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Fix the unfixable
Dealing with full-blown crisis and instability: How to bring greater stability to the Sahel?

The full-blown crisis that hit Mali in 2012 illustrated the failure of local mechanisms and international programmes that were supposed to tackle the security and development problems in the north of the Sahel region. Huge amounts of foreign assistance have been provided, but with no guarantee of ensuring future stability. Some 16 different stabilisation strategies are being deployed in the region, but the lack of coordination among the actors involved, and weak ownership at the local level, cast doubt on their overall effectiveness. Given the regional and international ramifications of the current situation, corrective measures are urgently called for. A broader dialogue must be initiated to identify (1) the most pressing security and economic challenges facing the region, and (2) the actor best suited to lead the coordination of efforts to address these challenges on the ground.

Introduction

Despite a firm and long-standing security commitment from Western countries, including France and the USA,[1] the outbreak of the 2012 Malian crisis could not have been prevented. During the four years since then, the region has been confronted with increasing terrorist threats, uninterrupted flows of combatants from Libya, the occupation of towns in northern Mali by armed movements affiliated to terrorist organisations, and the free circulation of arms. All these developments have contributed to the establishment of a lawless area across a range of countries, only 2,000 kilometres from the shores of Europe.

The crisis and its subsequent developments are pushing regional and international actors into rethinking their security and stabilisation strategies for the Sahel region. These strategies need to encompass a number of countries and address a whole new set of what are in fact interlinked problems, ranging from violent extremism to the lack of safe drinking water and widespread youth unemployment. So far, existing strategies have failed to achieve their stabilisation objective and have even been accused of feeding insecurity precisely because of their security-specific focus (that is, they concentrate solely on combating terrorism).

This Policy Brief presents a critical overview of the existing initiatives concerned with security and development in the Sahel region. It aims to identify key obstacles – not only in terms of challenges related to the international system of engagement and geopolitical relations, but also in terms of dynamics in the local contexts – that might

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1   With the first Western hostages taken in 2002, the Sahel became an area of growing interest for international security initiatives, especially for those of the USA (Pan Sahel Initiative and, today, the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism partnership) and France (Plan Sahel).

have prevented the current strategies from being fully implemented and achieving positive results, and to suggest how current international support strategies could be remodelled to make them more effective.

1. Local obstacles to enhancing development and security in the Sahel region

Implementation of development and security programmes in the Sahel region is held back by a variety of problems. Some of these arise from inadequate dialogue and coordination among international actors and between these international actors and their regional and local partners. However, there are many obstacles at the local level that are not directly under the control of international actors, but that affect the extent to which programmes can be fully implemented and achieve positive results. These obstacles therefore should be taken into account when a security and stabilisation strategy for the region is being drawn up.

Lack of political consensus, and weak political institutions
The fragile – or even non-existent – consensus among local actors (that is, within political society or between political and civil societies) means the political foundation on which international actors have to position their assistance is very weak. It also means that many doubts colour the issue of local support for international action. In Mauritania, for example, government bodies are very reluctant, for nationalistic reasons, to appear to be working hand in hand with the international community in the fight against terrorism and in the implementation of development projects. In Mali, this reluctance has had more serious consequences since some officials of Amadou Toumani Touré's regime (in power from 2002 to the military coup in March 2012) secretly cooperated with the armed groups. When Bamako decided to 'collude' with the northern al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) combatants in order to prevent attacks or retaliation on Malian soil, this had the effect of severely damaging the effectiveness of existing donor-aided

programmes and security actions taken to counter the spread of the terrorism threat to the whole country and beyond. As a result, Mali isolated itself from other countries in the region (especially Mauritania and Niger) that cooperated more willingly with international donors.

More generally, local mechanisms for promoting political dialogue or for effectively preventing political or security breakdown are too weak to be regarded as a real safeguard for international initiatives, for which some level of stability is a prerequisite. Despite one or two laudable initiatives in the region (such as the National Council for Political Dialogue established in Niger with the support of UNDP after the 2004 Tuareg rebellion), political institutions in Sahelian countries generally do not represent a strong bulwark against instability. Lack of institutionalised political dialogue, weak parliaments and contested judicial systems are among the many deficiencies that are hampering long-term stability.

Governments' failure to decentralise means they lack legitimacy
The question of state presence throughout a country and the legitimacy of central government is central to any understanding of: (1) the troubled relationships between postcolonial central states and their peripheral areas and (2) the ambiguous political control of remote areas.

For decades, decentralisation has been regarded as a means of tackling the issue of deficient state presence. Presented as a way of bolstering state-building after independence and as a way to establish political stability in troubled areas (as in the Senegalese Casamance region, for example), decentralisation became the institutional framework in all French-speaking Africa. In most cases, however, this process was impeded by a lack of political will on the part of the postcolonial authorities and by major difficulties in the transfer of central resources to the local authorities.

Indeed, central authorities deliberately marginalised their remote regions and the consequence was growing distrust

and frustration among populations in the northernmost parts of the countries. These policies led to a great loss of positive influence and delegitimised the central governments as credible actors in the eyes of the international community. It also made the need for regional approaches more urgent.

The failure to decentralise remains one of the main obstacles to governments achieving nationwide authority and is a cause of friction between communities, and especially between central governments and populations in the peripheral areas. Nevertheless, there are disparities within the Sahelian region, and situations differ from country to country. For example, while in Niger, the central government allocates more than CFA 1,200 billion (€1.8 billion) for regional development in the country, Mali allocates only CFA 800 million (€1.2 million) for its eight regions. Despite this low figure, the Bamako government regularly presents decentralisation as the main, and even the only, institutional response to crisis and rebellions in Mali.

Because of their failure to deliver goods and efficient basic services to all parts of their territory, some Sahelian countries have gradually lost their ability to control sections of the population, especially in the most remote areas where the lack of infrastructure and historic misunderstandings have precluded any chance of effective 'bottom-up' communication.

Corruption, lack of state presence and lack of public services leave a dangerous gap

The trend towards a growing rift between the state and society has been exacerbated by the embezzlement of public funds and foreign aid by both central and local governments.[2] Corruption contributes to the weakening of actions taken by foreign partners in the fight against violent extremism and the criminal economy, and

it also widens the gap in state–society relations.

Political illegitimacy and the lack of state presence have been particularly marked in Sahelian countries' volatile northern fringes, where shortfalls in public investment have been partially filled by foreign aid, and by foreign-supported charitable organisations who provide basic services to local populations.

In some cases (especially in northern Mali and Niger), the armed groups have imposed themselves as providers of social services or economic assistance (including the supply of medicines for community health centres, Islamic education for children, financial assistance for families or other in-kind support). They even fulfil some state functions such as those of a police or justice service (as in the case of the *de facto* Islamic government that ruled an enclave the size of France in northern Mali in March–April 2012). States in the Sahel region are too weak to compete with these 'warring statelets', which have far greater financial capacity and powers of attraction, particularly for young people.

Instability enables illicit activities to flourish

Illicit activities in the region are estimated to generate $3.8 billion annually.[3] In addition to trafficking, which provides perpetrators with considerable income, and valuable goods for their intermediaries (for example, the gift of vehicles that have been used for transporting drugs), other substantial revenue streams have also developed and even flourished as a result of regional instability. More than €750 could be earned for viable intelligence that could be utilised against the United Nations Mission in Mali (MINUSMA[4]) or a French military 'Barkhane' convoy, €1,500 for a landmine and more than €30,000 for a valuable hostage. In Mali, the minimum wage is less than €50 a month. The African

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2   Especially in Mali after the signature of the 2006 Algiers peace agreement, with the implementation of a Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in Northern Mali (PSPSDN in French).

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3   International Crisis Group, 'The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm', *Africa Report* 227, 25 June 2015.

4   Mission multidimensionnelle Integrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali.

states cannot seriously compete with these inflows of easy money that attract the most vulnerable populations[5] and contribute to the growth of allegiance to outlawed movements.

Underestimated emerging trends: demography and education as key issues for stability

The Sahelian states clearly lack the capacity not only for strategic planning to deal with the effects of instability, but also for identifying the long-standing factors that contribute to insecurity. Most of them are unable to carry out pre-emptive measures to protect the most vulnerable segments of the population from political marginalisation and ideological radicalisation. They also fail to properly assess the wider negative impact of these trends.[6] By neglecting education and by not carrying out awareness-raising campaigns (such as anti-radicalisation programmes), political authorities have mostly failed to prevent the isolation of their country's youth, who have few employment options and very limited opportunities for upward mobility. As often stated, poverty and destitution are among the most common reasons for young people becoming associated with armed groups in the Sahel. Their isolation has progressively encouraged a growing split from the old models or references (religious brotherhoods, traditional chiefs and elders' authority), which no longer have the necessary influence over the young population to steer them away from radicalisation and violence. With 150 million people in the Sahel region today (70 per cent under the age of 25) and the prospect of ballooning numbers over the next 25 years (a total of a quarter of a billion expected by 2030), it will become more and more difficult for countries to deal with the 'unexpected' consequences of such demographic trends, with insufficient economic growth to match the population explosion.

Moreover, chronic underinvestment in strategic sectors such as agriculture, energy, social protection systems and basic social services, together with a lack of accountability, remains the norm and characterises most states in the Sahel region. Also, the very high debt burden (for example, $2.1 billion in Niger, $2.8 billion in Mali, $4.1 billion in Algeria) means that their room for manoeuvre is very limited. It is therefore very likely that these states will remain unable (and, to some extent, unwilling) to fulfil their main basic functions, further exacerbating their weakness and illegitimacy and, in the long run, perpetuating this downward spiral.

In these conditions, it appears to be extremely difficult for states in the region to, first, properly assess the existing and emerging threats and, second, to ask technical and financial partners for untied aid to deal with their own problems of instability. The local context in which international assistance is applied is too fragile or unreliable to guarantee that aid will be fully effective. Long-term stability will not be achieved unless states in the region have a real understanding of the security and development challenges they face. Therefore, Sahelian countries themselves must be the main driving force in all stabilisation efforts and strategies.

2. African initiatives: seeking local pathways to security and development and a response to efforts from outside

Given the strong links that exist between countries in the Sahel region (porous borders, same populations, common demographic trends, similar economic fundamentals, etc.) and the acknowledged fact that instability extends across the whole region, solutions must first and foremost encompass a regional perspective, able to (1) foster trust and a sense of joint

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5   For more details, see http://www.clingendael. nl/publication/after-malian-crisis-security-and-stabilization-sahel-region.

6   The Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 'Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Community Engagement in West Africa and the Sahel', July 2013, https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10299/44331/Action+Agenda+ENG. pdf, 1 July 2015.

ownership among neighbouring countries and (2) reinforce the role and influence of the Sahelian governments in their dialogue with foreign partners.

Regional efforts to address instability

The Malian crisis highlighted the existence of an 'arc of crisis' across the Sahara–Sahel region, with deep-rooted connections between 'negative' forces (the Libya/Algeria–Niger–Mali axis) and the almost complete freedom of movement for illicit flows. With the violent shock of 2012, countries in the Sahel tried to react and to adopt a common posture and military strategy vis-à-vis the threat posed by AQIM and its allies.

In October 2011, the Government of Niger launched its strategy for development and security in the Sahel–Saharan areas of the Niger. Its five main areas of intervention are: strengthening the security of goods and persons, creation of economic opportunities for the population, improvement of access to basic services, enforcement of local governance, and the integration of returnees from Libya, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire.[7] The Government of Mauritania has also been at the forefront of efforts to promote enhanced regional border management and it even hosted an African Union (AU) ministerial conference on security cooperation in the Sahel–Sahara region in March 2013. Since 2014, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the AU, the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel, set up in January 2015) have all developed, or are on the verge of adopting, initiatives and programmes to tackle issues they consider to be relevant for long-term stability in the region. Unlike the French and US military-based strategies that have been carried out in the Sahel region since the early 2000s and that are primarily aimed at supporting local states to address security issues by supplying them with resources,

military training and/or intelligence,[8] these plans mainly focus on a broader concept of stability, encompassing security, political, economic and resilience issues.

Continued dependence on international support

However, the lack of public resources, the poor military interoperability, and political disputes at a regional level, have prevented full and effective coordination and implementation of the plans. Despite some worthwhile initiatives and a regional awareness regarding the security risks, the Sahelian governments remain highly dependent on their foreign partners (for financial assistance, intelligence-sharing and airborne capability).

ECOWAS, for instance, evaluates its financial needs at up to $4.7 billion and will not be able to implement its Sahel strategy without the active support of foreign partners. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has already committed itself to supporting the ECOWAS early warning and response systems; the EU and the UN will also help the West African organisation to build up its regional strategic food reserve.[9] The World Bank decided in July 2014 to provide technical support to G5 Sahel's permanent secretariat. Other initiatives focusing on the Sahel region include programmes set up by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD),[10] the Nouakchott Process, and the Permanent Interstates Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel.

Financial dependence on interventions such as these restricts the ability of individual countries in the region to implement by

7 See B. Rouppert, 'The European Strategy for Development and Security in the Sahel: Rupture or Continuity?', Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security, 16 January 2012, p. 8.

8 C. Whitlock, 'U.S. counterterrorism effort in North Africa defined by decade of missteps', *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2013.

9 See, for example, Report of the UN Secretary-General, 'Progress towards the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel', 6 June 2014, p. 7.

10 NEPAD is an AU strategic framework for pan-African socioeconomic development. Programmes include the issues of integration, infrastructure, agriculture, food insecurity, climate change and national resources management.

themselves their own strategies. It has also led to competition between the Sahelian states to secure international resources, which are essential for bolstering political influence and regional leadership.[11]

A continued disconnect between the international agenda and African priorities

Unlike the Sahel–Saharan countries' strategies, foreign programmes are backed by the necessary resources to address both the causes and the consequences of insecurity and instability. However, international actors' lack of legitimacy in the eyes of local actors really hampers their ability to run programmes effectively and with full local ownership and support.[12] While security problems and the fight against terrorism appear as a legitimate concern to foreign partners, who see their own national and economic interests threatened, these issues tend not to be a priority for Sahelian countries and, in the case of Mali, Niger and Mauritania, do not attract a strong buy-in from either the local governments or the population. Indeed, these security problems affect mainly the most northerly remote areas – where the central states do not have any real strategic interests – and, as a consequence, are seen as side issues compared with more pressing challenges such as those of education, health, drinking water or infrastructure. By imposing 'disconnected' priorities, donors have contributed to the weakening of the central states and to the bypassing of local actors' strategies: 'The efficacy of counter-terrorism programmes in building the capacity of Sahelian states to "find, fix and finish" terrorist groups, and protect their borders against illicit smuggling of arms and drugs, is undermined by the lack of focus on non-military solutions that prop up democratic governance, fight public corruption, and tackle social inequalities.'[13]

The 2012 Malian crisis, which the long-standing military commitment of France and the USA in the north of the country failed to prevent, was a clear illustration of the proven inefficiency of security responses focusing on a single country and represented a direct call for an urgent 'comprehensive' approach to instability. The EU, the UN and the World Bank group have all developed their own strategies and integrated programmes in the Maghreb–Sahel region, but so far with very mixed results in terms of effectiveness.

3. From security to development: the slow mutation of foreign aid in the Sahel

'The political and security crisis (…) is only one aspect of a more deep-seated and multidimensional crisis, whose structural causes are rooted in fragile state institutions, problems related to governance and vulnerable local populations.'[14] To address this multidimensional instability in the Sahel region, international strategies have tried, a bit late in the day, to focus on both security and development aspects. Their attempts to stem disorder in countries affected by instability have been very poorly coordinated or too much focused on particular countries or geographical areas. With strategies drawn up by no fewer than 16 different organisations or countries[15] and the presence of numerous representatives or special envoys, the Sahel has become, in a very short period of time, an area of intense competition. Coordination among partners should be a top priority, but their strategies

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11 See D. Helly et al., 'Stratégies Sahel : L'impératif de la coordination', note d'analyse 76, Institute for Security Studies, European Centre for Development Policy Management, March 2015, p. 9.

12 See, for example, Helly, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

13 A. Boukhars, *Rethinking security across the Sahara and the Sahel*, Policy Brief 199, FRIDE, April 2015, p. 5.

14 H.G. Selassié, 'The interconnected and cross-border nature of challenges in the Sahel', in: *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security*, ed. L. Bossard, OECD, 2014.

15 African Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, World Bank, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Community of Sahel-Sahara states (CEN-SAD), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, United Nations, Africa Union, European Union, Arab Maghreb Union, Group of Five Sahel, International Organisation of La Francophonie, France, the USA, Denmark.

should also take into account the expansion of the area affected by insecurity and enlarge their Mali focus to embrace the regional emerging trends that could, and indeed will, endanger tomorrow's stability. This process should entail simultaneously addressing the immediate security threats posed by the armed groups and the violent extremism in the region, and the need to establish viable political and economic foundations for long-lasting stability. The comprehensive strategies of the EU, the UN and the World Bank all aim to embrace this new, broad vision of stability covering the Sahelian region as a whole, but they struggle to move beyond unilateral approaches (with inadequate discussions with countries' governments), and approaches that address only certain segments of the whole spectrum of instability.

The EU's comprehensive approach: economic resources and diplomatic legitimacy but no clear political leadership

The EU's strategy, drafted in March 2011 and then confirmed in December 2013 in its comprehensive form, is a perfect illustration of this weakness. With an overall budget of €150 million (in addition to the €450 million allocated by the EU Commission), the first version of this policy focused on Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Later, the programme was extended to include Burkina Faso and Chad and it is now structured around four main lines of action that encompass both the political (development, good governance) and the security (security, internal conflict resolution, the fight against violent extremism) aspects of stability.[16]
In spite of this effort to build a multi-pillar strategy, criticisms highlighted the failure of the EU's approach to prevent the 2012 crisis and, later, to tackle the regionalisation of tensions in the Sahel, just as the US and French military strategies had failed to do. The plan lacks a preventive perspective and, as demonstrated by the security pillar and the EU missions (EUTM and EUCAP)

in Mali, acts most of the time in reaction to an already full-blown crisis. Critics also point out the very large range of actions in the EU's strategy that 'emphasized the prevention of extremism and radicalism, to be addressed by tackling poverty, social exclusion and unmet economic needs, which complemented the reinforcement of the security and rule of law sector'.[17] Finally, the multiplicity of interlocutors in Brussels (EU Special Representative for the Sahel, European External Action Service Coordinator for the Sahel, Director for West Africa, the Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development's, the West Africa and Sahel Coordinator and other crisis management structures), and in the region (EU delegations in each country, EUTM Mali, EUCAP Mali-Sahel and EUCAP Sahel-Niger) has contributed to further weaken the effects of the EU's action in the Sahel.

The UN's integrated strategy: a work in progress

In October 2012, the UN decided to target specific efforts at the situation in the Sahel region and for this purpose to appoint a new special envoy to draw up an integrated strategy 'encompassing security, governance, development, human rights and humanitarian issues'[18] (UN Security Council resolutions 2056 and 2071, 2012). Approved in June 2013 by the Security Council, this integrated strategy has three main objectives, namely: (1) to enhance inclusive and effective governance throughout the region, (2) to strengthen the capacity of national and regional security mechanisms to address cross-border threats, and (3) to integrate development and humanitarian interventions with the aim of building resilience.[19] To do this, the UN Special Envoy set up three regional inter-agency working groups convened by, respectively, UNDP, the UN

16   For details, see EEAS, 'Stratégie pour la sécurité et le développement au Sahel', http://www.eeas. europa.eu/delegations/mali/documents/strategie_ sahelue_fr.pdf, 8 June 2015.

17   D. Helly and G. Galeazzi, *Avant la lettre? The EU's comprehensive approach (to crisis) in the Sahel*, ECDPM, Briefing note 75, February 2015, p. 3.

18   Report of the Secretary-General, 'Progress towards the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel', United Nations, 6 June 2014, p. 1.

19   Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Sahel, United Nations, 11 June 2013, p. 7.

Office for West Africa and the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel. With no dedicated funds (apart from those for the infrastructure development project), the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) only 'aimed at guiding collective interventions in the region'.[20] Like the EU's comprehensive approach, UNISS seeks to address the interrelated root causes of instability in the Sahel (that is, in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad) but, unlike the European strategy, the UN's strategy is designed also to coordinate regional and international efforts in the region. However, the lack of dedicated resources and the UN's strong dependence on member states' willingness to act restricts the UN's ability to play a leading role.

The World Bank Group's Sahel strategy: no security mandate and failure to coordinate with other international actors

In November 2013, the World Bank Group (WBG) launched its own initiative for the Sahel in order to tackle 'political, food, climatic, and security vulnerabilities with a regionally coordinated approach to build resilience and promote economic opportunity for the region's families and communities'.[21] With a $1.5 billion envelope, the WBG strategy focuses on Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mauritania in order to support those countries to break free of the 'fragility trap' created by the main factors behind instability (high rate of population growth, climate volatility, malnutrition and gender inequalities). The many initiatives supported by the WBG in the region include projects for water resources development and the provision of social safety nets, the Africa Centres of Excellence, the Kandadji Niger Basin Water Resources programme and the Banda Gas to Power project in Mauritania. In the next 24 months, the Bank is planning to carry out programmes in the

areas of pastoral livelihoods, disaster risk management, irrigation and transport.[22] In the specific case of Mali, the WBG has characterised the 2012 crisis as a symptom of central government's inability to establish a positive presence in the north of the country. This absence allegedly encouraged foreign interference, illicit activities and organised crime. Unlike previous conflicts (1963, 1991 and 2006[23]), the 2012 crisis was more localised and, as a consequence, is less well suited to generic solutions. The WBG expects that a viable resolution of the crisis could take up to one generation, given the manifold drivers involved, including: (1) the breakdown in the role of traditional and religious authorities and hierarchies, (2) the growing demands for security, justice and livelihoods, (3) persistent insecurity and conflict spreading further south and (4) the political radicalisation of Malian central government.[24]

The WBG's lack of mandate for dealing with insecurity as a cause of regional instability and its failure to fully coordinate its interventions with those of other international actors involved in the region have lessened the effectiveness of its programmes and made them highly vulnerable to security or political shocks. Improved synergy with the EU (and its military/security components in the Sahel) or the UN (and its stabilisation mission in Mali) would help to avoid possible overlapping of international programmes and

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20   Report of the Secretary-General, 'Progress towards the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel', United Nations, 6 June 2014, p. 15.

21   World Bank Group Sahel and Great Lakes Initiatives, http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/world-bank-group-sahel-and-great-lakes-initiatives (24 June 2015).

22   In 'Supporting Stabilization and Development in Mali and the Sahel', World Bank Group presentation at a Clingendael conference, 'Development and security in the Sahel: Lessons learned from the Malian crisis and implications for international strategies in the region', The Hague, 20 and 21 May 2015.

23   See G. Chauzal and T. Van Damme, *The roots of Mali's conflict. Moving beyond the 2012 crisis*, the Conflict Research Unit, the Clingendael Institute, March 2015, pp. 37–42.

24   In 'Supporting Stabilization and Development in Mali and the Sahel', World Bank Group presentation at a Clingendael conference, 'Development and security in the Sahel: Lessons learned from the Malian crisis and implications for international strategies in the region', The Hague, 20 and 21 May 2015.

enable the WBG to bridge the political and security gaps in the region.

4. Untying the Gordian knot: finding ways to reach agreement on the targeted area and to improve coordination among actors

With more than $4 billion a year of multi-sectorial assistance (excluding the costs of the UN stabilisation mission), the Sahel region represents one of the 'trendiest' destinations of foreign aid. However, as demonstrated by the assessment of the EU, the UN and the WBG strategies above, existing initiatives are failing to develop a coordinated and comprehensive approach to the region's problems, despite a common will to support development and security. The initiatives have so far failed to develop a successful and locally accepted strategy to deal with Sahel's instability. With questionable political legitimacy, duplication of leadership and very sectorial bias (security vs. development, regional programme vs. bilateral aid), international actors still struggle to underpin the added-value of their assistance on Sahel stabilisation. The various initiatives focus on specific areas and manage their own programmes or priority agendas (borders, migration, radicalism, youth), with a clear risk of overlap and a waste of effort and resources. In order to move into the direction of more effective support strategies, there is a need to settle a number of key issues that are within the span of control of the international actors themselves.

Defining the Sahel and selecting the 'eligible' countries

As demonstrated by the way that donor governments and international organisations divide the work of their sub-Saharan and their Middle East and North African (MENA) departments, with the Sahara-Sahel as a grey area in the middle, it is difficult to agree on a geographical definition of the Sahel. Even among countries in the region, borders are not clearly set in stone and political disputes continue to play a prominent role in

'fixing' the security coalitions. For example, Senegal which, though it is directly affected by the security situation in Mali and is an active member of MINUSMA, is not part of the G5 Sahel. The same goes for Nigeria, which is not geographically part of the Sahel, yet its Boko Haram group has a direct impact on the security of countries in the region.

While the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel, known by its French acronym CEMOC, groups together Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria, the G5 Sahel focuses on Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso. The US Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) encompasses 10 countries in the Maghreb–Sahel region, but the French Plan Sahel focuses on only three Sahelian countries, and the EU Sahel strategy focuses on five. A lack of consultation among partners on the region's vulnerabilities and of any resulting consensus regarding which countries in particular need to be targeted in order to maximise long-term regional stability, has led to multilayered strategies and overlapping (or even competing) programmes.

Future strategies will have to encompass the geographical extent of the security threat along a west–east axis from Mauritania to Libya and from Algeria in the north to the shores of the Gulf of Guinea in the south, and at the same time deal with multifaceted issues as diverse as security, economic development, education and demographics.

Given that regional dynamics shape the stability of individual countries and affect the efficacy of regional and international strategies, all programmes (regardless of how they were originated) should concentrate their efforts and resources on the same group of countries. In a nutshell, all partners involved need to agree on a common core target. Peripheral countries (that is, those not eligible to be in this core group) should nevertheless not be discriminated against; a specific 'associate member status' could then be created and would help to prevent any duplication of interventions.

Currently, the Coordination Platform for the Sahel, established in the wake of the Malian

crisis, seems to represent the most inclusive initiative for dealing with the multifaceted problems affecting the Sahel region. In the medium term, and for cases beyond that of Mali, this Platform could represent an operative institution to bring together the crisis-affected countries in the region and the various international technical and financial partners.

The Coordination Platform: the most promising example of international coordination in the Sahel

The uncoordinated nature of these various international initiatives in the Sahel is in fact a direct threat to regional stabilisation and diminishes the effectiveness of the aid being provided. It undermines the overall results of international assistance without clearly enhancing the local situation in the affected countries. If the UN Special Envoy for the Sahel were to play a coordinating role, her leadership might be challenged by other partners, such as the head of the UN Office for West Africa, the EU Special Representative for the Sahel, or MINUSMA. For most of the actors, however, an *ad hominem* leadership would not be an appropriate option at all. For them, a collegial leadership would appear better fitted to the challenges relating to a multifaceted crisis. Given this perspective, the Coordination Platform could be a serious, but not exclusive, candidate for the leadership role.

The Coordination Platform was established in 2013, on the margins of a high-level joint visit to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger by the UN Secretary-General, the director of the World Bank, the chairperson of the African Union Commission and the president of the African Development Bank.[25] The Platform's goal is 'to maintain attention on the important challenges that the region continues to face, facilitate discussion of common priorities for regional initiatives in the Sahel and track the progress resulting, especially, from the coordinated support of

the international community'.[26] Co-chaired by the UN Special Envoy and the AU Special Representative, the Platform also convenes all the relevant national, regional and multilateral actors (ministers from Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Chad, Algeria and Egypt, the presidents of ECOWAS and the West African Economic and Monetary Union [French acronym UEMOA], the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security and High Representative for the Sahel, the UN Special Representative for West Africa, the representative of the European External Action Service and the EU Special Representative for the Sahel). In May 2015, this group held a closed meeting in The Hague.

The Platform represents the first concrete step towards coordinating aid for the region. However, even though the resilience and humanitarian pillars might be well defined and the UN leadership accepted by all stakeholders, the areas of governance and security appear, unsurprisingly, to be more 'subtle' – even highly sensitive – both for countries traditionally reluctant to share their sovereign prerogatives, and for the international actors whose priorities could be dictated by domestic political agendas. The absence of any strategy on joint border patrols or joint security initiatives illustrates perfectly this issue.

Uniting state and non-state actors: towards a coordination mechanism with dual leadership?

In addition to the matter of coordination, there is still the question of the growing role and responsibilities of 'independent' non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society actors in the region. Because of this trend, it is likely that these non-state actors would regard the option of strategy coordination being led by institutions as too complex, and even unwelcome. Although the UN has the legitimacy to foster dialogue between international development partners (EU and WBG) and

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25   See 'Conclusions de la présidence malienne de la réunion de haut niveau pour le Sahel', http://eeas. europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140207_04_fr.pdf, 24 June 2015.

26   Report of the Secretary-General, 'Progress towards the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel', Unted Nations, 6 June 2014, p. 13.

regional organisations (AU, ECOWAS, CEN-SAD), and even to take a leadership role in generating, sustaining and coordinating international engagement, it is unable to bring together the new range of non-state actors whose funding and programmes are far removed from the international agendas. Bringing together all the macro- and micro-organisations committed to stabilisation in the Sahel region would be a highly complex task. To enable a multisectoral approach to the region's problems and to ensure that implementation of programmes utilises the capacities of a range of stakeholders, the notion of a two-sided response mechanism could be explored: on the one side, a multi-donor platform coordinated by the UN Special Envoy for the Sahel, based on the framework of the Coordination Platform and, on the other side, a more flexible and less institutionalised 'Group of Friends', based on the model of other existing forums (Group of Friends for Gulf of Guinea, Group of Friends against Terrorism, etc.), which would gather together all the societal and non-societal actors (that is, including the NGOs and civil society groups) in order to encourage discussion and facilitate better coordination among partners.

Diversity of both goals and expertise is one of the greatest challenges for coordination efforts. When programmes have different priorities and no specific cooperation mechanisms, this often leads to isolated actions that affect other existing programmes, either by competing with another project or by making the international assistance even more complex for the beneficiaries (because of competing priorities): 'Success in the Sahel Strategy implementation requires that engagements with states, regional organisations and assorted grassroots stakeholders are complementary rather than exclusive.'[27] Better coordination would therefore strengthen the effectiveness of international assistance and help to foster local consensus on the stabilisation strategy (greater coordination also implies a more consensual

approach to the problems and a clearer view of the preferred solutions).

5. New foundations for more effective strategies in the Sahel region

Four years after the start of the Malian crisis in January 2012, the situation has still not stabilised and new concerns have arisen regarding long-term stability in this region. National disputes over the implementation of the Malian peace agreement, attacks against UN personnel, the opening of new fronts further south, and the terrorist attacks in the Malian capital (March and November 2015) still threaten Mali's security. At regional level, Boko Haram's expansion into Niger, Cameroon and Chad, the still unresolved Libyan conundrum and the perennial problem of illicit flows spreading all over the region significantly complicate the adoption of an inclusive and 'all-in-one' stabilisation strategy.

In this context, the leading role played in the region by Maghreb and sub-Saharan countries and the constant support of their foreign partners will be particularly important, helping to increase the likelihood of security in the coming years and to create the conditions for development across the whole Sahel region. The multiple political agendas that are in play in the Sahel region represent one of the main problems to be tackled in order to ensure stability in the long term. 'Textbook' approaches have revealed themselves to be ineffective and a new generation of programmes is now called for. A new generation of stabilisation programmes that takes account of all the affected countries (both those directly affected and the long-term peripheral 'targets') as well as the whole spectrum of state and non-state actors, is therefore essential to ensure the local ownership and long-term effectiveness of strategies for the Sahel. Key elements in this regard are:

1. *To progress from a fragmented country-by-country approach to a more strategic reading grid, the regional actors must come up with their own regional approach and determine their priorities – so that*

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27   O. Bello, 'Quick Fix or Quicksand? Implementing the EU Sahel Strategy', FRIDE, no. 114, November 2012, p. 11.

international stakeholders can support these, instead of concentrating solely on their own set of priorities.[28]

As recent local developments have demonstrated, siloed and piecemeal approaches (whether in relation to strategies or to individual initiatives) hamper the development of an integrated strategy and, more generally, cast doubt on stability as an achievable objective in the long term. From the international partners' point of view, the lack of regional coordination is still a structural obstacle to any efforts to address, simultaneously, the issues of security regional connections (between trafficking activities and flows of combatants), cross-border communities (nomadic groups), trade axes and economic development (especially regarding road infrastructure[29]).

The constant problem of having to 'outflank' country-by-country approaches in order to promote a more integrated strategy is jeopardising the attainment of viable stability in the near future. While bilateral actions are still the most common form of international cooperation, some actors strongly advocate for a border-based approach, seen as a more coherent way of tackling the obstacles lying in the way of regional stabilisation (concentrating on the border areas between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, for instance, or on those between Libya, Niger and Mali). More generally, recent developments have served to highlight the limits of international action without the coherent engagement of regional powers. In this context, enlarging

the scope of long-mooted strategies to include new/peripheral countries and other partnerships in the region is essential if stability is to be achieved. Because Tunisia, Algeria and Nigeria form part of, respectively, Maghreb and West African sub-systems bordering the Sahel, they must be part of a new scaled-up approach.

2. *As well as a more inclusive and broad-based approach, stability programmes must also address the drivers of instability and deal with 'new' trends and dynamics that directly affect the situation these countries are in and that could even exacerbate any existing crisis. Factors such as very high rates of population increase, youth unemployment, urban inequality and a lack of understanding between the civil and the political societies, must all be taken into account in a new comprehensive response.*

In contrast with the previous strategies, especially those shaping US and French military cooperation, future programmes should focus more on preventing rather than 'curing' the crises. Education, demography, youth employment, urbanisation or migration flows are among the numerous issues requiring urgent attention. These issues will determine the foundation for future stability and, as a consequence, both local and international actors should be aware of their destabilising potential if they are neglected as a result of short-sighted strategies.

Dealing with these matters will ensure that international strategies are constructed on a sound footing, and with a proactive stance designed to anticipate crises, rather than simply react to them. By strengthening local institutions and giving regional actors a greater role in setting the strategic priorities, international partners and foreign institutions could provide solutions better suited to the genuine needs of Sahelian societies.

3. *Lastly and probably most importantly, actors in the region and their Western counterparts should agree on a common and permanent platform for their exchanges in order to ensure that an integrated approach can be better turned into action.*

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28 The 'white paper' models for defence and security that exist elsewhere could be a suitable instrument to help these countries set their strategic priorities and engage their foreign partners to support the strategies they decide on.

29 'Territorial integration is a precondition for social integration (access to education, healthcare, water, electricity, and mobile phone service) and economic integration (links to markets, access to more and less expensive commodities, developing trade as well as new upstream and downstream activities, and developing tourism, agriculture and pastoral livestock farming', K.D. Ouedraogo, 'A regional agenda and communication infra-structure', in: *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security*, ed. L. Bossard, OECD, 2014, p. 249.

In addition to the existing structures that fulfil a valuable coordination role (in particular, the Coordination Platform) and the well-identified need to involve non-state actors more in the stabilisation efforts, participants at a Clingendael event organised on 20–21 May 2015 in The Hague[30] suggested other forums as having the potential to foster coordination among partners:

– *Domestic initiatives with regional agendas.* Two initiatives that come into this category are: the Nouakchott Process for security cooperation in the Sahel region (established in 2013 and grouping together Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Chad); and the Group of Five for the Sahel (created in 2014 by President Aziz of Mauritania to strengthen political, security and economic cooperation with Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad). These initiatives were both designed to promote regional relationships and develop joint programmes to fight insecurity or to support economic development in the Sahel. Nevertheless, because of old political misunderstandings (between, for instance, Morocco and Algeria or Mauritania and Senegal), these mechanisms have not been very successful in convening all the relevant actors and there is even the risk that they could become 'new' arenas for regional competition.

– *Local but non-institutional initiatives.* Former UN Special Envoy Romano Prodi's suggestion for creating in the region a 'Sahel Development Research Institute'[31] in order to support a bottom-up planning process and encourage greater ownership among countries could represent a very credible initiative in the medium term. By bringing together academics, military personnel and/or diplomats from the whole Sahel region, such an institute could legitimately aim to become a focal place

for meetings and to play an active role in developing relationships of mutual trust between partners. The absence of a regional perspective on the issues of development and security in the Sahel, and the deep vein of distrust within the region which, to date, has constantly undermined a regional approach, are both factors that suggest the need for an institute that could foster the building of a common understanding, and help to figure out the first steps of a collegial and comprehensive response. Moreover, with this institute in place, the international community could make its actions more credible (with a bottom-up approach) and directly contribute to strengthening local ownership.

– *Foreign and, allegedly, more neutral initiatives.* Finally, some initiatives from outside the region could also be looked at, such as the Nordic+ Group (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK), the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), or the New Deal initiative – all of which have developed real expertise in aid effectiveness.[32] Even though their focus seems far from the realities of the Sahel, these groups have developed a high degree of competence that could be useful in the context of intertwined rivalries among partners, the overlapping of the numerous programmes and the widespread decline in the effectiveness of regional and international assistance projects.

30 See http://www.clingendael.nl/event/development-and-security-sahel.

31 See the Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Sahel region, United Nations, 14 June 2013, p. 11.

32 See, for example, the 'Nordic Plus Practical Guide to Joint Financing Arrangements', October 2007, http://www.norad.no/globalassets/import-2162015-80434-am/www.norad.no-ny/filarkiv/vedlegg-til-publikasjoner/nordic-plus---practical-guide-to-joint-financing-arrangements.pdf, 25 June 2015. Also see http://www.pbsbdialogue.org/en/new-deal/about-new-deal/ for details of the New Deal initiative.

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