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Seven ways to support resilience and crisis responses in the Central Sahel

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Summary

Communities in the Central Sahel bear the brunt of the compounded effect of climate change and violent conflict. Their resilience is stretched to a maximum, with little support from the state. In many cases, they are forced to flee their homes or compromise with terrorist groups for a semblance of security. In this brief, we highlight seven ways to support resilience and crisis responses in the Central Sahel (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), in a context of climate change, prolonged insecurity and poor governance.

Our research shows that strengthening crisis responses and resilience in the Central Sahel requires regional responses that are more focused on vulnerable border areas. Responses should also be better coordinated based on regional organisations' comparative advantages. Regional, national and international actors should

simplify coordination and cooperation mechanisms, but more importantly, they should be led and owned by the region.

The responses to the crisis should rely more on localised gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive analyses and take into account psychological factors. They should be more informed by Sahelian expertise and able to rely on more (flexible) funding, including from Sahel states, towards their own regional organisations.

Lastly, stronger support for community resilience should not divert from the state's responsibility to protect civilians and at least ensure basic living conditions. Support for resilience should be complementary and reaffirm the state's primary role to address governance issues and protect civilians through military and non-military measures.

Introduction

The crisis in the Central Sahel,[1] and its impact on communities, endure despite myriad attempts by state, regional and international actors to tackle the crisis. A number of recent developments such as the geographic expansion of terrorist groups' activities,[2] military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, and growing tensions linked to geopolitics raise serious concerns for the resolution of this protracted crisis.

In Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, challenges related to climate change and insecurity are acute. Especially in remote rural areas, communities are faced with both slow and sudden changes in climatic conditions affecting their livelihoods and food security. At the same time, many communities live in constant fear, violence and

disconnection from the state and the rest of their country. This puts people's resilience capacities under intense pressure. Resilience is understood here as people's ability to respond and adapt to shocks, but also to improve their capacity to respond in the future. In the Central Sahel, strengthening communities' resilience can help them better prepare for, and deal with climate and security challenges in a long-lasting way. Regional, national and local actors support communities' resilience efforts via different activities, with varying degrees of success.

This brief presents seven ways forward to better support resilience and crisis responses in the Central Sahel, in a context of climate change and conflict. It draws from research conducted under the OKP-RESCOM project, a collaboration between three universities in the Central Sahel and three Netherlands-based organisations.[3] This brief summarises the main takeaways from a longer research paper, informed by three country reports and a regional synthesis drafted by the Sahel universities, complemented by an ECDPM-led regional analysis of the role of regional and subregional organisations in supporting community resilience (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023).

1. Regional responses focused on border areas

The origins and effects of climate change and conflicts cross borders, which is manifest in Central Sahel. Yet, **border areas remain fragile and insufficiently addressed by regional actors**. In addition, some regional organisations have set up partnerships to tackle the crisis, such as ECOWAS, CILSS and UEMOA's joint efforts to address climate change and environmental degradation (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023). However, **many areas of complementarity remain under-explored**, for instance on the linkages between military, non-military and socio-economic measures. For instance, the

Liptako Gourma Authority's aim to develop a localised, non-militarised security approach in the "three border" region could complement regional military responses (for instance by the G5 Sahel) (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023). Therefore, **regional responses** should be based on partnerships that make the best use of such **comparative advantages**, have a **stronger focus on border areas**, and **support community resilience via a combination of measures** to strengthen peace and stability, connect peripheral communities to urban centres, restore economic activities and public services, and help sustain livelihoods in case of climate shocks.

2. Responses sensitive to complex conflict, gender, and psychological factors

Responses to the Sahel crisis are informed by analysis which does not account for the full complex picture of the situation. The **diverse roles of youth and women** in climate adaptation, peace- and resilience-building activities are increasingly recognised but structural barriers remain for them to participate effectively (Salzinger and Desmidt, 2023). In addition, **climate adaptation** is often approached from an **overly technical perspective that lacks conflict sensitivity and is deprioritised in the fight against (international) terrorism**. Psychological factors, especially communities' traumatic experience of continued violence, displacement and poverty, are not considered in depth. Conflict analyses and responses should **step away from a *singular* focus on combating terrorism** and should be based on **localised assessments which integrate the complex political, economic and psychological factors** that play into the conflict. Such conflict- and gender-sensitive responses can better account for the diversity of actors involved, including women and youth, but also violent actors

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such as national and foreign militaries, terrorist groups, self-defence militias, criminal networks, etc.

3. More financing, especially for regional organisations

Not enough resources are channelled towards supporting community resilience in the Central Sahel. Sahel states' financial contributions to the regional organisations they have set up are low or even missing in certain cases, making **regional organisations dependent on international donor funding** (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023). This is unsustainable and affects responses, which are overall marked by short-termism, limited funding flexibility, and a lack of systematic anchoring in local processes. **More financial resources are needed, especially via Sahel countries financing their regional organisations** but also by facilitating easier access to flexible finance for local actors such as local authorities (e.g. the UN [Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility](#)). International and national actors can also increase support for local resilience efforts by becoming **more flexible on criteria, planning and procedures** so that regional actors, local CSOs and local innovators can develop responses gradually and based on their needs and priorities (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023).

4. Simplified coordination and integrated responses to climate, security and governance challenges

NGOs, governments, local actors, technical services, regional organisations etc. are working on climate and security issues in the

Sahel without a common- agenda and effective coordination. This creates gaps, with the most affected- and difficult-to-access areas being less supported (Amadou et al. 2022). Several coordination mechanisms (Sahel Alliance, Peace and Security Partnership for the Sahel, etc.) exist but are seen as added layers of complexity, amplifying the confusion (Lebovich 2020). Furthermore, siloed approaches to climate change adaptation, development and security persist, with few regional organisations setting up integrated approaches that help communities face the pressure of combined challenges. **Fewer coordination mechanisms directed by regional actors** would reduce confusion, while **integrated responses to climate, security and governance challenges**, like conflict-sensitive climate adaptation, can bring multiple dividends from limited resources. The PRAPS and FREXUS regional programmes are promising in this regard (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023).

5. Stronger, coherent support for community resilience

Communities' resilience mechanisms to deal with climate impacts and insecurity are **not sufficiently understood, supported and used** by regional and international actors in the Sahel. For instance, mobility is met with suspicion instead of being recognised as a resilience strategy people (notably, pastoralists) use to adapt to climate impacts that threaten their livelihoods. Additionally, communities' use of traditional climate adaptation techniques, cooperatives, community dialogue and conflict-resolution mechanisms to solve conflicts are not capitalised on and scaled up enough (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023). National and international actors should **address incoherences like supporting resilience while restricting human mobility**, and provide more support to **peaceful**

dialogue initiatives, to help communities avoid negative coping strategies like compromising with terrorist groups.

6. State responsibility first

Resilience needs are highly context-specific and communities face acute pressure to respond to multiple crises at once. In conflict-affected areas of the Central Sahel, the space to develop longer-term resilience to climate change is more narrow and almost absent when it comes to resilience to insecurity. The effects of violence being immediate and life-altering, people are forced to flee or negotiate with terrorist groups to prevent deadly attacks, which has not been conducive to sustainable peace (Salzinger and Desmidt 2023). Therefore, **support for community resilience is complementary and should not supplant state responsibility** to protect from violence and climate disasters. International and regional responses to the crisis should align themselves with affected communities in their rightful calls for **state protection, accountability and improved governance (including access to justice and basic services) as primary solutions** to the crisis (Zoungrana et al. 2022; Salzinger and Desmidt 2023).

7. Sahel-led responses and knowledge

Sahelian experts and knowledge brokers are underrepresented in the research and discussions that concern them. For instance, only 3.8% of global funding for climate change research is spent on African topics, and when looking at who receives this funding for climate research on Africa, institutions based in Europe and North Africa get 78% while African institutions only get 14.5% (Overland et al. 2022). Policy discussions on conflict responses (often held outside

Africa) also do not involve Sahelian analysts enough. Not only is this inherently problematic, but it also leads to responses being ill-suited to local priorities and needs (Deb and Baudais 2022). Local researchers have access to updated, granular data and the perspectives of conflict-affected communities, while international organisations struggle to access these areas logistically or are not similarly trusted with information. **Sahelian leadership over regional responses to the climate and security crises in the Sahel must be recognised**. Diverse Sahelian actors including local researchers should develop knowledge and drive responses, which can take the form of **joint programming and research** that centre Sahelian agency. Collaborative approaches that **value local knowledge and perceptions** should become the norm.

Seven ways forward to better support resilience and crisis responses in the Central Sahel

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1 **Regional responses focused on border areas**: Based on their comparative advantages, regional organisations should combine security and socio-economic measures in border areas, support local authorities and local solidarity networks.

2 **Responses sensitive to complex conflict**-, gender, and psychological factors: Responses should be localised, recognise diverse conflict actors of both genders beyond terrorist groups, and communities' feelings of fear and abandonment.

3 **More financing**, **especially from Sahel states towards their regional organisations**: Increased national and international funding, and more flexible procedures would be better adapted to local resilience needs.

4 **Simplified coordination and integrated responses to climate, security and governance challenges**: Less coordination mechanisms would reduce confusion. Integrated responses like conflict-sensitive climate adaptation can bring multiple dividends from limited resources.

5 **Stronger, coherent support for community resilience**: national and international actors should address incoherences like supporting resilience while restricting human mobility. They should support peaceful community dialogue more, so communities are less vulnerable to terrorist groups.

6 **State responsibility first**: Support for community resilience is complementary and should not supplant state responsibility to protect from violence and climate disasters. Responses should prioritise governance and protecting civilians through military and non-military measures.

7 **Sahelian leadership**: Diverse Sahelian actors including local researchers should be recognised as leaders to develop knowledge and drive responses to the crisis. Joint programming and research that centre Sahelian agency should become the norm.

References

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Endnotes

1. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso
2.
https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/
3. The OKP-RESCOM Sahel project aims to generate knowledge on the interactions between climate change, insecurity and the rule of law in the Central Sahel, and identify measures for long-term capacity building and resilience of local communities. The funder is the Netherlands Organisation for Internationalisation of Education (NUFFIC). The consortium is composed of three Universities in the Central Sahel: Université des sciences juridiques et politiques de Bamako (USJPB) in Mali; Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey (UAM) in Niger; Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo (UJKZ) de Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso; as well as three Dutch institutions: Maastricht School of Management (MSM), Centre for Africa-Europe Relations (ECDPM), and CINOP.