CUSTOMARY CHARACTERS IN UNCUSTOMARY CIRCUMSTANCES

PROGRAMMING AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COFO   Land tenure commission

KIIs   Key informant interviews

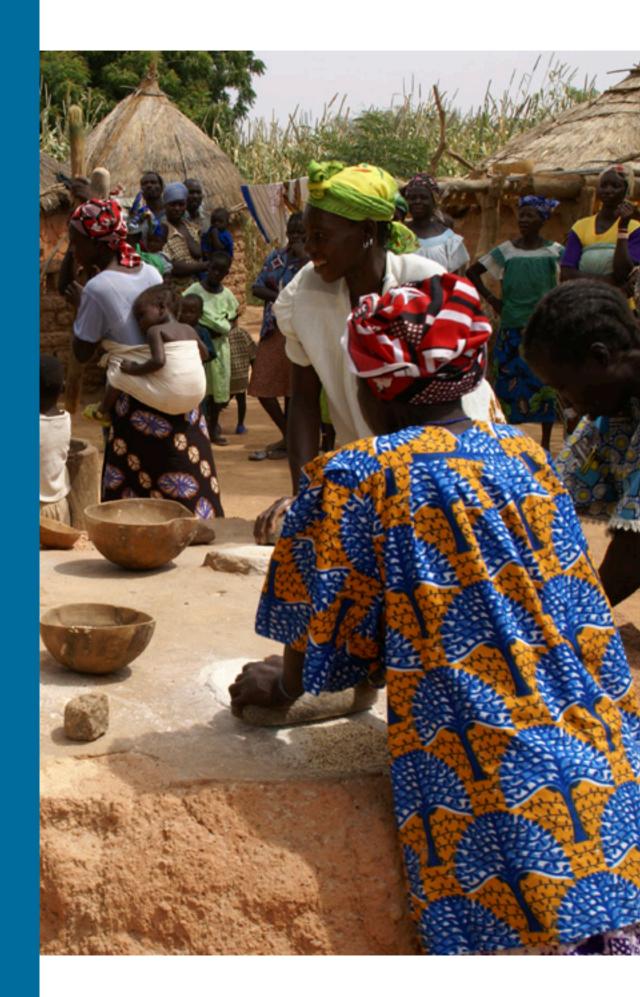NGO   Non-governmental organization

OSCE   Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

P/CVE   Preventing and countering violent extremism

VDPs   Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland
            (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*)

VEO   Violent extremist organization

BACKGROUND

The Liptako-Gourma region – the tri-border zone between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger – is one of the most conflict-affected regions in the world. Already facing a number of challenges, including the absence of the state, lack of basic services, high levels of poverty, dwindling levels of natural resources, and communal tensions, the region now also faces unprecedented levels of violent extremism. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the Sahel have been able to capitalize on the widespread feelings of deprivation, marginalization, social injustice, and lack of economic opportunities in the region to gain a foothold. In the process, they have come into direct contact with traditional local governance providers, such as tribal chiefs, and religious leaders, who have historically taken on key governance functions in communities within these remote areas. For both governments and VEOs, traditional and religious authorities play a central role in community life. Their unique role positions them either as strong allies to collaborate with to strengthen resilience, or as potentially harmful actors that weaken social cohesion.

Yet while both resilience building and the importance of customary authorities, i.e., traditional and religious authorities, have received increasing priority in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy and programming, the specific ways in which these authorities may impact their respective communities' resilience to violent extremism is not well understood. The USAID Customary Resilience project, jointly implemented by the Clingendael Institute's Conflict Research Unit (CRU) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), has thus sought to further the understanding of traditional and religious authorities' contributions to strengthening and/or weakening community resilience to violent extremism in six regions across the three countries, all of which have witnessed ever increasing levels of violent extremism in recent years.

The study is based on primary quantitative and qualitative data gathered through over 1400 surveys and 600 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted in various municipalities across the Ménaka and Gao regions (Mali), the Tillabéri region (Niger), and across the Sahel, Est, and Centre-Nord regions (Burkina Faso). Ultimately, the *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* reports explore the impact of these authorities on their respective communities' general resilience and, more particularly, their resilience against violent extremism in each region and in the broader Sahel region in West Africa. This study shows that, while being primary targets of VEOs' violence themselves, traditional and religious authorities' contributions to P/CVE efforts can take on various forms. These authorities are often the first set of actors that citizens contact regarding issues of conflict resolution, justice provision, and – in some regions – even security and basic service provision. Notably, they are much more relevant, and also much more trusted, as governance providers than either local and national state administrations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), suggesting significant potential as partners in the effort to counter terrorism in the region.

Despite this, any engagement with traditional and religious authorities must take into account that these actors are not a

panacea when it comes to addressing violent extremism. Instrumentalizing these authorities may not only put them at risk, but it may be ineffective or even counter-productive if it does not take into account the local context, which will include factors such as how trusted are traditional and religious authorities; in what domains are they perceived as effective; and their capacities to govern in an inclusive manner. All of these factors, and more, impact overall community resilience and will impact the types of programing recommended for engaging traditional authorities as part of a multidisciplinary approach to P/CVE.

General Resilience

In our survey data, the two most crucial dimensions that affect general community resilience are: (1) the extent to which traditional authorities are perceived to serve their communities' interests rather than their own, and (2) the extent to which traditional and religious authorities are perceived to treat men and women equally. Analysis shows that in 59 percent of our cases, it is possible to correctly predict whether respondents give low, average, or high scores to their communities' resilience just by knowing their answers to these two questions. These findings have implications for engagement with traditional authorities that will not only affect violent extremism-specific programming, but would likely also have a significant impact on development support projects across all areas.

The findings of our research are also crucial because the survey analysis also shows that substantial differences exist in the way traditional and religious authorities operate across the different regions. Authorities in Centre-Nord (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger) are perceived particularly well when it comes to legitimacy, being generally seen to work for the benefit of their communities, resulting in community trust in these authorities. In contrast, authorities in Ménaka (Mali) score poorly on these measures. Authorities in the other regions (Gao (Mali), Est (Burkina Faso), and Sahel (Burkina Faso)) fall somewhere in between the two ends of the scale.

Resilience to Violent Extremism

Violent extremism poses a particular type of threat to community resilience due to not only the violence it inherently entails, but also because of the degree of insecurity and instability it brings to the community. Approaches to countering violent extremism have, both traditionally and currently, overwhelmingly focused on state actors, in particular security forces, including both police and the military. Increasingly, however, in recent years—particularly since the launch of the 2015 United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism[1]—calls for a different approach, one that comprehensively addresses the factors that make conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism and seek to understand what leads individuals

For more in depth information about the findings and analysis, please see the following reports:

- Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances Synthesis Report
- Tillabéri (Niger) Regional Chapter
- Centre-Nord (Burkina Faso) Regional Chapter
- Est (Burkina Faso) Regional Chapter
- Sahel (Burkina Faso) Regional Chapter
- Gao and Ménaka (Mali) Regional Chapter
- Methodology

A Dashboard visualizing the data and findings can be accessed here.

to radicalize to violence, have grown in strength and popularity. Current best practices in P/CVE call for a 'whole-of-society' approach. In other words, an approach that involves a multidisciplinary group of actors, particularly those at the community level, rather than focusing on state actors and security forces.

Additionally, the concept of resilience has come to prominence within the field of P/CVE. 'Resilience', however, remains a commonly used but infrequently defined term. Thus, our study uses the OSCE's definition of resilience: "the ability of a community to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of harmful and adverse events."[2] In seeking to enhance the understanding of how customary authorities can impact, positively or negatively, general resilience and, specifically, resilience to violent extremism, we honed in on traditional and religious authorities' roles in security provision, conflict resolution, and prevention of recruitment by VEOs.

The data collected showed that although traditional authorities are not typical security actors, they do play a role in this area within their communities, being the actor that a fifth of those surveyed turn to when in need of security provision. Most commonly, traditional authorities act by calling on security forces for help, surveilling 'foreign' (outside) elements in the community, and resolving conflicts by dialogue. The efficacy of traditional authorities in security provision varies significantly based on region, as discussed in the regional chapters, and the role of traditional

authorities in this realm remains more closely linked to promotion of dialogue and resolution of disputes, rather than any sort of active role in kinetic maneuvers. This informs our recommendations on engagement with these authorities on security provision (discussed below), as does the fact that VEOs may deliberately target traditional authorities for the role they play in security, rendering any instrumentalization of them for this purpose to involve heightened risks. Traditional authorities in the Sahel have also countered violent extremism through awareness-raising initiatives, as well as conflict mediation and resolution, especially of conflicts over the access to land and resources, including herder-farmer conflicts, a key source of tension. The ability of extremist groups to exploit existing communal grievances to gain support and legitimacy makes addressing these fault lines in society likely to be particularly impactful.

To support the development of mechanisms that could help address community concerns peacefully, this policy report builds on findings such as those mentioned above to explore possible avenues for utilizing traditional authorities' position as key local governance actors to design more effective programming and responses to violent extremism in the Sahel. All the recommendations formulated in this report are based on key research findings from the *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* synthesis and regional reports. They are directed at both national and international stakeholders, project implementers and donors willing to engage with traditional and religious leaders in the Sahel.

P/CVE APPROACHES NEED TO INVOLVE A MULTIDISCIPLINARY SET OF ACTORS, PARTICULARLY THOSE AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

ADOPT A COMPREHENSIVE LOCALLY-TAILORED 'WHOLE OF SOCIETY APPROACH'

Recommendation 1. Take a step away from security-focused approaches to address communities' needs

While the Sahel has attracted much attention and support from various international actors primarily due to the rise in terrorist violence in the region since 2012, the *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* study interestingly reveals that violent extremism is not always perceived by local communities as the main threat to their security. In half the regions under study—namely the Est, Centre-Nord and Tillabéri regions—, food insecurity is perceived as the number one threat[3] and one of the main crises having impacted local communities in the past five years,[4] with violence perpetrated by armed groups only coming in second. Approaches that address the underlying development needs may be more responsive to the primary concerns of communities, while at the same time reducing the factors that may make an environment conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

This recommendation not only reflects the project's specific finding that armed conflict may not be the primary challenge or threat in a given area, but also reflects the broad global recognition of the importance of the security-development nexus, in which the inextricable links between conflict and development are highlighted. Still, when it comes to counter-terrorism strategy and policies, a hard security approach (prioritizing security above development-related concerns such as access to socio-economic growth, health, education, food security, etc.) is often the one adopted. As indicated by the responses on the top concerns of local populations, avoiding this trap in the Sahel should be paramount.

When considering local populations' exposure to external shocks (climatic, economic, breakout of violence, etc.), our research shows that, while most of the respondents have been exposed to such shocks in the past two years, a minority indicated that their household have been able to fully recover from the shock. Self-reliance moreover appears as the dominant coping strategy, with most respondents either relying on themselves or their family and friends to recover, with responses ranging from using one own's savings, selling or slaughtering livestock, selling products or household articles, as well as in some regions, accepting additional work (Tillabéri) and receiving food aid (Gao).

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for greater support to be provided to local communities in remote and largely ungoverned regions of the Sahel, while underlying the fact that the international community's security priorities may not always be in line with those of the local population. Departing from security-focused counter-terrorism measures and broadening the scope of actions to be implemented seems crucial. Placing greater emphasis on addressing development issues, meeting local populations' basic needs, and reducing inter-ethnic tensions, is essential for programming to sustainably reinforce community resilience against VEOs.

Recommendation 2. Develop P/CVE programming that reflects local governance actors' roles

This research moreover shows that in not one key governance domain, be it the provision of basic services, emergency aid, justice or conflict resolution, do state officials come as the first points of contact for local inhabitants. The limited and often contested presence of central state authorities in Sahel bordering regions has often been exploited by VEOs, providing a basis for extremist narratives and recruitment strategies. Against this backdrop, the solution promoted by the international community has often consisted of encouraging the re-establishment of central authority over remote 'ungoverned' areas—an over-simplified approach to a very complex governance crisis.[5] Not only the return of the state, which is often perceived as a corrupted and predatory institution, may not be the solution preferred by local communities, but such discourse moreover largely ignores the hybrid governance that characterizes these regions, and the role played by various formal and informal sources of authority.

By contrast, our study shows that traditional authorities – and religious authorities to a lesser extent – are key actors that people rely on when it comes to conflict resolution, as well as important contributors to local security and justice provision. This underscores the vital importance of adopting a whole-of-society approach to P/CVE in the Sahel. It underlines the need to not only broaden the scope of actions to be implemented but also the range of actors to be involved. Rather than focusing on 'hard' security-focused counter-terrorism measures in which state actors are the primary counterparts, programming should reflect the role played by a diverse array of local governance actors.

Among traditional authorities, our research shows that the most accessible to community members are local chiefs, especially district and village chiefs. As regards religious authorities, responses varied from region to region depending on the existing religious communities, but notably included imams, marabouts, as well as priests and pastors in Burkinabè Centre-Nord and Est regions. Particular attention should thus be paid to integrating these actors into programming aimed at strengthening community resilience to violent extremism.

Recommendation 3. Avoid blueprint approaches and tailor intervention to the local context

Adopting such a comprehensive whole-of-society approach however does not imply that a simple blueprint solution may be applied across the whole Sahel region. On the contrary, this study shows significant differences between, and even within, the researched regions, be it in terms of the main threats, the actors that are present on the ground, the socio-demographics of the regions, and the performance of traditional authorities in various areas. We thus recommend that for programming to build upon clear political economy assessments before engaging with traditional and religious authorities, in order to develop locally tailored interventions. The series of regional chapters, as well as the dashboard, provide precious insights on these authorities' performance across regions and represent useful baseline assessments.[6]

PROGRAMMING MUST BE TAILORED TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT

STRENGTHEN TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES' CORE CAPABILITIES

The *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* study has shed light on the essential role played by local traditional and religious actors. It should however be noted that, with this essential recognition of non-state sources of authority and resilience, comes the potential risk of a premature load bearing on traditional institutions. These sources of traditional authority are likely to be informal or, if formalized, to still lack the resources, capacities and networks to immediately take on the larger responsibilities associated with an influx of support from international actors, be it financial or otherwise. With such an injection of support, increased pressure is placed on these institutions to be "effective, legitimate, transparent and accountable."[7] These authorities and their communities will thus be under a spotlight to remain resilient, and (in some cases) to do the work that state authorities have failed to carry out. Moreover, a too strong emphasis on community agency and the support of traditional institutions may provide external actors, including state authorities and international actors, with a convenient justification for disengagement.

While underlying the need to further consider local traditional and religious authorities' role in enhancing community resilience to violent extremism, this study suggests that supporting them across the board is likely to be an inefficient use of resources. Even if they may be the most well-placed community-based actor to work with, programming should avoid instrumentalizing them and assuming that they can dramatically expand their core capabilities to play a role in P/CVE that is outside of their traditional purview. Thus, rather than being tempted to see how traditional authorities can step into the roles that other actors should play, such as the provision of security by state forces, programming is likely to be more effective if it utilizes the skills and competencies that have historically sat with traditional and religious authorities, enhancing their capabilities in areas in which they are found most impactful. As a necessary first step, our study has allowed to assess the relative role played by traditional and religious authorities in various key governance domains (see Table 1 below), thereby helping to inform these authorities' core capabilities to be strengthened.

Table 1   Key findings: Traditional and religious authorities' roles and functions

Basic service provision: Traditional and religious authorities are rarely actors that people turn to for the provision of basic services, such as food, health and education. Respondents overwhelmingly either have no one to turn to or rely on their immediate social circles. Our analysis however shows that the limited number of respondents that do turn to traditional and religious authorities for basic service provision perceive their communities to be more resilient. This may be a way in which these authorities can contribute to their community's resilience, although only if they do so in a manner that benefits the entire community.

Emergency aid: Traditional, and to a lesser extent religious, authorities are found more active in the distribution of emergency aid. Yet our analysis does not show that traditional authorities contribute significantly to general community resilience when they engage in the distribution of emergency aid – this is only the case for religious authorities. Involving these authorities in programming designs that focus on the provision of aid may, therefore, not be the most efficient way of seeking to leverage their contributions to resilience at the local level. Further, it might even be counterproductive, as the diversion of aid to themselves and their families and friends is among the main grievances people hold towards traditional and religious leaders.

Security provision: Traditional authorities are generally perceived as important actors in terms of security provision, coming in second after the various armed actors present in these regions, including the law enforcement, state security and defense forces, self-defense and other non-state actors (such as the signatory groups in Mali). Our analysis shows that the availability of traditional authorities for security provision contributes significantly to community resilience, which is however not true for religious authorities.

Conflict resolution: Traditional authorities are generally the first actors responsible for conflict resolution, especially in the domains of land, farmer-herder conflicts, and matrimonial and inheritance disputes. They represent the first type of actors that community members would approach,[8] only bringing their conflicts to the police, gendarmerie, or judiciary once this avenue has been exhausted. This is particularly the case in Niger and Mali, and to a lesser extent in Burkina Faso where armed actors are almost equally important. Our analysis moreover shows that their efforts to resolve conflicts and mediate disputes contribute significantly to community resilience. Religious authorities also support other actors' conflict resolution efforts, and may have a seat on, or a consultative role in, dispute resolution mechanisms.

Justice provision: Traditional authorities were also identified as the number one actor community members contact for justice provision, although their role in this area appears less predominant than for conflict resolution.[9] This difference is likely linked to the local perception of conflict resolution and justice provision, with the first rather referring to instances where disputes are handled by informal actors, mainly traditional authorities, and based on mediation, while respondents will refer to justice provision when unsolved cases are then transferred to state actors, law enforcement or the formal justice system.

Information-sharing and awareness-raising: One of traditional and religious authorities' core capabilities that significantly contributes to the effectiveness of their conflict resolution is their role in raising awareness of social cohesion, tolerance, forgiveness, mutual understanding, and solidarity. In order to do so, authorities use different communication channels, including regular meetings with the population, awareness-raising campaigns on the radio, and *inter alia*, interventions during cultural events, such as inter-communal festivals. Our analysis finds that the more active traditional and religious authorities are in this domain, the more effective respondents perceive their conflict resolution efforts to be.

Recommendation 4. Support traditional and religious authorities' role in conflict resolution

The *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* study revealed that traditional and religious authorities' contribution to resilience is first and foremost linked to their role in maintaining and reinforcing social cohesion, particularly through their conflict mediation and resolution efforts. Given Sahel-based terrorist groups' instrumentalization of pre-exiting intercommunal tensions, social and ethnic fault lines, these efforts are likely to also reinforce communities' ability to resist violent extremist propaganda and recruitment efforts. In particular, international partners may consider:

- Training traditional authorities in conflict resolution and mediation techniques, building their capacity to identify the sources of conflict, use adequate tools to more professionally, consistently, and transparently engage in conflict mediation and resolution. Since agro-pastoral conflicts are some of the most sensitive drivers of conflict and have the most likelihood to be instrumentalized by VEOs, which seek to capitalize on underlying ethnic and resource-based tensions to gain support and recruit among local communities, particular attention should be paid to these types of conflicts.

- Placing emphasis on raising these authorities' awareness on the need to treat different parties equally and the ways to deliver impartial mediation in order to preserve social cohesion. This should include the development of clearer guides and frameworks for mediation processes, trainings on ethnic and gender sensitivity and neutrality, and training on how to diffuse situations where violent armed actors might attempt to involve themselves in the process.

- Capitalizing on and exploring the transferability of successful initiatives and mechanisms in place in some of the regions under study. For instance, the structures and procedures established by the rural code in Niger, the land tenure commissions (*commissions foncières, COFO*) which gather traditional authorities, religious authorities, youth, women, civil society, and representatives of the groups in conflict, are considered very successful in decreasing agropastoral and natural resource conflicts. Along the same lines, the organization of community dialogues, as observed in the Est region, may also provide a promising avenue to prevent and de-escalate intra- and intercommunal tensions.

- Ensuring that the competencies of formal justice and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are clearly delineated, and understood by all actors, including the local population, may also be necessary in some cases. Our study shows that in some regions, especially in Burkina Faso, the first course of action in conflict resolution may not always be to contact traditional authorities but may be to go to the police, gendarmerie, and even self-defense groups. To avoid confusion, duplication of efforts, or even competition, ensuring that all community members know the processes is necessary.

Recommendation 5. Enhance traditional and religious authorities' role in awareness-raising

One of traditional and religious authorities' core capabilities is their role in raising awareness of, and sharing information on, social cohesion, tolerance, forgiveness,

mutual understanding, and solidarity. Many authorities use their discursive power to speak out, over communal radios, in regular meetings with the population and, *inter alia*, during cultural events, against the values that underpin violent extremism and intercommunal conflicts more generally. Programming may thus focus on leveraging these authorities' voices,[10] including by:

- Enhancing traditional and religious authorities' knowledge of communication tools, strengthening their public speaking skills, and providing them with techniques to stimulate dialogue and sharing within the community to create a sense of connection, shared understanding and peace.

- Training traditional and religious authorities on the processes of radicalization and engagement with violent extremist groups to allow them to spot real dangers, assess risk within their communities and develop tailored messages for their communities that counter stereotyped views, such as the stigmatization of certain ethnic communities perceived as sympathetic to VEOs.

- Raising traditional and religious authorities' awareness on the risks involved in developing and disseminating such alternative narratives should also be a priority. Providing them with deeper knowledge in measures that can be implemented to mitigate such risks in indeed crucial to limit potential undesirable effects, placing these authorities at even greater risk of being targeted by terrorist organizations.

Recommendation 6. Allocate adequate resources to traditional and religious authorities

The lack of material and financial means is unsurprisingly the most salient issue faced by traditional authorities when carrying out their functions. For instance, providing them with the resources needed for public outreach, including the necessary technology, transport and other types of infrastructures, may also help them broaden their targeted audience and improve their awareness-raising efforts' overall impact. However, to avoid allegations of corruption, impartiality, embezzlements, or any other malpractice, the allocation of means should come with a slew of safeguards, such as:

- Clearly earmarking the different budgetary posts and communicating about it with community members in order to avoid generating disproportional expectations and limit the risks of misappropriation. This is particularly relevant for implementers engaging with IDPs, as programming should make sure not to trigger host communities' frustrations that material and financial means are "diverted" to support IDPs to the detriment of local populations.

- Ensuring oversight and accountability of the financial support provided, requiring traditional authorities to hold accounts and justify expenses. Avenues for creating accountability mechanisms involving representatives of the different segment of the community may also be explored to limit grievances against traditional authorities often perceived as self-serving (see Recommendation 7).

- Including inclusiveness safeguards in oversight mechanism to ensure that the funds provided to traditional chiefs benefit equitably to all (ethnic) communities, and to avoid the risk of stirring up ethnic tensions, with special attention to be paid to Fulani community members, who are often among the most marginalized segments of the population (see Recommendation 8).

ADDRESS TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES' KEY WEAKNESSES

The *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* study also sheds light on several key weaknesses that undermine traditional and religious authorities' legitimacy and overall ability to perform their core functions, thereby decreasing the positive impact they might have on their communities' resilience (see Table 2).

Table 2 Key findings: Main grievances against and weaknesses of traditional and religious authorities

Corruption and patrimonial tendencies: Traditional authorities are often perceived as being too self-serving – particularly when it comes to the distribution of resources and aid –, favoring their own and their family's interests at the expense of the broader population, which significantly affect their credibility in the eye of the population. While underlying the need to raise their awareness on the importance of countering patrimonial tendencies, this finding also implies that any programming that engages with these authorities needs to take into consideration how it may impact how much communities trust these actors.

Partiality and unequal treatment: Equal treatment of all community members has been found as significantly impacting community resilience. Yet, traditional authorities are perceived as providing preferential treatment to some segments of the population, tending to favor men over women and elders over youth, with considerable differences between regions, including when it comes to unequal treatment between herders and farmers.

Unilateral decision-making: In parallel, KIIs also denounced that the lack of consultation of the local population as part of traditional authorities' decision-making processes also represents an important source of grievances. Many interviewees across the researched regions advocated for more transparency and inclusiveness in the way traditional governance is performed.

Politicization: Traditional authorities' legitimacy appears to be significantly impacted by their involvement in politics. Ranging from receiving and/or providing support to a political party or candidate, to getting more actively involved in campaigning, or *inter alia* giving vote instructions, traditional authorities' politicization is generally described by KIIs as diverting them from their original mission, exposing them to critics and undermining their credibility. Sometimes portrayed as solely defending the interests of those who are on the same political side, they are often not trusted, nor respected by people who vote for the opposition.

Internal divisions and infighting: In some regions, different traditional and religious authorities are blamed for competing with one another and for having created similar divisions and tensions within their respective community. In the Burkinabè Est region, some municipalities are faced with the co-existence of two traditional leaders. This dual-headed chieftaincy has reportedly not only undermined social cohesion, creating rivalries between each chief's followers, but has also undermined both leaders' ability to perform their roles. In Niger's Tillabéri region, grievances are rather triggered by the divisions and competition between religious leaders pertaining to the Tijaniyya and Izala (also known as *Ahl-as Sunna*) movements.

Recommendation 7. Reinvigorate traditional and religious leaders' legitimacy

The *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances* study shows that the most crucial factor affecting general community resilience is the extent to which traditional authorities are perceived to serve their communities' interests rather than their own. While serving their communities' interests is thus the key contribution that traditional and religious leaders can make to strengthen their communities' resilience, many respondents complain that their authorities are too self-serving – particularly when it comes to the distribution of resources to their communities. While underlying the need for initiatives aimed at countering patrimonial tendencies and raising awareness among traditional and religious' authorities, programming should also pay due attention to the potentially destabilizing role of external support, and the risk that collaborating with traditional and religious authorities inadvertently further undermine their legitimacy at the local level:[11]

- Any programming that engages with either traditional or religious authorities needs to carefully assess how working with either state actors or other stakeholders will impact how much communities trust these authorities. This assessment, and the development of mitigation measures, needs to be at the forefront of program design to ensure effectiveness and avoid unintended effects.[12]

- In this regard, considering regional and local specificities is also of paramount importance. As underlined by this study, while traditional authorities in Centre-Nord and Tillabéri are likely well-placed to support project implementation that seeks to improve resilience against violent extremism, due to their relative strength and contributions, traditional authorities in Ménaka, on the other hand, score so low on key legitimacy indicators that their own behavior should form the prime focus of any programming attempts in this region. The same applies in part to Gao, where traditional authorities are seen to primarily serve their own rather than their communities' interests, and to Est, and Sahel, where trust in traditional authorities is relatively low.

- The case of religious leaders also deserves special attention, as they seem to be generally looked upon more favorably by community members, considered more trustworthy and subject to less grievances than their traditional counterparts, especially in Ménaka and Gao. However, this research also finds that one of the main reasons behind this more positive image is linked to religious authorities' limited role in the day-to-day administration and management of their communities, and subsequent reduced exposure to external actors' influence. This draws a challenging picture, where religious leaders appear

as more suitable partners in the quest to prevent violent extremism, but also as actors even more vulnerable to the potential negative side effects of being associated with external actors and implementers. Any programming that seeks to engage with religious leaders should thus carefully take this risk into account. Even more so since religious leaders themselves are aware that the trust and legitimacy that is endowed to them is strongly influenced by their perception as a neutral and impartial partner, and have expressed no interest in engaging in more administrative capacities or acting as main liaison with external partners.

Recommendation 8. Ensure more inclusive and equitable traditional governance

Traditional authorities' equal treatment of all community members, especially men and women, comes out as the second most important factor contributing to their communities' general resilience. Yet, our analysis shows that traditional and religious authorities are often perceived as providing preferential treatment to some segments of the population, tending to favor men over women, and elders over youth, with however significant differences between regions. Programming may thus also focus on encouraging more inclusive and equitable traditional governance, which may include taking on the following steps:

- Initiatives could be developed to raise traditional authorities' awareness on the need to perform more inclusive and equitable governance,[13] not only as a tick-the-box exercise, but rather placing emphasis on the fact that it severely impacts their own influence and ability to positively impact their community.

- When it comes to women's inclusion, notably in traditional decision-making processes, our study shows significant differences across regions, with better scores being observed in Tillabéri, and lower scores being observed in Ménaka despite initiatives having been implemented to support the role of women in local communities. These findings suggest that developing projects aimed at supporting women's roles in society and participation in public life may not always be sufficient. They indicate that further research might be helpful to explore why efforts to support the inclusion of women have reportedly been more successful in some regions than in others, and assess whether they could be transferred across other regions. One hypothesis may be that when external values are seen to be imposed on the community rather than being internalized, efforts are less efficient. In addition, attention would need to be paid to avoid instrumentalizing women in the fight against VEOs, or essentialize them as natural peacemakers, or as benevolent maternal influences - or else the risk of perpetuating gender clichés would work counter-productively.

- When considering youth, initiatives could be developed to create awareness among traditional and religious leaders that involving youth in local decision-making processes can form a key measure to prevent radicalization and recruitment by VEOs. Given that the relationship between these authorities and youth is often of a teacher-pupil nature, dialogue-type interactions could also be promoted to rethink the relationship. In parallel, programming may also focus on youth's advocacy, public speaking and communication skills in order to allow them to be more politically engaged and to defend for their own needs. Finally, many respondents, especially in Mali and Niger, underlined that in the absence of jobs and economic

opportunities, there is little traditional and religious authorities can do to discourage youth and other community members from finding another way to make a living. Although it is not the role of traditional authorities to set up job-generating schemes and vocational trainings, any such initiatives would be more efficient if helped and encouraged by traditional and religious authorities, and would moreover render the latter's awareness-raising efforts towards youth more efficient.

- The lack of inclusion does not only concern women and youth, but also covers ethnic minority groups. Efforts to improve traditional authorities' ability to govern inclusively and equitably should be extended across all ethnic groups in the community. More specifically, when working with traditional authorities in Sahel and Ménaka, implementers should be mindful that, according to our research findings, these may have a pro-herder bias, while those in Gao, Est and Centre-Nord may hold a pro-farmer bias. These biases may translate into ethnic marginalization and stigmatization – potentially spurring violence.

Recommendation 9. Regulate traditional and religious authorities' succession and involvement in politics

Some of the most questionable aspects of the current positions of chiefs is their politicization and lack of real autonomy relative both to the central state and to local authorities. If interactions with political figures constitute a daily necessity, the line with outright malpractice can be blurry and generate frustrations among local communities. To ensure credibility in the eye of people in their jurisdiction, ways and means must be found to insulate chiefs from politics:

- In regions where this does not yet exist, such as Burkina Faso, traditional authorities could benefit from the legal regulation of their position, including a prohibition to run for public office and to join political parties. Legally defining their status may also help more clearly delineated and improve their abilities to perform their functions.[14]

- Work with relevant national and local stakeholders, including traditional leaders themselves and local populations, to define clear criteria for succession in order to avoid conflictual succession processes, the establishment of two-headed chieftaincies, such as observed in the Est region, and the subsequent weakening of social cohesion.

- Work with relevant national and local stakeholders, including traditional leaders themselves and local populations, to define and adopt a code of conduct with regards to the relationships held by traditional and religious authorities with the political sphere. Tailored ethical trainings would make great strides towards preventing conducts denounced by interviewees.

- While traditional authorities need training and a code of conduct to help them secure some autonomy relative to special community interests and other sources of untoward influences, this could work only if they are provided with more resources. At the moment, only higher chiefs (at the canton and province level) have real resources. A financing scheme – including contributions from NGOs – could be set up to provide them with a budget, which in turn would demand accountability and transparency on their part. This latter point is crucial to avoid further allegations of corruption and the self-serving behavior that undermines the legitimacy of chiefs (see Recommendation 6).

REFRAIN FROM INSTRUMENTALIZING TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AS SECURITY ACTORS

A crosscutting theme throughout this research has been the complex interactions between traditional and religious authorities and the insecure environment they are faced with. On the one hand, these authorities have a role to play in diverse governance domains, including security provision, as they represent key intermediaries between state authorities, security forces and local populations. As such, they may help in ensuring that security measures are responsive to the actual needs of the community, increasing buy-in of these measures at the local level and, as highlighted by our KIIs, potentially helping address abuses committed by self-defense groups. They thus represent useful allies and partners. On the other hand, they have also been among the primary victims of the growing insecurity.

Recommendation 10. Avoid putting traditional and religious authorities' own safety at further risk

The spread of violent extremism in the region has affected traditional and religious leaders' ability to conduct their daily activities, including the initiatives susceptible to help prevent engagement in violent extremism.[15] Due to the growing insecurity, the instrumentalization of existing intercommunal conflicts by violent extremist groups, and the increased circulation of weapons, pre-existing conflicts over access to land and natural resources are turning increasingly violent – making traditional authorities and their reliance over conciliation less equipped to handle them. The growing resort to violence in conflicts therefore compels traditional authorities to transfer them to the security and defense forces. As a result, their role in conflict resolution processes diminishes, eroding the bedrock of legitimacy they draw from it. In addition, traditional and religious authorities have themselves been primary targets of terrorist attacks and abductions. Therefore, implementers should take all necessary precautions to ensure that their interventions do not put traditional and religious authorities in harm's way.

- Any collaboration on security matters with traditional and religious authorities should be treated with caution and discretion, as to avoid exposing them to retaliatory actions by VEOs. If stakeholders are going to work with the traditional or religious authorities, this should be kept private and not publicized.

- At a minimum, projects that seek to engage with traditional and religious authorities should not be framed as counterterrorism or P/CVE projects, as this will likely increase the targeting they experience. Such project should obviously contain a local risk assessment at the outset to ensure they do no harm.

Recommendation 11. Build upon their role as intermediaries between local populations and security actors

While traditional and religious authorities should not be considered as security actors themselves, they may play a useful role as intermediaries between the local population and security actors. Due to their in-depth knowledge of the local context, communities and terrain, consulting them when designing security mechanisms to be deployed can help ensure that these mechanisms and measures are responsive to the actual needs of the community. Their involvement might also increase buy-in at the local level. Taking the aforementioned precautions (see Recommendation 10), programming may thus focus on:

• Enhancing cooperation between traditional and religious authorities and security forces deployed in their respective municipalities. The organization of regular consultations gathering traditional leaders, religious authorities, administration and security and defense forces, as observed in the Est region, is one possible avenue that could be explored.

• Associating traditional and religious authorities to the organization and implementation of local initiatives aimed at improving trust between security forces and local inhabitants more generally. This will however only prove efficient if the issue of alleged abuses of human rights by security and defense forces is effectively addressed (see Recommendation 12).

Recommendation 12. Explore their potential contributions to holding security actors' accountable

Our research suggests that one specific aspect on which traditional and religious authorities may have an important role to play is in addressing the issue of extrajudicial killings and other abuses allegedly carried out by both state and non-state security actors throughout the region. Not only are they well-placed to collect first-hand testimonies and experiences necessary for the investigations of such abuses, but their tight connections to non-state security actors, in some regions, may also place them in a position to push back against human rights abuses committed by self-defense groups.

• Whilst they may not openly take on full accountability for the exactions committed by self-defense groups, such as the Koglweogo, or the VDPs, programming could incite traditional authorities to wield all the influence they hold to push these groups for accountability and respect for human rights.

• This could be paired with trainings on human rights, as well as awareness about the dangers of retaliatory cycles of violence which risk triggering further ethnic-based killings.

CONCLUSION

Despite the tendency to exceptionalize violent extremism as a phenomenon that requires a completely novel approach—most often one grounded in security-based reactionary measures—best practices within the field of P/CVE increasingly recognize that many of the same approaches that seek to improve developmental outcomes are likely to be effective in addressing the conditions that allow violent extremism to flourish. Thus, in developing policies and programs to address the growing challenge of violent extremism in the Sahel, there must be a conscious shift away from the mindset that state security actors such as police, military, and self-defense groups should be the primary counterparts in implementing CT initiatives. Instead, efforts should be made to determine what actors at the local level can be useful partners to address the myriad complex factors that result in violent extremism.

Undoubtedly in some communities, traditional and religious authorities have the capacity to be a beneficial counterpart in collective efforts in P/CVE. Where traditional and religious authorities are perceived as trustworthy, fair, and working in the best interests of their community, they can play a significant role in enhancing the resilience of their communities. In engaging with these actors, institutions and stakeholders providing financial resources and technical assistance can support them to safely carry out their functions. But it should not be presumed or taken for granted that traditional and religious authorities will be seen as legitimate and trustworthy by their communities. Rather, this assessment needs to be done on an individualized basis. Where traditional and religious authorities fall short in those aspects that would render them effective in enhancing community resilience to violent extremism, they may either not be the right partner to pair with, or may need support in first building their capacities in order to reestablish their legitimacy and ability to positively impact their communities. Ultimately, regardless of whether a particular traditional or religious authority (or the traditional and religious authorities in a particular community) are capable of supporting efforts to strengthen resilience to violent extremism, traditional and religious authorities as a whole should be considered as one of the many actors that should have a proverbial seat at the table in terms of P/CVE approaches.

EFFORTS SHOULD BE MADE TO DETERMINE WHAT ACTORS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL CAN BE USEFUL PARTNERS TO ADDRESS THE MYRIAD COMPLEX FACTORS THAT RESULT IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

NOTES

1   United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (A/70/674), 24 December 2015. https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/70/674

2   Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2014. "Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach"

3   Our quantitative data show that 75 percent of the survey respondents in Est, 68 percent in Centre Nord, and 60 percent in Tillabéri identified food insecurity as being among the main threats to their security.

4   Our qualitative KIIs similarly underline the issue of chronic food insecurity that local populations are confronted with, as illustrated by a district chief's representative in Gothèye, Tillabéri region: *"The biggest crisis/event that has been damaging to our community over the past five years, in my opinion, is chronic food insecurity. Every year a food crisis hits the area. The rainy periods are irregular. The land is no longer productive because of poor soil. The arable land is no longer sufficient to cope with a galloping population. Climate change is the variable determining this whole crisis."*

5   Devermont, J. and Harris, M. 2020. Rethinking Crisis Responses in the Sahel, CSIS Brief.

6   The Clingendael-ICCT dashboard for Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances can be accessed here: https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-legitimacy

7   European Centre for Development Policy Management, "Resilience: a Trojan horse for a new way of thinking?" 2013, p. 15.

8   Our survey data shows that 44.61 percent of respondents indicated that they turn to traditional authorities to resolve conflicts within their community, and 43.98 percent of respondents would approach traditional authorities to resolve conflicts outside of their community. Molenaar, F. Demuynck, M. and de Bruijne, K. 2021. Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and Religious Authorities' Resilience to Violent Extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Clingendael Institute Conflict Research Unit (CRU) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).

9   26 percent of survey respondents affirmed turning to traditional authorities and 19 percent to religious authorities for justice provision. Molenaar, F. Demuynck, M. and de Bruijne, K. 2021. *op. cit.*

10 Reinforcing traditional and religious' leaders capacities in awareness-raising was suggested by many KIIs as a possible avenue to enhance their positive impact on community resilience against violent extremism. Interview with a community member in Ménaka, Ménaka region: *"They are the only ones who can speak and tell the truth despite certain circumstances, so they need financial support for their efforts and also capacity building because they are communicators who must also adapt their communication to the different contexts and socio-political and security issues of the moment and according to the actors that are facing."*

11 Menkhaus, K. 2013. Making Sense of Resilience in Peacebuilding Contexts: Approaches, Applications, Implications, Geneva Peacebuilding Platform, Paper No. 6: 9.

12 Interview with a community member, Ménaka, Ménaka region: *"Some traditional authorities can be accused of all kinds of evil, because they are often misunderstood by their own populations, who accuse them of connivance or complicity with decision-makers or external investment actors, even though they really know the difficulties of the populations. For example, the inhabitants of the 3rd district benefited from a public fountain, but the NGO decided to install it just around the corner from the house of a councillor who is contested. This was misunderstood and some residents saw it as a political act, whereas it was only afterwards that specialists explained that it is in this place that the water table is abundant and that is the only reason why the standpipe was installed there. In spite of the explanations and the sensitizations, some inhabitants of the district prefer to go further away than to take water from this closer and cheaper hydrant."*

13 This need for more equity and justice in the way traditional and religious leaders govern was underlined by our KIIs, as illustrated by a community member in Ménaka, Ménaka region: *"It is also necessary to encourage them to act in the common interest and not in partisan and community interests, not to defend*

someone because he or she is only from your community or to reject another because he or she is not from your community, but rather to teach them to evolve for more justice and equity within the population."

14 Interview with a community member in Inekar, Ménaka region: *"The traditional and religious authorities in our municipality seriously need to be granted all the power they enjoy and the State must give them a status in this sense in order to be able to better play their role within their respective communities."*

15 For instance, an Imam in Ayérou, Tillabéri region, explains how insecurity has impacted his ability to travel and reach remote areas: *"The advent of insecurity poses difficulties for us in terms of limiting travel to preach in certain localities. And, again because of the insecurity, we are afraid to talk about certain subjects for fear of reprisals from terrorists."*