

The Network for
Religious and
Traditional
Peacemakers



**Supporting efforts in engaging with local religions and
traditional leaders in Burkina Faso and Mali**
A Baseline Study

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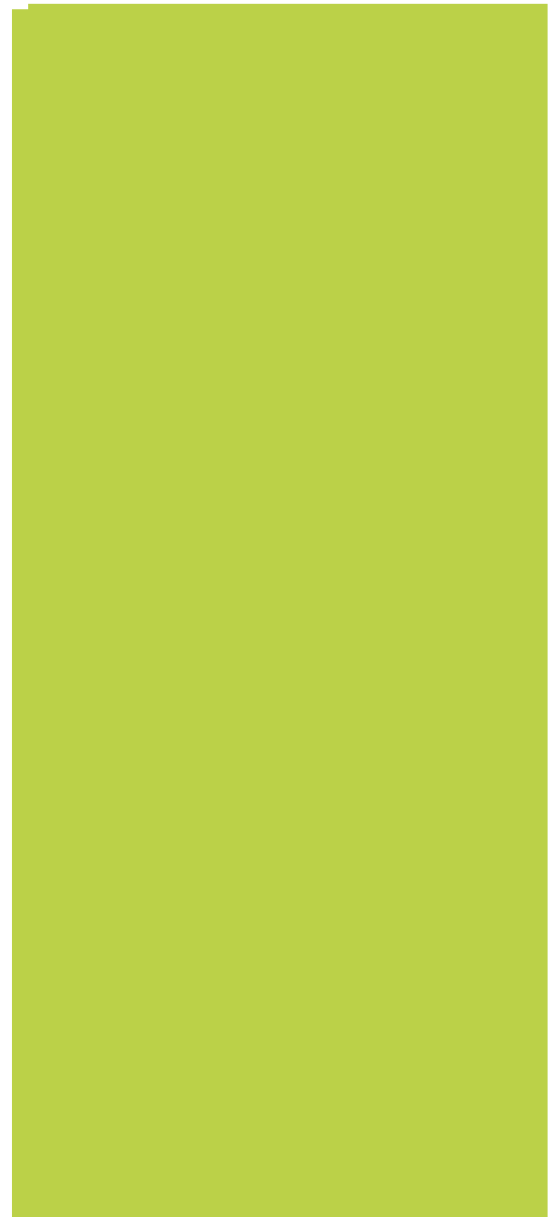


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List of Abbreviations

IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
MINUSMA	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration
VEOs	Violent Extremist Organizations ¹
ISGS of	The Islamic State In the Greater Sahara, constituted the local branch of the Islamic State Group
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, an umbrella coalition of al-Qa'ida aligned groups

¹ For a comprehensive overview of VEOs in the Sahel, please see ECFR: Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel, available at: https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping#introduction

Executive Summary

Since 2012, instability in the Sahel has contributed to ongoing humanitarian crises, insecurity, and illicit activities. Moreover, instability in Mali and Burkina Faso sponsored the growth of a large number of violent extremist actors, criminal groups, and a host of armed actors. What has facilitated the growth of armed groups is their ability to exploit the existing weak governance structures. This allowed various actors to sponsor religious propaganda and incite inter- and intra-communal conflict amongst religious and ethnic groups.

The escalation of violence in Burkina Faso and Mali is, thus, foremost a dynamic that takes place at the local and regional levels. Previous resilience mechanisms have been dismantled. For example, in Burkina Faso, a tradition of social cohesion and tolerance seems to have evaporated. Likewise, similar traditions in central Mali have not been able to stop the rapid growth of non-state armed groups ranging from vigilantes, VEOs, and ethnically aligned militias.

This report zooms in on the local conditions by highlighting the role of religious and traditional authorities in four communities in central Mali and western Burkina Faso. In both countries, the history of minimal government presence outside of capital cities has allowed religious and traditional authorities to play significant roles in local governance, security, taxation, and conflict mediation. The rise of armed group activities and a pre-conflict legacy of delegitimizing traditional and religious leaders by the state means the roles of these community leaders has diminished. Despite these challenges, research suggests traditional and religious authorities still yield influence. The shifting norms have created space for new actors to potentially influence peace processes in the region, including VEOs.

This baseline study asks how international and national peacebuilding actors can support traditional and religious authorities and social groups such as women and youth in peacebuilding and conflict prevention and transformation.

To this end, this study uses a mixed-method approach of desk literature review and in country fieldwork research in four locations in central Mali and western Burkina Faso. These four locations have been chosen to reflect both zones of active conflict (central Mali) and of relative peace (western Burkina Faso). This allows to consider both the role in peacebuilding and conflict prevention as well as conflict transformation.

The research finds a pervasive distrust within and across communities in active conflict zones (central Mali) but also in areas not yet affected by major conflict (western Burkina Faso). In Mali and northern Burkina Faso, social cohesion is tested by the encroachment of non-state armed groups while gaining momentum in southwestern Burkina Faso.

For traditional and religious leaders the primary consequence of these tensions is that they are frustrated with the state, the influence of armed groups in their areas, and particularly with their diminished legitimacy to engage in peacebuilding and justice practices. They point not only at the state, but also at nongovernmental organizations; our research suggest that community leaders feel “unheard” by nongovernmental organizations and government actors.

Moreover, other social groups to include youth and women expressed similar sentiments. Youth and women are generally considered to be marginalized in Sahelian societies. Our research finds they are disappointed in the limited space they have to express their views and opinions. They point to nongovernmental organizations but also traditional and religious leaders as actors who do solicit their participation in conflict prevention activities but argue their presence is often cosmetic and a tick-the-box exercise rather than genuinely inclusive.

Instead, as women and youth find themselves in greater positions of authority given the shifting roles and dynamics of traditional leaders and men threatened by armed group presence, they are trying to renegotiate their roles in conflict resolution practices, and in society generally. This shift could greatly impact peacebuilding dynamics, which must begin taking previously “unheard” voices into account alongside the traditional voices that, today, also feel “unheard.”

This report suggests three foundational recommendations and three technical recommendations on how international and national peacebuilding actors can support traditional and religious authorities and social groups. It is paramount that technical recommendations are not divorced from the wider conflict dynamics. Therefore, we start out with three main, foundational elements that should inform the response to the conflicts in Mali and Burkina Faso and are to be considered as necessary conditions for the technical recommendations of this report.

Foundational Recommendations:

1. The main focus of international and national actors should rest on reforming the current governance system, particularly the plurality of governance actors.
2. Supporting communal leaders and community groups such as youth and women in issues of conflict resolution and peacebuilding may not bring desired results as long as the lack of accountability for grave human rights violation is not addressed.
3. Interventions to support local conflict-resolution and peacebuilding will have to account for the different conflict environment in which traditional and religious authorities operate, as well as the different social constructs in which youth and women are allowed to take a leading and participatory role.

Technical Recommendations:

1. Supporting local-level peace agreements and conflict resolution mechanisms as a part of peace consolidation by following up on existing and future local agreements, starting conversations about engaging in negotiations with violent extremist actors, and ensuring key recommendations are actually accounted for and implemented.
2. Supporting traditional and religious authorities, whose capacities for effective conflict resolutions have been reduced over time, through capacity building activities and to support community engagements on religious topics as religion has become increasingly instrumentalized by violent extremists.
3. Pushing for greater inclusion of existing local peace building mechanisms by ensuring the involvement, leadership, and decision-making opportunities of key social groups such as youth and women. This allows for broader engagement of sections of society to create

more buy-in for peace, and thus builds a more complete picture of the breadth and scope of conflict's impacts and potential resolutions.

Introduction

The ongoing violent conflict in Mali since the 2012 uprising in the north has sponsored the spread of insecurity and violence within the Sahel region of Africa. After Mali neighboring Burkina Faso experienced a significant rise in violent conflict since an uprising in 2014 and attempted coup in 2015. Weak and poor governance and rule of law are the root causes of the rapid expansion of non-state armed groups in both countries.

Presently, armed group formation, the spread of violent extremism, and intercommunal and ethnic tensions characterize Mali and Burkina Faso.² Extremist groups have been able to capitalize on the absence of security and the grievances of local populations toward a neglectful central state.³

Yet, this does not imply a complete absence of governance. Traditional authorities⁴, such as tribal chiefs, and religious leaders have performed key governance tasks in the region since pre-colonial times, which have earned them a high degree of legitimacy.⁵ These traditional and religious authorities engaged in justice provision and conflict mediation, and they form a source of community unity through their influence based on ethnic affiliation and religious status. In areas where the government's presence is either limited or non-existent, traditional and religious authorities are crucial entry points for local dispute resolution and mediation initiatives.⁶

Previous research conducted by Clingendael investigates how the rise of armed groups in in the Sahel has impacted the legitimacy of traditional and religious authorities.⁷ The research, based on more than 300 interviews and more than 30 focus group discussions with traditional and religious authorities, finds how traditional authorities' legitimacy and ability to govern has decreased due to the rise in armed groups.⁸ Due to insecurity and direct targeting of traditional authorities, many forced to be displaced in search for safety. The research also

² Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) database

³ International Crisis Group. *Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural*, 2017.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>

⁴ As noted in our earlier work, „Traditional authority is derived from custom, where people obey a certain person or office (monarchs, tribal shamans, etc) because ‘it has always been that way’.” Traditional Authorities in Mali and Burkina Faso can take the shape of customary figures such as village and district chiefs and religious figures such as marabouts or Imam (see Chapter 3.3 for an elaborate discussion). Hereafter, the terms ‘traditional authorities’, ‘customary leaders’, ‘traditional leaders’ will be used interchangeably. For more details on traditional governance structure in the Sahel, see: Molenaar et al 2019: *The Status Quo Defied*.

⁵ Logan, C, 2013. *The roots of resilience: Exploring popular support for African traditional authorities*. African Affairs.

⁶ Ursu, A.E, 2019. *Under the gun: Resource conflicts and embattled traditional authorities in Central Mali*. The Clingendael Institute. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/under-the-gun.pdf>

⁷ Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute.

<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/legitimacy-traditional-authorities-mali-niger-and-libya>

⁸ Ibid.

found that armed actors have strategic interests to engage traditional authorities.⁹ Therefore, international engagement should build on the notion that traditional authorities can play important roles in preventing large-scale conflict and conflict mediation.¹⁰

Yet, traditional leaders are generally overlooked in international policy discussions on countering violent extremism and stabilization practices.

I. Methodology

This baseline study asks how international and national peacebuilding actors can support communal governance actors—specifically traditional and religious authorities—and societal groups such as women and youth in peacebuilding and conflict prevention and transformation.

To this end, this study applies a mixed-method approach combining a desk-based literature review with qualitative data collection in four selected municipalities in Mali and Burkina Faso. The selected municipalities allow for a comprehensive overview of local peacebuilding initiatives and capacity needs, representing two distinct cases in the Sahelian conflict panorama. For Mali, the study focuses on peacebuilding and conflict resolution experiences of communities at the center of violent conflict, central Mali. The two selected municipalities include Mopti in central Mali, and Bamako, where a significant part of internally displaced people (IDPs) from Mopti has sought refuge. In Burkina Faso, the two selected municipalities Bobo-Dioulasso and Banfora are located in the west of the country, and therefore in geographies not yet gripped by the conflict dynamics that have taken hold of northern and eastern Burkina Faso. By combing zones of active conflict and of relative peace, this municipality selection allows for a preventative approach to peacebuilding in the Sahel—a crucial necessity because of the rapidly developing geographic expansion of violent attacks.

In each municipality, local research teams conducted four focus group discussions per town with up to 10 participants, including traditional and religious authorities, and women and youth representatives.¹¹ In addition, a total of 15 key informant interviews were conducted to capture gaps in engaging communal peacebuilding actors and the benefits and challenges (inter)national organizations encounter. A full list of Focus Group Participants and Key Informant Interviews will be shared in a separate note.

In order to address how peacebuilding actors can make better use of communal governance actors and social groups, this report is structured as follows.

⁹ Raleigh, C. & de Bruijne, K., 2015. *Where Rebels Dare to Tread: A Study of Conflict Geography and Co-option of Local Power in Sierra Leone*. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 61. 10.1177/0022002715603767.

¹⁰ Boone, C., 2017. *Sons of the Soil Conflict in Africa: Institutional Determinants of Ethnic Conflict Over Land*. *World Development*. 96. 10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.03.012.

¹¹ Due to COVID-19 restrictions on international travel, the data collection was carried out by a team of national researchers. National COVID regulations were followed at all times and, where possible, Key Informant Interviews were carried out online.

In the first step, we provide a comprehensive background of the context of peacebuilding efforts, shaped by differing conflict dynamics, international interventions and violent extremist actors in which traditional and religious authorities take on governance roles.

In a second step, we turn towards local perceptions of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. We specifically investigate the role that traditional and religious leaders take in disputes and conflict resolution and provide insights into local peacebuilding initiatives. Subsequently we investigate the inclusiveness of existing approaches, by dissecting the inclusivity of both pre-existing efforts of conflict-resolution efforts and the governance provided by traditional and religious communal leaders.

As a third step, we analyze the level of inclusivity that communal actors – both governance providers and social groups such as youth and women – experience on the side of national and international stakeholders.

Lastly, we provide an analysis of our key findings and outline the general preconditions for successful local peacebuilding and a series of technical recommendations of how to best engage peacebuilding actors on the communal level.

II. Background: Conflict Dynamics and Peacebuilding in Mali and Burkina Faso

3.1 Conflict Dynamics

Since 2012, instability across the Sahel, specifically in Mali and Burkina Faso, has contributed to ongoing humanitarian crises, political insecurity, illicit economic activities, and the spread of criminal and violent extremist networks. These networks of armed groups have demonstrated an acute ability to exploit weak governance to sow religious propaganda and incite inter- and intra-communal conflict amongst a variety of religious and ethnic groups. The resulting violence has negatively impacted community resilience and social cohesion. The escalation of violence at the local and regional levels is becoming particularly acute in Burkina Faso, previously considered a relatively stable country and regarded as socially cohesive and tolerant.¹² In central Mali, the rapid growth of non-state armed groups ranging from vigilantes, VEOs, and ethnically aligned militias created under the pretext to protect their community has disrupted normal life, especially among youth.

In both countries, the history of minimal government presence outside of capital cities had created a space for communal leaders, namely religious and traditional authorities, to play significant roles in local governance, security, taxation, and conflict mediation. Traditional leaders noted during focus group discussions that they used to be heard at the beginning on the conflict, but now youth are voluntarily joining armed groups. One traditional leader highlighted the impact of armed group presence on education, saying that in Fatoma commune, Mopti region, a commission helped re-open schools, but after armed persons

¹² Gosselin, L.A. *What is behind the attacks against the Christian community in Burkina Faso?* The Conversation, 22 July 2019.

calling themselves the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) arrived they ordered all teachers to leave the area.

Government inability to manage conflicts ongoing for the past decade coupled with its delegitimizing of religious and traditional leaders has led to a proliferation of non-state armed groups, some aligned with violent extremist organizations that wield religious propaganda and the rhetoric of equality and brotherhood.¹³ Further, the presence of these groups has promulgated the proliferation of small arms and light weapons amongst not only extremist groups linked to al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State but also the innumerable non-state self-defense groups that have taken on a vigilante-like role in their stated aims to protect their communities.¹⁴ A youth focus group participant from Mopti characterized the ongoing conflict, saying,

“This conflict and the insecurity that you see in the region is due to the lack of employment because ever since the 2012 crisis in the North, youth have witnessed the state’s failure, and with the proliferation of small arms, people are obtaining weapons to at first conduct banditry in the region, and today, terrorism.”¹⁵

Such a dynamic results in increased violence, increased inter- and intra-communal conflict around security measures, and increased ethnic tensions due to human rights abuses by these groups.¹⁶ As conflict worsens, displacement because of violence, as well as climate-related disasters going back decades, creates even greater food insecure conditions because of the poor agricultural outputs and cross-border trade outcomes.

In both Mali and Burkina Faso, the absence of government authorities is long standing and predates the current context of violent extremism, popular uprising, and political coups d'états in 2012 and 2020 in Mali, and the 2014 uprising in Burkina Faso. The 2012 rebellion led by secular armed groups and furthered by jihadist groups in northern Mali eventually spread insecurity to other parts of the country including central Mali's Mopti region and surrounding area referred to as the *zone exondée*.¹⁷ The area, which has extremely limited government presence, is where VEOs began relocating in 2015 after a peace agreement in the north, and where decades-long ethnic tensions over scarce land and natural resources have gone unchecked by both government and religious and traditional leaders. These tensions, stoked by the behaviors and rhetoric of jihadist group presence, have evolved into increased armed group presence and communal violence between rival Fulani and Dogon ethnic groups.¹⁸ ***“From the severe crisis in 2018 to the present day, communities no longer give each other gifts; they kill, and they kill each other,”*** a traditional leader said.¹⁹ A religious leader from Mopti, Mali, said during a focus group discussion that although the security situation has continued worsening since 2015, religious authorities ***“have used all the means***

¹³ Gosselin, L.A. *What is behind the attacks against the Christian community in Burkina Faso?* The Conversation, 22 July 2019.

¹⁴ Sollazzo, R. & Nowak, M. *Tri-Border Transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire-Mali Region*. Small Arms Survey, October 2020.

¹⁵ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021 Mopti, Mali

¹⁶ Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group. *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*. November 2020.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group. *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*. November 2020.

¹⁹ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

at our disposal to resolve the security problem in our region.²⁰ Even so, in 2019, the area accounted for 60 percent of conflict-related deaths in Mali.²¹

In Burkina Faso, areas along the borders of Mali and Niger, generally considered socially cohesive, are now facing not only conflict from outside violent actors but also conflict amongst herders and farmers and along social lines, similar to Mali. Within these contexts, criminal networks and violent extremist groups are exploiting the gap in government presence to further their nefarious activities. In Burkina Faso, the slow decentralization processes that began in the early 1990s during a sweep of democratization across the Sahel is attributed to the central government's effort to block political ownership of local reforms, including the incorporation of local voices in budgeting processes.^{22,23} Therefore, local officials facing weak state systems began engaging in patronages that served their individual interests to maintain political power.

The onset of decentralization in the 1990s introduced local elections, thereby transforming the local level into an arena to contest the position of traditional leaders through the introduction of elected office. As a result, traditional elites became invested in capturing political office in order to cement their position and guarantee access to resources.²⁴ The resulting politicization of traditional authorities negatively impacted the status of local traditional leaders. Previous Clingendael research underlines how the politicization of traditional authorities is perceived to undermine their impartiality. As a consequence, citizens express a strong preference for a clear separation of traditional leaders from politics.²⁵

Ultimately, for Burkina Faso, the system of clientelism and cronyism coupled with the ongoing weakness of the government both centrally and locally has been attributed to former president Blaise Compaoré's resignation in October 2014, which has been cited as dismantling key political and security structures in addition to ending the government's relationship with non-state armed groups and jihadist groups aligned with al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) cultivated by Compaoré.²⁶ Since then, al-Qa'ida and Islamic State affiliated groups have rapidly spread across northern and eastern Burkina Faso. Consequentially, the northern border areas of Côte d'Ivoire are also impacted by non-state armed group movements in Burkina Faso—as well as Mali—resulting in a nearly 200 percent increase in violent attacks between 2019 and 2020.²⁷ Focus group respondents in southwestern Burkina Faso near Côte d'Ivoire highlighted the importance of reinforcing social cohesion at the family and

²⁰ FGD Religious Leaders, 7 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

²¹ International Crisis Group. *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*. November 2020.

²² Kaboré, A., Siboné, E., Abari, M. & Boukary, I., 2014. *Governance at the Grassroots: An Analysis of Local Government Structures in the Sahel Regions of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali*. Catholic Relief Services.

²³ Champagne, E. and Ouedraogo, B.M. 2008. "Decentralization in Burkina Faso: A Policy Reform Process in Slow Motion." Georgia State University.

²⁴ Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute. p.41

²⁵ Goff, D., Diallo, M., and Ursu, A., 2017. *Under the microscope, Customary justice systems in northern Mali*. The Clingendael Institute.

²⁶ Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

²⁷ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) database

community level, as well as sensitizing youth about violence and extremism, to prevent conflict.

3.2 A multidimensional localized conflict

A number of military interventions at the international level have occurred in an effort to stabilize the spreading conflict and to address extremist threats. These interventions are centered in Mali and include the European Union Training missions, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA), and the French-led military Operation Barkhane, active since 2014 to counter the Islamic extremist presence. Additionally, the G-5 Sahel, a regional entity made of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, was created in 2014 to improve coordination around issues related to countering security threats and engaging in military actions against extremist groups.²⁸ These engagements, whether military or political, are not necessarily well received, with one traditional leader in Bamako insisting that the international community, under France's leadership, wants anarchy and not peace in Mali.

Despite international intervention, 2019 was the most violent year in the Sahel since the 2012 Malian uprising began.²⁹ Even with the successful individual operations, as a whole, these efforts have not resulted in significant success in stabilizing or securing the area from extremist influence. A woman respondent from Mopti said the military response is not working, suggesting the presence of military worsens the violent targeting of villages by extremists.

“Soldiers cannot be everywhere at the same time,” she said. “Their short stays hardly help because the mujahedeen return a few hours after they leave to preach and to punish all those who from near or far collaborated with the army during their stay.”

While local jihadist groups have been linked to global Islamic violent extremist organizations throughout the conflict, their largely independent decision making suggests their aims and objectives are localized.³⁰ One religious authority respondent from Mopti said, ***“Jihadists are not in conflict with the populations but with the state.”***³¹ Additionally, the 2017 amalgamation of groups associated with al-Qa'ida, forming *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM), suggests that perhaps the nature of conflict in JNIM areas of operation have become more localized or even regional, making the draw toward participation in jihadism more aligned with sociopolitical and economic issues than religious ones.³² Examples include real or perceived injustices around land resource allocation that are exacerbated by climate shocks and poor public access to state institutions, communities' perceptions of increased security needs in the absence of state security presence, and opportunistic moves by criminal

²⁸ French Foreign Ministry. *G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance*. June 2019.

<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/crises-and-conflicts/g5-sahel-joint-force-and-the-sahel-alliance/>

²⁹ Pellerin, M., 2019. *Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving From Jihadism to Insurgency?*. Ifri.

³⁰ Ibrahim, Y.I., 2019. *Insurrections Djihadistes en Afrique de l'Ouest : Idéologie Mondiale, Contexte Local, Motivations Individuelle*. Cairn.

³¹ FGD Religious Leaders, 7 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

³² Pellerin, M., 2019. *Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving From Jihadism to Insurgency?*. Ifri.

networks for profit purposes.³³ This does not negate the pull toward jihadist groups at the local level on an individual basis, as some testimonies indicate in both northern and central Mali.³⁴ A Mopti youth respondent said jihadist groups provide monetary support, despite the risks, for **“an unemployed youth who has become bitter, embittered, and stressed by their corollary poverty.”**³⁵

In another instance demonstrating the more local nature of jihadist activity, as ISGS began moving into more traditionally JNIM areas, Fulani fighters within JNIM began shifting allegiance to ISGS, demonstrating that the Fulani-centric ISGS could have more draw for ethnic reasons—not religious reasons.³⁶ The argument that conflict has taken on an insurgent nature over time threatens the ability of international institutions to react, as their focus remains on the religious extremist component of the ongoing violence.

Regardless, jihadist violence post-2016 has at times reflected a religious nature. In 2016, Amadou Koufa, the deputy supreme leader of JNIM and key figure for the jihadist group in central Mali, was against the targeting of Christians.³⁷ Instead, in Mali, where 93 percent of the population identifies as Muslim, local Muslim imams and chiefs within the *zone exondée* were targeted, attacked, and threatened if they did not abandon their communities.^{38,39} However, particularly in the more religiously diverse Burkina Faso, Christian leaders and churches have come under attack in parts of Burkina Faso. Although Burkina Faso is majority Muslim, 61 percent, 23 percent report following a Christian group and 15 percent maintain indigenous traditional beliefs.⁴⁰ Some have advanced the argument that by April 2019 it had become a strategy for jihadist groups to target Catholic and Evangelical churches in an attempt to break down the fabric of religious co-existence and that Catholics specifically in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso are seen as foreigners aligned with the state, therefore making them appropriate targets for violence as opposed to Christians in eastern Burkina Faso who are more tightly enveloped within society.^{41,42} Overall, local Muslim leaders have called on members of their community not to see the conflict as religious, specifically Muslim-Christian conflict.⁴³ In places such as Banfora, one religious authority respondent noted inter-religious initiatives are occurring under the guise of social cohesion.

While experts and researchers have focused on narratives demonstrating the nuances of the conflict beyond the more global, religious-centric narratives, they have also characterized the positive role traditional and religious leaders are capable of across the region through participation in conflict resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding. Particularly amongst

³³ Pellerin, M., 2019. *Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving From Jihadism to Insurgency?*. Ifri.

³⁴ Ibrahim, Y.I., 2019. *Insurrections Djihadistes en Afrique de l'Ouest : Idéologie Mondiale, Contexte Local, Motivations Individuelle*. Cairn.

³⁵ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

³⁶ Pellerin, M., 2019. *Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving From Jihadism to Insurgency?*. Ifri.

³⁷ Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

³⁸ Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

³⁹ Gellar, S., 2020. *Steps Toward Peace: A Conflict Assessment of the Liptako-Gourma Zone Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*. Catholic Relief Services.

⁴⁰ US Department of State, 2019. *Report on International Religious Freedom: Burkina Faso*.

⁴¹ Gosselin, L.A. *What is behind the attacks against the Christian community in Burkina Faso?* The Conversation, 22 July 2019.

⁴² Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

⁴³ Thurston, A., 2019. *Escalating Conflicts in Burkina Faso*. Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung.

populations older than 35, high levels of trust are placed amongst these local leaders, who actively engage in traditional conflict resolution despite their limitations because of central government delegitimizing efforts and of violent targeting by non-state armed groups (see annex 1).⁴⁴ Such leaders continue playing influential roles, most recently at the national level in 2020 in Mali, when some influential religious leaders including Salafist imams such as Mahmoud Dicko led the Movement of June 5 called for the resignation of former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. His removal from office was ultimately successful in August 2020 after a military coup.⁴⁵ While these leaders supported the August 2020 coup, they are in the minority amongst religious leaders.⁴⁶ Salafism's growth in popularity amongst youth represents a disturbing trend away from religious co-existence because it abstains from interfaith dialogue and religious acceptance. However, it is also important to distinguish Salafism and other Muslim belief systems in the area such as Sufism from the political ideology that drives jihadism, or violent religious extremism.

Outside of Muslim populations, the same trend away from religious co-existence is also seen in some Evangelical churches that do not accept other religious groups and target Muslims with proselytization.⁴⁷ Christian proselytizing by Evangelical groups is increasingly occurring online through social media, as well as efforts on an individual level amongst Christians and Christian leaders to engage with global religious networks.⁴⁸

3.3 Communal Leaders as Governance Actors

In Mali and Burkina Faso, traditional authorities can be differentiated according to their key responsibilities: administrative; resource-related or religious. Positions of traditional administrative leadership at the municipal level vary according to the level of urbanization and settlement of a given locality. In urban settings, traditional authorities in each district hold the position of district chief or "chef de quartier;" in rural settings, traditional authorities include the village chief and his advisors; and in nomadic settings, traditional authorities hold the position of fraction chief.⁴⁹ The term 'traditional' thereby refers to the customs and traditions on which they are designated in each village, district, or fraction.⁵⁰ Traditional authorities holding key responsibilities regarding the access of natural resources include the chief of land, chief of water or chief of pastures. Religious authorities on their part include the position of Imam or Priest and Pastor in Burkina Faso – or the position of Marabout.

⁴⁴ Gellar, S., 2020. *Steps Toward Peace: A Conflict Assessment of the Liptako-Gourma Zone Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*. Catholic Relief Services.

⁴⁵ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) database.

⁴⁶ Gellar, S., 2020. *Steps Toward Peace: A Conflict Assessment of the Liptako-Gourma Zone Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger*. Catholic Relief Services.

⁴⁷ Gosselin, L.A. *What is behind the attacks against the Christian community in Burkina Faso?* The Conversation, 22 July 2019.

⁴⁸ Gosselin, L.A., 2018. *Médias 2.0 et Églises chrétiennes au Burkina Faso*. Centre d'expertise et de formation sur les intégrismes religieux, les ideologies politiques et la radicalisation (CEFIR).

⁴⁹ Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute. p. 39

⁵⁰ Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute.

Typology of traditional and religious authorities⁵¹

Administrative Criteria	Resource Criteria	Religious Criteria
Village Chief + Village Council (between 5 – 15 members depending on population)	Chief of Land (Tengsoaba in Burkina Faso)	Imam (prédicateur) or Priests and Pastors
Fraction Chief + Fraction Council (in a nomadic setting)	Chief of Water (in central Mali)	Cadi (in northern Mali)
District Chief + District Council (in urban settings)	Chief of pastures (Djoro in central Mali)	Marabout
	Chief of Forests	

Whereas traditional leaders hold a prominent role in local governance, their legal status across the Sahel varies to a great extent. In Mali, a 2006 law on the administration of municipalities defined traditional authorities as community representatives vis-a-vis state administration. The law outlined the responsibilities and roles for traditional authorities, including the administration of villages, fractions or neighborhoods, and were responsible for mediation between community members, basic service provision, and tax collection.⁵² Yet, while traditional authorities position are hereditary, their appointment needs to be certified by a local representative of the state administration. In reality, the overwhelming majority of traditional authorities in Mali—while officially recognized governance authorities—have not been officially confirmed in their positions.⁵³

In addition to these traditional authorities of administrative value, traditional leaders – also called customary chiefs—similarly occupy positions regarding the governance and access to land and natural resources. In central Mali, the position of Dioro (Jowro) signifies the ‘Master of Land,’ as a Dioro holds significant value in granting access to pastures in the Mopti Delta—a key concern for pastoralist communities. In addition to traditional and religious authorities, each ethnic group in Mali includes social groups of experts in mediation and conflict reconciliation. These are usually composed of different castes such as blacksmiths or griots.⁵⁴

In contrast to Mali, traditional authorities in Burkina Faso are not officially recognized by the constitution.⁵⁵ Yet, their role as crucial communal governance actors dates back to pre-

⁵¹ Ursu, A. 2018. *De perspectives locales aux stratégies nationales : une feuille de route pour la complémentarité entre la justice étatique et les mécanismes traditionnels de règlement des litiges au Mali*. A Clingendael Institute Study.

⁵² Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute. p. 41

⁵³ Goff, D., Diallo, M. & Ursu, A., 2017. *Under the microscope: Customary justice systems in northern Mali*. The Clingendael Institute.

⁵⁴ This data collection focuses on traditional leaders playing a central role in local administration, and not on individuals of various castes.

⁵⁵ Tiendrebeogo, A., 2013. *Municipalities: Failure likely*. Development & Cooperation (D&C).

colonial times.⁵⁶ Among the Mossi, the predominant ethnic group in Burkina Faso, the position of “Tengsoaba” constitutes the “chief of land”. As chief he is responsible for questions of land access and allocation, as well as the distribution of natural resources and the settling of conflicts surrounding these issues. In addition to these land-related traditional positions, traditional authorities in Burkina Faso also take on a more administrative character as which they act as village chiefs similarly to the case of Mali. While the position of Tengsoaba and village chief can represent two distinct roles, in western Burkina Faso these responsibilities are usually combined in one position.⁵⁷

In addition to traditional authorities holding both administrative and resource related responsibilities, religious authorities such as Imams and Marabouts hold a less pronounced but still crucial role in local governance. As preachers of Islam, their position ascribes them to the roles of community actors of great moral value who regulate morality within communities.⁵⁸ Their importance as entry points to rural communities has similarly been recognized by VEOs, making them one of the primary targets as jihadist actors attempt to establish presence in selected zones. In central Mali specifically, Imams were among the first targets of spreading jihadist violence in early 2015, as well as other notables of the region.⁵⁹

At the local level, traditional authorities and religious leaders have played an important role in maintaining some semblance of rule of law and order, despite the violent threats in some areas and the overall reduced legitimacy. A traditional leader in Bamako said,

“Some of us are no longer credible in the eyes of our communities. The latter feel abandoned because many [traditional leaders] do not go beyond key cities [Mopti in central Mali for instance] for fear of being kidnapped by jihadists. They are very afraid of [Amadou] Koufa’s men [jihadists].”

IV. Traditional leaders in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: Local Perceptions of Malians and Burkinabé

Key Findings

- Traditional and religious authorities identified multiple conflicts and disputes ranging from family and relationship disputes, land access and natural resources management, religious and ethnic tensions, disputes related to lines of succession for key village leaders, and ancestral issues around inheritances. According to

⁵⁶ Beucher, B., 2017. *Manger le pouvoir au Burkina Faso. La noblesse mossi à l'épreuve de l'histoire*. Karthala Les Afriques.

⁵⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Burkina Faso: *Autorités traditionnelles et institutions coutumières*. http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/country-profiles/listcountries/customarylaw/traditionalauthoritiesandcustomaryinstitutions/fr/?country_iso3=BFA

⁵⁸ Hagsberg, S., 2019. *Chefs coutumiers et responsables religieux* in: Sécurité par le bas. Perceptions et perspectives citoyennes des défis de sécurité au Burkina Faso'. Uppsala University.

⁵⁹ Thiam, A., 2017. *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée*. Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire.

participants, these types of disputes can turn into social issues that spark deep-rooted inter and intra community tensions.

- According to our respondents, conflicts at times become complex for traditional and customary authorities to resolve involving sometimes so much anger and bias that it becomes difficult to resolve. This dynamic suggests that social tensions have negatively impacted customary justice processes and legitimacy. Therefore, with poor legitimacy at the customary and the state justice levels, the opportunities for violent conflict become more likely.
- Religious and traditional authorities are sometimes emboldened to participate in social cohesion activities by sharing amongst one another, particularly through social media applications such as WhatsApp. Interviews suggest that social networks have become one common method for religious and traditional leaders to engage with youth; one respondent credited their engagement with youth on various initiatives for the ability to understand how to use social networks.
- Community relations in central Mali and western Burkina Faso differentiate markedly. In central Mali the breakdown of social relations amid violent conflict has let certain sections of society, especially women and youth to challenge pre-existing social hierarchies and the traditional leaders guarding them. While community conflict-resolution initiatives illustrate a more inclusive character where supported by external stakeholders, traditional and religious leaders themselves are generally not perceived to be inclusive as such. This is to a lesser extent shared by respondents in Burkina Faso, who point more to a dynamic of traditional marginalization than outright exclusion.
- Across both countries, women and youth representatives express their desire for increased involvement in both local conflict-resolution and peacebuilding.
- In Mali and Burkina Faso, women's inclusion in local conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms remains shaped by gendered inequalities in which women's role is largely confined to the domestic sphere.⁶⁰ As men are typically assigned agency in the public sphere, women's role in conflict resolution is largely omitted despite individual examples of inclusion.
- Youth respondents, men and women, in both Mali and Burkina Faso indicate regular collaboration and inclusion in processes led by communal leaders. Nonetheless, the data points to a considerable mismatch between how religious and traditional leaders perceive inclusiveness of their initiatives and mechanisms, and how it is perceived by youth themselves.
- National and International stakeholders stress the relevance of including both traditional and religious leadership as entry points to communities, and the inclusion of youth and women in order to ensure broad buy-in. Yet, they also flag a number of challenges in engaging traditional leaders, including the politicization of communal authorities and the role of ideology as a barrier to inclusive peacebuilding. In central Mali, respondents similarly underline how traditional authorities at the highest echelon of social hierarchies should partially be considered as a source of grievances

⁶⁰ According to the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, Mali ranks 143 out of 146 countries. See: UNDP Human Development Report 2011.

on the communal level – particularly by marginalized social castes and groups. In both countries, the lack of formal recognition (in Burkina Faso) and its implementation (in Mali) is considered a further barrier to stakeholders who struggle with the plurality of local governance actors and initiatives.

4. Roles in Conflict Resolution

4.1 Disputes and Conflict Resolution

Residents of the research locations in Burkina Faso and Mali are exposed to a variety of conflicts that are addressed through mediation and conflict resolution practices. Traditional and religious authorities identified these conflicts and disputes as ranging from family and relationship disputes, land access and natural resources management, religious and ethnic tensions, dispute related to lines of succession for key village leaders, and ancestral issues around inheritances. While they did mention their roles in awareness raising and sensitization of youth to promote social cohesion and peace, women and youth respondents more clearly placed themselves within the context of armed conflict as both those personally affected and those who can play defining roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Focus groups discussions indicated that traditional authorities in all locations are most clearly engaged in local-level justice provision and dispute resolutions related to land access and natural resources management. These types of disputes can quickly turn into social issues that spark deep-rooted inter and intra community tensions, according to a traditional authority respondent from Bobo-Dioulasso. One respondent in Mopti added that judgments made by traditional authorities, or other *“agents of justice”* are not always resolved amicably, at which point the government justice system gets involved even though the respondent said he knew ***“few actors in conflict who have been satisfied with the country’s justice system because it is so partial.”***⁶¹ The same respondent added that both sides to a conflict must be reasonable, but there is sometimes so much anger and bias that it becomes difficult for traditional authorities to engage in customary justice processes. This dynamic suggests that social tensions have negatively impacted customary justice processes and legitimacy; therefore, with poor legitimacy at the customary and the state justice levels, the opportunities for violent conflict become more likely.

Traditional authorities indicated they consistently engage with youth, government, security officials, and religious leaders on information and awareness campaigns centered around social cohesion, and to offer guidance and council related to conflict resolution.

“We all play a role in supporting all initiatives, wherever they come from, so long as they lead to something viable for Central Mali and for its populations,” a Mopti respondent said. ***“If it is necessary to pray to God, to take action, to preach the good word, to put forth a good proposal, nothing is off limits at this time, in my opinion, to allow Mali and its central region to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”***⁶²

⁶¹ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁶² FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

Information and awareness campaigns, which respondents said generally target male and female youth, focus on social cohesion, peace, and respect—with an urgent goal to dissuade youth from engaging in violence and fighting. A respondent in Bobo-Dioulasso said that when engaging with youth in peace-related activities, there is a focus on guiding youth to accept themselves and to accept others, to build a culture of forgiveness, and to adopt good behavior. Traditional authorities appeared to be more engaged in youth awareness campaigns in Mali research locations compared to Burkina Faso research locations, which could potentially be attributed to the different contexts of peace and security in southwestern Burkina Faso compared to Central Mali and Bamako. However, respondents in Burkina Faso noted the latent conflict and the risk of worsening conflict, and one respondent said,

“We must now certainly increase the number of consultation meetings to take into account their concerns and obtain information under the guise of monitoring and early warning.”⁶³

Most notably, traditional authorities are actively engaged in providing guidance and council to not only families or communities but also to government, security, and other partners in peace and security. Often times, one respondent in Mopti explained, traditional authorities are considered to be the village chief, but he noted that the village council members are also relevant to social cohesion and violence prevention. He indicated that traditional authorities are taken advantage of and used for their knowledge without any acknowledgement or follow up. He said partners underestimate the village council:

“They use us to achieve their goals of successful meetings and leave by throwing us out like old sponges. From the beginning of the crisis, we’ve been contacts and associated with endless meetings with lovely recommendations at the end each time. But the fact is these recommendations have never been taken into account—no follow up and no evaluation to see the changes.”⁶⁴ ***Most of us volunteer using the means we have, but we would benefit from the support of partners who advocate, sensitive, and train communities and preventing and managing conflicts.”***⁶⁵

While it is concerning that traditional authorities—who are considered key contributors to preventing and countering violent extremism—perceive that their collaborations are not respected or taken seriously, the respondents did overall express they play a role in ending the crisis. Another respondent from Mopti added,

“Our role is to propose solutions to end the crisis and to support the good proposals of others. This is why we, traditional authorities, are receptive to all good initiatives to end the crisis in Mali, especially in Central Mali. Because it is time for this crisis to end.”⁶⁶

⁶³ FGD Traditional Leaders, 21 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

⁶⁴ Traditional authorities are structures acknowledged by law, supported by state and international partners.

⁶⁵ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁶⁶ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

If “conflict” in Mali is viewed through a perspective of violent armed conflict, particularly given the references to small arms, then the traditional authorities in Burkina Faso see “conflict” through the lens of resource access and allocation. Social cohesion, according to respondents, is related to respect for all cultures and religions—particularly around community level disputes over natural resources. **“The disputes we face are generally issues related to land tenure—the anarchic occupation of spaces, which creates disagreements within communities,”** a traditional leader from Banfora said.⁶⁷

Land issues and access to the scarce water running through the “sacred backwater” in Bobo-Dioulasso were also highlighted. Traditional authorities did express feelings of frustration that politics interferes with customary practices. In Burkina Faso, a Bobo-Dioulasso respondent said important decisions are often made without including customary authorities. For example, government authorities selected the site of a new Chinese-funded hospital on forest land without consulting traditional authorities, resulting in an uproar in the community. **“Ultimately, it was the traditional authorities who found the current site of Pala for the hospital’s construction in place of the old site, which aroused strong tensions within the Bobo-Dioulasso populations and even nationally,”** the respondent said.⁶⁸ In another instance, a traditional authority said traditional authorities were not included in a project to drain sacred water, though they are responsible for the resource management of the water and for protecting the catfish living within the water source.

Religious authorities mostly reported resolving disputes related to relationships, family issues, and forced marriages. Notably, religious authorities representing both Muslim and Catholic communities reported similar types of dispute resolution practices. Religious authorities who participated in the Mopti focus group discussions, similar to traditional authorities, said their positions also result in invitations to participate in meetings with government, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and others to discuss conflict mediation practices. They also reported engaging with the government and security forces—urging them to act on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

“The peace so sought after will come when the government of Mali decides to play a role with all its fullness,” one religious authority said. “To do this, the state must fight against the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and above all, put an end to vigilante groups.”⁶⁹

One way religious authorities in Mopti are tackling the presence of armed groups is by engaging with individuals and groups described as “mujahedeen” or “jihadist.” A Bamako religious leader said:

“We are associated [with initiatives] along the way. This is because the jihadists are looking for something. If we do not ask them what it is, we will not be able to find a

⁶⁷ FGD Traditional Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

⁶⁸ FGD Traditional Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

⁶⁹ FGD Religious Leaders, 7 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

solution. It is through our position as religious leaders, as belonging to the communities, as our geographical origins, that we are able to speak with them.⁷⁰

Some religious leaders suggested that marabouts have been corrupted and now align with jihadist groups out of greed, opportunism, and individualism—twisting the word of God. This, they said, makes the work of religious authorities even more critical. One respondent said, ***“We are the real actors of reconciliation in the sense that we are able to discuss [with jihadists] counter arguments in front of the various mentors and preachers associated with jihadist armed groups.”***⁷¹

Religious authorities are sometimes emboldened to participate in social cohesion activities by sharing amongst one another, particularly through social media applications such as WhatsApp. Interviews suggest that social networks have become one common method for religious leaders to engage with youth and armed group members; one respondent credited their engagement with youth on various initiatives for the ability to understand how to use social networks. Another respondent said he recently created a WhatsApp group for both Fulani and Dogon marabouts (religious scholars) and religious leaders to engage in social cohesion through religious traditional activities and to ***“try to save the little that remains of social cohesion in the central region (of Mali).”***⁷²

With religious and traditional leaders playing the roles of guide, counsel, and oftentimes mediator in conflict, youth and women place themselves more directly in the pathway of the violent conflicts ongoing for nearly a decade in Mali and half a decade in Burkina Faso. Youth respondents overwhelmingly said their role in conflict resolution is not necessarily to mediate existing conflict but to be made aware of the importance of social cohesion and to support awareness raising initiatives to prevent future conflict. But the positionality of such sentiment varied depending on the location of the respondents.

The words of a youth griot in Bamako, who implied that griots—who play multiples roles as historians, storytellers, musicians, and artists—live peaceful lives and rely on peaceful conditions to earn money through performances at cultural events was in some ways echoed by a Fulani woman in Bamako who similarly implied that the violence perpetrated by Donsos against the Fulani negatively impacts the financial wealth of females.

“With the carnage in Fulani villages in 2018, with a friend we together encouraged young Fulani men to care for the safety of their own,” she said. “Because after each attack on a Fulani village, the women are stripped of their gold and silver jewelry. It had to end, or at least not remain unpunished.”⁷³

This financial aspect to the conflict contrasted deeply from testimonies of youth in Mopti who spoke of awareness raising activities to encourage youth to pursue employment and income-earning opportunities outside of banditry and armed groups. ***“Young people need to be aware,”*** one youth respondent said. ***“We have to work and learn to earn a living with the***

⁷⁰ FGD Religious Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁷¹ FGD Religious Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁷² FGD Religious Leaders, 7 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁷³ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

sweat of our brow.⁷⁴ The Mopti respondents described the challenges to dissuading youth—people from their own age groups and communities—from joining armed groups when ***“having to support oneself is what is desired. And the solution is there despite the risks.”***

All the Mopti youth respondents contended that youth must work together through any means possible to support initiatives that consolidate peace and dissuade youth from joining armed groups. One respondent participates in peace caravans. Two of the respondents suggested the future of Mali is dependent upon the roles of youth in either engaging in conflict resolution with the support of local authorities or in taking the political position of building a “new Mali.” One respondent said:

“To face this crisis, young people must help in the entire and total demolition of present-day Mali so that it rises from the ashes. Mali needs to sacrifice at least a generation to build itself ... It is the conscious youth who will pull Mali out of this hole, inshallah. If not, with the old wolves, they have nothing; they want to line their pockets with taxpayer money.”⁷⁵

This passionate rhetoric again contrasts with youth from Burkina Faso, who see their roles as engaging in participatory processes and governance alongside government and local authorities. For example, youth focus group participants said their role in conflict prevention includes cooperating with authorities on security matters and directly contacting them with any information about suspicious activities. They, too, have participated in and contributed to awareness-raising campaigns. However, much of the work that male and female youth organizations and youth groups engage in is preventative. ***“We organize ourselves in small neighborhood groups,”*** a Bobo-Dioulasso youth respondent said. ***“So that no young person remains isolated for a long time because we are aware that loneliness also constitutes a danger for emotional stability.”***⁷⁶

Women in Mali and Burkina Faso say they see themselves as already playing pivotal roles in conflict prevention and conflict resolution by educating their children, promoting behavioral changes in their male family members, and participating in peace and awareness raising activities. Interestingly, while tropes around women being mothers, daughters, and wives are at times dismissed, female respondents truly saw their positions of influence in conflict roles as stemming from their familial connections with male armed grouped members. One respondent said women can dissuade everyone from children to brothers to husbands from both joining [armed groups] and also from giving up. This matches with what a Bamako female respondent said about buying cola nuts for men to encourage them to join militias and protect “their own.”

However, women also said their roles are underestimated and taken for granted. ***“People don’t believe in the power of women,”*** a Mopti respondent said. ***“But everyone knows that every jihadist, every hunter, and every militiaman comes from a woman ... The people who sow terror in communities are our own sons.”***⁷⁷ Another respondent from Bobo-Dioulasso

⁷⁴ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁷⁵ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁷⁶ FGD Youth Leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

⁷⁷ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

said outside the home, women are seen as merely symbolic in their presence during activities with traditional and political authorities. She felt “used” as a prop or ornament, much like other respondents in Bobo-Dioulasso who said they felt used as messengers of information, recommendations, and instructions. Meanwhile, another respondent said women have important things to themselves share because they are well informed about social dynamics.

Those women who did participate in engaging conflict prevention activities outside of their homes said they organized a women’s march for peace and social cohesion and participate in women’s associations to share recommendations about maintaining peaceful coexistence within their communities and amongst all women. They also made clear that their voices are either diminished or not heard because, as one respondent in Mopti said, **“Men try to control everything.”**⁷⁸ A Bobo-Dioulasso respondent said, for example, men seek the advice of women in the evenings inside the home, and then resolve conflict during the daytime using the guidance provided by their wives. **“Why not, therefore, acknowledge us (women) directly for our knowledge in broad daylight?”** the respondent said.⁷⁹ Women respondents indicated genuine interest in participating in conflict mediation and conflict resolution trainings for future activities.

4.2 Local Initiatives and Conflict Resolution

Religious leaders on their part predominantly state that they are involved through the organization of public prayers – sometimes including national leaders – and as mobilizers of community members.⁸⁰ Customary, traditional practices were also highlighted, demonstrating to cultural traditions embedded in conflict prevention practices. These practices are built into the fabric of societies, and the promotion of such ceremonies could be considered a valuable component of social cohesion practices. For example, in Bobo-Dioulasso, traditional authorities said they sometimes make sacrifices or offerings to ancestors in exchange for the protection of their communities. **“They sometimes anticipate certain negative situations that could arise, thanks to the occult and premonitions from the ancestors,”** a researcher said.⁸¹

Women respondents reported more positive progress in their participation in local conflict resolution processes. One Mopti female respondent said that after trainings or meetings with nongovernmental organization, her female group works together to brainstorm new ideas for community projects. Another Mopti respondent say women consult with traditional and religious authorities about their conflict prevention and conflict management ideas. The respondent said religious authorities strongly support their efforts, and traditional authorities make conflict management decisions with women’s knowledge and joint effort. Women in Mopti also appear to have support beyond the local level, receiving support from women’s organizations and women leaders at the regional and national levels.

Women’s abilities to mobilize and to engage with traditional, religious, security, or government authorities on security and surveillance issues could possibly be somewhat

⁷⁸ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁷⁹ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

⁸⁰ FGD Religious Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁸¹ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

impeded by the lack of organized structure in their planning. In Mopti, women said they are not involved with security activities. And, in Banfora, women meet with one another to instead discuss how to take simple security measures to ensure their own safety when participating in conflict prevention activities. Some female respondents in Banfora reported being threatened or intimidated by male youth during activities.

Given the sensitivities around religious co-existence in Burkina Faso locations with both Muslim and Catholic populations, a number of civil society organizations focus on promoting and protecting rights are religious. These groups are often centered around youth and youth activities.

- Banfora: Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne (Young Christian Students), Association des Elèves et Etudiants Musulmans au Burkina (AEEMB), the Youth Assemblies of God (JAD), and the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina (FAIB)
- Bobo-Dioulasso: FAIB, AEEMB, and a variety of church unions and Catholic student youth groups including the Basic Catholic Community and the Association of Female Catholics (AFC)

In Banfora, Catholics and Muslims organize a joint Islamic-Christian conference to encourage inter-religious dialogue. Youth are considerably active in Banfora, and are able to engage with a range of authorities through the National Observatory for Conflict Management and Prevention, which has an early warning initiative that supports conflict management and prevention. Youth also mobilized during a community conflict involving two Goin ethnic group chiefs by working to restore dialogue and awareness, and reduce tensions. ***“Young people were strongly involved in this crisis through strong initiatives to sensitize youth themselves so that youth weren’t exploited in this conflict, which they did through repeated approaches to several traditional religious, and government authorities,”*** a Banfora respondent said.

Awareness raising and sensitization activities occur to some degree across the research locations, and media was referenced in a number of examples of local initiatives. These public-facing activities can, however, be challenging for participants. In Mopti, a youth respondent said young people participate in radio broadcasts about what makes a happy community. The respondent said his experience has been challenging because people call in during the program to make comments about youth and because he feels there is no state anymore. ***“Despite this,”*** he said, ***“we do our best to educate our comrades of the same age to lay down arms through advocacy and awareness sessions on the radio.”***⁸² Another youth Mopti respondent said awareness raising is hard because all youth have different mindsets.

In Mopti, religious leaders similarly reported engaging with armed group members on WhatsApp, sometimes at great personal risk, to counter the messaging of VEOs who post content online. These examples underline the crucial role that religious leaders can take as an intermittent actor capable to engaging VEOs.

4.3 Cooperation with Traditional and Religious Leaders

⁸² FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

Traditional authorities themselves indicate struggles in collaborating with government authorities. Traditional authorities from all locations engage with government but with different objectives. In Mopti, for example, one respondent said he has a strong relationship with the government in reporting displacement into his community so that the displaced can be relocated to camps. However, another respondent explained that local authorities are beneficial for publicity. ***“Intercommunity conflicts are often managed internally, but to publicize them through media, we often need the presence of local actors to show the outside world cases of success,”*** the respondent said.

In Burkina Faso, however, traditional authorities appear to very rarely collaborate with government, and respondents suggested that government authorities hinder traditional and customary practices for conflict resolution. Respondents suggested that collaboration occurs during moments of crisis. For example, a Banfora respondent said that when the Comoé Sugar Company (SOSUCO) factory could not operate, it caused a local economic crisis, and traditional and religious authorities had to step in to resolve the crisis and restart economic activity. The lack of positive collaboration described in the interviews suggest that traditional and government authorities in Burkina Faso struggle over power and influence in the communities where research occurred.

Organizations working on conflict and violence prevention acknowledged that cooperation with both traditional and religious authorities is important for a variety of reasons, including, at the minimum, to better understand a local context for program design purposes. A number of organizations also referenced the importance of collaborating with traditional authorities on issues around justice. One organization said campaigns for access to justice and creating village-level committees to address legal issues is supported by traditional authorities. ***“For us, all these actors help prevent conflicts and consolidate peace and stability within members of the community,”*** the respondent said.

Traditional and religious leaders found nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to be more trustworthy than other actors, especially international actors. In some cases, religious leaders in Bamako suggested NGOs were partners in peace, and in other cases they noted their roles in negotiating for the safe release of kidnapped humanitarian aid workers. In all the examples of cooperation provided by Bamako religious leaders, respondents saw themselves as playing a key role in the ability of NGOs to conduct their work in Central Mali.

5. Community Relations and Inclusivity

5.1 Community Relations

Any support for communal leaders such as religious and traditional authorities is likely going to impact an already fragile and precarious balance of community relations in the midst of violent armed conflict. While traditional and religious leaders are perceived as highly legitimate governance actors across the Sahel, our data collection illustrates how their

position has become increasingly challenging as pre-existing social hierarchies are questioned.

This is especially evident in central Mali, which has been the epicenter of proliferated violent conflict for the past five years. Even as the city of Mopti is considered relatively safe due to the presence of United Nations peacekeeping mission MINUSMA, respondents characterize community relations as rife with distrust.

According to traditional leaders in Mopti, key points of community disagreement revolve around opposing views on the implementation of sharia law, the proliferation of bandits and criminals within the community, and aggravated levels of violence by community self-defense militias.⁸³ While self-defense militias, such as the Dogon and Fulani militias, have portrayed themselves as protectors of communities, both traditional and religious respondents of our focus group discussions in central Mali strongly criticized the groups for their escalation of socio-economic and ethnic community divisions. As one traditional leader expressed it, those ***“community self-defense groups have become anything but protectors. They expose their communities to the fury of opposing militias and radicals.”***⁸⁴

Amid insufficient formal justice mechanisms, years of violent conflict have led to the breakdown of social cohesion among communities. In this context, even minor disagreements among community members can lead to a violent settlement of accounts.⁸⁵ Women representatives from Mopti detailed how pervasive mistrust is splitting families along ethnic conflict lines, as relatives comprising both ethnic Dogon and Fulani—two opposing ethnic groups in central Mali—refuse to even speak to one another.⁸⁶ Crucially, female respondents originating from Mopti underline how these tensions have similarly started to seep into social relations in the capital. As one women religious leader in Bamako explained:

“At present, it is even difficult to approach one’s neighbor who is from another community. We celebrate our weddings without being able to associate our Dogon or Bambara neighbors because we are potential adversaries. There is resentment all the way to the capital. Rare are the marriages of Fulani people in Dogon country in which Dogons take part and vice versa. The same goes for baptisms and funerals. Moreover, the situation in Bamako is tense and even very serious.”

This breakdown of social relations has similarly challenged pre-existing social hierarchies. Where formerly great respect was extended to elders, the command of arms by youth now compels youth to a greater authority. According to a group of youth leaders in Bamako, in the context of the conflict in central Mali, ***“The social hierarchy has been shaken up everywhere. Young people are armed at the center and dictate their law to their parents without their parents deigning to talk about their birthright. Gunmen are better listened to than older people since the crisis broke out.”***⁸⁷ An NGO program officer similarly noted the challenge of engaging youth in peacebuilding initiatives, stating ***“We have noticed that 80 percent of the***

⁸³ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁸⁴ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁸⁵ FGD Religious Leaders, 7 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

⁸⁶ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁸⁷ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

combatants in the armed groups are young [male] people. They are the ones fueling the conflicts.”⁸⁸

This has especially challenged the position of community elders holding informal governance positions, such as traditional chiefs and religious leaders. Youth representatives from Bamako originating from Mopti referenced how members of violent extremist groups can break existing social norms even without carrying their weapons, without anyone daring to question him. As one respondent explained: **“Just as the presence of an old man could influence a debate among young people, so the presence of a child/teenager who was a supporter of jihad influences the debate in an assembly of old elders.”⁸⁹**

In addition to the disruptive impact of conflict on social hierarchies, the advancement and access to social media has further facilitated the flattening of existing orders. With no barriers to express and educate themselves online, young people are capable of tackling subjects that older people remain cautious about tackling.⁹⁰ According to a youth leader in Bamako: **“With social networks, there is no respect for elders because there is no longer an age to speak in public or to talk about this or that subject. Everybody talks and no control. So the way is open to anyone who wants to give their opinion on any event.”⁹¹**

Conflict dynamics have similarly had significant influence on the role of women in society. Female respondents in general are very aware of the subordinated role attributed to them in society. According to a women focus group participant in Burkina Faso:

“As in Burkina Faso as a whole, women play a marginal role and are confined to secondary activities. For men, women have to take care of their homes as those who take care of household activities, make children and often take care with their own resources of the expenses related to the provision of food for the family and especially for their children. In rural areas, this is even more serious, as they are the first ones to take care of the fields as well.”⁹²

In central Mali, the pervasive disruption of everyday life by the conflict has reshaped gender roles drastically. Women are increasingly responsible for sustaining their family unit and household, and men’s roles are constrained in the face of VEO threats. This opened up opportunities to transform pre-existing social norms and roles, allowing for opportunities to “question the traditional order.”⁹³

⁸⁸ KII SFCG, Bamako, Mali.

⁸⁹ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali. “For example, a 16-year-old teenager came to find us at the door of a CSCoM in the delta in 2018. We were having tea there. He came and sat next to us. Whenever the tea was ready, he was the first to be served without anyone flinching. In normal life, it would be served last or he wouldn’t even dare to sit next to us.”

⁹⁰ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁹¹ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁹² FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

⁹³ Raineri, L., July 2020. *Dogmatism or pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*.

International Alert. ; Chauzal, G and Gorman, Z. 2019. *Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali*, SIPRI Report.

Female respondents in Mali stressed how their responsibilities have significantly expanded in the face of violent threats against men by armed groups. Describing their new role, one female respondent in Bamako explained:

“It is the woman who is in charge of the family because the men in our community can no longer play their role if they go outside; they are threatened with death.”

A woman leader originally from Mopti described how women’s roles have evolved from being an observer of the public sphere to being the only actor within the family unit. ***“In the beginning, we were spectators of everything that was being done, but today we are not only actresses but the only actresses because men can no longer go out.”***⁹⁴

Another Mopti respondent expanded, saying the role of men in the face of threats has significantly diminished. ***“Our men can no longer graze their animals in certain bush areas, can no longer cultivate their fields in remote bush areas, let alone fish in certain waters of the Niger River. Our men are also unable to trade or travel without fearing for their lives.”***⁹⁵

As a consequence, respondents are faced with increased pressure to provide for the family unit on top of their household responsibilities. As women are exempted from threats, they are left to take on the majority of tasks formerly carried out by men. Another female respondent from Bamako described the situation as follows:

“We women do everything to keep our families, our men, our husbands, our fathers, our brothers alive. We do everything we can to bring together the essentials so that everyone can eat. It is our wives who are now being asked to pay for condiments, cereals, etc. So everything that concerns the necessary needs of the family, it's up to the women to take care of it.”⁹⁶

Witnessing the effect of conflict on the men in their surroundings, has heightened the responsibility put on women to engage in peacebuilding efforts and conflict resolution.

According to Malian respondents from Mopti: ***“The role of the women of the center is above all to fight for the return of peace. Women must do this because ‘ndjidjam hoorè worata daandè’—‘the blood from the head will not spare the neck.’ If we don't try to stop the conflict, we will live with the consequences where we are.”***⁹⁷

Against the backdrop of these rapidly evolving social dynamics, the following sections unpack the extent to which women and youth as essential community actors are involved in local-level peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. Whereas women’s involvement is shaped by gendered discrimination, the relation between youth and traditional leadership is strained through mutual suspicions. The last section investigates the extent to which peacebuilding efforts by national and international actors to include local peacebuilding actors and initiatives.

⁹⁴ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁹⁵ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁹⁶ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

⁹⁷ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

5.2 Inclusion of Women

In Mali and Burkina Faso, women's role in local conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms is largely shaped by gendered inequalities of men's and women's place in the public sphere. Previous research has illustrated the extent to which gendered divisions of roles and responsibilities between men and women leave women to be the "least involved social group" in mechanisms of conflict resolution.⁹⁸ As such, women's public participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution is constrained by "norms, customs and religious beliefs" limiting the rights of women.⁹⁹ As governance positions of local conflict management are held by communal leaders such as traditional and religious chiefs – and thus by men – the potential of women as peacebuilding actors remains underdeveloped.

While women recognize the extent to which their role in Malian society has evolved in recent years, female respondents identify the unwillingness of traditional and religious leaders as an obstacle to their involvement in local conflict resolution initiatives. This finding mirrors earlier research in central Mali, which called attention to the refusal of men or traditional authorities to allow women to participate in such initiatives.¹⁰⁰

To begin with, several respondents report limited access to communal leaders. One Fulani respondent from Mopti further explained: ***“Women cannot speak in front of men, especially with religious authorities. The latter relegates women to the background.”***¹⁰¹ These findings mirror earlier research by Clingendael, in which female respondents underlined their dependency on male guardians to approach traditional or religious authorities.¹⁰² According to one woman representative from Mopti: ***“They (traditional and religious leaders) do everything possible to keep women out and only involve them when they no longer have a choice.”***¹⁰³

A female respondent from Bamako also indicated poor collaboration with traditional authorities—again citing women's roles. This reflects comments from a traditional leader from the Bamako focus group, who said, ***“In the search for peace, we do not exclude anyone except for women because of their indiscretion.”***¹⁰⁴ However, another respondent somewhat cynically considered traditional authorities as more accessible because of their closeness with government authorities, who understand that women's presence is essential. ***“The quota for***

⁹⁸ Lorentzen, J., Toure, N. and Gaye, B., 2019. Women's Participation in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali, *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. p. 12; Sadiki, J. J. P., 2008. *La femme dans la gestion des conflits en Afrique précoloniale*. Editions L'Harmattan. p.14

⁹⁹ Lorentzen, J., Toure, N. and Gaye, B., 2019. Women's Participation in Peace and Reconciliation Processes in Mali, *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO. p. 12; ACORD, 2016. Deconstructing Women, Peace and Security A critical review of approaches to gender and empowerment. p. 7

¹⁰⁰ Gorman, Z., 28 January 2020. *Women in Mali: Key influencers in turning the tide*. Aspenia Online. https://aspensiaonline.it/women-in-mali-key-influencers-in-turning-the-tide/#_ftnref8; Spiri, G., 2019. *Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity*. SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security. No. 2019/6.

¹⁰¹ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹⁰² Molenaar, F., Tossel, J., Schmauder, A., Idrissa, R, Lyammouri, R. 2019. *The Status Quo Defied The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya*. The Clingendael Institute.

¹⁰³ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹⁰⁴ FGD Traditional Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

women's representation in the last legislative elections is proof of this," she said, adding that traditional authorities are less resistant to change than religious authorities.¹⁰⁵

Respondents from Burkina Faso equally criticize the marginalization of women in the public sphere, referencing the lack of systematic involvement of women by both traditional authorities and formal state administration. Female respondents from Bobo-Dioulasso indicated that traditional authorities are nearly inaccessible to them because of cultural considerations and the roles of women in traditional Burkina Faso society. **"They cannot have direct access to traditional authorities to voice their concerns without the support of their husbands or through respected persons,"** the researcher explained.

In Bobo-Dioulasso, a number of meetings and consultations on key issues of the city have been organized without the representation of women, leading to frustration among women representatives.¹⁰⁶ While addressing the discriminating nature of local governance mechanisms, it is thus important to recognize that the exclusion of women is not an endogenous characteristic of traditional leadership, but rather a symptom of norms shaping the wider social context.¹⁰⁷

Nonetheless, women have gradually taken on increasing responsibilities related to religious leadership. According to one women leader from Mopti:

"There are women who speak and preach on the radio stations, women at the microphone to say the word of God but also to inform and sensitize the population on current issues such as the importance of peace in the city, the quest for peace among humans, the guarantee of any peaceful practice of our religious life. For example, every Wednesday we give sermons to raise awareness and inform people about social cohesion and conflict prevention."¹⁰⁸

Yet, these individual examples are not definitive proof that women are a part of an inclusive approach to religious outreach. Female respondents tend to perceive the role of religious authorities as a key barrier to women's involvement. As one women leader from Mopti stated:

"For me, the religious authorities do not associate women very much because religion itself endows women with a spirit inferior to that of men. And this is why they don't take us seriously despite the development and training women have acquired."

These experiences were echoed by female respondents in Burkina Faso, describing **"cultural burdens still influencing collaborations with women,"** while recognizing the work of existing Muslim initiatives in raising awareness of the involvement of women in conflict prevention

¹⁰⁵ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹⁰⁶ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

¹⁰⁷ Ursu, A., April 2018. *Between ideals and needs: is Malian customary justice incompatible with international human rights standards?* The Clingendael Institute.

¹⁰⁸ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

and management.¹⁰⁹ Members of a group discussion questioned whether religious precepts forbid their increased involvement or whether it is due to the place of women in Burkinabe society that reflects this regard towards women.¹¹⁰ In contrast to Malians, respondents in Burkina Faso engage with both Christian and Muslim leaders.¹¹¹

Women representatives in Banfora report being involved by Christian authorities from the outset.¹¹² This differentiation was equally observed by respondents in Bobo Dioulasso. Female respondents expressed gratitude for their involvement in church activities, which they consider to be on “equal footing with men.”¹¹³

Women respondents attribute their inclusion by communal parts in substantial parts to the work of nongovernmental organizations. Respondents from Mali emphasize how **“it is the support of NGOs that has enabled women to play their role in advocacy and awareness-raising to ease conflicts. In this way, women are recognized as having the capacity to think in a meaningful way, and their flexibility to participate in problem solving in society.”**¹¹⁴

Yet overall, female respondents across all four selected municipalities indicate a significant mismatch between their strong desire for an increased involvement in local peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives, and their actual inclusion. Respondents shared their frustration with what they perceive to be a significant mismatch between their experience and capacity to inform local peacebuilding and conflict mitigation initiatives, and their involvement by local actors heading such initiatives. Yet, while women in Burkina Faso recognize their limited inclusion in existing security and conflict resolution initiatives, they have established channels for women to discuss these observations among themselves.¹¹⁵

By omitting women from a more active role in the public sphere of conflict resolution, local peacebuilding initiatives and actors risk overlooking crucial observations and intelligence. All women representatives repeatedly stressed their closeness to conflict actors as wives, mothers, and sisters, and their capacity to reach male relatives. Female respondents from Burkina Faso indicated their ability to provide information **“on some of the deviations they notice or even radicalization postures among men and children in the community.”**¹¹⁶ This is similarly stressed by a mediation expert who underlined how **“women have this ability to tell the problem, to tell the source of the conflict. They have the leverage that allows them to analyze the conflict analyzed.”** According to this key informant, the inclusion of women in conflict resolution initiatives is crucial as they bring a distinct perspective with them. Crucially, the underestimation of women also ignores the important positions they take as informants,

¹⁰⁹ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso: Respondents referred to the work of Muslim associations such as CERFI (Cercle d’Études, de Recherche et de Formation Islamique) and FAIB (Fédération des Associations Islamiques du Burkina).

¹¹⁰ FGD Female leaders, 21 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹¹¹ Add source on numbers, roughly 60 % Muslim, 20 % (mostly catholic) Christian

¹¹² FGD Female leaders, 21 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso. *“The women say that Christian authorities involve women from the outset and do so whenever opportunities for encounters arise. Women welcome this attitude of Christians who do not segregate or marginalise women. However, in the Muslim community, this remains a whole problem and a great challenge to be taken up.”*

¹¹³ FGD Female leaders, 21 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹¹⁴ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹¹⁵ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

¹¹⁶ FGD Female leaders, 21 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

and providers of logistical support for armed groups, and increasingly as active fighters within armed groups in central Mali.¹¹⁷

These statements are in line with consecutive research about the gendered dynamics of peacebuilding in the Sahel that stressed the role of women in appealing to, reaching, and motivating potential and active fighters.¹¹⁸ In geographies of active violent conflict such as central Mali, women have been identified as the persuasive voices in “decisions to join, leave or remain implicated in armed groups”.¹¹⁹ In fact, given the recorded high influence of women in motivating men to join armed groups, they can similarly be considered an overlooked conflict actor. A study of women’s roles among Fulani in central Mali finds women’s mobilization of men “to mobilize in support of VEOs a widespread phenomenon, reported by 75 percent of respondents.” The same study asserts that the individuals exerting the “most influence on men deciding to join or leave an armed group to be their wives and mothers.”¹²⁰

While women leaders are in instances invited to communal reconciliation meetings, their involvement remains circumstantial and irregular. Their limited inclusion stands in stark contrast to the multiplicity of engagement and initiatives that women have set up on their own. These mechanisms range from the founding of local women’s groups that discuss common problems, to awareness raising through preaching sermons on the radio as in Mopti, to fundraising activities for community members in need.¹²¹ Where women are associated—often in initiatives supported by national and international organizations—female representatives nonetheless note a lack of belonging. As a woman representative from Mopti expressed it: *“In my opinion, we women are sometimes associated for form. Because our opinions are taken into account little or not at all.”*¹²²

Across all group discussions, women express discontent with what they perceive as a stark division between their role in the domestic sphere and in the public sphere. All respondents referred to the idiom “la nuit porte/donne conseil” – the night gives advice – referring to the practice of women advising their husbands in private, while being excluded in public. According to women in Mopti: *“When they can’t reach an agreement during the daytime meetings, each man confides in his wife to guide him.”*¹²³ This experience is equally shared by women in Burkina Faso, who describe how men resort to women’s sound advice at night to resolve conflicts in the middle of the day after having benefited from their wives’ advice at night. As women are hence already proving their ability to support conflict resolution, respondents question why they are not involved directly in broad daylight.¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ KII Centre HD, Bamako, Mali. According to the respondent, the self-defense militia Dan Na Ambassagou has increasingly registered female fighters.

¹¹⁸ Raineri, L., July 2020. *Dogmatism or pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*. International Alert; Spiri, G., 2019. *Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity*. SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security. No. 2019/6.

¹¹⁹ Gorman, Z., 28 January 2020. *Women in Mal : Key influencers in turning the tide*. Aspenia Online. https://aspeniaonline.it/women-in-mali-key-influencers-in-turning-the-tide/#_ftnref8

¹²⁰ Raineri, L., July 2020. *Dogmatism or pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel*. International Alert; Spiri, G., 2019. *Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity*. SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security. No. 2019/6. p. 56

¹²¹ FGD Female Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali; FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹²² FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹²³ FGD Female Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹²⁴ FGD Female leaders, 22 December 2020, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso.

5.3 Inclusion of Youth

“In any stabilization, peace, or conflict prevention process without the involvement of young people, everything is doomed to failure. It would be like’ wèdaadè naaguè ndoondè’—‘throwing stones in the sun.’” – Mopti youth respondent

Youth respondents in both Mali and Burkina Faso indicate regular collaboration and inclusion in processes led by communal leaders. For the majority of respondents, inclusion takes place through associating autonomous youth structures or direct involvement in intercommunity meetings, forums, and trainings. ***“Youth are represented, because without youth any initiative for conflict resolution is doomed to fail,”*** one Mopti youth respondent said.¹²⁵

Nonetheless, the data points to a considerable mismatch between how religious and traditional leaders perceive inclusiveness of their initiatives and mechanisms, and how it is perceived by youth themselves.

Characterizing the challenging relationships between youth and traditional and religious community leaders, respondents share what they perceive as a seemingly insurmountable clash of norms and values. As expressed by one focus group participant, ***“The first difficulty is cultural. Our traditional and religious authorities still think that only the elderly or personalities/notabilities are supposed to make good decisions for the communities. Young people as well as women are not meant to do this because the former are not mature and the latter (women) will never be mature according to their vision. And that is why they do not involve us.”***¹²⁶

Accordingly, several respondents express their discontent toward what they experience as an inclusion for form but not for content. Respondents consider their inclusion by communal leaders not necessarily as a recognition of the value they can bring to existing efforts, but rather as an adaptation to donor expectations. As one youth participant in a group discussion in Bamako expressed it:

“I think that young people are associated for form. Nowadays, traditional and religious authorities are politicized. Through politics, they have learned that any proposal that does not mention the participation of young people and women has no future with the state and its partners, they involve young people and women just as extras to win their case.”

Responses by interviewed traditional and religious leaders tend to have a moralizing tone toward including youth in their conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. Rather than considering them as a valuable community actor, youth is rather considered as a collective in need of education about traditional values. As one traditional leader in Burkina Faso stressed: ***“We need to involve youth in their activities for a better understanding of traditional***

¹²⁵ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹²⁶ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

values.¹²⁷ In this understanding, the adherence to traditional norms and values is considered as conducive to peace and stability in the community. Youth respondents by contrast underlined the mismatch between what they consider outdated norms and the necessities of adapting to a changing world.

Traditional and religious leaders tend to describe young people as **“always in a hurry, impatient, (...) driven by a spirit of greed”**¹²⁸ and **“inclined towards rapid and sometimes illicit enrichment, trampling on religious and customary bases and principles.”**¹²⁹ Youth for their part do not paint a positive role of communal leaders.

The security situation in central Mali has further heightened that disconnect, leading to mistrust and suspicion between communal leaders on the one hand, and youth on the other. Respondents in both countries at times painted the picture of nearly opposing positions. Both youth representatives and traditional and religious leaders express how their inclusion in existing peacebuilding mechanisms is hampered by the perception of youth as a collective risk factor of insecurity.

One religious leader from the Mopti focus group described it as follows:

“Idle youths are exposed to laziness and banditry. At the same time, they are easy prey for potential merchants of illusions who can recruit them into jihadist groups at any time.”

This is equally stressed in Burkina Faso, where according to one religious leader, **“Young people are more often than not actors in crises, which makes it difficult for them to be involved because one cannot be judge and jury.”**¹³⁰ The inclusion of youth in conflict-prevention mechanisms is hence hampered by the role they have come to play as members of armed conflict. As one youth leader from Bamako described the changing social relations in central Mali: **“It is the young people who are armed and who secure the villages of the center. And it is other armed young people who are attacking the place. On both sides, it is young people who have taken up arms and are killing each other for reasons specific to each camp.”**¹³¹

Youth respondents on their part recognize this mistrust and suspicion on the side of communal leaders, **“(…) Wishing traditional and religious authorities to avoid stereotypes towards young people for a better management of the crisis.”**¹³² The breakdown of trust is hence a clear obstacle to the more inclusive involvement of youth in existing local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. According to one respondent, an obstacle lays in **“the lack of confidence, since in their mentality young people are recalcitrant and are somehow involved in the crisis within the community.”**¹³³

¹²⁷ FGD Traditional Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹²⁸ FGD Traditional Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹²⁹ FGD Religious Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹³⁰ FGD Religious Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹³¹ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹³² FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹³³ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

At the same time then rejecting what they perceive as a stereotypical approach by communal leaders, youth similarly share objections against both traditional and religious leaders. Whereas customary authorities describe youth as greedy, youth consider communal leaders to be corrupted on their part. As one Bamako youth respondent expressed it:

“The customary/traditional and religious authorities have become calculating, not to say predatory. Politics has disgraced these people. This is why these different authorities see money and profit everywhere. As they do not want to share, they keep young people away to keep everything for themselves and only themselves.”

This pattern of mistrust appears to be mutual, as respondents attribute politicization to both traditional and religious leaders but similarly to youth. As one traditional leader in the Bamako focus group said, ***“I do not involve youth in my activities, and I do not intend to do so for the simple reason that they are all politicized and not honest. Like master politicians, they only defend their selfish interests.”***¹³⁴

5.4 Inclusion of Community Actors by (inter)national Actors

All key informants underline the necessity of an inclusive approach to local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. While the methodology of inclusion varies according to each organization, the majority of national and international organizations work with a broad set of community actors, including formal authorities such as local administration; informal communal leaders such as traditional authorities, religious chiefs, and representatives of different ethnic groups; and women and youth representatives and associations. On the side of the administration, one respondent criticized the lack of follow-up on promises to increase the involvement of youth in peacebuilding mechanisms. According to this representative from Bamako, ***“The only thing I deplore is that the Malian administration does not respect its word. Of all the meetings in which I have taken part on behalf of the youth, I cannot cite any where at least one of the recommendations has been taken into account so far. It's as if we organize meetings just because there is money to do so without worrying about what will happen next.”***¹³⁵

Even where projects target predominantly women and youth, the inclusion of traditional and religious leaders is considered an important element to the success of a project. This indicates a shared understanding of the role of traditional and religious chiefs as gateways to local communities because they can hamper or support projects. At the same time, advancing the role of youth and women is dependent on underlining the importance of their inclusion vis-à-vis traditional communal leaders. In this sense, the sustainability of local peacebuilding efforts—even where the main target group does not include communal leaders—depends on an early inclusion of traditional chiefs in order to mobilize broad sections of the community.¹³⁶

However, the inclusion of communal actors in conflict resolution is highly individualized and varies according to each locality depending on the legitimacy and consideration given to individuals within the community. As one NGO project manager described: ***“There are***

¹³⁴ FGD Traditional Leaders, 9 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

¹³⁵ FGD Youth Leaders, 15 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹³⁶ KII CSAMAP, 12 January 2021, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; KII CDH, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

*localities where the traditional authorities are the persons considered, others where religious leaders and Village Development Committees (VDCs) are the persons considered.*¹³⁷ In addition, respondents in central Mali underline the importance of associating an additional layer of conflict resolution mechanisms. As customary in Mopti region, different castes can play key roles in communities in addition to traditional and religious leaders. This relates specifically to the role of griots and blacksmiths (see Box 1: Roles and Functions of Traditional and Religious leaders).

Key informants uniformly underlined the advantages of including traditional and religious leaders in their peacebuilding programming. According to one NGO program director in Mopti, ***“Traditional authorities and religious leaders remain key actors because Malians listen and trust these leaders. They are bearers of high social capital on the local level.”***¹³⁸ Due to this central role on the communal level, any programming in conflict resolution and peacebuilding ensures its sustainability by including traditional chiefs and religious leaders. As communal leaders, they remain a crucial factor in mobilizing communities behind a common goal and any capacity training of traditional chiefs is likely to translate in direct benefits for the community. As one respondent described it, the inclusion of traditional authorities guarantees greater impact within communities: ***“The first advantage is that they will be the first to benefit from these projects because they are above all the most concerned by the return of peace. Our mission is to support them. It is their conflicts, they know the terrain, they know the people involved and who to turn to.”***¹³⁹

Yet, the inclusion of communal leaders comes with multiple challenges. While the majority of key informants underlined the necessity of including traditional and religious authorities, some respondents similarly warned not to fall in the trap of an overly simplistic approach. As one respondent from Mali underlined, the inclusion of communal leaders should not automatically be considered conducive to conflict resolution efforts. Amid the pervasive impact of proliferated armed conflict in central Mali, the role of both religious and traditional authorities should be considered as substantially altered. According to one project manager, ***“The context has shifted dramatically and does not favor the involvement of customary authorities in conflict resolution. The context has not had a positive influence on these authorities. They no longer embody the values of impartiality and neutrality.”***¹⁴⁰

This concern was flagged by several key informants with regard to religious authorities. Key informants said some religious leaders bring their own challenges in a context in which ideological convictions can run counter to peacebuilding and CVE programming. As views of religious leaders are not necessarily aligned with national legal frameworks, the inclusion of religious authorities can provide a particular challenge.¹⁴¹ Citing an example of CVE programming, one respondent illustrated this dilemma with the example of sports program offered to Malian youth, which religious authorities opposed due to its inclusion of girls and young women.¹⁴² These examples aptly illustrate how cultural norms and values that on the

¹³⁷ KII Terre des Hommes, 12 January 2021, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

¹³⁸ KII UNDP, Bamako, Mali.

¹³⁹ KII SCFG, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁴⁰ KII CSS, 26 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁴¹ KII Mercy Corps, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁴² Ibid.

hand are at the basis of communal leaders' authority can similarly hamper and undermine local peacebuilding efforts.

In central Mali specifically, traditional authorities as hereditary pasture managers have consistently added to grievances of Fulani pastoralists, raising elevated fees to access grazing land.¹⁴³ Growing resentment with this hereditary system of authority transfer has given rise to the Katiba Macina, a leading member of the JNIM network. Noting the detrimental positions of customary leaders, one respondent referred to western Mali, where slavery of lower-caste citizens remains a persistent problem. For individuals concerned by slavery, their first point of contact is the traditional chief in their community, who himself might be in favor of what is considered a "traditional value."¹⁴⁴

In northern and western Burkina Faso, communal leaders have similarly contributed to dynamics undermining peacebuilding efforts. The chieftaincy structure composed of majority sedentary Mossi routinely worked to the detriment of pastoralist Fulani. Prior to 2015, 40 percent of reported conflicts were registered between farmers and herders.¹⁴⁵ Discontent populations in the 2015 uprising accused traditional leaders of "exploiting their positions, sometimes colluding in the buying and selling of land."¹⁴⁶ Grievances did not only result from disputes over land use but similarly included more structural deprivation of pastoralist Fulani. Unable to pay grazing fees to sedentary Mossi, mounting debt has gradually led to transitions of Fulani cattle owners to merely cattle caretakers.¹⁴⁷

Lastly, the politicization of both traditional and religious leaders adds an additional layer of complication. According to one respondent, "***When a political party goes to a region, it is not uncommon to observe that when the emissaries of a political party arrive in a locality, they try to get the different leaders (traditional, customary, and religious) of the area. Politicians want shortcuts and go out to conquer the followers of religious leaders so that the latter give the instructions to vote in their favor.***"¹⁴⁸

Amid this dynamic of politicization, and as communal leaders have increasingly become captured by conflict dynamics, informal governance actors add an additional layer to the challenges in including traditional and religious chiefs in (inter)national efforts of peacebuilding. Rather than fulfilling a complementary role, traditional and formal governance are in instances in competition, which further complicated inclusion efforts. One NGO respondent in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, indicated a key challenge in this lack of formal recognition, stating, "***The challenge is to define the status of traditional and customary chiefs so that they can better act legally and their activities can be better supervised.***"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Thurston, A., 2018. *Political settlements with Jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel*. OECD Publishing. West African Papers No. 18. p. 331

¹⁴⁴ KII Mercy Corps, Bamako, Mali; add news source

¹⁴⁵ International Crisis Group. Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. February 2020. p.7

¹⁴⁶ International Crisis Group. Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence. February 2020. p.9

¹⁴⁷ Idrissa, R, 2019. *Tinder to the Fire Burkina Faso in the Conflict Zone*. Africa Yearbook. p.39

¹⁴⁸ KII CSS, 26 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁴⁹ KII CELLRAD, 15 January 2021, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

While engaging them and other actors such as faith-based organizations, women, and youth in peacebuilding practices is inclusive and welcome, these initiatives must be carefully considered understanding that jihadist groups and armed non-state actors are already participating in conflict and violent extremism prevention activities. Therefore, bringing together these various community representatives with armed groups requires extreme caution and adherence to conflict sensitivity practices to avoid sparking further violence or marginalization.¹⁵⁰ Conflict sensitivity practices around such inclusive engagement must also be cautious to avoid any religious partisanship or the equation of religious extremism with the motivations of non-state armed group members. Not all non-state armed groups in Mali and Burkina Faso are jihadist, and not all who associate with groups that are jihadist have extremist religious beliefs driving their motivations for participating in political ideological movements.¹⁵¹ Additionally, several traditional and religious leaders interviewed indicated they previously or currently supported non-state armed groups created with the objective of securing their communities during outbreaks of violence.

V Conclusion

This baseline study investigates how national and international peacebuilding actors can support traditional and religious authorities and social groups such as women and youth in peacebuilding and conflict prevention and transformation.

While inclusive processes remain a key challenge across all four selected municipalities, we find major differences between central Mali and western Burkina Faso. In central Mali, the proliferated dynamics of violent conflict have significantly eroded social cohesion to a level that presents considerable challenges to local peacebuilding. In particular, the relationships amongst relevant community actors such as traditional leaders and youth is characterized by mutual suspicion and mistrust. By contrast, the relative stability and peace in western Burkina Faso results in what appears to be, at present, a relatively intact social cohesion of local communities. Relationships amongst traditional leadership and civil society actors such as youth and women is characterized by long-established marginalization instead of outright exclusion and suspicion.

As a result of these fundamental differences in conflict dynamics and hence social cohesion, both research arenas are characterized by a diverging presence of international actors supporting local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. Whereas central Mali has been in the focus of international security interventions for the past five years, much less attention has been given to western Burkina Faso—a geographic zone far exempt from major conflict. Amidst a predominant focus on security operations and counterterrorism in Mali, the support of local peacebuilding efforts in western Burkina Faso remains highly localized and therefore limited.

Peacebuilding experiences in central Mali are thereby exemplary of a prevailing reactivity of the international approach. The case of Mali illustrates the necessity of a more preventive

¹⁵⁰ International Crisis Group. *Enrayer la communautarisation de la violence au centre du Mali*. November 2020.

¹⁵¹ Ibrahim, Y.I., 2019. *Insurrections Djihadistes en Afrique de l'Ouest : Idéologie Mondiale, Contexte Local, Motivations Individuelle*. Cairn.

way forward for local peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives in the Sahel. In this sense, both cases hold valuable lessons for international actors aiming to support local initiatives.

This report suggests three technical recommendations on how international and national peacebuilding actors can support traditional and religious authorities and social groups. These recommendations follow points stressed by traditional and religious authorities as well as youth and women as crucial members of civil society. Recommendations are further informed by experiences of our Key Informants and best-practice examples of local inclusive conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as in the case of northern Niger. However, it is paramount that these technical recommendations are not divorced from the wider conflict dynamics. Therefore, we start out with three main elements that should inform the response to the conflicts in Mali and Burkina Faso and are to be considered as necessary conditions for the technical recommendations of this report.

Conditions to supporting local-level peacebuilders

First, the main focus of international and national actors should rest on reforming the current governance system, particularly the plurality of governance actors. The key insight from the present research is that respondents in Burkina Faso and Mali alike face the same challenge: the multitude of informal and formal governance actors involved in local level peacebuilding processes hampers rather than facilitates conflict resolution. This observation is similarly echoed in our interviews. As one key informant expressed, ***“Where there are several mechanisms, instead of reducing the problem, it accelerates the problem ... Conflict can be passed from one conflict resolution mechanism to another without finding a resolution.”***¹⁵² The informal positions of power and influence that traditional and religious leaders hold in the Sahelian governance system complicate efforts to integrate these parties into a holistic peacebuilding approach. Ultimately a system will have to arrive where a plurality of actors operate on some form of complementarity rather competition. It is only within that system that traditional governance actors can retain their crucial role in the years to come. This may imply formal

Second, supporting communal leaders and community groups such as youth and women in issues of conflict resolution and peacebuilding may not bring desired results as long as the lack of accountability for grave human rights violations is unaddressed. In central Mali, where both state security forces and community self-defense militias routinely commit excessive violations, focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the sense of helplessness in their everyday peacebuilding and sensitization efforts. The present lack of accountability further risks undermining existing efforts for peacebuilding and sensitization on the local level. As one religious authority stated: ***“I tell you that we pray morning and evening but we do it for an unjust army, which does not respect human rights and the presumption of innocence of***

¹⁵² KII UNDP, Mopti, Mali.

the people it arrests. ¹⁵³ The work of local peacebuilders can thus be supported by investigating human rights abuses by armed actors:

“The first thing to do is to play fair by really helping to achieve peace in this battered central region,” one Bamako traditional leader said. ***“To do this, the state must work for respect for human rights, the presumption of innocence, and the end of the stigmatization of certain communities in central Mali.”***¹⁵⁴

While government forces and violent extremist organizations are culpable, particular attention must be paid to the role of self-defense militias. In central Mali many interviewees believe that state authorities sponsor these groups and profit from violence. As long as the state is perceived to be at the core of accelerating inter-communal violence, communal leaders and community groups will have little trust in the value of local-level peacebuilding efforts. Accountability is hence a crucial precondition for any actor aiming to support conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Sahel.

Third, interventions to support local conflict-resolution and peacebuilding will have to account for the different conflict environment in which traditional and religious authorities operate. In central Mali, peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts takes place alongside activity of violent extremist groups that pressure and target traditional and religious leaders. As underlined in our data collection, the proliferation of self-defense militias has similarly constrained the scope of action of communal leaders. In western Burkina Faso, extremist groups have not yet succeeded in gaining a large, sympathetic following. following and the presence of formalized self-defense militias is less pronounced than in eastern and northern parts of the country.¹⁵⁵ In Burkina Faso, the more limited role of armed actors leaves space for more proactive and preventive peacebuilding and social cohesion activities to promulgate. Different environments will require different interventions.

Technical Recommendations

1 Support Local-Level Peace Agreements and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

1.1 Follow up on Local-Level Peace Agreements

Our research suggests that the number of existing local peace agreements in central Mali will further increase. One NGO worker highlighted three peace agreements covering 11 communes in Koro circle of Mopti region alone, and another agreement amongst 16 Koro communes that is expected to go into effect between February 18-19, 2021.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ FGD Religious Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁵⁴ FGD Traditional Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁵⁵ In early 2020, the Burkinabe government formalised pre-existing self-defence groups through the creation of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP). As a voluntary military forced their task is to support the approach to tackle widespread insecurity and attacks by armed groups in Burkina Faso. APA News 29 January 2020: Burkina Faso: Recruiting armed volunteers to tackle terrorism;

<http://www.apanews.net/en/news/burkina-faso-recruiting-armed-volunteers-to-tackle-terrorism>

¹⁵⁶ KII Centre HD, Bamako, Mali.

To begin consolidating peace, there is a need to provide follow up with existing local peace agreements. This could include creating spaces for dialogue amongst all parties to peace agreements so that they can share grievances, objectives, red lines in their relationships, and other information that can be used to positively direct the parties to the peace agreements in a non-violent direction. At present, existing peacebuilding and mediation organizations across the Sahel simply lack the resources to provide a follow-up.

1.2 Dialogue with Violent Extremists

Start the conversation on negotiation with violent extremist actors. Discussion groups did candidly and honestly discuss the participation of jihadist groups in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities. While engaging VEOs directly in such practices could be seen as controversial—and most certainly must occur with incredible sensitivity and preparation—focus group participants did suggest that an open dialogue with VEOs is the path central Mali is on. One traditional leader from the Bamako focus group said: ***“Recently, we set up a new commission, which is made up of the Jowros.¹⁵⁷ The commission is responsible for establishing a relationship with the jihadists and facilitating the integration of youth who desire to join the national armed forces by using a DDR process.”¹⁵⁸***

A landowner from the Bamako focus groups similarly said, ***“In my opinion, things will only move in the direction of peace when the various armed actors are gathered around a table.”*** These statements echo a reality in which dialogue with VEOs has taken on a significant extent on the local level.¹⁵⁹

These processes of engaging with jihadist organizations take place—likely more frequently than is known—at higher levels like in the example above but also at a localized level. In the past months, a series of local-level peace agreements involving VEOs has been mediated by the non-governmental organization Humanitarian Dialogue and MINUSMA. These peace agreements have focused on the cercles of Mopti, Koro, Bandiagara, Bankass and Djenné in central Mali.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, any peacebuilding and mediation process in central Mali, moving forward, should carefully consider bringing individuals known to participate in a jihadist group into the process. This is also because, as the research illustrates, vast numbers of community members are somehow affiliated with a non-state armed group; therefore, the pervasiveness of the problem requires engaging with VEOs to find peaceful solutions.

1.3 Ensure Implementation of Key Recommendations

¹⁵⁷ Jowros are traditional pastoralist leaders. For a more detailed analysis of their changing role see: Benjaminsen, T., & Ba, B. 2008. *Farmer-herder conflicts, pastoralist marginalisation and corruption: a case study from the inland Niger delta of Mali*. *The Geographical Journal* 175, No. 1.

¹⁵⁸ FGD Traditional Leaders, 14 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁵⁹ Ba, B. & Cold-Ravnkilde, S.M., 20 January 2021. *When jihadists broker peace: Natural resource conflicts as weapons of war in Mali's protracted crisis*. Danish Institute for International Studies.

<https://www.diis.dk/en/research/when-jihadists-broker-peace>

¹⁶⁰ See e.g.: Bagayoko, N. 15 February 2021. *Faut-il négocier avec les terroristes? C'est déjà le cas*. Jeune Afrique. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1121591/politique/tribune-faut-il-negocier-avec-les-terroristes-cest-deja-le-cas/>

Presently, a broad range of activities of conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives is organized by (inter)national partners. However, the lack of follow-up was mentioned in all focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Respondents who participated in any trainings, conferences, seminars, or other sponsored activities to discuss conflict resolution, social cohesion, or peacebuilding noted the lack of follow through by event organizers to implement the recommendations made during the events. Promoting activities that build on recommendations are quick wins that can be applied instantly. To this end, creating a database of recommendations and keeping track of their status could be one way to build local trust. It will allow for sustainably engaging with community members and speak to feelings of disillusionment and marginalization when their recommendations are neither implemented nor further mentioned.¹⁶¹

2 Support Traditional and Religious Authorities

2.1 Strengthen Decentralization Processes to Increase Capacities of Communal Leaders

Respondents stress how traditional and religious leaders' capacities for effective conflict resolution is partly hampered by their limited knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of local government. In instances this constraint might prevent traditional leaders to reach out to available support through formal state authorities and might thus prevent state authorities from taking responsibility for the communities they are meant to govern. This point is similarly expressed by a religious authority in Banfora, who said, ***“For a better collaboration between the different actors, it is first of all necessary to be aware of each entity in its role within society.”***¹⁶² Yet, capacity-building and training of traditional leaders alone is not sufficient in a context in which local administrations are characterized by a substantial lack of resources. As one respondent stressed: “the challenge of governance lays already at the local level because local authorities do not have the capacity to play the role that is expected of them.”¹⁶³ Supporting local level conflict-resolution and peace-building initiatives lacks sustainability if it is not accompanied by the implementation of a hitherto stalled decentralization process that would provide substantial sources and capacities to enable local authorities. Only through decentralization and the concomitant transfer of powers will local authorities exhibit the competences, services and skills required for an effective integration and response to the multiplicity of local conflict resolution initiatives.

2.2 Support Religious Leaders to Engage in Exchanges on Religious Topics

Religious norms and values are identified as a point of contention in both Mali and Burkina Faso focus group discussions—especially the roles of women in the public sphere. Despite the ideological aspects of violent conflict in both Mali and Burkina Faso, little focus has been given to necessary debates about the role and position of religion in conflict—or in peacebuilding. Instead, focus is put on the formal training of Imams in worshipping practices considered moderate such as Sufi or Maliki practices.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ FGD Religious Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹⁶² FGD Religious Leaders, 24 December 2020, Banfora, Burkina Faso.

¹⁶³ KII UNDP, Mopti, Mali.

¹⁶⁴ Malian imams travelled to Morocco since 2014 to receive these training. So the efforts are bi-lateral between Moroccan and Malian government.

Religious leaders consider themselves a link between a population that they perceive as increasingly disconnected from Islamic values and the violent extremists that attempt to bring Islam to the same populations but in a different manner. Although there is a Christian population especially in western Burkina Faso, the majority of the population is Muslim. Holding community exchanges between both Muslim and Christian communities, or, if possible, Fulani and Dogon and Bambara communities, could be a means to discuss religious topics in an inclusive manner. Donors and implementers should however be careful to avoid being perceived as interfering with religious discourses and practices. Existing research on the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism indicates the dangers of interfering with religious discourses. Any support to religious leadership should therefore be embedded in localized conflict-sensitivity analysis.¹⁶⁵

3 Push For More Inclusivity of Existing Local Peacebuilding Mechanisms

A third set of recommendations is meant to ensure more inclusive local peacebuilding. All key informants stressed that stronger inclusivity as part of local conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives is needed. To logic is clear; inclusive conflict resolution mechanisms ensure the involvement and leadership in decision-making processes of key social groups such as youth and women. This allows to reach broader sections of society, and thus builds a more complete picture of the breadth and scope of conflict's impacts and potential resolutions. While a multitude of NGOs engage in inclusive peacebuilding mechanisms, these efforts remain highly localized and are constrained by lack of resources. Three specific activities and programs might ensure greater inclusiveness:

3.1 Homogenous Dialogue Spaces

As indicated by several respondents, homogenous dialogue spaces would permit key segments of communities to dialogue openly among themselves – an important prerequisite for exchanges among different community members. An NGO respondent in Mali said, ***“With women, it's very complicated, but they are very much involved in decision making. Don't put them with men if you want to get the most out of their visions, otherwise they will tell you that they are lining up behind the men's position. During the meetings, put the women aside and listen to their points of view, and [first] discuss with the men so that they accept and allow this.”***¹⁶⁶ As such, the organization of homogenous dialogue spaces among both men and women can provide a crucial first step.

3.2 Inclusive Community Committees

Support for traditional and religious leaders alone will provide limited success in instilling sustainable peacebuilding processes in the Sahel. Given their limited inclusion of key communal groups such as youth and women, a support of these communal leaders alone risks supporting existing hierarchies to the detriment of

¹⁶⁵ Prevez 2020: Policy brief summarizing the EU and other stakeholder's prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the Maghreb and the Sahel.

¹⁶⁶ KII SFCG, Bamako, Mali.

concerned citizens. Equal access to and inclusion by communal leaders at the heart of conflict resolution initiatives is a crucial feature to advance local peacebuilding. This finding emerges from our key informant interviews with particular focus on the role of women. Their current position of women as the most marginalized pillar of society is best supported by increasing their involvement on the local level.¹⁶⁷

External organizations should build on existing local approaches attempting to integrate traditional and religious leaders into more inclusive community approaches. These inclusive community approaches allowing for exchange in heterogeneous dialogues spaces should build on preceding homogeneous dialogue spaces. A similar approach has been established in northern Niger, where district committees include representatives of both traditional and religious leadership as well as youth and women leaders.¹⁶⁸ One NGO worker in Mali underlined the advantage of such an approach: ***“The advantage is that the various participants, including representatives of religious, traditional, and communal authorities, all benefit from cross referencing. Everyone steps out of their Ivory Tower and understands what the other thinks and stands for.”***¹⁶⁹

3.3 Preventative Approaches to Sensitize Youth About Social Cohesion

In locations such as western Burkina Faso, which has been largely unscathed by the conflict that has spread from Mali into eastern and northern parts of Burkina Faso, respondents noted that the security situation is precarious, and conflict could arrive in their area at any time. Given the more preventative approach to conflict resolution and maintaining peace and social cohesion that is sensible for places not yet at the center of the conflict, peace caravans are a traditional Sahelian initiative to reach large audiences.¹⁷⁰ A focus group participant in Mopti said one of the best ways to collaborate on peace initiatives is to provide ***“materials and financial support so that youth can expand the awareness campaign in the region, organize awareness***

¹⁶⁷ KII UNDP, Mopti, Mali.

¹⁶⁸ In central Mali, the setting up of similar committees has been supported by Mercy Corps. The practice of district committees established in northern Niger is analyzed in more detail in: Claes, J. & Schmauder, A., 2020. *When the dust settles Economic and governance repercussions of migration policies in Niger's north*. The Clingendael Institute.

¹⁶⁹ KII Konrad-Adenauer Foundation, 22 January 2021, Bamako, Mali.

¹⁷⁰ In neighboring Niger, the Peace Caravan - called 'Taghlamt N'Alkher' constitutes an important building bloc in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding. The Peace Caravan organizes meetings to sensitize communities on issues such as the circulation of weapons, drugs and radicalization. At regional level, this peace committee has been a central component of Niger's trafficking management strategies, successfully resolving clashes between rival traffickers and preventing communal clashes.

See: Claes, J. & Schmauder, A., 2020. *When the dust settles Economic and governance repercussions of migration policies in Niger's north*. The Clingendael Institute.

raising peace caravans throughout all the Mali regions, and train young volunteers about the process of managing and preventing conflict.^{171,172}

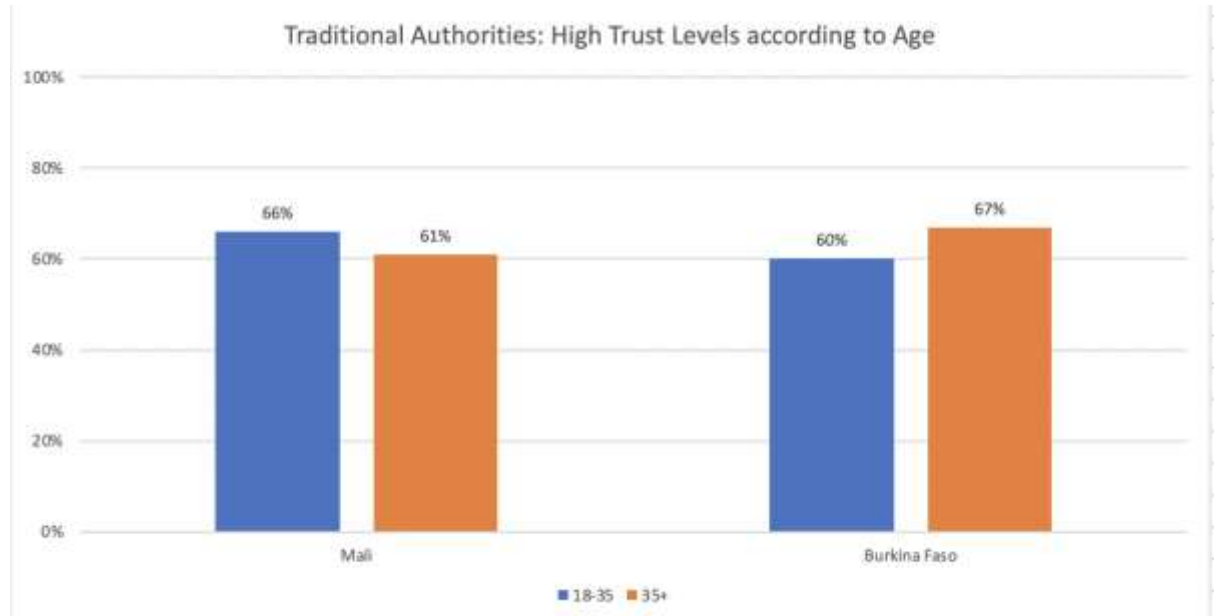
3.4 Move Beyond “Ticking-the-Box” Inclusivity to Ensure Real Inclusion

Focus group respondents in both central Mali and western Burkina Faso emphasized that at times they felt their inclusion was not meaningful and instead exploited for information or to check a box. Moving forward, mainstreaming youth and gender into peacebuilding must ensure their participation is fruitful and meaningful. Pathways for youth inclusion tend to focus on male youth as their involvement with armed groups—especially in central Mali—puts a premium on their inclusion. Moreover, youth participation is more likely in Burkina Faso as more preventative activities exist that seek to engage the community on conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

¹⁷¹ FGD Youth Leaders, 8 January 2021, Mopti, Mali.

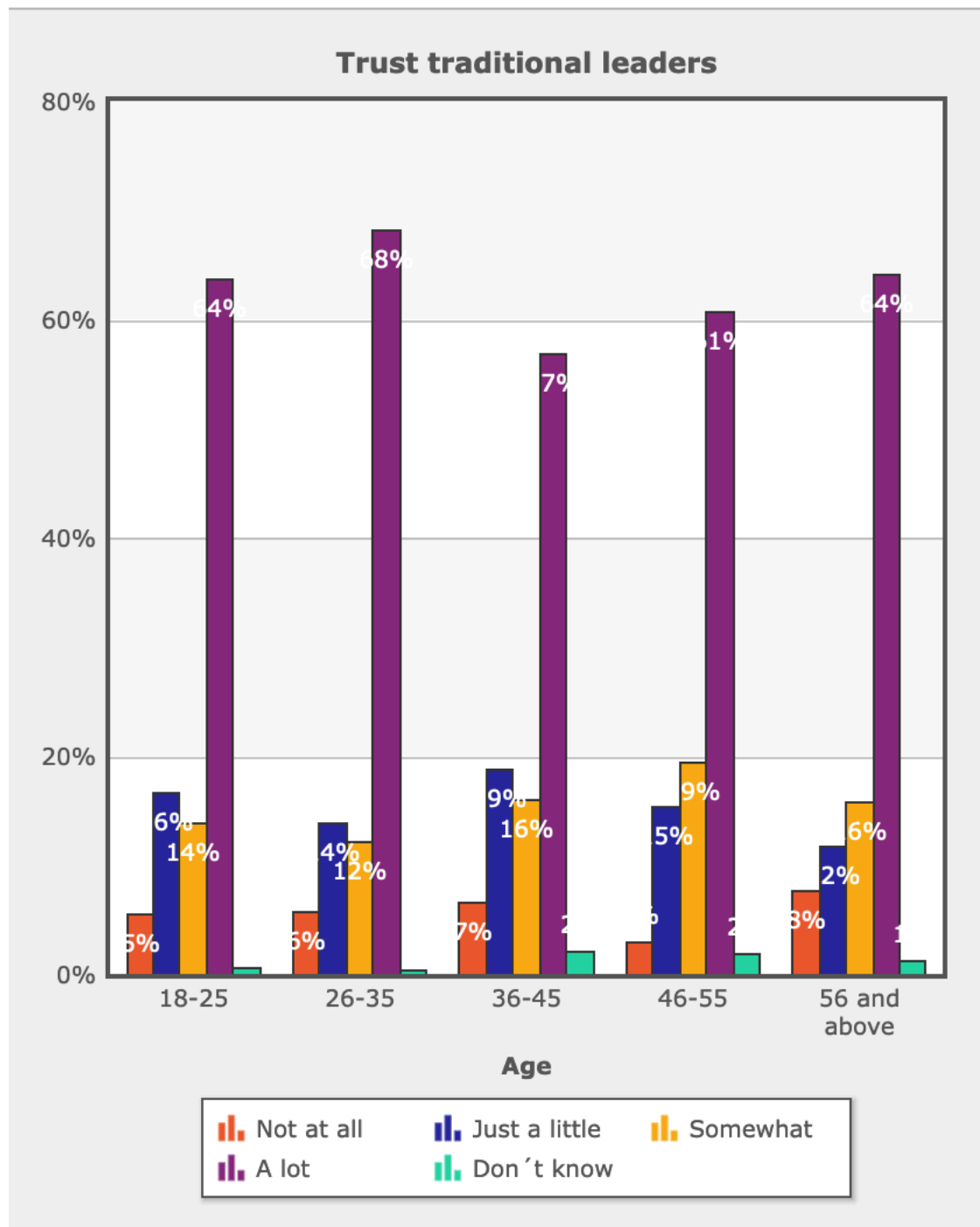
ANNEX 1

Afrobarometer Data: Trust Levels towards Traditional Leaders according to Age Group

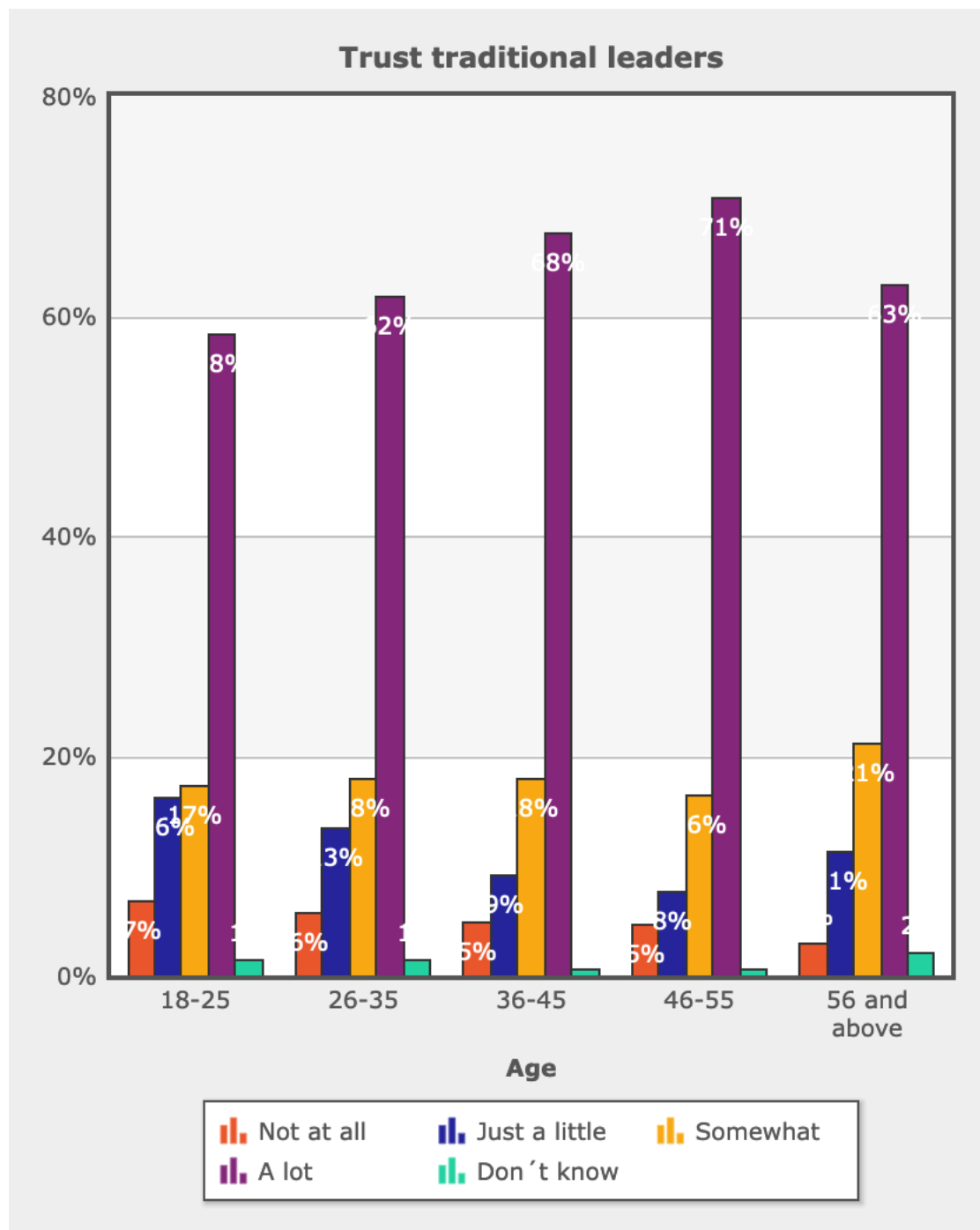


Source: Own Illustration, based on Afrobarometer Data 2016/2018.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ The graphic illustrates the share of respondents that responded “A lot” to the question: “How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say? Traditional leaders”



¹⁷⁴ Afrobarometer Online Data Analysis, Data Collection Round 7, 2016/2018



¹⁷⁵ Ibid.