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Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National
Civil Society Organisation Platforms

CASE
STUDY

4

**Mali civil society
in the firing line
- the consequences
of conflict**



Mali civil society in the firing line - the consequences of conflict

In Mali, CSOs find themselves facing a complex mix of disasters driven by drought and floods, population growth and poverty, conflict and instability, in an extremely poor country. Working in this situation demands strong coordination between CSOs, the National CSO Platform and other actors. The challenge is made worse by the actions of peacekeeping forces who blur the lines between military and humanitarian action.

Context

The people of the landlocked country of Mali, in the southern Sahara desert, are spread across rural areas. The majority depend on subsistence farming and are exposed to frequent droughts and floods. The country is ranked 184th out of 189 on the Human Development Index.³¹ The country was destabilised in 2012 by a Tuareg rebellion in the north of the country after which Islamists took control of this region. Further conflict broke out in the central region of the country in 2015.³²

Case study contributors

FECONG is the Federation of collectives of NGOs in Mali, acting as a collective at national level, with representatives at regional level. It undertakes advocacy with donors and the government. It also promotes the role of CSOs and seeks funding for them internationally. FECONG is a member of Forus.

Website: <https://www.repaoc.org/mali-fecong/>

AFAD is a member organisation of FECONG, working locally. It is also National Coordinating Organisation for Views from the Frontline (VFL) and coordinated the work of CSOs in conducting the study.

Website: <http://climatdeveloppement.org/lercd/afad-mali/>

Focus on: Mali

Both organisations have worked in the country since before the conflict. They acknowledge the complex situation they face: 'In this crisis we saw all kinds of abomination, ethnic groups who killed each other. The Fulani - or even Dogon - ethnic groups kill each other and other ethnic groups are involved. Villages have been burnt and we have seen immense loss of life. This has added to the impacts of famine and malnutrition resulting from the unpredictable rains.' 'The most recurrent crises are floods almost every year which affect people, partly due to the nature of the land and partly because of land use. Due to population increase there is a lack of land in some places and we often see people build on low lying land. It might not rain much for years and they think there is no risk, but in heavy rains the rivers flood straight into these houses. Mali really is a country of multi disasters'.

The National CSO Platform

One way in which FECONG responds to 'multi-disasters' is by coordinating specialist members who can address different issues. Some organisations work on environmental protection, others on health, on basic education, or on work focused on women. FECONG itself does not engage locally, it receives information from members which it uses to advocate with the authorities through reports and press releases. It also develops project proposals.

If specific needs arise, FECONG can seek information and build the capacities of members. It also relays information by giving alerts and undertaking advocacy, so that areas which are affected can be helped and supported. It enlists support from technical and financial partners who can contribute to work in the field. The link between FECONG at national level and its members' knowledge at local level is through regional coordinators who act as relays.

The Local CSO

AFAD is an example of a member organisation working locally. 'We have had a humanitarian project for 3 years. We are working in an area on the humanitarian aspects linked to the floods: we have set up boreholes, latrines, schools that were flooded, with donations of food, cash to women and then lots of food and cereals on the ground.'

AFAD has led VFL studies in the country, coordinating other participating organisations. The studies are intended to find out more about the situation regarding disasters in Mali. Based on priorities which emerge, CSOs are currently developing action plans. Information is drawn together in VFL reports. The 2013 report stated, 'The findings are bitter. People take a lot of risks without worrying about the consequences. Most often, this state of affairs is due to illiteracy and ignorance . . . Hence the urgency for each actor to fully play their role. In Mali, the concept of crisis and disaster prevention is little known.'

AFAD explains: 'Often disasters are not seen as a priority, but they block normal development actions and affect living conditions. We think it's important to see how to protect our development work through prevention. We've seen this most recently through the Coronavirus pandemic which is impacting on the economy, health and other aspects of development because people are confined, can no longer work, and in other cases populations are decimated.'

OCHA reported in 2020 that 'about 3.5 million people are currently in food and nutritional insecurity, including 757,000 in severe food

insecurity [...]' and predicts that 'in the lean season (June-August 2020), nearly 5 million people will be food insecure.'³³ This will inevitably have a huge impact on the focus of actions by civil society organisations such as AFAD, who depend to a great extent on partnerships and funding from INGOs.

Blurring the lines: military and humanitarian action

One of the most insidious challenges to the work of CSOs in the country comes from the actions of the various 'peacekeeping' missions which attempt to stabilise the situation. 'The security forces are mandated to protect, and protect equally,' Corinne Dufka, Sahel director at Human Rights Watch, told The New Humanitarian. 'And yet we see them far too often engaging in collective punishment, in retaliatory attacks against communities for their real or perceived affiliation with armed Islamist groups.'³⁴

Civil society organisations, such as FECONG members, find increasingly blurred lines between humanitarian and military actors. Collaboration with the military is limited and communications poor. Often, as they attempt to bring humanitarian aid, military action starts. Peacekeeping forces also involve themselves in short term humanitarian actions, seeking to improve relations with local communities, and competing with civil society actors. They sometimes use white vehicles, normally recognised as signifying humanitarian work, leading to increased risk of attack on humanitarian workers.³⁵

Summary

Mali is truly a country of multi-disasters. The combination of national coordination by the FECONG platform, and local knowledge and action by member organisations such as AFAD, is particularly critical where social, political and economic conditions are dynamically changing. However, the continuing conflict and instability in the country means CSOs are increasingly under threat themselves because of the actions of security forces.

FOOTNOTES

³¹ <https://www.wfp.org/countries/mali>

³² 'Situation in central Mali 'deteriorating' as violence, impunity rise, UN rights expert warns. UN News. 2020'. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1057911>

³³ OCHA Mali Rapport de situation (24/04/20).

³⁴ Obi Anyadike, in - <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/05/Sahel-Mali-Niger-Burkina-Faso-security-forces-killings>

³⁵ 'In militarised Mali, humanitarian responders say aid is an afterthought'. New Humanitarian, 2019. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/03/11/militarised-mali-humanitarian-responders-say-aid-afterthought>