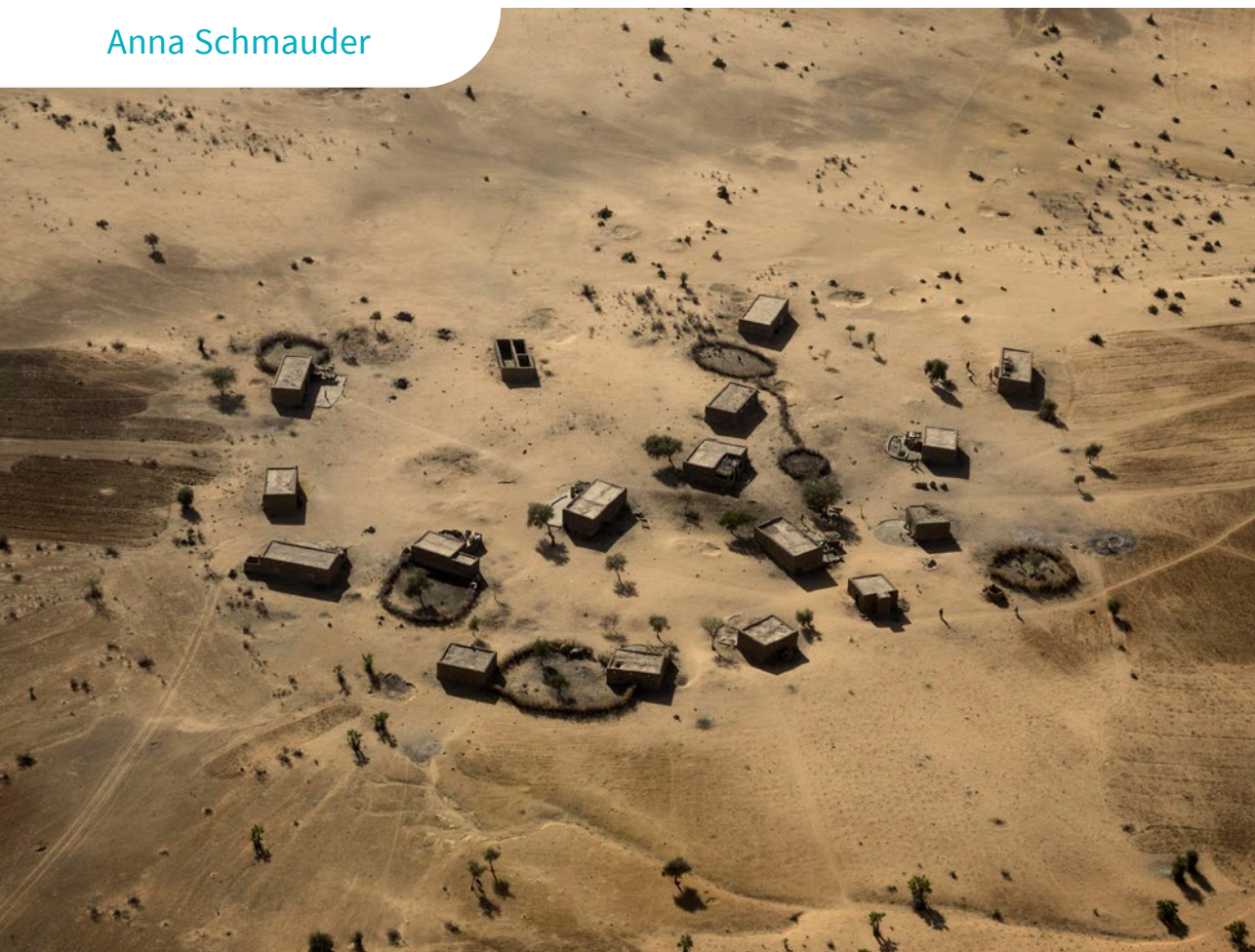# Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Northeastern Mali

USAID Customary Resilience

Anna Schmauder

Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Northeastern Mali

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Acknowledgements

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

CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims
KII	Key Informant Interview
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MOC	Operational Coordination Mechanism
MSA	Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
VEO	Violent extremist organization

1 Introduction

Six years following the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation signed to stabilize northern Mali, the northeastern regions of Ménaka and Gao are characterized by expanding territorial control by violent extremist organizations (VEOs). While customary authorities such as village chiefs have in the past increasingly become a target of VEOs, this report focuses on their agency. In particular, it asks what role traditional and religious leaders play in community resilience against violent extremism.[1]

In a context where the Malian state struggles to establish its presence in large parts of the country, customary leaders are largely considered to be the most readily accessible governance actors to rural communities.[2] However, this report's findings highlight the extent to which both state and customary administration in northeastern Mali has become constrained by armed violence, including by VEOs.[3] The report finds that the actual impact of customary governance – despite crucial regional differences between Gao and Ménaka – is severely limited, as customary leaders have been largely undermined in the prevailing quest for protection alliances. These findings thereby highlight the extent to which calls to include customary leaders, in the quest to stabilize northeastern Mali and prevent violent extremism, need to be contextualized through a localized analysis of their evolution amid the proliferation of armed actors. At present, such calls are largely based on the *ex ante* role of customary leaders prior to the 2012 insurgency.

Our data highlight significant regional differences – with community resilience and trust in customary governance actors significantly lower in Ménaka than in Gao.[4]

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1   Reuters 2021. Extremists target African village leaders in wave of assassinations, 8 October.
2   Goff, D. Diallo, M. and Ursu, A.-E. 2017. Under the Microscope: Customary justice systems in northern Mali, CRU Report, The Hague, Clingendael.
3   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.
4   Molenaar, F. 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.

Ménaka also scores comparatively poorly on a number of other indicators. Its traditional leaders are not perceived to be successful at conflict resolution – at times even exacerbating conflicts – and respondents also noted a relatively low level of intervention in community disagreements. Respondents do not trust traditional leaders, who are seen to serve their own interests more than they serve their communities' interests. In contrast to traditional chiefs, religious leaders are perceived to be less self-serving. They also take on a greater role in mediating community conflicts.

Traditional and religious leaders in the Gao region are perceived to be more efficient – in particular in those municipalities in proximity to the regional capital of Gao. Despite the security situation being more critical, and the fact that the region is perceived to have the highest exposure to external shocks and the lowest capacity to recover from such shocks of all six regions included in this study, chiefs and religious leaders are perceived to be more successful at conflict resolution than they are in Ménaka. According to respondents, traditional chiefs in Gao are also the most active, out of all six regions, when it comes to intervening in community disagreements. Trust in customary authorities is high and they are perceived to be more inclined to serve their communities' interests than they are in Ménaka – albeit not overwhelmingly so and less than is the case in other regions included in this study.

To better understand why customary leaders have such different track records across both regions, this report delves further into more than 450 surveys with community residents and nearly 200 key informant interviews (KIIs) with governance stakeholders and civil society representatives collected in five municipalities in Gao and four municipalities in Ménaka.[5] To make sure the data is representative, we selected municipalities on the basis of three criteria: their security context, their ethnic/tribal make-up, and their caste stratification. Selected municipalities in the Gao region are predominantly Songhay but relatively heterogenous, with Fulani and Arab minorities. Gabero was selected as a community with a majority Fulani community. By contrast, the Ménaka region is more homogenous with dominant Imghad and Dhouassahak Tuareg tribes in selected municipalities. The municipality of Anderamboukané was selected as a municipality with

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5   This data collection forms part of a comparative study on community resilience against violent extremism in six border regions of the Liptako-Gourma area. For the comparative analysis of customary leaders' role, see: Synthesis report: Molenaar, F. 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.

a Bellah majority.[6] With regards to the security context, the municipalities of Gounzoureye, Soni Aliber (Gao), and Inékar (Ménaka) are relatively stable. Municipalities experiencing more instability include Anderamboukane (Ménaka) and those located along the Gao-Ansongo Axis in the Gao region: Gabero, Lellehoye, and Ansongo, which experience daily attacks on transport and personal vehicles and are under indirect VEO governance. Finally, Tidermène and Ménaka in the Ménaka region are characterized by a relatively stronger presence of security forces and signatory groups and have recently witnessed a brief improvement in their security situations.

In order to delve into the role of traditional leaders in northeastern Mali, this report takes four steps. First, it provides an introduction into the political economies of Gao and Ménaka against an assessment of security dynamics in order to clearly identify the threat of violent extremism to the surveyed communities. Second, it analyzes the level of community resilience in the selected municipalities. Subsequently, it dissects limitations to customary leaders' governance provisions at the village and municipal levels, before analyzing their contribution to community resilience. The report concludes with four main implications for Mali's government and international partners focusing on non-state actors in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programming in northeastern Mali.

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6   The Songhay term *bellah* denotes a caste of former Tuareg slaves. Lecocq, B. 2010. Disputed Desert: decolonization, competing nationalisms and Tuareg rebellions in Mali, Afrika-Studiecentrum Series.

2 Ménaka and Gao: key challenges and threats

2.1 Political geography of eastern Mali

Nine years after the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northeastern Mali against the central government and the subsequent surge in VEO governance, the country's northeastern regions of Gao and Ménaka largely remain outside of the control of the state. Except for regional capitals such as Gao and Ménaka, state representatives and security and defense forces are scarce. In the absence of effective state presence, territorial control is contested between signatories to the 2015 Algiers peace agreement and allied armed groups on one side, and VEOs on the other. As a result, residents primarily rely on informal economies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private networks to secure their livelihoods.

In line with the stipulations of the 2015 agreement, administrative and political positions of interim authorities at regional and district levels are filled according to a quorum that was agreed upon between the central government and signatory, as well as compliant armed groups.[7] These essentially ethnic-based armed groups act as the primary formal governance mechanisms of eastern Mali's tribes and fractions.

In the Ménaka region, the *Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad-Dhaoussahak* (MSA-D) (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad) acts currently as the dominant armed group of the majority ethnic group,[8] while the minority group of Tuareg

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7   While signatory armed groups refer to the signatories of the 2015 Algiers Agreement, compliant groups refer to the MSA – a splinter group of the MNLA that formed in 2016, and has since split into one group aligned with the pro-autonomy CMA coalition, and one group aligned with the pro-unity Platform coalition. Interim positions are appointed in the absence of electoral procedures.

8   United Nations Security Council, 2018. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali in accordance with paragraph 11(c) of resolution 2374", S2018/581:17. United Nations Security Council, 2020. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali in accordance with paragraph 4 of resolution 2484 2020", S/2020/785/Rev.1: 17. Armed alliances are often fleeting and subject to practical considerations. Desgrais, N., Guichaoua, Y. and Lebovich, A. 2018. "Unity is the exception. Alliance formation and de-formation among armed actors in Northern Mali", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, pp. 654-667. Bencherif, A and Campana, A. & Aurélie Campana 2017. Alliances of convenience: assessing the dynamics of the Malian insurgency, Mediterranean Politics, 22:1, 115-134.

Imghad is allied to the *Groupe Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés* (GATIA).[9] Across ethnicities, factions have also aligned with the pro-autonomy *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA) (Coalition of Azawad Movements), as well as with VEOs such as Al-Qaeda-affiliated fractions. In the Gao region, territorial control is contested on several levels, including among 2015 Algiers Accord signatory groups (mainly due to the CMA's expansion across the northeast), but also between signatories and VEOs, as well as among VEOs (notably between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), particularly in the Ansongo district).[10]

As an essential tool to further (political) representation of northern populations, the 2015 Algiers agreement has effectively established signatory and allied parties to the peace agreement as governance actors in at least a twofold manner. On the one hand, it has allowed signatories to establish themselves as formal security actors through mixed patrols of signatories and state security forces through the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC). On the other hand, it has given new impetus to decentralization. In a step to further decentralized governance, Ménaka – a former district of Gao – was restructured to form its own region in 2016.[11] To this date, however, effective decentralization in northern Mali remains limited in terms of both implementation of restructured territorial boundaries and operationalization. Instead, the restructuring of community territory has become a point of tension for different factions, further heightening the quest for territorial control between signatory armed groups.[12] This is particularly the case in the newly formed region of Ménaka, where governance positions in selected municipalities are distributed among community leaders of different armed affiliation, and trust in local state officials is low.[13]

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9   The Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA) led by leader of the Imghad community Gamou rallies minority groups in Ménaka including but not limited to Imghad and Chamanamas fractions. European Council on Foreign Relations, undated. "Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel: Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA)."

10 As members of the Platform coalition, FNL and CMFRP are both composed of militias that formed to oppose rebelling Tuareg insurgency since the early 1990s. The CMFRP members Ganda Izo and Ganda Koy militias are predominantly composed of Songhay and Fulani. European Council on Foreign Relations, *op. cit.*

11 The region became effectively operational only in 2018.

12 Schmauder, A. 2020. Decentralisation amidst hybrid governance of northern Mali. Conflict and fragility, Policy Brief, The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

13 According to our survey data, in Ménaka only 14 % of respondents register high trust in state authorities, as do 35 % in Gao region.

Moreover, across northeastern Mali, inhabitants cannot rely on effective local authorities. In particular in rural areas located far from secured regional capitals, communal authorities and civil servants have fled to more protected urban centers. In the ninth year of the Sahel crisis, the representation of civil administrators across northern regions remains at only 14 percent, while the representation of district authorities has effectively further decreased amid a deteriorating security situation.[14] As a consequence, communities in areas remote from regional capitals – both rural and urban – are required to travel significant distances for simple administrative tasks. As one respondent from the town of Inekar illustrates:

> *We just need the administration to come back, because between here and Ménaka, it's more than 160 km and even to get a birth certificate to travel to Niger, you have to go to Ménaka first and come back.*[15]

As the following section highlights, prospects of a state return remain distant amid the fragile security context.

2.2   Security situation in Ménaka and Gao

The security situations in Gao and Ménaka significantly deteriorated following the start of the insurgency in 2012, mainly with deadly clashes between the French military and VEOs. Since then, most casualties have been attributed to Barkhane operations against VEOs including JNIM and its constituent groups; the ISGS and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa; infightings between ISGS and JNIM; and, most worryingly, violence against and between civilians.[16] Other armed groups have been active in the two regions as well: From the onset of the conflict until now, signatories of the 2015 peace agreement have reportedly clashed among themselves and with Al-Qaeda–affiliated groups. In the Gao region, this is particular the case for Ganda Koy/Izo – a northern self-defense group that forms part of the signatories of the 2015 peace agreement.

In Gao, fatalities peaked in 2020, due to heavy fighting between ISGS and JNIM coupled with Barkhane operations (drone strikes) – mostly against ISGS – as well

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14   United Nations Security Council, 2021. "Report of the Secretary General on the situation in Mali", S2021/ 519.

15   Interview with a community member, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 20 March 2021.

16   Violence against and between civilians as a cause of casualties is so far surpassing all the others in 2021.

as an upsurge in violence against civilians.[17] Violence targeting civilians has risen dramatically over the past three years. Attacks by ISGS against civilians went from nine in 2019 to 40 in 2020 and had already reached more than 20 by mid-2021. Following a lull of sorts in 2019 and 2020, JNIM-attributed killings of civilians also picked up in 2021. A strong increase in attacks from unidentified VEOs is also evident, especially in the Ansongo district of Gao.

Figure 1   Incidents + Fatalities Gao, 2013-2021
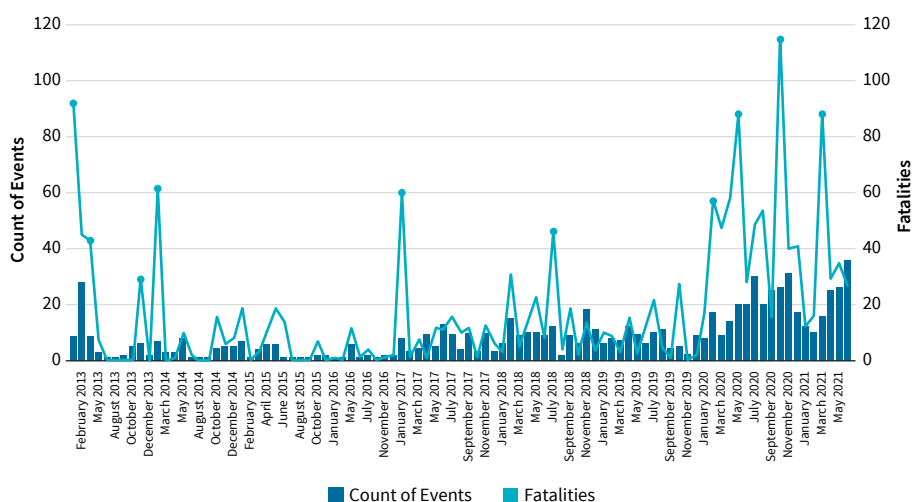
In Ménaka, the number of fatalities peaked in November 2019, due to two heavy attacks against the Malian army during which 114 people were killed. Ménaka was also not spared from increased intercommunal tensions, as clashes between Ibogholitane and Dawsahak Tuareg, between Imghad and Idnane, as well as between Fulanis and Tuaregs were reported around Ménaka and Anderamboukane in 2017. Since then, the number of incidents and (civilian) casualties have declined dramatically.[18] While in 2018, 126 civilians were killed by ISGS and 43 by unidentified armed groups, the civilian death toll has been comparatively low in the last two years.

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17 Our survey respondents similarly indicate that the security situation in Gao is dangerous and that it has deteriorated in 2020.

18 Our survey respondents similarly indicate that the security situation in Ménaka is neither dangerous nor safe and that it has improved in 2020.

Figure 2   Incidents + Fatalities Ménaka, 2013-2021
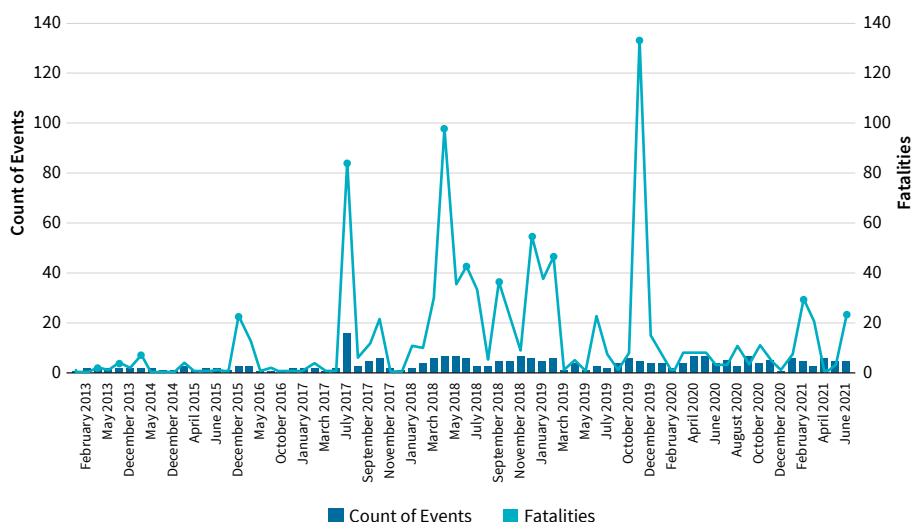
Although clashes are spread across the two regions, violent incidents tend to be concentrated around the large municipalities under study. Zones under the control of ISGS cells (concentrated in the Gao region, and more particularly near the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region) are subject to a high number of casualties as ISGS resorts to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – primarily against the Malian Armed Forces and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – abductions, executions of civilians, cattle theft, attacks against schools, destruction of critical infrastructure, and tax extortion (zakat collection).[19] Clashes between JNIM and ISGS, first reported in 2019, are mainly taking place in the Gao region (Ntillit, Tessit, and Talataye) as well as near the tri-border zone. By way of example, in the Gourma area of the Gao region, JNIM has largely pushed out ISGS.[20]

19 Our survey respondents in Gao and Ménaka note that cattle theft is the biggest threat they face, followed by taxation of zakat. In the case of Gao, lack of food and violence perpetrated by armed groups are also noted as big threats.

20 A JNIM cell has been reported around Ménaka since its formation. A first attack by JNIM in the municipality of Ménaka has been claimed in 2017. Bourem is characterized by the presence of JNIM as well as Ganda Izo/Koy (the latest being also active near Gao).

A comparative analysis of the two regions under study points to important differences in their security trajectories since early 2020, with significantly more conflict events and fatalities registered in Gao, particularly the Ansongo district, than in Ménaka. These differences can in part be explained by an unofficial truce in Ménaka between signatories and allied groups on the one hand and ISGS on the other. By contrast, ISGS efforts to subjugate community residents in Gao have resulted in several large-scale attacks, particularly in Ansongo – as most recently illustrated in Ouatagouna, where more than 40 civilians were killed.[21]

Map 1   **Conflict Events June 2020 – June 2021, Research Locations, ISGS/JNIM cells December 2020 in the Menaka + Gao Region**

Events
- 1
- 5
- 10
- 15
- 20

Legend
- ✕ Cell
- ● Event
- ☐ Research Site

- ■ Research Site
- ■ Alleged JNIM Cell
- ■ Alleged ISGS Cell
- ■ Battles
- ■ Violence against Civilians
- ■ Looting/Property Destruction/Explosions
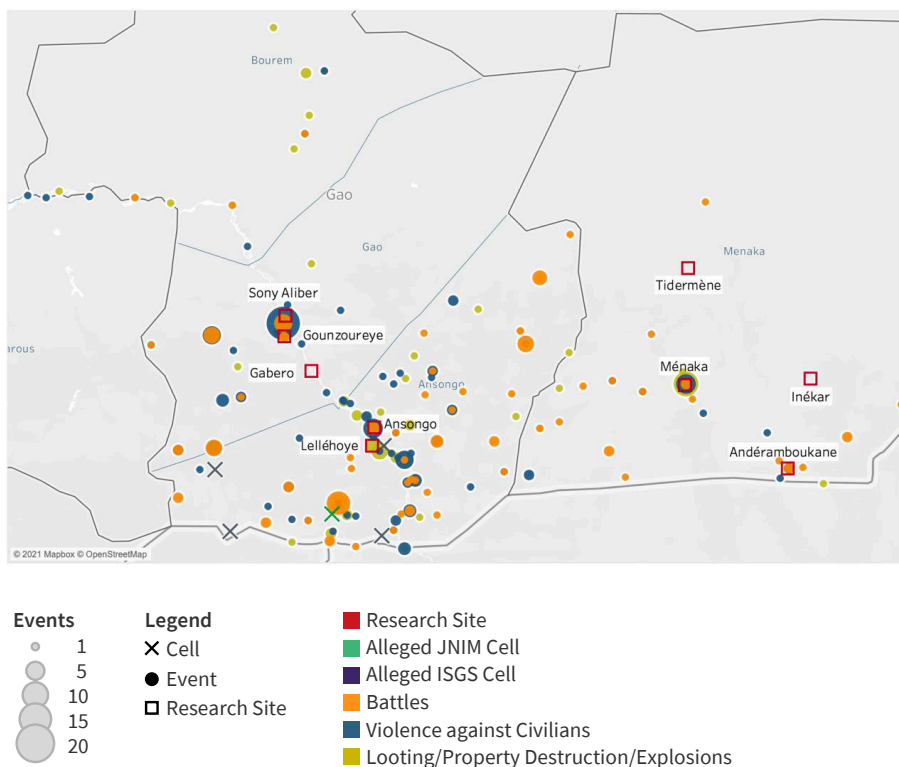
21   France 24. Suspected jihadists kill scores of villages in northern Mali, 9 August 2021.

3 Community resilience against external shocks and violent extremism

In this security context, communities' resilience against violence – including, but not limited to VEOs – is finite, as security responses remain largely focused on urban centers.

In both regions, state security and defense forces and armed movements signatory to the 2015 peace agreement work in cooperation and partly substitute for each other, particularly in bigger cities where state forces have an at least limited presence. In Ménaka, armed groups of the Platform Coalition and the allied MSA are financed through monthly community contributions to purchase fuel and food for security patrols (see Box 1 below).[22] In Gao, local inhabitants dissatisfied with poor security provision by mixed patrols of signatory armed groups and Malian security forces have created community-based vigilante groups.[23]

Box 1   Ménaka sans armes

Since September 2020, Ménaka has been the center of the new security initiative *Ménaka sans armes* (Ménaka Without Arms), set up in coordination between signatory armed groups, local authorities, state security forces, and the support of Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA.[24] The initiative has been widely praised as exceptionally ambitious, with mixed patrols consisting of armed forces, armed movements, and MINUSMA cooperating in nightly patrols.[25] In parallel, weekly security meetings in the regional capital including local administration, traditional and religious leaders, NGOs, technical services, MINUSMA, and Barkhane

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22   Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 28 January 2021.
23   United Nations Security Council, 2017. "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali ", S/2017/811.
24   Laetitia Lago Dregnounou, "Mali : l'opération ''Ménaka Sans Armes'' rassure la population", Africa News, December 2, 2020.
25   UN Peacekeeping, "Les résultats positifs de l'Opération « Ménaka sans armes »", January 2021. See Interview community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 27 January 2021.

ensure the exchange of information to discuss security threats and dynamics.[26] This community infrastructure has been further strengthened with the support of Centre-HD, which set up and trained a committee of 30 key actors from Ménaka in their capacity to handle all things security related. While the reach of the initiative remains limited and inhabitants of Ménaka criticize the lack of broader reforms such as successful disarmament, the initiative has brought "a semblance of calm."[27] According to one inhabitant, "at least people are starting to close their eyes, because the gunshots that we hear every day and night have decreased a little."[28]

In contrast to urban centers, rural areas are characterized by the near absence of local administration and only a fleeting presence of state security and defense forces.[29] Existing security measures such as patrols rely partly or entirely on local vigilante committees predominantly composed of youth.[30] Across all localities, youth take on a large role in vigilante committees, neighborhood watch groups, or patrols. In areas where no or only limited state security forces are present, they substitute more or less institutionalized community watch groups for national security forces.[31]

Despite this plurality of local-level security mechanisms, respondents perceive the security situation as extremely dangerous, with a particularly high threat of cattle theft, zakat taxation, and violence perpetrated by armed groups (see Figure 3 below). Collection of zakat by VEOs appears widespread not only in the Ansongo district of Gao, but also in the area surrounding Gao City and across municipalities

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26 Interview community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 22 February 2021.
27 Interview community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 27 Januray 2021.
28 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 28 January 2021.
29 "*We see the Malian armed forces only in passing. We are left to our own devices*" Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region.
30 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 14 February 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Ménaka, 7 March 2021.
31 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Soni Aliber, Gao region, 17 February 2021.

in Ménaka.[32] In a region where pastoralism is central to inhabitants' livelihoods, cattle theft directly undermines a key source of resilience for local populations. While this threat is significant in both regions, it appears predominantly high in Gao, particularly in the Ansongo district and on the road connecting Ansongo and Gao.[33] Where community security mechanisms are accompanied by a fixed presence of state security forces, such as in the regional capital of Ménaka, confidence in their effectiveness is highest.[34] Yet, across all localities, the near exclusive focus on solely the core of communities is undermining resilience mechanisms largely dependent on mobility.

Figure 3   Security threat (per region)

32 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 26 November 2020. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 18 March 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 15 February 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Soni Aliber, Gao region, 15 April 2021.
Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 17 February 2021. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 17 February 2021.
33 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 17 February 2021. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 17 February 2021.
34 Interview community member, Respondent, Lellehoye, Gao region, 10 April 2021. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent,Ménaka, Ménaka region, 22 February 2021.

Both urban and rural areas are usually characterized by an at least some-what securitized center from which wider vicinities are excluded. In urban areas, even in municipalities which tend to be characterized by security measures such as the presence of armed forces or vigilante committees, those security measures rarely extend beyond the perimeters of the urban city towards surrounding villages which form part of the same municipality. This is even the case for the most recent security initiative Ménaka Without Arms'. While the deteriorated security situation had previously forced NGOs and technical services to abandon their activities in Ménaka, they have gradually begun to return since the start of the new initiative.[35] Nonetheless, respondents criticized the only limited impact in communities outside the cities limits within the wider municipality of Ménaka:

> *There are places where people no longer sleep at night in their camps; they don't know how to spend the night; people are robbed at every turn because the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets have no protection from either the armed forces or armed groups. Security measures are concentrated only in the town of Ménaka, whereas the commune is beyond the town of Ménaka.[36]*

In more rural areas, the absence of security heavily restricts daily activities, such as wood collection and tending to crops, that are required to secure basic liveli-hoods. In many localities, respondents are unable to move beyond a limited radius of communities.[37] According to a resident of Soni Aliber:

> *Now it is almost impossible to go even two kilometers from the village. Even to get wood for the kitchen or to go to collect dung has become impos-sible. (…). Our daughters can no longer leave for school, which is only five kilometers away, without being attacked by armed youths.[38]*

Even where respondents mention the existence of security mechanisms, they are further limited both by their lack of effectiveness and by the absence of trust in state forces and armed movements. According to one inhabitant of Gabero, "in concrete terms, the measures are more in words than in action."[39]

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35 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021. Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region 26 February 2021.
36 Interview community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 27 January 2021.
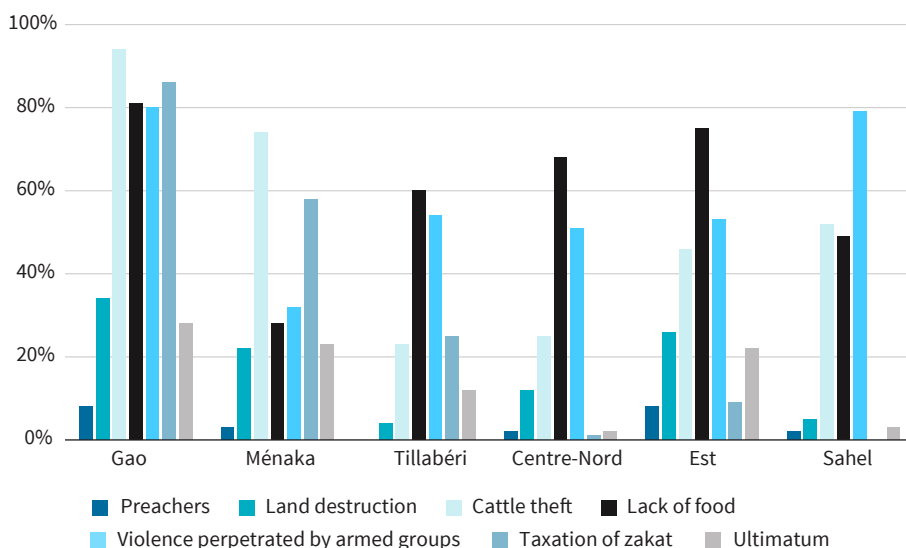37 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 5 December 2020.
38 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Soni Aliber, 5 February 2021.
39 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 5 December 2020.

In Anderamboukane bordering Niger, community members highlighted their mistrust in the capacity of MSA fighters to defend their city against attacks:

> [T]hese people I see [the armed men of the MSA] cannot provide security if they don't have support. On the contrary they will expose the city, they are very young and they are not trained either for defense or for the protection of people and their property.[40]

Community members' assessment in Anderamboukane is thereby representative of a broader reproach of armed movements as security providers in the Ménaka region. Rather than the community security actors as which armed groups present themselves, they are regularly perceived as both ineffective against wide-spread crime and banditry and exploitative toward populations they are set to protect. Interviewees frequently identified persistent clashes between signatory groups among the main crises over the past five years, highlighting the extent to which so-called self-defense actors have come to be perceived as a menace to stability and peace. Lacking discipline of armed actors and absent accountability structures have contributed to a setting in which non-state security providers are perceived as deliberate participants in a profitable business of insecurity. As a result, trust in self-defense groups is low, with nearly 70 percent in Gao indicating they do not trust them at all – a sentiment equally shared by more than 40 percent in Ménaka. In this setting, financial contributions to community security, such as fees collected at checkpoints entering and exiting cities, are perceived as economic reprisals and financing mechanisms for the armed movements setting them up.[41] This pattern of extraction and protection rackets expands beyond the vicinity of towns, to the wider infrastructure connecting cities and markets, and to fairs and markets themselves. As one inhabitant of Ménaka summarized, "*in the end, we only work for the armed men.*"[42]

Amid the deteriorating security situation and widespread state absence, local administrators and civil servants do not appear to play any significant role in supporting communities' responses to shock events such as natural disasters or security-related incidents. In the absence of (effective) formal administration, in Gao only 23 percent of respondents in need of basic services reach out to state officials – a share that is still twice as high as in Ménaka. NGOs are effectively

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40 Interview with community inhabitants, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Gao region.
41 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Ménaka region, 7 March 2021.
42 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 26 February 2021.

substituting for local authorities both in the provision of basic services – in particular health care – and in supporting affected communities in their recovery from external shocks and emergencies.[43] Yet, the security situation has in many cases limited NGOs' capacity to respond to the basic needs of communities. In the Ménaka region, NGOs have effectively halted their operations and withdrawn since late 2019, amid state forces' incapacity to secure their presence.

As a result, a relative majority of respondents in both regions are left to their own devices and rely on a personal network of friends and family in the quest for basic service provision and to cope with external shocks. In the case of basic service provision this is true for more than 50 percent of respondents in the Ménaka region, and more than 40 percent in Gao. This degree of communities' self-reliance is similarly pronounced in the face of external shocks such as natural disasters or security incidents. Whereas the majority rely on themselves or their personal network, traditional leaders and NGOs constitute the most frequently named governance actors contacted in cases of urgent need.

Figure 4   Community actors contacted for basic service provision (per region)

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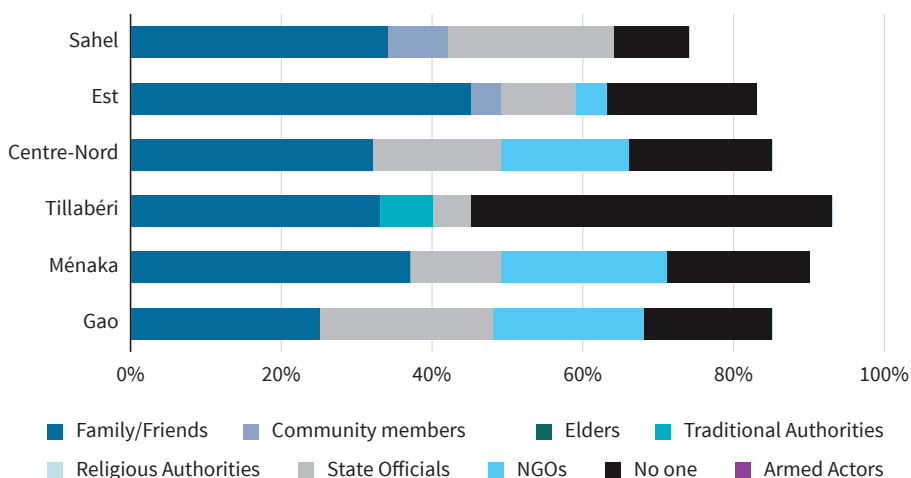
43   Mann, G. 2014. From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality.

Figure 5   Key person/authority that helped households deal with shocks

■ Family/Friends   ■ Community members   ■ Traditional authorities   ■ Religious Authorities
■ Civil servants/Elected leaders   ■ NGOs   ■ No one   ■ Armed Actors
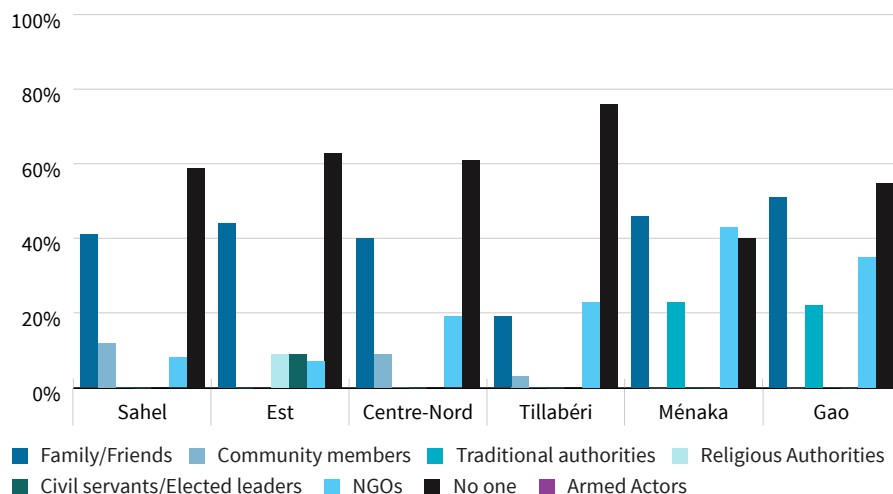
Communities' self-reliance is largely dependent on the economic capital available to them or to their larger personal networks. In the seminomadic regions of northern Mali, economic capital often takes the form of livestock such as sheep, goat, or cattle herds.

In order to cope with external shocks such as flooding, respondents in both regions, and in particular across the Ménaka region, rely largely on selling or slaughtering livestock. As one inhabitant of Anderamboukane described it:

> I have at least 50 heads with our shepherd and, from time to time, with the absence of banks here and the delay that salaries take, I can sell a head or two to get through the difficult times.[44]

In addition, communities' livelihoods and informal economies rely on weekly fairs and markets to ensure food security through imported staple foods, such as from southern parts of the country and Algeria.[45]

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44 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Ménaka region, 7 March 2021.
45 Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2013. "Special Report : Northern Mali's Markets."

Amid the focus on securitizing community cores and the widespread inability of existing security mechanisms to prevent cattle rustling and banditry, previously existing mobility-dependent resilience mechanisms have broken down. Informal activities and daily livelihood activities such as collection of dung and fuelwood are constrained within a small orbit around communities. Weekly fairs and markets – strengthening food security and informal economy of communities – are less frequented amid the high exposure to security threats along the road.[46]

In this context of fragile community resilience and high insecurity, what role is there for customary authorities as governance providers?

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46 The majority of respondents notes limited contact to other communities. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 25 March 2021.

4 Limits to customary authorities' role as governance providers

4.1 Customary authorities' role in governance: high expectations, lacking resources

The introduction of elected positions through decentralization in the 1990s originally challenged traditional authorities' prerogative over the local arena.[47] Since then, traditional elites have successfully established themselves as power brokers both within formal governance structures and informally through their position as interfaces between external actors and rural communities.[48] Even where state actors are present, local governance provision by the state administration is significantly reliant on the chieftaincy system as a contact point and linkage to local communities.[49]

In their capacity as community representatives, traditional authorities are involved in local governance commissions that bring together key community actors to focus on topics such as education or health. In urban centers or localities close to regional capitals where state actors are still present, these relations can be one of complementarity. Amid the absence of state agents and civil servants, local elected leaders lean on traditional chiefs for awareness-raising activities and development projects.[50] Wealthy chiefs can go so far as to contribute to financing basic community infrastructure, such as paying salaries of staff or purchasing medicine for the health center.[51] Yet these examples are a rare exception. While a 2006 law formalized chiefs as administrators of both sedentary (village) and nomadic (*fraction*) settlings and in theory entitles them to remuneration for their

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47 Lecocq, B. 2010, *op. cit.*

48 Civil Military Interaction Command, 2013. "Mali Information Bulletin", Unclassified.

49 Rural municipalities of eastern Mali are usually composed of several villages, whose village chiefs (in sedentary settings) and fraction chiefs (in (semi-)nomadic settings) act as councillors to the local state representative.

50 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 25 January 2021.

51 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 6 December 2020.

work, the law has in practice not been implemented.[52] Amid the combined lack of state protection and financial support and the prevalence of armed violence and natural disaster, chiefs are often themselves victims of external shocks, limiting their capacity to support community members. In many settings, chiefs' contributions largely consist of mobilizing community members in meetings, coordinating inhabitants, and advocating for NGOs' intervention to support those affected by the impact of a shock.[53]

Yet, as the often-sole remaining communal governance actor linked to state administration, traditional leaders frequently find themselves on the receiving end of high and unrealistic expectations. As explained by a youth leader:

> *Traditional authorities are often criticized because of their inability to provide minimum services to the population, notably in the areas of water supply, justice, health, and education. But very often these accusations are unfounded because traditional authorities are supporting actors and not service providers.[54]*

In the absence of effective civil servants and state agents, chiefs' legitimacy is linked to their access to and command over necessary resources for the at least partial fulfilment of community expectations.

The stalling of decentralization has in this regard further aggravated grievances of inhabitants *vis-à-vis* the central administration. Especially in Ménaka, the restructuring and re-formation of pre-existing community boundaries has heightened unease and competition over already scarce basic infrastructure and resources.[55]

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52 République du Mali. 2006. Loi n°06023 du 28 Juin 2006 relative à la création et à l'administration des villages, fractions et quartiers. The 2006 law formalised the central governments realisation of their dependency on chiefs to effectively administer large swaths of territory. See Lecocq, B. 2010. *op. cit.*: 13-14, 89-91. Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*

53 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 6 December 2020. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 2 March 2021.

54 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 25 January 2021.

55 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020.

The same youth leader who highlighted residents' unrealistic expectations of chiefs also stresses how expectations of traditional leaders' capacity to deliver access to basic services are at times raised by the chiefs themselves. Their ability to convey themselves as essential interlocutors and advocates for their community can reinforce or weaken their positioning. According to the youth leader in Ménaka:

> *The same authorities [faced with unrealistic expectations], put forward these false illusions to get elected or to maintain their position.*[56]

Resource constraints appear to provide corruption incentives for chiefs to present themselves as capable actors to their community. Amid the large-scale absence of state authorities, expectations of basic service delivery have in part shifted to traditional leaders as the only present link to administration. While chiefs are unable to fulfill largely unrealistic expectations amid the protracted decentralization, their attempt to invest limited resources for their own community is a coping mechanism to preserve their position – one with ultimately negative effects on social cohesion. This calls into question intentions to revalorize traditional leaders' role as intended in the 2015 peace agreement, which are founded on the chiefs' erstwhile role up to the 2012 conflict. Since then, less attention has been given to the extent that this revalorization is coherent in a dynamic in which communities and their chiefs have been captured by a logic of clientelism and armed proliferation.

4.2   Clientelism, Nepotism, and Armed Alliances

Traditional authorities' administration is not uncontested. Chiefs are increasingly perceived as contributing to inequalities that are at the root of localized grievances, further undermining their already limited role in local governance provision. Most surveyed respondents in Ménaka and more than a third of respondents in Gao perceive their traditional leadership as biased, arbitrary, and

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56 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 25 January 2021.

prone to misappropriation of resources and infrastructure.[57] This is also recognized by traditional leaders themselves. As one chief in Tidermene explained:

> *There are people who feel that the management of resources and donations is not equitable. The leaders choose their main groups or groups of their choice to benefit from everything that comes to the population.[58]*

Forming a link between rural communities and external actors, such as humanitarian organizations, traditional leaders are involved in the distribution of emergency aid – according to respondents nearly twice as often in Gao than in Ménaka.[59] Yet community perceptions that view chiefs as discriminatory and clientelist are widespread. According to our survey data, more than 50 percent of respondents consider chiefs to choose the main interest group as beneficiary for emergency relief, such as food aid – a sentiment that was also reiterated in interviews.[60] As exemplified in Soni Aliber, many respondents deplore traditional leaders' discriminatory practice:

> *In general these authorities always choose their relatives and supporters as beneficiaries.[61]*

> *The share of aid brought for the village is usually distributed to groups of individuals close to the traditional authorities.[62]*

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57 Traditional leaders are perceived to serve their own interests over those of the community according to 60 percent of interviewed community inhabitants in Ménaka, and 40 percent in Gao. The lower regard of traditional leaders in Ménaka goes hand in hand with a lower level of social cohesion and higher degree of social divisions than in Gao.

58 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 7 December 2020.

59 More urban areas or municipalities close to regional capitals are characterised by a significantly lower involvement of traditional leaders. According to survey data, traditional leaders' involvement in the distribution of emergency aid is lowest in Ménaka city and the municipalities of Soni Aliber and Gounzoureye, just outside of the regional capital of Gao.

60 Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020. Interview with a commmunity member, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 19 March 2021. According to survey data, 61 percent of respondents in Ménaka – compared to 47 percent in Gao think that traditional leaders choose the main interest groups as primary benefiaricies. In Ménaka, 37 percent of respondents also consider chiefs to keep aid for themselves and their families – compared to 27 percent in Gao.

61 Interview with a member of the army, Respondent, Soni Aliber, Gao region, 18 February 2021.

62 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Soni Aliber, Gao region, 16 April 2021.

Where chiefs are perceived to abuse their position for their personal enrichment, their actions alienate community members:

> [E]very time there are announcements of what is being sent to this or that community or village, but we see nothing. And at the same time there are traditional authorities who drive around in beautiful cars and build beautiful houses or send their children to study in the best schools. So there are questions to be asked.[63]

Another resident in Gabero explained, "[P]eople do not understand why so many opportunities are exclusively reserved for [traditional authorities'] relatives and friends."[64] In a similar vein, an inhabitant of Anderamboukane highlighted chiefs' "acts of nepotism and favoritism" by explaining how a traditional authority who "sends his children to study or his relatives to be treated in Bamako or Gao" will comply if "the person to whom he sends his relatives asks him to do something, even to the detriment of his community."[65] Self-serving tendencies appear particularly pronounced in the Ménaka region, where a majority of 58 percent of respondents consider chiefs to serve their own interests over those of the community. This share is significantly lower in the Gao region, but still more than twice as high as in all other regions studied in the Liptako-Gourma.[66]

These tendencies are further aggravated through the politicization of chiefs. According to our survey data, in northeastern Mali the influence of civil servants or elected leaders on chiefs appears highest across all six regions of the Liptako-Gourma, and again higher in Ménaka compared to Gao. While state representatives rely on chiefs especially in rural zones, chiefs' involvement in politics is considered to undermine their capacity to act as impartial community actors.

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63 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Ménaka region, 7 March 2021.

64 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 3 December 2020.

65 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Anderamboukane, Ménaka region, 7 March 2021.

66 Molenaar, F. 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.

Against this widespread perception of traditional elites as self-serving and politi-cized, community members highlight their anticipation for religious leaders to take on a broader role in community administration. In contrast to village or district chiefs, imams are perceived as exempt from the dynamics of politicization and associated nepotism and therefore as more trustworthy.[67]

Amid clientelist inclinations, traditional elites can at best be considered to be sympathetic to certain sections of northeastern Malian society – those relevant to the position of elites, in terms of a political, military, economical or numer-ical sense. In fact, due to the "tribalization of armed politics,"[68] affiliation and membership in armed movements has become the main channel to ensure both political representation and territorial control of one's tribe or faction.[69] As signa-tory armed groups determine key administration positions in northeastern Mali, armed alliances of village or faction chiefs are a mechanism to ensure community representation and, with it, access to resources.[70]

Traditional leaders on the municipal and village levels in rural areas are often on the lower end of the traditional echelon of power. Their agency and leverage is largely shaped by key regional actors.[71] It is *their* respective positioning and alle-giance to the political center in the capital Bamako – the armed groups signatory and compliant to the peace agreement as well as groups considered extremist – that ultimately determines the positioning of traditional figures on the level of rural communities.[72] Allegiances to armed groups serve two main purposes: to satisfy protection needs in areas outside the reach and control of state security and defense forces, and to provide a channel to satisfy material interests.

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67   Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 1 December 2020.
68   Sandor, A. 2017. Insecurity, the breakdown of social trust, and armed actor governance in central and northern Mali. Chaire Raoul Dandurand en études stratégiques et diplomatiques, UQAM.
69   Fractions refer to intra-tribe groups/clans. A tribe is composed of multiple fractions. Territorial control involved transhumance tracks, natural resources such as grazing land and wells, and trade and smuggling routes. Security Council 2018, *op. cit.*
70   By way of example, the chief of the regional interim authority in Ménaka – Abdoul Wahab Ag Ahmad Mohamed – is a close ally of MSA leader Moussa Ag Acharatoumane. Author Interview with MSA representative, Bamako 2019.
71   Utas, M. 2012. "African Conflict and Informal Power, Big Men and Networks", Zed Books.
72   The semi-nomadic society of north-eastern Mali follows a hierarchical structure in which socio-political allegiances are largely expressed along fraction lines. In recent years, fraction leaderships have become increasingly contested. By way of example, the Daouassak fraction might be split between MSA factions adhering to the pro-government Platform or the pro-autonomy CMA coalition or across the spectrum of VEOs.

Signatory and compliant armed movements are legitimate interlocutors of the central government. As such, they determine key (interim) governance positions in northeastern Mali. A close alliance with armed movements can thus bring access to rare salaried positions, as well as control over resources set to be distributed – for example, through the Northern Development Fund. As recognized representatives of local communities, armed movements have also become vehicles of socioeconomic progress. As such, customary leaders' affiliation with a certain group can increase leverage over administrative processes such as redistricting which promises a redistribution of available basic services including wells, health centers, and schools between different communities. The perhaps more promising access to resources is not related to decentralized resources, but rather to transport passing through land. Movement and transport of goods – both legal and illicit – are a crucial component in the political economy of the region, and one in which armed groups participate through protection rackets.[73]

Allegiance to armed movements – including VEOs – can strengthen traditional elites' access to resources and their power positions. Given signatory parties' propensity to base governance and territorial control on customary elites, they have a direct impact on local power balances.[74] This highlights the pragmatic considerations and material interests behind leaders' shifting alliances, and the limited usefulness of differentiations between "radicalized" and not.[75]

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73 Raineri, L. and Strazzari, F. 2015. "State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali", *African Security*, vol. 8, pp. 249-271.

74 Tobie, A. Sangaré B. 2019. The impact of armed groups on the populations of central and northern Mali. Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute:17. According to our survey data, the influence of non-state security or self-defense actors and initiatives on chiefs is considerable, with crucial recorded differences. Again, regional differences prevail. In Ménaka, a majority of respondents (61 %) consider self-defense groups to influence chiefs – more than double than in Gao (29 %).

75 Dermais et al 2017, *op. cit* ; Rupesinghe, N., Hiberg Naghizadeh, M. and Cohen C. 2021. Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel. Report, Oslo: Norwegian Institute for International Affairs. As such, joining VEO can itself constitute a 'resource in struggles for local power' (Grémont 2019: 58, 60). Communities' resilience against violence can also consist in joining groups considered extremist. Interviews in Ménaka and Gao, highlighted overlapping features of signatory and compliant armed groups that have become legitimized through the 2015 peace agreement, and Al-Qaeda affiliated JNIM. Respondents made little differentiation between GATIA, MSA and CMA and the armed group led by Iyad Ag Ghali. This reflects a reality, in which a form of indirect jihadist governance has been established in rural parts of north-eastern Mali. See also: *in* Scheele, J. 2021. "Islam as a World Religion in Northern Mali", *in "Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds, Religion and Society in the Context of the Global"*, pp. 159-182:*163*.

5 Customary authorities' contribution to resilience against violent extremism

5.1 Security provision

Despite the precarity of the security situation, chiefs' displacement to more urban centers is still significantly lower than that of other state authorities, leaving chiefs as the only authorities available to raise awareness and monitor potential security threats. Their contribution to community security is fourfold, ranging from informal intelligence gathering and liaising with security actors to the collecting of funds for security initiatives and negotiation with armed actors.

The main security measures they undertake consists of gathering information and intelligence, such as through the surveillance of foreign elements. Elected leaders, such as mayors, thus depend on chiefs not only as middlemen for service provision, but also for information gathering and intelligence sharing with external actors – including both state authorities and armed movements.[76] As a state representative in Gabero explained:

> The state is absent. We hardly exist. The only ones who reside in the villages are the traditional and religious authorities. They are very often the basis of all the information that we and the other partners have.[77]

Nonetheless, the role of chiefs in security provision differs significantly between the two regions. In Gao, chiefs are identified as relevant security actors by 42 percent of respondents, mainly for their role as a liaison with security forces, notifying them of security emergencies. In contrast, in Ménaka, armed groups (such as signatory armed movements) are those identified by respondents as the

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76   Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 4 December 2020. Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 3 March 2021. Interview with a member of a member of a non-state armed group, Respondent, Ansongo, Gao region, 3 December 2020.

77   Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 4 December 2020.

most relevant security actors.[78] Armed groups' prevalence in security provision in Ménaka appears to have undermined chiefs' relevance as intermediaries between the state and local populations in the region.[79]

Despite chiefs' participation in communal security provision through liaison with security actors, trust in their ability to provide timely protection is limited. As most evident in the Ansongo district of the Gao region, chiefs and their families are themselves too often subject to the same threats as the rest of the community.[80] As one community leader highlighted, calling on Malian security and defense forces in situations of immediate threat is a futile exercise and communities are better served to build good relations with armed movements and potential security threats. In this context, chiefs play a subordinate role in security provision, which is largely carried out by security actors including signatory and compliant armed movements.

Accordingly, chiefs sustain communal security mechanisms and measures through (albeit limited) financial and material support. In Anderamboukane, for example, security measures such as checkpoints and patrols provided by signatory armed movements are financed through communal taxation collected by village chiefs. The most recent security initiative, Ménaka Without Arms, is exemplary of this community-funded approach. As a village chief explained, traditional councilors and village chiefs collect household contributions on the municipal level, to finance fuel, food, and basic infrastructure for patrolling movements.

In addition to these practical measures of support, chiefs might also take on the role of mediator, both with the armed movements acting as security actors, and potential threats to the community. In Ménaka, our survey data highlight the extent to which negotiation with armed groups is perceived as a security measure taken by traditional authorities. In contrast with Gao, where a greater reliance on state

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78 In Gao the top security measures taken include calling on security forces (67 percent), followed by warning community members of threats (57 percent) and surveillance undertakings (54 percent). In Ménaka by contrast, chiefs security measures do not relate to state security forces but are instead focused on reciprocal information exchange and collection (warning, exchanging information, surveillance).

79 The bypassing and replacing of chiefs is also exemplary with the example of MSA-D leader Moussa Ag Acharatoumane who has been declared chief of the Dhaouassahak community. On the circumvention of customary leaders in security provision also see Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*

80 Interview with a member of an NGO, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 3 December 2020. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Gabero, Gao region, 27 November 2020.

security forces prevails, negotiations with armed groups present the second most frequent security measure taken by traditional leaders in Ménaka.[81] This prevalence of armed group negotiation appears to extend to VEOs. In both Ménaka and Gao, most respondents approve of negotiations with VEOs to prevent attacks on their community, and to a lesser extent even to prevent recruitment (see Figure 6 below). This finding is similarly reflected in interviews with community leaders, in which little distinction is made between armed signatory and compliant movements, and the Al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM (often only referred to as "Iyad's men," referring to JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali).[82]

Figure 6   When is it acceptable for traditional and religious authorities to negotiate with VEOs (per region)
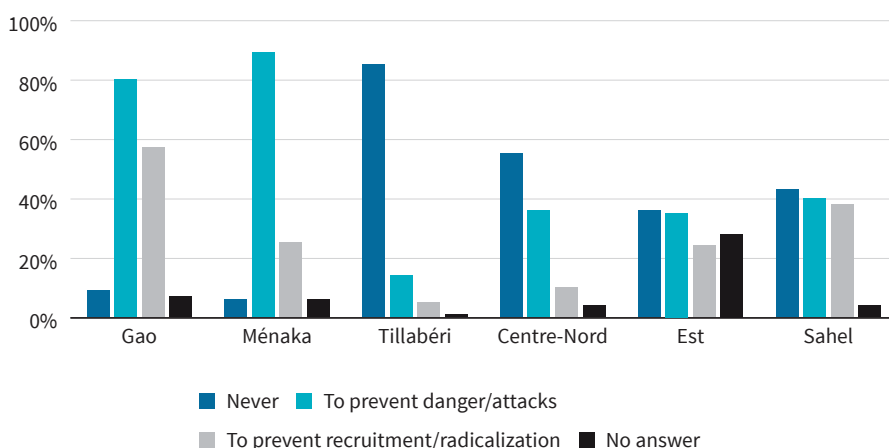
5.2   Conflict resolution

Traditional chiefs play a significant role in conflict resolution, whereas armed movements' contribution remains largely constrained to more serious crimes. In line with traditional justice provision in northeastern Mali, chiefs are often considered the first justice actor and mediator between community members. In the

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81   According to 51 percent of respondents in Ménaka region.

82   In KIIs, this interpretation of security governance actors is only extended to Al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM and not to ISGS. This finding speaks to the greater social anchorage of JNIM, led by an established Malian former political figure, in contrast to ISGS that is perceived as foreign – being led by a leader from Mauritania.

event of community disputes and conflicts – ranging from familial and marital disagreements, to conflicts over land management, grievances between farmers and herders, to more serious crimes of cattle theft and banditry – traditional chiefs and religious leaders are often the first to be consulted by aggrieved parties.[83] In the Ménaka region, half of the respondents named traditional leaders as the community actors to contact for conflict resolution. In Gao this share is even higher, standing at 67 percent. In some instances, traditional elites are also called on to mitigate tensions and disputes between different signatory and compliant armed groups.[84]

In conflicts around land usage, chiefs in Gao appear to intervene twice as frequently as in Ménaka.[85] There are two possible explanations for these regional differences. On the one hand, it highlights how chiefs' effectiveness in conflict resolution is directly linked to their legitimacy. In Ménaka, where a large majority of respondents has limited trust in chiefs – whom they perceive as self-serving, – chiefs are less relevant actors in conflict resolution than in Gao, where they are endowed with greater legitimacy. When it comes to justice provision, the dynamic is reversed as the overwhelming majority of respondents in Ménaka identify religious leaders to be the most relevant actors, whereas in Gao only a third consider them relevant.[86]

However, violent armed conflict, which is of greater concern because of its prevalence across northeastern Mali, exceeds chiefs' capacity.[87] As indicated by respondents across all municipalities, while chiefs might mandate conflict resolution by convening, for example, a commission of community members to investigate crimes such as cattle rustling, their efforts are often futile. In practice, these serious cases are rather brought to the attention of armed groups – contributing to a spiral of vengeance.

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83   Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020.

84   United Nations Security Council, 2019. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Mali in accordance with paragraph 4 of resolution 2432", S/2019/636:69. Example of a mediation by a Marabout between GATIA and MSA fighters.

85   By comparison, in Ménaka region, 50 % of respondents identify chiefs as relevant community actor for intra-community conflict resolution.

86   In Ménaka, 77 % of respondents would turn to religious leaders for justice provision. In Gao, this share is less than half of that with 32 % turning to religious leaders, while 49 % still consider chiefs most relevant.

87   Interview with the interim mayor (Tidermene 436) Interview with a fraction chief (Inekar 487), SIPRI 2019: 11.

Across north-eastern Mali, prevalent conflicts center around management of and access to natural resources between different socioeconomic groups. As commercial livestock breeding constitutes the most important source of household income, access to natural resources such as water points, wells, and grazing land and pasture is not only a matter of human necessity and survival, but a matter of economic concern.[88] As a result, chiefs' involvement in conflicts over land, and between farmers and herders, are the most common.

These conflicts are further exacerbated by climate change, broadening agricultural conservation, internally displaced persons, and irregularity of land ownership, which have increased pressures on existing natural resources. Patterns of land ownership and acquisition are defined by a lack of formality, in which more than 90 percent of land is acquired through heritage and only 8 percent of land property is accompanied by a formal title.[89] Land rights are dependent on historical occupation of land and hence remain largely static. In this context, the lack of regularization of land property aggravates the resolution of disputes around land management.

Nevertheless, access to basic services and community infrastructure such as wells and water points frequently appears as a source of community grievances triggered by the discriminatory interventions of chiefs.[90] Chiefs' intervention in community conflicts over the access to natural resources is considered as biased toward different groups of land and resource usage. As a community resident described it:

> *The main grievances of the population are around the bad management of public affairs or the bad management of the resources of the commune. We have known grievances of the local population toward the traditional authorities occurring at the time of the food distributions, the use of the water points, grazing.[91]*

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88 "Agriculture et sources de revenu au Mali: Etat des lieux à partir des données de l'EAC-I 2017", Cellule de Planification et de Statistique du Secteur du Développement Rural (CPS/SDR) du Ministère de l'Agriculture du Mali, (2019), p. 29.

89 Ibid: 37.

90 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020.

91 Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Tidermène, Ménaka region, 3 December 2020.

This bias is most pronounced between the two main groups of land users – farmers and herders.

Emerging evidence has highlighted the significantly reduced impact of chiefs' previous governance mechanisms, particularly when it comes to conflict resolution and justice provision.[92] As armed groups dominate the sociopolitical balance of power in northeastern Mali, traditional chiefs are increasingly bypassed in conflict resolution and mediation, and their authority in practice constraint by individuals bearing arms. Rather than awaiting often lengthy mediations by traditional leaders that promise conciliation at best, penalty for perceived grievances is readily available for anyone bearing arms.[93] Traditional leaders' dependence on non-state security provision has to that end undermined pre-existing endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms and their capacity to sensitize against VEOs.

5.3   Preventing recruitment

Chiefs' reliance on non-state armed actors for security provision has changed the pre-existing social hierarchies. While chiefs customarily were positioned at the higher echelons of communal hierarchy, their dependence on armed groups and community security commissions largely composed of youth has limited their capacity to simply impose their decisions.[94] As youth have become emboldened by their membership in armed groups, the capacity of chiefs to influence youth has conversely declined.[95] As a result, young men's membership in armed groups has emerged as a venue for them to circumvent traditional leadership; this effect is particularly observable in the Ménaka region, where the social embeddedness of armed groups is arguably higher than in the more plural Gao region.[96]

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92 Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*

93 Tobie, A., Sangaré B. 2019, *op. cit. : 19*.

94 Note that while the current 9-year Sahel crisis has been preceded by previous rebellions and armed conflict in northern Mali, the duration and extent of armed governance and its circumvolution of social hierarchies is without precedent.

95 Tobie, A., Sangaré B. 2019, *op. cit.* speaks of a process in which armed groups supplant traditional elites.

96 Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*

In the absence of effective state forces – particularly in more rural areas – the reliance on youth in the realm of security measures has undermined chiefs' capacity to influence youth through mediation and sensibilization measures. As chiefs' awareness-raising and sensitization measures are largely centered on moral arguments that lack any tangible underpinning, their role in supporting community resilience against VEO mobilization is effectively void. This is further reinforced through the current education crisis in which many schools have been closed for several years, and youth end up unoccupied and without any prospects.[97] In addition, the lack of resources local communities experience creates further incentives for extremist recruitment. Alliances with and joining of VEOs in this context are considered both a protection mechanism, and a step to rise in the social hierarchy and achieve higher economic status.[98] Overall, VEOs are perceived as more organized and as possessing greater resources. Chiefs' sensibilization efforts can be considered negligible in view of their inability to offer any material benefits. In contrast to the promise of material gains offered by recruiting armed groups, it is easy to see who provides the more convincing argument.[99]

Given the prevalence of armed alliances and simultaneous personal overlap and occasional cooperation between armed groups and VEOs, and their simultaneous inability to provide even the most basic services, chiefs are an unlikely candidate to prevent recruitment. To the contrary, in an effort of strategic positioning chiefs have since 2012 pledged their community to altering armed groups, including VEOs.[100] Their means and power of persuasion are therefore necessarily limited. This is similarly explained by an inhabitant of Ménaka, who said

> [A]lmost every community has its militia (Daoussahaq, Arab, Imghad, Chamanammas, Songhay, Fulani) so on the contrary the traditional and religious authorities are more in a position to encourage young people than to discourage them from joining armed groups.[101]

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97   Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 18 March 2021.

98   Pellerin, M. 2019. "Armed violence in the Sahara; Are we moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?", Etudes de l'IFRI, Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales. L. -A. Théroux-Bénoni, W. Assanvo, I. Maïga, et al., "Jeunes 'djihadistes' au Mali. Guidés par la foi ou par les circonstances ?", Institute of Security Studies, August 2016.

99   Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 18 March 2021; Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent,Inékar, Ménaka region, 18 March 2021.

100 Thurston, A. 2020. "Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups" Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

101 Interview community member, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 22 February 2021.

5.4   Improving social cohesion and inclusion of women

Grievances against traditional management and administration are further heightened by exclusive decision-making processes and access to traditional leaders. While male authorities repeatedly highlighted the inclusion of women in their decision-making and governance, women leaders and representatives interviewed for this study were quick to point to significant points of tension and conflict with traditional and religious leaders.[102] This was particularly the case in the Ménaka region, where only 18 percent of respondents perceive traditional chiefs to treat both genders equally.

Despite their invitations to community meetings and awareness-raising strategies, women's *de facto* impact remains negligible. In the social setting of northeastern Mali, the prevalent view allocates agency in the public realm overwhelmingly to men – while women's agency is confined to the private sphere. As community leaders, traditional and religious leaders are the personification of norms that prevent increased participation of women.

Women get the short end of the stick in particular when it comes to dispute resolution, where traditional norms obstruct the rights women are granted by law. In traditional justice provision, women's rights are respected less than those of their male representatives.[103] In most localities of northeastern Mali, traditional conflict resolution processes do not directly include a woman but rather her male representatives – father, husband, or brother. As one respondent in Ménaka highlighted:

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102 According to survey data, up to 65 percent of respondents in both regions consider men and in particular elders, favored by traditional leaders. "Unfortunately, between us and the traditional authorities, the differences of opinion are very numerous and very frequent. Our differences generally concern the conditions of women and their place in our societies and then in the decision-making bodies. These authorities want women to be always behind, as a background. Even in actions initiated and supported by women, they want the men to be in front and the women to follow. For example, if we have activities in the commune, you will see that the presidium is 100 percent occupied by men (the mayor, the governor, the interim authorities), while we who are actors become observers." Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021.

103 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021.

> *If a woman has been a victim, it is others who come to speak on her behalf and it is them who forgive in the place of the victim, whereas it is she who bears the suffering and the after-effects.*[104]

According to another female resident:

> *[T]he grievances we have are mainly the lightness with which women's rights are treated by these traditional authorities, and this is really a reality. Women are the losers in the majority of court decisions because of the protection of the dignity of some to the detriment of women.*[105]

Against the backdrop of social obligations to submit to gendered customs, interview respondents estimated the influence of traditional leaders on women to be significantly greater than *vis-à-vis* male community inhabitants.[106] While young men have in many instances achieved emancipation through armed mobilization, allowing them to circumvent the hierarchy of the chieftaincy, this is not the case for women.[107] In the tension between a more liberal interpretation of women's rights and prevailing traditional norms, women are left with limited agency.

These findings from selected municipalities illustrate the extent to which traditional elites as key stakeholders in northeastern Mali constitute a major barrier for women's efforts for emancipation.[108] Given traditional elites' position as communal gatekeepers, their role toward female residents should be considered detrimental to communities' resilience against violent extremism.

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104 Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021.

105 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021.

106 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Inékar, Ménaka region, 18 March 2021.

107 Comparing the position of youth and women against the hierarchy of the chieftaincy, one respondent stressed the difference to lay in the ability of chiefs to impose their will on women – while they are no longer able to do so with regards to male youth. "It is as I said before, women are in the same logic as young people. But the difference is that for young people we decide, but for women we decide and impose at the same time." Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Ménaka, Ménaka region, 24 February 2021.RFI .

108 Synthesis report: Molenaar, F., Demuynck, 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.

6 Implications for programming

Engaging customary governance actors remains a main challenge for donors and implementers, even in contexts in which their role in local administration has been formalized, such as the case in Mali. External actors are faced with a dilemma: the difficulty of grasping both often highly localized governance dynamics and the role of chiefs and religious leaders in it has left them disadvantaged in the quest for stabilization, as they are unable to compete with violent extremist actors' detailed understanding of local dynamics.

Recent dynamics, such as the role of chiefs and religious leaders in negotiating local ceasefires, have highlighted the potential that lies in endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms.[109] Yet previous attempts to reinforce the role of chiefs in these mechanisms largely focused on their *ex ante* role and only insufficiently took into account their drastically reshaped authority.

By way of example, the 2015 Algiers Accord aimed to upgrade the role of customary authorities. Yet, nearly ten years into the violent insurgency that started in 2012, many chiefs are perceived to contribute to rather than to alleviate grievances – thereby actively undermining community resilience against violent extremism. Chiefs' capacity to mediate and be a force of reconciliation has rapidly deteriorated as they have been captured by armed group politics.

Regional differentiations in terms of trust in and effectiveness of customary leaders' contributions to community resilience can be explained by the presence or rather absence of effective state administration and security provision. In the Ménaka region, where both the state and international communities have a much less pronounced presence, armed groups of signatory groups have effectively substituted governance through both decentralized administration and security governance. As a consequence, informal actors, including those well-positioned to the signatory armed groups, in practice dominate the political order – a process that has led to the decline of the chieftaincy in the region.

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109 RFI, "Dans les coulisses de l'accord de Niono au Mali", 12 April 2021, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/reportage-afrique/20210411-dans-les-coulisses-de-l-accord-de-niono-au-mali-1-4.

And while traditional chiefs function as important linkages, they are widely perceived to instrumentalize their position to advance their own interests rather than respond to community concerns – a dynamic that appears more pronounced in Ménaka than in Gao.

This is best illustrated in emergency relief, where a large share of respondents consider chiefs to select their main interest group as beneficiaries – to the detriment of community members less close to community elites. P/CVE programming of northeastern Mali should therefore consider chiefs as secondary actors in resilience-building interventions.

Religious leaders by contrast emerge as community leaders who are considered more trustworthy than chiefs. As highlighted in our KIIs, this is attributed to the fact that religious leaders have largely remained outside of the day-to-day community administration. As a consequence, their association with clientelism and nepotism is far less pronounced than that of chiefs, who are perceived as highly politicized and act as main liaison to external actors. At first sight, this appears to make religious leaders the more suitable partner in the quest to prevent violent extremism. Yet, donors should be mindful of three major limitations.

First, donors should be mindful that religious leaders have, similarly to chiefs, integrated into the political economy of armed alliances that is characterizing northeastern Mali, including into VEOs. Second, religious leaders themselves expressed no interest in engaging in more administrative capacities or acting as main liaison with external partners. As expressed in the KIIs, imams in northeastern Mali are aware that the trust and legitimacy that is endowed to them is strongly influenced by perception of them as neutral and impartial partners. Third, in this regard, P/CVE programming from other regions should act as a warning. External support to religious leaders in a largely externally driven counter-terrorism narrative risks undermining the very basis of religious leaders' trustworthiness.

Even more, recognizing that large parts of (rural) northeastern Mali are effectively controlled by violent extremist groups does bear the question to what extent the concept of P/CVE is still applicable. Policy makers and implementers alike should recognize that many respondents' current understanding of resilience against violent extremism in eastern Mali first and foremost consists of enduring armed (extremist) governance. As expressed by multiple interviewed community leaders, the primary advice chiefs give inhabitants is one of submission: to listen to VEO orders, to act as if they agree, and to not attract any attention. In this context, classical P/CVE programming appears maladaptive.

Despite these challenges, the following examples highlight opportunities of how implementing organizations and donors should account for customary leaders' role as most local governance actor in northeastern Mali.

Increase cooperation with state security forces

Chiefs' precarious situation is directly linked to the inability of state security forces to protect communities over large swaths of Mali's northeastern territory. Amid their absence, chiefs' reliance on non-state security provision and resulting integration into armed alliances of signatory groups has undermined their legitimacy to act as community actors for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Even in municipalities in proximity to military bases, chiefs note the futility of calling on state security forces for protection amid delayed or lacking responses. Against this backdrop, any efforts to prevent violent extremism must push to increase community-centered security provision. State security actors are presently understood as a distant force that is unresponsive and inconsistent. For customary leaders to successfully fulfill their administrative functions, they depend on a basic level of security which is currently not guaranteed.

Improve existing linkages: coordinating community members

Even amid the lack of state support and resources, chiefs can play a role in mobilizing community residents to enhance cooperation and information flow – in turn increasing community resilience. Across all municipalities, respondents expressed a strong wish for chiefs to take on a stronger coordination role amid community members. While an effective support of community members is after all resource dependent, the number one expectation expressed toward chiefs consisted of improving coordination between public authorities and community members. This finding highlights how inhabitants in northeastern Mali still turn to chiefs as linkages – not only with external actors but also internally within communities, coordinating both with public authorities and among community members themselves. External actors should therefore focus on process-oriented support, for example by supporting chiefs in coordinating community members in the face of external shocks such as natural disasters.

Horizontalization of customary mechanisms

While chiefs' influence is highly localized and dependent on their perceived legitimacy, corresponding resource access and positioning within armed group alliances, the struggle lies in reshaping their position to a more inclusive one. Traditional elites have proven to be resilient actors over decades of Mali's existence, yet our data has highlighted that their actual contribution to community resilience depends on how susceptible they are to community input. Support for traditional and religious leaders alone will provide limited success in supporting

resilience against violent extremism. Calls for training of customary leaders therefore fall short. Equal access to and inclusion by communal leaders at the heart of conflict resolution initiatives is a crucial feature to advance community resilience. Asked to identify priority actions for chiefs, a large majority in both regions underlined the necessity for chiefs to work toward improving social cohesion within the community. External organizations should build on existing local approaches attempting to integrate traditional and religious leaders into more inclusive community approaches. A similar approach has been established in northern Niger, where district committees include representatives of both traditional and religious leadership as well as youth and women leaders.