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Building resilience to organised crime: a policy review

Yvon Dandurand, Lucia Bird Ruiz Benitez de Lugo, Kingsley Madueke
and Oumar Zombre



OCWAR-T Policy Brief 1 | January 2023

Summary

State-centric approaches to building resilience to organised crime must be complemented with community-based, context-specific responses that challenge organised crime and violence at a local level. Local communities are key elements of the necessary response to the destabilising impacts of organised crime in conflict as well as post-conflict settings. There remains a gap in stakeholder understanding of the elements of community resilience to organised crime, particularly in unstable settings. This policy brief takes steps to address this gap, by analysing key drivers of community resilience – identified as social capital, community capacity, the role of women, economic capital and infrastructure – in four communities in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso. This policy brief is based on a research report, “Building resilience to organised crime”.

Recommendations

- Target public corruption as a key element of building state legitimacy and promoting community resilience to organised crime.
- Address context-specific obstacles to community resilience, commonly including lack of coordination among resilience actors and lack of public awareness regarding the local impact of illicit markets.
- Strengthen local governance, including traditional governance mechanisms, and leadership.
- Support better relationships and cooperation among state institutions, local governance mechanisms and local resilience actors.
- Civilian defence groups and other non-state security actors may be operating at the local level. If they are cited by communities as key elements of resilience, support communities in engaging with them and negotiating expectations and rules.



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Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking

Introduction

Across swathes of West Africa, there is a significant geographic overlap between areas where illicit economies flourish, and regions affected by conflict and instability. Illicit economies are part of the environment enabling conflicts to start and endure. Therefore, understanding how these phenomena interact with community resilience in such unstable contexts is key to shaping more effective responses. To date, many state-centric responses to illicit economies have proved ineffective or even counterproductive, triggering surges in violence, or damaging the legitimacy of the state.

There is growing awareness that innovation is required and that state-centric approaches to building resilience to organised crime must be complemented with community-based, context-specific responses challenging organised crime and violence at a local level. This approach should recognise that local communities must be key elements of the response to the destabilising impacts of organised crime, including in conflict and post-conflict settings.

One of the challenges is that there is a gap in our understanding of how community resilience is built, and how this interacts with resilience at a state level. Recognising this, the GI-TOC designed a research stream to explore the elements of community resilience, focussing on contexts affected by conflict or instability. This complements a growing body of evidence exploring bottom-up peacebuilding approaches, which centre on local conflict resolution.¹ This policy brief, one element of this work stream, presents the key findings of a project to test a framework for analysing resilience to organised crime at a community level in conflict or fragile contexts.

The research consisted of field studies conducted in five West African communities: Dadin Kowa, Nasarawa Gwong and Angwan Rukuba in Jos, Nigeria; the Radgo gold mine and the pastoralist community in Burkina Faso;² and Pitche, in the Gabú region of Guinea-Bissau. Data was collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Each of these communities faces differing levels of threat from illicit economies and violent extremist groups, and each exhibits different levels of resilience.

The communities were chosen and compared in order to better understand the role of and the interplay among key drivers of resilience in different West African contexts. Detailed case studies of each of the communities under study, and more detailed findings, are published in an accompanying research report.³

The study sought to shed light on the following questions:

- How do the drivers of resilience operate at the community level and what are the key factors affecting a community's resilience to organised crime and violence?
- Which factors enable local resilience to bloom in contexts afflicted by high criminality and instability?
- Which factors act as obstacles to building community resilience to organised crime, including in fragile and conflict contexts?
- What can states and international actors do to build greater resilience at a community level?

This exploratory study was conducted in parallel with a similar study in East Africa, where field studies were coordinated in Kenya and Mozambique. The two studies are intended to complement each other, building a cumulatively enhanced understanding of the elements of community resilience to organised crime. Both explored community resilience in contexts facing different degrees of security threats – with some communities caught in full-blown insurgencies, others facing urban criminal and gang violence, and yet others faced with significantly lower security threats.

To date, many state-centric responses to illicit economies have proved ineffective or even counterproductive

Understanding community resilience

The GI-TOC's working definition of community resilience, conceived in the context of resilience to organised crime, is a community's ability to respond to organised crime while retaining its functional capacities. It refers to the collective capacity of a community to absorb change, transform and seize opportunities to improve conditions.

The drivers of community resilience and the factors related to a community's overall vulnerability to organised crime are not yet sufficiently understood. The first step was to design an instrument through which to analyse community resilience in West African communities. This was done in consultation with the GI-TOC team coordinating a community resilience study in East Africa.

A literature review was conducted of existing material on (1) measuring organised crime, using primarily the GI-TOC Organised Crime Index; (2) assessing community resilience; and (3) assessing community resilience in specific contexts: refugee communities, humanitarian crises, natural disasters, climate change and post-conflict recovery. We also drew on previous GI-TOC research and the work of the GI-TOC's Resilience programme, which had highlighted the importance of considering the role of women in community resilience in the context of organised crime.

The result was five interrelated drivers, together with additional sub-drivers, of community resilience:

- State institutions: effective state support; governance; safety and security.
- Social capital: community cohesion; social stability; social networks.
- Community capacity: effective local governance and leadership; local security governance; communication.
- The role of women: involvement in governance, economy, responses to illicit economies.
- Economic capital and infrastructure: strength of local economy, availability of resources, physical infrastructure.

The drivers are interrelated and should not be viewed as a prioritised list.

Cross-cutting findings

State institutions

While state-centric approaches to fighting organised crime, when pursued in isolation, may deprioritise local contexts, disenfranchise communities and ignore the role they can and must play in countering the negative impacts of organised crime,⁴ the state can play an important role in supporting community resilience. Strengthening the connections between state structures and traditional community structures can result in more effective actions against organised crime and violent extremist groups.⁵

Support and protection from the state were limited in the five communities studied. In many instances, the state's response to organised crime, communal violence and violent extremism was compromised and ineffectual. Integrity and capacity challenges at law enforcement and justice institutions had eroded the trust of the population.

In some instances – most prominently in the Burkina Faso case studies – state institutions had withdrawn almost completely from the community, as a result of or in anticipation of violent conflicts with armed groups. Where the state is unable to protect a community from active threat from criminal or jihadist groups, this undermines the community's ability to demonstrate resilience and take effective action.



*Street view,
Nasarawa Gwong,
notorious for
street gangs.*

The field studies underscored the importance of collaboration between state and community structures, both at the level of governance (e.g. customary authority structures engaging with local officials, or feeding information to security forces) and security (including regarding cooperation between state security forces and community self-defence groups). Further, it underscored that where state institutions were unable to support communities in provision of security, non-state actors stepped in to provide this service (explored further below).

Community capacity

Three major components of community capacity are essential to building resilience against organised crime: effective local governance and leadership; local security governance; and communication.

Local governance and leadership

Coalitions among local leaders in the shape of local governance structures mitigate the vulnerability of individuals in contexts affected by high crime governance, rendering local governance more resilient over time.⁶

Across the communities in Jos, where the state was present and the threat of violence from illicit economies was significant, local governance structures played a key role in shaping resilient responses to illicit economies. Resilience in the face of organised crime was largely dependent on the extent to which local community councils (and civilian security networks where they exist) maintained good working relationships with the state and commanded community support.

In contrast, the Burkina Faso field study showed that, in the face of significant threats from armed violence and the absence of effective state protection, local leadership, including traditional authorities, sometimes lost its ability to act effectively.

Local security governance

The dynamics of community mobilisation and response to perceived and real security threats are complex and fluid, sometimes showing blurred lines between communal defence, criminality, and an ambivalent relationship with the state. The organisation of vigilante groups was a key feature of the communities' responses to the threats of conflict and illicit economies, stepping in to fill the spaces left by gaps in state presence.⁷

Whether a community shows resilience depends on the threats it faces, the goals pursued, and actions taken

Where state protection was unavailable in the field studies, vigilante groups were the most common manifestation of perceived community resilience. Communities across the case studies were predominantly positive about the role of self-defence groups in mitigating security and crime threats, perceiving such groups as a key element of community resilience.

Bolstering synergies between state and community structures promotes action against organised crime

The role of vigilante groups is complex: they can exacerbate fragility and violence by, for example, preying on communities (violence, predation or extortion) or aligning with other non-state armed groups; but they can also be engaged to play constructive roles in enhancing safety and security.⁸ Notably – GI-TOC and predominant definitions of community resilience enshrine the importance of non-violence in such approaches. This exposes a key disjuncture between community and external perceptions of resilience and points to better understanding and engaging with self-defence groups as a key theme for further programming and study.

Communication, information and the media

Communication and information have been identified across a range of contexts as ‘a central component of most if not all community resilience models’.⁹ Spaces for regular and inclusive communication were identified as a key element of community capacity. Community radio stations were particularly emphasised in Pitche, Gabú, where they were a key source of information and operated as a platform for whistle-blowing in relation to corruption and illicit activities. By contrast, the importance of social media networks, particularly WhatsApp, was underscored in the field studies in Burkina Faso, where they were central to the communities’ ability to mobilise against threats.

The role of women

The participation of women in local governance structures and decision making varied across the field studies, and appeared to have some correlation with the communities’ ability to mobilise as a whole. For example – within the Nigeria research studies, women’s involvement in leadership and governance structures in Dadin Kowa, which overall appeared to demonstrate higher levels of community resilience, far outstripped that of the other two communities. In contrast, in both Nasarawa Gwong and Angwan Rukuba, women expressed dissatisfaction that they were excluded from decision-making, one element of marginalisation and social fracture which appeared to weaken community resilience.

Economic capital and infrastructure

All five communities survive on fragile and largely informal economies where, to differing degrees, illicit markets play an important function. In Pitche, and the Radgo gold mine, illicit economies were central elements of local livelihoods. Here the illicit economy operated as an element of economic resilience and any interventions designed to address the illicit markets would need to be sensitive to that.

Where the role of illicit markets in fostering economic resilience of communities is ignored in designing responses, these can be counter-productive. In areas where violent extremist groups are present, such interventions are particularly dangerous as they can drive recruitment into armed groups.

Providing access to resources the state has forbidden has in some contexts become part of the recruitment strategies of armed groups. For example, in the Est Region of Burkina Faso the governor ordered the closure of artisanal mining sites in 2018, officially to cut off sources of funding for terrorist groups. Miners turned towards jihadists, who reopened certain mines, like the one at Kabonga.

Dadin Kowa: A high degree of community resilience to illicit economies

Across the five case studies, Dadin Kowa was the community that stood out because, despite its ethnic diversity and various challenging circumstances, it demonstrated greater cohesion, peaceful social relations, and visible resilience to organised crime.

Since the onset of large-scale communal violence in Jos in 2001, Christian-Muslim relations in Dadin Kowa have been tense. However, the community has managed to remain nonviolent even when nearby communities have been engulfed by violent unrest.

Residents of Dadin Kowa speak proudly about the community's peaceful image. In the words of one resident, 'we're proud to be an example of how to live in peace with other communities'.¹⁰ Peace featuring as central elements of community identity is a common characteristic of communities which have exercised a significant degree of resilience in the face of conflict and crime.¹¹

The main criminal groups in Dadin Kowa are engaged in drug dealing and armed robbery. However, contrasting to the highly organised networks operating in Nasarawa Gwong and other communities in Jos, the criminal networks are loose, horizontal and without central coordination.

Dadin Kowa stood out in terms of the strength of its community capacity, partly due to strong local governance and leadership structures. The traditional council meets weekly to discuss the welfare and security of the community, and engages closely with women's associations and youth, adopting an inclusive decision-making structure.

The relationship between community and vigilante was particularly close in Dadin Kowa – vigilantes spoke proudly about the cooperation and support they received from the residents of the community, and residents usually contribute cash to cover a monthly stipend to the vigilantes. Vigilantes also had a strong collaborative relationship with law enforcement. Vigilantes in the other Jos communities received less community support, and did not receive financial support from the community.

Cumulatively, strong and inclusive governance and security networks, together with the central role of peacefulness as an element of the community's identity, had enabled residents of Dadin Kowa to effect greater resilience against the threats faced by the community, resulting in reduced levels of community tensions and consequent violence, and a lower prevalence of violent crime.

Conclusion

This exploratory study starts to highlight key interrelated elements of differing communities' resilience to threats from armed conflict and illicit economies.

This study confirms the findings of previous research with respect to the blurred lines between communal defence, criminality and even communal violence.

The legitimacy, or otherwise, of each illicit economy within the community must be fully understood before seeking to support responses. Where illicit economies enjoy a high degree of legitimacy, and are part of the communities' economic resilience, this must be taken into account before designing interventions, and may determine that developmental rather than law enforcement responses are appropriate.

With respect to community resilience to illicit markets and armed conflict, resilience at the community level is linked to national resilience – namely, to state support in providing security. The absence of effective state support in security provision undermines efforts to build local resilience, although some local initiatives

emerge nonetheless. Nascent initiatives and projects should be identified and nurtured with a view to engaging the state in their activities, to the extent that is feasible.

Recommendations

Seeking to draw practical lessons from the study for the purpose of more effective programming, we offer the following recommendations for strengthening the community-resilience approach to countering the negative impacts of organised crime and illicit markets. The recommendations outlined below are to a significant degree interdependent, each reinforcing the other, and any in isolation unlikely to be sufficient.

Women play a vital role in building community resilience to organised crime across diverse jurisdictions

Furthermore, these recommendations require sustained commitment, considerable resources, flexibility and adaptivity. Crucially they must be locally driven and owned, and tailored to the specific context of intervention. Even if these difficult elements are achieved, the same actions may still not have the same result across different communities. Further research is required to test and deepen these recommendations and to strengthen the understanding of how these may be achieved in practice across a range of different contexts.

- Providing basic protection and security to vulnerable communities facing security threats is a prerequisite to building community resilience against organised crime. In some cases, that may involve improving basic infrastructure. In other instances, it might involve supporting state initiatives to improve local security and public safety in cooperation with local leadership. Where the state is predatory and a significant element of the security challenge, this is likely to be extremely difficult.
- Effective strategies to address public corruption are key elements of building state legitimacy and promoting community resilience to organised crime. It is necessary to adopt measures to address impunity and corruption at all levels, but especially at the local level, where they undermine the community's confidence in institutions and its willingness to take action to counter the negative impacts of organised crime.
- It is important to support the development of social networks that are aware of and concerned about organised crime and illicit markets, in proportion to the scale of the threat. They can play a crucial informal social control role by affirming shared values and goals, respect for institutional rules, and mutually agreed expectations.
- It is necessary to pay attention to context-specific obstacles to community resilience, including the lack of coordination among resilience actors and the lack of public awareness regarding the local impact of organised crime and illicit markets.¹²
- It is necessary to support local governance, including traditional governance mechanisms and leadership, by building capacity, providing resources and, when necessary, offering them effective protection. Incremental interventions are needed to create relationships and coalitions among local leaders and resilience actors and to support concrete action.
- It is important to support better relationships and cooperation among state governance agencies and institutions, local governance mechanisms and local resilience actors. This includes improving state-citizen relations at the local level based on communication, mutually agreed expectations, transparency and mutual accountability.
- It is possible to improve public safety and local resilience to organised crime by supporting local community councils, traditional leaders and civilian security networks where they exist, and helping



*Equipment at the
Radgo artisanal
gold mine,
Burkina Faso.*

them to develop and maintain good working relationships with the state as well as command community engagement and support.

- Where community resilience programming occurs in contexts where non-state security actors have filled the spaces left by gaps in a state presence at the local level, it should include interventions to support communities as they negotiate expectations and rules with civilian defence groups. This will mitigate the risks inherent to such groups and determine how they can legitimately offer effective protection to the community.

Notes

- 1 See: S Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- 2 The findings of the research into the pastoralist community were drawn on in the overall analysis, but they were not built into a discrete case study because, in contrast to the other communities under study, the pastoralist community is geographically dispersed and was not appropriate for comparison.
- 3 Yvon Dandurand, Lucia Bird Ruiz Benitez de Lugo, Kingsley Madueke and Oumar Zombre, *Building Resilience to Organised Crime*, January 2023, <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/building-resilience-to-organised-crime>.
- 4 L Bird, *Rethinking Resilience: The Role of Women in Community Responses to Organised Crime*, Geneva: GI-TOC, 2021.
- 5 R Locke, *Organised Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: A New Approach*, New York: International Peace Institute, 2012, p 14.
- 6 C Arandel, DW Brinkerhoff and MM Bell, Reducing Fragility Through Strengthening Local Governance in Guinea, *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5), 985–1006, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1025741>.
- 7 Lars also identified the organization of vigilante groups as an important element of the increasingly prominent role of non-state actors in security provision in Nigeria. L Van Metre, *From Self-defense to Vigilantism: A Typology of Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups*, RESOLVE Network, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3>.
- 8 L Van Metre, *From Self-defense to Vigilantism: A Typology of Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups*, RESOLVE Network, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3>.
- 9 JB Houston, ML Spialek, J Cox, MM Greenwood and J First, The centrality of communication and media in fostering community resilience: a framework for assessment and intervention, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59: 2, 270–283, p 271.
- 10 Interview with resident of Dadin Kowa, 7 December 2021.
- 11 See, for additional examples across a wide range of jurisdictions: S Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- 12 For example, the community resilience dialogues facilitated through the GI-TOC Resilience Fund provide a significant opportunity for community members to discuss issues and potential action in a safe space that would not exist without external support.



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This publication is co-funded by



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This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or the German Federal Foreign Office.

About the authors

Yvon Dandurand: Yvon is Professor Emeritus, Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of the Fraser Valley, B.C., Canada; fellow and senior associate, International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy; and a member of the Global Initiative Network of Experts.

Lucia Bird Ruiz Benitez de Lugo: Lucia is the Director of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Previously, she worked as legal and policy adviser to the Planning and Development Department of the Punjab government, Pakistan, and to the Ministry of Finance, Ghana.

Kingsley Madueke: Kingsley is the Nigeria research coordinator with the West Africa Observatory at the GI-TOC. He is a lecturer at the Centre for Conflict Management & Peace Studies at the University of Jos and has written extensively on violence and instability in Nigeria. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Amsterdam.

Oumar Zombre: Oumar is a senior bilingual journalist, currently based in Burkina Faso. He has been practising for over fifteen years and has won a number of prizes and journalistic distinctions.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all the community members who took the time to engage with the team, and share their experience of illicit economies and instability. Without their voices, which are at the centre of this brief, this research would not have been possible. In addition, we are grateful to the support of ADIC-Nafaia, and a team of researchers in Guinea-Bissau, which supported with the data collection in Pitche, and to reviewers of this report who shared invaluable insights.

Cover image:

Women in Kaya, Burkina Faso, kneading millet to prepare food.



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Coordinated by



Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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