



**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

November 2013

The importance of field research for civil society organizations' peacebuilding strategies

Gaudence Nyirabikali

Field research is an important component of SIPRI's Mali Civil Society and Peacebuilding Project. This paper describes the purpose of the field research and the questions that will guide this research in Mali in December 2013.

The main purpose of the field research component of the Mali Civil Society and Peacebuilding Project is to provide an evidence-based foundation for the development of a strategic vision on how civil society in Mali can contribute to peace, security and development.

Fostering sustainable peace requires the tackling of root causes of conflicts and the promotion of equitable socio-political structures that inclusively respond to the needs of all members of a specific society. In order to address the root causes of a conflict, one has to fully understand them. A shared understanding of the social order in which conflict occurs and the elaboration of a strategy for specific initiatives to address prevailing needs constitute a key pillar in any peacebuilding process.

A peacebuilding agenda also involves complementarity among three categories of actors and stakeholders: (a) state actors representing public institutions at all levels in the conflict setting; (b) domestic non-state actors broadly identified as civil society; and (c) external stakeholders providing support to the respective internal stakeholders.



Civil society therefore has a natural and strategic role to play in the building of sustainable peace as it provides a bridge between the state and society, but also as an active actor in the elaboration of strategies and their implementation.

Although civil society enjoys a natural closeness and direct interactions with citizens and communities, these relationships need to be maintained. The strength and credibility of civil society depends on its constituency or social base and the accuracy with which it represents the views of this constituency. Civil society organizations (CSOs) need to maintain their interactions with the communities they are associated with in order to genuinely represent the views of their social base.

Field research conducted by CSOs therefore presents an advantage for both the CSOs themselves and for the communities they work with, as it provides an opportunity for in-depth communication and updates on the prevailing issues in the community. These updates are necessary as they help CSOs to revise their own planning of activities but also an evidence-based foundation for engaging other partners, such as the state and external stakeholders.

This field research presents an opportunity to obtain specific information about the actual manifestation of the crisis in Mali and about other related social and political issues as they unfold in the community, which can provide a basis for subsequent project-related activities and further studies.

The information resulting from the field research will enable CSOs to convey their own understanding of the realities on the ground to their internal and external partners, including information on the real nature of issues prevailing in the society, how they are perceived at the grassroots level and what expectations exist in terms of security and development. For external actors, including the development cooperation community, this information—conveyed by civil society—can provide an important alternative to impressions of crisis provided by the media.



In addition to mapping the root causes of conflicts as they are perceived and endured by grassroots and communities at the local level, the field research presents an opportunity for civil society to reflect on its own relationships with these groups and the awareness, at the community level, of CSOs' operations.

As part of the training workshop for field researchers assigned to conduct field research in Mali, a research guide has been developed by the SIPRI project team to help the field researchers gather information about the prevailing understanding, at the community level, of the current conflict, including who the conflicting parties are and what they are fighting for. This research guide also includes questions that will help to assess if there are any other ongoing conflicts within and among communities.

Furthermore, a discussion guided by these questions will help collect views about possible solutions to existing conflicts, as well as about the existing needs in terms of social and economic development. The research guide is conceived as a guide to the discussion, with room for additional questions that might be raised by respective groups and individual interviewees.

Read more on the project website:

<http://www.sipri.org/research/security/Mali>