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Field Notes

Armed Violence Reduction in Central Mali: A Community-based Approach

by Sonia Pezier [UNMAS] and Jean-Denis Larsen [DanChurchAid]

According to the Small Arms Survey, around 526,000 persons are killed every year as a result of armed violence, and many more sustain injuries requiring medical and rehabilitative care that severely impacts their lives.¹ In West Africa, the propagation of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) escalates armed conflicts and affects the security and the stability of the entire Sahel region.

In Mali, the proliferation of SA/LW leads to numerous incidents, mainly caused by intra- and inter-community violence and poor gun-storage practices at the household level.² In order to reduce these risks, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) launched a pilot project, which was implemented by DanChurchAid (DCA) from March 2014 to July 2015. The project aimed to improve the security situation and reduce tensions within and between communities in the region of Mopti (central Mali), which is affected by armed violence. It used a community-based approach to ensure ownership of the project by the community.

SA/LW Survey

A survey was first conducted in the Mopti region with the following objectives:

- * Report on the number of SA/LW stored in homes within the Mopti and Douentza districts
- * Conduct a needs assessment and inform the subsequent strategy for armed violence reduction (AVR) and SA/LW awareness through a thorough analysis of the scope and nature of the problems and their underlying causes. Establish a baseline for evidence-based impact monitoring of the activities in order to develop community-owned safety strategies and improve risk awareness.

The survey found that 17 percent of people consulted admitted to owning firearms. “Self-protection” figured highly in both self-reported and perceived reasons for firearms possession. The survey shows that an estimated 10 percent of the population was victim to armed violence in 2013. Participants identified road robberies, house burglaries and conflict between farmers and pastoralists as the three most significant concerns related to armed violence.

Attitudes toward disarmament were generally positive, although 50 percent of the respondents said that disarmament did not concern them or did not apply. While young males were most often identified as perpetrators of armed violence, women and youth were less in favor of disarmament than their elders (both men and women).

Community Safety Planning

After analyzing the results of this survey, the community safety planning (CSP) methodology was used to define activities and implement safer community action plans. By first selecting a community safety committee, the CSP method empowers communities to develop plans that they can implement themselves.³ This capacity-building approach to AVR programming consists of concrete activities aimed at empowering and improving the resilience of local populations in order to anticipate, analyze, prevent and manage threats to their security, as well as to respond to incidences of armed violence and conflict. The CSP method is participatory and places communities in control of all phases of the project cycle, from the initial assessments to the final evaluations. The results of the needs assessment identified a higher prevalence of armed violence in some areas than others, thus the project focused on the municipalities of Konna



A concert banner.
Photo courtesy of UNMAS.





An awareness leaflet.
Photo courtesy of UNMAS.

and Boroundougou (Mopti district), and Gandamia and Deberé (Douentza district).

Operational Achievements

The delivery of SA/LW risk education sessions was one of the project's cornerstones. The sessions promoted safe behaviors for at-risk groups and firearm owners. The project reached a total of 13,930 people (35 percent women and girls) in 20 villages and distributed 11,446 awareness leaflets. Both before and after the sessions, a sample of the beneficiaries received questionnaires to measure whether their knowledge and awareness toward SA/LW issues had increased.

Moussa Fofana, the village chief of Takoutal, remarked that the AVR project “has brought about many changes in the villages, one among all is the fact that children are no longer tempted to play with SA/LW and their ammunition: when they see something suspicious they go and inform their parents.”

In parallel, DCA distributed 120 wooden gun boxes to beneficiaries who legally possess a firearm, thus encouraging people to better secure their weapons, and thereby reducing accidents and loss of life. Each box contained a copy of Law N. 04-050 concerning firearms and ammunition ownership in Mali and an instruction leaflet on how to use the gun box.

Under the heading of *Jeunesse et musique face aux armes légères* (Youth and Music Against Small Arms), DCA aimed to empower youth to advocate for dialogue while raising awareness of the dangers and risks associated with SA/LW in an effort to discourage youth from arming themselves. A concert organized in December 2014 gathered more than 1,000 people; the national TV channel ORTM and local radio stations in Mopti and Douentza districts covered the event.

Another important component of the project was the creation or re-establishment of peace and mediation committees as well as surveillance committees. Peace and mediation committees are generally composed of religious leaders, traditional leaders such as the *forgerons* and *griots*, village chiefs and other influential community members. These committees handle family disputes and intra- and inter-community arguments, and therefore play a key role in promoting peace and forgiveness among the parties. The surveillance committees provide protection to the village through an early warning system mechanism, which includes reporting anything suspicious to the village chiefs and ensuring that unattended animals are not damaging the crops. These activities address the needs identified by the communities for a sustainable mechanism to settle conflicts.

Impact of The Project

At the end of the project, the AVR teams conducted an impact assessment in 20 target villages, which shows a three-fold impact.

Firstly, all participants recognized that the project significantly contributed to a reported decrease in security incidents and conflicts between communities. The target population noticed that relations and social cohesion between different social groups improved due to better dialogue and cooperation between the communities. The establishment of peace and mediation and surveillance committees helps the population to feel safer and has provided a means through which to share concerns. Conflicts are now managed at the village level, with security as the common goal. Moreover, the reduction of tensions and security incidents facilitated the movement of people and goods.



The 20 young artists before the concert.
Photo courtesy of DCA.

Awareness activities changed how people behave in regards to handling and storing SA/LW, and has helped to decrease the number of SA/LW accidents. The distribution of gun boxes helped increase safe weapons storage practices; the beneficiary communities are now aware of the Malian laws regulating SA/LW possession.

Moreover, the CSP methodology enabled a high level of local ownership of the project, which has empowered communities to take action and improve their own security through enhanced conflict management practices at the village level. The participatory approach and the involvement of women in the committees have also impacted gender perceptions. The Safer Community Committee members are now practicing their newfound skills in mediation, advocacy and SA/LW risk education.

Conclusion

Mali is facing several challenges linked to armed conflict, terrorist activities and intra-community violence. Armed violence reduction activities are a key enabler of stabilization and development efforts, especially in the central and northern regions of Mali. In line with the implementation priorities of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali signed in June 2015, such a project should be considered good practice for restoring social cohesion amongst communities as it complements peace education and effective security and justice mechanisms. ©

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