# RESILIENCE TO ORGANIZED CRIME IN GUINEA-BISSAU

Lucia Bird and A. Gomes





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# INTRODUCTION: ENGAGEMENT IN GUINEA-BISSAU

ith a population of just 2 million, Guinea-Bissau is one of the smallest countries in Africa, dwarfed by the continent's major urban centres. However, the country has experienced a disproportionate share of conflict and instability, much of which has been linked to the growth of the transnational cocaine trade through West Africa, facilitated by Guinea-Bissau's political and military elite.

Since the early 2000s, Guinea-Bissau has become associated with high levels of illicit activity. A drought of cocaine seizures between 2013 and 2019 suggested that the country's role as a transit point for cocaine trafficked from Latin America to end markets in Europe had diminished, but two major seizures in 2019 underscored its continued prominence in regional and international trafficking dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

Illicit markets have a prominent role in shaping the economic and social development of Guinea-Bissau,

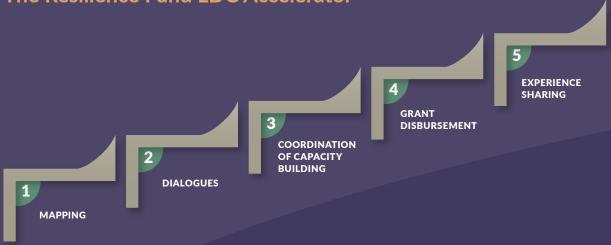


▲ Community members attend a workshop in Gabú as part of the LDC Accelerator programme in Guinea-Bissau, December 2020.

where 67 per cent of the population live in poverty, and the country has a fragmented civil society with low awareness of illicit markets and corruption. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Resilience Fund, through its targeted programme of support to least developed countries (LDCs), focused on mapping civil society in Guinea-Bissau and bolstering community awareness of illicit markets, with a long-term objective of building a foundation for further support to civil society. The programme, named LDC Accelerator, was funded by the government of Norway and supported the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in Guinea-Bissau, a joint GI-TOC and UN Development Programme initiative launched in 2020.

This document outlines the current landscape of civil society in Guinea-Bissau and offers a snapshot of the work undertaken through the LDC Accelerator programme. Supporting civil society is now more important than ever, as citizens continue to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its countermeasures, and face increased pressure from state institutions seeking to silence critical voices.

### The Resilience Fund LDC Accelerator



Organized crime and criminal governance have serious implications for development and security in least developed countries. This is attributable to the increased vulnerabilities of many communities in such countries and to the weaknesses of state institutions. Civil society struggles to play a strong role in responding to organized crime, as it is often fragmented and underdeveloped, and its knowledge base regarding the illicit economy is limited. In some contexts, the space for civil society is shrinking, with key community organizers and activists finding themselves directly under threat.

The LDC Accelerator programme was designed to address these challenges. In addition to Guinea-Bissau, the programme has supported initiatives in Haiti, Liberia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Initial stages included mapping the existing civil society capacity; organizing preliminary engagement and workshops; conducting community resilience dialogues; coordinating tailored capacity-building activities; and disbursing grants to financially support civil society partners.

### **Civil society under pressure**

Civil society organizations have long played an important role in bringing communities into the national discourse, enabling civic participation in elections, providing electoral monitoring and holding judicial institutions to account.<sup>2</sup> 'Corruption is preventing [Guinea-Bissau] from effectively securing the basic needs of citizens. As a result, citizens are completely abandoned,' said Augusto Mário da Silva from the NGO Human Rights League.<sup>3</sup> 'Promoting peace in a context of permanent instability' is civil society's role in Guinea-Bissau, he said, pointing to the cycles of political violence that hinder the country's economic development.

Civil society organizations have also been active in the education and cultural sectors, and more recently, they have started to engage with environmental crime issues, for example by monitoring illicit logging and the sale of illicit logging permits at a national level. According to Udé Fati, head of the NGO Voz de Paz, civil society in the country is at a critical turning point. She pointed to an 'awakening

of awareness' among communities and an increased focus on governance, emphasizing that this could bring significant changes.<sup>4</sup>

GI-TOC fieldwork in other countries has shown that the role of civil society as a counterpoint to elite capture of illicit activities is strengthened by enhancing its relationship with law enforcement. In 2019, there was evidence in Guinea-Bissau of growing ties between civil society activists and law enforcement officers, which proved pivotal in strengthening criminal justice mechanisms. However, cooperation between the two sectors remains limited and concerns regarding the politicization of the judicial police – who has historically had the strongest relationship with civil society – is undermining relationship building. Enhancing debate around illicit markets and their impacts, not only among community members but also with law enforcement and government officials, is central to counter this.

The media also plays an important role in supporting and informing communities. However, media organizations in Guinea-Bissau are weakly developed and underfunded. Many representatives of the press lack objectivity and are often financially dependent on political backers, operating as mouth-pieces rather than critical and independent voices. Although few are entirely free of allegiance to political positions, elements of the press have demonstrated a greater ability to offer commentary on unfolding events and grant communities better insight into political developments. Veteran journalists in Guinea-Bissau expressed hope that the 'new generation' of journalists, using tools such as social media channels, will increase coverage of political events.<sup>7</sup>

Yet civil society, and in particular media organizations, are under growing pressure from the government. In the political upheaval of early 2020, the national broadcaster was temporarily suspended and a number of journalists were assaulted. Media rights groups cite the January 2021 suspension of a journalist from state television – reportedly for failing to interview President Umaro Sissoco Embaló at a ceremonial football match – as one of many instances of political pressure on the country's media.<sup>8</sup> Assaults on journalists peaked in March 2021, including the brazen abduction and beating of Aly Silva, a well-known blogger in the country.<sup>9</sup> A number of journalists now report increased self-censorship to avoid retaliation.

For many Bissau-Guineans, radio is the primary means of news consumption. The president has threatened to shut down a number of radio stations and reporters have been threatened with detention. The privately owned Radio Capital FM has come under particular pressure; its headquarters in Bissau were destroyed in March 2020 and later rebuilt with funding provided by the Bissau-Guinean diaspora. (In February 2022, in the wake of an attack on the governmental palace labelled a failed coup by the government, the building was again destroyed.)

Although repression of the press occurs in waves in Guinea-Bissau – typically heightening during periods where the legitimacy of the government is questioned – most stakeholders point to a particularly severe crackdown on press freedom since early 2020. <sup>11</sup> The worsening landscape for media freedom is reflected in Guinea-Bissau's low rankings on international indices. <sup>12</sup> Supporting media organizations and the wider civil society in Guinea-Bissau is central to accelerate the country's development.

# TARGETED ACTION: RESILIENCE DIALOGUES

he Observatory of Illicit Economies in Guinea-Bissau coordinated five community resilience dialogues in four regions of the country in 2020 and 2021. Community discussion around illicit markets has historically been limited in Guinea-Bissau, and information sharing between community members and local government – particularly law enforcement – is low. Predatory behaviours among the police have eroded trust, leaving communities with no recourse to justice when facing crime and corruption.

The dialogues were coordinated in partnership with local civil society organizations seeking to enhance their work on topics relating to illicit markets and with a significant footprint in the region. Each included elements of capacity building, with representatives of civil society and the state speaking on different topics relating to illicit markets, together with focus group discussions tailored to the region.

The dialogues sought to create a safe space for exchange between individuals who typically cannot openly discuss the impact of illicit markets. Speakers and participants were selected to ensure representation across society, including within marginalized groups.<sup>13</sup> The dialogues focused on empowering community members who lack a voice in society, including women and youth, to share their perspectives. The locations of the dialogues were strategically chosen, taking into account the key illicit markets in the regions and ensuring engagement with communities of different ethnicities and cultures across Guinea-Bissau.

As the GI-TOC's first engagement with communities in the country, these dialogues were intended to create a foundation and to provide insight into the level of awareness among each community regarding illicit markets and corruption. These preliminary engagements will inform further work with civil society partners and community members, enabling follow-up action to be tailored to fit the relevant context.

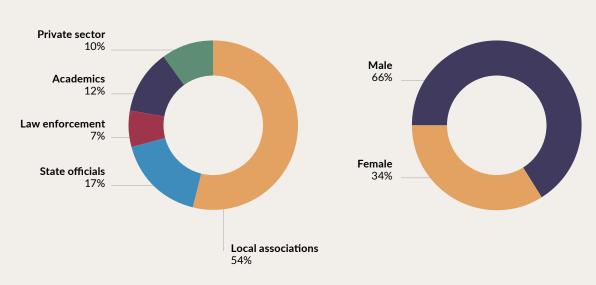
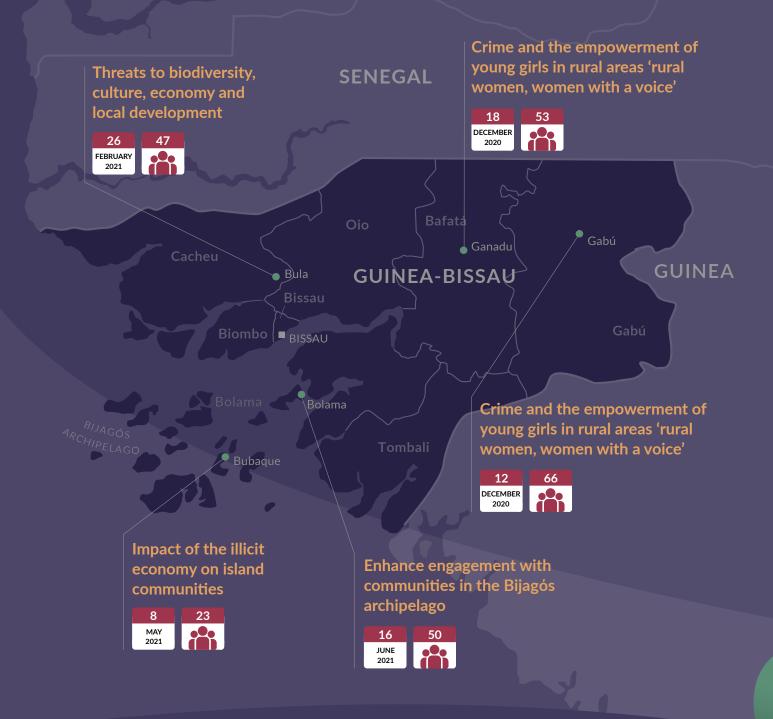


FIGURE 1 Stakeholder and gender breakdown of participation in the dialogue events.

## COMMUNITY DIALOGUE EVENTS: BUILDING CIVIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH ILLICIT MARKETS

### THE GAMBIA





▲ Participants at the resilience dialogue in Gabú, December 2020.

### Gabú

At the far east of Guinea-Bissau, the Gabú region borders Senegal and Guinea, which shapes its role as a transit area for goods and people, and makes smuggling of commodities a key element of the informal economy. Gabú, whose residents are mostly of Fula ethnicity, is predominantly Muslim. Particularly since early 2020, there have been reports of growing religious extremism in the region.

Gabú is afflicted by high levels of illicit logging, with devastating economic consequences. Participants at the dialogue reported that *forôdo*, meaning 'smuggling or trafficking' in the Fula language spoken by the majority of Gabú residents, is institutionalized and seen as legitimate. These factors, and particularly the intersection between illicit markets and potential instability, make it an important site for community engagement.

Community members noted that the dialogue was unusual in the range of participants and frankness of the discussion. Female participants made significant contributions to the debate. 'It is very important that we [women] are considered an important link for the chain of solutions against crime, we are active and concerned members of society that deserve to be heard, even if this is considered a man's subject', said one participant.

State officials and civil society representatives based in Gabú exchanged phone numbers with community members and encouraged participants to report concerning events, including illicit felling of trees, acts of violence and corruption. Although a small step, this was key for enhancing communication and engagement between state representatives and members of civil society.



Community members gather in Ganadu to discuss how to build resilience to organized crime, December 2020.

### **Bafatá**

Bafatá is the second largest city in Guinea-Bissau, with around 10 000 inhabitants. It is located in the interior of the country on the banks of the Geba River and it presents considerable levels of criminality. The dialogue held in Ganadu, in the Bafatá region, focused on empowering rural women and reinforcing their role as promoters of peace and development. Speakers discussed the smuggling and trafficking of commodities, illicit logging and child trafficking.

Community members recounted waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of chainsaws as trees were felled without their consent and, most importantly, without accruing any benefits derived from the logging. When they asked those involved in the felling for permits, they procured documents issued by the country's Environment and Nature Protection Brigade (BPNA), pointing to possible state involvement in the practice. Participants highlighted the importance of community radio as a means to enhance awareness of logging practices among the community.

With regards to child trafficking, participants highlighted the practice of Talibé children, in which children are recruited from rural communities and sent abroad to study the Koran, as there are perceptions that studying the Koran abroad (predominantly in Senegal) has more value than receiving that education within the community. Although the practice is mainly focused on ensuring a Koranic education for children, most spend the majority of their time abroad begging for income to support their Koranic masters. Participants suggested the inclusion of Koranic teaching within community school education as one approach to counter this practice.

Participants shared a feeling of helplessness in the face of the challenges that illicit markets posed to their communities and said that additional awareness built through the dialogue was a step forward in empowering them to take a proactive stance against criminality.



▲ Participants of the Cacheu resilience dialogue, Bula, February 2021.

### Cacheu

In the north-west of Guinea-Bissau, the Cacheu region is one of the most heavily affected by illicit logging in the country. In addition, a major road connecting the capital, Bissau, with Senegal passes through the region, which is transited by significant volumes of cocaine trafficked out of Guinea-Bissau. North of Cacheu, the separatist Casamance region in Senegal is a pivotal transit zone not only for cocaine but for a myriad of illicit flows. Villagers in Cacheu report that separatist fighters sometimes flee into Guinea-Bissau and inhabitants have repeatedly been destabilized by the longstanding conflict across the border.

The dialogue held in Bula, Cacheu, explored the nature and impacts of illicit markets in the region, most prominently illicit logging. Participants highlighted the involvement of state institutions – namely the National Guard (a militarized element of the police force) and the BPNA – in illicit logging activities. Community members also pointed to the collusion of some community leaders with actors engaged in illicit logging activities. One state official expressed particular concern regarding the surge in illicit logging activities in the Bigene area and noted that community protests against the logging had been severely quashed by law enforcement.

Participants also expressed concern regarding the cultivation of cannabis in the region and the harms caused by the trafficking and sale of counterfeit medicines. They voiced deep distrust of state institutions, doubting their capacity and will to govern in a manner that benefitted them. They also highlighted the importance of mechanisms for denouncing criminality and corruption, and identified high levels of youth unemployment as a key risk factor leading to involvement in illicit markets.



Participants of the resilience dialogue in the island of Rubane included law enforcement officers and community members.

### **Bubaque and Bolama**

Dialogues held in the islands of Bolama and Rubane, near Bubaque, sought to enhance engagement with communities in the Bijagós archipelago, a vulnerable entry point for cocaine imports into the country. In both of the 2019 major cocaine seizures, traffickers had used the islands as the import point for drug shipments.

The dialogue in Bubaque, the administrative and commercial capital of the Bijagós at the south-western edge of the archipelago, was held in the island of Rubane. Participants discussed the challenges posed by organized crime, including sex tourism and child sexual exploitation, corruption, drug trafficking, money laundering, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and an endemic impunity for perpetrators, which contributes to the under-reporting of most crimes. Participants listed the lack of state presence and high levels of poverty among the population as factors that make the area vulnerable to drug trafficking.

The Bolama dialogue, coordinated in partnership with the NGO Pro-Bolama, included participants from Galinhas, a small island that has allegedly been used as a cocaine import point, and a wide range of community members such as police officers, doctors, teachers, students and fishermen. Participants mentioned money laundering and endemic corruption as their main concerns, noting that, in the past, police had demanded payment in exchange for filing complaints or launching investigations. This practice has now stopped, but trust in the police remains low. Participants also engaged in discussions on drug markets and shared their experiences around drug consumption in the region. They drafted recommendations to address the challenges raised, including the creation of a radio programme hosted on Esperança de Bolama Community Radio to enhance awareness of illicit-market dynamics.



Resilience dialogue in Bolama, June 2021.

# ENHANCING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

mpowering civil society to play a critical role in shining light on corruption and organized crime, and enhancing the resilience of communities to counter illicit markets is a long-term goal. Yet, the activities implemented by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in Guinea-Bissau points to nascent successes. The resilience dialogues have spurred debate on illicit markets and facilitated the discussion of their impacts on communities. Tailored capacity-building initiatives have sought to strengthen the technical skills of civil society organizations, supporting their important work.

Political instability constitutes a key obstacle to economic and social development in Guinea-Bissau. As the state proves to be an uncooperative partner, civil society must take the lead in providing a better future for the country's people. In order to counter illicit markets and support development in Guinea-Bissau, the following actions, derived from the dialogues with civil society, are recommended. For the results to be achieved, stakeholders (including state institutions in Guinea-Bissau, law enforcement agencies, civil society, and regional and international organizations) must cooperate and work together.

- Strengthen government monitoring of key informal crossings of illicit cross-border trade, increase the number of border posts and deploy law enforcement agents to patrol main routes used by traffickers.
- Support collaboration between members of the community and local authority officers.
- Support administrative authorities to implement local and regional development plans and to monitor illegal activities that hinder economic development.
- Involve civil society organizations, local administrative authorities, community leaders, youth associations and the wider community in diagnosis, awareness-raising and training activities aimed at reducing illicit practices in the most affected communities.
- Monitor the curriculum and activities of religious missions on a regular basis and track the sources of funding for socio-religious activities in the country.
- Strengthen capacity-building activities for community-based organizations protecting young people, especially girls, from engaging in illicit activities and promote livelihood alternatives.
- Strengthen the capacity of NGOs and civil society organizations to support their community in denouncing illicit activities and operate as early-warning mechanisms for government stakeholders.

### **NOTES**

- 1 António Rodrigues, *Condenados todos os arguidos da maior apreensão de droga na Guiné-Bissau*, *Público*, 3 April 2020, https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/03/mundo/noticia/condenados-arguidos-maior-apreensao-droga-guinebissau-1910937.
- 2 Interviews, Guinea-Bissau, July 2019.
- 3 Interview, Bissau, January 2021.
- 4 Interview, Bissau, December 2020.
- In one case, the judicial police asked members of civil society to support a judge who was under pressure from criminal actors and politicians following the March 2019 cocaine seizure. The objective of this campaign, which appears to have been successful given the stringent judgment handed down to the perpetrators, was to make it clear that civil society was committed to the rule of law in the country, and was closely monitoring the activities of the judiciary and would make public any abuses.
- 6 Interviews with civil society organizations, Bissau, January 2021.
- 7 Interview with Bissau-Guinean journalist, June 2021, Bissau.
- 8 The journalist, Baducaram Imbenque, was suspended from the state Guinea-Bissau Television on 11 January 2021.
- 9 Público, Guiné-Bissau: Depois do blogger Aly Silva, jornalista Adão Ramalho foi agredido, 13 March 2021, https://www.publico.pt/2021/03/13/mundo/noticia/blogger-aly-silva-jornalista-adaoramalho-agredido-guinebissau-1954296.
- 10 Iancuba Dansó, Presidente guineense acusado de querer dividir jornalistas, 3 March 2021, Deutsche Welle, https://www.dw.com/pt-002/presidente-guineense-acusado-de-querer-dividir-jornalistas/a-56747915; Agência Lusa, Aumenta violência contra defensores dos direitos humanos na Guiné-Bissau, 26 March 2021, https://www.dw.com/pt-002/aumenta-viol%C3%AAncia-contra-defensores-dos-direitos-humanos-na-guin%C3%A9-bissau/a-57014976?fbclid=IwAR3vC\_VMEuDMhGBIMfsUn9iyYDFgvDMEWPEBhaMn8wYd9tyBI42fRuB4cl).
- 11 Yasmina Nuny Silva, Guinea-Bissau's journalists are under attack, 8 June 2021, World Politics Review, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29714/press-freedom-disappears-underguinea-bissau-president-sissoco; Interviews with journalists, civil society representatives and lawyers in Bissau in February, March and June 2021.
- 12 Reporters Without Borders, Guinea Bissau, Political deadlock curtails media freedom, https://rsf. org/en/guinea-bissau.
- 13 Participants included magistrates, public administration officials, human rights activists, religious leaders, sociologists, police and customs officers, civil society members, and women and youth associations.



**EMAIL** 

secretariat@globalinitiative.net

PHONE

+41 227308635

PHYSICAL AND MAILING ADDRESS

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime Schwarzenbergplatz 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria

