

# bicc report

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## Addressing Regional Dynamics of Armed Conflict — Connecting DDR Policy, Research and Practice

**Outcomes of the Extraordinary Meeting  
of The Integrated DDR Training Group  
6–7 July 2023 in Kenya**

**The Integrated**   
**DDR Training Group**

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## Introduction

Many parts of the world have suffered from various forms of armed conflict in recent decades, including political rebellions and violent conflicts between herders and farmers tied to issues of resource scarcity and climate change. Conflicts and their aftermath are also often closely intertwined with organised crime and violent extremism (McMullin, 2009). The illicit exploitation of natural resources, such as the mining of gold, diamonds, cobalt and other precious minerals has created economic opportunities for non-state armed groups and other criminal actors in regions experiencing conflict. During and after armed conflict, state authority tends to be weak, and the provision of basic services poor, particularly in vast and remote border areas. As a result, border regions, where borders are often described as ‘porous’ are referred to as “ungoverned spaces” (Clunan & Trinkunas, 2012; Taylor, 2016) and hubs in the production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs and other illegal commodities.

On the other hand, local and regional conflict realities, for instance in the Sahel, also show that socio-economic ties between communities extend beyond borders. Cross-border communities thus govern border areas in ways conducive to peace that sometimes escape the notice and understanding of state-centric models of regional governance. Borders also provide economic and other opportunities for communities living along them. Social ties across borders are often forged through intermarriage, trade, social mixing, and other forms of interaction. However, the regional dynamics of cross-border mobility—including the traditional trade and trans-humance routes that characterise the socio-economic strength of a region—are increasingly hampered by the growing insecurity that non-state armed groups produce, whether these groups are labelled jihadist, community self-defence or criminal. Traditional cross-border trading routes are now used not only for the movement of people and goods but also for illicit activities such as human trafficking and illicit transfers of small arms and light weapons (SALW), ammunition and drugs.

Bolstering the peacebuilding potential and capacity of border regions while managing and resolving armed conflicts is, therefore, a major challenge. Effective management of non-state armed groups correspondingly requires a multi-dimensional, regional approach that takes into account historical and current conflict dynamics. This management is likely to have to blend state-based models that seek to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate ex-combatants by building national capacity and security provision, with community governance traditions prevalent in border regions not accustomed to a strong state presence (and where states are likely to lack the resources to extend that presence in a sustainable, meaningful way). Complicating effective management are knowledge gaps about how regional dynamics intersect with war-making strategies and tactics of non-state armed groups and about the best way to engage in DDR in areas that are remote from capital cities and state security hubs. Additional challenges arise when DDR actors seek to disband and reintegrate armed groups considered to be extremist or designated as terrorist organisations. These multiple challenges complicate local, national, regional, and international support for DDR processes in border communities.

As stated in Module 5.40 of the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) on cross-border population movements:

*Any DDR programmes, DDR-related tools or reintegration support should be regional in scope in order to deal with the realities of cross-border conflict. Experience has shown that DDR directed at nationals of a specific country in isolation have failed to adequately deal with the problems of combatants being recycled from conflict to conflict within (and sometimes even outside) a region, and with the spillover effects of conflicts (United Nations, 2023).*

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To address the subject of regional DDR dynamics of armed conflict, this year's extraordinary IDDRTG meeting, which took place on 6 and 7 July 2023 at the International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) in Nairobi, Kenya, brought together DDR practitioners, policymakers, researchers, members of national DDR commissions and/or national focal points and DDR training institutions to discuss the theme of the extraordinary meeting, "Regional Dynamics of Armed Conflict: Connecting DDR Policy, Research, and Practice".

The meeting aimed to:

- \ enhance dialogue among DDR practitioners and training institutions, policymakers and researchers, to unpack the topic of regional dynamics of armed conflicts by sharing insights and developing practical recommendations;
- \ facilitate a networked approach to regional conflict challenges (by bringing together researchers, international, regional and national policymakers and DDR training institutions to share knowledge on regional conflict dimensions), and explore joint ways of working beyond the context of the meeting, ideally allowing for a continued exchange alongside day-to-day work;
- \ identify specific areas/gaps and related action points where cooperation between practitioners and training institutions, researchers and policymakers can be effective in the future.

During the two days, representatives from nine African countries, including Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and South Sudan, as well as representatives of regional and international organisations, including the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA) as well as various UN agencies, think tanks, members of universities and DDR training institutions discussed various aspects of the topic in different discussion formats.

Day one set the scene, focusing on conceptual aspects of regional approaches to dealing with armed groups, with working groups on:

- \ unpacking regional dynamics of armed conflict and their responses, current approaches, opportunities and challenges;
- \ foreign fighters and mercenaries;
- \ linkages between armed groups and organised crime;
- \ armed groups designated as terrorist organisations.

On day two, participants representing member states had the opportunity to share their experiences on central elements related to the topic at a roundtable discussion. The second part of the day then focused on bringing together the different discussion strands and identifying future opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.



*National focal point roundtable discussion on day two of the meeting moderated by the African Union and the Regional Centre on Small Arms, RECSA (picture: Milena Berks, BICC, 2023)*

# Regional Conflict Dynamics: Insights Drawn from Research and Practice

Dr Jaremeay McMullin, a researcher at the University of St Andrews, opened the session by raising important questions about data collection and knowledge generation to emphasise the crucial link between research and practice. He argued for considering new ways of collecting data and data sources that can inform programming, particularly by privileging the lived experiences of individuals (including combatants and ex-combatants) living in border communities. He also argued for linking knowledge of how regions and borderland areas fuel conflict with knowledge of how border communities also generate peaceful social relations, successful conflict resolution strategies and ideas for effective DDR and peacebuilding.

Following Jaremeay's opening remarks, BICC researcher Milena Berks provided key contextual details on regional conflict dynamics. The total number of violent conflicts and the number of victims of armed conflicts increased in 2023—about half of these armed conflicts took place in Africa. The role of non-state armed groups in these conflicts is significant. The number of conflicts between non-state armed groups rose from 72 to 76 in comparison to the previous year—a devastating historical high (BICC et al., 2023). With an average of around 20,000 deaths annually, the past seven years have been among the years with the most violent conflicts between non-state armed groups since the early 1990s. With 25 non-state conflicts, Africa was the continent with the highest number of violent conflicts without state involvement. Many of these involved armed groups designated as terrorist organisations.

Local communities are particularly vulnerable when war, climate change and food insecurity occur at the same time. Humanitarian crises and armed conflicts often lead to complex emergencies in which the interests of multiple actors compete (BICC et al., 2023).

To set the scene for the subsequent discussions during the two-day workshop, Milena Berks provided a review of some of the approaches and concepts in the literature on regional conflict dynamics. Her presentation focused on four central questions:

- 1\ How can the regionalisation of conflict be understood?
- 2\ What are the central dynamics linked to it?
- 3\ How do the responses of different actors, both state and non-state, to insecurity shape regional conflict dynamics?
- 4\ What are the different understandings of the border and the communities that live in the areas?

## Nature of Peace and Conflict in Border Zones

In her presentation, Milena Berks emphasised that armed conflicts and their consequences, such as the displacement of communities, transcend state borders and thus bring a regional perspective, or the aspect of regionalisation, to the fore. As conflicts shift from one area to another, “sub-region-wide system[s] of conflict” are created, which (...) “involv[e] different actors, modalities and stakes” (Gnanguênon, 2005, p. 76). In these settings, the social, spatial, and political boundaries, which used to be organising features are increasingly blurred (Gnanguênon, 2005).

In the absence of an agreed definition of ‘regionalisation’, elements, such as orohydrographic criteria (for example, Chad Basin, Congolese Basin), bioclimatic criteria (for example, Congolese forest, Sudanian savannas, Sahel), or politico-institutional distinctions (for example, the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States [CEMAC] or the Economic Community of Central African States [ECCAS], etc.) as proposed by Chauvin and Magrin (2020, p. 1) facilitate understanding. According to the authors,

*these criteria are transcended by the dynamics of functional regionalisation, which take the form of powerful cross-border flows between contiguous spaces, essentially reticular and driven by the mobility of goods, people and capital* (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020, p. 4).

Largely dominated by unregistered “informal” flows, functional regionalisation is even more difficult to analyse (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020).

In her presentation Milena Berks further argued that contemporary crises are strongly influenced by the spatial configurations of functional regionalisation (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020). These, in turn, create cross-border flows, military or non-military. Armed violence has expanded regionally: It has transcended the national borders within which it was initiated, or it has regionalised by involving an increasing number of actors from neighbouring countries (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020). Interestingly, Chauvin and Magrin observe, on the one hand, an intensification of relations between cross-border spaces (Richard, 2014), and, on the other hand, a ‘deregionalisation’, understood as a reduction of these interrelations. Here, Chauvin & Magrin focus predomi-

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nantly on the linkages between pre-existing regional systems and the regionalisation of insecurities (2020). They argue that armed violence can recompose regional organisation, in particular by modifying cross-border economic flows that shape functional regionalisation (Chauvin, 2018; Magrin & Pérouse de Montclos, 2018). The central argument is that violence can destroy regionalisation, including in its most functional dimensions, but that violence can also contribute to forms of specific regionalisation (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020). Here, Milena Berks alluded to an example the authors gave, pointing to a migration of primary resources production and merchants towards spaces where violence is less prevalent and towards neighbouring areas localising production centres and exchange networks (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020). Another important example she quoted in her presentation is that of the cattle market, traditionally organised in a mobile system (transhumance migration), where the regional trade has been reorganised due to violence. This also applies to more fixed production systems, such as agriculture or fishing, which can progressively be displaced. Similar dynamics apply to trade networks and routes, not least because of tax payments often demanded by armed groups in the areas.

The regional trading system is not disappearing, but “regional flows are shifting, in part, to stable areas bordering on areas of violence, which are themselves undergoing regionalisation processes. Violence thus reshapes the hierarchies between trade corridors” (Chauvin & Magrin, 2020, p. 3).

Cross-border movements of irregular fighters link different zones of violence, often transiting status—for example rebel, bandit, etc.—country and conflict (Debos, 2012, in Chauvin & Magrin, 2020). Cross-border recruitment of mercenaries to increase ranks is equally witnessed in many contexts. Moreover, the flow of combatants is accompanied by illicit trafficking and the circulation of weapons (Leggett et al., 2022). According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), over 500 armed groups operated across Africa in 2020. These groups were involved in a range of activities, including political violence, organised crime and violent extremism. It should be noted, however, that this figure is an estimate and may not capture the full extent of

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*Dangerous crossing of a Wadi (riverbed only filled during the rainy season) at the Chadian-Sudanese border. An example of unique and transforming border traits, impacting flows of goods and people (picture Allah-Kauis Neneck, CRASH, Chad, 2023).*

non-state armed group activity across the continent. Clapham (1995), for example, sees the prominence of these groups as “symptomatic decay of the state in favor of other actors”. According to Clapham, insurgency groups claim and exercise control over territory, trade and population and are often supported by states and other regional and international actors. They also establish control over local resources, including precious minerals, gold, diamonds and oil, which, once again, are tied to international criminal networks and partners (Abdullahi, 2019).

Conflict situations thus promote the “informalisation” of certain state rents, with non-conventional armed groups taking control (Chauvin et al., 2015). Rebel governments (Cuvelier et al., 2014) imitate the administrative structures of the state, particularly in terms of taxation (roadblocks, market patents, purchasing offices, etc.) and sometimes take over the marketing of these products on regional or even international markets.

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In short, this section has attempted to provide answers to the initial questions about the understanding of the regionalisation of conflict, dynamics involved and the responses to it by providing an understanding of regionalisation through the prism of functional regionalisation including cross-border flows, particularly of an informal nature, of people, goods and capital. It has stressed the impact of violence on functional regionalisation, including economic flows, displacing flows of goods and people, and thus influencing the hierarchy of trade corridors. Finally, it highlighted the role of armed non-state actors within regional conflict systems, with different forms of relationship to the state, for instance, through the extraction of state rents, including diverse forms of taxation, the exploitation of natural resources or claims to control over territory.

To shed more light on this last issue, the next section will examine the understanding of the border and the social dynamics of community relations in borderlands.

## Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Border

In her presentation on regional dynamics of peace and conflict, Milena Berks also paid special attention to social research on ‘borderlands’, highlighting a debate between conceptualising border zones as ‘frontier’ (a boundary demarcation) versus ‘borderland’ (a place where different people live, fight, peacefully coexist and trade).

### Boundary

Similar to the border, a boundary demarcates the territorial sovereignty of the state and allows its internal and external security to be secured. Its function evolves with neighboring states' relations. It signifies an area which can be spatially limited by topography or by geometric lines drawn on the map. Boundaries may be open or closed to the movement of capital, goods and people. They may also act as barriers, when for example both sides see it as an 'interface of military confrontation', separating two distinct areas (such as the former Berlin wall). Anthropologists in comparison, refer to boundaries highlighting also its symbolic dimension, for instance, regarding collective and individual identity.

### Frontier

An area or zone, not imperatively delimited from a geographical point of view, which covers either side of the boundary. It is often presented as an area of interaction across the border. However, political scientists often refer to the frontier as a synonym of the boundary or the border.

### Borderland

A wider area than the frontier, viewed as a transition zone within which the boundary lies. Geographers, political scientists, historians, and anthropologists refer to the local populations living in the borderland as 'borderlanders'.

Source: Cassarino, 2020, p. 3



Since the late 1980s, there has been a significant evolution in scholarly approaches to the perception of borders. Various disciplines have explored different concepts, such as frontiers and borderlands, amongst others (Cassarino, 2006). During the 1990s, there has been a shift from a conception of borders as geographical and

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political peripheries towards reconsidering borders as social constructs and processes rather than spatial entities. As such, borders are susceptible to transformation and erasure (Kolossov & Scott, 2013).

Historical (Donnan & Wilson, 1999), anthropological (Casajus, 2011) and political science perspectives (Albert et al., 2001) provide important additions to the geographical perspective. While historians focus on the nature of borderlands (alienated, coexistent, interdependent, and integrated), anthropologists add the aspect of identity construction and renegotiation (Salih, 2000, p. 330), political scientists include the aspect of state sovereignty implicating power and control dimensions (Cassarino, 2006).

This last point is particularly important when considering borderlands and dynamics of functional regionalisation in relation to non-state armed groups. As Chauvin and Magrin point out (2020, p. 7), where armed groups contest a state's territorial control, repressive counterinsurgency measures by states also have significant implications for the regional dynamics in borderlands.

The shift to a borderland conceptualisation helps to highlight how state-centric models can privilege securitised approaches that aim to control borders (and population movements) and, therefore, neglect to centre on the security, prosperity and peace of border communities.

Researchers invited to present at the extraordinary meeting further illustrated borderland dynamics and their impact on peace and conflict.

BICC senior researcher Dr Boubacar Haidara used the example of Mali to illustrate how armed groups benefit from local factors in border areas. Jihadist groups have instrumentalised and manipulated local factors, such as access to land and natural resources, as well as the sympathy of communities and local officials. These groups have not only been able to establish themselves and flourish in certain regions of Mali, but a similar dynamic has also been observed in Burkina Faso. Groups are mobile and easily cross borders, having their own patterns of exchange and conflict systems across borders. These spillover effects are noticeable not only between Mali and Burkina Faso but are also likely to be seen in the Gulf of Guinea and beyond. An additional factor Boubacar Haidara highlighted was the ability of groups to recruit and to adapt. When jihadist groups move, they choose areas where they have a high degree of influence and where national forces find it difficult to pursue them. The groups use geographical areas that are very difficult to access. This explains why the groups move into southern Burkina Faso and the border regions on the Gulf of Guinea. Communities in these areas are often dissatisfied with the management of land and resources, and armed groups take advantage of these community tensions. Stigmatisation is another determining factor, as in the case of pastoralists.



*Cattle in a town close to the border between the Central African Republic and Chad (picture: Milena Berks, BICC, Batangafo, CAR, 2018).*

Oyewole Oginni, also a BICC researcher, highlighted other elements relating to the Lake Chad Basin. He pointed to the fact that there are shared cultures and social networks among communities across borders in the area, which need to be better understood and taken into account in current responses to insecurity. This brings into play issues of nationality and belonging. He went on to outline the phenomenon of ‘borderisation’, whereby countries actively protect their borders. However, at the national level, discussions and strategies on how to effectively address international conflict dimensions and regional dynamics are largely missing. Reflecting on economies of violence, connections between bandits and jihadist groups need to be further unpacked. This includes asking when crime becomes organised and what the links are between informal and formal economies.



*Transport of goods between the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the Bangui River—a liquid border (picture: Milena Berks, BICC, Bangui, 2019).*

ISS researcher Francis Wairagu drew attention to how changes in a conflict affect the security situation. For instance, the Somali conflict has had a spillover effect on Uganda through the involvement of an international peacekeeping operation AMISOM. He also highlighted the impact of national interests on responses to shared conflicts. However, given their unique dimensions on different borders, conflicts in various areas require tailored responses. Focussing on DDR, Francis Wairagu highlighted the impact of protracted conflicts on DDR processes, in particular the issue of comradeship, long-lasting ties within groups and among individuals, which are important to consider when it comes to regional bonds that cut across borders. This was also reflected by country representatives at the meeting, who shared experiences from their own contexts. Comradeship makes it difficult to break chains of command, and former fighters might remain armed and not demobilise. Beyond links with former comrades, there was also an emphasis on the need to pay more attention to the families of combatants.

### Joint Sudanese–Chad border forces

With the joint Sudanese–Chad border forces, Nikhil Acharya highlighted a positive example of cross-border cooperation. The 700-km-long border has no checkpoints, which requires a constant presence of border forces and patrols in the region. The mere presence of the joint border forces has allowed the movement of goods and opened windows for legitimate trade in various sectors, which has had a positive impact on health care and education in the region.



*Soldier of the joint Sudanese–Chad border forces (picture: Nikhil Acharya, BICC)*

Nikhil Acharya, the final researcher asked to present during this session and a member of the UN Panel of Experts for Somalia, underlined the importance of linking academic debates to practice. He emphasised the liquidity of borders that are not clearly demarcated, such as the border between the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It would, therefore, make more sense to look at border management, including positive examples of cross-border trade and not at border control, rather than focusing solely on illicit activities. Security-related initiatives, including DDR, tend to focus on negative transactions, such as trafficking. However, it is equally important to look at legal trade, which reduces youth unemployment and drivers of armed conflict.

Another important aspect raised was related to resource management, touching on topography, climate and populations, focusing on climate change as a central driver of conflict. In this context, we need to look at which groups provide which resources and which resources are used by which armed groups. However, not all natural resources are used by armed groups. In the context of Somalia, several drivers, such as famine, flooding, etc., have aggravated some of the conflict dynamics, and some actors have benefitted from this. Al Shabab sees itself as a governance actor controlling taxation, revenues and charcoal flows. Regional cooperation also applies to armed groups who transfer weapons, knowledge and ideas. This is illustrated through the transfer of improvised explosive device technology in the East African region and the Horn of Africa, in the South of the Horn into eastern DRC and Mozambique. For instance, according to Acharya, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo use more sophisticated devices now as they have access to better technology originating from Al Shabab groups. In addition, there is a transfer of knowledge beyond the transfer of weapons and people, including know-how and technical know-how, which is spreading from Somalia to other countries.

The open discussion that followed reflected many of the points raised by the panellists. Country representatives highlighted the impact of the crises in neighbouring countries on security and livelihoods in their own countries, for instance the impact of forced displacement, the influx of illicit goods, combatants, etc. Participants agreed that armed groups designated as terrorist organisations were a great challenge and emphasised that because these groups remain outside of peace agreements, it is more difficult to engage with them and resolve the crises.

Several participants in the plenary discussion repeatedly mentioned climate change as a driver of conflict, particularly in herder-farmer conflicts, where land rights are not clearly identified and competition for access to resources, including water and land, continues to be a source of often deadly conflict for many communities.



Border crossing in Kousséri, Cameroon's far north (border to Chad)  
(picture: Claudia Breitung, BICC, 2023).

In summary, the plenary discussion in response to the researchers' structured presentations focused on **how to ensure connectivity in borderlands (viewed as transition zones where community, economic ties and important livelihood flows cut across in times of (extreme) insecurity)** and how to ensure a balance between securitisation and unintended consequences versus regionalisation, including positive elements of economic exchange and social connection.



## Regional Approaches to Dealing with Armed Groups

Taking into account the above-mentioned findings from existing research, and building on the plenary discussion on peace and conflict dynamics in ‘borderlands’, the meeting participants continued to explore regional approaches to dealing with armed groups in various breakaway groups. The following key takeaways emerged from the discussion:

The regionalisation of armed conflicts and groups, including ethnic ties, alliances between armed groups and the nexus between conflict, terrorism and organised crime, continue to pose a threat to regional stability and hamper regional cohesion. Moreover, the interlinkages of these threats with cascading risks, such as the reverberations of climate change and existing vulnerabilities, are particularly evident today in fragile and conflict-affected settings across the African continent. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to epitomise the interplay between these threats, with the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin and Horn of Africa regions experiencing multi-dimensional crises and requiring multi-dimensional and regional responses.

Zooming in on the nature of armed groups in contemporary conflicts, including those designated as terrorist organisations, participants of the meeting recognised the growing complexity of their operational capacities and structures. Non-state armed groups no longer operate in caves and have grown to control territory and exercise governance functions that were traditionally a state’s strict purview. Today, many of these groups aspire to—and succeed in—creating new forms of transnational statehood that lie outside the existing international legal order and challenge the very notion of the nation-state.

Additionally, it is not uncommon for many of them to engage in trans-border illicit activities, as outlined in the previous sections. The evolution of armed groups is thus an integral part of understanding regional conflict dynamics. Viewing armed groups and organisations as static actors that do not change or evolve over time paints a very narrow picture of the dynamics and complexity of the landscape in which armed groups operate today. The prominence of certain types of group structures has shifted, and it is possible to observe transformations from centralised group structures to decentralised, community-embedded and transnational armed groups.

The key takeaways of the above discussion are linked to the imperative to recognise the regional nature of ongoing conflicts in different countries, with repercussions and destabilising effects beyond the countries’ borders in which they occur. However, there is a lack of adequate conceptualisation of what regional approaches should entail as a response, particularly with regard to the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants and DDR processes in general in these areas. Intensive coordination and joint programming

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are key to unpacking how regional approaches can be designed, who should lead such processes, what components they should include and who they should address.

Against this backdrop, the various working groups convened during the meeting aimed to advance recommendations and pragmatic regional approaches and mechanisms to address the regional dimension of armed conflicts and armed groups. More specifically, the working groups assessed and analysed current regional interventions, focussing on efforts to address cross-border challenges and issues such as organised crime, foreign fighters and dealing with armed groups designated as terrorist organisations.

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## Responses Addressing Regional Conflict Dynamics

Regional responses and security arrangements have emerged in response to the persistent threats of terrorism, organised crime and protracted conflicts. These arrangements primarily represent attempts at unified and collective action in the face of common security threats, pooling resources, capacities and expertise in the pursuit of collective outcomes—in this case, the elimination of common security threats and the promotion of long-term sustainable peace and development (see box below).

Another key example of regionalised responses to the cross-border dimensions of armed conflicts and groups outlined in the working groups is the Group of Five for the Sahel countries (G5 Sahel), Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, which established the G5 Sahel Force in February 2017. This force has an expanded mandate to combat terrorism and the illicit trafficking of arms, drugs and people across the region, while strengthening regional cooperation between its five member countries. Nevertheless, the security situation in the Sahel has continued to deteriorate, with the proliferation of armed groups designated as terrorist organisations, namely the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat Al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Liptako Gourma region in the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, in particular.

Working group participants also acknowledged that, more recently, and in response to the growing threat from armed groups and terrorism in the Cabo Delgado region in northern Mozambique, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) established the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in July 2021, as a regional response to support the Republic of Mozambique to combat terrorism and acts of violent extremism. SAMIM comprises troops deployed from eight Personnel Contributing Countries from SADC namely, Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, working in collaboration with the Mozambique armed forces.

Meeting participants also pointed out that neighbouring countries have also taken regional initiatives to improve the living standards of cross-border communities, particularly to strengthen the pillars of resilience against conflict, organised crime and terrorism. This capitalises on the fact that regional dynamics of armed conflict can also have positive cross-border interactions. One example presented during the group discussions was the joint Sudanese–Chad border security forces, formed along a 700-km border as part of the détente process between the two countries. The forces allowed the movement of goods to stimulate markets and facilitated the creation of positive and legal trade relations in the area. While such responses are not common across regions, they can serve as a building block for reducing fragility in border communities.

### Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)

An example of such regional action mentioned by working group participants is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) composed of forces from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The MNJTF was established in 2014 in response to the threat posed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, which had spread to the Lake Chad Basin region. It operates under the authorised mandate of the African Union Peace and Security Council. Within the mandate, the MNJTF can use all the necessary means within its capacity to eliminate Boko Haram and provide a safe and secure environment and to facilitate the stabilisation in the areas affected by the activities of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups.

However, the MNJTF, although regional in scope, was primarily focused on securitised responses and was later complemented by the adoption of the 2018 Regional Strategy for the stabilisation, recovery and resilience of the Boko Haram-affected areas of the Lake Chad Basin (RSS) in 2018. The strategy was designed in recognition of the need to balance the military response with non-kinetic measures that address the root causes of the conflict. While the strategy has successfully liberated large swathes of territory from Boko Haram's control and incentivised defections and voluntary surrenders from the group, the scope has remained overly securitised, and challenges persist in terms of bureaucratic bottlenecks, inadequate capacity and funding resources and the transnationality of the threat across the porous borders.

## Challenges and Opportunities of Existing Approaches

While meeting participants acknowledged that efforts have been made to develop complementary regional responses that take into account the rapidly evolving conflict landscape, challenges remain in ensuring their implementation and responsiveness. A key issue identified by meeting participants in this regard is the fragmentation of frameworks and responses across countries and regions. While there is no shortage of national frameworks addressing these issues—and recognising that these approaches need not be uniform across nations—more effort is needed to ensure that policies are complementary between neighbouring countries and within specific regions. Ensuring that regional approaches also take into account the different policies at the national level, with a view to integrating them, is key.

Ultimately, according to the meeting participants, this also requires an effective exchange of information across regions, as well as the sharing of good practices and common principles. Communication on which national practices should be translated within regional approaches should form the basis for designing programmes, processes and policies. As they are ultimately left at the discretion of each state, inconsistent frameworks can exacerbate the challenges of dealing with ex-combatants in conflict-affected settings. For example, and as reflected by many of the participants in the specialised working group discussions on foreign fighters, organised crime and AGDTOs, many fighters, ex-combatants and associates take advantage of porous borders and the legal fluidity between nations to move across borders in search of preferential treatment. They may also sometimes exploit ethnic ties in border communities, making it difficult to identify national affiliation and complicating the process of designing DDR-related interventions in the region.

**A key challenge identified by meeting participants in this regard is the “non-binding” nature of regional arrangements and approaches, particularly when matters are left to be dealt with at the national level.**

A key challenge identified by meeting participants in this regard is the “non-binding” nature of regional arrangements and approaches, particularly when matters are left to be dealt with at the national level. For example, Mali’s decision to withdraw from the G5 Sahel implies a weakened capacity of these arrangements to enforce collective action, responsibility and cohesion in the face of regional threats and challenges. This raises the question of how to create sustainable and binding solutions for a regional approach, but more importantly, whether this binding nature is indeed necessary for an effective regional approach. During the meeting, participants consciously sought to unpack the various challenges and weaknesses of these regional arrangements while taking into account the need to balance and harmonise regional and national approaches in a feasible manner.

Another major source of complexity highlighted by meeting participants is the legal and conceptual challenges of dealing with armed groups designated as terrorist organisations (AGDTOs). Due to the lack of a universally agreed definition of terrorism and vague interpretations of what constitutes a “terrorist act”, the designation of certain armed groups as “terrorist” or not has eventually become an entirely political and often arbitrary process. This has led to discrepancies between different listings at the international, regional and national levels, as well as to changes in these lists over time due to political changes. Ultimately, such conceptual and legal complexities create challenges and limitations as to when and where practitioners can meaningfully engage in a given context.

The conceptual and legal complexities are compounded by the fact that the majority of regional interventions and responses have been primarily designed to address the security dimension while failing to respond to the developmental, humanitarian and social drivers that are at the core of recruitment. Militarised and security-based interventions, while absolutely necessary, are not sufficient on their own to address armed groups and

conflicts. Even in cases where the regionalised approach recognises the developmental and social aspects and reflects them in guiding policies and frameworks, this rarely goes beyond rhetoric and, unfortunately, does not translate into action on the ground. This is a part of a much larger systemic problem whereby countries and international and regional bodies find it easier to “manage” and “respond” to security crises and threats than to invest in longer-term prevention efforts, which are ultimately more costly and difficult to measure.

**Armed groups are increasingly involved in criminal activities, highlighting a further nexus between conflict, terrorism, and organised crime. This undermines state legitimacy, creates avenues for armed groups to sustain themselves and reduces their incentives to engage in political settlements.**

Other challenges relate to the identification and handling of foreign fighters in the context of regionalised armed conflicts. According to the IDDRS, all foreign combatants who have participated in the war or individuals who have crossed national borders to join an armed group should be repatriated and included in DDR processes. In reality, however, as displacement increases, the lines become increasingly blurred, and it is becoming almost impossible to separate populations on the move into ex-combatants, civilian associates, abductees and other categories. This situation is exacerbated when foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) are added to the equation, as they 1) have a vested interest in not disclosing their affiliation for fear of prosecution or 2) in cases where they are identified, states of origin refuse to repatriate them, citing concerns over national security.

The growing links between armed groups, terrorism and organised crime further exacerbate the challenges of engagement for practitioners. Armed groups are increasingly involved in criminal activities, highlighting a further nexus between conflict, terrorism, and organised crime. This undermines state legitimacy, creates avenues for armed groups to sustain themselves and reduces their incentives to engage in political settlements. It is also worth noting that such illicit activities often occur in border communities and areas where the state presence is weak, and where porous borders allow armed groups and illicit networks to exploit conditions to further their strategic objectives.



*People crossing the Chari River, at the Chadian–Cameroonian border, with Chad's capital N'Djamena in the background (picture: Claudia Breitung, BICC).*

# Engagement in ‘the Borderlands’: Implications for Research and Policy

Based on the roundtable discussions and working group engagements during the event, the meeting participants were able to identify important implications for research and policy that can inform future engagement in ‘the borderlands’:

**There are different interpretations of the cross-border dimensions of armed violence.** Different participants highlighted different priorities for action and different regional challenges related to regional dynamics. For example, researchers emphasised the need to anchor the understanding of regional dynamics in the particular historical and political contexts that give rise to regional dimensions, where national authorities highlighted obstacles to cooperation with regional organisations and bordering national counterparts. One recommendation is that clearly stating one’s immediate objective and understanding of the level of analysis can help to broaden perspectives beyond immediate perceived priorities and begin to build a more holistic picture of contextual challenges and opportunities for action that transcend participants’ immediate affiliations and viewpoints.

**There is a need to unpack and challenge well-established terminology.** Throughout the meeting, participants challenged seemingly well-established terms and concepts used in programming. Among the terms that were critically examined and challenged were ‘border’ and ‘border porosity’ but also terminology referring to specific types of armed actors such as ‘jihadists’ or ‘groups designated as terrorist organisations’. A more critical perspective on some of these terms would benefit future border management programming, but also programming specifically targeting non-state armed groups.

**Borderlands are opportunities for peacebuilding.** Central government actors often disregard or overlook ‘borderlands’, and this creates entry points for non-state armed groups to expand their networks and spheres of influence. These actors use borderlands and borderland communities to advance their cause because of their inaccessibility and unique geographical features. On the other hand, borderlands and borderland communities are vibrant spaces where people and groups connect, share identities and social networks. These create opportunities for peacebuilding that have been underestimated. Policymakers should take greater account of this by creating programmes that specifically focus on the potential that exists in borderland communities. There is a need to broaden the perspective of securitised approaches to borders, which focus primarily on their control.

**There is a need for increased data sharing and dissemination.** To develop more timely and proactive programming targeted at borderlands and armed actors operating in these spaces, increased knowledge exchange and dissemination is necessary. Research on regional conflict complexes, which is highly relevant for programming, needs to be ‘translated’ into programming language and actionable policy recommendations and disseminated more widely among practitioners and policymakers.

**A more honest discussion of the nature of regional challenges and threats is necessary.** At the community level, the root causes of conflict are usually well known, but programming still often responds to crisis symptoms rather than addressing the underlying root causes. In particular, the political dimensions of regional conflicts and the involvement of political actors in these conflicts deserve more attention.

**There is a need for a critical examination of existing regional initiatives and their effectiveness.** As there are already regional initiatives targeting transnational armed non-state groups, it is worth learning from them and drawing important lessons for future programming: Are these programmes achieving their stated objectives? Are they working from the right assumptions? Are they causing harm? Do they take sufficient account of the wealth of knowledge available in borderland communities? Are they tailored to the unique characteristics of the diverse communities in these borderlands?



**Focus on predisposition to armed violence in borderlands.** Discussions revealed that access to land, the exploitation of resources, lack of state provision of social services, and the behaviour of the security apparatus precede and are largely responsible for recruitment into armed groups. It is these elements that policymakers should take into greater account when considering approaches to dealing with non-state armed groups.

An additional **set of recommendations** helps to outline **a way forward for improving DDR planning and implementation in the context of regional conflicts** by considering how DDR actors can work together to mitigate the impact of the multiple challenges posed by border regions where armed conflict is ongoing or where post-conflict transition faces critical challenges linked to regional conflict dynamics:

**Cross-border security, dialogue and cooperation.** Mechanisms are already in place that (have the potential to) promote cross-border policy dialogue and information exchange on regional conflict dynamics (e.g. governors' fora, webinar series) and these should be continued for the sake of knowledge development. Beyond this, the establishment of more effective mechanisms for cross-border information sharing and cooperation between security agencies in areas of risk can be a useful means of identifying risk factors and practical responses. This should also include shared databases on ex-combatants receiving assistance to ensure that ex-combatants do not "double-dip" on both sides of the border in search of preferential treatment.

**Reinforcing border networks and commissions.** Conflicts in border areas can quickly lead to mutual suspicion and recriminations, especially when cross-border groups are involved in violence. The creation of fora to promote cross-border dialogue can be an effective means of addressing issues of common concern and responding quickly to incidents. Such groups could include security actors, political, religious and traditional leaders, and those involved in cross-border trade and transport. Women need to be a part of these dialogue groups.

**Working directly with border communities.** Border-zone communities are the most vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and involvement in illicit activities due to the weak presence of the state, lack of basic services and a general sense of marginalisation and lack of inclusion. Border communities should be consulted and involved in dialogues on peace, reconciliation, trauma healing and trust building. They should also be the recipients of targeted livelihood and infrastructure projects to address root causes and transform these areas from pockets of fragility to sources of resilience.

**Regional planning and response frameworks.** The development and increased use of regional planning frameworks and approaches can make a significant contribution to addressing the immediate drivers of conflict including the cross-border movement of armed groups, as well as to developing strategies to address risk factors. Additionally, regional instruments and structures should be operationalised to support national efforts. African member states should make use of regional bodies, security arrangements and continental frameworks to address and respond to conflict, organised crime and terrorism. Examples include the RSS and the AU OGN on DDR.

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