

Mali on the brink

Executive Summary

Insights from local peacebuilders on the causes of violent conflict and the prospects for peace

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Mali is facing an escalating violent conflict that has spread from the peripheral Sahel regions in the far northwest to the centre of the country. In 2018, the country is faced with a situation where violence is more intense and widespread than during the widely publicised 2012–2013 crisis.

Mali is not experiencing a civil war in the conventional sense but a complex, multidimensional security crisis of interlinked micro-conflicts. Communities are fragmenting into competing armed factions and mass atrocities are becoming commonplace. In 2013, international military intervention took place, followed by a democratic transition. Yet, five years on, the presidential election due on 29 July, poses a short-term risk to political stability, as well as a long-term opportunity to rebuild the Malian state and society.

Peace Direct began working in Mali in late 2017, in collaboration with the national office of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). With over 500 member organisations across West Africa, WANEP is well placed to increase coordination between local civil society and women led organisations in the region. Peace Direct will be supporting WANEP in its aims to increase the sense of security and social cohesion among communities, through enhanced capacity and coordination of local civil society organisations.

This report presents the findings of Peace Direct's first Peace Exchange workshop in Bamako, a practitioner led conflict analysis workshop, (subsequently referred to as 'Peace Exchange'), bringing together 20 representatives from grassroots peacebuilding organisations from across Mali to discuss the drivers of violent conflict, opportunities and challenges. It also draws on results from a qualitative survey that was distributed to participant organisations to share among their respective local peacebuilding networks across Mali, as well as three in-depth interviews with participants from the Peace Exchange. In addition, the report refers to quantitative data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project Database to present a bottom-up picture of the challenges Mali's people and communities face in building a safe and dignified future.

The main findings

Malian peacebuilders identified three primary, long-term drivers of violent conflict in Mali, namely:

- The limited presence of the state in almost all areas of the country, including administrative, police and justice institutions, as well as the provision of basic social services like healthcare and education.
- The poor quality of governance and justice experienced by Malians, not least corruption and impunity.
- Pervasive poverty, under-development and unemployment, especially the impact this has on young people.

In addition, dynamic drivers of violent conflict were identified by local peacebuilders, of which the main was the spread of radical ideologies. This is not merely a reference to radical Islamist movements, which have become more active in Central, as well as Northern Mali this decade, but also to radical ethnically defined political and armed groups, such as the Azawad National Liberation Movement (known as the MNLA). Other dynamic factors include the impact from violent conflicts elsewhere in Northern and Western Africa and its influence on arms and drugs trafficking, migration (in, through and out of Mali), as well tensions around elections.

During the Peace Exchange it became clear that perceptions of the main challenges facing Mali differ across Mali's regions. Northerners and Central Malians are more concerned about armed groups and ethnic conflict than Southerners, reflecting the former's direct experience of violence. In addition, Northerners are more likely to be concerned about criminal impunity and economic insecurity, whereas Central Malians are concerned about ethnic tensions and land conflict.

Southerners on the other hand are worried about corruption and economic security. In terms of a gender divide in the perception of challenges, the differences in views expressed by men and women did differ somewhat, with female respondents being more likely to raise concerns about sexual and gender-based violence and abuse by government agents or security forces.

The Peace Exchange concluded that given the fragmented, decentralised nature of violent conflict in Mali, there is great value in the work of grassroots peacebuilding organisations.

Four key strengths of local peacebuilders were identified:

- Their local knowledge that functions as “the eyes and ears of the community”.
- Their local legitimacy as “the first victims” of local violent conflict.
- Their capacity for rapid response, often in the absence of any effective state presence.
- Their cultural sensitivity, speaking the local languages and understanding the traditional forms of authority and conflict resolution used locally.

This said, the challenges facing local peacebuilders in Mali are significant. Most directly, they may be physically threatened or targeted by violent actors. They also face resource challenges, including access to financial resources, lack of trained human resources, logistical constraints and a lack of information sharing from government and security forces. Levels of distrust will need to be overcome between civil society and local politicians and new connections will have to be established between the national government, national security forces, international donors and local peacebuilding organisations to ensure relevant information sharing.

Recommendations

As a result of the Peace Exchange, Mali's local peacebuilders made the following recommendations towards building a more stable and peaceful Mali and how best to support local peacebuilding organisations in their vital work:

1. Recommendations for national actors

- Prioritise civic education, focusing on developing a shared “spirit of peace”.
- Create employment opportunities across Mali, especially for young people.
- Accelerate the pace and scope of reintegration of ex-combatants, including the economic and social dimensions.
- Ensure the implementation of the ‘national countering violent extremism strategy’¹ through supporting community-level initiatives.
- Create reliable and trusted mechanisms to enhance information sharing between the national security forces, civil society and the local population.
- Reinforce dialogue frameworks between the state and civil society organisations (CSOs) at the national, regional and communal levels.
- As a minimum, uphold the legal levels of participation of women and youth in implementing the ‘Algiers peace agreement’.²

2. Recommendations for international actors

- Look beyond military actions towards building a more resilient Malian society and state, that include responses from beyond the security sector, such as investment in infrastructure, education and healthcare.
- Commit to support the consolidation of a functional state presence across all the communes of Mali, upon which it can gradually build an extension of its state services.
- Support peace and reconciliation as a national priority, not just in the North and/or between the North and South.
- Prioritise women, young people and grassroots organisations as fundamental constituents of building a more peaceful Mali, the majority among a largely rural population, and the future potential of Mali.
- Visit Mali's regions and local CSOs to better understand local political, economic and social contexts.
- Provide training and coaching to build the capacity of local peacebuilding organisations across Mali.

¹ In January 2018, the Government of Mali adopted the National Policy on the Prevention and Combating of Violent Extremism and Terrorism and its plan of action. The policy is based on the principles of good governance, gender equality, the promotion of human rights and the protection of victims of terrorism, and will be implemented and monitored with the support of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Office, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Mission (MINUSMA).

² Signed in June 2015, the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali was the result of two years of the so-called Algiers Process, with Algeria playing a key role in peace negotiations. This agreement will hereon be referred to as the Algiers peace agreement.



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About Peace Direct

Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts, and this report is the third in a series canvassing local views on violent conflicts around the world in an effort to highlight local capacities for peace and local expertise.

For more information on this series of reports, please contact us.

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