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POLICY | brief

The Sahel Crisis:
Where do European and African
Perspectives Meet?

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Introduction

The crisis in Mali has brought the Sahel to the centre of international attention. This fragile region not only suffers from longstanding development challenges, but also from an acute security vacuum that has triggered military intervention. A key task is understanding the principal challenges to political stability and economic development in the Sahel. The European Union (EU) has engaged in the region, but an analytical perspective should indeed ask whether the response is up to the challenges currently afflicting the region. Another key aspect to the regional crisis is whether or not the international and regional responses can break the fragility cycle of humanitarian emergencies, economic under-development, political instability, porous borders and a lack of security.

There is also a need to understand the range of local and regional actors involved in the crisis. A comprehensive approach to the local and regional dynamics must uncover the role of different regional powers, whether or not certain groups benefit from a protracted crisis and what interests are at stake. The military and security component of the response is vital too. In addition to the EU mission to Niger and the wider region (EUCAP Sahel) there is the direct French military intervention in Mali and the deployment of an *EU Training Mission (EUTM)* to that country, plus the gearing up of the African-led support mission to Mali named AFISMA. A challenge however arises in putting in place an organisational division of labour between the different political, humanitarian, developmental and military actors and responses. How military assistance to the region ties-in with the broader developmental and security objectives is vital.

Many questions have therefore arisen as a consequence of the crisis. Has the EU the ability to cope with such a complex and dynami-

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The Main Challenges in the Sahel

Most conference speakers agreed that the eruption of the crisis in Mali should not have come as a surprise. Trouble had been brewing in the wider Sahel region for some time. From the decades-long protracted crisis in Northern Mali involving the Tuareg and the internal governance problem in Mali to the 2010 coup in Niger and the 2011 downfall of Qaddafi in Libya, the early warning signs were there. Regional and international partners were unable to provide a rapid and comprehensive response to these crisis signs. Early warning systems are in place, but no regional organisation had the capabilities, the reach or a common political vision to address the fragility in the Sahel region. The United States was unwilling to take the lead and the United Nations is only now mustering its own response. As a consequence, the root causes of the Sahel crisis festered and erupted in Mali under the guise of an armed rebellion bent on toppling the government. The combination of this fragile situation and European interests (Simon, Mattelaer and Hadfield, 2012) led to the French military intervention 'Operation Serval'.

One important aspect raised by the conference was that the Sahel crisis requires more than just military intervention over the longer-term. The Sahel is a belt of instability marked by migrations of people, refugees, the trafficking of goods (including weapons), weak governance, chronic economic under-development, humanitarian emergencies, widespread malnutrition and competition for natural resources such as food (Baudot, 2013). There is no guarantee that the crisis begins and ends in Mali, however, as other countries in the region remain fragile. Borders are porous in the Sahel and a lack of governmental control over a desertified space that is geographically similar in size to Western Europe is a key challenge (Fiott, 2011). It is no wonder that multinational rebel and terrorist groups, not bound to national borders, and reveling in the relative ease of arms and narcotics trafficking routes, have found the region attractive.

As participants learned at the conference, the EU response to the crisis has been multi-faceted in conception. The 2011 publication of the EU's Sahel Strategy for Security and Development has sought to implement a comprehensive approach to the crisis. The EU has made financial contributions to Mali, through the European Development Fund and the Instrument for Stability, on condition that Mali adheres to the agreed political roadmap. After the military coup the European Commission interrupted its aid to the Malian government, however, the aid is now being resumed and is focused on supporting justice, infrastructure, food security and decentralisation. This last focus was acknowledged as an important political challenge in Mali. The EU has also delivered humanitarian assistance to the region without any political conditionality. Furthering the comprehensive approach, the EU has also deployed two civil-military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In 2012 through EUCAP Sahel Niger, which among other tasks is designed to train police and build capacities for the rule of law in Niger. In 2013 an EUTM to Mali was deployed with the task of training Mali's armed forces. The deployment of an EU Special Representative to the Sahel region is foreseen. The EU also envisages support for the organisation of the next elections, which are regarded as necessary to restoring democratic order in Mali.

Some participants questioned the EU's approach and its priorities, and they stated that the EU should focus more on the people on the ground by concentrating on building resilience, the creation of social safety nets and the challenges around pastoralism in the region. As state fragility is indeed a challenge, the participation of citizens and the creation of checks and balances are essential to building a sustainable state from the bottom-up. The issue of accountability is not only essential to addressing fragility but also for development assistance.

Local and Regional Dynamics

A long-term vision for the Sahel region involving all local and regional actors is required (Lacher and Tull, 2013). Any response must be inescapably regional in scope and ambition. Indeed, a lack of regional responses, mechanisms and capabilities played into the hands of those seeking to profit from instability in the Sahel. Fragile states such as Niger, Libya and Mauritania need to be brought into a coherent regional response over the longer-term. Algeria is key to such a response. Root causes that are shared by the Sahel countries need addressing, and the development of full spectrum governance capabilities over large ge-

ographical areas should be the aim (Théroux-Bénoni, 2013). As an immediate local and regional response, the risk of contagion spreading from Mali to the broader region needs to be contained. One must not forget, stated one expert speaker, that the Sahel region links into a broader Saharan political space that is also at risk from instability.

Panellists speaking at the conference also argued that a number of local-level actions need attention over the longer-term. The crisis in Mali largely derived from a lack of government presence throughout the country. Security and social services were sparse in the North of Mali. Once the country has recovered some semblance of country-wide security, then addressing government legitimacy and accountability and the creation of a viable economy are key. However, any local-level comprehensive response to the country's challenges must also seek to promote reconciliation with marginalised groups such as the Tuareg (Lecocq, 2010). A more inclusive political system in Mali will bring on board civil society as a key actor in driving a sustainable political settlement forward.

But what is necessary for Mali is also necessary for other countries in the Sahel region. A lack of political accountability, failures in democratic governance and the rule of law, human rights abuses and socio-economic under-development are cross-border issues; even if individual countries are different. A particular problem for the Sahel region is chronic economic under-development, and more will need to be done on a regional basis to address factors such as youth unemployment – jobs should help dry up recruitment to terrorist and rebel groups. Furthermore, no amount of aid can substitute for regional cooperation. However, any regional response will be inescapably political. Regional tensions exist between players such as Algeria and Mauritania and regional groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

From Military Intervention to Security Assistance

Before any longer-term focus on economic development, political inclusion and government accountability can be achieved in the region the immediate concern is restoring security. Without security there can be no sustainable political and economic development – but security will depend on a legitimate political process. While the French prevented a bad situation from getting much worse through Operation Serval, the immediate military phase is about ensuring security while the French withdraw militarily from the country. French military withdrawal from Mali raises many ques-

tions about whether AFISMA is able to fill the security vacuum that will be left. One must also question the Malian army's abilities to regain full control of the North of the country, and whether they will be prepared to engage rebel groups if they resort to asymmetric tactics. Indeed, the Malian government and security forces should not assume that Operation Serval has secured Mali for good. This last point was particularly stressed by the conference speakers.

In this sense, EUTM Mali has an important and mammoth task. With the aim of training and restructuring Mali's forces so that they can perform conventional military tasks, this will not be an easy venture for the five hundred and fifty or so European personnel being mobilised. There are longstanding divisions within the Malian army linked to national political power games, and the EU mission has to take these into account, as intervention will impact the internal power balance, even if the evolution of this balance remains uncertain. It will also be a challenging test case for the EU's comprehensive approach. The Mission will have to simultaneously train the Malian armed forces to safeguard the military advances provided for by Operational Serval, while also ensuring that the armed forces conduct themselves within the boundaries of international humanitarian law and in keeping with broader reconciliation efforts. Supporting and strengthening the Malian military command structure is seen as vital in this regard.

Considering the human rights violations committed, the participants also raised questions concerning the legitimacy of working with the current Malian army. The Malian army cannot be allowed to continue to be a source of instability in the country – this will however depend on the progress on the political front. Lessons should be learned from EU Security Sector Reform activities in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Guinea Bissau. As a response, various speakers mentioned the EUTM mission that is training Somalian security forces as a successful example of EU engagement.

National and regional forces will inevitably take up the necessary longer-term military and security tasks. While the medium-term will see a need for the strengthening of local law and security enforcement, it should not escape the attention of interested parties such as the EU that more than military training may be required if Mali's problems are to be addressed over the longer-term (Coolsaet, Biscop and Coelmont, 2013: 3). Indeed, there is the key issue of ensuring that the Malian army has the capabilities of retaining security against rebel groups. These groups being armed with sophisticated weaponry coming from across the border from places

such as Libya and further afield. Some of the conference speakers notioned how capabilities and equipment may have to be addressed sooner rather than later, especially if security is to be put on a sustainable footing in Mali and the wider Sahel region.

Conclusion

This Policy Brief argues that the long-term response to the Sahel region has only just begun. This was a point also strongly underlined by the conference participants. The region is very much at the end of the beginning phase. The principle aspect of a long-term response to the Sahel region remains local, national and regional. No international actor involved in the region can pretend to fully understand all the political nuances and dynamics at play in the Sahel. This point should translate into prudence and a cautious approach. Yes, for international partners such as the EU long-term political will and funding for African responses will be essential. Yes, a common regional approach to development and security, which takes into due consideration porous borders and the transnational dynamic to the crisis, is necessary. However, whether Mali's armed forces will be resilient and willing enough to secure the whole country is the most immediate challenge. Efforts to reinforce the capabilities of national security forces will have to go hand-in-hand with a legitimate political process to lay the foundations for a renewed social and economic development process. The road will however be long and tenuous.

Information on "The Sahel Crisis: Where do European and African Perspectives Meet?" conference, including a conference programme and speaker biographies (including biographical errata for Nick Westcott and Amar Bendjama), can be found here: http://www.ies.be/conference/sahelcrisis2013/

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