SYSTEM STRENGTHENING WITHIN CORDAID: PEACE, SECURITY, AND JUSTICE

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CONTEXT

In times of escalating political volatility, declining rule of law, and global power shifts, system strengthening in peace, security, and justice is more urgent than ever—particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). Cordaid prioritises support to national civil society and collective action that influences decision-making across international, regional, and national levels, helping mitigate risks in restrictive environments.

Operating in the context of a global polycrisis—marked by armed conflict, climate stress, and humanitarian emergencies—Cordaid emphasises locally led governance and resilient systems to strengthen civil society actors and foster political stability.

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating resource scarcity, displacement, and social and economic tensions. Particularly in fragile and conflict-affected countries, this requires climate-adaptive approaches. Meanwhile, digitalisation brings both transformative potential and significant risks, including surveillance, exclusion, and cyber insecurity. Cordaid's integrated approach to system strengthening responds to this complex landscape, driving inclusive and adaptive solutions aligned with global development goals.

WHAT DOES SYSTEM STRENGHTENING MEAN IN PEACE, SECURITY, AND JUSTICE?

System strengthening means improving and enhancing the entire network of people, institutions, and resources involved in maintaining peace and delivering justice. This approach focuses on making security and justice systems responsive to the needs of people and communities. It involves ensuring that these systems work together effectively, are adaptable to changes, and can address root causes of conflict and injustice.

Key Pillars of System Strengthening

1. **Human security:** A shift from state-centric to people-focused security, addressing economic, social, and political challenges, including digital security and climate-related risks.
2. **People-centred justice (PCJ):** Strengthening both formal and informal justice mechanisms to improve accessibility, efficiency, and trust within communities.
3. **Inclusive peace:** Engaging all societal groups, especially women, youth, and marginalised communities, in peace processes to address root causes of conflict and promote long-term stability.
4. **Locally-led development:** Prioritising local actors in designing and implementing justice and security initiatives to ensure sustainability, relevance, and accountability.

SYSTEM STRENGTHENING IN PEACE, SECURITY AND JUSTICE

Effective security and justice systems are essential for stability, development, and community well-being. Cordaid advocates for a holistic, people-centred approach that integrates bottom-up solutions with government policies to enhance service delivery, promote justice, and ensure safety.

Traditional state-focused justice models often fail in FCAS due to political and institutional instability. A broader system-strengthening approach ensures that civil society plays a role in accountability, transparency, and social cohesion, making justice systems more resilient and inclusive.

Cordaid

This approach aligns with SDGs 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) and 5 (gender equality), and integrates key frameworks like Conflict Transformation, the Triple Nexus, and Climate-Peace-Security to create sustainable, community-driven solutions. By strengthening systems holistically, Cordaid fosters inclusive, accountable, and resilient security and justice structures that support lasting peace and development.

BUILDING BLOCKS

The following building blocks are key elements that collectively contribute to system strengthening. It is not a rigid checklist to be applied to every context – each component serves as a crucial part of a broader strategy, and their implementation may vary depending on specific circumstances and needs. These principles allow for a tailored approach that can effectively address unique challenges and leverage contextual strengths.

Evidence-based decision-making ensures that programmes and policies respond to the changing needs of communities by identifying trends, measuring impact, and adjusting strategies.

It builds trust based on **transparency,** accountability and **value-based** and **inclusive decision-making.**

Nexus programming integrates humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts to address crises holistically, prioritising local leadership and long-term resilience.

Conflict sensitivity helps prevent programmes from worsening tensions and supports peacebuilding by addressing root causes of conflict, enhancing resilience and sustaining development.

Applied to Security and Justice systems, it involves thorough conflict analysis and integrating conflict-sensitive practices, beyond just 'do no harm'.

A **multi-stakeholder approach** involves collaboration among formal and informal actors, including government bodies, security and justice providers, oversight institutions, civil society organisations, and communities, to design and implement programmes that are effective, accountable, and responsive to the needs of all segments of society.

Creating an **enabling environment** involves establishing legal, political, and economic frameworks that empower all actors, including civil society, community organisations, and security and justice providers, fostering cooperation.

The programmes provide legal protection, political engagement, and economic support activities which sustain and enhance justice delivery.

Women's leadership ensures that programmes are inclusive, locally owned, and gender-transformative by addressing intersectional needs and perspectives.

Empowering women enhances policy effectiveness and challenges power dynamics. Frameworks like the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda foster resilient communities capable of preventing and addressing conflicts.

Youth leadership brings fresh perspectives, and innovative solutions to security and justice challenges.

The Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda, supported by resolutions like UNSCR 2250, promotes active participation of youth in peacebuilding and governance, ensuring programmes are dynamic, relevant, and sustainable.

Cross-sector engagement involves coordinated planning to align policies and programmes, reducing redundancy and maximising impact.

This is achieved by sharing resources, expertise, and fostering dialogue, such as through task forces and public-private partnerships across health, economics and justice.

Community engagement ensures programmes are rooted in local contexts, reflecting the needs and perspectives of the community, building trust and ownership.

The outcomes and sustainability of programmes are maintained through inclusive participation and local capacity-building, thanks to transparent communication, addressing specific issues, and integrating community feedback into decision-making.

Through tablets, Burundians living in remote communities can now access crucial legal information. (Image credits: Auxfin)

SECURITY AND JUSTICE SYSTEM STRENGTHENING TRAJECTORIES

These examples illustrate how system strengthening is applied to peace, security, and justice programming and results in robust, adaptive systems that address complex challenges.

Community engagement and ownership: Engaging communities ensures programmes are locally relevant and effective, fostering accountability and sustainability. Community-led initiatives in conflict areas have successfully maintained peace and justice.

Capacity sharing: Strengthening both formal institutions (police, courts) and informal justice providers (community leaders) ensures all actors have the necessary skills and resources. Training programs improve interactions and trust with the public.

Digital transformation: Leveraging digital tools supports evidence-based decision-making, enhances access to justice, and improves resource management. Digital case management systems streamline processes and increase accountability.

Gender and youth inclusion: Incorporating gender and youth perspectives promotes equity and harnesses innovation. Programmes supporting women and youth in leadership roles improve conflict resolution and foster inclusive communities.

Policy and legal reforms: Reforming policies and legal frameworks eliminates discriminatory practices and enhances protection for vulnerable groups. Legal reforms can improve access to justice and system effectiveness.

Climate justice: Addressing climate change's impact on justice ensures vulnerable communities are fairly treated and involved in climate policies. Integrating climate resilience strategies helps manage resource conflicts and promotes long-term stability.

ESPER: PATHWAYS TO PEACE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The ESPER programme (Ensemble pour la Sécurité et la Paix à l'Est de la RDC) is a collaborative programme by Cordaid and VNG *International* aimed at improving local justice and security systems in conflict-affected areas of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It involves communities directly in planning and decision-making, so that local needs are heard and addressed, with the goal of strengthening the social contract and restoring state authority.

Community-led assessments and action plans guide decisions, while mobile courts and local justice groups make legal help more accessible. The programme also uses a results-based financing model (RBF), which links funding to measurable outcomes, incentivising quality service delivery.

ESPER supports local and national authorities to collaborate, and embeds gender inclusion, youth participation, and anti-corruption efforts into its design. By connecting civil society, government, and local leaders, it builds stronger, more trusted systems that support peace and justice.
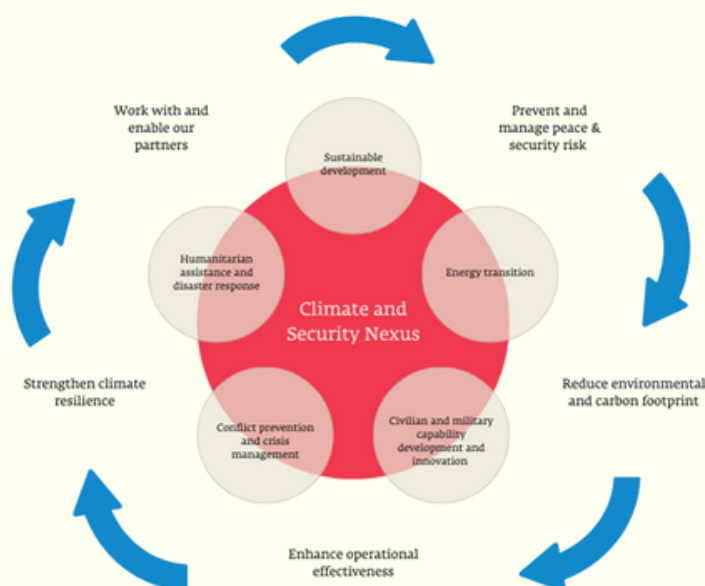

A delegation of Congolese experts at an event for the ESPER programme in The Hague on 6th February 2025. (Image credits: Mickael Franci / Cordaid)

THE CLIMATE-SECURITY NEXUS

The Climate-Security Nexus highlights how climate change impacts natural resource availability, contributing to conflicts over land and water. It pushes people into cities, altering social dynamics and exacerbating tensions. Climate-induced displacement adds to regional fragility. Addressing these issues requires coordinated international efforts and robust climate justice policies that prioritise the needs of those most affected.

Cordaid strives to include climate justice in all aspects of its Security & Justice programming, recognising it as a non-negotiable component of sustainable peace and development.

Image: The Climate-Security Nexus (adapted from EEAS, 2023)

LEGAL CLINICS EMPOWER WOMEN TO CHALLENGE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BURUNDI

In Burundi, gender-based violence (GBV) affects 40% of women aged 15–49, reflecting entrenched gender inequalities such as domestic violence, forced early marriages, and economic abuse. Enforcement of legal frameworks remains weak, and many women lack awareness of their rights.

Barriers to justice include stigma, economic constraints (e.g. land rights), and limited access to legal services. Cordaid's legal support programme addresses these gaps by establishing legal clinics and mobile caravans that provide direct assistance to survivors of GBV. The programme focuses on legal awareness, conflict resolution, and representation in court for marginalised women. It was implemented in collaboration with our local partners *Association des Femmes Juristes du Burundi (AFJB)*, *Barreau de Bujumbura*, *Barreau de Gitega*, and *Association Ntabariza*.

Psychologist Laurette Kaneza with her clients in the waiting room of the legal clinic in Ruyigi. (Image credits: Mickael Franci / Cordaid)

Key actions and outcomes of the programme included mobile legal clinics, awareness campaigns on legal rights and justice processes in remote villages, facilitation of conflict resolution outside of court where possible. Over two years, legal support reached 850 individuals, predominantly women, strengthening the rule of law and enabling survivors to pursue justice.

The programme's legal clinics exemplify how localised legal support can address GBV, empower survivors, and enhance the broader justice system. By improving access to justice and challenging harmful social norms, the initiative demonstrates a scalable model for integrating gender equity into system strengthening efforts in security and justice.

YOUTH-DRIVEN SYSTEM STRENGTHENING FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE IN MALI

Through the Accountable Local Governance Programme (PGLR+), Cordaid, together with its partners *SNV*, *Oxfam Novib* and *Fondation V4T*, is driving systemic change in Mali's conflict-affected regions by empowering youth to lead efforts in peacebuilding, justice, and inclusive governance. Implemented across 240 municipalities thanks to our local partners *ALPHALOG*, *AED*, *AMSS* and *OMAES*, the programme strengthens civil society, enhances local government accountability, and fosters trust between citizens and institutions. In areas like Ségou and Tombouctou, young people have taken the lead in civic education, improving community engagement on issues such as tax compliance and prenatal care, and promoting social cohesion through local events and dialogue. These initiatives, supported by Cordaid's focus on capacity building and advocacy, show how engaging youth as key actors can reinforce local governance systems and contribute to a more peaceful and just society.

Mohamed Mahmoud Elhadj, participant in Cordaid's PGLR+ programme in Timbuktu, Mali. (Image credits: Mickael Franci / Cordaid)

"Thanks to the ESPER programme, local security issues are better understood at the grassroots level. Responsibility for solutions is more widely shared, and because communities —especially women and marginalised groups—are actively involved, responses are more sustainable and better tailored to people's specific needs."

Claudine Tsongo Mbalamya, Coordinator Dynamique des Femmes Juristes

ABOUT CORDAID

Cordaid works to end poverty and exclusion. We do this in the world's most fragile and conflict-affected areas as well as in the Netherlands. We engage communities to rebuild trust and resilience and increase people's self-reliance.

Our professionals provide humanitarian assistance and create opportunities to improve security, health care and education and stimulate inclusive economic growth. We are supported by nearly 300,000 private donors in the Netherlands and by a worldwide partner network. Cordaid is a founding member of Caritas Internationalis and CIDSE.

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