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Early Findings from Evaluation of Systemic Action Research in Kangaba, Mali

**Jacqueline Hicks, Alamoussa Dioma, Marina Apgar and
Fatoumata Keita**

March 2024

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Summary

This paper presents early findings from evaluation research embedded in a community-driven peace-building project implemented in Mali. Called the 'Vestibule of Peace', the project uses Systemic Action Research (SAR) to first support diverse members of selected local communities to collect and analyse life stories through mapping the systemic drivers of conflict. This causal analysis then motivates the generation of collective solutions to selected drivers through facilitated action research groups (ARGs). The SAR approach as an alternative, participatory approach to peace-building aims to engage and empower local actors to build their agency as they define and negotiate innovative pathways to achieve everyday peace.

The overarching evaluation design of the Vestibule of Peace project uses contribution analysis as its overarching approach, with multiple methods exploring specific 'causal hotspots'. This paper presents the results of in-depth case studies of ARGs as part of the SAR approach in the Kangaba region in Mali. This is one method used within the contribution analysis design which aims to describe the context, mechanisms, and dynamics of a selection of ARGs. The data sources come from documentation of the ARG processes by ARG members and project staff, interviews and reflection sessions with the participants and facilitators. After describing the internal processes of the groups, the paper then draws together a contribution narrative to share comparative findings of how the ARG processes worked for whom in what context.

Keywords

Systemic Action Research; Mali; conflict mediation; Participatory Action Research evaluation.

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Executive Summary

Maliens have faced a series of volatile conflicts since 2012, with armed political, ethnic, and religious groups fighting for control of land and criminal trafficking routes in the north of the country. Lower-level conflicts over resources have also increased in the more densely populated regions of central Mali. Pockets of violence persist around the country despite billions of dollars spent on peacekeeping by the UN, the Malian government, and the wider international community.

The Vestibule of Peace project was born in 2019 from a consortium of organisations that all identified the critical failure to meaningfully include local communities in peace-building. The project builds on groundbreaking work from the **Malian Institute for Research and Action for Peace** (Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix, IMRAP) and **Interpeace**, and the Systemic Action Research methods developed in a **previous IDS collaboration project**. The bold step to invest in this long-term, multi-partner initiative was taken by **Humanity United**, adding to their portfolio of locally grounded peace projects. Rather than relying on formal peace accords made by a distant national and international elite, the project aims to engage and empower local actors by supporting them to analyse the systemic factors that drive conflict and collectively generate their own solutions. The project is implemented in three regions of Mali and includes an SAR process with national-level peace-building actors.

This paper presents initial findings from case studies of Action Research Groups (ARGs) as part of the broader contribution analysis of the Vestibule of Peace project. The case studies describe in detail the context, mechanisms, and dynamics of five ARGs in the Kangaba region of Mali. Action research aims to support collaborative production of evidence and definition of actions in response to a particular issue. The ARGs are diverse groups of local community members who are facilitated by IMRAP staff in the field to not only explore specific conflict dynamics but also to design and implement their own actions. The case studies are drawn from a rich set of data collected over a period of four years, which include baseline and endline interviews with the ARG members, reflective journals by the evaluation team, and an analysis workshop held in Bamako in December 2022 where the project team made sense of 127 outcomes documented through a participatory outcome harvesting process.¹

After detailing the process of setting up all the ARGs, the paper describes the internal dynamics and activities of each of the five case study ARGs. It then

¹ The full results of the participatory outcome harvesting process including the substantiation of emergent outcome pathways are published separately.

draws together a contribution narrative to share our comparative findings of what worked for whom in what context. This evaluation is not focused on measuring the effectiveness of ARGs, nor on making judgements of all the outcomes achieved, but rather on providing rich, detailed understanding of how the participatory processes worked. The paper concludes with a reflection on how the findings relate to the initial theory of change developed for the SAR intervention.

In brief, some of the key findings of this evaluation include the following:

- Existing conflict mediation mechanisms in the region draw from traditional conceptions of ancestor authority, or more recent state authority. In contrast, the conflict mediation mechanisms supported in this project draw from its methods: inclusive processes of systemic research, and collective listening and analysis.
 - ARG members frequently noted that they gained mutual trust and community respect from participating in the ARG activities. They further identified these values as key to supporting their conflict mediation activities in the wider community.
 - Many of the groups met in official community places, like the town hall, or in the houses of already respected members of the community, and included members who already had some authority in the community. This could also have helped confer some legitimacy on the ARGs' conflict mediation activities.
 - All ARGs were well integrated with the wider community through interviews and information gathering as part of their research activities. They also held community-wide meetings prior to establishing their projects (e.g. soap-making). This community integration helped to strengthen the ARGs' conflict mediation activities.
 - The life story collection and analysis phase helped build relationships between ARG members, and between the members and the project team, for their later activity phase. However, evidence from one successful ARG, which only had one member from the life story phase, shows that having personal skills to integrate others and support their ownership and participation can be just as important as the numbers of people who transition between the two phases.
 - Including women as facilitators for the ARGs, even with support from the project team and the group members, did not automatically afford them a new role in conflict mediation. Women excelled as facilitators only when they had the necessary background skills and experience.
 - In some cases, ARG research into the root causes of conflict became a barrier to successful mediation activities where trauma was still present among the group. Facilitators should be specially trained to deal with the potential for trauma to arise if root causes are part of the research activities.
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Acronyms

ACODEP	Appui aux collectivités décentralisées pour un développement participatif [Support for Decentralised Communities for Participatory Development]
ARG	Action Research Group
ASACO	Association de Santé Communautaire [community health association]
CFA	Communauté Financière Africain [African Financial Community]
CGS	comité de gestion scolaire [school management committee]
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IMRAP	Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix [Malian Institute for Research and Action for Peace]
MEL	monitoring, evaluation, and learning
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SAR	Systemic Action Research
ToC	theory of change

1. Project context

1.1 Design of the Vestibule of Peace project

The project was developed through a collaboration between four partner organisations: (1) Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix (IMRAP), a local Malian non-governmental organisation (NGO) with experience of participatory research through the **Malian Self-Portrait of Obstacles to Peace project** they had carried out with (2) Interpeace, a Swiss peace-building organisation with participatory peace-building experience, (3) IDS, who brought extensive experience with participatory methodologies and rigorous evaluation, and (4) Humanity United, whose peace-building strategy centred on building local agency as a vehicle to transform the peace-building system. The collaboration aimed to use Systemic Action Research (SAR) as an alternative to the conventional externally driven conflict management mechanisms which have revealed their limits through the 2012 crisis in Mali. The central proposition was to use SAR to build the agency of local actors, thus activating endogenous ownership of the pathways to peace.

Part of the inspiration for use of the SAR approach in Mali came from previous experience of one of the IDS team members, Danny Burns, in an application of SAR in Myanmar in 2015–20 (Gray and Burns 2021). Some promising results from this first use of SAR in peace-building were the ability to motivate large numbers of marginalised actors to engage in their own peace-building activities and, in particular, the creation of a mechanism for youth to engage with peace process actors (*ibid.*).

SAR is part of the broader family of Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches which have been applied widely in community development and social change endeavours and can be defined as ‘a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern’ (Bradbury 2015: 1). SAR follows this tradition and infuses it with a systemic orientation which requires evolving implementation design that is responsive to what emerges from the context (Burns 2007: 85), a systemic inquiry phase which aims to use lived experience to uncover the causal dynamics and drivers of system dynamics (in this case, conflict dynamics) (*ibid.*: 89) and use of multiple inquiry streams that enable parallel pathways to grow organically, led by people who have set the agenda and have passion for the questions.

The project, therefore, aimed to develop and test SAR as a dynamic and evolving methodology to locally owned and driven peace through establishing a number of parallel inquiry streams in different local contexts in Mali, as well as

establishing a co-inquiry stream at the national level with relevant peace actors. Within each inquiry stream, the SAR phases, as described in Oosterhoff and Burns (2020) in the context of a bonded labour programme in India and Nepal, which begins with participatory collection and analysis of a large number of (approximately 300) life stories to map the causal dynamics and drivers of conflict. A selection of causal dynamics identified through the analysis are then used as the starting point for a number of ARGs who then move through facilitated cycles of further inquiry into specific themes, development of theories of change (ToCs) and implementation of their own actions. A theory-based and participatory evaluation was embedded throughout the SAR phases (see below for further details).

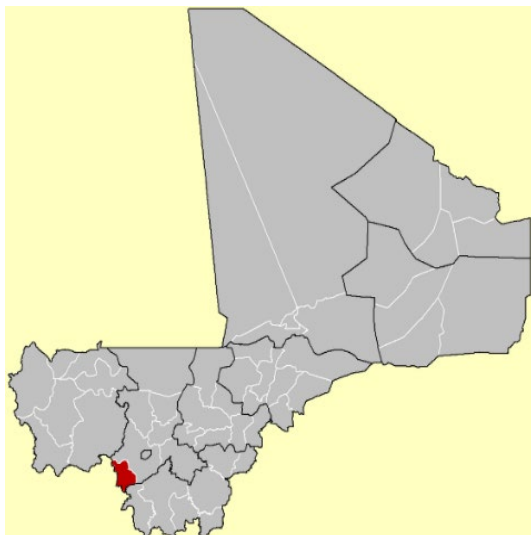
1.2 Context of Mali and Kangaba

Administratively, Mali is divided into 19 regions and one district, 159 *cercles*, 474 *arrondissements*, 815 *communes*, and 12,641 villages.

The **entire** Vestibule of Peace project involved **23 Action Research Groups** (ARGs) in three *cercles*: Kangaba (ten ARGs), Djenné (nine ARGs), and central Mopti (four ARGs), in addition to six interest groups in the District of Bamako.

This report covers only findings from ARGs in the Kangaba *cercle*. The Kangaba *cercle* was chosen as the first local context to implement SAR because at the time of the project it was a relatively stable area, close to the capital Bamako. This provided the partners with a testing and learning ground for the project as a whole.

Figure 1.1 Kangaba *cercle* in Mali



Source: [Wikipedia](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Note: *Cercle* shown in red (darker shade)

The *cercle* of Kangaba (Figure 1.1) covers an area of 5,500km², and is about two hours' drive from Bamako. It is made up of nine communes, each with between 8 and 15,000 inhabitants. It is considered a relatively stable area in the sense that conflicts are less violent and the security situation is less alarming, compared to the armed conflict, terrorism, and chronic insecurity that have prevailed in other parts of Mali since 2012 (e.g. the north and central parts). In almost all the communes of the *cercle*, minor misunderstandings and divergent interests between stakeholders around land and gold mining sometimes lead to violent conflicts between populations of the same or different villages and communes. The types of conflict that are frequent throughout the Kangaba *cercle* include the following:

- Land conflicts: especially over agricultural land. They occur within villages or communes and between different villages or communes, as well as between clans, families or individuals. They arise from misunderstandings or conflict interests surrounding the management, ownership, or demarcation of land.
- Conflict around gold panning sites: the discovery of gold, the management of gold mining, and the influx of young people from all countries and all localities in Mali generate the most violent conflicts in the *cercle*. These are also land-related conflicts, but given the scale and specificity to Kangaba, they are managed separately to other land conflicts.
- Traditional chieftaincy or leadership conflicts: leadership successions, and particular changes in succession mechanisms which at times erode the privileges that traditional power represented, are sometimes the source of conflict within the traditional chieftaincy in the same village.
- Conflict between border communities: the delimitation of borders between Mali and Guinea Conakry is not sufficiently precise, understood, or respected by many border populations, and the clash between this administrative delimitation and customary land boundaries causes significant conflict between border populations.
- Conflict linked to territorial and administrative division: when village entities refuse to be part of the commune of their administrative district, often linked to the way in which the division was carried out, this can lead to conflict.
- Inter- or intra-family conflict: alongside conflicts over land, gold mining, and traditional chieftaincy, issues such as marriage and migration fuel conflicts within a family, a household (between couples), and between different families.

In Kangaba there is a mix of conflict mediation mechanisms within communities, operating at different and interconnected levels. These include a number of different actors in traditional mechanisms, associations or community leaders,

religious leaders, state security forces and administrative and political entities. Even if traditional and formal conflict management often work together, the underpinning logic is based on a traditional mediation process. As a general rule, conflict management begins with the heads of families and clans, before arriving at the village chiefs, with the involvement of griots,² notables and, depending on the case, the partial involvement of young people or women.

Conflicts are brought before the town hall, the courts, the prefecture, when complications arise in the traditional mechanism, or because they have taken a violent turn (e.g. physical harm to individuals, violent confrontation). It is recognised by all people engaged in the project (shown in the commune mapping report³) that the justice system should be the last resort in the chain of local conflict management. However, it is often taken up directly by many actors in conflict, either because they have lost confidence in the traditional system, or because they have enough money and knowledge to help them see legal proceedings through to the end. Legal proceedings can be very costly for the local population, who also complain of corruption in the conflict management processes at the town hall and judicial levels.

Traditional conflict mediation mechanisms are based on a legitimate authority relating to the traditional and customary organisation of power and society long before the advent of the nation state. Within this framework, the roles and authorities of the actors involved are not equal, but all contribute to finding a peaceful and consensual solution to all community conflicts. In Kangaba, it is the 'Bloon' or Vestibule that is invested with the power of the traditional system and exercised by the traditional chieftaincy according to a mechanism of hereditary succession (lineage of the fathers). It confers irreversible authority and legitimacy on all decisions taken within it by the members of the chieftaincy.

On the other hand, griots play a role in regulating social ties, facilitating and mediating conflict management. They are the memory of the knowledge and practical experience of the ancestors of each community, using traditions, cultures and through words and songs they are thought to be able to 'soften hearts and lower the egos of men'. They are an integral part of the traditional conflict management system, and may act alone or accompanied by village chiefs, families or clans, but they generally carry out their mission on behalf of the traditional authorities or a dignitary family.

The agreements and decisions resulting from a traditional conflict mediation process in Kangaba are not generally and systematically documented, they remain oral. The durability and security of evidence and its credibility over time are not guaranteed through time and the disappearance of actors. There is also

² Griots are traditional keepers of oral histories using music and song. They are tasked with preserving genealogies (births, deaths, marriages). They are also traditionally called on to resolve disputes.

³ Internal project report.

a declining legitimacy of certain traditional chiefs in the villages, and the difficulties encountered in the succession of many of these chiefs, pose enormous challenges for traditional mediation mechanisms to be able to effectively manage current conflicts with a more inclusive approach.

As for formal conflict management mechanisms (e.g. justice, town hall), they are based on texts and laws referring to the authority of the State. All decisions taken by these mechanisms are documented and archived. Traditional legitimacies and the exercise of their power are recognised and valued by the texts in force in Mali, notably the new Constitution of 2023, which devotes a title to them:

Traditional authorities and legitimacies, guardians of the values of society, contribute to the reinforcement of living together and social cohesion, and to the prevention and management of conflicts. The different categories of traditional authorities and legitimacy, their roles and the terms of their intervention are determined by law. (Article 179, Secretariat General du Gouvernement 2023: 16)

1.3 Evaluation methods for the Kangaba case studies

The evaluation of the whole project uses a contribution analysis⁴ design. This theory-based approach aims to identify and explain **the contribution** a project intervention has made to observed changes rather than trying to directly **attribute** change to the project. It does so by building and then reflecting on causal ToCs.⁵ These set out how the implementing partners assume change might happen, and build on existing evidence of how SAR and action research methodologies work from the literature and in previous evaluation reports. The evaluation research then explores if and how these causal pathways actually take shape through implementation in order to compare the actual change to the hypothesised change.

Causal ToCs were developed for the local SAR process through a collaborative process involving all partners at the beginning of the project. Based on this initial causal thinking, the evaluation team then identified two main areas (called causal hotspots⁶) within the ToC where evaluation research would be useful to fill specific evidence gaps. One of these focused on **how the ARGs work for whom, and what they achieve at the individual and group level**. A comparative case study methodology is used to respond to this evaluation question and is reported on here. The second causal hotspot relates to the

⁴ For more on contribution analysis see Mayne (2008) and Apgar, Hernandez and Ton (2020).

⁵ For more on causal theories of change see Mayne (2015).

⁶ For more on causal hotspots see Apgar and Snijder (2021).

outcomes that emerge beyond the ARGs and influence change in the community and ripple out to the broader system. This second causal hotspot is explored through outcome harvesting and is reported on separately. Combining findings across the methods and the two hotspots will provide an overall picture of if and how the SAR processes worked and for whom, but also if and how they contributed to outcomes related to peace-building (Apgar and Alamousa, forthcoming).

The **five ARG case studies** were chosen according to a purposeful sampling logic, to choose cases which appear to have a larger learning potential when compared. The criteria used to decide where the largest learning potential could be found included: thematic focus, membership, geographic focus, efficiency of moving from analysis to action, and the type and strength of facilitation.

In **three of the ARGs** (Maramandougou, Manicoura, and Nougua) the members developed very **similar ToCs** related to **income generation** for women, which it was thought would decrease household and inter-family conflict by supporting the daughters of the family to remain in school (Maramandougou and Manicoura) or reduce the need for adult women to work in the gold mines (Nougua). Their **income-generation activities were soap-making**. These three were chosen due to the high potential for comparative analysis and deepening understanding on how the groups identified and analysed the same issue and how this led to distinct ToCs yet similar actions.

The **two further ARGs** are both focused on conflict mediation activities. They were chosen because one (Naréna) was considered by the project team to be 'successful' as several villages cooperated in building a meeting house for the commune, while the other (Balan-Bakama) was considered the least 'successful' because it undertook few activities. Success is defined as the ability of the groups to move from analysis to action that is aimed at creating change in the community. In addition to these reasons, these cases were thought by the evaluation team to represent a range of other factors, including strength of facilitation in the ARG and diversity of its members, both of which were conditions the team hypothesised initially would influence how the groups worked.

Within each of the five case studies, we first describe in detail the ARGs' membership, conditions, and internal dynamics (section 3). We then provide a cross-case analysis considering: what works, for whom, how does it work, and in what context? (section 4).

The **data** collected by the evaluation team for this project is unusually rich. It includes the following:

1. Well-documented periodic write-ups by the evaluation team at various key points in the project;
2. Interviews three years apart of around half of the ARG members, constructed as a baseline and endline study;
3. Outcome harvesting data from the initial analysis workshop (December 2022);
4. A detailed reflection on the internal dynamics of the meetings by the evaluation team after one year of functioning; and
5. Details on the identity of the group members and meeting places.

2. Setting up all the ARGs

2.1 Setting up the life story analysis phase

When the IMRAP team visited Kangaba to decide on locations for the ARGs, they identified 20 local ‘story collectors’ (*enquêteurs*) to collect individual life stories in local languages. IMRAP also recruited 19 ‘researcher-transcribers’ (*enquêteur-transcripteurs*) in Bamako and Kangaba to transcribe and digitise the content of these stories into French.

To identify story providers, the IMRAP team and local mobilisers spoke with traditional village chiefs (*chefferie traditionnelle*) to identify all the different families and/or communities in the locality (see section 2.3 for more information on the overall role of mobilisers). A random selection of potential story providers was made to represent these different groups. The final selection of potential story providers was made during further team discussions to ensure the inclusion of all social strata in the process.

After training by the IMRAP team, the collectors were introduced to the village chiefs, and then began collecting stories from the story tellers from July to October 2019, collecting a total of 312 individual life stories from the ten ARG sites. These stories were anonymised to protect their sensitive nature and guarantee confidentiality.

2.2 Conducting the collective analysis of the stories

The collective analysis of the stories took place on 11–16 February 2020 in Kangaba, principal town of the *cercle* (in large groups for all stories). Around 50 people analysed the stories as part of a participatory causal analysis process.⁷ These people were all members of the community: there were some who were story collectors, and some who were story providers, and some who were neither. There were also mobilisers, women and young people, authorities and citizens, and literate and non-literate people. They first analysed each story in pairs – one person who could read and one who could not. The pair drew a system map for each story (Figure 2.1) and identified a key message about cause and effect.

⁷ For more on the analysis methodology, see Burns (2021).

Figure 2.1 Drawing a system map for each story



Source: Alamoussa Dioma.

The maps were further aggregated into a large system map. Through discussion and deliberation, the participants selected five key themes which represented causal dynamics in the map that they would be motivated to move to ARGs on: **mediation, agriculture, poverty, health, and schooling.**

Some of those who participated in the analysis workshop reported back publicly to their communities, at a meeting room with the village chief, at the town hall with locally elected officials, at a *grin* (a place of meeting, entertainment, exchange where men of the same generation gather around tea), and to the Tomboloma (community police at gold-panning sites).

2.3 From collective story analysis to setting up the ARGs

Overlap between those involved in story analysis and those involved in ARGs: recorded data shows that all ten ARGs had 97 people in total. Of those, 45 (46 per cent) had participated in the collection and/or analysis of the life stories. The rest were recommended either by the 'mobilisers' and local authorities or chosen by the ARG members themselves.

Selection of ARG members: the IMRAP team chose some ARG members from among the people who had taken part in the story analysis workshop to become the nucleus of the groups. In choosing these people, the IMRAP team considered their personal qualities and predispositions, and their availability, neutrality, and volunteerism. Each ARG nucleus then integrated, at its own pace and according to its own needs and objectives, people chosen by the members themselves.

Selection of ARG facilitators: there are 20 facilitators (ten men and ten women) divided between the ten ARGs (two per group). They were chosen by the IMRAP team from among the ARG members for their ease in speaking out and drawing others towards a common goal, having a certain recognised authority, and an interest in and connection to the life of their communities. They were given special training from IMRAP. Their role is very important in the ARG process: they facilitate discussions between members, ensure compliance with the ARG operating rules, take notes and report on meetings to members and to the IMRAP team, and take the lead in organising activities. Facilitators received a payment for each regular monthly meeting, but nothing for other (extraordinary) meetings, research activities, or the implementation of community initiatives. At least one of the two facilitators per group must be able to read and write in either French or the local language. This is because they need to be able to facilitate meetings in the language accepted and understood by the whole ARG; take notes on the broad outlines of discussions, so as to keep on track; and take stock of exchanges from time to time with participants and the project team. Local facilitators must be both men and women to take into account the effective participation and concerns of women (who are often in the minority) in the ARGs.

The role of mobilisers: there were approximately 30 mobilisers in all the communes and 31 villages chosen for intervention by the project in Kangaba. They were chosen by the traditional chieftaincy of each locality to serve as a guide and orientation for the IMRAP team, based on the realities, culture, and organisation of the community. IMRAP's criteria for mobilisers are that they are neutral, consistently available, and there is a consensus of agreement to have them involved. They receive an occasional commitment fee to ensure their availability. During field missions or activities, they mobilise communities in collaboration with the IMRAP team. They participate in the story collection phase by bringing story collectors and story tellers together, contributing to the collective analysis of stories, and later become members of the ARGs.

The IMRAP operational team: the IMRAP team is made up of 11 people (seven men and four women). It is made up of one coordinator; three researchers, five assistant researchers; one monitoring, evaluation, and learning officer; and one monitoring, evaluation, and learning assistant. The coordinator is responsible for implementing the project as a whole, as agreed in the project documents, and the division of roles between partners and the various bodies (e.g. scientific cell, grand council) which were set up for reflection and decision-making on the project. Researchers are responsible for the locality entrusted to them by the coordinator and are in charge of carrying out all the activities planned for this area. They may be called upon by each other in another locality to help with any project task. The assistant researchers support the researchers in their responsibilities and in carrying out specific tasks. They (researcher and assistant) form an autonomous team within the communities. The monitoring,

evaluation, and learning (MEL) team is responsible for participating in the development of the MEL system, implementing it and adapting it according to the needs of the field and the decisions taken by the partners' MEL team. They are also responsible for training team members and participants in the project's MEL approaches and tools.

Financial support to the ARG: all ARG members receive travel costs to attend each regular meeting where an IMRAP team member was present (5,000 CFA per participant), in addition to food and drink provided by the IMRAP team. The meeting facilitators receive 30,000 CFA per meeting. In three of the ARGs (Maramandougou, Nougou, and Balan-Bakama), any unannounced lateness or absence of the ARG members incurred a penalty of 500 CFA for lateness and 1,000 CFA for absence. In practice, these funds were then used by the groups to buy refreshments for the meetings.

No fees or other support are given by IMRAP for the meetings and research which are carried out by the ARG members without the participation of the project team. These are supported by the members themselves, e.g. travel, telephone, etc. and the facilitators do not receive a fee.

Where project activities require financial support, such as the building of the Vestibule or the soap-making business, IMRAP waits for the groups/communities to start with their own available means before committing its support definitively. Budgets are drawn up as part of the participatory process in meetings.

Different types of training given by IMRAP: as mentioned above, specific training was given to the facilitators and story collectors to undertake their tasks, and direction was given to participants in the story analysis workshops. In addition, there were workshops on methods of analysis, mediation, and conflict management for ARG members, including inter-ARG workshops attended by at least two members per ARG, and one focus group per commune on understanding and managing the dynamics of each commune. At almost every ARG meeting where IMRAP staff were present, questions of methods, attitudes, situation analysis, and actors in conflict were also addressed and shared to help members understand the ARG approach and experience its added value in their mediation.

3. Case studies of five selected ARGs: the process of implementation

3.1 Naréna

Table 3.1 Naréna

Profile of ARG members	Number of members: 9 Number of members from story phase: 4 Number aged under 34: 2 Number of females: 2 Occupations: farmer (3); griot ⁸ (1); village head/mayor advisor (4); youth president (1) Number of villages covered: 4 (Naréna, Sébécourani, Socourani, Balan-komana)
Meetings	Place of meetings: state agricultural offices ('ACODEP') and the town hall Number of meetings from 2020–23: 44
Theme	Conflict mediation

Note: ACODEP – Appui aux collectivités décentralisées pour un développement participatif [Support for Decentralised Communities for Participatory Development].

Source: Authors' own.

3.1.1 Facilitator(s)

In Naréna, there were two facilitators. One was a woman who, according to the evaluation team, was a competent facilitator, a good listener, and patient. She leads a women's group and works at the town hall. She is a key member of the commune's women's association, a town councillor, and works with another local NGO. She frequently interacts with community members through meetings and discussions, and has experience in facilitating meetings with women, men, and local authorities. This had a positive influence on her facilitation skills within the ARG, enabling her to play a key role as a woman. The second was a young man, university graduate, and influential player on the commune's youth

⁸ Griots are traditional keepers of oral histories using music and song. They are tasked with preserving genealogies (births, deaths, marriages). They are also traditionally called on to resolve disputes.

committee. He was described by the evaluation team as having a tendency to impose his own ideas on discussions.

3.1.2 Internal meeting dynamics

The evaluation team reported that the ARG included a relatively high number of village chiefs and caste men. However, given that the ARG was in a relatively urban environment where the level of education was higher than in some other ARGs, women and younger members were more confident in expressing themselves at meetings. It was noted that the village chief's advisors tended to dominate discussions on land, while young people dominated on other subjects, and women were less involved. Exchanges between meeting participants were direct between all members, and age and gender did not hinder participation in group discussions. There was one woman who was very shy and less involved in the exchanges, despite all the encouragement from members and the IMRAP team. She came from a village and had been chosen by the ARG members to make the group more inclusive at village and gender level. Geographical diversity was also deemed important by group members, and efforts were made to ensure that members came from each of the surrounding villages. The evaluation team noted that the Naréna group collaborated well together due to a certain degree of cultural similarity, even though not all had previously worked together on story collection and analysis. They kept each other regularly informed about the dynamics of the commune, and had to organise meetings without the IMRAP team to discuss and make decisions. They delegated research tasks to each other, often working in pairs or groups. The absence of two or three members was enough for them to postpone a meeting. They make great use of humour and joking as a means of calming misunderstandings, promoting truth among themselves and encouraging each other.

3.1.3 Process of identifying theme and problem

According to interviews with ARG members, the group discussed two other themes before settling on the final theme and associated activities. Initially, they decided to deal with a land dispute between two neighbouring villages belonging to two different communes (Naréna and Karan), triggered by the redrawing of an administrative boundary, some physical altercations between young people from the two villages, and a lengthy legal procedure spanning 20 years. However, this was dropped as one of the communes failed to cooperate.

The second theme the ARG initially considered was related to health issues. It concerned a problem between the medical staff and the local population regarding the unwelcoming reception of patients and the new ultrasound used on pregnant women in the locality. Ultrasound is either poorly perceived or misunderstood by many of the local population, or misused by certain health

staff. This led to a drop in user attendance at the Naréna health centre. The ARG organised awareness-raising sessions between the users, health staff, community health association, and authorities which helped to dispel tensions and bring about a positive change in attendance at the centre. After this success, the group then decided to return to the mediation theme, but instead of a specific conflict, they decided to build a mediation infrastructure – a ‘Vestibule’ or meeting place for mediation (see below for more detail).

Throughout these discussions, the evaluation team noted that members were not discouraged and continued to meet, discuss, and adapt, eventually deciding on an activity.

3.1.4 Research activities

Research topic: initially, the group researched a conflict between two municipalities (Naréna and Karan) over whose land a gold-panning site was located on.

The ARG members spoke with members of traditional chiefdom; the administrative authorities (mayor and governor); members of the Naréna ‘Kèlèbolo Saba’ (a traditional mechanism for resolving conflicts between the various Naréna sister villages); the land commission of Naréna ‘Kèlèbolo Saba’; villagers living close to the gold-panning site. The ARG members then organised a meeting among Naréna’s six villages and the ‘Kèlèbolo Saba’.

The findings: it was found that Naréna owned the land. The communities then requested another meeting with the ARG members as a follow-up, and also to understand the ARG and its objectives. Further meetings were planned, but the ARG then postponed activities on this issue as the ARG in Karan was engaged with a different problem.

One ARG member notes the importance of the information-gathering process:

When we started with the research, what was being said and the information we received was not the same. I personally found myself in several meetings held whether in Socourani or Naréna here. So through the information I received, I realised that it may be possible for us to solve, but it was going to be difficult.

3.1.5 Theory of change and actions taken

One of the group’s members explains that his research into the mediation of land disputes has highlighted the role of a historical group called ‘Kèlèbolo Saba’, which meets between villages in the event of a land dispute. This group has a cultural resonance and is involved in a kind of founding myth associated with filial ties between villages.

The ARG found in its research on the land dispute that women and young people were not involved in the conflict resolution processes and structures. They found that while the chiefs agreed that the conflict had ended, that social ties between villages had not been repaired. As a result, the conflict persisted between citizens, and in particular the women and youth who continued to hold a grudge. This led the ARG to decide that an action that would provide a more sustainable solution would be to reform the Vestibule, an existing endogenous conflict resolutions mechanism. Traditionally, the Vestibule is part of the tradition of each village, and each village had its own space in which conflict resolution processes take place. The ARG reflected, based on their research and experience with the specific land dispute that the existing Vestibules are only functional at village level, and so cannot engage manage inter-village conflict, and, furthermore, are employed using a traditional mindset that could continue to block access to women and youth.

The ARG therefore decided to construct a new Vestibule building which both represented where conflict mediation could take place, building on traditional mechanism, and could become a more inclusive and effective space and process and work across the six villages within the commune and so be used by the 'Kèlèbolo Saba'. The construction materials were financed jointly by the project and the town hall, and the labour was provided by the six neighbouring villages. The villages contributed an estimated 500,000 CFA francs' worth of labour, while the town council contributed 1,000,000 CFA, and IMRAP contributed 4,500,000 CFA. Construction of the building took two months. All the villages in the commune participated in the construction, mainly by each contributing a sum decided unanimously. The traditional chiefdoms and landowners voluntarily ceded a guaranteed plot of land for this initiative, which is located close to the sub-prefecture, the town hall, and the youth centre.

The ToC: if a Vestibule is built at commune level and based on the customary conflict management mechanism, it can integrate the only village in the commune that is not a member of 'Kèlèbolo Saba', the existing traditional authorities, and extend to women and young people. It will be a space for inclusive dialogue and management of any type or size of conflict in the commune.

The process of developing the ToC: at the start of the thematic discussion sessions, the IMRAP team displayed the systemic map previously developed to serve as a reference point for discussions. To understand their own conflict situation and dynamics, the Naréna ARG took the five themes from the systemic map, then used the causal chains on that map to draw a smaller map under each theme, highlighting the causes and consequences of a specific problem/conflict in their locality. The systemic map therefore served as a jumping-off point for discussions. The ToC is developed and reflected in

reference to this smaller map, depending on the problem concerned. Both the systemic map and the small map were important starting points for the group's understanding of the causal relationships of each chosen problem, but as discussions proceeded, the systemic map was not always referred to. The IMRAP and MEL team frequently drew attention back to the relation of the problem to the small map during discussions and its relation to conflict and resilience. However, in all three ARGs with soap-making activities (Naréna, Maramandougou, and Manicoura), there were only small differences between the ToC and the small systemic map.

The MEL team observed that there was some discrepancy between the initial problem mapping and the ToC. The initial problem mapping had emphasised the management of a conflict between farmer and herder via the intervention of griots and the traditional chieftaincy, whereas the ToC focused on building resilience through the 'Kèlèbolo Saba' mechanism by constructing a 'Vestibule'. However, the MEL team considered that the aim of the approach was not for the group to exactly follow their first thoughts on the problem before conducting more in-depth research in the community. Rather, the aim of the approach was to help the group members to understand the whys and wherefores of the action taken, of their own ability to adapt analyses or decisions through in-depth, ongoing reflection, and of the possible short- and long-term implications, both individually and collectively. At the last session of the group's reflections in November 2022, with the building still under construction, the MEL team returned to the group's ToC, documenting it and its associated activities on a large piece of paper.

Finally, we decided to take an action that can be an example for the whole village which is the construction of the Vestibule... often with us, when you are faced with a land problem and there is not someone in your home who knows how to speak or defend himself, you may lose your land... I can lend you a land to cultivate several years later, if I want it back if you are more listened to in the village than me, you can grab my land against my will.

(ARG member)

Effects of the peace Vestibule functioning: at the time of writing this case study report, the Vestibule was not yet operational, and there had been no dialogue/mediation activities inside. Finishing touches such as interior painting, toilets, and fencing are taking longer than expected. Future discussions and documentation (from August 2023) will enable us to learn more about the reasons for this delay, what impact it may have on the ToC, and the dynamics within the group and between it and the community.

3.2 Balan-Bakama

Table 3.2 Balan-Bakama

Profile of ARG members	Number of members: 9 Number of members from story phase: 4 Number aged under 34: 1 Number of females: 2 Occupations: farmer (3); municipal councillor (1); youth president (1); housewife (2); retired military (1); builder (1) Number of villages covered: 5 (Solefara, Balan-masala, Komana-couta, Namagana, Djolibana)
Meetings	Place of meetings: town hall Number of meetings from 2020–23: 47
Theme	Conflict mediation

Source: Authors' own.

3.2.1 Facilitator(s)

There were two facilitators at Balan-Bakama. One is a housewife, described by the evaluation team as relatively young (30). She was chosen because of her other community activities with women, her availability, and her interest in the project, but she was not a confident facilitator. The other facilitator is a young man, active in his community, but his moderation of debates and note-taking were weak. The relationship between this facilitator and a member of the group (the retired military man) was strained at first, due to existing tensions between their two families in the village. Problems with facilitation led to dysfunction in the group, and it was noted that members did not openly discuss issues and that it was sometimes difficult to bring members together in group discussions. Because of these tensions, another member, a local councillor, also took on the task of facilitating certain meetings, which helped a great deal.

3.2.2 Internal meeting dynamics

In this group ongoing tensions between some members of the group did not encourage an atmosphere of trust to be built easily. Two individuals who were involved from the collection and analysis phase of work had a long-standing dispute that related to a broader dispute between their families and two chiefs who both claimed to be legitimate leaders of their villages. Working together during the analysis process seemed to create an opportunity to resolve the

immediate tension with the two seemingly building a constructive relationship. The IMRAP team saw this as a positive sign and hoped that including both in the ARG would have a ripple effect out to their broader village dispute.

However, the tensions resurfaced during the ARG meetings leading to insincerity in the ARG discussions and a real challenge for the group dynamics. In this case, the IMRAP research manager in the area, and the MEL team intervened directly with the group members and some tolerance was established between the two members of the group who were in conflict. At the November 2022 meeting, the ARG members strongly criticised one of them (an ex-soldier) for his bellicose attitude, which they felt was getting in the way of the group objectives. The courage to make this open critique was a sign of the trust that had been built by the group. The individual himself recognised his role in feeding the conflict. What the team witnessed was that throughout the ARG process these two individuals who represented a broader conflict in their village did in fact begin to build a stronger relationship of trust. The wife of one of them claimed to be afraid at first when she saw the two men working together, as she thought further conflict would result. In fact, what she saw was a real lasting change that has allowed these two families to overcome this long-standing dispute.

Five new members (young men) joined the group several months after its creation, which also disturbed the atmosphere because they sometimes criticised the activities planned by the original members of the group. The initiative to integrate these people had been taken by the ARG members in a meeting in order to strengthen the representativeness of the group within the municipality and its ability to work effectively in a highly conflictual environment. The group had found that it was underrepresented at the village level and its legitimacy was contested by the commune. This is why the ARG initiated a visit to present the group to all the villages and took the opportunity to ask the village authorities to appoint representatives to integrate into the group.

3.2.3 Diversity

The diversity of members, all from different social strata, made it possible to involve the same range of community people, who sometimes attended the meetings although they were not regular ARG members. For example, health personnel, members of the community health association (Association de Santé Communautaire, ASACO), and the town hall were invited to participate in ARG meetings. Diverse membership also facilitated research, giving good access to different people and useful information that served to improve knowledge and relationships within the community. However, the external community members sometimes did not understand the group's approach. For example, a chief doctor who had been involved in humanitarian, but not peace-building, activities spoke at one meeting but did not understand the purpose of the group until it was explained by the MEL team.

Of the two women in the group, only one attended meetings regularly and was not very active in discussions. Their participation in discussions was low, they did not voluntarily take the floor, and when encouraged to do so, they spoke very little. They were interested in researching the problems of the health centre, as the subject concerned women in pregnancy, vaccination, medication, and care. When encouraged to speak up, they put forward their opinions and experiences on these aspects. However, the group, including the women, preferred to focus on development activities unrelated to the real dynamics of existing conflicts. After the group realised, after much input by the IMRAP project team, that it was not aligned with the ARG objectives, the women's level of participation fell even further. They seemed a little lost or lacking in confidence, with some saying that they had not understood the logic of the ARG.

The women did not participate much in the research activities, as it was not considered appropriate for women to travel long distances alone to undertake the research. This is because the distances between villages are very great in this commune, over 30km between certain villages with roads in very poor condition. The women in the group did not own a motorcycle and would have had to travel in the company of a third party. As married women, not all men in this locality were willing to let their wives be accompanied by another man on a motorcycle. However, they were initially involved in the research about the health centre, but only at the level of the commune main town where they lived and where the centre was located. They had even been able to conduct a few interviews with women about the problem of the centre.

In short, the women's participation in the group fell because their topic of interest (health) did not align with the topic of conflict dynamics, and when the topic changed, they became less interested and less confident. Cultural norms about travelling alone also prevented them from fully participating in the research activities.

3.2.4 Theme and problem identification process

The group began by looking at two land conflicts, but these had been mediated by other parts of the community and were deemed too complicated for the group's resources. Then the group decided to focus on women's involvement in conflict resolution, and the women in the ARG were tasked with organising meetings with other women in the commune to mobilise them. The project team delegated a female member of its staff to encourage them, help them organise meetings, and plan activities to implement this action. However, the women were not proactive, partly because a new Chinese mining unit opened in the commune, and the women began to work there. The group then turned its attention to conflicts linked to access to health facilities and the price of

medicines which had led some members of the community to go to a different health centre in another locality.

The evaluation team noted that the group did not do well at understanding their activities in relation to the causalities identified in the system-mapping and story collection phase. They instead thought that development activities such as health care and the price of medicine were more important than the dynamics of conflict and resilience.

As Balan-Bakama is one of the poorest communes in the *cercle* in terms of development infrastructure, projects can quickly be perceived as a means of carrying out development activities. During the ARG's first meetings, the language used by the various members of the project team on field missions may not have been sufficiently clear about their activities and objectives. The group members also wanted fast concrete results, instead of spending a lot of time researching, developing causal links, meeting, and seeking community involvement. They tended to reach agreement in meetings very quickly, after around one to three meetings.

While the researcher and the MEL team tried to explain the methodology and the use of the system map, key members of the group continued to cling to the idea of building or rehabilitating infrastructure (relating to health, schools, markets, town halls), to demonstrate to the community their effectiveness and value as a local group. In their view, this would prove their effectiveness and give them greater legitimacy in the eyes of the community. This meant that they did not value or prioritise the steps when discussing or planning measures. The steps that should have been taken were problem identification, causal chains, evidence gathering, inclusion, involvement and participation of all, solution and ToC formulation, action, and reflections on change. They remained interested in development or quick-impact projects, without deep reflection and research into a problem, and without demonstrating how the solution put into action could transform the dynamics of existing conflicts in the commune.

Only later did the group begin to reflect on soap-making or Vestibule-building actions when inspired by feedback from other ARGs. But they did not themselves demonstrate the links between these and existing conflict or resilience dynamics in the commune. Indeed, one group member mentioned in interviews that he would have preferred to have a soap-making business like some other ARGs, and two others said they were disappointed not to have been able to build a Vestibule like the one in Naréna:

Because the Vestibule is part of our Mandé customs, everything that is decided in the Vestibule is irreversible... we had wanted that too, but it didn't work. We could not agree on the place to build it... so finally we didn't do it.

(ARG member)

3.2.5 ToC and action undertaken

The Balan-Bakama group did not develop a ToC, but they did undertake research and mediation, particularly about the health centre. This involved research to obtain many administrative documents from the commune's health authorities and the town hall, to better understand the functioning of the health committees and the reasons for medicine pricing.

3.2.6 Research activities

Research theme: the group quickly turned its attention to the health theme, identifying a dysfunction in the community health association (ASACO). For the group, this problem was the source of much frustration and tension between the local population, health staff, the ASACO office, and the town council. The members of the ARG met with the mayor, health staff, the president of the ASACO, village chiefs, women, and young people. However, the initial interviews were largely limited to the commune's chief town and two other villages from which the first members had come. They later collected documents, conducted more interviews beyond the initial ones, and held meetings where the chief medical officer, the president of the ASACO, and staff from the mayor's office attended. Finally, all stakeholders agreed on the need to reshuffle the ASACO board and replace members to make it more dynamic and transparent.

During the research, the problem of drug prices was identified, and it was understood that the rules of the ASACO had to be respected for its reorganisation. The research also identified that tensions and low attendance at the health centre were not directly and solely linked to the dysfunction of the ASACO, but rather to a general lack of information, for which all the stakeholders took responsibility. They therefore decided to carry out awareness-raising activities aimed at the stakeholders and the general population, in parallel with discussions on community-wide action:

A large part of the population of the commune had boycotted the health centre, people did not know that the [health centre committee] is for the commune which means that it was very little frequented. We have organised meetings around this problem with all the actors concerned, today it's okay. Thanks to the actions of the ARG, this problem is solved. The people have understood and the centre is very well frequented now.

(ARG member)

Results: because the group itself contained two members who were in a conflictual relationship, seeing the change in their relationship to becoming more tolerant of each other over the months left an impression on some of the other group members.

Some of the group also emphasised their increased respect and legitimacy in the eyes of the community as a result of their activities with the group:

I am now more solicited by my community to intervene in case of problems to try to intervene and mitigate the situation before it is too late. It has brought me a big change in the community, I have the respect, trust, and esteem of many people.

(ARG member)

3.3 Maramandougou

Table 3.3 Maramandougou

Profile of ARG members	Number of members: 9 Number of members from story phase: 6 Number aged under 34: 1 Number of females: 3 Occupations: farmer (2); village head/mayor advisor (1); teacher (2); housewife (1); women community leader (1); matron (1); trader (1). Number of villages covered: 5 (Figuiratomo, Figuirakoro, Fouh, Namissala, N'golodjebougou)
Meetings	Place of meetings: town hall Number of meetings from 2020–23: 46
Theme	School enrolment

Source: Authors' own.

3.3.1 Facilitator(s)

There are two facilitators, a man and a woman, both of whom have experience of working with other NGOs (which are not peace-building NGOs). The man is a farmer and a village and municipal councillor. The woman is a leader in the commune and president of the women's association. Both can read and write – the man in French and Bamanankan, the woman in Bamanankan only.

Both participated in the story collection phase and demonstrated their ability to mobilise the community. The evaluation team considered the male facilitator to be a little rigid in his approach, not allowing the discussion to go beyond specific topics and tightly regulating speaking time. However, he encouraged everyone to speak and listened well, while ensuring that speakers respected each other. The woman very often facilitated meeting sessions, and she did it just as well as the man (with less authority). The two of them exchanged facilitation roles and took

notes to complement each other. The group had chosen to keep their meeting minutes in the Bamanankan language, despite their ability to do so in French. This was because the majority of members felt more at ease with the local language, both written and spoken.

3.3.2 Internal meeting dynamics

The strong and focused facilitation helped ensure that everyone took their turn at speaking and listening. The evaluation team notes that the tone of the discussions is generally neutral and relaxed. All decisions are taken together in plenary session, and proposals are frequently passed by majority agreement. Occasionally, some members dominate some conversations, but not the same people for all topics and all the time. For example, women tend to be quite quiet in discussions about land issues but are more vocal on discussions about health and education. The biggest disagreements are between young people and older adults, but agreement is eventually found. Sometimes, the views of older or influential people in the group affect decisions because of their social status and experience in managing local conflicts. When a group member has a task, they take their responsibility very seriously and are respected by the others. The member invests his own time and money in undertaking tasks.

3.3.3 Process of identifying theme and problem

The group began by studying a **land dispute** between two neighbouring villages (Dambala and Namissala). This conflict was settled by traditional mediation involving the traditional village chiefs and the 'Grand Forum du Mandé'. One of the group's members also took part in this mediation and discussed it with the other group members, drawing up a report. The commune has no gold-panning sites on its soil, nor are there any fairly dynamic economic sectors, so conflicts are essentially fuelled by questions of agricultural land and family dynamics. So instead of waiting for a likely conflict to erupt, the group decided to change the theme and work instead on **schooling**, in particular on the de-schooling of girls, which, based on the systemic map, would lead to family conflicts.

3.3.4 Research activities

Research activities on de-schooling were the following: ARG members spoke with teachers, pupils, parents, the school administration, the school management committee (comité de gestion scolaire, CGS), and local authorities. The research found a lot of evidence that de-schooling was widespread. The evidence enabled them to organise a targeted awareness-raising activity as a first step, and then to initiate a community-wide project.

3.3.5 Diversity of members

Unlike other groups, all members can read and write. Young people and women participate on an equal footing. There is a diversity of members from different social levels in the group, including from the traditional chieftaincy, the town hall, and the youth association, in addition to women. Many of them already have links to conflict mediation processes. Unlike some of the other groups, geographical representation of the different villages was not raised by the members in interviews.

3.3.6 ToC and action undertaken

The awareness-raising and community action about de-schooling included the following activities. Awareness-raising was carried out in a number of villages, with the screening of short films featuring interview content, and the words of successful girls. The project team provided technical support and travel to the villages to show the film. This activity should contribute to the preparation of a larger, sustainable initiative on a commune-wide scale. At the same time, the group was discussing the idea of soap-making as a solution to girls' schooling problems. They had taken notes of the discussions during the awareness-raising sessions, and then organised meetings with women, chiefs, and young people to find the best way forward. That process was how they decided to undertake the soap-making project aimed at women, so that their income could help keep girls in school.

Group members identified conflict within the home and between families, caused by young girls dropping out of school to work in the gold mines. They saw poverty as the cause, with some families unable to continue paying school fees. They suggested that if the women had an income-generating activity, this would enable their daughters to stay in school and pay for their wedding trousseau. It was decided that soap-making was a good income-generating activity because access to soap is quite difficult in the area, while demand is much higher than supply. Also, it is an activity that women can do all year round, individually and collaboratively, it does not require a lot of water or sophisticated equipment, and it does not interfere with their household responsibilities or their farm work. And yet soap is used daily for personal hygiene, and cleaning clothes and utensils, by women, men, and young people of all social classes. As a result, it is one of the most important imported consumer products in the area. Other potential income-generating activities require more commitment and are less realistic for a project like this one. For example, market gardening requires a lot of water (boreholes) to be feasible in the dry season, and the upkeep of boreholes and the extra gardening can be too much of a burden for the women. Women were identified for soap-making because, culturally, it is the mothers who are primarily responsible for the school fees and wedding trousseaux of their daughters.

The soap-making activities proved successful for some of the women at the community level, prevented some of them from going into debt, and reduced their conflicts within the family. The evaluation team also saw an increased confidence, collaboration, and cohesion among the women involved in the activity.

In the interviews with some of the group members, few actually spoke of the soap-making activities, rather concentrating on how it had changed their attitude to conflict. One spoke of the benefits of the research activities, and particularly analysing the causes of conflicts:

During the training, we mapped the causes of conflicts. This changed me... I understood more people from outside... people who move, I imagined if it was me who left and leave everything behind.
(ARG member)

Others highlighted the sense of legitimacy that membership of the ARG conferred on them:

The activities of the ARG brought me a change. As a conflict resolution actor, I cannot be belligerent... I do my best to prevent conflict. I have become a respected man in the locality, I am received every time I intervene throughout the commune.
(ARG member)

Several members of the group expressed that they were concerned about a lack of funding into the future, and spoke about being reimbursed for travel expenses.

3.4 Manicoura

Table 3.4 Manicoura

Profile of ARG members	Number of members: 9 Number of members from story phase: 6 Number aged under 34: 2 Number of females: 3 Occupations: farmer (2); village head advisor (2); housewife (1); women community leader (2); griot (1); youth leader (1). Number of villages covered: 1 (Manicoura)
Meetings	Place of meetings: meeting room of the facilitator Number of meetings from 2020–23: 47
Theme	School enrolment

Source: Authors' own.

3.4.1 Facilitator(s)

The evaluation team consider the facilitation to be excellent, and say that all the group members are very comfortable with its facilitation. The facilitator is an older man who was the first contact for the project in the village. He is one of the main actors in the management of his community and very influential, although he is not officially the village chief. Of all the facilitators for all the groups, he is the only one who is both a facilitator and a mobiliser. This could suggest that the earlier and more active a facilitator is involved in the project, the better an ARG may be managed.

The co-facilitator is a woman who is active in women's affairs in the village. However, she did not actively facilitate the meetings.

3.4.2 Internal meeting dynamics

The facilitator ensures that no one monopolises the floor in discussions, and the exchanges between the group members are open and frank with a friendly tone, possibly because everyone comes from the same village and so know each other well. The evaluation team say that decision-making is participatory and democratic, although there are sometimes contradictions, particularly between young people and adults. The group's activities are supported by the village authorities, young people, women, and other actors working in mediation.

3.4.3 Conflict between administrative authorities

All of the other ARGs are one per commune, but the commune of Maramandougou has two ARGs: (1) the commune of Maramandougou; and (2) a town within the commune of Maramandougou called Manicoura. They were set up separately from the outset because Manicoura did not want to be associated with Maramandougou on the project. This is because of existing tensions between the two related to an administrative division process in the 1990s related to certain clauses in their union into one commune. However, there is no violence or contempt between the inhabitants, who maintain a perfect historical and cultural fraternity. It is only with regard to the authorities of Maramandougou that the village authorities of Manicoura feel a certain distrust, rooted in the history of these two communities, which makes Manicoura prefer to seek its own administrative independence (being a commune in its own right).

Their only point of collective participation during the project was limited to collective analysis, inter-ARG workshops, and training courses organised by the IMRAP team. On the other hand, these activities brought some key members of the two ARGs closer together, and made certain members of the traditional authority and the Manicoura community aware of the schooling problems they were causing their children because of their categorical refusal to declare births to the Maramandougou town hall. In that way, the ARG functioned well as a deliberative dialogical space. One group member explained,

Since the conflict between us and the municipality, none of our business has reached the town hall. We told the superiors of the project [peace Vestibule] that we do not take part in any initiative that goes through the commune, even if we have interests in it.

3.4.4 Process of identifying theme and problem

From the outset, the group chose to work on the problem of **schooling**, with the aim of understanding the causes and consequences of children dropping out of school – a frequent occurrence in their community. Initially, the group looked at the problem of the administrative subdivision of the school, but not all members agreed on its relevance to the theme of conflict mediation. They then examined a number of problems linked to children's education, including corporal punishment by teachers, which provokes the anger of parents; and the impossibility of obtaining birth certificates from the town hall due to the conflict with the communal level, which has a knock-on effect on children's schooling.

They finally decided on an income-generating activity to help pay school fees. They first considered market gardening, but the women had realised that production would be slow and seasonal, and opted instead for soap-making. Several projects prior to the ARG had also helped the women with market

gardening, which did not work out due to numerous technical, water, and organisational constraints. With soap-making, on the other hand, demand is high and local production almost non-existent. Soap-making is a regular activity with little availability, no seasonal issues, does not hinder any of the women's other related activities, and is profitable in both the short and long term. One of the group's members explains

At the beginning, saponification wasn't on the agenda. The men in the group thought that market gardening was profitable, but the women recommended soap-making.

Initially, the group had problems understanding the chain of causality from the systemic map in justifying the project, but it became easier after discussions. The group developed an action plan, identified the actors involved, formulated research questions, and distributed roles and responsibilities.

3.4.5 Diversity of members

The evaluation team say that the young people, women, and people with higher status participate actively and fully in group activities and meetings at the same level. Women tend not to speak on land issues but on health and education. In the interviews with group members, most of those who spoke about the soap-making were women, while the men spoke more of conflict.

3.4.6 Research activities

Research theme: after conducting some research, the group decided to focus on the problem of girls dropping out of school, which, according to their analysis, generated more existing family conflicts.

For the research, ARG members interviewed teachers, pupils, parents, the school administration, the school management committee (CGS), village authorities, heads of families, and parents with no children at school. They had found that the problem of girls dropping out of school was a serious one.

Like the Maramandougou ARG, they then ran an awareness-raising campaign on girls dropping out of school in the village neighbourhoods by filming interviews with key players and successful girls to create a short video which they later screened for the general public. This activity was carried out with the technical and logistical support of the project team.

The group also decided to carry out a mediation activity, which they improvised during an ARG meeting, on a conflict between neighbours that had suddenly arisen in the Manicoura housing estate. And finally, as discussions continued on

a community initiative, the market gardening activity was aborted in favour of a women's soap-making business.

3.4.7 ToC and action undertaken

The ToC is the same as Maramandougou: poverty causes young girls to drop out of school and seek income in gold panning. This in turn can cause conflicts within and between families as some of the girls return pregnant. They proposed that if women have an income-generating activity, it will help keep their daughters in school, and pay for their wedding trousseau. It was decided that soap-making is a good income-generating activity because demand is high, and local production is almost non-existent. This activity can be carried out in any season in controlled quantities without interfering with the women's other activities, the main constraint remaining the supply of manufacturing products. Women were identified because culturally it is the mothers who are mainly responsible for school fees and marriage trousseaux for girls.

In interviews, the group members also spoke of the training they had been given in conflict management (see section 1 for different types of training) and the effect it has had on them personally:

Before, in conflict management, we talk directly to the conflict parties to stop without looking for the causes... The Vestibule peace project allowed me to have more experience in conflict management.

(ARG member)

My experience in this group is good conflict management, I learned patience and humility through the monthly activities of the group.

(ARG member)

3.5 Nougá

Table 3.5 Nougá

Profile of ARG members	Number of members: 11 Number of members from story phase: 6 Number aged under 34: 0 Number of females: 3 Occupations: president of conflict commission (1); miner and farmer (5); former mayors (2); housewife (1); farmer (1); miner (1). Number of villages covered: 5 (Banankoro, Tombola, Djoulafondo, Danga, Samaya)
Meetings	Place of meetings: facilitator's house Number of meetings from 2020–23: 53
Theme	Poverty

Source: Authors' own.

3.5.1 Facilitator(s)

The Nougá group experienced some difficulties with facilitation. Initially, it was the mobiliser who was trying to play the role of facilitator, not understanding that his role was to support the facilitator in mobilising and engaging stakeholders. Following discussions between members and with the IMRAP team, the facilitator (a retired teacher and mayor) took his facilitation role seriously. He led the meetings, took notes, and kept the minutes at each meeting. The co-facilitator was supposed to be a young woman, a housewife, but she did not take on this role in practice.

3.5.2 Internal meeting dynamics

From the beginning, there were disagreements about the purpose and methods used in this group. Instead of the research process being used to gather information in a neutral manner, the mobiliser (who did the first research task) gave his version of events to the actors involved in the conflict. This caused some disagreement in the meeting when the mobiliser reported back his findings with some of the group members saying that they should stay more neutral in the research process. The group then planned new research activities involving all members this time, with clear objectives and predefined research questions.

The evaluation team later reported that exchanges within this group were open and respectful, with decisions being made collectively and democratically. All members were able to propose actions or ideas, which were then discussed and chosen by the group before a plan of activities was made.

The group is known by the local customary and administrative authorities, women's groups, and youth groups, who participate readily in the research done by the group.

3.5.3 Process of identifying theme and problem

Initially, the group decided to focus on a specific **land dispute** between two villages (Sombo and Banankoro) over ownership of a gold-panning site. But the conflict escalated when other mediation actors (village chief) became involved. The villages are located in two different communes (Nouga and Kaniogo), and the Kaniogo commune did not want to focus on this issue in their ARG, so the Nouga ARG also dropped it as a problem. Personal links of two of the group's members with the families in conflict also complicated the situation.

It was following an inter-ARG workshop organised by IMRAP in Kangaba that this group realised, by listening to the experiences of other groups, that it was preferable to change themes and problems if it became too difficult to work with for some reason. As the group had been stuck for some time on this conflict (above), on their return to Nouga, the participating members called a meeting to report on the activity to the other members. It was during discussions on the inter-workshop's learning points that the members agreed to choose the **poverty** theme and abandon the mediation theme. So, the soap-making activity was initiated following research carried out by the ARG into the causes and consequences of poverty in the locality.

3.5.4 Diversity of members

Only one of the three female group members is active. One other is frequently absent from meetings, while the third participates but infrequently. There are also not enough young people in the group, with one unexpectedly going to prison and another falling ill.

3.5.5 Research activities

Research theme: once the group switched to researching how poverty could lead to conflict within a household, they referred back to their systemic map to provide some pathways to start their research activities. ARG members spoke to women, young people, men, Tomboloma (community police at gold-panning sites), gold panners, heads of families, village chiefs, the mayor's office, and the

land commission. They found that conflicts within the household are generally linked, on the one hand, to the husband's financial inability to meet all the basic needs of family members, especially those of the wife, and, on the other hand, to the wife's regular frequentation of gold-panning sites in search of additional income. The group therefore decided to undertake income-generating activity for women.

3.5.6 ToC and action undertaken

The ToC is a little different from that of Maramandougou and Manicoura, even though all three ARGs share the same soap-making action: poverty drives almost all Nougá women to visit the gold-mining sites in immediate search of money, in order to secure their own needs and those of the household. However, they encounter all kinds of risks on the gold-mining sites, some of which provoke conflicts within their households, especially between them and their husbands. The solution was to reduce women's frequentation of the gold-panning sites, by enabling them to have another income-generating activity to meet their financial needs and contribute to those of the household.

The soap-making activities did not proceed in the same way as for the other two groups. The evaluation team notes that the women selected for soap-making by the village authorities were not sufficiently motivated and dynamic. The benefits were less significant in Nougá than in Maramandougou, and several cases of failure in the production process were recorded.

In addition, gifts of soap were made to village authorities and notables, so that the money left over from soap sales was not sufficient to start another production cycle. The gifts were on the women's initiative, which they decided in an ARG meeting. All of the villages in Nougá gave such gifts. The Maramandougou and Manicoura ARG also gave such gifts to village authorities, although the quantity was less compared to Nougá (not to all the members of the traditional chieftaincy). The main aim of giving such gifts was to test the quality of the soap, and gifts of soap were also made to other members of the ARG, and women, for the same purpose. However, in Nougá, the soap was of poor quality and sometimes had to be disposed of, and the marketing was not strong, which compounded the impact of the gifts on the profitability.

Some members reported that they had learned to become more patient, but unlike the other groups, interviews with members revealed a degree of dissatisfaction. Conflict mediation efforts and soap-making activities were met with frustration. One noted that soap-making equipment had been delivered by IMRAP when groundnut harvesting was due to take place, with the result that another village harvested its area and there were disagreements between the villages. A few others noted the lack of adequate resources for soap-making:

The place of our group in the commune is reduced because most of the members are not educated and we cannot agree on points... they can do things at village level but not at commune level... they do not have the knowledge and that is why the group could not resolve conflict. It is not the fact that the group does not work but there are problems of understanding.

(ARG member)

The idea of saponification came about... then we no longer discuss peace issues in our commune as we move in this direction.

(ARG member)

4. Contribution narrative

This section develops a contribution narrative by describing how the intervention (ARGs) was implemented, and how it contributed to any change. It asks how credible the narrative is, and how much of it is supported by good evidence, taking into consideration the role of external factors.

4.1 All of the ARGs operate in a context where multiple other mediation mechanisms exist

The baseline–endline interviews with the group members ask several questions about the existence of other conflict mediation mechanisms in the locality, so there is a good level of detailed information on this.

Some of the existing conflict mediation mechanisms are the following:

griots, who are traditional keepers of oral histories using music and song. They are tasked with preserving genealogies (births, deaths, marriages), and are also traditionally called on to resolve disputes. Depending on the nature of the dispute, a family head, a clan head, or a traditional chief may also be called on to intervene or advise. More recently, after the formation of the nation state, disputes may be taken to the formal mechanisms related to the town hall or the law. Youth or women groups may be involved if they are part of the dispute.

Many of the respondents explain that family disputes are usually handled first by the family or clan head. If unresolved, they may be taken further to the traditional chiefs and/or griots. If escalated, disputes will be taken to the town hall, and as a last resort, the police. One interviewee said that bribes are sometimes paid to the town hall in disputes. The IMRAP team collected testimonies of legal proceedings that were very costly for the local population, and of cases of corruption reported by communities in the context of conflict management processes at the municipal and judicial levels.

Each mechanism has a different source of authority: griots rely on ‘our traditions, our cultures, our ancestors’. As ‘caste men’, griots play an essential role in regulating social ties and managing conflicts. They were seen as the memory of ancestral knowledge and culture. One ARG member said: ‘In principle, a caste man cannot ask a person to make peace and that person refuses. With us, no matter how angry you are, if a caste man begs you, you must accept’. Village chiefs rely on their status of power and the legitimacy of their decisions as guarantors of the authority of the traditional system of governance. Similarly, a building can be invested with this authority: ‘The Vestibule is part of our Mandé customs, everything decided in the Vestibule is

irreversible', whereas the town hall and the justice system draw on the authority of the state.

4.2 In contrast, the ARGs' legitimacy in conflict mediation draws from their research and analysis methods

Research is the bedrock of the mediation process and associated group meetings. Particularly in Naréna and Balan-Bakama, where mediation was chosen as the theme, the group members identify a problem, assign tasks to each other to gather information, go out to the community to interview people, and then return to report back to the group. This approach was followed by all five ARGs studied. The approach itself is adaptable to the treatment of any theme or problem that, directly or indirectly, connects with a peace-building objective.

Many ARG members said that the project's mediation methods were very different to existing mediation mechanisms. The same message came up over all five case studies from the baseline–endline interviews, and can be classed as strong evidence.

Rather than drawing on the authority of the state, or traditional notions of caste, the project's method draws on what the members see as more **objective and independent information gathering**:

There is a difference. With the village chief, we speak on the basis of our customs, morals, and the bonds that exist between our parents. We say, 'This is your father's intimate friend. If you conflict with his child, your father's soul will get angry with you.' On the other hand, IMRAP does not go through all this. It is smarter and with their methods, if we practise them, the conflicts will diminish or end.
(Nouga)

Caste men, for example, intervene by addressing remarks that affect the forefathers of the parties to the conflict. These actors, unlike ARG, intervene without looking for the causes of the conflict, which only makes things worse. The ARG, on the other hand, conducts research into the causes of the conflict and the actors involved, and then designates the ARG members who are better placed for this type of intervention. Local actors go in the direction of kinship to resolve a conflict (i.e. I am your father, I am your brother, or I am your griot).
(Maramandougou)

The difference between conflict management by the ARG is to go step by step, unlike local actors who want to have an answer immediately. This approach of the ARG allows both parties to see things clearly.
(Maramandougou)

In Naréna, some of the group members compare this project with one by another NGO, AZHAR. They say,

This project is particularly dedicated to peace. It undertakes research processes and then finds a lasting resolution. This is not how AZHAR operates.

AZHAR is an NGO working on the restoration of degraded land and the sustainable management of mining sites in Naréna. Its activities concern the interaction between communities and their physical environment – reforestation, restoration of gold pits, and market gardening – and are therefore conflict-sensitive. Thus, the NGO takes into account the conflict sensitivity and community mediation dimension to achieve its goals, but it is not a peace-building NGO *per se*. The IMRAP project team collaborates well with AZHAR, and the facilitator of the Naréna ARG works with this NGO.

Many members also noted the importance of drawing **causal chains** in their analysis:

The difference is that the group evolves according to learning the causal lines between factors to resolve a conflict. While the traditional mechanism does not take these into account, but it is the same problem.
(Manicoura)

The experiences I have received as an ARG member are first conflict resolution techniques, that is to say, when there is a conflict to end it, first research the real causes of the conflict with people who are able to give information on the problem, and then bring the different parties together to find a solution.
(Naréna)

Currently, the Vestibule peace project has shown us a new way of conflict management, that is to say, to first look for the causes of the conflict, then to meet each separately by agreeing with each without the other knowing it and then we gather them to ask them to stop the conflict and that there is no point in quarrelling. Before, in conflict management, we talk directly to the conflict parties to stop without looking for the causes.
(Manicoura)

4.3 However, looking for root causes may not always be helpful, particularly where facilitators are not specially trained in dealing with trauma

This is generally the case in situations of armed conflict or extreme violence causing serious physical or mental trauma to victims (individual or community). One ARG member said that,

Trying to dig too deep can complicate matters. So it's the caste men who intervene, not by looking for causes, but by putting pressure on the party that's right, that can resolve a lot of conflicts. That's the difference.

The evaluation team also points out that the search for root causes can, in some cases, bring to the surface wounds or buried truths which, instead of promoting appeasement, can worsen the current situation (in the opinion of some ARG members). Although not excluded from the project, the IMRAP team say that searching for root causes may require specific ongoing capacities to anticipate the resurgence of traumatic factors or avoid awakening feelings of vengeance. There may also be cases where those involved in the mediation of a conflict, whether resolved or not, do not want the truths they have deliberately concealed or not to come to light, as this could rekindle the fire between the parties. This learning informed the inclusion of psychosocial wellbeing support in future iterations of the work by the IMRAP team.

4.4 Membership of the ARG also confers a degree of respect that the members think aids their mediation efforts

Many of the members from all of the groups talked about the importance of respect in conflict mediation activities:

We did a lot of mediation as actors involved in conflict management. But it was you with this ARG process that brought us to light in the eyes of the communities.
(Manicoura)

The activities of the ARG allowed me to be a known person, to be fulfilled.
(Manicoura)

I do my best to prevent conflict. I have become a respected man in the locality, I am received every time I intervene throughout the commune.

(Maramandougou)

As some of the first members of the group, people have respect for me, especially new members.

(Manicoura)

It changes my behaviour, first of all people have respect for me, this respect must allow me not to get involved in trivialities. It allowed me to control myself, to control myself for useless acts.

(Naréna)

The MEL team speculate that the respect that some of the ARG members feel after being involved in the project is related to its principle of neutrality; inclusion of people from all social levels (including some who already have authority); close family and associates noticing their change in behaviour.

Respect may also have been conferred by the meeting places of the ARGs, which all had a degree of authority attached: the state agricultural office (1); the town hall (2); the facilitator's house (2) where the facilitator is already an authoritative figure in the community.

4.5 The project had a strategy of engaging with existing authorities, both in the community and by inviting them to be group members

In all five cases, many group members already enjoyed a degree of authority within the communities in which they were based. Judging by the professions held by group members, some 23 of the 44 members of the five groups could be considered community leaders (52 per cent of ARG participants). It seems that Manicoura and Naréna are two groups with a majority of community leaders.

Within the ARG group dynamics, **having participants with some authority sometimes helped**. For example, in Balan-Bakama, there were tensions between certain group members, and one of the group who had some existing authority (as an advisor to the town council) stepped in to support the group facilitator to help ease the tensions.

In other examples, it became clear that **people with existing authority or status** (high status, gender, level of knowledge, degree of social responsibility and involvement) **monopolised the speaking time**. With experience, some facilitators were able to manage this well using the pure ARG method (e.g.

Maramandougou); others had to combine the traditional method of distributing speaking time with the ARG method (e.g. Balan-Bakama, Manicoura). This did not bother the members, as they did not see it as an obstacle to speaking freely, and no one was interrupted in their speech by any consideration. However, for some members, speaking time was a little short (e.g. women in general, young people at times) and varied according to the meetings and subjects discussed. Young facilitators had particular problems with distributing speaking time if a higher status person spoke too much.

Other efforts were also made by the group to **interact with existing authorities**, whether formal or informal. For example, immediately after returning from the story analysis workshop, some of the participants reported their experience in different venues, including at the Tomboloma, the *grin*, the town hall, and at the village chief's. A Tomboloma is a community security and conflict management group associated with a gold-panning site, and a *grin* is a meeting place where older men drink tea and chat. There was also a good deal of engagement with the village chiefs when the project team first arrived in the locales and were setting up the groups.

Having authoritative people as members of the group already probably helped to confer legitimacy on the group. The evaluation team also say that it ensured that group members were able to gain access to the people involved in the conflict, or the people who could give access to documents in the town hall. Two of the five groups met in the town hall itself.

It could have potentially also helped ensure that **local leaders are not threatened by the project intervention** by seeing it as competition to their authority, although there is no evidence to support this idea.

However, **the inclusion of people with authority did not work well** where conflict dynamics from the wider community infiltrated the group via its members. In Balan-Bakama, the group itself became politicised as two of the group members (facilitator and a retired general) were themselves involved in a wider dispute within the village. This made agreement in discussions difficult, and many of the other members did not feel free to express themselves.

4.6 There was also interaction between the ARG and the larger community, beyond those with authority

The community projects of soap-making and building a Vestibule were agreed and discussed within the ARG, and between the ARG and the wider communities.

The wider communities were consulted by holding a general assembly with representatives of each village – a minimum three people per village (one youth, one woman, one village counsellor for men).

The community were also extensively involved in ARG business through the research activity interviews detailed above for each ARG.

4.7 Trust developed among the group as a result of prior interaction in story collection but also through relations with the project team

The evaluation team observed that there was overall a greater sense of **trust between the group members who had participated in the prior activities of collecting and analysing the stories**. This was shown through the degree of commitment to making the process a success, collaborating well in dividing tasks, quality of deliberations in discussions, and maintaining contact outside the group meetings.

In the interviews, some of the group members said that they considered **the rest of the group to be trustworthy**: ‘All members are trustworthy people’, and ‘I really appreciate their choices because they are trustworthy people’.

The quality of interaction between the group members and the project team also played a role in increasing trust within the group. The evaluation team noticed that part of the increased trust among members who had participated in story analysis was also related to their familiarity with the approach and spirit of the project, and they were more comfortable with the project team than members who had joined after the story collection phase. However, after six months of the group functioning, the evaluation team observed that this mutual trust had spread to the new members too, evidenced by their ability to express and receive different opinions in discussions. It also enabled reflections on their activities and the ability to adapt plans.

A few group members also spoke of their sense of responsibility for conflict mediation because of the trust that had been shown in them by the project team when inviting them to be a member of the group:

I am in a position where I have to keep a commitment. The job that has been entrusted to me, which is to resolve conflicts, I have to be able to respond to that so that I am not told that I am not doing my job well.

The members also frequently mentioned trust in relation to **the trust that the community now has in them** to be involved in conflict mediation:

I had a big change when I became an ARG member. It also allowed me to be a trusted person in this work. Because there were people who didn't trust me but thanks to the work I've done in the ARG in recent years, when they saw it, I had the trust of them. It allowed me to have other different jobs than ARG in the village.

The context for developing the trust that is crucial for conflict mediation activities is also related to the degree of geographic diversity represented in the groups. In Manicoura, the group represented only one village, and because all the group members knew each other already, trust and collaboration came easily. But even where the groups represented multiple villages, some (e.g. Naréna) worked better together than others (e.g. Nougá) because they occupied the same cultural and territorial space.

Clearly, in a case like Balan-Bakama, where the members themselves were involved in a dispute, this contention had a negative impact on the levels of trust within the group, which could be seen by the fractious quality of their discussions and their difficulty in agreeing.

4.8 Some of the group members appreciated IMRAP's efforts to understand and engage with their local context

Comparing this project with another one that had previously been active in the same locality (AZHAR), one member said,

The difference between that project and 'the Vestibule of Peace' is that IMRAP first sought to know us and understand our community before starting the work... you first researched us and our community.

Another group member said that,

At the beginning, IMRAP went to all the villages to greet the village chiefs and introduce the project. IMRAP is no longer a stranger here, if ARG members work with community members the job will be well done.

4.9 The inclusion of women as co-facilitators did not always work smoothly

The five groups studied here began with women as co-facilitators, but over time, they did not evolve much in their role of contributing to facilitation. In Balan-

Bakama, the female facilitator did not participate in the facilitation at all. In Nougou and Manicoura, the female facilitators did not participate much either. But none of them was replaced by her group, as the main facilitators delegated other tasks to them for the organisation and mobilisation of the women. This is despite the efforts of the project team and some of the group members, and mirrors the experience of women as facilitators in other ARGs not included in this case study report.

However, there were also examples of successful female facilitation. In Maramandougou and Naréna, women facilitators made a large contribution to facilitation, continuing to play their role to the same extent as male facilitators. They are leaders in women's associations, literate – one in Bamanankan (Maramandougou) and the other in French (Naréna) – and they have charisma and frequently collaborate with NGOs. The female facilitator in Naréna is an advisor to her local town council.

The evaluation team think that the context of Naréna may have played a part because it is a relatively urban area where women and young people have more confidence to speak in front of elders than in more rural areas where the other groups are located. However, the Naréna ARG was in fact made up of people from not just the urban area of Naréna but also people living outside the urban area. In addition, by comparison, there are other ARGs in rural areas where women were also active in meeting discussions. Rather than analysing differences in terms of urban or rural, the MEL team think that the dynamism of a commune may be a better way to conceptualise different contexts. Naréna can be considered a very dynamic commune in terms of land, gold, NGOs, politics, and trade, which makes its inhabitants more mobile and interactive than other areas, encouraging collaboration and self-confidence.

Nevertheless, this all seems to show that even where encouragement and support is given by project staff and group members, simply giving women positions of responsibility does not automatically work well. Rather, it depends on their existing skills.

4.10 Many of the women gained confidence from working within their own space of soap-making rather than in conflict mediation

Some of the group members explained that **women do not normally get involved in conflict mediation**, except where it concerns them directly:

Family conflicts are usually handled by traditional chieftaincy... they often call on communal councillors, women, and youth for discussion

sessions at the town hall on the problems of the commune; there is always effective inclusiveness in communal affairs.

It is rare for women to participate in the agricultural land conflict, but they can testify.

In the interviews, many of the women were pleased with the little extra that soap-making gave them, and it was observed in other groups in Kangaba that the soap-making promoted women's interaction in the village where sometimes there had been disputes.

In the three groups that were involved in soap-making out of the five case studies, the evaluation team noted their great interest in the activity. This included their ability to remember the production details, take notes, request further documentation from the project team, and question the trainer. The women generally were more vocal and confident in the meetings about soap-making than when discussing mediation.

It is notable that while the male interviewees often mentioned the soap-making, the female interviewees spoke about the conflict mediation far less frequently than the men, tending to focus instead on the soap-making.

In the context of Nougua, the soap-making was a less positive experience, as noted in the Nougua section above, even causing some disputes among the members, and between villages. According to one of the interviewees, this may be because a key female member was called away from home just as the training was due to start. A different woman was invited into the group to replace her, but without consultation with the whole group, which caused disagreements. The MEL team note that the Nougua soap-making was simply badly organised, and did not master manufacture and marketing because of the weak cohesion and the weak interest of the women chosen in certain units. Nougua is also an area of high tension around gold panning.

5. Conclusion

We have presented findings from within and cross-case analysis of five out of the ten ARGs that were part of the SAR process implemented in the *cercle* of Kangaba. Kangaba was chosen as the first location to implement the SAR process because of the relatively low levels of conflict enabling the full partnership team to work together such that the IDS team could model the methodology in context. The sample of five ARGs were chosen to maximise learning across the following criteria: thematic focus, membership, geographic focus, efficiency of moving from analysis to action, and the type and strength of facilitation. The analysis presented has explored **how ARGs work, for whom, and what they achieve at the individual and group levels.**

The initial ToC for the local SAR process hypothesised that the collective analysis of life stories would build greater understanding of local conflict dynamics, and support participants themselves identifying entry points for their own peace-building actions. It further assumed that local leaders would be engaged throughout the set up and implementation of the ARGs which would support ARG participants to feel valued, and in turn would build their commitment to the AR process, leading them to feeling a sense of collective responsibility and motivating them to take collective action. We also hypothesised that the actions of the ARGs would directly aim to reduce conflict in the project areas and that sharing the results of the actions with a large number of local actors will build confidence in the process and in time build more favourable attitudes for local conflict management.

The contribution narrative confirms that the analysis of the life stories enabled the ARGs to identify starting points for their own research. A number of groups however, evolved their thematic focus, in particular after their research showed that it would be difficult to quickly address the specific topic through their own actions. In one of the five groups, the participants struggled to make connections back to the initial causal analysis and this was an impediment to developing a ToC to propel action. Evidence on how the ToCs were developed illustrates that this step in the ARG process is an important mechanism for groups to re-visit the initial causal analysis of system dynamics, building momentum for action.

The evidence also shows that inclusion of participants from the analysis phase into the ARG phase was important for building trust, which is fundamental for meaningful engagement and facilitation across a diversity of actors within the ARGs. Further, the causal analysis as a methodology for exploring and understanding conflict dynamics was valued in its own right by individual ARG members, even in cases where the ARG did not achieve a high level of collective action. That the value of the initial causal analysis of the stories continues to

build through the ARG process was not part of the original ToC which assumed the main outcome of the analysis would be new understandings of the conflict dynamics.

The case studies confirm that engagement with community leaders within and throughout the ARG process conferred legitimacy to the groups which was an important mechanism for the groups in the conflict mediation activities they undertook. A further outcome of the engagement of leaders was to mitigate any sense of being threatened by the new approach to mediation the ARGs brought. However, where conflict dynamics from the wider community infiltrated the ARG via its members, the inclusion of leaders became a barrier to smooth functioning of the ARG. This adds weight to the idea shared by some participants that it is the impartiality of the ARG that supported their legitimacy, which enabled them, in some cases, to undertake large commune-wide actions to strengthen local conflict mediation mechanisms, as is evident with the Vestibule facilitated by the Narena ARG.

In terms of what motivated ARGs to move to actions, quality facilitation that could navigate power dynamics was a clear contributory factor. The strategy of including one male and one female facilitator did not work in all cases. What allowed women to take on more active facilitation seems to have been a mix of their own capacities, previous experience as well as being in a context described by the local team as 'dynamic' suggesting greater opportunity for collaboration and engagement by women. There was no direct evidence of the initial hypothesis of a sense of collective responsibility driving action. Rather, ARGs that had a clear plan that was underpinned by a logical ToC that built specifically on the research the group had done seemed better able to move to action. Also important was that the group was acting on an issue that relates directly to their lives. Notably, women were motivated by the soap-making activities, which provided a direct opportunity to support their own livelihoods, rather than conflict mediation which they are generally excluded from.

The findings from the case study method within the contribution analysis design, will be combined with findings from other methods that explore the effectiveness of ARG actions and their direct and indirect actions on local pathways for peace. Synthesis of all evaluation findings on how the SAR process worked in Kangaba will be presented in subsequent reports.

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