Roots of Sustainable Peace

Promising Practices in Violence Prevention and Development in West Africa
Over the past 20 years a vibrant civil society in West Africa has been involved in a myriad of activities that highlight the fundamental tenet of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development: that development and violence reduction go hand in hand.

Several of these grassroots organizations, along with representatives from governments and regional entities, participated in the “West Africa Regional Seminar on Promising Practices on Armed Violence Reduction and Prevention (AVRP)” held this June in Abuja, Nigeria. The meeting was part of a series of regional meetings leading up to the Second Ministerial Review Summit on the Geneva Declaration.

It seemed unthinkable then that the UN House where preventing armed violence was discussed would be bombed only a few weeks later on August 26th, killing 23 and injuring 116.

This issue of the Comunidad Segura Magazine reports on the work of participants at that meeting, participants who share urgent human security concerns despite disparate histories, settings and languages.

Currently 10 of the 15 West African countries are signatories of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons and have established Small Arms Commissions. The West African Network for Peacebuilding, for example, works to curb the proliferation of small arms and to enact domestic gun control laws.

Participants stressed that when local resources are exploited without regard for host communities armed violence increases. This is especially poignant in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region.

The “youth bulge” is another source of concern, whether in massive migration from rural areas to cities, (Liberia and Ghana) or in young societies that have only known the trauma of conflict (Sierra Leone). Job creation is one way to address latent tensions; another is to ask good questions. Ask families how they solve problems, ask why gender closes school doors to some and not others (Nigeria).

Borders in the region are porous. Security sector reform is needed, as is increased cooperation among governments. Conflict mediation and resource management are key, as shown by the Senegalese Peace Committees. In many countries rule of law must be buttressed against organized crime and yet sensitive to triggers of conflict through early warning systems.

A universal concern is to invite women to take an active role in managing conflicts at all levels, from their own clans and villages to the political life of their countries.

Finally, there is the fundamental issue of gathering data on armed violence. “When there is no data, there is no problem,” said Sebastian Taylor for Action on Armed Violence.

Armed violence takes a staggering toll on communities worldwide. We dedicate this magazine to Mimidoo Achakpa, of Nigeria’s Women’s Right to Education, who was the heart of the Abuja meeting, and who lost her only son Charles Lubem Abaagu to armed violence on September 4th.

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This edition was produced with the collaboration of participants of the “West African Regional Seminar on Promising Practices on Armed Violence Reduction and Prevention (AVRP).
Aliou Demba Kebe, a former teacher and current Programs Coordinator of Afrique en Jeux (The African Challenge), works in an area “caught between two fires” he says, referring to the Casamance region of South Senegal where tensions are rife between a local rebellion and security forces. The organization helps to reinsert and reintegrate internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and is also active in promoting cross-border initiatives to promote peace-building and development.

“What we see in the Casamance conflict is a conjunction of bad governance at the roots, combined with repression by security forces [that] fan the flames of unrest. While development has stalled, the uprising has turned from traditional weapons to armed violence, making the conflict more lethal. And there have been attacks on offices of the authorities, undermining the rule of law,” said Kebe. Complicating matters, Kebe reports, armed rebels have established bases in a veritable ‘no man’s land’, along the borders with Guinea-Bissau and with the Gambia.

“This conflict’s victims are the population. Official statistics say that landmines alone have made 753 victims,” said Kebe.

Afrique en Jeux establishes local Peace Committees, which Kebe says teach villagers to “analyze the causes behind the internal conflict in their own communities and to look for solutions. “These may be traditionally or culturally based solutions and the tone is reconciliation.” Just on the Senegal – Guinea Bissau border we were able to establish 25 peace committees,” said Kebe.

**Lesson learned:**
**respect local culture**

Kebe notes that an important lesson learned in the field is to resort to local mechanisms and traditional values when raising awareness about conflict resolution. For Kebe, establishing trust is based on virtues that will put peace before war: Community leaders must enjoy credibility in their communities. Elders must be respected. Dialogue and consultation must be facilitated, kinship relations understood as well as religions, symbolism and the value of cultural events.

The committees are composed in a way that ensures they will reflect the various interests of the community, with space for men, women and young people to participate.

“There are many ways to encourage dialogue,” said Kebe, adding: “One way is to encourage transborder activities that foster economic growth. Our transborder gardens are a good example, a simple project that nevertheless requires different communities to spend time together, and it helps change mentalities in the field.”
Engaging youths coming out of conflict

IN GOVERNANCE

Florella Hazeley, coordinator of the Sierra Leone Action Network on Small Arms, works on the frontlines of violence reduction, engaging youths as they emerge from the country’s internal conflict.

“Countries coming out of conflict like Sierra Leone must have a special role for their young people in consolidating peace,” said Hazeley, who also participated actively in her country’s peace process. “The key to peace are the youths who have been both the victims and the perpetrators in Sierra Leone’s conflicts,” said Hazeley.

Her organization launched a ‘Ballots not Bullets’ campaign to guarantee peaceful elections in 2007, the first time Sierra Leoneans went to the polls after peace was declared. She says it was clear that challenges to security were too great to leave solely in the hands of the police. The campaign was a way to engage youths and interest them in governance. It was deemed a success and was replicated in Ghana the following year.

The program also inspired Youth in Governance, a program that engages youths in the country’s institutions. “These are young men and women who have fallen behind on their schooling because of the disruption of war. They need to be taught what it is like to live in a peaceful society. They have no memory of it, no natural expectations.”

Hazeley says many demobilization programs favor males who had weapons, and fail to tend to others who may have been left without the necessary emotional or social skills to reenter social life. That “one size fits all” package deployed in post-conflict situations is problematic because it does not include input from women’s organizations, nor from health professionals.

Hazeley says most victim relief efforts are tentative at best. “There is no data on victims, little effort is put into including local coping mechanisms, they are blind to women.”

“Most victim relief efforts are tentative at best. There is no data on victims, little effort is put into including local coping mechanisms, they are blind to women.”

Hazeley says reconstruction must entail preparing host communities to receive victims and former perpetrators, strengthened data collection systems, and most importantly, a non-discriminatory (it must include women) reception of victims. “In the immediate aftermath of violence government capacity is short,” said Hazeley, “We needed help from the UN and humanitarian organizations. Now our goal is to change mindsets of young people and engage them in governance.”
Consolidating Peace: “We encourage women to step forward”

When Sierra Leone’s internal conflict ended officially in 2002, it left the nation a generation of young men and women divorced from the flow of civilian life. Youths born in Sierra Leone and recent arrivals from neighboring Liberia had little to count on to build their futures. The Center for Human Rights and Peace Education has been active in engaging this generation in the southern provinces’ four districts of Pujehun, Moyamba, Bonthe and Bo, areas heavily destabilized by the fighting.

“It may seem like it has been a long time since the war, but the fact is that a significant part of the young population, former combatants and those otherwise affected by conflict, is not gainfully employed today,” said John Koroma, director of the CHRPE, an organization working to integrate young people into civilian life. Koroma describes a generation that lives in a resource-rich area known for its diamond mines and agriculture, youths who are nevertheless idle. “They have dropped out of school, they are frustrated and are not involved in any enterprise,” Koroma said.

The Center for Human Rights and Peace Education reaches out to those affected by war through three main strategies: by fostering an engagement with arts and sports, by stimulating active participation in public life, and by connecting people to the health system. “We organize football matches and peace concerts” said Koroma. “We focus on violence prevention, on building capacities through peace education in communities particularly for women and youth.”

Based in Sierra Leone’s second city, Bo, the organization focuses on the role of public life in consolidating peace. “The 2012 elections are coming up and it is our goal to increase the number of women in public office. Currently there are perhaps three or four women for every hundred men in public office. We want to bridge that gap, we want to see women making up at least 30% of the body of government officials, from the local administration to the higher authorities,” said Koroma. The effort has involved networking with political parties and founding the All Political Parties Women’s Association to promote the participation of women in politics.

“We encourage women to step forward, we network with civil society organizations so that they increase their advocacy, we go to schools, to community based organizations and contact traditional leaders,” said Koroma, adding that “we want to break the cycle of violence. Women have suffered the brunt of violence during the war. They want – like we do – to stop the revenge and animosity.” The organization’s training material addresses various kinds of violence – domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse. Most of the materials they use have been adapted over time to include opinions and responses given by the beneficiaries.

The Center’s efforts to champion women’s active participation in civil society led the organization to engage in another aspect of human security: the right to health.

“We are actively involved in reproductive and health rights. We are close partners with the Ministry of Social Welfare, spreading the word about family planning and encouraging pregnant women to interact with the health system and deliver babies in hospitals.” Babies who, as Koroma reminds us, unlike their mothers and fathers, have a chance to grow up with no direct recollection of war, and may play a role in consolidating peace in the community.

Country: Sierra Leone
Organization: The Center for Human Rights and Peace Education
MEASURING LEVELS OF ARMED VIOLENCE IN LIBERIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

By Teresa Dybeck

Armed violence, both threatened and actual, continues to pose a significant threat to security, stability and hence sustainable development in Liberia. Although recovery from the direct impacts of the Liberian conflict has been positive, a marked absence of rule of law, security and justice sector capacity in often-remote rural areas, results in high potential for social instability, use of weapons in community-level disputes, and risk of re-recruitment of (mostly) young men, to wider regional conflicts.

Of 960 households surveyed by British NGO Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) across the capital Monrovia in a 2010 baseline armed violence study, one in four (23%) had experienced crime in the last year; half of these respondents had been victimized multiple times.

Armed robberies and interpersonal assaults resulting in injuries were the most common acts of armed violence. While small arms and light weapons (SALW) are the most commonly used weapons in many countries, this is not the case in Liberia. Instead rocks, sticks, bladed weapons, and agricultural tools are used in the vast majority of cases (over 80%). When it comes to SALW and other forms of conventional weapons, states have the power to implement laws and regulations to either ban or regulate the ownership and use of weapons. However, the instruments used in Liberia are not subject to the same kind of preventive responses, making it even more acute to address the root causes of violence.

Liberia has shown great leadership internationally in fighting armed violence. Until recently, however, the country did not have an institutionalized central system for data gathering, analysis and measurement regarding incidences of armed violence. In early 2011 the Liberian Armed Violence Observatory (LAVO) was established. The project is an offshoot of the 2006 Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development to which Liberia is one of the original signatories.

The LAVO gathers, analyzes and reports on armed violence data in Liberia, working collaboratively with government, non-governmental organizations, academic and media actors, and international organizations. The LAVO unites 20 stakeholders, where the Liberian National Police and the Ministries of Health, Defense, Gender and Development are the key data providers. Liberian civil society organizations and international NGOs participate in analyzing data collected.

The LAVO is thus a partnership between stakeholders, a way to build institutional capacity and collaboration among key actors and experts on the issue in Liberia. The LAVO primarily uses existing data sets and sources, rather than building a new system in parallel.

The British NGO Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) facilitated and supported the establishment of LAVO; the initiative is now led by Liberian experts and will soon be housed in a Liberian institution.

Implementation of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and
Development is centred on three pillars: advocacy, measurability and programming. The LAVO works directly in line with the second pillar i.e. monitoring to improve understanding of the scope and scale of armed violence and its negative impact on development. The LAVO also has a strong advocacy component. The LAVO ultimately aims to inform policymakers and support effective policy development and program design.

Reliable data on the incidence, impact and perceptions of armed violence are critical to addressing the root causes of violence, and ultimately reducing its incidence and impact. The working group meets monthly to discuss and analyse the data collected and the LAVO will report on a quarterly basis. The first LAVO report is to be published in 2011.

LAVO also works with the Liberian Early Warning Early Response group, which aims to collect information in order to address potential security threats. An important part of this work is to map incidences recorded in order to identify hotspots. The map is available online at http://lern.ushahidi.com.

The idea of building a coherent national database on armed violence, by centralizing, monitoring and analysing existing data, was enthusiastically received. However, challenges remain, and there are still significant gaps in data collection and handling.

In Liberia, there are vast disparities between Monrovia and rural areas in terms of capacity, communication possibilities and infrastructure. In the case of the police, although regional command structures are in place, the system is overly centralized, and regional offices receive inadequate logistical support.

Given these circumstances there is a risk that armed violence incidences, particularly in rural areas go unreported. The Liberian and international organizations that form part of the LAVO working group thus have a very important role to play: They may hold information that could contribute to filling in gaps and identify incidences which may go unreported to the authorities. This is the significant advantage of having an observatory – it enhances possibilities to triangulate individual data sources.

When establishing the LAVO it also became clear that more awareness-raising on the issue is necessary. Today, many Liberians, both at government level and the general public, associate armed violence solely with armed conflict. Because the war is over, many fail to understand the interrelation between insecurity and underdevelopment.

Hospital data is key to creating a comprehensive picture of gun violence nationwide. Another significant challenge for LAVO is that the standard reporting forms of Ministry of Health and Social Welfare do not have a separate category for injuries caused by armed violence (VRI), making data collection very time consuming.

LAVO has therefore been working with the Ministry to investigate possibilities to create such a separate category for VRI on the standard reporting forms nationwide. Accurate information on the number of VRI treated by Liberian hospitals will further contribute to creating an accurate picture of the situation, and also allow the Liberian government to calculate the actual cost of armed violence.

Armed violence implies enormous costs at all levels of society. Even non-lethal injuries can cause long-term costs related to hospitalisation, rehabilitation and lost productivity. Armed violence constitutes a security threat and affects all members of society; rich and poor, old and young and men as well as women. Real or even perceived insecurity has very negative effects on social cohesion. LAVO stakeholders have noted that internationally, Liberia is still perceived as an insecure country which may discourage investors.

Armed violence is a complex issue. In order to understand it and thereby to find effective ways to prevent it, accurate data is necessary to build a complete national picture of the situation. Based on reliable data the LAVO can support effective policy development and program design, as well as building public awareness, to strengthen national and local efforts to reduce and ultimately prevent armed violence.

Teresa Dybeck is Armed Violence Observatory Coordinator.
Liberia’s Youth Crime Watch has taken their work on armed violence reduction to the suburbs of Monrovia. James Sumo, the deputy director of the organization believes that engaging young people between their teens and 35 in meaningful activities can help them refrain from violence.

Like in other cities across the developing world, migration from the country’s interior to the cities have filled Monrovia’s suburbs with young people seeking out services, jobs, and education. Youth Crime Watch seeks to engage these youths, provide alternatives to crime, and improve community relations between locals and the police.

“We are involved in proactive strategies to mitigate crime. We want to lower the incidences of crime among young people by engaging them; we organize musical and sporting events, we contact them in schools, we go to the markets. We would like locals to know they have a role in reducing violence and improving security, too, and that the police are their partners,” said Sumo.

### Social Exclusion is a Tinderbox

While one might imagine that urban centers would be best prepared for preventing armed violence, civil society activists in the West African region say that services in the area are strained by urban growth, culminating in gross and visible structural inequalities. The resulting sense of social exclusion – defined as the intentional lowering of an individual’s quantitative and qualitative life expectancy in a community – is one of the main triggers for armed violence. Infant mortality, lack of access to schooling, poor diet, maternal mortality among other factors plague many of these communities. NGOs have proposed that the triggers of urban violence in communities in West Africa are:

- High unemployment especially among youths;
- Widespread illiteracy;
- Corruption and bad governance;
- Rising student dropout rates;
- Incitement of youths on the part of politicians;
- A weak security sector;
- The illegal use of resources;
- Large rural to urban migration;
- Drug trafficking.

They also offered three key recommendations:

- Quality education should be extended to all members of urban centers;
- Security forces should be better supported by the authorities;
- Politicians should refrain from mobilizing youths for political gain.
Lomé, the capital of Togo, is home to a number of civil society initiatives that focus on peace. The West African Network of Peacebuilding WANEP-Togo includes 17 civil society organizations dedicated to conflict prevention and resolution. Their goal is to contribute to “consolidate social peace”, according to Sowu Mesa Yawo Edem, who gave Comunidad Segura an interview during the meeting held in Abuja.

“We have gotten together to ensure that peace is not broken, we observe the situation so that we can detect emerging conflicts,” said Sowu. Sowu notes the presence of an early warning system WARN, that monitors for signs of possible upsets across Togo. Information collected locally is assimilated regionally; data is centralized at the WANEP regional office in Accra, Ghana, which in turn relays it to the larger ECOWARN system that belongs to the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS.

But closer to Sowu’s heart is a project to prevent violence even earlier. “You have to start at the very beginning, with children. And through them you can reach their families and friends,” said Sowu. The capacity-building for peace project sees children as the harbingers of change, and key players in refining sensibilities for peace and non-violence.

It starts at a very young age, through capacity building workshops focusing especially on pre-school teachers and the parents. “We want teachers to teach peace and non-violence skills to small children; our effort is to reach them when they are three to five years old. And the parents have to continue at home what the teachers have started at school”, said Sowu.

The numbers involved provide a sense of the scope of the program. According to Sowu, the program involves 53 schools, and affects as direct beneficiaries 53 teachers, 2200 children, 106 parents. It touches the lives of a further 150 teachers indirectly and countless more children.

This project helps improve dialogue between children and parents. “What happens is that now children are more likely to approach their parents when something wrong happens, and by opening up dialogue, parents are more likely to listen to their children. It is about finding a way to solve conflicts and differences that involves thinking more than reacting, and encouraging creative participation in solving situations that otherwise could be ignored or merely decided top down,” said Sowu.

When asked how the program was assessed, Sowu said the most important recommendation received was that they start involving the children’s parents more directly. “We are going to include parent participation during the next three years, and we now have the tools we need to measure the presence of peace skills in families and in schools,” he said.

The project continues to evolve. The next step is creating a team of child peace leaders in 6 of the 53 schools, with 3 boys and 3 girls each. “For the next three years, we will have 6 children as peace leaders in their schools and in families. We will follow their activities over the next 3 years. You should have in mind that although families are small, with one or two children each, they all usually live with their parents and grandparents in a compound, and they usually have play groups of 6 to 8 children. As you see we have the beginnings of social change,” said Sowu, adding: “It is a project that takes time, what we are doing is building a new citizenship”.

Country: Guinea Bissau
Organization: Platform des ONGs de la Guinea Bissau, Placon-GB
The twin goals of violence reduction and development have taken Abigail Aizebamwan to Nigeria’s South Zone, where she directs Women and Youths Empowerment (WOYEM), an organization she founded.

“We call our organization by what we do; we work to empower and educate women and youth to help them along the road to development. We want them to learn the necessary skills, have cultural development, and become aware of how rural communities can connect to the outside world,” said Aizebamwan.

Aizebamwan navigates hours of winding waterways in a low-security area of Nigeria to reach communities in need. The Niger Delta is the site of armed violence where militants in conflict with security forces have resorted to taking hostages. Guns are in abundance, and violence and repression are rife. Recently, the government has launched an initiative to demobilize the local youths.

Demobilization however, has been but a small step to reduce violence. The rural communities living on those waterways are isolated, a condition that Aizebamwa says breeds discontent and violence. “In places where you see gas pipelines, there are no adequate roads. The communities we work with are very difficult to access, and it can take us up to seven hours on a ‘flying’ boat to reach them. My main concern is to reach the women and youths in these communities that have been neglected, to encourage processes that lead to peace in these societies.”

In Aizebamwan’s view, most of the unrest in these communities results from unequal access to resources. She notes that while the locals see large companies present in the area creating infrastructure to extract oil, the local residents remain without access to electricity, schools, and hospitals. “When I go there I lose contact with the rest of the country, there is no radio, no internet, no satellite phones,” she says.

Young men in the region control the waterways, and they have been enticed by the benefits of development without having the means to engage in the process peacefully. “They go to the nearest cities and want the benefits that they see. But at the end of the day they get into vices and into crime. Because they are not a part of the process of urbanization, they want to have everything immediately. People who are part of the process of urbanization understand that development happens slowly. Those who are excluded and live in isolation want to have its benefits fast,” said Aizebamwan.

The Nigerian demobilization process has offered young militants a way out of fighting, but it has not reached the women in the area, nor has it addressed the needs of local communities.

Aizebamwan’s work takes her to an area that spreads across two local
administrations, covering seven communities in the riverine area: Gelegele, Ekehuan, Ofunama, Grikorogna, Jamagie, Ajakurama, and Ikoro, reaching about 1,500 men and women, and two communities neighboring the town of Egor. She takes into account these villages’ notions of rule of law, of dialogue as a form of conflict resolution and advocacy. “I want to see women have a voice in society, in the issues that concern them, in their families, to be able to bring up youths properly,” she said. It is a region where few have more than a year or two of formal schooling. “The ratio of educated women or girls in the region is one in ten,” said Aizebamwan.

Where there are schools, she adds, as many as three different grades share classrooms at the same time.

Her main goal is to empower women through capacity building. “When we have development there will be violence prevention and vice versa. So we are working on both sides,” she said. When locals ask her how to obtain money from the government, she puts the focus back on development.

These are communities that have also suffered losses from being caught in the middle of the region’s security crisis. Some of them were attacked by joint task forces that were targeting local militants. In many cases the communities lost their goods, money, clothes, and materials they use for their subsistence.

**Symptoms of underdevelopment**

WOYEM trains female leaders in the local communities to pass the knowledge on to their peers. Most of the communities have male and female leaders, and the organization develops the activities in line with traditional gender distinctions. Young men are given fast-track reading and writing classes to help them enter vocational training. “The key thing is to help make connections strong. Communal thinking fosters peace. When authorities reward community representatives who then fail to share the benefits with their peers, we question the notion of individual gain at the expense of others. We try to foster putting the future of the community first,” said Aizebamwan.

In her view, creating a deeper understanding of development is also a way to ensure that locals don’t only avoid taking up arms, but that they are less vulnerable to sects that condemn westernization altogether.

“We are now organizing advocacy visits to the appropriate offices, to the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Sports, the Ministry and the Commission of the Niger Delta. Of course there is the issue of political will. But our will is on the side of peace,” said Aizebamwan.
The effects of environmental degradation that has resulted from the exploitation of local resources is a source of concern in the Niger River Delta. Emeka Ononamadu of Nigeria’s Citizen’s Center for Integrated Development and Social Rights articulated concerns about the often-unequal partnerships being established:

“We would like a code of conduct to hold both the state and exploring firms accountable to the communities. We would like to see cases where communities do not need to resort to international courts for justice, like the Oguni community case in 1995, and instead have access to justice within their own state.

In terms of investment, we feel that a certain proportion of income generated from a host community must go back as investment in the communities. This would mean a push to diversification, since most communities have a single source of income. Diversification goes a long way to reduce the levels of conflict that affects particular regions. It helps the economic communities grow faster and lowers problems such as unemployment.

Investment is critical and it must link up to the various tiers of government. If for example, in Nigeria, the local, state and national government include the development of resource-host communities as a part of its development plan, I do not think that we would be experiencing the levels of armed violence around resources that we currently are experiencing. A conscious effort to have economic development in the communities would tie in with security efforts and establish community-company cooperation around the exploration of resources instead of violence.

It is important to note the need for neutral regulatory bodies. We sometimes forget potential conflicts of interest. It is important to find neutral bodies, in civil society or through ombudsmen.”

“Most communities rely on a single source of livelihood. Investment in diversification would go a long way to reduce levels of conflict.”

Controlling porous borders under the pressure of organized crime

Etchen Sambu, president of the NGO association Placon Guinea Bissau, wants civil society in Guinea Bissau to engage with authorities to protect the “value of human dignity.” He spoke with Comunidad Segura:

On Small Arms:

“Guinea Bissau has high numbers of small arms in circulation. Thanks to our work, the army and the department of defense have banned military officers from bearing arms. The next step is to consider gun control legislation. As a post-conflict country, we need a synergy between the state and civil society organizations. We have also restored the National Small Arms Commission, which is headed by a civilian. Civil society is very active on gun control.”

On the pressure of organized crime:

“Guinea Bissau has signed practically all the international conventions against drug trafficking and organized crime. With a coastline that is peppered with more than 80 islands, our geography is prime for transit of illegal drugs and weapons. This pressure has led to a significant rise in crime and armed violence over the past 20 years. Prior to the 1998 conflict, a shoot out between armed gangs and law enforcement was unthinkable. Now it is relatively frequent. Civil society aims to work with the authorities to address organized crime.”
Role of women
IN REDUCTION OF ARMED VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

By Nkem Menkiti

IANSA Women’s Network – Nigeria was created to combat armed violence against women by bringing together a wide range of women’s rights activists. Established in Abuja in March 2005, it is an umbrella organization for groups concerned about the effects of gun violence on women. The Network seeks to raise the public’s awareness on the problem and influence policies at all levels of government, and aims to bring gender perspectives to international debates and processes on small arms control.

Armed violence in Nigeria

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has for several years, grabbed international attention owing to armed conflict in the region arising from the activities of more than 20,000 militants protesting the lopsided distribution of the accruements. No fewer than 3,000 persons, largely women and children, were killed or maimed in the confrontations between militants and the army. Many expatriates, local oil workers and other individuals in the region have been kidnapped and threatened. An offer of an amnesty for militants in the area is currently in effect. Almost 26,000 rebels have exchanged weapons for a pardon. They now await retraining and rehabilitation, as well as promised upgrade of social infrastructure in the region.

However, the amnesty failed in a very fundamental way: women were left out. They were neither represented in the amnesty committee nor specially targeted for support. The program missed the opportunity to factor in the plight of a very significant segment of the society.

The exclusion of women from active participation in the resolution and prevention of the conflict’s re-occurrence adds to the trauma from the conflict. These women have borne the brunt of the armed conflicts in the region just as they bear the brunt of the backwardness of the region.

Relatively little is known, let alone done, about the plight of the Niger Delta woman. Little is reported about her plight, and virtually nothing is heard about her opinion, about her impossible world. Little is done to salvage her present circumstances, or to preserve her future and that of her children. She is not consulted whenever the multinationals or government agencies want to brainstorm on “serious” issues affecting her community. The male elders and youth leaders make decisions on issues that affect entire communities.

These women – mothers, wives and sisters of the protesting youths, and the main breadwinners in most families – remain central to sustaining the peace and healing the physical and emotional wounds caused by these conflicts. Involving women is therefore vital, for the success of any intervention.

Intervention strategy

IANSA Women’s Network – Nigeria designed and implemented a project to train some of these women to participate actively in their communities’ peace-building processes. It was a one-year project from April 2010 to May 2011 called “Enhancing Women’s Participation in Peace Building in the Niger Delta”, funded by the United States Institute of Peace and implemented in four conflict-prone communities in the Niger Delta.

The project gave us an opportunity to sensitize these women on their rights, improve their confidence, and build leadership capabilities in the...
peace and security processes. This has empowered them to advocate for, campaign for and promote gender issues in conflict and peace development. This was achieved through a number of activities, including:

- An immersion program: Rural women were mentored by female urban political leaders and city women. This activity created bonds between women from different backgrounds and provided learning opportunities for political leaders on the challenges and needs of poor rural women. This will help to promote effective pro-poor policy framework, including the promotion of peace and security in these volatile communities. For the women from local communities, the activity built their confidence and capacity for influencing policies;
- A workshop on peace building, conflict transformation and small arms control; this training was then brought to local communities in various states;
- A capacity-building workshop on public speaking and media relations management;
- Advocacy visits to stake-holders in the peace building process in each state;
- Interactive forum with the media, in each of the three states;
- Town hall meetings with members of project’s communities;
- Information, education & communication (IEC) materials such as t-shirts, face caps, training manuals and newsletters were produced and widely distributed during the course of the project.

Impact/Results

At the end of the project, the following results were achieved:

- 90 community women passed through training, confidence building activities, mentorship programs, interactive forums and town hall meetings. These activities were focused on topics such as peace building, conflict resolution and transformation, arms control, media advocacy and engagement, and public speaking;
- Project beneficiaries created a “Mothers for Peace Network” in the three states. This platform aims to promote peace in conflict prone communities and to ensure that knowledge gained will be utilized;
- Target communities gained awareness on the role of women in peace building. Men and youth were involved in some of the project activities, so that they can support the women. Communities were very receptive to the project.

Lessons Learned

The major lesson learned was that when people who have been neglected are given the necessary training and technical skills, they assert themselves even in dire circumstances. The project was therefore considered a success, for the following reasons:

- The activities – like visiting cities – of this project served as a means of exposure to some of the participants, broadening their perspective on various issues of life. Some participants said that they have now been empowered to work to restore peace to their communities and to advocate for their rights and those of their families in other aspects of life;
- The project and the idea that women can play an active role in peace building were well received;
- The men and some of the youths who were present at the trainings promised to help spread the message that women are the best peace initiators.
Guarding Peace in the midst of Ethno-Religious Violence

By Jana Krause

The political crisis over ‘indigene’ rights and political representation in Jos, central Nigeria, has killed at least 4,000 and possibly as many as 7,000 people since the first riot broke out in late 2001. 2010 was one of the worst years on record, with more than 1,000 lives lost. Today, only the heavy presence of military and police forces ensures a fragile calm in the city. Tensions between ethnic groups rooted in allocation of resources, electoral competition, fears of religious domination, and land disputes have amalgamated into an explosive mix. The presence of well-organized armed groups in rural areas, the proliferation of weapons, and the sharp rise in gun fatalities within Jos all point to the real risk of future large-scale violence. Residents fear any minor incident could set the town ablaze again.

Many residents are left traumatized after a decade of violent confrontations and brutal killings. Religious identities have become strongly polarized and one-sided conflict narratives internalized. All sides have suffered massive losses due to livelihoods destroyed. Violence and displacement have reshaped Jos and many rural settlements. As neighborhoods become religiously segregated, ‘no-go areas’ alter patterns of residency, business, transportation, and trade.

In the midst of these developments, the religiously mixed community of Dadin Kowa – located in the southern part of the city – has managed to avoid violence and displacement. Several mixed communities surround this settlement; some have seen sporadic killings and others violent clashes. The majority of Dadin Kowa’s population is Christian, although there is a significant Muslim minority. The population is mixed in terms of economic and social status, with large houses on the outskirts and crammed streets of poor settlements in its center.

Women played a major role in keeping peace in that community. After a devastating crisis in the city in 2008, more than 200 women came together with support from a local NGO to voice their fears about potential future violence. They met and discussed their everyday problems and challenges against the background of the ongoing crisis. Many Christian families had fled to Dadin Kowa from violence-affected areas in Jos. Some of the women who had found security in Dadin Kowa had lost their husbands and children, their houses, and their businesses. They brought with them their grief as well as stories of atrocities and loss. The influx of displaced persons increased tensions. Many women worried that their community could soon also be affected by violence.

After the gathering, the women regularly met in several smaller groups to address problems and establish dialogue with each other. Although peaceful to date, Dadin Kowa remains volatile. Women
have found it difficult to face each other after violent clashes in neighboring communities. Everyday tensions are evident. For example, both sides hold grievances over loudspeakers during prayer times at mosques and churches. A Christian pastor said Muslim residents had sent soldiers to ask the church not to use its loudspeakers during Muslim early morning prayers. The pastor refused on the grounds that this early morning time represented a core Christian prayer time and could not be violated.

But when violence broke out again in January 2010 in Jos, women went to their religious leaders and pleaded with them to forbid killings. Community and religious leaders met in search for violence prevention measures and agreed on a ‘peace declaration’ that was read aloud to the community. Elders organized local youths to guard the settlement against outside attacks. When youth groups from neighboring settlements came to attack Muslims in Dadin Kowa, a local pastor successfully pleaded with them and averted killings.

This courage of community leaders and residents is remarkable at a time when – despite numerous peace efforts – revenge killings are frequent in Jos. While religious leaders have preached peace and tolerance, the message does not fully trickle down. There exist small grassroots initiatives that echo their tenor, but mid-level religious leaders feel pressure to protect their communities. After ten years of violence, some within the churches and mosques call for a more militant response from their congregations. But in Dadin Kowa, it was ordinary residents who called on their religious leaders to guard the peace of their community.

Some of the women who had found security in Dadin Kowa had lost their husbands and children, their houses, and their businesses. They brought with them their grief as well as stories of atrocities and loss.

The political crisis over ‘indigene rights’ and political representation in Jos has killed at least 4,000 and possibly as many as 7,000 people since 2001. The term ‘indigene’ refers to Nigerian citizens who hold ‘indigene certificates’ issued by local governments and who reside in the state that issued that certificate. The term is meant to apply to individuals and groups that are native to a federal state, in contrast to the ‘settlers’. Who qualifies as an indigene is highly contested because many ‘settler’ groups have lived in their places of residence for several generations.

Unlike many of its neighbors, Ghana is classified as a “conflict-free” country. However, small conflicts do arise, and Justin Bayor, the Project Coordinator of Ghanep, wants to keep them at bay. He spoke to the Comunidad Segura magazine about the Ghana Alert Project, an early warning system established to detect signs of armed violence before it erupts.

How does Ghana stand with respect to security in the region?
Ghana is classified as a conflict-free country, but we have minor conflicts in the form of inter-ethnic fighting, land disputes, and chieftaincy-related violence, with outbreaks in various spots.

What is the early warning system?
Ghanawarn identifies conflict hotspots, currently in 15 places across the country and establishes Community Monitoring teams to look out for the emergence of conflicts. There are always some key signs, pointers that people tend to ignore until it is too late.

What do the teams do?
The teams comprise three men and two women who are trained to pick up minor signals, changes that affect the peaceful rhythm of the communities. The teams know the communities well and look out for changes that may lead to hostility and violence.

Can you give me an example?
Many of the signs of imminent outbreak of violence are context sensitive. If you are in a community where people do not usually gather, sudden agglomerations may indicate the immediate threat of violence. This can also be true of an influx of strangers into the community, or for example, if people begin to hold secret or closed meetings.

The truth is, however, that people often want to let others know that simmering conflict is about to peak. They bring out their guns, start showing them openly, cleaning and loading them for everyone to see. In other situations, communities will start making complaints about unresolved issues. Finally, things can be much less public. Women will say their husbands are refusing their food or are absent from home only to return very late at night, a typical sign that people are planning to start fighting.

Who receives this information?
These signs are first reported through the monitoring system to Wanep Ghana’s main office in Tamale. The Wanep office contacts local police stations or the regional minister, or any number of a host of officials connected to the early warning system. We notify them of the types of signals that have been picked up and request the authorities to make the appropriate investigations.

If alert signs merit further attention, the Criminal Investigation Department may send plain clothes policemen and launch an investigation. We also report to the Bureau of National Investigations, and to the army.

What keeps the teams safe?
The teams keep a low profile, their membership is not publicly disclosed, and they report to the Disec, a District Security Committee. The nature of work itself of course also means they will not be continuously filing reports to Wanep. Wanep in turn has a role in deciding whether it will forward the information to the security forces. The fact is that part of what ensures both the safety of the team, and its good relations with the authorities is the result of the team’s careful management of information and the credibility it has built over time.
The teams are not likely to contact security forces directly?
The early warning network has to work with the security services, with the police, the army, the Bureau of National Investigations. Individual team members however have limited contact with security specialists.

What happens if the teams make mistakes?
No law enforcement institution will act based on flimsy information or rumors. The security forces will only act after they have launched their own investigations. A number of successful cases have shown the efficiency of the early warning system.

Are the teams limited to violence prevention?
The teams also monitor other security aspects that may affect their communities. If there are reports of outbreaks of a disease or in the case of drought, Tamala directs information to the ministry of health or agriculture.

The Importance of Strengthening Local Governance

Pamela Cole is with Wanep in the Gambia a nation that has not experienced armed conflict. Her organization works with conflict prevention:

“Wanep Gambia is a network of about 30 NGOs. We work with the local government to promote the decentralization process instated in the 2001 Local Government Act. We train local authorities and educate the community about the act. We want communities to be involved in the decision making processes of the local government.

Our educational work takes place at the grass roots, creating educators in communities, training them and having them train others. We use the media for sensitization and outreach programs. Our Women and Peace program was created to ensure that women’s contribution to sustaining peace is not neglected, and it has chapters in every region of the Gambia. We have carried out voluntary gun hand-ins and worked to make Gambians aware of how to legally own a gun, and the risks that entails.

We also trained domestic observers to monitor and observe elections. The presidential election is in November, and our national assembly elections is next year, followed by local elections the following year.

We believe we have reached over 75% of residents in communities of 25,000 inhabitants. In smaller communities we have probably reached almost every resident. Taking into account that we work in all five regions of the Gambia, we estimate we have reached about 40% of the population.

We encourage women to take part in peace building and decision-making in their communities. We hope that there will be more women candidates in the upcoming national assembly elections, if not for the presidential elections. We are starting a mentoring program in which we train women on indicators of conflict and mediation techniques to help them become candidates.

The important lesson here is that issues related to armed violence and small arms use are not only important in countries experiencing armed conflict, or post conflict. These issues are also crucial in peaceful communities as is the case of the Gambia.”
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