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# **An Assessment of the Experiences and Vulnerabilities of Pastoralists and At-Risk Groups in the Atakora Department of Benin**

**Analytical Report | January 2023**



## Acknowledgments

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## Executive Summary

Benin, like its neighbors in West Africa, is now facing a violent extremist insurgency. The violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have taken an intersectional approach to recruiting and influencing the local population in Benin, in response to the country's higher resilience through its pluralistic culture, religion, and demographics, and more capable institutions, relative to its Sahelian neighbors. Nonetheless, VEOs continue to find success in exploiting the grievances of at-risk groups among the local population, through direct recruitment and spreading propaganda.

The research found that pastoralists figure prominently among the at-risk groups in Benin's northern Atakora department, that are being targeted by VEO recruitment efforts, which highlighted that VEO propaganda has been inadvertently helped by Benin's recent policy reforms to modernize its agro-pastoral industry and conserve the fragile ecosystem of the Park W-Arly-Pendjari complex. These reforms have impacted the livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable groups in Atakora, who traditionally rely heavily on local production, instead of commercial trade. As a result, the research found documented cases of these vulnerabilities directly pushing at-risk groups to join the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the West Africa al-Qaeda alliance, known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

### Key Numbers<sup>1</sup>

- 45% of the research sample has reported seeing JNIM in their community.
- 30% personally interacted with JNIM combatants.
- 23% experienced recruitment attempts from JNIM.
- 20% personally know someone who joined JNIM.
- 50% of the Matéri respondents experienced intercommunal conflicts in 2022, a decline from previous years that respondents attributed to the military in Porga.
- Over 70% of respondents support the security force efforts in Matéri.
- 96% of Kouandé respondents experienced intercommunal violence, resulting in over 60% of the Kouandé respondents feeling more insecure in 2022 than usual.
- 50% of farmer-herder violence in Atakora is successfully mediated by police.

### Farmer-Herder Conflicts

Farmer-herder relations have an outsized role in shaping and impacting socio-economic relationships at the community level in West Africa, as pastoralism has historically sustained a

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<sup>1</sup> These are statistics from primary data collected by Elva Community Engagement in eight settlements in Matéri, Tanguiéta, Cobly, and Kouandé communes, in the Atakora Department, in September 2022. The research sample included 192 key informant interviews and 271 participants in 32 focus groups discussions. Disaggregated by gender: the research sample was 86% male, and 14% female.

large portion of the region's population.<sup>2</sup> As a result, farmers and herders generally enjoyed long-standing, mutually beneficial relationships, so cooperation between these groups has always been more common than conflict. However, ethnic tensions have created widening differences between these groups in recent years, which VEOs and communal militias are now exploiting.<sup>3</sup> For example, Peulh pastoralists often experience significant disenfranchisement, resulting from their lack of citizenship and land ownership rights in Benin. As a result, nativist views in Atakora that frame the Peulh as 'VEO collaborators' have grown recently, which has resulted in social and punitive discrimination that has, at times, escalated into intercommunal violence.

In the Atakora department, violence from farmer-herder conflict has escalated since 2020. The recent increase in violence was linked to the implementation of land reform and sedentarization rules coupled with park closures that have inadvertently shrunk the availability of common grazing and farming space. This has resulted in many pastoralists finding it impossible to compete with commercial livestock production and wealthier ranchers. This impacts individual herders and breeders, and limits their livelihood opportunities, as much as it shrinks their political and social influence. Farmers are also frustrated by land reforms, which have redistributed some farmland back to transhumance corridors. The research found that farmer-herder violence in Benin resulted primarily from property damage, and dispute over resources and land. In general, it seems that the confusion around these new policies, and whose rights supersede others, has exacerbated property damage issues, and devolved into this friction at the intercommunal level.

### Escalating Insecurity in the Atakora Department

In addition to escalating intercommunal conflicts resulting from local land distribution policies, insecurity has increased in Atakora since 2021. Benin's military deployment to the north has served as a deterrent for regular local violence and criminal activity in Matéri commune. However, the other communes remain insecure and vulnerable to VEOs and intercommunal conflict, in the absence of regular security patrols. Though the reasons for JNIM's advances into Benin are not entirely clear, controlling and having undisrupted access to the illicit supply chain, which runs through northern Benin, is central to their current strategy.<sup>4</sup> Koalou - a significant node along the illicit supply chain - located north of Atakora, remains the primary stronghold for JNIM, and presents a serious vulnerability for Benin, due to border porosity and the northern communities' reliance on trade from this town and surrounding trade routes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Peter, and Muggah, Robert. 2021. "Climate Change and Security in West Africa." Igarape Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29101.6>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kwarkye, Sampson. "Breaking terrorism supply chains in West Africa." *ISS Africa*, 8 June 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/breaking-terrorism-supply-chains-in-west-africa>.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard, Aneliese. 2021. Tracking the Spillover of Violent Extremism from the Sahel to Littoral West Africa. N.p.: Elva Community Engagement.

JNIM's activities and recruitment in Benin are realized through both a combination of *spilling over*, through its southward push from the Sahel, and its interaction with mobile groups on the periphery, as well as *homegrown*, through local recruitment of at-risk groups: The research unequivocally found that violent extremism first expanded into Benin through entry points with mobile groups. As their livelihood opportunities shrink, pastoralists' desperation for access to basic goods and money has served as a push factor for some, towards VEOs. Furthermore, their marginalization around transhumance corridors, border areas and rural areas - spaces that are often located in VEO areas of control - has brought them into close interaction with JNIM. Similarly the communities in Atakora have grown suspicious of foreigners and seasonal migrants who regularly move across borders, due to the ease with which they appear to pass through VEO-controlled spaces in Burkina Faso and the parks.

Since 2021, however, spillover has given way to local recruitment and a domestic insurgency, driven by JNIM operators staged out of Burkina Faso; youth were found to be the most at-risk to local recruitment in Atakora. In addition to the typical indicators that push young men and women towards VEOs in West Africa (unemployment, lack of education, religion, etc.), the opportunity to increase one's social standing and make quick money, were found to be significant drivers towards joining a VEO. Similar push factors applied to women, and JNIM was reported to have used the promise of freedom to not marry or the choice of a young husband, as successful recruitment tactics in Atakora; there were multiple reports of young women choosing to join JNIM in Burkina Faso.

The research found that JNIM's presence in Atakora has become increasingly familiar to the local population, underscoring an objective to win local support and the longevity with which JNIM has been there. In the past year, JNIM stopped relying exclusively on clandestine recruits, and instead enters a community and first meets with the town leadership to present themselves, and what they intend to do. They also continue to offer financial incentives to at-risk groups that are easily swayed to join, in order to increase their numbers. These actions showcase a level of impunity the group has developed since the onset of their activity in Benin.

### Targeted Interventions for Reinforcing Local Resilience

Civil society organizations that deploy localized community stabilization interventions have previously had a role in the Atakora department. However, years of neglect and lack of resources have rendered many of these services inadequate in the face of violent extremism. The research found that the local population's vulnerability was largely driven by the community's lack of information and general knowledge about what violent extremism is, who is at-risk, and what coping mechanisms can be deployed in response to it. This has manifested as a primary vulnerability that VEOs have exploited, when promoting their agenda, and pushing misinformation.

Targeted, localized solutions include making available information about civic education regarding Benin's legal system, and available tools to address intercommunal and

farmer-herder issues. Additionally, deploying livelihood interventions for unemployed youth, women, herders and farmers, could dramatically alleviate the stress that these vulnerable groups face, and that VEOs are actively exploiting for recruitment purposes. Finally, community cohesion activities are critical, to ensure that social cleavages are mended, particularly regarding intergenerational differences, that have become more prominent with access to social media.

Nonetheless, despite the slew of vulnerabilities impacting the north, Benin generally experiences a stronger sense of community cohesion and trust in government, compared to neighboring countries. However, the onset of violent extremism has had negative impacts on northern communities' ability to adapt to their destabilizing environment. Resilience is starting to falter, and pre-established preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts are increasingly incapable of withstanding pressures from VEOs. Nevertheless, the war is not lost. Thoughtful and locally-driven efforts to reinforce existing vigilance mechanisms and leverage them to overcome cultural fissures that are pushing marginalized groups towards violent extremism, could rebuild community resilience.

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## Glossary

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
ABeGIEF	L'Agence Béninoise de Gestion Intégrée des Espaces Frontaliers
APN	African Parks Network
ATDA	Agence Territoriale de Développement Agricole
APESS	Association pour la promotion de l'élevage au Sahel et dans les Savanes
AVIGREF	Union des Associations Villageoises de Gestion des Réserves de Faune
CENAGREF	Centre National de Gestion des Réserves de Faune
CLS	Comité Local de Sécurité
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAB	Forces Armées Béninoises
FDS	Forces de Défense et de Sécurité - a term used in Sahel countries in reference to all security forces (police, military, gendarmes), but less commonly used in Benin
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
Garso	Fulani scouts who chart the way for pastoralists, in search of grazing space, and away from violence
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
KII	Key Informant Interview
NSAG	Non-state armed group
Pastoralism	The livelihood of raising livestock in grasslands using herd mobility
P/CVE	Preventing/countering violent extremism
Respondent	Interviewees and FGD participants that responded to the questions during the data collection
Ruga	Traditional mediators and chief herders in Peulh communities
Sahel	West African countries in the Sudano-Sahara region
Transhumance	Practice of seasonal nomadic pastoralism
UCOM	Union Communale des Coopératives Villageoise
UC/DOPER	Union Communale/Départementale des Organisations Professionnelles d'élevage des Ruminants
VE	Violent extremism
VEO	Violent extremist organization
WAP	W-Arly-Pendjari park complex

# 1. Methodology

This research was initiated on behalf of USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives’ Coastal West Africa Regional Initiative. The report contextualizes and synthesizes primary field research with existing literature and expert knowledge on farmer-herder dynamics and at-risk groups in Benin, in three parts:

1. Farmer Herder Dynamics
2. Assessing Atakora’s Vulnerability to Violent Extremism
3. Mapping Local Actors for Building Resilience

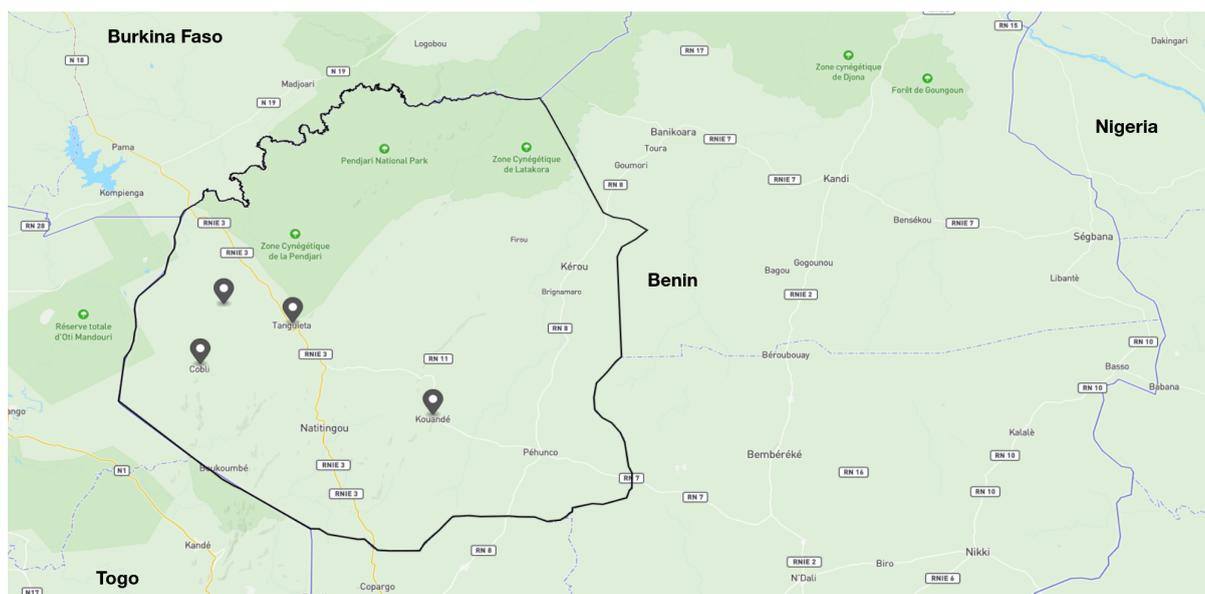


Figure 1. Map of interview locations in Atakora. From left to right, communes of Cobly, Matéri, Tanguiéta & Kouandé. Map source: Mapbox, OpenStreetMap.

## Primary Research

This analytical report relied on a mixed methods approach that included a comprehensive review of the existing academic and press literature, and open-source data, coupled with expert and key informant interviews. The data collection took place across eight settlements in Matéri, Tanguiéta, Cobly, and Kouandé communes, Atakora Department, in September 2022. Persons interviewed included farmers, herders, youth, women, local customary and political-administrative authorities and defense and security forces. In total, 20 key informant interviews (KII) and 3 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in each settlement, with approximately 8 participants per FGD. The total research sample across the eight settlements amounted to 192 KIIs, and 271 farmers and herders that participated in 32 FGDs. Disaggregated by gender, the research sample was 86% male, and 14% female. KII questionnaires were semi-structured with open-ended questions.

## Challenges

The research took place during the end of the rainy season, so floods and road closures created minor access challenges and delays, which were addressed by accessing alternative

communities. Some communities were also not receptive to the research questions, due to sensitivities around openly discussing violent extremism. As a result, some respondents self-censored responses. Additionally, due to the nature of the topic, it was challenging to identify enough women to participate in the research that were willing to discuss sensitive topics and issues focused on an industry that is predominantly male.

Expert interviews were conducted during and after the research deployment phase, in order to specifically address gaps in the research that were not answered by the data collection. Expert interviews were based on semi-structured open questions. Experts that were interviewed for the research included traditional and local leadership from the communes, customary leaders of herder communities, and department level administrative leaders.

## Workshops

Elva was commissioned by LRI to conduct sensitization workshops in Atakora under the same project. The objectives of the workshops were to engage at-risk community members in Matéri and Kouandé in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) activities that include sensitization and community engagement. These objectives are based on the assumptions that socio-economic grievances and a sense of marginalization increase at-risk group's vulnerability. This makes communities, and particularly the at-risk groups, more susceptible to joining VEOs and contributes to the spread of VEO influence and activity, and therefore growing instability in Benin. The reporting from the workshops also informed the findings in this report. These are cited as takeaways from the workshops.

The workshops took place in September 2022, in the communes of Matéri and Kouandé. In Matéri, workshops were held in Gouande, Matéri-town, and Dassari. In Kouandé, workshops were held in Oroukayo, Kouandé-town, and Guilmaro. Each workshop convened over 50 participants, culminating in 300 total participants across both communes. Participants included youth, Peulh impacted by farmer-herder dynamics, and civil society leaders. Approximately 20% of the participants were female.

## Terminology

Widely used terms are defined in the glossary and some are detailed in this subsection. During the primary field research, enumerators collected data in surveys from KIIs and FGDs. The individuals who participated in these surveys and were interviewed for this research are referred to throughout the report as 'respondents.'

Individuals associated with terrorism are defined as violent extremists, and the activity itself as violent extremism. Groups that are aligned with ethnic and self-defense groups, such as Dozo hunters, are generally referred to as communal militias. The ethnic group that speaks variations of the Fulfulde language is commonly referred to as Fulani in English and Peulh in French; since the report covers a francophone country, the report refers to this group as Peulh.

## 2. Introduction

Pastoralism - the use of widespread grazing for livestock - is practiced by hundreds of millions of people globally. The United Nations (UN) estimates that there are 268 million pastoralists across the African continent,<sup>6</sup> involving nearly 20 million people and 70% of the cattle in West and Central Africa.<sup>7</sup> Annually, Benin experiences the migration of one million cattle into its northern Atakora, Alibori and Donga departments.<sup>8</sup> In Atakora, which this report focuses on, a significant portion of the population is involved in, or dependent on, agro-pastoralism, the industry that accommodates both herders and agriculturalists.<sup>9</sup>

The pastoralist way of life often goes beyond livelihoods, and concerns group identity, culture, and politics as well. As a result, the conflicts that involve pastoralists, which are typically farmer-herder conflicts, are not always the result of a dispute over destroyed property, and can encompass more complex cultural tensions between groups. In recent years, these conflicts have begun to define intercommunal relations in West Africa, and at times have drawn in violence from well-armed militias, escalating the localized dispute into a larger conflict. In response, in April 2018, ECOWAS ministers convened an extraordinary session to discuss how to manage farmer-herder conflicts; it was their concern that violent extremists would exploit these conflicts, and use the people involved and their energy, to further destabilize the region.<sup>10</sup>

Farmer-herder conflict cannot be managed by conflict mediation tools alone, because the source of the disputes are typically rooted in a number of issues, which can include economic growth in rapidly developing countries like Benin. As the region continues to experience a population boom, demands for meat and dairy products increase.<sup>11</sup> But, in the absence of industrialized urban centers and transcontinental shipment of freight that can move consumer products long distances, these growing populations remain reliant on local small-scale farmers and herders to supply regular sources of food.<sup>12</sup> Benin is in the process of modernizing its economic activity around livestock and agricultural production. However, modernization of commercial activities has challenged small businesses in Atakora, as market demand for products from small scale farmers and herders has reduced. These effects are further exacerbated by the shrinking availability of farming and grazing space.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nnoko-Mewanu, Juliana. 2018. "Farmer-Herder Conflicts on the Rise in Africa." Human Rights Watch.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/06/farmer-herder-conflicts-rise-africa>

<sup>7</sup> "West and Central Africa Transhumance Crisis Response Plan 2021." West and Central Africa Transhumance Crisis Response Plan 2021. Global Crisis Response Platform, 2021.

<https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/west-and-central-africa-transhumance-crisis-response-plan-2021/year/2021>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2014. "Benin Agricultural Situation." USDA's Foreign Agriculture Service (FAS).

[https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/report/downloadreportbyfilename?filename=Agricultural%20Situation\\_Lagos\\_Benin\\_3-20-2014.pdf](https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/report/downloadreportbyfilename?filename=Agricultural%20Situation_Lagos_Benin_3-20-2014.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> 95% of the research sample reported that their livelihoods are directly linked to agro-pastoralism.

<sup>10</sup> George, Justin, Adesoji Adelaja, Olufemi Vaughan, and Titus Awokuse. 2022. "Explaining transhumance-related violence: Fulani Ethnic Militia in rural Nigeria." *Journal of Rural Studies* 89 (January): 275-286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.12.003>.

<sup>11</sup> Meester, Jos, and Ine Cottyn. 2021. "'Of Cattle and Conflict' – Rethinking responses to pastoralism-related conflicts." Clingendael Institute.

[https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Policy\\_brief\\_Rethinking\\_responses\\_pastoralism\\_related\\_conflicts\\_August\\_2021.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Policy_brief_Rethinking_responses_pastoralism_related_conflicts_August_2021.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Bernard, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Nnoko-Mewanu, 2018.

### Box 1: Benin's shrinking farming spaces

Agriculture contributes to a third of Benin's GDP and 80% of the country's export income.<sup>14</sup> The World Bank estimates that nearly half of Benin's population works in agriculture; small-scale farmers produce 90% of Benin's agricultural outputs, but on less than 10% of the country's arable land.<sup>15</sup> This is in part due to disparate land ownership and access, wherein the majority of farmland is owned by a small group of property owners who rent land to sharecroppers.<sup>16</sup>

Issues around Benin's shrinking farming and herding spaces were further compounded by the closures of Park W and Pendjari National Park in 2017-2020, when the conservation NGO, African Parks Network (APN), was contracted by the Beninese government to restore and protect the parks' ecosystems. APN has effectively replaced the roles that the Centre National de Gestion des Réserves de Faune (CENAGREF) and the Union des Associations Villageoises de Gestion des Réserves de Faune (AVIGREF) previously held in managing the parks and overseeing farmers' and herders' use of communal lands.<sup>17</sup>

Before APN was brought in, the parks had experienced years of uncontrolled use and poaching, damaging the fragile natural ecosystem. In order to restore the protected space, APN redefined the park borders, and removed pastoralists from Pendjari and Park W. However, pastoralists are now forced to compete over even less available land and water in northern Benin, which has contributed to an uptick in farmer-herder violence. In some communes like Tanguiéta, APN redistributed grazing and farming space back to the communities, whereas in other areas, like Matéri, they displaced communities and expropriated the farms and grazing spaces, disrupting livelihoods.<sup>18</sup> Though important for environmental protection, their arrival in Benin, has ostensibly changed the very fragile and tenuous equilibrium that had been settled between farmers and herders.

A decade ago, approximately 80% of cattle in Benin participated in the annual north-south seasonal migration from the Sahel.<sup>19</sup> However, since Benin began sedentarizing herders in 2019, reliance on transborder transhumance has changed, though the statistical reporting is not yet available. Still, many pastoralists continue to use the designated herding routes. There are five ECOWAS-recognized transhumance corridors that pass through Niger and Burkina Faso and end in Benin.<sup>20</sup> One of the primary routes passes through Fada n'Gourma and Pama (Est Region, Burkina Faso) onto Porga and Tanguiéta (Atakora department, Benin) and heads southward into Djougou (Donga department, Benin, see figure 3).<sup>21</sup>

This route crosses through a central corridor between the Sahel and coastal West African regions that, since 2018, has experienced some of the highest rates of violence, criminality, and banditry in the region, committed by VEOs, communal militias and organized criminal groups. Due to growing violence along these corridors, herders have by necessity armed themselves, or

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> World Bank, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> de Bruijne, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

turned to other armed groups for self-defense and to protect their livestock from cattle rustling. This has contributed to the proliferation of arms and spiraling violence in the region.

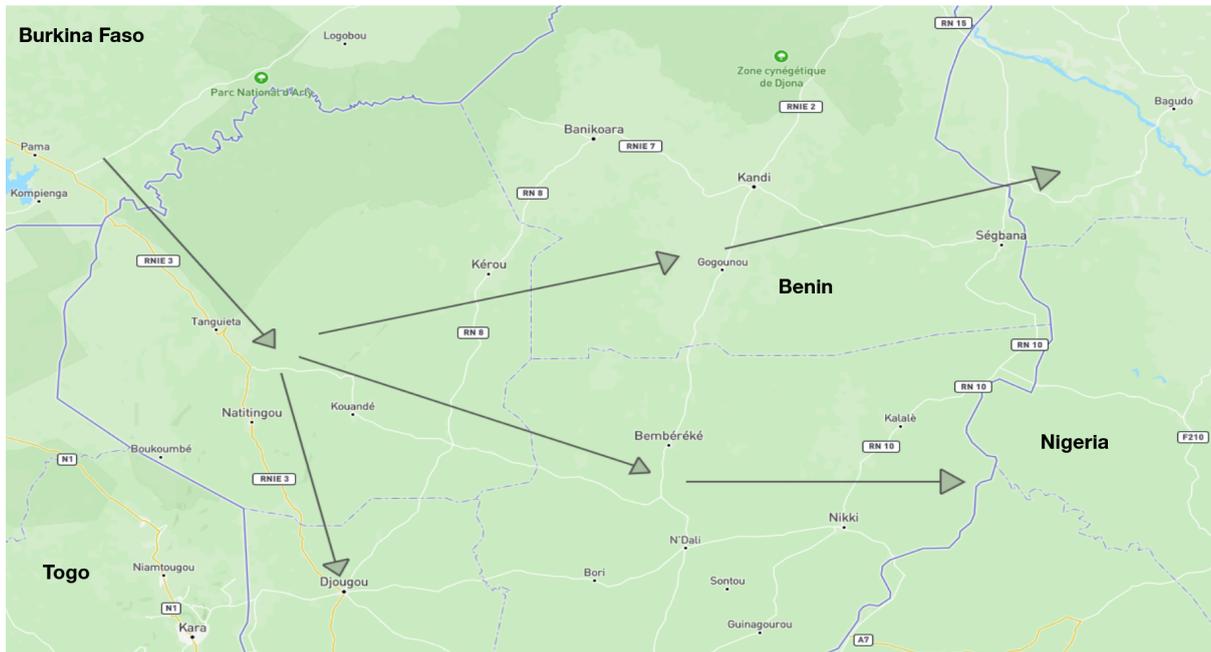


Figure 2. Schematic view of approximate southward pathways of transhumance via the Atakora department. Map source: Mapbox, OpenStreetMap.

Over the past decade farmer-herder violence has regularly escalated from low-intensity conflict into regional insurgencies, with a violent extremist angle.<sup>22</sup> As a result, the relationship between local communities and herders has become more complicated and strained. Nonetheless, the research found that in Benin, herders are still seen as critical actors by other stakeholders.

*“We depend on the breeders. They take care of our livestock, and they also sell the bulk of the dairy products, meat and fertilizer in the markets.” - farmer, Coby commune, Atakora.*

<sup>22</sup> An example of intercommunal violence ceding space for VEO activity is the case of the northern Tillabéri Peulh that make up a significant portion of the Nigerien combatants in ISGS. In this case, the farmer-herder conflict between the Tolebe Peulh of Tillabéri, Niger and the Daossahak Tuaregs of Ménaka, Mali, remained unmediated for years, often escalating into violence. The Tolebe, needing security after the Nigerien government demobilized their self-defense militia, were easily coerced to join ISGS in 2016-2017. Bernard, 2021.

### 3. Farmer-Herder Dynamics

This section examines how interconnected farmer and herder relationships are, and what factors can and have led to a breakdown in relations between these two groups in the Atakora department in northern Benin.

#### The Social and Political Environment for Pastoralists in Atakora

The socio-economic politics of pastoralism is dynamic in West Africa, and the livestock markets are the central stages where these relationships occur.<sup>23</sup> Trade markets are segmented by size and importance: assembly and export markets are large commercial centers for vendors buying and selling all sorts of products from across the region. These markets are located in provincial capitals like Fada n’Gourma, Burkina Faso, where they receive a significant amount of traffic from a regionally diverse clientele of sellers and buyers, that includes formal commercial actors, small vendors, and illicit traffickers. The venues that supply assembly and export markets are called collection markets, which are smaller trade centers that stock products - like cattle - and are located at the village level, like Koalou, the border town between Benin, Togo and Burkina Faso.<sup>24</sup> As a collection market, the Koalou market has convened a close-knit community of local vendors, that includes pastoralists selling their cattle and cattle byproducts (milk, fertilizer, etc.), and local farmers selling their produce.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Box 2: Benin’s Pastoral and Sedentarization Policies**

Atakora’s population is typically highly dependent on trade with the Koalou and Fada n’Gourma market vendors, and the pastoralists that come from the Sahel who buy and sell livestock in these markets, before traveling to the export markets in Kano, Nigeria (the largest cattle market in central West Africa). However, since 2020, newly passed sedentarization policies - particularly *Loi No 2018-20 Du 23 Avril 2019, portant code pastoral en Republique du Benin* - have slowed demand for Sahelian transborder transhumance, in place of nationalized livestock production.

The policy specifically differentiates domestic livestock breeders from transborder pastoralists (transhumance) and requires that all herders carry with them documentation authorizing their status in Benin. Under this law, transborder transhumance is now only allowed through government designated corridors and “gates” that are selected by both the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of Agriculture, underscoring the inherent security reasons for these new measures. The border gates are not fixed to one location; instead, opening periods for herders and their location is an annual selection process of the Ministry of Agriculture, based on agricultural conditions and security. At these gates, herders are required to provide proof of livestock vaccination and pay an annual tax of 1,000-2,000 FCFA, in addition to a 1,000 FCFA sales tax on each animal head they sell (taxes which were agreed to by herder representatives and communal authorities, see section 3).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> de Bruijne, Kars, Loïc Bisson, Ine Cottyn, and Fransje Molenaar. 2021. “Between Hope and Despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso.” Clingendael Institute. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/pastoralist-adaptation-burkina-faso>, chapter 3.1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Because Koalou is located in ungoverned space, it also attracts a sizable illicit economy that has become a central staging area for VEOs (see Box 5).

<sup>26</sup> Expert Interview in Atakora, November 2022.

In December 2019, an amendment to the protocol was adopted that temporarily blocked all transborder pastoralism. In March 2020, Covid-19 protocols reinforced these border closures, and since 2021, the government has justified these continued policies due to the increased presence of violent extremists on its border. The Association pour la promotion de l'élevage au Sahel et dans les Savanes (APESS), the regional herder association for many ECOWAS countries, is responsible for sensitizing herders to these new laws in Benin.<sup>27</sup> In April 2020, the herding community successfully encouraged Benin to broker arrangements with the Government of Niger to allow a 10-day lifting of the border blockade, allowing 50,000 heads of cattle to move into the Alibori department, through a gate at Bosse-Kompa in the Karimama commune. Meanwhile, due to the VEO situation on Benin's northwest border with Burkina Faso and Atakora, the absence of the Burkinabe state there has made it hard for Benin to negotiate border access, so those corridors have remained closed.<sup>28</sup>

Despite efforts to curb transborder transhumance from the Sahel, pastoralists are still arriving in Benin through unofficial border crossings. Many transhumant pastoralists continue to be pulled into Benin because they have families, networks and friends that have sedentarized, and operate herding ranches in Benin.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the research found that since 2020, these numbers have decreased due to the implementation of these border security protocols, though the exact data on pastoralists journeying through unsanctioned corridors is unavailable.<sup>30</sup>

Although the major livestock markets in Atakora, such as Tanguiéta's cattle markets, rely almost entirely on livestock supply from the Sahel, and depend on product from transborder transhumance herders, other communes are shifting towards sedentarized livestock suppliers that have permanent breeding ranches in Benin, as a result of the government's sedentarization policies.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, some herders have taken up farming as supplementary to breeding livestock. Others have set up permanent ranches in Benin, diminishing their reliance on the transborder transhumance trade. This has impacted the practice of *confiage* - of entrusting cattle to Peulh herders, in return for money or farming subsidies. The pivot towards ranches and sedentarization has reportedly diminished local reliance on transborder pastoralists.<sup>32</sup> The research found that Atakora's population is upset by mobility restrictions and curfews that have been implemented as part of the response to the growing terrorism threats, as they impact the market supply of goods, and have driven prices upwards, as supply became less predictable.<sup>33</sup>

Although some herders have adapted to Benin's sedentarization policies, Peulh pastoralists are struggling overall to adjust.<sup>34</sup> These pastoralists are traditionally nomadic and can bring with

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<sup>27</sup> n.d. APESS: Association pour la Promotion de l'Élevage au Sahel et en Savane. <https://www.apess.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> Multiple interviews with expert informants in Kouandé, November 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Multiple expert interviews, November 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>31</sup> The research did not capture perspectives from a large sample of sedentarized herders, because sedentarization has largely occurred in Borgou department, outside the research target. However, research in Ghana about similar issues has shown that overtime, pastoralists typically set up some permanent ranches in communities they regularly frequent, in order to anchor their herder social networks, so that they have the ability to negotiate with local buyers and sellers. This underscores how sedentarization is not foreign to pastoralists, but that sudden implementations blocking mobility can negatively impact livelihoods. Bukari, Kaderi, Shaibu Bukari, Papa Sow, and Jürgen Scheffran. 2020. "Diversity and Multiple Drivers of Pastoral Fulani Migration to Ghana." *Nomadic Peoples* 24, no. 1 (March): 4-31. DOI:10.3197/np.2020.240102.

<sup>32</sup> Multiple expert interviews, November 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Meester and Cottyn, 2021.

them up to 2,000 heads of cattle that they sell in various collection markets, amounting to significant wealth. If these animals were not sold at markets along the way, but instead were sedentarized on ranches, they would quickly overpopulate and devastate grazing areas, or die from malnutrition, destroying profit margins.<sup>35</sup> The logistics of transhumance is complex, but Peulh herders do not have sufficient representation to advocate for policies on their behalf, because they often do not have citizenship, and are not always present to negotiate, as a result of their mobility.<sup>36</sup> For Peulh pastoralists, their mobility is part of their core identity, thus forcing them into sedentarism can strip them of some agency, and key parts of their culture.<sup>37</sup>

### **Box 3: Climate Change Impacts on Pastoralists' Vulnerabilities**

According to the World Bank, 75% of the Sahel is arid or semi-arid, but the region is still largely dependent on agrarian practices for sustenance, creating an incredibly vulnerable region of people.<sup>38</sup> Transhumant pastoralism was practiced to manage these extreme weather changes. Twenty million pastoralists travel annually during the dry season to southern wetter areas, which include Benin's sub-Saharan areas.<sup>39</sup> These transhumance corridors support the grazing of 70% of the region's cattle according to the UN's International Organization for Migration.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, climate shocks like desertification, extreme heat waves and rainfall, and untimely changes to seasonal weather patterns, shrink arable grazing areas and contribute to internal and regional displacement, pushing communities closer together and forcing them to compete over scarce resources.<sup>41</sup> Communities south of the Sahel have fewer socio-economic systems that are built around the transient nature of seasonal pastoralists, so when these herders move even further south, it strains existing fragile ecosystems.<sup>42</sup> This trend has become further pronounced, by the growing presence of displaced communities that are fleeing the Sahel due to violence.<sup>43</sup>

Sedentarization policies have impacted herders most with regards to restrictions on grazing spaces. Privatization of common grazing spaces has further contributed to tensions in Atakora, especially because Benin's citizenship laws restrict migrant communities - which includes some pastoralists - from being able to own lands.<sup>44</sup> The protections that do exist to uphold pastoralists' rights are rarely adhered to by local authorities, because pastoralists lack effective representation in these communities to enforce these policies.<sup>45</sup> The research also found that herders' access to land is increasingly denigrated by growing nativist views against seasonal pastoralists, despite multiple generations of herders born there.

<sup>35</sup> Expert interview in Kouandé-town, December 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Expert interview in Kouandé commune, November 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2022. "Sixth Assessment Report — IPCC." IPCC. <https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/>

<sup>39</sup> Plante, Berger, and Ba, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> International Organization for Migration. 2021. "West and Central Africa Transhumance Crisis Response Plan 2021." Global Crisis Response Platform. <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/west-and-central-africa-transhumance-crisis-response-plan-2021/year/2021>

<sup>41</sup> George et al., 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt and Muggah, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Brottem, Leif. 2021. "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa." U.S. House of Representatives' Human Rights Commission | Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <https://humanrightscormission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscormission.house.gov/files/documents/ASB39EN-The-Growing-Complexity-of-Farmer-Herder-Conflict-in-West-and-Central-Africa.pdf>

*“The Peulh breeders of Sombako were just evicted from their grazing space without notice from the landlords because of the laws that now allow them to do this. The breeders brought the dispute to the courts, but we don't expect to win this fight, because the courts will side with the indigenous.”<sup>46</sup> - Herder, Guilmarou, Kouandé commune.*

Demarcated grazing plots could help solve the conflicts over land in the short term, but researchers point out how efforts like this in the Sahel and Nigeria have led to displacement of local communities, which have further inflamed intercommunal tensions.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, grazing spaces force herders into narrower corridors, which in the Sahel has translated into ways by which the state can police herders, while not necessarily protecting them from violence.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.1 Farmer-Herder Violence

Since 2010, farmer-herder violence in West Africa has dramatically increased, resulting in over 15,000 deaths; over half of these fatalities have occurred since 2018.<sup>49</sup> In 2022, ACLED recorded over 70 violent intercommunal clashes in Benin, driven by farmer-herder disputes, thirteen of which occurred in the Atakora department.<sup>50</sup> The recent surge in this violence across West Africa is due to a variety of secondary and tertiary factors linked to climate change, evolving and industrializing economies, population growth, and distrust in governance systems that have emerged since independence.<sup>51</sup>

In Benin, farmer-herder violence resulted primarily from land conflict and property destruction or theft.<sup>52</sup> The new land ownership rules under sedentarization allowed farmers to settle near transhumance corridors,<sup>53</sup> disrupting herder mobility and further inflaming farmer-herder tensions by bringing the groups closer together, forcing them to compete over land.<sup>54</sup> Cattle theft has also increased across Atakora, amplifying tensions that trigger intercommunal conflict. VEOs were generally blamed for the increased cattle theft, despite reports of corruption among local elites and wealthier herders. This is partly due to the national approach towards agriculture and livestock commercialization, which has limited financial prospects for landowners that had profited from charging seasonal farmers and herders to rent their space.<sup>55</sup>

*“There are always problems between farmers and herders here. Normally, if you can't agree, the matter is brought to the village chief. If it escalates, it goes to the commune authorities. But the real problem is corruption. The Peulh can sell an ox and pay off authorities. The*

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<sup>46</sup> Expert interview in Kouandé commune, November 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Adeniyi, Daniel A. 2021. “What an irrigation project reveals about farmer-herder conflict in northern Nigeria - Nigeria.” ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/what-irrigation-project-reveals-about-farmer-herder-conflict-northern-nigeria>

<sup>48</sup> Touré, Oussouby, and Adama Faye. 2015. “Etat des lieux et analyse de la prise en compte du foncier pastoral dans les politiques et les cadres réglementaires en Afrique de l'Ouest.” Institut Prospective et Agricole Rural. [https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/synthese\\_pastoralisme\\_et\\_enjeux\\_fonciers\\_ipar\\_2015.pdf](https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/synthese_pastoralisme_et_enjeux_fonciers_ipar_2015.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> Brottem, Leif. 2021.

<sup>50</sup> ACLED database, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Adeniyi, Daniel A., 2021. “What an irrigation project reveals about farmer-herder conflict in northern Nigeria - Nigeria.” ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/what-irrigation-project-reveals-about-farmer-herder-conflict-northern-nigeria>.

<sup>52</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Expert interview in Kouandé-town, December 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Plante, Caroline, Christian Berger, and Amadou Ba. 2020. “Pastoralists on the move in the Sahel: the original climate-adapters.” World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/pastoralists-move-sahel-original-climate-adapters>.

<sup>55</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

*government should evict all Peulh, so there can be peace.” - Focus Group with farmers, Coby commune.*

Respondents from Tanguiéta and Matéri, reported that half of the communities across Matéri commune had experienced intercommunal conflicts, specifically farmer-herder disputes, in 2022. This is a decrease that respondents believed was due to the security force (FDS) patrols in the north since November 2021, under a counterterrorism mission. They explained that the military’s regular patrols in the north have had the secondary effect of discouraging the community from starting conflicts (and presumably their imposed curfews have limited violent interactions). However, there is no evidence that the Beninese military (FAB) is actively intervening in intercommunal disputes. Meanwhile, in the southern communes, around Kouandé, where there is less security, 96% of the respondents recently experienced farmer-herder conflict.

*“It has been a long time since we have recorded a case of banditry, because of the increase in security presence.” - Female farmer, Tanguiéta commune.*

## Land Conflict

Historically, farmers and herders have enjoyed cooperative relationships and peaceful coexistence, based on old customary arrangements regarding land access and ownership, dating back generations.<sup>56</sup> These relationships range from traditional approaches to assigning common areas for grazing, to simply parsing out select spaces for farming. These customary arrangements might not have legally binding authority, but were nonetheless traditionally accepted, before national laws on land use were implemented and land ownership was assigned. Customary arrangements were practiced over the years because they often superseded national laws in remote communities that were far from the capitals, and therefore less connected to national politics, and instead more reliant on traditional ways of doing things.

These traditional relationships have now been disrupted by decentralization and modern policies that reduce the role of customary authorities and associations. As a result, in Atakora, many pastoralists have become dispossessed of their power broker roles in traditional agro-pastoral societies.<sup>57</sup> In larger communities and cities, herders are increasingly marginalized to the peripheries of settlements and the bush surrounding them, further limiting their ability to advocate effectively for themselves to policymakers.<sup>58</sup> In Kouandé commune, farmer-herder violence has been exacerbated by new land ownership policies that favor property owners and have allowed these landowners to evict herders without much notice.<sup>59</sup>

### **Box 4: Peulh pastoralists in Benin**

The Peulh have experienced severe socio-economic and political marginalization across West Africa. Historically, Peulh pastoralists were powerbrokers in the region, due to the immense size of their livestock and their wealth. One’s money was tied up in what they could sell, and cattle byproducts were always valuable commodities. Before colonial

<sup>56</sup> George et al., 2022.

<sup>57</sup> de Bruijne, Bisson, Cottyn, and Molenaar, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Multiple interviews with expert informants in Kouandé, November 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Focus group discussions about intercommunal violence, in Kouandé town, September 2022.

borders were drawn, and modern laws were established, customary legal arrangements favored powerbrokers, and in a desertifying region of the world like the Sahel, the mobile communities that carried their wealth with them were often in positions of power. However, as West African borders became increasingly fortified under the auspices of counterterrorism, nomadic groups like Peulh pastoralists became disadvantaged by modern land and migration legal frameworks.<sup>60</sup> These macro-policy changes have directly influenced traditional relationships between farmers and herders at the community level, and repositioned sedentary communities as the main powerbrokers today. Benin's efforts to commercialize and grow local production have also left Peulh pastoralists with little ability to keep up in an increasingly competitive industry.

These tensions are amplified by their lack of land rights. The Peulh in this region are generally not landowners themselves, and have been disenfranchised, because the law favors landowners. Many also remain skeptical of government interventions, having been sidelined by peace deals brokered in the 1970s and 80s, when droughts in the northern Sahel pushed large groups of displaced Peulh south, which quickly led to clashes that escalated into farmer-herder wars.<sup>61</sup>

*"The farmers marginalize us herders, saying that we are nomads who have no land, that we are foreigners even though we have lived on this land for decades. We need to raise awareness to make them understand that we are also Beninese because we were born and raised in Benin."*

- Peulh pastoralist, Kouandé commune.

Longstanding prejudices against pastoralists, especially ethnic-Peulh, persist, and have contributed to beliefs that herders are outsiders involved in crime and violent extremism, described in the research as *"foreigners that should be forced back to where they came from (the Sahel)."* These nativist views, shared by locals and some law enforcement, often extended to second and third generation Benin-born Peulh, showcasing discrimination against descendants of migrants, who have familial and cultural ties to the Sahel. The assumption that one party to farmer-herder violence is supported by VEOs has inadvertently inflamed intercommunal tensions, highlighting how these conflicts are rarely straightforward, and therefore interventions to address them require significant nuance.

Peulh communities are generally well organized, though conflict, displacement, and VEO radicalization has had a damaging impact on their social structure, including limiting their ability to advocate for their needs. For example, Benin's decentralization efforts have reduced the power-brokering role that Peulh Ruga's - pastoralists that operate as the leaders and peace-brokers of their group, and who have an outsized role in representing Peulh to external stakeholders - have in managing inter- and intra-Peulh relationships. This is because after decentralization, local politics fell under politically appointed authorities that rarely take up Peulh issues.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bernard, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Cissé, Modibo G. 2020. "Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis – Africa Center." Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>.

<sup>62</sup> Molenaar, Fransje, Jonathan Tossell, Anna Schmauder, Rahmane Idrissa, and Rida Lyammouri. 2019. "The Status Quo Defied - The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya." Clingendael Institute. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/legitimacy\\_traditional\\_authorities\\_mali\\_niger\\_libya.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya.pdf).

*“A Ruga is the king of the Peulh, he is a peacemaker, mediator and judge. What he says, the other Peulh respect. He is the Peulh delegate and the guarantor of their security.” - Herder, Kouandé-town.*

Rugas are responsible for overseeing the herders, and managing conflicts related to them, which the Garso can help delegate on. The Garso, as the scout, is responsible for clarifying and relaying information about movement and activity (conflict) between herders and the Ruga. Both the Ruga and the Garso might be involved in mediating conflicts between their pastoralists, and the other party to the dispute or conflict. As such, it's critical that as representatives of Peulh, their position is respected by the commune authorities. Some Peulh communities, like in Ghana for example, have elevated their civil society groups into political power-broker associations, like Thabital Pulaaku.<sup>63</sup> Peulh in Benin do not have similar organizations.<sup>64</sup>

Farmer-herder violence in Benin has also been the result of disparate resource and land allocation by landowners and government officials, that favor farmers (particularly native Beninese farmers) over 'foreign' pastoralists - namely the Peulh herders from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This includes access to subsidized grain, water, and shared land plots for poor farmers, which displaces or marginalizes the herders who need these items for their livestock.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, farmers are equally frustrated with herders' lack of respect for privatized farmlands, which has inflamed local grievances against herders. Multiple farmers that were interviewed for this study also reported their dissatisfaction with the way that land has been designated as protected transhumance corridors, which are fertile shallow grasslands that they believe should be used for rice cultivation.<sup>66</sup>

*“The farmers set up their fields near our camps, so our animals destroy their fields. Sometimes we can't control the animals because they are used to grazing on the fields they pass by, but the farmers get angry and conflicts start. The state should help us to delimit the corridors of passage of our cattle so that the farmers do not settle with disorder.*

- Peulh pastoralist, Kouandé-town.

Farmer-herder tensions have existed for decades, but the research highlighted how these tensions have become less palpable in recent years resulting from changing socio-economic and political relationships, and commercialization that has impacted and displaced traditional farming and herding relationships. These issues have created vulnerabilities that armed groups and VEOs have exploited for recruitment, which is elaborated in the following section.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Expert interview with Dr. Kaderi Noagah Bukari, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, November 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Expert interviews with multiple Peulh representatives in Atakora, November 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Takeaways from workshops in Matéri commune, October 2022.

## 4. Assessing Atakora's Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

This section reviews the vulnerabilities that at-risk groups experience in northern Benin, particularly in the face of looming instability presented by violent extremism. At-risk groups were identified for this research based on their perceptions and experiences of inequality, marginalization, and economic disparity, which have been amplified by the onset of insecurity in Atakora. The research found that poverty, lack of or unequal access to resources, governance, and education, have made individuals vulnerable in the less developed region of Atakora. However, most of the population is not at risk of engaging in violent extremism and the type of individual that is recruited by VEOs is not easily generalized. In fact, JNIM has taken an intersectional approach to its recruitment strategy in West Africa, that is highly adaptable to the local context. For example, some reports about their recruitment of women are in contrast in many ways to how experts expect Islamist extremists to manage unmarried women.

### The Specter of Insecurity

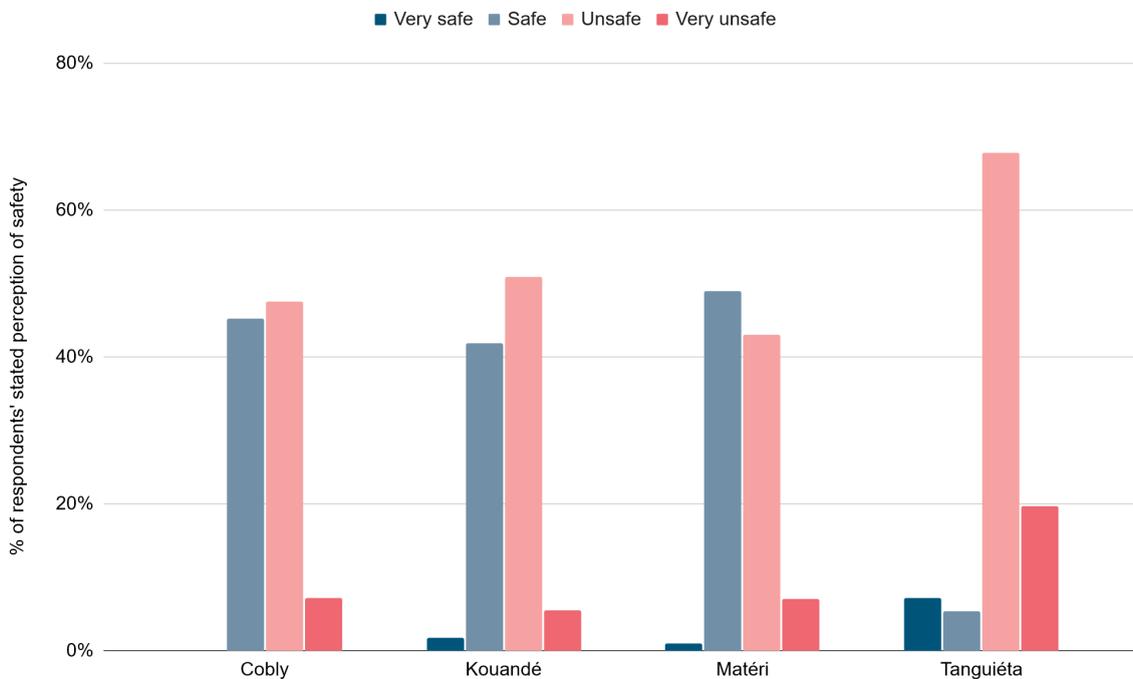


Figure 3. Perception of security among respondents, per commune. Source: key informant interviews.

When the FAB first responded to VEOs at the border with Burkina Faso in November 2021, their deployment to Matéri created a sense of urgency and alarm among the local population. Respondents spoke of how unsettled they suddenly felt, triggered by fears of a silent insurgency underway, that became tethered to their everyday activities. As a result, the collective paranoia has deteriorated community cohesion and neighborly trust, and overwhelmingly placed suspicion on herders, traders, and migrants - anyone who regularly travels between Benin and Burkina Faso. However, the research found that the FAB presence in Matéri has inadvertently deterred regular crime and intercommunal violence. Over 70% of respondents support the government's counterterrorism missions in Atakora, underscoring a preference for more security and governance, to less, following reports that the FDS have

successfully intercepted members of VEOs in Matéri.<sup>68</sup> There were still reports of indiscriminate arrests of Peulh pastoralists, based on presumed suspicion about their activities.

*"Since the jihadists arrived, security has increased, so petty theft has decreased, and you can leave your animals outside... people won't steal them for fear of being mistaken as a jihadist."- Herder, Coby commune.*

However, when the FDS were absent, as in Kouandé commune, VEOs were moving and operating with a certain level of impunity.<sup>69</sup> Respondents there also reported increased crime, including motorcycle, cellphone, and cattle theft. Fewer security patrols relative to other communes, has left Kouandé relatively defenseless. Because insecurity was high where the FDS were absent, over 60% of respondents reported feeling less safe in their communities today, as compared to a year ago; respondents felt the most insecure in remote and small towns located along highways, near bush and forest, and in border-towns, because there were far fewer security forces present. As a result, many Klls talked about wanting to relocate to bigger cities.

Almost all respondents (96%) reported relying on the police and military for security. Communal and self-defense militias do not play a significant role in Atakora, particularly since the government demobilized hunting groups in 2019.<sup>70</sup> The Atakora department also makes use of vigilance committees - civilian networks that report on suspicious activity - that report to the communal authorities, who are supposed to share this information with FDS and department level authorities though respondents reported that these networks, which were stood up before VEO threats emerged, have been largely ineffective in practice (see Section 5).

#### 4.1 Categories of At-Risk Groups in Atakora

*"Today, terrorism is the result of the consequences of injustice. People have been wronged for a long time, and when they find a way to defend themselves they do, and it's really deplorable." - herder, Kouandé-town.*

Individuals that are categorized as 'at-risk' include persons who experience socio-political and economic marginalization. In the context of Atakora, the research focuses on two major groups: first are labor migrants and herders, who are not Beninese citizens and are therefore lacking formal representation during disputes, legal conflicts, and violent events. Second, are groups that experience socio-economic marginalization, such as unemployed persons (including women and youth), sharecroppers and local herders that have been displaced by park closures or other land tenure issues. Grievances are determined by the lack of employment opportunities, education, socio-political representation, loss of material, financial and personal resources, and fatalities. This section also draws parallels between the grievances of at-risk groups, and VEO members, showcasing the relative ease by which VEOs recruit.

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<sup>68</sup> Peulh pastoralists interviewed for the research, underscored the importance of being vigilant during austere times, like during counterterrorism campaigns. It's possible that these Klls were self-censoring their responses, in order to appear supportive of Beninese processes. However, during the workshops, the Peulh participants generally spoke to the need for their community to avoid criminality, and be transparent about their activities, acknowledging that their position on the peripheries of society can contribute to these biased tropes about their involvement in illicit activity, which leads to arrests. They acknowledged the urgent need to build community cohesion and cooperate with security forces.

<sup>69</sup> Multiple Kll and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and Workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Bernard, 2021.

## Youth

Youth - particularly young men, but also young women - are the group that is most at-risk of VEO recruitment and influence in Atakora, due to their limited access to opportunities and resources. The research found that youth are particularly dissatisfied by the restrictions they experience in the social caste system that persists within traditional herding and farming communities. JNIM has offered these socially low-ranking youth the opportunity to rise in the ranks of VEOs, providing them with opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have by remaining in their communities. For example, in the early days of the VEO conflict in central Mali, JNIM's Katibat Macina (one of the more active groups under the al-Qaeda consortium, led by Amadou Kouffa) found success in recruiting among young Peulh herders that were interested in fighting against the traditional Peulh hierarchies and aristocracies, who were seen as having done too little in support of the communities themselves, benefiting from the corrupt governments.<sup>71</sup> The research found that JNIM continues this recruitment approach in Benin.

*"A young man's family reported his disappearance to the police. When he returned home he knelt down on the ground in front of his mother to offer her milk and told her he was no longer her son, and he was returning to her the milk that he took from her as a child. He was now the son of the terrorists." - local official, Guimaro, Matéri commune.*

Young pastoralists in Benin are experiencing disenfranchisement on a larger scale than older pastoralists who already own livestock and have pre-established relationships with sellers, buyers they work with. Younger herders are increasingly unable to afford livestock, and establish these key relationships, as the industry shrinks and becomes sedentarized. Similarly, young farmers are unable to purchase farmland due to soaring property prices, unless they inherit it. The growing youth bulge in West Africa, has created an at-risk group of people that have no other option but to engage in criminality and violent extremism to obtain basic livelihoods or make quick cash. These desperate means have become pronounced because the youth are less interested in the traditional agro-pastoral lifestyle, but due to lack of education and vocational training opportunities, there are not many alternative options available to them.<sup>72</sup>

## Women

The role of women in violent extremism is a complex issue, as women are not always victims of the violence, and can act as the belligerents as well. Women have been active participants in 60% of global violence involving non-state armed groups over the past several decades.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, there is little methodical research on the push and pull factors for women and girls' involvement in VEOs in West Africa. A less understood push factor for women from underdeveloped and conservative patriarchal communities, is the promise of money and freedom.<sup>74</sup> The research found that JNIM has offered young girls the option to remain unmarried; in other situations women are given an array of age-appropriate husbands to choose from, a freedom that is not available to them in their home communities, where they are married

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<sup>71</sup> Expert interview with Andrew Lebovich, Sahel Fellow, Clingendael Institute, December 2022

<sup>72</sup> Takeaways from Elva workshops in Kouandé commune, October 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Abatan, Jeannine E. 2021. "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: including women to what end?" ISS Africa.

<https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/katiba-macina-and-boko-haram-including-women-to-what-end>.

<sup>74</sup> Bigio, Jammille, and Rachel Vogelstein. 2019. "Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/report/women-and-terrorism>.

off in an arranged marriage at a young age.<sup>75</sup> Multiple respondents shared reports of young women recruited by JNIM after being promised a 75,000 FCFA (roughly \$150) weekly stipend in return for providing the group with regular intelligence and resources.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, several respondents reported that they knew young women from their communities who had left for Burkina Faso, after JNIM offered remuneration and freedom to avoid a fixed marriage.<sup>77</sup> There were additional reports that JNIM had established family quarters for VEO combatants with their wives and children, that was separate from the rest of the camp and well secured to minimize sexual and gender based violence.<sup>78</sup>

JNIM also has a history of ingratiating themselves with women, seeing them as the gatekeepers to a community. This is in contrast to the Islamic State's approach of kidnapping women and girls and forcibly marrying them off to combatants.<sup>79</sup> JNIM views women as powerful actors to advocate for them, to the men in their community; in Atakora, respondents reported examples of known women that had recruited their husbands and sons, encouraging them to leave and join JNIM in Burkina Faso.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, because women are rarely viewed suspiciously, violent extremists were known to enter a community dressed as women.<sup>81</sup>

## Foreigners and Seasonal Migrants

80% of the sample from Matéri report that they engage with foreigners regularly due to their reliance on the markets at the border with Togo and Burkina Faso; under 50% of respondents in Tanguiéta and Kouandé are faced with foreigners in their community because of their distance from these borders. These foreigners - migrant laborers, herders, and traders - are primarily Peulh (from Niger and Burkina Faso), Zerma (from Niger), Ibo (from Nigeria), Gourmantchés (from Burkina Faso) and Haoussa (from Niger or Nigeria). They supply the local markets with cattle products, manufactured goods such as condiments, plastics, and foodstuffs. Some of them also trade in produce (garlic, peppers, onions) and talismans or animal organs.

More than 70% of respondents across both Matéri and Kouandé communes expressed serious fears that foreigners - particularly Peulh and light-skinned Arabs (presumably Tuaregs, based on their dress and appearance) - are involved in violent extremism. Pastoralists (Peulh and Bariba) are generally lumped into this category because the locals in Atakora know that the transhumant corridors pass through VEO zones of influence in the Sahel. As a result, the local population has come to believe that to survive the trans-Saharan journey, herders must be aligned with one of the armed groups, for protection.

In recent months, respondents claimed that foreigners they believe to be violent extremists, were surveilling the town centers and markets, while not actually participating in market activity. Katibat Macina, the JNIM group operating in Atakora, is known to deploy reconnaissance teams ahead of their advance into a commune, to scout for security, and obstacles to their efforts. These surveillance tactics also spread paranoia across the local population, which pits community members against each other and creates societal cleavages that JNIM exploits and recruits from.

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<sup>75</sup> Expert interview with Andrew Lebovich, Sahel Fellow, Clingendael Institute, December 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and Workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Expert interview in Matéri-town, November 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Abatan, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Takeaways from workshops in Kouandé commune, October 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

The research found evidence in Atakora that JNIM is already spreading mis- and dis-information through their local recruits, about anti-government propaganda, to include western support for counterterrorism missions, and the role of Peulh in VEOs.<sup>82</sup> The herder respondents expressed feeling increasingly unsafe in Atakora, because of the misinformation about their role in VEOs. Their fears are reinforced by reports that police are indiscriminately arresting Peulh based on these allegations.

*"We don't feel safe here... they [farmers] think we are with the jihadists. This is due to the conflicts between us and the farmers ...and the Fulani are always accused of being the perpetrators of robberies."*  
- Herder, Coby commune.

### Actors involved in the Illicit Supply Chain

Benin is both a country of origin and transit for illicit trafficking.<sup>83</sup> The regional illicit supply chain encompasses many of the major export and trade markets that pastoralists and other at-risk groups like labor migrants, frequent during their journey into Benin. These trade nodes bring together licit and illicit actors - VEOs, criminals, pastoralists, and merchants. Their relationship in these markets is largely economic, though it also includes tacit recruitment, friendship, and other terms of social engagement, furthering the nexus between criminal actors, VEOs and other at-risk groups in Benin.<sup>84</sup>

The research found that a significant part of the population of Atakora relies heavily on trade with markets in Togo, Burkina Faso, and northern Benin.<sup>85</sup> 90% of respondents from Matéri, the commune in Atakora that includes the access bridge into Koalou (at Porga), claimed that their economic livelihoods are intrinsically tied to the trade that passes through these contested border areas, highlighting local reliance on trade in areas occupied by JNIM. Meanwhile, Kouandé commune, which is further south, is significantly less reliant on cross-border trade, with only 22% of respondents regularly traveling to Koalou and beyond.

The Atakora population is generally familiar with the dynamics of the informal economy in Koalou because the local markets across the department are highly dependent on these supply chains for stocking basic and regular goods, such as food, fertilizer, and fuel. 68% of respondents were aware of the illicit supply chain in the region, and the trafficking of goods through their community. Disaggregated by gender, all male respondents had significant knowledge of the informal economy in Atakora (92%), whereas most females were unaware of trafficking networks (less than 8% - see footnote for analysis).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Peulh participants in the workshops argued in favor of continued sensitization programming to deliberately overcome the propaganda and misinformation campaigns that JNIM was pushing against foreigners (see recommendations).

<sup>83</sup> GI-TOC and ENACT. 2021. "Global Organized Crime Index." Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. <https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/global-ocindex-report.pdf>.

<sup>84</sup> Expert interview with mayor of Gouande, Matéri Commune, November 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Over 50% of KIIs surveyed said that their livelihoods and other goods are primarily sourced from markets in neighboring Togo and Burkina Faso, requiring regular cross border travel.

<sup>86</sup> The research was unable to amass a large sample of female KIIs. However, based on research about women's roles in trafficking in the Sahel, it can be assumed that the reason women are less informed about illicit trafficking is because they might not be traveling outside their communities as regularly as men are. The authors also assume that women self-censored in their reporting, as they might be less inclined to speak openly about criminality that could impact men in their family.

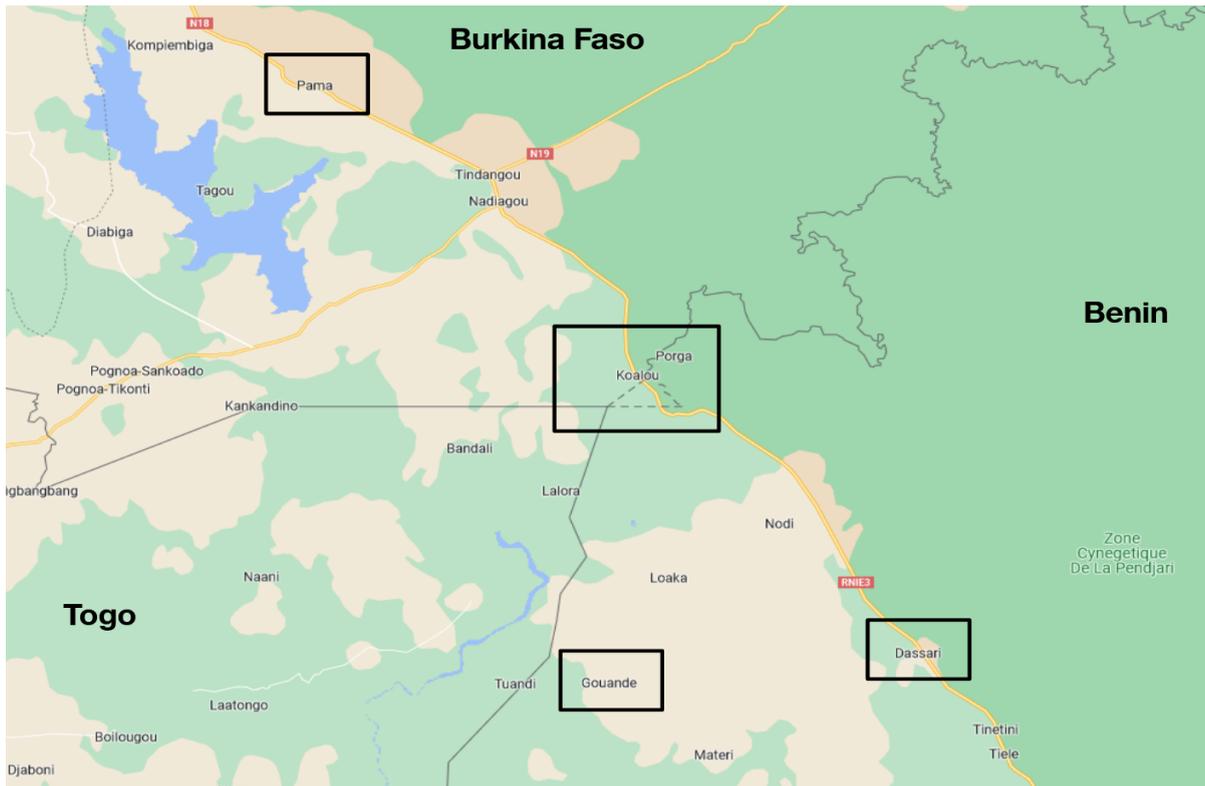


Figure 4. Map of the Burkina Faso-Benin-Togo tri-border area, focused on ungoverned Koalou. Map source: Google Maps.

Merchants and taxi-moto drivers are the primary actors moving goods from the illicit supply chain in Koalou into stores and local markets in Atakora. There was also speculation that pastoralists are increasingly participating in the illicit trafficking trade, to offset losses they've incurred from sedentarization policies and increased banditry that has stripped them of their livelihoods. Respondents were familiar with illicit trafficking networks, underscoring how normal it was that goods from cattle rustling and banditry made their way into local stores.<sup>87</sup>

*“They introduce the stolen animals into their herds to hide them, in the middle of the night. They sometimes sell the animals for cash, but lately they barter the animals for fuel for their trucks, because they can't buy gasoline in Koalou.” - taxi-moto driver, Tanguiéta.*

Trafficking networks figured prominently in Cobly and Kouandé-town, where over 80% of Klls spoke to the common presence that traffickers and the goods they peddle,<sup>88</sup> have in their everyday lives. In Matéri and Tanguiéta, only 50% of Klls spoke openly about trafficking networks. Since the onset of VEO threats in the north, and the FAB deployment to Porga, traffickers have reportedly found it more challenging to move freely in Matéri.

<sup>87</sup> Multiple Klls in Kouandé and Matéri, September 2022.

<sup>88</sup> The research found that trafficked items include basic goods, people, drugs, livestock, fertilizer, human organs, medicine and fuel, among other things. To a lesser extent, arms are being trafficked into Benin, which is due in part to the strict policies against owning guns (see VEO push factors).

### **Box 5: Koalou, a center of illicit activity and the southwestern front for JNIM**

Koalou is an important commercial node on the illicit supply chain that connects northern Benin to the Sahel. Route N-18 runs through the town, connecting Fada n’Gourma and Pama, Burkina Faso, to Porga, Benin. The town, and nearby communities, including Tantega and Gouande in Benin, and Nadiagou in Burkina Faso, have become lively trading and resting zones for those involved in illicit trafficking, criminal activity, and violent extremism, because they are located in disputed territory (between Benin and Burkina Faso) allowing Koalou to remain ungoverned for decades. As such, the ungoverned space served as an early pull factor driving VEOs from the Sahel south into coastal West Africa.<sup>89</sup>

Since late 2021, JNIM has consolidated control between Fada n’Gourma (Burkina Faso), Kpendjal (Togo) and Koalou. JNIM engaged in violence with security forces in Burkina Faso and Togo, eventually forcing them out over the course of 2021-2022. They then delivered declarations to the communities in these areas, allowing civilians time to leave, or remain in place knowing that they are now living under JNIM control. The Beninese established a security front in Porga, across the bridge from Koalou in late 2021, in response to the insurgency on the border. However, their ability to patrol the area, and buttress JNIM incursions into Benin, has been hampered by limited resources, personnel, and capacity, which is further undermined by vast border porosity.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, the VEOs have successfully consolidated control of Koalou, and areas north and west of the town. The people who stayed in Koalou are stuck with limited access to resources. The FAB has blocked trade into Koalou from Benin in order to cut resources off from JNIM. This has impacted the civilians there as well, and when they reenter Benin, they must pass through military checkpoints at the Porga bridge, and are only allowed to fill their fuel tanks halfway or purchase no more than a kilo of flour from Beninese sellers.<sup>91</sup>

*“A Peulh woman tried to hide a liter of fuel in a bag of flour, so that she could cook at home, but the FDS arrested her, accusing her of trying to bring the fuel to the VEOs.” - Herder, Matéri-town.*

VEOs have benefited greatly from trafficking networks and informal markets in West Africa. The illicit supply chain is a source of resources and financing for JNIM and ISGS in the Sahel, and as such, VEO combatants have been known to moonlight as traffickers at times. As a result, the early push southward into coastal West African states was in part driven by the direction of the illicit supply chain that runs richly across the shelf that is the northern border of these coastal countries with the Sahel. The early expansion of JNIM into Benin’s Alibori department was in lockstep with the sales and transfers of artisanal weapons from Ghana and Burkina Faso to northwest Nigeria. Although it remains unclear which group first moved into Benin in 2019, there is some speculation that these arms traffickers were associated with JNIM and Ansaru (the al-Qaeda aligned faction that splintered from Boko Haram in 2012, and regrouped in northwest Nigeria), ISGS, or bandits and smaller organized groups aligned with a new VEO cell that’s operating out of the Kainji Forest, in Zamfara, Nigeria.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Bernard, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Strategic Stabilization Advisors, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Expert interview in Matéri, November 2022.

<sup>92</sup> de Bruijne, 2021.

Over 60% of respondents indicated that merchants that buy and sell regular (licit) goods, are also often the individuals involved in the transporting of illicit goods such as drugs, weapons, stolen livestock, and motorcycles. In general, the research underscored that it is not always explicitly clear what goods are being trafficked or sold legally, further blurring the lines between formal and informal economic pursuits.<sup>93</sup>

## 4.2 Violent Extremism in Benin

Violent extremism in Benin has been driven by Sahel-based VEOs that are actively expanding their zones of operation into coastal West African states. Though their activity in Benin has grown more violent since 2020, there is little consensus on what their strategic goals are for expanding southward. A circulated video purporting to show a 2020 summit meeting in Mali, in which JNIM's leadership announced their plans to attack major cities in coastal states, has provided experts with some understanding of the group's objectives.<sup>94</sup> However this video, as well as the existing research, have yet to really underpin what JNIM's overarching motivations for moving into coastal West Africa are, where the security forces are better resourced than Sahel forces, and the countries are more developed, pluralistic, and resilient.

Initially, JNIM and ISGS moved into the WAP park complex, that sits between Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo and Niger, to shelter from counterterrorism missions in the Liptako-Gourma region, that began in frequency under France's Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel in 2015. Inside the parks, VEOs found success in building secure rear-bases for rest and training and profited from the illicit supply chain. Then in May 2019, Ansarul Islam, a Burkinabe cell that frequently collaborated with both ISGS and JNIM at that time, kidnapped two French tourists and a Beninese tour guide from Pendjari National Park, marking the first violent extremism event inside Benin.<sup>95</sup>

Since late 2019, VEO presence inside Benin's northern departments has increased significantly, with ISGS attacks on security installations in the Alibori department (along the border with Niger), and a growing insurgency campaign led by JNIM's Katibat Macina, encircling Atakora's borders based out of Kpendjal, Togo to the west, Koalou to the north, and Pendjari National Park to the east.<sup>96</sup> The ACLED database recorded 39 violent events in Benin by JNIM over the past year, which included property destruction, abductions, and armed clashes with FDS. The research found that JNIM largely avoided violence against civilians, and there were only three reported incidents, including a JNIM reprisal attack against government informants in Koumpehoum, Matéri commune, in July 2022.<sup>97</sup>

### JNIM's Localized Insurgency Campaign in Atakora

JNIM's insurgency campaign in Benin has been predicated on building a local intelligence network, promoting anti-government sentiments, and spreading fear and confusion to disrupt

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<sup>93</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and Workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>94</sup> The video featured Iyad ag Ghaly, Amadou Koufra and Abdelmalek Droukdel participating in a summit meeting that laid the plans for JNIM's expansion into coastal West African states. Roger, B., "Côte d'Ivoire - Benin: French Intelligence Warn of Jihadist Expansion", The Africa Report, February 9, 2021,

<https://www.theafricareport.com/63807/cote-divoire-benin-why-french-intelligence-released-footage-of-a-jihadist-meeting/>

<sup>95</sup> Rush, Claire. 2019. "Two French tourists kidnapped, local guide killed in Benin." France 24.

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190505-two-french-tourists-kidnapped-local-guide-killed-pendjari-benin-safari>.

<sup>96</sup> de Bruijne, Kars. 2022. "Conflict in the Penta-Border Area." Clingendael Institute.

<https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/conflict-in-the-penta-border-area/>.

<sup>97</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). 2022. ACLED Database and Dashboard. <https://www.acleddata.com>

community cohesion. The group is actively recruiting facilitators in Atakora, who operate as local informants that alert JNIM to security movements and report on local counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts. JNIM also relies on these facilitators to help them develop in-roads with the community and win local support for their cause.<sup>98</sup>

When JNIM arrived in Koalou in late 2021, they first killed all the swine in the city, closed the bars, and gave the civilian population time to vacate the territory peacefully.<sup>99</sup> Respondents stated that since then, they have grown familiar to the locals in Atakora.<sup>100</sup> JNIM combatants reportedly rent rooms in town and walk around the markets during daytime.<sup>101</sup> Respondents claimed that when they engage with despondent members of the community, who they've targeted based on intelligence from their local informants, JNIM has focused on exploiting local dissatisfaction with social issues, politics, and the economy.<sup>102</sup> They also convened community members at the mosques or in meeting spaces, where they preached their Salafist interpretations of Islam, though the respondents stated being unfamiliar with the religious tenets they were pushing. JNIM relies heavily on spreading mis- and disinformation to further their cause. Where they have been less successful at recruitment, they used forced coercion and threats of violence.

*“They [VEOs] came to my village and gathered the population to preach. They warned us that if we talk to the police or the army, they will know. They explained that Islam is a religion of peace, and that they are here to re-establish God’s Justice” - community member, Gouande, Matéri commune.*

Respondents believed that JNIM’s mis- and disinformation campaigns are specifically intended to confuse the communities and stir paranoia and chaos, so that they alone can clear up the confusion and mediate divisive issues, operating as proxy authorities.<sup>103</sup> Misinformation also has the effect of creating mistrust between community members, and as a result, people are reporting their neighbors to police, based on presumed ties to VEOs.<sup>104</sup>

45% of respondents claimed to have witnessed VEOs operating in their community or in the bush nearby, and almost a third of respondents claimed to have had conversations or transactional interactions with VEOs in the past year, and 23% of respondents have personally experienced recruitment attempts.<sup>105</sup> Respondents stated that they know who the VEO facilitators are, though these beliefs were generally derived from biased tropes; for example, Peulh pastoralists were flagged as known collaborators because of their frequent movement through VEO staging areas in the Sahel and in the bush.<sup>106</sup>

Multiple respondents strongly held that JNIM had infiltrated their family and friend networks.<sup>107</sup> 20% of respondents claimed that members of their community are actively collaborating with VEOs. Ten percent of respondents personally know someone from Atakora that has left to join a

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Workshop discussions, Matéri, November 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Brottem, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Workshop discussions, Matéri, November 2022.

<sup>102</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and Workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Boko Haram similarly used these tactics across the Lake Chad Basin, which resulted in thousands of arbitrary arrests that led to criminal justice backlogs and have since put a spotlight on those governments’ failures.

<sup>105</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and Workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Multiple expert interviews, November 2022.

VEO; most respondents that spoke about VEOs actively operating in their community were based in Matéri commune, though since Benin deployed a counterterrorism mission to the north in November 2021, these reports have decreased. In Atakora, JNIM combatants reportedly move in groups and speak multiple foreign languages. They were also seen speaking on the phone in code that was unintelligible. They were usually armed, wore their beards long, though they were usually masked as well, to presumably guard their identity. They often dressed in military or traditional Tuareg and Peulh dress.<sup>108</sup>

*“People are suspected of having links with the terrorists. Some of those people were advisors to the Village. The police and military intelligence in Tapoga, arrested them.” - farmer, Coby commune.*

Despite the religious and cultural pluralism Benin enjoys, JNIM is attempting to exploit religious disinformation in Atakora as well. They have been actively promoting a Salafist version of Islam, which does not conform with local religious practices. Respondents claimed that JNIM convenes Beninese Muslims for religious discussions, where they admonish the local practice of certain holidays like Mawlid as being in violation of the tenets of Islam, even though it is popular and important for Sunnis to celebrate.<sup>109</sup> Local imams are reportedly not adhering to these interpretations, but the extremist ideology continues to circulate, eroding cohesion within the Muslim community, and creating distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims.

### The VEO-Pastoralist Nexus

The research findings confirmed suspicions that JNIM’s initial engagement in Benin had been through radicalizing Peulh pastoralists that frequent Atakora. Katibat Macina is led by Amadou Kouffa, a central Malian Peulh and former imam who became radicalized after meeting JNIM’s principal commander, Iyad Ag Ghali, at a local Malian Tablighi Jama’at chapter in the early 2000s. In 2016, Katibat Macina focused its operations on the Niger Delta, and began aggressive outreach to the Peulh populations there, who were frustrated with the continued targeting they faced by local hunter groups and the lack of justice they received during intercommunal conflicts. At first, Kouffa faced opposition due to his interpretation of Sharia and his attempts to curtail local and religious holidays,<sup>110</sup> although this is still an approach the group has deployed in Benin.<sup>111</sup> This strategy became more salient among Peulh pastoralists in 2017, when violence against them increased across the Sahel, and they sought alliances with stronger armed groups for self-preservation.<sup>112</sup>

Pastoralists interact more closely with VEOs when they share the same routes and campgrounds. Since late 2020, JNIM has consolidated significant control over parts of the transhumance corridors that run through the Est Region of Burkina Faso towards Benin. In the northern Sahel, JNIM typically patrolled these roads, and taxed civilians passing through them,<sup>113</sup> a tactic they have reportedly deployed along the corridors into Benin as well.<sup>114</sup> The

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<sup>108</sup> Findings from workshops, October-November 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Lebovich, Andrew. 2019. “Katibat Macina - Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel.” European Council on Foreign Relations. [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/katibat\\_macina](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/katibat_macina).

<sup>111</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022 and workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Lebovich, 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Higazi, Adam, and Shidiki Abubakar Ali. 2018. “Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Coexistence.” UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

[https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_pastoralisme\\_eng-april\\_2019\\_-\\_online.pdf](https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_pastoralisme_eng-april_2019_-_online.pdf).

<sup>114</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs conducted in September 2022.

research found that Peulh herders had regular contact with VEOs while herding livestock in the WAP park complex or along the transhumance corridors that pass through Burkina Faso and Togo, into Atakora. The respondents suggested that JNIM is interested in the freedom of movement that herders typically enjoy.<sup>115</sup> By taking over hunting and herding campsites JNIM was able to move freely at first inside the parks, until APN began conservation work in 2017 and 2020. However, JNIM has continued to stage out of the rear bases it has established in these former hunting and herding lodges.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, the proliferation of arms across West Africa over the past 15 years has exacerbated old sectarian rifts, because as one group armed themselves, the opposing side required either the ability to obtain arms as well, or augment their security with aid from well-armed and trained groups, like VEOs.<sup>117</sup> As violence spiraled in the Sahel, pastoralists that regularly traverse dangerous terrain, increasingly required access to arms for protection from banditry and conflict.<sup>118</sup> The research found that 25% of the herders who venture into Atakora from the Sahel are now heavily armed. Since firearms are difficult to legally obtain in Benin, respondents stated that the promise of security and access to weapons is another recruitment tactic VEOs use.<sup>119</sup> Illicit arms trafficking into Benin has increased since the onset of violent extremism as well, though FDS have become more vigilant policing weapons during security operations.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs, conducted in September 2022 and workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Brottem, 2022.

<sup>117</sup> Higazi and Abubakar Ali, 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Mangan, Fiona, and Mattias Nowak. 2019. "The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross Border Arms Trafficking." Small Arms Survey. <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>.

<sup>119</sup> The 1961 protocol prohibiting the import and trade of weapons, is enforced through the Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre la Prolifération des Armes Légères et de Petits Calibres. Benin also implemented additional policies in 2019 to disarm and demobilize traditional hunting groups.

<sup>120</sup> Strategic Stabilization Advisors, 2022.

## 5. Mapping Local Actors for Building Resilience

Benin's size, and relative success at administrative decentralization, allowed its northern regions to experience some degree of autonomy through well-deployed governance and security for some time. This was achieved under communism, when the government replaced traditional authorities with state functionaries to promote a national agenda. However, the removal of traditional authorities has, overtime, weakened local capacity to sustain conflict resolution mechanisms, which has had negative impacts on local resilience in the face of VEOs.<sup>121</sup> This section examines the role of local actors and civil society in managing intercommunal dynamics, and focuses on how disputes are managed - particularly when they involve herders.

### 5.1 Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

The research reviewed local conflict resolution and customary approaches to mediating farmer-herder disputes and found that Atakora boasts nominal mechanisms for managing intercommunal disputes, that were codified into national law in 2019.<sup>122</sup> The law requires that farmers first inform the herder and local authorities about damages done to their crops before escalating the conflict. Communal and traditional authorities are responsible for mediating and quelling intercommunal conflicts, and these disputes are usually managed amicably, according to the research. However, if a resolution is hard to reach, the parties can escalate the dispute to the administrative and political authorities, who are elected officials that comprise the communal council.

Members of the town halls are also key players that mediate and engage in intercommunal conflicts, since 'maintaining the peace' is also a responsibility of theirs.<sup>123</sup> If a solution is still not found, the parties are entitled to engage in legal proceedings, usually through the district police station, where damages are recorded. The Agence Territoriale de Développement Agricole (ATDA) is then brought in to adjudicate the conflict, and depending on the caliber of damages, levy a penalty on the parties involved. In accordance with the law, if there is still no resolution, the case will be sent to the courts, and the ATDA will pass the case onto lawyers and a judge, who manage proceedings thereafter.<sup>124</sup>

Associations play a role in intercommunal conflicts in Benin, often taking on the cases on behalf of the parties involved. Herders rely on the Union Communale/Départementale des Organisations Professionnelles d'élevage des Ruminants (UC/DOPER) and the regional organization, APESS, to advocate on their behalf during farmer-herder conflicts. These associations are also accountable for pastoralist activity in general, overseeing them and their livestock.<sup>125</sup> Farmers rely on the Union Communale des Coopératives Villageoise (UCOM), a local association that represents their interests in disputes, in addition to overseeing farmer cooperatives that exist in most communities.<sup>126</sup> However, the research found that when conflicts escalate, these associations have minimal success in advocating on behalf of their parties. In fact, almost all respondents and experts said that these tools are ineffective, and

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<sup>121</sup> Multiple interviews with expert informants in Kouandé, November 2022.

<sup>122</sup> Loi No 2018-20 Du 23 Avril 2019, portant code pastoral en République du Bénin.

<sup>123</sup> Multiple interviews with expert informants in Kouandé, November 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Expert Interview in Kouandé-town, November 2022.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

solutions are usually only found when the parties to the conflict agree between them to settle their issues.

*“There is no intermediary between the authorities and the breeders, everyone defends themselves. The mediators exist only on paper.”*  
- community member, Kouandé-town.

Respondents unanimously pointed to local authorities and police as the main arbiters of disputes that escalate into violence, though UC/DOPER is supposed to step in, when violence from intercommunal conflict results in fatalities.<sup>127</sup> The research found that police mediation during violent conflicts is successful at least half of the time. However, it is unclear how well these conflicts might be managed should VEOs begin to intervene and exploit the violence on one side, as both JNIM and ISGS have done across the Sahel.

## 5.2 Local P/CVE instruments

*“We need to urgently raise awareness, and make the population understand that terrorism is not only a matter for the security and defense forces, but for the people to participate in too.”*  
- municipal official, Coby commune.

Prior to the onset of violent extremism in 2019, Beninese citizens typically held a high level of confidence in their security and governance providers. Discontent was generally linked to political marginalization, and perceptions of socio-political disenfranchisement of “outsiders,” such as transborder transhumant pastoralists and seasonal migrants. In response, in 2012, Benin’s Agency for the Integrated Management of Border Spaces (ABeGIEF) established multiple initiatives to address intercommunal violence that was driven by inequality and political disenfranchisement, including a poverty reduction project and sensitization programming to increase perceptions of citizenship and representation in the north.<sup>128</sup>

Maintaining community engagement over time, and in the face of growing instability, has been met with challenges. In Benin, as well as across West Africa, Peulh pastoralists are often disenfranchised by local dispute resolution processes. As a result, they typically place more trust in religious authorities - viewing them as impartial - over local officials who they believe will favor the native population.<sup>129</sup> Having large ethnic-Peulh membership, JNIM and Katibat Macina have been known to co-opt the religious authority position in these cases and use these modicums to gain in-roads with the aggrieved herder community by adjudicating scenarios in their favor.<sup>130</sup>

In anticipation of needing to respond to failing conflict mediation processes, Benin passed an inter-ministerial ordinance *Arrêté Préfectoral 2012 no. 143*, establishing community-based vigilance committees in the Matéri commune, referred to locally as the *Comités Locaux des*

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<sup>127</sup> Expert Interview in Kouandé-town, November 2022.

<sup>128</sup> See Coopération History. Agence Béninoise de Gestion Intégrée des Espaces Frontaliers (ABeGIEF), <http://www.abegief.org/>.

<sup>129</sup> de Bruijine, Kars, Fransje Molenaar, and Meryl Demuyneck. 2022. “Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances.” Clingendael Institute. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-characters-uncustomary-circumstances>.

<sup>130</sup> Higazi and Abubakar Ali, 2018.

Sécurités (CLS).<sup>131</sup> The CLS, which were initiated through an EU-funded project, were intended to be used as official forums for civil society, traditional authorities, security forces and the local population to convene and discuss matters of public security. The EU project targeted communes across all northern departments in Benin, but only Atakora's Matéri commune scaled the project up into a formal administrative process. However, even in Atakora, the research found that the CLS are now largely ineffective and have not convened in years, because the committee's leadership are perceived as unrepresentative of the communities they work with.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, the CLS are reportedly too costly to convene regularly with the local communes' budgets, now that EU funding is no longer available.<sup>133</sup>

The research found that intergenerational difference of opinions has also exacerbated tensions between community members. The youth are increasingly disengaged in traditional mediation efforts led by aging community leaders, whose perspectives on conflict, resources access, and mediation techniques are less relevant to them, in the modern context.<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, the elders are frustrated with the youth's disrespect for traditional values, which they blame for the uptick in intercommunal violence.<sup>135</sup>

Nonetheless, the surveyed communes of Atakora remain somewhat resilient. In response to growing insecurity, the research found that the population has begun to adopt more vigilant coping mechanisms for their circumstances. Out of growing concerns of violent extremist spies amongst them, they are self-censoring their regular conversations, by speaking in coded language, for example when discussing VEO sightings. They are also adapting their everyday activities to the austere dynamics they are facing, and limiting group and nighttime activities, and the celebration of religious, cultural, and family events.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Arrêté Préfectoral, Année 2021 no.2/059/P-SG-CM-SAG-SA. "Portant Nomination Des Membres Des Comités Locaux des Sécurités de La Commune de Matéri." Ministère de la Décentralisation et de la Gouvernance Locale, Du Département de l'Atakora, Préfecture de Natitingou.

<sup>132</sup> Expert Interview in Kouandé-town, November 2022.

<sup>133</sup> Several members of the CLS participated in the workshops but did not identify themselves as representatives of these committees. Matéri Workshop Participant List, November 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Multiple KII and FGDs, Atakora Department, September 2022 and workshop discussions in October 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

## 6. Conclusion

The push by violent extremists into coastal West Africa brings with it a new set of dynamic problems and risks, that requires states and their partners to reset their P/CVE and counterterrorism responses. Cohesion across pluralistic societies of countries like Benin, has typically been a sufficient bulwark against violent extremist threats. However, when the insurgency first began in early 2020, it shredded the mirage that these countries were safe from VEO threats and temporarily paralyzed local responses.

Most notable in Benin, is that VEOs have sown widespread distrust between the community members of Atakora, which has eroded confidence in the government and security actors as well. This distrust takes the form of sowing doubt into old personal relationships and stigmatizing already at-risk groups, like Peulh herders, unemployed youth and individuals who question traditional norms. JNIM has so far experienced great success in Benin through psychological operations - and convincing previously stable and quiet communities that insecurity is widespread and there are no assurances that the government will step in to protect them.

*“The terrorists have succeeded at putting the population on alert. Psychosis has spread among the population. There is distrust between everyone - between neighbors, and between the people and the government.” - farmer, Kouandé-town.*

The research found that JNIM can move around Kouandé commune, promoting a sense of fear across these communities, where security is significantly less present than elsewhere in northern Benin. Meanwhile in Matéri, where the FAB have a strong position in Porga, JNIM is operating more discreetly, though still present there. This presence directly affects farmer-herder tensions. Although many communities have built tested resiliencies to mitigate farmer-herder violent conflict, VEOs have figured out that their efforts are most effective at the point in the conflict when there is a breakdown in trust between communities.<sup>137</sup>

When that trust is being tested, JNIM has successfully pushed mis- or disinformation about what the government is allegedly incapable or unwilling to do, and then exploited the marginalized group’s vulnerabilities. The research found that those vulnerabilities are most experienced by the pastoralist community (to include both transborder and local herders). These vulnerabilities have also been recently compounded by their shrinking rights due to sedentarization policies and the growing nativist views held against them by local landowners and farmers. Though JNIM is currently building its insurgency by exploiting these issues, as the VEO conflict evolves, presumably their tactics will also adapt to the changing context. This has already been seen in the Sahel, where traditional P/CVE tools have become largely ineffective instruments to combat violent extremism. In conclusion, Benin is experiencing a significant violent extremist threat in the north, but the war against VEOs is by no means lost. Now is the time for thoughtful adaptation of P/CVE responses.

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<sup>137</sup> de Bruijne, Bisson, Cottyn, and Molenaar, 2021.

## 7. Targeted Recommendations for Adapting Local Efforts into P/CVE instruments

Farmer-herder conflict mediation: Modern legal frameworks can erode the roles of customary authorities and most respondents to the research prefer traditional approaches to manage disputes, claiming that political processes are often out of touch with local issues.<sup>138</sup> The confusion about which legal system to apply towards these issues is problematized by overlapping laws, or competing interpretations of existing frameworks.<sup>139</sup> This confusion can inevitably lead to a breakdown in communication between parties to a conflict.

**Recommendation:** Interventions, like legal training, that equip traditional authorities with the capacity to employ the government's rule of law, could resolve - or at least deescalate - some of the stress points in farmer-herder violence. This includes educating herders' mediators and representatives about national and regional frameworks, like the 1998 ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance and the 2013 Nouakchott Declaration on Pastoralism, local land rights and ownership policies, and changes that have taken place during herders' absence. APESS has been tasked with this in Benin, however the research found their approach to be largely ineffective. Educational workshops should include herders themselves and be scheduled for when they are available and present.

Renovate youth centers: Town halls in Atakora are primarily used for political activities, and therefore many communities were absent formal meeting spaces or places for at-risk youth to convene without drawing suspicion. The youth need a safe space for dialogue, sensitization programming, but also vocational training and access to educational resources, computers, books, etc. There are existing youth houses, known as the 'Maison des Jeunes', however these buildings are dilapidated and require renovation.

**Recommendation:** The Maisons require immediate renovation, which should be carried out by unemployed youth, to provide them with temporary employment, while also giving them a sense of ownership over a project, pride and belonging to their community. After the renovation, these youth houses can be used as community and youth centers that host events and trainings, and serve as safe spaces for at-risk groups to convene and talk about their experiences. The centers should be run by the youth, with support from community leadership. Post-renovation operation may also require financial support.

Intergenerational engagement: The research found that younger generations are increasingly less engaged in traditional livelihoods, community customs, and conflict mediation. Yet, there are few alternatives in Atakora to these old static systems that adhere to a social and economic caste system. This leaves young people yearning for opportunities to better their circumstances. Meanwhile, VEOs offer disillusioned, impoverished youth the opportunity to join a group that allows them to achieve opportunities not normally available to them, an enticing recruitment tool in Atakora for young men and women.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Expert Interview with in Kouandé, November 2022.

**Recommendation:** Vocational training that equips youth with alternative trades and skills can be held at the Maisons des Jeunes, with those that focus on self-actualization of the participating individuals. Additionally, intergenerational trust building exercises and community engagement activities would stymie growing fissures between the elders and youth, and create more awareness about what youth need.

Civil-military cohesion: There is little dialogue taking place between the local population and security providers in Atakora. Though people are not inclined to support VEOs, in the absence of security - or information about security activity - there is little opportunity for the people to counter VEO narratives about the governments' negligence. The sensitization workshops found that the people want positive relationships with security forces, and to build civil-military cohesion, and reduce FDS stigmatization of certain groups. They also acknowledged the need to collaborate with FDS more, so that the security forces could benefit from local knowledge regarding VEO recruitment activity.

**Recommendation:** Town hall dialogues and mediated workshops should focus on civil-military cohesion and collaboration. These activities allow parties to build relationships with each other first, then build trust and the networks that rely on this trust, such as early warning systems, key leader engagements, and civilian-led counterinsurgency campaigns. Within these efforts, marginalized communities should be prioritized through sensitive engagements that do not put the community at risk for being targeted by VEOs, for their presumed collaboration with the government.

Countering mis- and disinformation: Promoting mis- and disinformation about the government, their activities, and their priorities, is how JNIM has quickly radicalized communities across the Sahel, where government activity is often not transparent. The communities in Atakora are similarly not fully aware of the government's counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, due to a lack of shared information about these plans. These information firewalls are amplifying local paranoia, and VEOs are aptly exploiting this by pushing false narratives. Efforts to deplatform fake news have been stymied by growing instability, and the lack of engagement between security forces and the local population.

**Recommendation:** Radio transmissions can push regular news stories about the government P/CVE and counterterrorism efforts. Additionally, regular town halls can actively counter mis- and disinformation through information sharing and sensitization. This would provide the local population with the opportunity to ask questions, which is a powerful and easy way to counter VEO propaganda, while building community cohesion. By expanding sensitization campaigns to counter misinformation, and focusing on interreligious dialogue, these engagements can promote moderate views of religion (specifically Islam) and demote extremism. Sensitization workshops can also equip all religious affiliations with a better understanding of Islam and enable them to differentiate between extremist views and the religious tenets that are typical of most practicing Muslims in Benin.

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