

PIECING TOGETHER THE JIGSAW

Prospects for improved social relations after the
armed conflict in northern Mali



ILARIA ALLEGROZZI AND ELISE FORD



WiLDAF/FedDAF/MALI

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1 INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVES OF THE SURVEY

Since January 2012, Mali has been suffering an unprecedented and multi-dimensional socio-political, security and humanitarian crisis. It follows years of weakening state authority, poor governance, a disintegrating army and inter-community tensions. Antagonism and tension between and within communities have built up since the beginning of the conflict, and the rebuilding of social ties and the implementation of a genuine reconciliation process are among the main challenges that must be overcome in order to reconstruct Mali and ensure its long-term stability.

The need for reconciliation is broadly acknowledged both nationally and internationally. Efforts have been led by Mali's transitional government through the establishment of the Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation in March 2013, and the nomination of a Minister for National Reconciliation and Regional Development at the heart of the new government. However, discussions about reconciliation have not yet been followed up by concrete actions. Affected communities have not been consulted on the state of their social relations, the level of tensions they face, and the actors or mechanisms that would be capable of helping.

Oxfam, in collaboration with Handicap International and WILDAF,¹ launched a survey in June 2013 on the impact of the conflict on social relations within and between the populations of northern Mali. This was the first time since the beginning of the January 2012 conflict that these populations had been consulted on these issues in such depth. This report aims to give them a chance to speak and amplify their voices in order to ensure a better understanding of the impact of the conflict on social relations and to highlight the solutions they propose. Oxfam, Handicap International and WILDAF hope this report will then prompt reflection and guide the actions of the various national and international actors involved in Mali's reconciliation process.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted simultaneously in Mali and Burkina Faso. It adopted a qualitative approach that sought, through a combination of open and closed questions, to discover the perceptions, views, fears and hopes of the various populations of northern Mali who have been directly affected by the crisis.

Discussions were held with 168 population groups from two regions in northern Mali (Timbuktu and Gao), as well as with internally displaced people in Bamako and refugees living in two camps in Burkina Faso (Goudebou and Mentaou). In addition, 166 individual interviews were held with leaders and influential people at community level in order to deepen the analysis (see Figure 1).

The quotations transcribed in this report have been taken directly from these individual interviews and do not reflect the views of Oxfam, Handicap International and WILDAF.

The discussion groups were organized based on the participants' ethnic group, gender and age (see Figure 2). This approach meant that those surveyed were able to speak more freely. It also facilitated the analysis of the disaggregated data.

Discussion groups were organized with individuals from almost all the populations of northern Mali: Arab, Fulani, Songhai, Tuareg, Bambara and Bozo.

Following preliminary consultations with experts, including anthropologists, the discussion groups with participants from the Arab and Tuareg ethnic groups were divided into white/black Arab and white/black Tuareg, since these communities may express their perception of the crisis differently. Some mixed groups were organized on the advice of the management committees of the refugee camps, in order to avoid separating Tuareg and Arab groups on the basis of skin colour.

Because the mass displacement of populations caused by the conflict has affected the ethnic diversity of certain towns and villages of northern Mali, some populations (particularly white Tuareg and white Arab) can now only be found outside the country. Most of the discussion groups organized with these populations took place in the two refugee camps.

Figure 1: Geographical locations and numbers of interviews, 2013

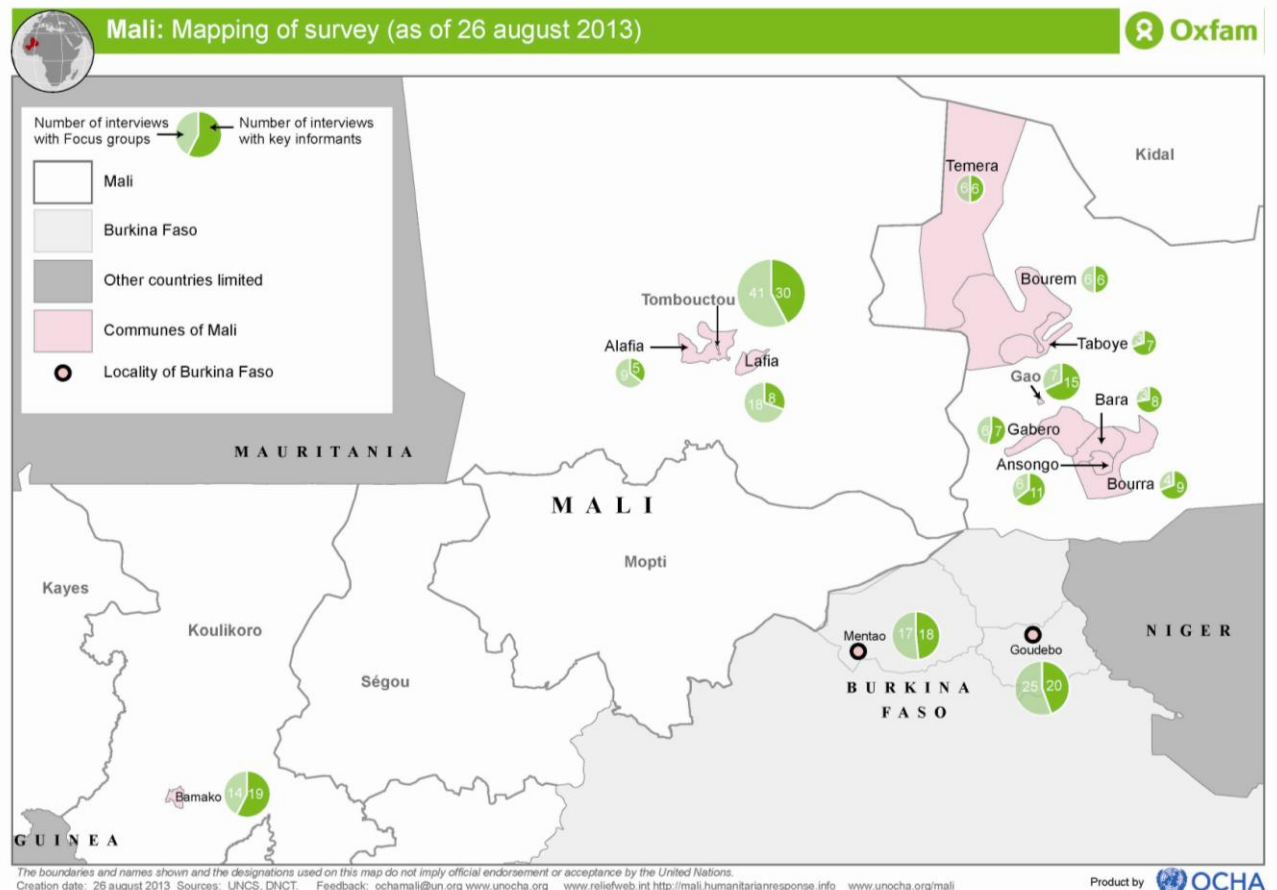
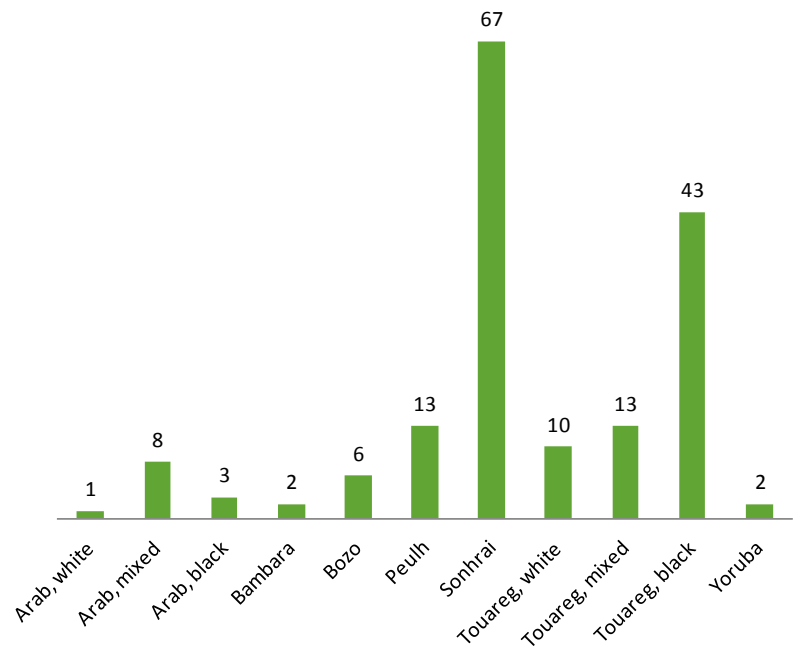
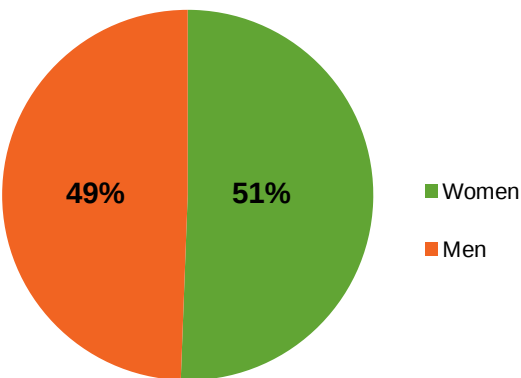


Figure 2: Composition of groups surveyed

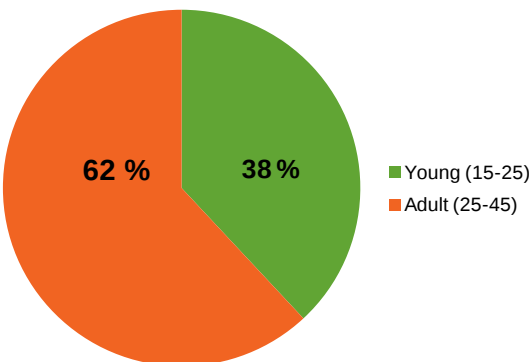
Composition of discussion groups by ethnic group



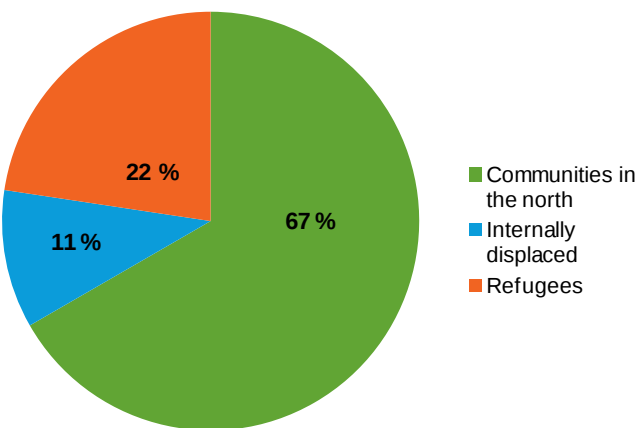
Composition of discussion groups by sex



Composition of discussion groups by age



Composition of discussion groups by status



LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research was intended to be exploratory and indicative, rather than conclusive. Since the chosen methodology is qualitative, this report can provide only general trends and does not aim to reflect the perceptions and views of all Malians.

The research explored relations between populations originating in the north of Mali only. The points of view of communities from the south were not consulted, although Oxfam, Handicap International and WILDAF are aware that a lasting reconciliation can only take place with the involvement of all Malians. Consultations and analysis on a national scale would be indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of the main factors causing tension between communities across Mali.

Due to logistical and security constraints, the survey could not be carried out in Kidal or the refugee camps in Mauritania and Niger.

Although the choice of participants was made so as to ensure fair representation of all ethnic groups, in reality, some are represented more strongly than others.

ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF THE SURVEY RESULTS

The information collected by the teams in the field was transferred to a database and analysed according to the following categories: ethnic group, age, sex, status (internally displaced persons, refugees, populations still in the north). This made it possible to highlight the different perceptions of the various populations.

Sections 3 and 4 present only the information collected directly from the survey, based on the responses to quantitative and qualitative questions provided by the participants of discussion groups and individual interviews.

In addition to a general and disaggregated analysis, the report provides an indication of the frequency and/or significance of the responses given, depending on the proportion of the discussion groups that gave each response, according to the following criteria:

- 95 percent or more: almost all participants
- 80 percent or more: a significant majority
- 50 percent or more: a majority; more than half
- Between 25 percent and 50 percent: a frequent response; often; many people; a number of people
- Between 10 percent and 25 percent: a significant minority; few; some; sometimes
- Under 10 percent: a small minority; very few

For the most significant figures, the results are represented by a simple proportion.

For greater clarity, the total number of responses and the number of groups that provided a response to a question are indicated in the notes.

Some of the questions asked were quantitative. In this case, each person's responses were recorded according to the categories 'yes/no' or 'good/average/poor'. This made it possible to record both the response and the strength of the response.

For the 'yes/no' option, a response is classified as being 'strongly positive/negative' if 80 percent or more of the participants of a discussion group responded 'yes' or 'no' respectively.

For the 'good/average/poor' option, if 80 percent or more of discussion group participants responded with one of these three responses, the entire group was classified as having responded in line with the response of the majority.

The individual interviews were used to support the general analysis. Where responses from individual interviews are quoted quantitatively, they appear in boxes.

GLOSSARY

Population

A population may be defined as a group or collection of individuals inhabiting a geographical area.

Community

A spatial or political unit of social organization that gives people a sense of belonging, based either on shared residence in a particular place or on a common identity.²

Group

Any number of people with similar norms, values, and expectations who interact with one another on a regular basis.³

Reconciliation

This report chooses to adopt the definition of 'reconciliation' proposed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA):

'There are several definitions of reconciliation. [...] Reconciliation needs to be a broad, inclusive process. There is a certain danger in talking about reconciliation in terms of strict sequences. At each stage a relapse back into more violent means of dealing with conflicts is always a real possibility. And the stages do not always follow logically after each other in any set order. Nonetheless, they remain essential ingredients for lasting reconciliation. Stage 1. Replacing Fear by Non-Violent Coexistence; Stage 2. Building Confidence and Trust; Stage 3. Towards Empathy.'⁴

Dialogue

This report uses the definition of 'dialogue' proposed by the OECD:⁵

'Dialogue uses a collaborative approach and aims to find a common solution based on the mutual consideration and understanding of the points of view and different positions adopted by the participants [...] As such, dialogue helps to separate the individual positions to reach a new situation where all parties can consider themselves represented.'

Displaced populations and persons

In this report, the expression 'displaced populations' refers both to populations who have fled to other locations within Mali and to those who have fled to neighbouring countries. When referring to one or the other of these two categories of displaced populations, the terms 'internally displaced persons' and 'refugees' are used.

2 CONTEXT



Bamako, September 2013: a young boy collects water for cooking. In March 2012, like many teenagers he had to flee the conflict in northern Mali to a temporary home near Bamako with his family. He will be soon returning home to start school again.

PREVIOUS CRISES

The north of Mali is prone to instability; one insurrection has followed another since the colonial period. On the one hand, certain members of Tuareg and Arab communities, facing marginalization, choose the path of armed conflict in order to challenge the state authority. On the other, the government responds in a way marked as much by repression as by negotiation. Thus, conflict is entrenched and festers, and tensions reach a peak when shocks occur, such as the droughts of 1973–1974 and 1983–1984.

The Tamanrasset Peace Accords (1991), the National Pact (1992) and the Algiers Peace Accord (2006)⁶ all failed to establish peace and to relaunch the economy of northern Mali. Measures on development, security, decentralization and the reintegration of ex-combatants have never really been implemented. Furthermore, for several decades, President Gaddafi of Libya supported and encouraged the frustrations and separatist demands of some Tuaregs who had migrated to Libya by training them for war or enrolling them in the Libyan army.⁷ The end of his regime in spring 2011, and the influx of arms and fighters that resulted from it, pushed Mali into a state of chaos.

The 2012–2013 conflict and its human impact

Beginning in January 2012, an armed insurrection initiated by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* – MNLA), and supported

by other armed groups, took control in the north of Mali and forced the withdrawal of the Malian security forces. The government's authority began to wane, resulting in a coup d'état by a military junta in March 2012. The involvement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) led to the establishment of a transitional government.

Meanwhile, the three regions of the north fell one by one into the hands of armed groups,⁸ some of which, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), had been established in the vast, uncontrolled areas of northern Mali for several years. In January 2013, after armed groups took control of the strategic town of Konna, the French authorities launched a military offensive in support of the Malian army, with the stated aim of preventing the advance of the armed groups and regaining control of the north. In April 2013, the United Nations Security Council authorised the deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (*Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali – MINUSMA*).⁹

The effects of the Malian armed conflict have been wide ranging. It has exacerbated a humanitarian situation that was already serious due to an existing food crisis,¹⁰ and caused around 500,000 people, mostly women and children, to be displaced both within and outside Mali's borders.¹¹ The conflict provoked violent abuses,¹² including extra-judicial killings¹³ (sometimes during acts of retaliation),¹⁴ forced disappearances, acts of torture,¹⁵ the recruitment of child soldiers¹⁶ and sexual violence.¹⁷

The conflict has also had less visible and less understood effects: profound socio-cultural changes have weakened the social fabric and transformed relations both between different populations and between these populations and those in positions of power. The conflict has weakened the foundations of Malian society. There has been a significant erosion of the government's authority, with more than 50 percent of the territory under the control of armed groups. Social cohesion in a number of communities in the north has been affected dramatically.

Divisions and ties between the communities of the north

Several groups cohabit the wide spaces of northern Mali: the main ones being the Songhai, Tuareg, Arab, Moor, Fulani, Bozo and Bambara.

In many respects the populations of the north have enjoyed interdependent social, cultural and economic relations over many centuries. Practices such as 'joking relationships'¹⁸ – a sort of unwritten convention that allows communities to make fun of each other by inverting relations of domination – and inter-community marriages have helped to build and maintain social cohesion. Economic relations characterized by the system of trading with cash and bartering also play a crucial role in the interaction of people in the north and help to maintain peace.¹⁹ Tacit pacts and alliances concerning the exploitation of resources have always existed, and to date have been respected. Markets and fairs not only act as places to exchange goods, but also provide people with opportunities to meet and converse.

In other respects, the "hierarchical and fragmented nature of these societies"²⁰ and their notional classification into sedentary and nomadic, farmers and stockbreeders, 'black' and 'light skinned' are sources of antagonism. These divisions – exacerbated by the scars of previous conflicts,²¹ including population displacements and abuses – have been reinforced since January 2012. They are made worse by competition for control of limited resources and for opportunities within local government. There is also a north–south divide, which is perpetuated both by the geographic distance between the three northern regions and the rest of the country, and by clichés such as the idea that the south of the country is the 'Mali utile' "(the useful part of Mali)", which was conceived by the French colonists and maintained by some Malian decision makers.²²

Towards the future

Mali has made some progress towards peace and reconstruction, not least through the signing of preliminary peace accords in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in June 2013, and by the peaceful process leading to the election of a new President two months later. This progress has been rewarded in renewed donor confidence in the country, unfreezing bilateral aid that had been suspended following the coup d'état, and making new financial commitments.

Today, the country is beginning the long and laborious process of stabilization. In order to strengthen its institutions and achieve economic and social reconstruction, an in-depth analysis of the roots and impacts of the conflict must be undertaken by the government and its partners, including those that are less visible; such as the effects on the social fabric of Mali.

Efforts to promote reconciliation were made by the transitional government through broadcasts on national radio and the establishment, in March 2013, of the Commission on Dialogue and Reconciliation²³. The new Cabinet includes a Minister for National Reconciliation and the Development of the Northern Regions, a new portfolio that could help to integrate the objective of social cohesion into the plans of the government.

Additional measures are needed to ensure that the new government's security, political, and economic priorities do not overshadow the crucial need to rebuild social ties. Beginning the process of reconciliation and bringing about lasting peace is one of the major challenges Mali must face in the coming months and years. It will be achievable only if all the country's main actors – from all levels of government to civil society – are involved and work together towards this common goal. Donors can make a contribution by helping Mali to develop an environment that fosters respect for the rights of all its citizens, so that ties between individuals and communities can be rebuilt and long-term peace can be guaranteed.

3 THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON SOCIAL RELATIONS



Bamako, September 2013: a group of displaced women sit together to talk about their situation and their hopes for returning home.

SHATTERED COMMUNITIES

Social relations between individuals and communities in the north of Mali have been severely affected by the devastation wrought by the armed conflict. Their experiences of traumatic situations including widespread violence, finding themselves direct or indirect victims of serious human rights violations and a mass exodus, has caused many people of the north to lose some of their family ties and traditional values. This has weakened social ties more generally, restricted interactions and provoked feelings of fear and mistrust.

'This crisis is a nightmare for me. I lost my father and younger brother in previous crises. They were rounded up and executed here in our home because we didn't flee. I forgave them because it was a mistake. But this crisis hasn't spared anyone. It's turned everything upside down.'

Male, white Tuareg, village in the Timbuktu region

As testified by a significant majority²⁴ of the focus groups, the conflict has turned the life of each and every Malian from the north upside down. Nothing is as it was before. Those interviewed describe this change as a 'tornado' and a 'catastrophe' that has completely transformed their way of life; forcing them to change job, location, food, leisure activities and to adopt dangerous survival strategies.

Box 1: An 'unequalled' crisis

No previous conflict in Mali has had such a devastating effect. Almost all those interviewed individually confirmed this, describing the most recent crisis as 'incomparable', 'unequalled' and 'scandalous', adding that the deterioration of the social fabric caused by the crisis made it completely different from those that had gone before.

How local communities view the tensions

The perception that social relations have worsened is much stronger among displaced populations than among those who have remained in the north of the country. Six out of ten²⁵ discussion groups involving displaced populations believed that relations between individuals and communities in the north are currently 'poor'.

Although the perception of the populations interviewed in the north was more optimistic (almost 7 out of 10 discussion groups²⁶ thought that relations are currently good, with 3 in 10²⁷ claiming that relations have worsened following the conflict), the descriptions of the changes in their day-to-day life are testament to a genuine deterioration of the social fabric and help us to understand how widespread this phenomenon is.

Table 1: Perception of social relations according to status (communities in north Mali: Gao/Timbuktu, internally displaced and refugees)

Social relations: How were they before the conflict?

	Good	Medium	Bad
Communities in northern Mali	93	10	1
Internally displaced	15	2	0
Refugees	26	9	3

Table 2: Perception of social relations before the conflict according to ethnic group (Arab, white; Peulh; Songhai; Tuareg, white; Tuareg, black)

	Good	Medium	Bad
Arab, white	8	1	0
Peulh	8	2	3
Songhai	50	10	0
Tuareg, black	37	5	0
Tuareg, white	19	3	0

Table 3: Perception of social relations now²⁸ according to status (internally displaced, refugees)

The relations between different people in your village: how are they now?

	Good	Medium	Bad	Don't know	Total
Internally displaced	5	1	9	0	15
Refugees	9	3	23	5	40

Table 4 : Changes in the perception of the state of social relation for communities in the north (before/after the conflict)

Social relations: How were they before the conflict and how are they now?²⁹

Good/Good	62
Improving (from bad or medium to good)	8
Medium/Medium	2
Deteriorating (from good to medium or bad)	30
Bad/Bad	0
Total	102

Mistrust

Tensions are apparent in day-to-day life, regardless of age, sex and ethnic group. Among the terms frequently cited by focus group participants to describe the tensions are fear, mistrust, loneliness and betrayal.

'The crisis has made everybody afraid of other people. You no longer know who is with you and who is against you.'

Songhai woman, village in the Gao region

These feelings manifest themselves in people's behaviour and their relations with and actions towards others. The results of the study show a very high number of cases of people being distanced from their former social circle: neighbours who no longer spend time together, marriages that fall apart and end in divorce, friendships that break down, mothers who are suspicious of their own children.

'I have Malian friends who no longer speak to me or send me text messages; they have forgotten me. These friends include Fulani, Dogon and Bambara. We were good friends at school. When I call some of them, they answer but I feel like they no longer feel any consideration, trust or affection for me.'

Female white Arab refugee, Burkina Faso

Within towns, villages and local areas, the social fabric has been weakened by suspicions and resentment towards individuals or families suspected of having supported the armed groups or 'participated in the war effort', particularly by hiding arms.

'Social relations have changed: you no longer trust your brother, your neighbour or even your son. When they come back after having gone away, you wonder whether they are hiding arms underneath their boubous.'

Songhai woman, village in the Gao region

Abuses and violence

The loss of trust in others can also manifest itself openly in the form of insults, threats and, in the most extreme cases, physical violence resulting from acts of vengeance and retaliation.

*'Acts of vengeance are being committed among the communities who have remained in Ber. The Arab community has committed rapes, and the Ganda Koy attack the 'red-skins'.'*³⁰

Black Tuareg man, Timbuktu

Displaced populations frequently cite violence or the fear of violence as their main reason for fleeing. Although, according to some, their worst fears have not been realised, others claim that the threat of abuses remains and prevents displaced populations from returning home.

'I left because my house has been ransacked and all my property stolen. I'm afraid of returning. I can't live with people who have killed members of my family; they will want to hurt me too.'

White Tuareg man, Mentao, Burkina Faso

Economic decline

More than half the discussion groups³¹ believe that economic relations have changed for the worse and that the main reason for this is a loss of trust between individuals and communities, with population displacements being responsible to a lesser degree. Economic relations, including traditional practices of barter and exchange, are often based on good faith between individuals and/or communities and have been severely affected by the loss of trust and fraying of social ties. This means that the Songhai can no longer sell their cereals to the Tuaregs, almost all of whom have left the north of Mali. The Tuareg, in turn, can no longer sell their cattle.

'The Arabs, who are the town's main suppliers of food, are now few in number. This means that milk, sugar, tea and oil have become very expensive. The black Tamasheq who used to supply the town with wood and coal no longer dare to venture into the bush. A lot of Songhai have shut up shop, since they can no longer get supplies.'

Songhai woman, village in the Gao region.

A considerable number of the focus groups bemoaned the departure of key economic actors (Arab traders in particular) which caused serious shortages of imported products and price rises. Equally, they spoke of being afraid to leave their houses to go to rural market fairs because of a lack of security on the area's secondary roads.

Tensions with multiple causes

The results of this survey shine a light on some of the causes of the current social tensions. If the first trigger seems to be the armed conflict that started in January 2012, there are deeper fractures and aggravating factors which are underlying causes.

'Social relations are poor because people have always lived with a latent tension; it was a situation that could explode from one day to the next.'

Internally displaced Songhai man, Bamako

Dividing lines between communities

The existence of tensions can be seen in both the language used in the discussion groups and the facts given by those surveyed, without distinction.

Geographic differences are evoked: a 'northern' identity is opposed to a southern one, and disputes between nomads and settled communities, farmers and pastoralists, are renewed.

'I would like to have a Bambara friend, but I am scared of any ethnic group from the south.'

Refugee, white Tuareg, Mentao, Burkina Faso.

Ethnic or racial identities emerge from the language used by some interviewees, who primarily define themselves and others on the basis of ethnic group: 'it's the Songhai'; 'it's the Tuareg'; 'it's the Arabs'. Those surveyed often referred to the crisis as 'war of colours'; a 'war on white skins'; or 'racism against black populations'. These views, as the results of the survey show, can sometimes become extreme.

'If they find a Tuareg, they will kill him. If a white man goes to the market to sell his cattle, they will kill him. Even a woman who uses lightening products will be killed.'

Refugee, black Tuareg, Mentao, Burkina Faso.

Generalizations regularly feature in the speech of those interviewed. Thus, the Tuaregs are associated with the MNLA, Ansar Dine and, indirectly, the MUJAO and AQIM; the Arabs with elements of the MUJAO and AQIM; and the Songhai with the Ganda Koy militias. For some of the interviewees, it follows from this that these ethnic groups are the cause of the suffering inflicted on local populations when these armed groups controlled the three regions of northern Mali.

'We are afraid of the white Tamasheq; we even close our doors if we see them coming, because we don't even want to speak to them anymore.'

Songhai woman, village in the Timbuktu region

Among the participants of individual interviews who believe that social relations are currently average or poor, six out of ten say they have a problem with an entire ethnic group,³² rather than just with certain individuals. The difficulty in distinguishing between degrees of responsibility and the propensity for making judgements about an entire group reveals just how fragile the social fabric has become.

'The black Tamasheq are in collusion with the armed groups. They wanted to evict us and occupy the entire village. The problem is not with individuals but with the entire group, because they have all taken up arms and they all know what is happening; they are all the same!'

Songhai man, Ansongo, Gao region

Other focus groups saw the current tensions as a continuation or a consequence of the division between settled and nomadic communities, which has been exacerbated by competition for access to limited natural resources. Some Songhai point out that the militia name 'Ganda Koy'³³ means 'sons of the land' or 'sons of the earth'. The sense of 'self', and the difference with 'others', is reinforced by a strong feeling of belonging to a community or group. They often go back to pre-existing collective identities, or those created during previous crises.

'There have been conflicts between nomadic and settled communities for a long time; there have always been killings and relations have never been good. There is no trust between blacks and whites.'

Fulani man, Timbuktu

Although current social tensions were explained by some focus groups in racial or ethnic terms, others had broader interpretations. In fact, while some focus groups affirm that ethnic divisions were latent and have simply been exacerbated by the conflict, others suggest that they are simply a myth invented by leaders in order to 'divide and rule' or to hide the real political and structural causes of problems. As such, according to some of those surveyed, the real cause of the degradation of the social fabric resides in political manipulation.

'The problem is political, not ethnic! Relations between communities have got worse, it is true, but it is not just about ethnicity. There are those who want to divide us to rule more easily, but we have to resist.'

Young Songhai woman, Timbuktu region.

Structural causes

Many focus groups conveyed their feeling that northern communities are excluded in relation to central authority; or that discrimination is perpetrated by the state authorities against certain communities in the north. They also mention the inability of the state to satisfy the population's basic needs and to ensure a fair allocation of resources because of, among other factors, corruption at both local and national levels. These perceptions of inequality and limited access to basic services lead to competition for scarce resources, which weakens or breaks social ties.

'The relations between communities have changed, but the problem is not the Dogon, the Songhais or the Tuaregs. The problem is the social injustice and the corruption of the State. That is what spoils relations.'

Refugee, white Tuareg, Mentaou, Burkina Faso.

A number of focus group participants³⁴ also expressed their disappointment with the judicial system, which is perceived of acting exclusively in the interests of the richest and most powerful, leading to frustrations that contribute to social tensions.

Finally, many focus groups³⁵ cited the presence of arms as an aggravating factor. The widespread circulation and possession of weapons – particularly among young people who feel that they have no choice but to use them to escape unemployment and support their family – seems to be at the root of many of the tensions and fears of those surveyed in the Gao and Timbuktu regions.

4 THE VOICES OF THE COMMUNITIES ON RECONCILIATION



Refugee camp in Burkina Faso, October 2013. At the end of the day, a group of refugees play Wali, a Malian strategy game played with stones and sticks.

Most discussion groups – 150 out of 156 – think that social relations between individuals and communities in northern Mali need to be improved. The solutions proposed by those surveyed vary, ranging from the most basic and direct aspects (the need to talk to and understand each other) to those more complex and elaborate, such as the need to find lasting solutions for displaced populations and to overcome structural challenges to development. One thing that is clear to surveyed communities is that reconciliation will be a long process and must be tackled from a long-term perspective, and that there is no one approach that will guarantee successful reconciliation.

'We need long-term reconciliation, not something that lasts five to 10 years, but forever.'
Black Tuareg man, Gao

PROMOTING COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND UPHOLDING JUSTICE

More than half³⁶ the discussion groups said that the solutions for improving social relations must be anchored at community level and take place through discussion: 'raising awareness', 'communicating' and 'listening to each other' are the most frequently used phrases. Sitting together around the same table and looking into each other's eyes; sharing a cup of tea; and beginning a simple and direct dialogue seem to be the actions populations felt that will bring a

true reconciliation. The need to communicate with and to understand each other is often linked to the need to forgive and move forward.

'We need to sit down together, talk, shake hands and look in the same direction. We don't need to hate anymore.'

Black Tuareg woman, village in the Timbuktu region

The results of the survey reveal a genuine interdependence between different groups, as well as intricate social, economic and cultural networks. According to a large number of those surveyed, it will not be difficult to begin a dialogue if the ties that have always existed between individuals and communities of the north are rebuilt. It is precisely out of these shared interests that dialogue can be born. Some people believe this process has already begun.

'Until there is proof to the contrary, I continue to maintain strong friendly and fraternal relations with other groups. For example, once when I was questioned on the spot by the forces (army), it was my black Tamasheq and Songhai brothers who supported me by telling them that I had never either directly or indirectly collaborated with armed groups. This noble gesture is testament to the fraternity that exists among us.'

White Tuareg man

However, the majority³⁷ of the discussion groups claim that traditional leaders are key actors with a leading role in the dialogue process. Rebuilding ties will not be sufficient if dialogue is not facilitated by these actors whom the communities trust the most.

'Our traditional leaders, village and group chiefs, are the ones who must give people good advice and oversee the reconciliation process.'

Songhai woman, Gao region

Religious leaders are perceived to be key actors in facilitating inter-community dialogue. Powerful and respected, 'marabouts'³⁸ are often perceived as figures who are capable of defending the people by acting as an intermediary between them and the armed groups, and can help to pacify the populations without letting them lapse into a radical interpretation of Islam.

'The marabouts are currently the figures who most people listen to. It is essential that we involve them so they can preach dialogue, reconciliation and openness towards neighbouring populations.'

Fulani woman, Gao

Some focus groups³⁹ recognized the power and strength of young people, highlighting that they can support the facilitation of dialogue between individuals and communities given the role they played during the conflict (support for communities' safety, economic support for the most vulnerable families). Yet at the same time, other groups also point out that young people could equally represent a destabilizing element, particularly if job opportunities are not created. Unemployment is seen as one factor that could encourage young people to join armed groups.

'We need to think about how to handle young people and how to free child soldiers in the least damaging way possible. They joined the ranks of the armed groups due to a lack of work and became the cooks and assistants of warlords. What are they going to do now?'

Black Tuareg woman, Timbuktu

The participation of women in dialogue and reconciliation efforts was also mentioned. However, the results of the survey have not enabled a clear definition of the nature of this participation. Although more than half the discussion groups⁴⁰ said that women are listened to when a conflict breaks out, that does not necessarily mean they will be given a formal role in the dialogue process. In fact, those surveyed stated that women are listened to only under 'certain conditions': if they are old and considered wise; if they are directly involved in a dispute as victim and/or witness; and if they do not 'show themselves off' in public. Since they traditionally intervene in the management of conflicts at the domestic level, it appears that women find it

difficult to go beyond this informal level and the role of ‘advisers to their husband,’ in order to be part of a higher level of decision making and to assume formal public roles within society.

‘Women are consulted at a late hour, in bed. In order to resolve problems, husbands, including village chiefs, discuss matters only with their wives.’

Internally displaced black Tuareg woman, Bamako

Box 2: What role should the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission have?

None of the focus groups spontaneously mentioned the Commission on Dialogue and Reconciliation – the organization created by Mali's interim government in March 2013 – as an actor with a potential role in reconciliation. When asked directly about the existence of the Commission, more than half the discussion groups said they were not aware of it. Those who said they knew of the Commission's existence mentioned a number of different roles that they thought it had: raising people's awareness about peace by disseminating messages of calm and forgiveness; facilitating dialogue between different groups and individuals; dispensing justice by punishing those who have committed crimes; disarming armed groups; and putting an end to abuses. In the eyes of the people interviewed, assigning tasks to the Commission is not the same as trusting it. Indeed, several discussion groups expressed reservations about the composition, legitimacy and impact of the Commission.

‘The Commission was not set up according to the rules of good practice. The people who sit on it are the same ones who have always trampled all over us. We don't understand a commission made up of people who sit in air-conditioned rooms in Bamako. You need to know communities to be able to reconcile them.’

Black Tuareg male, Timbuktu

Table 5: Level of knowledge of the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission⁴¹

Have you heard about the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission?

	Yes	Split group	No
Communities in northern Mali	46	11	37
Internally displaced	9	4	0
Refugees	8	7	22

The responses show not only the need to talk and forgive, but also the need to adopt a balanced approach between forgiveness and justice. A significant minority of focus groups highlight the importance of justice, pointing out that for some, amicable solutions will not be enough. They mentioned the need to put an end to impunity; to establish the truth about what has happened; and to compensate the victims. Some highlighted the need for fair justice for all. Thus, the responses of those surveyed appear to correspond to the ‘transitional justice’ approach (the right to justice, the right to compensation, the right to the truth, and institutional reform aimed at preventing repetition).⁴²

‘Any solution must involve justice and putting an end to impunity. All guilty parties must be held responsible for their actions, because it is no longer acceptable for people with blood on their hands to walk around freely among us. We must forgive, because the land belongs to all of us and needs all its sons to rebuild it, but we need justice!’

Songhai man, village in the Timbuktu region

Box 3: The traditional mechanisms of conflict prevention, management and resolution: trust and doubts

The results of the survey show that in northern Mali, the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts are primarily the remit of traditional and religious justice. Almost all the discussion groups (163 of 168) stated that in the event of a conflict, the population initially turns to traditional leaders. Religious figureheads were also cited by a number of discussion groups (65 of 168) as being key actors. Very few discussion groups (11 of 168) mentioned official judicial institutions, the police and the gendarmerie as conflict management mechanisms. Traditional leaders manage all conflicts under the 'meeting tree' "(a traditional community meeting place), in an amicable manner. Religious leaders rule in these matters based on the Koran. According to those interviewed, their decision is accepted by everybody. It is only if these attempts fail that the parties in conflict decide to refer their disputes to the official judicial authorities.

'Among old people, peace is negotiated, while among others, it's all about money. For older people, the party who caused the conflict should pay. For others, the witnesses to the fight give money and that's how justice is dispensed.'

Fulani refugee, Goudebou, Burkina Faso

Unlike the populations interviewed in northern Mali, the displaced populations show a very low level of trust in traditional mechanisms of conflict management and resolution, which could make the reconciliation process more difficult. 'Anarchy', 'disorder', 'shambles' and 'score-settling' are the words most frequently used by refugees and internally displaced persons to describe the way in which conflicts are settled in their home towns and villages since their displacement.

'We don't go to anybody to resolve our conflicts now; everybody has become a judge.'

Male Songhai refugee, Mentaou, Burkina Faso

The flight and dispersal of some community leaders, combined with the lack of detailed information on people's place of origin and their isolation from traditional support systems, seem to make displaced communities relatively cut off from events and processes in Mali. This could explain the feeling of injustice and the loss of trust in traditional mechanisms of conflict settlement that have frequently featured in discussions with displaced communities. It could also illustrate the need for measures aimed at rebuilding confidence in traditional leaders and boosting their authority with refugee and displaced populations.

THE RETURN OF DISPLACED POPULATIONS: LIVING TOGETHER AGAIN

Any attempt at improvement of social relations must prioritise lasting solutions for displaced populations, and the survey shows that the vast majority of those interviewed want those people who have fled to return. Almost all the discussion groups held with the populations remaining in the north⁴³ want those internally displaced to come back, while a significant majority⁴⁴ want the refugees to return. Of the 56 discussion groups held with refugees and the displaced, only three groups (all refugees) included participants who did not plan to return home.

Table 6: Willingness of communities in northern Mali for displaced and refugees to return

	Yes	Split group	No
Do you want the displaced to return?	93	2	0
Do you want the refugees to return?	81	5	9

Some of those who fled – especially those who were displaced within Mali – have already begun timidly and spontaneously to return. But there is still a risk of tension and conflict between those who come back and those who remained. Almost half the discussion groups held with internally displaced people and refugees believe that they will not be welcomed when they return to their place of origin.

‘I don’t think we will be welcomed back, because the people who stayed behind have pillaged our shops, ransacked our houses, taken our land and killed our brothers.’

Female black Tuareg refugee, Mentao, Burkina Faso

The fears of the displaced are not unfounded, as shown by the recent incident in Léré, in which a prominent Tuareg was killed when he went there to vote in the presidential election.⁴⁵

‘Those who lost people close to them during the crisis believe that the light-skinned people are responsible. They plan to take revenge. That is why I don’t think I will be welcomed back.’

Male white Arab refugee, Mentao, Burkina Faso

Considerable challenges must be overcome for the return, integration and/or relocation of displaced populations to take place peacefully, while the needs of the returnees must be taken into account equally with those of the existing inhabitants.

COMBATting POVERTY AND INEQUALITY AND BUILDING A FAIR STATE

One of the most striking observations from this study is the association made by the interviewees between existing social tensions and structural development challenges.

The perception that the north suffers from a low level of development is sometimes seen by those surveyed as a hindrance to social relations, suggesting that investments in this domain could help to improve inter-community cohesion. Mentioned by a minority of discussion groups,⁴⁶ poverty and a lack of development were described in very simple terms, with concrete examples relating to the lack of public infrastructure, suitable latrines for women or properly equipped schools. Job creation was also cited by a considerable number of discussion groups, not only as a key element in improving living conditions, but also as a major form of social inclusion and an important factor in social cohesion.

‘If we don’t want to have cyclical crises, we must fight poverty. If we want peace, we must give young people work, which will help them to resist all kinds of temptation.’

Songhai man, Timbuktu

A large number of focus group participants⁴⁷ highlighted the need for ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ in order to put an end to discrimination between different groups and disparities between north and south.

‘We must fight against corruption and injustice, we must build the country on different foundations and, above all, we must have less nepotism and more fairness, from the president right down to the small farmer in Gao.’

Young Songhai man, Gao

Some respondents called for an ‘end to favouritism’, complaining about the poor handling of previous conflicts and pointing out that the peace accords signed in the past favoured certain groups (former fighters) over others by giving them privileged access to the defence and security forces.

The frustrations expressed by those interviewed were addressed directly to the government, whose role in improving social relations seems ambiguous; its institutions and representatives having lost some of their legitimacy. In fact, only a small minority of discussion groups (16) mentioned the government as an actor that could play a role in improving relations between different communities. The results of the survey show that the government is both part of the problem and part of the solution. While the majority of interviewees highlighted the weakness or even absence of the government in the north, some insisted that it should still be the responsibility of the government to implement fairer policies to promote reconciliation.

‘The government should lead, and the people will follow.’

Songhai man, village in the Gao region

The discussion group participants tackled the issue of the disputed role of government at local level when discussing their relations with elected local leaders. Most discussion groups⁴⁸ stated that the relationship between communities and elected local leaders had changed for the worse following the conflict, although it had never been good. The populations surveyed said they had been disappointed in their representatives, due mainly to their displacement, support for armed groups and corruption.

TENSIONS CAUSED BY HUMANITARIAN AID

The return of displaced people now underway in northern Mali, combined with the limited access to natural resources and basic social services, could risk serious destabilization. The scarcity of economic opportunities and the state of the basic infrastructure after destruction during the armed conflict could also be sources of tensions between and within communities, as the results of the survey indicate.

Against this background, the results of the survey show the difficulties faced by the humanitarian community in understanding and analysing the current context, particularly the social tensions already existing and those that could arise between host populations and returnees.

In several of the areas covered by the survey, humanitarian aid seems to be a source of tension. Poor management of humanitarian assistance by the some NGOs and authorities on-site (traditional chiefs, elected local leaders and representatives of ‘crisis committees’)⁴⁹ was highlighted by some of the discussion groups held in the Gao and Timbuktu regions.⁵⁰

‘The distribution of donations given by international organizations was not fair, and our representatives sold the donations to traders from the town while the inhabitants died of hunger.’

Songhai man, Gao

In the majority of such cases, conflict breaks out when potential beneficiaries do not find their names on the lists developed by NGOs with the support of local actors; followed by accusations either of bias or corruption.

THE CHALLENGE OF DISSENTING VOICES AND NEW DEMOGRAPHIC REALITIES

More than one in four of the discussion groups⁵¹ held with refugees – mostly, but not exclusively, Tuareg – brought the populations' ability to live together peacefully into considerable doubt. These interviewees recommend radical solutions to improve social relations, such as 'segregation', the geographical separation of ethnic groups, and the creation of a new state (Azawad). One of the major obstacles to reconciliation will be to understand how the populations with a more radical perspective can be integrated into the reconciliation process and thus contribute to a common vision of the future of Malian society.

'Separation is the solution: we need to separate the ethnic groups to be certain that there will be no more conflicts. We need totally separate zones, roads and water points.'

Female Fulani refugee, Goudebou, Burkina Faso

The survey also revealed that the mass displacement of populations (mostly Tuareg and Arab, but also Fulani and Songhai) has brought about new demographic realities, changing the traditional composition and ethnic diversity of the villages of northern Mali. Some multi-ethnic villages have been transformed into mono-community villages or villages made up exclusively of black Tuaregs and Songhai. While such an upheaval has allowed the creation of new social ties between different groups, it could also represent an obstacle to the reintegration of those who return or plan to do so.

'Before the crisis there were lots of different people: Arab, Fulani, Bozo, Tamasheq, Bambara. Now it's just us, the Songhai, and not many other people'.

Songhai woman, Bazi Haoussa, Ansongo, Gao region

5 CONCLUSIONS

The conflict that began in January 2012 deeply affected Mali's social fabric and turned the life of almost every Malian upside down. The populations surveyed for this report are unanimous that the consequences of this crisis are far greater than those of the past, and that what makes this conflict different is the breakdown of social relations.

Faced by violence, mass exodus, and having had their human rights violated, many of those surveyed have lived through shocking experiences, losing family ties and weakening traditional values. The situation has undermined their social relationships and led to feelings of fear and mistrust that have resurrected and deepened older divisions. Threats and violence, combined with a strong tendency to generalize blame, are manifestations of the social breakdown caused by the armed conflict.

However, the study also reveals that despite the physical and moral damage caused by the war, despite the abuses committed by all parties, despite the differences of interest between individuals and communities, and despite the difficulties of communication following massive displacement, the rift between communities is not irreparable. The wounds can be healed. There is a willingness displayed by the vast majority of people interviewed to begin a process of dialogue and reconciliation. This will have to start from the community level, be facilitated by the actors that people trust most; and be based on the economic, social and cultural links and complex interdependencies that have existed between communities for centuries.

The path to rebuilding northern Mali's social fabric is not without major obstacles. As the results of this survey show, significant minorities – particularly from displaced and refugee populations – believe that the separation of communities is either an inevitable or appropriate option for Mali's recovery. And while a timid return of displaced people has already begun, the risk of tensions between those who return and those who stayed remains significant.

How more radical views will be listened to; what sustainable solutions will be available for people forced to flee their homes; and how the management of humanitarian aid can be improved are all essential issues in achieving long-term reconciliation. The need for justice that is both fair and seen to be fair is also a priority, together with the need to tackle impunity and to establish the truth about crimes committed against individuals and communities.

Although ethnic and racial differences emerge relatively strongly from the discourse of many of those surveyed as a way to explain the conflict and sources of tension, the question of ethnicity deserves to be better analysed and understood. As some of those surveyed affirm, a diagnosis defining social tensions as being primarily of ethnic nature would be misleading and ignores the political and structural sources of those tensions. It often emerges as a tool used by some political leaders in order to exercise power.

One of the findings of this survey is the link made by respondents between the current social tensions and development challenges. Poverty, corruption, the perception of under-development, accompanied by feelings of injustice and marginalization are seen as factors undermining harmonious social relations.

Mali finds itself at a turning point in its history. Divided for over a year by the presence of armed groups and torn apart by a conflict that spared few, with enormous consequences at all levels, the country has now regained its territorial sovereignty, boasts a new peacefully elected president, is preparing to hold legislative elections and is beginning the long and arduous process of reconstruction and recovery.

A lasting peace cannot, however, be achieved if concrete efforts are not undertaken to improve understanding of the impact of conflict on the country's social fabric. Such analysis must now be part of any policy aimed at rebuilding the Malian state.

Firstly, it is for the Malian state and its citizens to establish a comprehensive vision of reconciliation. This vision will be led and implemented by the Commission on Dialogue and Reconciliation – which needs to better define the composition, roles and responsibilities -, as well as the new Ministry of Reconciliation. These instruments should ensure that discussion and reconciliation initiatives take place at national, regional and local level and guarantee the stronger participation of all citizens, especially marginalized groups such as women and youth. To be effective, the new government needs to restore confidence between its representatives and communities and prevent the use of ethnicity for political purposes and take additional policy measures such as:

- Strengthen the judicial system so that it can guarantee the rights of all Malians, is able to fairly and transparently judge those who have committed abuses, and takes on board the concerns of those who feel excluded from traditional mechanisms and seek remedy through the courts;
- Tackle structural challenges such as poverty, underdevelopment, poor governance, marginalization and exclusion to prevent the resurgence of other conflicts;
- Establish and implement inclusive and participative policies promoting an equitable approach to development and economic reconstruction;

Secondly, all partners of the Malian government involved in efforts to promote recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation should recognize and take into account the historical links which unite the different communities in the north, as well as the divisions that separate them in all their reconciliation initiatives. They should allocate aid impartially on the basis of a thorough needs analysis and not on the basis of political or security objectives, taking into account the social divisions and new power dynamics. Finally, it will be key for them to develop and implement sustainable solutions for displaced populations, preventing the tensions between these populations and host communities in order to lay the groundwork for peaceful long-term coexistence.

Building a peaceful democracy in a context characterized by social, political, economic and cultural diversity will not be an easy task. The future of Mali is not written in stone, and it must be renegotiated periodically. The key is to find solutions that can enable all groups to live in harmony and peace, while retaining their differences and enhancing their complementarities.

NOTES

All URLs were accessed in September 2013 unless otherwise noted.

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- 24 151 of 168 discussion groups.
- 25 29 of 56 discussion groups. In this case results are represented by a simple proportion.
- 26 70 of 103 discussion groups.
- 28 30 of 103 discussion groups.
- 28 "now" indicates when the survey was done: June 2013.
- 29 now" indicates when the survey was done: June 2013.
- 30 Red-skin is an expression commonly used in Mali to refer to light-skinned people.
- 31 97 of 168 discussion groups.
- 32 66 out of 111 people interviewed have a problem with the whole ethnic group (six out of ten).
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- 43 98 of 100 discussion groups.
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- 46 18 of 168 discussion groups.
- 47 41 of 168 discussion groups
- 48 94 of 168 discussion groups.
- 49 Crisis management committees, made up of community, religious and economic leaders, were set up in the Gao and Timbuktu regions during the time that these regions were under the control of armed groups. Assuming different names in the different regions, these bodies have often played the role of intermediary between armed groups and the population and acted as a new form of local governance, frequently taking the place of absent authorities on issues such as security, basic social services and imposing new rules.
- 50 33 of 168 discussion groups.
- 51 10 of 38 discussion groups. In this case results are represented by a simple proportion.

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