The Mano River Region in West Africa has been known as a conflict hotspot for decades. Instability and conflict easily spill over porous national boundaries and affect all the countries in the region, feeding into existing conflicts or generating new ones. Frequent examples of this are seen when political leaders support rebel groups in neighbouring countries or vice versa, resulting in cycles of complex civil wars. Regional peacebuilding measures are crucial, but must be seen as a complement to local and national initiatives.

The Mano River Union:

Regional peacebuilding — a collective initiative by various actors

Grace Maina and Warigia Razia

Scholars and practitioners have varying perspectives on the definition of peacebuilding, as the concept is extremely broad and conflicts around the globe diverse. In spite of the widespread debate on its instrumentalities, there is common agreement on the goals of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding seeks to prevent, reduce, transform and help people recover from structural and other forms of violence. It empowers people to foster relationships at all levels that sustain them and their environment.

Further, peacebuilding seeks to break cycles of violence by taking a series of interrelated, connected and coherent actions. It is a systematic process that facilitates the establishment of sustainable peace and tries to prevent the reoccurrence of violence by addressing the root causes and effects of conflict. It does this through conflict prevention, conflict transformation, relationship building, promoting social cohesion, institution building and political transformation, facilitating economic transformation and strengthening civil society. “Overall, peacebuilding is a long term process that occurs before, during and after conflict has slowed or abated.”

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The region requires specific attention and focus, and the MRU needs to strengthen its efforts in light of this fact.

In studying conflict trajectories in the MRR, it is evident that successful national peace processes in the region have a tendency to fail due to the spillover of insecurity and conflict from neighbouring countries. Illustrations of this can be seen in how political leaders have supported rebel groups in neighbouring countries, or received support from neighbouring states and rogue rebel groupings, resulting in extremely intertwined regional civil wars. Liberia, through President Charles Taylor, for example, supported the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, and the Liberians received support from Guinea in the Second Liberian Civil War.

The crisis following the post-election stalemate between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara in Côte d’Ivoire is the most recent demonstration of the interconnectedness of the region. Ouattara won the election, but Gbagbo refused to accept defeat until he was ousted through military force in April 2011. Grand Gedeh County in Liberia is, due to the relationship that developed during the war, predominantly pro-Gbagbo (their militia received support from Gbagbo) and thus ‘allied’ with their ethnic ‘brothers’ the Guere on the Ivorian side of the border, whereas the Gio/Mano of Liberia are predominantly Ouattara supporters and ‘allied’ to the Yacouba, their ethnic ‘brothers’ across the border. It is this form of regional insecurity, for example, that resulted in the killing of seven United Nations (UN) peacekeepers deployed in Côte d’Ivoire at the beginning of June.

Weak governance at border areas is a pertinent concern in this region. Historically, the border regions of these states were of little importance and received very little investment and services, further making them a haven for illegal activities such as the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and crimes like kidnapping and drug trafficking. This is compounded by the presence of retired or ex-military trained personnel and non-state combatants. The porous borders in the region facilitate the movement of these persons and weapons. This has adverse implications for peacebuilding processes.

Weak governance at border areas is a symptom of a fragile state. Most fragile states are characterised by weak institutions and poor governance structures, severe economic decline, disintegration, social unrest and loss of state legitimacy, massive human and capital flight, absence of the rule of law, and decline in public services. They are increasingly divided along various lines, including ethnic, regional, linguistic, political and religious ones. This is compounded by government corruption, which repels external and domestic investment as well as official development assistance. The presence of such fragile states poses a challenge to peacebuilding in the MRR, necessitating the adoption of both conflict transformation and structural approaches to peacebuilding.

**Disputes over scarce resources**

For decades the region has experienced intermarriage and the migration of ethnic groups for economic reasons.
As a result of years of coexistence and easy movement across borders, ethnic groups are not focused within the geographical territory of a country, but are spread across the different countries. This brings to the fore the ethnic and economic dimensions in the MRR. Specific examples in Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea-Conakry highlight the impact of identity and ethnicity in these national conflicts. Conflicts between indigenous groups, such as the Kpelle and Guerze, and settlers, like the Mandinka and Kouranka, have raged on in Guinea, as they fight for control over land and other resources. Questions of identity have been the basis for exclusionary policies, as seen in Côte d’Ivoire with arguments over who is or is not an Ivorian. This is at the core of the conflict dynamics within Côte d’Ivoire.

The constant refugee flows across the different countries due to conflict have become integral to understanding the history of the MRR. The huge influx of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone into Guinea from 1990 to 2005, and the 2010 influx of Ivorian refugees into Liberia following the presidential elections are illustrative of this. This often creates growing competition and increased disputes over land and other resources between refugees and indigenous groups, with negative consequences for already struggling economies. As discussed above, refugee flows also create instability, as ethnic groups ally with their ethnic ‘brothers’ across borders and provide support, such as refuge for crimes, which contributes to a culture of impunity.

The MRR has a rapidly growing youth population and has to meet the challenge of finding ways to constructively engage this part of the population. Urban centres are populated by unemployed youth, who are used by politicians for violent activity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone identified youth marginalisation and political exclusion as one of the root causes of the Sierra Leone conflict. The presence of a large number of unemployed, unskilled youths that can be easily instigated to violence threatens the consolidation of peace and regional stability in the MRR. The socio-economic realities that characterise these environments force youth to engage in violence and/or shadow economic activities for survival. This is compounded by a logic and culture of violence. With the exception of Sierra Leone, the MRR has been characterised by ineffective demobilisation and disarmament and unsuccessful reintegration processes. The involvement of multiple players in a holistic approach aimed at full and self-sustained social and economic reintegration is key.

Following the conflicts in the MRR, there has been rampant growth in the number of civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the area of peacebuilding. While there have been attempts to coordinate the different civil society initiatives in the region, there is still a major need for a more coherent and coordinated approach amongst civil society actors. Failure to do this has resulted in unnecessary duplication of peacebuilding activities and unhealthy rivalry between and among many peacebuilding actors, for instance, in the way CSOs work with national governments, inter-governmental, and regional organisations. While synergising peacebuilding activities is desirable in order to maximise comparative advantage and available resources, this has not been realised in the region. An integrated peacebuilding framework would be more effective in reaching its goals than the present fragmented approach.

**Promote regional peacebuilding**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the challenges that lie at the root of violent conflict without the requisite resources. Peacebuilding is daunting and the financial resources required can be overwhelming. While there has been donor support and aid from the international community to assist, through different actors, including the UN, this falls short of the real needs and development challenges, which continue to plague these states. However, the real challenge lies beyond the amount of aid given, and more in the focus and design of peacebuilding programmes and support. The sustainability of the different interventions is questionable, and there must be a conscious effort by all peacebuilding actors to formulate viable initiatives that are long term, incorporate local ownership right from the design, build local capacities for peace and utilise local resources. In addition to local and national peacebuilding interventions in the MRR region, it is imperative that donor encourage programmes that have a regional approach, given the interconnectedness of the region.

A critical challenge in all peacebuilding initiatives in post-conflict states is how to measure impact. Following years of peacebuilding in the MRR, it is imperative to explore whether what
has been done over the years has been effective in contributing towards sustainable peace. The reflective practice of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment is critical to understanding outputs and assessing the impact and outcome of all interventions. There has been limited research in this regard, but this remains key to understanding what the obstacles to peace are. The lack of reflective spaces to analyse and judge the efficacy of different interventions continues to be a challenge to the realisation of sustainable peace in the region.

**Multi-level peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding efforts in the MRR will have to acknowledge the regional nature of the conflict dynamics and develop processes to accommodate the complex multi-level character of the conflict, the proliferation of actors at different levels, and the rapidly shifting boundaries. Regional peacebuilding can, therefore, be summarised as a collective initiative of the conflict dynamics and develop outcome of all interventions. There has to acknowledge the regional nature of the region and the common characteristics and experiences that tie member states together.

The role of the MRU, its Secretariat and Joint Security Commission, play an important role in contributing to conflict prevention and the achievement of sustainable peace. In aiming for conflict prevention and in contributing to peacebuilding, the MRU can be enhanced through sustained dialogue, creation of stronger regional management and coordination bodies, and constant information sharing amongst the different actors and institutions within the region. In the end, collaboration and integrated partnerships with commitment to local ownership and responsibility by all actors in all peacebuilding efforts will contribute to stability and sustainable peace in the MRR.


2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 The Mano River Region refers to the geographic arrangement of the countries within the broader region of West Africa, which include Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Mano River Union is a regional intergovernmental body aimed at fostering economic cooperation amongst member states.
9 Ibid.