

## Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Mali: Key Research Findings

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### The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG) at Kings College London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries, in order to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in knowing more about youth in the region.

Specifically, we were interested in understanding the impact of decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance, armed conflict and globalization on the young people of West Africa. Our initial conviction that young people are at the heart of both the region's challenges and its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the interest in young people displayed by international organizations such as ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. The re-emergence of conflict in the north of Mali underscores the urgent need to alleviate horizontal inequalities among groups and young people in both rural and urban areas.

### What we found in Mali

- As across the region generally, Mali's young people are in the majority, forming 70 per cent of the population. This percentage is set to rise over the next decades.
- Seventy-two per cent of Malians live on less than USD 2 a day.
- Feelings of exclusion and vulnerability among poor populations are palpable, and many young people feel that they are simply left to fend for themselves.
- An exodus from rural northern areas to Bamako is creating an urban underclass and weakening rural areas. Young migrants especially resent what they

consider to be the neglect they experience, if not the outright discrimination against them and their regions of origin.

- Generally, this resentment does not translate into exit, alienation or violent protest. The study found a widespread commitment to democratic action and patriotic duty. Independent minded and optimistic, many young people spoke of their belief in Mali's capacity to overcome its difficulties through democratic reform, and in themselves to survive and prosper through application, thrift and socially minded industry.

### The nature and needs of youth in Mali

- Youth-hood is not captured by simple age-bound definitions.
- Youth-hood is felt to be a problematic, but embedded social status within established cultural systems that are changing, but are far from rejected by modern Malians.
- Youth-hood in rural areas is an especially active and complex social construct with a clear role in sustaining social stability, as well as patterns of influence and wealth distribution.
- Although theoretically available to wide age ranges of people, government employment programmes are regarded as unfair, hard to access and ineffective. The possibility of open access is often viewed with profound scepticism, because official agencies operate through nepotism that is understood to be reflective of broader social and national characteristics.
- The possibility of violent conflict in the north of the country continues to heighten youthful concerns about the quality and extent of supportive government action in the region. Migrants from the north in Bamako constitute an emerging constituency and pressure group within Malian youth.

## What the government is doing to assist youth (and the limitations of these efforts)

- Rhetoric on youth is certainly strong and there is an undeniable, developed, historical recognition of the centrality of youth at the governmental level. In 2006, Mali was one of only three African states to have signed and ratified the African Youth Charter.
- A state-run youth employment agency, the APEJ, was set up in 2003 to cater to those aged 15–40 under a comprehensive anti-poverty and development plan: Youth Employment Programme: Framework Document (Programme Emploi Jeunes: Document Cadre).
- A youth-focused triennial programme, the National Programme for the Promotion of Youth (Programme National de Promotion de la Jeunesse - PNPJ), was begun in 2005. This was regarded as a genuine attempt to involve youth at all levels and from all regions and allow for a bottom-up planning process. Evaluation of the PNPJ is currently under way.
- Youth issues were also taken up more broadly in the presidential programme: the Economic and Social Development Project (Projet pour le Développement Economique et Social).

## What sustains young people?

Young Malians are sustained by:

- *système D*, where ‘D’ stands for *débrouillardise*, i.e. the ability to keep on top of extremely difficult circumstances by a combination of resourcefulness, optimism and good-will (which sometimes might entail cutting legal corners);
- self-started social, cultural and economic activity as a product of self-reliance, which is understood by young Malians as a moral imperative;
- to an extent, micro-credit schemes;
- sports, music, cultural industries, mosque and church;
- social connections;
- *mugnu ni sabali* (patience and abnegation);
- informal economic activity in the agriculture, trade and service sectors;

- political activity (protest and lobbying have been used to influence employment policy on public works projects, while young people continue to turn out in large numbers at election times);
- traditional beliefs; and
- NGO projects and programmes.

## Priorities for national government, donor agencies and regional stakeholders

- Youth policies and economic policies should give more equal weight to rural and urban issues and should be more effectively integrated.
- The importance of focusing on rural areas cannot be underestimated. Eighty per cent of Mali’s youth are still tied to the primary economic activities in these areas.
- Resource capture by political elites is a problem in social contexts where youth-hood is a fundamental part of patterns of influence and patronage, and must be tackled.
- The education system should be reformed, and should be more responsive to the demands of the labour market.
- There needs to be more systematic promotion of social entrepreneurship among youth.
- Programmes currently under way to prevent the rural exodus of youth must be strengthened and sustained. There must be greater action within rural food-producing sectors to increase jobs for the youth workforce.
- The national government should demonstrate a commitment to fairness and transparency in managing youth employment programmes. It is essential to build confidence in these programmes from the point of view of young people and donor agencies alike.
- Programmes must be developed to cater specifically for early school leavers.
- The problems affecting Mali’s youth affect the region as a whole and must be dealt with accordingly. Specifically, ECOWAS should co-ordinate an action-oriented youth policy that deals with the realities and implications of youth mobility across the region.