

Effects of Armed Conflict on Children in Mali

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Abstract

The reoccurring incidence of armed conflicts has become hazardous and threatens the well-being and rights of children in Mali. This paper examined the effects of armed conflict on children in Mali. The paper adopted descriptive research design and extracted information from secondary source of data. The paper analysed the Mali crisis through the lens of Failed State Theory, examining the role of weak governance, institutional weaknesses, and corruption in contributing to state failure and internal conflicts. Drawing on both the strengths and limitations of the theory, it emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors in addressing Mali's challenges. It highlights the potential role of external intervention in fostering stability while acknowledging the need for more comprehensive strategies, including institutional reform, good governance, and inclusive peace building processes. By critically engaging with Failed State Theory and its application to the Mali context, this paper contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the crisis and offered valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to foster sustainable peace and stability in the region. Though stakeholders have made some efforts to stem the tide of armed conflict in Mali, such efforts appeared to be inadequate. The paper thus recommended among others, that government should, in strengthening the implementation of peace agreement, there should be enhancement of security sector reform, issues of governance and corruption should be tackled critically, let there be enhanced access to basic services, promotion of economic development and livelihood is essential for reducing poverty and inequality.

Keywords: Conflict, armed conflict, children, crime, Mali

Introduction

Armed conflicts have devastating impacts on children around the world, exposing them to displacement, trauma, lack of education, recruitment as child soldiers, and other grave violations of their rights (UNICEF, 2020). In recent years, the effects of armed conflict on children have been particularly pronounced in West and Central Africa, where ongoing conflicts have affected millions of children (Save the Children, 2019). Mali, in particular, has experienced significant conflict since 2012, with children bearing a disproportionate burden of the resulting violence and instability (UNICEF, 2021).

The conflict in Mali has forced over 200,000 children to flee their homes, interrupting their education and putting them at increased risk of exploitation and abuse (Save the Children, 2019). The trauma experienced by children in conflict situations can have long-term effects on their mental health and development (Attanayake et al., 2020). Furthermore, the closure of schools due to insecurity has disproportionately affected girls, who are often the first to be kept home in times of conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The recruitment and use of child soldiers by armed groups is another major concern in Mali, with grave consequences for children's physical and mental health (Child Soldiers International, 2018). The conflict has also limited access to basic services such as healthcare and sanitation, putting children at increased risk of illness and malnutrition (UNICEF, 2021). Finally, girls and women face increased risks of gender-based violence in conflict situations, including sexual violence and exploitation (UN Women, 2019).

The 2012 rebellion by Tuareg separatists and subsequent coup d'état created a power vacuum that was filled by Islamist militant groups, leading to a protracted conflict in Mali (Lebovich, 2018). Despite ongoing peace efforts and international interventions, violence and insecurity persist, particularly in the northern and central regions (International Crisis Group, 2021). This has had significant consequences for children in the affected areas, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and creating new challenges for their protection and well-being.

One of the key ways in which children have been impacted by the conflict is through recruitment as child soldiers by armed groups. The United Nations has documented cases of children being used as combatants, informants, and for other roles in the conflict (UN Security Council, 2020). This exposure to violence and trauma can have severe psychological and social impacts on children, affecting their long-term mental health and ability to reintegrate into society (Wessells, 2006).

Furthermore, sexual violence has been a persistent problem in the Mali conflict, with girls and women facing increased risks of exploitation and abuse. The United Nations has reported incidents of rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage perpetrated by armed groups (UN Security Council, 2020). This form of violence can have devastating consequences for victims, including physical injuries, psychological trauma, unwanted pregnancies, and social stigma (Bastick et al., 2007).

The destruction and closure of schools have also had significant consequences for children's education in Mali. According to UNICEF, more than 800 schools were closed due to insecurity in 2019, affecting over 244,000 children (UNICEF, 2021). This disruption of education not only affects children's learning and development but also increases their vulnerability to exploitation, recruitment by armed groups, and other forms of abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The conflict has contributed to widespread displacement, with over 200,000 children forced to flee their homes (Save the Children, 2019). Displacement can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, as children may struggle to access basic services and are more likely to experience exploitation and abuse (Klasen et al., 2020). Displaced children also face challenges in continuing their education, which can have long-term consequences for their future opportunities and well-being (UNESCO, 2020).

The Mali conflict has had far-reaching implications for children's protection and well-being, affecting their mental health, education, and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. It is essential to address these issues through targeted interventions and policies to mitigate the harmful effects of conflict on children's lives. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined the effects of armed conflict on children in Mali.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conflict

Conflict has been used and defined from various perspectives by scholars, depending on their scholarship trust and research orientation. However, what seems consistent in their submission is that conflict is an inevitable process of human life. Francis (2006) submitted that conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence, which involves the pursuit of incompatible

interests and goals by different individuals and groups in the society, nation-state and the international level resulting in the application of illegitimate, illegal, unlawful and unconventional methods and strategies. Coser, (1956 cited in Adeola, 2015) presented conflict as the struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate the rivals. However, for the purpose of this paper, conflict is a fluid and infinitely elastic phenomenon which could be twisted into different shapes, patterns, forms and scale. Conflict may be on a small or large scale, the latter degenerating into armed conflict i.e. the use of physical force and worst forms of armed conflict such as mass murder and genocide against unarmed civilians

Armed Conflict

The concept of armed conflict refers to the use of armed force between two or more parties, typically involving a state's military forces and one or more non-state armed groups (Geneva Academy, 2014). Armed conflicts are characterized by organized violence and the use of weapons, with the primary objective of achieving political, economic, or social goals. Fleischman (2019) opined that armed conflict involve at least two organised parties, one of which must be a State. The other party or parties may be non-state groups, such as rebel forces insurgency groups or terrorists organisations. For a situation to be classified as an armed conflict, the violence must reach a certain level of intensity, which is usually measured by factors such as the number of casualties, the duration of the conflict, and the types of weapons used (ICRC, 2008). Armed conflicts are often driven by political, economic, or social goals, such as control over territory, resources, or political power (Kaldor, 2012). Armed conflicts can be categorized as international (between two or more states) or non-international (between a state and one or more non-state armed groups, or between such groups (ICRC, 2008).

In the context of this paper, the concept of armed conflict is essential for understanding the dynamics of violence and insecurity in Mali, as well as the specific impacts of the conflict on children. By examining the parties involved, the intensity of violence, and the underlying objectives of the conflict, it is possible to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by children in Mali and the need for targeted interventions to protect their rights and well-being.

Children

The concept of children refers to individuals who are not yet adults and are considered vulnerable due to their physical, emotional, and cognitive development (UNICEF, 2018).

Generally, children are defined as individuals under the age of 18 years (United Nations, 1989). However, the age of majority may vary among different countries and cultures, with some societies considering individuals as children until they reach a later age. Children are typically dependent on adults for their physical, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as for their protection and care (UNICEF, 2018). This dependency can make children more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse.

Rights: Children have specific rights, including the right to education, healthcare, protection from harm, and participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives (United Nations, 1989). These rights are recognized internationally through treaties and conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Failed State Theory. The Failed State Theory focuses on the inability of a state to fulfill its core functions of maintaining stability, and providing essential services, leading to internal conflicts and security threats. Key exponents include Robert Rotberg, who identified indicators such as corruption and poor governance, and Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner, who argue for external intervention. The theory assumes that state failure is driven by internal factors, is a continuum, and poses a threat to regional and global security.

The Failed State Theory has strengths, such as drawing attention to the causes and consequences of state failure and emphasizing the need for external intervention in rescuing

failed states. However, it also has weaknesses, as it is often criticized for oversimplifying complex political, economic, and social issues in states facing challenges. Furthermore, the theory neglects the role of external factors, such as colonialism and global economic structures, in contributing to state failure.

However, this theory is relevant to Mali's crisis as it provides insights into how weak governance and institutions contribute to state failure and conflict. By understanding the root causes of Mali's challenges, we can better address the crisis and develop strategies for institutional reform. Additionally, the theory highlights the potential role of external intervention, which must be carefully considered within the specific context of Mali's situation. The Failed State Theory offers valuable insights into the Mali crisis by highlighting the role of weak governance, institutional weaknesses, and corruption in contributing to state failure and internal conflicts. It emphasizes the need for external intervention and nation-building efforts to rescue failed states, which can inform policy discussions on the role of international organizations and regional partners in addressing Mali's challenges.

Nevertheless, the theory's weaknesses should also be considered when applying it to the Mali context. Critics argue that it oversimplifies the complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors that contribute to state fragility. Additionally, the theory largely overlooks the historical and external factors that have shaped Mali's trajectory, such as colonialism, regional dynamics, and global economic structures.

Considering the relevance of Failed State Theory to this paper, it provides a framework for understanding the underlying factors contributing to Mali's crisis and the potential role of external intervention in fostering stability. By acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of this theory, policymakers and stakeholders can better assess the complex nature of Mali's challenges and develop more comprehensive strategies for addressing the crisis. This includes focusing on institutional reform, promoting good governance, and fostering inclusive peace building processes while also considering the broader historical and regional context.

Armed Conflict in Mali: Historical context

The origins of Mali's contemporary conflict can be traced back to the country's post-colonial history, characterized by political instability and socio-economic inequalities. Following Mali's independence from France in 1960, successive military regimes and coups weakened the country's democratic institutions and contributed to widespread poverty, particularly in the north (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015).

In the early 1990s, a Tuareg rebellion against the Malian government fueled grievances over political marginalization and economic neglect (Lecocq et al., 2013). While a peace agreement in 1992 granted greater autonomy to northern Mali, tensions persisted, leading to several further uprisings. In 2012, Tuareg separatist group the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), along with Islamist militants, took advantage of a military coup in Bamako to launch a rebellion, swiftly capturing northern Mali (Chivvis, 2016).

The 2012 crisis prompted international intervention, with France launching Operation Serval in 2013 to push back jihadist forces and support the Malian government (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015). While this military campaign helped restore Mali's territorial integrity, it also led to the fragmentation of armed groups and the spread of jihadist violence across the Sahel region (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Since 2013, the conflict in Mali has evolved into a complex landscape involving multiple actors, including jihadist organizations, ethnic militias, and criminal networks. This proliferation of non-state actors has contributed to widespread insecurity, human rights abuses, and political instability, undermining peacebuilding efforts and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis (United Nations, 2020). Mali's colonial past under French rule from the late 19th century to 1960 has significantly influenced the country's socio-political landscape. The colonial administration favored specific ethnic groups and centralized power in the south, sowing seeds of division and resentment, particularly among the Tuareg community in the north (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015). This legacy of marginalization contributed to the Tuareg-led rebellions in the 1990s and 2012.

Following Mali's independence in 1960, the country experienced several military coups and political instability, hindering the development of strong democratic institutions and exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. The limited provision of public services, such as education and healthcare, particularly in the north, fueled grievances and provided fertile ground for armed groups to recruit members and challenge the government's authority (Lecocq et al., 2013).

The rise of extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates, has been a crucial factor in Mali's armed conflict since 2012. These jihadist organizations have exploited local grievances, religious divisions, and weak state presence to expand their influence and launch attacks on civilians, government forces, and international peacekeepers (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The evolution of Mali's conflict reflects a broader regional trend, with the Sahel becoming a hotbed for violent extremism and organized crime. This regional dimension underscores the need for a coordinated response among neighboring countries, as well as international partners, to address the root causes of instability and promote peace and development (United Nations, 2020).

In conclusion, understanding the historical context of armed conflict in Mali requires examining the interplay between colonialism, post-independence politics, and the rise of extremist groups. By considering these factors, policymakers and researchers can develop more effective strategies to address the ongoing crisis and support Mali's long-term stability.

Effects of armed conflict on children in Mali

The armed conflict in Mali has had a profound and devastating impact on the country's children. With over half a million children in conflict-affected areas being denied access to education, these youngsters face significant obstacles in their personal development and future prospects (UNICEF, 2021). According to UNESCO, in 2020, nearly 60% of children in Mali were out of school, with this number likely being even higher in conflict-affected areas. This figure likely underestimates the true number of children who are not attending school, as many schools have been forced to close due to the conflict. Those who manage to attend school often struggle with psychological trauma stemming from exposure to violence, hindering their ability to focus and learn effectively (ReliefWeb, 2023). The disruption of education, the conflict has led to severe mental and physical health issues for Malian children. As documented by the United Nations (2020).

Family separation is another tragic consequence of the conflict in Mali. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that over 370,000 children have been displaced due to conflict in Mali. Many of these children have witnessed atrocities or experienced traumatic events, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and emotional well-being. Displaced children are often separated from their families and communities, which can lead to increased risk of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking. The displacement of families often results in the loss of basic needs such as shelter, food, and healthcare, exacerbating the challenges children face in their daily lives (Save the Children, 2019).

Médecins Sans Frontières reports that more than 1,500 children have been hospitalised due to conflict-related injuries and illnesses in Mali. Many of these children have suffered severe burns, gunshot wounds, and injuries from explosive devices. The UN reports that over 200 cases of sexual violence against children have been reported in Mali since 2012. However, this figure likely underestimates the true number of cases, as many victims are afraid to report the abuse due to fear of retribution. Save the Children reports that 80% of children in conflict-affected areas of Mali have experienced traumatic events such as displacement, violence, and family separation. These experiences can have profound impacts on their physical and mental health, leading to long-term problems with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Exposure to violence can result in post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, among other psychological conditions. These mental health challenges, coupled with limited access to healthcare, can severely impact children's long-term well-being (UNICEF, 2021).

According to the UN, more than 2,500 children have been recruited and used by armed groups in Mali since 2012. The majority of these children are boys between the ages of 10 and 18, although girls are also recruited and used for support roles such as cooking, cleaning, and sexual exploitation. The UN reports that children are often forcibly recruited by armed groups, including through abduction, coercion, and deception. Majority of the child soldiers in Mali are subjected to harsh conditions, including physical and sexual abuse, forced labor, and drug use. (UN, 2020). According to Save the Children, child soldiers in Mali are often forced to participate in armed combat and may be used as human shields or for suicide bombings. In 2020, the UN reported that at least six children were killed or injured while participating in hostilities in Mali. Efforts to reintegrate child soldiers back into their communities can be challenging due to the stigma and trauma associated with their involvement in conflict. Displacement, recruitment by armed groups, and abduction all contribute to breaking up families, leaving children vulnerable and without a stable support network (United Nations, 2020). The World Food Programme reports that over 1.2 million children in Mali are facing acute food insecurity due to disrupted livelihoods caused by conflict. These children are at increased risk of malnutrition and chronic health problems.

The effects of armed conflict on children in Mali are multifaceted and severe, requiring urgent attention from national and international actors. Immediate action is necessary to address the educational, health, and psychosocial needs of affected children, as well as to reunite separated families and provide basic necessities. Addressing these challenges is not only critical for the well-being of Malian children but also for the long-term stability and development of the country as a whole.

Roles of different terrorists groups in Mali

Different terrorist groups have played a significant role in the ongoing crisis in Mali. These actors can be broadly categorized into armed groups, religious extremists, and criminal networks, each with their own motivations and agendas.

Armed groups such as the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) have sought autonomy or independence for northern Mali, leading to clashes with government forces and other groups (Lecocq et al., 2013). Islamist extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates, have exploited the security vacuum in the region to gain influence and pursue their ideological goals (Chivvis, 2016).

Criminal networks involved in smuggling and trafficking have also contributed to the crisis by providing funding and resources to armed groups, as well as exacerbating corruption and undermining governance (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015). The involvement of these terrorists groups has not only intensified the conflict but also complicated efforts to achieve peace and stability in Mali. The ongoing crisis in Mali is largely driven by the actions of various non-terrorists groups. These actors, comprising armed groups, religious extremists, and criminal networks, have been able to emerge and operate due to a combination of historical, socio-political, and geographical factors.

Decades of political instability, socio-economic inequalities, and weak governance have laid the groundwork for the emergence and growth of terrorists group in Mali. Additionally, the country's vast and remote terrain, coupled with porous borders, has allowed these groups to evade government control and conduct cross-border operations.

Moreover, these terrorist groups have capitalized on local grievances and ethnic divisions to garner support and legitimacy from segments of the population. For example, the Tuareg separatist movement has been fueled by longstanding grievances over political and economic marginalization. The involvement of these diverse non-state actors has contributed to the complexity and intractability of the conflict in Mali.

The role of the government and other stakeholders in the Mali armed conflict

The Mali armed conflict is marked by the involvement of multiple stakeholders with varying interests and objectives. The Malian government, despite facing challenges such as instability,

corruption, and resource constraints, is responsible for addressing the conflict through peace negotiations, implementing agreements, and providing security and essential services to its citizens. Non-state armed groups, including the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform of Movements, have played a significant role in fighting for control over territory and resources, often clashing with government forces and each other.

The international community has also been heavily involved, with organizations like the United Nations and African Union supporting peace negotiations, deploying peacekeeping missions, and providing humanitarian aid to affected communities. Civil society organizations have contributed by advocating for peace and promoting human rights, as well as delivering vital services like education and healthcare to people impacted by the conflict. The complexity of the conflict and the range of stakeholders involved have shaped the dynamics of the crisis and the efforts to establish lasting peace and stability in Mali.

The Malian government has been working to restore stability and peace, but its efforts have been hindered by numerous factors, including a lack of trust among certain segments of the population, insufficient resources, and the presence of corruption (Chivvis, 2016). To overcome these challenges, the government has sought support from the international community and engaged in peace negotiations with armed groups. International organizations such as the United Nations and African Union have played a critical role in mediating peace agreements and providing humanitarian assistance. However, their efforts have been complicated by the fragmented nature of armed groups, the difficulty of accessing remote areas, and the need to balance various political interests (United Nations, 2020). Civil society organizations have faced their own set of challenges, including security threats and limited funding. Despite these obstacles, they have been instrumental in promoting human rights, fostering dialogue among conflict parties, and providing essential services to communities in need (USIP, 2023). Non-state armed groups have sought to advance their interests by engaging in both violent and non-violent tactics. Some groups have entered into peace agreements with the government, while others have continued to use violence to pursue their objectives (CSIS, 2022). Their actions have contributed to the complexity and ongoing nature of the conflict in Mali.

Evaluating the combined efforts to address the Mali crisis, it is clear that there have been some positive results. Notably, the 2015 Algiers Accord has contributed to a reduction in violence and established interim authorities in some regions of the country (UN, 2021). Additionally, humanitarian assistance has provided vital support to affected communities, saving lives and alleviating suffering (OCHA, 2023). Furthermore, development aid has bolstered efforts to improve governance, strengthen civil society, and promote economic growth (USAID, 2021). Finally, peace building initiatives have led to increased dialogue and reconciliation at the local level (USIP, 2023).

Despite these positive results, Mali continues to face significant challenges. Insecurity and violence persist in certain areas, with civilians, security forces, and peacekeepers frequently targeted in attacks (CSIS, 2022). Delays in implementing the peace agreement and ongoing disagreements between involved parties have hampered progress towards stability. Governance remains weak, corruption is prevalent, and trust in state institutions is low. Terrorist and extremist groups continue to operate within the country, exacerbating instability. Moreover, access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and water, sanitation, and hygiene is limited (UN, 2021). In summary, while the combined efforts to address the Mali crisis have had some positive outcomes, much work remains to establish lasting peace and stability in the region.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Mali crisis is a complex issue that has posed significant challenges to the country's stability, security, and development. Various actors have been involved in addressing the crisis, leading to some positive outcomes such as a reduction in violence and provision of humanitarian assistance. However, the crisis remains unresolved due to factors such as ongoing insecurity, governance challenges, and limited access to essential services. To achieve sustainable peace

and stability, it is crucial to tackle the root causes of the crisis, including poverty, corruption, and inequality. Therefore, the following recommendations are made.

Firstly, government should strengthen the Implementation of Peace Agreement. All parties must accelerate the implementation of the Algiers Accord. This includes establishing interim authorities, disarming and reintegrating armed groups, and deploying joint security forces. Prioritizing these actions will help create a more secure environment for citizens and foster trust between conflicting parties. Secondly, enhancement of security sector reform. The Malian government should focus on security sector reform by professionalizing security forces, improving oversight mechanisms, and encouraging community-oriented policing. These efforts will contribute to a more effective and accountable security sector that can better protect civilians and maintain stability. Thirdly, addressing governance and corruption challenges. Strengthening governance and tackling corruption are critical for improving trust in state institutions and reducing conflict drivers. Promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in decision-making processes is vital for creating a more resilient and equitable society.

Fourthly, let there be enhanced access to basic services. Improving access to healthcare, education, water sanitation, and hygiene services is crucial for building resilience and fostering development. By investing in these areas, the government and its partners can improve the well-being of citizens and create a more stable foundation for peace. Furthermore, let there be promotion of economic development and livelihoods. Investing in economic opportunities and livelihoods, particularly in conflict-affected regions, is essential for reducing poverty and inequality. These efforts will help create a more equitable society and address some of the underlying drivers of conflict. In addition, let there be support to civil society and local peace building initiative. Strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations and supporting local peace building efforts is vital for promoting reconciliation and addressing the root causes of conflict. By empowering communities to engage in these initiatives, the government and its partners can create a more inclusive and sustainable peace process.

The above recommendations require sustained and coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, including the Malian government, international organizations, regional partners, civil society, and development agencies. With a strong commitment to collaboration, Mali can move towards a more peaceful, secure, and prosperous future.

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