



Mali

Mali: Current Path

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Chart 2: Population structure in the Current Path, 1990-2043

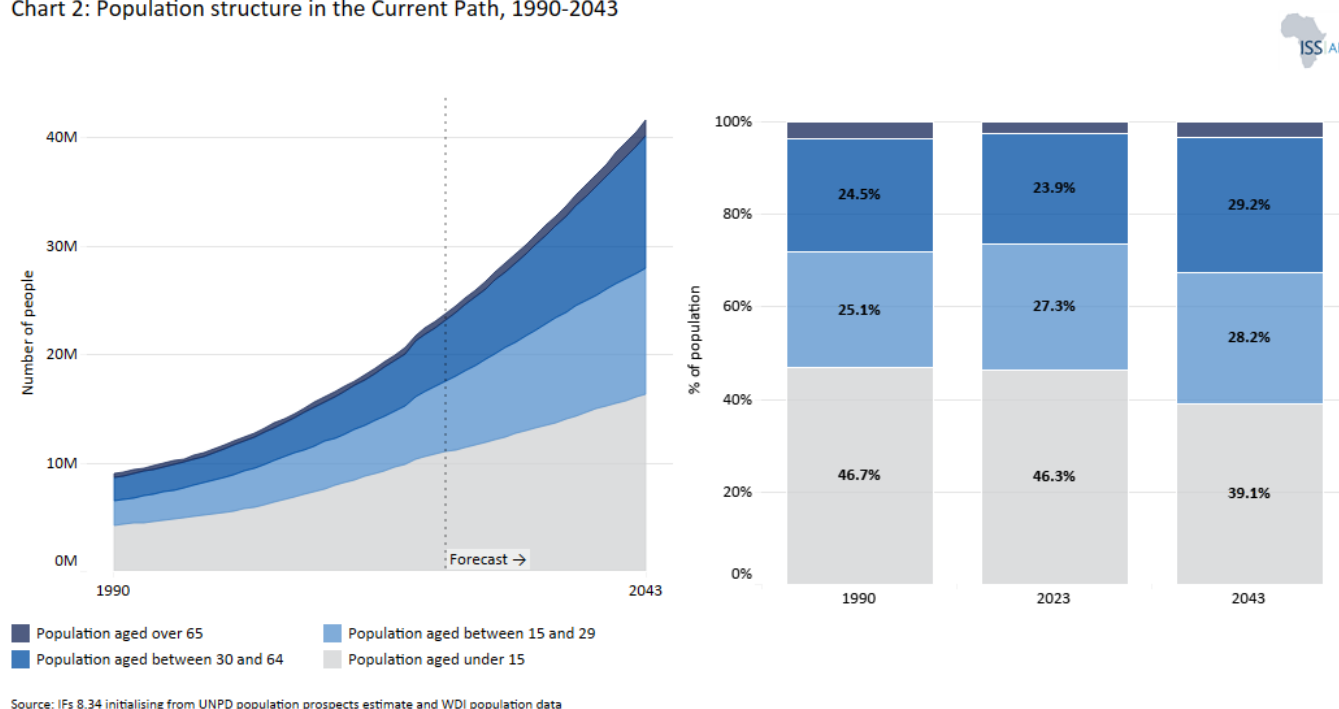


Chart 2 presents the Current Path of the population structure, from 2020 to 2043.

Mali's population has more than doubled between 1990 and 2023, growing from 9.2 million to 23.8 million people. This makes Mali the fifth most populous country in West Africa and the 19th most populous in Africa. In 2023, the country had the seventh-highest population growth rate in Africa at 3.3%, up from 2.6% in 1990. This rapid population growth places significant pressure on government finances, as the government must increase its spending on essential social services, including education, healthcare and other amenities, to accommodate the growing population.

Mali's fertility rate fell from 7.1 children per woman in 1987 to 6.3 in 2018, and further to 5.5 children per woman in 2022. Despite this decline, it remains the **fourth-highest** rate in the world. Several **factors** contribute to this, including the widespread occurrence of early childbearing, limited levels of women's education and empowerment, persistent poverty, reliance on informal and subsistence lifestyles, low urbanisation and extremely limited family planning. As a result of this high fertility rate, 46.2% of Malians were below the age of 15 years in 2023 while 51.1% were in the age group 15–64 years (working age) and 2.6% were 65 years and older. Comparing this with the structure in the 1990s reveals that Mali's population structure has not fundamentally changed over the past three decades. The high dependency ratio significantly affects the government's ability to generate the necessary revenue for development, as there are fewer individuals in the working-age population. On a household level, families with more dependants can typically save less, which reduces overall domestic savings. This, in turn, limits the capital available for investment, impeding economic growth.

Mali has the 7th-largest youth bulge (the ratio of its population aged between 15 and 29 to the total adult population) in Africa and the second highest in West Africa, after Niger. The country's youth bulge stood at about 50.8% in 2023—a rise from 47.2% in 1990 and above the average of 45.3% for Africa and 47.5% for West Africa. Likewise, the median age for Mali in 2023 was 16.6 years—a slight increase from 15.4 years recorded in 1990 and lower than West Africa and Africa's median ages of 18.8 and 20.6 years, respectively. This makes Mali the country with the second-lowest median age in West Africa after Niger and 5th lowest in Africa after Niger, Central African Republic, Somalia and Chad.

The large youth population in Mali presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it can lead to youth activism and drive positive political change in the country. On the other hand, if the needs of the youth are not adequately addressed, it can increase the risk of criminal violence, conflict and instability. A major concern is the rising youth unemployment and underemployment, as the government struggles to provide employment for the growing youth population. For example, **youth unemployment** in Bamako is 32%, well above the national average of 12%. With over **300 000** young Malians entering the labour market each year, the security crisis could worsen if sufficient job opportunities are not created. However, the country can harness the potential of its youthful population by making substantial investments in education and training, equipping young people with the skills they need, and creating opportunities through both government initiatives and private sector involvement.

The structure of Mali's population will not change much across the forecast horizon to 2043. Although the country's population growth rate will decline to 3.0% in 2030 and 2.4% by 2043, the total population will rise to 29.2 million in 2030 and double to 41.5 million by 2043 on the Current Path. By then, the median age will increase to 17.8 years in 2030 and 20.3 years in 2043, while the youth bulge will rise to 51.3% in 2030 before eventually declining to 46.3% by 2043. The proportion of people under the age of 15 will slightly decline to 43.3% in 2030 and 39.1% in 2043. Consequently, the share of the working-age population and the population aged 65 and older will increase to 54.0% and 2.7% in 2030 and 57.4% and 3.5%, respectively, by 2043. Despite these shifts, the rapid population growth will continue to place pressure on development and limit improvements in average income, as the government will face significant challenges in addressing the needs of its rapidly expanding, youthful population.

Chart 3: Population distribution map, 2022

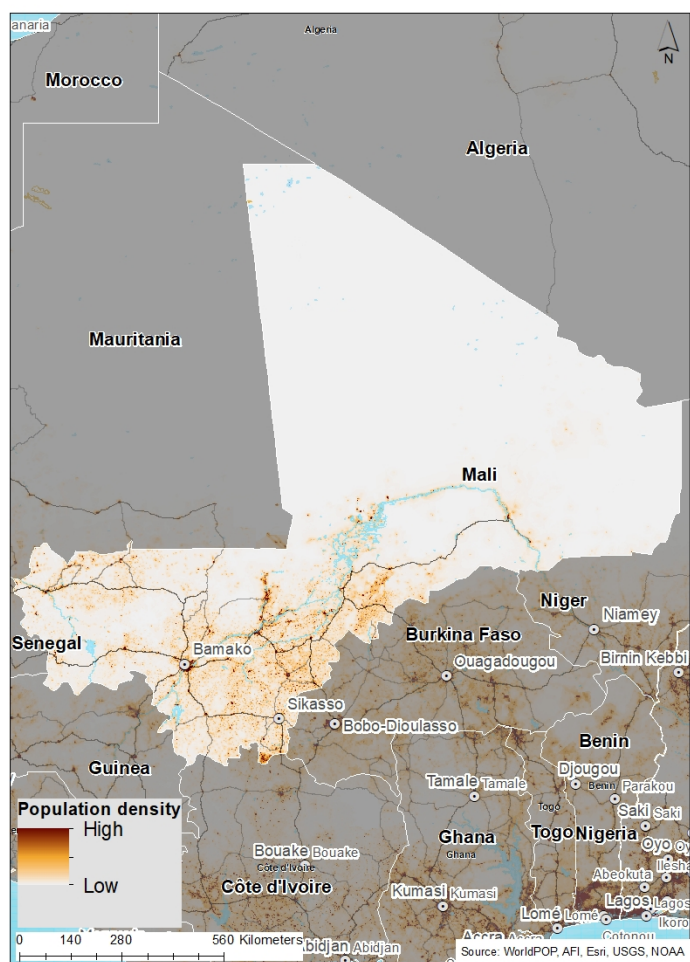


Chart 3 presents a population distribution map for 2023.

Spanning 1.24 million km², Mali is the eighth-largest country in Africa, comparable to the sizes of Angola and South Africa. This, coupled with its small total population makes it technically one of the most sparsely populated countries in Africa. In 2023, Mali was the most sparsely populated country in West Africa and the 11th most sparsely populated country in Africa. Mali's population density is estimated to be about 0.2 people per hectare, which is about 2.5 times lower than the average of 0.5 people per hectare for Africa and 4 times lower than West Africa's average of 0.88 people per hectare.

The majority of Malians live in the less arid southern half of the country, which is more suitable for agriculture thanks to the Niger River and is home to nearly all of Mali's sizable cities. This includes cities like Sikasso with over 445 000 people, Mopti with 200 000 people and Koutiala with over 160 000 people. Conversely, the north of the country has faced continuous depopulation fuelled by desertification, insecurity, instability and the attraction of urban life in the south.

In the Current Path, Mali's population density will reach 0.24 people per hectare, less than half the average of 0.60 for Africa in 2030. By 2043, this will increase to 0.34 people per hectare, although that will still be significantly lower than the average of 0.78 and 1.4 people per hectare for Africa and West Africa, respectively.

Chart 4: Urban and rural population in the Current Path, 1990-2043

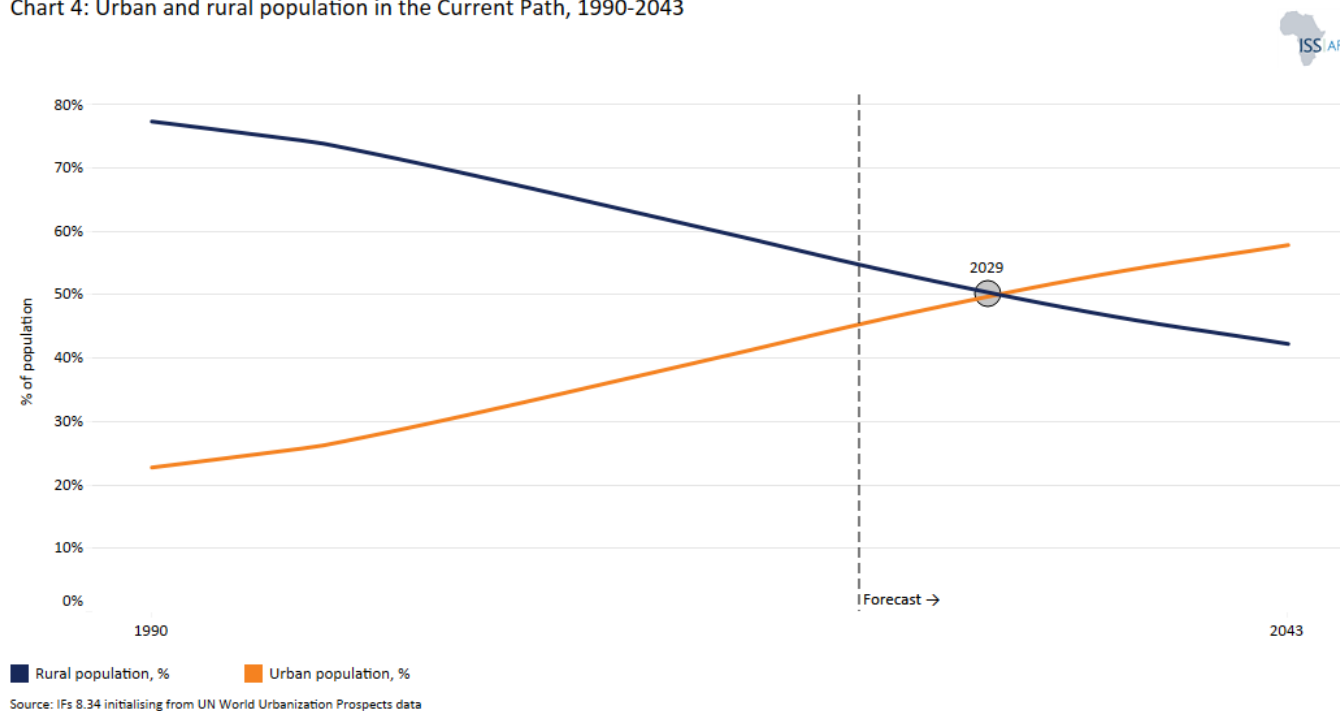


Chart 4 presents the urban and rural population in the Current Path, from 1990 to 2043.

Mali's population is predominantly rural. In 1990, over two-thirds of Malians lived in rural areas—slightly below the average for low-income countries in Africa. However, Mali has urbanised more rapidly than its income peer group in Africa over the years. As a result, by 2023, 13.0 million Malians, equivalent to 54.8% of the population, lived in rural areas. This was below the 67.4% average of low-income countries in Africa. Consequently, the urban population stood at 45.2% in 2023, making Mali the ninth most urbanised country among low-income African countries, instead of the 13th in 1990.

Urban growth is the result of population increases of people already living in urban areas as well as rural-urban migration. In the case of Mali, rural-to-urban migration is a significant driver of urbanisation. Many rural residents are moving to urban areas in search of better employment opportunities, improved housing and access to essential services such as

healthcare, security and education. Bamako, the capital city, is the largest urban centre with over **three million** inhabitants and is considered one of Africa's fastest-growing cities. Other **factors** influencing urbanisation in Mali include the commercialisation and transformation of agriculture. As the economy shifts from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, there is a growing demand for labour in urban areas like Koulikoro, particularly in agro-industries and processing plants, which further encourages rural residents to migrate to cities.

On the Current Path, Mali will achieve parity in urban-rural settlement by 2030; and by 2043, 24.0 million Malians, constituting almost 57.8% of the population, will live in urban areas. This will be far above the average of 41.4% projected for low-income countries in Africa.

The rapid urbanisation in Mali, particularly in Bamako, has several significant implications. It places considerable strain on public infrastructure, resulting in overcrowded roads, inadequate public transportation and limited access to essential services like healthcare and education. The growing urban population can also lead to increased demand for housing, driving up housing costs and contributing to the development of slums with poor living conditions. Additionally, rapid urbanisation raises environmental concerns, including heightened pollution in urban areas. It thus requires careful planning and investment in sustainable development to ensure positive outcomes.

Chart 5: GDP (MER) and growth in the Current Path, 1990-2043

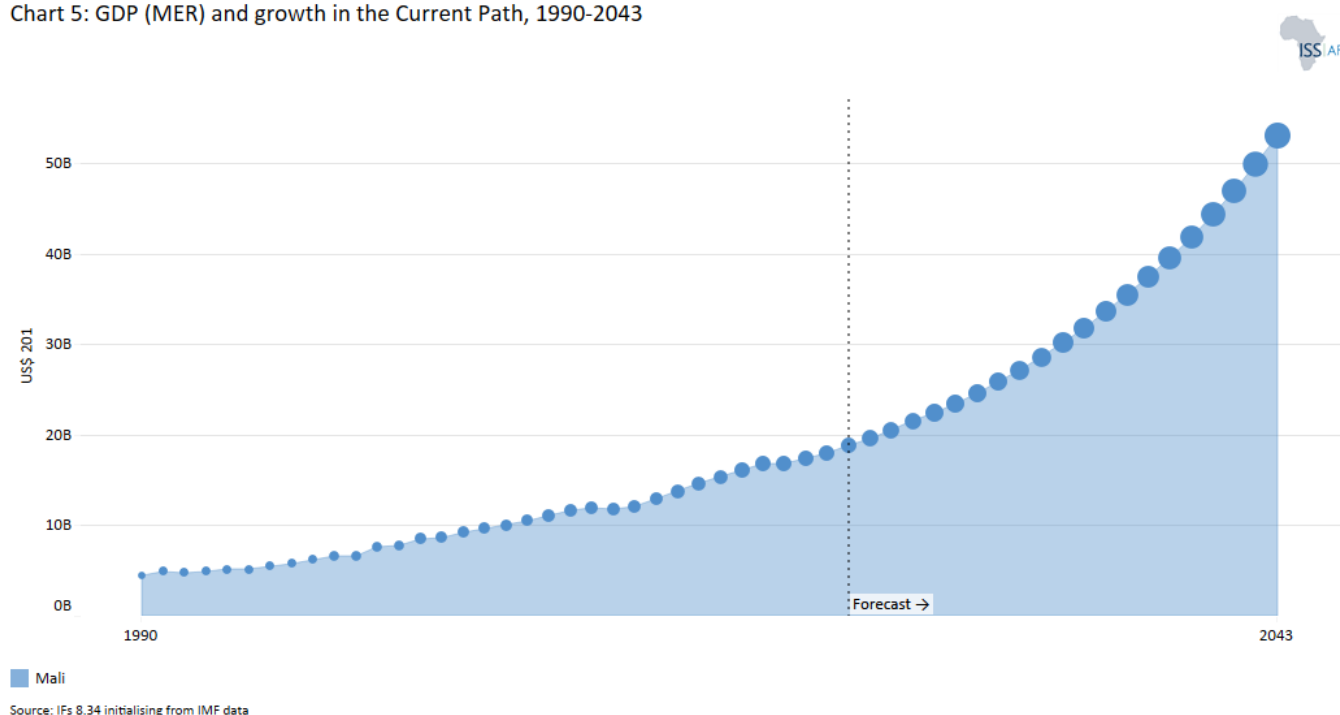


Chart 5 presents GDP in market exchange rates (MER) and growth rate in the Current Path, from 1990 to 2043.

The Malian economy is the fifth largest in West Africa (after Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal) and among the low-income countries in Africa (after Ethiopia, Sudan, DR Congo and Uganda). Its GDP measured in market exchange rates (MER) more than quadrupled from US\$4.5 billion in 1990 to US\$18.6 billion in 2023. Within this period (between 1990 and 2023), Mali's GDP grew at an average of 4.3% per annum, above the average of 3.9% for low-income countries in Africa. The relatively stronger performance compared to its income peers can be attributed to rapid population growth in addition to the implementation of several medium-term plans, such as the Strategic Plan for Economic Recovery and Sustainable Development (CREDD 2019-2023). Additionally, various internationally supported economic reform programs have contributed by promoting economic development and improving quality of life. These include initiatives like the Structural Adjustment Programmes, the Aid Effectiveness, the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative, the Poverty

Reduction Strategies, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the African Union Agenda 2063.

Despite this relatively strong performance above its income peers, the fundamentals of the Malian economy remain weak and the economic structure is still agrarian and untransformed. Mali's economy is centred on the export of traditional raw materials such as cotton and gold, while much of its processed and finished goods are imported. Efforts to promote more value-added industrialisation remain at an early stage. For instance, in 2020, gold **accounted** for 82.9% and cotton for 6.7% of exports. The implication of this is that economic growth is highly volatile and mainly driven by weather patterns, international commodity price fluctuations and external shocks. For instance, its exceptional growth of 15% in 2001 was largely driven by the global commodity boom or supercycle in the early 2000s (1999 to 2001) due to high demands from then-emerging economies like China. Similarly, the country's strong economic growth in recent years, averaging about 5.7% from 2014 to 2019 before COVID-19 has mainly been driven by the large commodity exports of gold and agriculture (mainly cotton) within the period.

On the other hand, in periods where the country had experienced severe drought such as in the early 2000s and in 2010/2011, the economy contracted. For instance, the negative growth rate of 0.8% recorded in 2012 was due to the severe drought in previous years. Aside from this, global or external shocks also significantly worsen domestic vulnerability and lead to adverse economic conditions. Key among them is the 2007 global financial crisis which caused economic growth to dip in those years. In recent years, Mali's economic growth was further disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The restrictive measures and protocols instituted to control the virus curtailed economic activities, resulting in the GDP shrinking by 1.2% in 2020—the largest drop since 1992. The economic contraction was accentuated by political instability in the country arising from the 2020 coup. However, the GDP recovered and grew by 3.1% in 2021, mainly due to the recovery of the services and agriculture sectors. GDP growth **dropped** to 1.8% in 2022 as a result of the combined effect of ECOWAS sanctions, high food inflation and parasite infestations affecting cotton production as well as the negative impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on commodity prices. Such volatility in economic growth further hinders development, job creation and poverty reduction.

Annual inflation reached an all-time high of **13.9%** in August 2022, mainly driven by high food inflation. This was **due** to the displacement of farmers arising from the persistent insecurity, ECOWAS sanctions and increased global food prices. Huge public spending is also resulting in a large fiscal deficit and public debt largely financed by external borrowing. **Public debt** stood at about 55.9% of GDP by the end of 2023, with external debt constituting about 25.9% of total debt in 2022. This is 37.3% larger than the 40.7% recorded in 2019 prior to COVID-19. The increase in expenditure within this period is accounted for by the large COVID-19 expenditure, high wage bills and security spending.

Regardless, the **economy** has begun to show signs of recovery, with economic growth in 2024 estimated at 3.5% and annual average inflation estimated at 2.1% in the same period.

To build a resilient economy, Mali needs to address its structural long-term economic vulnerabilities. These **include** its undiversified export basket dominated by gold and cotton, which exposes the economy to commodity price and climatic shocks, rising foreign debt and a large informal sector. Also, over-reliance on the agriculture sector, in addition to its low-productivity informal service sector and a limited manufacturing sector concentrated in agro-industries and cotton ginning, remains a structural weakness in the economy.

However, in the medium term, insecurity and the ongoing political transition present potential risks to the economy, as the military has yet to transfer power to civilian rule and restore the country to multiparty democracy and constitutional governance. This is particularly important given that the country's recurring insecurity and political instability have historically worsened economic conditions. Also, an **ECOWAS** withdrawal that is not properly negotiated could disrupt the free movement of goods and people and thereby trade with non-WAEMU countries (Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, for example).

With the removal of the ECOWAS sanctions in July 2022, the economy is expected to bounce back as Mali still has strong growth potential. The country faces an optimistic future with economic growth projected to rebound to 4.0% in 2024 and 4.9% by 2026. Inflation is projected to fall to 1.2% due to reduced import costs and increased agricultural production. The government now faces the difficult job of reviving its economic growth record and translating such gains into poverty and inequality reductions as well as addressing long-term development needs. Achieving sustainable development requires Mali to build a resilient economy that is less dependent on external volatility or shocks, particularly the global commodity cycle.

On the Current Path, Mali’s GDP will reach US\$25.8 billion and 2030 and more than triple to US\$53.0 billion by 2043. The average growth rate within this period is estimated at 5.4%, meaning that the economy of Mali has the potential to grow quicker than it has in the past, although its high population growth will impede income growth. In the long term, the country needs to rethink its economic development strategy to focus on economic diversification and value-addition to its main commodities. Its huge natural resource deposits, together with its agricultural and renewable energy potential, are opportunities that can be used to grow and transform the economy.

Chart 6: Size of the informal economy in the Current Path, 2020-2043

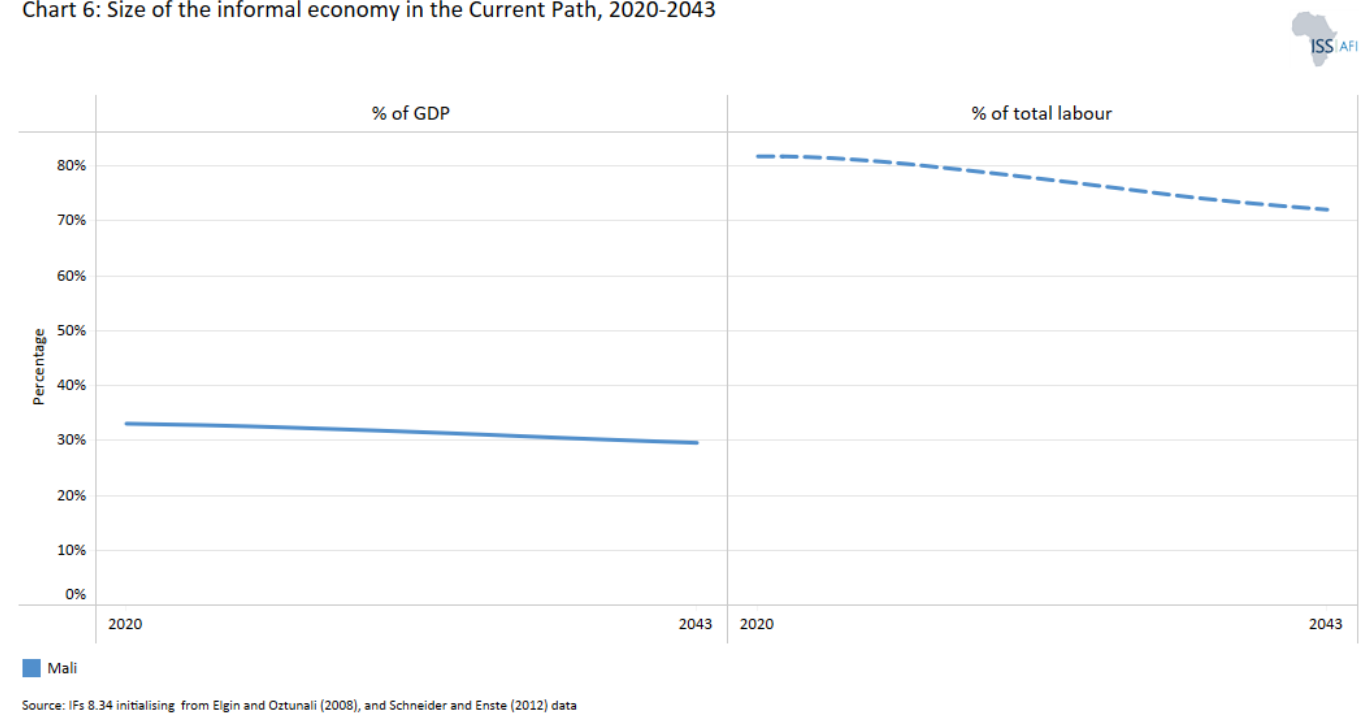


Chart 6 presents the size of the informal economy as per cent of GDP and per cent of total labour (non-agriculture), from 2020 to 2043. The data in our modelling are largely estimates and therefore may differ from other sources.

The informal sector serves as a lifeline to many people, especially unskilled labourers, who cannot secure employment in the formal sector. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), informal employment is often associated with income insecurity, unsafe work conditions, and limited access to the rights and benefits accorded to the formal sector. The lack of workplace safeguards can impact workforce participation rates and limit the contribution to the economy by lower-waged workers.

The informal sector in Mali, like in many African countries, is large, serving as a source of livelihood for the majority of the population, especially women and young people. Informal enterprises in Mali are typically small-scale businesses, including artisans, shopkeepers and service providers, which are often unregistered and lack access to formal credit and

markets. The sector **offers** a more flexible entry point for individuals, allowing them to engage in economic activities without the formal requirements of registration and taxation.

According to the **ILO**, 73% of the economically active population in Mali works in the informal sector, with about one-third of these workers being young people between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Women, also **account** for 79.6% of non-agricultural employment, compared to 62.9% for men. In 2023, about 81.5% of total labour in Mali works in the informal sector, making it the fifth largest among the low-income countries in Africa. A significant proportion of informal workers are **employed** in the agriculture sector. In the Current Path, the proportion of informal labour share will decline to 78.4% in 2030 and 72.1% in 2043 far above the average for its income peers in Africa.

Over the years, the share of the informal sector to GDP has grown rapidly compared to the formal sector. The **contribution** of the informal sector to total value added by the service sector increased from less than 40% in 1980 to over 60% in 2015. It currently **contributes** about 98% of all value added in the primary sector, mainly agriculture. In 2023, the size of the informal sector in Mali was approximately 33% of GDP above the average of 29.3% for its income peers in Africa. Despite this large contribution to GDP, the informal sector in Mali faces numerous challenges that hinder the growth of businesses in the sector. Many businesses are **reluctant** to transition to the formal economy due to the complexity, cost and burdensome compliance with tax regulations and bureaucratic procedures. Additionally, many informal workers **lack** formal education or business training, which limits their productivity and makes it difficult for them to move into formal employment. Poor infrastructure further **hampers** business operations, creating obstacles for informal enterprises to thrive or expand.

As part of efforts to address these challenges, Mali has **introduced** a new registration system for micro and small enterprises to streamline the transition of informal workers into the formal economy. Additionally, **initiatives** like the National Fund for Youth Employment aim to integrate young workers into the labour market through targeted programs that provide training and support. **Efforts** are also being made to improve access to credit for informal businesses, which could encourage them to formalise their operations if they see clear benefits. Furthermore, **programmes** focusing on enhancing skills development among informal workers, particularly through vocational training that meets market demands, are essential for improving employability and productivity.

In the Current Path, the size of the informal sector will decline slightly to 31.8% of GDP in 2030 and 29.3% of GDP by 2043.

While the large informal sector in Mali provides employment and income opportunities, particularly for the poor and vulnerable, its activities can also hinder economic growth. The widespread informality deprives the government of essential revenue, as many businesses in this sector do not pay taxes. Most individuals employed in the informal sector are in vulnerable positions, lacking job security and social protection (such as pensions and health insurance), and often receiving lower wages. Given these challenges, it is in the country's best interest for the government to implement incentives that encourage businesses in the informal sector to formalise their operations. This can be achieved through measures such as tax education, tax incentives, simplified business registration requirements, and creating a more enabling business regulatory environment.

Chart 7: GDP per capita in Current Path, 1990-2043

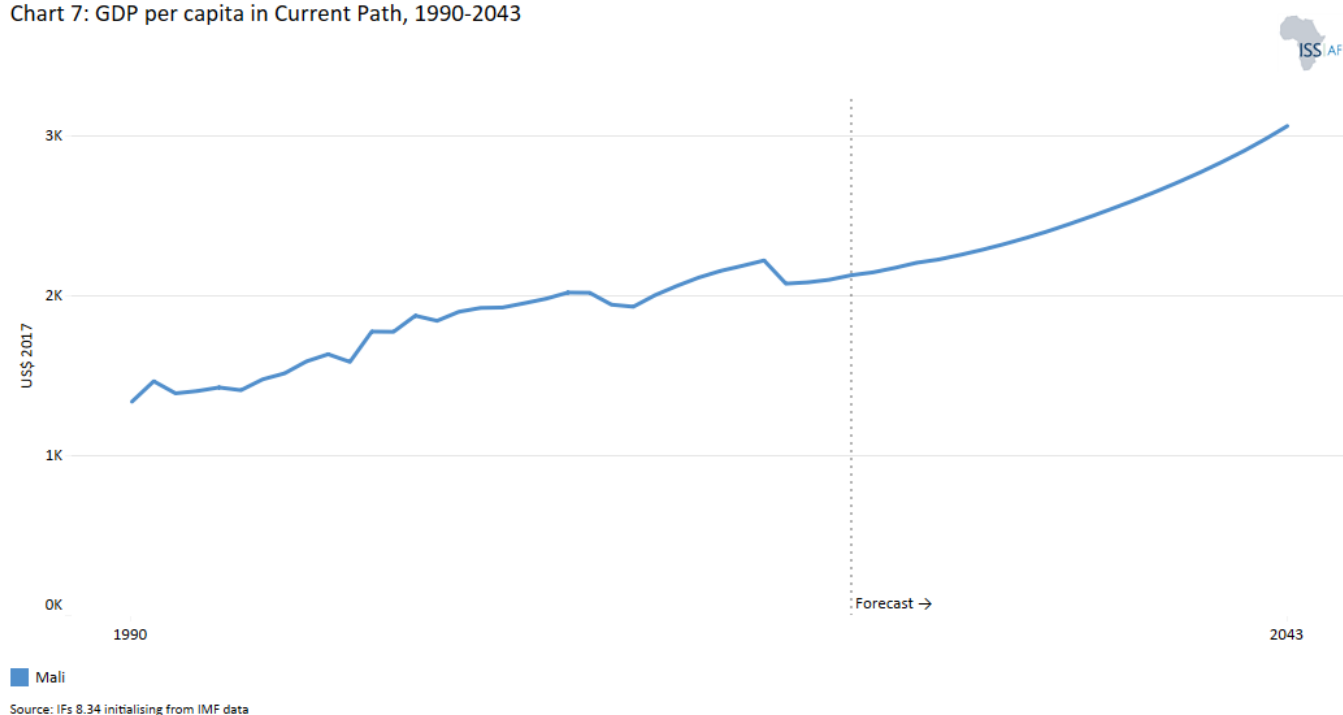


Chart 7 presents GDP per capita in the Current Path, from 1990 to 2043, compared with the average for the Africa income group.

Despite its limitations, GDP per capita is generally used to measure the standard of living and is the most widely used and accepted indicator to compare welfare among countries. Using the purchasing power parity (PPP) measure for this analysis, Mali's GDP per capita of US\$2 127 in 2023 is the sixth-highest GDP per capita among the low-income countries in Africa, and it is 17% higher than the group average of US\$1 814 for low-income countries in Africa. This figure represents a tremendous improvement of about 59.1% from the US\$1 337 it recorded in 1990 when it was the eighth highest among the low-income countries group in Africa. However, this growth is insufficient to drive a faster transformation in livelihoods. The slow pace of GDP per capita growth is primarily attributed to high population growth, which hampers progress in reducing poverty and improving human development indicators.

By 2030, Mali's GDP per capita will rise to US\$2 320 above the average of US\$2 084 for low-income countries in Africa. In the long run, Mali will lose ground on its income-group peers as GDP per capita will reach US\$3 059 by 2043, placing it eleventh among low-income African countries. At this rate, the country's GDP per capita will be slightly higher than the average of US\$2 986 for its income-group peers in Africa.

Slower growth in GDP per capita can have several implications. First, it can lead to slower poverty reduction and limited improvements in living standards in Mali. Additionally, slow GDP per capita growth may imply that the benefits of economic growth are not evenly distributed or broadly shared which can worsen inequality in the country. It may also constrain government revenue, limiting the ability to invest in critical areas such as education, healthcare and infrastructure.

Chart 8: Extreme poverty in Current Path, 2020-2043

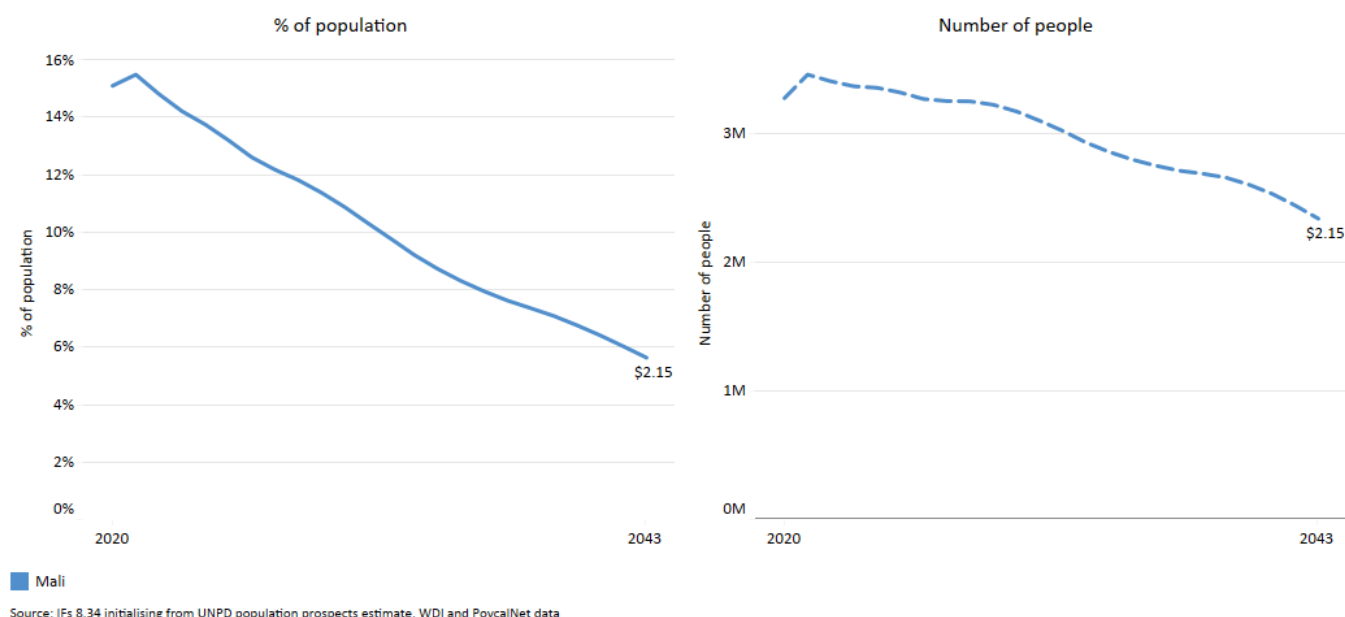


Chart 8 presents the rate and numbers of extremely poor people in the Current Path from 2020 to 2043.

In 2022, the World Bank updated the poverty lines to 2017 constant dollar values as follows:

- The previous US\$1.90 extreme poverty line is now set at US\$2.15, also for use with low-income countries.
- US\$3.20 for lower-middle-income countries, now US\$3.65 in 2017 values.
- US\$5.50 for upper-middle-income countries, now US\$6.85 in 2017 values.
- US\$22.70 for high-income countries. The Bank has not yet announced the new poverty line in 2017 US\$ prices for high-income countries.

Like many low-income countries in Africa, poverty in Mali is widespread. As a low-income country, Mali uses the US\$2.15 benchmark for extreme poverty. In 1990, 7.9 million Malians, representing 86.3% of the population, lived below the poverty line of US\$2.15, far above the average of 66.6% for low-income countries in Africa. Over the past three decades, the country's effort at poverty eradication has yielded some results as the poverty rate declined to 14.2% in 2023—far below the average of 41.5% for low-income countries in Africa — but still corresponds to 3.4 million Malians living below the poverty line of US\$2.15 in 2023.

Efforts to combat poverty in Mali have been diverse, encompassing national strategies, international collaborations and community-level initiatives. The Malian government has **developed** several Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to guide its poverty alleviation efforts, with the most recent one focusing on increasing public spending on programmes aimed at reducing poverty and improving access to essential services such as education and healthcare as long-term solutions to poverty. Additionally, since the early 1990s, Mali has **implemented** governance reforms to decentralise administration, allowing local governments to take a more active role in addressing poverty. This approach empowers communities to identify specific needs and develop context-sensitive solutions.

Mali has also **forged** partnerships with international organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF, securing funding and technical support for poverty reduction initiatives, which are vital for sustainable development. Furthermore, collaborations with organisations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have **focussed** on improving youth social and economic behaviours, increasing agricultural productivity and fostering community-based organisations, creating synergies across the health, education and economic sectors. Access to microfinance is another key initiative aimed at empowering poor families, enabling them to invest in small businesses and improve their livelihoods. This provides a crucial safety net during periods of economic hardship.

Despite these efforts, Mali faces significant challenges in poverty alleviation as poverty still persists. To appreciate the full incidence of poverty, one must look beyond monetary poverty as it only tells part of the story. The Human Development Index (HDI), which measures the average achievement of countries in three main areas: health, knowledge and standard of living, is one such measure. Mali's HDI **score** of 0.410 in 2022 ranks 188 out of 193 countries globally, constituting a drop compared to the 0.434 it recorded in 2019. The global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) also measures acute multidimensional poverty by measuring each person's overlapping deprivations across 10 indicators in three equally weighted dimensions: health, education and standard of living.

The MPI complements the international US\$2.15 a day poverty rate by identifying who is multidimensionally poor and also shows the composition of multidimensional poverty. The headcount or incidence of **multidimensional poverty** is often several percentage points higher than that of monetary poverty. This implies that individuals living above the monetary poverty line may still suffer deprivations in health, education and/or standard of living. According to the **2023 UNDP Multidimensional Poverty Index**, about 68.3% of Malians were considered to be multidimensionally poor with an intensity of deprivation estimated to be 55%. An extra 15.3% of the population was considered to be vulnerable to multidimensional poverty. Aside from these, inequality is also prevalent in Mali with more poor people in the rural areas. Also, about **90%** of the poor people in the country are concentrated in the densely populated areas of the southern part of Mali.

The cause of poverty in Mali is multifaceted. It **includes** lack of education, poor governance, malnutrition and widespread conflict due to terrorism and political instability. **Also**, the typically large family size (average household size in 2019 was 8.2 people), coupled with increased drought, food shocks and outdated agricultural practices, has severely raised the cost of living in the country. In recent years, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the security crisis has increased poverty levels particularly from 2020 to 2022. These issues intensify pressure on resources and public services, hindering effective poverty reduction.

On the Current Path, Mali's progress in reducing poverty rates will be slower so that by 2030, 10.9% of the population, equivalent to 3.2 million people will be living in extreme poverty. This means that Mali will require significant policy shifts in order to meet SDG 1, of eliminating extreme poverty. Projections indicate that by 2043, Mali is still likely to fall short of achieving SDG 1, with an estimated 5.6% of the population expected to remain below the international extreme poverty threshold of US\$2.15 per day.

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Mr Enoch Randy Aikins joined the AFI in May 2021 as a Researcher. Before that, Enoch was a research and programmes officer at the Institute for Democratic Governance in Accra in charge of local governance reforms, poverty and inequality and public sector reforms. He also worked as a research assistant (economic division) with the Institute for Statistical Social and Economic Research at the University of Ghana. Enoch's interests include African politics and governance, economic development, public sector reform, poverty and inequality. Enoch is a Young African Fellow at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute in Florence and has an MPhil in economics from the University of Ghana, Legon.

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