



Photo by Sam Phelps for CRS

# Peace in the Sahel:

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

### INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region of West Africa is the epicenter of numerous ongoing humanitarian, socioeconomic, ecological, and geopolitical crises. Increased violence and extremism, weak institutions, and shrinking natural resources have all contributed to the displacement of millions. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has well-established programs in the most affected countries of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and has been in many countries for decades or since the creation of the nation. CRS is also present in the peripheral coastal countries such as Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, which are potentially at risk. In response to the magnitude of the crisis, CRS is building and committing substantial resources to a Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI).

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. Based on the unique insights stemming from CRS' deep-rooted partnership in the region, we provide policy recommendations on what the role of the U.S. government (USG) should be to best work towards a peaceful and prosperous Sahel.

### BACKGROUND

**Violence.** The levels of violence skyrocketed in 2019. According to the UN, the number of casualties from terrorist attacks increased five-fold between 2016 and the end of 2019, with more than 4,000 deaths in 2019 ([UNOWAS](#)). During the same time period, "fatalities linked to direct attacks targeting civilians... [rose] by a startling 7,028% in Burkina Faso, followed by 500% in Niger and over 300% in Mali" ([ACLED](#)).

There is a significant presence of transnational terrorist groups, such as Islamic State affiliates and various Al Qaeda affiliates. However, the conflicts themselves are increasingly local. Violent conflicts in the Sahel are highly concentrated in local areas, and sources indicate some conflicts are “motivated by unresolved grievances of local communities,” which are then catalyzed by the broad presence of extremist groups ([OECD](#)).

## ROOT CAUSES

**Weak Institutions and Lack of Economic Opportunity.** A common thread across the Sahel is a lack of strong government presence throughout the countries—particularly in rural regions—and the presence felt is often security focused. This leaves many citizens without a sense of social or financial security and drives down faith in the government’s capacity. Despite military investments, many citizens are left without protection amid serious security risks, for example in parts of northern Mali where the government is facing the threat of nonstate actors who govern citizens and own and operate trade routes. These concerns feed into distrust for governments. According to the 2018 Afrobarometer, only 33.3% of citizens in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have “a lot” of trust in their national parliament or assembly, and 42.1% said the same for the president. The distrust also expands to a local level, as only 40.9% said they have “a lot” of trust in their elected local government council (Afrobarometer R7 2016/2018, retrieved November 2019).

**Climate and Agriculture.** Much of the Sahel region, including Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is heavily dependent on agricultural production. However, these livelihoods are at risk due to a combination of factors including drought, soil degradation, deforestation, and poor agricultural management, all of which are exacerbated by climate change and the spread of violence ([FAO](#); [WEF](#)). The average recorded temperature of the Sahel is rising one and a half times faster than the global average, which places this community into a unique risk profile. This warming causes a reduction in food and natural resources, such as grazing land, which is attributed to the spike in violence that has been seen throughout the region ([NRC](#)).



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## ADDITIONAL CONSEQUENCES AND CHALLENGES

**Forced Migration.** The violence has resulted in a dramatic and historic migratory crisis in the Sahel. Within Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger over 1.1 million people ([UNHCR](#)) have been displaced either internally or internationally to escape the violence that has continuously escalated and expanded to new areas within their countries. In January 2020, Burkina Faso alone had 150,000 people displaced within a span of three weeks, and the displacement has continued at a rate of 4,000 people per day ([UNHCR](#)).



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**Food Production and Security.** Another escalating and pressing consequence of the ongoing conflict is the region’s sharp reduction in food production levels.

Violent conflict and the resulting emigration inhibit Sahelians from planting crops to feed their families. This reduction in food production, compounded by the climate and agricultural challenges addressed above, has exacerbated food shortages. Currently, 33 million people in the Sahel are food-insecure, with an estimated 10.8 million considered to be severely food-insecure ([NRC](#); [FAO](#)). These numbers will only increase as the conflict lingers and the region’s population grows—the FAO already estimates 15 million people will be severely food-insecure by mid-2020, which they are calling, “an alarming deterioration that has never been observed in the last five years” ([FAO](#)).

**Education and Health Access.** Widespread school and health center closures are limiting children and families’ access to education and health care. As of February 2020, over 3,600 schools had been closed due to the violence, with some reports that armed assailants are directly targeting schools. Over 460 health centers have additionally been closed in the area ([OCHA](#)). More closures are expected as violence continues to increase and expand, “[jeopardizing] the future of children and depriving violence-affected communities of critical services” ([OCHA](#)).

**Responses in the Region.** The global community universally recognizes the complex challenges facing the Sahel but has struggled to mount an effective response at the scale of the conflict. The international responses in the region, led primarily by

the French, thus far have been 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 including insufficient funding and a lack of trust between communities and military operations ([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 way forward for US policy in the Sahel.

- CRS Niger assisted more than 380,000 refugees and IDPs between 2015 and 2019. CRS provides support for Niger’s economic recovery and market system, agriculture and food security, and WASH infrastructure. In the western region of Tillabéry, CRS Niger conducts social cohesion activities through 75 peace ambassadors. CRS Niger also supported malaria prevention through the distribution of 21 million long-acting insecticide-treated nets (MILDA) and anti-malarial medication to over 4 million children between 2009 and 2019.
- In Burkina Faso, CRS’ development-focused programs have focused on education, WASH, cash



## OUR RESPONSE

CRS currently has offices throughout the Sahel, including in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger, and Mali.

- In Mali, CRS maintains deep community ties and can serve populations that other groups cannot with programming focused on malaria, agriculture and irrigation, and emergency response. CRS’ Food for Education program serves almost 400,000 children and provides management and technical support to the school council and administrators. Our Global Fund malaria prevention program reaches over 1.2 million children ages 3 to 59 months. Between June 2016 and November 2019, CRS assisted over 230,000 IDPs in Mali’s conflict zones, mainly the northern and central parts of the country, through USAID’s Rapid Response Mechanism funded by OFDA & Food for Peace (FFP). Cash transfers, food, non-food items, WASH programming, and shelter were provided based on the assessed needs of communities and individuals.

transfers, agriculture and value chains. CRS maintains a Food for Education program as well as a Food for Progress program focusing on organic cotton ([USDA FAS FFE](#); [USDA FAS FFP](#)). Additionally, CRS maintains a portfolio of emergency programming activities which cover WASH, shelters and settlements, and cash transfers for food and non-food items. With the rapidly escalating levels of violence and subsequent spikes in displaced persons in Burkina Faso, CRS will strengthen its emergency response efforts, food support, water and sanitation, shelter and social cohesion projects to help displaced persons better integrate with their host community.

Drawing from these strong program foundations, CRS is embarking on a new Sahel Peace Initiative. To develop goals and a roadmap for this initiative, CRS met with the bishops and Church officials from the relevant Sahelian countries in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in October 2019.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The USG continues to provide humanitarian, development, and security assistance in the Sahel and has an important diplomatic influence. For this reason, we provide here a series of policy recommendations for the USG to continue and improve upon efforts to support a peaceful, resilient, and thriving Sahel.

### 1. INTEGRATE SOCIAL COHESION AND PEACEBUILDING ELEMENTS INTO HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS.

USG should specifically look to fund programs that integrate social cohesion and peacebuilding elements. If we are able to strengthen the bonds between communities, they will be more resilient to outside forces seeking to destroy them. Violent, external nonstate actors are preying upon poor and vulnerable communities in the Sahel by exploiting and leveraging historical ethnic conflicts and a history of limited government services and support. This exacerbates tensions and increases conflict. Including social cohesion and peacebuilding elements into programming would help communities address underlying tensions and decrease the chances of further conflict.

### 2. STRENGTHEN THE LEGITIMACY AND ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Given the widespread feeling that the governments across the Sahel are not providing critical social services, it is more important than ever to support the legitimacy and capacity of local leaders, including local governments and the local church. While working to legitimize national institutions should be one part of the equation, it is essential to also work with local communities and civil society to rebuild trust in local government, reignite civic participation and find creative locally based solutions. In order to restore citizen trust in local government, the government needs to be supported and capacitated to provide basic services to its people. USG should practice the principle of subsidiarity by supporting programs that empower and enable the local government and community, rather than create parallel systems.

- **Strengthen Capacity for Local Leaders including Local Government through Long-term Partnerships.** Throughout our history, CRS has seen the most effective transitions to locally led development efforts come through meaningful, long term partnerships. It can take time to build capacity and resources so the U.S. should support programs that are focused on

long-term engagement and close collaboration with local partners to deliver quality programs and achieve their vision.

- **Ensure Adequate and Appropriate Funding.** The shift towards local leadership requires unique funding mechanisms to achieve its intended impact. The USG already has effective funding mechanisms, such as the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM), which should be continued and scaled up. Consideration of the size of awards that are reasonable for local actors to manage, the timelines of their operation, procurement methods, risk management and ICR are all important to ensure successful local leadership implementation. In the emergency response arena, increasing non-earmarked and multi-year grants; harmonization of reporting requirements; improved transparency and cost efficiency; innovative tools and mechanisms like RRM all encourage and support local institutions in taking more lead roles.
- **Continue to Support Representative Governments Elections and Dialogue.** Although elections have improved significantly throughout the region, some countries, such as Mali, still struggle to establish representative local governments, given a sharp divide between local actors and the national government. In these cases, the USG should continue to support legitimate, representative and genuinely decentralized governments and support dialogues between the central government and local groups where necessary.

### 3. SUPPORT YOUTH THROUGH ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND EDUCATION.

Youth in the Sahel face a lack of economic opportunities and are often excluded from the political system (IDS). Across the Sahel, youth unemployment is consistently higher than each country's national average. For example, Mali's youth unemployment rate is 25%, and much higher in rural areas, compared to 7.8% overall (IDS). For these reasons, youth continue to be an untapped resource that, if properly engaged and capacitated, will be instrumental in building a peaceful and prosperous society in the Sahel. The USG should encourage all its development and where possible emergency programs to include activities which empower youth and give them hope, skills, education and employment.

- **Consider the Context.** Although youth face unemployment, that does not necessarily

indicate that youth livelihoods are the key driver. For example, a study conducted by International Alert concluded that youth violence in Mali is largely driven by a growing culture of violence in the country, which is best addressed through local peace initiatives and programs that provide “the potential for people to find satisfying economic, psychological and social opportunities without the use of violence” ([International Alert](#)). USG should focus on programs that consider the context of youth disempowerment and seek to identify and address root causes and grievances rather than relying only youth livelihoods as a panacea.

- **Build a Culture of Peace.** The USG should work towards building a culture of peace in the Sahel, particularly among youth. Although this is a long-term solution, it is essential to support youth to become actors in their own right by enabling them to recognize and act upon injustices in order to improve their society. While the messages and methods used to create this culture vary by community and context, the USG ensure that schools are safe, protective and inclusive spaces, including building students’ and teachers’ social-emotional skills. Beyond youth, it is essential for USG to also engage the wider community to understand and support these peace culture initiatives.
- **Support Education Access.** Finally, thousands of displaced children are without education due to school closures in areas experiencing violence. In ongoing development and humanitarian efforts, the USG should ensure funds remain available to address the need for access to education and the provision of goods and services that schools typically provide to children, including food, water, healthcare and hygiene as well as psychosocial support.

#### 4. INCREASE SUPPORT FOR HUMANITARIAN SECTORS IN THE SAHEL.

As the crisis in the Sahel continues to escalate, so too does the number of people affected and their specific needs. This rate of increase is outpacing current and projected programming and funding levels

The USG should support the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, through additional emergency funding for humanitarian assistance. The UN is seeking almost \$1.1 billion to respond to needs in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger alone, and the funding for the appeals is already lagging while the needs are growing.

- **Protect Humanitarian Principles.** The environment of rapidly increasing need and chaos leaves humanitarian principles under threat and jeopardizes the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance. The militarization of relief operations is of particular concern as some tactics recorded by Refugees International and others, including the use of quick impact projects, unmarked vehicles, and required military escorts, may already blur the line between humanitarian and security assistance in targeted communities. In order to improve civilian protection efforts, the USG should encourage OCHA to begin a civ-mil dialogue in the field so that they can better streamline and coordinate efforts from multiple agencies and ensure best practices are understood and implemented.



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- **Encourage other donors to contribute flexible humanitarian assistance.** The United States is to be commended for leading in providing humanitarian assistance to the Sahel region. Other donors, like the French and Germans should also be encouraged to increase their assistance. Donors should improve their policies to ensure their contributions can be used flexibly in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. This means previously allocated development funding should be allowed to be used for humanitarian programming if needed, and crisis modifiers should be written into grants and contracts to allow for more continuous programming in a rapidly changing security environment that alternates between emergency, development, and peaceprogramming.

## 5. LEVERAGE THE PUBLIC TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS THROUGH INTERFAITH PROGRAMMING.

According to the 2016 Afrobarometer survey, West Africans trust their religious leaders more than any other form of authority, with 72% of respondents indicating their trust in these institutions ([OECD](#)). The Sahel region is predominantly made up of



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Muslim-majority countries, although there is a strong interfaith community which affords the Church with a high level of trust and acceptance throughout the region. Faith groups' deep ties with the community make them uniquely equipped to provide humanitarian and development aid to even the hardest-to-reach people in need.

- **Solidarity Against Extremism.** USG should support efforts for interfaith dialogues and programs at all levels of society where Christian, Muslim, and other religious actors can work together to show unity against extremism and leverage their individual power for good. Where this kind of coordination already exists, such as the Inter-Religious Dialogue Commission (CDIR, in French) in Niger, it should be supported and capacitated. CRS has seen from other programs, such as an inter-faith program in CAR, that incorporating interreligious aspects can be a unique strength that helps to build better solidarity and cohesion between and within social groups.
- **Messaging.** Within the Sahel, there is a consistent understanding of the ongoing conflict that violent, external nonstate actors are preying upon poor and vulnerable communities by exploiting and leveraging historical ethnic conflicts for their own benefit. However, to some global audiences the conflict has been presented as a religious one between Muslims and Christians—a narrative that neither resonates with residents of the Sahel nor holds truth. It is imperative that the correct narrative is messaged globally; the USG should support efforts for the Sahelian interfaith community to correct this narrative while also responding to the true root causes of the issue.

## 6. PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE WITH EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS FOR VIOLENCE IN COASTAL COUNTRIES.

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 on a small scale and, with the violence in neighboring Burkina Faso, are at risk of following a similar pattern to the Sahel countries if no intervention is undertaken. The United States should continue to support and expand ongoing efforts such as USAID's Reacting to Early Warning and Response Data in West Africa Program (REWARD), which aims to strengthen the "response to early warning recommendations and improve the ability of national and local stakeholders in Niger, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Mali to respond to electoral violence triggers" ([USAID](#)). Programs such as REWARD should continue to be prioritized for funding and expanded to include additional coastal countries such as Cote d'Ivoire.