

Public round table

Understanding the potential of defense and security forces (FDS) to prevent violent extremism in West Africa

Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday 13 December, 2022
Maison de la Paix, 9th floor, 15 :00-17 :45

SYNTHESIS

Given the limitations of military and security responses to violent extremism, has the response of prevention, which focuses on the multiple and complex causes that generate violence, been sufficiently explored? Can the defense and security forces (DSF) have a role in preventing violence? If so, do their mandate, culture and training prepare them for this? How and with whom can the DSF build a culture of dialogue? Where are the spaces for these exchanges to take place?

These were the questions posed by participants at a roundtable organized in Geneva on 13 December 2022 by the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). On that day, they presented the results of the comparative study on the [Review and Analysis of Policy, Legislative and Operational Frameworks for the Engagement of Defense and Security Forces \(FDS\) in the Prevention of Violent Extremism \(PEV\) in West Africa \(2020-2022\)](#).

This study, carried out between 2020 and 2022 in **seven West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Niger, Senegal and Togo)**, is part of the regional dialogue initiative led by Switzerland since 2016 in favor of violence prevention in West and Central Africa, which has already organized some forty meetings and workshops in recent years, involving more than 2000 people. Among other things, this program launched, in Dakar and with the Centre for Advanced Studies in Defense and Security (CHEDS) of Senegal, a series of regional seminars specifically devoted to the role of the DSF in the PVE. The study explicitly aimed to respond to the requests of the DSF in the region, expressed during these seminars, to better understand and compare the frameworks in which they operate. **This was in order to better understand the potential of the defense and security forces (DFS) to prevent violent extremism in West Africa.**

This work benefited from the participation of a dozen experts from the region who, alongside the DCAF and the Swiss FDFA experts, carried out the documentation gathering, the field surveys (more than 300 individual interviews in the seven countries), the comparative analysis of the engagement frameworks and finally, the drafting and validation of the results in the final report. To achieve this overall objective, the study sought to:

- To better understand how extreme violence undermines the experience and mandate of the DSF.
- To clarify how the DSF themselves can engage in a PVE process.
- To collect and analyze the frameworks for engagement of the DSF in PVE, be they political, legislative and operational.
- To strengthen the will and capacities of the DSF for such a commitment.
- To continue the dialogue with senior politicians, senior officers, civil society and researchers on their vision, experience and needs in the face of this challenge.

With this wealth of knowledge in their hands (the report contains 89 pages), **some 50 people took part in the round table**, which took place in an hybrid format and was opened by the representative of the Swiss FDFA, Ms. Andrea Aeby, and the representative of DCAF, Ms. Anne Bennett. Both emphasized that the results of this study, based on 2.5 years of work, constitute a unique material available to the authorities concerned and to practitioners in the region, so that new relations between the DSF and the population can be developed, which constitute the basis for the prevention of violence and the co-production of security.

Brief presentation of the results

The content of the report was then presented by two experts of the FDFA and the DCAF, who emphasized that **the essential tool of the PVE was the inclusive dialogue**, among others between the DSF and the populations, women and young people, and that the presentation of the study and the presence in the room of the numerous guests was an integral part of this dialogue. Furthermore, the report shows that although the causes of the VE (porous borders, weak state presence at the borders, weak capacity of the DSF to cover the national territory, ambiguous behavior of the DSF, links with criminal circles, expansion of illegal gold mining, political and decision-making exclusion) are better understood, **the security reading of these causes (rather than the socio-political one)** remains predominant. In fact, **the role of the DSF in the PVE is still very rarely explicitly included in policy, legislative and operational frameworks, and even less so in DSF training**, which hinders the integration of the prevention role in their mandates and practices. It is true that PVE strategies have been prepared in all countries, but generally without any concrete link to the role of the DSF, and similarly, although public security and defense policies are almost everywhere under review, they still rarely integrate the prevention dimension. This **siloed approach**, as well as the lack of linkage between security policy makers and senior DSF officials, which blurs the vision of security for those with that mandate, are among the obstacles to be overcome. Nevertheless, the study reveals that pragmatic steps have already been taken in many places, even if the momentum remains tentative and unstructured. **Local mechanisms for dialogue** and therefore PVE, such as security committees, exist and, in some cases, are effectively opened to civil society, which generally seeks this dialogue with the DSF. It was also noted that **civil-military activities** geared towards the needs of the population contribute to the easing of tensions. However, the necessary measures regarding the **training** of the DSF and public access to information have not yet been fully taken into account. In its final section, the report mentions **seven challenges and courses of action** and asks the fundamental question: **what is the real place of the DSF in our societies?**

Where to find the report:

https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/PVE_Report_EN.pdf

Panel and exchanges

To the question: "Can the DSF play a role in the prevention of VE?" the first speaker, General Guidiméy of Benin, clearly answered: not only can they, but they must. In reality, this dual role of prevention and repression is well established in the doctrines, but because of their history, the DSF tend to focus primarily on repressive measures. Given the seriousness of the violence that today affects not only the Sahel but also the Gulf of Guinea states, there is an opportunity to reactivate this preventive role. For this to happen, however, a clear political impetus is required, which must include this prevention function in the doctrines of use of forces as well as in training. In this way, current practices, such as community policing, civil-military actions, control and, if necessary, punishment of abusive behavior by the DSF, would be reinforced and would be fully in line with the mandate of the DSF to serve the population.

In the room, several participants expressed their doubts: if the military are above all in a logic of repression, and if today they even tend to arrogate power to themselves through coups d'état, will they be inclined to dialogue? Is it not illusory and difficult to reform oneself? In response to these

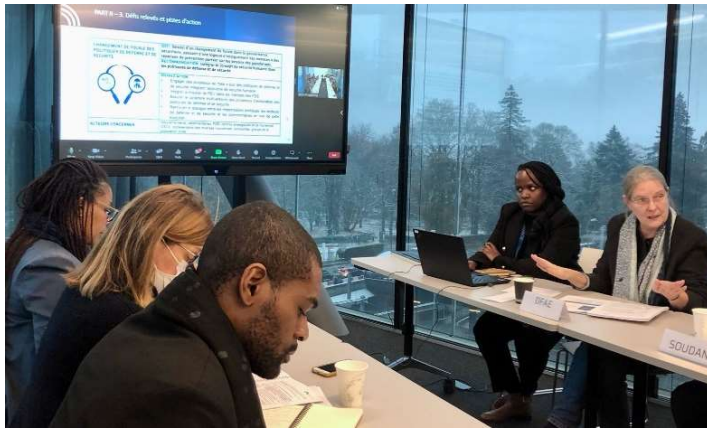
questions, the second speaker, Mr. Mahamoudou Savadogo from Burkina Faso, returned to the last words of the General: "If we include dialogue in the doctrine of use of the forces, they will do it." For as he explained, it is a question of the culture of the corps. Of course, it will take time, but it must be seen that at the beginning, the military were victims of a bad policy, which did not include dialogue in their "toolbox". Now that it is becoming less taboo, and more and more a real possibility, the time has come for the DSF to "learn to dialogue", through training, through awareness-raising within the corps, and also through the strengthening of inspection structures that contribute to the evolution of this culture

For all of this must serve, as Mrs. Madeleine Memb reminds us online from Cameroon, first and foremost to restore the population's confidence in the DSF, which is the only State presence in West and Central Africa, except in the capital and the major urban centers. Promoting proximity actions between the DSF and the population, and in particular with the women, is a necessary and salutary path. Listening to women, who are first and foremost mothers, wives, and sisters, about the needs of communities and youth, and working to meet those needs, would solve many of the problems that are at the root of this violence. But for this to happen, the DSF must learn not only to listen, to dialogue, but also to communicate. Their proverbial silence does them a disservice: their mandates are not well known, the reasons behind certain repressive actions are not well understood, and even the civil-military actions that they implement for the benefit of the population are not well known.

Reflecting on the role of women and gender in relation to security, the last speaker, Ms. Cristina Finch of DCAF, reminded us that it is also essential to base these new policies on empirical data, as well as on concrete examples, which demonstrate that the failure to take into account a part of the population (women) in various interventions sometimes leads to side effects that could be avoided by more inclusive approaches. Such work allows for a better understanding of the effective role of women in both VE and PVE - and for the deconstruction of stereotypes that hinder women's full engagement in these still very masculine fields.

Stimulated by these presentations, participants in the room and online recognized the benefit of this study in dotting the i's and crossing the t's, namely that this prevention role is indeed central to the DSF mandate. They felt that in reality, in most countries in the West and Central African region, the role of the DSF is paramount - they are often the symbol of the state for the people, and there is a need to fully shift the focus and unleash the full potential of their public service role. Asking that the results of this study be even more widely disseminated, including to the capitals concerned, the roundtable ended with a unanimous plebiscite: that Switzerland and the DCAF should provide support for the follow-up of the 7 recommendations resulting from the study.





Program

14 :30-15 :00	<i>Guests' arrival</i>
15 :00-15 :10	Welcome and presentation of agenda and panellists (former Amb. Jean Daniel Bieler)
15 :10-15 :20	Opening remarks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andrea AEBY, Peace and Security Advisor, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva • Anne BENNETT, Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Programme – DCAF
15 :20-16 :00	Presentation of key findings of the study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carol MOTTET, Senior Advisor, Peace and Human Rights Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs – FDFA, Suisse • Ariane INKESHA, Programme Coordinator – DCAF
16 :00-17 :30	Panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Général Améyi Célestin GUIDIMEY, Expert consultant, Vice President of the Presidential Committee for the Control of National Security Missions, Benin • Madeleine MEMB, MediaWomen4Peace, Cameroun (online) • Mahamadou SAVADOGO, Risk management specialist, consultant on violent extremism, Burkina Faso • Cristina FINCH, Head of the Gender and Security Division – DCAF <p>Moderator : former Amb. Jean Daniel Bieler</p> <p>Open discussions</p>
17 :30-17 :45	Closing remarks
17 :45	<i>Coffee</i>