# Understanding and Addressing Linkages Between Maritime Security and Land-based Human Insecurities


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## 1. Introduction

The contemporary maritime domain is increasingly recognized as a geopolitical and economic space, but also as an environment intertwined with human, social, ecological, and governance systems ashore. The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research *(UNIDIR* 2024) report argues that maritime security has evolved from a narrow naval and state-centered concern into a multidimensional issue embedded in global human security. Likewise, (Piegon, 2025) considers maritime crimes, such as piracy, smuggling, and trafficking as extensions of terrestrial criminal networks rooted in exclusion and inequality. In the Gulf of Guinea, for instance, onshore unemployment and corruption enable recruitment into maritime criminal operations. (Fabinyi and others 2025), suggest that a more holistic approach to maritime security is needed that encompasses state, economic, human and environmental security to make maritime security more equitable, sustainable and responsive to contemporary social and environmental challenges.

This paper examines ***How are maritime security and land-based human insecurities interconnected, and what governance mechanisms can address them?*** It adopts a global analytical perspective but grounds its empirical discussion primarily in the Atlantic African maritime spaces, where the intersection between coastal poverty, illegal resources exploitation, and maritime threats is visible.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first explores the conceptual framework that could be applied to the maritime land insecurity nexus. The second assesses the linkages between Maritime and land-based human insecurities. The third presents the key findings and some policy recommendations.

## 2. Conceptual Frameworks

### *2.1. Maritime security: Definition and Evolution*

Since the end of the Cold War, the notion of *maritime security* has progressively expanded. Initially dominated by naval defense and freedom of navigation, it now encompasses threats such as piracy, terrorism, environmental degradation, human

trafficking, and IUU fishing (Bueger, 2015). *UNIDIR (2024)* defines it as "a condition in which people, infrastructure, and the marine environment are protected from harm, enabling sustainable economic and human development." This broadened understanding aligns maritime governance with the Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 14 on "Life Below Water."

Drawing on *UNIDIR (2024)* and *Bueger (2015)*, five interrelated dimensions can be identified in maritime security:

1. **State and defense security:** Protection of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and navigation routes.
2. **Economic security:** Safeguarding maritime trade, offshore energy infrastructure, and blue economy activities.
3. **Environmental security:** Preventing pollution, resource depletion, and ecological collapse.
4. **Human and community security:** Ensuring livelihoods, food access, and labor rights for coastal populations.
5. **Cyber and infrastructure security:** Protecting ports, undersea cables and pipelines, as well as energy grids from cyber or hybrid threats.

### *2.2. Analytical Frameworks Applied to the Maritime-Land Nexus*

Three conceptual frameworks help elucidate the interconnections between Maritime security and land-based insecurities:

**Human Security Paradigm:** Shifts focus from sovereignty to individual well-being, emphasizing that maritime threats undermine food, health, and livelihood security (UNIDIR, 2024).

**Regional Security Complexes theory:** posits that neighboring states' security problems are interdependent and cannot be solved unilaterally (Burry Buzan and Ole Waever 2003). In maritime contexts, this translates directly: insecurity in one country's territorial waters (piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling) spills into neighboring EEZs and shared ocean basins. For Atlantic Africa specifically, a single weak maritime state creates vulnerabilities across the entire Gulf of Guinea—fishing vessel theft in Benin affects shipping corridors Nigeria uses; oil bunkering in Nigeria destabilizes regional trade routes; governance collapse in Somalia enables transnational maritime criminal networks operating across the Red Sea.

**The Maritime Security Matrix:** Bueger's (2015) "maritime security matrix" conceptualizes maritime threats as both *symptoms* and *drivers* of terrestrial insecurity. Similarly, *UNIDIR (2024)* stresses that maritime stability cannot exist without governance capacity, poverty reduction, and environmental resilience on land. In Atlantic Africa, declining fish stocks and offshore oil exploitation exemplify this

interplay. In other words, maritime resources underpin coastal community livelihoods, but their mismanagement fuels both coastal poverty and criminal economies.

Together, these frameworks situate maritime insecurity within broader human and ecological systems rather than as isolated acts.

## 3. Understanding linkages between maritime and land-based human insecurities

### *3.1 Land-to-Sea: How Terrestrial Vulnerabilities Drive Maritime Crime*

Land-based insecurities, such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, and weak governance, constitute fertile ground for maritime crimes. Likewise limited state presence along coasts creates “permissive environments” for illegal fishing and smuggling networks. Similarly, land-based insurgencies project into maritime spaces as "maritime terrorism."

Studies in the Gulf of Guinea demonstrate that youth joblessness and environmental degradation from oil exploitation have increased piracy recruitment. In Nigeria, the Niger Delta Avengers' 2016 offshore pipeline sabotage campaign illustrates this dynamic: onshore grievances over oil pollution, poverty, and inequitable revenue-sharing drove militant groups to target maritime infrastructure, slashing Nigeria's oil output and costing the state approximately $1 billion in lost revenue (CFR, 2024). In the same region, Nigeria’s Niger Delta conflict over oil revenues has given rise to militant groups that hijack ships, steal crude, and kidnap crew for ransom. These pirates and oil thieves thrive on the legacy of weak governance, corruption, and inequality – they can recruit impoverished coastal youths, obtain weapons, and evade law enforcement through bribery or intimidation. Similarly, Sahelian jihadists exploit poorly monitored harbors across West Africa's 6,000+ km coastline for weapons trafficking or clandestine movement (ISS, 2024).

In Yemen, civil conflict has spilled into the Red Sea through Houthi attacks on shipping lanes (Policy Center for the New South, 2024). Such actions not only disrupt global trade but also exacerbate humanitarian crises, showing how terrestrial violence and extremism can manifest in maritime domains.

Moreover, it can be argued that the growing coastal concentration of populations in Atlantic Africa increases social and economic pressures in cities, causes greater marine pollution, and encourages illegal migration. Also, the attacks carried out by malicious groups or unscrupulous governments against submarine cables or offshore gas and oil pipelines cause serious damage to marine ecosystems. Similarly, marine disruptions, rising sea levels, melting ice, and the disappearance of marine species are largely the result of societal and economic models that are destructive to the environment.

These examples confirm that terrestrial vulnerabilities, particularly poverty and weak governance, are the primary drivers of maritime insecurity.

### *3.2 Sea-to-Land: How Maritime Disruptions Amplify Coastal Crises*

Maritime disruptions such as piracy, port blockades, oil spills intensify land-based crises. In the Niger Delta, the profits from piracy and oil bunkering feed criminal networks and sometimes armed groups on land, perpetuating instability. Maritime terror disruptions (pipeline sabotage, port attacks) similarly destabilize onshore economies and reduce government capacity to address root grievances, creating feedback loops that perpetuate violence.

Likewise, environmental degradation from IUU fishing and pollution worsens food insecurity in coastal Africa, where fish accounts for nearly 19% of animal protein intake (FAO, 2024). Industrial-scale illegal fishing by foreign vessels depletes local fish stocks, triggering cascading human security crises. In Ghana, average artisanal canoe income has declined as much as 40% over the past 15 years due to stock depletion (EJF 2025), driving coastal youth toward piracy recruitment. The broader consequence is acute: the crash of fish stocks in Senegal around 2005–2006 forced an estimated 36,000 West Africans—mainly Senegalese and Mauritanians—to risk dangerous voyages to Spain's Canary Islands in search of work. This reflects a direct causal link between collapsing fisheries and irregular migration. Today, the North-West African "Atlantic route" to Europe remains one of the world's deadliest migration corridors, populated by desperate coastal youth from Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania whose fishing livelihoods have collapsed (Global Initiative, 2024). Those who remain face rising food insecurity and social strains of poverty. In some cases, frustrated fishermen have turned to illicit maritime activities themselves—lacking employment, they join IUU fishing operations or piracy crews (INTERPOL, 2024).

Beyond livelihood theft, IUU fishing operates as a vehicle for multiple transnational crimes. Industrial trawlers—predominantly foreign-owned vessels flagged under local registries to evade oversight—use fishing operations as cover for smuggling drugs, weapons, and stolen oil along the West African coast. The scale of theft is staggering: illegal fishing is estimated to cost West African nations between $2.3 and $9.4 billion annually in stolen value and lost government revenues (ADF Magazine, 2023). This resource plunder robs states of income and tax revenue that could be invested in development, while simultaneously eroding public trust in authorities' capacity to protect national wealth—feeding political grievances and social unrest. Thus, maritime resource crimes are intimately linked to land-based human security issues, from unemployment and non-regular migration to corruption and governance erosion.
Similarly, maritime attacks in the Red Sea have inflated global energy prices and disrupted humanitarian aid deliveries. Fear of attacks has driven up shipping costs and deterred investment in coastal communities, hurting legitimate economies and weakening governance (Atlantic Council, 2025). Maritime threats thus magnify terrestrial insecurities through economic shocks, environmental loss, governance

erosion, and forced displacement.

### *3.3 The Vicious Cycle: The Maritime-Land Insecurity Nexus in Atlantic Africa*

The maritime-land insecurity nexus operates as a self-perpetuating cycle where each disruption amplifies vulnerabilities across domains. Understanding this cyclical dynamic is essential for designing interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms alone.

**The Cycle Begins Onshore:** Poor governance, poverty, and limited economic opportunity in coastal communities create recruitment pools for maritime crime. Youth unemployment drives piracy recruitment; weak law enforcement enables smuggling networks; corruption allows officials to be bribed. These terrestrial vulnerabilities translate directly into maritime crimes—piracy, IUU fishing, terrorism, and trafficking.

**Maritime Disruptions Ripple Landward:** Once maritime crimes gain foothold, they generate immediate economic shocks onshore. Piracy and oil bunkering profits feed criminal networks and armed groups, perpetuating land-based instability (Niger Delta case). Fear of maritime attacks drives up shipping costs and deters foreign investment in coastal communities, weakening legitimate economies and governance capacity. Maritime terror disruptions—pipeline sabotage, port attacks—destabilize onshore economies and reduce government revenue precisely when it is needed to address root grievances. Environmental degradation from IUU fishing depletes fish stocks, worsening food insecurity where fish provides 19% of animal protein intake (FAO, 2024). In Ghana, artisanal canoe income has declined 40% over 15 years due to stock depletion (ADF Magazine, 2025), driving coastal youth back toward piracy recruitment—completing the cycle.

**Displacement and Migration Accelerate the Cycle:** Collapsing fisheries trigger forced displacement and irregular migration. The 2005–2006 Senegal fish stock crash forced 36,000 West Africans to attempt dangerous crossings to the Canary Islands. Today's "Atlantic route" to Europe claims over 5,000 lives annually (UNHCR, 2024), reflecting both maritime governance failure and onshore economic collapse. Those who remain in coastal communities face acute food insecurity; climate projections indicating 30–40% fish biomass decline by 2100 (FAO, 2024) suggest this displacement will intensify, forcing millions into irregular migration or maritime criminal operations. As fishers transition from victimhood to criminality—joining IUU fishing or piracy crews due to lacking alternatives (INTERPOL, 2024)—the recruitment pool expands, perpetuating maritime crime.

**Transnational Criminal Networks Entrench the Cycle:** Beyond fisheries theft, maritime spaces enable multi-crime trafficking networks that amplify vulnerabilities bidirectionally. Industrial trawlers flagged under local registries to evade oversight—use fishing as cover for smuggling drugs, weapons, and stolen oil. These networks cost West African nations $2.3–$9.4 billion annually in stolen seafood and lost revenues

(ADF Magazine, 2023), while maritime trafficking adds another estimated $2 billion in contraband annually (UNODC, 2023). This resource plunder robs governments of development funding while eroding public trust in state stewardship—feeding political grievances that fuel further instability. Conversely, stolen natural resources from land (timber, minerals) leave African shores via clandestine maritime routes, enabling criminals to bribe port officials and exploit poorly guarded coastlines (INTERPOL, 2024). Weapons and drug trafficking originating from maritime networks fuel onshore urban crime, gang activity, and armed conflict, perpetuating the violence and instability that drove maritime crime in the first place.

**The Self-Perpetuating Nature:** Critically, each phase weakens state capacity to intervene. Maritime resource theft reduces government revenues; piracy profits empower criminal rivals to state authority; displacement drains coastal populations of productive labor; irregular migration reduces remittances; and transnational trafficking further corrupts governance. Simultaneously, **lawlessness and weak state presence at sea undermines state authority and economic development, even as poor onshore governance created the permissive environment for maritime crime initially.** This creates an inescapable cycle where maritime insecurity is simultaneously symptom and driver of terrestrial instability—neither can be resolved without addressing both simultaneously.

## 4. Key Findings

1) **Bidirectional and Cyclical Linkages:** Maritime and land insecurities perpetuate one another; addressing one in isolation is ineffective.
2) **Human Security Deficit:** Coastal populations bear the brunt of interconnected crises, yet remain marginalized in policymaking.
3) **Regional Diversity, Global Commonality:** While manifestations vary, the underlying mechanisms—poverty, weak governance, and environmental stress—are consistent in different way across regions.
4) **Ocean good governance as a Main Actor:** Institutional strength and inclusiveness determine whether land-sea nexus produces stability or insecurity.
5) **Atlantic Africa as Microcosm:** The Gulf of Guinea illustrate the pertinence of the linkage between maritime security and land-based human insecurity and vice-versa.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

- **Integrated Sea–Land Nexus:** Establish an Atlantic coordination platform aligning maritime, development, human and climate agendas.
- **Human-Centered Policy:** Incorporate livelihood, displacement, and gender indicators into maritime risk assessments. Hard security+ Soft Security= Smart security.

- **Strengthen and articulate the Regionals/Internationals Mechanisms:** Consolidate regional architectures (Yaoundé, Atlantic Africa State Processus) and articulate them with the Wither Atlantic and the international cooperation.
- **Sustainable Blue Economies:** Regulate resource extraction and fisheries to balance growth with social equity and environmental protection. Look at the EU Directive 2014/89/EU of 23 July 2014 "establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning."
- **Capacity and Data Integration:** Develop interoperable databases linking maritime incidents, migration patterns and socio-economic data.

## 6. Conclusion

Maritime security and land-based human insecurities form a single continuum of risk and resilience. The sea mirrors the social and political conditions of the land: weak governance, inequality, and environmental degradation translate into maritime instability. Conversely, insecurity at sea—piracy, resource plunder, ecological collapse—feeds back into poverty, displacement, and fragility ashore. The Atlantic African experience, especially the Gulf of Guinea, illustrates both the risks of fragmentation and the potential of a wider Atlantic and cooperative governance.

More broadly, it would be strategically useful to promote the emergence of an Atlantic community built around the following three nexuses: the sea/land nexus, the security/development nexus, and the sovereignty/interdependence nexus. Indeed, the emergence of a genuine Atlantic Community requires recognizing the deep interdependence that shapes this vast maritime-continental space. First, the Sea/Land nexus reminds us that Atlantic security begins onshore and vice-versa. Second, the Security/Development nexus shows that enduring stability cannot be achieved through patrols alone; it depends on jobs, infrastructure, a resilient blue economy and inclusive growth. Finally, the Sovereignty/Interdependence nexus highlights the reality of the Atlantic: each state seeks strategic autonomy, yet none can secure its oceans, its trade or its development without shared responsibility and coordinated action.

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