BUILDING BONDS OF TRUST

The Relationship between Conflict Resolution Committees and Social Cohesion in Mali

DECEMBER 2024

Introduction

In recent decades, Local Peace Committees (LPCs) have become a fixture in peacebuilding efforts worldwide and have helped expand locally-led peacebuilding. Unlike other peace bodies, LPCs are community-based and serve as participatory forums that encourage discussions and foster understanding among community members. Essentially, LPCs are local problem-solving platforms. The main goals of these entities are to prevent future violence, contribute to community resilience and social cohesion, and empower marginalized groups in peacebuilding efforts.[1] Additionally, given the in-depth knowledge that LPCs have of the local culture and community relations, they may be better equipped than other actors to contribute to a sustainable peace.[2]

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[1] Schumicky-Logan and Reis, 2023.

[2] Nganje, 2021.

Existing research also argues that LPCs have a greater chance at mitigating violence and sustaining peace than other externally-imposed peacebuilding structures. [3] Specifically, when communities have a vested interest in peacebuilding and take responsibility for starting peace initiatives, local ownership further strengthens the potential success and sustainability of LPCs. In addition to its locally-driven and sustainable nature, existing evidence highlights that inclusivity is also a key feature of LPCs, due to their ability to bring together different stakeholders for discussion and dialogue. However, communal gender dynamics and norms can pose significant challenges to the inclusiveness of LPCs, [4] especially when LPC members view inclusivity as a threat to their decision-making power.[5] This illustrates the challenges many LPCs encounter when trying to harmonize traditional and modern social and gender norms, particularly regarding the inclusion of women and youth.[6]

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps Mali

Several countries in Africa have utilized LPCs in their peacebuilding efforts post-conflict and during conflict. The Wajir Peace and Development Committee in Kenya was formed in 1995 and is considered one of the most successful examples of a community-level LPC. Another example is the Harambe Women's Forum formed in South Africa in 2004 that aimed to empower women and provide a better future for the next generation, including through youth literacy classes.[7] Despite these strong examples from Africa, the literature currently lacks a thorough discussion of LPCs in Mali, where LPCs are significant community-level governance and security actors.[8] Given the country's ongoing insecurities at the community and state levels, the experiences of LPCs in Mali could provide valuable lessons for other organizations or community-level peacebuilding entities in the Sahel and the region more broadly. This research aims to generate new knowledge about the perceived influence and practices of LPCs in central Mali to broaden understanding about this critical approach to localizing peacebuilding and advancing social cohesion.

This study aims to fill two main gaps in the existing literature and to contribute to the current discussions on LPCs in Africa. The first gap is a lack of fine-grained descriptions of the work of LPCs in Mali. As stated by academics, "the evidence for the role of LPCs… in Mali is still emerging."[9] The second gap is a lack of detailed understanding on how the work of LPCs in Mali connects to social cohesion and to broader conflict dynamics. To make these two contributions, this study focuses on the work of LPCs in central Mali established under a program called Ben ni Baara, which aims to address the interconnected drivers of conflict. Implemented by Mercy Corps Mali and funded by Sida, Ben ni Baara created LPCs known as Conflict Resolution Committees (CRCs) at the community level as forums for community members to resolve conflicts. This study expands on findings from a previous research study on Ben ni Baara conducted

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[3] Nganje, 2021.

[4] Chivasa, 2019.

[5] Ndalira, 2023.

[6] Chivasa, 2019.

[7] Muchanyuka, 2022.

[8] Schumicky-Logan and Reis, 2023.

[9] Schumicky-Logan and Reis, 2023, page 11.

in 2021 that identified the importance of social cohesion to resilience and conflict in central Mali, particularly vertical social cohesion and social cohesion within and between groups.[10] Overall, this study will make valuable contributions to understanding "the role of LPCs in Mali [which] is at a very nascent phase."[11]

The report will first provide contextual background for the study, specifically focusing on the country of Mali and the Ben ni Baara program, and then will discuss the study's methodology and objective. The report will then discuss the research findings in two parts. First, the findings will focus on the study participants' perception of how the CRCs within Ben ni Baara positively influence community social cohesion, specifically the dimension of trust. Second, the findings will discuss the three core practices of the CRCs discussed by study participants that contribute to their success, specifically their focus on collaboration, accessibility, and sustainability. The report will close with recommendations for the CRCs moving forward, which can apply to other LPCs in Mali, the region, and globally.

Key Study Findings

- Study participants perceived the CRCs to have a **positive influence on community social cohesion**, particularly by fostering **trust** (both between community members and the CRC members *and* among community members) and by helping **reduce the number of conflicts** through conflict management and peacebuilding education.

- **Three core practices**, as perceived by the study participants, contribute to how the CRCs positively influence social cohesion and peacebuilding, which are:
  - **Collaboration** with other peace and security actors in their communities, including other committee entities like RECOTRAD, as well as specific social groups, notably youth.
  - Focusing on the **accessibility** of their services to all community members since the CRCs are considered more approachable and affordable than other security actors such as the police or courts. Accessibility could be further improved through additional focus on the influence of gender norms and power dynamics on CRC membership and women's participation.
  - The importance placed on the **sustainability** of the CRCs even after the Ben ni Baara program ends. The formalization of existing community conflict resolution mechanisms through the CRCs, and ultimately local ownership of the committees, demonstrates this practice.

- **Recommendations** for the CRCs and LPCs in general include:
  - Prioritize **awareness raising** and **relationship building** with members of the community.
  - Strengthen **youth engagement efforts**, particularly by increasing the visibility of the roles they play in their community's conflict management and peacebuilding efforts.
  - Strengthen **gender equality and social inclusion efforts**, particularly through capacity building for women (i.e. leadership training and public speaking) and for men (i.e. gender inclusivity awareness).
  - Support and implement **conflict management activities for predictable shocks**, such as seasonal shocks like the rainy season.

- A final **recommendation** for donors and peacebuilding programs working with LPCs is to reflect on a broader diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses across all **dimensions of social cohesion** – trust, belonging, shared identity, attitudes towards other groups, collective action norms, and civic engagement – to effectively sequence and layer LPCs with interventions that target other dimensions of social cohesion.

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[10] Mercy Corps Mali, 2021 October.

[11] Schumicky-Logan and Reis, 2023, page 12.

The Context: Mali and Ben ni Baara

Mali is a landlocked country in the Sahel with a predominantly Muslim population composed of a diverse number of ethnic groups. For the past decade, jihadist insurgencies have contributed to the country's instability, along with the coups in 2020 and 2021 that overthrew Mali's civilian government. In addition to these macro-level conflicts in Mali, conflicts at the local level also persist, particularly related to natural resources and climate change. In central Mali, specifically the regions of Mopti and Ségou, agriculture is the main form of livelihood, leading to conflicts over natural resources and land to have devastating effects on families and communities.

Specifically, conflicts over access to land and water persist between agriculturalists and pastoralists in central Mali, especially due to increasing pressure on natural resources due to climate change.

The Ben ni Baara program, implemented by Mercy Corps in partnership with International Alert and Humanity & Inclusion, is a human security program in central Mali that aims to strengthen mechanisms for local peace and address drivers of conflict. The primary objective of Ben ni Baara is to prevent the spread of violence in central and southern Mali by addressing the drivers of conflicts in communities living in the buffer zone between southern Mali (which is relatively stable) and central Mali (which is less stable) in the Mopti and Ségou regions (Figure 1).
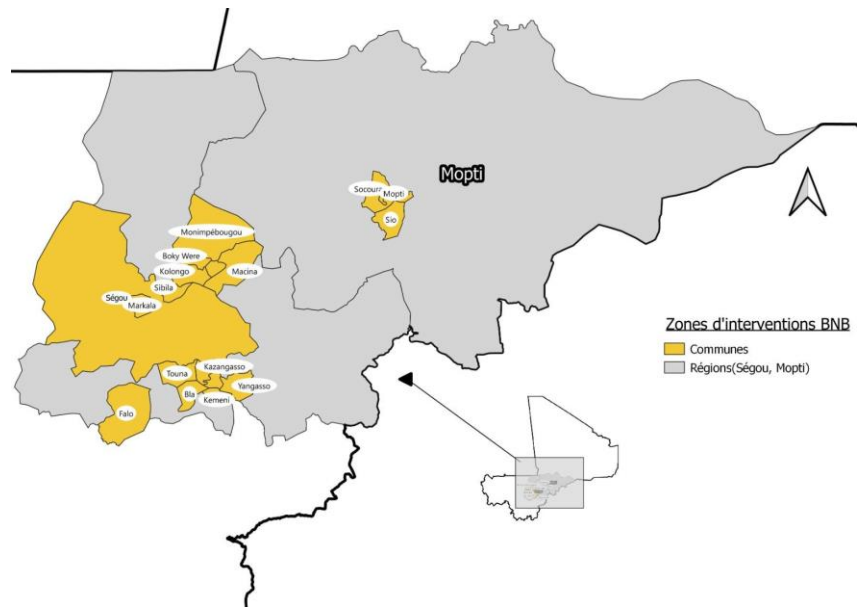

Figure 1. Map of Ben ni Baara Implementation Sites in Mali

In order to reach this objective, a key conflict management mechanism established through the Ben ni Baara program are the Conflict Resolution Committees (CRCs), which are community-level LPCs focused on conflict prevention and resolution through mediation and dialogue. CRCs are established at the commune level within the program's selected communes, with CRC members representing all of the villages that compose the commune. After the establishment of the CRC, the members choose a president to lead the committee, which is often a village chief or another leadership figure. The CRC membership aims to be diverse and composed of elected municipal officials, women's leaders, youth leaders, people with disabilities, livestock technical service members, agriculture technical service members, and influential community members. CRC members also include members of Reseau de Communicateurs Traditionnels (RECOTRAD), or Traditional Communicators Network, which is a network of traditional leaders who hold the customs, traditions, and values of their respective communities. Additionally, some members of the CRCs are also members of the Land Commissions (COFOs), which are land committees that resolve conflicts specifically over land. The membership within the CRCs represent a diversity of ethnicities, ages, genders, and disabilities. Additionally, the number of members within each CRC reflects the population and village configuration within its corresponding commune.

The CRCs also function within a larger early warning and early response (EWER) system. Specifically, each CRC has several monitors who are recruited and selected based on objective criteria. The monitors relay information to the CRC members from village informants about verified and credible conflict incidents or potential conflicts. In addition to this early warning early response system, community members can also approach the CRC directly for conflict management services.

Methodology

This qualitative research study contributes to new knowledge about the perceived role and influence of LPCs in central Mali.[12] The CRCs implemented under the Ben ni Baara program provide a unique case study that contributes to larger discussions about LPCs in the peacebuilding literature. Specifically, the research question guiding this study was: *What is the relationship between conflict resolution committees/frameworks and social cohesion?*

The findings in this report result from the analysis of qualitative data collected in May 2023 in central Mali. CITRACO, a data collection firm based in Mali, was recruited and hired as a consultant to collect the qualitative data. CITRACO collected, managed, organized, translated (from Bambara to English), and cleaned the data, and members of the Mercy Corps Research and Learning Team conducted the data analysis and writing. Team members from Mercy Corps Mali and Mercy Corps Research and Learning held regular calls with CITRACO during the data collection preparations, throughout the data collection, and post-data collection during data cleaning.

The data collection methods used were Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, observations of CRC meeting sessions, and practitioner reflections from the Ben ni Baara staff. A question guide was used for the FGDs and interviews, and a note-taking guide was used for the observations of the CRC meetings. Study participants were recruited through purposive sampling in order to meet specific selection criteria based on the data collection method, as listed in Table 1 below.

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[12] This study was part of a larger mixed-methods study. However, since only the qualitative data from that study was used for this report, this section focuses solely on the qualitative methodology.

Method	Selection Criteria
FGDs	✓ 18 years of age or older ✓ Living within the study sites ✓ Between 6 to 11 participants in each ✓ Sex-disaggregated FGDs ✓ FGDs with CRC members ✓ FGDs with non-CRC members

Interviews	✓ Representation from males and females
	✓ 18 years of age or older
	✓ Living within the study sites
	✓ Representation from a variety of livelihoods, such as:
	  o Farmer
	  o Fisherman
	  o Government worker
	  o Housewife
	  o Market gardener
	  o Seamstress

Observations of CRCs	✓ Gender diversity of CRC membership ✓ Meetings held during data collection period
Practitioner Reflections	✓ Staff member of Ben ni Baara during data collection period ✓ Holds historical knowledge about Ben ni Baara and its activities

TABLE 1. SELECTION CRITERIA FOR QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Table 2 below provides a summary of the number of FGDs, semi-structured interviews, and observations conducted within each of the six purposively-sampled study sites in central Mali – Bankoumana, Diedala, Foulabougou, Kouabougou, Massabougou, and Sibila – for a total of 19 FGDs (12 groups with males, and 7 groups with females), 33 interviews (18 males, and 15 females), and 6 observations of CRC meetings.

Commune	FDGs	Interviews	Observations of CRCs
Bankoumana	3	6	1
Diedala	3	3	1
Foulabougou	4	6	1
Kouabougou	3	6	1
Massabougou	3	6	1
Sibila	3	6	1
Total	**19**	**33**	**6**

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF STUDY SITES AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The study's qualitative analysis approach was content analysis of the FGD transcripts, notes taken during the interviews and CRC observation sessions, and practitioner reflection notes. The analysis identified the dominant themes/sub-themes in the data, and grouped these themes into analytically-relevant categories. The qualitative software Dedoose was used for coding and analysis. Throughout the rest of this report, footnotes indicate a cross-reference of specific findings to the anonymized source documents where they can be found.

CITRACO obtained verbal informed consent from all study participants before beginning data collection. During the informed consent process, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants along with their role and responsibilities during the data collection. Participants were also assured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained and that their participation was completely voluntary and could end at any time. Data collection occurred in private, secure locations to ensure confidentiality for the participants. The collected data was anonymized and stored in secure locations (either at a secure location within the CITRACO offices, or on a password protected drive).

Findings

The study participants' lived experiences with the Ben ni Baara program's CRCs in central Mali highlight the positive influence of LPCs on community-level peacebuilding, conflict management, and social cohesion. The findings from this research focus on two main areas, which will be discussed further below. The first describes the perceptions of study participants regarding the CRCs' positive influence on community social cohesion, specifically the dimension of trust. The second discusses three core practices of the CRCs, as identified by the study participants' lived experiences, which contribute to the specific ways in which CRCs work to promote social cohesion and trust, specifically through collaboration, inclusion, and sustainability.[13]

Positive Influence of CRCs on Social Cohesion

The main aim of the CRCs within Ben ni Baara is to serve as a platform for dialogue, discussion, and conflict resolution and prevention for the communities in which they serve. While select members of the community serve on the CRCs, all community members are welcome to bring matters to the committee for assistance. Overall, study participants perceived that the CRCs included in this study have a positive influence on building social cohesion among community members and helping reduce conflicts.

The Ben ni Baara program, and Mercy Corps as an organization, defines social cohesion as "the sense of common purpose and trust among the members of a given group or region and the willingness of those members to engage and cooperate with one another to survive and thrive."[14] Mercy Corps identifies six dimensions of social cohesion: trust, belonging, shared identity, attitudes towards other groups, collective action norms, and civic engagement.[15] In this study, the dimension of trust stood out most in the findings,

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[13] Within the sampled communities, the COFOs are another main conflict resolution mechanism, dealing specifically with land conflicts, in addition to the CRCs. At times, it was unclear which committee (CRC or COFO) a study respondent was referring to during interviews or FGDs. The research team tried to probe for clarity in these situations, but there was still a possibility of committee confusion by some respondents.

[14] Mercy Corps Mali, 2021 November.

[15] Olawole, et al, 2022.

particularly in two ways – (1) the trust between the community and the CRCs, and (2) the trust among community members themselves. Overall, a majority of study participants – about 72% of key informants – identified CRCs' contributions to building trust within their communities, which supports findings from research in other contexts on the relationship between LPCs and social cohesion.[16]

> *"The most important organization is the CRC in the prevention and management of conflicts."*
> — Housewife, Interview, Sibila

Trust between the Communities and the CRCs

Study participants shared a number of concrete examples from their lived experiences that show how the work of the CRCs in conflict prevention and conflict management influence their communities. A councilor from Diedala explains this saying, "When there is a conflict, the whole committee comes together to manage it so that it does not get worse."[17] Participants also view the CRCs as fair and impartial with their decisions and management of conflicts, which is not always the case with other peace and security actors. As one woman in a focus group in Massabougou explains, "We like the fact that they [the CRC] respect everyone's rights, and they don't offend anyone."[18]

Due to their fairness, impartiality, and effective conflict management, study participants believe these characteristics help the CRCs gain the trust of their community members. Additionally, the fact that the members of the CRC are directly chosen from the communities which they serve helps strengthen this trust. As a housewife in Sibila explains, "The bonds of trust are strengthened because the members of the CRC are everywhere in the village."[19]

> *"They [the CRC] give the truth to the one who deserves it and… [determine] who is wrong while advising them to not commit such offensive acts anymore. It's this practice that we really appreciate because they treat everyone equally."*
> — Women's Focus Group Participant, Massabougou

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[16] Schumicky-Logan and Reis, 2023.

[17] KII Diedala_Councilor.

[18] FGD Massabougou_Women.

[19] KII Sibila_Housewife.

Trust among Community Members

In addition to a solid foundation of trust between the CRCs and the communities they serve, many study participants also shared experiences and perspectives that demonstrate how the work of the CRCs has also helped build trust among the community members themselves. This, in turn, appears to have helped reduce the number of conflicts within these communities, as explained by a gardener from Foulabougou: the CRC "has changed… the way we get along with each other, the way we live together… [so] it has reduced our conflicts."[20]

By helping build trust among the community members, the study participants perceive that the CRCs have contributed to the reduction in conflicts within the communities they serve. This includes conflicts between farmers and herders, as perceived by the study participants, which are prevalent in central Mali. A gardener in Diedala explained in an interview that the work of the CRCs has helped build trust between farmers and herders, leading farmers to no longer monitor their lands since they trust shepherds and pastoralists[21] to keep proper watch of their animals.[22]

However, the conflict reduction work of the CRCs applies not only to conflicts between farmers and breeders but to other types of conflicts as well. Access to certain natural resources, such as water, can also be a contentious issue, but the CRC has helped with such conflicts. For example, the CRC previously resolved a dispute among three men in a community who were arguing over water in a canal. The men went to the CRC for assistance, and they were able to resolve this dispute amicably.[23]

Based on the experiences of the study participants, the CRCs engage in conflict reduction in two main ways. One is by their conflict prevention and monitoring work that prevent the development or escalation of potential conflicts. A member of a CRC in Sibila describes an example of this here: "One day there was a conflict between a woman and her children. After indirectly hearing the news, we [CRC members] called a meeting with the village chief, inviting the women and her children as well as the children's father, and we were able to solve the dispute."[24]

> *"[The CRC is] a very good instrument for regulating differences between the population."*
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> — Farmer, Interview, Sibila

Along with direct resolution of conflicts, another way study participants have experienced the CRCs' conflict reduction efforts is through peacebuilding education. Specifically, the CRCs help spread peacebuilding

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[20] KII Foulabougou_Gardener.

[21] A shepherd is generally a person to whom the animals are entrusted to be grazed, whereas a pastor is the owner of the livestock he grazes.

[22] KII Diedala_Gardener.

[23] KII Foulabougou_Gardener.

[24] FGD Sibila_CRC Farmers.

values and practices throughout their communities. In particular, dialogue and open discussions with parties in a conflict are regarded as important approaches to reaching peaceful solutions and avoiding violence. A mother from Foulabougou explained the following experience she had with her daughter regarding a water conflict: "At the water pump, my daughter got into a fight for water. I understood that nothing is better than sitting down and talking to get back to better feelings [and] knowing how to master one's feelings. I then realized the importance of the CRC in our community."[25]

Core Practices Contributing to the Success of the CRCs

The experiences and perspectives shared by the study participants demonstrate how CRCs operating in central Mali have made a number of positive contributions to the communities in which they serve. In particular, participants have experienced how the CRCs contribute to building social cohesion by advancing trust, including through the reduction of conflicts through conflict management and peacebuilding education. Specifically, participants identified three important practices of the CRCs that contribute to their ability to build peace and advance social cohesion and trust: (1) their collaboration with other peace actors; (2) their focus on accessibility of their services to all community members; and (3) the importance placed on the sustainability of the CRCs even after the Ben ni Baara program ends.

Collaboration

Collaboration is an important practice and principle within peacebuilding, and it is one that the CRCs implement in their work as well. While the CRCs themselves are powerful conflict resolution mechanisms, community members acknowledge that the CRCs work most efficiently when collaborating with other members of the community. Consequently, the CRCs are taking steps to further their collaboration efforts with community members, particularly with youth.

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

Study participants have experienced how the CRCs work with other peace and security actors within their communities. For example, one study participant said that the CRC in his community also works with the griots and with the blacksmith association, who are a part of RECOTRAD. Specifically, the CRCs collaborate with these other village entities by holding meetings and sharing their experiences to foster learning, even including members of other entities like RECOTRAD as CRC members themselves.[26]

> *"The older we get, the less work we do… [so] to keep the village moving forward… if the committee is made up of young people… [then] these young people will be able to manage [the committee]."*
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> — CRC Member, Focus Group Participant, Massabougou

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[25] KII Foulabougou_Gardener.

[26] KII Kouabougou_Farmer.

Several participants have experienced the importance the CRCs place on collaboration with youth and youth engagement in their work. Participants explained how the CRCs engage with youth in their communities at different levels. Specifically, youth play a large role in helping organize and implement community events, as explained by a focus group participant in Massabougou: "a youth group that works in our village… is there to work on events that happen in our village. That's what I really like about their [the CRC's] work."[27]

Despite the efforts of the CRC to engage with youth, these efforts could be strengthened. For example, a critique of the CRCs by study participants is their lack of youth members. As explained by a focus group discussion participant in Sibila, "The CRC doesn't have young people in its committee who can report to [the] young people" in the community, which becomes an obstacle for awareness raising efforts.[28] However, practitioner reflections show that the challenge is not the lack of youth membership within the CRCs but the lack of visibility of the youth membership. Since youth at times are not considered effective conflict management actors, given their lack of experience, CRC youth members often function more in the background, like helping with event coordination, as opposed to direct engagement in conflict matters brought to the CRCs.[29] Greater engagement with youth on CRC conflict management could have significant benefits, particularly with information gathering efforts, as explained by a focus group participant in Sibila: "I suggest they get the young people involved so they can look for information to bring back to the old men [in the CRC]. If young people were involved [in the CRCs], that's what would help the committees evolve… because they'll be able to find information [about conflicts] and pass it on."[30]

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The Dozo in Mali

The Dozo are groups of traditional hunters from centuries ago, even before the establishment of national borders within Africa. In Mali, the Dozo are primarily from the Bambara ethnic group, but they also include Bozo, Malinke, and other ethnic groups. The Dozo in central Mali function as a local, village-level self-defense force that monitors and responds to village security threats.

Source: Human Rights Watch, 2018

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Photo Credit: © Amadou Diallo/Mercy Corps

Several study participants also explained that the Dozo often provide security and protection for their villages from threats. A farmer in Foulabougou explained that "we have hunters here protecting the village."[31] A woman in Diedala also describes the importance of the Dozo to their physical security: "There are hunters here that the community has put in place to watch over the village [since] there was a time when we couldn't go out at certain times."[32]

According to this study's findings, the relationship between the CRCs and the Dozo is vague, but should be explored further. For example, a woman in Massabougou

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[27] FGD Massabougou_Farmers, fishers, others.

[28] FGD Sibila_Farmers and others.

[29] Practitioner Reflection, Ben ni Baara Staff.

[30] FGD Sibila_Farmers and others.

[31] KII Foulabougou_Farmer.

[32] KII Diedala_Gardener.

stated that the CRCs work with the Dozo in conflict management efforts since "the CRCs help the hunters," but she did not provide any details.[33] Additionally, some participants discussed the important role that the Dozo play in conflict prevention and management in their villages. One farmer explained how breeders who bring their animals to his lands only listen to the hunters and not the CRC: "Even when I attempt to… inform the chief of the village [and the CRC], their [the breeders'] response is often indifferent. The stock breeders only show concern when I mention involving the hunters in the matter."[34] As one hunter explained, "If only we could have some help to bolster our security, we will be delighted."[35]

It is important to note that while participants in this study overall spoke positively about the Dozo, this may not be the same response from other communities in Mali. Given tensions between the Dozo and other groups, such as the Fulani, which has led to violence and civilian casualties,[36] further research is needed to better understand the relationship between community members, the Dozo, and the CRCs and other LPCs in Mali, and any potential collaboration opportunities (if at all) among these actors.

Accessibility

Along with collaboration, study participants perceive accessibility and transparency as an important practice for the CRCs so that all community members can be involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Unlike previous conflict resolution mechanisms in these communities, the CRCs have an open-door policy in which other community members can observe their conflict management sessions. As explained by a farmer in Kouabougou, "Previously, it was the councilors who met to discuss the problem, [but] now the door is open to people who are interested in discussion."[37]

Additionally, anyone can approach the CRCs for conflict management assistance. While some study participants said that certain people have easier access to the CRCs than others, such as men and older individuals, most of the participants, about 70% of the key informants interviewed, said that the CRCs are accessible to everyone. This is because "nobody is left out or excluded [because] the door is open to all… anyone aware of a conflict can contact the CRC for rapid intervention."[38]

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

Due to the priority placed on access for all, study participants view the CRCs as an alternative mechanism for conflict management compared to other structures. Specifically, several participants explained that the CRCs are a more favorable conflict resolution mechanism than government actors, like the police or courts. One reason is because the services provided by the CRCs do not require

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[33] KII Massabougou_Gardener.

[34] FGD Foulabougou_Farmers and Fishers.

[35] FGD Foulabougou_Farmers and Fishers.

[36] AP News, 2019.

[37] KII Kouabougou_Farmer.

[38] KII Kouabougou_Farmer.

additional expenses, such as fees or travel expenses. As explained by a farmer in Diedala, "What I like [about the] CRC is that it resolves conflicts while allowing us no spending."[39]

> *"All community members are equal under the eyes of the CRC."*
> — Farmer, Interview, Kouabougou

Along with affordability, study participants explain that the CRCs are also preferred because they encourage dialogue and understanding through their conflict resolution processes. Additionally, the CRCs carry out their proceedings and decision-making in a fair and impartial manner, unlike other actors. A focus group participant explained the challenges of approaching the local authorities with conflicts: "Going to the authorities is becoming more and more of a problem. It's unbearable because those who go to the authorities for justice end up hating each other forever… [and] spend a lot of money."[40]

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps

While there is strong accessibility to the services provided by the CRCs, accessibility of CRC membership itself is less clear. Several study participants said that members of the CRCs are usually men, particularly older men.[41] Additionally, as previously discussed, study participants believe youth representation is not as strong within the CRCs' membership, though the committees engage with youth in other ways. For example, a farmer in Diedala explained that "the committee is composed first of all of the village chief who is the president, religious leaders, caste men, representatives of women, and the president of the youth association."[42] However, the number of youth representatives within each CRC is unclear, which could ultimately impact the extent to which youth concerns are voiced and represented within CRC discussions.

Despite these inclusivity concerns, other study participants said that anyone who is an important community resource can become a member of a CRC since there is no gender or age criteria for membership. Instead, membership selection criteria focuses on soft skills, like having a strong moral character, good leadership skills, and the community's trust in the individual.[43] Ben ni Baara staff explained that the selection process to become a member of the CRC is driven by the community themselves. Specifically, each of the different groups and associations within the community (such as women's groups, youth groups, etc.) nominates a person to join the CRC on their behalf. That nominee then holds an introductory meeting with different segments of the community, and then the nominee must receive an endorsement by the commune's

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[39] KII Diedala_Farmer.

[40] FGD Massabougou_Female farmers and others.

[41] KII Massabougou_Gardener; KII Kouabougou_Farmer; KII Foulabougou_Farmer.

[42] KII Diedala_Farmer.

[43] KII Kouabougou_Fisherman; KII Massabougou_Farmer.

mayor.[44] However, some study participants believe that the process to become a member of a CRC tends to lie more in the hands of the president of the committee and the other CRC members, as explained by one a housewife from Sibila: "to join the committee it is the village chief and his advisers who must choose you."[45]

Regarding accessibility to membership, the CRCs also face challenges posed by gender dynamics within these communities, even though they strive to have gender diversity within their membership as a broader goal within Ben ni Baara. During the observation of a CRC meeting in Foulabougou, the members in attendance were eight men and four women. While this representation was not entirely equal in gender representation, the men actively encouraged and called upon the women members to speak and give their opinion during the discussions, illustrating the members' support for women's representation.[46]

Despite the policies and practices for CRC membership, gender equality within the CRCs' leadership is more difficult to achieve. Specifically, prevalent social structures and gender norms impede these efforts. For example, the village chief within these communities in central Mali is always a man, and it is often the village chief who becomes a member of the CRC on behalf of his village, at times even becoming the CRC president. Due to the gendered nature of the CRC and village leadership structure, this does not leave much possibility for a woman to become the president of a CRC.

Sustainability

The third critical practice of the CRCs observed by study participants is their focus on sustainability. Even though the CRCs have been created under the Ben ni Baara program, the longevity of these committees even after the program ends is critical to ensure their long-term contributions to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in these communities. The way the CRCs were established, and how they are viewed by the communities they serve, contributes to their sustainability.

Within the Ben ni Baara intervention communities, local conflict resolution mechanisms were already in place. Study participants explained that even before the formation of the CRCs, the village chief, who discussed matters with his councilors, served as the main contact for resolving community disputes. Since the village chief and his councilors already played a central role in community conflict resolution efforts, the Ben ni Baara program maintained these existing mechanisms and incorporated them into the CRCs. As one focus group participant explained, "the village chief and his councilors… [were] the first Conflict Resolution Committee here."[47] This supports findings from previous Mercy Corps research about the importance of building upon existing conflict resolution and governance structures within communities, as opposed to creating completely new mechanisms.[48]

❯ *"The project [Ben ni Baara] found that the committee already existed, but it reinforced it. We are all from this village and we listen to each other. So, if you have a problem, it's better to solve it here without having to go elsewhere."*

— CRC Member, Focus Group Participant, Kouabougou

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[44] Practitioner Reflection, Ben ni Baara Staff.

[45] KII Sibila_Housewife.

[46] Committee Observation_Foulabougou.

[47] FGD Kouabougou_CRC.

[48] Hakiman and Sheely, 2023; Radhakrishnan, Santara, and Sheely, 2023; Reardon, Wolfe, and Ogbudu, 2021.

While the CRCs already existed to some extent through the village chief and councilors, study participants explained how the Ben ni Baara program helped formalize these community structures. Additionally, the CRCs have a more open membership policy since other community members can apply to join. Even though new members of the CRCs must be approved by the president and its members, the CRCs are still more inclusive compared to the previous mechanism that limited membership only to the village chief and his councilors.

By incorporating existing conflict resolution mechanisms into the CRCs, this can lead to greater legitimacy and acceptance by communities. Additionally, the study participants feel empowered to claim the CRCs as internal mechanisms that belong to them and their communities. A majority of participants said that "the CRC is a village-owned device" that belongs to the community and all of its members.[49] Consequently, this will ensure greater sustainability and longevity of the CRCs since the communities view them as their own mechanism, particularly since they incorporate conflict resolution practices that have been prevalent in their communities for generations.

> *"Given its importance, we will keep it [the CRC] forever [since] it reinforces our ancient practices."*
> — Farmer, Interview, Bankoumana

Even though the local ownership of the CRCs will contribute to their sustainability, study participants discussed other concerns about the sustainability of the committees after the Ben ni Baara program ends. For example, some CRC members are concerned about maintaining the committees' existing practices, like holding regular meetings and effectively maintaining the incident alert system. Some community members have also expressed concerns about the lack of a clear plan for the future of the CRCs. However, the Ben ni Baara staff have been taking steps to support CRCs in the development and implementation of their long-term sustainability plans for after the program ends. Specifically, Ben ni Baara's work plan for the next year includes providing support to the CRCs in updating their sustainability plans to reflect their current contexts and in the implementation of the plans. This will include advising other NGOs or intervening programs not to duplicate this mechanism but to work with the existing CRCs to respond to conflicts in communities, and to provide them with additional capacity building resources.[50]

Recommendations

The findings from this research lead to several recommendations for the future work and efforts of the CRCs established through the Ben ni Baara program. These same recommendations can also be extended more broadly to LPCs operating within the Sahel, the Africa region, and globally. However, it is essential to note that these recommendations must be adapted to the specific, local context of other LPCs.

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[49] KII Massabougou_Farmer.

[50] Practitioner Reflection, Ben ni Baara Staff.

Prioritize awareness raising and relationship building with community members.

- *For the CRCs:* The study found that some community members do not know about the CRC, its members, and/or its function within the community. If people are not aware of the CRC and its services, it cannot provide adequate conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and social cohesion support to the community members. As a focus group participant explained, "If the CRC doesn't work to make itself known… nothing is going to change."[51] To address this challenge, future program activities should involve **more awareness raising and relationship building activities** between CRC members and community members. Such efforts could be led by the CRC monitors that already have a breadth of reach within the communities. Through these efforts, community members can become more familiar with the CRC and its members and understand how its services can be utilized to address different types of conflict, both within the home and the community. Some activities along these lines have already been piloted, including public debriefings by the CRCs to their respective villages, the use of community radio stations, and encouraging participants in CRC activities to report back on their experiences to their community members.

- *For LPCs in General:* LPCs should dedicate a significant amount of their start-up time to **raising awareness** about their role within the community so people know about their services and how best to use them. Additionally, the LPCs should spend this time implementing activities that help committee members build relationships with different segments of the community, if they do not already have these relationships, which will further enable trust and confidence building.

Strengthen youth engagement efforts.

- *For the CRCs:* Several study participants expressed the importance of strengthening the CRCs' efforts with respect to youth engagement. While the CRCs engage youth in peacebuilding activities and events and include youth representatives as members within the CRCs themselves, **increasing the visibility of youth** within the work of the CRCs is important. One way to do this is by more actively involving youth members in conflict prevention information gathering efforts, particularly in collaboration with the existing CRC monitors. Such youth engagement will be particularly valuable for maintaining the committees' institutional knowledge for when older CRC members can no longer serve.

- *For LPCs in General:* To address inclusion efforts, LPCs must **prioritize the engagement of youth** throughout their activities and consider the most appropriate way to do this given the local context. This youth engagement could take several forms – such as conducting youth-led participatory action research, ensuring youth representation on LPCs, developing separate LPCs solely for youth, or actively recruiting and including youth community members to participate in peacebuilding activities – but must accommodate the local needs and practices.

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[51] FGD Sibila_CRC.

Strengthen gender equality and inclusion within the committee membership.

- *For the CRCs:* While the Ben ni Baara program prioritizes women's membership within the CRCs, the research found that female committee members do not always actively participate in committee meetings, which reflects the impact of persistent gender dynamics and patriarchal norms within these communities. Providing **capacity building opportunities for women** within the CRCs, particularly focusing on leadership and public speaking, would be valuable resources that could contribute to greater gender inclusion and participation within the committees.[52] Additionally, providing **training and capacity building for men** to help them understand the value of women's contributions will be important to ultimately help create safe spaces in which women can feel comfortable to meaningfully participate.

- *For LPCs in General:* While LPCs should aim to have gender equality within their membership, this can be difficult to achieve given the local context's gender dynamics and gender norms. To address these challenges, LPCs should incorporate **tailored capacity building resources for women** within the LPCs so they can more actively participate and contribute to committee meetings and adequately represent the interests of women within these discussions. This should also include **capacity building resources for men** that will help them create safe spaces for women to actively participate in these meetings.

Support and implement peacebuilding activities to address predictable, seasonal shocks.

- *For the CRCs:* Along with conflict management and resolution support, the CRCs also support peacebuilding activities and events within their communities. These peacebuilding activities should be tailored to meet the demand of **predictable conflict management needs throughout the year**. For example, multiple study participants explained that conflicts become more prevalent within their communities during the **rainy season**. Consequently, the CRCs and the Ben ni Baara program overall should consider the implementation of peacebuilding activities before the rainy season, and subsequent reinforcement of this messaging through community forums, designated community ambassadors to help spread these messages, and via phones and/or the internet throughout the rainy season.

- *For LPCs in General:* LPCs should aim to be **proactive in trying to address predictable shocks**, particularly climate-related shocks. Steps should be taken by LPCs and other peace actors to implement and reinforce peacebuilding activities and messaging during the specific times of the year when weather-related shocks can potentially increase the risk of conflict, or to incorporate locally-tailored climate and weather data and information services alongside local knowledge of weather patterns.[53] Such proactive measures can reinforce social

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[52] The program Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP) implemented by Mercy Corps in Nigeria provides examples of capacity building opportunities for women, specifically through its women's peace groups. Such activities include opportunities for women to connect, network, share skills, and engage in peacebuilding activities. For more on the women's peace groups within CIPP, please refer to Radhakrishnan, Bello, and Ogbudu, 2024.

[53] Hakiman and Stull-Lane, 2022.

cohesion measures during both predictable times of uncertainty, as well as during unexpected shocks and stresses that are a result of climate change.

Along with the above recommendations for the CRCs and LPCs more broadly, the study findings highlight an important recommendation for donors and programs, specifically:

Situate support to LPCs within a holistic approach to measuring and addressing the underlying dimensions of social cohesion.

- While this study focused on trust, future programming and research with LPCs can develop and implement theories of change that **target multiple dimensions of social cohesion**. When wanting to work with LPCs as a part of programs that aim to strengthen social cohesion, donors and implementers should deploy a holistic approach to social cohesion across all phases of the program life cycle, from assessments, to design, through implementation and evaluation.[54] In practice, this will entail identifying the strengths and weaknesses in a given context of each of the six main dimensions of social cohesion – trust, belonging, shared identity, attitudes towards other groups, collective action norms, and civic engagement – and then identifying which can be addressed through LPCs. This type of evidence-driven, contextually-grounded approach can help to identify which dimensions of social cohesion need the most attention in a certain context, which can help program teams and communities themselves to both tailor LPC activities to the local context and to sequence and layer work with LPCs with interventions that target other dimensions of social cohesion.

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[54] Mercy Corps, 2024.

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