



Members of a savings and lending group in Senegal. The group of 25 women meet every week to pull together their savings and make loans to members of the group. Photographer: Michael Stulman

Integrating Social Cohesion Senegal

CASE STUDY 3: RETURNING HOME TO SENEGAL'S CASAMANCE REGION: EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF RESTORING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS TO REBUILD VILLAGES AND LIVES

In southern Senegal's Casamance region, CRS and local partner Caritas Ziguinchor supported communities long uprooted by violent conflict to enhance social cohesion around the most basic needs of running water, latrines, and adequate shelter.

CRS and Caritas focused first on improving social ties in target communities, exposing all participants to peacebuilding and conflict resolution workshops. As a result of these workshops, village residents prioritized inclusivity and empowerment of marginalized groups, particularly women. CRS established Savings and Internal Lending Committees (SILC) and reinvigorated existing community-led groups to resolve conflicts and protect women and girls from gender-based violence.

The systematic integration of social cohesion around various project activities contributed to positive trajectories for community-level behavior change: villages reported fewer conflicts and a greater willingness to help one another rebuild and restore positive relationships.

Country: Senegal

Project location: Ziguinchor area in Casamance Region

Target population: 95% returnees and 5% host community members across 28 villages; to date, 3,299 direct and 18,622 indirect participants

CRS' role: Supports WASH, shelter assistance, social cohesion trainings, GBV, and SILC

Duration: One-year phases from 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-ongoing

Donor: U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM)

Partner: Caritas Ziguinchor

THE ELAGNOUL PROJECT

Elagnoul ('Let's go back home') project aims to improve the wellbeing and autonomy of new returnees in the Casamance region through access to drinking water, secured shelters, WASH¹ facilities, and social cohesion.

CRS and Caritas strengthened Village Management Committee (VMC) capacity by including more women, supporting the resolution of 23 community-centered disputes and referring reports of violence against women and girls to existing community organizations. In its third year, the project formed 43 women-led SILC groups to increase ownership and stewardship of community assets. Both VMCs and SILC groups catalyzed positive community-level change by building relationships, improving solidarity, and helping to steer communities toward peaceful and just resolutions to enable an environment of collaborative development.

One village worked to integrate a neighborhood that had long been opposed to working with the village chief. In response to the social cohesion training, the neighborhood agreed to collaborate with the chief, even clearing the main road linking both districts.

Project results show positive effects as the CRS Social Cohesion Barometer measured a 7% increase in positive perceptions of social cohesion. Women contributed their knowledge and opinions to important community matters, had a voice in selecting the most vulnerable households for community-led projects and used SILC groups as a space to resolve community conflicts. Women thereafter assumed increasingly active roles in community governance.

MAIN PROJECT INTEGRATION STRATEGIES



Build competence and capacity of communities through social cohesion trainings

Elagnoul provided social cohesion trainings through community meetings to all project participants, increasing awareness on the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships through exploring social and group dynamics and shared cultural values. CRS' 3Bs and 4Ds² method reinforced the project's peace building and trauma awareness training. During trainings, examples of local realities resonated with communities. For instance, two refugee returnees resolved their conflict over the borders of their fields when one acknowledged that the many years of absence had caused him to forget where the actual boundaries were.



Ensure inclusive, diverse representation in community-led groups

Experiences show that men held a disproportionate degree of power and influence, making most decisions without input and buy-in from women or youth. Under Elagnoul, community members established criteria to identify potential beneficiaries as either 'vulnerable' or 'very vulnerable.' CRS and Caritas created three distinct groups – women-only, youth-only, and men-only – to select households according to the community's criteria. The Village Government Agency (VGA), which includes 50% female members, then coordinated and confirmed the three groups' decisions to select the most vulnerable community members.



Empower marginalized groups to take a more active role in community governance

Elagnoul aimed to balance power through existing and newly established community-led groups, emphasizing equitable access for women to serve in community governance roles. Elagnoul focused on the integration of women across numerous platforms. In addition to adding a gender quota to VGAs, the project linked with the Women's Platform for Peace in Casamance (PFPC) to build the capacity of its community-based women's group members to provide GBV information and education through community meetings. SILC groups also brought together women to establish shared goals around solidarity funds, savings, and income-generating activities, all of which promoted social cohesion in previously conflicted communities.

RESULTS OF INTEGRATION

- Since the start of social cohesion workshops, "fewer conflicts have arisen in the villages and conflicts are more quickly resolved. These communities now have official institutions that support the village chiefs in their peace-building roles."³
- Once shelter construction began, communities organized themselves to help one another pitch roofs using the precisely allotted numbers of roofing metal sheets, wooden planks, and spikes. But one community decided to use roofing supplies for 11 households to voluntarily include one additional home "to promote mutual aid and social cohesion."⁴
- Through their active participation in SILCs, women gained the skills and legitimacy to participate effectively in conflict resolution processes: "Like all other strategic components of the project, the SILC approach added value in empowering communities and especially women."⁵

¹ Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

² CRS' 3Bs (Binding, Bonding, Bridging) peace-building approach and 4Ds of Appreciative Inquiry (Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver) method

³ Elagnoul II final report to donor.

⁴ Elagnoul II final report to donor.

⁵ Elagnoul III fourth quarter report to donor.