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Sahel: Why stabilization efforts should address internal displacement

The conflict situation in the Sahel has created one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world with more than 2.5 million people displaced over the past decade.

International donors have largely dealt with the crises by supporting humanitarian efforts to provide emergency aid to IDPs. This policy brief argues that this response is important but ultimately inadequate; donors should start viewing IDPs as a key element to enable (regional) stability.

Moving IDPs from the exclusive realm of humanitarians to stabilization, brings to the fore a policy tension that carries the promise a policy reconciliation. National governments in the Sahel push for the return of IDPs to their regions of origin in an effort to secure, re-populate and 'stabilize' abandoned territories (a effort that remains complex in a dire security context). But those international donors who do 'stabilization' leave IDPs completely off the radar and miss their constructive potential.

This brief calls for international partners to pay greater attention to the crisis of internal displacement in the Sahel. Such policies have to make IDPs themselves one of the actors that can help bring 'stability' to conflict affected settings and, in that way, also speak to their (humanitarian) needs by providing long-term prospects of rebuilding their lives and livelihoods.

Introduction

The security situation in the Sahel continues to worsen despite an increase in stabilization efforts. Over the past ten years, European and other international partners have multiplied their interventions to stabilize the region and contain the advance of violent extremist groups after France's successful 2013 Serval operation in Mali. And yet, in these ten years, a series of military coups have swept through Burkina Faso and Mali, the number of violent attacks on civilians, state infrastructure, and the military continues to increase, and inter-communal

conflicts over resources are on the rise.¹

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that the conflict situation in the Central Sahel has displaced more than 2.5 million people over the past decade – of which 2.1 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs).²

1 See ACLED Data [Dashboard](#).

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ["Decade of Sahel conflict leaves 2.5 million people displaced"](#), UNHCR, 14 January 2022.

The situation of insecurity has triggered a change of approach among international partners from a security-only lens to a broader governance focus. Speaking about the Sahel to a conference of ambassadors in September 2022, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs recognized that “the security approach alone is insufficient. [...] It is essential that it goes hand in hand with development and stabilization projects, the return of State services, and improved governance.”³ Displacement, however, often falls off the radar of external stabilization strategies for the region⁴ – and of public attention outside the region.⁵

According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.” This, however, is a descriptive definition, which does not confer a special legal status because IDPs, being inside their country, remain entitled to all the rights and guarantees as citizens and other habitual residents of their country. As such, national authorities have the primary responsibility to prevent forced displacement and to protect IDPs. See <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/idp-definition>.

- 3 Catherine Colonna, “Speech at the conference of ambassadors”, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Paris, 2 September 2022.
- 4 There is no commonly agreed-upon definition of stabilization. In the Sahel context, international, European and Sahelian actors have developed different approaches to stabilization that speak of differing objectives and means. Initial stabilization efforts in the Sahel (partly led by France) were reactive to political instability and tied to military interventions. These have evolved into a variety of efforts to support the rule of law, security sector reforms, the justice sector, governance, and civil society groups linked to the promotion of income-generating activities. See: Delina Goxho and Selina Daugalias, “[European aphaşia in the Sahel: stabilizing how?](#)”, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2022.
- 5 The displacement crises in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali rank respectively second, fifth and sixth on the Norwegian Refugee Council’s (NRC’s) list of the 10 most neglected displacement crises of 2021. See: Norwegian Refugee Council, “[The world’s most neglected displacement crises in 2021](#)”, 1 June 2022.

This contrasts with the approach of national governments in the Sahel, for whom addressing massive population displacements has long been an integral part of their stabilization efforts. Currently, all three central Sahelian countries – Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger – are pushing for the return of thousands of IDPs to their regions of origin and have launched return operations, starting in 2021 with Niger.⁶ For governments in the Sahel, this is part of the ‘return of the State’ agenda which starts with the return of people. Return policies serve several purposes. First, they aim to provide durable solutions to the humanitarian emergency by returning people to their home regions where they have greater access to livelihoods and solidarity networks. Second, there is a strategic angle: with the return of IDPs, governments seek to invite humanitarians to deploy aid delivery in deserted border regions – regions that were already isolated from central governments before the crisis. Third, return strategies serve domestic politics, with the return of displaced groups to their regions of origin signaling success in counter-terrorist operations. Fourth, return policies provide an answer to security imperatives. Refugee and IDP camps in the Sahel have often been the target of violent attacks leading governments to close or move camp facilities to other regions.⁷ More than a mere consequence of the conflict, internal displacement is a political field where Sahelian governments pursue strategic objectives.

Instead of displacement, European stabilization strategies for the region mention irregular and transit migration which they consider to be, simultaneously, constitutive elements

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- 6 Voices of America (VOA) with Agence France Presse (AFP), “[Niger Says 26,000 Displaced People in Southeast Are Now Home](#)”, 1 August 2021.
 - 7 This was the case in Niger in 2019 when UN organizations and government authorities decided to close camps near the Malian border and to relocate refugees to the Tahoua region. See: Eric Topona, “[L’Onu a fermé deux camps de réfugiés au Niger](#)”, Deutsche Welle, 6 August 2020.

and consequences of the Sahelian “arc of instability”.⁸ The narrative is as follows: cross-border smuggling routes allegedly contribute to supplying criminal and terrorist groups with smuggled arms, drugs, money, and people. At the same time, the European strategy for the Sahel argues that instability and the lack of economic perspectives force people to look for opportunities outside of their places of origin and concludes that “instability also contributes to irregular migration”.⁹ But while migration is a clear priority of European policy-making in the Sahel region, it is unclear how countering irregular migration is tied to the policy-makers’ stabilization efforts. More importantly, European strategies for the Sahel only mention displacement as a consequence of the conflict and seem to ignore the fact that Sahelian partners, as well as some international actors,¹⁰ have integrated displacement – and not migration – into their own stabilization efforts.

In fact, international stabilization actors, Europeans included, are reluctant to engage in the question of displacement that Sahel governments consider to be their own domestic turf. As the room for political engagement in the Sahel is shrinking, international partners have to negotiate a difficult balancing act between adverse national governments and their calls for substantial governance reforms. But as the response by national governments tends to indicate, internal displacement in the Sahel is not only a matter of human security and humanitarian priority, but also one of regional stability. Population displacement is not only a product of the security crisis, but a constitutive element of the prolonged destabilization of the region. Addressing IDPs in the Sahel demands

far greater attention from particular types of international actors: those who engage in ‘stabilization’. This means going beyond the simple acknowledgement that conflict creates displacement and integrating displacement into stabilization strategies.

The brief starts by reviewing mobility trends in the region to highlight the prominence of conflict-related displacement. Second, it analyses humanitarian responses to the Sahel displacement crisis and the shortcomings of an emergency-centred approach. Third, it suggests analysing displacement from a stabilization perspective. The brief ends with a series of recommendations for international and national actors on how to better integrate displacement into stabilization efforts.

A decade of conflict and displacement in the Sahel

The Sahel entered into a deep multidimensional crisis after the eruption of the Malian conflict in 2012. Violent groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic-State have spread from Central Mali to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger, while Boko Haram has made incursions into Southern Niger from Nigeria. Over the years, the conflict has expanded and has grown in intensity (Figure 1). Attacks against civilians, the military and public infrastructure have steadily increased ever since. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) estimates that in 2022 alone the conflict resulted in 3,300 civilian casualties in the three central Sahelian countries, compared to 1,900 in 2021.¹¹ The increased presence of security forces deployed in response to these attacks was not without consequences for the civilian population: in 2020, more civilians were reportedly killed by national and foreign military than by extremist groups.¹²

8 MACS Netherlands 2018-2021; Council of the European Union EU, “[Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel](#)”, 16 April 2021.

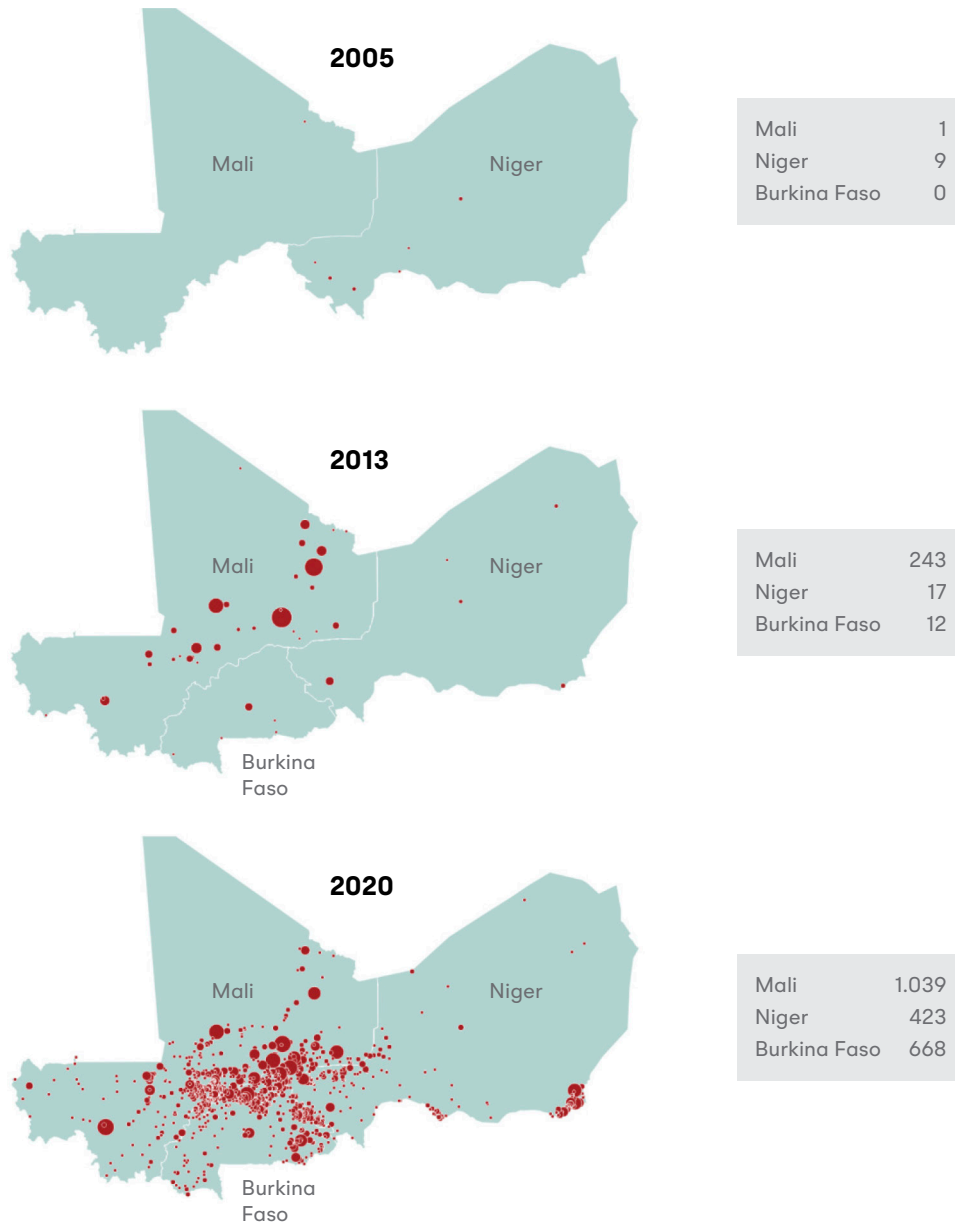
9 Council of the European Union, “[Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel](#)”, 16 April 2021.

10 See for instance: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “[Facilité Régionale de Stabilisation Liptako-Gourma au Mali](#)”, 2021; UNDP, “[Mécanisme de Stabilisation pour la Région du Liptako Gourma](#)”, November 2022.

11 Data as of 21 October 2022. See ACLED Data [Dashboard](#).

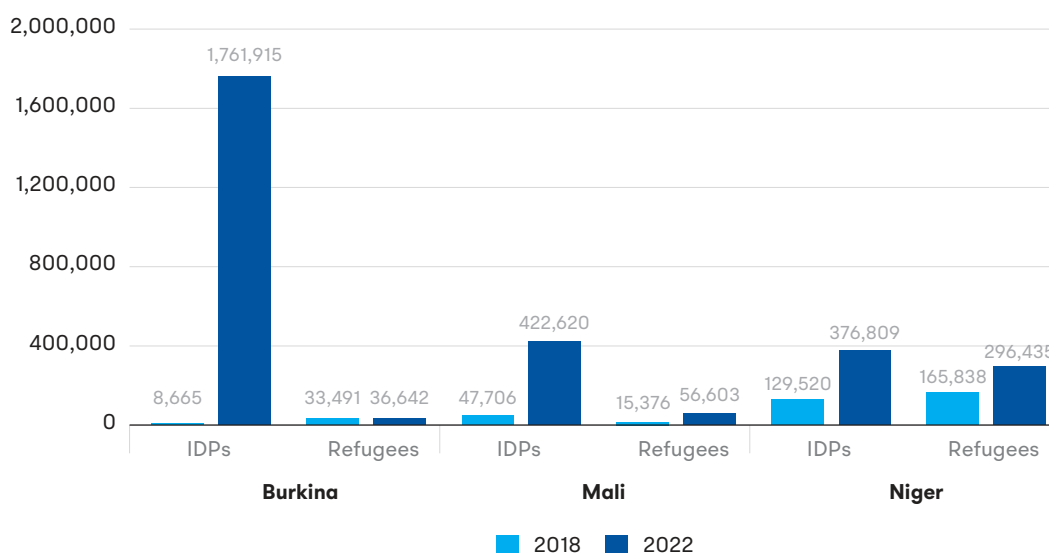
12 International Federation for Human Rights, “[The Sahel: ‘In 2020, more civilians were killed by the security forces than by extremist groups’](#)”, 26 February 2021.

Figure 1 Violent Events in the Sahel



Source: Armed Conflict Event Data Project (ACLED), 2020; Crisis Group, “A Course Correction for the Sahel: Stabilisation Strategy”, 1 February 2021.

Figure 2 Comparison of IDP and refugee numbers in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger between 2018 and 2022.



Source: UNHCR*

* For 2018, the earliest comparable data that is available has been used (January 2018). For 2022, the latest available data has been used (August 2022 for Mali and October 2022 for Burkina Faso and Niger).

This generalized situation of insecurity has led to unprecedented levels of mass displacement across the region. People are forced out of their homes because of violent attacks or threats against their villages or members of their community. According to the available data, between 2018 and 2022, the total number of refugees and asylum seekers almost doubled, while the number of internally displaced persons increased almost 14-fold (mostly due to the explosion of internal displacement in Burkina Faso). This means that close to 3 million people had been displaced in the central Sahel at the end of 2022 – refugees and IDPs included (Figure 2) – up from 2,5 million at the beginning of 2022 according to UNHCR data.¹³

The response by national authorities and international partners falls short of the needs of displaced populations. The UNHCR estimates that the Sahel faces one of the “fastest growing displacement crises in the world – and yet it is

one of the most forgotten.”¹⁴ Displaced persons gather mostly in border regions that have long been neglected by central authorities and where access to basic services and state infrastructure remains very limited. Added to that, displaced groups often lack the official documentation required to have access to some public services¹⁵ and the Sahel countries have insufficient protection frameworks for refugees and displaced persons. The volatile security context further complicates access to conflict areas for humanitarian and aid organizations, leaving many of those who are displaced with little or no assistance.

This is crucial considering that displaced persons have few options to provide for themselves. Like the rest of the Sahelian populations, the majority of displaced persons depend on agriculture and pastoralism as their main

13 Cf. footnote 2.

14 UNHCR, “Sahel Emergency”, November 2022 (last updated).

15 NRC Interview, November 2022.

source of income, activities which they can hardly continue after their displacement as they will have left their land and cattle behind. Access to land in host communities is very limited, and some displaced persons choose to commute between their villages of origin and their settlement location in order to care for their crops and cattle, thereby creating additional security risks for them.¹⁶ Men are often the ones who commute between their villages of origin and their settlement areas, leaving women and children behind.¹⁷

The ongoing conflict in the central Sahel has led not only to a geographic expansion of the conflict but also to a widening of the parties thereto. In addition to the central government and jihadist groups initially involved, other actors such as humanitarians have also become associated with the conflict and are often targeted by extremist groups. In addition, IDPs have also become a prey for armed groups operating in the region. There have been several instances of attacks against IDP settlements or convoys of displaced persons in Mali and Burkina Faso resulting in casualties and in new displacements of the targeted groups.¹⁸ More and more IDPs choose to resettle further away from the conflict areas – undertaking so-called secondary or tertiary displacements. As people move away from their regions of origin, their traditional solidarity structures and safety nets are

stretched, which humanitarians fear will result in higher levels of vulnerability.¹⁹

Additionally, the re-displacement of IDPs complicates the task of data collection for aid organizations and the authorities. Secondary and tertiary displacements create a risk of people being registered several times in different locations. For instance, in Burkina Faso, the authorities had to revise their data for IDP registrations to remove cases of double counting. Between April and October 2022, Burkina Faso authorities removed more than 380,000 registrations from the national IDP database leading to a considerable drop in IDP numbers – from 1,903,000 to 1,719,000 – as the authorities explained that some people had been registered several times in the database.²⁰ Variations in the number of IDPs can also be explained by their supposed integration into host communities or their return to their villages of origin once they perceive that the security situation has improved, but humanitarian organizations and state authorities lack adequate tools to monitor the scope of these returns and their implications for the returned communities.²¹

An inadequate emergency-centred approach to protracted displacement

The response to the Sahel displacement crisis has been primarily a humanitarian one. This is understandable; humanitarian needs are immense and have only grown in intensity as the security crisis has deteriorated.²² But an emergency-centred approach applies palliative solutions to a protracted displacement crisis that is the result of a multidimensional socio-political crisis. There are several reasons for this. First, durable solutions to displacement,

16 NRC Interview, November 2022.

17 NRC Interview, November 2022; Humanitarian Response, “[Aperçu des Besoins Humanitaires: Niger](#)”, February 2022; and Ornella Moderan, “[Au Niger, les conséquences de l’insécurité pour les filles et les femmes de Tillabéri](#)”, Institute for Security Studies, 8 December 2022.

18 In March 2020, an attack on an IDP camp in Goudoubo in Burkina Faso persuaded several thousand people to flee. In October 2020, 25 IDPs were killed when their convoy of 46 people was ambushed by an armed group near the town of Pissila, in the Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso. Most recently, in November 2022, an IDP camp in Kadji, a locality situated in the commune of Gounzoureye, about 7 km southeast of Gao, Mali was attacked by suspected jihadists. See: Sam Mednick, “[Thousands of Malian refugees flee Burkina Faso camps after attacks](#)”, 29 May 2020.

19 Anonymous humanitarian sources, Dakar, November 2022.

20 Anadolu Agency (AA), “[Burkina Faso : le nombre de déplacés internes passe de 1,9 à 1,5 million au 30 avril 2022 \(gouvernement\)](#)”, 8 September 2022.

21 NRC interview, November 2022.

22 Humanitarian Response, “[Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview](#)”, 2022.

while being officially on the table, seem to be out of reach considering the regional security context – these solutions include the local integration of displaced persons in host communities, the return of displaced persons to their village of origin, or the resettlement of asylum seekers to third countries. Second, humanitarian actors have to carefully negotiate their presence in an increasingly adverse political environment, especially in Mali and in Burkina Faso. To remain relevant, humanitarians must evaluate their actions in such a way that they always remain on the fringes of what might be considered political positioning by government authorities.²³

According to protection organizations, the humanitarian-only approach is a default response, but it has many shortcomings. First, the funds available for a humanitarian response are scarce: in 2022 the UN estimated that their funding needs for the planned humanitarian response in the Sahel were only partly covered (11% of the funding requirements were covered for Mali and 16% for Chad).²⁴ Aid workers struggle to mobilize funds for displacement programming in particular.²⁵ Humanitarian actors on the ground estimate that internal displacement attracts little political attention from donors in comparison to irregular and transit migration. According to one of them, countries like Niger “suffer from the fact that they are perceived as transit countries for migration” which is reflected in the financial commitments of international donors that prioritize programmes for improved migration governance and countering irregular migration.²⁶

Second, humanitarian responses to displacement are essentially short-term and concentrate on the provision of immediate basic assistance (e.g., access to food, water, sanitation, health,

and education) for a limited period of time. But this type of intervention can be counter-productive. Emergency solutions have an end date, but a situation of protracted displacement like the one of the Sahel requires longer term solutions intrinsically related to solving the causes of the conflict. Once humanitarian actors leave a certain area, the displaced communities they were assisting rarely stay put. Some return to their areas of origin, if the situation allows for this, but many move on to other areas where humanitarian aid is present. In fact, humanitarian actors in Niger have noticed several cases of groups of people settling in new areas to mimic displacement in order to provoke the delivery of aid.²⁷ This goes to show that, paradoxically, in some cases humanitarian assistance for displaced persons can trigger further forms of displacement.

Third, restrictions on access severely reduce the scope of humanitarian interventions. The International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that 1.5 million Sahelians are in areas where it is “virtually impossible to access humanitarian aid and essential services”.²⁸ In Niger for instance, restrictions imposed by the regional governor complicate access to the tri-border area neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso. In most of the rest of the country, humanitarians must obtain security clearance and be accompanied by a military escort.²⁹ In Mali, armed groups’ renewed activism in the northeast region also complicates access to the Ménaka region, where about 30,000 IDPs are located.³⁰

Humanitarian actors face an interventionist dilemma: on the one hand, they advocate close engagement with target populations while, on the other hand, they are forced to withdraw from

23 UN official, January 2023.

24 Humanitarian Response, “[Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview](#)”, 2022, p. 31.

25 Anonymous humanitarian sources, Niamey, November 2022.

26 Anonymous humanitarian source, Niamey, November 2022.

27 Anonymous humanitarian sources, Niamey, November 2022.

28 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “[After Ten Years of Armed Violence in the Sahel, There is Still Time for Humanity](#)”, ICRC Statement, 10 February 2022.

29 ACAPS, “[Central Sahel: Humanitarian access and civil-military coordination](#)”, 28 January 2021.

30 United Nations, “[L'insécurité complique davantage l'accès humanitaire dans le nord-est du Mali](#)”, 12 October 2022.

especially vulnerable areas³¹ or to negotiate access with armed groups or military forces³², thereby compromising core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.³³ This cooperation between the military, humanitarians, civilians – and at times non-state armed groups – contributes to blurring the lines between the parties to the conflict and their perceived political weight. Humanitarian workers themselves are a target for violent groups – according to ACLED a third of global abductions of aid workers occur in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso alone.³⁴ Civilians cooperating with outside actors, humanitarians included, face threats and violence from rebel groups or from their communities as they are wary of becoming a target for these groups.³⁵

The room for humanitarian intervention is also shrinking at the political level. Humanitarian and development actors must thread the needle between toughened government partners and the deteriorating humanitarian situation. For the Sahel governments, aid delivery is a highly sensitive topic as it points to governance gaps that have been left unaddressed.³⁶ The concept of durable solutions has become the new buzzword in the Sahel. But linking emergency responses to durable development solutions seems to be an impossible task in the current security context and the shrinking space for humanitarian aid. The recurring targeting of humanitarians, civilians and IDPs demonstrates the limitations of an emergency-only response to the displacement crisis and points to the responsibility of political actors.

Stabilization amid displacement: Sahelian and international strategies

Population displacement is not only a product of the security crisis, but a constitutive element of the prolonged destabilization of the region. As such, the return of IDPs has become an integral part of national Sahelian stabilization strategies. Bringing people back to their regions of origin is key to repopulating areas left empty after violent incursions and countering the depopulation strategy pursued by non-state armed groups and to showing that national counter-terrorist strategies do produce positive results. As Niger's President Mohammed Bazoum puts it, "terrorists need a human desert to act as they wish."³⁷

With the return of displaced communities, governments are also trying to persuade humanitarians to provide basic services – from sanitation and shelter to schools and health centres – with the hope that the presence of aid will produce more returns. In the longer term, national return policies aim to reduce IDPs and returnees' dependency on aid as people regain access to their livelihoods.³⁸ The UNDP Stabilization Strategy for the Liptako-Gourma area integrates the return of displaced populations with the provision of the basic services, increased social cohesion and the reinforcement of local infrastructures.³⁹ This approach shows that displacement and population return cannot be reduced to a humanitarian emergency without politically framing the situation, but on the contrary must be seen as a broader political issue to ensure stability in the area.

31 Humanitarian Response, "[Sahel Crisis: Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview](#)", 2022, p. 28.

32 ACAPS, "[Central Sahel: Humanitarian access and civil-military coordination](#)", 28 January 2021.

33 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "[Humanitarian Principles](#)", July 2022.

34 ACAPS, "[Central Sahel: Humanitarian access and civil-military coordination](#)", 28 January 2021.

35 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "[Perilous terrain: Humanitarian action at risk in Mali](#)", 29 March 2017.

36 UN official, January 2023.

37 Christophe Châtelot, "[Dans le sud-est du Niger, le difficile retour des déplacés de Boko Haram](#)", Le Monde, 28 June 2022.

38 UNHCR, "[Niger becomes the first country in Africa to adopt a national law for the protection and assistance of Internally Displaced Populations](#)", 7 December 2018.

39 UNDP, "[Mécanisme de Stabilisation pour la Région du Liptako Gourma](#)", November 2022.

National governments in the Sahel have prepared to launch large operations for the return of people who have been displaced in the region. Mali's 2020 "plan for the return and reinstallation of internally displaced persons, refugees, and for the stabilization of return areas" aims to return 80% of all IDPs and refugees to their regions of origin by 2026.⁴⁰ In 2021, Niger decided on a policy to return some 130,000 IDPs. The return of refugees is also on the table. Back in 2014, Mali, Niger and the UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement for the return of Malian refugees from Niger.⁴¹ More recently, Niger and Nigeria have agreed on the return of over 100,000 Nigerian refugees from Southern Niger.⁴² Although the poor security situation in many of the target regions blocks the implementation of these return plans, the governments in the Sahel are multiplying their return initiatives. At the same time, governments combine return policies with some efforts to strengthen the protection of IDPs. All three central Sahelian countries – Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali – are engaged in adopting and implementing national strategies to increase assistance and protection of IDPs. For instance, Niger was the first African country to incorporate the provisions of the Kampala Convention on IDPs into its national legislation in 2018 – perhaps in an attempt to reassure humanitarian actors of its good intentions.

In practice, a return policy has often proved to be more complicated. The first operations carried out in Mali and Niger demonstrated that the security situation in the target regions did not meet the conditions for a sustainable return. Humanitarian sources confirm that many of the returned IDPs left the area once again after the military convoys had departed. A military presence also attracted attention and made returnees potentially more vulnerable to

armed and criminal groups present in the area, particularly in Mali.⁴³ In these cases, returns have created renewed displacement rather than stabilization.

International partners for their part re reluctant to integrate displacement into their stabilization strategies.⁴⁴ Addressing internal displacement may be seen as meddling within internal affairs or hinting at governments' responsibility at a time when Western allies need to renegotiate their presence in the Sahel. Instead, European actors in particular have had their eyes on transit migrants. Since 2015, Europeans have prioritized reducing irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean Route and have encouraged Sahelian states to consolidate their border control capacities in order to halt irregular journeys, in unison with Sahelian national strategy agendas. For instance, the mandate of the EU's capacity-building mission for security forces in Niger (EUCAP Sahel), a country central to regional mobility in the Sahel, was extended in 2016 to cover irregular migration in its training curriculum.⁴⁵ Although these interventions managed to significantly reduce migration through Niger,⁴⁶ the mission continues to increase its capacity to combat irregular movements with the recent signing of an agreement with the EU's border guard agency FRONTEX.⁴⁷

In the European envisioned stabilization strategy, transit migration in the Sahel is the result of the smuggling of migrants by organized criminal groups associated with armed groups that contribute to destabilizing the region – a narrative that empirical research has called

40 Malian Ministry for Health and Social Development, "Plan de retour et de réinstallations des personnes déplacées internes, des réfugiées et de stabilisation des zones de retour", June 2022.

41 UNHCR, "Mali, Niger and the UNHCR sign agreement on repatriation of Malian refugees", 3 May 2014.

42 Africanews with AFP, "Niger sets goal of returning 130,000 Nigerian refugees by year-end", 9 July 2021.

43 Anonymous humanitarian source, November 2022.

44 UN official, January 2023.

45 European Council, Council of the European Union, "EUCAP Sahel Niger: mission extended, budget agreed, mandate amended", 18 July 2016.

46 Gabriella Sanchez, Kheira Arrouche, Matteo Capasso, Angeliki Dimitriadi and Alia Fakhry, "Beyond Networks, Militias and tribes: Rethinking EU Counter-Smuggling Policy and Response", EuroMeSCo, May 2021.

47 Frontex, "Frontex signs Working Arrangement with EUCAP Sahel Niger", 15 July 2022.

into question.⁴⁸ The fact that armed groups continue to proliferate whereas the levels of transit migration through the central Sahel have decreased following initiatives by the EU and national governments is another testament of the flawed intervention logic on migration in the region.

Conclusion and recommendations

Sahelian governments' ambitious objectives to stabilize displacement and return IDPs are likely to remain on paper. The main reason is that the numbers of displaced persons are bound to increase considering the uninterrupted targeting of civilians and public infrastructure by armed groups and the growing number of attacks perpetrated against civilians, national security forces and their partners. More and more people will find themselves in situations of intense vulnerability as the crisis continues.

While humanitarian interventions are necessary, treating displacement as a purely humanitarian emergency bears the risk of erasing the social and political context in the regions where displacement mostly occurs. These are border regions that have long been marginalized by central governments leaving populations exposed to security risks, fuelling regional grievances, and providing a breeding ground for non-state armed groups. The lack of a state presence, infrastructure, and of opportunities in these regions has also facilitated the displacement of people and does not incentivize the return of these populations. If anything, the prioritization of returns over other durable solutions to displacement by national governments in the Sahel should prompt international actors to review their own approach to displacement.

Stabilization is a political imperative, but it should also benefit communities affected by the conflict – including those displaced by it.

In the complex intersection of conflict, political grievances, and insecurity, IDPs are first and foremost victims of the instability and blurring the lines between the military, humanitarian, and political actors. The lack of the clear-cut divisions between parties to the conflict and politicization of the humanitarian sector exposes civilians to increased threats which should be realistically analysed and factored in by the stabilization community. This should compel stabilization actors to review the way their strategies address displacement and displaced persons in order to make, as the European Sahel strategy argues, “concrete commitments visible to the affected population.”⁴⁹

Although internal displacement is a sensitive issue in the Sahelian context, there are ways for stabilization actors to better monitor and respond to the regional displacement crisis:

1. Encourage research on the links between displacement and stabilization: There is a need for a thorough analysis of regional conflicts, players, and the actors involved as well as their interactions to understand the ways in which internal displacement is perceived by different parties to the conflict and how this affects civilians and in particular IDPs. Stabilization actors should support humanitarians and governments with risk assessments to evaluate the feasibility of IDP return campaigns (in terms of the security context, reconstruction needs, and the public infrastructure available) and to monitor the reintegration of returned IDPs in their region of origin.
2. Integrate displacement into the stabilization strategies for the Sahel: International partners should rethink their intervention logic in the Sahel and integrate IDPs not simply as a by-product of the conflict, but as primary victims and active parties of the political solution. This will be easier said than

48 Gabriella Sanchez, “Beyond Militias and Tribes: The Facilitation of Migration in Libya”, European University Institute Working Papers, September 2020.

49 Council of the European Union, “Council conclusions on the European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel”, 16 April 2021.

done, however. Stabilization should not be about wishful thinking, but it should signal strong political commitment to the destiny of displaced persons. One way to integrate displacement to stabilization strategies would be to contribute to the monitoring of the return strategies implemented by national governments. While return may be part of the solution, it raises numerous concerns including the problem of local conflicts between those who fled and those who stayed and potentially supported the rebels. International actors should for instance support state-sponsored strategies that address well-known regional grievances, governance gaps, and local community conflicts, as the state of Niger recently did in the Tillabéry region.⁵⁰

3. Increase financial commitments to assist IDPs: Displacement, whether caused by ongoing conflicts or natural disasters, is unlikely to slow down in the Sahel. International donors should increase their assistance to IDPs in the region and support local actors in building capacities to deal with people on the move. Importantly, for close partners, such as the European Union, this entails recognizing that internal displacement and refugee movements in the Sahel are a true emergency, unlike migration, both in terms of their scale and their political implications. The prioritization of displacement over transit migration should be reflected in the financial commitments made to emergency and development assistance in the region.

50 Radio France Internationale (RFI), "[Niger: communautés nomades et sédentaires de Banibangou signent un accord de paix](#)", 26 January 2023.

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