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 who have left their homes 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 and has established a new Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI). 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

The level of violence in the Sahel is skyrocketing, including sharp increases in the number of reported fatalities, violent incidents, and direct attacks

targeting civilians (ACLED). While there are many transnational terrorist groups in the region, some sources indicate that the conflicts are increasingly local and "motivated by unresolved grievances of local communities" (OECD) which are then catalyzed by the broad presence of extremist groups.

ROOT CAUSES

This conflict is 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 drives down faith in the government's capacity. Climate and agriculture also play major roles in the conflict as poor agricultural management, exacerbated by rising temperatures (which rise one and a half times faster in the Sahel than the global average) decreases available resources which then contributes to spikes in violence (FAO; WEF; NRC).

ADDITIONAL CONSEQUENCES AND CHALLENGES

Increased violence and conflict have resulted in a dramatic and escalating migratory crisis. 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).

The crisis has also affected availability of food in the region and people's access to limited food products where they exist, as conflict and the resulting migration 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 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, as well as over 460 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

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 essential to work with local communities 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, support free and fair local elections, and scale funding opportunities designed to strengthen services and accompany local institutions. USG should practice the principle of subsidiarity by supporting programs that empower and enable the local government and community, rather than create parallel systems.

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). 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. 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. USG can also build a culture of peace and ensure that schools are safe, protective and inclusive spaces, including building students' and teachers' social-emotional skills. 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.

   The number of people in need is increasing more rapidly than current programming and funding levels can accommodate. The USG should

continue to support the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, by providing additional emergency funding for humanitarian assistance and making the funding flexible to fit the ever-changing needs the crisis presents. 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. The USG should also support humanitarian principles by supporting an OCHA-led dialogue between civilians and the military.

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

West Africans trust their religious leaders more than any other form of authority, making religious groups key partners in the region (OECD). 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 and leverage their individual power for good. Additionally, USG should support existing interfaith efforts to frame and message the ongoing conflict in the Sahel as one rooted in violent, external nonstate actors exploiting historical ethnic conflicts for their own benefit, rather than an inter-religious conflict.

6. **PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE: SUPPORT 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 USG should continue to prioritize funding and support for early warning systems, such as USAID's Reacting to Early Warning and Response Data in West Africa Program (REWARD) and expand programming that prevents and mitigates conflict such as those that strengthen community bonds.