Trials Under Fire:

RCT and Women's Empowerment Amid Insecurity in Burkina Faso

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Roadmap

Intro

Over the last decades, RCTs have become the gold-standard method to address complex and cutting-edge questions, especially in LMICs.

→ While randomization allows to confidently attribute the difference in outcomes to the intervention being tested, randomized studies are not often unsensitive to general environmental, political, and economical factors (Gibson et al., 2017).

→ Unforeseen events, such as rising insecurity, can pose a serious threat to the success of a program once implementation has begun. These threats from conflict-affected areas can both affect program take-up rate and deteriorates outcomes targeted by the intervention.

  · see McKenzie et al. (2017) in Yemen, Beath et al. (2013) in Afghanistan, or Blattman and Annan (2016) in Liberia

Scope: This paper concerns both possibilities and goes further.

Context: Focusing on the context of rising insecurity in Burkina Faso and its interaction with the Soutenir l'Exploitation Familiale pour Lancer l'Elevage des Volailles et Valoriser l'Economie Rural (SELEVER) program, a gender- and nutrition-sensitive poultry value chain intervention designed to improve women's empowerment.

Questions:

→ **(1)** How did the increasing insecurity in the Sahel affect the intervention take-up?

→ **(2)** Did it affect women's empowerment?

→ **(3)** If so, did the program help mitigate these negative effects?

Methodological challenges and solutions:

- (1) Conflict does not strike randomly. Example
  $\rightarrow$ Exploit variation in conflict exposure at different periods.
- (2) What is the best way to measure/define conflict exposure?
  $\rightarrow$ Perception VS Objective indicators? Here

Main findings:

- Strong correlation between proximity to conflict hotspots and low interventions take-up.
- Conflict weakened key dimensions of women's empowerment
- As insecurity intensified, women lost bargaining power within households, displayed reduced control over income, ceded greater decision-making influence to men in livelihood activities, and reported higher acceptance of intimate partner violence.
- small evidence that the SELEVER cushioned women from some of the adverse effects of conflict, except on work balance

Literature:

- Women's empowerment is multi-dimensional → Instrumental, intrinsic, and collective agency (Rowlands, 1998; Malapit et al., 2019).

- Conflict constrains women through multiple channels → Restricted mobility, household disruption, stress, and norm shifts (Justino et al., 2012; Eissler et al., 2020; Heckert et al., 2020; Ma and Kusakabe, 2015).

- Effects on decision-making and labor are ambiguous → Mixed evidence across contexts and domains (Calderón et al., 2011; Ekhator-Mobayode et al., 2021; Le and Nguyen, 2023; La Mattina and Shemyakina, 2024).

- Evidence on intrinsic and collective agency remains limited → Context-specific effects on self-efficacy and political participation (Hammad and Tribe, 2020; Yadav, 2021; Kreft, 2018; Webster et al., 2019; Bakken and Buhaug, 2021).

Motivating evidence

Motivating evidence

Table 1: Definitions of empowerment variables and baseline means

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Men		Women		Difference (M-W)
Variable	Mean	N	Mean	N	
Binary version of pro-WEAI indicators (Mean in %)					
Intrinsic agency					
Autonomy in income	54.60	1478	44.17	1637	0.1043***
Self-efficacy	66.37	1478	53.82	1637	0.1256***
Rejection of IPV	74.63	1478	51.86	1637	0.2276***
Instrumental agency					
Input in productive decisions	94.86	1478	77.70	1637	0.1715***
Ownership of land and other assets	99.26	1478	87.17	1637	0.1208***
Access to and decisions on financial services	37.82	1478	21.08	1637	0.1675***
Control over use of income	82.48	1478	60.97	1637	0.2151***
Work balance	71.49	1473	31.34	1637	0.4015***
Visiting important locations	62.52	1478	45.82	1637	0.1670***
Collective agency					
Group membership	51.22	1478	46.79	1637	0.0442**
Respect among household members	77.18	1402	60.36	1496	0.1681***

Experiment, Data & Strategy

Experiment

**Figure 1:** Schematic view of the RCT and A/B Test randomization design
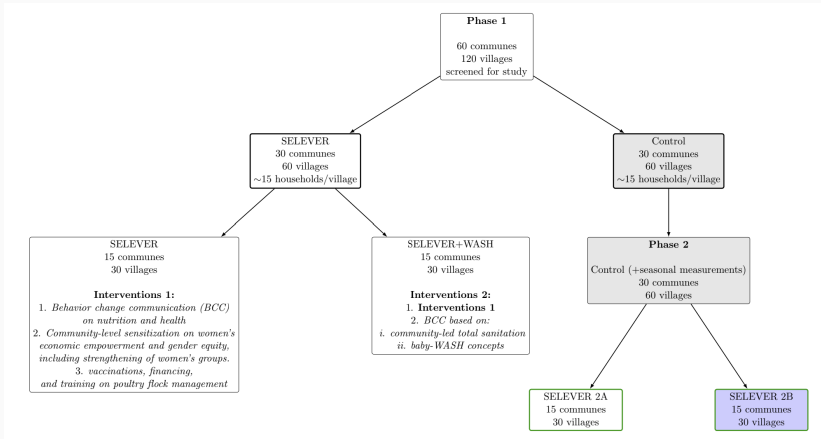
Data: Survey Data

- Census Data: 2006 and 2019

- Pre-intervention census `BC`
    - → A full household census in each community to collect basic demographic information and construct the sampling frame.
    - → Georeferenced data on villages (coordinates) and contact details of village chiefs.

- Baseline surveys: 2017 `BC1` , `BC2`
    - → collected a wide range of information, including women's empowerment indicators, women's health and nutrition knowledge
    - → + Villages, Households and individuals characteristics

- Follow-up surveys: 2022-2023
    - → participation in the A/B Test activities such as training attendance, the number of sessions attended, and engagement in VSLA trainings, savings, loans, and related activities.
    - → + Same outcomes/variables as in Baseline surveys.

- ACLED Data: 2017, Baseline

Figure 2: Number of conflict-related events
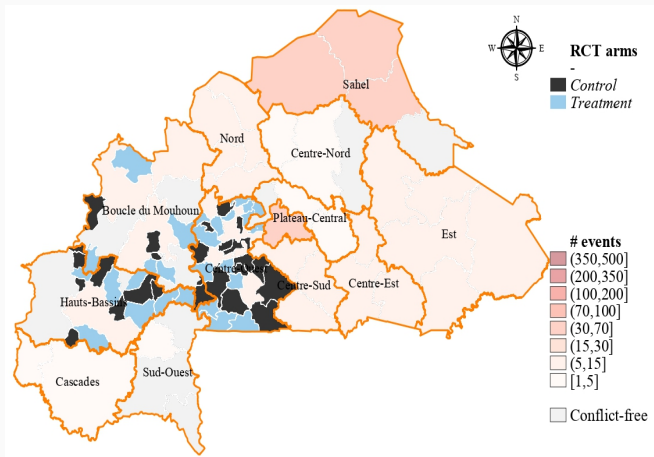
- ACLED Data: 2020, Midline
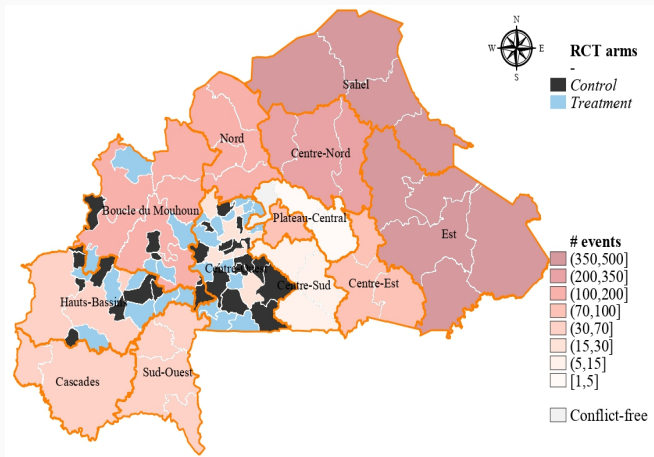
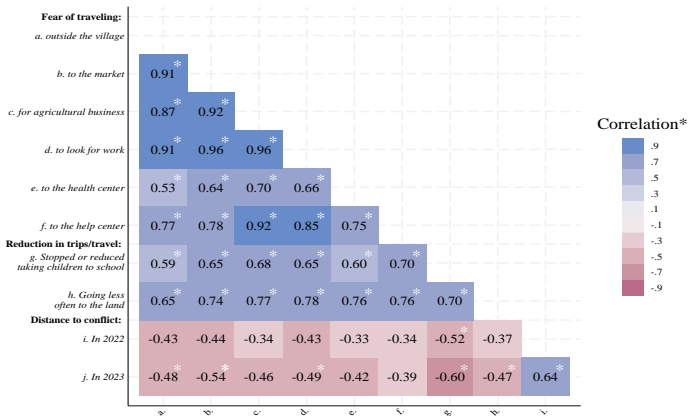Figure 2: Number of conflict-related events
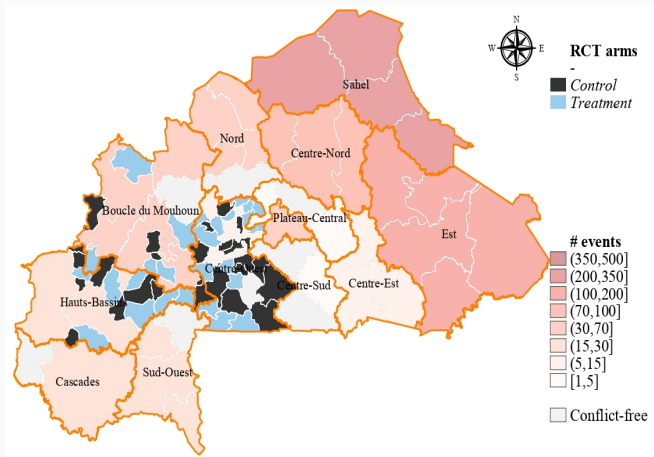
- ACLED Data: 2022, Endline

Figure 2: Number of conflict-related events

- Survey Data: 2022, Endline

Figure 3: Fear of mobility & Distance to conflict hotspots

Note: *Stars indicate significance at the 5% level, with p-values adjusted using the Sidak correction. Fear of mobility variables collected for A/B Test (2022-2023).*

- Phase 1:
  - → Households with at least one woman aged 15-35 years who had a child aged 2-4 years living with her, provided that all members consented to participate and did not report plans to move out of the study area within six months of the baseline.
  - → This sampling strategy yielded a target baseline sample of 1,800 households across 120 villages in 60 communes.

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- Phase 2:

  → Phase 1 control communities and included two reference groups: (1) women who participated in the baseline survey and who had resided in the village for at least six months during the A/B Test intervention implementation period; and (2) an additional sample of potential women VSLA members.

  → Approximately 2100 households (900 from Phase 1).

Why do we exclude the green? `Back`

Figure 4: Distribution of change in distance to the nearest conflict-hotspot from 2017 to 2020 : (*villages targeted by SELEVER*)

Strategies

What are we after here?

$\rightarrow$ We begin with a "first-order" question: *to what extent is distance to conflict correlated with our outcomes of interest?*
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→ "second-order" question: *how does **increased** proximity to conflict affect women's empowerment?*

→ While the first focuses on simple **correlations**, the second moves toward **a causal interpretation** through a difference-in-differences framework, as detailed below.

Baseline specification (First order question)

$$Y_{ivt} = \tau_t + \alpha_v + \beta(-d_{vt}) + C'_t\gamma + \text{SELEVER}_v \times \text{POST} + \varepsilon_{ivt}, \qquad (1)$$

$\rightarrow$ Y_{ivt} denotes the outcome for individual i in village v at time t;

$\rightarrow$ τ_t are time fixed effects; α_v are village fixed effects;

$\rightarrow$ and d_{vt} is the distance from village v at time t to the nearest conflict event.

$\rightarrow$ **C** represents a set of conflict-related variable other than distance and measuring intensity (*number of events at period t, number fatalities at period t*, etc.).

Note: $-d_{vt}$ represents negative distance - larger values correspond to closer proximity to conflict. β captures the *correlation* between *proximity* to conflict and the outcome. SELEVER is the dummy equal to 1 for treated villages.

Panel unit level of analysis?

Strategy 1: Effects of conflict exposure on empowerment

Continuous difference-in-differences

→ As shown in (Stayers), our setting includes a substantial share of stayers: villages whose distance to the nearest conflict hotspot remained unchanged between the baseline and endline periods.

→ Approximately 18% of villages (21 villages, representing roughly 315 households or about 630 respondents) did not experience any change in distance.

→ The presence of both stayers and switchers enables us to implement a continuous difference-in-differences design following (de Chaisemartin et al., 2025).

Specifically, the parameter we are after here is as follows:

$$\beta := -E\Big(\frac{\mid d_t - d_{t-1} \mid}{E(\mid d_t - d_{t-1} \mid\mid \Delta d_t^-)} \times \frac{Y_t(-d_t) - Y_t(-d_{t-1})}{d_t - d_{t-1}} \mid \Delta d_t^- \Big), \qquad (2)$$

where $\Delta d_t^- = 1_{\{\Delta d_t < 0\}}$.

Triple difference approach

$$Y_{iv} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_{01}\text{Endline}_t + \alpha_{02}\text{SELEVER}_v + \alpha_{03}\text{ConflictExposure}_{vt}$$
$$+ \alpha_{12}\left(\text{ConflictExposure}_{vt} \times \text{SELEVER}_v\right) + \alpha_{13}\left(\text{Endline}_t \times \text{SELEVER}_v\right)$$
$$+ \alpha_{11}\left(\text{ConflictExposure}_{vt} \times \text{Endline}_t\right)$$
$$+ \beta\left(\text{ConflictExposure}_{vt} \times \text{Endline}_t \times \text{SELEVER}_v\right) + \varepsilon_{iv}. \qquad (3)$$

$\rightarrow$ One of our parameters of interest is β (Muralidharan and Prakash, 2017), and measures whether SELEVER differentially mitigates the (DiD-identified) conflict effect, and can be seen as the difference of two difference-in-differences (Olden and Møen, 2022).

Triple difference approach (2/2)

$\rightarrow$ The OLS estimator of β and α_{11} write as:

$$\hat{\beta}_{OLS} = \overbrace{\left\{ \left[\bar{Y}_{C=1,S=1,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=1,S=1,T=0} \right] - \left[\bar{Y}_{C=0,S=1,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=0,S=1,T=0} \right] \right\}}^{DiD^{S=1}: \text{ Effect of conflict (C=1) on SELEVER-treatment (S=1) villages}}$$

$$- \underbrace{\left\{ \left[\bar{Y}_{C=1,S=0,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=1,S=0,T=0} \right] - \left[\bar{Y}_{C=0,S=0,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=0,S=0,T=0} \right] \right\}}_{DiD^{S=0}: \text{ Effect of conflict (C=1) on SELEVER-control (S=0) villages}}$$

$$\hat{\alpha}_{11,OLS} = \left[\bar{Y}_{C=1,S=0,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=1,S=1,T=0} \right] - \left[\bar{Y}_{C=0,S=1,T=1} - \bar{Y}_{C=0,S=0,T=0} \right]$$

When is a protective effect conclusive?

$\rightarrow$ If β is not zero, then we know for fact that conflict affects differentially villages regarding the SELEVER group they belong to.

$\rightarrow$ if $\alpha_{11} < 0$ (as we hypothesize), and $\beta > 0$ then we know that the effect of conflict on SELEVER-treatment group is lower than the effect of conflict on SELEVER-control group.

Results

Figure 5: Effects of conflict exposure on empowerment:
(*Continuous DiD specification, **Primary outcomes***)
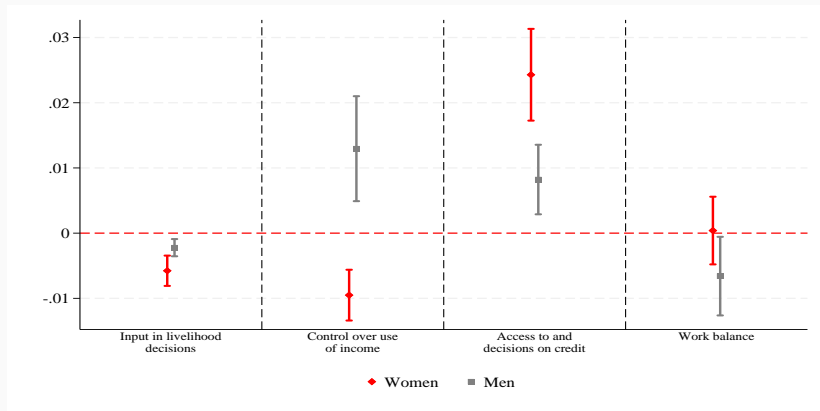
Note: *The outcomes presented here are the binary versions, i.e., Empowerment = 1 and Disempowerment = 0.*

Figure 6: Results 1 : Effects of conflict exposure on empowerment: (*Continuous DiD specification, **Secondary outcomes***)

Note: *The outcomes presented here are the binary versions, i.e., Empowerment = 1 and Disempowerment = 0.*

Table 2: SELEVER and conflict exposure on empowerment: Protective effect diagnostic - (*Primary outcomes*)

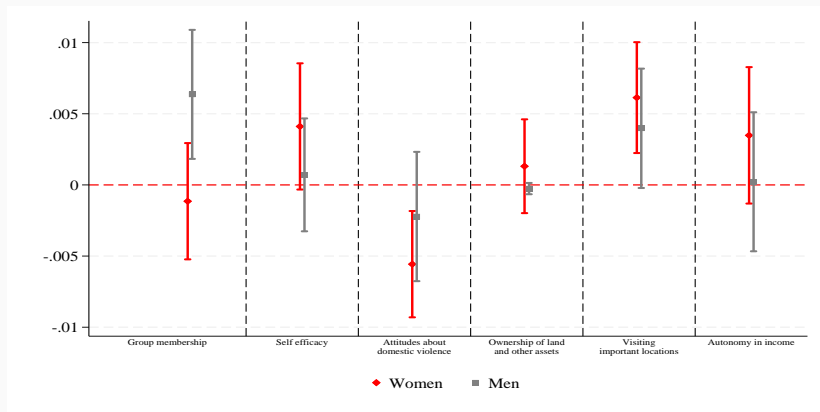|	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
	Input in livelihood decision		Control over use of income		Access to and decisions on credit		Work balance	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Panel A. DiD on SELEVER treatment group sample								
Conflict Exposed×Post	-0.0056	-0.0068	-0.0478	0.0357	0.0002	0.0431	0.1102	0.0395
	(0.0254)	(0.0503)	(0.0654)	(0.0834)	(0.0957)	(0.0458)	(0.0726)	(0.0793)
Panel B. DiD on SELEVER control group sample								
Conflict Exposed×Post	-0.0161	0.0062	-0.1050*	-0.0966	0.2184***	0.0790	-0.1348**	-0.1629
	(0.0239)	(0.0555)	(0.0554)	(0.0911)	(0.0731)	(0.0577)	(0.0640)	(0.1001)
Panel C. Triple difference using full sample								
SELEVER × Conflict Exposed × Post	0.0105	-0.0130	0.0571	0.1323	-0.2182*	-0.0359	0.2450**	0.2023
	(0.0345)	(0.0741)	(0.0847)	(0.1221)	(0.1190)	(0.0728)	(0.0957)	(0.1264)
Conflict Exposed×Post	-0.0161	0.0062	-0.1050*	-0.0966	0.2184***	0.0790	-0.1348**	-0.1629
	(0.0236)	(0.0550)	(0.0548)	(0.0902)	(0.0724)	(0.0571)	(0.0634)	(0.0992)
Post=1	0.0151	-0.0238	0.0235	-0.0057	-0.1423**	-0.0509	0.0528	0.0887
	(0.0189)	(0.0382)	(0.0430)	(0.0591)	(0.0602)	(0.0502)	(0.0506)	(0.0934)
SELEVER × Post	-0.0093	0.0308	-0.0560	-0.0688	0.1262	0.0707	-0.1403**	-0.0962
	(0.0270)	(0.0521)	(0.0593)	(0.0758)	(0.0833)	(0.0597)	(0.0671)	(0.1080)
Observations	2266	2534	2266	2534	2266	2534	2107	2365
Village FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Secondary here

Table 3: A/B Test training: Attendance
(*Across different levels of conflict exposure*)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Distance to the nearest conflict hotspot in 2022			
	First quartile (Q_1) (< 11km)	Inter-quartile	Third quartile (Q_3) $\geq$ 32km	Difference ($Q_1 - Q_3$)
Attended at least one session	0.438	0.489	0.602	-0.164***
Number of attended sessions	1.451	1.778	3.075	-1.624***
Total duration (in hours)	4.429	3.599	10.051	-5.623***

Conclusion & Discussion

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Implementation and household dynamics

- **(1)** Conflict undermined program implementation $\rightarrow$ Lower participation in SELEVER activities (–16 pp attendance, fewer sessions, fewer training hours).

- **(2)** Conflict weakened intra-household bargaining power $\rightarrow$ Reduced control over income and livelihood decisions, alongside higher acceptance of IPV.

- **(3)** Losses reported by both women and men $\rightarrow$ Heightened stress and insecurity likely reduce communication and joint decision-making within households.

Conclusion & Discussion

Why some domains improve and others do not?

- **(1)** Improved access to credit without empowerment gains → Likely driven by humanitarian and livelihood-focused aid responses.
- **(2)** Mixed effects on autonomy and collective outcomes → Higher self-efficacy for women and increased men's group participation (e.g. VDP, *Koglweogo*).
- **(3)** Limited buffering role of SELEVER → Small protective effects only; null impacts in several domains and strong structural constraints (Leight et al., 2022).

Merci pour votre attention!

Table 4: Balance tests for pre-intervention control variables

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
			SELEVER Treatment Status		
		Control (N = 60)		Treatment (N = 60)	*Difference* *(C - T)*
		A/B Test			
	A (N = 27)	*B (N = 28)*	*A - B*		
Panel A. Community characteristics					
Has a market	0.65	0.73	-0.08	0.54	0.11
Population size	1864.97	2018.60	-153.63	1937.00	-72.03
Number of functional boreholes	1.45	1.60	-0.15	2.00	-0.55
Number of functional wells	2.71	3.13	-0.42	3.58	-0.87
Health center presence	0.23	0.20	0.03	0.38	-0.15
Number of female associations	3.61	3.07	0.54	5.12	-1.51
Panel B. Main source of income					
Cereal and tuber crops	0.39	0.40	-0.01	0.38	0.01
Cotton cultivation	0.35	0.47	-0.13	0.33	0.02
Other crops	0.26	0.13	0.13	0.29	-0.03
Panel C. Main agricultural production					
Cotton	0.26	0.40	-0.14	0.29	-0.03
Corn/Millet	0.48	0.33	0.15	0.46	0.03
Sorghum	0.23	0.20	0.03	0.25	-0.02
Other crops	0.03	0.07	-0.04	0.00	0.03

Table 5: Targeted women and men characteristics across RCT arms

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
				SELEVER Treatment Status	
					Difference (C - T)
	Control (N = 1,647)			Treatment (N = 1,666)	
	A/B Test				
	A (753)	B (N = 768)	A - B		
Age	38.03	38.60	-0.57	38.35	-0.25
Number of adults in HH	3.39	3.42	-0.03	3.49	-0.13**
Literacy in local language	0.08	0.10	-0.02*	0.10	-0.01
Can speak French	0.16	0.18	-0.02	0.15	0.01
Attended school	0.24	0.23	0.00	0.24	-0.00
Household size	8.85	8.84	0.01	8.81	-0.01
Polygamous household	0.49	0.50	-0.01	0.50	-0.01

Table 6: Characteristics of villages across RCT arms

	SELEVER Treatment Status		
	Control (N = 60)	Treatment (N = 60)	Difference (C - T)
Panel A. Distances (km), and diversity			
Distance to nearest police station	20.100	19.930	0.170
Distance to nearest power supply	9.420	8.320	1.090
Distance to nearest asphalt road	20.000	22.690	-2.690
SDIa (language)	0.410	0.380	0.040
SDI (religion)	0.480	0.560	-0.070
SDI (ethnicity)	0.400	0.410	-0.010
Panel B. Mobility and migration			
Internal public transportation	0.180	0.290	-0.100
External public transportation	0.850	0.800	0.050
Asphalt road	0.130	0.170	-0.040
Inflowb	0.570	0.690	-0.130
Panel C. Security and conflict			
Presence of police	0.570	0.690	-0.130
Presence of army	0.330	0.370	-0.040
Police/army intervention (last 5 years)	0.450	0.440	0.010
Presence of armed group	0.400	0.460	-0.060
Any pastoralist-farmer conflict	0.580	0.640	-0.060

Table 7: Conflict-related events across RCT arms
(*Objective conflict exposure measurements*)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
				SELEVER Treatment Status	
					Difference
		Control (N = 60)		Treatment (N = 60)	(C - T)
		A/B Test			
	A (N = 27)	B (N = 28)	A - B		
Panel A. Distance to conflict (km)					
Distance to conflict (Any)	14.458	12.987	1.470	16.156	-2.611
Distance to conflict (Battles)	24.940	23.020	1.920	24.587	-1.416
Distance to conflict (Riots)	66.178	64.778	1.400	67.665	2.313
Distance to conflict (Protests)	41.970	39.757	2.213	43.932	-2.508
Distance to conflict (Civilians)	24.435	23.793	0.641	26.583	-3.584
Distance to conflict (Fatal)	17.458	18.345	-0.887	20.450	-3.184
Distance to conflict (+10 deads)	43.821	53.458	-9.638	43.921	1.962
Panel B. Number of conflict-related events					
In 2022	0.857	0.769	0.088	0.533	0.500
In 2020	0.000	0.077	-0.077	0.067	0.267
In 2017	0.000	0.231	-0.231	0.033	0.100
Panel C. Number of fatalities					
In 2022	1.357	0.231	1.126	0.167	1.067
In 2020	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.067	0.800
In 2017	0.000	0.308	-0.308	0.000	0.200

Figure 7: Number of conflict-related events over time
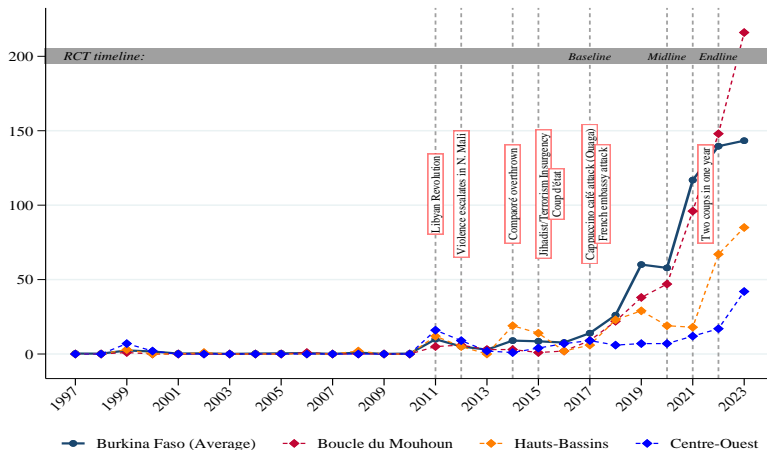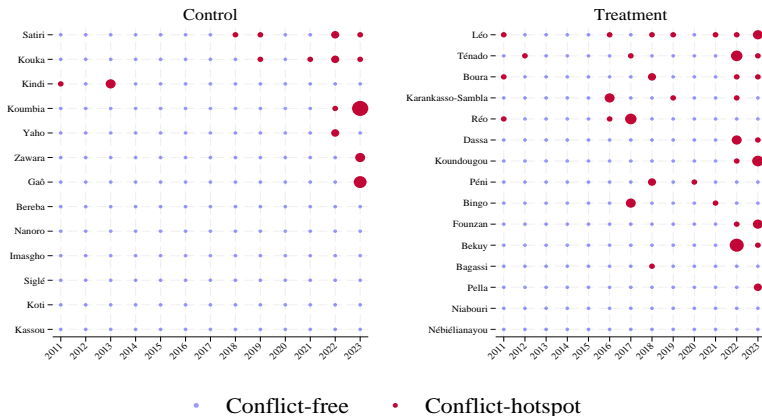(In Burkina Faso & SELEVER targets regions)

Figure 8: Distribution of conflict-related events over across communes (*Communes targeted for A/B Test*)

Table 8: SELEVER and conflict exposure on empowerment:
Protective effect diagnostic - (*Secondary outcomes*)

	(1) Group membership	(2)	(1) Self-efficacy	(2)	(1) Attitudes about domestic violence	(2)	(1) Ownership of land and other assets	(2)	(1) Visiting important locations	(2)	(1) Autonomy in income	(2)
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
SELEVER × Conflict Exposed × Post	-0.0431	-0.0570	-0.0249	-0.0825	0.0504	0.0243	-0.0171	-0.1653***	-0.0811	0.0080	0.0442	-0.0340
	(0.1289)	(0.1027)	(0.0738)	(0.1061)	(0.0854)	(0.0732)	(0.0139)	(0.0553)	(0.0748)	(0.0849)	(0.0989)	(0.1210)
Conflict Exposed×Post	0.1742	0.1129	0.0645	0.1652**	-0.0652	0.0164	-0.0012	0.0718	0.0463	-0.0076	-0.0380	-0.0385
	(0.1038)	(0.0866)	(0.0490)	(0.0744)	(0.0745)	(0.0556)	(0.0090)	(0.0454)	(0.0545)	(0.0662)	(0.0747)	(0.0944)
Post=1	-0.0574	0.0347	0.0396	0.0085	0.1381**	-0.0278	0.0038	0.0171	-0.1372***	-0.0416	-0.0953	-0.1200
	(0.0702)	(0.0542)	(0.0367)	(0.0619)	(0.0641)	(0.0391)	(0.0078)	(0.0370)	(0.0241)	(0.0505)	(0.0587)	(0.0747)
SELEVER × Post	0.1704**	0.1236*	-0.0275	0.0928	-0.1605**	-0.0676	0.0047	0.0640	0.0317	-0.0397	-0.0279	0.0382
	(0.0821)	(0.0700)	(0.0484)	(0.0730)	(0.0695)	(0.0548)	(0.0097)	(0.0456)	(0.0370)	(0.0598)	(0.0797)	(0.0931)
Observations	2266	2534	2266	2534	2266	2534	2266	2534	2266	2534	2266	2534
Village FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Back to Primary

Formally, the HHI is defined as follows:

$$\text{HHI}_i = \sum_{g=1}^{G_i} s_{ig}^2, \tag{4}$$

where G_i denotes the number of groups (e.g., industries, religions, ethnicities, or languages) in area i (e.g., market, country, or village), and s_{ig} corresponds to the share of group g in area i. The maximum value of the HHI is 1 (or 10,000 if shares are expressed in percentages), corresponding to full concentration. If groups are equally sized (i.e., each group has the same share), the HHI equals $\frac{1}{G_i}$.

The standardized diversity index (SDI) is then defined as:

$$\text{SDI}_i = \frac{G_i}{G_i - 1} \left(1 - \text{HHI}_i\right). \tag{5}$$

0 corresponds to no diversity (since $\text{HHI}_i = 1$ when there is only one group) and 1 corresponds to maximal diversity (when all groups are of equal size).

For example, from the religious (respectively, linguistic) perspective, if a village is composed of 50% Muslims and 50% Christians (respectively, 50% Moore and 50% Dioula speakers), the index equals 1.

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