THE SAHEL PEACE INITIATIVE

Steps Toward Peace

A CONFLICT ASSESSMENT OF THE LIPTAKO-GOURMA ZONE
BURKINA FASO, MALI AND NIGER

Acknowledgments

Catholic Relief Services is the official international humanitarian agency of the United States Catholic community. CRS' relief and development work is accomplished through programs of emergency response, HIV, health, agriculture, education, microfinance and peacebuilding. CRS eases suffering and provides assistance to people in need in more than 100 countries, without regard to race, religion or nationality.

Cover photo by Annika Hammerschlag for CRS

Ouagadougou le 13 Novembre 2019

A:

Monsieur Seal L Callahan

Président de l'Agence Catholic Relief Services

Baltimore, USA

Estimé Monsieur le Président,

Nous venons d'achever un atelier qui a réuni des évêques délègues des conférences du Burkina-Niger et du Mali qui a connu la participation de deux délègues du Ghana et de Cote d'Ivoire.

Comme vous le savez, la réflexion a porté sur la situation d'insécurité au Sahel, les causes et les conséquences du phénomène qui dépassent le Sahel. Nous voudrions vous remercier d'avoir recueilli ce projet qui, grâce à l'engagement de tout CRS, est devenu une réalité.

Alors que les travaux qui sont bien déroulés s'achèvent, nous voudrions vous demander encore d'user de ce qui est en votre pouvoir pour accompagner le processus déclenché par cet important atelier afin que les actions retenues et planifiées puissent se concrétiser en vue de provoquer les changements souhaités en matière de cohésion social, de sécurité et de paix au sahel.

Veuillez féliciter votre équipe de CRS Afrique de l'Ouest pour la fructueuse collaboration que nous avons eue dans l'organisation et la tenue de cette rencontre inter-conférence sur la sécurité au Sahel.

Persuadés que la bonne collaboration nous réunira toujours autours des défis auxquels l'Eglise fait face en Afrique de l'Ouest en général et au Sahel en particulière, nous vous assurons de nos prières et de notre disponibilité.

Monseigneur Laurent B. DABIRE

Président de la Conférence Episcopale

Burkina-Niger

Monseigneur Jonas DEMBELE

Président de la Conférence Episcopale

du Mali

Foreword

Our sisters and brothers in the Sahel are living through an unprecedented period. Communities in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are under direct attack by violent factions who seek to aggravate and exploit community grievances and tensions for their own gain. The increasing number, severity and scale of these attacks against civilians, displaced persons and families is shocking. Millions of innocent people need immediate, lifesaving assistance and the region needs a solution for long-term, sustainable peace.

The Catholic Church stands united against this violence and has been working tirelessly to respond to the humanitarian and development needs of the region. Working across all three countries, among those displaced as well as the families hosting them, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has provided cash distributions, water, food and shelter over the past year. We are also continuing our work to provide healthcare, education and agricultural assistance, as well as carrying out peacebuilding activities. These efforts are led and championed by the Catholic Church in West Africa and grounded on an overriding priority for justice and peace in the region. CRS strongly supports this call as essential to its vision that all people fulfill their God-given human potential. We are proud to witness the superhuman efforts undertaken in response to this crisis, efforts that are to be celebrated.

But we are also alarmed by the growing demand for help that far exceeds available resources. While governments have recognized the critical importance of investing in the Sahel, we are calling on donors, policy makers, advocates and humanitarian responders to redouble their efforts to make peace a reality in the region.

In response, the Sahelian Catholic Church is leading a multi-country effort, The Sahel Peace Initiative, to raise awareness about this violent conflict and advocate for positive change. Toward this end, we present Steps Toward Peace, a multi-level conflict assessment of the ongoing crisis in the Sahel. Its ultimate message is clear: those who seek peace must focus on reinforcing social cohesion, vertical and horizontal, while engaging local leaders and civil society in all responses, activities and policies.

The findings and recommendations in this report are a reflection of the work conducted by Caritas Burkina Faso (known as OCADES), Caritas Niger (known as CADEV), Caritas Mali and CRS and shaped by extensive first-hand primary data collection, analysis and review. Our integrated team engaged with and listened to hundreds of individuals from the most vulnerable communities so that we could understand their challenges and reality, and better coordinate a unified response.

We invite you to consider how to actively support the application of these recommendations to ensure the integral human development of each and every person living in the Sahel. Similarly, we pledge to adopt these recommendations in the promotion of a new era of collaborative, integrated peacebuilding that seeks to unite communities across the region, and we invite you to join us. Although we are troubled by the gravity of the crisis, we are optimistic about a brighter, more just and secure future for the Sahel.

Thank you for your tireless efforts to build peace in the region.

Monseigneur Laurent B. Dabire	Monseigneur Jonas Dembele	Sean Callahan
Président de la Conférence Episcopale Burkina-Niger	Président de la Conférence Episcopale Du Mali	Chief Executive Officer Catholic Relief Services

Executive Summary

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report summarizes the findings, conclusions and recommendations of a conflict assessment commissioned by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Church in West Africa. The conflict assessment supports the Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI), launched in November 2019 by CRS in cooperation with local partners in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Niger.[1] The SPI seeks to assist the Church and other civil society actors to design and implement locally-led responses to the spiraling violence and growing humanitarian and development crisis in the tri-border area of Liptako–Gourma, the epicenter of the violence. Although this study acknowledges the role of hard power to protect and secure, it chooses rather to focus on the strengths of civil society and it emphasizes non-violent solutions to conflict. To this end, the authors call on governments, regional and international to balance military interventions with an equal commitment to humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding because—as the past decade shows—the root causes and drivers of the conflict cannot adequately be addressed through armed intervention alone.

Specifically, this assessment was commissioned to respond to the following objectives: (1) generate new knowledge and effective approaches to mitigate the Sahelian crisis; (2) identify opportunities to mainstream peacebuilding, social cohesion and governance into humanitarian and development aid programming; and (3) identify entry points and strategies for the Church and civil society to respond to the Sahelian crisis with special emphasis on advocacy-based and communication approaches that support and give voice to local community needs, priorities and initiatives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The conflict assessment prioritized the following research questions:

- What are the underlying causes of violence, who are the perpetrators, and what are their motives, incentives, interests and grievances?
- Who are the main victims of the violence and what are their resiliencies?
- What have been the impacts on and consequences of the violence for local economies, government, services, political stability and social cohesion?
- What are possible ways forward?

METHODOLOGY

The assessment employed mixed qualitative and quantitative methods comprising key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), a literature review, direct observation, and a perceptions survey of social cohesion. KIIs and FGDs were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires, and the survey was based on an adapted version of CRS' Mini Social Cohesion Barometer (the Barometer), containing 18 indicators grouped into socio-cultural, economic and political spheres. The

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1   The study was executed between April and June of 2020 and the report was drafted before the August 2020 coup in Mali.

assessment framework combined CRS' 4Ps (profile, problem, people and process)[2] and USAID's Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) 2.0.[3] CRS' Peacebuilding, Governance, Gender, Protection and Youth Assessments: A Basic Guide for Busy Practitioners[4] provided additional guidance. CAF 2.0's focus on grievances and resiliencies and the 4Ps analytical structure were highly complementary for identifying factors that informed macro- and micro-recommendations.

Sampling was conducted within nine zones of the Liptako–Gourma tri-border area, which straddles Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Six of the zones have experienced severe conflict. Focus groups and interviews were organized with individuals most affected by and/or involved in violence—women, youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, self-protection groups, marginalized ethnic groups, peacebuilders, administrative and security officials, and traditional chiefs and religious authorities. Across the study area, the assessment team held 45 FGDs and interviews. In addition, the team administered 90 surveys to government officials, traditional leaders and community members.

The assessment designers identified participants through purposive and snowball sampling.[5] Sampling relied on references from Caritas staff, mayors, religious leaders and others working in the target zones. The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions on movement required the enumerators to conduct some activities in Mali and all activities in Niger by telephone.[6]

The team processed qualitative data manually through matrixed relational content analysis, which relies on the co-occurrence and identification of concepts captured in focus groups and informant interviews. This method permitted the assessment team to more fully explore conflict dynamics, key components of the main problems, the connections and relationships among conflict actors, and the context impacting and being impacted by the crisis. To bolster the relational content analysis, the team disaggregated and summarized quantitative Barometer data using descriptive statistics.

As mentioned, the assessment team encountered limitations such as COVID-19. In addition, snowball convenience sampling resulted in an oversampling of members of major ethnic groups—especially males. Findings of the Mini Social Cohesion Barometer were not representative as the study did not attain a sufficient sample size. For security reasons, active combatants and members of extremist groups were not interviewed. To mitigate these drawbacks, CRS and partners purposefully engaged women and minority ethnic groups where possible and hosted two virtual validation workshops during which partners and key respondents critiqued, corrected and confirmed the findings and recommendations.[7]

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

As noted above, the assessment methodology relied on USAID's Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) 2.0 and CRS' signature 4Ps methodology (profile, problem, people and process), CAF 2.0 offered advantages at the macro level because of its

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2   CRS. 2018. Peacebuilding Fundamentals: Participant's Manual. CRS.

3   USAID. 2012. Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) Version 2.0. June 2012. Washington D.C.: USAID. USAID. 2012. Conflict Assessment Framework Application Guide. June 2012. Washington D.C.: USAID.

4   CRS. 2015. Peacebuilding, Governance, Gender, Protection and Youth Assessments: A Basic Guide for Busy Practitioners. CRS.

5   Snowball sampling is a nonrandom technique where known study participants from among their social network. Naderifar, Mahin & Goli, Hamideh & Ghaljaei, Fereshteh. (2017). Snowball Sampling: A Purposeful Method of Sampling in Qualitative Research. Strides in Development of Medical Education. In Press. 10.5812/sdme.67670.

6   A complete list of those engaged can be found in Annex C.

7   Moving forward, CRS will continually engage communities in focus group discussions while regularly administering the Mini Social Cohesion Barometer to inform regular reporting and sharing of representative data.

focus on national and international actors, and its conceptualization of institutions, which were familiar constructs for recipients of Western-based education. The 4Ps complemented these strengths by emphasizing historical perspectives, micro level dynamics, and framing questions and concepts in language easily grasped by diverse cultures and people without formal schooling. The overlay of these frameworks encouraged a comprehensive contextual analysis and resulted in six key findings.

1. **Insufficient and inequitable access to wealth, livelihoods, and natural resources is the driving force behind the deterioration of the social fabric and uptick in violent conflict, especially for youth from traditional pastoralist backgrounds. Individuals emigrate, join violent groups, or perpetrate violence as an escape from poverty and injustice.**

Poor economic prospects are a major cause of the deterioration of the social fabric and rise in violent conflict. Virtually all focus groups identified youth unemployment and the lack of economic opportunities for youth as the main cause and consequence of violent conflicts. These findings were triangulated with CRS' Mini-Social Cohesion Barometer to provide a cross-sectional view of social cohesion in each assessment zone. Barometer findings clearly show that the economic and political contexts are closely interrelated as the most influential factors contributing to a lack of social cohesion. Results from this assessment align with previous research, which demonstrate that poverty alone does not drive or cause conflict. Mismanagement of and unequal and limited access to resources, largely agricultural in the Sahel, are also key drivers. The lack of employment opportunities as well as feelings of hopelessness, have motivated rural youth to abandon agriculture and seek their fortunes elsewhere by joining violent extremist movements or turning to crime and banditry to earn a living.

2. **The scale and scope of violence surpass the capacity of government and local leaders to coordinate a unified and effective response.**

Multiple, overlapping factors drive conflict. Among these are competition for the control of trans-Saharan trade routes, heavily securitized responses to conflict, conflicts over control and access to natural resources, failure to fully implement the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, and a dubious reliance on national-level leaders to resolve localized and regionalized conflict. Further, all respondents cited the number of violent actors as a major obstacle to resolving the conflict as it is often impossible to identify which violent actor is responsible for specific attacks or malevolence. The negative political and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising number of people in need of humanitarian aid also exacerbate conflict and increase pressure on limited state resources.

The scope of the drivers of conflict exceeds the capacity of any single country or actor to respond. The literature review and KIIs indicated that developmental and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs have largely been fragmented and ineffectual due to insufficient attention paid to local conditions and inadequate consultation with communities. While donors have dedicated significant resources to humanitarian aid, large swaths of the population remain unreached and in need.

3. **The conflict has impacted men and women differently with women the least involved in conflict management at national and local levels.**

Within their households and communities, women play an important role in building social cohesion. They reinforce family values, participate in formal and informal women's associations, and advocate for social services. They are rarely the perpetrators of physical violence but may indirectly foster violent attitudes and behavior as they pass along implicit biases to children or actively act on prejudices. FGDs revealed that some women act as informants for violent groups.

Women are the indirect recipients of violence and manage the long-term impacts. When villages are attacked, men either flee or are killed. The consequence is that women must fend for themselves and their families in post-attack settings. They face multiple stressors—high market prices, searching for or buying firewood, tending fields, finding food for their families, caring for out-of-school children, and receiving fair treatment under the law.

While at national levels women's voice has gradually improved, authority structures at subnational levels typically remain the purview of older males, and do not favor women. This is especially true of chiefdoms and traditional community management systems. For example, traditional land tenure systems prohibit women from owning land. Norms are beginning to change. Imams and Quranic schoolteachers interviewed welcomed the participation and engagement of girls and women in their schools and mosques. Despite this openness, women consulted in the study felt marginalized and without influence beyond the household.

4. **Traditional chiefs and local religious leaders are committed to peace and social cohesion. They command respect from their communities for their objectivity and neutrality. Communities value traditional conflict management mechanisms and perceive them as essential resources.**

Traditional chiefs and local religious leaders are strong supporters of non-violent resolution of conflict, community cohesion and peacebuilding. They uniformly oppose violent extremism and denounce bad governance while actively promoting local conflict management mechanisms. Villagers, especially those above the age of 35, exhibit high trust in traditional authorities and religious leaders. All survey respondents indicated a strong belief in the importance of traditional conflict mediation and practices to prevent, mitigate and transform violence at the grassroots. They also valued a strong national response to the presence of violent extremists and external provocateurs. Three main obstacles have limited the effectiveness of traditional chiefs and religious leaders: 1) the lack of inclusivity of women and youth; 2) the disempowerment of local leaders by national governments; and 3) the targeted assassination of local leaders by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs).

5. **Self-defense groups are well-established throughout the Sahel, but they are less respected as peace actors in Mali. Self-defense groups do not necessarily make their communities more secure; indeed, they may perpetuate violence.**

The proliferation of extremist violence and widespread banditry has spawned a new kind of self-defense group that differs from historically small traditional village policing of petty thievery and livestock raiding. The new groups are heavily armed. They retaliate against alleged cooperation with extremists and expel competitors for control over land and resources. Owing to the anonymity of external actors and the unreliability of state protection, citizens increasingly depend on homegrown self-defense. In Mali, 46% of Barometer respondents knew someone or had themselves been recruited to a violent group. In Burkina Faso, the figure was 87%.

Self-defense groups are the perpetrators and victims of violence against civilians. To paraphrase one elder in Mali: There are no winners in a conflict where each side wrongs the other. In Burkina Faso, communities demonstrated strong support for these groups, such as the Kogleweoogo. However, the Burkinabe also recognized that locally armed groups could be magnets for violence. Self-defense groups in Mali were widespread but were less viewed as guarantors of peace than as a necessary evil. In Niger, these groups were generally smaller and less well-armed in part because of community reliance on government forces for physical security and protection. As opposed to Burkina Faso and Mali, Niger's self-defense groups reflected geographic rather than ethnic allegiances.

6. **Unaccountable and unresponsive political leadership, especially at national levels, has eroded faith in democracy and civic engagement. In the tri-border area, governance failures exacerbate weak connections to modern economic and political systems.**

The study respondents were emphatic that citizens trust local more than national government. Top-down, poorly designed and executed decentralization policies have hindered development and shaken faith in local government. The disconnect between people and government is most apparent in rural, neglected, and impoverished areas.

Respondents widely expressed concern about security. For communities, peace was a moral state where people could feel protected, trust their neighbors, and work harmoniously to better their lives. In Mali, 70% of Barometer respondents felt it was impossible to send children to school in the current environment. From the KIIs and FGDs it was clear that to stoke grievances, extremist groups exploited political corruption, bad governance, economic deprivation, and social and ethnic division.

CONCLUSION

A mixture of incentives has driven external actors to war against Sahelian communities and their protectors. Some motivations appear to ride on greed and thirst for control over lucrative illicit trans-Saharan trade. Others have deep roots in religious ideology, grievances and propagandistic interpretations of global hegemony and marginalization. Various theories explain manipulative jihadist behavior. However, decades of misrule and neglect in the Sahel have advantaged these movements and increased their ideological appeal, especially to marginalized and unemployed youth with few prospects for a brighter future. On the bright side, few people in Liptako Gourma embrace jihadist goals and ideologies.

The results of this assessment show that Sahelians and their governments have been living on borrowed time, **Sahelians must rebuild a tattered social contract**, and with the help of their allies, restore order, reconcile conflicted groups, and strengthen social cohesion. Reforms must address chronic unemployment, inequitable access to land and unaccountable leadership. Peacebuilding needs to become the mandate and responsibility of ordinary people including traditional chiefs, religious leaders, women and youth. Actors for peace can make a difference. If they can value indigenous knowledge and implement locally generated solutions, they can reinforce vertical and horizontal social cohesion by engaging local leaders and civil society, thereby giving voice, opportunity and support to the people of the Sahel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommendations support local mechanisms and solutions to mitigate the violence and promote community resilience and social cohesion. The report recommendations are not one-size-fits-all as contexts, key persons and grievances differ by community, commune, region and country. Communities may be ill-equipped to confront violent actors, but they can present a unified front to those seeking to exploit divisions. Recommendations are designed to be actionable and are elaborated in the report's *Recommendations* section.

■ **Reinforce peacebuilding task forces (in response to findings 4 and 6).**

Existing peacebuilding task forces (PBTFs) should bring together religious leaders at national levels to advocate for the adoption of realistic, just and humane policies

to overcome the suffering caused by the current crises and to reverse political and religious polarization, violent extremism and social unrest. National PBTFs in each country can reach out to grassroots members to promote interfaith collaboration in their local communities and ensure that local communities' voices are heard at the national levels.

◼ Strengthen and diversify traditional conflict management and social cohesion mechanisms (in response to findings 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

Peace actors should seek to strengthen and diversify conflict management mechanisms while avoiding the creation of parallel platforms that create redundancies and confusion. Tapping into local knowledge about traditional conflict management mechanisms, supporting local leaders and encouraging the inclusion of women and youth in decision-making will empower chiefs, mayors and governors to lead while enhancing inclusive civic participation for democratic local governance and accountability.

◼ Engage women as direct actors in the construction and management of peace (in response to findings 1, 3, 4 and 6).

Women must be engaged and mobilized to take a more direct role in peace processes and social cohesion. Women's participation has improved at national levels, but more effort must be directed toward increasing their contributions in rural communities, towns and districts across the tri-border area. Protocols to include women in civic matters beyond the family are needed. Raising the status of women as peacebuilders must respect local cultural norms and practices, but advances in this traditionally male-dominated domain could significantly improve accountability and strengthen the social fabric in the long run.

◼ Buttress humanitarian options for the poor (in response to findings 1, 2 and 3).

The greatest untapped resources in the Sahel are its people, most of whom live below the poverty line, and many of whom lack formal education and skills that could enable them to ascend social and economic ladders. Stakeholders supporting peace efforts should redouble efforts to target populations most vulnerable to violence and its causes and ensure that development resources are directed toward their safety, their resilience and their right to be protected from exploitation and marginalization by predatory governments and extremists. High priority should be given to finding and applying local solutions that can revitalize rural economies, upgrade skills, and protect women and children.

◼ Promote civil society solutions, especially regarding livelihoods (in response to findings 1, 4, 5 and 6).

Peace actors should facilitate collaboration between and among learning networks linking external peace actors with Sahelian civil society. Peace actors should take advantage of critical indigenous expertise within paysan (smallholder farmer) universities[8] and apply it holistically to emergency and development assistance. Sahelian civil society has successfully responded to many of the root causes of indigenous conflicts; they now need political and financial resources to implement at scale.

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8   Paysan universities are informal schools used to share learning on agricultural best practices.