

# What hope for peace in Mali?

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What hope for peace in Mali? | President Keïta at the OECD in 2015

**“I want to reconcile hearts and minds...so that all the different people can play their part harmoniously in the national symphony.”** So said Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta on being elected president of Mali in 2013, against a backdrop of violence and crisis. Now, five years later, with instability still an issue, can the recently re-elected President Keïta bring about the changes needed for a lasting peace?

Relaunching the 2015 peace accord is one challenge, and the cards are not stacked in the president’s favour in a country still heavily divided by conflict. Large swathes of the northern part of the country are still insecure, despite the presence of Malian, French and international troops, and the newly-created G5 Sahel Joint Force. Tensions reign among communities in central Mali and the reconciliation

process is at a standstill. Meanwhile, low voter turnout (about 34% in the decisive second round of voting, well down compared to the 2013 level of 46%) clearly weakens the political credibility of any initiative, while controversy over the election result has not helped.

As in 2013, President Keïta (known locally as IBK) focused his campaign heavily on security. But the large majority of Malians are concerned about vital day-to-day issues like food security, good governance, access to health services and water, poverty alleviation and economic advancement, all areas in which they consider the government has performed “fairly badly” or “very badly” (Afro Barometer poll of 4 July 2018). In addition, more progress is needed in reducing gender inequality and empowering women, and the implementation of basic social services, notably in health and education, is sorely needed.

### **Northern star**

Still, peace is clearly critical for progress, the question is how to achieve it. A focus on the north of the country is essential, to make it once again a central and shared space that is more than just the “north of Mali”. This, however, requires sustained political, economic and security co-operation across the Sahara. The Malian government must speed up progress in implementing its ambitious integrated development plan for the country’s northern regions, without which there can be no lasting peace and any progress on improving livelihoods.

The northern regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, as well as the two newly created regions of Ménaka and Taoudénit, account for two-thirds of the national territory and are home to 1.5 million people (8.8% of Mali’s population). The vast majority of the northern population is concentrated along the Niger Bend (Boucle du Niger). It would make sense to shift the policy emphasis to this river and valley area with an integrated plan for its management, preservation and development, for example, by building the already fully-funded Taoussa dam near Gao, which is on hold because of security issues. Other projects that aim to improve urban planning, social services, agriculture, livestock, fisheries, not to mention job creation for young people in the region are also at a standstill and should be unblocked.

International development partners could play a key role in supporting many of these projects.

Aid remains a vital part of Mali’s budget. Every year, Mali receives about US\$1.3 billion in official development assistance (ODA) from abroad, which represents more than 40% of the total annual government budget. However, development partners have so far lacked the co-ordination and knowledge-sharing needed for effective interventions. The newly-launched Sahel Alliance, which aims to pool and co-ordinate partner commitments, could help solve this. Over 500 projects and €6 billion of investments over the next five years will benefit Sahelian

populations in the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania).

These interventions aim to transform the whole Sahel region, not just Mali, by 2022. For Mali, the Sahel Alliance offers a great opportunity to speed up achievements for those actually in need, particularly those living in the most vulnerable areas.

While re-connecting the north is important, there is also the question of how the northern areas might contribute to Mali's development and the Sahara-Sahel areas more generally. The aim should be to develop economic co-operation with North Africa, increase trade and interaction, and build a common future. Mali's northern regions would then no longer be on the margins of African economic development but play a strategic geographic and economic role as vital nodes in a vibrant regional network stretching between Lagos and Algiers. The important role that Mali's northern areas can play in the regional development and stabilisation of the whole Sahara-Sahel area should not be underestimated by President Keita. By using his next term in office to develop an intense trans-Saharan co-operation with a view to massive long-term investment, IBK would contribute not only to building lasting peace, but pave the way for his national and regional symphony as well.

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