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Resource Curse and Resource Rents in ECOWAS: A Systematic Review of Institutional and Governance Dynamics

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Abstract: This study provides the first systematic and bibliometric synthesis of nearly five decades of research on the resource curse and resource rents within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By combining Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)-guided screening with network analysis using VOSviewer, it offers a novel empirical mapping of thematic evolution, a perspective largely missing from prior regional reviews. This study systematically reviews existing scholarship on the resource curse and resource rents within the ECOWAS. Using PRISMA-guided screening and bibliometric analysis, 129 peer-reviewed studies published between 1979 and 2025 were analyzed to trace thematic and chronological trends. Results reveal three major research phases: an early period dominated by theoretical debates on resource dependency (1979–2000), an expansion phase linking natural resources with governance and conflict (2001–2011), and a maturity stage emphasizing institutional quality, rule of law, and social cohesion (2012–2025). The review identifies persistent gaps in understanding how legal enforcement, social trust, and regional spillovers mediate the relationship between resources and development. By integrating economic, institutional, and social dimensions, this study contributes a comprehensive framework for addressing the resource curse in ECOWAS. It highlights policy priorities for converting resource wealth into inclusive and sustainable growth.

Keywords: resource curse, natural resource rents, institutional quality, governance and corruption, ECOWAS region

1. Introduction

This research conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) on the resource curse and resource rents in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a region characterized by resource-rich yet developmentally constrained status in sub-Saharan Africa. Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone have abundant resources but still face economic, institutional, and governance challenges. Empirical evidence suggests that in West Africa, natural resource rents frequently have adverse effects on economic and financial development, mainly due to institutional weaknesses and governance failures [1]. Additionally, institutional quality plays a decisive role in mediating the effects of resource rents on economic outcomes, with stronger governance frameworks transforming resource wealth from a curse into a developmental opportunity [2]. ECOWAS's abundant resources, shared institutions, and diverse paths make it a key context for studying the resource curse in developing economies.

The primary objective is to synthesize evidence and insights to understand how resource abundance frequently correlates with macroeconomic underperformance, institutional decay, and governance fragility, commonly referred to as the resource curse. The importance of addressing the resource curse in the ECOWAS region cannot be overstated, underscoring the significance of this research. The thoroughness of this research instills confidence in the reliability of its findings [3]. In ECOWAS, this paradox is troubling given the region's vast natural resources. Despite this, most countries face poor development outcomes, not because of resource constraints but because of governance issues.

Weak political institutions, rent-seeking behavior, and misallocated public expenditures have been identified in several studies as key factors perpetuating the resource curse [4]. Resource wealth undermines democratic accountability by allowing elites to monopolize rents and divert resources for personal or political gain, known as "elite capture." This weakens institutions and reduces incentives for long-term investment in human capital and infrastructure. Additionally, commodity price volatility exacerbates fiscal instability and increases the likelihood of external shocks. However, diversification can break the cycle of dependence on extractive revenues, offering a potential solution to the resource curse [5]. In West Africa, politicized resource governance and fragile security worsen conflict, instability, and economic stagnation. However, ECOWAS states can break this cycle with effective strategies, fostering hope and optimism for a stable, prosperous future [6].

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This review highlights empirical trends and causal links between resource wealth and development setbacks in ECOWAS, providing direction for future panel data research. It provides a solid foundation for analyzing how ECOWAS states can overcome the resource curse and promote sustainable, inclusive growth, based on peer-reviewed studies. The study explains the choice of an SLR, which employs a transparent, structured, and replicable process, rather than subjective narrative reviews. This rigor is essential for comprehending complex issues such as rentier states, institutional fragility, and conflict in resource-rich ECOWAS countries. The thorough approach enhances confidence in its findings [7, 8]. This study employs an SLR to synthesize findings and map the discourse on the resource curse in West Africa. It highlights key themes, theories, methods, and gaps that are often overlooked in typical reviews. This approach offers a comprehensive analysis of the resource curse within ECOWAS [9]. The SLR format effectively examines how the intersection of natural resource use, state capacity, governance, and conflict occurs in ECOWAS. These complex, multifaceted issues require a systematic approach for a thorough understanding, as they cannot be adequately captured through anecdotal or single-case assessments.

Moreover, applying a systematic method enables the triangulation of diverse theoretical lenses, such as rentier state theory, Dutch disease, and the institutional resource curse, thereby enhancing the credibility of the inferences drawn. This is vital in a field often marked by conflicting interpretations and country-specific contingencies [10]. This study uses SLR as a research technique for evidence synthesis, thereby supporting its goal of re-examining resource governance and development in ECOWAS. It provides a foundation for analyzing institutional fragility and socio-political instability, focusing on how resource wealth, weak governance, and rent-seeking worsen development stagnation in West Africa. The resource curse is empirically linked to governance failures, where resource rents promote elite capture, corruption, and poor spending, hindering inclusive growth [11]. As emphasized earlier, this study examines how corruption, poor institutions, and rentier behaviors interact with resource rents to perpetuate instability in the ECOWAS region. Literature shows that resource wealth without strong institutions fuels state fragility, hampers human capital development, and weakens accountability [12]. These dynamics are particularly acute in countries like Nigeria, where vast oil revenues coexist with profound governance deficits.

This review synthesizes macro-econometric findings and case studies, guiding empirical modeling in future studies, especially on governance and trade spillovers from Northern Nigeria. It helps select variables and interaction terms in econometric models, ensuring a coherent, grounded, and regional approach to understanding why resource-rich ECOWAS states often remain fragile and conflict-prone. Despite extensive research on the resource curse, studies on ECOWAS are fragmented, often focusing on economic or political aspects alone, with limited integration of institutional, legal, and social cohesion factors influencing governance and development. Few works examine how these themes evolve, leaving gaps in understanding regional research patterns. This study conducts a systematic review and bibliometric analysis to synthesize evidence and reveal governance patterns underlying the resource curse in ECOWAS. Focusing on ECOWAS and resource rents, it fills a key gap often overlooked when broadening findings from sub-Saharan or MENA regions to West Africa [13]. This review offers a tailored, evidence-based assessment of how ECOWAS countries can move beyond the resource trap and leverage their endowments for inclusive growth. It highlights potential for change to inspire hope about resource management in the region. Its three key contributions include being the first PRISMA-guided systematic review focused solely on ECOWAS countries, thereby setting it apart from broader studies on sub-Saharan Africa. Second, by combining bibliometric network mapping with thematic synthesis, this approach offers a novel method that uncovers previously unobserved research linkages. Third, it enhances conceptual understanding by integrating institutional quality, rule of law, and social cohesion into a unified framework for analyzing the resource curse in West Africa.

2. Literature Review

This section is structured as follows: first, it presents the theoretical underpinnings of the resource curse and institutional quality, followed by an examination of empirical findings from both global and ECOWAS contexts. The review then synthesizes insights on governance, corruption, and conflict dynamics, identifying the critical gaps that this study aims to address. This structure ensures a coherent narrative that links theory, empirical evidence, and identified research needs.

2.1. Theoretical foundations of the resource curse and institutional quality

The study examined the intersection of resource curse and institutional theories, focusing on their interaction and the implications of resource abundance. This relationship has been a key scholarly focus, linking natural resource wealth to development. The resource curse hypothesis posits that resource-rich countries tend to experience slower economic growth than resource-poor countries. This concept can be traced to the earlier works of Auty [14] and Gelb [15]. This was formalized by Sachs and Warner [16]. Resource-rich countries often grow more slowly than non-resource-rich ones due to factors such as corruption, Dutch disease, rent-seeking, lack of diversification, overreliance on resources, poor governance, and mismanagement. Resource booms lead to currency appreciation, which hurts manufacturing, promotes rent-seeking, marginalization, instability, and slow economic growth [17]. These challenges underscore the importance of robust institutions in addressing the resource curse and achieving the economic benefits of these vast resources.

Given these challenges, institutional theory is more critical for investigating how institutions can address them. Several scholars have provided crucial insights into how robust governance and institutional quality mediate the effects of resource wealth. For instance, Dymitrowska [18] argued that the resource curse is not an inevitable outcome but somewhat contingent upon the strength of institutions. Furthermore, countries with robust institutions and substantial resource wealth can spur investment in infrastructure, education, and public goods, thereby driving sustainable economic growth. Institutional quality is pivotal in determining whether resource wealth translates into long-term economic benefits [19]. Many countries face challenges from environmental phenomena. For example, Venezuela's natural resources have led to economic instability, inflation, poverty, and unemployment, driven by weak institutions and corruption, which hinder national development [20, 21].

Countries such as Norway, Chile, Canada, Qatar, and Australia have overcome the challenges of the resource curse through strong governance. Norway's wealth fund ensures intergenerational equity and fiscal discipline; Chile's Copper Stabilization Fund reduces economic volatility with effective policies [22, 23].

Canada has also avoided the resource curse despite its dependence on natural resources through equality in resource distribution and by preventing rent-seeking through strong rules of law and government accountability [24]. Strong legal reforms, transparency, and institutions are key to turning natural resources into benefits and overcoming the resource curse. While global lessons are helpful, their relevance to ECOWAS varies due to the region's diverse institutions, histories, and governance structures. Theories of the resource curse must be adapted to West Africa's unique socio-political context. This section examines how these theories play out in ECOWAS, where institutional weaknesses, rent-seeking behavior, and instability create complex development challenges.

These interwoven challenges, influenced by resource curse and institutional theories, demonstrate how the presence of abundant resources often promotes corruption due to weak governance. Poor institutions allow resource mismanagement, leading to unequal distribution among elites and increasing social and economic inequalities [25]. These inequalities marginalize certain groups that are excluded from the benefits of resource wealth, often leading to grievances and unrest [26]. Furthermore, political and social instabilities contribute to an unfavorable investment climate, discouraging trade activities for both local and foreign investors and hindering economic affairs and sustainable development across countries [27, 28]. This cycle presents the conceptual linkages between resource wealth pathways and socioeconomic and political challenges, highlighting how resource wealth can be diverted from productive investments or public goods. As a result, these countries often fail to translate their natural wealth into long-term economic growth and development, ultimately undermining their potential benefits [29]. Figure 1 illustrates the framework, highlighting the nexus among resource abundance, corruption, governance challenges, and the undermining of regional development.

In the ECOWAS countries, the region exhibits several facets of the resource curse, including high levels of corruption, poor institutional quality, inequality, and instability. Scholars argue that most ECOWAS countries have failed to escape this curse. For instance, Nigeria, one of the region's most oil-dependent countries, suffers from systemic corruption, enabling elites to divert the country's resources for personal gain [30]. Guinea's reliance on bauxite and Sierra Leone's diamond resources illustrate the consequences of mismanagement and corruption, which hinder their developmental potential [31].

Additionally, corruption has led to resource mismanagement in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Liberia, despite their vast natural resources, including gold, oil, and iron ore [32, 33]. These examples underscore the critical need for robust legal frameworks and governance to mitigate the resource curse. A particularly pronounced aspect of the resource curse in ECOWAS countries is the unequal distribution of natural resource wealth, which often drives instability and conflict. Sierra Leone has experienced brutal civil wars fueled by the unequal distribution of diamond wealth [34]. Protests and instability in Guinea have been linked to dissatisfaction with the allocation of bauxite revenues [35, 36]. Long-term instability and conflict in countries such as Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Senegal can similarly be attributed to inequality in resource wealth distribution, further obstructing country-level development [37]. Addressing these issues requires social cohesion through equality, transparency, and accountability to mitigate marginalization, foster stability, and ensure equitable resource distribution. The following section translates these theoretical perspectives into the context of ECOWAS governance.

2.2. The state of rule of law, corruption index, and political instability in ECOWAS

There have been several issues regarding how corruption has undermined the development of these abundant resources due to loopholes in the weak rule of law and political instability in many ECOWAS countries, which have been a concern for many scholars [38, 39]. Scholars note that many ECOWAS countries struggle with corruption, weak laws, and political instability, which undermine the benefits of their resources. Figure 2 shows disparities in governance, with Cape Verde, Senegal, and

Figure 1
Conceptual linkages of resource abundance, socioeconomic, and governance issues

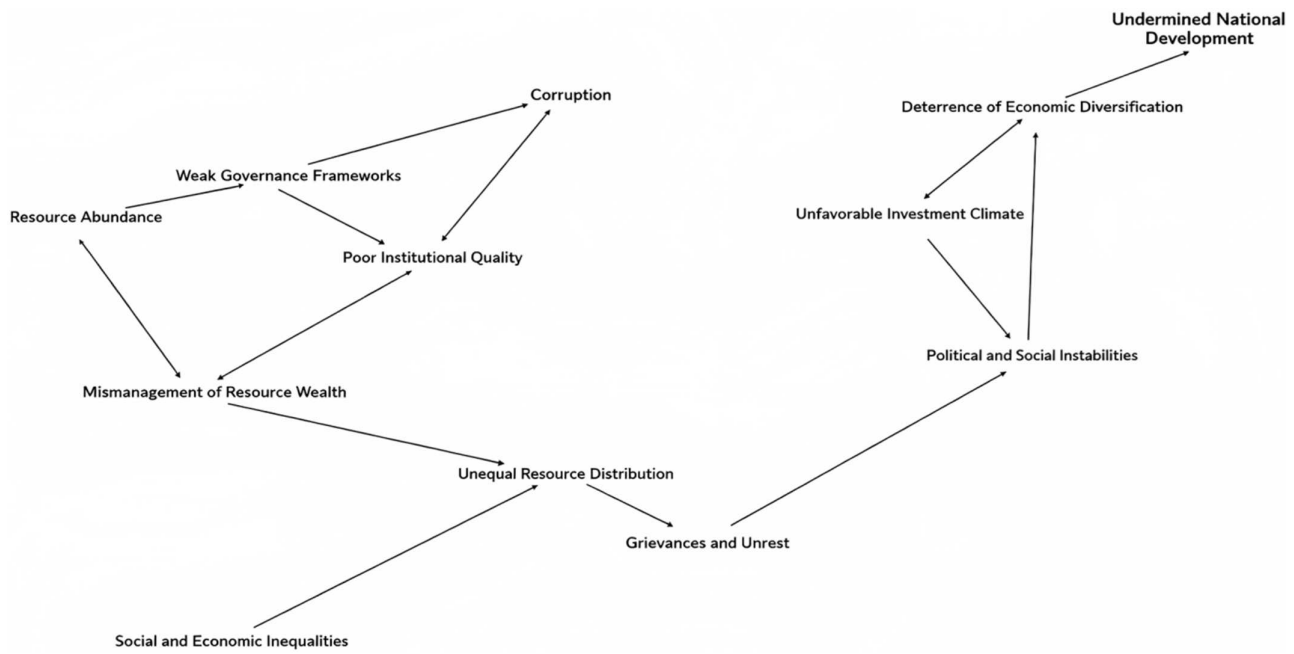
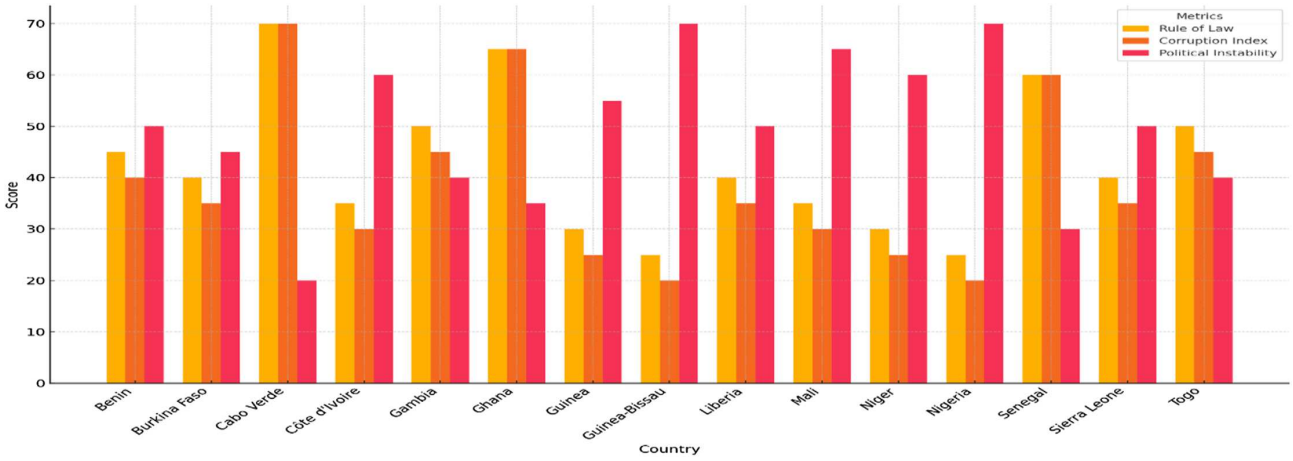


Figure 2
Rule of law, corruption index, and political instability



Ghana performing better in the Rule of Law and Corruption Index than Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Nigeria. Nigeria's low rule-of-law score, high corruption (over 60), and instability reflect the resource curse, where resource wealth fails to boost development due to weak institutions [40]. These indicators closely align with recent findings linking poor governance quality to violent conflict in mineral-rich zones across the Sahel [7, 41]. This alignment reinforces the centrality of institutional quality as a mediating factor between resource abundance and developmental outcomes. In particular, governance deficits translate resource wealth into fragility when political institutions lack credibility, transparency, and enforcement capacity.

A comparative lens reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions of ECOWAS member states. Cape Verde and Senegal, with high rule-of-law scores and low corruption, serve as positive examples. Strong institutions enhance transparency and enable resource rents to foster inclusive growth, supporting the idea that institutional quality mediates development outcomes in resource-rich countries [42, 43]. This governance variance supports a tailored, coordinated policy approach that emphasizes country-specific capacities and the regional architecture. Strengthening the rule of law through judicial independence, enforcement, and oversight is crucial for fighting corruption, stabilizing resource management, and preventing conflict, as noted in UNDP's West Africa diagnostics (UNDP, 2022). Addressing corruption alone is inadequate; legal and political stability must also be improved. A governance-driven systemic shift is necessary to break the cycle of resource mismanagement. Ongoing poor outcomes raise questions about the link between resource wealth and conflict, which are discussed further in the next section.

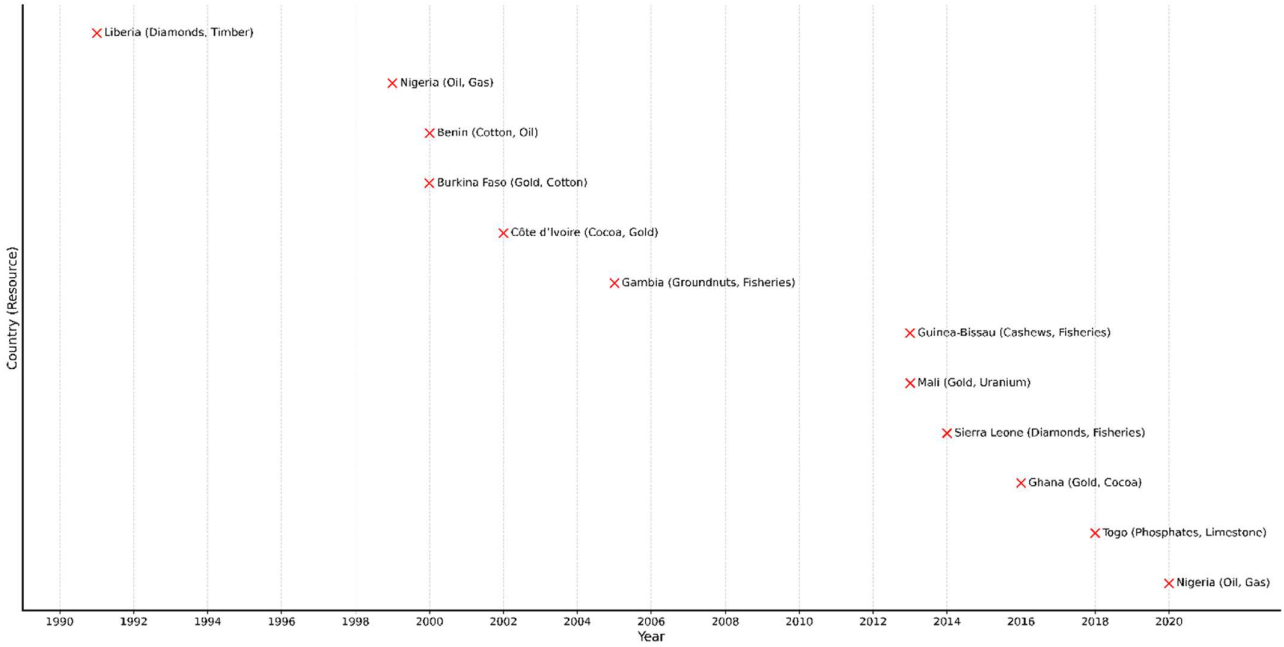
2.3. Conflicts and abundance of resources in the ECOWAS region

Conflicts, civil wars, and violence frequently cause destruction and delay resource development in ECOWAS regions. Beyond human tolls, these conflicts have lasting economic impacts, hindering growth by damaging trade, infrastructure, human capital, and natural resources [44]. Conflict impedes growth, quickens the flow of refugees, raises the poverty rate, and damages the networks of roads, bridges, and communication that support commerce and economic activity [45]. The sluggish stoppage of goods and services transit disrupts supply chains and causes shortages of necessary commodities, severely hindering production and commerce in many countries in ECOWAS [46, 47]. Several studies have shown that people often need to leave their homes due to safety concerns related to conflict and violence. This human displacement has a negative impact on the country's workforce, leading companies to lose workers and thereby increasing unemployment and poverty rates [48]. The departure of skilled individuals depletes human capital, hindering innovation and depriving organizations of valuable resources. This highlights the impact of the conflict on growth in ECOWAS. To understand resource conflicts in some ECOWAS countries.

Figure 3 maps resource-related conflicts across ECOWAS states, showing how resource wealth often worsens regional instability. Conflicts stemming from Liberia's diamond and timber issues in the 1990s, as well as recent crises in Nigeria, Mali, and Togo, highlight the persistent link between resource conflicts. The figure reveals two trends: resource-rich countries, such as Nigeria (oil), Mali and Ghana (gold), and Sierra Leone and Liberia (diamonds), frequently face unrest, insurgencies, or conflict. These are driven by poor resource governance, opaque revenue management, elite capture, and exclusion, fueling grievances and violence [49]. For instance, Nigeria's Niger Delta conflict, which intensified around the 2000s and again in the 2010s, was fueled by local perceptions of marginalization and ecological degradation caused by oil extraction, despite the region being the country's economic lifeline [50].

Second, the visualization points to a spatial contagion effect. Conflicts are not isolated but often spill over into neighboring states or inspire similar dynamics. This spillover threatens regional integration and economic development, aligning with earlier findings that associate resource mismanagement with interlinked cycles of fragility [51]. Moreover, the clustering of conflicts around periods of commodity booms (early 2000s, post-2010) illustrates how rent volatility and price shocks exacerbate tensions when states lack mechanisms for equitable redistribution or conflict resolution [52]. The timeline's late entries of Togo and Guinea-Bissau reflect newer hotspots, especially as artisanal mining and small-scale extraction, often informal and poorly regulated, expand into previously less-contested areas [41]. This highlights the need for stronger institutions, community benefit schemes, and regional governance to manage resource wealth and reduce conflict. Without reforms, resource-rich ECOWAS countries risk ongoing unrest that harms stability and growth. Conflict

Figure 3
Resource-related conflicts in ECOWAS countries



patterns show the importance of social cohesion and institutional strength in managing resource tensions. Weak institutions worsen exclusion, and a lack of trust and inclusive governance increases violence. Understanding the institutional–social interface is key to explaining why resource wealth has not increased, but rather decreased, conflict in ECOWAS countries.

Several studies have shown how poor institutional quality undermines the resource benefits across the ECOWAS countries [53]. These highlight the vital role of institutional quality in maximizing resource benefits in ECOWAS countries. Numerous studies have investigated whether resource abundance contributes to conflicts and governance issues. This systematic review analyzes publications from 1979 to 2025 and reveals gaps in understanding how the rule of law, social cohesion, and regional spillovers influence resource management and stability. Addressing these gaps is crucial for ECOWAS to manage resources effectively and tackle socioeconomic and political challenges. While resource curse and institutional theories provide valuable insights, their empirical application in ECOWAS remains fragmented, which guides the focus for the next section's review.

3. Method

This study used an SLR to analyze previous research, identify gaps, and recommend future studies. The SLR approach provides a structured, transparent, and reproducible process, boosting research credibility. It is especially effective across disciplines for understanding resource rents, corruption, conflict, institutional quality, and social cohesion within ECOWAS countries. The review followed PRISMA guidelines, a standard for reporting SLRs and meta-analyses [54, 55]. PRISMA enhances transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in literature reviews by following a structured approach. It starts with sourcing studies through a comprehensive search using keywords across databases to capture all relevant studies. The screening stage reviews titles and abstracts to filter studies according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, retaining only those that contribute to the review objectives. The PRISMA 2020 update added more detailed reporting requirements for transparency in selection, data extraction, and synthesis [56, 57].

The systematic search strategy incorporated multiple databases, including Scopus and Web of Science, to ensure a broad yet rigorous selection of peer-reviewed articles [58]. Selection criteria focused on relevance to core themes: resource rents, corruption, conflict, institutional quality, and social cohesion. Articles were systematically screened, beginning with keyword searches and an initial review of titles and abstracts. Unclear articles were further evaluated for relevance based on findings and contribution. Qualitative studies were reviewed for their thematic and theoretical alignment. This approach ensures a rigorous and transparent synthesis of the literature, offers policy insights, and highlights research gaps. Table 1 summarizes the literature search and screening process, which employed the PRISMA framework. This process involved filtering 355 articles down to 129 high-quality studies based on relevance, language, timeframe, and themes.

3.1. Search string

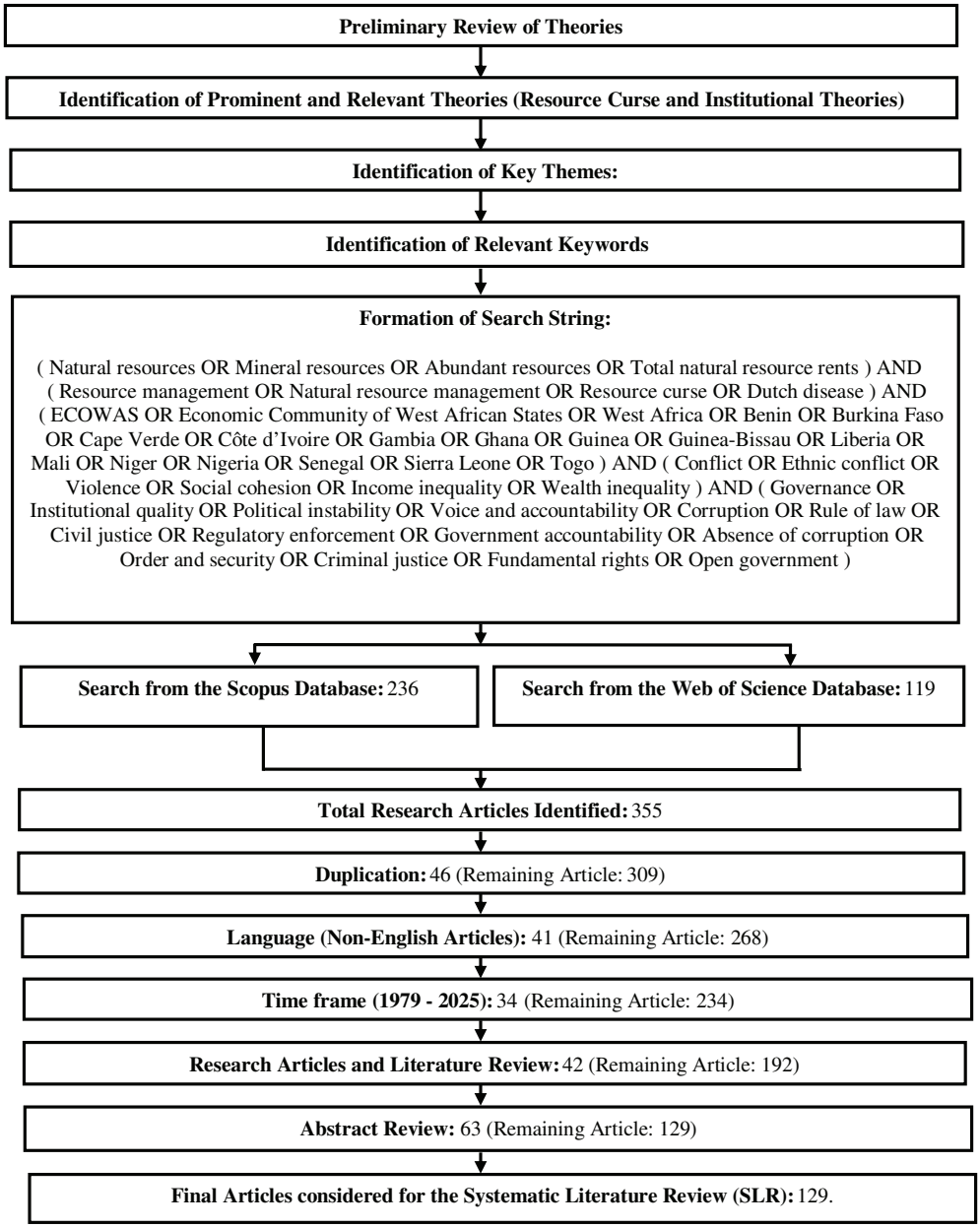
A structured search strategy was employed using the Scopus and Web of Science databases to ensure the comprehensive and systematic retrieval of relevant literature. The search string was developed around three core themes: (1) natural resource–related terms, (2) governance and socio-political factors, and (3) geographical focus on global and, more specifically, West Africa/ECOWAS countries. Within each thematic group, keywords were connected using the Boolean operator "OR" to capture variations and synonyms. In contrast, the three thematic groups were connected using "AND" to ensure that all retrieved articles addressed the intersection of these key concepts. Filters for publication date (1979–2025), language (English), and document type (journal articles) were applied to ensure the credibility and relevance of the results. This strategy yielded 355 peer-reviewed articles, which served as the foundation for the SLR. The literature review process and article selection criteria are presented in Figure 4.

Table 1
Summary of literature search and screening process

Stage	Description	No. of articles
Initial search (Scopus + Web of Science)	Combined results from both databases before filtering	355
Duplicate removal	Removed overlapping articles across databases	309
Language screening	Excluded non-English publications	268
Time frame screening	Limited to studies between 1979 and 2025	234
Relevance and thematic screening	Excluded studies not aligned with the study's themes	192
Full-text review	Evaluated for theoretical and empirical relevance	129
Final selection	Studies included in the systematic literature review (SLR)	129

Note: Author's compilation based on PRISMA-guided screening.

Figure 4
Literature review process and article selection criteria



3.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A systematic inclusion and exclusion process was applied when selecting the articles reviewed to ensure the reliability, relevance, and academic rigor of this study. The selection process was conducted using established SLR methodologies, ensuring a transparent, replicable, and bias-free literature selection process [59]. The criteria aligned with the research's scope to filter peer-reviewed, relevant literature. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published from 1979 to 2025 were included, excluding non-scholarly sources, to ensure both foundational and recent studies were included.

Only final-stage publications were included, excluding preprints, working papers, articles under review, or published before 1979. Non-English articles were excluded due to translation issues. The literature was selected and categorized by author, abstract, year, keywords, methodology, and findings. Each article underwent SLR guidelines to ensure credibility and thematic relevance [60, 61]. This filtering ensured that only quality, relevant articles were included, boosting the research's validity and impact. Table 2 shows the thematic classification of 129 studies in this SLR. It highlights the focus on resource rents, institutional quality, corruption, conflict, and social cohesion, indicating the level of research attention in each area.

4. Descriptive Analysis

4.1. Research trends and growth over time

Figure 5 illustrates trends in 1562 articles on the resource curse, highlighting issues such as resource rents, corruption, conflict, inequality, poor institutions, and social cohesion in ECOWAS countries. Over time, scholars' focus shifted due to socioeconomic and political challenges. Between 1979 and 2000, only 59 articles (3.78%) were published, marking the beginning of academic interest amid resource wealth, stagnation, and governance issues, partly due to limited data availability. Between 2001 and 2010, the number of publications increased to 312 (19.97%), reflecting a growing concern amid global oil fluctuations and conflict, as scholars expanded their analysis to include social and institutional factors. Between 2011 and 2020, 654 articles (41.87%) emerged, with research adopting empirical methods to explore the governance and social influences on the resource curse. Since 2021, the number of publications has increased to 537 (34.38%), driven by issues such as inequality, corruption, conflicts, and efforts to diversify economies in resource-rich ECOWAS countries.

4.2. Analysis of the scope of the literature review

Figure 6 shows the disciplinary distribution of 1562 articles from multidisciplinary research on resource abundance and the resource curse in the ECOWAS region. The Social Sciences comprise 32.1% (501 articles) and focus on policy, sociology, and governance, highlighting socio-political and institutional dynamics. Environmental Sciences account for 24.5% (382 articles), with an emphasis on environmental degradation, climate change, and the ecological impacts of resource extraction.

Many resource-rich ECOWAS countries face challenges in environmental governance and the enforcement of regulations. This research informs policy for sustainable resource management. Economics studies, comprising 11.9% of the articles (186), explore resource wealth, economic growth, and inequality. These highlight the coexistence of resource abundance and poverty, the impacts of resource dependence, and the challenges posed by macroeconomic policy. Effective governance and resource revenue management are vital for reducing conflict. Fields like Agricultural and Biological Sciences (120 articles, 7.7%), Earth and Planetary Sciences (66, 4.2%), Business, Management and Accounting (55, 3.5%), Energy (48, 3.1%), Arts and Humanities (36, 2.3%), Multidisciplinary (33, 2.1%), Medicine (32, 2.0%), and Others (103, 6.6%) investigate resource extraction effects on land use, food security, and geology. This is particularly crucial when mining disrupts agriculture, leading to displacement and insecurity. Multidisciplinary research is limited, underscoring the need for further study of the resource curse.

4.3. Analysis of the geographic distribution of research contributions

Figure 7 presents the analysis by country, showing the geographical distribution of research on resource curse challenges, governance, and socioeconomics in resource-rich nations. South Africa leads in publication count, emphasizing its role in resource governance, sustainability, and economic policy, driven by its history with natural resources and the mining industry. Its

Table 2
Thematic classification of reviewed studies

Core theme	Focus area	No of studies	(%)	Representative references
Resource rents and economic growth	Relationship between natural resource rents and economic development outcomes	35	27.1	[16, 62]
Institutional quality and governance	Institutional effectiveness, rule of law, and governance quality	28	21.7	[63, 64]
Corruption and rent-seeking	Corruption, elite capture, and public expenditure inefficiency	24	18.6	[26, 65]
Resource-driven conflict	Civil unrest, instability, and violence linked to resource control	22	17.1	[41]
Social cohesion and inequality	Equity, inclusion, and trust in resource governance	20	15.5	[66, 67]
Total		129	100%	

Figure 5
Documents by year

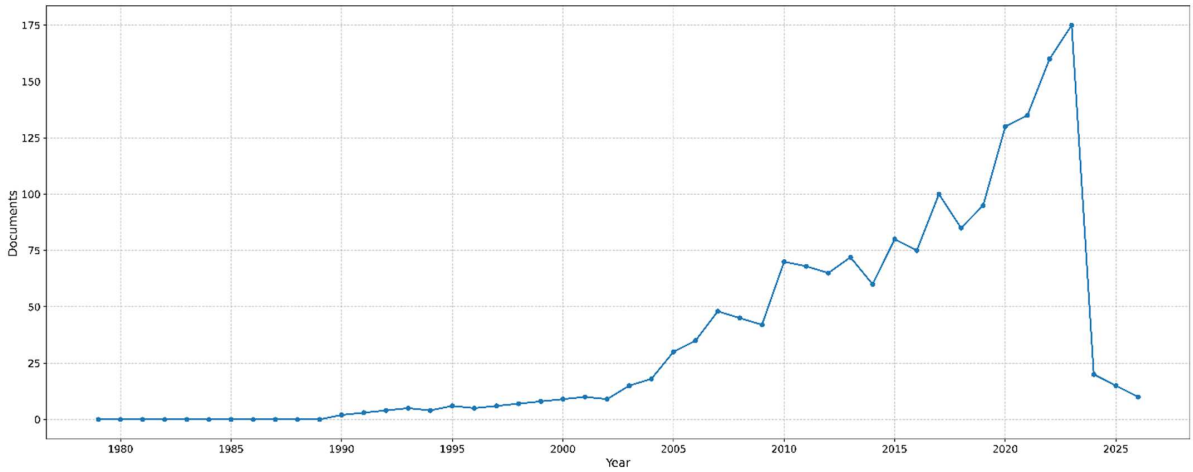


Figure 6
Documents by subject area

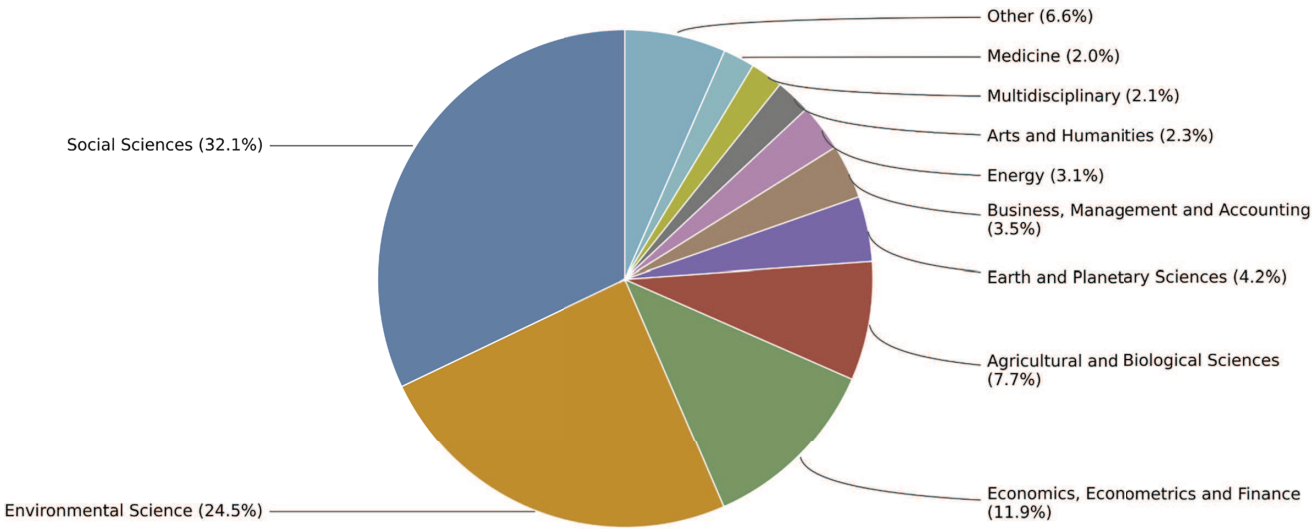
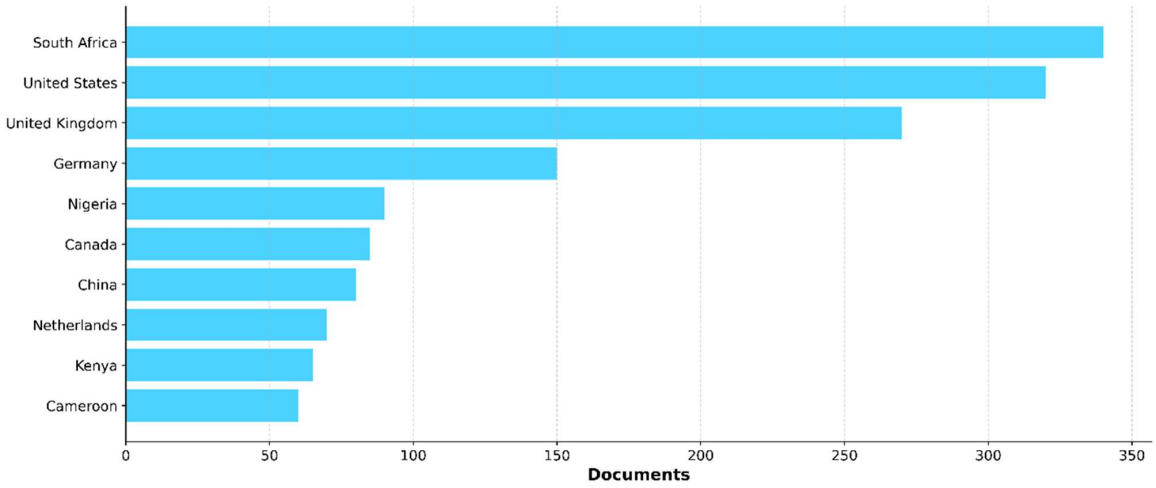


Figure 7
Documents by country or territory



dominance reflects its status as an African research hub. The USA and UK rank second and third, indicating global interest in these topics. Countries such as Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, and China also have notable research output, underscoring that resource governance and economic development are concerns that extend beyond Africa.

Germany and Canada, with advanced extractive industries and governance, may compare resource management in developing and developed economies. China's role in Africa's mining, especially in ECOWAS through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and projects, explains its inclusion. Nigeria, Kenya, and Cameroon are key in resource curse studies; Africa, the continent's top oil producer, struggles with corruption and governance issues linked to its resource wealth. Nigeria's research output shows a strong interest in policy and governance reforms, while Kenya and Cameroon focus on regional governance and resource management. Increased collaboration among African institutions could enhance knowledge exchange and policymaking to address governance issues in ECOWAS.

5. Empirical Results and Discussion of the Findings

5.1. Trend of the resource curse

An SLR was conducted using two major academic databases (Scopus and Web of Science), which are widely recognized as global, high-quality repositories for peer-reviewed literature [68, 69]. Initially, 2726 articles were retrieved from databases, and then narrowed down to 1562 for the African context. A review identified two core theories, the resource curse and institutional theories, serving as the foundation for five research themes: resource abundance, corruption, conflict, social cohesion, and governance, emphasizing the rule of law in ECOWAS. These themes guided the development of the search string for the SLR. Based on the search criteria, 355 articles were extracted, 236 from Scopus and 119 from Web of Science. After removing duplicate articles (46), the total number of articles was reduced to 309. Subsequently, 41 non-English articles were excluded to ensure consistency in language and accessibility [70]. Thirty-four articles outside the 1979–2025 period were removed, leaving 234. This process aimed to capture a broad range of literature on resources, corruption, conflict, social cohesion, and governance. A subsequent review identified two core theories (the resource curse and institutional theory) to underpin the study. A comprehensive review of these articles ensured thematic relevance to the ECOWAS context. Articles not mentioning theories were read in detail; 105 were deemed less relevant for lacking focus. The final 129 articles were highly relevant to the research. Using strict inclusion/exclusion criteria, this study establishes a credible foundation for analyzing the impact of the resource curse on governance, corruption, conflict, and social cohesion in ECOWAS.

5.2. Robustness and validity of the SLR

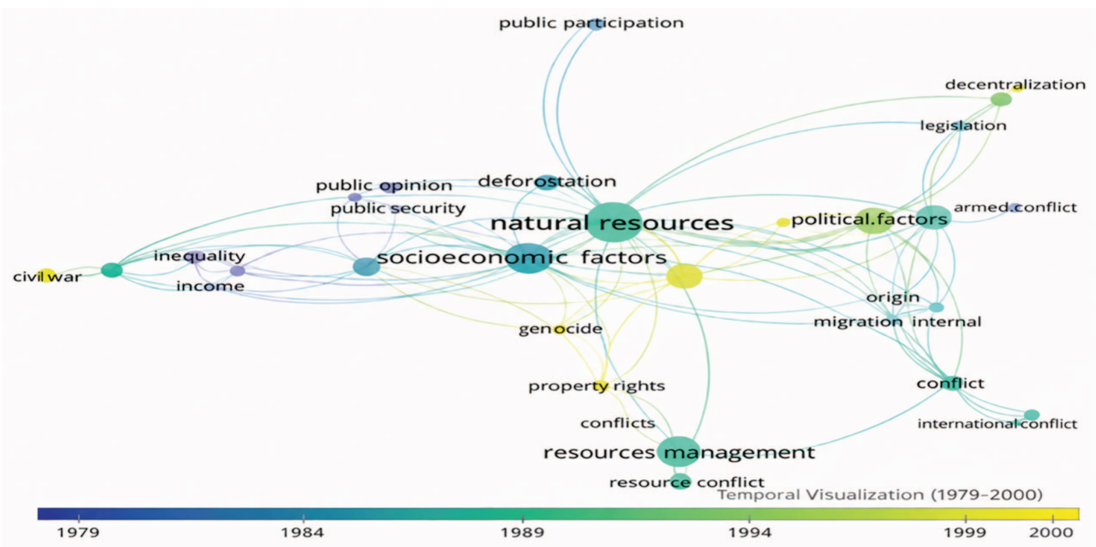
5.2.1. Chronological evolution of resource curse research in ECOWAS

This section presents the bibliometric evolution of studies on the resource curse and resource rents in the ECOWAS region across three different periods (1979–2000, 2001–2011, and 2012–2025). These divisions capture the field's theoretical maturation, thematic diversification, and methodological sophistication. The evolution of these clusters demonstrates a clear trajectory from global theoretical arguments toward context-specific, multidimensional analyses within the ECOWAS region.

5.2.2. Early period (1979–2000): foundational theories and emerging awareness

VOSviewer network visualization was employed to support, validate, and map the identified research gaps from the SLR. The VOSviewer was divided into three segments to observe trends over time, spanning the earlier studies from 1979 to 2025. Figure 8 of the VOSviewer visualization highlights the centrality of natural resources and their strong connections with political factors and resource management, indicating a recognized link between governance and resource abundance. However, nodes such as legislation and decentralization are smaller and less connected, suggesting that while political factors are discussed, the role of the rule of law remains underexplored. The timeline (1990–2000) suggests that discussions on the legal governance of natural resources have been ongoing; however, insufficient attention has been paid to legal frameworks to mitigate challenges associated with natural resources.

Figure 8
Research trend between 1979 and 2000



Additionally, network visualization reveals connections between conflict, resource management, and socioeconomic factors, suggesting a strong link between resource wealth and instability. However, critical elements of social cohesion, such as inequalities, public participation, and public opinion, were not further explored, suggesting a gap in conflict-resolution strategies. This reinforces the need for further studies on how social integration and trust-building mechanisms can mitigate resource-driven conflict. These necessitate further research to explore the underexplored areas regarding the study. This period aligns with the foundational propositions of the resource curse theory, which emphasize the paradox that resource wealth can translate into weak governance and slow institutional development. The absence of governance-related terms in this era underscores that the ECOWAS context had not yet entered mainstream academic discourse.

5.2.3. Expansion period (2001–2011): integration of governance and conflict

Figure 9 of the network, covering the period from 2001 to 2011, builds upon the previous discussions (1990–2000) by revealing new developments in research on natural resources, governance, conflict, and the rule of law. The analysis of node connectivity (relationship strength), node size (concept frequency), and node proximity (closeness to key themes) allows the study to examine further research gaps that align with the themes. The node's natural resources remain central and closely linked to the resource curse, violence, and conflict, underscoring that these areas are among the most challenging aspects of resource wealth in the governance system. However, governance-related nodes, such as accountability, law, law enforcement, political instability, legal aspects, and legislation, are relatively small, and rent-seeking is often associated with corruption. This suggests that while corruption is acknowledged, the role of judicial enforcement and legal institutions in addressing the rent-seeking impact on natural resources remains underexplored. The emergence of laws and legislation, as well as legal pluralism, suggests a growing recognition of legal frameworks; however, these elements have not been thoroughly explored.

Furthermore, visualization shows a link between natural resources, conflict, violence, and ethnic conflict, underscoring the ongoing relationship between resource wealth and social instability. However, despite socioeconomic indicators, trust, income distribution, and equity being key nodes, they remain small, suggesting that social cohesion is still not a dominant theme in conflict-resolution discussions and indicating a gap in understanding how economic inequalities contribute to resource-driven disputes. The identified gaps call for further investigation in future studies. The increasing integration of governance and conflict themes during this period reflects the gradual recognition of the institutional dimension of the resource curse. This empirical shift corresponds with the theoretical expansion advanced by Abdulwahab and Firmansyah [71] and Simionescu [72], who argue that institutional quality determines whether resource rents become a curse or a blessing.

5.2.4. Latest period (2012–2025): multidimensional governance and conflict nexus

Figure 10 visualizes the research network for 2012–2025, which is more complex and interconnected, involving natural resources, resource rents, corruption, conflict, institutional quality, and the rule of law. The nodes of natural resources remain the focal point of the discussion, which is closely connected to resource rents, corruption, and institutional quality, indicating an increasing recognition of governance in natural resources studies. Unlike previous years, when corruption was not explicitly mentioned, the connection between the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and government effectiveness suggests a growing focus on governance mechanisms to mitigate corruption related to resource wealth. However, despite this progress, the rule of law and government effectiveness remain small and an emerging area, suggesting the need for more focused studies on how the rule of law or legal enforcement can curb the adverse effects of corruption on resource rents. Moreover, the network illustrates

Figure 9
Research trend between 2001 and 2011

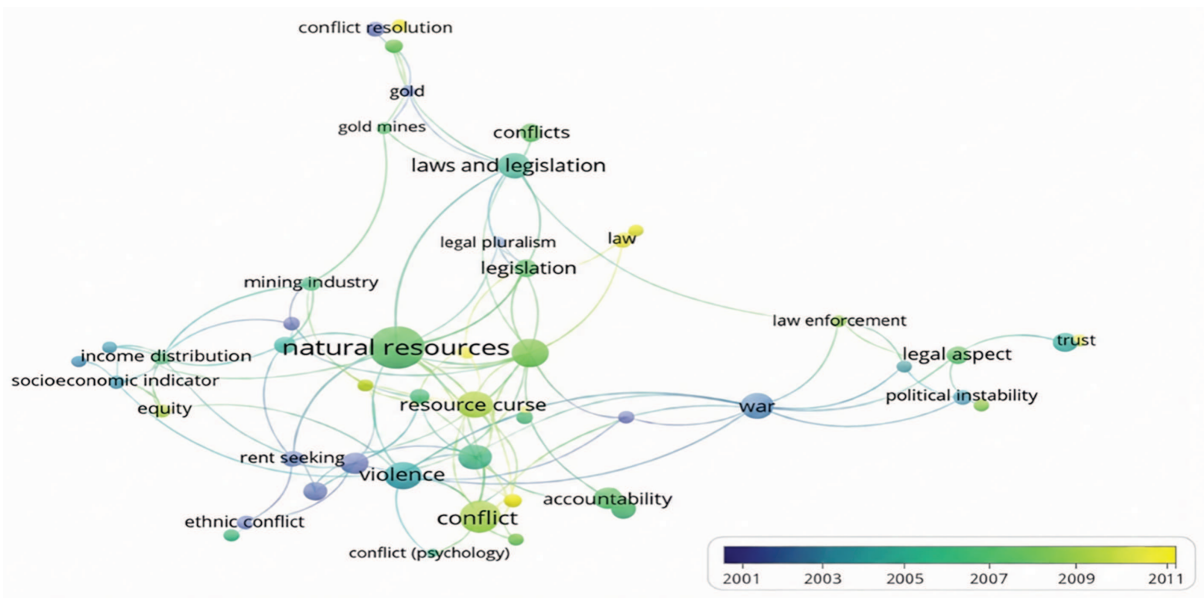
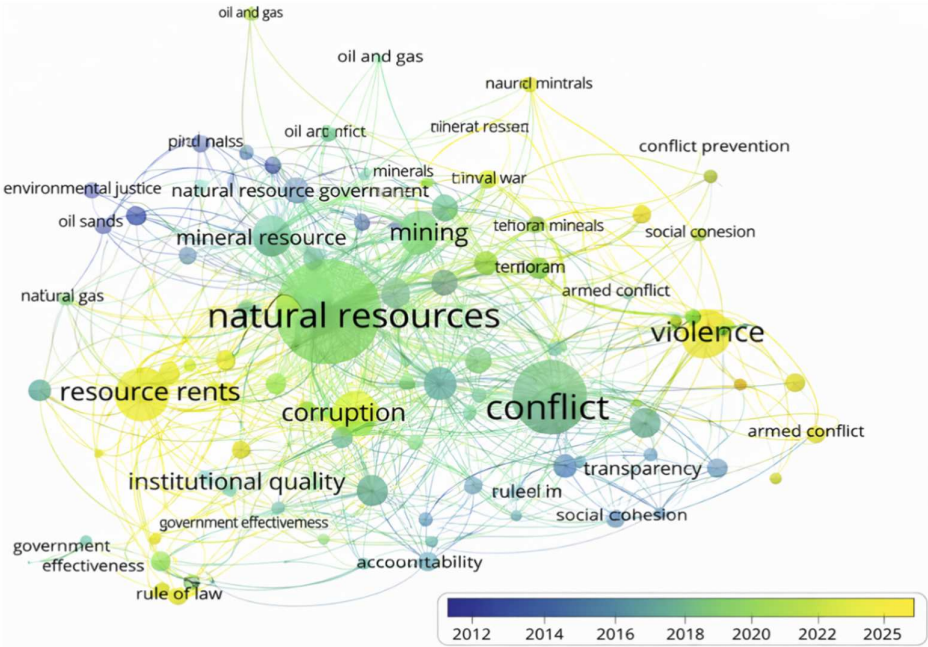


Figure 10
Research trend from 2012 to 2025



a significant connection between natural resources, conflict, violence, civil war, and terrorism, reinforcing the persistent challenge of resource-driven instability. A notable development is the emergence of social cohesion and conflict prevention, indicating a shift in research toward addressing conflict by size. However, these nodes remain small, suggesting that while the role of social cohesion is acknowledged, it is not yet a dominant theme in research on resource-related conflict.

Institutional quality and government effectiveness are now more closely aligned, highlighting governance as a key strategy for mitigating conflict. Future research should explore the role of social cohesion in preventing conflicts in resource-rich countries and examine the types of violence and their implications. However, the absence of trade data reveals a gap in analyzing economic impacts. Although governance responses draw interest, they often lack a focus on mitigating economic disruptions caused by conflict. Future studies should assess how governance can mitigate spillovers and promote economic stability. Addressing these gaps will improve policies on resource benefits, conflict prevention, and reforms. The rise of legal and social factors, such as the rule of law and social cohesion, demonstrates that ECOWAS research is evolving into a multidimensional framework that supports institutional theory and incorporates governance and social capital in resource management.

5.3. Identified research gaps and emerging themes

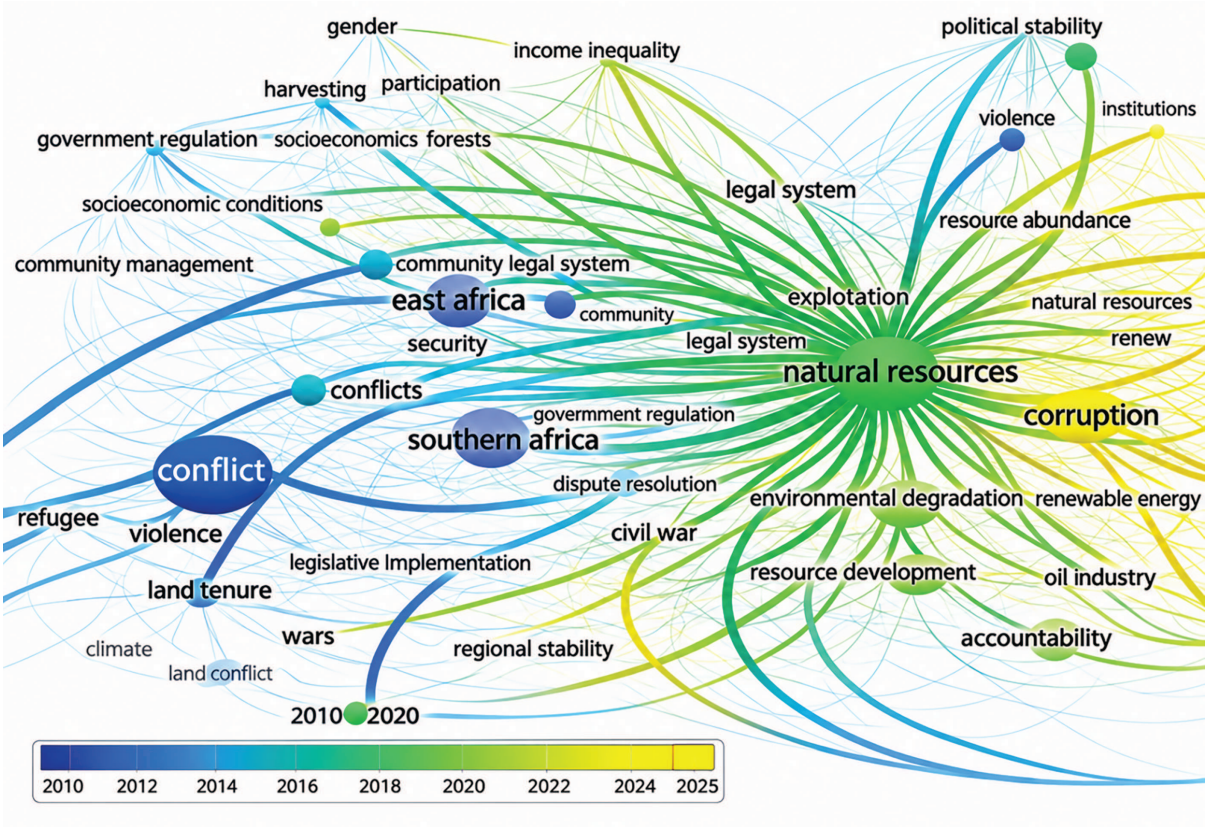
Figure 11 highlighted gaps and visualized key themes, showing their interconnections and dominance. The network illustrates how natural resources, corruption, governance, conflict, and social cohesion are linked, confirming the three main research gaps in the literature. The network visualization highlights dominant themes through node size, where larger nodes indicate well-researched areas and smaller nodes reveal underexplored aspects [73, 74]. The largest nodes represent natural resources, corruption, and conflict, indicating an extensive study of these topics in resource-rich economies and regions with political instability. While corruption and resources are well-studied, the rule of law and institutional quality, highlighted by the yellow nodes, are underexplored yet crucial. This highlights a research gap emphasizing the need to strengthen the rule of law, regulations, and transparency to improve governance and resource benefits [75].

The social cohesion, accountability, and inequality nodes are smaller but well connected to natural resources and conflict, indicating a crucial link. While resource-driven conflict is well-studied, the role of social cohesion in mitigation remains understudied. Strong connections suggest that accountability and resource equality are vital for reducing tensions. The limited exploration underscores the urgent need to study social cohesion's stabilizing role in resource-rich countries [66].

While regional conflicts and resource-based wars have been studied, their cross-border interconnectedness and the impact on regional stability require further research. The absence of a central conflict spillover node suggests a limited understanding of how conflicts in one country impact ECOWAS neighbors and regions. This highlights a crucial research gap that requires urgent attention, with future studies exploring the conflict spillovers on trade to promote peace, economic benefits, and resolve conflicts that hinder progress [76].

The VOSviewer highlights areas needing further research, aligning with the systematic review. Key gaps include limited focus on the rule of law, corruption, and social cohesion in resource conflicts within ECOWAS. Future studies should also assess how conflict spillovers affect interstate trade and governance in ECOWAS countries. Addressing these gaps will advance research and help policymakers reduce resource conflicts and corruption, thereby strengthening governance and combating the resource curse. These findings show a shift from economic to institutional and social analysis, with implications for ECOWAS policy.

Figure 11
The VOSviewer network is used to identify all gaps



6. Discussion

The chronological division of these eras reveals that research on the resource curse and resource rents in ECOWAS has evolved from focusing on economic factors to incorporating governance, institutional quality, and social cohesion. Early studies (1979–2000) highlighted the resource abundance paradox and weak governance, whereas later work focused more on corruption, accountability, and the rule of law, reflecting a growing understanding of the institutional and societal contexts that influence resource dependence. These findings are broadly consistent with the classic propositions of Moudatsou [77], who highlighted the macroeconomic paradox of resource dependence. However, the present review extends their scope by demonstrating that ECOWAS-focused studies are increasingly integrating institutional and governance variables. In contrast to early global literature that portrays the resource curse as primarily economic, more recent African-based analyses [78] emphasize political accountability and social inclusion—trends that are reflected in our results as well.

The findings validate the main propositions of institutional theory, which suggest that institutional strength determines whether resource wealth becomes a curse or a blessing. The chronological evidence supports the theoretical expansion advanced by several scholars [79], who argue that governance quality mediates the relationship between rent and growth.

From a policy perspective, research highlights the need for a governance-led development strategy in ECOWAS, emphasizing the importance of institutional quality and effective legal enforcement. These findings complement analyses by the African Development Bank (2020) and UNDP (2021) on accountability, transparency, and citizen participation for sustainable resource management. Tracing academic focus on these issues offers a foundation for reforms in resource governance, anti-corruption, and cross-border cooperation. ECOWAS's path out of the resource curse requires an integrated approach that strengthens legal institutions, improves transparency in governance, and promotes social cohesion. The study highlights the importance of coordinated regional reforms that link institutional changes with inclusive policies. These insights lead to practical recommendations for researchers and policymakers.

7. Conclusion

A systematic review and network analysis of 1562 articles, filtered to 129 relevant works, reveal key insights into resource-related themes. While research encompasses natural resources, corruption, conflict, and institutional quality, themes such as the rule of law, social cohesion, and conflict spillovers, particularly in ECOWAS, are underrepresented. Between 1979 and 2025, the governance aspects of the resource curse gained recognition; however, the literature lacks depth in legal frameworks and accountability to reduce corruption and manage resources equitably. The role of social cohesion in preventing conflict is often underexplored, and regional conflict spillovers are frequently overlooked. These findings support focusing on how institutional factors, social dynamics, and regional connections influence the impact of resources.

The study suggests policy priorities for countries and ECOWAS, including strengthening the rule of law by improving judicial independence, enforcement, transparency, and accountability. It highlights the need to utilize social cohesion policies to promote inclusive governance, equitable resource sharing, and civic participation, thereby building trust and reducing tensions. The lack of research on conflict spillovers underscores the

importance of cross-border conflict monitoring, peace initiatives, and trade cooperation to prevent regional unrest. Lastly, governance should be integrated into broader development plans, encompassing reforms, conflict prevention, and economic sustainability within a coordinated framework that acknowledges their interconnectedness.

7.1. Recommendations and suggestions for further direction

This study highlights future research areas, including empirical investigations into how legal institutions influence corruption in natural resource governance and evaluating judicial and regulatory efficiency in ECOWAS countries. It also suggests exploring the role of social cohesion in conflict mitigation, focusing on community trust, inclusion, and equality, which are crucial according to current studies. Additionally, the impact of intra-state conflicts on trade, migration, and political alliances needs urgent research, especially concerning Nigeria, which leads regional affairs. Addressing these gaps will provide valuable insights to promote stability, equity, and sustainable development across Nigeria and the ECOWAS region.

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Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Lawal Olamilekan Abdulwahab: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. **Wei Loon Pang:** Validation, Supervision, Project administration. **Roslee Bin Hj Baha:** Validation, Supervision, Project administration. **Ahmed M. Khalid:** Validation, Supervision, Project administration.

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