



Photo: Warri,
Delta State

Building on Success for a Holistic Niger Delta Security Framework in 2021

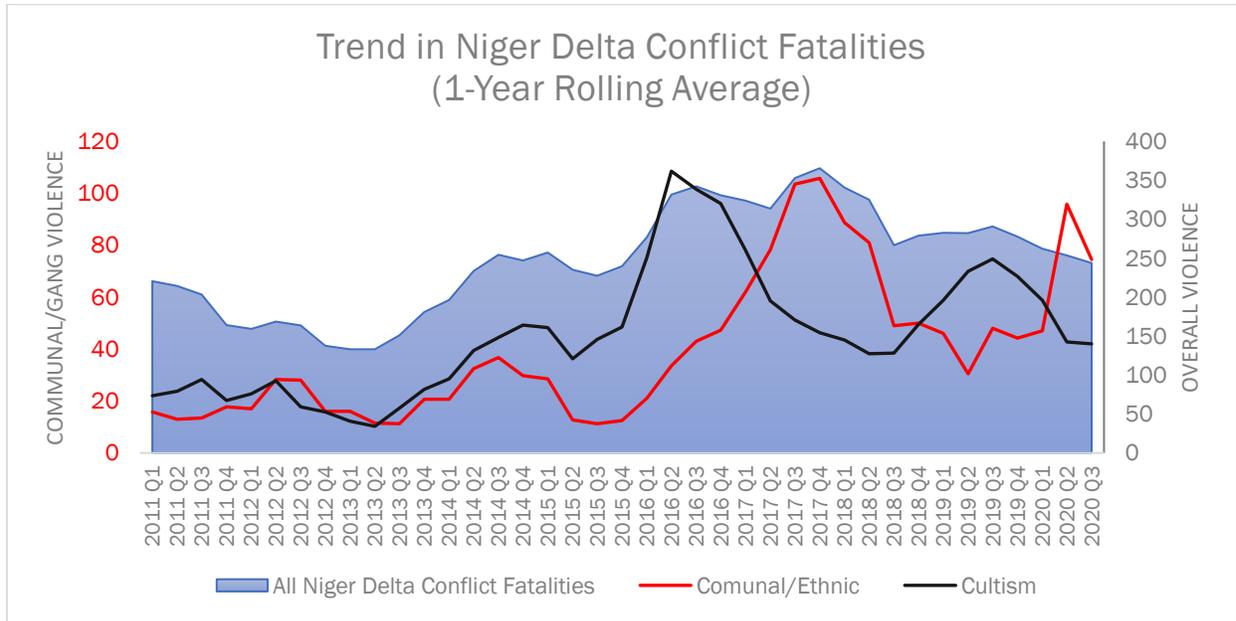
Introduction

A strategic framework for peace and security must consider the complex and dynamic nature of violent conflict. Analyzing security through the separate lenses of communal violence, farmer-herder violence, ethnic violence, cult violence, piracy, election violence, militancy, or criminality will ultimately have limited explanatory value because of how fast things can change.

Communal clashes today may be expressed as banditry tomorrow. Perpetrators are constantly changing their motives, goals, and tactics, both opportunistically and to stay one step ahead of law enforcement. Cultists and cult groups in particular, shift their business model with ease between the trafficking of illicit contraband, robbery and kidnapping, political thuggery, and militancy, depending on the market, the grievances, and the generosity of different patrons and godfathers. This, in an environment with longstanding communal tensions over land and resources, creates a conducive environment

The Niger Delta has long been considered a conflict-affected region, going back to the Biafra War in the late 1960s and the militancy in the 1990s. However, despite the challenges, it must be noted that over the last five years there has been an incremental improvement overall in levels of violence, which should be celebrated and built upon to bring the levels down to where they were in the immediate aftermath of the amnesty program in 2010.

However, particularly in light of the October 2020 #EndSARS protests, what may be needed most is a strategic security framework that is holistic and comprehensive enough to incorporate both violence prevention as well as conflict resolution as a complement to deterrence. For sustainable security to take hold in the Niger Delta, these must go hand-in-hand.



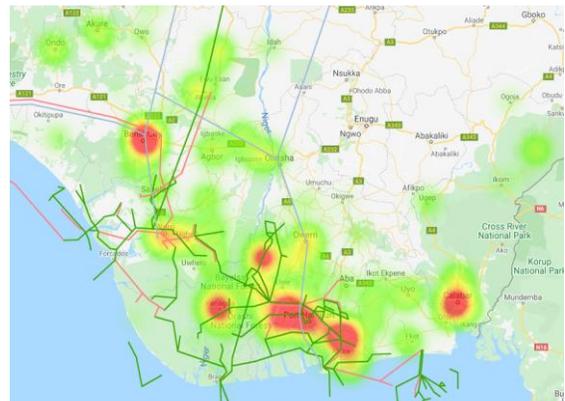
Sources: Nigeria Watch, P4P IPDU, CIEPD CWC as presented on the [P4P Peace Map](#)

Cult Wars

While analysis must go deeper than the mapping of interests and grievances of oppositional groups, in reviewing recent trends in Niger Delta violence, the data shows that violent conflict is frequently expressed in two forms: communal violence and cult wars. In terms of the latter, from 2011 to 2016 violence increased steadily and peaked in 2016 with a major cult war between the Greenlanders and Icelanders in Rivers State. At the same time, there was a series of less lethal clashes among other cult groups such as Aye, Eiye, Black Axe, Maphites, Debam, Deywell, Klans, Vikings, and others in Edo, Delta, Imo, and Cross River states.

Coincidentally or not, the most lethal cult violence did generally occur in the vicinity of pipelines and oil facilities, and often rose sharply during election cycles, such as 2015-2016, perhaps compounded by a legacy of patronage and clientelism and the high stakes that elections can have in the region as connected to illegal oil bunkering and contracts.

Since 2016, however, cult violence has reduced considerably, suggesting the possibility of building on these successes to continue the reduction in violence over the longer term. This paper will outline approaches that show promise in that regard, and which should be included in any comprehensive security framework for 2021.

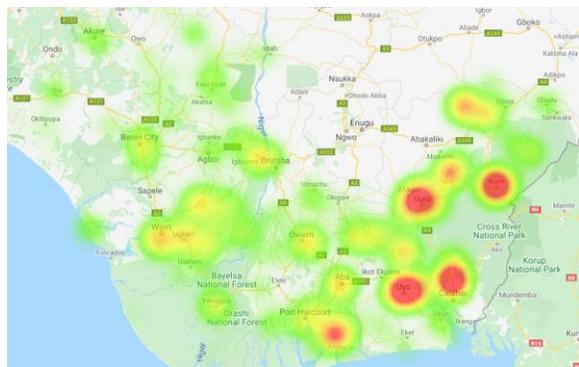


Heatmap of lethal cult clashes 2011-2020, with oil and gas pipelines layer (Data Sources: Nigeria Watch, ETH Zurich) presented on the [P4P Peace Map](#)

Communal Violence

If cult clashes were most intense in the oil-rich core Niger Delta states, communal clashes were most prevalent in the eastern states of Cross River and Akwa Ibom. The worst of it was in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, as communities battled over fishing rights and access to farmland, killing hundreds in the last ten years. In Delta State, violence between Aladja and Ogbe-Ijoh communities also left dozens of people dead in 2017 and 2018.

Despite these lethal communal clashes, much has been done over the past several years in terms of early warning and early response, with the PIND Foundation and the P4P Network conducting trainings throughout the region to equip local stakeholders with both the assessment and analytical skills to understand the driving forces of risk and vulnerability in states and local communities, as well as the necessary conflict mediation and resolution skills to respond prior to these drivers becoming incidents of full-fledged violent unrest.



*Heatmap of lethal communal clashes 2011-2020
(Data Sources: Nigeria Watch, CIEPD CWC)
presented on the P4P Peace Map*

Between cultism and communal violence, as well as election violence, piracy, and general incidents of criminality and interpersonal

women and children across the Niger Delta have been threatened over the last decade.

However, as noted in the introduction, this trend over the last five years has been generally positive, with an incremental reduction in overall violence. Nevertheless, there remain emerging issues and concerns that must be addressed to ensure that they do not serve to compound or exacerbate lingering issues with cultism or communal tensions. These emerging issues are explored in more detail below.

EMERGING ISSUES & CONCERNS

Any security framework must not only consider the hotspots and historical trends, but also the contextual risk factors and emerging pressures which have the potential to exacerbate underlying drivers of conflict, causing them to flare up in varied and unpredictable ways. For instance, beyond its direct health effects, the COVID-19 pandemic has already led to critical socio-economic outcomes which have contributed to restiveness, criminality, and gender-based violence. The longer-term economic stresses could impact security more broadly.

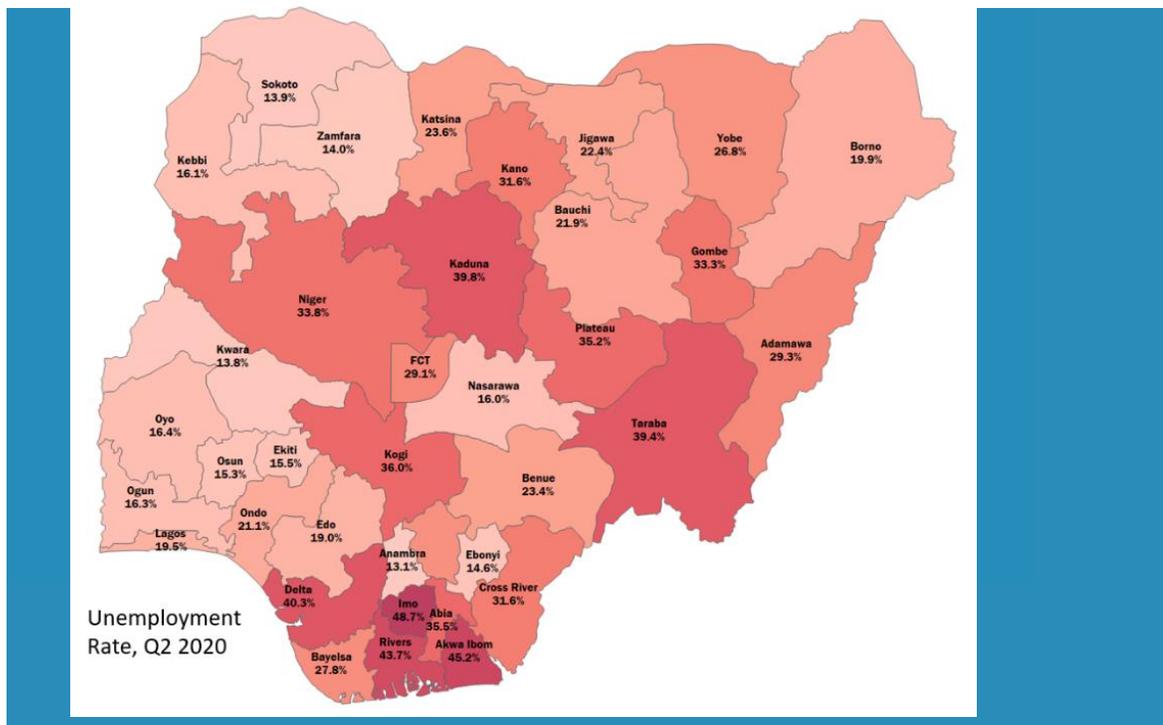
Coming on the heels of Nigeria's emergence out of a recession, its first in 25 years, the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with a sharp drop in global oil prices, has heightened pre-existing economic pressures and reversed promising economic gains. The national and international slowdown in economic activity due to containment measures resulted in a 6.1 percent year-on-year contraction in the second quarter, a decline in remittances, an increase in food prices, and widespread un- and under-employment.

According to Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics, as of Q2 2020, over a quarter of the labor force is unemployed, three times what it was five years ago – and another quarter is underemployed. The situation is particularly severe amongst those aged between 15 and 24, over 70 percent of whom are either unemployed or underemployed. The Niger Delta is particularly badly affected as it is home to the four states with the highest unemployment rates: Imo (48.7 percent), Akwa Ibom (45.2 percent), Rivers (43.7 percent), and Delta (40.3 percent).

The loss of livelihood and general hardships stemming from the lockdown led to an initial rise in unrest and reinforced restiveness in affected states, including in the Niger Delta.

Although Nigeria has gradually eased virus mitigation policies as a step towards economic growth, the path to economic recovery is likely to be a long process due to the magnitude of these pressures and the evolving dynamics of the pandemic.

With a majority of Nigerians still moving in and out of formal employment following the economic re-opening, discontent and disillusionment about the pace and effectiveness of recovery measures is likely to grow, particularly among vulnerable groups such as the youth population.¹ This, as seen with past and ongoing incidents of insecurity, leaves vulnerable groups highly susceptible to the machinations of gangs and cults as well as other



¹ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/tracking-socioeconomic-impacts-pandemic-nigeria-results-first-three-rounds-nigeria-covid>

Additionally, economic insecurity and acute economic stresses are likely to increase incidents of interpersonal violence, as evidenced in the immediate lockdown period. In line with global trends, Nigeria experienced a rise in gender-based violence (GBV) immediately following the implementation of various federal and state-level lockdowns. According to UN Women, GBV data from 24 states showed a 56 percent spike in incident reports after two weeks of lockdown.² In particular, Abia, Cross River, and Rivers, the three Niger Delta states for which data was available, saw spikes in reported cases of GBV by 84 percent, 50 percent, and 130 percent, respectively, between March and April 2020. As restrictions also extended to GBV centers and redress mechanisms, access to quality care services was considerably limited, forcing women and girls vulnerable to GBV to rely primarily on hotlines.

Another key socio-cultural development that has the potential to interplay with the aforementioned socio-economic impacts to further intensify drivers of conflict and insecurity are the effects of the prolonged closing of schools. As part of efforts to curb the spread of the pandemic, schools remained closed following the end of the academic break. Though a credible public health response strategy, the limited availability of remote learning opportunities meant that school closures impacted approximately 39,440,016 learners, of whom 35,905,977 were primary and secondary learners.³ Beyond the long-term gendered impacts, the prolonged disruption to education has longer term implications for the security landscape.

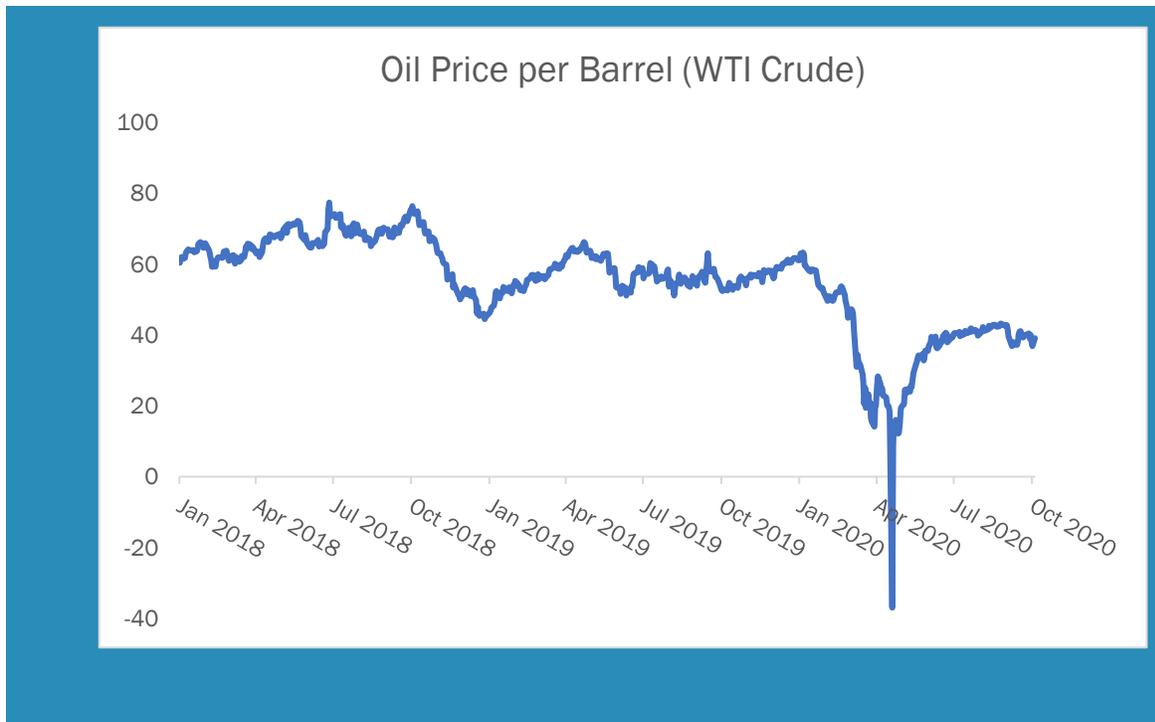
²https://nigeria.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Gender%20Based%20Violence%20in%20Nigeria%20During%20COVID%2019%20Crisis_The%20Shadow%20Pandemic.pdf

³<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

Although schools recently opened, for many impacted learners, ongoing economic pressures from the pandemic may mean an end to their education in order to pursue economic opportunities. As with unemployed groups, dropouts, who are largely to be youth, are particularly vulnerable to instrumentalization by various cult and armed groups who provide economic incentives to their members.

In addition to the COVID-19 related risk factors, there are two recent economic phenomena which are likely to have significant effects on the Niger Delta broadly and the region's security situation specifically. The first is the volatility in the petroleum sector, which has seen an unprecedented global price crash, falling Nigerian production, and the introduction of a potentially radical landmark oil reform bill. The second is a spike in food prices across the country which has prompted President Buhari to issue new restrictions aimed at severely reducing food imports.

A combination of reduced demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia has led oil prices to fall to unprecedented lows, with WTI crude oil prices even briefly plummeting well below zero in late April. Prices recovered to about 2/3 of their December 2019 level by mid-June but have failed to rise any further since then. Oil revenues, which constitute 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and 70% of government revenue, fell by around 80% during the price crash.



The deal that ended the price war and allowed prices to recover was founded on an agreement by all members of the OPEC+ alliance – which includes Nigeria – to cut their production. Consequently, Nigeria’s oil production is currently nearly 20% below where it was before the crisis. Furthermore, Nigeria remains out of compliance with some of its commitments, which means that further cuts may be required. Already facing lower prices and lower production and with rumors of another price war brewing on the horizon, Nigeria is likely facing a persistent revenue shortfall in the short- to medium-term.

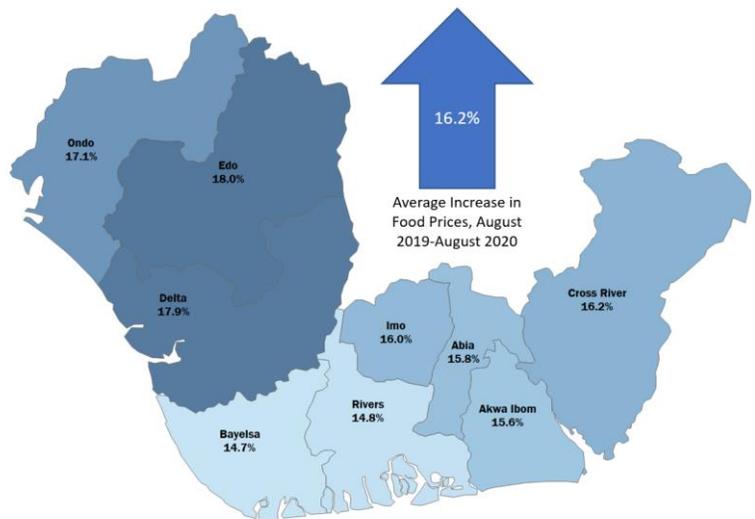
This is the context in which President Buhari’s government has introduced major reforms to the oil sector in Nigeria. The first is the removal of fuel subsidies, which in 2019 cost the government 1.5 trillion naira – over four times the combined spending on the health sector.

In June, the government announced it would phase out these subsidies, and has spent the past several months steadily lifting the retail price of fuel. The second major change is the Petroleum Industry Bill, which includes several momentous changes. In addition to providing for “unrestricted free market pricing” of petroleum products, the bill will reportedly reduce some oil and gas royalties, boost the amount of money paid by companies to local communities and for environmental clean-up, and alter the dispute resolution process between companies and the government. Perhaps the biggest change, however, would be a reformed Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), which would “become ‘a commercially oriented and profit-driven national petroleum company’ independent of government and audited annually”.

In addition to the potential for a reduction in spending on social services due to the fall in revenue, the fall in oil prices may have unpredictable effects on oil bunkering and the activities of armed groups in the Niger Delta. On the one hand, the lower prices may make oil bunkering less profitable. On the other, the fall in profits from oil bunkering may push armed groups to diversify their activities, thereby increasing other types of criminal activity and violence, and reenergizing the violence entrepreneurs. The oil reform bill may also have effects that are difficult to anticipate. Increased spending on local communities and on environmental clean-up may reduce the tacit support for armed groups, while the elimination of fuel subsidies may open another market for stolen oil.

At the same time as Nigeria has been grappling with this volatility in the oil sector, the country has also been faced with a dramatic rise in food prices. As of August, Nigeria's states had experienced an average increase in food prices of over 16%, with some of the largest increases coming in Delta, Edo, and Ondo states. These price increases were driven by several factors, including the measures that were implemented to contain the COVID-19 pandemic as well as ongoing conflict in several parts of Nigeria, especially the displacement of farming communities.

In September, President Buhari directed the central bank to stop issuing foreign exchange for food and fertilizer imports. This order follows a similar one made last year in a bid to shrink Nigeria's trade deficit, but which was only partially implemented. The fall in foreign exchange earnings as a result of the oil price crash in the spring contributed to that deficit widening to a record 1.8 trillion naira and forced the central bank to devalue the naira twice. However, the ban is likely to exacerbate the increase in food prices. The ban also has the potential to give rise to a black market around food imports, which would strengthen criminal groups



TOWARDS A STRATEGIC SECURITY FRAMEWORK: BEST PRACTICES

Although overall levels in violence have improved over the last five years, as outlined above, there are increased economic pressures which have the potential to reverse those gains unless government, civil society, and development actors take advantage of the moment to develop a security framework that emphasizes prevention as a complement to deterrence. Otherwise, the cycle of violence could escalate.

One of the great strengths of the peace and security infrastructure in the Niger Delta's is the high level of engagement by civil society groups throughout the region, and the foundation that has already been built in many ways for collaboration around violence prevention. Already, civil society groups like the P4P Network serve to promote collaboration between civil society actors and state and national governments, including security actors, to jointly assess and address the drivers of violence in a holistic and integrated manner. Some initiatives, for example, have included multi-stakeholder engagement in key senatorial districts to promote non-violent gubernatorial elections, bringing together both civil society leaders as well as local government and security actors to promote non-violent elections and design messages of peace and strategies for de-

Linked to a robust early warning system, the use of radio, television, and print journalism to champion the work of Peace Agents in the region and reach a wide network of stakeholders and community members has been very successful over the years. Capacity building in conflict management and the facilitation of interventions to reduce cult violence, communal violence, youth restiveness, and gender-based violence has also had positive outcomes for peaceable livelihoods in the region.

Any strategy that will be successful in both preventing and deterring violence must be flexible enough to respond to rapidly changing dynamics and emerging vulnerabilities. It must also be participatory, to include the perspectives and insight of all key stakeholder groups. To that end, building upon some of the successful initiatives undertaken by civil society organizations and collaborative partnerships between civil society, governments, and security actors, there are several key elements that can be distilled and could inform the design of any strategic security framework for the region.

Peace Education

- Emphasizing training for community peace structures and committees
- Developing periodic publications on drivers of conflict
- Organizing community town halls for residents to address grievances
- Engaging in media and peace campaigns

Multi-Stakeholder and Inclusive Approaches

- Involving diverse stakeholders e.g. civil society organizations, community-based organizations, traditional and religious institutions.
- Building trust and confidence with stakeholders in the communities through dialogue forums

Early Warning and Early Response (EWER)

- Utilizing early warning and response effectively for conflict prevention.
- including state and non-state actors as part of a systematic and multifaceted process of data collection, information sharing, and verification
- Collaborating with existing community structures that

Research

- Conducting conflict and baseline assessments and surveys
- Developing a profile of conflict in the communities including actors and local capacities of peace
- Conducting research on drivers of conflict as well as key vulnerabilities and resilience factors to improve understanding of conflict dynamics

Regional Coordination

- Establish multi-stakeholder platform, including state government representation as well as civil society groups working on conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This forum could meet quarterly to share priorities, best practices, and coordinate efforts.
- This platform will help peace agents to anticipate spillover effects of conflict across state lines as well as to build upon success for sustainable security and peaceable livelihoods.