



Building security in the Sahel: European, regional and local approaches.

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Introduction

On 11th September 2015 the conference "**Building security in the Sahel: European, regional and local approaches**" was held under the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU. This policy note briefly highlights some major conclusions and observations that can be of interest for Belgian policy in the Sahel.

Background

The Sahel faces overwhelming demographic and developmental challenges in the medium term, and is also severely affected by terrorism, Islamist radicalization, irregular migration flows, and political instability. In recent years, the European Union has increased its engagement in the region, which has become a test-case for the EU's comprehensive approach. The EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel currently covers the 'Sahel G5' countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, and sets out a range of policies aimed at building peace and security. Tools and support programmes for development and political dialogue in the Sahel include the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), three civilian or military CSDP missions (in Mali and in Niger) and a EU Special Representative. Implementation of new policy concepts such as Capacity building for security and development (formerly known as 'train and equip') has the potential to significantly impact the region. The EU and member states plan to commit up to €8 billion to the Sahel over the next few years. But how much is enough to address the wide array of problems and challenges besetting the region?

Main Observations & Conclusions

- **EU Sahel Strategy:** the strategic focus of the EU for the Sahel region, as articulated in the Regional Action Plan 2015-2020, was reaffirmed. This focus has been translated into four priority areas: (i) preventing and countering radicalization, (ii) create appropriate conditions for youth, (iii) migration and mobility, and (iv) border management and fight against illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime. Concerns were raised on the possible **imbalance between EU and local priorities:** donors are often faced with the difficult task of reconciling their proper strategic objectives with those of national and local populations (OECD, 2010: 10). One example illustrating this point is the fact that for the EU the problem of

northern Mali is one of terrorism, migration and illicit trafficking, while for the local population the problem is more framed in terms of local and internal Tuareg conflicts. Insufficient analysis of these **strategic dilemmas between geopolitical and local objectives**, in order to find a better balance between them, can and will have a negative effect on external interventions.

- **Regional Focus:** all actors agreed upon the importance of a regional focus and approach, as no single country has the resources to solve most of the problems. However, there was discussion on the exact geographical delineation of the regional focus. Some argued that the challenges in the Sahel can not be analysed without the role played by actors such as **Marocco** and **Algeria**, hence the suggestion to widen the scope to **Nort-West-Africa** as a region instead of focusing solely on the Sahel. Also the particular realities in **Libya** and **Sudan** were mentioned as illustrations of the need to have an even broader regional focus.
- On the other hand, there was also a clear plea to focus on the **micro-dynamics of conflict, violence and insecurity**. The focus on regional analysis should not let us forget that most violence and insecurity are deeply rooted in local conflicts. The case of the Macina Liberation Front - presented as a new section of Boko Haram while ignoring the complex local reality on the ground - was highlighted as an illustration of the need to integrate better local level analysis.
- **Key challenges:** radicalisation and terrorism, demographic pressure and climate change, and illicit trafficking and border control remain the key challenges as expressed by the majority of interlocutors. However, current approaches to these challenges were also put in a critical perspective. First, with regard to radicalisation and terrorism, the need to focus more on **prevention of radicalisation** was highlighted, together with a plea for a stronger international will to **neutralise terrorist groups** in northern Mali, as they are critical spoilers in the Malian peacebuilding process. Second, the **demography-conflict nexus** was put into question, as it was argued that countries such as Mali need a growing population in order to develop their country. Third, current approaches to border control and management do not take sufficiently into account the local geographic and socio-economic reality on the ground. The geographical situation of the Sahel entails that border control remains a hypothetical activity, as patrolling the Sahel is impossible. In addition, border control results in a **militarization of borders**, which in turn, leads to a further **criminalisation** of these borders (presence of arms attracts illicit activities). On the socio-economic level, one should take into account that transnational economic activity has been there for decades, and is a crucial part of local livelihood strategies and economic activity. This is an excellent illustration of the need to balance geopolitical objectives (terrorism, migration, ...) against **local needs** (transborder economic activity).
- **Aid Effectiveness:** in order to increase the impact of external support several issues were raised. The most important one was the observation of a fundamental **imbalance between budgets and human resources**: while budgets for the Sahel have raised substantially during the last years, human resources have remained at the same level or even decreased. Furthermore, what is called the **'bunkering of aid'** can be observed: because of insecurity many agencies pull staff back from the field and operate from their 'safe bunker' in the capital or even abroad (Duffield, 2012). This results in a lack of staff and access to target populations in order to build up expertise necessary to design and implement effective programmes. As a consequence, the need to focus more on less, that is, the need to select and work on a **set of strategic priorities**, was expressed several times. In Mali, for example, PTFs have initiated more than 20 thematic working groups, yet many agencies do not have personnel with expertise to staff these groups. Furthermore, the issue of **timing and sequencing of reforms** was raised: external support would probably benefit from analysing more in detail if delaying certain reforms until the requested preconditions are in place is **doing less harm** than imposing these reforms in a short term logic in order to get quick results.

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