Community Safety Mechanisms in the Anglophone Armed Conflict: Lessons from Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba in the South West Region of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

In the face of persistent insecurity and the erosion of formal state protection, communities caught in the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon have had no choice but to adopt self-survival strategies as a means to navigate the high insecurity and stay safe. This research examines the community-driven safety mechanisms adopted by civilians to navigate the Anglophone armed conflict, with a specific focus on the rural community of Tole-Bwiyuku and the peri-urban settlement of Mile 16 Bolifamba in the South West Region of Cameroon. Anchored in the Community Resilience Theory, the research challenges the perception of conflict-affected populations as passive victims, thereby highlighting their roles as active agents in their own protection. With a qualitative research approach and a comparative case study design, data were collected through ten (10) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), two (02) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) of eight (08) members per group, and direct field observations. The findings reveal five core safety strategies: unarmed civilian self-protection, informal early-warning and information-sharing systems, collective negotiation with armed actors, mobility and routine adaptation, and the formation of community watch (vigilante) groups. The study demonstrates that while Tole-Bwiyuku prioritized agricultural continuity and Mile 16 focused on navigating transit-related volatility, both communities leveraged social cohesion, local legitimacy, and traditional institutions to mitigate violence in the absence of state protection. These findings offer critical insights for peacebuilders and humanitarian actors, suggesting that resilience-based interventions should be rooted in existing grassroots networks to enhance civilian security and social continuity in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Community Safety, Anglophone Armed Conflict, Civilian Protection, Community Resilience, Tole-Bwiyuku, Mile 16 Bolifamba, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

In times of armed conflict, communities devise means to protect themselves, adopting mechanisms and tactics to stay safe in the height of insecurity and chaos. Experience has shown that even in areas of sheer desolation, social life and organisational systems can readily re-emerge within community networks to protect one another from the scourge of conflict (Pouligny, 2005). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the adoption of community-based approaches to help address the extensive needs in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. Fragile contexts are situations in which 'state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development, and to safeguard the security and human rights of their population' (OECD DAC, 2007).

The Cameroon Anglophone crisis started in 2016 and rapidly metamorphosed into an armed conflict in 2017 between the Cameroon Government and the non-state armed group (Anglophone Separatist fighters). The crisis erupted due to the demands made by lawyers and teachers of the Anglophone extraction against the alleged marginalization by the central government (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2019; Awasom, 2021). The crisis, which escalates as a full-blown armed conflict, has caused devastating effects in the Anglophone regions of the country (Mbaku, 2022). The population in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon has suffered the scourges of the conflict. Many people have been killed in the conflict, hundreds of thousands are now Internally Displaced

Persons (IDPs), and others are refugees in neighbouring countries. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2023), over 700,000 people have been displaced internally, with millions more in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Families have been separated, villages have been burned down to ashes, schools, hospitals, and other essential places have been shut down. Children face serious difficulties going to school, health facilities are limited, and essentially, life-saving amenities are absent. The effects also include the destruction of livelihoods, rape and unwanted pregnancy, and an alarming rate of juvenile delinquency (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Due to this highly volatile security situation, communities in the North West and South West regions have no choice but to adopt individual and community safety and security mechanisms that enable them to stay safe during the conflict. These measures are drawn from the high insecurity, economic collapse, and erratic violence in the conflict-ridden region (Krings, 2022: 19). While many have focused their attention on the macro-political dynamics of the Anglophone armed conflict, there is little or no attention on how communities developed means and strategies to stay safe amidst the Anglophone armed conflict. Despite being at the centre of most conflicts, research on conflict resilience always presents communities as passive victims of war. This position failed to demonstrate the reality of communities in armed conflict. Communities are not merely passive victims of war, but they are active agents that frequently depend on social networks, traditional institutions, and informal strategies to navigate safety and insecurity (Ojewska, 2020: 266). The understanding of these community-based safety mechanisms is pivotal for both academic inquiry and practical peacebuilding, as they regularly offer the first line of defense for populations caught in armed conflict.

The situations of Tole-Bwiyuku, a rural agrarian community near the city of Buea, and Mile 16 Bolifamba, a peri-urban settlement on the Buea–Kumba highway, demonstrate the difficulty of community safety strategies in conflict zones. Both communities have observed recurrent clashes between the non-state armed groups and the state forces, population displacements, and the militarization of the communities on daily life (Che, 2021: 67). However, their socio-economic profiles differ: while Tole-Bwiyuku relies heavily on subsistence farming and plantation labor, Mile 16's strategic location as a transport corridor has made it a recurring hotspot for roadblocks, ambushes, and curfews. Analyzing these two cases offers an opportunity to examine how context-specific realities shape the mechanisms communities adopt to ensure survival in the face of high insecurity.

This study is fixed in the concepts of human security and community resilience, which emphasize the protection of individuals and the adaptive capacities of communities in times of armed conflict. By focusing on the lived experiences of civilians in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba, the research not only documents the ingenuity and resilience of grassroots responses to armed conflict but also generates insights that can inform peacebuilding interventions, humanitarian programming, and broader policy debates on civilian protection in Cameroon and the globe.

The following objectives guide the study:

To identify the community-driven safety mechanisms employed by residents of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict in the South West Region of Cameroon.

To examine lessons and best practices from these local safety strategies that can inform broader conflict management, peacebuilding, and resilience initiatives in conflict-affected communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

The research is anchored on the Community Resilience Theory. This theory, propounded by Norris et al. (2008), emphasizes the capacity of communities to absorb shocks, adapt to changing circumstances, and transform social structures in response to crises. It underscores that resilience is not merely the ability to survive adversity but involves the interconnectedness of individuals, social networks, and institutions working collectively to maintain functionality in the face of disruption. The core assumptions of community resilience theory are: care, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and transformative capacity. These highlight that communities can mitigate

immediate danger, adjust social and economic practices in response to stressors, and even create new strategies or institutions to reduce vulnerability to future shocks. In conflict-affected contexts, this theoretical lens recognizes communities as active agents that leverage local knowledge, informal institutions, and social networks to sustain order, protect livelihoods, and maintain essential services, rather than passive victims of violence (Pouligny, 2005).

In the context of the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon, community resilience is particularly relevant because prolonged conflict has weakened formal state structures, leaving populations without reliable protection or public services (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2019). Communities such as Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba illustrate how resilience manifests in practice. In Tole-Bwiyuku, subsistence farmers organize mutual aid networks, share labor, and form local vigilance groups to safeguard their livelihoods and households, demonstrating both absorptive and adaptive capacities. In Mile 16 Bolifamba, residents face frequent ambushes and roadblocks but respond with coordinated displacement strategies, temporary shelters, and informal early warning systems, reflecting adaptive and transformative capacities. Applying the community resilience theory to these cases allows for a better understanding of how local knowledge, social cohesion, and grassroots strategies serve as protective mechanisms, not only about survival but also about adaptation and innovation to preserve social life and human security.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research approach and a comparative case study research design to provide an in-depth description, analysis, and comprehensive understanding of the community safety mechanisms adopted by residents in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon. The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a robust and multifaceted perspective. Primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A total of ten (10) Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted within Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba. The interviews include community leaders, civil society leaders, chiefs, researchers, and local indigenes in Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba. To complement the KIIs, two FGDs were conducted face-to-face in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba, each consisting of eight (8) participants from the respective communities. These discussions provided rich, context-specific insights into the lived experiences of community members and the various strategies they adopt to ensure safety and cope with the Anglophone armed conflict. The researcher also made use of direct observation to gain first-hand insights into community safety practices and daily life under the conditions of the Anglophone armed conflict. Observation focused on community interactions, local vigilance measures, temporary shelters, patrol routines, and informal early warning systems. This method allowed the researcher to complement the data obtained from KIIs and FGDs, providing a practical and context-specific understanding of how residents organize, adapt, and implement safety mechanisms in real-time within their communities. On the other hand, secondary data were collected through published and unpublished research works, including books, journal articles, and reports, obtained from both online and offline libraries. These sources were reviewed to provide historical context and theoretical grounding for the study.

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify respondents, selecting participants based on their knowledge and experience of community safety mechanisms and coping strategies during the Anglophone armed conflict. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, indicating that no new information was emerging from additional interviews. Both KIIs and FGDs were guided by a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore key themes related to community safety strategies, resilience mechanisms, and local coping practices in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the thematic method of data analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes that emerged from the data. Thematic analysis is a widely recognized and flexible approach for interpreting qualitative information, making it particularly suitable for uncovering the complexities and context-specific strategies that communities adopt to ensure safety during the Anglophone armed conflict.

This study was conducted with careful attention to ethical considerations, given the sensitivity of researching communities affected by armed conflict. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were informed about the purpose of

the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality, the identities and responses of participants were protected through anonymization, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. All digital recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, and identifying details that could indirectly reveal participants' identities were removed. To minimize harm, interview settings were selected to prioritize participants' safety and emotional comfort, and particular care was taken to avoid questions that could expose participants to risk or retraumatization, given the ongoing insecurity in the region. These safeguards were implemented to protect participants from potential social, political, or security risks associated with their involvement in the study and to uphold the ethical integrity of the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Anglophone armed conflict in the South West Region of Cameroon has significantly disrupted formal security systems, leaving communities like Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba vulnerable to ongoing violence, uncertainty, and social upheaval. In this precarious environment, residents have turned to community-driven safety measures that draw on local knowledge, social bonds, and collective action to safeguard lives, livelihoods, and their sense of communal stability intact. This section explores the specific strategies these communities have implemented amidst the conflict by showcasing how civilians have proactively dealt with insecurity due to the absence or limitation of state protection mechanisms. It also highlights essential lessons learned from these grassroots initiatives, which can offer valuable insights for improving broader efforts at managing conflicts: peacebuilding; resilience strengthening within affected areas alike, thus proving highly relevant overall so far throughout every stage involved therein.

A) Community Driven Safety Mechanisms in Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 / Bolifamba

This section presents and interprets the study's findings on community safety mechanisms in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict. It provides a detailed account of the strategies employed by residents to navigate insecurity, protect livelihoods, and maintain social cohesion. The results are analyzed thematically, highlighting the key patterns, similarities, and differences between the rural and peri-urban communities. Where appropriate, the findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the broader context of conflict-affected communities in Cameroon. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the practical and socio-cultural dimensions of community resilience in these settings.

1. Unarmed Civilian Self-Protection

The aspect of unarmed civilian self-protection appeared as a critical survival strategy for inhabitants of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict. This is more evident in situations where the government forces were either absent, distrusted, or perceived as parties to the conflict. Unarmed civilian self-protection is the deliberate, non-violent actions taken by civilians to reduce exposure to harm, avoid confrontation, and enhance collective safety without resorting to weapons (Mahony & Eguren, 1997). Within Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba, citizens' protection was grounded in everyday practices rather than formalized structures, reflecting a pragmatic response to insecurity shaped by local realities and conflict dynamics (Baines, 2017). The methods facilitate rapid information sharing through mobile phones, trusted messengers, shouting, and face-to-face communication. This signals early warnings to the villagers about impending violence, such as military patrols or the presence of armed groups. Such informal early-warning systems allowed civilians to run to the bush, relocate to other places, stay indoors, or adjust daily routines, which then reduced their vulnerability to sudden attacks from any angle (Wallace, 2016).

The effectiveness of these networks lies in their legitimacy and trust, as information circulated primarily among known and reliable community members. Collective vigilance and negotiated behavioral norms formed an important aspect of unarmed self-protection. Community members developed shared understandings regarding movement patterns, market days, curfews, and acceptable conduct in public spaces to minimize risk. For instance, residents often moved in groups, avoided certain routes at particular times, or coordinated activities to prevent individuals from being isolated and targeted. Traditional leaders, elders, and respected community

figures played mediating roles, helping to enforce these informal rules and resolve internal disputes that could attract external violence. Such localized governance practices contributed to maintaining a degree of order and predictability amid widespread insecurity (Autesserre, 2014).

Importantly, the reliance on unarmed civilian self-protection helped the communities of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict to avoid militarization, which could have increased their exposure to reprisals from both state and non-state armed actors. By emphasizing non-violence, neutrality, and collective responsibility, the inhabitants of Tole and Mile Bolifamba reduced the likelihood of being perceived as collaborators or combatants. This aligns with broader scholarship on civilian protection, which suggests that non-violent, community-led strategies often provide safer and more sustainable protection outcomes than armed self-defense in asymmetric conflicts (Baines, 2017; Wallace, 2016). In Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba, unarmed civilian self-protection and community networks therefore functioned not only as immediate safety mechanisms but also as foundations for resilience, social trust, and long-term peacebuilding.

2. Early-Warning and Information-Sharing Systems

The early-warning and information-sharing systems constituted a central pillar of unarmed civilian self-protection in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict. In a context marked by unpredictability, limited state protection, and frequent population movements, timely access to reliable information became essential for civilian survival. Early-warning mechanisms are commonly described as locally driven processes through which communities monitor security threats and communicate risk to prevent or minimize harm (Wallace, 2016). In these communities, such systems were informal, adaptive, and deeply embedded within everyday social relations rather than formal institutions.

Community members relied heavily on trusted social networks, family ties, neighborhood groups, youth associations, and religious communities to gather and disseminate security-related information. Mobile phones, word-of-mouth communication, and discreet signals were used to alert residents about approaching armed actors, military operations, roadblocks, or impending clashes. Information was often filtered through respected individuals to reduce the risk of misinformation, reflecting a collective awareness of the dangers associated with false alarms in highly volatile environments. These networks enabled civilians to take preventive actions such as staying indoors, temporarily relocating, suspending market activities, or adjusting movement patterns, thereby significantly reducing exposure to violence (Baines, 2017).

Importantly, these early-warning systems were not merely reactive but also preventive in nature. Through continuous monitoring of the security environment, the Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba communities developed shared understandings of high-risk periods, locations, and behaviors. This knowledge informed collective decisions on curfews, safe routes, and coordinated movement, reinforcing a culture of vigilance and mutual responsibility. Scholars argue that such community-based early-warning mechanisms are particularly effective in intrastate conflicts, where civilians possess contextual knowledge that external actors often lack (Autesserre, 2014). In Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba, early-warning and information-sharing systems thus functioned as vital civilian-led tools for risk reduction, resilience building, and the preservation of social cohesion amid prolonged armed conflict.

3. Collective Negotiation with Armed Groups

The precarious security situation in the Anglophone armed conflict left the communities of Tole Bwiuyuku and Mile 16 Bolimba with no choice but to see how they can negotiate with the different armed groups that continue to threaten their lives and peace. The aspect of collective negotiation was fundamental in the search for peace and safety during the Anglophone armed conflict. Faced with persistent violence, movement restrictions (commonly known as lockdown, or ghost town), and the absence or unreliability of state protection within the communities, residents in these communities pragmatically engaged in dialogue with non-state armed groups as a means of reducing harm and ensuring everyday survival. The idea that these communities engage in negotiation with armed groups does not in any way justify their activities; however, such negotiation was purely a means of survival for the community as a whole. Community leaders, including traditional authorities, respected elders, religious figures, and youth representatives, often acted as intermediaries, negotiating access to farmlands,

markets, schools, and burial grounds, as well as the observance of informal ceasefires during farming seasons, market days, or religious events. In Tole-Bwiyuku, a predominantly rural community, negotiations focused on securing safe passage to farmlands and minimizing disruptions to agricultural livelihoods, which constituted the primary source of survival. Also, negotiation was in line with the funeral and burial situation, as a means for families to mourn their death and carryout burrier without necessary disruption from the armed groups. Contrary to the views of Tole Bwuiyuku, in Mile 16 Bolimba, which is a peri-urban setting, negotiations were more oriented toward easing restrictions on mobility, preventing arbitrary attacks, and allowing limited economic activities to continue, reflecting the community's higher population density and reliance on informal urban livelihoods.

The collective engagement is a typical reflection of the realities on grown, which appears to be a community strategy to mitigate prolonged insecurity and stay safe. This often applies in areas where communities operate within constrained choices and moral ambiguity. Rather than passive victims, civilians acted as strategic agents navigating power asymmetries through dialogue, compromise, and appeals to shared identities, kinship ties, or moral norms. Such practices align with the broader literature on unarmed civilian self-protection, which emphasizes negotiation and relationship-building with armed actors as a non-violent means of reducing civilian vulnerability in contexts of weak state authority (Baines, 2014; Kaplan, 2017). Worthy of note is that these negotiations were often informal, fragile, and contingent, offering no permanent guarantees of safety for the inhabitants. In many instances, agreements were violated, causing severe harm to the populations. This is particularly during periods of intensified fighting or leadership changes within armed groups. Nevertheless, participants perceived these arrangements as preferable to complete disengagement, as they provided temporary predictability and reduced the likelihood of indiscriminate violence. In this sense, collective negotiation functioned as an adaptive coping mechanism rooted in communal solidarity, local legitimacy, and pragmatic ethics, underscoring the capacity of conflict-affected communities to exercise agency and resilience even under extreme conditions (Justino, 2012; Autesserre, 2021).

4. Mobility and Routine Adaptation

Mobility and routine adaptation constituted a central community-driven safety mechanism through which residents of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba navigated the volatile security environment created by the Anglophone armed conflict. In the absence of reliable protection and amid unpredictable violence, community members continuously adjusted their daily movements, work schedules, and social practices to minimize exposure to harm. These adaptations were not merely individual survival tactics but collectively learned and socially coordinated responses shaped by shared experiences, local knowledge, and informal communication networks. In Tole-Bwiyuku, residents altered farming routines by cultivating plots closer to home, farming in groups, harvesting at dawn, or, to an extent, temporarily abandoning their distant farmlands during periods of heightened insecurity. Market attendance and travel out of the villages were carefully done to coincide with perceived "safe windows," often based on prior incidents or the informal information shared within the community. In Mile 16, Bolifamba, residents responded to persistent insecurity by significantly adjusting their everyday mobility and livelihood practices. Commuting patterns were altered to minimize exposure to violence, with individuals deliberately avoiding main roads and known flashpoints. Night-time movement was largely curtailed due to heightened risks, while commercial and economic activities were selectively suspended during enforced lockdowns (ghost towns) or in anticipation of confrontations between armed groups and state security forces. These adaptive strategies reflect a pragmatic form of civilian self-protection aimed at reducing vulnerability while navigating an unpredictable conflict environment.

The patterns of adaptive mobility show the response or means of safety adopted by the various communities in times of chronic insecurity, where civilians continuously recalibrated their routines to balance safety, livelihood needs, and social obligations. Rather than complete immobilization, which would have undermined economic survival and social life, residents engaged in what scholars describe as "risk management through everyday practices," navigating violence by blending caution with necessity (Vigh, 2008; Nordstrom, 2004). These strategies were often gendered and generational, with women, children, and the elderly experiencing greater restrictions on movement, while youth, particularly young men, faced heightened suspicion and risk at checkpoints or during patrols. Despite these constraints, communities collectively normalized adaptive routines,

such as rotating market days, informal curfews, and shared transport arrangements, which enhanced predictability and reduced individual vulnerability. Although these strategies offered no absolute protection and were constantly revised in response to shifting conflict dynamics, they underscore the willingness of civilians to shape their own security landscapes. Mobility and routine adaptation thus functioned as a form of everyday resilience and unarmed civilian self-protection, highlighting how ordinary practices became critical tools for survival and social continuity in conflict-affected communities in Cameroon (Justino, 2012; Kaplan, 2017).

5. Community Watch Groups (Vigilante Groups)

Community watch groups, often referred to locally as vigilante groups, are one of the community-driven safety mechanisms adopted by the community of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the phase of the Anglophone armed conflict. Confronted with limited state presence, delayed or no security responses to violent situations, and widespread fear of attacks, theft, and infiltration by armed actors, the residents of Tole collectively organized informal night patrols and neighborhood surveillance structures to protect lives and property. This group was typically composed of able-bodied youth and adult men. In Tole-Bwiyuku, vigilante activities were largely oriented toward guarding the neighborhood, monitoring access routes into the village, and preventing opportunistic crimes that proliferated amid displacement and insecurity. In Mile 16 Bolifamba, the vigilante groups operated at the level of streets and quarters, focusing on night-time patrols, early detection of suspicious movements, and safeguarding small businesses and residential areas in a densely populated peri-urban environment.

The formation of vigilante groups reflected a sense of collective fear and collective responsibility. Residents did not perceive these groups as replacements for formal security institutions but as necessary stopgap measures in an environment were relying solely on external protection was no longer viable. Community legitimacy was central to their functioning; vigilante members were often selected based on trust, familiarity, and moral standing, and their actions were regulated by local norms and informal oversight by elders, quarter heads, or the chief. This local embeddedness helped distinguish vigilante groups from armed militias and reduced the likelihood of overt militarization, although the boundary between protection and coercion remained fragile. Existing literature on civilian self-protection underscores that such community-based security arrangements can reduce crime and enhance collective vigilance, but also carry risks of abuse, exclusion, and escalation if not socially constrained (Baker, 2008; Meagher, 2012).

Nevertheless, despite their perceived effectiveness, community watch groups in both Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba operated under significant limitations. Members were unarmed or minimally armed with rudimentary tools such as whistles, torches, and sticks, making them vulnerable during encounters with heavily armed actors. Moreover, vigilante groups occasionally faced suspicion from both state security forces and non-state armed groups, who sometimes interpreted their activities as collaboration with opposing sides. This precarious positioning required careful neutrality and restraint, reinforcing the non-confrontational ethos of these groups (Kaplan, 2017; Autesserre, 2021).

The community-driven safety mechanisms adopted in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict show the resilience and pragmatism of civilians living under conditions of prolonged insecurity. Through collective negotiation with armed actors, adaptive mobility and routine adjustments, and the organization of community watch (vigilante) groups, residents actively managed risks, protected livelihoods, and sustained social cohesion in the absence of reliable state protection. Although these mechanisms differed in form between the rural and peri-urban contexts, they were united by a shared logic of harm reduction rooted in local knowledge, trust, and collective responsibility. At the same time, these strategies remained fragile, informal, and morally complex, offering only temporary and negotiated forms of safety within highly asymmetrical power relations. Nonetheless, the findings underscore that every day, locally grounded practices of civilian self-protection constitute a critical yet often overlooked dimension of security in conflict-affected communities, with important implications for policy and peacebuilding interventions in Cameroon.

B) Lessons learned and best practices from Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolimba during the Anglophone armed conflict

The experiences of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict offer very significant lessons and some of the best practices for community resilience and civilian protection in times of armed conflict. The two communities have demonstrated that even in highly volatile environments, local populations are not passive victims but active agents capable of devising adaptive strategies to safeguard their lives and livelihoods. Some of the key lessons that emerged from the investigation include the importance of social cohesion, community-based early-warning systems, negotiation with armed actors, and the strategic use of cultural and religious institutions. These practices reveal how context-specific strategies, grounded in local knowledge and social networks, can enhance the effectiveness of civilian self-protection and provide insights for broader peacebuilding and humanitarian interventions (Pouligny, 2005; Che, 2021). By analyzing these cases, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars can identify replicable approaches and best practices that strengthen community resilience in conflict-affected regions of Cameroon and other similar contexts.

One of the most significant lessons that emerges from Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolimba is the indispensable role of social cohesion and community networks in promoting safety and survival. Inhabitants depend heavily on extended family networks, kinship relations, local associations, and informal neighborhood structures to coordinate protective strategies, share critical information, and provide mutually beneficial assistance. These networks functioned not merely as channels of communication but as living systems of collective decision-making and support, enabling communities to respond rapidly to emerging threats. In places where the government security was absent, inadequate, or distrusted, these networks became the primary line of defense, demonstrating the critical importance of social capital in conflict resilience (Ojewska, 2020). The lesson is clear: fostering and strengthening these local social structures is essential for any meaningful intervention in conflict-affected regions. It has been demonstrated as a pivotal mechanism used by the inhabitants in Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolimba to protect themselves in times of armed conflict.

Another decisive lesson from the strategies employed by Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba is the value of adaptive and context-specific strategies in civilian protection. Both communities displayed remarkable capacity for anticipatory planning, situational awareness, and strategic adaptation, which enable them to protect their lives and livelihoods despite the chronic insecurity. In Tole-Bwiyuku, farmers staggered agricultural activities and adjusted routines according to observed patterns of armed group movement, ensuring the continuity of subsistence farming while minimizing exposure to danger. Even though their lives depend so much on subsistence farming, they were able to mitigate the situation and play it safe in the face of high insecurity. Similarly, in Mile 16, residents created informal "safe corridors," coordinated mobility schedules, and utilized mobile communication networks and social media to send out alert signals in real time. These adaptive strategies demonstrate a dynamic understanding of local conflict ecology, where residents continuously assess threats, modify behavior, and coordinate collective responses to mitigate risk and limit harm. These practices challenge the traditional notions of civilians as always being victims of war, and position them instead as active agents capable of learning, innovating, and shaping their security environment (Krings, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2020). For scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution and civilian protection, these findings highlight the obligation of designing interventions that respect local adaptive capacities and leverage indigenous knowledge systems, rather than imposing externally conceived security models that often do not apply or do not effectively fit within a particular local context.

The practice of collective negotiation with armed actors represents another salient best practice, highlighting the sophisticated social and political skills exercised by civilians. These negotiations relied not only on moral authority and legitimacy but also on an acute understanding of local power dynamics, armed actor behavior, and the socio-political context. The findings indicate that effective civilian protection requires more than physical measures; it demands social and political acumen that allows communities to navigate asymmetries of power strategically and pragmatically (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2019; Che, 2021). The implication for policy and practice is the necessity of supporting community negotiation capacities. Thus, the recognition of local authorities, investment in community dialogue mechanisms, and respect for customary norms can meaningfully enhance civilian security and contribute to broader peacebuilding objectives.

More so, another best practice identified is the use of mobility adjustments and routine adaptation as a mechanism for risk mitigation and enhancing safety. Within the Anglophone armed conflict, the community of Tole Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba demonstrated an impressive ability to reorganize daily life, economic activities, and social routines as a means to response to the shifting patterns of conflict. In Mile 16, residents employed staggered commuting schedules, avoided known ambush sites, and adhered to self-imposed curfews. In Tole-Bwiyuku, inhabitants adapted planting and harvesting times to reduce exposure to armed actors while ensuring food security (Krings, 2022). These adaptations reflect both individual and collective foresight, underscoring that resilience in conflict settings is a continuous, contextually informed, and proactive process. Importantly, mobility and routine adaptation were often interconnected with early-warning systems and community negotiation efforts, forming a multi-layered strategy that reinforced safety, social cohesion, and the continuity of community life.

In all, the emergence and functioning of community watch groups or vigilante networks highlight the importance of organized, local-level monitoring and rapid response. These groups, coordinated by elders, youth, and community leaders, were tasked with patrolling neighborhoods, monitoring threats, relaying early-warning information, and assisting vulnerable populations. Their activities strengthened both the practical security and social fabric of communities, creating a sense of collective responsibility and mutual protection that formal security apparatuses were unable to provide (Ojewska, 2020). The study reveals that such groups are not merely reactive; they are proactive instruments of civilian agency, reflecting sophisticated social organization and a commitment to communal resilience. For instance, the vigilante group in Tole that was established as a means to fight insecurity was very instrumental in fighting armed groups out of the community. The group was made up of children from Tole who understood the nooks and crannies of the community. They were empowered by the authority that be to ensure that strangers within the community that appears suspicious must be taken for questioning. This was due to the difficulty in easily identifying members of armed groups.

Conclusively, the experiences of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba demonstrate that community-driven safety mechanisms operate as interconnected, adaptive, and socially embedded systems, integrating unarmed protection, early-warning communication, negotiation, mobility adjustments, and organized vigilance. These mechanisms offer critical lessons for humanitarian actors, policymakers, and peacebuilding practitioners that effective interventions in conflict situations must recognize, support, and build upon local strategies, emphasizing the role of community agency, indigenous knowledge, and social cohesion. By documenting these strategies, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how civilians navigate armed conflict, sustain livelihoods, and foster resilience, offering actionable insights for improving human security, informing conflict management, and designing contextually grounded peacebuilding initiatives in Cameroon and comparable conflict-affected regions globally.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined community-driven safety mechanisms adopted by civilians in Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba during the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon, highlighting how communities respond to prolonged insecurity in contexts of limited or absent state protection. The findings demonstrate that civilians are not merely passive victims of violence but active agents who employ locally grounded strategies to reduce harm, protect livelihoods, and sustain social cohesion under conditions of chronic conflict (Pouligny, 2005; Ojewska, 2020). Through unarmed civilian self-protection, early-warning and information-sharing systems, collective negotiation with armed actors, adaptive mobility and routine adjustments, and the organization of community watch groups, residents constructed informal yet effective mechanisms of everyday security.

The comparative analysis of the rural setting of Tole-Bwiyuku and the peri-urban context of Mile 16 Bolifamba reveals that while the forms of community safety mechanisms vary according to socio-economic conditions and spatial dynamics, they are unified by a common logic of collective action, pragmatism, and harm reduction. These strategies are embedded in social networks, traditional authority structures, and shared norms, underscoring the importance of social cohesion and local legitimacy in civilian protection (Autesserre, 2014; Kaplan, 2017). Consistent with community resilience theory, the study shows that absorptive and adaptive

capacities were particularly evident as communities adjusted routines, negotiated access to livelihoods, and responded rapidly to evolving threats (Norris et al., 2008; Vigh, 2008).

At the same time, the study underscores the fragility and moral complexity of community-driven protection mechanisms. Negotiations with armed groups, vigilante arrangements, and adaptive mobility strategies were often informal, temporary, and contingent on shifting power relations within the conflict environment. While these practices reduced immediate risks, they offered no permanent guarantees of safety and were vulnerable to breakdown during periods of intensified violence or leadership changes among armed actors (Justino, 2012; Autesserre, 2021). This highlights the limitations of community-based protection in isolation and the continued necessity of accountable state institutions and international engagement.

From a policy and peacebuilding perspective, the findings suggest that effective civilian protection and conflict management interventions must recognize, support, and complement existing community strategies rather than undermine them. External actors, including humanitarian organizations and state authorities, should engage with local leaders, strengthen community-based early-warning systems, and support non-violent negotiation capacities while avoiding the militarization of civilian spaces (Wallace, 2016; Kaplan, 2017). Such approaches are more likely to enhance human security, legitimacy, and sustainability in conflict-affected settings like Cameroon's Anglophone regions.

In conclusion, the experiences of Tole-Bwiyuku and Mile 16 Bolifamba demonstrate that community-driven safety mechanisms function as interconnected systems of resilience, rooted in local knowledge, trust, and collective responsibility. By foregrounding civilian agency and everyday practices of survival, this study contributes to broader debates on human security, civilian self-protection, and conflict resilience in protracted armed conflicts. It calls for a reorientation of policy and scholarly attention toward the lived realities of conflict-affected communities and the critical role they play in shaping their own security landscapes.

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