



# BALANCING THE ELEMENTS: STABILITY IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

## EVIDENCE AND LESSONS ON THE INTERSECTION OF CONFLICT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE SAHEL

POLICY BRIEF | NOVEMBER 2025

The Central Sahel stands as a stark illustration of the devastating realities of climate change in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS). Temperatures are rising at 1.5 times the global average, and the region faces both increasingly frequent extreme weather events and longer-term shifts in rainfall patterns. Once predictable seasons are now marked by destructive floods followed by prolonged and severe droughts. These changes are pushing already fragile communities to the edge, destroying harvests, collapsing rural economies, and deepening food insecurity. The cumulative effect of these climate shocks is profound: altering migration patterns and intensifying displacement, and fuelling tensions and grievances, both among communities and toward governments, perceived as unable to meet citizens' urgent needs. Armed groups, such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel), are capitalizing on growing tensions and competition for scarce natural resources and filling governance voids left by weakened state institutions.

It is within this context that Mercy Corps implements the FCDO-funded Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS) programme in partnership with communities, governments, and the private sector in Mali and Niger. JASS is the flagship for Mercy Corps' approach to [working at the conflict-climate nexus](#), adopting an integrated model that connects social cohesion, inclusive governance, and climate adaptation in mutually reinforcing cycles. This brief summarises evidence and lessons from JASS alongside [insights from past Mercy Corps programming in the Sahel and beyond](#) to make the case to program implementers and donors that effectively addressing the interconnected challenges of climate change and instability require integrated, multi-sectoral programming models that simultaneously advance trust in governance, social cohesion, and collective capacities to adapt to climate shocks and stresses.

Read the JASS Research Study on Inclusive Natural Resource Governance, Social Cohesion, and Climate Adaptation

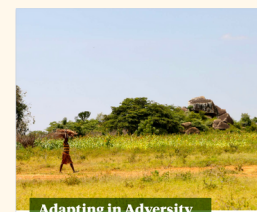


**PATHWAYS TO STABILITY:**  
UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN INCLUSIVE NATURAL  
RESOURCE GOVERNANCE, VERTICAL  
SOCIAL COHESION, AND CLIMATE  
RESILIENCE

Evidence From a Survey Experiment in Mali and Niger  
Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS)  
August 2025



Learn more about Mercy Corps' experience supporting Climate Adaptation in FCAS



**Adapting in Adversity**

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLIMATE ACTION  
IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED SITUATIONS

November 2024

**Introduction**

Communities characterized as fragile and conflict affected are often extremely vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis. Many of these nations are geographically exposed to extreme and persistent climate hazards, and the severe consequences that threaten their people – food shortages, loss of livelihoods, and displacement – have driven them to cope with and adapt to these shocks. In fact, of the top 20 most climate-vulnerable countries are fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS) as defined by the World Bank.

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# MAPPING THE REINFORCING IMPACTS OF CONFLICT PREVENTION AND CLIMATE ADAPTATION

In FCAS, the mutually reinforcing connections between instability and violence on one hand and vulnerability to the impacts of climate change mean that siloed interventions often fail. Building peaceful climate resilience requires [reversing vicious cycles of climate change and fragility](#), by combining political and social analyses and interventions that identify and address the root causes of conflict and instability with technical and economic interventions that build household and community resilience.

## The foundations of social cohesion and legitimate governance are built through inclusive natural resource management and dispute resolution.

Entrenched socio-cultural norms and histories of conflict have long shaped patterns of inclusion, exclusion, participation and cohesion among communities in Mali and Niger. JASS's foundational work, designed to challenge these norms, has engaged more than 30,000 participants in 418 community-led peace initiatives - 352 community forums and 66 Community Peace Initiatives (CPIs) - resulting in reductions in local tensions, enhanced collective problem-solving, and strengthened trust and cooperation across communities. Building on these foundations of cohesion, JASS revitalised and established key community-based governance institutions central to natural resources and conflict management, notably 351 Commissions Foncières (COFOs or land commissions), in both countries, as well as 24 community-led early warning early response mechanisms, including community relays and conflict resolution committees (CRCs) in Mali, and community early warning systems (SCAP/RUs) and observatory monitoring (OSV) in Niger.

These efforts improved their presence, inclusivity and capacity to deliver effective land and natural resource governance and dispute resolution to local communities. A strong emphasis on inclusion led to increased representation and participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in these structures. By 2024, JASS increased women's representation in COFOs from 11% to 30% in Mali and from 16% to 33% in Niger, fostering trust through shared decision-making and marking a key milestone in moving beyond the "one COFO – one woman" practice.

When local people are empowered to participate directly in decision-making around natural resource management, they are more likely to perceive processes as just and that outcomes reflect the collective interest. 90% of respondents considered governance, access and use of land and natural resources to be fair and equitable at midterm, up from 59% at baseline.

Local governance institutions serve as critical bridges between informal, locally legitimate mechanisms and the formal justice system. Preference for and trust in local institutions, coupled with enhanced perceptions of their fairness - attributed to improved inclusivity - are strongly associated with increased stability and reduced support for violence. For example, focus group participants in Mali, where local institutions have been empowered, reported a decrease in conflicts over land, particularly between farmers and herders. The reduction in disputes suggests an emerging sense of legitimacy and use of the system, emphasising the mutually reinforcing nature of inclusive, community-led governance and social cohesion – both horizontal and vertical.

## JASS Case Study: The role of inclusive local governance in preventing land conflicts and supporting climate adaptation in Mali

During the implementation of Social, Economic, and Cultural Development Plans (PDSEC), municipal authorities—particularly mayors—played a decisive role in preventing conflicts and securing resources. In municipalities such as Niasso, Diégna, Touna, and M'Pessoba, land tensions were frequent, often linked to unwritten transactions and intergenerational conflicts, exacerbated by the return of young migrants.

To remedy this, mayors established intergenerational consultation frameworks, promoting dialogue, understanding of local rules, and awareness of land issues among young people. These initiatives have significantly reduced cases of unregulated land occupation, as confirmed by the mayor of Niasso: *"Complaints about unregulated land occupation are becoming increasingly rare."* This has led to an improvement in communities' perception of their local leaders: no less than 98% of those surveyed believe that local officials are now able to prevent and resolve land conflicts thanks to the mechanisms put in place. The municipal authorities, in collaboration with technical services and management committees (COFO/CRC), have anticipated the risks associated with the management of restored resources—land, ponds, and transhumance corridors—by drawing up local agreements. These agreements set out usage rights, exploitation schedules, and collective management arrangements, thereby preventing tensions between farmers, herders, fishermen, and other users.

In Touna, for example, the inter-community pond is now managed under a local agreement that clarifies the periods of access for watering livestock and collective fishing, thereby reducing the risk of conflict. At the same time, work has been carried out to deepen the ponds and develop the banks, while specific agreements have been put in place to regulate the influx of migratory animals. Inclusive forums and local agreements have also provided a framework for the management of restored land and developed ponds, anticipating tensions related to the influx of animals from Burkina Faso and Mali. Finally, monitoring committees affiliated with land commissions were created to ensure compliance with commitments. These mechanisms illustrate how local governance, combined with participatory mechanisms, strengthens social cohesion and secures resources in a context of climate pressure.



## **Social cohesion and trust in government catalyse collective action to adapt to climate shocks and stresses.**

Improved social bonds, trust and more effective governance institutions have enabled the inclusive development of 310 land conventions, including 304 conventions in Mali across 20 communes and 284 villages, and 6 social agreements for natural resource management in Niger across 4 communes and 6 villages. This has also led to the mapping of 141 kilometres of transhumance routes across several strategic areas of the programme (90km in Mali and 51km in Niger), providing vital frameworks that outline and enforce peaceful sharing of land and natural resources between previously divided communities.

The sense of ownership in these agreements and institutions has enabled communities to not only sustain peace but to coordinate effectively in the face of climate shocks or resource scarcity, facilitating decisions on collective actions such as land restoration and water point rehabilitation within these agreed frameworks.

In addition to their longer-term governance functions, strengthened institutions also played a critical role in collective crisis response, including flood and drought management, early dispute resolution, and coordinated humanitarian responses during shocks. JASS has supported both existing and newly formed Early Warning and Early Response (EVER) mechanisms which are now widely functional and recognized. JASS facilitated the establishment of four Vulnerability Monitoring Observatories (VMO or OSV) and 20 SCAP/RU in Niger, and expanded CEWERS in Mali - with monitors and CRCs strengthening their capacities to address local needs related to natural disasters and conflict - fully serving as multi-risk committees.

By integrating early warning systems, facilitating cross-sectoral collaboration, and supporting humanitarian response, local institutions have strengthened communities' abilities to anticipate and positively manage risks.

Shocks can present *tipping points* to already vulnerable communities who may adopt behaviours they would otherwise avoid. Mitigating the impacts of these is key to preventing the adoption of negative coping strategies, including violence, thereby safeguarding the sustainability of peace and resource-sharing agreements that might otherwise collapse under stress. Programme data indicates that EWER systems have enabled community actors to reduce seasonal farmer-herder conflicts by up to 80%, preserving relationships and preventing violence.

## **Strengthening service delivery related to climate adaptation improves trust in government institutions and furthers state responsiveness.**

Where insecurity is, in part, a result of state-citizen fracture, working with government to improve their capacities to meet the needs of communities through enhanced governance and service provision is an important factor in reducing support for violence and building faith in state institutions. JASS worked closely with both national and local governments to provide legal grounding for local agreements, and to strengthen their abilities to provide support and services to local communities, with marked improvements in citizen-state relations. In Mali JASS has helped restore trust in the judicial system with strengthened relations between communities, COFOs and the courts, and across both countries communities speak of feeling the presence of local administrative authorities with more meaningful engagement with agriculture and forestry services. 94% of respondents reported that relations with state and local/technical authorities have improved, suggesting strong programme influence on rebuilding trust in institutions.



## Locally led climate adaptation reduces violent competition for resources and demonstrates the value of cohesion.

In FCAS, [adaptation to climate change must be informed by conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts](#), recognising that adaptation should be considered as a process of social, political and economic change that must incorporate the needs of different interest groups.

JASS provided training and materials for climate-smart agriculture and livestock keeping to over 7,000 farmers and herders. In 2025 in Niger, yields increased by 101% for millet, 83% for cowpea, 34% for groundnut, and 48% for okra compared to the previous season, while in Mali, similar improvements were observed with 475 hectares cultivated using improved seeds and producer knowledge of new agricultural techniques rising from 70% to 98%. Mid-term data suggest that widespread support for climate adaptation enabled communities to better cope with climate shocks, improve their life prospects and sustain adoption of climate resilient practices.

These activities were most effective where local governance structures had the legitimacy to coordinate, enforce, and scale adaptation strategies, with evidence that communities exposed to improved, climate adaptive governance systems reported higher confidence in their ability to withstand shocks and a greater willingness to adopt new practices.

Investments in climate adaptation such as land restoration, water infrastructure and climate-resilient seeds or herding practices directly support food security and reduce competition over resources. In Niger, JASS successfully restored nearly 400 hectares of rangeland, which have been fully revegetalized within just two seasons and are now once again hosting grazing herds. The labour-intensive restoration process served as a powerful platform for shared community commitment to climate adaptation while strengthening social cohesion. The rehabilitated rangeland stands as a viable seed for peace between farmers and herders in the Tarka Valley, a strategic pastoral zone for the country. In Mali, similar efforts covered 125 hectares of land restored and more than 6 500 trees planted.

In addition, a focus on strengthening off-farm business opportunities, particularly for marginalised groups, through initiatives such as the marketing of improved cook stoves, market gardens and nurseries also serve to both build resilience and reduce reliance on and competition for resources. When grounded in principles of cohesion and inclusive governance they form virtuous cycles, whereby community peace initiatives and inclusive resource management reduce land and natural resource conflicts, fostering trust and collaboration that strengthen collective responses. In turn, shared experiences in managing climate risks further deepen social cohesion and confidence in local institutions.

## Key Takeaways: How integrating peace, governance, and climate adaptation can help to break cycles of instability and climate vulnerability in the Sahel.

Taken together, these lessons indicate that JASS's integrated programming model creates positive feedback loops that amplify resilience and stability over time through the following interconnected pathways:



**Strong social cohesion fosters collective action**, making it possible to implement climate adaptation strategies at scale and to mobilize rapid responses in times of crisis.



**Effective, inclusive governance builds trust and enhances cohesion**, enabling communities to manage disputes and share resources peacefully, which reduces the risk of conflict even as climate pressures intensify.



**Successful climate adaptation**, when managed through inclusive governance frameworks, **increases community confidence and demonstrates the value of cooperation**, further strengthening both institutional legitimacy and social bonds.



As trust and resilience grow, **communities become better positioned to advocate for their needs** with state authorities and external partners, attracting further investment and support.



## JASS Case Study: Restoring pastures to reduce farmer-herder conflicts in Dan-Goulbi, Niger

In Niger, the commune of Dan-Goulbi in Dakoro department (Maradi region) illustrates the delicate balance between farming and herding. Although primarily agricultural, Dan-Goulbi lies along key transhumance routes shaped by regional pastoral dynamics. Dakoro serves as a critical transition zone between southern agricultural lands and northern pastoral areas, with designated corridors to facilitate herd mobility and minimize conflicts. At the Djambali site, 24 hectares were rehabilitated using half-moons, 4,000 seedlings were planted, and sowing was completed to restore vegetation. Additionally, an 18 km passage corridor was reopened between Dan-Goulbi and Djambali, ensuring safe livestock movement and supporting sustainable ecosystem regeneration. These interventions reinforce coexistence and resilience in a region where seasonal mobility is essential for livelihoods.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

In fragile and conflict affected states, investments must recognise the mutually reinforcing linkages between violence, conflict and climate change. Whilst climate change is rarely a direct cause of conflict, it exacerbates conflict drivers and triggers and can unravel existing mechanisms of peace and cooperation. In turn conflict and insecurity limit local abilities to cope with and adapt to climate change, reducing access to key land and resources, curtailing traditional risk management strategies, such as migration and reducing the potential for collective, peaceful action. As such:

- Programmes seeking to build resilience in fragile contexts like the Sahel must **integrate technical, political and social approaches bringing together conflict prevention, inclusive governance and climate adaptation**. Where shocks are recurrent and systems are under strain, integration is vital for scaling successful models and ensuring gains are durable.
- In contexts where histories of conflict and eroding state functions have weakened trust and relationships, **cohesion building and governance strengthening should be early-stage interventions**, creating enabling conditions and frameworks for shared climate adaptation.
- **Climate adaptation interventions must be collective and inclusive**, avoiding maladaptation and identifying issues of common concern and mutual benefit. Interventions such as land and environmental restoration can be a unifying cause around which to unite communities across dividing lines, with collective benefits serving as peace dividends.
- Where fragility and instability are grounded in weakened state systems, **interventions should centre local government, providing avenues for building stronger state-citizen relations**.
- Efforts must continue to **promote increased climate financing in FCAS**, recognizing the costs of inaction both locally and globally, and the potential for positive impacts on stability and resilience through integrated programme models such as JASS.

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