



# BREAKING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

## EVIDENCE AND LESSONS ON STABILISATION AND PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL

POLICY BRIEF | NOVEMBER 2025

The Central Sahel remains one of the world's most fragile regions, where cycles of violence are fuelled by a convergence of weak governance, intercommunal tensions, and climate-induced shocks. In Mali and Niger, armed groups exploit local grievances and institutional vacuums to expand territorial control and legitimacy, often by offering informal justice and protection. **The Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS) programme**, led by Mercy Corps and local partners, offers an integrated model to address these intersecting drivers of instability. Operating across 24 communes in Mali and Niger since 2022, JASS links inclusive governance, climate adaptation, humanitarian assistance, and conflict prevention to enhance security and stability in the Sahel region. To advance inclusive conflict prevention and natural resource governance, the programme works through local institutions such as land commissions (COFOs) in both countries, as well as conflict resolution committees (CRCs) in Mali and early warning systems (SCAP/RUs) in Niger. The programme also supports short term emergency response and resilient livelihoods through Cash-for-Work initiatives and climate-smart agriculture, in close collaboration with local government technical service providers focused on agriculture and livestock.

This brief summarises the key lessons from [a recent JASS report on Violent Extremism](#) alongside insights from past Mercy Corps programming in the Sahel and beyond to make the case to program implementers and donors that integrated, multi-sectoral programming models are particularly well-suited to contribute to stabilisation and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in fragile contexts.

Read the full JASS Evidence Synthesis and Learning Report on Stabilisation and Violent Extremism



UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND RESILIENCE: MEASURING AND INFLUENCING ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND BEHAVIOURS RELATED TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MALI AND NIGER

Evidence Synthesis and Learning Report  
Justice and Stability in the Sahel (JASS)

June 2025



Learn more about Mercy Corps' programming and evidence on Preventing Violent Extremism



CONNECTED COMMUNITIES, COLLECTIVE RESPONSE  
Mercy Corps' Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

As an international humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding organization, Mercy Corps works to prevent and resolve violent conflict (P/CVE) in the world's most challenging conflict contexts. We recognize that making violent conflict averted is essential to ensuring short-term assistance and long-term development, and that violent extremism is increasingly part of complex conflict responses. Therefore, we partner with local actors across three programming pillars:



## **Integrated programming approaches are essential for effectively addressing the interconnected drivers of instability and violent extremism in the Sahel.**

Although JASS was not originally designed as a P/CVE programme, evidence from Mercy Corps' broader programming portfolio and research in [Mali](#), [Niger](#), and [Burkina Faso](#) makes a clear case that violent extremism in the Sahel is driven by a complex mix of structural, relational and individual-level factors including grievances about governance, economic hardship (exacerbated by these underlying grievances and recurring climate shocks), and social exclusion and fragmentation. JASS's integrated programming model addresses these interconnected drivers by strengthening the effectiveness and inclusivity of local natural resource governance mechanisms, linking humanitarian response and climate-smart livelihoods to opportunities to build constructive relationships, and promoting social cohesion through inclusive dispute resolution, collective action, and effective service delivery.

The value of this type of integrated, multisectoral programming approach to P/CVE is seen in evidence from other Mercy Corps P/CVE programmes. In the [CREATE programme in Kenya](#), a holistic mentorship intervention that emphasized social connections, life skills, agency, esteem in community, and ability to participate in politics contributed to sustained reductions in support for violence that lasted beyond the end of the programme.

## **Fostering inclusive participation is the foundation for building trust in government and addressing the grievances that drive violent extremism.**

JASS improves citizen-state relations by enhancing the legitimacy of both formal and informal justice systems through its work with COFOs, CRCs, and SCAP/RUs. Perceptions of justice systems have improved by 11% since JASS began, with 85% of respondents reporting high trust in local authorities.

Quantitative analysis using the [JASS midterm evaluation data](#) shows that these perceptions of governance shape attitudes towards violence—individuals with positive perceptions of local authorities and the broader legal system are less likely to believe that their community supports the use of violence.

Qualitative data show that programme participants frequently note that JASS's underlying participatory approach is at the core of its ability to shape positive perceptions of governance, marking a positive departure from the status quo and most other development interventions. Participants attributed a number of positive governance outcomes to JASS's work to support inclusive and participatory governance norms and behaviours, including increased community engagement and improved responsiveness from both village leaders and government authorities in dispute resolution and public service delivery. One herder in Segou described this transformation, saying: "Before we were afraid of the staff of the technical services of the state... but with JASS we understood they are there for us, that we have to approach them, exchange on needs, today we have a very good relationship with them."

## **Supporting household abilities to respond to shocks reduces reliance on negative coping strategies, including violence.**

Quantitative analysis using [JASS midterm evaluation data](#) shows that experiencing climate shocks is associated with an increased likelihood of turning to armed groups to help resolve disputes. This is broadly consistent with findings from past Mercy Corps research in the Sahel and other contexts which shows that economic hardship—combined with related grievances and perceptions of exclusion—can drive individuals towards violent extremist organisations. This pathway can be intensified in the aftermath of climate shocks, in which crisis decisions can lead to negative coping strategies, including violence.

## **JASS Case Study: Supporting Local Structures to Prevent the Transformation of Grievances into Extremism**

Establishing and supporting Conflict Resolution Committees (CRCs) and early warning/early response bodies is one of the core ways that the JASS programme addresses the underlying causes of instability and violent extremism. These locally-led structures provide spaces for community members to express themselves, share their concerns, and find peaceful, mutually-beneficial solutions to shocks and tensions. Where cases are complex, they are dealt with in extended forums or referred to the relevant government authorities, ensuring a legitimate avenue of redress. The example of a commune in Mali named Dieli illustrates the role this kind of mechanism can play in addressing the drivers of violent extremism. In 2023, byproducts of sorghum farming left in the fields caused the death of several cattle, provoking the anger of pastoralists. The CRC received early alerts of this emerging conflict and was able to convene farmers and pastoralists, along with representatives of the local council and a veterinarian to quickly come to a shared understanding of the problem and to agree on possible solutions. As an output of this process, the youth pledged to monitor the fields after the harvest to avoid a repeat of the incident. This collective action has eased tensions and prevented escalation to violence, demonstrating that well-structured local mechanisms can prevent the escalation of tensions into conflicts and grievances that can be exploited by extremist groups.



JASS's emergency response and climate adaptation activities, including Cash-for Work, improved agricultural inputs, and skills-building have helped communities cope with climate shocks and associated economic hardship in ways that can counteract the pull of violent groups.

In qualitative data from the midterm evaluation, JASS participants frequently noted that Cash-for-Work activities were especially helpful in helping them to maintain income and food security throughout especially tough moments of economic hardship following shocks, while also improving community infrastructure that helps to build resilience to climate shocks, such as reclaiming land for agricultural use or digging drainage systems to mitigate impacts of flooding.

## Strengthening norms and behaviours that promote inclusion and cohesion helps to catalyse community-level resilience to Violent Extremism.

JASS fosters cohesion between groups through its efforts to support inclusive natural resource governance and dispute resolution institutions and by promoting meaningful participation and inclusion of all individuals and groups within a community in the programme's activities.

Qualitative data show that JASS's inclusive ethos is seen as transformative by community members, providing a model for supporting the adoption of inclusive attitudes, norms, and behaviours. A farmer in Tahoua, Niger reflected: "I was able to sit in front of the sultan and the prefect, and also thanks to the sensitisations we learned to live in peace and work with women, young people and even the disabled." Quantitative analysis of the [JASS midterm evaluation data](#) confirms that these types of positive perceptions of belonging and inclusion are associated with lower perceived community support for violence.

Evidence from other Mercy Corps programmes in the Sahel supports this link. In the [PEACE programme in Niger's Tillaberi region](#), interventions to strengthen social cohesion in fragmented communities reduced support for political violence. Similarly, in the [Youth Connect programme in Niger and Burkina Faso](#), training young people in dispute resolution skills improved young peoples' ability to participate meaningfully in their communities and reduced support for violence and violent incidents in high-risk areas.

## Key Takeaways: How integrated, evidence-driven programming can help to achieve stabilisation and P/CVE goals in the Sahel.



**Inclusive governance, social cohesion, and climate-responsive livelihoods programming are mutually reinforcing** and essential for stabilisation and violence prevention in fragile contexts such as the central Sahel.



Evidence from JASS suggests that its **combined focus on governance, resilience, inclusion, and cohesion contributes to reduced support for violence and engagement with armed groups**. This finding is supported by a broader body of evidence and practical experience from Mercy Corps' decades-long track record of implementing P/CVE programming in the Sahel and around the world.



**Locally-led, participatory approaches** are the key to building the trustworthiness and legitimacy of P/CVE interventions, forming the basis for effective, safe, conflict-sensitive interventions in challenging environments.



Continued innovations in **measurement, analysis, and adaptive management** are critical to refining integrated P/CVE interventions and scaling impact.

## JASS Case Study: Reducing Negative Coping Strategies and Building Community Resilience through Climate-Smart Agriculture

The JASS programme's support for women's economic empowerment in Ngolonianasso, Mali, offers a compelling example of how strengthening household resilience can reduce reliance on negative coping strategies—some of which may make communities more vulnerable to violent extremism. Before JASS's intervention, women in the community's market gardening group faced significant barriers, including a lack of quality seeds, training, and knowledge of sustainable farming techniques. Many households struggled to meet their basic needs, leaving families vulnerable to shocks such as poor harvests or rising prices, and at risk of resorting to negative coping mechanisms like unplanned asset sales or reducing investments in children's wellbeing. With JASS's support, over 170 women received training in climate-smart agriculture, learning to prepare crop beds, manage water efficiently, and use organic fertilizers. The programme also provided seeds worth one million CFA francs, leading to productive harvests of tomatoes and okra. Women reported earning up to 60,000 CFA francs each from the inception of the project. This new source of income allowed women to provide for their families' needs—such as food, school fees, and medical care—without depending on their husbands, fostering their dignity and self-confidence. The initiative fostered inclusion and cooperation by creating opportunities for women to organize themselves into small groups, share agricultural responsibilities, and support one another's success. These collaborative practices not only improved economic outcomes but also strengthened social cohesion, built trust, and created a more supportive community environment. By reinforcing inclusive behaviors and collective action, the Ngolonianasso experience demonstrates how locally-driven, inclusive economic initiatives can reduce vulnerability and help communities resist negative coping strategies that might otherwise increase susceptibility to instability or extremist influence.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, these findings and lessons from the JASS Programme in Mali and Niger suggest a number of clear operational and strategic priorities for practitioners and donors seeking to support stabilisation and reduce vulnerability to violent extremism in the Central Sahel.

## For Practitioners

- **Integrate Livelihoods, Climate Adaptation, and Governance:** Combine economic support, climate adaptation, and governance strengthening to address the intersecting drivers of violence and vulnerability.
- **Prioritise Participatory, Inclusive Approaches to Enable Access, Conflict Sensitivity, and Program Effectiveness:** Ensure programming is truly community-led, participatory, and inclusive of all social groups, moving beyond well-worn rhetoric to meaningfully shift exclusive social norms and power dynamics.
- **Strengthen Local Conflict Resolution:** Invest in local dispute resolution and natural resource governance mechanisms that can mediate disputes, prevent escalation, and build trust in both formal and informal systems.
- **Support Evidence-Based Adaptation:** Use ongoing data collection, learning, and adaptive management to tailor interventions to evolving risks and community needs.

## For Donors

- **Focus on Prevention and Root Causes:** Move beyond militarised responses by investing in addressing economic, governance, and social drivers of violence, particularly in prevention zones not yet affected by insurgency.
- **Support Locally-Led and Adaptive Solutions:** Prioritise funding for community-driven, flexible interventions that can adapt to local contexts and rapidly changing risks.
- **Promote Evidence Generation and Learning:** Allocate resources for rigorous, inclusive evidence and learning to simultaneously innovate in measuring the success of P/CVE programming and in making that evidence useful to diverse local stakeholders working together to advance stability and security.
- **Facilitate Learning and Coordination:** Create spaces for joint learning and coordination among international, national, and local actors, centring local leadership and fostering cross-regional collaboration.

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