# Security and humanitarian crisis in Mali

## The role of regional organisations

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## About the author

Simone Haysom is an independent consultant.

## Acknowledgements

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# Acronyms

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| **AAFISMA** | African-led International Support Mission to Mali |
| **AGIR** | Global Alliance for Resilience |
| **APSA** | African Union Peace and Security Architecture |
| **AQIM** | Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb |
| **ASEAN** | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| **ASF** | African Standby Force |
| **AU** | African Union |
| **CEN-SAD** | Community of Sahel-Saharan States |
| **CILSS** | Permanent Interstate Committee for drought control in the Sahel |
| **ECOMOG** | ECOWAS Monitoring Group |
| **ECOWARN** | ECOWAS Early Warning System |
| **ECOWAS** | Economic Community of West African States |
| **EPSA** | ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture |
| **ESF** | ECOWAS Standby Force |
| **FCPN** | Food Crisis Prevention Network |
| **MICEMA** | ECOWAS Mission in Mali |
| **MINUSMA** | UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali |
| **MNLA** | National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad |
| **MUJAO** | Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa |
| **OAU** | Organisation of African Unity |
| **PSC** | Peace and Security Council |
| **WAEMU** | West African Economic and Monetary Union |

# 1  Introduction

Throughout most of 2012 Mali was in a state of deep crisis. Its political institutions were in disarray following a military coup. Its territorial integrity was threatened by a secessionist conflict in the north with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and other actors, and its people were facing displacement, acute hunger and violence. Some of the most active responses to this state of affairs came from Mali's neighbours, in the form of diplomatic interventions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and eventually an African Union (AU)-led push for a UN-authorised military intervention.

This Working Paper explores the role played by ECOWAS and the AU in addressing the crises in Mali. It is part of a research project entitled 'Zones of Engagement: Regional Organisations and Humanitarian Action', being undertaken by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) as part of its 2013–2015 Integrated Programme. The project is designed to explore the role of regional organisations in humanitarian action, the rationale for their involvement and the degree to which their approaches may or may not differ from the approach of the UN.

The paper mainly concerns the period from January 2012 to August 2013. The analysis covers three phases: the origins and underlying causes of the crisis (discussed briefly below); the outbreak of conflict, political instability and the French-led intervention (in Section 2); and the handover from the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) to the UN (Section 3). The aim is to explore the evolution of the crisis in Mali, its humanitarian consequences and the role of regional organisations in the response, with a particular concern for the high-profile role played by ECOWAS. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of current humanitarian needs and protection concerns, and the role of AU and ECOWAS humanitarian mechanisms in addressing them. This report is a desk-based study drawing on academic literature, think-tank and policy reports and news articles and limited consultations with experts.

## 1.1 Origins and underlying causes of the 2012 crisis

There have been recurrent episodes of conflict in northern Mali since the Tuareg rebellion in 1963–64, with periods of revolt and unrest from 1990 to 1996 and 2006 to 2009. The 2012 crisis had its roots in multiple interlinked processes, including long-term problems in Mali's governance institutions, decades-old grievances in the north, fractious political relations between communities in the north and the central government and the failure of the government to stop the expansion of cross-border criminal and extremist networks. The issues at stake include the long-term neglect of the north by the government in Bamako, the role of Islam in Malian politics and society and the government's failure to make good on promises of greater decentralisation and funding for development (Thurston, 2013). Socio-economic conditions in the north, particularly endemic poverty, a pervasive sense of marginalisation and a lack of livelihood opportunities for young men, have fed into the region's recurrent conflicts.

A key feature of the north is the economic and social importance of smuggling by criminal networks which truck cigarettes, weapons, illegal immigrants and drugs across the Sahel and the Sahara (Lebovich, 2013). While these criminal networks and militant extremists are largely distinct organisations, smuggling provides increasing revenue to armed groups. Militant groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and an AQIM splinter group, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), place levies on goods passing through territory they control (Fall Ould Bah, 2013). Kidnapping has also emerged as a lucrative enterprise; AQIM in particular has expanded its operations through the huge ransoms paid by European governments for the release of kidnapped nationals (Lacher, 2013). At the same time, the increasing threat of kidnapping curtailed access for aid workers, cut off support for a range of small organisations and twinning schemes and caused the collapse of the tourist industry – all important sources of financial support and employment.

The dominance of illicit activities in the economy has had a corrosive effect in numerous other ways. With the rise of patronage politics and the dominance of criminal actors in the economy, traditional leaders – Arab-Berber chiefs – have lost their authority and influence (Fall Ould Bah, 2013: 3). Political elites in Bamako also became involved in kidnapping and smuggling, frustrating regional attempts to address the problem and contributing to general popular disaffection, in both the south and the north, with corruption amongst the political class.

While these conditions provided fertile ground for the outbreak of fighting, it was the Libyan conflict that tipped the north into war. The fall of the Libyan regime in August 2011 led to the return of several hundred heavily armed Tuareg fighters formerly in the employ of President Muammar Gaddafi (Lacher, 2013). This contributed to the militarisation of the north and bolstered the position of the MNLA considerably. Bamako's misspending of aid earmarked for other uses in the north provided added momentum to direct that firepower against the Malian state.

All of these developments unfolded against a backdrop of widespread, chronic food insecurity affecting millions of households. In 2012, a combination of crop failure, insect plague, high food prices, conflict and drought contributed to high levels of hunger and threatened a regional famine. In Mali, most of the 4.7 million acutely food insecure people at the height of the emergency were in the south, but there were still over one million in the north when the conflict began.

# 2 From rebellion to foreign intervention: intersecting humanitarian and security dimensions

Throughout 2012 the situation in Mali evolved considerably, as did the regional and international response. In January 2012 the Tuareg MNLA rebelled against President Amadou Toumani Touré's rule, attacking Malian army posts in the north. In March members of the Malian military – embarrassed by their defeat and angry at the political class for a perceived lack of support – staged a coup, ousting Touré and seizing control of the government in Bamako. The following May, taking advantage of the chaos caused by the military rebellion, Tuareg rebels, at times in alliance with the Islamist grouping Ansar Dine (Arabic for 'Defenders of the Faith'), took control of northern Mali and declared independence for 'Azawad', an aspirational Tuareg homeland including Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu provinces. By the middle of the year, the alliance between the MNLA and Ansar Dine, always opportunistic, had become rocky. Following Ansar Dine's proclamation of northern Mali as an Islamic state to be ruled according to Sharia law, the MNLA broke away, issuing a statement that imposing Sharia was against its values (Chanda, 2013). The MNLA began to lose territory to extremist factions, and by July all of northern Mali was controlled by extremist groups.

## 2.1 Intersecting security and humanitarian crises: consequences for civilians and aid actors

The violence exacerbated the existing humanitarian crisis and took a heavy toll on the local population. It put households at greater risk of food insecurity (for instance by affecting agricultural and pastoral activities), reduced access to assistance and generated new needs. The fighting and insecurity precipitated a displacement crisis and caused the gradual collapse of private enterprises and public services, affecting access to water, food and health services. As of August 2012, an estimated 595,000 Malians had fled their homes (OCHA, 2013). Most refugees settled in neighbouring countries in impoverished areas close to the border, amongst host communities who were themselves struggling to recover from the region-wide food crisis (Oxfam, 2013).

The fighting was accompanied by reports of the murder of civilians, the execution of captured soldiers and rape by the MNLA. Although the Islamists improved order, the imposition of Sharia law led to the greater seclusion of women and suppression of their rights and violent punishments (*huddud*) for serious crimes (Lecocq et al., 2013). More generally, both the Tuareg rebels and extremists targeted state structures; in Douentza, for instance, the MNLA closed down schools, prisons, medical centres and banks. According to Lecocq et al. (2013): 'The administrative void had disastrous effects. Tensions between different populations – Fulbe, Dogon, Songhay, and Tuareg – became more lethal as small arms were traded in high quantities, and as official mediation was absent'. Armed groups also reportedly recruited children around Timbuktu, Tessalit and Gao.

Aid agencies faced multiple difficulties reaching populations in the north. The growing risk of kidnapping had already reduced the number of aid workers on the ground and had led to a shift in operating modalities, with more extensive use of remote programming. Prior to the crisis some NGOs had been working in the north-west, but after the outbreak of the conflict access became more constrained by the destruction of infrastructure and threats to staff. As a result, little aid reached the north. Bringing in commercial supplies became more difficult with the closure of the border with Algeria, and there

was no trade between southern and northern Mali (HPG, 2013; HPN, 2012). Concerns over the consequences of counter-terrorism legislation on humanitarian operations may also have led agencies to become more risk averse in their response. As described by one senior humanitarian aid worker working in the region: 'In Northern Mali it is difficult to ascertain the identity and allegiance of all the groups that control access to populations, provide services or commodities, so potentially any transactions can make staff liable to criminal pursuit' (HPG, 2013).

## 2.2 Regional and international responses

The first response of regional bodies and neighbouring states was to try to mediate a resolution to Mali's political crisis. ECOWAS denounced the March coup and urged the junta to 'immediately relinquish power to the rightful Government so that the country could return to constitutional normality'. It also called for the MNLA to lay down its arms. On 30 March 2012 it imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on Mali, and ECOWAS member states bordering Mali closed their borders, thereby blocking Mali's access to neighbouring seaports. Thereafter, ECOWAS focused on political negotiations to remove the military junta. President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso was appointed the lead negotiator, and an agreement was reached in April outlining a transition to civilian government under an interim president, parliamentary speaker Dioncounda Traoré.[1] The following August, after a brief reassertion of control by the junta and continued intimidation of civilian politicians, a government of national unity was formed.

ECOWAS' approach came under increasing pressure as extremists in the north took advantage of the lack of clear political leadership in Bamako to extend their control. Although it advocated for a military mission (the ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA)), this idea did not come to fruition; the organisation did not have the political clout or financial resources to go ahead without international assistance, but donors were reluctant to back the proposal because they were sceptical that ECOWAS forces would be equal to the conditions in

northern Mali (Willis, 2013). Meanwhile, in April the AU imposed sanctions, asset freezes and travel bans against the junta and others deemed to be involved in 'contributing to the "destabilization" of Mali' (CNN, 2013). The following June MICEMA was transformed into the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), thereby making it an African, rather than a West African, initiative (Théroux-Bénoni, 2013). However, before AFISMA could be deployed the hand of the international community was forced when some 1,200 extremists militants – primarily from Ansar Dine and MUJAO – launched an offensive towards the south and threatened an advance on the capital, prompting Traoré to call on France, the old colonial power, to intervene (Chanda, 2013; BBC, 2013a). Operation Serval was launched the following day, 11 January 2013, and, with the aid of 2,000 Chadian soldiers, the north of Mali was rapidly retaken. The first contingents of AFISMA were deployed a week later.

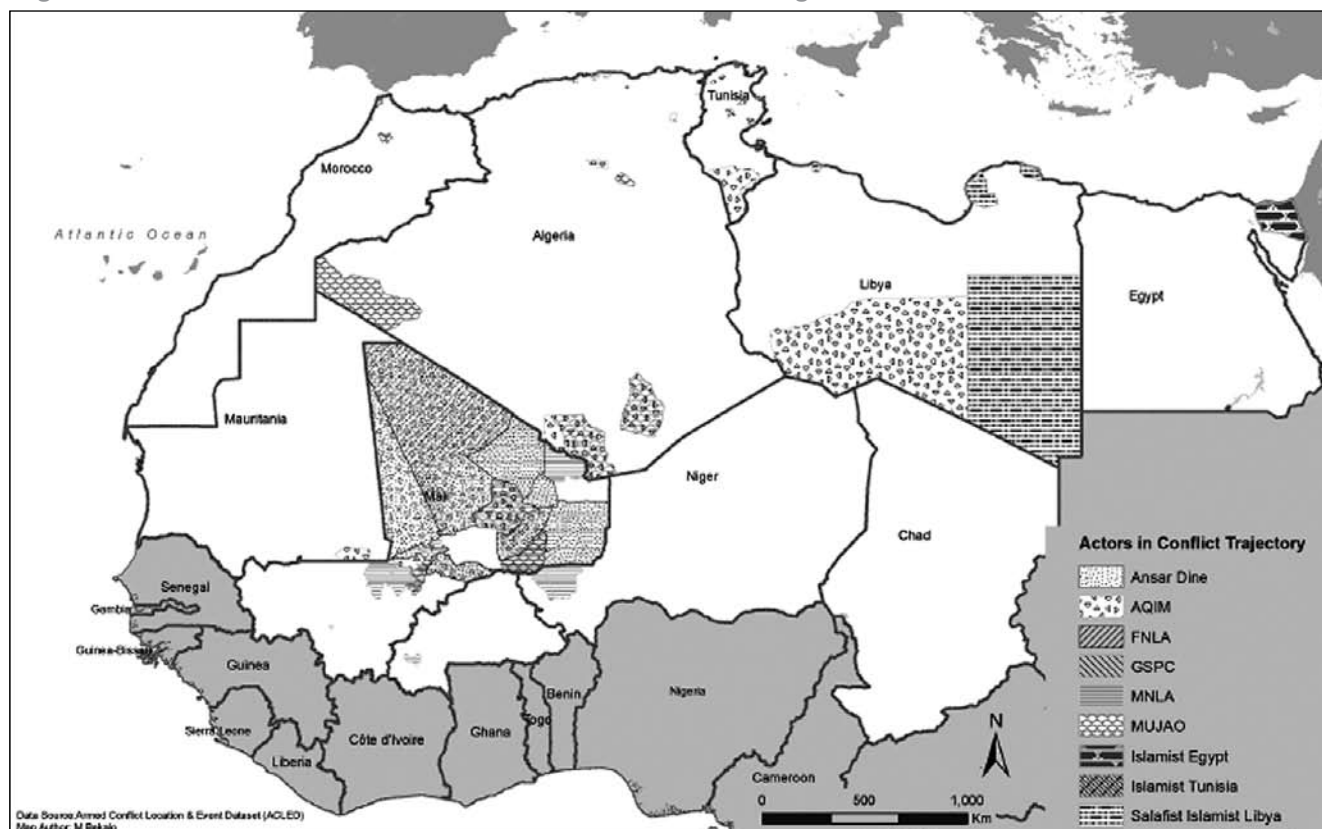## 2.3 Deploying regional forces: motivations and challenges

While it may seem obvious that ECOWAS – with a history of intervention in the region and a high level of institutional compatibility with UN mechanisms – should be a prominent actor, some commentators have questioned its suitability for the role of coordinating a regional response in Mali. This section looks first at the need for a regional response at all – the degree to which threats and consequences are regionalised – and then the obstacles that prevented other groupings and neighbouring states from playing a leading role, and how they have subsequently sought to influence developments. ECOWAS' prominent role was not just determined by its history but also by the manoeuvring it was able to do in order to secure UN backing, support from non-ECOWAS neighbouring states and financial backing for its strategy from key Western states.

### 2.3.1 Regionalised threats
Neighbouring countries view the Tuareg rebellion in Mali in light of the implications it could have for stability in their territory. This concerns three primary issues: the ramifications for the Tuaregs' political demands, for the activities of armed groups and for smugglers' networks. The Tuareg, though a sizable ethnic group, do not form a majority in any of the countries in which they are present. The largest populations are in Mali and Niger, where there may

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1 Burkina Faso's role was ambiguous. As well as trying to mediate in the conflict, it hosted rebel groups in Ouagadougou, and there were reports that the MUJAO had received arms shipments via Burkina Faso (Lecocq et al., 2013).

## Figure 1: Conflict actors in North Africa and the Sahel region, 2012



Data Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED)
Map Author: M Bakako

**Actors in Conflict Trajectory**
- Ansar Dine
- AQIM
- FNLA
- GSPC
- MNLA
- MUJAO
- Islamist Egypt
- Islamist Tunisia
- Salafist Islamist Libya

be close to 800,000. The population in Algeria is also thought to number in the tens of thousands. The most maximalist interpretation of 'Azawad' would encompass territory in Niger, Algeria, Libya and Chad, though Malian armed groups and political movements have only claimed territory in northern Mali. While the ties between Tuareg confederations in different states are very weak, the prospect of self-determination for Malian Tuaregs is nonetheless extremely threatening to Libya and Algeria, which fear that it would trigger similar developments amongst their populations.

Smuggling networks are likewise cross-border, and controlling them in the Sahel and the Sahara will require cooperation among multiple states: from Libya and Algeria, state-subsidised fuel and food are smuggled into Sahelian states and beyond, and in the opposite direction cigarettes from Mali and Niger are illegally trucked into Saharan states. Moroccan cannabis traverses west to east, passing through the northern areas of some Sahelian states.

Lax border controls and the impossibility of controlling borders in such a geographically vast area also make it easier for extremist militant groups – as well as Tuareg

fighters – to evade capture, retreat from open combat and recruit fighters or secure arms. For instance, reports suggest that, to stage the attack on the Amenas gas field in Algeria in January 2013, extremists transited through northern Mali, northern Niger and southern Libya, where they acquired their weapons (Lacher, 2013). The leadership of AQIM emerged out of the Algerian conflict in the 1990s. In this group, Mauritanians and Algerians are the largest non-Malian members.

Porous borders, the movements of armed groups and smuggler networks and the strength of sub-national political and identity groups in the region all affect how neighbouring states approach security in Mali. As noted above, Algeria and Niger in particular do not want an independent Tuareg state in Mali to succeed, as they fear that this will encourage movements for Tuareg self-determination in their own countries. Algeria and Mauritania did not want military intervention in Mali lest it force extremists to quit Mali and return home; indeed, in the wake of Operation Serval, fighters are believed to have fled back to where they came from (Mauritania and Algeria), or to Libya, where the state is weak and other extremist networks are operating. Both Tuareg rebels and extremists have fled to Niger (Lacher, 2013; Larémont, 2013).

## 2.3.2 Obstacles to regional cooperation

These regional aspects of the Malian crisis clearly called for a regional framework for coordinating responses in several countries, yet regional relations were often an obstacle to efforts to address the current conflict. Most notably, there is no regional organisation whose membership includes all the key countries involved. While there are regional organisations other than ECOWAS that could theoretically play this role, namely the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), these are largely seen as empty shells. CEN-SAD comprises 23 states across the Sahara (but notably excludes Algeria). It was a creation of the late Libyan president Gaddafi in 1998, with the objective of furthering his own influence in the region, but it never became a functional organisation (Lacher, 2013: 4). The AMU, a trade agreement between Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, came into effect in 1989. It also has ambitions to be a political and security union, but is deadlocked by the confrontation between Morocco and Algeria

over the Western Sahara. Rivalry between these two states and Libya was also an obstacle during Gaddafi's rule, but this has changed since he fell. Libya may be more willing to join regional initiatives now – and indeed has supported Morocco in a bid to revive CEN-SAD – but its central state is weak and has considerably less control over the border regions and its own militias than the previous regime (Lacher, 2013).

In recent years Algeria has attempted to coordinate regional security cooperation in the form of the Pays du Champs, or Core Countries, initiative. The initiative established an intelligence-sharing and joint military operation centre in Algeria in 2010, but this was not successful: 'the initiative by and large failed to translate into operational security cooperation on the ground, as representatives of its Sahelian members repeatedly pointed out' (Lacher, 2013: 3). Algeria has perhaps the most direct influence on affairs in northern Mali. It has a long-term role as mediator in Mali's conflicts – in this latest conflict it mediated between the MNLA and Ansar

## Box 1: Food insecurity and regional organisations

In contrast to security cooperation, there has been a greater degree of cooperation and complementarity between regional organisations on the issue of food security in West Africa and the Sahel. ECOWAS, the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Permanent Inter-state Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS) each play specific roles in addressing food security: ECOWAS and WAEMU are decision-making bodies and take measures that apply to their member states, while CILSS is the technical branch of the two institutions, informing their policy departments through research and technical advice (Sahel and West Africa Club, 2012). WAEMU and ECOWAS have both developed regional framework policy interventions in agricultural development and the promotion of food security and nutrition (the ECOWAS Common Agricultural Policy and le Politique Agricole d'UMOA). While there are concerns that overlapping policy frameworks lead to duplication, ECOWAS argues that, in the case of food security, they are complementary, allowing these three organisations to maximise resources as WAEMU focuses on implementation in the CFA franc zone, ECOWAS focuses on implementation in the remaining member states and CILSS focuses on technical issues to inform policy.

In the course of the response to the 2012 famine ECOWAS and WAEMU also undertook action at field level, including 'the restoration and preservation of the agricultural tools, improving agricultural productivity, access to inputs, insertion of small producers in the market, improving the health and nutrition of vulnerable groups, including pregnant women and children, education, and social protection of the poor' (OECD, 2013). The scale and scope of these interventions are however unclear.

Cooperation was given a boost by the political and financial resources that the 2012 famine attracted, primarily through the Global Alliance for Resilience (AGIR) in the Sahel and West Africa. In April 2013 a regional roadmap was officially adopted during a meeting of the Food Crisis Prevention Network (FCPN) (AGIR, 2013). AGIR aims to develop Country Resilience Priorities (CRP) with all three regional organisations (AGIR, 2013). Despite these initiatives, cooperation to date has not been exemplary: food insecurity has long been an issue in the Sahel and has hitherto not been addressed in a comprehensive regional manner. Nonetheless, this is an interesting example of how regional organisations can complement each other's actions.

Dine, though this was seen as in competition with efforts by ECOWAS and Burkina Faso (Lecocq et al., 2013). Algeria's border provides access to cheaper food and petrol for people in northern Mali. Algeria also has an extensive intelligence presence in the region, as well as being its most powerful military force (Lacher, 2013). Its reluctance to either take the lead in the response or to fully cooperate with ECOWAS efforts was therefore a significant drawback to regional cooperation.

### 2.3.3 Why ECOWAS?

In contrast to the problems that affect cooperation between Sahelian and Saharan states, ECOWAS offers an existing and feasible regional framework for action in West Africa. ECOWAS was founded in 1975 with the aim of achieving a customs union and a common market over a 15-year period, though in practice economic integration has been minimal. ECOWAS is primarily funded by a levy placed on members' trade, though this does not fully cover its running costs or the costs of military interventions. Nigeria, with the largest population and greatest wealth, dominates the diplomatic and military strands of ECOWAS, though the Mali crisis demonstrated the toll that internal conflict is having on its ability to project military power. The Francophone countries – also grouped in the WAEMU organisation – also often work as a bloc within ECOWAS, with Côte d'Ivoire being the most influential.

ECOWAS' motive for intervening in Mali stemmed from the threat to West African stability that the conflict was thought to pose – with the potential to spill over into Niger and the possibility of stronger relations developing between Islamist extremist groups in Mali and Nigeria: according to a UN report, 100 Boko Haram fighters from Nigeria received training at AQIM camps in Mali in 2011, and Boko Haram is believed to have provided support to extremist groups in Mali (UN Security Council, 2011; De Castelli, 2013; Loeuillet, 2013). ECOWAS was able to align these concerns with those of powerful Western states, and demonstrate a willingness to work with UN mechanisms.

With French support, ECOWAS called both for political negotiation and military intervention in the form first of MICEMA and then, as the AU became involved, AFISMA. However, key states outside of ECOWAS – Mauritania and Algeria – blocked these efforts, and the UN was also reluctant to provide logistical and financial support. Reservations about the intervention centred on the weakness and illegitimacy of the administration in Bamako that it would be supporting,

## Box 2: The evolution of ECOMOG

Of all the African regional economic communities, ECOWAS has the oldest mechanism for regional intervention, having first intervened in the conflict in Liberia at the end of the 1990s with the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) mission. ECOMOG engaged in a variety of activities, including protection of humanitarian aid, disarming factions, cantonment, mediation and peace enforcement (Olonisakin and Aning, 1999). However, no peacekeeping structures were in place when it was established, meaning that structures to support the mission were created in an ad hoc fashion. There was initially no disciplinary or complaints mechanism, no training or understanding of the mission, poor logistics and administration and poorly equipped soldiers unused to peacekeeping missions. The mission committed significant human rights abuses and violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including indiscriminate bombing of civilians and looting and attacking humanitarian supply lines and agencies (Olonisakin and Aning, 1999), prompting a new 'acronym' for ECOMOG – Every Car Or Movable Object Gone.

ECOMOG's failings resulted in a revision of the 1975 ECOWAS treaty in 1993 and the gradual development of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture. In 1999, the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security established a Mediation and Security Council, an early warning system and a standby force (Moti, 2013). The early warning system – ECOWARN – functions through regional observation networks and observatories, which undertake risk mapping and observation and analysis of the social, economic and political situation in the ECOWAS region. ECOMOG was formally established as a standby force – renamed the ECOWAS/West African Standby Force (ESF) – in 2004, and its role was expanded to cover conflict prevention, humanitarian intervention, enforcement, peacebuilding and action against organised crime. A permanent force, the ESF can draw on reserves of 6,000 troops, including a rapid reaction Task Force of 1,500 troops deployable within 14 days, with the entire brigade deployed within 90 days.

doubts about its longer-term security strategy (as the groups leading the conflict would be dispersed rather than defeated), concerns around ECOWAS' tense relations with the political leadership in Bamako (it was, after all, attempting to remove the military junta from power) and the fact that AFISMA did not have the necessary equipment or combat experience (Loeuillet, 2013). In the end, it was the southward advance of Islamist groups that broke the impasse. Algeria and Mauritania dropped their opposition to the intervention and sent representatives to ECOWAS to discuss AFISMA's deployment. Although the AU was crucial in securing broader political support for the mission – and a UN mandate – by framing it in a more global perspective (preventing jihadists from establishing a base in northern Mali as a launching pad for attacks outside the region) (Théroux-Bénoni, 2013), ECOWAS remained the effective lead and implementer of the plan and the 'key regional partner institution for Western states' (Lacher, 2013: 4).

# 3 After the French intervention: what role for ECOWAS and the AU?

Since France launched Operation Serval in January 2013, millions of dollars have been committed to support the military effort and, with a large amount of help from foreign forces, the government in Bamako has secured control of the north. Operation Serval is ongoing, with 1,000 French soldiers remaining in the country for counter-terrorism operations. Meanwhile, AFISMA was 'rehatted' as a UN mission, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), in July 2013, tasked with a 'robust' peace enforcement role (RFI, 2013a). Elections were held in July and August, and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was elected president. The MNLA and non-extremist groups are in political negotiations with the government.

The Mali crisis has demonstrated the ability of regional organisations to respond to emergencies, as well as highlighting their limitations in the security, political and humanitarian spheres. The shifting lead relationship between ECOWAS, the AU and the UN has also highlighted tensions in how these organisations relate to one another. As the situation evolves the involvement of regional organisations, however, appears to be waning.

## 3.1 The handover from the AU to the UN

The French intervention was never intended to be a long-term solution to Mali's problems, and the French sought to make the mission multilateral quickly so as to reduce their involvement. As such, AFISMA was transformed into a UN mission on the explicit understanding that it would be better equipped and financed in such an arrangement – and that African troops would continue to engage 'robustly' (RFI, 2013b). MINUSMA has a similar composition to AFISMA, and about the same complement, with around 6,000 personnel.

Although in accordance with the policy of both the AU Peace and Security Council and the UN, the speed of the handover from the AU to the UN – AFISMA deployed in January 2013, and 'rehatted' just six months later – was unusual.[2] Several AU missions have been rehatted under the UN, but previous handovers have been fraught with delay and disagreement – and expected handovers have not materialised. For example, the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) had its mandate extended four times beyond the scheduled handover date of March 2006, and it was not until December 2007 that the UN finally took control of the mission, forming the new AU–UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

Likewise, the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has been unable to hand over to the UN despite a clear preference on the part of the AU to do so, at least in the first few years of the deployment. Again, political opposition amongst UN member states prevented the establishment of a UN military mission in Somalia, despite the obvious difficulties that the AU faced in deploying and financing the AMISOM force (Williams, n.d.). Troops were slow to arrive and initially ill-equipped and trained. While the UN did not take over the mission, a UN office was established in Somalia to provide logistical support, and the mission received a large amount of funding from bilateral donations, the European Union (EU) and voluntary contributions to a UN-managed Trust Fund in Support of AMISOM (AU, 2013a).

The unaccustomed speed of the transition from AFISMA to MINUSMA has been attributed to France's desire

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2  The APSA – and the African Standby Force (ASF) – are designed for short-term missions in circumstances that constitute serious breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The intention is that these missions will later be taken over by the UN. Long-term missions such as AMISOM and UNAMID were not envisaged, and as such there is no established practice for lengthy AU involvement in conflict and post-conflict situations.

not to become embroiled in a protracted counter-insurgency and stabilisation operation in Mali (Théroux-Benoni, 2013). France's wish to see the UN take over AFISMA is likely to have stemmed from fears about the capacity of the AU-led mission in the absence of UN logistical support and funding. For its part, the AU, while acknowledging that the mission would be better resourced under UN leadership, has had reservations about the process and its outcomes, believing that African states were not 'appropriately consulted in the drafting and consultation process in the lead up to the adoption of the resolution' (AU, 2013b).

The Mali crisis brought to the fore challenges not only in the relationship between the AU and the UN, but also within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). In theory, the AU establishes rules of cooperation with regional economic communities which should guide complementary action, within which the AU's role has primacy, irrespective of which body actually takes the lead.

In practice, the relationship between the AU and ECOWAS has been marked by rivalry, tension and a lack of coordination (Théroux-Bénoni, 2013a; Théroux-Bénoni, 2013b). It is not clear what role either ECOWAS or the AU will have in Mali now that the handover to MINUSMA has taken place. Commentators have urged both bodies to maintain their involvement, implicitly raising the prospect of a withdrawal of African leadership from what is now a more explicitly Western and international project (Théroux-Bénoni, 2013b). Given that the involvement of ECOWAS and the AU will now decline and evolve, it remains to be seen what direction this will take and what lessons these organisations will draw from the experience. ECOWAS has in the past demonstrated that it is an adaptable organisation, having introduced increasingly sophisticated institutional mechanisms for its security role following challenges with the early ECOMOG missions; the AU too is refining its practices and mechanisms following the transition from its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

# 4 Tackling humanitarian needs and protection

While French and Chadian forces helped to re-establish territorial control in northern Mali, a UN mission has been established and a new government in Bamako has been elected, the crisis lingers in the north. Existing humanitarian issues have not been resolved, and others are likely to flare up again. This raises a number of questions for the roles that various actors, including regional organisations, will assume. Regional organisations' lack of engagement in humanitarian action is significant for two main reasons: first, the consistent need for attention and assistance to the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict; and second the fact that ECOWAS and the AU have policy commitments to human security, the protection of civilians and humanitarian response. In theory ECOWAS and the AU are more than simply security actors: they have conflict prevention mechanisms and a policy and institutions relating to human rights and emergency assistance.

## 4.1 Ongoing humanitarian needs and threats

The primary humanitarian issues are the continuing displacement of a large section of the population in the north, and the livelihood crisis that the conflict – overlying chronic hunger and poverty – has prompted. Since March 2012 over half a million people have been forced to flee from northern Mali. According to the latest UNHCR data (August–September 2013), over 350,000 are internally displaced in central and southern Mali, mostly staying with host families, and around 175,000 are refugees in camps in border areas and dispersed in urban areas (with little access to assistance) in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger (OCHA, 2013a). While humanitarian agencies and neighbouring governments have tried to meet refugees' needs, conditions in camps are poor and levels of need high; in Niger in early 2013 a fifth of children in camps were malnourished, and malnutrition rates are 'alarmingly high' among refugee children in Mauritania (Oxfam, 2013). In Burkina Faso most refugees in urban areas are reportedly unregistered and receive no assistance. Refugees have also struggled to participate in political processes in Mali that will have major implications for the north. In Burkina Faso, voter cards for the first round of elections for the new government were not delivered (Slate Afrique, 2013).

Most refugees have not returned. In Timbuktu, for instance, almost a quarter of the population fled, and there is insufficient labour to tend to crops (OCHA, 2013). In Gao, rice was not planted during the conflict, animals were not taken out to pasture and the maintenance of infrastructure such as dykes, which prevent the Niger River from flooding, did not take place. Farmers are suffering as there are insufficient customers for the secondary professions – as masons, carpenters or cobblers, for instance – which many adopt outside of the growing season. People are drawing on limited household reserves and relying on international aid to survive (OCHA, 2013). Food security is a chronic challenge (as indeed it is in many parts of the Sahel), with additional stress in the north due to the effect of the conflict on the economy.

Another concern is around protection threats. Although the stated purpose of the ECOWAS and AU interventions was to protect the population, in practice little has been done to support protection activities or monitor threats. There is also a need to address breaches of IHL and human rights abuses committed during the conflict, and to that end ECOWAS announced in April 2013 that it had enlisted human rights observers from the Network of National Human Rights Institutions in West Africa to monitor, report and document human rights violations (Associated Press Africa, 2013). People may also be at risk of abuse by peacekeepers – as highlighted by allegations that Chadian soldiers have sexually abused numerous women in Gao (BBC, 2013b). Lastly, it is likely that the conflict will flare up again: the local political struggles that underpin confrontations between groups in the north and with the government in Bamako have not been resolved, and foreign extremist networks and smugglers are re-infiltrating the north.

## 4.2 AU and ECOWAS humanitarian mechanisms and their limitations

It is noteworthy that the AU has accepted the principle of 'humanitarian intervention' under the Responsibility to Protect discourse. However, interventions tend to be primarily political and military in nature, and action to ameliorate the threats facing populations is seen almost exclusively in direct relation to political or security functions. The mandate for AMISOM, for example, included humanitarian activities, but these were combined with state-building and stabilisation, and the discourse of 'humanitarianism' is uncritically tied to political aims. The AU has only recently begun to develop its comprehensive policy on humanitarian action and, while there is an AU Humanitarian Affairs, Refugees and Displaced Persons Division (HARDP) under the Department for Political Affairs, this entity has no operational mechanism or role and lacks the capacity, funding and vision necessary to deal with refugees and IDPs (Sharpe, 2011).

In March 2012 ECOWAS issued its first dedicated Humanitarian Policy and Humanitarian Action Plan (ECOWAS Commission, 2012). The overall strategic objective guiding the policy is 'the prediction, prevention and overall management of disasters and conflicts towards limitation or elimination of effects thereby preventing death, human suffering, and development losses; and enhancing the protection and social situations of all West African citizens and residents as basic conditions for regional integration, peace, security and development'. The policy, which covers natural disasters, conflicts, complex emergencies and 'other types of crises', envisages a complex and comprehensive humanitarian response and crisis prevention structure, including a humanitarian coordination mechanism involving 'humanitarian partners', 'national platforms' and 'civil societies', seemingly as implementers. The stated aim of the policy is to standardise action in humanitarian affairs by member states by promoting the link between humanitarian action, security and human development across the region (ECOWAS, 2012a). Member states are urged to put aside funds for disaster response and devote resources to strengthening national response actors. The policy also calls for a system of Humanitarian Procurement Centres, which are 'non-profit making organisations that specialise in the technical and commercial management of supplies and services necessary for the implementation of humanitarian actions [sic]' and an ECOWAS Humanitarian Relief Fund.

The structures laid out in the policy may have their roots in the work done to increase ECOWAS' disaster risk reduction (DRR) capacity and planning. Since 2011 this has included setting up an Emergency Flood Fund, which individual countries can draw from; a natural disaster reduction task force; and an Emergency Response team (IRIN, 2011). However, progress towards a collaborative regional DRR initiative is hampered by insufficient resources, and ECOWAS has no budget line for these actions (IRIN, 2011). More broadly, while the development of ECOWAS institutions and polices pertaining to human security, conflict management, disaster reduction and humanitarian response has been rapid and impressive, there is a large gap between the aims of these policies and their actual implementation. Emerging humanitarian response mechanisms have severe capacity limitations; human resource deficits are 'glaring, tend to increase dependence on external financers, and increase the problem of compartmentalisation of expertise and resources' (HFP, 2009: 10). Likewise, although ECOWAS is unusual among regional organisations in the extent of its engagement with civil society, this is symptomatic of a lack of capacity within the Commission and subsequent reliance on external partners (*ibid.*).

Humanitarian and human rights concerns in Mali call for a number of interventions which the government is not in a position to provide: human rights monitoring, mechanisms to address impunity and bring people to account and material assistance for people suffering the effects of the conflict inside Mali and in neighbouring countries, as well as programmes to facilitate the return of refugees and the demobilisation of, especially, child combatants. However, neither ECOWAS nor the AU has functioning mechanisms for assuming these roles and neither has any meaningful funding; when the label 'humanitarian' is given to an activity these are inevitably military and political interventions. Given these limitations, it is hard to see how regional organisations – with their current capacity – could support humanitarian action, including protection work on behalf of people affected by violence.

# 5 Conclusion

As the Mali crisis unfolded over 2012 the situation was framed in terms of stability, conceived at national, regional and global level. Within this focus on security and political transition, the abuses suffered by the population and their humanitarian needs – and aid access and mechanisms for addressing human rights issues – have been secondary concerns in regional and international engagement.

The issues affecting Mali have regional dimensions which call for meaningful participation from countries outside of the ECOWAS zone. While ECOWAS does appear to offer the most functional framework for a regional response, its limitations and the relationships between its member states should be factored into any analysis of how to support a response to the crisis at this level. Context analysis must continually seek to look beyond national borders and the 'usual suspects' to fully appreciate where most leverage will be found.

ECOWAS' engagement to date has encompassed strong involvement in mediation with armed actors and negotiations with the military junta and other political actors to install an interim government and then lay the groundwork for an electoral process (which has recently unfolded, albeit controversially). ECOWAS was also the first multilateral institution to propose a military intervention in Mali and to begin to compose a force, though these plans were superseded by AU involvement and then supplanted to some extent by the French and Chadian intervention. Now that the AU/ECOWAS force AFISMA has transitioned to a UN mission it remains to be seen how involved ECOWAS will become in humanitarian and security functions.

Both ECOWAS and the AU are disposed to intervene militarily to support regional stability. However, the willingness of both organisations to take decisive action to contain crises outstrips their current capacity to do so. In ECOWAS' engagement there was no significant tangible attention to the needs of people affected by the conflict: it did not play a role in aid coordination and access, act as a donor or service provider or address IHL or human rights abuses against non-combatants. This is not a result of a lack of policy or insufficient rhetorical attention. ECOWAS has deliberately branded itself as focused on human security, human rights, poverty and humanitarian concerns, and it has recently released a lengthy policy position piece on humanitarian assistance, which includes plans for a greater role in facilitating aid provision. Yet there remains a gap between the development of policies and institutions for humanitarian action within ECOWAS and their implementation. However, signalling a more tangible approach, ECOWAS has begun developing rosters of experts from civil society to operate as human rights monitors in the region. It will be important to watch how this initiative develops and what impact it has.

Assessing the role that regional actors have played in addressing humanitarian issues is limited by the largely desk-based nature of this paper. More remains to be learned about the role that regional organisations have had, perhaps behind the scenes and on the ground. Nonetheless, the regional response to the Mali crisis underscores the need to move beyond African regional organisations' political and military functions and more fully examine their humanitarian role, which so far is aspirational rather than operational.

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