Evaluation summary
Security actions for everyone (SAFE) project, Liberia –
Internal evaluation
Feb 2018

Evaluation themes

1. Security and justice

Introduction

This summary outlines the evaluation of the Security actions for everyone (SAFE) project. The project was implemented from January 2016 to December 2017 in Liberia and the evaluation was conducted in February 2018. The project aimed to enhance Liberians’ access to quality and responsive security services through the promotion of inclusive participation of people in defending their rights, and support for the strengthening of accountable and transparent police-citizen relationships.

The evaluation found that the project had achieved several notable successes and unintended consequences that have been of advantage to the project beneficiaries. As a result of the project activities, particularly the community dialogue group element of the work, the evaluation concluded that the security situation in many of the areas targeted has been dramatically improved.

Background to the project

In the aftermath of the Ebola crisis, communities’ trust in the Liberian police was rated by an International Alert survey to be particularly low. The SAFE project was developed to respond to gaps in communication between the Liberian National Police (LNP) and communities. It targeted 35 communities in Montserrado, Bong, Lofa and Nimba counties. These counties were identified as target locations because of their importance to the country’s security. All four counties were major hubs of violence during the civil conflict and have experienced security threats and incidents with the LNP in recent years.

The overall objective of the project was to enhance Liberians’ access to quality and responsive security services through the promotion of inclusive participation of people in defending their rights (specific objective 1) and support for the strengthening of accountable and transparent police-citizen relationships (specific objective 2).

Project activities included community group discussions and dialogue meetings with police officers, local station visits, school presentations, radio programmes, training for police on conflict sensitivity, code of conduct and ethics, and annual advocacy meetings with police leadership. These activities were developed around three Expected Results (ER): Citizens
increase awareness about their rights and obligations and those of security and justice institutions including complaints mechanisms (ER1); Citizens analyse, monitor, report and address the security and justice situation in their communities (ER2); and civil society organisations (CSOs) promote greater accountability and transparency in the security and justice sector (ER3).

Methodology

This evaluation took the form of a qualitative assessment based on a series of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The evaluators began by conducting a desk review of all available project documents (project proposal, baseline report, mid-term evaluation etc.) and took part in some informal discussions with relevant staff members around the national context and project structure. In total, this evaluation recorded 14 KIIs, including four police officials, and six FGDs with communities across 3 of the 4 counties where the project took place.

Due to time constraints, the evaluators met a small fraction of beneficiaries, primarily urban and peri-urban communities and did not collect data from Lofa County. Although the feedback from the FGDs was consistent and suggests minimal variance, it does not capture the contextual idiosyncrasies of rural life.

Summary of findings

- The project was successful at increasing awareness of the rights and obligations of citizens and police. Understanding the responsibilities and restrictions of police helped to change participants’ perceptions and increased understanding and accountability, leading to more open communication channels and strengthened cooperation.
- Dialogue groups played an important role in the communities’ ability to address issues, conflicts and security concerns. One community member said that dialogue groups were like a court: existing primarily to discuss and resolve problems. The groups benefitted from their inclusive nature, comprising of a broad representation of the local community, including elders, youth leaders, and women’s representatives. The participation of the community leader and his empowerment as an effective mediator of disputes played a significant role in the communities’ ability to solve conflicts.
- Unintended consequences of the project include greater intra-community bonds, a decrease in local criminal activity and a decrease in ‘mob justice’.
- The project enhanced access to quality, responsive police services for all the 35 target communities. However, structural issues related to lack of funding for security services continue to limit both the quality and responsiveness of the police. It is also worth noting that because this project was focused mostly on working with the police, it did not have as much impact on other security services as intended.
- Participants believed that many of the project outcomes, for example reduced crime rates and improved unity within target communities, would continue. Improved relations with police were perceived as long term and there appears a sincere desire on behalf of the police to remain involved in the meetings should they continue, though limited resources may restrict this.
Overall, the project achieved its objectives. However, there was a general sense that the impact would have been much greater if the project had covered more communities and involved more police officers for a longer period of time, and had been more flexible in terms of adding strategic or learning activities, such as exchange visits between community mobilisers and facilitators. The clear line of causation between the community dialogue groups and the results recorded suggests that other activities could be re-examined to cut costs or redesigned to better contribute to objectives.

Recommendations

- Given the many successes of this project, both intended and unintended, it would help if International Alert could ensure that the learning from this project is internalised and shared across the organisation to provide insight into the design of future programming around security sector issues. Linked to this, it would also be useful to condense this learning into a short document that can be shared with partner organisations in Liberia for their own fundraising and advocacy purposes after International Alert’s departure.

- One of the points raised with regard to International Alert’s management of this project referenced the high turnover of staff, and potential disruptions this may have caused to implementation. In practice, it seems that these disruptions were minimal and well managed due to the relatively smooth-running nature of the project and the capacity of partner organisations to minimise the risk and initiate contingency plans. With regards to an exit strategy and Alert’s departure before the end of the project, this evaluation found that the moves were largely well handled, and the project did not suffer too much as a result. However, it is recommended that in any similar situation in the future, it might serve the interests of both the project and the accompaniment of partners to create closer links between partner organisations and donors prior to exit.

- It is recommended that donor organisations take the successes of this project into consideration when formulating strategy for future engagement with, and support of, the Liberian security services. Community dialogue groups are a demonstrable vehicle for creating positive change. The specific reductions recorded in crime and violence are valuable, and potentially replicable lessons.

- Where possible, donors should use what influence they have with the Liberian government to advocate for a reliable increase in resources for the LNP and structural change that will prioritise the development of this police force. With the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) having withdrawn from Liberia, this is especially important.