



How not to lose the Sahel

Community perspectives on insecurity and international interventions in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

February 2022

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Louisa Waugh. The research in the Sahel was conducted by Yida Diall (Mali), Oumarou Makama Bawa (Niger) and Dr Zacharia Tiemtoré (Burkina Faso). Massaran B. Traore was the gender consultant. Any mistakes are those of the author.

Valuable comments and analysis were provided by Assitan Diallo, Lucia Montanaro, Larry Attree, Robert Parker, Abigail Watson, Lewis Brooks, Jordan Street, Delina Goxho and Ornella Moderan, and several others who asked not to be identified.

Scott Yearsley and Jessica Summers provided valuable copyediting and publication support. This report was designed by Jane Stevenson. Translation services were provided by NaTakallam.

We are grateful for the generous support from Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the Open Society Foundations and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

This paper is part of a strand of work to promote long-term peace through research and analysis, and by setting up policy dialogue with governments, international organisations and civil society on peace, terrorism, stability and responses to forced displacement.

Cover photo: Weekly market in Djenné, Mali.

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Abbreviations

AQMI	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CITAC	Casualty and Incident Analysis and Tracking Cell (also known as MISAD)
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSO	Civil society organisation
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUTF	Emergency Trust Fund for Africa
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces (<i>Forces Armées Maliennes</i>)
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	<i>Jamat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin</i> (also translated as GSIM)
MINUSMA	the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	<i>Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad</i>
P3S	Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (<i>Volontaires Pour la Défense de la Patrie</i>)
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

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The majority of people in the Sahel live in rural areas.
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Executive summary

This report looks at the central Sahel from the perspectives of its citizens, the diverse communities who live in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.¹ Through interviews with community members and civil society leaders across the region, we heard people's perspectives on insecurity, stability, migration, and gender, and the links between these. Our analysis of these consultations highlights above all how civilians are paying the price for dysfunctional international interventions based on militarised frameworks that urgently need to be improved – through better consultation and communication with communities and more emphasis on their rights.

For example, the majority of people we interviewed said they wanted security and defence forces to be more accepting of the roles that communities can play in supporting local security; equally, they emphasised the urgent need for more local forums and dialogue spaces where they can do so safely.

This juncture is an opportunity for the EU to consult with Sahelian communities about what these critical terms mean to them, and to listen and respond to build a meaningful partnership with them.

Through further discussions we learnt how people are organising and acting to prevent violence and address insecurity in their own communities, and what they feel needs to happen elsewhere. This includes women-led and women's rights organisations working to tackle structural violence against women and girls, including violence associated with patriarchal militarised agendas. These perspectives can support international efforts to be practical, targeted and transformative, if they are strengthened through mutual accountability between communities, national authorities and international entities – especially the European Union (EU), which has invested so heavily in the region.

EU investments in the Sahel include huge resources devoted to managing migration. However, the EU's approach is based upon assumptions that migration can be contained through security policies aligned with incentives for international partners, especially governments in poorer countries. This risks underwriting corrupt regimes, such as the government in Niger and the military junta in Mali. Our interviews with migrants in Niger show this securitised approach does not robustly address accountability, nor the rights of migrants to work and travel, including across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region. On the contrary, it actively incentivises Sahelian governments to effectively play donors at their own game and inflate the 'migration threat' – despite the economic benefits of seasonal migrant workers across the Sahel.²

The recommendations that emerge from these interviews and exchanges include:

- The need to step back from military escalations. This requires a strategic shift away from short-term military interventions driven by the EU's narrow security and migration agenda in support of state-centric national security and counter-terrorism policies, towards more people-centred, long-term strategies for peace and security that listen to and work with conflict-affected communities and civil society, and ensure security responses observe and uphold people's fundamental human rights.
- Both Sahelian and international military deployments need to recognise, and challenge, negative gender norms and dynamics prevalent in such patriarchal systems.
- Improve coordination, consistency and transparency among international actors. Competing interests, mandates, rules of engagement and a lack of coordination between these actors in the region do little to increase transparency, trust or accountability.
- **A greater focus on directly engaging with and supporting Sahelian civil society**, including through direct funding, can strengthen successful local initiatives that provide stability for local communities. This also reflects the EU's focus on stabilisation and a 'civilian surge' in its new Integrated Sahel Strategy.
- **The perspectives of migrants need to be better taken into account regarding migration approaches and policies.** There also needs to be increased focus on migrant protection, both within the ECOWAS region and for the minority of migrants who seek to move outside the region.

The community and civil society leaders we interviewed for this research want to engage with policy and decision makers; they want their voices heard and to be part of the change that can begin to break the cycles of political violence and insecurity across the Sahel. We aim much of our analysis and our recommendations towards the EU, and note that despite criticism of international military interventions, especially of France, EU institutions are still seen as having a role to play. For example, in a 2021 survey of five thousand Malians, almost half of the people surveyed believe the EU can support Mali's transition towards democratic elections.³

Notes

- 1 For the purpose of this report, central Sahel refers to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso
- 2 Andersson R, Keen D (2019), 'Partners in crime? The impacts of Europe's outsourced migration controls on peace, stability and rights', Saferworld, July (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1217-partners-in-crime-the-impacts-of-europeas-outsourced-migration-controls-on-peace-stability-and-rights>)
- 3 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2021), 'Mali Mètre: Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?', March (<https://mali.fes.de/mali-metre>)

A note on terminology

The terms 'jihadist' and 'terrorist' and their limitations

This report aims to be situated in Sahel realities: therefore, the term 'jihadist' appears throughout the report to reflect how people we interviewed describe some of the different violent armed groups in their context, including criminal networks and those organised around identity and/or religion. At the same time, we recognise its shortcomings: the term itself is a reflection of Western discourse on the Sahel.

Sahelian communities formerly used 'men from the bush' and 'terrorists' to describe these groups. From 2015, as Western interventions increased, the term 'jihadist' has increasingly become the norm among political, military and civilian entities cross the region.

Communities continue to use 'terrorists' to describe entities such as those al-Qaeda affiliates which have coalesced under *Jamat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)*; they equally apply this to *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*.

Some Sahelian human rights organisations reject the term 'terrorist' because it has become a political tool. We therefore focus on the terms 'jihadist' and 'jihadist groups' as well as referring to 'violent armed groups' collectively. At the same time, we recognise that such labels carry connotations that may belie the complexity of such groups, their motives and agendas.

Security and defence forces

The make-up of armed forces across the Sahel is complex. In general, communities do not distinguish between different forces; for example, in Mali between the FAMa (Malian armed forces) and the *Gendarmerie* (police). Many of the allegations of abuses across the region are aimed at military bodies. When interviewees explicitly referred to the military we use the term 'security and defence forces'; otherwise we use the term 'security forces', which include for example the *Gendarmerie*.



A market street in Niamey, Niger.
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Introduction

France and its European partners have been attempting to secure Mali and the central Sahel for ten years. In 2013, French troops intervened in northern Mali to contain violent armed groups, and prevent them from destabilising the country and its Sahelian neighbours. France is now accompanied by a growing matrix of international military partners from West Africa and Europe. Despite their combined efforts – and those of Sahelian security and defence forces – the region is far more unstable and insecure now than a decade ago. Political violence is killing more civilians across the Sahel every year.⁴

President Emmanuel Macron's 2021 decision to 'adjust' France's role in the region is in keeping with his government's long-standing strategy of Europeanising military interventions in the Sahel. This will give France the advantage of retaining its role as strategic military leader while getting its European military partners to share the risks as well as the human and financial burden of military operations in the Sahel. This includes responsibility for the failure to combat terrorism and insecurity across the region. It also reflects France's frustration at its unmet demands for Sahelian states to take greater security and governance responsibilities, especially following the military coups in Mali.⁵

At this political juncture, Saferworld consulted communities in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. We worked with expert researchers in each country, who conducted semi-structured interviews in pre-identified research sites, as well as focus group discussions of 5–10 participants. The researchers each conducted at least 25 individual interviews, as well as 2–4 focus group discussions of 8–10 people in each site, including single- and mixed-sex focus groups. Approximately 40 per cent of the interviewees were women. In addition, we conducted 20 in-person and online interviews with national and international Sahel experts, including civil society activists, diplomats, researchers, human rights defenders, UN personnel and civil-military experts. The field research and in-person interviews took place in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in November and December 2020. As interviews in Burkina Faso were limited due to security concerns, this report mainly focuses on the findings from Mali and Niger.⁶

Our aim was twofold: firstly, to better understand the disconnections between international interventions and community realities; and secondly, to identify inflection points where existing local initiatives can be expanded or new, locally owned initiatives can be introduced.



The predominance of counterterrorism operations continues to place a stranglehold on the respect of humanitarian and human rights principles. State incapacity, corruption and human rights abuses prevail. Until now, government interventions in the Sahel have not met the scale of the Sahel's human security crisis

The People's Coalition for the Sahel⁸



This report complements Saferworld's recent report on EU security assistance, **'The search for stability in the Sahel'**.⁷ Both reports have been researched and written by Saferworld Europe, in collaboration with our civil society partners in the region.

The report begins with a brief analysis of the 'conflict geographies' of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso: it highlights distinctions and commonalities between the three countries, their political trajectories, the emergence of armed groups, and multiple impacts of structural violence.

The third section interrogates community experiences of insecurity. It unravels what security means to communities in Mali, highlighting how 'strategic narcissism' has led to international counter-terror approaches becoming the security status quo, while not sufficiently addressing *the process of violence*.⁹

Section four investigates stability. Making the case that this politically seductive rhetoric and its practices are being weaponised, it calls for a strategic shift by international entities, and discusses how community analysis is integral to addressing political violence.

The fifth section explores how securitisation approaches affect migration dynamics, especially those migration routes that have sustained Sahelian communities for generations. Migrants and ex-migrants from Niger offer perspectives on addressing current migration challenges through inclusive national and regional initiatives.

Section six provides an overview of how women and young people remain systematically excluded from political leadership, why younger Sahelians are rebelling against traditional social hierarchies, and why financial support for women's and youth rights organisations is critical to addressing these challenges.

We conclude with recommendations for each thematic area.

Notes

- 4 International Committee of the Red Cross (2020), 'Central Sahel: Spike in violence leads to higher deaths, more than 1 million fleeing homes', 14 September (<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/central-sahel-spike-violence-leads-higher-deaths-more-1-million-fleeing-homes>)
- 5 Lebovich A (2021), 'After Barkhane: what France's military drawdown means for the Sahel', European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 July (<https://ecfr.eu/article/after-barkhane-what-frances-military-drawdown-means-for-the-sahel/>)
- 6 The research sites were Fatoma and Séveré in Mopti region, Mali, Zinder in Niger and the region of Kaya in Burkina Faso.
- 7 Guiryanan O, Montanaro L, Rätty T (2021), 'The Search for Stability in the Sahel', Saferworld, September (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1368-european-security-assistance-the-search-for-stability-in-the-sahel>)
- 8 The People's Coalition for the Sahel (2021), 'The Sahel: What Needs to Change – Towards a New People-Centred Approach', April (https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sahel_people_coalition_report_final.pdf)
- 9 Violent armed groups described as 'jihadists' by people in the Sahel include the MAA (Arab Movement of the Azawad), Ansar-al-Din, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun and other affiliates of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) that have coalesced under the umbrella of Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), as well as affiliates of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), who include ex-members and supporters of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). In addition, there are numerous small cells of 'non-identified combatants' throughout the region whose allegiances are opportunistically fluid, as well as numerous mobile networks of criminals who shift allegiances as they see necessary for political, economic and territorial opportunities. For more details, see ACLED (2021), 'Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines' (<https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/>)

The central Sahel





The view from Djenné mosque
across the town.

© Louisa Waugh

2

“You can’t make omelettes without breaking eggs”¹⁰

Conflict geographies in the Sahel

To understand the crises that are rupturing the central Sahel, it is important to reflect on the political histories that have shaped Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, especially since independence. These ‘conflict geographies’ provide insights into the challenges facing each country, as well as trends emerging across this contested region.

Post-colonial political contours

The Sahel has a tradition of consensual political and community dialogue; this however needs to be placed within a historical context including slavery, the stigmatisation of minority groups, and deep-rooted gender and social inequalities. These extreme social stratifications created political and gender power imbalances that still resonate today.¹¹ French colonial administrators practised divide and rule to quash local rebellions, deliberately exacerbating many of these tensions.¹²

These divisions played out intensely from 1960 onwards. After independence, the first nationally led governments in Bamako, Niamey and Ouagadougou all struggled to assert their political authority. Between 1960 and 2012 Mali and Niger witnessed a number of Tuareg uprisings in Mali and Niger. These were driven by widespread lack of political and social inclusion, factors which Nigerien authorities made more progress towards addressing through increased political diversity. In all three countries, militaries also launched violent takeovers.¹³ By 2012, there had already been three military coups in Mali.¹⁴

These political shocks choked efforts by some leaders to institutionalise state accountability mechanisms. On a larger scale, they thwarted the development of distinct post-colonial identities based on nationally defined principles of statebuilding and mutual accountability between citizens and the state.

“
Abuses by state security forces have been shown to be significant motivating factors for young men joining armed groups across the region, in a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle that can be dismantled only through state accountability and effective sanctions.

”

Political centralisation and structural impunity left populations across the Sahel sensing themselves abandoned and politically disenfranchised. Meanwhile, widespread violence by men against women and girls has until today frequently been perceived as banal.¹⁵ This gendered violence, highlighted by interviewees, cannot simply be downplayed as ‘socio-cultural’. It has been historically and politically embedded, through rigid political and economic systems dominated by older men that have structurally marginalised young men and especially young women, exacerbating political and economic exclusion.¹⁶

For Mali, the unresolved Tuareg uprisings, interspersed by decades of political mismanagement, culminated in a fourth rebellion in January 2012. Led by the Tuareg-dominated *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad*, (MNLA), it was swiftly followed by another opportunistic military coup in Bamako. These events are often cited as the beginning of Mali’s current crisis.¹⁷ Looking back over the 62 years of Mali’s

independence, however, we can place them in a long trajectory of instability and violence.

The Franco-African military reaction – especially to the emergence of al-Qaeda-aligned groups violently opposing the MNLA in northern Mali – massively influenced Mali’s future trajectory from 2013 onwards.¹⁸ France intensified its military engagement, strengthening its focus on counter-terrorism operations to stem the spread of ‘violent jihadist groups’ across the Sahel. In particular, it sought to tackle groups aligned with al-Qaeda, who could potentially extend their reach towards Europe.¹⁹

Years of political misgovernance and state abuses have led to an accelerated deterioration of citizen–state relations in Mali and Burkina Faso, and the situation in Niger is beginning to look very similar.²⁰

This report complements other studies in highlighting the failure of international bodies to confront these critical issues.²¹ Instead, international interventions are overwhelmingly configured around short-term military objectives, remaining disconnected from local realities and from those processes that cause political violence to recur and worsen.

This violence is inextricably linked to long-standing abuses by state military forces, as well as militia groups often associated with political and criminal elites. Abuses by state security forces have been shown to be significant motivating factors for young men joining armed groups across the region, in a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle that can be dismantled only through state accountability and effective sanctions.²²

Political and criminal ‘conflict entrepreneurs’, especially flourishing criminal networks across the Sahel region, have a vested interest in maintaining conflict dynamics that facilitate their business interests.²³ Explaining their failure to tackle these interests, France and its international partners, especially the EU, have, among other reasons, cited principles of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states.²⁴ This approach has done little to arrest the normalisation of corruption and criminality in the political economies of the central Sahel.

As we discuss later, the scale of violent conflict across the Sahel is not the only reason people seek to move across the region. There is a long tradition in the Sahel of economic migration across the ECOWAS region for many, often overlapping reasons, including lack of local opportunities, corruption, food insecurity, climate change, and intraregional networks.²⁵ Migration is therefore a natural part of life in the Sahel, but it has become a major preoccupation within international security strategies that aggressively focus on containing ‘migrant flows’ in order to protect European borders.²⁶

At the centre of this mosaic of competing interests, and the starting point for our research, is how Sahelian citizens perceive international interventions, and what they believe needs to change both in their communities and across the region, to address the violent insecurities they often confront on a daily basis.

“
Addressing violence against women in Mali will require more than a law. Society’s views on women need to change and the structural power imbalances between women and men must be rectified.

”

Ornella Moderan, Head of Sahel Programme, Institute for Security Studies, Mali

A mosaic of competing interests

The French-led focus on counter-terrorism, championed by Sahelian governments until 2021, has neglected the political governance challenges that have corroded the region since independence.

Notes

- 10 This traditional saying was quoted by interviewees from Burkina Faso, referring to violence between security forces and ‘jihadist groups’.
- 11 For slavery references, see: UNHCR (2021), ‘Mali: UN experts condemn increased attacks on ‘descent-based slaves’, deplore government’s failure to act’, 19 July (<https://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27324&LangID=E>); for social inequalities and political power imbalances, see Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) (2019), ‘Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel’, 6 December (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/politics-heart-crisis-sahel>); for gender inequalities, see Alliance Sahel (2021), ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A Unique Opportunity for the Sahel’, 8 March (<https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/news/gender-equality-sahel/>)
- 12 Clingendael, March (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/roots-malis-conflict-moving-beyond-2012-crisis>)
- 13 In Burkina Faso, for example, then-President Thomas Sankara was beaten to death by presidential guards in 1987.
- 14 Tchioffo K (2020), ‘4 out of 4: Why has Mali had so many successful coups?’, *African Arguments*, 27 August (<https://africanarguments.org/2020/08/4-out-of-4-why-has-mali-coups-had-so-many-successful-coups/>)
- 15 *ReliefWeb* (2020), ‘Central Sahel facing a protection crisis as gender-based violence against girls continues to rise’, 11 December (<https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/central-sahel-facing-protection-crisis-gender-based-violence-against-girls>)
- 16 Agbiboa DE (2015), ‘Youth as tactical agents of peacebuilding and development in the Sahel’, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10 (3), pp 30–45 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2015.1082927>)
- 17 See for example Felter C, Bussemaker N, ‘What to Know About the Crisis in Mali’, Council on Foreign Relations, 12 August (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-know-about-crisis-mali>)
- 18 Other factors included mass displacement of Malians both inside the country and the region: the violent armed groups consolidated their power bases in northern Mali through local recruitment, especially by facilitating local marriages for poorer families: they expanded their numbers and began to move into central regions of Mali, and border areas especially the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region. See: Farooghi M, Waugh L (2016), ‘They treat us all like Jihadis’, *International Alert*, December (<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis/>)
- 19 Many of these have now coalesced under Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). In Mali, Katiba Macina is especially influential. See footnote 3.
- 20 CSIS (2019), ‘Politics at the Heart of the Crisis in the Sahel’, 6 December (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/politics-heart-crisis-sahel>)
- 21 See for example, *International Alert*, ‘If victims become perpetrators (2018)’, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/if-victims-become-perpetrators-violent-extremism-sahel/> (June); Schmauder A, Sotomayor G, Goxho D (2020), ‘Strategic Missteps: Learning From a Failed EU Sahel Strategy’, ISPI, 5 November (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy>)
- 22 *International Alert* (2018), *ibid.*
- 23 Galletti C, Rainieri L (2016), ‘Organised crime in Mali: Why it matters for a peaceful transition from conflict’, *International Alert*, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/publications/organised-crime-mali-en>)
- 24 Saferworld interview with EU Delegation in Bamako, November 2020.
- 25 Aboneaaj R, Yayboke E (2020), ‘Perils in the desert: irregular migration through the Sahel’, CSIS, October (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/peril-desert-irregular-migration-through-sahel>)
- 26 Andersson R, Keen D (2019), ‘Partners in crime? The impacts of Europe’s outsourced migration controls on peace, stability and rights’, *Saferworld*, July (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1217-partners-in-crime-the-impacts-of-europeas-outsourced-migration-controls-on-peace-stability-and-rights>)



The Grand Marché, Bamako.
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3

Strategic narcissism

International security interventions and their disconnections

The limitations of militarised security

On 3 January 2021, villagers in central Mali gathered for a wedding near a remote village called Bounti. As they celebrated, a French *Mirage 2000* jet fighter opened fire, killing at least 19 people.²⁷ A MINUSMA investigation concluded that ‘the group affected by the strike was overwhelmingly composed of civilians’ and that the killings raised ‘serious concerns about respect for the principles of the conduct of hostilities [in Mali]’.²⁸ The French Defence Ministry claimed Operation Barkhane had targeted ‘an armed terrorist group’.²⁹ Two months later, another Barkhane airstrike killed five people, including two boys, near Agarnadamos village, in the region of Gao. Once again, Barkhane claimed to have ‘neutralised’ ‘terrorist’ elements.³⁰ Local officials disagreed, insisting all the victims were civilians. MINUSMA launched another fact-finding investigation to ascertain the facts.³¹

French-led military operations in the Sahel

In 2012, the Government of Mali requested France’s support to push back violent armed groups occupying northern Mali. France launched **Operation Serval** in January 2013. One year later, Serval was replaced by **Operation Barkhane**, with 5,100 French military personnel deployed mainly in Mali and the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region. Barkhane supports the G5 Sahel Member States in counter-terrorism operations. **Task Force Takuba** was launched in July 2020, initially with Special Forces from France and Estonia. It now includes troops from Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Italy, Greece and Hungary.

In October 2021, France began withdrawing its troops from northern Mali as part of a broader drawdown of its visible military presence in the region, amidst mounting insecurity and criticism of its political influence from Sahelian citizens and the military government of Mali.

“
We cannot say the situation [in the Sahel] has improved in the last eight years ... The human and financial cost is out of all proportion to what can be drawn from it. The Sahel people must be given back the means to decide for themselves.

French National Assembly Defence Commission, January 2021

These killings, especially in Bounti, reignited demonstrations and calls for French troops to leave Mali.³² In Paris, public opinion questioned how long France could stay engaged in what was becoming ‘a forever war’ in the Sahel, with a rising French death toll.³³ At least 50 French troops have died in Mali since 2013. Five Barkhane soldiers were killed within the space of one week at the end of 2020. That year, France spent almost €1 billion (76 per cent of its overall expenditure for military missions and operations at home and abroad) on funding Barkhane.³⁴

Since taking over from Operation Serval in 2014, Barkhane’s primary objective has been supporting the G5 Sahel partner countries in ‘[t]aking over the fight against armed terrorist groups across the Sahel-Saharan strip (SSS)’.³⁵ France has consistently talked up its successes in Mali, and the wider Sahel, however these have been wholly short-

term and tactical. Assassinations of leaders of violent armed groups, such as Jamat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) commander Bah Ag Moussa, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi by French troops, for example, do temporarily disrupt the strategies of violent groups who use terror tactics, and make good headlines. ‘But,’ says Sahel commentator Alex Thurston, ‘[t]hey don’t really produce a lasting drop in violence’.³⁶

Other studies confirm that assassinations of leaders of violent armed groups rarely disrupt these groups in the long term. Ex-Royal Air Force (RAF) intelligence officer Keith Dear found that this so-called ‘decapitation’ strategy can have the inverse effect – ‘[i]t often draws in recruits in search of revenge resulting in larger groups, consolidates alliances between disparate radicals [and] widens the zone of instability’.³⁷

Barkhane and its international military partners have neither systematically weakened, nor contained, the power and lethal capabilities of Sahelian armed groups, whose influence has spread from northern into central Mali and is now also beginning to engulf the south.³⁸ Violent armed groups now also severely affect regional coastal states like Benin and Togo, demonstrating ‘their resilience and their capacity to adapt ... [and] the limitations to current responses to the threat [of such groups]’.³⁹

By looking at the Sahel only through their own security-first lens, international military entities have employed the logic of short-sighted strategic self-interest, regarding the region primarily as a legitimate target for Western counter-terrorism

interventions to contain actual and perceived threats. Political scientist Hans Morgethau called this ‘strategic narcissism’ – when states and international bodies view the world only in relation to themselves and their own interests.⁴⁰ In the context of the Sahel, this means failing to take into account that this is a region of complex, interlinked societies and networks, where many individuals are in fact willing to support interventions that respond to their security realities and needs.⁴¹

Despite huge financial and human resources (particularly from the EU) being injected into counter-terrorism operations and capacity building of national forces, civilian and military deaths have spiralled in Mali and across the region.⁴² Since 2013, at least 8,000 Malian soldiers have been killed in action.⁴³

Killings of civilians by security forces have reached unprecedented levels, with massacres documented in central Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in 2020 alone.⁴⁴ To date, none of these has been independently investigated, and no perpetrators brought to justice. In 2020, a citizen of Mali was more likely to be killed by state security forces than by violent armed groups, and the state committed more human rights abuses in three of the four quarters of the year than violent armed groups, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and MINUSMA.⁴⁵

The killings in Bounti highlighted several important, interlinked tensions that typify and permeate the mixed mandates and diverse deployments in the region: between UN efforts to secure accountability for civilian deaths and France’s counter-terrorism strategy;⁴⁶ between UN requirements to operate impartially and apparent French efforts to draw the UN peacekeeping mission, and other international military bodies, into counter-terrorism and regime protection roles; and, more broadly, between the priorities of counter-terrorism strategies and Sahelian communities most directly affected by them. These normative frameworks push militarised agendas that not only bypass consultations with communities, but can have devastating impacts on them. Saferworld has investigated how counter-terrorism has emerged, through multiple UN Security Council resolutions, as a global strategy, and the current effects and future implications of the UN’s increasing embrace of counter-terrorism.⁴⁷

Interrogating assumptions: community perspectives on security and security forces

In this context, interviewees shared perspectives on security with Saferworld researchers. We particularly

focused on communities based in Sévaré and Fatoma districts, in Mopti region, central Mali.

We asked interviewees in Mopti to define security in their own terms. For many, it was strongly aligned with freedom of movement. “You are secure if you can move freely, if your property is secure [and] you can go freely to harvest your fields.” Others referred to “peace of mind in all areas: economic, social and cultural, and [the capacity] to accept to live with your neighbour”.

Women and men shared very similar definitions, frequently linking security with peace, especially peace of mind and security in their homes. According to the representative of a local women’s organisation in Fatoma, “security means tranquillity and accepting to live together. It also means stability.” For another respondent, “security can be defined from several angles: it can be physical in individuals, it can be social, because social structures are [also] threatened; it can be economic, and can be individual or collective.”⁴⁸

Interviewees in Niger equally defined security in terms of freedom of movement and what some called ‘social protection’. Women highlighted the importance of ‘peace’ within the home, and particularly of children’s education as a form of security. Most Nigerien interviewees emphasised the importance of food security, reflecting the fact Niger is one of the least food-secure countries on earth.⁴⁹ “Security is first of all being able to eat enough and [being able to] take care of your family properly.”⁵⁰

For Burkina Faso interviewees, physical security and collective well-being are inherently linked, with some people describing this as ‘human security’. According to one Burkinabé, “security is vast: it is both food and health and concerns people and their property and the peace of mind of the majority.”⁵¹

All the communities that we engaged with for this research equated security with access to, and control of, local natural resources, especially land and water.

In Mali, natural resources were cited both as sources of local-level conflicts, and as linkages between local dynamics and wider disputes, especially what some described as ‘ancient grievances’. When discussing these issues, people consistently wove history into their perspectives on local conflicts. For example, according to one woman, “all these inter-community conflicts are to do with the control and management of natural resources, and the old political problems linked to chieftaincies before [Malian] independence.”

This feedback complements other studies in highlighting how unresolved disputes, pivoted on access to natural resources but fuelled by power

struggles, especially between competing political elites, have created deep cleavages that continue to divide communities, particularly along ethnic and agro-pastoral lines.⁵²

Malian perceptions of national military and security forces were similarly nuanced.⁵³ Interviewees did not clearly distinguish between different forces, but emphasised how they saw their overall roles as being the protection of civilians, and their collective responsibilities, to “avoid stigmatisation of certain ethnic groups,” especially Fulbé (also known as Fulani) communities, who have frequently been labelled as ‘jihadists’ by Sahelian communities across the region, as well as by security forces. Similarly, interviewees in Niger and Burkina Faso commented on the entrenched stigmatisation of Fulbé communities. In Mali, brutal violence between Fulbé and others, especially Dogon communities, has increasingly been fuelled by armed groups who instrumentalise different ethnicities for their own ends.⁵⁴

The majority of people that we interviewed said that they wanted security and defence forces to be more accepting of the roles that communities can play in supporting local security: they emphasised the urgent need for more local forums and dialogue spaces where they can do so safely. Previous analysis of dialogue spaces shared by civilians and security forces in central Mali, demonstrates that these mechanisms can play an important role in improving local security.⁵⁵

Women in Mali highlighted abuses by national forces more than men. In the words of one woman from Sévaré, “these security forces must come to provide security, and not to kill us. They killed my cousin. He was not a terrorist.”

Women interviewees raised physical and sexual violence, including by national forces, as a central concern. They highlighted the lack of women in the FAMA (Malian armed forces), calling for recruitment of older and younger women into military forces, including as soldiers. This will require a substantial reconfiguration of extremely patriarchal institutions. Feedback from communities in other studies shows that this would be in the FAMA’s own best interest, as having more women working in security forces can reduce violent confrontations and help security forces better fulfil their missions.⁵⁶

Regarding international military forces, many people in Mopti homed in on why, despite the presence of many “foreign

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Security can be defined from several angles: it can be physical, it can be social ... [or] economic, and it can be individual or collective.

Focus group respondent from Mopti, central Mali

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The security forces must avoid confusing Fulbé communities with jihadist groups. They must stop abuses against innocent people.

Focus group respondents in Zinder, Niger

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forces”, especially UN peacekeepers (*les Casques Bleus* or ‘Blue Helmets’), local insecurity is spiralling out of control. They called for more military patrols by UN peacekeepers to focus on protecting civilians in remote areas, not just “in the big cities”.

One person said, “UN forces should be present in the flooded zones [the inland delta of the Niger River] like Tenenkou, and Youwarou in the same way as they are in the circles of Douenza, Bandiagara and Bankass.”⁵⁷ Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and

ISGS have frequently clashed in the Delta region, around Mopti, the Dogon Plateau, and the borderlands of Liptako-Gourma region.⁵⁸

Interviewees in Mopti frequently referred to local “jihadists” and “terrorists”. For some, “jihadist” groups often feature in daily life, against the backdrop of larger “terrorist” groups linked to al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and ISGS. Other people used the terms interchangeably, without clearly distinguishing between them. Many acknowledged that UN peacekeepers and other “foreign forces” such as Barkhane are also “victims of attacks”

by armed groups. They also questioned why Mopti region continues to suffer from regular attacks by armed groups when so many international forces are stationed there.

Analysts have often referred to the ‘security traffic jam’ in central Mali⁵⁹ – with the European Takuba Task Force now added to the mix. Composed of Special Forces, Takuba is not mandated by an international organisation, but is part of Operation Barkhane and under French command. It is a ‘force multiplier’ created to beef up and intensify counter-terrorism operations, despite years of evidence that counter-terrorism has fuelled mass violence while exacerbating state–society divisions and failing to address complex underlying tensions.⁶⁰

For many interviewees, this security traffic jam represents a major disparity between international interventions and the violent insecurities they live with. Interviewees shared their frustrations about needing to be better protected by peacekeepers, and wanting the UN to better understand, and respond to, their security needs.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) positions civilian protection at the centre of MINUSMA’s mandate, and peacekeepers are authorised to use all means necessary to protect civilians.⁶¹ These are long-standing operational hurdles that face peacekeeping missions; however, the feedback from interviewees illustrates another important disconnect regarding insecurity. The UN

mission in Mali was not designed with protection of civilians (POC) as a central priority. Assisting the national peace process and protecting itself from terrorist attacks have been the top priorities for MINUSMA, ‘while the POC mandate has received less attention’.⁶² In addition, the design of effective and innovative protection strategies has been hampered by restricted access to communities, resulting in a lack of granularity in analysis of threats to civilians. This has been compounded by a deterioration of peacekeepers’ security, adversely affecting the mission’s capacity to be present and mobile. Regular ambushes of MINUSMA by violent armed groups have led it to ‘bunkerise’, reducing its domination of the terrain. A UN military officer explained, “[i]f human rights [officers] want to go to Telataï [a village in Gao region, Mali] to investigate killings, it requires two companies and four helicopters and an entire military operation to bring one civilian.”⁶³

The relative lack of responses talking directly about Barkhane forces could be attributed to the low profile of French troops in central Mali. Until recently, Barkhane has played a technical support role to G5 Sahel co-joint forces: they are active in northern Mali, but have not officially carried out unilateral counter-terror operations in central Mali.⁶⁴ G5 Sahel forces meanwhile predominantly operate in the Liptako-Gourma borderlands, where, according to a Sahel civil-military specialist, “they almost don’t engage with communities at all”.⁶⁵

Mainstreaming militias and the process of violence

The interviewees in Mali highlighted that insecurity in Mopti region frequently emanates from violent inter- and intra-communal conflicts between ethnic groups: for example, between the Fulbé (also known as Fulani or Peuhl) and Bambara and Dogon communities, or between Bozo fishing communities in the Niger River Delta and Donso traditional hunters.⁶⁶ These struggles are well known, underlining how deeply embedded they have become in local and national conflict dynamics. Often these are presumed to be conflicts over natural resources. However, this glosses over the historical weaponising of access to, and control of, resources, especially land and water, by state officials. Examples include the systematic failure of agricultural reforms (where the status quo generally favours farmers’ rights over those of nomadic communities), and weak or non-existent application of existing legal texts and/or customary laws, especially regarding *transhumance*.⁶⁷ As the International Crisis Group notes, ‘local conflicts affecting central Mali are less the result of dwindling resources than of increased tensions surrounding land use’.⁶⁸

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The presence of the security forces should reassure women and girls especially regarding violence against [them]. Because the most formidable weapon against women and girls is rape.

Woman interviewee, Mopti, central Mali

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The interviewees underscored that security problems cannot always be solved by counter-terrorism strategies. In the words of a woman resident of Fatoma, “security challenges are not only the fight against terrorism. There are also inter-community and intra-community conflicts that have been generated by violent armed groups in our region”.⁶⁹

In response to these challenges, communities in central Mali began to establish informal local self-defence groups. Many of these groups were set up a number of years ago; as they evolved, they took on various forms – from *Brigades de Vigilance* in Macina (in Segou region) to *Groupes de Veille* (community watch groups) across Mopti region.

At first, the composition of these groups was often very similar: men with makeshift weapons volunteering to protect villages from competing interests, especially from marauding cattle rustlers and armed nomads.

As Mali became increasingly saturated with small arms and light weapons (especially after the 2011 fall of Gaddafi when Malian fighters returned from Libya) these local protectors increasingly began to use guns. Self-defence groups morphed into armed militias, who began extorting money, sometimes from the same communities they had been protecting. Long-standing confrontations between these groups and predominantly Fulbé transhumance nomads – who armed themselves for self-protection and hunting as well as for revenge attacks – ratcheted up into increasingly deadly violence. **Communities often bore the brunt of vicious power struggles between rival local militias.**⁷⁰ With grievances now increasingly settled through armed violence and murder, ineffectual and often corrupt state representatives sank further into insignificance.

In central Mali, violent armed groups, often small in number, and sometimes ‘representatives’ of larger structures, such as Katiba Macina and the Arab Movement of the Azawad (MAA), also used these unresolved disputes to demand ‘obedience’ in return for providing local security on their own terms.⁷¹ The many officials who fled central Mali, often in fear of being assassinated, created the void that these groups eagerly filled.⁷²

The boundaries between these different armed groups and militias are not clear-cut – difficult to separate and often mutually reinforcing.⁷³ Members of Donso militias have allegedly forced male villagers in Mopti region to join their ranks by threatening them with hefty fines, or death, if they refuse.⁷⁴ Members of Fulbé communities have frequently been accused of representing the majority of ‘jihadists’ and have in turn claimed that ‘a struggle

for self-defence against Jihadists has degenerated into a war against the [Fulbé]’.⁷⁵

Malian security and defence forces have also been linked to militia groups for decades.⁷⁶ More recently, investigations by Human Rights Watch in central Mali found militias passing unheeded through security force checkpoints in central Mali, where ‘[d]ozens of witnesses said they saw Dogon and Bambara self-defence members [of militias] carrying firearms and travelling freely on motorbikes in defiance of government bans.’⁷⁷

In this political maelstrom, kidnapping has become much more prevalent: in Mali, more people were abducted in the first eight months of 2021 than in any other year, as documented by ACLED.⁷⁸ Their research indicates that, while half these kidnappings were attributed to ‘jihadists’ a third were by non-identified groups. These groups take hostages both for money and as leverage when pressuring communities to conform to their agendas.⁷⁹

In June 2021, MINUSMA reported widespread human rights abuses against civilians. Alongside abuses by ‘extremist’ groups, they noted that, during the previous three-month reporting period, ‘[v]iolations in the context of security or counterterrorism operations [also] persisted, while a substantial surge in abductions, largely perpetrated by community-based groups and militias in central Mali, severely undermined the enjoyment of fundamental human rights.’⁸⁰ Abuses by Malian security forces included looting, destruction of civilian property, physical abuse directed towards suspects and summary executions.⁸¹

Abuses attributed to militias during the same period included abductions of civilians, extortion and online messages inciting violence against Fulbé populations.⁸² Abuses and violations of civilians by national security forces and community-based armed groups and militias were almost double those attributed to violent extremist groups.⁸³

Analysis conducted in Burkina Faso reveals similar trends. Land privatisation was one of the factors that catalysed widespread community dependence on self-defence militias like the Koglwego.⁸⁴ Relations between armed Burkinabé militias and the state have become politically enmeshed, resulting in a situation where ‘[t]he state encourages the formation of this mosaic of vigilante groups that swiftly acquire official or quasi-official status with respect to administering justice, security [and] property.’⁸⁵

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The saboteurs of peace [in Mali] used to be only the armed groups, but now some militia groups have also entered the dance.

Youth leader from Sévaré, Mopti region

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Whether through banditry or joining self defence or jihadist groups, taking up arms has become widespread and banal in the region ... The porous boundaries between these groups demonstrate that, in a disastrous social and economic context, exercising and controlling violence is above all a political resource.

Tanguy Quidelleur, Burkina Faso researcher, 2020

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Many of the Burkinabé interviewees we spoke to expressed their “appreciation” of the Koglweogo for their “concrete results” in reducing crime and

punishing perpetrators, especially in the absence of state security forces. But they criticised Koglweogo – and other militias – for their abuses and “negative cultural values”, especially violent humiliation of suspects, and racketeering of local populations.⁸⁶

To place this in context, violent armed groups aligned with al-Qaeda began expanding from Mali into Niger and Burkina from 2015, via the Liptako-Gourma region. They established themselves in Niger’s Tillabéri region, and across eastern Burkina Faso – where they began to absorb local militias such as the Koglweogo into their own ranks. In Burkina Faso, national security forces have conducted extensive counter-terror ‘combing exercises’ that have resulted in arbitrary arrests, abuses against

suspects and extra-judicial killings, all of which the government has promised to fully investigate.⁸⁷ One in twenty Burkinabé citizens is now estimated to have been internally displaced by violence.⁸⁸

Since early 2020, the Burkinabé government has pursued a policy of recruiting civilian ‘Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland’ (VDPs) in order to ‘reinforce local-level security’.⁸⁹ The Ministry of Defence, responsible for training and arming the volunteers, claims these are inclusive local self-defence forces who support community security. However, this claim is heavily undermined by the fact that VDP ranks are dominated by members of existing militias such as Koglweogo – and recruits from other already politically dominant ethnic groups, such as the Mossi and Gourmatché.

The Burkinabé interviewees raised several serious concerns about VDPs, especially lack of transparency, acceptance by communities, and “zero respect of the [Burkinabé] law”, including examples of severe abuses against civilians. VDPs have been accused of the same violations attributed to militias, and of effectively replicating their tactics, including torture, summary executions and rape, all with state-sanctioned impunity.⁹⁰

Historically, Niger took a different trajectory. After brutal putdowns of rebellions by state security forces, especially in the 1990s, successive governments managed to contain local level self-defence and militia groups with relative success, especially by integrating rebels into security forces and state institutions. Using the political carrot of meaningful representation for minority groups, they

largely consolidated the state’s monopoly on armed violence. But the contested border areas of Tillabéri and Tahoua have been increasingly wracked with intercommunal violence, exacerbated by the influence of criminal networks moving across the region. **In this setting, local armed self-defence groups have emerged, mainly composed of Tuaregs and Fulbé members.**⁹¹

Analysis indicates that efforts by the Niger state to dissuade many other ethnic minorities from setting up armed groups, thereby avoiding the ‘militiafication’ seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, are floundering. In the face of the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin, and massacres of civilians by ISGS (accounting for 79 per cent of violence targeting civilians in the first six months of 2021), community militia groups are now expanding, particularly in Tahoua and Tillabéri.⁹² ISGS is reported to have positioned itself by ‘making claims of protection [to communities] against the state and Mali and militias’.

As previously noted, Nigerien military forces have been credibly implicated in mass killings and disappearances of civilians, especially during counter-terror operations.⁹³ The dynamics between predatory security forces, ISGS, and the emergence of militia groups in Niger need further deep analysis, to draw out the contextual realities feeding this process of violence. As in Mali and Burkina Faso, communities find themselves in the crosshairs between these violent competing interests.

Stepping back from continued military escalation

The mainstreaming of armed violence in the Sahel is a constantly evolving process. Political dysfunction, especially the systematic exclusion of civilians from decisions that hugely influence their lives, has played a major role in creating insecure, fragmented communities who frequently turn in on themselves, and against each other. Local self-defence groups and militias often evolve in problematic ways, and perpetrate sometimes extreme violence. At the same time, they represent the resilience of communities forced to protect themselves, including from predatory state actors whose severe abuses are not being sufficiently confronted by leaders of international military interventions.⁹⁴

Reports that Mali’s military transitional authorities have deployed troops from the Russian Wagner Group inside the country highlight once again the Sahel’s profile as an arena of ‘Great Power competition’ between military powers like the US, Russia and China, for showcasing their capabilities and building political influence and alliances.⁹⁵

This also includes regional players like Algeria, which has long nurtured political influence in Mali through its policy of strategic non-intervention.⁹⁶ The political matrix of competing interests intensifies the risk that civilians' needs will become – or remain – secondary considerations compared with the priorities of (and power struggles between) the political powers using the Sahel as their military test-site.⁹⁷

The genealogy of violence and insecurity plaguing the Sahel is multi-dimensional. It includes deeply embedded structural violence: the oppression of minorities and gender-based abuses, in some cases conducted by political elites, including those leading and influencing national military and security forces. Although a matrix of international partners has intervened in the Sahel, they have not rigorously challenged this status quo, instead following France's lead in spearheading a 'security first' approach.

The trajectories of self-defence and militia groups in Mali, and the Sahel region, illustrate that **armed violence frequently begins locally, fuelled by unresolved political disputes that spiral**; this creates opportunities for networks of 'jihadists' and criminals (who are not always the same) who exploit unresolved tensions for their own ends. This disconnect between international interventions and the lived realities of communities is one of the critical shortfalls of current counter-terror-driven approaches: their logic ignores the deep, unresolved grievances and inter-linked local conflicts that incubate them.

The interviewees' experiences and analysis strengthen the evidence that militarised strategies alone cannot address these complex issues. Effectively labelling all armed groups as 'terrorists', including those willing to participate in dialogue that can begin to address their grievances, has been counter-productive: it has reinforced counter-terrorism responses that have consistently failed to stem violence against civilians.

A refocusing by international actors on better understanding these self-defence and militia groups and the grievances that continue to drive them, is necessary to precipitate change.

This would be most effective if integrated with an existing knowledge of hierarchies within and across militia groups, including how community networks could encourage them to enter dialogue spaces. This requires active engagement and operationalisation of civilian expertise as well as a focus on non-securitized strategies that include dialogue, consultations and feedback to and from communities that is monitored and the results formally evaluated.

In practical terms, so many coalitions and initiatives have been launched in the region (including, for example, the Partnership of Security and Stability in the Sahel and the Coalition for the Sahel) that coordination between entities appears to be more a process whereby '[o]verlaps, duplications and turf battles are more defining than the actual work being done on the ground.'⁹⁸

One mechanism that stands apart is the EU-funded Casualty and Incident Tracking and Analysis Cell, known as (CITAC or MISAD). It is a component of the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Compliance Framework of the G5 Sahel. Bringing together civil society activists, human rights representatives and military personnel, it aims to track, analyse and respond to all incidents that involve harm to civilians. This is a good start. However, in the words of a Sahel civil military expert, "can you do this only by working with G5 Sahel? I think the answer is no."⁹⁹

The following chapter explores how better coherence between local, national and international dialogue initiatives can also help to begin reconfiguring these dynamics.

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We are not ready to address root causes: we are working at the periphery. We have 20 different strategies for the Sahel! We have more bilateral than multilateral actions and relationships. The UN and EU – we have killed multilateralism [but] we should all be fighting for the same principles

UN Political Advisor in the Sahel

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DIALOGUE
NATIONAL
INCLUSIF

J'ai
MON
MOT à
DIRE



Dialogue est une vertu



DIALOGUE
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Billboard in Bamako, promoting inclusive national dialogue in Mali with the caption. "I have my word to say".

© Hamdia Traoré

4

A state within the state

What stability means to Sahelian communities

“We almost don’t have a country anymore”

Assitan Diallo, President of a pan-African women’s rights organisation in Mali

In August 2021, independent UN expert Alioune Tine visited Mali to assess its human rights compliance. He found that violence was spreading so rapidly, ‘it threatens the very survival of the state’.¹⁰⁰

Tine described some parts of central Mali as ‘a state within a state’. Here, armed groups have consolidated their power over communities so completely that they have effectively replaced state functions, including tax collection, security provision and (their versions of) justice. Alioune Tine highlighted civilian populations’ doubts about the Malian authorities’ political will ‘[t]o take concrete measures to respect, protect and promote human rights and to respond to the serious challenges facing the country’.¹⁰¹

His statement affirms what Malian, and some international, activists have been warning about international ‘stabilisation efforts’ both before and after the most recent military coups. In the words of Assitan Diallo, **“stabilisation in Mali means for us stabilisation of the military status quo”**.¹⁰²

Stabilisation has become the mantra of many international powers operating in the Sahel; however, there is no consensus about what it means. Despite being a ‘multi-dimensional integrated stabilization mission’, MINUSMA does not have a working definition of stabilisation. The EU on the other hand, defines it as actions supporting a political process:

‘Stabilization could be defined as a set of swift actions aiming at creating conditions supportive of a political process, helping countries and/or communities to prevent or reduce violence, and initiating efforts to address the drivers of conflicts on the consequences of a crisis.’

European External Action Service, 2017

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Through this [inter-communal] violence, the very foundation and basis of the stability of our society is totally destroyed.

Interviewee in Fatoma, Mopti region, 2021

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establish ‘good governance’ – have not shifted the dynamics driving political violence and human insecurity. The mantra of stabilisation has become a political tool that effectively means what people wielding political influence say it means.

Though we did not directly ask communities how they would define stabilisation, feedback from interviewees across the three countries focused on how they framed safety and security and what they needed to feel safe and well. The responses were very consistent: feeling physically secure, and having access to food, economic opportunities and education (which was a priority across all the communities we consulted) and especially the ability to move freely and without fear, all contributed to people feeling they and their communities had more stability. Many interviewees also wanted to engage with political processes, at local or regional levels, including being part of dialogues and local peacebuilding initiatives. These factors are generally compatible with the European External Action Service definition of stabilisation (above), indicating a convergence that could, for example, help the EU define stabilisation in its new Sahel strategy in a manner that reflects community needs and priorities.

This chapter presents community perspectives on the process, and value, of dialogue and other initiatives aiming to stem violence and insecurity, contributing to stability in communities from the bottom up.

Dialogue dynamics: local influencers and limitations

Interviews and focus group discussions on community dialogue dynamics took place in central Mali and South-eastern Niger, at a substantial distance from the capital cities. In both areas, customary, traditional and religious leaders have

historically been widely respected as ‘persons of influence’.¹⁰⁴ In both countries they are almost exclusively older men.

Interviewees in both Mopti and in Zinder highlighted the continuing influence of traditional leaders in resolving conflicts. For an interviewee from Mopti, “traditional chiefs and religious leaders [still] occupy a very important place in terms of dialogue between certain communities.”¹⁰⁵

Certain traditional Malian leaders have been able to negotiate, “lifting the embargo of villages that had been locked up by radical [jihadist] groups”. This refers to villages effectively taken hostage by armed groups, who then controlled villagers’ daily lives, through coercion, threats and violence. These take-overs (locally known as ‘embargoes’) are currently dominated by Donso militias and fighters aligned with Katiba Macina.¹⁰⁶

Other local Malian ‘people of influence’ who have enabled ‘the return of peace’ between communities in conflict include representatives of associations of local women, youth councils and blacksmiths (*forgerons*), as well as elected village chiefs, and representatives of traditional networks of communicators (known as *recotrade*). “No [local] dialogue can start without the presence of the customary chiefs, the religious chiefs in the village elders,” said a Malian civil society researcher.¹⁰⁷

Community members identified individual villages in Mopti region that had been ‘liberated’ through peace agreements negotiated by these local people of influence. But local militias and other violent armed groups in central Mali have been using a strategy co-opting or coercing traditional and religious leaders into effectively surrendering their authority for some years. Interviewees in Niger reported that this was now also a pattern in some local villages, especially in western areas of the country.

Interviewees in Sévaré shared an example from the commune of Djenné: after traditional leaders had negotiated a local peace accord between representatives of Bambara and Fulbé groups, it was Donso militia members who imposed the fines on Bambara farmers and Fulbé herders who continued to steal from each other. “The Donso imposed that if you stole livestock from a Fulbé, you must pay [him] a fine: if you don’t pay, you are killed. The same applies to a Fulbé who steals from a Bambara.”¹⁰⁸

These reconfigurations of local power have compromised the moral authority of many traditional leaders, no longer seen as credible interlocutors in many local conflicts. According to a woman interviewee from Fatoma, **“our marabouts, our community leaders and village chiefs are lost. If you want to oppose something and say ‘don’t do this’, tomorrow you will be murdered.”**

Across Mopti and neighbouring Ségou, other local peace agreements to lift embargoes have been violated, and villages ‘recaptured’ by Katiba Macina, or by Donso militias, who force local men to join their ranks, threatening to kill them unless they pay hefty ‘fines’.¹⁰⁹

In Zinder, however, traditional (especially religious) leaders still retain much moral authority. “The particularity of the Nigerien rural world is the omnipresence of religious leaders [who are] well integrated into the community.”

Zinder interviewees shared their analysis that “the [state] administration intervenes through these popular structures” in Niger. This includes influential elders acting as ‘sentries’ during informal coordination between security forces and rural communes, especially in conflict-affected areas like Tillabéri and Diffa.

This underlines a strategic difference in approaches towards traditional power bases in the two countries: in Niger, state actors have interacted closely with local authorities (including traditional and religious leaders) using these local power bases to promote the state’s wider political agendas. This also includes local unarmed vigilance groups, or ‘*groupes de veille*’, set up by young men in many rural areas to monitor local security.¹¹⁰ Integrating the state into these traditional mechanisms enabled successive Nigerien governments to retain their monopoly on the use of armed violence through national security forces.¹¹¹ However, the approach has been undermined by state abuses (including mass killings and torture), which have caused citizen–state relations to deteriorate.¹¹²

The overwhelming majority of influencers in Sahelian communities are men. Although more women in Mali are gradually taking positions of leadership at local and national levels, including a minority of political positions, structural and cultural barriers severely limit their political agency. But at the local level, women are extremely active. For example, informal networks of women mediators operate in the regions of Mopti and Timbuktu. These activists have, with minimal financial resources, successfully negotiated between local conflicting parties, including traditional leaders in the region of Timbuktu.¹¹³

These initiatives, led and managed by women, have created spaces for them to challenge men’s ingrained authority, as well as allowing them to influence the local political conflicts that divide and destabilise communities. They are locally ‘owned’ and contextually responsive, not imposed from outside.

In the regions of Mopti and Timbuktu, local peace influencers include networks of women mediators who have successfully negotiated between

conflict parties, including local customary chiefs locked in power struggles.

These localised initiatives underline the incoherence and disconnects of many international security interventions across the region, which do not address the *processes of violence*. Those structures and dynamics which have meant that self-defence groups and armed militias are now driving much of the violence in central Mali, and increasingly in Niger and Burkina Faso.

Spaces for change: supporting civil society expertise

Many interviewees in Mopti and Zinder said they valued locally managed dialogues as being truly transformative, and called for more opportunities and resources to expand them. In Mopti, many people cited positive examples of dialogue work supported by local, national and some international organisations, as well as by Mali’s National Reconciliation Support Mission (MARN) and its Regional Support Team for National Reconciliation (ERAR).

Interviewees generally supported existing local-level dialogues between communities and ‘jihadists’, and some people recommended these efforts be intensified. To date, there have been a number of successful local dialogue initiatives with leaders of armed groups, for example in Koro and Djalloubé communes.¹¹⁴

However, many of the people we interviewed also recognised the limitations of these local initiatives. Despite certain tangible successes, such as in Koro, the success of many local dialogue initiatives has been short-lived. For many traditional leaders, their quandary is that they may be able to negotiate the lifting of ‘embargoes’ of villages, but not to sustain them. Local mediation networks face similar challenges of maintaining new peaceful status quos in areas where violent conflicts have become the norm and peaceful resolution of disputes the exception. Security interventions often override the gains made by local peacebuilders by normalising military responses to conflicts, where one side ‘wins’.

In practical terms, one of the major challenges facing civil society activists and organisations is a lack of flexible, medium-to-long-term funding. Informal structures, such as local mediation

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It is necessary [for states to punish] those who violate the conventions of peace, to enforce the law. It is the armed groups that enforce the law.

Focus group participant in Mopti

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Traditional leaders are inescapable [here]: in Niger, the traditional and religious chiefs are the two poles of traditional village power who complement each other.

”

networks, especially those led by women and young people, often function without offices or representatives in capital cities, leaving them outside of many potential funding ‘loops’. Coordination between organisations is often weak, especially at a wider, regional level. In Mali especially, there has been duplication of activities as national and international organisations compete for funds.

As Sahel analyst Delina Goxho notes, regarding the EU Sahel strategy, ‘[w]hensoever [organisations in the Sahel] . . . get funding from the EU, this happens through other organizations who act as intermediaries – retaining part of the money, setting priorities and exerting decision-making authority.’¹¹⁵ This requires major donors, like the EU, to undertake comprehensive mapping – ideally with civil society organisations (CSOs) themselves – of existing formal and informal structures, to ensure access to funds is not limited to the ‘usual suspects’ but available particularly to those working in towns and rural communities who may well struggle with donor bureaucracies, and especially women-led and women’s rights organisations.

The EU strategy talks up civil society, placing greater emphasis on political dimensions, especially governance and accountability. These are welcome developments, although, like stabilisation, the strategy does not define these terms, nor how accountability would actually work. This vagueness risks treating the undefined mantra of good governance like ‘the ultimate solution to the region’s multi-layered conflicts and waves of instability’¹¹⁶ without interrogating what it means in the context of the Sahel, and where responsibilities and accountability lie.

The political crises in the Sahel clearly require responses that extend beyond local initiatives. Representatives of national and international organisations in Mali interviewed for this research called for revision of the national constitution – something the transitional military authorities have already agreed to in principle, but not delivered – and for it to legally enshrine the rights of minority groups, such as Fulbé and Bella communities.¹¹⁷

The Malian military authorities are beginning to re-establish the presence of local authorities across the centre of the country: this approach can only succeed if people are brought into working partnerships with authorities, with agreed and clearly defined ‘governance’ criteria, and with indicators that allow communities to hold their leaders to account. Through the French–German Partnership for Security and Stability in Sahel (P3S) the EU could help to ensure that people are involved in monitoring the return of the state and its administrations, as well as access to basic services based on locally defined needs.¹¹⁸

The highly analytical reflections shared by interviewees highlight their deep understanding of more widespread, conflict dynamics. ‘Our state must privilege dialogue initiated by the people themselves . . . and [it] must fight against other political influences.’¹¹⁹ Medium- to long-term investment in civilian expertise, including in rural settings where CSOs that have often been neglected by state authorities and international donors, can begin to shift some of these entrenched dynamics. This approach of strengthening commitment to dialogue initiatives led by Sahelians could also be extended to violent armed groups who have shown some willingness to engage. This clearly involves risks that communities are often best placed to assess. It is imperative that this approach is both designed and implemented with communities, and that it is not sabotaged by political elites with vested interests, or by international partners, both of whom have substantial influence. As the International Crisis Group observes, there is for example, a clear potential role for a national mediator.¹²⁰

But a comment by a national civil society leader echoes Malian perspectives about how the political ground has more recently shifted and who holds the political cards. ‘Because of the growing disagreement between our Malian leaders, France, and by extension the European Union, we are all talking about geopolitical perspectives especially stabilisation and good governance. [But] we know these problems [in Mali] will in the end be determined by these outside interests.’¹²¹

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Many Nigeriens migrate seasonally to work across the 15 countries of the ECOWAS region.

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5

Broken pathways

EU policies and traditional migration routes in the Sahel

The southern Niger city of Zinder lies between Agadez (to the north) and Diffa (to the east, bordering Chad). It's also a day by bus from the border with Nigeria, making it a hub for Sahelians on the move. Before presenting people's perspectives on migration dynamics, it is worth setting these in context, especially as we consider the political role of the European Union in Niger, and the Sahel.

Travellers have criss-crossed Niger for many years due to its position along traditional migration routes between North and West Africa. Travellers have included seasonal traders, businesspeople, migrant workers, and those hoping to reach Europe, primarily via Libya. A relatively formalised smuggling system eventually emerged, which substantially boosted local Nigerien economies.¹²²

Many of the workers who criss-crossed Sahelian borders, didn't necessarily consider themselves 'migrants' – they simply continued a long tradition of using what many Nigeriens call 'traditional channels' to find seasonal employment before returning home some months later. Therefore, for numerous communities, these cyclical migrations are embedded in their cultural economy.

The rights of West Africans to travel and work across the 15 ECOWAS states was legally enshrined in 1979.¹²³ In this section we use 'migrants' as a generic term for people on the move – because this reflects how Nigeriens, Malians and Burkinabés routinely describe themselves and others, when they cross borders for work and to trade.

While Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso could all be described as countries of origin and transit for migrants, Mali in particular is also a destination in its own right, due to its relative level of development compared with Niger and Burkina Faso, and the increased opportunities for work and trade. Migrants from throughout the ECOWAS region have settled in Bamako, which is considered relatively safe.

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Seventy-five per cent of migration in Sub-Saharan Africa is regional.

Saferworld, ‘Partners in Crime’, 2019

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Migrants, as well as people who have been expelled from other countries, or decided to return home, have access to health care, and legal advice from national and international humanitarian organisations.¹²⁴ Burkina Faso is more a country of transit for migrants, and economic fragility and increasing violent conflict have pushed huge numbers of Burkinabés themselves to migrate to neighbouring states, particularly Côte d’Ivoire, where they are so well established, they have their own diaspora CSOs.¹²⁵

From 2010, as the Sahel region became more politically fragile, people increasingly began to migrate northwards through the Sahara towards Libya via the Nigerien city of Agadez.¹²⁶ The EU and European governments began consolidating strategic migration management ‘partnerships’ with third party countries, to outsource the containment of so-called ‘migrant flows’ attempting to reach European borders. When more than a million migrants and asylum-seekers arrived in Europe in 2015 – mainly via Mediterranean routes – mainstream political responses hardened. European politicians and the media increasingly began to adopt a rhetoric of panic framed around Europe being overwhelmed by asylum-seekers and immigrants.¹²⁷

In 2015, the EU set up the ‘Emergency Trust Fund for Africa’ (EUTF).¹²⁸ This instrument enabled European leaders to shift much of the responsibility for migration, and especially border security, to non-European governments, especially in Africa. The same year saw the government of Niger introduce a wide-ranging law against migrant smuggling and irregular migration, the first country in the Sahel to do so.¹²⁹

Niger subsequently became one of the top recipients of EU aid in the world, hugely profiting from its cooperation in containing mixed migration through border security coordinated by military actors.¹³⁰

Since 2015, the EU has used this two-tiered approach of securitisation matched with externalising, or outsourcing, the management of migration beyond Europe’s borders to contain irregular migration, with, as the case of Niger illustrates, financial incentives for those countries willing to cooperate with its agenda. Saferworld extensively researched the outsourcing of migration containment in our 2019 report, ‘Partners in Crime’. Through the experiences of migrants from several countries, including Niger, the report exposed how ‘the short term political expediency of this approach ... create[s] a vicious circle within which the [migration] system reinforces itself’.¹³¹

Local pathways, motivations and challenges of migrating

Interviewees in Zinder described how young men travelling to work in Libya and returning home with camels (as proof of their success) has been a traditional rite of passage into manhood across Niger. Young women meanwhile have regularly travelled to Algeria for work as housemaids for wealthy families, although, according to a Nigerien gender expert we interviewed, some women resort to sex work or other ‘disreputable’ means of making money.¹³²

According to the interviewees, many local Zinder farmers trade in neighbouring Nigeria, and some move on to northern Benin because of a “lack of reliable and sustainable local agricultural opportunities”. They say that Niger’s neighbours are the main destination countries for local migrants; this is echoed by other studies on migration patterns across the country.¹³³ However, some young men now travel to study and work in the Middle East Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia.¹³⁴

As in other Sahel countries, these regional channels, or pathways, have helped to sustain rural Nigerien communities, especially as Niger is one of the economically poorest and least developed countries in the world. In 2020, the UN Development Programme Human Development Index ranked it bottom of the table, with 45 per cent of the population surviving on less than two US dollars a day.¹³⁵

As for motivations for migrating, although interviewees in Zinder did frequently refer to poverty, the majority focused more on structural economic inequalities, such as “the exaggerated [high] rates of taxes on the small and tiny businesses that make up the great majority [in Niger]”.

For another local Nigerien trader, “owners of medium and large businesses rarely pay their taxes, or [else they] pay very little”. Niger has long been rated as one of the most corrupt countries on earth: almost a quarter of people who used public service reported paying a bribe in 2019.¹³⁶ The combination of these structural inequalities had heavily influenced interviewees’ decisions to migrate for work.

Most of the interviewees believed that migration dynamics have changed, especially during the last few years. Two factors in particular emerged from the interviews and focus groups: firstly, many people testified that rising insecurity, locally and nationally, had negatively affected their ability to migrate, especially north of Zinder; secondly, they complained that the remaining opportunities to migrate for work were being systematically closed down by “national and international armed forces

[that] are blocking migrants”, as well as by local state officials.

Ninety per cent of interviewees in Zinder said they had already either migrated, or had attempted to migrate, and been turned back.

Regarding insecurity, there have been many cases of “young would-be [Nigerien] migrants who are often robbed indiscriminately in [their] country of origin by guides, transporters and elements of the security forces, and by gangs and smugglers on the borders [of Libya]”. Other studies have highlighted the dangerous risks faced by migrants travelling north, towards Libya or Algeria, including being stranded in the Sahara, and, for women, sexual violence and exploitation. The extreme militarisation of the border between Mali, Niger and Algeria has frequently seen migrants abandoned far from the official borders, forcing them to navigate this desert terrain on foot.¹³⁷ The International Organization for Migration has documented deaths of hundreds of migrant women, men and children in the Sahara, but, despite these risks, and the brutal reputation of Algerian border security forces, thousands still take their chances every year.¹³⁸

As migration has become increasingly restricted, and effectively criminalised, migrants have increasingly turned to these more dangerous northern routes through desert areas tightly controlled by hybrid networks and alliances of Tuareg and Tubu *passeurs* (or smugglers), transnational criminals and violent armed fighters.¹³⁹ The crackdown on migrants has expanded lucrative business opportunities for these networks. A study into the changing dynamics on migration routes from Niger to the North African states of Algeria and Libya concluded that ‘the implementation of migration policies in the Sahel has contributed to an increase in human rights abuses and risks for migrants and refugees, as well as rises in human trafficking and forced labour’.¹⁴⁰

On the question of Nigeriens being prevented from crossing national borders, security forces have long extorted bribes from migrants, and have been known to accompany *clandestins* (irregular migrants) travelling towards Agadez in exchange for bribes. The draconian 2015 anti-smuggling laws adopted by Niger led to further crackdowns on migrants, who became increasingly vulnerable to being arrested or coerced into bribes. According to the interviewees, this vicious circle continues to this day.¹⁴¹ For many people, “[t]he public administration is increasingly against migration. It would seem this is contained in the international conventions ratified by Niger.”

In addition, interviewees reported that they were being increasingly prevented from crossing borders by officials demanding official papers (such as ID

papers) which many of them do not have. “The official agents make you fill out forms, but we don’t know how to read, so we are blocked, sometimes for days and days for nothing.” Non-literacy is high in Niger, rendering migrants, especially those from rural areas, vulnerable to exploitation by officials. Another said, “[y]ou have to pay money for each administrative [formal] paper. Often you don’t even get a receipt.”

Some interviewees believed the Nigerien Government has set targets for migrants to be forcibly returned, in response to these international conventions. One young man who had recently returned said he believed the police and gendarmerie receive a bonus according to how many migrants they turn back at the border; however, this could not be verified.¹⁴²

These multiple **migration stresses** have hit young people in Niger particularly hard. “Our youth see no other alternative to seasonal migration, which has become a tradition from generation to generation. If the migration routes are blocked, the young people remain in the villages idle. This is not without consequences, with some being tempted to join jihadist groups.”

While there is little evidence to directly support this claim (and it is important to question assumptions that violent armed groups are largely made up of poor unemployed youth) we consulted Nigerien CSOs, who also expressed deep concern about the impacts of lack of opportunities for young Nigeriens. “Many of our youth used to work in Agadez, transporting migrants, but now that has been criminalised,” said the director of a national NGO working on civil rights. “Others worked in the salt mines around Agadez, but most of them are now closed. Then the government banned motorbikes in rural areas because of insecurity, so the local motor-taxis are illegal.¹⁴³ They banned fishing in Lake Chad too! So I ask, what exactly can our young people do in this situation?”¹⁴⁴

Steps towards inclusive change: how migrants in the Sahel can advise the EU

Interviewees’ reflections again highlight their analysis of the intersections between the challenges

“
Ninety per cent of interviewees in Zinder said they had already either migrated, or had attempted to migrate, and been turned back.
”

“
It is clear that a purely military response by states to the migration phenomena ... leads to the opposite result. Indeed, these responses lead to the proliferation of clandestine migrant smugglers ... with obvious consequences for social peace.
”

Civil society leader, Niamey

they face and the impacts of international agendas on the evolution of these challenges. Their feedback underlines that the Sahel region has historically been characterised by the mobility of its diverse populations, and how much cross-border economic cooperation has nourished and sustained their communities.

By systematically aligning complex migration dynamics, including migration within the region, with narrow definitions of security, the EU approach has institutionalised the increasing militarisation of borders across the Sahel. Saferworld's recent research on EU security assistance in the Sahel revealed, for example, that the budgets of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and security assistance projects in the Sahel doubled between 2015 and 2020, with a huge emphasis on capacity building of national security forces, frequently aligned with border security activities.¹⁴⁵

This takes place amidst a backdrop of French troops strongly supporting G5 Sahel forces across the region, including Niger. Italian troops have also been posted in Niger as part of anti-smuggling crackdowns.¹⁴⁶

Since the expansion of its mandates in 2015 and 2016, **EUCAP Sahel Niger has expanded its focus to migration containment and border control:** it has launched efforts to construct and equip border checkpoints in Niger and train border guards, including in detaining 'irregular migrants'. Meanwhile, EU Trust Fund-financed security assistance projects in Mali are loosely framed around migration management and border security management programmes.¹⁴⁷ There is a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the impacts of these programmes, including on migrants working within the ECOWAS region.

The EU has signed other partnership agreements with North African countries that have agreed to work to prevent irregular migration towards Europe, despite clearly documented risks to migrant populations.¹⁴⁸

According to Algerian NGO *Alarme Phone Sahara*, '[a]lthough the Algerian state has so far refused to

sign an official migration agreement with EU countries, its ruthless deportation policy will serve as an asset in the upcoming negotiations with European states on credits and economic cooperation.'¹⁴⁹

“
For many West African countries, migration is a precious economic and demographic safety valve and an important stable source of state income.

Ana Uzelac, Clingendael Institute (2019)

”

The inherent value of regional migration across ECOWAS

Migration containment has been mainstreamed across much of the Sahel, woven into highly questionable discourse about security and border controls, without sufficient assessment of the impacts on human rights, nor on migration within the fifteen members of ECOWAS. This has had particularly strong impacts on Niger because of its historic role as a country of transit.¹⁵⁰ The level of seasonal mobility across ECOWAS has long had a positive contribution to economic sustainability and cross-border stabilisation, by building links within and across communities.

There is, however, growing evidence (though at this stage limited empirical data) indicating that the EU's current approach is having negative impacts on livelihoods in some countries in West Africa. This includes analysis that 'EU policies aimed at curbing migration may thus also end up slowing down the development processes in West Africa that the EU perceives as one of the key approaches to tackling the root causes of migration'.¹⁵¹

The fact that Sahelian migration was not discussed in the recent integrated EU Sahel strategy, marks a missed opportunity that urgently needs to be addressed. As an influential international partner (and donor) in the region, the EU has an important role to play in ensuring that regional migration is better managed using rights-based approaches. This needs to take into account the positive contribution that migration brings across ECOWAS, alongside the need to rigorously monitor the impacts of its approach to migration management, including human rights abuses, as well as identifying those who 'lose' as a result of the EU's migration containment policies, and how these losses can be better mitigated.¹⁵² The interviewees we consulted in Zinder spoke of migrants' and ex-migrants' eagerness to participate in meaningful discussions on migration, and the importance of international decision makers listening and responding to their concerns regarding the impacts of current strategies. Their recommendations are included at the end of this report.

The (ECOWAS) Common Approach on Migration prioritises freedom of movement for citizens across the region. However, complex issues like security, governance and sustainable economic development – which ought to be pursued as strategic objectives in their own right – are being reframed as levers that policymakers can use to tackle irregular migration without sufficient attention to the impacts these policies have on communities who enjoy rights to migrate within and across the region.

For this paradigm to shift, the EU needs to reassess the impacts of its current approaches to migration in the Sahel, with a refocus on working with Sahelian governments to ensure migrants can travel safely across the region for work, trade and travel, and identifying legal pathways for the minority of migrants and refugees who do seek to migrate towards Europe. This approach is not incompatible with migration management; in fact it could begin to mitigate some of the severely negative impacts that current approaches are inflicting on migrant communities in Niger and other Sahelian states. It is important that the EU recognise the coherence between supporting the rights of migrants across the region and sustaining local economies and that this

is identified and reflected in policies that seek to protect migrants and their rights.

This could begin with an EU regional migration framework that respects the parameters of ECOWAS, and the sovereignty of its member states, while actively supporting migrants to travel more safely across the region. If developed through consultation with migrant communities, national and international organisations accompanying them, this could be a valuable tool in better aligning the EU's push for sustainable regional development with current migration realities, especially the seasonal, temporary and circular migration pathways that sustain so many different communities across the region.

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Nigerien women market traders.
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6

Gender, resilience and agency

Supporting women on their own terms

Military interventions, stabilisation efforts and migration dynamics can affect women and men very differently. Investigating the gender dynamics, and especially the discriminatory beliefs and practices that drive and embed them, is a prerequisite to understanding how better to address them.

Discrimination against women and girls across the Sahel region is recognised as widespread and structural, yet it continues to be systematically reinforced. **Out of 189 countries listed in the UN Gender Inequality Index (2020), Niger ranks 189th, Mali 184th and Burkina Faso 182nd, placing these among the most unequal countries in the world.**¹⁵³

A striking example of this overarching gender inequality is reflected in the formal mediation and peacebuilding fields where opportunities for women to play meaningful roles in political consultations, formal peace and mediation processes is severely limited across the region. This contrasts with the examples in this report of women-led local dialogue initiatives in Mali that show how effectively women use their political agency in their communities despite the multi-layered discrimination they face. In the words of one of a woman civil society leader we interviewed in Mali, “[w]e are double victims, we suffer from discrimination in our society, and violence because the crisis. But we are not only victims, we work together to change our lives and we understand the challenges we face.”

“

Women and girls of the central Sahel experience some of the highest rates of recorded [gender-based violence (GBV)] in the world. In gender studies, violence at the hands of armed actors and trauma due to witnessing violence are amongst the concerns raised by women and girls.

Gender Based Violence Global Protection Cluster, October 2020¹⁵⁴

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Regarding insecurity, and the securitisation approaches we addressed in the first chapter, it is now more recognised that international military interventions are largely driven and shaped by patriarchal agendas (especially Western ones) that consistently neglect gender dynamics. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently acknowledged that,

“**The integration of women in uniform into the defence and security forces of G5 Sahel is not only a matter of women’s rights; it is also a matter of strategic effectiveness.**

Aminata Ndiaye, G5 Sahel

‘[e]xternal military organisations have not created the conditions necessary to protect civilians, including women, thus far. While some interventions have led to temporary stability, they have not led to a durable means of reducing violence [against women] over the long term.’¹⁵⁵

Strong and vocal recognition at the diplomatic, strategic and tactical levels of the importance of challenging negative gender norms in society and in the military backed up with investments in full-time dedicated senior gender experts as essential roles within all international military deployments would be a huge improvement. If supported by senior leadership and given appropriate incentives and sanctions for compliance, this would help to ensure that accountability and human rights mechanisms, such as the CITAC/MISAD mechanisms discussed earlier in this report, are implemented with a strong gender sensitivity lens. This is vital in monitoring the different gendered impacts of military interventions for different communities, especially women and children. Saferworld has developed gender-sensitive conflict analysis toolkits that can be adapted to different contexts by analysts and programme designers to mitigate harmful risks and build on the more nuanced understanding of social and political dynamics afforded by such analysis.¹⁵⁶

More broadly, capacity building programmes for national and international military and security forces need to integrate gender sensitivity into training, ensuring (with rigorous monitoring) that the needs of women and girls are fully taken into account and harmful gender norms begin to be addressed. Mainstreaming the presence of women civil society representatives meaningfully into these processes, and working with them to monitor and evaluate the results of these engagements, can also impact positively on civil–military relations.

Stabilisation efforts in the Sahel provoke a host of other gendered questions. Many women-led organisations, and especially smaller organisations working for example on women’s rights, struggle to access flexible funds that allow them to design and implement their own programmes as opposed to those favoured by larger international organisations. As previously noted, one of the issues frequently

raised by the organisations we interviewed for this research was local CSOs’ lack of access to direct funding from donors, and lack of direct engagement with these donors, such as the EU.¹⁵⁷ Instead, much of the international funding from (for example) EU instruments is distributed via large international structures such as the UN or international development organisations or agencies.¹⁵⁸

While recognising that compliance with international financial regulations on the financing of proscribed groups and individuals provides an increasingly confusing and complex legal and operational playing field, and taking into account the diverse needs and circumstances of CSOs in different conflict contexts, efforts to offer more direct and flexible funding to local and national organisations – in particular women-led organisations – **would help realign some of the power dynamics between local and international organisations working on women’s rights**, including in the Sahel. It would help to ensure that funds do not overwhelmingly favour ‘the usual suspects’ and are instead more widely dispersed amongst more diverse organisations, such as for example, those led by women.

Regarding migration dynamics, regional migration management strategies – such as in the ECOWAS area – need to systematically include assessments of gender dynamics, ideally through facilitating meaningful consultations with diverse migrant communities, and implementing changes based on their feedback. Women migrants face extreme risks of physical and sexual exploitation and violence, including human trafficking, and often severe stigmatisation when they return home.¹⁵⁹ This requires a rethinking of how Sahelian governments and international donors address the gendered impacts of migration, including practical measures such as access to safe houses and refuges for women fleeing violence and support when they return home. More fundamentally, as raised by many of the interviewees in Zinder, it is imperative that women and men can access information before they migrate that can help them to do so safely, including their legal rights and where to seek assistance, especially regarding protection from abuses.

The concerns of the communities we consulted in Zinder, for example, provide important discussion points about how migration can be managed through a more rights-based approach. Young people and women are affected by migration gender dynamics, in both positive and negative ways, and migration is also an individual, and community resilience strategy.¹⁶⁰ By engaging diverse migrant communities, the EU and other multilateral actors can begin to reduce some of the widespread negative impacts of migration containment, but ultimately this requires a strategic shift away from



A pirogue or wooden canoe ferrying people across the River Niger in Mopti region, central Mali.

© Louisa Waugh

the securitisation of migration strategies, which at the moment effectively criminalise many migrants.

The 'militarisation' of UN Resolution 1325

The UN International Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, now over 20 years old, has also affected gender dynamics in the Sahel, with some notable improvements: the value of including women in both formal and informal peace talks, and in peacekeeper ranks, is now widely accepted; although, as the International Crisis Group notes, '[s]uch gains are too few and too modest.'¹⁶¹

More problematically, the UN, reflecting the agendas of its most powerful member states, used resolution 2242 (2015), to call on states to integrate women's leadership and gender considerations into counter-terrorism and Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) work. Multilateral organisations like the EU and NATO now routinely merge WPS and security programming together, bringing gender into the mainstream of C/PVE programming.¹⁶²

The increasing merging of C/PVE programming with WPS objectives has been increasingly questioned by international observers, including Saferworld. We have documented how this approach can lead to real

incoherence between what donors demand, and the priorities of women, especially in fragile regions, including the Sahel. Nonetheless, it has been increasingly taken up by major donors like the EU and the US as a 'soft power' complement to counter-terror interventions.¹⁶³

C/PVE programming risks reinforcing crude stereotypes, '[p]ositing men as perpetrators of violence and women as passive victims or bystanders, presumptions that can mean women are neglected in post-conflict demobilisation and integration.'¹⁶⁴

Feminist organisations have described this approach as prioritising the interests of state military forces, and 'the militarisation of 1325'.¹⁶⁵

Advocating for women-centred programming and rights

The challenges facing communities across the Sahel are immense, including persisting gender inequalities based on structural discrimination. Donors' focus on women as 'new security actors' risks diverting funds away from programming

“Over the years, the prevailing and unquestioned militarism, including within the UNSC, has further resulted in a WPS agenda entangled with militarised power dynamics that impede substantive progress towards sustainable peace and the realisation of women's human rights before, during, and after conflict.

Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, 2021

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designed to address these structural issues and the violence and discrimination that often accompany them.¹⁶⁶ To support the push towards meaningful gender equality, donors need to recalibrate efforts to protect WPS as a framework for achieving women's rights as a standalone goal, rather than as a means to achieve national security objectives. This means adopting long-term strategies that address underlying structural drivers of conflict such as gender inequality, poverty and poor governance.¹⁶⁷

Examples of positive programming shared by interviewees and civil society leaders we exchanged with in Mali and Niger include supporting survivors

of physical and sexual gender-based violence, and building locally appropriate resilience strategies designed by women and girls, as well as programmes that actively promote both formal and informal education for girls and women.

Sustained investment in young women and men as agents of political change through education, leadership training and employment, was another recommendation by many of the people we interviewed for this research. The success of recent programming in Mali of women- and girls-focused multi-year education programmes that rely on

national expertise and ownership of the project highlights the value and dividend of investing in women and girls and in national civilian expertise.¹⁶⁸

In Mali and Niger, civil society leaders especially talked about the importance of women being consulted at all stages of programme development, from inception to design, implementation and monitoring and evaluating, in order to better ensure that these correspond with the needs they define themselves.¹⁶⁹ This approach also helps to avoid badly designed programmes based on gendered assumptions that are disconnected from people's realities,¹⁷⁰ or built on disconnected models of 'building local capacities' or 'empowering women', sometimes with subtle overtones implying that African women are victims who require capacity building.

Finally, it's important to note that gender dynamics include youth: the Sahel has 50 million people under the age of 30, who together make up 65 per cent of the populations of the G5 Sahel countries.¹⁷¹ Many of them are beginning to challenge the complex social hierarchies that have long been dominated by older men and traditional customary leaders. This structural exclusion of youth from many key decisions that affect their lives, described by conflict analysis academic, Daniel E. Agbigboa, as a dynamic that 'exposes huge deficits in democratic governance [and] exacerbates generational tensions', offers both challenges and opportunities for the international community to better engage young people on their own terms.¹⁷²

Maybe the most appropriate way to conclude is with the words of a young activist in Niamey, an outspoken civil society representative, who said, "We hear about these international debates on security, terrorism and migration in the Sahel – but where are we in all this? It is our voices missing from these debates, the voices of youth, migrants, civil society and communities."

“

We hear about these international debates on security, terrorism and migration in the Sahel – but where are we in all this? It is our voices missing from these debates, the voices of youth, migrants, civil society and communities.

”

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A mosque in the old quarter of Mopti in central Mali.
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Conclusion and recommendations

Saferworld's consultations with communities in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso expose the immense challenges facing people across the Sahel region. They also reveal people's sharp analysis of how these challenges have emerged, the dynamics that feed them and, crucially, what different communities believe needs to change in order to alter the trajectory towards spiralling political violence and instability.

There are clear intersections between insecurity, stabilisation, migration dynamics and gender: for example, how short-term intensive military interventions contribute to long-term destabilisation by neglecting deeply entrenched conflict dynamics at all levels, and how securitisation approaches negatively influence regional migration.

It is worth repeating that the EU places democracy and human rights at the centre of its external action; however, international interventions are overwhelmingly pivoted on the political interests of both European and Sahelian governments. The new EU Sahel Strategy is an opportunity to begin redressing this imbalance, and for the EU to support a genuine 'civilian and political leap forward'. This needs to include a particular focus on directly supporting CSOs working on longer-term local peacebuilding initiatives, and security interventions that respond to local communities' needs and are accountable to them. Accountability – with sanctions if necessary – is crucial for any real change to succeed. So too is longer-term thinking about how to systematically address deeply entrenched political tensions, and promoting non-securitised alternatives to the current over-militarised status quo. Finally, conditionality needs to be in the interests of protecting communities and promoting their rights, not of maintaining corrupt government elites who abuse their citizens.

This kind of strategic shift, would also enhance the reputation of the EU as an international entity able to respond to complex, violent conflicts with multidimensional responses which arrest the violence – something surely in the interest of the EU and its member states.

By seeking out long-term, strategic partnerships with national civil society experts, including those based in rural communities, and other national and international interlocutors with relevant experience, the EU can complement its own expertise and expand its credibility as a global security provider.

Other international entities of course play an important role in security, stabilisation and assistance in the Sahel: at a time when the future of France's engagement in the region is being reconfigured, and amid discussions about future roles for other international partners, such as the US and NATO (as well as the controversial Wagner paramilitary group), it is essential that the international community remember that people's security across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – indeed, the entire Sahel region – hangs in the balance.

Recommendations

The interviewees (including civil society representatives) consulted for this research, as well as other national and international organisations working in the Sahel, have contributed to the following recommendations. They are intended primarily for those working in or in partnership with the EU and its institutions.

1) Reconfiguring international security interventions to better respond to community needs

The EU and its international partners need to cease relying on counter-terrorism as their principal *modus operandi* in light of its severely negative effects on communities, as well as its poor results in terms of improving human security. A refocus on responding to community security needs is necessary, beginning with a process of collating feedback from communities (after rigorous assessment of risks to people of doing so and identifying where feedback has already been provided to avoid duplication), helping to identify gaps between current military strategies and these needs. Community and civil society leaders, including traditional leaders, need to be actively engaged in long-term, meaningful consultations, including with senior military leaders, on how security can better evolve to protect them, the expertise they can provide, and how accountability mechanisms can be implemented and operationalised, and sanctions applied in cases of abuses by national or international military entities.

It is important that this feedback include community perspectives on self-defence groups and armed

militias who operate in their localities, including on how violence committed by those groups can be reduced, and how they can be encouraged to enter into dialogue with local and national authorities, with a view to eventually disarming. This long-term process needs to be supported by international entities, and led by communities and authorities with experience of armed groups, given that configurations of armed groups are different in the three countries. This approach needs to integrate gender to ensure women are not only included but integral to these actions. Communities in Mali also focused on the importance of consultations with youth to integrate their perspectives on security policies, and how economic opportunities can be increased.

Given the multiple coordination mechanisms that have been introduced, especially in Mali, it would be pertinent to have a moratorium on new mechanisms until there has been an assessment, by national and international independent experts, of the overlaps, duplications and conflicts of interest between current mechanisms, in order to assess if they are still fit for purpose. This needs to include meaningful feedback loops for communities regarding whether these coordination mechanisms improve their security, including the security of women and of children, and if not, what needs to change. This could incorporate people identifying places where they feel that military patrols would be useful in protecting civilians, whether civilian–military coordination mechanisms would be appropriate responses, and how those most vulnerable to attacks, such as traditional leaders and Fulbé communities, can be better protected.

The CITAC civilian incident tracking accountability mechanism needs to be independently assessed for its effectiveness and its gender sensitivity by all parties involved in assessing incidents, with a view to rolling it out beyond the G5 Sahel, to include national and international security forces in Mali, and more widely across the region. For this, and any other accountability mechanism, to work effectively, Sahelian entities need to gradually take ownership of them. This will require substantial planning and monitoring.

It is clear that one of the challenges of this approach is rebuilding trust between communities and security forces, and local and national authorities. This will take time. It will require long-term material support, and a willingness on the part of international security actors to stop relying on short-term military interventions, and instead work with communities and national experts on longer-term solutions, as well as a willingness to make necessary adjustments. This also requires engagements between national and international security forces

that can reinforce political and diplomatic efforts to institutionalise military strategies based on upholding human rights, proportionality and accountability.

2) Implementing strategic efforts to support communities

There need to be sustained efforts by donors and international partners to further identify what stabilisation means to people in the Sahel, and to ensure that international strategies, such as the EU Sahel strategy, are coherent with local needs, especially their emphasis on physical safety, education, freedom of movement and accountable local and regional governance, and how these can be addressed through both strategic engagements and policy developments. Civil society representatives said they would welcome opportunities to have frank conversations with policymakers, who they feel lack understanding of their lived realities. This can also better ensure that international stabilisation efforts do not duplicate or override existing civil society programmes, but instead complement successful initiatives.

One of the clearest ways that international actors can support CSOs across the region, as fed back by many of the interviewees, is to provide direct and flexible funding mechanisms, as opposed to funds being held by international organisations and agencies, who then hold power and influence over local civil society initiatives and development agendas. As a first step, it is important that donors work with established national and international NGOs, and with networks and partnerships making efforts to implement policies that offer more direct and flexible funding to local CSOs. This can be a stepping stone towards more direct relationships between donors and local organisations, especially where civic space is constricted or threatened.

In addition, given the lack of synergies between many local- and national-level peacebuilding efforts, it is important that there is an emphasis on those managing successful local initiatives having opportunities to contribute more broadly to regional and national processes. Substantially more women need to be included in this process, as well as in a critical examination of national peace agreements, including monitoring the ‘trickle down’ effects to communities. International organisations can play backseat facilitation roles by supporting national and regional CSO networks. In parallel with this, it is important that national Sahelian governments are encouraged to ensure their constitutions make specific reference to the legal protection of minorities and how their rights can be strengthened.

To support communities to engage in political life, states could issue ID cards to all Sahelians, giving

them legal status and formal access both to basic services and to their rights as citizens – including the right to vote. This approach is not a quick fix; it will present challenges, and require, for example, new funding streams as well as comprehensive risk assessments, to reduce the risk of corruption. However, with these appropriate safeguards, this could be part of a long-term shift, reducing disenfranchisement that feeds tensions between citizens and the state, and would contribute to improving mutual accountability and enhancing citizens’ rights.

3) Addressing the rights of migrants

Given the EU’s huge influence over migration dynamics across the region, and the emerging evidence, including feedback from interviewees in Niger, that its migration containment is impacting migration within the ECOWAS region, it is important that the EU conduct a series of independent assessments of the impacts of migration policies and interventions on different migrant communities across the region. This needs to include how current policies affect migrants’ legal rights, impacts on women migrants and how they can be better supported and protected, as well as how returnees can be assisted to return to their homes and be integrated back into their communities. Policies and interventions that are assessed as harmful to migrants’ rights need to be stopped, or redesigned, and the results of these assessments need to be made public.

As noted earlier, the EU could complement this work by developing a regional migration framework. This needs to be coherent with the legal rights of ECOWAS citizens to migrate, work and travel across the 15 ECOWAS states. The framework needs to involve ongoing meaningful consultations with different migrant communities, as well as with national and international organisations working on migration issues. The interviewees in Niger wanted opportunities to meet with and present their perspectives to national authorities charged with designing and implementing migration policies, to encourage them to develop migrant-centred protection mechanisms, and to expand the economic opportunities for returnees. They also wanted diplomatic staff in destination countries to be better informed about migrants’ rights and how to better support them. For this work to be credible, migrants and ex-migrants need to feed directly into this process, including their recommendations for how migration policies can better protect those on the move. The framework must distinguish between economic migrants and those fleeing violent conflict.

This framework also needs to reflect the protection needs of migrants who are, often violently, expelled

from neighbouring countries, such as Libya and Algeria, and how these abuses can be better mitigated, including through strategic dialogue between international governments. The EU can use its leverage in positive ways, including to identify humanitarian corridors for returnees, in addition to the support mechanisms currently in place. Legal protection of those on the move would be further bolstered by, for example, delivering training on migration dynamics and rights-based approaches to all security forces who are trained through the three EU CSDP missions in the region.

In addition, the EU can conduct research and independent assessments of the impacts of instruments, such as the EU Trust Fund for Africa, on regional migration and economic opportunities. This could help to ensure that EU funded policies and programmes do not undermine Sahel citizens' rights to travel and work across the region.

For the minority of migrants and refugees who do seek to move beyond the ECOWAS region, or who are compelled to flee, there needs to be a more substantial shift in current policy. This needs to include the provision of legal pathways with designated centres where migrants and refugees can apply for asylum and/or resettlement, so that they do not have to resort to taking more dangerous routes and rely on smugglers and human traffickers. This is politically sensitive, and requires national and international dialogue, including with EU member states. However, with considered planning and regional agreements and cooperation, it has the potential to speak to the interest of the EU, Sahelian governments and migrant communities. It is worth repeating that the overwhelming majority seek to move to neighbouring countries, and that European 'policy panic' does not reflect the complex realities of intra-regional migration in the Sahel.

4) Tackling gender-based violence, discrimination and exclusion

As gender-based violence, especially men's violence towards women and girls, remains a huge issue across the region, it is important that gender and conflict analyses are systematically carried out by gender experts before designing international civil or military interventions. This can begin to institutionalise gender sensitivity, and help achieve the better protection of women's and girls' rights. There also needs to be further research into the impacts of international security interventions on these rights, as well as those of marginalised communities.

To improve the reporting of gender-based abuses, national authorities must ensure that police and judicial officers are systematically trained in sexual and gender-based violence, and that this training is monitored to track the impacts on women's and girls' rights. The EU needs to support national debates on how to increase the numbers of women in security forces, and to ensure they are reflected at different levels of chains of command, not simply relegated to administrative or low-level roles. Whistleblowing mechanisms for women to report abuses, including of civilians, could also begin to incrementally change a culture of impunity.

International security forces need to be better monitored for gender sensitivity in order to confront patriarchal attitudes and norms that marginalise women within security forces, and to be strongly encouraged to include dedicated gender experts in all deployments.

International donors need to prioritise funding for GBV prevention and response programmes that are coherent with the needs and concerns identified by women and girls across the region. These must include health and social service provision of physical, psychological, social, economic and medical support to women and girls recovering from violence, as well as programmes to support women to address the stigmatisation facing survivors' physical and sexual violence.

Donors also need to make substantial efforts to support the meaningful participation of women in political processes at all levels, helping transform damaging gender and social norms. More broadly, donors need to strategise on how better to support women's organisations and women's rights organisations, including through WPS frameworks, so that they can develop women-centred projects on their own terms that are not co-opted into donor priorities such as security agendas. It is important that these approaches are intersectional, and that they are coherent among different donors, including the EU, UN, the African Union and others.

As France readjusts its footprint in the Sahel, leaders of international and multilateral deployments are reflecting on their future amid growing public opposition. People across the Sahel and international civil society representatives are calling for a comprehensive, long-term and civilian-led political strategy for the region. One that puts people at the centre and reaffirms their rights to protection, and to play their role in shaping the future of the Sahel.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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ISBN 978-1-912901-30-2

