

**Background paper****INTEGRATED STRATEGIES FOR SENSITIVE BORDER AREAS
IN WEST AFRICA**

September 2004

Background

1. The political landscape of West Africa has become increasingly marked by persistent regional insecurity and cross-border problems. Most of the conflicts that have devastated a number of countries in the region have their roots in poor governance practices, which have over time greatly eroded state legitimacy and opened the door to vicious civil strife over resources and ethnic differences. Many have also been exacerbated by neighbouring governments or rebel movements seeking to advance their own agenda. Because the borders of the sub-region are porous and cut across ethnic identities, conflicts tend to spread easily from one country to another, producing serious economic, political, security and humanitarian implications for millions of people.

Sensitive border areas

2. As might be expected, those populations who live in the border areas adjoining countries undergoing or emerging from violent conflict are often especially affected by cross-border instability. The presence in these zones of armed groups, refugees, internally displaced people, returning or deported migrants and third country nationals who have fled tensions in their home countries, has had profound consequences for many host communities. The gap between rising demands and available resources regularly causes tensions and frustrations that, if unchecked, may spiral into communal violence. Food, water, and medicine are made more scarce; schools and health clinics overcrowded; and adequate sanitation facilities usually lacking. Also pronounced is the issue of youth unemployment: high population growth combined with lack of infrastructure development, investment and even informal sector activity have created ever-greater numbers of unemployed youths who can provide fertile recruiting ground for armed groups promising the rewards of pillage.

3. Porous borders, the limited capacity of security forces, and the inaccessibility of many border regions also make border zones particularly vulnerable to the spread and trafficking of drugs, small arms, mercenaries, child soldiers and women. Insecurity is often rife in areas where there are few checks on the activities of rogue armed groups. Other problems prevalent in these border areas include the proliferation of roadblocks (with a devastating effect on security and the free

movement of goods and peoples), widespread environmental degradation, social exclusion, especially for women, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, and the emergence of a culture of impunity with regards to human rights abuses.

4. Solving these problems will be both complex and costly. Because of their regional nature and impact, they are often well beyond the capacity of individual states to manage. They will instead require a concerted regional approach.

Integrated border strategies

5. Developing integrated regional strategies for stabilizing border areas in conflict-prone situations in West Africa will require working together on many levels and among many different sectors and areas of expertise: at grassroots, national, regional and international levels; linking government agencies with civil society, the private sector, neighbouring countries, development partners, the UN system. It also means identifying comparative advantages among different actors and ways to combine and build on these comparative advantages to tackle border problems more effectively. Trans-border cooperation can take many forms, and each border has a unique set of political, economic, humanitarian, security, and geographical realities, depending on the countries surrounding it and on the presence of conflict or war. But there are also general trends and historical circumstances that link different experiences. Integrated strategies for preventing conflict and building peace and security in one border area could provide important lessons and guidance for similar strategies to be implemented and replicated elsewhere.

Cross-border study

6. One year ago, UNOWA embarked on a major collaborative effort with its partners in the region to prepare the report requested from the Secretary-General by the Security Council, on *“Ways to combat subregional and cross-border problems in West Africa,”* in particular the proliferation of small arms and the use of child soldiers and mercenaries¹. The report was presented to the Security Council on 25 March, and a Presidential statement was issued.² During the debate, the Secretary-General noted that the report under discussion was the first one devoted specifically to those problems that cannot be tackled solely on a country-to-country basis and emphasized that implementing the recommendations contained in the report required a multi-faced regional approach.³ Following on this, the SRSG for West Africa convened a meeting in April with the UN system in the region, ECOWAS, development partners, and civil society representatives to discuss joint actions to take in response to each recommendation. A progress report for the Security Council is currently being prepared to this effect.

UNOWA/OCHA missions

7. Related to the ongoing work on cross-border sub-regional issues, UNOWA and OCHA have conducted joint field missions along some border areas of West

¹ S/2004/200

² S/PRST/2004/7

³ SG/SM9218, SC/8038, AFR/866

Africa.⁴ They noted an overall deterioration of the human security environment along the borders visited and, the emergence of hidden crises among host communities, internally displaced persons, returning and deported migrants and third country nationals who had fled the tensions in either Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia.

8. After being briefed about these missions, the Security Council mission to West Africa in June 2004, included the following paragraph in its official report:

“Many interlocutors raised their concerns about the special problems experienced by certain border zones in West Africa and the fact that they are often the first to be affected by neighbouring instability. Particularly sensitive areas include the Guinean province of Guinea Forestiere... and those provinces in Mali and Burkina Faso adjoining Cote d'Ivoire. **The mission recommends that the United Nations system work on integrated strategies in cooperation with the Governments concerned in dealing with the broad range of problems afflicting those areas in order to try to prevent conflict from spreading further.** These strategies would involve UNOWA, OCHA, the relevant UN country teams, the European Union and other development partners, and UN peace operations in countries from which much of the violence is exported.”⁵

Aims of the meeting

9. Further to the Security Council recommendations, UNOWA and OCHA formed a working group to ensure proper follow-up to this cross-border recommendation and also to the discussions on Guinea-Forestiere held with the UN Framework Team in NY this year, which included the UN Country Team in Guinea.⁶ The working group met in mid-July 2004 and discussed various ways of initiating a sub-regional and cross-thematic process for stabilizing certain sensitive border zones in West Africa and agreed on the need to convene a sub-regional meeting in Dakar in the coming months.

10. This first meeting seeks to achieve broad ownership of the process of tackling the special problems faced by border areas in an integrated fashion. More specifically, the meeting will look at ways to support UN country teams and other actors in the development of an inter-agency approach tailored to the specific needs of the populations of border areas with regard to conflict prevention, post-crisis recovery and emergency preparedness. Special attention will be paid to the political, security, economic and humanitarian impacts of the conflicts in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire on the border zones of neighbouring countries, namely: Guinea/Côte d'Ivoire/Liberia/Sierra Leone (especially Guinea-Forestiere); and Mali/Burkina Faso/Côte d'Ivoire. Emphasis will also be placed on the following border clusters: Senegal/Gambia/Guinea Bissau and Mauritania/Mali/Niger. The meeting will bring together participants from relevant United Nations country teams, peace operations

⁴ Guinea-Forestiere in January 2004 and Mali/CDI followed by Burkina Faso/CdI in June 2004.

⁵ Paragraph 58 of the Report of the Security Council mission to West Africa, 20-29 June 2004. S/2004/525.

⁶ Meeting of the UN Framework Team for Inter-departmental coordination on conflict prevention focusing on Guinea-Forestiere, 22 April 2004, NY.

and regional offices, the European Union and other development partners, ECOWAS, and selected civil society organizations.

11. An integrated border strategy might include the following broad components, on which some of the discussions may focus:

- **Security:** Small arms and light weapons; youth unemployment and lack of economic opportunities; impact of porous borders and overstretched security forces; joint border management; effects of cross-border ethnic links; armed rebel groups, crime and banditry.
- **Economic:** Collapse of the informal economy; losses in direct/indirect revenues; obstacles to free movement of persons and goods; monitoring of economic impacts of humanitarian crises occurring in a neighbouring country; infrastructure development and environmental measures to protect natural resources.
- **Political:** Impact of weak border management on the political structure of the state in question; overburdening of the administrative authorities; the weakening of local political authorities and of the respect for the rule of law along border areas; community-based culture of peace programs, including the role of traditional chiefs; the use of civil society organizations to promote peaceful border management; lack of international responses to impunity.
- **Humanitarian:** Impact on basic social services/infrastructures bordering areas of conflicts such as schools and health clinics; deterioration of the food security environment; the issue of diseases control and HIV-AIDS; the breakdown of traditional social behaviour; rapid deforestation and land-related tensions.

Meeting objectives

12.

- Secure agreement on the nature and scope of economic, security, socio-political and humanitarian issues plaguing border areas of West Africa;
- Take stock of the strategic and operational expertise of participants at the meeting, and establish networks for subsequent implementation of integrated strategies for particular border areas;
- Develop strategic recommendations and a sub-regional action plan for addressing problems affecting sensitive border areas of West Africa;
- Agree on elements of what should constitute an integrated strategy for each of the **four** border areas that will be discussed in working groups during the meeting.

Other ongoing border areas initiatives

13. The issue of sensitive border areas in West Africa is already of concern to many regional and international partners, including the UN system at large. For example, Guinea-Forestiere has been the focus of the UN Framework Team (FT) in NY. The FT convened a meeting in April 2004 to address the situation in this province, with the UN Country Team in Guinea asked to prepare a draft strategy paper which would then be discussed at a meeting of the Resident Coordinators in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, along with the Director of UNOWA.

14. Another example of an integrated approach that is being developed in regard to Guinea-Forestiere is the EU project *Linking Relief to Rehabilitation and Development*, a nationally-funded initiative concerned with the vulnerable situation of host communities in this border zone, in addition to refugees, third country nationals, and returnees. The overall objectives of the project are to promote socio-economic development and stability, improving also the relations between the populations of the Manu River Union countries. The EU's 25 million Euro project on Guinea-Forestiere is expected to begin in January 2005. Part of the funding will be channelled to local civil society organizations for implementation. There have also been several discussions with UNDP/Guinea about collaborating on various elements of the project. The EU is also seeking other partnerships, especially focusing on the regional dimensions.

15. Parallel to the work of the UN and the EU is the large sub-regional initiative undertaken by the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC), which focuses mainly on economic cross-border integration. The aim of the initiative is to boost economic development in the region through trans-border cooperation and integration, creating synergies between local and national economies and with ECOWAS. Their initiative "West African Borders and Integration" network (WABI) is a result of this type of collaboration across borders and within countries. It includes such partner organizations as ENDA/Diapol and the DNF (Direction Nationale des Frontières du Mali). SWAC also has a cooperation framework with the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja. A conference of the WABI network on "West African Borders and Integration," is planned for 26-28 October in Abuja this year, bringing together a large number of people from West African border areas.

16. The initiative by Club de Sahel is also related to the proposal by the Malian Government to establish an ECOWAS working group on cross-border cooperation, leading to a 'Crossborder areas monitoring facility' in West Africa. This facility would promote both economic trade and stability among countries and around border areas. Recommendations have already been developed in this regard, and the aim is to present the legal framework for this facility to the ECOWAS Heads of State Summit at the end of 2005.