its independence in 2011, weak institutions and power struggles between factions escalated into civil war. The lack of governance infrastructure left millions in poverty and displaced them, with basic services almost non-existent (World Bank, 2017).

**Zimbabwe:** Political repression, corruption, and the breakdown of democratic institutions fueled economic collapse and widespread poverty since the early 2000s. Poor governance decisions, including land seizures and currency mismanagement, lead to hyperinflation and chronic food insecurity (Kaufmann et al., 2010; UNDP, 2021).

These cases underscore that without credible governance structures, political stability cannot be sustained and poverty reduction becomes unachievable.

#### ***4.8 Implications for Development Policy and Institutional Reform***

The literature suggests that addressing poverty and insecurity in fragile states requires more than economic assistance; it demands deep structural reform in governance. The key policy implications include the following:

**Strengthening Institutions:** Promoting the rule of law, transparency, and efficient public service delivery.

**Inclusive Political Processes:** Ensuring political representation and engagement of marginalized communities to reduce feelings of exclusion.

**Anti-Corruption Mechanisms:** Establishing independent oversight and enforcing anti-corruption laws.

**Security Sector Reform:** Building strong security institutions that protect citizens rather than regimes.

Therefore, development partners must therefore adopt a governance-centered approach that prioritizes political accountability, institutional strengthening, and citizen participation (UNDP, 2022; IMF, 2023).

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### ***5.1 Conclusion***

This literature review examines the intricate relationship between political instability, poor governance, poverty, and insecurity, drawing on scholarly and institutional sources from 2005 to 2023. Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that political instability and poor governance are significant drivers of both poverty and insecurity, particularly in developing countries.

Political instability disrupts governance continuity, weakens state institutions, displaces population, and deters investment. Meanwhile, poor governance, manifested through corruption, weak rule of law, exclusionary politics, and inefficient public service delivery, erodes public trust, marginalizes vulnerable groups, and perpetuates socioeconomic inequality.

The reviewed literature confirms that poverty and insecurity are not isolated outcomes, but are deeply rooted in structural political failures. Where political institutions are weak and governance is poor, poverty thrives and insecurity becomes normalized. The interaction of these forces creates a cyclical pattern in which bad governance leads to instability, which reinforces poverty and violence.

The study also reveals significant regional examples, including Nigeria, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe, which illustrate how governance failure and instability can push the entire populations into chronic poverty and violent conflict. The key takeaway is that efforts to alleviate poverty and reduce insecurity must address the root causes of political exclusion, institutional fragility, and poor leadership.

### ***5.2 Recommendations***

Based on the findings from the reviewed literature, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Democratic Institutions and Rule of Law.** Promote constitutional reforms that limit political interference in institutions. Empower independent judiciary and anti-corruption agencies to hold leaders accountable.
2. **Promote Inclusive and Accountable Governance.** Encourage the participation of marginalized groups, women, and youth in decision-making processes to reduce exclusion and grievances. The electoral processes should be strengthened to ensure transparency, credibility, and fairness, thereby reducing the risk of violence and instability.
3. **Enhance transparency and fight corruption:** Implement e-governance systems and public finance monitoring tools to reduce resource mismanagement and enforce strict penalties for corrupt practices among public officials.
4. **Investment in Human Capital and Basic Services:** Direct public resources toward critical sectors, such as education, healthcare, and rural development, to reduce poverty and promote social stability and also focus on equitable service delivery, especially in conflict-prone and marginalized regions.
5. **Adopting a human security approach** shifts from a state-centric to a people-centered security framework that addresses not just violent threats but also structural vulnerabilities, such as hunger, displacement, unemployment, Support community-based peace building, and conflict resolution programs.

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