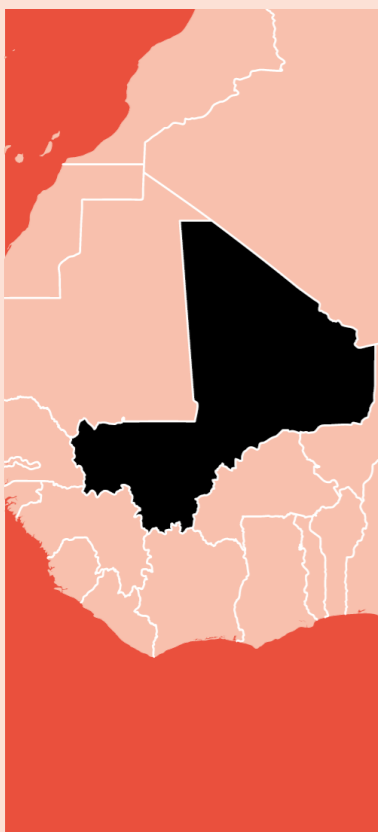




Marco Dorino/ UN Photo

Mali: Between hope and despair



One day, the war will come to an end and the Festival of the Desert in Timbuktu will resume

Chief of a Tuareg faction north of Timbuktu.

Mali used to be known for the beauty of its desert, the hospitality of its people and its *'cousinage à plaisanterie'*, a peaceful social contract between its communities. Today, however, tensions are high and many areas are no longer accessible to outsiders. The current crisis, and the constraints affecting humanitarian operations, are a source of great concern. Ongoing unrest is the result of a combination of historical factors, unequal development between the south, north and east of the country and unresolved issues raised by the conflict in the 1990s. Libya's implosion in 2011 and

the subsequent flow of armed groups and weapons into Mali, alongside the rise of domestic and international radical groups, has led to spiralling conflict. Military operations by France and the UN helped the government regain control of its territory and a peace agreement was reached in May 2015, but genuine peace still seems a long way off: a new crisis has flared up in the central region of the country, fuelled by competition over land, grievances around state corruption and violence by the armed forces.

In early 2016, many observers regarded Mali as a crisis nearing its end, and anticipated a smooth transition from humanitarian response to development. Instead, it has gradually transformed into a highly complex and explosive conflict, with insurgents

establishing bases in the arid lands along the country's borders. It is unlikely that a military response will succeed in resolving the crisis, but political negotiations are making little headway. Malians want and need justice and good governance but, caught in the midst of this multi-faceted crisis, they are losing hope. With donor fatigue growing, regular droughts and resilience eroded by years of conflict, this is an increasingly challenging context.

Reaching the population: a key challenge

Security remains a major barrier for aid organisations. Until recently, the humanitarian community was able to work almost everywhere in the country, but as the situation has deteriorated access has become more difficult. While NGOs have attempted to adjust their strategies to continue providing assistance, Western aid workers now rarely travel to the north of the country because of the risk of abduction or robbery: break-ins and vehicle theft in the north account for more than 80% of attacks against NGOs in the country. Although access is possible, including through the use of UN aircraft, the UN mission in Mali is a political entity and humanitarian organisations are reluctant to use UN logistical assets for fear of compromising their perceived neutrality.

Most international aid workers stay in Bamako or are based in bunkers cut off from the field. This effectively transfers risks to African expatriates, national staff and local NGOs, which are supposedly less visible and are, as one humanitarian worker put it, 'less valued in the hostage market'. While a practical solution, this is neither ideal nor particularly ethical.

Large parts of northern and central Mali are neglected: in areas north of Timbuktu, east of Gao and in the central Niger Delta, it takes hours to travel short distances on sandy desert roads or on muddy tracks in flooded areas. The population is very widely dispersed and the insurgents are extremely mobile. Working in low-density areas north of the river Niger is difficult and costly, and the majority of assistance goes to the most accessible and secure areas. As one Malian livestock specialist explained: 'These are huge, practically empty areas, with a few settlements at water points. It can take hours or days to cover the harsh sandy or rocky terrain that separates villages and settlements'. In areas where humanitarians are present the impact is generally positive, albeit insufficient and largely unsustainable. Livestock programmes connected with human health are reasonably effective, and a significant amount of assistance has been funnelled into providing free healthcare, though the system depends on external assistance and it is

unclear what will happen when the aid stops and the pre-war practice of cost-recovery resumes.

The difficulty of providing 'protection'

Providing protection is also a complex challenge in northern and central Mali. On their own NGOs are often unable to do much, as this is either the responsibility of the state or is managed by traditional local systems that international agencies are generally not familiar with. Civilians are regularly attacked by armed groups or find themselves caught in fighting between opposing groups, and sexual violence is a serious problem. Human rights organisations have underlined how the national army and police have regularly behaved ruthlessly, leading to widespread distrust of 'men in uniform'. Specialised NGOs have worked hard to document abuses and violence by the army and have engaged in advocacy to mitigate them, but in the absence of sanctions impunity remains the norm. Donors have tried to support the Protection Cluster and its partners, but resources and specialised personnel are lacking and state institutions are very weak in large areas of the north and centre of the country, which remain practically lawless.

Humanitarian principles in the vicinity of a UN integrated mission

Humanitarian organisations have to manage their relationships with state institutions with great care. Being perceived as too close to the authorities can be interpreted as a loss of neutrality and independence, which can put NGO staff



Until recently, the humanitarian community was able to work almost everywhere in the country, but as the situation has deteriorated access has become more difficult.

directly at risk. NGOs also want to avoid appearing too close to the UN integrated mission in the country, MINUSMA, or even sometimes to the UN in general. The armed groups active in much of the north and centre of the country tend to target military forces. As one NGO staff member stressed: ‘the danger for humanitarians is being too close to these military forces, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time’.

With around \$1 billion spent on military operations each year by the UN,²¹ the situation remains unsettled and the future uncertain. In the absence of sustained development efforts, basic needs are still not being met and will only grow as a result of a rapidly deteriorating food security situation, triggered by a crisis in a pastoral

economy already weakened by the impact of insecurity resulting from the conflict and the deteriorating law and order situation. Faced with these conditions, combined with increasing insecurity and the challenge of working in parallel with a range of different armed forces (from France, the UN and regional states), humanitarian actors are going to need a great deal of imagination and stamina. Staff security will depend on the ability to negotiate with all stakeholders, and a continued commitment to demonstrating respect for humanitarian principles.

While it is likely that humanitarian resources will decline, new funding mechanisms are being deployed with the aim of bridging the gap with development. It remains to be seen whether these are agile enough, or

whether development donors will be sufficiently flexible to enable the response to adapt to such a fast-changing and unpredictable environment. For the time being, sustainable peace in Mali, and the Tuareg Chief’s hopes that the Festival in the Desert will resume, appear a long way off. • **FRANÇOIS GRÜNEWALD, GROUPE URD**

This write-up is based on a case study conducted for the SOHS 2018 by Groupe URD. The full case study can be found at: sohs.alnap.org



Marco Dorino/ UN Photo