SUMMARY

Root Cause Analysis of Community-based Violence and Conflicts in G5 Sahel Countries

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MAIN STUDY

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About G5 Sahel

The Group of Five Sahel countries (G5 Sahel) is an intergovernmental partnership for the coordination and monitoring of regional cooperation, founded in 2014 by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. Addressing development and security issues in an integrated approach, the G5 Sahel has adopted the **Strategy for Development and Security (SDS)** focusing on four pillars of intervention: defence and security; governance ; infrastructures and resilience and human development.

To face the current multidimensional crisis in the region and achieve better results on the ground, especially in areas of greatest need, the G5 Sahel developed the **Integrated Priority Action Framework (CAPI)** in 2020.   The **CAPI** is an operational mechanism of the SDS, which calls for an approach focusing on priority areas with adapted, targeted and rapid impact initiatives incorporating security, development, humanitarian action, governance and reconciliation.

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African Security Sector Network (ASSN)

Founded in 2003, the African Security Sector Network (ASSN), headquartered in Accra (Ghana), is a pan-African network of practitioners and organizations working to promote effective and democratically governed security sectors across Africa.

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SUMMARY

Root Causes of Inter-communal Violence and Conflicts in G5 Sahel Countries

Owing to their occurance in a context of repeated attacks claimed by jihadist groups, the tensions, violence or community-based conflicts in the G5/ Sahel area are regarded by many as primarily stemming from violent extremism. While it is clear that this security factor is critical, using it as the only variable to explain the Sahel situation can limit our understanding of the root-causes of these conflicts.

The approach taken in this study seeks to identify the underlying structural dynamics of violence and competition within and between Sahelian communities. It is divided into three sections: Section one offers a critical analysis of conflicts and community-based violence in the Sahel region, based on their typology; Section two discusses the various prevention and management mechanisms for these conflicts, and Section three provides recommendations. The report is supplemented with annexes providing case studies on specific situations in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad respectively.

Section One. Typology and Analysis of Community Conflict Dynamics in G5 Sahel Countries

Using a cross-cutting approach to analyse community conflict dynamics in the G5 Sahel region has made it possible to distinguish six types of conflicts:
- **land-use and natural resource conflicts (related to the use of land and agro-pastoral resources on the one hand and of subsoil riches on the other);**
- leadership and legitimacy conflicts;
- conflicts related to social structure;
- religious conflicts;
- conflicts related to the spread of jihadist groups, and
- conflicts related to the communitarisation of security.

Land-Use and Natural Resource Conflicts

Rivalries for the use and management of agro-pastoral resources have long triggered disputes between herders, farmers and other groups in the Sahel region. Conflict dynamics in this category involve several variants. These include clashes between herding factions (nomadic and sedentary herders); clashes between farmers; farmers - pastoralists conflicts; herders - fishermen conflicts, and disputes between herders, farmers and mining companies/real estate operators. Of these conflict dynamics, farmer - herder clashes are by far the most recurrent in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad (but less in Mauritania).

This tense competition over natural resources results from a combination of interrelated factors. In most Sahelian regions indeed, natural resource management has historically been based on three coexisting production systems: a pastoral system, an agricultural system, a fishing system. These traditional resource management systems have relied on a number of social practices, norms and hierarchies (including those governed by first-occupancy / "primitive property" right and those codified in the colonial era) that have structured networks of centuries-old power relations between different categories and institutions (villages, family units / lineages, castes). In their configuration however, these power relationships between customary actors have undergone deep-rooted changes over decades, and the resulting conflicts are linked to:
- decentralisation processes initiated by the various countries, which have introduced new stakeholders (local authorities) and resource management standards. Since then, a customary system and a legal system have been coexisting, deriving their legitimacy from customary law and positive law respectively.

- societal disruptions caused by development policies, especially aimed at the promotion of farming. The emphasis on agriculture in development policies has often resulted in growing inattentiveness to pastoral activities, which in turn has led to an increase in clashes between cattle herders and farmers;
- clientelistic networks (corrupt political actors and civil servants with rent-seeking behaviours/rationales; corrupt judicial systems and customary authorities; land-grabbing by mining companies or real estate operators, etc.);
- the environmental aspect, whose influence can be examined by considering either climate change (whose supporters argue that conflicts are associated with environmental degradation) or "political ecology", whose advocates believe that conflicts are primarily caused by political marginalisation resulting from resource scarcity.

The exploitation of subsoil wealth equally tends to fuel inter-community tensions in the Sahel. This is particularly illustrated by artisanal gold mining, which is practiced in all G5 Sahel countries and generates different types of conflicts affecting communities in mining sites (over limited access to water; between neighbouring communities; between natives and non-natives, or between cross-border communities).

Leadership and Political Legitimacy Conflicts;

G5 Sahel countries are also gripped by a local governance crisis fuelling inter-communal tensions over leadership and political legitimacy. Indeed, the democratisation processes initiated during the 1990s have introduced more egalitarian and inclusive local governance mechanisms in the various G5 Sahel countries. These changes in the process of appointing authorities have paved the way to multiple disputes opposing legally appointed officials to rival family/lineage factions (inheritance disputes), leading to divisions within communities. Other legitimacy crises are aggravated by the political instrumentalisation of chiefdoms.

The Renegotiation of Statutory Orders and Social Hierarchies

The local governance crisis and its reconfiguration equally provides fertile ground for challenges to the traditionally hierarchical social orders that have for centuries laid the foundation for inter-community stability in Sahelian States. **Some less-favoured social groups longing for more equality and social justice use these contexts and processes as a lever for renegotiating hierarchical and statutory orders.** Rigid social stratification is a real obstacle to social mobility. It constantly structures social fields of community violence in which the desire for emancipation of lower categories runs against elite interests.

In these dynamics of violent reconfiguration of sclerotic socio-political orders, the Sahelian youth population known as the demographical majority and particularly confined to a subordinate status, is proving to be very active. This social fragility is therefore the reason both for intergenerational tensions and youth's tendency to occupy any new empowerment position (local associations, resource governance committees, self-defence groups, etc.) or to take advantage of any situation challenging leadership, including by rallying some armed groups.

Finally, one of the factors shaping power relationships between communities is closely related to indigenous discourses based on identity claims on primacy or precedence over a given land. Thus, some communities claiming autochthony tend to distinguish themselves from "foreign" or "non-natives" communities considered as their subordinates.

Religious Tensions and the Instrumentalisation of Community Identity

Religious conflicts in G5 Sahel countries - with an overwhelming majority of Muslims and Christian minorities-occur as a result of both inter and intra-community divisions.

The Muslim - Christian tensions prevailing in Chad are also rife to a certain extent in Burkina Faso where, national stakeholders are strongly mobilised around the national dialogue.

But the predominance of Islam in Sahel does not necessarily mean an absence of internal conflicts within the Muslim community, as illustrated by the activities of violent radical groups and the rise of reformist Salafist movements adhering to a more rigorist Islam, as opposed to a historically dominant Sufi Islam.

Finally, it is worth pointing out a few mystical and magical incidents related to mutual accusations of witchcraft.

Community Cleavages and Jihadist Groups

Today, Sahelian jihadist groups tend to invoke and use community divisions and grievances as a tool in their rhetoric. As a result, local jihadist figures have thus managed to encourage certain communities to engage in the fight against injustice, oppression and discrimination. Jihadist groups (as well as other armed groups) have also developed an argument on security provision, whereby they can often get support from communities feeling abandoned by governments.

The economic factors can also explain the link between communities and jihadist groups, since the jihadist struggle sometimes appear to be an opportunity to (re)appropriate farming areas, pastures and markets, or to engage in looting.

Security and Protection as a Community Issue

In a deteriorated security environment where States are struggling to assert their authority by deploying armed and security forces throughout their territories, populations are strongly tempted to rely on community-based security initiatives. This is why self-defence groups or communal militias have emerged in recent years in Mali and Burkina Faso. The provision of security by community actors sometimes appears to be a factor leading to escalated tensions between competing community groups. It structures cycles of violence, fuelled by a desire for revenge or reprisals.

Section Two. Mechanisms for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Community Conflicts in G5 Sahel Countries

Traditional and Customary Mechanisms

For centuries now, Sahelian communities have developed a set of endogenous mechanisms aimed at preventing and settling intra and inter-community clashes. Thus, the following typology applies to all G5 Sahel counties, depending on their sources of legitimacy:
- First of all, there are political and economic mechanisms, whose aim is to secure consensus, to preserve social harmony and to ensure the supremacy of community interests over individual interests. They primarily rely on political entities with courts responsible for settling contentious matters (lineage chiefdoms in nomadic communities, village chiefdoms in sedentary communities, cantonal chiefdoms federating several villages; sultanates and kingdoms). In addition, these mechanisms operate with a second category of actors: **the rights holders/ holders of control rights / détendeurs de droits de maîtrise**, acting as resource managers (master of pasture land, masters of water, land and bush chiefs, etc.).
- - Social mechanisms, based on a strategy meant for managing the tensions arising from hierarchical and statutory differentiations. Social mechanisms refer to all conflict management methods deriving their legitimacy from the founding principles of communities' social architecture. Three social mechanisms still govern inter-community relationships in the Sahel region: kinship or joking alliances; socio-professional and brotherhood institutions; councils of Elders.
- Finally, the mechanisms falling within religious authorities. These include the *sarakunan anna* (animist leaders), the marabouts, the imams and the cadis, who are most active in the Sahel region. Islam is so deeply rooted in Sahelian countries that Islamic law has become a major conflict management reference.

Traditional community conflict management mechanisms thus rely on a range of practices and actors with complementary roles. Either of these mechanisms can be used depending on the nature of the conflict, the community identities involved, the issues at stake, and the history that led to the conflict situation. All of these actors and practices actually form a unique "conflict management system", wherein political, religious and spiritual, historical and social aspects are taken into consideration to make legitimate decisions.

However, the social perceptions associated with traditional conflict management mechanisms have been restructured: the trust placed in them is thus increasingly being questioned.

Establishing New State Mechanisms for Conflict Management

For a decade now, Sahel countries have endeavoured to enhance their conflict prevention and management system through regulatory, political and institutional reforms, as well as practical instruments. For instance, there has been a series of measures by government authorities:
- the establishment of the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) in Niger (in 1995) and the creation of special constituencies to effectively represent minorities within the Parliament;
- the creation of community-based structures for natural resource management known as COFO in Niger and Mali;
- the creation of bodies like the High Representative of the President of the Republic for the Central regions and the Permanent Secretariat for the Policy framework for the Management of the crisis in Mali;
- the establishment of the National Agency for the Support and Integration of Refugees (ANAIR), which became the Tadamoum Agency after 2013 and whose mission encompasses three components: fight against the consequences of slavery, integration of Mauritanian returnees from Senegal and fight against poverty;
- the development of hydraulics projects (DHP-AFD) (DHP-AFD) in Chad;
- The establishment in Burkina Faso of village-level commissions responsible for conciliation of conflicts (Commission de conciliation foncière villageoise (CCFV))

However, since the state regulatory system operates through decentralised administrative entities, the judicial system as well as the defence and security forces, it is also being criticized and challenged. The arbitration of conflicts through state mechanisms is indeed considered to be partial and even fraught with serious abuses.

The Emergence of an Alternative Conflict Management Offer: the Role Played by Non-Governmental Organisations

The weaknesses of traditional methods as well as state approaches to inter-community conflict prevention and management have created conditions for the emergence of an alternative approach by NGOs and local development partners. This approach is grounded in the principles of inclusive community dialogue and aims to create spaces for consultation and dialogue bringing together all forms of legitimacy in a territory experiencing a conflict (customary legitimacy, Islamic legitimacy, elected officials, administrative legitimacy, civil society, etc.). These negotiating arenas are thus governed by a hybrid traditional and modern conflict resolution mechanisms. As such and depending on the case, they can involve traditional authorities, youth and women associations for instance, elected municipal officials and judicial authorities. The initiatives taken do not replace traditional rulers or the local and national administration: the actors involved rather act as partners in settling conflicts. Though these mechanisms are primarily meant for conflict prevention, they are increasingly being used in conflict mediation and resolution.

Non-state actors do not enjoy legitimacy and trust yet, as compared to traditional authorities or the State.

Recommendations

On natural resource governance

Each G5 Sahel state needs to reassess its resource management systems by:
- Harmonising resource management methods specific to customary systems and national laws respectively, so as to avoid any overlap between attributions and missions of both administrative (whether deconcentrated or decentralized) and customary authorities. This especially entails a revision / adoption of new rural codes and / or pastoral charters for the drafting of which G5 Sahel could suggest member states to mobilise relevant technical experts;
- reproducing the "Community Peace Complexes" model initiated by Niger's HACP in all agro-pastoral areas of G5 Sahel countries;
- establishing, under G5 Sahel's supervision, an information and land management system, based on concrete aspects of both pastoral and agricultural land tenure;
- conducting studies both on the causes of dispossession and on land tenure;

- launching a fund-raising program as part of G5 Sahel activities, in order to equip the land Commissions of the various countries with adequate logistical and financial means and help them fulfil their missions in securing natural resources;
- organising local G5 Sahel meetings between customary rulers, local governments, and State representatives in order to agree on short, medium and long-term steps that can ensure peaceful coexistence of the three production systems (agriculture, livestock, fishing), and
- implementing programs for agricultural and pastoral communities, both in partnership with the Senegal River Basin Development Organization / OMVS (for the West zone) and the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority (for the Central zone)

A number of the above recommendations could be eligible under the priority projects defined in the G5 / Sahel Priority Investment Program (PIP). The Decentralized Cross-Border Cooperation Unit of Sahel Local Authorities (C3-Sahel) could be instrumental in their implementation.

In managing social diversity

G5 Sahel should encourage its member States to:

- establish frameworks for consultation and regular dialogue in each locality between the public administration and all communities without discrimination.
- consider setting up, where they are still absent, "special" electoral constituencies (on the Nigerian model) with a view to encouraging minorities to involve in the management of public affairs at the national and local levels.
- Initiate development projects in areas with strong community polarisation, specifically focusing on the social categories that are most vulnerable to violence.
- fight against impunity and ensure that justice and reparation are provided to all victims of community violence, regardless of their ethnic background and alleged political affiliation.
- refrain from supporting armed or self-defence groups formed on community bases in all strategies to combat terrorism and other forms of violence.

Furthermore, within the "governance of its mandate" component, the G5 Sahel could consider the following:
- implementing projects promoting shared value systems in different communities, for instance, by reinvigorating the festivals and cultural events that have historically made interactions possible between customary landowners and nomadic pastoralists.
- disseminating (including through oral and audio media) the handbook on best practices regarding community resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism in the G5 Sahel States.
- partnering with local governments in remote areas to support groups (especially of women and youth groups) with mixed community composition through the promotion of cultural and social diversity acceptance programs as well as discussions between young people from different communities.
- supporting citizens' initiatives for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and encouraging citizens' debates in all municipalities;
- initiating a reflection on cross-border experiences of community resilience in the three zones.

In supporting conflict management mechanisms

The report recommends that the G5 Sahel provide support and work closely with its member states in order to:
- advance root conflict prevention and management programs in endogenous mechanisms wherein the conflicting communities recognize themselves, in compliance with equality and human dignity principles.
- forge partnerships with national and international CSOs to help them better coordinate their dialogue and community reconciliation activities, particularly in areas having suffered severe violence.
- develop an exhaustive inventory of conflict management methods in order to better equip administrative, judicial and customary actors in community conflicts resolution.
- develop national directories of all traditional, customary and marabout chiefdoms in each of the G5 Sahel countries to engage them in a fruitful dialogue.
- organise a National Joking Kinship Day in countries where it is not celebrated, as a mechanism for preventing community conflicts and fostering social cohesion.
- organize a Day of Living Together each year in all municipalities.
- build the capacity of community radio stations to enable them broadcast programs on conflict prevention and resolution in the local languages.
- increase the ongoing religious dialogue with radicalised militants as it the case in Mauritania or with repentants in Niger.

In the area of decentralisation

As far decentralisation is concerned, G5 Sahel member states should be encouraged to:
- resort to community policing in rural municipalities and / or set up inclusive territorial policies.
- establish offices for the Ombudsman of the Republic in all rural municipality capitals (in countries where there are Ombudsmen).
- support the establishment of spaces for dialogue between law enforcement agencies, decentralised public administration structures, local authorities and community representatives.

- build the human and logistical capacities of deconcentrated structures (justice, civil status, police, prefect, etc. especially), which should be used as redress bodies in the event of community conflicts.
- support school protection initiatives and contribute to education programs for children from different communities deprived of schooling due to conflict situations.

The G5 Sahel as an institution could:
- extend the pilot cross-border cooperation initiative between municipalities to all its operational zones.
- encourage the Joint Force to carry out civil-military activities for communities living in border and peripheral areas, and
- support a special "territorial governance" program where the government and key local socio-economic players will develop "quick-impact action plans".