

Public round table

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

Cotonou, Benin, 12 September 2022
Golden Tulip Hotel, 10:00-13:30

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 Cotonou on 12 September 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 in 2020 and 2021 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, 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 presented in Cotonou. 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 60 people took part in the round table**, which was opened by the Director of Cabinet of the Minister of the Interior and Public Security of Benin. For him, the DSF represent the ultimate recourse against extreme violence. Aware that VE has already infiltrated Beninese society, he is counting on numerous reforms of the security sector (modernisation, adaptation, strengthening of equipment and human capital) to prevent it from spreading and to develop new relations between the DSF and the population, which are 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 representatives of the FDFA and the DCAF, who emphasised 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 reading of the threats, the organization of the envisaged responses and the interactions between texts and practices are different in each country, there is an increasing **concordance of security policies in the countries of the region**. The example of Burkina Faso and its late awareness of the importance of the threat serves as a precedent for the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. 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 according to the results of the study. States strive to secure their borders but too often use the population as an intelligence auxiliary. Furthermore, **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 **siload 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

Exchanges

The ensuing debate, launched by four panelists from Benin, Togo and Burkina Faso, was very lively and highlighted a number of points:

The DSF do not form a compact whole but are composed of **entities with different functions**, which often makes it difficult to coordinate their actions. Through their diversity, they are nevertheless also responsible for the dual functions of defense and security, but also for protection and development through their civil-military activities. However, they have not yet overcome the **negative image** they have among certain parts of the population. It has been said that “a police force that is frightening deprives itself of the collaboration of citizens, which is essential for the balance of society”. The DSF should talk to the population, that is what the population expects. “The police are the public and the public are the police”.

The debate then focused on the **limits of DSF action and military solutions**, the adaptability of security actors to asymmetric warfare, the creation of special forces in the countries of the region and the **pooling of fighting resources at regional level**. Another issue that was mentioned several times was the need to encourage the rapprochement of border populations on both sides of the border. Is this possible if at the same time the borders are set up as shields? As for the **community police** (and there was a lot of talk about it), it is based on a way of doing things, a working method. It is not a constituted body. For many people, it is one of the central tools for the protection and prevention of violence, because it enables new relations to be established with the population and the wall of mistrust and fear to be broken down.

The need to reverse the traditional priorities was stressed: **the DSF** have a new role to play, they have to be more proactive and accept to take into account (and at the same time make it understood) that **security was everyone's business**. But for this to happen, relations between the DSF and politicians, which are often distant, must change. **The top brass must also make proposals in the field of PVE**, that politicians, who are not security professionals, can integrate into their decisions. It is through this dialogue that the DSF can be provided with an innovative framework that can promote the evolution of their mandate towards human security.

So if the military response does not always work, it is because **armies are trained to wage war** and it is difficult for them to respond to new threats in other ways. It has been said that the fear of the policeman is the beginning of wisdom. Is this still true today, when VEs are beginning to infiltrate the population? There is currently **no teaching of PVE in DSF's schools or training centers**. For the DSF, it is difficult to understand the PVE. Therefore, **training of the DSF** was considered essential. It was also suggested to integrate PVE units or positions within the DSF, according to the modalities of the different corps. But more broadly, there is a need to educate both the DSF and the population about their respective roles in the security of the nation. **Teaching the actors to work together and to dialogue** will help to restore the confidence and support of the population, with whom it is useful to create strategic partnerships.

Women and young people are still too absent from the production of security; there are not enough female personnel in the DSF. They must therefore act on their own and thus help the actors who provide security to be better understood, accessible and responsive to the needs of the community. Special mention was made of the **herders**, who were said to be more afraid of the military than of the jihadists. On his side, the soldier is also afraid when he sees a farmer in his field or a shepherd, not knowing if he may be dealing with an element of an armed group?. We must therefore **reassure both sides**. On the ground, the DSF must adapt to this situation. **The PVE is no longer an option, it is a necessity**. When there is confidence, many problems are solved.

The perception of **injustice**, the biased treatment of cases in court, the bad behaviour of judges, the abuses and harassment of the DSF break the confidence of the population in the state and its representatives, and encourage the recruitment of young people and support for VE groups.

Finally, returning to the texts, it was mentioned that about ten frameworks require a **legislative review** because the doctrines of the DSF have not changed since independence. The concept of human security must be integrated into national defense and security policies.

In conclusion, it was said that **we are all custodians of the answer** and that the experiences of Mali and Burkina Faso should be useful for the Gulf of Guinea countries. To this end, a multi-stakeholder dialogue platform is fundamentally necessary because "it is the sons of the nation who are among the VEs". This is partly the reason for the existence of the **Association for Peace and Prevention of Violent Extremism in the Gulf of Guinea countries - APEV-P2G Benin**.



Program

09 :30-10 :00	Arrival, coffee and installation of guests
10 :00-10 :10	Welcome and introduction of the program and panelists
10 :10-10 :40	Opening of the round table <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H. E. Mr Jean-Daniel BIELER, former Ambassador, Counsellor, Peace and Human Rights Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs - DFAE, Switzerland • Anne BENNETT, Director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Program, Centre for Security Sector Governance - DCAF • Mr Abasse OLOSSOUMARE, Director of Cabinet representing the Minister of the Interior and Public Security of Benin
10 :40-11 :00	Group photo
11 :00-11 :30	Presentation of the main results of the study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carol MOTTET, Senior Advisor, Peace and Human Rights Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs - FDFA, Switzerland • Ariane INKESHA, Program Coordinator, Centre for Security Sector Governance - DCAF
11 :30-13 :00	Panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Amèyi Célestin GUIDIMEY, Expert consultant, Vice-president of the Presidential Committee for the Control of National Security Missions, Benin • Nakmak Michel DOUTI, Expert Consultant Security Sector Governance, Togo • Colonel Faïzou GOMINA, Deputy Chief of Staff of the National Guard, Benin • Sandrine NAMA, Coordinator, Justice and Security Dialogue USIP, Burkina Faso <p>Facilitation: Dr. Oswald PADONOU, President of the Beninese Association for Strategic and Security Studies – ABESS, Benin</p> <p>Discussions</p>
13 :00-13 :15	Closing
13 :15-14 :15	Refreshments and press briefing