

West Africa

REGIONAL INTRODUCTION

1.0 Regional Context

1.1 Brief Overview

Positive steps have been made towards conflict resolution, peace and democracy in West Africa since 2005. The extremely violent civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone that lasted for more than a decade have come to an end. Many of the hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned and are gradually rebuilding their lives.

In Ivory Coast, a peace agreement between the Government and the rebel forces was signed in March 2007, aimed at ending the more than four year political impasse that has divided the country and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

In Mauritania, a new president has been democratically elected in 2007. After three earlier attempts at making slavery illegal, Mauritania has in 2007 enacted a law which goes further than ever before, making slave ownership punishable with a fine or prison sentence.

In Mali, considerable efforts have been made over the last decade to decentralize and to improve governance and democracy. An obstacle is local structures that are still lacking both resources and competence to take up their duties in a way that convinces the people who have elected them of about positive change.

Despite this progress, the region as a whole continues to be volatile. Many of the governments are weak with limited popular support and legitimacy.

New negotiations between Morocco and the liberation movement of Western Sahara, Polisario, brought a new hope for a resolve to the conflict that has been in stalemate for decades. However, as no result could be seen the frustration grows among the 165.000 Saharawi refugees in Algeria, which could force Polisario to resume to armed struggle.

The political situation in Guinea is particularly fragile with the strong possibility that either a popular uprising or a military coup will soon end the long reign of the deeply unpopular and ailing president Lansana Conte. Growing frustration with high living costs and non-payment of salaries to the lower ranks of the army have resulted in mutiny and riots. If the situation in Guinea breaks out in chaos, this may have negative impacts on the peace process in Ivory Coast as well as on the still fragile political situation both in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The security situation in the different countries in the region is interlinked, both through strategic alliances between the leaders, regional financial and commercial networks and through refugees and migration.

West Africa covers a variety of climate zones ranging from tropical rainforest in the south to savanna and desert in the northern part of the region. Natural resources are abundant in some parts of the region and extremely scarce in other parts. The effects of climate change in West Africa are not known, however, experts seem to agree that large parts of Africa may be confronted with new periods of drought and consequent food and water shortages. A major natural catastrophe will likely fuel social tension and increase migration, both to urban centers in the region and to Europe.

Poverty is a common factor all over the region. The countries in West Africa are the poorest of the least developed countries in Africa. The Human development report 2006 ranks Niger at the very bottom (177) below Sierra Leone (176) and Mali (175). The five countries with the lowest rank are all in West Africa, while Liberia is still not on the list.

1.2 Participation

All over West Africa, large groups of women and men are illiterate and unaware of their rights. In Mali, civil society is closely involved in the decentralization process which aims at involving the grassroots in the development of their own communities. However, low literacy rates hamper active participation. Empowerment of women and men to participate in the development of their communities is a major challenge for further development in the region.

In Northern Mali another bottleneck to participation of a wide range of civil society in the decentralization process have turned out to be the hierarchical structures of power represented by traditional chiefs who might not easily accept changes towards a modern society. This trend was confirmed in the 2004 communal elections, where traditional leaders increased their influence, while at the same time there was little change with regard to the number of elected female representatives.

Although some progress is being made when it comes to access to health services and education, it still seems that the region will keep lagging behind for the years to come. The majority of women and men are illiterate and unaware of their rights. In parts of the region tradition and colonial history represent obstacles to education, particularly (but not only) for women and girls. These are the same areas where religious conservatism seems to gain terrain, a factor that utterly contributes to negative attitudes towards education. The nomadic lifestyle also entrains specific challenges related to education. In Liberia, schools have not been functioning regularly for many years due to the civil war, and a whole generation has never had the opportunity to attend school.

1.3 Equity

Inequalities between women and men are substantial all over the region, and gender based violence is practiced in various forms and contexts.

There are important social disparities between different social groups and regions within each country. Lack of economic opportunities, especially for rural youth, is a major problem, and might lead to recruitment into criminal networks, paramilitary groups and religious extremism.

Feudal traditions and different forms of patron-client relations exist in various forms all over the region and lead to exclusion of certain groups and limit their access to productive resources.

Unequal access to natural resources and land is contributing to serious disputes between different groups and clans. Conflicts between cultivators and livestock keepers are recurrent and can be very violent.

1.4 Protection

Extreme poverty implies vulnerability and insecurity implies vulnerability and insecurity. Most of the population relies on subsistence farming or animal husbandry. The arid climate and unpredictable rainfall in the Sahel, together with limited possibilities to organize, control and exploit existing water sources is one of the most fundamental problems for the population in the region.

Statistical information, if and when available, on HIV and AIDS shows an increasing number of hiv positive in most of the countries. Bad socio-economic conditions seem to be among the main factors contributing to the spread of the virus in West Africa. Under such conditions, women are often exploited and have an inferior status to that of men. In many communities women have very little, if any, control of their sexual lives and the ways to prevent HIV. High unemployment and the numerous refugee movements throughout the region promote family disruption. Women living under precarious socio-economic conditions, be it in refugee camps or in the slum areas of the bigger cities, are often forced to sell sex to earn precious money for food and basic needs, and to take care of their children. HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases often go untreated and thus spread more easily. Poor education and low literacy levels keep people ignorant of the ways and means to avoid diseases like HIV.

Female genital mutilation and early marriage represent serious human rights problems in addition to putting young girls' lives and health at risk. These practices also represent major obstacles for girls' education and empowerment of women.

1.5 Civil Society

The landscape of civil society varies quite a lot in the region, but a general trend is that a lot of local groups and organizations have significant need for increased competence and capacity building efforts at all levels. It is particularly important and challenging to empower disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in order to influence and participate in local, as well as national decision-making processes, and to hold duty bearers accountable for their acts.

2.0 NCA's Added Value

At present

NCA has been working continuously in Northern Mali since 1984. Since then, the type of intervention in Mali has varied considerably according to the needs and the context. After a period with emergency relief, the program was readjusted to meet long term development needs in the same area, then reconciliation and conflict resolution in the 1990s. From 1999 NCA partly changed its mode of cooperation from being operational to supporting local municipalities and civil society organizations, in line with the decentralization process launched by the Malian Government. Despite these changes, NCA has kept its focus on the Northern part of the country. Mobilization of women and men in concrete activities on local community level has been another constant factor in NCA's approach. However, since 2004, NCA has worked with developing contacts and increased cooperation with government structures and civil society also on county (cercle), province (region) and national level.

NCA's main partner in Mauritania, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has a similar history in that country, starting with emergency relief after the drought in 1973-74, reorienting the intervention towards long term development cooperation. Since around 2000, LWF has expanded their work traditionally focused on food security and management of natural resources into the thematic of human rights, good governance, HIV and AIDS and gender based violence.

Both NCA in Mali and LWF in Mauritania have managed to establish a fruitful cooperation with Muslim leaders.

For the Western Sahara refugees, NCA has since 1999 had fruitful cooperation with the Health Ministry of the exile government who runs the refugee camps in Algeria. Capacity

building of the ministry and staff at the hospitals continues to be one of the major goals for NCA

In Liberia, NCA's main added value lies in the church network. We believe that the churches as well Islamic communities and congregations and religious leaders have an important role to play in the development of the country in the years to come. NCA is currently working with church related organizations on gender issues: reproductive health, violence in the church and gender based violence.

NCA is member of the Action by Churches Together (ACT) alliance which is an important mechanism for emergency response and has facilitated emergency aid in various situations to several countries in region (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Mauritania and Niger).

Ambitions

For the rest of the five-year period, NCA has the following ambitions in West Africa:

- Further development and improvement of the Mali country program, which will continue to be NCA's main priority in the region.
- The Mauritania program is relatively small and it is not planned to increase it except for strategic interventions where NCA considers having special knowledge or advantages.
- We want to make more out of the potential synergies between NCA's activities in Mali and the programs of NCA's partners in Mauritania, especially within the fields of food security, water, human rights and in particular women's rights, good governance and HIV and AIDS.
- To support an initiate pilot initiatives on solar energy and rainwater harvesting. Recently, NCA has linked both a local partner organization in Mali and LWF in Mauritania up with the Barefoot College in India.
- Continue to use the rights based approach as a fundamental principle for NCA's interventions and support to partners.
- Continue the process of linking community based groups and activities to processes on county, province and national level in both in Mali and Mauritania.
- Explore possibilities of reestablishing NCA presence in Liberia in cooperation with European sister organizations and LWF.

3.0 Thematic Focus

The overall vision of NCA's program in Mali is to promote human dignity for disadvantaged groups, by supporting partners and programs that contribute to increased participation, equity and protection. For the rest of the current five years period, NCA will have the following thematic focus areas:

- Capacity building of partner organizations
- Civil society for accountable governance
- Women and men address gender based violence
- Food security, water and environment
- Education
- Local response to HIV and AIDS

In the revised plan for Mauritania, the thematic focus have been slightly altered to be as follows:

- Promotion of human rights and fight against gender based violence and HIV and AIDS
- Food security, water and environment

In addition, a small program on civil society for accountable governance is being developed.

In Liberia, NCA is currently developing a program on gender together with church based partners. The following components are being considered: gender and reproductive health, gender based violence and violence in the church.

4.0 Geographical Focus and Presence

Focus Countries	NCA Presence and Follow-up	Professional Capacity
Mali	Regional representation: Bamako Local branch office in Gao Local branch office in Kidal	National Advisor, Mali Thematic Advisors on Civil society for Accountable Governance, Gender Based Violence, Food Security, HIV and AIDS, Monitoring and Evaluation Administrative and Support Staff Regional Representative Regional Program Coordinator
Mauritania	Regional representation: Bamako	Regional Representative Regional Program Coordinator
Other Countries of Priority		
Liberia	Follow-up from Head Office	
Algeria/ Western Sahara	Follow-up from Head Office	

5.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation practices by NCA in Mali have improved significantly since the creation of the Gao office. This provided the possibility to work more closely with the partners and operational projects in Northern Mali. NCA has also started with the introduction of Result Oriented Management practices, based on the Logical Framework Approach.

Monitoring visits are the basis of the monitoring system. The major strategy applied is to accompany partners in their activities and to facilitate extensive internal reflection afterwards, aiming to improve performance and decision making processes and to contribute to better results. Mission reports of these visits will be produced and shared internally as well as with the partner concerned.

The partner assessment provides information on strengths and weaknesses of partner organisations. It is one of the tools NCA will exploit for analysing its partners' capacities in order to elaborate, together with the partner, a plan for capacity building, including clear performance and organisational objectives and indicators. Special sessions (training and workshops) for capacity building will be facilitated by NCA. Based on the initial plan for capacity building and the results, follow up activities will be planned.

Monitoring and evaluation are directly linked to decision making processes, knowledge management and organisational learning. Innovation and creativity are necessary to improve monitoring and evaluation practices. NCA has recruited a Monitoring and Evaluation officer who is coordinating all M&E activities and who is leading the development of new M&E systems.

In Mauritania, the main activities linked to monitoring and evaluation will be as follows:

- Regular monitoring visits from NCA Mali / NCA Norway
- Participate in evaluations of LWF (mid-term) and in the elaboration of the new country strategy (from 2009)
- Assist LWF in the development of improved use of results based monitoring (LWF has recently appointed a new person who will be in charge of their planning, monitoring and evaluation work)
- Include the partners in Mauritania in regional evaluations (FGM, HIV)
- Evaluations of specific projects and partners
- Periodical narrative and financial reporting

NCA will work on strengthening the capacity of local partners in planning, monitoring and evaluation.