Regional Security, Community Stabilization & Natural Resource Protection: Peace, Reconstruction & Elephants for Mali

January 2015

The Gourma region of Mali occupies a strategic position both within Mali and within the “arc of insecurity.” It also contains an internationally important and unique herd of desert elephants, the most northerly in Africa (fig1).

One of the devastating features of the recent conflict in Mali was the ease with which armed groups recruited the local young men to join their cause, and enabled them to occupy and control the north part of the country. Youth unemployment was a key contributing factor as the majority were recruited through financial rewards or economic opportunities, and the status and social recognition that money brings

Post conflict, security in some northern towns has improved, however securing and disarming rural areas and villages is proving a huge problem. The continuing insecurity allows former members of militant groups to hide and launch sporadic attacks; it hampers aid operations; refugees/displaced people are reluctant to return, and the risk of radicalization rises.

The Mali Elephant Project (MEP) has operated successfully within this region for 10 years, creating a model for regional security by integrating community empowerment, social upliftment, & natural resource protection.

Summary: Community stabilization through natural resource protection

Elephant/ivory poaching (and other natural resources crimes) are directly funding rebel and terrorist groups. The MEP approach to natural resource security - in this case, the protection by local communities of a unique herd of Africa elephants - is now a “war-tested” model of community engagement and stabilization that has protected the elephants (and secured other key natural resources) by providing employment for young men and empowerment for community elders. This project survived strongly despite complete collapse of national government presence, control of the area by armed groups (domestic and foreign), total lawlessness, and a proliferation of firearms.

MORE INFORMATION: Dr Susan Canney, Director of the Mali Elephant Project, susan.canney@zoo.ox.ac.uk
10 minute Tedx video telling the story of the project at http://bit.ly/KwOrxd
The MEP has developed a cost-effective model for securing the rural areas and protecting key natural resources. Local people know who has firearms, and who belongs to which groups. Uniting clans and ethnicities around a common cause that affects them all - reversing habitat degradation and restoring ecosystem resilience - provided the basis for responding to the conflict situation. Stabilizing and empowering local communities has also been pivotal role post-conflict reconciliation, disarmament, aid and reconstruction activities. Regional security is dependent on communities that are strong, resilient, engaged, and trustworthy.

In addition to the political and social benefits of the MEP, the natural-resource benefits of this model are well proven. Between January 2012 and December 2014, only 18 elephants were illegally killed and, most importantly, community networks identified the perpetrators. This compares to others, where populations have collapsed by 60-90% or more, with events such as 89 elephants being killed in one night.

The mobilization of communities around this one iconic species has also improved all other natural resource conditions by eliminating deforestation for urban charcoal industry; addressing diminished and degraded water supply through controlling uninhibited access to water by transhumant herders; improved grassland quality through firebreak creation; etc. Successful natural resource by local communities creates social and ecological resilience at a local level...the basis for regional security.

Project Background: The MEP, a “war-tested” model of community engagement

The Mali Elephant Project has been in existence since 2002 and has been working with national government and local communities to establish consensus systems of natural resource management that protect and restore the natural resources upon which the livelihoods of the local people depend, at the same time as protecting elephant habitat and the migration route, and restoring degraded ecosystems. These involve establishing a management committee composed of elders and clan leaders who create rules of resource use, while patrols of young men called “Brigades de Surveillance” (BDS) work with government foresters to enforce the rules, and are formally recognized by as assistant foresters, Mali’s version of rangers. These brigades also work in the protection of natural resources, the elephants and ecosystem restoration.

After the coup, the government fled and the area was overrun with armed groups and awash with firearms -- completely lawless. The project built on its work to establish community elephant protection. Elders communicated (including to the leaders of the armed groups) that killing elephants was stealing from the local people, and recruited additional Brigades de Surveillance of 520+ young men throughout the elephant range to watch out for elephant killings and resource abuse, and discover the identities of perpetrators. Jihadis were paying between $30 and $50/day and yet despite the fact that the MEP only paid in the equivalent of food, none of these young men joined the armed groups because being a Brigade-member was regarded as a more “noble” occupation.

The strengths of this approach are that the local people have a personal reason to do this and it is a part of their culture; it can be deployed immediately; and it is cheaper and more effective than military intervention.

The problem of security

Militants and armed radical groups have expanded and entrenched their positions throughout the Sahel and the Sahara over the last decade under the umbrella of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) causing some international commentators to refer to an “arc of instability” stretching across North Africa and the Sahel from Mauritania through Niger to Somalia, and providing a clear path to extend Al-Qaeda and allies’ activity into Africa.

Continued sporadic attacks are hampering aid operations and keeping refugees from returning home. However in the second half of 2014 community initiatives supported by the project sought to mobilize and unify local communities in fighting the insecurity through promoting community cohesion and who took arms. This has prompted the army to increase the deployment of soldiers to
more strategic locations and there are signs of improvement, such as the re-opening of markets, but this is fragile.

Project information networks have information that a well-organized poaching network has just started targeting the Gourma and the most severe elephant massacre to date took place when 12 elephants were killed between 27th December and the 20th January (leaving 2 orphans) by heavily camouflaged poachers on motorbikes. This poses a severe threat to the elephants.

**Security, reconciliation, aid & reconstruction are interdependent: local involvement is key**

Unless security improves, few of the refugees will return home and the risk of radicalization increases. A focus on local community reconciliation builds confidence in refugees wishing to return and helps the reintegration of young men thus reducing the risk of their radicalization. Reconciliation coupled with the implication of local communities in aid and reconstruction, will help the rebuilding of livelihoods, prevent dependency on relief efforts and promote peace, stability and longer term development.

In the past, international aid has been ineffective, enabling corruption, undermining the government’s will to develop adequate institutions and governance, and insulating the government from accountability to the population. These conditions were fundamental to the conflict in the north and political crisis in Bamako.

Channeling funds through local elites meant that these funds did not result in services for the local population. Decentralizing aid management would help tackle those problems. Shifting monitoring mechanisms over to the local community would hold recipients more accountable for funds and increase local ownership. The local people know whom has arms, whom belong to which organizations, who did what, who had what possessions before the conflict (crucial information for reconstruction)… and should therefore be included in post-conflict negotiations. People are ready to help disarm and chase down criminals. Fighting poverty and disenfranchisement in this way could help quell rebellion. But the window of opportunity is short.

**SPECIFIC NEEDS**

**Anti-poaching** — The MEP has managed to pre-empt the development of an ivory route up by working closely with the Malian government and local communities to put in place the elements of an anti-poaching response, but recent developments pose a potentially catastrophic threat to the elephants unless the remaining elements of the anti-poaching system are put in place to co-ordinate operations and enable the timely mobilisation of armed back-up over this vast area (the size of Switzerland). A radio-communications system is being deployed and a military camp established in the centre of the range, but the following are still required:

1) Funds to cover the costs of displacement for the military, plus a vehicle for the foresters, to enable rapid pursuit, particularly in the sandy north of the elephant range
2) The training of 50 newly recruited foresters to enable their deployment in the Gourma

**Resource protection and management**

1) Repair of the bridge/dam at Lake Gossi is essential to restore pasture and water resources for people and elephants. The breach of this dam has meant water has drained a 100km chain of lakes reducing the area available for use by herders from the river to the north, increasing pressure on resources and potential conflict between communities, and between people, livestock and elephants. AFRICOM have stepped in to help deliver this.

2) Repair of water infrastructure sabotaged by fleeing jihadists that enable local communities to relocate to an area with clean water, good pasture, and no conflict with elephants; leaving Lake Banzena for elephant use only. This requires 1-2 wells with manual pumps, and digging out of a silted seasonal lake.
References

