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# Between Ambition and Stalemate: Lessons from the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation Process in Mali (2015-2024)

## Summary

- The experience of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement (APR) demonstrates that an agreement negotiated primarily among political and military elites, and supported by strong international mediation, cannot deliver sustainable outcomes without popular support, meaningful citizen participation, and strong national ownership by stakeholders.
- Beyond the quality of an agreement's provisions, the success of a peace process depends on the sustained commitment of the parties involved, institutional continuity, and credible monitoring and implementation mechanisms.
- Future peace agreements in the Sahel must draw lessons from the shortcomings of the APR, including fragmented international mediation, excessive dependence on external funding, the exclusion of key stakeholders, and the disconnection between security issues and governance challenges. Peace processes should integrate security, development, justice, reconciliation, and citizen participation in order to address the root causes of conflict.

## Introduction

Signed in 2015, the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (APR), born out of the Algiers process, was one of the most ambitious and high-profile peace efforts in the Sahel, given the scope of international mediation, its duration and the complexity of the crisis. Designed as a comprehensive response to the 2012 crisis, marked by the collapse of the state, the occupation of the north by armed groups and international military intervention, it aimed to reform Mali's political framework around three pillars: reaffirming national unity through substantial decentralisation, promoting renewed and inclusive governance, and fostering reconciliation through the reintegration of combatants and transitional justice. Yet, nearly ten years after its signing, the transitional authorities' official repeal in January 2024 marked the failure of a costly, controversial process that had been largely stripped of its political substance. However, describing the APR as a mere failure would be analytically inadequate. For several years, the agreement also prevented a widespread resumption of clashes between the state and the main signatory armed groups in the north, whilst maintaining room for political dialogue.

The experience of the APR constitutes a key case study for the entire Sahel region. Its trajectory reveals the limits of a strong international peace model, negotiated between political and military leaders, but with little grounding in local social and territorial realities. The gradual erosion of trust, the persistence of the terrorist threat and the shift of the conflict's epicentre towards the Centre have ultimately stripped the agreement of its purpose. An analysis of this relative failure is therefore a necessary prerequisite in looking to the future.

## Born out of necessity and the rapid onset of a deadlock

The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali was not the product of a shared vision, but rather of an urgent necessity. It emerged from the wreckage of the 2012 crisis, marked by the rebellion of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), the March 2012 coup, the occupation of the north by a motley coalition of separatist and jihadist groups, and the emergency deployment of Operation Serval<sup>1</sup>, followed by MINUSMA<sup>2</sup>, preceded by MISMA<sup>3</sup>.

This is the fourth agreement of its kind, following those of Tamanrasset (1991), the National Pact (1992) and Algiers (2006). It was preceded by the preliminary agreement of Ouagadougou (2013) and built on the processes of inter-Malian dialogue, including the regional forums in Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, culminating in the national conference on the North and the General Assembly on Decentralisation – held in the early days of the regime of the late President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. It was largely driven by a diverse international mediation effort, led by Algeria and supported by a 'monitoring group' comprising the UN, the African Union, ECOWAS, the European Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and other countries. This genesis under external supervision is fundamental: the APR was less the result of an internal political maturation than of a prescription accepted by a weakened state, then fighting for its survival.

Four categories of stakeholders were involved in this process, namely the international mediation led by Algeria, the signatory parties (the Malian government and armed groups), observer countries, and civil societies invited to voice their opinions. However, the negotiations remained primarily structured around the Malian government and the two main armed coalitions in the north, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform.

The implementation of the Agreement, with a particularly ambitious initial schedule, quickly revealed the gap be-

tween the agreement's ambitions and the reality on the ground. From the outset, the process was mired in a cycle of delays, mutual mistrust and structural deadlocks due to multiple delays in the submission of names to establish the agreement's bodies, the failure to provide lists of combatants for DDR and SSR, and differences in the interpretation of certain parts of the agreement, notably the role of the State representative in the region, among others. The deadlocks were both political and security-related. The CMA made its progress in DDR conditional upon institutional and political progress linked to decentralisation. Meanwhile, the government regarded DDR and SSR as essential prerequisites for restoring state authority and demonstrating the armed groups' good faith. These differences created a gap of mistrust between the Malian government and the CMA. The Agreement Monitoring Committee (AMC), designed as the main mechanism for arbitration and coordination, gradually became an ineffective bureaucratic body. Despite the existence of sectoral committees and the mobilisation of significant financial resources, the recommendations produced were rarely acted upon. Monitoring mechanisms remained weak, and responsibilities were diluted amongst the various stakeholders. Heavy financial dependence on international partners also contributed to the creation of a costly 'peace economy' that was at times disconnected from the Malian state's budgetary capacities. The financial benefits associated with certain implementation mechanisms may have reduced incentives to accelerate the process.

Simultaneously, the conflict was rapidly escalating. Whilst the APR had been designed primarily to address the crisis in the north, the epicentre of the violence was gradually shifting towards central Mali. The agreement, therefore, appeared increasingly unsuitable for a conflict that had become more widespread, community-based and regionalised.

The exclusion of groups linked to international terrorism from the political process was another major factor contributing to the country's instability. The mechanisms put in place to combat these groups jointly, notably the joint special security units, were never actually made operational. As a result of this failure to contain the situation, insecurity continued to spread towards the centre of the country and then to neighbouring countries.

## Insufficient national appropriation

The lack of political support by the signatories to the APR weakened its acceptance and national awareness. Both the government and the armed groups often regarded the agreement more as a compromise imposed by the existing

1 Operation Serval: A French military intervention in Mali launched on 11 January 2013 to halt the progress of terrorist groups into southern Mali.

2 MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali.

3 The African-led International Support Mission to Mali (MISMA) was a mission deployed by the African Union to support Mali in 2013, but it was very quickly replaced by MINUSMA

balance of power than as a genuine political agreement. This lack of trust was exacerbated by the population's lack of knowledge of the agreement, the ambiguities of certain provisions, and the growing perception of international oversight of the process. A portion of Malian public opinion considered that certain provisions of the agreement, including Article 6, unduly favoured the northern regions or placed the Malian state on an equal footing with the armed groups. Despite multiple efforts to disseminate it, the APR remained largely unknown to Malians, including some officials responsible for its implementation.

Data from Mali-Mètre (FES-Mali, 2021) reveal a low level of public awareness of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APR), with nearly two-thirds of Malians having no knowledge of it. However, this lack of awareness contrasted with a relatively high level of confidence in the Agreement's ability to restore peace, revealing support that was more symbolic than based on a thorough understanding of the Agreement's content.

Despite the difficulties encountered, the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APR) offered relevant solutions to resolve the Malian crisis. Its main approach was based on the establishment of decentralised and participatory governance, granting extensive powers to local authorities without undermining the sovereign prerogatives of the unitary state, the sole repository of national sovereignty and guarantor of territorial integrity and national unity. This framework seemed to meet the country's needs for a return to lasting peace. However, the complexity of the dynamics (local, national, regional and international) has diverted the stakeholders from the initial objectives and the benefits of these solutions, which are so necessary for regional peace and the security of the Malian people. Their individual agendas (with armed groups focusing on territorial disputes and profits from gold panning sites, whilst the government was concerned with the growing terrorist threat and the management of persistent internal political tensions) prevailed, leading to a series of tensions, power struggles and unnatural alliances. Although the ceasefire between the government and the CMA has generally held, recurring clashes between the CMA and the Platform have severely hampered the implementation of the Agreement. Furthermore, the limited control exercised by the signatory movements over their fighters, who often move between signatory armed groups and terrorist organisations, has permanently undermined trust between the parties.

Similarly, chronic political instability also contributed to undermining the continuity of the process. Mali experienced a rapid turnover of prime ministers and ministers responsible for reconciliation from 2015 to 2022. Each change required the rebuilding of trust between the parties.

## **Fragmented international mediation**

International mediation was both a strength and a weakness of the process. It enabled considerable financial, dip-

lomatic and technical resources to be mobilised, but also contributed to the fragmentation of the process's governance. The multitude of parties involved (UN, AU, EU, ECOWAS, etc.) led to fragmented diplomacy and competing agendas. France's dual role, as both mediator and belligerent in the fight against terrorism, fuelled suspicions. The CSA, under international supervision, became a symbol of Mali's confiscated sovereignty. Ultimately, a real lack of coordination emerged in the implementation of the APR.

Differences in approach between international stakeholders, particularly between Algeria, the lead mediator, and France, committed to the fight against terrorism, fuelled a silent rivalry for leadership that greatly hampered international coordination. Algeria found itself in a tricky position due to its dual role as the main mediator and a long-standing stakeholder in the management of previous crises in Mali. Depending on the stakeholders and the crises, it was accused either of being too close to the Tuareg armed groups or of being unable to exert effective pressure on the Malian government. As for MINUSMA, it was given significant responsibilities, notably in terms of logistical, financial and technical support, and the coordination of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes, transitional justice, and political and institutional reforms. However, it was ultimately criticised for its inability to stabilise the country and its inaction as the conflict spread to other parts of Mali.

The lack of clear and consensual arbitration within the CSA also hindered the building of progressive consensus, which is essential for consolidating trust in a process aimed at building lasting peace. This weakness gradually contributed to the erosion of trust between the parties.

## **The APR and cross-cutting challenges in the Sahel**

The failure of the APR also highlights the structural problems that are undermining the entire Sahel region, offering a framework for understanding regional deadlocks.

### **Futile security measures and the spread of threats**

The spread of the conflict from the north to central Mali and then to Burkina Faso and Niger highlights the limited effectiveness of approaches focused primarily on security. Despite significant international military investment, jihadist armed groups have gradually expanded their territorial presence.

The failure to integrate groups affiliated with international terrorism into the political process has reduced the potential security benefits of the agreement. The security measures provided for in the APR to combat these groups were never fully implemented.

## Geopolitical rivalries

The Sahel has become an arena for geopolitical rivalries that undermine peace efforts. The failure of international mediation in the APR foreshadows a significant trend: the erosion of collective mediation mechanisms in favour of bilateral state rivalries. The Algerian-Moroccan rivalry, the shifting positions of France, Russia and other powers such as Turkey and China, and the tensions between the regimes of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and ECOWAS, create an environment where the logic of power prevails over the requirements of peace. Local stakeholders (governments and armed groups) are learning to exploit these rivalries, further fragmenting the diplomatic landscape.

## The return of 'sovereignty'

The emergence of a vigorous sovereignty-based narrative in the Sahel region presents a major cross-cutting challenge. Although it responds to a popular demand for dignity and self-determination, the reality is that these countries remain heavily dependent on external stakeholders, limiting genuine strategic and economic autonomy.

In short, these cross-cutting challenges reveal the limits of externally devised peace models and call for a rethinking of dialogue processes as long-term political dynamics, rooted in local realities and centred on rebuilding trust between the state and its citizens.

## Lessons learned

### Lesson 1: Political will, an essential resource

No peace agreement can survive without the signatories' sustained political commitment. Institutional stability, consistent dialogue partners and the credibility of commitments are fundamental prerequisites. Similarly, implementation mechanisms must be based on realistic schedules, clear progress indicators and robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Establish a clear and realistic implementation schedule, with objectives and indicators of progress;
- Establish an implementation monitoring committee comprising representatives of the state (government and parliament), armed groups and civil society in all its diversity;
- Organise regular meetings between stakeholders to assess progress and resolve issues;
- Set up transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure the credibility of the process.

### Lesson 2: International mediation must remain pragmatic and measured

Effective mediation must be perceived as impartial, coordinated and respectful of national sovereignty, rather than as a governing body exercising control. International partners must support a process led primarily by national and regional stakeholders.

To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Establish a clear and limited mandate for international mediators;
- Ensure coordination between international mediators and national stakeholders while maintaining a balance that upholds state sovereignty and guarantees the mediation's arbitration capacity;
- Establish mechanisms for transparent and regular communication between mediators and stakeholders;
- Avoid unilateral interventions and respect the will of the stakeholders.

### Lesson 3: Inclusion, beyond words, an inescapable reality

Inclusion cannot be limited to symbolic participation. Women, young people, rural communities, displaced persons, refugees and traditional authorities must have real opportunities for participation and decision-making. To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Establish quotas and participation mechanisms to ensure that all stakeholders, including women, young people, rural communities and displaced persons, have a voice;
- Set up transparent and regular communication mechanisms to keep the public informed about the peace process;
- Ensure that marginalised groups are represented in decision-making bodies.

### Lesson 4: National budgetary anchoring, a prerequisite for survival

Peace processes must be financially sustainable for the states concerned. International aid must support specific and temporary objectives, rather than creating long-term structures dependent on external funding. This is why they require:

- The establishment of a clear and realistic budget for the peace process;

- The implementation of transparent and accountable financial management mechanisms;
- A guarantee for national stakeholders to participate in the management of funds;
- The alignment of budgets with the standards of the country concerned.

### **Lesson 5: Trust, the heart of the process**

Peace depends above all on the gradual building of trust. Every delay, deadlock or ambiguity feeds perceptions of dishonesty among stakeholders. Mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, mutual trust-building measures and credible arbitration mechanisms are therefore essential. To this end, building and maintaining trust requires:

- Establish mechanisms for transparent and regular communication between stakeholders;
- Ensure that agreements and commitments are implemented;
- Set up conflict and dispute resolution mechanisms;
- Foster concrete and mutual actions to build trust.

## **Conclusion**

The APR experience is a lesson. It teaches us a fundamental truth, too often overlooked by the bureaucracy of diplomats and the urgency of donors: peace cannot be decreed by a single document, no matter how sophisticated and comprehensive it may be. Peace is not merely a document to be signed, but a slow and deeply political process that must necessarily emerge from within the societies it seeks to reconcile. Although it is clear that reaching a ceasefire requires urgent measures, this does not alter the fact that a long-term, participatory and inclusive process is necessary to achieve a lasting peace. The APR failed because it was developed as an external remedy, imposed on a society whose complexities and underlying dynamics it had failed to understand.

The key lesson for the future of the Sahel is therefore clear: future peace processes must go beyond mere negotiations between political and military leaders under close international supervision. They must rely more on local dynamics, community mechanisms and genuine citizen participation.

To this end, the Malian experience is a set of lessons on pitfalls to avoid rather than a model to be replicated: fragmentation of international mediation, limited inclusion, excessive financial dependence and insufficient national awareness. To support a more inclusive and sustainable peace process, it is essential to build trust among stakeholders. It is also vital to support economic and social development initiatives in conflict-affected regions to address the root causes of instability. Finally, it is necessary to promote national reconciliation and transitional justice to enable people to look to the future with hope and confidence.

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### Imprint

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#### Design/Layout:

Abdoul Malick Almaimoune

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First published June 2026 by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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ISBN 978-2-490093-58-8

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