UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND RESILIENCE: MEASURING AND INFLUENCING ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND BEHAVIOURS RELATED TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALI AND NIGER

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

November 2025

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with Ife Olawole, Simon Mercer, and Matt Ribar contributed substantially to the data collection tools used in this report. Special thanks also go to Sarah Gibbons (Mercy Corps Senior Director, Peace and Conflict – 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 justice (Medam and Sheely 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. In addition, this report was prepared concurrently with a research study on youth radicalisation in Jordan that Mercy Corps conducted for FCDO (Olawole et al. 2025). As a result, while reviewing the broader literature on the drivers of violent extremism is out of scope for this report, we are able to draw on the literature review from this other study to help situate the patterns from JASS within the broader body of knowledge and practice on violent extremism. When we draw on literature review and other passages from our concurrent and previous writing in this way, we note them in a footnote. 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.

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

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.

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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 marginalized 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 stressors, and strengthening the evidence base for locally driven interventions.

This **Evidence Synthesis and Learning Report**, part of the JASS Evidence and Learning Agenda, focuses on **bringing the programme's theory of change and activities into dialogue with broader evidence and debates on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in the Sahel and beyond**. To do so, the report **draws on data from the 2024 mid-term 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 other residents. In addition to this data from JASS, the report also **synthesises evidence** from **five previous P/CVE programmes implemented by Mercy Corps in Mali and Niger from 2017-25.** This report explicitly differentiates between JASS's zones of intervention in Mali and Niger, recognizing the contextual specificities in each country and exploring how these differences shape community experiences with and perceptions of violence and violent extremism.

The report begins by outlining the broad conflict landscape in JASS areas, setting the scene for understanding community perceptions of violence and violent extremism. It then explores how Mercy Corps has measured perception of violent extremism in past research and programming in the Sahel and provides an overview of the two aspects of perceptions of violent extremism that are the focus of this report: 1) a set of four survey questions asking individuals if they believe that members of their community think it is justified to use violence for different purposes and 2) a measure of whether individuals would turn to armed groups for help with dispute resolution. The report then unpacks the factors shaping perceptions of violent extremism, including **economic hardship and shocks, perceptions of governance and justice, marginalisation and inclusion,** and **social cohesion.** The final section offers practical recommendations for the JASS programme and similar multisectoral resilience initiatives and the broader set of local and international stakeholders working on P/CVE and stabilisation in Mali, Niger, and the broader region. The key findings are as follows:

JASS's programming approach is well-calibrated to address community and societal-level push factors that shape the ability of VEOs to recruit fighters and exercise territorial control. Each of the broad types of push factors that have been shown to shape risk of radicalisation and violent extremism in past programming and research in the Sahel are present and operating in the regions of Mali and Niger where JASS is being implemented. This supports the view that **risk and resilience to violent extremism is driven by the complex interactions of a mix of economic, governance, and social dynamics at both the community and individual level**. Similarly, we find that JASS's theory of change, programming approaches, and underlying design principles are **aligned with evidence-based practices that have been used by Mercy Corps and other actors in P/CVE programming in the Sahel and globally**.

Safely and reliably measuring perceptions of violent extremism remains difficult and requires both creativity and trust. Although **effective P/CVE interventions rely on rich, contextually relevant data and evidence to effectively identify high-risk communities and individuals, this type of data is especially difficult to collect in Mali and Niger**, due to norms about speaking openly about violence and the potential risks associated with doing so. A **very low proportion of individuals in the areas where JASS works were willing to even express indirect acknowledgement of support for violence or armed groups in both the mid-term survey and concurrent qualitative transcripts.** While this pattern could indicate that support for violent extremism is quite limited in the regions where JASS is operating, it is also consistent with individuals censoring themselves due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Continuing to build the evidence base for P/CVE programming in the Sahel is possible, both through **creatively deploying cutting-edge quantitative and qualitative methods** and by **investing in equitable, trust-based partnerships with local communities and organisations.**

Experiencing climate shocks is associated with increased risk of radicalisation, indicating that climate adaptation activities can play a role in preventing violent extremism. The quantitative analyses show that in the regions where JASS works, individuals who experience climate shocks are more likely to turn to armed groups to help resolve disputes—in violation of community norms against the use of violence. This finding is broadly consistent with past Mercy Corps research in the Sahel, which shows that economic hardship and related grievances can drive individuals towards Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) and indicates that climate shocks can intensify this pathway. As a result, **JASS's activities focused on livelihoods and climate resilience—Cash-for-Work, improved agricultural inputs, and training in climate-smart agricultural**

and business skills—may play a role in counteracting the relationship between climate shocks and push factors toward radicalisation and violent extremism.

JASS's participatory, inclusive, community-led approach underpins the programme's ability to address key VE risk factors. The quantitative analyses show that in the regions where JASS works, individuals with **positive perceptions of justice and inclusion** and a **sense of belonging** perceive lower levels of community support for violence. A key theme across the qualitative KIIs and FGDs is that the ways in which JASS centres **meaningful participation and inclusion of all individuals and groups within a community** can help foster these positive perceptions of governance, inclusion, and social cohesion, and sets the programme apart from other development initiatives in the eyes of community members. While JASS's unique approach to inclusive participation is especially visible in its work on conflict prevention, it is also a hallmark of the programme's activities focused on economic livelihoods, market systems, and climate adaptation.

Conclusions and Implications for Programming and Policy. This report is intended as a **living input into ongoing programme implementation and advocacy, rather than a final, top-down set of recommendations**. The goal is for these findings and reflections to spark further dialogue, inform adaptive programming, and guide collective action in the months and years to come.

Recommendations for JASS and other multisectoral resilience programmes in the Sahel

Recommendation #1: Bring a focus on violent extremism into programming and learning, building on the approach piloted in this study.

Recommendation #2: Continue to explore synergies between conflict prevention and climate adaptation activities.

Recommendation #3: Amplify the participatory, inclusive, community-led ethos that is a transversal aspect of programming activities, stakeholder relations, and team culture.

Recommendations for Donors and Policy Stakeholders

Recommendation #4: Expand JASS and similar programmes to more explicitly address P/CVE goals by tailoring activities to specific, localised pull factors shaping radicalisation and recruitment.

Recommendation #5: Create spaces for joint learning and collaboration that convene international, national, and local actors working on P/CVE and the broader climate adaptation-peacebuilding nexus to consolidate evidence, align interventions, and drive coordinated action – assuring that available foreign assistance funding yields the greatest sustainable impacts possible.

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 inter-community 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, 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 undertaken.

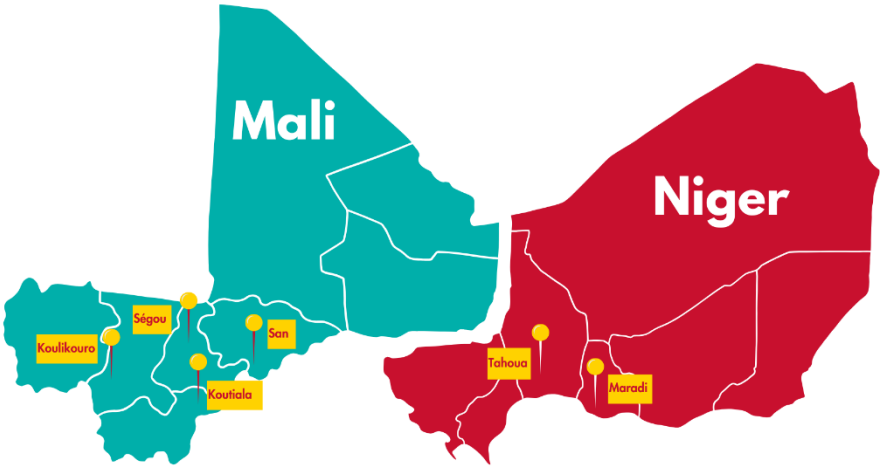

Figure 1. JASS's intervention areas

The risk of **violent extremism** in Mali and Niger is primarily driven by the presence of violent extremist organisations (VEOs), such as Jama'at Nusrat ul Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) whose most active component group is Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the Islamic State in the Sahel (Etat Islamique au Sahel**,** EIS), also known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[1] All of these organisations exploit local grievances, weak governance, and the lack of state presence in remote areas. Both countries suffer from weak institutions, high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited economic opportunities, particularly for youth, making communities vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organizations. Additionally, competition over resources, especially in the context of climate change, exacerbates local tensions and fuels insecurity. Ethnic and sectarian tensions also play a significant role, with historically marginalized groups such as the Touareg and Fulani (or Peulh) in Mali being particularly susceptible to extremist group recruitment. In Niger, resource access issues and historical grievances contribute to local instability. Regional instability further complicates the situation, as porous borders allow extremist groups to operate freely across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso – particularly in their cross border Liptako-Gourma region – amplifying the spread of extremist ideologies and destabilizing areas across three states. Humanitarian crises, driven by violence, displacement, and climate-related shocks, exacerbate the vulnerability of local populations, while international interventions can deepen local mistrust when they are administered in a top-down manner that do not incorporate meaningful participation from local communities (Raineri 2020). A comprehensive approach addressing both the socio-economic drivers and security concerns is needed to effectively mitigate the risk of violent extremism in the region.

[1] For a more detailed overview of the history and composition of VEOs operating in Mali, Niger, and the broader region, see Eizenga and Williams (2020) and Djitteye (2023).

Beyond these factors related to perceptions of governance and justice, it has been widely observed that in the Sahel, increased livelihood opportunities – both on- and off-farm – can significantly influence community and youth perceptions of extremist organizations by addressing key factors that make individuals vulnerable to radicalisation. Economic stability reduces the appeal of extremist groups, which often exploit poverty and unemployment to recruit members. Improved livelihoods may also foster social cohesion, as communities that benefit from economic opportunities may have enhanced capabilities and resources needed to work together and reject extremist ideologies. As people experience tangible benefits from development, they may view extremist groups less favourably, especially if those groups are seen as destabilizing local economies. For youth, access to alternative pathways for success—through agriculture, vocational training, or off-farm employment—can reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies, empowering them to focus on building a stable future, affording access to key rites of passage like marriage. These alternative economic pathways can also help young people to be viewed by their communities as contributing members of society, countering local stereotypes of young people as idle and excessively under the influence of drugs, alcohol, and other social vices. Overall, better livelihoods should help promote stability, security, and social engagement, making extremism less attractive to vulnerable populations.

In response to growing instability in Mali and Niger in regions that had not previously been sites of active conflict and extremist activity, 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 access to justice. 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 to lead to fair and equitable access to land, justice, and livelihood opportunities, focusing on marginalised or minority groups, in zones at risk of conflict, which will support the programme's ultimate goal of improved stability and security in regions of Mali and Niger that are fragile albeit stable. **While this theory of change—and the programme's results framework and activities—are not explicitly framed around Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), promoting improved security and stability in the programme's zones of operation in Mali and Niger will by definition require that the programme be aware of and address specific risks and challenges to stability posed by VEOs.**

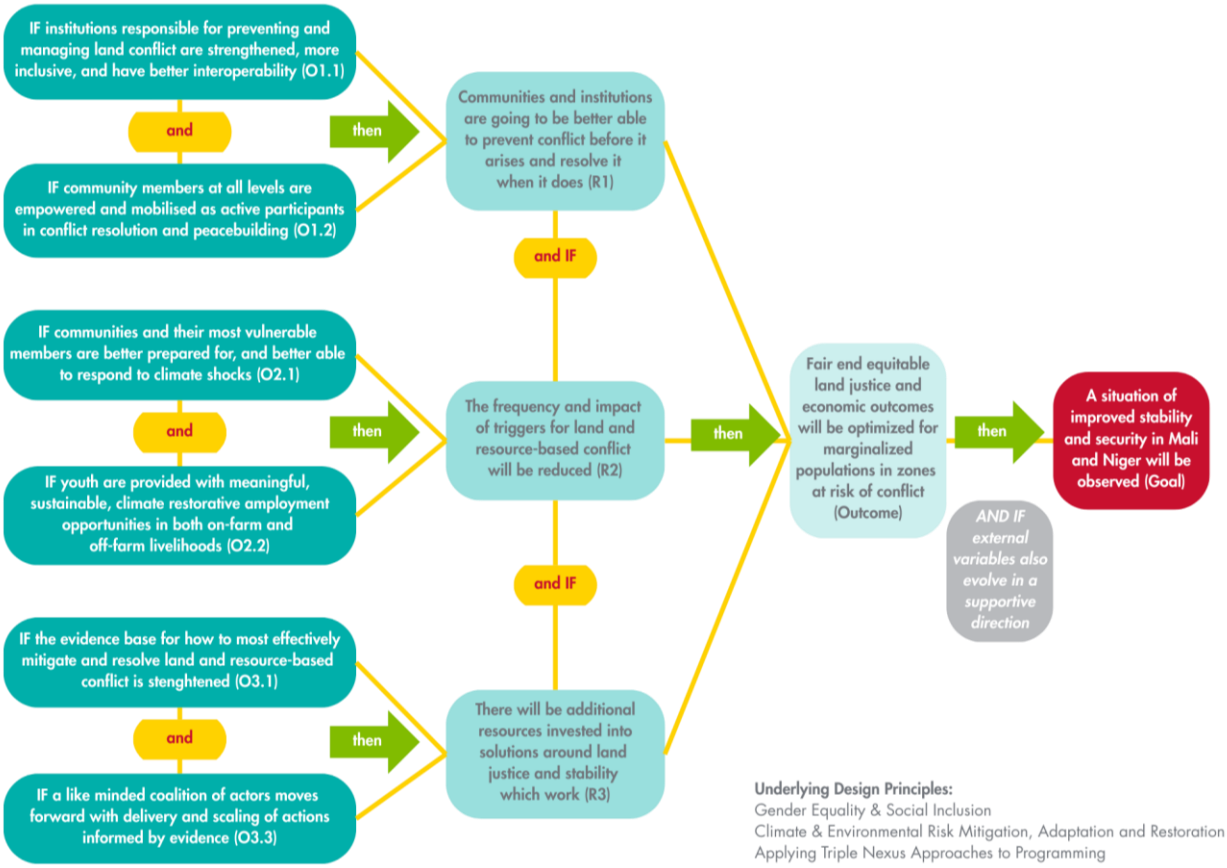

Figure 2. JASS's Theory of Change

Objectives of this Report

This **evidence synthesis and learning report** is part of the JASS Evidence and Learning Agenda (ELA), aligning with the prioritised learning areas on both agricultural livelihoods and climate-smart market systems development (linked to Outcome 2) and conflict mediation and natural resource governance (linked to Outcome 1). This study focuses on bringing the programme's theory of change and activities into dialogue with broader evidence and debates on P/CVE in the Sahel and beyond. **Given that the spread in territorial control and increasing attacks by VEOs is the greatest overarching threat to stability in Mali and Niger—and the Sahel as a whole-- it is vital for the JASS programme to understand how the push and pull factors of radicalisation and violent extremism are operating in the programme's area of operations.** Growing this evidence base will help JASS **adapt its programming activities, evidence generation, and learning** to be more sensitive to VE dynamics and to engage in more effective **advocacy** to bring together key local and international stakeholders to address the threats to stability and security posed by extremism.

Because openly discussing violent extremism in Mali and Niger is both politically sensitive and risky, the brief examines quantitative and qualitative data on participants' **perceptions of the use of violence** along with **several key push factors that shape community and individual-level risk and resilience** to radicalisation and the influence of violent extremism. To complement this approach, we also draw on insights from Mercy Corps's extensive

history of implementing research and programming focused on P/CVE in both Mali and Niger to place JASS's programming approaches and evidence within a broader context.

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 how the programme's activities can address the push and pull factors for violent extremism. To do so, we combine **original analysis of quantitative and qualitative data** that was collected during the programme's mid-term evaluation with **sensemaking sessions with practitioners working with the programme** and insights from existing **internal JASS assessments and reports** and **evaluation reports and research studies from past Mercy Corps P/CVE programmes in Mali and Niger**. 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 mid-term evaluation, which was completed in December 2024 by IWORDS Global. A total of 3,687 individuals were surveyed across the regions where JASS operates: Koutiala, Ségou, Koulikoro, and 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 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 was expanded beyond the programme's indicators to include questions on attitudes toward violence and the perceived justifications for it. Indices of community resilience were enhanced to assess exposure to and impacts of economic, environmental, and conflict-related shocks, including changes over the past five years. Additionally, data on agricultural production, livelihoods, and social cohesion were included to provide a more comprehensive perspective of known push and pull factors for Violent Extremism.

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 summarize 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 **five measures** that capture relevant aspects of **justification for the use of violence** and **willingness to turn to armed groups to resolve disputes**. The explanatory variables in the regressions are proxy measures for **four broad types of factors that may shape community members' perceptions of violent extremism**: 1**) impacts of economic hardship and shocks**, 2) **perceptions of governance and justice**, 3) **patterns of marginalization and inclusion**, and 4) **strength of social cohesion**. While these measures broadly capture the relevant aspects of perceptions of violent extremism

and the factors that influence these perceptions, we note the challenges with measuring perceptions of violent extremism throughout this report. 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, ethnolinguistic identity, occupation, and participation in JASS activities. We discuss results for two different specifications of the dependent variables that measure community support for violence: 1) the full five-point scale (from Never to Often) and 2) a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the individual responded “Most Times or Often”. Throughout this report, results from the regressions using the five-point scale 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 perceptions of violent extremism, but are all based on the regression specification that contains all explanatory and control variables, with standard errors clustered at the village level. For tables with the full regression results, see Appendix A.

Variable Type	Variable Description	Variable Coding in Regression Analyses
Perception of Violent Extremism (Dependent Variables)	**Community Believes Violence is Justified to Retaliate Against Violence**	Version 1: 5 Point Scale; Version 2: Coded 1 if "Most Times" or "Always" Coded 0 otherwise
	Community Believes Violence is Justified to Defend Religion	Version 1: 5 Point Scale; Version 2: Coded 1 if "Most Times" or "Always" Coded 0 otherwise
	Community Believes Violence is Justified to Defend Ethnolinguistic Group	Version 1: 5 Point Scale; Version 2: Coded 1 if "Most Times" or "Always" Coded 0 otherwise
	Community Believes Violence is Justified to Force Government to Change Policies	Version 1: 5 Point Scale; Version 2: Coded 1 if "Most Times" or "Always" Coded 0 otherwise
	Additive Index: Community Justifications of Violence	Additive Index of All "Justified" Measures
	Willingness to turn to Armed Group to Resolve a Dispute	Coded 1 if individual answered "Armed Groups" Coded 0 otherwise
Economic Hardship and Shocks (Explanatory Variables)	**Individual Experienced Climate Shock in Past 12 Months**	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise
	Individual Experienced Economic Shock in Past 12 Months	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise
	Individual Experienced Conflict Shock in Past 12 Months	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise
	Impact of Shocks	Additive index of individual responses of "The Worst Has Happened" to impact of shocks on income and food security
Perceptions of Governance and Justice (Explanatory Variables)	**Trust in Local Authorities**	Coded 1 if "Trust a Lot" Coded 0 otherwise
	Perception of the Legal and Justice System	Coded 1 if "Fair" or "Very Fair" Coded 0 otherwise
	Perception of Transparency of Natural Resource Decision-Making	Coded 1 if "Transparent" or "Very Transparent" Coded 0 otherwise
	Satisfaction with Governance of Natural Resource Governance	Coded 1 if "Satsified" or "Very Satisfied" Coded 0 otherwise
Marginalisation and Exclusion (Explanatory Variables)	**Representation of Women and Minority Groups in Decision-Making About Natural Resources**	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise
	Respondent's participation in decision-making about natural resources	Coded 1 if "Yes" Coded 0 otherwise

Social Cohesion (Explanatory Variables)	**Trust in Members of Other Livelihoods Groups**	Coded 1 if "A Lot" Coded 0 otherwise
	Belief in Benefits of Cooperation with Members of Other Livelihoods Groups	Coded 1 if "A Lot" Coded 0 otherwise
	Belonging	Coded 1 if "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" with "Feeling Left Out Coded 0 Otherwise
	Frequency of Peaceful Dispute Resolution	Coded 1 if "Most Times" 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

Qualitative Data and Analysis

Concurrent with the collection of the mid-term 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 citation is to an anonymised code to protect the identity of the respondents. A full description of how the document codes are constructed is available in Appendix B.

Synthesis of Past Evaluations and Research from Mercy Corps VE Programming in the Sahel

Acknowledging the sensitivity of extremism-related topics, the study also draws on evaluations and research from JASS predecessor programmes implemented by Mercy Corps and partners in Mali and Niger, which enabled more direct exploration of these issues in less restrictive contexts. In particular, we draw on a total of 9 evidence products (3 from Mali and 6 from Niger) from an assortment of 4 programmes (1 in Mali and 3 in Niger) and one standalone research project in Mali, all of which included an explicit focus on preventing violent extremism. As with the qualitative analysis, we utilised MaxQDA's Tailwind to **synthesise the main overarching themes across this body of existing evidence products.**

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 to ensure that the interpretation aligned with the local contexts of implementation. 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 from the broader analysis. Generative AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) were used to support notetaking and synthesis of insights from the sensemaking sessions.

Document Title/Citation	Year	Program/Donor	Country/Region
We Hope and We Fight: Youth, Communities and Violence in Mali (Inks et al. 2017)	2017	Standalone Research (Joint with Think Peace) Donor: Humanity United	Mali: Mopti, Timbuktu, and Gao
Analysis of Vulnerability Factors and Sources of Resilience of Communities in the face of Violent Extremism (Mercy Corps Mali 2022)	2022	Ben ni Bassigui (Building Resilience in Kayes and Sikasso- BRIKS) Donor: European Commission	Mali: Kayes and Sikasso
Ben ni Bassigui Final Evaluation (Mercy Corps Mali 2023)	2023	Ben ni Bassigui (Building Resilience in Kayes and Sikasso- BRIKS) Donor: European Commission	Mali: Kayes and Sikasso
Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism: Final Synthesis Report (Mercy Corps Niger 2018)	2018	Vulnerability and Resilience Assessment Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism (VRAI) Donor: USAID	Niger: Diffa and Tillabery Burkina Faso: Gorom-Gorom
Understanding the Links Between Social Cohesion and Violence: Evidence from Niger (Lichtenheld et al. 2021)	2021	Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased Social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) Donor: USAID	Niger: Tillabery
Mobilizing Communities to Build Social Cohesion and Reduce Vulnerability to Violent Extremism (Lichtenheld et al. 2022)	2022	Preventing Violent Extremism Actions through increased Social Cohesion Efforts (PEACE) Donor: USAID	Niger: Tillabery
Pitfalls and tradeoffs in measuring support for violent extremism: Evidence from Niger and Burkina Faso (Ribar et al. 2023)	2023	Youth Connect (YC) Donor: USAID	Niger: Tillabery and Maradi Burkina Faso: Sahel and Est
Determinants of Recruitment of Young People by Violent Extremist Groups in Niger (Moha and Harouna 2024)	2024	Youth Connect (YC) Donor: USAID	Niger: Tillabery and Maradi
Getting to Youths: Development Programming, Conflict Resolution, and Political Violence in Niger (Ribar et al. 2025)	2025	Youth Connect (YC) Donor: USAID	Niger: Tillabery and Maradi

Table 2. Evidence Sources on Violent Extremism from Mercy Corps P/CVE programmes in the Sahel, 2017-2025

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 Mid-term Evaluation Report prepared by IWORDS, Security Reports and Analyses prepared by 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.[2]

Roadmap for this Report

This report proceeds as follows. The second section briefly summarises the security context and dynamics of violent extremism 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 working definitions of radicalisation and violent extremism used throughout this report and how these concepts have been measured in past Mercy Corps programming and research in the region. We then provide an overview of the two aspects of perceptions of violent extremism that are the focus of this report: 1) a set of four survey questions asking individuals if they believe that members of their community think it is justified to use violence for different purposes and 2) a measure of whether individuals would turn to armed groups for help with dispute resolution.

The fourth section of the report provides an overview of four broad types of factors that influence these perceptions of violent extremism, as identified in the broader literature on preventing violent extremism and in Mercy Corps's past programming in this space in Mali and Niger: 1) economic hardship and shocks, 2) perceptions of governance and justice, 3) marginalisation and inclusion, and 4) social cohesion. For each of these broad sets of

[2] The JASS media library is in the process of being updated, and additional programme reports and evidence products mentioned throughout this study will be uploaded as possible.

factors, the subsection starts with a brief snapshot of key findings about the evidence about the relationship between the factor and perceptions of violent extremism in the broader set of Mercy Corps evidence from previous programs and research in Mali and Niger, before moving on to a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the broader learning about that factor, based on the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data from JASS. The fifth section concludes by summarizing the core takeaways from the report, focusing on practical implications for the JASS programme itself, as well as for FCDO and broader stakeholders working on violence prevention and stabilisation 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 violent extremism 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 Conflict Patterns in Mali and Niger

Mercy Corps's 2024 Climate and Conflict Resilience Assessment highlights the interplay between climate change and conflict in regions of Mali and Niger targeted by the JASS programme. The assessment identifies several interconnected factors contributing to instability, including socio-economic, environmental, and conflict dynamics. Environmental challenges, such as deforestation, desertification, water scarcity, and declining soil fertility, combined with economic issues like rising food prices and reduced agricultural yields, increase vulnerability. These stresses drive migration of men and youth, particularly from rural areas to urban centres or abroad, leaving women and younger children alone, further straining social and economic systems.

Conflict dynamics are a significant driver of fragility in the region. Poor conflict management and disregard or poor knowledge of pertinent laws and norms contribute to escalating tensions. In Mali, land conflicts between farmers tend to be interpersonal, while in Niger, intra-household conflicts—often rooted in inheritance issues—are more common. Both countries face climate-related shocks, such as droughts and floods, which disrupt agricultural and pastoral livelihoods, heighten food insecurity, and deepen poverty. These climate shocks increase stress within households and communities, further exacerbating the risk of violent extremism. The assessment also highlights a strong link between climate shocks and conflict, with climate change expected to worsen existing tensions, especially between farmers and herders due to irregular rainfall. Food insecurity is likely to heighten household tensions. Common coping strategies include migration, asset sales, and school dropouts, alongside efforts to implement new agricultural technologies and savings mechanisms. To address the underlying risks of violent extremism, a holistic approach is needed, focusing on climate resilience, effective conflict management, and sustainable development.

The security situation in the regions within JASS's intervention cercles 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.[3] From January 2024 to February 2025, a total of 2,608 security incidents were reported in these areas out of a national total of 14,659. Early 2024 saw an intensification of armed group activities across cercles and specific communes in central Mali (Ségou, San, Mopti, Bandiagara, and Douentza). The most affected cercles and communes include Niono and Macina (Ségou), Tominian (San), Djenné and Mopti (Mopti), Bandiagara and Koro

[3] This discussion draws on JASS security reporting; statistics reported here draw on data from the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO).

(Bandiagara), and Mondoro and Boni (Douentza). During the last three months of 2024, a reduction in incidents was observed across these areas, which may be linked to the rising water levels as well as the increase in operations by the regular armed forces (Forces de Défense et de Sécurité, FDS). In 2024, these areas recorded more incidents than in 2023, with 2,070 compared to 1,548. The trend in incidents affecting humanitarian organizations 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 FDS and chasseurs, community self-defense groups, 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.[4] In Ségou and San, chasseurs maintain security, occasionally setting up checkpoints. In Koutiala, most incidents were linked to criminal activity and land disputes.

Politically, in the aftermath of the July 2023 coup d'état, 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 organizations boycotting the national conference, held in February 2025. 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 (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES).

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 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.

Dynamics of Violent Extremism in JASS's Areas of Operation

In **Niger**, violence by radical armed groups such as JNIM and EIS continues to target state structures, security forces (FDS), and related individuals, particularly in regions like Diffa, Tahoua, Tillabery, and Dosso. In Tillabery, there has

[4] While Zakat is an Islamic financial term referring to a form of almsgiving, it is also used to referred to involuntary taxes levied by armed groups (Eizenga and Williams 2020).

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, neutralizing 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 organized 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 reduced in some areas. Outside of Niamey, armed escorts remain required by the state, considering heightened risks of attacks by ISWAP on key routes. 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.

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 justice mechanisms that some community members perceive as fairer and more transparent than the official state justice system, which includes Malian courts and COFOs (land commissions). 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 consistent, predictable, 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.[5]

However, there is a clear distinction between JNIM and other armed groups like EIS. 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, particularly in central Mali, where JASS operates. 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 by protecting 'their' communities. 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 alternative justice mechanisms in areas where the state's presence is minimal or absent.

[5] For more information on dispute resolution by JNIM and other armed groups in the context of the broader literature on governance by armed groups, see Lyammouri (2021).

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 state 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 community 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 residents 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 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, imperative for legitimacy.

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 VIOLENCE AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Definitions of "violent extremism" and related concepts remain contested and difficult to measure, with scholars offering various interpretations**. Radicalisation is conceptualized as a process of increasing extremity in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours that justify the violation of important social norms—often culminating in the acceptance or use of violence in general or killing civilians** (Kruglanski et al 2014). This process encompasses both **cognitive radicalisation**, the adoption of violent beliefs, and **behavioural radicalisation**, an individual's engagement in violent acts (Vergani et al 2018**). Violent extremism is frequently understood as the willingness to use or support the use of violence to advance beliefs of a political, social, or ideological nature** (Norwegian Refugee Council 2017; Glazzard and Zeuthen 2016). As such, violent extremism involves mobilisation of radicalised individuals by armed groups—Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs)-- which pursue a goal of dismantling existing political and cultural institutions in favour of alternative governance structures that are aligned with their ideology and norms (Bak et al. 2019).

Evidence from previous Mercy Corps research and programming in the Sahel collectively demonstrate the complexity of measuring support for violent extremism and the importance of drawing on multiple quantitative and qualitative methods that leverage different strengths to offset the limitations inherent in each method for measuring violent extremism. Because of the role of the **acceptance of violence** in definitions of both radicalisation and violent extremism, the majority of these studies (regardless of overall methodology) use **attitudes and behaviours related to the use of violence** as a proxy measure for **support for violent extremism.**

Beyond being theoretically relevant to the aims of programmes that seek to prevent radicalisation and extremism, these measures have the advantage of placing respondents and survey enumerators at less risk than asking **directly about attitudes towards specific armed groups** or their **radical ideologies**. For example, the Mercy Corps security team in Niger prevented the researchers working with Youth Connect from asking survey questions about specific VEOs. Attempts to adapt to this constraint by asking indirectly about radical armed groups by the use of euphemisms (such as "bearded men") generated confusion among enumerators and respondents and did not ultimately produce usable data (Ribar et al. 2023).

Taken together, previous MC studies and evaluations on VE in the Sahel employ a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to measure perceptions of violent extremism, including **surveys** (Mercy Corps Mali 2022, Lichtenheld et al. 2022, Lichtenheld et al. 2021, Mercy Corps Niger 2018; Ribar et al. 2025, Ribar et al. 2023), **interviews** (Mercy Corps Mali 2022, Inks et al 2017, Mercy Corps Niger 2018, Moha and Harouna 2024), **focus group discussions** (Mercy Corps Mali 2022, Mercy Corps Niger 2018, Moha and Harouna 2024), and **violent events data**, especially from ACLED (Lichtenheld et al. 2022, Ribar et al. 2023, Ribar et al. 2025).

Research embedded in the PEACE and YC programmes in Niger **successfully deployed list experiments within programme surveys to indirectly measure support for violent extremism** (Lichtenheld et al. 2022, Lichtenheld et al. 2021, Ribar et al. 2023, Ribar et al. 2025). List experiments are frequently employed to mitigate bias in research on sensitive topics by presenting individuals with one of two randomly assigned lists of statements: a "control" list that includes an assortment of statements and a "treatment" list that includes the control list plus the sensitive item that is the focus of the research. Respondents are then asked how many statements they agree with, but not which statements they agree with. A difference in the number of statements that participants agree with between the treatment and control lists can be interpreted as a measure of the level of underlying agreement with the sensitive statement, as that is the only difference between the two lists (Blair and Imai 2012). For the version of the list experiment method used in past MC research, the sensitive item added to the treatment list was "It is justifiable to use violence for a political or religious cause".

A research study based on baseline data from the Youth Connect programme in Niger explicitly compares five strategies: direct and indirect survey questions, list experiments, analysis of individual-level factors associated with VE risk, qualitative rankings by local elites (based on the Village Selection tool developed in the VRAI programme), and ACLED data, revealing inconsistencies between the methods and highlighting the trade-offs between different approaches (Ribar et al. 2023). For example, while the study found that the list experiment did reveal a baseline level of support for the use of violence within the sample, this measure was negatively correlated with the measure that asked respondents whether members of their community feel that various uses of violence are justified. In other words, young people who reported low levels of support for the use of violence in their community were more likely to indirectly express their own view that violence is justified to advance a political or religious cause (Ribar et al. 2023). While puzzling, this finding is broadly consistent with the conceptualisation of

radicalisation as a process of becoming more comfortable with violating social norms regarding the use of violence (Kruglanski et al 2014).[6]

All of these previous Mercy Corps studies on VE in the Sahel consistently acknowledge the limitations of each method, including non-random sampling in qualitative studies (Inks et al 2017), small sample sizes impacting statistical power (Lichtenheld et al. 2022), potential biases in qualitative data (Inks et al 2017, Mercy Corps Niger 2018, Ribar et al. 2023), and the inherent limitations of indirect measures (Lichtenheld et al. 2021, Mercy Corps Niger 2018). In addition to these limitations of original data collected by Mercy Corps programme teams and research partners, a broader literature identifies the biases and limitations in ACLED's violent events data, due to its reliance on secondary sources —particularly press reports – which necessitate the presence of media outlets in these areas (Eck 2012; Miller et all 2022; Carboni and Raleigh 2024). The synthesis report on the VRAI programme in Niger further highlights the trade-offs in qualitative data collection between formal, structured questionnaires, which allow for more systematic comparisons across localities, and more informal, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which can build trust with respondents and can help to gather more candid information (Mercy Corps Niger 2018).

Overall, Mercy Corps's experience with research on violent extremism in the Sahel suggests that a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, offers the best chance of safely and validly measuring support for violent extremism, but even then, the interpretation of results requires careful consideration of the specific methodologies and their inherent limitations. The studies also highlight the importance of considering both individual and community-level factors in understanding the drivers of support for violent extremism and in designing survey questions and sampling strategies.

Measuring Attitudes Toward Violence and Armed Groups in JASS Programme Areas

As noted above, the JASS mid-term evaluation included a total of four survey questions that ask respondents to indicate whether they perceive that members of their community support the use of violence for four different purposes: 1) retaliating against violence, 2) defending one's religion, 3) defending one's ethnic group, and 4) forcing the government to change its policies. As in past Mercy Corps research, these four measures can each be analysed one-by-one, as well as in a combined additive index (Ribar et al. 2023). The mid-term evaluation also included a question that asked "If you have a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction, who would you approach to resolve the dispute?" While this question primarily aimed to measure willingness to engage with various formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms and actors, one of the response options was "armed groups", serving as a measure of individual-level willingness to turned to armed actors to help resolve a dispute.

A descriptive analysis of patterns in this set of variables related to perceptions of violent extremism in the data from JASS reveals two important patterns. A first pattern is that it is **extremely rare** for individuals within the JASS mid-term evaluation sample to express that members of their community believe that **violence is justified** or **that they would be willing to turn to armed groups to help resolve disputes.** Out of the 3,687 individuals who responded to the survey, a small proportion of individuals reported that they believe that members of their

[6] Alternative interpretations for this finding are also possible, such as that even though both questions are calibrated to elicit truthful responses on the sensitive topic of attitudes towards violence, individuals are more comfortable speaking honestly about their friends or community members. As noted in this report and Mercy Corps's past research, understanding how various alternative measures for perceptions of violent extremism relate to one another remains an important area for future research and sensemaking.

community think violence is justified for any of the listed purposes “always” or “most times” — less than 1% of the total sample. Similarly, only 14 individuals in the entire sample expressed that they would turn to armed groups to resolve a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction—essentially 0.37%. In contrast, individuals were much more likely to list any other actor, including village elders, family members, conflict resolution committees, and even government actors.

Explicit mentions of support for violence or violent extremism are also conspicuously absent from qualitative data from the KIIs and FGDs. MaxQDA’s AI-assisted tailwind tool was unable to find enough explicit mentions of support for violence or violent extremism in the qualitative data to even produce a summary on the theme—this was the only thematic area within the entire JASS ELA for which there was not enough content to produce a single summary for any of the regions where the programme operates. Similar, spot-checking the transcripts by hand revealed very few oblique or coded references to violent extremist organisations or violence that were too subtle to make it into AI analysis.

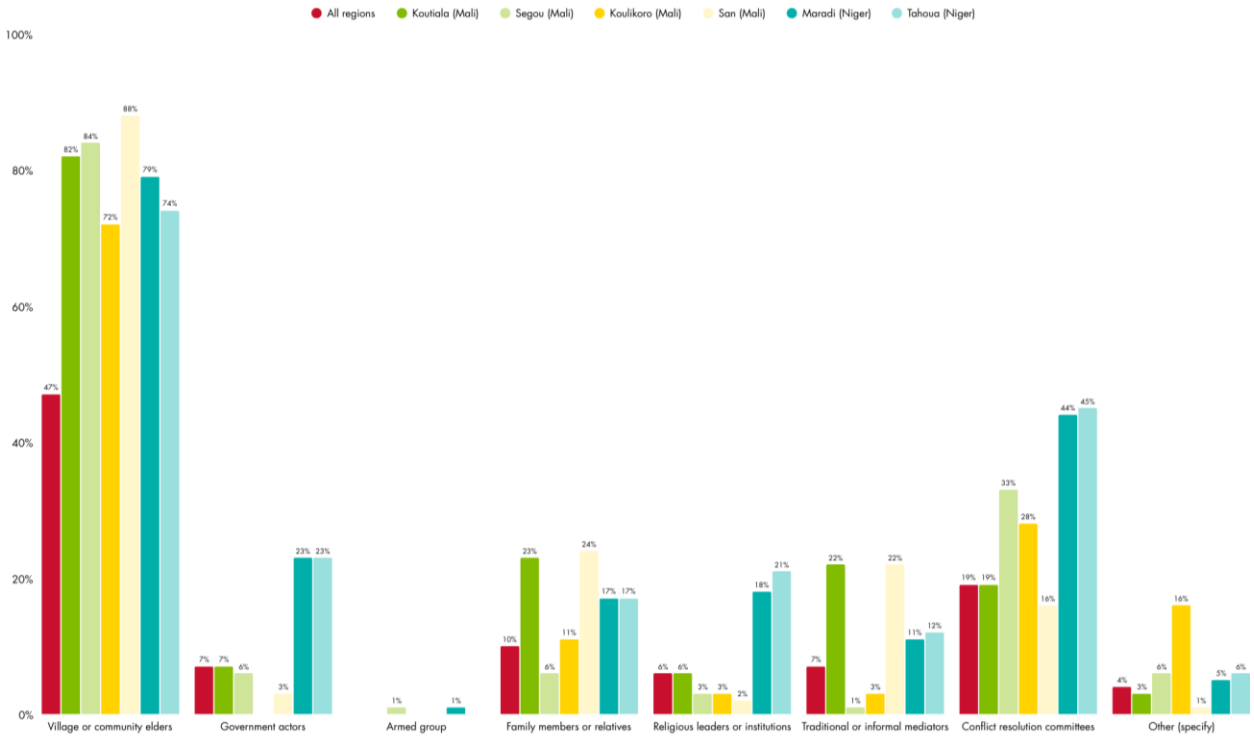

Figure 3. If you have a dispute about land, livestock, or a business transaction, who would you approach to resolve the dispute?

There are two possible interpretations for these patterns in the quantitative and qualitative data from JASS. One possibility is these responses (and non-responses) are accurately revealing a set of strong underlying norms against using violence and engaging with armed groups. A second possibility is that individuals were not comfortable speaking openly about their perceptions of violence and armed groups, due to stress and anxiety about the topic or fear of reprisals from the government, VEOs, or both. To help adjudicate between these two explanations, the JASS annual survey that is being conducted in April 2025 incorporated the same list experiment used in PEACE and YC alongside the existing questions on community support of violence. Similarly, the qualitative FGDs and KIIs being deployed alongside the annual survey included a set of open-ended questions that probe attitudes towards violence and non-violence and about how and when individuals develop more extreme views. These prompts

attempt to elicit more concrete engagement from participants on themes related to violence and violent extremism, while still avoiding directly asking them about stressful or risky topics.

A second pattern from the descriptive analyses is that the survey questions on perceptions of the broader community's justification of violence and willingness to turn to armed groups to resolve disputes appear to be **measuring different underlying concepts.** Examining the correlations between the six variables indicates that while the four variables measuring community justifications for using violence for different purposes are all positively correlated with one another—and with the additive index measuring cumulative justifications for violence, they all have no correlation (or a slight negative correlation) with the variable measuring whether individuals would turn to an armed group to help resolve a dispute. This finding is broadly consistent with the finding of the research on YC in Niger, which found that the same set of measures on community perceptions of violence was negatively correlated with individual support for violence (Ribar et al. 2023)

Figure 4. Correlation coefficients for JASS measures of perceptions of violent extremism

Violent Extremist Organisations and Broader Patterns of Conflict in Mali and Niger

Relative to the JASS baseline, community perceptions of safety and peace have shown notable improvements in both Mali and Niger. The mid-term value now stands at 94%, a significant increase from the baseline of 58%. In Mali, perceptions of safety and peace have surged from 51% at baseline to 91%, while in Niger, the increase is even more pronounced, rising from 64% to 99%. Among the JASS target communities, 94% of women and 94% of men now respectively believe their communities are safe and peaceful. This positive shift in perceptions is likely attributable to the efforts of JASS in fostering improvements in equitable access to land, social inclusion, natural resource governance, and justice outcomes in both countries, which have collectively contributed to the enhanced sense of security and peace in the targeted areas.

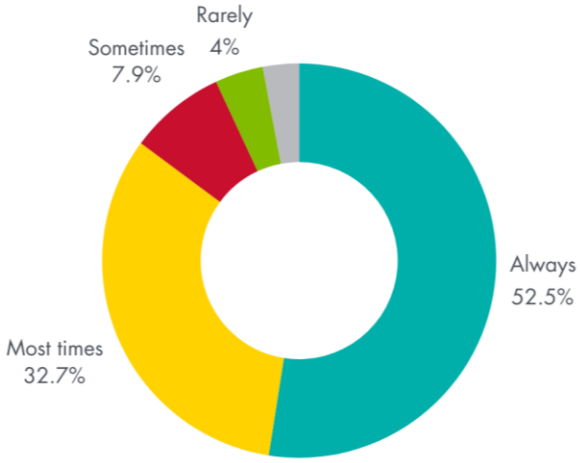

Figure 5. How often would you say that conflicts / violent disputes are resolved peacefully in your community?

Mali's recent history has shown that the presence of **radicalized groups** and the rise of **self-defence militias** have disrupted existing patterns of conflict and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, exacerbating divisions between communities. The historical context of these conflicts reveals that marginalized ethnic groups have sometimes turned to radicalized factions for protection, inadvertently fuelling a cycle of conflict between communities. As these groups gain influence, they offer protection to their allies but also deepen divisions with those who resist their influence. The rise of self-defence groups in response to radicalized factions, particularly in cercles like Niono and Banamba, has created a complex and often violent interplay between the two. In the absence of state authority, these self-defence groups have taken on roles in protecting their communities and sometimes administering justice. These developments have further strained the already fragile dynamics of social cohesion and justice, presenting new challenges for local authorities.

Indeed, a relatively **newer type of conflict**, often referred to by JASS program team members as "**conflicts of opinion**" rather than ethnolinguistic or religious conflicts, has emerged in **Mali**. These conflicts, primarily related to differences in viewpoint - especially involving radicalized groups and tensions between communities concerning their past and present allegiances and historical grievances - have added complexity to the conflict resolution process.

"In regions where the state's presence is weak or absent, radicalized groups have filled the void, assuming roles traditionally held by local authorities. These groups administer justice based on their own criteria, often favouring their allies, which deepens community divisions. Even after they withdraw, the tensions they leave behind continue to disrupt long-standing social structures and conflict resolution systems."

Malian legal scholar working on the JASS programme

Although these conflicts are concentrated in specific JASS intervention cercles like Niono, Banamba, and Siribala, their impact has been profound. Radicalized groups have significantly influenced local dynamics, including in some cases **justice and conflict resolution processes**, and have deepened rifts between communities. This shift has further complicated efforts to maintain **social cohesion** and effectively address local justice needs. The actions of both radicalized groups and self-defence militias have had a lasting impact on social cohesion in these regions. Communities aligned with radical groups often find themselves in conflict with those supporting self-defence groups, fostering a climate of distrust and tension. As a result, social cohesion has been significantly disrupted, making it more challenging to resolve conflicts and pursue justice effectively.

When it comes to **Niger**, and more specifically the Departments of Dakoro (Maradi) and Madaoua & Bouza (Tahoua), where JASS operates, there have been no significant security incidents, or signs of armed group activity or major issues with radicalization. As noted, while isolated incidents, such as armed bandits from Nigeria targeting traders, do occur, they should not be seen as indicative of broader insecurity. There is no perceived direct link between local conflicts and the rise of radicalisation in these areas. Instead, **radicalisation is viewed as stemming from deeper socio-economic grievances, particularly among the youth**. Though some individuals may later use radicalised positions for personal revenge, personal motivations, rather than local conflicts, are often the underlying factors driving radicalisation. In these regions, **youth facing socio-economic hardships typically choose economic migration over radicalisation**. Many young people migrate to northern Niger (Agadez) or even farther to countries like Mali, Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana in search of work. Interestingly, **while radicalisation can arise from these underlying issues, it is seemingly not typically utilized to resolve disputes within the communities.**

FACTORS DRIVING VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

As noted in the previous discussion on measuring support for violent extremism, explanations for violent extremism—and interventions for preventing/countering violent extremism—identify drivers of risk and resilience at both the community/societal and individual levels (Mercy Corps 2023, Charkawi et al. 2024). At the community and society level, structural factors such as political grievances or economic vulnerability can create a fertile ground for violent extremism, operating as underlying root causes. These types of community and society-level factors are frequently described as "**push factors"** and are the focus of **"primary prevention"** strategies in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) efforts by weakening the overall broader operating environment within which VEOs attempt to recruit fighters and exercise territorial control (Vergani et al 2017; Charkawi et al 2024).

Individual-level factors drive specific decisions to collaborate with, join, and/or leave armed groups, encompassing both the recruitment of at-risk individuals by Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs), which is the focus of **"secondary prevention"** in the P/CVE literature, along with efforts of active VEO members to disarm and re-enter

community life, the focus of **"tertiary prevention"** in the P/CVE literature (Mercy Corps 2023, Charkawi et al. 2024). These individual factors include both **"personal factors"** such as individual personality traits, mental health, and demographic characteristics, as well as **"pull factors"** that make extremist ideas and groups more appealing, including consumption of extremist narratives or propaganda and/or social or material recruitment tactics (Vergani et al. 2018).

It is important to note that these categories of risk factors—and the types of programming approaches that can address them—are closely related to the measurement challenges described above. Although primary prevention approaches target community and society level factors, they work best when they target the set of communities in a given area that are at the highest risk of providing a hospitable operating environment for VEOs. The primary purpose of the Mercy Corps VRAI programme in Niger and Burkina Faso was to develop a data collection tool and analytic framework that could serve as a Village Selection Tool (VST) for PVE programmes (Mercy Corps Niger 2018). This tool was successfully used in subsequent programs, including PEACE in Niger, YC in Niger and Burkina Faso, and Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS in Mali (Lichtenheld et al. 2022; Mercy Corps Mali 2022; Ribar et al. 2023). Secondary and tertiary prevention approaches require even more precise data on risk, as they explicitly target individuals who are at the highest direct risk of recruitment (secondary prevention) or armed group members who are looking to demobilise and re-enter community life (tertiary prevention). While Mercy Corps programming in Mali and Niger has not used this kind of targeted prevention approach extensively, the FCDO-funded CREATE programme implemented by Mercy Corps in Kenya and neighbouring countries used fine-grained data on individual risk factors to identify young people who were at the greatest risk of recruitment by VEOs and to build resilience by pairing them with a mentor and implementing a holistic set of activities that addressed each of the individual risk factors (Olawole et al. 2022; Orwa et al. 2023).

Pull factors for violent extremism are generated by the intersections of community and individual risk factors and armed group strategies and tactics (Vergani et al 2020). As a result, generating evidence on pull factors—and developing programming strategies to address these factors—requires a strong set of timely, fine-grained data on push and personal factors and the specific recruitment activities and tactics used by armed groups within that context.

Across these levels of drivers and dynamics, factors that influence risk of radicalization and violent extremism can be grouped into several broad families, each of which contains a mix of push, pull, and personal dynamics. In the discussion that follows, we start the discussion of each broad type of factor by providing a brief overview drawing on the broader literature on violent extremism.[7] We then summarize the existing evidence on each factor from past Mercy Corps programmes and research in Mali and Niger, along with a snapshot of quantitative and qualitative patterns related to the factor in question in the data from the JASS mid-term evaluation.

Economic Hardship & Shocks

A variety of economic factors have been advanced to explain radicalisation and participation in violent extremism. The most basic version of economic explanations focuses on purely material motives—unemployed individuals with limited job opportunities and high poverty or food insecurity may join armed groups or terrorist organisations to earn a wage or access to food and clothing, due to the lack of viable alternatives (Brück et al 2021). This is grounded in opportunity-cost theory in economics— that such individuals have the most to gain and least to lose

[7] For economic hardship, perceptions of governance, and social cohesion, the brief review of the broader literature draws on the discussion prepared by one of this study's co-authors in Olawole et al. 2025. For exclusion, the brief review draws on a similar snapshot of existing literature prepared by the same co-author in Egan et al. 2019.

by participating in violent behaviours or joining violent organisations (Becker 1968; Draca and Machin 2016; Collier and Hoeffler 1998). Other evidence has noted that specific expenses related to gender norms and expectations may drive young people to participate in VEOs (Hudson and Matfess 2017). Interventions based on this explanation typically focus on a combination of job training and access to cash or financial resources. However, there is little evidence that addressing employment or poverty alone is effective in reducing individual participation in violence (Mercy Corps 2015, Brück et al 2021).

Evidence from Past MC Programmes and Research in the Sahel

Poverty, unemployment, and a lack of economic opportunities are consistently identified as key drivers across multiple evidence products from programmes in both Mali and Niger (Mercy Corps Mali 2023; Mercy Corps Mali 2022; Inks et al 2017; Lichtenheld et al. 2022; Lichtenheld et al. 2021; Mercy Corps Niger 2018; Ribar et al. 2025, Moha and Harouna 2024). **Research studies on the PEACE and Youth Connect programmes in Niger note that these economic vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by factors such as climate shocks and stresses, resource scarcity, and competition over land and water, leading to increased tensions and conflict, especially between pastoralists and agriculturalists** (Lichtenheld et al. 2022; Lichtenheld et al. 2021; Moha and Harouna 2024).

> *"On the borders between Niger and Burkina, Niger and Mali, the only activity is livestock breeding. With successive droughts, herders lost their livestock. They all became poor. They have no activity to do. The young people are there, sitting around doing nothing. As soon as the jihadists came, they joined them."*
>
> Young Person in Niger, Quoted in Moha and Harouna 2024

Both the Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS VE risk assessment in Mali and the VRAI synthesis report in Niger **highlight the ease of financial gain offered by VEOs is a major pull factor for individuals**, particularly youth (Mercy Corps Mali 2022; Mercy Corps Niger 2018). This is further compounded by the lack of access to legitimate employment opportunities, with the 2017 "We Hope and We Fight" report from northern Mali noting that some individuals—including members of armed groups-- even described paying to join armed groups in the hope of securing stable employment and social status (Inks et al 2017).[8]

Several past studies examine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at addressing these economic vulnerabilities, with the broader aim of building resilience to violent extremism. While programs such as Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS provided **vocational training, micro-projects, and livelihoods support** show some positive results, the **long-term sustainability** of these interventions is uncertain (Mercy Corps Mali 2023). Furthermore, the 2025 research study on Youth Connect in Niger highlights that **addressing economic factors alone may be insufficient to reduce the risk of youth recruitment by VEOs**, suggesting the need for a more holistic approach that also builds the conflict resolution skills of young people (Ribar et al. 2025). Similarly, while not focused explicitly on preventing violent extremism, recent research on the Mercy Corps Mali Ben ni Baara programme (which utilised the same programming approach as JASS in Ségou and Mopti from 2020-2024) found that **individuals who participated in activities designed to mitigate the negative economic impacts of climate shocks only expressed reduced support for the use of violence when they also participated in a broader set of peacebuilding and development activities** (Lance et al. 2024).

[8] This dynamic was also described in a recent qualitative account of young peoples' "social navigation" of violent extremism within the context of their broader social and economic lives in Sikasso, Mali (Beldé 2024).

Patterns in JASS Programme Areas

Key Finding: Experiencing climate shocks is associated with increased risk of radicalisation, indicating that climate adaptation activities can play a role in preventing violent extremism.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data paint a picture of the nature of economic hardship in the areas where JASS operates, and how shocks can intensify those patterns of hardship. In the qualitative interviews and focus groups, respondents frequently discuss how poverty shapes ability to obtain basic necessities such as food, climate-resilient seeds, animal feed, healthcare, and to pay tax obligations.[9] Young people also explicitly mention unemployment as a challenge facing them, driving harmful behaviours such as drug use and crime.[10] Respondents describe that these pre-existing patterns of hardship are further shaped by climate shocks, especially erratic rainfall patterns that lead to both flooding and drought, and economic shocks, including those following from climate shocks such as crop failure, death of animals, and closure of transportation routes to markets, as well as independent economic shocks such as price increases for agricultural inputs and household goods.[11]

The survey data helps to contextualise these qualitative descriptions, revealing the big picture patterns in the ways in which individuals are impacted by shocks and significant regional variations in exposure to economic and environmental shocks, with notable differences between Mali and Niger. In general, a significant portion of respondents report experiencing some form of shock, particularly climate-related shocks. In the aggregate, 52% of respondents across all regions have been exposed to a climate shock, indicating that environmental factors such as droughts, floods, or other climate-related events have affected many households. This impact is especially high in Niger's Tahou and Maradi regions, where 70% and 68% of respondents, respectively, report experiencing climate shocks. In contrast, Mali's regions like Segou (39%) and Koutiala (46%) report somewhat lower exposure, though still a significant percentage.

[9] Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_Fa
[10] Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM
[11] Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_GIC, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_VLC_M, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H

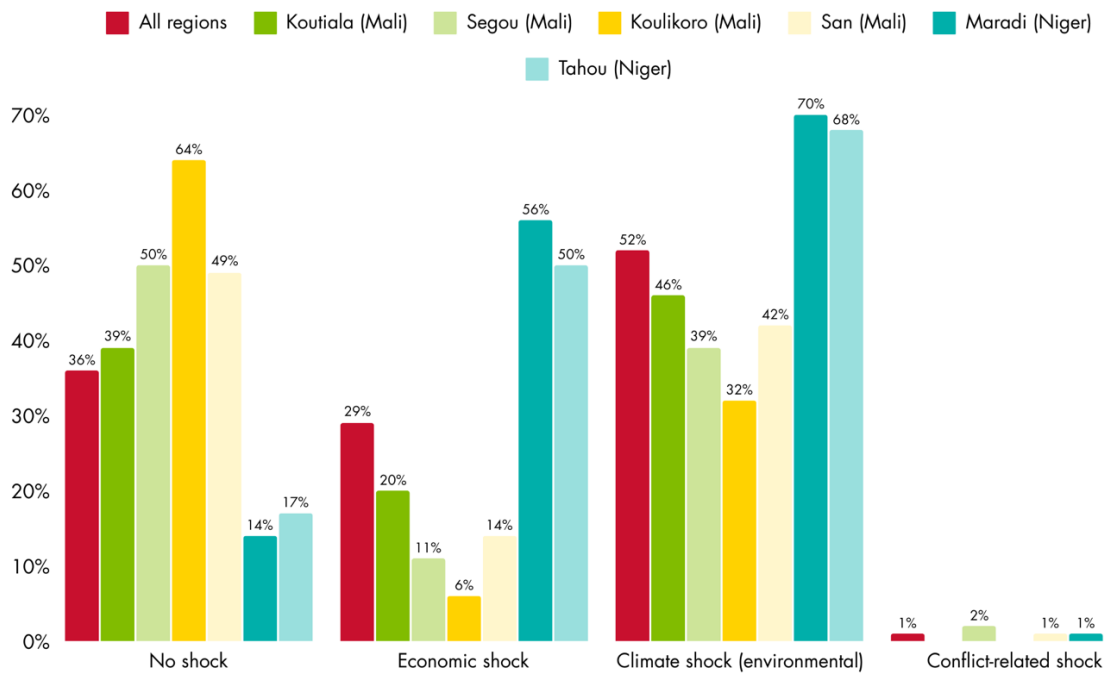

Figure 6. Over the past 12 months, have you and your household been exposed to one or more of the following shocks and pressures?

Economic shocks have also been a considerable factor, with 29% of all respondents across regions indicating that they faced such pressures. However, there is once again a clear difference between the regions. For example, in Tahou (Niger) and Koutiala (Mali), a large percentage of respondents report economic shocks (56% and 50%, respectively), reflecting intensifying economic hardship in these regions. On the other hand, Segou (Mali) and Koulikoro (Mali) report much lower figures (11% and 6%), suggesting that households in these areas may have been comparatively more insulated from economic pressures compared to other regions.

In contrast, only 1% of respondents across all regions reported exposure to conflict-related shocks. This number is consistent across most regions, with only minor regional variations. This suggests that in the areas where JASS operates, conflict has not yet had as much of a widespread impact on economic well-being as climate and economic shocks.

The survey data also measured the impact of shocks on individuals' income and ability to feed themselves. For economic shocks, 43% of respondents report a "High impact" on their income, and an additional 41% report a "Moderate impact." These results suggest that a large portion of individuals experienced notable disruptions to their financial stability. While 10% of respondents experienced a "Slight impact," a minimal 0% indicated that the economic shock had no impact on their income. This underscores the severity of the economic strain, with only a small percentage of people remaining unaffected. The climate shock data reveals even more severe consequences. For income, 83% of respondents report a "High impact," and 60% indicate a "Moderate impact," showing that climate-related shocks have had a far greater effect on income compared to economic shocks. This data suggests that climate change or weather-related events have disrupted livelihoods to a much larger extent than economic factors alone.

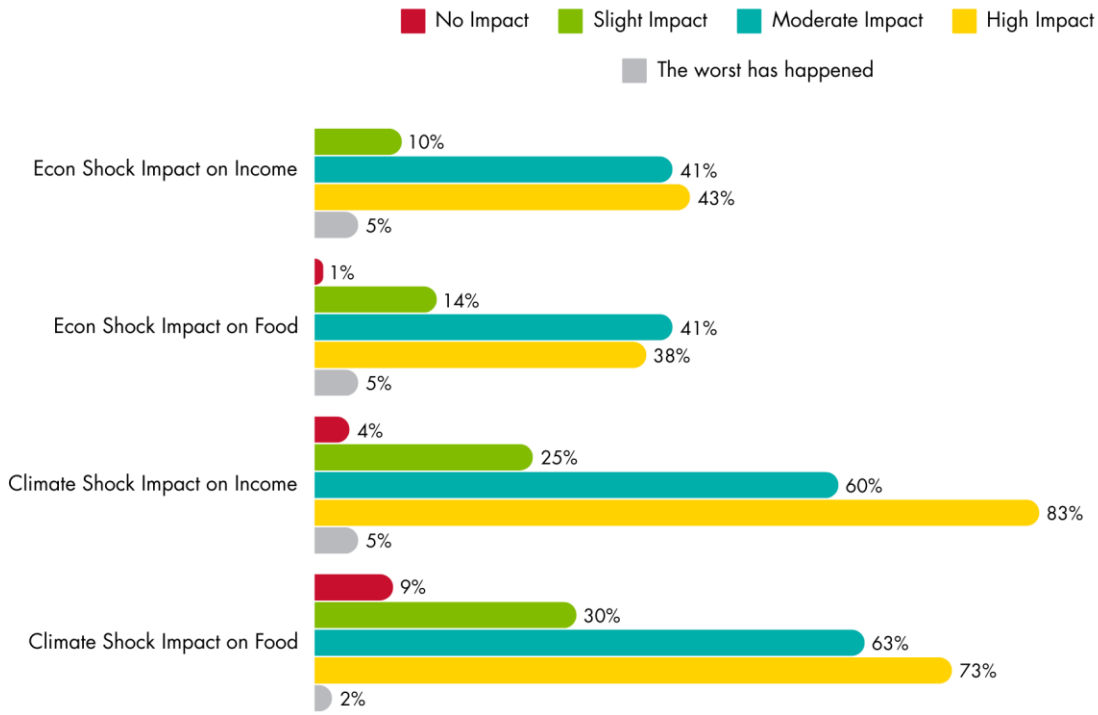

Figure 7. What has been the impact of these shocks your income and / or ability to feed yourself?

In contrast, when it comes to the impact on food security due to economic shocks, the effects are somewhat less severe, but still significant. 41% of respondents indicate a "Moderate impact" on food, with 38% reporting a "High impact." These figures suggest that while food security is a concern, it is not as universally catastrophic as the income impacts, though still affecting a large portion of the population. Only 14% of respondents report a "Slight impact" on food security, and just 1% claim no effect at all, highlighting that the majority of individuals feel at least some level of disruption in their access to food. However, the impacts on food security due to climate shocks are more severe, with 73% of respondents indicating a "High impact" and 63% noting a "Moderate impact." This illustrates that climate shocks are felt more acutely in terms of food availability and affordability than in the economic sphere, with a greater portion of the population struggling to secure adequate nutrition.

> *"We participated in the activity of digging a gutter in our village and we received money…. I paid for food with this sum, also the activity promotes the drainage of rainwater, which has facilitated the access of certain flooded neighbourhoods."*
>
> Cash for Work Participant- Segou, Mali, in FGD- December 2024

Activities under JASS's Outcome 2 aim to increase resilience to the impacts of these types and shocks, by helping community members to prepare for and respond to shocks and by providing young people with employment activities that help to mitigate the impacts of climate change. In the programme's theory of change, the aim of this suite of climate adaptation and livelihoods opportunities activities is to contribute to JASS's broader goal of improved stability by reducing the frequency and impact of triggers for resource-based conflict, in part by making people more resilient to these shocks and increasing their ability to recover when the shocks do occur. In the FGDs

and KIIs, programme participants spoke at length about their how their experiences with this diverse set of activities helped them to prepare for and respond to climate and economic shocks.

"Through microprojects, some have received employment through training on processing local products… Most conflicts are linked to people not having work. You're all there; without work, it leads to conflict."

Technical Services Provider- San, Mali, in KII- December 2024

Interviewees and FGD participants noted that **Cash-for-Work** activities were especially helpful in helping them to maintain income and food security throughout especially tough moments of economic hardship following shocks, while also improving community infrastructure that helps to build resilience to climate shocks, such as reclaiming land for agricultural use or digging drainage systems to mitigate impacts of flooding.[12] Community members consistently reported that the distribution of **improved seeds and agricultural inputs** such as fertilizers improved agricultural yields and improved food security.[13] Participants also described that these types of material inputs were complemented by a variety of types of **training and learning opportunities**, including on climate smart agriculture and livestock management processes, land rehabilitation, market gardening, and entrepreneurship skills needed to pursue a broader range of economic activities.[14]

The regression analyses provide a snapshot of how climate and economic shocks—and the JASS programme's attempts to address these shocks-- might shape perceptions of violent extremism, highlighting several avenues for programme adaptations and further learning. The results from the regressions indicate that individuals who experienced climate shocks are less likely to believe that their broader community supports the use of violence in general, and to defend religion or get the government to change policies.[15] At the same time, individuals who experienced a climate shock are more likely to express that they would turn to an armed group to help resolve a dispute. In some specifications, individuals who experience economic or conflict shocks also are less likely to believe that members of their community support the use of violence.

[12] Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Madaoua_Cons_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_PF_VFG, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma4_Ma2_FGD_J_Cons_CFW

[13] Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Kagarki_H, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_VLC_M, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma2_FGD_J_Nkolondjala_YP, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Ag_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_VFG_F, Ma2_Ma4_KII_J_Cons_VFG_M, Ma4_FGD_J_Ntorosso_H, Ma4_KII_J_Medine_API_M, Ni2_FGD_J_ZangonMalanAli_CFW, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_Ag_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_Chief_M

[14] Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Kagarki_H, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_KII_J_Karoufane_Ag_M, Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Kagarki_H, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, 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_Karoufane_Ag_M, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Ourno_Env_M, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_FGD_J_ZangonMalanAli_CFW, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_CLS_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_Chief_M, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_CLS_M, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, Ma3_FGD_J_Dacoumani_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_YP, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_Ag_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_Ag_M, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Touna_H, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_PF_F

[15] This finding is specific to the specification that uses the five-point scale to measure perceived community support for violence.

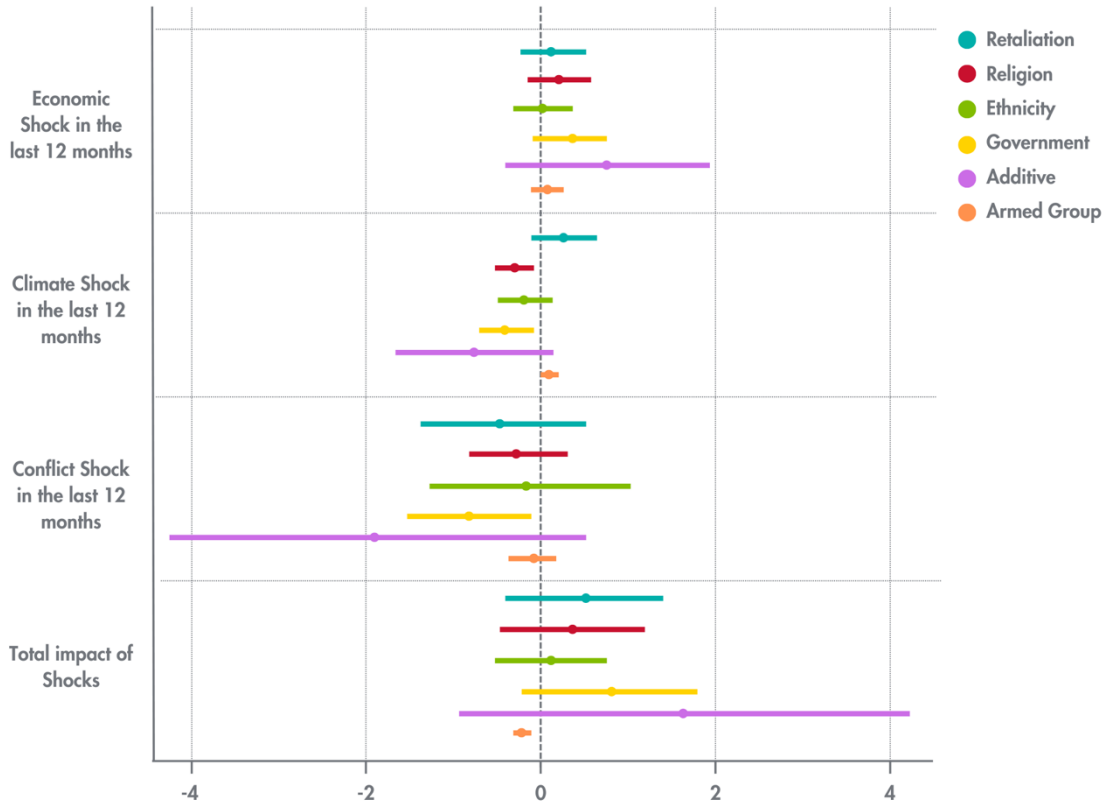

Figure 8. Relationships Between Economic, Climate, and Conflict Shocks and Perceptions of Violence and Armed Groups

Note: This graph is the coefficient plot for the regression analysis. The Y-axis includes the names of the relevant subset of explanatory variables, and the dots represent the relationship between each listed variable and the measures of justifications for violence and turning to armed groups. Each colour represents a different dependent variable. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The regression models that produced this graph include the full set of explanatory variables for all factors, along with demographic control variables and village fixed effects. The results for the justification of violence measures reported in this graph draw on the models that use the 5-point scale. See the tables in Appendix A for the full regression results.

Conversely, individuals who reported that economic or climate shocks led to the worst possible impacts on their incomes and food security are more likely to perceive that members of their community would feel that violence is justified to get the government to change its policies, but less likely to turn to an armed group to resolve a dispute.[16]

The finding that experiencing climate shocks is associated with an increased likelihood of turning to armed groups to help resolve disputes—in violation of community norms against the use of violence-- is broadly consistent with findings in past Mercy Corps research in the Sahel that economic hardship and related grievances can drive

[16] The finding about the relationship between impact on shock and justifying violence to change government policies is specific to the specification that uses the five-point scale to measure perceived community support for violence.

individuals towards VEOs, and indicates that climate shocks can intensify this pathway. **This finding indicates that JASS's activities focused on livelihoods and climate resilience—Cash-for-Work, improved agricultural inputs, and training in agricultural and business skills—have a role to play counteracting the relationship between climate shocks and addressing push factors toward radicalisation and violent extremism.**

However, the finding that experiencing the most severe impacts from shocks is associated with perceptions of increased social support for violence, but a lower likelihood of turning to armed groups is more puzzling. This finding merits **further exploration in the quasi-experimental study based on the annual review data, to help test the impacts of Cash-for-Work and JASS's other climate adaptation activities on the impacts of shocks and perceptions of violent extremism.**

Governance Perceptions and Grievances

Grievances and negative perceptions of the quality of governance have also been identified as a risk factor for radicalization and violent extremism. These grievances can be related to a variety of factors including economic and political marginalisation, inequality, deprivation relative to other groups, and perceptions of injustice. In this set of explanations, discontent over access to economic resources and opportunity and to broader public services and political representation can lead to increased susceptibility to radicalisation and violence, due to a lack of belief that these inequalities and grievances can be resolved through nonviolent means (Gurr 1970; Krieger and Meierrieks 2015). Individual-level interventions targeting these drivers typically focus on strengthening skills and knowledge needed for civic engagement, political participation, and/or conflict resolution, especially among young people at risk of recruitment into VEOs (Olawole et al 2022; Mercy Corps 2023; Ribar et al. 2025). Community and societal-level interventions built on this kind of explanation typically focus on participatory planning processes and social accountability mechanisms that aim to improve service delivery and strengthen relationships between communities and the government (Mercy Corps 2023).

Evidence from Past MC Programmes in the Sahel

The linkage between political grievances and support for violent extremism is a recurring theme in Mercy Corps's past research and programme evidence in the Sahel. Evidence products from the "We Hope and We Fight" research and Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS programme in Mali and from VRAI, PEACE, and Youth Connect in Niger all detail how poor service delivery, lack of state presence (particularly in border regions), perceived injustice, and inter-community tensions contribute to grievances that fuel recruitment into violent extremist groups (Mercy Corps Mali 2022, Inks et al 2017, Lichtenheld et al. 2021, Mercy Corps Niger 2018, and Moha and Harouna 2024).

> *"It was the inability of the government that led us to this situation of conflict and war. I feel cheated by the tax services, customs and the departments of economic affairs. I became a part of the Arab movement MAA in response."*
>
> Young Man in Timbuktu, Mali, Quoted in Inks et al. 2017

These grievances are often rooted in experiences of government neglect, corruption, and abuse, as illustrated by numerous quotes from young people interviewed in "We Hope and We Fight" (Inks et al 2017). Both the Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS VE Risk Assessment Study and research from Youth Connect note that the perceived absence of the state creates "ungoverned spaces" where extremist groups can thrive (Mercy Corps Mali 2022; Moha and Harouna 2024). "We Hope and We Fight" also specifically highlights the geographic and ethnolinguistic dimensions of these grievances, with the North of Mali and specific communities expressing especially strong grievances about governance and service delivery (Inks et al. 2017).

Patterns in JASS Programme Areas

Key Finding: Individuals with positive perceptions of customary and official state justice actors express perceptions of stronger community norms against violence.

The qualitative and quantitative data on perceptions of governance and related grievances from the JASS mid-term evaluation are largely focused on the programme's focus areas: natural resource governance, delivery of agricultural and livestock extensions services, and dispute resolution and justice--particularly with respect to land and natural resources. As discussed at length in the recent JASS report on Perceptions of Justice (Medam and Sheely 2025), most respondents report positive relationships with local authorities, although some do voice grievances about corruption and bias among customary leaders and interference in dispute resolution by elders.[17] More community members in both Mali and Niger list grievances about the effectiveness and responsiveness of government service delivery including support in the aftermath of crop pests and flooding and the provision of infrastructure.[18] Others express grievances about the fairness and transparency of government dispute resolution, justice, and a lack of a knowledge of relevant laws on natural resources and land ownership.[19]

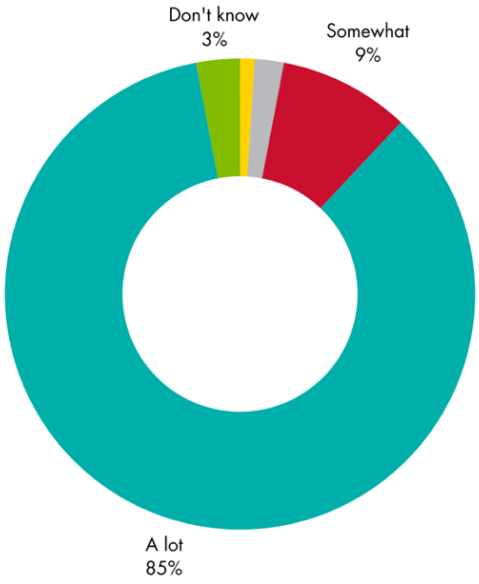

Figure 9. How much do you trust local authorities to fairly resolve disputes and ensure justice?

The survey data help to place these qualitative accounts of governance perceptions and grievances in broader context.[20] A vast majority (86%) of respondents trust local authorities to manage natural resources in a way that benefits the community, and 85% trust them to resolve land disputes fairly. Similarly, 85% trust local authorities to ensure justice in conflict resolution. In both Mali and Niger, the approach to conflict resolution in targeted communities is layered, localized, and deeply trusted. Traditional systems, which are culturally relevant, address most day-to-day disputes and are generally considered more effective than formal state judicial mechanisms. These customary 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 (chefs de village), 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 ethnolinguistic affiliations, are key in maintaining peace by providing non-violent means of managing disputes.

[17] Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H, Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_Fa
[18] Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni2_KII_J_Ourno_EWCO_M, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H
[19] Ni1_FGD_NJ_JamgabeSedentaire_F, Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_CFW, Ma3_KII_J_KoyantGolobala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_RL_M, Ma3_KII_J_Touna_PF_M
[20] For a more detailed overview of perceptions of justice actors and mechanisms, see the full report on that topic produced concurrently with this study. For more information on Natural Resource Governance, see the research study reporting findings from a survey experiment about alternative Natural Resource Governance institutions.

The majority of respondents perceive the broader justice system as fair, with 50% describing it as fair and 31% as very fair. However, a notable 10% still view the justice system as unfair or very unfair, suggesting room for improvement in terms of public trust and perception of justice.

In Mali's regions of Koutiala, Segou, Koulikoro, and San, the majority of people still believe that the justice system is either fair or very fair, with percentages ranging from 55% to 61%. The region of San stands out for having the highest percentage (9%) of respondents who consider the system unfair.

These patterns are largely replicated in Niger as well. People in both Maradi and Tahoua have reasonably high percentages of believing that the system is fair, with Maradi at 59% and Tahoua at 48%. Tahoua, in particular, has the highest percentage of people (38%) who view the system as "very fair."

When it comes to resolving specific cases of conflicts over natural resources, most individuals perceive their resolution to be effective. 37% rate the resolution as very effective, and 57% find it effective. A small 4% find it only slightly effective, and 2% are unsure.

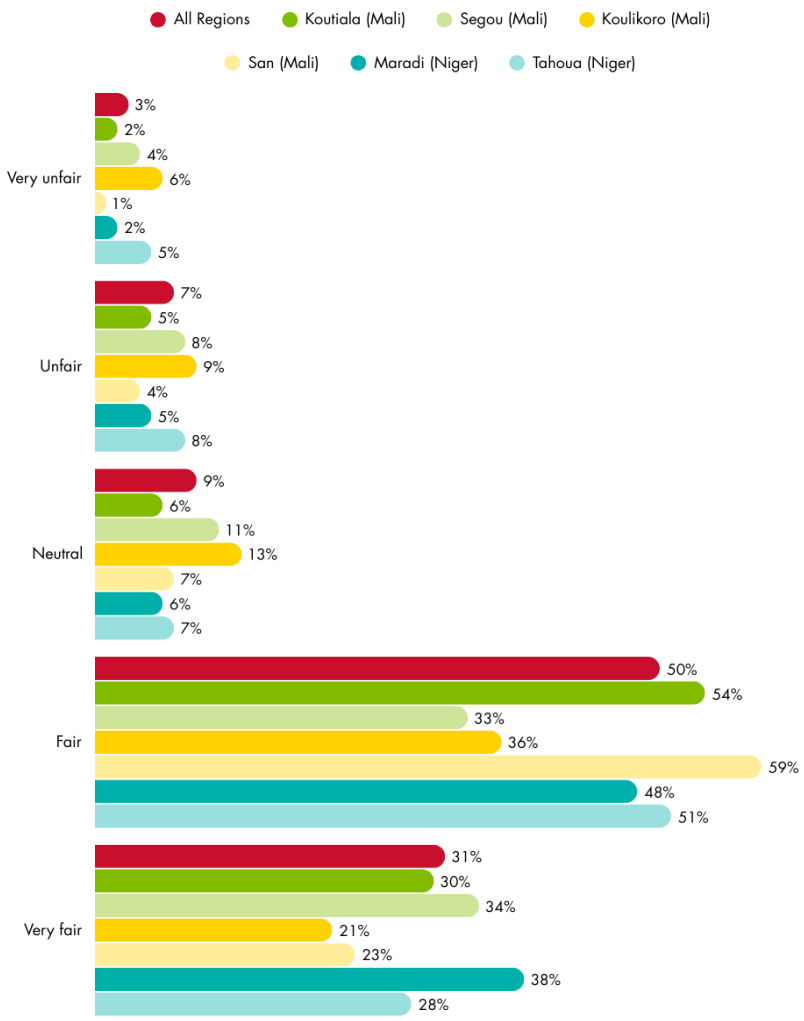

Figure 10. How fair do you believe the legal or justice system is in your community?

Similarly, 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, land use, and natural resource 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.

JASS's activities under Outcome 1 aim to strengthen positive perceptions of governance by building on trust and legitimacy in local authorities to help foster stronger relationships with the national government and to improve the inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness of institutions at all levels by mobilising community members as active participants in peacebuilding. FGD and KII participants frequently note that JASS's underlying **participatory approach** is at the core of its ability to shape positive perceptions of governance, marking a positive departure from the status quo and most other development interventions.[21]

[21] Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_COFO_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_VLC_M, Ni1_KII_J_Madaoua_Cons_COFOCOM_M, Ni1_KII_J_Ourno_Env_M

"Before we were afraid of the staff of the technical services of the state, here we didn't even know their importance in the locality, but with JASS we understood that they are there for us, that we have to approach them, exchange on needs, today we have a very good relationship with them thanks to the efforts of the project."

Herder- Segou, Mali, in FGD- December 2024

As will be discussed in more detail below, community members especially highlighted the programme's distinct emphasis on ensuring **meaningful participation of women, young people, and people with disabilities in decision-making.**[22] These values of participation and inclusion were particularly attributed to **the programme's work with local-level dispute resolution, justice, and natural resource governance institutions**, such as land commissions (COFOs) in both countries and community conflict resolution and early warning response committees (CRCs in Mali and SCAP/RUs in Niger). Participants attributed a number of positive governance outcomes to JASS's work to support inclusive and participatory governance norms and behaviours, including **increased community engagement and improved communication and responsiveness** from both village leaders and government authorities, and well as **improved awareness of existing laws**.[23]

[22] Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, 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_Gogarma_SCAP_F, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Madaoua_Cons_COFOCOM_M, Ni1_KII_J_TsanaAssanga_SCAP_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_Env_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_KII_J_Ourno_EWCO_M, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_GIC, Ma1_FGD_J_Pala_VFG, Ma1_KII_J_KoutialaCoco_API_M, Ma1_KII_J_NGolaniasso_VFG_M, Ma1_KII_J_Pala_VFG_F, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_COFO_M, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_PF_M, Ma3_FGD_J_Segou_Cons_GIC, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_API_M, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_PF_F, Ma3_KII_J_KoyantGolobala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_API_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_Ag_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_JA_M, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_PF_F, 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_Cons_EWCO_M, Ma2_Ma4_KII_J_Cons_VFG_M, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_F, Ma4_KII_J_Dieli_TSG_M, Ma4_KII_J_Zembougou_CC_M

[23] Ni1_FGD_J_Kagarki_H, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_NJ_JamgabeSedentaire_H_Fa, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_COFO_M, Ni1_KII_J_Gogarma_SCAP_F, Ni1_KII_J_TsanaAssanga_SCAP_M, Ma3_FGD_J_Dacoumani_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_CFW, Ma3_FGD_J_Siribala_PF_VFG, Ma3_FGD_J_Touna_H, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_API_M, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_Ag_M, Ma3_KII_J_Niono_JA_M, Ma3_KII_J_Touna_JA_M, Ma2_FGD_J_Nkolondjala_YP, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_EWCO_M, Ma4_FGD_J_Ntorosso_H, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_F, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_H, Ma4_Ma2_FGD_J_Cons_CFW

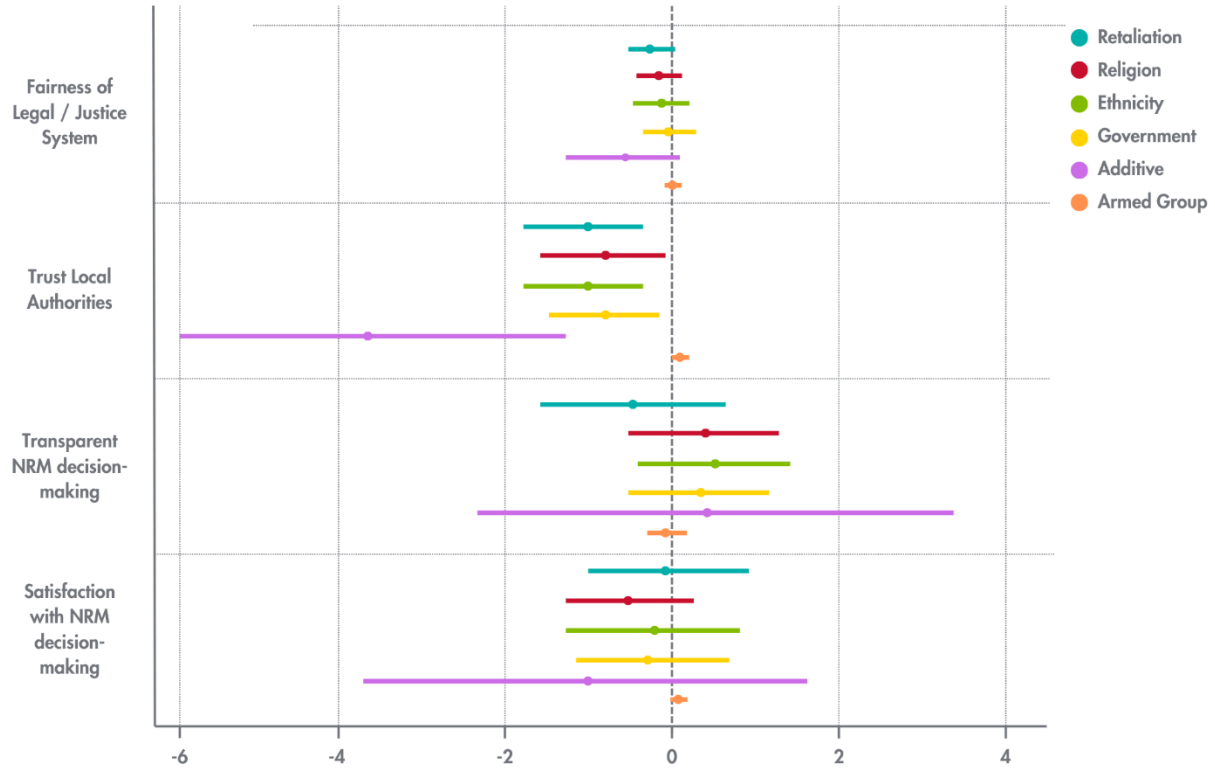

Figure 11. Relationships Perceptions of Governance and Perceptions of Violence and Armed Groups

Note: This graph is the coefficient plot for the regression analysis. The Y-axis includes the names of the relevant subset of explanatory variables, and the dots represent the relationship between each listed variable and the measures of justifications for violence and turning to armed groups. Each colour represents a different dependent variable. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The regression models that produced this graph include the full set of explanatory variables for all factors, along with demographic control variables and village fixed effects. The results for the justification of violence measures reported in this graph draw on the models that use the 5-point scale. See the tables in Appendix A for the full regression results.

The regression analyses provide deeper insight into how perceptions of justice and natural resource governance—and the JASS programme's attempts to shift governance norms and behaviours—might shape perceptions of violent extremism, highlighting several avenues for the programme to explore further in the future. Individuals with positive perceptions of both local authorities and the broader legal and justice system are both less likely to believe that their broader community supports the use of violence in general.[24] **Trust in local authorities reduces perceived community support for all uses of violence**, and **perception of the broader justice system as fair is associated with perceptions of reduced support for using violence to retaliate against violence and defend religion**.[25]

[24] For perception of the broader justice system, this finding is specific to the specification that uses the five-point scale to measure perceived community support for violence. For trust in local authorities, this finding holds for both the five-point scale and the dichotomous measure of the strongest support for violence.

[25] The findings for the relationship between trust in local authorities and violence hold across both measures of the dependent variable for "retaliate" and the additive index, while the findings for religion, ethnic group, and government are specific to the five-point scale. The findings for the broader justice system hold across both measures for religion and are specific to the five-point scale for retaliate and the additive index.

This finding supports a key assumption of JASS's theory of change—and the programme's name itself—that there is a fundamental connection between **justice** and **stability** in the regions of Mali and Niger where the programme operates. In particular, this finding indicates that community members' perceptions of the trustworthiness and legitimacy of customary and official state dispute resolution actors and mechanisms can shape community-level resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. Taken together with the recent JASS report on perceptions of justice, which finds that individuals' experiences with conflict and both formal and informal justice actors can shape their perceptions of the trustworthiness and legitimacy of these institutions (Medam and Sheely 2025), this evidence collectively suggests that JASS's work under Outcome 1 show strong promise for countering the kinds of negative perceptions of governance that can drive radicalization. This hypothesis will be explored further in the forthcoming **JASS quasi-experimental study based on the annual review data**.

In addition, this finding is specific to the community-level norms about the use of violence that can serve as protective factors against VE risk, indicating that as currently structured, **JASS's activities under Outcome 2 have the potential to operate at the level of primary prevention at the community level, strengthening broad-based community resilience to VE**. In order to play a role as a secondary prevention activity that targets individuals within communities that hold the strongest grievances about governance—and the highest risk of radicalization and joining VEOs—JASS needs more fine-grained individual level data on individual support for violence and underlying grievances, matched with how armed group strategy and tactics generate context specific pull factors, including via propaganda and mis/disinformation.

In contrast, the regressions show very little evidence of a statistically significant relationship between perceptions of natural resource governance and support for violence—with the exception being that individuals who report being satisfied or very satisfied with natural resource governance are more likely to turn to armed groups for help resolving disputes. This is a difficult finding to reconcile with the findings from the recent JASS study that uses a survey experiment to show that individuals within JASS's operating areas generally prefer the model of inclusive, participatory, community-led natural resource governance used by JASS to be preferable to either the status quo or to a centralized, state-led approach (Bezares Calderón and Olawole 2025). As a result, this is a puzzling finding that merits further exploration in future JASS sensemaking and research. One possible explanation is that this is picking up individuals who do have experience with armed groups—either VEOs or local self-defense militias playing a role in dispute resolution, as described above. If this is the case, then it may indicate that while this arrangement is rare, those who do engage in it may find it effective and legitimate.

Marginalisation and Inclusion

Governance structures and institutions—and broader social norms and economic systems-–that systematically exclude certain groups from decision-making and meaningful opportunities can exacerbate grievances and lead to violence by those that feel politically, socially, or economically excluded (Bodea and Elbadawa 2007). In many contexts, the exclusion of certain minorities, women, youth, or other groups from local and national decision-making processes directly contributes to conflict and instability (Tilly 1998; Stewart 2008). At the individual level, vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups is also often shaped by structural factors like repression, inequality, discrimination, and a history of hostility between identity groups (Khalil and Zeuthen 2016). Similarly, the political marginalization of specific ethnolinguistic or religious groups is associated with an increased risk of violent extremism (Allan et al 2015). In addition to intensifying grievances by marginalised individuals, systematic patterns of gender-based exclusion are also closely tied to toxic, masculine-coded identities and behaviours. These types of masculinities can justify misogyny and violence and can fuel grievances by creating a misplaced sense of entitlement or privilege (Dier and Baldwin 2022; Rottweiler et al. 2021).

Programming approaches that aim to address the role of marginalization and exclusion as a driver of violent extremism aim to promote more inclusive and participatory governance and decision-making, with a specific emphasis on supporting the meaningful participation of women, youth, people living with disabilities, and other excluded ethnic, religious, or other identity groups. At an individual-level, because age and gender are often identified as core risk factors, interventions focus on strengthening individual-level capabilities to meaningfully participate in civic and economic life through a gender transformative, Positive Youth Development approach (Mercy Corps 2023; Olawole et al 2022; Ribar et al. 2025). At the community-level, these strategies are targeted at both governance actors as well as marginalized groups themselves and often seek to build capacity, awareness, and avenues to promote more inclusive decision making (Egan et al 2019; Mercy Corps 2023).

Evidence from Past MC Programmes in the Sahel

Mercy Corps's past programming and evidence in the Sahel identifies how exclusion along a variety of different identity lines can shape risk of violent extremism, especially highlighting dynamics related to age, gender, and ethnolinguistic group membership—and in some cases the intersectionality of all three (Inks et al. 2017).

Consistent with the broader literature, age consistently emerged as a particularly salient dimension of exclusion—and of VE risk (Inks et al. 2017; Moha and Harouna 2024; Ribar et al 2025). Youth participation in armed groups is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including exclusion from economic opportunities and community leadership, perceived injustice, the desire for identity and belonging, and the influence of friends and family members (Inks et al. 2017; Moha and Harouna 2024). The Youth Connect program in Niger and Burkina Faso deployed an integrated programming approach to address the multidimensional nature of youth exclusion, finding that combining economic empowerment activities with youth-focused civic engagement and conflict resolution training can effectively reduce support for violence and armed group activity (Ribar et al 2025).

Mercy Corps's past research and programming in the Sahel similarly highlights the role of gender norms that constrain women and men to specific social roles and aspirations and which can limit women's participation in decision-making both within their households and broader communities (Radhakrishnan et al. 2023). Several past studies shed light on women's involvement in violent extremist groups, challenging simplistic narratives. The qualitative assessment of VE risk for the Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS programme in Mali emphasised the economic motivators for both men and women to join and engage with extremist groups. The Youth Connect qualitative research on VE recruitment in Niger further illustrates the role of family ties in recruitment, with women and children joining their spouses in extremist camps (Moha and Harouna 2024). The 2017 *We Hope and We Fight* research on Mali includes the most detailed discussion of the intersection of gender and violent extremism, drawing on interviews with several women who are affiliated with armed groups, revealing a number of different modes of engagement, from support roles (providing food and shelter to armed groups), to coerced sexual activity, to direct participation in combat (including as leaders), challenging the notion that women are solely bystanders or victims (Inks et al. 2017). However, this report also acknowledges the increased risk of stigmatization faced by women involved in armed groups, indicating the intersection of norms about gender and the use of violence (Inks et al. 2017).

Several previous studies highlight interventions aimed at addressing gender norms and dynamics within broader PVE programming. For instance, the Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS programme in Mali reported significant improvements in gender relations and community relations, particularly through initiatives like Sport for Change (Mercy Corps Mali 2023). However, other interventions, such as the PEACE programme in Niger, faced significant challenges at encouraging meaningful parcipation by women, due to patriarchal norms and resistance from men and community elders, despite achieving near 60% female participation (Lichtenheld et al. 2022). This resistance underscores the deeply ingrained norms and social structures that hinder women's full participation in decision-making processes,

a theme echoed in the Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS pre-programme assessment, which highlights women's limited involvement in local governance despite their significant economic contributions (Mercy Corps Mali 2022).

Exclusion on geographic and ethnolinguistic lines is frequently exploited by VEOs, who recruit members by leveraging existing grievances, perceived injustices, and a lack of state presence (Inks et al. 2017; Mercy Corps Niger 2018; Lichtenheld et al 2021; Lichtenheld et al 2022; Moha and Harouna 2024). The synthesis report on the VRAI programme in Niger and Burkina Faso highlighted the high percentages of households in Diffa region, Niger, and Gorom-Gorom region, Burkina Faso experiencing difficulty in marrying, attaining respect, and lacking employment, directly linking these to vulnerability to violent extremism (Mercy Corps Niger 2018). The 2017 *We Hope and We Fight* illustrates the link between geographic and ethnolinguistic marginalisation and violent extremism through a number of direct quotes from interviewed persons expressing animosity and a sense of marginalisation.

"I come from a community called Bella Tamashek. We are very marginalized in society by the other communities. We are trying to fight for our ethnic and cultural identity."

Young Man Affiliated with pro-Government Armed Group in Timbuktu, Mali, Quoted in Inks et al. 2017

Patterns in JASS Programme Areas

Key Finding: Beliefs that NRM decision-making includes meaningful inclusion of diverse perspectives are associated with perceptions of lower levels of community support for violence.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data paint a picture of patterns of pre-existing exclusion alo wthat is broadly consistent with the patterns observed elsewhere in the Sahel. The qualitative interviews and FGDs placed a specific emphasis on two dimensions of exclusion: gender and ethnolinguistic identity (and relatedly, livelihood or socioprofessional communities- specifically along farmer/herder lines), with relatively limited focused attention to the specific dynamics of youth exclusion.[26] In both Mali and Niger, respondents noted gender imbalances in community and household life prior to the introduction of JASS activities, particularly related to access to water, justice, and access to information and resources related to natural resource management.[27] As will be discussed in more detail below, these gendered patterns of exclusion are meaningful for shaping community-level risk factors for violent extremism, as the regression analyses show that women perceive less community-level support for violence and express more positive perceptions of both customary and official state justice actors (Medam and Sheely 2025). Other documents highlight exclusion of specific communities before the start of JASS activities, either along ethnolinguistic lines (as in the Touareg community in the Tahoua region of Niger) or more broadly referencing "herders" as especially excluded, particularly in both regions of Niger.[28]

"We don't really know if there are difficulties related to natural resource management. We are housewives; this is the responsibility of our husbands."

[26] Ni1_FGD_J_Kagarki_H, Ni1_FGD_NJ_JamgabeSedentaire_F, Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H

[27] Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_CC_M, Ni1_FGD_NJ_JamgabeSedentaire_F, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_F, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa

[28] Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_NJ_Tahoua_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H

Participant in a focus group with women in a non-JASS community, Maradi, Niger- December 2024

The survey data put these qualitative perceptions on exclusion and inclusion in the regions where JASS operates into broader perspective. 87% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that conflict resolution committees include gender and age diversity and a similar 86% of respondents also believe that women and minority groups are effectively represented and empowered to participate in decision-making bodies concerning natural resources and land. As noted above, these largely positive perceptions of inclusion are likely in part due to the sample for this study being primarily drawn from communities where JASS is operating. The forthcoming quasi-experimental study will include a larger sample from non-JASS communities to help better assess differences in perceived inclusivity of natural resource governance across areas where JASS has implemented activities versus communes that are still primarily managing natural resource governance as they have in the past.

Figure 12. Do you participate in making decisions in terms of access, use and management of resources and related disputes in your community?

More broadly, 61% of respondents believe that local conflict resolution committees ensure all participants' perspectives, needs, and voices are equally considered. When it comes to individuals' assessment of their own representation and ability to be meaningfully involved in community decision-making, a significant majority (77%) feel that their concerns are genuinely listened to and considered by village authorities. However, a smaller proportion of individuals feel that they are able to actually participate directly in decision-making: 53% of respondents report participating in decisions related to land and resource management, while 45% do not.

More broadly, significant portion of the responses across all regions indicates that people generally view the management of land disputes as both peaceful and inclusive. On average, 78% of respondents across all regions believe that land disputes are resolved in a way that is both peaceful and inclusive. This view is particularly strong in Tahoua in Niger (85%), where the majority of 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.

While most respondents perceive the process as peaceful and inclusive, a smaller group of people think that land disputes are peaceful but not necessarily inclusive. The "Peaceful only" response is 14% across all regions, with notably high figures in Koutiala in Mali (15%) and Maradi in 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.

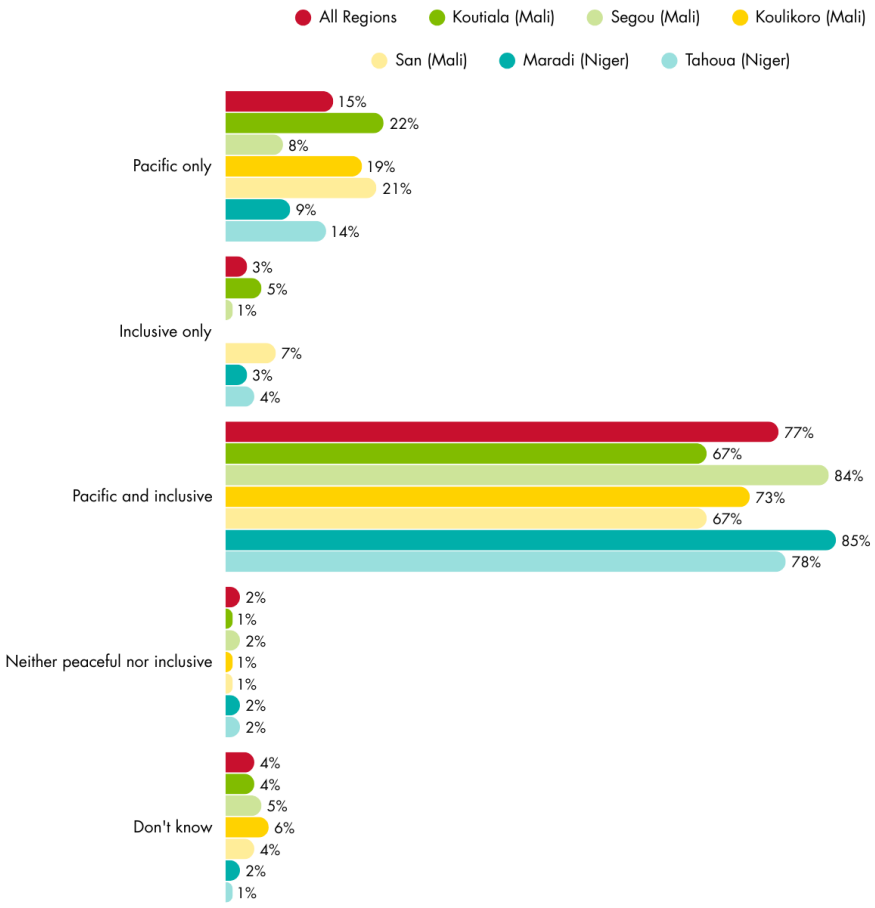

Figure 13. How do you judge the management (governance), access and use of land today?

Rather than being aligned to a specific outcome, a focus on supporting inclusion is mainstreamed throughout JASS's theory of change, with Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) serving as an underlying design principle that informs all aspects of the programme's implementation. In addition, marginalisation/inclusion are called out in three points in the theory of change: "Inclusions responsible for preventing and managing land conflict are strengthened, **more inclusive**, and have better interoperability" (O1.1); "Communities and their **most vulnerable** are better prepared for and better able to respond to climate shocks" (O2.1); and "**Youth** are provided with meaningful, sustainable, climate restorative employment opportunities in both on-farm and off-farm livelihoods" (O 2.2). In particular, KII and FGD participants highlighted that the focus on inclusion within JASS's work with institutions focused on land management (COFOs at various levels in both countries) and conflict management/prevention (CRCs in Mali and

SCAP/RU in Niger) helps to promote equitable access to decision-making by women, young people, and people with disabilities, which in turn contributes to the joint perception of dispute resolution as peaceful and inclusive.[29]

> *"Thanks to JASS I was able to sit in front of the sultan and the prefect, and also thanks to the sensitisations, we learned to live in peace and work with women, young people and even the disabled. To help live in peace between herders and farmers, there has been distribution of seeds and recovery of degraded land."*
>
> Farmer- Tahoua, Niger, in FGD- December 2024

Similarly, numerous FGDs and KIIs noted that JASS's work with COFOs, CRCs, and SCAP/RUs helped to increase access to fair and transparent dispute resolution, regardless of the identities of the parties to the dispute, helping to address perceptions of marginalisation by minority ethnolinguistic groups and herders—particularly in both Tahoua and Maradi regions in Niger, where this dimension of identity was flagged as an especially salient dimension of exclusion.[30] While there are fewer mentions of how JASS supports inclusion through its activities focused on economic livelihoods, market systems, and climate adaptation, numerous FGDs and KIIs highlighted increased land access for women and the intentional involvement of both women and young people in trainings on economic activity—such as market gardening.[31]

[29] Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_Env_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_KII_J_Ourno_EWCO_M, Ni1_KII_J_EdiriMahaman_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_Galba_VLC_M, Ni1_KII_J_Gogarma_SCAP_F, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ni1_KII_J_TsanaAssanga_SCAP_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_CLS_M, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_COFO_M, Ni2_KII_J_AdjeKorya_Env_M, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_COFOCOM_M, Ni2_KII_J_Gogarma_COFO_M, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, 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_KII_J_Siribala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_Ag_M, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_API_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_EWCO_M, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_VFG_F, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_KII_J_Dieli_TSG_M, Ma4_KII_J_Somo_CRC_M

[30] Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_FGD_NJ_Tahoua_Cons_YM, Ni1_FGD_NJ_ZongonIkaka_H, Ni1_KII_J_Karoufane_Ag_M, Ni1_KII_J_Madaoua_Cons_COFOCOM_M, Ni1_KII_J_Ourno_Env_M, Ni2_FGD_J_AdjeKoria_GIC, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ni2_FGD_J_ZangonMalanAli_CFW, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni2_KII_J_DanGoulbi_Chief_M

[31] Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_FGD_J_Galba_PF, Ni1_FGD_J_Ourno_GIC, Ni1_KII_J_Karoufane_Ag_M, Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_J_Golondi_H, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_GIC, Ma1_FGD_J_Pala_VFG, Ma1_KII_J_Pala_VFG_F

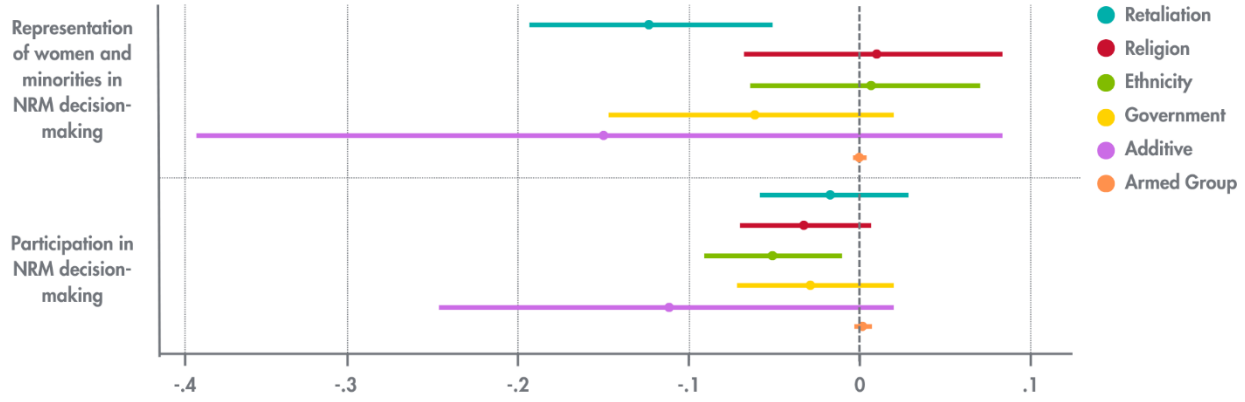

Figure 14. Relationships Between Inclusion and Perceptions of Violence and Armed Groups

Note: This graph is the coefficient plot for the regression analysis. The Y-axis includes the names of the relevant subset of explanatory variables, and the dots represent the relationship between each listed variable and the measures of justifications for violence and turning to armed groups. Each colour represents a different dependent variable. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The regression models that produced this graph include the full set of explanatory variables for all factors, along with demographic control variables and village fixed effects. The results for the justification of violence measures reported in this graph draw on the models that use the 5-point scale. See the tables in Appendix A for the full regression results.

The regression analyses help to provide an initial snapshot of how perceptions of exclusion—and JASS's holistic approach to inclusion—may shape perceptions of violent extremism. **Individuals who perceive that they are able to participate in decision-making related to natural resources are less likely to believe that their broader community supports the use of violence in general**, and are less likely to believe that their community supports the use of violence to defend their religion or ethnolinguistic group in particular.[32] In addition, individuals who perceive that women and minorities are represented in natural resource management are less likely to believe that their community supports the use of violence to retaliate against violence. Together, these findings indicate that as with perceptions of governance, individuals' perceptions of inclusion can shape community-level resilience to radicalisation and violent extremism. As noted above, this hypothesis will be explored further in the forthcoming **JASS quasi-experimental study based on the annual review data,** to help provide further evidence that JASS's activities support inclusion, and that this inclusion in turn helps to advance peace and stability in the areas where JASS works**.**

Alongside this planned study, a priority area for further reflection, learning, and adaptive management for JASS in the year ahead **will be to get more specific about how each of the relevant dimensions of exclusion and inclusion interact with one another and shape participation in both conflict and non-violent dispute resolution and decision-making**. In particular, future evidence generation and learning will benefit from 1) a greater and more explicit focus on the dynamics of youth exclusion and how this is addressed in JASS activities, 2) a more specific assessment of JASS's work on gender to addresses norms and behaviours related to violence, including masculinities and how they intersect with other identities, 3) an explicit focus on exclusion and inclusion of people

[32] These findings for the relationship between participation and violence are specific to the regression models that use the five-point scale to measure perceived community support for violence. For the model that uses the dichotomous measure of the strongest support for violence, individuals who report participating in NRM decision-making are actually more likely to perceive that their community justifies the use of violence to retaliate in most cases.

living with disabilities and how—if at all-- these patterns contribute to dynamics of conflict and stability in general and to risk of violent extremism in particular.

This recommendation for deepening JASS's evidence and learning on inclusion is supported by several quotes from key informants in the mid-term evaluation report, which emphasised the need for JASS to adopt a more targeted and deliberate approach to inclusion, tailoring activities in a given community to address the forms of exclusion directly linked to conflict in that area, ensuring that the programme's work on inclusion is tailored so that the most relevant issues are tackled effectively. The **planned study on mapping participation by marginalised groups** will help to support this goal by generating more fine-grained data on what participation means and looks like in the context of various dimensions of identity and how individuals and groups want to participate, what settings they want to participate in, and what facilitates that participation. The evidence from this study—alongside the quasi-experimental study—can and should form the basis for sensemaking and programme adaptations that help to fine-tune activities to the dimensions of inclusion, resilience, and peace that are relevant to the diverse lived realities of individuals residing in the areas where JASS works in Mali and Niger.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion—defined as a sense of trust, shared purpose, and willingness to engage and cooperate among different individuals, groups, and institutions in a given area-- has also been identified as an important factor shaping risk and resilience to violent extremism (Mercy Corps 2023). This definition of social cohesion consists of six measurable dimensions, each of which can shape VE risk in distinct ways: trust, collective action norms, civic engagement, attitudes towards out-groups, belonging, and identity (Kim et al 2020).

At the individual level, the search for identity and a sense of belonging can make individuals susceptible to extremist ideologies (Olawole et al 2022; Vergani et al., 2018). At the community level, weak social cohesion can fuel radicalisation by increasing the salience of identity-based cleavages and weakening inter-group trust and social norms of cooperation. This can erode informal systems of social protection and networks that typically support and safeguard at-risk young people, thereby leading conflicts to escalate to violence and creating fertile territory for armed group recruitment and activity (Lichtenheld et al. 2022; Ribar et al. 2025). Individual-level interventions focused on addressing the relationship between social cohesion and risk of radicalisation typically focus on strengthening building social connections and a sense of belonging through a mix of mentorship, peer support networks, and youth-friendly spaces, such as community centres (Mercy Corps 2023). Community-level interventions focused on addressing the relationship between social cohesion and radicalization typically focus on facilitating collaboration on joint projects across lines of social division, often alongside work to strengthen dispute resolution (Lichthenheld et al. 2022; Mercy Corps 2023).

Evidence from Past MC Programmes in the Sahel

Evidence from past Mercy Corps programmes and research in the Sahel indicate that social fragmentation and frayed social cohesion play an important role in driving risk of extremism. Recurring themes from studies in both Mali and Niger include the intensification of pre-existing tensions between herders and farmers, different ethnolinguistic groups, and geographically disparate communities (Mercy Corps Mali 2023; Inks et al 2017; Lichtenheld et al. 2022; Lichtenheld et al. 2021; Ribar et al. 2025; Moha and Harouna 2024). In particular, research using baseline data from the PEACE programme in Niger found that specific dimensions of social cohesion were correlated with reduced support for violence—and VE risk (Lichtenheld et al. 2021). In particular, the study found that trust—and especially trust regarding natural resource management—between identity groups is associated

with reduced support for the use of violence (Lichtenheld et al. 2021). In addition, the study found that while interactions across group lines had no relationship with support for violence, individuals who reported positive interactions with out-groups reported reduced support for the use of violence (Lichtenheld et al. 2021).

At the same time, the 2017 *We Hope and We Fight* study from northern Mali also highlights how in some cases strong social ties and interpersonal trust can drive youth to join armed groups, in cases where community-level social norms justify the use of violence (Inks et al. 2017). In such cases, young people's desire for belonging**,** approval from their families and broader communities, and need for protection from abuse by government forces or other armed groups are presented as significant motivators for joining both VEOs and pro-government armed groups (Inks et al. 2017). The qualitative study on youth recruitment by VEOs in Niger also highlights the influence of familial ties, with family members in armed groups often increasing the likelihood that young people will support an armed group or join the group themselves (Moha and Harouna 2024).

Several of the existing evidence products detail interventions aimed at strengthening the protective aspects of social cohesion and mitigating the risk of violent extremism. The Ben ni Bassigui/BRIKS programme in Mali which utilized conflict resolution training, reconciliation committees, and early warning systems, resulted in reported improved social cohesion and reduced violent incidents (Mercy Corps Mali 2023). In contrast, research on the PEACE programme in Niger found mixed results (Licthenheld et al. 2022). While some aspects of social cohesion improved, particularly within identity groups, improving trust between groups proved more challenging. The program's impact on violent extremism was indirect, primarily through improved conflict resolution skills rather than solely through increased social cohesion per se. Similarly, the 2025 research study on Youth Connect presents a RCT that shows that the impact of the core YC economic and civic engagement interventions are augmented by training for youth in conflict resolution skills (Interest Based Mediation and Negotiation), finding a significant reduction in support for violence, along with a reduction in violent events by VEOs, in the communities where young people were trained in conflict resolution (Ribar et al. 2025).

Patterns in JASS Programme Areas

Key Finding: A sense of belonging is the dimension of social cohesion most strongly associated with perceptions of lower levels of community support for violence in the areas where JASS works.

The qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs help to provide a broad picture of social cohesion and fragmentation in the regions of Mali and Niger where JASS works. Existing social structures, such as kinship ties, mutual aid, and local dispute resolution mechanism are described as playing a significant role in maintaining social cohesion and peace, even in the face of disputes and tensions.[33] However, these modes of maintaining cooperation and trust are strongest within relatively homogenous ethnolinguistic or socioprofessional groups, with fewer positive interactions and greater frequency of disputes that escalate to conflict across group lines.[34] In particular,

[33] Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_F, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_F, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa

[34] Ni2_FGD_J_Gogarma_VFG, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_F, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma2_FGD_J_Nkolondjala_YP, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_F, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_Fa, Ma4_FGD_NJ_San_Cons_H, Ma4_Ma2_FGD_J_Cons_CFW

participants in both Niger and Mali noted the existence of persistent disputes and mistrust between farmers and herders, especially with respect to land and water availability, crop damage, and migration routes.[35]

The quantitative data from JASS's mid-term evaluation survey help to provide a clearer picture of patterns in three specific dimensions of social cohesion that are relevant for VE risk: belonging, trust, and attitudes towards out-groups. Overall, the quantitative data indicate that most individuals (84.9%) feel a sense of **belonging** in their community, with only 11% of individuals agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that they feel left out of their community.

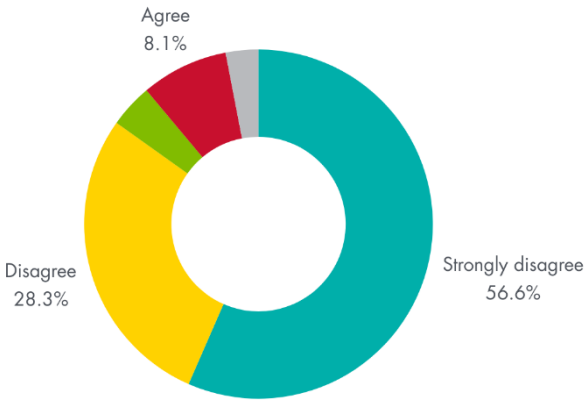

Figure 15. Agreement with the statement "I feel left out of my community"

The survey data reveals a strong sense of **trust**, particularly toward close relationships, such as relatives and neighbors, with a noticeable difference when it comes to interactions with people from different ethnolinguistic and socio-profesisonal groups.

When examining trust, the most striking contrast is seen in how individuals perceive their relatives and neighbors compared to people from other thnolinguistic and/or socio-profesisonal groups, echoing patterns described in the qualitative data. 91% of respondents expressed a high level of trust in their relatives, and similarly, 80% reported trusting their neighbors a lot. This is far higher than the 67% who expressed trust toward people from other ethnolinguistic groups or those with different livelihoods. Similarly, high levels of generalised trust in "other citizens" is also 66%, suggesting that while there is a general sense of trust within close-knit communities, it is less prominent in broader societal interactions.

[35] Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_Fa, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_H, Ni2_FGD_NJ_Maigemou_YM, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_CRC, Ma1_FGD_J_MPessoba_H, Ma1_FGD_J_NGolonianasso_PF, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Koutiala_Cons_YM, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Oulan_H, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_F, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_Fa, Ma1_FGD_NJ_Sirakele_H, Ma1_KII_J_Signe_CC_M, 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_Bla_PF_F

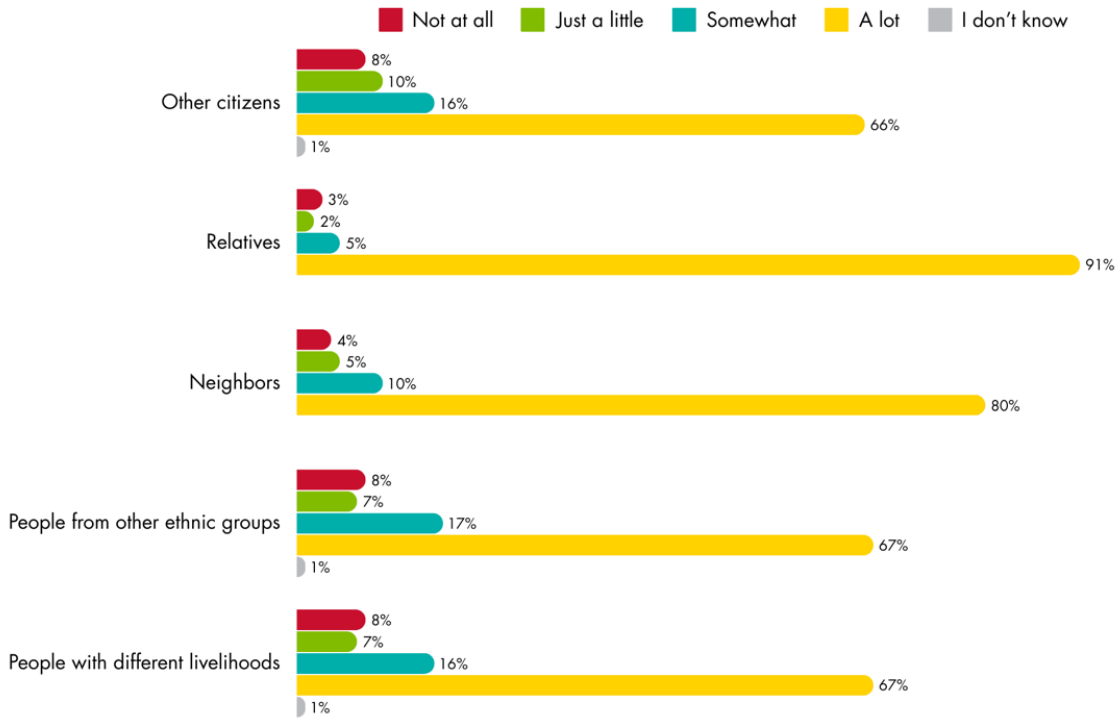

Figure 16. How much do you trust these groups?

Attitudes towards cooperating with others follows a similar pattern. Once again, 91% of surveyed individuals express that there are a lot of benefits to cooperating with family members, closely followed by neighbors at 83%. Perception of high levels of benefits to cooperating with other groups drops off slightly for people from other ethnolingustic groups and those with different livelihoods, both at 69%. Generalised perception of benefits of cooperation with other citizens was ranked lowest, at 70%.

Before, it was only during baptisms, marriages and deaths that the people of my community gathered. But today, thanks to JASS, we meet almost every week and everyone knows each other. These periodic meetings allow us to consolidate our achievements in terms of peace and social cohesion.

Herder-Maradi, Niger, in FGD- December 2024

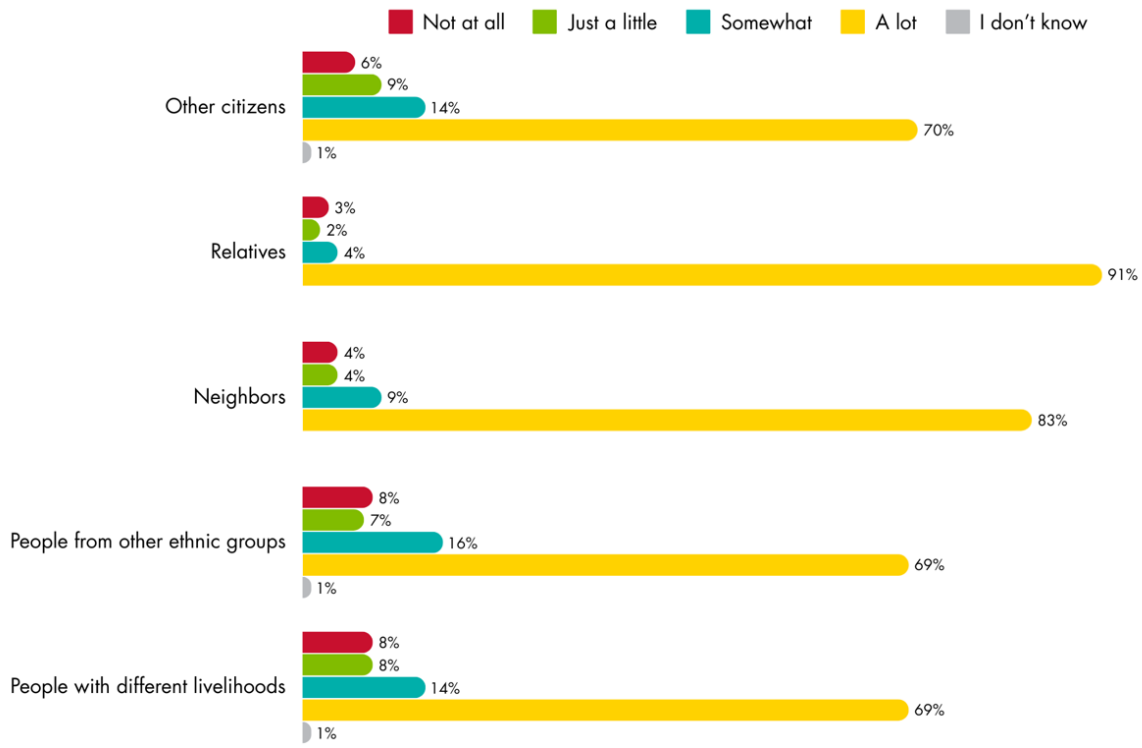

Figure 17. To what extent to you believe there are advantages to cooperating with these groups?

Although social cohesion is not explicitly mentioned in JASS's Theory of Change, activities under Outcome 1 implicitly aim to strengthen social cohesion by strengthening "conflict management capacity and collaboration between communities divided by conflict". Across the qualitative KIIs and FGDs, respondents note that JASS's work with COFOs in both countries and with CRCs in Mali and SCAP/RUs in Niger help to build trust and positive attitudes about cooperation between farmers and herders by bringing members of both groups together to prevent and resolve disputes.[36] Strengthening social cohesion in service of building resilience to climate shocks and stresses is also an implicit goal in Outcome 2, through communities' collective preparation for climate shocks and stresses. Participants in both FGDs and KIIs mentioned that a number of livelihoods and climate adaptation activities helped to foster collaboration and a sense of shared purpose between farmers and herders, including CFW infrastructure projects, land reclamation efforts, and trainings on livelihoods skills.[37]

[36] Ma3_FGD_J_Dacoumani_YP, Ma3_FGD_J_Niono_CFW, 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_Bla_API_M, Ma3_KII_J_Bla_PF_F, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_CRC_M, Ma3_KII_J_Siribala_PF_F

[37] Ni1_FGD_J_Bagare_CO, Ni1_FGD_J_Karoufane_Cons_VFG_CFW, Ni1_KII_J_Leymatawa_SCAP_M, Ma2_FGD_J_Banamba_GIC, Ma2_KII_FGD_Banamba_Cons_PF, Ma2_KII_J_Banamba_Cons_VFG_F, Ma4_FGD_J_San_Cons_GIC, Ma4_KII_J_Somo_CRC_M

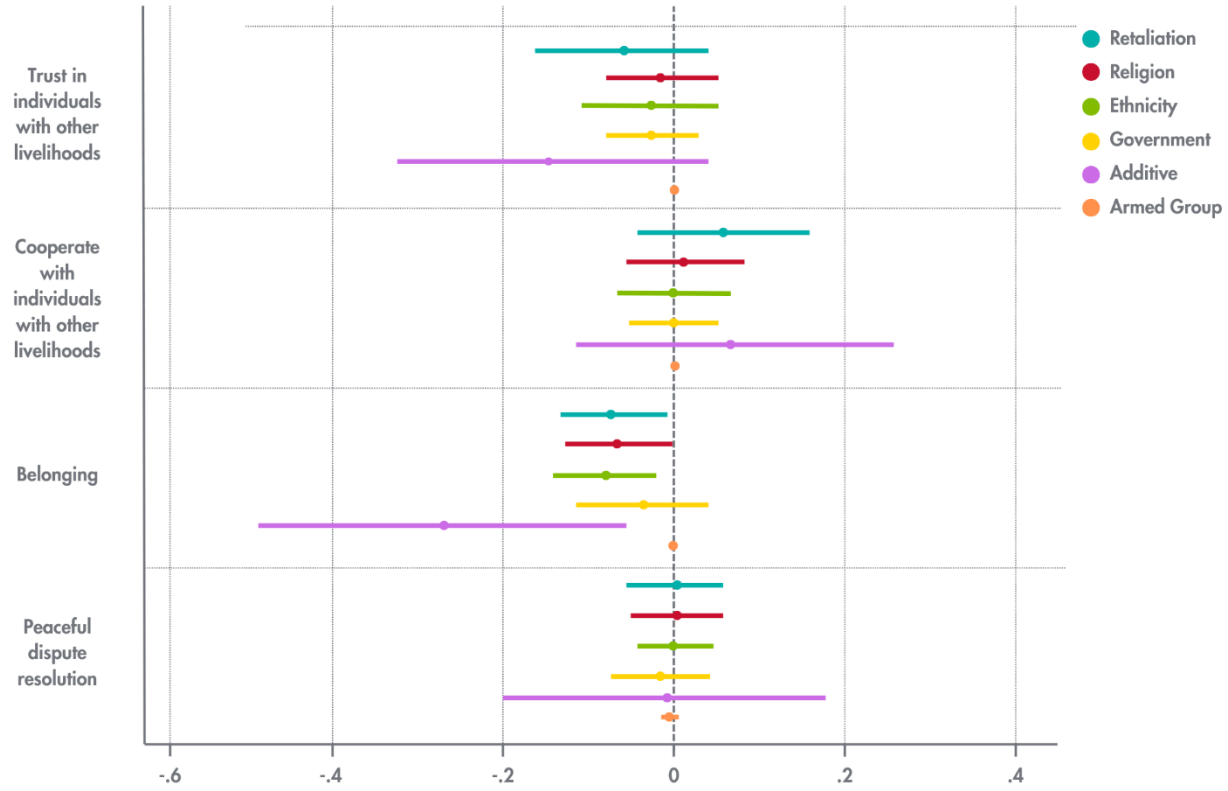

Figure 18. Relationships Between Social Cohesion and Perceptions of Violence and Armed Groups

Note: This graph is the coefficient plot for the regression analysis. The Y-axis includes the names of the relevant subset of explanatory variables, and the dots represent the relationship between each listed variable and the measures of justifications for violence and turning to armed groups. Each colour represents a different dependent variable. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The regression models that produced this graph include the full set of explanatory variables for all factors, along with demographic control variables and village fixed effects. The results for the justification of violence measures reported in this graph draw on the models that use the 5-point scale. See the tables in Appendix A for the full regression results.

The regression analyses provide additional insight into how belonging, trust, and attitudes towards out-groups correlate with attitudes towards violence—and perceptions of violent extremism more broadly. In particular, a feeling of belonging—measured by individuals disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement that they feel "left out" of their community—is associated with lower levels of perceived community justification for the use of violence in general, and with perception of reduced support for using violence to retaliate against violence, and defend one's own religion or ethnic group.[38] This suggests that in the regions where JASS is working, individuals' sense that they are part of the community may be an important contributor to the community's sense of shared purpose—and its overall resilience to VE recruitment. Taken together with the previous findings, this indicates that in the areas where JASS works, perceptions of governance, inclusion, and social cohesion are closely related factors shaping community-level risk and resilience to VE, and that the programme addresses these interlinked factors through its conflict prevention and NRM work in Outcome 1, but also through the participatory, inclusive, community-led approach that is core to **how** the programme works across all outcomes and activities. As with the findings throughout this report, the **forthcoming quasi-experimental study using the annual review data** will be

[38] These findings for the relationship between belonging and violence are specific to the regression models that use the five-point scale to measure perceived community support for violence.

an important opportunity to test these emerging hypotheses by comparing patterns of belonging in JASS communes with areas where the programme is not working and assessing whether and how differences in belonging shape perceptions of community-level support for violence.

At the same time, the regression analyses also show the somewhat puzzling pattern that individuals who report high levels of trust and perceived benefits of cooperating with members of other livelihoods groups are more likely to report that they would turn to an armed group to help resolve a dispute. In addition, in the regression models that use the dichotomous measure of the strongest perceived support for violence, individuals who report higher levels of trust in out-groups are less likely to perceive that their community justifies the use of violence across the board, but individuals that have similarly positive perceptions of the benefits to cooperating with other groups are more likely to perceive that their community justifies the use of violence to retaliate against violence. This **puzzling relationship between trust and positive attitudes towards out-groups and willingness to engage with armed groups** resonates with the 2017 *We Hope and We Fight* study from Northern Mali, which found that in communities that perceived a shared threat from the government or VEOs, strong social ties and community cohesion actually increased the likelihood that young people would join armed groups to help protect their community and gain respect and approval (Inks et al. 2017). This finding suggests that to better address the complex relationship between social cohesion and perceptions of violent extremism, JASS's planned evidence and learning activities over the next year should start to gradually add a focus on how **armed group presence, strategies, and tactics in the regions where JASS works intersect with community and individual-level patterns of trust and inter-group interactions to shape pull factors for recruitment**. This can be achieved by bringing JASS's strong security analysis—and the expertise of local research institutes such as the Timbuktu Centre for Strategic Studies on the Sahel-- into conversation with its broader research and MEL activities under Outcome 3, as part of ongoing sensemaking, learning, and adaptive management.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, this report finds evidence that **each of the four broad types of factors that have been shown to shape risk of radicalisation and violent extremism in past programming and research in the Sahel are present and operating in the regions of Mali and Niger where JASS is being implemented**. This supports the view that risk and resilience to violent extremism are driven by the complex interactions of a mix of economic, governance, and social dynamics at both the community and individual levels. Similarly, we find that JASS's theory of change, programming approaches, and underlying design principles are broadly aligned with evidence-based practices that have been used by Mercy Corps and other actors in P/CVE programming in the Sahel and globally. In particular, the

report shows that **JASS's programming—and related evidence—is reasonably well calibrated to address community and societal-level push factors that shape the broader operating environments within which VEOs attempt to recruit fighters and exercise territorial control.**

At the same time, we find that **safely and reliably measuring perceptions of violent extremism remains difficult**, which is a consistent pattern running throughout Mercy Corps' past programming and research in the Sahel. In particular, a **very low proportion of individuals in the areas where JASS works were willing to even express indirect acknowledgement of support for violence or armed groups in both the mid-term survey and concurrent qualitative transcripts.** While this pattern could indicate that support for violent extremism is quite limited in the regions where JASS is operating, it is also consistent with individuals censoring themselves due to social norms against speaking openly about violence or perception that doing so will expose them or their communities to increased risk of reprisals from either the government or armed groups. These measurement challenges are an important barrier to allowing JASS—and similar multisectoral stabilisation programmes—to move **from working on primary P/CVE activities focused on addressing broad community-level push factors** to more **targeted secondary prevention that addresses the pull factors that shape radicalisation and recruitment for the most at-risk individuals**.

This report 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**.

Recommendations for JASS and other multisectoral resilience programmes in the Sahel

Recommendation #1: Bring a focus on violent extremism into programming and learning.

JASS and similar programmes should bring a **more intentional focus on violent extremism into its evidence, learning, and programming activities over the next year**, building on the approach piloted in this study. In particular, this study's findings on the difficulty of measuring perceptions of VE have already informed new quantitative and qualitative measures that are being used in the programme's annual survey. Similarly, the programme team should utilise the recently established protocol of collaboration with the Timbuktu Centre for Strategic Studies on the Sahel to draw on their deep, policy-relevant expertise and evidence on topics related to Violent Extremism in the region.

In the year ahead, further sensemaking reflections with JASS programme team members should use diverse sources of evidence— the **quasi-experimental study** drawing on the annual review data, ongoing **JASS security analyses and reports**, the planned study on **participation by marginalised groups**, and **the expertise of the Timbuktu Centre** -- to build shared understanding of how VEO strategies and tactics shape pull factors for radicalisation and recruitment and how JASS's activities can adapt to address these factors in a conflict-sensitive way that is tailored to the programme's local operating environments in both Mali and Niger. Where possible, these sensemaking and learning sessions should continue to draw on existing knowledge and practical experience related to implementing P/CVE programming within Mercy Corps's Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso offices, to help

ensure that these new adaptations draw on the strong history of technical expertise and local knowledge in both country offices.

Recommendation #2: Continue to explore synergies between conflict prevention and climate adaptation activities.

As noted in the JASS Perceptions of Justice study (Medam and Sheely 2025), the recommendation to continue and expand sensemaking and adaptive management related to violent exptremism presents a strategic opportunity to deepen efforts to integrate implementation experience, evidence, and learning on conflict prevention from **Objective 1** with the wider climate adaptation and livelihoods activities under **Objective 2**. Doing so will help to 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. **Exploring and expanding these connections across JASS's programming components is an especially important success factor for starting to address risk of VE recruitment**, as the evidence in this study—and Mercy Corps's broader programming and research in Mali and Niger—indicate the need to jointly address interconnected risk factors related to economic hardship, grievances about governance, marginalisation, and social cohesion.

Recommendation #3: Amplify the participatory, inclusive, community-led ethos that is a transversal aspect of programming activities, stakeholder relations, and team culture.

A key finding of this study is that JASS's **participatory, inclusive, community-led approach** is core to **how** the programme works across all outcomes and activities, and that this approach underpins the programme's ability to address a number of VE risk factors, including **negative perceptions of governance, feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, and weak social cohesion**. A key theme across the qualitative KIIs and FGDs is that the ways in which JASS centres meaningful participation and inclusion of all individuals and groups within a community sets the programme apart from other development initiatives in the eyes of community members. Similarly, the recent JASS quasi-experimental study on natural resource governance supports this finding, showing that community members perceive that inclusive participation of all segments of their community in decision-making about natural resources and resolving disputes produces results that are more trustworthy and equitable, and which both increase resilience to climate-related challenges and reduce conflicts over natural resources (Olawole and Bezares Calderon 2025). As a result, **when starting to incorporate an increased P/CVE lens to JASS programming and learning activities in Year 3, the programme team should continue to keep the participatory, inclusive, community-led ethos at the core of how it works** and to find ways to continue to model and live these principles in both specific activities and the general way that the programme team interacts with communities, partners, and one another.

Recommendations for Donors and Policy Stakeholders

Recommendation #4: Expand JASS and similar programmes to more explicitly address P/CVE goals by tailoring activities to specific, localised pull factors shaping radicalisation and recruitment.

The explicit purpose of this study was to draw on a diverse range of evidence to help bring an explicit focus on P/CVE into dialogue with JASS's theory of change and programming approach. **What we find is that although JASS was designed to address the intersections of climate shocks and stresses, disputes over the use of natural resources, and intercommunal conflict, the programme's interventions and underlying design principles are well-calibrated to address the major community and societal-level push factors for violent extremism in Mali and Niger.**

This finding has important implications for FCDO and other donors designing future funding on stabilisation in the Sahel. **The findings of this study indicate that future stabilisation funding in Mali, Niger, and the surrounding region should maintain an integrated focus on the intersections of climate and conflict—broadly in line with JASS's overall approach—while more explicitly integrating outcomes and programming approaches from the field of P/CVE.** As noted in the short-term recommendations to the JASS programme, this integration should entail **using fine-grained data on armed group strategies and tactics and on community and individual-level risk to tailor future zones of intervention and activity designs to the specific localised pull factors shaping radicalisation and recruitment.**

Recommendation #5: Create spaces for joint learning and collaboration that convene international, national, and local actors working on P/CVE and the broader climate adaptation-peacebuilding nexus to consolidate evidence, align interventions, and drive coordinated action – assuring that available foreign assistance funding yields the greatest sustainable impacts possible.

This study also underscored an important paradox in P/CVE policy and programming in the Sahel. Although **effective P/CVE interventions rely on rich, contextually relevant data and evidence to effectively identify high-risk communities and individuals, this type of data is especially difficult to collect in Mali and Niger**, due to norms about speaking openly about violence and the riskiness of doing so. However, this study also shows that continuing to **build this evidence base for P/CVE in the Sahel is possible, both through creatively deploying cutting-edge quantitative and qualitative methods and by investing in equitable, trust-based partnerships with local communities and organisations.**

As noted in the Perceptions of Justice study, this means that FCDO and other stakeholders should prioritise the creation of **spaces for broad learning and collaboration across international, national, and local actors working on P/CVE—and the broader climate adaptation–peacebuilding nexus in Mali and Niger**. This includes centring the leadership of local organizations, 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 synthesizing and sharing insights across organisations to consolidate learning, align interventions, and drive coordinated, collaborative action.

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Appendix A: Tables of Regression Results

Perceptions of Violent Extremism- 5 Point Measures of "Justified" Measures (Models 1-5)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Violence-Retaliate	Violence-Religion	Violence-Ethnic	Violence-Government	Violence-Additive	Armed Group
Economic Shock	0.015	0.024	-0.002	0.034	0.071	0.003
	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.063)	(0.003)
Climate Shock	0.025	-0.041***	-0.015	-0.049***	-0.078*	0.004*
	(0.018)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.043)	(0.002)
Conflict Shock	-0.053	-0.039	-0.016	-0.083**	-0.191	-0.002
	(0.047)	(0.034)	(0.056)	(0.036)	(0.121)	(0.009)

Total Impact Shock	0.044	0.031	0.010	0.081*	0.163	-0.005***
	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.031)	(0.048)	(0.129)	(0.002)
Fairness of Legal/Justice System	-0.024**	-0.017*	-0.012	-0.004	-0.058*	-0.000
	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.033)	(0.002)
Trust in Local Authorities	-0.101**	-0.086**	-0.106***	-0.080**	-0.368***	0.002
	(0.038)	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.032)	(0.118)	(0.002)
Transparency-Natural Resources	-0.055	0.036	0.046	0.029	0.054	-0.012
	(0.056)	(0.051)	(0.054)	(0.049)	(0.143)	(0.008)
Satisfaction With Gov of Natural Resources	-0.007	-0.052	-0.027	-0.030	-0.108	0.011*
	(0.050)	(0.040)	(0.054)	(0.045)	(0.136)	(0.006)
Representation of Women and Minority Groups	-0.119***	0.013	0.009	-0.058	-0.151	-0.001
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.035)	(0.042)	(0.120)	(0.003)
Participation in Natural Resource Decision-Making	-0.013	-0.033*	-0.048**	-0.025	-0.117*	0.003
	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.068)	(0.003)
Trust	-0.058	-0.015	-0.028	-0.028	-0.133	0.003*
	(0.049)	(0.036)	(0.041)	(0.030)	(0.088)	(0.002)
Cooperate	0.058	0.014	0.000	0.001	0.078	0.004**

	(0.050)	(0.040)	(0.038)	(0.031)	(0.095)	(0.002)
Belonging	-0.073**	-0.068*	-0.084**	-0.043	-0.268***	-0.001
	(0.033)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.099)	(0.004)
Peaceful Disp Res	0.005	0.006	0.002	-0.020	-0.008	-0.008
	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.032)	(0.035)	(0.098)	(0.008)
Observations	2954	2953	2951	2903	2961	2961
Adjusted R-squared	0.084	0.095	0.088	0.114	0.150	0.086
Village Indicators	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Perceptions of Violent Extremism- Dichotomous Measures of "Justified" Measures (Models 1-5)

	(1) Violence Retaliate	(2) Violence Religion	(3) Violence Ethnic	(4) Violence Government	(5) Additive	(6) Armed Group
Economic Shock	-0.003	-0.003	-0.004*	-0.002	-0.012*	0.003
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.007)	(0.003)
Climate Shock	0.001	-0.004	-0.004	-0.003	-0.009	0.004*
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.008)	(0.002)
Conflict Shock	-0.005	-0.001	0.000	-0.003	-0.007	-0.002
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Total Impact Shock	0.005	0.011	0.009	0.008	0.032	-0.005***
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.033)	(0.002)
Fairness-Legal	0.001	-0.004*	-0.002	-0.002	-0.007	-0.000
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.006)	(0.002)
Trust- Local	-0.016**	-0.003	-0.004	-0.004	-0.027*	0.002
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.016)	(0.002)
Transparency-NR	-0.006	-0.007	0.001	0.002	-0.010	-0.012
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.022)	(0.008)
Satisfaction-NR	0.005	-0.012	-0.009	-0.010	-0.025	0.011*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.020)	(0.006)

Representation-NR	-0.012*	0.003	-0.002	-0.004	-0.014	-0.001
	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.019)	(0.003)
Participation-NR	0.007*	0.002	-0.001	0.003	0.012	0.003
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.009)	(0.003)
Trust	-0.009	-0.005	-0.006	-0.003	-0.024*	0.003*
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.002)
Cooperation	0.012*	0.005	0.006	-0.003	0.022	0.004**
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.002)
Belonging	-0.003	-0.008	-0.006	-0.003	-0.020	-0.001
	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.014)	(0.004)
Peace Disp Res	-0.003	-0.001	0.000	-0.001	-0.005	-0.008
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.017)	(0.008)
Observations	2954	2953	2951	2903	2961	2961
Adjusted R-squared	0.015	0.058	0.068	0.058	0.071	0.086
Village Indicators	Yes	Yes	Yes	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		**Gender (KIIs Only)**	**Code**		Vulnerable Household Participating in CFW	CFW
			Male	M		Peace Forums/Community Inclusion Group Dialogues	PF
			Female	F		Vulnerable Farming Groups	VFG
						Young People	YP
						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