

The European Union - Sahel Relations: An Elusive Nexus Between Development and Security

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) strategy for the Sahel region has simultaneously focused on security and development. For years, the EU has invested massively in the region with this objective, proving that the security-development nexus is more than a wishful thinking. In time, it has even adopted a more comprehensive approach to raise the living standards across the region, with an expansion of the geography that it has centred its policies on. The EU has also developed policies and implemented them in collaboration with other international actors. Nevertheless, the EU's achievements have not proven successful. Some reasons explain the EU's failure, such as the heterogeneity of Sahel: Stretching on more than three million square kilometres, it is a vast, diverse, and complex region encompassing multiple countries and ethnicities. Security deserves attention as well, both at regional and international levels. Limited resources at the EU's (and its member states') disposal is also an obstacle for coherent development and security strategies. So is the coordination challenges: The EU member states have different priorities and approaches to addressing the challenges in the Sahel region. Last, but not least, political instability makes it extremely difficult to implement effective and sustainable development and security programs.

1 Introduction

The Sahel region, a vast expanse of semi-arid land stretching across Africa, has emerged as a critical area of concern for global security and development. These challenges have also made the region a focal point for international efforts to promote peace, security, and sustainable development. As the title suggests, the European Union (EU) will be the main actor whose efforts will be taken into consideration in this study. Through a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach, the EU seeks to address the root causes of instability, strengthen governance mechanisms, and promote sustainable socio-economic progress. While exploring the EU's position vis-à-vis the region, attention will be brought exclusively on five states: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Three reasons justify this choice. First, these five states are representative of the challenges in the region. Second, within the framework of the G5 Sahel (established in 2014), they keep cooperating to overcome common threats. Third, the EU's Sahel strategy specifically targets these states.

The answer to the question why the EU is involved in the region should be based on at least three pillars. Basically, the instability in the region has direct consequences for the security of the EU and its neighbours. Decision-making circles in Brussels are well aware that political action cannot be useful if isolated from governance mechanisms, human rights, and collaboration with civil society and local authorities in Sahel. They also believe that security and development in the region are interlinked and cannot be separated. In addition, supporting regional cooperation is a must for security and development. This leads us to highlight the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the root causes of instability and promotes cooperation mechanisms.

Within this perspective, the study will begin by focusing on the EU's disposition to build a connection between security and development. The circumstances in the region that make such an attitude all the more important will come next. The specific framing of the EU's Sahel policies will constitute the next title. The EU has indeed valuable assets to realize its objectives, but there are also obstacles in its way. Such obstacles will be explored before presenting the perspectives -which will be a substitute to concluding remarks.

2 The Security-Development Nexus: More Than a Simple Rhetoric for the EU Despite Obstacles

Affirming that insecurity -whether stemming from armed conflict, violence, or political instability- hampers economic growth, social progress, and sustainable development sounds like truism. Extensive research and studies have been successful in demonstrating the complex interplay between security and development, particularly in conflict-affected or fragile contexts. Security and development are thus interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Insecure environments often lead to displacement and destruction of infrastructure, subsequently ending economic activities and making access to essential services impossible. Such processes have a negative impact on socio-economic development and can significantly impede it or even halt its progress. Conversely, development initiatives and improvements in socio-economic conditions can contribute to enhanced security. Investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and governance structures, coupled with poverty reduction efforts and inclusive development programs, can crucially help address underlying grievances and promote stability.

The EU recognizes the link between development and security as an important part of its foreign policy. Its involvement in the security in Sahel is so intense that some scholars mention a "foreign policy entrapment" (Plank

& Bergmann, 2021). The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell has, on various occasions, hinted at the idea that if the EU wants to have a global role, it should utilize hard power, such as military force, in addition to soft power. Official documents also show that the EU bases its foreign policy on the interlinked relationship between security and development, as illustrated by the European Consensus on Development, the EU Global Strategy. It is in this perspective that the Union has developed policies and strategies that aim to address the root causes of insecurity and promote development and prosperity.

Yet, there are practical issues that hamper the achievement of this double objective. The EU's planning for the long-term budget, particularly the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), seems to overlook the integration of human security into development. The allocation of resources for development and security is a contentious issue, with disagreements on whether development resources should be used for purposes of security or only for fighting poverty. In some circles, security-related actions are considered part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), separate from development funding, while others support a strong security component integrated with development in regions of need.

For the EU, activities in conflict-affected areas are considered security-relevant, requiring security arrangements and a conflict-sensitive approach. On the other hand, security target refers to situations where peace and security are the principal objectives. Most actions are thus security-relevant, and not security target. The one problem that this distinction reminds us it that the EU cannot use budgetary resources to finance partner countries' armed forces. As a remedy to this rather problematic situation, the Capacity Building in Support of Security and Development (CBSD) has been instrumentalized to strengthen local military actors. The main rationale behind CBSD is the assumption that security is a precondition for development, and that sustainable development can only be achieved when security is ensured. Yet, CBSD has faced criticism for potentially contributing to the securitization of EU development policy (Bergmann, 2019).

There are, on the other hand, instruments such as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) constitute extra-budgetary funds that can finance security means, including weapons (Gavas & Pleeck, 2021). The NDICI is a new EU external financing instrument that aims to support countries most in need to overcome long-term developmental challenges and will contribute to achieving the international commitments and objectives that the Union has agreed to, in particular the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. The NDICI unifies grants, blending, and guarantees, which will allow the EU to strategically promote public and private investment worldwide. The EPF can finance security means, including weapons, to support partner countries in addressing security challenges. It also aims to enhance the EU's ability to prevent conflicts, build peace, and support international security (European Commission, n.d.).

Due to the importance of coordination and cooperation in tackling security threats at local, national, regional, and international levels, the EU attaches a particular importance to the NDICI and EPF. Nonetheless, it faces serious difficulties in achieving the above-mentioned objectives with these two instruments. One of them is about the fact that achieving coordination and cooperation can be challenging due to the different mandates and interests of actors involved. Another difficulty concerns the objective to rationalize EU development spending by merging several former EU external financing instruments. This rationalization can be challenging due to the complexity of the security-development nexus and the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach. Last, but not least, addressing long-term developmental challenges and contribute to achieving international commitments and objectives is easier said than done. This requires a successful multidimensional approach that takes into account the complex and interlinked nature of security and development. Whether such success will be achieved in a foreseeable future is debatable.

3 Sahel: A Geography that Needs Security and Development

Situated at the crossroads between North Africa, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel has increasingly held a strategic importance due to its proximity to major migration routes, transnational organized crime networks, and vast natural resources. Its geographical location also makes it susceptible to the spillover effects of regional conflicts, posing significant risks to both regional and global security. As part of a complex web of challenges that threaten stability and prosperity, issues such as poverty, food insecurity, political instability, and the rise of extremist groups stand out.

The Sahel region faces significant security challenges, including armed conflicts, terrorism, and the presence of extremist groups. The Sahel region harbours the world's fastest growing and most deadly terrorist groups. Notably, groups such as the Islamic State (IS) persistently wage violent campaigns in the region, contributing to a staggering toll of casualties. In 2021, terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel accounted for 35% of the global total, a sharp contrast to the mere 1% recorded in 2007 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2022). At present, the Sahel region alone represents 43% of the world's terrorism-related fatalities, surpassing the combined figures of South Asia and the MENA region. This percentage continues to rise unabated. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI),

two Sahel countries, Mali and Burkina Faso, rank among the world's five countries most severely impacted by terrorism-related deaths (Green, 2023). These circumstances hinder stability, impede development efforts, and pose threats to the safety and well-being of the local population. Addressing security concerns is essential for creating a conducive environment for development activities.

High levels of poverty and inequality are problematic as well. Sahel is recognized as one of the poorest regions globally. Inequities emerge from persistent gender disparities, pervasive poverty rates, and constrained access to essential services. Insufficient access to basic services such as education, healthcare, clean water, and adequate infrastructure limits economic opportunities. Poverty is all the more intense due to the vulnerability stemming from the impacts of climate change, including droughts, desertification, and unpredictable rainfall patterns. These environmental challenges have adverse effects on agriculture, food security, and the livelihoods of local communities. Development aid can support climate resilience initiatives, sustainable natural resource management, and the implementation of adaptation measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change. International support can also help alleviate poverty, promote social equity, and enhance livelihoods, thereby reducing the factors that contribute to insecurity (de Melo, 2016).

Recurrent humanitarian crises, including food insecurity, malnutrition, and displacement of populations also require attention. Development aid plays a crucial role in providing emergency assistance, supporting humanitarian relief efforts, and facilitating long-term solutions to address the root causes of displacement. The World Health Organisation's warning below exposes the intensity of such crises:

The Sahel region of Africa is facing unprecedented humanitarian needs as a result of armed conflict, poverty, climate change, food insecurity and political instability. In 2022, more than 33 million people across Burkina Faso, the Far-North of Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and North-East Nigeria will need live-saving assistance, an increase of more than 25% over the last five years. This makes the Sahel crisis one of the fastest growing crises in the world (WHO, n.d.).

Last, but not least, prevalence of corruption in the Sahel has created a vicious cycle of poverty, inequality, and instability, further perpetuating the region's vulnerability to conflict and extremism. The lack of transparency and accountability in the Sahel's governance systems has created fertile ground for corruption. In turn, the latter allowed illicit activities, such as drug trafficking and smuggling, to thrive in the Sahel, undermining security and impeding development efforts. More robust foreign backing seems indispensable, together with more determined fight against corruption by Sahelian states, to strengthen governance structures, promote the rule of law, improve public administration, and enhance the capacity of institutions to effectively deliver services and ensure inclusive development.

4 The Contours of the EU's Sahel policy

Geographical proximity between the European Union and Sahel makes the interactions between the two sides natural. On the other hand, it generates tensions and poses a security risk for the EU. Issues such as illegal immigration from sub-Saharan Africa to European states, the escalation of fundamentalist activities targeting Western individuals (kidnappings and attacks in the region, as well as the risk of attacks on European soil and airlines), and the rise in drug trafficking towards Europe attract close attention of the EU citizens. Indeed, these factors also perpetuate ongoing diplomatic conflicts between European and Sahelian capitals (Tisseron, 2015). The EU has a clear interest in ensuring stability in its vicinity and securing its interests (Rouppert, 2012). Despite the myriad challenges involved in establishing robust partnerships within an inherently volatile region, the European Union remains resolute in its determination not to cede the 'strategic field' to other states and entities whose interests converge upon the Sahel region (European Parliament, 2020).

The latest grounds of strategy, as laid out by the Council of April 2021, point to the same direction. The items stressed in the Council conclusions signify considerable development funds to improve the lives of the Sahelian populations, accompanied by military and civilian missions to ensure security and stability. The updated strategy underscores the significance of multilateral cooperation while entrusting ownership to the countries within the region. It is evident that the strategy aims to clarify the framework of action and demonstrates the European Union's commitment to maintaining active engagement in the Sahel region (Ridon, 2021)

As mentioned in the introductory section, the EU's Sahel policies specifically focus on the five countries of Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Therefore, a study revolving around security and development issues in Sahel can legitimately focus on them. Two different avenues can be explored, however: the EU's independent endeavours and its collaborative efforts with other international actors. The Union provides various sorts of support to the region. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa is thus an important case in point. With a budget surpassing €1.3 billion, the funds that 27 European states have allocated covered various fields such as education, health, and job creation. Indeed, they have also provided support to address the root causes of irregular migration, such as poverty and lack of opportunities. The development in Sahel takes an important place on the EU's agenda, as the concomitant efforts of Paris and Berlin demonstrates. Since the decision reached in

2017 by the Franco-German Council of Ministers creating jobs, especially for the young population, through vocational training offers and investments in agriculture and infrastructure is an important pillar of support.

The EU's strategy in the Sahel aims to address regional challenges through a multifaceted approach. It encompasses four primary objectives, each contributing to the overarching purpose. Firstly, the EU seeks to strengthen political action by focusing on governance mechanisms, human rights, and collaboration with civil society and local authorities. The following excerpt from the EU's Council conclusions of 2021 is illustrative in this context:

[T]he EU wants to make its action part of a partnership [with the Sahel countries] based on each partner's responsibility to fulfil its commitments. This mutual accountability is based on close and continuous political dialogue, allowing progress to be made in jointly agreed priority areas, in a climate of trust. Its aim is to encourage the achievement of concrete and measurable objectives, in particular in the areas of governance, the rule of law and the fight against corruption and impunity. (Council of the EU, 2021)

Secondly, the strategy emphasizes the enhancement of partnerships with the five G5 Sahel countries. Built on the principle of mutual accountability, this approach fosters a cooperative framework to tackle regional challenges. Thirdly, the EU recognizes that improved governance is essential in addressing the underlying issues in the region. As a result, it aims to promote effective governance structures and mechanisms. The fourth area of action involves combating terrorism and promoting stability in the region. Given the security concerns in Sahel, the EU recognizes the importance of countering terrorist activities and establishing a stable environment conducive to development and prosperity.

When it comes to the EU's collaboration with other actors, the EU-G5 channel is the first partnership scheme that must be invoked. Originally, the G5 Sahel, generally abbreviated as G5S, was an institutional framework where the above-mentioned five states coordinated and monitored regional cooperation on development and security policies. On May 15th, 2022, however, Mali announced its withdrawal from the organization. The G5S convenes at various levels, including meetings of the chiefs of staff of the armed forces for military matters. The reason why G5S is peculiar stems from two key factors. First, it closely intertwines economic development and security, with member states recognizing the interdependence of security and development challenges. Second, it involves Sahel states directly threatened by various jihadist organizations in the region, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Boko Haram.

The EU has set up regular dialogues with the organisation, due to its desire to remain a credible partner in the region. Its successive strategy papers have pointed to the need to strengthen cooperation on development, governance in fragile areas, improved security, where the anti-terrorism, transnational crime and anti-illicit-trafficking efforts stand out. In the specific field of security, strengthening capabilities and addressing security threats materialized with financial and technical support to the G5S Joint Force.

An interesting case study is the EU-ECOWAS cooperation to address the 2013 crisis in Mali. During the period between January 2013 and September 2013, the two organizations engaged in collaborative peace operations following the seizure of significant territories in Mali by armed groups. Their collective endeavours yielded a level of effectiveness deemed 'medium' due to a series of factors, including moderate resource exchange, varying levels of convergence between the partners, limited internal capabilities, and the complexities of the conflict setting (Plank, 2022).

In tandem with the Sahel Alliance, the EU wants to expand its cooperation with the Sahel countries in various policy areas - especially in development cooperation. At its inception in 2017, the Alliance had three founding members: The EU, France, and Germany. Three years later, the number of development partners had reached 13, providing a portfolio of 17.1 billion euros (Alliance Sahel, 2020). In addition to its budget that is highly meaningful, the objectives that the Sahel Alliance pursue are in parallel with the EU's efforts of anti-corruption, rural development, agriculture, food security and the rule of law. To note, the Alliance also provides support on the environmental issues. This support consists of specific programmes dealing with the environmental challenges faced by the region comprising projects that aim to bring out sustainable solutions.

5 Difficulties of maintaining the security-development nexus in Sahel

As mentioned earlier, the Sahel region is a vast, diverse, and complex region that encompasses multiple countries and ethnic groups. The region faces a range of challenges, including poverty, climate change, weak governance, and insecurity. These challenges are interconnected, making it difficult to address them in isolation. Yet, the governments in the region are struggling to provide basic services throughout their territory and security at their borders and are competing with armed groups that have emerged from the failed regimes of Central Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. With such intense problems, it is not easy for them to create synergies and improve the living conditions. The EU has recognized the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the root causes of insecurity and promotes regional cooperation but faces the same problem: achieving these objectives can be challenging due to the complex security and development situation in the region.

Terrorism is one of the key issues in maintaining the security-development nexus. Sahel is facing increased attacks from militant fundamentalist groups, which pose a threat to security and development in the region and remain a significant obstacle to maintaining security-development nexus for the EU and other international actors. What is striking is that various endeavours on the EU's side have spanned on decades, with no tangible result to improve the situation in the region.

This leads us to make a connection with another problem that the Union of 27 European states has been facing for decades: limited resources. As mentioned above, the states in the region do not have adequate resources to attain security and development objectives. The EU and its member states, on the other hand, do not have such resources as well. It goes without saying that dire financial capabilities make it difficult to balance development and security efforts effectively. In order to provide support to the Sahel countries, the EU has allocated a total of €4.5 billion for the period for the previous seven-year budgetary period spanning from 2014 to 2020 (European Commission, 2020).

Coordination challenges call for a consideration as well. Despite a high level of common threat perceptions, priorities and approaches to address Sahel-specific challenges differ. This can create coordination challenges and lead to a lack of coherence in the EU's overall strategy. In a brief, the European Parliamentary Research Service was rightfully pointing in 2020 to the fragmented approach that has cast a shadow on European endeavours to coordinate its security assistance to the G5 members (European Parliament, 2020). In a similar vein, the EU has been criticized for its slow disbursement of funds and its failure to align its development assistance with the priorities of the G5 Sahel countries.

Political instability is another point that demands acknowledgment, for it has affected the EU-Sahel cooperation schemes on various occasions. The region is plagued by recurring coups, rebellions, and civil unrest. The 2020 coup d'état that was staged in Mali, for instance, has blocked the EU's military training assistance to the country (Emmot & Diallo, 2020). The suspension of assistance was in fact a temporary measure, and there have been discussions about the possibility of resuming training in partnership with the United Nations once a transitional government is established. Yet even a provisional suspension can worsen the security and development dynamics in this troubled geography. In addition, one should also remember that coordination challenges are not an EU-only problem. As a CSIS commentary puts forth, the operationalization of the G5 Sahel Joint Force could complicate coordination should unexpected issues arise (Cook et al., 2017).

6 Perspectives

There are at least four avenues that the EU can explore to meet its objectives. One of them is the involvement of civil society in the Sahel. It is an important aspect of the EU's strategy for the region, for the civil society can play a crucial role in promoting good governance and security, building trust between Sahelian states and citizens, and ensuring that the EU's policies are effective and sustainable. The EU can involve civil society in the Sahel through various ways. For instance, further funding and technical assistance to civil society organizations in the Sahel will help them build their capacity and strengthen their role in promoting good governance and security. Further dialogue and consultation with such organizations in the region can ensure that their views and perspectives are taken more seriously into account in the development and implementation of EU policies. The EU can also consider being a partner and collaborate with Sahelian civil society to promote good governance and security, build trust between states and citizens in the Sub-Saharan Africa, and ensure that the EU's policies are effective and sustainable. In the same vein, advocacy and awareness-raising -for policy change and raising awareness about issues related to governance, security, and human rights- must be among the main components of the EU's policy targeting the region, where civil society can naturally play an important role.

The place of women deserves a particular attention and must be taken apart from the EU-civil society relations in Sahel. Approximately one in five women without education in Africa will come from the G5 Sahel countries by 2030, which will increase to over one in four women by 2050 (Alliance Sahel, 2021). In the Sahel, women are deliberately targeted by Islamist organizations. However, it is well-documented that women play a crucial role in the agricultural sector in the Sahel region and are responsible for the majority of food production and processing. Women are also involved in marketing and selling agricultural products in the region. A survey by the West Africa and Sahel Club of the OECD justifies this view: Women represent 80% of employment in the agricultural product processing sector, 70% in marketing, and nearly 90% in the street sale of ready-to-consume agricultural products. Women constitute an important foundation in Sahel countries' societies. They can play a significant role in peace-building strategies in the region. Therefore, it is crucial to involve them fully in the decision-making process regarding security and focus on their economic empowerment and political participation. It would be necessary to integrate more women into peacekeeping missions in the Sahel countries to better address gender inequalities and the violence they endure.

The third avenue on which the EU can focus is local development. Indeed, the EU has committed significant funding to development assistance in the Sahel region, but there is still much more to do. Addressing governance challenges is one of them. The new integrated strategy in the Sahel aims to strengthen action at the political level,

focusing on governance mechanisms and human rights. Yet, the EU can do more. In the past, EU policies have been subject to criticism for being too narrow and not taking into account the broader political and social context (Schmauder & Goxho, 2020). The EU can better address governance challenges by taking a more comprehensive approach that addresses their root causes that include corruption, weak institutions, and limited accountability. It can also promote transparency and accountability in the region. This objective brings to fore, once again, the key position of the civil society to which the EU can provide more technical assistance and funding. Closer regional cooperation will certainly be an asset as well. Intensifying cooperation with regional organizations such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must be seriously considered. Security-development nexus must also be strengthened. By promoting good governance and accountability, the EU can help address the root causes of instability and promote stability and prosperity in the region.

The fourth area of improvement relates to capacity building. In close connection with this premise, emphasis should be put on the provision of basic public services. At this point, technical assistance to Sahelian governments seems valuable, in that it will help build their capacity in areas such as public administration, financial management, and the implementation of policies. Education and training can be viewed by the same angle. What deserves particular attention here is that promoting capacity building is an effective way to address the root causes of instability in a region where prosperity primarily depends on the capacity to foster stability. Decades of poor governance have paved the way for forms of radicalization and frustrations. The latter, in turn, have fueled rebellions and organized crime in the region. In the absence of public services and state protection, fundamentalist groups have stepped in to provide them, managing thus to gain the trust of local populations. These groups have presented themselves as a more legitimate and less corrupt alternative to political elites. They have also exploited the socio-economic vulnerabilities present in the region to attract and recruit individuals lacking opportunities (school dropouts, for example).

Supporting the capacity building must also focus on reinforcing the legitimacy of state. In other words, it is necessary to rebuild trust between the governing authorities and the governed. In the same vein, military and police forces must be reconciled with the population. Therefore, efforts must be made to invest in public services and infrastructure, strengthen institutions, ensuring thus the state's presence across all parts of the territory. Of particular note is the significant neglect experienced by the northern regions within certain Sahelian states. The weakness of states in extending their presence to remote areas, coupled with porous borders, facilitates the infiltration and takeover by armed groups. It is essential to combat the phenomenon of corruption so that all the efforts to reinstate the state are not in vain. This is all the more meaningful in light of the fact that G5 countries particularly lowly ranked in terms of corruption (Transparency International, 2023).

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