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An Assessment of the Experiences and Vulnerabilities of Pastoralists and At-Risk Groups in the Atakora Department of Benin

Executive Summary | January 2023



Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Benin, like its neighbors in West Africa, is now facing a violent extremist insurgency. The violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have taken an intersectional approach to recruiting and influencing the local population in Benin, in response to the country's higher resilience through its pluralistic culture, religion, and demographics, and more capable institutions, relative to its Sahelian neighbors. Nonetheless, VEOs continue to find success in exploiting the grievances of at-risk groups among the local population, through direct recruitment and spreading propaganda.

The research found that pastoralists figure prominently among the at-risk groups in Benin's northern Atakora department, that are being targeted by VEO recruitment efforts, which highlighted that VEO propaganda has been inadvertently helped by Benin's recent policy reforms to modernize its agro-pastoral industry and conserve the fragile ecosystem of the Park W-Arly-Pendjari complex. These reforms have impacted the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable groups in Atakora, who traditionally rely heavily on local production, instead of commercial trade. As a result, the research found documented cases of these vulnerabilities directly pushing at-risk groups to join the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the West Africa al-Qaeda alliance, known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

Key Numbers¹

- 45% of the research sample has reported seeing JNIM in their community.
- 30% personally interacted with JNIM combatants.
- 23% experienced recruitment attempts from JNIM.
- 20% personally know someone who joined JNIM.
- 50% of the Matéri respondents experienced intercommunal conflicts in 2022, a decline from previous years that respondents attributed to the military in Porga.
- Over 70% of respondents support the security force efforts in Matéri.
- 96% of Kouandé respondents experienced intercommunal violence, resulting in over 60% of the Kouandé respondents feeling more insecure in 2022 than usual.
- 50% of farmer-herder violence in Atakora is successfully mediated by police.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts

Farmer-herder relations have an outsized role in shaping and impacting socio-economic relationships at the community level in West Africa, as pastoralism has historically sustained a

¹ These are statistics from primary data collected by Elva Community Engagement in eight settlements in Matéri, Tanguiéta, Cobly, and Kouandé communes, in the Atakora Department, in September 2022. The research sample included 192 key informant interviews and 271 participants in 32 focus groups discussions. Disaggregated by gender: the research sample was 86% male, and 14% female.

large portion of the region's population.² As a result, farmers and herders generally enjoyed long-standing, mutually beneficial relationships, so cooperation between these groups has always been more common than conflict. However, ethnic tensions have created widening differences between these groups in recent years, which VEOs and communal militias are now exploiting.³ For example, Peulh pastoralists often experience significant disenfranchisement, resulting from their lack of citizenship and land ownership rights in Benin. As a result, nativist views in Atakora that frame the Peulh as 'VEO collaborators' have grown recently, which has resulted in social and punitive discrimination that has, at times, escalated into intercommunal violence.

In the Atakora department, violence from farmer-herder conflict has escalated since 2020. The recent increase in violence was linked to the implementation of land reform and sedentarization rules coupled with park closures that have inadvertently shrunk the availability of common grazing and farming space. This has resulted in many pastoralists finding it impossible to compete with commercial livestock production and wealthier ranchers. This impacts individual herders and breeders, and limits their livelihood opportunities, as much as it shrinks their political and social influence. Farmers are also frustrated by land reforms, which have redistributed some farmland back to transhumance corridors. The research found that farmer-herder violence in Benin resulted primarily from property damage, and dispute over resources and land. In general, it seems that the confusion around these new policies, and whose rights supersede others, has exacerbated property damage issues, and devolved into this friction at the intercommunal level.

Escalating Insecurity in the Atakora Department

In addition to escalating intercommunal conflicts resulting from local land distribution policies, insecurity has increased in Atakora since 2021. Benin's military deployment to the north has served as a deterrent for regular local violence and criminal activity in Matéri commune. However, the other communes remain insecure and vulnerable to VEOs and intercommunal conflict, in the absence of regular security patrols. Though the reasons for JNIM's advances into Benin are not entirely clear, controlling and having undisrupted access to the illicit supply chain, which runs through northern Benin, is central to their current strategy.⁴ Koalou - a significant node along the illicit supply chain - located north of Atakora, remains the primary stronghold for JNIM, and presents a serious vulnerability for Benin, due to border porosity and the northern communities' reliance on trade from this town and surrounding trade routes.⁵

² Schmidt, Peter, and Muggah, Robert. 2021. "Climate Change and Security in West Africa." Igarape Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29101.6>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kwarkye, Sampson. "Breaking terrorism supply chains in West Africa." *ISS Africa*, 8 June 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/breaking-terrorism-supply-chains-in-west-africa>.

⁵ Bernard, Aneliese. 2021. Tracking the Spillover of Violent Extremism from the Sahel to Littoral West Africa. N.p.: Elva Community Engagement.

JNIM's activities and recruitment in Benin are realized through both a combination of *spilling over*, through its southward push from the Sahel, and its interaction with mobile groups on the periphery, as well as *homegrown*, through local recruitment of at-risk groups: The research unequivocally found that violent extremism first expanded into Benin through entry points with mobile groups. As their livelihood opportunities shrink, pastoralists' desperation for access to basic goods and money has served as a push factor for some, towards VEOs. Furthermore, their marginalization around transhumance corridors, border areas and rural areas - spaces that are often located in VEO areas of control - has brought them into close interaction with JNIM. Similarly the communities in Atakora have grown suspicious of foreigners and seasonal migrants who regularly move across borders, due to the ease with which they appear to pass through VEO-controlled spaces in Burkina Faso and the parks.

Since 2021, however, spillover has given way to local recruitment and a domestic insurgency, driven by JNIM operators staged out of Burkina Faso; youth were found to be the most at-risk to local recruitment in Atakora. In addition to the typical indicators that push young men and women towards VEOs in West Africa (unemployment, lack of education, religion, etc.), the opportunity to increase one's social standing and make quick money, were found to be significant drivers towards joining a VEO. Similar push factors applied to women, and JNIM was reported to have used the promise of freedom to not marry or the choice of a young husband, as successful recruitment tactics in Atakora; there were multiple reports of young women choosing to join JNIM in Burkina Faso.

The research found that JNIM's presence in Atakora has become increasingly familiar to the local population, underscoring an objective to win local support and the longevity with which JNIM has been there. In the past year, JNIM stopped relying exclusively on clandestine recruits, and instead enters a community and first meets with the town leadership to present themselves, and what they intend to do. They also continue to offer financial incentives to at-risk groups that are easily swayed to join, in order to increase their numbers. These actions showcase a level of impunity the group has developed since the onset of their activity in Benin.

Targeted Interventions for Reinforcing Local Resilience

Civil society organizations that deploy localized community stabilization interventions have previously had a role in the Atakora department. However, years of neglect and lack of resources have rendered many of these services inadequate in the face of violent extremism. The research found that the local population's vulnerability was largely driven by the community's lack of information and general knowledge about what violent extremism is, who is at-risk, and what coping mechanisms can be deployed in response to it. This has manifested as a primary vulnerability that VEOs have exploited, when promoting their agenda, and pushing misinformation.

Targeted, localized solutions include making available information about civic education regarding Benin's legal system, and available tools to address intercommunal and

farmer-herder issues. Additionally, deploying livelihood interventions for unemployed youth, women, herders and farmers, could dramatically alleviate the stress that these vulnerable groups face, and that VEOs are actively exploiting for recruitment purposes. Finally, community cohesion activities are critical, to ensure that social cleavages are mended, particularly regarding intergenerational differences, that have become more prominent with access to social media.

Nonetheless, despite the slew of vulnerabilities impacting the north, Benin generally experiences a stronger sense of community cohesion and trust in government, compared to neighboring countries. However, the onset of violent extremism has had negative impacts on northern communities' ability to adapt to their destabilizing environment. Resilience is starting to falter, and pre-established preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts are increasingly incapable of withstanding pressures from VEOs. Nevertheless, the war is not lost. Thoughtful and locally-driven efforts to reinforce existing vigilance mechanisms and leverage them to overcome cultural fissures that are pushing marginalized groups towards violent extremism, could rebuild community resilience.