The EU strategy for the Sahel

An overarching approach to a systematic crisis

CAPSTONE FINAL PROJECT

Authors: Brussels School of Governance, MA Security and Strategy 2022/2023 class
Editors: Linda Bonetti, Gregor Naegeli, Paula Hernandez, Andrea Sau

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VUB | BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

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Executive Summary

This policy paper explores the complex issues threatening the Sahel region's security and stability. It looks at important topics like leadership, military strategy, climate change, gender inequality, and economic growth. The report offers a series of extensive policy recommendations for the European Union (EU) in response to these difficulties.

Policy Recommendations:

Transparent Communication: To improve EU-Sahel ties, develop mutual understanding and cooperation, and establish open channels of communication.

Military-Civil Holistic Approach: To increase security in the Sahel, use a combined military-civilian strategy. During EU military peacekeeping missions sponsored by the European Peace Facility, this entails proactive interaction with local civil societies.

Investments in Family Planning: Support gender equality through making investments in family planning, including in women's safe places, education, and contraceptive techniques. In addition to upholding human rights, this promotes economic development and lessens conflict.

Act Local, Plan Regional, Think Global: Implement a plan that starts with agroforestry education for local farmers, encompasses regional planning in conjunction with national governments, and seeks to have a worldwide influence. In this strategy, open communication is essential.

Establish a Joint Climate Change Task Force: Together with regional and international organizations, establish a Joint Climate Change Task Force that will be supported by a climate-specific fund. This task group will coordinate the Sahel region's efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

This policy brief acknowledges the many problems the Sahel is experiencing and suggests a comprehensive strategy that deals with several connected problems. It highlights the necessity of a strategic and cogent EU response to the instability in the region, taking into account terrorism, gender inequality, economic hardship, and climate change. The report advocates for an all-encompassing strategy that recognizes the interaction between security and several other aspects of the situation. Recent occurrences, such as the coup in Niger, have brought attention to the region's vulnerability. With recurrent upheavals, the future of the Sahel region is still uncertain. The study emphasizes the need for a coordinated EU response to the difficulties in the Sahel, highlighting the necessity for more engagement and tackling the myriad problems in the area. This essay was initially written as a class project in July 2023, but it has been modified to reflect current affairs and the ongoing unrest in the Sahel. The article urges the EU to prioritize this crucial region on its foreign policy agenda as a contribution to the conversation about how the EU can better solve the complex problems facing the Sahel G5.

Introduction

Disclaimer

This paper originates from a group project carried out as part of the Capstone Course of the MA in Global Security and Strategy at Vesalius College. The course was taught by Dr. Christina Bache and Elie Perot, from May to mid-July 2023. It was during this period that the research for this paper was conducted. While some of the parts of this paper have been edited since its final release, we, the editors, did not think it would be appropriate to change the research and conclusions we reached as a course and presented to our client on the 25th of July 2023.

This is why this paper will not be addressing anything that happened after the 25th of July 2023, including but not limited to the coup-d'état in Niger on the 29th of July 2023. We did, however, edit some parts of the paper that made, in hindsight, inappropriate references to Niger's political stability.

This paper was developed as part of a university module and is a collaborative effort between all students in the course. We formed five groups, each with a different focus in their approach to possible responses by the EU to the peace and security situation in the Sahel. Each student wrote an individual paper, that was later merged into a group paper. Each of the group papers is now reflected as a chapter of this paper.

Structure

After a brief introduction to the relevance of the Sahel and its relation to the European Union, the first of the five chapters will focus on "Reinforcing political and governance structures." Following that, we will be "Addressing the military dimension" and exploring the EU's possibilities in "Fostering economic development" in the Sahel. Lastly, this paper will consider policies that help "Ensure gender equality and equity" and try to "Deal with the impact of climate change."

Then, we will present our five policy proposals that should be implemented by the European Union and make final remarks about the project.

Our five proposals can be summarized in the following key points. First, the EU needs a clear communication strategy, both at home and in the Sahel. This is the fundament without which none of the other policies can work.

Secondly, we recommend adopting a holistic military-civil approach while keeping the multilateralist character of both the EU and Sahel in mind. In our opinion, European peacekeeping operations in the region must be coordinated with NGOs and the civil society in the country.

Our third recommendation is to increase access to family planning and invest in countering gender inequality and inequity in the region, helping to fight gender-specific poverty and overpopulation.

As our fourth recommendation, we want to address the different levels of cooperation with the Sahel in a scheme we call "Act Local, Plan Regional, Think Global," urging the European Union to not only focus on cooperation with national states and supranational organizations but also engage with local communities.

Finally, we recommend establishing a Joint Climate Change Task Force in collaboration with international and regional organizations powered by a climate-specific fund.

Relevance of the Sahel for the European Union

The Sahel region is a vast expanse of semi-arid land that stretches 6,000 kilometers from West to East Africa just South of the Sahara Desert. It is known as a region that faces a range of challenges and difficulties, so much so that it is ranked as one of the most vulnerable to the threats of conflict, fragile state, environmental challenges, and other concerns, ranking much lower than most of its sub-Saharan neighbors.

The political instabilities and the constant military takeovers are a few of the causes of the humanitarian and security crises that are taking place. The threat of terrorist groups manages to infiltrate and exacerbate during times of political instability, leading to more violence, which as a result, causes a myriad of displacement issues and resource scarcity. Given its location, the area is particularly important for the security and stability of the EU, which finds itself directly affected by the irregular migration waves and the jihadist terrorist networks originating in the area.

The security challenges present in the Sahel, alongside climate issues, create a dire picture for the local economies and sustainable development commitments, bringing the region to a situation of deep instability that has direct effects on the European Union (European External Action Service 2021).

At the start of the year 2020, Joseph Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in a summit with the heads of the Sahelian countries and French president Macron, claimed that it was a priority for the European Union to strengthen the relationship with the Sahel and help to stabilize and securitize the area (Borrell 2020). After a global pandemic and the start of a war very close to EU territory, the Sahel remains a prime concern for the European Union.

Positive and negative Peace

From the very beginning, this project was guided by a more nuanced understanding of violence and peace. We will not make direct reference to positive and negative peace of structural and personal violence in the rest of this paper, but we believe they are all important concepts to better grasp the complexity and interconnection of the issues at stake in the Sahel.

This paradigm is rather simple, and it is useful to dissect the conditions of violence. We are taught, and rightfully so, that peace is the absence of direct violence, meaning that is there is not physical or emotional harm done directly between two nations, cultural, ethnic, or social groups or between two people then there is no violence and there is peace. The step taken further by peace scholars, especially Galtung (1969; 2008; 2013), was to build upon conditions that go beyond physical violence. When there is no direct violence the peace that we witness is negative, indicating the absence of violence as causing peace. On the other hand, violence could still be present, just not in the direct, personal form; it could be structural.

Structural violence includes social, gender, economic inequalities that may even not be perceived as damaging within a static society that has normalized and absorbed them (Galtung, 2008). At the same time to tackle a region with such an intertwined level of issues and complexities it is important to understand peace beyond the simple absence of direct violence but by rather having a positive notion of peace. This approach is the reason why we tackled issues such as gender inequalities and the consequence of climate change as well as the military and governance aspect of the region.
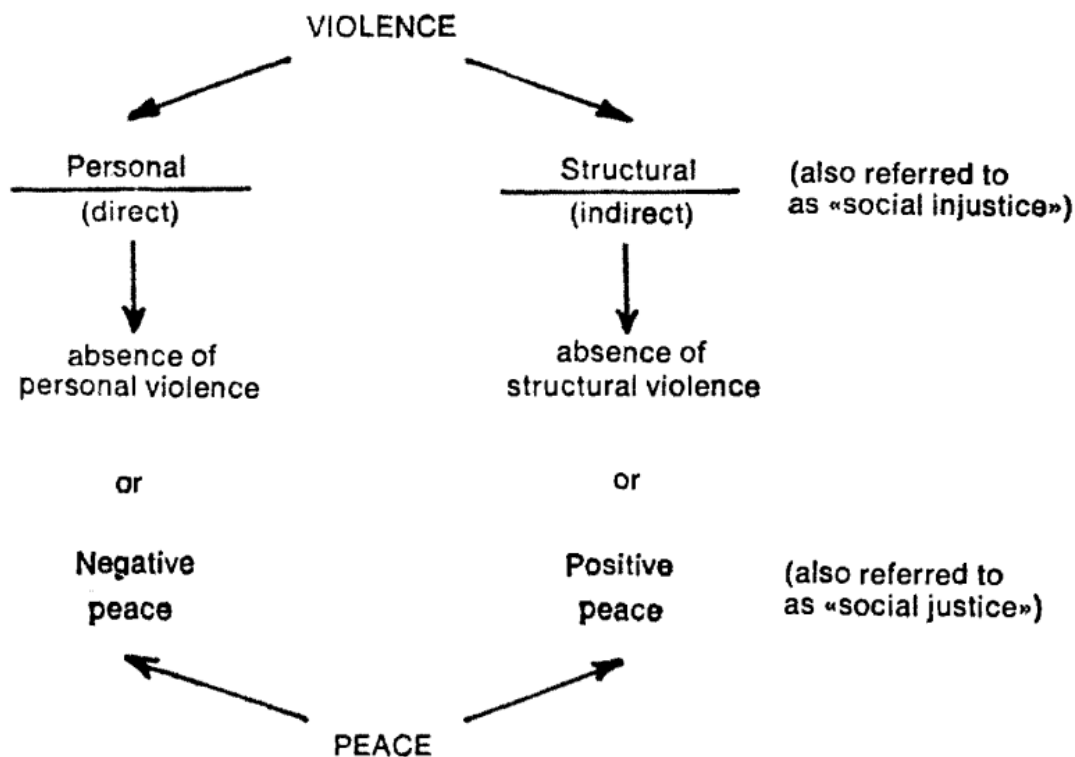
(Galtung, 1969)

I. Reinforcing political and governance structures

The Sahel region has experienced escalating violence recently, with observers attributing some blame to the fallout from the 2011 collapse of the Libyan state. This turmoil underscores the interconnectedness of the Sahel's security with neighboring states, influenced by European policies. Fragile political and governance structures have left Sahelian states vulnerable to internal and external threats. This chapter examines key challenges, including elections, corruption, minority groups, terrorism, humanitarian aid, and migration, and proposes ways for the EU to bolster these aspects for a more resilient Sahel. External assistance, particularly from the EU, is pivotal for the region's security and self-sufficiency. However, EU priorities, such as migration control, create challenges and impact the success of its efforts in the Sahel.

Furthermore, this chapter will take a look at the political landscape in the Sahel states, in most cases further complicating cooperation.

Burkina Faso, for instance, experienced a transformative event in 2014 when a popular uprising led to the end of President Blaise Compaoré's 27-year rule. Subsequent elections saw President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré taking office, but the outbreak of violence and the emergence of COVID-19 cast shadows over the electoral process, raising questions about stability.

Chad's political history is marked by a series of coups and contested elections, revealing a turbulent transition from authoritarian rule to a more democratic path. The unexpected death of President Idriss Déby in 2021 and subsequent power struggles underscored the fragility of democratic institutions.

Mali once hailed as a model of African democracy, faced setbacks with the collapse of its democratic foundation in 2012 due to a combination of factors, including the MNLA rebellion and a subsequent coup. The consecutive military coups in 2018 and 2020 further highlighted the challenges of maintaining a stable democratic framework.

Mauritania's journey towards democracy has been marked by upheaval, with democratic transitions punctuated by coups. The country's struggle with internal discrimination against minority groups and violent extremism poses significant hurdles to achieving stable governance.

Niger, previously thought to be on its way to a more advanced stage of democratic processes, as evidenced by the peaceful transition of power in the 2021 presidential elections, recently experienced a coup that might still see former and current member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) facing each other in armed conflict.

Corruption in the region:

The examination of corruption within the Sahel region reveals a pervasive issue that undermines governance and stability. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index highlights consistently low scores for all G5 Sahel countries except Burkina Faso. Notably, corruption is not merely a symptom but also a catalyst for poor governance, as it diverts resources, erodes trust in institutions, and weakens the ability to achieve public purpose.

Instances of corruption in Mali and Niger, involving embezzlement, mismanagement, and unauthorized financial transactions, reflect how corrupt practices permeate various levels of governance. This prevalence of corruption contributes to instability, fostering an environment conducive to the rise of armed groups seeking to exploit weaknesses.

Ethnic tensions within the Sahel region present yet another layer of complexity. Historical borders drawn during colonial times have led to the division of ethnic groups across multiple states, resulting in a sense of detachment from central governments. This, coupled with socio-economic disparities and weak state presence, fosters resentment and fuels local conflicts.

Foreign interference further complicates the situation, with the fall of the Libyan state in 2011 contributing to the proliferation of weapons and armed fighters throughout the Sahel region. Transnational terrorist groups like AQIM, Boko Haram, and affiliates of the Islamic State have taken advantage of existing grievances to gain support, exacerbating instability.
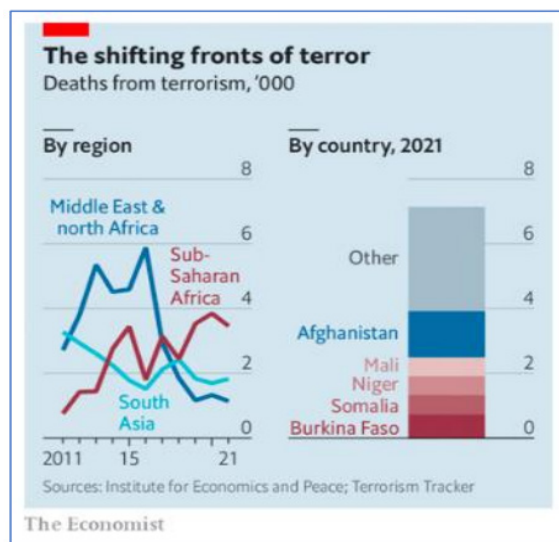
Terrorism and its impact:

Figure 1: Terrorism by country in 2021 (The Economist 2018)

Terrorism, particularly Jihadist terrorism, casts a significant shadow over the Sahel region, posing grave concerns for its stability and security (Lebovich, 2018).

The rise of jihadist terrorism has triggered an alarming displacement of millions across the Sahel, forcing citizens to flee their homes, searching for safety and stability (Aljazeera, 2022). Burkina Faso, for example, has witnessed a distressing trend, with a staggering 10 percent of its population, approximately 2 million people, displaced since 2018 due to terrorist activities (The Economist, 2023). This distressing displacement is exacerbated by the Sahel's strategic role as a transit route for African migrants aiming to reach Europe. This combination of factors could potentially result in a heightened influx of migrants to the European continent, especially considering the Sahel's fast-growing population (World Bank, 2022). The spatial proximity, as highlighted by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's "Regional Security Complex Theory," implies that security challenges in one country are more likely to affect neighboring regions (2003).

The humanitarian crisis and its ramifications

Juxtaposed with terrorism, ethnic conflicts, and minority uprisings, a severe humanitarian crisis looms large over the Sahel, impacting millions across the G5 States. Burkina Faso, in particular, faces its most severe humanitarian crisis to date, with around 4.7 million people requiring immediate humanitarian assistance. Disturbingly, over 1.9 million individuals, constituting one in ten of the population, are internally displaced as of December 2022 (OCHA, 2023). The crisis has left more than a million children without access to education, disrupted healthcare services, and exacerbated epidemics like meningitis and cholera. Chad grapples with a dire refugee crisis, hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring countries. In Mali, the aftermath of coups in 2020 and 2021 has intensified the humanitarian situation, prompting hundreds of thousands to flee or return, further straining the country's resources. Mauritania, facing acute food insecurity due to adverse weather conditions, has also become a refuge for Malian refugees, adding to its challenges.

Niger confronts critical issues such as food insecurity and the closure of schools due to armed conflict, impacting both education and healthcare. The cumulative effect of these crises paints a dire picture of human suffering, underscoring the urgent need for international support.

The European role and conditionality

The repercussions of terrorism and the humanitarian crisis extend beyond the Sahel, directly influencing the European continent, as insecurity and deteriorating living conditions drive migration. The EU has responded with a policy known as "conditionality," embedded in various agreements and strategies. This approach links support and aid to good governance, democratic change, and human rights promotion. Over time, the EU's conditionality strategy has evolved and intensified, especially in addressing issues like irregular migration through mechanisms like the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) (Castillejo 2019, 25).

However, critics argue that the EU's focus on security-oriented measures may overshadow the imperative of addressing underlying causes of instability (Lebovich 2020). The approach has led to complex power dynamics, with Sahel countries holding leverage over the EU through conditionality, impacting the efficacy of the partnership and potentially reinforcing a coercive framework (Tull, 2020).

In conclusion, the intertwining challenges of elections, corruption, terrorism, ethnic conflicts, and a humanitarian crisis underscore the fragility of the Sahel region. The ripple effects of these challenges extend to Europe, prompting the EU's adoption of conditionality as a strategy. While this approach aims to leverage aid for governance and stability, it poses its set of complexities and power dynamics, underscoring the intricate nature of addressing multifaceted crises across borders.

Analysis

In this section, each issue area will be analyzed and discussed in terms of how the findings relate to the EU's overall strategies for the Sahel.

Elections

Elections in unstable states with fragile democratic systems can exacerbate violence due to inherent vulnerabilities in the electoral process. The election structure and process encompass various phases, each carrying risks for state stability within the G5 Sahelian countries. The pre-electoral phase requires a legal framework ensuring minority representation as the exclusion of marginalized groups escalates political violence. Inadequate media representation during campaigning can lead to violent actions by parties seeking representation, especially when political oppression and unlawful actions by the reigning party are present.

Socio-economic inequality contributes to electoral violence, as poverty hampers access to public services and fosters an environment where election outcomes are rejected due to corruption or injustice. Non-state armed actors further complicate the electoral cycle by controlling media, corrupting campaigns, obstructing election official training, and encouraging violent resistance to results. These risk factors erode election credibility and citizen trust in the process.

The situation is complex, influenced by diverse internal and external factors that interact to intensify violence in the Sahel region during electoral periods.

Corruption

Corruption is also a complex issue present in the Sahel. The prevalence of this phenomenon in the region is a consequence of weak governance, dismissal of the rule of law, and lack of separation of powers.

Corruption in the Sahel is intertwined with poverty and fiscal scarcity, as governments prioritize salaries over essential services due to limited budgets. Powerful constituencies demand a share of GDP for stability, often leading to shady transactions and patron-client networks. The region's involvement in informal migration infrastructure, such as revenue from migration, further exacerbates corrupt practices. This corrodes good governance, leading to persistent socio-economic inequality and dissatisfaction despite periodic democratization efforts.

The scarcity of property rights and reliance on agriculture also contribute to corruption. Seasonal migration for survival is hindered by armed conflict, trapping people with unprofitable assets and enabling non-market transfers like theft or appropriation. The governance of natural resources becomes contentious, leading to violent clashes and further destabilization.

Political fragmentation and loss of control over lower-level functionaries advance corruption. This dynamic is driven by a lack of political unity and misaligned loyalties, further complicating efforts to combat corruption.

As seen, addressing corruption requires comprehensive strategies that target the root causes and involve regional cooperation, governance reforms, and initiatives to promote stability, social cohesion, and accountability.

Minorities and representation

Addressing the grievances of minority groups is crucial to tackling the sociopolitical turmoil in the Sahel region. The EU can adopt several policies to achieve this despite challenges in finding reliable partners due to unstable political situations. Enhancing legitimacy and creating new institutions that garner mutual respect from all sides is vital. The EU could promote inclusive governance by assisting with electoral reforms, supporting political dialogue, and training minority representatives. Encouraging regional cooperation among Sahel countries can aid in integrating migrating tribes and fostering stability.

The EU's commitment to human rights promotion and protection is essential. Collaboration with Sahelian governments to strengthen legal frameworks, combat discrimination, ensure access to justice, and protect minority rights is paramount. Investment in education programs promoting tolerance, diversity, and cultural preservation can help deracialize and promote social cohesion. This aligns with improving marginalized groups' socio-economic status through enhanced healthcare, vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and job creation.

Security and military measures, with other policies, can be effective. The EU can act as a mediator, supporting conflict prevention through early warning systems, dialogue initiatives, and mediation efforts. Establishing a reliable rule of law and security sector reform can involve building accountable police, military, and justice institutions. Peacekeeping missions like MINUSMA and EU missions such as EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel can contribute, but their effectiveness is limited by the volatile political situation in host countries and concerns about neocolonialism.

For sustained security, it's crucial to establish stable, legitimate, and reliable governments within the region's capital cities. Regional organizations like ECOWAS or the G5 could play a pivotal role in this process, serving as valuable allies for achieving stability and security for minority groups in the Sahel.

Terrorism

The instability in the Sahel region, stemming partly from the aftermath of Gaddafi's regime fall in Libya in 2011, has led to ethnic conflicts, particularly involving the Tuareg and Fulani populations. The collapse of the Libyan government triggered a Tuareg rebellion in 2012 due to political and economic marginalization. While no direct evidence exists, Tuareg communities in Burkina Faso and Mali are suspected of supporting jihadist insurgents, leading to their targeting by government forces and militias.

Addressing the security challenge, the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) committed 8 billion Euros to counterterrorism in the region. However, efforts have been hindered by insufficient political will, funding, and trained personnel. Despite development aid and military interventions by the EU, France, and Germany, jihadist groups have continued to grow, and in some cases, foreign military presence has been met with resistance, such as France's Operation Barkhane.

Poverty is a significant factor contributing to the recurrent issue of jihadism in the Sahel. About 80 percent of Sahelian people live on less than $2 a day. This poverty, coupled with governmental corruption and failure, has driven societal grievances and led some to view jihadism as a means of addressing their deteriorating circumstances. For some, joining a Jihadist group represents the sole opportunity to achieve a stable income and provide for their families.

However, what initially seemed like a response to governmental decay has evolved into a larger crisis. Jihadist forces in the Sahel have grown both in size and operational capabilities, surpassing the lethality of jihadists in other regions. Burkina Faso and Mali, in particular, are grappling with jihadist crises, with significant portions of territory falling out of government control. The approach to combating this threat has seen shifts, with private military groups like the Wagner Group taking over in some cases, showcasing a departure from the EU and Western-led anti-terrorism strategies focused on democracy, rule of law, and transparency.

Humanitarian assistance

The urgency of addressing the ongoing crisis in the Sahel calls for the European Union (EU) to enhance its role beyond security provision. The EU should allocate substantial funds to all five states in the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – to meet the humanitarian needs of their citizens and refugees. While the EU has already allocated significant amounts to each country, external aid alone will offer only short-term relief.

To effectively address the crisis, the EU should target the root cause: weak governmental structures plagued by corruption and predation. The EU's emphasis on supporting better governance and increasing state presence is crucial, but a clear strategy for achieving these objectives is lacking.

To counter-recruitment into terrorist organizations, international projects should focus on creating economic opportunities and human development for local populations. Comprehensive projects that target society as a whole are important, redirecting aid toward resolving the foundational issues within the failed governmental structures. This approach addresses the underlying sources of insecurity, which are more social and economic than purely military.

The EU's aid should transition from merely establishing peace to fostering positive peace by strengthening public institutions and stable governments capable of providing essential development services. While the EU's actions have been reasonable, they offer only temporary relief. The Sahel states need to build resilience and self-sufficiency to ensure long-term security. Currently, dependent on external donors, the G5 countries should work towards reducing their reliance on humanitarian aid in the future.

The EU, regional institutions, and conditionality

To achieve self-sufficiency and cooperation in the Sahel region, the EU should reevaluate its conditionality approach. While migration is central to the EU's trade and aid clauses, this priority doesn't always align with Sahelian countries, especially within ECOWAS, where migration is primarily inter-regional. This singular focus on migration has unintended consequences, like inadvertently harming local economies and perpetuating unsafe migration routes. Instead of rigid conditionality, the EU should foster a flexible partnership with ECOWAS and the G5. Leveraging regional organizations like ECOWAS, which excel in conflict resolution and governance norms, can lead to better coordination with local groups. ECOWAS has shown its ability to act against anti-democratic behavior, offering the EU a tool for multi-layered diplomacy.

Collaboration through ECOWAS and G5 enables the EU to better engage Sahelian stakeholders. Initiatives such as promoting regional election standards, facilitating problem-solving workshops, and ensuring minority representation in decision-making can be more effective than migration-focused conditionality. Redirecting efforts through regional actors and enhancing their institutional resilience would help the EU achieve its goals while empowering Sahelian countries to be less reliant on external support.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper, we have analyzed some of the issue areas that hinder stable governance in the G5 Sahel States. The European Union must invest in the enhancement of stability in the region, as it has a significant number of interests connected to it. By establishing and publicizing, both at home and in the areas of interest, an approach based on the mutuality of the benefits Europe and the Sahel can share through a balanced partnership, the EU can find a more welcoming environment for its actions. This would generate a more fertile field for the other two proposals to thrive: enhancing the dialogue with regional actors and taking over the leadership of local operations.

II. Addressing the military dimension

Context and importance of the problem

To counter the traditional and non-traditional threats challenging the Sahel, domestic and international actors have tried to implement different solutions, including peacekeeping missions and development programs. However, the complexity of the region has often diminished the effectiveness of the policy and military options adopted by the EU and the G5 countries. Despite the efforts, the Sahel remains an unstable "security traffic jam" (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2018).

This situation can be partly explained by the unsustainability of the approach adopted by the actors in the region, which often relied on an exclusively military strategy. By choosing to address the regional threats of the Sahel via peace-enforcing operations, rather than peacekeeping ones, domestic and international actors failed to act as regional stabilizers. Instead, the growing presence of military troops ended up empowering local terrorist groups and militias, whose ranks were fueled by disillusioned and resentful civilians, therefore decreasing the area's overall security (Devermont, 2019). In addition, the military operations conducted both domestically and internationally seemed to lack the necessary troops, equipment, and training to succeed in the long term (International Crisis Group, 2017).

In light of these previous failures, the EU has developed a new strategy for the Sahel to support the G5 in addressing the challenges that characterized the region. This new comprehensive and multilateral framework is a significant first step towards integrating the military approach with the human rights and development dimension of cooperation. However, when unpacked, the EU strategy confirms its limitations regarding the need for a long-term approach and a sustainable plan that is pivotal when addressing future scenarios (European External Action Service, 2021). As the Sahelian population keeps growing, the pressure on local governments to deal with infrastructure, agriculture, and security needs increases. The delivery of effective development assistance by the G5 governments is also made harder by the growing jihadist influence, which restricts the educational progress of women and provides alternative sources of income to the increasingly impoverished pastoral underclass (Cincotta and Smith, 2021).

Furthermore, the growing presence of the Russian Wagner group in the Sahel should push the EU to rethink its approach to the region. Europe's exclusive military presence in the region is insufficient to effectively address and counter the negative impacts of disinformation, political interference, and the involvement of mercenary troops (Finabel, 2021).

Altogether, the five countries have dealt with grave internal problems and challenges, ranging from coups to rebellions and political repression, but also democratic transitions. Indeed, nearly all Sahel countries are positioned in the bottom half of the perceptions-based indicators of political fragility (OECD, 2022). The interconnectedness of the Sahel states' fragilities pushes us to treat the current scenario using Buzan and Weaver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which encourages practitioners to address security challenges from a broader perspective. This is pivotal in the case of the EU-Sahel relationship, where challenges like migration, terrorism, organized crime, and conflict are often cross-border, multifaceted, and intertwined. The Sahel's military dimension of security is believed to be a core starting point for the resolution of its instability. As mentioned by Buzan (1991, pp. 35), "A state and its society can be, in their terms, secure in the political, economic, societal, and environmental dimensions, and yet all of these accomplishments can be undone by military failure".

The interplay of different actors and security norms increases the complexity of the challenges in the Sahel, whose roots can be traced back to the 1990s when the Algerian civil war came to an end. Its epilogue led to an overflow of armed militias onto the Malian desert, which increased the number of terrorist groups and militias (International Crisis Group, 2017). When looking at the data reported in 2007, the Sahel only covered 1% of the global terrorism death toll, while today the region accounts for 43% of it as analyzed by the Institute for Economics and Peace in their 2022 report. The Sahel's terrorist scenario is fragmented and characterized by different terrorist groups with local nature, different tactics, and ethnic backgrounds. Among those groups some of the most relevant are (IEP, 2023):

- AQIM, present in northern Mali since the early 2000s, is closely related to Al-Qaeda.

- Ansar al-Din, leader of the Tuareg rebellion and symbol of Salafist ideology in the Sahel.

- Al-Mourabitoun, active since 1994 and in open opposition with the former threegroups

- Katiba Macina allied with the first two, operating in central Mali.

As military groups target with impunity civilians of ethnicities associated with jihadist terrorism, "the lack of justice drives radicalization and recruitment" among the civilians and favors the crime-conflict nexus driving insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This situation worsened in 2014 due to intercommunal conflicts in central Mali and the end of the Libyan civil war, bringing more groups to the fray (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The 2015 Algiers Accord tried to solve the problem peacefully and was considered the "go-to peace framework." The signatories were pushed by the international community to accept the final agreement's terms within a year of the start of the negotiations, which were greatly supported by the EU and France, given the relief a successful implementation would have

brought to their military operations in Mali and the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2020). However, only 23% of the elements of the treaty were implemented by 2020 (Devermont and Harris, 2020). These numbers are unsatisfactory for some but have been overlooked by many in light of the stability that followed the Accord. Regardless of the lack of a real implementation, the outcome of the agreement was a paradoxical stability that prevented the signatories – the CMA and the Malian state – from resorting to the fight in Northern Mali. Meanwhile, the jihadist groups expanded to the border area between Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. This is a tri-border area, or the Liptako-Gourma region, and is considered the main flashpoint of conflict in the Sahel Region (International Crisis Group, 2017).

In response to the expansion of terrorism, the locals organized self-defense militias, feeding the cycle of violence. In a progressively interconnected framework, where the military dimension of security is connected to the others and one country's instability impacts both one of its direct neighbors and that of the actors sitting on the other side of the Mediterranean, the Sahel started becoming a global top priority. Consequently, international troops were sent to enforce peace and counterterrorism, while new local militias contributed to the "security traffic jam".

In total, there are currently more than ten actors operating in the region, without counting the Sahel states. The growing foreign attention received by the G5 countries, however, has not always brought positive results.

The international lack of success in tackling the terrorist and international criminal groups led Sahel countries to seek to take control over their security and to switch from a peacekeeping to peace enforcing approach. As a result, in 2014, the G5 Sahel was created to improve cross-border security and development cooperation. In 2017, with France's support, the Sahelian countries formed the G5 Joint Force (JF-G5S), composed of 5000 troops. It was an ambitious initiative aimed at tackling terrorism, organized crime, migration, restoring state authority, and assisting in development projects in their shared cross-border regions. However, in practice the JF-G5S was a "counterinsurgency operation" (International Crisis Group, 2017), moving away from the principles of peacekeeping and into the realm of warfare (Welz, 2022, pp. 245-246). Thus, the G5 switched from a multidimensional aim with a focus on development, to prioritizing the creation of a joint force.

Overall, the group lacks leadership as none of the members predominates over the others, and they do not share a common view on how to proceed first. It has been common for the G5 and its bodies, like the Defence and Security Committee, to not convene for extensive periods of time, like in 2022 when they did not meet for over six months (UN News, pp. 2022).

The current approaches, far from solving the situation, seem to have worsened it, seeing how the number of terrorist groups has kept growing over time, and local militias have sprouted. While the JF-G5S seemed promising, the lack of troops, funding, and unity of action has made it dysfunctional in practice. Furthermore, in some cases like Mali, they have caused more people to flock to the cause of extremist groups due to the disregard of the military for the safety of civilians. Some authors (Welz 2022) even point out that the leaders of the G5 prioritized the use of the G5 for pushing out foreign influence and bolstering their power, through international recognition and funding, over security issues.

International actors' solutions

Given the significant geopolitical, economic, and security implications that the developments of the Sahel can have on the global stage, it's no surprise that many global powers and international organizations (IOs) have direct interests in the region (Wilén, 2020). Consequently, a high percentage of intervention and direct involvement by foreign actors is observed. However, due to the fragile political systems of each G5 state, foreign actors are careful when pursuing their objectives, aiming to avoid getting caught in the complex landscape of Sahelian politics.

The European Union and France have their strategies for security and development in the Sahel. The EU's latest strategy, implemented through CSDP, focuses on different missions: A military non-combat mission to train and advise the joint intervention force of the G5 Sahel states, and the armed forces of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and, two civilian missions that focus on training and non-lethal equipment with a focus on civilian capacity- building. These missions (EUCAP Sahel Mali & EUCAP Sahel Niger) aim to support the police in Mali and the internal security forces of Niger, and the other members of the G5 Sahel. The EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger) will help improve the military capabilities of the Nigerian armed forces. This mission, as an answer to the withdrawal of the French Barkhane and Takuba forces, aims to strengthen the military capabilities of the Nigerian armed forces and combat the emerging terrorism and violence in the region.

However, the relationship between Mali and the EU is described as dissonant. After a coup against the transitional government in May 2021, the military Junta of Mali announced in May 2022 the withdrawal of Mali from the 5G Sahel, after they refused to take over the 5G Sahel presidency.

France, the former colonial power, maintains historical ties with the countries in the region, exerting influence over their political affairs (Guichaoua 2020). France has a substantial military presence with over 4,500 deployed troops, often acting independently, and lacking inclusiveness. These forces have been engaged in long-standing operations, using special forces coupled with airstrikes and helicopter gunships. Notably, President Macron authorized the deployment of an additional 600 troops in February 2020.

An emerging actor in the Sahel is Russia. Seizing the opportunity presented by a reduced military presence of France, the European Union, and other Western stakeholders, Russia has begun exerting its agenda and influence in the region. Through groups like the Wagner Group and other Russian-led and funded organizations, Moscow aims to influence the elites of Sahelian countries, promoting anti-Western opinions throughout the region. Mali, for example, has developed a strong relationship with Russia. This bond was cemented in 2021 when Mali's government called for the Wagner Group to intervene in the country, deploying 1,000 troops (Mackinnon and Gramer 2022). Notably, a military alliance between both parties was already in place in 2019 through an agreement for the sale of helicopters and other arms. With Mali officially condemning France and Western involvement in the region, Russia sees a perfect opportunity to infiltrate the Sahel, pushing its economic, security, and political interests.

Recent developments

The end of summer 2023 has seen a new wave of instability in the Sahelian region: The coup d'état in Niger at the end of July has brought dangers and instability that its predecessors did not have (Wilén and Guichaoua 2023). This new balance between military parties in the region has once again shifted the attitudes of international actors towards the African region. Margarita Robles, the Spanish Minister of Defense has expressed, in a Security and Defense Committee meeting in September 2023 at the European parliament, how for the EU Spanish presidency the Sahel is one the priority alongside Ukraine, reminding how the European Union needs to be united in its defense and military actions.

III. Climate change and resilience in the Sahel

The Sahel G5 region finds itself entrenched in a profound crisis, and climate change is one of the influencing factors of this crisis. The environmental crisis has large consequences, and it is acting as a multiplier, making the already existing nexus even more challenging. In recent years, The EU has been one of the main cornerstones of climate change negotiations at the multilateral level. On the other hand, there is little if no provision to mitigate the effects that are currently impacting the world. This is especially tough for regions such as the Sahel, which are affected much more than the rest of the world by climate change.

Due to its geographical location and climatic characteristics, the Sahel is affected yearly by erratic rainfall patterns, causing seasonal heavy precipitations followed by intense droughts. This complex situation has now been exacerbated by the effects of climate change, with temperatures rising 1.5 times faster than the global average, and an increase in the frequency of extreme weather events (IPCC, 2023). In the last 70 years, the precipitations have been heavily altered by climate change: on one hand, the annual rainfall has been steadily decreasing, on the other hand, extreme heavy precipitation and meteorological, agricultural, and hydrological droughts have been on a spike. This constant rise of temperatures combined with the erratic precipitation patterns in the Sahel has caused the loss of millions of hectares of forest land and potentially arable and fertile land to desertification. This degradation worsens the condition of the land, simultaneously reducing biological productivity, ecological integrity, and value to human life (IPCC, 2019).

Another key challenge posed by climate change is resource availability and food security in the region. Erratic rainfall patterns, extreme weather events, and rising temperatures have degraded natural resources in the region, affecting agriculture, livestock, and water sources. The agri-food sector, which comprises agriculture, livestock, and processing and marketing of food products, is crucial for the region's stability, as a secure source of food ensures self-sustenance and enables efforts to be focused on other critical areas of development. As a consequence of rising temperatures, low yearly precipitation, heavy destructive rains and floods during monsoon seasons, and degradation of the land, crop production has been

hampered: only about 2% of total cropland is properly irrigated, and the overall coverage of water infrastructure is insufficient to make up for the progressive decrease in precipitations and the degradation of the soil (OECD, 2022). Livestock herding, a significant part of the livelihoods of many Sahelians, has also been impacted by the scarcity of water and pasture, influencing traditional transhumance routes, and collapsing herding seasons with harvesting seasons, causing tension between herders and farmers. Climate change has also worsened the impact of uncontrolled urbanization and unregulated mining activities, further depleting resources. Uncontrolled urbanization has led to the expansion of built-up areas and poor-quality infrastructure, exacerbating climate-related threats such as deforestation, floods, landslides, and the formation of urban heat islands. Lastly, unregulated mining, driven by international demand for resources, is causing environmental pollution, land degradation, and depletion of important natural sources of resources, further affecting the local populations' livelihoods.

Agricultural losses and food insecurity have impacted the region's economy, as agriculture is crucial for the Sahel. The service sector and financial industry also face vulnerabilities, where transportation and tourism are affected by insecurity, and the banking sector lacks diversification and climate risk management. In this matter, there have been initiatives for climate change adaptation, such as the 'Great Green Wall Initiative' (GGW), which aims to combat desertification and climate change, coordinate operations, and provide financial support. The GGW effort seeks to trap 250 million tons of carbon, rehabilitate 100 million hectares of currently damaged land, and generate 10 million green employments by 2030 (UNCCD, 2023). The project is already partially funded by the EU Commission. The GGW is not only targeted at the Sahel G5, but it is one of the most successful tools for improving climate resilience in an area affected as badly as this region. Implementing climate-resilient agriculture and the initiative can unlock economic opportunities and improve local resilience, reducing reliance on agriculture, improving food security, and promoting a diversified and sustainable economy in the Sahel region.

Climate change is also increasing conflict within the countries of the Sahel G5. As a result of the inherent movement of the Sahelian region created by the rainfall patterns, there is a constant state of conflict within the area. As the desert expands towards the south, nomadic tribes are forced to seek new cropping areas for their livestock. However, this often leads them to infringe upon cultivated lands, resulting in inevitable and unresolvable clashes with farmers, therefore, this clash between sedentary and transhumant populations has exacerbated forced migration and displacement (Frìas, 2020). Additionally, food security and water security also contribute to the migration crisis, this context allows for armed groups to nurture from the conflict and situation of precariousness, and organized crime becomes the only option for many without resources. Terrorist groups throughout the region also profit from population mobilization, and despite not having a direct link at first, climate change has proven itself to aggravate the terrorist threat in the Sahel, as well as the overall conflictive reality faced in the region (Hill, 2021). Moreover, it is important to note that due to the internal instability throughout the countries of the Sahel and the weakness of the governments in place in the G5, the management of the situation and the possibility of tackling conflict management within is pretty unattainable, resulting in a need for foreign intervention, humanitarian aid, and development aid to manage conflict resolution and stop the terrorist threat.

Migration is a multi-causal phenomenon in the world, influenced by many factors like economic opportunities, family reconciles, crime, or war. However, in the Sahel region, it is demonstrated that it is affected directly by climate change, causing risks and impacting the likelihood of the local populations. Communities in the Sahel are known throughout their history to be a mobile population, as they have always used migration to adapt to environmental issues and strengthen social resilience (Neumann and Hermans, 2014). Although seasonal migration has been known to be an effective adaptation strategy, studies have shown that negative effects have risen in the last years due to droughts and water scarcity during the dry seasons and heavy rain and floods during the humid seasons (Freeman, 2017). Pastoralists in the Sahel, whose migration is crucial, are forced to shift their habitual routes, with the consequence of extending and endangering their journey (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). In addition, climate migration amplifies related to human rights, interacting with poverty, food insecurity, population growth, gender inequality, political instability, and armed conflict (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). One of the main impacts of climate migration in the Sahel is undoubtedly urbanization, which causes issues both in the rural areas, where former habitable zones are abandoned, as they are not cultivable anymore (Neumann and Hermans, 2014), and in urban areas, where local communities and national authorities are struggling in providing fundamental services, like education, food, land, and jobs.

As explained so far, climate change has been a devastating force for the Sahel, and it is already impacting the lives of millions, experiencing the adverse effects of climate change, including food insecurity, migration, and conflicts. Beyond the EU, regional and international organizations are engaging with this issue. The United Nations plays a crucial role, particularly through its Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNIWAS). In 2011, UNIWAS initiated the integrated strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), focusing on three pillars: governance, resilience, and security. Within these pillars, specific attention is given to addressing the consequences of climate change in projects like the aforementioned GGW. Regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union are also contributing. ECOWAS has launched the West African Initiative for Climate-Smart Agriculture (WAICSA), which provides support to local farmers through financial, technological, and technical assistance. Similarly, the African Union has developed a climate change and resilient development strategy and action plan for the years 2022-2032. These initiatives emphasize the importance of investing in climate-resilient development, infrastructure, and agriculture to effectively mitigate the consequences of climate change in the region.

While international organizations and regional actors are actively engaged in addressing climate change in the Sahel, the EU has yet to implement direct measures focused on mitigation efforts. The EU does engage with climate change in the Sahel through various strategies and provisions, although it's rarely considered a strategic priority. The EU's Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change acknowledges the global nature of climate impacts and indirectly highlights the importance of addressing climate change in vulnerable regions like the Sahel. The European Green Deal, while primarily focused on Europe, also recognizes the need for international action and promotes climate change as a global priority. Additionally, the EU's collaboration with African countries and partnerships like the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States)-EU prioritize climate action and sustainable development. While the EU's various strategies indirectly influence the Sahel, more specific provisions are required to directly address climate change in the region.

In conclusion, the Sahel's survival depends on climate-resilient agriculture and targeted measures to combat climate change. While the EU's strategies touch on the issue, they lack the specific provisions needed for effective climate change mitigation. By aligning policies with the region's challenges and fostering international collaboration, the EU can play a pivotal role in addressing the Sahel's climate-related threats and promoting sustainable development.

IV. Approaching gender inequality

The ongoing crises in the region disproportionately affect women, thus contributing to the issues of gender equality and equity. Gender inequality has been chronically prevalent in the Sahel region in Africa, where women have confronted discrimination under the patriarchal systems in various countries. We have defined "gender equality" as "a situation in which access to rights and opportunities is unaffected by gender" (Oxford, 2023) and "gender equity" as "men and women having the same starting position". In such contexts, this type of inequality gets so rooted that introducing different ways to treat people based on gender becomes profoundly challenging. As a result, women especially get seriously disadvantaged and suffer unequal access to education, economic opportunities, and political representation (Meagher et al., 2021). We have divided the research into different categories to tackle these topics as deeply as possible.

Factors contributing to gender onequality and inequity in the Sahel

Cultural norms have significantly contributed to the unequal reality of women in the region (Krookand Jacqui, 2010). Most of the countries in the Sahel region are predominantly patriarchal, thus subjecting their women to oppressive practices. For instance, women and girls in Niger suffer from forced and child marriages, genital mutilation, gender-based violence, limited access to healthcare and education, and subjection to physical and mental torture (OECD,2019). Similarly, women and girls in Mali face oppression from the country's cultural norms that mistreat women, including limiting their mobility, participation in decision-making, and restricting their inheritance rights. Such practices disadvantage women markedly, subjugating them to men. Additionally, several countries in the Sahel region have discriminatory laws and policies against women. For example, Chad's legal system is unfair to women on inheritance restrictions and marriage and divorce injustices. Consequently, women in this country experience reduced self-determination, especially in decisions regarding marriage. Similarities occur in Burkina Faso, while its laws are fair to women and their rights, gender inequality still prevails since its authorities do not implement them effectively (Crola, 2019). This outcome is an effect of the oppressive cultural norms that dominate even where progressive laws and policies are in place. Restriction on healthcare and education access also plays a major role in gender inequality in the Sahel region. These countries favor

empowering men over women (Bokeriya, 2023). As a result, there are high illiteracy rates among women in a country like Mauritania, limiting their access to economic and political opportunities. The inherent lack of empowerment among women makes them dependent on men, develop self-helplessness, and lack social mobility (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2015). There is also widespread economic inequality based on gender discrimination: because they struggle to access education and empowerment opportunities, they lack the basic skills to participate in economic activities; thus they resort to poorly paying wage jobs that subject them to undesirable working conditions and exploitation. Moreover, traditional gender roles and social expectations in the Sahel region continue to limit women, further contributing to gender inequality. For instance, domestic duties and caregiving responsibilities are reserved for women, while leadership and decision-making are for men. This factor explains women's low political participation in Niger and Chad. Conventionally, women should stick to their domestic duties and leave the more important leadership roles to men. These are retrogressive social expectations, given that countries worldwide have made significant progress in addressing gender inequality and inequity through women's empowerment. (United Nations, 2020).

Effects on peace

Gender inequality and inequity indirectly correlate with peace since it is hard for peace to prevail where unfairness and injustice do. Undermining women's contribution to society and further subjugating and oppressing them through sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination, and exclusion intensifies the tribal clashes and terrorism in the Sahel region. Most countries in this region experience intercommunal conflicts and terrorism due to governance issues and disparities in distributing scarce resources. These wars threaten human and women's integrity and security profoundly. Al Qaeda and Boko Haram are among the most notorious terror groups in the region, known for abducting women and girls and subjecting them to sexual slavery, rape, and physical assault. Also, since they are not allowed to pursue educational empowerment and economic activities, they resort to secret activities, such as joining extremist groups and criminal networks that provide them with the resources they desire for sustenance (UNESCO, 2020). In addition, authorities in the Sahel region undermine women's contribution to decision-making, leadership, and peacebuilding. While these countries have several peacekeeping initiatives, they do not adopt a holistic problem-solving approach since women are excluded from these processes. These divisions among community members result in vulnerabilities that can be exploited to cause conflict. Consequently, as long as social cohesion is lacking in this region owing to gender inequality and inequity, it will remain at risk of inter-communal and terrorist insecurity. Based on their experiences in oppressive and war-torn countries, they would provide valuable suggestions and recommendations on peace restoration. However, ignoring their perspectives and input makes those participating in the peacekeeping initiatives constantly fail in their efforts.

Access to education and economic empowerment

Economic empowerment includes acknowledging and valuing the contributions of men and women, upholding their dignity, and facilitating fair distribution of growth's advantages. It entails enhancing women's access to economic resources and opportunities, such as employment, financial services, property ownership, productive assets, skill development, and market information. Although the initial impression of education in the Sahel region may seem positive, there are concerning issues regarding the quality of learning outcomes. Primary school enrolment for Sahelian children increased by approximately 50% from 5.9 million in 2005 to 10.8 million in 2018 (The World Bank, 2021), while secondary school enrolment more than tripled from 1.4 million to 4.6 million students. However, the current state of educational achievement is troubling, with only 60% of children completing primary education and approximately 90% failing to meet the minimum standards for reading and writing upon completion. These low levels of educational attainment can largely be attributed to a scarcity of classroom resources. According to the 2021 Sahel Education White Paper by the World Bank, only one in six primary school students in Mauritania have access to class textbooks, and in Niger, the figure drops to one out of 11 students. Additionally, the G5 Sahel region experiences one of the highest primary student-teacher ratios globally, standing at 41 students per teacher, which is roughly three times the average ratio observed in high-income countries. In such circumstances, students face significant challenges in receiving adequate attention and instruction (World Bank, 2021).

Girls and women in the Sahel region face the most significant challenges in terms of educational outcomes. Many girls from these nations drop out of school before reaching secondary education due to early marriage and pregnancy. Consequently, the adult female literacy rate in the G5 Sahel region is alarmingly low, standing at 27.4% based on the most recent data from each country. In comparison, the global average for female literacy in 2020 was 83%. Legal obligations for women to obey their husbands, the legality of polygamy, and limited economic opportunities hinder their educational opportunities (Alliance Sahel, 2023).

Gender-based violence (GBV)

Violence against women is understood to be a violation of human rights. Women in the Sahel are amongst the female populations that suffer the most gender-based violence in the world. This violence is shaped in many different ways, for example, sexual abuse, child marriage, or denial of services and resources. But the main way to perform this violence is through physical abuse, which makes up 43% of GBV cases in the Sahel (My zone, 2023). A great participant in this reality is the culture of normalization of violence against women because it is proliferated by a form of tolerance towards such acts. Child marriage is a problematic reality in all these five countries. In Burkina Faso, for example, the prevalence of child marriage among girls counts up to 52%, being the highest one (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2020). It is better, in comparison, in Mauritania, where it is forbidden and it still accounts for 37% of women getting married before the age of 18 and religion plays an immense role, bigger than in the other countries and it is against gender equality. In Mauritania the crime of rape is penalized but other forms of sexual assault are not. Sexual relations outside marriage are punished, and rape survivors

are often judged and imprisoned which is why, systemically, early marriage is generally seen as a protection for girls. Most men from these countries think they have the right to beat a woman, especially if it is their wives refusing to have sex with them (Ndiaye, 2023). The vast majority of physical abuse comes from husbands, in some countries like Niger up to 72% Ndiaye, 2023). In the region, 9 out of every 10 women are excised and have genital mutilation performed on them (Alliance Sahel, 2023).

Effects of gender discrimination on state fragility and governance

Gender equality and equity are fundamental when it comes to socio-economic development and the strengthening of the political structures of a country. The deteriorating security of the region, attributed to a 16-fold increase in terrorist attacks since 2016, 10.5 million people facing starvation, environmental disasters, vital resource scarcity, and constant mass displacement of the population (Herzer Risi et al.,2022), have all led to a worsening in women's well-being in the Sahel countries. This has enabled a vicious cycle of poverty and has fueled insecurities for women who fall victim to this power struggle.

Political exclusion

Low levels of women's political participation have devastating effects on the region's democratic development and establishment of democratic practices, contributing to state fragility. Their representation in executive and legislative bodies remains overall extremely low with the percentage across the region being as low as 15% (Castillejo, 2015). There have been attempts at putting quotas, but conservative religious groups strongly opposed such initiatives barring political structures from enabling women to take part. However, even though such attempts might improve the numbers of the assemblies, the impact women can make in Sahelian societies is limited by the nature of politics present in the region as women are barred from influencing decision-making.

European Union involvement and mechanisms

The EU has some presence with ongoing projects that might have an indirect positive impact on women, such as efforts to promote the health and education systems. From our research, the initiatives focused directly on combating gender discrimination are limited. For example, in Chad, The EUFOR Chad/CAR was exclusively in place to protect civilians and UN workers. The EU focuses its efforts on alleviating the bad aspects of conflict. The issue affecting women is parallel to women affected by the issue, which means: that women cannot progress towards gender equality because of conflict, and the conflict is stuck because women cannot progress towards gender equality. These two realities feed on each other, creating a non-escape cycle. Women are barely directly impacted by the EU in most parts of the Sahel, although in Niger, for

example, there has been investment to combat the education gender gap, and there is some cooperation with the UN and the AU for the protection of GBV both victims and survivors.

V. Fostering economic development in the Sahel

Introduction

In any attempt to foster durable and inclusive economic development in the G5 Sahel, the agricultural sector plays a leading role. It has become key in addressing a whole range of issues, as it is an ecosystem that interacts with multiple domains, including the overall economy, the state of gender equality, climate change, and demographics. Agriculture's central location in Sahelian socio-economic life is because it makes up for a third of its GDP and 75% of the employment in the region (IFC 2022).

The significance of this chapter derives from the fact that economics cannot be thought of as being independent from other domains of life. In that sense, this chapter, through a comprehensive overview of the challenges facing the Sahelian agricultural sector, will outline concise policy recommendations for inclusive and sustainable agricultural development. These efforts, in turn, can lead to positive feedback mechanisms that transcend into other domains of Sahelian life. Altogether, through a narrower focus on agroforestry, we will be analyzing data and contributing to solutions in other domains of relevance to establish a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient agricultural sector that can serve as a spearhead for fostering durable economic development more broadly.

Background

All G5 Sahel countries gained their independence from their French colonial exploiter in 1960. After gaining independence, many states in the region were struggling with political instability and the lack of efficient governance. The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986 led to the liberalization of international trade, removing barriers to foreign capital. Yet, as African agricultural output suffers from high variability due to weather conditions and low crop yields, it became increasingly difficult for African farmers to compete in the globalized trading system (Mkpado 2013). For example, in 2021, the GDP growth of Niger was 1.4%, in comparison to 11.5% in 2022, largely caused by the 27% increase in agricultural production as a result of good weather conditions for farming (World Bank 2023). Therefore, a range of initiatives have been launched in the development of a more resilient post-colonial Sahelian agricultural system. This section will briefly outline the most prominent initiatives that were launched in the post-colonial period.

By and large, stakeholders have centered their efforts around what is called climate-smart agriculture (CSA), measured along three major streams: (1) ensuring agricultural production remains sustainable for greater strides in equitable farmer income, food security, and

development, (2) strengthening the agricultural sector's resilience against climate change, and (3) mobilizing instruments to reduce the output of greenhouse gasses from agricultural activities (Zougmoré et al. 2016). Thereby, climate-smart agricultural policies have become the benchmark for engagement. These efforts have most notably been integrated into both the African Union's programs and ECOWAS' agricultural policy.

Extensive scientific attention has been paid to the influence of climate change on Sahelian agriculture more broadly. The World Bank has, for example, been heavily engaged in the development of the West African and, by extension, Sahelian, agricultural sector. Thereby, it has financed many country-level projects that have attempted to enhance regional cooperation over the use of agricultural technology, greater scientific research focused on local agricultural requirements, and productivity programs (Stads and Beintema, 2018).

As part of these investments, ECOWAS was able to establish the West Africa Agricultural Productivity Program, which has contributed to agricultural productivity by supporting a range of actors from research agencies and universities to NGOs and farmers' organizations (Stads and Beintema, 2018). By extension, the United Nations, through the Food and Agricultural Organization, has also established conservation agriculture (CA) techniques to counter the adverse effects of soil degradation, improving soil fertility and water retention (Partey et al., 2018).

To conclude, while several attempts are being made, it is evident that current food production and food prices are not sustainable for the region to keep the local population well-fed. Non-governmental and international organizations play a crucial role in helping local farmers to distribute food aid, to educate local communities about high-tech farming techniques, and to empower women in the agriculture workforce. Still, the efforts need to be even more significant.

Analysis

In this analysis, we will explain the concept of agroforestry and demonstrate how it can provide the foundation for sustainable and inclusive economic development, despite the challenging conditions in the Sahel. The goal of this analysis is to first shed light on the concept of agroforestry and its immediate impact on the soil and the people working in the field. Next, the indirect consequences of agroforestry are explained demonstrating the impact it has on the local community through sustainable and inclusive development. In a third step, we expand our focus to bigger societal problems in the Sahel, such as the demographic boom that is looming over the region.

Agroforestry and climate change

The Sahel, where 75% of the population relies on agriculture (IFC, 2022), faces pressing challenges due to climate change and land degradation. Land degradation, a global concern, impacts regions like the Sahel, leading to soil degradation primarily through wind and water erosion - depleting fertile topsoil and causing soil quality decline (Doso, 2014).

Climate change further exacerbates the Sahel's woes, with a 20-30% reduction in rainfall since the 20th century's second half (Batterbury and Warren, 2001). Climate change also intensifies seasonality, increasing droughts and floods (Abdelkrim, 2011). To break this cycle, can the Sahel combat climate change and soil degradation?

A promising solution lies in agroforestry, integrating trees into pastures and crops to enhance ecological interactions and yields. In a region facing Water-Energy-Land-Food (WELF) shortages, agroforestry proves suitable. Trees shield against wind erosion by reducing wind speed through leaves and sturdy stems (Doso, 2014). Tree roots also bolster soil water retention, curbing water erosion (Torralba et al., 2016). This heightened water retention aids in managing heavy rainfall and prolonged droughts, mitigating climate change's amplified seasonality (Elagib and Al-Saidi, 2020). Furthermore, tree-derived organic matter enriches the soil, offering a cost-effective soil nourishment method (Doso, 2014). Agroforestry, therefore, acts as a shield against climate change and land degradation, crucial factors diminishing arable land and food security in the Sahel (Elagib and Al-Saidi, 2020).

Agroforestry for inclusive economic growth

Agroforestry offers not only a solution to combat land degradation and climate change but also has untapped potential for fostering an inclusive and sustainable economy (Foster and Neufeldt,2014; Elagib and Al-Saidi, 2020; Benjamin, Ola, and Buchenrieder, 2018). It bolsters economic development in several ways: enhancing agricultural productivity per unit of land, diversifying income through marketable tree products, and providing resources like fuel, firewood, and building materials (Foster and Neufeldt, 2014).

While these benefits are sustainable, they are not inherently inclusive. Past evidence suggests that sustainable agroforestry disproportionately favored men due to their control over productive resources and farm decisions (Kiptot and Franzel, 2012). However, it's possible to alter this dynamic. Agroforestry can generate revenue by selling the carbon captured by trees in international carbon markets through payment for ecosystem services (PES) (Benjamin, Ola, and Buchenrieder, 2018). When gender equity is incorporated into PES, both group economic development and women's economic empowerment increase, granting them more control over production, income, and inputs, thus enhancing their resilience to climate change and economic shocks (Benjamin, Ola, and Buchenrieder, 2018).

This increased economic return can also empower women to engage in activities like education, contributing to their democratic participation and reducing violence and harmful traditional practices (Mindzie, 2015). Women have historically played vital roles in peacebuilding and conflict mediation in the Sahel.

Agroforestry and demographic challenges

Fertility rates in the Sahel average from 4.6 children per woman in Mauritania to 6.5 in Nigeria (Cincotta and Smith, 2021), foreshadowing a doubling of the G5 Sahel population by 2040. This demographic boom will further lower the average age of the population; currently, almost half (47%) is under 15 years old. As a result, the agricultural sector, crucial for food and livelihoods, must accommodate a rapidly growing population instead of primarily addressing climate change.

Urbanization poses a challenge, as it draws young people away from agriculture to urban areas, leaving rural areas with an aging workforce. However, urban areas struggle to absorb the surplus labor. Estimates suggest that at least one-third of the population will still rely on agriculture, necessitating some youth to stay in rural areas. Since women constitute half of the agricultural labor force and contribute 60%-80% to the region's food sector, women's empowerment is essential for the sector's success (Njobe and Kaaria, 2015).

Despite the challenge, agroforestry can alleviate this issue while benefitting from the burgeoning labor force. It thrives in previously inhospitable areas, increasing food production per unit of land (Kuyah et al., 2019). As a labor-intensive practice (Mueller-Darss, 1982), it capitalizes on the available labor pool. Furthermore, depending on tree species, it can create new jobs, particularly in bioenergy production, expanding the biofuel market and generating income for the those at the lower end of the economic pyramid.

Agroforestry, thus, addresses the demographic surge by creating jobs, enhancing food production, and stabilizing communities, indirectly countering extremism and criminality by offering employment opportunities. Government support is instrumental in overcoming barriers to agricultural initiatives and achieving a balanced labor distribution between urban and rural areas. Agroforestry proves to be a multifaceted solution, contributing to economic development, stability, and resilience in the Sahel.

Policy Recommendations

1) Transparent communication as the key to success

Our first policy recommendation is integral in helping the other recommendations to succeed. Only with effective communication from the European Union and its regional partners can policy in the Sahel have a lasting impact.

In addition to public awareness campaigns to inform European citizens about the EU initiatives, there is also a need to provide user-friendly, multilingual, and accessible platforms to Sahelian residents.

The goal of communication campaigns in Europe should be to justify why the Sahel is such a key region, not only for locals but also for example for European security concerns. These campaigns should also be honest about the goals and not solely focus on the humanitarian side of the engagement. While humanitarian storytelling has been successful in the past, the public has become desensitized to heartbreaking narratives, making success stories or explanations with economic and political incentives more compelling.

This does in no way imply that the important human rights work and humanitarian aid should be stopped or even reduced, but rather, the communication with the European public should be adapted to include other aspects of engagement in the Sahel.

On the other hand, communication with the local public needs to focus on disrupting the narrative of post-colonial ambitions by European actors in the Sahel. Examining the recent coups in Sahel countries like Niger, it becomes clear that European interference, especially from the former colonizer France, has become an excellent bogeyman for bad actors to justify breaking with the international community and isolating their countries from external help.

To combat this narrative, the EU needs to effectively communicate tangible improvements that their involvement in the region has on the local economy, population, and security. This strategy is not only able to enhance the understanding of and appreciation for European projects, but also hopefully increases the resilience of the local population against anti-western sentiments and anti-democratic movements.

To make these campaigns effective, they need to be rolled out in various languages and include verbal and visual communication, as literacy rates in some parts of the Sahel can be quite low, with only 23% of women in rural areas being able to read and write. It is this accessibility hurdle that when overcome, can make EU initiatives come to life and successfully and positively change the lives of millions of people.

To further underscore the importance of transparent communication in Sahel policy, it's crucial to delve into the nuances of the communication channels themselves. In an era dominated by digital connectivity, harnessing the potential of technology is paramount. The EU should invest in making platforms that are easy to use, multilingual, and accessible for Sahelian residents. The purpose of these platforms should not only be to disseminate information but also to facilitate discussions and participation, encouraging a feeling of ownership among the local populace. By facilitating dialogue and participation, the EU can empower Sahelians to voice their concerns and aspirations, ensuring that policies are not imposed but rather co-created, thereby enhancing their chances of success.

Furthermore, the European Union should consider adopting a dynamic and adaptive communication approach. The Sahel is a region that is full of challenges and complexity. To stay relevant and effective, the EU needs to be able to change its communication plan quickly. This entails regular updates, real-time reporting, and an ability to pivot when necessary. This level of agility is not only a pragmatic necessity but also a testimony to the EU's commitment to being a reliable partner in the Sahel's development journey.

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity must be placed at the forefront of communication initiatives. The diversity of cultures, traditions, and belief systems in the Sahel demands a nuanced approach. The EU should respect local customs and values while promoting universal principles of human rights and inclusion. Tailoring messages to fit the region's rich tapestry of identities makes people feel respect and authenticity, which makes the EU and Sahelians feel closer together.

Priority should be given to collaboration with local influencers, community leaders, and civil society organizations. These stakeholders are essential in bridging the gap between external actors and local communities. Their endorsement and active participation in communication campaigns lend credibility and authenticity to EU initiatives. The EU can gain more in-depth insights into the Sahel's intricacies through these partnerships, ensuring that policies are finely tuned to meet the region's needs.

In conclusion, transparent communication is not just a means to an end, it's a goal in itself. It is the bedrock upon which all other policy recommendations for the Sahel rest. By investing in effective communication, the EU can create a virtuous cycle of understanding, trust, and collaboration. Through technological and cultural adaptation and local partnerships, the EU will be able to navigate the complex Sahelian landscape with finesse, achieving its vision of a stable, prosperous, and secure Sahel. It does that by communicating with purpose, intention, and impact, paving the way for a brighter future for the region.

2) Adopting a military-civil holistic approach

Considering the multifaceted scenarios and challenges, the Sahel brings to the European Union and the world, it is worth noticing the presence of EU missions itself as an outstanding security achievement, considering that the European Union does not have EU military forces of its own. Besides a complex coordination of diverse Member States, this multilateral approach enables different strengths and techniques of the national military forces, which has proven promising for the Sahel and its security challenges. The EU has also made efforts, when it comes to training and capacity building, to enhance the security in the region and support the domestic troops in tackling their varied security challenges.

EU military peacekeeping missions need to be accompanied by further measures, especially adapting it to local nuances. Although the EU strategy promises to continue putting the protection of civilians as a top priority, the strategy lacks a concise plan to include the civil societies and various NGOs on the concerned territory proactively. Considering the highly problematic presence of the private military contractor Wagner Group in the Sahel, the emerging terror activities, the brutal violence, and the desire of the EU to control migration flows, it is high time to start to emphasize and understand the importance of training and building rapport with local societies actively impacted by the conflicts.

By proactively including local and national civil society and NGOs alongside any military activity, the EU should engage in activities that could help prevent acts of terrorism. The EU must tackle the problems at its roots and work against any terrorist propaganda and

disinformation. Taking into account local response capacity and providing local responders with adequate support will help to address various challenges, such as fighting radicalization, terrorism, and violence. The localization of the aid will build up local capacities and incentivize long-term sustainability. Therefore, led by the EU and in cooperation with NGOs, EU teams must get in contact with civil society, representatives, and stakeholders and have to focus on groundwork with civilians to prevent radicalization.

When feasible NGOs, such as the International Red Cross, the local Sahel alliance, and other relevant organizations, should provide ground teams with bases at every EU peacekeeping mission in the Sahel region. These teams should be dedicated to working closely with civilians and civil society actors. The engagement with these actors should be carried out according to DG ECHO's commitments and expectations regarding stronger support for L/NAs (European Commission, 2023). It is crucial to engage with these stakeholders to promote European values of peace and freedom before the Russian Wagner Group can spread its spirit of destruction across Sahel borders.

These ground teams should actively engage with specific groups, including local communities, women's organizations, youth groups, religious leaders, and other relevant stakeholders. Their objectives will focus on promoting EU values, peacebuilding, democracy, and understanding local dynamics. Ultimately, the goal is to prevent the rise of terror groups and provide stability.

However, engaging with civil society puts the ground team at risk; therefore, a holistic military-civil approach is crucial. EU military troops on the ground must guarantee the security of respective organizations. Specific measures such as risk assessments or protective measures for civilians and specific protocols to accompany NGO representatives are necessary to protect the ground teams.

This holistic military-civil approach requires proper funding. First, the EU military peace-keeping missions need additional troops to safeguard the NGOs at their mission. However, it is also important to consider the growing anti-European and particularly anti-French sentiment in the region. Thus, the EU should also focus on providing adequate training and equipment to strengthen and scale up autonomous peace operations of African defense and security forces.

This must be financed through the European Peace Facility, which the EU uses to fund the common costs of the military CSDP missions. These costs are shared by the Member States. Second, the groundwork by the NGO and the general development of the Sahelian countries must be sponsored by the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy program which is part of the EU program Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). The NDICI should work on the civil side of the holistic approach needed in the region and support the strengthening of the countries' military capacity obtained via the European Peace Facility funds. However, this approach also involves a complex decision process, which prolongs the procedure. Furthermore, engaging with civil society poses security risks, which must be addressed by EU military troops on the ground. Therefore, a holistic approach, including military peacekeeping and civil society, is crucial. The EU must consider both a military approach alongside a sustainable groundwork strategy. As part of the integrated strategy of 2021, the EU will "make sure to draw on decentralized authorities and civil society

in all its diversity" (Council of the European Union, 2021). However, many questions still need to be answered regarding the inclusion of civil society. Therefore, the EU needs a precise plan as outlined to approach civil society and include NGOs in their groundwork alongside the military approach.

The continued instability in the Sahel is showing very clearly the wrong balance between military and social operations. Being able to successfully mesh the two dimensions by creating action plans that actively involve society in military operations may be one of the keys to making actual strides in the region (Wilén, 2021).

3) Investments in family planning

All aspects of gender inequality and inequity are deeply affected by the caretaker role of women in the Sahel. They live in a reality where they are expected to be moms and wives at a very young age, and their liberties to decide are greatly constrained. Women in the Sahel are amongst the least empowered in the world (Oasis, 2022) thus raising educational attainment and delaying marriage and pregnancies can dramatically improve their situation and their outcomes.

Raising awareness about this freedom and about the choices they have is vital for them to advocate for their basic rights. The common way to name these liberties and decision-making processes is family planning, which is defined by the NCBI (2023) as "the ability of individuals and couples to anticipate and attain their desired number of children and the spacing and timing of their births". This is everybody's right under the UNDHR (1948) and it heavily relies on contraceptive methods. Its main uses are reducing pregnancy-related risks, reducing teenage pregnancies, and making sure that babies are apart enough for them to be healthy. But it is not limited to that, it also offers a plethora of economic benefits to families and communities (Oasis, 2022). It has been called by the former Executive Director of the UN Population Fund, "the most important intervention for human development in the world).

The first investment is education. Girls typically drop out of school when they get married, no matter their age; staying in school longer changes vastly the way these girls are educated and raised, and how their self-determination and rights are seen. It is key to stronger economies, healthier families, and more resilient communities. For example, every 1% increase in girls' secondary school completion rates in this region means a 0.3% increase in gross national income (Oasis, 2022). Education, health, and family planning all reinforce each other in the enhancement of self-determination for girls and women.

Educated women globally, tend to choose to have smaller families, controlling in the process the population growth as well, which in the Sahel is a worrisome matter: this region has one of the fastest-growing populations in the world. Overpopulation, along with climate or armed conflict, are some of the most worrisome factors about it. For example, Niger is the number one country in the world with the fastest projected population growth (VoH, 2023). This undermines food security, threatens the well-being of hundreds of thousands of people, exacerbates terrorism and armed conflict.

Several layers need investment in this topic:

First of all, sexual education. This involves knowledge of contraceptive methods, causes and consequences of pregnancies and abortions, boundary setting, but also anatomy, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual health, or consent. This issue is extremely rooted in the Sahelian communities, so education has to go further than sexual and not only given to women so that they know their bodies and rights. If men do not support, or at least do not stop this layer of progress, there will be none.

Secondly, safe spaces to perform these liberties. Because of strict religious beliefs or the absence of female nurses and doctors in the health sectors, there the cases where women get taken away the opportunity to decide. So safe centers and groups are vital for them to be able to put into practice what they learn.

Then, postpartum, and post-abortion (planned or unplanned) aftercare. In both cases, there needs to be professional medical leave, compensation, as well as duly medical treatments and processes. Added to this.

In European Countries, the investment in Family Planning reaches several million per year: for example, in France, it was 30 million euros last year (2022) and the European Commission contributed 45 million euros to the UNFPA to support girls and women's reproductive health (UNFPA, 2023). European countries keep this topic very present in their 2030 agenda. The UNFPA and the World Bank, along with other associations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, organized 2017 a special session for family planning in the Sahel to apply more urgent and intense measures for the 2030 agenda (UNFPA, 2017). They created the Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Initiative in the Sahel -or SWEDD- that believes that peace, security, development, and stability cannot be achieved in the Sahel if the population keeps growing as is and if women are denied basic access due to GBV (UNFPA, 2017). The G5 with Cote D'Ivoire, which is where it was implemented, invested around 210 million euros up to 2020 (UNFPA, 2020). The African Development Bank has also contributed to this case, forming, with the UNDP, Alliance Sahel to better perform in the area. The Copenhagen Consensus Center (2020) estimates that for every $1 invested in family planning, the return is $120, making it one of the most profitable industries.

One thing is clear: without bodily autonomy, there will never be gender equality. Caution is of the utmost importance regarding this topic, especially due to some of these nations' colonial histories, and the reluctance to foreign involvement. Religious and extreme groups not only reject these beliefs but also actively fight them, reluctant to engage in family planning at all (Barro and Bado, 2021). The main focus has to be at all times on assessing and improving the reproductive coercion Sahelian women are subject to -with all that implies- which goes against the most fundamental human rights. The EU and the UN are clear on the importance of it as an essential health service to face issues such as overpopulation and even armed conflict, due to the role that educated and empowered women play in the instauration of peace.

4) Act local, plan regional, think global

'Act Local, Plan Regional, Think Global' is the core of our policy recommendation and consists of three, well-defined parts.

The first step of our policy recommendation is to 'Act Local' and is about the farmers working on the lands in the Sahel itself. 'Plan Regional' is the second part of our policy recommendations. It serves the point of identifying the important regional and national actors that are necessary to implement the strategies defined at the local level. 'Think global' is the third part of the recommendations and is all about spreading the local actions onto a larger scale, thereby allowing for a meaningful change in the entire region.

Act local

For local farmers to be convinced of the method of agroforestry, they should be explained the short and long-term benefits and challenges of agroforestry. This education effort should be made available through an EU platform where the necessary materials and textbooks would be available for teaching the concepts, benefits, and challenges of agroforestry. This platform would work in cooperation with the national government of each country and consist of local experts with a proven background in agriculture who would get paid to explain to farmers how agroforestry works.

Important is to realize that this procedure will take time, run into difficulties, and even face setbacks. This will happen more likely than not and should be incorporated into any timeline attributed to this project. Next, while these recommendations allow local communities to flourish, it is important to have agreements with the government to spread the knowledge over the entire country, that is why it is important to 'Plan Regional'.

Plan regional

The EU should realize that the only way the implementation of agroforestry is going to work at all is with the blessing of the national government. Indeed, as the EU will rely heavily on local civil servants for the monitoring and perhaps even managing of the project, the government must be aligned with the original idea of agroforestry and the benefits attached to it.

To have the government's backing, it is important to have regular dialogues on various levels, trying to work out a plan on how to implement a nationwide strategy of agroforestry in the agricultural sector. However, this should be done with the utmost respect, as the idea of a Westerner coming into their country and telling them what needs to be done can bring back bad memories. Important therefore is to not only talk but to listen to their ideas and possible objections and try to find common ground. Again, not a lot of strategies can withstand their first contact with reality and therefore shifting the approach should not form a problem, as long as the overarching goal is still attainable.

The flexibility that flows from this situation should enable the EU to work out longer-term agreements with the governments of the Sahel region, making longer-term projections about the expected results and the way that those results could be obtained, with economic incentives tied to it. Most important in this process is clear communication about the expectations while simultaneously maintaining mutual respect.

This allows the EU to develop a transparent monitoring system, approved and run by the national governments, and able to provide the details of the impact of allocated funds. This transparency, in turn, will inform both governments in the EU and private companies about the impact their support makes. Surpassing the national level would therefore allow us to form a platform that tries to discuss the transnational challenges and smooth out any differences that might arise between countries, this brings us to the 'Think Global' phase.

Think global

The first observation on the international level is the plethora of international organizations that are working on projects within the Sahel. To prevent any further complications of the international interactions between organizations or the duplication of efforts, we direct our recommendations to be formulated in a way that allows us to work with existing organizations.

For instance, a key operator in the Sahel with sufficient power to make these decisions in the name of the EU is the EU's special representative for the Sahel. Combining her level of authority concerning the EU's strategy on the Sahel would for instance be greatly supplemented by the European Global Climate Change Alliance (GCCA+) with its expertise in climate change. Its authority to convene the G5 Sahel organization would enable it to give the GCCA+ the necessary visibility and credibility to successfully start the program.

Next, we would use the organizational capabilities of the GCCA+ at an international level to serve as a coordination and knowledge point to develop best practices. This would allow the GCCA+ for instance, to teach high-ranking civil servants how to approach certain difficulties in implementing the strategy while simultaneously serving as a center for best practices.

This knowledge could help the G5 countries to further improve on the organizational aspects of the initiatives that they are running such as the GGWI. Indeed, one of the mid-term evaluations of the GGWI shows that the Pan African agency, consisting of countries including the G5 has difficulties in organizing themselves, thereby possibly leading to an extension of the UNCCD's effort. Through the cooperation between the GCCA+ and the Sahel G5, there could be spillover effects that allow the G5 countries to become stronger in their agricultural initiatives. In the longer term, this kind of spillover effects could lead to significant consequences, with the G5 Sahel countries for instance becoming champions in combating climate change. This is what we refer to as 'think global'. It incorporates the long-term positive consequences of actions while simultaneously acknowledging the long-term negative consequences of inaction.

5) Establish a Joint Climate Change Task Force in collaboration with international and regional organizations powered by a climate-specific fund

Given the urgent need to address climate change in the Sahel region, the European Union (EU) should take a proactive approach by establishing a Joint Climate Change Task Force in collaboration with AU, UNIWAS, and ECOWAS. This task force would aim to coordinate efforts and maximize the impact of mitigation and adaptation initiatives in the Sahel. More practically the EU should follow these steps to implement the Joint Task Force:

➔ Formation of a Joint Climate Change Task Force: The EU should initiate discussions with key stakeholders, including the United Nations (UN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU), to establish a Joint Climate Change Task Force. This task force would serve as a platform for regular dialogue, information exchange, and coordinated action among participating organizations.

➔ Collaborative Strategy for Climate Change: The task force should work together to develop a comprehensive and harmonized strategy to mitigate climate change impacts in the Sahel. This strategy should align with existing initiatives such as the UN-integrated Strategy Sahel but should not be exclusively a repurpose of older strategies. This Collaborative Strategy should take into account the priorities and expertise of each organization involved. Through collaborative strategy development, the task force can ensure that interventions are well-coordinated, synergistic, and tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the Sahel region.

➔ Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building: The task force should prioritize knowledge-sharing and capacity-building initiatives to enhance local institutions' ability to address climate change challenges. This can involve organizing workshops, training programs, and information exchange platforms to share best practices, lessons learned, and scientific findings related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. By strengthening the knowledge base and capacities of local actors, the task force can facilitate the implementation of evidence-based and context-specific interventions.

➔ Monitoring and Evaluation: The task force should establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track the progress and impact of climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives in the Sahel. Regular reporting and assessment of projects' outcomes will enable the task force to identify successes, challenges, and areas for improvement. This data-driven approach will ensure accountability, inform evidence-based decision-making, and support adaptive management practices.

➔ Create a dispute resolution mechanism: The task force is going to put very different realities and types of governance. This may cause conflicts among the different entities to make the task force; conflicts are not inherently a negative force, but there may be the need to settle disputes. The Task Force work, while slowed down by constructive democratic dialogue, cannot be completely frozen by disputes. To address them there should be a permanent panel of independent practitioners that would vote on the disputes so that when dialogue does not work the activity of the Task Force may eventually continue.

A Joint Climate Change Task Force could effectively contribute to the mitigation of climate change impacts in the Sahel region. Through coordinated efforts, resource mobilization,

knowledge sharing, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation, the task force can maximize the impact of interventions, promote synergy among initiatives, and foster a collaborative approach to addressing the urgent climate challenges faced by the Sahel. To focus on providing significant financial support to programs that address climate-related concerns in the region, the European Union (EU) should establish a specific Climate Change Mitigation Fund for the Sahel administered by the task force.

To implement the Climate Change Mitigation Fund for the Sahel the following steps should be followed:

➔ Money Allocation and Standards: To show its commitment to combating climate change in the Sahel, the EU should devote a sizeable sum of money to the Fund. To choose the initiatives that are qualified for funding, open criteria should be created. This should include an emphasis on initiatives that support the adoption of clean energy, sustainable land management, climate-smart agriculture, and ecosystem protection. Additionally, the criteria ought to give top priority to initiatives that strengthen the capacity of communities to withstand the effects of climate change and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

➔ Processing of Applications and Evaluation: To ensure a just and effective selection of projects, a transparent and simplified application and evaluation process should be created. This means creating a submission forum that would include both online proposals and in-person ones (through local offices). To evaluate the projects' adherence to the criteria, a committee including both European and local practitioners should be constituted.

➔ Building Capacity and Technical Support: The EU ought to offer project implementers in the Sahel building capacity and technical support. To improve the knowledge and skills of local communities, government representatives, and implementing organizations, this support may include training programs, workshops, and information-sharing platforms. Throughout the project implementation process, technical help should be offered to make sure that projects are completed and in line with industry best practices for mitigating climate change.

➔ Stakeholder Engagement: the EU should engage with local communities, civil society organizations, and governmental bodies so that the implementation of the projects and the benefits that they could bring are agreed upon with the Sahel stakeholders. This can be accomplished through collaborations, workshops, and consultations. Projects can be modified to address particular needs and objectives by integrating local stakeholders, making them more stable and efficient both in the short term and the long term.

➔ Monitoring and Evaluation: The evaluation procedure should determine a project's viability and effectiveness, point out obstacles, and record lessons learned. The EU will be able to make knowledgeable decisions, improve strategies, and make sure that supported projects get the desired results with the help of this information. Furthermore, the Union needs to implement transparent mechanisms for grant distribution, financial management, and reporting. Each project should produce reports on a semesterly base during the implementation period and on a yearly base afterward. This should be done to avoid wasting already limited funding and to understand areas of improvement.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed some of the most urgent and worrisome matters that challenge security and stability in the Sahel.

The first topic analyzed is how governance can be reinforced in the Sahel for stability and security purposes. It involves improving corruption ethics, minimizing terrorism, or enhancing humanitarian assistance from the EU. Secondly, the military dimension in the Sahel is extremely relevant to its progress, especially due to the scale of terrorism and militias in the region. The EU has developed a military framework with the aim of it being more efficient. The third chapter is about climate change, and how it is a threat multiplier for the Sahel. This is a deeply affected region where the vast majority of the population lives in agriculture. Food insecurity is a devastating consequence of this, along with the increase in conflict and migration crises. In the fourth chapter we explain how gender inequity and inequality are extremely involved in conflict and peace, and how excluding women from the decision-making sphere affects growth negatively. The last chapter, Fostering Economic Development, and how agroforestry would turn to better some of the most challenging realities of the region, such as the economic or the demographic aspects.

Given the current situation as explained, we present several different policy recommendations. In a glimpse:

The first one, integral for the others to succeed, is about transparent communication, as it is of the utmost importance for the relations between the EU and the Sahel. This also enhances the understanding of the EU's narrative as well as the cultural sensitivity. The second, is adopting a military-civil holistic approach. This is for security purposes because the Union recognized the relevance of the Sahel and its stability. EU military peacekeeping missions need to be more than that through proactiveness with local civil societies funded by the European Peace Facility.

The third one is investing in family planning. This includes contraceptive methods, education platforms, and safe spaces for women, and the consequences go from the recognition of human rights and liberties to economic improvement and lesser conflict. The fourth one, is acting locally, planning regionally, and thinking globally. Thinking global involves taking into consideration all the international organizations that are working in the Sahel and how they impact the region, as well as considering what they could do differently to be more efficient. Planning regions includes counting with national governments for every step for things to work properly. The EU already relies heavily on local authorities, and this is why transparent communication is so relevant.

The last one is to establish a joint climate change task force in collaboration with international and regional organizations powered by a climate-specific fund.

This policy paper attempted to address a very complex region and how the EU could intervene in it. Recent events in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have highlighted even more the fragility of the region. There is no single solution to address the cross-sectional instability that plagues

the Sahel G5. What we attempted to do in this paper was to propose a holistic approach to the instability of the region, tackling, at the same time, multiple multifaceted issues such as climate change, economic distress, weak governance, terrorism, and gender inequality.

The EU has engaged only partially in the region and by either single member states or by a single-issue approach. Such ground-shaking instability is addressable only coherently and strategically but the EU strategy for the Sahel over-focus on politically relevant issues (migration) and dismisses the interconnection between the various dimensions of this crisis. Furthermore, the topics that are addressed have very vague solutions without clear implementation strategies. In the recommendations we attempted to address very different topics but in a deep manner so that are not simple propositions, but they are practical steps to try and improve the regional situation. The only possibility to better the situation of the local population in a long-lasting way is to address the region *en bloc* and to address the plethora of issues with an overarching approach that counts how gender equality, climate resilience, economic stability, and stronger governance, all influence security.

The Sahel region is currently undergoing another chain reaction of crisis with the Niger coup-d'état. This just highlights how even a country that was considered one of the more stable in the region went under a dramatic shift. Currently, the future of the Sahel is still grey and there is still a European presence in the region while the crisis is spiraling. France still has a prominent role, but it is, on one hand supporting dictatorial regimes such as the Chad military leadership and on the other hand harshly criticizing the coups in Burkina Faso and Niger. While the situation is still evolving the development of Niger in the upcoming months will also be vital for the Sahel, West Africa, and ECOWAS. The generals who overthrew the government in Niamey still hold radical views, which makes it very challenging for ECOWAS to have a dialogue (Yabi, 2023).

This paper originates from a class and a project that was presented in July 2023; we added some contextual information, especially regarding the most recent events. What has happened in the Sahel since is topical of how much the region has been ravished by never-ending crises. The future of the Sahel G5 is still uncertain, but we believe that this paper can still contribute to the discussion on how development aid projects from the European Union could plan to address the G5 issues. The EU is still lacking in its response to the crisis and a better engagement in a key area of the world should be one of the EU foreign policy priorities.

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