

Life on the line: stability and livelihoods in Coastal West Africa

# Chapter 4: stability and livelihood challenges in the Sikasso border region between central Mali and southwestern Burkina Faso

Andrew Lebovich

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## About the author

**Andrew Lebovich** is a Research Fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. His research focuses on security and political issues in the Sahel (and North Africa), with a particular emphasis on religious mobilisation, armed conflict, and sources of local political and religious legitimacy. Additionally, he is a postdoctoral researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, examining EU foreign policy in the Sahel.

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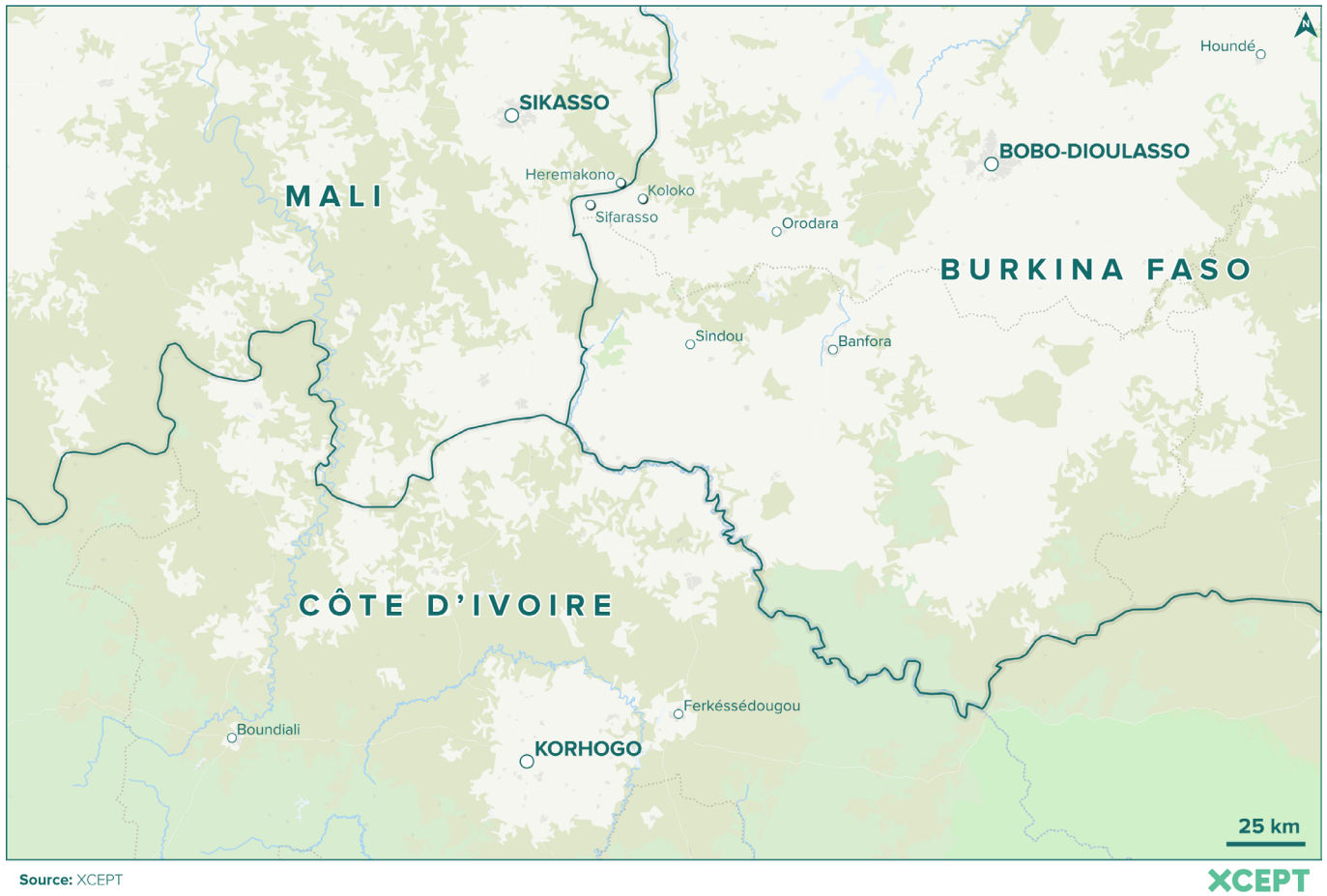
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**Figure 1.** Map of the research area

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on cross-border trade dynamics in the Sikasso border region, both licit and illicit, and the adaptation of communities to the presence of security forces in these border areas. It also explores the presence and activities of armed groups from different backgrounds and ideologies operating between Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as the role of trade in the lives of communities on both sides of the border.

The chapter reviews the formal and informal trade and movement of people between Mali's Sikasso Province and the Hauts-Bassins and Cascades regions in southwestern Burkina Faso, now the region of Guriko following the country's administrative restructuring in July 2025. These regions, which also trade extensively with parts of northern Côte d'Ivoire, are among the most economically important for Mali and Burkina Faso.

This is a crucial area for commerce and the movement of people and goods.<sup>1</sup> As one young male merchant from Sikasso, Mali, described: “These commercial centres are linked to the communities (in Mali and Burkina Faso) by trade, buying, and selling of commercial products. These commercial products benefit the two peoples. These commercial centres allow us to maintain our social cohesion.”<sup>2</sup>

For several years, the area has also been an area of expansion for violent extremist organisations (VEOs), particularly the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and its predecessors. There are significant security concerns in the region as movement and insecurity shift further south in Mali and Burkina Faso, and as violent extremist groups continue to impact the Central Sahel and Coastal West African states.

The area is a hub for cross-border trade in various goods, including clothing and fabric, shoes, fuel, tubers, vegetables and legumes, groundnuts, shea butter, cattle, and dried caterpillars.<sup>3</sup> The Sikasso border region is also a major site for transhumance movement,<sup>4</sup> both historically and more recently due to climate change and displacement from conflict in central and northern Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>5</sup>

The socio-economic dynamics of the area are characterised by the volume and importance of trade in formal and informal goods (including gold from artisanal mining and drugs),<sup>6</sup> and also by the confluence of conflict vectors in the region. Since at least 2015, attempted militant infiltrations and attacks in Sikasso and northeastern Côte d’Ivoire, and increasing levels of violence in western Burkina Faso, have dramatically impacted civilians and their livelihoods. The tri-border area has also seen a proliferation of self-defence groups, conflict over land tenure, and social tension between communities – tensions that have further increased with the influx of people and cattle displaced by conflict in Central Mali, northwestern Burkina Faso, and into northern Côte d’Ivoire.<sup>7</sup>

The Malian government has long had a strong presence in Sikasso given the size and economic importance of the region, which produces significant agricultural and trade revenue for Mali. The Burkinabé government is also present in the main cities and towns of the former regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades. Since 2018, this has included more security deployments to address increasing insecurity in the region, as discussed later in this chapter. However, this expanded security presence has been uneven, and the security situation has increasingly impacted the lives and livelihoods of communities on both sides of the border.

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- 1 Solazzo R. and Nowak M, ‘Tri-border transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d’Ivoire-Mali region,’ *Small Arms Survey*, October 2020, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/tri-border-transit-trafficking-and-smuggling-burkina-faso-cote-divoire-mali-region>.
  - 2 Interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, February 2024.
  - 3 This data is drawn from an assessment of the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted for this study, in addition to a review of the relevant secondary literature related to this area.
  - 4 Telephone interview with regional security expert, September 2023; telephone interview with Malian pastoralism specialist, October 2023.
  - 5 International Alert, ‘Maintaining peace and stability in Mali’s Sikasso Region: Strategies to contain land-related conflicts,’ *International Alert*, 2020, pp. 8–14, <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Maintaining-Peace-And-Stability-EN-2020.pdf>; Interview with regional security specialist, September 2023.
  - 6 These illicit goods are common in the region studied. However, because they move via clandestine means and draw significant scrutiny from authorities, the study did not seek specific information about these trades to avoid endangering the researchers and interviewees.
  - 7 International Alert (2020), ‘Maintaining peace and stability in Mali’s Sikasso region’; Mathieu Pellerin (2021), ‘Listening to Herders in West Africa and the Sahel: What Future for Pastoralism in the Face of Insecurity and its Impacts,’ *Réseau Billital Maroobé (RBM)*, September 2021, pp. 118-120, <https://www.inter-reseaux.org/wp-content/uploads/Edited-Report-Patoralism-and-Insecurity-in-the-Sahel-and-West-Africa-RBM.pdf>.

# Methodology

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Research for this chapter was carried out in border regions of southern Mali and southwest Burkina Faso by Cabinet Gayaa, a local research organisation with relevant regional knowledge, experience, and language skills to conduct interviews with members of the major ethno-linguistic groups in the region. It conducted 55 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and two focus group discussions (FGDs), operating with the knowledge and permission of local authorities. Researchers conducted additional interviews with experts in security, politics, and commerce in the region both before and after the field data collection.

Interviews were conducted at four sites: Sikasso and Hèrèmakono in Mali, and Koloko and Sifarasso in Burkina Faso. In Mali, they conducted 30 KIIs (25 in Sikasso and five in Hèrèmakono) and two FGDs. In Burkina Faso, they conducted 25 interviews: 13 in Koloko and 12 in Sifarasso. No FGDs were conducted in Burkina Faso due to political sensitivities and security risks. Interviews conducted in Burkina Faso were complicated by the presence of village chiefs at several interviews, and the need to conduct a certain number of interviews in their compound.

The researchers also noted that interview subjects in Burkina Faso were often reluctant to speak openly due to fear of VEOs, as well as from the government and auxiliaries from the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP). Local researchers' observations informed the author's analysis presented in this report.

Since the 2022 coup, security forces in Burkina Faso have detained a number of opposition figures and journalists critical of the government of interim President Ibrahim Traoré, only for the detainees to appear later having been enrolled by force into the security forces or VDP.<sup>8</sup> These risks, compounded by the threat of militant violence as retribution for providing information to researchers, may have resulted in shorter interview responses and limited criticism of the government.

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8 Human Rights Watch, 'Burkina Faso: Abductions Used to Crack Down on Dissent,' *Human Rights Watch*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/27/burkina-faso-abductions-used-crack-down-dissent>.

# Overview of socio-economics of border communities

## Community dynamics in the Sikasso border region

The border areas in this chapter, particularly along the border that separates Sikasso from the former regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades in Burkina Faso, share several commonalities and cross-border ties. The area is largely populated by ethnic Senufo and Malinké, as well as several smaller ethnolinguistic groups.<sup>9</sup> As such, some studies have pointed to the fact that the border area can only be understood through a transnational lens, with the area marked by shared ethnic and linguistic communities and close commercial ties.<sup>10</sup> This closeness has deepened as a result of a rapprochement between the military governments in charge in both Mali and Burkina Faso, particularly since the creation of the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) in September 2023 – an alliance formed between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and originating as a mutual defence pact.<sup>11</sup>

According to a female merchant in Oradora, Burkina Faso: “Commercial centres are the primary places to buy products for daily life. They are very important economic centres because they allow for the reinforcement of socio-economic links [across the border].”<sup>12</sup> Trade, both short-haul and long-haul, allows communities to sell their products more widely (particularly on market days), while also benefitting from lower prices for goods in different areas.<sup>13</sup> This is particularly true in a region that has long received state subsidies for staple goods such as tea and sugar that have allowed for profitable trades in smuggled or informally sold goods.<sup>14</sup> Cross-border trade also allows for increased profits from the sale of abundant foodstuffs, such as potatoes, yams, tomatoes, fruits, and onions, as well as cash crops like cashews, sesame, and soy.<sup>15</sup>

In the Sahel, there are often broad communal distinctions and specialisations in different trades and products, with certain social and ethnic groups responsible for specific trades, although these labour

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9 Solazzo and Nowak, “Tri-Border Transit,” p. 7.

10 For instance, Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD) (2021), ‘A territorial foresight of Sikasso Region (Mali),’ CIRAD, November 2021, <https://agritrop.cirad.fr/602187/7/Sikasso%20in%202040%20GIZ%20Final%20report.pdf>; also see Lassina Diarra, L. (2021), ‘Étude: Radicalisation et Perception de la Menace Terroriste dans l’Extrême Nord de la Côte d’Ivoire,’ *Timbuktu Institute*, April 2021; See also, for instance, International Crisis Group (2023), ‘Keeping Jihadists out of Northern Côte d’Ivoire,’ *Crisis Group Africa Briefing* No. 192, 11 August 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/b192-northern-cote-divoire.pdf>; Diarra, ‘Étude: Radicalisation et Perception de la Menace Terroriste dans l’Extrême Nord de la Côte d’Ivoire’; See also research conducted under PVE programming, such the Resilience for Peace (R4P) initiative in northern Côte d’Ivoire, descriptions of which are available here: <https://www.equalaccess.org/project-tax/resilience-for-peace-r4p-cote-divoire/>. While these initiatives are very important to stem the spread of insurgency, they often struggle to take cross-border dynamics fully into account since projects often focus on one country at a time.

11 See, for instance, Ochieng, B., ‘Will the Sahel Military Alliance Further Fragment ECOWAS?’ CSIS, 15 February 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-sahel-military-alliance-further-fragment-ecowas>.

12 Interview with adult female merchant, Oradora, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

13 Interview with young male merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

14 Such disparities have often been at the heart of trade in foodstuffs like pasta and sugar between North Africa and the Sahel, as well as goods such as fuel. On these trades and their origins, see Scheele, J. (2012), *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

15 Information derived from nine interviews in Mali and Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

divisions are not universal and often do not neatly align with communal boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Generally, agricultural products are handled and sold by traditionally agricultural communities, such as the Senufo and Mossi, with some gender divisions coming into play; for example, women are often responsible for producing and selling more finished products, such as shea butter and clothing. However, as respondents overwhelmingly noted, men are almost exclusively responsible for producing, taking to market, and purchasing agricultural goods, such as cashews and sesame. These products are largely brought to market by Senufo men, as well as Mossi and Minianka communities that are more common on the Burkinabé side of the border.<sup>17</sup>

## Cross-border movement of goods and people

The Mali–Burkina Faso border area, extending down to the border with Côte d'Ivoire, has a very active and important set of trade routes and market towns, allowing for selling and buying a wide variety of goods. According to KIIs, the goods sold and bought in the main centres in this study – Sikasso (with several main markets), Hèrèmakono, Bambougou, Danderesso, Kadiolo, Zégoua, Koloko, Sifarasso, and Oradora – include manufactured foodstuffs and consumable goods such as cooking oil, tea, sugar, shoes, clothing, and fabric; agricultural products for consumption, such as onions, potatoes, and yams; and export products such as cattle, cashews, sesame products, and fuel.<sup>18</sup>

Foodstuffs and consumables tend to be sold by small cultivators or traders, where they are they resold in market stalls, particularly in secondary markets.<sup>19</sup> Goods designed for more large-scale export require more capital, and are handled more exclusively by men.<sup>20</sup> This large-scale export trade is vulnerable to factors such as theft, a deal collapsing, or border closures. As a result, families can supplement their income through other small, more localised forms of trade or activities like small farming (maraîchage).<sup>21</sup>

Respondents cited the difficult security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso as the primary challenge facing traders, particularly difficulties encountered on the road and high fees associated with cross-border commerce. Less than one-third of interviewees (14 out of 55) said their livelihoods and overall living conditions had been positive during the previous year.<sup>22</sup> Only five of those positive responses came from interviewees in Sikasso and Hèrèmakono.<sup>23</sup>

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16 On the role of different social groups and communities in trade, see Bruno Stary, B. (1995), 'Réseaux marchands et territoires étatiques en Afrique de l'Ouest,' paper presented at conference 'Le territoire, lien ou frontière?' Paris, 2–4 October 1995.

17 14 Interviews conducted in Sikasso and Hèrèmakono, Mali, as well as in Oradora, Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

18 18 interviews conducted in Sikasso and Hèrèmakono, Mali, as well as Oradora, Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

19 13 interviews conducted in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

20 Interview with adult female merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with adult male cashew merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with adult male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with a young female merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with an adult male merchant in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

21 Interview with a young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; KII with a young male cattle merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

22 Interviews conducted in Sikasso, Hèrèmakono, Koloko, and Sifarasso with diverse inhabitants, December 2023–January 2024.

23 Interview with adult female merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with young male migrant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, January 2024; interview with young female merchant in Sikasso, Mali, January 2024; interview with adult male merchant in Hèrèmakono, Mali, December 2023.

Nonetheless, several key informants highlighted the importance of cross-border trade in helping them overcome these difficulties. For instance, one merchant reported financial difficulties over the previous year, but noted that cross-border trade was still vital to local livelihoods.<sup>24</sup> Another described cross-border trade as allowing traders to “satisfy the needs of our families”, while also allowing for several partnerships to be forged between Burkina Faso and Mali.<sup>25</sup> “Personally, I can say that my situation changed some due to the revenue from this commerce”, a male merchant from Sikasso, Mali, said. “This [cross-border] commerce allowed me to have new external relationships founded on confidence.”<sup>26</sup>

Cross-border trade is essential for the provision of basic goods, and the trade in foodstuffs on both sides of the border is particularly essential for local communities. These goods are sold widely across regional markets, illustrating their importance to cross-border communities that benefit from their production and sale. According to the qualitative field data, goods are transported to Burkinabé posts and markets on motorbikes and three-wheeled motorbikes, which are common across the region. Malian respondents, on the other hand, largely noted that goods were transported into Mali and to Malian markets by trucks and specialised buses or transport vehicles.<sup>27</sup> This difference reflects the size and importance of Sikasso as a regional trade centre, with goods stocked on the Burkinabé side and repackaged for transport into Mali and toward Sikasso in particular.

Goods such as cashews, sesame seeds, and soy beans are largely delivered to market and traded by men, according to respondents.<sup>28</sup> This gender dynamic is generally not present when it comes to other agricultural and commercial goods.<sup>29</sup>

Cash crops, particularly cashews, also represent more globalised trade, and reveal distinctions between trade in Burkina Faso and Mali.<sup>30</sup> According to a merchant and cashew seller in Sikasso: “During the last year, we encountered difficulties in sales and purchasing partners. Burkinabé are our direct partners. However, they sign contracts with Indian and Vietnamese [businesspeople] who own factories to transform [the cashews]”.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, a Burkinabé merchant in Sifarasso observed that: “Markets in Mali allow us to satisfy the needs of our Indian and Pakistani partners who order lots of product from us, and we buy it in Mali”.<sup>32</sup> This imbalance led one Malian merchant to recommend that facilities be built in Mali to refine and export cashews and similar products.<sup>33</sup> It also demonstrates how government policy and investment can dramatically improve exports and incomes for border communities, which adapt to, and profit from, these imbalances where possible.

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24 Interview with adult male merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

25 Interview with young woman in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

26 Interview with adult male merchant older than 35, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

27 Drawn from 20 KIIs in Sikasso, Mali, and Oradora and Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

28 Interview with male cashew merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

29 Observations based on more than 50 KIIs and FGD responses in Mali and Burkina Faso as part of this study.

30 Although the data is not further disaggregated, in 2022, Burkina Faso exported US\$168 million worth of coconuts, brazil nuts, and cashew nuts: Observatory of Economic Complexity. ‘Coconuts, Brazil Nuts, and Cashews in Burkina Faso’. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/coconuts-brazil-nuts-and-cashews/reporter/bfa>; in Mali during the same year, only US\$3.22 million were exported: Observatory of Economic Complexity. “Coconuts, Brazil Nuts, and Cashews in Mali.” <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/coconuts-brazil-nuts-and-cashews/reporter/mli>.

31 Interview with male cashew merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

32 Interview with male merchant in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

33 Interview with adult male cashew merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

## Trade flows across borders

The border area is significantly more agriculturally productive than the more arid zones to the north. This drives the trade between the important commercial cities of Sikasso, Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire), and Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso).<sup>34</sup> This section focuses on the Burkina Faso–Mali border crossings, particularly the towns of Sifarasso and Koloko on the Burkinabé side of the border, and Hèrèmakono and Sikasso city on the Malian side. These sites were chosen to reflect the importance of the crossroads of two major trading cities – Bobo-Dioulasso and Sikasso – and the large volumes of people living on both sides of the border in the immediate border areas (approximately 250,000 in Sikasso and nearly 200,000 in the former regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades).<sup>35</sup>

Within the border area, there are several main routes for the movement of both licit and illicit goods. However, it is important to note that illicit goods do not tend to follow major road networks, particularly in areas between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire where border security is relatively light, and the terrain makes crossing on motorbike feasible for only small groups of traffickers.<sup>36</sup>

The three main smuggling axes in this are: Bondoukou–Bouna–Varale–Doropo, which is reportedly used to smuggle arms, gold, and other goods; Ferkessédougou–Ouagalodougou, with subsidiary routes splitting off into Burkina Faso and Mali; and the 'Tengrela routes' that are used to smuggle from Côte d'Ivoire into Mali and vice versa.<sup>37</sup>

Sikasso is one of the major centres in Mali and the region for cotton production, while the former region of Hauts-Bassins is also an essential trade node and production site for agricultural, industrial, and artisanal goods.<sup>38</sup> As elsewhere in the Sahel, land under cultivation in Sikasso and across the border in Burkina Faso has increased dramatically in the past several decades. This has contributed to the importance of the tri-border region for agricultural and cash crop production, but also tensions with herders.<sup>39</sup>

## Cattle trade a target for theft and smuggling

The tri-border area hosts significant economic activity (see Table 1), as well as seasonal migration related to cattle and other herds. It is also a destination for stolen animals to be transported or resold in local

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34 Institut National de la statistique et de la démographie (INSD) (2022), 'Résultats, Cinquième recensement général de la population et de l'habitation: Monographie de la région des Hauts Bassins,' December 2022. <https://www.insd.bf/sites/default/files/2023-02/MONOGRAPHE%20DES%20HAUTS-BASSINS%205E%20RGPH.pdf>.

35 Rabat-Process, (n.d.) 'Cross-border cooperation, mobility and border management between Mali and Burkina,' *Rabat Process*, <https://www.rabat-process.org/images/RabatProcess/Documents/infographic-cross-border-cooperation-burkina-mali-rabat-process.pdf>.

36 Telephone interview with Malian security expert, November 2023.

37 Salazzo R, and Nowak M. (2020), 'Tri-border transit: Trafficking and Smuggling in the Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire-Mali region,' pp. 8–10.

38 Institut National de la Statistique et de la Démographie (INSD) Burkina Faso (2022), 'Résultats, Cinquième recensement général de la population et de l'habitation: Monographie de la région des Hauts Bassins,' pp. 1-2.

39 CIRAD, (2021) 'A territorial foresight of Sikasso Region (Mali),' p. 40; also see, for instance, Pellerin, M. (2021), 'Listening to Herders in West Africa and the Sahel,' p. 57.

markets.<sup>40</sup> These patterns of theft occur throughout the region and involve different members of the herding economy, from herders themselves to those who watch the cattle at night, criminal groups that specialise in cattle theft, cattle merchants, and butchers.<sup>41</sup> The cattle trade and the related volume of traffic are important for the livelihoods of people living in the Sikasso border region given the size of herds on both sides of the border and the region's role as a local processing and reselling hub for cattle from central and northern Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>42</sup>

Traded Items	Direction of Trade	Dominant Demographic
 Vegetables (onions, tomatos, peppers, tubers)	Mali ← → Burkina Faso	Older women (short haul) Men (long haul)
 Cereals (millet, soy, maize, corn, rice, gari)	Mali ← → Burkina Faso	Older women (short haul) Men (long haul)
 Nuts (cashews, groundnuts, shea)	Mali → Burkina Faso	Men (Mali–Burkina trade) Women
 Livestock (cattle, goats, fowls, sheep)	Mali → Burkina Faso	Older men
 Household items (ataya tea, cooking oil, plastic goods, bottles & bags, utensils, soap)	Mali ← → Burkina Faso	Women (largely)
 Fabric, clothing, and sandals	Mali ← → Burkina Faso	Men Women
 Fuel	Burkina Faso → Mali	Older men (in charge) Male youth (as workers)

**Table 1.** Trade flows in the Sikasso border region<sup>43</sup>

Several factors have exacerbated these trends in cattle theft in recent years. Insecurity in central and northern Mali, for example, has led some herders to move south toward Sikasso and the border with Burkina Faso, or to give their herds to specialised agents to keep in Sikasso.<sup>44</sup>

Over the last three years, refugees from violence in Burkina Faso (particularly from Fulbe, or Peulh in French) have also increasingly taken their herds into northeastern Côte d'Ivoire; as experts in Côte d'Ivoire observe, stolen cattle from areas like Bounkani, Côte d'Ivoire, are often taken on foot or by truck into Burkina Faso or Ghana for butchering and sale as meat, or for resale before they are processed.<sup>45</sup>

In Central Mali and Burkina Faso, VEOs have benefitted from cattle theft and herds in ways that could impact the border areas studied here. There is limited reporting, for instance, related to the fact that VEOs

40 Berger, F. (2023), 'Locked Horns: Cattle Rustling and Mali's War Economy,' *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, March 2023, p. 5.

41 Assanvo, W. (2023), 'Liens entre extrémisme violent et activités illicites en Côte d'Ivoire,' p. 10.

42 Pellerin, M. (2021), 'Listening to Herders,' pp. 124–127.

43 This data was put together based on evidence from the qualitative data collection among all KIIs interviewed in the Sikasso border region.

44 Telephone interview with regional security expert, September 2023.

45 Assanvo, W. (2023), 'Liens entre extrémisme violent et activités illicites en Côte d'Ivoire,' pp. 9–10.

profit from the sale of stolen cattle either directly or through taxation (*zakat*), and indirectly benefit from returning stolen cattle to communities that align with them,<sup>46</sup> deepening their governing legitimacy in the process.

VEOs have also reportedly recruited young herders in Sikasso, specifically in recent years,<sup>47</sup> and it is very likely similar processes are at work in western Burkina Faso. These dynamics have impacted trade flows and routes, which, in turn, affects the livelihoods of border communities. As explained in Chapter 2, the shifting trade flows can often affect women differently, as their livelihoods depend on trade routes within their communities. When these routes and flows change, their income-generating activities, such as selling premade food and drinks to people passing along their routes, can be negatively impacted. Insecurity therefore impacts this important cross-border trade in different ways, while also potentially feeding into VEO recruitment as transhumance movement grows.

## Illicit trades and criminality

The design of the study largely excluded questions related to illicit trading and markets, for reasons of sensitivity. Nonetheless, it did reveal limited information about illicit trades, informal markets, and the effect of criminality on trade. For instance, one respondent in Koloko highlighted fuel as one of the main goods traded there, and cited Bobo-Dioulasso, Oradora, and Sikasso as the commercial centres that fuel traders most frequented.<sup>48</sup> Respondents from Sifarasso also described their trade as informal due to the lack of state authorities in the village and its environs to regulate border commerce.<sup>49</sup> A limited number of respondents also mentioned cattle theft by armed groups, particularly in market towns like Bambougou and Nongon-Chouala, though without specifying which armed groups conducted the thefts.<sup>50</sup>

Their comments highlight a key thread running through all four chapters in this report: in these under-governed cross-border spaces, much of the trade is somewhere between formal and informal in nature. As a result, when regulations are imposed to curb explicit illicit activity through increased policing of cross-border movement, they can sometimes push people to conduct regular trade in more discreet, informal ways to circumvent security (see later in this chapter for more on the impact of security on trade).

Sikasso, and parts of the tri-border region, are also transit and production areas for narcotics (particularly cannabis and related products) due to the relatively rich agricultural land available there. Locally grown cannabis serves local demand, as well as some consumption in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>51</sup>

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46 For instance, Berger, F. (2023), 'Locked Horns,' pp. 12–17.

47 Pellerin, M. (2021), 'Listening to Herders,' p. 118.

48 Interview with adult male merchant, Koloko, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

49 Interview with adult male merchant in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, January 2024; interview with adult male farmer in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

50 Interview with young male cattle merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

51 Assanvo, W. (2018), 'Drug Trafficking: Mali's Silent Enemy,' *ENACT*, 5 April 2018, <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/malis-silent-enemy>.

## Gold mining and smuggling in the Sikasso border region

The local economies of the tri-border area covered in this chapter include significant gold deposits that have made the area a hub for both official mining and artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM).

ASGM functions within the broader licit and illicit trade flows of this borderland, even though respondents did not address issues related to gold. However, it is important to note the size of this sector in the formal and informal economies of Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as its impact on armed violence and armed group governance in the region (see the following section for more).

The formal gold sector and ASGM provide significant revenues for the states in question (particularly Mali's Sikasso region), and large amounts of gold are smuggled to regional capitals and then sold further afield. Gold is also reportedly smuggled from Mali into Burkina Faso for further distribution, in part owing to the large numbers of Burkinabé miners active in ASGM in Sikasso and elsewhere in southern Mali.<sup>52</sup>

Corruption related to the gold trade and smuggling linked to ASGM play important economic, political, and social roles in the areas in question. They provide access to revenue for border communities and traders, and are an important source of income for armed groups that sell gold directly, levy taxes on miners, and conduct their own mining operations.<sup>53</sup>

In some cases, regional states tolerate ASGM to maintain order in border areas that are hard to police, such as in northern Côte d'Ivoire or southwestern Burkina Faso. Traditional hunters (Dozo) and VDPs profit from ASGM revenues in exchange for ostensibly providing security against other armed groups.<sup>54</sup> In late 2021 and 2022, JNIM reportedly seized control of some artisanal gold mining sites in Cascades from the Dozo and pushed them from the area. This deprived the Dozo of access to the gold mining sites, while potentially increasing revenue for JNIM through taxes on miners and other means.<sup>55</sup>

# Security factors impacting cross-border livelihoods

## Non-state armed groups

VEOs have operated in Mali in different ways since the 2000s, if not earlier. In 2012, a jihadist coalition occupied the northern half of the country until a French-led military intervention in January 2013 dislodged them from northern Mali's main cities and towns.

52 Hunter, M. 'Beyond Blood: Gold, conflict and criminality in West Africa,' *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*. November 2022, p. 35, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Marcena-Hunter-Beyond-blood-Gold-conflict-and-criminality-in-West-Africa-GI-TOC-November-2022.pdf>.

53 Bussink, C., Patuel, F., Cook, R. and Hunter, M. 'Gold Trafficking in the Sahel,' *UNODC*, 2023, pp. 20–21, [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta\\_sahel/TOCTA\\_Sahel\\_Gold\\_v5.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_Gold_v5.pdf).

54 Van Offelen, C. 'L'orpaillage au Sahel: un vecteur de l'expansion du terrorisme?' *Sécurité Globale*, No. 30, 2022, pp. 7, 20.

55 Beevor, E. 'JNIM in Burkina Faso: A Strategic Criminal Actor,' *GI TOC* August 2022, p. 12, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM-29-Aug-web.pdf>.

For several years following the jihadist occupation of the country's north and the French-led intervention, the Malian government and many people in the international community believed that the insurgency was limited to the country's northern regions of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu. However, VEOs sought to penetrate areas of southeastern Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire as early as 2015. These early attempts were reportedly led by Souleymane Keita, a Malian militant charged by Ansar al-Din leader Iyad Ag Ghali to help spread the group's reach into southern Mali.<sup>56</sup>

Keita and militant leader Yacouba Touré established a presence near the tri-border region, conducting attacks against Malian security forces in the border towns of Misseni and Fakola in 2015, before Malian security forces and intelligence services disrupted their operations and arrested both leaders.<sup>57</sup> However, the group's reach continued. Boubacar Sawadogo, a Burkinabé militant linked to Touré and Keita, reportedly carried out at least one attack in Burkina Faso in 2016 before being arrested the same year by Malian authorities.<sup>58</sup>

During this period, other militants also reportedly established a presence in northern Côte d'Ivoire,<sup>59</sup> although attacks in the country's north did not occur until a series of assaults on Ivorian troops in 2020, most notably when jihadist fighters killed 14 Ivorian soldiers in Kafolo.

Since then, Ivorian authorities have pursued an aggressive, integrated strategy to increase security – and their presence – in the country's north, reducing attacks in 2021 and eliminating them after 2022.<sup>60</sup> The threat to northern Côte d'Ivoire seems to have been largely contained for now, even as some reports indicate that VEOs continue to be present, particularly in Bouna and Bounkani, further east of the area along the border with Mali.<sup>61</sup> While some reports also suggest a possible VEO presence near Tengréla along the border with Mali,<sup>62</sup> experts indicated this may no longer be the case.<sup>63</sup>

While the security situation in Côte d'Ivoire appeared to be relatively stable at time of writing, that is not the case along the country's border with Burkina Faso; VEOs have increasingly operated here since 2021 in both the former regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades.<sup>64</sup> By 2022, JNIM had consolidated its presence in a number of regions in Burkina Faso, including the former regions of Hauts-Bassins and Cascades.<sup>65</sup> The groups that operate along the southern border with Côte d'Ivoire are sometimes referred to as 'Katibat Alidoukou' after the town of Alidoukou near the border, although all appear to be groups subordinate to JNIM.<sup>66</sup> These groups continue to conduct regular attacks near the border with Côte

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56 Carayol, R. (2015), 'Mali: Keita et Kouffa, l'inquietant duo terroriste du sud,' *Jeune Afrique*, published online 3 December 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/280602/politique/mali-keita-kouffa-linquietant-duo-terroriste-sud/>.

57 Nsaibia H. and Weiss, C. (2018), 'Ansarul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso,' *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 3, March 2018, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/ansarul-islam-growing-terrorist-insurgency-burkina-faso/>.

58 Ibid.

59 Author discussions with researchers focused on Côte d'Ivoire, 2021–2023.

60 International Crisis Group (2023), 'Keeping Jihadists out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire'.

61 Diarra, L. (2023), 'Étude: Radicalisation et Perception de la Menace Terroriste dans l'Extrême Nord de la Côte d'Ivoire'; Assanvo, W. (2023), 'Liens entre extrémisme violent et activités illicites en Côte d'Ivoire,' *Institute for Security Studies*, pp. 11–13.

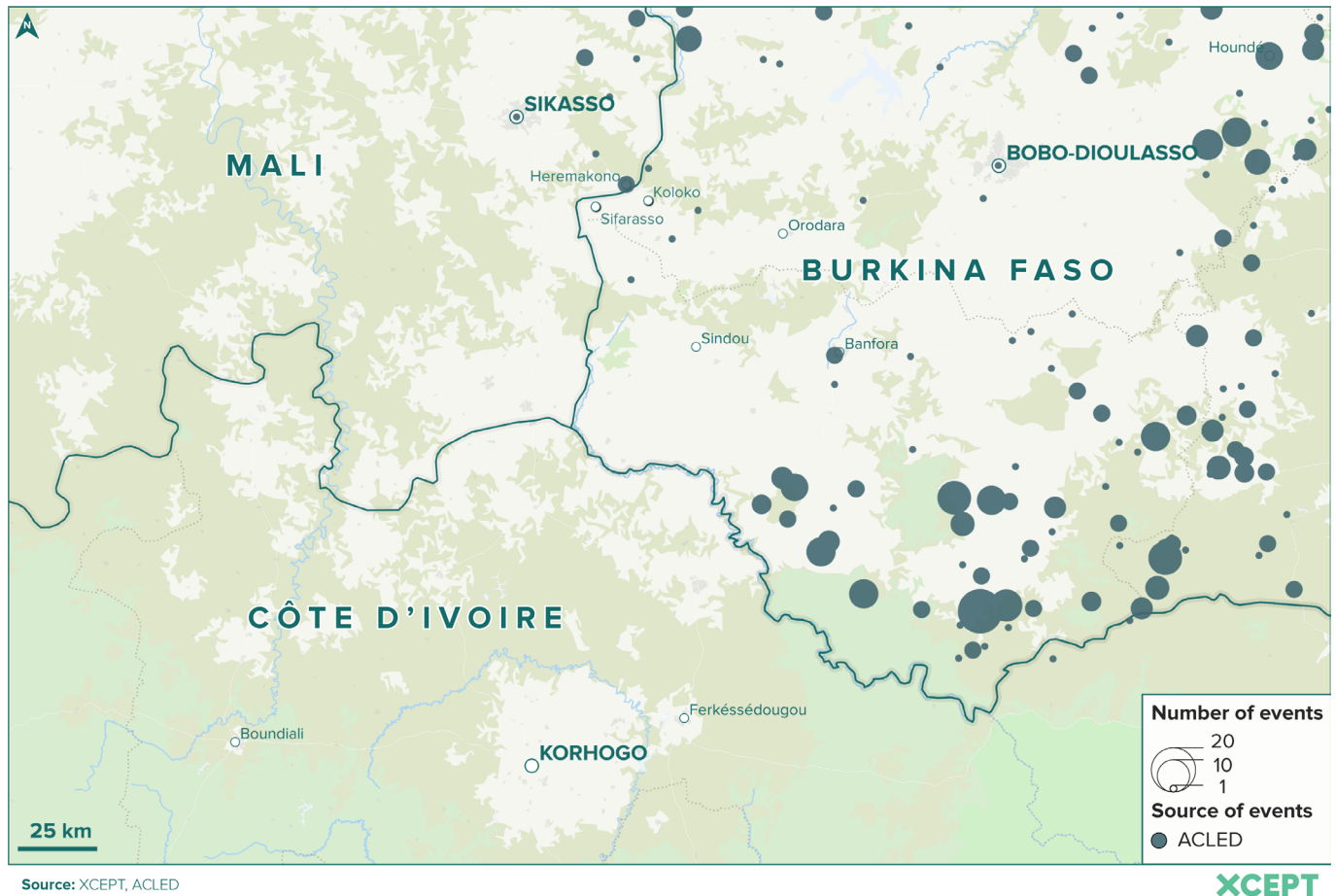
62 International Crisis Group (2023), 'Keeping Jihadists out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire'.

63 Telephone interview with NGO representative active in Côte d'Ivoire, October 2023; telephone interview with specialist in militancy in the Sahel and West Africa, November 2023.

64 International Crisis Group (2023), 'Keeping Jihadists out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire'.

65 Beevor, E. (2022), 'JNIM in Burkina Faso: A Strategic Actor,' *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, August 2022, p. 12. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Burkina-Faso-JNIM-29-Aug-web.pdf>.

66 Assanvo, W. (2023), 'Liens entre extrémisme violent et activités illicites en Côte d'Ivoire,' p. 4.



**Figure 2.** Map of VEO activity (2022-2024)

d'Ivoire, including near trading centres such as Niangoloko, significantly impacting short- and long-haul trade into Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>67</sup> Other groups appear to be operating on both sides of the border, especially in Burkina Faso's former Hauts-Bassins region (and the Boucle de Mouhoun to the north), as well as in northern areas of Sikasso, Mali – like Koutiala and Yorosso, which have been repeatedly attacked over in the past several years (see Figure 2).<sup>68</sup>

Attacks on border posts – and on security personnel and other government workers, including healthcare professionals – increased in 2021 and 2022.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, regional experts have suggested further movement of JNIM fighters under Katibat Macina south from Douentza and Koutiala toward Sikasso city and beyond,<sup>70</sup> while some forested areas south of Sikasso city, in Mali, have been regarded locally as 'no-go' zones due to the presence of VEOs since at least 2021.<sup>71</sup>

In 2022 and 2023, militants launched a number of attacks in Mali, along the country's border with Burkina Faso.<sup>72</sup> These incidents indicate the ongoing southward spread of militancy, and the fact that militants are

67 International Crisis Group, (2023), 'Keeping Jihadists out of Northern Côte d'Ivoire'.

68 UNHCR, (2021), 'Rapport mensuel de monitoring de protection Mali.'

69 Ibid.

70 Interview with regional security expert, September 2023; interview with Malian security expert, September 2023.

71 CIRAD (2021), 'A territorial foresight of Sikasso Region (Mali),' p. 40.

72 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), 'Mali Catastrophe Accelerating Under Junta Rule,' *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 10 July 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-catastrophe-accelerating-under-junta-rule/>.

now taking multiple routes to conduct operations in Sikasso – coming from both Central Mali and Burkina Faso to slowly encircle the area, and bringing together different elements of JNIM and JNIM-linked groups, particularly Katibat Macina and the remnants of Ansarul Islam.

## Impact of non-state actors on local trade

JNIM, and particularly Katibat Macina and Ansarul Islam, have been encroaching into Sikasso for several years, conducting border attacks from Burkina Faso, and descending into Sikasso from points in Central Mali. But despite their obvious presence in the Sikasso border region, no interviewees or participants in FGDs observed or talked of direct VEO involvement in cross-border trade networks or wider economic systems within Burkina Faso or Mali.<sup>73</sup> This may be due to fear of retaliation from armed groups, and concern that state authorities might target those with direct knowledge of, or contact with, armed groups. It could also be the case, however, that armed groups are actually avoiding direct economic involvement in the area, preferring to make money through more indirect means such as *zakat*.

Respondents said that armed groups sometimes went into certain villages involved in cross-border trade, especially on market days, to purchase supplies and, on occasion, took them by force. One respondent noted the presence of armed groups at different times in Bambougou, Danderesso, Tionkonbougou, and Zantiquila in Mali.<sup>74</sup> Another indicated that armed groups have been involved in cattle theft in Bambougou (which hosts a cattle market) and Nongon-Chouala.<sup>75</sup>

JNIM has conducted several attacks in Hèrèmakono since 2021,<sup>76</sup> including multiple attacks in early 2024.<sup>77</sup> On 16 March 2024, JNIM claimed responsibility for an attack on the military base at Danderesso, displaying images in released statements of significant material, including weapons and ammunition, seized during the assault.<sup>78</sup> Several respondents in Hèrèmakono observed difficulties in their daily lives and reduced trade from the attacks, as well as the ongoing presence of VEOs near Hèrèmakono.<sup>79</sup>

On the Burkinabé side of the border, respondents generally did not observe the presence of armed groups, although several KIIs in Sifarasso noted the absence of government forces in the town, and the need for youth to provide security for village gatherings and celebrations.<sup>80</sup> Another respondent in Koloko noted that “insecurity exhausts us in our commercial work,” suggesting a downturn in trade because of armed group violence.<sup>81</sup>

73 Interviews and FGDs conducted in Mali and Burkina Faso for this study.

74 Interview with adult male merchant in Sikasso, December 2023.

75 Interview with young male cattle merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

76 For instance: Traore, A. (2023), ‘Mali: Deux morts dont un policier dans l’attaque du poste de contrôle frontalier de Hèrèmakono,’ Maliweb, published online 13 April 2023, [https://www.maliweb.net/insecurite/mali-deux-morts-dont-un-policier-dans-lattaque-du-poste-de-controle-frontalier-de-heremakono-3018861.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.maliweb.net/insecurite/mali-deux-morts-dont-un-policier-dans-lattaque-du-poste-de-controle-frontalier-de-heremakono-3018861.html#google_vignette).

77 CEENASA, Twitter (now X), 16 February 2024. <https://x.com/CEENASA396971/status/1758482867615678798>.

78 Baché, D. (2024), ‘Mali: attaque jihadiste meurtrière près de Sikasso, bavure de l’armée à Amasrakad près de Gao,’ RFI, published online 18 March 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20240318-mali-attaque-jihadiste-meurtri%C3%A8re-pr%C3%A8s-de-sikasso-bavure-de-l-arm%C3%A9e-%C3%A0-amasrakad-pr%C3%A8s-de-gao>.

79 Three interviews conducted in Hèrèmakono, Mali, January 2024.

80 Five interviews conducted in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, December 2023.

81 Interview with young female merchant in Koloko, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

In general, respondents in Koloko and Sifarasso appeared hesitant to speak about the presence of armed groups in the vicinity, and reluctant to criticise security forces or state-aligned armed groups.<sup>82</sup> Additional information about VEO presence on both sides of the border comes from first-hand observations by researchers, and their informal discussions with travellers and locals in cities and towns.<sup>83</sup>

In Mali, for instance, researchers visiting in January 2024 observed that the area was relatively calm following attacks and increased security operations in Sikasso in 2022 and 2023. However, local residents and travellers said VEOs were still present in forested areas near the Burkina Faso border between Hèrèmakono and Farako, a market town west of Sikasso city.<sup>84</sup> These armed groups reportedly buy goods and consumables, as well as fuel, from local populations, and local residents told project researchers of checkpoints set up to levy taxes on drivers between Hèrèmakono and Farako, indicating a persistent VEO presence south as well as north of Sikasso city.<sup>85</sup>

In Burkina Faso, researchers learned from discussions with local residents that VEOs were present near Koloko and the larger trading town of Oradora to the east on the road to Bobo-Dioulasso. They also noted that an attack took place about 50 kilometres west of Koloko on the day they were in the village, and that residents sought refuge in Koloko – highlighting how displacement from violence can affect trade flows and supply.

Not all insecurity problems can be attributed to VEOs. For example, there has been no reported militant presence in Sifarasso. However, researchers reported that groups of bandits (*coupeurs de route*) targeted larger transport trucks between Sifarasso and Loulouni, a Malian market town near the border with both Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>86</sup>

Militants and other armed groups are a persistent presence along trade routes and key trade nodes, according to experts interviewed for this report. This presence can be largely low impact, as militant groups seek to establish themselves in an area. But it can also quickly result in militant attacks on security forces that appear designed to push them from border nodes and make it easier for the groups to operate freely.<sup>87</sup> These attacks – and the larger conflict with security forces – can also lead to pressure on civilians or direct targeting of civilian communities, particularly when militants accuse them of passing information or otherwise collaborating with authorities. VEO checkpoints on major trade roads are also a means of asserting a political and governing presence, as well as collecting funds.<sup>88</sup>

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82 Telephone interview with Malian security expert, 2 March 2024.

83 Communications with Malian researchers, January 2024.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Personal communication with counterterrorism expert, March 2024.

88 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E. and Berger, F., 'Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM),' *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime*, October 2023, pp. 26–27.

## State security force responses

Both the Malian and Burkinabé militaries are active, to varying degrees, in the borderlands between the two countries.

Sikasso falls under the southern portion of Operation Maliko, the anti-terrorism deployment of the Malian armed forces launched across the country in 2020.<sup>89</sup> In Burkina Faso, beginning in 2022 and continuing through 2023, security deployments into the country's southwest included a number of VDPs, an expansion that was accompanied by allegations of forced displacement and abuses against civilians.<sup>90</sup>

In Sikasso, auxiliary forces or militias do not appear to be active despite fears of increasing inter-communal violence prompted by growing competition for access to resources and land.<sup>91</sup> However, the conflict in Central Mali – pitting Mali's armed forces, communal militias, and mercenaries linked to the former Wagner Group, subsequently Russia's Africa Corps, against jihadist groups – has pushed civilians and resources like cattle further south into Sikasso.<sup>92</sup>

This has increased the likelihood that the security situation will become increasingly tense and dangerous as JNIM continues to expand its presence in the Sikasso borderlands.

## Impacts of security provisions on local trade

While respondents spoke little about VEOs and other armed groups and their impact on trade, they were much more vocal about the role of regional security forces. “We demand the authorities take on their responsibilities to put an end to this insecurity that is raging across the country,” one male merchant from Sikasso in Mali said.<sup>93</sup>

In Mali, in particular, most respondents held strong views on the role of security forces.<sup>94</sup> In Sikasso, as well as in Hèrèmakono, respondents generally spoke positively about security forces, and particularly the army. There, and in Koloko, they voiced appreciation for security forces protecting them and restoring a measure of calm after increasing security threats in recent years; several respondents even praised the security forces for warning them when not to take certain roads due to the threat of armed groups.<sup>95</sup>

One adult male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, said: “We can say that the actions of the security forces have only been to secure us and that they help reinforce us in our daily activities”.<sup>96</sup> Respondents spoke less favourably about internal security forces – including police forces, gendarmes, and customs officials.<sup>97</sup> This is no doubt partly due to the fact that traders' daily interactions – especially when crossing borders –

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89 Personal communication with counterterrorism expert, March 2024.

90 Nsaibia, H., Beevor, E. and Berger, F., 'Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)', 2023.

91 Interview with Malian security expert, September 2023.

92 Interview with Malian security expert, September 2023.

93 Interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

94 During the interviews and FGDs conducted for this project, only four respondents spoke negatively about the security force presence in their areas.

95 Analysis drawn from 15 KIIs in Sikasso, Mali.

96 Interview with adult male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

97 Data from 19 KIIs in Sikasso and Hèrèmakono, Mali and in Oradora, Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

tends to be with police, gendarmes, and customs officials who guard border checkpoints, check relevant trade and ID documents, and impose fines in addition to commanding regular payments and duties.

Respondents also complained frequently about unfair or unequal treatment at the hands of internal security forces, citing police harassment or exorbitant border payment requests. They also spoke of customs officials who would seize and hold goods until they made a payment.<sup>98</sup> “The difficulties we face are at the police, customs, and gendarmerie posts, concerning abusive payments, and enormous fees for trade routes,” one respondent said.<sup>99</sup> Another respondent added, “often [customs officials] arrest us to take our merchandise and then ask us to pay sums that exceed the value of our merchandise” in order to get them back.<sup>100</sup>

Several respondents in Mali specified that this situation has worsened since 2017, when Burkinabé border officials instituted several taxes and fees in response to what they viewed as abusive behaviour from Malian authorities toward Burkinabé travellers. This retaliation highlights the difficulties of border coordination between the two countries. Several respondents said they hoped this would improve with increased political coordination in the Sahel under the Alliance of Sahelian States (see final section of this chapter).

Some of these complaints might be related to the payment of regular fees, which people misconstrue as ‘damages’ rather than regular taxation. Most respondents said there were relatively fixed prices for border crossings between Mali and Burkina Faso, although some indicated a need to negotiate on prices.<sup>101</sup>

Most key informants identified the costs for individual traders or passengers as follows:<sup>102</sup>

- 1,000 West African Communauté Financière Africaine Franc (CFA or XOF), or £1.30,<sup>103</sup> for those without ID cards to pass at Hèrèmakono (administered by the police, customs, and gendarmerie), although other respondents complained of fees even when their documents were in order, indicating these are the standard fees paid by travellers and merchants when passing through these posts
- 2,000 CFA-5,000 CFA, or £2.60–6.50, for entry at Koloko (a police post, with a customs post approximately 100 metres past it) in Burkina Faso, depending on negotiations with authorities
- Around 5,000 CFA, or £6.50, at a separate gendarmerie post at Koloko, 500 metres past the police and customs posts
- Up to 4,000 CFA, or £5.25, at the customs post at Bougoula (the site of a cattle market)
- 6,000 CFA, or £7.84, at Hèrèmakono for those not carrying ID cards<sup>104</sup>

98 Responses given in FGD by eight merchants and transporters in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

99 Interview with young male cattle merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

100 Interview with young male merchant, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

101 Interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with young male tailor in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with young male merchant in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023; interview with adult male farmer in Sifarasso, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

102 Answers given by KIIs conducted in Sikasso, Mali, as well as Koloko, Burkina Faso, December 2023–January 2024.

103 Interestingly, this is approximately the same price for crossing borders between Burkina Faso and Ghana, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, highlighting consistency across Burkina Faso.

104 Interview with adult male tailor, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

- 35,000 CFA, or £45.71, at customs posts in Burkina Faso and Mali for larger transport vehicles
- 85,000 CFA, or £109, for trucks transporting cashews, and 125,000 CFA, or £161.37, for transporters carrying sesame seeds at the Hèrèmakono customs post<sup>105</sup>

Differing popular views of the security forces deployed along the Mali–Burkina Faso border have varied implications for social, economic, and political stability in the Sikasso border region. On one hand, a larger security presence along the border is reassuring to local communities. On the other, the proliferation of fees and extended wait times at border crossings can engender anger and drive trade to informal crossing points. Rising frustration with new restrictions created by an enhanced state security presence may also drive some communities to join, or at least tolerate, the presence of armed groups.<sup>106</sup>

## Considerations for policy and programming in the Sikasso border region

Those interviewed for this study in the Sikasso border region generally have a positive view of the military, which they perceive to be protecting their communities, but have somewhat negative views of internal security services, which they see as imposing hurdles on their livelihoods. Some respondents in Sikasso called for strengthened security forces to combat various forms of insecurity, or urged better communication and cooperation with authorities to better execute their mandates and protect populations and trade.

Several respondents – particularly in more export-oriented fields, such as the cashew and sesame trades – highlighted the need for improved infrastructure, such as better roads or buildings to stock and refine cashews and other products in order to facilitate exporting their crops internationally. This reflects the current situation in which Burkinabé traders buy these products – as well as the seeds to cultivate them – in Mali before exporting them directly to international businesses for refining and resale.

Better integration of the Malian and Burkinabé economies under the AES was also suggested, in the interest of improving economic coordination and smoothing trade frictions.<sup>107</sup> However, the economic integration programme of the AES currently remains poorly defined. It is also unclear how the formation of the AES will impact trade within the Sahel or between the Sahel and Coastal West African States.

Communities engaged during this research almost uniformly expressed either lack of knowledge of international programming or affirmed that it is absent in their region. In Sikasso, for instance,

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105 Interview with adult male cashew salesman, Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

106 For instance, Quidelleur, T. (2020), 'Les racines locales de la violence dans l'Est du Burkina Faso: La concurrence pour les ressources, l'Etat et les armes,' *Noria Research*, 28 January 2020, <https://noria-research.com/africas/fr/les-racines-locales-de-la-violence-burkina-faso/>; also see Sangaré B. (2016), 'Le Centre du Mali: épice centre du djihadisme?' *GRIP*, 20 May 2016, <https://www.grip.org/le-centre-du-mali-epicentre-du-djihadisme/>.

107 Interview with adult male in Sikasso, Mali, December 2023.

respondents largely did not know about the international programming in the region, particularly related to border areas.

On the Burkina Faso side of the border, respondents observed no international programming, and none of the respondents in Burkina Faso said they knew of government programming. In Koloko, one respondent called for continued efforts to combat insecurity to facilitate commerce and economic exchanges.<sup>108</sup>

Border communities in different areas have developed various coping mechanisms to manage the uncertainty and disruption to their livelihoods caused by violence and security force responses. Some have turned to petty commerce or small farming (for subsistence and sale) to supplement lost income from other trades. Others have abandoned their trades altogether and joined JNIM in parts of central and northern Mali.<sup>109</sup>

Small-scale local trading, combined with continued cross-border commerce, supports resilience in the face of economic and security challenges. Generally, respondents asked for a combination of improved infrastructure, increased and harmonised security, and efforts to normalise and standardise payments required to cross the border and conduct trade.

## Learning from the Sahel experience

As highlighted in the narrative section and previous three chapters, there are several lessons to be learned from the Sahel about the impact of buttressing borders via donor-funded border security and counterterrorism mechanisms. On the one hand, the method has been partially successful in reinforcing the security capacity of Sahel states; overall, however, it has had limited results in securing borders and stopping armed groups from destabilising the region.

In Mali, external donors have provided support to various security institutions via numerous mechanisms, training, capacity building, infrastructure, and intelligence, with the goal of reinforcing and securing borders and containing VEOs to the north and centre of the country. Before 2022, when French forces withdrew from the country, and 2023, when UN peacekeepers withdrew, Mali received significant capacity-building support from direct training with the French military; held dialogue and consultations supported by the UN Mission in Mali; and received additional training under the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and the EU Capacity Assistance Programme (EUCAP).<sup>110</sup>

In Burkina Faso, international assistance was not as fully developed in terms of government-to-government training as in Mali, although both benefitted from training programmes and support through the G5 Sahel before their formal withdrawal from the organisation in late 2023.<sup>111</sup>

However, VEOs continue to expand across the sub-region, threatening Coastal West Africa. This is, in part, because donor programmes focus on counter-terror operations and capacity building of security

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108 Interview with adult male in Koloko, Burkina Faso, January 2024.

109 Telephone interviews with security specialists focused on central and northern Mali, March 2024.

110 On these programmes and their effectiveness, see. Tull, D.M. (2022), 'Security Force Assistance under Geopolitical Stress: The EU's 'Strategic Review' of its CSPD Missions in Mali,' SWP, 20 July 2022. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-09-the-eus-strategic-review-of-cspd-missions-in-mali>.

111 Jeune Afrique. 'Après le Mali, le Burkina Faso et le Niger quittent le G5 Sahel,' 2 December 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1510714/politique/apres-le-mali-le-burkina-faso-et-le-niger-quittent-le-g5-sahel/>.

forces, without sufficient parallel focus on related areas of governance, border management, and security forces' engagement with civilian populations.<sup>112</sup>

Border and stabilisation policy considerations in the Sikasso borderland region are complex for US and European donors now, as the Alliance of Sahelian States has made it less permissible to engage on these issues. Moreover, the tension between the AES and other regional bodies in West Africa could hamper short- and long-haul trade if these relations do not cool. As discussed in Chapter 3 on the Hamile–Ouessa border region, improving AES-Ghanaian relations is critical to sustaining cross-border trade while working toward containment of security threats.

Data collected on the Sikasso border region echoes considerations for border security emerging from the three other regions studied for this project:

- **Locals often welcome reinforcement of security**, provided security forces explain their activities to communities and ensure they do not needlessly inhibit the movement of people or commercial activities.
- **Capacity building for internal security forces should focus on broader governance and anti-corruption work** to ensure that increased capacity and presence is not abusive or detrimental to civilian populations in the Sikasso borderlands.
- Ongoing **support for community cohesion is vital to address ongoing population movements in the region, but must have adequate government buy-in** to protect civilians and not leave their governance and protection to militias or other self-defence groups who might prey on already-vulnerable populations.

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<sup>112</sup> See, for instance, Lebovich, A. 'Disorder from Chaos: Why Europeans Fail to Promote Stability in the Sahel,' *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 August 2020.

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**XCEPT**

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