

# SOCIAL MEDIATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BORDER AREAS IN NORTHERN CÔTE D'IVOIRE: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON VULNERABILITIES IN THE FARMERS' WORLD

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## RÉSUMÉ

**Introduction** : La Côte d'Ivoire fait face à l'expansion du spectre d'un extrémisme violent et de criminalité organisée qui cherche à se constituer une base dans le nord du pays. Or, les groupes extrémistes violents se construisent ou se développent à partir des vulnérabilités tels que les conflits locaux, les déficits de gouvernance, les défaillances des systèmes de sécurité et les frustrations. À partir des études menées dans les localités frontalières du nord de la Côte d'Ivoire, cette contribution vise à montrer comment les vulnérabilités nées de la gestion des ressources naturelles peuvent servir de carburant à l'extrémisme violent. **Méthodologie** : La méthodologie s'appuie sur des enquêtes de terrain réalisées dans les localités situées le long de la frontière du Mali et du Burkina Faso particulièrement à Tiéfinzo, Sanzanou, Sokoro dans la sous-préfecture de Kimbirila-nord ; Kanakono, Zanikaha, Kapégué, Koulousson dans le département de Tingrela ; à Togoniéré, Sokolo et Petit Nassian dans le département de Kong puis à Kalamon et Gogo respectivement dans les départements de Doropo et Tehini. **Résultats** : Les résultats de cette étude permettent d'identifier les conflits autour du foncier, l'élevage, l'orpaillage et l'accès à l'eau comme pouvant être le creuset de vulnérabilités capables d'alimenter l'émergence tout comme le développement de groupes extrémistes violents.

**Mots-clés** : Côte d'Ivoire, Monde paysan, Vulnérabilités, Médiation sociale, Orpaillage illicite, Extrémisme violent.

## ABSTRACT

**Background**: Côte d'Ivoire faces the growing specter of violent extremism and organized crime that seeks to establish a base in the north of the country. Violent extremist groups build or develop on vulnerabilities such as local conflicts, governance deficits, security system failures and frustrations. Based on studies carried out in the border localities of northern Côte d'Ivoire, this contribution aims to show how vulnerabilities arising from natural resource management can serve as fuel for violent extremism. **Methodology**: The methodology is based on field surveys carried out in localities along the border with Mali and Bukina Faso, particularly in Tiéfinzo, Sanzanou and Sokoro in the sub-prefecture of Kimbirila-Nord; Kanakono, Zanikaha, Kapégué and Koulousson in the department of Tingrela; Togoniéré, Sokolo and Petit Nassian in the department of Kong; and Kalamon and Gôgô in the departments of Doropo and Tehini respectively. **Results**: The results of this study make it possible to identify conflicts over land, livestock, gold panning and access to water as potential vulnerabilities that can fuel the emergence and development of violent extremist groups.

**Keywords**: Côte d'Ivoire, Farmers's world, Illegal gold panning, vulnerabilities, Social mediation, violent extremism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

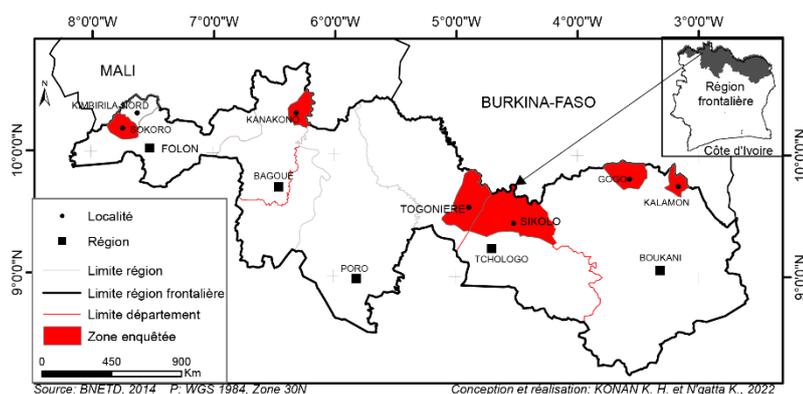
On 11 June 2020, the border area of northern Côte d'Ivoire recorded its first terrorist attack. Since then, the actions of these extremist organizations have multiplied, resulting in other types of attacks until March and June 2021 [1]. Opinions as to the origins of these deadly operations perpetrated by these criminal groups have been widely debated in the scientific and policy analysis community. The history of violent radicalization in West Africa is said to be exogenous. It began in the Maghreb-Sahel region in 1991 and then in Algeria, with the crisis of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in 1991. Radicalization continued with the birth of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1992, followed by the split of the GIA and the birth of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998; the conversion of the GSPC into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007; and the birth of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Mali in 2011, more than 20 years later. All this heralds the emergence of pseudo-jihadist groups in the Sahel, with the exception of the Boko Haram group, created in 2002 [2].

For some people, the security situation is a consequence of the "Talibanization" of the Sahel. Like Afghanistan, the Sahel has become training and implementation center for jihadist concepts, with the leaders of the AQIM branch, namely Yahya Abou Al-Human and Abou Abdelrahman Al-Sahaji, the Ansareddine branch led by Iyad Ghali, and Mourabitoun led by Al-Hassan Al-Anssari, as well as the other branches. According to this theory, the violence taking place in the north of the country is the work of the Quatiba Macina group, which has set out to export the Sahelian model of jihad to this part of the country [3]. Analysts suggest that the deteriorating security situation in these border areas is the result of a development problem. Specifically, these areas are marked by great disparities compared to other regions of the country and by the absence of the state. Local bandits who have set up illicit networks and made these areas their own have exploited this state of affairs. This dramatization of local banditry is reinforced by the vulnerabilities experienced by the populations in the daily management of their activity. This is the thesis that this contribution subscribes to,

based on the principle that the hints of this extremism are more linked to endogenous than exogenous factors and that it is built on vulnerabilities such as local conflicts, governance deficits, failures of the security systems and frustrations arising from the management of natural resources. How can vulnerabilities arising from natural resource management be used as fuel for violent extremism? This contribution is part of a preventive approach to a situation that can worsen at any time depending on the growing vulnerabilities in a context where violent extremist organizations are expanding across West Africa.

## 1. METHODS

The data for this study were collected in the border localities of the North-West, namely Tiéfinzo-Sanzanou-Sokoro in the sub-prefecture of Kimbirila-North; Kanakono, Zanikaha, Kapégué, Koulousson in the department of Tingrela; the North through A Togonière, Sokolo and Petit Nassian in the department of Kong, and then in the North-East, with Kalamon and Gôgô, located respectively in the departments of Doropo and Tehini (figure 1).



**Figure 1:** study areas.

For this ethnographic study, data collection was carried out using some of the tools of the Participatory Research Methodology (PRM), such as the Venn diagram, the resource map of the different terroirs, seasonal calendars, natural resource matrices and focus groups. The resource maps of the terroir with young people or women were useful to allow people to materialize the current state of natural resources. Once the map was completed, a feedback session was organized, followed by discussions. Seasonal calendars in general were made with the women to identify the links between rainfall, agricultural work, food availability, income and water availability. Women's participation was satisfactory. The completed calendar was presented during a feedback session followed by discussions. The natural resource matrices were carried out with the women's and men's groups to understand the importance of different natural resources for women, food, income and the future, but also to examine the effects of climate change on these resources and levels of conflict. The focus groups were aimed at all the targets at the survey locations. Each of these different groups of actors was interviewed in groups of 09 or 12 on the issues and dynamics surrounding lowlands, savanna areas affected by cash crops, areas used for cattle breeding, mining sites and forests. The discussions focused on the difficulties linked to each of these areas, but also on community responses.

## 2. RESULTS

### 2.1 Water and grazing as a source of conflict and chronic vulnerability

In all the border areas surveyed, lowlands are used by all socio-occupational categories. For some social groups, these areas are the main source of income and food, while for others they are the only grazing areas for livestock. The different pressures on this resource are a source of vulnerability for women, who are the most specialized in the development of these lowlands. The frequent damage to crops by livestock is leading to the gradual abandonment of the lowlands in Kalamon and Tiéfinzo, from which they used to derive most of their income. The women are trying to protect the crops from total destruction, but makeshift fences made of branches and various salvaged materials are not enough to protect the crops from animal damage. As a result, some women lose their crops altogether, exposing them to poverty and starvation.



**Photos 1 and 2:** View of hedges made of branches to protect gardens near Tiefinzo and Kalamon.

The lack of compensation for crop damage is a source of demotivation for the main women farmers in the lowlands. This contributes to the deterioration of women's quality of life and household food security. In addition, the short period of water availability in the lowlands decimates herds that are unable to cover their water needs. This constitutes a considerable loss of income for herders. The numerous damages caused by oxen to access the rare water points also constitute a loss of income for the women. Also, the drying up of water points leads to a decrease in yield and affects the quality of the products. The lack of water is not only linked to climatic variability, it is often due to silting caused by the deforestation of riverbanks. The advent of gold panning, which appears to be more profitable, has led to a shift in farmers towards this new activity, which deprives women of the labor they need to start work in the lowlands. Similarly, as the men are mainly the owners of oxen in the village, they do not see the point of supporting the women in the fight against crop damage in the lowlands. Finally, tensions over access to water between Malinke people and Lobi people over the Lobi community's failure to respect Muslim practices during the dry season remain very strong in Sokoro.

This conflict in access to water sources is due to the application by Malinke people of an Islamic principle which holds that a woman who does not perform ablution defiles the water in the water source she steps into. Consequently, the use of water from this source by a Muslim woman would not make her pure before Allah, hence the ban on Lobi people (animist) women from this water point, which is closest to the village during the dry season. Access to water and grazing areas remain the key factors of vulnerability in relation to cattle breeding. Indeed, the drying up of rivers for a long period of the year, the scarcity of dams and the lack of boreholes in these border areas are limiting factors for the practice of this activity. However, situations of vulnerability are experienced differently from one locality to another. In Kalamon, the arrival of new herders from Burkina Faso in search of suitable grazing areas on land already saturated by local herders represents a risk of amplifying existing conflicts. The arrival of these herders is taking place in a context where the Fulani community, which has been living in this locality since the 1950s, is often stigmatized and lives under constant threat of reprisals for crop damage.

This stigmatization is reinforced by the defense and security forces, who assimilate them to non-Ivorian invaders and extremists. In Gôgô, the Fulani community feels progressively expropriated by cashew tree planters who want to reclaim the land ceded to them by the chiefdom. Furthermore, the contiguity of cashew fields is the reason why the Fulani are gradually moving away from the village in search of pasture. In search of grass in the dry season, the cattle consume the cashew nuts, which can be a danger to the health of the cattle and cause enormous losses for the herders because of its high acid content. In order to solve the difficulties linked to access to pasture, the sub-prefect of Gôgô has given an area to the Peulhs in Kénégora, but now the farmers are expressing their desire to take it over. In Togoniéré, problems of access to grazing areas force herders to travel long distances and pay grazing fees. The absence of a transhumance corridor encourages the risk of rambling and also aggression on the cattle.

## 2.2A rural population increasingly vulnerable to the problems of food and agriculture

The border areas are in the grip of a crisis in food and agriculture. This agricultural crisis is reflected in the abandonment of yam farming, which is an important source of income. In Sokolo, it is more expensive than any other crop, with 200 f per kg for assawa and 300 f per kg for kponan. In Petit Nassian, its production is no longer possible because of the damage done by oxen to this crop. This abandonment does not only concern yam cultivation. In general, women who practice food crops lose a large part of their harvest in the lowlands because of oxen damage to the crop. But Fulani are increasingly refusing to pay the fines, believing that they are not the only owners of the oxen that cause the damage, especially since Lobi people, who are the originators of cattle rearing in Sokolo, are now entrusting their oxen to the Fulani. The crisis in agriculture is also manifested in the instability of prices and difficulties in marketing agricultural products. Indeed, farmers deplore the state's inability to guarantee prices for agricultural products.

In general, the incentive prices offered by the state for the adoption of new crops plummet when these crops become part of the farmers' cropping habits. To this must be added the low prices offered by traders who impose the law of the market on them. Farmers who do not have the means to preserve their products to take advantage of a favorable situation are obliged to sell off their harvest. The labor force used to come mainly from Burkina Faso and Mali. With the boom in gold mining, this workforce is becoming increasingly scarce, especially since the measures put in place by the population restrict access to land to non-natives. This involves applying a series of measures aimed at reserving the practice of perennial crops for the indigenous people. In Petit Nassian, for example, the non-natives believe that their arrival in this locality was motivated by the dream of having perennial crops to pass on to their descendants. Now this dream is crumbling and this news is perceived as exclusion. The problems of agriculture are also expressed in the lack of marketing channels for food products.

This major concern was noted especially among the indigenous people in Sokoro. Women have difficulty selling their products. The sales channels are not well known, especially for large quantities of foodstuffs. The foodstuffs rot on their own without finding an outlet. This situation results in a loss of income after a lot of hard work. This food crop farming is also marked by *difficulties in the supply of inputs, as was observed in Tiéfinzo*. The women of Tiéfinzo buy their inputs

in Mali. But these inputs are not accessible to all because of their high cost. Cow dung used as fertilizer is not enough when the cultivated area is large.

### 2.3 Social cohesion seized up Land conflicts and the issue of Fulani integration

The Fulani surveyed in this part of the country say they are faced with a feeling of statelessness and a difficulty in integrating. Indeed, the Fulani feel that the state of Côte d'Ivoire does not favor their integration. They feel hounded by the Ivorian authorities, even though all their interests lie in that country. Worse still, in Mali and Burkina, their countries of origin, they are considered as foreigners. In Sanzanou, this difficult integration is aggravated by Malinke customs that prevent Fulani from marrying indigenous girls of the Cissé lineage, whereas the Cissé can marry Fulani girls. The refusal of the people of this locality to involve the Fulani in the ceremonies of the authorities and other village officials is seen by them as palpable proof of their rejection. Surveys in Petit Nassian revealed that the Fulani feel that they are not consulted by the public authorities on issues that concern them.

The Fulani community is poorly literate and consequently does not have a representative to bring its problems to the attention of the public authorities. They are very often the victims of an overvaluation of compensation costs when their herds destroy crops compared to other communities. The fragility of the social link between the Fulani community and the other communities present encourages the latter to withdraw into their own identity. They complain of being subjected to injustice, harassment and false accusations. They are even likened to jihadists by some communities and law enforcement officers. This makes them easy prey for violent extremist groups. In addition, the Fulani, who is the main service providers in the monitoring of cattle herds, say they are rightly or wrongly to blame for the damage to crops in the lowlands. This situation exposes them to all kinds of violence and exclusion. In their relationship with the police, they say that they are victims of arbitrary arrests by the authorities who consider them to be terrorists.

Social cohesion in some of the study areas has been weakened by the desire of the indigenous people to expropriate the land of non-native communities. This situation is experienced in Sanzanou, where the Miankas from Mali, who are more enterprising in terms of agriculture, are at the head of huge farms, and have pushed the indigenous populations, such as those in Kouéla and Lélé, into confinement. In Sokoro, the tensions are linked to the modification of the land use clauses between Lobi people and the Malinke people. When Lobi people settled in Sokolo, the Malinke chief, as landowners at the time, introduced an annual fee of 10,000 CFA francs per year with a small harvest for each Lobi household. This contract, which was modified by the new chief by requiring an annual royalty in kind of 100 kg of cashew nuts per field, led to open conflicts in 2017 and continues to cause discontent among Lobi people. Frustration is also felt by Malinke people, who believe that Lobi people, who have become progressively more important demographically, are using this strength to avoid paying the royalties that have been agreed upon.

### 2.4 Inadequate infrastructure, rural populations facing a feeling of abandonment

The villages along the Burkinabe border are marked by a severe lack of infrastructure and equipment. The subprefecture of Gôgô has one health center which covers a health area of 47 villages. The low capacity to cover the health needs of the population leads to systematic recourse to health centers in Burkina Faso, specifically in Gagouli or Gawa. The only health center covers a health area of 26 villages with an attendance rate of 26%, higher than the national average of 25%. On the other hand, there is a considerable lack of equipment. The same situation is experienced in Sanzanou, which does not have a health center. Patients are transferred to Tienko where the quality of care is acceptable. Otherwise, they have to go to Odienné. The village needs a health center because of the frequent cases of malaria. Traveling and staying outside the village is expensive for the villagers. These study villages are also poorly provided with school facilities. Kalamon, for example, has only one school with six classrooms for an estimated population of 2000. As a result, about 100 pupils from Kalamon attend schools in Burkina Faso. Thus, the schoolchildren go to the primary school in Tambila, 2 km away, and the secondary school pupils go to the college in Kosso. The hydraulic pumps installed in the village of Tiéfinzo to provide drinking water are old and insufficient. There are only 2 pumps for an estimated population of 1200.



**Photo 3:** Disused hydraulic pump turned into a well in Gôgô.

Access to drinking water is a major concern in the village of Sanzanou (see photo no). The only non-functional pump that has been converted into a well date back to 1985.

## 2.5 Clandestine gold mining, the nerve of war

In the study areas, gold panning has become an economic alternative for the population since the military-political crisis of 2002. However, the state's desire to take advantage of this new activity and turn it into an economic lever has led to the transfer of exploration permits to numerous companies. As a result, gold miners are now considered as clandestine in mines whose permits have been granted to these companies and have seen their sites closed down altogether. The closure of gold panning sites exposes young people to poverty and banditry as gold panning is their main source of income. For young people, the advent of gold panning has not only considerably reduced acts of banditry by allowing everyone to have the material goods they desire, but also leaves little time for idleness. The closure of the gold panning sites is at the root of the radicalization of young people. The young people of Gôgô firmly stated that their survival depended on gold panning. They said they were ready to do anything to defend and maintain their livelihood and to fight anyone who got in their way. They believe that the state, which is unable to ensure the development of their locality through the establishment of basic social infrastructure and the creation of income-generating activities, also wants to deprive them of their main source of income. The closure of the sites is also seen as a deprivation of the local communities in the exploitation of their own mining resources through the surveillance of mining areas by the state; the youth of Kalamon feel condemned to "exile" seeking to work on other sites while they have this resource in their basement. The eviction of gold miners following the granting of exploration permits in certain localities such as Kalamon has had repercussions on the development of the village insofar as the rebates received on the sale of gold for the supply of community funds which were used for the development of the village.

The vulnerability of the population in relation to gold panning is not only due to the closure of the sites. Some perverse effects of this activity have made some sections of the population equally vulnerable. Indeed, gold panning is the reason why young people and children in Gôgô drop out of school. The lure of quick money leads some pupils to drop out of school and end up on the sites. Child labor in gold panning is common in Gogo. Furthermore, the indigenous populations and the administration no longer have effective control over the migration of foreign populations clandestinely exploiting the mining resources. Food insecurity is being progressively introduced, either by the massive arrival of gold miners, which leads to soaring food prices, or by the massive departure of young people to new gold-mining sites in the interior of the country, resulting in labor for agricultural activities. To this must be added the work of adolescents aged 13 to 16 years old on the work sites to provide for their families in Burkina: *"We know that it is dangerous, but we are obliged to take the risk because it is the only way to help our parents."*



**Photo 4:** Gold collection at a site in Zanikaha.

These young people usually work for site owners or operators who live outside the country and only appear to collect their dividend when a find is made.

## 3. DISCUSSION

Violent extremist groups rely on individual, social and structural vulnerabilities to establish themselves or operate. The north of Côte d'Ivoire is not free of vulnerabilities that revolve around issues such as recurrent conflicts between herders and farmers over access to water, the struggle for control of certain natural resources, and the lack of basic social services. Our results show that these study areas are remote or border areas, poorly controlled by the public authorities, where the link between the central state and the population is weak. In these conditions, some of the population's needs cannot be met because they do not have the means to meet these needs themselves. According to Loada and Romaniuk (2014) [4], this lack of response to socio-economic needs is the reason for the absence of a national strategy. Loada and Romaniuk (2014, p. 9) [4] a source of vulnerability and a seedbed for violent extremism, especially when accompanied by factors such as widespread corruption and lack of security and justice. It is a marked social exclusion on the part of the state that can be exploited by violent extremist groups who sometimes offer remuneration or services

to the population. Our studies have also revealed the difficulties of cohabitation between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, with the issue of control over resources, of course, being the desire of the former to expropriate the latter. The result is an identity crisis that is experienced by the Fulani community as a rejection that hinders their integration, and by young non-natives as a form of exclusion from opportunities. From the point of view of Cordero (2021, p. 42) [5] these identity-based tensions built around the notion of autochthony are a source of communitarian ideas. They sometimes emerge as a legacy of the past and reflect the deep discontent of young people with social stagnation and lack of opportunities. Our studies have also pointed to religious practices as vulnerabilities that can undermine cohesion and be the basis for violent extremist acts. In this respect our findings are similar to those of Barry et al., (2018, p. 56) [6] for whom selfishness, social exclusion, misinterpretation of religious precepts, politics and weak governance including injustice, mismanagement of public resources, corruption are generally mentioned by individual interviewees as elements that can push people to become extremists or join extremist groups. These are the same factors that were identified during the study carried out in the framework of the regional prevention program against violent extremism in the Maghreb and Sahel.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The difficulties observed in the agricultural world in northern Côte d'Ivoire after independence haven't been adequately addressed to date. The presence of non-obvious actors, the informality of agricultural groups, the lack of mastery of cultivation techniques and the high cost of inputs are still highlighted. On the strength of this, farmers now have other resources to exploit to get out of their often pitiful living situation. Amongst the opportunities, illegal gold panning has become a profitable activity that allows entire villages to be fed. Customary law, which allows each person to dispose of his or her own plot of land, encourages the phenomenon. The question of land tenure arises, which is at odds with the right to land and the right to property in a context of increased land pressure. Thus, children, young people and adults, men and women alike, invest themselves in the activity, even during fieldwork, often at the risk of their lives. If the activity allows people to get out of the ordinary of their difficult daily life, it calls upon new actors who are never clearly identified or named. And if it supports the extremist groups operating around the Mano River, its recuperation by the state through its means of repression, a question arises for us: What recourse do the farmers have, knowing that agriculture is less remunerative today? This is why we propose the identification of all the sites and their co-management with the state. In addition, the mechanisms for preventing and managing local conflicts must be strengthened, whether through the action of the chiefdoms, the gendarmerie or the justice system. In addition, relations between the population and state representatives need to be improved. Hunting for the man who started the hunt would not be the solution; gold miners must be encouraged to obtain mining permits, which would regulate the activity.

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