

FBA Brief 2020

Mitigating Election Violence through Dialogue and Mediation in West Africa



Violence around elections is a phenomenon that occurs in many parts of the world, even in relatively stable democracies. In West Africa, the regional organisation ECOWAS is addressing this through technical assistance, election observation and peace mediation amongst others. To strengthen resilience against electoral violence, ECOWAS and the Folke Bernadotte Academy have trained local peace actors on peaceful dispute resolution in several member states.

A recent assessment study shows that strengthening the competence in dialogue and mediation among civil society, traditional and religious authorities, media and election officials, improves the conditions for the conduct of peaceful elections.

Introduction

This brief discusses the role that dialogue and mediation training can play in addressing electoral violence, a serious problem to human life and democracy in many countries. Over fifty percent of the African states have experienced electoral violence since the 1990s.

The background is a series of multi-stakeholder workshops organised by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in partnership with the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA).

The basis is the findings from a field assessment study of five workshops organised by ECOWAS Dialogue and Facilitation Division (of which four in collaboration with the FBA) in Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Nigeria.

The brief is structured around three questions: (1) why the problem of electoral violence was addressed in this way; (2) actual outcomes and (3) key lessons learned. The hope is to inspire or contribute to the work of other practitioners of conflict resolution.

Why this approach?

In most countries, the electoral management body in charge of organising the elections may neither have the independence, analytical capacity nor the mandate to resolve election disputes, which may happen before, during or after election day. If instead capacity of local peace actors is built, their actions during the electoral period could help stop the inevitable political tensions to spiral into violence. This is the programme rationale in a nutshell.

Participants included NGOs, traditional and religious leaders, political parties and the media and state officials. They often deal with conflict in their daily work but often feel their skills are limited. Not surprisingly, supporting their professional development in dialogue and mediation was very well received.

The workshops highlighted key principles such as inclusivity and impartiality and skills such as active listening or mindful communication to apply as a facilitator of talks between conflict parties.

What was achieved?

The assessment study found that the participants acquired skills that were useful both at personal and

professional levels. For example, the training reinforced skills of a female participant which she deployed in the inter-party negotiations regarding the appointment of a new Prime Minister of Guinea-Bissau. A participant and local council leader in Nigeria reported that he had successfully advocated for peaceful elections and a religious leader in Mali had mediated a dispute between political parties at the local level.

The assessment study found that the training had boosted the confidence of female participants to engage in their communities where unhelpful stereotypes about women persist.

The workshops also created crucial space for networking amongst civil society mediators and government officials in charge of the elections. In several cases, WhatsApp groups were created and contact maintained both between ECOWAS and participants and between the Office of the ECOWAS Representative and headquarters long after the workshops.

What are some lessons learned?

- **Participants:** their selection should not only achieve gender and knowledge balance, but also ensure that those trained have both authority and ability to use their newly acquired skills to prevent and respond to electoral conflicts.
- **Context:** being sensitive to how dialogue and mediation practices and principles relate to context-specific traditional conflict resolution practices improved the relevance and success of the trainings.
- **Timing:** the trainings should not be held later than three months before election day, and ideally six to four months before, to allow sufficient time for participants to network and apply new skills.
- **Ownership:** giving the offices of the ECOWAS country representatives a central role in the preparation and execution of the workshops contributed to the success of the training workshops and provided opportunities for follow-up.
- **Impact:** The experience in Guinea-Bissau showed that bringing opposing groups together in a training may have the added advantage of creating space for peace dialogue around conflict issues amongst participants.
- **Gender:** Ensure gender balance because women

play key roles in community dialogue but are often underrepresented in trainings.

Conclusion

The assessment study pointed to several concrete examples of how participants put their new skills to use, both in and out of the election context. It highlighted the importance of selecting the right participants to maximise their chances to apply the new skills as mediators, facilitators and advisors with leverage over conflict parties. Importantly, the study underscored the value of strengthening collaboration between ECOWAS and local peace actors to achieve mutual objectives in member states.

A challenge to take forward is how to create synergies between local peace actors with dialogue and mediation skills, and the work and mandate of formal election officials. With strengthened coordination between relevant ECOWAS entities, as recommended in the assessment, trainings on dialogue and mediation can play a vital role building capacity amongst local peace actors to address electoral and other violent conflict.

Download the *Lessons Learned and Assessment Study* in [English](#), [French](#) or [Portuguese](#).



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