

Security governance in the Mano River borderlands

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In the Mano River region of West Africa, comprising Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, communities span national boundaries. People make crossings daily for personal visits and to trade. Informal cross-border trade of livestock, agricultural and manufactured goods, and handicrafts forms the backbone of many locals' livelihoods and deepens cross-border connections.

Both women and men participate in trade, but the benefits they derive and the challenges they face differ and are gendered. Since women tend to have been educated less, petty trade is an important source of income and financial independence. But they are most vulnerable to sexual assault and other forms of harassment at the hands of corrupt security service staff. All borderland traders experience forms of corruption and exploitation routinely.

Mano River border communities have been speaking about the need to improve border security governance and ways of doing this. An initiative supported by Conciliation Resources (CR) conducted broad-based interviews to map the day-to-day problems of poverty, corruption and abuse faced by local people along the region's borders, and also consulted security sector staff.

The initiative has explored the underlying drivers of violence and exploitation along the borders – impunity, locals' lack of awareness of regulations and poor resourcing of the security sector – as well as possible responses. CR has helped bring together regional government and Mano River Union (MRU) representatives to discuss the effectiveness of border management and coordination around cross-border trade, the free movement of people, and community safety and security.

To highlight and generate discussion around these issues, in March 2010 CR produced a docu-drama based on the interviews relating to daily challenges faced by people trying to cross or manage Mano River borders. It was screened in Sierra Leone's capital Freetown the same month in order to draw attention to the seemingly peripheral, borderland concerns among policymakers in the capital. It has been distributed internationally and is available on YouTube [www.c-r.org/our-work/west-africa/west-africa-resources.php]

CR and its partners in West Africa hope to build on this work through outreach at policy and community levels in the region, including screening the film with borderland communities and security staff, and facilitating dialogue on the challenges of working towards local solutions.

Mano River insecurity

Since the 1980s, violent conflict in the Mano River region has led to more than 300,000 deaths, millions displaced and mass economic hardship. In Liberia and Sierra Leone particularly, governance systems, infrastructure and communities' social fabric have been devastated.

The region's civil wars are heavily intertwined. Communities and governments have hosted and financed neighbouring insurgent forces. Liberians fought along side the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as it advanced into Sierra Leone in 1991, and during the 11-year conflict in Sierra Leone the RUF received financial support from then Liberian President Charles Taylor.

Liberia's own rebel groups received significant cross-border support. Guinea harboured and financed the disparate armed

factions that coalesced into Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and fought the Second Liberian Civil War from 1999 to 2003.

Such cross-border conflict dynamics have been enabled by soft borders, political and ethnic interests and marginalisation from the centre. Mano River countries face governance problems that are particularly acute at the peripheries where state presence is very weak, producing a power vacuum. Existing state presence is largely securitised. Due to a lack of oversight, corruption is endemic in local security services. Exploitative, predatory practices threaten rather than protect border communities' security and livelihoods.

There have been considerable internationally-, regionally- and locally-led efforts to strengthen governance in the region, both before and after the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. The MRU intergovernmental organisation was established by Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1973 to promote regional integration, particularly economic cooperation. In 1980 Guinea joined, followed by Côte d'Ivoire in 2008. A declaration and protocols were developed on areas like trade, immigration and security. For example joint border patrols are ongoing which discuss challenges with their authorities. But the regularity with which such initiatives are implemented is limited by resource shortages. The impact of war and poor governance have hindered the MRU's effectiveness. Implementing regulations in the under-governed borderlands is particularly difficult.

Postwar, member states are committed to revitalising the MRU, but capacity challenges remain. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone's security sectors have also been subject to extensive, ongoing reform. Aiming to 'humanise' security, these processes have had successes. For example the creation of the largely civilian-staffed Office for National Security, responsible for coordinating Sierra Leone's security services, has improved inter-agency

working and reduced politicisation. And the creation of Sierra Leonean provincial and district security committees that incorporate civil society are a positive step. But the processes have not reached the states' peripheries. Border communities are meanwhile calling for better security and justice services. Improving state-society relations and developing accountable security in these vulnerable areas is integral to sustaining the region's fragile peace.

Building on ongoing work in Sierra Leone to facilitate better collaboration between communities and security sector staff, in 2009 CR developed an initiative to enhance security governance in the Mano River borderlands. The *Improving Information Dissemination on Security Issues in Cross Border Areas* project focuses on strengthening security sector governance along the borders through gathering experiences and facilitating dialogue around the issues locally, while also raising awareness of local realities among decision-makers nationally and regionally. Its aim is to empower communities to better understand the law and articulate their rights, and to inform and galvanise local, national and regional responses to the challenges experienced and posed by the borderland security sector.

Sharing experiences and 'Talking Borders'

The project gathered first-hand experiences of crossing and managing the border from local people, including women traders, ex-combatants, security sector staff and government officials. Three assessments were carried out in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone and Grand Cape Mount, Liberia; the Kailahun tri-border; and Kambia in Sierra Leone, near the Guinea border.

The assessments revealed a range of issues that clustered around capacity problems, corruption and abuse. The security sector's ability and will to operate legitimately is limited by a dearth of resources and recompense. Police, military, customs and immigration officials work under poor conditions, lacking the equipment, infrastructure and human resources to adequately manage the region's long, porous borders. In Sierra Leone's Pujehun District state authorities manage only one of thirty existing crossing points. In Kailahun District customs officers are considered to be 'volunteers' or 'self-employed' and do not receive a salary. Police submit situation reports to their respective governments but frequently receive no response. Low pay, impunity and inherited perceptions of power contribute to practices of extortion and exploitation in border areas.

One trader in Gendema, Sierra Leone explained: "Security [actors] most times ask traders for money, even if they are



Police officer Marie Koroma inspects a traveller's documents at the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia at Gendema in Sierra Leone.
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Mano River Union

transporting commodities within Gendema. Business people are targeted, and the money that is extorted does not go to the NRA [National Revenue Authority]. If you don't pay, the goods are seized, and in the middle of Gendema town, there are about seven police checkpoints. You have to pay to all of them. Movement of people between the two sides of the border is difficult; people are asked for money to see their relatives." A civil society activist in Gendema commented: "Money is your passport". The monetisation of security extends to the police. In Kailahun District, a youth leader complained about the police being "money collectors rather than regular police officers".

Political patronage is also a problem. Military officers in Kailahun claim that the immigration and customs officers based in Koindu were appointed by politicians as a reward for support during the elections. Weak oversight also creates the conditions for abuse. Women traders are exposed to rape and sexual harassment, particularly if they fail to pay charges. Redress mechanisms are ineffective. NGOs that supported women psycho-socially and in seeking justice have since left. In Sierra Leone, women turning to the Family Support Units created as part of its security sector reform process are often asked for money for stationery to register a complaint and for

the fuel to investigate it. Women are often told it is their fault and perpetrators rarely face justice. High rates of economic disempowerment and illiteracy among women increase their vulnerability.

A lack of information and awareness of people's rights contributes to their exploitation. For example the MRU declaration states that traders doing business within seven miles of one of the member countries' borders are exempt from tax. Traders rarely know this so customs officials are able to charge unjustified tariffs. The lack of oversight to enforce MRU protocols, weak local demand, and reportedly little coordination between the different countries' security forces means that the benefits that regional regulation should bring to border security and trade are not being realised.

In partnership with the MRU Secretariat, CR held a workshop with regional government and MRU representatives which focused on the effectiveness of the four countries' border management and coordination around cross-border trade, the free movement of people, and community safety and security. One emerging conclusion – that people's lack of awareness about their rights and responsibilities hinders fair treatment

– mirrored concerns also expressed at the community level. There were also suggestions that structures be developed to empower vulnerable or disenfranchised communities, such as a Border Communities Women’s Forum to address breaches of their rights. But interviews with locals revealed that the solutions needed are not just structural. Without proper oversight and resourcing, the deep-rooted cycles of opportunism and impunity that fuel corruption and insecurity will persist.

Based on the experiences gathered, CR produced the docu-drama *Talking Borders*, which tells the stories of a young woman trader, a policeman and an ex-fighter living in the Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea tri-border area. The film depicts some of the key issues faced by borderland communities and security sector staff of extortion, sexual harassment, resource shortages and poverty. The film was produced in the local languages Krio, Mende, Susu and Liberian English. It is also subtitled in English.

The film was launched at the British High Commission in Sierra Leone’s capital Freetown with an audience of some fifty Sierra Leonean, Liberian and Guinean government officials, and representatives of donor governments and local and international civil society. It has subsequently been shown more broadly in Sierra Leone, such as at the Human Rights Commission and at University Fourah Bay College as part of its Conflict Studies curriculum, and has been widely disseminated on DVD and YouTube. To promote locally-owned responses to borderland challenges, CR hopes to screen the film and hold discussions with local communities and security sector staff throughout the region. For local people, having information about their rights and increasing the visibility of abuse is a step towards challenging abuse. For security sector staff, addressing the need for proper resourcing and staff payment is important.

Conclusions

There have been considerable efforts to develop regional security, immigration and trade regulation, and cooperation through the MRU. But these have not filtered down to the under-governed borderlands due to weak implementation in such areas. Similarly, security sector reform and wider efforts to strengthen national governance have not been adequately realised in areas of weak state penetration.

The chief challenges include the lack of oversight and accountability of security and border management services in the border areas. The ‘opportunity’ this provides, combined with ‘push’ factor of poor pay and working conditions, helps to generate cultures of corruption. The problems and solutions are not purely ‘top down’ however. The evident demand by local communities for transparent, accountable, effective security governance and border management needs to be reinforced

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with information about their rights and responsibilities and further dialogue between communities and security sectors.

Processes that promote visibility of the problems and the empowerment of local communities to exercise oversight collectively will strengthen the demand for accountability and, in turn, the need for authorities to respond. The type of initiative documented here facilitates such processes in select border areas. But better account should be taken of security governance issues affecting peripheral communities most acutely within the Mano River region. Coordinated provision of resources, oversight and information is needed – within governments and across borders.

Policy messages

Governments need to develop robust central and local oversight to ensure that security and trade regulations are being implemented accountably in peripheral areas. Adequate resourcing and pay is also key to reducing the incentive for corruption among security sector staff.

Governments need effective mechanisms to communicate with and empower marginalised border communities. Their concerns, particularly around security, need to be fed into policymaking. Local civil society is well positioned to facilitate such links, as well as educate communities and security sector staff about customs and immigration regulations and their rights and responsibilities.

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