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Self-defence groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa: Learning from international experiences

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Summary

Self-defence groups have proliferated across West Africa. While these groups are often considered key sources of resilience for local communities, they often pose major political and security concerns. Given their entrenchment in many contexts in the region, this report outlines what lessons can be learned from cross-continental experiences towards building a more effective framework to mitigate the risks and harness the benefits of self-defence groups.

Recommendations

- ECOWAS should leverage its role as a regional norm-setter by adopting and promoting a regional charter of principles for the regulation of armed self-defence groups.
- States should prioritise diagnoses and dialogues to rebuild trust between state, communities and self-defence groups.
- There are several key considerations that must be taken into account when states adopt a strategy of absorbing or legalising self-defence groups.
- Impunity of self-defence group members must be effectively and publicly challenged, emphasising narratives around accountability, with clear mandates established.
- Community and civil society oversight mechanisms for self-defence groups must be strengthened and engaged with by national policymakers.
- Clearly defined demobilisation programmes and 'exit strategies' must be crafted to ensure long-term sustainable peace.



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Organised Crime: West African Response to Trafficking

Introduction

Vigilante groups have multiplied across West Africa, becoming a major political and security concern in some states. The emergence of such groups is the result of accumulated citizen discontent with and mistrust of public authorities and the incapacity of the latter to provide efficient responses to violence and crime in their respective countries.

While self-defence groups have long been commonplace in several countries across the region, over the past decade they have become more prominent elements of national and local responses to violence, whether driven primarily by armed conflict or by criminality. Historically rooted in community mobilisations, the creation of state-sponsored vigilante groups has been a recent trend, particularly since 2020, underscoring the complex relationship between government authorities and these groups. The Amotekun in Nigeria and the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, VDP) in Burkina Faso are just two examples which will be scrutinised in this report.

The approach of creating new state-established self-defence groups or absorbing existing self-defence groups into state structures has become a central part of a broader public security outsourcing trend. As lessons from Latin America highlight, this risks feeding the power of strongmen who eventually compete for local resources and tap into both licit and illicit markets to maximise their power and maintain their position as government proxies. Although the decision to collaborate with, or even establish, local non-state armed groups might appear efficient in the short term – for example, if it contributes to a sudden drop in homicides – it delegitimises the state as the sole guarantor of order and security, posing a crucial threat to long-term stabilisation and reduction of violence.

The risks intrinsic to the emergence of self-defence groups are crystallising across West Africa, with such groups swelling existing cycles of violence. More specifically, while violent crime can be a key driver for the incorporation of self-defence groups, it is not uncommon for them to gradually become more involved in illicit activities. In such cases, self-defence groups tend to gradually transform into hybrid security configurations that bring together state security agencies and civilian security groups, whose activities and incomes draw from revenue streams that include extortion, trafficking and theft to ensure the financing of patrol operations, the deployment of armed men and the payment of meagre salaries.

This report outlines the contexts and evolution of self-defence groups in Mexico, Burkina Faso and Nigeria and considers the enabling characteristics that shape their emergence and the four key risks of deploying self-defence groups. We then turn to assess prominent response frameworks and what lessons can be learned from cross-continental experiences towards building a more effective framework to mitigate the risks and harness the benefits of self-defence groups.

The report does not advocate the use of self-defence groups as a tool to address crime or conflict. It instead adopts a pragmatic approach, departing from the baseline that self-defence groups are already entrenched elements of the response to these interlinked phenomena in the two regions under study. The recommendations are therefore targeted at regional institutions, states and civil society in contexts where self-defence groups are already deployed.

Creating new state-established self-defence groups or absorbing existing self-defence groups into state structures has become a central part of a broader public security outsourcing trend

Self-defence groups, vigilantes, community police and more: A note on terminology

The characteristics of self-defence groups can differ substantially. They may be backed by community laws or not; they may carry heavy weapons or be entirely unarmed; they may be state-created and/or sponsored; or they may start out organically without the support of the authorities. We aim for a better understanding of the common trends of self-defence groups, understood as collective movements of citizens that share an objective of providing security and protection within their communities, without asserting – at least initially – autonomy, secession or any insurgent agenda, with a particular focus on recent trends in state absorption of and support to such groups.

Given our focus on the political economy of vigilantism, this report uses ‘self-defence groups’, ‘vigilante groups’, ‘community police’ and other terms impartially, in accordance with specific local contexts. ‘Self-defence group’ is, however, used more broadly to refer to non-state security actors whose stated role (whether executed in practice or not) is community defence.

West African stakeholders have identified self-defence groups as, simultaneously, a driver of conflict and a source of resilience in the face of security threats.¹ This paradox merits further exploration. While experiences across the region, including in Burkina Faso and some Nigerian states, show that the presence of vigilante groups has effectively reduced crime and violence, many analyses demonstrate that the groups’ lack of accountability to the state or their communities has led to their involvement in multiple criminal activities. These include extortion and protection rackets, participation in illicit markets and the perpetration of human rights violations and abuses of power, often along ethnic lines, thus exacerbating intercommunal tensions.

Methodology

As a comparative case study, a key objective of the methodology was to bring voices from different contexts together to share experiences, insights and recommendations. Thus, this deep dive into vigilante groups is centred on a virtual roundtable discussion that was held in May 2023 with experts from academia and research institutions with knowledge of Mexico, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. It also included GI-TOC experts on the topic of vigilantism.

To supplement the focus group discussion, external experts produced five white papers for the West African context. These focused on the ways in which national policymakers in West Africa, in particular Nigeria and Burkina Faso, can learn from responses to self-defence groups in Mexico: first, to mitigate the risks posed by the proliferation of self-defence groups and, second, to harness any potential benefits they may yield.

By bringing together case studies from West Africa and Latin America, this study explores the lessons that policymakers can draw from cross-continental comparisons. It offers recommendations for managing the risks associated with the proliferation of self-defence groups while harnessing any potential benefits they might offer for the West Africa region.

Vigilantism in West Africa

While vigilantism has myriad manifestations across West Africa, we concentrate on vigilante landscapes in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. These share many similarities – as outlined below – but also have several core differences, two of which are worth highlighting. Crucially, the majority of self-defence groups in both Burkina Faso and Nigeria were created as local responses to crime and banditry. In Burkina Faso, however, the VDP evolved primarily in response to the growing threat of violent extremism. Most self-defence groups in Nigeria retain a strong anti-crime focus.²

Further distinguishing the two contexts, the Burkinabe VDP has federal government support while government-affiliated vigilante groups in Nigeria primarily operate at the subnational level within specific states or regions.³ These differences in the primary goal and the nature of government support are pivotal to a nuanced comparison of their dynamics.

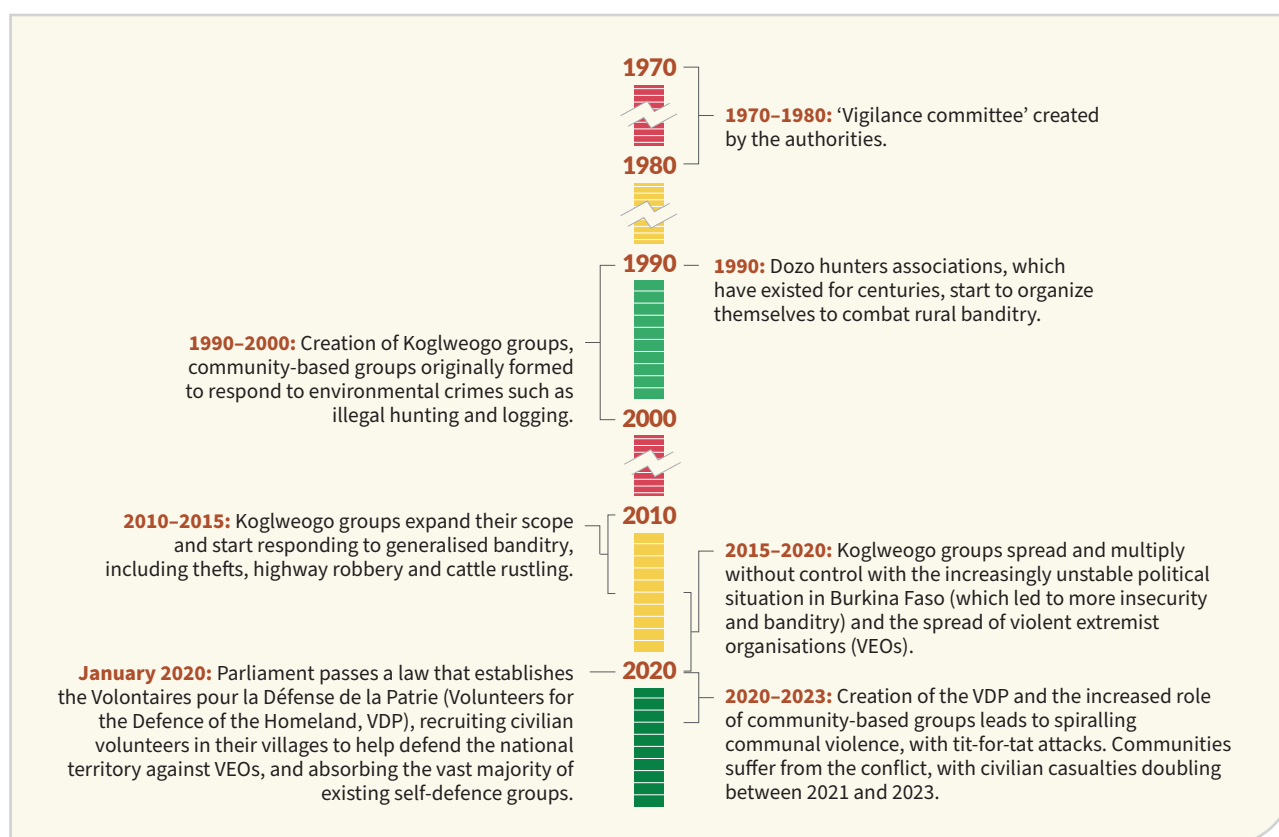
The evolution of self-defence groups in Burkina Faso

Self-defence groups in various forms have always been part of community responses to crime and insecurity in Burkina Faso. They have, however, grown in importance since 2014 and the end of the Blaise Compaoré regime. The fall of Compaoré led to political instability, a failed military coup, widespread insecurity and increased crime and banditry. Across the country, rural communities responded to the state's inability to guarantee their security by forming self-defence groups, often called Koglweogo, meaning 'guardians of the bush' in Mossi, the local language.⁴

Defining themselves as 'watchers' or 'protectors', the Koglweogo groups' self-legitimation is based on their contribution to solving crime and protecting communities against low-level crime and banditry, such as the theft of motorbikes, livestock and other commercial goods.⁵ These groups are organised at the village level, driven mostly by volunteers who have themselves been victims of violence or theft.⁶

From 2018, violent extremist groups operating in Mali – in particular Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – increasingly expanded into Burkina Faso and the security situation across the country sharply deteriorated. The Koglweogo groups became increasingly prominent elements of the response to this conflict. Launching reprisals against Fulani communities following violent extremist-group attacks, as discussed below, they also became key drivers of escalating cycles of communal violence. The first of these revenge massacres occurred in Yirgou in January 2019.

Chart 1: Creation of self defence groups in Burkina Faso



Source: Authors

In 2020, as more and more of the national territory fell to violent extremist groups, the Burkinabe parliament passed a law that established the VDP, recruiting civilian volunteers in their villages to help defend the country and absorbing the vast majority of existing self-defence groups.⁷ The VDP's actions, like the Koglweogos, have heightened communal violence. Civilian casualties doubled between 2021 and 2023 (from approximately 750 to 1 500); in 2023, one-third of these casualties have been attributed to armed violence from state forces or its auxiliaries.⁸ VDP members have also engaged in criminal behaviours, such as racketeering, kidnap for ransom and cattle rustling.⁹

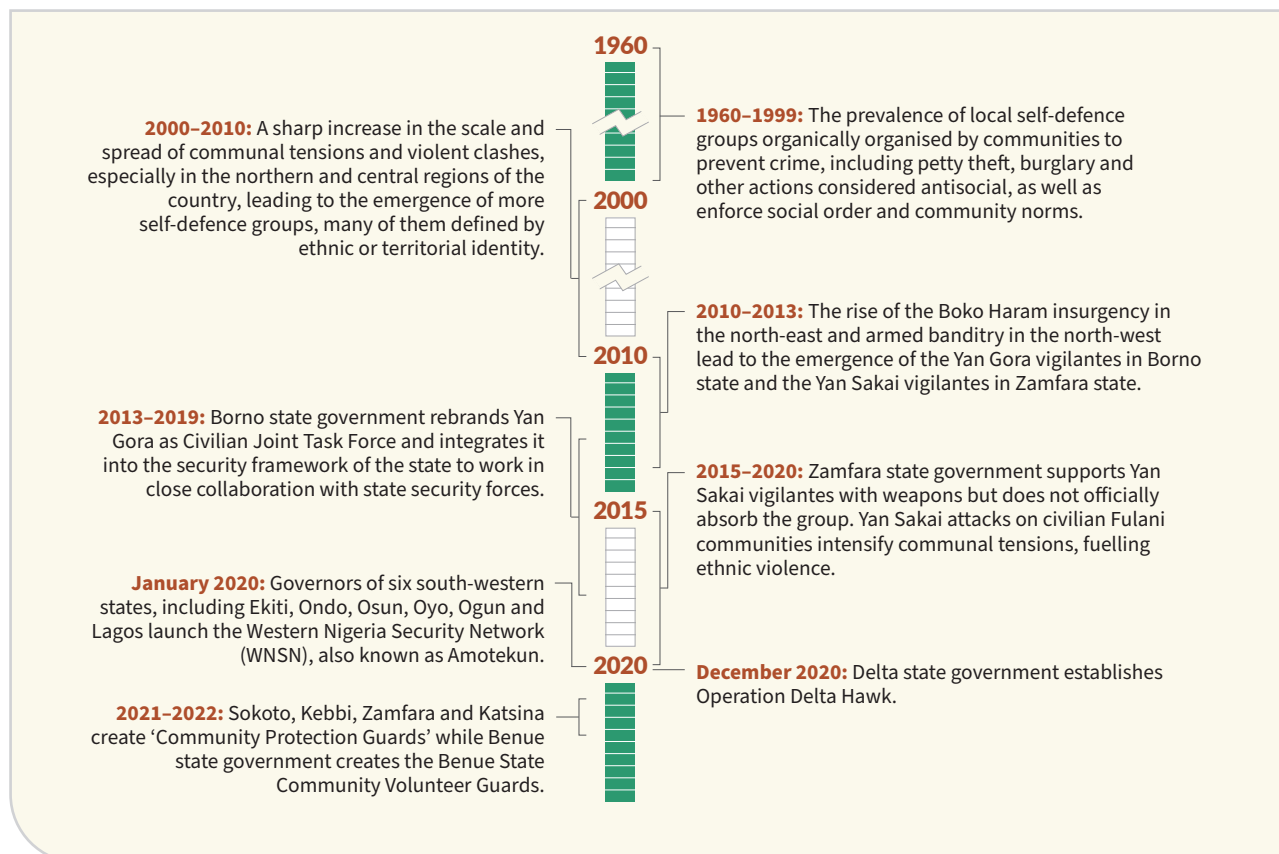
The state's creation of the VDP also sought to gain control of the existing self-defence groups. Although originally supposed to be representative of all communities,¹⁰ the VDP largely reflects ethnicities in line with the Koglweogos (primarily Mossi and Gourmantché) and the Dozo, another prominent group.¹¹

While these groups have not disappeared and not all members were integrated into the VDP, those who did received weapons, training and a salary and operated legally as auxiliaries of the Defence and Security Forces. In late 2022, Burkina Faso's military government reaffirmed the central role played by the VDP, stating that it will remain the heart of its security strategy and announcing that 90 000 citizens had signed up in the latest recruitment campaign.¹²

The evolution of self-defence groups in Nigeria

Vigilante groups in Nigeria can be broadly described as community-based local responses to security gaps caused by rising crime, communal conflicts and insecurity.¹³ For example, communities in Northern Nigeria traditionally organise male volunteers into vigilante groups known as Yan Banga to tackle crimes such as theft, armed robbery and, since around 2011, armed banditry.¹⁴ Working under the oversight of residents' associations and community leaders, such groups are highly localised and remain largely unconnected to the state.

Chart 2: State absorption and creation of self defence groups in Nigeria



Source: Authors

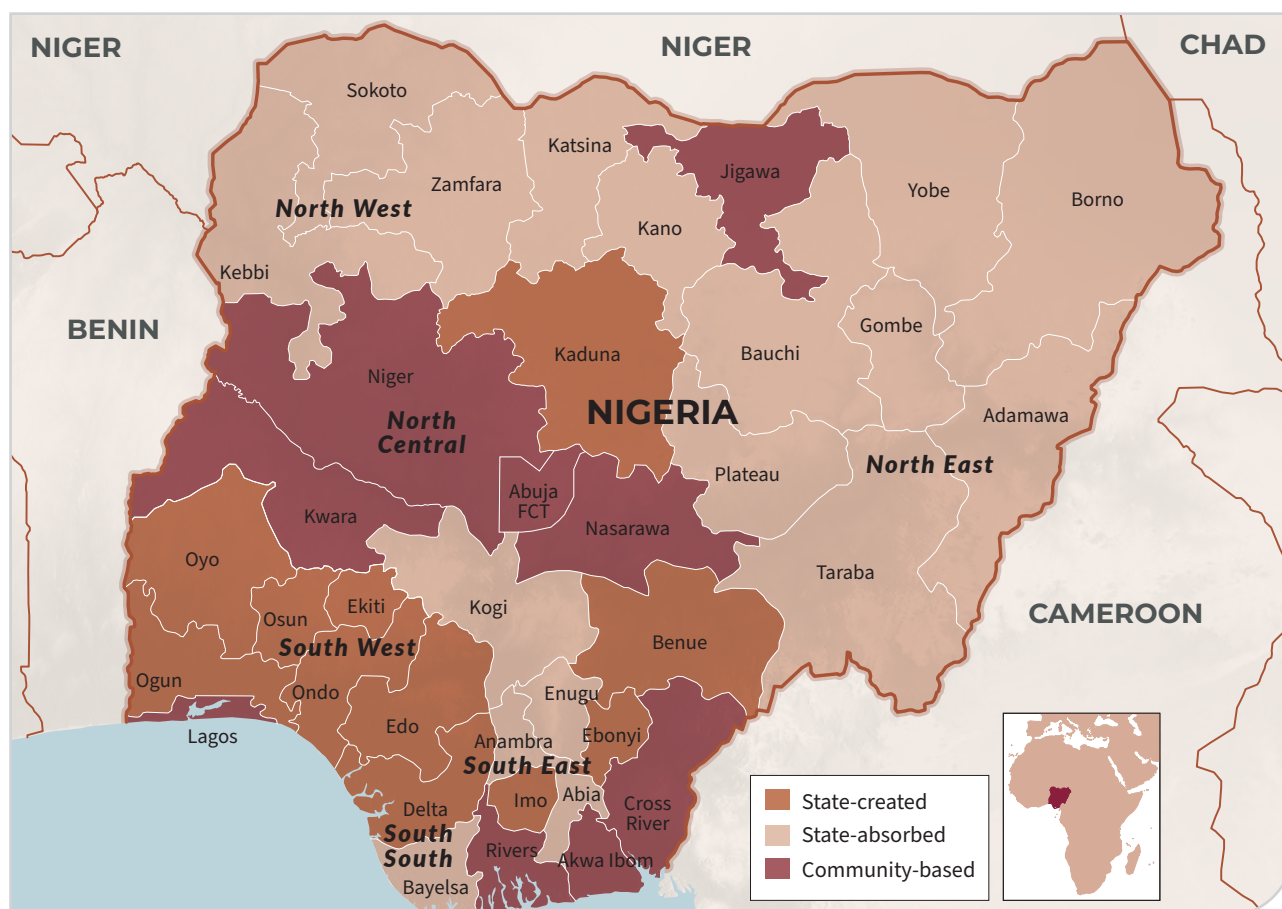
In 2013, the Borno State government assumed greater control over local vigilante groups. The Yan Gora, a community-based group in Maiduguri that was initially formed to combat Boko Haram insurgents, was integrated into the state's security framework.¹⁵ At the time, this was an isolated case but, since 2020, it has become a trend replicated in other parts of the country.

In Kaduna, the state government incorporated existing vigilantes into the newly created Kaduna State Vigilante Services in 2020. Likewise, the state government in Zamfara established the Community Protection Guards in June 2022, assimilating existing vigilante groups into the official security apparatus. These initiatives demonstrate an effort by state governments to integrate self-defence groups within their security strategies.

Not only have government authorities increasingly sought to assume control over existing vigilante groups, but, since 2020, there has also been a surge in the number of state-created vigilante groups.¹⁶ In January 2020, the governors of six South West states joined forces to establish the Western Nigeria Security Network, popularly known as Operation Amotekun. Similar initiatives have been introduced in various regions across the country, notably, Operation Delta Hawk in Delta State in December 2020, Operation Shege Ka Fasa in Northern Nigeria in February 2020 and the Benue State Community Volunteer Guards in 2022.¹⁷

Short-sighted and ill-planned commitments to arm state-established self-defence groups have flown in the face of federal regulations, causing disputes between state and federal governments which distract from a unified response to security threats. The failure of states to enforce limited mandates for 'their' self-defence groups has also opened the door for mission creep, with self-defence groups deploying against an extremely broad range of crimes, including non-violent cybercrimes.¹⁸

Chart 3: State-created, state-absorbed and community-based vigilante groups in Nigeria



Note: Nigeria's vigilante landscape is complex, with most states featuring a blend of state-created, state-absorbed and community-based vigilante groups. For each area, the map highlights the predominant form of vigilante group without implying the absence of others.

Source: GI-TOC interviews and media reports

Vigilantism in Mexico

The prevalence of self-defence and vigilante groups is not unique to West Africa. Mexico also has a long history of citizen security mobilisation, closely interlinked with state recognition of the rights of indigenous groups.¹⁹

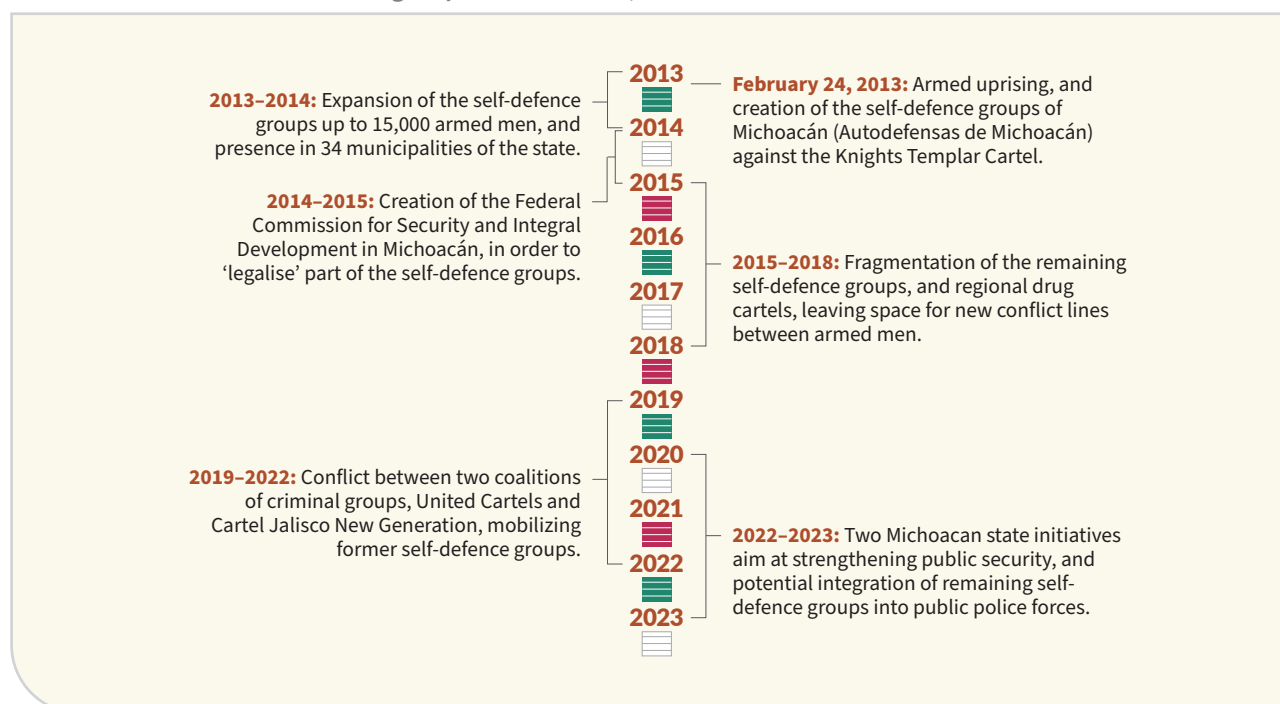
Since the beginning of the 1990s, the phenomenon of community police forces has been particularly pronounced in the state of Guerrero, reaching its peak around 2010 and spreading to at least 15 other states in Mexico. By 2020, studies counted the presence of 106 armed self-defence groups across 17 states.²⁰

These community mobilisations had the largest number of members in Guerrero and Michoacán: about 20 000 in each state at their peak. Consequently, both states have been at the centre of debates over the legal status and designation of this type of group, making them well positioned as comparator areas for examining responses. Such groups, most commonly designated as ‘community police’ or ‘community patrols’ (*rondas comunitarias*), are legally recognised by the Mexican Constitution, which acknowledges ‘the indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and, consequently, the right to autonomy’ and ‘to apply their own legal systems to regulate and solve their internal conflicts.’²¹

Such community police forces are responsible for local security and their actions are – at least in theory – protected by the legal capacity of indigenous communities to create systems to protect their territory, their people and their resources.²² These groups, which have varying capacities to mobilise personnel, share a key characteristic: their members belong to a recognised indigenous community.

The *autodefensas de Michoacán* (Michoacán self-defence groups) marked a diversion from this alignment when they emerged in 2013 to combat the Knights Templar Cartel, a criminal organisation that dominated the state of Michoacán. The *autodefensas* did not belong to indigenous communities. Although some leaders did not hesitate to allude to indigenous mobilisations as an inspiration, the communities have not endorsed the *autodefensa* movement or supported their uprisings. After two years of mobilisation, which brought in more than 15 000 armed men, the groups managed to successfully dismantle the cartel.

Chart 4: Creation of self-defence groups in Michoacán, Mexico



Source: Authors

During the entire *autodefensa* movement – and, in some cases, still today – leaders from Michoacán used ‘community police’ and ‘*autodefensa*’ interchangeably. Yet, the difference is not merely semantic. The use of ‘community police’ reflects leaders’ desire to appropriate a label that is supported by a legal framework and tied to a known lexical and symbolic field. The *autodefensas* – as well as drug cartels – have used this tactic to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the community, the state and the national government. It has not given the *autodefensas* the institutionalised legitimacy of indigenous organisations, but they have had some success in using these labels to circumvent the law. The *autodefensas*, bedded into their wider context, provide the central Mexican case study in this analysis.

Our research in Mexico and the analysis mobilised for this comparative report focused solely on non-indigenous groups, particularly the Michoacán *autodefensas*. Their unprecedented level of mobilisation, firepower and political engagement make them the strongest case study for the phenomenon in Mexico. They are characteristic of self-defence groups, notably by their proven involvement in illicit activities, their complex relationships with both criminal organisations and public authorities and their ability to influence the course of politics at local, regional and federal levels.

The *autodefensas* sought to fulfil the role that the state had failed to play in protecting communities from violence, organised crime and extortion, while still calling upon the government to support them politically, financially and militarily. In some ways, this is the paradox of self-defence groups: professing to belong to a tradition of localism and self-help and taking justice into their own hands, they simultaneously want to satisfy community demand for more state presence and greater intervention.²³

In Michoacán, the groups’ demands to the state were partly met. As the *autodefensas* took on the cartel in numerous violent clashes, the federal government supported their endeavour and launched an unprecedented process of negotiation with them. By the end of 2014, the *autodefensas* became partly legalised and state-affiliated through their absorption into a newly created regional police force, the Fuerza Rural (Rural Force).²⁴ This led to a gradual demobilisation of armed civilians and a progressive return of federal police and armed forces to areas where they had extremely limited reach before 2013.

However, this state support was not accompanied by a long-term institutional strategy and quickly disappeared. The groups’ leaders, progressively acting as more autonomous strongmen and political bosses, accumulated power by engaging in not only licit but also illicit activities, including the drug trade and extortion, effectively stepping into the vacuum left by the dismantled Knights Templar Cartel.²⁵ More than ten years after the *autodefensas* emerged, Michoacán remains one of the most violent states in Mexico. Indeed, the situation appears to be deteriorating. In 2021, the state registered its worst homicide, violent crime, firearms crime and organised crime rates since 2015.²⁶

The trajectory of the *autodefensas* demonstrates the risks inherent in supporting self-defence groups: they themselves can become central perpetrators of crime and violence.

This form of public security outsourcing can empower strongmen, enabling them to compete for local resources and violently secure a position as government proxies while abandoning their initial community promises.

Given the longevity and relevance of the *autodefensas* in Mexico’s security landscape, the challenges they still pose to political stability and state intervention, and the plethora of responses attempted, their case can provide important lessons for policymakers in West Africa. As in Mexico, some Nigerian and Burkinabe groups were established with the explicit goal of responding to a rise in criminal activity and born of social resentment of the state’s inability to address insecurity.

The trajectory of Mexico’s *autodefensas* demonstrates the risks inherent in supporting self-defence groups: they themselves can become central perpetrators of crime and violence

Chart 5: Typologies of self-defence groups and oversight structures in Mexico, Nigeria and Burkina Faso

Typology of self-defence group	Oversight structure
MEXICO	
Regional state-created	Local leaders head each group, in each municipality in which a group is created; in certain cases, citizens' committees are created to monitor the groups' actions, but they tend to be dismantled after a couple of months; regional self-defence coordination and a spokesperson are active between 2013 and 2015, before disappearing.
State-absorbed	Creation of the Rural Force in 2014, a new police force under the supervision of the Federal Government, the Federal Public Security Ministry and the Ministry of Defence. Between 2014 and 2015, the Rural Force fell under the supervision of the Michoacán state government, before being progressively dismantled after 2015.
Community-based	Community assemblies, citizens' committees and elected community leaders (e.g. commissioners).
NIGERIA	
State-created	Governing boards made up of representatives from security agencies, state ministries of justice, state police commands and office of the secretaries of state governments, Department of State Services, state ministries of youth, community development associations, state executive assistants on security.
State-absorbed	State ministries of justice, security committees, traditional rulers, ward heads and divisional police heads.
Community-based	Traditional rulers, ward heads, elders' forum, youth associations.
BURKINA FASO	
State-created	National Armed Forces (FAN), Internal Security Forces (FSI), Defence Ministry, Military tribunal.
Community-based	Customary or community leader heads the movement, with some (Koglweogo) structured around a chief of staff, an elder council and a national supreme council while others (Dozo) created a High Council.

Source: GI-TOC interviews and media sources

Why self-defence groups emerge: Analysing key characteristics of the enabling environment

The creation of self-defence groups is largely driven by the incapacity of the state to provide security and citizens' resultant sense of abandonment and lack of confidence in the authorities. This fuels the desire for local control over security matters and grounds the groups' ability to act as the enforcers of social contracts and moral norms, which in turn enables them to appear as legitimate security providers in the eyes of the population.

Across the case studies, localism is a central source of legitimacy of self-defence groups. In Mexico, all *autodefensas* members proudly pledged that they were from the communities they were fighting for, reflecting a sense of belonging and purpose. Security is repeatedly described as a service that must be provided by locals for multiple reasons: moral, because the vigilantes present their actions as necessary; political, because the state is seen as corrupt and inept (and, in the case of Mexico, allied with the cartels); and logistical, as only locals know the terrain, the perpetrators, how they operate and where they can be found.

Further elements of local knowledge, including familiarity with customs and language, position self-defence groups as essential partners for state security forces, helping to bridge the gap between them and the communities they serve. The claim of 'being local' is meant to mark a fundamental separation from 'outsiders', a category which the state government generally falls into.

Such groups tend to be created not necessarily where state authorities are fully absent, but rather where their involvement seems partial, distant or comes solely in the form of armed forces deployment, whether in the context of the war on drugs in Mexico or counter-insurgency strategies in West Africa. Here, citizens' grievances have more to do with the quality of the state's presence and perceptions of corruption, and they often call for more state presence.

In Mexico, for example, the *autodefensas* did abolish the control of the Knights Templar Cartel, notably by eliminating or expelling their members. Nevertheless, the *autodefensas* combined their zeal for authority and action with a call for the federal government to intervene as the final guarantor of the law. This paradox is a tension that accompanies most vigilante groups, in Mexico and elsewhere, where outlaw citizen movements 'violate the law in order to enforce it.'²⁷

In Burkina Faso, then, it is not the so-called 'security vacuum' or the 'incapacity of the modern state to function' that explains the rise of self-defence groups such as the Koglweegos; it is more a competition for power between various security actors.²⁸

The Koglweegos view the state as inefficient or unwilling to act against insecurity.²⁹ It is against this backdrop that, although they are known to operate brutally and outside of human rights considerations, Koglweego groups have long been seen as efficient by the communities, the authorities and the Defence and Security Forces.³⁰ The communities also perceive them as brave and driven by the desire to defend their village, rather than the pursuit of personal gain.³¹

Similarly, the popularity of self-defence groups in Nigeria is underpinned by their perceived successes in tackling insecurity, partly through their much-vaunted local knowledge. As described above, some state governments have integrated self-defence groups in an effort to enhance local acceptance and support for the government and its forces.³² Some states have sought to both replicate such legitimacy and strengthen their community ties by going one step beyond and creating new groups.

Vigilante groups link their legitimacy to a sense of efficiency. Over time, they develop a set of practices, such as quick mobilisation, territorial occupation and armed patrolling, and a more diffuse but powerful

Vigilante groups tend to be created not necessarily where state authorities are fully absent, but rather where their involvement seems partial, distant or comes solely in the form of armed forces deployment



Local communities show their support for *autodefensas* fighting against the Knights Templar cartel

Authorities must address the initial conditions of unrest, rather than relying on their relationships with local leaders

collective sense of mutual help and belonging. However, this opens a pitfall – as happened in Mexico – for governments to first delegate basic security functions almost entirely to non-state actors, and then to make self-defence leaders the sole interlocutors on the ground while neglecting their duties to regain the trust, acceptance and legitimacy of the citizens who remain hidden behind the strongmen. Authorities must therefore seek to regain a foothold in relevant territories with programmes that address the initial conditions of unrest, for example, rather than relying on their relationships with local leaders.

The proliferation of self-defence groups is best understood as part of a broader multiplication of non-state armed actors that challenge a state's territorial integrity, contribute to fracturing the central state's monopoly of violence and pose threats to local communities they were established to serve. This is not to ignore that such groups can, to an extent, also provide effective security functions, but the risks of their deployment and proliferation, as outlined below, have repeatedly brought their overall impact into question.

Assessing key risks associated with self-defence groups

Firearms proliferation and arms trafficking

The proliferation of self-defence groups tends to swell a demand for firearms that is, to a large extent, met through illicit supply. In Mexico, for example, the uprising of Michoacán's self-defence groups prompted massive purchases of AR-15 and AK-47 rifles. As new civilian groups were created, thousands of medium- and high-calibre weapons entered Michoacán. Some were supplied (sold or given) to the *autodefensas* by public forces. To date, no public strategy has been designed for the disarmament of the self-defence groups in Mexico.

Similarly, the VDP is armed by the Burkinabe government and its creation has contributed to an influx of weapons into Burkina Faso, mostly from Mali and Niger. Demand sharply increased since 2020, from both the VDP and, to a significant extent, civilians wanting to protect themselves from the violence of state and VDP forces as well as the violent extremist groups. Arming civilians and increasing the number of weapons in circulation means that many are being diverted from official channels.

In Southern Nigeria, state governments have repeatedly vowed, in breach of federal regulations, to arm the Amotekun, with growing reports that state governors elsewhere may be supplying arms to self-defence groups.³³ As the number of non-state armed groups multiply, communities increasingly seek to arm themselves for self-protection, further fuelling demand for weapons.³⁴ In turn, this proliferation heightens existing conflicts, multiplying the violence.

Involvement in criminal activities

There are innumerable examples of self-defence groups engaging in predatory and destabilising activities in the communities they are supposed to protect.³⁵ In Mexico, the *autodefensas* became major players in regional drugs and extortion markets. Koglweogo groups in Burkina Faso, created to counter crime and theft, have been accused of extorting communities, looting animals and racketeering against those they accuse of being affiliated with violent extremist groups.³⁶

In Burkina Faso (and Mali and Côte d'Ivoire), Dozo militias have played a major role in gold-mining regions. When Compaoré's regime fell, the control of the mining sites went from private security companies to self-defence groups. The rising power of these groups has morphed

The proliferation of self-defence groups tends to swell a demand for firearms that is largely met through illicit supply

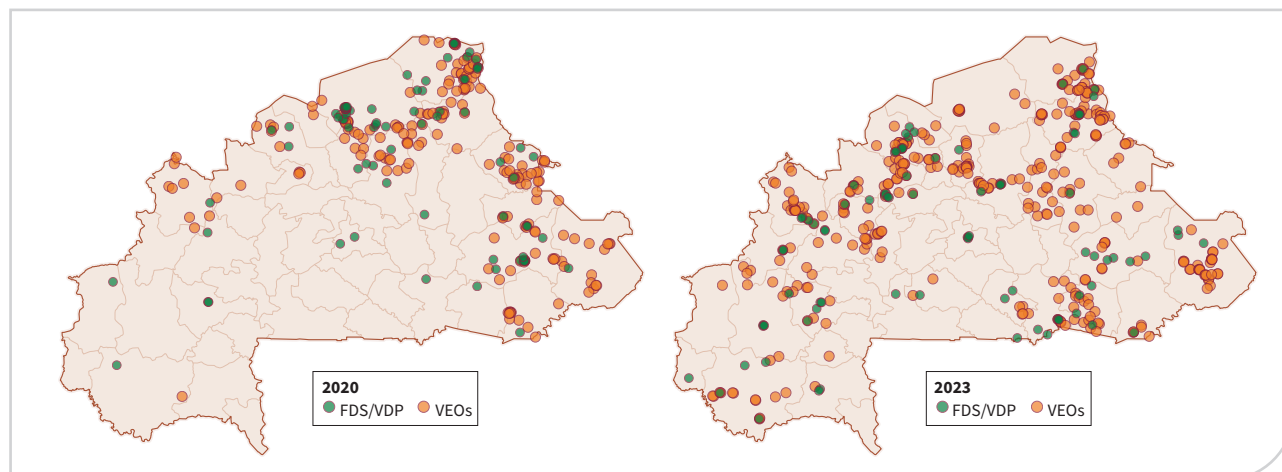
them into mafia-style ‘violent entrepreneurs’ or even armed militias.³⁷ VDP groups have also been accused of involvement in illicit economies such as cattle rustling and kidnap for ransom, capitalising on their firepower, their positions of authority and the lack of accountability.³⁸

In Nigeria, different self-defence groups have been accused of involvement in illicit activities such as extortion, armed robbery and drug trafficking. In Zamfara, for instance, the Yan Sakai group has been accused of colluding with criminals and falsely labelling residents as ‘armed bandits’ to seize their cattle.³⁹ These incidents highlight the complexity and potential abuses of power of such groups and the need for careful monitoring and accountability.

Human rights abuses and culture of impunity

Self-defence groups are typically subject to limited training and oversight coupled with extensive firepower and often wide-ranging mandates. This creates an enabling environment for human rights abuses. The Amotekun Corps, VDP and *autodefensas* have all been accused of extrajudicial killings and assaults, with the VDP also perpetrating forced abductions and disappearances.⁴⁰ When state authorities take limited action to bring offenders to justice, as is common, this further undermines the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of communities and fosters a culture of impunity.

Chart 6: Violence against civilians in Burkina Faso, by perpetrator



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project

Fuelling inter-ethnic violence

As self-defence groups are often established along ethnic lines, they can fuel communal tensions, amplifying cycles of violence and creating victimised communities that open recruitment opportunities for violent extremist groups. In Burkina Faso, Koglweogo groups – with the tacit agreement of the state – disrupted inter-community equilibrium when exercising police responsibilities. In particular, their role in resolving conflicts over land issues typically benefitted Mossi communities, the dominant ethnicity within the Koglweogo, at the expense of the Fulani.⁴¹

Tensions rose even higher when the Koglweogo became involved in counter-insurgency. Under the pretext of defending their communities, they began to launch pre-emptive attacks against neighbouring communities, predominantly Fulani, whom they accused of being aligned with violent extremist groups. This exacerbated tensions between both communities, fuelling tit-for-tat attacks and a series of massacres on both sides since early 2019,⁴² which remains the deadliest year for civilians in Burkina Faso.

Eventually, this discriminatory exercise of quasi-judicial power resulted in some targeted communities seeking protection from extremist groups in the country. In 2020, the creation of the VDP further increased violence against civilians, entrenching the dynamics of communal violence.

Members of the Yan Sakai, a vigilante group originally established in Nigeria's Zamfara state in response to predominantly Fulani armed bandits



Many self-defence groups in Nigeria also have a strong ethnic identity and have become entangled in communal tensions. For example, around 2011, the Yan Sakai group emerged in predominantly Hausa communities in Zamfara State in North West Nigeria in response to predominantly Fulani armed bandits engaged in cattle rustling, kidnapping and lethal assaults on local populations.

Initially, the Yan Sakai enjoyed the support of local communities, to the extent that, in June 2020, the Zamfara State government remodelled them as the Community Defence (Yan Tsaron Gida) to counter the activities of the armed bandits.⁴³ This approach soon backfired. The Yan Sakai began to launch indiscriminate attacks on Fulani communities, irrespective of their involvement in criminal activities. This fuelled tensions between the Hausa and Fulani communities, driving many Fulani individuals to take up arms and some to join the ranks of the very armed bandits the Yan Sakai had initially sought to counteract.⁴⁴

Mirroring the situation in the North West, the homogeneously Yoruba Amotekun – a regional group created by state governors in the South West to counter cattle rustling, kidnapping and other crimes – has fuelled communal tensions between Yoruba and Fulani communities and also engaged in violent clashes with Fulani groups in Oyo state.⁴⁵

Members of the Yan Sakai vigilante group bring their weapons into the Zamfara State Government house as they surrendered more than 500 guns to the Zamfara State Governor, Bello Matawalle, as part of efforts to accept the peace process of the state government in Gusau, on December 3, 2019. - Attacks on villages has seen gangs of bandits terrorise remote communities for years in this impoverished region of Zamfara



In contrast, the dynamics of self-defence groups in North East Nigeria have followed a distinct trajectory largely devoid of ethnicisation. The Yan Gora, which emerged in 2013 to combat Boko Haram insurgents embedded within the region, was representative of communities across distinct ethnicities. The group garnered support from local communities and was subsequently incorporated into the formal state security apparatus by the state government. It was rebranded as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and partnered with state security forces to confront insurgents, successfully reclaiming lost territories.⁴⁶

Starting to formulate a response: Mitigating risks and harnessing benefits

Recognising that self-defence groups are prominent elements of the response to conflict and crime in the regions under study, we unpick three prominent approaches to harnessing their benefits: two that seek to enhance accountability, either to communities (typically where they have not been absorbed into or created by the state) or to the state, and one seeking to address the risk of ethnic polarisation of self-defence groups through recruitment approaches. By no means addressing all the risks outlined above, this is instead an assessment of selected current response frameworks.

Enhancing accountability to communities and civil society: A thorny tangle

In the early stages of mobilisation, self-defence groups emphasise their service to the community. In many cases, whether real or staged, they present their actions as being supervised by the people. This dynamic can take the form of setting up citizens' committees or working with existing community oversight structures, as is the case in many of the groups studied in Mexico, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. However, when self-defence groups multiply or become more involved in armed criminal or vigilante activities, citizens' committees tend to lose their power and capacity to regulate them.

Experts of the Mexican context gave examples of community members deciding to step down from their committee roles when vigilante groups turn into criminal entrepreneurs, either for personal protection in the context of greater violence or to avoid appearing as accomplices of a criminal actor. As a consequence, most committees in Michoacán have gradually disappeared and, with them, one of the only forms of accountability that self-defence groups might be subject to.⁴⁷

The disappearance of community oversight also opened the door to even greater participation in criminal activities, especially extortion and protection rackets against agricultural and commercial activities in the Tierra Caliente region, thus reproducing what had been put in place by the former Knights Templars Cartel.

In Michoacán, there are only two instances of lasting oversight by citizens' committees. The first is found in regions with solid pre-existing community institutions that work in total autonomy from the government, such as the indigenous communities of Cherán and Ostula.⁴⁸ Here, local autonomy is sustained by broader community institutions, in particular the citizens' councils in charge of public administration. The vigilante groups fall under their authority and respond to their orders.

The second is where private entrepreneurs support such committees financially through largely informal public-private funding schemes, such as in the avocado-producing municipality of Tancitaro or the banana-producing municipality of Coahuayana. These vigilante groups also seem to remain under strict supervision of committees, although locals have criticised them for opacity in their day-to-day operations and for acting more like private militias of the landowners than a truly public force.

In Nigeria, self-defence groups that are unaffiliated with the government are often supervised by traditional rulers and elders' forums through community youth associations. These often exert limited influence over the vigilante groups, as commanders and unit leaders typically hold the authority to make tactical decisions.

In Burkina Faso, the role of customary and traditional authorities and justice systems was similarly perceived to be important for accountability and oversight structures. For example, experts from the region mentioned the

*Locals gather
at a church
in Ostula,
Michoacán,
where citizen
councils play a
crucial role as
an oversight
mechanism for
vigilantes*



role of Koglweego chiefs, given that the VDP was created on the back of Koglweego groups and many of their members are still close to community leaders.⁴⁹ However, such leaders have been subjects of JNIM attacks, as they are perceived to be affiliated with the state or state-affiliated groups, further swelling civilian casualties.⁵⁰

In order to increase self-defence groups' accountability, state authorities are often tempted to actively support the citizens' committees. Again, Mexico holds a note of caution: in a number of Michoacán municipalities, public authorities aligned particularly strongly with oversight committees. However, self-defence group leaders, feeling sidelined, violently acted against their former comrades in the form of assassinations of committee members and reprisals against civilian elements of the committees.⁵¹

Since 2015, and especially on the Pacific coast in the Tierra Caliente region, dozens of *ex-autodefensas* members who became social activists or active political actors after 'the conflict' ended have been victims of violence.⁵² Hipolito Mora, a principal founder of the self-defence groups, was assassinated in front of his house in June 2023, allegedly by a former self-defence group that evolved into an active drug cartel.⁵³

Drawing from the disparate experiences of accountability, we can start to draw some preliminary takeaways. While positive on paper, the establishment of sustainable civilian oversight committees is fraught with risks. Two particularly prominent risks must be taken into account and mitigated. First, vigilante leaders may feel sidelined by such processes and react violently (and leaders' incentives to participate is key to the long-term success of such oversight).

Second, members of civil oversight committees may be exposed to violence as a result of their role, either at the hands of the self-defence group they have been established to oversee or by the very 'threat' the self-defence group was established to defend against, as they become perceived to be allied to the state and/or the self-defence groups. A heightened risk of harm to civilians can also serve to justify further weaponisation and creation of self-defence groups.

Taking these risks into account, civilian oversight mechanisms are most likely to work, and these risks mitigated, in particular contexts. The first is where levels of violence are not excessive – for example, after the conflict and violence have peaked. The second is in contexts of high generalised crime and violence committed by a fractured set of perpetrators, that is, those who are less likely to have the intelligence-gathering capabilities and incentives to monitor and attack civil society oversight mechanisms. Establishing such oversight mechanisms for self-defence groups in contexts of high violence with a unified and sophisticated conflict actor – as is the case with JNIM in Burkina Faso – is more likely to escalate civilian casualties.

State absorption of self-defence groups

Governments are often tempted to ‘legalise’ self-defence groups by absorbing them into existing, or newly established, public forces. This is intended to mitigate the risks of multiplying vigilante groups and to draw some of their legitimacy into state forces. It is an effective branding exercise, simultaneously shrinking the presence of ‘non-state armed groups’ and swelling government ranks with limited disbursement. Governments in Mexico, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and elsewhere have experimented with this approach. Yet, such legalisation (or, in some cases, whitewashing) of burgeoning armed groups presents multiple challenges.

Fuerza Rural: A cautionary example leads to new initiatives

In 2014, Mexico’s federal government, without any coordination with state or municipal authorities, created the Federal Commission for Security and Integral Development in Michoacán. It sought negotiations with the Michoacán *autodefensas* groups to reorganise, demobilise and legalise them through a mix of formal and informal discussions and co-optation. This partial legalisation process allowed the federal government to consolidate its presence on the ground.

Between January and May, around 400 *autodefensas* were selected to become police officers of the Fuerza Rural, receiving uniforms, weapons and vehicles, along with the promise of a salary, training and career paths. Yet, the fanfare was not underpinned by a solid institutionalisation plan and the promises faded away after a couple of months.

By the end of 2014, new personal cliques and private armies mushroomed as vigilante leaders not selected for the Fuerza Rural turned to other sources of income. These ranged from providing security to commercial banana and avocado producers to active collaboration with criminal groups and drug-trafficking organisations. Interviewees in *autodefensas*-controlled municipalities laid responsibility for this development at the feet of the government and the ‘government-aligned leaders’ who had supported the establishment of the Fuerza Rural.⁵⁴

There has since been a marked shift in the official approach to integrating self-defence groups into state structures. Michoacán State appears to be experimenting with a more dispersed absorption of *autodefensas* across existing state structures, designed to address state needs. The Fund for Strengthening Peace (Fondo para el Fortalecimiento de la Paz, or Fortapaz) was launched in 2021 to encourage self-defence-group elements to join municipal police forces and benefit from an extensive initiative that includes training, certification and equipment.



Members of civilian militias gather in Zagtouli to celebrate the organization's sixth anniversary in Zagtouli, Burkina Faso, Feb. 14, 2021

The legislative effort to clarify, define and supervise the status of *autodefensas* groups is a significant opportunity for self-defence groups operating in indigenous or mixed communities



The programme is coordinated by local authorities with support from the federal government, with both providing a portion of the financing.⁵⁵ Local interviewees believe this approach holds promise not only for integrating former *autodefensas* into a regulated police force, but also for municipal solutions to public security and violence prevention issues.⁵⁶

The second initiative, approved by the Congress of Michoacán in July 2022, aims to bring informal community guards and auxiliary police under existing national public security laws. By extending the framework that serves to legalise indigenous community policing, this would allow community guards the use of uniforms, badges and weapons to perform public safety work. Several leaders saw legal

recognition as a way to protect their men who were armed and patrolling without institutional backing.⁵⁷ It would also enable community policing groups to secure extra funding and to expand their ability to maintain power and authority within their territory.⁵⁸

In 2023, armed groups that label themselves as ‘self-defence groups’ are active in at least a dozen Michoacán municipalities. Both initiatives might open a more transparent, long-term institutionalisation of these loosely organised armed actors. In the first instance, the expansion of public funding, training and career planning for municipal police could offer crucial professional opportunities to ex-*autodefensas* members operating in non-indigenous or mixed communities where community police are not officially recognised.

Such opportunities could pave the way for a progressive demobilisation of armed civilian groups, diminish the power of informal armed leaders at the local level and ensure a more permanent presence of locally formed police forces. If conducted through a transparent vetted process of recruitment and integration and backed by a strong budget commitment from the state government – in contrast to the Fuerza Rural launch in 2014 – this initiative to strengthen municipal policing is one of the most important steps taken towards institutional building in the region for decades.

The legislative effort to clarify, define and supervise the status of various *autodefensas* groups is a significant opportunity for self-defence groups operating in indigenous or mixed communities. The ability of self-defence groups to informally appropriate convenient labels like ‘community police’ often reflects the inability of the government and the judiciary to properly investigate their true nature. But by expanding the registration of self-defence groups, this new legislation could – if backed with proper funding and due diligence processes on the ground – offer groups the same professional opportunities enjoyed by municipal police in non-indigenous communities and, ideally, increase state capacity to monitor them.

Although it is too soon to assess the implementation of these strategies, the fact that they are coordinated between the executive and the legislative branches is quite unprecedented. It does offer a sign of stronger coordination, as well as a prospect for long-term institutionalisation and state presence. Yet, neither initiative will succeed if they are not supported by structural long-term funding and – maybe even more difficult – structural long-term political will.

Moreover, they will only be successful if the state can ensure that informal unregistered armed leaders are either incorporated or demobilised. Otherwise, the new flows of public funding, training, weapons and materiel will only fuel their ability to accumulate more power at the expense of public policies. This is why dealing with self-defence groups solely as a public security issue cannot succeed. The integration/legalisation process must be accompanied by a strict judicial effort to select new officers and sanction those who remain armed and active outside the law after the recruitment process has concluded.

Self-defence group absorption in West Africa

In Burkina Faso, although the VDP was a state-created force, it did effectively absorb the proliferation of existing self-defence groups. According to the law, the VDP is an auxiliary of the state's Defence and Security Forces and hence is not integrated into them. However, it comes close to it: by their mission, to defend the country; and by their training and discipline, as they are trained and protected by the state, with a duty of obedience to the military hierarchy.

They also receive a monthly state salary of CFA 60 000, and they or their family – at least on paper – receive benefits in case of illness or death.⁵⁹ Experts from Burkina Faso raised concerns about the risks of a scenario where the state would partially or fully stop its moral and material support to the VDP,⁶⁰ causing VDP groups to turn their allegiance away from the state and potentially against it.

In Nigeria, the absorption of self-defence groups into state security structures has produced mixed outcomes, as discussed above. Nigerian experts and stakeholders in the North East generally contend that the absorption of Yan Gora vigilantes and their rebranding as the CJTF in 2013 played a significant role in pushing back Boko Haram insurgents.⁶¹

However, many residents believe that this has empowered CJTF operatives to act recklessly: taking the law into their own hands, violating human rights, extorting motorists, engaging in sexual violence against vulnerable groups and participating in various illicit activities.⁶² Another looming concern emphasised by Nigerian experts is the absence of a clear post-insurgency demobilisation plan for the CJTF, which poses a significant risk. This factor could lead vigilantes to resort to illicit activities for survival, ultimately becoming a threat to local communities.

State-promoted or legalised self-defence groups cannot be considered a silver bullet. It may instead fuel the creation of new groups and feed competition among local actors for preferential access to state resources including budgets, favours, electoral seats and protection. It can spur direct political violence, as seen in Osun state in the run-up to Nigeria's 2023 elections, where vigilantes were allegedly leveraged to intimidate political opponents, or during the 2015 electoral campaigns in Michoacán.⁶³

Putting a legal blanket over self-defence groups, especially if the laws never go beyond their paper intentions, is not only insufficient but poses immense challenges for future administrations faced with 'legalised' armed groups. Such practices essentially support the creation of a reserve of armed men, trained in violence, who are likely to seek alternative markets for their skillsets if state-supported deployment diminishes, and further extend the constellation of armed groups perpetrating violence across a region.⁶⁴ The risk of self-defence groups spinning off into uncontrollable militias and escalating ethno-religious violence is already crystallising in some contexts.

Recruitment: Mitigating the risks of ethnically motivated violence

Across West Africa, as highlighted above, there is a clear risk of self-defence groups feeding inter-ethnic conflicts. The nature of the recruitment process is a significant determinant of local trust in non-state security providers.

In Burkina Faso, VDP recruits were selected not by the national authorities but by communities themselves through their committee for village development and with the involvement of traditional authorities. This strategy was meant to avoid the appearance of state

State-promoted or legalised self-defence groups cannot be considered a silver bullet but may instead fuel the creation of new groups and feed competition for preferential access to state resources



imposition. While it may have been shrewd in theory, in practice it favoured certain communities over others. Existing Koglweogo members, who had the advantage of previous security experience, were predominantly from the Mossi ethnicity.⁶⁵ This led to the apparent exclusion of Fulani individuals from selection, ultimately contributing to a rise in ethnic tensions.⁶⁶

In Nigeria, the different paths taken by the CJTF in the North East and the Yan Sakai in the North West highlight the critical risk of ethnicisation when governments are establishing or managing self-defence groups. A key strength of the CJTF lies in the ethnic diversity evident within both its membership and leadership structures,⁶⁷ while the main weakness of the Yan Sakai is its ethnic homogeneity.

These aspects were already in place before government absorption, but it indicates that authorities must identify and rectify uneven ethnic representation within groups before supporting or absorbing their members and promote ethnic diversity as a core guiding principle throughout the structures. However, the initial recruitment process is not the only period of risk: CJTF recruitment has become increasingly politicised, with officials favouring their acquaintances and loyalists, essentially transforming the recruitment process into a patronage system.

Conclusion

In Burkina Faso and Nigeria, as in Mexico, security strategies rely heavily on a combination of formal and informal arrangements between public authorities and non-state security providers, whether self-defence groups, vigilante groups or so-called ‘military auxiliary forces.’

Despite the efficiency demonstrated in some cases by self-defence groups and the legitimacy they may enjoy within local populations, this has encouraged an outsourcing of the state’s monopoly in legitimate public security violence to non-state armed actors. It also arose in parallel to states’ insufficient institutional or security responses to threats that have emerged in recent years. In the meantime, arrangements with vigilante leaders have fed the power of strongmen who can, and already do, compete for local interests and resources to maintain their position as government proxies.

Analysis of the risks, both short and long term, centres on three principal dimensions. First, self-defence groups not only benefit from considerable public support, in part through their ability to efficiently address the security threats facing local populations, but their growing popularity also contributes to a loss of trust in the government and state security forces. The (short-term) success of self-defence groups, combined with their local support and the mistrust of national authorities, can then lead the latter to rely almost exclusively on the former, which itself can have severe ramifications for the future security landscape.

November 16, 2022 shows men standing in line with their application letters to enrol as a Volontaire pour la Défense de la Patrie - VDP (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland), at the Governorate of Ouagadougou



Second, lack of accountability is a key risk in the proliferation of self-defence groups. Community oversight infrastructures have sometimes successfully held non-state defence militias to account, but for the most part prove ineffective, particularly when governments give overt support to such groups.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of successful policy development, the legalisation of self-defence groups is insufficient to harness their potential benefits and, crucially, to mitigate the significant risks they pose. If the legalisation policy does not fall within a wider programme of long-term institutionalisation of self-defence groups – such as formal integration into national security forces or a clearly formulated demobilisation strategy – it may even exacerbate violence by catalysing the proliferation of armed groups and the intensification of illicit economies.

In the long term, the objective of relevant stakeholders should be to avoid the multiplication of self-defence groups. Where legalisation is being considered, governments must acknowledge that legalisation alone is not a silver bullet. Although the groups might enjoy a high degree of legitimacy, the state has to limit its outsourcing measures and reliance on local strongmen in order to reclaim its public security responsibilities and regain its citizens' trust.

Recommendations

It is crucial to note that this paper does not advocate the leveraging of self-defence groups as a response to either conflict or crime in West Africa. Instead, it is key for governments to advance institutional measures to ensure public security and offer credible alternatives to vigilante groups, strongmen and violent intermediaries.

However, in contexts where self-defence groups are already proliferating, we outline a number of recommendations towards harnessing their potential benefits and mitigating their risks.

ECOWAS can leverage its role as a regional norm-setter

- Acknowledging that the best strategy concerning vigilante groups is highly dependent on local and national contexts, and recognising the sovereignty of national governments to determine their own security policies, the 15-member body of West African states can adopt and promote a regional charter of principles for the regulation of armed self-defence groups, supporting key parameters that respond to clear risks and vulnerabilities as outlined in this paper.
- These high-level principles should include a directive to refrain from supporting ethnically segregated self-defence groups and a requirement for unequivocal condemnation of violence against civilians and other human rights abuses perpetrated by armed actors.



The 15-member body of West African states, ECOWAS, should leverage its role as a regional norm-setter to promote principles and policies that respond to the clear risks and vulnerabilities associated with self-defence groups

Diagnoses and dialogues to rebuild trust between state, communities and self-defence groups

- Establishing self-defence groups clearly contributes to the proliferation of armed groups operating in any particular territory and should be avoided.
- Where self-defence groups have emerged, states should invest in mapping the needs of the population, including and beyond public safety issues, and take up opportunities to build better relations.
- These diagnoses should be accompanied by channels and spaces for dialogue between local authorities and citizens, with the intention to respond to the population's initial demands and rebuild trust.
- The role of traditional authorities and customary leaders is pivotal as a bridge between communities, states and self-defence groups.

Key points for governments when absorbing or legalising self-defence groups

- Recruitment processes should first of all be designed to ensure local populations have a key voice in the process, but also to ensure that no single community or ethnic, religious or linguistic group dominates the composition of self-defence groups, not only in the ranks, but also in leadership and oversight structures. This is crucial both to secure widespread buy-in from citizens and to reduce the possibility of heightened communal tensions and violence.
- Processes for selection/integration must be thorough and transparent to prevent the use of public resources by criminal actors.
- Self-defence group members who are being integrated must be given training in human rights, professional conduct and violence prevention.
- Long-term public policy commitments and resource allocation must underpin absorption promises. In particular, breaches of commitments to pay salaries to those mobilised are particularly risky, pushing actors into the arms of criminal sponsors or shifting their allegiance against the state.
- The difficult question of which self-defence elements to absorb must be carefully considered before plans are announced. Where integration efforts are incomplete, as the Mexico example shows, excluded vigilante groups can turn to alternative revenue streams, seek stronger territorial control and more weapons, and vie for direct involvement in politics and access to state benefits.
- Similarly, it is key to protect existing political structures to mitigate the risk of disbursements becoming extensions of existing patronage networks.

Impunity must be effectively challenged

- Authorities should ensure that self-defence groups that receive support from, or are absorbed into, state forces are held to account if they perpetrate human rights abuses or other crimes, and that such judicial cases are well publicised, emphasising narratives around accountability. This poses challenges, given that states rarely sanction their own personnel for corruption or abuse. The arm's-length nature of many self-defence actors, even following absorption, could facilitate disciplinary action.
- At each level of the hierarchy, state institutions should coordinate their approaches to avoid legal discrepancies about what actions can or cannot be taken in relation to self-defence groups. Discrepancies in narrative and approach further harm state legitimacy and pose obstacles to a cohesive programme, as has been seen in both Nigeria and Mexico.
- Clear mandates should be established to limit the contexts where armed self-defence groups can deploy to avoid granting them jurisdiction in the context of non-violent crimes.

The role of community and civil society oversight for self-defence groups

- Community oversight is more suitable in contexts where levels of violence are not extreme and the self-defence groups are not engaged against unified, sophisticated adversaries.
- Where such mechanisms already exist, particularly for local conflict resolution, these should be supported to strengthen oversight over self-defence groups, with the aim of fostering local agency and consolidating trust between residents, their decision-making and representative structures, the self-defence groups and public authorities.
- Civilian oversight bodies should draw from different channels of authority. For example, governance functions can be split between customary leaders (a role in vetting potential recruits), local police (operational oversight) and local governments (financial support). Doing so is one step towards mitigating the personalisation of power to regulate self-defence groups and the risks of oversight mechanisms becoming extensions of patronage networks or overly politicised by state representatives.
- Customary leaders and traditional authorities should play a significant role in self-defence oversight committees, binding such groups into existing accountability structures.
- Civil society organisations and international and intergovernmental agencies should be welcome to engage with national policymakers, alongside key national stakeholders, on public policy to integrate or outlaw vigilante groups, in order to minimise the risks of fuelling the further development of armed groups.

Demobilisation and exit plans

- When the activity of self-defence groups is no longer warranted, the process of their demobilisation requires a long-term vision: the hazards of a sudden lack of employment for large numbers of armed young men trained in violence must be addressed in advance.
- Lessons can be drawn from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes enacted with non-state armed groups in disparate contexts – most of which have failed, but many of which can be learned from. One such takeaway is the importance of ensuring that the absorption of self-defence groups is dispersed across state security forces to avoid the effective creation of private protection armies under former self-defence leaders.
- Clear ‘exit strategies’ should be crafted to give group members alternatives to ongoing engagement in security work.

Notes

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