

GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON FLOWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE TERRITORY IN THE CENTRAL REGIONS OF MALI BETWEEN 2012 AND 2025

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ABSTRACT

Since the onset of the political and security crisis in 2012, Mali has experienced massive and continuous internal displacement driven by a combination of armed violence, inter-communal conflict, chronic insecurity, and in certain contexts natural disasters. The country's central regions specifically Mopti, Djenné, Bandiagara, and Ségou are major hotspots for this forced mobility. This article analyzes flows of internally displaced persons (IDPs) between 2012 and 2025, drawing on field data from the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) and national humanitarian summaries. The findings reveal a progressive intensification of displacement starting in 2018, a heavy concentration in the Mopti and Bandiagara regions, and high vulnerability among displaced households, which consist predominantly of women and children. The study also demonstrates that these flows are not merely linear movements; they encompass returns, secondary displacements, and complex mobility trajectories, reflecting a protracted territorial crisis. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these flows for population protection, territorial governance, basic social services, and stabilization strategies.

KEYWORDS: Central Mali, security crisis, internally displaced persons, Bandiagara, Mopti, Ségou, forced mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2012, Mali has faced a multidimensional crisis that has profoundly disrupted its territorial and social balances (Adama Koné et al., 2018). The collapse of security in the north, the spread of violence to central regions, and escalating inter-communal tensions have triggered large-scale displacement, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. Today, flows of internally displaced persons (IDPs) serve as a key indicator of state fragility, the vulnerability of rural populations, and the reconfiguration of living spaces (African Development Bank, 2020; Bertrand, Monique, 2021).

Central Malian regions—specifically Mopti, Djenné, Bandiagara, and Ségou—occupy a strategic position in this crisis. They encompass administrative districts (*cercles*) highly exposed to armed attacks, conflicts over resource access, the closure of pastoral mobility corridors, and deteriorating day-to-day security. These factors have driven mass departures toward areas perceived as safer—often urban centers, district capitals, camps, or outlying localities with a stronger humanitarian presence.

Analyzing IDP flows is essential for several reasons. First, it makes it possible to identify areas of origin, host areas, and patterns of movement. Second, it sheds light on the social and spatial transformations associated with displacement: strain on essential services, changes in family structures, the reconfiguration of local economies, and shifting dynamics between host and displaced populations. In Mali's case, these dynamics are particularly significant given that displacements are often prolonged and frequently involve incomplete returns or further rounds of displacement. The aim of this article is therefore to analyze, from a diachronic perspective, the flows of internally displaced persons in the central regions of Mali between 2012 and 2025, in order to identify trends, explanatory factors, and territorial implications.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study area

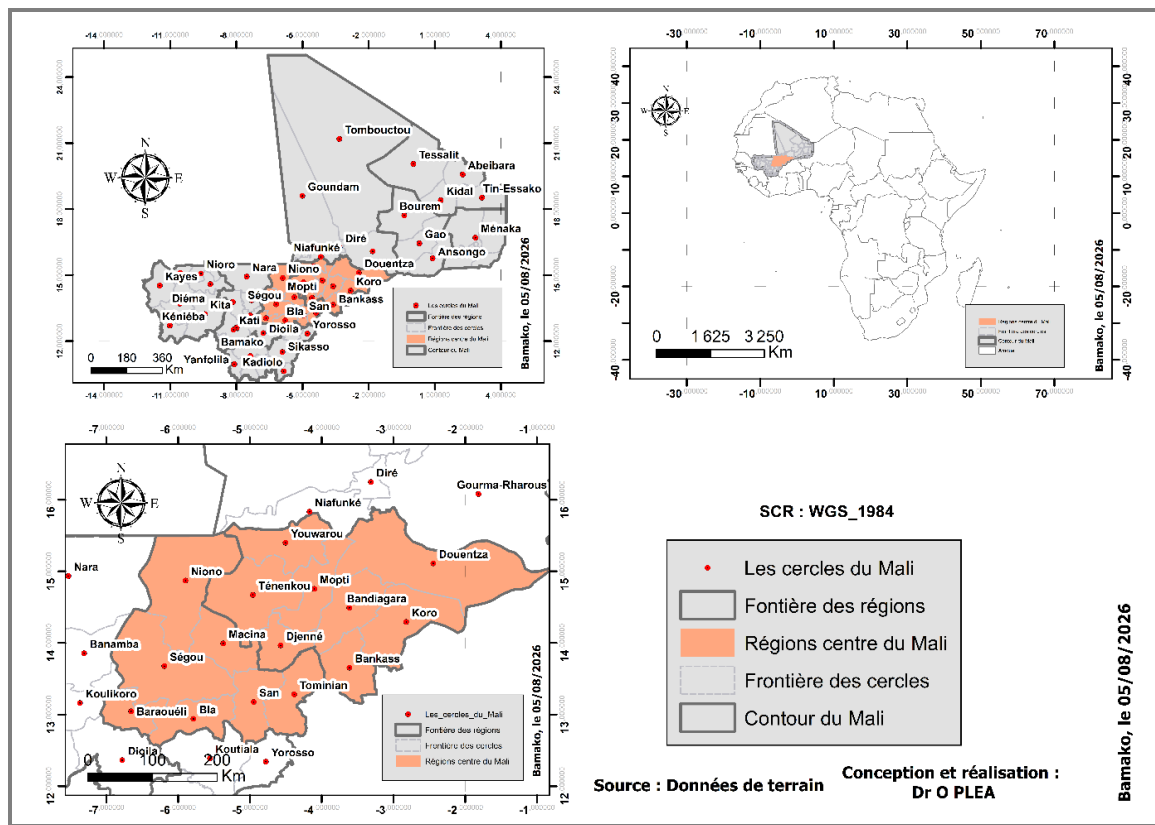


Figure 1: Map of the study area.

The study area covers the central regions of Mali primarily Mopti, Djenné, Bandiagara, and Ségou. Located in the country's central zone, these regions lie at the interface between the Sahelian and Sudanian belts. They are characterized by high rural population density, an agro-pastoral economy, and significant exposure to security-related tensions since 2012. Mopti is the primary hub of displacement in the central region, followed by Bandiagara, Djenné, and specific cercles within Ségou particularly those bordering conflict zones or situated along strategic transport routes.

METHODS

The study employs a descriptive and analytical approach based on both primary data collected in the field and secondary data derived from DTM reports and humanitarian documents. The methodology aims to track displacement trends over time and across locations, with a particular focus on the Mopti, Bandiagara, and Ségou regions.

Data Used

This study draws on qualitative and quantitative data, supplemented by empirical fieldwork conducted in central Mali specifically in Mopti, Djenné, and Bandiagara regarding the mobility of internally displaced persons (IDPs) linked to insecurity in the country. The methodology also combines a review of scientific literature, an analysis of institutional reports, and a critical review of case studies from various conflict hotspots in Mali. The data were organized around three axes:

- ❖ Temporal analysis: trends in the number of IDPs and returnees over the 2012–2025 period.
- ❖ Spatial analysis: distribution of displaced persons by region, with a focus on the central regions.
- ❖ Structural analysis: profiles of displaced households, drivers of mobility, and types of displacement.
- ❖ Trends were interpreted in light of the security context, local conflict dynamics, and the hosting capacities of the respective areas.

RESULTS

An escalation in internal displacement starting in 2018

While displacement was already occurring in 2012, its intensification became particularly evident from 2018–2025. Data show a continuous rise in the number of displaced persons in the central regions, with periods of rapid increase coinciding with spikes in violence or targeted attacks (Figure 2). Results indicate that, nationwide, 414,524 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were identified in September 2025, with the vast majority of displacement cases concentrated in the Gao, Ménaka, Mopti, Bandiagara, Ségou, and Timbuktu regions. The central regions are among the most severely affected due to the recurring incidents recorded there.

By 2020, some reports already placed the number of IDPs in the Mopti region at over 100,000, while Ségou also recorded high levels of displaced populations. This trend persisted through 2024–2025, with concentrations remaining high in the most exposed areas.

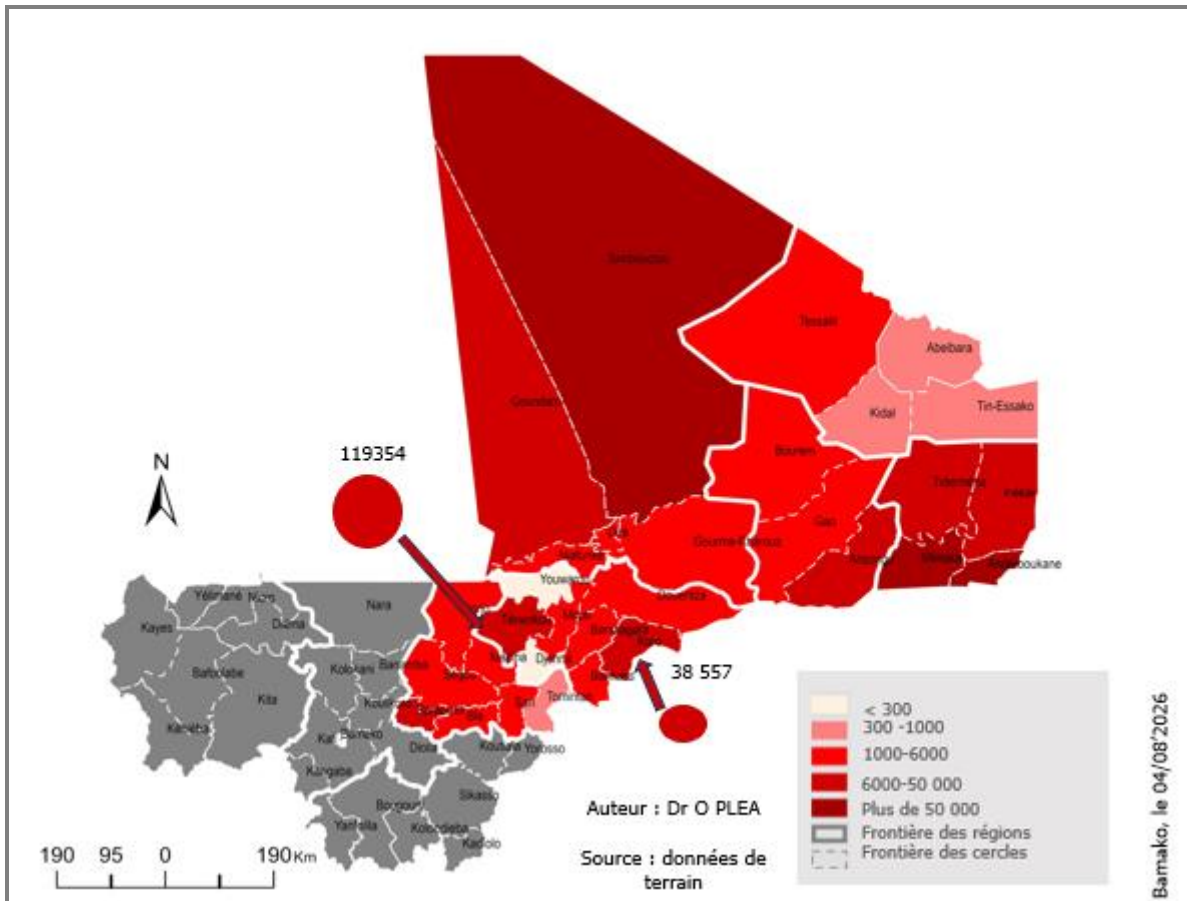


Figure 2: Distribution of internally displaced persons (IDPs) based on insecurity in the most exposed areas.

Mopti as the primary area of origin

Available data indicate that Mopti is the region most heavily affected by internal displacement in central Mali (Figures 3 and 4). The cercles (administrative districts) of Bankass, Bandiagara, Mopti, Douentza, and Koro consistently appear as major areas of origin for displaced households. These districts are characterized by recurring armed attacks, inter-communal conflicts, and disruptions to rural mobility.

Ségou and Bandiagara: areas of pressure and transit

The Ségou region plays a significant role in internal displacement flows, particularly in areas near Mopti and along transport corridors. It serves as both an area of origin and a destination for displaced persons, especially in districts affected by insecurity or communal tensions. Bandiagara recently established as an administrative region also hosts a large number of IDPs due to its proximity to conflict zones in the central region.

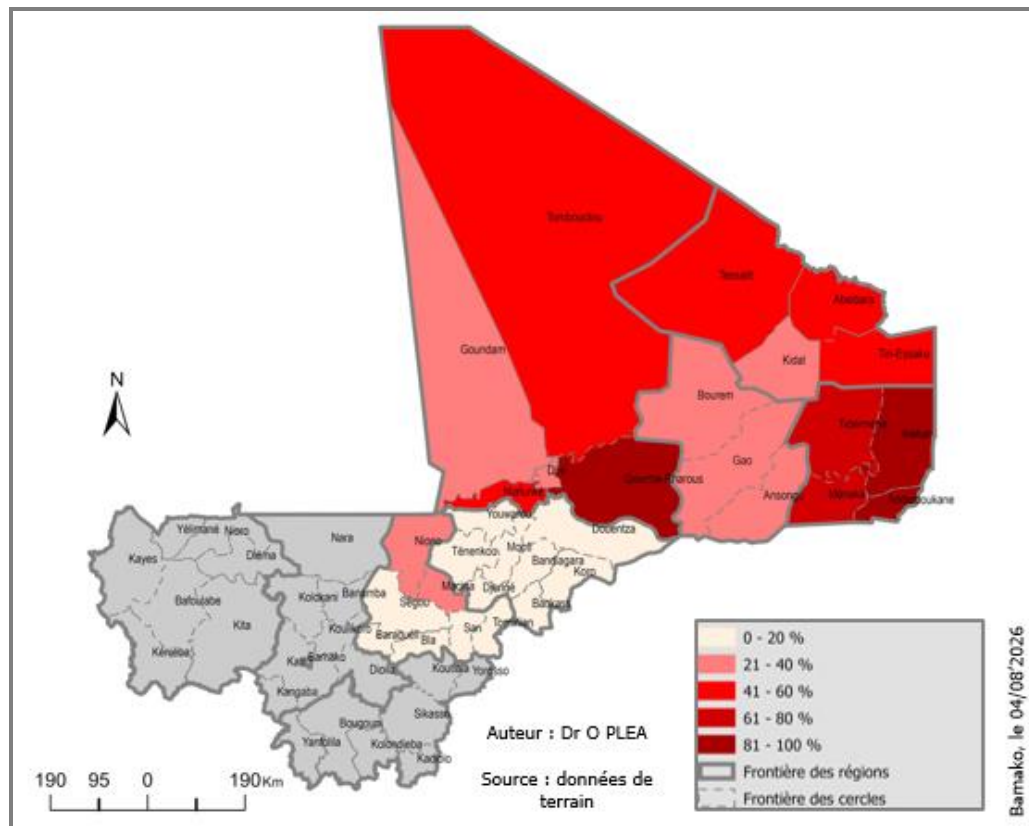


Figure 3: Distribution of internally displaced persons (IDPs) based on damaged housing.

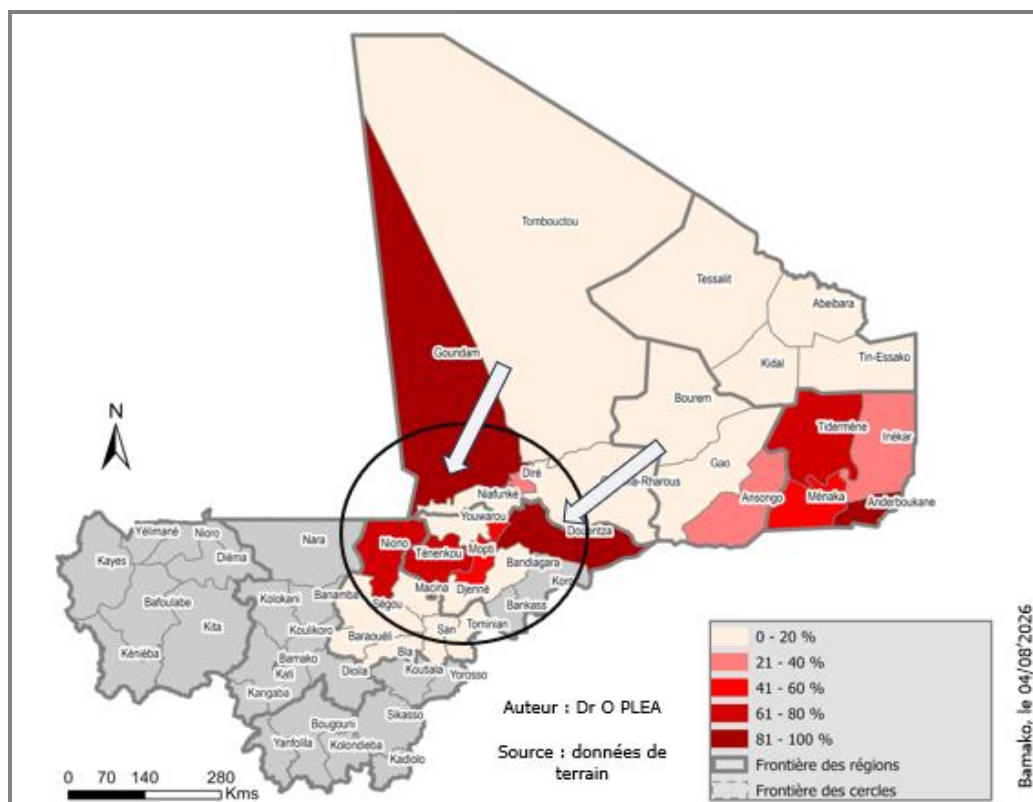


Figure 4 : Concentration des déplacés interne (PDI) et le couloir de transit.

Social structure of displaced households

Cross-referencing results with DTM¹ reports reveals that the internally displaced population consists predominantly of women and children. In 2020 reports, children accounted for 58% of individuals in displaced households, while women made up 54% of registered persons. This demographic structure heightens the need for protection, food, healthcare, schooling, and shelter.

Return, resettlement, and re-displacement

One of the most significant features of the situation in Mali is the high number of "internal returnees." Between September 2012 and September 2025, DTM reports indicate a very high cumulative volume of internal returnees, reflecting both attempts to return to places of origin and repeated mobility driven by changing security conditions. However, such returns do not always signify lasting stabilization; many households experience cycles of return and re-displacement, particularly in areas where insecurity persists.

Drivers of displacement flows

Displacement flows within Mali are primarily driven by persistent insecurity in the country's central regions. Armed attacks and inter-communal tensions are the most frequent immediate causes, forcing households to leave their communities and seek refuge in areas deemed safer. These factors are compounded by insecurity on roads and in villages which severely restricts the movement of people, goods, and services as well as the collapse of livelihoods, particularly in the agricultural and pastoral sectors. Fear of abuses and targeted violence further drives displacement, especially among the most vulnerable populations. Together, these factors fuel repeated and prolonged forced displacement, reflecting a protracted territorial and humanitarian crisis. In some contexts, floods and climate-related hazards exacerbate household vulnerability, though they are not the primary drivers of displacement flows in the central regions specifically in the Djenné cercle and the city of Mopti.

Furthermore, the quantitative trends observed between 2012 and 2025 reflect a highly fluctuating yet overall persistent dynamic. Nationally, the figures rose from 61,621 internally displaced persons (IDPs) recorded in December 2014 to 250,998 in April 2020, and subsequently to 412,387 in December 2022. A decrease was then recorded with 354,739 persons in December 2023 followed by a renewed increase to 414,524 persons in September 2025. However, these fluctuations should not be interpreted as the disappearance or resolution of the crisis. They may stem from changes in the security situation, returns,

¹ This refers to the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), a system implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

secondary displacements, methodological shifts, and successive DTM data-updating operations. One of the study's key findings highlights the circular and reversible nature of forced displacement. While internal returns have been significant with 875,681 returnees identified between September 2012 and September 2025 this does not necessarily mean that the conditions for sustainable return are in place. In several central territories, a return may be followed by renewed displacement if insecurity resurfaces, livelihoods remain inadequate, or social services are not restored. Distinguishing between displacement, return, resettlement, and re-displacement is therefore essential to avoid a static interpretation of the data.

In territorial terms, displacement has produced four major effects. First, it has led to a demographic restructuring of host areas, with rapid population growth in certain urban centers and secondary localities. Second, it has increased pressure on water, health, education, sanitation, and housing infrastructure. Third, it has weakened the rural economies of areas of origin through land abandonment, a decline in agricultural and pastoral activities, and the disruption of trade networks. Fourth, it has deepened the disparities between relatively secure territories and areas affected by violence.

Displaced populations do not constitute a homogeneous group. The fact that women and children make up the majority accounting for 58% of the displaced population recorded in September 2025 highlights the highly vulnerable and family-centered nature of these population movements. This demographic makeup entails specific needs regarding protection, reproductive health, schooling, nutrition, housing, and violence prevention. It also demonstrates that the territorial impact of displacement cannot be measured solely by the number of displaced persons; it must also be assessed based on changes in family structures, livelihoods, and social relations.

The analysis also highlights the limitations of managing displacement solely through a humanitarian and short-term lens. While emergency assistance remains essential, it is insufficient to address the structural causes of forced mobility. A sustainable response must combine the protection of civilian populations, the securing of territories, the restoration of social services, economic recovery, infrastructure reconstruction, and the reintegration of returnees. It must also take into account host populations, who often face the same service gaps and vulnerabilities as displaced persons. However, it must be noted that the data used have certain limitations: varying territorial coverage, reliance on access capabilities, differences in data collection dates, changes in administrative boundaries, and the difficulty of documenting secondary or temporary movements. It is therefore recommended to cross-

reference DTM data with censuses, household surveys, geospatial data, information on public services, and qualitative surveys involving both displaced and host populations.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the flows of internally displaced persons in central Mali do not represent a mere one-off movement, but rather a sustained form of forced mobility linked to the ongoing security crisis. The concentration of displacement in the Mopti, Bandiagara, and Ségou regions reveals a territorial pattern of violence, with certain administrative districts becoming recurring hotspots of instability.

This situation has several consequences. In areas of origin, it leads to the disruption of agro-pastoral activities, the abandonment of villages, the breakdown of community networks, and the weakening of the local economy. In host areas, it places a strain on existing infrastructure and social services, and sometimes creates tension between host and displaced populations.

The fact that women and children make up the majority of displaced persons highlights the humanitarian and gendered dimensions of the crisis. The cycle of return and re-displacement also demonstrates that the issue of internal displacement cannot be addressed solely through emergency assistance; it requires a strategy focused on stabilization, early recovery, and the rebuilding of trust within the territory.

CONCLUSION

A geographical analysis of internal displacement flows in central Mali between 2012 and 2025 reveals a complex territorial crisis characterized by concentrated forced mobility, repeated displacement, and the gradual restructuring of living spaces. Triggered by the 2012 crisis and subsequently amplified by the spread of armed violence, inter-communal conflict, and rural insecurity, these flows have profoundly altered the relationships between areas of origin, transit zones, and host areas. The findings indicate that the Mopti region and the Djénne and Bandiagara cercles are major hubs of displacement, while Ségou simultaneously serves as a place of origin, transit, and reception. This spatial configuration confirms that internal displacement does not follow a single trajectory from rural to urban areas. Instead, it unfolds along multiple routes often temporary and reversible connecting villages, administrative centers, secondary urban hubs, and major cities. As of September 2025, the Gao, Ménaka, Mopti, and Bandiagara regions alone accounted for 70.6% of internally displaced persons recorded in Mali, underscoring the significant role played by northern and central areas in the national geography of displacement. Ultimately, the flows of internally

displaced persons in central Mali between 2012 and 2025 appear to be the product of a crisis that is simultaneously security-related, social, economic, and territorial. They are not merely a consequence of violence; they permanently transform territories, alter demographic balances, reshape mobility patterns, and exacerbate inequalities in access to resources. Understanding these flows therefore requires an integrated geographical approach capable of linking the village, commune, cercle, regional, and national scales. Thus, stabilizing central Mali can only be sustainable if public policies shift from an approach based on the ad hoc management of displacement to a long-term territorial strategy. This strategy should be grounded in a permanent mobility monitoring system, joint planning for areas of origin and reception, improved anticipation of needs, and the effective involvement of local authorities, communities, displaced persons, and humanitarian partners.

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