



Members of the RSD in Gabú together with their partners from Voz di Paz

Peacebuilding in Practice #3:

LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURES FOR PEACE IN GUINEA-BISSAU:

**The contribution of the Regional Spaces
for Dialogue to Peacebuilding**



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Summary

In 2007, Interpeace and its partner, the national NGO, Voz di Paz (Voice of Peace), established 10 permanent dialogue groups all over the country. By assisting the population in conflict management, these Regional Spaces for Dialogue (RSDs) made a critical contribution to peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau.

Since 2011, they have resolved more than 200 local conflicts by using dialogue as a tool for the peaceful management of conflict related to insecurity, bad governance, religion and violence against women, among other issues. In a number of cases, the RSDs invite the population and State representatives at the local level to find common solutions to their problems. This power to convene such gatherings can be explained by the respect and legitimacy conferred on the local personalities who constitute these RSDs. As a result of the integration of 31

community radio stations in their network, the RSDs can communicate with a large part of the people in Guinea-Bissau and its State representatives. The radio stations provide the platforms for the RSDs to create awareness among the listening public of peaceful conflict resolution and of the risks posed by violence and to express the concerns of their fellow citizens from all parts of the country. Every week, each of these community radio stations broadcasts, among others, two different programmes on peace produced by Voz di Paz. This way 90 peace programmes are broadcast on the radio about 6,000 times each year.

While rooted in local realities, at the same time, the RSDs represent a community of craftspeople of peace at the national level. Their members have a sense of full ownership of their mission and RSDs objectives. Together, they pursue their engagement with dedication and demonstrate their determination to support, in the long term, their country's journey to stability and non-violence.

Against the background of the State being almost non-existent at the local level, the RSDs comprise a trustworthy institution at the local level which is in close contact with the population. They enjoy coherence and national coverage which provides them with the power to collaborate with national stakeholders to leverage societal change in the long term. However, this potential for national impact can be achieved only if relatively modest financial support can be provided to facilitate the operations of the RSDs.

In this period of reconstruction in the aftermath of the political crises which took place in Guinea-Bissau from 2012 to 2014, both national and international stakeholders have an interest in collaborating with the national network of RSDs to prevent and manage possible tensions and violence.

This report is complemented by a documentary film in which selected members of the Regional Spaces for Dialogue and other community members share their perspective on how these Spaces contribute to peacebuilding. This documentary film is available in Portuguese with subtitles in English at <http://www.interpeace.org/resource/the-contribution-of-regional-spaces-for-dialogue-to-peacebuilding-in-guinea-bissau/>.



The contribution of the Regional Spaces for Dialogue to Peacebuilding

- The creation of a trustworthy institution at the local level that has taken root in communities across the country with the potential to collaborate with national stakeholders;
- The resolution of more than 200 local conflicts since 2011 in various thematic areas such as insecurity, governance, religion and violence perpetrated against women;
- Understanding and use of dialogue by the population as a tool for peaceful conflict management;
- Better cooperation between State representatives and the population at the local level;
- A network of 31 community radio stations which are working in the area of education, advocacy, information and the denunciation of violence through broadcasting two peace programmes produced by Voz di Paz each week.

“We are the most influential people. Wherever we go, we are respected and warmly welcomed. We have a certain moral authority. People easily listen to us. That is the strategy of Voz di Paz.”

Imam, member of the RSD in Bafatá

A. What is the *raison d'être* for the Regional Spaces for Dialogue?

Succession of political crises and weakness of the State

The Regional Spaces for Dialogue fall within the context of successive political crises and the nearly complete absence of the State at the local level. It is against this background that they operate as trustworthy institutions whose closeness with the population enables them to play a key role in managing local conflicts.

In 1998 a crisis broke out in Guinea-Bissau which lasted for 11 months and was considered to be the most violent one since the country attained its independence in 1974. Furthermore, the period 2000-2009 was characterized by a succession of political and military crises marked by attempted and successful *coups d'état*, insurrections and assassinations. The last major crisis faced by Guinea-Bissau, starting with the *coup d'état* of April 2012 and ending with the general

elections of April 2014, has once again revealed how fragile the country is.

As a result of this violent history and of the associated uncertainties, the country is confronted with a high level of poverty, permanent conflicts among political groups for the control of State resources; weak political institutions, an exploitation of ethnic affinities for political interests and a lack of constructive and inclusive dialogue.¹

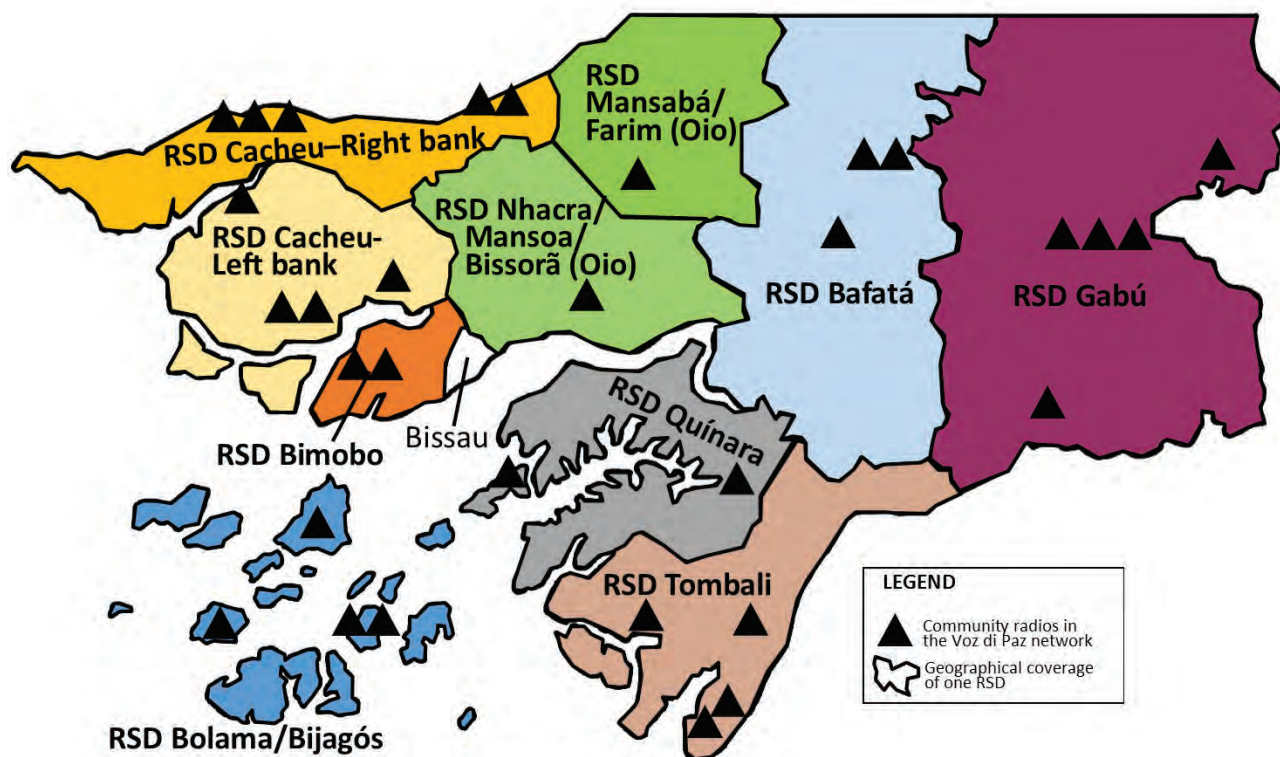
The presence of the State at the local level through its representatives is non-existent or marked by dire lack of resources. One manifestation of this non-existence of a local structure for governance by the State is the fact that Guinea-Bissau has never had any municipal elections.

A network of RSDs across the country

Confronted with the weakness of State institutions and tensions relating to previous violent conflicts, the creation of a culture of

1. Voz di Paz, Roots of Conflicts in Guinea- Bissau: The voice of the people, (2010). <http://www.interpeace.org/publications/guinea-bissau/40-roots-of-conflicts-in-guinea-bissau-the-voice-of-the-peopleenglish>

Geographical coverage of Regional Spaces for Dialogue in Guinea-Bissau



dialogue remains indispensable for the re-establishment of relations characterized by confidence between the population and the State and in order to jointly find solutions which allow to overcome their conflicts.

To address this need for dialogue, Interpeace and its partner in Guinea-Bissau (initially the National Institute for Studies and Research, later on Voz di Paz) established the Regional Spaces for Dialogue (RSDs) in 2007, in each of the eight regions of the country.² These RSDs enable Voz di Paz to mobilize the population and the authorities at the local level all over the country to participate in the process of

2. In the two regions Oio and Cacheu, the natural barriers relating to access and transport are so significant that it was necessary to establish two spaces in each of the two regions to enable effective dialogue between the population and the ERDs. The Cacheu region is divided into the left-bank and the right-bank and the Oio region is divided into Mansaba/Farim and Nhacra/Mansoa/ Bissorã.

dialogue that the organization is undertaking in every part of the country to resolve the obstacles to peace.

Furthermore, the RSDs pass on information to Voz di Paz and thereby enable it to remain connected to the population all over the country in a context where the lack of road infrastructure and a geographical landscape characterized by a large number of rivers, swamps and islands make access to the population difficult.

This way, Voz di Paz can transmit local perspectives on peace and conflicts to policymakers at the national level.

“My reputation has been enhanced and today I am very much known in my zone [for my mediation work]. That is the reason why I am continuing.”

An elderly person, member of the RSD in Quínara

“On several occasions, they [RSDs] have invited the police, the authorities, the military and the population to talk freely. This has brought about friendships between the population and the police. Today, the police invites the population to their celebrations.”

Member of the RSD in Gabú

A group of legitimate personalities

The term “space”³ does not refer to a physical structure such as a fixed building. It rather refers to a group of between 5 and 20 persons who live in the different administrative sectors of a region. These are personalities who have been carefully chosen by Voz di Paz through consultations with the population because they enjoy a high degree of legitimacy and are widely respected by the people of their region as a result of their integrity, independence and wisdom. They are community, religious and/or traditional leaders or journalists who serve voluntarily⁴ in the RSDs. The role they play is highly appreciated by the population, further

enhancing their legitimacy and reputation within their respective communities and thus constituting an additional source of motivation for the members of the RSDs.

If the existence of a conflict comes to the attention of the members of the Spaces, they go to the particular location of dispute, either alone or with several members.

A “space for dialogue” is therefore a platform and a moment of dialogue for conflict prevention and management created by the members in response to the needs of the population and to the circumstances in time. This high level of flexibility is necessary for the adequate management of conflicts and is not a ready feature of a fixed physical space.

3. The use of the word “space” was suggested by a participant in the course of the dialogue in 2007.

4. In general, Voz di Paz transfers a compensation, every two months, to cover transport and communication fees. This financial support is however subject to available funding.



Journalist, member of the RSD in Cacheu-Left bank

B. How do the Regional Spaces for Dialogue contribute to Peace?

According to the members of the RSDs and other community leaders⁵, the work of the RSDs since 2007 has contributed to changes in attitude and behavior on the level of individuals, the community and the society as a whole. This change is demonstrated by an openness to dialogue and a commitment to peace resulting in a reduction of violence and a prevention of the escalation of conflicts.

The main activity of the RSDs is the mediation and facilitation of dialogue between the stakeholders in order to develop in a consensual manner solutions and concrete actions to manage local conflicts without

resorting to violence. This may concern conflicts between individuals, within the family, between communities or between State representatives at the local level and the population. The areas of disagreements vary depending on the regions. They include in particular, access to land and natural resources, domestic violence, sexual abuse, the actions of the local authorities, religious cohabitation, criminal activities and insecurity. The members of the RSD engage in a separate dialogue with each of the different parties to the conflict and then encourage them to engage in a dialogue among themselves. By providing a platform for exchanges in which the participants feel confident and secure, the RSD provides the opportunity for all the parties to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution.

Each RSD counts at least one journalist from a community radio station among its

5. These perceptions were compiled during focus group discussions with members of the RSDs in the regions of Bafatá, Biombo, Cacheu-Left bank, Gabú, Quínara and Tombali and during interviews with other community leaders from 22 to 26 July 2014. The total number of RSDs visited: 6 out of 10 RSDs; the total number of members visited: 32 out of the 76 members (42%); the number of women among the members visited: 10 (31%).

“We do not wait for people to call us. We proceed directly to the location once we hear there is a problem.”

Imam, member of the RSD in Bafatá

“Our part of the work is reconciliation. Our work is to create harmony in the community.”

Chairperson of a women’s association, member of the RSD in Biombo

members. This integration of radios in the RSDs is all the more important as the radio is the first source of information for the majority of the population⁶. Consequently, the radio is an indispensable tool for the RSDs for awareness raising among the population and the local authorities regarding conflicts and their management through the process of dialogue. Every week, each of these community radio stations broadcasts two different programmes on peace produced by Voz di Paz. On the whole, 90 peace programmes are broadcast about 6000 times in a year through the network of community radio stations.⁷

6. In 2004 (more recent statistics have not been published) the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated that radio broadcasts in Guinea-Bissau reach 75% of the population, with more households owning a radio than a television set (27.5% as against 25.7%). Furthermore, only 5% of the population had mobile telephone subscription and less than 2% of the population used internet facilities. These statistics are quoted from “ICT in West Africa” from the website: <http://www.home.uni-osnabrueck.de/uafemann/PDF-Dokumente/ICT%20in%20West%20Africa%20-%20Frankfurt%202006.pdf>

7. Every year, Voz di Paz produces almost 90 different radio programmes on peace, with a length of approximately 45 minutes each. Each of the community radio stations broadcasts two weekly programmes every week. On the whole, 35 radio stations collaborate with Voz di Paz to produce more than 6000 broadcasts of these 90 programmes on peace per year. Among these 35 radio stations, 31 collaborate with the RSDs

Resolution of more than 200 conflicts since 2011⁸

People interviewed in the framework of the present study have given many meaningful examples of conflict resolution that illustrate the contribution of Regional Spaces for Dialogue to peace.

Settling religious disputes

In the Quinara region, an Arab country had financed the building of a mosque for a group of non-natives from Guinea-Conakry. Traditionally, it was the group of native “Elders” which took decisions on the construction of mosques, the site where it would be built as well as the choice of the Imam to be leading the mosque. These Elders wanted the mosque to be built in their part of the community and not in the part of the non-

and four radio stations are located in Bissau.

8. In 2011, the RSDs supported the resolution of 60 conflicts all over the country. In 2012, they resolved 110 conflicts. Since 2013, the exact figures have not been documented and therefore cannot be published with credibility.



natives. They had decided to send the matter to the police but the members of the RSD feared that seeking redress with the police would lead to an escalation of tensions. They therefore initiated several meetings with the stakeholders including the authorities. A formal consensus was able to be reached: The construction of the mosque would take place as planned by the people of Conakry, but the use of the mosque should benefit the entire community. This formal agreement was transmitted to the authorities to enable them to continue with the building of the mosque.⁹

Strengthening governance

In the Biombo region, the inhabitants of a village had agreed that the governance of their village should alternate between people of different age groups every four years. But at the end of four years, the group consisting of the oldest people who were holding power

refused to relinquish power to the younger ones. Consequently, the old people and the young ones were no longer greeting one another. The situation was tense to the extent that violent confrontations were expected at any moment. When the members of the RSD heard about the conflict, they convened a meeting with the leaders of the two groups. After several direct discussions with the older people, the members of the RSD organized a forum of dialogue for one full day between the two groups. This way, a solution was found and the youths were able to take their turn in the governance of the village.¹⁰

9. Members of the RSD in Quinara.

10. Member of the RSD in Biombo.

“Before [the Regional Spaces for Dialogue] in the community, thieves were beaten when caught. Today, it is no longer done this way. Previously, [people in the community] fought and argued a lot. Today, they say ‘sorry’ and they move on with their life.”

Traditional chief, member of the RSD in Quínara

“Voz di Paz ensures that people speak out loud about their concerns. They have created a feeling of citizenship and confidence in the individual strengths of every person.”

Catholic priest in Cachungo, Cacheu region

Improving security

In the Cacheu region, in 2007, the theft of cattle was rampant. Cows play a role similar to modern banks, because someone can buy a cow to preserve his wealth and sell it to obtain cash. This cultural value of the cow means that the theft of a cow can create very strong and violent reactions. The population was complaining about the inability of the State and the military to protect their property, so they created vigilante and self-defense groups. This created tension between the population and the military since the civilians do not have the right to carry arms. Being in direct contact with the population and having knowledge of the conflict zones, the members of the RSD, in numerous cases have used dialogue to bring the different parties to

arrive at a solution. However, when the RSD comes to the realization that an intervention by the authorities or the police is necessary, they bring the issue to the attention of State representatives at the local level, with the help of, among others, the community radio station. As a result of this advocacy, the police have established a rapid response squad against cattle theft.¹¹ The reduction in theft cases resulting from this move has allowed for the self-defense groups to be resolved. The effects of this conflict have been felt at the highest level of the State, including the President of the Republic, because the people organized a march to Bissau to voice their concerns. Voz di Paz and the RSD supported this political process and thus enabled the

11. Members of the RSD in Cacheu and the former administrator of Cachungo, Cacheu region.



Bafatá community radio station

politicians at the topmost level to come to the Cacheu region to find a solution.¹²

Reducing the harmful practices against women

In the Quínara region, the incidents related to forced marriages and female genital mutilations have reduced in recent years.¹³ The RSDs directly contribute to this reduction of these harmful practices through denunciation via one of the 31 community radio stations which collaborate with Voz di Paz and the RSDs. Thanks to the journalist at the community radio station, who is a member of the RSD, all members of the RSD can use the community radio station as a platform to denounce malicious acts that come to their attention (e.g. domestic violence,

forced marriages). The risk of hearing one's name mentioned publicly on a radio station in relation to such acts creates fear of social repercussions and seems to dissuade people from inappropriate actions.¹⁴

12. Former administrator of Cachungo, Cacheu region.

13. Opinion leader, member of the RSD in Quínara.

14. This prevention mechanism through radio stations was explicitly mentioned by the RSDs in the regions of Biombo, Cacheu-Left bank and Gabú.

“The fear of being presented on the radio as a person committing bad acts makes people reduce their foolish behaviors. Forced marriages and domestic violence have reduced considerably.”

Journalist at the community radio station, member of the RSD in Cacheu-Left bank

“The work is done in collaboration with the radio stations which broadcast messages of peace and mediation in the whole region. This allows the population to understand. The work of radio stations reduces the number of conflicts.”

Chairperson of an association, Coordinator of the RSD in Gabú

Collaboration and complementarity between the RSD and the police in the Bafatá region

“The RSD cannot intervene when 20 people confront each other with violence. When the RSD is informed about a conflict, they inform the police. The RSD engages in mediation to see if the situation can be resolved without resorting to the courts. In case it is not possible, the RSD accompanies the judicial process to ensure its smooth functioning. But, there are difficult situations where the arms [of the police] should not be used but which can be resolved through mediation. The collaboration greatly empowers the RSD since the RSD enjoys our support.” - Commissioner of Police, Bafatá

Improvement of relations between the population and the State representatives at the local level

Beyond the short-term resolution of conflicts, the engagement by RSDs contributes to improving relations between the population and representatives of the State at the local level in the long term. It does this by building a “bridge of understanding”¹⁵ between the two sides, thus creating an effective collaboration.

The members of the RSD broadcast messages via the radio stations that reflect the concerns of the population compiled during the course of their work. In this way they regularly inform the representatives of the State at the local level about the perspectives and concerns of the population, which the authorities are often not aware of as a consequence of the weakness of State institutions and their

15. Former Regional Secretary, member of the RSD in Bafata



physical absence from certain locations.

What is more, a collaboration has emerged between the RSDs and some regional and local authorities (police, administration or judiciary). The fact that the RSDs enjoy the confidence of both the population and the State authorities enables them to communicate the information and opinions of these two sides. The objective is to enhance the confidence and encourage the direct collaboration between the State representatives at the local level and the population. In Biombo for example, thanks to the work of the RSD, the people express themselves before the State authorities on “concerns they had never expressed before”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Chairperson of a women’s association, member of the RSD in Biombo.

A community of peacebuilders at the national level

In addition to the beneficial effects at the local level, the RSDs have laid the foundation to contribute to peace at the national level since they constitute a national community of peacebuilders.

The term “Regional Spaces for Dialogue” is known and understood by their members. Nevertheless, they identify and introduce themselves in public as members of “Voz di Paz” and not of the RSDs. This feeling of belonging to a national community is nurtured by Voz di Paz. Once a year, and until recently, a national meeting was organized in Bissau for the members of the RSDs to allow for an exchange of ideas and to take stock of annual activities. Owing to these strong interpersonal links, the RSDs and Voz di Paz form a community of peacebuilders at the national

“We are one family, and we grow together.”

Journalist and member of the RSD in Bafatá

“There was a subsidy, but it is no longer there. That does not stop anything because we are working for peace. The work the Spaces are doing is for the future of our children.”

Chairperson of a women’s cooperative and Chair of the RSD in Biombo

level which goes beyond regional divisions. Thus, the RSDs are trustworthy community-based institutions at the local level which, at the same time, enjoy national coverage. Currently, the State cannot demonstrate these two assets. The State could, therefore, rely on the RSDs when it attempts to establish its presence at the local level throughout the country or to accompany the implementation of public policies which are likely to increase the risk of tension between the various communities. The RSDs have a potential to contribute to changes on the level of the whole of society, thus contributing to consolidating peace in Guinea-Bissau.

Little support, big impact

However, this great potential to contribute to peace at all levels remains to be exploited further and requires minimal financial assistance.

The 2012 *coup d'état* had led to the imposition of diplomatic sanctions against Guinea-Bissau by the international community. Consequently, most of the assistance earmarked for peacebuilding was suspended until the 2014 elections. This situation has, since May 2013, forced Voz di Paz to stop payments meant to cover the transport and communications expenses of the RSDs.¹⁷

The suspension of the basic operating funds forced the members of the RSDs to reduce the scope of their activities at the local and community levels to correspond to their own resources. The national meetings between the members of the RSDs from the various regions were no longer held. Even within the same region, members living in the different sectors found it difficult to join their efforts together in order to intervene in complex conflicts. In spite of the lack of resources, the RSDs have continued to work with devotion.

17. This was a fixed amount paid every two months.



This shows that the commitment to peace on the part of the members of the RSDs is not conditioned by money.

A relatively moderate annual financial package of about 30,000 euros would enable all the members of the 10 RSDs to solve their problems in the areas of transport, communications and access to the people, and, therefore, make a big impact on the contribution of the RSDs to peace at the local and regional levels. Building on the action which is adapted and recognized at the local level, such assistance would also enable the RSDs to consolidate their community of peacebuilders beyond the regions and, by so doing, to enhance their impact at the national level.

C. Conclusion

The 10 Regional Spaces for Dialogue (RSDs) constitute a sustainable infrastructure for the promotion of a culture of dialogue capable of managing conflicts in a non-violent manner and developing consensual solutions. Through their activity, they make an important contribution to peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau.

– Through the promotion of a culture of dialogue, the RSDs are playing a crucial role within their communities to help in the identification of **concrete non-violent actions to manage and prevent conflicts**, and to improve relations between the citizenry and representatives of the State at the local level. Since 2011, the RSDs have

“Peace is a plant which must be watered in order to grow roots and to last. The people must hear “peace” until they can hear no more. If a single year passes without an activity [of Voz di Paz] and without listening to “peace”, it is very dangerous because peace in Guinea-Bissau is still fragile.”

Former Regional Secretary and member of the RSD in Bafatá

been supporting the non-violent resolution of more than 200 conflicts in diverse areas like insecurity, governance, religion and violent practices against women.

- Through their sense of devotion and volunteerism, the members have **truly taken ownership** of the objective and functioning of their RSD, thereby laying the foundation for the **sustainability of the RSDs**.

- Thanks to their geographic coverage, the RSDs have **access to the people of Guinea-Bissau and the local authorities throughout the country**.

- Moreover, given that radio remains the main source of information, **31 community radio stations**, which constitute an integral part of the RSDs, make it possible to raise awareness of the population as well as the authorities on a large scale. Every week, each of these community radio stations airs two different programmes on peace produced by Voz di Paz. Other actors engaged for peace and development could **tap into the network of RSDs** in order to design and implement their programmes.

- The lack of financial support forces the members of the RSDs to restrict their activities to the local and community levels. Funds for their basic operations can enable them to realize their full **potential to build a national community of peacebuilders** which can become a factor of change for peacebuilding at the national level. A financial support of about **30,000 euros per year** would cover the operating expenses (communications and transport) of all members of the 10 RSDs.

- The RSDs are **trustworthy institutions at the local level which are in close contact with the population**. Since the State lacks this quality, it could, therefore, rely on the RSDs when it attempts to establish its presence at the local level.

- The experience of the RSDs is an asset which, if passed on and shared more broadly, can **inspire other peacebuilders** in Guinea-Bissau and beyond.

Voz di Paz and Interpeace

Since its creation in 2007, Voz di Paz - Iniciativa para a Consolidacao de Paz (Voice of Peace - Initiative for Peacebuilding), is working in partnership with Interpeace.



Voz di Paz is a Bissau-Guinean organization working for the peaceful development of its country by contributing to civic engagement for social cohesion and the modernization of institutions. The long-term mission is to address the obstacles to peace in Guinea-Bissau by promoting a culture of dialogue and engaging all sectors and levels of society in the peacebuilding process.



Its partner, **Interpeace** is an international organization recognized for its approach to accompany and strengthen the capacity of societies in building lasting peace.

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