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Strategic Priorities for the Comprehensive Stabilisation of the Sahel: Voices of Civil Society ¹

II Sahel Europe Dialogue Forum

Introduction

On the 14th, 15th and 16th of July 2022, the International Security Centre of the Francisco de Vitoria University (CSI - UFV) organised the 2nd edition of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum. Several workshops, conferences and masterclasses allowed international experts to review and debate the situation and stability of the Sahel.

In the masterclass entitled "Strategic priorities for a comprehensive stabilisation: Voices of Civil Society", moderated by Aitor Martínez Ayala; Regional Manager for West Africa CIDEAL Foundation; Sylvestre Tiemtoré, Coordinator of the Permanent Secretariat of NGOs in Burkina Faso; Lourdes Benavides, Regional Manager of Oxfam in West and Central Africa; and Badié Hima, Resident Director NDI Mali and former Vice President of the Niger Association for the Defence of Human Rights, analysed the strategic challenges of global stabilisation based on the voices of civil society.

¹ This analysis is part of a series of research studies conducted by the International Security Centre on dialogue with the Sahel. Following the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum held in March 2021, the speakers belonging to the [Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum's](#) panel of experts have deepened the themes of their conferences, analysing the shared challenges, and the opportunities for cooperation on our common challenges. This analysis was carried out by Beatriz de León Cobo, Director of the Sahel-Europe Dialogue Forum, based on the notes of the conference of the same title with the collaboration of Julie Bonin, French Army Reservist.

In a changing environment such as the Sahel, which includes states with significant democratic fragility, it is important not to forget that this region is Europe's advanced frontier. It is now more important than ever to promote a space for dialogue in which both regions can share, cooperate and propose innovative solutions with civil society, with the aim of installing global stabilisation.

Thus, the concept of "civil society" is confusing because its definition is diverse. Conceptually, we will define it as any form of organisation different from or outside the state, the family and the company. That is, an organisation without the aim of making a profit for itself or its members, without the ambition to conquer and manage state power and/or outside the family unit. However, the concept can have several different definitions in different countries, because depending on the political interests at stake, organisations, media or trade unions, can also claim to be civil society. For this reason, it is impossible to define the term exactly. However, there is a shared consensus on what characterises civil society: neutrality and independence from the state, and defence of the overall integrity of society and of vulnerable or marginalised groups.

In the following paragraphs the experts discuss the context and the existing strategic challenges for global stabilisation, as well as the shift in discourse towards civil society, while analysing the current situation of the 'all-military' and the lessons learned.

1. Context and challenges

When we talk about the Sahel, we are also talking about a multidimensional crisis, in other words, the superimposition of security, political, financial, climatic, population displacement and governance crises. Faced with this situation, taking action in the Sahel is a complex task, particularly because of the weakness or absence of the state. Nevertheless, some civil servants and members of civil society, as well as NGOs, try to improve the local situation on a daily basis. However, the methods used by development aid actors remain the same. For example, over a period of two years, civil society conducted a study with more than 4,000 people, who were interviewed to create a White Paper for peace and security². According to the report's diagnosis, the Malian state currently has a problem of governance, clientelism, isolation, porous borders, poor distribution of wealth and is suffering from the increase in arms and drug trafficking. Long before the 2012 crisis, the Malian state was already unable to provide for the needs of the population, which led to the creation of non-state actors and became an aggravating factor in the loss of legitimacy of central government in Mali. Faced with the impossibility of accessing certain areas affected by insecurity, the authorities have abandoned certain regions, leaving the door open to the strengthening of other actors. A multitude of challenges arise from this continuing situation.

Challenge 1 - Democratic fragilities

These democratic and institutional fragilities of the state are the first challenge facing the Sahel. Although there is a lot of economic investment by international organisations, there is no consensus on the issue of building democratic governance. Thus, funds are invested without succeeding in building the resilience of the Sahel community. To evolve, democracy must start locally.

² Civil society organisations Mali. *Civil Society White Paper for Peace and Security in Mali*. 2019.

Addressing the existing democratic fragilities in the region is key to ensuring that aid has a real impact. Similarly, international civil society organisations, such as Oxfam and Caritas, need to contribute to the strengthening of a local civil society as a factor of social resilience and state-building. However, these institutions are extremely fragile as local realities are not well integrated.

Furthermore, when we speak of a 'strong state', we are referring to an institution that is close to the citizens and that must provide basic public services. However, for example in Burkina Faso, state institutions that technically should be closer to citizens, such as the social ombudsman or the Economic and Social Council³, are hollow positions that do not take action. The weakness of institutions contributes to an environment that allows crises, such as coups, to occur. In Guinea, where the government was deposed extremely quickly (in 30 min / 1 hour), or similarly in Mali and Burkina Faso. With strong institutions these governments would probably not have fallen in such a way. They would have had popular support.

Challenge 2 - The tilt towards terrorism

The second challenge is the tipping of the population towards terrorism. Think Tanks such as *the Institute for Security Studies* (ISS) conducted interviews with 60 ex-combatants in October 2016, finding two major causes of radicalisation, which paradoxically is neither ideological nor religious. The ex-combatants explained that they were fighting against poverty and unemployment or driven by the desire to protect their families. Where there is neither a justice system nor a state with basic social services, the security vacuum is easily filled by armed terrorist groups.

Challenge 3 - Changing the "all-military" approach

Military and security approaches are favoured by international and national actors, yet they have failed to protect the civilian population. Indeed, the number of civilians affected by violence in the region continues to rise. Clearly, the "all-military" approach that has taken hold in these areas is not the solution to the many challenges in the Sahel: the discourse needs to change in order to engage on both the security and humanitarian fronts. Civil society is already demanding it, but the challenge is to adopt new strategies based on public policies that are close to the people and that strengthen democratic institutions.

Challenge 4 - Climate change and demography

Other issues are equally important, such as climate change, which has a negative impact on local realities. Climate challenges are a priority and must be tackled to reduce conflicts. Among other important factors, the issue is deeply linked to the population explosion. Thus, with the demographic increase, there is not enough land to feed the population and the livestock, which interferes with the peaceful cohabitation between herders and farmers (as in the case of the Dogon and the Peul in central Mali, a conflict which has caused and continues to cause hundreds of victims). Citizens also face the loss of their land: between 2004 and 2013, 5.13 million hectares were lost in Burkina Faso (i.e. 19% of the territory) while in Mali, 500,000 hectares of forest are lost every year

³ The latter has advised the government on the implementation of budgetary policies that do not produce results.

Challenge 5 - Food and humanitarian (IDPs)

The challenge of food and humanitarian security must also be a priority, especially as the consequences of population displacement have an impact on the whole sub-region, but also on Europe. For example, the United Nations has produced a report on desertification, explaining that desertification is accompanied by an increase in food problems. Moreover, this situation has worsened with the Ukrainian crisis: in Burkina Faso, there is 13% inflation, making basic necessities inaccessible for populations that were already weakened before. In addition to an increasingly alarming food situation, the number of refugees and displaced persons has increased by 35% between 2020 and 2022 and cases of gender-based violence have increased by 40% in 2022 compared to 2021. Thus, there were 3 to 4 million IDPs, of which 2 million were in Burkina Faso. However, only 17% of the funding to meet humanitarian needs has been mobilised, despite donor commitments. Donors should commit to funding flexible mechanisms that cover climate protection in cooperation with humanitarian aid.

Challenge 6 - Employment

Finally, one of the fundamental reasons for the crisis in the Sahel is the problem of creating decent and sustainable employment for young people, who are all the more inclined to use other means to support themselves; 70% of the population in the Sahel is under 35 years old. Moreover, even if youth employment programmes exist, they lack funding. Development aid must accompany states that do not have sufficient resources to transform young people into local assets and create wealth. Similarly, projects that add value must be created. For example, Mali and Burkina Faso are countries that produce a lot of cotton but barely process 5 to 10% of it in the country. The development of a cotton processing industry could create jobs for young people, to name just one example.

2. A shift in discourse towards civil society

Conflict and political instability clearly affect governance. Sahelian civil societies have suffered from these situations, while being sidelined from the political dialogues of their own countries. Yet, they are indispensable actors in the reconstruction of the social contract, democratic participation and good governance, as well as in the sustainable return to security and peacebuilding.

On the democratic security side, there is a need for a national democratic consensus by states and international organisations on security priorities and strategies. However, a consensus on the future must first be reached with the participation of citizens, without whom any approach loses its legitimacy.

Supporting civil society is therefore a priority. To do this, it is necessary to take into consideration that the Sahel is at a crossroads and that foreign (especially Western) influence is being challenged. The European Union must therefore rethink its approach, the way it works with the Sahel, and try to play a different role by listening to local demands instead of imposing its own solutions. This need to create a more balanced relationship between Europeans and Sahelians could give a real role to civil society in reconstruction, as Sahelian society also demands to be listened to. For example, the Citizen's Coalition for the Sahel is an excellent example of an engaged civil society platform with a strong analytical capacity and impact. The report published in 2021, "The Sahel, what

needs to change"⁴, is built around 4 main pillars: the protection of civilians; more transparent and inclusive governance; the fight against impunity and respect for human rights; and the humanitarian response.

If there is a change in discourse, especially in the civilian world, how is it translated into policy and concrete action? How is the vision of human security centred around protecting people and ensuring humanitarian assistance and access to social services oriented? Thus, all civil and political action must aim at the active participation of society to promote positive change, with a constructive transformation of conflicts towards a social system that responds for all populations. This is the responsibility of states, without whose commitment organisations will continue to invest funds without being able to build the resilience of Sahelian communities.

In short, in civil society's analysis of international aid and state actions, the 'all-security' (i.e., 'all-military') approach is denounced as insufficient and inappropriate in its current form. The crisis has only increased in recent years and citizens are now looking for human security that covers all aspects and not just the military aspect. However, there is a lack of a global approach: humanitarian aid is not adapted to the realities on the ground and to the existing humanitarian situation. The flow of humanitarian aid must also respond to the level of need and the security challenges in the country.

3. Lessons learned

At the heart of this analysis, it is clear to Oxfam that there is a common prism between the way societies are governed and the issue of growing inequalities. The root causes of the security crisis are linked to the lack of civil protection, the consequences of climate change, the COVID pandemic, inflation, social inequalities, exclusion (the role of women in the economy is very important but often not recognised), the absence of the state and its lack of legitimacy, and the inadequacy of development aid. In order to combat this, open cooperation on security and development is necessary.

There is a clear need to provide substantial financial support to the current humanitarian situation and insufficient community support. It is therefore necessary to fund the triple nexus of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding, while maintaining a comprehensive vision. While the urgent response must address the immediate needs of the humanitarian and security crisis, there is a need to look at the longer-term roots of the problem. Flexible financial mechanisms would enhance resilience and the possibility of rapid action. For example, it is important that international aid is targeted at reducing inequalities. All donors, such as the EU, should make this an objective, for example by supporting sustainable agricultural systems and local civil society. Particular attention should be paid to population growth and the possible responses of actors, including civil society, to the challenges it poses.

Furthermore, another lesson learned is that conflict-sensitive aid is needed, based on an understanding of the interactions between different conflict dynamics and the possibility of responding to them while building on the triple nexus that links humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding. Therefore, coherence of development assistance with other elements of economic policy assistance is necessary to reduce the inequalities that have been exacerbated in recent years. An example of the inconsistency that exists in this regard is the IMF's austerity policies in West Africa. They are extremely strict and jeopardise the reconstruction of the social contract, calling

⁴ Citizens Coalition for the Sahel. "Sahel: what needs to change. 2021.

for a reduction in public social spending of \$9 billion over the next 5 years (in the central Sahel, Mauritania and Senegal), not to mention inflation and the damage of the conflict in Ukraine and the limited funds dedicated to the region that are diverted to Ukraine.

Similarly, we must work to build a national consensus between states and international organisations on security issues and the future, placing citizen participation at the basis of legitimacy. Moreover, a favourable educational environment would help to achieve these objectives. However, here too, issues of funding and access to projects are key.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the Sahel is a strategic priority, both for its own development and for the countries of the European Union. It is therefore clear that reflection and debate on how to strengthen EU cooperation and support to the Sahel is a priority. This reflection must be carried out on three levels: political, in order to address, in particular, the serious shortcomings in terms of governance and the protection of human rights; security, by adapting it to humanitarian issues and by listening to and respecting civil society; and development, with endemic poverty, high population growth and low socio-economic cohesion. Indeed, all these factors contribute to the worsening of food insecurity, the increase in migratory pressure and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Several recommendations can be put on the table.

- It is essential to address the structural causes of this multi-faceted crisis through public policies that combat inequalities; policies on health, housing, education and work, among others, that improve precarious living conditions.
- Action is needed to move away from the "all-military" approach and to cooperate, particularly with civil society. Resolving the humanitarian crisis and building democratic institutions that are up to the task is essential for the reconstruction process to be sustainable in the future.
- Donors should agree during the strategic planning phase to link the development part with the humanitarian part, knowing that civil society organisations do not have the same capacities, and to focus on balanced and accessible funding, as resources almost never reach the local level, targeting the whole of the Sahel. The state and donors must also facilitate sustainable management actions in the medium term.
- Cross-sectoral dialogue and local leadership must be at the centre of actions to find solutions.
- The importance of strengthening good governance to overcome the political, security, social and humanitarian crisis. Good governance must focus on strengthening accessible justice, fighting corruption and improving access to and delivery of basic services.