Bridging the Gap: Stakeholder Knowledge and Governance Strategies for Countering Violent Extremism in Ghana

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Abstract

Ghana has, for the most part, been spared the violence that has engulfed several of its Sahelian neighbours, yet its exposure to spillover risk from Burkina Faso and Mali has grown steadily over the past decade. This raises a question that is often assumed rather than tested: do the officials, civil society actors and community leaders responsible for preventing extremism actually know the governance frameworks they are meant to apply? This study investigates this question through a qualitative, descriptive design combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis with 39 purposively sampled stakeholders drawn from government agencies, civil society organisations and traditional and community leadership structures across the Greater Accra and Northern regions. An embedded structured awareness inventory, administered within the interview protocol, allowed the study to report both the depth of participants' familiarity with specific instruments and the reasoning behind their responses. The findings show that awareness of foundational instruments, notably the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (Act 762) and the 2020 National Security Strategy, is comparatively strong, while awareness of more specialised instruments, particularly the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and its associated financial-crime amendments, is considerably weaker and unevenly distributed across stakeholder categories. Participants linked Ghana's vulnerability chiefly to youth unemployment, unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes, and the risk of spillover from conflict-affected neighbours, and they called for more consistent dissemination, inter-agency collaboration and community-based early-warning mechanisms. The study argues that the existence of a governance framework on paper does very little unless it is

matched by sustained investment in how that framework is communicated, understood and owned by the people expected to act on it, and it closes with a set of practical recommendations for strengthening stakeholder engagement in Ghana's counter-extremism architecture.

Keywords: violent extremism, terrorism, governance, stakeholder awareness, Ghana, West Africa

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1.0 Introduction

Violent extremism has become one of the defining security challenges of the past two decades, particularly in regions marked by political fragility, economic hardship and uneven institutional capacity. West Africa illustrates this trend starkly. What began as a largely Malian and Sahelian problem in the early 2010s has, over the past several years, pushed steadily southward, drawing coastal states that were once considered relatively insulated into the orbit of risk (UNDP, 2023). Ghana occupies an unusual position within this shifting landscape. It has remained politically stable, its security institutions are comparatively well resourced by regional standards, and it has not experienced a major extremist attack on its own soil. At the same time, it shares a long and porous border with Burkina Faso, a country that has suffered some of the sharpest escalations in extremist violence anywhere in the world in recent years (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). That combination of relative calm and rising proximate threat is precisely what makes Ghana an instructive case: the question is not simply whether Ghana has built the architecture to prevent extremism, but whether the people responsible for using that architecture know it well enough to make it work.

Ghana has, in fact, built an extensive governance architecture for this purpose. The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (as amended in 2012), the 2020 National Security Strategy, and the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism together set out the legal basis, institutional responsibilities and strategic priorities for the country's response. Yet a framework's existence on paper is only the starting point. Its practical value depends on whether government agencies, civil society organisations, traditional authorities and community members understand its provisions well enough to coordinate their efforts, comply with its requirements and translate its aims into everyday practice. Where implementation depends on a wide and uneven coalition of actors, as it does here, gaps in knowledge do not stay abstract for long; they surface as miscommunication, duplicated effort, and

policies that exist mainly in the documents that describe them rather than in the routines of the institutions meant to carry them out.

This is why governance, rather than security policy in a narrower sense, is the more useful lens for this study. Governance scholarship draws attention to transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, responsiveness and collaboration as the conditions that determine whether public action achieves its stated aims (Bevir, 2012; Stoker, 2018). In a country like Ghana, where formal state institutions operate alongside chieftaincy structures and community-level systems of authority, these conditions shape how security-relevant information circulates, how responsibilities are understood, and how prevention efforts are coordinated across very different kinds of actors. Framing the research question this way treats stakeholder awareness not as a peripheral detail but as a central test of whether the governance framework is functioning as intended.

It is also worth stating plainly that extremism in Ghana, as in other African countries, is rarely just a security problem. Poverty, unemployment, weak service delivery, unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes, and a general erosion of trust in institutions all create conditions in which extremist narratives can gain a foothold (Aubyn, 2021). These pressures are especially visible in Ghana's case given its youthful population, its long-running chieftaincy disputes, and its position along a border that has become considerably less secure. Any serious account of stakeholder knowledge, then, must be read against this wider backdrop rather than treated as a narrow, technical question about legal literacy.

Despite several academic writings on both the security threat itself and the formal architecture built to address it, comparatively little empirical work has asked how well the people responsible for implementing that architecture actually understand it, or what that understanding, or the lack of it, means for how the framework functions in practice. This paper addresses that gap directly. It asks three interrelated questions: What is

the level of stakeholder knowledge of Ghana's governance frameworks for preventing violent extremism? What factors shape that level of knowledge? And what are the implications of the resulting knowledge gaps for coordination and implementation among stakeholders? In pursuing these questions, the study aims to provide grounded evidence on where sensitisation and coordination efforts are working, where they are falling short, and what a more effective approach to stakeholder engagement might look like in the Ghanaian context.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within governance theory and reviews the empirical literature on the drivers of extremism in West Africa and the role of stakeholder knowledge in governance effectiveness. Section 3 sets out the study's qualitative design, sampling strategy and analytic approach. Section 4 presents the findings, organised around stakeholders' awareness of specific frameworks, their perceptions of what drives Ghana's vulnerability, and how they access and evaluate information on the subject. Section 5 discusses these findings against the theoretical and empirical literature, and Section 6 closes with conclusions and practical recommendations for strengthening Ghana's governance response.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Governance Theory

Theory, in the social sciences, is best understood as a constructed tool rather than a discovered truth; it exists to serve a purpose, namely, to bring order, focus and interpretive insight to an otherwise unwieldy set of observations (Weber, 2012; Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). Governance theory, the framework applied in this study, examines how institutions and structures shape decision-making and the implementation of public strategies, including counter-terrorism strategies (Salami, Joh, & Ibrahim, 2014). Its intellectual roots lie across political science, sociology and economics. Ronald Coase's (1937) work on transaction costs and

property rights, later developed by Oliver Williamson (2007), established the idea that organisational structures exist in part to manage conflicts of interest; Elinor Ostrom's (2002) research on how communities govern shared resources extended this thinking to collective action problems; and Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means' (1991) analysis of the separation of ownership and control added a further dimension concerned with accountability.

Because governance is inherently multidisciplinary, no single account of it commands universal agreement. Scholars distinguish institutional, collaborative, regulatory, network and corporate governance, among other variants (Vienna School of Governance, 2024). This study draws specifically on three of these strands: network governance, institutional governance and collaborative governance, each of which speaks to a different dimension of the research problem.

Network governance, associated with the work of Provan and Milward (1995) and later Sørensen and Torfing (2005), examines how public, semi-public and private actors coordinate through inter-organisational linkages rather than through any single hierarchical authority. Provan and Milward's comparative study of mental health delivery systems in four American cities found that network integration, external control, system stability and the availability of environmental resources jointly explain how effective these networks become. Sørensen and Torfing (2005) extended this line of thinking by asking whether such networks could be made democratically accountable and proposed an analytical model to evaluate their democratic performance. For the present study, network governance justified the decision to sample stakeholders across government, civil society and community categories rather than from a single institutional type, on the premise that awareness of a governance framework is distributed across, and dependent upon, the linkages between these different actors rather than residing within any one of them.

Institutional governance, most closely associated with Douglass North's (1990, 1991) work on the economic role of institutions, holds that institutions are "the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction" (North, 1991, p. 97), and that both formal rules and informal norms shape how effectively actors cooperate. North's argument that skills and knowledge are themselves a driver of institutional change is directly relevant here: gaps in stakeholder awareness are not incidental to institutional performance but are, in North's terms, evidence of weak institutional transmission. This premise guided the interview and focus group questions used in this study, which proved not only whether stakeholders knew a given framework but how, if at all, that knowledge had been communicated and reinforced through their institutions.

Collaborative governance, developed most influentially by Ansell and Gash (2008), describes a mode of decision-making that brings public and private stakeholders together around a shared, consensus-oriented process. Ansell and Gash identify conflict history, the incentives facing individual stakeholders, leadership, institutional design and the accumulation of small early successes as the conditions under which such collaboration tends to succeed. This strand directed attention, during the coding of the interview and focus group data, toward statements concerning trust, joint decision-making and the incentives that different stakeholder categories bring to counter-extremism work, and it subsequently informed the thematic categories reported in Section 4.

Taken together, these three strands were not used simply as background citations to be worked into the introduction; they shaped the empirical design at each stage, from sampling through to coding, and they provide the interpretive lens through which the findings are read in Section 5. This explicit linkage between theory and method is intended to move the analysis beyond a general appeal to governance concepts toward a genuinely theory-informed reading of what stakeholders in Ghana know,

and do not know, about the frameworks meant to guide their work.

2.2 Conceptual Clarification: Violent Extremism and Terrorism

Violent extremism and terrorism are related but distinct concepts, and both remain contested in the scholarly literature. Bak, Tarp and Liang (2019) define violent extremism as a form of mobilisation that seeks to elevate the status of one group while excluding or dominating others along lines such as religion, ethnicity, gender or culture, typically by dismantling existing political and cultural institutions and replacing them with structures aligned to an intolerant or totalitarian ideology. The Australian Government (2022, p. 9) offers a related definition, describing it as "a willingness to use unlawful violence or support the use of violence by others to promote a political, ideological or religious goal," a formulation broad enough to include terrorism alongside other forms of politically motivated or communal violence. A recurring difficulty in this literature is that violent extremism is frequently used as though its meaning were self-evident, without much effort to separate it clearly from adjacent terms such as radicalisation and terrorism (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino, & Caluya, 2011). For this study, violent extremism is understood as the use or threatened use of violence, coercion, or support for such acts, in pursuit of ideological, political or psychological goals.

Terrorism, for its part, lacks any single agreed definition, and debates over what should count as a terrorist act, and who should be labelled a terrorist, remain unresolved (Bak, Tarp, & Liang, 2019). Some scholars define it as premeditated, politically motivated violence directed against non-combatants by sub-state or clandestine actors, generally intended to influence an audience beyond the immediate victims (US Department of State, 2001; Rogers, 2018). Others conceptualise terrorism as a tactic employed by various groups, arguing that it comprises six defining elements: the use of violence; the involvement of organised groups; the pursuit of political objectives; the targeting of civilians; the exclusion of state actors, except where both parties to the conflict are non-state actors;

and its character as a tactic available to actors who lack the resources of a conventional state (Lutz & Lutz, 2019, 2022). Ghana's own Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (Act 762), as amended in 2012, defines a terrorist act as one carried out in furtherance of a political, ideological, religious, racial or ethnic cause that causes serious harm to persons or property, endangers public safety, involves firearms, explosives or hazardous substances, or is intended to disrupt essential infrastructure or services (Republic of Ghana, 2008, pp. 3–4). Following the Act's own framing, and consistent with the broader literature, this study treats terrorism as the deliberate use of violence against individuals or infrastructure to generate fear that extends well beyond the immediate target, in pursuit of political, ideological, religious, racial or ethnic aims. Where the term appears in this paper, it is written in full rather than abbreviated, both to keep the writing accessible to readers outside the security studies field and because the acronyms common in the specialist literature can obscure rather than clarify the distinctions at stake.

2.3 Global and Regional Trends

The global picture on terrorism is, on balance, worsening even as the number of recorded incidents falls. The Global Terrorism Index recorded a 22 percent rise in terrorism-related deaths in 2023, reaching 8,352, the highest total since 2017, even as the total number of attacks declined, implying that individual attacks have become considerably more lethal, with deaths per attack up 56 percent (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa has become the epicentre of this trend, accounting for close to half of all terrorism deaths and roughly a quarter of all attacks recorded in 2023 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). As the conflict in Syria has receded, groups aligned with the Islamic State and with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin have redirected their focus toward the Sahel, and the latter organisation is now considered the fastest-growing terrorist group in the world, while the Islamic State's West Africa affiliate has been ranked the single most lethal (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2022, 2023, 2024). The consequences of this shift

are not confined to the Sahel itself. Since around 2020, the UNDP (2023) has documented a steady push of extremist activity toward the coastal states of West Africa, converting what was once viewed as a landlocked, Sahelian problem into a shared regional one. Ghana's long border with Burkina Faso places it squarely within this zone of heightened exposure.

The concentration of violence in conflict-affected states is well documented: in 2022, the fifteen countries most affected by terrorism were all embroiled in active conflict, and nearly all terrorism-related deaths, 97.6 percent, occurred in conflict-affected countries, with 80 percent of these within fifty kilometres of an active conflict zone (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). This pattern is consistent with the broader argument that extremist violence tends to take root where conflict, weak governance and porous borders already coexist, as has been observed in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Somalia and Nigeria (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023).

2.4 Drivers of Vulnerability

The scholarly consensus is that no single factor accounts for why individuals or communities become vulnerable to extremist recruitment. Structural conditions, including poverty, discrimination, marginalisation, weak governance and unresolved historical grievances, interact with psychological factors at the level of the individual and the group, and with the more calculated, cost-benefit reasoning that rational-choice accounts emphasise (Ross, 1993; Crenshaw, 2007). Allan et al. (2015) situate these dynamics across three levels: macro-level conditions affecting entire countries or regions, meso-level conditions affecting specific communities or identity groups, and micro-level factors shaping individual decisions to join. The UNDP's (2023) study of pathways into extremism across Africa adds a developmental dimension to this picture, associating recruitment with childhood unhappiness, weak parental involvement, unemployment, a sense of injustice, and distrust of government.

In Ghana specifically, the 2020 National Security Strategy identifies a cluster of structural vulnerabilities, including poverty, inequality, corruption, weak law enforcement, chieftaincy and land disputes, and electoral violence, alongside newer concerns such as cyber threats, the proliferation of small arms, and the spread of misinformation (Republic of Ghana, 2020). Aubyn (2021) adds that Ghana's exposure is compounded by its geographic proximity to countries experiencing active extremist violence, by rising irregular migration, and by the documented, if still limited, involvement of extremist actors in the country's artisanal mining sector. Ofosu-Mensah (2012) similarly points to the entanglement of mining disputes and chieftaincy conflicts as a distinctly Ghanaian dimension of structural vulnerability. Read together, this literature suggests that youth unemployment, unresolved local disputes and cross-border spillover are not simply background conditions but the specific vulnerabilities most likely to be named by Ghanaian stakeholders themselves, a proposition this study tests directly in Section 4.

2.5 Stakeholder Knowledge and the Effectiveness of Governance Frameworks

A governance framework's formal existence is not, on its own, a guarantee of its effectiveness. Prah and Chanimbe (2021) argue that translating a counter-terrorism framework into practical benefit depends on active knowledge management, including inter-agency training, media collaboration and the continuous updating of personnel on emerging trends. Evidence from elsewhere in West Africa suggests this is achievable: assessments in Nigeria (Counter-Terrorism Centre, 2022; Ibrahim, 2021) and in Kenya (Kessels, Durner, & Schwartz, 2016; Mutisya, 2023; Kirima & Khayundi, 2024) both reports comparatively high levels of stakeholder knowledge, though these studies do not always distinguish clearly between awareness of a framework's existence and a working understanding of its provisions.

More broadly, governance scholarship consistently treats stakeholder

engagement and awareness as central determinants of whether a framework functions as intended, whether the domain in question is counter-extremism, educational reform or environmental sustainability (Arribas, 2020; Bettencourt, Simões, Fernandes, & Fonseca, 2023; Aguilera, Aragón-Correa, Marano, & Tashman, 2021). This literature repeatedly emphasises that governance frameworks require continuous, adaptive engagement rather than one-off dissemination if they are to remain effective as circumstances change (Clarke, Westerhuis, & Winch, 2021). The implication for the present study is that stakeholder knowledge should not be treated as a fixed baseline to be measured once, but as something that is either actively maintained through institutional practice or allowed to atrophy in its absence, an argument developed further in the discussion in Section 5.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive research design, chosen because the research questions ask what stakeholders know and how that knowledge shapes coordination and implementation, rather than seeking to test a causal relationship between variables (Sandelowski, 2000). A descriptive qualitative approach was judged more appropriate than a quantitative survey design for two reasons. First, the object of interest, stakeholder knowledge of a governance framework, is not reducible to a simple present-or-absent measure; it involves depth of understanding, the reasoning stakeholders use to justify their responses, and the institutional context in which that knowledge was or was not acquired, all of which are better captured through open-ended engagement than through fixed-response instruments. Second, a purely quantitative approach would have said little about why gaps in awareness exist or what stakeholders believe should be done about them, both of which were central to the study's purpose.

To allow for systematic comparison across stakeholder categories and frameworks, an eleven-item structured awareness inventory was embedded within the semi-structured interview and focus group protocol. This inventory asked participants directly whether they were familiar with each of four named instruments, namely the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (Act 762); the 2020 National Security Strategy; the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism; and the Anti-Money Laundering Act, 2012, together with its subsequent amendments, before moving into open-ended follow-up questions asking participants to explain what they understood these instruments to contain and how they had come to know about them. This hybrid design allowed the study to report both the distribution of awareness across the sample, presented in Section 4, and the qualitative reasoning behind it, without requiring a full mixed-methods architecture built around a separate quantitative instrument.

3.2 Study Sites and Sampling

Fieldwork was conducted in the Greater Accra and Northern regions of Ghana. Greater Accra was selected as the seat of national government and the location of most of the ministries, agencies and civil society organisations with a direct policy role in counter-extremism governance. The Northern Region was selected purposively, rather than as a matched comparison site, because national security assessments have repeatedly identified it as an area of heightened exposure to cross-border violent extremism risk given its proximity to Burkina Faso (Republic of Ghana, 2020; UNDP, 2023). Including both sites allowed the study to compare how awareness of national frameworks looks from the administrative centre against how it looks in a region living closer to the threat itself.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct involvement in, or responsibility for, counter-extremism governance: government officials, security-sector personnel, civil society representatives, and traditional and community leaders. A

maximum-variation strategy was applied within this purposive frame, deliberately seeking out participants who differed in institutional role, seniority and geographic location, since the study aimed to compare knowledge across stakeholder categories rather than to generalise statistically to a wider population. Government and security-sector participants were identified through direct contact with relevant ministries and agencies. Civil society and community-level participants were identified through a combination of institutional referral and snowball sampling, in which initial participants suggested other knowledgeable individuals, a strategy intended to reach community-level actors who would not otherwise appear on institutional contact lists.

Eligibility required that participants held a current or recent role, within the preceding three years, connected to security governance, counter-extremism policy, or community-level peacebuilding, and that they were able to participate in English or in Twi or Dagbani with interpretation support. In total, 39 stakeholders participated across the two regions. Table 1 summarises the composition of the final sample.

Table 1. *Composition of the Study Sample (N = 39)*

Stakeholder category	Greater Accra	Northern Region	Total	Percentage
Government officials (policy and security-sector)	10	6	16	41.0%
Civil society representatives	6	5	11	28.2%
Traditional and community leaders	3	9	12	30.8%
Total	**19**	**20**	**39**	**100%**

Note. Government officials include representatives of security ministries, the police service and district security committees. Civil society representatives include non-governmental organisations working on peacebuilding, human rights and community development. Traditional and community leaders include chiefs, assembly members and recognised community elders.

3.3 Data Collection

Three data sources were combined: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. Interviews were conducted individually with government officials, security-sector personnel and civil society representatives, and provided space for participants to speak candidly about institutional dynamics that they might have been reluctant to discuss in a group setting, particularly where those dynamics touched on inter-agency friction or resource constraints. Interviews lasted between forty-five and seventy minutes and were conducted in person at participants' workplaces or a mutually convenient neutral location.

Focus group discussions were held separately with community members in each research site, with each group limited to participants drawn from a single community to avoid inhibiting discussion of locally sensitive issues such as chieftaincy disputes. These discussions surfaced grassroots perspectives, particularly around informal, community-level early-warning practices, that individual interviews with institutional actors alone would not have captured. Institutional and community-level participants were deliberately interviewed in separate settings, a decision taken in recognition that participants' institutional position could shape what they were willing to say. Government officials, for instance, might have an incentive to present frameworks more favourably than their day-to-day experience would support, while community members might be reluctant to discuss chieftaincy disputes candidly in the presence of officials. Separating the two groups was intended to reduce this risk, and where positionality appeared to shape a particular response, this is flagged

in the presentation of findings in Section 4.

Document analysis complemented the interview and focus group data. Relevant policy documents, including the National Security Strategy, the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, and reports produced by government agencies and non-governmental organisations, were reviewed to provide contextual background against which participants' responses could be interpreted, and to verify factual claims made about the content and status of specific instruments.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis: familiarisation with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, searching for candidate themes, reviewing themes against both the coded extracts and the full dataset, defining and naming the final themes, and producing the analytic narrative presented in Section 4. Coding combined deductive categories drawn from the study's governance-theory framework, including awareness and knowledge, inter-agency coordination, collaboration and trust, and resource and capacity constraints, with inductive codes that emerged from participants' own language during the coding process. Two members of the research team independently coded a subset of the transcripts and compared their coding to check the consistency of interpretation, with any disagreements resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged across successive interviews and focus groups, at which point the research team judged that thematic saturation had been reached. Findings from the interviews, focus groups and document analysis were triangulated to corroborate recurring themes and to identify points of divergence between stakeholder categories, which are reported explicitly in Section 4 rather than smoothed over.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Positionality

Beyond the separation of institutional and community-level data collection described above, several further steps were taken to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Interview and focus group guides were piloted with two participants outside the final sample and revised for clarity before fieldwork began. Preliminary themes were shared with a small number of participants for member-checking, allowing them to confirm or challenge the research team's interpretation of what had been said. Field notes recording the research team's observations and reflections were kept throughout data collection and were used, alongside the transcripts, during coding to help distinguish participants' own language from the researchers' interpretive gloss on it.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before fieldwork began. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and written or verbally informed consent, as appropriate to the setting, was obtained before data collection. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, particular care was taken to anonymise participants in the presentation of findings; quotations are attributed only to a stakeholder category and region, never to an individual or named institution.

3.7 Limitations

Three limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. First, the purposive and snowball sampling strategy, while well suited to reaching knowledgeable stakeholders, means the findings are not statistically generalisable to all stakeholders nationally. Second, the sample of 39 participants, concentrated in two regions, may not capture the perspectives of stakeholders in other vulnerable areas, such as the Upper East and Upper West regions, which also border states

experiencing active extremist violence. Third, self-reported knowledge of governance frameworks is potentially subject to social-desirability bias, particularly among government participants who may feel some pressure to present their institutions favourably. The study sought to mitigate this through the open-ended follow-up questions described in Section 3.1, which asked participants to explain, rather than simply assert, their level of familiarity, but the possibility of some residual bias cannot be ruled out. These limitations do not undermine the study's contribution to identifying patterns of awareness and gaps in Ghana's governance framework, but they should inform how far the findings are read as representative of the wider stakeholder population.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Awareness of Governance Frameworks

Stakeholders' familiarity with Ghana's governance frameworks for preventing violent extremism was uneven, and the pattern of that unevenness is informative. Awareness of foundational, longer-standing instruments was comparatively strong: thirty-three of the thirty-nine participants reported familiarity with the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (Act 762), and thirty-one reported familiarity with the 2020 National Security Strategy. Awareness dropped noticeably for more specialised instruments. Twenty-three participants reported familiarity with the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, and only twenty-one reported familiarity with the Anti-Money Laundering Act, 2012, and its subsequent amendments. Several participants, particularly among civil society and community-level respondents, explained this gap by noting that newer instruments and amendments are simply not publicised as widely as the founding legislation, leaving them to learn about updates informally, if at all.

Table 2 breaks this pattern down by stakeholder category. The breakdown shows that the drop in awareness for specialised instruments was not evenly distributed: government officials remained comparatively well

informed across all four instruments, while civil society representatives and, especially, traditional and community leaders showed a much steeper decline in familiarity with the newer, more technical frameworks.

Table 2. *Stakeholder Awareness of Selected Governance Frameworks, by Category (N = 39)*

Framework	Government (n = 16)	Civil society (n = 11)	Community leaders (n = 12)	Total aware	% of sample
Anti-Terrorism Act, 2008 (Act 762)	16	10	7	33	84.6%
National Security Strategy (2020)	15	9	7	31	79.5%
National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism	13	6	4	23	59.0%
Anti-Money Laundering Act, 2012 (as amended)	12	5	4	21	53.8%

Note. Figures represent the number of participants in each category who indicated familiarity with the named framework during the structured awareness component of data collection.

This divergence is consistent with what participants said when asked to

elaborate. Foundational frameworks, they explained, had benefited from years of institutional repetition, media coverage and inclusion in basic security-sector training, while newer or more technical instruments had not yet been absorbed into the same routines. As one civil society participant in the Northern Region put it, more sensitisation was needed on the specialised framework's core components so that stakeholders could not just recognise its name but actually apply it: understanding the framework's provisions in the abstract is of limited use if stakeholders cannot translate them into implementation mechanisms on the ground. This distinction, between recognising a framework's existence and being able to act on its content, recurred throughout the interviews and is taken up further in the discussion below.

4.2 Perceived Drivers of Ghana's Vulnerability

When asked what makes Ghana vulnerable to violent extremism, participants converged on a fairly consistent set of themes, summarised in Table 3, though the emphasis placed on each varied somewhat between the two regions.

Table 3. *Perceived Drivers of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism, as Raised by Participants (N = 39)*

Theme	Participants raising theme	% of sample
Youth unemployment and limited economic opportunity	34	87.2%
Risk of spillover from conflict-affected neighbouring countries	30	76.9%
Unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes	27	69.2%
Weak trust between government and communities	19	48.7%
Porous borders and weak border security	17	43.6%

Youth unemployment was the most consistently cited driver across both regions. Participants described a large population of young people without stable economic prospects as, in effect, a standing invitation to extremist recruiters, who could offer material incentives that the formal economy was failing to provide. Several participants linked this directly to the demographic pressures identified in Ghana's 2020 National Security Strategy, arguing that limited employment opportunities compound frustration among young people in ways that make them more receptive to extremist messaging.

Unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes emerged as the second most frequently cited driver, particularly among participants in the Northern Region. Participants described these disputes as longstanding fault lines that had, in some communities, already produced violent clashes, and argued that this history of instability creates conditions extremist actors can exploit even where no formal extremist presence yet exists. The concern was less that these disputes were extremism in themselves, and more that they weakened community cohesion and trust in local governance in ways that left communities more exposed.

The risk of spillover from Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, Mali and Togo, was raised almost as frequently, and was described in more immediate, visceral terms than the other themes. Participants pointed to the porous nature of Ghana's northern border and to the tendency of extremist groups to exploit weak security infrastructure and local grievances to establish a foothold in new territory, and several noted that as extremist activity intensified closer to Ghana's borders, the country's own exposure rose correspondingly. These three themes, youth unemployment, unresolved local disputes and cross-border spillover, are consistent with the wider West African literature reviewed in Section 2.4 (Aubyn, 2021; Ofosu-Mensah, 2012; UNDP, 2022, 2023), and their prominence in the Ghanaian data suggests that participants' own diagnoses of the problem track fairly closely with the academic and policy

consensus, even where their vocabulary for describing it differs.

4.3 Information Sources and Continuing Education

Participants relied on a mix of sources to stay informed about violent extremism and the governance frameworks addressing it, summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. *Sources of Information on Governance Frameworks Cited by Participants (N = 39, multiple responses permitted)*

Source	Participants citing source	% of sample
Government publications and official briefings	29	74.4%
Security-sector briefings	24	61.5%
Academic journals and research reports	18	46.2%
Media (television, radio, print, online)	22	56.4%
Informal networks and colleagues	15	38.5%

Government publications and official briefings were the most frequently cited sources across all three stakeholder categories, valued by participants for providing authoritative and current information on legal and strategic frameworks. Security briefings were valued particularly by government and security-sector participants for the real-time intelligence and threat assessment they provide, information that is less readily available through published sources. Academic journals were cited less frequently overall but were specifically valued by participants for offering research-based analysis that helped contextualise immediate developments within longer-term patterns. Media sources, while widely used, drew a more ambivalent response: several participants noted that media coverage, while useful for staying current, was uneven in quality

and occasionally propagated inaccurate or sensationalised information, underscoring the importance of cross-verifying media reports against more authoritative sources.

The frequency with which participants sought out this information varied considerably, from those who checked in on developments weekly, often as a routine part of their institutional role, to others who did so only monthly or on an ad hoc basis driven by specific events. Participation in formal training, workshops and other educational sessions on preventing violent extremism was similarly mixed: some participants, mostly in government and security-sector roles, reported extensive and recurring training, while others, particularly among community-level participants, reported little or none.

4.4 Perceived Adequacy of Knowledge

Opinions were divided when participants were asked directly whether they considered their own knowledge of the governance frameworks sufficient for their role. A majority described their knowledge as broadly adequate, while still recognising a need for continuing education, and a smaller but notable group described their knowledge as genuinely lacking, particularly in relation to the more specialised instruments discussed in Section 4.1. This sentiment was captured succinctly by one government official in the Greater Accra region, who observed:

Knowledge is critical in our fight against extremism; we must ensure all stakeholders are adequately informed of the frameworks. For example, stakeholders need more sensitisation on the four pillars of the National Framework for Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism to ensure stakeholders understand and internalise them in the implementation mechanisms.

This observation reflects a theme that recurred across the interviews and focus groups: the distinction, noted already in Section 4.1, between recognising that a framework exists and being able to explain what it

requires. Participants who described themselves as confident in their knowledge tended to link that confidence to regular institutional exposure, through training, briefings or direct involvement in implementation, rather than to any general familiarity with the subject. Conversely, participants who described gaps in their own knowledge, most often among civil society and community-level respondents, tended to attribute this to limited access to training opportunities rather than to any lack of interest in the subject. This pattern is taken up in the discussion that follows, which reads these findings against the theoretical framework set out in Section 2.

5.0 Discussion

The findings presented above speak directly to the three research questions set out in Section 1, and they do so in ways that both confirm and complicate the existing literature on governance and stakeholder engagement.

On the first question, concerning the overall level of stakeholder knowledge, the two-tier pattern identified in Table 2 'strong awareness of foundational instruments alongside weaker awareness of newer, more specialised ones' is broadly consistent with governance research showing that the effectiveness of a framework depends heavily on the level of stakeholder engagement and awareness sustained around it (Arribas, 2020). It also lends empirical support to the broader argument that co-productive governance, in which stakeholders are active participants in a framework's ongoing life rather than passive recipients of a single announcement, is necessary for effective implementation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Ansell & Gash, 2008). The fact that awareness clusters around instruments with a longer institutional history suggests that familiarity in this domain accumulates gradually, through repeated exposure, rather than being established once and retained indefinitely. Read through the lens of institutional governance theory, this pattern is precisely what North's (1990, 1991) account would predict: institutions

function as constraints that structure interaction only to the extent that their rules are actively transmitted and reinforced, and the comparatively low awareness of the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism among community-level participants is best read as evidence of weak institutional transmission rather than as evidence that community leaders are simply less engaged with the subject.

On the second question, concerning the factors shaping stakeholder knowledge, the findings point squarely to differential access to institutional exposure, training and briefings, rather than to differences in motivation or interest. Government and security-sector participants, who benefit from routine institutional training and briefings, reported the highest and most consistent levels of awareness across all four frameworks. However, civil society and, especially, community-level participants, who typically lack equivalent institutional channels, reported markedly lower awareness of newer instruments despite expressing comparable levels of concern about the underlying threat. This is consistent with the broader literature linking training and continuous professional development to stakeholders' capacity to implement and adapt counter-extremism strategies (Amit & Kafy, 2022; Sydes et al., 2023; Jackson et al, 2019). It also supports Network Governance's core premise: because awareness is distributed across, and dependent upon, the linkages between different kinds of actors, a framework that is well understood within government but poorly transmitted to civil society and community structures will function as a genuinely networked governance system only in a partial sense (Provan & Milward, 1995; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005).

On the third question, concerning the implications of these knowledge gaps for coordination and implementation, the findings suggest that the practical cost of uneven awareness is not simply a matter of some stakeholders knowing less than others in the abstract; it shapes who can

participate meaningfully in implementation at all. Participants themselves drew this connection explicitly, associating gaps in specialised knowledge with an inability to translate a framework's stated pillars into concrete local action, echoing collaborative governance's emphasis on shared understanding as a precondition for genuine joint decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Where community leaders and civil society actors are expected to contribute to implementation without the same institutional grounding available to government officials, the resulting asymmetry risks reproducing, within the governance framework itself, exactly the kind of top-down, centre-heavy dynamic that collaborative and network governance approaches were designed to move away from.

The findings on perceived drivers of vulnerability, summarised in Table 3, largely corroborate the existing literature on West Africa (Aubyn, 2021; Ofosu-Mensah, 2012; UNDP, 2022, 2023; Oriola & Knight, 2019), with youth unemployment, unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes, and cross-border spillover from Burkina Faso and its neighbours emerging as the dominant themes in both regions. What the present study adds is confirmation that these structural drivers, so often discussed at a fairly abstract policy level in the literature, are also the terms in which stakeholders on the ground actually understand their own vulnerability, suggesting a reasonably strong alignment between academic and policy diagnoses of the problem and practitioner experience. This alignment is, on balance, encouraging, since it implies that governance interventions built around these themes are likely to resonate with the stakeholders responsible for carrying them out, rather than requiring an additional round of persuasion about which problems actually matter.

The pattern of information-seeking documented in Section 4.3 offers a further, more practical layer to this picture. Stakeholders' reliance on government publications and security briefings as their primary information sources is consistent with prior findings that official channels are generally regarded as more credible than media coverage, even as

many participants continue to consult media sources for the sake of currency (Faure-Walker, 2019). The comparatively lower reliance on academic research, cited by fewer than half of participants, suggests a persistent gap between scholarly output on Ghana's security governance and the channels stakeholders actually use to inform their day-to-day work, a gap that researchers and policymakers alike might usefully address through more deliberate translation of academic findings into practitioner-facing formats.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Ghana's difficulty is less a matter of designing better governance instruments and considerably more a matter of sustaining the institutional work required to keep existing instruments alive in the awareness of the people meant to use them. This is not a uniquely Ghanaian problem; it echoes a recurring theme in governance research more broadly, namely that frameworks require continuous, adaptive engagement rather than a single moment of dissemination if they are to remain effective as circumstances evolve (Clarke, Westerhuis, & Winch, 2021). What the Ghanaian case adds is a clear illustration of how this general principle plays out unevenly across different categories of stakeholder, with real consequences for how inclusive and genuinely collaborative the resulting governance system can be.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to establish how well stakeholders in Ghana know the governance frameworks meant to prevent violent extremism, what shapes that knowledge, and what the resulting gaps mean for coordination and implementation. The evidence gathered across thirty-nine interviews and focus group discussions in the Greater Accra and Northern regions points to a fairly clear conclusion: awareness is real but uneven, strongest for long-established instruments and weakest for newer, more technical ones, and this unevenness tracks closely with differences in institutional access to training and briefings rather than with differences in concern about the

underlying threat. Stakeholders across all three categories, government, civil society and community leadership, agreed on what makes Ghana vulnerable: youth unemployment, unresolved local disputes and the risk of spillover from conflict-affected neighbours, and on what would help: more consistent communication, stronger inter-agency and cross-sector collaboration, and greater investment in community-level early-warning capacity. What differed was less their diagnosis of the problem than their access to the institutional resources needed to act on it.

The practical implication is that Ghana's governance architecture for preventing violent extremism does not, primarily, need new instruments; it needs sustained investment in how the instruments that already exist are communicated, understood and owned by the full range of actors expected to apply them.

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations.

1. **Strengthen dissemination of specialised frameworks.** Government agencies should develop a deliberate communication strategy for newer or more technical instruments, particularly the National Framework and Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and the amended Anti-Money Laundering Act, using formats, such as accessible summaries, community briefings and localised translations, that reach civil society and community-level actors as effectively as they currently reach government officials.
2. **Build formal, recurring channels for cross-sector collaboration.** Rather than relying on ad hoc engagement, government agencies should establish standing platforms, such as regional stakeholder forums, that bring government, civil society and traditional authorities together on a regular schedule to share updates, resources and emerging concerns, consistent with the collaborative governance principle that trust and shared understanding are built cumulatively rather than instantaneously.

3. **Extend training and capacity building beyond the security sector.** Given the clear link identified in this study between institutional training and awareness, training opportunities currently concentrated in government and security-sector institutions should be extended more deliberately to civil society organisations and community leadership structures, with content tailored to the practical, implementation-facing knowledge that these actors identified as lacking.
4. **Invest in community-based early-warning and response mechanisms.** Community leaders in this study consistently emphasised their capacity to identify local risk factors, including chieftaincy and land disputes, ahead of their escalation. Government agencies should build formal channels for community leaders to feed this local knowledge into national early-warning systems, both to improve the systems themselves and to give community actors a tangible stake in the governance framework's success.
5. **Address the underlying structural drivers directly.** Because youth unemployment, unresolved chieftaincy and land disputes, and weak border security were consistently identified as the drivers of Ghana's vulnerability, governance strategies focused narrowly on security-sector coordination are unlikely to succeed on their own. These should be paired with, and explicitly linked to, existing employment, land-dispute resolution and border-management initiatives, so that counter-extremism governance is understood as connected to, rather than separate from, this wider policy agenda.
6. **Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms tied to awareness, not only activity.** Current monitoring of counter-extremism strategies tends to track implementation activity rather than stakeholder understanding. Government agencies should incorporate periodic awareness assessments, of the kind piloted in this study, into routine monitoring and evaluation, allowing gaps

in knowledge to be identified and addressed before they translate into implementation failures.

7. **Encourage academic-practitioner exchange.** Given the comparatively limited reliance on academic research as an information source documented in Section 4.3, universities and research institutions should invest more deliberately in translating research findings into formats accessible to practitioners, whether through policy briefs, practitioner workshops or structured partnerships with the agencies responsible for implementation.

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