

# “WE HOPE AND WE FIGHT”

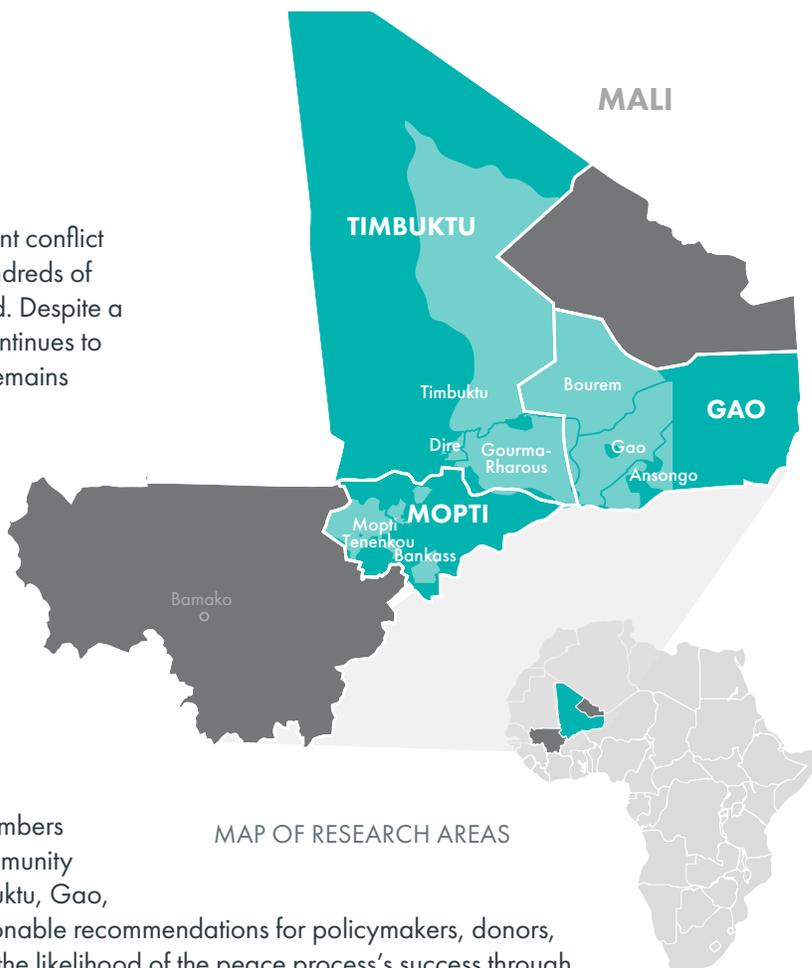
## Youth, Communities, and Violence in Mali

SEPTEMBER 2017

### Research Brief

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

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



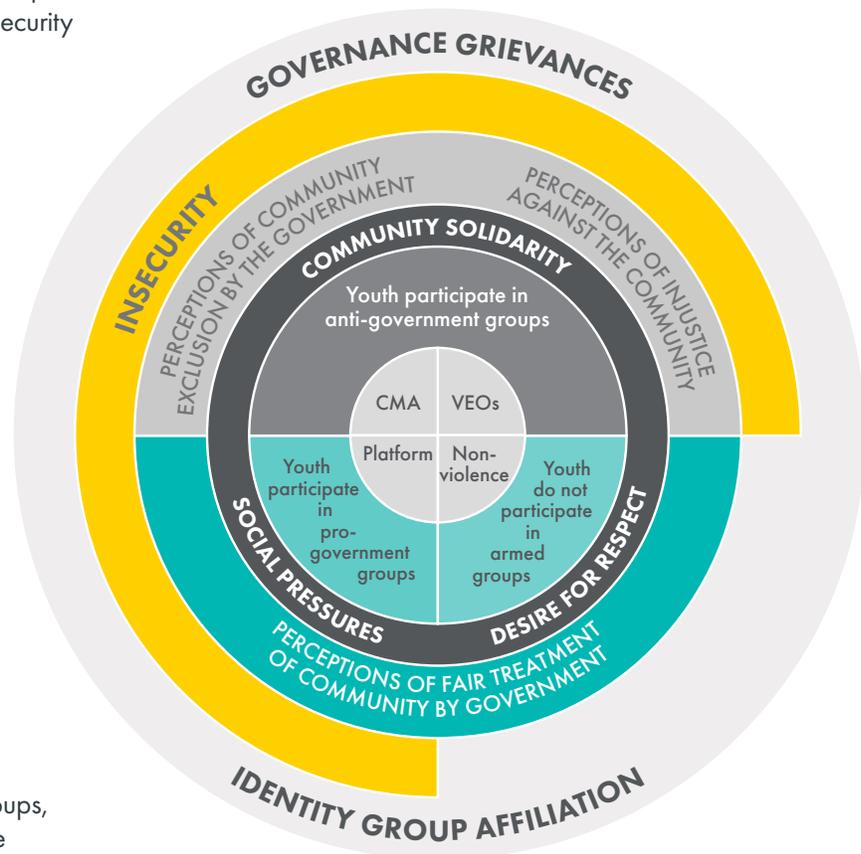
### Key Findings

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

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

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

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



FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ARMED GROUPS

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

## Recommendations

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

1. **Focus on violence prevention and strengthening protective factors at the community level, rather than seeking to identify and target only those youth assumed to be “at-risk.”** Our study did not identify specific risk or vulnerability attributes that would indicate some individual youth are more likely to participate in violence. In fact, many youth in armed groups described deep social ties to others in their communities, suggesting they are not the most marginalized. Therefore, government and civil society actors should ensure that an inclusive, whole-of-community approach guides their interventions to prevent further violence; they should identify and address risk factors at the community level and design responses that recognize the strong influence of community support for or rejection of armed groups on youth engagement in violence.
2. **Establish inclusive, collaborative processes to ensure the peace process is transparent and responsive to diverse communities’ needs.** The peace process’s success will depend in part on whether it can meet youth’s expectations and whether the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups and regions are seen as legitimate and fair. Government and multilateral officials charged with implementing the peace process must respond to changing dynamics and ensure that diverse ethnic and clan groups, as well as armed groups not included in the peace agreement, are still accounted for in future planning. Civil society and government actors should facilitate conversations in conflict-affected areas to raise awareness about the terms of the agreement and identify and mitigate other risk factors related to the peace process.
3. **Develop community-level security plans that outline a transition from armed groups to state-led security management.** Because of widespread community support for many non-state armed groups, traditional heavy-handed security and counter-insurgency approaches led by the Malian military will likely backfire—resulting in increased support for armed groups. Failing to address communities’ real security concerns and frustration around military abuses in a fair and equitable manner will prevent development and violence reduction initiatives from taking root. Government security actors will need to partner with conflict-affected communities to improve accountability and develop localized plans to transition youth into non-violent roles, while advancing national-level security sector reform.
4. **Facilitate improved local governance through better service delivery and inclusive community-government decision-making.** Because perceptions of exclusion have contributed to community support of armed groups, improving governance processes and outcomes should be a key long-term priority for the government and local and international civil society actors. However, service provision is unlikely to reduce grievances on its own and requires inclusive and accountable decision-making processes. The government should incorporate community feedback—including that of youth—into their comprehensive development strategy for the Northern and Central regions. As local government officials return to their posts in these regions, they should work with community leaders to create formal feedback mechanisms for eliciting opinions from representative identity groups and identifying which services would best meet communities’ needs.
5. **Identify and facilitate opportunities for youth to achieve status without engaging in armed groups.** Our findings indicate that youth need non-violent ways to gain status and recognition in their communities. For some youth, particularly those from Platform armed groups who cited their desire to join the military, creating opportunities for meaningful, stable, and demand-driven employment may expand their sights beyond scarce military or other civil service jobs. For the majority of youth interviewed, participation in social activities, civic engagement projects, or advocacy groups may help promote this needed sense of recognition and provide youth agency in addressing their grievances—as long as the formation of such groups is paired with real changes in government service provision and inclusion.

## CONTACT

LISA INKS

Senior Peace and Conflict Advisor  
links@mercycorps.org

REBECCA WOLFE, PHD

Director of Evidence and Influence | Peace and Conflict  
rwolfe@mercycorps.org

### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



**MERCY  
CORPS**

45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
mercycorps.org

40 Sciennes  
Edinburgh, EH9, 1NJ, UK  
44.131.662.5160



HUMANITY  
UNITED