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Global Threats in Africa

What steps should the international community take in order to mitigate the development and security threats coming out of Africa? Shannon Dick recommends adopting a broad brush approach that engages with non-traditional partners from the security, development, environmental, and health fields.

By Shannon Dick for ISN

For nearly two years, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been plagued by armed violence, with the civil war between the rebel coalition and government forces claiming the lives of thousands of victims and displacing millions more. Armed groups sustain their activities in part by exploiting CAR's many natural resources and the conflict itself has resulted in a significant humanitarian crisis that will likely have implications for the country's health and security sectors for years to come. Unfortunately, CAR is not alone in dealing with the complex challenges that impact both sustainable development and security. Many countries in Africa struggle with the unfortunate realities caused by unfettered arms flows within and between conflict zones, environmental crime, and devastating public health crises. These interconnected challenges and their subsequent policy responses are often viewed through a singular lens. Yet the very ways in which they intersect can impact national, regional, and international security, and present wider global consequences.

The unchecked flow of arms, for example, fuels armed conflict and contributes to the displacement of millions of people worldwide, which strains local health and welfare systems. Illicitly trafficked wildlife commodities help fund armed groups and criminal organizations, providing them with the means to continue their nefarious activities. The spread of disease weakens state institutions and capacities to respond to security threats, and fosters conditions that breed instability. Poorly regulated borders and the lack of appropriate national infrastructure can exacerbate these challenges for years, often seemingly without end. Thus, it is important for national, regional, and international approaches to address these interrelated problems and develop far-reaching responses that prioritize local innovation to combat these threats.

Arms Flows

Numerous countries in Africa continue to struggle with the deadly legacy of weapons used to perpetuate conflict. Largely unregulated arms transfers have direct and indirect impacts on many countries across the region, as thousands of people are killed or injured each year due to armed violence. The spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in particular imposes significant problems on states by disrupting post-conflict development and hindering economic growth. Studies

estimate that there are approximately 39 million firearms circulating throughout Africa, and though this represents less than half the total number of firearms circulating Europe, these weapons nevertheless take a significant toll on countries throughout the region.

Reports estimate that armed conflict costs Africa roughly \$18 billion a year due to average annual losses of 15 percent in Gross Domestic Products (GDP). This includes direct costs to societal infrastructure due to physical damage and loss of personnel, as well as indirect costs to national economies due to reduced workforce, limited investments, loss of development aid, and other economic challenges wrought by instability and insecurity. And while it is difficult to ascertain the exact value of illicit arms transfers throughout the region, porous borders and the lack of comprehensive arms regulations contribute to this security challenge. Indeed, persistent armed conflict can limit access to much needed resources such as economic and humanitarian aid and dissuade investors, thereby limiting the ability of many countries to rebuild and establish the laws, regulations, infrastructure, and capacities needed to mitigate future violence and potential instability. This situation was highlighted in 2014 when Exxon Mobil discontinued oil exploration plans in South Sudan amid continued conflict, signaling weakened confidence in the country's stability and security.

While illicit or black market sales represent one source of weapons across the continent, weapons and ammunition have also been sourced from government stockpiles around the world. Researchers have traced conflict weapons to government sources in China, Europe, Iran, Russia, and the United States. Recent research has revealed that Khartoum's government stockpiles are a primary source of weapons for actors engaged in all sides of the conflict in Sudan and South Sudan. Additionally, poor stockpile management puts weapons at risk of looting – as exemplified by the capture of thousands of SALWs and other munitions in Libya – as well as unplanned explosions, which can have lethal impacts on surrounding communities. Without adequate safeguards to ensure the security of weapons caches across the region, poorly regulated arms can be diverted to conflict zones and fuel continued violence and instability. This, in turn, offers a prime environment for exploiting many of Africa's valuable natural resources.

Environmental Crime

Environmental crime in many countries across Africa poses a number of ecological, security, and development concerns. While poachers and illegal loggers devastate biodiversity, their activities also hinder economic development, threaten public health, and put regional security at risk. These threats are compounded by connections to and relations with various armed groups and organized criminal syndicates. Recent reports have found, for example, that armed groups in the CAR finance their activities in part through trafficking of natural resources such as diamonds and ivory.

Estimates of the value of transnational environmental crime suggest that the trade is worth between \$70 and 213 billion a year. This includes estimates for gains to be made from illegal logging, poaching, fishing, mining, and trafficking in various wildlife commodities worldwide. The low risk, high reward nature of these crimes – and the vocational opportunities they offer for individuals lacking viable alternatives – makes it difficult for governments to mitigate their detrimental impacts. Illegal logging across Africa exemplifies this challenge. Just as countries are affected by the lack of comprehensive controls to secure arms flows throughout Africa, lax controls and permeable borders negatively impact regulation of the timber trade. Armed groups looking to increase their buying power can commandeer these trades and impose strict taxes to help fund arms sales and other illicit activities. And as wood is largely used for fuel and charcoal among local communities, the unregulated trade is estimated to cost African countries \$1.9 billion annually in direct revenue losses.

Continued logging and deforestation have also raised concerns about potential influences on the

spread of disease. Studies have noted the impact that forest clearance and shifts in ecosystem dynamics can have on the emergence (or re-emergence) and spread of infectious diseases such as yellow fever and Malaria. Indeed, numerous studies have examined the link between deforestation and the spread of Ebola, with additional correlations to dry ecological conditions, the frequency of human contact with infected animals, and the fragility of local health systems. As forests throughout Africa continue to be threatened by deforestation and illegal logging, such links raise important questions about the tools and resources available to national governments to effectively address these challenges.

Public Health

The Ebola crisis that devastated West Africa – particularly Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone – highlighted in the most serious way the risks posed by an overstrained and underdeveloped health infrastructure. Many national public health systems in Ebola-affected countries had been crippled by years of armed conflict and limited resources, leaving local providers under-equipped and unprepared for what became the largest Ebola outbreak in recorded history and the first of its kind in the region – with over 24,000 reported cases and more than 10,000 deaths.

Ebola underscored the detrimental impact that increased stress can have on already fragile public health systems. According to World Health Organization statistics, Liberia only had one doctor for every 100,000 people and Sierra Leone only two at the height of this most recent outbreak. In addition, under-resourced health centers meant that countries lacked the facilities and equipment necessary to address the epidemic and the patients requiring help. The outbreak further reduced these capabilities after taking the lives of more than 400 health-care workers.

Local and Global Collaboration

The development and security challenges that affect many African states do not exist in a vacuum. Efforts to address these challenges should take the opportunity to engage non-traditional partners from the security, development, environmental, and health domains. A broad based approach could provide strategies for systematically addressing the challenges posed by illegal or irresponsible arms transfers, environmental crime, and public health crises.

The success of such efforts will hinge on the ability of states to effectively develop and implement innovative regulatory responses that eliminate bureaucratic stove-piping. In part, this will mean establishing comprehensive border control measures, including enhancing customs protections and developing appropriate national legislation to ensure that illegal goods do not cross porous borders. Efforts such as INTERPOL's Regional Threat Assessment Workshops that emphasize local partnership to strengthen border management and security could provide lessons-learned and examples of good practice to increase national and regional security measures. These practices could be applied to established regional initiatives such as the African Union Border Programme to enhance border management – tailored to the relevant needs of a given country – in an effort to impede illicit transfers. Countries will also need statutory regulations and penalties for those that contravene the legal trade in arms and other commodities. A harmonized regional approach may help countries learn from each other and establish best practices and develop better cooperation measures.

National governments will need to commit to building and enhancing such capacities if progress is to be made. Without a commitment from governments to establish appropriate legislative bodies and other regulatory systems, for example, or fund healthcare, support education for healthcare professionals, or engage with donor communities before a crisis emerges to put such systems in place, efforts to mitigate these challenges will fall short of creating long-term improvements.

National, regional and international efforts must include local buy-in to ensure sustainability and help mitigate future threats. Although international actors have often been at the forefront of developing solutions to many challenges throughout Africa, input and resources from local communities is critical to ensure meaningful and lasting success. Local coordination and participation in on-the-ground programming should be a priority of the donor community to ensure long-term progress, and national, regional and international institutions must establish systematic responses that reach across the security, development, economic, and public health spectrum to fit their individual needs. In doing so, governments and key stakeholders in the region can establish a more orchestrated approach to addressing the challenges posed by these interconnected threats.

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