

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Opportunity and conflict: the impact of a refugee influx on decentralisation in Mali**

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## **Introduction**

To look at the impact a refugee presence has on decentralisation, this paper takes the case of Loulouni, a rural commune capital in southern Mali that is part of a national project to decentralise public services. Soon after fighting broke out in Cote d'Ivoire in 2001, the town hosted a refugee camp. The refugee presence is both a symptom and a cause of the current process of state transformation in Loulouni and, as such, is simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the decentralisation process.

Decentralisation is so central to Mali's development and democratisation strategy that the country's constitution explicitly recognises local governing bodies, and articulates a pro-decentralisation agenda (Republique du Mali, 1995). Despite widespread agreement about the importance of decentralisation, the debate on its promises and limits is far from over. Some claim that as powers are "redefined by the state through the process of decentralisation, contradictions, paradoxes, and unintended consequences increase, and struggles over meaning and power intensify (Benjaminsen, 2001 p15)." Others herald decentralisation as "a silent revolution in public sector governance....to move decision making for local public services closer to the people (Shah and Thomson, 2004 p5)."

Empirical data emerging from these ongoing decentralisation experiences shows that decentralisation is a useful tool for some, but not all development challenges it has been employed to address (Manor, 1997). Emerging empirical data are both providing a more robust discussion of the potential and limitations of decentralisation, as well how contextual factors affect the implementation of the process. One contextual factor that is contentious is migration; its political impacts are particularly important to understand given the unique questions it raises about social inclusion and access to services that are highlighted when political decisions are made at the local level.

By bringing the decentralisation literature and forced migration literature together, this study initially hypothesised that the social goals of decentralisation such as increased collective action and increased interaction with government officials would be helped by the refugee presence, because it would introduce an "other" around which to mobilise, building and consolidating a sense of community. Upon analysing the data, however, this didn't adequately describe the situation in Loulouni.

Evidence from Loulouni will be presented to argue that a refugee presence can facilitate the political dimensions of decentralisation. This includes increased interaction between community members and local government officials, and increased allocative efficiency of resources. With the arrival of the refugees and the resources that accompanied them, the demands of the residents of Loulouni changed from service provision to negotiating rights and access to services. Since the downwardly accountable mayor was able to respond to these needs of the community, this relationship was strengthened.

However, this paper will also argue that a refugee presence makes it more difficult to achieve the administrative aspects of decentralisation. This includes implementing downward accountability structures, transparency, and participatory systems of decision making. The relief effort was accompanied by a lack of clarity of roles, and consequently aggravated existing power struggles at the local level. In terms of the developmental aspects of decentralisation, there is a balance between more efficient

allocation of resources stemming from a more constructive relationship between citizens and local government officials, and a lack of clarity of mandate between local government and other service providers.

### **The refugee experience in Loulouni**

There is growing evidence that refugees have more than a material affect on their host communities; they are also transforming the host country's governmental practices, and the expectations citizens have of their elected officials (Landau, 2003). This stems from several authors looking towards the long term, fundamental transformations refugee impacts could have on host populations (Waters 1999, Jacobsen 2002, Whitaker 2002 and Landau 2003 and 2004).

Waters (1999) begins this discussion by speculating that these economic patterns are creating fundamental social and political changes. Whitaker (2002) suggests the refugee presence in Tanzania seems to increase in 'mwanko' in the host population ('awareness,' largely in the socio-political sense). This is a key intersection of decentralisation and forced migration literature, as it speaks to collective action and participation that is key to decentralisation. Landau (2004) builds on this speculation about political transformation, finding that the refugee influx is in fact fundamentally changing the relationship between citizens and the state in Tanzania.

Whitaker (2002) looked at the impact a large number of refugees from neighbouring countries had on Tanzania in the late 1990s. She sums up that "refugees generally impose a burden on local infrastructure, environment, and resources, but they also provide cheap labour, expand consumer markets, and justify increased foreign aid." She joins Chambers (1993) and Waters (1999) in the disaggregation of hosts using the economic patterns of both refugees and hosts to argue that some parts of the population are benefiting from the influx, while others are being marginalised. The stance of all of these authors is essentially that a refugee influx exacerbates certain inequalities through the economic characteristics shared by refugee situations.

Supporting this, the most common source of tension between refugees and hosts in Loulouni was regarding access to common pool resources and public services. Conflicts around refugee access to these became the leading source of interaction between citizens and local government officials. The refugee influx had very clear, tangible impacts on water, health, and education in Loulouni. These impacts were both positive and negative, and were instrumental in changing the trajectory of the decentralisation process in Loulouni.

### **Community - refugee relations**

The relationship between the community of Loulouni and refugees was generally good, with many hosts citing the positive contributions refugees have made to the community and many refugees pointing out the warm hospitality the community of Loulouni has offered them. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2002), for example, claims that "the relation between host communities and refugees/evacuees is good. Host communities have been very forthcoming in their support to refugees in the Sikasso region."

This is supported by the findings of the survey, in which 81% of respondents say the refugees have had an “overall positive” impact on the community, and 87% claiming the relationship between refugees and the community could be described as having “no conflict whatsoever.” However, certain tensions were underlying this positive relationship. Looking at how the relationship was defined by both refugees and hosts, and the patterns that tensions followed, uncovers many aspects of how the refugee influx has impacted citizen-state interactions.

Because the refugee influx was so large, virtually everyone in the community reported a great deal of interaction with Ivorians fleeing the conflict. Understandably, few people distinguished between Ivorians with official refugee status and those without, or even Malians who had been living in Cote d'Ivoire. 97% of respondents reported having interacted with refugees in the marketplace, and businessmen reported more interactions with Ivorians than other professions.

This is most understandable because the refugee camp was located at the doorstep of the marketplace, geographically. Upon initial inspection of the data, quantity of interaction with refugees seems strongly correlated to economic status. However, closer inspection reveals that this is explained completely by neighbourhood of residence, since the closest neighbourhood to the refugee camp is also the wealthiest, while the farthest away is the poorest.

### **Access to common resources and services**

Much of the refugee studies literature dealing with the impact refugees are having on their hosts concentrates on competition for resources or services. A modest amount of research indicates that refugees use a disproportionate amount of common pool resources (Whitaker, 2002; UNHCR 2004). Numerous scholars have asserted that when strain is being put on common pool resources by refugees, it is the poorest of the poor hosts, who depend on common pool resources for their livelihood, who are further marginalised (Kibreab, 2001; Whitaker, 2000; Chambers, 1993).

This does not seem to describe fully the situation in Loulouni. One explanatory factor is that Cote d'Ivoire generally enjoys a higher level of economic development than Mali. While the assumption that refugees are comparable to 'poor' in host communities is being challenged, Loulouni is a clear case of the inverse scenario – refugees accustomed to a significantly higher level of development than the host community.

The supposition that refugees use more common pool resources than the host community is to a small extent true in Loulouni. This statement, however, does not come without qualifications. Refugees use only slightly more firewood than their local counterparts. Most other common pool resources, such as grass for thatching roofs, resins and gums, fibres for basket weaving, etc. were scarcely used by the refugees at all.

While firewood is arguably more important than the others in aggregate, in that more people spend more hours per day devoted to its collection than other materials, it is also true that extra strain will be felt by people nearly regardless of their income category, as nearly all residents of Loulouni across the economic spectrum cook with

wood. Those whose livelihoods depend on these other common pool resources, on the other hand, often have specific trades or areas of expertise, and the refugees are not in a position to compete with them and thus displace them in their livelihoods.

While many respondents (thirty-six, mostly women, and disproportionately poorer respondents) noted an increased scarcity in the past several years of common pool resources, particularly firewood and thatch, it is significant that not a single one cited the arrival of refugees as a source of the scarcity. The most common reason cited was a sustained lack of adequate rainfall affecting the growth of vegetation around Loulouni, followed by general population growth, and the commercialisation of the firewood sector (often attributed to various causes, such as increased transportation to Sikasso, and a growing need for access to cash), which meant commercial exploiters would chop firewood to sell in cities or make charcoal.

Access to public services was the source of more tension between refugees and residents of Loulouni than access to common pool resources. The impact of refugee youths on the education system was widely cited, although interpreted differently by different people. To begin with, over half of those at the refugee camp were under twenty-five, meaning the school systems were particularly affected by the influx.

Refugees and returnees had benefited from Cote d'Ivoire's superior education system, and as such, had an overall advantage over Malian students. This was compounded by the fact that French, the medium of instruction, is more widely spoken in Cote d'Ivoire than in Mali, since Bambara, the local trade language that most Malians speak in addition to their mother tongue, does not have an equivalent in Cote d'Ivoire. Some parents saw it as a blessing. In one discussion, the mother of a secondary school boy was encouraged by the arrival of the new students.

My son is a smart boy, but before the Ivorians came, he was bored at school. The level of education is not very high; the teachers don't expect much from the students. If the work has been completed, they are satisfied. He has something pushing him now. I have much more hope for his education than I had before. He is seeing students continuing on to Sikasso, benefiting from education; this wasn't the case before.

Another parent, however, did not see the developments so positively.

My daughter is in second cycle now, and she has always been very good at school. If she did not come in at the top of her class, she was always in the top 3, ever since her first year. Before the Ivorians came, she was first in her class for two years running. When the conflict started in Cote d'Ivoire, the school in Loulouni has taken on many different kinds of students. There are students who did 9<sup>th</sup> standard in Cote d'Ivoire, now in standard 7. Now the top student in every grade is an Ivorian, and my daughter is discouraged. It's a matter of discipline in the system.

Health services were slightly more contentious than education, though the conflict did not stem from the host community as a whole, but only the local health centre. It is widely recognised that refugees sell a large portion of their aid disbursements (Landau, 2002). In the months after medical kits were included in the disbursements, however, the pharmacy almost went out of business due to the availability of pharmaceuticals being sold at cheap prices by the refugees. An interview with the *chef de post* (18 January, 2006) does a good job of explaining the dynamics in the health sector.

Of course, the biggest problem we as health workers experienced with the refugees was the problem with the pharmacy. That was not a conflict per se, but a logistical problem. It was poor planning by those helping the refugees. They didn't consider that we are also here selling medicines, and that the budget of many of our activities is connected to the pharmacy. We were not trying to make a profit, but running effectively is not free. It's necessary to have a refrigerator for vaccinations, but how can it run without money for petrol? We suffered from the medical supplies from Bamako, and we tried to reach an agreement with the decision makers, but everything was too far above our heads. There was no consultation.....

[Other interactions] were generally positive. There were some challenges; the Red Cross workers had their way of doing things and we had our way, and sometimes it was a challenge to synthesise these differences. It was good to exchange these ideas. I was on the crisis committee, and I gathered from my experience there that some people in Loulouni suffered when the refugees came. But speaking for myself, I can't say that was the case with the health centre. I think now we are better organised and coordinated than we were before.

The most conflicted service provision issue was that of water. Water was one of the biggest problems in Loulouni before the arrival of the refugees, and even after the two borehole hand pumps were installed at the site of the camp, Loulouni remains far below the Sphere Project Humanitarian Standards minimum criteria. Given its population of 3,000 without counting refugees, evacuees, and returnees, there should be at least six hand pumps (Sphere Project, 2004).

As it is, the vast majority of residents drink primarily untreated water from uncovered wells, and for activities that require large amounts of water, such as washing clothes, they go to a seasonal river that skirts the town (Site log, 2000). The installation of the two water sources in Loulouni serving 750 people (a hand pump serving 500 people and a tap serving 250 people), approximately covered the population of the camp as per the standards mentioned above, but without consideration for the host population.

When UNICEF installed the two new water sources, there was a lack of clarity about usage rights of the pump and tap. Nearly all members of the community assumed that they had free use of both water sources, while nearly all refugees assumed that they

had exclusive usage rights. The tap at the school was not terribly contentious. It was further from the camp and therefore used less frequently by the refugees not attending school, and few members of the community besides students went to take water there. It was locked outside school hours, and conflict was kept to a minimum. The tap near the market, however, was a constant source of conflict. It was reported by both members of the host community and refugees that for a period of several weeks in 2003, fights broke out at the pump daily.

The crisis committee took up the issue of the pump, and concluded that while the tap at the school would be shared equally by the school and the refugee camp; refugees would have exclusive use of the pump near the market. There was constant debate about who could be responsible for locking the pump at certain times and whether fees could be charged for pump usage and who would be responsible for managing them, and agreeing on this system did not immediately reduce conflict with the community.

This can be attributed to three things. Firstly, a lack of communication of the decision of the crisis committee to the community meant that many people were unaware of the decision, and continued to think the refugees were being unfairly selfish. Secondly, there was a lack of acceptance of the decision on the part of many women, who perceived it as unfair, and imposed by the *sous préfet*. Thirdly, because the market attracted vendors and merchants from as far afield as Bamako, Mopti, and Cote d'Ivoire, and conflicts pertaining to pump usage were most frequent on Wednesdays and Thursdays (Thursday being the day of the market, but people travelling long distances tended to arrive on Wednesday to set up), it was difficult to communicate to non-members of the host community the details of the pump usage regime, and even more difficult to induce them to respect it, given the lack of incentive they have to maintain community relationships.

When asked about the impact refugees had had on the economic situation in Loulouni, eighty-three respondents made reference to the new water sources as being a positive contribution to the community. Even people with a negative view of the refugee influx generally allowed that the refugee relief effort was responsible for the water points, even if they created problems of access, or conflict relating to them.

Sanitation is an issue closely connected to water, and while it was somewhat less contentious than the question of pump access, there were all the same many sanitation problems raised in the community and at the refugee camp, and the task force dealing with water was also responsible for sanitation. Sanitation issues came to the forefront early on, while the camp was still being installed; however, they were more reflecting existing power struggles than a problem of sanitation *per se*.

At a crisis committee meeting, the *sous préfet* called on the youth association to require that its members sweep and tidy the camp area once weekly, as a gesture of good will towards the refugees. The mayor was opposed to the idea, reflecting many of the historical dynamics between the *sous préfet* and the mayor. Perhaps equally significantly, the youth association in Loulouni had not been functioning for nearly a decade due to certain long standing disputes in the community, making the issue moot.



The second sanitation issue that came up was related to the sweeping of the market area. Beginning in 2002 before the arrival of the refugees, the mayor's office contracted out the sweeping of the market area every Friday to the women's association. They were paid through a nominal stall fee paid by each vendor at the market. This was very much a case of public service on the part of the association, as they did a great deal of work at a reduced rate. In 2003, however, the arrangement was cancelled. The president of the women's association (interview, 14 January 2006) cited mismanagement of funds on the part of the mayor's office. Other women in informal discussions, however, suggested that it was motivated by a dissatisfaction with the way the water conflict with the refugee camp was being handled.

Residents of Loulouni and Ivorian refugees generally had positive relationships. However, looking at service provision points to some tensions. First, the experience of the pharmacy is a clear case of unintended consequences on the part of humanitarian agencies. The water sector demonstrates one of the clearest cases of refugees bringing resources into the community and changing the demands citizens have of local government officials. The dynamics around education and sanitation both underline the historical relationship between Malians and Ivorians, and the class element that is a part of both this refugee experience, and the impact the refugees have on the decentralisation process.

### **Patterns of economic activity**

The economic patterns of refugees in Loulouni are in many ways accurate indicators for their integration into the host community, due to the fact that they reflect a wide range of concerns for refugee communities, such as social interactions and economic independence. They also reflect how the historical dynamics and class differences between Malians and Ivorians express themselves in the present situation. There were various differences in the economic habits of refugees and citizens, and exploring these will shed light on the relationship between refugees and citizens.

Refugees were less likely to engage in farming as citizens of Loulouni, even though land was made available to refugees should they have chosen to cultivate it. This is unsurprising, given that their time horizons were uncertain, the land set aside was often marginal, and cultivation would have required substantial capital. Additionally, the largest influx of refugees was between the months of September and December – harvest time. It would be approximately another six months before refugees could sow their own plots. Even so, eleven respondents critically mentioned that refugees did not cultivate their land, often as support for assertions that they were lazy, used to the city life, or not interested in contributing to the development of Loulouni.

While refugees were more likely to engage in commerce than citizens, they were less likely to engage in the least profitable kind of commerce - buying a product in bulk and selling it in smaller quantities. Instead, they were more likely to be selling products that they either made or processed, which is generally more profitable, but also requires more skills and capital. The most typical of these activities is making *attieke*, a fermented cassava dish that is difficult to prepare and a luxury in Mali, but a staple in Cote d'Ivoire. One resident of Loulouni knits hats for a living, and she said the refugee influx had a substantial impact on her work.

Ten years ago, I was the only one in Loulouni who knew how to do this. My aunt went to Abidjan with her husband, and she learned there. When she came back to visit, she taught me how to do it, and I had a successful business. It's the kind of thing only people in big cities do. In Cote d'Ivoire, more people learn these things. When so many Cote d'Ivoirians came, they all knew how to do this knitting. It's okay, I still have my clients and now they have theirs, but business was better before they came.

The cooking of specialised dishes was particularly common among refugee women. Due to higher rainfall in Cote d'Ivoire, many food products common there are luxuries in Mali, and are generally prepared by Cote d'Ivoirians who have more experience preparing these dishes. This, in combination with cultural norms formed in the relatively wealthier Cote d'Ivoire, could explain the charcoal consumption among refugees being nearly double that of residents. As one woman explains,

Some of my [Malian] friends laugh at me, because I use charcoal so much. I cook nearly everything on a charcoal furnace. At home, I didn't have a mud stove. I'm not used to cooking with wood. My friends say that I must be rich; they must think I'm showing off money cooking everything on charcoal. That's not the case; I need to sell plantains, and if they were cooked over wood, I can't say how they would turn out, or if people would buy them.

Another occupation for which Ivorians were renowned is brewing *dollo*, a term which applies to various alcoholic drinks including millet beer and palm wine. As the vast majority of residents of Loulouni are Muslim, alcohol is taboo, and no local residents would openly brew *dollo*. Twelve of the fourteen respondents who thought that the refugee presence was having a generally negative impact on the community cited *dollo* as a factor, causing moral degeneration in the community. This was inevitably linked to other debaucherous, disrespectful activities, such as laziness, prostitution and stealing.

All of the activities mentioned above are primarily “women's jobs,” and it is true that women at the refugee camp were, on average, more economically active than men. Some men reported doing wage labour on farms, but most of the refugees came at a particularly bad time of year for temporary agricultural work. The influx took place during harvest, and for the months following, work is almost completely unavailable. The following two years both had very poor rainfall, substantially decreasing the demand for hired workers.

A few individuals worked in the construction sector (the primary dry season occupation); however, most refugee men cited difficulty doing this work because mud bricks in Loulouni were a different style than those in Cote d'Ivoire, to suit the drier climate, and thatching was also done differently. Others reported attempting to work as artisans, but facing difficulty primarily due to a lack of access to capital, but also because of either a saturated market, or difficulty breaking into the existing market (mentioned in eight interviews). Petty employment available to men in Loulouni is generally less prestigious than for women. Many youths were reported to work as

porters or other small jobs on market day, but beyond that and agricultural labour, job prospects were limited.

In terms of material possessions, refugees were less likely to have access to various material indications of wealth than residents. For example, relatively few refugee households had bikes or motos, solar panels, radios, etc. This is unsurprising again given the context of their arrival to Loulouni, and that most do not consider it their permanent place of residence. These material indicators do not make a good measurement of economic integration, however, as numerous non-material indicators suggest a lifestyle considered prestigious by residents of Loulouni.

The use of charcoal burners mentioned above is once example. They were also more likely to eat cassava than local residents, and less likely to eat corn. A difference in dietary habits was exacerbated by food distributions, which were based on rice. Rice is a relatively prestigious food in Loulouni, and not even the wealthiest residents have a diet based primarily on rice.

In addition to material possessions, refugees tended to have cultural capital to associate them with the elite in Loulouni. They were on average more educated than residents, from more urban areas, and had a far better command of French. Finally, through no choice of their own, refugees report more leisure time than their Malian counterparts. As one young man reports (refugee interview 34, 1 October, 2005),

People could look at me and say I'm lazy, but that's not it. I don't want to spend all my days sitting around drinking tea, but what else can I do? I'm sad every time I go to the office of the *sous prefet*; I am young and fit, I should be working for the food I eat. I wish the aid workers would distribute jobs instead of food.

The economic aspects of the refugee camp are both a cause and a consequence of the interaction between the camp and the decentralisation process. While certain economic indicators (staple food, for example) are less an indicator of economic class than geography and planning by relief agencies. However, the history of classism and discrimination between Cote d'Ivoire and Mali means that all these factors influence the way refugees interact with the community, and how the community perceives the rights and powers of refugees. These interactions then shape the discussions that take place between citizens and local government officials, particularly in the arena of access to resources. This is a key element in shaping the decentralisation process.

### **Perceptions and identity**

A common starting point when looking at host country political processes is that refugees serve as an “other,” or opposing social force that will create solidarity in the community. “The significance of outsiders threats in rousing national allegiance is...almost too much of a truism to deserve to deserve further comment” (Landau, 2002 p20) and many forced migration theorists positing that the refugee presence provides just such an “other” identity to rally against, this presence ought to help decentralisation achieve its goals.

While the idea that refugees are a distinct group often in opposition to the local population is a dominant one in forced migration literature, it has not gone unchallenged. Bakewell (2000) argued that it was “necessary to put down the lens of the emergency, which portrayed the world starkly in terms of refugees and hosts, and use a more fuzzy lens which allowed boundaries to be blurred between refugees and hosts, or emergency and normality. (p2)” When this was done, he claims that the discourse of aid agencies that defines practice is quite inapplicable to the local situation.

This study has found that in the case of Loulouni, the assumption that “othering” is a characteristic that can be assumed of all refugee situations is off base. An extensive history of migration as well as a shared language, culture, religion, and ethnicity all contribute to the inclusive nature of refugee-host identities. This does not necessarily imply a lack of tension, however, and some conflicts were actually framed around this sameness of identity. It was mentioned in four interviews and by two respondents that there were Malians passing themselves off as refugees.

Are more commonly expressed view, however, was to take pride in the identity shared with the refugee community. One man said

You can't come here and say there are the refugees, and these are people from Loulouni. We're all the same. You can see the truth in what I'm saying by watching the young people interact. Whenever there are functions, playing football, and even if there is work to be done, the young people are all together. They are even marrying each other, and we adults are happy with it, because once, we made a distinction, and we have seen that it is wrong.

Still others shared the above respondent's observation about young people interacting, but took a very different view on the matter. Previous quotes have alluded to stereotypes in the community of the refugee camp as a den of sin – a source of alcohol, prostitution, etc. Some of these accusations have truth to them. Even respondents who had generally positive views of the refugee presence tacitly acknowledged the presence of alcohol and prostitution. As one respondent (16) said,

Many of the refugees are from cities, where they are used to things we are not used to, and we don't accept all of the views they bring with them. A lot of them drink, they aren't Muslim. It is something we don't like, and they are used to doing things with girls that people here don't accept. Despite this, they come with a lot of new ideas that we are interested in hearing; many of them have travelled, and seen things we haven't seen. That is an important asset. Like everything, we have to learn to take the good, and leave the bad.

An additional accusation often levelled against refugees is that they erode social structures, for example, undermining traditional authorities or family structures. This, like crime, is something those with an already negative opinion of refugees evoked to strengthen their case, and the majority of respondents acknowledged, and yet attribute to different sources. Seventy-six respondents brought up a change in traditional

structures of authority as a change Loulouni has seen in the past five years; every single older man mentioned it. However, only four linked it to the presence of refugees. That is the same number of respondents who linked the same phenomenon to decentralisation. The majority of respondents linked it to changes with roots in economic patterns, such as more young people migrating, working for cash, or no longer depending on their families for paying bride prices.

This is very much in line with what academia suggests, as various studies have found that “where agricultural decline and urbanisation lead to high mobility among youth and a concentration of elderly people in rural communities....older people often lose control over important productive resources and traditional support structures become less effective.” (Whitaker, 2002 p 374, citing Baker, 1995; Sommers, 1995 and Parkin, 1972).

While these negative stereotypes that are frequently dealt with in the refugee studies literature could be found in Loulouni, they were not descriptive of the average host perception of the refugee community. Perceptions both by refugees and hosts overwhelmingly centred on the economic differences between Mali and Cote d'Ivoire. The refugees, while not seen as rich during their sojourn in Loulouni, were seen as coming from a place of economic privilege, not accustomed to the difficult living conditions in Loulouni. This defined many levels of engagement between hosts and the community, and was certainly the centre of how other perceptions were articulated. For example, many of the hosts who cited the refugees as a source of social degradation linked this to the “urban way of life” in Cote d'Ivoire. These articulations were widely shared by refugees as well. One refugee woman demonstrated this view discussing the water conflict.

Women from Loulouni say it's not fair that we have a pump to ourselves. It's true that they have a problem of water too, and there are more of them than us. But they have been here for a long time, living like this. They are used to it. Staying in Cote d'Ivoire, we are not used to such things. We can barely survive with this pump as it is.

While this difference of economic background was a source of tension, it was not always seen negatively. The most commonly cited affect refugees had on the community was that they brought new ideas, mentioned by seventy-four survey respondents. In Mali, travelling is considered an important form of education, and as such, anyone coming from far away is respected as having knowledge of different places, customs, etc. The vast majority of respondents' initial framing of their interactions with the refugee community was based around this exchange of ideas. This was particularly emphasised by poorer respondents, and those who had never travelled to Cote d'Ivoire. One man explained,

Many people in Loulouni have been to Cote d'Ivoire, and come back with stories about what it is like there. I have never had the chance to go, so I must keep quiet. Now when I talk to the people coming from Cote d'Ivoire, it is like I have gone myself. I can come to understand their way of doing things. I can also help teach them, since they are strangers here. It turns all of us into wiser people. This has

really benefited the town. Now, the boundaries of Loulouni don't stop at the river, they stretch all the way to Cote d'Ivoire.

This idea was also expressed through responses about refugees' economic activities. Sixteen women surveyed cited the Ivorian's superior *attieke*-making abilities. Three even reported working with them to learn the skill.

The only two respondents who reported hiring Ivorian agricultural workers also had positive things to say about the exchange of ideas. One mentioned

farming in Cote d'Ivoire is not exactly the same as it is here. There, the plots are usually bigger, and some of the things we plant are not the same. Sometimes it is a disadvantage, because the workers don't know how to do everything, and we must teach them. But sometimes I gain a lot, because they might know ways of doing things that are better, or faster.

The strongest trend evident in the data, a dynamic which was also evident in other interactions, including the interviews and informal interactions, was that opinions about the impact refugees had on the community were strongly correlated to the economic status of the respondent. Specifically, the wealthier the respondent, the more likely they were to feel like the refugees had a negative impact on the community. Reasons for this were articulated in a number of different ways, and its implications are central to thinking about transformations in governance in general and decentralisation in particular.

The most striking articulation stems from the fact that wealthy men were more likely to have travelled to Cote d'Ivoire themselves to work than any other sector of the population. Every single male respondent claiming the refugees were having a negative impact on the community had spent time working in Cote d'Ivoire, and they all made a link to the discrimination they themselves faced during their time in Cote d'Ivoire. One man said

We who have worked in Cote d'Ivoire, we will turn our backs to the refugees. We went there and suffered. I can't describe what it is to be a Malian working in Cote d'Ivoire; the humiliation when you go to pray. People take advantage of you, stealing because they know you are a stranger, and you have nowhere to turn. Now they are trying to turn to me? No, my eyes are closed to their problems (association leader interview, 18 March, 2006)

Conversely, a wealthy woman who had also spent time in Cote d'Ivoire experienced similar difficulties, but drew a different conclusion about the impact the refugees were having.

I am glad the refugees came. When I went to their doorstep asking for help, they turned me away. I slept outside in the cold, hungry. Now that they are at my doorstep, they will have a warm bed and a full stomach. I used to be angry at

the Ivorians, and the way they treated me, but now that they are here, I have the chance to make peace. Being a good host has been a chance for me to regain the respect that I lost when I was in Cote d'Ivoire.

In the case of women, negativity in seven of the nine cases was expressed primarily because of the problem of water in the community. As one woman said,

When we learned that the Ivorians were getting pumps installed, we were very happy. We had also been obliged to walk far to the river to get water, and then it is not always clean. But then the Ivorians said we couldn't use their pumps, that they were only for them. Even if they were not using them, they would lock them so we couldn't take water. How can we accept them as guests if they behave like this?

The fact that there is a correlation between economic status and a negative opinion of refugees is not on its own important to this study. It becomes important, however, upon learning that economic status was correlated to interactions with local government officials. While the wealthy were not substantially more politically engaged, they were more likely than their less affluent counterparts to go to the mayor or commune council to help them resolve any disputes they might be party to in the community. As wealth decreased, respondents were more likely to consult extended family members, religious leaders, or the village chief. The consequence of these two patterns converging is that local government will be more engaged on issues relating to refugees by those who feel they have had a negative impact on the community.

What above sections illustrate is that a wide range of members of the host community in Loulouni are making the same observations about the impact of the refugee presence in Loulouni, which seem accurate in that they are supported by other kinds of data as well. The conclusions they are drawing, however, differ wildly. The current refugee studies literature looking at the impact refugees are having on their hosts explains this by disaggregating the local population, and pointing out that different people are experiencing different aspects of the same phenomenon.

While this is one element, simply disaggregating the population does not go far enough. This study proposes that these differences in articulation can be more accurately explained as a reflection of the pre-existing power dynamics in the community, and provide important insights about stakeholders views and involvement in the local political process.

While disaggregation of all populations is important for a robust understanding of social and political dynamics, it is inadequate. Rather, the historical political, economic, and social dynamics that make such a process of disaggregation relevant must be brought into the picture as well. These played a large role in setting the trajectory for the process of integration. In the case of Loulouni, the close historical ties between southern Mali and Cote d'Ivoire meant that refugees were not seen as outsiders that the local community could build an identity in opposition to. However, because Cote d'Ivoirians were historically wealthier, at times at the expense of migrant workers from Cote d'Ivoire, discourse over rights and access to resources

were often framed in terms of differences of class, level of education, etc. This has then been instrumental in shaping the decentralisation process.

### **Transformation of decentralisation**

It is evident that the implementation of decentralisation in Loulouni was strengthening many aspects of participatory democracy. Citizens were much more likely to interact with local government officials. Channels of communication had opened, and there was a widespread perception that, however serious the problems of capacity may be, local government valued consultation, and had become more responsive to their needs.

However, from an administrative point of view, the division of powers between the democratically elected mayor and the upwardly accountable *sous préfet* was delicately balancing many issues of legitimacy, capacity, and service provision. This balance was threatened by limits of fiscal decentralisation, since a lack of resources at the local level was both undermining the relationship between the mayor and the community, and between the mayor and the *sous préfet*.

The arrival of refugees to this scene transformed the situation in several important ways. On one hand, the refugee influx was accompanied by significant resources from humanitarian organisations. This had clear benefits for the community, particularly since many of these resources came in the form of infrastructure. However, rights and access to these resources had to be negotiated between the refugees and the host community, and these negotiations took place in a context of historical inequalities. Additionally, the power to control rights and access had to be negotiated between the mayor and the *sous préfet*.

### **Administrative impact**

The impact the refugee influx has had on the administrative aspects of the decentralisation process have been largely negative. As previously discussed, lack of clear mandates on all levels has been a huge challenge to the effective implementation of decentralisation in Mali. Just as local government officials were developing a way of working in the face of this challenge, the introduction of new powers and resources by the refugee influx upset the fragile administrative balance. Power struggles were exacerbated, occasionally to the point of limiting the capacity of the local government to act.

Because of the nature of the relief operation, unprecedented demands for coordination were made on local government. This had the positive affect of improving coordination across the board. However, it is also possible that such demands will result in unintended transformations of local government structures. The final outcome remains to be seen as the transformation is very much still work in progress, but evidence from Loulouni suggests that the relief effort moved local government away from participatory, democratic practices by vesting more power in upwardly accountable authorities.



Because of the political history of Mali, *sous préfets* are responsive to responsibilities passed down to them from the hierarchy of government. One NGO extension worker in a neighbouring commune cited a history of conflict with the *sous préfet*, as he was seen as working with the mayor on issues surrounding decentralisation. When this was discussed in Sikasso at a planning meeting, he returned to a complete reversal of attitude. Upon inquiry, he found

it was really quite simple. All it took was a letter from the office of the governor saying 'decentralisation is our project too; give it your full support.' After that statement was received, the *sous préfet* was nothing but helpful.

From the formation of the crisis committee, it was clear that managing the refugee situation was being placed in the hands of the *sous préfet*. This explains his strong support of the refugees on so many issues, such as according exclusive use of one pump to the camp, and the encouragement of the community to clean the camp. The mayor, however, felt marginalised throughout the process of the arrival of refugees, and this undoubtedly made already existing tensions with the *sous préfet* worse, and possibly mobilised negative sentiments about the refugees. Allegiances with the mayor by certain segments of the population then became articulated as anti-refugee.

Like many survey respondents, the former mayor cites a lack of consistency as accompanying a relief effort, and he claims that this is due to a lack of clarity in roles. This lack of clarity was at the heart of the power struggle between him and the *sous préfet*. In his words,

Before the refugees came, I knew my work, and the *sous préfet* knew his. But when the refugees came, everything was shaken up. What it comes down to, is that nobody knows exactly who is responsible for the refugees. And when we started discussing that in detail, it became clear that nobody knew who was responsible for many other things as well.

The lack of clarity in mandate and at times *ad hoc* implementation that may be inherent in any emergency relief situations reignited power struggles between local actors. In certain contexts, there may be nothing transformatory about such struggles. In the case of Loulouni, however, and arguably in many refugee hosting countries in a state of political transition, the outcomes of such power struggles will have a defining impact on emerging political structures. This is particularly true in the early years of decentralisation in Mali, since legislation on the decentralisation of powers is not sufficiently developed to provide clarity on roles. As a result, the local reality in Loulouni is in a position to shape policy as much as the opposite is the case.

By giving powers for the allocation of resources at the local level to the *sous préfet*, the degree to which decentralisation was truly implemented was reduced. This effective recentralisation of powers has had a negative impact on the other administrative goals of decentralisation. As mentioned earlier, the *sous préfet* works in less transparent ways than the mayor. Furthermore, because he is not accountable to a local electorate, nor does he have consultative decision making processes, he has less allocative efficiency than the mayor. While the refugee influx did not necessarily

change the way the office of the *sous préfet* worked, it did change the trajectory of decentralisation from an administrative point of view, in that new powers were devolved to an upwardly accountable, untransparent governing body.

There would be a valid argument to be made that such a system was necessary for the protection of the refugees; an official accountably only to the local population would not have an incentive to protect the refugee population, skewing what precisely constitutes efficient allocation of resources. While this argument is credible, it is also important to note the transformatory impact any shift in powers has on the decentralisation process while legislation is still being solidified. The challenge to the administrative aspect of decentralisation would be less pressing if it were contained to the influx itself. However, as evidence earlier in this section has shown, there was an element of norm creation when the *sous préfet* took on these new powers.

### **Political impact**

One of the most significant findings of the newly emerging empirical research on decentralisation is that central governments are better than local governments at creating infrastructure – initially installing the service - whereas local governments are better at managing and maintaining what is already in place (Fageut, 1999). Since the refugee influx created a shift in focus from infrastructure creation to management, it actually created a situation that was more conducive to decentralised governance. Furthermore, since the demands of management and maintenance are clear, and full involvement on the part of the community is inherent to a conflict resolution process, this has created a situation whereby the local government has a clear mandate that is visible to the community, facilitating accountability and transparency.

The arrival of refugees raises many questions about access to services for host communities. Complex negotiations inevitably take place to determine the rights of refugees to make use of public services, as well as the rights of hosts to access relief related services. Local governing authorities are particularly well placed to deal with these issues, and at the same time they are institutionally strengthened by being given the mandate to make decisions on issues that were formerly nonexistent.

The political impact of the refugee influx is thus largely positive. Before the refugee influx, residents of Loulouni were overwhelmingly frustrated with the inability of local government to meet their needs with regards to basic public services. Local government was frustrated with the demands being made on them from the population while they were unable to access resources to respond. Mirroring the administrative conflicts caused by the humanitarian influx, the introduction of resources that accompanied the refugees created conflict in the community. This changed the demands of local government from service provision to conflict resolution. Local government was unable to provide services because of a lack of resources. However, a high degree of success was possible on the conflict resolution front. This built a relationship of trust between local government authorities and the population, bringing the residents of Loulouni on board in the decentralisation process. This confidence is crucial to the success of decentralisation, and without the change in local government role prompted by the refugee influx; decentralisation would have risked being brushed aside as more talk from the central government.

At the same time, the arrival of refugees may be hindering the establishment of the kind of accountability mechanisms decentralisation needs to succeed. On one hand, when the demands the community made of local government officials changed from the provision of infrastructure to the negotiation of access and rights to use existing infrastructure, the local government was much better able to respond to the needs of the community. However, this is enforcing a system that has been in place in Mali for a long time, in which the public sector is not providing services.

One of the political aims of decentralisation is to change this pattern. As long as the citizens of Loulouni are not going to expect service delivery on the part of local government, however, the system of tax payment and accountability envisioned by Mali's leaders at the national level, and partners at the international level, will not be established. This is closely related to the developmental implications of the refugee arrival on decentralisation, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Development considerations**

A central consideration in evaluating the impact of refugee related activities is the resources of the host community. The lack of resources on the public sector to undertake development activities in Loulouni and other rural communes means that many of such activities had long since been privatised by default, largely left in the hands of NGOs or individuals. There are numerous economic models for analysing the effectiveness and efficiency of decentralisation, but if there is not financial support for decentralised governing structures, these models can all be thrown out the window. In Loulouni, any role player who invests resources in services or infrastructure can be seen as having a positive contribution towards the development goals of decentralisation simply because the decentralised governing structure does not have the resources to implement their own development activities. However, it is important to point out that while this may work towards the developmental aims of decentralisation, it is coincidental, and does not represent any institutional change.

The significance of relief services delivered in a decentralised context is threefold. First, they ease some of the pressures on local government who is unable to provide these services with the resources available. This is particularly true of resources which the host community and refugees both use without distinction, such as school supplies at the secondary school attended by both refugees and hosts. As Whitaker suggested, this seemed to foster a higher degree of satisfaction with the local government than would otherwise be the case. More respondents cited that local government should be responsible for coordinating NGO interactions to develop the commune than to actually provide services (sixty-four vs. two).

The second is that these services are instituted outside of the accountability structures of local government. While the relief effort may add legitimacy to local government by creating powers and responsibilities that previously did not exist, it is simultaneously undermining them through the back door, by taking control over services that would normally reside with the local government. This could inhibit the creation of accountability structures and future resource mobilisation. It essentially ensures that service provision and infrastructure development remains outside of the institutional and political transformation decentralisation is trying to promote.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the impact a refugee influx has had on the process of democratic decentralisation in one commune in southern Mali. It has found that the influx of refugees has had a profound impact on the transformation of governance in the commune. It has encouraged the process of political decentralisation to become more participatory, through creating incentives for interaction between residents of Loulouni and local government officials. At the same time, some degree of recentralising took place, since many new powers and resources that were brought by the humanitarian influx were placed in the hands of the upwardly accountable *sous préfet*.

From an administrative point of view, the impact of the humanitarian influx in Loulouni has threatened the decentralisation process. The way decentralisation has been implemented in Mali is such that powers were devolved often while legislative, financial, and other forms of support were still evolving. This created a delicate time period (in which this research was conducted) during which local government authorities had to designate their roles and responsibilities with very little support or enforcement.

Just as the mayor and *sous préfet* had reached certain working norms in line with the little guidance they had, the humanitarian influx came, introducing a large number of resources and powers that had not existed before in the commune. The result was a significant degree of recentralisation. Had this been explicitly temporary, the impact of the humanitarian influx could not accurately be described as transformatory. Because the decentralisation process in Mali is still so nascent, however, and the process of political transformation was still very much in progress, and also very much defined by practice, a large amount of norm creation in the offices of the *sous préfet* and mayor went on with the arrival of the refugees.

From a political point of view, however, the humanitarian influx granted decentralisation several victories. Before the influx, a lack of resources at the local level was holding back the political goals of decentralisation. Citizens saw little utility in political involvement, since local government was not in a position to provide services. When resources and infrastructure accompanied the refugee influx, the demands citizens made of local government authorities changed from service provision to negotiating rights and access to services.

This is something the local government had the capacity to do, and because of this, a good deal of trust was restored between residents of Loulouni and their elected leaders. A cautionary note must be added, however. While it is too early to know if this will be the case, there is a possibility that the shift from demanding services to conflict resolution will inhibit the longer term creation of accountability structures at the local level.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this study speak first to the literature in forced migration studies that are connected to state transformation. It supports the findings of Landau and Whitaker who claim that refugees are having a fundamental, transformatory impact on the state. Both Landau and Whitaker were studying the case of Tanzania, but neither focussed on specific bureaucratic changes the state was undergoing. Rather, they defined state transformation in a broader social sense,

looking primarily at affiliations citizens expressed towards the state. This study has taken the premise of their findings, and applied it to a specific case of state transformation: decentralisation. Its findings have been in line with those of Landau and Whitaker; essentially, that refugees are transforming the way citizens interact with governments in important and fundamental ways. This study particularly bolsters their claims because they both used Tanzania as a case study, while this study was done in Mali, a significantly different political context.

The current decentralisation process in Mali is undeniable a time of tremendous institutional change in the State's bureaucratic system. This paper has argued that the refugee presence is playing an important role in shaping local political processes, particularly redefining power dynamics and leadership disputes. A refugee presence can then be seen as having a substantial transformatory impact on the shape of the institutions currently emerging from this period of political evolution.

The short-term political consequences of the refugee impact may have a positive affect on governance. This study found that the refugee influx in Loulouni has promoted interaction with local government officials, and shifted demands away from the provision of services that officials lack the resources to provide to negotiation of management and conflict resolution, which local governments are better equipped to handle. This has played an important confidence building role that is crucial to the decentralisation process. The long-term consequences, however, could be more problematic, as power struggles between upwardly and downwardly accountable officials regarding their responsibilities to the refugees could result in an institutional shift away from downward accountability.

While this study has exclusively focused on the commune of Loulouni, there are implications for other parts of Mali and other countries currently undergoing a process of decentralisation. As mentioned in the introduction and throughout the paper, many countries, particularly in Africa, share certain historical and economic links, and are experiencing decentralisation in similar ways. While each case will have important differences, there are lessons from Loulouni that can be generalised. This generalisation must be done with caution; much of this research was devoted to background information about the history and context of decentralisation in Loulouni, to completely understand the process and the dynamics surrounding it. In generalising, the same process of contextualising must take place.

One lesson is for the humanitarian organisations that operate in areas of political transformation. As noted previously, many refugee crises happen in weak states, with challenges of institutional capacity, and ongoing transformation of the roles and responsibilities of state institutions. It is then particularly necessary to be sensitive to the political realities on the ground. In Loulouni, humanitarian organisations had such capacity when compared to local government structures, that it was nearly inevitable that they would shape the political realities in Loulouni.

Given the potential to impact the decentralisation process tremendously, they could have been a strong tool for promoting participatory governance without compromising the protection of refugees that was their mandate. By working through upwardly rather than downwardly accountable officials at the local level, they took the decentralisation process in Loulouni several steps back. This element of planning should be introduced into all relief operations.

Going forward, there is a need for the research question to be turned on its head, to explore the implications of decentralisation on refugee protection and camp management. As the autonomy of local governments becomes better understood, their autonomy related to a refugee influx will provide an important missing link between theory and practice in forced migration studies literature. This gap is already widely acknowledged in the forced migration studies literature (Misago, 2005), but as norms develop for interaction between humanitarian agencies and local governing bodies, there will certainly be a call better to understand these dynamics.

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