Clingendael
Netherlands Institute of International Relations

CRU Policy Brief

MAY 2024

Supporting the state?

Constraints to stabilisation efforts and lessons learned from the Central Sahel

Ekaterina Golovko & Kars de Bruijne

The international community hasn't been successful in its efforts to support 'stabilisation' in the central Sahel. To learn lessons from recent engagement, this policy brief seeks to make three contributions to an already long list of 'strategic misfits'. First, that 'stabilisation responses' are built on the wrong assumption "to bring back the state" and "expand state presence", without serious work on how to reform the state that had to be brought back. Second, that external actors – and in particular Western governments – consistently overestimated their ability to influence and effect real change in the region and have to become more modest in their objectives. Third, that there is an urgent need to apply these lessons to the new area of policy attention: coastal countries of West Africa and the fight against violent extremism. This policy brief calls for a stronger reflection on what decades of largely failing Sahelian policy can tell us about how to engage with Coastal West Africa.

From liberal peacebuilding to stabilisation

For decades the international community has sought to tackle instability in the Middle East (e.g. Syria), South Asia (e.g. Afghanistan) and the African continent. Despite variations, the overall strategy from roughly the 1990s to the 2000s could be labelled 'liberal peacebuilding' – a set of policies seeking to address conflict root causes and promoting a form of (participatory) democracy and market economy.[1] Due to both serious challenges to realise this agenda and the global War-on-Terror, a shift took place over the last 20 years where the wording '(liberal) peacebuilding' was increasingly replaced by 'stabilisation'. While the term is widely debated, it often seeks to convey the idea that ambitions are less encompassing and mainly seek to contain problems and limit the impact of these crises.

The term stabilisation was first used by NATO in its mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1996 to 2004. Subsequently, the U.N. Security Council introduced the term "stabilisation" in the U.N. mission in Haiti (2004) and in missions such as MONUSCO in the DRC (2010), MINUSMA in Mali (2013) and the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA, 2014). In this context, stabilisation was a more short-term political process that sought to enhance the stability and peace of communities faced with armed conflict. Stabilisation efforts were presented as

1 "The liberal approach to peacebuilding assumes that, in order to guarantee peace, a broad range of issues concerning social, economic and institutional needs should be addressed in building stable states. This approach is based on the straightforward assumption that states with strong political democratic institutions which ensure political representation and a market economy guarantee sustainable economic growth and provide basic public goods, are necessary conditions for establishing durable peace", Michal Natorski, "The European Union Peacebuilding Approach: Governance and Practices of the Instrument for Stability", Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2011, pp. 3-4.

a process that would establish the groundwork for sustainable peace.[2]

The limits to 'stabilisation'

There is an increasing realisation that the stabilisation agenda is fraught with problems.[3] For example, the response to protracted insurgencies has been a 'robust' intervention and a proposal for a political solution which involves an immediate or a significant reduction of violent conflict. One key problem has been that responses prioritised robust military intervention and left the political solution insufficiently addressed (hence prioritizing security over governance).[4] Clear evidence is that African Peace Operations have increasingly used military interventions and development aid but without clear demands for political change.

Other problems are also well documented. There are known issues with the structure of the response system by the international community: a lack of coordination, difficulties of compromising on mandates and having one clear strategy and challenges in the actual response. Moreover, there is renewed activism of continental and regional organisations in the field of security under the claim of providing 'African solutions to African problems' (albeit often in ad-hoc form, creating its own problems).[5] But this also creates tensions with the existing global and multilateral UN framework and whether donor needs and interest are sufficiently aligned with local interests and needs.[6]

A final problem is conceptual in nature. Stabilisation approaches tend to view "the horizon of peace" (cf. when results can be achieved) of the liberal peacebuilding agenda as too lofty and difficult to attain. The stabilisation approach instead seeks to control and contain rather than transform.[7] But this move is applied half-heartedly. Many policy-makers struggle to balance the desire for realistic control and contain policy (while often not clearly defining what interests are at stake), with the desire for a more ambitious governance agenda that is rooted in the needs of local citizens and seeks transformation.

Contribution of this brief

This policy brief seeks to make two (modest) contributions by challenging the assumption that the state needs to be strengthened and the assumption that large-scale externally driven change is possible. But apart from this contribution, this brief also seeks to add urgency to the debate on stabilisation in general. The central Sahel is increasingly becoming an inaccessible area for larger Western players (France and increasingly the United Sates) and forces a mirror to the West as to how a decade of engagement is perceived. But combined with the spread of violence, this is a major impetus to move stabilisation programming "inspired" by the Sahelian experience to the littoral states of West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin for now).

In 2021 the US funded $37.5 million Littoral Regional Initiative.[8] In 2022, the World Bank started the $450 million Gulf of Guinea Northern Regions Social Cohesion Project on the prevention of violent extremism (and other

2 Interpeace, "Rethinking Stability Key Findings and Actionable Recommendations", November 2022.

3 Andrew Lebovich, "Disorder from chaos: Why Europeans fail to promote stability in the Sahel", European Council on Foreign Relations.

4 Belloni, Roberto, and Irene Costantini. "From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilisation: The International Intervention in Iraq", Ethnopolitics, 23 July 2019.

5 De Coning, C. (2023). Ad-hoc initiatives are shaking up African security. Training for Peace. https://www.thecable.ng/tinubu-to-talon-theres-a-lack-of-synergy-between-nigeria-and-benin-republic-we-are-one; Unpublished study on stabilisation in the Sahel prepared by Clingendael Institute.

6 https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/03/peacekeeping-in-africa-from-un-to-regional-peace-support-operations/.

7 Mac Ginty emphasizes that stabilisation is "as an essentially conservative doctrine that runs counter to its stated aims of enhancing local participation and legitimacy. It is an agenda of control that privileges notions of assimilation with international (western) standards and mainstreams the military into peace-support operations". Roger Mac Ginty, "Against Stabilization", Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, November 2012.

8 https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/projects/political-transitions-projects/west-africa-the-littorals-regional-initiative-lri/.

themes).[9] In 2023, a variety of UN agencies set up the Integrated Border Stability Mechanism (IBSM) to strengthen cross border governance and security (amounts not confirmed yet).[10] In the same year, UNDP complemented two ongoing stabilisation initiatives (Lake Chad and Liptako Gourma) with the $27 million Atlantic Corridor to harmonise P/CVE work. In 2023, the $20 million German-US lead Coastal States Stability Mechanism (CSSM) started, also a stabilisation programming. Still in 2023, also the US funded $49.5 million Strengthening Regional Peace and Stability in West Africa Program (SRPS) program started. And by the end of 2023, the EU launched its Gulf of Guinea project, a security and defense initiative to support coastal countries.[11]

In short, donors flock to the coastal states with stabilisation programming. It is imperative to ensure that insights from the Sahel filter into this new programming cycle.

The brief has the following build up. The first part, highlights how stability as a concept remains ill-defined and means different things to different governments. Subsequently, the brief concentrates on two key assumptions: the idea to "bring back the state" (or at least reinforce its dwindling presence) and the ability of outside actors to effect change. We derive these insights from a decade of work supporting stabilisation activities in the Central Sahel (most prominently for the EU system, the UN system and the Dutch government). Data in this brief stems from a number of stabilisation research projects on the Sahel, a meeting with the EU Sahel envoys in March 2023 and a set of interviews with policy makers.

1. Stabilisation interventions in the Central Sahel

From the abundance of research on problems with stabilisation efforts, perhaps one trumps them all: there is no common understanding of what stability is and what stabilisation should be about. This lack of common understanding means that stabilisation tends to become a catch all term for all programming that is undertaken.

The lack of a common understanding of stability among the main stakeholders

There are a variety of conceptions of what stabilisation is. For instance, some countries (Netherlands, Canada, France) take a broad approach to stability called 3D: Diplomacy, Defense, Development.[12] At the same time, when speaking to policy makers on the region, it is common to hear more essentialist readings such as: "stabilisation comes through the provision of basic services".[13] Similarly, no EU policymaker interviewed for this brief provided a definition of stabilisation. But where they mentioned stabilisation they referred to the ATI (Approche Territoriale Integrée). This approach was developed in 2019/2020 by the Sahel Alliance and is an inter-sector approach to security, governance and development.[14] It is an approach that focuses on localised projects rather than a nationwide framework.[15]

Among international organizations, UNDP has the most significant involvement in stabilisation. The aim of UNDP's stabilisation approach is to build confidence in a peace process through security, access to basic social services, economic recovery and social cohesion. It does

9 https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P175043; http://www.mlgrd.gov.gh/images/phocadownload/Ghana_SOCO_Project_Info_Sheet_final.pdf.

10 https://www.iom.int/news/integrated-border-stability-mechanism-set-strengthen-border-governance-and-security-west-african-countries.

11 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/11/gulf-of-guinea-council-launches-an-eu-security-and-defence-initiative/.

12 It is important to mention that 3D approach was initially elaborated and adopted by the USA. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/pb240-fostering-diplomatic-defense-development-3d-cooperation-in-responding-to-complex-crises.pdf.

13 Interview with a French Policy Maker, 2022.

14 Ministry of Internal Security and Civil Protection of Mali, "Plan de Sécurisation Integrée des regions du centre", February 2017 – as implemented with the Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (PSIRC).

15 Interview with EU Policy Makers, 2022.

so in a civilian-led fashion that is "time-bound, localised, integrated, civilian programmes with the primary purpose of building trust between communities and legitimate authorities and laying the foundations for recovery, peacebuilding and development".[16] Stability is defined as "the desired long-term outcome of stabilisation processes." However, there is limited agreement on what the outcome should be and how stability is exactly configured.[17]

A similar insight comes from the Dutch engagement in Mali.[18] Stability by the Netherlands "referred to 'legitimate stability', a political, socio-economic and cultural situation in which citizens feel represented and safe on the basis of inclusive political processes, trust between them and the state ('social contract') and social cohesion between groups".[19] The Netherlands approaches stability by promoting human security, the rule of law, peace processes and political governance.[20] This is an ambitious mission that aligns with a liberal peacebuilding agenda.

While these definitions all include political aspects and access to basic services[21] they are at face value, however, not coherent, particularly not when considered in conjunction. In an interview in 2022, a European policymaker put it bluntly while expressing their reading of stabilisation in the Sahel: a 'bunch of ideas' that do not actually guide policy makers.[22]

16 ibid.
17 UNDP, "Guidance Note on Stabilisation Programming", October 2022.
18 Stability and stabilisation are sometimes used interchangeably although they do not represent the same thing.
19 IOB Inconvenient Realities. An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, August 2023.
20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, "Development Cooperation: Security and Rule of Law", May 2020.
21 Interviews with European Policy Makers, 18 May 2022.
22 Interview with a European Policy Maker, 2022.

A catch-all-term for all that is being done but a lack of an integrated strategy

This wide variety of definitions has allowed donors to subsume a bewildering variety of programming interventions under the term 'stabilisation'.

For example, in a meta-evaluation on Dutch stabilisation in Mali this included restoring access to basic services such as water, education, and health (the so-called "peace dividend approach"), investing in income-generating activities or promoting economic growth, supporting civil society, building infrastructure for demobilisation of combatants and restoration of government buildings in the North, and building conflict resolution capacity through training for community-based conflict prevention and resolution. At the institutional level, support for Mali's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission was also seen as stabilisation. Finally, support for the political-administrative decentralization process was seen as another way to rebuild the country's political stability.[23]

A case in point is also the European Union (EU) programming. Overall, the EU's main focus in the Sahel has been to support the development and security of the region through a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the crisis.[24] Furthermore, the EU also aimed to support Sahel countries in addressing security challenges. Key initiatives included the Sahel Alliance – a partnership between the EU, the African Union, and the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) – to mobilise resources and coordinate efforts to address the development and security challenges in the Sahel region.[25]

A similar all-encompassing notion is the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S) – a French-German initiative which sought to mobilise international support for the judicial system and internal security through

23 Meta-evaluation, Part I, p. 11-13.
24 Alliance Sahel, "The Sahel Alliance", 2023.
25 The EU has committed €8 billion to the Sahel Alliance for the period 2018-2022.

capacity-building and training programs for local forces. The P3S was meant to complement the Sahel Alliance.[26] France itself argues that stabilising the Sahel requires a multidimensional approach, including military operations, security provision, development, and improved governance.[27]

The effect of allowing all types of programming to be part of a stabilisation approach is that it has been even more difficult to determine the overall impact of donor support. For example, a recent evaluation by the Dutch Evaluation Agency on Dutch stabilisation activities in the Sahel, pointed out how there was no comprehensive theory of change on how stabilisation could be achieved. As a result, the indicators at the level of projects were unfit to measure their impact (e.g. whether the skills acquired by beneficiaries corresponded to real needs in the present context).[28] As such, a key problem is that it remains unclear how individual projects and programmes actually contribute to increased or decreased stability in the region.[29]

2. A really problematic assumption: "the return of the state"

Conflicts in the Sahel represent crises of governance, characterized by low levels of legitimacy among elected officials and some customary authorities they work with, a lack of state presence in rural areas, deficiencies in delivering essential public goods and services, unequal resource access and distribution, and hierarchical customary structures that influence societal relations.[30] The series of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2021 and 2023 are a case in point. Western donors have often sought to sponsor better governance, including greater accountability, more commitment to reform, and more effective decision-making by governments. In short, they have pushed for the "return of the state", or, where it subsists, "strengthen state structures".

Some programming focused on infrastructural development. This involved rehabilitating essential infrastructure, access to justice, building new security posts or sponsoring courts in rural areas.[31] The 'return of the state' there stood for infrastructural interventions that could lead to the return of credible representatives of the state (e.g. state security forces).

But this approach of rebuilding institutions and services to allow a return of the state is employed more widely. A good example is UNDP's stabilisation mechanism in the Liptako-Gourma. This mechanism is a large-scale stabilisation effort for fragile and unstable areas.[32] To achieve long-term stability, UNDP emphasises the need to create access and restore state structures and basic services effectively. Additionally, social cohesion must be fostered through inclusion and ongoing consultation. And this form of stabilisation addresses the needs of the affected populations while restoring essential services and state structures.[33]

The first expected outcome was the consolidation and/or (re)establishment of state authority in strategically selected target areas. To this end, the mechanism sought to support the redeployment and strengthening of administrators, judges, police, gendarmerie and community police in the target areas. The project intended to cooperate with existing programs

26 Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in Geneva and other international organisations in Switzerland, "France's action in the Sahel", 04 March 2021.

27 International Crisis Group, "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy", 1 February 2021.

28 IOB, Inconvenient Realities. An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, August 2023.

29 Unpublished study on stabilisation in the Sahel prepared by Clingendael Institute.

30 Alex Thurston, "The Hollowness of 'Governance Talk' in and about the Sahel", ISPI, 12 April 2021; International Crisis Group, "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy", 1 February 2021.

31 UNDP, "Document de projet Mécanisme de Stabilisation pour la Région du Liptako- Gourma", 2020, p. 17.Despite the fact that there is still no guarantee that these posts can be filled safely and effectively International Crisis Group, "A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy", 1 February 2021.

32 UNDP, "Document de projet Mécanisme de Stabilisation pour la Région du Liptako- Gourma", 2020, p. 16.

33 ibid.

that already facilitate police and gendarmerie redeployment and support community security and service delivery at the local level and ensure their complementarity.[34]

UNDP LGA initative is just an illustration of the desire to work on the "return of the state" as one of the major stabilisation interventions. For example, the EU strategy speaks about the need to expand the presence and services of the state by supporting the spread of state structures and the provision of basic public services.[35]

The problem: technical solutions to an unclear assumption

But the issue is that the process of "restoring the state" is a long-lasting and multifaceted endeavour. Moreover, it also depends on the state's ability to serve the interests of all its citizens and to maintain order.[36]

And this is where a stabilisation programming has been in want: the political aspects of restoring a state are systematically neglected. For example, while rebuilding infrastructure does speak to local needs, it does not address why the state was absent in the first place. What often has happened is that rebuilding the state has been implemented in a way where technical responses took priority (e.g. how to access an area, how to build an area, who can operate a court) rather than the thorny problem of seeking to contribute to solving political problems. Approaching the return of the state as a technical issue – as infrastructure to be built, officials to be deployed, etc – has clear limits: it depoliticises governance and often ignores the politics and conflict that shape the intervention.[37] However, such an approach helps to avoid disagreements on policy priorities and discrepancies in the agenda.

Moreover, the return of the state as a programmatic goal disregards crucial questions about what type of state should return or emerge. This is a central question because it forces donors and implementers to engage with the reasons for the absence of the state in areas where it is supposed to return. Yet, programmes appear to rely implicitly on a liberal peacebuilding narratives with a predefined model of somewhat responsive and accountable state. At the same time these programmes are part of a less ambitious stabilisation agenda which leads to a much greater hesitation to address and make demands on existing state structures and the organisation of its politics. This is a tension that is not solved.

Where this problem is clearly visible is in support to security forces. Such support fits the idea of 'stabilising' contexts and 'rebuilding the state'. The problem is not that security forces have sometimes been involved in multiple human rights violations, summary executions, mass killings and – recently – *coup-d'états*.[38] The real issue is that outside actors have had difficulties fully comprehending the politics of security forces. For example, what political faction controls what part of the security forces? What explains that there are so many divisions in the security forces and how does this relate to the stability of the regime? Instead of asking deeper questions and seeking long-term structural change, the main approach is providing training and equipment as a form of short-term stabilisation assistance.[39]

34 ibid.

35 Eric Pichon and Mathilde Betant-Rasmussen, "New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel", European Parliament Briefing, July 2021.

36 Katherine Pye, "The Sahel: Europe's forever war?", Centre for European Reform Policy Brief, 31 March 2021.

37 Denis M. Tull, "German and international crisis management in the Sahel: Why discussions about Sahel policy are going around in circles", SWP Comment, 27 June 2020.

38 Among others the Massacre in Moura in Mali, see: Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers", 04 April 2022; and execution of civilians in Djibo, see: Human Rights Watch, " Burkina Faso: Security Forces Allegedly Execute 31 Detainees", 20 April 2020.

39 A similar dynamic involves that it is often return of the army to an area previously out of control, meaning that the army will represent the state. Andrew Lebovich, "Disorder from chaos: Why Europeans fail to promote stability in the Sahel", European Council on Foreign Relations.

In short, by providing technical support, donors invertedly silence political questions of what type of government would be conducive. The "return of the state" is inevitably a political process and requires addressing fundamental questions about the balance of power between the state and the people. The type of the returning state does not have to be a liberal democratic one, but one that seeks to operate in accordance with the needs of the population and the social environments. After all, people's willingness for the return of the state is conditioned by their perception of previous experiences, including abuses and benevolence, corruption and reward. Skipping this stage sets programming up for failure. Indeed, the advent of three military regimes that have been fuelled by both clear anti-elite narratives and clear anticolonial sentiment are a case in point; politics will rear its heads one day.

3. What role can external actors actually play?

In addition to the problems around the return and/or strengthening of the state there is a second problem: the ambivalent position that external actors take vis-à-vis Sahelian (and increasingly Coastal) governments.

Policy documents often place Sahelian authorities at the forefront of both the military and civilian aspects of stabilisation, arguing that these processes are driven and managed by the national authorities themselves. This agenda of "local ownership" is normatively correct (after all self-determination includes the right to rule oneself) but also shifts the responsibility away from the donors to the governments. Yet a fundamental question is hidden: how are donor priorities reflected in the stabilisation agenda, particularly if those priorities do not coincide with national governments?

Who sets the agenda?

The issue of local ownership is often considered to be central to the successful outcome of stabilisation interventions. While local ownership is on the one hand, a genuine attempt to not assume power and ensure local actors are in the lead, it is unfortunately also a way to divert attention from the donor who promotes a specific agenda. A good example can be a choice of target groups for the stabilisation interventions. As the donors formulate programmes there are often requirements on which target groups are relevant (e.g. women, girls and youth). Mac Guinty defines this approach as 'helicopter parenting of stabilisation' which may interfere with social norms of the Sahelian societies.

For instance, some Dutch programmes put a premium on women, girls and youths engagement.[40] But to ensure meaningful engagement of these target groups and achieve concrete results, project design and implementation have to be attuned to social norms and networks. In this case, Malian cultural values give a preponderant place to elderly men compared to women and young people. While such programmes are set up precisely to address such biases, the problem is that the design excludes key actors in the initiative and that success cannot take place without the involvement of these actors.[41]

Such tensions between requirements of external actors and social context and norms can have unintended consequences. For example, because of the prominence of Western policy objectives (e.g. around the assumed effect of rule of law programming, pastoralist programming or migration programming) sometimes the objectives were presented as needs. For some initiatives, the unintended effect was increased tensions within communities and, in one instance, even the persecution of marginalized groups because attention was drawn to them during the implementation.[42]

40 Unpublished study on stabilisation in the Sahel prepared by Clingendael Institute.

41 Unpublished study on stabilisation in the Sahel prepared by Clingendael Institute.

42 IOB, Inconvenient Realities. An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, August 2023.

Local ownership can even be a paper exercise when there is a genuine attempt to include local stakeholders. Available data from a Dutch evaluation showed that the choice of a specific beneficiary group was relevant to Dutch priorities but not necessarily to the local context. For example, during one project a 'follow up' committee was created which was supposed to include stakeholders such as local, traditional and religious authorities and direct beneficiaries. However, these stakeholders were not systematically associated with initiatives central to project implementation, such as the selection of beneficiaries and of community projects. Hence, rather than being leading actors, these stakeholders were only consulted.[43]

Perhaps the present backlash against Western involvement in the Sahel builds on dynamics where the balance between local ownership and donor desires have been off. Years of large-scale Western interventions without significant tangible results have created among the population disillusionment and a willingness and need for different partners.[44] The current situation poses an important question about how the donor countries should position themselves and deeply consider what national interests are at play when doing stabilisation. An answer is urgently needed in order to counter the perception of Western donors acting as 'helicopter parents' and in effect not actually addressing the problem at hand.[45]

What do stabilisation targets want?

The 'helicopter-parenting model' has allowed Western donors to occupy an "intermediate" position between engagement and disengagement. The effect is that thorny questions have not been sufficiently addressed. For example, the question of priorities should be pursued has been partly offloaded to Sahelian states under the mantra of local ownerships (e.g. a dynamic visible also in the recent EU Gulf of Guinea project where each country receives two consultants to understand and support local needs).

Yet another fundamental question is whether external actors actually have the tools and power to influence processes in countries with high levels of insecurity? Can outside actors help to rebuild the social contract and influence the perceptions of people in their state and their authorities? The case of the Central Sahel (as Afghanistan perhaps showed in a different context) shows that the answer seems to be negative.

A key problem is that the Western approach and goals do not always match the priorities of Sahelian governments. Consider for example migration. Europe's interest in the region has been among others a desire to curbing migration (perceived as a key threat to the EU). But this priority is perceived differently by governments in the Sahel; migration is not seen as a security threat but as a regular process of movement of people.[46] Instead, for governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger the real problem is not migration but displacement. For them addressing internal displacement is part of their conception of stabilisation; the return of IDPs to regions of origin is key to repopulating areas left empty after violent incursions and counter the depopulation strategy pursued by non-state armed groups.[47]

For example, governments in the Sahel have sought to start large operations for the return of displaced persons. Although the poor security situation has blocked the implementation of

43 Unpublished study on stabilisation in the Sahel prepared by Clingendael Institute.

44 https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/hundreds-join-anti-france-protest-burkina-faso-capital-2023-01-20/.

45 Roger Mac Ginty, "Against Stabilization", Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, November 2012.

46 ECOWAS, "Protocol A/P/.1/5/79 Relating to free movement of persons, residence and establishment", 29 May 1979.

47 Ekaterina Golovko and Alina Fakhry, "Sahel: Why stabilization efforts should address internal displacement", April 2023. https://www.clingendael.org/publication/sahel-stabilisation-efforts-should-address-internal-displacement.

these return plans or has interfered with actual return initiatives, return initiatives continue to multiply.[48] Interesting, these return policies are often paired with some national effort to strengthen the protection of IDPs. All three central Sahelian countries – Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali – are engaged in adopting and implementing national strategies and approaches to assistance and protection of IDPs.[49]

4. Recommendations

This brief joins criticism that stabilisation efforts in the central Sahel are plagued by a variety of problems. It points with many others to the lack of a common understanding of stability and stabilisation among key actors. This approach has led to difficulties in distinguishing between stabilisation efforts and traditional development efforts, resulting in unclear priorities.

Yet, it also seeks to make two additions. First, that programming tends to focus on short-term and often times technical approaches. Western donors have prioritised infrastructural and capacity-building activities, such as training state security forces, constructing new gendarmerie posts and setting up courts in rural areas. The underlying assumption has been an effort to enable the return of the state or – where it is present – strengthen it. Yet, these initiatives fail to address the politics of stabilisation, i.e. understanding what kind of the state should return and how it can be reformed to assure that old problems do not resurface. Tempting as it may be, as outputs can be present as success, technical solutions cannot solve political problems. It remains one of the major gaps in stabilisation by external actors.

Second, that the Western approach to stabilisation in the Sahel has (perhaps unintentionally) led to donor holding the intermediate space between the desire to enable locally led initiatives and the need to also have a role in decisions (which has taken the form of concentration on technical problems and leaving political problems to governments). But in reality this has led to a form of 'helicopter parenting' where local ownership often was more of a paper exercise than a practice.

In a context where a number of new 'stabilisation' activities are popping up in the coastal states, it is time for a deeper reflection how these initiatives can be better framed. The following five recommendations are meant to help steer that discussion.

1. Address tensions more heads-on: what state should return? The return of the state is not a technical solution. As a concept laying at the basis of the stabilisation strategies, it should have behind a clear vision of what kind of the state should return and how this process will take place. The return of the state and the decision on how to do so cannot take place without the involvement of the authorities, civil society and civilian populations of the countries targeted. This should be accompanied by a strategy to address any mismatches between donor and government priorities.

2. A much clearer expression of real interests that guide support. There is a strong need to define actual strategic interests by the donor governments rather than subscribing to lofty ideas that in reality will not guide the efforts. Having clearly defined interests will allow for better quid-pro-quo's. Moreover, in a time where equal partnerships are the new buzzword for

48 In practice, return has proved more complicated. The first operations carried out in Mali and Niger showed that the security situation did not meet the conditions for sustainable return. Many of the returned IDPs left the area again once military convoys were gone. Military presence also attracted attention and made returnees potentially more vulnerable to armed and criminal groups present in the area, particularly in Mali. In these cases, returns have created more displacement than stabilisation.

49 Mali's 2020 "plan for the return and reinstallation of internally displaced persons, refugees, and for the stabilisation of return areas" aims to return 80% of all IDPs and refugees to their regions of origin by 2026. In 2021, Niger decided on a policy to return some 130,000 IDPs. The return of refugees is also on the table. Back in 2014, Mali, Niger and the UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement for the return of Malian refugees from Niger. More recently, Niger and Nigeria agreed on the return of over 100,000 Nigerian refugees from Southern Niger.

engagement with 'Africa', donors must find ways to take into account the priorities of the governments. But this can be done if own interests are more clearly defined in order to align priorities with national governments.

3. Modesty. Western partners have to engage with the Sahel and littoral states with more modesty. This means calibrating interventions to local contexts, include the priorities of populations, West African governments, along with their own priorities. The key point is to accept the fact that intervention by external actors has its limitations. Understanding these limitations and considering what possibilities remain for collaboration should be the point of departure.

4. Helicopter parenting has to end. Projects that emphasise local ownership must rethink the power relations between donors and communities and strive to move away from a hierarchical relationship where communities or Sahelian governments have a role in setting up the agenda. Communities need to be included at all stages of project design and implementation to be able to influence the process.

5. Context, context, context. Stabilisation activities, both strategic and practical, need to be based on a thorough political analysis and understanding of context. Conflict analysis needs to consider in detail what specific interests are at play for the different parties to the conflict they engage with, including the state, civilian populations, violent extremists.

About the Clingendael Institute
Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

www.clingendael.org
info@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

@clingendaelorg
The Clingendael Institute
The Clingendael Institute
clingendael_institute
Clingendael Institute
Newsletter

About the authors

Ekaterina Golovko is a Research Fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. Her work focuses on migration, migration governance and organized crime in West Africa and the Sahel.

Kars de Bruijne is the Head of the Sahel Program and a Senior Research Fellow with the Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit.