Policyweekly

Strengthening Enablers of Peace and Security in the Mano River Union

Policy Recommendations

1   The electoral processes in member states should be strengthened to ensure access to the ballot by all political actors and the credibility of the election results.

2   There is a need for the youth to be empowered politically to participate effectively in the political space, and they should also be empowered economically through capacity building and support for higher education.

3   There is a need to strengthen border security across member states.

4   Member states and development partners should invest in critical sectors of the economies, particularly manufacturing, to boost industrialisation in the countries.

5   Activities of civil society organisations focusing on governance and democracy in the Mano River states should be supported.

Introduction

The Mano River is a sub-region within West Africa that consists of Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. In 1973, the Mano River Union (MRU) was established between Liberia and Sierra Leone mainly to deepen collaboration and mutual assistance in matters of common interest in economic, social, technical, scientific and administrative fields. Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire joined the Union in 1980 and 2008, respectively. Despite the enthusiasm with which the MRU was established, the dreams of the Union as contained in the Mano River Declaration remains stillborn due to the violent conflicts and political instabilities that ravaged the MRU member states and the entire Mano River sub-region. States of the sub-region, particularly the founding states of the MRU, suffered severe civil wars from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, beginning with Liberia in 1989 – 1997

and 1999 – 2002. Sierra Leone's civil war lasted over a decade, from 1991 to 2002. Côte d'Ivoire also experienced two civil wars, the first lasting from 2002 to 2007 and the second lasting between 2010 and 2011. Even though these were internal conflicts in the states, the cross-border military and political interactions among the conflict actors spread security threats and instability across the entire sub-region. The experience of the Mano River states exemplifies the thesis of Buzan and Weaver, which posits that geographical contiguity is potent for (in) security because threats travel more easily over short distances. Moreover, contiguity increases interaction around the field of (in)security more consistently than in the economic sector.

Given the devastating impact of the conflict in the Mano River in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the threats it posed to the stability of the entire West African region, enormous resources were deployed by regional and global bodies to restore order and promote stability in the Mano River region. At least six peacekeeping missions operated in the Mano River sub-region between 1993 and 2018. More recently, the triennial Framework of Cooperation Agreement (FCA) for 2024 – 2026 was entered into between the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and the Mano River Union (MRU) on March 01, 2024. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly accounts for the stillbirth of the Mano River Union. It also explains why the failure to address the structural enablers of conflicts in the Mano River sub-region may stifle the actualisation of the normative principles of the MRU and other nascent frameworks for cooperation in the sub-region.

Accounting for the Stillbirth of the Mano River Union

The Mano River Union was established with two core objectives – elimination of all barriers to mutual trade and fair distribution of the benefits from economic cooperation among member states. However, more than five decades after establishing the MRU, the objectives in the Mano River Declaration are yet to be actualised. Cross-border trade among member states is still challenged by multiple barriers, with informal trade dominating formal trade across the sub-region. The failure of the MRU to actualise its stated objectives is connected to the violent conflict that engulfed member states of the sub-region, particularly Liberia and Sierra Leone, at various times.

At the roots of the violent conflicts that engulfed the MRU states were several key factors such as legitimacy crisis, crisis of political transition, political exclusion and manipulation of primordial sentiments. The role played by the crisis of legitimacy and political transition (especially in Liberia and Sierra Leone) in destabilising the Mano River sub-region is remarkable and requires a brief analysis. Liberia was plunged into its first civil war in 1989 due to a legitimacy crisis that characterised the regime of Master-Sergeant Doe, who took over power following the April 12, 1980, coup d'état. The regime of Doe faced a serious legitimacy crisis because it failed to address decades of political repression, governance deficit and socioeconomic underdevelopment that afflicted Liberia since independence in 1847. This legitimacy crisis faced by Doe led to an armed rebellion launched by the Charles Taylor-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) on December 24, 1989. The armed rebellion by Taylor

plunged Liberia into the first phase of prolonged violence between 1989 and 1997. Although Taylor won the 1997 Liberia general election, as a result of the legitimacy crisis he faced, the second civil war began when anti-Taylor rebel groups – Liberia United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) – launched attacks against Taylor's regime from different fronts in 1999 leading to eventual exit of Taylor from Liberia in 2003.

The Sierra Leone civil war, which lasted for over a decade, shares certain similarities with Liberia's civil wars in terms of the root causes of the war, which is connected to the crisis of legitimacy. After its independence in 1961, Sierra Leone was ruled by inept leaders. Siaka Stevens' 17-year rule (1968 to 1985) was metaphorically referred to as "the 17-year plague of locusts" because of the poor governance under his rule. His rule led to Sierra Leone's retrogression from constitutional democracy to one party, which his successor, Joseph Momoh, worsened. This deterioration in governance created room for the emergence of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which launched an onslaught against Momoh's regime, thereby plunging the country into a civil war that lasted for 11 years.

These violent conflicts experienced by Liberia and Sierra Leone impacted negatively on the MRU in many significant ways. First, the conflicts engendered hostility and mutual distrust among member states of the MRU because some states provided overt and covert support for different warring factions in the neighbouring states going through civil war due to the self-interests of the political leaders. In the case of Liberia, it was reported that Ivory Coast provided a base from where the remnants of Gen. Quiwonkpa's forces regrouped under the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Taylor and launched an attack against Doe's regime. Similarly, in the 1990s, Guinea and Sierra Leone governments supported anti-Taylor rebels, such as the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group, which attacked Taylor's regime. In the case of Sierra Leone, due to Taylor's desire to overthrow governments that were supporters of the ECOWAS peace plan, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was supported by Charles Taylor to overthrow Joseph Momoh's government.

A second negative impact of the violent conflicts on the MRU is the economic devastation brought about by the wars. The wars created room for the pillage of countries' natural resources and illicit trade by both political elites and rebel groups. In Sierra Leone, the RUF engaged in illicit trade in diamonds with Liberia, from which RUF generated an estimated $75 million annually, which was used for the purchase of arms and ammunition. Liberia's Charles Taylor and his cohorts stole and sold the country's natural resources even before they formally seized power. The pillage of natural resources robbed the governments of resources needed to deliver basic amenities, engendered cross-border illicit trade and proliferation of arms, thereby deepening insecurity, all of which are detrimental to evolving effective mutual economic and social cooperation across the Mano River sub-region as envisaged in the Mano River Declaration.

Although stability has returned to the Mano

River sub-region with the end of civil wars in all the countries and efforts are being made to revive the Mano River Union, the structural enablers of violent conflict – the crisis of legitimacy and political transition, economic underdevelopment and political exclusion – remain endemic across the region.

Recommendations: Addressing the Structural Enablers of Conflict for a Revival of the MRU

In order to create the conditions necessary for the effective functioning of the MRU, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. **Strengthen electoral processes in member states:** To address the crisis of legitimacy and political transition, the electoral processes in member states should be strengthened to ensure access to the ballot by all political actors and credibility of the election results.

2. **Youth political inclusion and economic empowerment:** The youth should be empowered politically to participate effectively in the political space by being appointed to political offices and supported to contest for elective positions. They should also be economically empowered through capacity building and support for higher education to ensure they acquire the skills necessary for productive engagement.

3. **Strengthen border security across member states:** Security across member states' borders must be improved by building capacity in border control. This will go a long way in reducing cross-border illicit trade and arms proliferation across the sub-region.

4. **Support industrialisation in the member states:** Member states and development partners should invest in critical sectors of the economies, particularly manufacturing, to boost industrialisation in the countries. Industrialisation will create employment, improve government revenue, and enhance the complementarity required for evolving a custom union in the sub-region.

5. **Support civil society activities at national and sub-regional levels:** Activities of civil society organisations focusing on governance and democracy in the Mano River states should be supported. This can bolster political participation and mobilise the people to demand accountability from the government. To this end, activities of the Democracy Network (DEMNET) – a civil society group operating to support CSOs focusing on quality elections across 10 African countries – should be scaled up to include countries in the Mano River sub-region.

Conclusion

The dream of engendering mutual cooperation and assistance in various areas of interest among the Mano River states under the umbrella of MRU was thwarted by the prolonged violent conflicts that spread across the sub-region in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although stability has returned to the sub-region with the end of civil wars in all the countries, the structural enablers of violent

conflict persist across the region. Efforts to revive the MRU must focus greater attention on dealing with the structural enablers of violent conflict in the sub-region.

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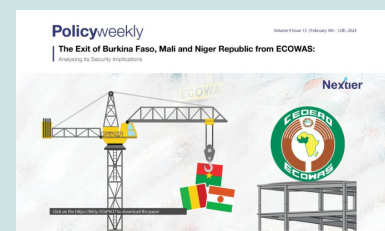
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