

**Dr. Peter Gergo Juhasz**  
University of Óbuda, Budapest  
Email: petergergojuhasz@gmail.com

**Mr. Csaba Szeremley**  
University of Óbuda, Budapest  
Email: szeremley.csaba@uni-obuda.hu

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## THE ROLE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN PREVENTING RADICALISATION IN MALAWI

**Abstract:** *In the past decade, the northern provinces of Mozambique have experienced a surge in violent radicalisation, particularly in the Cabo Delgado area. Neighbouring Malawi in the same period has remained relatively unaffected by such extremism, despite sharing similar rural and socioeconomic conditions. This paper explores the role of Malawi's primary education system in mitigating the risk of radicalisation. Rather than focusing on a single teacher-training program, the broader impact of educational quality is analysed. It includes teacher availability, teacher professionalism, and school infrastructure. The research argues that although education alone cannot prevent violent extremism, improvements in teacher training and school resourcing play a crucial role in strengthening moral grounding through value-based education and ethical reasoning, enhancing social cohesion by fostering inclusion and civic engagement, and developing critical thinking skills that enable learners to question and resist extremist narratives and ideological manipulation. This study advocates for comprehensive educational reform as part of a broader counter-radicalisation strategy in sub-Saharan Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Primary education; Preventive security; Radicalisation prevention; Education quality; Social resilience; Human security; Sub-Saharan Africa; Malawi; Social cohesion; Vulnerability reduction*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Radicalisation as a Security Challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa

Radicalisation is a complex process wherein individuals or groups adopt extreme political, religious, or ideological beliefs that may justify or lead to violence. Often, this process is driven by socioeconomic factors such as poverty, exclusion, and limited access to education. In sub-Saharan Africa, these root causes are particularly visible in rural regions characterised by high levels of deprivation and weak state presence. In recent years, violent radicalisation has emerged as one of the most significant non-traditional security challenges in sub-Saharan Africa (Abdisaid, 2016; Akinyetun, 2024; Hamdy, 2020; Merz, 2018; Programme, 2023; Ya'u, 2024). Unlike classical interstate threats, contemporary extremist movements are deeply embedded in local socioeconomic grievances, governance failures, and identity-based exclusion (Hamdy, 2020; Ostby & Urdal, 2010; Szabó, 2023). Insurgent groups operating across the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Southern Africa have demonstrated that fragile rural environments with weak state presence are particularly susceptible to radical mobilisation. As a result, security studies have increasingly shifted their analytical focus from military responses toward preventive and resilience-based approaches (Sinkó, 2024; Thelma et al., 2024). Within this evolving security landscape, education has gained prominence as a critical, yet underexplored, component of long-term stability. Educational systems influence not only economic prospects but also social cohesion, moral development, and political socialisation (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003). Where primary education systems fail to provide meaningful skills and equitable access, extremist actors may exploit the resulting vacuum. Conversely, functional and inclusive education systems may operate as early-warning and preventive mechanisms against radicalisation (Benjamin et al., 2021; Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023).

### 1.2 Research Purpose and Central Argument

This article examines the role of primary education quality as a preventive security mechanism, using Malawi as a case study in a region affected by violent extremism. While Northern Mozambique, particularly Cabo Delgado, has experienced sustained insurgent activity since 2017, neighbouring Malawi has remained largely insulated from similar dynamics, despite comparable levels of poverty, rurality, and demographic pressure (Matsinhe & Valoi, 2019; Pirio et al., 2018; Rusero & Maisiri, 2023; UNDP, 2020). This divergence raises important questions for security science regarding the factors that

contribute to societal resilience in fragile contexts. The central argument advanced in this paper is that Malawi's relative stability cannot be attributed solely to education; however, the quality and social function of primary education constitute a significant protective factor. By fostering moral grounding, social cohesion, and basic critical thinking skills, primary education helps reduce the appeal of extremist narratives among rural youth (Krueger & Malecková, 2003). Education is therefore conceptualised not merely as a developmental good, but as a component of preventive security policy (Marope, 2019; Silva, 2017).

## **2. Conceptual Framework: Education and Security**

### **2.1 Radicalisation, Human Security, and Social Resilience**

Radicalisation is widely understood as a gradual process through which individuals or groups come to adopt extreme ideological positions that may legitimise violence (Gill & Horgan, 2014). Contemporary security scholarship emphasises that radicalisation is rarely the result of ideology alone; rather, it is shaped by structural conditions such as marginalisation, inequality, lack of political voice, and perceived injustice (Ostby & Urdal, 2010). From a human security perspective, these conditions represent chronic insecurities that undermine individual dignity and social trust (Gasper & Gómez, 2023; Programme, 2022). Human security shifts the analytical lens from protecting state borders to protecting individuals and communities. Within this framework, threats such as poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion are recognised as security-relevant, as they increase vulnerability to coercion and manipulation. Social resilience, the capacity of communities to absorb shocks and resist destabilising influences, has therefore become a key concept in preventive security strategies (Edwards, 2020). Education intersects with human security and resilience by shaping cognitive skills, social norms, and identity formation from an early age. Primary education, in particular, represents a formative stage during which values related to the above-mentioned points are internalised (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003). Weak or exclusionary education systems may inadvertently reinforce grievances. However, inclusive systems can strengthen social bonds and institutional trust (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2022).

## 2.2 Education as a Preventive Security Instrument, a Tool to Reduce Vulnerability to Radicalisation

Within security science, preventive instruments are understood as interventions that reduce the likelihood of conflict and violence by addressing underlying structural vulnerabilities rather than reacting to their manifestations. Primary education qualifies as such an instrument not merely because it improves human capital, but because it shapes the social and institutional environment in which radicalisation processes either gain traction or fail to do so. Its preventive effect operates through a set of mutually reinforcing mechanisms that influence how individuals relate to authority, interpret grievances, engage with radical ideologies, and respond to competing ideological narratives (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2022; Krueger & Malecková, 2003). What can be stated is that the relationship between education and radicalisation is not linear. Higher levels of education do not automatically prevent extremist engagement, particularly when educated youth face unemployment or political exclusion (Ostby & Urdal, 2010). At the most fundamental level, primary education contributes to preventive security by embedding individuals within institutionalised social structures at an early stage of life. In rural and peripheral regions of sub-Saharan Africa, schools often constitute the most consistent and visible interface between the state and local communities. Regular exposure to functioning educational institutions can foster basic expectations of order and inclusion, thereby reinforcing perceptions of institutional presence and legitimacy. Where such legitimacy is absent or fragile, extremist actors are better positioned to challenge state authority and present themselves as alternative providers of justice or material support.

Education thus operates not only as a site of learning, but as a daily reaffirmation of the state-society relationship, particularly in contexts characterised by weak governance and limited service delivery. At the primary level, education plays a distinct role by establishing foundational skills and social integration. In rural African contexts, schools often represent the most consistent interface between the state and local communities, making them critical nodes of legitimacy and influence (Kirui, 2019; Marchetta & Dilly, 2019). Beyond its institutional dimension, primary education plays a formative role in shaping social norms and moral reasoning. Early schooling environments influence how children internalise concepts such as cooperation, authority, responsibility, and non-violent conflict resolution. Through interaction with teachers and peers, learners are socialised into shared behavioural

expectations that extend beyond family or religious affiliation. These processes are especially relevant in settings where radical ideologies rely on rigid moral dichotomies and the normalisation of violence. Education does not need to counter extremist content explicitly to be effective. Its preventive value lies in fostering normative frameworks that make absolutist and exclusionary narratives less cognitively and socially resonant. Primary education also affects vulnerability to radicalisation by shaping perceptions of opportunity and fairness. While schooling alone cannot eliminate poverty or unemployment, even limited educational access can mitigate feelings of abandonment and structural exclusion that often underpin radical mobilisation. By offering symbolic recognition and minimal opportunity structures, primary education can moderate the sense of relative deprivation that extremist groups seek to exploit. Conversely, exclusion from education or persistent exposure to dysfunctional schooling can intensify frustration and reinforce narratives of systemic neglect. Cognitive factors further reinforce the preventive role of education. Functional literacy and basic analytical skills enhance individuals' capacity to interpret information, assess credibility, and therefore resist manipulation. Although higher levels of education do not guarantee immunity from radicalisation, foundational skills acquired at the primary level can reduce susceptibility to simplistic explanations and conspiracy-driven narratives. In environments saturated with misinformation and ideological messaging, the ability to question and compare sources constitutes an important layer of resilience.

Taken together, these mechanisms indicate that the security relevance of primary education lies not in its capacity to transmit specific counter-radicalisation messages, but in its broader social and institutional functions. From this perspective, the quality and inclusiveness of primary education systems should be understood as structural components of resilience-building rather than as peripheral development concerns. When education systems perform these functions effectively, they reduce the social and psychological conditions that make radicalisation a viable or attractive pathway. This paper adopts a functional view of education, focusing not only on years of schooling but also on qualitative dimensions such as teacher availability, pedagogical practices, learning environments, and community engagement. These dimensions determine whether education operates as a stabilising force or remains a missed opportunity within broader security architectures (Millican, 2021).

### 3. Methodological Approach

#### 3.1 Research Design and Analytical Strategy

The study employs a qualitative, comparative analytical design grounded in secondary data analysis. Rather than testing causal relationships through quantitative modelling, the paper seeks to identify structural patterns and mechanisms linking education quality and radicalisation risk. This approach is appropriate given the complex, context-dependent nature of radicalisation processes and the limited availability of comparable micro-level data across fragile settings (Jensen et al., 2018).

The analysis integrates insights from security studies, development economics, and education research. Policy reports, academic literature, and international development assessments constitute the primary data sources.

#### 3.2 Comparative Logic: Explaining Divergent Security Outcomes in Malawi and Mozambique

Mozambique and Malawi were selected for comparative analysis due to their geographic proximity and broadly similar socioeconomic profiles, as well as the authors' local knowledge, having lived and worked in this area for over 10 years, mainly on development projects closely related to primary education. Both countries exhibit high levels of rural poverty, youthful populations, low-quality education systems, and limited state capacity in peripheral regions. Despite these similarities, their security outcomes diverge markedly, particularly regarding violent extremism. Northern Mozambique provides an illustrative case of how educational deficits and governance failures can interact to facilitate radicalisation. Malawi, by contrast, represents a positive case in which such dynamics have not translated into organised extremist violence. The comparison is not intended to imply direct causality, but to highlight how differences in institutional functioning, especially in education, may influence security trajectories (Kilburn et al., 2017; Mariotti et al., 2018; Matsinhe, 2019; Pirio et al., 2018; Rusero & Maisiri, 2023).

The comparative focus on Malawi and Mozambique is grounded in their geographic proximity and broadly similar structural conditions, including high levels of rural poverty, demographic pressure, limited state capacity, and historically under-resourced education systems. Despite these similarities, the two countries have experienced markedly different security trajectories over the past decade, particularly with respect to violent radicalisation.

Northern Mozambique has witnessed sustained insurgent activity since 2017, while Malawi has remained largely unaffected by organised extremist violence. This divergence provides a useful analytical opportunity to examine how variations in institutional functioning, rather than socioeconomic conditions alone, may shape vulnerability to radicalisation. A key point of differentiation lies in the nature and consistency of state presence in peripheral regions. In northern Mozambique, historical patterns of political marginalisation and uneven development have contributed to weak institutional penetration, particularly in the rural districts of Cabo Delgado. Public services, including education, have often been sporadic, under-resourced, or perceived as externally imposed rather than locally embedded. This has limited their capacity to foster trust and inclusion, creating a context in which non-state actors could challenge state authority and mobilise grievances. By contrast, although Malawi faces severe capacity constraints, its education system has achieved a relatively wide territorial reach following the introduction of Free Primary Education in the mid-1990s. Even where quality remains low, the regular presence of schools has provided a more consistent institutional interface between the state and rural communities, contributing to a baseline level of institutional familiarity and social integration (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003; Mariotti et al., 2018). Differences in grievance formation patterns further help explain divergent outcomes. In northern Mozambique, perceptions of exclusion have been intensified by the juxtaposition of extreme poverty with large-scale extractive projects that generated limited local benefits. The resulting sense of relative deprivation has been compounded by weak educational and employment pathways, particularly for young men, reinforcing narratives of injustice and abandonment that extremist groups have successfully exploited. In Malawi, structural poverty is widespread but more evenly distributed, and grievances are less closely tied to perceptions of targeted exclusion or resource dispossession. While educational outcomes remain weak, access to primary education has provided at least minimal pathways for social participation, moderating the intensity of grievance narratives that often underpin radical mobilisation (Krueger & Malecková, 2003; Ostby & Urdal, 2010; Pirio et al., 2018). The role of education systems in shaping social cohesion and local resilience also differs between the two cases. In Mozambique's conflict-affected regions, persistent teacher shortages, disrupted schooling, and attacks on educational infrastructure have undermined schools' capacity to function as spaces of socialisation and stability. This has weakened their ability to reinforce shared norms and collective identities, leaving social vacuums that extremist organisations have filled through

alternative forms of authority and belonging. Malawi's primary education system, despite chronic challenges related to quality and resources, has remained largely uninterrupted by violence. As a result, schools have continued to perform basic socialising functions, reinforcing routine, peer interaction, and normative expectations that contribute to community-level resilience, even in the absence of strong learning outcomes (Asim & Gera, 2024; Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023). Taken together, these differences suggest that divergent security outcomes cannot be explained solely by socioeconomic indicators. Rather, they reflect variations in how education systems interact with broader governance structures, patterns of marginalisation, and local perceptions of state legitimacy. The comparison between Malawi and Mozambique does not imply a simple causal relationship between education and security, nor does it suggest that Malawi is immune to future radicalisation. Instead, it highlights how even modest levels of institutional continuity and educational access can contribute to resilience by shaping grievances, expectations, and state-society relations over time. From a security science perspective, this underscores the importance of examining education systems not only as development inputs but as structurally embedded components of preventive security architectures.

### 3.3 Data Sources and Limitations

The study relies on secondary sources, including reports from international organisations, peer-reviewed academic publications, and national policy documents. While this enables broad contextual coverage, it also entails limitations. The absence of primary field data restricts the ability to capture individual-level motivations, and official statistics may underrepresent informal or localised dynamics. Additionally, the analysis focuses on primary education and does not address the role of secondary or tertiary education in radicalisation processes. These limitations are acknowledged, and the findings should be interpreted as analytically grounded propositions rather than definitive causal claims. Future research incorporating longitudinal and ethnographic data would further strengthen the empirical foundation of this line of inquiry.

## 4. Radicalisation Dynamics in Northern Mozambique

Since 2017, northern Mozambique, particularly the Cabo Delgado province, has experienced a sustained insurgency characterised by attacks on civilians, military personnel, state institutions, schools, and economic infrastructure as well. The emergence of violent extremism in this region reflects the convergence of chronic socioeconomic deprivation and

weak governance. Young men in rural districts face restricted livelihood opportunities and limited prospects for social mobility. Extremist groups have exploited these frustrations by offering material incentives and a sense of purpose. The group known as Ahlu Sunnah Wa-Jama, often referred to locally as Al-Shabaab (though unaffiliated with the Somali group), has carried out attacks on both government facilities and civilians. Their recruitment strategies often target marginalised, impoverished youth who lack employment opportunities or meaningful engagement with state institutions. Traditional rites of passage, such as marriage, are inaccessible for unemployed young men, leaving them alienated and vulnerable to extremist indoctrination. The group exploits these vulnerabilities to offer status, a sense of belonging, and financial incentives. This context provides a warning to similarly positioned countries, such as Malawi (Abdisaid, 2016; Rusero & Maisiri, 2023; Szeremley & Juhász, 2023). A weak state presence has amplified the risk of radicalisation in northern Mozambique. Educational provision has historically suffered from low enrolment, poor infrastructure, chronic teacher shortages, and, especially, qualified teaching staff shortages, particularly in peripheral regions. These deficits have reduced schools' capacity to function as spaces of social integration and civic socialisation (Pirio et al., 2018; Rusero & Maisiri, 2023).

## 5. Malawi's Socioeconomic and Educational Context

### 5.1 Demographic and Development Indicators

Malawi remains one of the least developed countries globally, characterised by high poverty rates and demographic pressure (UNDP, 2020). Malawi is a landlocked country in southeastern Africa, bordered by Mozambique, Zambia, and Tanzania. Despite its nickname, "The Warm Heart of Africa," Malawi is one of the poorest nations in the world, with a GDP per capita of USD 1,035 (PPP, 2019). Approximately 52.6% of the population lives below the national poverty line, and over 70% earn less than USD 1.90 per day (UNDP, 2020). The country is predominantly rural, with over 80% of its population living in non-urban areas. Malawi's population is young, with nearly half under 15, and it is growing rapidly. Despite high birth rates, the country struggles with low life expectancy due to factors such as HIV/AIDS and limited access to healthcare. These demographic characteristics place enormous pressure on education, health, and employment systems, all of which are critical in preventing societal destabilisation (Szeremley, 2025).

## 5.2 Structure of the Primary Education System

Formal education in Malawi has undergone significant changes since independence in 1964. Initially structured around missionary education systems, the government assumed control post-independence with the goal of universalising access to primary education. Between 1964 and 1994, enrolment grew significantly, but quality lagged behind expansion. The introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994 dramatically increased enrolment but strained infrastructure and human resources (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003). Eliminating school fees and thereby triggering a surge in enrolment, from 1.9 million to over 3 million pupils within a few years. While this policy was successful in improving access, it overwhelmed the existing educational infrastructure and exposed critical weaknesses in educational quality (Mariotti et al., 2018; Szeremley & Juhász, 2023). Malawi's educational structure includes eight years of primary education, from Standard 1 to Standard 8. The national curriculum aims to develop basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills, but resource shortages and teacher-student ratios of up to 1:100 in some schools severely limit effective learning. These systemic pressures have raised questions about how education can serve as a protective factor against radicalisation if quality is not addressed (Szeremley, 2025).

## 6. Structural Challenges in Malawi's Primary Education

Despite commendable efforts to improve access, the quality of primary education in Malawi remains a serious concern. The system faces multiple interconnected challenges (Dube, 2017; Mariotti et al., 2018). High pupil–teacher ratios and uneven teacher deployment limit instructional quality, particularly in rural areas. Infrastructure deficits continue to undermine educational quality and retention. Despite high enrolment, completion rates and learning outcomes remain weak. High pupil–teacher ratios and uneven teacher deployment limit instructional quality, particularly in rural areas (Asim & Gera, 2024; Kilburn et al., 2017; USAID, 2021).

## 7. Education Quality as a Buffer Against Radicalisation

### 7.1 Moral Grounding and Social Cohesion

A growing body of research has investigated the link between education and radicalisation. While early theories posited a straightforward inverse relationship—more education leads to less radicalisation—recent scholarship has painted a more nuanced

picture. For instance, Krueger and Malecková (2003) argue that poverty and lack of education are not direct causes of terrorism but may create conditions conducive to radical recruitment. Ostby (2010) further notes that educational systems that reproduce inequality or marginalisation can themselves become sources of grievance. Primary education fosters shared norms and social cohesion, reducing susceptibility to polarising narratives (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003).

## 7.2 Critical Thinking and Resistance to Extremist Narratives

However, many scholars agree that where education provides equitable opportunities and encourages critical thinking, it can serve as a protective factor against extremist ideologies. Functional literacy enhances resistance to manipulation and extremist indoctrination (Krueger & Malecková, 2003). In Malawi, rural youth often face social exclusion and limited job prospects, which can be mitigated by strengthening the education system. Malawi's advantage may lie not just in access, but also in the absence of widespread radical ideologies and in its potential to use foundational education to instil social resilience before such ideologies take root. Comparative analysis suggests that accessible education systems can delay or prevent radical mobilisation in fragile contexts (Asim & Gera, 2024; Pirio et al., 2018).

## 8. Policy Implications for Preventive Security

### 8.1 Education Policy as a Component of National and Human Security

Education investments address root causes of insecurity and should be integrated into national security strategies. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that primary education policy should be understood not merely as a sectoral development concern but as an integral component of preventive security and human security strategies. In fragile and low-income contexts, where military and law-enforcement capacities are often limited, long-term stability depends heavily on institutions that address the structural roots of insecurity. Education occupies a central position among these institutions because it shapes social norms, institutional trust, and individual life trajectories from an early age (Fontana et al., 2020). From a security science perspective, education contributes to threat prevention by reducing vulnerability to manipulation, mitigating grievance formation, and strengthening social cohesion. Schools function as everyday points of contact between the state and citizens, particularly in rural areas where alternative state services may be absent.

When primary education systems are accessible and perceived as legitimate, they reinforce the social contract and weaken the appeal of non-state actors that seek to mobilise discontent through extremist narratives. Importantly, the preventive security value of education lies less in curriculum content alone than in system performance. Teacher availability, professionalism, and education, combined with good learning conditions and community engagement, determine whether education is experienced as meaningful or alienating. Consequently, underperforming education systems may represent latent security risks, while even modest improvements in quality can yield disproportionate stabilising effects (Krieger, 2022; Tayimlong, 2020).

## 8.2 Strategic Recommendations

Policy priorities include expanding teacher training, investing in infrastructure, promoting civic education, and strengthening community engagement. Based on the comparative analysis, several strategic policy implications emerge for Malawi and for similarly positioned states in sub-Saharan Africa (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003; USAID, 2021). First, investment in teacher training and deployment should be prioritised as a security-relevant intervention. Expanding teacher training capacity and incentivising rural deployment can significantly enhance educational quality. Teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge but also authority figures and role models; their presence and competence influence students' sense of inclusion and institutional trust. Second, improving rural school infrastructure should be framed as a stabilisation measure. Adequate classrooms and learning materials contribute to retention and engagement, particularly among vulnerable groups. Well-functioning schools provide structured daily routines and safe spaces that reduce exposure to informal networks susceptible to extremist influence. Third, curricula should incorporate age-appropriate elements of peace education. Concepts such as cooperation, non-violent conflict resolution, and community responsibility can strengthen resilience against polarising ideologies. These elements are most effective when embedded in everyday pedagogical practice rather than treated as stand-alone subjects. Finally, education policy should be integrated with broader community-level development initiatives. Parental involvement and linkages to health and nutrition programmes enhance local ownership and reinforce the legitimacy of public institutions. Such integrated approaches amplify the preventive security function of education by addressing multiple dimensions of vulnerability simultaneously (Asim & Gera, 2024; Benjamin et al., 2021;

Dube, 2017; Kilburn et al., 2017; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003; Mariotti et al., 2018; Millican, 2021; Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023).

## 9. Conclusion

This manuscript has examined the role of primary education as a preventive factor in reducing vulnerability to violent radicalisation, using a comparative perspective on Malawi and Mozambique. The analysis demonstrates that while education alone cannot account for divergent security outcomes, the quality of primary education systems constitutes an important component of societal resilience in fragile contexts. Malawi's relative insulation from organised extremist violence, despite severe socioeconomic constraints, suggests that even modest levels of educational continuity and access can shape ways that reduce susceptibility to radical mobilisation. The study contributes to security science by advancing an analytical understanding of education not merely as a development variable but as a structurally embedded preventive security instrument. By identifying the mechanisms through which primary education influences institutional legitimacy, normative socialisation, cognitive resilience, and perceptions of inclusion, the paper extends resilience-based and human security approaches within the security studies literature. In doing so, it responds to calls for greater attention to non-military drivers of security. It highlights how everyday public institutions can function as long-term stabilising forces in environments characterised by weak governance and persistent deprivation. From a comparative perspective, the Malawi-Mozambique case illustrates that radicalisation cannot be adequately explained by poverty or demographic pressure alone. Instead, divergent security trajectories are shaped by how structural conditions interact with institutional performance, particularly in education. The findings underscore the importance of examining preventive security through a longitudinal, institutional lens rather than relying solely on reactive counterterrorism frameworks. The analysis is subject to limitations, notably its reliance on secondary data and its focus on primary education to the exclusion of secondary and non-formal learning pathways. Future research would benefit from field-based qualitative studies and longitudinal data to further explore the link between education systems and radicalisation. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that integrating education into preventive security thinking offers a valuable avenue for broadening the conceptual and empirical scope of security science, particularly in low-income and fragile settings.

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