A non-violent youth in the Sahel.
Jihane Nami/Mercy Corps

"WE HOPE AND WE FIGHT"

Youth, Communities, and Violence in Mali

SEPTEMBER 2017

Executive Summary

Since 2012, Mali has been steeped in a violent conflict that has fractured communities, displaced hundreds of thousands, and left thousands of people dead. Despite a peace agreement forged in 2015, security continues to diminish, and hope for a sustainable peace remains fragile. During this critical transition, Mali's conflict risks growing into an even bigger regional humanitarian crisis, with dire consequences for refugee flows, human suffering, and global stability.

Youth are critical for any peace to take hold, with more than two thirds of Mali's 18 million people under the age of 24. To understand the pathways youth take to armed groups as well as the factors that enable others to resist using violence, Mercy Corps and Think Peace interviewed youth members of armed groups, non-violent youth, and community leaders in conflict-affected areas within Timbuktu, Gao, and Mopti. This research informs a set of actionable recommendations for policymakers, donors, and civil society organizations for increasing the likelihood of the peace process's success through investments aimed at preventing youth participation in violence in both the short and long terms.

Key Findings

> **Community support for armed groups encourages youth to engage in violence out of a sense of duty or quest for respect.** A majority of members of armed groups—pro-government, anti-government, and violent extremist—said their communities supported and shared values with these groups, making youth participation in violence neither deviant nor abnormal. Hierarchical decision-making and strong social pressures fed youth's sense of obligation to support their community's affiliated armed group. Others joined, in part, to gain recognition and respect. A male youth from an anti-government group in Timbuktu said, "My source of motivation is the support I receive from my community for the safeguarding of property and people."

> **Perceptions of community exclusion perpetrated by the government—based on geography or ethnic identity—fuel participation in anti-government armed groups.** Across the North, respondents cited a lack of government services. However, youth in anti-government and violent extremist groups in particular shared deep grievances rooted in their perceptions of the government's relative neglect and mistreatment of their communities, primarily in Gao and Timbuktu. Non-violent youth were more likely to say the level of government service provision in their communities was similar to or better than that of others, potentially contributing to a lower likelihood that their communities would create or support armed groups.

> **Youth cite experience with injustice—including abuses and corruption—as motivators for joining anti-government armed groups.** Many youth in armed groups described injustices carried out by government and security actors. Some youth cited direct abuse by the military against their communities, and others described extensive experience with corruption. For example, in Mopti, communities' core issues around injustice stem from long-standing perceptions of extortion of the ethnic Peulh pastoralists by the government.

> **Some youth, seeking the long-term stability of a government position, see armed groups as a stepping-stone to joining the military.** While few youth cited short-term financial incentives for joining armed groups, more youth, primarily members of pro-government groups, spoke of their hope of joining the Malian military. These youth cited a need for long-term economic stability and a desire for increased status through integration into the army as factors leading them to join armed groups.

> **Many youth in armed groups and non-violent youth have high, but fragile, expectations for the peace process.** Some youth expressed hope that the process would bring about improved security, and others hoped to benefit from the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) provisions. However, slow progress and historical failures make some youth skeptical that the peace process will be effective. One male youth from a pro-government armed group in Gao said, "The agreement is good for Mali if it is applied in black and white, as it is written in the document. If not, then it is the start of the war and not the end." Other youth—particularly from the Mopti region—were concerned because they or their communities were excluded from the peace process.

Recommendations

Based on this research, we offer the following recommendations for government, donors, and civil society actors to build a foundation for lasting security.

1. **Focus on violence prevention and strengthening protective factors at the community level, rather than seeking to identify and target only those youth assumed to be "at-risk."** Our study did not identify specific attributes that put some individual youth at higher risk for participating in violence. In fact, many youth in armed groups described deep social ties to others in their communities, suggesting they are not the most marginalized. Therefore, government and civil society actors should ensure that a whole-of-community approach guides their interventions to prevent further violence; they should identify and address risk factors at the community level and design responses that recognize the strong influence of community support for or rejection of armed groups on youth engagement in violence.

2. **Establish inclusive, collaborative processes to ensure the peace process is transparent and responsive to diverse communities' needs.** The peace process's success will depend in part on whether it can meet youth's expectations and whether the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups and regions are seen as legitimate and fair. Government and multilateral officials charged with implementing the peace process must respond to changing dynamics and ensure that diverse ethnic and clan groups, as well as armed groups not included in the peace agreement, are still accounted for in future planning. Civil society and government actors should facilitate conversations in conflict-affected areas to raise awareness about the terms of the agreement and identify and mitigate other risk factors related to the peace process.

3. **Develop community-level security plans that outline a transition from armed groups to state-led security management.** Because of widespread community support for many non-state armed groups, traditional heavy-handed security and counter-insurgency approaches led by the Malian military will likely backfire—resulting in increased support for armed groups. Failing to address communities' real security concerns and frustration around military abuses in a fair and equitable manner will prevent development and violence reduction initiatives from taking root. Government security actors will need to partner with conflict-affected communities to improve accountability and develop localized plans to transition youth into non-violent roles, while advancing national-level security sector reform.

4. **Facilitate improved local governance through better service delivery and inclusive community-government decision-making.** Because perceptions of exclusion have contributed to community support of armed groups, improving governance processes and outcomes should be a key long-term priority for the government and local and international civil society actors. However, service provision is unlikely to reduce grievances on its own and requires inclusive and accountable decision-making processes. The government should incorporate community feedback—including that of youth—into their comprehensive development strategy for the Northern and Central regions. As local government officials return to their posts in these regions, they should work with community leaders to create formal feedback mechanisms for eliciting opinions from representative identity groups and identifying which services would best meet communities' needs.

5. **Identify and facilitate opportunities for youth to achieve status without engaging in armed groups.** Our findings indicate that youth need non-violent ways to gain status and recognition in their communities. For some youth, particularly those from Platform armed groups who cited their desire to join the military, creating opportunities for meaningful, stable, and demand-driven employment may expand their sights beyond scarce military or other civil service jobs. For the majority of youth interviewed, participation in social activities, civic engagement projects, or advocacy groups may help promote this needed sense of recognition and provide youth agency in addressing their grievances—as long as the formation of such groups is paired with real changes in government service provision and inclusion.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Conflict in Mali: A Deepening Crisis

Since 2012, Mali has been steeped in a violent conflict that has fractured communities, displaced hundreds of thousands, and left thousands of people dead.[1,2,3] Despite a peace agreement forged in 2015, security continues to deteriorate, with March 2017 registering the highest number of violent incidents in more than four years.[4,5] Hope for a sustainable peace remains especially fragile among youth, many of whom have taken sides to survive the ongoing violence.

Today's crisis in Mali is rooted in historical tensions between Northern groups—bound largely by ethnic or clan identities—and the government, located in the South. At the heart of this division is a long-time separatist movement led primarily by a faction of the Tuareg, an ethnic group spanning the Sahel and North Africa. While previous uprisings were unsuccessful, in 2012, the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) joined forces with Islamist extremist groups Ansar Dine, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), securing control of large swathes of Northern territory—their success owed in large part to an influx of weapons the Tuareg brought back from Libya after fighting on behalf of Colonel Gaddafi.[6] Soon after, a faction of the military, frustrated by the government's inability to maintain control of the North, waged a coup in Bamako that plunged Mali further into crisis. This crisis persists today—despite multinational and French forces helping restore Northern cities to the Malian government in 2013, followed by democratic elections, and the signing of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement resulting from the Algiers Process, or Algiers Accord, two years later—and the web of conflict actors grows more complex.[7]

While much of the conflict stems from Northern armed groups' perceptions of ineffective governance, other dynamics complicate the conflict landscape as well.[8] Power struggles among clans and other identity groups—in some cases fomented by the government in Bamako—sow deep divisions across the North.[9] In 2012 and 2013, when the MNLA-led offensive quickly escalated across the Northern regions of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao, communities raced to arm themselves against other armed groups, accelerating a deadly cycle of self-protection and political violence, drawn mostly along ethnic lines.[10,11] Since the beginning of the crisis, violence has spread beyond the North and consumed new regions, including Mopti in Central Mali. While governance grievances have been apparent in Northern regions for decades, a more recent degradation of governance in Mopti, along with perceptions of injustice among the Peulh ethnic group, has allowed violent extremists, most notably Katiba du

1   International Organization for Migration. (2017, May). Mali: IOM displacement tracking matrix report. Retrieved from https://mali.iom.int/sites/default/files/DTM_Reports/DTM_Mai_2017.pdf

2   The United Nations Refugee Agency. (2017, March). Mali situation: UNHCR regional update. Retrieved from: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55247

3   Project Ploughshares. (2015). Mali (2012 – first combat deaths). Retrieved from http://ploughshares.ca/pl_armedconflict/mali

4   Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2017) MALI, YEAR 2016: Update on incidents according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Retrieved from https://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/5250_1486725784_2016ymali-en.pdf

5   Since the beginning of 2013, the number of incidents per month was the highest in March 2017. From Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2017, April 11). Mali—March 2017 update. Retrieved from http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/mali

6   Chauzal, G., & van Damme, T. (2015). The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis. The Hague: Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

7   Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (2015). Mali Peace Accord: Actors, issues, and their representation. Retrieved from https://www.sipri.org/node/385

8   Scholars assert that poverty, lack of resources, and lack of government services originally laid the groundwork for the Tuareg uprising in the North, and a lack of efforts directed at recovery in the North since that time have further deepened a perception of inequality. From Agbiboa, D. E. (2015). Youth as Tactical Agents of Peacebuilding and Development in the Sahel. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, Vol. 10, No. 3.

9   Chauzal, G., & van Damme, T. (2015).

10   Among these sectarian divisions is the intra-Tuareg rivalry between the anti-government MNLA, led by the Ifhogas clan, and the pro-government GATIA armed group, led by the Imghad clan. From McGregor, A. (2015). GATIA: A Profile of Northern Mali's Pro-Government Tuareg and Arab Militia. Retrieved from https://jamestown.org/program/gatia

11   Other armed groups born of ethnic polarization include the Arab-based MAA (Le Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad), the Peulh-based Ganda Izo, and the Songhai-based Ganda Koyi, each of which have their own political agenda. From Welsh, M.Y. (2013, May 17). Making sense of Mali's armed groups. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/20131139522812326.html

Macina, to take root.[12] The government's inability to provide effective security—and the subsequent widespread impunity for perpetrators of violence—have left many in these conflict-affected regions seeking justice and security from non-state actors.[13, 14] This proliferation of armed groups, along with the spike and spread of violence, including criminality, has normalized violence across Northern and Central Mali.[15]

The Algiers Accord provides for increased autonomy in the North, including a decentralization plan splitting Mali's eight regions into 19, a dramatic increase in local governments' budgets, and the integration of select armed groups into civil service and the Malian armed forces (or Forces armées et de sécurité du Mali—FAMA).[16, 17] While goals and alliances shift continuously, armed groups fall under one of four main umbrellas: 1) Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)—coalition of groups or armed movements with common interests, notably self-determination and territorial control and influence; 2) Platform of Armed Groups (Platform)—a collection of diverse pro-government armed groups; 3) violent extremist organizations (VEOs); and 4) other, mostly smaller self-defense groups or those that do not align with CMA or Platform goals. While many CMA and Platform groups are promised provisions in the Accord's disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process, as well as greater influence in regional and national government decision-making, VEOs and independent groups were not party to the negotiations and will not benefit under the agreement. The peace process also excluded Central Mali, as it was less volatile when the Accord was signed. The degree to which government and other stakeholders implement this process inclusively and effectively will significantly impact Mali's prospects for peace.

Youth at the Center of Conflict and Peace

With more than two thirds of Mali's 18 million people under the age of 24, youth are critical for any peace to take hold.[18] However, this growing population faces enormous obstacles. Literacy rates among adolescents and youth between the ages of 15-24 range from 39% for girls and women to 56% for boys and men.[19] Many cannot access education, and those who can do not leave the system equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to find employment that meets their families' expectations.[20] A 2013 study on Malian youth employment found youth's expectations around livelihood opportunities were higher than what reality could offer them.[21] Further, Mali's hierarchical communities—where older men of dominant ethnic groups largely determine the social contract and make decisions for both male and female youth—further undermine their progress.[22]

Despite these challenges, youth remain Mali's biggest source of hope. While many fill the ranks of armed groups, many more have remained non-violent. Any long-term solution to Mali's conflicts will require understanding and addressing not only the pathways to violence, but also the capacities that support youth in remaining peaceful—even when the odds are stacked against them.

12   Katiba du Macina is also known as the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) and Amadou Kouffa's Group.

13   Sangare, B. (2016, May 20). Le Centre du Mali: épicentre du djihadisme? Note d'Analyse du GRIP. Retrieved from http://www.grip.org/fr/node/2008

14   International Alert. (2016, December). They treat us all like jihadis: Looking beyond violent extremism to building peace in Mali. Retrieved from http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis_EN_2016.pdf

15   Ibid.

16   Berbach, M.L., Graziosi, G.R., Sow, M., & Taiclet, B. (2015, December 23). Decentralization: The fiscal side of the peace agreement in Northern Mali. IMF Public Financial Management Blog. Retrieved from http://blog-pfm.imf.org/pfmblog/2015/12/decentralization-the-fiscal-side-of-the-peace-agreement-in-northern-mali.html

17   SIPRI. (2015).

18   World Bank. (2017). CIA world factbook: Mali. Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html

19   United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). (2015). Statistics: Mali. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_statistics.html

20   Arnaud, C. (2017, March). Sahelian youth: Dynamics of exclusion, means of reintegration. Paris: French Development Agency. Retrieved from http://www.afd.fr/webdav/site/afd/shared/Notes

21   Dougnon, I., Cisse, M.G., Bello, L., Koné, B., Touré, S., Langevang, T., & Gregersen, C. (2013), L'entrepreneuriat jeune au Mali—Etude de cas: Bamako, Segou, Konobou-gou et Niono. Bamako: Université de Bamako. Retrieved from http://research.cbs.dk/en/publications/lentrepreneuriat

22   Agbiboa, D.E. (2015).

Research Questions

Three primary questions guide this research:

1. What factors contribute to youth participation in violence in Northern and Central Mali?

2. What factors enable youth to avoid participating in violence?

3. What factors contribute to youth support for the peace process?

Drawing on the substantial body of literature documenting drivers of conflict in Mali, we aimed to identify the pathways that male and female youth take to joining armed groups. We spoke directly with youth from as many armed groups as possible—from pro-government and anti-government to violent extremist and independent fighting forces.[23] We wanted to understand what, if any, commonalities bind youth across diverse groups with disparate aims, and what key factors might differentiate these individuals.[24] We also wanted to understand the factors that influence youth to resist joining armed groups in an environment of widespread insecurity. This research informs a set of actionable recommendations for policymakers, donors, and civil society organizations for increasing the likelihood of the peace process's success through investments aimed at preventing youth participation in violence in both the short and long terms.

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23   While some of the armed groups have changed names, affiliation, purpose, or composition in recent years, we used the youth's own description of the armed group.
24   Variability among conflict actors highlighted in: International Alert. (2016, December).
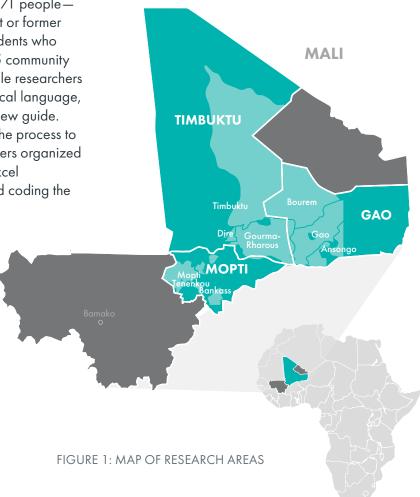
Methodology

To answer the above questions, Mercy Corps and Think Peace developed a qualitative research protocol and key informant interview (KII) guides designed for youth in armed groups, non-violent youth, and community leaders. Our researchers also developed a set of data collection tools aimed at exploring social influence around violence. This approach borrows elements of the "genogram" tool first used in public health and adapted to a violence prevention context. It consists of a questionnaire for youth that seeks to determine key influencers in their decision-making around violence, as well as an interview guide for those family or friends identified as key influencers.

Using these guides, Think Peace's research team conducted in-depth interviews between January and April 2017 in the regions of Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu (see Figure 1 for specific study sites within those regions). Researchers used a snowballing technique to identify respondents, starting with their contacts and requesting interviewees to suggest new potential respondents. Across 34 cities, towns, and villages, the team reached 71 people—mostly youth—who identified as current or former members of armed groups, 53 respondents who have not joined armed groups, and 25 community leaders. Three teams of male and female researchers led the interviews in the appropriate local language, using a common semi-structured interview guide. No names were recorded throughout the process to protect respondents' privacy. Researchers organized and analyzed qualitative data in an Excel spreadsheet, comparing responses and coding the data to discern trends and outliers. Our team presented key findings to community leaders, government representatives, and civil society members in each of the three regions, in addition to Bamako, to gather feedback and enhance our ability to interpret the data.

FIGURE 1: MAP OF RESEARCH AREAS

The table below contains the armed groups—separated in the four categories cited above—that respondents reported as active in their area. All armed groups listed below, except those in italics, are represented in our sample.[25]

TABLE 1: ARMED GROUPS ACTIVE IN RESEARCH SITES

PLATFORM: 32 respondents	CMA: 12 respondents	VEOs: 13 respondents	OTHER: 14 respondents
• Forces de libération des régions nord du Mali (FLN) • Ganda Izo • Ganda Koyi • Ganda Lassa Izo • Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance 1 (CMFPR1) • Gatia • *MAA (dissidents)* • *Le Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad (MPSA)*	• Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance 2 (CMFPR2)* • Le Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA) • Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) • *Higher Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA)* • *La Coalition du peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA)*	• Katiba du Macina** • Movement for the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)*** • Ansar Dine/Suna** • *Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** • *Al Mourabitoun**	• Congrès pour la justice dans l'Azawad (CJA) • Brigade • Smaller self-defense groups • Organized inter-communal conflict groups • *CMFPR3*
• *MOC (Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination, which comprises mixed patrols)*			

The CMFPR2 recently separated from the CMA, but is still included within the MOC.

**In April 2017, several of these groups merged into a coalition called Jamâ'ah Nusrah al-Islâm wal-Muslimîn (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims or JNIM).[26]

***MUJAO is no longer considered to be an active group.

The majority of respondents were youth between 18 and 35 years old. Our sample also included adults over the age of 35, some of whom identified as youth when they joined armed groups and others who still considered themselves youth. The sample retains those who self-identified as youth, as the term "youth" is defined broadly by the Malian government.[27] Below is a summary of the interviewees:

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25   Please note that this table does not purport to include all of the armed groups present in the regions today or since the 2012 crisis began.

26   Institute for Security Studies Africa. (2017, April 10). Mali's jihadist merger: desperate or dangerous? ISS Peace and Security Council Alert. Retrieved from https://issafrica.org/pscreport/situation-analysis/malis

27   The Malian government does not seem to have a strict age-bound definition of youth, but some government initiatives targeting youth have included youth between 15-40 years of age and 10-35 years. See: Youth Policy. (2014, June 11). Definition of Youth. Youth Policy. Retrieved from http://www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/mali/. Our own research did not include youth under the age of 18 for ethical reasons.

	MEMBERS OF ARMED GROUPS (TOTAL 71)	NON-MEMBERS OF ARMED GROUPS (TOTAL 53)	COMMUNITY LEADERS (TOTAL 25)
Current members	56	-	-
Former members	15	-	-
Males	65	40	17
Females	6	13	8
Regions:			
Gao	32	12	12
Mopti	17	19	6
Timbuktu	22	22	7
Median age at the time of interview:	28[28]	30	-
18 - 25	21	9	-
26 - 35	40	35	-
36+	9	9	-
Ethnic groups:			
Songhai	32	16	14
Tuareg	13	9	1
Peulh	7	6	3
Bambara	5	4	-
Arab	4	1	-
Bella	4	4	2
Dogon	2	3	1
Bozo	-	5	-
Mandinka	1	2	-
Other	2	3	3
Unknown	1	-	1

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28   One person's age was unknown.

Limitations

Because this study is based on qualitative data from respondents selected through a non-random method, findings cannot be generalized to all members of armed groups or to all non-violent youth. For the sake of analysis and privacy, we generally disaggregate respondents by the four categories of armed groups above, though shifting goals and alliances complicate examining any category in isolation. Further, youth described varying levels of involvement—from living in the armed group's encampments and fighting actively on behalf of the group to providing intelligence services sporadically. Because the line between participating in violence and not participating is often unclear, we were unable to analyze responses according to levels of support or participation in violence.

Despite having female and male researchers, we reached relatively few female members of armed groups and female respondents in general. Young women make up a significantly smaller share of armed group membership than men, and those who do participate are likely more reluctant to speak because they risk greater stigmatization within their communities.

Security and access issues prevented the team from reaching certain communities, creating an inherent bias in the sample. Individuals living in communities under the tight control of certain groups and closed to outsiders would likely have different perspectives on the issues explored in the study. In Mopti, specifically, respondents expressed suspicion about the intent of the research and fears of retaliation from armed groups. Because of security concerns, respondents from VEOs were especially limited, and the majority identified as former members of MUJAO.

In most cases, researchers interviewed only a few youth from each town or village before exhausting the snowball; rarely were researchers able to speak with both violent and non-violent youth from the same community, making triangulation of responses about community characteristics difficult. Additionally, given the sensitivity of the topic, respondents may have been less than candid about their views or participation in various activities.

Key Findings

Why Youth Join or Resist Joining Armed Groups

The following findings outline key factors that influence both youth participation and non-participation in violence. Many youth described more than one factor influencing their behavior, revealing a complex interplay between systemic and community-level factors and individual decision-making.

Community support for armed groups encourages youth to engage in violence out of a sense of duty or quest for respect.

While researchers set out to learn why young men and women do, or do not, participate in organized violence, the data indicate this framing diverts attention away from a fundamental component of conflict dynamics in Mali: the role of the community. While we initially sought to identify the protective factors making youth more "resilient" to armed group recruitment as compared to youth who are "vulnerable" to such recruitment, our research revealed these terms did not adequately characterize youth in the context of Mali. Many youth who participated in armed groups did so out of a deep connection to and respect from their communities—hardly traditional markers of vulnerability—leading us to avoid the labels "resilient" or "vulnerable." Only a handful of youth did not mention helping or serving their communities when describing their reasons for joining armed groups. We found far more evidence of community-level motivations for supporting armed groups than purely individual or personal motivations. The thrust of the research transformed from "Why do youth fight or not fight?" into "How does community support for or rejection of armed groups influence youth's decisions whether to join armed groups?"

In communities characterized by broad-based support for armed groups and widespread insecurity, youth participation in violence is considered neither deviant nor abnormal. Interviews made clear communities' attitudes toward an armed group—or strength of relationship with it—lay the foundation on which youth participation in violence was acceptable or desirable. A majority of youth members of armed groups said their communities both supported and shared values with these groups (inclusive of the Platform, the CMA, or VEOs). One male youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu said, "The Arab community shares the same Arab-Islamic values as the group. The leaders are on our side, against the government, who are not meeting the expectations of the population." Former members of MUJAO, a VEO, also said their communities supported the group, including a young man from Gao who said, "[The leaders of the group] prayed with our parents and in my opinion they shared the same values." In some cases, armed groups and communities were considered to be one and the same. One male youth from a Platform group in Gao said, "The community shows that it shares values with us as it supports us in our actions. Even the village chief...is an important member of our group." In a sign of solidarity between communities and armed groups, some youth reported that communities provided their armed groups with food and other supplies to sustain their actions.

What Does "Community" Mean to Youth?

The meaning of "community" in the context of Northern and Central Mali varied dramatically across respondents. Some youth viewed their community in geographical terms, with the organizing unit around the hierarchy of traditional leaders. Others viewed their communities in ethnic or clan terms and fought on behalf of their greater identity group. Still others saw their communities in terms of their social networks, those closest to them, and their families.

Almost no youth interviewed said they were forced to join armed groups or to remain peaceful, describing instead a community culture that discouraged non-normative behavior.[29] As one male youth from a Platform group in Timbuktu said, "The elderly are included in decision-making first, and they inform us afterwards. They think that we are children and that we must listen to our elders first." Youth described community environments that discouraged youth from questioning authorities' decision-making, including a male youth from a Platform group in Timbuktu who said, "When a decision is made, the whole community obeys, in respect of the wise and for the good of the village. A Bambara proverb says, 'A hen does not give bad seeds to her chicks.'"

Reinforcing the authority of leaders' decisions, youth described far-reaching social repercussions for disobeying the decisions of community leaders.[30] A male youth from a VEO in Gao described what would happen if he did something to upset or disappoint his community: "I will be cursed and so will my offspring." Ultimately, social pressure, even without the direct threat of punishment, exerted a powerful influence over youth decision-making. A male youth from a Platform group in Gao said, "I'm worried about what the community thinks of me because without it, I am nothing."

Family Influence: Setting Youth on a Pathway Toward or Away From Armed Groups

Within the context of community-level social pressures, a majority of youth who were members of armed groups said they had a friend or family member in the same armed group. Many respondents said their decision to join was influenced at least in part by these close contacts. For other youth, their decision not to join armed groups was also heavily influenced by their loved ones.

Parental influence specifically emerged as an important factor contributing to participation in violence or non-violence. Many youth in armed groups said at least one of their parents was part of those same or similar armed groups beforehand. Others described a warrior identity in their families—reinforced by the community—they felt they needed to uphold. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of non-violent youth described their parents as actively engaged in community decision-making and social gatherings, compared to only some youth in armed groups.

As illustrated in *Figure 2*, youth joined armed groups for a variety of interlinking reasons.[31] Many joined out of a sense of duty to the community. As outlined above, a combination of hierarchical decision-making and social repercussions for disobeying leaders' decisions fed youth's sense of obligation to support their community's affiliated armed group. One male Arab youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu said, "Participation in the group is voluntary for those in other ethnic groups who want to support us, but Arab youth in the region are consciously obliged [to join]." Others joined in part because being a member of an armed group afforded them the opportunity to gain recognition and respect as responsible youth supporting their communities. One male youth from a Platform group in Gao said, "I feel accepted and respected in my community because, as I'm the leader of the group, I defend the community's interests." Another male youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu

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29   This echoes Gilligan, Khadka, and Samii who find that social incentives are more powerful than material incentives for individual membership in armed groups, particularly for non-state armed groups as opposed to state armed groups. From Gilligan, M.J., Khadka, P.B., & Samii, C. (2017). Social Incentives in State and Non-State Armed Groups. (Working Paper).

30   Humphreys and Weinstein suggest two hypotheses, each of which is plausible in the context of Mali: individuals are more likely to participate in violent groups if members of the community do, and if their community features strong social structures. From Humphreys, M., & Weinstein, J.W. (2008, April). Who fights? The determinants of participation in civil war. American Journal of Political Science, 52(2), 436–455.

31   This backs up other literature suggesting that contributions to group objectives are often simultaneously personal, in that individuals who support their identity group may gain status or a sense of belonging. Khalil, J., & Zeuthen, M. (2016). Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Program Design and Evaluation. London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. Retrieved from https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20160608_cve_and_rr.combined.online4.pdf

said, "My source of motivation is the support I receive from my community for the safeguarding of property and people. Don't forget that a man must fight for his dignity, his happiness, and his descendants." For some youth, the line between duty and stature was blurred, with youth who felt solidarity with their community expressing their eagerness to both help the community and become a leader in the process.

FIGURE 2: MECHANISMS FOR HOW COMMUNITIES INFLUENCE YOUTH TO ENGAGE IN ARMED GROUPS

Sense of duty or obligation to community

Solidarity or pride in community or identity group

Desire for increased respect in community through fighting on its behalf

For communities that did not support armed groups, social influence translated into non-violence, whether through peaceful protest or simply a lack of violence. In one example, a male youth from Gao not involved in an armed group said, "The different types of decisions are implemented by the mayor and the community leaders. For example, when community leaders organize a [peaceful] demonstration, all of the young people participate." The same factors related to duty, solidarity, and search for respect kept youth out of violence in communities whose leaders did not support armed groups.

Protection of communities serves as a powerful motivator for youth to join armed groups.

Youth and community leaders described an array of threats facing their communities: abusive military forces, pro- and anti-government armed groups, VEOs, members of rival inter-communal groups, and bandits. One male youth from a VEO in Gao said, "There is no governmental security force, nor any self-defense group in our community. We live in insecurity, so everyone protects themselves." A vast majority of youth in armed groups said protecting their communities from outside threats was one of the key reasons they joined.[32] Communities assessed their unique threats and created or supported specific armed groups in response to those threats, choosing the solution that provided the greatest security. Many Platform groups, some of which predate the conflict, formed in reaction to physical threats (e.g., ongoing criminality, increasing activity of CMA groups and VEOs). One male youth from a Platform group in Timbuktu described how he was protecting his community specifically against CMA-affiliated groups: "Personally, I feel more secure with the Islamists because they do not attack the population to strip them of their property, at least. They only attack the symbols of the state, while the other armed groups prevent the population from going about their business." For members of CMA groups and certain VEOs, the threat often related to believing their identity group was under assault (see section below on exclusion), as well as protecting their communities from or avenging military abuses (see section below on injustice).

Unsurprisingly, youth who had joined armed groups described attacks against their communities far more frequently than youth who were not violent. Close to half of the respondents from armed groups said their communities had experienced attacks either by the military or armed groups, compared to only a few non-violent

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32   This reinforces findings from Théroux-Bénoni, L., Assanvo, W., Maïga, I., Abatan, J.E.A., Ba, F., Gnonsekan, O. ... Tounkara, A. (2016, August). Mali's young 'jihadists': Fueled by faith or circumstance? Institute for Security Studies. Retrieved from https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/policybrief89-eng-v3.pdf

youth who said their communities had experienced such attacks. Communities that had experienced violence were far more likely to form or create groups to defend themselves than communities that had not experienced violence, and this need for protection created an arms race throughout the region. While violence can breed more violence—both out of the need for protection and the normalization of violence—the data did not indicate whether experiences of violence predated individual youth respondents' participation in violence. For those communities affected less directly by the violence, leaders and youth have had no reason to form groups in the name of protection.

Perceptions of community exclusion perpetrated by the government—based on geography or ethnic identity—fuel participation in anti-government armed groups.

The majority of respondents in each group—members of armed groups, non-violent youth, and community leaders—described government failures, citing a lack of security, acceptable healthcare, education, and access to water as their primary sources of frustration. This finding is unsurprising, given studied linkages between poor governance and instability and the documented use of political violence to redress both economic and political grievances.[33]

Given so many youth—violent and non-violent—report failures of the government in their communities, identifying how communities perceive government actions is essential to understanding their decision-making around whether to support armed groups and which (i.e., pro- or anti-government) groups to support. While general governance grievances can create an environment conducive to support for and recruitment by armed groups, the research revealed two key variables that help determine support specifically for anti-government (i.e., CMA and VEO) armed groups: 1) whether communities express feeling particularly excluded compared to others, and 2), whether they experience direct injustices (e.g., corruption—see following s ection on injustice).
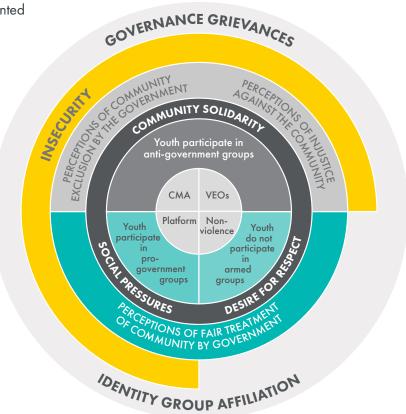

FIGURE 3. FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ARMED GROUPS

Figure 3 illustrates the complex factors contributing to community support for or rejection of armed groups and youth decision-making around violence.

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33   Østby, G. (2008). Polarization, horizontal inequalities and violent civil conflict. Journal of Peace Research, 45(2),143-162.

Youth in Platform groups shared diverse motivations for fighting, which often did not include their outright support for the government. Some fought to defend their territory against CMA groups or VEOs. One male youth from a Platform group in Timbuktu said, "The population has been left alone in total suffering, while the leaders are in bed with the people's money in Bamako. So we defend ourselves, as we should, to protect our territory." Youth also shared community support for a Platform armed group on behalf of ethnic or clan affiliation. One male youth from a Platform group in Timbuktu said, "I come from a community called Bella Tamashek. We are very marginalized in society by the other communities. We are trying to fight for our ethnic and cultural identity." While some CMA groups (e.g., the Tuareg Ifhogas clan-majority MNLA) and VEOs (e.g., the Peulh-majority Katiba du Macina) garner support by capitalizing on ethnic groups' perceptions of exclusion by the government, other identity groups (e.g., the Tuareg Imghad clan in the North, the Songhai in Central Mali) support Platform groups to protect or position themselves against a rival ethnic group—even where communities harbor government grievances.[34,35]

Religion and Recruitment

The expansion of VEOs has caused some outside observers to characterize Mali's conflict as religious. However, youth rarely cited religion as an impetus for joining an armed group. When they did, religion was primarily linked to community values and support for the armed group, not necessarily the youth's individual religious belief system. One young man from Gao in MUJAO said, "MUJAO won the confidence of the community through its message and the practice of Islam." Respondents who did discuss religion tended to do so alongside other benefits. Another male youth from MUJAO said, "I decided to become a part of the group in order to have a job, to protect myself, and to improve my religion, which is Islam."

The one former member interviewed from Katiba du Macina, a young man from Mopti, spoke of the initial religious appeal of the group and its leader's charisma. "I knew [Amadou Kouffa—the leader of Katiba du Macina]...he was a true preacher...when he starts to preach in front of you, there is nothing you can do. You will love him. The first time I met him...immediately I liked him, and immediately he convinced me...Afterwards, I became aware of the real motivations that were hidden behind the religion, and I did not go far [in the group]."

The role of community-level religious leaders in supporting VEOs and other groups is unclear. Several youth said that religious leaders did not speak out against VEOs, some because of fear. A young woman from Mopti described a scene in which a religious leader was silenced: "Amadou Kouffa and a man came to the mosque. [I watched as] they threw two big men out of the window...One died directly...and the other (died) later in the hospital. Afterwards, the imam announced the deaths of the individuals on the microphone and that he wanted people to pray for them. Amadou Kouffa took the microphone to say that he was going to Sevaré, and on his return he would apply Sharia law. The imam said nothing."

Ultimately, religion and Islam surfaced infrequently in the interviews and did not emerge as a salient factor among youth choosing to join VEOs.

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34 Specifically, identity and inter-group relationships have been shown as a key determinant in communities' attitudes toward armed groups in war time. From Lyall, J., Blair, G., & Imai, K. (2013). Explaining support for combatants during wartime: A survey experiment in Afghanistan. American Political Science Review, 107(4), 679-705.
35 The Tuareg ethnic group is divided into several sub-groups or clans: the clans that surfaced in our data were the traditionally "noble" Ifhogas clan, the subordinate "vassal" Imghad clan, and the "former serf" Bella clan, formerly the slave class. From Chauzal, G., & van Damme, T. (2015).

In contrast, youth from CMA groups and VEOs in particular shared deep grievances from what they perceive as intentional underdevelopment and mistreatment of their communities by the government. Themes of exclusion emerged most strongly from the Northern regions of Timbuktu and Gao, some related to geographically-based grievances. A male youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu said, "I would say that the government only exists for those in the South. In any case they're not in the North because we cannot see any concrete action that they have made for the benefit of the populations here." A longstanding feeling of discrimination against and neglect of the North was pervasive among youth in anti-government groups. One male youth from a CMA group also in Timbuktu said, "The government does not exist in the far North. Simply go to the desert to see this absence."

> *"The government does not exist in the far North. Simply go to the desert to see this absence."*
> - Male youth - CMA group, Timbuktu

A male youth member of a VEO in Gao said, "Our community is less developed than other communities because we are marginalized, there is not so much as a single French school here." Members of armed groups in Gao, like those in Timbuktu and Mopti, were likely to perceive their communities as worse off than the average community, fueling a sense of inequality perpetuated by government neglect.

Jihane Nami/Mercy Corps

Alongside these geographic-based perceptions that the government favors the South, some youth expressed a sense of exclusion based on ethnicity. These sentiments echo documentation of Northern-based ethnic groups, which often organize their support for armed groups along ethnic lines based on their perception of political exclusion and marginalization at the hands of a predominantly ethnic Bambara (Southern) government.[36] One male youth from a CMA group said, "My community is less developed than others. The Tuaregs are generally nomads in the desert. The minimum subsistence, water, is very rare among us and there is no effort by the

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36   Lackenbauer, H., Lindell, M.T., & Ingerstad, G. (2015). 'If our men won't fight, we will': A gendered analysis of the armed conflict in Northern Mali. Kista: Swedish Defence Research Agency.

government to at least give us water." This type of frustration at what youth perceive as government's efforts to subordinate their ethnic group leads them to fight to protect their interests, whether those interests are greater recognition and influence over decision-making or access to resources.[37]

Within the overall environment of perceived exclusion described above, some youth described community perceptions that safeguard against support for violence. A marked difference emerged between members and non-members of armed groups in their perception of their communities' access to services. While the overwhelming majority of youth who joined armed groups said their communities had less or equal access to services when compared to others in their region, non-violent youth's responses were mixed. In one example, a non-violent male youth from Gao said, "In terms of development, my community is more or less developed compared to some others. We have a primary school, a secondary school, large wells, and a Health Referral Center." Ultimately, communities that are better developed—or at least perceived their level of government service provision as similar to or better than other communities—were less likely to create or support armed groups.[38]

Youth cite experience with injustice—including abuses and corruption—as motivators for joining anti-government armed groups.

Many youth described injustices carried out by government and security authorities. In some cases, youth cited direct abuse, such as one male adult from a CMA group in Timbuktu who described multiple army attacks on the city, recounting, "When the soldiers arrived in the village, they began to shoot in the air. The women and the children hid themselves under the tents.

Inter-communal Conflicts in Mali and the Broader Crisis

A long history of ethnic tensions in Mopti is closely tied to the Peulhs' continued perception of discrimination perpetuated by the authorities and other ethnic groups. While inter-communal conflicts—largely rooted in competition for resources—have plagued Mopti for many years, recent national events have complicated conflict dynamics. Specifically, interventions by the Malian state and army have been accompanied by accusations from external observers of human rights abuses against Peulh civilians, including reports of the army arresting Peulhs for affiliations with Katiba du Macina without proof and transferring them to prison in Bamako.[39]

The research revealed deep-seated discrimination, with one female Bambara youth in Mopti saying, "In my opinion, it is necessary to kill all Peulhs because it is because of them that we have these problems." This animosity toward Peulhs, grounded in the perception that they are responsible for the conflict, exacerbates the cycle of violence, pushing some Peulhs toward Katiba du Macina to escape discrimination.

They pulled out the adults and old people by force, and asked them questions about some weapons hidden in the sand...They took away a young man from the village, who, even to this day, has not been found." Other youth, specifically those from MUJAO in Gao, described multiple army attacks on their community. One male youth from MUJAO recounted being tortured at the hands of the military, saying, "During the military attack, I was arrested and taken to Gao, attached [to something and forced] to look at the sun. I was beaten by the soldiers, and they searched for my family." Others described military personnel in pursuit of MUJAO members beating men indiscriminately in a village. While some of these events likely occurred after these youth joined armed groups, their

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37   This is reflected in literature, such as Fearon, outlining theories of ethnic-based anti-government violence. From Brubaker, Rogers and David D. Laitin. 1998. "Ethnic and nationalist violence." Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 24(1), pp.423-452.

38   Whether or not those perceptions hold true across different individuals within communities is unclear from the data.

39   Human Rights Watch. (2017). "Mali: Spate of Killings by Armed Groups." https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/05/mali-spate-killings-armed-groups

experiences of injustice have exacerbated existing anti-government sentiments, perpetuating support for violence against FAMA and pro-government groups.

In addition to military abuses, other youth in armed groups from all regions described extensive corruption, with one male youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu saying, "It was the inability of the government that led us to this situation of conflict and war. I feel cheated by the tax services, customs and the departments of economic affairs. I became a part of the Arab movement MAA in response." Youth in Mopti expressed similar frustrations, with one male youth engaged in inter-communal conflict saying, "There is justice, but not for the poor...You see your rights are being violated and without money, you do not have justice."

Mopti's core issues around injustice stem from long-standing perceptions of unfair treatment of the ethnic Peulh pastoralists. Peulh respondents said they were driven to participate in violence after the government singularly exploited their community, taxing them unfairly. One Peulh herder described a common scenario:

> "We are mostly victimized by farmers. We come back (to the area) after the harvests, and if our animals come to graze the stalks or the grass, the farmers attack us or bring us to the court saying that our animals have destroyed everything on their farms. So we don't return to their farms until they have finished harvesting. The authorities tax us and we pay. We avoid the authorities because they ask for a lot of money from us...especially when you are Peulh."

A male Peulh youth from Mopti described how frustration with extortion has pushed many of the Peulh away from the authorities and toward armed groups, specifically Katiba du Macina: "We are at peace behind the river now. No soldier dares to go there now. Behind the river 90% of the Peulhs do not want to see the state because they have been too marginalized by the state. Otherwise the armed groups cohabit peacefully with the population."[40]

> *"There is justice, but not for the poor...You see your rights are being violated and without money, you do not have justice."*
>
> - Male youth - Other group, Mopti

Some youth, seeking the long-term stability of a government position, see armed groups as a stepping-stone to joining the military.

While community level support for armed groups forms the foundation for youth's participation in violence, some youth cited a need or desire for long-term economic stability and increased status as pathways to membership. Few youth cited short-term financial incentives for joining armed groups, and only a handful, largely former MUJAO members, said that joining provided them an opportunity to support their families. However, more youth, primarily members of Platform groups, expressed their long-term hope of joining the FAMA, some already having tried and failed to join the military. For example, one male youth from a Platform group in Gao said, "I applied several times to be in the military but failed, and with the death of my brother, I decided to find a way to join the army through the influence of this group." A male youth member of the Platform from Timbuktu said, "There are two factors that pushed me to join the group: the protection of [my community], and the concern of having a job in the military so that I can build my life with a woman, have some children, and take care of my parents." Another male youth from Timbuktu in a Platform group said, "I joined the group for the sole purpose of defending my region. But now that they are talking about DDR, I hope to be able to join the military, through the group, to defend my country."

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40   Studies have shown that government officials are often absent from their posts, fostering mistrust and leading some communities to support armed groups as a better alternative to the state. From United Nations Security Council. (2012, November 29). Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, S/2012/894. Retrieved from http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Report%20of%20the%20Secretary-General%20on%20the%20situation%20in%20Mali.pdf

In a few cases, youth came from Bamako and other areas in the South to join Platform groups in the North, in large part because they saw this as an opportunity to become involved in future DDR processes. One male youth left his job as a teacher in Koulikoro, outside of Bamako, to go to Mopti and fight with a Platform group: "I left teaching because I really love the army, and I would like to become a soldier for Mali." Another young woman left Bamako to join a different Platform group in Mopti: "I have always wanted to be part of the Malian army. We train here as the Malian military because it is our wish to become part of it."

Two youth even paid money to join Platform groups in the hopes that they would eventually be provided a stable, long-term army job. One young man from a Platform group in Timbuktu described selling a piece of land his father had given him and paying 1 million CFAs (roughly $1,700 USD) to join the group with the promise he would be integrated into the army. He said, "I was told that we would be officers in the army without going through the normal process and that...

Demographics and Violence

In analyzing data on motivations and background factors, we did not find a relationship between key demographics and participation in violence. Roughly equal numbers of respondents who participated in armed groups:

> were working versus those who were not

> had attended secular versus religious schools

> considered their families as better off than others, versus those who considered their families less well-off (with the majority viewing themselves as similarly economically positioned when compared to others

> were married versus those who were single

we would be paid 200,000 CFAs per month. My expectations were not met, as we live in miserable conditions. We do not eat enough to fill our deep hunger. We...can no longer return to our families. That would be shameful because everyone thinks we are in Timbuktu to train for the army." His desire to join the army stemmed both from his need for money and for the status it would afford him and his family.[41]

Even a few youth who fought in CMA groups expressed a desire to be integrated into FAMA, with two men in Timbuktu stating they hoped to gain a military position through the peace process. One said he had joined the group hoping he would gain "recognition and perhaps, one day, integration into the civil service for the state," and the other hoped that with DDR, "the fighters will be integrated into the army." While it remains unclear whether both hoped of being integrated into FAMA before joining their CMA group or if this potential benefit revealed itself afterward, their willingness to join FAMA after fighting against it reinforces the practical—rather than political or ideological—nature of armed group participation among many youth.

> *"We...can no longer return to our families. That would be shameful because everyone thinks we are in Timbuktu to train for the army."*
>
> - Male youth - Platform group, Timbuktu

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41   Youth's need to attain status that will help them transition to adulthood is well documented. McLean-Hilker, L., & Fraser, E. (2009). Youth Exclusion, Violence, Conflict and Fragile States. London: Social Development Direct. Retrieved from http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/CON66.pdf

Women in the Ranks: A Snapshot of Female Participation

Interviews with women—27 out of the 149 total respondents—illustrated the diversity of roles they play within the conflict. Some were spies, soldiers, or sex slaves. In total, we spoke to seven women who were part of armed groups. Below are a few of their stories:

> ❯ One divorced housewife from Gao voluntarily cooks for a Platform group in order to contribute to the security of her village. Her family members are actively engaged within the group.

> ❯ A young hairdresser from Timbuktu was kidnapped by a VEO at the age of 16 from her family house. She was taken to a camp and raped repeatedly by multiple men and later engaged in sex work. She explained that as she was earning much more money than she could at home she decided to stay, even after she was free to leave. When she did eventually leave, she did not return her home village because of the shame she expected to receive from her community.

> ❯ Four female soldiers living within a Platform base camp in the Mopti region had left their families, and even their studies, in Bamako or Gao to join an armed group, with the hope of being integrated within the army. They said they received the same training and had the same duties as men, and one had even risen to the rank of corporal. One of them explained how she would not return home until she was successfully part of the military, even though her family wanted her to return.

These stories, though limited, illustrate the variety of pathways that women take to armed groups and challenge common conceptions of women as exclusively victims in the conflict. Each of these young women has navigated the complexities of conflict with unique strategies to survive, protect their communities, or seek out a better life.

Sidi Mohamed/Think Peace

Prospects for the Peace Process

Whether they participate in armed groups or not, youth shared a diversity of perceptions about the peace process. Even individual youth held conflicting expectations, betraying a mix of optimism and pessimism across Northern and Central Mali, and further charting the complex landscape in which the peace process must take hold.

Many youth in armed groups and non-violent youth have high, but fragile, expectations for the peace process.

Many youth—both in armed groups and not—expressed support for the peace process for diverse reasons. Some expressed hope that the process would bring about improved security and a reduction in violence across the country. One male youth in a CMA group in Gao said, "My perception of the agreement is that it will bring everyone together and end the crisis in Mali." Another male youth from Gao, formerly in MUJAO, seconded this opportunity for peace, predicting, "We will be integrated with the Platform and work together." For other youth, their support for the process stemmed from their understanding of the benefits of DDR, such as potential integration into FAMA (as noted above). A male youth in Timbuktu spoke of his Platform group's expectations for the process: "The officials speak of it in our group meetings. They say that if the agreement works we will be stationed and engaged in the Malian army with monthly salaries. I think this is good, and the population will be at peace." Other youth expressed hope they would benefit from an economic package intended to ease their transition back to civilian life.

> *"The agreement is good for Mali if it is applied in black and white—as it is written in the document. If not, then it is the start of the war and not the end."*
>
> - Male youth - Platform group, Gao

However, many youth sensed that their hopes would quickly deflate if the government and other stakeholders did not deliver on the promises or perceived promises of the peace process. Some youth expressed pessimism that the agreement would take hold as intended, based on historical peace process failures. A male youth from a CMA armed group in Timbuktu said he feared that the peace agreement would be ineffective "because this is not the first time war broke out in Mali. The different resolutions bring nothing concrete." Others expressed frustration at widespread insecurity despite the signing of the agreement, noting circumstances had yet to change as a result of the Accord. One male youth from a Platform group in Gao said, "The agreement is good for Mali if it is applied in black and white—as it is written in the document. If not, then it is the start of the war and not the end."

A female youth from a Platform group in Mopti said, "The process is not advancing. There is no reintegration yet." When asked if this made the youth want to rebel, she said, "Yes, but we hope and we fight. We don't ask for anything except reintegration."

Importantly, while a considerable number of youth interviewed expressed support for the peace process, few demonstrated an in-depth understanding of what the peace and DDR processes will entail. Several youth—both members and non-members of armed groups—shared they knew the goal of the process was to bring about peace, but were not aware of other objectives or provisions included in the process.

Youth excluded from the peace process worry it may further divide the country.

Most of the hopefulness for the agreement described above came from Timbuktu and Gao, likely because these two regions are included in the peace process. However, in Mopti— which was less violent when the agreement was

signed in 2015, excluding the region from participating—youth expressed deep concerns about the process. One female youth not from an armed group in Mopti said, "If I have understood the agreement, it favors the North alone. Mopti is not considered in the agreement, but it is Mopti that is suffering here."

However, fears about exclusion from the peace process were not limited to Mopti. On an individual level, some youth expressed concerns they might be excluded from the provisions of the peace agreement, with one non-violent male youth from Gao saying, "The peace agreement has never inspired confidence in me because I

Abdoul Kassim Fomba/Think Peace

do not find myself in it." This type of concern was slightly more common among youth who were not members of recognized armed groups, as they do not stand to benefit directly from certain DDR processes. Other youth outside of Mopti—both members and non-members of armed groups—shared their concerns about the exclusion of certain ethnic groups. One male youth in a Platform armed group from Timbuktu said, "The peace agreement is a source of division in the country. It is only a document of folklore, the very one that is putting the country behind. It did not take into account the concerns of the country's cultural and ethnic diversity."

Some youth contend that the peace process is illegitimate due to the influence of elite interests and outside, particularly Western, actors.

Many youth, both members and non-members of armed groups, expressed concerns about how the agreement was crafted and whether it truly serves the interests of Malians. Some youth voiced their frustration about Western powers' influence and saw their government as capitulating to outside demands. A male youth from a CMA group in Timbuktu said, "I think that the signatory parties of the agreement had their hands tied behind their backs by the Toubabs (white people). So they signed it without properly analyzing the real situation of the country, and now it is being blocked." A male youth who participates in inter-communal conflict in Mopti said, "In my opinion it is purely political. Westerners forced Mali to sign this agreement for purely selfish interests. If it was them, they would not agree to do that. If they decide today that the war should stop, that would be the end. Look at the deaths in the attacks. It is always the African military who die."

In addition to wariness of foreign influence, other youth saw the peace agreement as the product of the Malian elite, whom they considered corrupt and disconnected from most citizens. One Tuareg youth from Timbuktu, not in an armed group, spoke of what he considered the political levers at work in the peace agreement:

> "From my point of view, the institutional part of the agreement makes me sick because there will be regional elections. That permits those elected regionally to direct the institutions through a president of the regional council. In the political scene of Mali, it is the richest who win, even if they are not credible or legitimate. I do not wish to be led by the rich without any vision for development."

This frustration about the role of the elites in the peace process has led to disengagement among some local populations. One male youth from Timbuktu said, "The peace agreement is an engagement taken by the population in an indirect way through the leaders. There is not a good response on the ground. The document was distributed across the village, but the problem is that no one is interested in reading it."

Discussion

Common among most of the findings from this study is an inextricable link between community attitudes and youth's decision-making around violence. A focus on youth as individuals obscures the more relevant questions at the heart of both violence and peace in Mali: Why do communities respond to societal failures in different ways? Why do some communities respond to governance shortcomings with rebellion, while others try to fill in governance gaps by supporting the state? And why do other communities stay out of conflict altogether? Reframing these questions moves us closer to piecing together what fuels the conflicts and what might help stem the violence.

Many looked to Mali as a model of stability in West Africa prior to the crisis of 2012, but the underlying drivers leading communities to create or support armed groups long bubbled below the surface.[42] While the scope of this qualitative research was limited, a broad story about community support for violence or non-violence is taking shape. Frustration with Mali's government is far-reaching among communities in conflict. These communities are also struggling to keep themselves safe and maintain their identity groups. Everyone shares a desire for change—in governance, their communities' well being, and their prospects for the future. Some communities avoid violence for as long as possible. Others—because of ethnic affiliation or other reasons—support Platform groups, aligning themselves with the government and filling security gaps. Still others—because of exclusion or injustice—seek that change via anti-government violence, whether through CMA groups or VEOs. From there, community mechanisms, social pressures, and a desire for increased status contribute to individual youth picking up or refusing arms.

Our findings do not seek to diminish the agency of individual youth or downplay the diversity of opinion, hopes, and fears within communities. However, we call into question the default unit of analysis in both studying violent conflict and seeking to prevent it in the Malian context: the individual. In the context of active conflicts such as Mali's ongoing crisis, a sharper focus on community attitudes—which in turn create an environment in which armed groups can thrive or wither—may prove more fruitful in developing solutions for sustainable peace.

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42   Chauzal, G., & van Damme, T. (2015).

Recommendations

Despite widespread grievances against the government, strong social pressure in many communities to fight, and pervasive insecurity and fear throughout Northern and Central regions, a remarkable number of Malian youth have not joined armed groups. Yet these issues, among other complex factors driving violence, are interlinked—reinforcing and intensifying risk as Mali works through its tenuous peace process. In this critical window, government, donors, and civil society actors must invest strategically in Mali's peace. Without timely, evidence-based interventions, Mali's conflicts threaten to metastasize into an even bigger regional humanitarian crisis, with dire consequences for refugee flows, human suffering, and global stability. Based on this research, we offer the following recommendations for collaborating with Malian communities—which wield primary influence over youth at the heart of the conflict—to build a foundation for lasting security.

1. **Focus on violence prevention and strengthening protective factors at the community level, rather than seeking to identify and target only those youth assumed to be "at-risk."** At the individual level, our study did not identify specific risk or vulnerability attributes that would indicate some youth are more likely to participate in violence. In fact, many youth in armed groups described deep social ties to others in their communities, suggesting they are not the most marginalized. Therefore, government and civil society actors should ensure that an inclusive, whole-of-community approach guides their interventions to prevent further violence in Mali's Northern and Central regions. This means that development and peacebuilding programs should identify and address risk factors for violence at the community level and design theories of change that recognize the strong influence of community support for or rejection of armed groups on youth behavior and violence more broadly. Program targets should center on community perceptions relevant to program objectives and measure the impact of changing community perceptions on youth's decisions whether to participate in violence. Further, any programs geared toward helping youth and addressing the drivers contributing to violence will likely be more successful if they espouse an open-door policy that ensures all youth in a given geographic area can take part if they wish. Finally, such programs should focus on the community-level drivers of violence generally, rather than zeroing in on violent extremism, as our study did not find deep differences in the factors influencing youth to join VEOs versus other types of armed groups.

2. **Establish inclusive, collaborative processes to ensure the peace process is transparent and responsive to diverse communities' needs.** While many have praised the peace process and its ambitions, its success will depend in part on whether it can meet youth's expectations and whether the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups and regions from specific provisions of the Accord are seen as legitimate and fair.[43] At the highest level, those in the Malian government and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) charged with implementing the peace process must respond to changing dynamics and ensure that communities—including Northern and Central Mali's diverse ethnic and clan groups—and armed groups not included in the initial Accord are still accounted for in future planning.[44] Specifically, provisions should be considered to include violence-affected areas of Central Mali within the peace process, and to engage with VEOs and other groups currently excluded from the DDR process and other Accord provisions.

   As implementation of the peace process moves forward, civil society actors should work with the

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43   At the time this report was published, there was some indication local government leaders in Mopti were initiating a DDR program specific to that region, but outside of the Accord.

44   The four main areas of the Accord are: Defense and Security Matters; Political and Institutional Matters; Justice, Reconciliation and Humanitarian Issues; and Socioeconomic and Cultural Development. Wiklund, C.H., & Nilsson, C. (2016). Peace in Mali? An analysis of the 2015 Algiers agreement and its implementation. Retrieved from https://www.foi.se/download/18.264a15c615872434ccd1f39/1479727271020/PeaceMali.pdf

government to facilitate conversations in Northern and Central geographic areas most affected by conflict to identify risk factors related to the broader peace process and generate ways to mitigate those risks. One known risk made clear in this study is the wide gap between youth's expectations and the reality of the peace process—and DDR provisions more specifically. This gap between expectations and reality threatens to roll back the gains made in peace to date and increase youth's vulnerability to participating in violence if they become frustrated or feel their expectations have not been met. In the short term, the national government must partner with community leaders to improve and expand activities aimed at raising awareness of the mechanics of and limitations to the peace process and DDR provisions. Civil society actors can help raise awareness of the Accord's contents by partnering with community leaders to facilitate opportunities for community members—including youth—to ask authorities questions that allow them to set and refine their needs and expectations. Where formal peace process mechanisms cannot address the challenges communities identify through the collaborative processes outlined above, donors should partner with local civil society to fill the gaps and ensure that community members—especially youth—of all groups are included in Mali's progress.

3. **Develop community-level security plans that outline a transition from non-government armed groups to state-led security management.** In large part, communities create or support armed groups—whether they identify as Platform, CMA, or VEOs—in response to pervasive insecurity that the state is unable to manage. Support for CMA groups and VEOs also arises from experiences of abuse at the hands of state military actors. Because of this history of abuse and widespread community support for many non-state armed groups, traditional heavy-handed security and counter-insurgency approaches led by the Malian army or international forces will likely backfire—resulting in increased support for armed groups. Failing to address communities' very real security concerns and frustration around government injustices (e.g., military-led attacks on communities, corruption) in a fair and equitable manner will prevent all development and violence reduction initiatives from taking root. Government security actors will need to partner with conflict-affected communities to develop plans to transition youth into non-violent roles, while advancing national-level security sector reform to ensure long-term law and order. In cases where armed groups are excluded from the formal peace process, civil society actors can play a role in supporting localized processes aimed at helping youth transition to civilian life. To achieve long-term security, the government should implement the other recommendations (delineated here) as part of a comprehensive plan for addressing the drivers of violence.

4. **Facilitate improved local governance through better service delivery and inclusive community-government decision-making.** Perceptions of exclusion among some Northern communities have fueled governance grievances and laid a foundation for community support of armed groups. Improving governance processes and outcomes should be a key long-term priority for the Malian government. Some measures will necessarily fall outside of the peace process, and the government should work to incorporate community feedback—including that of youth—in their comprehensive development strategy for the Northern and Central regions affected by violence. This may include revisiting the strategy and fostering conversations in conflict-affected areas to refine implementation planning, incorporating a participatory process between communities and government to identify their most pressing needs and work collaboratively to address them. These participatory processes must explicitly include diverse ethnic and clan groups, in cooperation with government actors, to ensure equitable development –ultimately creating a foundation of social cohesion on which good governance can stand.

Additionally, as local government officials return to communities in the Northern and Central regions, they should work with community leaders to create formal feedback mechanisms for eliciting opinions

from representative identity groups and identifying which services would best meet communities' needs. Government officials must then work with leaders from various ethnic and clan groups—including male and female youth—to create implementation plans for these services and local accountability structures to reduce corruption. These participatory and transparent processes, which will hold government responsible for addressing diverse communities' development priorities, will help the government repair or establish working relationships with the communities they serve.

5. **Identify and facilitate opportunities for youth to achieve status without engaging in armed groups.** Our findings indicate that youth need non-violent ways to gain status and recognition in their communities, which could include social and civic activities (e.g., creating leadership opportunities, supporting youth-led community projects). Participation in civic engagement activities or advocacy groups may help promote this sense of recognition and provide youth agency in addressing their grievances—as long as the formation of such groups is paired with real changes in government service provision and inclusion. Because few youth reported joining armed groups in pursuit of immediate financial gains, short-term economic programs designed to provide cash or temporary livelihood options are unlikely to reduce youth participation in violence. Youth, particularly those from Platform armed groups, who cited their desire for integration into military, emphasized the status and economic stability inherent to military or other government positions. Therefore, any program designed to improve youth's long-term earning prospects should be demand-driven and focus on creating opportunities for meaningful, stable employment. Programs that seek to provide youth with the education necessary to obtain higher-skilled or professional employment—specifically those with a proven demand for more employees—may expand youth's long-term options and their expectations beyond military or other civil service jobs. All such work should be informed by a thorough market analysis and research on youth's aspirations and constraints.

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