

**The implications of the multi-layered crisis in the Sahel and the urge to provide a European Union-led Humanitarian Response Plan.  
How should the European Union get involved?**

◆ September 2023 ◆

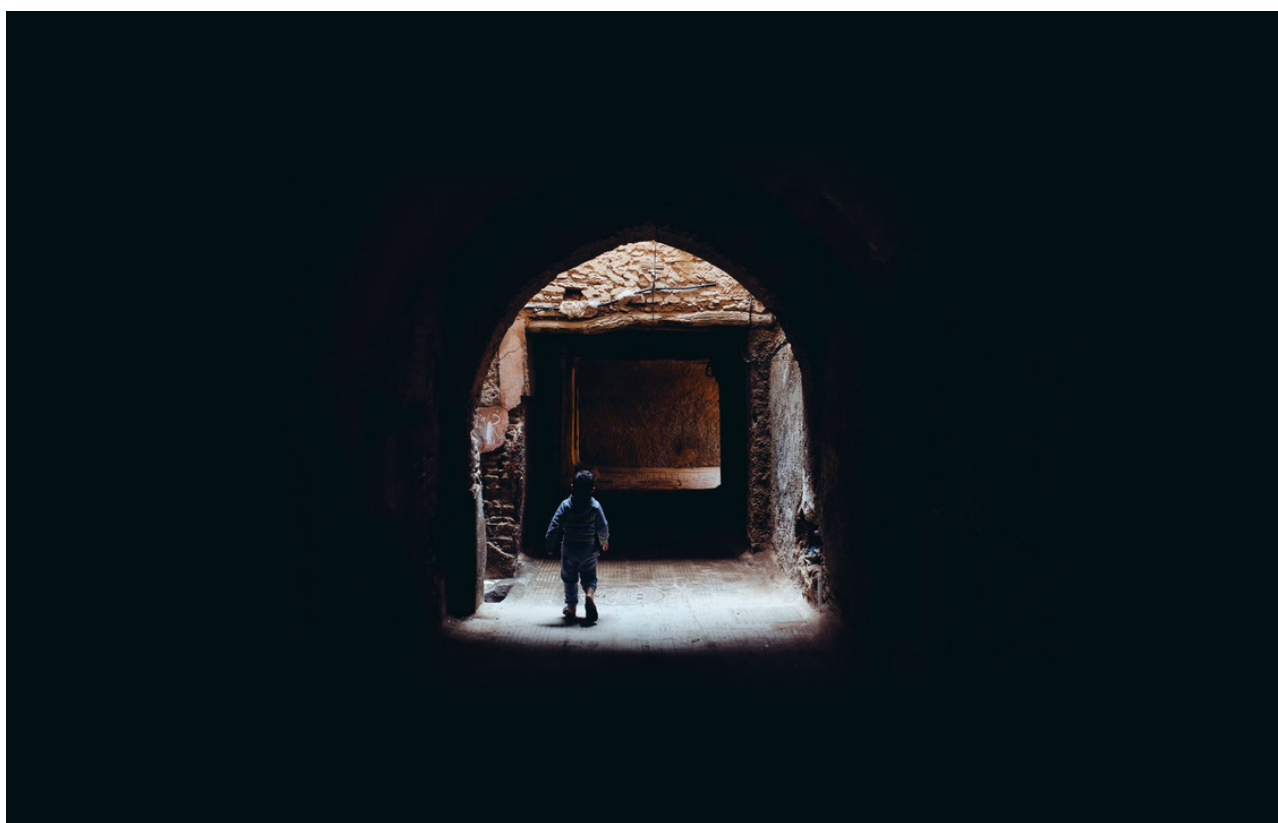


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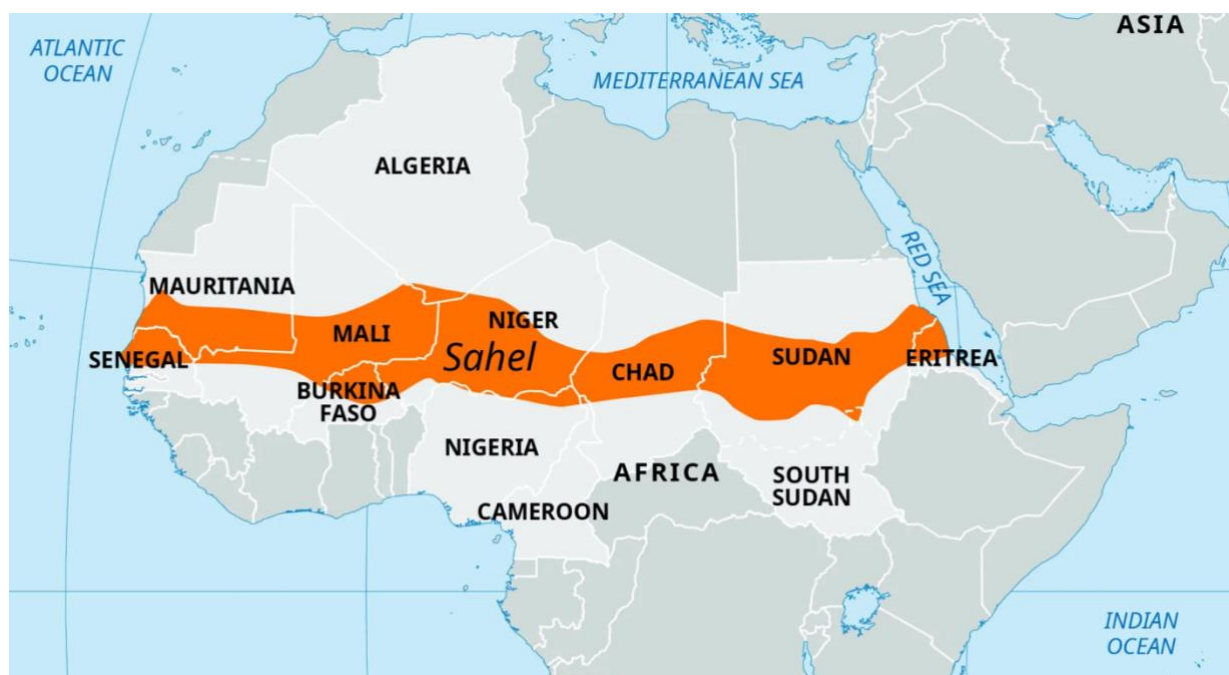
## *Introduction*

The Sahel region is identified as a geographic belt in Africa stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the east. It spans several countries as Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, and Algeria.

More than 10 years of conflict and countering terrorism in the Sahel region have generated severe levels of structural instability throughout the entire area, leading to a situation of risk for the civilians, posing massive suffering, and forcing millions of people to flee and leave their homes. This has caused an extremely concerning humanitarian situation, alongside the emergence of security challenges for the neighboring countries that reached unprecedented levels. Inequalities and grievances are fundamental drivers of the current security situation, which has led to the multiplication of non-state armed groups, that are becoming increasingly predominant.

This paper provides a detailed overview of the humanitarian emergency that both causes and is caused – or better exacerbated – by the threat of terrorism within the region and outlines a European Union-led Humanitarian Response Plan that addresses the grievances of the affected population in order to tackle the issue of violent extremism from its root causes, ultimately leading to its eradication.

## *The Sahel region*



The Sahel region is inhabited by multiple ethnic and linguistic groups, that vary from one part of the Sahel to another. Besides Arabic and French, numerous indigenous African languages are spoken throughout the region. Due to the colonial history, French is the official language of numerous Sahelian countries. Arabic (and its dialects) is widely spoken, particularly in countries with Arabic origins, as Mauritania, Sudan, Chad, and Niger. Among the indigenous African languages, *Fulfulde* (or Fula or Fulani) is spoken by the Fulani people across a wide area of West and Central Africa. The Hausa people speaking *Hausa* are concentrated in Nigeria, Niger, and parts of Chad and Sudan. *Tamasheq* (or Tuareg) is spoken in Mali and Niger by the Tuareg people, a nomadic Berber ethnic group originally found in Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso.

The entire region is characterized by intrinsic poverty. According to the World Bank, in fact, in terms of GDP in 2022, Algeria was registered as the wealthiest country, with US\$191.91 billion, followed by Sudan, with US\$ 51.66 billion; Burkina Faso with US\$ 18.88; Mali US\$ 18.83; Niger US\$ 13.97; Chad US\$ 12.7; and Mauritania, with US\$ 10.38<sup>1</sup>.

These figures must of course be analyzed in relation to each country's labor force. As of 2021, the percentage of participation in Eritrea and Niger amounts respectively to 79% and 73.9% followed by

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<sup>1</sup> GDP (Current US\$) - Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Algeria., World Bank Open Data, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2022&locations=MR-ML-BF-NE-TD-SD-ER-DZ&name\\_desc=false&start=2022&view=bar](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2022&locations=MR-ML-BF-NE-TD-SD-ER-DZ&name_desc=false&start=2022&view=bar).

68.4% in Mali; 66.6% in Burkina Faso; 59.4% in Chad; 49.7% in Sudan; 43.6% in Algeria; and finally, 41.6% in Mauritania.

The Sahelian economy relies mainly on the agricultural sector, which is being severely undermined by the effects of climate change. The last mentioned also affects other aspects as food provision, exacerbating the levels of food insecurity in the region<sup>2</sup>.

### *Overview of the humanitarian crisis*

The crisis in the Sahel is multi-faceted, rooted in an immense variety of circumstances ranging from the lack of access to services, inequalities, and denial of rights, all of which contribute to exacerbating already harsh grievances and discontent. It has penetrated every corner of society and has led to unprecedented levels of displacement, acute food insecurity, gender-based violence on a daily occurrence, and impossibility to provide children with proper education. As these multi-dimensional challenges interact with each other, they result in triggering radicalization and further fueling violence in the Sahel and its neighboring areas. As a matter of fact, terrorism is fostered by grievances, lack of livelihood opportunities, and extreme economic insecurity, which induce people to join extremist groups, as these offer the easiest, most direct, and often the only way to self-sustenance.

Besides this, the humanitarian situation is further aggravated by widespread malnutrition due to harsh poverty in conflict-affected areas, the effects of climate change, and the repercussions of the Ukrainian war. Indeed, hunger is expected to increase as the war protracts, being Ukraine and Russia the suppliers of one-third of the worldwide wheat<sup>3</sup>. According to the European Commission, never have so many millions experienced starvation in the Sahel as in 2022, when almost 35 million people across the region – a considerable share of which are children – faced severe levels of food insecurity<sup>4</sup>. Undoubtedly, water provisions do not exceed either, with the consequence of exacerbating the human insecurity of individuals<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Sahel Alliance,” Alliance Sahel, January 4, 2023, <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/sahel-alliance/>.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Cattani, “Sahel Crisis - Humanitarian Needs and Requirements Overview 2022” (UNOCHA), <https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/sahel-2022-hnro-eng-20220516-web.pdf>, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> “Unprecedented Hunger in the Sahel: How the EU Is Helping,” European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (European Commission, July 19, 2022), [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/unprecedented-hunger-sahel-how-eu-helping\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/unprecedented-hunger-sahel-how-eu-helping_en).

<sup>5</sup> Michele Cattani, p.25.

By the time of writing, 3.74 million people<sup>6</sup>, who were forced to flee their homes because of conflict, security incidents, kidnappings, and poverty are internally displaced and often find themselves living in even less safe conditions.

Furthermore, the level of education is extremely low. The cause for this is not only attributable to poverty but also, and most prominently, to the widespread violence due to the conflict. In fact, 7,878 schools were closed in the Sahel due to violence, and 53% of children in the Central Sahel do not feel safe at school<sup>7</sup>. Being 64% of the Sahelian population under the age of 25<sup>8</sup>, increasing the level of education is crucial for the achievement of long-term peace: in fact, in order to contribute to the end of the conflict, ensuring proper education is vital, inasmuch by providing knowledge, life skills, and training the younger generations to more properly fit into the labor market, future newborns will eventually be given the opportunity to seek alternative and sustainable ways of life, avoiding being recruited by armed actors, eventually impeding the continuation of terrorism groups' existence. The crisis is further exacerbated by the situation of extreme health insecurity the entire region has been undergoing for a long time. Indeed, healthcare facilities and workers are often targeted by terrorist attacks, undermining the health system's capabilities, which were already burdened by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, not only Covid-19 still represents a health-related risk: the area faces the outbreak of multifarious diseases including Yellow Fever, Measles, Meningitis, Lassa Fever, Cholera, and Circulating Vaccine Derived Poliomyelitis Virus Type 2 (CVDPV2), with a high risk of repercussion on food insecurity and malnutrition<sup>9</sup>.

On top of all the issues, it is threatening to recognize that the severity of the security situation in the Sahel extremely undermines the likelihood of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the region. The Sahel represents a source of opportunities that are potentially key to Africa's development aspirations: it is one of the richest regions in the world for its abundant human, cultural and natural resources. As a matter of fact, it is endowed with great potential for renewable energy, and sits atop some of the largest aquifers of the continent, which stores approximately 100 times the volume of annual renewable freshwater resources throughout Africa<sup>10</sup>. Nonetheless, as the exploitation of all the available resources is blocked by terrorist groups, so is the possibility for development in the region,

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<sup>6</sup> "Sahel Situation," UNHCR Global Focus (UNHCR), <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sahel-situation>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, note 3, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> "Sahel, a Region of Opportunities," UNDP, <https://feature.undp.org/sahel/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, note 3, p.25.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank Group, "Enhancing Knowledge of Groundwater Usage in the Sahel," World Bank, April 30, 2014, [https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/enhancing-knowledge-of-groundwater-usage-in-the-sahel#:~:text=The%20Sahel%20sits%20atop%20some%20of%20the%20largest%20aquifers%20on%20the%20continent](https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/enhancing-knowledge-of-groundwater-usage-in-the-sahel#:~:text=The%20Sahel%20sits%20atop%20some%20of%20the%20largest%20aquifers%20on%20the%20continent.).

with negative repercussions on the entire continent. From this perspective, the achievement of peace is functional not only to development but also to sustainability. If the current situation persists throughout the region, it is very unlikely that Africa will ever be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with the consequent collapse of the already severely damaged situation – creating irreversible damage to livelihoods, poverty, and failure in impeding the spread of diseases.

### *The threat of terrorism*

The abovementioned humanitarian crisis, together with the weakness of the rule of law, is nothing but fertile soil for the emergence of terrorism. The Sahel region has in recent times become the epicenter of terrorism: in 2022 the Sahel accounted for more deaths caused by terrorism than South Asia, the Middle East, and Northern Africa combined<sup>11</sup>.

The underlying drivers for radicalization and violent extremism are complex and systematic and range throughout the rule of law and human rights deficits, water scarcity, lack of food, deep poverty, but also the lack of a well-functioning criminal justice system. All these factors create the breach from which violent extremist groups emerge and, of course, the greater the grievances, the stronger the groups. In fact, beyond the particularly heavy human toll, especially for the Malian army in most recent times, what is alarming for the international community is both the continuously expanding geographical expanse of the attacks and the increasingly sophisticated operating methods used by the terrorists<sup>12</sup>.

Furthermore, the growing support these groups are receiving from the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group is contributing to strengthening their capabilities by providing much-needed resources to these organizations. As a matter of fact, the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Russian mercenaries heavily contribute to exacerbating grievances among the population, which in turn enlarges the fertile ground for terrorist groups to recruit new members, as the al Qaeda-linked *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* and the *Islamic State Sahel Province*<sup>13</sup>. On top of that, since it is very unlikely that private military contractors will be held accountable for any of their crimes, as the States where they are

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<sup>11</sup> “Global Terrorism Index 2023 - World,” ReliefWeb, March 14, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2023>.

<sup>12</sup> “The Terrorist Threat Is Expanding in the Sahel,” The terrorist threat is expanding in the Sahel | EEAS Website (European External Action Service), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/terrorist-threat-expanding-sahel\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/terrorist-threat-expanding-sahel_en).

<sup>13</sup> Colin P. Clarke, “How Russia's Wagner Group Is Fueling Terrorism in Africa,” Foreign Policy, January 25, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/25/russia-wagner-group-africa-terrorism-mali-sudan-central-african-republic-prigozhin/>.

operating lack investigative capabilities and strong, independent judicial systems, the sense of impunity that arises is only likely to incentivize further violence<sup>14</sup>.

The spread of terrorism represents a menace not only to the security of Africa but also of its neighboring countries, in particular to the European Union, for whom it also constitutes a direct threat in many other areas such as trafficking of all kinds<sup>15</sup>. As also claimed by Amina Mohammed in a speech held before the Security Council by the end of 2022, *«In today's hyper-connected world, the spread of terrorism in Africa is not a concern for African Member States alone. The challenge belongs to us all.»*<sup>16</sup> »

The greater the risk of a spill-over effect, the more Africa needs collective international support in response. Not without reason, the European Union has been mobilizing in such direction since 2011, when it adopted the “European Union’s Integrated Strategy in the Sahel”, which entailed a comprehensive approach aimed at bringing security and development in the region. In the same year, the “CT Sahel Project, 2011-15” has been approved by the Commission, and later the “Sahel Regional Action Plan, 2015-2020”.

The efforts have been multifarious, and success has partially been achieved, but in more recent years the tension has re-emerged, and a new strategic intervention is more than ever needed. A mainly military response to terrorism proved unsuccessful in the past, hence the future approach, in order to be rewarding in the long run, must ensure sustainability and be aimed at tackling terrorism as much as its root causes, such as the weakness of the rule of law and the absence of basic services for all.

It must be implemented according to a bottom-up approach: any military effort must necessarily be sustained by actions that benefit the most vulnerable among the population, in order to address the grievances that push them to affiliate, ultimately nourishing its growth. This has also been pointed out by Comfort Ero, President and CEO of the International Crisis Group, who rightfully claimed that *«Counter-terrorism missions [...] should be part of a broader set of responses, including projects to*

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, note 11.

<sup>16</sup> “Amina J. Mohammed (Deputy Secretary-General) on Counter-Terrorism in Africa: An Imperative for Peace, Security and Development - Security Council, 9188th Meeting | UN Web TV,” United Nations (United Nations), <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1r/k1rud3nom5>.



*provide basic services and better governance to populations in areas where non-state armed groups have gained influence<sup>17</sup>».*

## ***The strategy for the European Union-led Humanitarian Response Plan.***

The following paragraph outlines the guidelines for the future of humanitarian interventions in the Sahel. As a matter of fact, the first paragraph of this paper has already demonstrated the multilayeredness of the humanitarian crisis currently affecting the entire region. In light of this, it is essential to understand international support in terms of addressing the root causes by leveraging development, eventually causing a domino effect with positive repercussions.

### *1. The Basic Needs Approach*

To achieve success, assistance should be context-specific rather than based on universal standards. What emerges from the situation outlined above is the critical level of underdevelopment that pervades the entire region. The traditional means of responding to threats to peace no longer correspond to the new menaces, hence development-support initiatives are pivotal for the success of the intervention – after all, these are the types of policies that bring local people on the side of those who exert the intervention.

In that sense, the first pillar the present strategy calls for is the juxtaposition of the Basic Needs approach to the Military Countering approach. Indeed, because of the presence of a tangible security threat, military tools are certainly necessary for the pursuit of the final aim, but they proved insufficient in the past. A rewarding and all-encompassing strategy envisages the complementary implementation of human-being-centered policies. The Basic Needs approach aims at satisfying people's primary needs: in other words, giving people what they need, in order to prevent them from radicalizing in search of means of livelihood. This kind of engagement entails the pursuit of a bottom-up approach that prioritizes healing the root causes of the issue. Hence, this involves the reformulation of policies, which must now be aimed at tackling food and water insecurity, and that must be sharp enough to face the consequences of climate change, such as through the building of sources of water supply, exporting and training individuals in using advanced agricultural techniques, and providing

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<sup>17</sup> “Speech to the UN Security Council on Counter-Terrorism in Africa,” Crisis Group, November 10, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/speech-un-security-council-counter-terrorism-africa>.

the machinery for it. If implied in such manner, assistance will succeed in empowering individuals – eventually enhancing development – as they will be provided with the necessary equipment and the appropriate “know-how”, that will ensure the sustainability of the given assistance and avoid the possibility of aid dependency. Implementing the abovementioned strategy to reduce food insecurity will be highly beneficial to improving health security as well, as malnutrition and starvation represent excessively common causes of health-related harm.

The Basic Needs approach also aims at tackling the difficulties in accessing health services. The existing structures will be made again accessible by the provision of foreign experts and the training of new local ones. As a matter of fact, education is crucial for the success of a humanitarian intervention that is built from the bottom. By providing an advanced education system, future generations will be trained to properly fit into the labor market and provided with the possibility to seek alternative and sustainable ways of life.

## *2. The Legal Framework*

Moreover, it is extremely important to label the instability of the region as “conflict”, instead of mere terrorism, in order to be able to establish Humanitarian Law as the legal framework and benefit from the consequent protection of civilians. Indeed, under the appropriate legal framework, other crimes besides terrorism can be prosecuted, such as sexual and gender-based violence: when these are being committed on such a large scale, they may qualify as war crimes or as crimes against humanity, which will allow to prosecute them as international crimes before International Courts.

In order for the legal framework to root deeply and solidly into the legal system, intensive training for Rule of Law enforcement will be necessary first, as this embodies the foundation for economic and political recovery and prosperity. Its absence, in fact, represents the core of the grievances that fuel terrorism: when impunity prevails, not only justice for victims is being denied, but also it creates a permissive climate that will erode the public trust in the criminal justice system to fairly dispense justice. The process of Rule of Law enforcement must ensure that the new system is built on transparency and participation, in order to gradually restore trust from the bottom level of society.

It is thus important to invest in a strong and independent justice system, but also, with the aim of addressing and ending impunity, in the Security Sector Reform (SSR), by means of which it will be

finally possible to ensure the independence and reliability of civilian-led bodies charged with the responsibility of maintaining State security, with clear accountability for abuse.

Moreover, domestic law must then be redrafted according, in this specific case, to the full respect of human rights, and this process must necessarily involve local representatives, not only foreigners bringing external aid. Compliance with International Human Rights law, Criminal law, Civil law, and Commercial law (e.g., treaties on organized crime; drug trafficking; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Rights of the Child) is indeed crucial in order to ensure the adaptability of International Law frameworks into the legal system. Of course, the new set of laws has to be adapted to local conditions, and not only imposed through an external process or by foreigners – which is why the involvement of locals in the drafting of the law is decisive: if it appears unfamiliar to the population, its acceptance may be weak<sup>18</sup>.

At the end of the process of intensive training, people will have restored trust in the justice system and in politics and will be able to understand their access to the latter, as possible.

### *3. Infrastructure*

As also laid out in the African Union’s Agenda 2063, building connectivity is key to supporting accelerated integration, growth, and development.

Infrastructure connectivity, besides creating a bridge for populations in conflict-prone areas, has the potential of transforming socioeconomic and political changes in conjunction with other societal processes<sup>19</sup>. This transformative power is extremely relevant in fragile and conflict-affected areas (FCA), having connectivity the potential of contributing to stabilization efforts<sup>20</sup>. This will of course entail massive investments from the international community, but on the other hand, will be extremely fruitful for the achievement of long-term development and security, with positive repercussions on

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<sup>18</sup> “Rule of Law ,” United States Institute of peace, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/GP\\_72-105\\_Rule\\_of\\_Law.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/GP_72-105_Rule_of_Law.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> “Roads to Peace? The Role of Infrastructure in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States ,” DIIS Danish Institute for International Studies (UNOPS, January 2017), <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/DIIS-Roads%20to%20Peace.%20The%20Role%20of%20Infrastructure%20in%20Fragile%20and%20Conflict-Affected%20States.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Carlo Palleschi, “African Conflictivity, How Connectivity Can Affect Conflict and Fragility Dynamics in Africa,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, March 29, 2023, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/african-conflictivity-0>.

neighboring countries. Furthermore, infrastructure-building will positively impact the enlargement of the labor market, sensibly lower the poverty level and the attractiveness of violent extremism, as well as increase the likelihood of accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### 4. *Women Empowerment*

In the perspective of a development-oriented intervention, tackling the gender gap is critical. The Sahel region registers one of the highest gender gaps in the world that amounts to 68.1% measured across the economic, social and representation dimensions<sup>21</sup>.

Due to deeply rooted discriminatory traditions and stereotypes, woman empowerment is severely hindered, albeit they would provide a meaningful help in addressing the socio-economic challenges of the region. Women are in fact agents of change in all the areas that need to be tackled in a development-oriented intervention, as economic life, social cohesion, nutritional security, and climate resilience<sup>22</sup>.

As a matter of fact, as also claimed by Benedikta Von Seherr-Thoss, Managing Director for Common Security and Defence Policy and Crisis Response, women and girls must not be left behind in the reconstruction process in order for this to be successful, as *«Recognizing this and empowering them to be active members of society – economically, politically, and culturally – will make them, and their societies, more resistant to extremist influences in the long run<sup>23</sup>»*.

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<sup>21</sup> Alliance\_Sahel, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in the Sahel,” Alliance Sahel, March 8, 2021, <https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/news/gender-equality-sahel/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “EU Briefing – UN Security Council: Counter-Terrorism in Africa – an Imperative for Peace, Security and Development,” EU Briefing – UN Security Council: Counter-terrorism in Africa – An Imperative for Peace, Security and Development | EEAS Website, November 10, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-briefing-%E2%80%93-un-security-council-counter-terrorism-africa-%E2%80%93-imperative\\_en?s=63](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-briefing-%E2%80%93-un-security-council-counter-terrorism-africa-%E2%80%93-imperative_en?s=63).

## *Conclusion*

This paper has extensively delved into the details of the severe humanitarian crisis that is currently striking in the Sahel, generating concerning risks of spill-over effects in the neighborhood. It has demonstrated how the lack of basic needs and protection from the State structures embodies the fertile soil for terrorism to establish and expand.

On this basis, it has outlined the pillars of a European Union-led Humanitarian Response Plan, that entails long-term engagement and massive investments, but ensures success as it leverages the bottom level of society whilst providing the new overarching legal framework. In this way, the mere military, top-down approach is overcome and replaced by a development-oriented one that instead listens to the needs of society and provides it with what is necessary to achieve sustainable, peaceful, and secure lives, ultimately serving, by virtue of a positive domino effect, the eradication of an international threat to peace.

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