COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

RESOLVE Network Research
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RESOLVE
NETWORK

ABOUT THIS COMPENDIUM

This compendium brings together the collected work of RESOLVE's 2018–2022 Community-Based Armed Groups Research Initiative. Launched in partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development Africa Bureau, this research initiative sought to fill a gap in the literature on community-based armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa—often key actors in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, but highly localized and not well-understood. The papers in this volume are presented in a series of phases corresponding to the development of the research. Phase One involved mapping the existing literature to establish a common definition and typology of these groups, as well as options for engaging with them. Phase Two deepened these understandings through a series of case studies in West Africa. Phase Three added a sub-focus to this research initiative by mapping the available literature on women in community-based armed groups, and Phase Four built upon that knowledge with a series of case studies in East and West Africa. Finally, Phase Five featured a set of case studies in Nigeria and Somalia on disengagement from violent extremist organizations, drawing on the personal experiences of former members to map their journeys into and out of these groups, providing a model for understanding disengagement and reintegration more broadly. Taken together, these publications lay the foundation for improved understanding of and responses to community-based armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa, and provide clear avenues for future research.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

Community-based armed groups (CBAGs) are a common and complex feature of the African security environment that present a unique set of challenges to governments, local communities, civil society, and international actors working in conflict-affected or fragile contexts. While much attention has been paid to extremist and insurgent groups, fewer policies and interventions are designed to engage CBAGs and they are less well-understood overall. Yet, these groups form an integral part of conflict ecosystems, operating alongside or in opposition to the formal security sector, parties to conflict, and organized crime. In this role, they are uniquely positioned at the intersection of competing interests, seemingly able to both reinforce security and stability, and to undermine them. A nuanced understanding of the composition, behaviors, and relationships of community-based armed groups is thus a strategic imperative for security and development researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to promote peace and stability in sub-Saharan Africa.

CBAGs[1] are a subset of nonstate armed groups (NSAGs) defined by their relationships to the state and a host community. Unlike terrorist or insurgent groups that seek to undermine the state, CBAGs—sometimes vigilantes, local security assemblages, auto-defense groups, or other configurations—have localized agendas that do not include large political ambitions. This is because they often emerge from and are deeply embedded within local communities. Instead, CBAGs may operate alongside state authority or act independently to provide justice and security in areas where the central government is unable or unwilling to do so.

In such cases, at the community level, hybrid arrangements of justice and security provision often replace state services depending on the preferences of the community and the capacity of the state. In hybrid security structures, formal (e.g., government security forces or police) and informal (e.g., vigilantes, community watch groups, cattle raiders, criminal gangs, or peace committees) security actors and mechanisms function in parallel to protect their stakeholders, interests, and power. These actors and groups move along a continuum of formalization. Understood this way, community security is in many cases a hybrid security order where members of the community are not only the beneficiaries but also the agents of human security.[2]

In such hybrid orders, CBAGs typically enjoy a high level of legitimacy among their communities and can provide some stability. However, they often lack oversight and accountability. As a result, they may operate across physical or political boundaries, act without legal authority, and rely and prey on communities experiencing insecurity. Many formal state and international actors that encounter CBAGs in their work

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1   Moritz Schuberth, "The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 2 (2015): 296–320.

2   Moritz Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), 10, https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.1.

may therefore be reluctant to recognize or engage with them, despite their proximity to and impact on conflict and stability.

The habitual response by external actors—such as foreign governments or multilateral interventions—to ignore or bypass CBAGs reflects a legitimate concern. Engaging with informal security actors can legitimize them and in turn undermine the state monopoly on the use of force, fragment the security landscape, and weaken the rule of law. On the other hand, the do-not-engage reflex can exacerbate intercommunal conflict by excluding key conflict actors from conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts. Engagement with national actors can also harm community interests. Overall, a strictly state-centric approach may alienate local stakeholders and undermine community agency for peace and security.[3]

Responsible engagement with CBAGs requires context-specific, nuanced considerations, conflict sensitivity, and long-term planning. The defining aspects of CBAGs—sources of legitimacy, identity, incentives, resources, and relationships—must be carefully mapped and considered before making decisions about their inclusion in interventions. Micro-level analysis and a holistic, whole-of-community approach can help better understand the challenges and contributions they pose and improve strategies to engage them.

Nuanced mapping of the landscape of community-based armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa enables the international policy community, local governments, and development actors to devise more impactful strategies to understand and address the unique challenges and opportunities presented by CBAGs. That is why, in October 2018, the RESOLVE Network launched a research initiative on Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa in partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop analytical insights and evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

RESOLVE took a comprehensive and adaptive approach to this project by drawing on the existing literature on security sector reform (SSR), community violence reduction (CVR), alternative dispute resolution (ADR), preventing violent extremism (PVE), and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) to draw lessons learned from the spectrum of possible interventions. To complement the insights from the literature, RESOLVE commissioned diverse experts and scholars to perform in-depth, original research on the composition, behaviors, and impacts of CBAGs across sub-Saharan Africa. Through research reports, case studies, policy notes, stakeholder engagement, and roundtable discussions, the project provided key stakeholders with contextual knowledge on the dynamics of CBAGs and potential approaches to engage, manage, and transform them.

Through the years of the initiative, RESOLVE has learned that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners differ in their assessment of the opportunities and challenges that community-based armed groups present in the African security environment, in terms of the impact on host communities, the capacity of the state security architecture, and overall benefit as agents leverageable towards achieving development and security objectives. The objective of this research project is to help contextualize a complex system

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3   Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), 8, https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2.

of interactions between groups, civilians, state actors, and international development and security narratives, while recognizing that security and stability are only possible through engaging with the political aspects of armed groups and power distribution at the local and national levels.

The question of whether embracing hybrid security, where these groups are co-producers of justice and security, is a positive or negative approach to addressing low or absent governance capacity remains crucial. While context is key to situating normative questions, policymakers need concrete examples of where these groups have or have not been useful, why, for whom, and for how long. The challenge is finding evidence-based examples where hybrid security has been successful and where regulatory frameworks seeking to limit or control CBAG behavior have been constructive. Following that quest, this compendium collates firsthand accounts of communities' experiences in conflict. These are stories rarely told. The micro-level insights unearthed by RESOLVE's in-depth research reports are indispensable to comprehend drivers of conflict and avenues for peace. Centering the local as the site of knowledge production remains key to recognizing knowledge transfers from the ground up.

This RESOLVE research initiative grapples with a complicated set of interlocking factors in conflict-affected and fragile contexts across sub-Saharan Africa, with implications for the work of multilateral organizations engaging in these areas. Principally, it raises the question: what role for community-based armed groups should external or state actors advocate for, if any? What is the desired end state—for communities, national governments, and security governance? In what context can external actors have the greatest impact in achieving this end state, and what are the most effective tools? For the duration of the project and in discussion with key stakeholders, RESOLVE negotiated these issues toward clarifying and elevating the discourse surrounding community-based armed groups, by providing locally informed, evidence-based research and analysis.

The analytical framework of CBAGs, and their engagement, management, and transformation, offers a novel lens to studying conflict ecosystems. Through this lens, the need for addressing root causes of conflict shines through at every turn. Curing symptoms or mitigating tensions does not bring lasting, constructive, and inclusive peace. Instead, policy and programming should focus on understanding local perspectives, nuanced contextual details, and political realities to craft strategies that target underlying conflict drivers. For that, meaningfully engaging, managing, or transforming CBAGs is often indispensable. This RESOLVE Network research initiative has contributed robust analytical and thematic value to the body of knowledge with the potential to expand beyond the sub-Saharan African context and assist research and analysis on these groups and conflicts around the world.

Photo adapted from: Photo courtesy of the U.S. Institute of Peace. Kenya (2019).