

Protecting Peace in Coastal West Africa

CRS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT IN BENIN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA, GHANA, AND TOGO

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Background

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) presents a fresh opportunity for the United States government to invest in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. By focusing on reducing the risk of large-scale violence and instability, rather than responding to its aftermath, the United States government can proactively promote and invest in stable and productive civil society around the globe.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has deep roots in Coastal West Africa with decades-long operations in all five GFA focal countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, and Togo) and strong community networks through our local partners. CRS and its local partners implement humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming across the region, including a dedicated Sahel Peace Initiative aimed at scaling up and reinforcing local civil society organizations' (CSOs) peacebuilding activities. Based on rich context analysis and input from CRS stakeholders in the Coastal West African region, this policy brief highlights some of CRS' ongoing efforts in the region and proposes the following key policy recommendations to inform the USG's implementation of the GFA:

- Bolster stability of the region through economic development, focusing on **jobs for youth**;
- **Strengthen local government** and civil society actors;
- **Build social cohesion** to prevent future conflict and promote stability;
- **Improve coordination** between actors in the region;
- Invest in and **support Early Warning Systems (EWS)**.

Conflict Analysis

While the countries of Coastal West Africa each maintain unique histories, demographics, sources of resilience and challenges, they face similar challenges. Therefore, one cohesive regional strategy can be employed to implement the Global Fragility Act, while allowing flexibility to address context-specific needs. An effective strategy must address the root causes of instability, such as inequitable access to wealth, political and religious extremism, and the disaffection of communities¹.

The Coastal West Africa region remains highly vulnerable to the expanding influence of violent non-state armed groups (NSAGs) from the Lake Chad Basin and Central Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Over the past decade, the Central Sahel has experienced sharp spikes in violent extremism, terrorist attacks, and multiple coup d'états. The growing violence and instability have caused significant population displacement in the region. More than 2.4 million people are internally displaced (IDPs) within Burkina Faso and increasing numbers of refugees seek safe haven in the region, including in the border areas of Coastal West Africa, including Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

The impact of spillover instability from the Central Sahel on Coastal West Africa is particularly concerning given existing fractures in the coastal states' social contracts. These vulnerabilities include the breakdown of horizontal social cohesion (i.e., the strength of ties between members of a community) and vertical social cohesion (i.e., the strength of ties between community members and their institutions), in part due to historical grievances and the

¹ Catholic Relief Services. Steps Towards Peace (2020). <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/steps-toward-peace>

failure of some governments to provide basic social services and access to resources in an equitable manner.² Social cracks further allow NSAGs to exploit communities and expand their influence by filling the power vacuum left by weakened institutions and the dearth of economic opportunities.



[Laura Elizabeth Pohl for CRS]

Horizontal social cohesion is primarily threatened by land disputes, competition for natural resources (such as water and land), and ever-increasing land degradation linked to climate change. Regionally, changes in land ownership laws and low literacy about land rights have led to intercommunal conflict, and existing dispute mechanisms are both complicated and lengthy. Another challenge relates to conflict between migrating pastoralists and agricultural landowners on whose land pastoralists graze their animals. While land tenure is often the trigger for conflict, these issues can quickly take on a political or ethnic dimension as the conflicting groups galvanize supporters and sympathizers along identity groups.

Breakdowns in vertical social cohesion occur at both community and national levels, manifesting in political conflict, social unrest, corruption, and disaffection. Political conflicts and upheaval have been especially significant at the national level, as evidenced by the 2021

coups in Guinea and controversial presidential elections in both Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire in 2020. Civic unrest has led to significant protests and a decrease in citizens' trust in their government and other institutions. Many of the governments in this region struggle to manage the unrest and gravitate towards authoritarian responses such as violently interrupting or prohibiting protests, which in turn further intensifies the underlying disgruntlement.

Governments in Coastal West Africa also struggle to deliver basic social services equitably. Across the region, rural areas lack access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and water and sanitation. These services and opportunities are concentrated in urban zones, as evidenced in Ghana where 62% of urban households have access to potable water compared to just 17% of rural households.³ The lack of access to basic services in rural areas has fueled disaffection and leaves many communities feeling forgotten, while also creating a fertile environment for violent groups to exert influence. In some cases, NSAGs exploit this governance vacuum by providing protection and basic services, which later positions them to enforce their own ideologies and criminal activities within the community.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Operating Environment

One of the greatest challenges to ensuring stability and peace in the region is the weak economic environment. Individuals face a lack of employment and livelihood opportunities, particularly young people, who make up an estimated 70% of the population. While much of the land in this region is rural, the agricultural sector has lost its appeal to young people – who would rather move to the city for work than to continue working in the agricultural sector. With limited numbers of employment opportunities available in urban zones, many people find themselves unemployed and disgruntled. To respond to the disaffection and disgruntlement of these groups, peacebuilders must address the region's economic weakness.

Another challenge for GFA implementers in the region is the ability of implementers, donors and civil society to coordinate and align programming with the ever-changing realities on the ground. In many of these countries, INGO implementers have reported difficulty communicating with one another; there is little to no presence of humanitarian clusters and organizations rarely are able to coordinate their activities. Local civil society also faces barriers to communicating with one another and has a hard time connecting to their peers or partners at a national

² Horizontal represents the strength of ties between members of a community while vertical represents the strength of ties between community members and institutions such as government.

³ Hullum, Christian and Kwesi W. Obeng. "The West Africa Inequality Crisis." Oxfam International, July 2019. Web. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620837/bp-west-africa-inequality-crisis-090719-en.pdf>

level. This can make it challenging to implement programming efficiently, or transition between development and humanitarian needs, for example.

One opportunity for this region is its strong history of interreligious collaboration – which can act as a powerful resource for addressing conflict. While some of the extremism encroaching from the Central Sahel contains aspects of religion, it is not a primary driver of conflict. Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional community members have lived together in harmony for decades, providing a unique opportunity for civil society to tap into this collaboration to unite community members against the externally born extremist threat. Throughout the continent, Africans on average are more likely to be in contact with a religious leader than any other type of official and trust them more than leaders of any governmental institution. This underlying foundation of interreligious peace must continue to be reinforced so as not to become an opening for extremists to divide the region further.

CRS program examples

Catholic Relief Services implements a wide variety of integrated programming throughout the Coastal West Africa region, including humanitarian relief, nutrition, education, social cohesion and peace building, urban resilience, agriculture and livelihoods, malaria and other health programs, and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH). Programs focus on the most vulnerable with many targeting youth, women and other marginalized groups. Relevant to GFA, CRS activities demonstrate that peacebuilding outcomes can be enhanced when coupled with other sectoral interventions, particularly economic strengthening. Initial evidence shows integrating peacebuilding enhances outcomes in other sectors such as natural resource management, economic development, and humanitarian. CRS believes peacebuilding must be based in local communities and must engage local stakeholders as the drivers of their own peace.



[Sam Phelps for CRS]



In Togo, CRS is currently implementing the Naatann Burkina-Togo project, a social cohesion project funded by the PATRIP foundation. This program has a three-pronged strategy which aims at strengthening social cohesion through building community infrastructure, and creating a positive environment by engaging and empowering local leaders. The project has created 22 community infrastructure projects, instituted 80 community finance groups, and has established 6 peace ambassadors serving over 200 people.



The USAID funded Cultural Cohesion for Peace and Prosperity (2C2P) project in Guinea is another example of a regional peacebuilding project. This social cohesion program worked to increase knowledge and reduce violence for young people. Throughout the life of the 5-year program, more than 320 people were trained as young ambassadors for peace. Further, the program reached over 9,000 young people at risk of violence through educational talks.



CRS is also supporting local civil society organizations through the Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI). SPI partners with local organizations in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, and Ghana to scale-up and increase the impact of their peacebuilding activities. Since 2019, 30,000 individuals have received humanitarian support and participated in peacebuilding activities.

Policy Recommendations:

As the US government develops its GFA implementation strategy for the region, it should focus on repairing cracks in society that are being exploited by extremist forces, strengthening social cohesion specifically, while also helping communities to mitigate violent conflict. The following recommendations lay out a roadmap for how this can be achieved:



1. **Bolster stability of the region, through economic development, focusing on jobs for youth.** The lack of economic employment opportunities can leave people vulnerable to manipulation and mobilization into violence. The USG should utilize resources through the GFA to invest in training and employment opportunities for young people. While youth are increasingly moving to urban areas for wage employment, there remains ample opportunity in the rural and agricultural sectors of this region. In particular, there is significant opportunity in growing agriculture-adjacent opportunities such as green technology, supply chain operations, and early warning systems for crops.



2. **Strengthen local government and civil society actors.** Throughout many (particularly rural) areas of Coastal West Africa, local governments have struggled to maintain trust and provide basic social and government services to their populations, creating a power vacuum that is exploited by extremist groups. Through the GFA, the USG has an opportunity to help strengthen governance systems and structures to bolster the legitimacy of governments institutions – including building their capacity to provide high quality basic services, build and improve infrastructure, bolster resilient health and nutrition networks, and expand access to education. Further, the USG should work with local governments and civil society, including religious authorities, to rebuild trust in local and national state institutions and reignite civic participation. Where possible, the USG should avoid the delivery of services which run parallel or undermine state structures.

In addition to strengthening local governments, it is important to also build meaningful, long-term relationships with local civil society organizations and scale funding opportunities designed to strengthen their delivery of services to communities. The US should recognize and directly support the role an interconnected civil society can play in holding the public and private sectors to account. Broad and deep participation from a range of civil society actors in humanitarian and development interventions helps secure wide stakeholder representation and more inclusive approaches. This will empower citizens to hold governments accountable, drive change in their communities and countries, and ultimately address some of the root causes that are being exploited for violence in the region.



[Sam Phelos for CRS]



3. **Strengthen social cohesion to prevent future conflict.** The USG should strengthen the bonds between communities, as well as between communities and their institutions. Communities can also become more resilient through triple nexus approaches; the USG should fund and integrate social cohesion and peacebuilding elements into development and humanitarian projects. Social cohesion and peacebuilding connector projects can help build internal resilience, support communities to address underlying tensions, and decrease the ability

of malicious groups to influence communities.^{4 5} Particular attention should be paid to the increasing number of displaced persons in these countries while also addressing the needs of host communities to stave off a sense of competition and latent conflict.

Faith based organizations (FBOs) are particularly effective in this space given their existing recognized and respected peacebuilding platforms at the village, communal, and national levels.⁶ Where context permits, the USG should support efforts for interfaith dialogues and platforms at all levels of society where Christian, Muslim, and traditional actors can work together to demonstrate unity and leverage their collective voices for positive change.



4. **Improve donor coordination.** An interagency strategy will drive improved coordination within USG, but GFA implementation should also prioritize coordination and communication across donors, governments, and civil society actors. Better communication and coordination are essential to ensure programming is efficient and effective – avoiding gaps or duplication. In developing the GFA implementation plans, the USG strategy should map how existing and projected funding opportunities contribute to the overall strategy. This will encourage and permit implementing partners to better coordinate amongst themselves and share learning. As an example, a BHA-funded humanitarian response serving IDPs should coordinate and link with other USG funded activities such as early warning systems or WASH activities in the same zone.



5. **Invest in early warning systems (EWS).** Coastal West African countries do not currently have robust early warning systems, a crucial tool to maintain awareness of impending threats, while also helping civil society and governments to deliver more effective interventions that enhance security using real-time data. In particular, the USG should support the creation of community-based early warning systems and help to scale up the informal systems that have already popped up, as is the case in northern Ghana. For larger-scale systems, the USG should investigate lessons learned from previous iterations of early warning systems in conflict-prevention states to identify best practices to share timely and accurate information with communities. In all cases, the USG should ensure the participation of civil society in shaping early response, to create systems and solutions that are sustainable and locally sourced.

Conclusion

Catholic Relief Services remains committed to building peace and contributing to stability in Coastal West Africa by engaging local stakeholders as the drivers of their own peace. This is particularly relevant to GFA implementation as the coastal region grapples with ongoing fragilities and the spillover of conflict from the Central Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Now, more than ever, is the moment to unite all actors around a multi-sectoral strategy building synergy and collaboration.

"In Ghana, we saw the problem in Mali, and we thought that it was sad, but that it would never affect us. Then the conflict was in Burkina, and we could not believe the problem was so bad in our neighbor's house. We are no longer feeling safe in Ghana; the violence, disruption, and extremism are now also touching our communities. It is time for us to stop watching our neighbors' homes burn and instead work together"

–Archbishop of Tamale, Ghana. Philip Naameh

⁴ Kamatsiko, Valarie Vat, et al. "Connector Projects Approach: sustained interactions for strengthened relationships and collective wellbeing." CRS, 2021. Web. <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/connector-project-guide>

⁵ "CRS and the HDP Nexus" CRS. Web. <https://my.visme.co/view/90ro4x4g-triple-nexus-infographic>

⁶ Delapalme, Nathalie. "Africa is the continent of the future. Are democracy and governance up to the challenge?" OECD Development Matters. 23 September 2019. Web. <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/09/23/africa-is-the-continent-of-the-future-are-democracy-and-governance-up-to-the-challenge/>