

CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN KÉNIÉBA'S ARTISANAL MINING COMMUNITIES

This research brief presents the main points of a study carried out in 2023-24 by the FEMA project on the context and conflicts surrounding artisanal mining in four communes of the Kéniéba Circle in southwest Mali. Its main points include the predominance of conflicts linked to customary land management, growing tensions between artisanal miners, mining companies, and local authorities. The systematic exclusion of certain groups, mostly women and minorities, from artisanal mining activities is another source of tensions. The rapid growth of artisanal mining combined with environmental degradation and insecurity, further fuel these tensions and potential conflicts. The analysis presented in this brief also forms the basis of the project's conflict sensitivity strategy, developed to help mitigate tensions and promote a more inclusive and sustainable management of the artisanal mining sector in Kéniéba.



Female and male artisanal miners working at the Kereko site, Kéniéba commune

1. THE CONTEXT OF ARTISANAL GOLD MINING AND ITS SENSITIVITY TO CONFLICTS

Artisanal gold mining has a long history and is a crucial economic sector for the communities of Kéniéba given the area's relative underdevelopment. Furthermore, divergent interests generate tensions between the sector's key actors, including input suppliers, artisanal miners, gold buyers, customary and state authorities, as well as the owners of formal mining titles. This gives rise to a dynamic that fosters conflicts between some actors, which can sometimes turn violent. The expansion of artisanal mining activities in the region is intensifying these tensions and potential conflicts, and this in the broader context of institutional and security instability that has affected Mali for over a decade.



The analysis of conflicts linked to artisanal mining in Kéniéba reveals a number of situations whose nature and scale vary according to the interests and actors involved. The conflicts may be linked to “historical” factors, including underdevelopment or the exclusion of certain groups from the sector by traditional norms. These factors may then interact with “conjunctural” issues linked to more immediate challenges, such as the struggles for access to artisanal mining sites and the sharing of revenues. Concretely, they include disputes over the management of land access by village chiefs, disagreements between artisanal miners over profit sharing, and tensions linked to violations of formal mining titles involving artisanal miners and security forces. External actors can also interfere in these conflicts and contribute to their intensification in some cases.

From a methodological point of view, the analysis of these conflicts enables us to reveal and better understand the apparent and underlying causes of tensions that can become violent when they intensify and impact communities and FEMA project activities. Our analysis therefore aims to understand the interactions between the various actors and to identify potential sources of conflict to avoid aggravating them and help prevent them through project interventions. This can be done by working with local and national stakeholders to strengthen the governance of the artisanal mining sector in the project’s area. It is therefore essential to gain a better understanding of the factors behind these conflicts while assessing the capacities of the mechanisms for managing them. The analysis of artisanal mining conflicts in Kéniéba also aims at providing a solid basis for FEMA’s conflict sensitivity strategy.

2. THE NATURE OF CONFLICTS IN KÉNIÉBA



Example of the damages caused by artisanal mining in Sandougou, Kéniéba commune

The data show several types of conflict in Kéniéba, the nature and scale of which vary according to the interests at stake and the actors involved. Artisanal mining contributes to local conflicts by increasing competition for the access to resources in a context of growing economic, environmental, and migratory pressures. Conflict analysis identifies three predominant types of conflict.



- Conflicts over customary land management and access to land:** The legislative framework's recognition of customary land rights grants a privilege to customary authorities represented by village chiefs with regards to land management. This legal recognition is a formal transcription into the legal framework of the traditional practices of rural communities in Mali. However, interactions between customary law and formal law with regards to land management and access in the project's intervention areas raise many issues between institutional actors and traditional chiefs, particularly when it comes to the recognition of mining titles issued by the State. For example, traditional chiefs may grant land rights to artisanal miners that conflict with formal mining titles issued by the state, thereby creating friction between institutional and traditional authorities as well as artisanal miners. In addition, the significant migration to the Kéniéba's gold-mining areas and the social and environmental impacts of these activities' expansion amplify the scarcity of land and the potential for conflicts, particularly between farmers, herders, and artisanal miners. In fact, the demarcation between arable land and gold mining zones in the communes of Kéniéba is not clearly defined and can result from arbitrary decisions, which can lead to recurring conflicts between these actors.

- Site demarcation and profit sharing conflicts:** These conflicts are intrinsically linked to relations between artisanal miners in mining sites and villages, both in terms of site management and the sharing of production revenues between artisanal miners and informal fee collectors in the sector. These conflicts are mainly due to the following factors:

1. The violation of distancing practices between two mining pits;
2. Not respecting days off;
3. Certain actors' covetousness of women on the sites;
4. Problems of delimitation between two neighbouring villages that both want ownership of the same mining site, or of a watercourse used for artisanal mining;
5. The collection of informal taxes and fees, and how they are shared between customary and state authorities.

Concerning profit sharing, tensions between artisanal miners are mainly linked to disagreements over the mechanism for evaluating and quantifying gold production and how it is shared between miners. Tensions can also be caused by an exclusion due to non-compliance with the customary management rules for artisanal mining and the collection of taxes and informal fees. The main actors involved in these tensions are village chiefs, *tombolomas* appointed by the latter to manage mining sites, groups of artisanal miners, and state authorities.

- Violation of formal mining titles:** These conflicts between mining companies and artisanal miners are mainly due to the inadequate regulatory texts governing artisanal mining combined with the informal nature of its management, which conflicts with the legislative and regulatory framework of the industrial mining sector. The artisanal mining corridors that form the geographical zone determined by the regulator under artisanal mining's legal framework remain ineffective and non-operational. This is due to the rejection of the legal framework by customary actors and artisanal miners, but also to their claim that few gold resources are found in the gold-mining corridors. Moreover, this type of conflict also arises when mining companies exercise their right to occupy sites covered by artisanal mining. In fact, the formal mining titles held by mining companies entail an exclusive right of exploitation. When a mining company wishes to exploit a site occupied by artisanal miners, conflict and violence can arise between the various stakeholders, especially when security forces are called in to "clear" the miners. In addition, the presence of operators (Chinese, Burkinabe, nationals) who carry out illegal mechanized mining on sites belonging to mining companies, with the tacit agreement of local authorities, are another source of conflicts with the legal owners of mining titles.

3. THE FACTORS DRIVING CONFLICTS

We can distinguish three types of interacting factors that create conflicts in the artisanal mining sector. **Structural factors** involve longer-term causes that can't be changed in the short term. They are the root causes of conflicts, such as the absence of effective state governance over the management of mining resources, the predominance of customary actors and the marginalization of certain groups, notably women. **Conjunctural factors** include situational causes that amplify structural dynamics and increase the likelihood of conflict, but they can be mitigated in the short to medium term with specific interventions. For example, insecurity and internal migration put additional pressure on natural resources, which then paves the ground for conflict escalation. **Triggering factors** are sudden events that combine with structural and conjunctural factors to generate conflicts. These factors include land cessions or violations of mining titles, which can trigger violent conflict between the actors involved. We will explore these factors in more detail in the following sections.



A woman crushing ore at the Sandougou mining site, Kéniéba commune

3.1 Structural factors

- **The state's powerlessness to manage and monitor the artisanal mining sector:** An unsuitable legal framework and the institutional weakness of the state and local authorities are preventing effective regulation of the artisanal gold mining sector. This strengthens the control of customary authorities over the mining sector's management, giving rise to informal and sometimes arbitrary and inequitable governance and management practices that fail to mitigate the negative effects of artisanal mining.
- **Economic insecurity:** This mainly concerns low household incomes and the lack of infrastructure and access to public services in the Kéniéba Circle and the Kayes region. These factors create a sense of citizen alienation that heightens tensions between communities and state authorities and increases competition for resources.
- **Cultural norms:** These exclude certain ethnic groups and women from mining activities.

Conflicts in the artisanal mining sector are often rooted in structural factors, such as poor governance. Being unable to effectively regulate artisanal mining, the state leaves much of the control to customary authorities. This lack of state regulation creates imbalances in resource management and increases tensions between local actors. Chronic underdevelopment in the region increases the vulnerability of its communities, who develop a deep resentment towards the state, which they perceive as negligent despite the significant mineral wealth extracted from the region. Social exclusion also plays a major role in creating tensions. Indeed, some ethnic groups and castes are marginalized and excluded from access to gold mining activities, which deepens the divisions within communities. Finally, gender-based discrimination worsens these tensions. Women and adolescent girls are relegated to subordinate roles, poorly paid, and largely underrepresented in decision-making, which perpetuates social inequalities.



Weekly meeting of the Village Savings and Credit Association (VSLA) called "Normal" in Kéniéba town, Kéniéba commune

3.2 Conjunctural factors

- **Unstable political and security environment:** The loss of state control over certain regions of the country and the sub-region to armed groups drives internal and external migration towards gold mining areas, increasing pressure on mining resources. This also fosters banditry in the Kéniéba region, in addition to potential threats from extremist groups.
- **Rapid expansion of artisanal mining:** Factors such as economic insecurity and underdevelopment, the political and security crisis affecting Mali and the sub-region, and the greater earning opportunities afforded by the artisanal mining sector, reinforce the appeal of artisanal mining as an economic activity. This partly explains the migration to the Kéniéba Circle and the intensification of this practice, also carried out by resident populations.
- **Environmental destruction:** The uncontrolled expansion of artisanal mining reduces the land available for other uses and pollutes waterways. This intensifies competition for land and water access.



In addition to structural factors, several other elements amplify existing tensions. The unstable political and security environment has driven many people to migrate to gold mining areas to escape insecurity elsewhere, intensifying competition for access to already limited resources. Environmental degradation caused by the use of chemicals and machinery in artisanal mining aggravates the situation by polluting land and water sources, which amplifies conflicts between local communities, particularly between artisanal miners and farmers.

3.3 Trigger factors

- **Assignment of land rights:** Decisions by village chiefs or the state to allocate user rights can create tensions between land users and create open conflict.
- **Violations of customary norms:** Rules transgressions on artisanal gold-mining sites can lead to severe sanctions, conflicts, and even a breakdown in social cohesion.
- **Violations of mining titles:** This happens when artisanal miners or illegal mechanized operators disrespect the perimeters of formal mining titles. A mining company that wants to exercise its rights may require the intervention of security forces if a negotiated solution cannot be found. This is a major source of conflicts that has led to violence in mining communities.
- **Collection of informal taxes and fees:** Competition between customary and state authorities over the collection of (largely informal) taxes and fees from artisanal miners creates tensions between these actors and artisanal miners. In addition to fuelling corruption and a lack of transparency regarding the use of these resources, this can lead to conflicts between these actors.

Finally, certain trigger factors can rapidly turn underlying tensions into open conflict. Land conflicts are a key factor, involving increasing rivalry for access to gold resources and exploitation rights between mining companies, illegal mechanized operators, and artisanal miners, while excluding local farmers. This also triggers economic conflicts surrounding the collection of informal taxes by local authorities and the exclusion of local populations from the benefits of mining. These practices create resentment and injustice, leading to confrontations between local actors.



Women's savings management meeting of the "Normal" Cooperative, Kéniéba commune



4. GENDER AND CONFLICTS

Gender must be considered in order to understand conflict dynamics in the artisanal gold mining sector. Women are marginalized, relegated to less lucrative and excluded from decisions concerning the management of mining resources. On most artisanal mining sites, women are excluded from the most interesting activities (such as prospecting and ore processing) and given menial tasks such as transport or cooking, which worsens their economic insecurity. These gender inequalities stem from deeply rooted patriarchal norms that limit women's access to economic resources and decision-making.

This economic vulnerability is intensified by various forms of violence against women, whether physical abuse or gender-based violence (GBV), which is also a pervasive reality in mining areas. Tensions on mining sites can also intensify such violence, particularly when disputes break out over the control of a mining site or profit sharing. Together, these sources of vulnerability deepen social and economic inequalities and fuel tensions in mining communities. Gender issues therefore contribute to the various structural, conjunctural and trigger factors, and they must be considered when analyzing conflicts.



A female market gardener in Dioulafoundini village, Kéniéba commune

POTENTIAL OF EXTREMIST GROUPS IN THE KÉNIÉBA CIRCLE

The data also suggest the existence of a breeding ground for a more significant involvement of violent extremist groups in the area. Under pressure from military operations and attracted by lands with high potential, jihadist groups have been trying in recent years to expand their presence in western Mali. Historically, the Kayes region has been the area that was least affected by extremist violence. According to a report by the "Centre d'études stratégiques de l'Afrique", the initially low level of activity of jihadist groups will triple between 2020 and 2023. Studies carried out by several research centers have highlighted the strategic importance of gold mining in the expansion plans of extremist groups. Like cattle rustling, gasoline, arms and drug trafficking, artisanal gold mining also enables these groups to mobilize financial resources and increase their operational capacity. The informal nature of artisanal mining management and the various associated "taxes" and levies, often paid in raw gold, only add to this infiltration potential. Artisanal mining enables these groups to finance their operations in West Africa by benefitting directly from illicit financial flows in an easily usable and transferable medium.



A female artisanal miner carrying ore at the Sandougou site, Kéniéba commune

5. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS

Conflicts on artisanal mining sites are generally managed by tombolomas, who play a crucial role in collecting taxes, monitoring compliance and enforcing sanctions. In some cases, village chiefs may also intervene. These so-called traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are often preferred for their accessibility and simplicity, but they are limited in the face of increasingly complex conflicts and a lack of inclusiveness, particularly where women and minorities are concerned. When a conflict extends beyond a village, the commune’s mayor may be asked to intervene. Finally, in the most serious cases involving injuries and violence, the gendarmerie or police are called in, which brings together the informal and formal frameworks.

Improving the inclusiveness of conflict management mechanisms by including tombolomas, village chiefs, and mayors while involving representatives of artisanal miners, women, and other key local groups could increase confidence in these structures. We should also mention the often overlooked but critical role that women can play in building peace and social cohesion. Likewise, raising targeted awareness among local authorities and strengthening their mediation skills would also increase the effectiveness of conflict management mechanisms.

6. FEMA’S CONFLICT SENSITIVITY STRATEGY

6.1 Main points of the conflict analysis

An analysis of conflicts in the Kéniéba region reveals complex, deep-rooted dynamics, influenced by historical contextual factors combined with more cyclical elements. Tensions linked to customary land management, conflicts between artisanal miners and mining companies, and gender inequalities and exclusion are major challenges for the region’s stability and development. Furthermore, insecurity, precarious economic conditions, the rapid growth of artisanal mining, and environmental degradation have deepened these tensions. Jihadist groups are also opportunistic actors who could get involved in these tensions and spark violent conflicts. This reinforces the importance of better conflict management and prevention to preserve the zone’s relative stability.

The main findings of this analysis underline the importance of an integrated approach, considering both the local dynamics and the realities of the artisanal mining sector. Conflict management in the region needs to be viewed from a holistic perspective, combining inclusive governance, social inclusion, economic development, and natural resource preservation. This requires the involvement of local stakeholders, including traditional and state authorities, male and female artisanal miners, and vulnerable groups (women, youth, ethnic minorities), to prevent the escalation of tensions and promote equitable resource management. Only a concerted approach, involving all local and national players, will guarantee peace and sustainable development in this resource-rich but conflict-prone region.



6.2 Measures to integrate conflict sensitivity

The aim of the conflict sensitivity strategy is to identify and prevent conflict dynamics that may emerge or worsen in the project’s intervention zones around the artisanal mining sector, and especially those that may result from the project’s activities. This strategy aims to adopt a proactive approach to conflict management, by building the capacities of local players to foster inclusive and transparent governance. It involves explicitly considering the needs and contributions of vulnerable groups in the process, including women and ethnic minorities. Its ultimate objective is to minimize the risks of conflict amplification while promoting social cohesion and a culture of peace in the targeted communities.

The conflict sensitivity strategy places emphasis on building the capacity and inclusiveness of local institutions to reduce tensions around the main types of conflicts in the artisanal mining sector. A key aspect of this strategy is the integration of gender sensitivity, recognizing that women and children, particularly in artisanal mining communities, are disproportionately affected by socio-economic challenges and conflicts in the region. Accordingly, this strategy identifies two key approaches and a series of specific implementation measures.

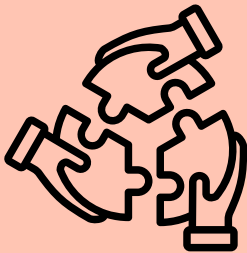
Approach 1



Strengthen local governance and conflict sensitivity:

Enhance, adapt, and strengthen local institutions to increase the transparency and inclusiveness of local governance with regards to the artisanal mining sector. Develop these institutional actors’ capacity for dialogue and conflict prevention, especially when it comes to access to land and resources, while promoting a culture of peace at the community level.

Approach 2




Foster collaboration, dialogue and inclusion:

Set up mechanisms for collaboration and dialogue at the communal level that involve state authorities, customary authorities, community leaders, and representatives of women and vulnerable groups, in order to jointly examine and resolve issues surrounding the artisanal mining sector, and prevent and manage conflicts in an inclusive manner.





Action 1



Set up governance and participatory conflict management mechanisms in the four FEMA project communes:

In addition to the inclusive management and monitoring committee for the artisanal mining sector in Kéniéba, ensure that local governance structures are set up in the communes of Dabia, Sitakily and Dialafara. These structures (involving state and customary actors, men and women artisanal miners), being closer to and better connected with local mining communities, will be in a better position to examine and attempt to resolve the issues and tensions related to artisanal mining.


Action 2



Strengthen conflict prevention and management at the community level:

Provide training and support in gender-sensitive dialogue and conflict prevention and management for members of the artisanal mining sector's management and monitoring committees and other community leaders in the four communes of the Kéniéba Circle. Combine training with community awareness-raising activities on the culture of peace. Reinforcing local actors in this way will help them identify problems and find solutions to reduce tensions and related better manage conflict factors.


Action 3



Support women's economic empowerment and influence in decision making and peace building:

Work with local institutions to help women gain access to safer and more remunerative economic activities. Mobilize community leaders to prevent discrimination and gender-based violence, while building women's capacity to participate in decision-making and conflict prevention and resolution.

Action 4



Identify and share lessons learned on participatory and inclusive conflict management in Kéniéba:

Monitor and evaluate the implementation of the conflict sensitivity strategy and identify lessons learned on an annual basis. Share knowledge locally and nationally and continuously strengthen interventions that support conflict prevention.

The FEMA Project

The Project « Femmes et Enfants des Communautés Minières Artisanales au Mali » (FEMA) is implemented by Cowater International from 2022 to 2027. It is financed by the Government of Canada (48 billion Francs or 9.9 million Canadian dollars) and B2Gold (225 million CFAF, or 464,800 Canadian dollars). FEMA aims to attain the following objectives:

- Improve economic opportunities for women and adolescent girls;
- Reduce the presence of children on mining sites and promote gender equality;
- Strengthen the local governance of the artisanal mining sector while reducing its negative impacts on mining communities, including on the environment and gender equality.

The project is implemented in 20 villages of the Kéniéba circle, located in four communes of the Kayes region: Dabia, Dialafara, Kéniéba and Sitakily. In addition to working with national and local authorities, including the “Ministère de la Géologie et des Mines” and the various decentralized technical services and communes, the project relies on contributions from the Canadian NGOs Impact and Right to Play.

