Exploring the Structural Causes of Conflict in Mali and Strategies to Prevent an Escalation of the Situation

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ABSTRACT

As per the definition of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Mali in Africa is a fragile state which is characterized by weak governance and vulnerability to conflict. The current situation is extremely grim with violent attacks committed by terrorists, various armed groups and there is emergence of a fusion group of terrorists and self-defense forces. The Malian situation underlines how illicit economies have reshaped political and armed mobilization in the country. This paper looks extensively on the different deep structural causes which are responsible for the current conflict situation in Mali and also tries to explore strategies to prevent escalation of these crises.

Keywords: Structural violence, conflict de-escalation, fragile states

Gilpin (2019:1) emphasises on the importance of understanding the nature and origins of Violent Conflicts in Africa. Cohen, *et al.* (1995) asserts that 'the sources and consequences of Africa's Intra states conflicts have their roots in colonialism, the subsequent processes of decolonisation and fractured state formation. Breton, *et al.* (2021: 43) submits an additional dimension on the role of cold war alignments in creating asymmetry in African economic trajectory thus stirring societal grievances. This is exacerbated by emergence of transnational crime and the new cold war emanating from geopolitical realignment masked by proxy wars Fofack (2022). The author uses Mali as a case study to illustrate structural causes of the crisis and recommending strategic solutions to African Union and ECOWAS as part of the mitigation efforts.

Onapajo (2022:1) pinpoints a worrying trend of unprecedented "coup contagion" across West Africa since 2019 with specific contexts and underlying factors differing between countries, subscribing to this viewpoint WDR (2011:1) notes that the nine Sahelian countries are among the poorest in the world, with poverty rates of over 50%, and most are seriously conflict-prone. "Dowd *et al.* (2023:2) proclaim that 'ungoverned spaces and the predicted collapse of states where democracy and globalization have less traction provide safe haven for extremism.

Structural Root Causes of Mali Conflict

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines fragile states as characterized by weak governance and vulnerability

to conflict, as well as differentiated constraints and opportunities of: (i) prolonged crisis or impasse, (ii) post-conflict or political transition, (iii) gradual improvement, and (iv) deteriorating governance (IDA, 2007:2). Mali's Economic, Political, Social and Cultural root causes of violence meet this threshold.

SECURITY

The current indicators of deplorable security situation include increasing insecurity, violent attacks committed by terrorist and other armed groups, as well as the emergence of a new and powerful fusion of terrorist and "self-defense" groups BTI (2020:3). Prior to the "intra-northern violence" trends of intercommunal dimension were still prevalent amongst Tuareg communities. The conflict has now mutated into a National, Regional and International Security threat. On the other hand, limitations such as traditional arrangements such as customary tenure regimes have increasingly become dysfunctional Bøås et al. (2017:2). Malian military does not only lack capacity but also credibility to contain the situation (ICG, 2012a).

Cognizant of IPSS (2019:18-19) Mali Conflict Timeline (1960-2019) reveals a complex, protracted, multidimensional security crisis of interlinked micro-conflicts. Reeve's (2018:5) argument demonstrating an interlink between fragile states borders and manifestation of conflict; This influenced by a series of events; The impetus for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion was the collapse of Libyan regime in 2011, and subsequent return of heavily-armed radicalised Tuareg fighters to Mali. Moreover, Algeria increases Mali's vulnerability due to extreme border porosity with infiltration by insurgency groups such as Algerian group Al Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Caprini (2015:1). Additionally, AQIM's significant role in criminalisation of the Sahel heavily influenced Mali's instability BTI (2020:4).

This underpins how illicit economies have reshaped political and armed mobilization in Mali by reconfiguring Tuareg traditions and grievances under the influence of new illicit revenues NOREF (2015). Emphatically, Shaw et al. (2014) pinpoints proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in

West Africa a major causal factor of the Mali War. Although, the Tuareg rebels focused on political demands, competition over control of drug routes became part of the fight" Musili et al. (2013:5). These groups have developed personal and business ties with communities in northern Mali on pragmatic, ideological, and ethnic grounds Arieff, (2013a).

NOREF (2015:5) notes salient gap in the security strategy. The focus has been more on terrorists' groups and *Tuareg* nationalist movement. Less attention has been devoted to the threat posed by the trends of transnational crime. The MUJAO armed group that consolidated its presence in the Gao region has proved to be dangerous and resilient well beyond the onset of the French military intervention. One of the eminent gaps is the underestimation of the evolving security trends on synergies that emerged between terrorism and organised crime an evolving security threat Caprini (2015:1). The three sources of insecurity might be thought of as overlapping networks shaped by opportunistic alliances between the various armed actors. Gao region sheds light on covert interest of the multiple actors on the conflict. The regions' role as a major intersection of trading routes and smuggling networks partly signifies MUJAO prominent role in the conflict. Explicitly, competing efforts to control and govern Gao were expressive of a conflict that linked long-standing ethnic rivalries, transnational organised crime and global jihadism. It is precisely because of its diverse connections with the surrounding social world that the MUJAO should be seen, as Lebovich (2013b: 5) argues, as "a political and social object, not a pathology".

To gain a critical and informed understanding of the complexities of the protracted Mali conflict it is vital to examine critically the efficiency and effectiveness of mitigation efforts. The above situation pinpoints failure of governance policy, allowing a *laissez -faire* states of outlawed groups. Chauzal et al. (2015:13) further interrogates on the reliability of available Early Warning Mechanism in the ECOWAS region, sighting some glaring gaps turning northern Mali into a hotbed for rebellions and criminal activities".

To reinforce this argument BTI (2020:3) argues: *inter alia:* polarisation and division of political class posits one of the major obstacles in successful implementation of the 2015 peace agreement. "Dowd *et al.* (2023:10) submits that the presumption of absence of National Government signifies a power vacuum." An additional dimension is the constrained diplomatic relations as a result of is fall out with Western and Regional Partners Crisis Group (2023:1).

Makinda (1998) defines security as the preservation of the norms, rules, institutions and values of society." An analysis of this definition automatically creates gap on the Mali's government security mandate. The eminent security threat posed by non-state security forces operating as a "state within a state" often with impunity is a clear indicator of a failed state. In some areas in the North and in the Delta of the central region, the Jihadist insurgents have become more relevant than the Malian state and its external stakeholders Bøås *et al.* (2017:8).

Social, Economic, Political Cultural

One important hypothesis concerning the causes of violent conflict focuses on the presence of major 'horizontal inequalities" and social exclusion, particularly when they coincide with identity or regional boundaries may increase a society's predisposition towards violent conflict Brown *et al.* (2007:222). Mali's economic dimension reveals a dilapidated economy, ranked as number 179 of 187 countries in global poverty UNDP (2017, cited in Bøås *et al.* 2017:9). The population lives in multidimensional poverty ranging from persistent food insecurity and malnutrition. The cumulative effects of frequent drought, armed violence and widespread insecurity have contributed to a progressive deterioration of livelihoods.

Contextualising above trends European Parliament (2014:2-4) reveal variation in poverty and social indicators, with some progress achieved in Mali's Western and Southern regions and acute poverty in Northern Mali. This economic dominance of the capital city spills over into welfare outcomes. The situation further aggravated by high dependency on foreign aid World Bank (2016). The social indicators leave much to be desired; HDI (2017, cited in BTI, 2020:17) presents alarming statistics on the low quality of formal education; The quality of schooling outside the urban centers is extremely poor.

"Mali's economy, relies heavily on agriculture, exposing its vulnerability to adverse climatic changes Sahel Security Brief (2020:3)". Climate change itself is not a direct cause of violent conflict. Yet, extreme changes in climate increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing political, economic and social vulnerabilities. Security Brief:(2023:1) rate Mali as the third highest on fertility rates globally on average ratio is 1 woman to 6 children. There is intricate relationship between Mali's ecology and socio-economic life, conflicts between groups over access to and management of natural resources occur and are interwoven with social and political dynamics. For instance, livelihood categories are often associated with ethnic groups, making the issue of resource governance and conflicts even more difficult within groups Hegazi *et al.* (2021:17)

The combined forces of population growth and climate-change amounts to decrease in the amount of land available for agriculture Bøås *et al.* (2017:2). United Nations (2022:1) reports Economic Sanctions which further deepens social, economic crunches. World Food Programme (2019) asserts that Food insecurity in Mali is aggravated by limited job opportunities, displacement, conflict, and violence. Vulnerability further heightened by high presence of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Further statistics by World Food Programme (2019) outlines lack of diversification in Mali's agricultural livelihoods.

The statistics further reveal a high discrepancy in levels of education presenting a whopping 78% illiteracy in women against their counterparts at 62%. In the same vein, Mali's Gender Inequality Index score of 0.677 points to the substantial marginalization of women. (Cited in Bøås *et al.* 2017:17). Under increasing climate stress, women in communities dependent on mobile and sedentary livestock breeding in northern Mali adopt more traditionally masculine roles, such as herding small

ruminant animals, as men migrate further to find work Hegazi *et al.* (2021:31). This further increases their vulnerability to insecurity. It is reported that women and children were the majority causalities.

There is a broad consensus that a mix of grievances and opportunity drove the rebellions, in post-independence Mali prior to 1990s, Tuaregs lacked any significant political representation in the national government, national army, in the national civil service and in the education sector Lode (1997). Moreover, the colonial state and the post-independence favored sedentarization and agriculture over the nomadic pastoralism that the Tuaregs practiced. Consequently, this shrunk the pastoral space available Abdalla (2009). The northern region also received fewer resources in terms of official development assistance, education funds, and other measures of public good's provision during the first three decades of post-independent rule. In an important study, Humphreys *et al.* (2005:274) conclude that the northern regions were in "exceptionally poor condition" relative to other regions. Paradoxically, therefore, the marginalisation and remoteness of the Sahel region shaped the emergence of new opportunities for extracting resources. The geopolitical value of the control of desert routes skyrocketed, especially in the remotest areas of northern Mali NOREF (2015:4).

Notwithstanding, the Malian armed forces have been accused of gross human rights violations in the region. The high handedness by the government towards protestors later culminated into violent rebellions. Several mass graves have been discovered, there are accusation of torture and summary execution, especially in the region of Mopti BTI (2020:5).

Mali has a significant youth bulge, ages 15-29 age bracket constituting approximately over 50% of the adult population World Bank (2016). Research suggests that "there is a clear correlation between large youthful age cohorts and the risk of political violence, including their susceptibility to recruitment into militia groups. It is reported that such recruitments were conducted with lot of ease by the insurgence groups in Mali (ICG, 2012a, 5).

The political instability has exposed long-term structural weaknesses in governance. There is a convergence between corruption and high levels of organised crime, (UNODC 2013). The trends reveal an Interlink between corruption and weak Institutions. Reeve (2018:26) examines state weakness from the angle of failed judicial system; a precursor to lawlessness and violence; where corruption is a key contributing factor to low levels of public trust in formal judicial authorities, significantly undermining state legitimacy. This leads to citizens resorting to informal justice solutions, particularly in territories where the state presence is weak (BTI 2016). Multiple incidents demonstrate these belligerent engagements just citing a few cases of; "(Bøås *et al.* (2013) cites vacuum on handling land rights disputes resulting a state of lawlessness and formation of self-defense militias between agriculturalists verses pastoralists.

According IPSS (2019:4) many rural localities throughout Mali and remote desertic spaces in the north and the centre have been ungoverned for decades. This is marred by inconsistent service delivery leading to emergence of parallel models of governance to provide basic social services in place of the state. Such opportunistic loopholes in governance propelled the infiltration and manipulation by external predators, posing a big threat to National Peace and Security Agenda.

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2017) pinpoints Fractured State-making processes: Failure in forging a common national identity and a collective destiny among the peoples within Sahelian States has been a deep-rooted structural cause of the conflict Bøås *et al.* (2013). Prior to the 2012 crisis, a cluster of signals did exist, the awareness that Tuareg separatism was a latent problem (Boeke & de Valk, 2021).

The identity national crisis prominent in Northern Mali with a divergent historical, geographical, ethnic and religious identity Humphreys *et al.* (2005). Highlights a sequence of interlinking compounding factors which include; Firstly, the north, which comprises mainly desert, is located a long distance from the political centre (Bamako), and is inaccessible

due to a lack of infrastructure. Secondly, colonialists treated the north as exceptional. Due to the extent of armed resistance in the north, the region took more time to come under French control. Shortly before independence in 1960, the French even considered separating the north from the rest of Mali. Consequently, the history of resistance was used to motivate and legitimise new actions leading to a culture of militarisation, Thirdly, although Mali is ethnically heterogeneous, Tuareg and Arab communities are almost entirely based in the north, with the dominant Bambara active in the political centre. Whilst they do not constitute the majority in the north, Tuareg and Arab groups are considered to be racially different from other groups in the country: 'white' as opposed to 'black'.

According Alexandre *et al.* (2015: 1-10) there is a nexus between the push towards democratisation in the 1990s and increase in election-related violence. Categorically, this directly pinpoints to backsliding in democratization process. This is evident in Mali through surge in coups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the unique sequencing of deep-rooted structural factors several popular perspectives suggest that all is not lost for Mali. The current crisis can be mitigated through a collaborative approach with regional.

The Malian authorities should foster the role of international community; this implies that they should find ways to rebalance relations with its different partners rather than securitising interventions primarily on military solutions with its Russian ally. (ECOWAS) Crisis Group (2023:1). The role of AU and ECOWAS should be demonstrated by supporting local structures in analysing underlying root causes and addressing any forms of insecurity and violence.

Reviving "the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord" which will foster collective unity of purpose, respect for diversity, inclusion of all stakeholders towards a unified, respectful dialogue on the path to addressing deep rooted structural causes. There is need to have a pre-dialogue to diagnose and seal loopholes that thwarted previous dialogues. The AU and ECOWAS can have a two-fold approach to the situation; giving priority to diplomatic and political efforts through mobilisation of different conflicting parties and playing a mediatory role towards enhancing sustainable peace and stability.

The failed attempt to the Malian crisis is largely a result of the international community's lack of authentic engagements of the local authorities. The anti-terror approach to the Malian crisis, has been strongly influenced by French Foreign Policy Marchal (2013). This poses critical question on effectiveness of "one size fits all intervention" on counter terrorism efforts. Considering that drivers of Violent extremism (VE) are complex and diverse this necessitates not only multisectoral collaboration but good will from diverse stakeholders. This can also be analysed as a missed opportunity to address underlying root causes. The inadequacy is further demonstrated by the actions of external actors resorting to quick fixes such as securitisation of structural root causes of violence. In such cases, the local and national contexts and mechanisms that promote violence within a state are ignored in favour of previously determined causes suitable to external powers Dowd *et al.* (2023:10). AU and ECOWAS should be bold to ensure that local authorities have a say in their matters and avoidance of manipulation even as they welcome support from External sources.

The jigsaw of Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and other illicit economies can be effectively addressed by strengthening collaboration on intelligence and Early Warning Mechanism as a global network structure. Adapting and implementing control measures that strengthen the existing policies and streamlining loopholes across borders and also a standardisation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) to overcome effects of more conflicts. Nganga (2008). AU and ECOWAS can facilitate a solid, cohesive credible frameworks for collaborations.

CONCLUSION

ICCT (2018) sums up causal factors of the crisis emanating from influence of (i) regional geo-political

dynamics, (ii) presence of armed groups, (iii) synergies between terrorism and organized crime, (iv) Consequences of historical marginalization and ethnic tensions, (v) Severe economic frustrations, (vi) Effects of climate change and poor governance. AU and ECOWAS have capacity and structures to champion regional stability by sealing existing loopholes and ensuring implementation of key treaties that will lead to realization of peace and stability in the region.

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