Conflict Prevention in the Sahel

EMERGING PRACTICE ACROSS THE UN

by Adam Day and Jessica Caus

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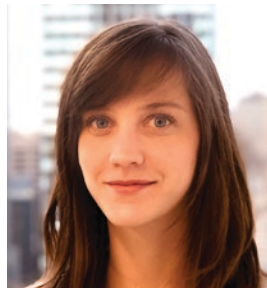Adam Day is the Head of Programmes and Jessica Caus is a Research Assistant at United Nations University Centre for Policy Research.

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Executive Summary

Preventing violent conflict is a central goal of the United Nations and a clear priority for Secretary-General António Guterres. It is generally recognised that for prevention to be effective, the UN must act earlier, often in non-mission settings where the UN is led by a Resident Coordinator (RC). Recent reform of the UN Development System has been geared at making the RC system more capable of addressing prevention challenges, including by aligning political, development and humanitarian work of the UN. In the context of these reforms, the Sahel presents an immediate challenge, given the inter-related security, humanitarian and political risks facing the region as a whole. In recognition of these risks, the UN has prioritised the Sahel, undertaking a wide array of new initiatives, channelling resources, and working in innovative ways with a range of partners in the region.

This policy paper was developed to directly support the UN's understanding of the situation in the Sahel, and of the ways in which the UN system in non-mission settings can better respond to current and emerging risks. Acknowledging that the UN reforms are still in early phases of rollout, the paper identifies **emerging practice in the UN's prevention efforts across the Sahel**. It finds that, while often the UN plays a minor and/or supporting role in conflict prevention, some of the new approaches arising from the reforms have enabled potentially greater impact and certainly stronger synergies that could be further leveraged into even more effective responses in the future.

The paper has three parts: (1) an overview of the risk landscape in the Sahel; (2) a study of emerging practice by the UN, with a particular focus on the UN's presence in Burkina Faso, transhumance in Nigeria, cross-border approaches across the region, and channelling funding resources; and (3) a set of conclusions and recommendations covering the following areas:

- Supporting the role of the Resident Coordinator
- The need for localised risk analysis and response
- Protecting the Peace and Development Advisor position
- Leveraging Headquarters
- Engaging with the regional offices
- Developing regionally-based action plans
- Understanding and harnessing financial resources
- Addressing the challenge of cross-border programming
- Incorporating a political-economy lens into analysis (the crime "blind spot")
- Addressing the issue of security services
- Treating elections as a form of early warning
- Bridging the centre/periphery divide
- Utilizing adaptive management techniques in prevention programming

Introduction

Preventing violent conflict is a core goal of the UN and a stated priority of Secretary-General António Guterres. It is widely acknowledged that for prevention to work, the UN will need to act earlier, to address conflict risks before they escalate. The front line of prevention, therefore, will be in non-mission settings, countries where the UN presence is led by a Resident Coordinator (RC) who coordinates the efforts of the UN Country Team (UNCT). Over the past three years, the UN has undertaken a series of reforms, one of which has been to make the RC system more independent, politically empowered, and able to address prevention challenges alongside broader efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As of January 2019, RCs report directly to the office of the Secretary-General and are expected to bring together the UN's peace, development, human rights and humanitarian priorities into a coherent strategy.[1] The RC reform is part of a broader effort to make the political, development, and humanitarian approaches of the UN more aligned and more regionally-driven.

The Sahel region presents the most immediate and acute test of the reformed UN system. Stretching from sub-Saharan Senegal to northern Ethiopia,[2] Sahelian countries are some of the most fragile in the world, characterized by a combination of poor governance and exposure to cross-border criminality and trafficking that are extremely difficult to address with traditional tools. While each country is unique, conflict dynamics across the Sahel tend to be transnational and inter-dependent, from the criminal networks that spread across the region and beyond, to transhumance patterns that ignore national boundaries, violent extremist groups operating on a global scale, large-scale population movements, and the acute impacts of climate change.[3] Weak governance capacities and long-standing patterns of corruption, patronage and predation mean that the state response to conflict risks is often insufficient, or at times exacerbates tensions.

In recognition of these risks, the UN has prioritized the Sahel in several important ways. The Joint Steering Committee on Humanitarian and Development Collaboration has placed the Sahel at the top of its agenda; the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) has engaged intensively in several Sahelian countries; and the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General has taken dozens of decisions on the Sahel in the past year alone. The publication of the UN Support Plan for the Sahel in 2018 reflects a serious effort to scale up development and humanitarian efforts in the region, with a clear intention of reducing the risks of conflict-driven human suffering.[4] And in September 2019, the Secretary-General issued new instructions for the reinforced coordination and implementation of the recalibrated Sahel strategy, including regional cooperation, capacity building, resource mobilization, and advocacy/communication.[5]

This policy paper was developed to directly support the UN's understanding of the situation in the Sahel, and of the ways in which the UN system in non-mission settings can better respond to current and emerging risks.[6] The starting point is a recognition that the UN's failures and shortcomings are often well-known, but the many ways in which the UN successfully averts crises, builds prevention capacities, and helps reduce risks are often ignored in public reporting. This leads to a lack of understanding by the UN and its partners as to what works in conflict prevention, minimizing the scope for effective, evidence-based policies. In 2018 the Centre for Policy Research at UN University responded to this shortcoming and conducted a series of case studies examining conflict prevention by the RC system, offering broad lessons for non-mission settings.[7] These were designed specifically to support the roll-out of the RC reform process, offering evidence-based recommendations for the newly configured field presences.

Building on this work, the present project will examine **emerging practice in the UN's prevention efforts across the Sahel**. Acknowledging that the UN reforms are still in early phases of rollout, the project focuses on how RCs and key partners – including UNCT, regional offices, national, regional, and bilateral counterparts – are working to leverage the UN system towards prevention outcomes. The key questions guiding the research are: How can RCs work with UN and other actors to play an effective prevention role? What approaches/strategies work in identifying risks, carving out political space for preventive action and obtaining key resources to respond? What partnerships, including with other UN entities, UN regional offices, national and local actors, contribute to resilience? How can Member States better support the UN in non-mission settings, including financing, political support, and bilateral engagement with affected countries?

Based on an in-depth literature review, access to internal UN documents, and interviews with a wide range of UN leadership in the field and Headquarters, this paper contains three parts: (1) an overview of the risk landscape in the Sahel; (2) emerging practice of conflict prevention in the Sahel; and (3) conclusions and recommendations for the UN and its partners going forward.

The intended audience for this paper is UN policymakers, UN agencies in field locations, Member States looking to support UN prevention work, and national governments engaging with RCs on prevention issues. This project will contribute to a stronger evidence base for policy development, concrete examples of good practice to inform conflict-sensitive planning, and a better understanding across the UN of the prevention work of the Organization.

I. The Risk Landscape in the Sahel

There is no universally accepted list of countries in "the Sahel," but it is generally understood to be the territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, falling between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannah ecosystems to the south.[8] It is considered to span at least parts of Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad.[9]

While the region is vast, sparsely populated over large stretches and oftentimes inhospitable, longstanding transnational patterns and historical ties mean the Sahel presents deeply interconnected socio-economic, political and security dynamics. And while public reporting on the Sahel tends to focus on its weaknesses and vulnerabilities, the region has proven remarkably resilient and capable of sustained growth: seven of

Source: UN Dispatch

the ten Sahelian countries have recorded improvements in governance over the past four years, while six have improved their human development indicators as well.[10] With massive natural resources, the greatest capacity for renewable energy anywhere in the world, and some of the fastest growing societies globally, a more stable Sahel region offers enormous potential. In contrast, if the region becomes more deeply mired in its many conflicts and is unable to build sustainable governance institutions that meet the needs of its people, the human and financial costs will be extraordinary.
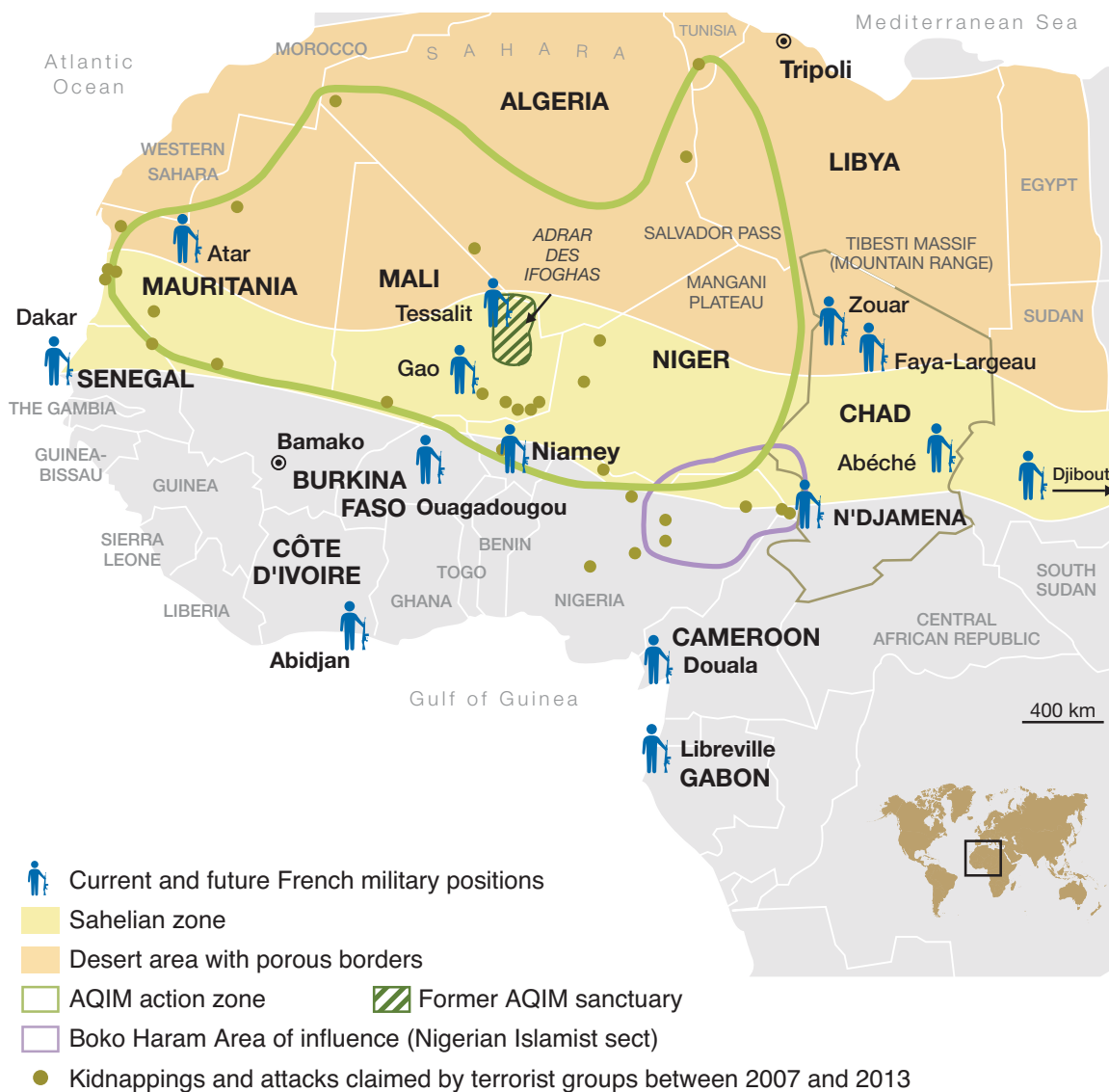
This section examines the major risk factors driving insecurity in the Sahel region. It acknowledges the country-specific nature of many of the risks but aims to provide an overview of the inter-connected nature of Sahelian dynamics. This analysis provides context for the conflict prevention efforts of the UN system in the sections that follow.

Insecurity and Violent Extremism

The 2011 collapse of the Libyan regime and subsequent armed uprisings in northern Mali have created a surge in armed activity across many parts of the Sahel, fuelled by massive weapons flows and the movement of fighters into the region.[11] Lack of state capacity, poverty and unemployment have contributed to conditions where armed groups are easily able to recruit, mobilize, and threaten large civilian populations. In Mali, a Tuareg insurgency that began in the north in 2012 has metastasized into a broader set of inter-related conflicts stretching into the centre of the country, where violent extremist groups have taken advantage of tensions to gain a foothold in the country.[12]

This violence has spread into neighbouring Burkina Faso, with regular cross-border attacks by armed groups along the border with Mali causing the displacement of more than 500,000 people.[13] Elsewhere, a growing rebellion in Cameroon has been described by experts as "on the verge of escalating into civil war,"[14] while active conflicts also stretch across the borders of Nigeria and Cameroon.

The active operations of jihadist groups is one of the most visible drivers of violent conflict in the Sahel.[15] The presence of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb across parts of Mauritania, Mali and Niger has fuelled insurgencies

Legend	
Current and future French military positions	
Sahelian zone	
Desert area with porous borders	
AQIM action zone	Former AQIM sanctuary
Boko Haram Area of influence (Nigerian Islamist sect)	
Kidnappings and attacks claimed by terrorist groups between 2007 and 2013	

Source: Le Monde 2014

that in some cases directly challenge state authority in large regions. Worryingly, jihadi groups frequently join existing inter-communal conflicts and forms of organized criminality, dramatically driving up tensions and deepening religious/ethnic fault lines. For example, in Mali, violent extremist groups joined the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, and have since taken advantage of weak state capacity in the centre of the country to participate in inter-communal conflicts between the Fulani and Dogon communities.[16] The Boko Haram insurgency has destabilized large territories in the Lake Chad basin area, where violent attacks in the border areas amongst Nigeria, Niger and Chad and Cameroon constitute a major risk to stability. Since 2014, for example, more than 240,000 Cameroonians have been internally displaced by Boko Haram's violence.[17]

Transnational Criminal Networks

Insecurity across the Sahel is driven by the presence of highly effective criminal networks (which pre-existed the current set of conflicts) capable of sustaining armed group activity and undermining state capacities in many areas. Capitalizing on arms trade, drugs, and human trafficking, organized crime in the Sahel is estimated to generate $3.8 billion every year.[18] In deeply impoverished areas, illicit activities represent far more attractive sources of income than the fragile pastoralist and farming careers, many of which are under increasing pressure by demographic and environmental changes (described below).[19] Ranked near the bottom of governance and corruption indices, some Sahelian governments are complicit in transnational criminal activities, undermining the legitimacy of the state and fomenting deep grievances among the population.[20]

Importantly, the transnational flows of illicit resources are linked to other dynamics. Armed groups are able to sustain themselves across national boundaries via trade in drugs and weapons, frustrating national efforts to eradicate or weaken them.[21] Jihadi groups benefit from black market resources and undermine international efforts to sanction or proscribe them, while also maintaining crucial lines of potential recruitment.[22] And nationally-driven development plans that look to build strong state governance capacities often founder on the fact that the illicit economy is far more robust than the employment options the state is able to offer.

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies
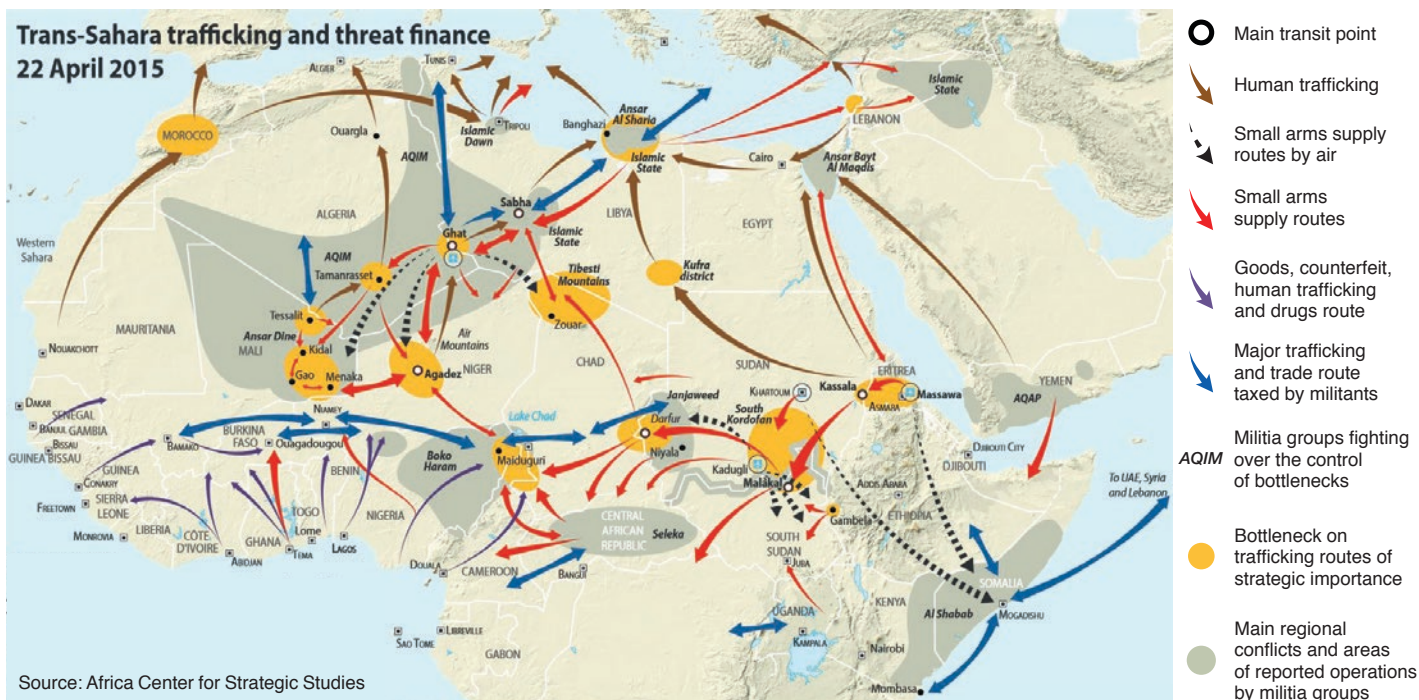
Transhumance and National Boundaries

For centuries, pastoralists have crossed the Sahel, following seasonal patterns that allow their herds to graze, often on the farming land of sedentary communities. Longstanding agreements between pastoralists and farmers have allowed for relatively peaceful transhumance, with strong local and traditional mediation capacities as the frontline of de-escalation when conflicts did arise. In recent years, these arrangements have come under increasing pressure for a number of inter-related reasons: the expansion of agriculture to meet increasing food demands has fragmented traditional migratory routes; longer, hotter seasons resulting from climate change have pushed pastoralists further southwards into areas traditionally dominated by farmers; and significant demographic growth has placed greater pressure on scarce resources, land in particular.[23] This has led to rapidly escalating tensions amongst herders and a range of farming communities in Mali and Nigeria, with thousands of civilians killed in intercommunal clashes in the past year alone.[24] Given that the majority of herders in Nigeria are Muslim[25] and many of the Nigerian farming communities

Source: Cairn International

0   200 km
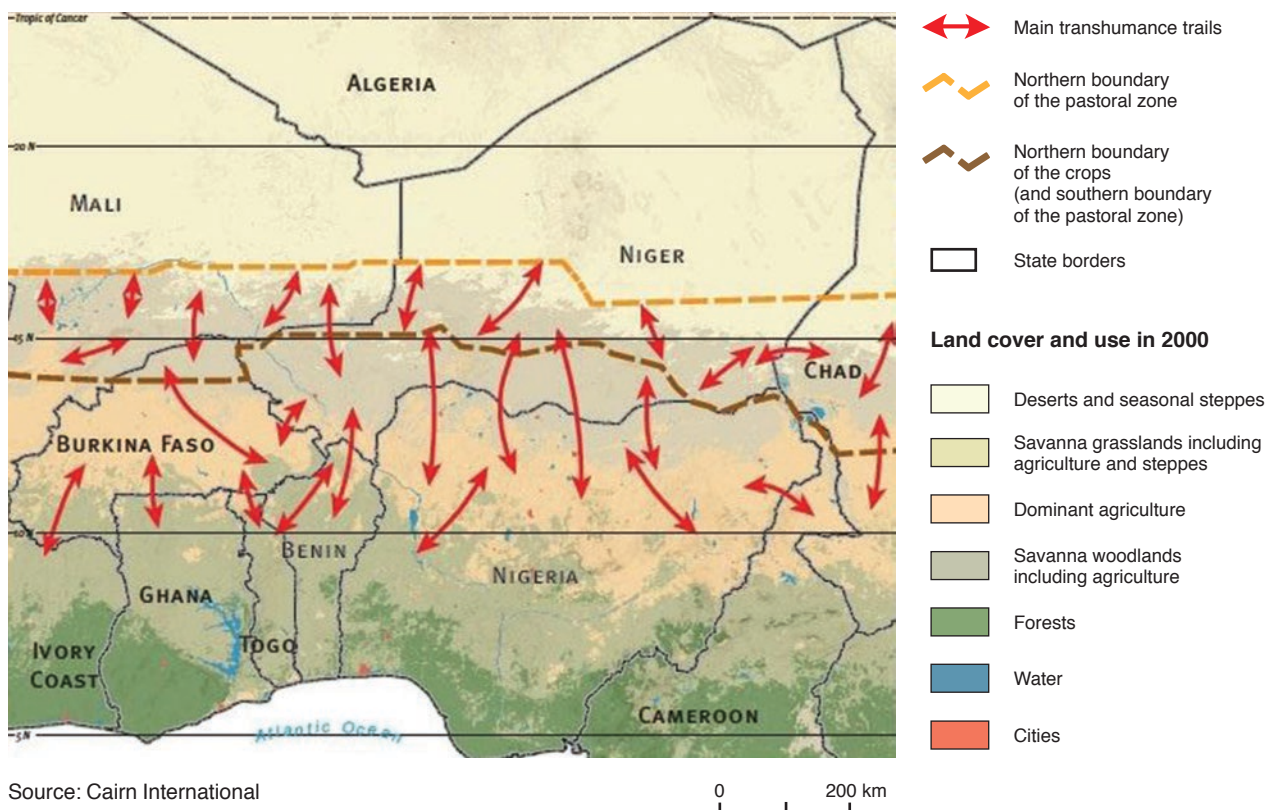
are Christian, there is a distinctly inter-religious element to the conflict dynamics, one made worse by accusations that the Fulani herders have collaborated with jihadist groups in the region.[26]

Farmer-herder conflicts have been exacerbated by the increased insecurity in the region but are also indicative of a deeper set of grievances and longstanding marginalization of minority communities across the Sahel. With the exception of Chad and Mauritania, pastoralists are a minority in all Sahelian countries and tend to reside in the northern regions, often without significant resources provided by the state.[27] National boundaries drawn on the basis of colonialism have divided these communities, rendering them under-represented in political systems and thus vulnerable to repression.

In fact, colonial-era national boundaries have an impact well beyond farmer-herder dynamics. In Cameroon, for example, the former British mandate area in the northern part of the country (called "Ambazonia") was merged with the former French-administered Cameroon in 1961, laying the seeds of today's brutal conflict between the Anglophone communities and the central government. Similarly, the Tuareg population in northern Mali rose up against the central state in 2012, demanding their own state and triggering a civil war that continues to impact stability today.[28] The combination of extremely uneven distribution of resources and deep ethno-religious divides in many of the countries of the Sahel has created a high risk of this kind of breakaway challenge to the state, where communities feel they are unable to rely upon the central government to address their needs.[29]

Socio-Economic Trends

The countries of the Sahel are almost uniformly categorized as "least developed" by the UN, based on low per capita income, extremely poor health and education indicators, and high economic vulnerability to shocks.[30] Nearly 50 per cent of the region lives in extreme poverty, and the Sahel countries represent the bottom of the Human Development Index.[31] Even the recent economic growth – driven by the export of primary goods – has not led to a broader reduction in risks or improvements in living standards, in part because of the rapid population increases, and also because growth has not been inclusive. Rural areas in the northern regions of the Sahel are largely unable to benefit from economic growth and continue to lack access to social services

and basic infrastructure. These geographic imbalances contribute to grievances that have fuelled the North-South conflicts in Mali, Cameroon, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, and offer ample opportunities for the further spread of corruption and criminal networks.[32]

It is important to note the important role of foreign actors in driving some of the economic inequalities in the Sahel region. A wide range of extractive industries, including a mining boom that has taken hold over the past decade, has meant rapidly growing interest by major multilateral corporations and bilateral actors.[33] However, there is strong evidence that the extractive industry has affected the migration routes of herding communities, potentially

raising the risk of conflicts as migratory patterns change.[34] Lack of accountability and transparency in the extractive sector has not only meant that many of the dividends have not been transmitted to needy communities in the peripheries, but has also fuelled mistrust of outside actors in many settings.[35] Unequal access to resources has been identified as one of the main conflict drivers across the region.[36]

Severe food insecurity is one of the most acute challenges in the Sahel, interacting with other conflict dynamics to heighten risks. Roughly two-thirds of the Sahel relies on farming or pastoralism for livelihoods, with nearly no diversification of income sources.[37] Rapid changes to the ecosystem – such as increasing rainfall variability, overexploitation of soil, overgrazing, and desertification – have created a food scarcity crisis that threatens

Sahel | Food and Nutrition Crisis

European Commission

Total number of people requiring **emergency food assistance** (Jun-Aug 2018, phase 3 to 5)	12 012 261
Total expected number of children suffering from **Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM)** children in need of treatment (Jan-Dec 2018)	4 185 222

People affected per country

XXX — People requiring emergency food assistance

XXX — Number of expected SAM children

Food Security Phases
- Emergency
- Crisis
- Under Stress
- Normal
- Not analyzed

538 446 / 67 896
735 306 / 147 450
1 615 875 / 274 145
1 624 000 / 612 202
990 706 / 347 069
954 315 / 276 734
5 289 761 / 2 414 998
263 852 / 44 728

Sources: UNICEF, Cadre Harmonisé, Food Security Cluster (FSC), Niger National Response Plan (RP) 2018.
(*) Cameroon: data cover only four regions (East, Adamawa, North, Far North).
(**) Mali: data are taken from Food Security Cluster (FSC).
(***) Niger: data are provided by National Response Plan (RP) 2018.
(****) Nigeria: Food security phases data (Cadre Harmonisé) cover only 16 Northern States, nutrition data covers 12 States.

over ten million Sahelians and has brought communities into more direct conflict.[38] These trends are amplified by recurrent natural disasters over recent decades.

Competition over resources continues to deepen as the population of the Sahel has surged in the past decade. Currently, nearly half the population of the region is under 14 years of age, and the population is expected to more than double by 2050.[39] With unemployment over 10 per cent in some countries and deep deficiencies in the educational sector, the population explosion in the region is not being met by sufficient economic growth.[40] Uneven growth is of particular concern: unemployment and poor governance indicators are far worse in minority communities in many countries, fuelling resentment, offering opportunities for armed group mobilization, and undermining governments' claims to legitimacy beyond the state capitals.[41]

Poverty and inequality are simultaneously conflict drivers and also the outcome of the violence that has spread across the Sahel.[42] As conflicts have driven deeper divides amongst communities, there is a growing sentiment that many governments are punishing marginalized communities. Fulani leadership in Mali has complained that they have been stigmatized and further isolated from state resources by the presence of jihadist groups in the country.[43] Anglophone separatists in Cameroon have long argued that the central government has systematically deprived them of resources, triggering a conflict that has left nearly half of the hospitals and most of the schools in the North shuttered.[44]

Population Displacement

Large-scale population movements across the Sahel are the result of insecurity and the socio-economic pressures of the region. Roughly three million Sahelians are currently displaced by conflicts, with hundreds of thousands seeking shelter outside of their country of origin.[45] Chad is hosting 460,000 refugees from neighbouring countries, while simultaneously trying to reintegrate 200,000 Chadians returning from Libya and the Central African Republic.[46] More than 250,000 Nigerians have been displaced by Boko Haram's violence, while in Cameroon the recent violence has displaced an estimated 600,000 people.[47]

The impact of population movements is often felt most acutely along the borders of countries, where state capacity is often weakest, and where other dynamics such as cross-border violence and transnational illicit flows are most prevalent. Of the 3.2 million internally displaced persons in the region, most are clustered along the border areas of Niger, Chad and Nigeria, or in the common border area among Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.[48] Returnee populations are also concentrated in the same border areas, contributing to an intensification of humanitarian needs in difficult to access and often conflict-prone areas.
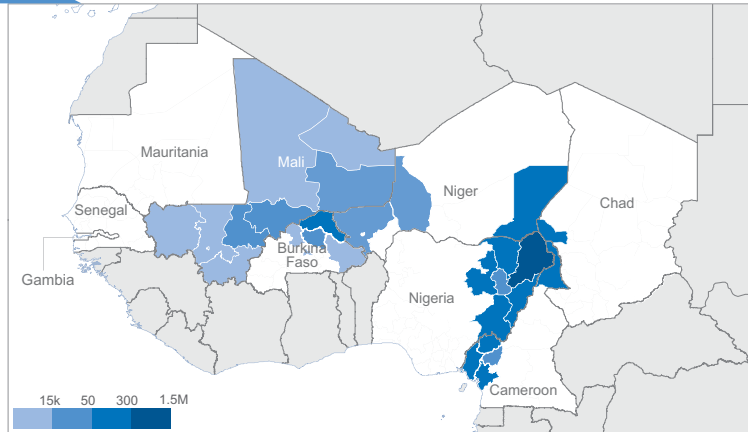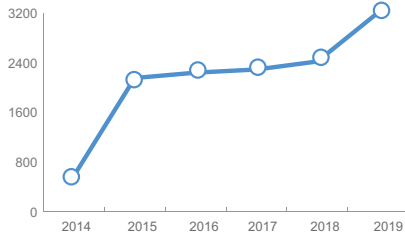
While most of the focus is on conflict-related population movements, massive urbanization has taken place over recent decades as well, driven by the increasingly precarious

3.21 million

In thousand

15k   50   300   1.5M

Data source: UNOCHA

agricultural sector and the search for better paying jobs in cities.[49] Largely unplanned urbanization has strained resources in major cities, exposing populations to greater risks of disease and susceptibility to food price increases.[50] Growing gang violence in many of the major urban areas has allowed illicit networks to establish a foothold in population centres, bringing greater risks of instability within cities as well.[51]

Climate change as an amplifier of risks

The impact of climate change on the Sahel is irrefutable and especially acute in the Sahel.[52] An increase in temperatures by nearly 1°C since 1970 has been accompanied by more frequent and severe droughts and other natural disasters.[53] The Physical Vulnerability to Climate Change Index ranks the Sahelian countries as the most vulnerable to climate change, well above other African countries and most other least developed states, and projected to have temperature increases 1.5 times the global average in the coming period.[54] Clear trends of reduced rainy seasons, higher temperatures, and rainfall variability directly increase the risks of crop failure, drought, desertification, crop disease, and increased food prices.[55] In a context where food scarcity and competition over arable land are direct drivers of violent conflict, and where mechanized agriculture is already putting huge pressures on land, climate change is an amplifier of risks in the Sahel.[56]

Expert analysis of current trends points to several links between climate change and insecurity in the Sahel, though the precise causal impact is not yet clear. Desertification and shifting rainfall patterns have altered the

routes of cattle herding communities, bringing them across farmland during the harvest season rather than after it.[57] Erratic rainfall has also meant that food scarcity risks have increased; given the uneven distribution of power and resources across the Sahel, the harshest impacts of this are felt in already marginalized communities. Additionally, there is evidence that these climatic shifts have driven recruitment into Boko Haram and other extremist groups, as instability and weak government responses to communities' needs disenfranchises marginalized people.[58]

Sahel Climate Hotspots

Climate hotspots

Percentage deviation of number of August wet days during 10 worst drought of the 20th century. Expressed as a fraction of the climatological value over the period 1970-2000

> — 0.30

-0.20 — -0.30

-0.15 — -0.20

The climate hotspots represent areas of the Sahel (12°N and 20°N) where reductions in August wet days during the 10 worst droughts of the 20th century have been **highest and most regular**. (Only areas with at least 77mm/month are shown.)

© Sahel and West Africa Club / OECD 2010

Source: UK Met Office Hadley Centre

Chronically weak governance

The most frequently cited risk factor in the Sahel is the inability or unwillingness of the governments of the region to address the inter-related security, social, political and economic challenges of the region.[59] The failure of state institutions to adequately service marginalized populations has been a driving cause behind the rebellions in Mali and Cameroon, while the rise in power of many of the armed groups in the region has been a direct response to poor governance by the state.[60] State corruption levels across the region are some of the highest in the world, while the diversion of revenues from massive natural resources – such as oil in Chad and Nigeria – means national coffers are unable to support social services or development.[61]

The poor governance capacities across the Sahel underscore the extraordinarily fragile political dispensation in most of the countries in the region. Authoritarian, often militarily-led rule is typical, as most countries have been shaped by a history of violent overthrows,

coups d'état, or other violent transfers of power.[62] A strong tendency in these contexts is for the central government to respond to opposition with oppression, cracking down on dissidents before they have a chance to mobilize into political (or armed) groups capable of challenging the state. In Mali, the harsh government response to the Tuareg opposition movement galvanized an armed secessionist movement that intersected at times with extremist groups in 2012. In Cameroon, the brutal government response to the Anglophone crisis has placed that country on the verge of open civil war. Chad's leader Idriss Déby (who himself took power in a coup 30 years ago) faces rebel groups who have given up on the possibility of a democratic transfer of power. And in Burkina Faso, despite the peaceful transition following Blaise Compaoré's 27-year rule, open conflict in the north and the positioning of armed groups ahead of the 2020 elections has led to a deterioration in security in the past year.[63]

Conclusion - a complex system of conflict risks

The above risk landscape of the Sahel can be considered as a single ecosystem, where risks feed off each other and multiply. Chronically weak governance capacities tend to fuel resentment in the peripheries, galvanize armed group activity, further open the space for criminal networks, and deepen inequalities. These dynamics become part of a cycle, where lack of state response (or indeed a harsh crackdown on dissent) tends to inflame tensions further. They also drive a common problem that has developed across the Sahel over the past several decades: central governments consolidate what power and resources they have, often neglecting or even targeting peripheral communities. This is borne out geographically, as rural areas are often most ignored, but also in political terms as ethnic and religious minorities are structurally kept out of the economic and political power centres of the country.

Crucially, Sahelian conflict dynamics are transborder, frustrating any attempt to address them via national channels alone. Large-scale population movements across the countries of the region have led to improved coordination across humanitarian actors and some information sharing, but a crucial shortfall thus far has been a regional solution to the interlinked security, political and development challenges. This complex set of inter-linked dynamics presents an extraordinarily difficult terrain for the UN, though as the following section will discuss, has given rise to several important innovations and emerging practices that could inform the broader multilateral system. Just as the risks are interconnected, the capacities for peacebuilding and conflict prevention can be synergistic and amplifying to each other.
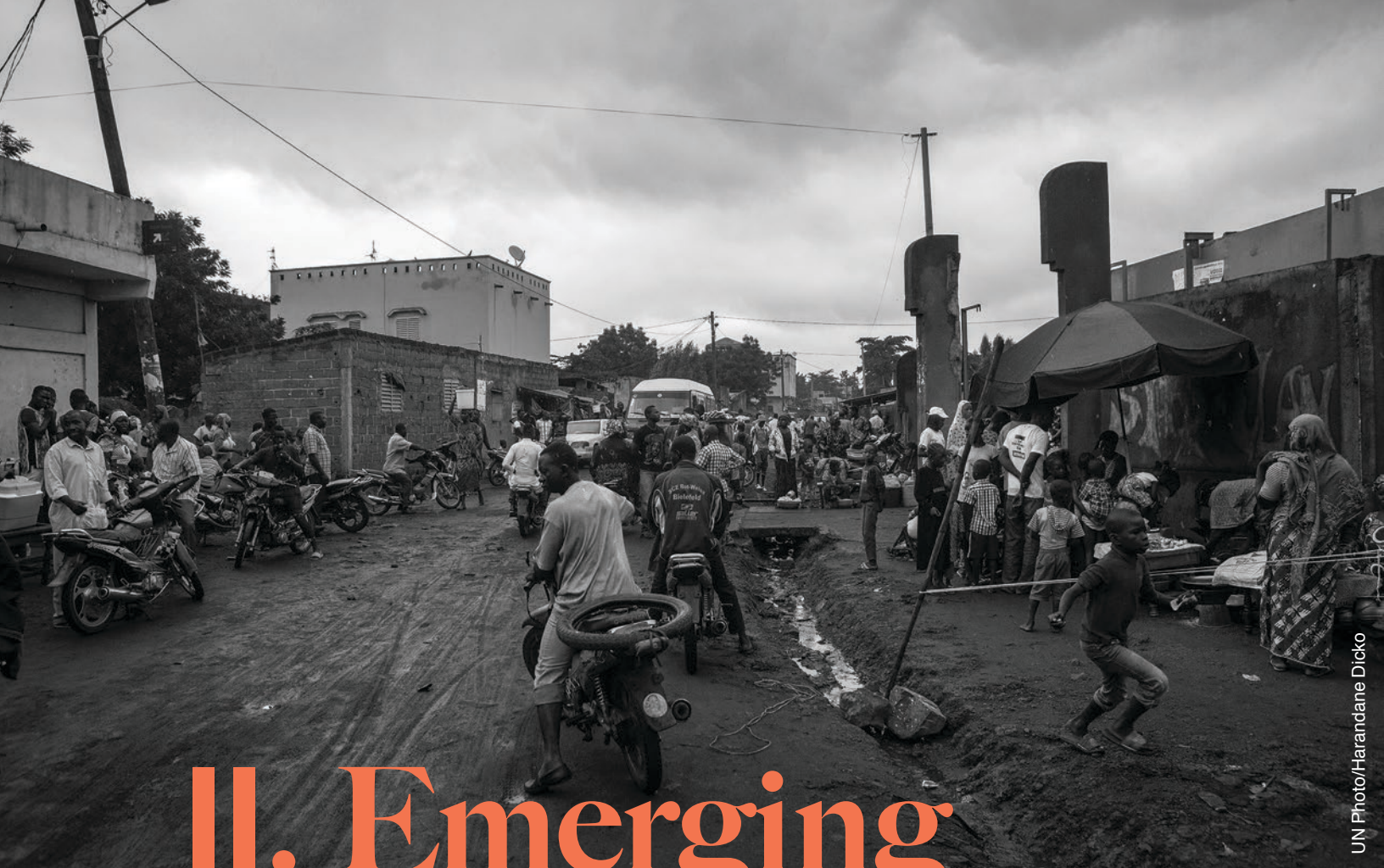
II. Emerging Practice

Across the UN system, the Sahel has become a key priority for conflict prevention and sustaining peace, generating a large number of strategies, initiatives and diplomatic engagements.[64] At the centre, the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), which was first launched in 2013 and has been updated since, broadly lays out the UN's collective efforts on security, governance and resilience. In 2018, the UN launched a Support Plan for the Sahel, translating UNISS' priority areas into more concrete plans for investment.[65] Across the development and humanitarian pillars, the UN's Joint Steering Committee has been tasked by the Deputy Secretary-General to focus on seven Sahelian countries, with ongoing tracking of the situation on the ground, progress on implementing collective outcomes, and recommendations for improvements.[66] And from January 2019 to present, the reformed UN development system has been intensively focused on supporting its offices in the Sahelian countries, including by deploying new resources and personnel. The Executive Committee of the Secretary-General has met dozens of times in the past year to

make decisions about UN support to Sahelian countries (some of which are described below), and the SRSG for West Africa and the Sahel has briefed the Council regularly on his work across the region.[67]

Much of the UN's recent effort in the Sahel is in its early stages, and the reforms to the UN development system are yet to fully materialize in transformed offices with new capacities. UN experts were quick to point out that the impact of new investment plans, regional coordination initiatives, and reconciliation processes might take years to emerge, while the fluid security situation across the region complicates any clear-cut conclusions about the successes or shortcomings of the UN. It is also clear that the UN is only one of a large range of players, from major bilateral donors to IFIs, and of course national institutions.

The UN's impact in helping to prevent conflict is largely dependent upon its ability to catalyse the actions of others, influence key stakeholders away from violence, and help build greater resilience at the local level.
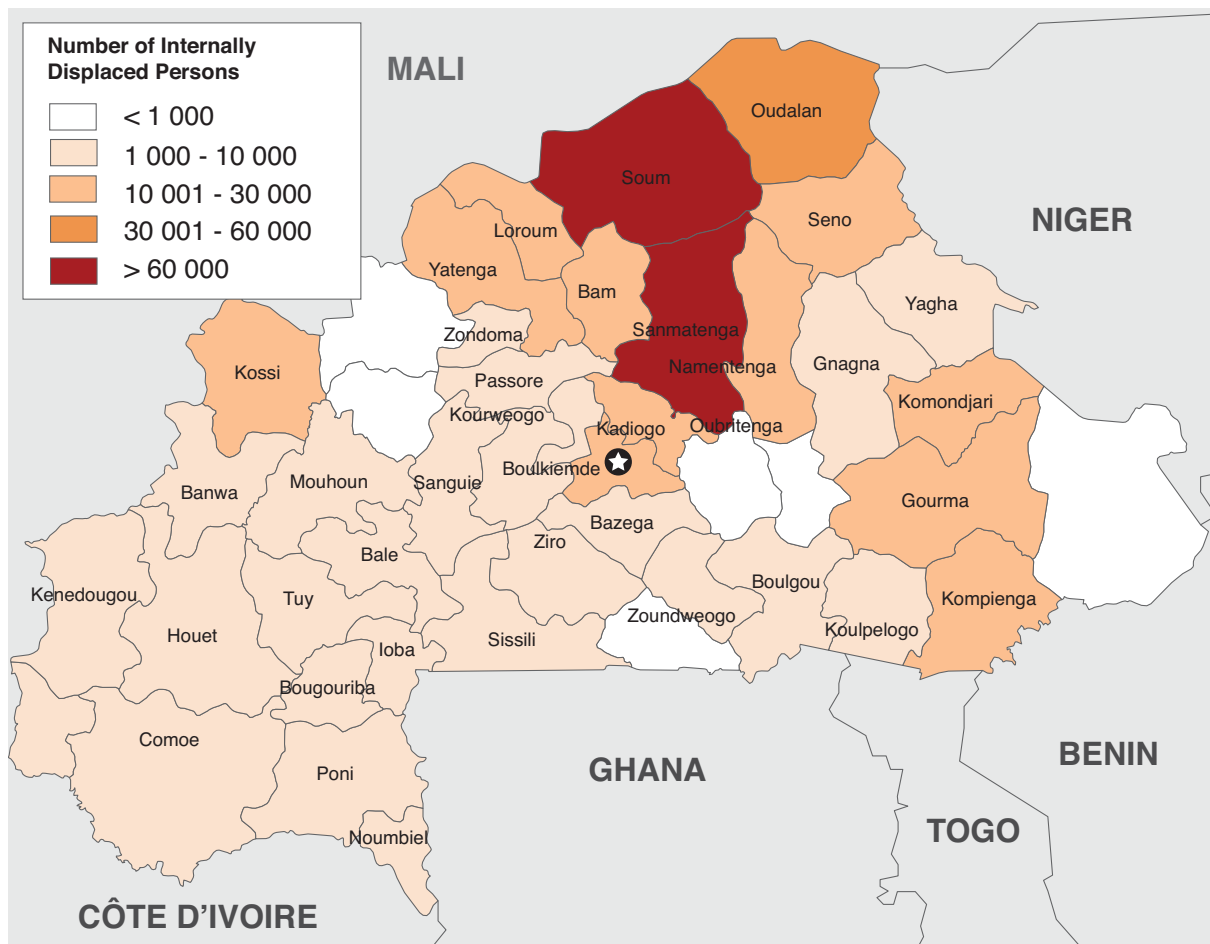
In this context, the below section captures recent understanding of and emerging practice in four priority areas of the UN's engagement in the Sahel: (1) regional and local conflicts, focusing on Burkina Faso; (2) farmer-herder conflicts, focusing on Nigeria; (3) cross-border prevention efforts; and (4) channelling resources and funds towards prevention. While there are of course a broader range of activities the UN is leading across the Sahel, these four areas aim to provide a sense of the different approaches currently underway.

A. Regional and local conflicts – the case of Burkina Faso

The violent conflict threatening much of northern Burkina Faso in 2019 demonstrates the complex interaction between regional and local dynamics in the Sahel. Until very recently, Burkina Faso had never suffered religious-based conflict, though the Muslim population in the northern region of the country had long complained about under-representation in the political elite of the country and lack of development in their regions.[68] Discontent amongst the northern communities built into a social movement as the Muslim population rallied around the so-called Ansarul Islam group to demand better services from the government and protest what they perceived as economic and political marginalization.[69]

A series of political crises in 2014 and 2015 – including an attempted coup against then President Compaoré and an international mediation intervention – resulted in the country's first democratic election in 2015, but a significantly weakened state and no resolution of the underlying grievances of the northern communities.

By the end of 2016, Ansarul Islam had established ties with Malian violent extremist groups, including some connected to Al Qaeda, and had initiated a series of brutal attacks on state institutions in northern Burkina Faso killing dozens of people.[70] Attacks in the capital city Ouagadougou in 2016 and

Number of Internally Displaced Persons

☐	< 1 000
☐	1 000 - 10 000
☐	10 001 - 30 000
☐	30 001 - 60 000
■	> 60 000

MALI

NIGER

Oudalan

Soum

Seno

Loroum

Yatenga

Bam

Yagha

Zondoma

Sanmatenga

Kossi

Passore

Namentenga

Gnagna

Kourweogo

Komondjari

Kadiogo

Oubritenga

Banwa

Mouhoun

Sanguie

Boulkiemde

Bazega

Gourma

Bale

Ziro

Kenedougou

Tuy

Boulgou

Houet

Zoundweogo

Kompienga

Ioba

Sissili

Koulpelogo

Bougouriba

Comoe

GHANA

BENIN

Poni

TOGO

Noumbiel

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Source: UNOCHA

2017 caused widespread panic. A military response by the government, including joint operations with the Malian and French forces under Operation Barkhane in 2017, gave the Burkinabè army temporary control over the northern areas. However, with extremist armed groups spreading across central and southern Mali and weak state capacity to maintain control of territory along the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger border area (Liptako-Ghourma), 2019 has witnessed a resurgence of attacks, the displacement of 400,000 people, the closure of the bulk of the schools in conflict-affected areas, and fears of further escalation.[71]

The political dispensation has remained extremely fragile, as parties have positioned themselves ahead of the 2020 elections. Demands for justice are particularly strong, as more than 20 former ministers have been indicted for their alleged roles in repressing opposition and the 2015 attempted coup. Having overseen three governments in four years, President Kaboré has achieved little of his agenda to combat insecurity, improve social cohesion, and re-establish good governance, though the 6% annual growth in 2019 points to positive effects in his efforts to re-energize the national economy. Inheriting a government

that had already largely withdrawn from the peripheries and had relied upon patronage for decades, Kaboré's reform promises have proven difficult to deliver. An especially difficult aspect is that fundamentally social issues – such as grievances over under-development and marginalization of communities in the North – have become entangled with regional security dynamics and the fight against terrorism. Given the attacks increasingly target community and religious leaders, the fears of larger-scale violence are continuing to grow.[72]

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The situation in Burkina Faso presents one of the most acute tests of the UN's attempts to put prevention meaningfully at the forefront of its work, especially given the already high levels of violence in many parts of the country.[73] It also offered an early trial of the reformed UN Development System, as the crisis in northern Burkina Faso reached a peak in January 2019, when the reforms formally took hold. This section will identify some of the key policy and operational steps taken by the UN to address the interrelated risks in Burkina over the past year, taking into account that the situation there remains fluid at the time of writing this report.

a) Collective outcomes

In 2018, the Secretary-General identified the Sahel as a priority region for the UN's cross-cutting engagement, setting Burkina Faso as one of seven countries that would be focused upon for the so-called New Way of Working across the development and humanitarian actors.[74] UN offices in the field were tasked to develop "collective outcomes" jointly with the government, while a Joint Steering Committee

to advance Humanitarian and Development Collaboration (JSC) was established under the Deputy Secretary-General to review the progress towards these outcomes. The primary goal of this approach has been to build a common vision between the government and the UN about the risks facing Burkina Faso, and a set of clear objectives to reduce risks and help prevent escalation.[75] This constitutes a significant shift from the 2017 collective outcomes, which focused on chronic malnutrition and food insecurity.

One important accomplishment of the early rollout of this approach was the Common Country Analysis (CCA), which revealed a clear link between vulnerability and exclusion: areas that have been historically marginalized are far more at risk than those that have received more state resources. According to the Resident Coordinator in Ouagadougou, this joint analysis provided an important platform to lobby the government for a shift in its approach, from focusing its resources at the national level to more provincial and local engagement. On the basis of this common understanding, she noted, "we have facilitated dialogues between the government and communities in need, and we are already seeing a shift towards more community-based programming."[76]

However, several experts pointed to the significant challenges in working with the Burkinabè government, which is only partway through its own transition process following the elections, suffers from chronic shortcomings in human resources, information flows and coordination, and has a highly centralized structure as a result of decades of prior authoritarian rule.[77] Agreeing on common outcomes has been an important step, but implementing them beyond the capital has proven extremely difficult, particularly in the northern rural areas where the state's security

presence is weak or altogether lacking. It has also proven especially difficult to measure progress against the collective outcomes, not only because they are by nature difficult issues to measure, but also because there is no dedicated capacity within the UN or the government for reporting on progress.

b) Boosted regional presence

Burkina Faso also presented an opportunity for the Secretary-General to put his "prevention platform" into direct use. Part of the reform process was designed to connect the executive decision-making of the Secretary-General more directly to the leadership in the field. Over 2019, the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General held three meetings on Burkina Faso, which included direct briefings by the RC on the needs of the UN in country. One of the key issues that arose in these meetings – and following a visit from the UNOWAS SRSG to Burkina Faso – was the need for the UN to have an expanded territorial coverage across the country. This was seen as especially necessary because of the significant differences in conflict dynamics and humanitarian/development needs in different regions of the country.

On the Secretary-General's recommendation, and driven by monthly meetings of the DPPA-led Emergency Task force, five new offices are currently in different stages of being set up in Dori, Kaya, Fada N'Gourma, Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouahigouya, all reporting to the UNCT, with more than 800 UN staff being deployed in country.[78] "This expands our ability to do early warning," a UN Sahel expert explained, "but it also gives us an improved capacity to engage with the political actors and begin to link the programmatic issues with the underlying social and economic problems."[79] Another UN expert described the expanded presence

as "creating something between a mission and a non-mission setting" perhaps offering a model to other settings in the Sahel where deep regional divisions are driving conflict but where no peacekeeping mission is possible.[80]

Though these new offices potentially create a significant new early warning and prevention capacity for the UN in Burkina Faso, the model has yet to be tested. One UN expert pointed out that the deployment of new offices during a period where other NGOs and UN agencies were withdrawing to capital meant that the offices were isolated, often without radio coverage or easy access to other international agencies. The risk profile of these offices may prove to be too high to sustain. Additionally, the cost of maintaining them (estimated by one UN expert at $20 million) may be difficult to continue in the medium term. Other experts suggested that even the relatively quick decision-making process of the Executive Committee still took several months to implement, as some of the offices still have yet to be fully established. Significant bureaucratic impediments exist to establishing new presences, not least the need to put in place adequate security measures in remote, exposed locations without viable infrastructure. In a prevention setting, a period of several months can feel extremely long.

In this context, it is important here to recognize that the UN, for the first time, co-facilitated a pilot of a Prevention and Peacebuilding Assessment (PBPA) based on the joint UN-World Bank Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment (RPBA) methodology. This operates as a shift from a more recovery-focused approach to a more prevention-oriented one, allowing for deployment of assets and capacities in line with a prevention vision articulated by the RC. This, combined with the creation of new offices in the regions, may offer a new model for the UN system.

UN Photo/Marco Dormino
A Rwandan peacekeeper from the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)
Formed Police Unit (FPU) speak to children while patrolling the streets of Gao in northern Mali.

c) Dialogue and mediation

Lack of trust between the state and major communities – and indeed a growing sense of abandonment in some communities – is perhaps the greatest challenge facing Burkina Faso today.[81] As described above, deeply entrenched patterns of absent and/or predatory governance by the state are holdovers from the colonial and post-colonial era, made worse by the human rights violations by state security services during the political crisis in 2014.[82] Improving social cohesion via platforms for dialogue between the government and civil society has been identified by a range of experts as an absolutely crucial element

of conflict prevention and risk reduction in Burkina Faso.[83] According to some officials, social cohesion must be accompanied by the resumption of basic services if it is to gain a positive foothold.

Again through the Executive Committee process, in early 2019 the Secretary-General dispatched UNOWAS SRSG Chambas to Burkina Faso to make recommendations for the UN's political response. One of Chambas' recommendations was to build an "infrastructure for peace" which would offer a forum for dialogues between government and civil society. A well-known mediator,

Emmanuel Bombande, was subsequently sent by the UN Mediation Standby Team to Ouagadougou to assist with the establishment of an infrastructure for peace in the country as part of the government's social cohesion strategy. As of the writing of this report, the strategy was still in planning, hoping to build a permanent dialogue capacity within 13 regions and 45 provinces in 2020.[84] Importantly, this strategy was underpinned by UNDP, which supported the decentralization of funds to local governments to help improve service delivery (a recurrent source of tension in rural communities).[85] In support of this approach, the RC has recently convened a series of forums where government representatives meet with community leaders, often for the first time. "These meetings have helped prevent high risk moments from spiralling out of control," she said, describing several instances dialogue sessions had reduced tensions in the context of recent attacks.[86]

d) Channelling resources

Burkina Faso receives roughly $950 million in official development assistance, and another $200 million in humanitarian aid.[87] Some funding, such as the $3 million PBF funding for the Liptako-Ghourma project (described below) appears well targeted to the risks of escalation.[88] Overall, however, donor response remains "scattered" and not aligned with the agreed collective outcomes.[89] Moreover, it is insufficiently flexible to be channelled to the peacebuilding needs that have been identified, and the relatively small amounts disbursed thus far by the Peacebuilding Fund appear insufficient to the task.[90] Other sources of funding, such as the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, have not been engaged in recent years.[91] One UN expert suggested that the three major global funds covering humanitarian (CERF), peacebuilding (PBF) and development

(the SDG fund) had not yet been considered together as resources for settings like Burkina Faso. More broadly, it should be noted that traditional development programmes do not allow for an accelerated pace to respond to communities' expectations in the face of a crisis. When the humanitarian agencies are able to act quickly in response to a large-scale crisis, the comparatively slower development response means that opportunities are missed to build on humanitarian impacts. As one UN expert noted, this can have the effect of increasing discontent in affected communities, even as they are receiving some support.[92]

Regarding Burkina Faso, some efforts have gone into addressing these funding shortcomings. The Executive Task Force has initiated a process for a joint mission by the Government and its partners including the UN to explore ways to improve coordination and maximize the impact of the assistance provided by these organizations. This effort translated into the launching of a light Prevention and Peacebuilding Assessment (PPBA) carried out jointly by the UN, World Bank, the African Development Bank and European Union, under the leadership of the Government, based on a shared assumption on the critical need to rapidly adjust international support to the crisis context in Burkina Faso and effectively align international support to the country's emergency response programs. The PPBA is expected to be finalized in November and immediately act as a catalytic instrument to ensure a rapid transition from the current traditional development cooperation framework to a crisis response and preventive framework by aligning programming, financing and monitoring of collective results and thus reinforce the link between humanitarian aid, as a rapid response measure in crisis situations, to a more medium and long-term development and peacebuilding action.

B. Farmer-Herder Conflicts – the case of Nigeria

The Sahel region is experiencing a surge in violent conflicts between herding and farming communities. Generally, the conflicts are driven by competition over land and water – which has grown more intense as a result of demographic growth, climate change, and agricultural development – and have become enmeshed in other dynamics such as the rise of violent extremist groups and transnational criminal groups.[93] In Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts are one part of a complex crisis that includes Boko Haram's attacks in the northeastern part of the country, intercommunal/religious fighting in the northwest, resource-based disputes in the Niger Delta, the Biafra nationalist uprising in the southeast, and the enormous refugee influx from the fighting in Cameroon.[94] Increasingly, the farmer-herder conflicts have taken on a religious and ethnic dimension, as roughly 90 percent of Nigeria's pastoralists are Muslim Fulani, while most farmers are Christians of various ethnicities.[95] A worrying rise of ethnic militias within both communities, coupled with inadequate government response, has contributed to an intensification of violence in the past two years: more than 1,500 people have been killed since January 2018, and more than 300,000 people have been driven from their homes.[96] According to UN experts in Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts pose the greatest threat to the country, far outstripping that of Boko Haram.[97] An extremely fragile political dispensation following the February 2019 national elections has kept Nigeria at high risk of further escalation.

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a) A common analysis

Farmer-herder dynamics in Nigeria cannot be isolated from the broader regional transhumance patterns in the Sahel. Fulani herding communities live and travel across national boundaries, complicating any purely national response. At the same time, national-level actions, such as Nigeria's 2017 anti-grazing legislation in some states, can have a dramatic impact on tensions beyond the country's boundaries.[98] In this context, the presence of UNOWAS offered an important locus for establishing a regional understanding of the risks in Nigeria and beyond. In August 2018, UNOWAS issued a major report detailing the broader regional risks associated with farmer-herder conflicts and proposing a set of recommendations across the region.[99] This was followed in November 2018 by a set of decisions by the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General, which tasked UNOWAS, DPPA and UNOCA to jointly analyse the region and establish a UN regional framework for information exchange. According to several experts, this common analysis has proven extremely important for planning a coherent UN response to the farmer-herder tensions, which could not have been accomplished absent the work of UNOWAS.

b) Influencing the government's position

Legislation around land use is an especially fraught issue in Nigeria—influencing the government's approach to such legislation has been a modality for the UN to help reduce tensions. Soon after assuming office in 2015, President Buhari directed his agriculture ministry to develop a plan to address farmer-herder conflicts, which resulted in a controversial series of bills and proposals regarding grazing routes around urban areas in the country.[100] In 2018, the government put forward a National Livestock Transformation Plan, meant to address the tensions around livestock, but seen by many farming communities as a ploy to secure unfair herding routes across agricultural land.[101] Some state legislatures responded by banning grazing outright, dramatically increasing tensions and potentially contributing to an increase in self-defence militias.[102] Heavy-handed security responses by the state when farmer-herder conflicts broke out contributed to a perception that the government was favouring the president's ethnic Fulani group, while accusations that Boko Haram was involved in some attacks have kept tensions extremely high.[103]

"Supporting the implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan in a way to reduce tensions and build confidence among communities is a key priority for the UN," an in-country UN staff member explained.[104] This support has involved several steps: (1) the Peace and Development Advisor established a coordination forum where government and civil society leaders can meet to develop approaches together, rather than just top-down plans; (2) through the UN Trust Fund for Human Security and the Peacebuilding Fund, new projects have been initiated in six states affected by farmer-herder conflicts, with a view to reducing the stresses on land in those areas; (3) human rights advisors have been positioned in some of the conflict-affected states to provide improved early warning; and (4) longer-term livelihood programming has been focused on conflict reduction rather than merely development goals.[105] "This is an example of using development funding for conflict prevention," an expert based in Nigeria explained. While the projects are still in early phases of implementation, focusing development resources on prevention outcomes demonstrates a shift in the system's approach.

c) Elections

Nigeria has a history of elections-related violence, including a 2011 crisis where 800 people were killed and 65,000 displaced.[106] In 2015, tensions again escalated ahead of the presidential elections, driven in part by the deep divisions between the Muslim north (which supported the eventual winner Buhari) and the Christian south (which supported then incumbent Goodluck Jonathan). At the time, SRSG Chambas played a crucial role in helping to reduce the risks of escalation, liaising directly with the leadership in Nigeria and also coordinating messaging with the regional leadership.[107]

This history of successful prevention in Nigeria positioned UNOWAS – and SRSG Chambas in particular – to again build confidence amongst the parties through the 2019 elections. In addition to helping coordinate common messaging around the need for restraint during the elections,[108] Chambas coordinated with the UNCT and ECOWAS to host a series of high-level dialogue sessions in four "hot spot" states of Nigeria in which all the key stakeholders were represented. Importantly, Chambas also encouraged the revival of a National Peace

UN Photo/Harandane Dicko
United Nations Police serving with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization
Mission in Mali (MINSUMA) carry out daily patrols in order to secure the civilian population.

Council to play a role in these dialogues, which helped ensure national-level buy-in to the process. While it is difficult to assess the overall impact of this work, it is worth noting the importance of long-term political investment by the regional office, which has meant the UN is well-positioned with contacts and influence each time an election arises in country.

C. Cross-border conflicts – funding and political engagement

Cross-border dynamics are some of the most fluid and dangerous in the Sahel region. Intercommunal conflicts over land use combine with large-scale scale displacements (especially from the crisis in Cameroon), while the presence of Boko Haram and other extremist groups poses an especially dangerous accumulation of risks. According to interviews with UN offices in Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon, building cross-border coordination mechanisms, information flows, and programming are top priorities for the UN and its partners.

Here, the use of peacebuilding funds is already showing promise as a flexible programming tool for cross-border prevention-related work. In Chad, for example, more than $4.5 million of peacebuilding programming is focused on community reconciliation between Chad and

Cameroon, dialogue between communities affected by transhumance conflicts between Chad and the Central African Republic, and prevention of inter-communal conflict between communities along the Chad/Niger border.[109] In Burkina Faso, roughly $6 million has been invested in reducing risks along the Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger border, where transhumance patterns have contributed to instability. Another $3 million has been allocated for cross-border conflict prevention projects along the Burkina Faso/Togo border. Overall, since 2016, the Peacebuilding Fund has allocated more than $13 million to Burkina Faso alone.[110] While it is too early to know with certainty whether this is contributing to a reduction of risks, in interviews with a range of UN actors in these countries they pointed to early signs that communities were less likely to come into conflict in areas where this programming was taking place. Importantly, the investment appears to have had a catalytic effect of leading to more bilateral support in the same areas.[111]

One of the more challenging aspects of the cross-border risks has been to maintain high-level political attention on the underlying socio-economic drivers, given that many Member States are more concerned with the counter-terrorism efforts in the region. Here, UNOWAS has found an important and innovative entry point into the Security Council discussions on the Sahel. In the context of the Mali crisis and the counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel, and following a visit to the region, in 2017 the Council acknowledged the importance of "root causes" at a regional level, including climate change, farmer-herder conflicts, and the impacts of poverty and population displacements.[112] In July 2018, on the invitation of the Council, SRSG Chambas briefed on the severe depletion of Lake Chad, the resulting economic insecurity for more than 45 million people, mass displacement, and the impact of climate change on farmer/herder dynamics and Boko Haram.[113] Since then, UNOWAS has been invited to report and brief on these issues on a regular basis, providing the Council with socio-economic analysis of the region.

The use of cross-border peacebuilding funds and the growing willingness of the Council to discuss transnational socio-economic trends may indicate a gradual reorientation of the UN's peace and security pillar to becoming more responsive to the deeper drivers of risks in the Sahel. Here, UN experts point to the growing importance of the Peacebuilding Commission as a way to maintain Security Council awareness of risks, while also helping to generate funds to respond to them.

D. Funding modalities

Official development aid to the Sahel offers a crucial path towards improved stability and conflict prevention, but the way in which it has been disbursed in recent years has almost certainly worked against the goals of peacebuilding. Between 2007 and 2015, international financing support rose by 22 percent, peaking in 2015.[114] Despite these increases, less funding has gone towards agriculture and education, two key sectors where greater investment is needed to address the problems of inter-communal tensions and instability in the peripheries of the Sahelian countries.

Other trends are even more worrying: while ODA loan commitments have gone up substantially (to roughly $20 billion by 2016), ODA grants have remained almost completely stagnant, with almost no increase over their $30 billion rate in 2007. Unlike grants, which have a high and relatively fast disbursement rate, loan disbursement is much slower and may not be the best vehicle for achieving development results in the region.[115] The biggest declines in disbursements have happened in some of the most fragile settings, with Burkina Faso seeing a steady decline since 2014 and Chad witnessing a 50 percent drop in disbursement for 2016.[116] Some of the largest gaps between commitments (where donors have allocated resources) and disbursements (where funds where spent) are in the social infrastructure, services, environmental protection, agriculture and population sectors. These sectors would have likely benefitted the rural and peripheral areas and ensured development outcomes were felt beyond urban settings.

The implications of these funding patterns are extremely troubling. First, donors may have a distorted picture of how much their support is actually being implemented, given the long disbursement periods of loans. This may be exacerbated by poorly run government ministries in many cases, which do not have a quick or transparent uptake process for new loans. Second, the shortfalls in funding appear to be occurring in precisely those areas where development support is most needed to reduce conflict risk: lack of social services and disputes over agricultural land are two of the most pressing drivers of instability across the region. Third, the lack for disbursements to rural and periphery settings may play into the conflict dynamics rather than help solve them, given that many conflicts have been born from a resentment by the periphery against the lack of adequate support from the central government.[117]

UN experts in Headquarters noted that the UN system was just becoming aware of this worrying funding dynamic, but that addressing it would be a key priority for the Sahel going forward. "We have done the analysis, now we need to see how to encourage donors to reorient the funding streams," one expert noted. Although the Resident Coordinators and the UNCT have limited role in coordinating donors in-country, exploring entry-points for realignment of donor efforts to address grievances and risks of violent conflict is key. This can be done through risk analysis, or through the EU-UN-World Bank methodology for Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments in preventive settings (Burkina Faso is a case in point).

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

As the above sections describe, the UN's work across the Sahel continues to evolve as the risk landscape changes. Nearly one year after the Development System reforms were put in place, some of the most important changes have been driven by the RCs and their new reporting lines into the Secretariat. The growing importance and impact of the Peacebuilding Fund is also evident, especially in areas where the risks fall across more than one country. The following section offers some preliminary conclusions and policy recommendations based upon this emerging practice and interviews with many of the key UN actors on the ground:

1 A heavy task for Resident Coordinators

Across all of the UN offices interviewed, there was a clear sense that the RCs were carrying an extraordinary burden. Several experts noted that the UNDS reform, which gave RCs a direct reporting line to the Secretary-General's office, had helped in some important ways, offering more opportunities to flag risks early and "get our conflict on HQ's radar." But they also noted that the expectations on RCs – none of whom had received the full suite of additional staff promised under the reforms at the time of writing – had grown dramatically. "RCs are expected to do much more across the political, humanitarian, and development sectors, but with fewer resources," one UN expert argued.[118] Moreover, efforts to help RCs can place an additional burden on them in the short-term; for example, the creation of five new offices in Burkina Faso will increase the ability of the UN to understand and respond to conflict risks, but it also imposes an enormous task on the RC to maintain new presences in often difficult settings. Several UN experts pointed out that placing all the prevention burden on the RC was unrealistic: instead, the goal should be for all UN actors – development, humanitarian, peacebuilding – to see their work through a prevention context and plan accordingly. It also became clear that different RC offices required unique capacities to fit each situation: **rather than offer each RC office the same five capacities, the UN should consider tailored, augmented support in high-risk settings, potentially as a predicable "package" of additional staffing provided to countries identified via the SG's Executive Committee.**

2 Local risk analysis, localized responses

Nearly every UN expert in the offices in the Sahel spoke of the importance of having an up-to-date as well as a local-level understanding of the dynamics on the ground. There was a recurrent concern that the main context analysis (the CCA) undertaken every four years of a program cycle was rapidly rendered out of date in the fast-moving settings in the Sahel. Helpfully, new guidance from the UN requires that the UNCT update the CCA more regularly, which may address the issue. **There also may be value in considering cross-cutting analytic products apart from the CCA that might give the UN system a more "live" read of the situation in country**. A local risk assessment could be developed jointly with partners and government, for example. Linked to this, the case of Burkina Faso underscores the importance of developing local responses – establishing new presences in the peripheries of the country is helping build a more complete picture of the trends there and contribute to bespoke UN engagement.

3 Protect and Focus the PDA function

Even in countries with a dedicated Peace and Development Advisor, there was a sense that these staff were often pulled into the day to day programmatic and organizational aspects of thinly stretched offices and frequently did not have the time for the kind of in-depth analysis they thought necessary. PDAs can play a crucial role in a UN field office, and past studies have shown the direct impact they can have on prevention results.[119] Here, several RC offices noted the lack of national staff to provide political analysis: **instituting a "national PDA"** would not only offer a set of insights that international staff rarely possess,

but would also build national capacity. Building on the pilot project of national PDA's that has begun under UN Volunteers would be a positive first step.

4 Leverage Headquarters

An evident improvement of the reforms has been the sense that UN Headquarters is (generally) more responsive to the early warning needs of UN offices in the Sahel. Burkina Faso offers a clear example of this: three Executive Committee meetings in 2019 alone have resulted in high-level political engagement in country; the deployment of senior mediation support; capacity to establish a reconciliation institution with the government; and resources to set up five new offices across the country. However, several UN experts on the ground noted that there was uneven knowledge of the full range of support available from NY. "If I had known from the beginning of the tools I could have leveraged from NY, I would have been much more effective," one RC noted. **DCO should offer RCs and Country Teams a clear overview and/or a set of SOPs describing the various ways in which they can request support from Headquarters, especially regarding peacebuilding and prevention.**[120]

5 The value of the regional offices

The value of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel was recognized universally, in particular the effective work of SRSG Chambas. This was not abstract: the physical presence of SRSG Chambas in country was cited by several RCs as catalytic for significant changes, including the revitalization of electoral institutions and processes (Nigeria), helping to establish an infrastructure for

peace (Burkina Faso), and frequent visits to other countries of the region. UNOWAS also produced important cross-cutting analysis of farmer-herder dynamics that helped guide the interventions of the UN in Nigeria. Here, **the analytic capacities of UNOWAS could be significantly strengthened** to support national-level planning and enable the UN to better respond to conflict dynamics across the region, many of which are poorly understood. Going forward, finding ways to **link approaches into the work of other regional presences** – ECOWAS and ECCAS in particular – was seen as an important priority, while several experts suggested that UNOWAS could be given a **more specific mandate and set of resources to link RCs and the broader UN country teams across national boundaries.**[121]

6 Translate the regional analysis and approaches into action plans

The UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel is an important reference point for the UN system, in particular on the need for a common approach across pillars. That said, the immediate relevance of the strategy for the in-country work of RCs and agencies is not always apparent. Several UN leaders in the field suggested that UNISS was not a meaningful reference point to their work and suggested instead that the UNDAF and Collective Outcomes process were their guideposts. As the UN rolls out regional strategies in the Sahel, the Horn, the Great Lakes and elsewhere, it will be important that **dedicated attention is given to translating the broad regional goals into inter-related national ones, with tangible benchmarks**. Equally, it will be necessary for the UN to dedicate attention to coordinating and rationalizing the often myriad national-level plans that coexist in such countries.

7 Investment matters

A recurrent theme across RC offices was the importance of using programmatic funds with a conflict prevention lens. PBF's role in this context is becoming far more central to the work of the UN, as significant sums of money have already been allocated in a flexible, conflict-sensitive manner. However, the PBF funds are quite small, and more broadly the donor engagement with the Sahel is worrying: the trend towards greater loans and fewer grants, with slow and uneven disbursement rates, may mean a concentration of development aid in sectors that have little impact on conflict risks, and may even increase tensions between centre and periphery. Certainly, there was a strong common view that development aid was too slow and inflexible to respond to the needs of Sahelian countries. It will be crucial that UN-led donor outreach addresses these trends, including by making donors aware of the current situation and looking for ways to use development aid more flexibly. Additionally, there was a clear message RCs should have a clearer picture of what funding instruments are available in a given setting: **Headquarters should provide guidance to field presences about the different funding streams that could be leveraged, as well as advice on how to coordinate across them.**[122]

8 Cross-border challenges

While many UN actors suggested that recent cross-border programming had improved significantly, they also pointed to chronic weaknesses in the ability of both the UN and national counterparts to share information and plan coherently across borders. Some pointed to the fact that national governments had prioritized military coordination – for example

via the G5 Sahel – and ignored the equally important coordination around socio-economic and political dialogues. If the countries of the Sahel are to address the underlying conflict risks that span their boundaries, better communication and joint planning will need to be a priority.

9 The "crime blind spot"

Across the interviews with UN experts in the Sahel, a common theme was criminality, and the difficulties of addressing transnational criminal networks with the current set of tools. Indeed, an examination of the major strategies across the Sahel and within each country demonstrates a near total lack of reference to transnational criminal networks, the effects of a war economy, or indeed domestic criminality. Greater attention to this issue, including by looking to build it into the "collective outcomes" in each country and possibly incorporating more political economy analysis into the UN's work, would help create better awareness of one of the most important risks in the region.

10 The security sector elephant in the room

Across much of the Sahel the state security services are seen as either absent or an exacerbating factor in conflict dynamics. In mission settings, such as Mali, the interface with security actors is a necessary aspect of the UN's peacekeeping engagement. However, in non-mission settings, entry points into the security services are more difficult to identify and exploit. The joint humanitarian-development of the UN has acknowledged the importance of the security sector but has established very few targeted security sector initiatives. This means the behaviour (and eventual reform) of the security services

may become an outsized but ignored issue, a crucial aspect of prevention that receives little direct attention from RCs and UNCTs. At the same time, the cross-border information-sharing work described above often does involve security actors on from two or more countries, offering an example of engagement in non-mission settings. Looking for innovative and constructive ways to engage the security services is a crucial challenge for the reformed RC system.

11 Elections *are* early warning

Across the Sahel, national and local elections are moments where underlying tensions can escalate rapidly. Prior to the reforms, RCs were also the heads of UNDP, which meant they were often directly engaged in the technical support to such processes. In the newly reformed system, RCs may have a less direct hand on election processes, so may need to look for other points of leverage (e.g. the visit of SRSG Chambas to Nigeria in 2019). But across the countries reviewed, there was a clear sense that **intensified political attention well ahead of elections** has had a beneficial impact.

12 Bridge the centre/ periphery divide

Some of the most impactful work cited by UN teams in the field concerned bringing national government actors together with local communities and civil society groups. This reflects a common problem across the Sahel, where central governments are often viewed as absent or biased against various rural communities. **Increasing presence outside of capitals** – such as the creation of new offices in Burkina Faso – may be one concrete way to play this bridging role

(though a clear-eyed evaluation of the risks of staying while other actors are leaving is also important). It may also be possible to increase regional awareness and impact by **better use of the network of NGOs and INGOs that operate beyond the scope of the UN** in a given setting.

13 Adaptive management

The situation in the Sahel is extremely fluid, and in many settings the UN has had to innovate significantly to emerging risks. This has led to new practices that may have utility beyond the Sahel; in fact, around the world the UN is often confronted with situations of uncertainty where the impact of a given approach may be difficult to ascertain. Here, it may be helpful to build on the new cooperation framework guidance and formally adopt an **adaptive management approach: rather than thinking in multi-year planning cycles, the UN could adopt a shorter-term, more iterative approach to interventions, attempting to learn and make adjustments in context.**[123] This would need to be reconciled with existing agency planning/ management documents, but especially given the interconnected nature of the conflict risks in the Sahel, attempting to learn quickly and flexibly from new approaches would allow the UN to identify good practice and apply it more effectively. This study has been an effort to support the UN in learning mid-stream, drawing from emerging practice.

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112 United Nations Security Council resolutions: S/ RES/2349 (2017), S/PRST/2018/3, S/PRST/2018/16. And in a March 2017 visit to the Lake Chad region, the Security Council specifically requested briefings on the root causes of conflict and its links to development.

113 United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel", S/2018/649, 29 June 2018. Available at: https://undocs. org/S/2018/649

114 United Nations, "UN Support Plan for the Sahel. Working Together for a Prosperous and Peaceful Sahel" (United Nations: New York, 2018). Available at https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sites/www.un.org. africarenewal/files/English%20Summary%20Report_0. pdf.

115 In the 2007-2011 period, about 71 percent of loans to the Sahel were disbursed, while only 61 percent were disbursed in the 2012-2016 period.

116 Internal documents on file with authors.

117 This centre/periphery dynamic was cited as a conflict driver by the UN offices in Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso.

118 It is worth highlighting here that this project covered a time period when many of the RC offices were still staffing up following the reforms.

119 Sebastian von Einsiedel, "What Works in UN Resident Coordinator-led Conflict Prevention: Lessons from the Field" (United Nations University: Tokyo, 2018). Available at: https://cpr.unu.edu/what-works-in-resident-coordinator-supported-preventive-action-lessons-from-the-field.html

120 NB: DCO has a template for RCO's to manage humanitarian response, which could be expanded or modified in this case.

121 It is worth noting that this report was drafted concurrently with a strategic review of UNOWAS. These recommendations align with the draft findings of that report, as well as the views of field experts consulted independently.

122 NB: UNDP is currently preparing a mapping of funding instruments in fragile settings, which could be an extremely useful starting point in this regard.

123 Other governments and international organizations have explicitly adopted adaptive management approaches. See, e.g. USAID Learning Lab "What is Adaptive Management?" (USAID: Washington DC, 2018). Available at: https://usaidlearninglab.org/lab-notes/what-adaptive-management-0; Chris Watson and Alberto Lizzi, "Opinion: Data-driven adaptive management for international development", *Devex News*, 27 September 2018. Available at: https:// www.devex.com/news/sponsored/opinion-data-driven-adaptive-management-for-international-development-92994; Leni Wild and Ben Ramalingam, "Building a global learning alliance on adaptive management" (Overseas Development Institute: London, 2018). Available at: https://www.odi.org/ sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12327. pdf. This approach is also proposed in Cedric de Coning and Emery de Brusset, Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation (Palgrave MacMillan: London, 2016).