External stresses in West Africa: cross-border violence and cocaine trafficking

The 2011 World Development Report on conflict, security and development highlights the centrality of 'external stresses' for generating insecurity and increasing the risk of violence in fragile areas. West African states are particularly vulnerable, with serious concerns around cross-border violence and illicit drug-trafficking. Policy responses need to: tackle the region's recent legacy of conflict and violent upheaval; address weak governance and entrenched corruption; improve regional cooperation; and support border and outlying communities that have been marginalised by insecurity, poverty and unemployment.

The 2011 World Development Report (WDR) has been instrumental in highlighting how 'external stresses', including global and regional drivers of conflict and crime, can have an important effect on fragile areas. The West Africa region is particularly vulnerable to external stresses because a large number of countries have porous borders that are not clearly demarcated. These countries also lack accountable and transparent governance, and include sizeable populations that have been marginalised by poverty and unemployment – including social groups that often have stronger allegiances to cross-border ethnic and political groups than to the nation-state. To a large extent these factors are a consequence, and become drivers of, the political conflict and violent upheavals that have taken place in West Africa in recent years.

This briefing analyses two examples of the impacts of external stresses on fragile areas: cross-border violence in the Mano River Union region (MRU), specifically along the Côte d'Ivoire–Liberia border; and cocaine trafficking, a region-wide problem that has particular impacts on some countries, notably Guinea and Guinea-Bissau.

Cross-border violence between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire

The MRU region (Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone) has been in a near-perpetual state of insecurity and violent turmoil since the late 1980s, with the most recent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire only ending in 2011. Violence along the border between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire is driven by exiled radical supporters of former Ivorian president, Laurent Gbagbo, who have reactivated contacts with Liberian warlords and established themselves in the border regions. These very active networks have been responsible for a sustained number of deadly border incidents – five in both 2012 and 2013 – with the most recent (as at time of writing) occurring on 23 February 2014. The most significant attack, in June 2012, resulted in the killing of seven Nigerian UN peacekeepers and 10–15 civilians in south-western Côte d'Ivoire.

Illicit rents and cocaine trafficking in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau

Changing global dynamics of drug supply routes have also seen West Africa emerge as a key transit point for the trafficking of cocaine from Latin America to Europe. Guinea and Guinea-Bissau are at the centre of regional

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operations, with political and military elites in both countries actively complicit in generating illicit rents from transnational cocaine trafficking, which also appears to help them maintain political power and patronage networks. According to UN figures, the volume of the cocaine trade has increased significantly since the mid-2000s, possibly reaching a high of 47 tons in 2007 and apparently continuing in sizeable form thereafter. The gross domestic product (GDP) and national budgets of the smaller countries in the region are dwarfed by the hundreds of millions of dollars that are estimated to be generated annually through West African participation in global drug-trafficking.

It is in the face of such scenarios that the UN Secretary-General and Security Council have repeatedly warned that the hard-won end to the armed conflicts that ravaged Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s and 2000s is at risk of being reversed.

Impacts of external stresses on governance and development

The WDR 2011 asserts that external stresses aggravate and exacerbate internal stresses. Certainly, in the case of the Côte d'Ivoire-Liberia frontier, border violence has aggravated and highlighted weak civil–military relations, the unresolved legacy of the conflict and a lack of efficient and permanent coordination between the two countries.

However, beyond WDR 2011, it is important to recognise that external and internal stresses can actually constitute and reinforce each other – as evidenced by those West African states that are most affected by cocaine trafficking, which have seen their existing modes of governance influenced and transformed. The high value of the transnational cocaine trade has increased the risk of corruption in the public sector and changed the political economy of corruption itself in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. Key actors have emerged with the capacity and financial means to challenge and transform existing power relations, established elites and their patronage networks. This in turn becomes a socially accepted form of commerce by broader groups. Such 'normalised' illegality breeds more illegality and, if not addressed, can become an established mode of wider socioeconomic behaviour and governance. In extreme cases, such as Guinea-Bissau, this can result in *coups d'état* by factions of the military and political class who not only compete over drug-trafficking rents, but seek to capture the entire state for drug-trafficking interests.

Furthermore, external stresses can have stabilising effects on states and state systems, and offer new opportunities to those who are beyond the reach of official support or far removed from established centres of commerce. Sustained elite systems of loyalty and patronage can provide stability and mitigate potential violent upheaval or change, while weak border controls can facilitate an unchallenged flow of goods and opportunities for employment and trade.

This is not to downplay the negative effects of external stresses. As well as enabling the flow of licit and illicit activity, weak border security is a potential blind spot for human rights abuse. In the MRU countries, for example, people in border areas that are void of state control also have little recourse to land tenure rights, with livelihoods and food security suffering as a result. So, while there can be short-term positive political gains, the long-term cost is likely to be the corrosion of democracy, which will only serve to further perpetuate insecurity and violence.

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What have been the policy responses?

Cross-border violence in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire:

- **Militarisation:** The Liberian government launched Operation Restore Hope (ORH) in June 2012, in partnership with Ivorian forces, in immediate response to the killing of seven UN peacekeepers. Publicly, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) declared ORH a success; however, there are question marks over its efficacy, as local communities have been attacked in August 2012, and January and March 2013. The five-month lull in cross-border incidents (from August 2012 to January 2013) is just as likely to be attributed to reduced funds to finance Liberian military incursions as it is to ORH.
- **Enhancing the capacity of justice and security services:** The Liberian government has pledged regional hubs in each of the country's five sub-divisions in order to decentralise and enhance access to justice and security services. The first hub, in Gbarnga, was opened in February 2013 but has faced severe logistical problems. Two further hubs – in Zwedru and Harper – are planned, and while they are better situated to reach out to marginalised communities, they will need to be more effective. This is particularly important in light of the ongoing drawdown of UNMIL forces, which are viewed as a critical security presence by local communities.
- **Regional response to security and peace:** A regional approach is critical to addressing insecurity in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire – with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) a key forum – as neither state's security problems can be resolved in isolation from the rest of the region. In early 2012, the MRU set up Joint Border Security and Confidence Units in 12 locations throughout the sub-region. However, they have proved to be poorly coordinated and the MRU under-resourced for the task.

Cocaine trafficking:

- **Current global anti-drugs policy:** Counter-drug strategies in West Africa focus primarily on the interdiction and seizure of drug shipments, the dismantling of trafficking groups and networks, and the capture and prosecution of traffickers (as well as users). Addressing the complex governance and socioeconomic problems associated with drug-trafficking receives less attention and fewer funds. Subsequently, counter-drug measures in unstable and/or poor producer and transit countries have little to offer by way of improving people's living conditions, and carry the risk of human rights violations.
- **Regional responses:** Although a number of mechanisms have been established by West African and Western governments to tackle cocaine trafficking, a lack of technical and financial support, as well as slow implementation by ECOWAS member states, means their impact has been minimal. In addition, initiatives to coordinate efforts between West Africa, Latin America, and Caribbean states have foundered due to marked differences in institutional capacity, and programmes not being linked to interventions addressing organised crime in Europe and between Europe and West Africa.
- **Need to focus on global as well as national/regional response:** The WDR 2011 asserts the importance of building strong national and regional buffering institutions for countering the effects of external stresses. However, this approach is insufficient in the face of transnational drug-trafficking, which requires a global dimension to supplement regional and national policy responses.

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Policy recommendations

National policy responses should:

- Include concrete measures to address the root causes of insecurity, and specifically border insecurity, as well as the grievances of the population in these areas, around issues such as land tenure rights, access to natural resources, and unemployment.
- Implement strategic outreach programmes, in collaboration with civil society organisations, to improve the capacity of security forces to engage effectively with local populations, particularly in border/marginalised communities.
- Engage with ex-combatants in a meaningful long-term manner to give them the capacity, opportunity, and desire to engage in positive ventures, particularly in terms of livelihoods.
- Reduce the incentives for former commanders and corrupt political and military elites to engage in drug-trafficking and cross-border violence by offering sufficiently attractive alternative income opportunities as well as protection from persecution.
- *For cross-border violence:* The governments of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire should engage in stronger cooperation and coordination of response strategies. Joint border security meetings should be enhanced through consistent joint border security patrols and information sharing.
- *For cocaine trafficking:* There is a need to strengthen formal and social accountability mechanisms so as to increase the capacity of state entities, civil society organisations, and the media to probe and expose official involvement in drug-trafficking.

Regional policy responses

- Member states of ECOWAS and other sub-regional groupings, such as the MRU, need to develop a regional strategy that provides a comprehensive framework for addressing common and cross-border challenges – including drug control agreements and institutions, and key regional governance, security, violence prevention and public health issues.
- *For cocaine trafficking:* There should be stronger cooperation and exchange of information on drug-trafficking and organised criminality between West African regional entities and governments, and their Latin American and European counterparts, so as to increase capacities in the region to respond to both 'push' and 'pull' factors along the transnational cocaine route.

International policy responses

- Civil society organisations and regional networks can play a vital role by monitoring drivers of and trends in insecurity, acting as an advocacy platform for messages to policy actors at national, regional and international levels.
- The UN should develop a method to evaluate the capacities of national security forces in post-conflict situations, including political tensions and movements of armed groups across the border, before the process of UN military drawdown begins.
- Foreign donors should increase their financial and technical assistance to West African states but provide it in tandem with continuous high-level political and policy dialogue with regional organisations such as ECOWAS, and partner governments, so as to mitigate the risks of any unintended negative consequences of counter-drug and anti-crime assistance.
- *For cross-border violence:* The UN should consider reviewing the process of UNMIL drawdown and put in place mechanisms to address Liberian security issues that emerge during the transition.
- *For cocaine trafficking:* There should be increased investment in public health-focused and human rights-based interventions to significantly reduce cocaine demand in Europe and other large consumer markets such as the USA, Brazil, South Africa and Russia.

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