Improving collaboration between security forces and communities in the Liptako-Gourma region

In recent years, the Liptako Gourma region covering the tri-border zone between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, has become the epicenter of instability in the Sahel region. Banditry and violent extremism took advantage of porous borders to gain a foothold in the region. This rapidly deteriorating security situation continues to erode communities’ confidence in the security and defense forces’ ability to protect them.

In this context, Search for Common Ground, in partnership with the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), contributes to **improving collaboration between security providers and community stakeholders for stability and security across the Liptako-Gourma region.**

This 26-month regional project, implemented in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, supports security forces in their protection mandate and communities in participating in stabilization efforts in conflict-affected areas and military operations. The project targets 16 border communes, including 5 communes in Mopti (Douantza) and Gao (Assongo), 5 communes in Tillaberi (Terra, Tillaberi), and 6 communes in the Sahel (Oudalam, Seno). This intervention is threefold:

- To strengthen the knowledge and awareness of, and communication among security forces and civilian populations regarding their roles, rights, and mutual responsibilities;
- To foster collaborative relationships between security forces and border communities;
- To raise perspectives from a wide array of stakeholders, including marginalized voices, on the value of civil-military cooperation for stability and security in border regions.

**WHO DOES THAT?**

The first component of our action is strengthening the knowledge and awareness of the security forces and civilian populations and communication between them concerning their roles, rights, and mutual responsibilities.

Depending on needs, we provide **training to members of the Security and Peace Committees (PSC) and security and defense forces (SDF) focal points from all branches in the region on conflict transformation**, positive leadership, mediation, community engagement, facilitation of dialogue, and protection of civilians. Equipped with their new skills, our

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trained SDFs then train their peers in the regions' units to support the fight against impunity and border communities' protection. Within the command, we also hold discussions with the police, gendarmes, and military on their respective roles' limitations and complementarity to promote a positive environment of trust and collaboration.

**Peace and Security Committees (PSCs)** are consultative bodies that enable political and administrative authorities, civil society, and national security forces to engage communities on peace and security issues on a common platform.

With early warning systems put in place by our partner WANEP, we collect information on exactions and monitor progress towards collaboration between the SDF and communities. Search then organizes joint workshops with the military and civilians to analyze this information and provide solutions and recommendations to key actors, such as PSCs and other structures involved in preventing impunity. Exchanges then occur at the regional cross-border level, where national authorities, security forces, the G5 Sahel, and civil society organizations share experiences and knowledge on border security management.

**FOSTERING COLLABORATION**

To stabilize the region, we need everyone’s help and collaboration. Therefore, our efforts focus on helping community actors and security forces share critical security information and communicate openly and transparently.

Search builds PSC members’ capacity to organize scorecard events and town hall meetings with communities and SDFs to discuss security issues and identify avenues of cooperation to address them. To further highlight the SDF’s positive role, we then support units identified by the scorecards in their exemplary dedication to civilians’ protection to implement small-scale projects with civilians. These solidarity activities range from community rehabilitation and sanitation projects to more substantial income-generating activities. These initiatives improve communities’ collaboration and living conditions, security and defense forces, and their dependents.

**What is a scorecard?** It is a process based on dialogue, accountability, and transparency that allows citizens and service providers to identify, evaluate, and improve performance criteria jointly. It enables providers to understand better the public's perceptions of the services offered and citizens to understand providers' challenges and respond to them.

**MAKING EVERYONE’S VOICE HEARD**

Search-Niger draws on its long experience and network with the media to amplify stakeholders’ contributions, particularly women, youth, and marginalized groups, to discussions on stability and security.

First, we train journalists from our partner radio stations in the three countries to develop effective and constructive communication on security sector reform (SSR). This training gives them the tools they need to provide conflict-sensitive information and better communicate with the population about the army and the police’s role and missions. Thus, journalists are better equipped to generate participatory public debates with different stakeholders, including women, youth, and marginalized groups. Second, our media team conducts a mass communication campaign to highlight positive role models within the SDF and the G5 Sahel force. Broadcast by our radio partners, it includes radio spots and the regional magazine "Génération Sahel" that contribute to reducing stereotypes and encourage behavioral change and collaboration between the security forces and the population.