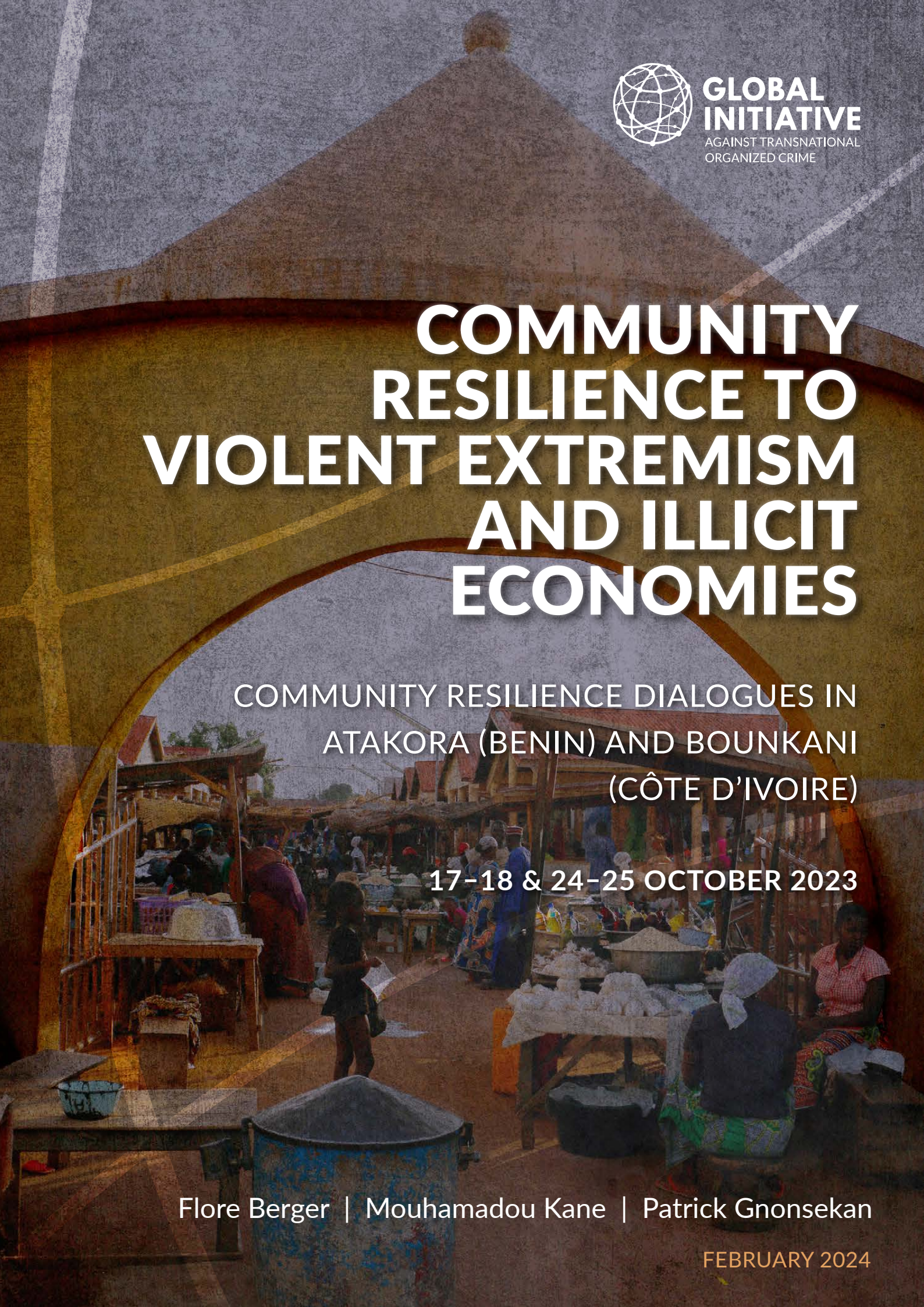

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE DIALOGUES IN ATAKORA (BENIN) AND BOUNKANI (CÔTE D'IVOIRE)

17–18 & 24–25 OCTOBER 2023

Flore Berger | Mouhamadou Kane | Patrick Gnonsekan

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GLOBAL INITIATIVE
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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2019 and 2020 respectively, the northern parts of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have been facing growing security challenges posed by the expansion of violent extremist groups. Besides this infiltration, the new dynamics of conflict in these border areas – adjacent to nature reserves and providing a link between coastal regions and the Sahel – do not occur in a security vacuum. They occur in an already well-developed illicit environment, with its own realities in terms of actors and supply chains and their impact on communities.

Research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in the subregion – notably through a mapping exercise on illicit economies[1] and specific reports on north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and the tri-border area between Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso[2] – has highlighted the complex but undeniable crossovers between illicit economies and conflict. Illicit economies, while not generally catalysts of conflict, play a key role in creating an environment conducive to the emergence of conflict, the maintenance of conflict and the obstruction of efforts to resolve conflict. This statement needs to be nuanced, however, because although illicit economies can fuel and sustain conflict, they can also be sources of income and resilience.

GI-TOC research has also shown the strategic importance of nature reserves in the expansion of armed groups.[3] In these areas, illicit economies contribute to the territorial expansion of armed groups through funding and resources. They are also entry points for armed groups to impose an alternative system of governance for local populations and even gain legitimacy within these communities. North-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and northern Benin, which border nature reserves such as the Comoé National Park and the W-Arly-Pendjari complex, respectively, are therefore pivotal regions for armed groups from Sahelian countries to expand their influence to coastal West African countries.

Although state responses have had some positive effects – for example, north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire has not seen an attack since 2021 – some elements of the response, mainly based on military and

security operations, have had the opposite effect. In particular, the widespread stigmatization of the Fulani community has exacerbated grievances and fuelled tensions between different communities.

State initiatives alone will not produce the expected results and must be supplemented by a community-based approach. In particular, the aim is to strengthen the resilience of communities faced with links between illicit economies and instability. To achieve a unified understanding of the problem and collective mobilization to tackle it, a holistic and sustainable peace-building strategy, aimed at breaking the link between illicit flows and instability, must complement state efforts with regional networks of individuals and organizations. There is no miracle solution to the twin challenges of crime and conflict, but two things are clear: first, interventions have little hope of success if they are not based on solid evidence; and second, state-centred programmes alone are not sufficient to enhance stability in West Africa.

States' resilience to organized crime is relatively well understood, and measurement methods have been developed, including the ENACT Organized Crime Index Africa[4] and the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index.[5] However, there are still gaps in our understanding of communities' capacity for resilience when faced with the destabilizing effects of illicit economies, as well as what constitutes this resilience and why some communities are more resilient than others.

Methodology

Based on this observation, the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa has developed a line of research to explore the elements of this community-based approach. The GI-TOC drew on its long-standing work on several continents, carried out under the aegis of the Resilience Fund,[6] to design an approach tailored to building community resilience in West Africa. A framework document on community resilience to organized crime in situations of conflict or fragility was developed in January 2023.[7]

This analytical framework aims to provide a better understanding of the drivers of community resilience, the key factors that impact negatively or positively on local resilience and the barriers to building resilience. The study also seeks to understand what role the state and international organizations can play in strengthening community resilience in these situations, which are affected by the infiltration of armed groups and the resulting instability.

This analytical framework was then put into practice by the GI-TOC through the organization of three Community Resilience Dialogues: the first in Jibya (not included in this report, which focuses solely on community resilience in areas bordering national parks); the second in north-western Benin, in Atakora, with participants from the Tanguiéta and Matéri municipalities; and the third in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire, in Bounkani, with the participation of the Bouna, Doropo and Téhini communities. Participants were selected on the basis of their role within the community, ethnicity and gender to ensure representativeness and inclusion for all; they included village chiefs, religious and community leaders, and members of women's, youth and professional associations.

Atakora and Bounkani were chosen because the two regions border national parks, which are particularly vulnerable geographical areas. This vulnerability stems from the fact that national parks are heavily regulated by governments, which, in order to protect the environment and preserve

biodiversity, prohibit many of the activities practised by communities living on the edge of parks. For their part, the communities in these regions (where official markets are rare) generally consider many prohibited economic activities such as poaching and the smuggling of fuel and consumer goods to be legitimate, because these activities are sources of income and provide essential goods to the communities.[8] State regulatory frameworks, particularly when imposed by force, give rise to many community grievances, which are then exploited by violent extremist groups as entry points.[9] The corridors around the national parks are therefore key areas for examining the links between illicit economies and the instability associated with the infiltration of violent extremist groups.

The approach to hindering the links between illicit economies and instability

WHAT: Support community-based resilience interventions aimed at eroding the link between illicit economies, violence and instability in each unique conflict network.

HOW: By implementing resilience programmes that put communities and local civil society at the heart of the action, drawing on lessons learned from the Resilience Fund, which works with civil society to build resilience to the harmful impacts of illicit economies, including violence and conflict.

WHERE: In communities where illicit economies play a particularly important role in fuelling instability, including regions where infiltration by armed groups continues to grow, as well as particularly vulnerable topographies such as border areas, national parks and areas affected by climate change. ■

Purpose of the dialogues

The purpose of these dialogues is to bring together all the key community actors to discuss the link between illicit economies and instability (with a focus on the infiltration of violent extremist groups), how this link plays out in their communities and how to build community resilience in their municipalities.

Understanding the crossovers between illicit economies and violent extremism, and particularly how communities perceive the issue, is complex, but it is crucial to providing appropriate solutions. The complexity arises from the fact that illicit economies can fuel conflicts in many ways. They can fuel conflict directly, through illicit supply chains that enable armed groups to source resources and derive income from them. They can also do so indirectly, by exploiting and fuelling community grievances, which can degenerate into conflict and serve as entry points for recruitment, and by strengthening

National parks are heavily regulated by governments, which prohibit many of the activities practised by communities living on the edge of the parks in order to protect the environment and preserve biodiversity.
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the governance and legitimacy of groups through the provision of economic opportunities and access to natural resources prohibited by the state, particularly in areas bordering national parks. Illicit economies can also be a key source of livelihoods and therefore a central element in the economic resilience of communities, making the situation even more challenging.

Interventions aim to erode the links between illicit economies and conflict. This involves working with civil society and communities to target and hinder the ways in which illicit economies fuel each stage of the conflict life cycle: shaping an environment conducive to the emergence of conflict, sustaining and prolonging conflict and acting as an obstacle to conflict resolution.

This report provides an overview of the discussions held, addresses key issues and identifies potential interventions for national, regional and international actors seeking to engage in community resilience building in these two contexts. The dialogues were organized in accordance with the Chatham House Rule, which guarantees the confidentiality of the information exchanged and does not attribute any information to a particular participant.

ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND THE RISE IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Once spared, the north of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have since 2019 become a target for violent extremist groups that are seeking to extend their influence and ensure the mobilization of resources for the fights they have been waging in Mali and Burkina Faso since 2012 and 2018, respectively. This expansion was driven in part by the fact that extremist groups have been using the northern parts of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire to resupply via formal and informal supply chains since well before launching operations in the areas in question. Considering the importance of illicit economies for their financing and to meet their material needs, violent extremist groups first approached those involved in illicit markets during their initial efforts to recruit and establish relationships, particularly in southern Burkina Faso and Benin. Violent extremist groups have also exploited community grievances linked to illicit economies – a central element in the governance and legitimacy strategies of armed groups in the Sahel and in the north of coastal countries. This strategy has not been as successful in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire.[10]

The crossovers between illicit economies and instability are complex and numerous. The Atakora department in north-west Benin and the Bounkani region in north-east Côte d'Ivoire face similar dynamics and vulnerabilities, not least because of their geographical location: Atakora and Bounkani form a link between the Sahel and coastal areas, and they border on national parks. But there are also differences between the two regions, particularly in terms of the life cycle of the conflict, with Atakora facing a major upsurge in violence in 2022 and 2023, while Bounkani has been experiencing a period of calm since 2022, a fragile lull that is still causing a great deal of concern among stakeholders.

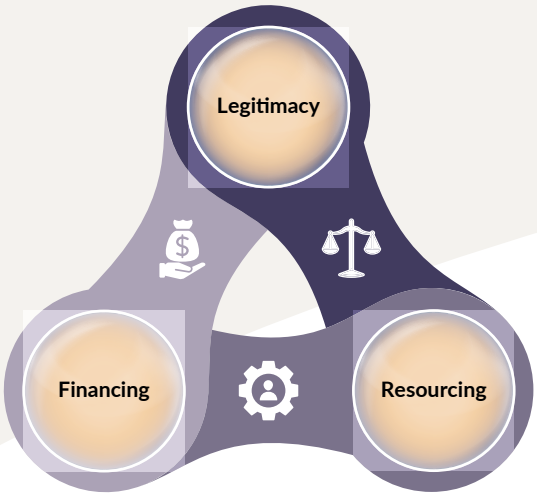

FIGURE 1 The relationship between non-state armed groups and illicit economies: Three angles of analysis.

Border areas linking the Sahel to coastal areas

These are tri-border areas: Atakora is bordered by Togo and Burkina Faso, while Bounkani is bordered by Ghana and Burkina Faso. The proximity of these two regions to the south of Burkina Faso, in particular, where extremist groups have been operating in an organized manner since 2018, as well as the porous nature of the border areas, makes them particularly vulnerable. Violent extremist groups, smugglers and many others move from one country to another through dozens of unofficial crossing points.

These areas are home to a well-developed smuggling network due to the price differences between the coastal states and the Sahel countries. In Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as in Togo and Nigeria, goods are much cheaper than in Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger thanks to port infrastructure and subsidies for certain basic products such as fuel. Smuggling is therefore widespread because it is extremely profitable, and many communities not only make a living from these illicit activities but also obtain supplies for their own needs from informal markets. Smuggling is therefore widely regarded as legitimate, despite being banned by the authorities.

For Atakora, one of the most important smuggling markets has historically been fuel trafficking, as the region lies along a key fuel smuggling corridor to Burkina Faso and the Sahel from Nigeria, a major producer whose fuel sector benefitted from state subsidies until May 2023. This is an important supply chain for armed groups. Atakora is also on a corridor for other contraband products between the coastal regions and the Sahel, such as counterfeit medicines transported by motorbike from Matéri or Tanguiéta to Fada in eastern Burkina Faso, a phenomenon that stems from the difference in prices.[11] Cattle rustling and kidnapping are also major illicit economies and are increasing with the infiltration of violent extremist groups. These two markets are accelerator markets – markets that play a central role in generating instability, which in turn fuels them. Other illicit economies, such as poaching and trafficking in protected species, are linked to the existence of the national park.

In Bounkani, between 2019 and 2021, the accelerant markets of cattle rustling and kidnapping were also expanding. In the case of cattle rustling, incidents have ranged from the theft of a few animals to the theft of entire herds, reflecting the development of this illicit economy. Since 2022, these two illicit economies have been slowing with a lull in the security situation in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire. Cattle rustling networks still exist, however, with animals stolen in Burkina Faso being sold on the Doropo market and animals stolen in Bounkani being transported to Burkina Faso. The border with Ghana also witnesses large movements of cattle (including stolen cattle) from Bouna. Gold panning is by far the most prevalent illicit economy in Bounkani and the Comoé National Park, with the direct and indirect involvement of armed groups, present on or financing gold panning sites.[12] The gold trade is very much oriented towards Burkina Faso, which is part of the network for the sale of gold extracted from artisanal mines in Bounkani; the gold is often transported to Ouagadougou where it is then sold abroad.[13] Significant amounts of gold are also transported and sold across the eastern border with Ghana.

Proximity to national parks

Atakora and Bounkani are located in the national park corridors of Pendjari National Park and Comoé National Park, respectively. In West Africa, 14 national parks were identified as illicit economy hubs in the GI-TOC mapping exercise, and half of them are considered particularly vulnerable, given the important role played by these illicit economies as vectors of conflict and instability.[14]

National parks, reserves and forests are key areas where illicit economies and instability intersect, for three main reasons. First, national parks are used as fallback zones, as wooded areas are particularly difficult for defence and security forces to control and monitor. These are also places where violent extremist groups can hold hostages for several weeks or even months.

Second, they are hubs for illicit economies, such as poaching, gold panning or timber or wildlife trafficking. National parks, reserves and forests are areas where trafficking flows – whether of fuel, medicine or stolen cattle – converge, but they are also where other illicit economies take place. Illicit activities in national parks, and more broadly in border areas, did not emerge with the violent extremist groups, but their involvement in these illicit economies, directly or indirectly, has altered the criminal environment. Armed groups have entered legal and illegal supply chains in order to finance themselves indirectly – through taxation, for example – or to supply themselves directly with material goods (fuel, motorbikes, medicines, etc.) or extracted resources (gold mining).

The final crossover factor is linked to the increased safeguarding of national parks, including Comoé and Pendjari, reflecting global trends in biodiversity conservation. This trend towards greater security has been accelerated by the risks associated with violent extremism. Security measures are creating a great deal of tension between communities on one hand and authorities and conservation officers on the other, as communities are being deprived of the resources (particularly those linked to resource extraction) on which they have always depended. The resulting grievances are then exploited by violent extremist groups as entry points for recruitment and for establishing their legitimacy with communities – a crucial aspect of their expansion strategy.[15]

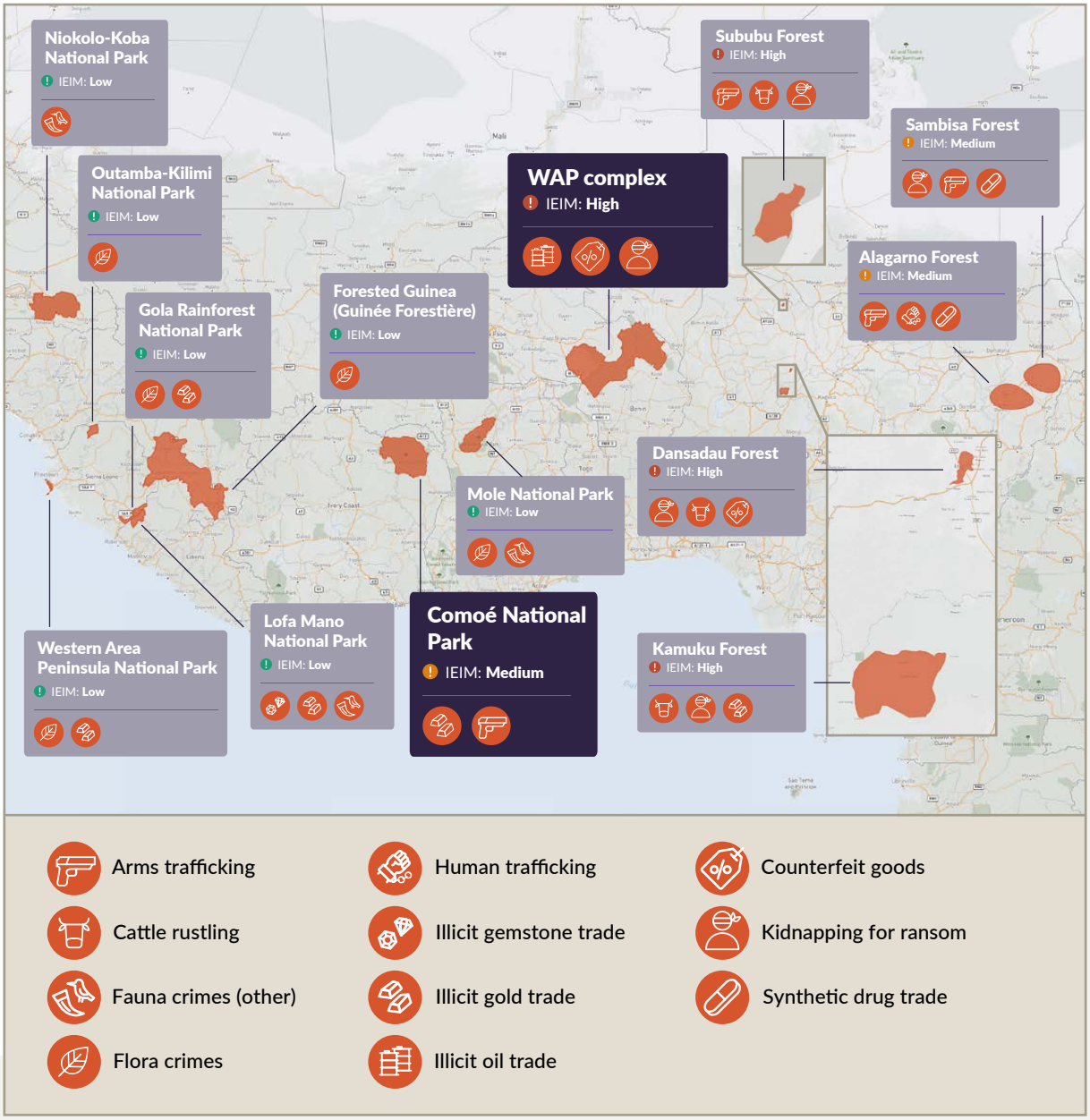

FIGURE 2 National parks, reserves and forests in West Africa identified as hubs for illegal trafficking.

SOURCE: Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability: Illicit hub mapping in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping/fr/map

Links between illicit actors and conflict actors: Illicit economies, recruitment of armed groups and relations with suppliers

In very different contexts, from Burkina Faso to Benin to Nigeria, armed groups have carried out awareness-raising campaigns targeting two specific categories of actors: marginalized or unemployed young people and illicit actors. The former are particularly vulnerable to recruitment into illicit economies and armed groups, making them a high-risk group that must be at the heart of initiatives aimed at breaking the link between illicit economies and armed groups.

For illicit actors, relationships with armed groups have often led to mutually beneficial alliances and support for armed groups expanding into new territories. Those involved in illicit economies, particularly smuggling, are not only vulnerable to recruitment but also have the knowledge and skills that armed groups need. They know the terrain, the routes, the positions of the defence and security forces and how to handle weapons. In the north of Benin, for example, in the areas bordering the W-Arly-Pendjari National Park, poachers very quickly began supplying violent extremist groups, either by going to town to pick up provisions or by selling them bushmeat, and providing them with information on the positions of the defence and security forces.[16]

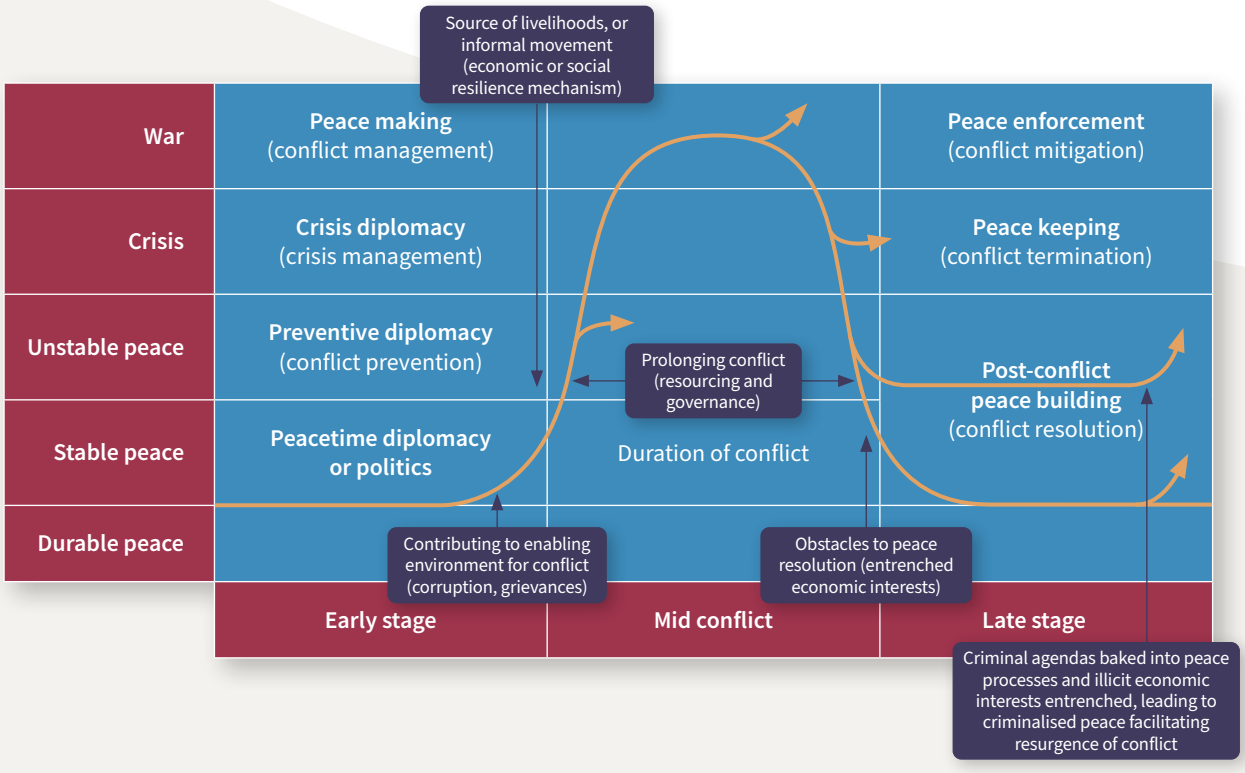

FIGURE 3 Interactions between illicit economies and conflicts at each stage of the conflict life cycle.

This recruitment was facilitated by the particularly tough measures to restrict access and movement in the Pendjari Park in 2020, decided by the Beninese authorities and implemented by the African Parks Network, an NGO that manages and patrols the Beninese sections of the W and Pendjari Parks. Poachers have been hard hit by these bans, and violent extremist groups have taken advantage of them to position themselves as guardians of resources whose exploitation has been banned by the state and who allow poachers access to the parks and to hunting wild animals.[17] These dynamics are specific to the W-Arly-Pendjari complex and have not been reported in Comoé National Park.

The changing criminal environment and the rise in violent extremism

Atakora and Bounkani have both witnessed the infiltration of violent extremist groups into pre-existing networks of informal and illicit economies. This infiltration has led to changes in illicit economies, with direct impacts on the communities living in these areas.

Some illicit economies have developed or undergone major changes. Cattle rustling, for example, rose sharply from 2020 onwards in both regions but has declined since 2022 with the lull in security in Bounkani. The most important marker of change is the progression in the scale of the thefts, from a few head of cattle per incident to entire herds. In addition, the modus operandi has changed from discreet, non-violent thefts, often at night, to daylight thefts using violence and threats, including firearms. The communities also mentioned that it was impossible to find their animals, as they are either slaughtered and their meat sold immediately, or transported to the borders (Burkinabe and Ghanaian) or within the country to the national parks (Pendjari for Atakora and Comoé for Bounkani).[18]

Kidnappings have also increased over the same period – rising from 2020 onwards, then falling in Bounkani since 2022 – although it is not always clear whether this is due to bandits or violent extremist groups. With the arrival of the latter and their involvement in the kidnapping market, the reasons for kidnappings have changed, with the emergence of kidnappings for intimidation, punishment or to gather information.[19] This is particularly the case in northern Benin, where extremist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (Support Group for Islam and Muslims, or JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel, or IS Sahel, are expanding rapidly, with a sharp rise in kidnappings in 2022 and 2023. In 2020 and 2021, only two incidents were reported, that number rose to 23 in 2022, and it more than tripled in 2023 with 75 incidents (up to November 2023). The majority of these kidnappings can be attributed to violent extremist groups.[20]

These two illicit economies were identified by the participants in the dialogues as particularly harmful to their communities, as they generate community tensions (especially cattle rustling). They also provoke suspicion of the abductees, who, if released, are suspected of having become allies of the violent extremist groups, creating a feeling of paranoia within the community. This echoes research carried out by the GI-TOC, which has described these two illicit economies, along with arms trafficking, as 'accelerant markets', a term used to describe markets that contribute significantly to instability and are in turn fuelled by instability.[21]

A Fulani man and his son in their village near Kafolo, in northern Côte d'Ivoire. Discrimination against the Fulani community has developed very rapidly in the context of threats from violent extremism, undermining community resilience. *© Sia Kambou/AFP via Getty Images*

Furthermore, although considered illicit by the authorities, many of these economic activities, such as fuel trafficking in Benin or gold panning in Côte d'Ivoire, are sources of income for the communities. These two illicit economies have become major security issues for the authorities with the arrival of violent extremist groups. Indeed, the potential financing of armed groups through gold panning (and their direct involvement in the Comoé Park sites, for example), as well as the key role of the informal fuel economy as an essential supply source for groups in Benin and Burkina Faso, has become a priority for the authorities. Benin and Côte d'Ivoire have taken measures against fuel trafficking and gold panning respectively, focusing mainly on the repression and prohibition of the activities in question. In Benin, however, in addition to military operations and restrictive measures (notably in the border region of Koualou/Kourou, particularly in September 2021), the authorities have also adopted other approaches to tackle supply and demand, introducing in 2021 a flat-rate tax on smuggled fuel (without any convincing results). More recently, in 2023, authorities in Benin announced the construction of mini-stations to absorb the informal trade into the legal trade, which is controlled and taxed by the authorities.[22] The first mini-stations emerged in Cotonou in December 2023, and the continuation of the project with the construction of mini-stations in the north has been announced and should take place in 2024.

Although illicit economies can be sources of destabilization, they can also be stabilizing factors by providing finance and resources. The Atakora and Bounkani communities survive on largely informal economies, with illicit economies playing an important role to varying degrees. This informal economic environment is changing, not only because of the involvement of violent extremist groups in supply chains, but also because of state responses to this new security threat that, when failing to take into account the role of illicit markets in the economic strengthening of communities, can have particularly dangerous impacts.[23] Beninese and Ivorian authorities have recognized that certain measures could be counterproductive and have tried to combine traditional security responses with innovative ones (such as the planned construction of mini-stations in northern Benin), and they have also invested massively in development and income-generating programmes for communities.

In order for governments and international actors to be able to make decisions and design support programmes that strengthen resilience at the community level, the focus must be on understanding community resilience and the drivers and factors that help to strengthen it.

ASSESSING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Community resilience is the ability of members of a community to take meaningful, deliberate and collective action to deal with a problematic or threatening situation, such as the threats posed by organized crime and violent extremism. In other words, it is the 'capacity (of the community) to carry out concerted actions as well as its capacity to solve problems and establish a consensus to negotiate coordinated responses'.[24]

The resilience of a community needs to be analyzed and measured at the local level, as it depends on the threats faced by that specific community. The first step is to identify the threats; in this case, it is the destabilizing impact of illicit economies on the Atakora and Bounkani communities. Once the threats and challenges have been identified, it is a matter of understanding and identifying the factors that enable communities to take steps to resist these threats.

The GI-TOC's studies on community resilience led to the design of a community resilience framework. According to this framework, the five building blocks of community resilience are: social capital, community capacity, economic capital, state support and the role of women.[25] These elements form a whole and are interdependent. Community resilience is a dynamic process, not the simple sum of its parts.[26] Each of these building blocks was discussed by participants in the Community Resilience Dialogues to help them reflect on their community's strengths and weaknesses and the impact of illicit economies and violent extremism on the resilience of their communities. This section presents the results of the discussions, reviewing each component.

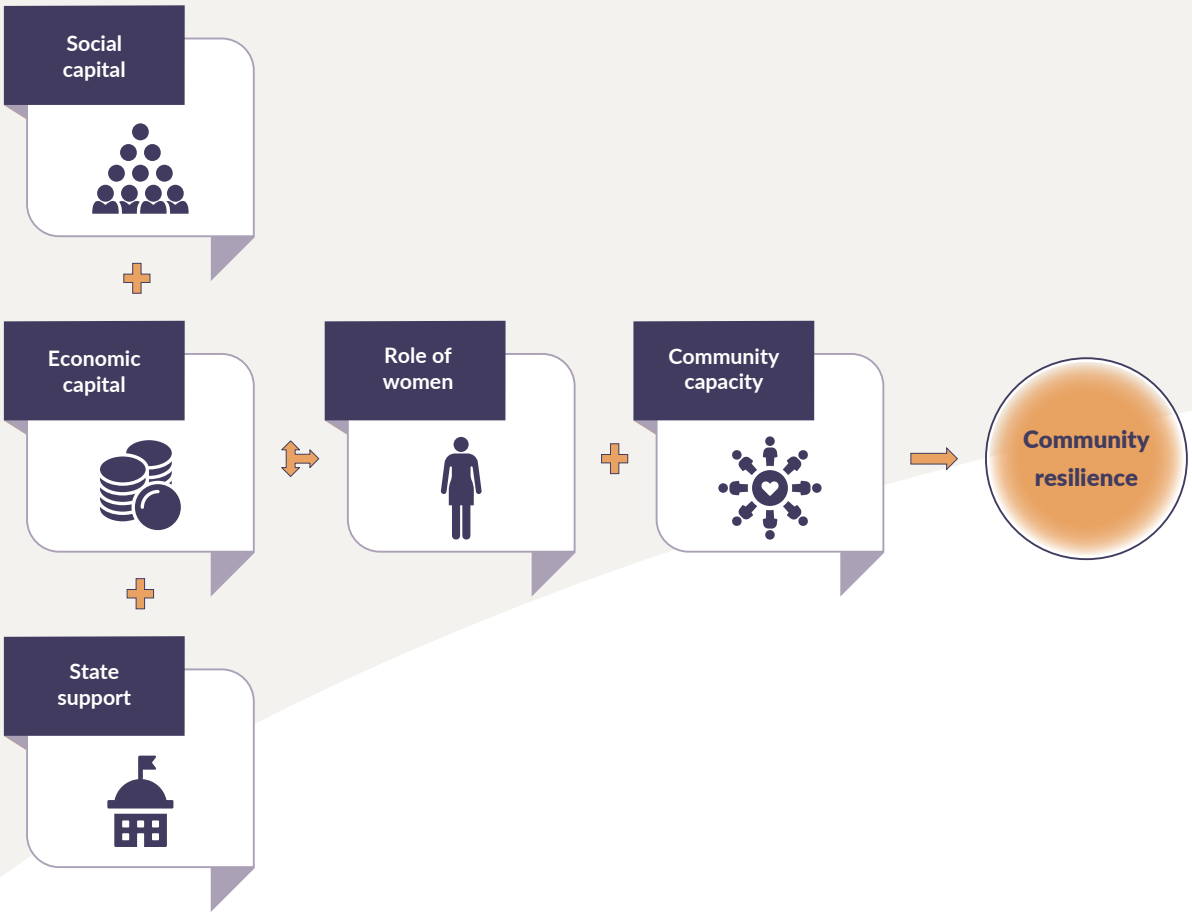

FIGURE 4 The building blocks of community resilience.

Social capital

Social capital is a key element of resilience because it focuses on community cohesion (diversity, inclusion/exclusion, marginalization, mobility, social tolerance/intolerance), social stability (population flows in and out, unresolved conflicts), social ties, trust and feelings of belonging or social acceptance.[27] Social capital is strengthened if the various components of civil society, such as journalists, NGOs and socio-professional associations, have strong links with one another.

In both Atakora and Bounkani, social capital has been negatively impacted not only by the arrival of violent extremist groups, but also by the state's response to this expansion and the resulting changes in illicit economies. Discrimination against the Fulani community has developed very rapidly in the context of the threat of violent extremism, and the testimonies of the Bounkani and Atakora communities are enlightening on this subject. In Bounkani, one of the working groups said:

> The jihadists were referred to as Fulani. They were accused of supporting the jihadists and this situation led to stigmatization in the community. [...] That's why all the Fulani in the region have been stigmatized and accused of colluding with the jihadists. Even if things are better today, because attacks have decreased, there is still this stigma, we have to recognize that.

In Atakora, the same observation was made by participants. But it is also the increase in cattle rustling and, to a lesser extent, kidnapping, two accelerant markets that develop with instability, that has affected the social capital of communities, eroding their cohesion. In both regions, cattle rustling leads to conflict between cattle herders and cattle owners, most of whom are Fulani. Tensions can increase so much that herders abandon areas where they have lived all their lives, creating a strong sense of injustice among herders, as well as economic distress. According to a participant in Matéri, 'It's really cattle rustling that causes us the most problems, it creates tension between us. Often, once the cattle has been stolen, if there is bad information and rumours circulate, that's when tensions between communities begin, and some people will want revenge.'

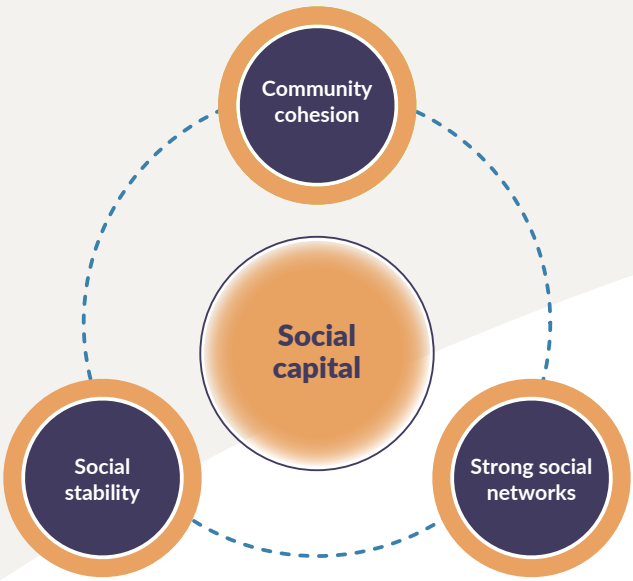

FIGURE 5 The constituent elements of social capital in community resilience.

Social stability, one aspect of which is the influx and outflow of people, is also affected by violent extremism and the fact that these regions border Burkina Faso. In Bounkani and Tchologo, for example, more than 30 000 refugees had arrived from Burkina Faso by June 2023.[28] Given the existing pressure on land availability and access to resources, the mass influx of refugees can create tensions within communities, many of which still welcome them. The majority of these refugees are Fulani, and many have brought their cattle with them, creating even greater pressure on the host communities.[29] Given the potentially destabilizing effects of such an influx and the pressure it creates on land, Côte d'Ivoire has banned the entry of animals from Burkina Faso into its territory since June 2023.[30] The Fulani are sometimes perceived by communities and the Bounkani defence and security forces as being close to the jihadists or potential recruits, and some participants admitted that they were wary of their arrival. Atakora is also experiencing an influx of refugees from eastern Burkina Faso, but to a much lesser extent.

In general, communities in both regions reported that the increasing infiltration of violent extremist groups had fostered an atmosphere of heightened suspicion, with widespread fears that informers were hiding within the communities.

Overall, the social capital of the Atakora and Bounkani communities has therefore been negatively impacted by violent extremism and the associated changes in illicit economies. However, the communities felt that social capital remained a vital force in the community in dealing with security threats and illicit economies.

Economic capital

The second cornerstone of community resilience to illicit economies is economic capital. Economic capital can be understood as the strength of the local economy, the availability of natural resources and the presence of good quality infrastructure. Economic capital is important because if the community has solid means of subsistence, their resilience to threats is increased. According to several studies, north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire and north-western Benin are regions that, when compared to the central and southern regions of the two countries, generally have lower economic indices: higher poverty rates, higher unemployment rates and poorer access to basic infrastructure such as healthcare, electricity and schools.

In 2015, the north-east region of Côte d'Ivoire had the lowest proportion of households with access to electricity in the whole country: 34.62% compared with an average of 70% for the southern regions.[31] The school enrolment rate in the three northern regions (north-west, north-east and north) is lower than in the rest of Côte d'Ivoire, with 47% of children aged 6 to 18 attending an educational institution, compared to the national average of 60%. Finally, the average annual expenditure of a resident of the north-east is around 320 000 CFA francs, the second lowest amount after the northern region (250 000 CFA francs).[32]

Atakora is the region with the highest rate of lived poverty, with nine out of 10 people reporting moderate or high lived poverty, according to Afrobarometer 2020. In 2011, the same survey reported moderate or high levels of lived poverty experienced by 47% of the population in Atakora. These results are not objective data on poverty, but instead data on personal experiences of poverty, or 'lived poverty'.[33] This data is particularly alarming, given the drastic increase in lived poverty in Atakora, but also because it is linked to other indicators. For instance, people with a moderate or high level of poverty live in difficult conditions – only half of them live in 'formal' dwellings built with solid materials; when compared to people reporting low levels of lived poverty, they also have less access to water (45% compared to 75%) and electricity (57% compared to 84%).[34]

Whether it's north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire or north-western Benin, the economic indices reveal the weaknesses of these regions. Economic capital is particularly important in fragile areas, because when it is strong, communities are less tempted to engage in illicit activities or join armed groups.

However, illicit economies also play a role in the economic resilience of communities. In particular, gold panning in Bounkani and fuel trafficking in Atakora contribute to economic resilience. These activities are illicit, but they are perceived as legitimate by the communities. In these two regions, as in many others in West Africa, communities depend on a fragile and largely informal economy in which illicit economies play an important role in their economic capital.[35]

Authorities must take into account the role of illicit economies in community resilience, as certain measures aimed at banning these economic activities can have counterproductive effects. According to a participant from Bounkani, 'The difficulty is that it is not possible to ban gold panning, because one way or another, young people will continue to go there, if necessary by hiding even more and taking risks for their safety. But above all, the main risk is that young people cannot be told to stop panning for gold and cultivate their fields and so if the activity is discouraged, the young people in the community turn to other opportunities, either banditry (highway robbery, hold-ups, shoplifting), or violent extremist groups who offer them money to join their cause.'[36]

Similar fears have been expressed about fuel smuggling in Atakora, while measures to combat this phenomenon are being put in place. According to the representative of smuggled fuel (*kpayo*)[37] dealers in Matéri:

> It's going to be difficult, a lot of people are going to lose out, and a lot of our young people who find a bit of income in this activity, I don't know what will become of them. And that's really not good these days. Young people are already suffering, and now they're likely to suffer even more. [...] Our young people are uneducated and unemployed. What do those looking for easy money do? Where do they go? The brave go off to Nigeria to work in the fields, while the others join the Islamists.[38]

Infrastructure – roads, in particular – was cited as an important factor in both communities, as it is crucial for the safety of communities, who can travel more safely on good roads; for trade and economic activities between villages and towns, particularly weekly markets; and for the state's ability to intervene and protect people in the event of a security incident. The communities have identified the Gouandé-Matéri road in Atakora and the Doropo-Kalamon-Danoa road in Bounkani as the priority roads to be rehabilitated, as they affect the safety of users and also have an economic impact, given the difficulty of getting to the Matéri market, the largest in the municipality, from Gouandé, for example.[39] According to a participant from Matéri:

> There are several markets in the Matéri municipality, including Matéri, Gouandé, Dassari and Porga. But it's the Matéri market that's the biggest, taking place three times a week, and above all it's where you'll find the biggest cattle pen in the municipality. But the road from Gouandé to Matéri is impassable for vehicles, not to mention trucks, which can't even use this road any more. This is a real obstacle to trade between the villages and towns of Matéri.[40]

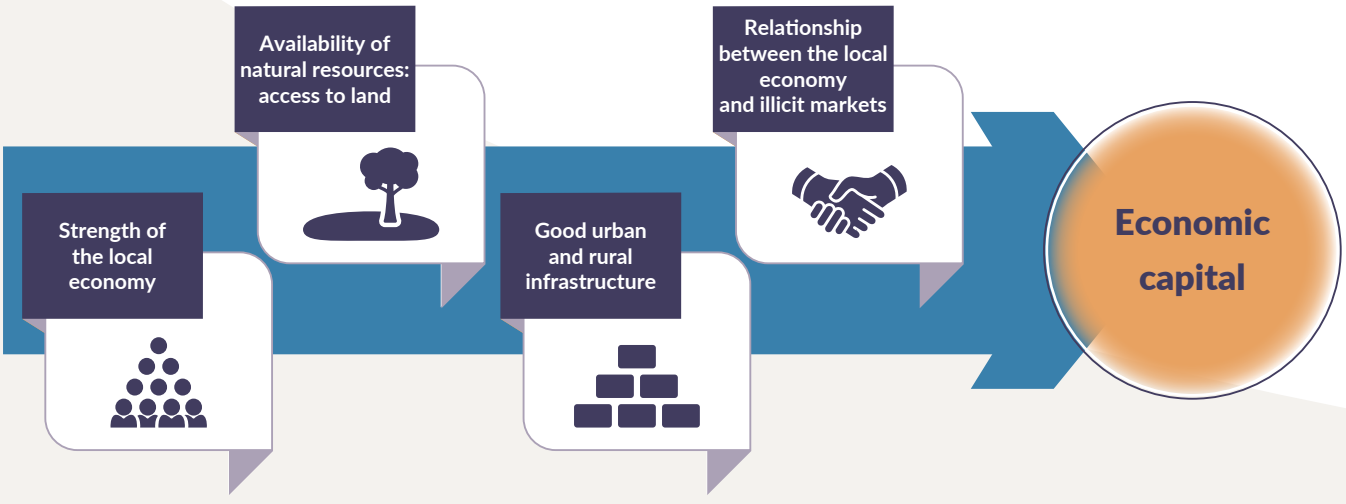

FIGURE 6 Components of economic capital in community resilience.

Worse still, in Bounkani, the Téhini market, one of the main markets, closed from December 2021 to March 2022 after attacks. From 2019 to mid-2022, even when the markets remained open, the roads were not safe, and it was difficult for communities to move around to sell their agricultural or animal produce. According to a participant from Doropo, 'There were so many robberies, especially at harvest time, and it was clearly the people returning from the market, after selling cattle or cashews or other products, who were targeted by the attacks and robberies.'[41]

Violent extremist groups also play an important role with regard to population mobility and the movement of licit and illicit commodities, as they control certain roads, especially in northern Benin (this was not reported in Bounkani), and sometimes plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on key routes. For example, with regard to fuel smuggling via Atakora to eastern Burkina Faso, a wholesaler from Natitingou explained:

> If you don't have a relationship with the people in the bush, you have no chance in the eastern region, you can't trade peacefully. They are the ones who decide whether the fuel gets through. […] For some time now, they've been controlling the roads like Arly, Nadiagou and Pama. If a truck, tricycle or motorbike passes by with petrol, they're bound to take their share. Sometimes they even take everything.[42]

This example shows how armed groups can co-opt the infrastructures that underpin mobility, strengthening the link between local economies and violent extremist groups.[43]

A growing number of studies demonstrate the importance of road networks in people's perceptions of safety and as key areas of contested influence between state and non-state actors.[44] Roads are the basis of human movement and trade, and when they are disrupted by non-state actors or when armed groups impose checkpoints, state control of the territory is seriously threatened and destabilized. Ensuring that road networks are operational and safe is therefore a key priority for governments seeking to strengthen the resilience of communities faced with infiltration by armed groups.

Beyond the main roads, rural areas are also affected. Getting out of the villages to work in the fields or look after cattle can be difficult, as rural areas are prey to particularly destabilizing illicit economies such as cattle rustling and kidnapping, which disproportionately affect rural communities who travel to carry out their economic activities. A farmer from Tanguiéta in Côte d'Ivoire said, 'There has been a real drop in agricultural activity and production because of the insecurity, as it has become risky and difficult to go to the fields, and also to sell one's harvest.' He also highlighted the link between economic pressures and growing community tensions: 'The difficulties are already there. So when a herder's herd enters a farmer's field, tensions erupt very quickly, and it's hard to keep calm because we farmers are already under enormous financial pressure.'[45] In these regions, it is therefore crucial that the responses provided take into account that certain informal and illicit economies are key means of subsistence, all the more so as growing instability is undermining already weak economic resources.

State support

The third cornerstone of community resilience is effective support from public authorities. Community resilience is linked to resilience at the national level, or in other words, support from the state. Community resilience can exist even in the absence of effective state support, but when the state is present to ensure protection and security and deliver criminal justice, community resilience is strengthened in a sustainable way.[46] When these services are not provided by the state, it creates a vacuum where other actors, including violent extremist groups, can enter. Such entry points have been exploited in Bounkani and Atakora and, more widely, in West Africa and beyond. In response to the upsurge in violent extremism, authorities have increased their presence – particularly in terms of security – in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire (from 2020) and in northern Benin (in 2021) through the construction of new military bases and increased deployments, patrols and more. In both regions, communities considered the military presence to be satisfactory for their protection.

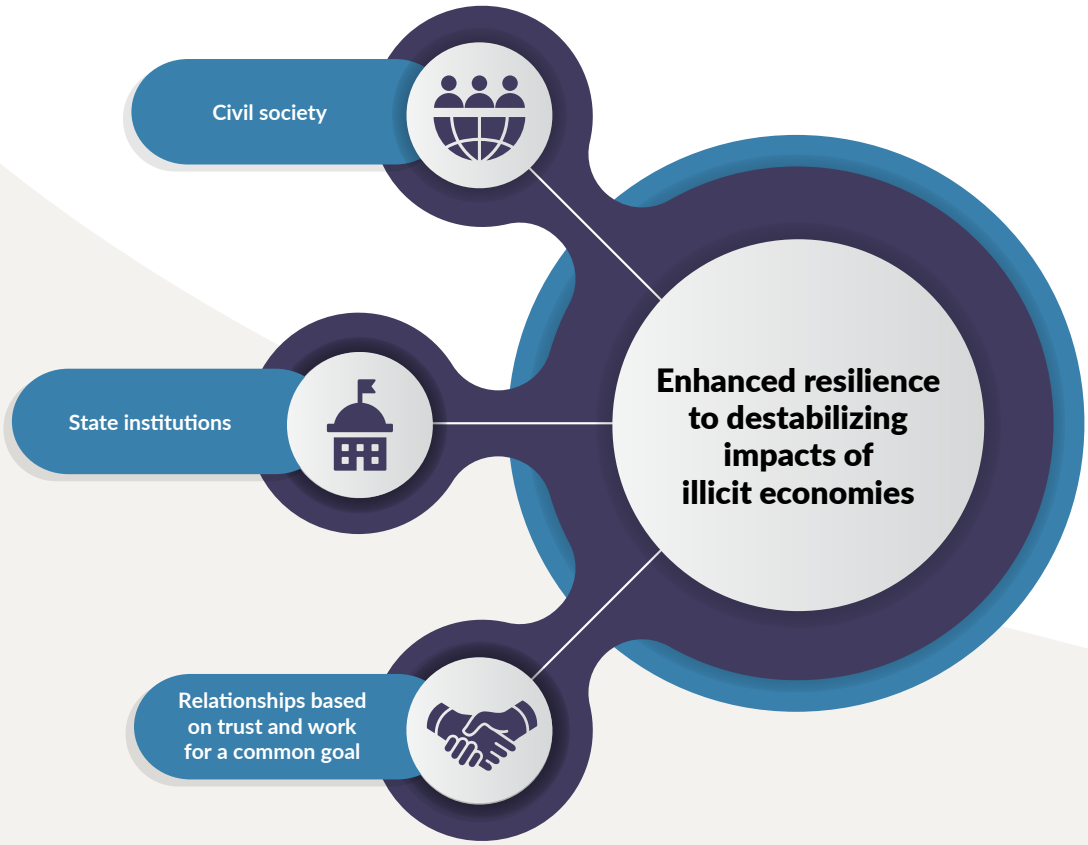

FIGURE 7 Components of state support in community resilience.

Communities in both regions also highlighted how responsibility for security is shared through local security committees (a term used in Atakora) and civil-military committees (a term used in Bounkani). These initiatives aim to harmonize relations between civilians and the military and give the population an active role in terms of security, for example, by alerting the authorities in the event of any suspicious movements in their communities. The risks associated with relying on communities for intelligence are very real, as they can become targets for violent extremist groups. In the Sahel, for example, these committees have led to an increase in violence against civilians, who find themselves caught between the various parties to the conflict. In fact, being part of these local security committees may be enough to be perceived as a legitimate target by violent extremist groups, who think that any collaboration with the state justifies being killed, arrested, threatened or kidnapped.[47] As for the state, it is often unable to protect these individuals or respond quickly to attacks.

Furthermore, communities have, on numerous occasions, identified the corruption of authorities, including of the defence and security forces, who extort money from the population, as a real problem. Such corruption jeopardizes the civil-military relations necessary for a successful security response. Corruption among public officials is decried in both departments, but especially in Bounkani.[48] This is apparent from a number of studies,[49] as well as from the dialogues on resilience, when the subject of relations between the community and the defence and security forces was raised. Most of the community's grievances in Bounkani concern demands for bribes when crossing borders (racketeering) or at checkpoints, as well as fines and other seizures of goods. In Atakora, it was the corruption of the park rangers that was highlighted as a source of grievance for communities.[50] When the authorities responsible for protecting the park are corrupt or use excessive force in administering regulations, grievances among the communities are reinforced – and can then be exploited.

More broadly, in the Sahel, corruption has regularly been identified as weakening relations between communities and state authorities, and therefore a possible entry point to be exploited by armed groups.[51]

Of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire are ranked 72 and 99, respectively.[52] The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index highlights corruption, including law enforcement corruption, as a factor in the growth of illicit economies in both countries.[53]

State involvement in informal and illicit economies was highlighted by communities as a key grievance. Communities have emphasized the inaction of the state in the face of certain forms of trafficking that they consider to be harmful, particularly the trafficking of medicines and drugs, the consumption of which has a significant impact on health. On the other hand, for illicit economies that are considered legitimate and are sources of income for the communities – gold panning and fuel smuggling, for instance – repressive action is very strong. Communities would like to see action that conforms with what they consider harmful. To strengthen stability and avoid actions that are counter-productive and that weaken community resilience, communities would prefer for legislation and state actions to be aligned with community views and for their own communities to be consulted in the process. In regions where non-state armed groups offer alternative visions of governance, governments that are leveraging their limited resources to respond to security challenges should not focus their strategic priorities on repressing economies that run counter to state laws but underpin community livelihoods.

Some participants linked the two phenomena, believing that it is the corruption of certain public officials that leads to their inaction when faced with certain types of trafficking (mainly in medicines and drugs), likely due to their involvement. They also noted the inaction of the authorities in cases of kidnapping; for example, even when kidnappings are reported to the authorities, it is ultimately the family or the community that gets involved to obtain the individual's release.[54] The same applies to cattle rustling, according to dialogue participants. Even if the state has more resources, representatives of herder associations would prefer to look for the cattle themselves, because the state action was often deemed unsatisfactory.[55]

With regard to conflict resolution and justice, the communities of Bounkani and Atakora were categorical: they prefer to settle conflicts internally, through their own conflict resolution mechanisms (the *ruga*[56] for the Fulani community and the village chief for the other communities) because they have no confidence in the state's justice system. Indeed, even when cases are referred to the state, the response is often unsatisfactory for the communities. Testimonies from north-eastern Benin, from Loumbou-Loumbou in Alibori, reflect a feeling of abandonment, a feeling that the state does not protect them. For example, when traders are robbed on transport routes or clashes occur between communities, state agents only intervene several days after being warned. A group of herders in the region noted, 'We feel abandoned. The situation is catastrophic. [...] There's no point in relying on them [the district chiefs].'[57]

This feeling of abandonment and the lack of trust between the state and the population is a major vulnerability, as it can serve as an entry point for violent extremist groups.

Although the exercise of justice by the JNIM – the main conflict actor in both regions – remains limited and far from uniform, some cases have been reported in north-eastern Benin, especially in Alibori. In Kalalé, for example, the JNIM was involved in settling conflicts over transhumance between farmers and herders, and in Malanville in 2021, it also intervened on behalf of Fulani herders by supplying weapons during a local conflict with Dendi farmers.[58]

Community capacity

The fourth cornerstone of resilience is community capacity, or the ability and willingness of members of the community to act collectively. This manifests itself, for example, through strong leadership, which can represent the community and influence responses to various threats, as well as through the role of the media in strengthening social ties. Community capacity can also take the form of self-defence groups, as in Burkina Faso, for example; this phenomenon has not developed in the communities invited to the dialogues in Atakora and Bounkani, who reportedly see no need for it.

Leadership, in the form of a traditional chiefdom, is respected and has the ability to influence the community. It is also key to resolving tensions and offering assistance against the harmful effects of illicit economies. The village chief and the *ruga* for Fulani communities are central figures of leadership. In reported kidnapping cases, for example, it is these two figures who support the family and foster the community's support to free the kidnapped person. The same applies to cases of stolen cattle. When a problem affects only one community – for example, the kidnapping of a Fulani – the problem is managed within that community. But these two figures can also work together, particularly in the case of cattle rustling, which involves Fulani cattle herders and owners who are often from different

ethnic groups. In Atakora, communities repeatedly spoke about how tensions between herders and farmers are having the greatest impact on them. If there is a problem between a farmer and a herder, the farmer goes to the village chief, and the herder goes to the *ruga*. The two leaders consult one another and try to reach an agreement.

It is therefore mainly the village chiefs and *ruga* who resolve conflicts and preserve community cohesion. Of course, it depends on the individual, as one Doropo participant explained: 'It's true that it's the village chiefs who solve the problems, and most of them do it well. But we also have to recognize that some people don't know how to handle things, and don't have good relations with the other community leaders, and that can lead to tension.'[59]

In addition to community leadership, socio-professional associations may be called upon to help settle disputes. In particular, herders' associations, which are very active at municipal, departmental and national levels, may be called upon for any tensions involving herders and for cases of cattle rustling. Farmers also have their own associations, but these are more divided and less active. In Atakora, where fuel smuggling is widespread, industry actors have formed a union to defend their interests and organize the business. Such associations are important for community resilience because they bring communities together, enabling them to act collectively and respond to the threats they face, thereby building resilience.

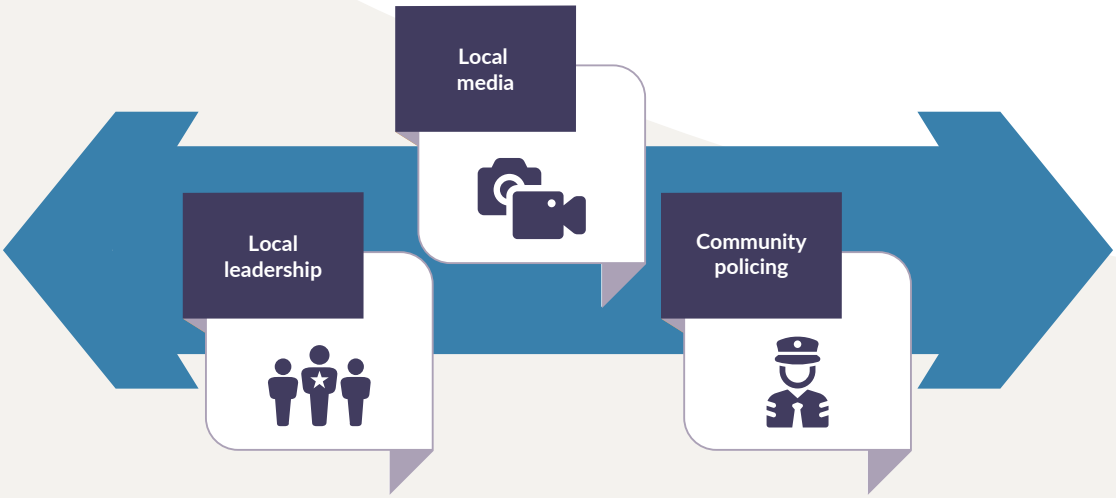

FIGURE 8 The building blocks of community capacity in community resilience.

However, community capacity suffers from a number of weaknesses, including the politicization of mechanisms for appointing community leaders. Government interference in the appointment of traditional chiefs generates community tensions, weakens the bond of authority and undermines local support. During the discussions in Bouna, participants denounced this phenomenon: 'In Bouna, there are currently two chiefs representing the Lobi community, one traditionally appointed and the other appointed by Abidjan politics, which creates conflict. The chiefdom is now divided and this is undermining the whole community.'[60]

Beyond leadership, the ability and willingness of community members to act collectively depends on the robustness of the local media. Indeed, communication and information have been identified in a range of contexts as 'a central element of most, if not all, community resilience models'.[61] The contribution of local media to building community resilience depends on the robustness and relative freedom of the media, the level of access the community and its leaders have to the media and the level of trust the community places in the media.

In Bounkani, support from international partners for the creation of radio programmes has been hailed as a great success by communities and authorities alike. Radio reports, round tables and broadcasts are devoted to raising awareness of the region's vulnerabilities: community tensions, violent extremism and security incidents, such as the series of burnt vehicles in Bouna. Messages encouraging cooperation with local authorities are also sent out. Communities are directly involved in the production of these programmes through review committees that help deter the spread of fake news or hate messages.

In Atakora, participants said that they did not know about or had not been involved in the development of radio programmes aimed at strengthening community resilience, but the communities repeatedly expressed the wish to do so in collaboration with authorities.

More generally, investigative journalists in West Africa are – to varying degrees, depending on the country – subject to increasing pressure and intimidation from authorities. This is a worrying trend. Severe crackdowns on press freedom have been implemented in Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as in Togo in connection with the security situation in the north of the country. In Benin, authorities have adopted an increasingly restrictive approach to press freedom, particularly with regard to events linked to the security situation in the north of the country. In a country known for its strong tradition of freedom of expression and of the press since the 1990s, press freedom has suffered major setbacks in recent years. Benin was ranked 96 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index in 2019, but it fell to 112 in 2023.[62] Journalists in Benin report significant restrictions on their ability to cover the security situation in the north, and a number of journalists have been arrested and threatened with prosecution before the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism.[63]

Covering the security crisis in the north, or even going there, has become extremely difficult for journalists, who are explicitly asked to keep their distance. This is a worrying trend that can erode the resilience of communities and, more generally, reduce the likelihood of a well-informed response to the destabilizing effects of illicit economies against the backdrop of an ever-increasing security threat.

The role of women

The fifth and final cornerstone of community resilience is the role of women. The GI-TOC's work on resilience, as well as in other contexts, has repeatedly shown that women are drivers of community resilience. This is particularly true in communities where they play a greater role in decision-making – by participating in traditional councils or by having women's networks weigh in on community decisions – and have economic capital, including access to high quality jobs and management of finances.[64]

In Atakora and Bounkani, the role of women in community resilience was considered weak. Although women are developing income-generating activities – processing tropical agricultural products, for example – and are active in small-scale trade and agriculture, they are not economically independent. Women cannot own land, which means that their activities are essentially dependent on those of men: women take part in activities managed by men to generate additional income.

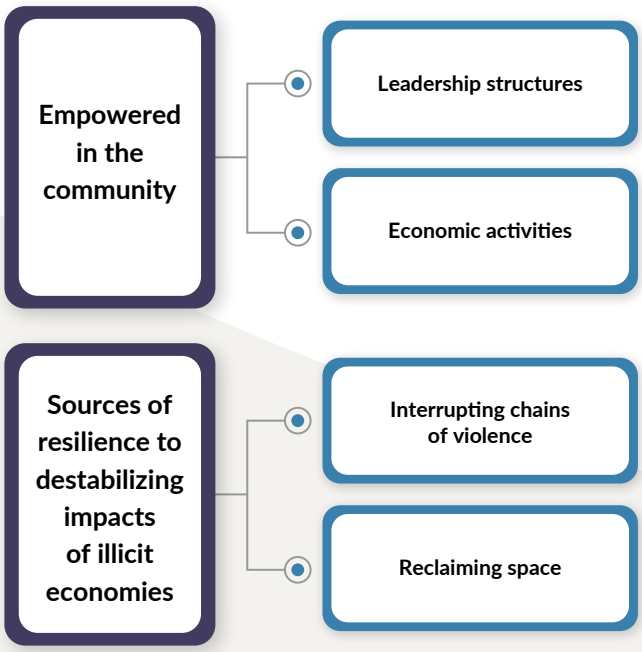

FIGURE 9 Components of women's role in community resilience.

Women in Bounkani and Atakora are poorly represented in decision-making bodies, and their participation in the development of policies that affect them is very limited, especially when it comes to issues related to instability, armed groups or illicit economies. There are still few women in the various decision-making forums, whether at the state level (village chief, monitoring committee, and municipal or departmental councils) or at the political level (local elected representatives). Although women are not directly involved or at the forefront, their voices do have a certain influence through associations.

Indeed, the various women's associations in both Bounkani and Atakora contribute to the role of women in resilience. The associations vary in size and type, but most are organized either around an economic activity (women's associations for income-generating activities) or community (Fulani women's associations), with organizations ranging across several levels, from the village to the municipality to the department. In Atakora, there is also the Women Leaders' Network for Peace in Atakora, set up with the support of the Swiss cooperation in 2019. Interestingly, in Atakora, although these women were representatives of associations, many of them introduced themselves as 'housewives' during the round-table discussion at the start of the dialogue. This illustrates a certain tension in their self-perception, between their role within the home, which remains very important, if not central, and their role as women at the head of socio-professional or community associations.[65]

Although women have organized themselves into associations, which is a strength, and although, in theory, these associations are involved in decision-making, particularly as part of local security committees (Atakora) or consultations aimed at including the community as a whole, they remain marginalized. What's more, while they may be involved in decisions related to community well-being, they play only a minimal role when it comes to discussions on issues such as security and illicit economies.

AVENUES OF INTERVENTION

Discussions on the avenues of intervention focused on five types of intervention that need to be considered holistically, rather than separately. The aim is to curb the propaganda of violent extremist groups, improve cooperation with the state, interrupt cycles of violence and recruitment routes into criminal networks and non-state armed groups, strengthen community cohesion mechanisms and engage in dialogue with illicit actors.[66]

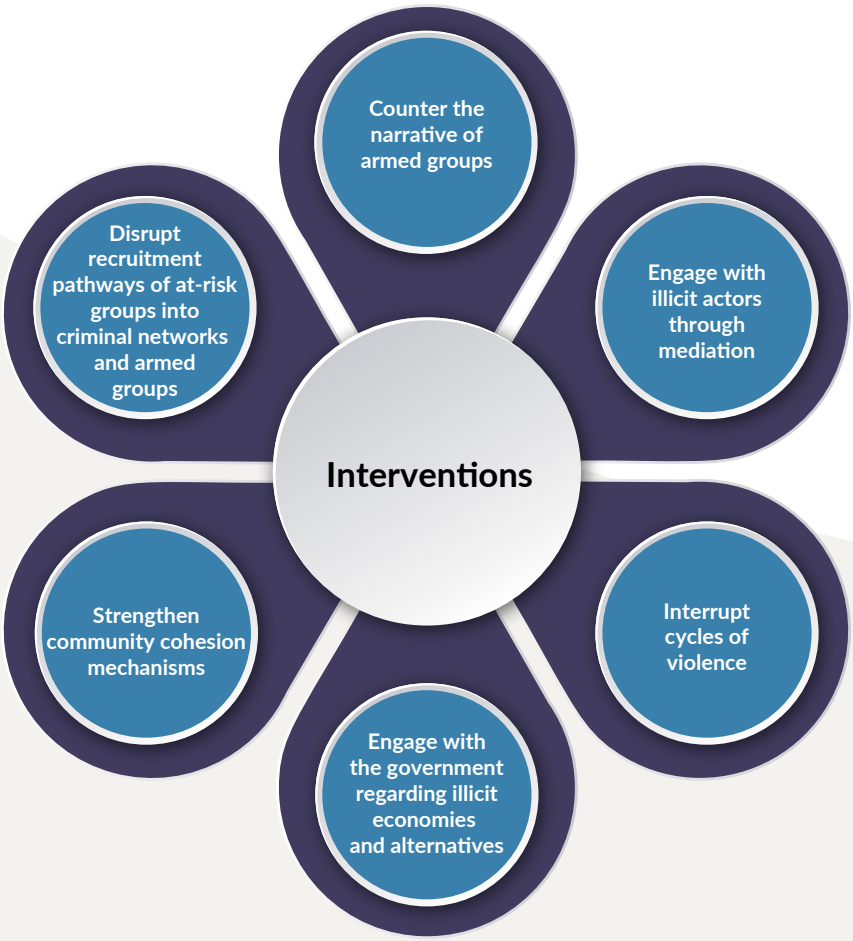

FIGURE 10 Types of interventions.

Intervening to strengthen community resilience

- Use alternative data to challenge the narratives promulgated by armed groups around illicit economies that sow mistrust, erode the role of the state and promote armed groups as alternative providers of governance and economic opportunities.
- Dialogue with actors involved in illicit economies, including through mediation, to address criminal agendas that can undermine peace processes and build resilience to messages from armed groups, whether for recruitment or for more informal alliances, by raising awareness of the risks they pose, solidifying links between community and state and providing legal economic alternatives.
- Support civil society engagement with state actors on illicit economies in order to strengthen state accountability and transparency; target discriminatory or unfair regulatory frameworks by seeking to reposition the state as a provider rather than an obstructor of economic opportunities; and above all, prevent security responses that are likely to increase harm, as has been the case on several occasions.[67]
- Identify and provide solutions to the tensions and violence generated by illicit economies, which can create and maintain entry points for armed groups, through community cohesion mechanisms.
- Work with women and young change-makers to interrupt cycles of violence and recruitment routes into criminal networks and non-state armed groups, including by identifying populations vulnerable to the rhetoric of criminal and conflict actors and supporting them with mentoring and life-skills support.[68]

Hindering the rhetoric of violent extremist groups and disrupting recruitment channels

For this type of intervention, two interconnected aims need to be considered: hindering the propaganda and recruitment rhetoric of violent extremist groups and remedying the disjunction between state regulations and community perceptions of the legitimacy of illicit economies, a phenomenon exploited by violent extremist groups in their expansion strategy.

Communities have recognized that the rhetoric of violent extremist groups directed at communities – particularly young people, women and those involved in the illicit or informal economies, three particularly vulnerable groups – enables them to infiltrate communities and gain access to the information and items they need for their operations. More specifically, in the case of Bounkani, cattle herders, individual hunters and gold miners were identified as being particularly vulnerable to this type of rhetoric.

The communities also pointed out that they were aware of recruitment strategies targeting women in particular. By promising women a degree of recognition, protection, money or access to certain resources limited by the state, violent extremist groups manage to turn different categories of people into allies, or at least co-opt them.

In addition to these three specific groups, the communities identified another grievance that makes them more vulnerable to the rhetoric of violent extremist groups: the limitation or restriction of movement and access to certain resources (e.g., national parks, gold mining). Efforts to prohibit these activities exacerbate the state's lack of legitimacy in the eyes of communities and encourage their support for armed groups that help them circumvent the restrictions. It is clear that the formal sector cannot meet all the needs of communities living on the fringes of national parks; authorities need to expand the range of formal services and recognize and accept that informal activities are sometimes the only ones available to communities.

Several courses of action have been proposed to meet this challenge, bearing in mind that that they are complementary and none of them will be sufficient on its own. It is therefore a question of designing and implementing them in a coherent manner.

- **Including communities in park management decision-making.**
  First, communities emphasized the need to be included in decisions relating to access to resources and informal economies. National authorities and the authorities in charge of protected areas must engage in constructive dialogue and exercise a degree of flexibility with communities.[69] Tensions over access to land, in particular grazing areas for herders, must be prioritized in Atakora and Bounkani, where grazing areas are dwindling in relation to areas that are protected or given over to agriculture.[70] This can be achieved by organizing dialogues between communities and local authorities, which will not only increase trust between the two actors, but will also serve as a basis for setting up innovative projects and granting subsidies to communities.

- **Redistributing national park resources.**
  With regard to access to the national parks and conservation efforts, the communities explained that they were not opposed, but that they must be able to take advantage of the situation and not just suffer a loss of income due to their inability to farm and graze animals. For example, communities living on the edges of parks could be directly involved in conservation efforts by increasing the number of jobs in park management structures, whether for temporary activities (demarcation of certain areas) or on a more permanent basis with official posts (forest rangers).[71] Such initiatives are already underway in both regions and should be welcomed and developed. In the long term, when the security context is strengthened, if tourism develops in these regions, the benefits generated should return to the communities, as well as to the upkeep of the parks.

- **Taking into account the role of illicit economies in community economic resilience.**
  With regard to informal economies, particularly gold panning in Bounkani and fuel trafficking in Atakora, any policy must recognize their role in generating livelihoods and their wider importance in local and regional political economies. Stability should be the priority of interventions, and so a flexible approach to informal and illicit economies, based on the harm caused to communities, should be adopted. Above all, dialogue with the illicit actors is needed, because simply banning an activity, whether it's gold panning or fuel trafficking, will not be enough to bring these actors back to legal activities; they will either turn to violent extremist groups or to other illicit activities such as highway robbery, hold-ups and shoplifting. Dialogue with illicit actors, through mediation and their integration into the formal economic sector, must be a priority.

- **Formalizing illicit economies to reduce criminalized areas.**
  It is essential to look at ways to reduce the number of criminalized areas and to formalize these activities, rather than banning them. The efforts of the Beninese authorities in this area, with the creation of mini-stations aimed at integrating fuel smugglers into the formal fuel sales economy, are an important step forward. There is still work to be done, however, and the authorities should place particular emphasis on building mini-stations in northern Benin, particularly in Atakora, where community grievances are greatest and fuel smuggling is most closely linked to security dynamics.[72] By reducing criminalized areas, resources for criminal justice, which have repeatedly proven to be counter-productive, can be reduced and realigned for initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of citizens.

  In the case of gold panning in Bounkani, communities also highlighted the need for formalization. The aim is to strike the right balance between better regulation and greater safety for artisanal mines, so that the activity brings economic benefits to communities.[73] This will also enable better regulation of the activity, particularly with regard to the use of mercury and cyanide, chemicals that are extremely harmful to gold miners, communities, their land and their animals.[74] The bureaucracy and slowness of the administrative process (to obtain a permit, for example) must be reduced as much as possible. The Bounkani communities pointed to Ghana as a good example, as the country has supported efforts to formalize gold panning alongside industrial mining.[75] According to the communities, it's a win-win situation: 'This policy would encourage all actors in the sector to be taken into account, not just the big operators; gold miners could benefit from better working standards and protection, and the state could play its role as a provider of public services by ensuring security and taxing the gold from these artisanal mines'.[76] A number of initiatives are being implemented to encourage formal artisanal gold mining in the Economic Community of West African States. It is essential to apply the lessons learned from these experiences and to ensure that the political focus is on formalization.[77]

Improving relations between the community and the state

With regard to collaboration, the communities expect a great deal from the state, whether in terms of strengthening infrastructure, basic services and economic programmes or providing security and protection services. One priority is to remedy the disconnect around the legitimacy of illicit economies, with communities and the state having opposing views of what is licit or illicit.

Other priorities have also been noted. For example, as the corruption of authorities undermines trust between communities and the state and fuels the persistence of illicit economies, effective strategies to combat public corruption are key to strengthening the legitimacy of the state and promoting the resilience of communities to organized crime. Measures need to be adopted to combat impunity and corruption at all levels, but especially at the local level. Locally integrated, targeted programmes need to be put in place, with the priority being to improve collaboration between the authorities, specialist police units and local NGOs. It is also a question of strengthening the monitoring and control of national park authorities and officials by civil society, as well as sanctioning and publicizing cases of corrupt officials – for example, in cases of corruption linked to granting licences for gold panning.[78]

In addition, the communities proposed organizing information days on the roles and responsibilities of local authorities within the community. For the Bounkani communities, such information days would be the ideal framework for raising awareness of the government's social programme and its forecasts among young people in the villages, which would also help to counter the rhetoric of violent extremists. Information days were not mentioned by the Atakora communities, but they could also benefit from them, as the discussions showed that there was sometimes a lack of knowledge among the communities about the activities and programmes of the Beninese state.

Combating cattle rustling, a trigger for cycles of violence

Another area for action concerns cycles of violence and how to prevent community tensions from escalating, as violent extremist groups can capitalize on such tensions to recruit. Moreover, if the lack of trust and marginalization of certain communities becomes too great, violent extremist groups can easily find allies within them, facilitating their expansion and infiltration. Discussions in this area focused on cattle rustling, as it is the illicit economy that creates the most community tension, according to participants.

A whole series of proposals have been made, both in terms of training and infrastructure. In view of the key role played by community leaders, the Atakora participants proposed funding training for community leaders in nonviolent rhetoric and conflict management. This training would give community leaders the tools to manage tensions more effectively so that they do not lead to cycles of violence.[79] This dimension came out strongly in the discussions in Atakora, while the communities in Bounkani placed greater emphasis on infrastructure. There is a real need for infrastructure for herders, such as the construction of cattle pens and agro-pastoral dams and the rehabilitation of certain transhumance corridors. Some of these projects are already underway,[80] but communities are sometimes unaware of them and have not been approached, or they feel that the needs are greater than the solutions currently available.[81]

Finally, although community cohesion and, more broadly, the share capital of the Bounkani and Atakora communities are seen as assets for community resilience, strengthening community cohesion mechanisms remains a priority and a challenge in both communities. Local governance, including traditional governance mechanisms and chiefs, should therefore be supported in the search for social cohesion. This can be done by consolidating the capacities of governance actors and providing them with resources (e.g. fuel to travel to dialogues or training or awareness-raising sessions organized in other municipalities or departments). In fragile situations where they become the targets of violent extremist groups, it is absolutely essential to offer them effective protection. Beyond traditional chiefdoms, local security committees, watch committees or any other civil security network should be supported in building and maintaining good working relationships with the state and in rallying community participation and support.

Strengthening economic resilience: Recognizing the importance of road infrastructure and safety on transport routes in supporting local trade and perceptions of safety

During both dialogues, the poor state of the roads – particularly those linking villages to major local and regional markets – was highlighted as a major obstacle to local trade and livelihoods. It was noted that poor road infrastructure exacerbates security problems, forcing travellers to drive slowly and making them more vulnerable to attack. Road attacks by non-state actors, particularly in the Bounkani region, are a key factor in communities' perception of insecurity. The state checkpoints where extortion practices have been observed, again mainly in Bounkani, have considerably eroded relations between the state and the community. Cases in which non-state armed groups have set up taxation systems on certain roads have been seen as a key indicator of their growing influence.

Taken together, these factors highlight the importance of road infrastructure and governance in supporting local livelihoods and relations with the state, impacting community perceptions of security and reducing the influence and revenue collection of non-state armed groups. The maintenance, construction and improved governance of roads (by detecting IEDs and ensuring security), particularly on key trade corridors such as the Gouandé-Matéri route for Atakora and the Doropo-Kalamon-Danoa route for Bounkani, should be a priority in infrastructure projects implemented by governments or international partners.

Working with at-risk groups to disrupt recruitment into non-state armed groups

A number of groups – including cattle herders, artisanal gold miners and hunters – have been identified as being particularly at risk of recruitment by non-state armed groups. Another type of individual – for instance, an informal fuel retailer – is likely to be targeted for the provision of services and supplies to these groups. These are therefore the priority groups for involvement in tailor-made community resilience programming. Where it is possible to formalize economies, these channels should be strengthened. However, additional support measures in partnership with communities should be considered, such as the provision and management of alternative income-generating opportunities to mitigate recruitment risks.

CONCLUSION

The dialogues provided an opportunity to discuss the main interdependent elements of community resilience, as well as the major challenges and impacts faced by the Atakora and Bounkani communities in relation to the destabilizing effects of illicit economies against a backdrop marked by the threat of violent extremism.

The discussions also provided an opportunity to reflect on the impact of instability on community resilience and how illicit economies can play a role in shaping this instability. It is clear that building resilience in the face of the interrelated challenges of illicit economies and armed conflict is particularly difficult due to the debilitating effects of conflict on local security, local economies, share capital, community resources and capacity for action.

Ensuring basic protection and security for vulnerable communities facing security threats in Bounkani and Atakora is therefore a prerequisite for building community resilience to the destabilizing effects of illicit economies.

It also became clear that the Atakora and Bounkani communities are resilient and that, despite the challenges, there are positive points to be noted. The capacity for action and the leadership of certain individuals, for example, appear to be important success factors and ways out of fragility. These factors must be supported and not weakened, as was done in Bounkani with the politicization of the leadership of the Lobi community.

Finally, understanding and taking into account the legitimacy of each illicit economy, as well as its potential role in the economic resilience of communities, must be a priority when designing interventions. State interventions that take this into account will build community resilience on several levels: not only will they strengthen communities' economic capital, but they will also improve community relations with the state, bolstering trust and legitimacy, and help counter the rhetoric of violent extremist groups. Moreover, as the example of fuel smuggling in Benin shows, the success of interventions to hinder the link between illicit economies and instability depends as much on the nature as on the timing of the intervention. Authorities must identify these windows of opportunity, demonstrating sustained commitment, considerable resources, flexibility and adaptability.

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