Photo by Dominique Guinot/CRS

Peace in the Sahel:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region of West Africa is experiencing increased violence and extremism, weak national institutions, and shrinking natural resources, which have contributed to the displacement of millions of people in search of security. Despite the current crisis in the region, the Sahel has a rich history of peace and stability and there is significant hope for development in the future. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has well-established programs in the most affected countries of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, as well as in the potentially at-risk coastal countries of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. In partnership with the Catholic Church in each country, CRS has established the Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI). Based on the unique insights stemming from CRS' deep-rooted partnership in the region, we provide policy recommendations on how the foreign assistance and diplomacy of the United States government (USG) can best be utilized to work towards a peaceful and prosperous Sahel.

BACKGROUND

The level of violence in the Sahel has been skyrocketing since 2015, including sharp increases in the number of reported fatalities, violent incidents, and direct attacks targeting civilians (ACLED). While many transnational terrorist groups operate in the region, some sources indicate that conflicts are increasingly local and "motivated by unresolved grievances of local communities" (OECD) which are then catalyzed by the broad presence of extremist groups. The ongoing conflict has been exacerbated by the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to stunted economic growth, increased inequality, political tension, and barriers to accessing basic goods and resources (Accord).

THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT

This complex conflict is primarily driven and escalated by weak institutions and the lack of economic opportunities – both of which leave many citizens without a sense of social or financial security and has diminished their faith in their government's

capacity. Poor agricultural management exacerbated by rising temperatures (which rise one and a half times faster in the Sahel than the global average) has decreased available resources, which in turn contributed to spikes in violence (WEF; NRC).

ADDITIONAL CONSEQUENCES AND CHALLENGES DUE TO CONFLICT

Increased violence and conflict have resulted in a dramatic and escalating displacement crisis. Nearly 1.7 million people have been displaced either internally or across borders from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to escape the violence that has continuously escalated and expanded to new areas within their countries (UNHCR).

The crisis has also affected food availability and access in the region, as conflict and the resulting displacement inhibit Sahelians from growing food to feed their families or to sell for income. This reduction in food production, compounded by the climate and agricultural challenges, has reinforced food shortages in households and in markets. Furthermore, school and health center closures are limiting children and families' access to education

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and health care. As of March 2021, over 3,900 schools had been closed due to COVID-19 and violence, with some reports that armed assailants are directly targeting schools, as well as over 130 health centers (OCHA).

The international responses in the region, led primarily by the French, thus far have focused on security and counter-terrorism efforts. However, these efforts have been unable to contain or adequately respond to the violence in the region for a variety of reasons (Reuters; UNSC; France 24; France Foreign Ministry). The lessons learned from the efforts in the region suggest that a more holistic societal and peace-driven approach to the conflict,

rather than a counter-terrorism approach alone, will be the most effective US policy in the Sahel.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

PROGRAMMING

1. **Integrate social cohesion and peacebuilding elements into humanitarian and development programs.**

Violent, external, nonstate actors prey upon vulnerable communities in the Sahel by exploiting historical communal conflicts and limited government services and support, which exacerbates tensions and increases conflict. Strengthening the bonds between communities can make them more resilient in the face of violence. The USG should fund and integrate social cohesion and peacebuilding elements into existing or new projects. Social cohesion and peacebuilding connector projects can help build internal resilience, support communities to address underlying tensions, and decrease the ability of external groups to mobilize violence amongst communities.

2. **Support youth through economic opportunities and education.**

Youth in the Sahel face a lack of economic opportunities (IDS)and are in need programs that consider the context of youth disempowerment, root causes and grievances, in addition to youth livelihoods interventions. The USG should encourage development and humanitarian programs to include activities which empower youth and give them hope, skills, education, and economic opportunities. The USG can also support human security by ensuring that schools are safe, protective, and inclusive spaces, including building students' and teachers' social-emotional skills. Special protections are needed for the thousands of displaced children without education due to school closures in areas experiencing violence. The USG should ensure funds remain available to provide access to education and the goods and services that schools typically provide to children, including food, water, healthcare and hygiene, and psychosocial support.

3. **Increase funding and support for humanitarian assistance in the Sahel.**

Humanitarian needs are increasing more rapidly than current programming and funding levels can accommodate. The USG should continue to support the Central Sahel with additional emergency funding for humanitarian assistance that is flexible to fit the ever-changing needs of the crisis. The UN

Humanitarian Response Plan calls for almost [$1.7 billion](#) to respond to needs in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger alone; the funding for the appeals is already lagging while the needs continue to grow. Immediate needs brought about by poor harvests and lack of opportunity must be addressed, or risk external actors exploiting communities' dissatisfaction with the lack of state services and filling the void to create loyalty and patronage to violent groups.

PARTNERSHIP

4. Strengthen the legitimacy and role of local government and local civil society to increase sustainability and accountability.

Local government agencies across the Sahel have struggled to maintain trust and provide services to their populations such as healthcare and education. It is essential to work with local governments and civil society, including religious authorities, to rebuild trust in local and national state institutions and reignite civic participation. The USG should support programs that build meaningful, long-term relationships with local partners and prioritize working in close collaboration with them, as well as support free and fair elections, and scale funding opportunities designed to strengthen services. The USG should practice the principle of subsidiarity by supporting programs that empower and enable the local government and community.

In addition to strengthening local governments, it is important to also strengthen the ability of local civil society to hold governments and external actors accountable. Improving the ability of local civil society to advocate to their local and national governments will empower citizens to drive change in their communities and countries and ultimately address some of the root causes that are being exploited for violence in the region. The USG should support efforts to inform civilians of their human rights and empower civilians to engage with UN efforts to improve accountability to affected populations. To address ongoing concerns about the flow of funding to militias and non-state armed groups, the USG should build support and protections for civil society and multilateral investigations into financing of terrorist activities. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) can further use their engagement with local civil society to better inform donor policy toward the region – making advocacy more localized and effective.

5. Leverage public trust in religious institutions and leaders through interfaith programming.

Most West Africans trust their religious leaders more than local or regional government authorities, making religious institutions key partners in the region given their existing recognized and respected peacebuilding platforms at the village, communal, and national levels ([OECD](#)). Where context permits, the USG should support efforts for interfaith dialogues and platforms at all levels of society where Christian, Muslim, and traditional actors can work together to demonstrate unity and leverage their collective voices for positive change. Additionally, the USG should support existing interfaith efforts to frame the ongoing conflict in the Sahel as one rooted in external nonstate actors' exploitation of historical ethnic conflicts for their own benefit, rather than as a religious conflict.

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PROTECTION

6. Prepare for the potential spread of conflict through early warning systems for violence.

West African countries like Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire are not currently facing the same level of crisis as their Sahelian neighbors but have experienced some community level conflict and, with the violence in neighboring countries, are at risk of following a similar pattern to the Sahel countries if no intervention is undertaken. The USG should continue to prioritize funding and support for community-based early warning systems such as Ghana's Satellite Peacebuilding Centers and USAID's Reacting to Early Warning and Response Data in West Africa Program (REWARD) while also expanding social cohesion programming that prevents and mitigates conflict. Where feasible, the USG should also consider implementing early warning systems in Sahelian countries already experiencing conflict to alert villages of impending attacks.

7. Improve civilian protection through the accountability of security forces

Civilians must understand the mandate and purpose of the security forces currently active in their communities, and the international community can play an active role in facilitation better communication between security forces and civilian community leaders. Civilians currently mistrust or misunderstand the mandates of the present security forces; this undermines civilians' protection and breeds disdain. Worse, sanctioned security

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forces can be mistaken for aggressors or seen as antagonists. Mandates for each security force must be communicated to civilians with a clear feedback mechanism that allows civilians to voice concerns and report adverse incidents.

- The USG should advocate for the inclusion of civilian protection in all security force mandates. As the crisis has evolved, the continued protection of civilians is paramount. For example; USG should support implementation of the OHCHR Compliance Framework in support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force to prevent and address international humanitarian law and human rights violations that may be perpetrated by security forces during military and counter-terrorism operations.

- The USG should empower local governments to coordinate community outreach efforts to share information about the purpose of security forces, build mutual understanding between the two groups and educate communities on accountability mechanisms.

- The USG should provide support for countering mis- and disinformation about their assistance in the region and emphasize their protection-oriented mandates.

8. Work through diplomatic and other channels to improve humanitarian access and urge respect for humanitarian principles by armed actors.

Several connected factors are contributing to restricted access for humanitarian actors. One factor is the proliferation of armed actors, which has created confusion on the ground and made it increasingly difficult for civilians to distinguish between security forces and relief organizations delivering aid. Additionally, many security forces operate in the region with limited coordination, and in some cases work contrary to humanitarian principles. For example, "quick impact projects" implemented by security forces outfitted in military gear delivering humanitarian aid fail to provide sustainable solutions for communities. These interventions have disrupted the delivery of humanitarian assistance by longstanding civilian organizations, which blurs the lines between military and civilian roles and responsibilities, leading to increased community distrust of humanitarian actors.

- Through international channels such as OCHA or bilateral diplomacy, the USG should advocate for adherence to humanitarian principles and ensure that security forces do not inappropriately engage in humanitarian assistance delivery. The USG should engage with MINSUMA specifically through their Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-general (DSRSG) to ensure the activities of the mission align with humanitarian principles in the region.

- The USG should also support strengthening the OCHA-led civilian-military dialogue process, focusing on defining cooperation and establishing red lines that respect humanitarian operational independence.