



## Parlez-vous français? Language and agricultural aid allocation strategies in northern Mali

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### ABSTRACT

In January 2012, insurgent groups in northern Mali began a violent campaign against the central government. By March 2012, then-President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) was ousted in a successful coup. The ongoing unrest has drastically shifted the strategies foreign donors are using to allocate aid, particularly to northern Mali. While bilateral donors have drastically scaled back all programmatic aid, NGOs including Oxfam International and the Red Cross have stepped in to provide humanitarian aid. This shift from programmatic to humanitarian aid has left the agricultural sector particularly vulnerable. Since most of the food grown in Mali is grown in the northern region, such a drastic decrease in agricultural aid will have catastrophic effects in terms of projected food shortages. Furthermore, using evidence from new World Bank survey data gathered in northern Mali in 2015, we find that the agricultural aid being distributed by NGOs is not targeting those most in need. We find that French-speaking villages are more likely to be targeted for aid compared to non-French-speaking villages. We argue that in northern Mali, under the current sociopolitical conditions, speaking French makes these villages more attractive to aid organizations, regardless of their actual need for assistance. This appropriation principle means that aid is not going to the most vulnerable, but to the most politically or socially connected. We also find proof of a second layer of aid misappropriation. While Sonrai and Tamasheq-speaking villages receive less agricultural aid than French-speaking villages, the aid they *do* receive goes to those households most vulnerable to exogenous shocks. However, in French-speaking villages, the most vulnerable households are not guaranteed to receive agricultural aid. If desperately needed agricultural aid continues to be misappropriated, it could lead countries like Mali to become even more unstable.

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### 1. Introduction

Farming villages in northern Mali face the combined shocks of environmental stress due to climatic change, ongoing violent conflict, and the resulting destabilization of local economic activity. These turbulent factors may significantly impact the process of aid allocation in the region by NGOs and governmental agencies due to increased constraints established aid networks. Since the outbreak of violence in the northern region of Mali in January 2012, followed quickly by the ousting of the democratically elected president Amadou Toumani Touré, the foreign aid community has completely reevaluated its special relationship with Mali. While it was once considered a donor “darling” (Bergamaschi, 2014), in the post-2012 sociopolitical atmosphere, major donors like the U.S.,

France, and the European Union (EU) have re-evaluated and re-organized their aid strategies. For example, since 2015, USAID’s Food For Peace (FFP) program has targeted only households in the Mopti region in the south of the country (USAID, 2017a). Organization like the EU, Oxfam International, and the Red Cross now providing mostly humanitarian aid to people living in the northern region (Arieff, 2013; Bergamaschi, 2013; Price, 2013; Spence and Simon, 2013).

One of the sectors hit the hardest by this re-organization of aid allocation strategies is the agricultural sector, which makes up roughly 80% of Mali’s workforce (Benjaminsen, 2008). Given that northern Mali is already highly sensitive to climatic pressures, with estimated crop yield changes reaching minus 17% by 2030 (Butt, McCarl, Angerer, Dyke, & Stuth, 2005), coupled with the massive internal displacement of northern farmers due to the ongoing conflict (Pugliese, 2014; van de Walle, 2012), this shift is potentially impactful to health, as well as political, social, and economic stability in the region.

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This alteration of the Malian aid landscape calls into question the applicability of established explanations of aid allocation strategies including ethnicity (Burgess, Jedwab, Miguel, Morjaria, & Miquel, 2015; Habyarimana, Humphreys, Posner, & Weinstein, 2007; Posner, 2005), good governance (Burnside and Dollar, 2000; van de Walle, 1999), the impact of corruption (Acht, Mahmoud, & Thiele, 2015; de la Croix and Delavallade, 2014), receipt of previous aid (Koch, Dreher, Nunnenkamp, & Thiele, 2009), size of the donor organization (Berthélemy and Tichit, 2003), colonial heritage (Berthélemy and Tichit, 2003; Bräutigam and Knack, 2004), and presence of ongoing armed conflict (Benjaminsen, 2008; Findley, Powell, Strandow, & Tanner, 2011). As aid to northern Mali becomes more constrained, aid organizations may increasingly rely on heuristics and efficiencies for desirable attributes with which to target aid (Koch et al., 2009). Local leaders and communities may in turn use these heuristics to signal desirable traits and facilitate connections between aid organizations and local communities in need.

We argue that language homogeneity between aid organizations and local officials is an underexplored piece of the aid mitigation puzzle, especially considering the bureaucratic and governmental importance of the French language in Mali. The choice to speak French by village leaders acts as a signal of desirable traits to aid organizations who use language as a heuristic when determining aid allocation strategies. This is because the choice of a Malian village leader to speak French carries with it political, social, cultural, and religious implications, making his village a more likely target for aid allocation, irrespective of need compared to other villages.

We use new household- and village-level survey data gathered by the World Bank from conflict prone areas of northern Mali in 2015<sup>1</sup> to examine the allocation strategies being used to ensure that villages are provided with much needed agricultural aid. The survey denotes the *preferred* language the village leader uses speaking with the World Bank representative. While all leaders presumably speak more localized languages, some prefer to speak with outside representatives in French, which is the language most used by the elite, governmental, bureaucratic class.<sup>2</sup> We find that the preference of a village leader to speak French greatly increases that village's chance of being targeted to receive agricultural aid in the form of seeds, pesticides, fertilizer, and needed farming equipment. Not only do we demonstrate that agricultural aid is disproportionately allocated to villages in northern Mali in which the leader uses French, our research further indicates that this aid is not as effectively distributed to those villages most affected by exogenous shocks compared to villages in which the leader prefers to speak a local language. Our findings indicate that aid organizations use language as an ineffective heuristic in the aid allocation process. French-speaking local leaders can manipulate aid toward their own communities regardless of actual need.

This paper is presented in five parts. First, we provide a brief overview of the current literature examining aid allocation strategies. Second, we situate the study of aid allocation within the history of aid allocation to northern Mali. Third, we focus on explicating the importance of our new causal variable that explains post-2012 aid allocation in northern Mali: language, namely, the ability for village leaders to speak French. Fourth, we present the methods and data taken from household- and village-level surveys conducted by the World Bank in northern Mali in 2015. Finally, we discuss the results and the possible implications for understanding

how actors are currently targeted for receiving agricultural aid in northern Mali.

## 2. Aid allocation strategies: an overview

A robust literature currently seeks to explain why bilateral and multilateral donors target certain countries (or areas within countries) for aid. One of the most significant determinants of aid allocation is simply donor preference (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Berthélemy, 2006; Clist, 2011; Dudley and Montmarquette, 1976). Donors decide how much money to give, where to give it, and what projects the money should fund. Countless studies exist trying to determine what accounts for this preference. For example, many scholars argue that ethnicity influences public goods provision, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Burgess, Jedwab, Miguel, Morjaria, & Miquel, 2015; Posner, 2005). In their experimental study in Uganda, Habyarimana, et al. (2007) find that co-ethnics are more likely to aid other co-ethnics.

Colonial heritage is another indicator of aid distribution. As Bräutigam and Knack (2004: 255) explain, “Colonialism did little to develop strong, indigenously rooted institutions that could tackle the development demands of modern states.” As a result, African countries have received significant donor support from their former colonizing powers. However, in their study, Berthélemy and Tichit (2003) find that, while postcolonial links still have a strong influence on aid allocations to former colonial countries, this influence is steadily declining over time.

Other reasons donors target certain recipients over others include the size of the donor organization, as well as any history of aid receipt. Berthélemy and Tichit (2003) argue that, on average, small donors need to specialize more because of budget constraints, so they tend to target their aid more effectively than larger organizations. By contrast, an organization like the World Bank uses a “country-level” targeting approach, whereby everyone is assumed to need aid (Bodenstein and Kemmerling, 2015; Nunnenkamp and Thiele, 2006; Sumner, 2012). Furthermore, Ford, Berrang-Ford, and Paterson (2011) explain that in most cases those communities targeted for aid are those communities with a history of being targeted for aid.

Perhaps the most robust argument for why donors choose to allocate aid to certain countries or groups over others is rooted in promoting the “good governance” agenda. For the World Bank, the single largest provider of official development assistance (ODA) worldwide, requiring governments to enact reforms is part of their global mission to promote good governance (Brass, 2016; Molenaers, Dellepiane, & Faust, 2015). International development continues to focus on promoting good governance, even though criticism of good governance abounds. Many international development theorists have argued that the normative aspects of the good governance agenda are not useful. For example, Grindle (2010: 5) argues that the term “good governance” provides a “fig leaf” for nominally apolitical donors to dictate political prescriptions to poor countries. Furthermore, scholars like Woods (2000) condemn the hypocrisy of aid organizations in requiring good governance as a precondition for aid, which these same organizations do not always practice.

Some scholars now call for recognizing the effectiveness of donor organizations as being just as important as government efficacy in the receiving country (Brass, 2016; Claeys, 2014). Scholars have also questioned the effectiveness of these aid allocation strategies for Mali (Bergamaschi, 2014; Bleck and Michelitch, 2015; Ford et al., 2011; Koch et al., 2009; van de Walle, 2012; Wing, 2013). Long considered to be a “darling” of the aid world, the ongoing unrest and instability in Mali—particularly in northern Mali—stemming from the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the ousting of

<sup>1</sup> All survey data used in this paper are available open access via the World Bank. Data can be accessed here: <http://www.gisse.org/pages/miec/miec-mensuel.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Survey administrators are fluent in several Malian languages. Thus, the preference of the village leader tracks the language the leader uses to interact professionally with outside officials.

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