

Understanding the EU Strategy for the Sahel

SUMMARY

The August 2020 coup in Mali has once again demonstrated the instability of the Sahel. The region is affected by climate change and rapid population growth. Rivalries over access to livelihoods exacerbate grievances against states. Struggling to provide basic services throughout their territory and security at their borders, governments are competing with armed groups that have emerged from the failed regimes of Central Africa, North Africa and the Middle East. The instability in this region has direct consequences for the security of the European Union's neighbours and for the EU itself.

In 2011, to respond to the multiple factors of this instability, the EU adopted the Sahel security and development strategy: the first comprehensive approach aimed at ensuring various external policy programmes and instruments converge towards common objectives. Despite the revamping of the strategy in 2015 based on the lessons learnt, its implementation, which involves the coordination of multiple stakeholders, has been difficult. While it has contributed to notable progress towards integration and regionalisation, security challenges have impeded tangible achievements in preventing radicalisation and fostering inclusive development. The Sahel action plan, adopted in 2015 to provide an overall framework for the implementation of the strategy, comes to an end in 2020; its revision (or replacement) will need to take the EU's and Africa's new geopolitical interests on board. As the EU endeavours to reconnect with Africa in a regional and full-fledged partnership, the successes and failures of the EU Strategy for the Sahel could inspire the whole EU development and security policy on the continent.

This briefing is a translated and revised version of Le Sahel: un enjeu stratégique pour l'Union européenne, of November 2017.



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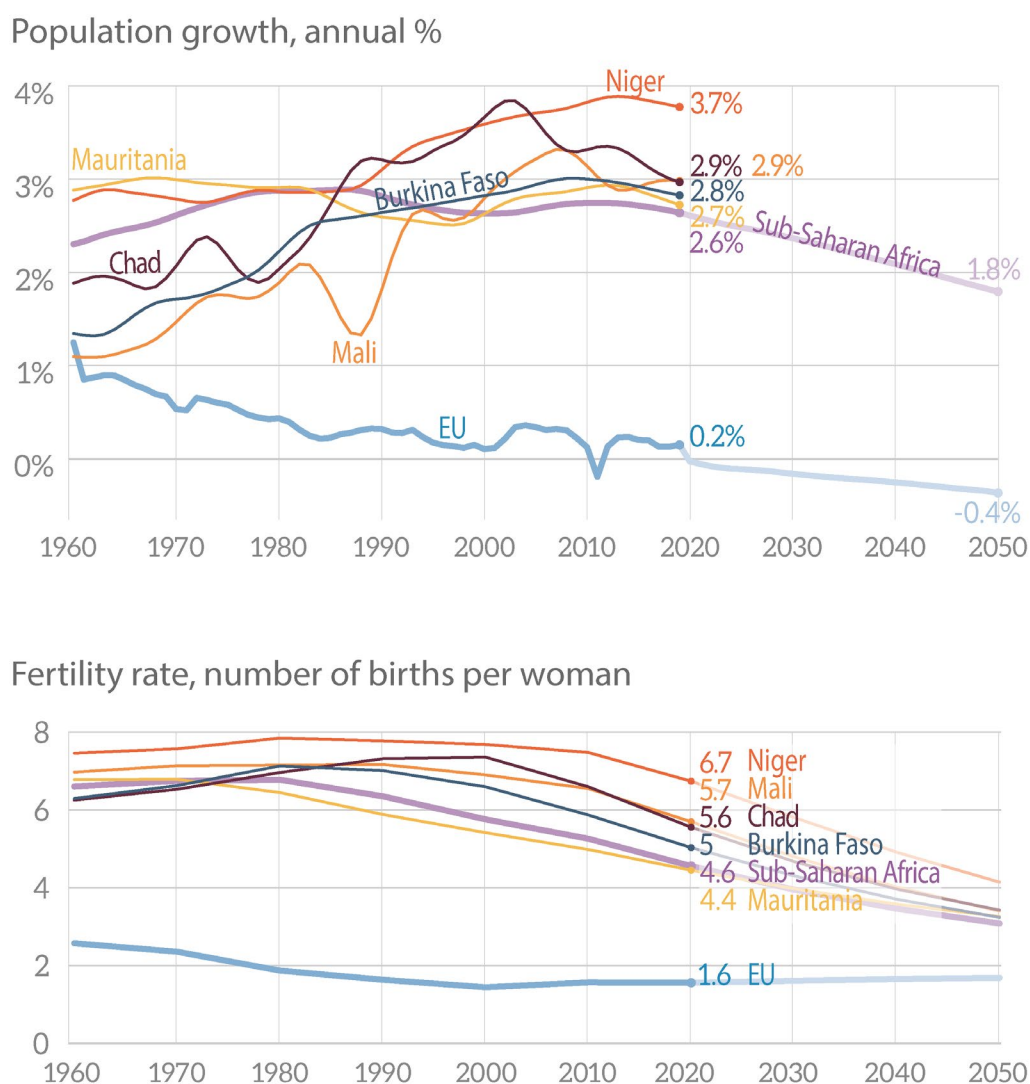
Background

A fragile region

The Sahel is a strip of land that stretches across Africa, from the Sahara Desert in the north to the savannah in the south, and from Senegal in the west, to Eritrea in the east.¹

Five Sahel countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – established the G5 Sahel in 2014 as an institutional framework to coordinate their regional cooperation in overcoming a number of common challenges, mainly related to climate change and security. Since the 1970s, temperatures in the Sahel have risen twice as fast as in the rest of the world, and rainfall patterns are highly variable, increasing the frequency and intensity of droughts and floods. The extreme variability of climatic conditions, compounded by [unsustainable agricultural practices](#), has led to the loss of arable land and pasture. This in turn has increased rivalries over land among farmers and nomadic herders. These tensions have been greatly exacerbated by rapid population growth, despite a slow decline in fertility rates.

Figure 1: G5 Sahel countries' fast population growth

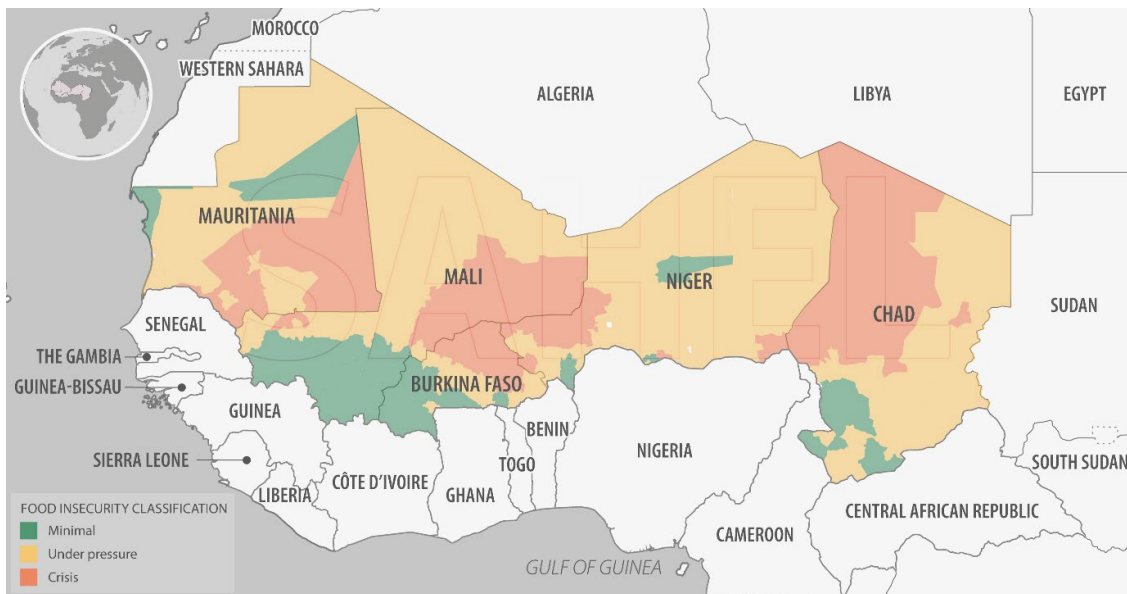


Data source: [World Bank](#), accessed 10 July 2020.

In addition to natural population growth, there is also the need to manage a very large migratory flow: crises and conflicts have led to the [forced displacement of more than 5 million people](#) in the Sahel (refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees).

State institutions do not have the legitimacy or the means to provide basic public services, particularly in the areas of security and education. The [northern regions](#) have been particularly neglected.² This weakness of states – highlighted by their low ranking in the [Normandy Peace Index](#)³ (see Figure 2) – and the porous nature of borders favour the infiltration and takeover of territories by armed groups such as Boko Haram, ISIL/Da'esh, AQIM, Mujao, Al Mourabitoun and Ansar Dine. Building on grievances against the state and [community rivalries](#), these groups have succeeded in establishing themselves by providing [young populations](#) affected by unemployment and school dropout with income from drug and arms trafficking, social services and a sense of community.

Map 1 – Food insecurity in the G5 Sahel countries

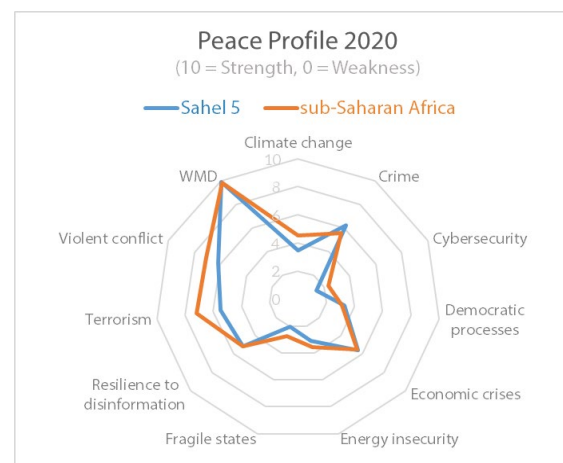


Source: UN OCHA, [Humanitarian data exchange](#), July 2020.

The World Food Programme [reports](#) that 'growing insecurity is threatening gains made in various sectors including food security and nutrition'. As a result, food insecurity (see Map 1) is growing dramatically and, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA), [12 million people](#) in the region – of whom [5 million](#) in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger alone (a figure that may double due to the coronavirus impact) – are facing a serious lack of food.⁴

[Insecurity](#) and the problems arising from climate change are so [closely interlinked](#) that they can only be addressed together. Failure to do so further feeds instability, as the [August 2020 coup in Mali](#) has once again evidenced. Moreover, actions at the national level alone are ineffective, given the difficulty of controlling borders but also the very geography of the Sahel, which calls for [inter-state responses](#).⁵

Figure 2 – G5 Sahel peace profile



Source: [Normandy Peace Index 2020](#), EPRS (forthcoming).

A particular concern for the European Union

EU leaders believe that improving development and security in the Sahel should help limit irregular migration, the risk of attacks on EU soil, and illegal trafficking. In [March 2011](#), the Council of the EU adopted the EU Strategy for the Sahel (**'European Strategy for security and development in the Sahel'**), with the aim to find the synergy between promoting development and improving security in the region (the [security/development nexus](#)). It [foreshadowed](#) the formulation of the [comprehensive approach](#) (2013) and the [Global strategy](#) (2016). It prescribed action within four domains:

- development, good governance and internal conflict resolution;
- politics and diplomacy;
- security and the rule of law;
- the fight against extremist violence and radicalisation.

The strategy initially targeted Mali, Mauritania and Niger; Burkina Faso and Chad were included in it in [March 2014](#). That way, it now covered all countries from the [G5 Sahel](#) launched a month earlier. In 2015, the Council confirmed the relevance of the strategy, and revamped it.

In April 2015, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted the **Sahel Regional action plan 2015-2020** (see Figure 3) as the [overall framework](#) for the implementation of the strategy. The action plan strengthened the security dimension, to take account of new risks related to the fall of the Libyan regime, the rebellions in northern Mali and the rise of ISIL/Da'esh. The action plan stressed the need for cooperation between all players, taking into account the [criticism](#) against the implementation of the initial plan, notably the 'continued fragmentation of efforts in combination with a lack of transparency ... in particular in the allocation of resources'. In the Sahel plan, the Council recommended including collaboration with the countries from the Maghreb and the West African region. The Council furthermore committed to monitoring the [progress of the action plan's implementation](#) at least once a year.

The EU Strategy for the Sahel: A mainstreamed approach

Institutional stakeholders

More than a new policy, the strategy seeks to bring together existing resources and operational tools. At the European External Action Service (EEAS), a **Sahel Task Force** coordinates the work of the various relevant geographical and thematic EEAS departments and of the European Commission Directorates-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), Humanitarian Aid (DG ECHO) and Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME); the [EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator](#) is also a member of this task force. An **EU Special Representative**, [Angel Losada](#), is responsible for [coordinating](#) the EU comprehensive action in the Sahel in liaison with the EU delegations, missions and the regional authorities.

Multi-channel funding

The EU Strategy for the Sahel is funded by multiple financial instruments:

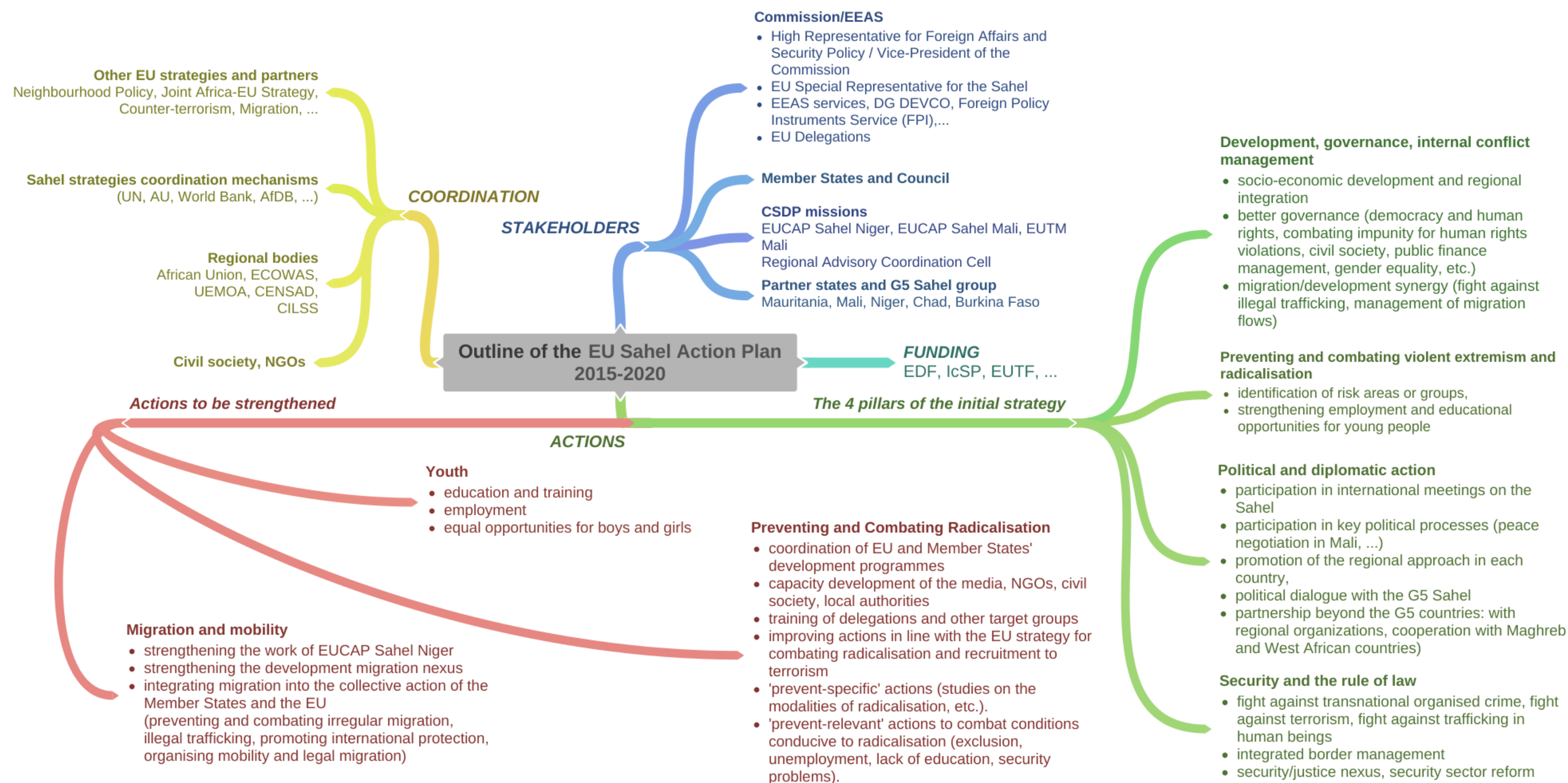
1. The European Development Fund, outside the EU budget, benefits the signatories of the EU-ACP Partnership Agreement (among them the G5 countries). The Commission has proposed to integrate this funding into the EU budget in the next multiannual financial framework (2021-2027).
2. Funds from the EU budget:
 - the Humanitarian Aid Instrument;
 - the [Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace](#) (IcSP) for crisis management and long-term stabilisation measures.
3. Assistance from the [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa](#) (EUTF Africa) established [in 2015](#) to address the main causes of migration and to provide support to migrants who have been denied asylum by the EU; EUTF Africa is a pool of resources from the EU and a number of Member States.
4. The [Africa Investment Platform](#) (AIP, formerly Africa Investment Facility), a blending mechanism that uses EU grants to leverage other public or private resources. The AIP is part of the [European Fund for Sustainable Development](#).

Table 1 – EU assistance to the G5 Sahel countries (€ million)

SOURCES OF EU ASSISTANCE PER G5 SAHEL COUNTRY	Burkina Faso	Chad	Mali	Mauritania	Niger
European Development Fund (2014-2020)	628	542	665	160	716
African Investment Facility			114.8	20.5	111.2
EU Trust Fund for Africa (since 2016)	245.8	170.7	270.8	135.5	317
Humanitarian aid (2018*)	19.2	66.7	21	74.9	38.7
Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP, 2015-2017)	22.7	9.85	22.5		
EU-Mauritania Fisheries Protocol (/year)				62.7	

Source: [EEAS](#), July 2019 – * Except for Mali (2019) and Mauritania (2014-2019)

In the [multiannual financial framework 2021-2027](#), if the European Parliament gives its consent, the above mechanisms will be part of a new single Neighbourhood Development and Cooperation Instrument ([NDICI](#)), excluding humanitarian aid, which would be kept apart. The European Development Fund would be brought into the EU budget's NDICI (excluding the African Peace Facility, which would be merged within an off-budget European Peace Facility). The precise share of funding allotted to each Sahel country is not yet available.



Source: EPRS, based on the [EU Sahel Strategy Regional Action plan 2015-2020](#), April 2015.

Players in the field

The **EU delegations** in the Sahel countries are responsible for informing their headquarters of the needs and potential threats on the ground, which have become known to them partly through their contacts with the main state and non-state players. They are furthermore responsible for consulting with local authorities on the action to be taken and for ensuring that the action of the various players on the ground (EU humanitarian aid, EU and Member State military missions) is coordinated.

A [survey conducted in 2014](#) shows, however, that in practice the heads of delegation, who do not have hierarchical power over all those involved, lack the authority and resources needed to carry out all these tasks. They have to rely on other resources, such as national experts seconded by Member States to the delegations, or Member States' diplomatic or military staff. In a sense, this contributes to the overall coordination, but it can also favour the specific interests of a Member State (particularly France, in the case of the Sahel), believed by some to be to the [detriment](#) of those of the EU as a whole. The operational aspects of the strategy in the field are rather carried out by three common security and defence policy (**CSDP**) **missions**, launched by the Council and involving staff from a number of EU Member States: the [EUCAP Sahel Niger](#), the [EUCAP Sahel Mali](#) in support of national security policies, and the [EUTM Mali](#), which trains the Malian armed forces and provides advice for their reorganisation. Over the years, the regional coverage of these missions has extended beyond their country of establishment.

EU cooperation with the G5 Sahel countries

In its 2015 conclusions on the EU regional action plan for the Sahel 2015-2020, the Council [reaffirmed](#) that the implementation of the action plan would primarily be the responsibility of the countries concerned. To this end, the EU and the G5 Sahel hold regular meetings in various formats, including with [heads of state](#). The actual ownership of the implementation, however, depends on the governance of the individual G5 Sahel countries and their collective ability to redistribute the allocated resources. EU support varies from one country to the next. Niger in particular benefits from [strengthened cooperation](#) as part of the [new migration partnership framework](#) with third countries. Support for this country is mostly aimed at strengthening the capacity of state institutions to control borders and fight organised crime. However, the [European Parliament](#) has warned that the EU's request that Sahel countries strengthen the fight against irregular migration in exchange for security support may have negative effects on economic development and the respect of fundamental rights.

For more information, please see the forthcoming EPRS briefing on EU support to the G5 Sahel.

Towards a regionalisation of the EU missions⁶

Regional Advisory Coordination Cell: Since June 2017, a regional coordination cell has been supporting capacity building and cooperation between the five target countries and the three CSDP missions. In [February 2019](#), the Foreign Affairs Council decided to beef up the coordination cell, renamed it the Regional Advisory Coordination Cell (RACC), and moved it from the EUCAP Sahel Mali premises to Nouakchott (Mauritania). The RACC provides strategic advice to G5 Sahel structures and countries, in synergy with Commission-funded programmes aimed at improving cross-border regional cooperation.

EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali are also allowed to 'conduct punctual and targeted activities' for the military in Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania.

EUTM Mali's strategic reviews: The EUTM Mali was launched in 2013, in response to UN Security Council Resolution 2085. It is staffed by about 650 military personnel from 22 Member States and 5 partner countries. As of June 2019, nearly 14 000 soldiers had been trained by the EUTM Mali, or nearly two-thirds of the Malian army. Since May 2018, the EUTM mandate includes advice to and training of the G5 Sahel Joint Force. In [March 2020](#), the Council decided to extend the EUTM Mali's mandate by another four years, increasing the staffing to 1 200. The Council entrusted the EUTM Mali with training and advising the national armed forces of other G5 Sahel countries – notably Niger and Burkina Faso. The EUTM Mali is also tasked with closely coordinating and cooperating with ECOWAS, as well as with the French ('Barkhane') and UN operations.

The EU missions' mandates do not include the [supply of military equipment](#) to the units they train. Some [analysts](#) consider this hampers their effectiveness and weakens the EU position in the field, as at the same time, [other players](#) such as Russia reinforce their influence, through military presence and supply of weapons. Others, on the contrary, believe such provision risks [fuelling conflict](#).

Member States' involvement

Spain has a longstanding [political commitment](#) to the region. [France](#) and [Denmark](#) each have their own Sahel strategy, and the French armed forces conduct a military operation in the Sahel, [Barkhane](#). Some Member States participate in the EU CSDP missions. A [number of them](#) are involved in the European task force [Takuba](#), aimed at supplementing the French and Malian forces in the field of operations. Other Member States are less present in the region, which reflects their varying strategic and economic [interests](#).⁷ The [terrorist threats](#) and [migration flows](#), however, are common concerns that have contributed to the approximation of Member States' positions and in particular to [Germany's](#) renewed attention. Accordingly, as recently as January 2020, the Council [expressed its support](#) for renewing and scaling up the EU Strategy for the Sahel with a view to increasing the impact of the EU action in support of security, stability and development.

Beyond standalone engagement and participation under the EU umbrella, some EU Member States are involved in the UN mission in Mali ([MINUSMA](#)) or in ad-hoc groupings. One such is the [Sahel Alliance](#) launched in 2017 by France, Germany and the EU in order to coordinate donors and the G5 Sahel countries. The alliance includes Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Commission's DG DEVCO, the European Investment Bank, as well as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

In the framework of the Biarritz G7 Summit in 2019, France and Germany launched the [Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel](#) (P3S) with the aim to broaden the scope of interventions against cross-border terrorism [beyond the G5 Sahel countries](#).

At the Pau Summit on 13 January 2020, French President, Emmanuel Macron, and the G5 Sahel countries' heads of state launched the [Coalition for the Sahel](#), [presented](#) as an umbrella for various initiatives, distributed in four pillars:

- the fight against terrorism (jointly led by the G5 Sahel countries and France);
- capacity-building for the armed forces of the G5 Sahel countries (led by the EU in cooperation with the G5 Sahel);
- support for the re-establishment of the state and the administrations in the territory (provided by the EU in connection with the G5 Sahel);
- and development aid (jointly piloted by the G5 Sahel and the Sahel Alliance).

The coalition secretariat is hosted by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While the Coalition for the Sahel has been [welcomed by the European Council](#), it has prompted [questions](#) as to who the actual 'driver in the seat' is as regards the EU Strategy for the Sahel. It also adds a supplementary layer to the global initiatives in the region.

The strategies for the Sahel: A puzzle

In 2015, Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, counted no less than [16 strategies](#) for the region, implemented by international and regional organisations and countries.⁸ Being of a more or less broad geographical scope, each of these strategies covers the five target countries of the EU's own strategy for the Sahel. A [comparative study](#) by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) shows that security, development, resilience, governance and education are at the heart of all these strategies. The study points out the risks of duplication and gaps between the different players, which are inevitable without prior consultation with one another.

There are, however, synergies between the strategies. Some players contribute to the financing of actions implemented by others: for example, the EU Strategy for the Sahel includes the provision of financial support for other Sahel strategies, such as those of the G5 Sahel or of [ECOWAS](#). In some areas, tools to improve synergies have been put in place: perhaps the most important of these is the Global Alliance for Resilience Initiative in the Sahel and West Africa ([AGIR](#)). The AGIR aims to provide a common framework of objectives and results for a set of initiatives to help people fight food insecurity. This consensual framework consists of a regional objective, broken down into 'resilience priorities' in each of the countries concerned; these resilience priorities have been established following a dialogue between all players concerned (institutional players, non-governmental organisations and civil society). The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel ([UNOWAS](#)) collects information on developments in the regional situation and operates a [Ministerial Coordination Platform](#), a dialogue between representatives of the Sahel countries and of their international partners, aimed at a better coherence between the various Sahel strategies.

European Parliament position

The European Parliament shows a continuing interest in the EU action in the Sahel, and is expected to discuss the topic again during its [September 2020](#) plenary session. In several resolutions it has commended the EU and the Member States' involvement; for instance, in its [resolution of 15 January 2020](#) on the implementation of the common security and defence policy, Parliament welcomes the ongoing regionalisation of the civilian missions in the Sahel but regrets the lack of 'any suitable indicators to monitor the outcome' of both EUCAP Sahel missions. Parliament also [hails](#) the EU and the Member States' support to the G5 Sahel, MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane. In [June 2016](#), it called for cooperation with the African Regional Communities, the African Union and the UN.

The Parliament has stressed on several occasions that the security aspect should not overshadow other aspects of the EU Strategy for the Sahel. In a [June 2013](#) resolution on Mali, it furthermore stressed the need to guarantee the impartiality of humanitarian action by maintaining a clear distinction between humanitarian and security programmes. In [December 2014](#), Parliament called for the human rights component of the EU Strategy for the Sahel to be activated, in order to better combat slavery in Mauritania. In the resolution of [19 December 2019](#) on violations of human rights including religious freedoms in Burkina Faso, it recommended a comprehensive approach to the prevention of radicalisation and terrorism, including through the promotion of inter-religious dialogue.

As concerns the development/security nexus, Parliament's overall position is that 'giving [support to security sector actors](#) in third countries, including, under exceptional circumstances, the military, in a conflict prevention, crisis management or stabilisation context is essential to ensure appropriate conditions for poverty eradication and development'. This position is reiterated in the [report](#) adopted in July 2020 by the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). The committee calls for coordination of the EU development and security initiatives by the High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, under the authority of the Council. It calls for the EU to be allowed to provide 'military equipment to partner countries, including arms and ammunition', while making sure 'that any military equipment is not given to recipients that are committing abuses, atrocities and other harms against civilian populations'. While the [regulation](#) establishing the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace does not currently authorise such initiatives, they could be implemented under the [European Peace Facility](#), if it is adopted as part of the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021 to 2027. In line with previous resolutions, the draft report calls for a 'comprehensive evaluation' of the EUCAP Sahel civilian missions in order to 'adapt them to real needs'. It also advocates Member States' cooperation with the Barkhane and Takuba operations. The Parliament has not yet passed a [resolution](#) on this topic; a vote should take place in September 2020.

Outlook

Many [commentators](#) have praised the analysis and the proposals made in the EU Strategy for the Sahel. However, initially it struggled to get off the ground, due to the silo approach involved in managing and funding it: EU external actions are shared between Member States and EU institutions; and within the EU institutions, several units of the External Action Service and several Commission directorates-general are involved in the decision-making and management of financial instruments. Successive organisational readjustments and the greater regionalisation of the EU missions' scope of action have led to a [great deal of progress](#) in the integrated approach. The focus on issues more relevant to the EU than for the region's countries – such as tackling illegal migration – still creates tensions between the EEAS and DG DEVCO, and with African partners who see their ownership challenged. This corresponds to a re-affirmation of the EU as a global strategic player in line with the EU Global Strategy. However, so far the [rise in violence](#) and the instability of the G5 countries – recently demonstrated again by the coup in Mali – have offset the results linked to the security aspects of the strategy, notably the fight against [transnational crime](#), and has challenged its development aims, such as better education and employment opportunities.

In January 2020, the EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, [declared](#) 'The Sahel and more generally Africa are very clearly priorities in my mandate and for the new European Commission'. As the Sahel action plan will come to an end in 2020, as will its main source of funding (the EDF) and the current EU MFF, an overhaul of the strategy is to be expected. It is very likely that EU leaders will endeavour to align it with the broader proposed [new comprehensive strategy with Africa](#) that pledges to 'deepen EU support to African peace efforts through a more structured and strategic form of cooperation focussing on regions in Africa where tensions are the highest'. However, as of August 2020, a new action plan has not been put forward.

FURTHER READING

Anghel S., The European Council and the G5 Sahel: Security, development and the rule of law, European Parliament, EPRS (forthcoming).

Fardel T., Pichon E., EU support to the G5 Sahel: EU collaboration on security and development with a regional grouping, European Parliament, EPRS (forthcoming).

Isabelle Ioannides [Peace and security in 2020: Evaluating the EU approach to tackling the Sahel conflicts](#), European Parliament, EPRS (forthcoming).

ENDNOTES

¹ There is no single definition of 'Sahel countries'. In the broadest sense - 'Sahel-Sahara-Horn of Africa' - the region includes Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. For the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Sahel is: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon. Institutionally, the G5 Sahel includes Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

² Despite differences in treatment between countries, funding for regional development is proportionally higher in Niger than in Mali, for example.

³ Peace profile of G5 Sahel countries:

Ranking in the Normandy Peace Index (the lower the ranking, the less peaceful the country): Burkina Faso: 45; Chad: 132; Mali: 114; Mauritania: 101; Niger: 103)
(source: EPRS, [Normandy Peace Index](#), 2020)



- ⁴ In the OCHA sense, see footnote 1 above.
- ⁵ For example, most water resources are shared between several countries and their management involves transboundary cooperation.
- ⁶ Following the 18 August 2020 coup in Mali, the EU acknowledged that [some of the putschists](#) had benefitted from the EU training for the Malian army forces and decided [to suspend the activities](#) of the EUTM Mali and the EUCAP Sahel Mali, while vowing 'they will start they 'will start working again as soon as possible'. Part of their staff might be [redeployed](#) to Burkina Faso.
- ⁷ Several reports highlight the differences between the EU Member States as concerns their involvement on the ground in the Sahel. While featuring less prominently in the headlines than France, [Denmark and Estonia](#) 'have sent troops on the ground in Mali, while the UK has sent helicopters' as of January 2020. [Italy](#) has become the second contributor to Takuba in July 2020. [Denmark](#) also contributes with military personnel to the UN's peacekeeping operations in Mali and the French led Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region'.
- ⁸ The Sahel strategies listed by Clingendael are those of the African Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the World Bank, the Economic Community of West African States, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States, the G5 Sahel, the United Nations, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the International Organisation of the Francophonie, the African Union, the European Union, the Arab Maghreb Union, Denmark, the United States and France. The Sahel Alliance (2017) and the Sahel Coalition (2020) were not launched at the time.

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