

# The Role of Parliaments in Preventing Armed Violence: Prospects and Challenges

## Executive Summary

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Armed violence kills, maims and destroys. It is induced, occasioned, facilitated and sustained by the militarization of societies, the increase in criminal activity and the availability of small arms. Armed violence creates insecurity among populations, instability within states and threatens developmental gains. When it occurs in situations of armed conflict, it impedes the peace process and undermines humanitarian efforts. Pervasive, armed violence affects every fiber of society and every country in the sub-region. Therefore, addressing the sources, causes and triggers requires a holistic approach both within and between countries. As a security issue, addressing the challenges of armed violence must be state led and must necessarily include effective collaboration between the three arms of government – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. It also calls for a cooperation between these arms of government and their agencies within the sub-region so that whilst there will be difference in the approaches used, there is consensus on the end-result envisaged – to eliminate or minimize drastically, the occurrence of armed violence in the sub-region.

As representatives of the people charged with the mandate to articulate the concerns, fears and aspirations of their constituencies, Parliaments are better placed to obtain information which relates to different dynamics at play in armed violence situations in order to evolve relevant response. Being law makers, Parliamentarians hold the key to enacting strong laws which provide the needed legal regimes to comprehensively tackle the root causes of armed violence in a proactive and preventative way. Furthermore, charged with the responsibility to approve budgets and oversee the implementation of national programs/activities for which money is located, Parliaments are best placed to animate implementation mechanisms. Finally, through their representational role, Parliaments are able to monitor the implementation of the laws and policies enacted to address armed violence using a number of methods including feedback from their constituencies which can then be factored into their oversight activities.

Using interpretive and thematic analysis, the study examines the root causes, triggering factors and prevention of armed violence in the West African sub-region. The analysis of the interaction between the risk factors and ongoing activities to address the challenge of armed violence is utilized to suggest some policy options for consideration.

### **The study confirms that:**

- A number of countries in the sub-region are weak and have several risk factors which include poverty, burgeoning unskilled youth populations, increasing criminality, low numbers of law enforcement officers and a dearth of logistical facilities, cleavage formation along emotive lines of ethnicity and religion, the absence of functioning rule

of law institutions in some instances and a proliferation of illicit arms and porous borders.

- Parliaments are critical actors needed to address the challenges of armed violence. Through its representational, legislative and oversight functions, Parliamentarians are able to articulate the fears of the people they represent, enact laws to address their concerns and oversee the implementation of the legislation passed to ensure that it addresses the needs for which they were promulgated.
- Parliaments in the sub-region are severely constrained in addressing the challenge of armed violence because of the lack of strong support structures; lack of comprehensive empirical data on the sources, causes and impact of armed violence, an over compartmentalization of the work of the different Parliamentary Committees, especially defence and security vis a vis other committees and the lack of cooperation and collaboration. There is also limited interaction between the constituents and Parliamentarians.

A number of recommendations aimed at strengthening the capacities of Parliaments to address issues of armed violence are made. They include: a need for awareness creation for Parliamentarians, Parliamentary staff and political parties; development of the capacities of Parliamentary staff to provide effective bases for Parliamentarians; a need for stronger movements to drive the process from outside Parliament; the development of mechanisms to strengthen the symbiotic relationship between Parliaments and their constituencies; the formation of Parliamentary networks; ratification of relevant international laws aimed at addressing among other things, issues of armed violence; and the harmonisation of national laws on armed violence issues.

The success of the above-mentioned recommendations are predicated on two assumptions- one being that Parliamentarians will be able to make time off their busy schedules to engage on the issues raised and secondly that there will be predictable sources of funding to sustain the engagement. It is therefore important to identify practical ways of implementing the recommendations, which would be useful and have a real impact on the work of Parliaments in addressing armed violence. How best can Parliaments be engaged to sensitize them on the sources, causes and triggers of armed violence and their correlation to national development and sub-regional security? How can Parliaments have better access to available information on issues of armed violence in order to, better engage their colleagues and the executive? How can Civil Society, Community and Faith Based Organisations collaborate to assist Parliaments address issues of armed violence? What mechanisms can be developed to strengthen the interaction between Parliamentarians and their constituencies, to ensure the top bottom and bottom up flow of information? How can the relationship between Parliaments and the Executive be enhanced to facilitate the ratification of international instruments and the promulgation of national ones to address issues of armed violence. And perhaps, finally, how can the national laws be harmonised to effectively address issues of armed violence within countries and in the sub-region?