

Countering Armed Social Violence in Guinea-Bissau

The Case of the Model Police Station in Bairro Militar

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1 Introduction*

Bernardo Arévalo de León and Ana Glenda Tager argue that peacebuilding’s inclusive and participatory methodologies may offer stakeholders a better basis for effectively addressing armed social violence than standard security and development approaches. These traditional approaches are rather limited, according to the authors: while security approaches tend to rely on “technical” law enforcement measures that fall short of addressing the structural causes of societal violence (e.g. policing, prosecution and incarceration), development approaches yield, at best, “pockets of stability and peace” that fail to connect and produce a broader societal impact.

The authors thus suggest that peacebuilding methodologies, which focus on “long-term, endogenous and holistic processes of conflict transformation” (Arévalo de León/Tager 2016, 16), may help to overcome these limitations by allowing “a highly granular, context-specific understanding” (ibid., 2) of violence and the collaborative mobilisation of stakeholders, both in state structures and in civil society. This granular understanding, according to the authors, can only be attained by factoring in the perspectives of all actors involved at the national level (victims, perpetrators, state officials, civil society) and international level (bilateral and multilateral agencies, international non-governmental organisations). They suggest that participatory methods which combine research and dialogue, e.g. participatory research, can produce insightful understandings of complex realities and map systemic linkages.

Our response explores the application of these participatory and community-informed approaches in the context of Guinea-Bissau, where a community-based policing model, the Model Police Stations (MPS), had its genesis in participatory research. Participatory research has also informed activities in other areas, such as the prevention of gender violence. In 2011, for example, a comprehensive portrayal of the violence against women in the country resulted from the combination of quantitative data with qualitative research on perceptions (see Roque 2011).

In our response, we focus on the MPS in Bairro Militar as it is more connected to the fight against organised crime, explored by Arévalo de León and Tager in the lead article. The design and implementation of the MPS followed the identification of issues such as lack of policing, low public trust in the police and access to drugs as key problems affecting Bairro Militar, a neighbourhood in Bissau. The identification of these problems, as well as the proposed solution (namely the MPS, which is rooted in a community policing approach) involved national authorities, community representatives of Bairro Militar and external partners.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the Bissau-Guinean context, which has been marked by constant fragility in its political, socio-economic and institutional structures. We subsequently focus on the connections between the structural forms of violence¹ in Guinea-Bissau in the context of organised crime. We then review the Model Police Station as an initiative designed on the basis of participatory research. While this example is small in scale, we believe it can be instructive for designing more inclusive participatory institutions as called for in the lead article by Arévalo de León and Tager. It also points to potential stumbling blocks in the political environment.

* The views expressed in this article are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views and positions of the United Nations.

1 Structural violence refers to the social and systemic conditions leading to injustice and exploitation, with unequal distribution of power and resources across society (Galtung 1996).

2 Fragility in Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau's political and institutional fragility is persistent: four coups d'état have taken place since 1974, the latest one in April 2012. The dismissal of three governments in less than one year (between August 2015 and May 2016) is just one recent example of its continuing instability. According to socio-economic indicators, the country is one of the least developed in the world, ranking 178th out of 188 countries surveyed in the latest Human Development Report (UNDP 2015).

According to a strategic assessment mission dispatched to Guinea-Bissau by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2014, the root causes of its instability lie in four interrelated factors. First, there are the *political-military dynamics* in the country, where, since the end of the independence struggle, the armed forces have had a disproportionate influence on civilian and political life by shifting alliances, influencing decision-making and toppling democratically elected governments. Divisions within Bissau-Guinean society have been exacerbated by these longstanding dynamics. The second factor is the *ineffectiveness of state institutions and the lack of rule of law*, which results from the monopolisation of the state by the political-military elite and has led to the de facto abolition of the separation of powers and a huge gap between state and society. The third factor is *poverty and lack of access to basic state services*, particularly for women and youth, stemming from the weakness of state institutions that are unable to deliver services to the public. Finally, the fourth factor relates to *impunity and human rights violations*, consequences of the country's weak security and justice institutions and the lack of public trust in the justice system (UN 2015, paragraphs 42-53). Combined, these factors create the conditions for continued instability and lack of socio-economic development in Guinea-Bissau.

Against this backdrop, public perceptions of safety and security continue to decline, along with the capacities of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to protect human rights and combat impunity. According to the latest figures from the Global Peace Index, for example, the country displayed high indicators relating to the perception of criminality, homicide rate and violent crime, all ranking 4 on a scale of 1 to 5.²

3 Organised crime as an expression of social armed violence

When summarising the common trends emerging from two empirical expressions of armed social violence, namely urban violence and organised crime, Arévalo de León and Tager referred to Guinea-Bissau (Box 3 in the lead article on page 12) to illustrate their discussion on where “stabilisation and development efforts ... are endangered by international drug gangs encroaching on [the country's] security apparatus” (ibid., 7) and posing risks to human development and post-conflict reconstruction goals. In this section, we briefly outline the challenge posed by organised crime, particularly drug trafficking, in Guinea-Bissau.

Criminal activities associated with illicit drug trafficking started to thrive in Guinea-Bissau in the early 2000s. At that time, as the European market for cocaine gradually expanded and the North American market started to slow down, criminal networks took advantage of the country's political and institutional fragility to illegally transport drugs from South America to Europe (Van Riper 2014). It has been reported

² Global Peace Index, see: www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/global-peace-index [accessed 31 May 2016]. On Guinea-Bissau, see: www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/global-peace-index/2016/GNB/OVER.

that Bissau-Guinean politicians, businessmen and military leaders alike reached out to international criminal networks as a source of funding for their own patronage networks, allowing international drug traffickers to use military facilities and the largely uninhabited islands of the Bijagós archipelago for undetected criminal activities (Kemp et al. 2013; Ellis/Shaw 2015). This has created an intricate web of relationships between some politicians and elements of the military and security forces that benefited all those involved to the detriment of the population at large, which continued to receive little or no basic assistance from the state.

Researchers have characterised a mutually beneficial relationship between international criminal networks and the political-military elites of Guinea-Bissau as a “bargain” in which “incumbent politicians close their eyes to the illicit activities that the security establishment uses to fund itself, while the security establishment agrees to limit its political interventions in the shape of coups and the like” (Ellis/Shaw 2015, 524). This bargain was made possible by the persistence of the root causes of instability outlined above, particularly the ineffectiveness and dire conditions of state institutions and the lack of rule of law.

These conditions included a dilapidated police infrastructure, unregulated police recruitment practices, weak police presence outside the capital Bissau, and low levels of training and wages for police officers (Kohl 2015). In this context, poorly paid civil servants and law enforcement agents became easily susceptible to bribery and corruption by growing networks of patronage that profited from international drug trafficking in the 2000s. Public trust in the administration in general and the police institutions in particular remained understandably low.

4 UN peacebuilding efforts in Guinea-Bissau: the Model Police Station in Bairro Militar

Efforts by national and international stakeholders to address the root causes of instability in Guinea-Bissau are ongoing. As part of these efforts, the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) has been mandated to support inclusive national dialogue and national reconciliation, assist in the implementation of security sector reform, and support national authorities in the mobilisation, harmonisation and coordination of international assistance (UN Security Council Resolution 2267, paragraph 2). As part of its activities in the area of security sector reform, UNIOGBIS assists national authorities in modernising security institutions and in strengthening the rule of law. This includes providing strategic and technical advice to Bissau-Guinean stakeholders in implementing national security sector reform and rule of law strategies, for example through support and advice on the review of national laws, internal policies and standard operating procedures of law enforcement agencies and through training and mentoring for law enforcement agents.

One of the initiatives supported by UNIOGBIS in the area of security sector reform and rule of law was the establishment of a Model Police Station (MPS) in Bairro Militar, a neighbourhood in the country’s capital. We believe that the establishment of the MPS is a real-world example of the application of aspects of the peacebuilding methodologies proposed by Arévalo de León and Tager, focusing on actions based on communities’ needs. The MPS in Bairro Militar was the first of 12 stations planned for strategic locations across the country, both in urban and in rural areas. An initial urban setting enabled a larger range of

stakeholders to participate than would have been possible in rural areas. The model would require further adaptation in border areas due to the need for transnational commitments on security.

The MPS model had its genesis in participatory research that assessed the perceptions of security/insecurity of a wide cross-section of the community residing in Bairro Militar (see Sani/Nunes 2013). The community involvement was a response to the government's request for international support in building police stations throughout the country. Previous international contributions lacked a participatory assessment process ahead of funding commitments. The research was undertaken by a team based at a Portuguese university in response to a request from national authorities and UNIOGBIS. The location for the research was chosen due to its relatively large and diverse population and reported high crime rates. While the results of the survey carried out by the research team in Bairro Militar showed a sharp polarisation of participants' perceptions of security and insecurity (49.5 per cent and 50.5 per cent, respectively), the arguments expressed by respondents who felt safe and by those who felt insecure focused largely on policing issues. For example, 24.5 per cent of respondents noted that the presence of the police was reassuring and 22.8 per cent of respondents identified scarce or insufficient policing as the main cause of insecurity in the neighbourhood (Sani/Nunes 2013). As a result, and based on the community's inputs, the researchers recommended the adoption of measures aimed at empowering citizens and at training law enforcement agents (*ibid.*, 59). Beyond the initial survey, the training itself was to be carried out and customised with the involvement of the community.

To address the public's concerns, and based on the findings of the research, UNIOGBIS and national authorities jointly developed a proposal for the establishment of Model Police Stations across the country. The MPS were rooted in the community policing paradigm, which combines "*consultation* with community members, *responsiveness* to their security needs, collective *problem solving* to identify the most appropriate means of meeting these needs, and the *mobilization* of the public to make all this happen" (Grabosky 2009a, 1). Having achieved positive results in other post-conflict scenarios (see Grabosky 2009b, covering Papua New Guinea, Cambodia and South Africa, among others), the application of the community policing paradigm in Guinea-Bissau was thought to bridge the perceived wide gap between law enforcement agents and the public. The change sought was to introduce national law enforcement agents to a philosophy of policing *with* and *for* the community, based on a more preventive than reactive approach.

The MPS in Bairro Militar opened in September 2011. The participatory approach was extended to the training on community policing, not only to enhance the capacities of police officers but also to establish partnerships between the Bairro Militar community, non-governmental organisations and the business sector. During participatory training, residents of Bairro Militar were invited to participate and discuss with trainees (national law enforcement agents) issues affecting the security of their community.

The exchange between residents and the police was intended to create the space for solutions to address the needs of the former within the limited resources of the latter, including the fight against drug trafficking. In the city of Bissau, the Bairro Militar has the second largest population (14%) of drug consumers between the ages of 15 and 25. Of the entire population surveyed in a 2013 study in that age group, 17% stated that they obtained funds from trafficking drugs (C6 Jr 2013, 53-55).

The government of Guinea-Bissau has recognised the need to involve civil society organisations working on crime prevention to reach a common understanding on cooperative activities (Republic of Guinea-Bissau 2011). From that perspective, it was hoped that the MPS would not only benefit the communities where they were established but would also serve as an entry point for and as an example of the larger process of security sector reform in the country (Kohl 2015).

According to data obtained from interviews with officers at the Model Police Station in Bairro Militar in July 2016, crime statistics covering the period between 2013 and mid-2015 do not allow a straightforward correlation to be established between the effectiveness of this approach and a reduction in drug trafficking or social violence. The number of reported drug-related offences was constant in 2013 and 2014, and fell by half by mid-2015. However, there was then a fourfold increase by mid-2016. The difficulty in establishing

a correlation stems from two factors. First, the increase in reported crimes coincides with a transitional period following a coup d'état in April 2012, which formally ended with general elections in May 2014. However, the new government which came to power in July 2014 was dismissed in August 2015, and political instability has returned to the country to date. Given the constant replacement of decision-makers on the side of the government, including police commanders, it becomes difficult to determine, with any degree of accuracy, the extent to which the MPS approach to community policing may have affected crime rates in Bairro Militar. The second factor is the difficulty in attributing the increase in crime reporting to the participatory approach as creating a greater willingness on the part of the community to report crime (Truman/Langton 2015, 7) or to a greater ability, through training of police officers, to document those crimes effectively.

It is beyond the scope of this response to juxtapose the participatory model advocated by Arévalo de León and Tager against the timeline of Guinea-Bissau's instability and the dynamics of drug trafficking in the same period. However, according to an external assessment, the MPS in Bairro Militar and the training provided to law enforcement agents have so far had only a limited impact owing to their "too abstract and superficial" nature and their inability to accurately reflect local dynamics and attract sufficient attention from beneficiaries (Kohl 2015, 27). While the training provided was quite specific in some areas (such as investigation techniques and reporting), it also covered matters of broad interest, such as human rights and gender mainstreaming which may be perceived by some trainees as somehow lofty concepts. It is, however, important to recall that the MPS's potential as part of larger security sector reform efforts in the country is still to be realised, particularly considering that the establishment of 11 other police stations across the country was suspended following the coup d'état in April 2012. Despite a return to constitutional order in 2014, the non-replication of this model until recently (a new MPS for the south of the country received international funding in May 2016) illustrates the challenges in translating a community-based approach to a nationwide policy commitment to address social violence.

5 Outlook: model replication

We have discussed the application of participatory and inclusive peacebuilding methodologies, as advocated by Arévalo de León and Tager, by focusing on the establishment of an MPS in a neighbourhood of Bissau as one element of UNIOGBIS's larger strategy to support national authorities in strengthening state institutions, including in the security sector. The MPS represents just one instance in which national authorities, international stakeholders and civil society participated jointly in designing an initiative to address the fragility of rule of law and security institutions and thus improve the prospects for stability and development in the country.

The impact of this multi-stakeholder approach was influenced by successive changes of government since the MPS came into operation (2011 to date), accompanied by interruptions or delays in international support. The MPS's results in addressing drug trafficking in the city of Bissau remain embryonic and the replication of this model would require a controlled qualitative and quantitative assessment of the contribution it can make in the Bissau-Guinean context. For the time being, the MPS illustrates an application of the peacebuilding approach in Guinea-Bissau's security sector reform, but has yet to connect and produce a broader societal impact. The connection between community-oriented problem solving and the formulation of national security policies, however, remains dependent on factors beyond the community itself, including political stability and economic development.

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