



KAIPTC
...where peace begins

FILLING THE VACUUM:

Agro-Pastoral Violence and The Crisis of Governance in Mali

Anna N. A. Mensah Medi
Frank Okyere Osei



Occasional Paper 67



Filling the Vacuum: Agro-Pastoral Violence and the Crisis of Governance in Mali

Anna N. A. Mensah Medi & Frank Okyere Osei

Occasional Paper 67

Filling the Vacuum: Agro-Pastoral Violence and the Crisis of Governance in Mali
Anna N. A. Mensah Medi & Frank Okyere Osei
Copyright © 2026 KAIPTC.

The opinions expressed in this occasional paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, its Governing Board or partners. Authors contribute to KAIPTC publications in their individual capacity

Cover Photo Credit: Generated Image
Design and Typesetting: DARIPS Editorial Team

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Complex and Multi-layered Causes of Farmer-herder Conflicts in Mali	3
From Land Ownership Crisis to Disoriented Decentralisation Policies	4
Aggravating Proximate Factors of Agro-pastoral Conflicts in Mali	6
A Transformed Security and Regional Order	7
Assessing the Malian State and International Response to the Crisis	9
Challenges of State Interventions	11
Conclusion	13
Recommendations	14

Abstract

Agro-pastoral violence in Mali has evolved from localised disputes over land, water, and grazing resources into a broader crisis of governance, communal insecurity, and contested authority. This policy paper examines how weaknesses in land governance, decentralisation, customary conflict resolution, and State service delivery have contributed to escalating farmer-herder conflict, particularly in central Mali. It argues that limited State presence and legitimacy have created governance vacuums exploited by armed groups, communal militias, criminal networks, and other non-State actors to provide protection, justice, and alternative authority. Climate stress, demographic pressures, arms proliferation, and the politicisation and ethnicisation of local disputes have intensified these dynamics. The paper assesses Mali's legal, institutional, and security responses, including land-tenure reforms, and identifies persistent weaknesses in implementation, coordination, accountability, and local legitimacy. It also considers the withdrawal of international forces, the role of Russian security actors, Mali's withdrawal from ECOWAS, and integration into the Alliance of Sahel States. The paper concludes that sustainable solutions require legitimate State institutions, inclusive local dispute resolution, support for agro-pastoral livelihoods, and pragmatic regional cooperation on transhumance, displacement, arms flows, and early warning.

Keywords: *Agro-pastoral violence; Mali; governance crisis; farmer-herder conflict; regional security*

Introduction

In the last decade, agro-pastoralist struggles have become a battleground for violent extremist groups, pushing to expand their frontiers and gain access to valuable resources. Conflicts between farmers and herders have become endemic in West Africa, and Mali is an epitome of how cyclical violence can create a complex multi-layered crisis if not promptly addressed. Longstanding unresolved grievances have precipitated violent attacks and reprisals in communities that have co-existed for centuries, making hitherto effortless solutions ineffective. Between 2018 and 2019, more than 300 people were killed in farmer-herder clashes in the central region alone in Mali. By 2020, nearly 700 fatalities had been recorded.¹ The violence has since intensified rather than abated: the central regions of Ségou and Mopti alone now account for close to 60 per cent of all violent events recorded in Mali, and the number of such incidents in 2024 stood roughly half as high again as in 2021.² In the first seven months of 2026, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), reported a 35% increase in fatalities across the country, resulting in 3,435 deaths compared to 2,546 in 2024.³ The resulting instability has let opportunistic extremist groups fill the governance gap left by a retreating state, offering protection, arbitration and revenge to communities ‘abandoned’ by the state.

The Malian state’s ‘business-as-usual’ approach to farmer-herder violence is no longer effective. A single land reform

law cannot resolve the problem, and neither can community trust-building alone, because the crisis is no longer a localised dispute over pasture and fields. This paper argues that the violence, which represents a complex cyclical problem, is also fundamentally a crisis of contested governance. Where the state has retreated and customary authority has been eroded, competing claimants, criminal networks and violent extremist groups have filled the vacuum, converting resource competition into a self-reinforcing cycle of communal violence that now spills across Mali’s borders. A durable response can therefore be neither purely local nor purely national: it must rebuild legitimate governance at the community level while coordinating security, mediation and resource management across the wider Sahel and West Africa. That task has grown harder since 2023, as the withdrawal of international forces, the turn to Russian paramilitaries and Mali’s exit from ECOWAS have deepened the vacuum and fractured the regional architecture through which cooperation was once imaginable.

This paper makes three arguments. First, agro-pastoral violence in Mali is rooted in a crisis of land governance and institutional legitimacy rather than resource scarcity alone. Second, the weakening of State and customary mechanisms has enabled armed actors to exploit local grievances and transform localised disputes into wider intercommunal violence. Third, the post-2023 transformation of Mali’s security and regional environment requires a policy response that combines accountable local governance with pragmatic cross-border

¹ Brottem, L. (2021). The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa, *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Africa Security Brief*, No. 39.

² Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025). *Militant Islamist groups in Africa sustain high pace of lethality*. February 18. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2025-militant-islamist-groups-in-africa/>

³ The Associated Press. (2026). *What to know about the conflict in Mali and the world's most terrorised region*. 31 July. <https://apnews.com/article/mali-conflict-gaia-jnim-fla-what-to-know-95c8bd22d84e270e5d0d83546b414190>

cooperation. The paper is structured as follows. It first examines the complex and multi-layered causes of agro-pastoral violence in Mali, with particular attention to land governance, decentralisation, customary authority, climate stress, armed groups and cross-border dynamics. It then assesses the transformation of Mali's security and regional environment, including the withdrawal of international forces and Mali's realignment from ECOWAS towards the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The paper next evaluates the Malian State's legal, institutional and security responses and identifies key implementation and legitimacy gaps. It concludes by proposing policy measures to restore legitimate governance, strengthen local conflict-resolution mechanisms, address structural drivers of violence, and rebuild pragmatic regional cooperation.

Complex and Multi-layered Causes of Farmer-herder Conflicts in Mali

The multiplication of farmer-herder conflicts in West Africa has become an important security concern, driven by the interaction of demographic growth, climate pressures, competition over land and water, proliferation of small arms, and the expansion of violent extremist groups.⁴ In Mali, these pressures have been particularly acute in the central regions

of Mopti and Ségou,⁵ where longstanding disputes over farmland, grazing routes, water access, and transhumance have increasingly become intertwined with communal violence and armed insurgency.

While international attention has historically focused on the separatist conflict in northern Mali, insecurity in the centre has developed into a complex conflict system.⁶ The violent conflict between farmers and herders in Mali, predominantly in Central Mali continues to threaten the security and stability of the Malian state, and its neighbouring countries.⁷ In 2019, for example, more than 150 Fulani herders were killed by Dogon militias, while at least 35 people were killed in retaliatory attacks by Fulani herders.⁸ More recently, the scale of violence has expanded beyond conventional farmer-herder confrontations. In 2024, the Ségou and Mopti regions recorded 605 violent events and 1,557 fatalities in the context of militant Islamist violence, the highest level recorded in those regions at the time.⁹ By 2025, violence had also intensified in Ségou, where military and Dozo operations against jihadist groups were accompanied by serious attacks against civilians, including the reported killing of more than 30 cattle owners near Markala in October.¹⁰

Several mutually reinforcing factors explain this deterioration. Weak land governance

⁴ Chambas, M. I. (2018). Address by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. United Nations, ECOWAS Conference, Abuja, Nigeria, 26 April 2018.

⁵ Birikorang, E. and Salihu, N. (2020). Revisiting the Trajectory of Regime Change in Africa – The Case of Mali. Policy Brief 8, Accra: KAIPTC

⁶ International Crisis Group. (2016). *Central Mali: An uprising in the making?* (Africa Report No. 238). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making>

⁷ Aning K. and Axelrod I.Z. (2020). Mali, Democracy and ECOWAS's Sanctions Regime [Policy brief 9]. KAIPTC. <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201028-Final-Policy-Brief-9-Axelrod-Aning.pdf>

⁸ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2019). *Mitigating farmer-herder violence in Mali*. Spotlight. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mitigating-farmer-herder-violence-in-mali/>

⁹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025). *The Shifting Front of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>

¹⁰ RFI. (2025). *Mali: L'armée accusée d'avoir tué des éleveurs dans la région de Ségou* [Mali: Army accused of killing herders in the Ségou region]. Yahoo Actualités. October 30. <https://fr.news.yahoo.com/mali-l-arme%C3%A9e-accus%C3%A9e-d-231752443.html>; Human Rights Watch. (2024). Mali: Islamist armed groups, ethnic militias commit atrocities. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/08/mali-islamist-armed-groups-ethnic-militias-commit-atrocities>.

and the erosion of customary mechanisms for regulating access to farmland, pasture and transhumance routes have reduced the capacity of communities to resolve disputes peacefully.¹¹ Climate variability and environmental degradation further increase competition over increasingly scarce resources, while population growth and changing patterns of land use place additional pressure on pastoral mobility.¹² The proliferation of weapons has transformed many local disputes into armed confrontations, while cattle theft, criminal networks and the commercialisation of livestock have added economic incentives to violence.

These local tensions have also been increasingly militarised and ethnicised. Dozo self-defence groups, initially organised to protect communities, have become important armed actors in central Mali and have carried out retaliatory attacks, particularly against Fulani communities accused of supporting jihadists.¹³ Jihadist organisations, particularly JNIM and its Katiba Macina network, have exploited these grievances, presenting themselves in some areas as alternative providers of security and dispute resolution while imposing taxation, movement restrictions and coercive forms of governance.¹⁴ By 2026, JNIM was directly confronting Dozo militias in parts of Mopti and Ségou, demonstrating how farmer-herder tensions have become embedded within a much wider struggle over territorial control and political authority.¹⁵

Thus, farmer-herder violence in contemporary Mali cannot be explained by resource scarcity alone. Land and livelihood disputes remain important underlying drivers, but their effects are amplified by weak governance, the erosion of customary institutions, climate and demographic pressures, ethnic polarisation, armed self-defence, criminal economies, and jihadist insurgency. The result is a conflict environment in which local disputes can rapidly escalate into broader communal and political violence.

From Land Ownership Crisis to Disoriented Decentralisation Policies

Land ownership in pre-colonial Mali was acquired through inheritance and managed by traditional leaders and customary laws.¹⁶ The ownership of lands was largely collective, with those having direct line of descent to the land, chiefs and village founders exercising greater rights of ownership and use than others.¹⁷ Land registration was introduced by colonial authorities, where vacant and ownerless lands were attributed to the state.¹⁸ Post-colonial Mali recognised both customary rights to land ownership and land registration. The registration process was however marred with lack of transparency, complexities, and expensive procedures which traced the path for crises and conflicts in land management.

¹¹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2019). *Mitigating farmer-herder violence in Mali*. Spotlight.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ ACLED. (2025). *From hunters to militias: The militarisation of Dozos in Mali*. <https://acleddata.com/report/hunters-militias-militarisation-dozos-mali>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ACLED. (2026). *Africa overview: June 2026* [Mali country analysis]. 5 June. <https://acleddata.com/update/africa-overview-june-2026#mali-a-jnim-offensive-against-dozo-militias-drives-a-surge-in-violence-in-central-mali-3>

¹⁶ Djire, M. (2007). Land registration in Mali-No land ownership for farmers, IIED, 144

¹⁷ Wells, T. (1999). Land tenure and the cadastral system of Mali, Cadastral and land information systems-SIE526

¹⁸ Djire, (2007), p. 4.

In 1999, Mali institutionalised a decentralised system of governance which established local government authorities at the commune, district, and regional levels.¹⁹ This provision required that natural resources, including lands were to be managed by local authorities while serving the interests of the population. There were however gaps in the process of transferring the management of natural resources to local authorities.²⁰ Clear directions were not given to determine the specific roles of stakeholders including technical departments and village or traditional structures in the distribution of land and other resources under the local government's authority. Under the principal decentralisation law (the Code des Collectivités Territoriales) and Law N° 96-050 of 16 October 1996, local governments were given control over the management and protection of natural resources: the state could transfer responsibility for public lands to them, while they became responsible for protecting the environment, formulating land use plans, developing government land and organising agro-forestry production, with communes charged with land management and the ratification of residential leases.²¹ This paved the way for the politicisation of land tenure issues.²²

The disruption in local customary conflict resolution mechanisms is an important factor in the aggravation of farmer-herder conflicts in Mali. Traditional authorities previously led the settling of conflicts through community-based mechanisms. However, the presence of foreigners and

settlers from other communities restricted the role and influence of traditional leaders over their communities. Disputes among Fulani herders and farmers could once be resolved by traditional leaders, but those involving other groups escalated into inter-community conflicts that exceeded their authority. Reliance on state institutions also grew fraught amid allegations of corruption: the Dioros (pasture managers), for instance, were accused of paying officials to win disputes.²³ Such allegations deepened mistrust between communities and their leaders. Rising tension and insecurity drove local administrators, judges and security forces from the region, and the withdrawal of state agencies removed basic services too, compounding local grievances and paving the way for further aggravating factors to the conflict. A further distortion of local arbitration comes from elite interference. An official of Mali's national early warning structure explained that wealthy Fulani traders and senior administration figures have organised into associations, so that when a village dispute arises these patrons are called upon and, in his words, the matter is settled at a snap of the fingers, often favouring their kin even when they are in the wrong. This capture of arbitration by well-connected elites deepens the frustration of farmers who lack such protection and erodes confidence that grievances can be settled fairly.²⁴

¹⁹ SNV, and Codelo. (2004). Decentralisation in Mali: Putting policy into practice. Decentralisation and local governance, Bulletin 362, https://www.kit.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/611_sarabs_merge362.pdf

²⁰ Jones-Casey, K. Hughes, A. and Knox, A. (2011). The challenges of decentralisation in Mali. Focus of land in Africa, brief on Mali.

²¹ Jones-Casey et al., (2011).

²² Jones-Casey et al., (2011), p. 42.

²³ Sangare, B. (2018). Settling local disputes is key to peace in Central Mali: Restoring state authority isn't enough to stabilise the region – local grievances and rights must be attended to, Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/settling-local-disputes-is-key-to-peace-in-central-mali>

²⁴ Interview with an official of Mali's national early warning structure, conducted by the author, Bamako, 19 February 2021.

Aggravating Proximate Factors of Agro-pastoral Conflicts in Mali

Beyond the governance failures at the root of the crisis, a set of proximate factors intensifies the violence. The most pervasive is climate change, which acts as a threat multiplier by sharpening competition over a shrinking resource base. Rising temperatures and recurrent droughts across Mali and the wider Sahel are depleting the pasture and water on which farmers and herders depend, compressing the margins within which the two livelihoods once coexisted. As grazing land degrades and seasons shift, herders move earlier and further for water while farmers extend cultivation into former transhumance corridors, so encounters that customary arrangements once absorbed now turn violent. Climate stress does not create the conflict, but by eroding livelihoods it lowers the threshold at which competition tips into confrontation. An official of Mali's national early warning structure observed that the water points once reserved for herders are drying up, so that the search for water itself now routinely provokes confrontation, compounded by the absence of any pastoral management plan in most affected localities.²⁵

Jihadist and extremist groups capitalise on these weaknesses to propagate their ideologies,²⁶ and the farmer-herder conflicts in central Mali have proved fertile ground for their infiltration. Although religion is not an underlying cause of the conflict, extremist groups exploit jihadist

ideology to manipulate the different factions for their own ends. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), also known as Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) for example, associate themselves with the Fulani herders to resist the land tenure system which they consider to be in favour of the farming communities.²⁷ The Macina Liberation Front (MLF)²⁸, also known as Katiba Macina founded by Hamadou Kouffa, focuses on rallying Fulani herdsmen in their support, while fusing Islamist terrorism with the pastoralist grievances.²⁹ This manipulation is compounded by a corrosive collective suspicion. An official of Mali's national early warning structure noted that in the Mopti and Ségou regions popular perception increasingly conflates herders with jihadists, so that a herder involved in any incident is assumed to have acted deliberately in concert with armed groups. Such prejudice, founded or not, hardens communal antagonism and makes disputes once settled amicably far harder to resolve.³⁰

The exploitation of existing grievances to recruit and indoctrinate the local population with extremist ideologies includes the offering of incentives, compensations and instant justice for victims.³¹ While the procedures for seeking justice was cumbersome and long, state authorities were seen as corrupt and there was no trust in them. Groups like MLF will intervene to replace stolen cattle for Fulani herders and attack suspects to satisfy the population and gain their trust.³²

²⁵ Interview with an official of Mali's national early warning structure, Bamako, 19 February 2021.

²⁶ Aning K. and Axelrod I.Z. (2020). Mali, Democracy and ECOWAS's Sanctions Regime [Policy brief 9]. KAIPTC. <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20201028-Final-Policy-Brief-9-Axelrod-Aning.pdf>

²⁷ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2019). Mitigating farmer-herder violence in Mali, Spotlight.

²⁸ The MLF has claimed responsibility for several attacks in Central Mali, including the assassination of political figures and members of the security forces.

²⁹ Fulton, K. and Nickel, B. P. (2017). Africa's pastoralist: A new battleground for terrorism, Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

³⁰ Interview with an official of Mali's national early warning structure, Bamako, 19 February 2021.

³¹ Interview with Security personnel in Bamako held on the 15.02.2021.

³² Interview held on the 15.02.2021 with an agent of the Anti-Terrorist Brigade of Mali, Bamako.

The rebellion in the North of Mali has increased the proliferation of weapons in the central regions of the country. This has resulted in an increase in various criminal activities including cattle theft in all herding communities, and has heightened the scale of violence to be deadlier. The sense of impunity that surrounds such criminal acts has led to the increase in armed bandits who are responsible for many incidents, notably attacks on fairs and markets, thefts of vehicles or cattle and assaults on stallholders, and the settling of political scores.³³ For example, in May 2012, a land dispute led to the massacre of sixteen Fulani herders by Dogon farmers in Sari (Koro circle), where no police officer was stationed. This violent episode, which has remained unpunished, has played a direct role in the decision by nomad Fulani groups to arm themselves; that same year, some of them joined the radical movements that were occupying Gao.³⁴

There is also a regional dimension of the farmer-herder conflict in central Mali. The effects of violent conflicts related to farmer-herder conflicts in Mali did not only result in the abandon of posts by state agencies, but also led to the displacement of an important section of the population. The cross-border search for greener pastures is progressively leading to neo-pastoralism in the region³⁵. This involves wealthy political and military elites amassing huge herds of cattle and hiring armed herders to protect their investments at all cost. The encroachment of these armed herders from one territory

to another, triggers conflicts with farm owners, and fuels other crisis among regional states.³⁶ These cross-border pressures are borne out by practitioners. An official of Mali's national early warning structure recalled that Malian herders moving into neighbouring Guinea in search of pasture caused such damage that, in 2017, the Guinean authorities issued a decree barring their entry, and that violent clashes between Malian and Guinean communities followed in which lives were lost on both sides.³⁷ The Malian state has however taken a few steps to resolve the underlying issues in these agro-pastoral conflicts.

A Transformed Security and Regional Order

The dynamics analysed above have been overtaken by a profound reordering of Mali's security and regional environment since 2023, which has widened rather than closed the governance vacuum at the heart of the crisis. Three developments are worth noting. First, the international security architecture that underpinned civilian protection and the restoration of state authority has been dismantled. At the transitional government's insistence, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) completed its withdrawal by the end of December 2023, closing its bases in the central regions, including Mopti, and removing a presence that, whatever its limitations, had monitored the ceasefire, documented abuses and supported the return of state officials.³⁸ Its

³³ International Crisis Group. (2016).

³⁴ International Crisis Group. (2016).

³⁵ Velturo, M. and Dick, S. (2020). How arms proliferation is driving herder-farmer conflicts in the Sahel, World politics review, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/how-arms-proliferation-is-driving-herder-farmer-conflict-in-the-sahel/>

³⁶ Velturo, M. and Dick, S. (2017).

³⁷ Interview with an official of Mali's national early warning structure, Bamako, 19 February 2021.

³⁸ United Nations Security Council. (2023). Resolution 2690 (2023). See also Sow, D., Koné, F. R., & Koné, H. (2023, July 6). *MINUSMA leaves Mali: Will regional leaders step up on security?* ISS Today. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/minusma-leaves-mali-will-regional-leaders-step-up-on-security>

departure, after the earlier exit of French and European forces, left the areas worst affected by farmer-herder violence with even thinner protection against armed groups.

Second, Mali turned to Russian paramilitary support to fill the vacuum, with consequences that deepened communal grievance. Malian forces operating alongside Wagner personnel were implicated in large-scale abuses against civilians, disproportionately Fulani, including the killing of more than three hundred people at Moura in 2022.³⁹ Wagner announced its departure in 2025 and its role was assumed by the Kremlin-controlled Africa Corps, a transition that preserved personnel continuity while adopting a more hands-off posture.⁴⁰ The net effect has been neither stabilisation nor protection: extremist groups have expanded, abuses have continued to alienate the communities most exposed to farmer-herder violence, and the association of the state with external mercenaries has further eroded its legitimacy in the eyes of a distrustful population.

Third, and most consequential for this paper, Mali has exited the regional framework through which a coordinated response was once conceivable. After successive coups, it joined Burkina Faso and Niger to form the AES in September 2023, and the three formally withdrew from the Economic Community of West

African States (ECOWAS) with effect from 29 January 2025.⁴¹ As a result, the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the transhumance framework and the bloc's early warning and mediation instruments no longer bind Mali, even as the cross-border drivers of the violence, transhumance, arms flows and displacement, continue unabated. The regional coordination the conflict demands has thus become harder at the very moment it is most needed.

The crisis has escalated from the rural periphery towards the centre of the state. JNIM and Islamic State affiliates have exploited the compounding vacuum to seize ground, and from September 2025 JNIM blockaded fuel imports into southern Mali, choking a landlocked capital that depends on tanker convoys from Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire for almost all of its fuel.⁴² What began as localised competition over pasture and fields has matured into a threat capable of besieging Bamako itself, confirming that the crisis is no longer a discrete rural problem but one thread in a wider unravelling of state authority. The remainder of this paper assesses the state's earlier reforms against this transformed reality before setting out recommendations calibrated to it.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch. (2022, April 5). *Mali: Massacre by army, foreign soldiers*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>

⁴⁰ Bauer, R. (2025). *The Wagner Group is leaving Mali, but Russian mercenaries aren't going anywhere*. June 12, RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/06/the-wagner-group-is-leaving-mali-but-russian-mercenaries.html>

⁴¹ ECOWAS Commission. (2025). *Press statement: The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of Niger from ECOWAS has become effective January 30*. <https://www.ecowas.int/press-statement-2/>. See also Aboagye, F. B. (2025, January 31). *The withdrawal of AES from ECOWAS: An opportunity for re-evaluating existing instruments for regional integration?* Amani Africa. <https://amaniafrica-et.org/the-withdrawal-of-aes-from-ecowas-an-opportunity-for-re-evaluating-existing-instruments-for-regional-integration/>; Alliance of Sahel States. (2023). *Charter of Liptako-Gourma establishing the Alliance of Sahel States*. Bamako, 16 September 2023.

⁴² Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2026). *JNIM attacks in western Mali reshape Sahel conflict*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/jnim-attacks-western-mali-sahel/>

Assessing the Malian State and International Response to the Crisis

While the security environment remains fragile, climate change and its impact on livelihoods exacerbate farmer-herder tensions. The Malian government, in its effort to stop the threatening violence, initiated some strategies to respond to the gaps in the legal, institutional, and security framework of land use in Mali. These measures, most designed before the rupture of 2023 to 2025, warrant assessment on their own terms, for what they attempted and why their promise has largely gone unrealised amid the collapse of the security and regional order.

Reform of the Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Considering the fact that approximately 42% of land use conflicts in Mali are between herders and farmers, and most of these conflicts stem from disputed access to and control over land and water resources,⁴³ the Malian State sought to review certain legislations on land ownership to mitigate land litigations. The legal reforms sought to guarantee and protect the legitimate rights of priority family farms and other users to land and natural resources. Two processes took place in parallel on land reform. The process of developing the Agricultural Land Law (LFA) on the one hand, led by a tripartite steering committee (administration, civil society, research) and directed by the Ministry of Agriculture in order to clarify the Agricultural Land Policy (PFA) adopted in 2014, and which resulted

in promulgation in 2017, and the Land Law Reform on the other hand, initiated in 2016, carried out by the Ministry of State Domains and Land Affairs in order to continue the revision of the State and Land Code (Code De Foncière).⁴⁴

The adoption of the Agricultural Land Law (Loi Foncière Agricole – LFA), by the National Assembly on March 31, 2017 made it the first law that specifically dealt with agricultural lands in Mali.⁴⁵ Its enactment by the president brought a commendable impact on the prevention of land ownership disputes. This law establishes the recognition of the collective customary land rights of families and village communities. The law establishes a system of local land management with the creation of agricultural and land commissions at the municipal and village levels and provides for provisions to give legal value to the resolution of conflicts by land commissions.⁴⁶ The Agricultural Land Law also requires that the State or customary authorities allocate at least 15% of land in areas subject to development and improvement to women and youth associations. This law seeks to overcome the marginalisation of women in land ownership and respond to the challenges in women's land ownership in Mali.

The State and Land Code was adopted in March 2000 and went through different revisions in 2002, 2012, and 2016. It emphasised on the decentralisation approaches where rights to lands are managed by local government bodies.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jones-Casey, K., Knox, A. (2011). Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Mali, Focus on Land in Africa, Placing land rights at the heart of development. Brief, February 11. World Resources Institute

⁴⁴ Secrétariat du Comité technique Foncier & développement. (2020). Mise en œuvre des réformes, gouvernance en temps de crise et développement : les enjeux du foncier agricole et rural au Mali, [Implementation of reforms, governance in times of crisis and development: the challenges of agricultural and rural land in Mali], Summary notes, Number 30, http://www.foncier-developpement.fr/wp-content/uploads/FR_Note-de-synthese-30_HD.pdf

⁴⁵ Coulibaly, M. (2017). Historic New Law Secures Land for Malian Farmers, International Institute for Sustainable Development, <https://www.iisd.org/articles/insight/historic-new-law-secures-land-malian-farmers>

⁴⁶ Secrétariat du Comité technique Foncier & développement, (2020).

⁴⁷ Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement. (2016). *Code domanial et foncier* [Land and property code] (Ordonnance n°00-027 du 22 mars 2000, modifiée par la loi n°2016-025 du 14 juin 2016). République du Mali. <https://sgg-mali.ml/codes/mali-code-domanial-foncier-2000-mai-2016.pdf>

Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions

A security-focused approach was opted to end agro-pastoral conflicts in central Mali. This included the provision for reinforcement of 4,000 soldiers, and the provision of the army with new material and financial resources.⁴⁸ The Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions, was a plan that sought to adopt both a military and development approach to mitigate farmer-herder conflicts in Central Mali. It sought to retake territories captured by the armed groups, bring back state officials to communities where they were absent, create enabling economic development, and lastly, focus on communication to explain the strategy to people living in the affected areas. According to the Malian Ministry of Security and Civil Protection, the Plan was structured into four components: a security component to strengthen local security and the criminal justice chain; a governance component to restore the functioning of state administration and local authorities; a socio-economic development component to generate wealth, jobs and basic infrastructure; and a communication component to mobilise civil society for a culture of peace.⁴⁹

Other security provisions and responses were also considered by the state to mitigate the impact of agro-pastoral conflicts in central Mali. In 2019, the government established a special administrative entity called the “political

framework to manage the crisis in central Mali” in order to coordinate political and military efforts.⁵⁰ The anti-jihadi vigilante group known as Dan Na Amassagou was disbanded by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita who also sacked two generals: chief of staff Gen M'Bemba Moussa Keita and chief of land forces Gen Abdoulaye Coulibaly and replaced them following a deadly terrorist attack and an ethnic massacre that killed 134 Fulani herders in central Mali.⁵¹ The Dan Na Amassagou was formed in August 2018, as an armed group to represent Dogon hunters. It refused to lay down its arms, arguing that the weapons were necessary to protect Dogon farming communities from jihadist threats.⁵²

There were a few other interventions by non-state actors like traditional authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs). Traditional authorities were recognised as mediators who settled conflicts among groups and individuals through community-based mechanisms. The evolution of tensions between different communities and traditional authorities restricted their impact. They were also accused of corrupt judgements which questioned their credibility in conflict resolution. CSOs also played various roles in mitigating violence associated with farmer-herder conflicts in Central Mali. An example is the role played by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in the signing of the July 2018 cease fire agreement between the Dogon and Fulani groups in Central Mali.⁵³ They continued

⁴⁸ FIDH & AMDH. (2018). In central Mali, civilian populations caught between terrorism and counter-terrorism (Fact-finding Mission Report No. 727a). https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fidh_centre-of-mali_population-sized-between-terrorism-and-counter-terrorism_727_en_novembre2018.pdf

⁴⁹ Malian Ministry of Security and Civil Protection. (2017). Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions.

<https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/PLAN-DE-SECURISATION-INTEGREE-DES-REGIONS-DU-CENTRE.pdf>

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group. (2020). Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence, report No 293/Africa, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali>

⁵¹ Reuters. (2019). *Mali leader sacks two generals after ethnic massacre, jihadi attack*. March 24. <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/mali-leader-sacks-two-generals-after-ethnic-massacre-jihadi-attack-idUSL8N21BON6/>

⁵² Ross, A. (2019). *Mali struggles to disarm ethnic militia suspected of massacre*. Reuters. April 19. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/mali-struggles-to-disarm-ethnic-militia-suspected-of-massacre-idUSKCN1RVOWB/>

⁵³ Sangare, B. (2018). Settling local disputes is key to peace in Central Mali: Restoring state authority isn't enough to stabilise the region – local grievances and rights must be attended to, Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/settling-local-disputes-is-key-to-peace-in-central-mali>

to sensitise the youth and hold dialogues aimed at ending violent conflicts between the different factions.

Challenges of State Interventions

Despite the legal and institutional reforms initiated by the Malian state, limitations in their implementation did not resolve farmer-herder conflicts. There are still some barriers and challenges in obtaining land titles. The 15% of agricultural irrigated land to be reserved for vulnerable groups, like women and the youth for example, was not backed by a decree for implementation, hence women and youth are still deprived of the right to land ownership.⁵⁴ Multiple institutional authorisation of land transfers have also constituted sources of conflict due to the lack of adequate communication and coordination within government offices. Corruption and allegations of the State's support behind certain factions of armed groups, have also discredited the role of the State in resolving inter-communal issues, rooted in the farmer-herder violent conflicts. Out of 185 firms surveyed in Mali for the 2016 World Bank Enterprise Survey, 43.9% agreed that firms are expected to give gifts to officials "to get things done".⁵⁵ A recurring theme in practitioner testimony is that the state engages the problem only reactively. According to an official of the national early warning structure, the authorities rarely intervene until a conflict has erupted and lives have been lost, at which point dignitaries,

griots and municipal representatives are sent to mediate, only for tensions to flare again because the underlying causes go untreated. He attributed this both to decentralisation, assumed to have passed pastoral management to mayors and local councils, and to the low priority the central state accords the issue amid competing crises. He identified preventive measures that remain unrealised, including drilling to sustain drying water points and reforestation of grazing zones, underlining that the state treats the symptoms rather than the roots of conflict.⁵⁶

The limited presence of State institutions in parts of central and northern Mali has constrained the delivery of basic administrative, security, and justice services, thereby weakening the implementation of reforms and contributing to persistent impunity for perpetrators of intercommunal violence. With approximately 15,800 military and paramilitary personnel responsible for a territory of 1,240,192 square kilometres, Mali's security forces faced significant challenges in establishing an effective and sustained presence across the country.⁵⁷ The resulting gaps in State authority and the provision of security and other public services have created opportunities for armed groups to expand their influence and assume functions normally associated with the State, contributing to heightened tensions and violence between communities.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Coulibaly, B., Sagoe, G., & Shixiang, L. (2021). Towards poverty alleviation in developing countries: An empirical study of the impact of land tenure reforms in Kati, Mali. *PLoS ONE*, 16(3), e0246502. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246502>

⁵⁵ Shipley, T. (2017). Mali: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption, Transparency International, CEM/U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/assets/uploads/helpdesk/Overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-Mali_2020_PR.pdf

⁵⁶ Interview with an official of Mali's national early warning structure, Bamako, 19 February 2021.

⁵⁷ Ibrahim, Y., Zapata, M. (2018). Regions at risk: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Mali, Early warning country report, Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

⁵⁸ Tobie, A., Chauzal, G. (2018). State Services in an Insecure Environment: Perceptions Among Civil Society in Mali,

SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, 2018 (7); Lyammouri, R. (2021). *Community Based Armed Groups Series*, Resolve Network, Available at <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.4>

The exclusion of real representation from the central region of Mopti in the peace process that led to the Algiers Accord, suggests the lack on State interest in the concerns of Fulani communities, which constitutes both pastoralists and sedentary farmers.⁵⁹ Such exclusions can provoke retaliatory violence and encourage the inclination of such groups towards embracing non state armed groups and jihadist radicalisations.

The politicisation of these conflicts was a central concern for civil society interlocutors. A national youth leader warned that farmer-herder disputes are increasingly instrumentalised by political and communal actors, read through partisan and ethnic lenses rather than as local resource disagreements, which inflames them and forecloses impartial settlement. Given the state's repeated failures to resolve such disputes, he argued for strengthening local structures to adjudicate them, giving communities legitimate mechanisms to arbitrate grievances before they are captured by wider rivalries or armed groups.⁶⁰

The limited State presence in certain parts of the central region has resulted in serious violations and abuses of human rights. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) reported in 2019 that in the Mopti region, many villages were under embargo by jihadists, preventing local people from going about their usual daily activities of

commerce or agriculture leading in turn to food insecurity and hunger.⁶¹ In the areas where the state security forces returned, they were accused of several human rights abuses and hence did not win the hearts of the locals. They claimed that the security situation was better under the jihadists or when the state was absent in 2012, than after their return in 2013.⁶² A report by International Crisis Group in 2016 cited an example in March 2013, in DOUNGOURA, where at least twenty people, mainly Fulani, were killed and thrown down a well.⁶³ The report indicated that this case was never clarified or solved, and although representatives of the victims quickly contacted the Malian authorities, they waited for more than a year before sending a delegation to support the investigation mission of the MINUSMA human rights office. Another report by Human Rights Watch⁶⁴, documented the detention of more than 60 men by Malian security forces in 2016, allegedly for their suspected support for or membership of Islamist armed groups in central and northern Mali. Malian soldiers summarily executed at least 10 of them and tortured or otherwise mistreated at least 20.

⁵⁹ Simpson, C. (2016). *Trouble in the heart of Mali: Unrest in central regions threatens deeper instability*. June 30. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/06/30/trouble-heart-mali>

⁶⁰ Interview with a national youth leader, Bamako, 20 February 2021.

⁶¹ United Nations. (2019). Mali needs comprehensive strategy to prevent violence and human rights abuses, says Independent Expert, Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/02/mali-needs-comprehensive-strategy-prevent-violence-and-human-rights-abuses>, Accessed on September 15, 2023.

⁶² International Crisis Group. (2016).

⁶³ International Crisis Group. (2016).

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2017). Mali: Conflict and aftermath: Compendium of Human Rights Watch reporting, 2012-2017. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/malicompendium0217.pdf

Conclusion

The farmer-herder crisis in Mali is ultimately a crisis of governance, layered with climatic, criminal and extremist pressures until localised competition over land and water has hardened into cyclical, cross-border violence. The central lesson of this analysis is that the problem cannot be resolved by treating resource disputes, insecurity, or weak institutions as separate challenges. Where legitimate state authority is absent or distrusted, armed groups, militias, criminal networks, and politicised local actors can appropriate unresolved grievances and convert them into enduring cycles of violence. The reforms the state has initiated, from the Agricultural Land Law to the Integrated Security Plan, are sound in principle but have faltered in implementation, while abuses associated with security interventions have further undermined public confidence.

Breaking the cycle requires rebuilding legitimate governance at the community level, restoring an accountable state presence, and coordinating security, mediation and resource management across borders. The fracturing of West Africa's regional order, marked by Mali's exit from ECOWAS and its realignment within the AES, has made that coordination harder but no less essential. This places a premium on pragmatic cooperation across the new regional divide and on the African Union as a framework to which all parties still belong.

Mali cannot secure its way out of a governance crisis through military force alone. Reducing agro-pastoral violence requires institutions that communities regard as legitimate, mechanisms capable of resolving disputes before they become communal conflicts, and regional arrangements capable of managing the cross-border movement of people, livestock, weapons and armed groups. Without these conditions, every security intervention risks treating the symptoms of violence while leaving intact the governance vacuum from which it continues to grow.

Recommendations

- 1. Restore inclusive and legitimate governance.** The Malian Government should re-establish impartial civilian administration, justice and basic services in central Mali, ensuring meaningful participation of Fulani and other affected communities in local governance and dialogue.
- 2. Rebuild regional cooperation.** AES member states should harmonise approaches to transhumance, border security and cross-border trafficking, while the African Union should facilitate practical cooperation with ECOWAS states on shared livestock corridors, displacement and other cross-border dynamics.
- 3. Address structural drivers of agro-pastoral violence.** The Malian Government, AU and development partners should prioritise climate adaptation, water and pasture infrastructure, land governance and livelihood diversification through conflict-sensitive, rights-based approaches.
- 4. Strengthen customary conflict resolution.** The Malian Government and local authorities should restore traditional and religious leaders' roles in dispute resolution, with clear mandates, oversight and safeguards against political manipulation.
- 5. Re-establish accountable state presence.** The Malian Government and security institutions should expand security, justice and essential services in under-governed areas while ensuring accountability for abuses.
- 6. Strengthen community-based early warning and response.** The Malian Government, AES and AU should connect community, traditional and civil-society monitoring to regional early-warning systems and establish clear protocols for timely preventive action.

About the Authors

Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah Medi (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Academic Affairs (FAA) of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). She holds a PhD in Law and Political Science from the Mohammed V University, Morocco. Her research focus includes; Conflict Resolution in Africa, Protection of women and children in armed conflicts, Gender implications in violent extremism, Gender mainstreaming in Peace Support Operations and in Maritime Security.

Frank O. Osei is Head of the Peace Operations, Stabilization and Peacebuilding Programme at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), and a Doctoral Candidate at the College of Community and Public Affairs, State University of New York at Binghamton.

How to Cite

Mensah Medi, A. N. A., & Osei, F. O. (2026). Filling the Vacuum: Agro-Pastoral Violence and the Crisis of Governance in Mali. *Occasional Paper 67*. Accra: KAIPTC

About the project

This study was conducted with support from the Government of Norway to undertake action research on emerging security challenges in Africa.

About the Centre

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) is an ECOWAS Centre of Excellence that provides globally recognised capacity for international actors on African peace and security through training, education and research to foster peace and stability in Africa.



KAIPTC
...where peace begins



Norwegian Embassy
Accra

KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE
PMB CT 210, CANTONMENTS, ACCRA-GHANA | T: 233(0)302718200 | F: 233 (0)302718201