

Policing Protracted Communal Violence in Bawku, Ghana: Security Interventions, Civilian Protection, and Conflict Management

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the security interventions in policing protracted communal violence in Bawku, Ghana, and the civilian protection and conflict management measures. Conventional policing strategies have been tested by the conflict in Bawku, which is a recurring issue between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi communities, leading to cycles of violence, displacement and deaths. The study draws on qualitative research approaches such as key informant interviews with state and non-state security actors, traditional authorities and affected civilians, as well as on documentary analysis based on policy texts and incident records, to explore the coordination of state and non-state security actors, the extent to which protection norms are adhered to by civilians, and the structural factors that foster or constrain escalation. Evidence shows that although the security operations by the joint forces have curtailed the open conflict for a period, they are still largely reactive, militarised in their stance and lack connection with community-based early-warning systems. Low levels of trust in security institutions, ethnic polarization in local security institutions and politicization of conflict resolution processes compromise civil protection. Limited trust in security institutions, ethnic polarization within local security institutions, and politicization of conflict resolution processes are threats to civil protection. The study argues that a balanced approach is needed that combines effective security efforts with participatory conflict dialogues, traditional mediation, and elements of accountability for non-combatant communities for addressing the conflict in a sustainable way in Bawku. The results are relevant to the debate on policing in divided societies, provide recommendations on security sector reform, community engagement, and the design of protection-of-civilians strategies in protracted communal conflicts.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

The north of Ghana, which bears the legacy of colonial administrative decisions and has experienced linear-sequence identities, is one of the longest communal conflict zones on the West African sub-continent. Since Ghana's independence in 1957, the country has experienced an estimated two thousand violent conflicts, which are most prevalent in the northern half of the country, including fights over chieftaincy succession, land ownership and political maneuvering over ethnicity (Dramani et al., 2023). Some of the notable events include Gonja – Nawuri – Nchumuru

conflict in 1991, 1992 and 1994; Kokomba – Bimoba conflict in 1984, 1986 and 1989; Nanumba – Konkomba conflict in 1980, 1994 and 1995; and Dagbon conflict in 1991 and 2002 (Dramani et al., 2023). Of these, the Mamprusi-Kusasi dispute in Bawku has been the longest and the most analytically productive, having been the cause of violent confrontations in 1983, 1984, 1985, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 and has experienced periodic re-flares since each of the above relatively calm periods.

The conflict is an ethno-political struggle of identity of the right to occupy the Bawku paramountcy, and a geo-symbolic struggle over the control of the Agolle area, east of the White Volta and the Toende area, west of the White Volta (Bukari, 2013). The Population and Housing Census of 2000 indicates that Kusasi make up about 75% of the population in Bawku West and 45% in Bawku East, whereas, Mamprusi are a significant minority group with entrenched customary claims to paramountcy (Longi, 2014). These present-day intractability of the dispute can only be understood within the context of the institutionalization of Mamprusi political suzerainty over the Kusasi communities along the White Volta, staging of the Kusasi Conference of March 1931 and the Mamprusi Conference of December 1932, colonial accommodation of Mamprusi claims as well as the entrenchment of partition arrangements that did not lead to inclusion nor legitimation across the divide (Longi, 2014). The most serious escalation in recent years started in late 2021 and continues to this day, resulting in loss of life, displacement of civilians, and flight of education and health workers out of the municipality (Dramani et al., 2023), (Kipo-Sunyehezi et al., 2024). The survey findings among 399 respondents in the area revealed that deaths (78.7%), injuries (74.5%) and obstructions to normal daily activities (66%) were the most severe impacts, while reduced access to health facilities (56.3%) and decreased use of health services (51.2%) were also considered severe impacts (Yaro et al., 2023). In addition to the human suffering, the conflict has affected commercial activities and cross-border trade between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo, and there is fear that it could cross borders because of the cross-cutting ethnic ties between the Mamprusi and Kusasi communities, and neighbouring states (Kipo-Sunyehezi et al., 2024).

Historically, the Ghanaian State's reaction to these incidents has been both kinetic in nature and formal in terms of mediation. In the 2008 encounter, the military was deployed to Bawku, a two-year curfew imposed on the town, and a brokerage of peace that included the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding and ECOWAS Warning and Response Network field officers which facilitated dialogue sessions away from the conflict zone and ensured that a signed peace agreement was reached in 2010 (Balogun, 2024). Governmental, civil society and traditional peace building infrastructures that are partially working in conjunction have been cited as the cause for the relative calm of the 2010–2017 period (Salifu, 2018). More recent versions involve strengthening joint police-military operations, the setting up of temporary military camps, and the inclusion of Houses of Chiefs and Traditional Councils in the resolution process (Halidu, 2018), (Kipo-Sunyehezi et al., 2024). The ongoing nature of the conflict in all of these cycles, however, provides some indication that current security operations, while effective at controlling the surface-level aspects of violent activity, have failed to effectively address the underlying causes of violence.

1.2 Problem Statement

After over 40 years of periodic security operations, peace dialogues, and mediation efforts, Bawku is still considered to be one of the most volatile localities in modern-day Ghana (Dramani et al., 2023). The few lessons of the contemporary past on the protection of civilians nor the institutional experience of plural policing in divided societies have been absorbed by the persistence of the violence. There are three interrelated issues that stand out.

First, the interventions to protect security are still largely reactive, episodic, and short-term, and do not benefit from a structured early-warning system (Halidu, 2018) (Dworschak & Sauter, 2025). The literature review undertaken for West Africa demonstrates the presence of foresight capacity in the region, albeit with limited extent of institutionalisation in national peace architectures, and only minimal support for community-based inputs (Cuadrado, 2018). In the Bawku Traditional Area, where infrastructures for peace exist but are not fully developed, they could not replace the integrated early-warning and response system that was missing (Salifu, 2018).

Second, the conflict has been politicised consistently in the Ghana context along the dominant party lines of the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress, both successive to previous party alignments and this has always affected the mediation process, as each party is perceived to be supported by one side of the ethnic divide,

and the perception that the conflict is structurally partisan has reduced the legitimacy of dialogue fora (Bukari, 2013), (Halidu, 2018).

Third, the Ghana Police Service are facing structural challenges. Current scholarship indicate that allegations of corruption, unlawful arrest and detention, excessive use of force, and delayed response to complaints affect the trust needed for community-based protection (CBPs) to be effective (Ansorg, 2017). The evidence base on community policing in divided societies is clear: although community policing was the topic of extensive field experiments in the Global South, these experiments have largely failed to bring about meaningful improvements in citizen–police relations or to curb violent crime, with the only exception being the adoption of incentives that encourage the police to focus on public safety rather than political agenda (Blair et al., 2021). The precondition of community policing is lacking in Bawku where local policing personnel are also embroiled in the ethnic dynamics of the conflict (Halidu, 2018) and (Dzordzormenyoh & Sarpong, 2025).

Consequences of civilian protection are grave. The impact of inter-communal conflict on the non-combatant population is well documented, with women, children, the elderly, traders, and farmers suffering disproportionately from losses in inter-communal conflict in Africa (Dworschak & Sauter, 2025; Yaro et al., 2023). The inability to distinguish between combatants and civilians, the apparent party affiliation of local police officers, and the lack of community-based early warning systems in the integration of security planning further increase the risk of collateral damage during operations in Bawku (Dzordzormenyoh & Sarpong, 2025), (Albrecht & Podder, 2020). The issue, in a nutshell, is not a lack of force, it's a security architecture with poorly formed protection-of-civilians instincts and a spotty duty to non-combatants. The aim of this research and the questions that were posed for it were formulated and defined as follows:

This study explores how security interventions are being used to police protracted communal violence in Bawku, Ghana, specifically focusing on the protection of civilians and conflict management. The specific objectives are: (i) understand the nature, scope and trajectory of the security interventions by the state and non-state actors deployed in the management of the Bawku conflict; (ii) evaluate the level of observance of the norms of civilian protection in the conduct of security operations; (iii) consider the pattern of interaction that exists among the Ghana Police Service, the military, traditional actors, civil society organisations and community-based actors; (iv) determine the structural, political and institutional factors that sustain or mitigate the escalation of the Bawku conflict; and (v) develop an integrated framework that will combine robust security operations with sustainable dialogue, traditional mediation and accountability safeguards.

The following four guiding research questions are used to pursue these purposes: What types of security interventions have been put into use in Bawku and how have they changed across the conflict cycle? How do current security responses meet the requirements for civilian protection in operations in the area? What are the institutional gaps and overlaps between state and non-state security actors in their coordination and cooperation? Which aspects of the Bawku conflict can be addressed by improved security and governance measures and what structural factors are creating the intractability? The study was designed to examine the contribution and significance of the study.

This article is a contribution to the existing scholarly literature in three respects. Conceptually, it helps explain the congruence between traditional conceptions of security architecture and the realities of prolonged identity-based conflict in West Africa from the perspective of Integrated Security – Infrastructures for Peace, consociational accommodation and plural policing theory (Osland & Røysamb, 2022), (Karreth, 2019), (Torres, 2024). It contributes to the existing academic literature on the Bawku conflict, which focus mainly on political and historical causes (Bukari, 2013; Longi, 2014); mediation outcomes (Salifu, 2018); and livelihood and health impacts (Yaro et al., 2023; Kipo-Sunyehzi et al., 2024), by highlighting the operational and institutional dynamics of security interventions as experienced by both security providers and recipients of protection (Albrecht & Podder, 2020; Dzordzormenyoh & Sarpong, 2025). The study is also critical of the new alternative paradigm presented by Dramani, Paalo and Adu-Gyamfi which goes beyond the single-paramountcy paradigm and instead explores shared political and land-tenure arrangements in the Bawku Traditional Area (Dramani et al., 2023). In practice, the findings are applicable to the Ghana Police Service, the Ministry of Defence, the National Peace Council, ECOWAS and civil society peacebuilders especially WANEP and ECOWARN who have led the state and regional prevention work in West Africa communal conflicts (Annan, 2014), (Balogun, 2024), (Cuadrado, 2018). The study provides an analytical template for the management of protracted communal violence in other divided spaces in the sub-region through reframing the Bawku case under the protection-of-civilians and plural policing lenses as suggested by Ansorg (2017) and Blair et al. (2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The architecture of this study is based on five interrelated concepts that together provide a framework for the empirical field of security interventions in protracted communal violence: communal violence, policing, security intervention, civilian protection, and conflict management. The ability to distinguish between the three concepts is critical to prevent analytical confusion that is often associated with policy discussion on communal clashes in northern Ghana regarding uses of 'policing', 'military operation' and 'peace enforcement'.

2.1.1 Communal Violence

Communal violence is organised, collective, physical violence inflicted between recognisable social groups who share a place of residence, or an economic livelihood, or symbolic ownership of a territory. The demarcation between communal violence and civil war, and communal violence and criminal violence is usually founded on the salience of identity markers (ethnicity, religion, indigeneity, chieftaincy) in the logic of targeting in the West African context. Communal violence has been more prevalent in the savannah regions of the North of Ghana where it has historically been linked to issues of chieftaincy succession, land allocation and the political playing of ethnic issues by national political parties (Annan, 2014; Longi, 2014). Annan's talk of the Bawku conflict as a "low intensity conflict," within a "notably stable country," is characteristic of the "low intensity" warfare that is a common feature of conflicts in "relatively stable" countries.

2.1.2 Protracted Communal Conflict

The word protracted refers to a specific type of time and structure; a conflict lasting for decades, with cycles of violence and uneasy calm, and no resolution despite repeated mediation efforts. Bukari records the cyclical nature of Bawku conflict, and reveals at least 9 violent incidents occurring between 1983 and 2010 (in 1983, 1984, 1985, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010), adding that the conflict keeps on recurring "due to the failure to resolve the conflict". This length of time is partly due to the fact that there is no single binding story of resolution. British colonial administrative decisions institutionalised the underlying dispute, such as those of the Kusasi Conference (March 1931) and the Mamprusi Conference (December 1932) which established dominant-subordinate dynamic among the two groups without achieving any legitimacy that would ensure enduring accommodation. Empirically, more recently, Yaro et al. have demonstrated that protractedness can be maintained not just by elite manipulation, but by social costs that affect civilians and civilian health services, such as civilian deaths (78.7% of respondents), civilian injuries (74.5%), and civilian restrictions of daily activities (66%), as well as lessened utilisation of health services (51.2%).

2.1.3 Policing and Security Intervention

The term "policing" is employed in a more comprehensive sense in this article, and is used to refer to all organised activity designed to ensure order, to prevent violence and to safeguard people and property within a specific geographical area. According to Dzordzormenyoh and Sarpong, plural policing in Ghana has been characterised by the involvement of not only the Ghana Police Service, but also of traditional authorities, vigilante groups, private security companies, neighbourhood watch groups and informal customary police. "Security intervention", on the other hand, is episodic and interventionist, referring to the use of specialised units of the State (police tactical units, Ghana Armed Forces, National Security Council, Rapid Deployment Force) in a localised conflict to suppress or contain violence. The two modes are very much intertwined in Bawku. Joint police-military operations regularly carry out aspects of both routine policing and interventionist suppression, but policymakers are not clear about the policy contours of what either actor is legally entitled to do and on what basis to do it in protecting civilians, due to the lack of a conceptual separation in policy discourse.

2.1.4 Civilian Protection

As it is used here, civilian protection is an approach developed in the United Nations for peacekeeping operations and adapted for domestic use: the responsibility of the security actors to minimise harm to non-combatants; the distinction between combatants and civilians; access for humanitarian assistance; and the prevention of atrocities. Albrecht et al. show that the Ghanaian and Indian peacekeepers see protection from three perspectives: 'An image or

notion of a beneficiary', 'A moral duty to protect and defend that beneficiary' and 'The actions that constitute the practice of protection'. These lenses emphasize the moral and workings confusion that exists in practice with regard to what is meant by "protection," and how local ownership of the concept of "protection" meets "templates" imposed by others. The concept applies to Bawku in the sense that the same security actors serve two roles – one that protects and another that harms during operations such as arrest sweeps, curfews and cordon-and-search operations, which also disproportionately impact women, traders, schoolchildren and the elderly.

2.1.5 Conflict Management

Conflict management" refers to the intentional planning and deployment of measures to reduce the destructive nature of communal violence, but not necessarily its causes. It is analytically different from 'conflict resolution' (focusing on underlying issue(s)) and 'conflict transformation' (changing relations between parties). In Bawku, all three approaches have been tried in succession and at times simultaneously, resulting in a mixed bag of curfews, joint operations, dialogue fora, inter-ethnic peacekeeping committees, traditional mediation, and adjudication by the Houses-of-Chiefs, which is typical of the conflict landscape. Annan also reminds the policy actors that "ending violent conflicts is a collective and collaborative effort to (a) identify and understand the causal indicators of violent conflicts; (b) develop concrete strategies and programmes for conflict prevention, management and complete resolution of such conflicts; (c) document, manage and disseminate information on lessons learnt and best practices for conflict prevention and resolution, and peacebuilding at the sub-region level; and (d) utilize indigenous conflict prevention mechanisms. The present study is guided by the following four-pronged agenda.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In order to better understand the chronic failure of traditional security interventions in the case of Bawku and other protracted communal conflicts, this study utilises four theoretical approaches: (i) Infrastructures for Peace (I4P), (ii) Consociational Democracy theory, (iii) Protracted Social Conflict theory, and (iv) Plural Policing/Plural Security theory. These complement each other in analyzing the case of Bawku, because none of them addresses the dynamics of the case fully.

2.2.1 Infrastructures for Peace (I4P)

Originated in the United Nations and then even adapted to the African Union and ECOWAS, the I4P framework puts the emphasis on the creation of standing national capacities (institutional, civil society, and traditional) for violent conflict prevention and management prior to their escalation (Rodríguez Torres, 2024; Salifu, 2018). Salifu then brings the framework to bear on the Bawku-East Municipality and contends that sustainable peace requires multiple "tracks" to operate – official state structures, civil society networks (including WANEP), traditional authorities and community-based early warning systems (including ECOWARN field officers). I4P is well suited for this study because it helps to understand why the lack of community-based early warning in Bawku, and the dominance of reactive state-led interventions, have been seen to have sustained, rather than abated, violence.

2.2.2 Consociational Democracy

Consociational democracy theory of Lijphart and expanded by Halidu for Africa's context suggests that a stable democracy in deeply divided societies must involve formal power sharing mechanisms: grand coalition, segmental autonomy, proportionality, and mutual/minority veto. Based on 542 respondents in a study of Ghana from 1992 to 2016, Halidu concludes that Ghana has enjoyed democratic stability relative to other countries despite the absence of formal consociational models, but suggests that conflict-prone areas, such as northern Ghana, have thrived under informal cross-cutting associations which mimic the consociational model. This study has drawn upon this theory to analyze the failure of police–military action without any measure of power sharing in the chieftaincy institution to end the cycle of violence in Bawku.

2.2.3 The theory of protracted social conflict.

Protracted Social Conflict theory, a theory of conflict resolution developed by Edward Azar, suggests that social conflicts are protracted if they include communal content (identity-based), weak or exclusionary state institutions, and reproduction through deprivation and unmet human needs. The Bawku conflict fulfills all three conditions and the current research is applying this theory to understand why a policy that fails to consider the colonial and post-colonial origins of conflict will be palliative rather than transformative. The plural police and security governance will be explored. The plural police and security governance will be discussed. Plural Policing theory is premised on the idea that policing is not exclusive to the state, but is shared by a range of actors in the state or non-state sector (Dzordzormenyoh & Sarpong, 2025; Ansorg, 2017).

In Ghana, policing is a constant negotiation between the Ghana Police Service, traditional authorities, community leaders, vigilante groups and private security providers, as Dzordzormenyoh and Sarpong demonstrate. From a New Institutionalist point of view, Ansorg takes further the argument that the blueprints that guide Western Security Sector Reform do not account for many of the realities of the African state, in which "authority and security may be provided by different state and non-state actors". The plural policing lens is key to the empirical part of this study, as an analysis of security intervention in Bawku that focuses on the formal Ghana Police Service and the Armed Forces does not include the role of traditional and community actors in conflict management.

2.3 Empirical Review

This sub-section presents the current pieces of research that are most pertinent to the Bawku case, and the larger topic of policing in divided societies. The review is organized into four strands:

- (i) studies about the Bawku conflict itself
- (ii) studies on community policing and civilian trust
- (iii) studies on security sector reform and external interventions in Africa
- (iv) studies on regional and supranational frameworks for peace and security in West Africa.

The Bawku Conflict is the subject of several studies. There are a number of studies of the Bawku Conflict. Over the last decade, the empirical literature on Bawku has steadily grown. As Kwamin observed, Bukari's primary research indicated that the conflict is a "deep-seated and longstanding ethno-political conflict" which has its foundation in colonial manipulation of chieftaincy and in particular the 1931 and 1932 conferences which institutionalized the dominance of Mamprusi people over the Kusasi communities to the west of the White Volta. The study importantly records the politicisation of the conflict by both the dominant parties in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) perceived to be supported by the Kusasis while the New Patriotic Party (NPP) of the Mamprusis was perceived to be supported by the Akwavitah. Also documented in the study is how subsequent conflicts (2000 and after) followed the political cycle of elections in Ghana. Longi then offers a more detailed historiography which shows how the British's support for the conference decisions of 1932 pushed the conflict, and how colonial officials "looking for easy and convenient ways to administer the vast territories they had acquired by 1900... enabled the Mamprusi to secure political suzerainty over the Kusasi. Salifu analyses the relative peace of the 2010-2017 period from the lens of I4P, and highlights the partial functioning of community-based, governmental and traditional infrastructures for peace, cautioning that it is fragile without a political settlement. Recently, Yaro et al. have offered systematic survey evidence of the health and livelihood consequences of the conflict in Bawku, including that 78.7% of survey respondents indicated deaths and 51.2% indicated that health service utilisation decreased during periods of violence. Kipo-Sunyehzi, Yaro, and Titigah continue this analysis and outlines how the repeated violence has caused problems with conflict resolution and public health management in the region. Most recently Dramani, Paolo and Adu-Gyamfi have introduced an "emerging perspectives" approach that goes beyond the accepted doctrine of commissions of inquiry (here again, the Alhassan Commission of 1978 and previous scholarship) to develop a "shared political and landownership system" where both Kusasi and Mamprusi have powers on land they occupy and the Kusasi have paramountcy, while the Mamprusi have a semi-autonomous status. This emerging vision is challenged, but provides the context for thinking beyond one-off solutions and is critically engaged by this study.

A recurring challenge in the empirical discussion of Bawku is the lack of attention to the operational and institutional challenges of security actions, that is, how polices, military, traditional authorities and civilians interact with each other in practice, particularly with regard to coordination and lack of coordination issues, and how these contacts are experienced by civilians. Looking back at the historical causes of the conflict or studying mediation strategies, however, leaves the question of policing and security intervention fairly under-researched. This article addresses that need.

2.3.1 The introduction of community policing and the trust of citizens in the police.

There are currently a number of pieces of literature that challenge the notion that community policing changes alone create trust between civilians and the police. Blair, Weinstein, Christia et al. ran a series of experiments in the Global South and in a nutshell failed to find that community policing leads to an increase in citizen trust in police or a decrease in crime rates in the Global South. The results of this study indicate that incremental community policing reforms need to be followed by structural reforms to change police incentives and de-politicise police behavior. In a study of community policing in two neighbourhoods in Cape Town, Karreth also looks at the conditions under which inter-group trust has an impact on the effectiveness of community policing and demonstrates that inter-group trust is a significant mediating variable. In Ghanaian terms, Dzordzormenyoh and Sarpong trace the history of plural policing in Ghana, and show that the public's interaction with community safety has always been through informal networks and traditional institutions as well as the formal police. In a comparative analysis of community policing following conflict, Osland and Røysamb argue that trust is 'a matter' at the core of community-oriented policing with a deep legacy of mistrust and conflict undermining the effectiveness of the reform programmes. All of this literature indicates that community policing reforms in Bawku will not bring civilian protection without wider reforms in police-civilian relations, but in a situation where local policing personnel are also engulfed in the ethnic conflict.

2.3.2 Security Sector Reform and External Interventions in Africa

The literature on SSR in the African context is used for a critical interrogation of the approaches of international actors to security reform. According to Ansorg, "In generalized blueprints, ideas and perceptions of international donors dominate the design of SSR processes, especially in post-conflict countries across Africa. It is also directly applicable to the Bawku situation where donor supported interventions (joint training, equipment and operational protocols) have been brought into the region without adequate consideration of local ownership, history and traditional authority. The existing paradigm of SSR and security governance, Ansorg goes on to say, "is fundamentally at variance with the realities of African states, where state authority and security can be wielded by other local or traditional actors that are outside the state. However, the Sierra Leonean community policing model that Ansorg celebrates as a successful model suggests that locally developed and participatory solutions might be more durable than foreign policy models. For Bawku, this line of argument suggests that sustainable protection for the civilian population necessitates a formal security planning process that engages traditional authorities, civil society and community-based actors; a process that is not yet realized.

The following are the frameworks for regional and supranational peace and security:

In any modern discussion about communal violence in West Africa, its regional aspect cannot be overlooked because of the ethnic entanglements across borders and the institutional set-up of the ECOWAS. Balogun examines how ECOWAS has shifted from being an economic community to a regional security community, and how peace and security practices have diffused through the ECOWAS Commission for Political Affairs, Peace and Security thanks to a group of "Ecocrats". The incorporation of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding into the ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate is one of the most relevant institutional innovations, as it "signals a change in institutional logic and practice" towards bottom up peacebuilding. In support of this analysis, Cuadrado highlights the importance of the United Nations early warning for the sub-region, noting that the spread of best practices in prevention is not uniform, and that although ECOWAS institutions have taken some steps, they have not gone far enough. The cross-border nature of the Mamprusi-Kusasi dispute - both communities are shared by Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo - makes these regional mechanisms even more relevant in Bawku in managing communal violence. Dworschak and Sauter examine a new dimension in the types of early warning that can be applied to Bawku, with the advent of remote-sensing technologies that connect climatic shocks to the escalation of inter-communal conflict.

The study aims to tackle the conceptual framework.

The five core concepts are incorporated into the four theoretical lenses within one conceptual framework which is used for analysis here. The framework assumes that:

The Bawku case brings to fore identifiable socio-political drivers of communal violence and suggests that the latter was a product of them (Annan, 2014; Longi, 2014; Bukari, 2013);

Multiple actors such as the police, the military, traditional authorities and civil society (under plural policing arrangements) intervene in these cycles of violence (Dzordzromenyoh & Sarpong, 2025; Ansorg, 2017);

The success of such interventions in civilian protection and conflict management is contingent on their alignment with I4P, consociational arrangements, the origins of the conflict in the long socio-historical dimension, and plural policing dynamics (Rodríguez Torres, 2024; Salifu, 2018; Halidu, 2018; Albrecht et al., 2020);

The lack of alignment results in the pattern that was documented in the Bawku case, which involves a lack of accountability protection for non-combatants, insufficiently linked to community-based early warning, posture in interventions, and interventions that are reactive (Yaro et al., 2023; Kipo-Sunyehzi et al., 2024; Dramani et al., 2023).

The methodology and empirical analysis that follow in this framework are operationalised.

The study examines the existing knowledge gap and the positioning of the study.

The three gaps in knowledge identified during the cumulative review are addresses by this study. First, the operational and institutional aspects of security interventions have not been studied as much as the historical and political aspects. Second, there are no systematic empirical experiences of civilians who have been subjected to prolonged security operations in Bawku. Third, there is a lack of a connection between the language of plural policing theory and the language of protection of civilians in the Ghanaian literature, although the two traditions have a clear overlap (Dzordzormenyoh & Sarpong, 2025; Albrecht et al., 2020). The present study aims at advancing the current studies and making practical recommendations that would benefit the Ghana Police Service, Ministry of Defence, National Peace Council, ECOWAS, and civil society actors in managing protracted communal violence in Ghana (Annan, 2014; Balogun, 2024; Salifu, 2018).

3. Methodology

The study was a qualitative study using a case study design to explore and understand the strategies used by the police, the protection and management of civilians, and conflict resolution practices during the prolonged communal violence in Bawku, Ghana. The qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable since the study aimed to capture the institutional responses, security measures, local experiences and the intricate nature of the relationship between security agencies and conflict affected communities. The case study approach allowed for a detailed analysis of the nature of policing interventions in the social, political and security setting.

The study investigated Bawku Municipality in the Upper East Region of Ghana where the recurring nature of the communal violence in the Municipality has occasioned security, humanitarian and governance concerns. The selection of Bawku was made, given that it is one of the world's longest conflictual communal relationships in Ghana, and has been a site of multiple deployments of security forces, curfews, support operations by soldiers and civilian protection interventions. This case study was used to gain insight into the role of policing institutions in the face of prolonged communal violence, and what consequences this has for conflict resolution and public security.

The primary data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders who are involved in policing, administration of security, community leadership and civilian protection. The participants were officers of Ghana Police Service, officers from other security agencies that have been participating in the joint operations, local government, traditional leaders, community representatives, civil society actors, and people with first-hand experience of the conflict. The study employed multiple stakeholder groups to allow for multiple viewpoints on issues related to security interventions and conflict management practices.

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach to ensure that they have relevant knowledge and experience in relation to the Bawku conflict and the security operations. A second sampling technique, snowball sampling, was then used to recruit more participants who had specific expertise in policing interventions, mediation or civilian protection protocols. The mix of purposive and snowball sampling made it easy to gain access to respondents directly involved in or affected by security operations in the conflict area.

Face to face interviews were used for data collection, which were supplemented by field observations and documentary analysis, in a specific fieldwork period. The semi-structured approach of the interview allowed the respondents to be flexible with the discussion of experiences, while maintaining consistency across the interview

format. The interviews sought to delve into notions of the effectiveness of policing, operational difficulties, intelligence sharing, protection measures for civilians, inter-agency coordination, community participation and the overall dynamics of Bawku's conflict management.

Security environment was documented through field observations including visible security measures, police/community interactions, movement restrictions, checkpoint operations, and others. This was combined with observational data, which helped to provide some context to the policing interventions in practice. The sources for documentary analysis comprised government documents, security statements, parliamentary reports, media reports, conflict assessments and national security management policy documents on communal violence, policing and amendment in Ghana.

Interviews were all conducted with informed consent and respondents were assured confidentiality and anonymity. As the conflict had been sensitive, identifying information has been deleted from transcript of interviews and anonymous codes were assigned during analysis. Respondents were given the option to refuse to answer any question or exit the study at any point during the research process and participation was voluntary.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The transcripts from the interviews, field notes and documentary materials were systematically coded to reveal common themes, patterns and connections within the data. The analysis process included multiple readings of transcripts, initial open coding, creation of thematic categories and finalization of themes addressing the study's objectives. Thematic analysis was chosen due to the ability to identify shared experiences and also variations in perspectives among different participant groups.

The study used methodological triangulation in order to increase the credibility of the findings, which means comparing the evidence obtained from the interviews, observations and documentary sources. Triangulation confirmed a number of important findings and mitigated against an overreliance on a single source of evidence. Interviews with security staff were also analyzed alongside the views of community members and civil society organizations to look for commonalities and differences in their perceptions on the effectiveness of policing and protection for civilians.

The study also focused on reflexivity on the part of the researchers during the data collection and analysis. Due to the sensitive political context of Bawku, researcher bias was limited as much as possible by ensuring uniformity in interview procedures, verbatim transcription, and analysis based on evidence given by the interviewees and documentary sources.

The methodology offers a systematic approach towards studying policing intervention, civilian protection and conflict management in Bawku. The study combines an interview, observation and documentary analysis process in a qualitative case study approach to provide a contextually anchored set of evidence on the effectiveness and challenges of security responses to prolonged communal violence in Ghana.

3.1 Mathematical Equations and Symbols

The study is qualitative in nature and hence mathematical equations and statistical modelling is not applicable. Results were presented and interpreted on the basis of qualitative evidence obtained from the interviews, the field observations and the documentary analysis – no mathematical formulations were required.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study on the responses of policing to the prolonged communal violence in Bawku are presented and discussed in this section. The analysis relies on field interviews with security personnel, traditional authorities, local government officials, civil society representatives and residents of communities impacted by the recurring Bawku conflict (Bukari, 2013, Kipo-Sunyehzi et al., 2024), as well as documentary research of incident records and policy documents associated with the recurring Bawku conflict. The results are presented under thematic headings reflecting the dynamics of security interventions, civilian protection, police–community relations, operational challenges and the overarching impact on the institutions of conflict management. The discussion is not just about how policing has evolved to address security concerns, it looks at how policing has affected public safety, state legitimacy and how policing has coped with recurrent communal violence, as raised in the literature reviewed earlier (Annan, 2014; Longi, 2014; Salifu, 2018).

4.1 Understanding the Changing Nature of Policing in Bawku

One of the most significant findings of the study was that the role of policing in Bawku has been transformed from the traditional law enforcement to continuous conflict management operations. There was a consensus by respondents that the Ghana Police Service works in a security stabilisation environment and not as a normal police force. But the conflict has not yet been resolved, despite multiple talks and spells of peace, and has necessitated constant outlay of specialist personnel, military action, enforcing curfews, intelligence-led patrols, and quick response actions.

Table 1. The respondents reported the following major security interventions:

Security intervention	Respondents identifying intervention (n = 42)	Percentage (%)
Curfew enforcement	36	85.7
Joint police–military operations	34	81.0
Intelligence gathering	31	73.8
Mobile patrols and checkpoints	29	69.0
Weapons retrieval operations	22	52.4
Community engagement initiatives	18	42.9

Source: Field data.

As shown in Table 1, curfew enforcement and joint police/military operations were the most common security interventions identified. The presence of curfews reflects the 2008 curfew which was imposed on Bawku, along with an overall military deployment to quell violence, and has been repeated in subsequent outbreaks of violence. Overall, respondents made it clear that these measures helped to temporarily decrease open confrontation. But they also noted that security operations were frequently undertaken to quell violence, not structural causes of the conflict. The findings indicate that in Bawku, policing activities have been more successful in reducing violence than in addressing the root causes of the violence, illustrating the short-term nature of policing approaches in managing prolonged identity-based conflicts (Ansorg, 2017; Halidu, 2018).

4.2 Civilian Protection under Conditions of Recurrent Violence

The research revealed that one of the most difficult experience that civilian protection poses to police work in Bawku is still a challenge. The current survey data on the same conflict shows that 78.7% of the respondents reported deaths, 74.5% reported injuries and 66% reported obstructions to daily activities as the most harmful effects of the conflict; 56.3% reported loss of access to health facilities and 51.2% reported a decrease in the use of health services. The current study confirms this scenario and identifies that there is insecurity for civilians, restrictions on their movement, security disruption of their livelihoods, and psychological distress, despite security agencies taking protective measures.

Table 2. The level of perceived effectiveness of civilian protection measures

Civilian protection measure	Effective (%)	Moderately effective (%)	Ineffective (%)
Security patrols	61.9	23.8	14.3
Curfew enforcement	54.8	28.6	16.6
Checkpoints and road monitoring	50.0	31.0	19.0
Rapid security response	47.6	33.3	19.1
Protection of vulnerable communities	40.5	35.7	23.8

Source: Field data.

Table 2 shows that patrols and curfew enforcement were perceived as relatively more effective than community protection of vulnerable communities. Several residents noted that visibility ensured security and that this was a deterrent to some attacks, especially in the city. However, there was a lack of equal protection at different locations

and civilians in peripheral communities frequently continued to be exposed to sporadic violence, the respondents reported. The results suggest that a mismatch between the actual physical presence of security forces and the perceived security of individuals in the longer term, consistent with findings from other countries on the relationship between the presence of security forces and the perception of long-term personal security in communal violence (Albrecht et al., 2020; Dworschak & Sauter, 2025).

4.3 Police–Community Relations and Public Trust

The issue of police–community relations was a common theme in all of the interviews, with a focus on how these interactions affect the success or failure of security measures. Overall, there was a general appreciation of the efforts of people on the ground to keep the peace, but lack of institutional trust. Many participants raised issues related to inconsistent enforcement, subjectivity in enforcement, delayed response, and lack of communication between security agencies and local communities.

Table 3. Community Perceptions of Police Performance

Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Police presence has reduced open violence	28	66.7
Police are responsive to emergencies	21	50.0
Police operate impartially	16	38.1
Community members trust police information	18	42.9
Police engage communities effectively	17	40.5

Source: Field data.

Table 3 indicates that a significant proportion felt that the presence of the police had led to a decrease in open violence, but a significantly smaller proportion felt that policing was impartial and community engagement was effective. This discovery implies that there is no automatic link between efficiency and popular acceptance. The security interventions can immediately help to stop violence, but also create perceptions of exclusion or unequal treatment, a dynamic that is echoed by the mixed global evidence on community policing (Blair et al., 2021; Karreth, 2019; Osland & Røysamb, 2022) and which reflects the plural and historically contested nature of policing in Ghana.

4.4 Operational Challenges Confronting Security Agencies

Operational challenges facing security agencies 4.4.1 indications of the challenges 4.4.2 impact of the challenges on the operation of security agencies

The findings also show the limitations facing police officers in their policing of prolonged communal violence. Logistical, intelligence, political, legal and civilian discrimination issues were identified as significant challenges.

Table 4. Major Operational Challenges Reported by Security Personnel

Operational challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Limited intelligence cooperation	24	57.1
Resource and logistics constraints	22	52.4
Community distrust	20	47.6
Political interference	18	42.9
Difficulty identifying armed actors	17	40.5
Coordination challenges among agencies	15	35.7

Source: Field data.

The main challenge found was the lack of intelligence cooperation. The respondents reported that they were dissuaded from providing information to security agencies because of fear of reprisal. The finding highlights the need to rely on social legitimacy and community confidence, and not just coercive capacity, in effective policing in communal conflicts, which is in concert with Ansorg's argument that externally imposed Security Sector Reform models are incompatible with the reality of African countries, where the exercise of authority and security is not restricted to the state alone, but is also shared by a variety of state and non-state actors. Coordinative difficulties, such as those between police and military forces, traditional authorities and civil society actors, also support the Infrastructures for

Peace argument that incapacities in any track serve as a multiplier effect on the overall chain of conflict management, which is weakened by these (Rodríguez Torres, 2024; Salifu, 2018).

4.5 Conflict Management beyond Coercive Policing

A significant conclusion of the research is that the respondents vastly perceived the police as being incapable of dealing with the longstanding communal violence. Participants agreed that although violence could be contained around security operations, more comprehensive conflict management processes and mechanisms of traditional authorities, local government institutions, civil society organisations and community leaders are needed for sustainable peace.

Table 5. Preferred Strategies for Sustainable Conflict Management

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Community dialogue and mediation	35	83.3
Strengthening traditional dispute resolution	30	71.4
Youth employment and livelihood programmes	29	69.0
Improved intelligence collaboration	27	64.3
Police–community partnership initiatives	26	61.9
Judicial accountability for violence	24	57.1

Source: Field data.

The most common preferred strategy was community dialogue and mediation. Repeated deployments have failed to address some of the underlying issues of identity, political representation, land and chieftaincy which successive commissions and inquiries have not been able to solve effectively (Dramani et al., 2023; Longi, 2014). The conclusion therefore is that policing has to be part of a comprehensive effort to prevent or reconcile conflict as well as to reform state institutions, which involves indigenous approaches and mechanisms, in addition to state ones (Annan, 2014; Bukari, 2013; Salifu, 2018). Kinship relationships cross the border to also connect Bawku communities with those in Burkina Faso and Togo only further emphasize the relevance of ECOWAS and United Nations' early-warning and peacebuilding mechanisms at the regional level (Balogun, 2024; Jara Cuadrado, 2018).

4.6 Discussion

The results bring a new perspective to the on-going discussions concerning police involvement in long-lasting communal conflicts in fragile and conflict affected areas. The Bawku conflict is unique in that the policing institutions have to play several roles at once: policing, civilian protection, intelligence management, conflict de-escalation, and mediation support. The more expansive role puts significant strain on security institutions and reveals the deficiencies of coercive security strategies in the absence of root causes of political and communal grievances.

The results show also the centrality of legitimacy in policing communal violence. Security deployments have led to a decrease in some aspects of overt violence, but there are uneven perceptions of impartiality, accountability, and community engagement. The impact of policing interventions should not just be measured in arrests, patrols or weapons recovery, but also in how effectively they build public trust, provide protection and aid long-term peacebuilding (Albrecht et al., 2020; Osland & Røysamb, 2022). The scores for the two other indicators—"police operate impartially" (38.1%) and "police engage communities effectively" (40.5%) are relatively low and confirm that without structural change to police incentives and alignment with political authority, community policing reforms are unlikely to enhance citizen–police relations in contexts such as Bawku (Blair et al., 2021; Dzordzromenyoh & Sarpong, 2025).

One of the strengths of this research is that it focuses on the link between policing and conflict management. Participants always emphasized that sustainable security cannot be realized by the use of force. In Bawku, effective policing also depends on the sharing of intelligence, institutional coordination, community involvement, and the involvement of local peacebuilding processes. The combined response of governmental, civil society, and traditional

tracks (theoretical premise for Infrastructures for Peace) is reflected in the strong endorsement for 'community dialogue and mediation' (35 respondents, 83.3%) and 'strengthening traditional dispute resolution' (30 respondents, 71.4%), as demonstrated in the current sample. It also reflects the new ideas put forward by Dramani et al, who suggest some common political and land-tenure modalities in the Bawku Traditional Area as a means of breaking the deadlock in the single-paramountcy impasse.

The results also show that the operational challenge that faces the police in Bawku is not lack of capacity but lack of community confidence. This echoes Ansorg's critique that Security Sector Reform in Africa has frequently focused on donor-driven models of security sector reform to the detriment of locally rooted models of policing. The multiple policing lens implies a need for synergy between the Ghana Police Service, Ghana Armed Forces, traditional authorities, vigilantes, civil society peacebuilders, and community-based early-warning actors for improvements in the protection of civilians. Empirical results for the question of "improved intelligence collaboration" (64.3% of respondents supported it) align with the perception that this form of collaboration is the most promising, rather than the militarisation of police.

Taken collectively, the results suggest that the security interventions have been effective in helping to curb violence and protect civilians in Bawku, but that they have been less effective in the longer term unless other conflict management processes are implemented that seek to address the structural causes of communal violence (Annan, 2014; Longi, 2014); build trust and relations between the police and the community; and improve the legitimacy and responsiveness of state security institutions (Ansorg, 2017; Halidu, 2018). The Bawku case therefore demonstrates the need for a multi-track, multi-level infrastructure for peace to be deliberately built at the local, national and regional levels and in an integrated manner—from the local to the national and regional, but not in isolation to address the challenge of civilian protection effectively as much as the challenge of security (Annan, 2014; Balogun, 2024; Rodríguez Torres, 2024).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the role of security interventions in policing protracted communal violence in Bawku, Ghana, especially on civilian protection and conflict management and its findings are clear and impacting. Security interventions have had a significant but limited effect in curbing open conflict in the Bawku Traditional Area and structural drivers of conflict proved to be insurmountable by coercive measures. The evidence presented shows that the most visible tools available to the state to enforce curfew and to conduct joint police–military operations, that the protection of civilians is inconsistent both within and between communities, that the police–community trust is fragile despite repeated deployments, and that the operational effectiveness of police–military operations has been and continues to be undermined by intelligence gaps, by lack of resources, by political interference, and by the difficulty of distinguishing between armed combatants and non-combatants in a dense communal setting. The overall picture these findings paint is clear: for the residents, security personnel, traditional authorities and civil society actors of Bawku, a security intervention remains a mitigation framework, not a resolution framework, and the continuance of the conflict over multiple cycles of state response is proof of this fact.

The significance of these findings is that they help to cast the Bawku case in a new light as an example of plural policing, where civilian protection is unavailable without a more integrated approach to peacebuilding, in which government, civil society, and traditional tracks work together, formal power-sharing arrangements within chieftaincy institutions are in place, and civilians are effectively protected during the conflict cycle. The findings are relevant not only to the municipality itself, but also to other similar protracted communal conflicts in northern Ghana, to the cross-border nature of the Mamprusi–Kusasi kinship network, which extends into Burkina Faso and Togo, and to the nature of these dynamics in relation to the overall peace and security framework of the Economic Community of West African States. The study provides a framework of practical steps to be implemented by key stakeholders such as the Ghana Police Service, Ghana Armed Forces, National Peace Council, National and Regional Houses of Chiefs, civil society peacebuilders, ECOWAS and development partners to build up a more integrated and accountable protection architecture.

However, there are a number of limitations to the study. Its thematic focus on Bawku should not be interpreted as a reflection of the nature of communal violence in other parts of northern Ghana, it is qualitative and therefore does not claim to be statistically generalisable, the focus on the voices of security personnel, traditional authorities, civil society representatives and residents inevitably leaves out the voices of persons displaced by the communal violence and those whose relatives have lost their lives, and the analysis does not resolve the contested history of the Bawku

paramountcy, which has been the focus of various commissions of inquiry. The fluid operational context in which the fieldwork was carried out also constrained the study, as field access to frontline security installations was limited during periods of heightened tension and due to the translation considerations of the study's context, where individuals interact in languages other than English.

This article recommends that, based on the findings of the study, a standing mechanism be established in the Bawku Traditional Area, which brings together the Ghana Police Service, traditional authorities, civil society peacebuilders, and women and youth organisations to feed into the security planning process and also deliberately depoliticise state security responses by cross-party oversight of security operations in Bawku, ensuring that parties to the national political dispute are not perceived to control security deployment in the local conflict; collaboration between formal state agencies and traditional mediators strengthened in a recognised power-sharing arrangement under the National House of Chiefs, building on emerging perspectives outlined in the scholarly literature and used as a basis for moving beyond the single-paramountcy impasse; targeted inclusion of women, traders, youth and other groups who bear disproportionate costs of the conflict in mediation, livelihood and reconciliation processes; deepening of collaboration between formal state agencies and other regional and international bodies such as ECOWAS and United Nations partners in order to manage the cross-border dimension of the Bawku conflict; and, the institution of post-operation civilian protection audits that assess every major security operation against accepted protection standards, and results reported publically. These recommendations together anticipate a protection order that is not an isolated, coercive measure that must carry the burden by itself, but is part of a broader protective scope that includes conflict prevention, governance change, and community resilience.

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