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**The Network for
Religious and
Traditional
Peacemakers**

BASELINE STUDY

Tradition- & Faith-Oriented Insider Mediators (TFIMs) as Crucial Actors in Conflict Transformation

Case Study: **Mali**

Contents

Background of this case study

In mediation processes, usually an *outsider* and *impartial* third party mediator is sought. In certain contexts, especially in traditional and high-context societies, an insider mediator who is intrinsic (geographically, culturally and normatively) to the conflict context, and thereby *partial*, often gets more legitimacy to mediate than an outsider. Tradition- & faith-oriented insider mediator (TFIMs) are those who take an assortment of concepts, values and practices from culture, tradition and faith (among other sources) as inspiration, motivation, guidance and as methodological support towards mediation. TFIMs may include traditional and religious leaders/authorities, but also other actors who may, on principle and/ or strategically, draw tools and inspiration from (multiple) faiths, cultures and traditions, as well as from non-religious (secular) and non-traditional concepts/ values. This case study is part of the empirical research that was carried out to understand the mediation roles, potential and constraints of TFIMs.

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1. Introduction

This report on the role, potential, challenges and needs of tradition and faith-oriented insider mediators (TFIMs) in Mali is primarily based on a one-week fieldwork visit to Bamako in early April 2015. This trip included a two-day conference on human security and civil society (which provided an opportunity to become more familiar with the current state of debates on ongoing developments in the peace process and the role of state vs. non-state actors), followed by four days of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Some of these interviews and discussions took place with TFIMs, comprising two prominent imams and their staff, two leaders of a Muslim women's organisation, one leader of a youth group associated with the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), one Catholic Church official, and two leaders of the network of traditional communicators (ReCoTrade). These were complemented by interviews with external observers (state officials, civil society representatives and international partners/donors) in order to obtain a more independent assessment of the role of TFIMs. In comparison with some of the other case studies, traditional authorities play a prominent role in Malian socio-political life; nevertheless, these actors are difficult to access from Bamako, since most of them operate locally and do not have any national representation in the capital city. For this reason, the fieldwork data was complemented by a review of existing studies and newspaper articles on the subject matter.

The purpose of this introduction is to provide some brief general information on the context in question, namely, on the nature of conflicts in Mali and the role of religion and tradition in Malian society. The rest of this report is organised along the same structure as the other case study reports, and successively analyses the nature and role of TFIMs (and the levels at which they intervene), their approaches and methods, their successes and challenges, before assessing their needs and the potential controversies and risks associated with supporting TFIMs in a highly violent and politically tense environment.

1.1 A land of conflict

Most conflicts in Mali – both local and national – have been continuing for several decades and appear to be stuck in cycles of settlement attempts and resumptions. In fact, these conflicts alternate between phases of latency and violent eruptions. Most conflicts are caused by feelings of injustice within or between communities, which provide the foundation for (violent) radicalisation.

At the macro level, one of the root causes of the current political and security crisis is the long-standing lack of economic development in northern Mali (i.e. in the self-proclaimed independent state of Azawad), which began with the failure to include these peripheral regions in the modernisation and development processes undertaken during the period of French colonisation, and continued after Mali gained independence in 1960. This has contributed to the marginalisation of the northern communities and the reduction of their opportunities for legal sources of income. In turn, this situation has provided a context for the series of Tuareg-led rebellions, and for the more recent emergence of violent armed groups with various Islamist agendas, and national and transnational organised crime (Sköns 2013).

The latest, ongoing cycle of violence emerged in early 2012, when northern insurgent groups launched an armed insurrection against the Malian government, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA – an organisation fighting to make Azawad an independent homeland for the Tuareg people). On 22nd March 2012, the Malian President was ousted by mutinous soldiers in a coup d'état over his handling of the crisis, a month before a presidential election was to have taken place. As a consequence of the instability that followed the coup, Mali's largest three northern cities – Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu – were overrun by the rebels. On 5th April 2012, the MNLA declared Azawad's independence from Mali. The MNLA was initially backed by the Islamist group Ansar Dine. After the Malian military was driven out of Azawad, Ansar Dine and a number of smaller Al Quaida-affiliated Islamist groups began to impose strict Sharia law. The MNLA and the Islamists struggled to reconcile their conflicting visions for a planned new state, and began fighting for control over the region. By mid-2012, the MNLA had lost control of most of northern Mali's cities to the Islamists. The Malian government requested foreign military help to re-take the North. On 11th January 2013, the French military began operations against the Islamists, and forces from other African Union states were deployed shortly after. By 8th February, the Islamist-held territory had been re-taken by the Malian military with help from the international coalition.

A ceasefire agreement between the government and the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) – comprising the MNLA and other allied Tuareg-led armed groups – was signed on 18th June 2013 in Ouagadougou with the President of Burkina Faso acting as the principal mediator; its main achievement was to make possible the presidential and parliamentary elections of July/August and November 2013. Following months of renewed fighting (involving jihadi groups as well as the MLNA, which claimed that the government had not respected its commitments) and sporadic ceasefires, another cycle of mediated negotiations took place in Algiers, leading to a peace accord signed by various militias on 19th February 2015 and finally by the CMA on 20th June 2015.[2] Meanwhile,

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2. During the fieldwork for this study, the negotiations in Algiers were still ongoing, which influenced to some extent the tone of the conversations (all interviewees voiced their opinions on the fairness (or unfairness) of the proposed deal, and on the responsibilities of the various parties (including the mediating bodies) for the refusal of the main opposition coalition to sign it).

French forces and the international coalition are still involved in helping the Malian military defeat the Islamist jihadi groups in the north (who were not party to the Algiers negotiations).

1.2 The role of religion and tradition in Mali
Mali is a rather homogenous country where religion is concerned: 90% of the population is Muslim, 2% is Christian, 8% is animist.[3] In contrast to many of its sub-Saharan neighbours, the country has no history of inter-religious (e.g. Muslim-Christian) confrontation. Instead, conflicts between different currents within Islam have emerged since the 1990s, and particularly since the last conflict in 2011. According to the interviewees, this is largely due to the instrumentalisation of Islam by (foreign-dominated or inspired) actors who have their own political, profit-oriented or criminal agendas.

In line with the French colonial tradition, the Malian state is secular; accordingly, religious leaders are not entitled to play any public political role, nor is the state supposed to intervene in religious affairs. This principle is highly respected among the political class in Bamako, and the two preconditions that were imposed on the opposition parties at the Algiers negotiation table were to abide by the basic principles of secularism and respect for territorial integrity. Nevertheless, religion and faith do play a large role in Malian society. Where jurisprudence is concerned, for example, Muslims in Mali regularly adhere to Muslim principles of law, especially in their personal lives and in family law.

Although Mali has multiple Islamic cultures, a shift has taken place in recent years. The 1991 coup and the subsequent process of democratisation (which included the liberalisation of rights of association and speech) led to a rise in private Arabic-language religious schools and religious organisations funded with foreign support; as a result, the long-standing home-grown tradition of moderate Sufi Islam has progressively faced competition from Wahhabi and Salafi currents. The new elite vocally proclaimed their concerns over and complaints against the lax 'permissiveness' of the 1990s, when new laws were introduced permitting gambling and allowing bars and nightclubs to remain open during Ramadan and pornographic films to be screened at cinemas, which offended many Malians. Women's rights and anti-excision movements, and the planned reform of family law were also criticised by these actors as un-Islamic and Western-influenced, and for destroying Malian identity. One vocal representative of these Arab-influenced Muslim elites is Imam Mahmoud Dicko, the current head of the HCIM, who was also interviewed for this study. Islamic organisations such as the HCIM have a significant ability to mobilise people; they discuss and debate Islam, Muslim values, morality and sometimes politics, and though their aims range from attempts to foster moral reform to possible challenges to the state's legitimacy, in general they support the idea of democracy (Soares 2006).

Tradition and ancestral customs also play a prominent role in Mali, even though traditional leaders lost most of their formal official functions with the advent of 'modern' liberal democracy following independence (as further discussed below). The country has a heritage of highly hierarchised communities, the three main historical classes being comprised by nobles at the top (sovereign families, chiefs and military leaders), guardians of tradition in the middle (so-called Niamakala, including griots), and former slaves at the bottom (IMRAP 2015). The traditional authorities are comprised of representatives of the first two classes, including village chiefs, district or tribal leaders, cadis (Muslim judges), griots (storytellers and traditional communicators, also self-described in interviews as 'spokespersons' and 'carriers of messages'), Marabouts (living saints) and members of elders' councils (Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2004).

2. Mediation roles and engagements

This section reviews the various forms and levels of insider mediation that have been practiced by TFIMs in recent years, beginning with top-level track 1 facilitation attempts, all the way down to inter-and intra-community dispute resolution.

2.1 Track 1 mediation
The representatives of traditional and religious authorities described their involvement as intermediaries or peace advocates as having taken place in several distinct but intertwined types of national conflicts. These include:

- The armed conflict between the Malian state and (separatist or Islamist) rebels in the north.
- The governance-related conflict between the armed forces and civilian authorities in Bamako during and immediately after the 2012 coup.
- The political conflict between the government, the political opposition, and civil society leaders/groups in Bamako during the current security crisis over exit strategies in the North-South confrontation.

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3. There is, however, a well-known saying in Mali that the country is "98% Muslim, 2% Christian and 100% animist", with Islam absorbing traditional practices and allowing people to retain connections with their customary spirituality – and thereby providing a formula for religious tolerance. (See Hicks 2013).

This section focuses primarily on the first type of conflict. On several occasions, the state has relied on, or has seconded/commissioned (the mandates were not very clear) traditional or religious leaders to establish a dialogue between the central state and northern armed groups.

One prominent example is the attempt made by the HCIM president, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, to facilitate dialogue with the Ansar Dine leaders controlling the northern city of Gao in summer 2012. His conversations with these actors seem to have focused on humanitarian access and aid, but little is known about the results of the talks or how they ended. According to media reports (Groga-Bada 2012), he supported the French military operation, and believed that the Islamists were mainly led and influenced by foreigners. He therefore accorded them little authority to speak for Malians (especially where their strict implementation of Sharia was concerned). Nevertheless, he was also criticised for his mediation attempts and for failing to condemn some of the Islamists' actions. He justified this as a necessary compromise in order not to undermine his talks with them.[4] Imam Dicko also claimed that the HCIM's regional bureau in Kidal (the centre of power of the MNLA) played a key role in mediating the liberation of 160 Malian soldiers from the hands of the Tuareg rebels in April 2012 (Boisbouvier 2012). Other TFIMs also offered their services as insider mediators during the occupation of northern cities by Islamist groups. In 2012, for example, the president of the Network of Traditional Communicators for Development (ReCoTraDe) appealed for support on national television to go and talk to the 'invaders', though without success.

More recently, during the conflict between the CMA and the pro-government Gandakoye militias in the Goundam Circle region in May 2015, a local delegation comprised of a female mayor and members of the Gina Dogon cultural association (characterised by several interviewees as a TFIM) successfully mediated a prisoner release deal. They did so using traditional local communication methods such as Sinagouya ('cousinage à plaisanterie'), as well as personal and family connections (Bamada.net 2015). This episode can be described as a track 1 initiative since it provided a window of opportunity for renewed negotiations between the government and the CMA, and for the latter's decision to commit to the Algiers peace accord.

With regard to the recent Algiers peace negotiations themselves, it is interesting to note that traditional and religious leaders played no direct role in the process. Very few of these actors were invited to the talks as part of the civil society delegations selected by each negotiation delegation to attend the second phase of the talks. No interviewees could provide any definitive answer as to why this was the case. One interlocutor, however, noted that traditional local authorities play an important but unofficial role within the politico-military movements, and were consulted by the CMA in March 2015 on the Algiers accord—a consultation which led to the CMA's decision not to sign the accord. TFIMs are likely to play a more central and active role in the 'Conference of National Understanding' (Conference d'Entente Nationale) called for by the Algiers agreement. Several clauses also provide a window of opportunity for the formalisation of the role of traditional and religious authorities in the peacebuilding and reform process (as argued further below).

2.2 Track 2 & 3 mediation

Track two mediation in Mali encompasses regional-level initiatives, especially between northern communities. They include the community pacts signed during the 1990s, which were facilitated by local leaders, most of them traditional chiefs. These talks were initiated after the 1992 National Pact, which primarily addressed the relations between the state and northern rebels, but did little to address the balance of power between the northern communities themselves. Some regional elites took advantage of certain provisions in the agreement and negotiated increased privileges to the detriment of other groups. The local pacts negotiated between the communities of northern Mali, with Western NGO funding, did not involve the central government at all (International Crisis Group, 2014, 8). More recently, some TFIMs have also played important intermediary roles during the Islamist occupation of northern cities, by mediating between the Islamist groups and the local population. Their mediation efforts included organising crisis committees and advocating against the forceful imposition of an 'imported' version of sharia law.

Finally, at the local level, traditional mediation has played a crucial role in settling intra-community or inter-community conflicts before and after Mali's independence. Even if the role of TFIMs has been contested by administrative and judiciary authorities, many Malians still prefer to resolve their disputes through traditional conflict settlement methods, without judiciary intervention. This is especially true in rural areas. Modern or state-based conflict settlement procedures run through administrative agencies or courts tend to be implemented only when traditional mechanisms fail to produce the desired outcome. Resource conflicts, for example, are often dealt with through village councils. Religious conflicts, for their part, are mainly mediated by religious leaders (such as imams, cadis or marabouts). Finally, social conflicts concerning inheritances or conjugal conflicts are first addressed within the family, then by neighbours and friends, religious authorities, and traditional communicators (griots) (Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2004).

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4. He only condemned the destruction of shrines in Timbuktu, for example, following public pressure to do so.

3. Mediation approaches, methods, tools

The TFIMs interviewed for this study associate a wide range of roles, approaches and functions with the term 'insider mediator'. Not all of them are strictly linked to inter-party facilitation; the work of some might better be described as dialogue support or peace advocacy.

One function often mentioned was that of a top-down relay between the state and citizens. Indeed, some customary leaders (especially traditional communicators) have been invited (or even hired) by the Ministry for National Reconciliation to mobilise and sensitise the population to the government's vision for peace, for example by organising marches in support of the Algiers process, or explaining the contents of the peace accord to the public. Griots play an important role in this regard, in translating the provisions of the accord into local languages for illiterate citizens. When asked about their position on the Algiers accord, all of the TFIMs interviewed agreed that "the accord is not perfect but no accord is perfect", and described it as a step forward in unifying the country and rebuilding social cohesion.

Fewer examples were given of bottom-up peace advocacy to relay the demands of the base to the authorities. One illustration was nonetheless provided by the leaders of the National Union of Muslim Women of Mali (UNAFEM), who cited a campaign (described as very effective) launched after the 2012 coup: their large organisation gathered together all of the political parties and notables and asked them to reconcile with one another or face its members' resignation from all political parties. International peace advocacy was also mentioned: several delegations of religious leaders have travelled to Europe to mobilise financial and diplomatic support for the peace process.

At the track 2 and 3 level, a number of third-party intervention methods have been used to settle conflicts between or within communities and families, including mediation, consultation, arbitration, investigation, confrontation and accommodation. All of these methods were described as being motivated by the drive to stabilise or appease social relations, and to preserve social peace and balance. The ReCoTraDe leaders, for example, argued that 90% of the daily work of traditional communicators involves "putting out fires in homes" through family and neighbourhood mediation. HCIM President Imam Dicko also described his organisation's current dialogue promotion work (between/within mosques, between communities, and between the majority and opposition parties) as a conflict prevention strategy, which aims to prevent the conflict from taking on a communitarian or inter-religious dimension.

Interfaith dialogue figures prominently in the range of activities mentioned under the heading 'mediation'. These include: the communication of unified messages through the 'sacred union' between the HCIM, the archbishop, and the Protestant leadership; the Muslim-Christian dialogue set up by Imam Diallo's Association for Peace and Salvation in 2008; and multi-confessional, joint prayers for peace organised by religious leaders, particularly women (including members of UNAFEM).

A last category of activities mentioned during interviews would best be described as 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) measures, such as promoting a tolerant form of Islam (e.g. Imam Diallo), engaging youth, and promoting a pluralist vision of religious texts to prevent radicalism (e.g. Sabati youth organisation, ICCO cooperation).

4. Successes and challenges

4.1 Assets and resources

According to a study comparing traditional and state-based conflict resolution mechanisms in Mali (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, op.cit 2004), the former have the advantage of being easier, cheaper and faster than the latter; they are also described as being better adapted to the socio-historic realities and cultures of the region, since they allow illiterate (and often rural) citizens to be included and frequently involve the entire community in the search for a solution. Other advantages, assets and resources which TFIMs have at their disposal include:

■ Moral authority and popular support

TFIMs such as cadis or griots are hereditary functions transmitted from father to son or daughter. These actors are therefore mandated to play the role of conciliators from birth. Their authority is also dependent on their alleged wisdom: on account of their knowledge of legal regulations and their capacity to analyse and understand, they are held to always tell the truth. The level of popular support enjoyed by such insider mediators is illustrated by the fact that during the 2014 National Forum on Decentralisation, most participants supported the idea of enhancing the role of traditional authorities within the municipalities. Furthermore, a recent survey revealed that 82 percent of Malians place a great deal of trust in traditional authorities, whereas only 50 and 43 percent feel the same about the police and the courts, respectively (Wing and Kassibo 2014).

■ Access

Some TFIMs have access to all communities and to the whole territory, including regions such as Kidal where no other Malians can go. According to the interviewees, this is allegedly the case for traditional communicators (who rely on a national network that has existed since the 18th century), the HCIM (through the mosques that act as a unifying body across all ethnic groups), the Catholic clergy (through bishops and parishes—albeit to a lesser extent in the North), and the UNAFEM (which coordinates 180 associations across all areas of the country except for Kidal). These actors also claim that they do not face any security challenges due to their credibility across all communities. Particularly important is the access they claim to have to armed (and especially radical Islamist) groups, which relies on personal connections with their leaders. Both the HCIM and (its former youth wing) Sabati have used such contacts in order to establish dialogue. As one interviewee put it, "Mali is a small country, we all know each other!"

Among TFIMs, traditional communicators also have a unique capacity to mobilise people, since all political and religious authorities rely on them to translate their messages or protocols. Thanks to these pre-established lines of communication they are able to convene all TFIMs, whenever necessary.

■ Mobilisation capacity

According to Imam Diallo, religious leaders are closer to the people than politicians, and can mobilise much larger numbers of people (the HCIM, for instance, is able to bring hundreds of thousands of supporters onto the street) because the credibility of the political class among the population has been weakened by years of state mismanagement and corruption. Despite being governed by a secular state, Malian society is very religious, and religious authorities therefore have a huge influence, since believers naturally listen to them. For its part, the Catholic Church represents a small minority of believers but is respected by all, including the Muslim majority.

■ Representative power

In terms of gender representation, Imam Dicko claimed that the HCIM has a higher proportion of women members and leaders than the government. It cooperates closely with the UNAFEM in promoting women's rights. The Catholic Church also has a women's body, the Association of Catholic Women of Mali.

4.2 Challenges

■ Lack of official recognition

In Mali, traditional authorities do not have any official status (in contrast to neighbouring countries such as Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso or Sierra Leone) on the basis of which they would be recognised and organised, or even elected and remunerated. One impediment to such recognition is the fact that their role was delegitimised when the Republic was established in the 1960s. Traditional leaders came to be seen by some elements of the Bamako elite as anti-modern and in contradiction with the basic principles of the Republic.

Similarly, a number of politicians (especially among the opposition) consider that increasing the role of imams and cadis in the provision of justice and mediation would represent a violation of the principle of secularism. Others, however, believe that given their considerable influence, their role should be regulated by the state–for example, via a Ministry for Islamic Affairs that would exert control over religious authorities. The secretary of the Archbishop of Bamako also identified as an obstacle to effective mediation a lack of understanding among some citizens of the active political role the church might be required to play for the sake of the country

■ State instrumentalisation and/or collusion

By contrast, other interviewees strongly believe that the politicisation of TFIMs is incompatible with a mediating role. For many, the explicit political position assumed by Sabadi (formerly the youth wing of the HCIM, now a distinct social movement), which conducted campaigns in

support of certain parties and candidates, goes one step too far. As a result, this organisation, along with the HCIM itself, has been described as having been instrumentalised by the government in order to spread its political message. These debates indicate that it is important to avoid a simplistic vision of religious leaders as solely a force for peace. Instead, these leaders all seem to have their own interests and to compete with one another for political and popular influence.

■ Maintaining the status quo?

Some interlocutors and authors even go one step further, describing some TFIMs as conservative (vs. progressive) elites, while traditional conflict management customs such as cousinage à plaisanterie are depicted as instruments for maintaining the status quo rather than promoting social justice. According to one expert, "the real Mali, in which most people mostly live their lives, is defined by a host of less visible institutions derived from tradition, religion or customs which, while they flex and adapt over time in response to external stimuli, do so merely as a self-preservation reflex, and tend to be conservative in character, keeping things largely the way they are and were" (Vernon 2014).

One indication of such an orientation is the fact that traditional methods have not been able to solve the underlying causes of community conflicts, since the latter still exist and continue to erupt in a cyclical fashion. These mediation mechanisms are thus seen by many Malians as being part of the problem rather than the solution: they contribute to the recurrence of the conflict and thus to an environment of constant insecurity (IMRAP 2015, 158-9). Another interviewee described the traditional authorities in the North as representatives of the local elite who ruled the region until their former vassals emancipated themselves through armed rebellion. Yet another respondent described the tacit cooperation between the state and all traditional and religious authorities in maintaining the people's submission to authority and the status quo. Imams, indeed, represent order and submission, and are known to preach obedience to power as being synonymous with obedience to God.

■ Difficulty of gaining international support

The TFIM organisations with the greatest mobilisation capacities and influence (such as the HCIM) seem to be poorly connected to international organisations and Western donor agencies—though they have strong links with sources of support in the Arab world. This weakness can partly be explained by the aforementioned politicisation of such actors, which makes it difficult for them to raise international funding for their activities. One can also assume that it can be difficult for Islamic organisations to raise funds from Western organisations. This creates a double obstacle for UNAFEM, since the barrier constituted by Islam prevents its members from benefitting from Western support, while the gender barrier impedes its ability to gain support from Islamic countries.

■ Contested legitimacy and representativeness

Beyond state collusion and political interests, there are also other factors that impede the recognition of TFIMs as neutral and objective mediators. Traditional conflict settlement mechanisms at the local level are more likely to become dominated or manipulated by family or clan interests, thus threatening their representativeness. Some traditional chiefs such as cadis in the northern cities are also perceived as having collaborated with the Islamist occupation after 2011, which has affected their popular legitimacy.

At the national level, the HCIM is becoming increasingly influenced by the radical Wahhabi and Salafi currents of Islam, whereas at the national level these currents are still underrepresented among the population. One can thus question how representative of the Malian people as a whole such entities really are.

■ Lack of coordination and operational challenges

Finally, a number of operational challenges were mentioned as impeding the provision of effective conflict resolution support. Most of the traditional authorities involved in mediation, for example, are not coordinated via networks; they only operate (and only exert an influence) at the local level. The traditional communicators are the exception here, since they have offices across Mali through the ReCoTraDe.

Legally, the role of TFIMs is also constrained, since they are bound to respect the limits imposed by authorities on what they can and cannot do (especially with regard to engaging with armed actors listed as terrorist entities). According to the archbishop's secretary, this creates a real challenge in reaching out to violent hardliners.

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5. With the exception of religious authorities and griots, who do not represent the incumbent elites.

5. Support: Needs, opportunities and risks

5.1 Support needs

The needs mentioned by the TFIMs and external observers/experts interviewed ranged from political/legal needs to technical and financial requirements for effective action.

■ Official recognition and role in the peace (building) process

Several interlocutors stressed the need to involve TFIMs, and especially the HCIM, more prominently in the peace process, and for the international community in Bamako to engage with it more directly. Others expressed their wish for religious leaders generally to be more engaged in political life and debates, or at least to regulate their political participation in a more transparent manner using formal channels (as suggested earlier).

■ Training

In terms of capacity-building needs, interviewees argued on the one hand that religious and traditional authorities, such as griots and cadis, are untrained, since (with the exception of imams) their positions are hereditary. Nevertheless, most interlocutors mentioned a range of technical gaps which could be remedied with external support. Imam Dicko, for example, mentioned that the HCIM needs to harmonise the levels of knowledge and skills among its members across the country, especially in the North (e.g. in Kidal and Gao).

The archbishop's office is in need of mediation training for church leaders. The UNAFEM requested support for specific training for members of its central committee, and especially for youth members who are progressively replacing the ageing generation of founders. This would include training in communication, leadership, and current topics (for sensitisation missions). Imam Diallo, for his part, stressed the need to counter-balance the current asymmetry in training capacities and resources between the two main competing currents of Islam in Mali. He commended Morocco's efforts to train 500 Sufi imams who promote a more tolerant and peaceful version of Islam, in order to compensate for the significant support that Wahabis and Salafis receive from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In his view, female preachers should also be better trained.

■ Financial and logistical 'accompaniment'

In addition to training TFIMs and harmonising skills across the country, one interviewee mentioned the importance of providing logistical means and resources to support peace-oriented preachers and imams, e.g. through regional radio networks, in order to counter-balance the influence of Salafi-oriented radio stations. Other interlocutors expressed an interest in receiving logistical support to organise transport to remote areas and adequate financial remuneration for the ceremonial services provided by traditional authorities.

■ Networking support and coordination of international assistance

As seen above, very few customary or traditional leaders are organised according to country-wide networks. One interlocutor in particular stressed the need to provide more support to cross-regional initiatives that can link various actors, particularly across the North/South divide.

With respect to international sponsors of dialogue activities, the interviewees expressed a desire for better coordination in order to avoid a duplication of efforts. At the national level, there are allegedly too many conferences with too few results, while at the regional level, it was felt that the relevant organisations and the UN Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA) should invest more resources in creating spaces for local reconciliation and supporting national appropriation of the accord beyond the Algiers process. A lack of coordination of international support at the track 3 level causes communities to become confused by too many workshops. What is required is first of all improved mapping of existing initiatives and their sources of support, as well as efforts to design more creative formats to promote reconciliation and inter-Malian dialogue.

5.2 Opportunities

Now that the Algiers accord has been signed by all major political stakeholders (with the exception of armed Islamist entities), it is necessary to assess whether its implementation will contribute to strengthening the role and formal recognition of TFIMs. Given the likely future decentralisation scheme, the role of traditional authorities is bound to become more significant. These actors are also likely to play a prominent role in the transitional justice mechanisms currently being set up by the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation. The Algiers accord recognises the crucial role of traditional authorities, imams and cadis in the administration of justice and civil mediation – which would seem to amount to a long-overdue formal recognition of these functions that have been performed informally for many generations.

Training for cadis is also planned, in order to support their role in alternative justice mechanisms. Furthermore, funding is promised for traditional authorities to support and valorise their ceremonial role (i.e. in preserving social harmony). Traditional, religious and customary authorities are also invited to serve in the soon to be established consultative local security committees as relays for the government and to sensitise the population to the accords. Finally, the accord also mentions a future representation of traditional authorities in the Senate.

5.3 Risks

While assessing support options to strengthen the role and capacity of TFIMs in Mali, one should carefully assess the risks bound up with the above-mentioned challenges. The sample of interviews conducted in March/April 2015 with external experts (both Malian nationals and staff from international/donor agencies) reflect a wide range of assessments on the nature (and interests) of traditional and religious authorities, and on the need (or not) to strengthen their role in conflict management mechanisms. For some, promoting TFIMs might impede conflict transformation and the search for more equitable social relations and access to political decision-making in Mali.

Another challenge, which is common to all research on civil society, relates to the representativeness of traditional and religious authorities. While it is a laudable aim to reinforce their role in transitional justice mechanisms and North-South, state-society dialogue, the poorly organised process of selecting civil society representatives for the Algiers negotiation process reminds us of the daunting task of selecting which TFIMs should be supported/assisted, according to which criteria.

6. Conclusion

TFIMs in Mali have played a major role in fostering multi-track dialogue, in settling disputes within and between communities, and in serving as transmission belts between state and society in the search for a peaceful exit strategy out of the current security mayhem in northern Mali. On the other hand, such actors should not be treated as an inherent force for peace; the interviews revealed that controversies abound regarding their political influence, their change-oriented vs. conservative agendas, and their degree of legitimacy and representativeness. Prior to any support intervention, one therefore needs to conduct a careful mapping of traditional and religious leaders who claim to be involved in mediation in order to assess their various roles, assets and limitations (which should include a consideration of public/state/external perceptions of these actors).

Here we might offer one example to highlight both the potential and limits of TFIMs in leading dialogue and reconciliation efforts in war-affected regions. In northern cities such as Gao and Timbuktu, social harmony between the various communities has been severely affected by several months of occupation by jihadists and rebel groups who have imposed their version of Islam and pitted ethnic groups against each other (particularly Arabs vs non-Ar-

abs). Given their experience and access, traditional and religious authorities, are best placed to support trust-(re)building activities by fostering inter-community dialogue, communicating messages of reconciliation on local radios, and so on. Nevertheless, for many local residents, the authority and legitimacy of these actors has been undermined by their role during the occupation, or their perceived (ethnic) proximity to the former occupiers.

At the central, track 1 level, traditional authorities should also have played a more active role in the Ouagadougou and Algiers negotiations, since their participation would have represented a pledge of credibility for the parties, given the high level of respect that traditional leaders enjoy among the population.

Finally, one might conclude that regardless of their real motivations and interests, religious leaders and traditional chiefs could also function as potential spoilers of peace given their huge mobilisation capacity, and that if only for this reason they should be constructively engaged and supported, while ensuring that such support does not risk reinforcing conservative, pro-status quo elites who would seek to re-establish an unjust social order and thus plant the seeds of the next rebellion.

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