

Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Niger's Tillabéri region

USAID Customary Resilience

Rida Lyammouri





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December 2021

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Cover photo: Fulani girls in a school in Makalondi (Tillabéri region, close to the BurkinaFaso border) Niger. © Flickr/Kelley S Lynch

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Project description

This report is part of the USAID-funded study *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso*. The data presented in this chapter are based on the 240 surveys and 123 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) collected in Tillabéri (Niger) between October 2020 and April 2021. Our online database with key findings, including links to the general synthesis report and four other regional reports, can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-legitimacy>.

List of abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
COFO	Land Tenure Commissions
COFOB	Local Land Tenure Commissions
COFOCOM	Communal Land Tenure Commissions
COFODEP	Departmental Land Tenure Commissions
GATIA	Imghad Touareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (<i>Groupe d'autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés</i>)
HACP	High Authority for Peacebuilding
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State West African Province
JNIM	Group of Support for Islam and Muslims (<i>Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin</i>)
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

1 Introduction

Of all the regions included in this report series, Tillabéri is the region that scores best when it comes to both general community resilience, as well as traditional and religious authorities' functioning.¹ The region is not as exposed to shocks as Est (Burkina Faso) and Ménaka (Mali), and its ability to recover from shocks is high compared to the other regions.² Trust in traditional and religious authorities is comparatively high as is their equal treatment of different subgroups in society. The effectiveness of traditional and religious authorities' conflict resolution and security provision mechanisms is also comparatively high. This begs the question of why these authorities do such a good job in Tillabéri and what the key take-aways are for other regions in the Sahel.

To answer this question, this report further delves into the data collected in five municipalities in Tillabéri.³ These municipalities are Abala, Ayerou, Bankilaré, Gothèye, and Say. Abala, Ayerou, and Bankilaré have been selected as municipalities that are under threat of violent extremism. Gothèye and Say are located in safer areas. The municipalities are all home to a number of ethnicities. Abala is a majority Hausa municipality (with Fulani, Tuareg, Zarma, and Arab minorities). Bankilaré and Say are majority Fulani municipalities, with the former also having Songhay minorities and the latter Songhay-Zarma and Gourmantché. Gothèye is a predominantly Songhay municipality and Ayerou has a majority Songhay population with strong minorities of Tuareg, Fulani, a smattering of Hausa, and even Yoruba migrants.⁴

1 Molenaar, F. Demuyne, M. and de Bruijne, Kars. 2021. [Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and Religious Authorities' Resilience to Violent Extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso](#), Clingendael Institute Conflict Research Unit (CRU) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).

2 Although respondents rely on friends and their own efforts to recover from shocks, this is the only region where acceptance of additional work is a dominant recovery strategy that does not eat away at households' capital.

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 A Gulf of Guinea ethnicity.

This report, which dives into the specifics of the data we collected in Tillabéri, shows that – despite it doing comparatively well – all is not necessarily well in Tillabéri. Historically, the contributions of traditional authorities have been significant in mediating conflicts, managing natural resources, promoting shared community values, and acting as interlocutors between the state and local populations. Traditional authorities have therefore been seen as making a vital contribution to keeping the peace among and between communities of different ethnicities and social standings. Yet, with the persistent presence of violent extremist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and the proliferation of armed non-state actors attempting to fill the increasing security gaps that have already overwhelmed the state, traditional authorities are navigating a context that puts their power and influence at risk. This report identifies a number of key implications for programming that could be used to address these issues.

2 Tillabéri: key challenges and threats

Niger's geographic location within the West African Sahel and along the borders of Northern Africa's Maghreb makes it part of a highly active transit route for the movements of both humans and goods. Niger's position along these borders also leaves it vulnerable to the impacts of violent extremism-driven conflicts along its borders. To the north, Niger has been subject to violence from the decade-long conflict in Libya. To the south and the east, it has become entangled in the fight to eradicate the violent extremist group Boko Haram, in addition to the Boko Haram splinter group known as the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), which has successfully spread across northeastern Nigeria and into the other Lake Chad Basin countries – namely Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. To the west, a vast range and network of armed groups and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are seeking to undermine the Malian government and exert control over local populations. VEOs have expanded across large swathes of Mali and into neighboring countries to include Burkina Faso and Niger and, at times, striking into coastal countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Benin.

2.1 Governance dimension

While Niger's political stability may be threatened by coup attempts, as happened in March 2021, the recent record in that regard has been less concerning than in neighboring countries.⁵ As a result, Niger has emerged as a key country in regional and international efforts to quell the spread of further conflict-related challenges – challenges that are overburdening populations already vulnerable to the impacts of environmental and economic crises.

Adding to these security challenges are the weak governance structures both in Niger and in the surrounding countries. In the border areas affected by cross-border insecurity, especially in the region of Diffa (Lake Chad area), Tillabéri, and the northern parts of the region of Tahoua, national security forces have traditionally had a very light footprint, and other government services have been all but

5 Mamane, D. and Larson, K. "[Niger government confirms military coup attempt thwarted](#)," AP news, March 31, 2021.

absent. This sparse presence has left gaps in administration and rule of law and provided, in the current context, opportunities for non-state actors to engage in informal or armed governance activities.

Historically, traditional authorities have been formalized within the administration of state governance and have contributed to filling these gaps.⁶ However, the increase in VEOs and armed groups moving across the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso borders has resulted in physical and structural threats to these traditional authorities. Much of this strategy revolves around intimidation of traditional authorities in order to further weaken the state's presence in these remote locations.⁷ This targeting does not discriminate in terms of ethnicity, and chiefs of Fulani, Songhay-Zarma, Arab, and Tuareg origins are threatened or even assassinated.⁸ The VEO presence, therefore, impairs the ability of traditional authorities to fulfill their roles as community stabilizers.

2.2 Violent dynamics and rise of non-state armed actors

The security situation in the region has gradually deteriorated since 2013. The war in northern Mali that initially opposed a coalition of Tuareg rebels and jihadist militants to the hapless Malian army intervention turned, that year, into a conflict in which the French intervened via Operation Serval. As the fortunes of war evolved, notably with an expansion of the conflict zone into north-eastern Burkina, jihadist outfits began to build a strong presence in districts of the Tillabéri region that are adjacent to Mali and Burkina, in a ripple effect.

As Niger becomes further ensnared in intensifying cycles of violence, deteriorating governance conditions, and growing environmental problems, one region of the country in particular has been increasingly experiencing levels of violence that foster endemic insecurity and population displacement. Tillabéri, located along the borders of Burkina Faso and Mali, has been impacted by VEO and armed group activities since at least the start of the 2012 uprisings in northern Mali. This is the case especially in its northern and western districts, the ones that have borders with the two neighboring countries – while the southeastern districts

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

7 *Ibid*: 72.

8 *Ibid*: 72.

are comparatively peaceful. Northern Tillabéri – in particular the departments of Ayerou and Abala where we have conducted research – has strong social and economic ties with the Gao and Ménaka regions of Mali, which are areas with a major presence of VEOs.⁹

Militants from these groups, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), enjoy free movement across the Mali-Niger border. They recruit members across the border and strive to extend their influence in view, ultimately, of territorial control. In Northern Tillabéri, militants have initially exploited tensions common in the Sahel's agropastoral zone – northern fringes of the ecological zone known as the Sahel – between herders and farmers, as well as between herders of different ethnicities (in this case Tuareg and Fulani) to gain a foothold. But their recruiting now transcends ethnic and community boundaries.

In addition to violence related to VEOs, the past two years saw high levels of ethnic-based violence. While intercommunal violence between pastoralist communities was already widespread in 2017 in the Mali-Niger borderlands, it accelerated in 2018 after Niger outsourced security along its border with Mali to Barkhane-allied Malian signatory and allied groups, namely Imghad Touareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe d'autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés, GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA). As a consequence, the area witnessed acts of extrajudicial killings and abductions by Tuareg-dominated groups against Fulani communities under the pretext of counter-terrorism efforts.¹⁰

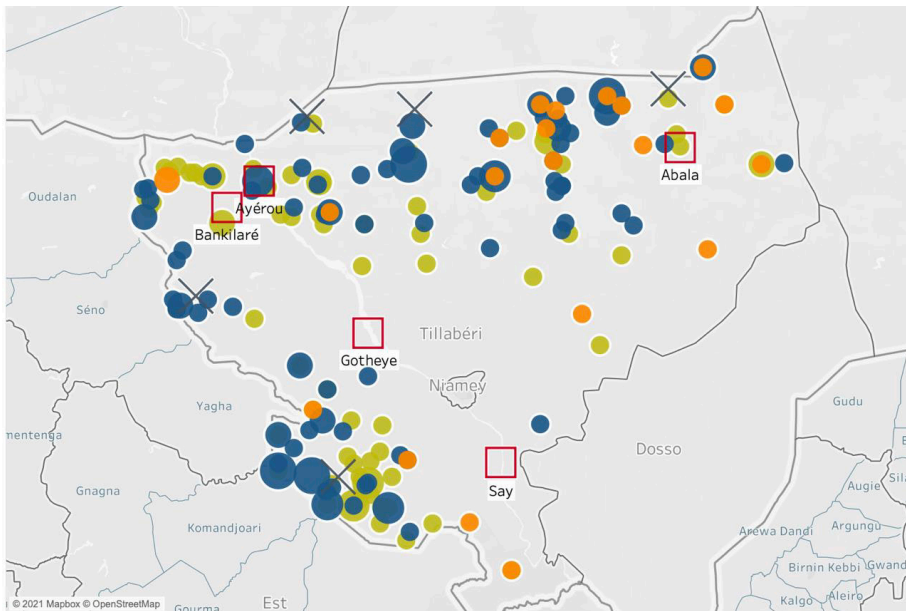
These attacks drew retaliation, which led to an escalation of the conflict, with a worrisome tinge of ethnic strife. Moreover, disgruntled social layers in some of the communities – lower caste Tuareg in particular – took sides with the jihadists, in their belief that the state was on the side of their community's upper echelons. In this context, disentangling sources of violence – jihadism, ethnic rivalry, socio-political issues, banditry – is not an easy task. But the effects are dire, including mass killings inflicted on communities that have tried to defend themselves given the inability of the state to protect them.

9 United Nations, Security Council, "[Militants Continue to Stage Deadly Attacks as Insecurity Expands into Previously 'Safe' Zones in West Africa, Sahel, Top Official Tells Security Council](#)", Press Release SC/14406 January 11, 2021.

10 In 2017 and 2018, Nigerien and French forces collaborated in counter-terrorism efforts with Tuareg dominated armed groups from northern Mali, including MSA and GATIA.

Alongside VEO violence, these parts of Tillabéri have also become a playground for opportunistic bandit violence that took advantage of the unraveling of the governance and security systems. The highest numbers of violent incidents have occurred over the past two years (2019 and 2020), with VEOs seeking to break resistance to their presence not only from the state, but also from civilians. As a result, 2020 saw new trends as the region witnessed attacks on schools, mining sites, and abduction and killing of workers in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It has resulted in mass killings, such as the ones perpetrated on January 2 and March 15, 2021, which caused the death of as many as 158 civilians.¹¹ The targeting of civilians has further continued throughout 2021 (see Map 1 below). In the first half of May 2021 alone, more than 16,000 people in Northern Tillabéri were displaced due to armed group violence.¹²

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



11 Lyammouri, R. 2021 “[Tillabéri Region: Concerning Cycles of Atrocities](#),” Policy Brief -10/21, Rabat: Policy Center for the New South.

12 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021, [Niger](#).



In response to the violence and efforts deployed by VEOs to control local populations – and despite government opposition to this phenomenon – informal community police groups have emerged among some of the communities, including a replication of Burkina Faso’s Koglweogo in south-western Tillabéri and Yan Banga – who have existed since the early 1990s as a local response to banditry – in predominantly Hausa areas in northeastern Tillabéri. Unlike in Burkina, where the Koglweogo are enmeshed with Mossi and Gourmantche chieftaincy, those in Niger where there is no Mossi population, appear to operate more autonomously.¹³ This is likely also the case of Yan Banga in the department of Abala. Previous research has found the mistrust created by an environment of “unregulated” violence perpetrated by non-state actors causes heightened inter-communal suspicions.¹⁴

13 It is noteworthy however, that the majority-ethnic Gourmantche in eastern Burkina Faso constitute a substantial part of the population in Nigerien border areas, especially in Torodi and Makalondi.

14 McGann, B. and Idrissa, R. 2021. [Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border](#). Washington: RESOLVE Network.

3 Community-level resilience mechanisms

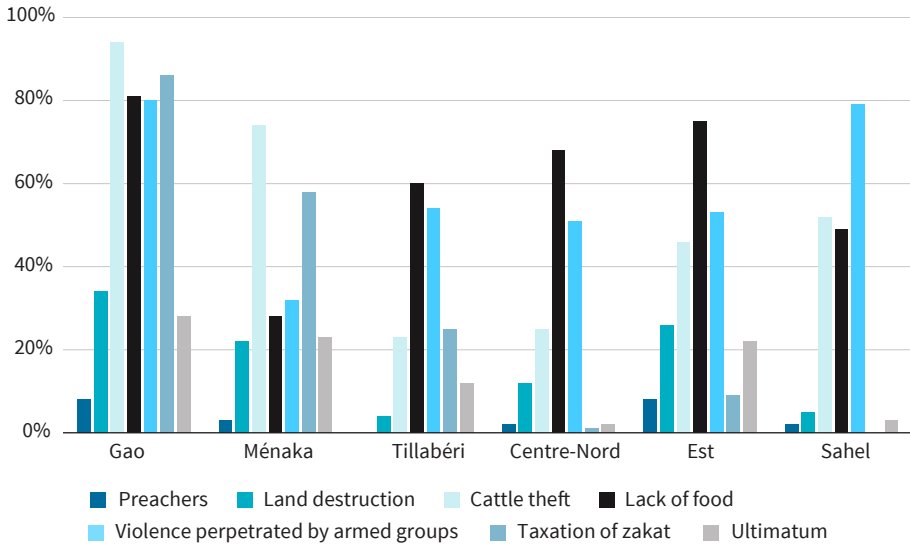
Tillabéri is exposed to external shocks stemming from environmental disasters but also a growing trend in VEOs' and armed groups' attacks on entire villages. In both instances of threatening environmental and conflict situations, responses from the 240 surveyed individuals suggest a high degree of real and perceived self-reliance.

3.1 External shocks and self-reliance

The biggest threat cited among Tillabéri survey respondents and key informants alike was related to scarce resources, not violence. Respondents most frequently cited a lack of food (60%) as their key security threat (see Figure 1 below).¹⁵ When asked if necessary resources are available within respondents' communities, 49 percent of respondents answered "yes," yet respondents overwhelmingly reported that they rely on themselves, their family, and their community for basic service provision, such as food, health, and education. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said they had been exposed to at least one external shock, such as a climatic or economic event or an outbreak of violence, in the past two years, and 76 percent of these respondents indicated that no external help was at hand when that happened.

15 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020: *"In my opinion, it is food insecurity that is the most damaging event for our commune. Successive bad harvests have impoverished people. People have sold all their animals and goods to support their families."* Also see interview with a traditional leader representative, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 27 November 2020.

Figure 1 Security threats (per region)



When asked how they deal with shocks, respondents said they seek and accept additional income-generating opportunities to overcome the burdens of the shock. Respondents largely indicated the mechanism for responding to shocks is to accept additional work (70%) – arguably the only constructive strategy found among our respondents’ answers as it does not entail the destruction of household capital – to take out a loan (41%), and to sell or slaughter their livestock (37%) (see Figure 2 below). This level of self-reliance, however, is not necessarily effective. Only 32 percent of respondents reported that they had recovered from their experiences with external shocks during the past two years – which is high compared to our other regions but low in overall terms (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 2 How households cope with shocks (per region)

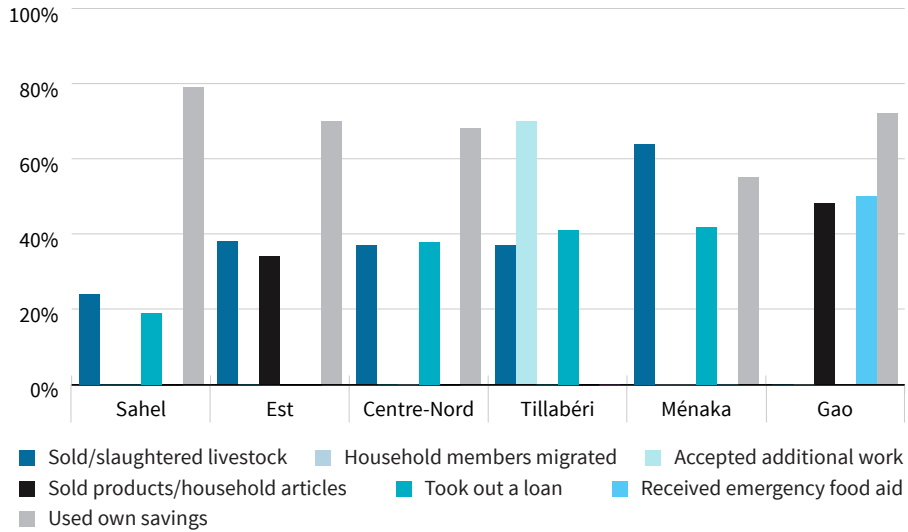
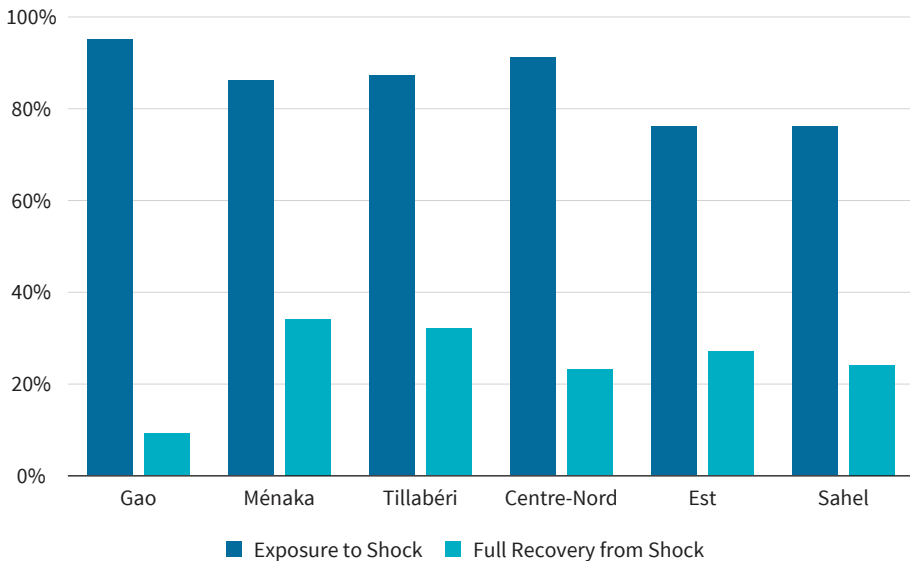


Figure 3 Exposure and full recovery from shocks over the past two years (per region)



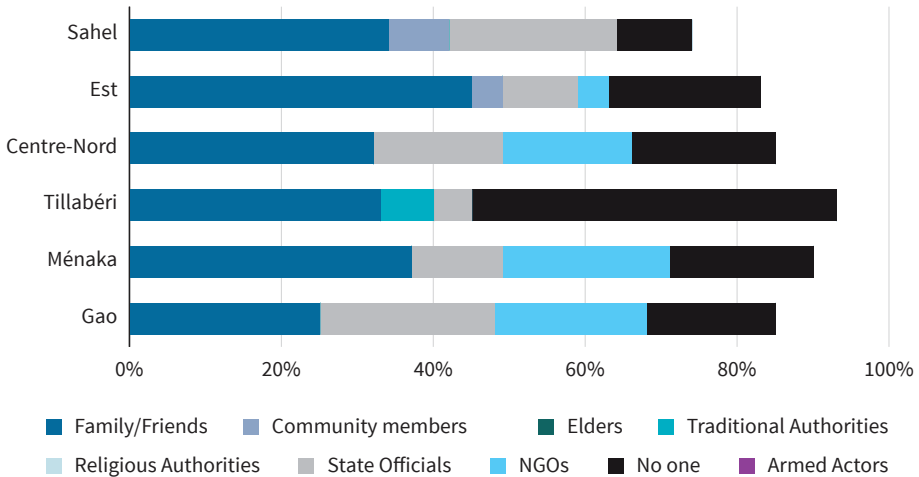
Other mechanisms do exist outside of self-reliance and family or friends, but these mechanisms are not taken advantage of by populations, based on the survey responses. Ninety-four percent of respondents said traditional authorities do nothing to help those affected by shocks, and when they are involved in activities such as emergency aid distribution, they choose their main constituencies as primary beneficiaries (58%) or, allegedly, keep the aid for themselves and their families (31%).¹⁶ While the government is understood to encourage traditional authorities to participate in the distribution of aid, the mechanisms through which the distribution occurs are not seen to be transparent.¹⁷ Respondents aspire for religious and traditional authorities to be more equitably involved in aid distribution practices and coordination in support of those affected by situations of external shocks, and this aspiration can improve the position of these authorities, if they can demonstrate fair and more efficient participation in responses to major shocks.

When it comes to basic service provision, Tillabéri is the only region where a minor percentage (7%) of survey respondents indicated that they would turn to traditional authorities in this area. This score is higher than it is for state officials (5%). A near majority (45%) of respondents indicated that they have no one to turn to when it comes to basic service provision (see Figure 4 below). This is likely an outcome of the security crisis, reflecting a sense of the unraveling of a governance system that operated more efficiently in the past but that can barely perform in the current conditions. Thus, the security crisis has fostered a situation where self-reliance has become the most viable proposition for many.

16 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Gothèye, 2 December 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Abala, January 2021.

17 Of course, account should be taken of the fact that the position of traditional chiefs is both political and administrative. Because chiefs – especially those at local levels (village, neighborhood, tribu) – are rooted in a given ethnic community, they wield less direct authority on people outside of that community, even when they reside within their area of jurisdiction. And because they are answerable to the interior ministry (the central state), their position is constrained by policy goals defined by the government. Thus, negative perceptions of chiefs derive in part from objective conditions on which they have little power.

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



Most respondents perceive their communities as willing to learn from the past and prepare to prevent future shocks, with 63 percent of respondents reporting their community actively tries to prevent future shocks. Examples of activities to prevent shocks include repairing and constructing public property and soil conservation. Female respondents were more positive in their reporting on access to resources and adaptability to prepare for future shocks. Notably, female respondents were more likely to report necessary resources are available than male respondents. Female respondents were also more likely than male respondents to agree that their community actively tries to prevent future shocks, with 69 percent agreeing compared to 60 percent of male respondents.

3.2 Traditional authorities’ participation in community-level conflict resolution

Respondents identified traditional authorities, elders, and religious authorities as the main community actors available to support conflict resolution and justice inside their village. The surveyed responses indicated that 61 percent of respondents would contact a traditional authority to support conflict resolution matters inside their village, 72 percent would contact a traditional authority to support conflict resolution matters outside their village, and 66 percent would contact a traditional authority for justice provision (see Figures 5-7 below).

Figure 5 Community actor contacted for conflict resolution within the community (per region)

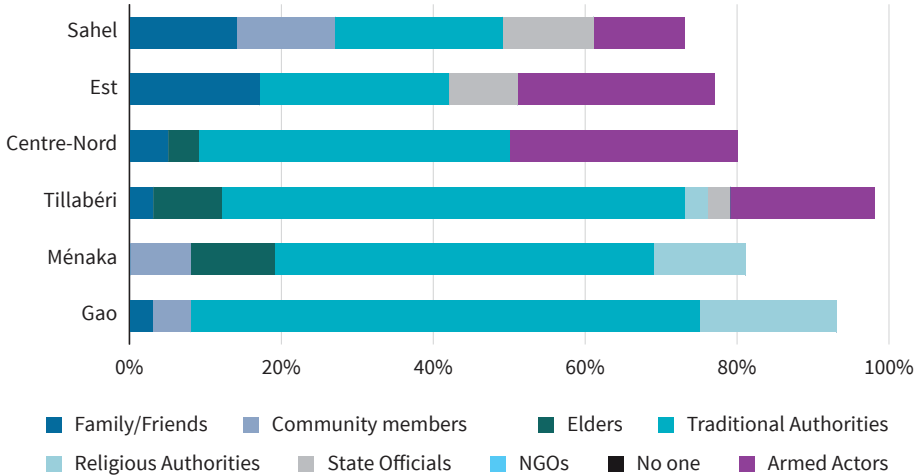


Figure 6 Community actor contacted for conflict resolution outside the community (per region)

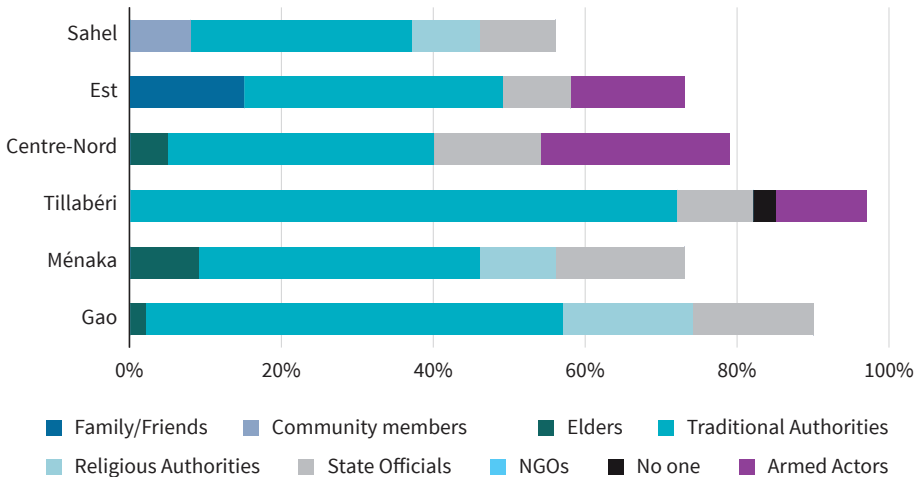
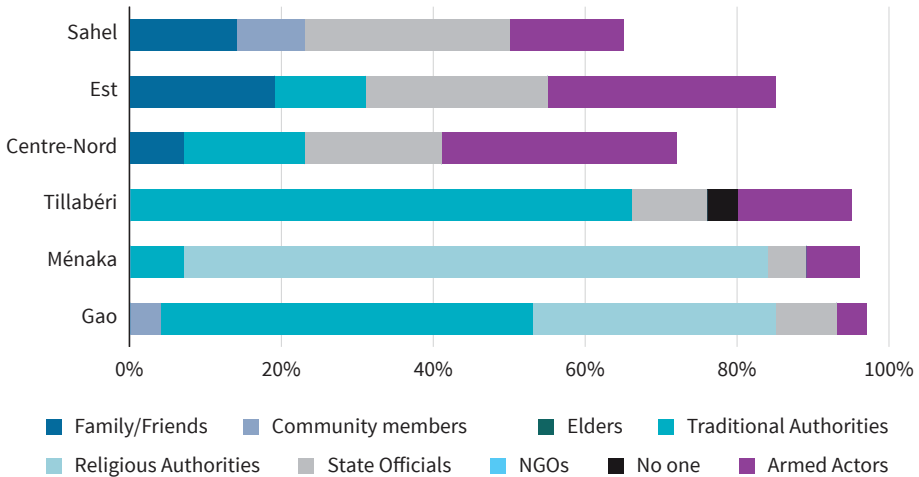


Figure 7 Community actor contacted for justice provision (per region)¹⁸



Interestingly, 87 percent of respondents said they had not contacted traditional authorities, or any other community actor, for justice provision within the past two years. Additionally, within the past two years, 87 percent of respondents reported they had not contacted a traditional authority for conflict resolution support inside the village, and 96 percent said they had not contacted a traditional authority for a conflict outside the village. The discrepancy may be a result of the conflict context, as conflicts involving physical violence go directly to the state forces. Conflicts involving physical violence or criminal offenses are tackled at the first level (before escalation to formal courts if the case requires it) by security personnel, such as gendarmerie or police.¹⁹

Respondents indicated in particular that they would approach a traditional authority to address conflicts related to water access (62%), farmland access (86%), pasture access (84%), and access to herd corridors (75%), which do require intervention from some public authority. The mechanisms to handle such conflicts are in place for land and agropastoral disputes, as well as conflicts related to accessing shared resources such as water wells and routes reserved for cattle crossing. They are managed through the procedures and structures put in place

18 Five actors are listed for Gao because both community members and armed actors have been selected by four percent of respondents.

19 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Bankilare, 25 November 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, 24 November 2020. Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021.

by rural codes, such as land tenure commissions (*commissions foncières*, COFO),²⁰ which our KIIs note are very successful in decreasing agropastoral and natural resource conflicts.²¹ These commissions gather traditional authorities, religious authorities, youth, women, civil society, and representatives of the groups in conflict. Members are, according to some interviewees, trained in conflict management. At the village, municipality, and department levels, the various land tenure commissions are reportedly successful in decreasing agropastoral and natural resource conflicts.

3.3 Mechanisms of resilience against violent extremism

Survey respondents (65%) generally agreed security is improving, and only 27 percent reported feeling the security situation in their area is dangerous (see Figures 8 and 9 below). Political and security efforts to address the insecurity caused by non-state armed groups and VEOs include: a region-wide state of emergency and prohibition on motorbike use, curfews, market closures, increased cross-border security measures, building new police stations, military escorts for traders and merchants traveling into Mali, house searches to look for suspected VEO members, and a significantly increased military presence. Security provision is coordinated by the prefecture and implemented by political and military/security actors to include mayors, canton chiefs, national police, and gendarmerie. Our interviewees noted, however, that these measures have had a severe impact on travel and transit and have disrupted economic and social activities.²²

20 These commissions exist at different levels. Village: local land tenure commissions (*Commissions foncières de base*, COFOB). Municipality (*commune*): communal land tenure commissions (*Commissions foncières communales*, COFOCOM). Department: departmental land tenure commissions (*Commissions foncières départementales*, COFODEP).

21 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankline, 25 November 2020: *“With the establishment of the COFOs and the sensitisation of the projects and the state’s technical services, there are fewer and fewer land disputes and conflicts. Everywhere in the department, in every village, there is a land commission. And every year, as the winter season approaches, the members of the land commission raise awareness among farmers and herders about respecting passage corridors and field damage. The populations are also made aware of the acts of loan, sale and donation of land. These different actions combined have made it possible to reduce problems relating to land and farmer-herder conflicts.”*

22 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021: *“In my opinion, certain measures create insecurity. When I say this, I am referring to the extension of the state of emergency and the closure of rural markets, which have contributed to bringing down the local economy. Many people have been left without activities. To sell a goat, in some localities, you have to go 50 km to find a market. People are not living. And all this contributes to a new situation of insecurity.”* Also see Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Say, 6 February 2021.

Figure 8 Evolution of the security situation over the past year (per region)

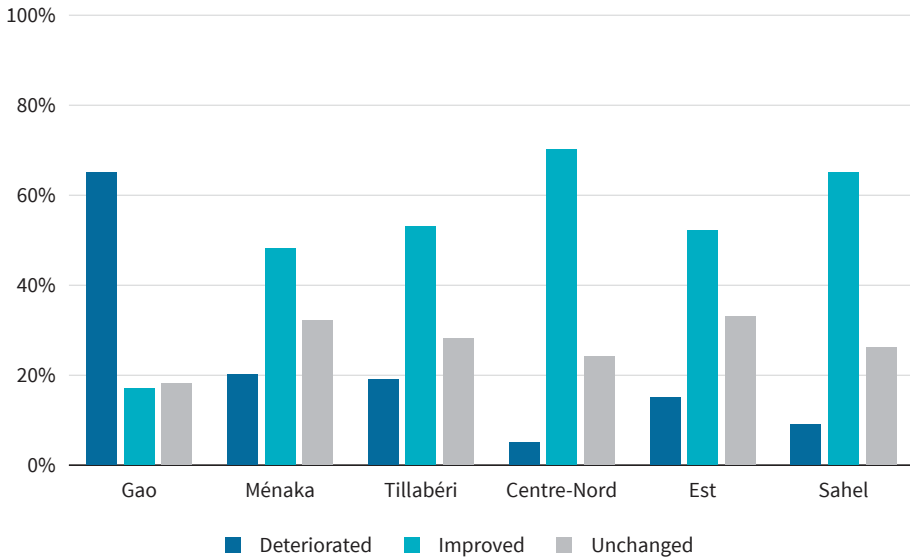
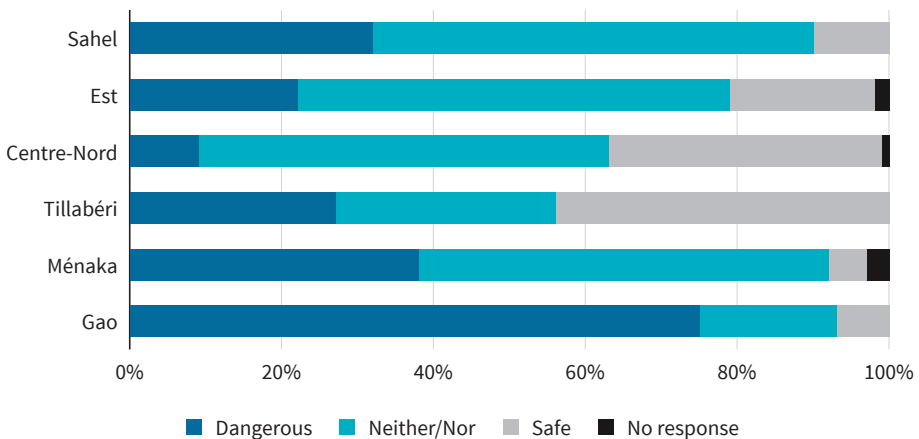


Figure 9 Evaluation of security situation in community (per region)



Communities reinforce their own security by conducting surveillance, contacting security forces, and respecting the curfews. These severe restrictions, together with the hardships brought about by the conflict situation, likely account for the fact that respondents identified lack of food as the greatest threat to security in the communities (60%), followed by armed group violence (54%) and “taxation”

– a tactic of extortion used by armed groups (25%).²³ Notably, female respondents were more likely to identify lack of food as the biggest threat to community security (72%). One respondent noted that insecurity also affects access to education (and municipal financial resources):

In these insecure areas, there is no more mention of taxes or municipal taxes. The bandits have warned all the village chiefs and tax collectors about collecting taxes and municipal taxes. What complicates the situation is that they have the complicity of some people in the community. Basically, they forbid two things: the French school and the payment of taxes.²⁴

The engagement of local populations in security mechanisms revolving around VEOs is focused around two main components. The first are formal peace committees that are trained to gather and inform authorities about violent extremism in their communities, and to support improving cooperation between populations and security actors. The second are informal meetings where security actors, political actors, and community members meet to discuss security issues in their communities. Both mechanisms, in addition to awareness raising events and peace caravans,²⁵ appear focused on improving relationships between governments and communities. The High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP) plays an important role in organizing these activities.²⁶

23 Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Abala, 2 January 2021: *“The collection of zakat from livestock. They operate with the shepherds in the area to whom they give notes or an oral message to be passed on to the village chief that his village is being taxed a sum to be mobilised within a short period of time on pain of reprisals. Currently, they are in the second phase of collection and except for the town of Abala, all the administrative villages and tribes have paid.”* Also see interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Abala, 4 January 2021. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Baniklare, 25 November 2020.

24 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020.

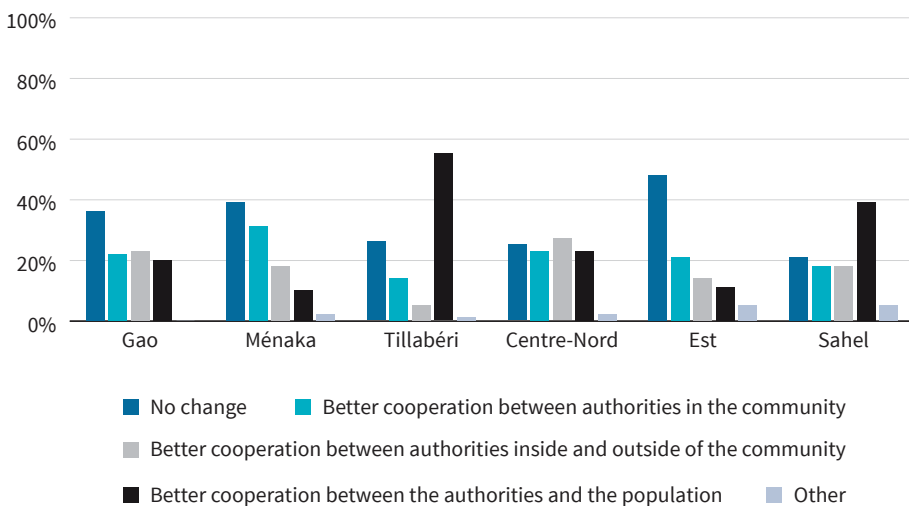
25 Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021: *“The community cohesion program (programme cohésion communautaire) in Niger funded an awareness raising caravan throughout the department of Abala to raise awareness, draw the attention of young people to the rise of violent extremism and not to respond to the siren call of armed groups. The program has set up recreational clubs for young people, traditional wrestling tournaments, football tournaments, and communal meetings.”* Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021: *“The traditional and religious authorities participate in the awareness-raising caravans that we organise in the commune in all the villages. We spend whole days with them in the campaigns to raise awareness of the communities about living together. [...] I personally had to spend 20 days in a caravan led by the women’s federation of Abala in the villages of the municipality to sensitize other women on the preservation of social cohesion and the attention that women must pay to the supervision of young people and the civic and social education of children.”*

26 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

3.4 Communication and collaboration between local communities and security forces

Respondents mostly agreed that the security situations in their neighboring communities have resulted in improved cooperation between community actors and local populations in their own communities. Additionally, a total of 55 percent of respondents said that, as a result, the cooperation between authorities and residents has improved, and 14 percent said cooperation among authorities has improved (see Figure 10 below). As the accompanying synthesis report shows, such cooperation contributes significantly to the effectiveness of traditional and religious authorities’ security measures. The shape such cooperation may take differs. Seventy-two percent of respondents said their communities organize a collective security response in case of a threat. This includes opting for surveillance (54%), as well as warning one another of threats (34%). Toward this end, communal vigilance committees combined with a system of informers at the tribe and hamlet levels have been set up.²⁷ These mechanisms may account for the fact that 53 percent of respondents feel that the security situation in Tillabéri has improved over the past year.

Figure 10 Change in communal authorities’ intermediary role (per region)



27 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020. Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Bankilare, 25 November 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

4 Contributions of traditional authorities toward community resilience against violent extremism

4.1 Traditional authorities' roles within local political structures

In Niger, traditional authorities such as canton chiefs, group chiefs, village chiefs or tribal chiefs are formal governance actors with legally defined roles, which were formalized in the 2010s.²⁸ Traditional authorities are intermediaries between the central state and the local populations, making them key actors within governance structures for accessing communities and maintaining law and order. The integration of traditional authorities into formal governance varies, but all play a local governance role in resolving and mediating inter- and intra-community conflict using a system of conciliation.

In the chieftaincy structure, the chiefs closest to most people's daily life issues are those at very local levels:

- District chief (*chef de quartier*): A district chief's role is to represent the neighborhood population to the village chief, and he is appointed by either vote or consensus. These authorities operate at a neighborhood level, and community members go to them first to resolve conflicts between residents of the area or at the family level. They are also responsible for collecting taxes, and maintaining communication between the village chief and their neighborhood. This includes surveillance and reporting on neighborhood activities. District chiefs also participate in public-facing events in the neighborhood such as meetings and ceremonies.
- Village chief (*chef de village*): village chiefs play an active role in ensuring peace, unity, and cohesion in the village.²⁹ They lead conflict mediation, head the village peace councils, observe and gather information about residents' activities, engage with security personnel, and welcome and integrate displaced

28 Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*: 4. McGann, B. and Idrissa, R. 2021, *op. cit.*: 12.

29 In nomadic settings, the group chief (*chef de groupement*) is the village chief's counterpart.

populations as needed. In Ayerou specifically, the village chief mediates conflicts that could threaten peaceful coexistence between existing populations and newly arrived displaced populations. They are also responsible for managing resource and food availability.

- Religious authorities: These authorities feel they play a moral role in setting examples for how populations should behave.

4.2 Conflict resolution roles

Within the dominant structure of conflict resolution, the traditional hierarchy of addressing conflicts begins with elders (*sages*) and works up to the canton chief (*chef de canton*). Elders attempt to resolve conflicts before even reaching out to traditional authorities. For example, in Abala in 2016, a sage received support from an imam to mediate a conflict between the vice mayor and an individual the vice mayor wanted to incarcerate.³⁰ District chiefs manage minor disputes and conflicts and accompany their community members to visit a village chief to discuss a conflict. Within a neighborhood (*quartier*), there are small committees composed of the district chief, imam, and sages. If someone attempts to circumvent this committee and go directly to a village chief or gendarmerie, they are sent back to first attempt to come to a resolution at the neighborhood level. Once a conflict reaches the village chief, another committee composed of a representative of the village chief and at least a representative of the local land tenure commission (COFOB) will provide an assessment prior to the beginning of the mediation. If the village chief cannot garner a resolution, parties essentially receive a report that allows for them to take up their case with the canton chief.

Most cases, especially agropastoral conflict cases, do not go to the canton chief and certainly do not go higher than this level, as the next arbiters are the gendarmerie and the administrative justice system. This indicates that the farmer-herder conflicts that are dominant within and across communities are being mediated at the level of village chiefs or below. This makes lower level traditional authorities more vulnerable to threats and intimidation by armed groups and VEOs hoping to capitalize on the farmer-herder and herder-herder conflicts. One exception is Bankilaré. As the closest justice tribunal is over 50 kilometers away in Téra, those with few means only have the gendarmerie in Bankilare to seek recourse from if they want to continue the case.³¹

30 Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Abala, 2 January 2021.

31 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 28 November 2020. Interview with a state representative, Bankilare, 25 November 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, 24 November 2020.

Respondents indicated, however, that when they do not agree with a decision from a traditional authority, they typically do nothing about it – meaning that they comply (72%). Only 13 percent of respondents reported that they take their case to a different traditional authority. Some respondents say the establishment of the COFO and rural code has supported the acceptance of decisions because it is not just the traditional authority participating in the conflict management but a committee of various actors. One KII said some people might simply accept what the traditional authorities decide because people equate “authority” with “the law.”³²

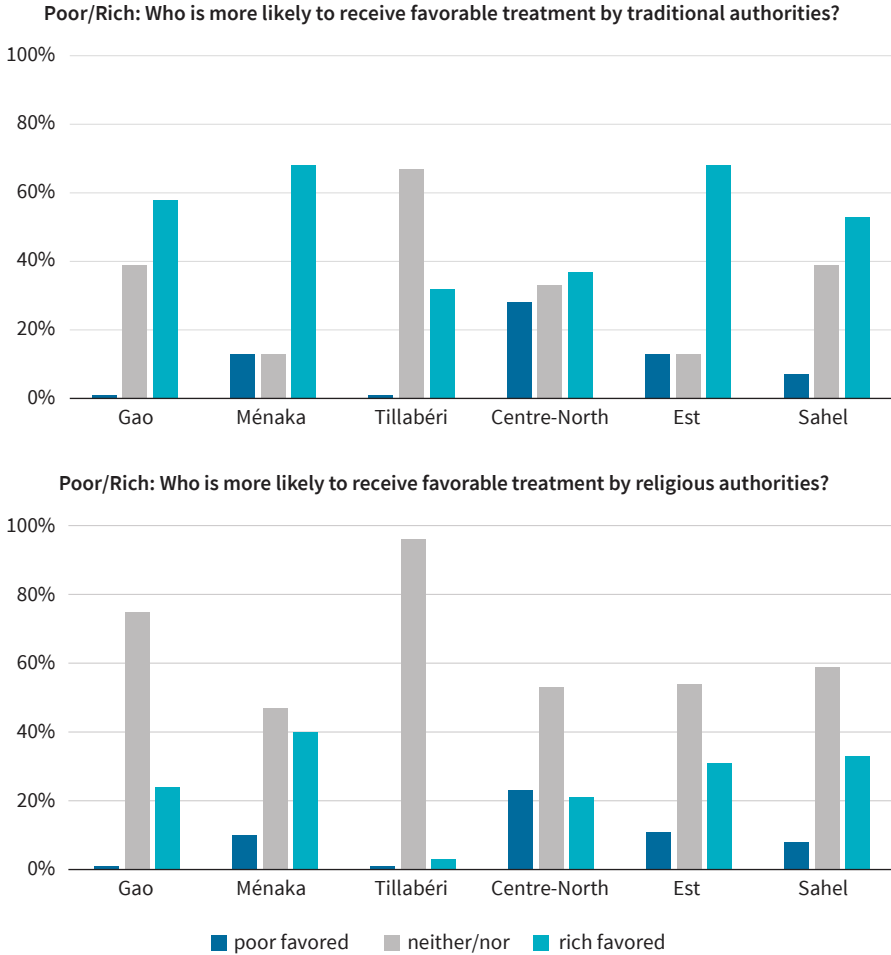
While the respondents reported that traditional authorities overwhelmingly remain neutral in conflicts between males and females, and between youth and elders, nearly one-third (32%) said traditional authorities favor the rich during mediations (see Figure 11 below). Some interviewees believe that judgements are made in exchange for bribes, with respondents specifically mentioning “rich operators” of Arab ethnicity who purchase land with help from traditional authorities.³³ In Gothèye, some respondents said traditional authorities favor rich herders over farmers.³⁴ Although traditional and religious authorities are perceived to favor the rich less than they do in other regions included in our study, this does point to a potential fault line that could grow bigger over time.

32 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021.

33 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021: *“There is a lot of contestation in land disputes where the general opinion is that the richest person often wins. I believe that this perception, which is widely shared by the overwhelming majority of people, is well founded. In reality, this feeling is based on the arrival, in recent years, of rich operators (mainly Arabs) who are buying up large areas and then fencing them off to make ranches. Many believe that it is with the complicity of certain traditional chiefs that these operators manage to deceive people into buying their land. This is a phenomenon that is growing in the area and if a solution is not found, it could create situations that could degenerate into serious crises for the area. There are currently five ranches of several hundred hectares in the Abala area alone.”* Also see: Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Abala, 4 January 2021. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ayerou, 11 January 2021. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

34 Interview with a member of a women association, Respondent, 2 December 2020.

Figure 11 Traditional and religious authorities' treatment of rich vs. poor (per region)



4.3 Resource management roles

Respondents indicated that traditional authorities most regularly intervene in natural resource conflicts related to land (93%), and between herders and farmers (88%) (see Figure 12 below). The mediation is focused on access to natural resources and management of these resources more generally.³⁵

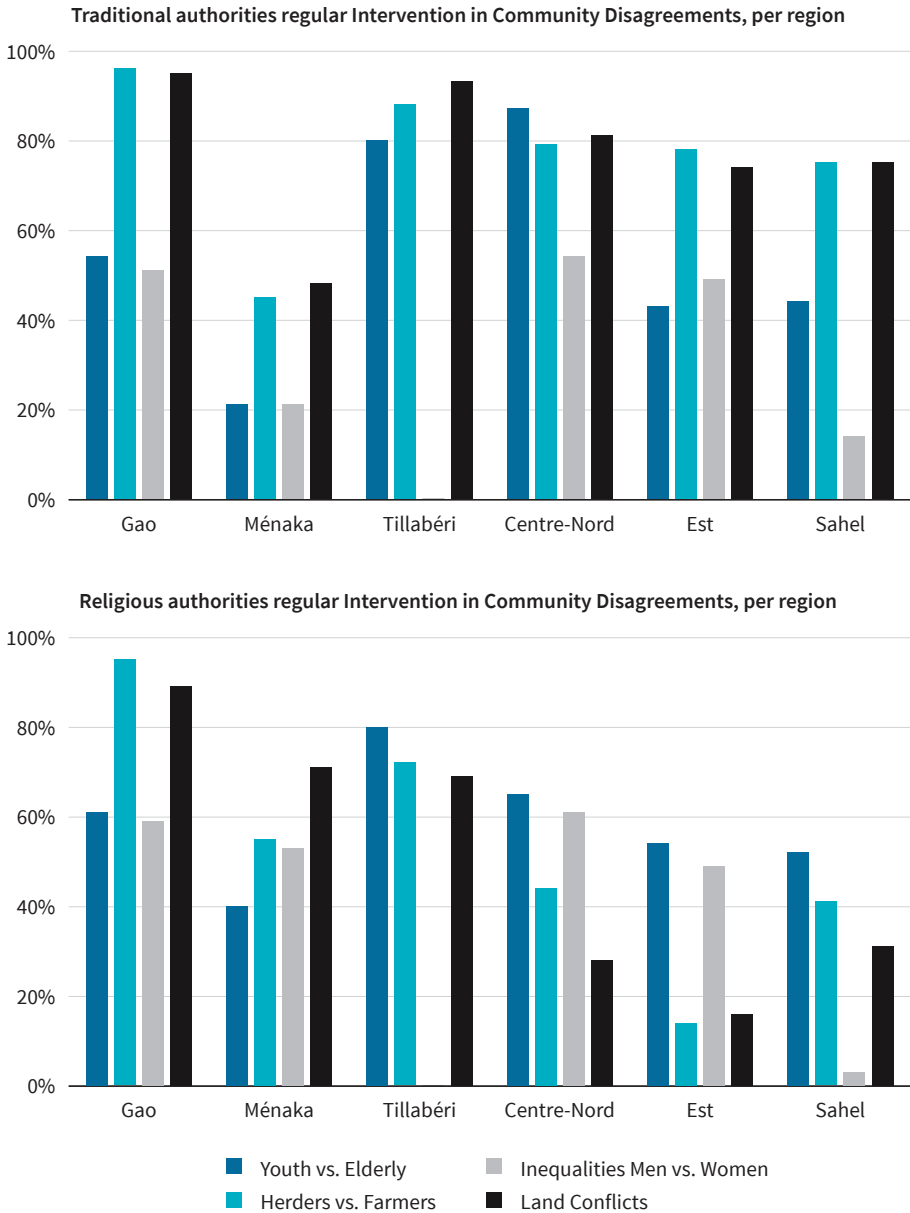
Traditional authorities participate in various committees for resource management and play an advisory function to the state and to local populations, with religious authorities playing the role of supporting the traditional authorities' decisions. District chiefs play a key role on resource management committees because they are tasked with providing an evaluation of which individuals should receive specific types of resources. In Ayerou, traditional authorities even serve as advisors to the mayor, thus publicly solidifying the linkages between them and elected officials.³⁶ Because of these linkages between traditional authorities and governance actors, traditional authorities are perceived as having the influence to step in and intervene when a basic service is lacking. For example, in Bankilaré, a traditional authority intervened when a healthcare facility did not open on time.³⁷

35 Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*:58. The pastoral Fulani also make use of additional traditional positions called 'Rugga' and 'Garso' that are specifically established to manage conflicts around access to natural resources among Fulani nomadic herders. In contrast to traditional chiefs, the role of Rugga and Garso is specifically adapted to the movement of nomadic communities and hence more flexible than chiefs who are much less mobile.

36 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Ayerou, 9 January 2021.

37 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

Figure 12 Extent to which traditional and religious authorities intervene in community conflicts (per region)



In Ayerou, however, two respondents said the lack of finances and support from NGOs is an example of the inability of traditional authorities to operate effectively.³⁸ Respondents highlighted that traditional authorities' roles and influence in resource management have been negatively impacted by the ongoing insecurity as well as the increased number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) present in the region. Because of security concerns, traditional and religious authorities are restricted in their movements, which impedes their ability to survey access to cattle corridors, and monitor wells and land plots. Without the ability to safely manage these resources, their roles in conflict management are not only reduced, but populations see them as less influential, and armed groups find it easier to gain control over the resources.³⁹

4.4 Security provision roles

Traditional authorities play a key role in maintaining communication channels between communities and security forces. They disseminate and explain security measures to communities, and they share information with security actors about the security situation.⁴⁰ The key role traditional and religious authorities play in terms of communication and information-sharing was acknowledged by most interviewees:

It is the village chiefs and religious leaders who receive the first information, process it and then pass it on. They play a very important role. They are also present with the population, which allows them to talk to them, encourage them and raise awareness about peace, security and cohesion between communities living together. They facilitate the understanding and implementation of security measures taken by the authorities and the collaboration between the population and the security and defense forces. For me, they are key actors who must be counted on in a context of insecurity.⁴¹

38 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ayerou, 12 January 2021.

39 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Ayerou, 12 January 2021. Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 26 November 2020. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Abala, 4 January 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 25 November 2020.

40 See, for example: Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Abala, 4 January 2021.

41 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021.

Radio communications are a common means for disseminating information to communities.⁴² Respondents identified the top security measures taken by traditional authorities as surveillance of elements foreign to the community (50%), calling security forces for help (46%), and imposing restrictions on movements⁴³ and resolving conflicts by dialogue (both 26%) (see Figure 13 below). Some respondents, including the traditional authorities themselves, however, underline the limits of this strategy. One KII noted, for example:

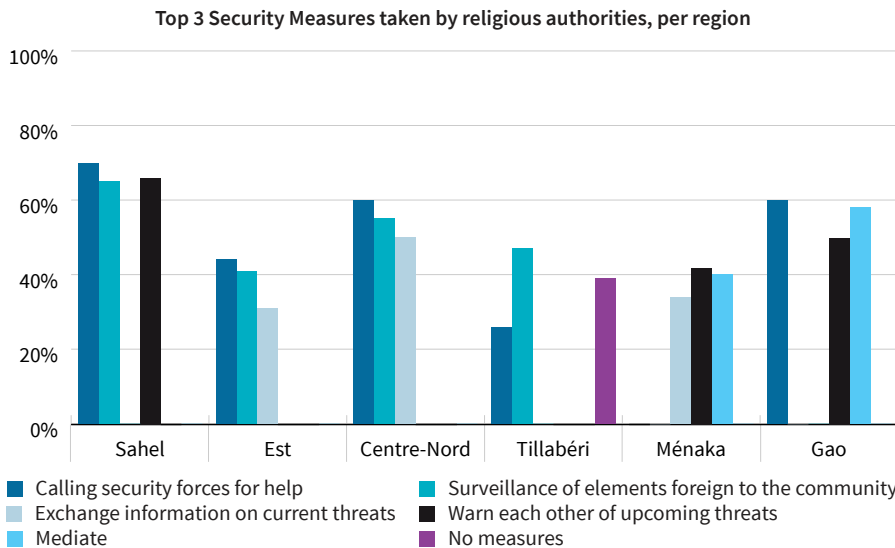
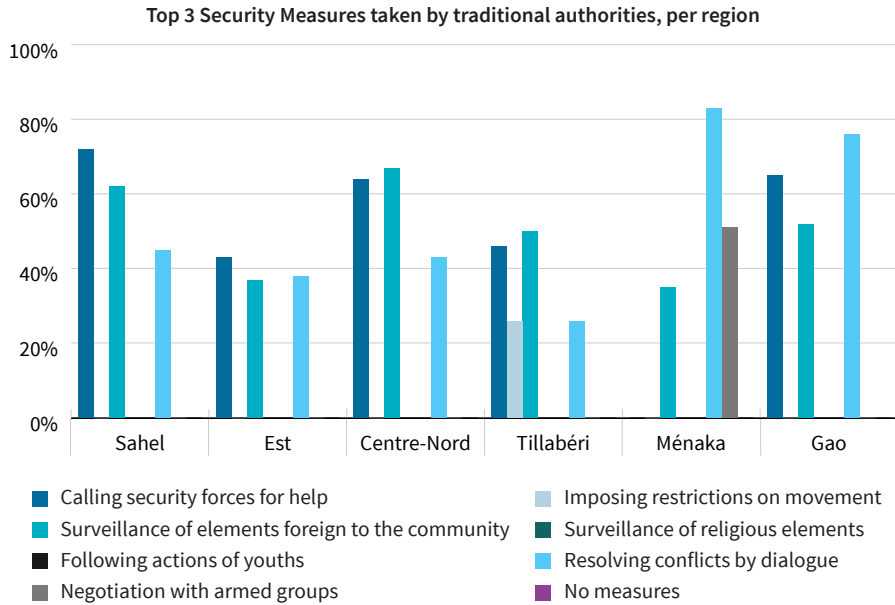
*One of the difficulties is the lack of responsiveness of the SDF [security and defense forces] when they receive information about attacks or the presence of bandits in a given locality. Even if the information is well verified, the SDF often do not react or are slow to react, especially at night.*⁴⁴

42 See, for example: Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020: “For the traditional and religious authorities, the word carries a lot of weight. We intervene in the spaces that are within our reach to raise awareness in our communities. I used to host sessions on the community radio.”

43 This is likely linked to the fact that that traditional authorities are accused of not having opposed the implementation of measures linked to the state of emergency, including the ban on motorcycles, despite their negative impact on local economies and populations. See, for example, Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gothèye, 3 December 2020. Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Say, 6 February 2021.

44 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Abala, 4 January 2021. Also see: Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Abala, 8 January 2021. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Bankilare, 25 November 2020.

Figure 13 Top 3 security measures taken by traditional and religious authorities (per region)⁴⁵



45 Top 4 security measures are listed for Tillabéri as ‘imposing restrictions on movement’ and ‘resolving conflicts by dialogue’ have both been selected by 26 percent of respondents.

This may also explain why a significant portion of respondents state traditional authorities take no security measures at all (24%). In addition, traditional and religious authorities have often become key VEO targets – at times resulting in their flight to safer areas:

They [traditional and religious authorities] help a lot in the area of information. Everywhere in the commune, as soon as there are motorbikes around a village, the traditional authorities are immediately informed. However, with the current deterioration of the situation marked by the multiplication of attacks and assassinations of traditional leaders, it is very difficult for the traditional authorities to play their role properly. It has become very complicated for them. For example, all the Fulani tribal chiefs have fled the area because of the abuses they are subjected to.⁴⁶

Respondents tended to overwhelmingly agree that traditional authorities are key partners of security forces in combatting VEOs and armed groups. Traditional authorities are seen as bridges between security forces and local populations, and they are also seen as uniquely positioned to increase trust between communities and security personnel. Twenty-four percent of respondents said traditional authorities' role in terms of resilience against radicalization in the community should be to strengthen cooperation with security forces. Opportunities for traditional authorities to build on their relationships with security forces, and to further build stronger linkages between security forces and local communities, would likely be seen as a positive contribution toward communities' resilience against violent extremism.

At the same time, however, such a strategy poses some high level of risk to the safety of traditional authorities, who already face retaliation from VEOs or armed groups. In Ayerou, a district chief was reportedly killed after collaborating with security forces to denounce a suspected member of an armed group. A respondent from Bankilaré similarly notes that:

The presence of the military is certainly reinforced, but this does not prevent schools from being closed and community leaders from being assassinated every day. And this is what makes the population really disappointed and pessimistic today.⁴⁷

46 See, for example: Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021.

47 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 27 November 2020.

Moreover, some KIIs, particularly in areas not yet experiencing armed groups' violence or direct threats, accuse traditional authorities of having become complicit with VEOs and joining or collaborating with them. Respondents from Abala and Ayerou, for example, said community leaders and traditional authorities are (forced to) participate in jihadist activity, such as by collecting zakat⁴⁸ and closing their eyes to the VEO presence.⁴⁹ These accusations are sometimes ethnically charged. Abala respondent said that “among those who have joined the jihadists are Fulani community leaders,”⁵⁰ and another also said that chiefs have been seen “with guns in their hands crossing the border in Mali.”⁵¹ An Ayerou respondent said a marabout was arrested for supplying “bandits” with motorbikes.⁵²

Any ties between traditional/religious authorities and VEOs are generally frowned upon in Tillabéri. In contrast to certain regions in Mali, where there is a general level of acceptance of negotiations between these authorities and VEOs, 85 percent of respondents said they would “never” approve of traditional authorities engaging in negotiations with VEOs. Only 5 percent of respondents said they would approve of negotiations with VEOs if it would prevent recruitment and radicalization (see Figure 14 below).

48 Islamic concept of obligatory alms that has been appropriated by VEOs to a form of violent extremist taxation. Thurston, A. “[Why jihadists are collecting ‘zakat’ in the Sahel](#),” Political Violence at a Glance, July 12, 2021.

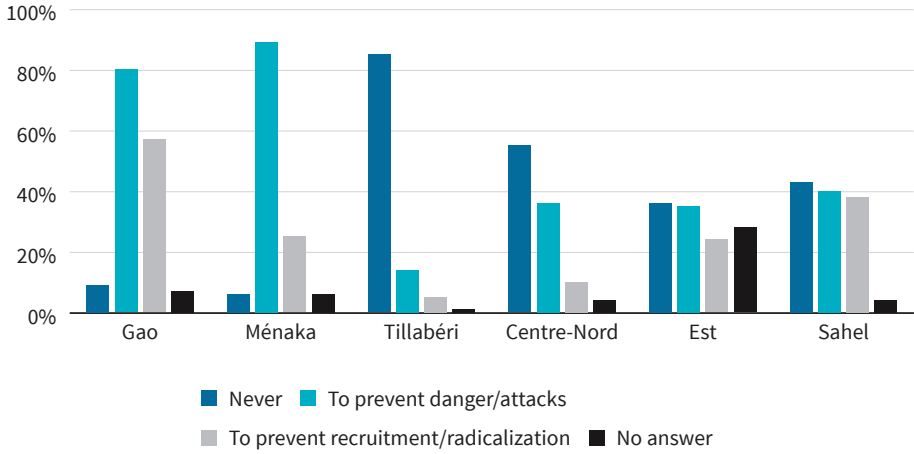
49 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Abala, 2 January 2021. Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Ayerou, 10 January 2021.

50 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Abala, 1 January 2021.

51 Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Abala, 3 January 2021.

52 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Ayerou, 10 January 2021.

Figure 14 When is it acceptable for traditional and religious authorities to negotiate with VEOs (per region)



5 Assessing conditions for positive and negative contributions toward community resilience against violent extremism

5.1 Contributing to social cohesion

Social order and hierarchies are generally respected by all actors in Tillabéri (although exceptions exist – see Box 1 below). Traditional authorities have a clearly embedded structure and hierarchy, and so long as this hierarchy is maintained, people appear satisfied with the structure, and relationships among traditional authorities are positive. Traditional and religious leaders also generally seem to have good relations and to work together, including as regards conflict resolution and security provision. For instance, imams are usually among the members of land tenure commissions, which are usually headed by traditional authorities, as well as village peace committees. Traditional and religious leaders also appear to join forces to raise awareness among their communities, supporting one another’s campaigns. In some cases, traditional authorities are responsible for appointing religious authorities, which might partially explain these strong linkages between both types of authorities.

KIIs are less satisfied with the relationships among religious authorities in those instances where the authorities have come into conflict, as these conflicts appear to trickle down and cause divisions in the population. Respondents from all five research locations specifically mentioned the conflicts between *Izalistes* (from a Salafi movement who label themselves as Ahl-as Sunna) and *Tidianistes* (from the Sufi persuasion Tijaniyya) and the negative impact on social cohesion.⁵³ In an example provided from Ayerou, *Tidianiste* and *Izala* leaders reportedly say they have good relations and respect for one another; however, they work separately

⁵³ See, for example: Interview with a member of the civil society, Respondent, Bankilare, 25 November 2020. Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Gothèye, 1 December 2020. Interview with a member of an NGO, Respondent, Abala, 5 January 2021

and have separate mosques.⁵⁴ Respondents said this has trickled down into relationships between the *Tidianiste* and *Izaliste* communities because they are now very divided, almost to the point of open conflict.⁵⁵

Box 1 Inter-elite tensions in Bankilaré

Multiple respondents spoke negatively about a “revolt” against a group chief (*chef de groupement*) in Bankilaré, who saw his authority questioned by a number of his tribal chiefs (*chefs de tribu*), as explained by a local civil servant:

*Tribal leaders rose up against their group leader and even signed a petition to demand his removal. The latter was able to count on the support of the authorities and the government to maintain his position. Some of the rebel chiefs were removed from office.*⁵⁶

Such events can have lasting effects on the cooperation between different traditional authorities, their collaboration with other stakeholders, and potentially undermine each other’s ability to positively impact their communities:

*This situation has created a divide within the community members. And today our main challenge is that there are many differences between the traditional authorities. In addition, there are rivalries between the traditional authorities of the three groups that make up the department of Bankilaré, namely the two Tuareg groups (Tingueruedeche-Loghmatten and Doufrafrak) and the Fulani group (Gaobé). They very often have divergent views, which is a major challenge in our collaboration with these traditional authorities and also impacts on the development of the department.*⁵⁷

In addition, traditional authorities are active in promoting shared values and in improving the awareness of community members about violent extremism and denouncing violent extremism (see Figure 15 below). Yet the populace does not always understand what these mechanisms are, and how effective they

54 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ayerou, 11 January 2021.

55 It should be noted that this is the case all over the country, not just in the conflict zone. And this has been the case since the 1980s.

56 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

57 *Ibid.*

may be. As a result, some interview responses are critical of these activities. One respondent, for example, said traditional authorities participate in peace caravans, but believes that nobody understands what these caravans entail.⁵⁸ Some interviewees pointed out the limited effectiveness of awareness-raising efforts (alone) in countering the rise of violent extremist groups, as this KII illustrates:

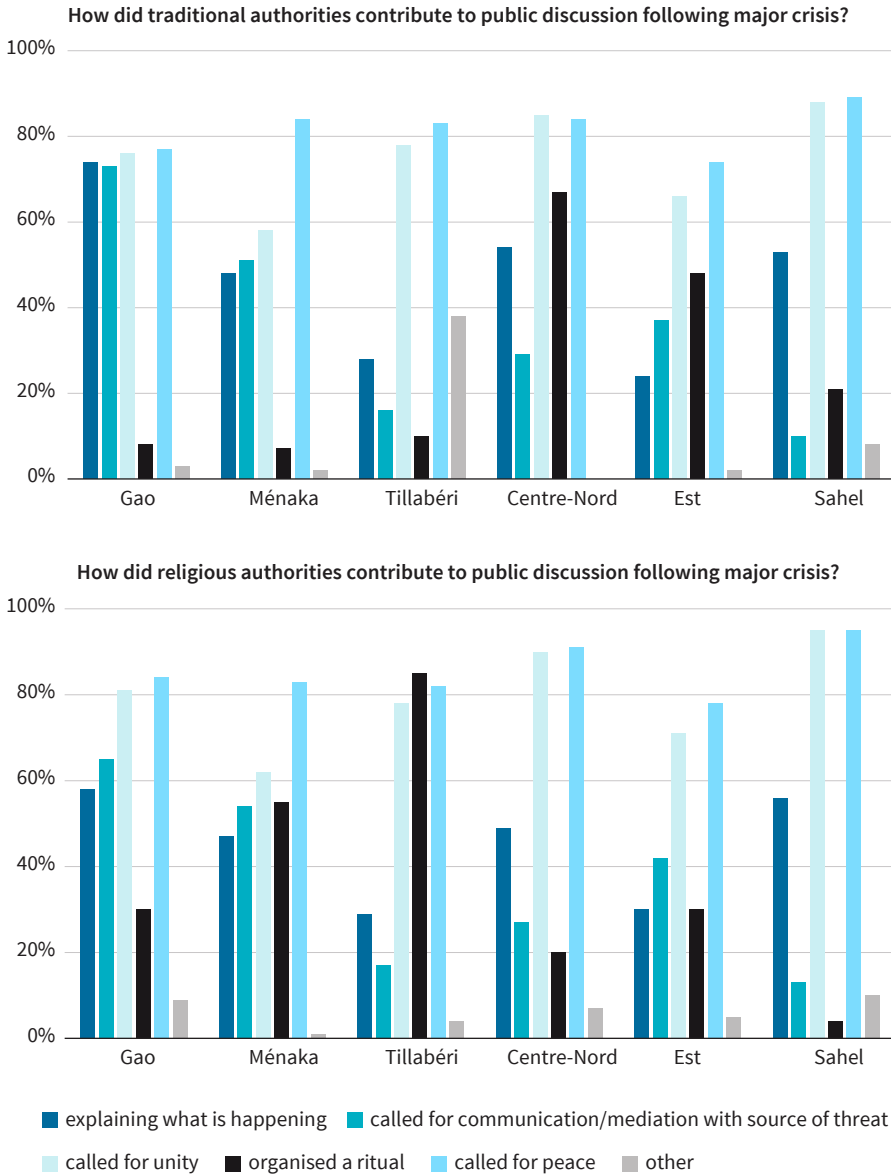
*The traditional and religious authorities have reached the limit of their efforts in this fight. They have collaborated, raised awareness, reported the facts, but nothing has changed. Worse, they are targeted by groups of armed bandits. Many of them have died, others have abandoned their communities. Religious people have prayed, raised awareness, but unfortunately extremism is becoming more and more established.*⁵⁹

Despite this confusion over traditional authorities' roles and contributions toward community resilience, 75 percent of respondents agree that traditional authorities can help improve social cohesion in order to strengthen community resilience against violence.

58 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Ayerou, 8 January 2021.

59 *Ibid.*

Figure 15 Traditional and religious authorities' discursive actions in the face of a major crisis (per region)



5.2 Politicization and ties to NGOs

The interactions between traditional authorities and state authorities or NGOs can be seen as positive when traditional authorities are perceived as representing and defending their community's best interests. However, respondents indicated that when traditional authorities appear to be too close to these actors or acting in their interests, they lose some legitimacy and are perceived as tools to extend the objectives of external actors. Previous research concurs with this assessment and finds that respondents assume traditional authorities are responsible for representing their communities before the state.⁶⁰

Given the shift over the years from traditional authorities being appointed based on family or heritage to a sort of democratization of the process of selecting traditional authorities whereby community members have a say in who is selected, it is likely that communities will continue to expect traditional authorities to represent their views and positions, and not the state's. One study found that within six municipalities of Tillabéri and neighboring Tahoua, 27 percent of traditional authorities are elected/designated by the community and another 9 percent are designated by a community elite in combination with the rest of the community. This is significant because historically, there is a line of succession or entitlement to the position.⁶¹ Yet in any case, the central state (interior ministry) always has to approve the choice made, and retains the right to remove a chief it disapproves of – a sign that, despite beliefs in the populace that the chiefs represent them, they primarily serve the state in the context of Niger.

Alluding to a rampant issue, respondents indicated that traditional authorities should not become politicized, and the closeness of traditional authorities to local political actors is seen by interviewees as a symbol of politicization, which reduces their trust in traditional authorities' decision-making.⁶² In the context of Niger, politicization of chiefs refers to the fact that chiefs pander to the interests of a political party or a specific party leader in a way that brings division into the

60 Molenaar, F. et al 2019, *op. cit.*:5

61 *Ibid.*: 64

62 Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ayerou, 10 January 2021: *"The latest disgraceful act of the traditional authorities is the census of people affected by floods caused by rainwater. They took the liberty of registering people who are not victims because they are simply people who are on the same political side as them. It is this kind of behaviour that makes religious authorities more respected."*

community – despite legal prohibitions.⁶³ It is somewhat inevitable, given that party politics determine who runs the central government and who ends up having administrative authority over chiefs.

Further causes of frustration in the community – such as when they blame chiefs for “accepting” the decisions of the prefecture without first consulting with the local community – indicate that the populace either do not understand well, or are unhappy with the chain of command of which the chiefs are part. In all five research locations, interviewees mentioned such concerns. In Gothèye and Say, respondents specifically noted that traditional authorities did not push back against bans on motorbikes, which is seen as detrimental to livelihoods. One Say respondent said traditional authorities’ lack of “courage” in defending them against the ban has negatively impacted the relationship between the community and traditional authorities.⁶⁴ It should be noted, however, that traditional authorities cannot oppose government policy, and can only advise and lobby – which they might have done in these instances, unbeknownst to their local critics. In the past, open resistance to such policies on the part of traditional chiefs – in the Diffa region – led to several of them being arrested on charges of complicity with Boko Haram.

A similar set of concerns arises from how respondents reported on the interactions between traditional authorities and NGOs. Nearly one quarter (23%) of survey respondents said they do not trust NGOs. While this is not a majority opinion, and some interviewees spoke positively about the role of NGOs in providing resources, supporting peace and security, engaging youth, and improving the capacity of traditional authorities to respond to community-level conflicts, there are those who are frustrated by the relationships. This is noteworthy in a context where only a small number of respondents reported contacting NGOs for basic service provision. Others expressed the view that NGOs have too much influence over traditional authorities and that the latter have become overly reliant on NGOs to

63 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Bankilare, 28 November 2020: “All the tribal chiefs, group chiefs, canton chiefs and religious leaders have become ready-made politicians. Some of them are even campaigning in spite of the legal prohibition. Everything starts with the election of group, canton or tribal chiefs and even villages. They are supported by politicians who in return ask them to campaign for them.” Also see: Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Ayerou, 10 January 2021. Interview with a member of a youth association, Respondent, Ayerou, 11 January 2021. Interview with a local state representative, Respondent, Gothèye, 30 November 2020.

64 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Say, 6 February 2021.

finance activities. KIIs said some traditional authorities no longer take initiative on certain issues they used to get involved with unless NGOs finance them. Such responses overlook the fact that traditional authorities never had autonomous budgets to engage in activities and that the real “culprit” here is the state.

Other respondents had better-targeted grievances against traditional authorities. In their view, traditional authorities are engaging in NGO propaganda and are representing NGOs’ values instead of their community’s values. Still more respondents said NGO support has resulted in traditional authorities showing preference for those whom NGOs choose to support, which creates tensions within communities. Overall, interviews suggested that when traditional authorities appear too close to NGOs, it could constrain their roles relevant to community resilience because they might be seen as propaganda tools and not acting in the community’s best interests. Additionally, traditional authorities’ relationships with NGOs are potentially seen as negative in building social cohesion because of accusations that traditional authorities are inequitably distributing aid. Respondents from all five research locations made accusations that traditional authorities are not impartial in aid distribution, with many respondents saying they demonstrate preferences toward family, friends, and themselves – in fact, their own constituencies and clientele.⁶⁵ As our synthesis report shows, this is the strongest factor explaining low levels of community resilience.

Ultimately, however, both state actors and NGO actors see traditional authorities as valuable partners in addressing violent extremism, even while recognizing that traditional authorities’ influence has waned over the past few years. Interviews with state authorities revealed that government actors need to work through traditional authorities to act efficiently at the community level. Some interviewees pointed out that traditional authorities understand day-to-day ground realities. NGO actors interviewed also mentioned that the proximity of traditional authorities to local populations makes them an important partner, despite the fact that NGO and civil society actors do not always agree with traditional authorities about social issues related to gender equality, children’s rights, and youth roles in society. Incidentally, this indicates that perceptions that chiefs represent the values of NGOs may be just that: perceptions.

65 See, for example, Interview with a community member, Respondent, Abala, 5 January 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Baniklare, 28 November 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Gothèye, 4 December 2020

5.3 Impact of relationships with women and youth

Youth and female respondents were more likely than other groups to perceive traditional authorities as those controlling access to natural resources, land, and herd corridors. The data suggest that youth and women consider traditional authorities as more authoritative figures than civic leaders and elected leaders.

Female survey respondents were more likely to trust traditional authorities than male respondents, with 67 percent of female respondents reportedly having “a lot” of trust in traditional authorities compared to 59 percent of male respondents. Although the data do not clearly illustrate why this is the case, one hypothesis is that women are more influenced by traditional authorities and willing to defer to them because women are less likely to engage with anyone outside their community – meaning they rarely have other perspectives beyond what they hear from traditional authorities.⁶⁶

While the interviews overall indicated that the weight of tradition still greatly influences the roles assigned to women in society, restricting their ability to speak out and to take part in public debates, especially in rural areas, some female interviewees however underlined more recent evolutions:

“Women are on an equal footing with men today. They are committed to claiming their rights. They take part in meetings and gatherings and express themselves well. They are not afraid like before. The NGO partners have trained women and girls to participate in decision-making bodies in the municipality.”⁶⁷

66 According to respondents, men are more likely than women to be “regularly” in touch with people from other communities. Thirty-three percent of male respondents said they were regularly in touch compared to 18 percent of female respondents.

67 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ayerou, 12 January 2021. Also see: Interview with a community member, Respondent, Ayerou, 11 January 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Bankilare, 28 November 2020: *“I am now a reference in the community. I am single and I take care of my family without help from anyone. During meetings, the group leader encourages the women to follow my example and become independent. So the women, thanks to the training and the various capacity-building activities, influence the authorities, but it is not the other way round. It is up to the chief to negotiate with us for the application of certain measures on the schooling of young girls, the collaboration of women in the fight against banditry... We are an important component in this fight.”*

Traditional and religious authorities struggle to maintain their influence over youth, where the latter face limited mobility and income-generating opportunities. Some respondents suggested that traditional authorities are thus out-influenced by the presence of non-state armed actors in their communities, or in the areas where youth migrate in search of employment opportunities. Additionally, respondents aged 18-35 more often than any other age group said they feel excluded from decision-making processes in their communities (30%) and social events (13%). One example of how traditional authorities have positively contributed to youth resilience against violent extremism is in Bankilaré. Traditional authorities, with support from NGOs and the government, are implementing recreational and cultural activities to prevent youth from being idle, offering temporary job opportunities to youth, and supporting youth recruitment into security forces.⁶⁸ It should be noted, however, that this is not an initiative of these authorities; rather, they are facilitators.

68 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020. Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Bankilare, 24 November 2020.

6 Implications for programming

Tillabéri is in the midst of heightened uncertainty due to VEOs and other armed groups' presence, environmental shocks, restrictions on movement and income-generating opportunities, and shifting sociopolitical dynamics. For decades, traditional authorities have been perceived as the stalwart presence that provides stability to populations. Now, although respondents across the spectrum said traditional authorities need greater protection, finances, and other resources to implement social cohesion, other conflict prevention activities, and training, there appears to be a disconnect from what exactly the roles of traditional and religious authorities should be within an evolving social order.

Much of what was observed in the fieldwork is affected by the peculiar context of endemic violence across large sections of Tillabéri. That should be factored into dynamics in which traditional authorities are seen as key leaders in their communities, but local populations do not always listen to them or seek them out for mediation. Within this changing dynamic where populations are increasingly forced to be self-reliant, youth push back against elders, and civilians are increasingly armed, traditional authorities' influence with populations is waning even as external actors, such as state authorities, NGOs, and VEOs/armed groups seek their support for legitimacy and access.

These findings must be assessed against a context in which traditional authorities, in many cases forced into exile, and in general operating under the stress of threats, violent attacks, and a government-imposed state of emergency, are not working the way they did only five to ten years before. Thus, the findings, to a large extent, are measuring an anomaly. Taking this point into consideration, there are a number of recommendations that could support building stronger community resilience with the participation of all actors within the community, thus reducing the need for self-reliance at the individual level.

Recommendations

- Traditional authorities have a window of opportunity to improve their relationships with all community members and to support resilience to external shocks by becoming more involved in preventive acts to protect their communities. The biggest threat to their communities that respondents identified was lack of food. Traditional authorities are in a position to lead community-level committees that prepare response plans that address shocks and stressors in their areas such as environmental disasters, security incidents, elections, and the arrival of displaced populations from Mali, Burkina Faso, and other parts of Tillabéri.
- The above recommendation must take into consideration a key finding of this study – respondents’ perceptions of traditional authorities around the allocation of aid skews toward negative. Allegations of corruption, suspicion, and lack of trust are ultimately detrimental to creating conditions for traditional authorities to play positive roles in increasing community resilience to violent extremism. In partnership with members of the community, the state, and NGOs, concrete guidelines should be either created or explained to ensure transparency in aid distribution processes and to reduce these negative perceptions where possible.
- Traditional authorities are representatives of the state at times, but they are also seen as representatives of their communities first and foremost. The research indicates that for traditional authorities to be trusted by their communities, they must be advocates. Thus, at an institutional level, traditional authorities must have the opportunity to create pathways to better advocate for their communities within existing governance structures.
- Traditional authorities at the *quartier*, *tribu*, and *village* levels are more likely to engage in conflict mediation and diffusion, especially for agropastoral conflicts. These are some of the most sensitive drivers of conflict in Tillabéri and have the most likelihood to gain the attention of armed groups and VEOs hoping to capitalize on underlying ethnic and resource-based tensions while undermining the position and legitimacy of traditional authorities. Therefore, for traditional authorities to meet the expectation of respondents to support social cohesion, these actors must be prioritized for trainings on how to more professionally, consistently, inclusively, and transparently engage in conflict mediation and resolution. This should include the development of clearer guides and frameworks for mediation processes, trainings on ethnic sensitivity

and neutrality, and training on how to diffuse situations where violent armed actors might attempt to involve themselves in the process.

- Traditional authorities can play a role in ensuring stability so that communities can address and heal from the trauma of living through insecurity, and so that they can focus on progress. Respondents have grievances against traditional authorities but also regarding inadequate service provision and unresolved intercommunal conflicts, such as the high cost and inaccessibility of health-care services, poor infrastructure, mismanagement of resource committees, and persistent conflicts among community members. Cumulatively, these factors render them vulnerable to the influence of outside actors who can sympathize and promise to provide stability. Traditional authorities must be empowered to be a stable force so that communities are resilient against alternatives. Doing so may shift the findings seen in areas such as Ayerou – which has seen one traditional authority killed for collaborating with security forces, and a religious authority arrested for collaborating with armed groups – and where respondents indicate greater levels of trust in local security initiatives and self-defense groups, rather than in traditional authorities, than respondents from other areas.