

Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Burkina Faso's
Sahel Region

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USAID Customary Resilience



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Project description

This report is part of the USAID-funded study *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso*. The data presented in this chapter are based on the 1,437 surveys and 656 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) collected in Gao and Ménaka (Mali), Tillabéri (Niger), and Centre-Nord, Est, and Sahel (Burkina Faso) between October 2020 and April 2021. Our online database with key findings, including links to the general synthesis report and four other regional reports, can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-legitimacy>.

List of abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
CVD	Committee for Village Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (<i>Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie</i>)
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

1 Introduction

What role can traditional authorities and religious leaders play to improve the resilience of their communities against violent extremism?

Sahel, Burkina Faso's northern region, is a key region in which to probe into this question for two reasons. First, it has been the region in Burkina Faso most affected by violent extremism, and so far attempts to stem violent extremism in the region have not yielded sufficient success. In 2020, reported fatalities in the Sahel region outnumbered those in the neighboring regions of Centre-Nord and Est by a factor of five.¹ More civilians have been killed by state security forces than in attacks by extremist groups.² Second, Sahel is only a moderately resilient place. Compared to other regions in the Liptako-Gourma, communities in the Sahel region are somewhat more resilient than in the Ménaka (Mali) and Est (Burkina Faso) regions, but fall short compared to Tillery (Niger) and Centre-Nord (Burkina Faso).³ Sahel scores moderately well on a number of other resilience indicators.

To assess community resilience in Sahel, we surveyed 238 respondents and interviewed over 75 key informants.⁴ These data show that respondents in Sahel overwhelmingly feel that their customary authorities serve their communities' interests rather than their own (coming in second only to the Centre-Nord region in this aspect). Their trust in these authorities is rather low, however, with Sahel coming in second to last when compared to other regions for trust in traditional authorities and last for trust in religious authorities. In terms of treatment of various subgroups in society, traditional and religious authorities are generally seen to favor one group over others – in particular men, elders, rich residents, and herders. Finally, it is the region where security measures taken by customary

1 ACLED Data, see: Raleigh, C. Linke, A. Hegre, H. and Karlsen, J. .2010. "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, pp. 651-660. Reported fatalities include state forces, non-state actors as well as civilians. [Burkina Faso: reported fatalities.](#)

2 José Luengo-Cabrera, (@J_LuengoCabrera), "[Burkina Faso: civilian fatalities by attributed perpetrator, Data source: @ACLEDINFO.](#)" Twitter, January 26, 2021.

3 Molenaar, F., Demuyne, M., de Bruijne, K. 2021. [Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.](#) The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

4 For the methodology chapter of this study, please see De Bruijne, K. 2021. [Methodology "Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances".](#) The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

authorities are seen to have contributed the most to increasing respondents' security and where their conflict resolution measures have had the biggest positive impact.

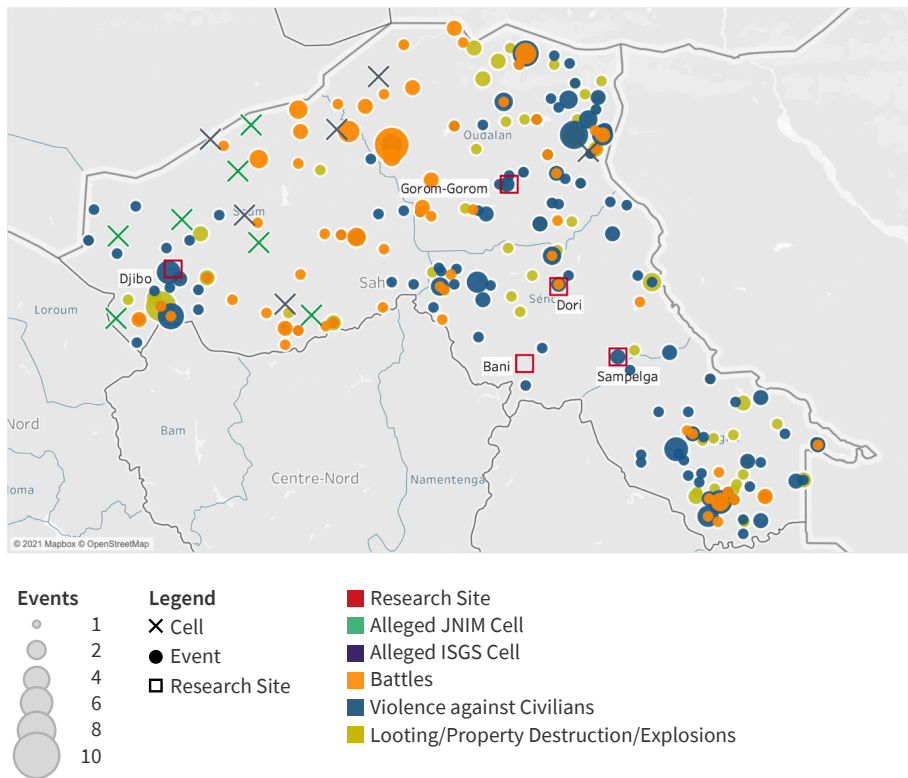
At the same time, Sahel differs from other regions in one key aspect: formal state authorities at the local level play a stronger role than they do in other contexts. Whether it involves being a first recourse for help when faced with a crisis, justice provision, or conflict resolution, state officials such as military or members of village development committees play a larger role than elsewhere. Hence, Sahel is a place where traditional and religious authorities are viewed as providing good governance output but are trusted comparatively less, and local state actors play an important role. What explains this discrepancy, and what does it mean for the role that customary leaders can play in promoting community resilience against violent extremism?

This report explores this question on the basis of data collected in five municipalities: Djibo, Dori, Bani, Sampelga, and Gorom-Gorom. Similar to the rest of the Sahel region, all five selected municipalities are host to a majority Fulani Muslim population, but according to our data also host Mossi, Sonrai, and Tuareg minorities. The Djibo zone has a higher share of Fulani from the higher nobles caste, while the area around Dori has a higher share of Fulani of the lower former slave caste. The majority caste in all the municipalities under study is the Fulani nobles caste of Rimbé, while the minority castes are the Blacksmiths, or Fulani historic slave caste, the Rimaibé. Unequal treatment of members from these castes has made especially members from the Rimaibé caste the targets of, and vulnerable to, recruitment from violent extremism groups such as Ansaroul Islam (from 2015–2016 onwards) in the region.

Hence, Sahel data collection is based on a unique sample of stratified Fulani communities and therefore offers an opportunity to provide detailed assessment of local realities. To do so, the chapter takes four steps. It starts with an assessment of security dynamics in order to clearly identify the threat of violent extremism to surveyed communities. Subsequently, the chapter explores community resilience and probes into the strength of resilience in the Sahel. A third section delves into the role that customary authorities play to enable community resilience against violent extremism, followed by an assessment of limits. The final section explores implications for policy and programming.

2 The Sahel region at the center of violent extremist entrenchment

Map 1 Conflict Events June 2020 – June 2021, Research Locations, ISGS/JNIM cells December 2020 in the Sahel Region



What is the challenge of violent extremism to Burkina Faso's Sahel region? In short, the problem is large, as various violent extremist organization (VEO) cells operate in the region and extend their control into areas surveyed in this study.

Violence started intensifying in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso in 2016, as jihadist militants from Mali gained a foothold in northern Burkina Faso.⁵ Ansarul Islam was able to attract a wide audience, especially among lower social castes such as the Fulani Rimaibés, by tapping into their grievances with the social hierarchies in the province.⁶ In the following years, Ansarul engaged in frequent battles with the Burkinabé security forces, targeted state and customary authorities, and enforced the closing of schools, causing a displacement of 100,000 civilians in Soum alone.⁷ Yet by mid-2019, due to a decline in support by local communities, defections to the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the consistent presence of the Burkinabé security forces in Soum, Ansarul Islam became progressively less relevant as an actor.⁸ Since then, both ISGS and JNIM have expanded their activities throughout the Sahel region. JNIM has been primarily present in the provinces of Yagha and Soum. ISGS's presence is foremost concentrated in Oudalan province, yet its influence has been spreading to all other provinces of the Sahel region since 2020.

The two main VEOs operate differently. JNIM primarily directs its attacks at the Burkinabé security forces by focusing on explosive devices and symbolic targets – like traditional authorities and village councilors – through abductions and targeted killings. The group has thereby engaged in fewer acts of indiscriminate violence against civilians than ISGS, but resorts to extortion, destruction of public property, and the strict enforcement of rules, such as the wearing of veils (women) and shortening of pants (men) in areas under its influence.⁹ In contrast, ISGS regularly directs violence in the form of extortion, abductions, and executions at civilian targets, besides also targeting security forces or symbolic targets.

5 In 2016, Malam Ibrahim Dicko mobilized for the creation of Ansarul Islam, the Ansar Dine branch in Burkina Faso, in the Soum province, which constituted the epicenter of conflicts in the Sahel region at the time. International Crisis Group, 2017. [The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North](#). Report Africa no. 254.

6 Assanvo, W. Dakono, B. Thérout-Bénoni, L. and Maïga, I. 2019. [Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma](#). West African Report, no. 26, Paris: Institute for Security Studies.

7 Le Roux, P. 2019. [Ansarul Islam: The Rise and Decline of a Militant Islamist Group in the Sahel](#), Washington: African Center for Strategic Studies.

8 The involvement of State Forces in incidents increased from 21 in 2017, to 46 in 2018, to 74 in 2019 in the Soum department. ACLED data, See: Raleigh, C. et al, 2010 *op. cit.*

9 Ibid.

In short, the Sahel is the Burkinabé region that has been the most heavily exposed to violence since 2017.¹⁰ A recent study by Interpeace shows that in the Sahel region, 68 percent of respondents know someone who has been threatened or become a victim of violence.¹¹ Due to the ongoing insecurity in the region, many residents have had to flee their communities or migrate to urban areas. In January 2021, Soum hosted the most internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Sahel region. The town of Djibo, Dori and Gorom-Gorom all of which were research sites for this study – similarly housed significant IDP populations.¹²

Social underpinnings of violent extremism

Violence in the Sahel region has deep social roots in very local conflicts and tensions. The primary conflict is between mostly Fulani pastoralists and sedentary communities. Violent events regularly erupt between the Foulse and Mossi communities on the one hand, supported by self-defense groups such as the Mossi-dominated Koglweogo, and the Fulani on the other hand. Especially in Soum, where 90 percent of the population are Fulani, members of Fulani communities have been heavily targeted by the Koglweogo since 2019, causing more than 100 civilian deaths in that year. Likewise, Fulani communities have frequently been subject to abuses by the Burkinabé security forces, involving large-scale arrests and executions of Fulani community members. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) show that from 2018 to 2020, more civilian deaths were caused by the security forces than by VEOs in the Sahel region.

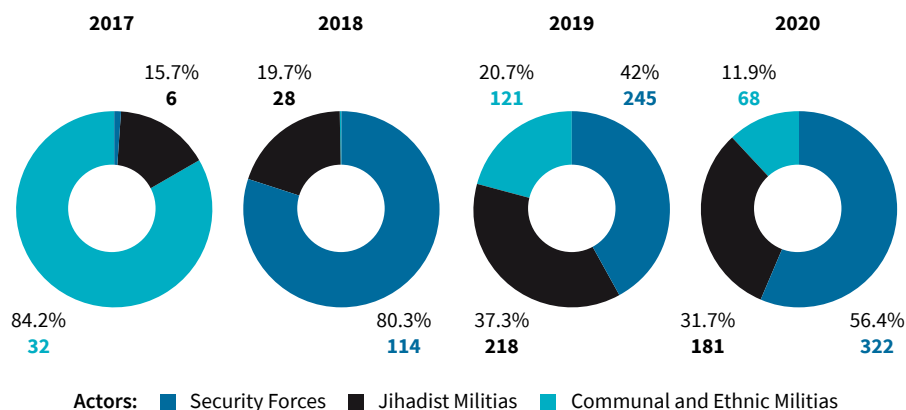
On their part, ISGS in particular has carried out large-scale attacks against specific ethnic groups, such as the killing of 39 Mossi and Foulse community members at the market in Silgadji (Soum) in January 2020, or repeated killings of Tuareg community members in Oudalan throughout 2020 and 2021. State representatives have also been prime targets of violent extremist attacks, which have targeted not only military posts but also local state representatives such as mayors, council representatives, and even customary leaders. Since 2019, several key community leaders have been killed, including the mayor and the imam Souaibou Cisse of Djibo.¹³

10 ACLED Data: Since 2017, ACLED recorded 1,073 incidents in the Sahel region, followed by 573 in Est and 320 in Centre-Nord. See: Raleigh, C. et al, 2010 *op. cit.*

11 Bertrand E., Nana A., Marius Soma Y., Diallo O. Nadia Bambara C., and Ouedraogo M. 2021. [Jeter les bases d'une paix durable au Burkina Faso : Analyse participative des facteurs de conflit et de résilience](#). Ouagadougou : Interpeace.

12 UNHCR, 2021. ["Rapport de Monitoring de Protection : Region du Sahel"](#).

13 Radio France Internationale, ["Burkina: après le meurtre du maire de Djibo, la ville au bord de l'état de siège"](#), November 4, 2019. The mayor of Djibo was also parliamentarian, and hence a leading intellectual figure in the region.

Figure 1 Trends 2019-2021

With the creation of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) in early 2020, these ethnic cleavages have further been reinforced. Despite claiming to be an “inclusive force” that fights militant jihadist groups, VDP forces are largely composed of fighters from existing self-defense groups like the Koglweogo and the Dozo, hence not representing members of pastoralist communities.¹⁴ ACLED data from 2020 and 2021 show that VDP members were regularly involved in the killing of Fulani and Tuareg community members and the theft of livestock from these communities. At the same time, VDP fighters seem to have been placed at the front lines in the fight against JNIM and ISGS, as suggested by high fatality counts among VDP fighters.¹⁵

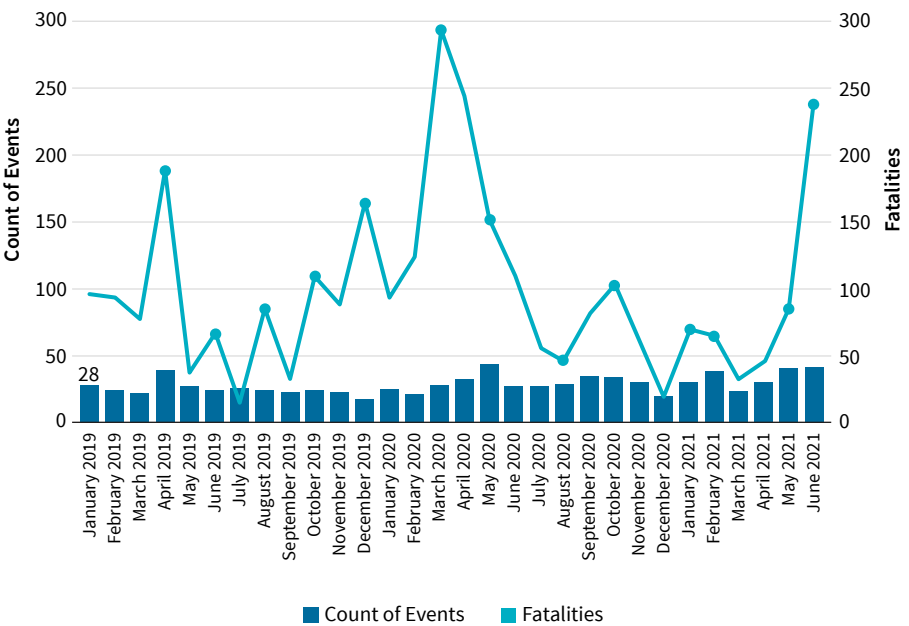
During the time of data collection (2020 and 2021), violence in the Sahel region shifted away from the Soum province and toward Oudalan, Seno, and Yagha. ISGS was active in Oudalan and in the north of Seno, while JNIM operated in Soum and Yagha. Fighting between ISGS and JNIM has surged since 2020, taking place in multiple provinces of the Sahel region that year, while in 2021 ISGS–JNIM clashes seem to be fully clustered at the border between Soum and Oudalan. Across the surveyed municipalities included in this study, Djibo was subject to distinctly

14 Willeme, A. and Schmauder, A. 2021. [The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland](#). Conflict and Fragility, Op-ed, the Hague: Clingendael Institute.

15 Nsaibia, H. and Duhamel, J. 2021. [Sahel 2021: Communal wars, broken ceasefires, and shifting frontlines](#). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

more attacks than any of the other research sites in 2020. Twenty-two incidents, of which 14 targeted civilians, caused 124 civilian casualties in Djibo alone. In 2021, most of the municipalities experienced at least one violent incident.¹⁶

Figure 2 Trends 2021/2021



In this context of severe insecurity including violence perpetrated by self-defense groups, what mechanisms can communities employ to protect themselves against these threats?

16 None of them during data collection.

3 Community resilience mechanisms? External shocks and self-reliance

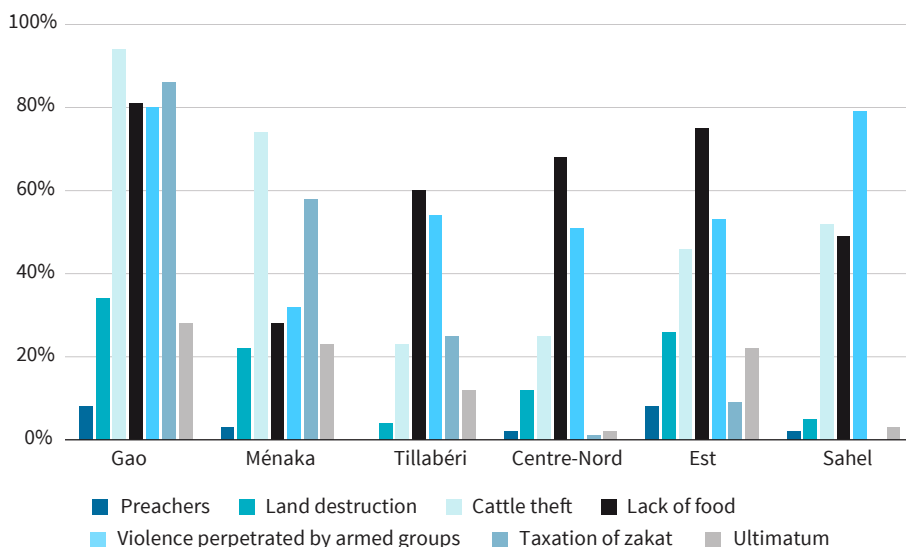
As elsewhere, the primary response mechanism of communities in the Sahel is to seek help from those they trust. To measure this, we presented a large number of shocks ranging from security risks to agricultural problems. The responses show that respondents rely primarily on close family, friends and – most often – on themselves (e.g., by using savings, selling livestock, or taking out a loan). But an important characteristic of the Sahel region is that in addition to relying on friends and family, people contact state officials for basic service provision (22 percent) as well as security provision (15 percent). What does this mean for community residents?

To delve into existing community resilience mechanisms we start by exploring three topics: (1) the type of threat faced by communities; (2) how they ensure basic service provision; and (3) how they ensure their safety and security.

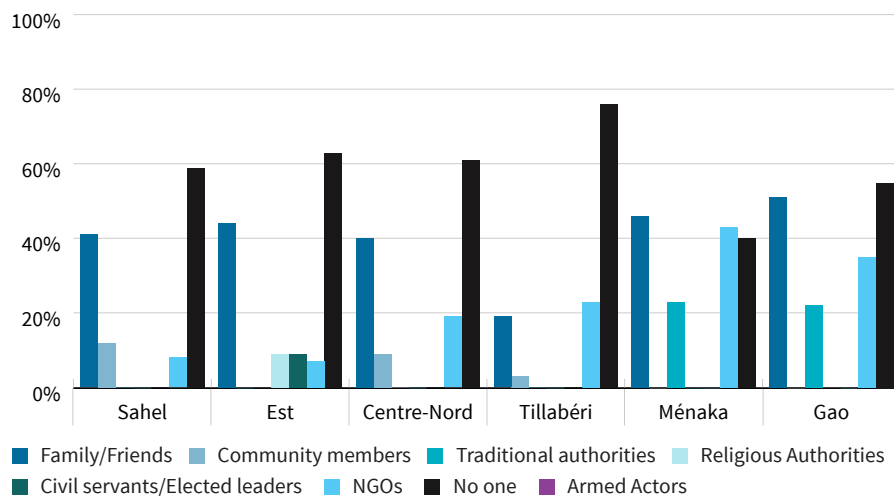
Not surprisingly, respondents from the Sahel region report different challenges than respondents in Est and Centre Nord: for them violence perpetrated by armed groups constitutes the most imminent threat, followed by cattle theft and food insecurity (see Figure 3 below). Respondents highlighted the multilevel crisis they are experiencing in the face of a deteriorating security situation that has severely restricted their scope of movement to a narrowly defined sphere around municipalities. As one resident of Djibo described:

The biggest crisis that prevents us from thriving is obviously terrorism, even going 5 to 10 kilometers is a problem. This inevitably leads to other crises, such as economic and food crises, which are very frequent. (...) We don't look to the authorities for this because everyone knows the realities. For the poorest, sometimes at the mosque there are contributions made to help them but nothing good, people have nothing left around here.¹⁷

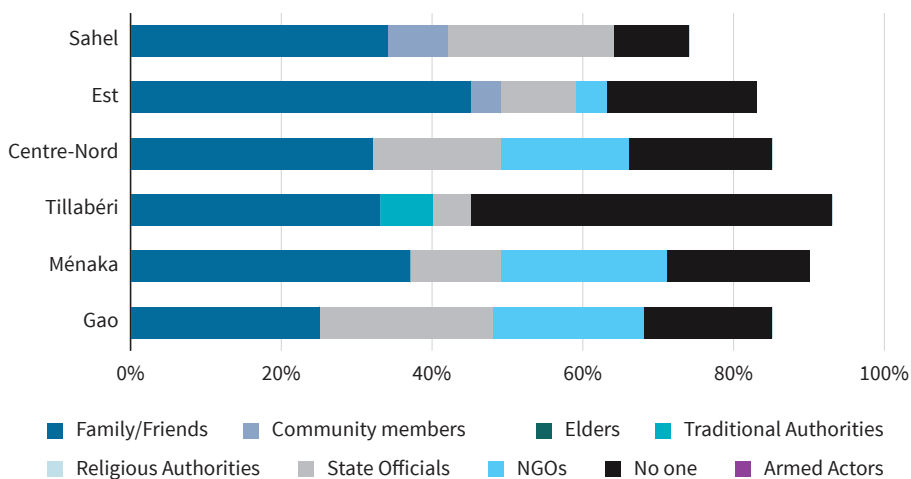
17 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Djibo, 1 March 2021.

Figure 3 Security threats (per region)

It is clear from the data that communities severely struggle in dealing with these shocks. According to 60 percent of respondents, no community authority was available to help them cope with the effects of a shock event, and only 8 percent indicated they had received support from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). More than 40 percent of respondents indicated they had to rely on their private networks of family and friends to cope with the shocks (see Figure 4). This illustrates how inhabitants of Burkina Faso's Sahel region are left with limited resilience mechanisms to face the multilevel crisis of security, economy, and livelihood.

Figure 4 Key person/authority that helped households deal with shocks

To further probe into this, we have focused on two responses by communities: seeking the provision of basic services and seeking security. As in the other two regions of Burkina Faso included in this study, most inhabitants of the Sahel region rely on private networks of family and friends in their quest for basic service provision, with only 22 percent of respondents saying they turn to elected leaders and civil servants (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5 Community actor contacted for basic service provision (per region)

The second response mechanism is to seek security. While self-reliance plays some role, it is clear that communities in the Sahel seek the recourse of state actors (15 percent the highest of all surveyed regions) as well as armed groups. The latter include the army, VEOs, and the integrated VDP forces (self-defense groups such as the Koglweogo and Rugga play a less prevalent role than in neighboring regions). Residents in the Sahel were thus less likely than in other regions to organize a collective response in the face of security threats, and primarily relied on security forces and state-sponsored VDP forces, curfews, and surveillance measures.¹⁸

This result is confirmed by interviews. A resident of Sampelga explained,

*We trust in God because we have no weapons, the village is very small, and we have no army. What we can do is to be on the lookout, each one of us from our geographical location, if there is an unusual situation that occurs, we try to warn our relatives so that everyone can make arrangements.*¹⁹

But formal state security is also mentioned. Since December 2018, all communes of the Sahel region have been under a state of emergency, and the provinces of Soum, Seno, and Oudalan even under a curfew. On the municipal level, security measures include patrols by police, police barriers, and frequent identity checks. In Bani, security forces reportedly regularly patrol the surrounding villages, and a security brigade is present on the main road leading into town.

Responses from interviewed residents mirror some of these findings. In Djibo, inhabitants indicated feeling more positive about the security situation in the area following the arrival of the Joint Armed Regiment security forces. Similarly, interviewees in Dori were very critical of the security situation but mentioned that it had improved since the arrival of additional security forces that also allowed the return of police to the city.²⁰

18 Only 36 percent of respondents indicate that their community organized a collective response in the case of a security threat. This is far below regions such as Centre-Nord, where the rate was 80 percent.

19 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Sampelga, 23 February 2021.

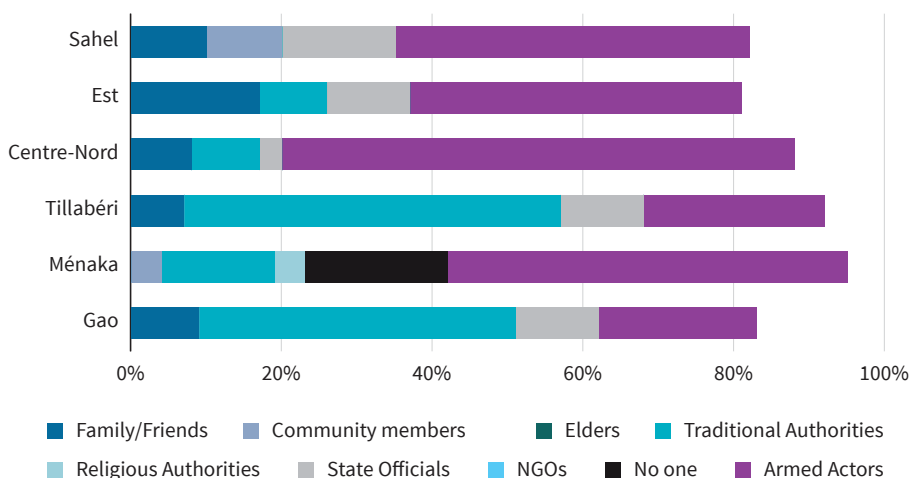
20 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Djibo, 2 March 2021.

At the same time, state security provision is fragile. For example, Sampelga is effectively controlled by VEOs, and as one inhabitant noted:

Sampelga is a small municipality, we were warned by the terrorists not to call on the defense and security forces, because they will know and come to settle our account, even the gendarmerie is just an empty building. The terrorists had come to look for the mayor, but fortunately for him he was not present, since [by] then he ha[d] been installed in Dori.²¹

These examples of isolated municipalities, as well as large attacks by VEOs, as seen in Solhan in June 2021 with the killing of over 100 civilians, underline the constant fragility of existing security mechanisms against advancing VEOs.

Figure 6 Community actor contacted for security provision (per region)



Despite the role that armed actors and state officials play in the provision of security, it is important to understand that this is merely a reflection of community perception of strength rather than trust.

For example, the trust rates *vis-à-vis* state security forces in the Sahel region is the lowest of all three surveyed regions (see Figure 7 below). This is not surprising, as abuses such as arbitrary arrests and exerting violence on civilians – reportedly

21 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Sampelga, 23 February 2021.

carried out by state security forces, including VDPs – during counterterrorism operations are well known, which has undermined the effectiveness of these security measures. Most of these have targeted Burkinabé of Fulani ethnicity, especially in the Sahel's Soum and Oudalan provinces, where ethnic Fulani constitute a majority.²²

This low trust in state forces is accompanied by high distrust of local self-defense groups (see Figure 8). In fact, residents of the Sahel express the lowest rates of trust *vis-à-vis* local self-defense groups of all three regions studied in this report. As in other regions, recruitment into state-sponsored VDP groups is based on exclusionary and discriminatory practices, *de facto* excluding Fulani from joining local-level self-defense groups.²³ Finally, while reliance on civil servants appears slightly more pronounced than in the Centre-Nord and Est regions, it is nonetheless shaped by mistrust and fear of state authorities who are perceived as self-serving and extractive.²⁴

22 ACLED data, see: Raleigh, C. et al, 2010, *op. cit.*

23 This is also the case for IDPs who, according to our interviews, were often not allowed to join because they were viewed as 'outsiders' and thus mistrusted by the community. Willeme A. and Schmauder, A. 2021, *op. cit.* Nonetheless, recent months have seen increasing recruitment efforts by VDPs, in particular outside of Soum province.

24 Bouju, J. 2020. "[La rébellion peule et la « guerre pour la terre » : le gouvernement par la violence des ressources agropastorales \(Centre-Mali, Nord, Burkina Faso\)](#)", *Revue internationale des études du développement*, no. 243, pp.67-88. :79. . In a study conducted by InterPeace in 2021, 44 percent of respondents in the Sahel region reported believing that public funds were 'never' used in a way to contribute to the development of the region. In the regions of Centre-Nord and Boucle du Mouhoun only 7.5 percent and 3.8 percent respectively answered in the same manner to this question. See: Bertrand, E. et al 2021, *op. cit.* Bertrand, E. Nana A. Marius Soma Y., Diallo O. Nadia Bambara, C. and Ouedraogo M. 2021. [Jeter les bases d'une paix durable au Burkina Faso : Analyse participative des facteurs de conflit et de résilience](#). Ouagadougou : Interpeace.

Figure 7 Trust in police and security forces (per region)

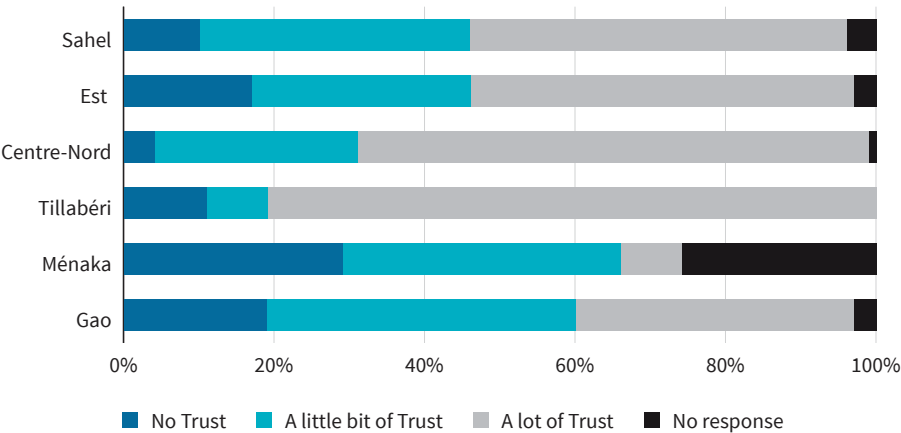
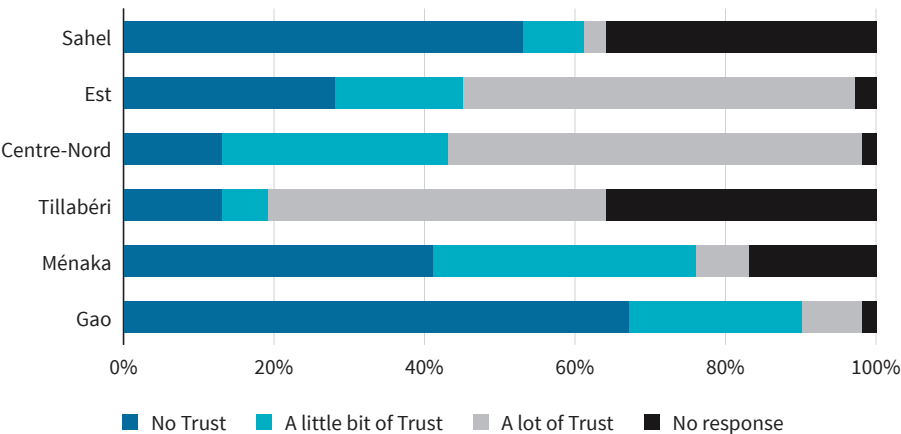


Figure 8 Trust in self-defense groups & local security initiatives (per region)



4 Customary contributions to resilience against violent extremism

Overall, community resilience is neither very weak nor very strong in the Sahel, which suggests that there is a base upon which community resilience can be strengthened. As in the other regions of Burkina Faso included in this study, customary leaders' role in the Sahel has a strong focus on conflict resolution.

4.1 What role for customary authorities in the political geography of the Sahel?

In the 1990s, Burkina Faso instituted a system of decentralized civil authority, while keeping the role of traditional leadership.

There are several different systems of traditional leadership in the Sahel region that can be roughly differentiated between ethnicities and municipalities. The main types of customary leaders, as well as their roughly corresponding respective administrative levels, are shown in the table below. As the roles of customary leaders lack formalization and predate the creation of the administrative levels, their areas of influence often do not exactly match the boundaries of administrative regions. In addition to this, many customary leaders exert their authority on specific ethnic groups, families, or tribes, and thus their area of influence can vary.

Table 1

Administrative Level	Centrally Appointed	Elected Leaders	Traditional Leaders
Region	Governor	Regional Council, President of regional council	
Province	High commissioner (works with 'Conférence des Cadres Consultative')		Emir/canton chief (<i>chef de canton</i>)
Department/ commune	Prefect (works with 'Conseil Départemental Consultatif')	Mayor (elected by municipal council)	Emir/group chief (<i>chef de groupement</i>)/ canton chief

Administrative Level	Centrally Appointed	Elected Leaders	Traditional Leaders
Village / Fractions		Communal counsellors	Village chief (<i>chef de village</i>)/fraction chief (<i>chef de fraction</i>)/tribe chief (<i>chef de tribu</i>)/land chief (<i>chef de terre</i>)
Neighbourhood (urban environment)			District chief (<i>chef de quartier</i>)

The majority ethnicity in the Sahel region is Fulani, and hence Fulani traditional authorities reign supreme over the region. The highest traditional authority among the Fulani is the emir. There are five main emirs, three of whom are in the Djibo zone, and two of whom rule the area around Dori and Yagha respectively.²⁵ Emirs are comparable to the “dima” position in the Mossi hierarchy and can also be referred to as canton chiefs (*chefs de canton*).²⁶ For example, the emir of Gorom-Gorom is also the canton chief of Oudalan. The position of a canton chief is specific to an ethnicity, meaning that there can be multiple canton chiefs for the same geographic area. The title of emir implies ruling over a set area, including all the different ethnicities within it. Given the Sahel is majority Fulani, all ethnicities thus ultimately follow the traditional authority of the emir. One of the five main emirs in the region, the emir of Liptako, is one of the seven superior customary leaders of Burkina Faso.²⁷ The emir of Liptako can thus play an essential role in mobilization of resilience mechanisms in the Sahel.

Below the emirs, in nomadic environments, there are group chiefs (*chefs de groupement*) and fraction (*chefs de fraction*) or tribe chiefs (*chefs de tribu*).²⁸ The Mossi are generally more sedentary and are organized around a canton chief, village chief, and district chief. The Songhai and Tuareg are found mainly in the Oudalan and are also organized around a canton or village chief (*chef de village*), but don’t generally have district chiefs (*chefs de quartier*). The Gourma on the other hand,

25 Dembélé, F. “Ousmane Amirou Dicko, Emir du Liptako a propos du Programme d’urgence pour le Sahel : « L’époque des vaines promesses pour plaire est révolue », Le Pays, April 10, 2018.

26 A Canton is a Sedentary administrative district at the municipal level introduced in the colonial time.

27 These leaders include together the Mogho Naaba, emperor of the Mossés, the Naaba Kiba, king of Yatenga, the Naaba Sonré, king of Boussouma, the Naaba Guiguem-Pollé king of Tenkodogo and the , the king of Gulmu – now exclusively claimed but practically shared by two descendants of the Thiombiano family. See: Dembélé, F. 2018 *op. cit.*

28 Molenaar F., Tossell J., Schmauder A., Idrissa R., and Lyammouri R. 2019. [The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya](#), CRU Report, The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

are less centrally organized and while they have lower tier chiefs, they tend to address the traditional authority of other ethnicities around them. Key informant interviews (KII) in the Sahel region indicated that the most accessible customary authority is generally the canton chief.

4.2 The governance role of customary authorities

In the Sahel, community expectations of customary leaders are limited and – contrary to other regions of the Liptako-Gourma area – do not include support of basic livelihood provision and services. In our research, we explored general service provision, the provision of emergency aid, security provision, conflict resolution, and justice provision. In the Sahel, unlike other areas, the only real role for traditional authorities and religious authorities is in conflict resolution. However, the data also clearly shows that traditional authorities and religious authorities remain trusted and have important roles to play in the community.

As an inhabitant of Djibo explained, chiefs themselves are perceived as unable to fulfil this role, given their own precarious situation:

Here in Djibo even if the religious and traditional authorities have the desire to help the people of the commune and fulfil their roles, they have to eat first to be able to get to the end. They don't have good sources of income to at least leave poverty.²⁹

Conflict resolution

Customary leaders in the Sahel play a relevant role in community conflict resolution – particularly in the case of land-related disputes. Our survey data highlights that populations heavily rely on chiefs to mediate the two dominant types of conflict in the Sahel region: conflicts between farmers and herders and conflicts regarding land utilization and access.³⁰ In these areas, traditional authorities and religious authorities play bigger and more positive roles than in any of the other surveyed regions.

29 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Djibo, 1 March 2021.

30 Our respondents indicate that authorities most available for conflict resolution are religious leaders (51%), traditional authorities (48%), members of the community (40%) or functionaries and elected leaders (35%).

Interviews show that conflict resolution starts at the neighborhood level with the district chief. Depending on the complexity of the conflict, the process can be referred higher up the customary hierarchy, first to the village chief, and then to the canton chief or emir if necessary. Similar to traditional authorities, religious leaders indicated that if a conflict is beyond their expertise, they refer it to state authorities.

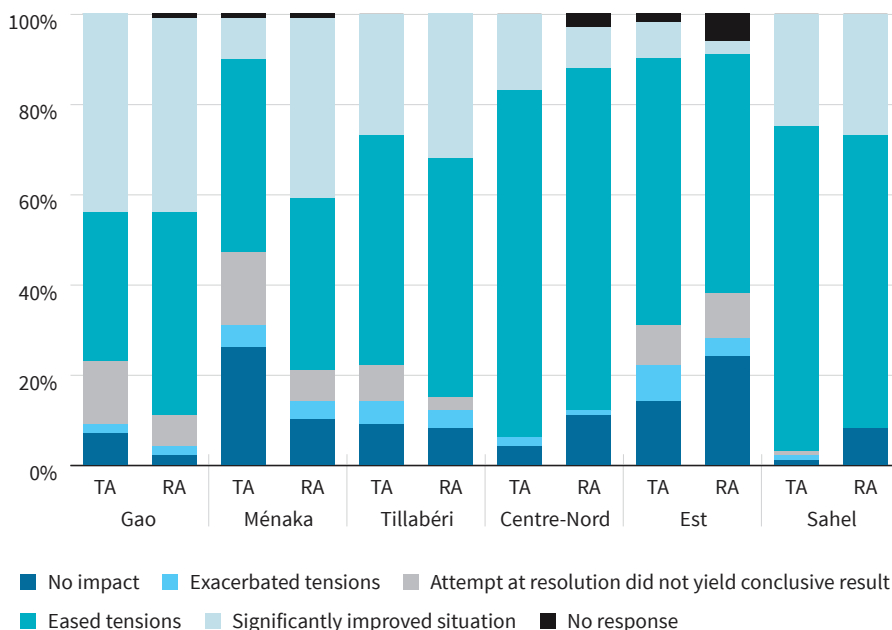
While chiefs remain in a vulnerable position – in which they are themselves dependent on protection measures – their impact in mediating between conflicting parties still appears largely positive (see Figure 9 below).³¹ Furthermore, almost all interviewees mentioned that people respect and agree with decisions made by traditional authorities.

It is important to note that this customary role is not viewed in isolation from the state. First, the prevalence of customary conflict mediation is particularly strong for land-related conflicts. Interviews indicate that when a conflict either involves violent disputes, becomes too large in scale, or the grievant disagrees with the decision of the traditional authority, the conflict is brought to the state administration or justice system. Moreover, the strong role of chiefs in conflict resolution appears to be related to the prospect of escalating a conflict to state authorities. According to a respondent from Bani:

People are used to respecting a solution proposal made by a traditional or religious authority, because they are afraid that the police or the gendarmerie will otherwise get involved and they know that most of the time they solve conflicts in court where fines are sometimes very high and there is a possibility of incarceration.³²

31 According to our survey, 72 percent of respondents said that the traditional authority involved manages to ease tensions, with 25 percent saying they significantly improved the situation.

32 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Bani, 26 February 2021.

Figure 9 Effectiveness of traditional and religious authorities' conflict resolution efforts (per region)**Moral roles: social cohesion and gender and youth inclusion**

Our data also show that Sahelian chiefs have a strong normative position in their societies. They actively promote calls for peace and unity (and are named as actors that could engage in negotiations with VEOs). As a chief in Dori explained:

Traditional and religious authorities are working in synergy to implement preventive actions by insisting on raising awareness of the dangers in our region [Sahel] and more specifically in our commune [Dori]. These dangers in the face of this security threat are, among others, the division between communities, the fracture of social cohesion and the questioning of peaceful coexistence. We are carrying out these actions with youth groups teaching them how to resist the indecent proposals of certain extremist groups who could make them illusory promises.³³

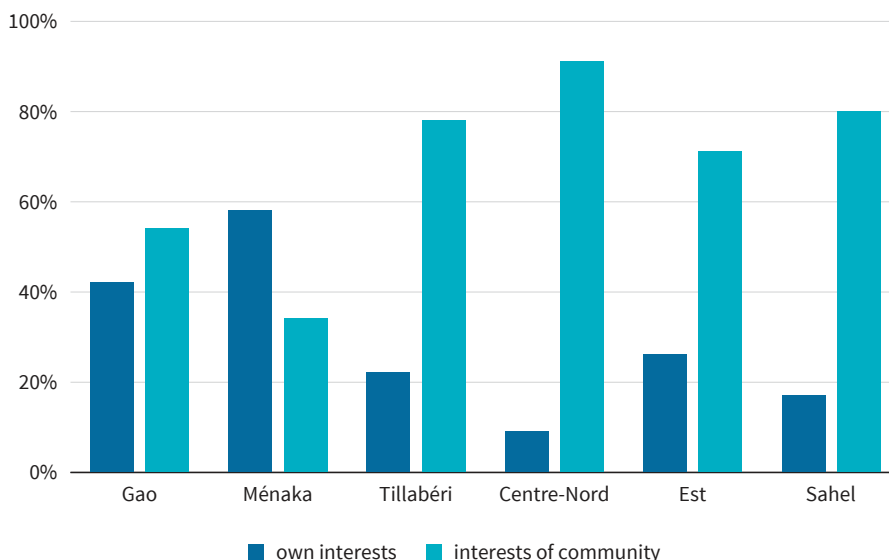
33 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, 17 February 2021. See also: Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Dori, 17 February 2021.

There is a second indication that the moral roles of traditional authorities and religious authorities in the Sahel are strong. Our research has shown that the best predictors for community resilience are whether traditional authorities are perceived as serving the interests of the community well and whether they are promoting inclusive relations between men and women. On the former, respondents find on average traditional authorities in the Sahel to be most seeking the interests of the community in the Liptako-Gourma (just after Centre-Nord) rather than their own self interests. Indeed, our data show that 93 percent of the population have “a little” or “a lot” of trust in traditional authorities and religious authorities.

A third important finding in relation to customary leaders in the Sahel is that they contribute to community cohesion, for example by defusing tensions stemming from the rising number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region. Amid limited resources and widespread suspicion of potential linkages to VEOs, the arrival of IDPs has created tensions in some hosting communities. The example of Gorom-Gorom underlines how chiefs’ interventions have in instances assuaged initial defiance among hosting community members. As one civil society representative noted:

At the beginning, the main subject of disagreement between the population and the traditional chiefs was the arrival of internal refugees, because the population was a little suspicious, claiming that there might be infiltrated terrorists. After negotiations with the traditional and religious leaders, the population finally agreed.³⁴

34 Interview with a member of an NGO, Respondent, Gorom-Gorom, 18 February 2021.

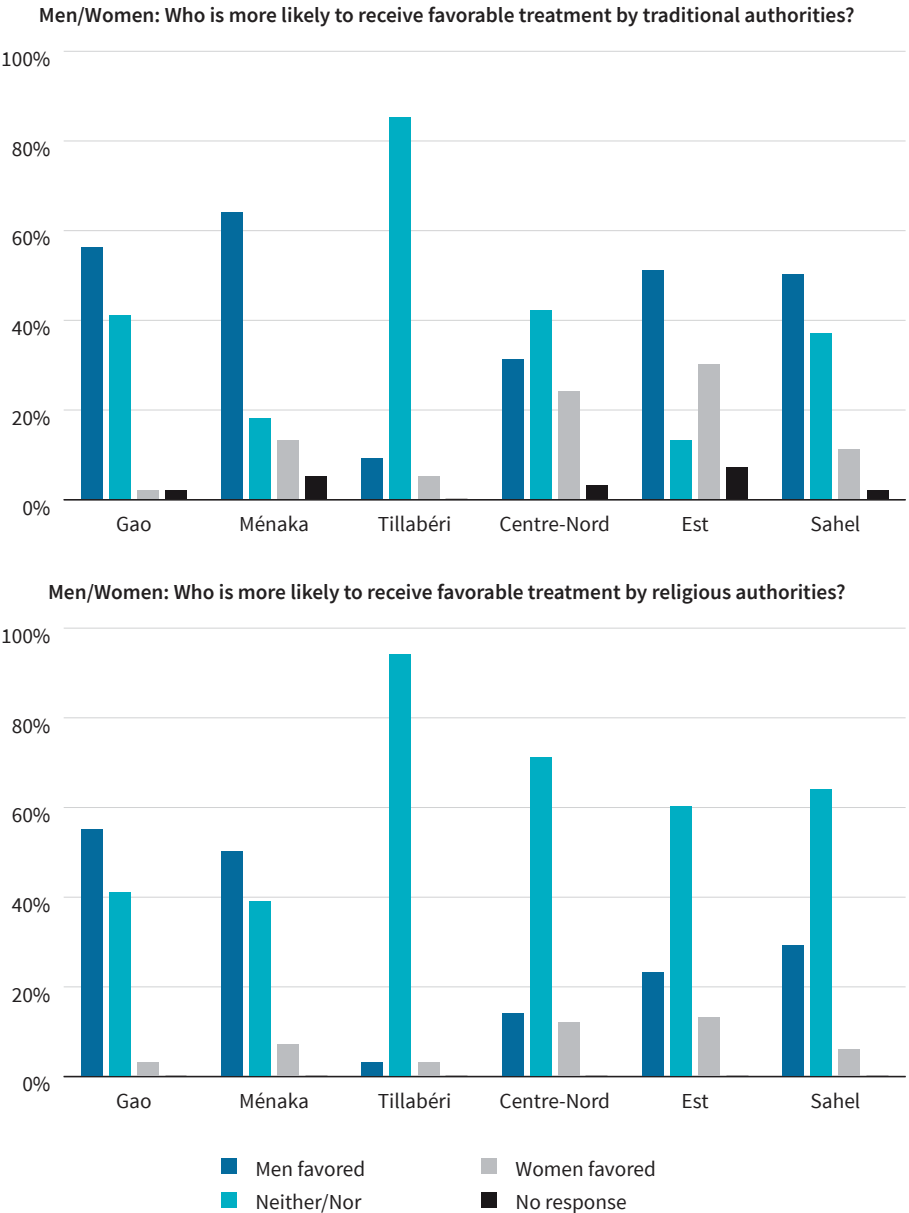
Figure 10 Interest traditional authority is most likely to serve, per region

The lack of inclusion

As in other regions, the chieftaincy is characterized by a lack of inclusivity. A first insight on inclusivity is that our data highlight women are overall less likely to participate in the public sphere than men, with a comparatively limited presence in official community meetings.³⁵ This pattern is also replicated in meetings convened by customary leaders (see Figure 11), as men are generally more likely to receive favorable treatment than women. For example, interviews highlight that accessibility to traditional authorities is slightly more difficult for women – despite some progress made. In Gorom-Gorom, notably, interviewees mentioned that women have to speak to the chief through an intermediary, or risk being negatively perceived.

³⁵ The share of men reporting monthly community meetings in the Sahel is at least three times the share of women. Women are reportedly also less likely than men to turn to local authorities and civil servants for basic service provision.

Figure 11 Traditional and religious authorities’ treatment of men vs. women (per region)



There is a noticeable difference in interview answers given by men and women on the question of the inclusion of women by traditional authorities. Because men are largely overrepresented in government-appointed and customary authority positions, only women leaders from civil society could be interviewed on this issue. While male interviewees highlighted women's inclusion in decision-making processes and emphasized that they can communicate openly with traditional authorities, female interviewees told a different story. For example, a female interviewee from Sampelga highlighted the restrictions imposed on women:

*Whatever their ideas, women do not have the right to express themselves whenever and however they want. They can still make themselves heard on certain occasions and through representation.*³⁶

As such, women in the Sahel region are more confined to the domestic and family sphere. According to interviewees, women were most often asked to combat the spread of violent extremism in the private sphere, or through the use of the moral authority they have by virtue of being female. According to a resident in Djibo:

*[A woman] is the mother of all, even if she is not fit to keep the secrets of tradition according to the men. However, despite all this respect, she must remain at home. She must refrain from entering into men's talks.*³⁷

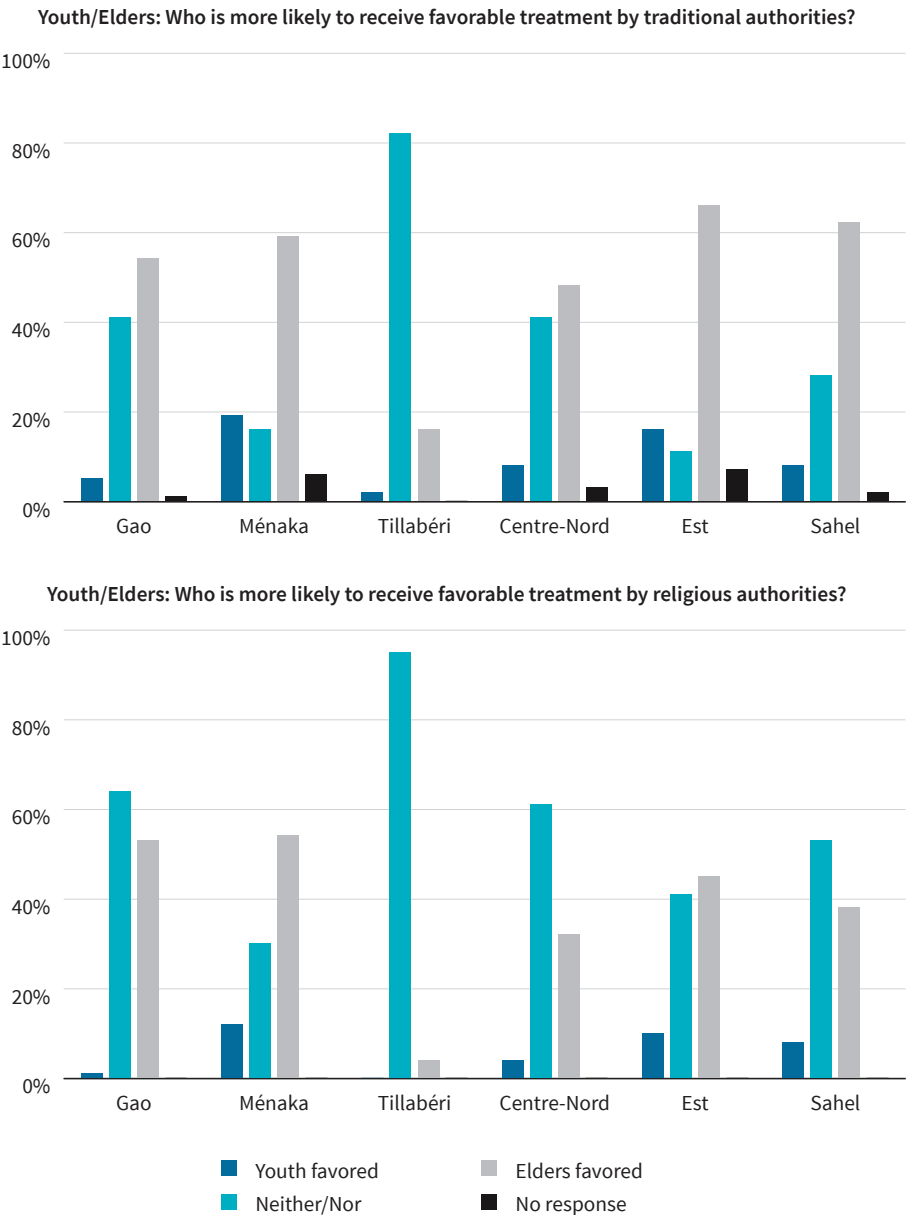
This subservient role of women is thus not a choice by traditional authorities to exclude women from decision-making but reflects general norms in the Sahel region on what gender roles should be.

A second concern about traditional authorities' inclusivity is the role of young people. Interviews show that many participants regard young people as an important security liability. Survey data in the Sahel region highlight young people are not usually treated equally or involved by traditional leaders (see Figure 12 below). This unequal treatment is instrumentalized by armed groups, who articulate narratives that challenge the strict social hierarchies that many Sahelian societies follow, thereby offering young people an alternative. Interviewees emphasize that "naïve" and unemployed young people are likely to (and already have) joined armed groups and turn against the community.

³⁶ Interview with a community member, Respondent, Sampelga, 21 February 2021.

³⁷ Interview with a member of an NGO, Respondent, Djibo, 2 March 2021.

Figure 12 Traditional and religious authorities’ treatment of youth vs. elders (per region)



What's more, just 39 percent of young people have “a lot” of trust in traditional authorities in the Sahel region (compared to 70 percent in Ménaka, 73 percent in Gao, 73 percent in Tillabéri, 71 percent in Centre-Nord, and 68 percent in Est). Reflecting this, some community members expressed concern that young people do not respect traditional leaders anymore (although others underlined that chiefs still command respect and authority among this demographic).

This logic of youth recruitment differs from other regions in that members of VEOs are usually well-known in their respective communities. This highlights the notion that VEO mobilization in the Sahel region is a highly local dynamic, whereby many of the young people who join these groups are the sons, nephews, and cousins of community inhabitants, including those of customary leaders. Young people join VEOs as an alternative to the existing system, which offers them few prospects.

In this regard, while chiefs might be able to deter youths through threats in the short term, their efforts are in the long run mostly ineffective as they lack the means to offer any significant prospects of social and economic advancement. According to a religious leader in Djibo:

Faced with the violence perpetrated by armed groups in the community, we can raise awareness and occupy young people because it is due to a lack of means that they join these groups. Since we have influence, we can use it to discourage the youth, but to do this we have to offer them something to do and accompany them.³⁸

This observation was echoed by many other interviewees, who stressed the importance of creating jobs to get young people off the streets. In Djibo, one pastor has started employing young people to grow crops for the village, in order to provide them a livelihood and ensure they do not join armed groups. As such, traditional authorities regard providing young people with an education and employment as an important resilience mechanism against radicalization and violent extremism – a component that is to date entirely absent in the region. At this time, chiefs rely on threats to deter youth from joining armed groups. In Djibo, interviewees said they tell young people that security and defense forces will track them down and kill them if they join armed groups. In Sampelga and Bani multiple interviewees mentioned that they threaten the youth with being cursed or in danger of vengeance by God if they join VEOs.

38 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Djibo, 2 March 2021.

5 Cooperation and support of local state authorities

So far, this chapter has pointed at three main characteristics of the Sahel. First, that community resilience in the Sahel region is mostly organized by the people themselves and that the ensuing coping mechanism results in moderately strong community resilience. Second, that traditional authorities and religious leaders hold a strong position in the society, have moral authority in their communities, and play important and appreciated roles in conflict mediation. Third, that key functions such as the provision of security and basic services in the Sahel are provided by civil servants, state representatives, and armed groups including the Burkinabé army, which makes Sahel a clear anomaly when compared to other regions. Hence, the question arises: What explains the stronger role of state authorities and what does it mean for policy-making aimed at improving the positive roles of traditional and religious authorities?

5.1 Hybrid mediation

Historically, traditional leaders in the Sahel were tasked with managing natural resources, mediating conflicts, and ensuring the continuation of cultural and social values in the community. But in the Sahel region, the state has increasingly arisen as an authority parallel to customary authorities. Yet, as is clear from the data, the current context of insecurity has put pressure on governance systems, and there is minimal state presence in many areas as a result. While various traditional leaders have been targeted and moved to other areas, many others have remained in their communities and are a means to access portions of the population living in insecure areas.

This situation has reinforced an implicit task division between traditional authorities and state officials that predates that conflict: traditional authorities use their positions to ease communication between the population and state actors, and thus allow the state to carry out basic tasks more effectively. Hence, traditional authorities have become important intermediaries between civil servants and the local population, gathering and disseminating crucial information between the two. It is telling that when asked what traditional or religious leaders should do to help prevent shocks in the future, 76 percent of our respondents answered

that they should coordinate with public authorities. When asked what traditional authorities should do to improve resilience against violence, 64 percent said they should strengthen cooperation with security forces.

Interviews with state representatives are clear in pointing to traditional authorities as strategic partners who can explain and ensure measures are followed by the population. State authorities highlighted how traditional authorities have close proximity with and knowledge of the population, and are listened to, respected, and trusted by the community. Given the relative high levels of legitimacy of chiefs, the majority of stakeholders interviewed emphasized that collaboration with customary leaders is essential for measures to be implemented and activities to be successful.³⁹

NGOs also benefit from customary leaders' role as intermediaries. Likewise, interviewees from NGOs or civil society groups overwhelmingly reported the importance of traditional authorities in mobilizing and communicating with the population. They state that traditional authorities' endorsement is crucial to the success of measures implemented by NGOs.

5.2 Subservient customary roles

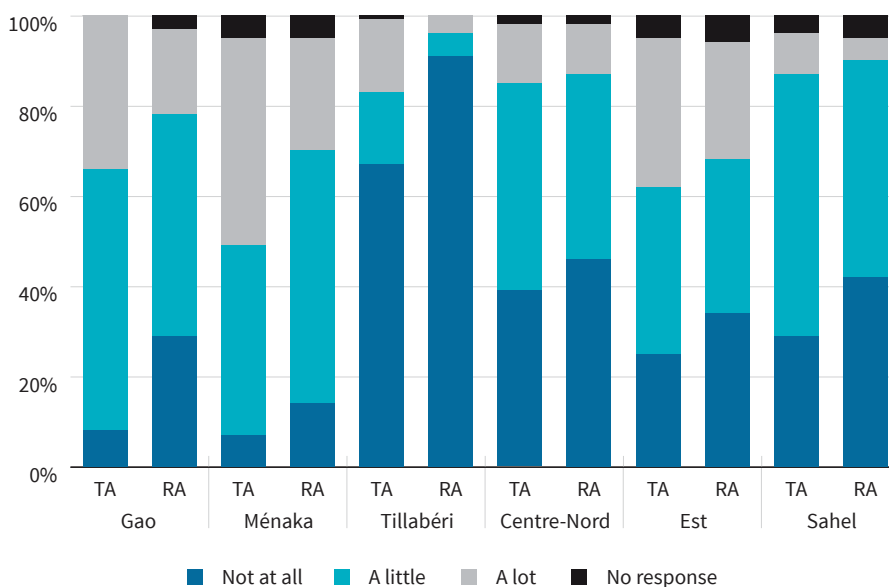
None of this, however, should lead to the conclusion that state authorities and customary authorities interact on equal levels, as is clear from how the community responds to crises; civil servants and state authorities are the first recourse, whereas traditional authorities play a smaller and more subservient role. This division of tasks predates the conflict but is also reinforced by it. Since the 1990s the Burkinabé state has sought to co-opt local power. For example, a 1993 law established consultative councils for administrative territories, creating space for the voices of traditional chiefs and religious leaders. Chiefs often hold important positions within these consultative councils, through which the state can exert

39 44 percent of respondents indicated having a lot of trust in traditional authorities, while only 20 percent had a lot of trust in the central administration. In this context, these chiefs' most important contribution is their role as intermediaries between the state and the population, an essential support to the state's attempts at implementing resilience measures against violent extremism such as information-sharing and awareness-raising. In Gorom-Gorom, interviewees recounted how chiefs carried out information campaigns aimed at encouraging the population to respect security measures, while at the same time pressing state authorities to implement more measures.

significant influence over them. Attesting to the attempts by chiefs to reconnect with the formal state, there have been attempts by chiefs to become local state officials (and vice versa). For example, the mayor of Oursi in Oudalan is also a land chief, and the canton chief of Gorom-Gorom often represents the mayor of Gorom-Gorom at meetings. The preference of Mossi-dominated Ouagadougou to work through formal state structures might be partly a result of the ethnic Fulani make-up of the Sahel region.

Conflict has reinforced these dynamics. Especially in the Sahel, traditional authorities are largely unprotected and hence risk retaliation by VEOs. In recent years, many customary leaders have been targeted and have had to flee the region to Ouagadougou and other cities, limiting their contributions to fostering resilience in the region but also increasing their dependence on remaining authorities – as weak, ineffective, and biased these may be. According to our survey results, the Sahel region is the region where traditional leaders are influenced the least by civil servants. One way to understand this result is that the state prefers alternative avenues to control the local context and that traditional authorities have been co-opted by the central state.

Figure 13 Influence of state officials on traditional and religious authorities (per region)



In the long run, these dynamics are problematic. Our data highlights that the more traditional authorities are perceived to get too involved with state authorities, the more they lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Interpeace found that customary authorities are suffering from declining levels of legitimacy in part because of their involvement with politics, as well as other perceived biases towards certain members of the population.⁴⁰ Various KIs reveal concerns over traditional authorities' involvement in politics. According to a resident of Djibo:

The main complaint of the local population against traditional leaders is that they clearly position themselves in support of certain politicians. They show themselves a lot with politicians and that bothers people. (...) They mix politics with tradition, and this does not make them very credible in the eyes of some members of the municipality.⁴¹

Some residents further mentioned that the involvement of traditional leaders in politics keeps them from performing their roles, and makes them corrupt and biased, which risks undermining their legitimacy among community members as a result:

The frequent links between traditional authorities and politicians mean that they are often viewed in a negative light by the population.⁴²

40 Bertrand, E. et al 2021, *op. cit.*

41 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Djibo, 1 February 2021.

42 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Gorom-Gorom, 19 February 2021.

6 Implications for programming

This chapter has made four contributions. First, it has demonstrated that community resilience in the Sahel region is mostly organized by people themselves and that the resulting coping mechanism results in comparatively moderate community resilience. Second, it has shown that traditional authorities and religious leaders have a strong position in the society, have moral authority in their communities, and play important and appreciated roles in conflict mediation. Third, it has shown that key functions such as the provision of security and basic services in the Sahel are provided by civil servants, state representatives, and armed groups, including the Burkinabé army. Fourth, it has demonstrated that the local political hierarchy in the Sahel is that the state takes precedence over traditional authorities in various domains, putting them in subservient roles.

What are the consequences of these insights for programming on improving community resilience against violent extremism in the Sahel? And what role can traditional authorities and religious leaders play?

Ensure civilian protection in counterterrorism efforts

One aspect that was emphasized by all respondents was the urgent need for security. What is interesting in the Sahel is that despite widespread allegations of human rights abuses by state security forces, the predominantly Fulani population in the Sahel surveyed for this research still has some trust in the security forces. This can in part be explained by state efforts to build confidence among Sahelian elites through appointments of Sahel residents to positions of responsibility. It is important to build on this remaining trust while it still exists, foremost by ensuring proper accountability mechanisms, inclusive composition of the armed forces, and civil defense outfits, and on that basis reinforce the presence of security forces in the region. Justice procedures for the cases that have already occurred should be set up, as well as structural oversight mechanisms to ensure similar events do not happen again. Furthermore, efforts should be made to include more members of the Fulani ethnicity in the security forces to help tackle targeting of Fulani inhabitants by state forces.

Apart from improving the main concerns of communities, improving security also will in the long run enable community resilience, as traditional authorities can continue to play a role in promoting resilience against violent extremism when they have a base level of safety. Our research has shown that attacks against

traditional authorities impact the entire society (for example, many interviewees from Djibo mentioned the profound impact that the murder of Grand Imam by armed groups had on the entire population).

Support customary leaders in becoming more inclusive

Our research has shown that traditional authorities in the Sahel region do not fare too badly in terms of their inclusion of women, but that there is still much that can be improved. For young people, however, there are clearly problems, as they feel less represented by traditional authorities and are also not included in decision-making processes. Our analysis highlights that these are key mechanisms by which community resilience can be fostered. Moreover, traditional authorities play important roles in conflict mediation and are using their moral authority to support security measures instituted by state administration and security forces, while also working among themselves and with religious authorities to create a narrative of peace and unity. These efforts have promoted community resilience and deserve support.

Regularize the position of customary leaders

One way in which customary leaders' contribution to resilience is undermined is their dependence on the state and their lack of resources and formal functions. In the absence of a clear mandate and corresponding state support, chiefs are largely self-reliant, encouraging their alliance with political leaders. As the examples of neighboring regions such as Est underline, the politicization of chiefs can trigger rivalries within the customary hierarchy and undermine social cohesion as a result. In the Sahel region, there are indications that the position of chiefs is undercut by these tendencies. The central government could strengthen the position of customary leaders by officially regulating their position and responsibilities – as is the case in neighboring Niger, for example. While not a golden panacea, official status would provide legal regulation of their position, endow them with resources, and shore up unclarity about who is responsible for what. In the present context, a prohibition to run for public office or join political parties as well as specify clear criteria for succession questions would help traditional authorities protect against the hollowing-out of their moral standing in society.

Improve coordination and linkages between local authorities

This report has shown the integral role that traditional authorities play in coordinating between the state and local communities in the Sahel region. While there is already informal collaboration between state officials and traditional authorities, this should be integrated in a more structured way. These efforts are especially crucial given the rising numbers of IDPs in the Sahel, and in Burkina Faso more generally. As our data have highlighted, customary leaders such as chiefs play a

relevant role in mediating tensions between hosting communities and displaced communities. More comprehensive cooperation with traditional authorities will only be possible if they are also supported practically. As such, the state should ensure they reimburse the expenses of traditional authorities in meeting with state and security officials.

Equip and support customary leaders

Traditional authorities hold a culturally and historically significant role in mediating land-related conflicts. However, given the instrumentalization of herder-farmer conflicts by armed groups, these conflicts now often fall outside of traditional authorities' scope of expertise. As many interviewees mentioned, it is important to train traditional authorities to deal with the new types of conflict they are facing. Trainings on transparent and conflict-sensitive mediation should be a priority for traditional authorities dealing with land conflicts. Educating traditional authorities on how to tackle violent extremism, human rights abuses and threats, and the involvement of armed groups in land conflicts is imperative. Land conflicts are prime drivers of conflict in the Sahel, and traditional authorities such as land chiefs, tribe chiefs, and village chiefs are uniquely placed to diffuse them.