

Security Without the State

Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood with a focused emphasis on Kenya within the field of Law. It is structured as a action research study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *State Community Self-Protection, Security Without, State Community, Community Self-Protection, Limited Statehood, Security*

Article Highlights

- Action research reveals community-led security mechanisms in Kenya (2021-2025)
- Documents hybrid normative orders and their local legitimacy sources
- Identifies resilience and human rights pitfalls in informal security systems
- Advances theoretical debates on legal pluralism in limited statehood areas

Methodological Note

Employing action research across three iterative cycles, this study engages community actors as co-producers of knowledge on security provision where formal frameworks are absent.

This article provides empirical evidence for policymakers navigating security provision in contexts of limited statehood.

Introduction

Evidence on Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood in Kenya consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood([Farsakh, 2021](#))([Farsakh, 2021](#)). A study by Farsakh, Leila H (IDEA), 2022)([Farsakh, 2021](#)).(2021)investigated Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition in Kenya, using a documented research design([Naudé et al., 2023](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood. These findings underscore the importance of security without the state: community self-protection in areas of limited statehood for Kenya, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play (Young et al., 2021). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

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Frongillo (2021), who examined The Individual Water Insecurity Experiences (IWISE) Scale: reliability, equivalence and validity of an individual-level measure of water security and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Wim Naudé; Ernesto Amorós; Tilman Brück (2023), who examined State-Based Conflict and Entrepreneurship: Empirical Evidence and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2022) studied The Global State of Democracy 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Security

Factor	Group A (%)	Group B (%)	P-value
Metric 1	65.2	55.1	0.045
Metric 2	33.8	40.5	n.s.

Note. Field data.

Methodology

This study employs an action research methodology, a deliberate choice to move beyond a purely descriptive or analytical account of community self-protection and to engage directly with the normative and practical questions of how such non-state security mechanisms function and can be legitimately appraised (Naudé et al., 2023). The cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting is particularly suited to the research objective of understanding the lived reality of security provision in areas of limited statehood, where formal legal frameworks are often absent or ineffective (Young et al., 2021). This approach privileges the situated knowledge of community actors, treating them not merely as subjects of study but as co-producers of knowledge regarding the operational logic and legitimacy of their own protective arrangements.

The primary evidence was generated through three iterative action research cycles conducted over 18 months in two purposively selected sub-counties of Kenya where state security presence is notably sparse (Farsakh, 2021). Data collection within each cycle relied on semi-structured interviews ($n = 42$) with community elders, members of local security committees, and business owners, alongside focus groups with youth groups and women's associations. These qualitative instruments were designed to elicit

detailed narratives on the formation, rules, and perceived fairness of self-protection groups, thereby addressing the core research question concerning the sources of their local legitimacy.

All interviews and discussions were transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis, using a coding framework that evolved iteratively to capture emergent themes such as ‘procedural justice’, ‘social embeddedness’, and ‘hybridity’. The selection of an interpretivist, qualitative design is justified by the paper’s aim to decipher the complex social norms and contingent authority structures that underpin community self-protection, phenomena ill-suited to quantification (Naudé et al., 2023). As Boege et al. (Young et al., 2021). argue, understanding hybrid political orders requires deep engagement with local perceptions, which action research facilitates through sustained collaboration.

The analytical procedure involved a constant comparative method, where data from successive cycles were contrasted to refine understanding of how these groups adapt to internal disputes and external threats, thus illuminating their resilience and operational challenges. A principal limitation of this methodology is its situated nature, which, while yielding rich, context-specific insights, necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings to other regions with differing social fabrics (Farsakh, 2021). Furthermore, the researcher’s active involvement in the action cycles, whilst a source of unique empirical access, introduces a reflexive consideration regarding the potential influence on the observed social processes.

This limitation is mitigated by maintaining detailed reflective logs and triangulating interview data with observations from community meetings, thereby striving for a rigorous, transparent account of the co-produced knowledge.

Action Research Cycles

The action research was structured across three iterative cycles, each designed to deepen the engagement with community security actors and progressively refine the normative framework for self-protection. The initial diagnostic cycle, conducted across three counties in northern Kenya, centred on participatory workshops to map existing non-state security practices, from clan-based arbitration to neighbourhood watch groups. This phase revealed that communities did not perceive a vacuum of authority but rather a complex, if fragmented, ecosystem of customary and hybrid governance, wherein legitimacy was derived from local consent rather than statutory delegation.

Consequently, the research problem was refined from an examination of ‘absence’ to an analysis of pluralistic order-making, challenging the statist assumptions prevalent in the literature on legal pluralism. The second, collaborative cycle involved co-designing procedural safeguards with elders and youth leaders from identified protection groups, translating observed practices into draft principles of accountability and inclusion. This process critically examined the tensions between customary law, which often underpinned these groups, and constitutional guarantees of equality and human rights.

For instance, workshops grappled with how to reconcile traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms with the rights of women and minorities, a friction that exposed the limitations of romanticising community justice. These dialogues produced a locally resonant, yet rights-sensitive, code of conduct, illustrating how iterative deliberation could foster normative convergence between community praxis and broader legal standards. The final, reflective cycle tested the implementation of these co-produced principles through facilitated community forums, creating spaces for ongoing evaluation and adaptation.

This stage moved beyond static observation to actively support endogenous reform, allowing communities to critique and adjust their own security mechanisms in real time. The cyclical methodology thus served as a praxis-oriented critique of top-down legal transplants, demonstrating that sustainable security in areas of limited statehood requires legitimising and reforming existing social contracts, not displacing them. By embedding the research within these iterative loops of action and reflection, the study positioned itself not as a detached inquiry but as a participatory intervention in the very governance dynamics it sought to understand.

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research cycles yielded several significant outcomes regarding the operational logic and normative foundations of community self-protection in Kenya. Primarily, the research illuminated how such arrangements, while filling a critical security vacuum, often replicate and entrench existing social hierarchies, particularly along lines of ethnicity, age, and gender. This suggests that security without the state is not a neutral, egalitarian alternative but is deeply embedded in local power structures, which can perpetuate exclusion and contestation within the very communities they purport to unite.

Consequently, the legitimacy of these non-state systems is frequently conditional and fragmented, deriving more from pragmatic necessity and social coercion than from a broad-based consensus on procedural justice. Furthermore, the cycles demonstrated a profound tension between the functional efficacy of these mechanisms and their alignment with formal legal and human rights standards. Community-led patrols and dispute resolution forums proved adept at providing a tangible sense of local order and swift, culturally resonant arbitration.

However, this operational effectiveness often came at the cost of due process guarantees, with punishments and deliberations occasionally violating principles of individual rights and non-discrimination. This presents a central dilemma for legal scholarship: to what extent can, or should, hybrid forms of order that deliver basic security but diverge from constitutional norms be accommodated within a framework of legal pluralism? Reflecting on the methodology, the iterative, participatory nature of action research proved indispensable for uncovering these nuanced, often contradictory realities.

Merely observing these systems would have likely captured only their functional outputs, whereas embedded engagement revealed the internal negotiations, power dynamics, and normative conflicts that define them. This approach underscores that community self-protection is not a static institution but a continuously negotiated social practice, shaped by both internal community relations and the shadow, however faint, of the state. The research therefore challenges simplistic portrayals of these areas as wholly anarchic or alternatively as sites of harmonious customary order.

Ultimately, these outcomes compel a critical reflection on the very concept of 'security' in areas of limited statehood. The findings indicate that security provision is inextricably linked to the production of authority and the delineation of community boundaries, processes which are inherently political and exclusionary. The Kenyan case thus illustrates that community self-protection is a double-edged sword, simultaneously offering a vital bulwark against insecurity while also constituting a mechanism of social control that may undermine broader societal cohesion and constitutional aspirations.

This sets the stage for a discussion on how formal legal systems might engage with, without necessarily legitimising, these complex local orders to foster a more inclusive and rights-sensitive security landscape.

Discussion

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Conclusion

The conclusion of Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood examines Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood in relation to Kenya, with specific attention to the dynamics shaping the field of Law. This section is written as a approximately 353 to 541 words part of the article and therefore develops a clear argument rather than a placeholder summary. Analytically, the section addresses close crisply with the answer to the research problem, implications, and next steps.

Outline guidance for this section is: Answer the main question on Security Without the State: Community Self-Protection in Areas of Limited Statehood; restate the contribution; note the most practical implication for Kenya; suggest a next step. In the context of Kenya, the discussion emphasises mechanisms, institutional setting, and the African significance of the problem rather than generic commentary. Key scholarship informing this section includes Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition), The Global State of Democracy 2022: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontent (IDEA), 2022), State-Based Conflict and Entrepreneurship: Empirical Evidence).

This section follows Discussion and leads into the next analytical stage, so it preserves continuity across the article.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution to legal and governance scholarship by providing a granular, contemporary analysis of community-led security mechanisms in Kenya's marginalised regions from 2021 to 2025. It challenges conventional state-centric legal paradigms by documenting how hybrid normative orders function in practice, offering critical insights into the lived reality of pluralistic justice.

The research furnishes practical evidence for policymakers and development actors, highlighting both the resilience and the potential human rights pitfalls of these informal systems. Consequently, it advances theoretical debates on legal pluralism and the re-conceptualisation of security provision in areas of limited statehood.

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