

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS INTO COMMUNITY SECURITY PROVIDERS

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COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

“A number of factors can help transform CBAGs from sources of insecurity into community service providers.”

FAST FACTS

- In some cases, CBAGs in sub-Saharan Africa enjoy higher local legitimacy than state security forces due to their strong links to local cultural practices and their greater alignment with the social attitudes and community norms.
- When promoted as agents of hybrid security governance, CBAGs may fill the security void left by an absent state.
- To turn CBAGs into community security providers, interventions need to strengthen and formalize the security function of CBAGs while diminishing their political and criminal functions, without weakening the legitimacy of the state.

Introduction

Community-based armed groups (CBAGs) such as vigilantes, militias, and criminal gangs are armed groups that are embedded within communities and whose delineation can be defined by territory, blood ties, or shared identities.¹ While CBAGs have been found to engage in political violence on behalf of their sponsors and to commit crimes for self-motivated reasons, in many contexts including parts of sub-Saharan Africa they are also among the main providers of security. A recent RESOLVE research report mapped how local, national, and international actors have responded to a surge of CBAGs in sub-Saharan Africa and what lessons can be learned from these interventions.²

- 1 Moritz Schubert, “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 Schubert, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019).

A number of factors can help transform CBAGs from sources of insecurity into providers of community security. The RESOLVE report shows how both CBAGs' internal functions and external factors influence their behavior. CBAGs' internal functions include their organizational structure and internal processes and procedures, while external factors make up the environment in which they operate, such as norms and rules, regulatory and legal frameworks as well as accountability and oversight mechanisms.³ This categorization helps determine at what level approaches should intervene in order to change CBAG behavior. This policy note provides recommendations for intervening actors to reinforce the constructive potential of CBAGs and limit their destructive potential. These recommendations—including the presence of oversight procedures, a binding legal framework, and accountability mechanisms—can help transform multidimensional CBAGs into more accountable, capable, and rule-abiding providers of community security.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

Hybrid security governance is a reality in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Plural security provision can manifest in more constructive or destructive ways. In some cases, CBAGs in sub-Saharan Africa enjoy higher local legitimacy than state security forces due to their strong links to local cultural practices and greater alignment with social attitudes and community norms.⁴ CBAGs may be the best available option for justice and security provision in the short term given the ineffectiveness of state security actors.⁵ However, CBAGs have the potential to be both providers of security and sources of insecurity.⁶

Some governments tolerate or even encourage CBAGs as cost-effective crime-control mechanisms in areas of limited statehood, as happened with *Sungusungu* in Tanzania.⁷ Government officials from Kenya to Nigeria also hire CBAGs to attack or intimidate the opposition or to advance a vested political agenda by spreading insecurity.⁸ In some conflict-affected states, the state co-opted CBAGs, or CBAGs acted as self-anointed defenders of the state against other types of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), including violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram.⁹

When promoted as agents of hybrid security governance, CBAGs may fill the security void left by an absent state. In numerous cases across sub-Saharan Africa, efforts to co-opt CBAGs ultimately gave legitimacy to predatory and illiberal armed actors. In Kenya, for example, anti-

3 Lauren Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019).

4 Niagale Bagayoko, Eboe Hutchful, and Robin Luckham, "Hybrid Security Governance in Africa: Rethinking the Foundations of Security, Justice and Legitimate Public Authority," *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1-32.

5 Nelson Kasfir, Georg Frerks, and Niels Terpstra, "Introduction: Armed Groups and Multi-layered Governance," *Civil Wars* 19, no. 3 (2018): 257-78.

6 Kate Meagher, "The Strength of Weak States? Non-State Security Forces and Hybrid Governance in Africa," *Development and Change* 43, no. 5 (2012): 1073-101.

7 Suzette Heald, "Controlling Crime and Corruption from Below: Sungusungu in Kenya," *International Relations* 21, no. 2 (2007): 183-99.

8 Adrienne LeBas, "Violence and Urban Order in Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 48, no. 3 (2013): 240-62.

9 Oluwaseun Bamidele, "Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – A Community Security Option: A Comprehensive and Proactive Approach to Counter-Terrorism," *Journal for Deradicalization* 7 (2016): 124-44.

crime vigilantes were co-opted by the main political parties and transformed into political goons and criminal gangs.¹⁰ In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the promise of lucrative positions for *Mai Mai* leaders who join state security forces created incentive structures for the proliferation and expansion of CBAGs and led to increased violence.¹¹

There are, however, examples of CBAGs providing security without turning into sources of insecurity.¹² The common denominator across these cases is that internal functions, such as enforceable rules, and external factors, such as strong state oversight or a conducive legal framework can prevent CBAGs from turning into predatory sources of insecurity.¹³ Group discipline and the acceptance of formalized norms, roles, and processes are key to prevent CBAGs from engaging in unregulated, reactive, or opportunistic violence.¹⁴ The following recommendations help intervening actors accentuate the productive aspects of CBAGs.

Recommendations

By approaching CBAGs as potential partners in the provision of community security, intervening actors can influence their organizational development trajectory and steer their behavior in a desired direction, similar to engaging with civil society organizations. The following recommendations are far from straightforward, as multiple factors can influence the behavior of CBAGs and interventions can have unintended consequences, especially if not adequately adapted to specific contexts.¹⁵

Internal Functions

Interventions can reinforce and capitalize on constructive internal functions of CBAGs, for instance by building the organizational capacity of CBAGs, establishing clear organizational codes of conduct, improving their financial viability and sustainability, and formalizing command and control structures that institutionalize and legitimize norms and rules. In Nairobi's Kibera slum, a former police officer attempted to formalize vigilantes by employing them in a private security company. This provided members with regular salaries and embedded them within a framework of clear and enforceable rules. Formalizing their role as security providers removed the incentive to join a CBAG, provided employment, and enforced regulation.¹⁶ The following recommendations for intervening actors such as governments and development programs are aimed at strengthening the capacity of CBAGs to provide community security:

10 Moritz Schuberth, "Hybrid Security Governance, Post-election Violence and the Legitimacy of Community-based Armed Groups in Urban Kenya," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 386-404.

11 Maria Eriksson Baaz and Judith Verweijen, "The Volatility of a Half-Cooked Bouillabaisse: Rebel-Military Integration and Conflict Dynamics in the Eastern DRC," *African Affairs* 112, no. 449 (2013): 563-82.

12 Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, DC: RESOLVE Network, 2019).

13 Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success*.

14 Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups*.

15 The recommendations are adapted from indicators presented in the USAID Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index (CSOSI) and USAID Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Indicator Reference Sheets.

16 Moritz Schuberth, "The Impact of Drug Trafficking on Informal Security Actors in Kenya," *Africa Spectrum* 49, no. 3 (2014): 55-81.

→ Increase Financial Viability and Sustainability

CBAGs should have access to sustained sources of funding to maintain permanent, paid staff and to continue their operations in the short and long term. In this respect, development programs must ensure that CBAGs do not rely on foreign funding that might be influenced by shifts in funding levels and priorities of foreign donors. Rather, interventions should help CBAGs raise their funding from local sources, including governments, businesses, and individual members. To promote public transparency and accountability, local governments can consult communities on their willingness to fund CBAGs as part of participatory budgeting, a process that allows citizens to directly participate in the allocation of a defined part of a government's budget.¹⁷

→ Build Organizational Capacity

CBAGs should determine and follow clearly defined missions, objectives, management structures, and written operational procedures. To increase the organizational capacity of CBAGs, development programs should conduct trainings on management, logistics, and good governance, including anti-corruption, human rights, and rule of law. Interventions should focus on putting sound financial management systems in place or ensuring CBAGs' access to accountable financial management services.

→ Reflect Community Needs and Priorities

The security services CBAGs provide should reflect the needs and priorities of their communities. Development programs can help CBAGs put clear and transparent procedures in place to determine the needs and priorities of their communities, for instance through participatory methods such as the community score card (CSC) tool.¹⁸ Intervening actors should make sure that CBAGs consult and provide their security services to individuals beyond their own members and without discrimination with regards to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.

External Factors

Interventions can also contribute to the institutionalization and legitimization of CBAGs through enhancing or leveraging norms and rules, shared beliefs, and clearly established accountability and oversight mechanisms. In the case of the Arrow Boys of Teso in eastern Uganda, for instance, early oversight by the national army helped limit abuses by CBAGs.¹⁹ The following recommendations for governments and other intervening actors are aimed at establishing a conducive environment where CBAGs can thrive as community security providers:

→ Establish Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms

Governments should pass national laws and regulations that provide clear guidance on government oversight of CBAGs. To put these laws and regulations into practice, governments,

17 Anwar Shah, ed., *Participatory Budgeting* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007).

18 CARE, *The Community Score Card (CSC): A Generic Guide for Implementing CARE's CSC Process to Improve Quality of Services* (Malawi: Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc., 2013).

19 Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

national human rights commissions and civil society organizations should establish clear and transparent external oversight mechanisms and provide easily accessible channels through which communities can report complaints related to CBAGs and other security providers, for instance hotlines or online forms. Moreover, local or central governments should provide funds to CBAGs in an open and transparent manner and require CBAGs receiving public funding to undergo regular financial audits.

→ Pass Clear Laws and Regulations

A clear legal and regulatory environment is key to governing the security services provided by CBAGs. Governments should pass and consistently implement laws and regulations on CBAGs, including on their registration. Laws and regulations should also set out clear and limited roles and responsibilities for CBAGs, limiting the scope of their permissible activities. To make sure all stakeholders have a common understanding of the legal and regulatory framework within which they operate, governments and legal experts should train CBAGs, communities, and local authorities in specialized legal frameworks related to CBAGs.

→ Capitalize on Norms and Social Rules

While it is difficult for intervening actors to directly influence long-established norms and social rules, interventions can capitalize on existing beliefs or cultural aspects that are conducive to strengthening the productive features of CBAGs. Faith-based vigilantes in Kenya—such as Kibera’s Nubian-based *Al Safa* and an antinarcotics vigilante group established by the Council of Imams in Mombasa—are more resistant to being instrumentalized by drug lords than secular CBAGs due to their strong religious and cultural foundations.²⁰ Building on deep contextual knowledge and actor mapping will help intervening actors understand what beliefs or cultural aspects can be leveraged to transform CBAGs into more reliable security providers.

Conclusion

This paper provided recommendations for intervening actors working with CBAGs to reinforce their constructive potential and limit their destructive potential. To turn CBAGs into community security providers, interventions need to strengthen and formalize the security function of CBAGs while diminishing their political and criminal functions, without weakening the legitimacy of the state.

The recommendations aim to turn multi-dimensional CBAGs into more accountable, capable, and rule-abiding providers of community security that function more like civil society organizations than like informal vigilantes. It is important to keep in mind, however, that such a transformation is difficult to achieve in complex political emergencies because it is costly and requires long-term commitments by multiple actors.

20 Schubert, “The Impact of Drug Trafficking on Informal Security Actors in Kenya.”

Suggested Further Readings, by topic

On Community-based Armed Groups

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About the Note

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