



Blending Pragmatism & Principles: How can the EU & Member States promote trust, resilience & inclusive governance in the Central Sahel?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

On 14 March 2024, **over 100 experts from EU institutions, Member States, international and Sahelian NGOs, and think tanks** gathered in Brussels to i) share lessons learned from the past decade of Team Europe engagement in the Central Sahel and ii) explore effective local efforts in favour of inclusive and accountable governance and integrated, peacebuilding-informed approaches to the region's multiple crises. The gathering was organised by Search for Common Ground, in collaboration with the Just Future Alliance, co-hosted by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and co-financed by the Belgian development cooperation department. This paper presents **a summary of recommendations generated** in rich exchanges among attendees.

The event took place amid **intense volatility in the Central Sahelian countries** of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, as well as **new tensions among former close partners** in West Africa and internationally, triggered primarily by a series of (bloodless) coups d'état. Transitional authorities in each country have resisted calls for a timely return to civilian rule and curtailed the space for opposing voices domestically, while initiating a dramatic reorientation in their regional and international cooperation. The G5 Sahel is shutting down following the withdrawal of the three countries in favour of their own newly formed Alliance of Sahelian States (ASS). ECOWAS is struggling to avoid a similar exit, ending previously adopted sanctions but facing waning credibility and leverage in the region. The African Union has been largely absent. Framed in terms of asserting sovereignty, the ASS leaders have not shied away from confrontational and anti-European narratives or exploring partnerships, such as with China and Russia, which present serious geostrategic dilemmas for the EU.

For Central Sahelian populations, this political instability and breakdown in regional and international cooperation happens in a **wider context** of population growth and intergenerational tensions, rapid urbanisation and digitalisation, deep-seated governance weaknesses, longstanding challenges in fostering inclusive development and controlling financial flows, and devastating impacts of climate change with associated pressure on natural resources. The recent volatility and reduction in international investments, as well as ongoing violence and forced displacement, decreased accessibility and quality of basic services and necessities, and rising polarisation on and offline, have deepened an **already serious crisis of trust in institutions and the international community** and led to ever more people **struggling to meet their most basic needs**.

Yet, amid these challenges and gaps in support, **popular resilience has shone through**. Local actors, in particular civil society organisations (CSOs), have stepped up to provide an ever **growing part of basic service delivery**, adapting efforts to **address shifting conflict and security dynamics**. At the request of communities and in coordination with local authorities, CSOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are increasingly employing **a triple humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach**, delivering services such as education, humanitarian assistance, and economic opportunity support with attention for conflict sensitivity and social

cohesion, for example across age groups, ethnic groups, or displaced and host community divides. They help maintain **spaces for communities to be heard in decision-making and hold authorities accountable**, even as elections are repeatedly postponed and the space for more direct political activism has shrunk.

The EU and its Member States have struggled to align on an effective response, with key tensions around pursuing **interests or values** (or pragmatism versus principles), **short term versus long term perspectives**, and the **acceptability** (or not) of **different types of partners** to work with. **The following recommendations seek to cut through some of these dilemmas and offer a way forward** for political and programming priorities commensurate with the challenges and opportunities facing Central Sahelian populations.

OVERALL DIRECTION FOR TEAM EUROPE ENGAGEMENT

- **Protection of civilians and wellbeing of the Sahel population must be at the centre of the EU's approach, as a compass which marries principles and pragmatism.** Team Europe should remain deeply engaged in the Sahel, demonstrating the resilience that has been demanded of the people of the Sahel for so long. This requires fresh thinking on engagement modalities at national and subnational level to ensure support continues to reach the population, in particular the most vulnerable groups, and to accompany positive, locally-led transitions.
- **Such fresh thinking must rely on more listening and learning, taking the time to understand the visions of communities and the *de facto* authorities (DFAs),** and ensuring a renewed EU approach more adapted to each country's distinct reality. This requires a much deeper situational awareness, stakeholder analysis, and accountability to the priorities, hopes, and agency of communities. Likewise, decisions should be informed by **constant learning, based on monitoring the real impact** of Team Europe engagement.
- **Continued engagement and trust building with the national authorities is crucial,** even if the road may be bumpy and progress slow. The EU should be 'strategically patient' and seek to establish mutual respect. Such dialogue does not imply agreeing on everything: it should aim to increase mutual understanding and trust and to identify openings, without sidelining universal values important to the EU and to Sahelian populations, such as human rights, human dignity, freedom, equality, sustainable development, and respect.
- While some are concerned that such external engagement may legitimise the coup leaders, there is simply no viable alternative. **Isolation will not lead to better respect for human rights, nor to better outcomes for the civilian population and there is nothing to be gained from a forceful or militarised approach** leading to further destabilisation of the Sahel. Positive change will need to come from within and gradually, by increasing space for dialogue and accountability of authorities towards the population, which is in everyone's interest. The EU should find creative ways to accompany this, rather than purely relying on external pressure, the results of which have been limited and often counterproductive.
- **With this in mind, the EU should broaden its view of who key partners are,** looking not only at national institutions or regional bodies. **The EU should foster partnerships with local authorities where possible and with diverse non-state actors,** including community, religious and customary leaders. This widened concept of partnership will enable the EU to tap into local expertise, both to channel support and to learn from this wider variety of voices, including critical voices, while vice-versa also sharing EU messages beyond the traditional counterparts.
- **Within this, CSOs and CBOs merit particular attention and support** as they fulfil diverse roles across all the key challenges and opportunities identified and require international support to stay functional amid shrinking civic space and social polarisation. This should include both core and project funding, with

special heed to women's and youth organisations, and appropriate budgetary and procedural flexibility in order to adapt to risks and openings in a volatile context, including more small funding opportunities that CSOs/CBOs can access directly.

- **Across all support and partnerships, there should be a particular focus on meeting the needs of and actively involving more vulnerable and less heard groups**, including women, youth, displaced and mobile communities, ethnic and religious minorities, and people living with disabilities and social stigma.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS ON PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

1. Encourage and accompany positive reform and transition processes from within

- The EU should find creative ways to **accompany locally- led and transnationally networked** efforts to foster inclusive decision-making and accountability of authorities. This should seek to both address immediate concerns and help prepare for elections in the medium term and wider citizen participation in the longer term. It should include support to CSO-led efforts focused on:
 - **Culturally-embedded awareness raising** on rights and good governance, as well as **capacity building for diverse emerging voices**, in particular young women, to play an intermediary role and raise the priorities of less heard communities;
 - Promoting **inclusive and effective participation in existing structured consultation and dialogue spaces**, such as the *Cadres de concertation communaux* or *Comités consultatifs de sécurité*, which are proving effective in negotiating greater responsiveness and accountability of formal and informal authorities, including armed forces;
 - **Protection support for those who raise their voices**, including conflict-sensitive prevention measures and accessible, holistic support (material and psychosocial) for those at risk;
- The EU should seek **constructive dialogue with the transitional, technical, and decentralised authorities**, *a minima* fostering **transparency and recognition** around EU support in-country and its impact. EU dialogue with the DFAs should also **encourage positive reforms and opening of civic space**, while **stressing shared priorities** such as protection of civilians, meeting basic needs, reduction of capital flight and illicit financial flows, and the key role of African states in the international community of nations.
- On the basis of this dialogue, Team Europe should **identify promising areas for technical cooperation** with line ministries, national agencies, and decentralised authorities, for example on health, education, anti-corruption efforts and improving the accessibility of judicial services. On more sensitive, but crucial, sectors like security and defence, the EU should maintain dialogue to encourage the responsible use of force to ensure protection of civilians, attention to non-military approaches to preventing violent extremism, and the protection of human rights.

2. Contribute to healthy information spaces to reduce tensions and polarisation and promote access to quality information

- Civil society in a wide sense - including e.g. CBOs, midwives associations, youth social groups, religious actors - are key **partners in mapping and understanding** how information, including disinformation and harmful narratives, is circulating.

- While avoiding the temptation of focusing on pro-EU messaging over locally defined priorities, the EU should partner with CSOs to **support their efforts and engagement with community and online influencers** (e.g. traditional and religious leaders, musicians, griots, social media personalities...) to improve the information space, e.g. through fact-based dialogue on key issues such as peace and cohesion or transition and reform processes.
- The EU should also **work with online platforms**, such as WhatsApp, to ensure they have adapted strategies for addressing information flows in such conflict-affected, polarised, and linguistically diverse contexts.
- **Support for quality education** is also key, including adapting curricula to include **media and digital literacy, as well as peace education**, aimed at reducing off-line and online polarisation, improving social cohesion, and avoiding that tensions escalate to further violence. Also, **virtual intra- and inter-continental youth exchanges** can help support increased understanding.
- The EU should seek to **support independent local media**, many of which are at serious risk of discontinuation, including partnering with CSOs to provide training in **conflict-sensitive and peace-promoting journalism**.
- There is also a need to **support European media to better cover the reality** of the Sahelian context, beyond terror dynamics. In its own public communication, especially via Embassies, Team Europe should **prioritise constructive narratives** in an effort to reduce tensions.

3. Take the lead from local actors in providing adapted support to meeting the needs of the population amid deteriorating conflict dynamics, while seeking to increase resilience

- European donors should work to **reduce funding gaps for triple nexus** work by CSOs and CBOs, **avoiding silos and zoning restrictions** that hamper locally designed efforts to meet real needs, reduce acute tensions, alleviate root causes of conflict, and open possibilities for collaborative efforts on major issues like equitable, sustainable natural resource management.
- With a view to durable outcomes - whether on food security, reducing the appeal of criminal and extremist violent groups, tackling gender-based violence and harmful gender norms - such nexus efforts must pay **special attention to the needs and agency of diverse groups and inter-group relations**. This requires capacity building and micro-financial support, including on entrepreneurial and agricultural activities, directed towards and, ideally, across those groups that are hardest to reach - including diverse women and youth, displaced persons, former combatants - combined with efforts on social cohesion, awareness of rights, and nonviolent conflict resolution (notably, on access to land or resources).
- The EU should work to ensure **decentralised authorities are involved** in such conflict-sensitive and adapted efforts on resilience and service provision that meet the real needs of the population, including, where possible, direct technical and financial cooperation.
- The EU should also deepen its engagement with financial institutions like the African Development Bank, multinational businesses active in the Sahel, and, where possible, China and other rising investors on **context-appropriate support for infrastructure and economic opportunities**, with due attention to conflict-sensitive due diligence and corporate social responsibility.