

Executive summary

Understanding the links between cities and violence

This report expands on previous efforts by the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC/OECD) to document how violence varies geographically across North and West Africa. Using an innovative tool called the Spatial Conflict Dynamics indicator (SCDi), the report examines the links between cities and violence and maps the region's major conflict hotspots. In a context of rapid urbanisation and unprecedented levels of violence, this report is particularly timely. It addresses the contested question of whether conflict is more urban or rural in nature. It also fills a knowledge gap for policy makers: understanding where violence emerges, spreads and eventually dissipates is key to addressing its root causes. A qualitative analysis of ten cities and sub-regions complements the indicator, to better understand the origins of conflict at the local level.

Violence has moved to rural areas even as urban populations grow

Throughout history, cities have been synonymous with warfare, insurgency and politically motivated violence. In recent years, the importance of cities and urban areas as sites of conflict attracted increasing attention, given the global trend towards urbanisation. Africa is undergoing unprecedented urban growth driven by high fertility rates, the emergence of new cities and migration. The continent's population is expected to double by 2050, and two-thirds of

this growth will occur in cities. In North Africa, for the past 35 years, more people have lived in cities than in rural areas. In West Africa, the urban population will soon reach 50%.

This report shows that despite rapid urbanisation, violence remains predominantly rural, particularly in West Africa. More than 40% of all events and fatalities recorded since 2000 occurred in areas with fewer than 300 people per square kilometre. When violence does occur in urban areas, it is more frequent in small urban agglomerations of less than 100 000 inhabitants than in medium or large urban areas. Armed groups flourish in rural areas, especially if they can control the population and extract natural resources. In the Central Sahel, conflict is most likely to occur in rural areas, which are ideal places for belligerents to challenge state forces. Jihadist groups, in particular, have contributed to the ruralisation of conflicts in the Sahel.

Conflict hotspots transcend national boundaries

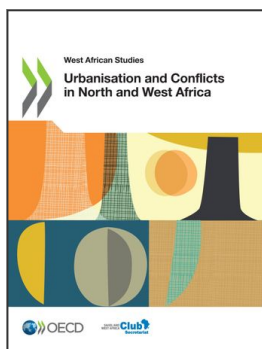
Political violence has reached an all-time high in West Africa and has considerably decreased in North Africa following the end of the Second Libyan Civil War. Just five countries account for 93% of the violent events and 94% of the fatalities recorded from January 2021 through June 2022: Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon and Niger, all located in West Africa. Furthermore, several clusters of violence have converged in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria, forming large conflict hotspots that transcend national boundaries. This situation is unique. Nowhere else in the world has a multistate region been

affected by so many different forms of violence, each with its own localised root causes, which converge over time.

Nigeria is the epicentre of violence in the region. From 2021-22, 40% of all violent events and more than half of the fatalities recorded in North and West Africa occurred in Nigeria alone. Central Sahel is the second major hotspot of violence, and Burkina Faso is now the second most affected country in the region after Nigeria, with violence engulfing most of its border regions. Beyond these specific hotspots, conflicts also continue to expand to previously unaffected areas. Two new hotspots that are likely to emerge in the coming years are i) between Burkina Faso and its southern neighbours, and ii) in north-western Nigeria.

Shifting patterns of violence

This study shines a light on the fact that patterns of violence are rapidly shifting across the region. Now that violence has diminished in the Gulf of Guinea and North Africa but has emerged in the still largely rural central Sahel, conflict has shifted from urban to predominantly rural areas. Patterns of violence remain largely dependent on states' ability to manage sovereignty within their own borders. They also depend on the actions of various groups that seek to challenge or somehow reconfigure states. Given the importance of cities to this process, urban areas will remain critical for place-based policies that attempt to address the origins of political violence, now and in the future.



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