

# Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances

The case of Burkina Faso's  
Centre-Nord region

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USAID Customary Resilience





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## December 2021

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## Project description

This report is part of the USAID-funded study *Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities' resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso*. The data presented in this chapter are based on the 256 surveys and 123 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) collected in Centre-Nord between October 2020 and April 2021. Our online database with key findings, including links to the general synthesis report and four other regional reports, can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/customary-legitimacy>

# List of abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
CCFV	Village Land Management Committees
CVD	Committees for Village Development
GFAT	Combined Anti-Terrorist Forces ( <i>Groupement des forces antiterroristes</i> )
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Group of Support for Islam and Muslims ( <i>Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin</i> )
KIs	Key Informants
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland ( <i>Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie</i> )
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization

# 1 Introduction

Across the Sahel, customary leaders such as village chiefs are increasingly targeted by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) – a dynamic similarly at play in Burkina Faso’s Centre-Nord region.<sup>1</sup> This report analyzes the roles of customary authorities in municipal governance and highlights their contributions to community resilience. In particular, it dissects their contributions to community resilience against violent extremism, highlighting their agency even where under threat.

In a comparison between six Sahelian border regions of the Liptako-Gourma, we find that Centre-Nord is the region in our study that scores best on general community resilience.<sup>2</sup> It also scores comparatively well on several other indicators. Notably, respondents in Centre-Nord overwhelmingly feel that their customary authorities serve their communities’ interests rather than their own. As a consequence, customary leaders are endowed with high levels of trust and their roles in both conflict resolution efforts and security measures are perceived to be positive.

To better understand why traditional and religious authorities do so well in the Centre-Nord region, this report delves further into more than 120 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 250 surveys collected in five municipalities: Kaya (Centre-Nord’s capital), Boulsa, Pissila, Mané, and Kongoussi.<sup>3</sup> One key caveat when interpreting the Centre-Nord data is that – due to security reasons – all these municipalities are located in the relatively safer southern part of the region. Mindful that the Mossi ethnic group is overwhelmingly predominant and monopolizes most of the high-ranking state positions across the region, as well as the traditional and religious authorities’ hierarchies, we selected a number of municipalities that are home to significant minority ethnic groups as well.

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1 Jeune Afrique 2019. Burkina Faso : le bilan de l’attaque de Yirgou s’alourdit et passe de 13 à 46 morts, 4 January. ; Reuters 2021. Extremists target African village leaders in wave of assassinations, 8 October.

2 Molenaar, F. 2021. [Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities’ resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso](#). The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

3 For the methodology chapter of this study, please see De Bruijne, K. 2021. [Methodology “Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances”](#). The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

As this report will show, existent rates of social cohesion and cautious optimism from our respondents ought not to make one overlook the precarity of Centre-Nord. Burkina Faso is experiencing one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world – and the Centre-Nord region is at the epicenter of this crisis, hosting nearly a third of all internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>4</sup> Ever-growing numbers of IDPs, exhausted and overstretched security actors, as well as a severe lack of material and financial means are putting enormous strains on the region’s resilience capacity – including on the customary leaders at the municipal level.<sup>5</sup>

To provide a detailed assessment of local realities, this report takes the following steps. It begins with an assessment of the multifaceted key challenges and security threats faced by inhabitants of Centre-Nord, in order to identify the challenges at stake in surveyed communities. Subsequently, the chapter dissects the role of customary governance actors in this governance landscape, before turning to their contribution to community resilience. A fifth section analyzes customary authorities’ contributions to resilience against violent extremism, with a particular focus on their role in security provision, conflict resolution, and community cohesion. A final section explores implications for policy and programming.

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4 UNHCR Burkina Faso, Country Operational Update July – August 2021.

5 The growing IDP crisis is a sensitive issue for the government. In September 2021, the government suspended activities of the NGO Norwegian Refugee Council after it had criticized the slow response of the Burkinabé government.



## 2 Centre-Nord: key challenges and threats

### 2.1 Security situation

In addition to food insecurity, Centre-Nord is increasingly shaped by violent incidents and conflict dynamics that are deeply rooted in rising tensions between herders and farmers. Climate change, heavy economic Mossi migratory pressure from the Nord and Plateau-Central regions, the development of dry season crops and the expansion of agrobusiness activities, land erosion and decreasing arability, speculation, decreasing hydraulic resources, and demographic expansion all have contributed to a reduction of available land and translated into intensified competition over natural resources.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, herders face extortion from security and defense forces, cattle theft from bandits, and obstruction of transhumance corridors – which leads them to let their cattle wander unattended, causing damage that may eventually trigger additional conflicts with farmers.<sup>7</sup>

Conflicts between herders and farmers are often embedded in ethnic tensions, particularly between the Mossi (traditionally farmers), and the Fulani (traditionally herders), who form the two biggest ethnic groups in Centre-Nord. Mutual suspicion between these two ethnic groups runs deep. The Mossi are alleged to have privileged access to the state administration – a claim reinforced by the influx of Mossi migrants, bolstering their demographic dominance.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2016, the security situation in Burkina Faso at large has been deteriorating in the face of a growing presence of VEOs in the north of the country, at the border with Mali and Niger. With the gradual spread from the north to other parts of the country of Ansarul Islam in mid-2018, and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Group of Support for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in late 2018, insecurity has also been rising in Centre-Nord. From 2018 to 2019, incidents involving VEOs surged from seven (in 2018) to 109 incidents (in 2019), of which almost

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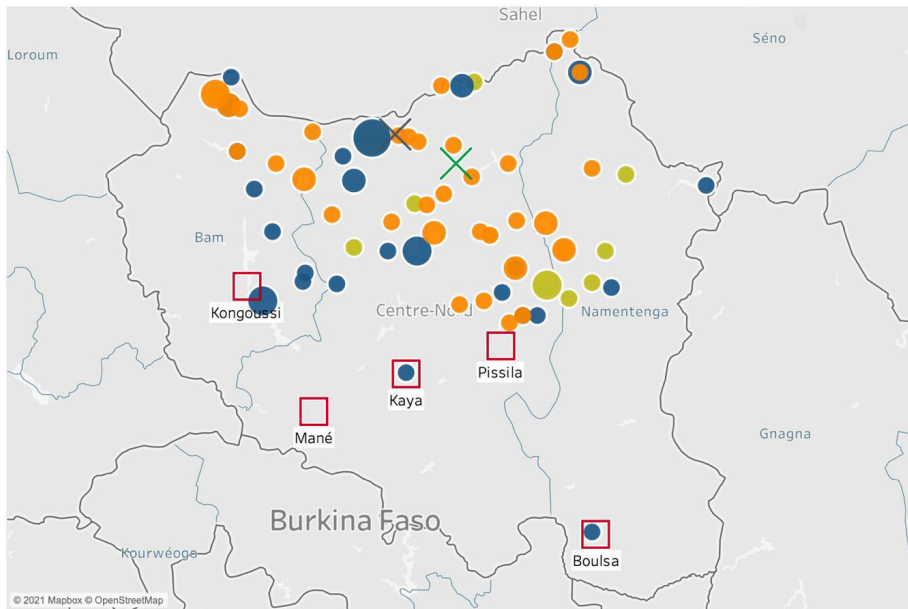
6 International Crisis Group, 2020. [Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence](#). Africa Report, no. 287.

7 Bisson, L. Cottyn, I. de Bruijne, K. and Molenaar, F. 2020. [Between Hope and Despair: Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso](#). CRU Report, the Hague: Clingendael.

8 International Crisis Group 2020, *op. cit.*

two-thirds targeted civilians in the form of looting, extortion, abductions, and killings (see Map 1 below for an overview of violent incidents throughout the data collection process).

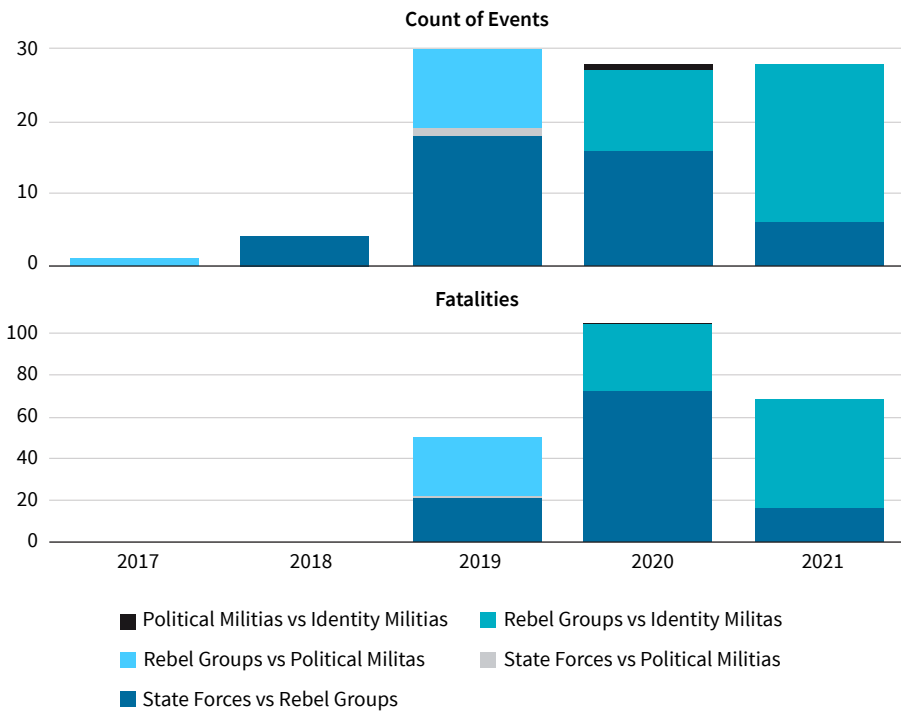
**Map 1 Conflict Events June 2020 – June 2021, Research Locations, ISGS/JNIM cells December 2020 in the Centre-Nord Region)**



Throughout 2019, both ISGS and JNIM expanded in Centre-Nord, and dominance over the area seemingly shifted between the two groups throughout the year. Ansarul Islam and JNIM militants were very active at the border with the neighboring Sahel region in early 2019, and primarily targeted security forces, local self-defense militias, and symbolic targets such as local leaders, schools, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers. ISGS started gaining a stronger presence in the region from mid-2019 onwards. Across all three departments of Centre-Nord, ISGS increasingly committed acts of indiscriminate violence against civilians. Toward the end of 2019, JNIM seemed to have taken up this tactic as well – potentially in an attempt to secure their grip on the region.

After a sudden escalation of violence in 2019, and amid a continuation of the same trend in 2020, the Burkinabé government created the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (*Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie*, VDP), a defense force largely composed of members of existing self-defense groups such as the Koglweogo, supporting the Burkinabé government’s efforts to counter VEO activity in the country. While engaging in multiple clashes with both JNIM and ISGS, VDP fighters have become a strategic target of VEO attacks. From early 2020 to mid-2021, these attacks have doubled, and caused almost double the number of fatalities too (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1 Interaction of actors in battles in Centre-Nord (2017-2021)<sup>9</sup>**



9 ACLED data, see Raleigh, C. Linke, A. Hegre, H. and Karlsen, J. 2010. “Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, pp. 651-660. This is the coding of the interaction between actors during battles that occurred in Centre-Nord from 2017-2021.

Simultaneously, Burkinabé security forces and self-defense groups/VDPs have engaged in numerous abuses against civilians, primarily targeting Fulani communities. Even though VDPs claim to be inclusive of all ethnicities, it is not in practice, which reinforces existing ethnic tensions that translate into violent conflict.<sup>10</sup> The Koglweogos' and the VDPs' targeting of ethnic Fulani occurs as a result both of these two groups recruiting chiefly among Mossi and Fulse communities, and of largely held prejudices against the Fulani, whom they perceive to be affiliated with VEOs. In Centre-Nord, one particular example that stands out is the January 1, 2019 massacre of 113 Fulani by Koglweogo members in the north of Sanmatenga province. In turn, the Fulani are in instances pushed into the arms of VEOs.<sup>11</sup>

The entrenchment of intercommunal and ethnic tensions in Centre-Nord and the involvement of state and non-state armed groups in this dynamic have played out strongly in 2021. Between January and June 2021, the most violent incidents occurred between VEOs and VDPs (or the security forces), having caused 69 fatalities by June 2021. Likewise, recent incidents in the Bam department, where VDPs attacked and killed Fulanis on several occasions, point to a dynamic of retaliatory attacks that became particularly prevalent in the first half of 2021.<sup>12</sup>

Municipalities where data collection took place are not spared by violence. In Kaya, for example, a suspected VEO attack targeted the town's police station in February 2019, resulting in an increased police presence.<sup>13</sup> In Boulsa, Kaya, Pissila, and Kongoussi, respondents from all backgrounds warned about insecurity in the surrounding areas. When asked about the gravest crisis to have occurred in the last five years, the district chief (*chef de quartier*) of Boulsa answered:

*The attacks in Dablo, Yirgou, and Nagraogo and many other threats have caused terror and psychosis in the municipality.*<sup>14</sup>

A chief's counselor in Pissila told us many young people have fled to Kaya and Ouagadougou due to the level of insecurity in the municipality.<sup>15</sup> One traditional chief said he had been forced to flee his village to find refuge

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10 *Ibid.*

11 Human Rights Watch 2020. Sahel: Atrocities by the security forces are fueling recruitment by armed Islamists, 1 July.

12 ACLED data, see Raleigh, C. et al 2010, *op. cit.*

13 Interview with a Koglweogo, Respondent, Pissila, 12 December 2020.

14 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulsa, 4 December 2020.

15 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Pissila, 17 February 2021.

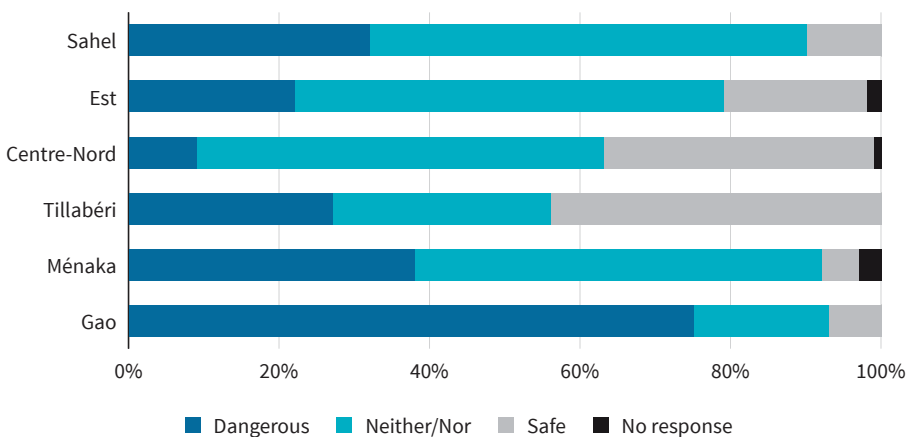
in Pissila.<sup>16</sup> Overall, many respondents warned that the “security situation” poses a grave threat going forward.

## 2.2 Community resilience

How does this overall security situation impact the level of risk and resilience that municipalities in Centre-Nord are subject to? Despite high exposure to external shocks, we find that Centre-Nord still presents some of the most resilient features of all Sahelian border regions researched for this study. This is particularly evident through high levels of trust toward both security actors and state governance actors.

Despite the security challenges described above, Centre-Nord overall features the lowest rate of respondents feeling unsafe in their communities in all six regions included in this study (see Figure 2 below).<sup>17</sup> This distinction is partly explained by the fact that all municipalities included in our study are located in the relatively safe southern part of the region. In these municipalities, the presence of security actors is perceived as largely positive, with higher trust levels than in other regions.

**Figure 2 Evaluation of security situation in community (per region)**



16 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.

17 Molenaar F., Demuyneck M., and de Bruijne, K. 2021. [Customary Characters in Uncustomary Circumstances: Traditional and religious authorities’ resilience to violent extremism in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso](#). The Hague: Clingendael Institute and ICCT.

In addition to the strong presence of the Koglweegos and the VDPs, the deployment of security and defense forces has dramatically increased since the upsurge of VEOs in 2015. Two municipalities stand out as particularly securitized, namely Kaya and Pissila. As the capital of the Centre-Nord region, Kaya hosts the largest deployment of security and defense forces.<sup>18</sup> Respondents also mentioned a significant presence of the gendarmerie on the Ouagadougou-Kaya axis and of the police on the Kaya-Pissila axis.

The presence of security forces is reflected in our survey data, which show that citizens in Centre-Nord are the most likely – out of all regions included in this study – to contact armed actors for security provision (68%) and when faced with violence (74%).<sup>19</sup> The “armed actors” label used here encompasses a broad category of actors, including police and state security forces, but also self-defense groups and local security initiatives. Such local security provision is very prevalent in Centre-Nord, with 80 percent of respondents stating that their communities have organized a collective security response in case of a threat.<sup>20</sup> A community member from Kongoussi explained:

*At present, the population is involved in the fight against insecurity because alert committees have been set up in each village. These committees are in charge of reporting to the VDPs any suspicious case or any foreigner who enters the locality.<sup>21</sup>*

The propensity of respondents in Centre-Nord to contact security actors is underpinned by high levels of trust. The police and security forces in Centre-Nord enjoy the highest rates of trust of all three surveyed regions in Burkina Faso, while self-defense groups and local security initiatives are awarded the highest trust scores out of all six regions included in this study (see Figures 3 and 4 below).

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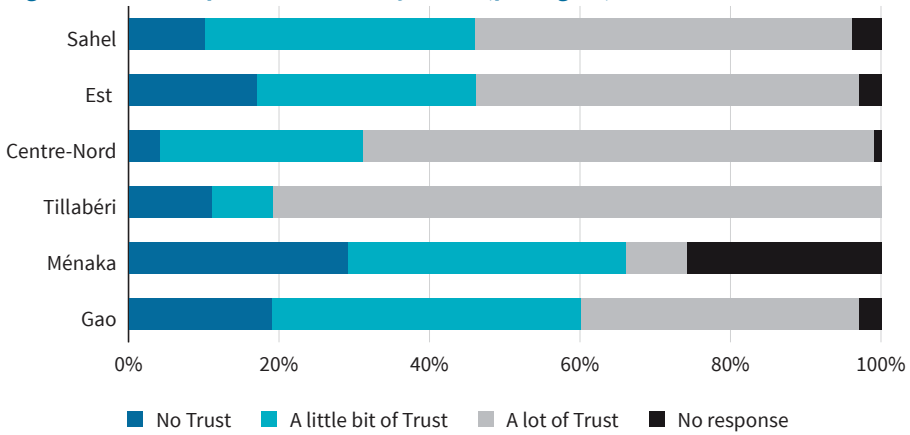
18 Kaya also hosts the commanding structure of the Combined Anti-Terrorist Forces (*Groupement des forces antiterroristes*, GFAT) and the principal base of the Burkinabé army in Centre-Nord.

19 Traditional authorities – the second relevant actor in Centre-Nord – are only contacted by nine percent of respondents for security provision and by 27 percent of respondents when confronted by violence.

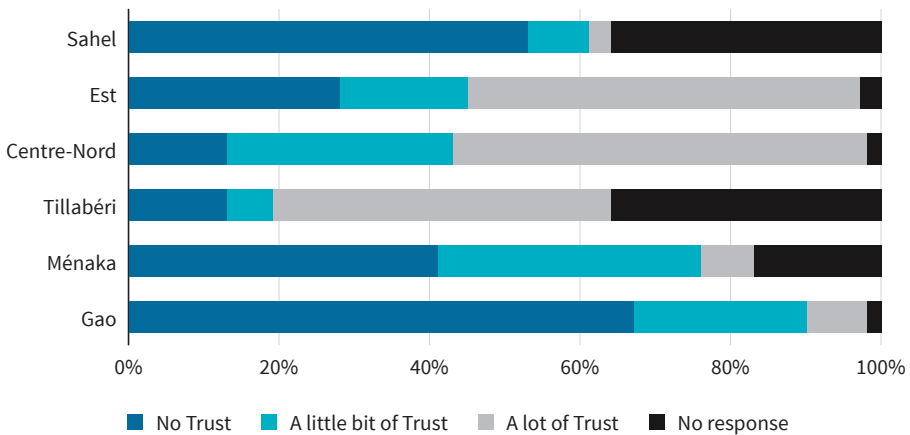
20 Beyond the hypothetical, 58 percent of respondents state to never have provided security to themselves or to another community member, and a mere 15 percent to have participated in activities to improve security.

21 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021.

**Figure 3 Trust in police and security forces (per region)**



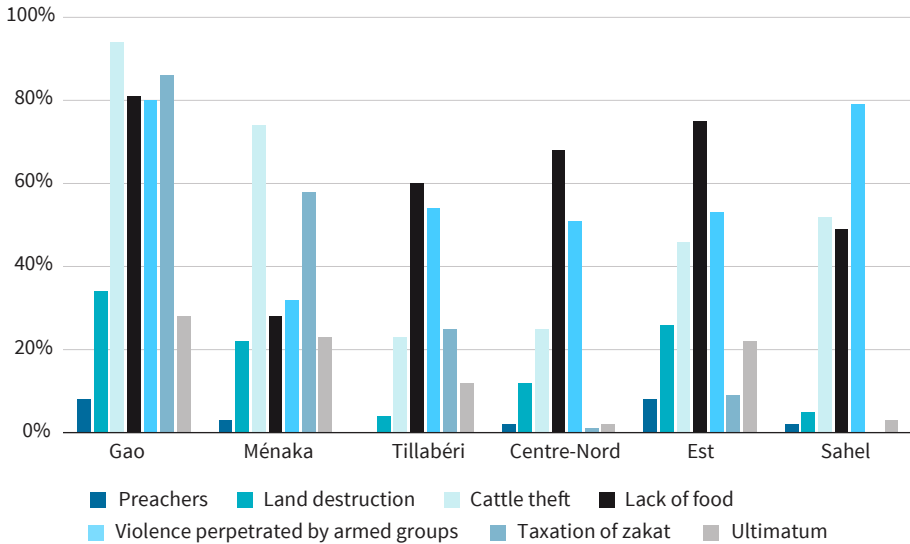
**Figure 4 Trust in self-defense groups & local security initiatives (per region)**



Nonetheless, interviewed residents identified threats other than security challenges as more pressing, with many survey respondents highlighting the threat of climate change. Most survey respondents (68%) perceive food insecurity as the main threat, followed by violence perpetrated by VEOs (51%) and cattle theft

(25%) (see Figure 5 below).<sup>22</sup> Respondents also highlighted the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures taken to contain it.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 5 Security threats (per region)**



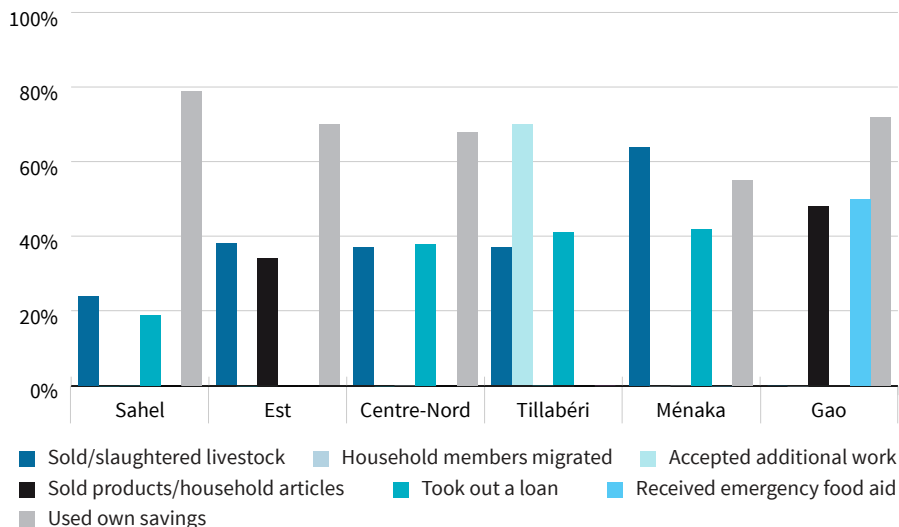
Similar to other regions, respondents in Centre-Nord highlighted their self-reliance in the face of these multidimensional threats. More than 60 percent of surveyed residents stressed that no-one helped them cope with the effect of negative events, and as a result 40 percent relied on their private network of family or friends. When looking at their strategies to deal with external shocks, we noticed that respondents primarily rely on their own savings (68%), taking out loans (38%) or slaughtering or selling their livestock (37%) (see Figure 6 below). These coping strategies underline the lack of effective state presence to support communities in need.

22 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulsa, 19 February 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021. Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021. Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Mané, 16 February 2021. Interview with a representative of a traditional leader, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021.

23 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Pissila, 17 February 2021.

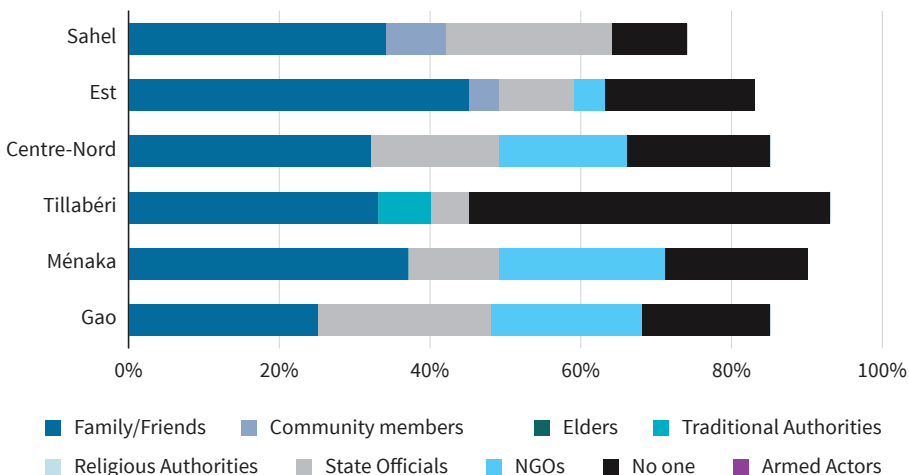


**Figure 6 How households cope with shocks (per region)**



This self-reliance in part also extends to basic service provision, with 50 percent of respondents stressing they primarily relied on themselves and their friends and families. Yet inhabitants of Centre-Nord – more so than residents in neighboring Sahel and Est – appear to be more reliant on external actors, including both municipal authorities and NGOs, in the quest for basic services (see Figure 7 below).

**Figure 7 Community actor contacted for basic service provision (per region)**



In contrast, customary authorities such as traditional chiefs and religious leaders – similar to all regions studied – do not appear to play a relevant role in either supporting community members in coping with shocks or the provision of basic services. The following sections will first dissect their role in governance provision in the Centre-Nord region, before turning to the multiple ways that customary authorities are impacting community resilience.

# 3 Customary authorities as local governance actors in Centre-Nord

## 3.1 Prevailing local governance structure

Centre-Nord features a juxtaposition of governance structures led by government representatives, elected leaders, and traditional authorities. As a caveat, it is worth noting that exact areas of competence and geographical influence may vary from one governance structure to another. It is nevertheless possible to establish the following approximate equivalents:

Traditional and state authorities			
Administrative Level	Centrally Appointed	Elected Leaders	Traditional Leaders
Region	Governor	Regional Council	/
Kingdom <sup>24</sup>	/	/	Chiefs (Dima of Boussouma and the Chief of Sanmatenga)
Province	High commissioner	/	Canton chief ( <i>chef de canton</i> )
Department/Commune	Prefecture	Mayor (elected by municipal council)	Group chief ( <i>chef de groupement</i> )/canton chief
Village/Fractions		“Comité Villageois de Développement (CVD)”	Village chief ( <i>chef de village</i> )/fraction chief ( <i>chef de fraction</i> )/tribe chief ( <i>chef de tribu</i> )/land chief ( <i>chef de terre</i> )
Neighborhood	/	/	District chief ( <i>chef de district/quartier/secteur</i> )
Family <sup>25</sup>	/	/	Family chief ( <i>chef de famille</i> )

24 The kingdoms are not administrative entities per se, but overlap multiple provinces, hence their insertions above the provinces in the table.

25 The family is not an administrative entity per se, but remains the smallest societal organizational unit, hence its place in the table.

This hybrid governance structure has the potential to create legal issues as to the delineation and overlaps between the law and the custom. Although the Constitution foresees the possibility of harmonizing traditional customs with state legislation, in practice the two sources of regulation remain distinct, with special legal accommodations made to leave certain areas to the sole ambit of customs. This is especially the case when it comes to land, as the Law on Farm and Land Reorganization excludes land under the control of traditional authorities from the scope of state law and recognizes the latter's role as an indispensable partner in land development policies.

Over the past decades, development policies have facilitated the emergence of a new category of local leaders, including the committees for village development (CVD). Created in 2006 as part of a decentralization initiative aimed at transferring more executive power to villages, CVDs are primarily tasked with contributing to the elaboration and implementation of development plans, and participating in municipal commissions for local development.<sup>26</sup> In practice, the CVD is established by the municipal council and accountable to it.<sup>27</sup> It runs on multiple sources of financing: a budgetary post of the municipal council, profits generated by its development activities (including works directly delegated to it by the municipal council), development subsidies, and donations.<sup>28</sup>

Some municipalities, such as Kaya and Pissila, also have set up additional commissions to handle land management.<sup>29</sup> These village land management committees (*commissions de conciliation foncière villageoise*, CCFV) are created at the level of villages to bring together the land chief (*chef de terre*) and representatives of the village chief (*chef du village*), a religious authority, and the farmer and herder communities, as well as women and youth.<sup>30</sup>

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26 Traoré, S. “[Qu'est-ce qu'un conseil villageois de développement?](#)”, Radio France Internationale, March 17, 2018.

27 In practice, the relationships between the CVDs and traditional authorities are characterized by a dynamic symbiosis. Early on, the CVD president – oftentimes its only member – was often chosen among the entourage of traditional authorities, when they themselves did not accede to this position. Maïga, I. “[Conseils villageois de développement : Un outil efficace du développement local](#)”, LeFaso.net, July 12, 2007.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Kaya, 3 December 2020. Interview with a civil servant, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.

30 Yameogo, A. 2020. «[Guide de Conciliation simplifié à l'usage des Commissions de Conciliation Foncières Villageoises](#)» Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Aménagements Hydro-agricoles du Burkina Faso.

### 3.2 Prevailing customary authority structure

Mossi (Moagha) society is characterized by a hierarchical, structured, and centralized administration. It consists of kingdoms, which are composed of different substructures. There are five main Mossi kingdoms in Burkina Faso, along with numerous smaller, autonomous, yet connected kingdoms.<sup>31</sup> In parallel to the state apparatus, there are two kingdoms in Centre-Nord, controlled by traditional chiefs competing for power and influence: the Dima of Boussouma, based in Boulsa and spanning the municipalities of Pissila, Mané, and Kaya among others, and the chieftaincy of Sanmatenga, based in Kaya and spanning the canton of Sanmatenga.<sup>32</sup> These two principal chiefs share informally delineated zones of influence, in which they exert their authority on all respondents – regardless of their ethnicities. Among their subjects are the Fulanis, who also have their own chiefs. Although the latter enjoy some autonomy, they remain under the authority of the Mossi chieftaincies.

#### Box 1 Historical competition between the kingdoms

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Boussouma family usurped the throne of Sanmatenga. Historical misgivings persist even today: domestic politics in Kaya remain contested between those who advocated for the return of the Sanmatenga family and partisans of the Boussouma family.<sup>33</sup> In practice, however, the Chief of Sanmatenga enjoys vast freedom of action and is merely bound by the respect of traditions and customs, as well as symbolic submission to the Boussouma Dima (i.e., the Chief is enthroned by the Dima himself).

31 Englebert, P. 1996. “Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Arica”, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

32 The Dima of Boussouma is called Naaba Sigré and the Chief of Sanmatenga is the Naaba Koom. Politization is a phenomenon which transcends all layers of the traditional hierarchy: the former Dima of Boussouma – Naaba Sonré – was an opposition member of parliament under the banner of the Party for Democracy and Progress-Socialist Party (PDP-PS), while the new Dima has even created his own political party, the Panafrican Alliance for Democracy (APD). See also: Hilgers, M. and Mazzocchetti, J. 2010. “[Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas du Burkina Faso](#)”, Hommes et sociétés, Karthala. Kadari, S. “[La création d’un parti politique par le Dima de Boussouma marque un recul de la démocratie représentative](#)”, LeFaso.net, May 21, 2020.

33 Vaast, M. 2010. “[Le recours à la chefferie moaga dans la commune de Kaya. Stratégies personnelles ou opposition populaire ?](#)”, in Mathieu Hilgers éd., “Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire. Le cas du Burkina Faso”, Hommes et sociétés, Karthala.

Beneath them, power is shared between the “administrative” or “political” chieftaincy (village chief or canton chief) and the “land chieftaincy,” also called *tě̃n-soab-kě̃ema* (water chief, bush chief).<sup>34</sup> Although the latter enjoys much more legitimacy, their status is left legally unregulated.<sup>35</sup> The district chief and canton chief are designated by their communities on the basis of their wisdom and hold authority solely over their ethnic communities. The position of village chief is hereditary. He acts as the surrogate of the king, which confers significant influence on him. Some of these positions can also be held simultaneously; notably, a village chief can simultaneously act as a canton chief.

Relations between lower level traditional authorities do not replicate the power struggles that exist at the kingdom level. Based on the qualitative data garnered, from both community members and traditional authorities, it emerges that traditional authorities entertain good relationships among themselves. They frequently meet to discuss issues and conflicts, as well as to exchange information on what is happening within their communities.<sup>36</sup> According to respondents, customary authorities tend to meet especially at religious ceremonies and major events happening within their communities (celebrations, weddings). Additionally, they get together at meetings with state authorities at the town hall, which are all the more frequent during times of crises.

### 3.3 Local governance in practice

In practice, customary and state authorities interact on a regular basis. They have developed a dynamic relationship based on “cohabitation” (co-living), all relying on one another to carry out their tasks, learning from one another. There is however a growing tendency among traditional authorities to become politicized, mostly as a reaction to successive decentralization initiatives. Prior to the 1990s, when the state was highly centralized, traditional authorities had no serious contenders in their mostly rural fiefdoms. The emergence of local actors, backed with electoral legitimacy (municipal authorities, development committees, etc.),

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34 Ouedraogo, H. M. G. 2006. “[Décentralisation et pouvoirs traditionnels : le paradoxe des légitimités locales](#)”, *Mondes en développement*, no. 133, pp. 9-29.

35 Ouedraogo, H. M. G. 2006, *op. cit.* It is also worth mentioning that, in Kaya, the legitimacy of traditional authorities is all the more pregnant that it is grounded in their historical role in protection local communities against former colonial powers (see: *Révoltes et opposition dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas du Burkina Faso*).

36 The frequency of their meetings has also increased since the start of the VEO’s spill-over.

has increasingly challenged their monopoly and chipped away at their power. Their bids to get themselves elected or accede to these local bodies in other ways can thus be interpreted as an attempt to nibble some power back, or at least limit its loss.<sup>37</sup>

Frustrated with the continued absence of both a fixed legal status and a clear partition of tasks, coupled with a feeling that municipal authorities are using them, traditional authorities increasingly tend to get elected or appointed to state organs to get access to resources and organize the provision of public services. The phenomenon is so widespread that some scholars assert that being a traditional authority has now become the “royal way” to being elected.<sup>38</sup> When traditional authorities do not themselves get elected to municipal positions, their influence increasingly depends on their party affiliation and the corresponding responsibilities assigned to them in function thereof.<sup>39</sup>

Traditional authorities will also not shy away from encouraging their subordinates to vote for specific parties – sometimes even standing near the ballot box on election day.<sup>40</sup> In Kaya, the canton chiefs meet behind closed doors with politicians to hash out a campaign strategy. Orders on how to vote are then passed down to the village chiefs, who are in charge of giving the instructions to their communities. In exchange, traditional authorities may be promised financial perks, or the promise of investments in their communities.<sup>41</sup> The growing politicization that results therefrom effectively undermines the traditional authorities’ legitimacy, as it suggests they are not above the political fray.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, survey respondents and key informants (KIs) said traditional and state authorities maintain a productive relationship when it comes to handling day-to-day issues in the municipalities and manage to get along without too much friction. Traditional authorities are recognized as indispensable

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37 Ouedraogo, H. M. G. 2006, *op. cit.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Finken, M. and Latouche, D. 2001. [Décentralisation, acteurs locaux et services sociaux en Afrique: l'impact de la décentralisation sur les services de la santé et d'éducation en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre](#). Programme de Développement Municipal, Centre de recherches pour le développement international.

40 Hilgers, M. and Mazzochetti, J. 2010. [“Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas du Burkina Faso”](#), Karthala.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Bertrand, E. Sindayigaya, A. Deceukelier, B. 2013. [Quelles opportunités d'action pour la société civile dans la gestion des conflits au Burkina Faso ?](#) Washington: Search for Common Ground:21.

intermediaries by state authorities, playing an important role in disseminating information. They are lauded for their ability to mobilize their communities and make decisions and rules respected. Some state authorities affirm that any actions or measures require their involvement to be successful. As a state representative in Pissila put it:

*Traditional and religious authorities are societal actors so we get involved with them because they have influence and they are listened to so very often if you involve them in the activities there are good hopes of success.<sup>43</sup>*

However, and as discussed previously, this positive assessment is tainted by allegations of politization and corruption:

*The only main problem here is the involvement of traditional authorities in politics. [...] They are betraying their oath and their people. Afterwards they will not be able to perform their duty properly in the eyes of their people and anything that comes out of their mouths will not be credible.<sup>44</sup>*

The politization of traditional authorities is strongly rejected across all layers of the civil society, especially among the youth. One young representative from Kongoussi denounced electoral proselytism and traditional authorities having a seat in the national assembly, saying traditional authorities are “too precious” to be involved in “politician politics.”<sup>45</sup> A state representative in Pissila raised the core contradiction between traditional leaders’ authority – which is supposedly absolute and undisputable – and the opposition and criticisms of political leaders inherent in a democratic political system.<sup>46</sup> By getting involved in politics, traditional authorities expose themselves to open criticism, which is a serious risk to their authority and legitimacy.

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43 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.

44 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Kaya, 1 December 2020.

45 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021.

46 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.



## 4 Customary authorities' contributions to community resilience

Given the crucial role that customary authorities play in local governance in Centre-Nord, this section delves into their roles in contributing to community resilience. In particular, we analyze the role of those customary leaders considered most accessible by respondents: village and district chiefs, as well as imams and priests. Religious leaders mostly serve as moral role models. As such, their actions are scrutinized by the general public and they play an important role in regulating morals within communities.<sup>47</sup>

According to survey respondents and KIs, customary authorities contribute to building community resilience in four main ways: through (1) their stabilizing role following major crises, (2) their role as intermediaries in the provision of public services, (3) their role in the management of resources, and (4) their role in sheltering IDPs.

### 4.1 Customary authorities' stabilizing role following major crises

Traditional and religious authorities' stabilizing role in the face of major crises is largely recognized by respondents: over 80 percent recognize their role in calling for peace and unity (see Figure 8 below). Traditional authorities also stand out by performing rituals (67%) – which religious authorities seem less inclined to do (20%) – with the traditional minister of talismans of the traditional chief in Boulsa explaining that

*In the face of violence we organize protection rituals, give protection talismans to our Koglweogos and invoke our ancestors to protect our security and defense forces and all the families here in Boulsa.*<sup>48</sup>

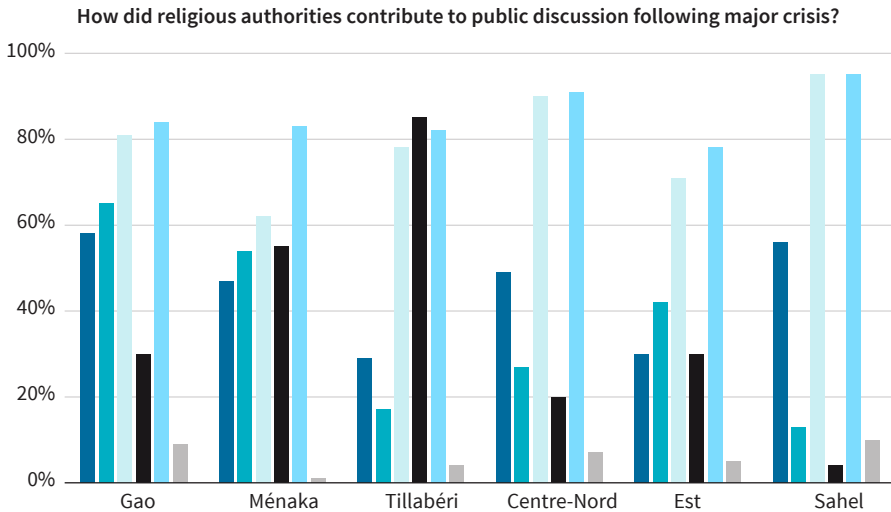
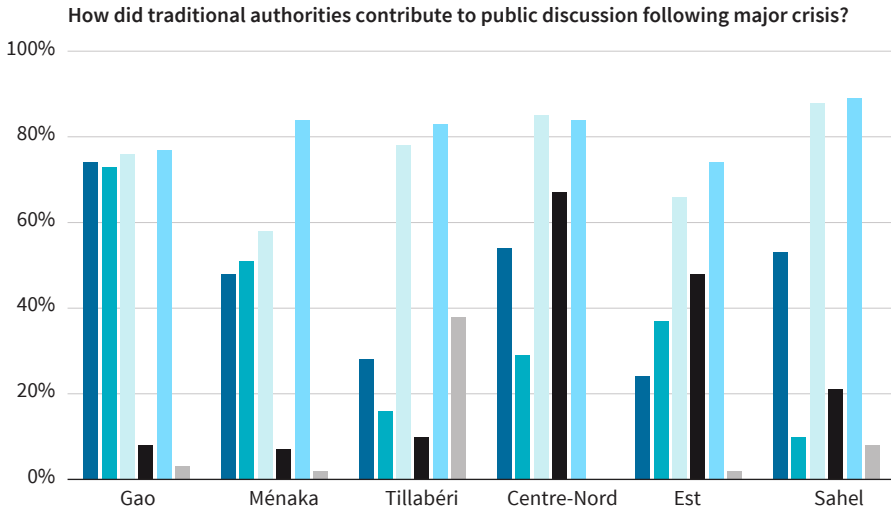
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47 Hagsberg, S. 2019. "Chefs coutumiers et responsables religieux" in "[Sécurité par le bas. Perceptions et perspectives citoyennes des défis de sécurité au Burkina Faso](#)", Uppsala University.

48 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulsa, 18 February 2021.

Traditional authorities also play a role in information-sharing following crises by explaining what happened (over 49%). However, they seem relatively reluctant to communicate or mediate directly with the source of the threat (28%).

**Figure 8 Traditional and religious authorities' discursive actions in the face of a major crisis (per region)**



■ explaining what is happening 
 ■ called for communication/mediation with source of threat 
 ■ called for unity 
 ■ organised a ritual 
 ■ called for peace 
 ■ other

Traditional authorities' role in stabilization nevertheless has its limits. Besides appealing communication within their community and performing rituals, traditional authorities are not relied upon by respondents for material help. At best, they act as coordinators by inviting community members for meetings and coordinating their relief efforts (37%). Respondents do not expect their traditional authorities to provide them with security. When asked what they would like traditional leaders to do in the future, the overwhelming majority wished for them to continue to play their current coordinating role.

Following major crises, rather than provide security or emergency material aid, traditional authorities therefore bolster their communities' resilience through actions aimed at promoting social cohesion, and intra-community dialogue and coordination, while tapping into the community's spiritual beliefs.

## 4.2 Customary authorities as intermediaries in the provision of public services

The provision of public services is handled by state authorities, with customary authorities generally being considered auxiliaries. Their role is mainly limited to serving as “intermediaries” or “facilitators” between the state and local populations, such as by relaying information about state decisions to their communities. They are nonetheless consulted before all actions regarding the development of the municipality, and, in function of the municipality (especially Mossi-concentrated ones such as Kaya), they may influence the decisions themselves. On the topics of education and health, their role is to raise awareness about crucial topics and mobilize the populations.<sup>49</sup>

Respondents hailing from NGOs and civil society consider traditional leaders as indispensable intermediaries with the population as well as key development partners, mainly by dint of their advocacy role. A state representative in Pissila even went so far as to say that traditional authorities act as “spokespersons” for NGOs.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in Boulsa, customary authorities helped NGOs with the coordination of the construction of toilets and showers, while religious leaders regularly assist with specific development projects, such as the distribution of food and basic necessities, as well as vaccination campaigns. In Kaya and Kongoussi, traditional authorities helped NGOs welcome and take care of IDPs by

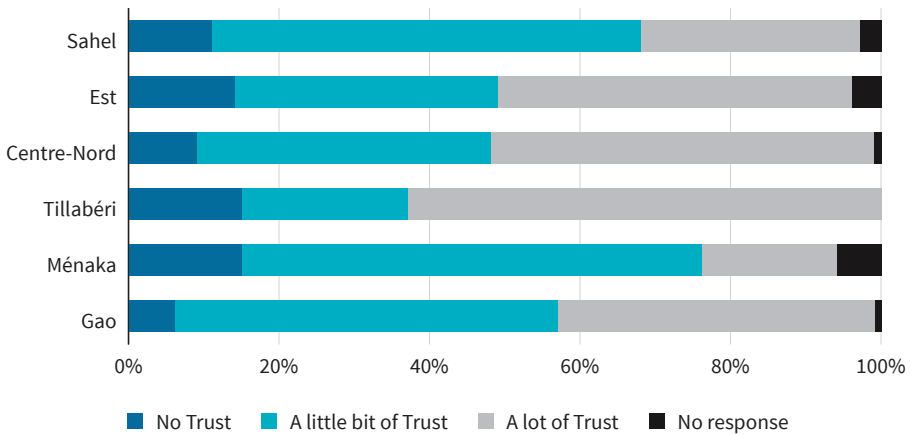
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49 Finken, M. and Latouche, D. 2001, *op. cit.*

50 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.

collecting food and basic necessities. There seems to be a smooth mutually beneficial relationship between them, helped by the fact that NGOs enjoy relatively high rates of confidence among the respondents (see Figure 9 below).

**Figure 9 Trust in NGOs (per region)**



### 4.3 Customary authorities’ role in land management

In the Mossi areas of the country, the “Tengsoaba” land chiefs hold the hereditary power over land succession rights and serve, in that respect, as true links with traditional ancestry. As custodians of the original “pact” sealed with the local land deity, the land chiefs have traditionally had the right to distribute and allocate community land, as well as to enforce customary laws and rules. According to customs, land is only leased and remains the property of the indigenous people.<sup>51</sup> This means that other groups who wanted to settle on the land, such as the Fulani, had to enter into a pact with the local land chiefs: in exchange to leased land, they had to submit to the chiefs and respect Mossi customs and traditions. For the first generations of Fulani settlers, the submission was thus consensual and did not cause grievances. However, new generations of Fulanis, born and raised in Mossi lands, have increasing trouble blindly accepting the original pact. They feel that the land is as much theirs as the Mossis’ and advocate for more freedom of action and recognition. If not adequately addressed in the future, these grievances could form a potential societal fissure.

<sup>51</sup> In practice, the land chiefs cannot exercise their competence over the entire territory under their control. Micro-management is delegated to the village chiefs (teng naaba), which remain directly accountable to the land chiefs. Bertrand, E. et al 2013, *op. cit.*

In Centre-Nord, traditional authorities' role in land management enables them to play an active role in welcoming IDPs and helping them find pieces of land to settle on, but also in organizing the collection of food, medicines, and other basic necessities, and encouraging the population to take care of them.<sup>52</sup> In practice, project implementers therefore make sure to involve traditional authorities, or at least carry out the project in a way to avoid alienating them.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, while few question the moral imperative of taking care of IDPs, interviews with traditional authorities and community members bring to the fore the frustrations it generates, both among IDPs, who reportedly often complain about how they are treated, and among host populations, who deplore that resources are being diverted and reallocated to IDPs.

Traditional authorities themselves deplore the lack of infrastructure, resources, food, and financing to accommodate IDPs. There are repeated complaints about health care centers being full, to the point that mosques have started welcoming patients.<sup>54</sup> IDPs are being increasingly perceived as a security threat, as explained by a pastor interviewed in Boulssa:

*The difficulties that we have are that we have very few resources to be able to satisfy the demand, especially with the massive presence of IDPs; and this reality puts us in a situation of insecurity insofar as it is the end that justifies the means, which means that if these IDPs do not have enough to eat that can lead them to accept all kinds of proposals [...].<sup>55</sup>*

Complementary aid brought by state authorities helps but is deemed insufficient. Although respondents said that a significant share of IDPs returned home during recent lulls in violence, renewed clashes are likely to trigger new displacements. Decreasing resources in the face of ever-increasing numbers of IDPs generated by VEOs' lethal campaigns is thus likely to further aggravate the tensions going forward.

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52 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulssa, 4 December 2020.

53 This is done by maintaining them informed before the start of the project, by regularly consulting with them, by involving them in mediation and conflict resolution, etc. See: Ouedraogo, H. M. G. 2006, *op. cit.*

54 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Boulssa, 4 December 2020: "In terms of health, we often contribute at the mosque to treat displaced people. [...] The health centres are full of sick people due to the massive arrival of IDPs in our municipality."

55 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Boulssa, 1 December 2020.

## 5 Customary authorities' role in strengthening resilience against VEOs

To understand traditional and religious authorities' role in strengthening resilience against VEOs, we also explored their role in security provision, conflict resolution, building cohesion, and ensuring inclusion of youth and women.

### 5.1 Customary authorities' role in security provision

At the macro level, traditional authorities' role in community security is twofold. First, they act as primary intermediaries between security and defense forces and the population. In this capacity, they disseminate security information, raise awareness about security risks, encourage their communities to work with the security and defense forces, and denounce suspicious elements, as well as exhort residents to observe security measures. In this line, they also monitor their communities through informal mechanisms of surveillance and convey relevant information to the security and defense forces. They sometimes also engage in targeted preventative measures, such as their participation in the so-called "peace caravans" organized by state authorities. The peace caravans are large fora bringing together leaders of different socio-professional strata for the purpose of discussing and promoting measures to reinforce social cohesion and safeguard peace.<sup>56</sup>

Second, traditional authorities informally participate in the provision of security through their *de facto* control over local self-defense units of the Koglweegos.<sup>57</sup> While Koglweego members have in part integrated into the state-supported VDP structure and operate under regional military commands, Koglweego units that in practice answer to traditional chiefs continue to operate in parallel. Both actors have developed a dynamic, mutually beneficial relationship. The Koglweegos provide

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56 See: Burina Labaali, "[Centre du Nord: La coalition Jam a organisé un forum avec les leaders d'opinion pour un retour à la paix à Kaya](#)", January 17, 2021.

57 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021 and confirmed to us by our local researcher.

traditional leaders with personal security during public events and ceremonies, while chiefs in turn provide them with legitimacy, help raise financial and material support for them, and carry out rituals and blessings before their missions.<sup>58</sup>

The Koglweegos are a powerful, but controversial tool in the hands of traditional authorities. The Koglweegos have on several occasions been accused of carrying out “offensive” actions against ethnic minorities, outside of their defensive mandate. These extrajudicial actions are said to have fueled ethnic conflicts, thereby incidentally facilitating the recruitment of ethnic minorities by VEOs.<sup>59</sup> Traditional chiefs overall have fallen short of condemning the Koglweegos’ alleged abuses, which leads some interviewees to allege they are tacitly complicit.

### **Box 2 The Yirgou massacre**

During the night from December 31, 2019 to January 1, 2020, VEOs attacked the village of Yirgou, killing six people – including the village chief and his son. The local Koglweego immediately retaliated, killing between 49 (according to the Burkinabé government) and 210 (according to the Association against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities) people. The Koglweegos purposefully targeted members of the Fulani community, accusing them of siding with VEOs. An investigation was launched by the prosecutor of Kaya.<sup>60</sup>

Going forward, and provided that the role of self-defense groups such as the Koglweegos in providing security keeps increasing, traditional authorities’ links to these groups will have to be recognized and taken into account while designing policies to enhance security in Centre-Nord.

## **5.2 Customary authorities’ role in conflict resolution**

When asked about which actors are the most predominant in conflict resolution processes, respondents overwhelmingly mentioned traditional authorities (41%),

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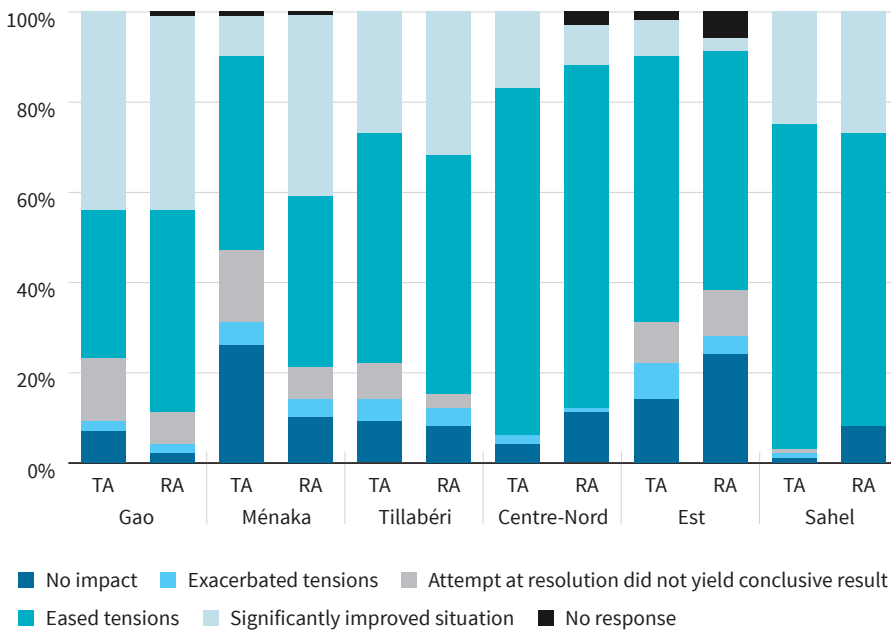
58 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Mane.

59 International Crisis Group 2020, *op. cit.*

60 Kansié, S. “[Burkina Faso – Massacres de Yirgou : 2 ans après les tueries, la justice se fait toujours attendre](#)”, Cenzo, February 11, 2021.

ahead of armed actors (30%),<sup>61</sup> for conflicts both inside and outside the village.<sup>62</sup> This is especially true when the object of the conflict pertains to land, notably land conflicts and farmer-herder disputes (80%), which often crystalize around ethnicities. They are further relied on to handle marital and family disputes. In Mané, respondents said they also have to handle disputes between gold mining companies and the population.<sup>63</sup> To date, respondents in the relatively safe municipalities in the southern part of the region rate their traditional authorities' conflict resolution efforts as highly effective (see Figure 10 below).

**Figure 10 Effectiveness of traditional and religious authorities' conflict resolution efforts (per region)**



61 In Mané however, respondents tend to point to the prefecture and state authorities more generally as primary handlers of conflicts.

62 In contrast with other regions in Burkina Faso, religious authorities overall only play a secondary role in conflict resolution processes – when they are involved at all. They are sometimes called in by the chief to present a point of view based on the scriptures (in the same way that civil servants are called in to bring their technical expertise).

63 Interview with a state representative, Respondent, Mané, 27 November 2020.



In practice, once traditional authorities are presented with a complaint, they send trusted surrogates to find out what happened on the ground.<sup>64</sup> Subsequently, they organize meetings with the parties, along with all relevant stakeholders (including the “wise men,” the “griots,” the “notables,” the families of the parties, religious authorities, the relevant civil servants, the Koglweogos, and the elderly, in function of the conflict at hand). Traditional authorities will hear the parties’ grievances and mediate the dialogue, with a view to obtain a decision by consensus.<sup>65</sup> Some say they do not really take decisions or pass judgments,<sup>66</sup> in contrast with the justice provision process, which mostly lies in the hands of armed groups and the police, as well as civil servants and elected officials.

Both qualitative and quantitative data show that traditional leaders’ decisions are generally well-accepted. The very few dissenting voices among respondents nuanced the statement by adding that acceptance can be driven by fear of having to bring the case to the police, the gendarmerie, or the judiciary and incurring punishments, fines, or even prison sentences. Others underline cultural factors, such as the fact that in the Moagha culture, opposition to the chief’s decision can lead the protagonist to be cursed. Both the high approval rates of traditional authorities’ role in conflict resolution, as well as fear of the alternatives, could explain the high rate (70%) of survey respondents stating they would not do anything if they disagreed with a decision.

Conflict resolution in Centre-Nord is also characterized by a high level of involvement of the Koglweogos and VDPs<sup>67</sup>. This is particularly the case in Pissila – where, interestingly, traditional authorities participated in the setting up of the Koglweogo unit and hold very tight relations with them.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, traditional authorities in Boulssa participated in the setting up of a self-defense group in the area of the municipality.<sup>69</sup> Some respondents said Koglweogos and VDPs are often the first

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64 The district chief is usually first called upon to attempt mediation. If no solution is found, the case may be transferred to the village chief, followed by the canton chief, and finally the great chief (*grand chef*).

65 Complementary to this institutionalized conflict resolution process, some traditional authorities also use more ceremonial mechanisms. For instance, in Pissila chiefs compel parties to swear before an object invested with sacred or magical powers before alleging their claims, which often forces the delinquent party to drop its claim.

66 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Pissila, 17 February 2021.

67 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulssa, 19 February 2021.

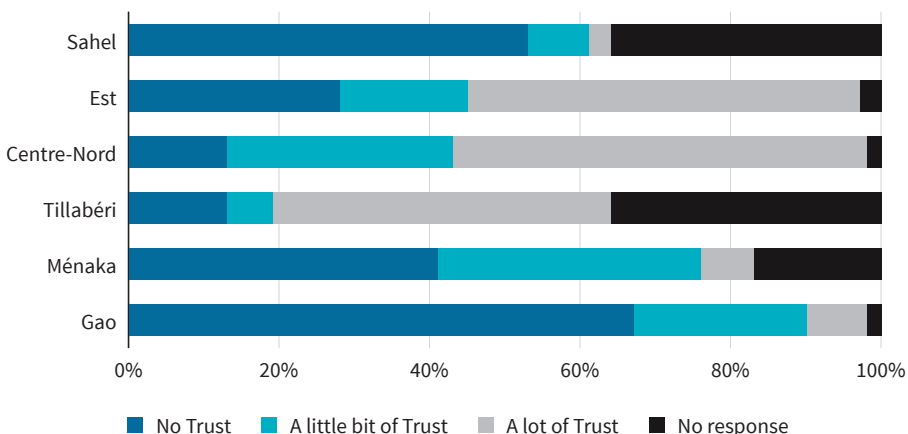
Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Kongoussi, 15 February 2021.

68 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Pissila, 3 December 2020.

69 Interview with a traditional leader, Respondent, Boulssa, 19 February 2021: “*As for security, we supported the establishment of the self-defence group in the province.*”

external actors consulted by parties to a conflict, before traditional and religious authorities, the police and the gendarmerie.<sup>70</sup> Respondents view the Koglweegos and VDPs as straightforward and trustworthy, and they enjoy the highest rate of trust in all regions of Burkina Faso included in our study (see Figure 11 below).

**Figure 11 Trust in self-defense groups & local security initiatives (per region)**



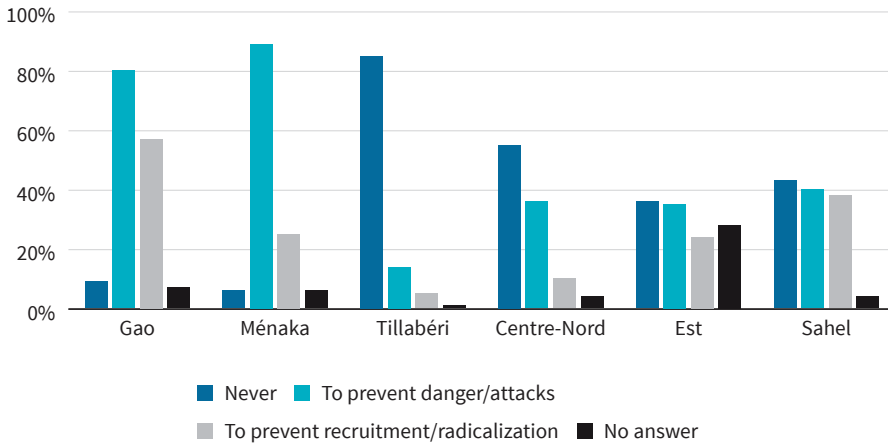
This may suggest a more general trend we witness across all regions where, when a conflict turns violent, traditional authorities pull out and refer it to the armed actors present on the ground. The more parties turn to violence, the less sway traditional authorities exert on conflict resolution processes, the lesser the role they play in building social cohesion and resilience as well as serving as a dam against violent extremism. While in the short term this does not appear to affect their legitimacy, this trend could seriously undermine their *raison d'être* going forward.

At the same time, however, traditional authorities may remain relevant when it comes to engaging as intermediaries between the population and state security forces. In Boulsa, for example, traditional authorities negotiated the release of a Koglweogo chief who had been arrested by government forces.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the majority of survey respondents in Centre-Nord disapprove of customary authorities entering into negotiations with VEOs (see Figure 12 below).

70 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Boulsa, 4 February 2021. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Boulsa, 4 December 2020.

71 Interview with community member, Respondent, Boulsa, 4 December 2020.

**Figure 12 When is it acceptable for traditional and religious authorities to negotiate with VEOs (per region)**



### 5.3 Traditional authorities’ contribution to community cohesion

In Burkina Faso, customary authorities are considered mediators who intervene in any problems related to community life.<sup>72</sup> They are the ones who define societal mores, but also behaviors seen as deviating from the norm and that can lead to banishment from the community.<sup>73</sup> They regularly preach peace, unity, solidarity, and social cohesion. They enjoy political authority and power distinct from that of the state, bestowed upon them by their ancestry.<sup>74</sup>

In Centre-Nord specifically, customary authorities fare relatively well when it comes to giving equal treatment to various subgroups in society, such as men vs. women, youth vs. elders, herder vs. farmers, and rich vs. poor. That is not to say that no room for improvement exists. When it comes to the equal treatment of women, for example, only 42 percent of the (predominantly male) respondents feel that traditional and religious authorities put men and women on equal footing (see Figure 13 below).<sup>75</sup>

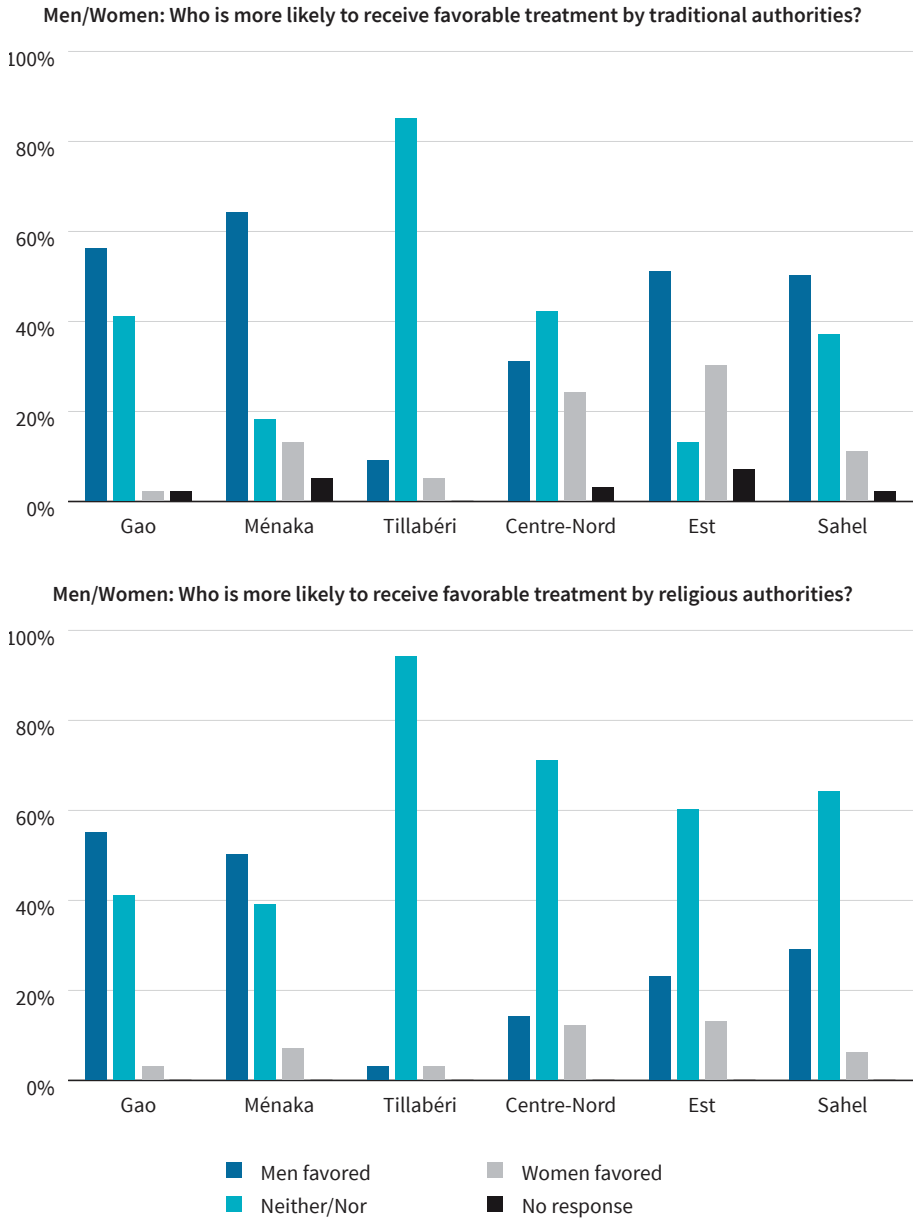
72 Hagsberg, S. 2019, *op. cit.*

73 Hagberg, S. 2007. “[Traditional Chieftaincy, Party Politics and Political Violence in Burkina Faso](#)”, in: Lars Buur, L. Kyed, H. *State recognition and democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Palgrave, pp. 131-153.

74 Halpougoudou, M. 2004. Chefferie traditionnelle et pouvoir républicain : une alliance contre-nature ?, *Espace scientifique*, no. 02.

75 For religious authorities, the figure is 71%.

**Figure 13 Traditional and religious authorities' treatment of men vs. women (per region)**



One reason for this is that the Moagha society remains very patriarchal and conservative. Women cannot speak directly to chiefs (unless indicated otherwise), and seldom have the right to attend meetings. When they have the right to express their opinions, the extent to which these opinions are taken into account is very limited, according to most respondents. In addition, women must use intermediaries to reach traditional authorities.<sup>76</sup>

An NGO director in Mané articulated the situation very clearly:

*It is very difficult for a traditional authority to convene women for meetings. Generally, among the Mossi, it is between men that decisions are made, so there are no meetings between women and the traditional authorities in a concrete way. It is always indirect: they always go through their husbands to transmit the message. There is what the woman can say and what she cannot say, what she can demand and what she cannot demand.<sup>77</sup>*

One school director in Mané addressed the role of women as assigned by tradition in Moagha societies very bluntly:

*According to Moagha traditions, a woman's place is in the home, looking after [...] her household in general. Interacting with the king or the Naaba does not exist, which means that the female voice does not carry weight. Among the Mossi, the woman is submissive, she suffers. It is rather the men who are influenced by these authorities.<sup>78</sup>*

Traditional authorities are perceived to do better when it comes to the equal treatment of herders and farmers. More than 70 percent of our respondents believe the same treatment applies to both groups alike (see Figure 14 below). For the remaining respondents, a majority perceives the authorities to favor farmers over herders.<sup>79</sup>

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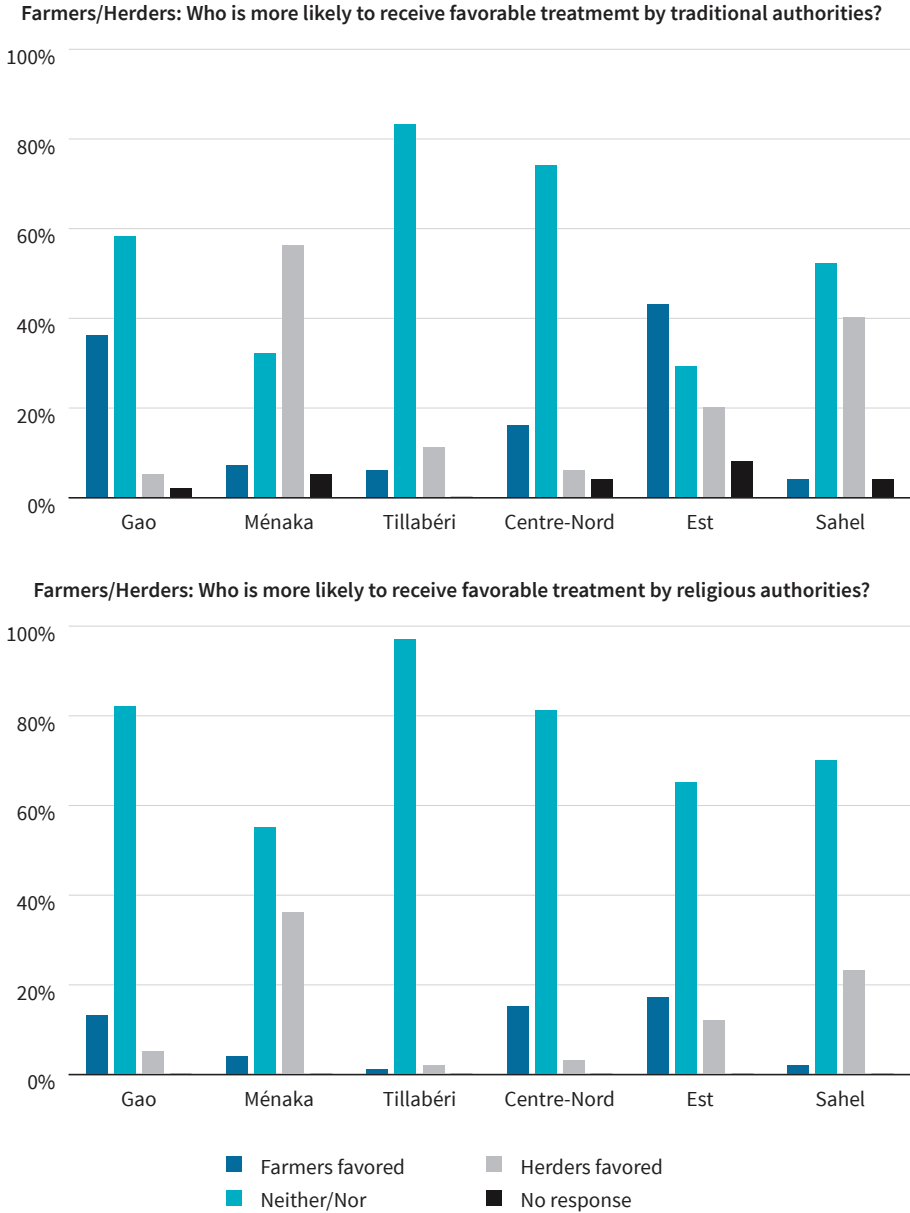
76 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Boulsa, 26 November 2020. Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kaya, 4 December 2020.

77 Interview with a NGO member, Respondent, Mané, 27 November 2020.

78 Interview with a civil servant, Respondent, Mané, 3 December 2020.

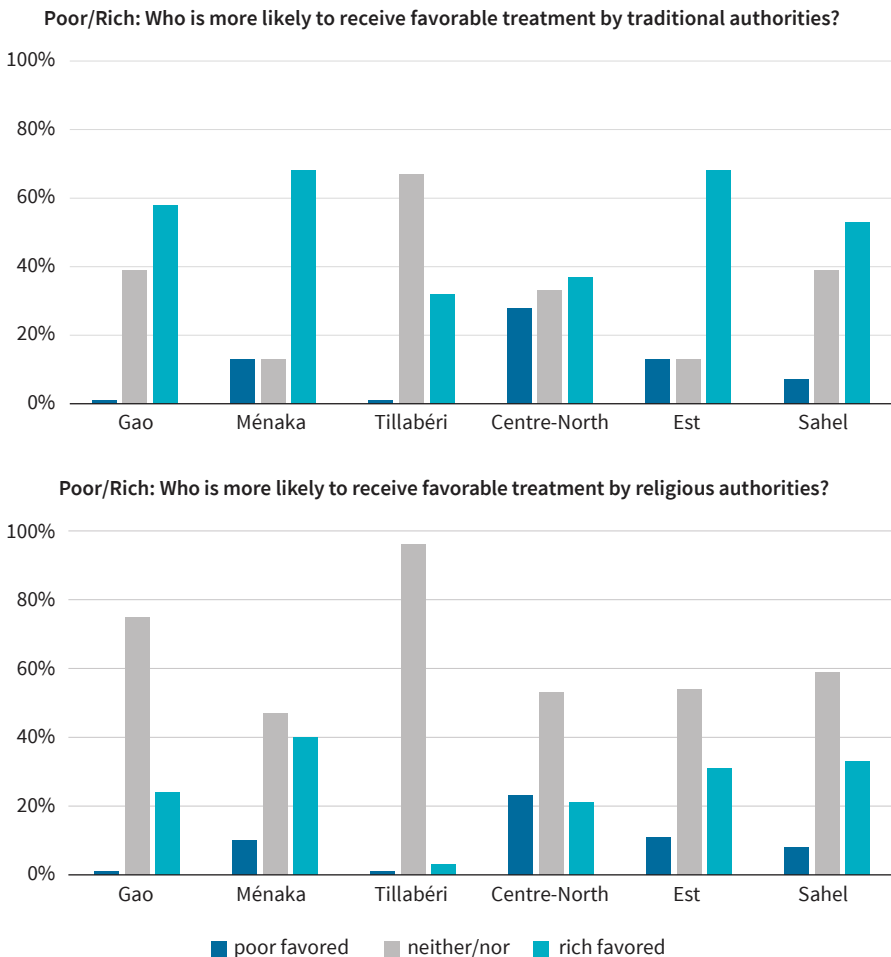
79 A similar distribution of scores is visible for religious authorities.

**Figure 14 Traditional and religious authorities' treatment of farmers vs. herders (per region)**

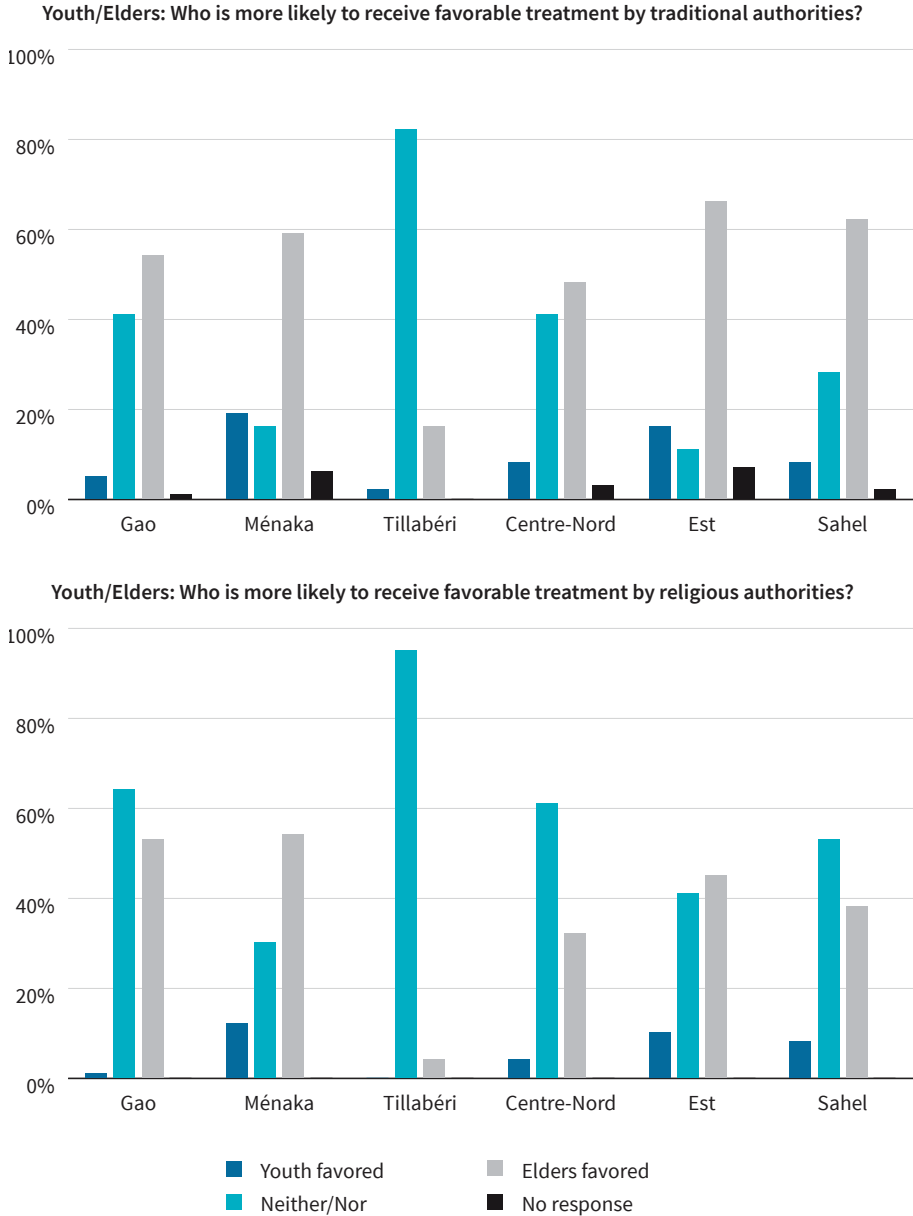


While the foregoing findings are consistent for both traditional and religious authorities, there are important differences when it comes to the rich-poor and the youth-elderly divides (see Figures 15 and 16 below). Notably, traditional authorities are perceived to be more inclined to side with the rich and the elderly than with the poor or young community members. By contrast, religious leaders are perceived as more fair, favoring neither of them.

**Figure 15 Traditional and religious authorities' treatment of rich vs. poor (per region)**



**Figure 16 Traditional and religious authorities' treatment of youth vs. elders (per region)**





## 5.4 Customary authorities' waning influence among young people

In a context where respondents across Centre-Nord warn that the lack of socio-economic opportunities and resources are making young people more susceptible to recruitment by VEOs, customary authorities are seen as exerting positive influence on younger generations, though increasingly less successfully.

Respondents explained customary authorities mainly draw their legitimacy among young people from a general respect for traditions, customs, and elders. In an effort to curb the influence of VEOs among young people, customary authorities have organized awareness-raising activities and education on peace and social cohesion. Some respondents said customary authorities' threats to curse those who join VEOs may also deter some would-be extremists.

One female resident of Kongoussi indicated customary authorities'

*great influence on the youth [...] is due to the fact that these authorities are opinion leaders and custodians of traditional and religious values. When a chief or a religious leader asks people not to do this or that, they have a strong chance of being listened to and followed. [...] Traditional and religious leaders sensitize the youth on the evils and harmful consequences of terrorism on social cohesion. In addition, traditional leaders do not hesitate to curse young people who try to join terrorist groups.<sup>80</sup>*

However, customary authorities' influence has been on the wane, to such an extent that some respondents say young people are now influencing traditional authorities with "Western ideas" instead. Customary authorities' influence is also less pronounced in Mané, due to a stronger presence of Christian beliefs (which leave less room for using the threat of religious curses). Lack of resources, both financial and material, also constitutes a serious strain on traditional authorities' ability to influence the youth. One *vicair*e in Mané draws out the limits of traditional authorities' influence:

*If you don't have the financial and material means, mere words are not enough. [...] To put it simply: for this to work, we need to have something*

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80 Interview with a community member, Respondent, Kongoussi, Centre-Nord, 15 February 2021.

*concrete to propose in addition to awareness, means that we do not have, which makes the task difficult.*<sup>81</sup>

Customary authorities across all research sites in Centre-Nord repeatedly lamented the decline of religion and spiritual beliefs among younger generations. In Boulsa and Kaya, KIs – such as the imam of Kaya – identified an increasing lack of respect for religious leaders, thereby eroding their legitimacy.<sup>82</sup> Other interviewees pointed to globalization and modernity as underlying factors that they said drive down the rates of people holding spiritual beliefs.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that traditional authorities remain key actors in the fight against violent extremism, but in the long term, more effective safeguards will need to be put in place. The lack of material and financial means, the declining role of religion, globalization, and the lack of employment and economic opportunities may seriously threaten their role in preventing youth from succumbing to the appeal of VEOs.

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81 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Mané, Centre-Nord, 16 February 2021.

82 Interview with a religious leader, Respondent, Kaya, 1 December 2020.

## 6 Implications for programming

As this report illustrates, customary authorities are crucial actors of community resilience. Yet the growing resort to violence puts conflicts outside the purview of traditional chiefs, thereby diminishing the role for which they are most acclaimed. In addition, lack of material and financial means as well as the declining role of spirituality jeopardize the effectiveness of their actions and limit the legitimacy and respect held by traditional leaders.

As a corollary, massive support for the IDP camps in Centre-Nord is an absolute necessity in the short term. This would alleviate the pressure currently felt both by IDPs themselves and hosting communities, and as a consequence significantly relieve the workload of customary authorities while permitting them to focus on their core tasks. In addition, national and international actors working to support community resilience and customary authorities should focus on the following four priorities:

- **Regulate Traditional Authority's Position.** The adoption and respect of a code of conduct with regard to the relationships held with the political sphere. If interactions with political figures constitute a daily necessity, the line with outright malpractice can be blurry and generate frustration among local communities. As examples from Burkina Faso's Est region highlight, politicization of customary leaders can provide an inroad for infighting of the chieftaincy and in the long term erode customary legitimacy and authority. An official status for traditional leaders could serve as a framework to regulate their position and responsibilities – similar to neighboring Niger. It would not only separate them from politics by, for example, prohibiting chiefs from running for public office, but would similarly allow them the allocation of means and compensation for their governance role on the municipal level. In Centre-Nord, this need is particularly evident amid the growing IDP crisis where chiefs continue to play a key role in mobilizing community resources.
- **Accountability for the local Koglweogo units under their control.** Ethnic targeting by Koglweogo groups in the name of counterterrorism risks further supporting VEO mobilization which aptly instrumentalize such targeting. Any efforts to counter human rights abuses cannot circumvent traditional leaders as crucial players of Koglweogo units. As the dynamic has not yet deteriorated to the point that it has in the neighboring Est and Sahel regions, such training of traditional leaders could still be leveraged to prevent the retaliatory cycles

of violence that could be triggered by ethnic-based killings. Any collaboration on security matters with traditional authorities should nevertheless be treated with caution and discretion, so as to avoid exposing them to retaliatory actions by VEOs.

- **The inclusion of women in traditional decision-making processes.** While it is a very delicate issue in light of customs and traditions, we believe it is necessary to gradually and incrementally open decision-making processes to women, heretofore sidelined. This should not be imposed through quotas, but rather through incremental steps, going from effective consultation to a greater role in conflict resolution processes. However, attention would need to be paid to avoid instrumentalizing women in the fight against VEOs, or “essentializing” them as “natural peacemakers,” or in a role of “maternal benevolence” – or else the risk of perpetuating gender clichés would work counterproductively.
- **Support socioeconomic development.** Customary influence exerted on youth by dint of tradition is decidedly not endless. As globalization, modernity, and the declining role of spirituality dispel the mysticism in which they are shrouded, the influence potential of traditional authorities will increasingly lessen in the fight against VEOs. Primarily perceived as driven by socioeconomic grievances, and lack of employment opportunities and prospects, VEO recruitment will require adequate concrete alternatives to be set up. While it is not the role of traditional authorities to create job-generating schemes and vocational training, any such initiative would, we believe, be more efficient if helped and encouraged by traditional authorities. Coupled with and put in the service of actual economic opportunities, the remnants of traditional legitimacy they command could constitute a powerful tool in the fight against VEOs.