Lesson Learnt from Countering Militant Groups in Africa

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Abstract

The disconnect between what truly drives the contagion of violent militancy in Africa and governments' attempts at countering it has led to ineffective interventions. As seen in the theatres where violent militancy is rampant, interventions that are not informed by inclusive, people-centered, country-specific, and robust policymaking are bound to fail. This paper focuses on identifying the core factors that make counter militancy interventions effective or unsuccessful. These factors are derived from an analysis of the studies on countering militant groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Kenya as well as the several workshops that the author has led on identifying best practices for countering violent militancy in Africa.

Keywords: defense and security forces, governance, militancy, insurgency, trust, interagency

Introduction

Much ink has been spilt in recent years attempting to unpack the seemingly interminable insurgencies that plague some fragile states in Africa. The drum beat of insights that emerged thumps home the common themes long scrutinized by scholars and astute observers of African insurgencies, namely how the combination of dysfunctional governance with weak and undisciplined defense and security forces (DSF) contribute to the rise and resilience of militant groups. Time and again and across disparate fragile countries in Africa, glaring deficiencies in governance, particularly in the areas of justice, defense, and law enforcement, have enabled and fueled insurgent activity. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that in some countries that have been engulfed by violent militancy, governments and

their security forces have been their own worst enemies. Instead of undertaking the political, socio-economic and security reforms necessary to improve governments' legitimacy and fill counterinsurgency capability gaps, governments tend to double down on militarized interventions (arming militias, arbitrary arrests, systematic closing of markets, impositions of curfews, and so on) to halt insurgencies. These measures often end up further eroding local livelihoods, exacerbating communal frictions, and damaging state-society trust.

In the few cases where governments with limited resources and low state capacity have made inroads against militants, governments have generally made efforts to understand the nature of the threat and then respond with security reforms, community engagement, improvement in public service delivery, and dialogue with militants. Mauritania and Niger (before the July 2023 coup) are examples where leaders exhibited the political will to address the drivers of insurgency while fighting the militants and providing recourse for dialogue and reconciliation. In Coastal West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, which was once ravaged by internal conflict, offers several important lessons in how to counter emerging militant groups. Abidjan's efforts to reorganize and align security and economic interventions have hitherto forestalled an emerging insurgency from taking root within communities along its long and vulnerable 630 kilometers border with Burkina Faso and Mali. In East Africa, Kenya provides a good case of the opportunities of balancing national leadership with local ownership in countering militant insurgency.

All these cases show what is possible when authorities make a candid effort to understand the threat and then craft integrated strategies designed not only to extend state capability and presence but also improve governments' legitimacy and build confidence between security services and aggrieved communities. Each context is different, but the cases' commonalities help illustrate what works and what does not in countering militant groups. This paper focuses on identifying these core factors of successful or otherwise failing counterinsurgency campaigns. These factors are derived from an analysis of the studies on countering militant groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Kenya as well as the several workshops that the author has led on identifying best practices for countering violent militancy in Africa.

Mali: The road to Strategic Failure

Mali is a classical textbook case where the failings of a dysfunctional state created ideal conditions for violent militant groups to take hold and thrive. In the post-2012 security crisis that saw much of Mali's north overrun by Tuareg rebels and militant groups, the state's inability to protect communities and the tendency of security forces to commit indiscriminate violence against suspect civilians have contributed to recruitment into violent militant groups. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated consistent evidence of an association between the need for protection and the decision to join violent armed groups (Boukhars and Pilgram 2023). State abuses have also been shown to be often 'tipping point' for insurgent recruitment (UNDP 2023)..

The dynamics of dysfunctional warfare that have characterized the security environment of Mali long predated the spread of violent militancy in the country (Pérouse de Montclos 2021). In the various uprisings that have engulfed the north of post-independence Mali, the choice of the authorities to unleash disproportionate violence while disregarding the demands of Tuareg rebels (end to marginalization of the north and "recognition of a northern political identity" played a major role in allowing resentments to simmer and propelling the narratives that have sustained the cycles of conflict (Chauzal and Damme 2015). To be sure, other factors fed the conflict between Bamako and its faraway northern regions, including internal divisions between and among the different clans and groups that populate the north, the influx of small arms, and recurrent droughts which made thousands of northerners climate refugees in Algeria, Niger and Libya where some Tuareg received military training and equipment (Chauzal and Damme 2015).. But it was the systemic weaknesses of the state and the dysfunctions of its security forces that abetted insecurity and fomented armed revolts.

Such failings became apparent in the 1990s and onwards when Bamako struggled to settle a new cycle of insurgencies that coincided with the country's tumultuous transition from military rule. Unlike the 1962 insurrection that was repressed in blood, the following rebellions proved hard to suppress using mere brute force. To tackle the new insurrections, Mali's elected presidents adopted a multi-pronged approach to suppress recalcitrant rebels, coopt leaders amenable to their control, and provide economic incentives to combatants willing to disarm. The government also made promises contained in different peace agreements to invest in the

development of the north, give localities more autonomy, integrate rebels in the army, and withdraw the bulk of the military from the north. The partial and bad implementation of these peace agreements worsened center-periphery relations, polarized community relations in the north, and paved the way for the rebellions of the 2000s, which took advantage of the weaknesses of Malian security forces and their sparse presence in the north.

President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), elected in 2002 and deposed in a military coup in 2012, tried to manage the restive northern regions through manipulation of internal divisions within northern communities and propping up of unaccountable ethnic and clan-based militias, some of whom were involved in trafficking and drug dealings (Lacher 2013). This fed distrust within Tuareg and Arab communities, fueled the anger of local populations at the unfulfilled promises of economic development in the north, and created entry points for violent militant groups that were pushed out of Algeria in the late 1990s (Boukhars 2013). The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which in 2007 evolved into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), took advantage of the security vacuums created by the state's withdrawal from the north, the unreadiness of a military whose leadership neglected its rank and file soldiers, and the infighting among and between communities, to settle and thrive in the north of Mali (Boukhars 2012).

Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, aka IBK, who was elected in 2013 with a mandate to restore state authority and trust in public institutions, had done little to address the sources of spiraling security crises engulfing Mali. His tenure had been characterized by corruption scandals and failures in the security, judicial and administrative realms, the accumulation of which led to the territorial expansion of violent militant groups, the proliferation of ethnic based militias, and the death of thousands of soldiers and civilians. The dramatic deterioration of security led to his ouster in August 2020 by a military that was demoralized by its losses. When he took office, IBK pledged to put an end to the threat of mutinies and coups that undermined the power of governments. But his inability to address the systemic ills that kept the army enfeebled and severely disorganized had engendered deep disenchantment and anger among the soldiers. In the end, the widespread fraud and waste that roiled the ministry of defense as well as the embezzlement of soldiers' wages drove the rank and file to their boiling point (Schmauder, Soto-Mayor and Goxho 2020).

The military junta that took power in August 2020 tried to address the weaknesses of the military by investing in recruiting more soldiers and procuring new military hardware, notably aerial equipment. They also turned their backs on France and pivoted to Russia as a new security partner that they hoped could help stabilize their hold on power and turn the tide against the militant insurgencies raging in the country's central and north-eastern regions. The military regime claims that this security rapprochement with Russia and its linked private security company Wagner and its successor Africa Corps has bolstered the offensive capabilities of the army and boosted the morale of Malian troops (International Crisis group February 2023). The reality on the ground, however, is still precarious. The military has shown the capacity to conduct "complex operations," but this has not stemmed the continuing deterioration of security (International Crisis group February 2013). In fact, by doubling down on a pure military response that relies on hard counterterrorism tactics, local militias, and mercenaries, the Malian authorities risk pursuing the same old failed strategy that exacted a heavy toll on civilians and exacerbated communal tensions.

The worst part of this dynamic is also playing out in Burkina Faso where the coup leaders' very attempts to solve the country's insecurities might end up aggravating the problem. The new military authorities that emerged out of two military coups d'état in 2022 have taken the country's reliance on armed self-defense groups and civilian auxiliary forces to new levels, making them "the main pillar of their response to insecurity" (International Crisis Group May 2023). This dependence stems from a capability gap *(de Bruijne 2022).*. Despite the efforts to reinforce the security and defense forces through recruitment of soldiers and gendarmes and acquisition of military equipment, the military still lacks the manpower to contain the spread of militant groups. In theory, it seems sensible that the military rulers continue to resort to informal militia groups while revamping national security policy, modernizing outdated military equipment, and improving the functioning of its security forces. An appreciable number of Burkinabés also seem supportive of setting up self-defense units to help the efforts of security forces in protecting communities and securing border areas *(Idrissa 2019).*

The problem, however, is that without proper supervision, the government's massive recruitment of 50 000 additional armed civilian auxiliaries, called the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), risks   worsening the security situation *(Koné 2023).*. Already, the increased

militarization of Burkinabe society and the recruitment of state-backed self-defense militias from settled communities has led to a spike in violence against civilians, an increase in intercommunal clashes and additional recruitments of endangered pastoralists into violent militant groups. Militants have targeted communities they accuse of supporting and supplying armed militias, while the DSF seems to retaliate against villages they suspect of siding with the insurgents (International Crisis Group May 2023).

The military leaders' management of insecurity in both Mali and Burkina Faso risks repeating the same errors committed by their civilian predecessors. Their efforts to upgrade the tactical capabilities of their security forces is long overdue, but these endeavors will not come to fruition if they remain restricted to a pure military response that gives precedence to arming specific communities and bolstering the army's manpower and equipment. So far, neither military government has embarked on improving security sector governance and accountability. Nor have they engaged in addressing the underlying grievances that fuel violent militancy, namely political dysfunction, DSF abuse of civilians, uncontrolled state-affiliated militias, rampant banditry, and land tenure disputes.

Niger: A Promising Case Gone Astray

Before the July 2023 coup that overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, Niger represented a promising case that demonstrated that fragile countries have the capacity to absorb and withstand shocks due to high levels of internal and external insecurity. Despite being surrounded with encroaching conflicts and insurgencies on its borders with Libya on the north, Burkina Faso and Mali on the north-west, and Nigeria on the south-east, Niger had shown remarkable resilience. Unlike its troubled neighbors, violent militant groups have not been able to establish permanent sanctuaries or occupy large swaths of territory.

This capacity to hold out against multiple destabilizing forces was largely due to the will of the highest authorities in the country to learn from the country's past struggles as well as that of its neighbors and adjust policies as conditions dictate. This is most evident in the way the country managed the insurrections and violence it has confronted since it gained its independence. Unlike its Malian neighbor, the authorities had the political wisdom to politically integrate the country's minority groups. The example

of Brig Rafini, a Tuareg who served as Minister of Agriculture in the late 1980s and then prime minister of Niger from 2011 to 2021, is a testament to the level of access to power that minorities were afforded. The government had also been more proactive in addressing some of the political grievances of Tuareg rebels. The ruling authorities enacted decentralization policies that devolved "some administrative functions and allowed local authorities to spend 15 per cent of locally generated mining revenues" (Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

        The government of Niger had also taken deliberate decisions to avoid inflaming local conflicts among border communities. Niger, for example, had always been wary of the mobilization of vigilantes and ethnic militias to fight insecurities. In this regard, Mali offered a powerful warning about the risks of subcontracting conflict management to ethnic militias. But concerns about their potential to exacerbate local conflicts as well as their propensity to go rogue or be politically instrumentalized also stem from the hard lessons that Niger learnt during the Tuareg insurgencies that engulfed its north in the 1990s and 2000s and the ethnic Tebu rebellion that hit the country's portion of the Lake Chad in the 1990s. In the latter case, Niger struggled to demobilize the Fulani and Arab militias that helped fight the Tebu rebels. Niger also learnt from the mistakes it made in 2017-2018 when it collaborated with Malian Daosahak and Tuareg-community armed groups to fight militant groups in northern Tillabery. Such military partnership, backed by French military forces, fueled deadly armed confrontation between competing communities as well as boosted recruitment for the militants, especially from Fulani young men who were disproportionately targeted by these joint offensives   (International Crisis Group 2020). The authorities had to reverse course and suspend pursuing policies that carry heavy costs.

        As a consequence, Niger has resisted the mobilization of community armed groups. In the areas bordering the Lake Chad Basin where Boko Haram is active, the authorities prohibited civilians from arming themselves, demanding instead "that vigilantes work as an informant network with the army's civil-military cooperation teams   " (International Crisis Group 2017). When some of those areas became hard hit by insecurities and the government proved unable to protect civilians, the authorities came to terms with the emergence of vigilantes, but they nonetheless pressed that they register with civilian and security officials. They also provided alternatives for communities to be involved in the state's security efforts at the local level. For example, the authorities started special training programs for young people in affected communities to join the National Guard. This was a

winning strategy as the integration of communities in local security initiatives improved relations between the National Guard and border communities. According to a 2021 study carried out by the Nigerien National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) on the obstacles of building trust between the security forces and the populations, the National Guard topped the rest of the DSF branches in terms of favorability ratings (ANiamey 2022). In fact, the study results revealed a convergence of positive opinion towards the National Guard, especially in the hard-hit regions of Tillabéri, Tahoua, and Diffa.

The study also showed that the government's efforts to bolster the operational effectiveness of its security forces and improve their relations with local populations were well-received in communities where DSF proved to be responsive to peoples' security needs. In the department of Konni of the Tahoua Region, majorities of respondents expressed confidence in the police, particularly in the Mobile Border Control Company (CMCF) that managed to reassure the populations thanks to the promptness and effectiveness of its interventions. In other regions where the police failed to promptly act on alerts from the populations, the study found low levels of popular satisfaction. The same applies to the military. In Diffa, the military managed to improve its image thanks to its awareness-raising activities and civil-military actions (CMA) while in Tillabéri the populations had a negative image of soldiers who they blamed for acts of human rights violations, especially in areas bordering Mali and Burkina Faso. This divergence of views shows that the DSF still have ways to go to rebuild trust with the populations. But, as the results of the study illustrate, DSF-population relations have gradually improved. By 2021, nearly half of Nigeriens had a positive assessment of their collaboration with DSF.

This positive trajectory was due to political determination to improve synergy of interventions between DSF, political actors, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local communities. In the years preceding the 2023 coup, Niger adopted several legislative and operational frameworks, including a National Strategy for the Prevention of Radicalization and the Fight against Violent Extremism (SNPRLEV) and a National Strategy for Local Security (SNSP), "as a model for community-oriented security management" (Mottet and Inkesha 2022). The High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) and other structures were "all levers for coordinated and effective" action to operationalize this integrated multi-stakeholder approach to countering violent militancy.

Niger's multidimensional approach to countering militancy also included providing recourse for mediation, dialogue and possible amnesty to insurgents who accept to lay down their arms and reintegrate into society. Such non-military means of countering violent militancy were designed to ease intra and intercommunal conflicts, lure associates of militant armed groups to defect, and help diminish the human resources and military capacity of militant groups. As such, Nigerien authorities began in 2021 exploring the prospect of dialogue with leaders of insurgent groups, especially after several militants deserted in Tillabéri. Under the "outstretched hand" policy adopted by then president Bazoum, several high-level initiatives were launched to incentivize defections (Agence France-Presse 2023). Some targeted local commanders while others, under the auspices of the interior ministry and HACP "opened talks with factions of ISSP and JNIM (Héni Nsaibia 2023), exploring options ranging from ceasefires, renditions, and prisoner releases to more substantial reform-oriented negotiations" (Armstrong 2023). These outreach initiatives, backed with security upgrades and community engagements, helped drive violence down in the North Tillaberi area by "nearly 80 percent in 2022." The authorities' drive for experimenting with dialogue with insurgents was "inspired" by the relatively successful Diffa "disarmament and reintegration process launched in 2016" as well as the disarmament and reintegration of Tuareg rebels in the 1990s (Koné 2023).

The July 2023 military coup threatened to derail the progress that Niger made in countering violent militancy. The governments' astute handling of the multiple insecurities that have confronted the state spared Niger from the worse fate of its Malian and Burkinabe neighbors. In fact, the experience of Niger illustrates that political will, perseverance, and adaptive strategy are key to countering insurgencies. To be sure, Niger was certainly still volatile. Despite some progress, poverty was still prevalent, particularly in rural and border areas. Ethnicity also remained a polarizing issue that affected politics, military recruitments, communal relations, and armed conflict. But since the country's transition to democracy in the 1990s and especially its return to democratic order in 2011, the governments of Niger had made deliberate decisions to address security threats in a multidimensional way.

Cote D'Ivoire: Keeping Militants at Bay

Côte d'Ivoire's story of how it emerged from devastating civil conflicts (2002-2007 and 2010-2011) into a relatively stable country with the strongest economy in Coastal West Africa is quite remarkable. Equally important is how the country managed to roll back militant incursions into its territory. Côte d'Ivoire was the first country in Coastal West Africa to suffer militant attacks in March 2016 and then June 2020. Militant groups based in Burkina Faso and Mali exploited the porosity of borders, disorganized state security services, and rampant illicit transnational flows to infiltrate the country's vulnerable northern regions. To disrupt them necessitated that the country bolsters its security apparatus, enhance its socio-economic investments in affected regions, and improve trust between security actors, local authorities and populations that have been marginalized or hard to reach. Abidjan's efforts in this regard have hitherto forestalled an emerging insurgency from taking root within communities along its long and vulnerable 630 kilometers border with Burkina Faso and Mali.

The success of Côte d'Ivoire in rolling back the insurgency illustrates the importance of developing and implementing an integrated strategy that demonstrates government resolve to meet its most basic responsibilities. Since the end of its second civil conflict (2010-2011), Côte d'Ivoire has made important strides in reforming its security forces. The restructuring of the military made its composition more balanced in terms of ethnic and regional representation (International Crisis Group August 2023). The significant investments in recruitment, training and equipment have also made the Ivorian military more capable than ever before (Le Monde 2023).

Côte d'Ivoire has also invested in reforming the capabilities of the police and law enforcement agencies to meet their diverse functions needs in terms of population protection, intelligence gathering and analysis, and interrogating and detaining suspects. The police, gendarmerie (paramilitary national police force), forest rangers, etc. play a critical role in countering violent militancy, but as those familiar with the literature on countering insurgencies know, these forces can also abet the growth of insurgent movements. Weak, ill-prepared, or abusive domestic forces can feed insurgency momentum. Boosting the capacity and legitimacy of internal security forces is therefore key to stemming a budding insurgency.

Equally important, the authorities made a determined effort to address the deleterious gaps in coordination between its different security agencies. The special forces of the army, the Police Search and Assault Force of the National Police and the Intervention Unit of the National Gendarmerie have had to work together within the framework of mixed operational units (Ricard 2021). The country also invested in the development of counterinsurgency coordination mechanisms that can gather, analyze, process and transmit information to relevant stakeholders. The ability to connect the dots relates not only to information sharing among the varied national government agencies but also to integration of efforts across different levels of government (state and local) and between government and non-government entities. This interagency process enables informed decision-making and ensures appropriate preparedness to prevent, investigate, disrupt and dismantle militant threats.

The tasks of countering militancy also included enhancing DSF-community relations. To avoid the limitations of the security-heavy approach adopted in the central Sahel, Côte d'Ivoire recognized early on the importance of integrating communities into the efforts to prevent and counter militancy. Since the 2020 Kafolo attack, the authorities have stepped their endeavors to boost communications between local communities and the security forces, governors, and local authorities. The establishment of civilian-military committees have played an important role in mitigating disputes between local populations and DSF. Côte d'Ivoire has also implemented community policing and its military has made efforts to gain civilians' support through building basic infrastructure and offering healthcare to communities though its army mobile clinics.

The case of Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates that political will and sound strategy are key to thwarting nascent insurgencies. The functions of countering militant groups included security, socio-economic, informational, and political components, all of which have been designed to restore order, enhance security for local communities, and advance political objective of reconciliation. This whole-of-nation approach, also called a comprehensive approach, factored in the multiple dimensions of countering violent militancy in Côte d'Ivoire.

Kenya: Adapting in the Face of Evolving Militancy

Kenya provides a good case of innovative practices in countering militant groups. The country's experience of tragic militant attacks started with the 1998 truck bombs that exploded at the American Embassy in Nairobi. Since then, the threat has evolved and been superseded by the Somali-based violent militant group, al-Shabaab. The latter has subjected Kenya to most of its strikes outside Somalia, attacking government and security personnel operating along the Kenya Somalia border as well as civilians in northeastern Kenya, in particular non-locals and individuals suspected of being government spies. In response to these attacks, particularly the deadly 2013 attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall and the 2015 killing of 148 students in Garissa, which borders Somalia, Kenya has invested significant resources in its struggle against violent militancy.

Deriving lessons learned from the shortcomings of its coercive approach to countering militancy, the Kenyan government began a gradual transition from a purely security-driven response to a more multi-stakeholder approach. After the 2013 attack, the government introduced new reforms to policing. Among other things, this included the gradual embrace of people-centered approaches to policing. This new approach to security was reflected in the creation of two state-initiated community-oriented policing models: the National Police Service's Community Policing Structure and the Nyumba Kumi (ten households). Both models were designed to help narrow the trust gap between the police and local communities. Indeed, an evaluation of community policing pilot projects found "better community involvement in the management and resolution of local security problems," and improved "trust and cooperation between the police, civil society, and local communities (United Nations Development Programme 2022). Promising community-friendly policing initiatives such as neighborhood 'police cafés' have also produced positive outcomes. Research has shown that dialogue forums between law enforcement and local communities in some restive borderland communities in Kenya tended to improve trust in security services (Jones 2020).

Traditionally, countering militancy practices have involved little consultation with local communities and have seldom taken into account their diverse needs, concerns and perceptions. The belief was that enforcement activities and intelligence-gathering methods must take priority over the arduous task of gaining public trust and earning the support of local

communities. The limitations of these methods, however, even when implemented within a rule of law framework, have highlighted the necessity of drawing on the support of local communities to successfully counter violent militancy. The logic behind this is quite simple. In many low-trust settings where policing is not closely integrated into local communities and where law enforcement agencies have little legitimacy and credibility, the ability of security actors to identify and enhance community safety issues and social order is undermined. By contrast, in areas where security actors adopt community-oriented approaches that prioritize public participation and support, their efforts tend to have positive impact.

Building trust is critical in contexts of countering militancy where communities and security actors must have a clear understanding of the nature and source of the threat they are facing as well as the causes and dynamics of violent extremism. This is the same rationale that drove a restructuring of security provision in Garissa. After the 2015 attacks, the authorities ordered a major personnel reshuffle that included the placement of locals in security positions of high prominence and visibility. The new security leadership, as documented in a 2017 Saferworld study, "commanded local trust and respect across social divides, clamped down on corruption and arbitrary arrest, worked with communities to restore trust and break up al-Shabaab cells" (Wakube 2017). The subsequent decline in militant attacks and improvements in local perceptions of security demonstrated the real and tangible benefits that could be derived from the adoption of strategies that seek to improve relations between the security services and local communities. This gradual shift towards people-centered approaches in the security space became notable in the state's more measured response to militant attacks. During the 2019 dusitD2 hotel complex siege that saw gunmen associated with al-Shabaab attack the complex, leading to a standoff that lasted 19 hours, "law enforcement agencies were described as comparatively measured and sensitive in their response" (Jone 2020). This stood in sharp contrast to the 2014 indiscriminate security crackdowns associated with Operation Usalama Watch whereby thousands of Somalis in Kenya were "subjected to arbitrary arrest, harassment, extortion and ill-treatment" (Amnesty International 2014).

Despite these promising outcomes, the implementation of policing and security reforms has not been easy. The police system has been plagued by "in-house problems," including "lack of human and economic resources, poor working conditions, training, management and leadership at various

levels in the police" (Gjelsvik 2020). Police reforms have also not fully filtered "down to frontline officers due in part to the insularity of Kenya's institutions, the difficulties of cross-departmental collaboration and frequent rotations of personnel" (Jones 2020). Misalignment of approaches between national and local levels exacerbated these problems as discrepancies produced "contradictory outcomes." (Jones 2020).

Adopting and implementing a collaborative, partnership-based approach to security is hard work. It requires significant organizational transformation and fundamental changes in policing and security cultures. This in turn necessitates political will, sufficient resources and on-going communication between all stakeholders. In other words, transitioning from a purely security-driven response to a multi-stakeholder, partnership-led approach entails a mindset change from all key stakeholders in the government, relevant ministries and defense and security agencies. For the latter, such a shift is a major undertaking as it requires a redefinition of identities, roles, mandates, and principles under which they operate.

Kenya's adoption of National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (NSCVE) in 2016 was an important step towards formalizing this drive towards embracing and implementing collaborative, partnership-based strategies to countering militancy. The novelty of NSCVE resided in its mandating counties to develop their own county action plans (CAPs) with "accompanying local co-ordination mechanisms and structures" (Crosby and Pkalya 2021). The result is that each county in Kenya has developed its own action plan as well as a county engagement forum (CEF), the body responsible for implementing the CAP. The forum includes several stakeholders from the government and non-government. These innovations have elevated the critical role that local governments and grassroots civil society stakeholders can play in tackling security challenges that are often community specific.

Local authorities, whether in urban centers or border villages, are generally more socio-culturally attuned to their communities' attributes and dynamics. They are often well placed to not only give contextualized understanding of local realities and provide early identification of risks for violence but also bring greater coherence to and alignment between often siloed locally driven initiatives and programing and national frameworks. Local governments can mainstream countering militancy activities into tailored development program that tackle the local causes of the problem.

Their access to critical local services such vocational training, social welfare, sports, recreation, etc. creates opportunities for engaging harder to reach youth meaningfully. This is critical as fostering popular trust in state services is key to countering militancy.

These localized approaches to countering militant insurgency have helped improve cooperation and coordination between and among several agencies and actors at the national and county levels, ensuring in the process that national government plans are informed by "local practice and perspectives" and local action is "in line with national frameworks   " (Rosand 2021). Naturally, not all counties, municipalities, provinces, or states need to develop local action plans to counter violent militancy. There is also not a one-size fits all template for the development of local action plans. There are, however, key principles and considerations which should be part of any successful local action plan. The latter must be rooted in a multisectoral, evidence-based, and community-led approach "with the local government playing a coordinating role   " (Crosby and Pkalya 2021). It must also be financially sustainable and have the political buy-in of government stakeholders at the national and local level.

Conclusion

Africa's evolving security landscape demands a shift from ad hoc approaches to more coordinated and strategic responses. As the case studies in this article demonstrate, states would benefit from developing and implementing comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained strategies that balance addressing the roots of violent militancy and increasing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state and its security services with fighting the insurgents, interdicting their supply lines, and providing recourse for mediation, dialogue, and reintegration of insurgents who accept to lay down their arms and renounce violence. Every insurgency is unique, and the design and implementation of the strategy should be tailored to the context of the insurgency. There is, therefore, no one model for ending insurgencies. The only imperative is that any strategy must be multidimensional, realistic, and adaptable.

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