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ORGANIZED CRIME

# LOCKED HORNS

Cattle rustling and Mali's  
war economy

FLORE BERGER

MARCH 2023





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The Niamana livestock market, in Bamako, the largest in Mali. © ILRI/Stevie Mann via Flickr

# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad)
CMFPR-1	Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements (Coordination des mouvements et front patriotique de resistance)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMa	Malian armed forces (Forces armées maliennes)
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies)
HD	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
JNIM	Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin)
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad)
MPLA	People's Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement Populaire de Libération de l'Azawad)
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest)
Plateforme	Algiers Platform of 14 June 2014 (Plateforme des mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger)
RBM	Billital Maroobe Network (Réseau Billital Maroobé)
RPPS	Network of Pastoralist Peoples in the Sahel (Réseau des peuples pasteurs du Sahel)






# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Herds of cattle in Mopti, 13 March 2022. Cattle rustling, perpetrated with ever-increasing violence, is key to understanding regional conflict in Mali. © Florent Vergnes via Getty Images





Cattle rustling in Mali surged in 2021 and continues at unprecedented levels, with the dominant perpetrators being violent extremist groups operating in the country. The scale of cattle rustling in Mali is the climax of a decade of growth of the practice, and cattle rustling is now a central and under-reported element of the country's security crisis variously as a driver of conflict, as a governance and intimidation mechanism, and as a key source of revenue for non-state armed groups. This has dramatic humanitarian, social and economic effects on communities. Cattle rustling has since the very start of the crisis been at the heart of Mali's war economy, with Tuareg rebel groups (since the 1990s) and violent extremist groups (since 2012) financing themselves by looting livestock and relying on a broader network to sell it, using its proceeds to finance their operations (e.g. buying fuel, vehicles and weapons).

Cattle rustling, understood in this report to mean the whole range of livestock appropriation,<sup>1</sup> has rarely been considered as a criminal economy, yet its impacts on communities and conflict dynamics across West Africa are arguably unrivalled by other more traditional organized markets, such as high-value narcotics. It is sustained by a complex network and supply chain, and perpetrated through ever-increasing violence. Furthermore, while a range of illicit economies have been used by violent extremist groups for resourcing – including trafficking of cigarettes, fuel and drugs; artisanal gold mining; and kidnapping for ransom – cattle rustling has proven to be a particularly resilient and broadly stable source of income.

Cattle rustling also stands out regarding the degree to which it intersects with a long-standing history of frustration and resentment by pastoralist communities, and is therefore integral to understanding regional conflict. Cattle rustling, and reprisals for theft, spark cycles of violence as herders protect themselves by joining armed groups and arming themselves. Other communities then respond by creating more armed groups for self-protection, many of which become predatory. Cattle rustling also operates as a mechanism wielded by armed groups to terrorize the population and deprive them of a central element of livelihoods. Hundreds of villages have been pillaged and burnt down, and cattle looted.

*Cattle rustling  
is integral to  
understanding  
regional conflict.*

Conversely, the provision of protection from cattle rustling has been leveraged by groups as a key governance tool, enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Groups have adopted regulatory roles regarding the management of natural resources, including livestock. Finally, livestock are a key resource in Mali's conflict, in which armed groups are in constant expansion and need to therefore acquire more weapons, recruits and vehicles. Cattle rustling, present at high levels across the regions most affected by the conflict, is an important source of financing. Livestock can be sold easily thanks to a broad network of traders, intermediaries and transporters, and its revenue used to acquire supplies, including weapons, in addition to feeding the groups' members.

This report assesses the intersection of the criminal economy of cattle rustling with Mali's instability.<sup>2</sup> To do this, the report looks at the evolution of cattle rustling in Mali, as well as its links with other illicit economies that have played central roles in the country's war economy – namely, trafficking of small arms and other criminal economies, such as kidnapping for ransom. It then focuses on understanding the political economy of cattle rustling – the actors involved, motivations and profits – and the relationship between these actors and local communities, with a focus on violent extremist groups' governance of natural resources. The report describes the supply chain, detailing the role of various actors, the routes taken, and the main secondary and exportation markets. Finally, it focuses on local and national responses to cattle rustling and offers recommendations to both Malian authorities and international actors involved in stabilization efforts in the region.

## **Methodology**

The report draws on primary research and secondary data gathering. Primary data was collected through three different rounds of data collection. First, data was gathered remotely with key stakeholders to explore elements of cattle rustling and help shape the fieldwork. Secondly, data collection – comprising 50 interviews and four focus group discussions – took place in March and April 2022 in northern and central Mali, the geographic focus of this study. Data collection sites were identified using a range of factors, including the security situation, the accessibility of areas and the prevalence of cattle rustling in particular districts. In northern Mali, the regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Ménaka were part of the data collection, and more specifically the communes and villages of Ansongo, Bara, Tessit, Gao (Gao region), Sarayamou and Toya (Timbuktu region). In central Mali, fieldwork took place in the Djenné, Youwarou and Koro districts. Finally, an additional data collection round (15 interviews) took place in the towns of Gao, Ansongo, Ménaka, and Andéramboukane in September and October 2022, to capture recent developments in northern Mali since the beginning of the year, given the spate of attacks and cattle rustling incidents, and the impact on communities. Interviews included

key informants such as members of livestock breeder associations, pastoralists and livestock owners, traders, butchers, members of local associations (involved in communal mediation, for example), state and regional administrators and journalists. Secondary informants included national government livestock sector officials and officials of UN entities such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

In addition, an extensive literature review of grey, academic and media sources was conducted. This includes data collected from government sources, such as annual reports and meeting documents, as well as reports provided by UN agencies, NGOs and livestock associations. Open-source intelligence data gathering from various subscription services, monitoring of news and social media, as well as extraction of data from organizations such as the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) also took place as part of secondary data collection, with the focus on providing specific incidents of theft, attacks and mass livestock movements. Finally, this report drew on the GI-TOC's hotspot mapping initiative, which has mapped hubs of illicit economies, including cattle rustling markets, across West Africa.<sup>3</sup>





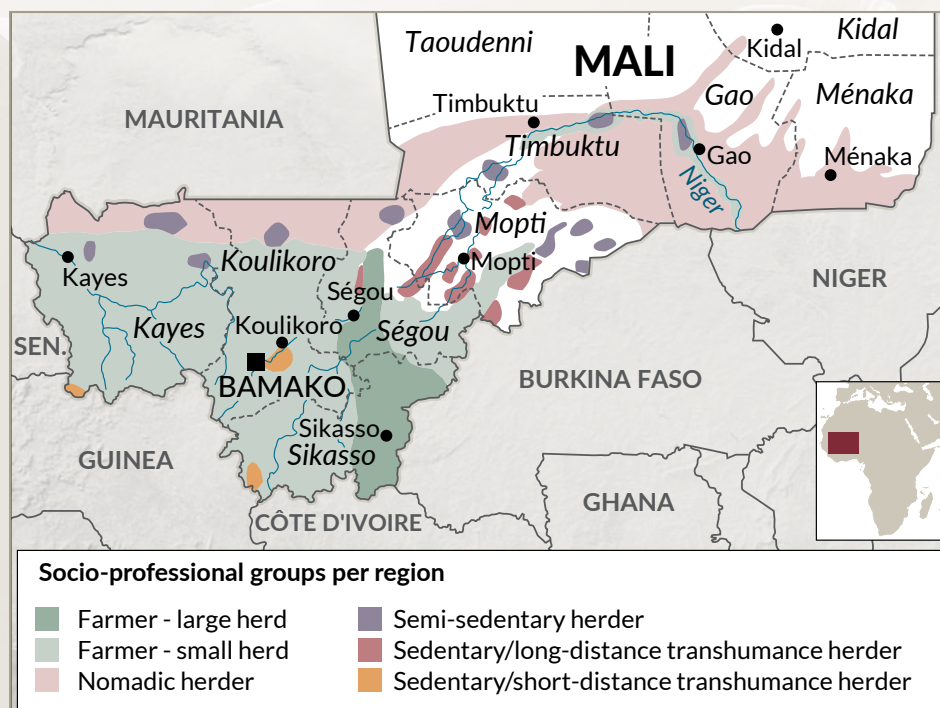
# EVOLUTION OF CATTLE RUSTLING

Herders looking to sell their goats at the weekly market in Ménaka. © Souleymane Ag Anara



## Key geographical and contextual elements

To assess the impact of the conflict on cattle rustling in northern and central Mali, it is necessary to understand the importance of pastoralism and transhumance in Mali and the precise role that it plays. Livestock production has always been the main economic activity for pastoral and agropastoral communities in northern and central Mali,<sup>4</sup> and is therefore a central element of the economic and social fabric of communities living in these zones. These overlap with regions that have been most affected by the deteriorating security situation since 2012, and the beginning of the current crisis was sparked by Tuareg separatists, allied with violent extremist groups, taking up arms against the government.<sup>5</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Main socio-professional groups involved in farming and herding by region, Mali. SOURCE: Adapted from Atlas of trends in pastoral systems in the Sahel, FAO and CIRAD, 2012, [https://agritrop.cirad.fr/567563/13/ID567563\\_EN.pdf](https://agritrop.cirad.fr/567563/13/ID567563_EN.pdf)

In northern Mali, livestock are mostly found along the Niger River and its tributaries: in the Timbuktu region (Goundam, Diré and Niafunké districts) and Gao region (Gao, Ansongo and Bourem districts). In areas beyond the riversides in both regions, as well as in the Ménaka region, most herds are formed of goats and sheep that can survive around waterpoints, and hence are more widespread geographically.

Spanning Mopti and Timbuktu regions, and connecting central and northern Mali, the vast Inner Niger Delta is key for pastoralists, agropastoralists, and farmers. Around 40% of livestock in Mali, as well as livestock from neighbouring countries, has long been taken to the Inner Delta on transhumance routes.<sup>6</sup> In Mali, herds are brought away from the Inner Niger Delta during the rainy season, when it is flooded, and brought back during the dry season.<sup>7</sup>

Cattle are particularly prominent in the Mopti region, in central Mali, which has about 30% of all cattle in the country. Pastoralism, alongside farming and fishing, dominates Mopti's regional economy.<sup>8</sup> Socio-professional groups<sup>9</sup> largely overlay with ethnic groups, although the lines are not clear cut. Broadly speaking, in Gao, Ménaka and Timbuktu regions, herders are mostly Tuaregs, Bellas,

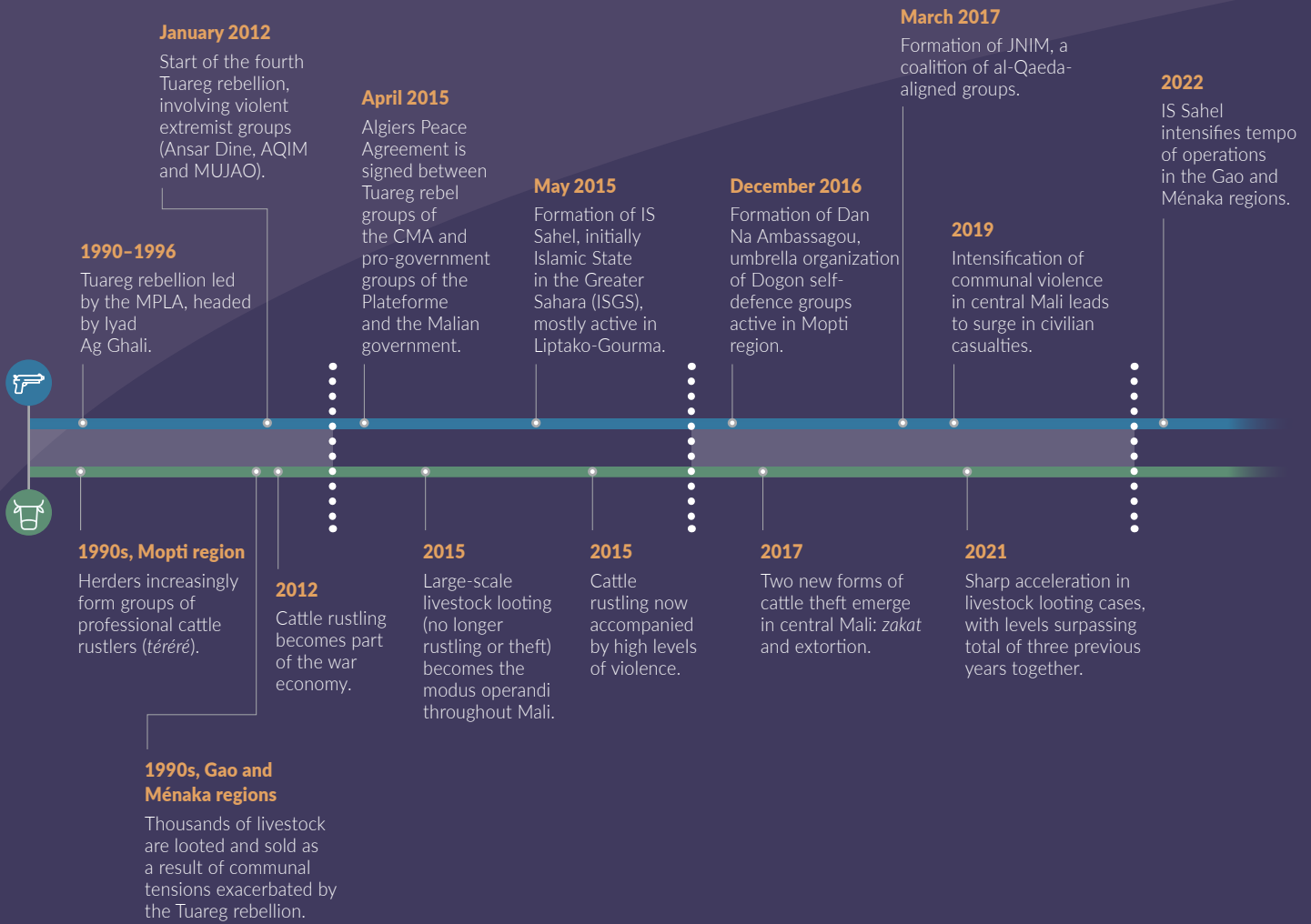
Arabs and Fulani, whereas in Mopti they are mostly Fulani. Fisher communities in Mopti region are Bozo, and farmers are mostly Dogon, Bambara, Markas and Songhai.<sup>10</sup>

These socio-economic groups cohabit in the same territories, and their activities are complementary: herders need vegetables and cereals produced by farmers, and farmers need livestock products such as milk and meat. However, their opposing modes of exploiting the land have long led to disputes around natural resources and mobility. Pastoralism is based on mobility: the majority of herders are nomadic, depending fully on livestock and following their herds on routes to find the best pastures depending on the seasons, while others are semi-nomadic and practice agropastoralism, especially in central Mali. Farmers mostly cultivate crops (millet, rice, onions, etc.) intensively in a fixed location. Disputes around access to land have always existed, and have often resulted in communal tensions given the correlation between socio-professional and ethnic groups. Authorities, from the Fulani empire of the Dina in the 19th century to today, have sought to regulate such tensions over land to avoid disputes turning into widespread communal violence, looting, destruction and cattle rustling.<sup>11</sup>

## Ancestral cattle rustling

Cattle rustling is as long-standing as the disputes and tensions between communities around natural resources outlined above and has existed for centuries across the Sahel. Actors involved in the mediation of conflicts within these communities explained that cattle rustling has been (and remains) very common within herder families.<sup>12</sup> A son stealing a cow from his father's herd is commonly a rite of passage. Theft is similarly driven by the desire to make money from selling the livestock. If not the son, the shepherds, often young boys, frequently steal one

head of livestock and sell it without telling the owner, to make some money. Alternatively, a shepherd intentionally mixes his herd with another, and leaves with a couple more cattle than he came with. These types of incidents are 'almost cultural and everyone accepts it – a cattle owner knows he will lose a couple of livestock heads during his life'.<sup>13</sup> These minor episodes have a relatively low footprint, are usually non-violent, and are mediated within the family or the community, if at all, and resolved mostly peacefully.



**FIGURE 2** Cattle rustling (green timeline) and instability (blue timeline) in Mali (1990–2022).

NOTE: The phases marked by the dotted lines correspond to the analysis sections that follow.

## Organized cattle rustling networks emerge: 1990s–2012

Cattle rustling has been taking place on a larger scale since the 1990s. Here the trajectories of central and northern Mali diverge. Northern Mali has experienced four Tuareg armed rebellions since its independence in 1960: in 1962, in 1990, in 2006 and in 2012. By contrast, until 2015, central Mali was mostly only indirectly affected by the insecurity further north.<sup>14</sup>

The 1990s saw the emergence of a phenomenon in central Mali in which young men, often Fulani herders, became professional livestock rustlers, called *térééré*.<sup>15</sup> The majority of *térééré* were herders who started stealing from other herders to replenish their stock. Some of them had lost livestock in the two big droughts that affected the Sahel in the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. While some of these herders only stole a couple of livestock heads, others saw the potential benefits of the theft and started making a living of it, forming groups of *térééré* professionalizing in this lucrative activity.<sup>16</sup> While data regarding cattle rustling in this period is scarce, most sources stated that a maximum of a dozen livestock heads were stolen at a time, and little violence (relative to current dynamics) was used.<sup>17</sup> This is partially a reflection of generally lower levels of violence in Mopti region at the time, partly a result of the lack of weaponization of pastoralism (shepherds, typically young boys, were unarmed, besides the sticks they used to move their herds around). Moreover, theft of livestock was carried out at night, when shepherds were not looking after their herds, so that clashes did not happen. 'Stealing cattle was hidden, discreet and non-violent,' a resident of Youwarou district revealed.<sup>18</sup>

In northern Mali, particularly in the areas of Gao and Ménaka regions that border Niger, historical tensions between the Tuareg herder community (the Daoussahak tribe) and the Fulani herder community living on the Nigerien side of the border (the Tolébé tribe) flared with the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s (1990–1996).<sup>19</sup> Tuareg rebels plundered Fulani herds transiting their territory in Ménaka and all the way south to northern regions of Mopti (Méma and Farimaké) as well as the Mauritanian Sahel.<sup>20</sup> No comprehensive data has been found for this period, but Fulani herders associations counted thousands of heads of livestock looted, leading to reprisal attacks and escalating violence.<sup>21</sup> While tensions calmed between 2008 and 2010 thanks to local mediation efforts, they were never fully resolved, and Fulani communities felt abandoned by the authorities, exacerbating feelings of resentment and marginalization.<sup>22</sup>

While dynamics and actors were different in northern and central Mali during this time, it is important to acknowledge that cattle rustling networks had become relatively organized in both regions during this phase. *Térééré* operating in central Mali, and Tuareg rebel groups at the Niger–Mali border relied on broader networks in their cattle rustling activities, which implicated a larger number of actors, including corrupt local authorities (either traditional or state), butchers, intermediaries, traders and transporters.<sup>23</sup> These networks will be explained in more depth below, but it is important to note that their existence preceded the start of the 2012 crisis.



## Main armed groups involved in Mali's conflict since 2012

**Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad) (CMA):** one of the signatory coalitions of the 2015 Algiers Peace Accords, an alliance of formerly pro-independence movements. One of the groups is the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad) (MNLA), formed in October 2011, mostly made up of Tuareg fighters who had returned from the 2011 rebellion in Libya and some defectors from the Malian armed forces (Forces armées maliennes) (FAMA). The MNLA started its operations in January 2012, allying with Ansar Dine to capture territories in northern Mali, and by April 2012, they had occupied large parts of the north and declared Gao as its capital. The alliance with Ansar Dine did not last and, by July 2012, the the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest) (MUJAO) had taken over and chased the MNLA from Gao.

**Algiers Platform of 14 June 2014 (Plateforme des mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger) ('Plateforme'):** one of the signatory coalitions of the 2015 Algiers Peace Accords representing pro-government groups. One of the members is the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe d'autodéfense Tuareg imghad et allies) (GATIA), formed in 2014 by a former Malian army officer called El Hajj Gamou, fighting alongside FAMA against the CMA. Other members include Ganda Koy and Ganda Izo, two self-defence groups created as a reaction to the Tuareg rebellions, respectively in 1994 and 2009, predominantly representing Fulani and Songhai communities. Both militias came together in July 2012 to form the Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements (Coordination des mouvements et front patriotique de resistance) (CMFPR-1), which initially joined the Plateforme coalition in 2014, before international rifts led to the group dividing into three different CMFPR units.

**Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) (JNIM):** a coalition of al-Qaeda-aligned groups which formed in 2017, regrouping Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Mourabitoun (merger of MUJAO and Signatories in Blood) and the Macina Liberation Front (Katibat Macina). The coalition is headed by Ansar Dine Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali. While the three former groups have been active in Mali since the start of the 2012 crisis and are present mostly in Mali's north and north-eastern regions, Katibat Macina is headed by a Fulani preacher named Amadou Koufa, who has led the central Mali expansion since 2015.

**Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel):** a violent extremist group affiliated with Islamic State, formed in 2015 as a splinter group from MUJAO, active mostly along the border areas between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Liptako-Gourma area). Initially known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the group was granted provincial status by the Islamic State in March 2022, renaming it IS Sahel. It is the most active violent extremist group in the Sahel conflict after its rival JNIM.

**Dan Na Ambassagou:** an umbrella organization of Dogon self-defence groups under the leadership of Youssouf Toloba, and one of the most active armed groups in the Mopti region, central Mali. The group was formed in late 2016 after Theodore Somboro, the Dogon hunter chief, was killed by violent extremists elements of Fulani ethnicity. The group clashes with violent extremist groups, especially Katibat Macina, as well as Fulani self-defence groups, and has been accused of abuses against Fulani populations.

## Cattle rustling contributes to and finances further conflict: 2012–2015

Although the 1990s Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali catalyzed the formation of self-defence militias and increased the volume of weapons in circulation, the start of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion sharply accelerated these trends. Most importantly, 2012 saw the arrival of a new type of violent actor: violent extremist groups. Already, profits from cattle rustling were feeding into the financing and self-positioning of differing groups in the conflict, and the arrival of violent extremist groups exacerbated this trend.

At the helm of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion was the MNLA, which took up arms against the government to achieve the independence of northern Mali, known as Azawad. Members of the Tuareg herder communities, who had been plundering Fulani herders since the 1990s, quickly joined the MNLA, using the revenue generated from livestock stolen in the past several years to buy weapons and mobilize troops.<sup>24</sup> Fulani herders, fearing for their security, particularly given the recruitment of their rivals into the MNLA, joined self-defence groups such as Ganda Iso and violent extremist groups such as the MUJAO.<sup>25</sup> The response to the MNLA and the counter insurrection did not come from the state but from violent extremist groups, which started to represent everyone who was not convinced by the Tuareg rebellion independence claims.<sup>26</sup>

Local and communal disputes strengthened the rebellion, which nominally pitted the MNLA against several self-defence and violent extremist groups. For example, Fulani herders who had suffered decades of pillaging by Tuareg herders not only sought to protect themselves but also pursued revenge. Now armed and part of a group, Fulani herders started attacking Tuareg herders, and the latter retaliated.<sup>27</sup> As a result, cattle rustling exploded, leveraging pre-existing networks for distribution and sale. Cattle rustling immediately became part of the war economy and

a key resource in the sale and purchase of weapons for both the MNLA and the constellation of newly established violent extremist and self-defence groups.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, the region had been flooded with small arms trafficked from the recently collapsed Libyan state, and those stolen from Malian army stockpiles.<sup>29</sup> Myriad groups formed and armed themselves, launching deadly reprisals and retaliatory attacks and violently looting livestock.

Cattle rustling was therefore, from the commencement of the insurgency, a key grievance driving recruitment into, and support for, violent extremist groups. During this phase, cattle rustling became far more violent, with herders increasingly arming themselves for self-protection. Cattle rustling dynamics thus became deeply intertwined with the dynamics of intensifying conflict. Moreover, the number of herds stolen in one incident increased from fewer than a dozen to a whole herd, making cattle rustling a far more prominent threat to livelihoods than it had previously been. For example, as the MUJAO and the MNLA were fighting over the control of key roads, herders coming back from the weekly market were regularly arrested and forced to give their animals away to one or another group, depending on who was controlling the road.<sup>30</sup> This led not only to herders losing whole herds, but to reduced accessibility of markets, and herders destocking or sharply reducing the size of their herds to avoid being targeted by rebel or violent extremist groups.<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting that while the violence remained largely located in northern Mali, MNLA operations reached southwards into the Douentza district, in the Mopti region, central Mali. There, again, the MNLA committed numerous violations against Fulani herders, including looting their herds. This drove violent extremists groups' recruitment and expansion efforts in central Mali from 2015 onwards.<sup>32</sup>

## Key ways in which cattle rustling feeds instability

- Fuelling violence: the need for protection leads to the creation of militias, which carry out acts of vengeance and retaliatory attacks.
- Contributing to an increase in other illicit economies, e.g. kidnapping and arms trafficking.
- Directly, constituting both food for fighters and an important source of revenue for armed groups.
- Indirectly, making and sustaining alliances, destroying livelihoods and driving displacement and recruitment by armed groups.
- Responding to cattle rustling being a key legitimization tool in armed groups' governance strategy driving their influence and expansion.

## Central Mali, an uprising in the making: 2015–2021

The year 2015 marked a pivot point for central Mali, with three key shifts driving a proliferation of generalized violence against and between communities, a transformation in the dominant forms of cattle rustling, and an increase in the levels of violence and weaponization used in cattle rustling. Cattle rustling and violence have increasingly intersected in central Mali since 2015, constituting 'an uprising in the making'.<sup>33</sup>

First, as explained above, herders in Douentza, who had been the victims of direct attacks by the MNLA, had joined the MUJAO and non-state armed groups at the beginning of the crisis. Second, pre-existing tensions between pastoralists and farmers were exacerbated by the southward displacement of many pastoralists from Timbuktu region. Around 70% of herders in the region, according to informal estimates, were driven by insecurity from 2012 onwards, towards Mopti and the Inner Delta regions.<sup>34</sup> This created yet further competition for access to pastural land in central Mali. Lastly, and most importantly, violent extremist groups, after first taking over swathes of northern Mali and then being chased out of the main cities by France's Operation Serval in 2013, reorganized and launched a new offensive towards central Mali in 2015.<sup>35</sup>

These three accelerators found fertile ground in long-standing localized conflicts over natural resources in central Mali, which had previously largely been managed by communal mediation. In the Mopti region, disputes over access to resources such as land and water had always existed, especially in the Inner Niger Delta. The roots of these tensions are old. Land management in the Inner Delta had long experienced various methods of management, which fed into these tensions.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Mali's independence in

1960 brought in decades of government policies and laws favouring agriculture and sedentarism,<sup>37</sup> to the detriment of pastoralist communities, leading to localized communal tensions.<sup>38</sup> The overspill impacts from conflict in northern Mali quickly ignited this pre-existing tinderbox.

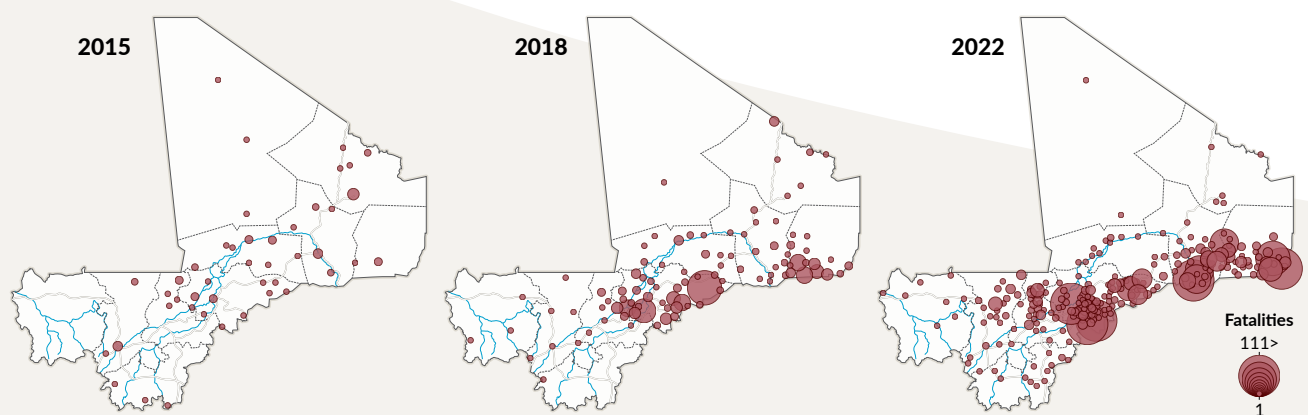
Foremost among the violent extremist groups driving southward expansion into central Mali was the Macina Liberation Front (Front de libération du Macina). The Macina Liberation Front, created in early 2015 (renamed Katibat Macina in 2017, when it joined the broader JNIM coalition) was led by Amadou Koufa, an influential preacher in the region. Koufa, a Fulani himself, recruited mostly, though not exclusively, from the Fulani community. Katibat Macina exploited feelings of injustice and resentment among Fulani herders in recruitment, intertwining religious discourse with traditional natural resource tensions. For example, as part of its recruitment drive, the group used the religious precept that the land belongs to Allah and no individual can claim it.<sup>39</sup> This discourse resonated with herder communities, and the group was quickly perceived as an alternative to corrupt state authorities and Fulani elites who profited from their traditional roles (by collecting fees for access to pasture land, for example).<sup>40</sup> Once again, pre-existing competition between socio-professional groups, fuelled by identity-based narratives, led to a domino effect of individuals joining, or creating, armed groups based

on what they perceived as the defence of a particular community's interests. This was the case with Dan Na Ambassagou, for example<sup>41</sup>

As the conflict in northern and central Mali increasingly unfolded along communal lines, the levels of violence climbed steadily, as did the scale of cattle rustling. An integral part of the war economy, cattle rustling developed in line with conflict dynamics (with thefts targeting rival groups in the conflict, and the scale intensifying alongside that of attacks) and geographies.

From 2015 onwards, several key changes occurred in terms of form, scale and modus operandi of cattle rustling.

First, there was a pivotal shift occurred in the kind of cattle rustling taking place. Although looting of herders – in which an entire herd, rather than a small number of cows, is stolen – had occurred at the Mali–Niger border in the 1990s, large-scale livestock looting became the main modus operandi throughout northern and central Mali during this period. This replaced ordinary, small-scale thefts, which became a marginal proportion of overall cattle rustling dynamics.<sup>42</sup> Instead, according to local stakeholders, hundreds or even thousands of livestock heads were looted and trafficked into neighbouring countries for sale during this time.<sup>43</sup> An increase in thefts of entire herds, coupled with a greater number of looting incidents, resulted in a spike in the number of livestock heads looted throughout this period.



**FIGURE 3** Conflict casualties in Mali, 2015, 2018 and 2022.

SOURCE: José Luengo-Cabrera, Twitter, based on ACLED data, [https://twitter.com/J\\_LuengoCabrera/status/1601937055445024770](https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1601937055445024770)



Second, as the number of armed groups increased, with their zones of influence eventually stabilized in some areas and remaining highly volatile in others, so did practices such as extortion or *zakat* (a tax imposed by violent extremist groups). This led to a higher number of livestock being taken from herders, either through looting (often coupled with attacks), extortion or *zakat*. Extortion and *zakat* emerged in central Mali in 2015 but have been widespread practices in central Mali since 2017, as groups have increased their levels of influence, from which point they are able to start 'protecting' the population (extortion) or imposing taxes (*zakat*).<sup>44</sup>

*Zakat* is an Islamic principle in which everyone over a certain threshold of wealth has to contribute a percentage of their assets (typically 2.5%), which is then either redistributed to the poor or used to support jihadi enterprises. Interviews have, however, highlighted that *zakat* is often abused by armed groups, especially in northern Mali, given the fluidity of the security situation there. This means that communities have to pay *zakat* to multiple groups all claiming to be IS Sahel or JNIM.<sup>45</sup> Self-defence groups, while not calling it *zakat*, use similar financial exaction methods as they extort people under their zones of influence, offering protection in exchange. Our interviews have highlighted that, in the Mopti region, a cattle owner might be extorted by a self-defence group claiming to protect his village, face an attack a couple of days later in which his livestock gets looted, and then later on be forced to give cattle heads to groups claiming to collect *zakat*.<sup>46</sup>

*Cattle rustling is prevalent in hubs where illicit economies are significant drivers of instability.*

## Three forms of cattle rustling

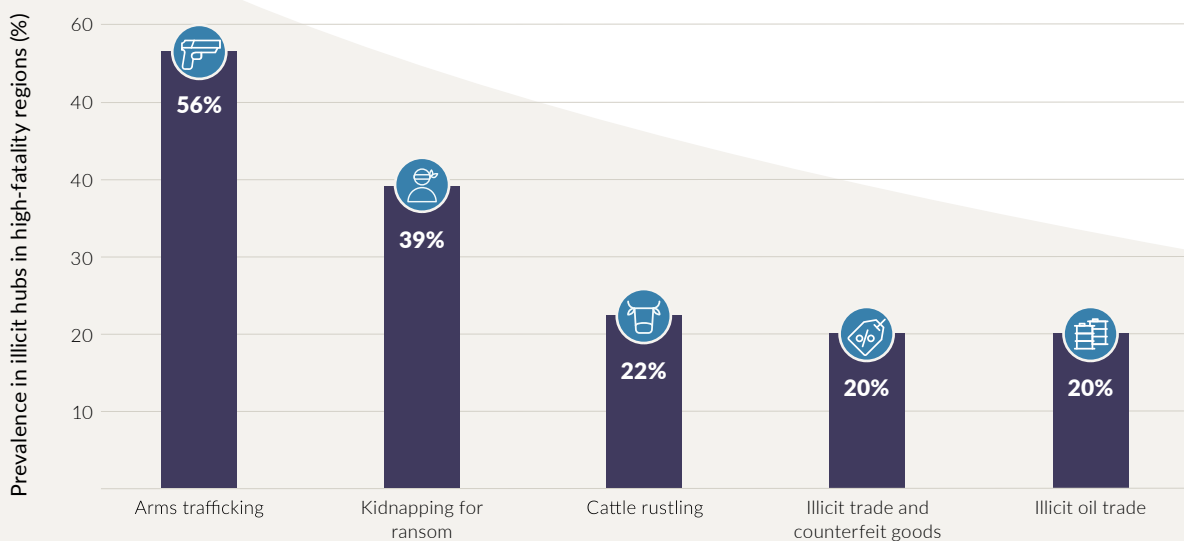
Stakeholders explained that rustling denotes stealing, looting or robbing, or extorting livestock from the rightful owners.

- **Stealing or theft** involves taking away livestock without the owner's knowledge, often by night or during the daytime in the fields. This form of cattle rustling is prevalent in cases of opportunistic theft of livestock by individual bandits or low-key groups taking advantage of insecurity. Individual bandits are in some cases former herders who know livestock owners well and often steal livestock at night, to avoid any ensuing violence. This form of rustling was prevalent in Mali until 2012.
- **Looting or robbing** involves forcefully taking away livestock from the owner and even killing or kidnapping the owner if he resists. There have been cases of unidentified attackers with large-scale cattle rustling ambitions, especially in areas where no specific armed group is in control. This is the form of cattle rustling that takes place in most parts of central and northern Mali, and is often associated with an attack on a village during which livestock are stolen and other goods looted.
- **Extortion** involves forcing the owner to unwillingly give some of his/her herd as part of *zakat*, in exchange for protection (e.g. by self-defence militias) or for other motives. This form of cattle rustling is particularly prevalent in areas under the control of IS Sahel and JNIM, as well as in self-defence militias' zones of influence.

Third, in addition to the change in scale (both in terms of number of incidents and number of livestock stolen per incident), the violence used in rustling incidents escalated sharply during this period. The number of armed groups and the weapons available to them, as well as the tactics used by these groups, have meant that cattle rustling incidents are often accompanied by high levels of violence. As the nature of the conflict became more driven by communal grievances, self-defence militias and violent extremist groups engaged in retaliatory attacks, burning entire villages, killing civilians, and looting all belongings and resources, including livestock.

Moreover, extortion and livestock looting, when not conducted as part of an attack on a village, were often coupled by kidnappings for ransom or killings. According to one expert, armed groups have killed hundreds of shepherds since 2015, including ‘all those who have shown the slightest sign of opposition’.<sup>47</sup> But armed groups also started to kidnap variously shepherds, family members of livestock owners, or livestock owners themselves, and to ask for ransom. A victim of cattle extortion explained: ‘During Ramadan in 2020, Dozo [self-defence militia] came and stole 85 of my cows, and I bought my life back by paying FCFA1 million (€1 526). I could see my animals just there, in Sofara village [Mopti region].’<sup>48</sup> However, some herders are not given the opportunity to provide ransom, but are instead killed.

The slightest resistance to the looting or extortion can lead to death. This is particularly the case with IS Sahel in the Gao and Ménaka regions.<sup>49</sup> In 2019, the representative of the Network of Pastoralist Peoples in the Sahel (Réseau des peuples pasteurs du Sahel) (RPPS) in Mopti, Amadou Gamby, described the situation as catastrophic, with armed groups in Mopti often killing livestock owners or herders before taking their animals away.<sup>50</sup> At a regional level, the link between cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, as well as arms trafficking, has been underscored by the GI-TOC’s mapping of hubs of illicit economies across West Africa, predominantly in Nigeria and Mali (see Figure 4). Not only are these three illicit economies often found together and interlinked – highlighting the high degree of weaponization around cattle rustling – but they are particularly prevalent in hubs where illicit economies are significant drivers of instability.<sup>51</sup>



**FIGURE 4** Most prominent illicit economies in ‘high-fatality region’ illicit hubs.

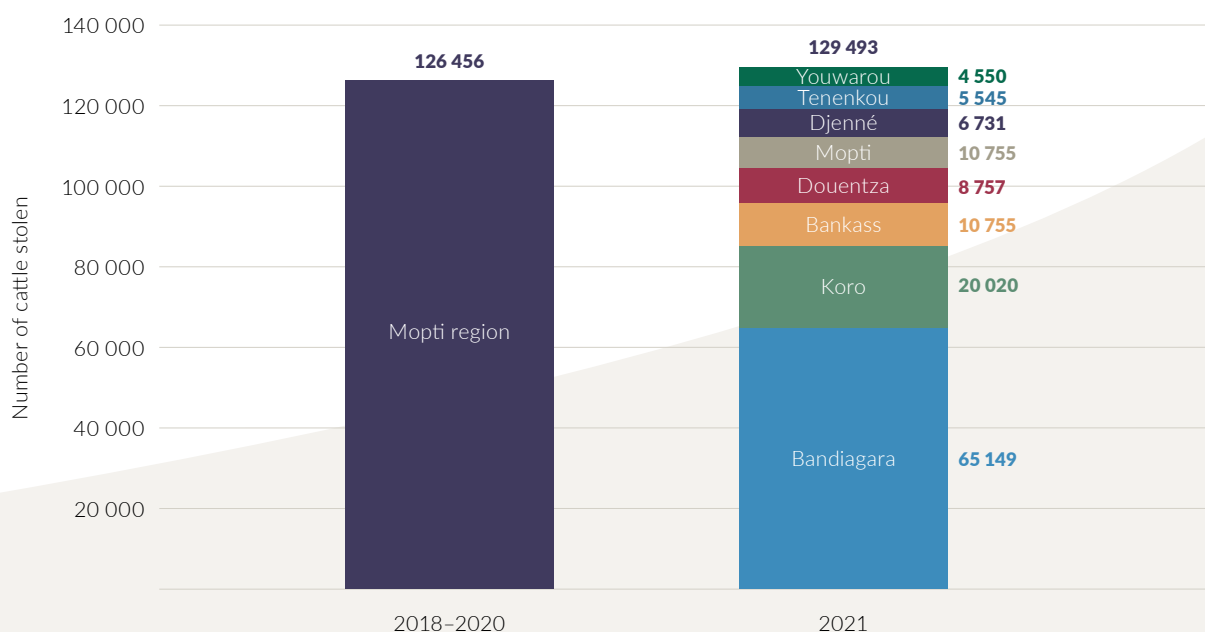
SOURCE: Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Risk Bulletin – Issue 5, October 2022

## Escalation of cattle rustling since 2021

The year 2021 marked a pivot point in terms of the scale of cattle rustling in both central and northern Mali. The dynamics described above, which developed between 2015 and 2021, have not only continued but accelerated since 2021. In 2021, violence and cattle rustling levels significantly surpassed the totals of previous years, and 2022 showed similar signs of exceeding 2021 numbers.

As attacks against communities and villages have grown in number and intensity, cattle rustling – a systemic element of these incidents – has intensified in parallel. Moreover, a higher tempo of attacks and accelerating geographic expansion of many armed groups have created a bigger demand for resources. Livestock – abundant in Mali and easily sold to buy weapons, motorbikes, fuel and food – is a resource well positioned to provide this source of financing. Furthermore, livestock also served to directly feed an increased number of fighters, and can be leveraged in maintaining alliances.

According to official figures, which are likely to under-represent the reality because of under-reporting and sporadic monitoring, the number of rustled cattle in central Mali in 2021 rose to more than those recorded in 2018, 2019 and 2020 combined (see Figure 5), with Bandiagara, Koro and Bankass (all in the Mopti region) the three most affected districts in central Mali.<sup>52</sup> From 2019 to 2021, cattle herds stolen in the Mopti region rose from about 78 000 to 130 000. In Bandiagara alone, this represents more than 1 250 heads of cattle stolen per week.<sup>53</sup> In addition to cattle, about 140 000 goats and sheep were stolen in 2021, bringing the total number of livestock looted in 2021 to 270 000 in the Mopti region.



**FIGURE 5** Cumulative number of cattle stolen in the Mopti region, Mali, 2018–2020 and 2021.

SOURCE: Governor's office of Mopti region, Report of the regional conference on cattle theft in the Mopti region, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, 7 December 2021, cited in Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Risk Bulletin – Issue 4, June 2022



While comprehensive data for 2022 is not available at the time of writing, qualitative interviews suggest that cattle rustling has continued to expand sharply in scale. Some reports have linked this reported surge, at least in part, to the increased operations of FAMa, pro-government self-defence militias and, since December 2021, their Russian partners in the Wagner Group.<sup>54</sup> These actors, while patrolling together, have been accused of an increased number of exactions in central Mali, including the most deadly incident in the history of the conflict, in which 300 civilians were killed in the town of Moura, Djenné district, Mopti region.<sup>55</sup> Interviews and open-source monitoring suggest that the last quarter of 2022 saw a strong uptick in cattle rustling cases in several communes of Mopti and Bandiagara districts.<sup>56</sup> While numbers are hard to compile, sources mentioned several thousands of cattle, and similar numbers for goats and sheep, stolen between October and November.<sup>57</sup>

While cattle rustling has become a constituent part of conflict dynamics, involving systematic looting of all belongings, some sources have expressed particular concern regarding the scale in 2022. Sources have suggested that cattle rustling might be part of a strategy to deprive communities of all of their possessions, forcing them to leave their villages to find food and new livelihoods.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, FAMa released a communiqué on 10 November 2022, stating that they had retrieved 600 cattle rustling heads ‘from terrorists’ and given them back to their owners.<sup>59</sup> Accusing other belligerents of cattle rustling and claiming to be the ones returning stolen cattle to communities is a narrative used by violent extremist groups on the one side, and the state and its affiliates on the other. Amid widespread disinformation and disorientation of public opinion, this has become a political argument that is difficult to corroborate.

In northern Mali, the concomitant spike in violence and cattle rustling incidents since 2019 was largely driven by IS Sahel expanding their operations in Gao and Ménaka regions (as part of a broader drive in the Liptako-Gourma area).<sup>60</sup> Although other rebel and violent extremist groups<sup>61</sup> do operate in the region, our data collection indicates that the most prominent perpetrator of both cattle rustling and violence is IS Sahel.<sup>62</sup> Unprecedented levels of violence took place in northern Mali in 2022, fuelled largely by IS Sahel.<sup>63</sup> This was, in part, but not exclusively, because of the security vacuum created by the French withdrawal from their military bases in Ménaka (June) and Gao (August).<sup>64</sup> Since this withdrawal, IS Sahel operations have changed in approach and scale. First, instead of fighting, looting and/or killing and retreating, IS Sahel forces now stay several hours or even days in relatively large towns (e.g. Talataye and Andéramboukane).<sup>65</sup>

Secondly, attacks have increased in tempo and scale.<sup>66</sup> This has driven over 70 000 civilians to flee to Ménaka (a town of normally 20 000 inhabitants),<sup>67</sup> thousands more to Gao and further north to Kidal, and even towards the Algerian border (as communities have families on both sides of the border).<sup>68</sup> As of October 2022, over three-quarters of the Ménaka region was under IS Sahel control.<sup>69</sup> Sources interviewed in October 2022 all expressed their distress, saying that civilians who owned cattle, goats or sheep, had to leave their herds behind, hundreds of people lost their livelihoods, and everyone feared for their security in view of the IS Sahel breakthrough since the beginning of 2022.<sup>70</sup>

According to official figures from the Direction régionale des productions et des industries animales – Gao and 2019 data from the FAO, livestock stolen in the first nine months of 2022 far exceeded total livestock rustled in 2019.<sup>71</sup> In Ansongo district, for example, authorities registered more than 86 000 livestock stolen, which is almost twice as many as in 2019.<sup>72</sup> In Gao district, numbers were already at 71 000 before the last quarter of the year.<sup>73</sup> Given the level of insecurity, the relatively low state presence outside of the main cities and significant under-reporting, it is likely that these numbers only reflect part of the reality. Stakeholders interviewed in August and September 2022 in Gao, Ansongo, Ménaka and Andéramboukane all stated that levels of livestock looting incidents in 2022 exceeded by far what they had ever experienced before.<sup>74</sup>

A Fulani herder in a green turban and grey shirt is herding a group of cattle in a dry, dusty field. The herder is in the foreground, looking towards the cattle. The background shows a simple brick building and a clear sky. The image is overlaid with a white geometric design consisting of a circle and several lines.

# RESOURCING CONFLICT

A Fulani herder leads his cattle to graze in the fields between Sevaré and Mopti in central Mali. Many Fulani herders feel helpless in the face of the proliferation of cattle rustling incidents in the region. © Michele Cattani/AFP via Getty Images



## Prices and proceeds

As noted above, cattle rustling is a significant source of revenue for non-state armed groups operating in Mali. According to the Malian authorities, between 2018 and 2020, cattle rustling nationally represented a loss of FCFA69.5 billion (over €106 million) for the economy.<sup>75</sup> Given the prominent role that myriad armed groups play in the cattle rustling supply chain in Mali, it is clear that a significant proportion of this lost revenue is flowing to armed groups operating in the country.

While it has not been possible to collect data on the financial proceeds of each armed group involved in cattle rustling in Mali, available data regarding pricing, number of stolen livestock in specific districts, and evidence concerning the geographic operations of different armed groups, allow us to draw some broad conclusions.

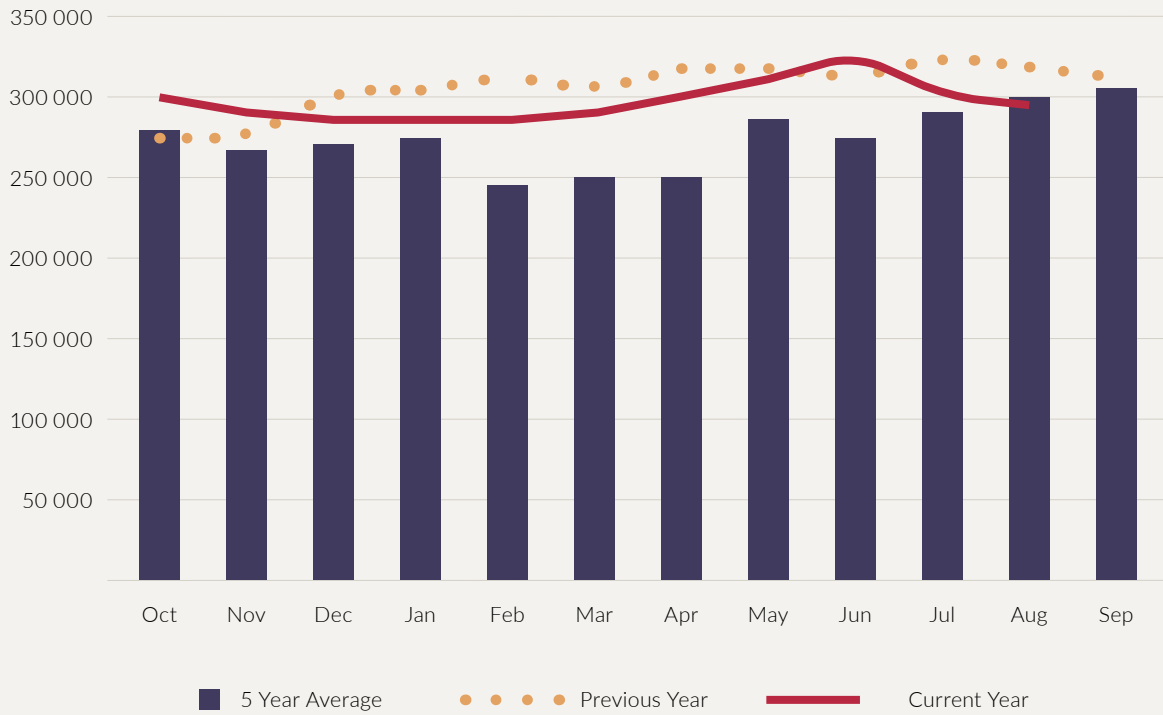
Prices of livestock (whether stolen or not) vary depending on multiple factors, including supply/demand; season; accessibility of the market; health, breed and quality of the animal; and regular livestock destocking, especially in times of crisis. Generally speaking, central Mali and zones along the Niger are abundant in cows and bulls, whereas the desertic regions of Gao and Ménaka have more small ruminants (goats and sheep) as well as camelids. Reflecting this, in Fatoma market, a large export market in the central region of Mopti, where cattle are abundant, the average price of a bull is typically between FCFA250 000 and FCFA300 000 (€335–€458), while the cost of a cow is between FCFA200 000 and FCFA250 000 (€305 to €335). There are important variations, as explained above, with a healthy and bulky bull, for example, being sold for FCFA500 000 (€670). Meanwhile, in Wabaria market, one of the main regional export markets of Gao region, where cattle are less abundant, the price of a bull is between FCFA300 000 and FCFA350 000 (€458–€534) and a cow between FCFA250 000 and FCFA300 000 (€335–€458). By comparison, a goat in Gao costs between FCFA20 000 and FCFA35 000 (€30–€53), whereas in Mopti, where goats are less abundant, prices of goats vary between FCFA30 000 and FCFA50 000 (€45–€76).<sup>76</sup>

Despite the widespread rustling of herds and the significant volume of stolen cattle, goats and sheep on markets throughout Mali (and neighbouring countries), livestock prices at these large regional export markets have remained broadly stable over the past six years (2016 to 2022).<sup>77</sup> This contrasts to prices in other regions where rustling has been rampant, such as in Nigeria's North-West, where market prices for cattle decreased as stolen cattle flooded markets and some purchasers were loath to purchase, given the clear risk of obtaining stolen property.<sup>78</sup> It is not apparent from this research why livestock prices in Mali have not been affected by cattle rustling, nor by generalized insecurity, COVID-19, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) sanctions and border closures (January to July 2022).

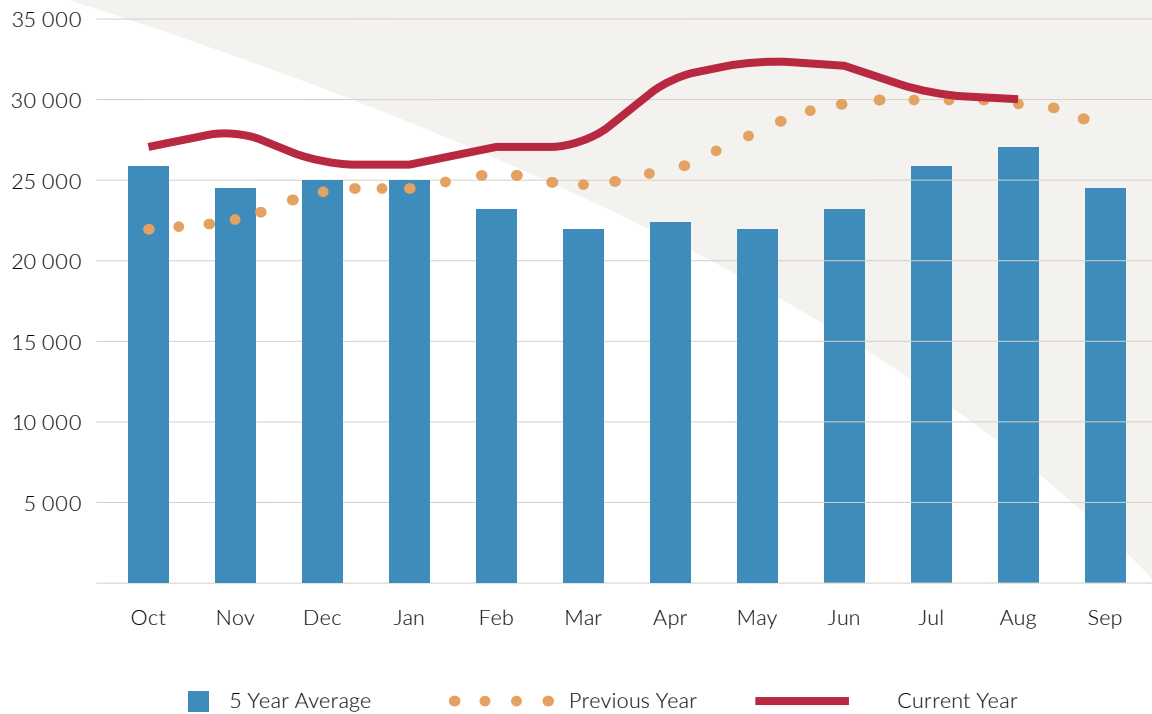




Bulls in Mopti



Goats in Gao



**FIGURE 6** Prices in FCFA of a bull and a male goat in Mali, 2017–2022.

SOURCE: Famine Early Warning Systems Network, *Mali bulletin des prix*, September 2022, <https://fews.net/west-africa/mali/price-bulletin/september-2022>

However, according to interviews with stakeholders, the price of stolen livestock at markets (local or regional ones) is consistently cheaper than that of other livestock.<sup>79</sup> The price of stolen livestock can be almost half the official price, according to our data collection, or sometimes even cheaper (up to 70% cheaper), according to one source.<sup>80</sup> Similar ratios were given throughout the region, for sheep, goats, cows and bulls. According to an intermediary involved in negotiating livestock prices, this is particularly the case when the seller 'wants to get rid of the evidence as soon as possible, and will sell in priority to butchers who will bring them immediately to the slaughterhouse'.<sup>81</sup>

These reported price differentials seem to indicate that purchasers will typically know the provenance of the livestock they are buying, whether stolen or otherwise. However, stakeholders disagreed on this point. Some sources explained that the individual who buys a cow much cheaper than the average price knows exactly what he is buying, but decides to do it anyway.<sup>82</sup> Other sources disagreed; one butcher responded that prices can greatly vary, especially in cases of destocking or depending on the season, so that it is not so clear cut whether livestock is stolen or not, and some buyers may purchase stolen animals unaware.<sup>83</sup>

From available data, it seems likely that a significant proportion of stolen livestock fetches cut-price rates. Moreover, a number of indicators – from specific markings to the identity of the trader and the speed at which the trader wishes to dispose of stock – can reveal the illicit provenance of livestock. However, it also seems probable that some stolen livestock are laundered into the formal supply chain at this regional market stage and sold at the standard price. This latter dynamic is likely to become more common the greater the distance of the point of sale from the point of theft.

In areas for which data is available for the volume of livestock rustled, and where a specific armed group dominates and is therefore the prominent actor in rustling incidents, it is possible to draw some broad estimates of revenue. Such estimates are likely to be below average,

however, as livestock thefts have tended to decrease in areas where a particular armed group exerts largely uncontested influence, probably because it is extremely unpopular with communities and therefore damaging to any governance agenda.

For example, Youwarou district (Mopti region) is under Katibat Macina's influence, and the vast majority of rustling incidents can be attributed to the group, either through taxes (*zakat*) or looting (spoils of war). According to data from the Mopti governor's office, 4 550 cows and 6 200 goats were stolen in 2021. (Note that this is far lower than in other districts where governance is contested, as noted above.) A broad calculation, using the lower band of official prices cited above and 50% of the official price for stolen livestock (FCFA100 000 [€152] per stolen cow and FCFA15 000 [€22] per stolen goat) – and with a caveat concerning the variations in prices highlighted above – a broad calculation can be made. Assuming that around 80% of livestock stolen is sold, the rest being either lost or consumed, the proceeds from livestock theft represent about FCFA440 million (€672 000) of revenue in one year in one district.<sup>84</sup>

In other areas of Mali that remain contested between different groups, it is not possible to calculate with any level of clarity the proceeds that each group is likely to draw. However, it is clear that the livestock trade is a substantial source of revenue for armed groups across the Sahel. For example, in Burkina Faso, internal sources within Ansarul Islam – a Burkinabé group with links to Katibat Macina in central Mali – said that they make between FCFA25 million and FCFA30 million (€38 285–€45 943) per month from cattle rustling in regions where they operate (Sahel, Nord and Centre-Nord), depending on the period.<sup>85</sup> The scale of the trade is significant: between 2017 and 2021, Ansarul Islam sold 8 million heads of cattle and other livestock, according to a consortium of traders affiliated with the group in Burkina Faso's Soum and Oudalan provinces (Sahel region), Bourzanga area (Centre-Nord region) and Fada N'Gourma area (Est region).<sup>86</sup>

## The resilience of cattle rustling in Mali's war economy

Since 2012, cattle rustling has proven a particularly resilient element of Mali's war economy. This contrasts with some other illicit economies whose importance has waxed and waned as a source of revenue for conflict actors, often as instability has rendered them less lucrative or too risky.

For example, kidnapping for ransom, predominantly of Western targets, was a significant source of revenue for violent extremist groups allied with al-Qaeda prior to 2012. However, as conflict surged, high-value foreign targets became scarce and revenues from kidnapping sharply dropped. Kidnapping for ransom remains a smaller revenue stream – for example, through the kidnapping of wealthy Malians (businessmen, traders, livestock owners and gold merchants) particularly in Gao.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, prior to 2012, a significant volume of cocaine transited the Sahara, constituting an important source of revenue for armed groups operating in northern Mali. The 2012 crisis and resulting spike in instability, as well as the increased presence of international troops, negatively affected trans-Saharan cocaine routes, with a significant proportion of the cocaine displaced elsewhere. This decreased opportunities available to armed groups, including violent extremist groups, to tax cocaine flows through territories of influence in the Sahel-Saharan. Notably, these routes were never entirely displaced, and some cocaine continues to transit Mali, providing significant financing to signatory armed groups in northern Mali and, to a lesser extent, violent extremist groups and other groups leveraging territorial influence through the levying of transit tax.<sup>88</sup>

The resilience of cattle rustling over time is partly due to the centrality of livestock to livelihoods in Mali, meaning that while some herds have been displaced through instability, many have remained. This reflects trends in the relationship between distinct illicit economies and instability, where transit trades are more commonly displaced by heightened risks linked to insecurity, while economies with local production and consumption markets are less able to move to new locations.<sup>89</sup> The dispersed nature of the livestock consumption market, with high levels of demand across the country and subregion, also contributes to making livestock an attractive source of revenue, as they can easily be sold and converted into money. This ability to quickly monetize stolen assets, even in contexts of significant instability, also underpins the enduring attraction of cattle rustling as a source of conflict actor revenue.

This is not to say that cattle rustling has had no impact on local herder communities. As the conflict lasts and intensifies, herders struggle more and more to keep their livestock, with many having already reduced the numbers of heads in their herds, some staying in towns and abandoning transhumance, and hundreds having already lost their entire herds and, with them, their only source of livelihood.

However, the comparative resilience of cattle rustling as part of the war economy could also in part be explained by the fact that it has not received the same level of response as other criminal activities (such as kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking or illegal gold mining) from local, national and international stakeholders. The role of cattle rustling, both in terms of generating revenues for armed groups and in driving instability, remains underestimated.

## Cattle rustling and armed group governance

Cattle rustling is an integral part of the war economy, and armed actors make significant profits selling stolen livestock, which allows them to provide for their logistical needs. However, for violent extremist groups particularly, cattle rustling – and, more broadly, engagement with the livestock economy – is driven by considerations beyond profit. Indeed, while communities do not get enough support from state authorities, either because of their absence or because of corruption, violent extremist groups have often taken matters into their own hands. In fact, groups such as Katibat Macina in central Mali have a legitimization strategy, which involves providing a number of basic services to the population.<sup>90</sup> These include the administration of justice related to everyday conflicts between and within communities, among which are tensions around cattle rustling and access to land.<sup>91</sup>

In the Inner Niger Delta, Katibat Macina has imposed clear enough rules on the management of natural resources – for example, by regulating access to pastures known as *bourgoutières*.<sup>92</sup> In areas under Katibat Macina's influence, cattle rustling and other forms of banditry have become marginal. (Notably, here Katibat Macina is clearly not allied with ordinary bandit groups and has instead repeatedly confronted these.) This does not mean that Katibat Macina does not engage in cattle rustling, but rather that the group does so in a way that can be justified and hence is presented as legitimate (or legitimized). This involves imposition of *zakat*, or looting of livestock from communities or individual livestock owners who are enemies and working with the state. Rules are strict, and communities fear the punishment that Katibat Macina imposes on thieves by applying sharia.<sup>93</sup> In other words, to live under the influence of Katibat Macina, one has to observe the rules to stay safe.<sup>94</sup>

In Youwarou district, for example, looting or stealing of livestock by bandits is rare, in part because of the above; in return, Katibat Macina imposes *zakat* on all livestock owners in the district. Equivalent taxes are also imposed on crops in the district, meaning that farmers must also pay. The group takes as part of *zakat* a one-year-old bull calf for every 30 heads of cattle and a heifer calf for every 40 heads of cattle.<sup>95</sup>

Many interviewees reported that in Katibat Macina's zone of influence, if a livestock theft is reported to the group, they will most often act on it and try to retrieve the herd to return it to its owner (though there are still many unresolved cases of reported stolen livestock). By comparison, interviewees reported that if a theft is signalled to the authorities, it is less likely that the stolen herd will be found or that compensation will be provided.<sup>96</sup>

Katibat Macina has also driven away corrupt officials of the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries who were demanding groundless payments from pastoralists. For example, officials would ask for a payment of between FCFA200 000 (€305) and FCFA300 000 (€458) if the animals were not vaccinated – without any explanation of what that money was for.<sup>97</sup> As most state officials have left the region, corrupted authorities can no longer extort herders, which has also fed into Katibat Macina's growing legitimacy. Similarly, situations like the example cited above in which the judge had been corrupted and did not administer justice, have disappeared.



*Cattle rustling is  
an integral part of  
Mali's war economy.*

Many elements of communities under Katibat Macina's zones of influence value the group's governance (i.e. provision of basic services, justice, protection against predatory behaviours), despite the fact that its rules are often imposed by force or threat, and that all socio-professional groups are compelled to pay.<sup>98</sup> This degree of legitimacy among the communities partly explains why the group has been successful and has managed to essentially replace the state in areas where it has taken control.

By contrast, the non-flooded zones of the delta<sup>99</sup> are not exclusively under Katibat Macina's influence but are disputed territories. For example – in addition to FAMA, numerous armed groups operate in Bandiagara, resulting in high levels of communal violence and armed confrontations: retaliatory attacks, burning and looting of villages and, of course, cattle rustling. Bandiagara is by far the district most affected by cattle looting, with more than 65 000 cattle stolen in 2021, almost 15 times more than in Youwarou district during the same period.<sup>100</sup> According to one cattle owner in Bandiagara, this high level of violence and generalized insecurity leads to 'everyone feeling like they can steal what they want'.<sup>101</sup>

One source reported that Katibat Macina has incorporated former *térééré* into its ranks, and the latter is in charge of carrying out the looting – after all, it is their specialty and the group needs specialized fighters (e.g. for looting, in kidnapping and in setting improvised explosive devices).<sup>102</sup> However, other sources reported that bandit groups operate independently and take advantage of the generalized insecurity to launch more attacks. The decrease in violence, which appears to correlate with one armed group consolidating control, can therefore constitute a central element of the legitimacy of the dominant armed group.





# THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Livestock for sale at Monday Market in Djenné. The price of stolen livestock at local and regional markets is consistently cheaper than that of other livestock. © Insights/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



## Perpetrators

There are three key categories of actors involved in the first stage of Mali's cattle rustling economy – namely, the point at which the livestock are stolen. As outlined above, the entry of a wide range of non-state armed groups (including self-defence militias) and violent extremist groups into the cattle rustling economy drove deep-rooted transformation in its functioning. As looting of livestock became part of intercommunal attacks and reprisals, almost all factions have become involved as perpetrators of cattle rustling incidents, to differing degrees. Bandits with unclear affiliations to violent extremist or political armed groups – including *térééré* and unidentified armed men – are also behind cattle rustling. In addition, FAMA are prominent perpetrators, and have been accused, alongside other groups, of looting livestock in Fulani villages whose residents they accuse of being members of violent extremist groups. These operations increased in 2022. While all of these actors operate individually in cattle rustling incidents, it is important to understand the alliances between actors, as these deeply shape the political economy of cattle rustling.

Starting with FAMA and other Malian authorities, these groups in some cases provide institutional support to non-Fulani self-defence militias in central and northern Mali and, in others, turn a blind eye to their operations. Malian authorities have repeatedly delegated their security responsibilities to self-defence groups. This means the latter operate with almost total impunity, particularly with regard to cattle rustling, or other abuses, perpetrated against Fulani victims. This state reliance on self-defence groups exacerbates pre-existing trends: sedentary communities have always been more represented in state institutions as, according to a herder in central Mali, 'all farmers will have a son or someone from his family' in the police, gendarmerie or local authorities, which often tilts the balance in their favour.<sup>103</sup> This is a leading perception among Fulani, which is feeding polarization. One source involved in communal mediation in Gao used an anecdote to illustrate the helplessness felt by many Fulani herders in the face of cattle rustling incidents: a Fulani herder once went to the courthouse to denounce the decision of the authorities to not investigate the case he had reported, but he saw one of his cows in the judge's courtyard and 'he understood quickly he was not going to win this case', the source concluded.<sup>104</sup>

In direct opposition, Fulani or Bella herders organized into self-defence militias or bandit groups (*térééré* in central Mali) can have a wide range of alliances with violent extremist groups. This reflects more broadly the complex relationship between violent extremist groups and illicit economies (and criminal networks operating in them), with cattle rustling one case among many others. Self-defence militias or bandits and violent extremist groups can either:

- Coexist: operating in the same territory with limited interaction but no competition between them;
- Cooperate: collaborating to various degree, either ad hoc or regularly;
- Merge: one group is integrated in the other, and violent extremist groups now focus on criminal activities, or the bandit group gains a stronger ideological slant.<sup>105</sup>

In the case of cattle rustling in Mali, some bandits have been taking advantage of the chaos and insecurity to increase their activities (coexisting); some bandit groups lost ground to violent extremist groups and were absorbed into them, leaving the violent extremist group as the only

## Supporting networks

As discussed above, violent extremists, self-defence militias, rebel groups, FAMA, and unidentified armed groups or bandits are all important players in the constellation of actors behind the lucrative cattle rustling economy. However, these primary perpetrators are supported by a far broader set of ancillary networks, which include spies, intermediaries, transporters, traders, wholesalers, butchers, as well as corrupted politicians and local administrators. Armed groups have relied on these networks since the 1990s; these networks therefore existed well before cattle rustling became an integral part of the war economy (see 'Organized cattle rustling networks emerge: 1990s–2012').

Of these, spies are the only ones involved in the first step of the cattle rustling supply chain – the act of theft. Spies are frequently young men or even children, often herders or from herder families, living in villages and rural areas among their community. They work in complicity with armed groups to gather and provide intelligence on specific herders, the presence of armed forces, the best spots to launch attacks and best time of the day to do so.<sup>106</sup> According to a cattle owner in Timbuktu, 'youth in Mali who see their parents being robbed of herds or lost their parents [...] become easy prey for bandits and violent extremists to recruit'.<sup>107</sup> While there is no standard price, interviewees mentioned that spies receive between FCFA5 000 and FCFA10 000 (€7.60–€15.20) for each cow stolen.<sup>108</sup>

Once the livestock have been stolen, some of the meat is often consumed by the perpetrators; however, most stock

cattle rustling perpetrators (merged); and, in other cases, violent extremist groups are reportedly using bandits to carry out the lootings and abductions (cooperating). While opinions differ on which dynamic is unfolding where, it is likely that across the country there is a mix of all three taking place. Which relationship dominates varies depending on several factors, including the degree of control of violent extremist groups over a territory, the level of organization of the bandits or self-defence militias, the logistical needs of the group (whether bandits or violent extremists) and environmental circumstances (transhumance periods and seasons).

needs to be transported and sold in livestock markets. This is the responsibility of middlemen, local traders and transporters who work together and traffic the livestock stolen by armed groups (though this is not a mutually exclusive relationship, with these traders and transporters working with any suppliers of livestock).<sup>109</sup>

Transporters play particularly important roles when livestock are trafficked across significant distances, including across borders to markets throughout the subregion. For these long journeys to market, which can take several weeks, sometimes over thousands of kilometres,<sup>110</sup> truck transporters are key. In a single truck, which can carry up to 40 heads of cattle and more than a hundred goats and sheep, one can find stolen and regular livestock, as they have been mixed beforehand in the pens at the secondary market, and, according to a trader in Gao, 'buyers and transporters simply turn a blind eye'.<sup>111</sup> Based on data collected, each armed group does not seem to have its own independent transportation network; instead, traders and intermediaries, who are the ones organizing the transport, have some alliances with transporters and other intermediaries, depending on the region in which they operate.<sup>112</sup> Once the livestock has been sold in the market by the broker (either primary or secondary markets, depending on circumstances – see 'A complex distribution network: The role of markets' below), the armed group draws its proceeds and uses part of the money to pay transporters and other intermediaries and keeps the rest, and is not actively engaged any further. However, what our interviews show is that if transporters



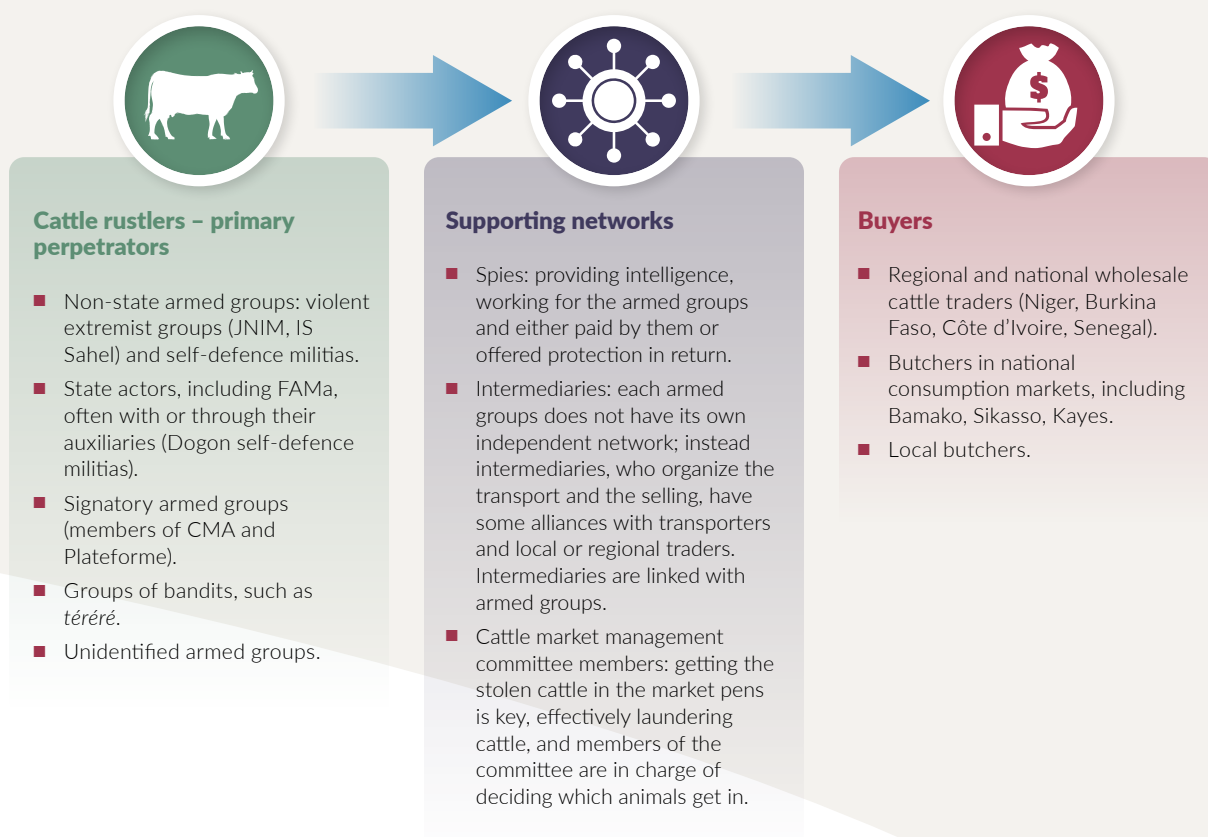
*Violent extremists,  
self-defence  
militias and  
bandits are involved  
in the cattle  
rustling economy.*

want to drive through an area under the influence of violent extremist groups, rebel groups or self-defence groups, an arrangement needs to be made beforehand by the intermediary, as taxation of goods (including livestock) is a common source of financing for armed groups.<sup>113</sup>

In the Gao region, for example, there is one main road linking Gao to Niamey, the RN17, which has been within IS Sahel's zone of influence since 2021. However, since mid-2022, IS Sahel's control over this road has increased, with some sources even saying that the road is now fully controlled by IS Sahel.<sup>114</sup> The level of control has not been independently assessed and this can change very quickly; nevertheless, stakeholders interviewed in October 2022 were unanimous: for transporters to use that route, they have to have a pre-made agreement with IS Sahel. 'No one else can take this road any more; the herders can't leave the town, and no one is moving,' said a butcher in Gao.<sup>115</sup> Similar dynamics can be observed in other parts of the country, and when no agreement has been signed, armed groups do not hesitate to attack trucks transporting livestock, with dozens of such incidents having taken place since 2015.<sup>116</sup>

Livestock markets are regulated by management committees. While some of these committees are in theory composed of several individuals (representing sellers, buyers, traders and butchers, for example), often only a couple of people are involved in its day-to-day management. One or two key members of the management committee are in charge of regulating the market, deciding which cows should be included in the pens to be sold. Getting the stolen livestock admitted into the pens is key, because, once in, the stolen livestock join the 'legal' livestock and can be sold to any buyers – it is effectively laundered. The committee member is hence a crucial person in the chain, and is well remunerated for that role, with up to 20% of the price of a livestock head.<sup>117</sup> Once the livestock have been admitted in the pens, intermediaries come into play for the negotiation and the selling of the animals. The number of intermediaries active in livestock markets has increased in the past 10 years because of insecurity and lack of opportunities in rural areas, and is estimated to now be at several thousand countrywide.<sup>118</sup> Intermediaries know all the other actors (traders, dealers/brokers, buyers, butchers), as well as the business environment, and can obtain the best price.<sup>119</sup>

In some areas, violent extremists have reportedly been able to cut the dealer out of the supply chain and circumvent official markets entirely. A source with good knowledge of markets in the Inner Niger Delta region stated that in areas where the armed groups have sufficient influence, or do not fear action from authorities or other armed groups, their intermediaries organize a black market next to the official market, and 'when one sees this parallel market, one knows that all of these are stolen livestock'.<sup>120</sup>



**FIGURE 7** Stolen livestock supply chain.

SOURCE: Observatory of Illicit economies in West Africa, Risk Bulletin – Issue 4, June 2022

## A complex distribution network: The role of markets

Livestock markets are a complex network dispersed throughout the country and can be divided into four main categories: primary, secondary, consumption and exportation. The market network is used for the distribution and sale of both stolen and non-stolen livestock, as it is often in the market that the two supply chains merge. Some stolen livestock will circumvent local markets, and instead be smuggled on longer journeys ending in coastal West Africa.

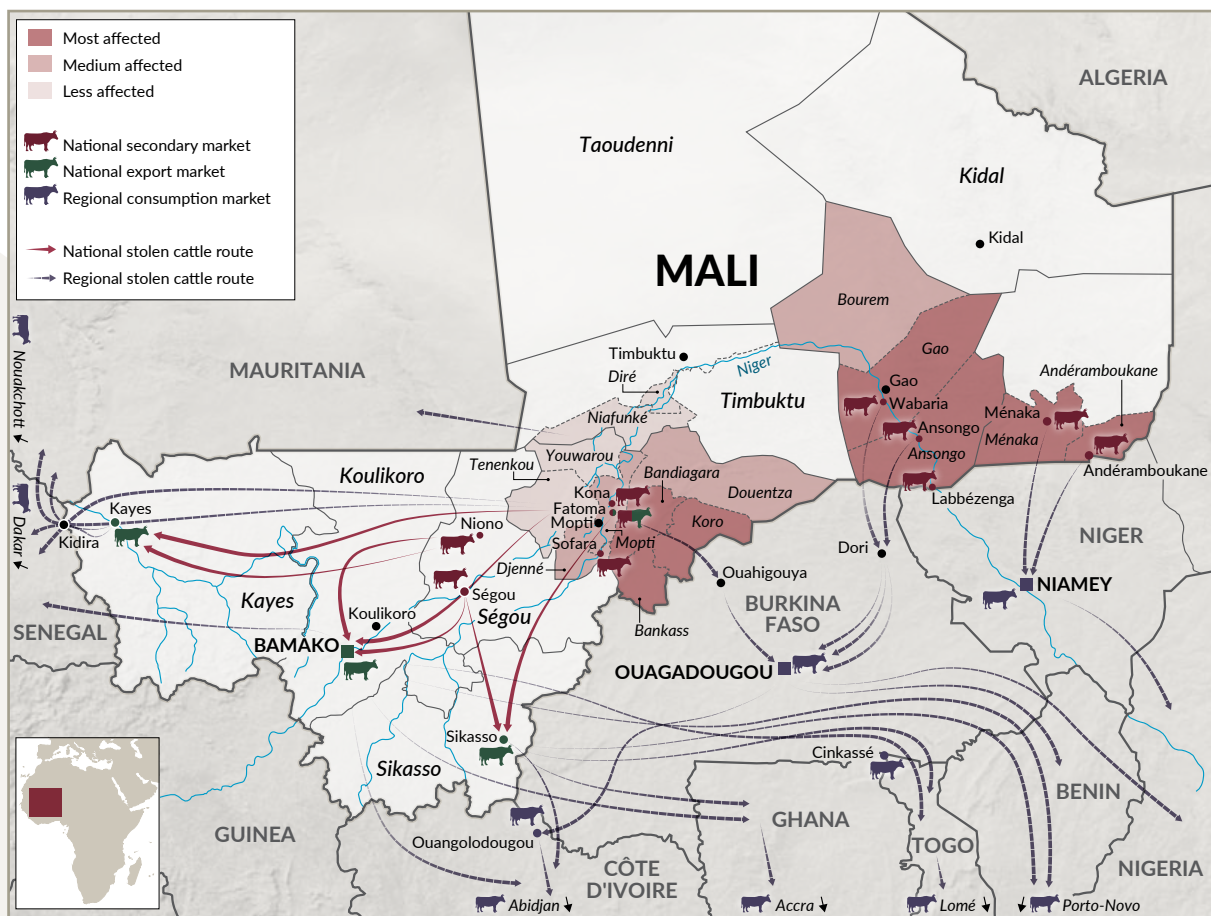
Primary markets<sup>121</sup> are located in production areas and are the first markets in which livestock are sold. There are thousands of such markets in Mali, located in small villages in rural areas. Looted livestock (by the dozens or hundreds) will not end up in a local primary market, because they would be too visible and easy to identify, instead they will be sent directly to the three other types of markets described below. However, livestock that is extorted (as *zakat* or compensation against protection) will often be sold locally in a primary market.<sup>122</sup> For example, if Katibat Macina collects an animal as part of *zakat*, they will ask an intermediary to sell it at the nearest local market. The cattle owner or herder will see his animal being sold in the market – easily recognizable to

them because of distinctive signs (e.g. markings, haircoat and chest shape) – but cannot do anything to get it back, except by paying for it.<sup>123</sup> For this short circuit, animals are brought to the market by foot by a herder associated with violent extremist groups – Katibat Macina, in this example.<sup>124</sup>

Secondary markets<sup>125</sup> are located in small urban centres. An exhaustive list cannot be given here, but the most important ones are included in Figure 8. Secondary markets are key, as many actors meet there, including traders, butchers and other intermediaries, and livestock are sold/bought in bulk (compared to the primary markets, which are very much local) allowing for stolen and not stolen livestock to mix, blurring the lines between the two. Some of these markets also operate as consumption markets, which is helpful for traders of stolen livestock, since the livestock will be slaughtered immediately, eliminating the already low risk of detection.<sup>126</sup>

Secondary markets are also important because they are connected with the last two categories of markets – namely, consumption and export markets – mostly in big urban centres, often regional capitals.<sup>127</sup> National consumption markets<sup>128</sup> include Bamako, Sikasso, Kayes and Fatoma: all of these also operate as export markets. Mali, the second biggest producer and exporter of livestock (stolen and not stolen) in West Africa after Nigeria, exports 10% to 15% of its total production, the majority of which is purchased by Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal.<sup>129</sup> Exports constitute a significant source of revenue, with 2016 Malian livestock exports representing about US\$220 million, according to UN Comtrade data.<sup>130</sup>

Export markets in Mali are connected to consumption markets across the region, most prominently Ouangolodougou and Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Dakar (Senegal), Ouagadougou and Djibo (Burkina Faso), Niamey (Niger), Accra (Ghana), Cinkassé and Lomé (Togo), Porto Novo (Benin) and Nouakchott (Mauritania).



**FIGURE 8** Cattle rustling routes and affected regions in Mali, 2022.

## Main export routes

As noted above, secondary markets can also operate as consumption and exportation hubs. Markets in the Mopti region, because of their geographic position, are key exportation points, supplying many locations nationally and regionally. This is particularly true of Fatoma market, which is directly linked to Côte d'Ivoire and other neighbouring coastal West African countries, although some of the livestock also transit Bamako or Sikasso on their way to being exported, as explained above.

Mopti's exportation markets, along with those in Timbuktu, also supply Mauritania and Senegal, though some of the livestock transit Kayes region first. In that regard, the town of Kidira on the Senegal–Mali border is a key transit hub for livestock brought from central Mali and being moved to Senegal and Mauritania.<sup>131</sup>

Burkina Faso, especially the market towns of Ouahigouya and Djibo, because of their proximity to Mopti region, are also supplied by secondary markets in central Mali. Some livestock are then sold directly to butchers in Burkina Faso, while others continue towards coastal West African countries, leveraging Burkina Faso's own exportation network and supply chain. Burkina Faso exports 30% of livestock produced in the country, predominantly supplying Nigeria, Ghana and Benin.<sup>132</sup> This explains why some of the livestock looted in central Mali has been found in eastern Burkina Faso, as it was most likely on its way to northern Benin or Nigeria.<sup>133</sup>

Owing to the proximity of exportation markets in the Gao and Ménaka regions to the Nigerien border, and the presence of the same armed actors (especially IS Sahel) on both sides of the border, livestock stolen in these regions quickly finds itself on the Nigerien market, with some continuing into Nigeria. According to a trader with good knowledge of cattle rustling in these regions, when the livestock is looted by IS Sahel, it is immediately transported across the border into Niger, and the livestock heads and/or financial proceeds are distributed among the members of the group.<sup>134</sup> However, livestock stolen in Gao, Ansongo and Labezzanga, because of their proximity with the Burkinabé border, can also cross into Burkina Faso towards Dori and supply the consumption market in Ouagadougou, or be sold further afield in Benin and Nigeria, as explained above.<sup>135</sup>

*Cattle theft should be monitored as an indicator of growing tension and instability.*





# RESPONSES

Cattle rustling is a central and under-reported element of Mali's security crisis, with dramatic humanitarian, social and economic effects on communities. *Photo: Souleymane Ag Anaras*

## State responses

The report has shown how cattle rustling operates as an integral element of Mali's war economy, resourcing the constellation of armed groups operating in the country, and how it has been feeding communal violence and helping to underpin the territorial expansion of violent extremist groups since 2012. In terms of state responses, this means that measures taken to increase the security of populations will have an impact on cattle rustling and the livelihoods of socio-professional groups depending on pastoralism or agropastoralism, and vice versa: without an improvement in security, specific actions taken to reduce cattle rustling will most likely not bring long-term results. Vast areas of central and northern Mali are under the influence of non-state armed groups, whether they are allied or not with the national authorities, and state provision of basic services is limited.

Specifically in relation to cattle rustling, regional and local authorities in central Mali organize multi-stakeholder meetings in order to collect data on cases of cattle theft, looting and extortion, and compile them in annual reports, which have been referred to throughout this report.<sup>136</sup> This is key to understanding cattle rustling incidents, the scale of cattle rustling, the actors behind it, the supply routes, and, more generally, how the illicit market works, in order that tailored measures can be taken against it.

However, this is only the first step. Armed forces, police or gendarmerie do act upon reports of stolen livestock and take action, although seldomly. For now, these remain rare occurrences. For example, interviewees in Djenné district all remembered one incident in December 2020, when FAMa intercepted Dozo hunters who had stolen cattle in Fakala commune, and returned the cattle.<sup>137</sup> While these interventions are welcome, and do help create trust between the state and the communities, the armed forces can also be predatory. For example, in September 2022, security sources in the Mopti region revealed that FAMa, with their Wagner Group partners, had patrolled in that same commune and stolen dozens of cattle in two different villages.<sup>138</sup>

Interviews also highlighted that the state needs to go beyond security measures to address cattle rustling, as the crisis in state legitimacy and lack of trust in authorities by the population will not be fixed by military operations. For example, stakeholders mentioned the lack of a clear legal framework surrounding cattle rustling, and the fact that there is no specific provision in the penal code criminalizing the practice. This contrasts with neighbouring countries, such as Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger, where the penal code has been modified in recent years to include a specific provision on cattle rustling with varying sentences, recognizing the seriousness of the illicit economy and the need to specifically penalize this increasing and harmful crime.<sup>139</sup> However, it does



not seem that these recent modifications of the penal code in Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger have resulted in a clear change of behaviours, and no decline in the number of cattle rustling cases has been reported so far, as cases of prosecution remain rare.<sup>140</sup>

In Mali, provisions on theft (Act 252 onwards)<sup>141</sup> with robbery and aggravating circumstances (e.g. use of violence, being perpetrated by an organized group or occurring in the night-time), which carry the death penalty as the maximum sentence, have been used to deal with cattle rustling incidents. In July 2021, in one cattle rustling case, the Mopti court found two individuals guilty: the first was sentenced to 10 years for complicity in robbery for having sold cows he knew were stolen, and the other to life imprisonment (judged *in absentia*) for the theft of 17 cattle. For both individuals, the aggravating circumstances of being organized by a group of people and taking place during the night led to these harsh sentences. The case involved several other individuals who could not be identified (and hence no case was brought against them), and two others were acquitted (the butcher and the cattle trader, who were part of the group).<sup>142</sup> This case, though rare, shows that even without a specific criminal law, the current penal code on theft can be sufficient to condemn cattle rustling perpetrators. As this example shows, what is really needed is for the law to be applied and for cases to be prosecuted; and while voting new laws is an important signal, what matters is the application of the law.

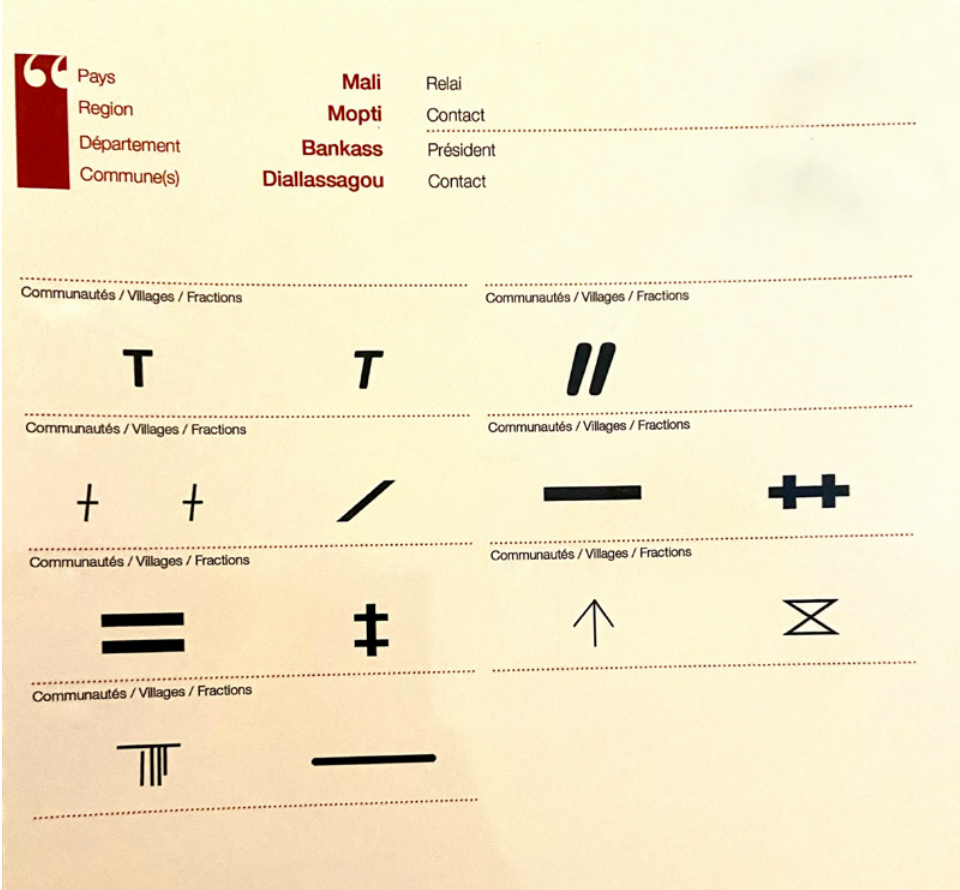
While several laws regulate livestock and can be used to sanction rustling,<sup>143</sup> stakeholders agreed that cases in which cattle rustlers had been identified, arrested and imprisoned by law enforcement were rare, and legal conclusions even more elusive.<sup>144</sup> While security challenges and resource constraints posed significant obstacles to successful investigations, many stakeholders also agreed with Sanoussi Bouya Sylla, president of the Bamako District Chamber of Agriculture, who fingered corruption of state authorities as a key challenge, noting: 'The thieves tell us that even if they are arrested, they have access to the courts.'<sup>145</sup>

## Community responses

The paucity of measures taken at the state level has created space for the emergence of an array of local responses. The most common of these is to resort to self-defence and protection, often involving more violence between communities, as described in the first part of this report.

Other types of responses, however, include peaceful conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as mediation efforts, either entirely local or supported by international mediation organizations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) and Promediation. For example, in addition to facilitating local peace agreements between various communities, HD has a specific programme developed for agropastoral mediation. This includes creating a network of focal points across Mali, and in the Liptako-Gourma area. This network of focal points across communities, villages, towns, regions and countries would allow a greater chance for a herder or livestock owner to find his stolen livestock. To do this, HD developed a manual with a comprehensive collection of all signs (*Répertoire des marques des animaux*) branded on livestock per communities – each tribe/community

using a different sign – as well as the name and contact of the local focal points (called *médiateur agropastoral*) for each commune. If a member of the network gets alerted that the livestock has been stolen in a certain commune, he can look in the manual and find the contact number of the relevant focal point. One HD member reported several positive results, including instances of livestock found hundreds of kilometres away from where they were stolen.<sup>146</sup>



An anonymized page from the *Répertoire des marques des animaux* (manual of cattle markings) developed by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue to link contact persons throughout the central Sahel in order to increase chances of recovering stolen livestock. © Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

In central Mali, other local initiatives include the creation of market watch committees, which comprise stakeholders tasked with alerting either livestock associations or livestock owners if they identify stolen livestock in a market's pens.<sup>147</sup> Similar initiatives include, on a broader level, connecting pastoralist associations with local human rights organizations to alert them to abuses faced by pastoralists (both by violent extremist groups and state forces). Pastoralist networks to represent and voice pastoralists concerns and needs have also been created, including the Réseau des organisations d'éleveurs et pasteurs d'Afrique, named Réseau Billital Maroobé (RBM). The RBM was founded in 2003 by a pastoralist organization from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and today includes more than 80 organizations in the subregion.<sup>148</sup> While these local initiatives are welcome, and sometimes bring positive results, they remain limited in their impact, given the scale of cattle rustling in Mali today.




A young boy in a purple shirt is herding two white cows in a dry, dusty field. The cows are harnessed together and appear to be pulling a plow or similar agricultural tool. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky. A large, light-colored graphic element, resembling a stylized 'W' or a series of overlapping lines, is overlaid on the top half of the image.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cattle rustling fuels instability in Mali by destroying livelihoods and driving displacement and armed-group recruitment.

© Karen Kasmauski via Getty Images





**T**his report has analyzed cattle rustling as a criminal market, underscoring its role in fuelling instability in Mali. Indeed, cattle rustling is a criminal market at the core of instability, both directly and indirectly. Directly, as it not only fuels intercommunal tensions, which further increases levels of violence and weaponization of actors in the country, but also serves as a source of revenue for conflict actors. And indirectly, through destroying livelihoods and driving displacement and recruitment, as well as serving as a governance strategy for violent extremist actors in trying to build legitimacy.

Cattle rustling cannot be dissociated from instability and conflict dynamics. In fact, it is a strong predictor of instability, as it marks the escalation of conflict and highlights strategies of armed groups and their levels of influence or control over specific areas. As armed groups move towards new territories further south, and towards coastal West African countries, cattle rustling could be a marker of future conflict areas as well as of locations where armed groups need resources.

The international community, the Malian authorities and civil society urgently need to mainstream cattle rustling into their analyses of conflict dynamics, to recognize cattle rustling as a central element of a broader conflict economy that needs to be tackled, and as something that should be part of any initiative designed at enhancing stability in Mali and in the region.

*The state needs to go beyond security measures to address cattle rustling.*

#### **Recommendations for the Malian authorities**

- Put in place a synergy of actions between state authorities, local authorities, technical services and all private stakeholders (e.g. pastoralist associations, livestock owners and butchers). The synergy is needed across the board but could, for example, be particularly helpful in building on existing reporting mechanisms to develop an information system on all cases of livestock incidents at the national level, with village monitoring committees, local and regional authorities feeding the information into a nationwide system. Better understanding of the illicit economy will be key to designing sensitive responses without creating more harm for communities affected by it.
- Recognize the central role that cattle rustling plays in fuelling and resourcing instability. Consequently, to the extent that state resources and authority exist, prioritize responding to incidents and punishing perpetrators. This could take the form of strengthening judicial and criminal measures to fight cattle rustling, as well as broader judicial measures to respond to human rights violations taking place between communities – for example, by setting up inquiry commissions in areas where communal tensions are high. Not only could the authorities add a criminal law penalizing cattle rustling to send a strong signal, as has been done in neighbouring countries, but efforts should focus on bringing perpetrators of cattle rustling to justice and punishing them, including those with political ties.
- Place the protection of civilians at the core of all security initiatives, including patrols and counter-terrorism operations, whether they are conducted by FAMA, their partners, the gendarmerie or the police.

#### **Recommendations for civil society**

- Local actors (e.g. NGOs, associations and traditional authorities) have a key role to play in combating cattle rustling, as dialogue efforts have shown, particularly in central Mali since 2017. These local dialogues or mediation efforts are often uncoordinated, sometimes even in competition, and hence have not yielded long-term stabilization results. They are nonetheless key and should be supported, and local actors should try to better coordinate their efforts, share experiences and lessons learned that can help other initiatives and other actors bring local stability. This is particularly relevant for civil society involved in mediation efforts between self-defence groups and violent extremist groups to reduce cattle rustling incidents and insecurity in localities.
- Not only should efforts be better coordinated, but they should also focus on concrete actions to resolve some of the root causes of communal violence. Without this, once an agreement is signed, and even if a local ceasefire is agreed upon, violence often returns fairly quickly.

## Recommendations for the international community

- It is key that the international community<sup>149</sup> focuses on the illicit economies that have the most impact on instability in Mali, and not the ones shaped by the priorities of external actors. To do so, international actors involved in stabilization initiatives need to develop a nuanced understanding of illicit economies when designing their approaches to crime and instability in the country. For cattle rustling particularly, the international community should recognize the key role it plays in furthering conflicts, far more so than other illicit economies that receive a lot of attention (such as human smuggling and, more broadly informal movement of goods and people across borders) but which do not contribute as much to instability. Moreover, given the key role that cattle rustling plays in furthering insecurity and violent extremism, it should be a key component of programmes designed at stabilization, even if cattle rustling is not a 'traditional' form of transnational organized crime (such as arms or drug trafficking).
- Understanding and supporting local actors in disrupting the market – and not supporting the state-centric frameworks in areas where state authorities are predatory – is important, as it allows arrangements and agreements between stakeholders that have the ability to protect the population (self-defence militias, violent extremist groups, traditional and local actors, and associations).
- Cattle rustling assessments can be used in early-warning stabilization operations, as is the case with other types of organized crime. When identifying priority geographies for preventative stabilization programming, escalating cattle theft should be included as an indicator of growing tensions and instability, and stakeholders should be encouraged to respond to this phenomenon.



## NOTES

- 1 'Cattle' and 'livestock' are used interchangeably in this report, with the recognition that livestock is a broader term that includes cows, goats, sheep and any other animal traded as a source of income. Similarly, dynamics constituting theft of cattle have largely evolved into livestock looting – cattle rustling terminology is used to cover this full range of livestock appropriation.
- 2 This is part of a broader programme coordinated by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa, titled 'Promoting stabilisation through crime sensitive interventions in West Africa', which focuses on exploring the link between transnational organized crime and instability in the region.
- 3 Lucia Bird and Lyes Tagziria, Organized crime and instability dynamics: Mapping illicit hubs in West Africa, GI-TOC, September 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GITOC-WEAObs-Organized-crime-and-instability-Mapping-illicit-hubs-in-West-Africa.pdf>; online tool available here: <https://wea.globalinitiative.net/illicit-hub-mapping>.
- 4 Livestock production generates 80% of pastoralist income and 18% of income for agropastoral communities. See Governor's office of Mopti region, *Rapport de la Conférence régionale sur le vol de bétail dans la Région de Mopti*, December 2021.
- 5 Although, particularly since 2020, the geographic diffusion of insecurity means that it has also been affecting (to a lesser extent) the four regions of southern Mali (Ségou, Koulikoro, Kayes, Sikasso), which are mostly agricultural.
- 6 UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Pastoralism and security in West Africa and the Sahel, August 2018, [https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_pastoralisme\\_fr-avril\\_2019\\_-\\_online.pdf](https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_pastoralisme_fr-avril_2019_-_online.pdf).
- 7 Within the Inner Niger Delta, access to a particular type of pasture called *bourgoutière* is key. *Bourgoutière* is a type of pasture with high productivity, where a nutritious aquatic plant (called *bourgou* in Malinké) forms in the alluvial flood plains of the Inner Niger Delta, and which becomes available at the end of the rainy season when floodwaters recede. See Catherine Simonet et al., *Marchés de bétail au Sahel: intégration des marchés, rôle du climat et des conflits dans la formation des prix*, BRACED, June 2020, <http://www.braced.org/fr/resources/i/March%C3%A9s-de-b%C3%A9tail-au-Sahel-Int%C3%A9gration-des-march%C3%A9s/>.
- 8 UNOWAS, Pastoralism and security in West Africa and the Sahel, August 2018, [https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_pastoralisme\\_eng-avril\\_2019\\_-\\_online.pdf](https://unowas.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_pastoralisme_eng-avril_2019_-_online.pdf).
- 9 For reference to socio-professional groups, as used in this report, see: Clingendael, *Under the gun: Resource conflicts and embattled traditional authorities in Central Mali*, July 2018, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/under-the-gun.pdf>. The notion of socio-professional or strategic groups assumes that not all actors in a community (divided according to ethnic group, tribe, profession, gender, etc.) share perfectly overlapping interests at all times; see Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Anthropology and Development: Understanding Contemporary Social Change*, Zed Books, 2005.
- 10 By contrast, in southern Mali, farmers are mostly Bambara. See Serigne Bamba Gaye, *Conflicts between farmers and herders against a backdrop of asymmetric threats in Mali and Burkina Faso*, FES, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueoros/fes-pscc/14174.pdf>.
- 11 For an extensive historical review, see Cédric Jourde, M Brossier and Modibo Ghaly Cissé, *Prédation et violence au Mali: élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 53, 2019, pp 431–445.
- 12 Interview with an NGO involved in conflict mediation between communities, Bamako, July 2022.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 It is worth noting that the rebellions also led to violence in Tenenkou district (1994) and later in Youwarou, Tenenkou and Douentza (2012).
- 15 *Térééré* existed before the 1990s, but interviews suggest that the phenomenon has increased since the 1990s.
- 16 Interview with a doctoral researcher specializing in central Mali conflict dynamics, Bamako, September 2022. Several sources underscored that cycles of victimization also underpinned this form of cattle rustling, as herders who started stealing cattle had themselves been victims of decapitalization of their herds, either through theft or because the livestock had died due to harsh climatic conditions.
- 17 Interviews with local authorities in Djenné, Youwarou and Koro districts, Mopti region, April 2022.
- 18 Interview with a resident of Youwarou district, Mopti region, April 2022.
- 19 Exploring these historic tensions goes beyond the scope of this report, but for more information see: Mathieu Pellerin, *Entendre la voix des éleveurs au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest*,

- RBM, September 2021, <https://www.food-security.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rapport-Etude-Avenir-du-pastoralisme-face-a-linsecurite-RBM.pdf>.
- 20 Mathieu Pellerin, *Entendre la voix des éleveurs au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest*, RBM, September 2021, <https://www.food-security.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Rapport-Etude-Avenir-du-pastoralisme-face-a-linsecurite-RBM.pdf>.
- 21 Yvan Guichaoua, *Mali-Niger: une frontière entre conflits communautaires, rébellion et djihad*, *Le Monde*, 20 June 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/06/20/mali-niger-une-frontiere-entre-conflits-communautaires-rebellion-et-djihad\\_4954085\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/06/20/mali-niger-une-frontiere-entre-conflits-communautaires-rebellion-et-djihad_4954085_3212.html). Yvan Guichaoua contacted by phone in October 2022 for more insights.
- 22 Ibid.
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- 24 Interview with a historian specialized in Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali, 10 October 2022, by phone.
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