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# Exploring the Impact of Conflict on Communities in the northern Mozambique – southern Tanzania Borderlands Region

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**XCEPT**  
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
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# Exploring the Impact of Conflict on Communities in the northern Mozambique – southern Tanzania Borderlands Region

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## Executive Summary

Since October 2017, Cabo Delgado in Mozambique has been the focal point of a violent insurgency, resulting in widespread human rights abuses, significant infrastructure damage, and over 5,700 fatalities, including nearly 2,400 civilians. This conflict has led to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, predominantly women and children, who face increased risks of exploitation. The region, one of the poorest in Mozambique, has seen its community resilience severely compromised, with longstanding cross-border economic, familial, and cultural ties with southern Tanzania being adversely affected.

This briefing outlines the impact of the conflict on community resilience in the northern Mozambique-southern Tanzania borderlands, particularly regarding disruptions to trade, social connectedness, and access to essential services.

The report underscores the need for policies that support cross-border trade, maintain social cohesion, and prioritise the rebuilding of healthcare and education systems as crucial strategies in countering violent extremism. Empowering communities through these measures will reduce their vulnerability to radicalisation and strengthen regional security. Conversely, security policies which disrupt cross-border trade and negatively impact upon the wellbeing of local communities in the name of counterterrorism will ultimately prove counterproductive.

## Recommendations

- Support cross-border trade by investing in road and port infrastructure, keeping border crossings open and safe for traders, and ensuring customs processes are streamlined and free from extortion.
- Strengthen anti-corruption efforts and human rights practises within the Police of the Republic of Mozambique (PRM) and Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) deployed to the region.
- Empower communities to become contributors to border security and leverage community intelligence and situational knowledge through community-orientated policing strategies.
- Ensure border crossings remain open and safe for citizens and encourage cross-border cultural events that promote social cohesion.
- Support and leverage cross-border peacebuilding committees and social forums to enhance cooperation, understanding, and awareness of regional terrorism risks.
- Prioritise the rebuilding of healthcare and education facilities in Cabo Delgado as critical pillars of a long-term strategy to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Cover photo: Alfredo Zuniga / AFP



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### COVER IMAGE:

Displaced people from the province of Cabo Delgado gather to receive humanitarian aid from the World Food Program (WFP) at the 21 de Abril Tribune School in the town of Namapa, Erati district of Nampula, Mozambique in February 2024.

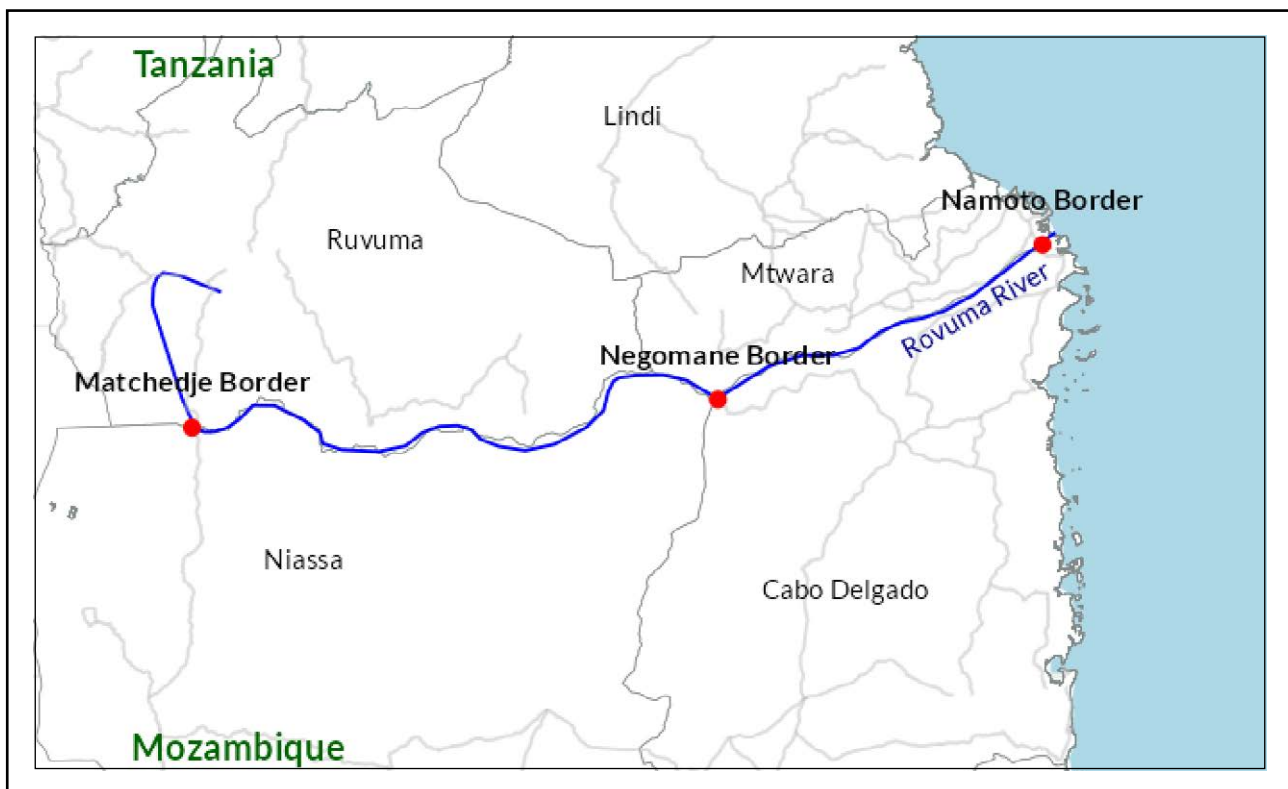
## Introduction

Since October 2017, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique has been the epicentre of a violent insurgency which has had profoundly negative impacts on communities in the region. The conflict has resulted in an estimated 5,771 reported fatalities – 2,398 of those civilian – and has been marked by widespread human rights abuses.<sup>1</sup>

The fighting has led to extensive damage to critical infrastructure, including schools, health facilities, police stations, and water and electricity systems.<sup>2</sup> Several hundred thousand people have been internally displaced, the majority of which are women and children who face a heightened risk of sexual exploitation and other abuses.<sup>3</sup>

Cabo Delgado is among the poorest provinces in Mozambique, with a large portion of households experiencing multidimensional poverty and low resilience capacity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, communities in northern Mozambique share historic economic, familial, and cultural bonds with communities in southern Tanzania which are critical to their wellbeing. These bonds have been negatively impacted by conflict and insecurity.

This policy briefing summarises findings from a research project which explored the impacts of conflict and conflict responses on community resilience in the northern Mozambique – southern Tanzania borderland regions.<sup>5</sup> Interviews with conflict-affected communities revealed a



**FIGURE 1:** Map of the southern Tanzania – northern Mozambique Borderlands Region with border-crossing points highlighted along the Rovuma River.

1 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2024). Cabo Ligado Update: 22 July – 04 August 2024; Amnesty International. (2021). “What I saw was death”: War crimes in Mozambique’s forgotten cape.  
 2 ACAPS. (2024). Mozambique: Impact of Five Years of Conflict on Mozambique.[Accessed 15.01.2024] ; UN Development Programme. (UNDP). (2022). Infrastructure Damage Assessment Cabo Delgado-Mozambique August 2022.  
 3 UNHCR.(2021).UNHCR appeals for Mozambicans fleeing violence to be given access to asylum in Tanzania. 18 May ; UN Human Rights Commission (UNHCR). (2024) 1 million people have fled five years of northern Mozambican violence.  
 4 Resiliency refers to the ability of individuals, systems, and organizations to adapt and overcome challenges and survive in the face of adversity or disaster. Resiliency capacity factors include both physical factors like access to healthcare, infrastructure, and resources, as well as cultural factors such as strong social bonds, cultural cohesion, and adaptive capacities that promote a sense of empowerment and sustainability. See: Nguyen, H.L., Akekar, R. (2020). “Modelling, Measuring, and Visualising Community Resilience: A Systematic Review” Sustainability 12, no. 19: 7896. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197896>; Saraiva, R., Erfe, A. (2023). Preventing violent extremism with resilience, adaptive peacebuilding, and community-embedded approaches. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability. Vol 61, April 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2023.101271>; UN Sustainable Development Group. (2021). UN Common Guidance on Helping Build Resilient Societies.  
 5 This study used a qualitative research methodology comprising both desktop research and fieldwork which took place in Cabo Delgado over the course of 2023 and early 2024. Over 60 interviews took place across Mueda, Nangade, and Palma districts, as well as two focus group discussions with youth participants in Palma, and two more in Mocimboa da Praia. While this does not constitute a representative sample size across these districts, the authors feels it provides some insights which could be useful for deeper study.

range of negative effects insecurity has had on cross-border trade and livelihood creation, access to critical services, and cultural and social life. Based on these findings, it provides a series of recommendations to avoid further undermining community resiliency in the region and to leverage local-community knowledge in strengthening security.

### Characteristics of the Tanzania-Mozambique Border

The Tanzania-Mozambique border is defined by the Rovuma River, stretching 860 kilometres from Lake Malawi in the west to the Indian Ocean in the east. Mtwara province lies along the coast on the Tanzanian side, while Rovuma province is near Lake Malawi. On the Mozambican side, the border is adjacent to the provinces of Cabo Delgado and Niassa. The Matchedje Border Post is located between Niassa and Rovuma provinces to the west. Connecting Cabo Delgado and Mtwara to the north is the Kilambo/Namoto Ferry Border Crossing at the mouth of the Rovuma River. The Negomano/Mtambaswala (Unity Bridge) Border Post Crossing is situated 200 kilometres to

the west. In addition to these border crossing posts, there are additional posts in Namatil, Ngapa, Nangade-Sede, Palma, and the town of Mocimboa da Praia.

There are several unofficial crossing points along the Rovuma River, easily crossed using small canoes and rafts. During the dry season, which typically occurs from June to late September, much of the river can be crossed on foot. Large portions of the land surrounding the river are sparsely populated and covered in dense forests. As a result, monitoring and policing this porous border is challenging.

Another common method of travel and transportation between northern Mozambique and southern Tanzania is the use of dhows along sea routes. These vessels can carry several tons of goods and can evade customs controls. According to interviews with residents, maritime transport is a significant investment for entrepreneurs in the region. Sea transport is often preferred for trading seafood and timber. Interviews also revealed that dhows are used to land heroin on the Mozambican coast, particularly during the darkest nights of the new moon. These

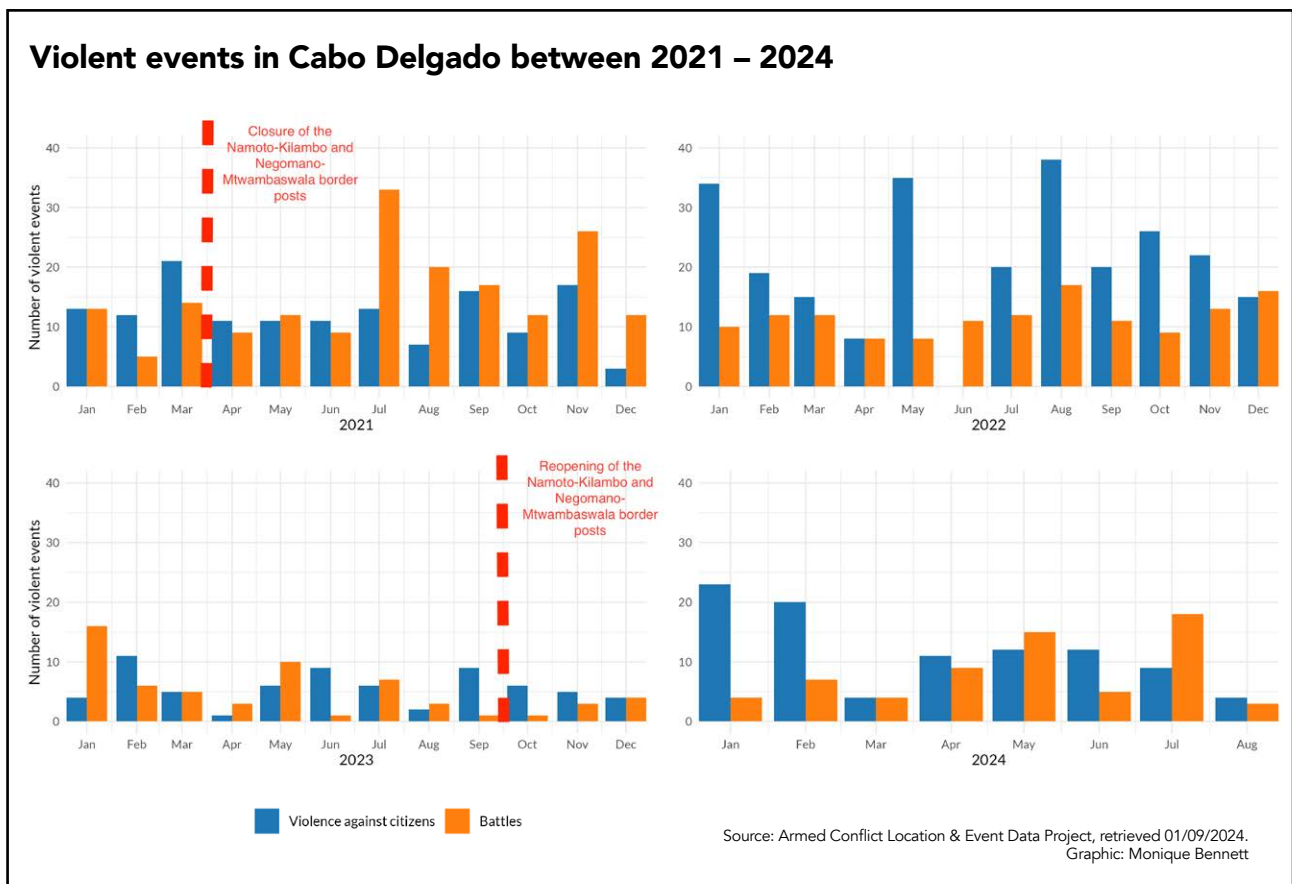


FIGURE 2: Conflict Timeline (2017 - 2024) to Conflict Timeline (2021 - 2024).

findings are supported by extensive research on the international drug trade, which identifies Mozambique as a transportation hub.<sup>6</sup>

The first incidents of the insurgency started in the port town of Mocimboa da Praia in October 2017, when approximately 30 militants stormed the town's police stations, killing several police officers and raiding the station's armory. Over the next two years, despite efforts by the Mozambican security forces, as well as outside private military contractors, the insurgent group was able to grow in strength and spread their geographical footprint across multiple districts in Cabo Delgado, attacking both civilian and government targets. This period of violence saw the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians and reports of human rights violations by both government security forces and private military contractors.

In October 2020, insurgents crossed the Rovuma River at Kitaya and launched an attack on local villages, killing at least 20 civilians, prompting Tanzania to deploy additional security forces to the border region. The rate of political violence events peaked in June 2020, however, major attacks on Palma in March 2021 garnered international media attention and represented a major inflection point in the conflict. The attacks precipitated TotalEnergies to evacuate their staff from the nearby Mozambique LNG project on the Afungi Peninsula and declare a force majeure which remains in place today. It also precipitated the deployment of Rwandan security forces and the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) in the months following. Importantly, following the Palma attacks and increased the government of Tanzania closed Namoto-Kilambo and Negomano-Mtwambaswala border crossings – the two largest official border crossings connecting Cabo Delgado with Mtwara, Tanzania. These border-crossings were only fully reopened over two years later, in September 2023.

## Susceptibility and Resiliency Against Violent Extremism

In the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (CVE/CVE), the concept of resiliency refers to the ability of individuals, communities, and/or societies to meet challenges, survive and even flourish despite adversity.<sup>7</sup> Resilience capacity is determined both by physical factors, such as access to healthcare, infrastructure, and resource mobilisation, and cultural factors, such as strong social bonds, cultural cohesion, and adaptive capacities that foster a sense of empowerment and sustainability.

Evidence suggests that community resilience is crucial in reducing individuals' vulnerability to recruitment and radicalisation into violent extremism.<sup>8</sup> In resilient communities, individuals are connected through shared values, mutual support networks, and effective communication channels, creating a buffer against extremist ideologies. Moreover, resilient communities empower individuals to address grievances and challenges through peaceful and constructive means, rather than resorting to maladaptive behaviours.<sup>9</sup>

While disruptions to trade, livelihood generation, and access to healthcare and schooling were often cited as the most urgent sources of concern by local communities during fieldwork, less obvious impacts on disruptions to family structures and weakening of community ties were also identified. This increase in multidimensional poverty (i.e. households deprived along three measures – monetary poverty, education, and basic infrastructure), in addition to social fragmentation may have long term negative consequences for efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism in the affected region.

6 See, for example: Hanlon, J. (2018). The Uberization of Mozambique's heroin trade. Working Paper Series, No. 18-190, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Department of International Development, London. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/224816/1/wp190.pdf>; Nelson, A., Convergence of Wildlife Crime and Corruption. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC). April. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/crime-convergence.pdf>; Mahadevan, P., Nelson, A., (2022). Crime, conflict and corruption: Nampula as a smuggling hub. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC). April. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/crime-conflict-corruption-nampula/>; Haysom, S., Gastrow, P., & Shaw, M. (2018). The heroin coast A political economy along the eastern African seaboard. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime (GI-TOC). Research Paper 04. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-heroin-coast-a-political-economy-along-the-eastern-african-seaboard/>

7 Nguyen, H.L., Akekar, R. (2020). "Modelling, Measuring, and Visualising Community Resilience: A Systematic Review" Sustainability 12, no. 19: 7896. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197896>.

8 See, for example: Saraiva, R., Erfe, A. (2023). Preventing violent extremism with resilience, adaptive peacebuilding, and community-embedded approaches. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability. Vol 61, April 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2023.101271>

9 Ibid P.24

## Trade Disruption and Extortion

A significant portion of the trade in Cabo Delgado is closely linked to the Tanzanian economy. For instance, residents of the Quionga administrative post in the Palma district frequently visit villages in Mtwara, Tanzania. Additionally, successful traders from Palma and Mocímboa da Praia often journey to markets in Dar es Salaam to purchase larger quantities of goods to sell in Mozambique. The distance between Palma and Dar es Salaam is only slightly greater (639 km by road) than the distance to the provincial capital, Pemba (423 km). The additional distance to Dar es Salaam is easily justified due to the presence of reliable transportation routes and its status as an important commercial centre. In either case, whether a trader travels to Dar es Salaam or Pemba, the journey takes an entire day.

Security measures imposed due to insecurity have raised both the risks and costs associated with this cross-border trade. Following the border closure in July 2021, a significant amount of trade in the Rovuma basin started to go through the Negomano border post, which is located 200km to the east. This led to additional transportation costs and increased risks for traders. The impact was particularly harsh on traders from the Palma region, who used to travel to Mtwara town to trade fish and other goods before the insurgency. Additionally, to disrupt potential supply lines which could be exploited by Islamic State Mozambique (ISM), a ban on using the sea lane off the coast of Mocimboa da Praia and Palma was implemented by the Mozambican and Tanzanian governments.

As a result of these disruptions to traditional trade routes and the heightened insecurity in the region, transport costs have increased. These added costs are then passed on to the consumer, further contributing to a rise in the cost of living for local populations. For example, prior to the conflict, the cost of transporting a person (excluding cargo) between Palma and Pemba was approximately \$11. However, since the conflict broke out, the cost of the same journey has risen to between \$31 and \$39.

The additional deployment of security forces in the borderland region has also raised the potential for extortion and human rights abuses of traders and travellers. Subjects interviewed detailed how police checkpoints along access roads to border posts were routinely used to extort Mozambican traders, who are forced by police to pay bribes

to pass. The situation, however, has worsened since the outbreak of conflict and the deployment of poorly trained and undisciplined soldiers of the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces (FADM) to the region. Low and irregular payment of these security forces adds to the problem of bribery and extortion.<sup>10</sup>

Collectively, the restriction of access to vital economic and trade opportunities, elevated cost of living, and increased exposure to security sector abuses has likely lowered community resilience across the impacted region. This leaves them more vulnerable to ongoing and future crises, and more susceptible to being recruited into violent extremism through coercion or radicalisation. Moreover, restrictions on licit trade channels can create new opportunities for the development of illicit trade networks and empower criminal organisations. As argued by economist Mark Thornton in his study of prohibition in different contexts, it is less costly to keep licit trade channels open than try and police illicit trade routes. The latter also brings with it a host of additional negative externalities associated with criminal cartels.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, the Mozambican and Tanzanian governments should work to support the normalisation and growth of cross-border trade. This can be achieved by ensuring border crossings remain open and safe for traders; customs processes and trade regulations are streamlined and free from potential extortion by border security officials; additional investment in road and port infrastructure to facilitate safer and easier travel for traders; and the provision of targeted assistance to small and midsize enterprises (SMEs), such as training, financial support, and transport equipment.

Moreover, traders are often well-positioned to identify and provide vital intelligence on illicit cross-border activity, including the movement of insurgents. Border security should seek to leverage this knowledge and have traders to become active contributors to regional security efforts.

## Familial Separation and Cultural Erosion

Familial relationships across the Mozambican-Tanzania border are common, with many families maintaining ties and engaging in cross-border activities for social, economic, and cultural reasons. It is also common for

<sup>10</sup> Cabo Ligado. (2024). Actor Profile: Defense Armed Forces of Mozambique (FADM). 31 January.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton, M. (1991). *The Economics of Prohibition*. University of Utah Press.

villagers in Cabo Delgado to have a second wife or family in southern Tanzania and vice-versa.

Insecurity in the northern Mozambique-southern Tanzania region has disrupted familial cross-border relationships causing families to be separated for extended periods. Several respondents indicated they have been unable to visit relatives in southern Tanzania or provide critical financial and emotional support due to ongoing insecurity. Respondents expressed how they have been unable to travel to attend funerals, perform traditional rites, and other important cultural events.

With the deterioration of security in Cabo Delgado, and specifically after the Palma attacks of March 2021, Tanzanian authorities increased security measures along the border to prevent the movement of displaced persons into southern Tanzania. Respondents indicated there were several incidents of individuals born in Tanzania, who could provide evidence of their citizenship and the names of their Tanzanian parents, not being permitted to return to their country of birth. The justification for denying re-entry was that these individuals had resided in Mozambique for an extended period and should therefore no longer be considered Tanzanian.

Cultural events like funerals, weddings, and traditional rites are vital for maintaining social bonds and fostering community resilience by reinforcing shared values and collective identity. The fragmentation of families and erosion of these cultural foundations may have profound long-term implications for community resilience and the prevention of maladaptive behaviours, including criminality and violent extremism.

Accordingly, the governments of Tanzania and Mozambique, as well as their development partners, should take actions that support the maintenance of social bonds and avoid social fragmentation in the borderlands region. This includes ensuring cross-border mobility by keeping the border crossing safe and open for travellers; encouraging cross-border cultural exchanges, such as joint cultural events, festivals, and traditional ceremonies that celebrate shared heritage and foster mutual understanding; and supporting cross-border peacebuilding committees and social forums. These can serve as important avenues for disseminating public awareness campaigns to prevent

and counter violent extremism ideology. They can also provide opportunities to leverage the unique local knowledge of communities to identify suspicious cross-border activity and empower them to become contributors to regional security.

## Reduced Access to Healthcare and Education

Prior to the onset of conflict in Cabo Delgado, communities faced low levels of access to both healthcare and educational services.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it was common for Mozambican citizens living in Cabo Delgado to cross the border into Tanzania for medical services. Although healthcare in Tanzania is more expensive, respondents interviewed perceived it to be of better quality. Furthermore, they regard Tanzanian health professionals as more attentive and professional compared to their Mozambican counterparts.

Similarly, those interviewed believed that Tanzania's education sector surpassed that of schools in Cabo Delgado. Only middle-class families in Cabo Delgado could afford to send their children to study in Tanzania. However, respondents noted that it was not uncommon for poorer families to send their children to Tanzania to work as domestic helpers for wealthier Tanzanian families in exchange for access to education. Additionally, the opportunity to study at religious institutions in Tanzania was widely seen as a means of social mobility, especially for poor communities near the Tanzanian border.

The onset of conflict, and subsequent security responses, has made it difficult for local citizens in Cabo Delgado to seek Tanzanian healthcare or educational services. While border closures and ongoing insecurity have limited access to Tanzanian health and education services, demand has significantly increased. Before the onset of the conflict in 2017, Cabo Delgado had a total of 131 health facilities. However, around 30% of the population still did not have access to these facilities.<sup>13</sup> A UN Development Programme conducted an Infrastructure Damage Assessment in Cabo Delgado from January to March 2022. The assessment focused on 30 healthcare facilities and found that 93% of them were partially damaged, while 3% were completely damaged. The damage was either the result of direct targeting by ISM or the facilities being located near heavy

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF. (2022). Main Socioeconomic Demographics of Cabo Delgado: 2022.

<sup>13</sup> ACAPS. (2024). Mozambique Health Facilities Under Siege.

fighting.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, due to displacement or damage to water and sanitation facilities, access to safe water supply has been affected. This has led to an increase in cholera and water-borne diseases, placing further strain on the limited health services available.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict has also had a significant impact on education services in Cabo Delgado. ISM has specifically targeted education facilities to prevent children from receiving a secular education. The same 2022 UNDP Infrastructure Damage Assessment looked at 56 educational facilities and found that 91% of them had sustained partial damage, while 9% were fully damaged. Prior to the conflict, the illiteracy rate in Cabo Delgado province was 12.5% higher than the national average of 39.4% for individuals aged 15 and above. Additionally, 55.7% of Cabo Delgado's population aged 5 to 17 had never attended school.<sup>16</sup>

Keeping Cabo Delgado's young people in schools is critical to preventing violent extremism in the long term. Schools not only offer skills and knowledge for them to pursue more meaningful careers and livelihoods but encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills which enable them to critically assess narratives and propaganda advanced by extremist groups. They keep youth productively occupied, reducing the time and opportunity for them to be recruited into extremist organisations, and promote social cohesion by bringing youth from different backgrounds and ethnic groups together.

Accordingly, the government of Mozambique and its international development partners should view the rebuilding and strengthening of healthcare and education services not only as a humanitarian and development agenda, but a critical pillar to preventing and countering violent extremism and the current insurgency.

## Conclusion

Sustainable strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism in northern Mozambique over the medium to long term should recognise building community resiliency as a crucial starting point. While traditional counterterrorism and counterinsurgency responses are important to degrade ISM and protect civilians, building community resiliency will help to lessen the ability of ISM to recruit and radicalise local citizens to their cause. Increasing evidence suggests that strong community resilience is crucial in reducing individuals' vulnerability to recruitment and radicalisation into violent extremism by promoting a sense of belonging, empowerment, and social cohesion. In resilient communities, people are connected through shared values, supportive networks, and effective communication channels. As a result, these communities act as a shield against extremist ideologies.<sup>17</sup>

### About XCEPT

This publication is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit [www.xcept-research.org](http://www.xcept-research.org) or contact us at [info@xcept-research.org](mailto:info@xcept-research.org). This research is part of XCEPT's workstream on how conflicts connect across borders. It was supported by the XCEPT Research Fund. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.



14 UN Development Programme. (UNDP). (2022). Infrastructure Damage Assessment Cabo Delgado-Mozambique August 2022.

15 International Committee of the Red Cross. (ICRC). (2023). Mozambique: How does armed conflict in Cabo Delgado affect access to basic services like water, sanitation, and health? 09 March.

16 UNICEF. (2022). Main Socioeconomic Demographics of Cabo Delgado: 2022.

17 Saraiva, R., Erfe, A. (2023). Preventing violent extremism with resilience, adaptive peacebuilding, and community-embedded approaches. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability. Vol 61, April 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2023.101271>







Cover photo: Alfredo Zuniga / AFP

A staff member of the World Food Program (WFP) addresses displaced people from the province of Cabo Delgado gathering to receive humanitarian aid at the 21 de Abril Tribune School in the town of Namapa, Erati district of Nampula, Mozambique, in February 2024, after an estimated 71,681 people were displaced due to new outbreaks of violence in the north of the country.

For more information on this policy briefing, contact our Good Governance Africa advisory services team.

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