



Despite Challenges, Peace Gets a Chance in Northern Mali



With cantonment camps, schools and other initiatives, the Peacebuilding Fund moves into a volatile region where few invest.

Normally, an empty camp in the desolation of the northern Mali desert would suggest abandonment instead of progress. Yet, three nearly finished camps in the Gao and Timbuktu regions signify peace moving forward. Known as “cantonment camps,” the facilities will provide transitional housing for former combatants. Soon, combatants from several rebel groups will live here while waiting for further steps toward disarmament and reintegration into the community.

The UN Peacebuilding Fund agreed to pay for the camps in 2014 at a time when other funds considered the situation in northern Mali too volatile to get involved. The Fund hopes that its early intervention will strengthen the resilience among the population and show the benefits of peace through peace dividends, such as a return of education and social services. **Its involvement opens the door to larger donors** to build on that initiative.

The PBF initially didn't think it needed to invest in Mali. After the provisional Ouagadougou Peace Agreement in 2014, large donors lined up to help Mali and pledged over \$3 billion. But aid failed to reach the still unstable northern areas around Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. Once it became clear that there was no money for programmes in the North, MINUSMA, the peacekeeping mission in Mali, asked the PBF to fund the cantonment camps. Within a few weeks, the Fund

approved a \$3-million project for cantonment camps to house several thousand armed combatants in Kidal, in the extreme North.

Always risky — in terms of reputation and financing — aid had to be suspended when hostilities flared up near Kidal. The camps being built had to be given up and three new camps were started away from Kidal after the Algiers Accord halted fighting.

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During the suspension, the PBF agreed to invest another \$8 million in northern Mali. This aid focused on early peace dividends to conflict-affected areas near Gao and Timbuktu. Intercommunal conflicts are widespread and the presence of the state is minimal. The UN is trying to stabilize these regions and wants to increase the confidence of the communities amongst themselves and in the government.

While it's too early to tell if Mali will be able to sustain peace in the North, the PBF-funded programmes are adding up and yielding results. On an international level, the catalytic effect of the Fund resulted in the World Bank committing \$26 million toward reintegration of the combatants into society, after they are demobilized. Soon, 3,500 combatants will move into the cantonment camps, which grew from three funded by the PBF to 10 more as other donors followed; locals near the camps will get new marketplaces and improved services; UNDP and UNIDO started teaching people on how to run a business and earn a livelihood;



Zeiratou Mahamane, 12: "We need to focus on the importance of talking to each other in the community."

following 10,000 radio ads, almost 500 victims of sexual violence have access to safe havens, treatment and a place to talk with one another, crossing ethnic divides; almost 4,000 children, half of them girls, went back to school to make up for four years of missed education and participated with their parents in programs fostering peace and unity. Finally, people who fled the conflict and are now returning get access to basic social services, which reinforces peaceful relations between local communities and returnees and a climate of increased trust in the peace process.

"Before the war, the women of Gao and Timbuktu from different communities did everything together. During the war many families left, but now" some families returned, said Arby Faiousy, a representative of 11 women associations in Gao and Timbuktu. "Thanks to the economic activities of the project, things are as before: **PBF has brought peace back.**"

Aboubakine Aguisa, a young man in the UNDP-UNIDO programme, echoed her sentiment, but also highlighted the continued challenge: "Despite the fact that the jihadists offer more than what the young people can make with their business plan, youth still prefers to participate in local development than in illicit activities."

In the case of Mali, the isolation of the North not only fostered local conflict but also created a haven for a wide range of illicit activities, including terrorism and trafficking of all sorts. So, in the face of a continued presence of armed groups in the North, it remains important for the Fund to stay involved.

ABOUT PBF IN MALI

The Peacebuilding Fund has been involved in Mali since early 2014, when the warring parties were still negotiating the peace agreement. Since then, the Fund has invested close to \$11 million in the country.

The projects are implemented by eight agencies: UNDP, UNIDO, UNICEF, IOM, UNHCR, UNOPS, UN Women and UNFPA, in close col-

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laboration with MINUSMA, the peacekeeping mission in Mali, and overseen by an Executive Committee, co-chaired by the UN and the Government of Mali. To reinforce the involvement of communities, strong partnerships are built with local Non-Governmental Organizations operating in the high-risk zones of the projects.

Overall, the PBF focus is on dialogue and reconciliation; support to the justice and security sectors; restoration of state authority; and community reintegration of refugees and displaced people.

ABOUT THE UN PEACEBUILDING FUND

The Peacebuilding Fund has financed more than 400 projects in over 25 countries. Its funding provides United Nations and non-UN organizations with the tools to help sustain peace and prevent violent conflict. The PBF is risk-tolerant and innovative, can act quickly and works on behalf of the Secretary-General. Its funding often provides the impetus for others to follow suit.

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