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How Local Leaders View Transparency and Local Autonomy in Humanitarian Aid Distribution

Evidence from Mali

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Abstract

Recognizing the pivotal role local governance plays in crisis response and the diversity of local conditions even within a single country context, this article examines variation in preferences over humanitarian aid delivery among local leaders in Mali. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork and a survey of 2,919 local leaders across the country, we investigate leaders' preferences over two key dimensions of aid governance: local autonomy over targeting and distribution and transparency over aid delivery. Using aid profile vignettes to elicit preferences over these attributes, we find that leaders generally favor approaches that combine both greater local control and greater transparency, viewing transparency as complementary to autonomy rather than constraining. Preferences, however, vary by leaders' position and by context: outsiders to aid governance demand more transparency, and leaders' relative trust in local aid committees versus donors predicts preferences for autonomy. Leaders in conflict-affected villages place greater value on autonomy and less on transparency, highlighting how insecurity reshapes aid preferences in fragile settings.

Keywords: Governance; humanitarian aid; conflict; resilience; policy implementation, Mali

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1 Introduction

Humanitarian aid distribution in fragile and conflict-affected settings often relies on local leaders, who are uniquely positioned to understand and address community needs. These leaders play a pivotal role in advancing the localization of development—a priority increasingly emphasized by donor agencies and humanitarian organizations alike. Their role becomes even more critical where central government and international donors face barriers to safe access to communities and lack reliable information on local conditions. Greater local autonomy over targeting and distribution and transparency over implementation are widely promoted as key to improving aid effectiveness in these settings while minimizing potential costs like rent-seeking (Meers, 2019; Platteau and Gaspart, 2003; Khan, Lee, and Bae, 2019).[1] The physical and institutional distance between aid providers and recipients weakens accountability—a gap that transparency and local autonomy can help to close. These principles are enshrined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, among other international pacts. The success of these principles depends, in part, on the behavior of local actors. Yet little is known about how local leaders themselves view local autonomy and transparency within humanitarian aid in contexts with severe need and rapidly changing conditions.

Mali is one such context; Malians increasingly face compound crises, with overlapping exposure to natural disasters, weather shocks, price shocks, economic crises, and escalating insecurity. Food insecurity—especially in areas affected by conflict—is dire, and set to worsen as climate change intensifies and armed groups block access to certain parts of the country. The United Nations estimates that over one million children in Mali face an imminent threat of acute malnutrition and that approximately 7.1 million need urgent humanitarian assistance (International Rescue Committee, 2024). With such urgent need combined with the departure of several important donors from the country, humanitarian agencies are confronted with limited resources, multiple competing imperatives (such as developing early warning systems to prevent hardship while also responding to urgent needs), and the potential for unintended consequences (such as erosion of communal and institutional trust, or conflict over aid resources) (Kosec and Mo, 2025). Delivering effective aid programming in fragile settings like Mali involves difficult choices and tradeoffs, as actors weigh complex costs and benefits amid substantial uncertainty.

This paper aims to understand when local leaders value autonomy and transparency within humanitarian aid, and how these preferences are shaped by political conditions, including the presence of conflict. We lay out a simple framework acknowledging that aid projects can be designed with either high or low local autonomy over targeting and distribution and with high or low transparency over implementation, noting that

[1] These objectives could reasonably be seen to work at cross-purposes if, for example, greater reporting requirements implied by transparency constrain local actors' autonomy. However, they could be highly complementary if, for example, transparency helps reveal greater alignment between citizen and local leader preferences.

accountability dynamics will differ within each quadrant along the two dimensions. Supported by evidence from qualitative interviews, we argue that transparency in contexts of scarcity and conflict can play both a costly disciplining role for leaders but also serve to benefit them in their governing tasks by, e.g., clarifying rules, socializing targeting criteria, managing expectations, enabling blame-shifting when aid is insufficient to meet needs, and facilitating credit-claiming when leaders help secure aid projects. We argue that the position leaders hold within local governance structures will shape leaders' views, particularly the extent to which they are a political "insider" or "outsider." We also explore the degree to which the presence or absence of conflict shapes these considerations.

To examine variation in these preferences, we fielded a survey with 2,919 local leaders across 139 communes spanning seven regions in Mali. We interview different types of leaders—including elected officials, traditional leaders, opposition candidates, and representatives of women's, youth, and civil society groups—thus capturing a broad spectrum of local leadership. We elicited respondent preferences over paired aid profile vignettes, within which we varied the level of local autonomy (commune aid committee vs. donor control) over targeting and distribution as well as the level of transparency (general information vs. clear disclosure of targeting and distribution processes). Contrary to what standard transparency-accountability theories (Fearon, 1999; Besley, 2006) suggest if we assume that transparency is costly for self-interested leaders, we find leaders prefer aid approaches that combine both greater local control *and* greater transparency. Further, transparency is valued *more* highly when autonomy is high. Instead of viewing transparency as a check on their power, leaders see it as complementary to greater autonomy.

We additionally consider how leaders' position within aid governance conditions their views. We show that leaders with weaker ties to local aid governance ("outsiders") have greater demands for transparency – a finding that hews closer to predictions from the accountability literature (Tsai, 2007). Individual perceptions of the fairness and capabilities of local aid committees versus humanitarian donors operating in their commune also condition preferences: leaders who perceive local aid committees to be more fair consistently prefer local autonomy, while those who perceive donors as more fair and capable consistently prefer *less* local autonomy. We also find that leaders in conflict-affected villages are less likely to value transparency, suggesting that transparency might confer more limited benefits, or be costly, in these settings. However, leaders in conflict-affected villages value autonomy more than do peers in villages without conflict—possibly reflecting the complexity of such settings, and the fact that information asymmetries between donors and local communities may be higher there.

These insights are highly relevant to a central dilemma donors face in fragile and conflict-affected settings such as Mali: how much autonomy to give local leaders in aid targeting and distribution, and whether

providing transparency will backfire by generating opposition among local leaders if they feel too scrutinized. Standard accountability models (Ferejohn, 1986; Fearon, 1999; Besley, 2006) might imply that self-interested incumbents should seek autonomy and resist transparency[2] (and that outsiders should favor the reverse), but our results show a more nuanced picture. We find that leader preferences are shaped not only by a consideration of the costs of transparency but also its benefits. Transparency is costly when leaders are under-performing. However, transparency can be beneficial when leaders are over-performing on some dimension, at least relative to citizen expectations. This can happen if citizens overestimate a leader's budget or discretion over funds, or they are poorly informed about distributional rules – all of which may be more likely when resources are coming from donor aid rather than internal sources. We also illustrate that gaining these benefits of transparency do not necessarily come at a cost. We provide examples of where community members expect local leaders to reap material benefits from their position and even participate in forms of informal taxation.

For donors, these lessons might imply that granting local autonomy need not always heighten risks of capture, particularly in contexts where social accountability remains strong and governance systems are more inclusive, and that transparency may serve multiple functions beyond curbing misuse that local leaders find useful—including managing citizen expectations, clarifying rules of allocation, and facilitate credit-claiming by local leaders over securing aid projects. Another implication for donors is that there are scenarios where low local autonomy is actually preferred by local leaders. Indeed, it would be better for donors if their dual goals of increasing aid localization and transparency were not working at cross-purposes. Helpfully, our data suggests that local leaders themselves see these two constructs as more complementary than we might have assumed.

We contribute to the literature on accountability by highlighting a context in which transparency may provide relatively greater benefits than costs to leaders. Others have similarly argued that transparency can be beneficial – both for strategic reasons and to attract particular constituencies. Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland (2011), for example, argue that leaders may strategically opt for transparency when the credibility benefits (signaling quality, reducing uncertainty) exceed political costs. Relatedly, Fox (2007) shows that leaders in weaker network positions or under institutional pressure can use transparency to strengthen credibility and overcome informational disadvantages. We suggest that leaders may be more concerned with managing community expectations than avoiding accountability in crisis settings characterized by high need and limited resources.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines how our paper relates to existing theory on localization of aid delivery, detailing our core hypotheses. Section 3 provides context on humanitarian

[2]Although Fearon (1999) also shows that good types benefit from greater transparency because voters can distinguish them from low-performing incumbents.

aid and local governance in Mali. Section 4 details the research design, sample selection, measurement approaches, and our estimation strategy. Section 5 presents our primary results on leader preferences and heterogeneity by insider/outsider status and capacity perceptions. Section 6 discusses implications of the results for our understanding of leaders' preferences over aid design, and Section 7 outlines directions for future research and offers policy recommendations for aid design in fragile settings.

2 Transparency, Local Autonomy, and Accountability in Aid Distribution

Humanitarian aid operates through a long and complex chain of accountability—from individual taxpayers and foundations in donor countries, through implementing agencies and national and local governments in recipient countries, to the final beneficiaries in crisis-affected communities (Ebrahim, 2013; Winters, 2010). Over the last two decades, the global aid architecture has increasingly emphasized aid transparency and local ownership as correctives to these long and often broken accountability chains. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) enshrined both as central to improving aid effectiveness. The presumption is that transparency can strengthen accountability by enabling citizens to monitor aid projects, while local ownership improves aid by leveraging local information and enabling recipient countries to channel aid toward local priorities (Alderman, 2002; Hayek, 1945; Grindle, 2007). Transparency and local autonomy are thus seen as complementary levers for donors, allowing them to capture the efficiency gains of local autonomy while mitigating its risks through greater transparency, and as potentially conflicting levers for local actors, facilitating directing aid toward local goals but enhancing scrutiny over their actions.

However, there are a number of reasons why donors might not always want to embed both local autonomy and transparency in aid projects and why accountability dynamics may not function in a straightforward way in fragile settings where humanitarian aid is distributed. First, citizens may not be able to tell in practice which aspects of aid project implementation are delegated to which actors, thus limiting their ability to hold actors accountable. Even when aid projects "bypass" governmental institutions and are implemented by NGOs (Dietrich, 2013), local government officials still play an important role in facilitating, approving, and monitoring projects, and citizens might appropriately credit local politicians for their role in this process (Baldwin and Winters, 2023). In this case, accountability dynamics would not vary much regardless of whether aid implementation is delegated to the local level or not.

Second, transparency can serve multiple functions beyond facilitating monitoring and accountability by citizens. Now decades into the global transparency and open government movement, transparency has become a normative expectation which all actors in the aid implementation chain (including local leaders) may find

costly to ignore. Rather than the presence of transparency being seen as an added benefit facilitating monitoring, citizens may view its presence as the norm and its absence with suspicion. Transparency could also benefit local leaders rather than simply serving to constrain their behavior (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland, 2011; Fox, 2007). Where need greatly exceeds available resources, needs-based targeting is challenging; no matter what decision rule leaders use to distribute scarce resources, there will inevitably be aggrieved citizens with reasonable claims to having been unfairly denied resources. Indeed, this can explain often mixed impacts of social transfer programs on citizens' views of those providing aid (Kosec and Mo, 2024, 2025). Under such circumstances, transparency in aid distribution and targeting can allow leaders to show that aid was distributed fairly, thereby deflecting blame for unmet need onto donors or higher levels of government. It can also socialize program rules and clarify the logic of targeting, reducing misinformation, suspicion, and rumors. Even when leaders act in good faith, transparency can enhance the perceived fairness and legitimacy of their decisions.

Additionally, transparency can support leaders' strategic goals. By making visible the benefits delivered, leaders can claim credit for aid reaching their communities (Mayhew, 1974; Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood, 2012; de la Cuesta et al., 2023). Public disclosure can also help leaders in their role of aid oversight and monitoring distributions, ensuring they know which households receive aid. In tightly-knit communities with strong social norms around sharing resources, leaders may need this information in order to fairly "rotate" resources across different families when resources are scarce or to respond to grievances. In some cases, leaders may also use information on targeting in order to facilitate rent-seeking (e.g. knowing which households might pay an "overhead fee"). In short, transparency is not only a disciplining mechanism imposed by donors, but also a political and practical tool that could be valued by leaders themselves.

Third, fragility and conflict dynamics may alter the value of autonomy and transparency. Weak and/or unstable institutions, limited freedoms for political opposition, and complex and rapidly-changing development challenges complicate the delegation and monitoring relationships that conventional accountability depends on (Hoeffler and Justino, 2024). Particularly in unstable environments, too-tight control over local agents can lower performance outcomes (Honig, 2019; Heinzel, Reinsberg, and Zaccaria, 2025). But funneling aid through weak systems also risks reinforcing existing problems like rent-seeking, clientelism, and corruption, and citizens can lack the freedom and information needed to use transparency for monitoring. At the same time, the urgency of humanitarian crises creates strong incentives to work through any institution capable of absorbing funds and delivering aid. Localizing aid in fragile environments therefore reflects both pragmatism and necessity rather than facilitating accountability: local actors hold the legitimacy and authority to convene communities and facilitate distribution in remote and conflict-affected areas. Effective accountability also requires credible "exit options" or an alternative provider of services, something largely absent in

crisis-affected settings. Evidence also suggests that limiting local involvement in fragile settings can worsen aid outcomes (Autesserre, 2014).

Conflict further complicates these accountability relationships. In areas that are or have recently been contested by armed groups, the destruction of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and breakdown of communication channels make it difficult for citizens to observe or verify how aid is distributed. Violence often fragments authority across armed groups, traditional leaders, and local administrators. At the same time, conflict widens information asymmetries between donors and local actors: external agencies often lose access to communities and have limited knowledge of evolving needs or power dynamics, while local leaders retain privileged, real-time information. In such environments, local autonomy may be especially valuable; it enables leaders to adapt delivery strategies to shifting security conditions, identify vulnerable households, and maintain community trust amid uncertainty where they are already strained. At the same time, revealing information about aid flows can endanger recipients by exposing them to predation or retaliation, while withholding it might fuel mistrust and accusations of bias. Thus, in conflict-affected settings, both the value of autonomy and the value and risks of transparency may be amplified: leaders may prioritize flexibility and safety over openness, even as opacity threatens perceived fairness and legitimacy in aid distribution. All of these factors complicate the relative value of local ownership and transparency.

Conceptualizing aid projects as a combination of high/ low delegation to local actors and high/ low transparency, we highlight four stylized methods of aid distribution:

- **High autonomy + low transparency**: This is the classic "capture risk" scenario feared by donors—local leaders have the freedom to allocate resources without scrutiny, thus potentially allowing for rent-seeking and favoritism. From the reverse perspective, classic accountability theories would say this should be the form of aid most favored by local leaders. However, low transparency may also be costly to leaders. Recall, transparency can allow local leaders to claim credit among competing actors in aid distribution, legitimate distribution decisions in contexts of scarcity, help deflect blame onto donors or higher levels of government, and reduce misinformation and suspicion.
- **High autonomy + high transparency**: Under this scenario, leaders have the freedom to allocate resources, yet their choices are visible to citizens. In theory, leaders would then be exposed to citizen grievances for any misuse of aid funds. Transparency could thus be costly, though leaders may still value if it allows them to claim credit for aid delivery and manage citizen expectations.
- **Low autonomy + low transparency**: Donors control targeting and distribution without informing citizens or local leaders. Under this scenario, local leaders risk being blamed for aid failures without

the autonomy to make adjustments.

- **Low autonomy + high transparency**: Leaders' hands are theoretically tied by donor rules and conditions, but transparency may allow them to credibly deflect blame onto donors and socialize program rules.

This framework highlights how transparency and local autonomy can work in relation to each other. Leaders may value transparency even if it facilitates more scrutiny of their actions if it supports legitimacy, credit-claiming, or blame deflection. Guided by this logic, we derived four core hypotheses[3]:

Hypothesis 1 Local leaders will prefer to have high autonomy in targeting and distribution of aid, all else equal.

Hypothesis 2 Local leaders will prefer high transparency in aid targeting and distribution when they have low autonomy in aid targeting and distribution.

However, we expect these dimensions to be inversely related. First, the benefits of autonomy will likely be lower in the presence of high levels of transparency about how aid is allocated and distributed because it opens leaders up to costly action from aggrieved constituents. Second, the benefits of transparency are more credible for leaders when the hands of local leaders are actually tied. But at higher levels of autonomy, transparency may now be more costly to local leaders who cannot shift blame as easily and may suffer consequences from citizens dissatisfied with actions taken by local leaders. This leads to the following two hypotheses about how we expect these two dimensions to interact:

Hypothesis 3 Local leaders are less likely to prefer high autonomy in aid targeting and distribution when the process is highly transparent, compared to when it has a low level of transparency.

Hypothesis 4 Local leaders are less likely to support transparency in aid targeting and distribution when they have high autonomy in aid distribution and targeting, compared to when they have a low level of autonomy.

While we pre-specified Hypotheses 3 and 4 to test more canonical expectations that autonomy and transparency act as substitutes, our framework also highlights that under certain conditions, they may act as complements—an empirical possibility we examine in the analysis. In our framework and in our pre-analysis plan, we note that transparency does have benefits at high levels of autonomy, and it is possible that these could outweigh its potential costs. In Section 6, we provide suggestive evidence on why leaders value transparency and under what conditions.

[3]These map onto H4, H6, H5 and H7, respectively, in our pre-analysis plan.

These hypotheses are based on two assumptions. First, local leaders in our survey are more likely to be political insiders than political outsiders, and so costs and benefits from local autonomy and transparency are likely to accrue to them. Second, we assume that local actors are more embedded in communities than are donors and so have greater access to information about the needs and resources of specific households. Local leaders thus have advantages over donors in being better able to target and distribute goods fairly (if so motivated).

We thus expect that the extent to which these assumptions are met will moderate our hypothesized relationships. First, for relative political outsiders, we expect a lower preference for autonomy (because they will not necessarily benefit) and lower costs and benefits of transparency. Second, local autonomy will be less valued when the assumption of leader embeddedness or community access is not met. Additionally, we should expect leaders to value autonomy less when they perceive donors to be relatively more capable or local aid committees relatively less capable.

3 Humanitarian Aid and Local Governance in Mali

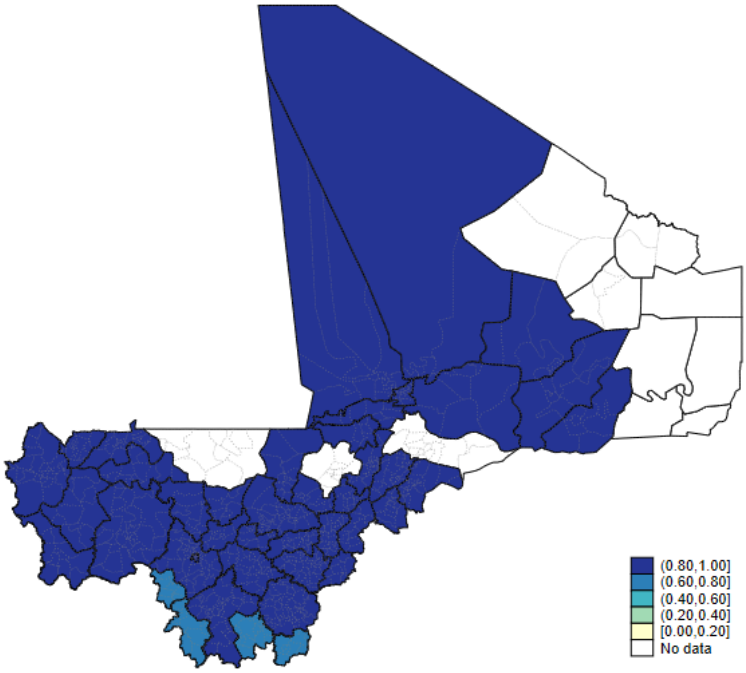
This study was fielded in Mali in 2024 amid ongoing humanitarian crises and a rapidly shifting donor environment. Malians face overlapping exposure to natural disasters, weather shocks, price shocks, and escalating insecurity. Food insecurity—especially in areas affected by conflict—is dire and set to worsen as climate conditions deteriorate and armed groups block access to certain parts of the country. The United Nations estimates that over one million children in Mali face imminent threat of acute malnutrition and that approximately 7.1 million Malians—over 30 percent of the population—need urgent humanitarian assistance (International Rescue Committee, 2024).

Survey evidence collected for this project across seven regions of Mali underscores the severity of the crisis. Ninety percent of local leaders we surveyed across seven regions reported facing a shock in the past five years that caused extremely or very grave food insecurity in their locality. Among these, 43% reported receiving no external aid at all from humanitarian donors or the central government. Of those who did receive aid, only 25% report that it was sufficient to meet needs, and just 14% said their locality had recovered to pre-shock conditions by the time of the survey. These findings echo broader humanitarian assessments: in all but four cercles in our survey, over 80% of surveyed leaders described food insecurity as a moderate or very large problem at the time of the survey (Figure 1).[4] Water shortages were reported as equally severe (Figure 2).

Despite overwhelming need, aid is woefully insufficient. Following coups in 2020 and 2021, Mali has become

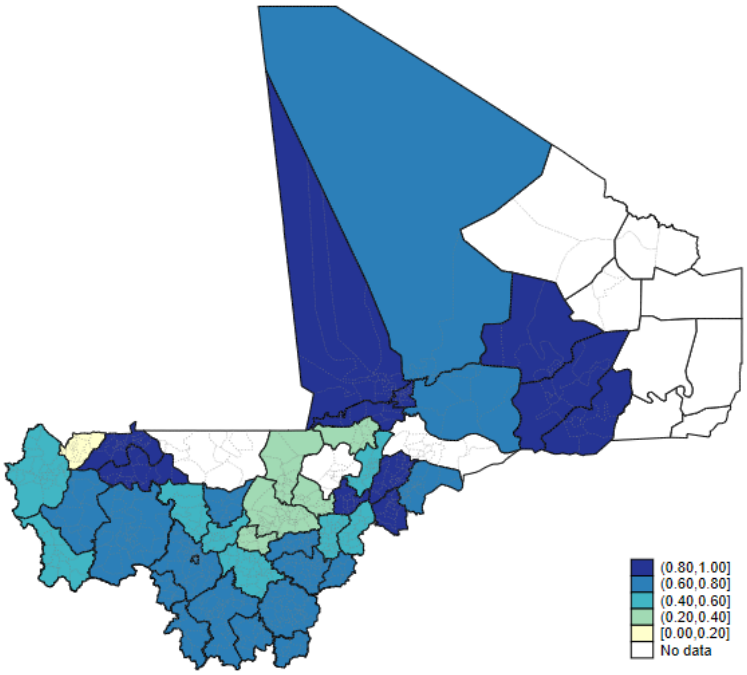
[4]We visualize data at the level of the cercle in order to preserve anonymity of our respondents.

Figure 1: Share of leaders in each cercle reporting food insecurity as a moderate or a large problem



Note: The map displays the share of leaders in each cercle reporting that food insecurity is a moderate or very large problem in their locality. Darker shades represent higher shares. Note that we aggregate data to the cercle level in order to protect the identity of respondents.
Source: MLLAR Survey (2024)

Figure 2: Share of leaders in each cercle reporting water shortages to be a moderate or a large problem



Note: The map displays the share of leaders in each cercle reporting that water shortages pose a moderate or very large problem in their locality. Darker shades represent higher shares. Note that we aggregate data to the cercle level in order to protect the identity of respondents.
Source: MLLAR Survey (2024)

increasingly isolated from the bilateral and multilateral donors that have traditionally provided it with aid. Most notably, the World Bank temporarily halted disbursing funds, and France and the United States, traditionally large donors in Mali, have decreased their financial support. In 2022, the Malian government banned French NGOs from working in the country, curbing NGO operations across Mali. Later in the year, the French Development Fund officially withdrew from Mali altogether. Given both the severity of the humanitarian crises faced within Mali and the curtailed funding landscape, donors continuing to operate in Mali face difficult decisions around how to engage local actors. Meanwhile, communities often have to look internally for sources of resilience.

Nonetheless, a handful of international actors continue to provide humanitarian support in Mali, with the World Food Programme (WFP) playing a particularly critical role. WFP has operated in Mali since 1964 and remains one of the few organizations able to access conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas, delivering emergency food, cash, nutrition, and resilience-building programs (World Food Program USA, 2024). In 2023, WFP reached approximately 3.8 million people in Mali, including internally displaced persons, host communities, and malnourished children and mothers (World Food Programme, 2023). However, WFP's global funding is also declining. By mid-2025, severe shortfalls——driven in part by decreased contributions from major donors like the U.S.—led WFP to announce the suspension of food and nutrition assistance across parts of West and Central Africa, including Mali, with food stocks expected to run out by September (Associated Press, 2025). In this constrained and shifting donor landscape, WFP's decisions on where, how, and with whom to engage are increasingly consequential—not only for immediate humanitarian response, but also for longer-term resilience and equity in aid delivery. Thus, in designing this research, we partnered with WFP around priority research questions to inform programming.

Landscape Analysis of Local Actors in Aid Distribution

Because donors must increasingly rely on local partners, it is essential to clarify who the relevant actors are in local aid governance. We began our study by conducting qualitative fieldwork in five communes in the Sikasso and Segou regions in central and southern Mali to define the landscape of local leaders who play important roles in crisis response and recovery in Mali. We interviewed a mix of elected mayors and regional coordinators of aid programming for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to understand the relevant different actors in shaping local engagement with donors and local crisis response strategies (Bleck et al., 2023).

This mapping exercise identified local leaders in Mali who play a key role in coordinating responses to the various crises that rural Malians face: political leaders at the commune level, village leadership, and

members of civil society at both the commune and village levels. We discuss each, in turn. Mali's lowest level of decentralized territorial administration is the commune; the country has 819 communes with elected mayors and communal councilors. The first municipal elections were held in 1999 with a five-year cycle.[5] However, the last municipal elections were held in 2016;[6] subsequently, Mali has not been able to hold local elections. Even so, mayors continue to play an important role in public service provision and coordinating humanitarian aid. Mayors also play important gate-keeping roles for donor-funded development projects (Bergamaschi, 2014).

Beyond elected officials at the commune level, the *secrétaire général* (secretary general)—a centrally recruited civil servant posted to the commune—manages budgets and liaises with line ministries. They also often have knowledge of the broader commune if they have resided in multiple villages. Given Mali's competitive parties and history of multi-party elections, prior research has shown that in some localities, opposition candidates who competed and were not elected to office can play an important role in organizing and representing those with opposing views to the incumbent leadership (Gottlieb, 2015).[7]

Mali also has a rich associational life (Bleck et al., 2024). Civil society organizations (CSOs) at the commune level mobilize resources, implement projects, and sometimes sanction local governments (Bleck et al., 2021). Historically, some of these grassroots civil society groups have played an important role in making demands on the state at the commune level and/or lobbying traditional leaders (Johnson, 2021; Shapland et al., 2023). Most villages have a woman's association and a youth association whose leaders may be consulted by the village chief or council of elders when making decisions and who play important roles providing welfare support and advocacy for their members. These groups play important roles in representing the population's perspectives.

Traditional village leaders remain central to dispute resolution, public goods, and brokering with state and donors (Baldwin, 2020). In our qualitative research, interviewees within commune seats noted that they often relied heavily on village and traditional leaders to help them with aid distribution logistics and problem-solving, even if village leaders did not have formal roles within aid programming. This was particularly true in areas where security and conflict concerns were high—making it difficult or impossible for mayors and other commune officials to access parts of the commune—or when there were disputes among and within communities over who would receive aid. Afrobarometer data shows that the Malian traditional leaders are among the most trusted on the continent(Logan, 2009), and are more trusted than national and local elected

[5]The Algiers Accords prescribed greater decentralization in Mali as a way to satisfy insurgent discontent about lack of representation- with the establishment of new regions.

[6]Some of these elections were plagued by jihadist violence or the threat of violence, but most of the country's territory was able to hold these elections.

[7]In contrast, research has shown that opposition candidates, when elected to serve on councils, can be co-opted by ruling party members (Gottlieb, 2015).

leaders. Traditional leaders regularly convene village meetings to disseminate information and solicit citizen perspectives.[8] They typically work closely with a set of councilors—who put their ideas into action.

Aid distribution committees at the commune level are the standard way through which donors, humanitarian agencies, and NGOs reach local communities with aid and coordinate with these local actors. These committees exist in nearly all communes (96% of leaders surveyed in our quantitative leaders' survey reported knowing of one in their commune) but meet regularly in only 10% of cases, typically convening only in response to humanitarian shocks. Roughly half of our survey respondents report some form of participation in the aid distribution committee. Village chiefs are the most likely to participate, while former opposition candidates (at the commune level) are the least likely. Meanwhile, all actor types, even former opposition candidates and women's and youth leaders report speaking with the aid committee in the past six months.[9]

Variation in Aid Project Design

In addition to the landscape analysis of local governance, we also conducted a focus group with aid project implementers in order to understand how transparency and autonomy are exercised in practice in Mali. Respondents were identified and recruited by a local statistical institute in Mali (GISSE) based on their experience working with humanitarian aid projects in different regions.[10]

Focus group discussions highlight considerable variation in how transparency and autonomy are exercised in practice. In some communities, aid processes are highly visible: criteria for selection, the names of households targeted, and the amount of aid distributed are publicly announced at village meetings. Aid project implementers, local leaders, and heads of household would all be invited to attend these meetings and are all invited to express their needs and engage in joint decision-making about who gets what and how much. In some cases, complaint committees are established, providing a formal mechanism for households to challenge perceived unfairness. Elsewhere, however, respondents shared that transparency is minimal. The population does not know the criteria for selection; they do not understand the selection procedure; do not know the intended amount of aid, or even who is ultimately responsible for delivery. In these settings, citizens often ask questions but rarely receive clear answers.

Another theme that came through clearly in the focus group discussion was that transparency has increasingly

[8] Though these meetings sometimes include only male heads of household.

[9] To ensure that we did not miss any other relevant local actors in our landscape mapping, we also asked respondents an open-ended question about who participated in these committees. The only actor types that were frequently mentioned as participating but which we do not have represented in our survey are representatives of donor agencies and international NGOs.

[10] Because aid project implementers are geographically dispersed across Mali, the focus group was held via Whatsapp, and respondents answered a set of structured questions using voice memos. Several of the participants also served as enumerators in the quantitative survey for this project.

become a norm in aid projects. Before the recent closures of many local NGOs, there were frequent and prevalent discussions about the value of transparency over aid projects, and respondents noted that leaders know there is a norm for transparency. Despite the withdrawal of aid, norms around transparency have endured. Despite this norm, respondents noted that there is a layer of project funding that can be captured by local leaders, often openly. For example, they might negotiate in advance with an NGO that they will be paid an "overhead fee" for organizing the project or put fake beneficiary names down on the list or request a "tax" from all households receiving aid. There is little objection to these activities even in transparent implementation as local leaders could credibly block aid flows altogether and often communities are genuinely thankful for the coordination role that leaders play, so these fees are often perceived as legitimate.

Local autonomy likewise varies. At one end of the spectrum, international actors retain full control of aid distribution, with minimal or no involvement from local authorities. In one example provided in the focus group, the donor sent their own agents to directly assess needs, select beneficiaries, and determine local food prices. They then distributed aid to communities without engaging local authorities. In other cases, aid projects rely heavily on local authorities, who are closely involved in decision-making over aid. For example, during a needs assessment, someone from the mayor's office accompanied project staff out to villages where they worked with village chiefs in charge of constructing the list of beneficiaries. This local autonomy can be used for favoritism. In one example, the mayor requires that any aid delivered in the commune be delivered using his personal vehicle and that he personally be involved in the delivery process. Villages largely consider the mayor to be their ally in securing aid and provide an "overhead fee" for transportation services, though villages that get along better with the mayor are favored in distribution.

Taken together, the focus group evidence underscores that both transparency and autonomy vary widely not only across communes but even within them, depending on donor practices and local relationships. While transparency does seem to be a widely held norm in the sector, it is not automatically nor uniformly provided and also does not necessarily deter rent-seeking or favoritism. Local autonomy also varies widely in practice. In the next section, we introduce our quantitative leader survey and the experimentally varied survey vignettes that we use to test leaders' preferences over aid project design.

4 Research design

Guided by our initial, qualitative fieldwork, we interviewed a diverse set of local actors at both the commune and village levels to capture a diverse perspectives on aid governance. In each of 139 communes, we recruited the mayor[11] (or his representative) and four other leaders: the primary state-appointed civil servant, the

[11] In our sample, these were always men.

secretary general; an opposition politician; and two civil society leaders (one from a religious organization and one from a youth association). In four villages in each sample commune, we recruited the village chief, an advisor to the chief, the women's association leader, and the youth association leader. Below, we describe our strategy for sampling a diverse range of communes that were also feasible to access and how we identified local leaders. Then we describe the vignette experiment, our measurement strategy for moderators, and estimation strategy.

Sample

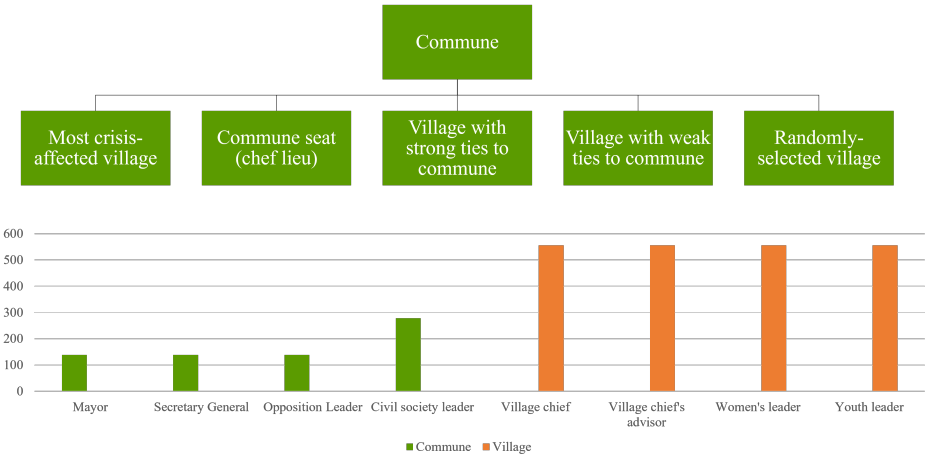
This study was conducted in 139 communes in rural Mali across seven of the 10 pre-2023 regions (we excluded Taod/'enit, Kidal and Menaka for security reasons). It was fielded between February and May 2023. Our implementing survey firm was the GISSE Institute, and they worked with us to select rural communes in each region. We attempted to survey at least one commune in each region. When selecting multiple communes from a region, GISSE selected communes that were non-contiguous to maximize variation local conditions, subject to access constraints given the security situation in Mali. We also consulted with WFP to ensure that they had some activities in at least a subset of the communes we selected, given our desire to make this research useful to them.

Within each commune, and in consultation with the mayor, we selected four villages. At the village level, we sought to maximize variation in "types" of villages, particularly in the extent to which they faced humanitarian crisis at the time and in their geographic and political proximity to commune leadership. In each commune, we targeted the commune seat, a village identified by the mayor as having a weak or oppositional relationship with the commune government, a village that is identified by the mayor as having a strong relationship with the commune government, and a village that is identified by the mayor as being most-affected by crises in the past year. In cases where the mayor was unable to provide this information to aid in sample selection or declined to do so, we selected villages at random within the commune until reaching four villages in total within the commune.

At the village level, chiefs served as the initial contact and identified the women's leader, youth leader, and another resource person or key interlocutor for the village on whom the chief relies. In total, the study includes 2,919 respondents (5 commune-level and 16 village-level leaders per commune), by design yielding four times as many village- as commune-level actors. Figure 3 provides an illustration of our sample and key interlocutors for the MLLAR Survey while Table 1 shows the distribution of each leader type across the sample and in each major geographic zone of Mali: South, Center, and North.[12] While Southern Mali

[12]The regions included are Gao and Tombouctou in the Northern zone, Mopti and Segou in the Central zone, and Kayes,

Figure 3: Diagram of Sampling Strategy



Source: MLLAR Survey (2024)

Table 1: Survey sample of local leaders

	All sample	Southern Mali	Central Mali	Northern Mali
N of unique cercles	41	20	13	8
N of unique communes	139	82	45	12
N of unique villages	557	329	181	49
Mayors or their representatives	139	82	45	12
Civil servants	139	82	45	12
Opposition leaders	139	82	45	12
Civil society leaders	278	164	90	24
Village chiefs	556	328	180	48
Village advisor	556	328	180	48
Women's leaders	556	328	180	48
Youth leaders	556	328	180	48

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

comprises the majority of our sample, we also have a sizeable sample from Central Mali, and smaller coverage of North Mali.

Because individuals in the survey hold specific leadership positions within villages and communes, many would be easily identifiable based on information on geographic units as well as the position that they hold. In order to preserve anonymity of our respondents, we carefully aggregate any descriptive statistics to large enough geographic units (e.g. cercles or regions) to ensure that individuals are not identifiable. Overall, the only refusal we faced in survey participation was that mayors often said they could not name villages that fit the sampling criteria (strong ties, weak ties, or crisis-affected). When they could not do so, we randomly sampled villages instead. The strong local presence and credibility of GISSE Institute across regions of Mali no doubt facilitated the high survey participation, even in areas that were conflict-affected or otherwise difficult to access.

Each of the leaders identified by our qualitative landscape mapping as key to aid distribution dynamics face distinct accountability pressures. Elected mayors are subjected to electoral pressure, although local elections have not been held according to a regular schedule since the coup d'état in 2020 (they were held once, albeit late, in 2016). Village chiefs, while unelected, live in close proximity to their neighboring villagers and often in conditions that are not much better than the average community member. While there are certainly opportunities for them to take advantage of their position as knowledge broker and intermediary between citizens and the state, they are also highly embedded in localized networks of reciprocity that make it challenging for them to engage in gross misconduct. In one example raised in the focus group, weekly assemblies allowed villagers to address and resolve complaints with their village chief. In another example, a chef de quartier (urban equivalent of a village chief) who was siphoning aid to friends and family instead of targeting intended beneficiaries was ousted from his post by the community. Secretary generals, meanwhile, are centrally appointed and face career pressures to follow national laws and regulations. Meanwhile, CSO, women's, and youth leaders articulate specific group interests and often sit outside of formal hierarchies.

Measuring preferences over transparency and autonomy

To test Hypotheses 1 - 4, each respondent evaluated a series of three paired aid profiles (each with a Donor 1 and a Donor 2) describing a hypothetical humanitarian aid program. Each profile includes three attributes, as summarized in Table 2:

1. **Aid type**: Aid type (either food, cash, or agricultural inputs) was randomly assigned with 1/3 prob-

Koulikoro, and Sikasso in the Southern zone.

ability at the level of the donor profile pair. Thus, the type of aid is held constant when respondents are comparing within a single profile pair. We do not aim to make causal inference with respect to how aid type may influence aid preferences but rather manipulate this dimension over the three pairs each respondent receives to add variation to the vignettes.

2. **Local autonomy**: Within pairs, we randomize *low* local autonomy (in which the donor controls targeting through a formula and handles logistics and distribution) vs. *high* local autonomy (in which the commune aid committee manages targeting, logistics, and distribution).

3. **Transparency**: Within pairs, we also randomize *low* transparency (general information is provided about how to prevent shocks) vs. *high* transparency (general information on how to prevent shocks plus clear information on how aid is targeted and distributed).

For each of the three pairs of aid profiles, the respondent is asked to select their preferred profile (Donor 1 or Donor 2). In half of the pairs, we manipulate the level of local autonomy, holding the level of transparency constant to test Hypotheses 1 and 3. In the other half, we manipulate the level of transparency, holding the level of autonomy constant to test Hypotheses 2 and 4. We infer the average preference for more transparency and more autonomy within our sample by observing the rate at which the aid profile containing the higher level of that manipulated feature is picked.

Table 2: Attributes of aid profiles and their possible levels

Aid type	**Discretion**	**Transparency**
Food	Low ($T = 0$): Donors control distribution and targeting through a formula	Low ($T = 0$): Information about general shock prevention is provided
Cash	High ($T = 1$): The commune manages distribution and targeting of donor aid	High ($T = 1$): Information about general shock prevention in addition to information about how anticipatory aid is targeted and distributed
Equipment		

For the attributes of autonomy and transparency, we do not use simple randomization (as would be the case in a conjoint experiment). We are only interested in a subset of the possible combinations of these two features. In particular, we are interested in the below four pre-specified contrasts:

1. The effect of transparency conditional on low local autonomy
2. The effect of transparency conditional on high local autonomy
3. The effect of local autonomy conditional on low transparency
4. The effect of local autonomy conditional on high transparency

As a result, we have four distinct pairings of aid profiles where only one of the two attributes—transparency or local autonomy—is different across the two profiles, holding the other one constant. Because we also want

to randomize aid type at the level of the donor pairing, this leaves us with $4 \times 3 = 12$ possible donor pairings. Each respondent receives 3 of these 12 pairings, ensuring (i) each respondent sees each aid type only once and (ii) at most one instance of each contrast per respondent. To do so, we divide the 12 pairings into four unique profile sets, as depicted in Appendix Table 9.

Respondents are randomly assigned to one of these four sets with equal probability. To mitigate order effects, the order of the three vignettes within each set is randomized. Additionally, within each donor pair, the position (Donor 1 or Donor 2) of the profile with the higher level of the treatment being varied (transparency or local autonomy) is randomized. This randomization strategy is equivalent to blocking: the assignment of each of the four contrasts is blocked on the assignment of aid type.

Measuring moderators

We pre-specified three key moderators that may condition leaders' preferences over transparency and autonomy for individual leaders: 1) outgroup status, 2) perceptions of capabilities and fairness of aid committees and donors, and 3) conflict-affectedness.

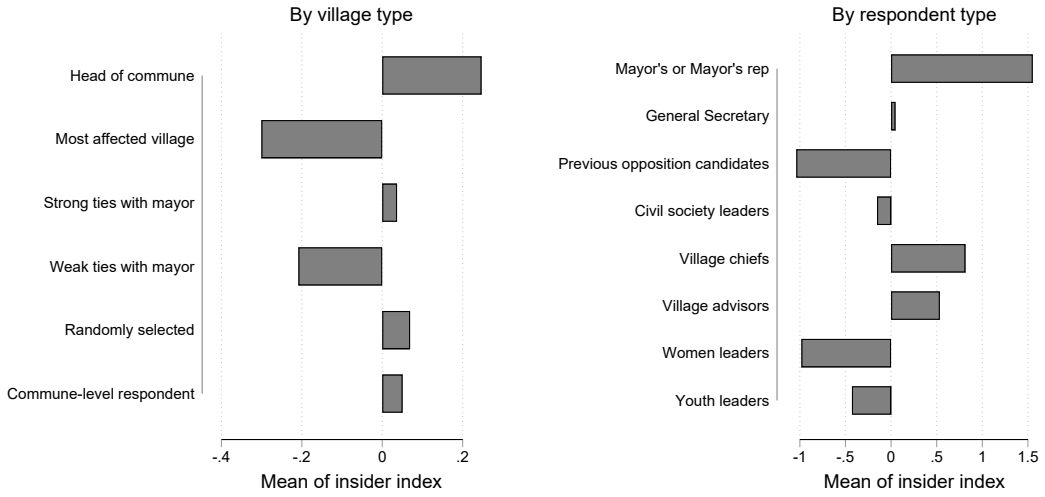
Outgroup status

Our pre-analysis plan notes that prior to collecting this rich quantitative data on local governance of aid distribution, we had weak priors both about the ingroup/ outgroup composition of our sample and about how to measure such a characteristic in this setting. We thus pre-specified three measurement approaches, and noted that we would prioritize measurement approaches with more variation. We also incorporate information from our qualitative fieldwork and local partners on measurement strategies. We report in the main text the third measure because it contains the most variation, and it is correlated in sensible ways with the first two measures. It also corresponds most closely with what we heard from local experts about how they think about ingroup/ outgroup dynamics. However, we report robustness to using the other two measures in the appendix.[13]

Our preferred approach is intended to capture outgroup status by measuring the extent to which the respondent anticipates being involved in decisions about aid distribution that were delegated to the aid distribution committee, whether formally or informally. We use principal component analysis (PCA), extracting the first

[13]The first approach measures outgroup status using an indicator variable for being among types of leaders or villages which we expected to be among outgroups: (1) opposition candidates; (2) residing in villages with weak ties to the mayor; or (3) being among CSO respondents who expected to be excluded from a hypothetical grant in their commune. Field reports indicated that this third question was misunderstood in the field, so we do not ultimately use this variable. The second approach focuses on types of leaders that we expect to have distinct views from mayors: (1) youth leaders in both villages and communes; (2) women's leaders; and (3) civil servants.

Figure 4: Index of insider/outsider status by village and respondent type



principle component, using the following variables. For the purpose of HTE analyses, we create an indicator for whether the respondent is above the median value on this *insider index*. The index is comprised of (i) aid committee membership; (ii) participation in seven distribution tasks over the past year (targeting, deciding aid amount, procurement, logistics, monitoring quality and implementation, dispute resolution over aid, and advising donors on commune needs); and (iii) whether citizens thanked the respondent for their role they played in aid distribution in the past year.

Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between the insider index, leader type, and village type. The insider index is lowest among the types of villages and leaders that we sampled in order to bring in outside perspectives on aid distribution. First, villages with weak ties with the mayor, and leaders who were previous opposition candidates are among those with the lowest average values of the insider index. Interestingly, the villages most affected by recent crises also appear to have the lowest insider status. Second, women, youth and civil society leaders report below-mean values of the insider index, and the local civil servant is the next-lowest reported average value.

Perceptions of capability

We asked respondents a number of questions about the perceived capabilities of different actors relevant to aid distribution. We focus on two questions most relevant to the experimental manipulations: 1) perceptions around capability to move goods to the village and distribute aid to households; and 2) perceptions around which actor would be fairest in its distribution—ensuring that aid reached the most vulnerable. Respondents could choose from among the following groups of actors relevant to aid distribution: central government, aid

distribution committee, village chiefs, civil society leaders, and donors. For each question, respondents are asked which of the actors would be most and least capable.

Conflict affectedness

To understand the incidence of localized violence and conflict, we asked respondents if they had experienced the following three types of violence in the previous 12 months: intra-communal, banditry, or violent extremism. Because we are ultimately interested in the effect of village-level conflict, we construct a village-level variable that indicates the village has experienced violence if at least three of the four surveyed local leaders reported at least one kind of violence each. Unlike for our other two anticipated moderators of treatment, we were ambivalent about the direction of the moderating effect on conflict and described reasons it could both intensify and attenuate effects in our pre-analysis plan.

Estimation

We define Y_{ij} as the probability that for donor pairing i, respondent j picks the aid profile with the high value of the contrasted (i.e., different across donors) dimension, or $Y_{ij} = 1$. So if the profile pair i has the same value on the transparency dimension and differs on the local autonomy dimension, then we consider the local autonomy dimension the contrasted dimension. To test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4, we seek to estimate whether the value of the contrasted dimension makes respondents systematically prefer one of the two aid profiles; that is, we carry out a t-test to test the null hypothesis that the mean of Y_{ij}, $\overline{Y}$, equals 0.5. We thus assess whether 0.5 falls within the 95% (or 90%) confidence interval of the estimated mean. This test is conducted separately for each of the four contrasts of interest.[14] To evaluate Hypothesis 3 about the value of high local autonomy being smaller when there is high transparency relative to when there is low transparency, we estimate the difference of $\overline{Y}$ across two types of paired contrasts: when profiles differ in autonomy and transparency is low, and when profiles differ in autonomy and transparency is high. In this way we can assess if the "value" of high autonomy is lessened due to the process being highly transparent.

When estimating heterogeneous treatment effects, we use binary variables for each moderator of interest and test whether $\overline{Y}$ varies with the value of the moderator of interest.

[14] Because no respondent sees the same contrast more than once, we do not cluster standard errors at the respondent level.

5 Results

We first test Hypotheses 1 and 2 to evaluate whether and to what extent local leaders prefer high autonomy (H1) and high transparency (H2) in the targeting and distribution of aid. Consistent with our expectations, leaders value both, as depicted in Table 3; conditional effects in all cases significantly exceed 0.5. Across each of the four contrasts, respondents substantially and significantly preferred high transparency and high autonomy. That is, whether local autonomy is high or low, respondents on average prefer high transparency (to low transparency), and similarly, whether transparency is high or low, respondents prefer high autonomy (to low autonomy).[15]

Table 3: Test of whether preference for aid profile exceeds 0.5

	Share of respondents	P-value
(1) Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is high	0.821	0.000
(2) Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is low	0.779	0.000
(3) Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is high	0.658	0.000
(4) Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is low	0.647	0.000
H3: Difference between (3) and (4)	0.011	0.449
H4: Difference between (1) and (2)	0.042	0.000

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

We find no evidence in support of Hypothesis 3, which predicted that leaders are less likely to prefer autonomy when the process if highly transparent, compared to when transparency is low. We cannot reject that leaders place the same value on high autonomy when transparency is high as they do when transparency is low. High autonomy appears to be broadly helpful to leaders on average, regardless of the transparency environment.

We find strong evidence *against* Hypothesis 4, which anticipated that the value placed on high transparency would be lower at high levels of autonomy. Instead, we observe that leader preference for high transparency is greater at *high* levels of autonomy, compared to low levels of autonomy. Instead of transparency being more valuable when local leaders are removed from targeting and distribution processes, it is considered useful when they are heavily involved. This appears more consistent with shifting blame and maintaining clarity being goals when citizens known local leaders are heavily involved as well as efforts to claim credit by local officials.

While we did not make any predictions to this effect, existing literature would lead us to believe that local leaders should prefer high autonomy over high transparency. Instead, we see the magnitude of the preference for high transparency is considerably higher than the magnitude of the preference for high autonomy. This is surprising, and suggests that transparency may be viewed to confer some benefits.

[15] Hypothesis 2 actually only predicted that local leaders will prefer high transparency when they have low autonomy—and did not make predictions about whether or not local leaders will prefer high transparency when the have high autonomy. Clearly, however, we find support for both.

Next, we investigate how these preferences are moderated by three pre-specified dimensions: respondents' insider vs. outsider status, respondents' perceptions of who is most capable at aid distribution (local leaders vs. donors), and village-level conflict affectedness. In all tables reporting heterogeneous effects, we estimate preferences over the same four contrasts reported in Table 3, but we estimate the share of respondents with that preference for each subgroup defined by the moderating variable. Then, rather than reporting whether the preference is different from 0.5, we report whether the average of one subgroup is significantly different from that of the other; we show the magnitude (column 3) and p-value of a t-test of a difference of means (column 4).

Insider/ Outsider Status

Table 4 finds mixed evidence with respect to our expectations of how insider/outsider status would moderate preferences using our insider index measure which takes into account how involved each leader is in aid distribution. We expected outsiders to value transparency more than insiders and we do find statistically significant evidence for this (rows (1) and (2)). We also expected insiders to value autonomy more than outsiders; while our point estimates indeed show this to be the case, the difference in the value placed on high autonomy for insiders vs. for outsiders does not reach statistical significance (rows (3) and (4)).

Table 4: Conditional effects: By outsider/insider status

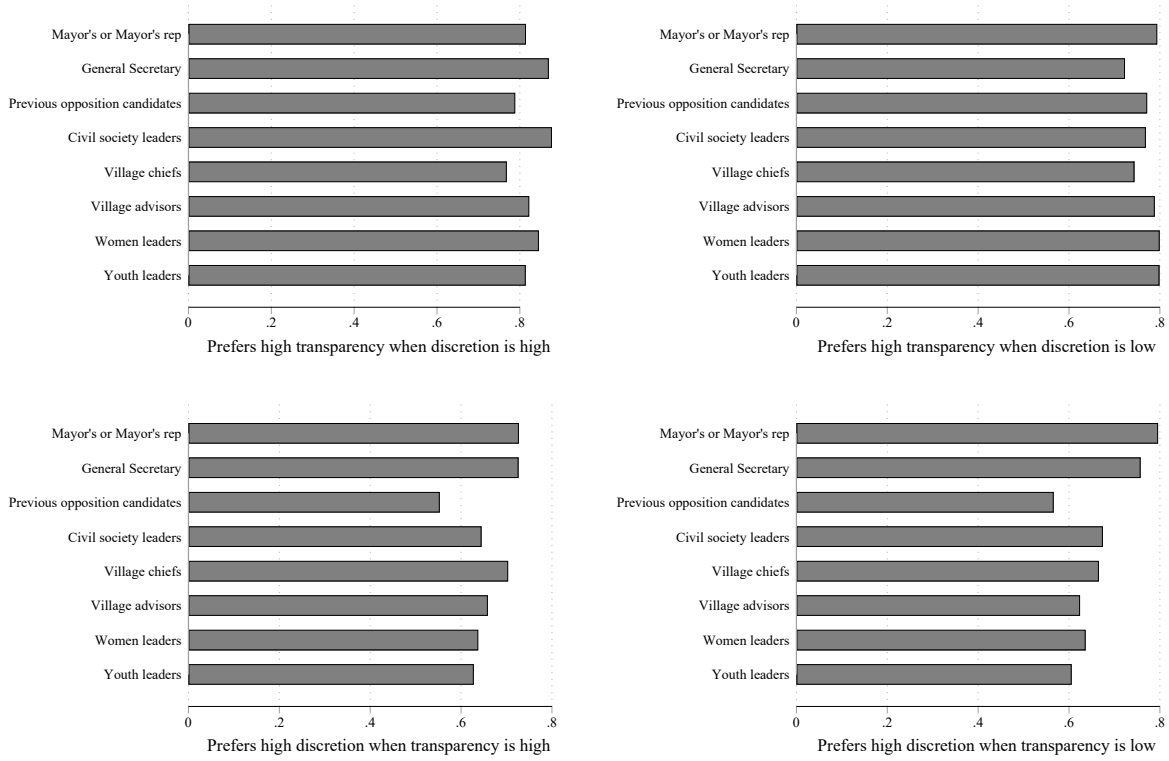
	Below median on insider index			
	Yes (outsider)	No (insider)	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is high	0.853	0.790	0.064	0.000
(2)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is low	0.801	0.757	0.044	0.012
(3)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is high	0.647	0.669	-0.022	0.270
(4)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is low	0.640	0.654	-0.014	0.499
Observations	1440	1479	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents identified as 'outsiders,' defined by a dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual scores below the median on the PCA index for insider status. Column 2 presents the respondents who do not fall into this category. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 provides information about the p-value of whether the difference is different from 0.

We pre-specified two additional measures of outsider status that were based on village or leader type rather than the reported involvement in aid distribution. We replicate Table 4 using these two alternative definitions of outsider status in Appendix Tables 10 and 11. There, we see somewhat different patterns emerge. Because these alternative outsider definitions collapse actor types together, it is difficult to know which leaders might be driving the observed relationships. We thus present a non-prespecified analysis that fully disaggregates outcomes by leader type below.

Figure 5: Mean preferences by actor type



In Figure 5, we see that transparency (when local autonomy is high) is most highly valued by the commune's highest civil servant (the General Secretary) and by civil society leaders. This is consistent with the intuitive notion that these more independent actors would value accountability relatively more than leaders who are more dependent on the mayor such as village chiefs. By contrast, political outsiders – candidates who were previously opposed to the mayor – do not value transparency relatively more as we might have expected. One explanation might be the tendency for opposition politicians to collude with leaders in power in a low-information context where all elites can take advantage of limited accountability to engage in private extraction at the expense of citizens (Gottlieb, 2015). Turning to autonomy, we also see an expected pattern emerge. Especially when transparency is low, opposition candidates value autonomy least and mayors value autonomy most.

Interestingly though, the unexpected relationship between transparency and autonomy that we saw in the full sample is replicated within all subgroups of insiders and outsiders. We anticipated that leaders, on average, would value transparency more when autonomy was low. And this should be particularly true for insiders who would benefit most from autonomy. However, even the least likely leader type – mayors – prefer transparency relatively more when autonomy is high (although not statistically significantly so). Similarly,

we expected autonomy to be preferred relatively more when transparency was low. This is not the case for any subgroup of insider or outsider (except for mayors, although the difference is not statistically significant).

Perceptions of local leader and donor capability

Tables 5 and 6 both find evidence consistent with our expectations of how perceptions of local leader and donor capabilities would moderate preferences for autonomy. In particular, we expected local leaders to prefer autonomy more when they perceived local aid committees as being the most fair (as opposed to any other actor). Table 5 finds strong evidence in favor of this. Next, we expected local leaders to prefer autonomy relatively less when they perceived donors to be the most fair in the distribution of aid. Not only do we find strong evidence in favor (see Table 6), but this relatively small subgroup of leaders who believe the donors are best able to equitably distribute goods (N=284) actually chooses the profile with *low* autonomy more often than not. Furthermore, consistent with the previous section, opposition candidates are twice as likely as other leader types to view donors as more capable than local leaders. They may see the donor's role in aid distribution as a check on the power of local leaders.

Table 5: Conditional effects: By Perceptions of aid committee capability (most fair)

	Chosen as most fair			
	Aid committee	Other Actor	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is high	0.847	0.806	0.041	0.018
(2)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is low	0.823	0.754	0.068	0.000
(3)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is high	0.763	0.600	0.163	0.000
(4)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is low	0.761	0.587	0.174	0.000
Observations	1037	1882	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents that chose the aid committee as the *most fair* in distributing goods for distribution decisions. Column 2 presents the respondents who chose a different actor as the most fair. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 provides information about the p-value of whether the difference is different from 0.

Table 6: Conditional effects: By Perceptions of donor capability (fairness)

	Chosen as most fair			
	Donors	Other actor	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is high	0.742	0.829	-0.087	0.002
(2)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is low	0.727	0.784	-0.057	0.054
(3)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is high	0.457	0.679	-0.222	0.000
(4)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is low	0.530	0.661	-0.131	0.000
Observations	284	2635	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents that chose the donor as the *most fair* in distributing goods for distribution decisions. Column 2 presents the respondents who chose a different actor as the most fair. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 provides information about the p-value of whether the difference is different from 0.

Community Exposure to Violence

We also explore whether a community's exposure to violence (banditry, intercommunal conflict, or extremist violence) affects leader preferences for transparency and local autonomy. Table 7 compares leader preferences in village that had experienced violence (about two thirds of of villages in our sample) and those which had not experienced violence over the last 12 months. The table reveals significant difference between the leaders in the two types of settings. Leaders in villages plagued by violence are more likely to prefer autonomy—at any level of transparency—and less likely to prefer transparency regardless of the level of autonomy.

In our pre-analysis plan, we had anticipated that the value of local autonomy could be higher in conflict-affected places due to the importance of local knowledge and lower donor access, but also that it may be lower in situations where conflict is likely to prevent effective collaboration within local communities.

Leaders in conflict-affected villages also appear to value transparency less than those in villages without conflict. It may be that the ability to use transparency as a tool to affect norms, claim credit, or avert criticism is muted in these conflict-affected environments. Some work has shown an association between inflows of humanitarian aid and rebel violence and argues that it can increase looting and predation of the local population and/or threaten insurgent authority (Wood and Sullivan, 2015); the public diffusion of information about the program could actually increase threats from malevolent actors (i.e., it might open leaders up to predation).[16] In these settings, local leaders may particularly value greater control and might not want aid details broadcast to predatory actors who seek to capture it for material gain.

Table 7: Conditional effects: By village-level violence

	Violence in village in past 12 months			
	Yes	No	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when discretion is high	0.787	0.860	-0.073	0.000
(2)Prefers high transparency when discretion is low	0.752	0.841	-0.089	0.000
(3)Prefers high discretion when transparency is high	0.690	0.600	0.090	0.000
(4)Prefers high discretion when transparency is low	0.675	0.557	0.118	0.000
Observations	1097	612	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents in villages that experienced violence, defined by a dummy variable equal to 1 if at least 3 local leaders reported at least one kind of violence (intra-communal, banditry, or violent extremism). Column 2 presents the respondents where the violence indicator takes a value of 0. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 presents the p-value of the difference of means test.

[16] At least in some Malian settings, there has been stigma about collaboration with international organizations such as the UN.

6 Discussion

Our survey data suggest that far from being afraid of being held accountable through greater transparency, local leaders actually welcome it. This suggests that a higher priority for local leaders in conditions of extreme need may instead be to demonstrate to constituents that they are doing the best they can with limited resources and shift any blame to donors.

So does local accountability matter at all in these contexts? Our data does suggest that predictions of standard models of political leaders trying to avoid accountability pressures still obtain to some extent. In the leader-level analysis in Figure 5, we saw for example that independent actors like the civil servant and civil society leaders prefer transparency relatively more and that political insiders like the mayor prefer local autonomy relatively more. However, these marginal differences are outweighed by the fact that all leaders have a strong preference for transparency (even when local autonomy is high).

Another possible reason for relatively high tolerance for transparency by local leaders is that transparency may not actually constrain the ability of local leaders to leverage their position for material gain. We heard several examples where aid beneficiaries essentially paid a tax to village chiefs and/or mayors out of their receipt of aid.[17][18] A second alternative explanation is that rather than leaders valuing transparency because of its ability to help them shift blame, they might instead value transparency because, in an information-poor environment, it helps them hold donors accountable. We find several reasons to reject this explanation. First, the fact that the value of transparency differs substantially according to perceptions of local capability suggests that the value of transparency is at least partially driven by local concerns rather than donor-facing ones.

If local leaders really value transparency when they are seeking to shift blame on donors, then we should expect to see leaders value transparency more when they are in communities they expect to be aggrieved or looking to place blame. To test this, we use a measure from our survey of the extent of distributive conflict, which might generate more grievances and motivations to blame leaders. In particular, we asked whether aid is most difficult to distribute because there are complaints about which households will receive aid. In Table 8 we see that among the subset of respondents who reported high levels of distributive conflict, transparency is valued considerably more than among the subset of respondents who attributed difficult aid distribution to some other cause.

[17] In these instances, households were required to give some portion of what they received to the chief and/or mayor.

[18] By contrast, there were also examples where local leaders clearly benefited from withholding aid. In one case, villagers were working on flood remediation in exchange for food aid and cash. The village and commune leaders colluded to send a long list of households contributing to this work when only a quarter of the list was actually working and received any benefit.

Table 8: Conditional effects: By Aspect of Aid Distribution Most Difficult for Local Leaders

	Most difficult: Complaints about targeting			
	Yes	No	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is high	0.847	0.768	0.079	0.000
(2)Prefers high transparency when local autonomy is low	0.813	0.711	0.103	0.000
(3)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is high	0.662	0.650	0.013	0.553
(4)Prefers high local autonomy when transparency is low	0.638	0.667	-0.029	0.187
Observations	1950	969	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 shows respondents who identified targeting as the most challenging aspect of aid distribution, citing complaints about unfair allocation. Column 2 displays respondents who reported a different aspect as the most difficult. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 provides information about the p-value of whether the difference is different from 0.

That said, perceptions of donors still matter with respect to local leader attitudes toward aid distribution. We saw that leaders who believe donors are best able to equitably distribute goods would actually sacrifice autonomy among local leaders: this subgroup prefers low to high autonomy, on average. These are more likely to be opposition leaders followed by civil society and then women. Similarly, local leaders who have least faith in the local aid distribution committee to equitably distribute goods (N=404) also prefer that local leaders have *less* autonomy. These are more likely to be opposition leaders, followed by youth and then women. Fairness of distribution matters more to this calculus than logistical capability. Even when local aid committees have the lowest logistical capability or donors have the highest, leaders still prefer the high autonomy profile more than 50% of the time.

A third alternative explanation is that local leaders prefer transparency so that they can claim credit for aid that reaches rural communities. We observe that leaders report being thanked for aid at greater rates than being blamed for unfair distribution. The more people learn about aid initiatives, the more they understand their leaders as being as connected and competent and able to extract supports from external communities (whether than be at commune or international level).

7 Conclusion

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, donors and implementing agencies face difficult choices about how much autonomy to delegate to local actors and whether to impose transparency requirements. Both are central to contemporary aid commitments—local ownership is essential for tailoring assistance to local realities and respecting national ownership of development priorities, and transparency is a global norm in the aid sector intended to strengthen accountability. Yet each introduces its own risks and costs. Delegation to local leaders may enable misuse or elite capture, while transparency can slow implementation and cre-

ate local tensions donors are ill-equipped to resolve. In remote or insecure areas, where communication is limited and last-mile delivery depends heavily on local intermediaries, donors may hesitate to provide full transparency in case it provokes community backlash if grievances surface without corresponding capacity to address them.[19] These tensions make autonomy and transparency not simply technical design choices but political and operational dilemmas for aid actors.

Our study challenges the idea that donors and local actors have opposite views and interests in autonomy and transparency. Surveying a broad cross-section of local leaders across Mali, we find that leaders consistently prefer both high autonomy and high transparency in humanitarian aid distribution. Notably, the two are not inversely related: transparency is more valued when autonomy is extensive. This suggests leaders view transparency less as a threat of punishment and more as a tool to legitimize their decisions, deflect blame when needs outstrip aid, and claim credit for aid deployed. We challenge the notion that self-interested leaders will always balk at greater transparency. Rather, leaders in this context appear more concerned with managing community expectations and credit claiming than avoiding punishment for rent-seeking.

We also find that leaders' preferences reflect their political position and context. Political insiders place relatively greater value on autonomy. Further, the value they place on transparency is greatest when autonomy is highest. Still, even outsiders strongly value transparency. Similarly, leaders prefer local autonomy only when they perceive local aid committees as fair—and favor donor control when donors are viewed as more equitable—revealing a pragmatic orientation toward fairness in aid delivery. Leaders in conflict-affected communities also value autonomy more than peer in village that have not been affected by conflict. However, these leaders are less likely to value transparency, which suggests distinct dynamics related to aid provision in these types of settings.

Taken together, our findings suggest that in crisis settings characterized by high need and limited resources, like that of Mali, the risks of local autonomy may be lower than commonly assumed. Transparency, rather than being a constraint on local leaders, can be a shared asset for both donors and communities. For donors and implementers, the challenge is not whether to delegate or disclose, but how to design systems that leverage local knowledge while managing the practical costs and political sensitivities of transparency. Future aid strategies might therefore focus on calibrating autonomy and transparency—ensuring that information is shared in ways that are feasible and safe, while empowering capable local leaders to adapt aid to dynamic and fragile conditions. In doing so, donors can move beyond zero-sum accountability logics toward approaches that recognize autonomy and transparency as potentially complementary foundations of effective and legitimate humanitarian governance.

[19] For a sense of how aid implementers may think about the potential risks of transparency, see Banerjee et al. (2018).

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A Randomization

Table 9: Assignment for donor vignettes

Unique profile set	Contrast	Aid type
1	1	F
1	2	I
1	3	C
2	4	F
2	1	I
2	2	C
3	3	F
3	4	I
3	1	C
4	2	F
4	3	I
4	4	C

Notes: Randomized order within respondent (F, I, C) and which profile comes first within unique pair.

B Robustness Tests

Table 10: HTE 1: By outsider/insider status (1)

	Opposition candidate, village with weak ties, excluded CSO			
	Yes	No	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when discretion is high	0.767	0.836	-0.070	0.000
(2)Prefers high transparency when discretion is low	0.748	0.787	-0.039	0.064
(3)Prefers high discretion when transparency is high	0.597	0.676	-0.078	0.001
(4)Prefers high discretion when transparency is low	0.594	0.664	-0.070	0.004
H2a. Difference between (1) and (2)	0.019	0.049	.	.
H1a. Difference between (3) and (4)	0.003	0.012	.	.
Observations	660.000	2259.000	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents identified as 'outsiders,' defined by a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent is a former opposition candidate, from a village with weak ties, or a civil society leader who believes they would be excluded from a hypothetical grant to the commune. Column 2 presents the respondents who do not fall into any of these categories. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 presents the p-value of the difference of means test.

Table 11: HTE 1: By outsider/insider status (2)

	Women or youth leader or civil servant			
	Yes	No	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when discretion is high	0.839	0.805	0.034	0.041
(2)Prefers high transparency when discretion is low	0.794	0.766	0.028	0.115
(3)Prefers high discretion when transparency is high	0.641	0.673	-0.032	0.116
(4)Prefers high discretion when transparency is low	0.635	0.657	-0.022	0.277
H2a. Difference between (1) and (2)	0.045	0.039	.	.
H1a. Difference between (3) and (4)	0.006	0.015	.	.
Observations	1337.000	1582.000	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays the respondents identified as 'outsiders,' defined by a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent is a village-level women or youth leader, a leader of a youth CSO, or a civil servant. Column 2 presents the respondents who do not fall into any of these categories. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 presents the p-value of the difference of means test.

Table 12: Conditional effects: by village violence

	Recent village-level experience of violence			
	Yes	No	Diff	P-value
(1)Prefers high transparency when discretion is high	0.793	0.852	-0.059	0.004
(2)Prefers high transparency when discretion is low	0.751	0.847	-0.096	0.000
(3)Prefers high discretion when transparency is high	0.688	0.599	0.089	0.000
(4)Prefers high discretion when transparency is low	0.667	0.569	0.098	0.000
H2a. Difference between (1) and (2)	0.042	0.005	.	.
H1a. Difference between (3) and (4)	0.021	0.030	.	.
Observations	1464.000	760.000	.	.

Source: Mali Local Leaders Aid and Resilience Survey (2024)

Notes: Column 1 displays estimates for the village-level respondents in villages coded as having experienced violence defined by a dummy variable equal to 1 if the majority of leaders in the village responded affirmatively to one of three questions about recent experience of violence. Column 2 presents estimates for the village-level respondents who do not fall into this category. Column 3 represents the difference between column 1 and 2 and column 4 presents the p-value of the difference of means test.

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