

MEASURING VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL



GCERF

Global Community Engagement
and Resilience Fund





GCERF

Global Community Engagement
and Resilience Fund

www.gcerf.org



Contents

Introduction	2
Conceptualisation of vulnerability to violent extremism in the context of the Sahel region	3
Methodology	4
Tool Development, Sample Size and Data Analysis.....	4
Survey Implementation.....	6
Study Area and Limitations.....	6
Regional Baseline Symposium.....	7
Findings.....	8
Correlation of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism	13
Implications of the Study	14
Next Steps	16
Annex 1	17
Personal and psychological factors.....	17
Family related values and sentiments on education.....	17
Religious and ideological perspectives.....	17
Perception on political and governance environment.....	17
Socio-economic prospects and wellbeing.....	18

Introduction

Since 2015, the Sahel region has become a hotspot for violent extremist activities than any sub-region in the sub-Saharan Africa, with doubling figures of fatalities each year¹. In 2019 alone, there were 700 independent violent episodes, leading to 2000 fatalities with the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansaroul Islam accounting for the majority of these atrocities².

In response, the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) has engaged with national and regional stakeholders to define its role within the Sahel. At the national levels, strategic and programmatic discussions were held with the relevant representatives of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, both in-country and in Geneva. Regionally, engagement with the G5 Sahel Secretariat concluded by establishing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the G5 Sahel and GCERF. The MoU outlines areas of collaborations within the scope of the G5 Sahel's Strategy for Development and Security (SDS) and its appended Priority Investment Programmes (PIP).

GCERF has already committed USD 6.7M in the Sahel through funding for six Consortia in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and additional grant-making is currently underway in the three countries. The current programmes started between January 2022 and May 2022, with an overarching goal of reducing the risk of vulnerability and building resilience to violent extremism (VE).

Ahead of implementation, a baseline assessment was conducted to set indicators, benchmarks, and inform monitoring and evaluation throughout practices. The findings provide insight into the current state of communities upon which future assessments will be conducted to determine GCERF's contribution.

¹ Le Roux, P (2019). Responding to Violent Extremism in the Sahel, *Africa Security Brief*, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ASB36EN-Responding-to-the-Rise-in-Violent-Extremism-in-the-Sahel-Africa-Center-for-Strategic-Studies.pdf>

² Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).

Conceptualisation of vulnerability to violent extremism in the context of the Sahel region

Vulnerability to violent extremism in the Sahel region is defined as the likelihood of people being susceptible to the influence of extremist ideologies and participation in acts of extreme violence.³ This vulnerability is assessed as a combined result of complex and multifaceted factors, including socioeconomic, political, psychological and cultural factors.⁴ In this study, it was conceptualised that the increasing lack of economic and educational opportunities, high rates of unemployment, political instability, and a degrading governance climate would create conditions of frustration, hopelessness and desperation among individuals and communities at large⁵. These multifaceted and complex conditions are known to predispose people to accept messages and promises from violent extremist groups.

Another important dimension conceptualised as a factor of vulnerability to violent extremism was the role of religion and culture. The lack of understanding of different beliefs and cultures within the Sahel has been associated with prejudice and discrimination,⁶ which is exacerbated by historical social tensions and conflicts. In the region, evidence suggests that these historical tensions have translated into different communities competing for power and resources⁷. Violent extremist groups have exploited these tensions to frame their actions as a defence of a particular community, religion or ethnic group⁸, resulting in an increasing appeal for solidarity among potential followers.

³ Stephens, W., Sieckelinck, S., & Boutellier, H. (2021). Preventing violent extremism: A review of the literature. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 44(4), 346–361.

⁴ APAU, R., 2019. Terrorism, Violent Extremism and Insurgency in the Sahel Region: An Assessment. *on Terrorism*, p.1.

⁵ <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/news-media/news/2023/02/77623/lack-jobs-main-driver-violent-extremism-sub-saharan-africa-undp>

⁶ Nikkilä, E., 2022. The role of religion in the prevention of violent extremism in the Sahel: A case study of ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel.

⁷ Le Roux, P (2019). Responding to Violent Extremism in the Sahel, *Africa Security Brief*, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ASB36EN-Responding-to-the-Rise-in-Violent-Extremism-in-the-Sahel-Africa-Center-for-Strategic-Studies.pdf>

⁸ Finkel, S.E., McCauley, J.F., Neureiter, M. and Belasco, C.A., 2021. Community violence and support for violent extremism: Evidence from the Sahel. *Political Psychology*, 42(1), pp.143-161.

Based on the analysis, it is concluded that understanding the vulnerability to violent extremism requires an integrated socio-ecological approach that considers **both individual and community-related factors**. This integrated focus informed the literature review presented in the scope of the tool development (see methodology).

Methodology

Measuring vulnerability to VE remains a complex issue. While some tools exist, most of these were developed in western contexts, making them inapplicable to contexts within sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the Building Resilience to Violent Extremism (BRAVE) tool was developed and validated with Canadian and Australian minority youth population.

As a result, GCERF intended to research, develop, and validate a tool which is contextually relevant and technically efficient in measuring the phenomenon within the Sahel region. Through an extensive literature review, 28 independent factors (coded as items) were found to be associated with vulnerability to VE⁹. These were clustered under five broad categories:

- personal and psychological issues
- family related values and sentiments on education
- socio-economic prospects and wellbeing
- perception on political and governance environment
- religious and ideological perspectives.

Through wide consultations with partners and local collaborators on the ground, these items were validated, reducing the vulnerability items to 25 from an initial 28. Final items by each component are shown in Annex 1 at the end of this document.

Tool Development, Sample Size and Data Analysis

Each item described above was reconstructed into a statement and using a Likert-based scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with it. To calculate vulnerability to VE index, all

⁹ Data on resilience to violent extremism was also collected but the tool is undergoing further development with analysis underway.

scores were added and divided by the total number of participants. Furthermore, in calculating each component of vulnerability, the items under those components were added and divided by the number of people who responded to those specific questions. The tool does not prescribe cut-offs in determining individuals at-risk, however, high scores could be indicative of potential vulnerability to the factors which predispose people to violent extremism.

A two-stage sampling strategy was implemented; cluster and simple random sampling. Within each country, the study took place in areas where GCERF is working and the targeting of specific places to conduct the assessment was done using population probability to size. Measures of statistical parameters were used to calculate the sample size, specifically, confidence interval, population response distribution and needed confidence level in addition to the population of each commune. A 95% confidence level was desired with calculated margin of error of 0.03 and a response distribution of 50%. Based on these parameters, 4,090 persons were selected to participate in the surveys in the countries.

Means and standard deviations were calculated per item and for the total score (known as level of vulnerability to violent extremism in this study). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare averages among the three countries and in determining the statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

The entire study considered ethical principles and all participants granted informed consent before the administration of each survey questionnaire.

Survey Implementation

A participatory approach was taken in working with grantees within each country, working with GCERF's local grantees in Mali (2), Burkina Faso (2) and Niger (2).

Following a first general meeting, the tools were shared with each partner with a request to pretest and validate the tool within their local communities. After the pretest, another general meeting was held to modify it to suit each partner. In the process, some items were removed, or the phrasing was changed for cultural appropriateness.

Questionnaires were codified in an electronic data collection tool, kobotoolbox which proved beneficial it limited the possibility of errors arising from data entry and collection on the field. While most partners had the capacity to do this, others required support which GCERF facilitated through peer-to-peer support with other partners. The training was used as another opportunity to further pretest the tool again.



Study Area and Limitations

The study focused on specific regions in Burkina Faso (Sahel and North regions), Mali (Ansongo, Koro, Bankass in the Gao region, Menaka and Mopti regions) as well as Tillabéri region of Niger. It is important to notice that every time there is a mention regarding these countries in the document, **it is referring to these specific areas within each one of them – and not to the entirety of those countries**, which is by default an important limitation of the findings.

Beyond the geographical scope, the interpretation of these findings should take note of the following additional limitations. First, the tool used (Annex 1) in this study is an experimental one, which requires further validation across different contexts and populations. As such, a higher score on this tool does not necessarily indicate an increased risk of radicalisation or

violent extremism. Rather, it is indicative of the degree to which these known factors are present within these areas and not the entire country. Findings should not be generalised within the entire countries or regions.

The items used in the tool were identified through literature research with scope of countries in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania), suggesting its applicability in similar contexts. However, given the idiosyncratic nature of VE and cultural differences, the application to this tool outside these areas should be preceded by adaptation and validation through consultation with local stakeholders.

Another limitation is about the sub-group sample size. While a robust strategy was employed to calculate the sample size, its calculation was on a level of geographic areas and no other sub-group characteristics such as profession, age, sex or other socio-demographic variables. Therefore, sample size per sub-group could be inadequate to establish a statistical relationship. Therefore, the interpretation of these disaggregation should be done with caution.

Regional Baseline Symposium



Regional Baseline Symposium hosted by The Embassy of France in Burkina Faso at the Ouagadougou Institut Francais, 20 and 21 September, 2022

After the studies were conducted and analysed, GCERF brought together grantees from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and relevant external stakeholders to engage on the key

insights from the baseline studies in a regional baseline symposium. The symposium had two objectives: 1) Consolidate key baseline findings at country level with a focus on key regional insights; and 2) Engage with government, donors, and other stakeholders through critical discussions.

Grantees jointly presented key findings during an external workshop attended by government, donors and civil society organisations in Ouagadougou. The symposium deep dived on i) Political governance, community trust and VE and ii) Religious feelings, individual psychosocial and VE through two panel discussions moderated by the G5 Sahel and the Country Support Mechanism (CSM).

Findings

This section presents the general results across all areas surveyed, referred as “regional results”. These regional results will be compared to the average results of the areas in each country: “country results”. As mentioned before, the results discussed in this section do not represent the entirety of Sahel neither the entirety of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but just those areas within the Liptako-Gourma region in which GCERF is working.

In terms of general scores, regionally, across all areas, vulnerability to VE was recorded as 56.4 (on a max score of 120). The areas within Burkina Faso ranking the highest followed by areas within Niger (Figure 1) with results were higher than the 2nd quartile of the tool (<60).

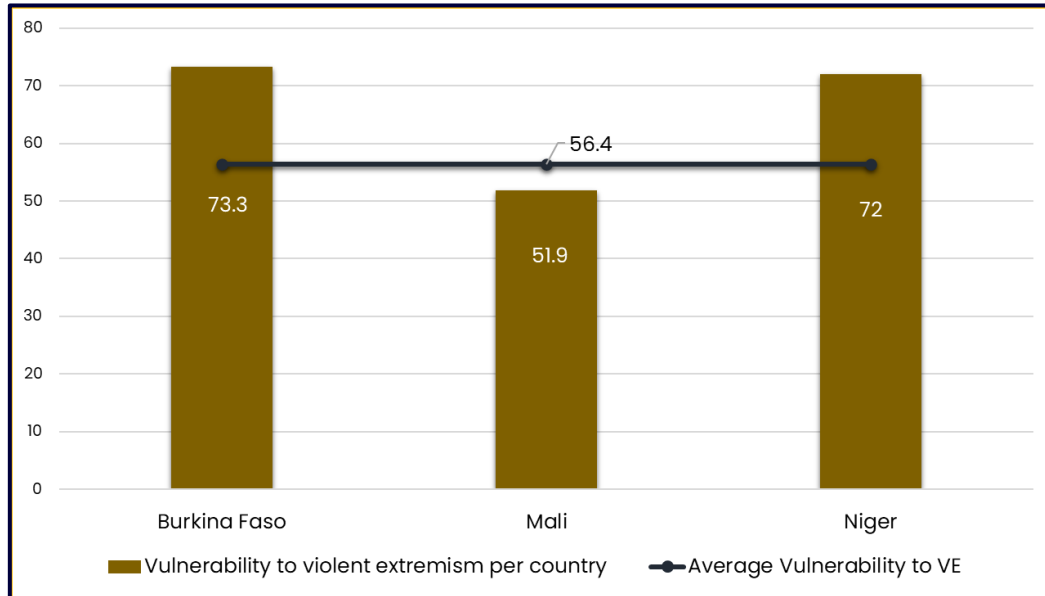


Figure 1: Comparative country analysis on vulnerability to VE

Personal and psychological factors to VE (measured on a maximum scale of 30) was on average 18 across countries (Figure 2). Niger was highest with a score of 16.2 followed by Burkina Faso. All countries' scores exceed the second quartile (>15), prompting consideration of whether psychosocial and psychological responses should be incorporated into all PVE interventions in the Sahel region.

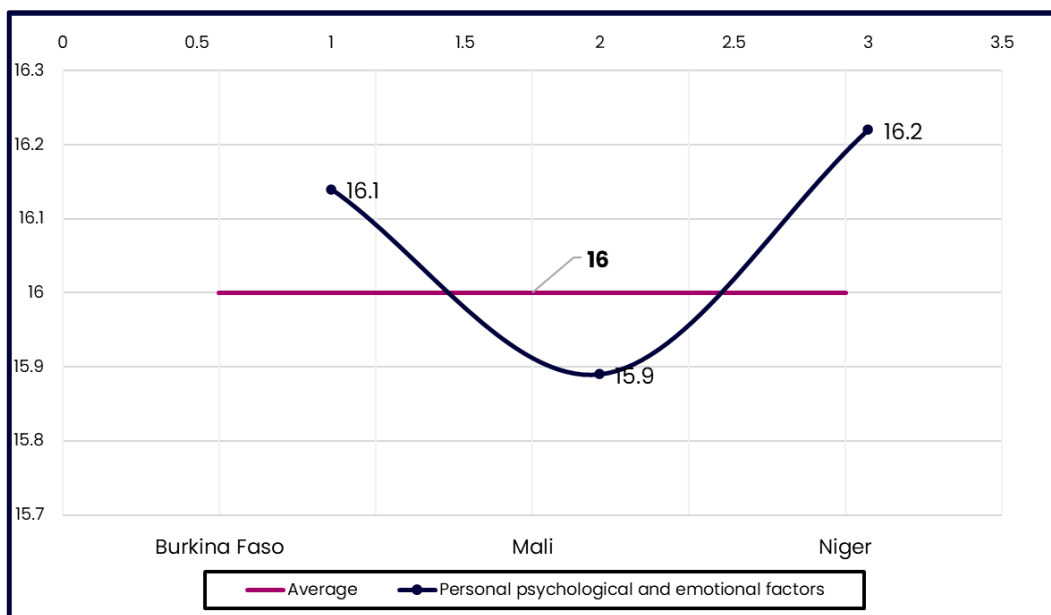


Figure 2: Comparative country analysis of personal and psychological factors

Negative sentiments on education and beliefs on traditional family values (measured on a maximum score of 25) were on average 18.8 (Figure 3). The highest score was recorded in Burkina Faso (20.7) followed by Mali (18.6). The differences were statistically significant, posing a question that demands research regarding Burkina Faso. It should be noted that the items, specifically on the respect of traditional values and transmission of strong positive values were much higher in Burkina Faso than other countries.

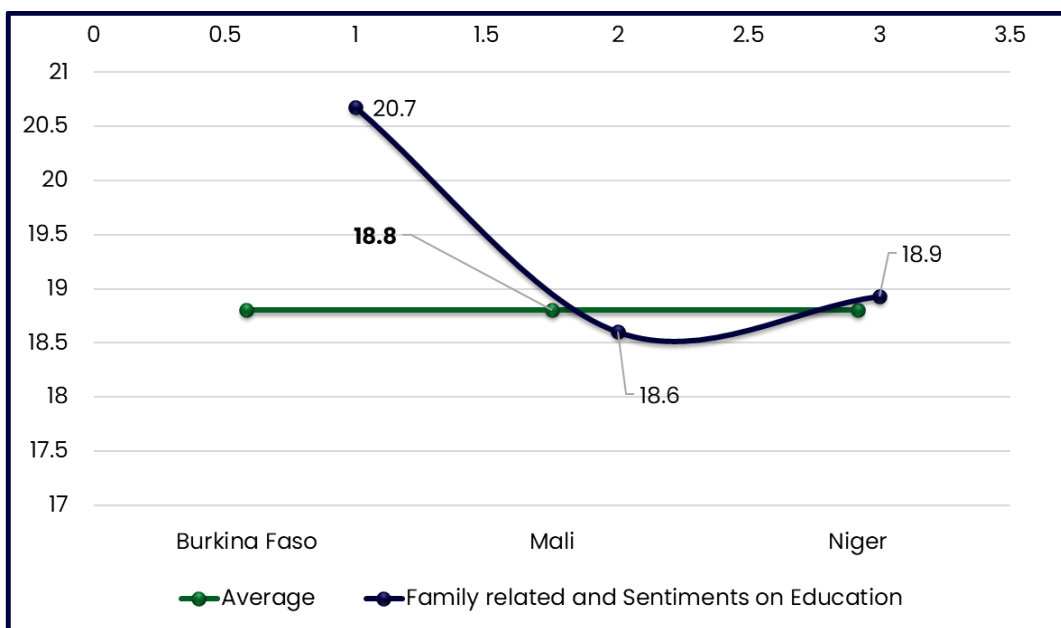


Figure 3: Comparative country analysis on family related and sentiments on education

Political Structures and governance (measured on a maximum scale of 30) was on average 18.8 (Figure 4), with a particularly high score in Burkina Faso (p-value of 0.005). This shows that a majority of the population in the region, especially in Burkina Faso, are concerned about the political climate. The three highest-ranking issues in this component were a belief that the judiciary does not function correctly, impunity, and injustice in resource distribution.

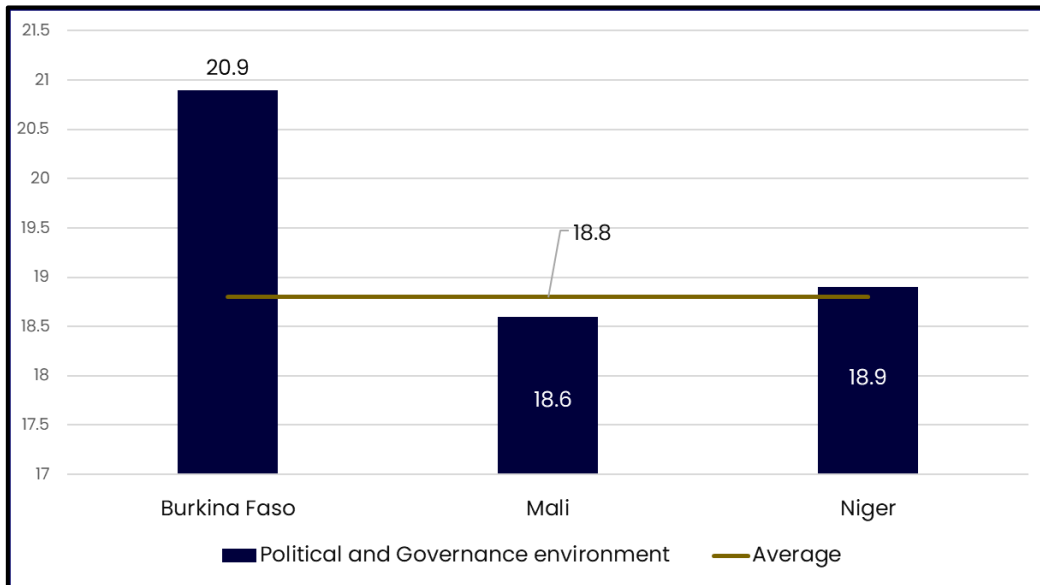


Figure 4: Comparative country analysis on views about political environment and governance

Economic prospects and well-being (measured on a maximum score of 25) was on average 11.3, with Mali having the lowest score compared to the others (as shown in Figure 5). Among the items, the difficulty in accessing financial aid for initiatives and limited employment opportunities ranked highest in Mali and Burkina Faso. In Niger, however, the limited possibilities for young people to get married or have good social standing due to economic vulnerability was one of the highly ranked items.

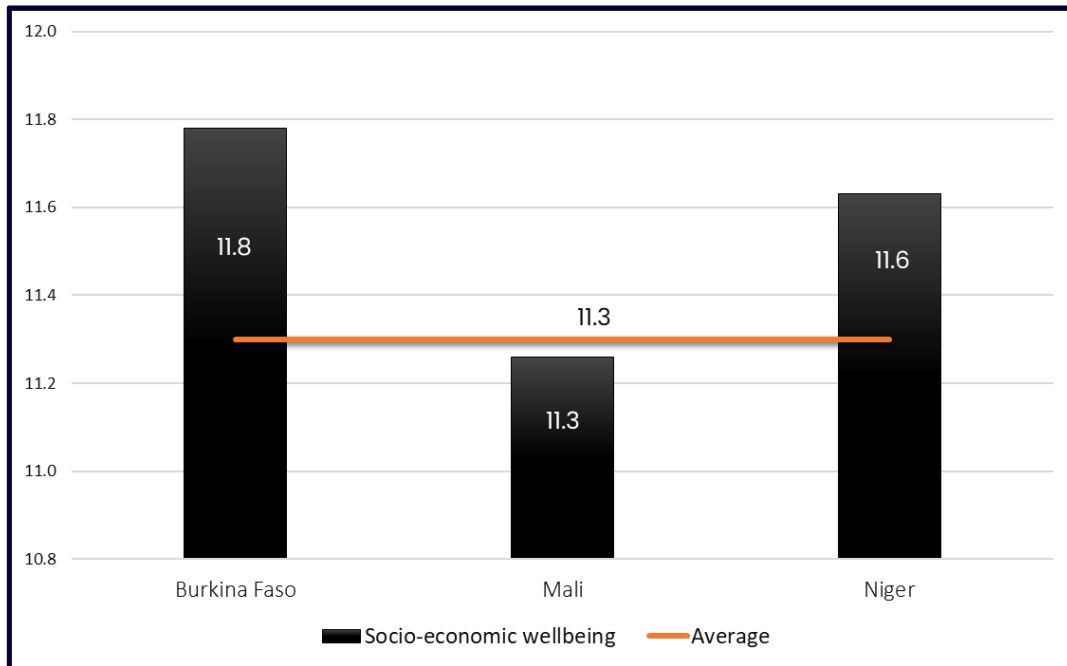


Figure 5: Comparative country analysis on economic prospects and well-being

Religious and ideological views (measured on a maximum score of 10) averaged 6.2 (Figure 6). Mali and Burkina Faso scored 6.5 and 5.8 respectively. Niger on the other hand scored the highest (8.2). Disaggregating by the items, the item “readiness to defend one’s religion irrespective of the price” was statistically significantly high in Niger (average of 4.3 on a max score of 5). On the same item, Mali scored 3.8 whereas Burkina Faso recorded 2.6.

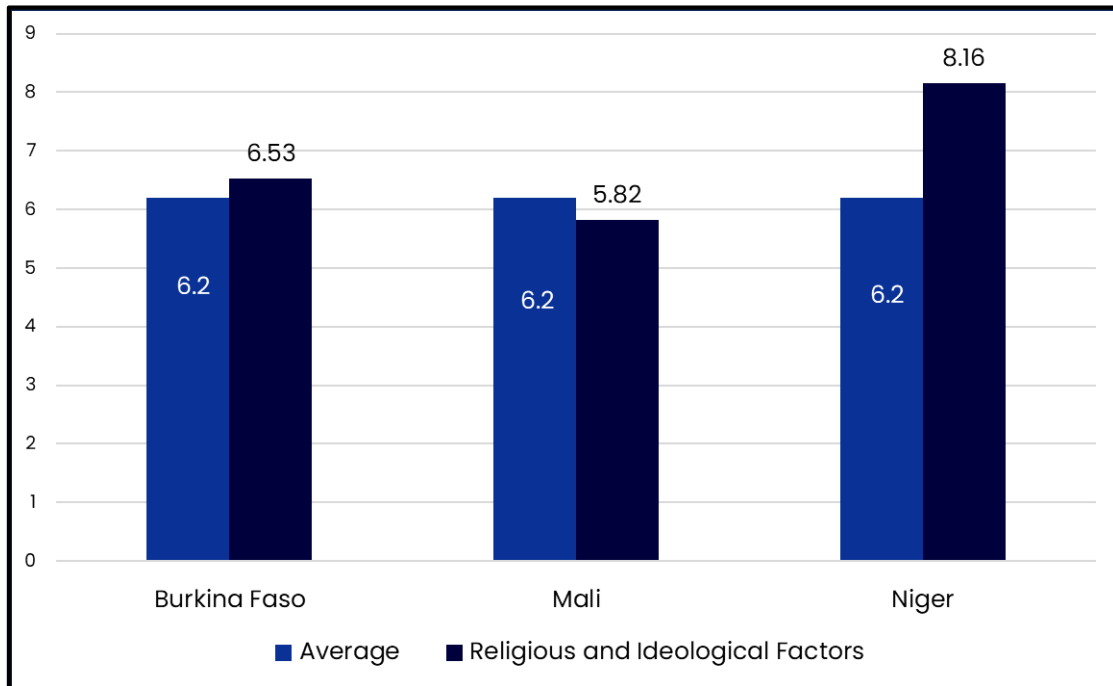


Figure 6: Comparative country analysis on religion and ideological factors

Correlation of Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

On the regional level, the study sought to analyse which of these factors had a correlation with the potential risk of vulnerability to VE. Among the five factors, negative views on the political environment and governance positively correlated with the risk of vulnerability to VE. It means that an increased score on the views on the political environment and governance corresponds to an increased susceptibility of VE and vice versa (Figure 7).

As noted by other studies^{10 11}, this factor is fundamental as it drives the other four factors. Weak governance structures that fail to provide basic social services can lead to a sense of limited opportunities, hopelessness, and frustration among the population, contributing to the vulnerability (as discussed in the conceptualisation section). This notion is supported

¹⁰ Le Roux, P., 2019. *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel*. AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIV FORT MCNAIR DC WASHINGTON United States.

¹¹ Fagbemi, F. and Fajingbesi, A., 2022. Political violence: why conflicts can result from sub-Saharan African socioeconomic conditions. *Journal of Business and Socio-economic Development*, (ahead-of-print).

by Urdal (2006)¹² who posits that youth bulge has been linked to increased expectations from government and when these are unmet, it results in violence.

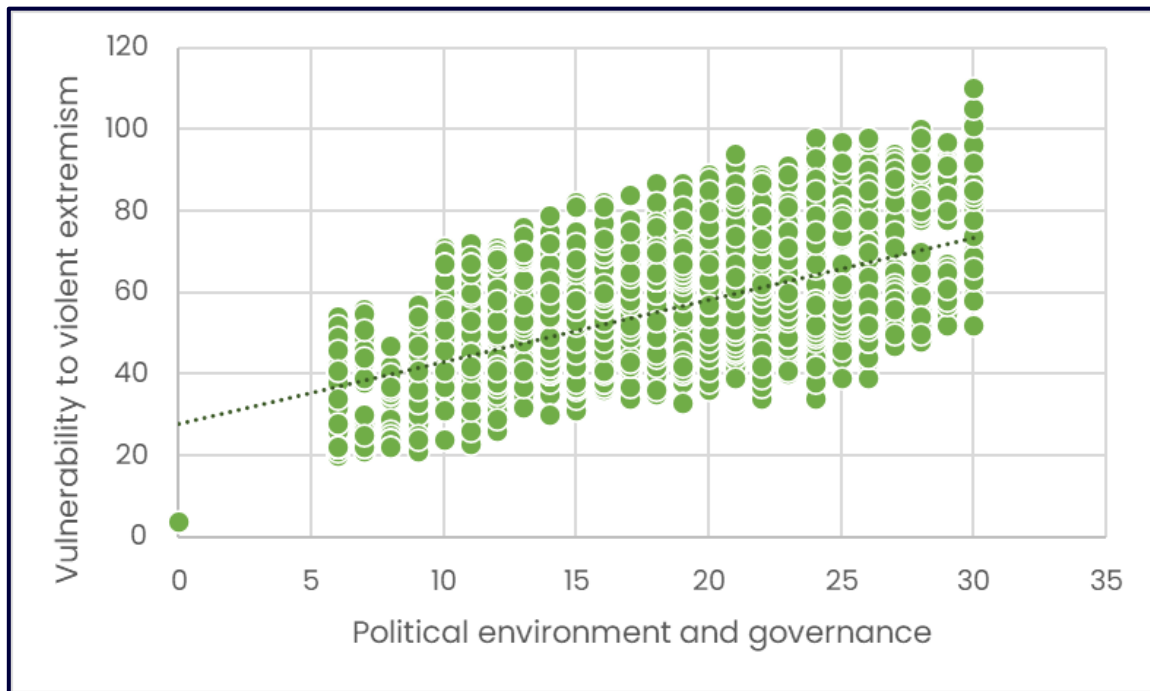


Figure 7: Correlation between political environment and governance and vulnerability to violent extremism

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study highlight four key implications, which should be considered for programming/policy action:

1. The use of a multidimensional tool in assessing vulnerability to violent extremism underscored its complex nature, which emerges from a myriad of factors, including personal, economic, political, religious and historical. This implies that interventions tackling violent extremism in the Sahel should adopt a systemic and complex lens. As proposed by Mokaddem (2019)¹³, interventions preventing violent extremism

¹² Urdal, H., 2006. A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence. *International studies quarterly*, 50(3), pp.607-629.

¹³ Mokaddem, S.H., 2019. Stability and security in Africa: the role of hard and soft power.

should adopt a conflict transformational theory, which is a comprehensive assessment of the causes, structural conditions and dynamic regional interactions among actors.

2. Political instability, weak governance and negative sentiments in the political system could result in frustration and lack of trust. These are part of the factors that violent extremist groups exploit to recruit. Programmatically, having a bridge between local governments and communities that addresses these sentiments could be of value. Such exchanges have been found to strengthen rebuild transparency and trust, which are potential resilience factors against violent extremism^{14 15}.
3. While strengthening community systems is important for preventing violent extremism, targeting specific 'at-risk' groups could be an essential step. From the assessment, certain groups such as pastoralists and ex-combatants were identified as potentially more vulnerable, although the sample warrants some caution regarding such results. Therefore, having targeted responses to such specific groups could be a leverage point in reducing vulnerability and building resilience.
4. Confirmed by other studies^{16 17 18}, the scores in vulnerability in those areas in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso reaffirm the expectation that areas on the country borders are particularly at-risk due to a mix of conditions, including arms and drugs trade, cattle rustling, artisanal gold mining among others. This is exacerbated by historical

¹⁴ Holzer, M., Melitskin, J., Rho, S.Y. and Schweser, R., 2004. Restoring trust in government: The potential of digital citizen participation. *Frontiers of Public Administration*, 6, pp.6-23.

¹⁵ Di Napoli, I., Dolce, P. and Arcidiacono, C., 2019. Community trust: A social indicator related to community engagement. *Social Indicators Research*, 145, pp.551-579.

¹⁶ Assanvo, W., Dakono, B., Théroux-Bénoni, L.A. and Maïga, I., 2019. Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma.

¹⁷ Idahosa, S.O. and Abiodun Bakare, I., 2022. Conceptualisation of regional instability in Sahel: modelling ABM-AfriLand-Rebel Approach. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 40(2), pp.190-205.

¹⁸ Alexander, Y., 2015. *Terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel in 2014*. Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies (administered by both the International Center for Terrorism Studies at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies and the Inter-University Center for Legal Studies at the International Law Institute).

tensions already present among groups in these areas¹⁹. Targeting these complex dynamics could be effective towards preventing violent extremism within the region.

Next Steps

The next steps following this analysis will be:

1. **Validating results through another round of country-level surveys:** These are intended to confirm the contextual viability of the tool in the Sahel. These will cover different geographic zones in the Sahel with a similar sample size. Following this round of surveys, a confirmatory factor analysis will be conducted to ascertain the extent to which this tool predicts one's susceptibility to VE.
2. **Conducting specialised thematic studies:** These findings present interesting perspectives which will be explored further. Two such studies include a comparative analysis of how ex-combatants differ in vulnerability to VE compared to the community. Another study will analyse VE among pastoralists and farmers and compare the extent to which they differ in the factors of vulnerability of VE. Beyond this, the question of why Niger has high religious sentiments is one that warrants a further look. GCERF will work with implementing partners to design and implement qualitative assessments to explore this.
3. **Continuous dissemination of findings:** GCERF will continue to seek other means to share these results. Some of which could include other research symposia, academic publications, meetings with stakeholders including donors and through the Global Action Platform (GAP).

¹⁹ Assanvo, W., Dakono, B., Thérour-Bénoni, L.A. and Maïga, I., 2019. Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma.

Annex I: Items for measuring vulnerability to violent extremism

Personal and psychological factors

1. Being violent helps me gain the respect of others
2. I think there are very few positive options for my life.
3. I don't feel safe in my community
4. I think that in all circumstances it is a good thing to do justice to oneself
5. I am angry about the lack of fairness or justice in the world/country/community.
6. I am ashamed because I am late (in comparison to my peers) in life.
7. I'm not sure of my life's purpose

Family related values and sentiments on education

1. I think traditional values are no longer respected in my community
2. I think the schools in my area do not offer a good quality of education
3. I think that society does not transmit strong positive values.
4. There is a disconnect between what people have studied and the opportunities available in the job market.
5. My community does not have sufficient infrastructure to pursue higher education

Religious and ideological perspectives

1. I am ready to defend my religion, whatever the cost.
2. I believe that there is only one correct interpretation of religion.

Perception on political and governance environment

1. I feel that resources are unfairly distributed in my community
2. I think people aren't punished enough when they do something wrong.
3. I have grievances against the police or the army
4. The state is not in a position to ensure the safety of the citizens of my region



GCERF

Global Community Engagement
and Resilience Fund

www.gcerf.org



5. The government does not provide basic services in my area
6. The judicial system is not functioning properly
7. There is anger in my community about certain government policies.
8. There is anger in my community about certain government policies

Socio-economic prospects and wellbeing

1. There are insufficient job opportunities in my community
2. Job opportunities are inadequate compared to exciting training in my community
3. It is difficult to access finance and support for micro and small enterprises and initiatives.