Preventing explosions

Taking stock of weapon stockpiles in West Africa and the Sahel

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Summary

This policy brief reviews the state of the physical state of security and stockpile management (PSSM) in West Africa and the Sahel as at 2022. Through desk research and policymaker interviews, it explores key policies and practices. It questions whether governments struggle to maintain their arms and ammunition because they bite off too much, encounter unforeseen consequences that lead to the exposure and diversion of weaponry, or are just negligent. Regardless, loss of life and the destruction of property continue unabated as criminals, violent extremists and other non-state actors take advantage of the armouries' sub-standard security.

Key findings

- The region (West Africa and the Sahel) implemented several PSSM measures from 2011 to 2020; and the African Union (AU) decided in December 2020 to extend the Silencing the Guns initiative until 2030.
- Interventions in the region were not harmonised and were short-lived, making their impact difficult to quantify. Most initiatives were programmes and capacity-building training rather than disarmament and/or practical steps to secure the safety and security of national stockpiles.
- The movement of people between countries oblivious of borders is a tradition linked to pastoralism and transhumance. However, the corridor proclaimed for this purpose has been subsumed by human settlement, leading to herder-farmer conflicts that have exacerbated the demand for illegal arms. These have put excess pressure on national stockpiles.

Introduction

This policy brief deals with two neighbouring regions that share similar challenges, many transnational in nature. The ease with which arms, particularly SALW, are smuggled across borders calls for a regional approach to mitigate risks to safety and security. The fight against illicit SALW is also integral to the AU's Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa[1] and the AU Commission action plan to silence the guns.[2]

Global importance of PSSM

The trend is that arms and ammunition stockpiles claim lives if not well managed, leading to either diversion from restricted or controlled storage in government armouries, or unplanned (also referred to as unintentional) explosions at munitions sites (UEMS). In whichever context, it's always too late to realise the importance of proactive preventive measures.

The world has suffered about 50 UEMS in the last two decades, five in Africa. They occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (April 2000), Mozambique (March 2007), Tanzania (April 2009), Republic of Congo (March 2012) and Equatorial Guinea (March 2021). These explosions killed 2 049 people and caused injuries to about 17 000. Damage was recorded to 50 000 properties.[3]

At the core of illicit arms proliferation is societal instability caused by state failure and corrupt institutions

Several global processes have evolved into the effective management of stockpiles of arms and ammunition.[4] Included are the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines, which provide internationally acknowledged standards for PSSM. As this study and previous ones have revealed, full compliance with international standards set out in treaties and instruments is difficult to achieve, particularly in resource-scarce countries.[5] This, however, should not prevent countries from incrementally implementing low-cost, high-impact projects to meet minimum standards of safe SALW storage.

These treaties and instruments were coalesced into the International Small Arms Control Standards (ISACS). Later, the United Nations relaunched them as the Modular Small-arms-control Implementation Compendium (MOSAIC).[6] This was subsequently translated into multilateral agreements such as the Programme of Action to Prevent, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in SALW in all its Aspects (UN PoA). There were also the International Tracing Instrument, the Firearms Protocol supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the Arms Trade Treaty.

The MOSAIC compendium provides PSSM and SALW management guidelines that range from development and weapons management (including establishing national commissions and formulating national SALW action plans and instituting effective stockpile management principles) to gender and public health.[7] It also promotes the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, notably Goal 16, Indicator 16.4, which includes a significant reduction in illicit arms flows.[8]

PSSM challenges in West Africa and the Sahel

In this region, PSSM processes are best understood in a post-conflict reconstruction and conflict prevention context. This is because, since post-independence, Africa's focus on improving PSSM in the region was most intensive in the aftermath of the Libyan and Malian civil wars.

If successful, such a multifaceted approach can create a knock-on effect in human livelihoods. For instance, tackling drought in the Sahel would lead to a greater focus on agriculture than on animal husbandry or pastoralism. Human mobility is often linked to the cross-border movement of herdsmen seeking green pastures and cattle rustlers who depend on SALW. Lower demand for weapons and ammunition would reduce the volume of risks to government stockpiles, which in Africa remain a major source of illegal arms and ammunition.

At the core of illicit arms proliferation in Africa is societal instability, often caused by state failure, inherent weak and/or corrupt institutions, failed peace settlements and an eventual relapse into conflict. When this happens, the attendant demand

for arms and ammunition 'cracks open' state armouries, releasing the once-secure stockpiles into the insecure hands of non-state actors.

To speak about PSSM in West Africa and the Sahel is to reference conflicts, not least the Libyan civil war. Widespread illegal arms are inextricably intertwined with armed conflict and the movement of armed irredentists, from one country to another. Weapons circulate uncontrollably across borders. Transnational linkages through trade, cross-border ethnic ties, organised criminal groups and rebel group mobility, among others, contribute to conflict accompanied by the illicitly acquired arsenal from government stockpiles.

Widespread illegal arms are inextricably intertwined with armed conflict and the movement of armed irredentists

This logic forms the basis of some scholarly explanations for the conflicts that have enveloped the greater Sahel region, leading to efforts to strengthen the region's PSSM. Most Sahel countries belong to ECOWAS, which creates an overlapping membership through which countries can benefit from projects from either region.

According to an ECOWAS PSSM expert and two policymakers in Mali and Libya, both regions continue to perform abysmally in conflict prevention and mitigation for reasons both country- and region-specific.[9] These sources and an ECOWAS regional conflict analyst state that countries straddling the Sahel belt, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Senegal, continue to suffer conflict.

This is further validated by the UN Refugee Agency, which in January 2021 confirmed that unrelenting violence in countries in the Sahel had reached breaking point, displacing more than two million people inside their own countries.[10]

Regional versus country–specific

The map on the following page shows countries that transcend the Sahel region as well as the ECOWAS region. It depicts how most countries in the Sahel (Senegal, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso) are in West Africa. The others are in Central Africa (Chad and the Central African Republic) and the Maghreb (Mauritania and Libya).[11] A Mali-based technocrat commented that 'whatever PSSM project is seen and implemented regionally in reality translates into a national project, because the implementation occurs at national and eventually at village or local level'.[12] According to this individual and two Central African PSSM analysts, the handicap of PSSM projects in the region is the tendency to differentiate between regional and national, making projects appear as two distinct entities.[13]

These experts cited recent projects with a regional outlook, which were implemented locally. For instance, in 2019, the AU Peace and Security Department's Defence and Security Division, the German Federal Foreign Office and Bonn International Centre for Conflict

Table: **Countries in bold are those with overlapping membership (both as Sahel member states and ECOWAS member states)**

Sahel country beneficiaries of UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC) project	Sahel country beneficiaries of the AU-German PSSM project	West Africa/ECOWAS member states
Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, **Chad,** Egypt, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Mauritania, **Mali, Niger, Nigeria,** **Senegal**, Sudan, Tunisia[14]	**Chad, Niger**, **Mali, Burkina Faso** and **Mauritania,** Cameroon, The Gambia, **Nigeria**, **Senegal**[15]	Benin, **Burkina Faso**, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, **Mali, Niger,** Nigeria, **Senegal**, Sierra Leone, Togo[16]

Source: Table by the author.

Map: **Countries that transcend the Sahel region as well as the ECOWAS region.**
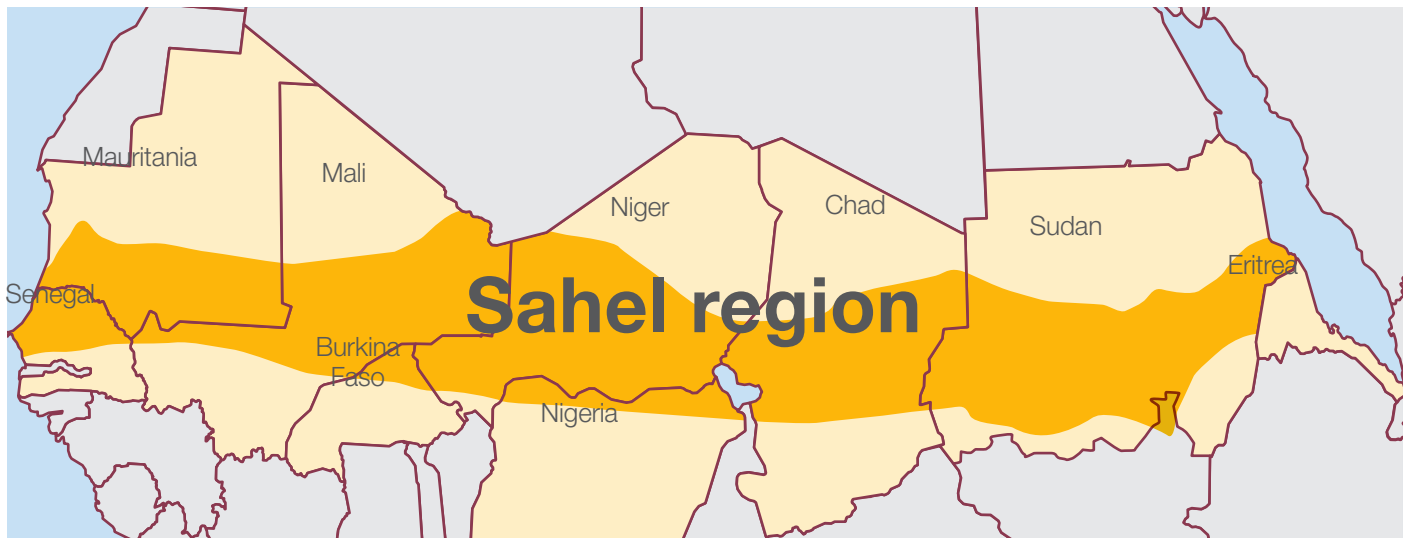
Source: Internal Displacement in the Sahel Tops 2 Million as Armed Conflict Intensifies, at https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_internal-displacement-sahel-tops-2-million-armed-conflict-intensifies/6201123.html.

Studies launched a Sahel PSSM database.[17] The launch was the culmination of close to a decade of activities to mitigate illicit arms flows, not only in West Africa and the Sahel, but on the continent.[18]

It was noted at the time that PSSM is an integral component of the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by the Year 2020 and its Plan of Action on SALW. Going forward, it broadened its thematic and regional scope to provide users and visitors with information on interventions across Africa in priority areas. These include marking, record-keeping and tracing, transfer and end use/r controls and brokering. Other priorities are information about cross-border cooperation, legislative and regulatory frameworks, institutional structures and national coordination mechanisms, criminal justice response, embargo enforcement, registration and voluntary disarmament.[19]

The participants added that the development of the database was further informed by the need to enhance universality and outreach on different approaches to the plan of action. The database would facilitate cooperation and coordination among key stakeholders.[20]

The Sahel region was relevant given the Libyan civil war, which saw an uncontrolled flow across the region of between 10 000 and 20 000 SALW from government stockpiles. Mali and surrounding countries bore the brunt.[21] Several PSSM mitigating initiatives ensued, multilateral, bilateral and civil society-based. Despite

this project, weapons have continued to circulate, fuelled by coups d'état in Sudan (2019), Mali (2020) and Chad (2021).

The European Union adopted a Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, with four levels of intervention

In June 2021, ECOWAS suspended Mali's membership over the 2020 coup. In return, Mali expelled the ECOWAS envoy,[22] meaning it no longer participated in ECOWAS activities. According to a Mali National Commission on Small Arms (NatCom) source, the country's suspension has ended its access to activities such as crucial PSSM planning in late 2021. This has derailed the country's fight against the illegal proliferation of SALW.[23]

Africa continues to register UEMS, the most recent in March 2021 in Equatorial Guinea. Twenty people were killed and more than 500 injured when a series of explosions occurred at a military base in Bata,[24] due, sources say, to mishandled dynamite.[25] In March 2012, explosions at an arms dump in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo, killed at least 250 people and injured thousands. Houses and a healthcare facility were destroyed.[26]

Explosions and solutions

Common causes of UEMS, say regional PSSM experts, civil society actors and technocrats, include failure to strictly adhere to standard PSSM storage, management and retrieval good practices. This leads to ammunition deterioration and the subsequent instability of arsenals, leading to explosions. Other factors are handling errors and poor working practices, failure to consider external environmental influences and events, and sub-standard security. The most immediate drivers in the context of West Africa and the Sahel, however, are:

A history of pastoralism and transhumance

According to a 2018 study by the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), violent conflicts involving pastoralists have increased in the region, albeit not in all countries.[27] The study covered six ECOWAS members (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria).

The objective was to understand the reasons for escalating pastoralist-related conflicts in recent years, their drivers and possible solutions. Pastoralism in the region ranges from nomadism to transhumance, to settled or semi-settled agro-pastoralism.[28] According to ECOWAS policy officials aware of this study,[29] these conflicts have claimed thousands of lives.

Arms as commodities and facilitators of crime

Demand for arms and ammunition has been sustained for decades by farmer-herder conflicts, but the number of illegally acquired arms is unknown. Not even the UNOWAS study could quantify it. Furthermore, the number of pastoralists, farmers and livestock is unclear. The Food and Agricultural Organisation estimates that, in 2016, ECOWAS and Mauritania had hundreds of millions of small ruminants[30] with pastoralist numbers in the tens of millions.[31]

Interconnected transnational crime

Transnational organised crime has a bearing on pastoralism and transhumance. Without criminalising pastoralism, an intrinsic cultural activity of some ethnic groups, it's worth noting that organised crime finds an easy channel in the cross-border movement of people, arms and ammunition. This demand is propelled by the need for herders to protect their animals from attacks by farmers onto whose land they encroach, and from cattle rustlers.

The ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance (1998), recognising the importance of cross-border mobility along traditional routes or past cattle tracks in agro-pastoral areas (where pastoralism and farming co-exist), secured those corridors for transhumance. However, according to the UNOWAS report, where routes are blocked and livestock movement curtailed, encroachment onto farms often results, triggering conflict. This leads to a corresponding increase in the demand for arms, which then puts pressure on government stockpiles while attracting illicit arms dealers.

The flow of arms and ammunition transnationally cannot be divorced from other forms of organised crime

The persistent and increased illegal circulation of SALW in the region led to a 2018 meeting of ECOWAS experts on herder-farmer conflict. Among the sources of arms proliferation in the region, the meeting concluded, were imported arms, local artisanal production and licit and illicit supply.[32] Consequences were being experienced in Guinea Bissau and Mali, including an armed rebellion in the Casamance region north of Niger and Mali. A Mali NatCom official stated that the 2012 civil war had led to looting by armed groups of some government armouries and to the entry of weapons from the Libyan conflict, abetted by border porosity.[33]

Violent extremism and radicalisation

The emergence and expansion of extremist groups in the region have spurred the spread and use of illegal SALW. Civil society actors, policymakers and an academic in Burkina Faso, Senegal and Nigeria respectively indicated that conflict, including traditional conflict that used to be settled through peaceful resolution mechanisms, is now militarised. SALW are the weapons of choice.

According to a 2021 study,[34] informal conflict resolution tools such as customary courts have struggled to cope. This is due to the rapid spread of small arms, the growing power of non-state armed groups and terrorist networks, and deteriorating social and political stability. The quest to cause fear and maximum damage makes antagonists seek more lethal weapons, which prompts them to penetrate state stockpiles, particularly in countries in conflict or with compromised state security.

The open display of deadlier SALW is a major factor for extremist groups such as the radical Tuareg militias and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, northern Mali.[35] These groups sustained armed insurgencies through their access to and use of SALW. Similarly, Boko Haram Islamist militants, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabaab and others operating across Africa have gained attention through violent attacks reflecting the lethality of their arms.

Most weapons in the hands of these extremist groups originated from Libyan stockpiles. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Mali, the Libyan civil war caused an outflow of weapons from government stockpiles into West Africa, the Levant, even the Horn of Africa. The Mali linkages occurred when a mixture of Tuareg and Libyan ethnicities fled Libya into Mali and through radical armed groups based in east Libya with transnational affiliation to al-Qaeda in Mali.[36]

Organised crime

Transnational organised crime is considered both a cause and a driver of the Libyan and Malian conflicts.[37] Because the larger economic interests, including the trans-border drug and arms trade, are woven within the conflict in Mali, the wider Sahelian region is affected.[38] The defeat of Qaddafi's regime was rooted in extensive collaboration among Mali, Algeria and Libya for control of northern Mali, as many of the fighters constituting the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad returned from Libya with weapons and ammunition, using already established routes that included the Sahelian transhumance corridor.

Whether the corridor was a cause or a facilitator of the flow of weapons from Libya to Mali is an ongoing debate. On the corridor's historical importance and its abuse by criminal networks, analysts note the revival of pastoral approaches in the Sahel from the late-1990s is attributable to several factors. Among them

is the need of Sahel states to maintain the region's herding sector.

Mixing religion and politics

The spatial dimension of the Saheli conflict and the increasing demand for SALW can also be seen in the context of politico-religious competition for power. The involvement of transnational terrorist groups with links to al-Qaeda and the rise of political Islam — 'a transnational movement feeding on national dissent'[39]— is evident in the wider regional context. This is based on a mixture of greed and grievance. The tools of choice for the perpetuation of their demands are SALW, which they acquire by conquering government forces and looting state stockpiles.

Determining the losses and impact of these arsenals is as challenging as disarming those in illegal possession

Islamist movements such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Din engage first and foremost in illicit activities, rather than the spread of Islam, thereby acting as criminal networks.[40] The flow of arms and ammunition transnationally cannot be divorced from other forms of organised crime. For instance, in 2013, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported the flow of cocaine through West Africa to be worth US$1.25 billion. Maritime piracy intensified in the Gulf of Guinea, with 22 pirate attacks off the coast of Benin in 2011.

Quantifying diverted arms

In most situations in stable or politically unstable countries, it's difficult to quantify arms and ammunition diverted from national stockpiles. This is because, often, state military records are confidential. This grey area is revisited by neither the old nor the new regime, making accountability impossible.

The beneficiaries are, therefore, the 'new' illegal owners, many among them non-state actors. Determining the losses and impact of these arsenals is as challenging as disarming those in illegal possession. The closest one

can come is looking at the state of PSSM in situations where this is practically possible. In most cases, this is easiest when explosions at munitions sites render the confidentiality of stockpiles futile. Unfortunately, when this occurs, it's too late for prevention and the impact is loss of life, trauma and destruction of property. It's a question of counting losses rather than prevention.

PSSM interventions to date

UEMS victim countries and their immediate neighbours tend to take stock of their own situations to mitigate the possibility of future incidents. The AU Strategy on the Control of Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (AU PSSM Strategy)[41] came into being in the aftermath of the Libyan civil war. The war's effects were spreading to the rest of the Sahel, particularly Mali. This heralded preventive measures by both the AU and the UN.

Amid the establishment of the AU PSSM Strategy, the UN developed and adopted the Sahel Regional Strategy in 2013, whose three objectives focused on the triple crises of the Sahel.[42] This was followed by an annex to the Sahel Regional Strategy, whose objectives included enhancing regional and interregional cooperation among Sahelian, West African and Maghreb states. This involved the development of harmonised approaches for combating illicit trafficking, controlling arms and movements of armed and criminal elements, including terrorists, and reinforcing the UN arms embargo mandate.[43]

The European Union (EU) adopted a Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, with four levels of intervention, namely that:

- Security and development in the Sahel cannot be separated, and that helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced.
- Achieving security and development in the Sahel is only possible through closer regional cooperation.
- All the states of the region will benefit from considerable capacity building, both in areas of core government activity, including the provision of security and development cooperation.
- The EU has an important role to play both in encouraging economic development for the people of the Sahel and helping them achieve a more secure

environment in which it can take place, and in which the interests of EU citizens are also protected.

The EU further declared that security and development in the Sahel cannot be separated, and that helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced.[44] In 2018, the UN launched its Support Plan for the Sahel, which targeted six priority areas,[45] namely:

- Promotion of cross-border cooperation for stability and development.
- Prevention and resolving of conflicts (violent extremism and crime, and promoting access to justice and human rights).
- Promotion of inclusive and equitable growth and increasing access to basic quality services.
- Building resilience to climate change, and decreasing natural resource scarcity, malnutrition and food insecurity.
- Promotion of access to renewable energy.
- Empowering women and youth for peace and development in the Sahel.

Most of these interventions were far-reaching, encompassing the improvement of livelihoods, poverty eradication and combating terrorism, but they all revolved around preventing the recurrence of instability in the region. Viewed on a post-conflict spectrum, all these efforts (sometimes seemingly competing), if well implemented, would directly alleviate the risks of SALW proliferation. Their effectiveness will be evident only in time.

Conclusion and recommendations

This policy brief reviewed the state of PSSM in West Africa and the Sahel, and concluded broadly that:

1. The two regions are interspaced geographically and programmatically. This calls for meticulous planning, especially because PSSM projects deal with arms and ammunition, which are at the centre (as drivers or catalysts) of the regions' political instabilities.
2. The nefarious impact of uncontrolled proliferation and circulation of SALW and increased political instability in West Africa and the Sahel (particularly Libya and Mali) continue to concern the AU.
3. Without effective PSSM systems, the wave of political instability in the two regions is likely to

endure, inhibiting the AU from achieving its mission of silencing the guns by 2030.

4. While it is too early to judge the ultimate impact of current interventions, signs point to very limited positive results on the ground, evidenced by the still-raging Malian conflict and Libyan instability. Not least, the thousands of arms and ammunition diverted from the Libyan (and eventually Malian) stockpiles still circulate in the region illegally.

5. Effective physical security and stockpile management (PSSM) processes are crucial to weapons management and the future stability of any country, not least unstable ones. Members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should consider PSSM activities and programmes central to peace and stability.

6. Countries in West Africa and the Sahel and their PSSM international partners/donors should ensure a continuum among all projects to create a seamless linkage that trickles from regional to national to local level. All arms management and control projects in West Africa and the Sahel should be harmonised to maximise funding from international partners.

Notes

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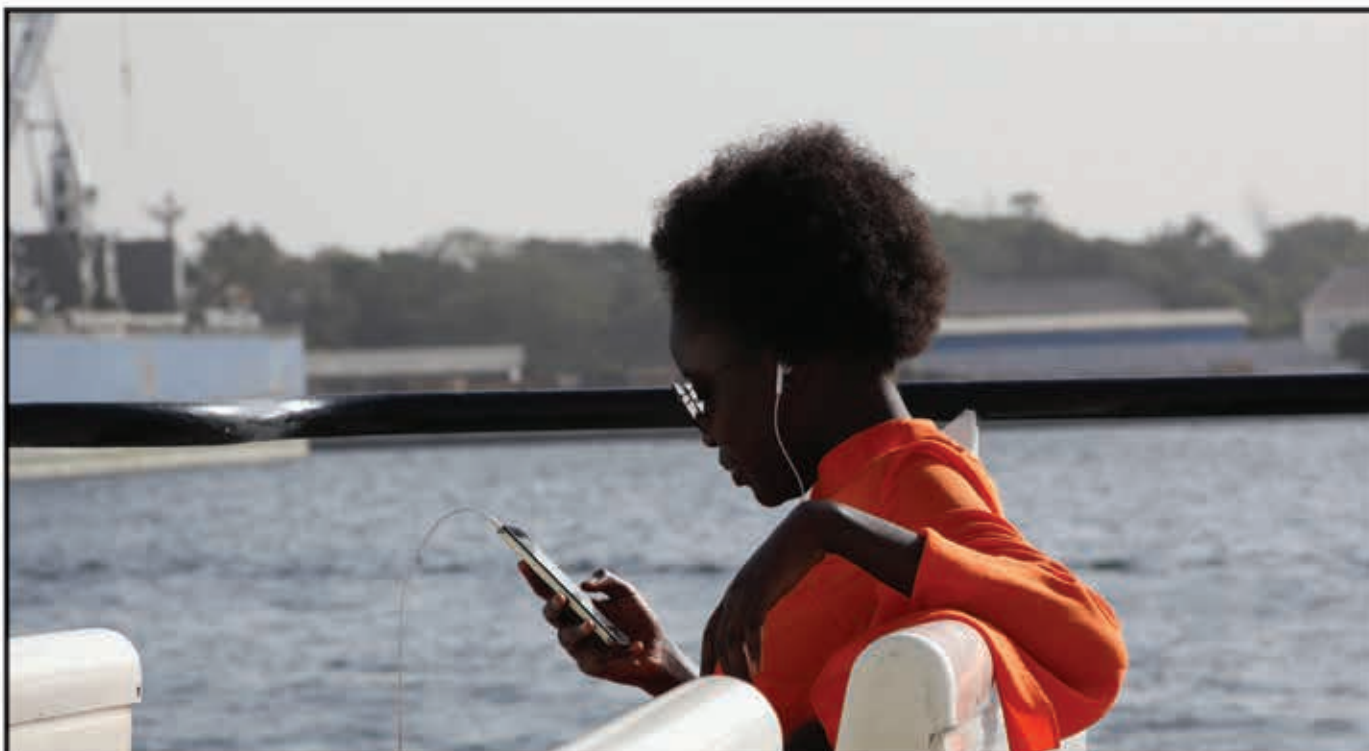
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