Profiles in Locally Led Approaches to Thinking and Working Politically

Case Study 2: Thinking and Working Politically by Engaging Youth in Peacebuilding and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Mali: The Case of Think Peace Sahel

Think Peace Sahel and Creative Associates International

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This is the second in a series of case studies aimed at documenting the Thinking and Working Politically-aligned practices of country and regionally based organisations and activists. The case study series is sponsored by the DC Working Group of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice and is meant to elevate the adaptive and politically-aware methods of diverse development actors operating across a range of contexts. This specific case study examines the context-driven approaches of Think Peace Sahel, an organisation addressing conflict and violent extremism in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. It was developed through a collaboration between Think Peace Sahel and Creative Associates International. The global TWP CoP is delighted to support the publication of this and other case studies in the series as they make an important contribution to the body of evidence on politically aware and adaptive development efforts from the perspective of those at the frontline of such initiatives.

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Background

Mali has suffered from ongoing, multi-dimensional conflicts, two recent coups d'état, and growing violent extremism, exacerbating the challenges for communities to stabilise and prosper. The multidimensional crisis in Mali includes the emergence of radical armed groups who capitalise on community grievances with the State and inadequate basic social services. Youth unemployment and poverty also create opportunities for violent extremist organisation (VEO) expansion and recruitment. This VEO strategy quickly gained the support of communities in certain areas of Mali and contributed to increased youth engagement in VEOs. Mali has witnessed a steady rise in extremist rhetoric and acts of violence, all of which have contributed to a lack of social cohesion and distrust between governments and citizens. Since the signing of the 2015 Peace Agreement resulting from the Algiers Process, Mali has put in place a peace and reconciliation program to create the conditions for resilience and development.

> **Think Peace** operates in 87 communes across 10 regions of Mali. Think Peace conducts activities within and across communities to strengthen the bonds of trust between the government and the population; prevent radicalisation and violent extremism of individuals in and out of prison; and reduce inter- and intra- community conflicts.

In this context, Think Peace, a regional NGO operating in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (see box), collaborated with Creative Associates on the USAID Peacebuilding, Stabilisation, and Reconciliation (PSR) project. Think Peace's work focused on youth empowerment and resilience to violent extremism. The aim was to minimise youth recruitment and radicalisation through capacity development, awareness raising, and building youth entrepreneurial skills.

Peacebuilding, Curbing Youth Recruitment to VEOs, and CVE in Mali

Through the PSR project, Think Peace implemented activities to promote community resilience to violent extremism and strengthen civic engagement and youth empowerment in central and northern Mali. Interventions focused on strengthening youth resilience to violent extremism, youth advocacy, community dialogues, and youth empowerment and leadership. Engagement in communities considered existing power dynamics, social divides, and conflict dynamics to ensure efforts were effective and above all to avoid further exacerbation of conflict. Think Peace prioritised the implementation of methods and tools that helped build and maintain the relationships needed to understand local political dynamics and promote dialogue between communities and local authorities.
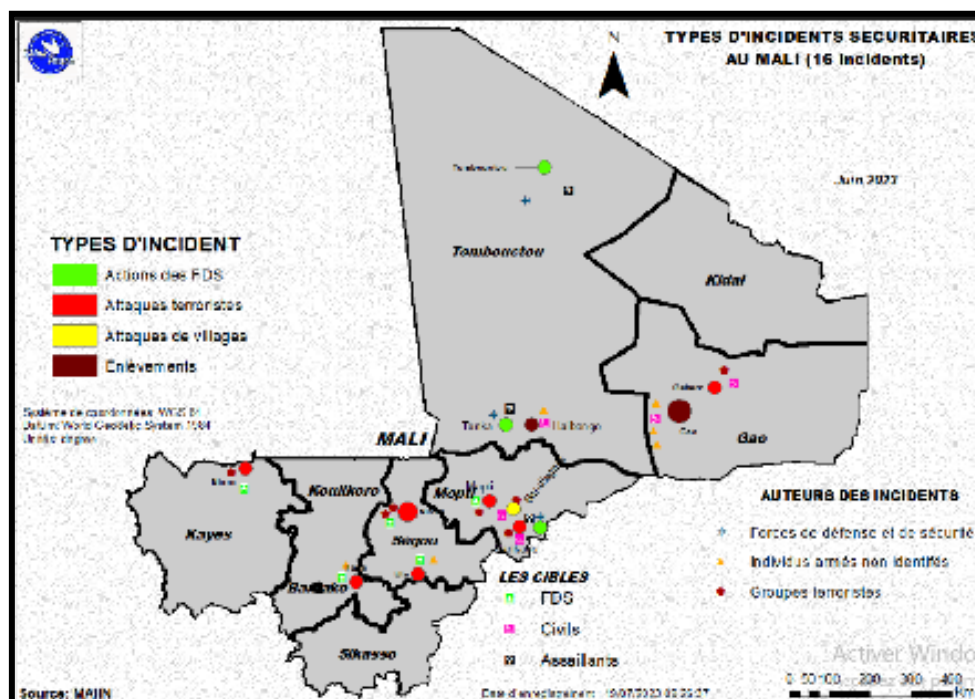
Think Peace's TWP Approach and Tools

As Think Peace entered new communities, they took an intentional approach, built over many years of work in Mali and other countries in the Sahel to understand the complex local system, actors, and power structures before designing interventions— with local communities— and regularly updated their understanding to adapt as needed.

Think Peace uses a tool called the MAIIN platform (Integrated Information Analysis Mechanism) to gather and analyse data through local community observatories. The community observatory includes: the village chief, local religious leaders/representatives, herders, farmers, youth and women's representatives, traditional communicators, and the

private sector. Think Peace selects members based on interest and representation from the community. The MAIIN platform collects information on electoral issues, community conflicts, security situations, risk analysis, power dynamics, and local governance. It helps to synthesise incidents to understand current dynamics, establish a database on conflict and politically sensitive issues, and alert political decision-makers to potential risks. The platform creates an early warning mechanism based on cross-referenced information from communities.

To collect data regularly, telephone numbers are made available to communities to report information and analyse and map inputs using QGIS. This allows for regular mapping of the political, security, and conflict situation. Think Peace has used this mapping to continuously evaluate the relevance of activities, conduct risk analysis, and produce a regular incident mapping (see graphic) shared with authorities and decision-makers. This data also feeds into Think Peace's local diagnoses of violent extremism in target communes, which includes understanding the degree of trauma in communities and analysis of economic opportunities, political dynamics, and space for advocacy.

Next, Think Peace works to understand the local actors and power dynamics in a target commune – e.g., youth organisations, women's organisations, key influencers, etc. Their focus is on understanding how these various actors understand the different problems in their localities and how these can be solved, including what mechanisms exist to solve the problem. To do this, Think Peace uses several tools:

- Stakeholder mapping. Think Peace conducts stakeholder mapping to understand actors' influence, connections, and interests, and to understand the different stratifications of actors – e.g., if they have a voice to contribute to a community meeting.

- Key informant interviews. To further understand local political dynamics, Think Peace conducts open-ended interviews. During PSR, Think Peace engaged the mayor in target communes to understand their experiences and perspectives, the historical dynamics

of their conflict and other issues, and what local authorities could do in this context. Similarly, they engaged administrative authorities to understand their interests, influence, and how interventions can be linked with public policies of the State for sustainability. Think Peace uses snowball sampling to triangulate findings.

- **Surveys.** Think Peace surveys youth, women, religious leaders, traditional communicators and other community leaders, other local administrative authorities, etc. Survey questions focus on individuals' understanding of their locality, including conflict dynamics and perceptions of issues in the commune. Think Peace analyses the survey data and feeds it back into the communities to discuss needs and adapt interventions.

- **Genogram.** Think Peace uses the genogram, a tool taken from the health sector and traditionally used during epidemics, as it allows the collection of information around an individual. Think Peace uses this approach in conflict zones to focus on understanding the actors around a target individual and the types of interaction they have. Then, Think Peace goes to each person identified to understand the connections to the person and uses the data to understand levels of influence between and across individuals. This helps to understand who pushes them toward violence or peace, and why, which is then used to inform activities. This method takes time and resources, so Think Peace uses this in certain situations when there are specific target (e.g., high-risk) individuals they want to understand better. Sometimes, they target a few significant community influencers to better understand how and with whom they make decisions.

Think Peace also uses a program hotline to gain feedback from project participants and beneficiaries. Think Peace has found that people are more comfortable sharing their feedback via the hotline rather than in writing or by having their responses recorded. The hotline serves several purposes:

> **Illustrative Questions.** How do you find the content of the activity? Was the activity useful? Are changes needed? What caught your attention during the activity? What is your level of satisfaction with this activity? Do you think that the achievements and results will be sustainable? What do you think of the collaboration with the staff? What are your suggestions for promoting peace in your community? Other comments?

1) To follow up with beneficiaries to collect feedback on activities and assess progress made in terms of changes in perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes (see box).

2) To discuss progress and unintended consequences among the project team and stakeholders based on data collected. This guides activity adaptation as needed during implementation, e.g., during community training on engagement, conflict management, and prevention, to refine its approach.

3) As a referral mechanism to connect individuals with services (e.g., women's organisations and shelters, psychosocial support, local community mechanisms, etc.). They are planning to upgrade to a toll-free line for broader use.

This suite of TWP tools was used in combination to understand political dynamics and adapt throughout implementation. With the PSR project, initial mapping and analysis fed into the creation of community engagement committees (CECs), which comprised key, influential people in the target communes, including youth and women, whose legitimacy was known and recognised by the community. The CECs were the centrepiece of Think Peace's and PSR's community involvement strategy, and key to mobilising women and youth

engagement in community actions. As noted below, the CECs were also leveraged to access key decision-makers and influence politically sensitive decisions. These efforts were successful in large part as they were based on a deep understanding of relationships and power dynamics in each target commune.

Think Peace's approach to understanding and responding to local political dynamics in its programming includes a focus on what hasn't worked in the past and why, with attention to the root causes of complex problems. Think Peace uses focus groups and open-ended interviews with community members and leaders to understand how they engage with the issue and can contribute to solutions. Mechanisms like the hotline provide anonymity and create space for community members to voice concerns without fear of repercussions. Think Peace has also used the genogram method to understand the vulnerabilities of youth at risk of recruitment to VEOs and found that women play a significant role. This data was used to advocate for the engagement of women and youth in decision-making frameworks. Typically, a community chief relies on a trusted circle of older male advisors. Think Peace has worked to create a connection between communities and these advisors over time, and directly with the chief, to influence decisions and promote change based on informal influence within the local system.

Outcomes and Results

Using the tool suite described above to understand the context and to think and work politically throughout the Mali PSR project yielded numerous results, despite the political challenges and sensitivities of this work. Highlights include:

- In Kai, Think Peace and local actors capitalised on the fact that CECs, which include women and youth, met with the Chief to explain their views and the Chief acknowledged that such committees play an important role. From there, they asked him to request that his advisors communicate regularly with the CEC so that they could provide ongoing input and advice. The head of the commune also met with youth through the program, and after three months of targeted engagement, they were able to persuade the governor of the region to expand these types of consultations and community participation meetings.

- In Mopti, Fulani herdsmen have been in conflict over land and water resources with Dogon hunters, leading to violence. Surrounding communes wanted to solve the problem but faced Dogon and Fulani ethnic divisions. Drawing on insights from Think Peace's TWP suite of tools and analysis, Think Peace identified key community members, with a focus on influence and representation, and supported a CEC in Bankass, a commune in the Mopti region. They trained the CEC in conflict resolution and radicalisation prevention, community leadership, and engagement, and worked with the local authorities and community in Ogossagou to resolve problems. The two municipalities now live in peace, largely thanks to the politically informed interventions of the CEC and its engagement with local authorities.

- In Tongué, analysis highlighted the issue of girls dropping out of school because of early marriage, displacement, or migration to urban areas. As a result, Think Peace support community members and the CEC to advocate for girls' school attendance with these root causes in mind and develop an engagement strategy informed by the community's power dynamics, targeting community influencers

on these issues. The parent association, school management committee, and traditional authorities committed to keep girls in school and sanction abusive removals.

- In Macina, the transhumance trail had become a source of conflict between herders and farmers, identified during Think Peace's initial community engagement and analysis. Drawing on the MAIIN platform, stakeholder mapping, and surveys, Think Peace understood the political dynamics around the situation and supported youth to lead an advocacy campaign that resulted in the liberation of the transhumance trail. In addition, leaders flagged the lack of resources and revenue from tax collection, and Think Peace saw an opportunity to engage youth and community leaders on this issue. The CEC and youth leaders led in-person and virtual discussions on the importance of tax collection; as part of this, a group of youth paid their tax/registration fees for 2-wheeled vehicles and many heads of householders paid their regional and local development taxes to set a positive example that had ripple effects in the community.

Challenges and Lessons

- The low representation of women in public life and participation in conflict management and countering violent extremism was a persistent challenge. While the project leveraged the influence of women, other structural and contextual factors, including risk of reprisals, dissuaded their participation. Think Peace's efforts to promote inclusion and understand the perspectives and needs of women for programming informed their engagement with women through their TWP tools, particularly the stakeholder mapping and surveys. Using these insights, Think Peace was able to identify areas of influence and spaces to advocate for increased participation of women in decision-making, as well as who from the community supported these initiatives.

- The politically sensitive, fluid context meant that the project needed to be intentional about understanding how relationships and dynamics were shifting throughout implementation. During the period of implementation, PSR experienced two coups d'état and significant shifts in the security context due to domestic and regional factors. This required ongoing efforts and close feedback loops with communities on what was working to understand political dynamics and ensure do no harm. It also required incremental progress in breaking down some of the politically sensitive issues based on long-standing siloes and tensions between and within communities.

- It is critical to use TWP tools appropriate to the context and the needs of programming; often a mixture is most helpful. Tools like the genogram provide a more in-depth exploration of an individual, their relationships, and networks of influence, while surveys provide a broader view. Depending on community needs and challenges, one may be more suited to informing programmatic approaches. Timing, staff expertise, and financial resources also need to be considered.

Recommendations for Development Actors

- **Consider carefully how people want to share information in politically sensitive contexts.** Being locally led means first and foremost ensuring 'do no harm' in the collection of political and contextual information from communities. Think Peace took care to gather data in ways that community members were comfortable with, enabling them to get more regular and candid feedback, even on politically sensitive topics.

- **Be intentional about gender and inclusion as part of TWP.** This is even more crucial where marginalised communities would typically be excluded. Given the challenges for the participation of women and youth in community decision-making in Mali, Think Peace had to be intentional about reaching these target groups to understand their perspectives and identify strategies to support their participation, and used their tool suite to identify actors and issues where there was space to advance inclusion as part of their work.

- **Organisations require resources and operational support to think and work politically.** Think Peace's approach to community engagement requires initial investment that enables them to engage communities sensitively and effectively. This requires funder and prime implementer support to build in time and resources for analysis and use of flexible mechanisms to enable adaptation throughout project implementation. Building in intentional analysis, pause and reflects, and adaptation in subcontracts/agreements and for the project consortium help to create the enabling conditions for TWP.