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Internal Evaluation Participatory Early Warning for More Effective Response to Religious Conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria

A Pilot Project funded by USIP

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2. Executive Summary

In late 2012, SFCG and CAPP received \$52,000 in funding from the US Institute for Peace (USIP) to conduct a pilot project to test the use of an SMS-based conflict early warning system (EWS) in the Jos region of Nigeria. Jos has increasingly become a conflict flashpoint area over the last several decades as instances of violence have risen between Muslims and Christians and along tribal fault lines.

The pilot project was tested in eight Jos Local Government Administrations (LGAs) (Jos North, Jos South, Jos East, Riyom, Barkin Ladi, Bassa, Mangu, and Wase) for the period of December 2012-July 2013. The project's goal was "to increase the capacity of local peacemakers to analyze and respond to emerging conflict before it escalates into a cycle of violence."

This goal was supported by three main objectives:

1. Conflict prevention actors have enhanced information (in terms of quantity and quality) and analysis to plan and target timely conflict prevention activities.
2. Conflict prevention actors have enhanced capacity to take action based upon information collected through new media
3. The program and its results are documented and shared for use elsewhere in Nigeria and other conflicts worldwide



The project activities involved training 109 focal points from across the eight target LGAs to send SMS messages of conflict early warning signs into a centralized SFCG/CAPP system. The focal points also conducted outreach efforts in each of their communities to encourage members of the public to also send text messages to SFCG/CAPP when they witnessed signs of potential conflict. Starting half way through the project, there was also the option to submit incident reports through the project's Crowdmapp website. The messages sent by both focal points and the general public were received by a Frontline SMS software

database managed by SFCG/CAPP, who investigated the validity of each alert and then notified key stakeholders (security, government, and NGO partners) of the occurrence via SMS (when urgent) or in a daily email report. Finally, the security and NGO partners met every other month at a stakeholders meeting organized by SFCG/CAPP to analyze the messages that had been received that month.¹

Given that one of the objectives of this project was to produce lessons learned and disseminate them widely, SFCG- Nigeria commissioned an internal evaluation that went beyond the standard OECD-DAC evaluative criteria and utilized a process approach. The aim was to produce an evaluative report that identified what worked well and what could be improved for when the project continues under funding from the European Union. In preparation for this evaluation, key documents were utilized to create evaluation standards for comparison and as a basis for criteria.

¹ Image from: "Nigerian Riot Victims Swamp Medits." BBC. 1 December 2008
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7758098.stm>

This evaluation report is the result of eight days of fieldwork conducted in Jos, Nigeria in July 2013 that involved focus groups with project focal points and the Jos public, as well as targeted interviews with NGO, government, and security organization partners.

The evaluation is divided into four sections, which are structured to mirror the process of developing the SMS system.

Phase 1, “Public Engagement”, describes SFCG’s outreach efforts to engage focal points and the general public in sending in early warning information.

- The sub-section on “Training” discusses the results of the project launch meeting/training that took place on (DATE), where the project was introduced to stakeholders and the general public, and the focal points received their first training. It also discusses the follow-up training that took place for focal points from Barkin Ladi and Riyom, when the project team discovered that they were not reporting incidents that had occurred in their areas.
- The sub-section on “SMS Blasts” discusses the use of blast text messages sent by SFCG/CAPP to members in their cell phone database. These messages were sent in order to engage the public in sending in messages. The SMS Blasts were one of the most successful components of the program because they helped keep the public alert and engaged in the program. This part of the program should be considered for continuation and possibly expansion under the new grant from the European Union.
- The sub-section on “Outreach” discusses SFCG/CAPP’s efforts to engage the wider public through the use of brochures, posters, and T-shirts. Because SFCG only budgeted \$1,000 (out of \$52,000) for this outreach effort, the impact was very limited. Outreach should receive greater budget and programmatic emphasis in the next phase of the program in order to increase the number of incident reports texted into SFCG/CAPP. Increased public outreach also presents an opportunity to further capitalize on the already high levels of trust in SFCG/CAPP within the Jos community and to mobilize people to play a greater role in bringing peace to their areas.

Phase 2, Incident Reporting, discusses how the SMS system worked in practice after the initial training, outreach, and launch efforts.

- The first sub-section describes the “Frequency” of the messages that were sent in by focal points and the public. They demonstrate that after the first month of the program (December), there was a major drop in the number of incidents reported. This was due most likely to a combination of a decrease in the actual number of violent incidents that occurred, problems with cell phone connectivity, and lack of sufficient public outreach and training of focal points.
- The following sub-section on “Content” analyzes what information was actually shared with SFCG/CAPP through SMS incident reports. It shows that the primary “senders” of information were the focal points and the general public, although there were a high frequency of messages that contained information not directly related to the purpose of the SMS system (such as requests for further information or greetings). This suggests

that both of focal points and the general public are interested in and engaged with the program, but may require further instruction on what type of information to send in.

- The sub-section on “Access and Affordability” looks at how well the focal points and the general public were able to use the system. It details the way in which problem with cellphone network coverage in Jos limited public participation. More positively, the focal points and general public felt sufficient ownership of the project to spend their own money sending in SMS reports.

Phase 3, “Bimonthly Stakeholder Usage” discusses how the messages were used by their ultimate audience.

- The sub-section on “Incident Alerts” provides comparative analysis on the degree to which SMS alerts, the daily incident emails, and the monthly incident reports were used. The first part compares communication methods, and the second part analyzes the use of incident information among stakeholder groups. It concludes that stakeholders prefer SMS based communication and that the monthly trend reports were infrequently used. These two trends suggest more broadly that stakeholders have used the EWS more for awareness and incident response than long term conflict analysis and prevention.
- The sub-section on “Bimonthly Meetings” describes the four meetings that SFCG/CAPP organized for its group of stakeholders. While these meetings increased exposure and connection between the groups, they do not appear to have been used for thorough conflict analysis, as the monthly mapping reports were only shared at the last meeting which was weakly attended. More positively, these meetings have made an important contribution in helping CSOs to better connect and communicate with security bodies.

The fourth and final section, on “Technology Systems” discusses the technological backbone of the entire conflict mapping system: Frontline SMS and the Crowdmap website. It also talks about the development of other EWS systems in Jos in the near future.

- The sub-section on “Frontline SMS” talks about the software system that was used by SFCG/CAPP to receive, store, and send SMS messages. It highlights several technological difficulties with the use of this software and recommends that SFCG/CAPP further investigate the source of these problems and keeps a back-up record of all message transactions on a separate log.
- The sub-section on “Crowdmap Website” introduces the platform used by SFCG/CAPP that allowed users to send in incident reports online and mapped all incident trends from both the online reports and the Frontline SMS system. Unfortunately, none of the focal points, members of the public, or bimonthly stakeholders used the website or seemed interested in using it in the future.
- The final section, “Other Early Warning Systems”, discusses the rise of competitive SMS-based early warning systems in Jos and offers suggestions for how SFCG/CAPP can maintain the use of their system while still collaborating with other EWS organizers to maximize impact and area coverage.

Topic specific recommendations are listed at the end of each section. The evaluation also has four overarching recommendations for the next phase of the project, which are further elaborated on page 34.

Recommendation #1: SFCG and CAPP should more purposefully define program objectives around conflict prevention and rapid response.

With EWS, there is often a bias toward short-term indicators at the expense of long-term structural factors, leading some EWS models to help anticipate rapidly approaching crises rather than long term trends.² This issue of whether the EWS is for short term response or long term prevention was one of the primary tensions within the SFCG/CAPP project, and it underlies many conclusions shared in this evaluation. The initial project documents describe the project as being created to empower NGOs and security actors in Jos to do conflict prevention work, as stated in both the project's first objective and its goal "to increase the capacity of local peacemakers to analyze and respond to emerging conflict before it escalates into a cycle of violence." The proposal also describes the need for a prevention-oriented EWS by the Plateau Peace Practitioners Network (PPPN), a primary intended user, stating that "[PPPN's] slow response and an explosive dynamic means that once triggered, conflicts escalate rapidly. Interventions often come too late to avoid substantial violence and loss of life... In response to the increasing risks and the slow response of local peace actors, there is a need for enhanced, timely, information and analysis to identify potential conflicts through an early warning system" Even the title, "Early Warning System" suggests an approach where peace and stability mechanisms are deployed before simmering conflicts erupt into violence.

There is, however, an important disconnect with the design of many of the project activities, which are largely focused on collecting information about violent incidents and sharing them quickly with stakeholders. The proposal's description of activities states "We will use SMS and mobile phone technology to collect information in real time about rumors and threats of violence in Plateau State and use a database and mapping software to analyze reports of rumors and produce easily-digestible daily bulletins including maps and analysis." The training content and outreach materials encouraged message senders to report incidences of violence in their area-but importantly, not information about long-term conflict dynamics that trigger violence, such as social or economic shifts. On the other hand, the bimonthly stakeholder meetings and monthly trend reports were designed to have stakeholders analyze the messages and create conclusions to inform their long term strategies.

Overall, while short-term conflict response and long-term conflict prevention are not mutually exclusive, they suggest some different trajectories for project activities. Conflict prevention work, which is inherently proactive, stems more from critical analysis of multiple variables known to cause or stem violence over the long term. Conflict response work, which is inherently reactive, stems more from rapidly collecting and disseminating information about violent events so that authorities and peace actors can take appropriate responses to quell the situation in the period after. The SFCG/CAPP project applied elements of both, while not following either trajectory fully and with strong results. The decision about which system to use has important design consequences for what sort of incident reports to request from the general public and what formats of communication and analysis are used by stakeholders. This evaluation recommends

² Barton, R., Hippel, K. v., Sequeira, S., & Irvine, M. (2008, February 1). Early Warning? A Review of Conflict Prediction Models and Systems . Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from <http://csis.org/publication/early-warning>

that as the project continues, SFCG/CAPP make more clear decisions about the purpose of the project and then re-design their project activities along this sharper focus.

Recommendation #2: Prioritize solidifying relationships with security actors. Over the course of the project, SFCG and CAPP made valuable progress in cultivating relationships with security actors. For CSOs in the bimonthly stakeholder group, bringing security actors into the meetings offered a new and important opportunity for civil-military cooperation. On a separate note, it was clear that the majority of focal points and members of the public had developed expectations that sending in EWS would lead to deployment or response by security actors to the incident reported. In this regard, SFCG/CAPP need to work on communicating appropriate public expectations so that community members don't rely on the EWS as a means for immediate help and that their trust in the EWS is not eroded over time if security response continues to lag. For both of these reasons, it will be crucial for SFCG/CAPP to continue reaching out to security actors so that they have greater trust and usage of the EWS.

Recommendation #3: Conduct a larger and more strategic outreach campaign to engage the general public. Many of SFCG/CAPP's outreach activities were limited in scope and reach due to the limited \$1,000 budget set for these activities. This may be one reason why, after December 2012, SFCG/CAPP received such a limited number of EWS messages into the Frontline SMS. In order to gain greater buy-in and use of the EWS by the general public, SFCG/CAPP should conduct a larger outreach campaign with more strategically designed outreach materials based on a refined strategy for the project, as discussed in Recommendation #1.

Recommendation #4: Conduct strategic data analysis of SMS messages. When SFCG/CAPP received messages into the Frontline SMS system, they were organized by some simple variables such as location and sender. Later, SFCG/CAPP would conduct analysis on a daily basis of the incidents received, and once a month print out a list of the SMS messages for review by stakeholders. In the future, SFCG/CAPP would strongly benefit by coding messages around a greater list of variables and then conducting more complex analysis in order to improve program implementation and utility. From a short-term perspective, SFCG/CAPP would benefit by analyzing who is sending messages, what type of messages are being received, and how the messages received correlate with violence reported through the media and other channels. This could inform decisions about where to conduct additional outreach or what content to include in future trainings. From a long-term perspective, SFCG/CAPP would benefit by analyzing important conflict variables, such as the type of incident and whether or not it leads to an escalated event. This could help the messages' end users, NGOs and security bodies in Jos, be more aware of what areas are violence prone and what issues act as violence triggers. In the next stage of the program, SFCG/CAPP will need to begin coding and identifying important variables and conducting appropriate analysis in the messages they receive to take full advantage of the information they collect.

trends appears to have been progress, and many members indicated that they are now more aware of the work others are doing.

Both of the security bodies interviewed believe that their participation in the bimonthly meetings generally helped them to share information with others and be more alert to the security challenges in their community. Said one, attending the bimonthly meetings had “helped us to see far more than where we were seeing- the work of SFCG has helped us to come closer to look at the issues more properly than ever before.” Neither agency could provide a concrete example of something they had learned that had helped them in their security role, though one noted that he was glad to have gotten to know CAPP better.

Recommendations:

- Consider increasing the frequency of the bimonthly meetings, especially during periods of greater violence.
- Consider using the bimonthly meetings to go beyond analyzing the incident reports but also to coordination action and response.

Technology Systems

Crowdmap Website

Participatory Early Warning for More Effective Response to Religious Conflict in Plateau State, Nigeria

An Early Warning System for Plateau State

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During the spring of 2013, SFCG/CAPP created a website for the EWS using the Crowdmap platform. All the incidents from that point forward have been put on the map, but this does not include all of the incidents from the over 100 messages received during December. SFCG/CAPP discussed this website at their second training and at stakeholder bimonthly meetings. Around April, SFCG and CAPP switched from categorizing all incidents among three categories: a) peaceful reports/rumors, b) violence/killing/murder/death/massacre, and c) bomb blast/gunshot/tear gas to calling all incidents “trusted reports.” These previous categories had been chosen by SFCG/CAPP because staff felt that these were the three most common categories of incidents in Plateau. To date, not all of the incident reports are on the website, as the website was launched in the spring and only includes incidents that were received from that point forward.

Though almost all of the stakeholders have heard of the Crowdmap website, none have visited the website and are unlikely to do so. Of the eleven stakeholders who were interviewed for this evaluation, ten of them had heard of the Crowdmap website. Most of the stakeholders had been introduced to the Crowdmap website at one of the bimonthly meetings where the website was mentioned or projected. However, among these ten stakeholders, none of them had ever actually visited it. Common reasons for not visiting the website included busyness, lack of regular computer use, and feeling sufficiently informed by the SMS and email incident alerts that the website was not seen as having a unique added value. Two interviewees also mentioned that they hadn’t been “properly introduced” to the website or had heard that it was being developed but did not know that it was completed. Regardless of the reason for not viewing the website, none of the interviewees indicated a strong desire or willingness to check out the website later.

Similarly to the stakeholders, none of the project focal points or members of the public who participated in focus group discussions had visited the website, and only few of them had heard about it. In two of the four focus groups, focal point participants had not heard of the website at all. Among, the other two, one person had received SFCG/CAPP’s blast SMS with the website information and all participants from both focus groups had heard about the website from the training, but none had visited. Most importantly, among focal point participants and even more strongly among public participants, the idea of a website with the incidents mapped had very low resonance. The combination of very low levels of internet access, internet use, and internet literacy meant that almost everyone from the public and a majority of focus group participants rarely use the internet.

Overall, the website appears to not have been used by stakeholders, focal points, and members of the public. None of these groups showed any particular interest in looking at the website in the future. When this issue was raised with the SFCG project team, it was pointed out that there may be some other organizations, such as UnLock, who look at and reference the website. However, because none of these organizations were interviewed as part of the evaluation, it was not possible to verify whether they were actually looking at and using the website.

Recommendations:

- *If the purpose of the EWS is to prevent violence rather than just respond to it, the three categories used previously are likely not the most useful. SFCG and CAPP should consider choosing incident categories that are more useful with an early response function and be sure that trained focal points know the difference. More broadly, the*

project should do more to distinguish between preventive and responsive objectives of the EWS so that the project decision making can be better tailored.

- When the EWS project continues, program managers need to make a strategic decision about whether or not to continue using the Crowdmap website. Continuing the website may not be a strategic use of staff time and budget, considering its current low rates of use, the lack of interest in the website among focal points, members of the public, and stakeholders, and limited internet/computer access (for many focal points and members of the public).
- If the website will be continued, managers should carefully and more narrowly define the website's primary user and what that user will seek to gain from the website. This way, the website can be more carefully tailored to the needs of that group.
 - If users are defined as a broader public audience, SFCG/CAPP should think through issues of limited access to and familiarity with computers and using the internet.
 - If users are defined as focal points, there is a tradeoff to consider in training them to report via the website with training them on other, likely more crucial topics, such as community outreach and incident categorization. Sometimes simple systems work better and are easier to understand.
 - If users are defined as stakeholders, it may be difficult to convince them to take time to regularly check the website given their active schedules. It would also create a fourth interface for them to engage, given that they already receive SMS, emails, and attend bimonthly meetings, and that SFCG has identified the need to strengthen stakeholder engagement in the latter two. Again, SFCG should consider the net value of having stakeholders use the website with the time and energy it takes to get them more engaged in bimonthly meetings and regular conflict analysis.
 - If users are defined as an audience that is more external to the project participants, SFCG should consider whether or not targeting such actors works to support the overall project goal and objectives.
- Regardless of how users are defined, if the website is continued it will need a much more targeted marketing campaign so that people not only know that the website exists but so that they understand the added value of visiting the site and visit it more regularly.
- Users of the Crowdmap platform should learn how to use the website management/analytics tools to more effectively monitor usage data in order to improve site visibility and utility.

Frontline SMS

Regular problems with the Frontline SMS system have impeded the successful functioning of the EWS. For the last two months of the project, CAPP was unable to successfully send a blast SMS message. Even though the Frontline SMS system shows the message as “sent”, test messages sent by CAPP to a phones of staff members and friends were not received. CAPP has also had to regularly move data from the Frontline SMS system into Microsoft Excel in order to have more storage space, though unfortunately this has resulted in a loss of some data on individual messages such as the names of the sender or location where the message was sent from. For the same reason, SFCG/CAPP had to move all the sent blast messages from the Frontline SMS system, but did not save these messages. As a result, it

was not possible to determine in the evaluation how many messages were sent, who they were sent to, and when they were sent.

Recommendation:

- SFCG/CAPP should keep separate records of all information sent through the Frontline SMS system in order to enable analysis when the Frontline SMS system runs out of storage space or encounters errors.

Other Early Warning Systems

There are at least two other large scale EWSs run by NGOs or civil society organizations in the Jos region. One is funded run by the CMM-RC in conjunction with other organizations such as IMC. The second is run by JDPC in conjunction with Operation Rainbow. Though neither of these two systems are yet fully operational, they speak to the growing trend of using SMS EWS to predict and respond to conflict. There have also been various attempts by security agencies to set up an independent security hotline.

The majority of bimonthly meeting participants had heard of at least one other NGO-run EWS besides SFCG/CAPP. In general they did not express wariness about the potential for overlap or competition among multiple systems but believed that the organizing bodies should work to integrate their efforts to avoid duplication. Importantly, however, one bimonthly meeting participant who works with a wide range of NGO groups and many communities around Jos said that there are community members who are already experience some degree of EWS fatigue.

Recommendation:

- SFCG will need to work to be both collaborative and competitive when the market of other EWSs in Jos continues to grow. To do this will require meaningfully forming a tighter bond with security so that they come to increasingly trust and rely on information from SFCG/CAPP. SFCG will also need to conduct stronger, clearer messaging to make sure that the public is not easily confused between SMS systems and understands how to engage with SFCG/CAPP. Finally, SFCG should work closely with other EWS coordinators to avoid overlap, public fatigue, and to maximize the combination of resources.