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# Sustained investment in the Sahel region

## A humanitarian, peacebuilding and strategic imperative

### REGIONAL BRIEF

**After a decade of instability and insurgency, the conflict in the Sahel is more violent and deadly than ever. In 2023, the central Sahelian states of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso saw conflict-related fatalities increase by 38% and civilian deaths by over 18%.<sup>1</sup> All three states are now ruled by military juntas, with the July 2023 coup d'état in Niger the latest in a succession of military takeovers across the region since 2020 – two in Mali and two in Burkina Faso.**

Persistent security threats from extremist groups, armed militias and intercommunal conflicts continue to create an environment of instability and violence, leading to widespread displacement of populations and limited access to essential services. This insecurity is further exacerbated by a deteriorating humanitarian situation, with millions of people in need of urgent assistance due to the security situation. The impact of climate change, causing recurring droughts and erratic weather patterns, is amplifying resource scarcity and adding to the region's vulnerability.



An internally displaced people camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso in 2022. The government estimates there are over 2 million people who are internally displaced and 38,000 refugees, mostly from Mali, according to UNHCR. © Associated Press/Alamy

As geopolitical tensions escalate, a shifting security landscape emerges in the Sahel. Its strategic location, natural resource potential and competing military interests mean conflict players reach far beyond the region, with Islamist insurgencies, Russian mercenaries and Turkish military technology and Western economic and political interests compounding complex conflict dynamics. There is growing anti-European sentiment, particularly towards France and its colonial legacy, further compounded by the suspension of aid programmes in response to military takeovers and the expulsion of the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali (MINUSMA) and European troops in 2023. This has created a greater vacuum that other global power players will seek to fill. The January 2024 withdrawal of all three states from the west Africa regional economic bloc (ECOWAS), citing the influence of foreign powers and a betrayal of pan-Africanism, risks further democratic backsliding.

In the face of these hugely complex and intensifying conflict dynamics, and with competing demands from increasing conflict and fragility in Ukraine, the Middle East and beyond, there is a huge risk that the international community will turn its back on the Sahel. But this is a region where the stakes are exceedingly high, and the consequences of inaction are severe – for the people of the Sahel, for the wider region and at a geopolitical level.

It is crucial to recognise that there exist myriad avenues for impactful support that do not necessitate direct engagement with governments facing controversy, as demonstrated by the range of community activity in the region. Indeed, despite the negative trends in overall governance in recent years, communities have continued to come together to make agreements on using shared resources stretched by climate change. They have continued to work to find better ways to resolve disputes over issues such as land, and to advocate for changes in national legislation to reduce tensions and uncertainties around land management. They have worked in local security groups, including women and young people, to hold security forces to account and build agreements for shared security in their communities or to reduce recruitment to armed groups. These initiatives across the region deserve support now more than ever.

## Why continued investment in the Sahel matters

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### 1. The Sahel is one of the world's fastest-growing humanitarian and security crises and its populations are bearing the cost

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As the political and military crises across the region intensify, it is the people of the Sahel who pay the price. And this is only set to deteriorate further in 2024. According to estimates by the UN, 17 million people in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger need humanitarian assistance and protection – this equates to about one-fifth of the population.<sup>2</sup> There are over 3.7 million internally displaced people, with a growing number being forced to flee into neighbouring countries or taking treacherous migration routes through north Africa and on to Europe – Burkina Faso and Mali already featured in the top nationalities among sea arrivals to Italy in the first half of 2023.<sup>3</sup>



People fishing in Mopti, Mali. © Ousmane Makaveli Traore/International Alert

These statistics underscore the gravity of the situation in the context, where the people of the Sahel are most vulnerable in this turbulent moment. The impact of sanctions and withdrawal have severe consequences for both the economy and the daily lives of Sahelian communities, particularly among the most marginalised populations. This has been keenly felt in Niger, where the post-coup sanctions by ECOWAS plus withdrawal of aid programmes by donors including the EU and France have contributed towards the worsening humanitarian situation, with 7.3 million people driven from moderate to severe food insecurity as a result.<sup>4</sup>

Climate crises are a key driver of poverty and conflict in the Sahel, where 78% of the population depends on agriculture and herding for their livelihoods, with limited resources for climate adaptation leaving the people hugely vulnerable to changing weather patterns. These climate shocks damage livelihoods and cause further displacement of people, but also increase competition for natural resources, particularly between settled agricultural communities, livestock herders and fishers, who typically represent different ethnic groups. Resource conflicts have been increasing over the past decade, reflecting and driving growing instability across the region. With weak natural resource governance systems and traditional authorities under threat, people are increasingly turning to jihadists or local militias to resolve disputes.<sup>5</sup>

Maintaining a commitment to the Sahel provides an opportunity to address the challenges faced by vulnerable communities directly. Alleviating suffering and addressing the root causes of insecurity contribute to the creation of a more stable and secure future for the region. Responding to the immediate and pressing need for comprehensive peacebuilding efforts in the Sahel is essential. The connection between addressing the humanitarian crisis and promoting peace and stability in the region is evident. Stability and peace form the foundation for delivering vital services, including education, healthcare and livelihoods support, crucial for the wellbeing of the Sahelian population.

## **2. The conflict transcends borders and is threatening wider stability in west Africa and beyond**

Conflict in the Sahel has been characterised by regional jihadist insurgency driven by rival factions including al-Qaeda in the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), local self-defence militias and military juntas. JNIM is expanding from its traditional strongholds in northern Mali to cover much of Burkina Faso and parts of Niger. It is further expanding into the west African littoral states (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo). IS Sahel operates primarily in Mali-Niger border areas and is expanding into Burkina Faso. While the Diffa region, in Niger's southeast, is impacted by the Lake Chad Basin conflict driven by Boko Haram. Conflict dynamics play out along historical, cultural and ethnic lines that do not conform to state borders.

The spillover effect of the Sahelian crisis on neighbouring west African littoral states, compounded by democratic backsliding, is posing a significant threat to countries previously experiencing relative stability. In addition to an increase in security incidents since 2021, the northern areas bordering Sahelian states host smuggling and trade routes supplying insurgents with fuel, gold, ammunition and other supplies.<sup>6</sup> Refugees from the Sahel are crossing into their southern neighbours, putting pressure on already weak social services and making access to limited vital resources difficult for refugees and host communities alike. Tensions are heightening within and between communities, as resentments and competition between different groups grow.

Extending the commitment beyond national efforts is essential, recognising that challenges in the Sahel often transcend national borders. This underscores the importance of regional cooperation and assistance to collectively address these issues. Collaborative efforts are crucial in addressing security threats, managing resources and implementing development initiatives.

## **3. Supporting the Sahel's populations does not equal support for unconstitutional authorities**

It is essential to recognise that extending support to the Sahel's populations does not mean endorsing or supporting unconstitutional authorities. The transformation we seek in the peacebuilding field encompasses both individual and institutional change. In the Sahel context, institutional change does not necessarily have to come solely through the state, as is commonly assumed. Traditional authorities, religious leaders and civil society play crucial roles in shaping the institutions and norms within a society. Engaging in peacebuilding efforts at the community and civil society levels allows for both institutional and individual change without necessarily supporting the government directly.

These efforts stem from a collective responsibility to address the pressing needs of vulnerable and suffering communities. Regardless of the political landscape or governance structures, the basic right to a safe environment should be upheld. A critical aspect of supporting Sahel's populations is promoting stability and peace. This



necessitates engaging with communities at the grassroots level, engaging with civil society, supporting democratic processes, empowering them economically and socially, and addressing the root causes of conflict and insecurity.

These efforts aim to reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies and enhance resilience against violence. Promoting stability aligns with the interests of international actors seeking peace and security in the region. It does not imply endorsement or support for unconstitutional authorities. On the contrary, it can serve as a lever to encourage these authorities to embrace democratic values and the rule of law, ultimately leading to a more stable and secure Sahel region. The important act in this context is to implement peacebuilding programmes that directly benefit and empower local communities, notably by supporting local NGOs, community-based organisations, and grassroots initiatives to deliver aid and assistance.

While the Sahel presents its share of challenges and uncertainties, it remains a region of immense strategic importance. The Sahel is not just a geographic location; it is a crucial battleground in the global fight against extremism, terrorism and the spread of instability. Disengaging now would not only jeopardise the hard-fought gains made in the region, but also expose people to the very threats we seek to combat. Moreover, the Sahel is home to vibrant cultures, resilient communities and untapped economic potential. By staying committed to the Sahel, we have the opportunity to foster lasting stability, unleash the region's growth potential and contribute to a more secure world. The continued support signifies not just an investment in the Sahel's future, but also in the shared global security and humanity's betterment.



International Alert dialogue session between farmers, fishers, boatmen and local administration officials in Mopti region, Mali. © International Alert

# What can be done in the region to act for peace?

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Based on the context analysis, the following are some tangible actions that could be taken in the Sahel region to contribute to sustainable peace, despite the current political situation.

## 1. Build from the grassroots up

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In the context of weak national governance and widespread instability, investment in capacity building programmes to empower local communities with conflict resolution skills and resources can provide a critical entry point to build the foundations for peace and stability from the grassroots. Harnessing support and collaboration with indigenous leaders, traditional authorities and grassroots organisations can leverage existing structures to facilitate mediation efforts and peace dialogues at the community level.

Promotion of inclusive dialogue that advocates for inclusive peace debates that involve diverse stakeholders, including marginalised groups, women, youth and minority communities is fundamental to good governance. Providing people with the skills, knowledge and platforms to engage productively with decision-makers at different levels can help build bridges and shape approaches, focusing on those issues and stakeholders where change is possible.

## 2. Address economic drivers of conflict

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Poverty, food insecurity and lack of economic opportunities are widespread across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and are increasing fragility, driving migration and fuelling violent extremism, as people seek to break free from the binds of poverty. Building alternatives to the conflict economy and criminality associated with extremist groups and supporting people to build sustainable livelihoods can help address socio-economic drivers of conflict.

As well as the impact on livelihoods and food security, natural resource governance and the impact of climate change on livelihoods is a key conflict driver in the Sahel. Supporting initiatives that enhance climate resilience, such as sustainable agricultural practices, water resource management and disaster preparedness, and include an interrelated response to that, linking peacebuilding, data science and the peaceful management of natural resources, can implement bottom-up, dialogue-based alternatives to seeking to address issues at a national level.

## 3. Integrate peace across all programming approaches

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Integrating conflict-sensitive approaches into humanitarian, climate and development actions is not only fundamental to the 'do no harm' principle, but also enables interventions to contribute towards positive peace. This requires ongoing conflict analysis, gender sensitivity and adaptive approaches to respond to a dynamic and rapidly changing context.



International Alert dialogue session between farmers, fishers, boatmen and local administration officials in Mopti region, Mali. © International Alert

Conflict sensitivity hubs can provide training, support and accompaniment to international actors, civil society organisations and local authorities to integrate conflict sensitivity into programming, policies and strategies. This can help ensure they understand the interaction between their actions and the context, and promote inclusive programming responsive to evolving conflict contexts and the needs of diverse groups, drawing lessons from implementation back into further improvements.

#### **4. See young people as positive change agents**

With 65% of the population under the age of 25, approaches designed to address the unique challenges and opportunities associated with the youth demographic are essential for peace in the Sahel. Young people can be powerful agents of change, bringing new ideas, energy and perspectives to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. However, marginalisation, disenfranchisement and lack of economic opportunities are leaving many vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups or extremist organisations and driving dangerous migration to Europe.

Identifying, training and supporting young people can catalyse their potential as peace ambassadors and mediators, empowering them with conflict resolution skills and leadership training. Approaches should be designed to facilitate the active involvement of young people in peace dialogues and reconciliation efforts, both within their communities and as part of broader peacebuilding initiatives, considering the different needs and barriers facing young people.

#### **5. Enhance wellbeing support structures**

Conflict and displacement are taking a huge psychological toll on people across the Sahel. Integrating socially and culturally sensitive support that is grounded in people's lived experiences and understanding of trauma, healing and wellbeing, and working

with affected communities to foster inclusion can support peace outcomes. Safe spaces for dialogue, healing and reconciliation are essential for supporting positive interactions among people across divides. Understanding gendered experiences of violence, support services and mental health and wellbeing is key to effective peacebuilding, including addressing barriers and stigma to mental health and psychosocial support, particularly for men and boys. Collaboration between peacebuilding organisations, healthcare providers and communities can help ensure an integrated response on mental health support and its link to peace and conflict.

## **6. Prioritise preventive measures**

Although conflict and instability are widespread across the Sahel, different areas are experiencing different levels of violence, which is often concentrated in hotspot areas controlled by different groups. There is an opportunity to concentrate efforts on preventive measures in those areas that have yet to experience the full extent of conflict and instability. Early warning systems, community dialogues and awareness campaigns can promote resilience and prepare communities for potential challenges. By addressing the root causes of conflict proactively, we can help prevent the escalation of tensions and violence. This can include approaches within central Sahel but also within and between the wider west African community.

**By implementing these measures, we can contribute to fostering peace, stability and prosperity in the region. International Alert, with its deeply rooted team in the Sahel, stand ready to work on those points with different partners and call for actions in the Sahel to continue. That matters for global security and for our shared values.**



## Annex: What works? Stories from our work in Mali and Niger

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### Addressing the root causes of conflict

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In Mopti in central Mali, water scarcity and mismanagement has exacerbated conflicts within and between communities. The city's economy is mainly based on agriculture, livestock and fishing, but lacks fair and sustainable governance, leaving communities extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as the sustained decline in rainfall across the region. Associated changes to the river flow are increasing competition within and between fishers and boatmen. They are also turning to livelihoods outside the river, in turn creating competition with farming communities, as fertile land becomes increasingly scarce. Through the Water, Peace and Security partnership, International Alert set up a forum to ensure direct communication between the boatmen, farmers and fishers to resolve and prevent conflicts between the groups and enable the sustainable management of water. As a result of these efforts, community representatives are engaged in continuous dialogue, allowing for early and non-violent conflict resolution.

*"We favour dialogue as an instrument for conflict resolution. Dialogue has helped to resolve conflicts between Pinasse boatmen, fishers and farmers in Mopti." – Tiema Djenema, Vice President of the Association of Touristic Pinassa Boats of Mopti*



International Alert dialogue session between farmers, fishers, boatmen and local administration officials in Mopti region, Mali. © International Alert

## **Dialogue enables effective conflict resolution**

The situation in Mali remains critically unstable following a succession of military takeovers and widespread insurgency by Islamist militants. As a result, there is a significant lack of trust between government authorities and communities. We have established dialogue platforms at local, regional and national levels between citizens (including women) and the state, facilitating open exchange of perspectives, concerns and suggestions. A key issue identified was that of the lack of birth certificates and the impact on accessing school, healthcare and other public services in some localities. The dialogue platforms enabled people to raise awareness of the issue and access to birth certificates is now much improved.

## **Empowering women as agents of peaceful change**

Effective, peaceful governance requires having men and women involved in decision-making, to broaden perspectives, increase creativity and innovation, diversify the pool of talents and competencies, reduce conflicts and improve the process of decision-making. However, women across the Sahel experience widespread marginalisation and exclusion. Thanks to International Alert's interventions, women and youth now represent 21% and 37% respectively of members in land commissions and community dialogue spaces, and 30% and 23% of participants in capacity building sessions on the provisions of the rural land code. Before our intervention, there were no women participating in the commissions.

## **Integrating peace outcomes in humanitarian and development programming**

In Niger, International Alert supported our partner to deliver two workshops on peacebuilding and social cohesion, bringing together local authorities, traditional leaders (chiefs of cantons, tribes and villages or neighbourhoods), technical services,



We joined civil society, security forces, peacebuilders and government authorities to plant trees in Ségou, Mali on Peace Day last year as part of discussions on the importance of equitable access to natural resources for achieving peace.

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defence and security forces, civil society representatives (women's associations, young people and small farmers' organisations) and the national High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace. Our conflict analysis enabled participants to discuss the main causes of conflicts that hinder living together, including scarcity of natural resources, exclusion of certain social groups, corruption, and customs that discriminate against women. As a result, participants developed an action plan to contribute to addressing recurring conflicts (herder–farmer, fisher–herder, intercommunity and natural resource management conflicts).

We are also working to integrate peace outcomes in development interventions. For example, the wells being built by a development organisation in N'Gourti, Niger were causing tension, as the camel herder community began coming into villages to use the water points themselves. International Alert worked to train and support locally legitimate peacebuilding mechanisms accepted by both sides, in this case the committees of chiefs' wives. Through them, the project has established a process to agree where the water points will be built, who will have access to them and under what conditions. This is announced through a joint appearance by community leaders on local radio and at the project launch event. The peace committees continue to meet regularly to navigate any emerging tensions, and the benefits of the project for both the villagers and herders are an important source of sustaining peace between them.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Sahel: A deadly new era in the decades-long conflict, ACLED, 17 January 2024

<sup>2</sup> Global humanitarian overview 2024: Response plans, Humanitarian Action, 8 December 2023

<sup>3</sup> Sahel situation, UNHCR, accessed 1 May 2024

<sup>4</sup> B. Balima and P. Kleinfeld, 'Collective punishment': Sanctions worsen humanitarian conditions in post-coup Niger, 14 September 2023

<sup>5</sup> A.O. Toure, Water resources in Mali's Inner Niger Delta: Actions to promote peaceful governance, Water, Peace and Security partnership, 2023

<sup>6</sup> 10 conflicts to worry about in 2022: The Sahel, ACLED, 2022, accessed 1 May 2024

**International Alert** works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

**[www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)**

**International Alert**

London, UK

+44 (0)20 7627 6800

[info@international-alert.org](mailto:info@international-alert.org)

**[www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)**

Registered charity no. 327553



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