PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE ACTORS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS IN MALI AND NIGER

Evidence Synthesis and Learning Report Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS)

November 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Africa), whose thoughtful review and incisive feedback significantly sharpened the analysis and strengthened the rigour of the recommendations and key takeaways.

This report was prepared concurrently with two other deliverables-- the evidence synthesis and learning report on perceptions of violent extremism (Sheely and Medam 2025) and the research report on natural resource governance (Bezares Calderón and Olawole 2025). As a result, some general text on the JASS programme and context is reused across these three studies. As noted in the methodology section, we utilised a variety of generative AI tools (Chat GPT, Copilot, MaxQDA Tailwind) to assist with various elements of evidence synthesis.

Note to the Reader: The primary audience of this document is a set of stakeholders already familiar with Mali and Niger. As such, the report does not provide extensive background information about the history of the area, or other contextual information that could be considered common knowledge for the document's primary audience.

This is version 3.0 of this report, published in November 2025 for public dissemination.

Suggested Citation: Medam, Benjamin and Ryan Sheely. 2025. *Perceptions of Justice Actors and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Mali and Niger*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK-funded **Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS) programme**, led by Mercy Corps and local partners, aims to enhance stability in Mali and Niger by promoting inclusive land governance, natural resource management, and access to justice for marginalised communities. Launched in central Mali in 2021 and expanded in 2023 to 24 communes across both countries, JASS will run until 2026. The programme focuses on improving conflict management, building resilience to climate-related stress, and strengthening the evidence base for locally driven interventions.

This **Evidence Synthesis and Learning Report**, part of the JASS Evidence and Learning Agenda, explores **conflict mediation and natural resource governance in Mali and Niger, with a focus on community perceptions of formal and informal justice mechanisms**. Grounded in JASS's Theory of Change — which posits that strengthening inclusive and effective local dispute resolution structures enhances trust in justice systems — the report **draws on data from the 2024 midterm evaluation, practitioner sensemaking sessions, interviews, focus groups, and internal assessments**. A total of **3,687 individuals were surveyed across the regions where JASS works: Koutiala, Ségou, Koulikoro, and San in Mali, and Maradi and Tahoua in Niger**, including both participants and non-participants. The analysis examines **how experiences with conflict, access to justice, and the effectiveness of conflict mitigation structures shape perceptions of fairness, trust, and legitimacy**. Insights from local partners contextualise the findings, supporting learning and advocacy efforts aimed at improving justice delivery, reducing the appeal of extremist alternatives, and promoting long-term stability. This report explicitly differentiates between JASS' zones of intervention in Mali and Niger, recognising the contextual specificities in each country and exploring how these differences shape community experiences with and perceptions of justice.

The report moves from context to analysis to practical implications. It begins by outlining the security and justice landscape in JASS areas, setting the scene for understanding community interaction with justice systems. It then explores three key dimensions of perception of justice: trust in local authorities, views on dispute resolution processes, and confidence in the broader legal system—using survey and qualitative data for a comprehensive picture. The report also unpacks the factors shaping these perceptions, including personal conflict experiences and challenges in navigating formal systems. The final section offers practical recommendations for strengthening justice delivery in fragile settings. A modular format allows stakeholders to easily access relevant sections. The study's key findings are as follows:

Across JASS areas, there is strong trust in traditional leaders like village chiefs and elders, who are seen as culturally relevant and accessible. Most community members view local dispute resolution as peaceful and fair, though inclusivity—especially for women and youth—remains limited due to entrenched norms. While informal methods are preferred, formal systems are used when conflicts escalate, or local resolutions seem biased. Perceptions of justice have improved overall, with 85% now viewing formal processes as fair—an 11% increase since the programme's start.

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Perceptions of justice are closely tied to conflict exposure.

Perceptions of justice are closely tied to conflict exposure. Most respondents report peaceful environments, but those who have experienced conflict are less likely to trust authorities or view justice as fair. Most disputes involve land or natural resources and are typically addressed through local systems. However, unresolved or complex disputes may escalate to formal courts. Climate stress, seasonal migration, and socio-economic inequality heighten tensions—especially among farmers and herders. In JASS' implementation areas in Mali, conflict and radicalisation have strained social cohesion and traditional systems, while in Niger's, economic migration is a more common response to marginalisation.

Findings highlight a complex interplay between traditional, community-based, and formal systems. While most respondents value traditional structures for managing conflict, some criticise their lack of consistency, especially in cross-jurisdiction disputes or cases needing documentation. Regression analysis shows that gaps in transparency can reduce trust, even in commonly used systems. Still, traditional leaders remain central—especially in Mali, where social ties reinforce their legitimacy. In Niger, religious figures are also key justice actors, particularly in rural areas with limited formal access.

In contrast, those who are aware of a broader range of justice actors and who prefer specialised structures—like Conflict Resolution Committees (CRCs) and land commissions (COFOs)—tend to report more positive views. These community-based mechanisms improve access and are particularly effective for land disputes. While well established in Mali through oral traditions like RECOTRAD, these structures are less widespread in Niger. Legal illiteracy, poor documentation, and tensions between traditional and formal systems present ongoing challenges. However, efforts such as COFO members' training and the promotion of systematic conciliation reports show progress toward integration. Despite these efforts, trust in formal systems remains low.

Access to formal justice is limited by legal illiteracy, language barriers, cost, and social stigma. Although people with some knowledge of land and natural resource laws view the system more favourably, most lack this knowledge—particularly in Mali. Formal justice is seen as inaccessible and intimidating, reinforcing reliance on informal systems. The dominance of French in legal proceedings excludes many who speak local languages, and there are few effective ways to share legal information in accessible formats. Despite JASS's efforts to improve legal awareness, corruption and elite influence—especially in regions with wealthy diaspora connections—continue to undermine trust. In both countries, formal court cases are often avoided due to fears of harming social cohesion, as court involvement is seen as divisive and potentially damaging to family and community relationships.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations for Programming and Policy. This study supports a core assumption in of JASS's theory of change, which suggests that people's perceptions of justice institutions—both informal and formal—are shaped by their direct experiences with the accessibility, inclusivity, and effectiveness of these systems. Findings validate the relevance of the programme's work on conflict resolution and dispute resolution in Mali and Niger, demonstrating that JASS's work with COFOs, CRCs, and SCAP/RU offers strong potential to bridge local dispute mechanisms with formal legal institutions. The report emphasises the need to continue data collection, particularly through the annual survey, to deepen understanding of how JASS influences perceptions of justice and governance, and to test whether these perceptions contribute to broader stability. Moreover, integrating learnings from Objective 1 with broader programming under Objectives 2 and 3 can foster synergies and align day-to-day activities with the overall goal of improving security in both countries. The continued practice of sense-making sessions, which provide valuable collaborative space for joint data analysis and reflection, is crucial for adaptive management. Tailoring strategies to the diverse regional and national dynamics within Mali and Niger is essential, as variations in trust, conflict exposure, and the role of traditional authorities require flexible, localised approaches based on real-time evidence and continuous learning.

For FCDO and broader donor stakeholders, the report underscores the need for integrated, multisectoral programming that bridges the gaps between formal and informal justice systems while also addressing climate adaptation, peacebuilding, and humanitarian challenges. Support for cross-sectoral solutions that

connect justice, land conflict prevention, and climate resilience is critical, especially in the face of shifting seasonal patterns and increasing stressors. The report recommends that FCDO and other actors facilitate broad learning and collaboration across international, national, and local stakeholders, local organisations, researchers, and policy actors. Additionally, generating and sharing appropriately scaled evidence, and using it to align interventions across organisations, will help consolidate learning and drive coordinated action. These efforts should include regional convenings, evidence-driven dialogues, and partnerships for comprehensive solutions. This approach will ensure that programming is context-specific and responsive to the unique challenges of each region, ultimately contributing to a more integrated, coherent justice ecosystem that supports sustainable stability and resilience.

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Introduction

Over the past decade, **Mali** has experienced **worsening security due to escalating violence in the northern and central regions**, driven by ethnic tensions, armed groups, and competition for resources like land and water. While extremist groups are involved, most conflict-related deaths stem from long-standing local grievances. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have weakened, and state structures are fragmented, especially in rural areas. The violence has not yet spread to southern Mali,

Figure 1. JASS' intervention areas

but similar structural issues could trigger conflict there. In **Niger**, the Tahoua and Maradi regions face **similar challenges**, particularly over **natural resources like land and water**, exacerbated by rapid population growth, climate change, and weak governance. The Tarka Valley, a vital resource area, is under increasing strain, contributing to conflicts and migration pressures. Both countries face **demographic and environmental challenges** that intensify resource-based tensions, but the situation remains manageable in central Niger and southern Mali if rapid interventions are made.
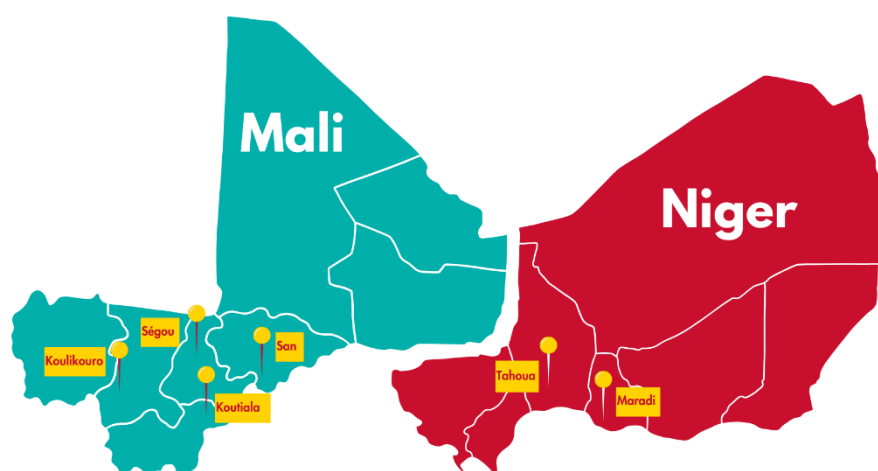
Mali and Niger share a **dual legal system** that combines formal state law, derived from French civil law, with customary law, which is rooted in local traditions and practices. Both countries face challenges when it comes to land disputes, as the tension between these two legal frameworks often creates conflict.

In response to the instability in Mali and Niger, the UK government is funding the **Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS) programme**. Following an initial phase from September 2021 to March 2023 in central Mali, the programme expanded in April 2023 to include 20 communes in Mali and 4 in Niger. As a three-year initiative, the programme is set to conclude in 2026. Managed by Mercy Corps in partnership with local NGOs AMEDD in Mali and Cercle Dev in Niger, JASS aims to enhance security and stability in the Sahel region by promoting equity and inclusion in land governance, natural resource management, and justice for marginalised communities. JASS's Theory of Change and programming approach is built around three outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Improved conflict management capacity and collaboration between communities divided by conflict, and between them and institutions, to mitigate and resolve conflicts over land and natural resources.
- **Outcome 2:** Increased resilience to climate shocks and stress factors to reduce the frequency and impact of conflicts related to land and other natural resources in the Sahel.
- **Outcome 3:** Improved evidence base for more effective programme design, implementation, and coordinated action and ownership by key stakeholders.

If the assumptions within this Theory of Change hold true, then attaining all three outcomes is expected lead to fair and equitable land justice and economic outcomes that are optimised for marginalised populations in zones at risk of conflict.
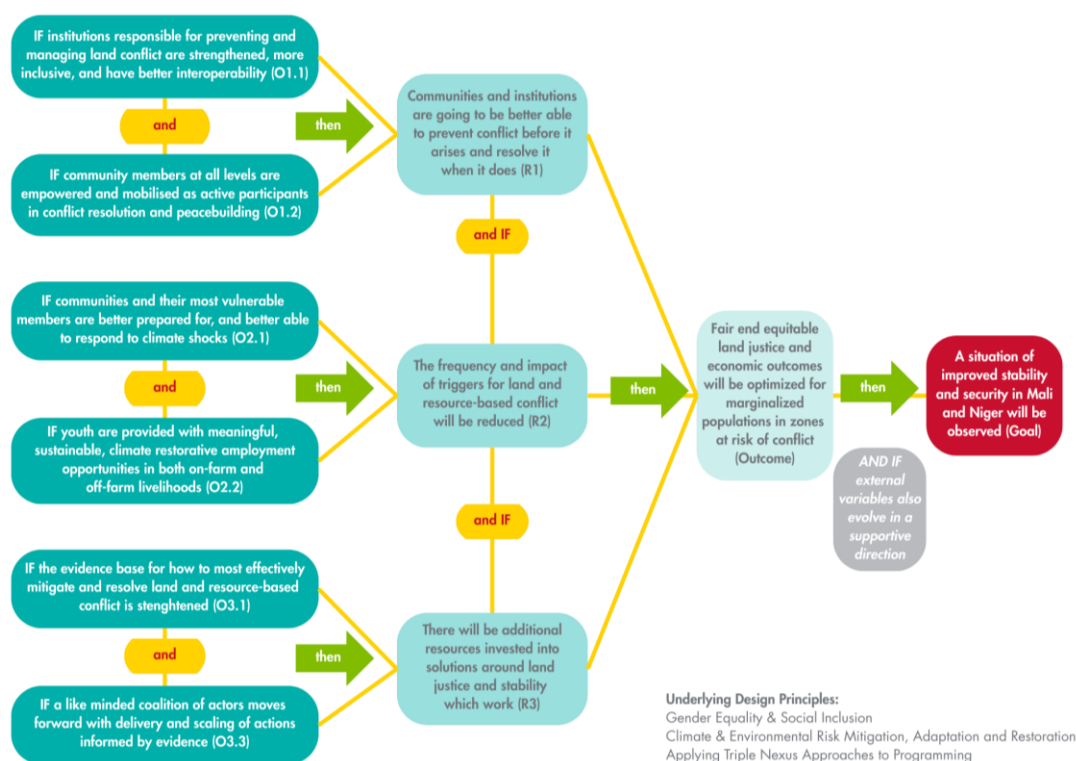
Figure 2. JASS' Theory of Change

Objective of this Report

This **evidence synthesis and learning report** is part of the JASS Evidence and Learning Agenda (ELA), focusing specifically on the prioritised learning area on Conflict Mediation and Natural Resource Governance (linked to Objective 1 of JASS's Theory of Change). The report aims to support learning, adaptive management, and advocacy about the programme's efforts to strengthen community-level land and conflict resolution mechanisms and their coordination with formal judicial structures.

In particular, this report examines **participants' perceptions of the fairness and trustworthiness of formal and informal dispute resolution structures** to support reflection and learning about JASS's Theory of Change and adaptive management of programming activities. A key assumption in the programme's Theory of Change is that JASS's work with local-level land and conflict resolution committees will have a positive impact on community members' trust in these mechanisms and, by facilitating interaction and coordination across the spectrum of informal and formal dispute resolution structures, help build confidence in the broader justice system. While an impact evaluation of JASS's activities is outside of the scope of this report, the diverse evidence gathered and synthesised here helps to **describe patterns in community members' perceptions of both informal and formal justice actors** and **how these perceptions of justice are influenced by their experiences with conflict, variations in the presence and capacity of dispute resolution mechanisms, and their knowledge of laws and judicial processes**, providing unique evidence about key links in the programme's theory of change.

Exploring perceptions of justice actors and mechanisms is crucial for enhancing justice and stability in the Sahel, given the region's complex security and governance challenges. The dual legal frameworks in Mali and Niger - combining statutory law and customary practices - further complicate justice delivery, especially in rural areas where state presence is weak or absent. Understanding how these informal justice systems are perceived, how they interact with formal mechanisms, and their impact on trust in governance structures is essential for developing more effective and locally relevant conflict resolution strategies. In both countries, entrenched instability, exacerbated by armed groups like *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM - Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims) and the Islamic State in the Sahel (EIS), has led to a power vacuum, with these groups providing alternative justice mechanisms that some communities perceive as fairer and more accessible than formal state systems. This exploration will also help identify gaps and opportunities to improve justice delivery, reduce the appeal of violent extremist groups, and promote long-term stability in a region struggling with conflict, governance challenges, and humanitarian crises.

Methodology

The overall methodological approach of this evidence synthesis and learning report is to draw together diverse sources of data and evidence generated by the JASS programme to help advance understanding related to a core assumption within the Theory of Change, which is that the **effectiveness and inclusivity of both informal and formal dispute resolution mechanisms** shapes individuals' perceptions of these institutions as being **trustworthy, fair, and legitimate**. To do so, we combine **original analysis of quantitative and qualitative data** that was collected during the programme's midterm evaluation with **sensemaking sessions with practitioners working with the programme** and insights from existing **internal JASS assessments and reports**. In the discussion that follows, we note limitations with each data source and methodology where relevant, while emphasising that the mixed methods approach that we adopt here helps us to draw on the strengths of each method to offset the limitations of any single method and to increase the overall validity of the findings and conclusions presented here.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

To ensure cost-effectiveness and build on existing MEL activities, this report draws on new analysis of data from the JASS midterm evaluation, which was completed in December 2024 by IWORDS Consulting. A total of 3,687 individuals (59% men, 41% women; 58% in Mali, 42% in Niger) were

surveyed across the regions where JASS operates: Koutiala, Ségou, Koulikoro, San in Mali and Maradi and Tahoua in Niger. While a majority of surveyed individuals were JASS programme participants, a total of 34% (1,249) did not participate in JASS activities, including (297) who live in communes where JASS is not operating. These individuals from non-JASS communes are included in these analyses to portray a broader picture of perceptions of justice in regions where JASS is operating, but because only a small number of individuals living non-JASS communes were sampled during the mid-term evaluation, the analysis in this report does not focus on comparisons between these areas and JASS zones of intervention. This comparison will be the focus of the forthcoming quasi-experimental study, which draws on the programme's annual survey data.

The survey included questions about communities' experiences with conflict, the nature of conflict resolution, and the presence and types of conflict prevention or management structures. It also assessed the effectiveness of these structures in addressing current conflicts. For this study, the survey was expanded to include questions on trust in these structures, its meaning, and the underlying reasons. Additional sections were added to explore confidence in and preferences for various conflict management mechanisms.

We use this survey data in two types of quantitative analyses throughout this report. First, we use data from a broad set of 57 survey questions to present **descriptive analyses** and **data visualisations** that summarise overall patterns within the sample, as well as differences across the four regions where JASS is operating in Mali and the two regions where it is operating in Niger.

Second, we use regression analysis with a smaller set of variables to help test key assumptions within JASS's theory of change about perceptions of formal and informal justice actors and mechanisms. These analyses focus on a smaller set of variables (Table 1, below). The dependent variables in the regression analyses are **three measures** that capture relevant aspects of **how community members perceive the trustworthiness and fairness** of both informal and formal dispute resolution actors and mechanisms. The explanatory variables in the regressions are proxy measures for **three broad types of factors that may shape community members' perceptions of justice**: 1) experiences of conflict and insecurity, 2) presence and capacity of conflict resolution stakeholders and processes, and 3) ability to understand and access the formal justice system. While these measures broadly capture the relevant aspects of perceptions of justice and the factors that influence these perceptions, we note several instances throughout the write-up where the meanings of specific question wordings are ambiguous. These limitations in the wording of some questions are highlighted in the findings addressed through triangulation with the qualitative analysis and reflections in the sense-making sessions.

The regressions also include control variables for gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, and participation in JASS activities. Throughout this report, regression results are presented as graphics plotting the estimate of the coefficient on each explanatory variable and the 95% confidence interval. The results presented in the full report are divided by the broad types of factors that shape perception of justice but are all based on the regression specification that contains all explanatory and control variables, with standard errors clustered at the village level. For a full description of the main regression model, see Appendix A.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

Concurrent with the collection of the midterm evaluation survey in December 2024, IWORDS also conducted structured **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** and **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**. This set included 33 FGDs with JASS programme participants (23 in Mali and 10 in Niger), 23 FGDs in communes where no JASS activities are being undertaken (14 in Mali and 9 in Niger), and 55 KIIs (35 in Mali and 20 in Niger), which primarily focused on interviewing leaders and members of conflict resolution mechanisms and decentralised state technical services representatives who collaborate with JASS. For this report, these qualitative data sources were analysed using MaxQDA's AI Assist features. In particular, we utilised the beta version of the Tailwind feature to conduct **rapid thematic analysis** of the broad patterns emerging across the full set of qualitative transcripts within each region. Where specific qualitative transcripts are referenced in the body of this report, the anonymised code is listed in a footnote to balance transparency with protecting the identity of the respondents. A full description of how the document codes are constructed is available in Appendix B.

Variable Type	Variable Description	Variable Coding in Regression Analyses
Perception of Justice (Dependent Variables)	**Trust in Local Authorities**: "How much do you trust local authorities to fairly resolve disputes and ensure justice?"	Coded 1 if "Trust a Lot" Coded 0 otherwise
	Perception of Dispute Resolution Processes and Principles: "How do you judge the management, access, and use of land disputes today?"	Coded 1 if "Peaceful and Inclusive" Coded 0 otherwise
	Perception of the Legal and Justice System: "How fair do you believe the legal or justice system is in your community or country?"	Coded 1 if "Fair or Very Fair" Coded 0 otherwise
Experiences of Conflict and Insecurity (Explanatory Variable)	**Recent experience with conflict**: "Have you experienced confrontations within the past six months?"	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise
Presence and Capacity of Conflict Resolution Stakeholders and Processes (Explanatory Variables)	**Limitation of Traditional Mechanisms**: "Are there specific problems/conflicts that traditional structures/mechanisms have difficulty dealing with?"	Coded 1 if "Yes"; Coded 0 otherwise
	Presence of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms: Total count of responses to this question "For each of the following, tell us if you are aware of the presence of these prevention/management structures/mechanisms, in your community."	Total count of number of mechanisms/institutions where the respondent answered "Yes", ranging from 0 to 8
	Willingness to turn to a Conflict Resolution Committee: "If you have a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction, who would you approach to resolve the dispute."	Coded 1 if individual answered "CRC" Coded 0 otherwise
Ability to Understand and Access Formal Justice System (Explanatory Variables)	**Knowledge of Laws on Natural Resources and Land Ownership**: "Are you aware of any laws on natural resources and land ownership?"	**Deep Knowledge** Coded 1 if individual answered "Yes, very good knowledge" **Limited Knowledge** Coded 1 if individual answered "Yes, but limited knowledge" Coded 0 otherwise
Social and Demographic Control Variables	**Age:** Age of respondent	Numeric value of age given by individual
	Gender: Gender of respondent	Coded 1 if individual answered "Female" Coded 0 otherwise
	Ethnolinguistic Group: Indicator variables for Haoussa, Bambara, Soninke, and Minianka	Coded 1 if individual identified as being in a given ethnolinguistic group Coded 0 otherwise
	Occupation: Indicator Variables for Farmer, Herder/Breeder, Private Sector, and Civil Servant	Coded 1 if individual identified as working in a given profession; Coded 0 otherwise
	Participation in JASS Activity: Indicator Variable for Participation in JASS programme activities	Nine separate variables, each coded 1 if individual participated in a given JASS activity; Coded 0 otherwise

Table 1. Variables Used in Regression Analyses

Sensemaking Conversations with JASS Programme Team and Partners

Following the preliminary analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, a series of sense-making discussions were held with key program stakeholders (both Mercy Corps staff and local partners) in both Mali and Niger in March 2025. These sessions aimed to ensure that the interpretation of findings aligned not only with the local contexts of implementation but also with the lived and experienced realities of team members delivering the programme on the ground.

Sensemaking sessions were structured as 90-minute-long semi-structured focus group discussions, in which participants were invited to reflect on a curated set of preliminary findings – which were visualised to help facilitate more focused, informed discussions around the results - from the broader analysis. Generative AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) were used to support notetaking and synthesis of insights from the sensemaking sessions.

Existing JASS Reports and Analyses

In addition to the original analyses and sensemaking discussions, we also utilise insights from a number of JASS evidence products throughout this report, including the Midterm Evaluation Report prepared by IWORDS, Security Reports and Analyses prepared by the JASS security focal points in Mali and Niger, and technical assessments conducted during programme start-up in late 2023, including the Political Economy Analysis (PEA), Climate and Conflict Resilience Assessment, and Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) assessment.

Roadmap for this Report

This report proceeds as follows. The second section briefly summarises the security context, dynamics of violence, and patterns of justice and dispute resolution in JASS's operating areas in Mali and Niger, drawing on the programme's internal security assessments and reflections from programme team members in sensemaking conversations. The third section provides an overview of the three aspects of perceptions of justice that are the focus of this report:1) trust in local authorities, 2) perception of dispute resolution processes and principles, and 3) perception of the broader legal and formal and informal justice system. The discussion of each of these aspects of perceptions of justice provides a snapshot of the overall patterns of the specific measures used in the regression analysis, along with a discussion of broader patterns across related variables from the survey and corresponding themes in the qualitative data and sensemaking discussions with members of the JASS team.

Section 1 — Background, objectives and methodology

Section 2 — Security context, dynamics of violence, and patterns of justice and dispute resolution

Section 3 — Overview of the three aspects of perceptions of justice in focus
1. trust in local authorities,
2. perception of dispute resolution processes and principles
3. perception of the broader legal and justice system

Section 4 — Overview of three broad types of factors that influence these perceptions of justice
1. experiences of conflict and insecurity
2. presence and awareness of both informal and formal conflict resolution stakeholders and processes
3. issues with understanding and accessing formal justice services

Section 5 — Core takeaways and practical implication for JASS

The fourth section of the report provides an overview of three broad types of factors that influence these perceptions of justice: 1) experiences of conflict and insecurity, 2) presence and awareness of both informal and formal conflict resolution stakeholders and processes, 3) issues with understanding and accessing formal justice services. For each of these broad sets of factors, the subsection starts with a brief snapshot of key findings, focusing on the overall trends and patterns emerging from the quantitative and qualitative analyses, before moving on to a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the broader learning about that factor, both providing more detail on the broad trends, as well as identifying important differences across Mali and Niger and between the specific regions in each country. The fifth section concludes by summarising the core takeaways from the report, focusing on practical implication for the JASS programme itself, as well as for broader stakeholders working on justice and conflict management in Mali and Niger.

While this report is designed to be read from start to finish, stakeholders who are interested in specific evidence sources or aspects of perceptions of justice are encouraged to jump to the relevant sections using the links in the table of contents and the overview of the report.

SNAPSHOT OF KEY CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Security Context and Dynamics of Violence in Mali and Niger

The security situation in the regions within JASS's intervention zones in **Mali** (Ségou, San, Bla, Niono, and Banamba) has remained concerning for several years, deteriorating over time both between regions and within the same region. From January 2024 to February 2025, a total of 2,608 humanitarian-related security incidents - as tracked by Mercy Corps' security teams - were reported in these areas out of a national total of 14,659. Early 2024 saw an intensification of armed group activities across the central regions of Mali (Ségou, San, Mopti, Bandiagara, and Douentza). The most affected districts include Niono and Macina (Ségou), Tominian (San), Djenné and Mopti (Mopti), Bandiagara and Koro (Bandiagara), and Mondoro and Boni (Douentza). During the third quarter, a reduction in incidents was observed across these regions, which may be linked to the rising water levels and intense floodings as well as the increase in operations by the State security forces. In 2024, these five regions recorded more incidents than in 2023, with 2,070 compared to 1,548. The trend in incidents affecting humanitarian organisations also followed a similar trajectory, with 34 incidents reported in 2024 compared to 21 in 2023.The most common incidents reported were theft, attacks, arrests, kidnappings, accidents, lockdowns, and threats. There were 778 thefts, 497 attacks, 449 arrests, 215 kidnappings, 158 accidents, 120 lockdowns, 105 threats from armed groups, 72 improvised explosive devices (IED) or mine explosions, 17 mine destructions, and 16 physical assaults. Displacement was also exacerbated by flooding from the Niger River during the rainy season. January 2025 saw the highest peak in incidents, with a decline in the following month. The primary threats included IEDs/mines and attacks on the State security forces and chasseurs[1] along National Road No. 6. In southern zones like Banamba, kidnappings and threats related to Zakat demands were frequent, while in the north, security worsened in areas like Mafounè and Timissa, where radical groups are active. In Ségou and San, chasseurs maintain security, occasionally setting up checkpoints. In Koutiala, most incidents were linked to criminal activity and land disputes.

In **Niger**, violence by radical armed groups such as JNIM and EIS continues to target civilians and security forces, particularly in regions like Diffa, Tahoua, Tillabery, and Dosso. In Tillabery, there has been a rise in attacks, including ambushes and the use of IEDs. Joint military operations between Niger and Burkina Faso have had some success in areas like Tera, Gotheye, and Torodi, neutralising radical fighters and dismantling logistical hubs. However, there are concerns that retaliatory attacks from these groups could increase. EIS has been particularly active in Dosso and Tahoua, engaging in crimes like livestock theft and forced collection of Zakat, often linked to organised crime and smuggling due to instability in north-western Nigeria. The security situation is volatile, with rising incidents of kidnappings and cattle rustling. In the Maradi region, criminal activity has increased, despite efforts by the FDS to tackle petrol trafficking and cross-border crime. In Diffa, security incidents have decreased in some areas, but armed escorts remain government-mandated on key routes due to the risk of attack by Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). Meanwhile, in Agadez and Zinder, FDS operations continue, though there has been no significant rebel movement reported recently. Humanitarian access remains restricted in many regions, and new government measures, including the banning of motorbike circulation and stricter control over NGOs, have further complicated aid delivery.

Politically, Niger has proposed a five-year transition period following national dialogues, which includes dissolving political parties and creating a new constitution. However, the proposal has faced criticism, with several civil society organisations boycotting the national conference. Additionally, relations with neighbouring countries like Benin and Nigeria remain tense, and Niger continues to focus on consolidating its position within the Alliance of Sahel States.

Humanitarian access is consistently put to the test in programme intervention zones, especially in Niger, leading to a continuous re-evaluation of activity implementation conditions, which may result in

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[1] In the security context of Mali, Chasseurs (also known as Dozo) refer to traditional hunters who have taken on roles beyond their original cultural and subsistence functions, including acting as community-based security forces—especially in rural areas.

rescheduling or cancellation. This revolved around JASS' systematic risk assessment and management mechanisms, which include daily monitoring of trends in media, secondary sources, the collection of incident data impacting activities, and close collaboration with organisations like OCHA (Niger) and INSO (Mali). With the beginning of the water level recession in October (seasonal), armed groups resumed attacks on several villages harbouring positions of chasseurs and the FDS, including direct attacks and the use of improvised explosive devices. Some civilian infrastructure, such as schools, roads, and GSM antennas, has been sabotaged by these groups, making it harder for people to access communication networks and reducing local mobility. Humanitarian workers are not the primary targets of these groups, though they are impacted and can still operate, with the exception of the inter-river Macina region, which faces restrictions from armed actors and is quite close to JASS intervention zones. JASS security advisors remain cognisant that in many areas in Niger and Mali humanitarian workers remain exposed to the risks of temporary detention, IEDs, regular and irregular checkpoints, robberies followed by thefts, physical violence, and office burglaries. Risk mitigation and management strategies, however, have allowed programme activities to continue on schedule.

Justice and Conflict Resolution in Mali and Niger

In **Mali**, statutory law governs formal property rights, including land registration and legal titles, while customary law, which predominates in rural areas, often dictates land ownership and use through communal rights and informal agreements. This system can be flexible, but clashes arise when customary practices, such as inheritance or land use across generations, conflict with formal titles recognized by the state. Rural communities, often unfamiliar with the formal legal system and lacking access to legal education, find it difficult to navigate statutory law, leading to slow progress in harmonizing the two systems.

In **Niger**, the situation is similar. While the formal legal system, based on codified laws, is used in urban areas and for major land disputes, rural regions rely heavily on customary law. Local chiefs and community elders play a key role in resolving land conflicts in these areas, where land is often viewed as a communal resource managed collectively. Niger's law provides a two-step process for resolving land conflicts: conciliation by traditional authorities, followed by judicial procedure. Conciliation is the process through which customary authorities resolve a conflict with the agreement of the parties involved, formalized in a conciliation report. In the event of disagreement, a non-conciliation report is issued. Parties may only turn to the courts if conciliation fails, as it is mandatory before seeking legal action. As in Mali, tensions between customary practices and formal legal systems can lead to challenges—especially when traditional land tenure systems limit women's access to property or conflict with state-imposed property laws. In some regions, weak judicial infrastructure further complicates the reconciliation of the two systems. Government efforts to integrate customary law with formal legal frameworks have been slow, and security concerns in conflict-affected areas further undermine access to formal justice systems. In such contexts, community leaders who uphold informal justice structures are sometimes forced to flee or are compelled to align with the most powerful actors, which can erode the legitimacy and fairness of customary systems. In both countries, rural populations continue to rely on customary law due to its accessibility and cultural relevance, despite efforts to improve legal awareness and strengthen formal courts. In some cases, even the formal judges lack adequate knowledge of the law, further complicating the justice landscape and undermining trust in the formal system.

Both Mali and Niger face similar **struggles in balancing informal community-based conflict resolution mechanisms with formal state-led initiatives**. In both countries, local justice actors, such as community leaders and elders, are essential in resolving disputes, but these processes can be undermined by violence, armed groups, or the absence of state presence. In Mali, the dual legal framework can create confusion and inequality, especially for women who face discrimination under certain customary land practices. Similarly, in Niger, marginalized groups, including rural populations and women, often struggle to access justice due to the decentralized nature of the justice system and logistical challenges, including gaps in infrastructure and political instability. Similarly, in Niger, minority groups - such as women, widows, youth, internally displaced persons (IDPs), persons living with

disabilities (PLWDs), and single woman-headed households - often struggle to access justice due to the decentralized nature of the justice system and logistical challenges, including poor infrastructure, political instability, and limited financial resources. Costs related to travel, repeated court visits, and legal fees can make formal justice systems particularly inaccessible. As a result, integrating both systems remains a significant challenge, requiring reforms that respect traditional customs while aligning with formal legal principles.

Informal justice provision by armed groups is a significant factor in the dynamics of conflict and governance in the Sahel region, particularly in **Mali**. In some areas, JNIM has established informal justice mechanisms that some community members perceive as fairer and more transparent than the official state justice system, which includes Malian courts and COFOs (communal land commissions – see box below). This perception is particularly prevalent in regions where JNIM has a significant presence and where the state's authority is either weak or has retreated. By filling the power vacuum left by the state, JNIM provides alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that some locals find more effective, especially when state institutions fail to deliver justice or are perceived as corrupt or inefficient. In such areas, JNIM's justice mechanisms are seen as more accessible, quicker, and often more aligned with local traditions and expectations, even though they are part of a broader agenda of the group, which has a radical and violent ideological basis.

What are *Commissions Foncières* (COFOs) and what role do they play?

In Mali and Niger, the *Commissions Foncières* (COFOs – Land Commissions) are key institutions for preventing and managing conflicts over agricultural land. They play an important role in mediating disputes and promoting land tenure security by contributing to the formalization of land rights.

In Mali, there is no hierarchical relationship between the different levels of COFOs, which include village COFOs, communal COFOs (at the commune level), and local COFOs (at the *cercle* level, which is above the commune). In contrast, Niger's COFO system is structured with a clear hierarchy: COFOBs (*COFO de Base*, village level), COFOCOMs (*COFO Communales*, commune level), and COFODEPs (*COFO Départementales*, department level).
Note: In Mali, the administrative unit above the commune is the "cercle," while in Niger it is the "department."

COFOs ensure that national land policies and legislation are respected in local practices. They are legally established institutions, the result of hard-won efforts by farmers to address land disputes—which are often complex—through the expertise of legitimate local actors who are well-versed in land issues, community histories, and customary practices.

However, the effectiveness of COFOs can vary. In some areas, they are either absent or exist only on paper, which limits their ability to serve as effective mechanisms for conflict resolution. Their credibility can also be undermined if the population perceives them as biased or politically influenced.

In Mali, COFOs work in tandem with the formal justice system. Initially, COFOs mediate between parties in land disputes. If an agreement is reached, the justice system ratifies it through a process known as *homologation*, thereby making the conciliation report legally binding and ensuring its durability. Even when COFOs are unable to reconcile the parties, the non-

conciliation report they produce provides valuable input for the judicial system if the case proceeds to court.

In Niger, by contrast, COFOs already have legal authority: their decisions carry legal weight without needing court validation.

However, there is a clear distinction between JNIM and other armed groups like EIS (*Etat Islamique du Sahel*). JNIM is often perceived as more "user-friendly" in its approach to justice and governance, with some local populations finding their system of justice more community-focused and less harsh. In contrast, EIS's approach is far more brutal, involving extreme violence and intimidation, which makes them feared by local populations. While JNIM's justice mechanisms might appear more appealing in the absence of state authority, EIS's methods are driven by a violent and uncompromising ideology that alienates communities. This contrast further shapes local perceptions of these groups and the role they play in the justice and security landscape of the Sahel.

The presence of these armed groups and their alternative justice systems may significantly impact the region in the future, particularly in central Mali where JASS operates. As Malian armed forces (FAMa) are increasingly occupied with operations in the north and heightened security responses around Bamako following terrorist attacks in September 2024, and as community self-defence groups like the *chasseurs* maintain presence in parts of the centre, the influence of radical groups and their justice mechanisms may continue to grow. This trend poses a growing concern for JASS intervention zones in Mali, potentially undermining efforts to promote rights-based, community-led justice approaches going forwards.

The power vacuum created by the weakening of state structures is increasingly filled by groups like JNIM. Tensions arise between JNIM and local militias, such as the chasseurs, who also seek to assert control. This ongoing struggle could complicate JASS's mission, especially as JNIM appears to be solidifying its presence in the region by establishing training centres and further entrenching its influence. These developments could shift the local balance of power, affecting both security and governance, and potentially altering the dynamics of conflict resolution in the area.

Justice provision by armed groups in **Niger** follows similar patterns to those in Mali, though the context and groups involved differ. In Niger, as in Mali, armed groups, particularly those affiliated with Islamist factions such as JNIM and EIS, have established informal justice mechanisms in areas where the state's presence is minimal or absent. These groups, filling the vacuum left by the retreating state, often provide local populations with a form of dispute resolution, which some perceive as more effective and accessible than the formal judicial system.

In regions of Niger affected by insecurity, especially along the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, JNIM and EIS have expanded their influence, offering justice services that include resolving land disputes, theft, and other criminal cases. These mechanisms can be seen as more aligned with local customs and expectations, providing solutions in a way that is perceived by some as timelier and fairer compared to the formal judicial system, which may be distant, underfunded, or ineffective. In the absence of the state's ability to enforce its laws, the justice systems provided by armed groups may appear as a necessary or even desirable alternative for local populations, despite the violent and extremist ideologies these groups represent.

However, like Mali, the justice provided by armed groups in Niger is highly influenced by their broader ideological and strategic goals. JNIM's justice mechanisms might be seen as more "community-friendly" in some areas, with a focus on aligning with religious and tribal traditions, which may appeal to local populations familiar with these practices. In contrast, EIS's approach is far more brutal and extreme, imposing a harsh form of justice that relies heavily on violence, intimidation, and punishment. EIS's influence in Niger has been particularly destructive, as their enforcement of strict interpretations of Sharia law can be severe and uncompromising, further alienating the local population.

The provision of justice by these armed groups complicates the situation in Niger, especially in the context of ongoing regional instability. While some locals might view these systems as more immediate or efficient, they are inherently linked to the political and military goals of the groups providing them, which include gaining and maintaining control over territory. This reliance on armed groups for justice not only undermines the formal state institutions but also fosters a cycle of violence and insecurity that makes it difficult for the state to reassert its authority or rebuild trust with its citizens.

In regions where JASS operates, such as in southern Niger, the state's authority is more robust, but the growing influence of armed groups complicates the environment for both justice and security. As armed groups like JNIM and EIS expand their reach, they undermine local governance structures, making it harder for international programs like JASS to operate effectively in these areas. The competition between these groups and the state for control over justice provision, along with the rise in violent extremism, presents significant challenges for maintaining security and stability in Niger.

PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE ACTORS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS

Trust in Local Authorities

The first aspect of perceptions of justice that we examine in our analysis is the **level of trust people have in the ability of local authorities to resolve disputes fairly and ensure justice.** Figure 3 shows that the level of trust in local authorities **is quite high**, with 85% of surveyed respondents declaring that they trust local authorities "a lot". However, given the complex local governance landscape described above - including the varying presence of customary leaders, COFOs, armed groups, and other informal actors - respondents may be considering a variety of actors as "local authorities". This variation in interpretation likely influences the reported levels of trust and warrant further investigation and refinement in future sensemaking and survey rounds.

Though both countries show generally high trust in local authorities to resolve land disputes, the data reveals interesting difference in trust levels between respondents in Mali and Niger's respective regions. In Mali, Ségou (89%) and Koulikoro (86%) report particularly high levels of trust in local authorities, with Koutiala (83%) and San (79%) showing slightly lower but still strong trust figures. However, San stands out with a higher percentage (14%) of respondents expressing only "somewhat" trust, and Koutiala has 11% in this category, suggesting a more nuanced perception of local authority effectiveness in these areas. In contrast, Maradi (91%) and Tahoua (82%) in Niger demonstrate slightly higher trust levels overall, particularly in Maradi, where only a small fraction (3%) report low or no trust. The trust in Tahoua is also relatively high, but the percentage of respondents expressing only "somewhat" trust (14%) is a bit more pronounced compared to Niger's other region.

Figure 3. How much do you trust local authorities to fairly resolve disputes and ensure justice?

In both Mali and Niger, the approach to conflict resolution in targeted communities is **layered, localised, and deeply trusted**. Traditional systems, which are culturally relevant, address most day-to-day disputes and are generally considered more effective than formal judicial mechanisms. These informal systems are also free of charge, making them accessible to all community members, including those without financial resources. This accessibility contributes to maintaining social cohesion and preventing conflict escalation.
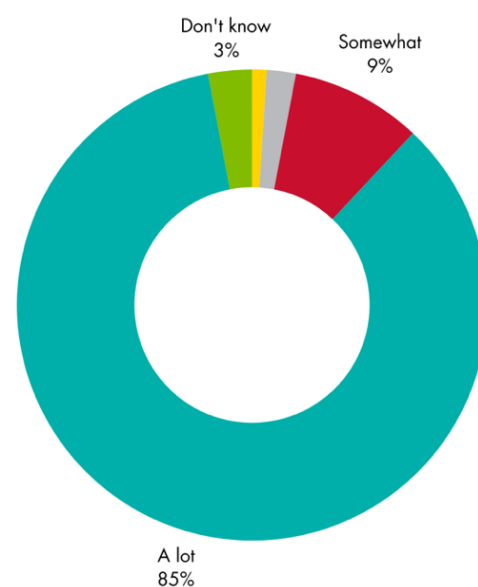
Traditional local authorities such as village chiefs, local leaders, and family elders play an essential role in conflict resolution. These figures typically mediate social and domestic disputes, preventing escalation into violence. Cultural mechanisms, such as social ties and ethnic affiliations, are key in maintaining peace by providing non-violent means of managing disputes.

Social and domestic disputes, including family matters and divorces, are generally handled **locally** through **traditional systems** involving village chiefs, family elders, and religious leaders. These systems are trusted by the community, largely due to their cultural ties, such as cousinage and inter-marriage. Traditional mechanisms are often effective in resolving issues without escalating to violence. Domestic conflicts, particularly those involving family matters, are generally resolved at the local level through village chiefs and community leaders. In both Mali and Niger, domestic disputes are also often managed within the household by elder women, reflecting a localised approach to conflict resolution that extends beyond spousal issues to include broader family dynamics.

In Niger, religious leaders play a significant role in the justice system, especially in rural areas where access to formal legal institutions is limited. Even in the capital, Niamey, many couples continue to turn to the Islamic Association to resolve marital disputes. These local institutions are seen as effective in managing such conflicts, preventing them from escalating into the formal legal system.
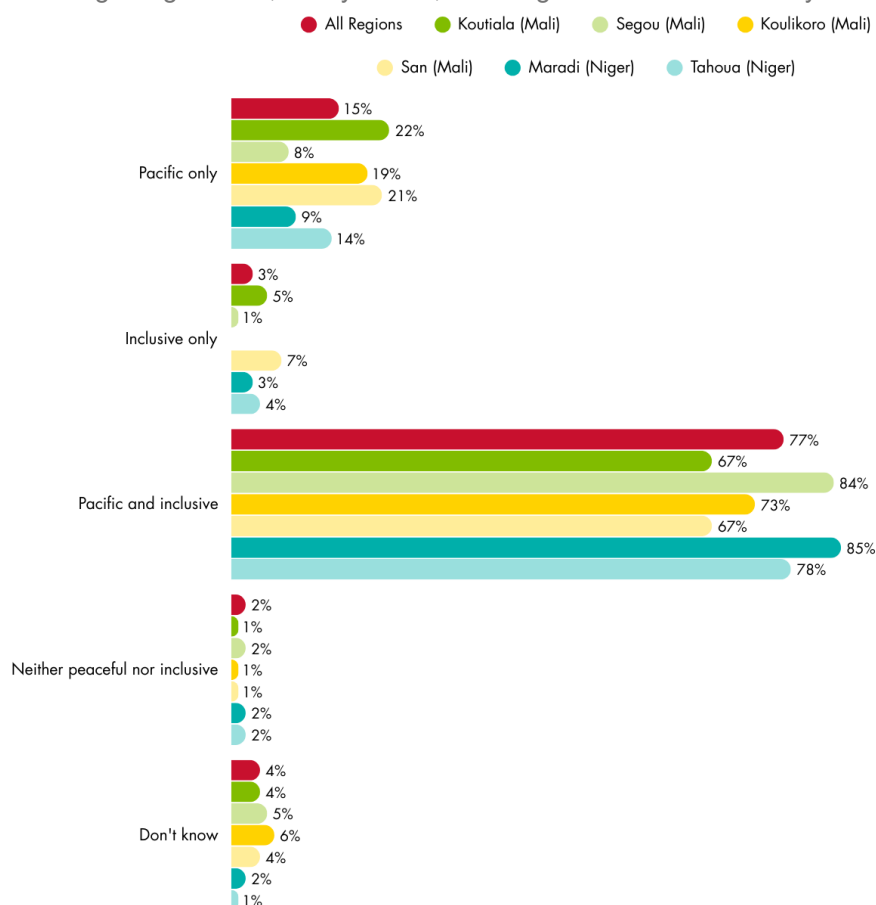
Figure 4. How do you judge the management (governance), access and use of land today?

Perception of Dispute Resolution Processes and Principles

A second important aspect of perceptions of justice that we examine in the regression analyses is the way that people assess the **principles and processes** that underpin how dispute resolution plays out. Surveyed community members across all regions in both Mali and Niger **view the management of land disputes as both peaceful and inclusive (78%),** however there is noteworthy regional variation across the sample. This view is particularly strong in Tahoua, Niger (85%), where most respondents see the resolution process as both peaceful and inclusive. Other regions like Koulikoro (84%) and Koutiala (77%) in Mali also report high percentages of people perceiving land disputes as managed peacefully and inclusively.

When it comes to the extent to which these processes are inclusive, a smaller proportion of respondents (14%) think that land disputes are peaceful but **not necessarily inclusive**, with notable figures in Koutiala, Mali (15%) and Maradi, Niger (21%). These figures suggest that while land disputes may be resolved without violence, there may be **issues with inclusivity**, where not all stakeholders are involved in the resolution process. In other words, the perception of peacefulness without inclusivity may point to systems where the process is calm, but certain groups or individuals might be excluded from full participation.

Regarding inclusiveness in conflict resolution committees, 47% of respondents agree, and 40% strongly agree that these **committees reflect gender and age diversity**. Additionally, 61% of respondents believe that these committees ensure all **participants' perspectives, needs, and voices are equally considered**.

When it comes to gender sensitivity, the majority (86%) of respondents believe that **women and minority groups are effectively represented and empowered to participate in decision-making bodies** concerning natural resources and land.

Traditional structures are overwhelmingly male dominated, with leadership roles typically held by older men, including elders, village chiefs, and religious figures such as imams. The question of inclusivity of conflict resolution processes did come up during discussions with program implementers in **Niger**, with a focus on efforts to improve the participation of **women and youth** in decision-making structures. While traditional leaders play a dominant role in resolving disputes, efforts are being made to ensure that these groups are represented and can contribute to decisions, especially in matters related to land and resource management. For instance, **COFOs** have a **quota** system with a set representation of women and youth. However, the hierarchical nature of society in Niger means that decisions are often made by elders and traditional leaders, and the influence of these figures can overshadow the participation of other community members, including women and youth. Despite these efforts, there is still a challenge in achieving full inclusivity, particularly in communities where traditional roles and structures are deeply entrenched. It is important to note that these systems are not uniformly exclusionary or anti-women; their dynamics vary significantly between communities. In some cases, traditional roles can offer women - especially elder women - a respected voice in local decision-making, even if not through formal leadership positions.

Figure 5. Do you participate in making decisions in terms of access, use and management of resources and related disputes in your community?

Similarly, with regards to **land governance**, interviewed stakeholder on Niger noted that while laws ensure the participation of women and youth in land commissions (COFOs), social norms and societal hierarchies mean that **decisions are often made by older men or traditional and religious leaders**. This is **not necessarily perceived as an intentional exclusion but rather a reflection of cultural**

acceptance of authority and established roles. The issue is not necessarily about legal access to land but about how land control and decision-making are structured within families and communities: indeed, while women do have legal rights under Islamic law, in practice, **land control is typically managed by male relatives**.

Beyond the principles of peace and inclusion, respondents also shared their perspectives on several other normative aspects of dispute resolution. **A large majority (85%) view conflict management as fair and transparent**, with only a small percentage (6%) unsure. Additionally, 85% of respondents trust local authorities to manage natural resources and resolve land disputes in a way that **benefits the community**.

Specifically on land-related disputes, 76% of respondents view the **decision-making** processes regarding the management of natural resources in their community as **transparent**.

The decisions related to land access, use, and governance are mostly seen as fair, with 71%, 69%, and 67% respectively considering them **equitable**. However, some respondents (7%, 3%, 6%) find these decisions inequitable in certain cases.

Legend: ● All Regions ● Koutiala (Mali) ● Segou (Mali) ● Koulikoro (Mali) ● San (Mali) ● Maradi (Niger) ● Tahoua (Niger)

Very unfair: 3%, 2%, 4%, 6%, 1%, 2%, 5%
Unfair: 7%, 5%, 8%, 9%, 4%, 5%, 8%
Neutral: 9%, 6%, 11%, 13%, 7%, 6%, 7%
Fair: 50%, 54%, 33%, 36%, 59%, 48%, 51%
Very fair: 31%, 30%, 34%, 21%, 23%, 38%, 28%

Figure 6. How fair do you believe the legal or justice system is in your community?

In terms of community engagement, **a significant 77% of respondents feel that their concerns are genuinely heard and considered by village authorities**, indicating positive involvement in local decision-making processes. When it comes to their actual participation in community decisions, **54% of respondents report being actively involved in decisions related to land and resource management**, while 46% are not engaged in such matters.

Perception of the Legal and Justice System

The final aspect of perceptions of justice that we examine in the regression analysis is whether individuals view **the legal or justice system in their community or country as fair.** While the wording of this question is broad enough to encompass both formal and informal systems, the use of "legal" and "justice" draws attention to the formal legal system. Similarly, the joint wording of "community or country" in this question does not make it possible to distinguish between perceptions of each of these systems, but

rather captures overall perceptions of justice. Future JASS sensemaking and data collection should seek to understand how participants understood this question refine the wording of this question accordingly.

 In practice in Mali, CRCs are expected to refer all land-related disputes to COFOs, which then escalate them further if they cannot secure a resolution. These types of disputes are often the most sensitive to deal with, and while escalation is sometimes necessary, there is a growing need to better equip COFOs with training and tools for sensemaking and case management. Strengthening their capacity could reduce dependency on higher-level intervention and improve the resolution of complex land conflicts at the local level.

As discussed in the first section of the report, the overwhelming majority of community members interviewed prefer using local and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. However, **while traditional mechanisms are highly effective in many cases, there are instances where they fail to manage conflicts that escalate beyond their capacity**. Conflicts over land ownership or access to resources, such as forests, tend to be more intricate and may escalate to higher authorities when local resolutions fail or when significant personal or family interests are involved. In these situations, disputes often reach **formal justice systems**. Typically, escalation originates from one of the parties involved, rather than from village authorities.

Conflicts are typically brought to formal justice systems under certain conditions. When local mechanisms fail to resolve a conflict, especially in cases where one or more parties are dissatisfied with the resolution, the issue may be escalated to higher authorities. This is particularly common in disputes related to land and property, where the stakes are high, and the legal complexities are beyond the capacity of local authorities. Similarly, pastoral conflicts, such as those between farmers and herders, may also be escalated when local efforts do not suffice. Finally, when individuals perceive local resolutions as unjust or biased, they may seek formal legal intervention to ensure fairness. These escalations often stem from the dissatisfaction of one party with the outcome of local dispute resolution.

Interestingly, just 12% of respondents have reported a problem to their local government or authority. The most frequently contacted departments include the Administration Department (32%), Security Service (12%), and Health Service (10%). Among those who reported issues, 78% believe these disputes were **effectively resolved**.

Indeed, **most people in surveyed communities in Mali and Niger view their justice systems as fair**. In both countries, 85% of individuals in JASS intervention areas who are aware of a recent legal proceeding believe that the process was managed transparently and equitably. As reported in the JASS Midterm Evaluation, this represents an 11% improvement from the baseline of 74%.

FACTORS THAT SHAPE PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE

Experiences of Conflicts and Insecurity

Key Finding: Recent experiences of conflict are associated with negative perceptions of local authorities and the broader justice system.

84% of respondents report that no violent confrontations or conflicts have occurred in their community in the past six months. Only 16% of respondents acknowledged experiencing conflicts. Regarding the frequency of violent incidents, the majority (86%) have witnessed between one and five violent occurrences, while 8% have observed between six and ten. These figures suggest that while violence is not widespread, it remains a recurring issue in some areas. Notably, no respondents reported large-scale violent events (more than 15 incidents). While these self-reports indicate that respondents perceive their communities as largely stable and peaceful, these perceptions could under-report the frequency of conflict, due to norms related to speaking openly about violence.

Although relatively few respondents reported experiencing violent confrontations in the months preceding the survey, the regression analyses show that individuals who did **experience conflict in the previous six months** were **less likely to express trust in the ability of local authorities to fairly resolve disputes** and **less likely to believe the broader legal or justice system is fair.**[2] While experiencing conflict was also associated with a lower likelihood of perceiving dispute resolution processes as peaceful and inclusive, this relationship was not statistically significant.
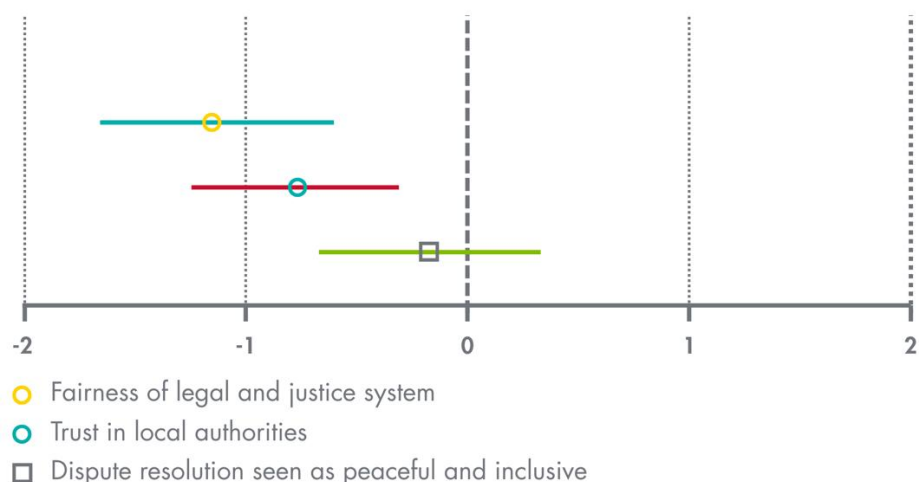

○ Fairness of legal and justice system
○ Trust in local authorities
☐ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 7. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Experience of confrontations in the past six months

This finding indicates that when community members' experience periods of relative peace and security, this in turn informs their perception of the effectiveness, trustworthiness, and fairness of both informal and formal dispute resolution mechanisms. This interpretation is echoed in the qualitative data, in which participants consistently drew a connection between perceived reductions in conflict in their community and the skills, capacity, and trustworthiness of diverse actors involved in conflict management including CRCs, COFOs, village chiefs, and various government officials and agencies.[3]

This tendency to link the lived experience of conflict to an assessment of how dispute resolution actors and institutions are performing was broadly consistent across regions, gender, livelihood type, and

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[2] Both of these correlations are statistically significant at conventional levels.

[3] Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_FGD_NJ_JamgabeSedentaire_H_Fa, Ni1_FGD_NJ_Tahoua_Cons_YM, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_COFO_M, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_VLC_M, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Madaoua_Cons_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_KII_J_Gogarma_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_Ourno_EWCO_M, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_GIC, Ma1_FGD_J_Pala_VFG, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H, Ma1_KII_J_KoutialaCoco_API_M, Ma1_KII_J_MPessoba_Ag_M, Ma1_KII_J_NGolaniasso_VFG_M, Ma1_KII_J_Pala_VFG_F, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_CC_M, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_COFO_M, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_PF_M, Ma3_FGD_J_Dacoumani_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Segou_Cons_GIC, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_PF_VFG, Ma3_FGD_J_Touna_H, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_JA_M, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Touna_JA_M, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma2_FGD_J_Nkolondjala_YP, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_API_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Ag_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_EWCO_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_VFG_F, Ma2_Ma4_KII_J_Cons_VFG_M, Ma4_FGD_J_Ntorosso_H, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_F, Ma4_KII_J_Dieli_TSG_M, Ma4_KII_J_Medine_API_M, Ma4_KII_J_San_Ag_M, Ma4_KII_J_Somo_CRC_M, Ma4_KII_J_Zembougou_CC_M

whether participants had directly engaged in JASS's conflict management activities or had participated in broader activities focused on livelihoods or economic opportunities.

Broader Learning on Conflicts and Insecurity

Perceptions of Security and Insecurity

While there are some violent conflicts and land disputes reported in the communities surveyed in both Mali and Niger, our inquiry shows that they are relatively infrequent and usually tied to specific issues like resource competition or personal disputes. Notably, these are community-level conflicts, monitored by community members themselves - through the Système d'Alerte Précose (SAP) Early Warning Early Response (EWER) systems in Mali and, more recently, a similar system being established in JASS intervention zones in Niger. This reflects a distinct layer of conflict, markedly different from the incidents documented by INSO - which primarily concern humanitarian access - or from military operations carried out by national armed forces, chasseurs, or extremist groups.

The **overall perception of community safety and security is strong**, with most people feeling safe in their neighbourhoods and able to carry out their daily activities without fear. However, the **occasional presence of land-related tensions and personal conflicts** still indicates underlying challenges that could potentially escalate if not addressed.

In **Niger**, surveyed communities in Maradi and Tahoua, are generally considered safe, with no significant incidents of insecurity reported. According to interviewed experts, since JASS interventions started in these areas, there have been no major security issues, reflecting the regions' relative stability. However, some isolated, rare, and small-scale incidents of banditry have been reported, typically involving individuals crossing from Nigeria to commit theft or kidnappings. In Tahoua specifically, areas such as the department of Madara and the commune of Bangui, which are closer to the Nigerian border, experience slightly more pronounced security concerns. These concerns tend to intensify around market days, prompting communities and humanitarian actors to avoid certain access roads and schedule activities accordingly during those periods. Despite these isolated incidents, the overall perception of safety in both Maradi and Tahoua remains positive, with these events having minimal impact on the broader sense of security.

When asked about **overall safety**, most respondents (94%) describe their community as "very peaceful, safe, and secure" (50%) or "peaceful, safe, and secure" (44%). Only 1% perceive their community as somewhat tense or violent, reflecting an overwhelmingly positive perception of safety. Moreover, 82% of respondents reported never feeling unsafe while walking in their neighbourhood, with only 11% occasionally feeling unsafe. This low level of insecurity is further supported by the fact that 89% of respondents have not experienced insecurity that prevented them from working, going to the market, or attending school. This demonstrates that most community members can carry out their daily activities without significant disruptions due to safety concerns.

It is worth noting that the JASS midterm evaluation report highlights that **community perceptions of safety and peace have notably improved in both Mali and Niger**. The midterm value stands at 94% as of December 2024, a considerable increase from the July 2023 baseline value of 58%. In Mali, perceptions of safety have risen dramatically from 51% at baseline to 90%, while in Niger, the increase is even more pronounced, climbing from 64% to 98%. Among JASS target communities, 94% of women and 94% of men now feel that their communities are safe and peaceful. As noted above, many interviewees and focus group participants attributed this decrease in active conflict and increase in security to JASS's efforts to improve land equity, inclusion, natural resource governance, and justice outcomes in both countries, which they describe as have collectively contributing to the enhanced sense of security and peace in these areas. These initiatives have been complemented by a broad range of mutually reinforcing activities under JASS, including extensive awareness-raising campaigns, conflict mediation and de-escalation trainings, the strengthening of community governance structures, and the delineation of transhumance corridors and agricultural fields to prevent disputes over land use.

Additionally, land regeneration efforts - such as the implementation of Azaï techniques and half-moon structures through cash-for-work programs - have contributed to the restoration of degraded areas and improved livelihoods. These hypothesised contributions between the JASS programme's activities and patterns of conflict, security, and peace will be tested in more detail in the quasi-experimental study drawing on annual survey data from both JASS zones of intervention and a set of comparison communes where the programme is not being implemented.

Sources and Types of Disputes and Conflicts

When looking at the specific sources and types of conflicts, the midterm survey data and sensemaking discussions have generally confirmed initial findings from previous JASS assessments like the PEA and the Climate and Conflict Resilience Assessment, which both emphasised how **resource scarcity and personal disputes, rather than broader political or ethnic divisions, are central to conflict dynamics in these regions**. This highlights the importance of addressing resource management and improving dispute resolution mechanisms to mitigate violence in these communities, which are essential components of the program. While it is not possible to attribute the observed improvements solely to JASS, the evidence suggests that, among other contributing factors, these interventions have played a meaningful role in enhancing community members' sense of safety and their capacity to manage tensions peacefully. This, in turn, may be indicative of growing social cohesion - a dynamic broadly aligned with the project's Theory of Change. According to JASS field teams, a key factor in the perceived success of these efforts is their grounding in familiar, traditional community dispute resolution practices. Rather than replacing existing systems, the program reinforces and enhances locally owned mechanisms, increasing both their legitimacy and effectiveness. This approach not only supports immediate conflict mitigation but also fosters greater prospects for sustainability beyond the lifespan of the program.

The Climate and Conflict Resilience Assessment conducted in Mali and Niger by the JASS team in late 2023 already shed light on existing conflict dynamics and potential sources of division in the target areas. The study uncovered similar major sources of conflict: interpersonal conflicts over land, conflicts between farmers and herders, and intra-household conflicts between husbands and wives. More specifically, it shows that in Mali, land disputes between farmers were particularly frequent, whereas such conflicts were less common in Niger. These were largely interpersonal, rather than driven by inter-group dynamics, which were rarely mentioned in either context. In terms of intra-household conflicts, respondents in Niger noted that disputes between husbands and wives were often linked to inheritance issues, while in Mali, these conflicts were more likely to occur when households struggled to make ends meet. Additionally, the assessment identified a significant seasonal pattern to these conflicts. The rainy season, especially at its beginning and end, was highlighted as a time when many of the land-based disputes occurred. This seasonal element underscores the role of climate factors in exacerbating resource-based tensions, suggesting that periods of resource scarcity, intensified by changing weather patterns, may fuel conflict.

When examining the causes of violent conflicts as part of the midterm survey, **66% of respondents perceive strong pressure on land and other natural resources**, while 30% see it as low. The **pressure has increased over the past year**, with 64% reporting an increase or significant increase in pressure. The data shows that **natural resources**, such as land, water, and pasture, are by far the most common source, cited by 49% of respondents. The occasional occurrence frequency of land-related conflicts is also worth noting: while 39% of respondents believe land conflicts occur "very rarely" and 38% say they occur "rarely," a smaller group (6%) views them as a frequent problem.

Logically, the most prominent conflicts discussed in sensemaking interviews focused on Maradi and Tahoua (**Niger**) include disputes between farmers and herders, as well as those related to land access and usage. While these conflicts are often resolved peacefully through traditional mechanisms (see below), they can occasionally escalate into violence, especially during periods of heightened tension such as the agricultural season. A significant number of conflicts arise between farmers and herders, particularly during the agricultural season when land access becomes a contentious issue. These conflicts often occur when herders fail to respect the closure of fields, which is intended to protect crops during the growing season. When fields are disrupted—either by grazing livestock or damage to crops—tensions escalate, sometimes leading to violence. Despite the frequency of these disputes, many are

resolved through local mechanisms, typically involving traditional authorities or direct negotiations between the parties involved. These informal methods help to de-escalate tensions before they lead to more serious consequences. Land access and usage also contribute significantly to the conflicts in Maradi and Tahoua. Disputes often arise when individuals are excluded from using land or when disagreements emerge over its management. These issues tend to disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, such as women and youth, who may struggle to assert their rights to land. In many cases, traditional and religious regulations are used to manage these conflicts, with local authorities playing a key role in ensuring that disputes are addressed fairly.

Conflicts over natural resources, such as disputes over land ownership, access to water, the exploitation of forest resources, or pastoral conflicts between farmers and herders over grazing lands, were also brought up by interviewed experts as another frequent issue in **Mali**. These conflicts are usually handled at the local level but may escalate to higher authorities, such as local government officials or formal judicial systems, if the parties involved are dissatisfied with the outcome. The escalation typically occurs when the local resolution is perceived as unfair or ineffective.

Personal disputes constitute another significant contributor of tensions in targeted communities, with 32% identifying them as key causes. Other causes, such as ethnic tensions (4%), politics (2%), and criminal activities (5%), are less frequently mentioned, showing once again that conflicts in this community are more often linked to tangible resources and personal disagreements than to broader social or political issues. Social conflicts were reported as common in both Mali and Niger communities and typically involve personal disputes, such as those between spouses or within families. These conflicts are often resolved by local authorities, such as village chiefs and community leaders. The resolution process is generally informal and aims to settle disputes amicably within the community, avoiding the need for formal judicial intervention.

Presence and Capacity of Conflict Resolution Stakeholders and Processes

Key Finding: Individuals who are more aware of the limitations of traditional insitiutions are more likely to express negative perceptions of justice across the board.

As described in detail below, community members on a whole **express satisfaction with conflict management processes and outcomes**, and an overwhelming majority (98%) express **a preference for working with community and local authorities** to settle conflicts, rather than modern judicial authorities (2%), i.e. working with formal dispute mechanisms, including chiefs, elders, religious leaders in both countries, as well as Griots and cousinage in Mali.

At the same time, there is variation in the extent to which individuals perceive that there are problems that traditional structures are unable to tackle. 80% of respondents feel traditional structures have no difficulty dealing with the problems faced by the community, while 20% believe there are some specific problems that they have trouble dealing with. As noted below, JASS programme team members identified that the main challenge faced by traditional institutions is **unevenness in documentation and standardisation,** which negatively impacts the consistency of how disputes are resolved over time and from one community to another. Responses in the qualitative KIIs and FGDs indicate that these types of inconsistencies can impact perceptions that these institutions are fair and trustworthy, and can impact the ability of such institutions to tackle disputes that span multiple jurisdictions, or which recur seasonally,

such as disputes over grazing routes. [4] The connection between comprehensive documentation, standardised processes, and the perceived legitimacy of these institutions appears to be particularly significant. In response, JASS has undertaken targeted efforts to address this gap, notably through homologation initiatives and close collaboration with key national stakeholders such as the *Secrétaire Permanent de la Loi d'Orientation Agricole* (SP/LOA - Permanent Secretary of the Agricultural Orientation Law) in Mali and the *Secrétariat Permanent du Code Rural* (SPCNR - Permanent Secretariat of the Rural Code**)** in Niger. These efforts aim to strengthen the institutional framework and enhance the capacity of traditional systems to resolve disputes effectively and equitably, thereby reinforcing their credibility and sustainability over time.

- ○ Fairness of legal and justice system
- ○ Trust in local authorities
- □ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 8. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Perceptions of limitations of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms

The regression results support these observations from the qualitative analyses and sensemaking sessions. Individuals who expressed that there are some **problems that traditional mechanisms cannot effectively address** are more likely to have **negative perceptions of justice across the board**. What is especially interesting is that these perceptions are not limited to local authorities. Awareness of the limitations of traditional mechanisms is also associated with a **lower likelihood of viewing the broader legal** or **justice system as fair or viewing dispute resolution as peaceful and inclusive**.

Key Finding: Individuals with broad awareness of conflict resolution stakeholders and individuals with a preference for turning to Conflict Resolution Committees (and similar local conflict prevention/management bodies) are more likely to express positive perceptions of justice.

[4] Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_H, Ma4_Ma2_FGD_J_Cons_CFW

As noted throughout this report, dispute management and conflict resolution functions in Mali and Niger are carried out by a **diverse and layered array of formal and informal actors**. Respondents in the JASS midterm survey and the qualitative FGDs and KIIs identify a wide range of actors and mechanisms that are present in their community and which they turn to resolve different kinds of disputes. As the discussion below indicates, **there is substantial variation in the presence of each of these types of formal and informal institutions** in Mali vs. Niger - as well as across the regions where JASS operates in Mali. The regression results indicate that overall, **institutional diversity is a strength rather than a limitation**. Individuals who listed a **larger number of conflict management structures in their community** were more likely to **view local authorities as trustworthy** and **more likely to view the broader legal and justice system as fair.**

Legend:
- ○ Fairness of legal and justice system
- ○ Trust in local authorities
- □ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 9. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Willingness to approach a CRC to resolve a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction

While the JASS programme has a broad focus on supporting the quality of conflict management within this broader hybrid justice system in Mali and Niger, its activities focus on two types of community institutions: land commissions (COFOs) and Conflict Resolution Committees (CRCs). Across the full sample of KIIs and FGDs, JASS's work with both COFOs and CRCs were frequently recognised by participants as essential to contributing to increased effectiveness, accessibility, and inclusivity of dispute resolution.[5] The regression results are aligned with these qualitative patterns. Individuals who expressed that they would **approach a CRC to resolve a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction** were more likely to have **positive perceptions of justice across the board.** In particular, willingness to turn to CRCs was especially strongly correlated with being **more likely to believe that dispute resolution is peaceful and inclusive**.

In **Niger**, Community-Based Early Warning and Emergency Response Systems (*Systèmes Communautaires d'Alerte Précoce et de Réponse aux Urgences* - **SCAP/RU**) are equivalent grassroots mechanisms designed to strengthen the resilience of communities to food crises and conflict. While their primary focus is food security, SCAP/RU also play a critical role in conflict prevention and resolution.

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[5] Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, Ma1_KII_J_KoutialaCoco_API_M, Ma1_KII_J_MPessoba_Ag_M, Ma1_KII_J_NGolaniasso_VFG_M, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_COFO_M, Ma3_FGD_J_Dacoumani_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Segou_Cons_GIC, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_PF_VFG, Ma3_FGD_J_Touna_H, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_PF_F, Ma3_KII_J_KoyantGolobala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_PF_F, Ma3_KII_J_Touna_PF_M

These volunteer-based structures empower local communities to detect early signs of tension by monitoring social and economic indicators. They also facilitate local mediation and promote dialogue among conflicting parties, helping to resolve disputes peacefully. Additionally, by involving communities in managing crises, SCAP/RU foster social cohesion, solidarity, and mutual trust. As such, they serve as key actors not only in responding to emergencies but also in promoting peace and stability at the local level.

○ Fairness of legal and justice system
○ Trust in local authorities
□ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 10. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Total number of conflict prevention / management structures in community

Broader Learning: Communities' Satisfaction with Conflict Management

Overall, there is a **high level of satisfaction with how conflicts are managed in the targeted communities**. Most respondents (53%) from both countries believe that conflicts and violent disputes are always resolved peacefully, while 33% report that these disputes are resolved peacefully most of the time. A smaller percentage (8%) say this occurs occasionally, and only 4% and 3% feel that such disputes are rarely or never resolved peacefully.

It is worth noting that almost all respondents (97%) do believe that the **governance, access, and use of land and natural resources are fair and equitable.** Additionally, 78% feel that their community has peaceful access to shared resources like water and grazing land.

More specifically, most individuals perceive the resolution of **conflicts over natural resources** to be effective, with 37% rating it as very effective, and 57% as effective.

Local institutions like community councils, village leaders, and environmental committees receive a high level of **satisfaction** for managing natural resources, with **66% expressing satisfaction** and 26% very satisfied. A significant **80% of respondents feel traditional structures have no difficulty dealing with the problems faced by the community**, while 20% believe there are some specific problems that they have trouble dealing with.

These local institutions are seen as effective in managing such conflicts, preventing them from escalating into the formal legal system. The local mechanisms are **accessible** and **do not incur major costs**, which makes them an attractive option for conflict resolution in these communities.

In **Mali**, experts working with the JASS programme noted that local and traditional systems are trusted by the community, largely due to **cultural ties such as cousinage and inter-marriage**. Similarly, in **Niger**, experts emphasised the importance of **community dynamics** in fostering peaceful conflict resolution. The coexistence of different ethnic groups, interethnic marriages, and the strong influence of religion all contribute to a sense of unity and mutual understanding. These factors create a social environment in

which conflicts are more likely to be resolved peacefully, as people share common values and a collective desire for harmony.

Regarding the effectiveness of conflict management structures, an overwhelming **97% of respondents believe that the people in charge of these structures can prevent and resolve conflicts**. Furthermore, 98% trust these conflict management bodies. The main reasons for this trust include their reliability (44%), fairness (54%), impartiality (41%), care for the community (44%), and their ability to find effective solutions to conflicts (63%). However, 2% of respondents expressed distrust, citing issues such as the inability to restore their rights (27%), lack of representation for all social groups (29%), unreliability (23%), partiality (32%), corruption (24%), fear of speaking the truth (26%), and insufficient mediation skills (24%).
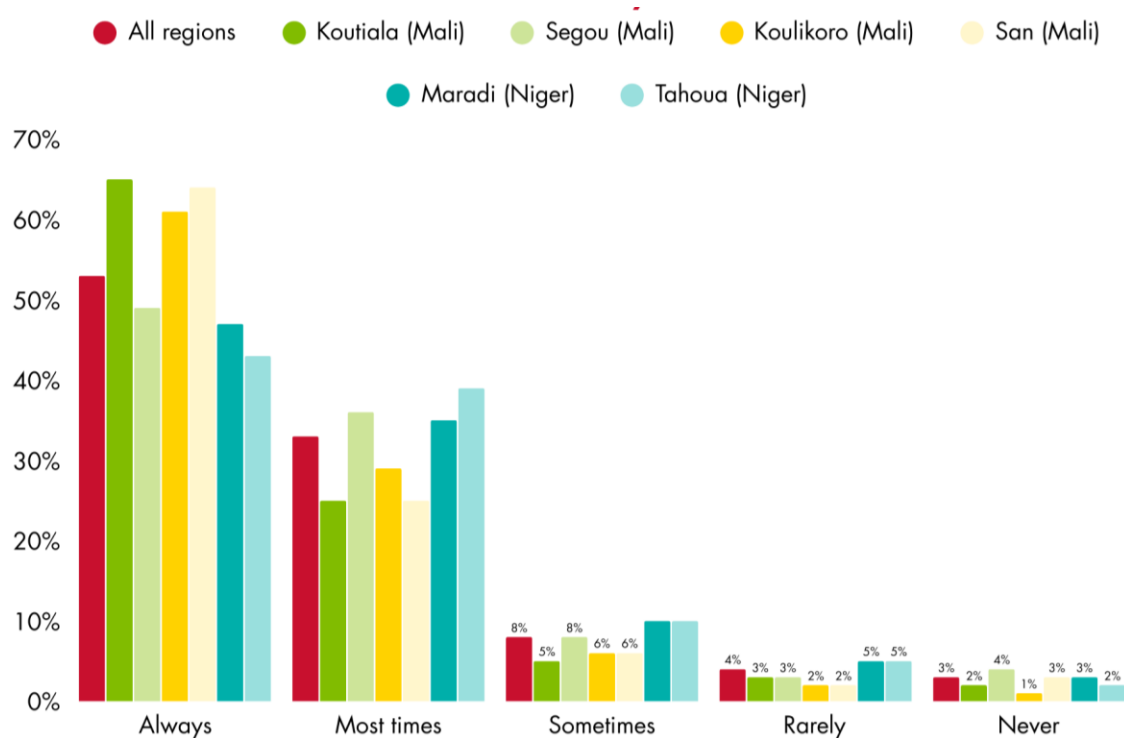
Figure 11. How often would you say that conflicts or violent disputes are resolved peacefully in your community?

Although JASS has been active in Mali longer than in Niger, nearly half of the survey respondents in Tahoua and Maradi reported that conflicts or violent disputes in their communities are resolved peacefully "always" or "most of the time." This suggests that interventions in Niger have been effective and may have benefited from adaptations based on lessons learned in Mali. The difference in the programme's maturity between the two countries may explain why a higher proportion of respondents in Mali reported that peaceful resolution occurs "always."

In sensemaking sessions, experts working with the JASS programme emphasised that while most conflicts in the region are resolved peacefully, **the effectiveness of conflict resolution mechanisms can vary depending on the type of dispute**. **Resource-related conflicts, particularly those between farmers and herders, are particularly prone to escalation**, especially during the agricultural season. Issues surrounding land use, the timing of field closures, and crop protection often lead to disputes between these groups, sometimes resulting in violence or even loss of life. Despite these tensions, social and religious norms act as moderating forces, helping to prevent open conflict by reinforcing respect for communal values and traditions.

Broader Learning: Presence and Capacity of Informal and Local-Level Conflict Resolution Stakeholders and Processes

Traditional leadership

In both countries, nearly all (98%) surveyed community members prefer community and local authorities over modern judicial systems to settle their conflicts.

The structure of traditional leadership, or *chefferie traditionnelle*, is well-organised and hierarchical, enabling conflicts to be resolved before they escalate. Traditional authorities, such as village chiefs and religious leaders, are highly regarded, and their decisions are often considered binding due to the deep cultural significance of their roles. In rural areas of Niger, where access to formal legal systems is limited, their ability to resolve disputes quickly and cost-effectively is especially crucial. Their proximity to the community, respected status, and cultural relevance are key factors that allow them to mediate disputes effectively. The community's trust in these traditional c onflict resolution mechanisms is high, as they are seen as both accessible and efficient.

The analysis of qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs and our sensemaking discussions with JASS programme team members both confirm that **conflicts in Mali and Niger vary widely and require different resolution methods**. This builds upon previous findings from the JASS PEA, which aimed to understand the power dynamics around land and natural resources in regions targeted by the JASS programme.

Village or community elders stand out as the most commonly chosen method of dispute resolution related to land, livestock, or business transactions, with a substantial 47% of respondents across all regions selecting this approach. This preference is especially high in regions such as Koutiala (82%) and Segou (84%) in Mali, as well as in San (88%), which indicates that in these areas, community elders play a central role in resolving disputes. Elders, often revered in rural settings, serve as mediators who are deeply integrated into the local social fabric, resolving conflicts based on tradition and customary law.

By which system do you prefer to settle conflicts?

Modern judicial authorities (State justice)
2%

Community and local authorities
98%

Figure 12. By which system do you prefer to settle conflicts?

The findings from the 2024 JASS PEA had highlighted that a **layered system of actors is involved in managing natural resource conflicts in both countries**. At the village/quartier level, the **chef de village** holds the most power in both Mali and Niger, while at the commune level, the **Mairie** holds the most influence. However, differences emerge between the two countries. In Mali, the chef de village's advisors are seen as the next most powerful, while **in Niger, the imam (religious leader) is often equally influential**, sometimes even more so than the chef de village's advisors. In Niger, the chef de canton is also considered a key actor at the commune level in managing resource conflicts.

"Informal conflict resolution mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and resolving disputes amicably within communities. These mechanisms, deeply rooted in cultural practices, are often preferred over formal

judicial processes due to their accessibility and the trust communities place in them."

Malian legal scholar working on the JASS program

The survey data reveals that in Mali, traditional and community-based structures, such as the Village Chief's Council and cousinage[6] (extended family networks), play a significant role in local governance and social organisation. The Village Chief's Council is widely recognised across Mali, with regions like Koutiala (94%), Ségou (94%), and San (93%) reporting nearly universal awareness. Awareness of cousinage is also notably higher in Mali, with regions like Koutiala (82%), Ségou (74%), and Koulikoro (77%) showing strong recognition. In contrast, awareness of cousinage is much lower in Niger, with regions like Maradi and Tahoua reporting only 35%-36% recognition. In Niger, while griots and cousinage are involved in conflict resolution, they have a less prominent role compared to village chiefs and COFOs. Their influence varies across regions and communities, often serving in a more symbolic or supportive capacity rather than being central to conflict resolution. These differences suggest that Mali may rely more heavily on traditional, familial systems for community support and governance, whereas Niger integrates both traditional and state mechanisms more evenly.

These differences indicate that **Mali may rely more heavily on traditional, familial systems for community support and governance, while Niger appears to integrate both traditional and state mechanisms more evenly**.

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[6] In Mali, *cousinage*, or *sinankunya* as it is called in certain regions, refers to a form of joking kinship—an ancestral social practice that strengthens intercommunity bonds and contributes to social cohesion. It is not a biological relationship, but rather one of courtesy and playful interaction between families, clans, or ethnic groups.

Village chiefs and their councils are the most prominent figures in conflict resolution. They are highly respected due to their traditional authority and proximity to the community. Chiefs, often supported by imams and other respected elders, form councils that mediate conflicts. Their approach is valued for being cost-effective and based on negotiation and mutual understanding, rather than formal judgments. As trusted leaders, their decisions are generally accepted by the community.

The key factors behind their effectiveness included position (granting respect and deference), character (fairness, honesty, inclusiveness), and competence. Local knowledge, particularly of land boundaries, was also critical in resolving disputes. The PEA explored what grants power and influence in natural resource conflicts specifically, with participants attributing this power to an individual's status, position, and adherence to socio-cultural norms that earn them respect. Personal characteristics such as honesty, fairness, and patience were also important, alongside economic power, which played a significant role in formal justice systems.
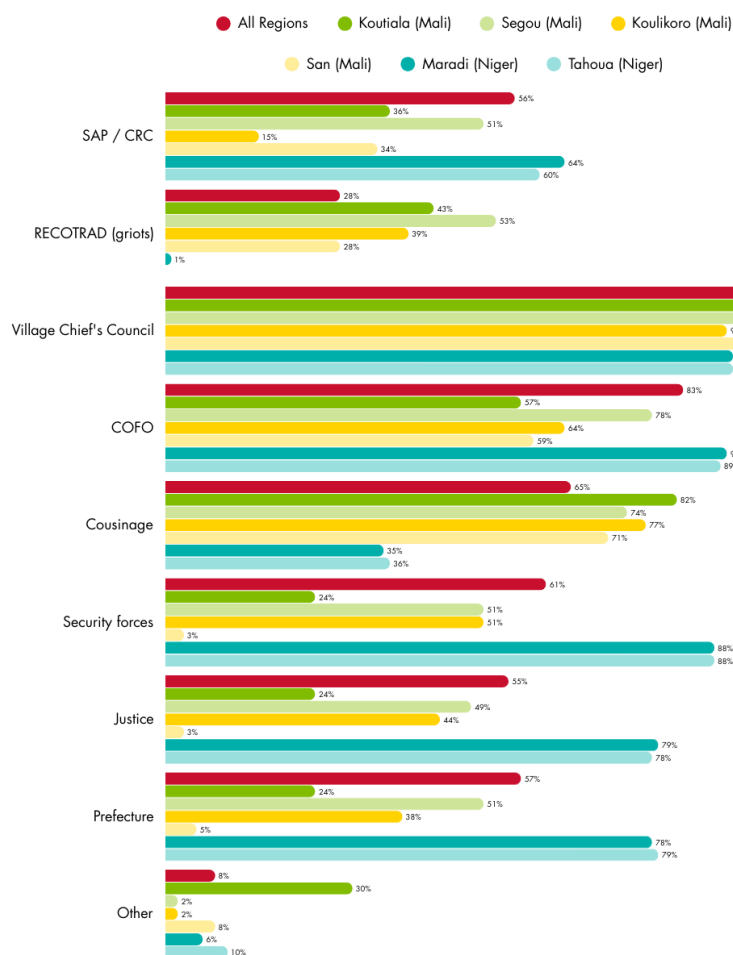
Figure 13. For each of the following, tell us if you are aware of the presence of these prevention / management structures in your community.

"Religious leaders, particularly imams, play a significant role in conflict resolution at the village level in Niger. They often accompany the village chiefs and other elders in mediating disputes, leveraging their influence and respect within the community to promote peaceful resolutions. This approach is appreciated for its proximity, cost-effectiveness, and the use of negotiation and understanding based on familial and religious ties."

Member of the JASS program team in Niger
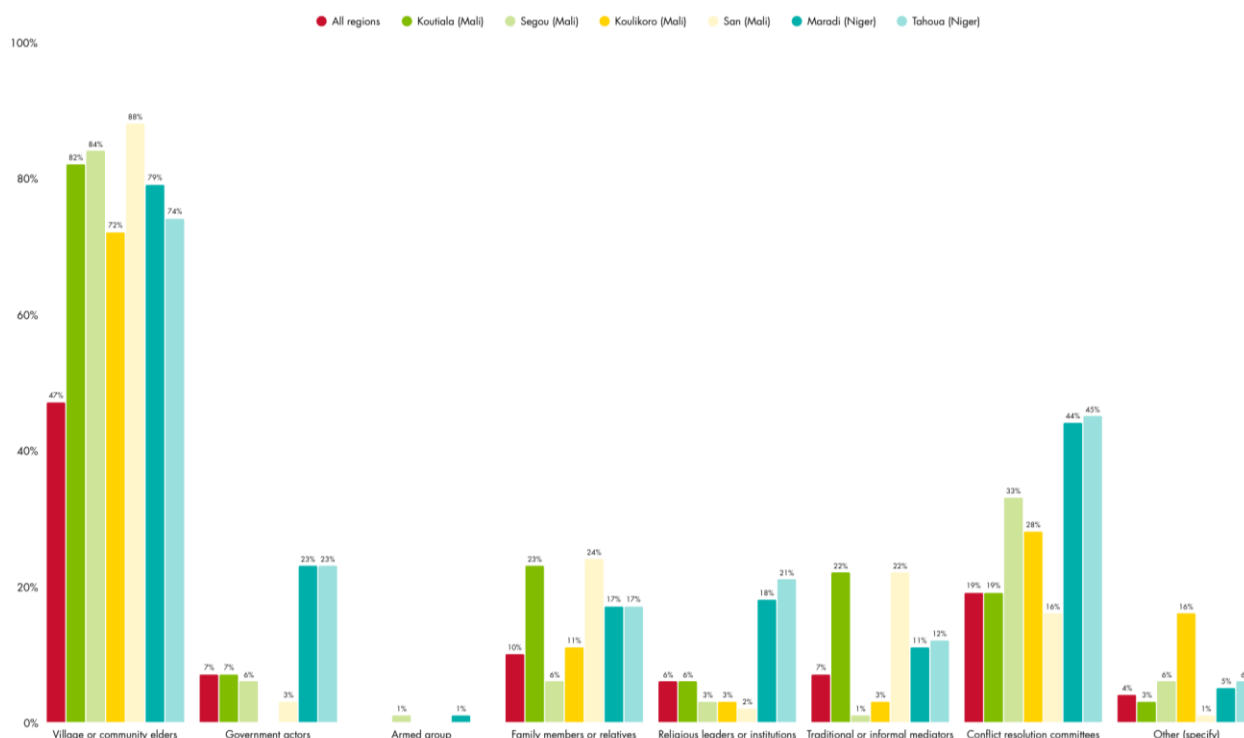
Figure 14. If you have a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction, who would you approach to resolve the dispute?

By utilising traditional norms and social ties, traditional leaders facilitate reconciliation and foster community harmony. Several factors contribute to the community's trust in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in **Niger**. First, the **proximity** of village chiefs and traditional leaders to the people ensures they are easily accessible, which reduces the time and effort required for formal legal processes. Second, the **cost-effectiveness** of traditional mediation is a significant advantage, as it is often more affordable than formal legal proceedings. This financial accessibility is particularly crucial for those in rural Niger who may lack the resources to engage with formal legal systems. Third, traditional leaders resolve conflicts through **informal mediation**, focusing on negotiation and reconciliation rather than formal judgments. This approach prioritises restoring social harmony, which is highly valued in Nigerien communities. Finally, the **cultural and religious influence** of these leaders, especially in Niger, strengthens the legitimacy of their decisions, as traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are deeply rooted in Niger's cultural and religious norms.

Land Commissions (COFOs)

Pastoral conflicts between farmers and herders are a significant issue in both Mali and Niger, but the resolution processes differ. In Mali, these conflicts are primarily handled at the local level, often through traditional means. In contrast, in Niger, disputes between farmers and herders are generally more challenging and sometimes escalate into violence. These conflicts often stem not from direct competition for resources, but from disagreements over land access and the timing of field closures. In response, JASS has supported the development and use of Pastoral Calendars - tools designed to facilitate dialogue and coordination among community members around seasonal land use, thereby helping to pre-empt misunderstandings and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Both Mali and Niger have established land commissions - **Commissions Foncières (COFOs)** - to manage land and resource conflicts (see "*What are COFOs*" box on page 17). These commissions play a **crucial role in conflict resolution**, particularly in disputes related to land and natural resources. COFOs

are tasked not only with resolving conflicts but also with preventing them, especially by addressing issues around land use and access. By proactively addressing these concerns, COFOs help reduce the likelihood of conflicts arising, contributing to the overall effectiveness of conflict management.

Embedded within local communities and often led by village chiefs, **COFOs are designed to be inclusive**, with representatives from various demographic groups, including women and youth. Observers agree that these structures are critical in managing land-related disputes and natural resource conflicts. Their inclusivity ensures that land conflicts are addressed fairly and effectively. Additionally, their integration into the community's structure and focus on preventing disputes make them a valuable resource in conflict resolution.

Community-based conflict resolution committees

In **Mali**, **community-based mechanisms** are more widely recognised and understood, with awareness of SAP/CRC being relatively moderate in regions like Koutiala (36%) and Ségou (51%). This suggests that community-driven conflict prevention structures are more familiar in these areas, indicating a stronger tradition of locally organised mechanisms for managing disputes. Furthermore, RECOTRAD, which involves the transmission of oral traditions and conflict resolution strategies through griots (traditional storytellers), has even higher awareness levels in these regions. Specifically, Ségou shows the highest recognition at 53%, while Koutiala also stands at 43%. In contrast, other regions in Mali, such as Koulikoro (28%) and San (28%), show comparatively lower awareness of these community-based methods, though the recognition remains somewhat higher than what is seen in Niger. In **Niger**, however, awareness of early warning and conflict resolution mechanisms is markedly limited, with significant regional disparities. For instance, in Maradi and Tahoua, recognition of RECOTRAD is extremely low - only 1% of respondents in Maradi and none in Tahoua reported awareness of its existence or relevance. While community-based structures are somewhat more familiar, it is important to clarify that **SAP/CRC, as they exist in Mali, do not have direct equivalents in Niger**. Instead, Niger operates through structures such as SCAP/RU and community forums, which are primarily focused on food security, nutrition, animal health, and environmental threats like floods or disease outbreaks. These systems track a vast array of indicators - often with varying consistency - and use them to determine "alert levels," which are then communicated up the administrative chain, starting at the commune level. This divergence in both structure and focus reflect the **distinct cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which early warning systems operate in Mali and Niger**.

In **Mali**, **community-based conflict resolution mechanisms** like SAP/CRC and RECOTRAD are not only ingrained in local traditions, but they also play a **crucial role in maintaining social harmony and stability**. These methods are woven into the fabric of daily life, with community leaders, griots, and local mediators serving as trusted figures who can facilitate dialogue and resolve disputes before they escalate into larger conflicts. The widespread familiarity with and acceptance of these structures reflect a cultural continuity where traditional systems of justice and conflict management have been preserved and adapted over generations. In many rural areas, these community-based mechanisms are often the first line of defence against conflict, and they are particularly effective in addressing local disputes related to land, inheritance, and personal relationships, which are the most common causes of conflict in the region. The trust in these systems is also strengthened by their accessibility and affordability compared to formal legal processes, which may be seen as distant or unresponsive to local needs.

In contrast, the **low awareness and utilisation of these mechanisms in Niger** may be attributed to several interconnected factors. One potential explanation is the relatively weak integration of traditional conflict resolution methods into modern governance and legal frameworks. In Niger, there may be a greater emphasis on formal state-run institutions and less recognition of the value of traditional methods, leading to a disconnect between state-driven initiatives and community-driven practices. This could result in limited public awareness of the effectiveness of community-based approaches to conflict resolution. Additionally, the relative novelty of some of these mechanisms in Niger, compared to their long-standing tradition in Mali, could mean that these structures have not been fully cultivated or institutionalised within the country. Lastly, the political and social dynamics in Niger may also play a role in limiting the

effectiveness of community-based conflict resolution. The political landscape in Niger has been marked by instability and conflict, which may hinder the development and widespread acceptance of non-state mechanisms. In situations of political turmoil or insecurity, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms can sometimes be undermined or displaced by more formalised systems or external interventions, which might not always align with local customs and practices.

Perceived challenges and need for reforms with local and traditional mechanisms

Experts interviewed in both Mali and Niger emphasised that **while traditional conflict resolution remains a trusted and vital mechanism at the community level, several structural challenges highlight the need for reforms**. Traditional conflict resolution systems in Niger face additional structural challenges that affect their overall effectiveness and fairness. These reforms would enhance consistency, transparency, and fairness across the system. Key areas for improvement include integrating documentation practices and aligning traditional methods with modern legal systems, which could further strengthen conflict resolution efforts.

> *"The lack of written records and standardised procedures often lead to inconsistencies in conflict resolution."*
>
> Member of the JASS program team in Niger

A primary challenge identified by experts working with the JASS programme is the **lack of documentation and standardisation**. Decisions made by traditional authorities, such as village chiefs and religious leaders, are often not formally documented, leading to inconsistencies in how conflicts are resolved. The absence of written records and standardised procedures undermines the reliability of these mechanisms, potentially resulting in disputes over the outcomes of conflict resolutions. The lack of standardised processes means that decisions can vary based on the discretion of local authorities – or on their uneven and sometimes incomplete understanding of the applicable laws and regulations.

Without written records, tracking passed resolutions is difficult, further compromising the system's reliability. This lack of formal documentation also reduces accountability and transparency within the system. Despite these challenges, a recent positive development in Niger has been the introduction of conciliation reports issued by chiefs through the COFOs. These reports are now required for access to formal justice mechanisms, helping to formalise the conflict resolution process. By ensuring that local conflict resolution steps are followed before escalating to the formal justice system, the requirement for conciliation reports provides a more standardised and documented approach to resolving disputes.

There is for instance **no standardised process for validating agreements facilitated by COFOs in Mali**. While the concept of homologation exists, it is poorly understood by COFOs, magistrates and judges. To address this gap, JASS, in collaboration with the National Judicial Training Institute, has developed training modules aimed at supporting judges, magistrates, and legal professionals. These modules are designed to help navigate the complexities of Mali's dual legal framework, which integrates both modern and customary laws, ensuring a more consistent and efficient process for validating agreements within the justice system. They also provide guidance on how to properly conduct *homologation* ceremonies and ensure that the relevant documents are filled out correctly to be recognised as formal verdicts by the judicial system.

Additionally, there are **practical barriers** to effective conflict resolution, such as **limited resources and personnel**. In some areas of **Mali**, the absence of essential roles like forest rangers ("forestiers") makes it difficult to manage and resolve conflicts related to natural resources. The lack of adequate personnel and resources further complicates efforts to ensure that conflicts, especially those related to land and natural resources, are resolved fairly and equitably. **COFOs are also often under-equipped and lack proper**

legal training. Members of these commissions often struggle with language barriers, as they may not be fluent in French, making it harder for them to interpret and apply the laws they are meant to enforce. This lack of legal literacy within COFOs exacerbates the difficulties faced by community members in accessing accurate information about land and natural resource laws.

Tensions also exist between traditional and formal legal systems, particularly in cases such as crop damage in Niger. Discrepancies in compensation procedures between local practices and state laws can lead to confusion and conflict. In some instances, security forces may intervene, either at the request of local authorities or independently. Their involvement can complicate the resolution process, often introducing fees for their services. This financial involvement risks undermining the informal, cost-effective nature of traditional mechanisms.

Lastly, another worthwhile challenge mentioned in both countries is related to the lack of recognition of a chief's authority, particularly when there is competition for leadership. Chiefs, who are typically unpaid, may retain a portion of fines as informal compensation, which can lead to perceptions of bias. This can erode trust in the process, especially in cases involving contested leadership or when decisions are seen as self-serving.

As discussed below, in more complex cases, particularly those involving land and resource disputes, formal institutions such as courts and administrative bodies - like mayors and prefects - are called upon.

Broader Learning: Presence and Capacity of State Authorities and Formal Justice System

While **government actors have a notably low level of trust**, with only 7% of respondents saying that they would turn to them to help resolve a dispute cross all regions, regions like San and Tahoua in Mali and Niger (23% each) show a slightly higher preference for governmental involvement in dispute resolution. The fact that only a small proportion of people in regions like Segou (6%) or Koulikoro (0%) expressed that they would turn to government actors with help to resolve a dispute indicates that there may be limited faith in formal legal systems, which might be perceived as less accessible or ineffective, particularly in rural and conflict-prone areas.

The data also reveals **significant differences between Mali and Niger in terms of the presence and recognition of formal state structures such as the police, justice systems, and local government**. Niger exhibits a stronger state presence, with regions like Maradi and Tahoua reporting high levels of awareness of state institutions (88% for both security forces and the justice system). In contrast, many regions in Mali, such as Koutiala and San, show much lower levels of awareness, with figures ranging from just 3% to 24%. This stark contrast highlights a more established state presence in Niger, while Mali, particularly in rural areas, faces challenges in communication and trust in formal state mechanisms.

In **Mali**, awareness levels of state structures vary dramatically by region, which highlights a more **fragmented state presence**. While regions like Ségou and Koulikoro show relatively high awareness of the police (51% and 51%, respectively) and justice systems (49% and 44%), other areas like Koutiala and San report alarmingly low levels of recognition, with just 24% of people in Koutiala aware of the police and only 3% in San. The data suggests that the presence and effectiveness of formal institutions like the police, justice system, and prefectures are less consistent across the country, particularly in more rural areas. This contrasts with **Niger**, where regions like Maradi and Tahoua demonstrate near-universal recognition of these formal structures, pointing to a more uniform state infrastructure across the country.

However, there are **notable differences between Mali and Niger regarding perceptions of the justice system**. Malians, particularly in regions like San, tend to be more sceptical, likely due to the country's political instability and internal conflicts. In contrast, Niger's more stable environment fosters greater trust,

especially in regions like Maradi and Tahoua. These differences reflect the distinct political, social, and economic contexts of each country.

In regions like Koutiala, Segou, Koulikoro, and San, most surveyed individuals believe the justice system is fair or very fair, with percentages ranging from 55% to 61%. It is worth noting that there may be conceptual ambiguity in this perception, as what is considered "fair" by respondents may often align with community consensus – i.e. the resolution of outcome that is seen as acceptable by local norms and expectations – rather than formal legal fairness as defined by the justice system. These regions also face challenges such as limited access to justice, inequality, and local corruption, which may influence perceptions. San stands out with the highest percentage (9%) of respondents who view the system as unfair, possibly reflecting localised disparities in access. Despite these challenges, about 80% of Malians generally view the system positively, although this may reflect a desire for fairness rather than confidence in the system's overall effectiveness.

Regional differences within Mali show varying satisfaction levels. In Koutiala, local judges are praised for collaborating with traditional leaders, which fosters a positive perception. However, in areas like Koulikoro, particularly Banamba, there is scepticism, with around 15% of respondents deeming the system unfair. This scepticism is often linked to perceptions of external influence, with wealth and diaspora connections seen as factors that can sway legal outcomes, undermining trust in the system.

"Today, we can say without hesitation that legal proceedings are managed fairly and transparently both at village level, through the COFO village council, and at justice via the mayor's office and the prefecture."

A JASS program participant from Mali

In contrast, respondents in **Niger** seem to show stronger trust in the justice system, particularly in regions like Maradi and Tahou. In Maradi, 59% of people view the system as fair, while 48% in Tahoua share the same belief. Tahoua stands out with 38% of respondents considering the system "very fair," suggesting a high level of confidence. This may be due to a more stable political environment or more effective legal institutions in Niger. It is also important to note a potential selection bias, as JASS strategically chose areas of intervention that are characterise as "fragile, albeit stable".

While village chiefs and COFOs are essential for resolving most local disputes, **security forces** and police become involved when conflicts escalate beyond the capacity of traditional mechanisms. Although these actors are often preferred for their ability to enforce resolutions quickly, their involvement can also introduce additional costs and formality, which community members may not always Favor. Many still prefer the informal, negotiated approach of traditional authorities. Security forces may intervene, typically due to the immediate need for resolution or to prevent further violence. Local experts in Niger have noted that security forces may sometimes step in without being requested, using force when necessary to restore order and prevent escalation. While this intervention is viewed as a last resort, it underscores the limitations of local authorities in managing conflicts that spiral out of control.

Understanding and Accessing the Formal Justice System

Key Finding: Individuals who express moderate or deep knowledge of laws on natural resource and land management are more likely to express positive perceptions of justice.

Across the survey data, KII/FGD transcripts, and sensemaking sessions with programme team members, **the formal justice system is often described as complicated and difficult to navigate**, especially by

those with limited education. Legal protocols can be intimidating, discouraging individuals from pursuing justice through formal channels. Moreover, **economic constraints** add to the issue, as engaging with the formal justice system often requires financial resources for legal representation, which many community members cannot afford. This economic barrier makes it even harder for individuals to seek legal action, further reinforcing the reliance on informal, community-based conflict resolution mechanisms.

Survey data indicates that a significant **knowledge gap** exists, particularly concerning laws related to land ownership and natural resources. Many community members are unaware of their rights and the legal processes required to defend them, which limits their ability to engage with formal justice systems effectively.

A large portion of the survey sample lack knowledge of laws governing land ownership, natural resource management, the movement of livestock, and access to forests. While most respondents (61%) are not familiar with the laws concerning land ownership, 89% believe that such laws, when known, are applied and respected in their community. This indicates a general lack of awareness regarding these legal matters, which could point to either limited access to information or a lack of education on these topics. The highest
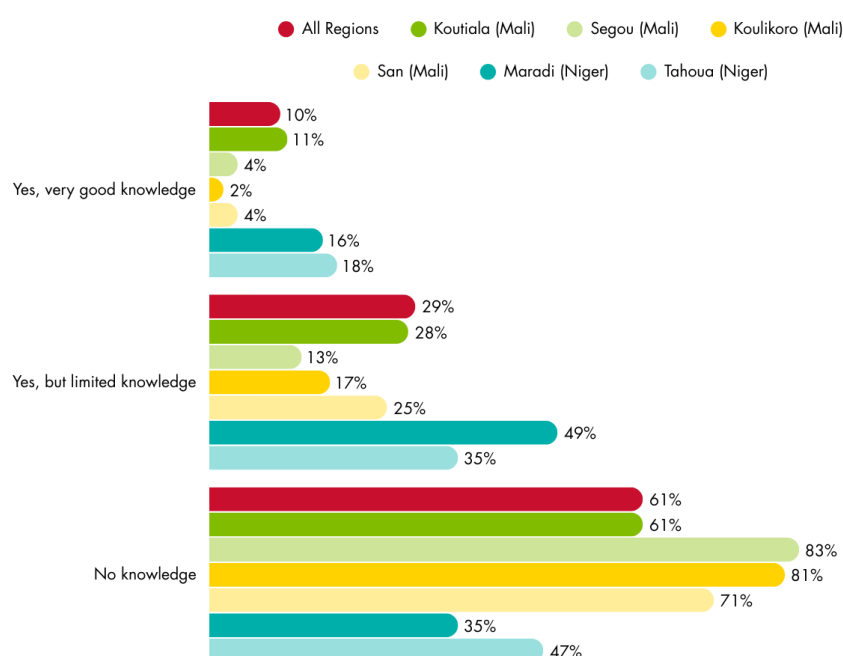

Figure 15. Are you aware of any laws on natural resources and land ownership?

percentage of people without knowledge is in Segou (83%) and Koulikoro (81%), suggesting that these regions may face challenges in educating the public about such laws or that these issues are not actively discussed or enforced at the local level.

A smaller proportion of respondents have limited knowledge, with 29% of people across all regions indicating they know a little about these laws. The highest percentage of those with limited knowledge is in Tahoua (49%) and Maradi (35%). These regions may have better access to legal resources or information, but still, a significant portion of the population lacks a thorough understanding. This suggests that while there may be some awareness, it is not sufficient to empower people fully to engage with or understand the implications of laws on natural resources and land ownership.

Only 10% of respondents across all regions report having very good knowledge of laws related to natural resources and land ownership. Koutiala stands out in this regard, with 16% of people indicating they have a strong understanding of these laws. This relatively higher percentage may reflect more effective legal education programs, better access to information, or a higher level of legal awareness in the region. However, despite Koutiala's higher knowledge level, it is still a minority of the population that possesses in-depth knowledge.

- ○ Fairness of legal and justice system
- ○ Trust in local authorities
- □ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 16. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Limited Knowledge of laws on natural resources and land management

The regression analyses show that **the extent to which individuals feel that they understand the laws on natural resources and land management** is substantially associated with perceptions of justice, **especially beliefs that the broader legal and justice system is fair,** and that **dispute resolution is peaceful and inclusive.** Individuals who assessed that they had "**limited knowledge"** of the relevant laws (as opposed to no knowledge) actually expressed **more positive perceptions of justice across the board**, as they are more likely to agree that they **perceive the legal and justice system as fair**, that **dispute resolution is peaceful and inclusive**, and that they **trust local authorities to resolve disputes fairly**. In contrast, the smaller proportion of individuals who assessed their knowledge of laws on natural resources and land as **"very good"** are also **more likely to perceive the legal and justice system as fair** and to view **dispute resolution as peaceful and inclusive**. While high self-assessed knowledge of relevant laws is positively associated with trust in local authorities, this relationship is not statistically significant.

- ○ Fairness of legal and justice system
- ○ Trust in local authorities
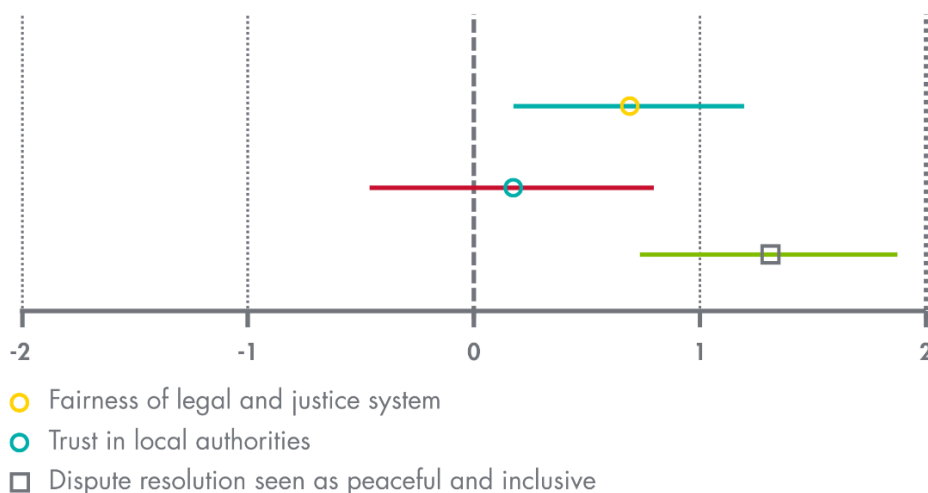- □ Dispute resolution seen as peaceful and inclusive

Figure 17. Relationship between Perceptions of Justice and Deep Knowledge of laws on natural resources and land management

Broader Learning: Issues with Understanding and Accessing Formal Justice Services

Barriers to accessing the formal justice system

As noted above, **the formal justice system is often seen as a last resort for conflict resolution**. While it is generally regarded as fair, several challenges make it less appealing to many community members, including **issues related to accessibility, understanding legal processes, and the financial costs associated with formal proceedings**. As a result, people typically seek to resolve conflicts through traditional methods before turning to the formal justice system.

While formal justice systems are intended to provide equitable access to all, there are significant barriers that prevent many individuals from utilising them. Our qualitative inquiry with community members and local experts and sensemaking sessions with JASS programme team and partners reveals that while formal justice systems are technically designed to be accessible to all, **in practice, access is often limited by several barriers**.

One significant issue is that **challenges with accessing these formal systems persist**, especially for those without financial means or social connections. Many individuals face difficulties in reaching legal institutions due to **geographical distance** and a lack of transportation, particularly in rural areas.

Additionally, **language barriers** are prevalent, as many community members do not speak or understand French, the official language used in legal proceedings. This lack of comprehension can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of confidence in the justice system, further deterring people from seeking formal legal avenues.

This is compounded by the **costs associated with formal courts**, such as filing fees, which are not required for local conflict resolution mechanisms. Local systems, typically involving village chiefs or community leaders, are free of charge, making them more accessible for many people.

"The JASS programme has made a major contribution to improving natural resource and conflict management by setting up COFOs in each village (...) we have also been trained to form commissions on land management and acquisition methods, complete conciliation agreements and have them validated by the justice. We've done a lot!"

Member of the Agriculture technical service from the Koutiala region, Mali

Knowledge gaps are an additional obstacle to accessing the formal justice system, as many community members lack understanding of how to navigate the justice system. As noted above, the **complexity of legal procedures** is another critical challenge. The data reveals a general lack of awareness of laws on natural resources and land ownership, with most respondents reporting no knowledge of these laws. While there are some regions with more awareness, especially Koutiala, overall, the population across the regions appears to have limited understanding of these important legal issues. There is a clear need for greater legal education and awareness campaigns to ensure that people are better informed about their rights and obligations related to land and natural resources.

As with accessing legal proceedings, a primary issue with understanding existing laws on natural resource management is the **language barrier**: legal texts are written in French, while most community members speak local languages. This linguistic divide makes it difficult for people to access and understand laws that directly impact their daily lives. Even when legal texts are available in local languages, there is often no effective mechanism to disseminate this information widely, further hindering the community's ability to understand and navigate land and resource laws.

The JASS project is aiming to address these challenges by translating and disseminating key legal texts into local languages. This initiative aims to ensure that community members can access and understand laws in a more accessible format. Furthermore, the project is working to integrate legal awareness into its activities to improve community understanding of these laws. Despite these efforts, however, a significant

gap in legal literacy remains, and JASS team members and partners emphasised the need for more systematic efforts to address this issue. Legal literacy is critically low in these communities, with the primary barriers being language and ineffective dissemination mechanisms, rather than a lack of interest. Informants have emphasised the need for better translation and localisation of legal texts and recommended improvements to the survey design, making it more concrete and culturally adapted. They suggested using audiovisual methods, such as microprograms on television, to raise legal awareness within the community. While this approach was recognised as effective, it was also acknowledged that it can be costly to implement.

JASS programme team members in Mali also described efforts to improve access to the formal justice system. Judges have begun to engage in community dialogues to build trust and address these concerns. Additionally, **awareness-raising** activities have been implemented to help demystify court processes and make legal systems more understandable for the general population.

General awareness of these laws appears to be notably higher in **Niger** compared to Mali. Interviewed experts brought up challenges in disseminating information about these laws and pointed out that the Code Rural, which governs land and natural resource management, needs to be more widely distributed and translated into local languages. This would improve the understanding of the laws and increase their impact within communities. While efforts have been made through forums, sensitisation campaigns, and radio broadcasts, interviewed JASS team members agreed that more needs to be done to ensure greater outreach and understanding. Despite the efforts to communicate these laws, experts acknowledged that the responsibility for widespread dissemination lies with the government, not just donor-funded programs like JASS, which have limited geographic reach. They concluded that increased support to the State in their outreach, translation, and legal education efforts is essential for improving legal literacy and ensuring that communities can effectively manage their natural resources.

Distrust and Perceptions of Corruption

Despite the general perception that the broader justice and legal system is fair, there is a prevailing sense of distrust and dissatisfaction. Some community members feel that verdicts can be unfairly influenced, contributing to recidivism or ongoing tensions. This reflects concerns that, although the justice system is generally viewed as fair, some aspects may not always be seen as entirely impartial. Several challenges contribute to this perception, making the formal justice system less appealing. Additionally, perceived **corruption** within these systems can undermine their effectiveness.

In **Mali**, **corruption** was mentioned for areas like Koulikoro and Banamba as a significant issue. Wealthy individuals with connections, both locally and internationally, are often seen as having the power to influence the justice system in their Favor, creating a perception that justice is not equally available to all. This situation exacerbates the mistrust and dissatisfaction with the formal justice system. Furthermore, many community members lack knowledge of legal texts and procedures, which hinders their ability to resolve conflicts effectively. This is especially problematic when legal texts are not available in local languages, limiting the ability of community members to understand their rights and navigate the justice system.

"Your bad name arrives before your good name."

A Bambara proverb quoted by a Malian legal scholar working with the JASS programme

Moreover, **perception of corruption and bias**, particularly in regions with wealthy diaspora members, further discourage individuals from seeking formal justice. These perceptions are often exacerbated by the belief that wealth can influence legal outcomes. Legacy perceptions of corruption and bias persist, and as a Bambara proverb shared by a JASS programme team member in Mali suggests, "Your bad

name arrives before your good name," signifying that reputation often precedes reform. This proverb underscores the deep-rooted scepticism that continues to affect perceptions of justice.

Dispute resolution and social cohesion

When disputes have been taken to court but remain unresolved or continue to cause tension at the community level, local authorities often face additional pressure. Once a case enters the formal justice system, bodies like COFO and COFOCOM typically withdraw from the process, as they are not meant to intervene once the legal system is involved. Local leaders, such as mayors or prefects, are then tasked with enforcing court decisions. However, this can be challenging. With regards to the specific case of Niger, JASS programme team members and partners noted a reluctance among local leaders to enforce rulings by force due to Nigerien society's strong emphasis on pacifism, community cohesion, and the importance of family and religious ties. This reluctance can result in court decisions being unenforced, leaving the community in a state of unresolved tension.

A key issue in accessing justice in Mali is the fear that taking a case to formal court could damage **social cohesion**. **Social stigma** plays a significant role, as resolving conflicts—particularly those involving family members—through the court system can harm relationships and lead to long-lasting resentment within the community. This fear is rooted in the belief that such disputes, especially involving family or neighbours, can cause long-term division. Once a conflict reaches the formal justice system, it is often seen as irreparably damaging relationships, with the stigma of court involvement lingering across generations. As a result, many prefer resolving disputes through local, informal mechanisms rather than engaging with formal judicial processes.

"Taking someone to court can have significant negative impacts on social cohesion within the community. Such actions can lead to long-lasting tensions and conflicts between families, often passed down through generations, ultimately undermining the social fabric and trust within the community."

Malian legal scholar working with the JASS programme

The fear of damaging social cohesion by involving formal justice systems is a considerable challenge in Mali. In sensemaking sessions, programme team members and partners described that individuals hesitate to take disputes to court due to concerns about creating lasting division and resentment. This reluctance to escalate conflicts undermines social trust and harmony, especially when the justice system is seen as biased or influenced by external forces. The risk of corruption amplifies these concerns, as community members worry that wealth and connections can sway legal outcomes, further deepening divisions within the community.

CONCLUSIONS, LESSONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, **this report reinforces a central premise of JASS's theory of change: that individuals' perceptions of justice institutions - whether informal or formal - are closely shaped by their direct experiences with how effective, inclusive, and accessible these mechanisms are**. Communities broadly trust traditional leaders, viewing them as culturally legitimate and accessible, yet concerns about consistency, inclusivity (especially for women and youth), and transparency can weaken this trust. Similarly, while formal systems are often seen as fairer over time - evidenced by an 11% increase in positive perceptions since the programme's start - barriers such as legal illiteracy, language exclusion, cost, and social stigma limit their perceived legitimacy and access. The report shows that those who understand and engage with a broader range of justice actors, including community-based mechanisms like CRCs and COFOs, tend to report higher trust in justice systems. **These findings underscore the complex but critical interplay between people's lived experiences and their evolving trust in justice institutions, validating JASS's focus on strengthening inclusive, context-specific dispute resolution pathways.**

This piece is intended as a **living input into ongoing programme implementation and advocacy, rather than a final, top-down set of recommendations**. As a result, this final section is meant to offer a brief synthesis that links key findings from the report to upcoming decisions and actions for the JASS team, FCDO, and the wider ecosystem of civil society, government, and donor actors operating at the nexus of justice, conflict prevention, climate adaptation, and humanitarian response in Mali, Niger, and the broader Sahel region. **The goal is for these reflections to spark further dialogue, inform adaptive programming, and guide collective action in the months and years to come**.

Implications for JASS and other multisectoral resilience programmes in the Sahel

The findings of this report support **continued investment in the broad range of activities under Objective 1**, focused on dispute management and conflict prevention, while emphasising the importance of ongoing evidence gathering and adaptive learning.

Implication #1

The results provide **strong validation that the core logic of Objective 1 is technically sound and broadly relevant to the contexts in which JASS operates in Mali and Niger**. In particular, JASS's engagement with COFOs in both countries, CRCs in Mali, and SCAP/RU in Niger shows promise as a bridge between locally legitimate dispute resolution systems and the formal legal and justice institutions.

Implication #2

Continued **collection and analysis of data** - particularly through the quasi-experimental design of the annual survey - should be prioritised to deepen understanding of how JASS's work is influencing perceptions of justice actors and mechanisms. This evidence is key to testing the broader hypothesis that improving these perceptions contributes to the legitimacy of governance institutions, conflict prevention, and overall stability.

The **sense-making sessions conducted with JASS team members** as part of this study were highly valued and represent a strong practice to carry forward. These sessions provided a collaborative space for joint data analysis, reflection, and testing of programme assumptions - an approach that is particularly important for adaptive management. This is especially relevant given the legacy and maturity of JASS programming in Mali, contrasted with the relatively recent implementation in Niger. Building on this, **we strongly recommend that the JASS team engage deeply with the findings of this report and continue to apply adaptive management principles to refine intervention strategies and implementation modalities**. This includes tailoring approaches not only to the **distinct** national contexts

of Mali and Niger but also to the diverse dynamics that exist across regions and communes within each country. Variations in the role of traditional authorities, levels of trust in formal systems, and patterns of conflict exposure all underscore the need for flexible, localised responses grounded in continuous learning and real-time evidence.

Implication #3

We recommend **building on initial efforts to ensure that JASS's engagement with community-level structures meaningfully connects to, and strengthens, community knowledge of and trust in the formal justice system and related legal frameworks**. Strengthening these linkages is critical to supporting a more integrated and coherent justice ecosystem. One promising approach involves the continued translation and dissemination of relevant laws through JASS-supported structures such as COFOs, CRCs, and SCAP/RU. This work can help close gaps in legal literacy and improve access to justice, particularly in linguistically diverse and rural communities. Additionally, emerging priorities from the sense-making sessions offer further opportunities to adapt and deepen this work. These efforts should remain context-specific and responsive to regional variations in trust toward formal institutions and the ways in which communities engage with justice actors.

Implication #4

As noted in the Perceptions of Violent Extremism study, we see a strategic opportunity to **deepen efforts to integrate implementation experience, evidence, and learning from Objective 1 with the wider activities under Objectives 2 and 3.** Doing so will help explore synergies across the programme's different components and support real-time adaptations, ensuring that day-to-day delivery is aligned with the overarching goal of enhancing stability and security in Mali and Niger.

Implications and Recommendations for Donors and Policy Stakeholders

Implication #5

JASS's work on land conflict prevention and justice is intricately linked with the evolving dynamics of climate change, including shifting seasonal patterns and increasing shocks and stresses. These intersections highlight the importance of **continued support for integrated, multisectoral programming** that bridges silos - not only between formal and informal justice systems, but also across **climate adaptation, humanitarian response, development, and peacebuilding effort**s.

Implication #6

As noted in the Perceptions of Violent Extremism study, FCDO and other stakeholders should prioritise the creation of **spaces for broad learning and collaboration across international, national, and local actors working on justice and conflict prevention—and the broader climate adaptation–peacebuilding in Mali and Niger**. This includes centring the leadership of local organisations, researchers, and policy actors, while also facilitating regional convenings and engagement with global partners to promote cross-learning and shared strategy development. Importantly, efforts should also focus on generating and using appropriately scaled evidence, and on synthesising and sharing insights across organisations to consolidate learning, align interventions, and drive coordinated, collaborative action.

Appendix A: Table of Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Perception of Justice System	Trust in Local Authorities	Dispute Resolution is Peaceful and Inclusive
Limited Knowledge of Laws	0.044**	0.043***	0.098***
	(0.017)	(0.014)	(0.019)
Very Good Knowledge of Laws	0.067***	0.022	0.134***

	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.027)
Willingness to turn to CRC	0.035*	0.029**	0.111***
	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.017)
Presence of Dispute Resolution Mechanisms	0.017***	0.017***	-0.004
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Limitations of Traditional Mechanisms	-0.127***	-0.131***	-0.065***
	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.022)
Observations	3,092	3,171	3,141
Adjusted R-squared	0.095	0.101	0.083
Village Indicators	Yes	Yes	Yes

Standard errors clustered at the village level in parentheses

Controls included are Age, Female, Ethnic Group, Occupation, JASS Activity.

* p<0.10 ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01

Appendix B: Description of Qualitative Document Codes

KEY FOR INTERPRETING DOCUMENT CODES

Each document in the JASS qualitative data is coded with a multi-part code to help with easy identification while maintaining confidentiality. The typical sequence of each code is "Country/Region"**,** "Data Type","Respondent Type", and "Gender" (for KIIs). As a result, the document "Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC" is from Banamba village in the Koulikoro Region of Mali, featuring a FGD with JASS program participants who are Gender Inclusion Champions.

For analysis in MaxQDA Tailwind (which currently is limited to 5 projects with 20 documents each), some documents needed to be consolidated, typically across similar respondent types in different villages. These are noted with the code "Cons".

Country/ Region	Code		Data Type	Code		Respondent Type	Code
Mali- Koutiala	Ma1		KII- JASS	KII_J		Young Men	YM
Mali- Koulikoro	Ma2		FGD-JASS	FGD_J		Femmes	F
Mali- Ségou	Ma3		FGD-Non-JASS	FGD_NJ		Herder in Non JASS (Pastoralists/Herders in JASS FGD)	H
Mali- San	Ma4					Farmer	Fa
Niger-Tahoua	Ni1					Gender Inclusion Champions	GIC
Niger-Maradi	Ni2					Vulnerable Household Participating in CFW	CFW
						Peace Forums/Community Inclusion Group Dialogues	PF
			Gender (KIIs Only)	**Code**		Vulnerable Farming Groups	VFG
			Male	M		Young People	YP
			Female	F		Conflict Resolution Committee (in KIIs + 1 FGD)	CRC
						Technical Services-Agriculture	Ag
						Technical Services-Animal Production and Industry	API
						Livestock Technical Service	LTS
						Justice Actors	JA
						COFO	COFO

					Village Land Commission	VLC
					Early Warning Rapid Response System Conflict Observer	EWCO
					Regional Reconciliation Support Team	ERAR
					Community EW System Committee	SCAP
					Complainants	Com
					Grazing Maps	GM
					Climate Change Micro-Projects	CC
					Women-Owned Business	WOB
					ICT Pilot Initiatives	ICT
					Religious Leader	RL
					Technical Services General	TSG
					Complaint Observer	CO
					Canton Chief	Chief
					Commune Land Commission	COFOCOM
					Commune Livestock Service	CLS
					Environmental Services	Env