



## ***Planning from the Future***

Component 2. The Contemporary Humanitarian Landscape:  
Malaise, Blockages and Game Changers

Case Study:  
Regional Humanitarian Challenges in the Sahel

Antonio Donini  
Giulia Scalettaris

April 2016

## Contents

Acronyms.....	iii
Planning from the Future—the Project.....	2
Component 2—The Humanitarian Landscape Today.....	2
Methods and limitations.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	3
1. Background and Context.....	3
The nature of the crisis.....	3
Major stakeholders.....	6
States.....	6
Regional actors.....	6
International organizations and INGOs.....	7
Civil society organizations.....	7
Conflict actors.....	7
Transnational criminal networks.....	7
Main donors and funding.....	8
OCHA FTS data on humanitarian funding.....	8
2. Major Findings and Themes.....	9
a. A peripheral region of intervention.....	9
b. Development and humanitarian action: An uncomfortable coexistence.....	10
c. A humanitarian system in constant expansion, polarization and proceduralization . . .	13
. . . in which local actors have only a minimal role.....	14
d. Declining field craft.....	16
e. Politicization, securitization, and geopolitics.....	18
f. Humanitarian architecture: The regional approach.....	20
g. Humanitarian architecture: Leadership, coordination, and the role of OCHA.....	22
h. MINUSMA integrated mission: Blockages and malaises.....	24
i. Upholding peoples’ needs or organizations’ mandates?.....	26
3. So What? Lessons Learned and Implications for Humanitarian Action.....	28
References.....	33
Notes.....	36

## Acronyms

ACF	Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger)
ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
ADB	African Development Bank
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission in Mali
AGHRYMET	Agriculture, Hydrology, Meteorology Research Centre
AGIR	Global Alliance for Resilience initiative
AQIM	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
ASG	Assistant Secretary General
AU	African Union
BCEAO	Banque centrale des états de l’Afrique de l’ouest
CAR	Central African Republic
CILSS	Comité inter-états pour la lute contre la sécheresse au Sahel
DFID	Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DRR	disaster risk reduction
ECHO	European Union Humanitarian Office
ECOWARN	Early Warning and Response Network
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator
EU	European Union
FIC	Feinstein International Center at Tufts University
FONGIM	Forum des ONG Internationales au Mali
FTS	(OCHA) Financial Tracking Service
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
GTAH	Groupe technique aide humanitaire
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
HC	UN Humanitarian Coordinator
HOO	Head of the OCHA Office
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
HPG/ODI	Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute
HQ	headquarters
IASC	Inter Agency Standing committee
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICVA	International council of Voluntary Agencies
IDMC	International Displacement Monitoring Center
IDP	internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
INSO	International NGO Security Office
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPI	International Policy Institute
ISP	internally stuck person
MINUSMA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NNGO	National NGO
OCDE/OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OFDA	Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance
PFF	Planning From the Future
RC	UN Resident Coordinator
RHC	UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator
SRP	Strategic Response Plan
SRSG	UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDG	UN Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHAS	UN Humanitarian Air Services
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHQ	UN headquarters
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISS	UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel
UNODC	UN Office for Drugs and Crime
UNOWA	UN Office for West Africa
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

## **Planning from the Future—the Project**

Kings College (London), The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute (HPG/ODI) in London and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (FIC) are partnering on a 15-month research project “**Planning from the Future: Crisis, Challenge, Change in Humanitarian Action.**” The research looks at the past, present and future of humanitarian action:

- HPG leads the analysis of the blockages in the past and how these have led to changes in the humanitarian architecture (Component 1).
- FIC identifies the key blockages and game changers in the humanitarian landscape today—and at urgent measures to reform it that could immediately be taken (Component 2).
- Kings College looks at the future and asks whether improvements contemplated today will be adequate to meet the growing vulnerabilities, dimensions, and dynamics of humanitarian crises in the longer term (Component 3).
- The three partners will then come together to provide a synthesis of their findings and recommendations in a final report to be issued in early 2016 (Component 4).

## **Component 2—The Humanitarian Landscape Today**

Despite impressive growth, institutionalization and professionalization the humanitarian system is facing an existential crisis. While time-tested tools, funds, and capacities are readily available, the system has succumbed to a widespread malaise and is not delivering. Recent crises from Afghanistan to Somalia, Haiti, Sri Lanka and Pakistan as well as current emergencies—Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic, among other less visible crises, question the very foundations of humanitarianism and of the galaxy of institutions that pursue humanitarian goals. The intractable nature of many crises and the instrumental use of humanitarian action to cover up for the political failures of the so-called international community are leading to a growing realization that the humanitarian system as presently constituted is not fit for purpose—and growing dissonance about what the purpose should be.

As part of component 2, FIC is producing a series of papers that capitalize on recent or on-going research. These include Case Studies that analyze blockages and game changers affecting humanitarian action in recent crises—and what these crises tell us about the state of the humanitarian enterprise. FIC is also preparing background papers on emerging or under-researched policy, operational or systemic issues that need to be better understood because of how they affect the changing humanitarian landscape.

The Sahel case raises a number of questions for the future of humanitarian action. These are detailed in the case study that follows. They include the difficulties inherent in tackling a complex regional crisis with a mix of seemingly intractable structural, developmental,

humanitarian, and political components now exacerbated by the emergence of violent conflict and counter-terrorism agendas in parts of the region. The size and diversity of the region, the mix of factors that generate humanitarian needs and the diverse analyses of key stakeholders involved present huge challenges for humanitarian actors.

### **Methods and limitations**

This report is based on a visit by Antonio Donini and Giulia Scalettari to Dakar, Bamako, and Niamey in late October and early November 2015. Fifty-nine interviews were held with individuals and small groups of informants in the field; additional context interviews were held in Geneva and Paris. Informants included senior and mid-level UN officials (at both the regional and national levels), and representatives from the Red Cross Movement, international NGOs, national or local NGOs, and donors as well as a small number of government officials involved in humanitarian response. Information was also gathered through analysis of reports, news sources, and academic literature. The findings presented here are largely based on the perceptions of the interviewees who were all part of or working with the organized humanitarian system. Given the short time spent in the region (about two weeks), it was not possible to interview affected groups or visit sites outside the capital cities. The converging (or sometimes diverging) views were used to develop a “picture” which, to the extent possible, was triangulated with other sources of data (literature review, aid agency reports, and conversations with Sahel experts).

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank all those who gave of their time to answer the questions of the research team and, in particular, the heads of OCHA offices in the three countries visited, and their staff, for their logistical support and their crucial help in providing access to a range of key informants.

## **1. Background and Context**

### **The nature of the crisis**

Originally referring to “the shore” of the Sahara (Arabic: *sahil*), the Sahel is a region of Africa that stretches in a 4,000 km band from Senegal on the west coast to Chad in the east. The Sahel is defined by the United Nations to include Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.<sup>1</sup> Despite the presence of natural resources—including hydrocarbons, uranium, and gold, especially in rural and border areas—these countries still feature among the world’s least developed. In 2015 Chad, Mali and Niger were among the 10 countries with the lowest Human Development Index (UNDP 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Generalizing about the Sahel is difficult; important peculiarities cross national and local realities. However, common factors exist that justify a regional approach. Beside the colonial heritage,

climate is one of the main structural factors affecting the whole region. Characterised by high temperatures and low rainfall, the Sahel is cyclically hit by severe droughts, with the most recent peaks in 2012 and 2005. This explains persistent high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition throughout the region. Drought is compounded by changing climatic conditions, reducing forest cover and precipitating desertification. Livelihoods, based mainly on agriculture and pastoralism, are highly fragile and vulnerable to market and food price fluctuations. In addition, the Sahel faces major and recurrent outbreaks of infectious diseases, such as meningitis, polio and cholera, which present significant challenges for weak health-care systems. The Sahel region is also prone to natural disasters, especially flooding. Demography is a further key issue: population growth in the Sahel is among the world's highest. At current rates, its population is likely to balloon in the next 25 years to nearly a quarter of a billion people. The population of Niger—with an average of 7.6 births per female—will double in 15 years while the population in Mali is growing at a slightly lower rate (May 2014). The population remains mainly rural, but accelerated, uncontrolled urbanisation is eroding traditional lifestyles as cities grow and rural residents leave in search for jobs (OECD 2014, ICG 2015a).

Structural poverty is compounded by weak governance. Corruption and political instability—coupled with the inability of states to deliver basic services such as effective policing, justice, access to water, affordable health care and education—have resulted in a widening gap in state-society relations. A booming youth population coupled with widespread disillusionment with the state, fuelled by poverty, lack of education, and jobs make the region vulnerable to illicit trafficking and organized crime. The historic trade routes across the Sahara appeal to criminal networks: the terrain is harsh, thinly populated, and extremely difficult to control. Cross-border criminal activities, such as trafficking in drugs, persons, weapons, and cigarettes, have become entrenched in the past two decades (Lacher 2012) and are estimated to generate \$3.8 billion annually (ICG 2015a). Since the early 2000s, moreover, transnational jihadist movements have penetrated the region, nesting in local movements, with the objective of building a sanctuary in the Sahara. In the wake of the Libyan crisis, which resulted in an outflow of arms and fighters, the number of active armed groups has been growing. The main groups are MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa), AQIM (Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb), Ansar Dine, and more recently Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin (IPI 2012, ICG 2015). Their activities are transnational in scale, contribute to destabilizing the region, and trigger displacement. Migration across the Sahara often relies on the same networks responsible for drugs and weapons smuggling (UNODC 2011, Werz and Conley 2012, World Bank Group 2014).

In sum, the Sahel is rapidly changing. Until the early 2000s, it was on the margins of geopolitical interest and of humanitarian action and debate. The emergence of conflict, the protracted and intractable nature of the structural issues, the weakness of governance and the emergence of strong non-state armed and non-armed actors—whether fundamentalist or irredentist—as well as migration and transnational criminal networks have brought the Sahel center stage, especially after the fall of the Gaddafi regime.

Mali is the major conflict-affected country in the region. The groups active in the north of Mali arose, on the one hand, from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, former Algerian Armed Islamic Group). On the other hand, they built on the traditional Tuareg resentment vis-à-vis the Malian state, which became more violent as fighters and sophisticated weapons flowed in following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. This boosted the lingering sense of political exclusion and tensions between northern population groups and the ruling southern elite. Following a coup by junior army officers in March 2012, armed groups (MNLA, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine) capitalized on the lack of leadership and took control of two-thirds of the Malian territory, triggering both internal and international displacement. A French intervention in January 2013 contained their expansion. It was followed by the establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission. In spite of a peace agreement in May 2015, low-level conflict continues (ICG 2015b). Water, health, and education services in the north have been disrupted, and large numbers of people are still displaced internally or in neighboring Mauritania and Niger.

The situation in the Lake Chad region where conflict has intensified since 2013 is also cause for concern. While the Boko Haram insurgency seems to be on the back foot in Nigeria, instability has spread to southern Niger and the Lake Chad area. Boko Haram cross-border raids into neighboring Niger and around Lake Chad as well as the presence of Nigerian, Chadian and, reportedly, Western militaries have triggered massive population movements (2.6 million people are displaced according to OCHA). These include Nigerien citizens who had migrated to Nigeria and returning to southern Niger (fleeing both Boko Haram and the Nigerian military intervention), Nigerien and Chadian fishermen communities in the islands on Lake Chad (already affected by cycles of drought and the shrinking lake and now displaced by Boko Haram militants seeking sanctuary there and the allegedly heavy-handed Niger-army strategy of clearing the islands of civilians to facilitate counter insurgency activities), and settled communities from southern Niger (moving northwards to towns away from the conflict area). Diffa, the capital of the poorest region in the poorest country in the world (OCHA 2015), was struggling to cope with the influx. Access for aid agencies had become difficult. Most observers felt that the security situation in the area was likely to further deteriorate.

The situation in the Sahel has been described as “a perfect sandstorm” in which discrete and inter-related factors coalesce into a complex multidimensional crisis (ICG 2015a). Structural, chronic, and acute factors—often made worse by the failures of development strategies of the past and the governance weaknesses of the present—compete for the attention of donors and aid agencies. As will be discussed below (section b.), one of the difficulties in understanding the nature of the crisis is that it can be viewed from both a developmental and a humanitarian perspective. This leads to tensions in strategy development and around who should be the lead in addressing, for example, the nutrition/food security aspects of the crisis. Other aspects are more clearly identifiable as man-made: conflict and its displacement consequences in Mali and Chad, which require a humanitarian response. Migration issues fall somewhere in-between: so-called economic migrants are not a humanitarian issue per se, but they become a caseload of

humanitarian concern when crossing conflict zones or when they are abused by smugglers, armed groups or militaries, or abandoned in the desert.

## **Major stakeholders**

The Sahel is a complex region with an array of state and non-state actors. As mentioned above, there is no agreement on the geographic contours of the Sahel. For the purposes of this study we consider Sahel as the mainly francophone band of countries south of the Sahara from Senegal to Chad. Long considered a backwater from a geopolitical perspective, it is now increasingly taking center stage because of a mix of factors perceived to be potential threats to peace, security, and social stability beyond the Sahel region. These transnational factors include insurgent groups and counter-terrorism activities, the spread of imported Islamic fundamentalist ideologies, international drug and people trafficking networks, and migration and smuggling networks, in addition to the structural issues related to climate change, desertification, endemic poverty, galloping population growth and weak governance.

## **States**

The Sahel countries share the French colonial heritage (except The Gambia) and the features of a common currency and lingua franca. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania are characterized by huge structural problems that seem largely intractable, poor development performance, weak governance and administrative structures especially in outlying regions, fraying social contract between governments and populations, heavy reliance on foreign development and humanitarian aid, irredentist sentiments or rebellions (the Tuareg movements), and radical Islamic insurgencies (particularly in Mali but now also in the Lake Chad region and Burkina Faso). Given its colonial history, in the past France tended to be seen as the main actor and interlocutor for the governments of the region. The traditional patron-client relationship between France and the countries of the region is loosening as France's influence diminishes and other key Western donors—the US and the EU in particular—step in more boldly (ICG 2015a).

## **Regional actors**

There is a plethora of regional intergovernmental institutions dealing with the common currency (BCEAO), development and now, increasingly, political and humanitarian issues (ECOWAS), desertification and food security (AGHRYMET, Club du Sahel, CILSS), management of river basins, etc. A more recent phenomenon is the appointment of regional envoys by the UN, the EU and major donor countries. These deal both with political and security issues (UNOWA), coherent and integrated strategy (Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for the Sahel), coordination of humanitarian action (the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator; ICVA) and a range of technical issues.

## **International organizations and INGOs**

The panoply of UN specialized development agencies and major INGOs has been present in the Sahel since soon after decolonization. Humanitarian agencies started showing up during the 1980s drought and more recently in the early 2000s to work on issues of nutrition and food security, among others. With the increased level of conflict and consequent displacement in the region, the humanitarian presence has been beefed up and/or agencies—both UN and INGO—that were doing primarily development work have redirected their activities toward humanitarian action.

## **Civil society organizations**

Sufi moderate “confrèries” have been an important traditional social support network. They are now caught between the proselytizing of radical Wahabi clerics from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf and the suspicion of the states that accuse them of radical sympathies. Because of state repression, young unemployed youth are being drawn towards more radical, if not violent, anti-government groups (ICG 2015a). The national NGO sector is relatively undeveloped in the Sahel but growing rapidly. Local groups work mainly as implementing partners for international agencies; only a few are self-sustaining or able to attract funding from international sources. Nevertheless, many local NGOs and CBOs are emerging and are occupying spaces where international agencies cannot or will not go.

## **Conflict actors**

Tuareg nationalist movements vying for a separate state or more autonomy have been active in the northern reaches of the region for decades. Their opportunistic alliance with Al Qaeda-linked movements (in particular AQIM) has led to open conflict in northern Mali in which insurgents captured large swathes of territory. This in turn triggered a French military intervention, followed by an AU and then UN peace operation. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has now spilled over into southern Niger and the Lake Chad basin including northern Cameroon. The national militaries are seen as unable to contain the various conflicts brewing across the Sahel. The US and other Western militaries are discreetly beefing up their presence and reportedly participating in French-coordinated counterterrorism campaigns.

## **Transnational criminal networks**

Further complicating the picture, mafia-style drug networks have begun operating in the region, which has become a conduit for cocaine from Latin America to Europe. The activities of some groups also extend to weapons and people trafficking including of women (for sexual exploitation) and children (for begging) in the coastal Maghreb (UNODC 2011). The collapse of the Gaddafi regime has also boosted weapons and people trafficking activities. Migration routes across the Sahara often overlap with the criminal and jihadist nodes and routes adding to the dangers and risks faced by migrants.

## Main donors and funding

The largest multilateral donors to the Sahel region are the United States and the European Union. Aid levels increased significantly during the early 2000s, with a focus on tackling food insecurity and nutrition. As the tables below show, the 2012 drought marked a sudden increase of humanitarian funding for the region. The renewed attention by donors was triggered by fear that the drought might have the same devastating effects as in Somalia. The spillover of the Libyan crisis and the conflict in Mali and in the Chad region attracted additional injections of humanitarian aid.

### OCHA FTS data on humanitarian funding

As the tables below show, funding has dramatically increased after 2010 in Niger and after 2012 in Mali because of drought and conflict, respectively. Nevertheless, the gap between needs and available funds is huge. In the last couple of years, humanitarian appeals have been funded at less than 50 percent.

Year	Funding received (USD)	Top recipient countries	Main donors	Unmet requirements (USD)
2015	some 872 million	Mali, Chad, Niger		some 1,090 million = 55%
2014	some 864 million	Mali, Chad, Niger		some 1,080 million = 55%
2013	some 1086 million	Chad, Niger, Mali	EC, US, Japan, UK	some 620 million = 36%
2012	some 965 million	Chad, Niger, Mali	US, EC, Canada Australia, Sweden, UK	

Source: <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-sahel>, consulted January 11, 2016

Year	Funding received (USD)	Main donors
2015	some 202 million	EC, US, Canada, Saudi Arabia
2014	some 380 million	US, EC, Germany, Japan, Sweden
2013	some 368 million	EC, Japan, US, UK, Sweden
2012	some 220 million	US, EC, Sweden, Germany
2011	some 28 million	US, EC Belgium, Germany
2010	some 17 million	EC, UK, Luxembourg, Spain
2009	some 17 million	EC, US, UK
2008	some 14 million	EC Spain, Saudi Arabia
2007	some 14 million	EC, Saudi Arabia, US
2006	some 14 million	US, France, Germany

Source : <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-emergencyCountryDetails&cc=mli>, consulted January 11, 2016

Year	Funding received (USD)	Main donors
2015	some 270 million	US, EC, Japan, Germany, Sweden
2014	some 273 million	US, EC, Japan, UK
2013	some 343 million	EC, US, Japan, UK
2012	some 434 million	US, EC, Australia
2011	some 177 million	US, EC
2010	some 367 million	US, EC, UK
2009	some 60 million	EC, US
2008	some 65 million	EC, US
2007	some 48 million	EC, UK, US
2006	some 78 million	EC, US, France

Source: <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=emerg-emergencyCountryDetails&cc=ner&yr=2006>, consulted January 11, 2016

## 2. Major Findings and Themes

Component 2 of “Planning from the Future” is organized around the notion of “game changers” and “blockages.” “Game changers” here refers to major factors that emerged from the crisis or were relatively new—factors to which the international humanitarian community is either unaccustomed or ill-prepared to deal with, or both—that underpin or trigger a crisis, or emerge in the response to the crisis. “Blockages” is a slightly more elusive concept—it can refer to things that are blocking humanitarian action in a given context, but it also can refer to longer-standing problems that have yet to be dealt with—and which in some manner significantly shape either the crisis or the response. The following are the main factors that fall into those categories but, as will be seen, some of these contain elements of both game changers and blockages.

### a. A peripheral region of intervention

In spite of the heightened interests of donors, the Sahel (and more generally the whole of West Africa) remains a relatively neglected region of intervention for the aid system, compared to the larger crises in Africa (DRC, CAR, Somalia, South Sudan) and in the world (Syria). Thus, with the exception of the regional approach discussed below, within the global humanitarian system operations in the Sahel region are characterized more by traditional concepts and operational procedures, and less as a laboratory of strategic thinking and operational innovation.

The peripheral position of the Sahel for the humanitarian system is apparent first by the budgets invested in the region. Total funding for the Sahel is in the USD 800–900 million range and appeals are consistently undersubscribed (see table 1 above).<sup>3</sup> According to several informants, this is compounded by widespread difficulties in staffing aid agency offices and operations, especially in conflict zones like CAR, northern Nigeria, and now the Lake Chad area. This is in part due to a language issue, as this is a Francophone working environment. More generally, interviews show that operations in the Sahel are perceived by many humanitarian staff as not very

prestigious or visible. Several informants noted a striking difference in terms of professionalism of humanitarian staff and efficiency of the aid system between West Africa and East Africa (an Anglophone setting where the humanitarian system has a more long-standing presence and critical mass). Several other informants (local and international, African and non-African origin, NGO and UN staff) had circulated among operations in francophone Africa, giving the impression of a francophone “African pocket” within the aid system.

Among the reasons that might explain the relatively peripheral position of the Sahel within the humanitarian system is the marked preference of most donors to frame problems and solutions in developmental rather than humanitarian terms (see section b. below). In addition, compared to other regions of the world, the geopolitical interests of the main donors have been, until recently, less clear-cut. The region has remained relatively sheltered from high geopolitical competition. In fact, most donors have long considered the region as a French zone of influence, where France had the main responsibility to intervene and invest, and where it was not necessary or advisable to step in too boldly. The emergence of armed conflict in Mali, northern Nigeria, and now Niger and Chad are changing this. The so called Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and migration issues are now hotly debated topics among donors and international organizations, as illustrated by the large number of reports published on these topics in the past years.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, interviews with USAID and other European donors indicated that many countries hoped that France would have a more incisive foreign policy in the region.

Finally, the chronic nature of many problems—drought, desertification, structural underdevelopment, weak governance—make the Sahel a difficult context for aid organizations. In general, interviewees for this study as well as literature reviewed show that there is not much optimism among donors and aid agencies that a step change on these intractable issues is possible. The feeling is that the development strategies of the past have failed and the international system may be just able to contain—not solve—these issues (as for example in the case of nutrition). This also leads to polarization in the perspectives of development versus humanitarian actors (see section b. below, also Olivier de Sardan 2005, Saqalli 2008).

## **b. Development and humanitarian action: An uncomfortable coexistence**

The Sahel is a particularly interesting context for looking at the relationships between humanitarian and development aid. Food security, malnutrition, and epidemics—three among the main problems in the Sahel—can be framed in both terms. Conceptualizing the lines between emergency and non-emergency, chronic crisis and acute crisis, becomes a matter of interpretation. In spite of the recent attempts to bridge the so-called gap between humanitarian action and development, a spirit of competition still prevails and the whole region remains a challenging arena for humanitarian agencies.

Since the '70s, the Sahel has been a traditional region of intervention for development agencies. These agencies worked in close relationship with the newly independent States, helping them to

set up development planning mechanisms and programs to tackle structural underdevelopment issues including, particularly after the drought in the 1970s, food security (mainly through food aid) and malnutrition. Humanitarian issues were not high on the international agenda. Most UN agencies and INGOs focused on development and redirected resources to relief activities when needed (e.g., in times of drought). Purely humanitarian actors (the Red Cross Movement, MSF, and a few smaller NGOs) arrived on the scene more recently in order to help cope with specific crises, such as the 2005 nutrition crisis in Niger (Olivier de Sardan 2011) and have been expanding their presence since the outbreak of conflict and displacement in Mali and the Lake Chad region. Many informants noted that humanitarian agencies (both UN and NGO) still struggle to find their place in the aid market. Currently the undisputed contexts where humanitarian agencies are present as the main aid actors are pockets corresponding to on-going conflicts: Mali and Lake Chad (and of course northern Nigeria and CAR, which are not covered by this report). In conflict areas, the situation is considered by most actors as unequivocally “humanitarian” and one in which development actors do not have the capacity to respond.

Most donors—with the exception of ECHO—and the governments of the region prefer to frame the issues in development rather than humanitarian terms.<sup>5</sup> Sahelian states do not want to be considered as recipients of humanitarian aid but as emerging countries; most donors tend to consider the humanitarian approach as too short term and after a long engagement in development action, a switch to humanitarian action is seen as a step backward. Also, due to the competition for funding, development actors feel challenged by the arrival of humanitarian agencies. The fact that development actors and rationales have been deployed for decades in the region, without much success in tackling structural problems, does not seem to shake the legitimacy of the development discourse of major donors, development agencies, and states in the region. This tension boiled over at the time of the nutrition crisis in Niger in 2005 and echoes of what was then termed a “shocking antagonism” between humanitarian and development actors (Trench et al. 2007) were still perceptible at the time of the visit.

This situation has triggered attempts to integrate development and humanitarian activities at the UN level and among donors. The UN strategy illustrates this as humanitarian and development aid always appear together, and one of the three explicit objectives of the strategy is “integrating development and humanitarian interventions to build resilience.”<sup>6</sup> The regional strategy developed by OCHA is another case in point: Of its three strategic objectives, only one concerns life-saving activities; the two others concern data collection and analysis on risk and vulnerability and supporting vulnerable populations to better cope with shocks (OCHA 2014:2), i.e., objectives that can be shared with development actors. And indeed, interviews in Dakar indicated that behind the creation of the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator function (see section g. below), there was initially, the idea of a strategic alliance between humanitarian and development agencies. Interviews however indicated that UNDP was lukewarm to the creation of the new position.

As elsewhere, resilience is the new buzzword.<sup>7</sup> This notion has become the key concept for international aid in the Sahel. It has become so popular *inter alia* because it is presented as a bridge between development and humanitarian approaches. As in other countries,<sup>8</sup> there is much confusion on the meaning of the term. Interviews showed that NGOs at the more Dunantist end of the spectrum were wary of resilience as they saw this as an attempt by development actors to tap into humanitarian resources. But development actors and government officials were critical of the focus of humanitarians on short-term life-saving interventions (e.g., nutrition) and their reluctance to work in an integrated manner with government departments.

Despite these attempts to create synergies, on the ground the dialogue between humanitarian and development actors remains difficult because of the differences in rationale, funding mechanisms, coordination mechanisms, modes of intervention, and organizational culture. The arrival of humanitarian actors has prompted several development NGOs, like Oxfam for example, to foster a process of internal diversification so as to be able to offer also humanitarian assistance. NGO informants mentioned that these differences, and in particular those concerning funding mechanisms, hampered coordination and dialogue even between departments of the same organization. Moreover, the proliferation of coordination mechanisms for humanitarian action (clusters) and development (sectoral groups chaired by the government), as well as donor-run coordination fora, further complicates the humanitarian-development relationship.

The situation in Mali exemplified the challenges that humanitarian agencies face when they enter an arena traditionally occupied by development actors. Until 2012, very few humanitarian agencies were operating in the country. The main UN actors were WFP and UNICEF and the main NGOs doing humanitarian work were ACF, Oxfam, and MSF. Most of the funds transited through the government. At the beginning of 2012, the deterioration of security prompted the withdrawal from the north of most NGOs operating there. At the same time, OCHA and humanitarian agencies and NGOs arrived in the country and established new coordination mechanisms (clusters) that out-flanked pre-existing ones. Most bilateral development funds were cut and diverted to humanitarian actors.

While the continuation of the hostilities in the north explains donors' on-going demand for NGOs able and willing to operate in the north, most actors wish to keep humanitarian assistance confined and temporary—an ad hoc intervention until security is restored. The donors, the Malian government, and the UN mission hope that the 2015 peace agreement will pave the way to stability. Labelling the current period as a phase of transition says that the peace process is progressing and the return to old development mechanisms and programs will indicate that the crisis has been overcome. Moreover, the Malian government—for which international development funds have been a consistent budgetary component since independence—nourishes a certain hostility *vis-à-vis* humanitarian aid because, contrary to development funds, humanitarian funds tend to bypass the national administration.

In Bamako, this polarization was palpable: There was a sense in interviews that humanitarian actors were seen as “intruders” by some of their development counterparts and that humanitarian and development aid were considered as mutually exclusive rather than complementary. Most informants reported a de facto geographical divide: The north is the field for humanitarian aid while the south remains the region where development actors continue to operate. This divide only entrenches the spirit of competition that permeates interagency relationships in Bamako and the feeling among interviewees that humanitarian actors have to struggle to maintain a legitimate place in the country.

In Niger, the tension was more muted. Formally, aid is coordinated through the “Dispositif” (the government’s aid coordination mechanism). But conflict and displacement in the Lake Chad area, where the government presence is more military than civilian, are creating strains between the government, OCHA, and UNHCR on who should be in the lead in humanitarian situations resulting from conflict.

### **c. A humanitarian system in constant expansion, polarization and proceduralization . . .**

The processes of expansion and proceduralization that have deeply transformed the global humanitarian system during the past two decades are still underway. As elsewhere, in the Sahel the system is multi-layered, increasingly complex, and more and more articulated. Coordination and transaction costs are high: Inter-agency dynamics absorb a great deal of human and financial resources, costs, and strategic thinking.

Maintaining status, expanding the size of the organization or trying to enter the system become objectives per se. We observed:

- 1) The extension of the geographical coverage of the system: During the past ten years, the Sahel has become a region of intervention for humanitarian agencies as demonstrated by the recent arrival of OCHA and of dozens of humanitarian NGOs in Mali in 2012.
- 2) Major UN agencies and large INGOs are further expanding their coverage and size. For example, a medium-size INGO in the phase of expansion—like Intersos—is opening a regional office in Dakar to strategically position itself to intervene in the region as soon as a new crisis breaks out. Several NGOs that were already operating in the Sahel in the early 2000s are now diversifying their activities, adding a humanitarian component. A few large INGOs (such as Oxfam, Save the Children, MSF) have become very large complex structures: Capitalizing on their consolidated relations with donors, they tend toward global coverage.
- 3) New organizations and fora are created. The emergence of new actors is related to the creation of INGOs that try to enter the system and to the mushrooming of national NGOs given the growing demand of donors and international NGOs for local partners. At the

same time, the top-down nature of the system and its proceduralization create barriers to entry for new international and, especially, local agencies. As in other contexts, polarization continues to increase between large and small international NGOs and especially national NGOs. Donors prefer to fund the usual suspects, i.e., INGOs with a track record and with whom they have worked before. For example, Alima is an international NGO with headquarters in Dakar. Former MSF international staff created it a few years ago in reaction to the expansion and proceduralization of MSF. The organization is now well established and growing. Alima staff reported the difficulties they faced in entering the humanitarian market and becoming credible partners for mainstream donors. The support of MSF Switzerland was key to funding the first years of activities and to gaining ECHO's trust. Similarly, Alima's network of local partners benefits from the wide network of local staff who collaborated with MSF in the past decades.

The emergence of new actors, increasingly, also relates to the process of technical specialization of the system: Many newly established actors and fora have specific functions in the system not directly related to funding or aid delivery. This includes specialized mechanisms for coordination (OCHA, ICVA), provision of security expertise, or production of maps (see the REACH initiative launched by ACTED aimed at providing sophisticated maps to UN agencies and donors) as well as provision of quality and accountability services.

Moreover, management and decision-making chains are becoming longer, both within individual organizations and in the system as a whole, because the number of intermediaries has increased. The fact that the UN agencies remain the privileged partners of donors, the establishment of regional coordination hubs as well as the increased reliance on local implementing partners to deliver aid contribute to this process. Long organizational chains imply that every agency contributes its own expertise, but many resources get absorbed at each link in the chain. We heard several times the same concern regarding the huge difference between the initial money allocated by a donor and the quantity that actually reaches the field and, in particular, the huge share of costs absorbed by the UN agencies just to pass-through the funds. A further disadvantage of long chains of intermediaries is the risk of diluting and depersonalizing responsibilities: The longer the chain, the more procedures need to be respected, and the easier to hide behind procedures.

### **. . . in which local actors have only a minimal role**

Despite much talk of the localization of humanitarian action, in the Sahel as elsewhere, the cleavage between national and international NGOs is deep, revealing and crystallizing global power relations and inequalities in the aid system. Donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs are increasingly looking for local implementing partners as a way of ensuring access to insecure regions (like northern Mali or the Lake Chad region) and ensuring legitimacy among local recipients. At the same time, it is very difficult for local NGOs to gain direct access to

international humanitarian funds. Many international organizations' representatives mentioned that most local NGOs are neither accountable nor capable enough and lack strategic vision. On the other hand, several informants from local NGOs expressed frustration that to become actors in aid delivery, they had to learn how to become part of a highly regulated and bureaucratic system. They saw this as a vicious circle: Unless you have a track record, you cannot get international funds; unless you get international funds, you will not have a track record. The issue of the salary gap between international and national NGO staff was also raised several times.

The relationship of local NGOs with other actors in the system is mainly structured by the circulation of funding, which entails an implicit hierarchy: Local NGOs are given a pre-assigned and circumscribed role in the organizational chain and confined in the role of implementation rather than as strategic partners. The staff of local NGOs met in Dakar, Niamey, and Bamako expressed bitterness about the little leverage they had to influence the strategic reflections and the content of programs, or to contest them. African NGOs like OFADEC are expanding, becoming regional and direct partners for donors, but they are still an exception and hardly mitigate this polarization. Nevertheless, national civil society organizations are expanding across the Sahel. One of their strengths is that they can work in areas where internationals fear to tread. In the longer term, the increasing role and voice of national NGOs and CBOs could become a possible game changer and at least a partial alternative to the top-down international system.

The barriers to entry for local actors remain huge. National NGOs meeting in Mali and Niger regularly complain about their difficulty in receiving funds from international donors and, especially, that obtaining funds to develop their capacity is nearly impossible, as they can only access project funds for a specific activity as implementing partner for an international agency. In Niamey, we met with a very small local NGO that runs micro assistance programs for affected groups displaced by conflict in the Lake Chad region. They operate under the radar using bicycles and motorcycles rather than Land Cruisers, with no armed escorts and no logos. They reach areas that mainstream agencies cannot and provide life-saving assistance: tools so that displaced fishing communities can cultivate some land, basic medical assistance, small amounts of cash to buy food locally. This organization is run on a volunteer basis by a small group of professionals (a doctor, a nurse, a vet) from Niamey. They have no access to international funds or to official coordination structures. Because they have no official track record, no donor will even consider their funding requests. They have to rely on small contributions in cash from a network of middle class professionals and the business community in Niamey (and a few who send some money from abroad). Their volunteer spirit and commitment provided a telling contrast to the top-down and often-remote organized humanitarian system. These small-scale interventions are often more relevant for affected groups than those of the "official" humanitarian system (Olivier de Sardan 2005).

The humanitarian system increasingly relies on standards and procedures. Guidelines and standards set the frameworks for both internal activities and inter-agency relations. There are guidelines on everything. The head of office of a MSF section in Bamako mentioned that even

for MSF staff in the field, every decision is actually oriented by guidelines. Among the main drivers of this process of proceduralization, is the accountability criteria imposed by donors. Compliance with these criteria is a prerequisite for becoming competitive for funding. The large geographical coverage of many agencies and the related need to ensure internal coherence, the need to participate in coordination and quality assurance fora also foster standardization.

While compliance with established procedures is key to being part of the system, this process also leads to conformism and isomorphism and tends to stifle internal debate or criticism.

#### **d. Declining field craft**

One notable finding of this research is the extent to which large aid agencies are losing their field craft and are no longer operational. While the aid system expands, its center of gravity is moving further and further from the field. The forces that are more influential in shaping the system are the needs of headquarters and donors, where the flows of money and strategic orientations originate. Donors' and headquarters' demand for accountability, coherence, reporting, and data is a powerful driver that shapes the system indirectly, through the competition for funds. Thus the activities of many agencies and offices are turned upward, so as to ensure their survival, their relevance, and their expansion. The point for an NGO or for an office in the field is not only to do something meaningful on the ground, but also to be able to demonstrate the relevance of what they want to do to potential donors and portray themselves as credible actors to obtain funding. This entails developing and devoting increasing resources to non-operational activities such as communication, coordination, reporting, and demonstrating accountability to HQ and donors (rather than to beneficiaries). These activities are often becoming more crucial than fieldwork for the survival of an agency. This upward orientation is also reflected in the proliferation of more sophisticated data and reporting tools (e.g., the boom of investment in maps, remote sensing, and other sophisticated tools for data collection).

Field interviews confirmed that, as in other contexts, most UN agencies are no longer operational. UNHCR and UNICEF in particular are largely funders and coordinators of the work of their local partners. WFP is the only UN agency that maintains a real operational capacity on the ground. Large INGOs also work through longer chains of intermediaries and are often unable to send senior international staff to visit projects because of security and complicated logistics. As a result, and as in other fraught contexts,<sup>9</sup> the “field” is often seen through the eyes of local intermediaries that are not always treated with respect, or trusted. MSF and ICRC stand out as the international agencies most present in the field and that rely the least on remote management.

Demonstrating a strong and effective presence in the field is still key to being competitive vis-à-vis donors. However, this “field rhetoric” contrasts with the fact that within many agencies, fieldwork is not the most-valued activity. The field is considered more as the site of aid delivery than as key to strategic thinking and negotiation. This devaluation is reflected, inter alia, in staff management, as more-junior staff normally work in the field. In addition, a mere “presence”

acquired by opening an office may be sufficient to become competitive for funding but does not necessarily mean an effective intervention. In northern Mali, for instance, officially dozens of NGOs operate across the three northern provinces but, as a senior donor representative noted, most are concentrated in urban centers and have little actual presence on the ground.

Often consistency across countries and operations is valued more than a consistent presence in each single site. Consider for instance the high turnover of senior staff as well as the pre-eminence of horizontal knowledge (standards and procedures) over field knowledge (local languages and dynamics). The horizontal dimension is very influential for strategic thinking and resource allocation, as very often a country operation or a local program is assessed in a comparative perspective, i.e., against other operations and programs rather than in absolute terms.

An informant mentioned that the system continues to produce an “overcapacity,” a kind of expanding superstructure of expertise and procedures that is de facto irrelevant for field operations. There is a risk of a growing disconnect between what feeds this superstructure and the realities on the ground, which is amplified in insecure environments where verifying information produced by actors present in the field is very difficult. These trends have also damaged the capacity to build credibility and trust with local partners and communities.

Interviews with the representatives of NGOs operating in the north of Mali indicate that the NGO community considers showing independence and delivering high quality, needs-based services as key elements to ensure access to and legitimacy in the field. Independence is demonstrated either by counting on the reputation of the NGO (as in the case of MSF, which openly promotes its identity and logos on its vehicles and offices) or opting for a low profile and anonymity. Another strategy to ensure the delivery of aid in northern Mali consists in asking influential local actors, such as the Islamic Council, to mediate or recruiting local actors, such as the Malian Red Cross, as implementing partners.

A further, key strategy is the use of non-Caucasian expatriate staff to distance the organization from its Western identity, which in the Sahel is redolent of the former colonial power, or an occupying force, or a party to the conflict. This measure aims at increasing acceptance, facilitating the establishment of constructive dialogue with local populations, and decreasing visibility to reduce the risk of kidnapping. Most international staff present in the north of Mali are either African Francophones, or from Muslim countries. The extent to which this de-Westernizes the humanitarian system from below or simply results in a transfer of risk is as yet unclear.

Interviews with the members of one of the few NGOs that has been operating for a long time in the Gao region of northern Mali suggest that to ensure trust and respect among local populations, keeping a distance from military actors and adapting the social origin of the expatriate staff is not enough. According to these informants, a long-term engagement and a human, personal investment in each specific site is key to demonstrating commitment and to developing relationships of mutual respect. This goes together with a fine-grained knowledge of the local

context. Large agencies in the process of expansion, bureaucratization, and proceduralization are less and less able to ensure this. Humanitarian agencies tend to conceive their interventions in the rather mechanical terms of aid delivery and through security lenses. They tend to consider themselves as outside the picture and neglect the social, economic, and political transformations they trigger on local societies, economies, and governance (for example, the resources they bring through salaries, the political tensions triggered by the competition for resources, the introduction of new social and moral values).

Interviews carried out in Mali highlight that, indeed, the main element shaping how the local population perceives NGOs is money. INGOs are mainly seen as people who have money rather than as independent benefactors. This explains why INGOs are frequently victims of looting as well as the prevailing “opportunistic” attitude of affected groups that is often lamented by frustrated expatriate staff who would expect more respect and gratitude. In addition, the unfamiliarity of many local communities with the humanitarian project explains a generalized feeling of mistrust: vested interests or ulterior motives are often ascribed to NGOs. A further factor is a generalized feeling by non-Tuareg populations of being discriminated against because they are not Tuareg.

#### **e. Politicization, securitization, and geopolitics**

Since the '70s, the Sahel has traditionally been seen as a French zone of influence and responsibility. The geopolitical interest of the US and other EU countries started increasing after 9/11, as an area harboring potential terrorist threats increasingly relevant for international security. In 2005, the US launched the Trans Sahara Counterterrorist Strategy (Warner 2014). Counterterror policies intensified in the second decade of the 2000s, in the wake of the conflicts in Libya and Mali and now Nigeria and its spillover in the Lake Chad region. The diversion of Colombian-Mexican drug trafficking routes through the Sahel triggered an increased focus on counter-narcotics (Lacher 2012). The Sahel's increased geopolitical significance is reflected by the enhanced amount of international funds invested in the region and by the increased presence of the main donors (as evidenced by the new and much-enlarged US embassies in Dakar and elsewhere in the region)—and by the discreet but growing presence of Western military forces in the region.

Humanitarian funding has significantly increased since the early 2000s. However, it represents a small percentage of the funding invested in the region and remains comparatively much lower than that invested in counterterrorism and counter-narcotics—and more recently “counter-migration.” Other sectors and agencies, such as UNODC, have been impacted more directly by these geopolitical developments. The view from the field is that the politicization of humanitarian action is more indirect than direct. Unlike Somalia or Afghanistan, humanitarian actors do not feel they are strong-armed into supporting political agendas. Many humanitarian staff see these geopolitical changes positively: The rise of donor interest in the region is an opportunity for more funding rather than a constraint. Concern was aired more openly by long-term Sahel analysts

interviewed for this study, and by the most recent ICG report (ICG 2015a), who felt that support for corrupt or ineffective governments and crack-downs on non-armed forms of dissent or social organization (such as the Sufi confrères) will lead to further polarization between minorities and the states. The militarization of specific areas—northern Mali and the Lake Chad region in particular—is seen as further testing the social contract between the population and ineffective and distant governments and as a challenge for humanitarian access.

The second main geopolitical interest is the EU's desire to contain migration flows toward Europe. The idea that fostering development in countries of origin in West Africa and in the Sahel is a way to reduce migration to Europe has been increasingly popular among European policy-makers since the early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> The recent migration crisis in the Mediterranean and the growing importance of the eastern Mediterranean route have triggered renewed efforts aimed at containing flows and fighting illegal migration across the Sahara. A new EU 1.8 billion Euro trust fund on migration was established in late 2015 between the EU and the countries of the Sahel based on the unproven assumption that injections of development projects can staunch migration flows. The funds are largely earmarked for development, but ECHO will manage a small part of the money.

The IOM is perhaps the agency whose programs are most directly influenced by the EU desire to contain flows of people on the move. It is involved in programs aimed at enhancing the capacity of Sahelian states to control their international borders and manage migration flows, as well as in return programs. Migration-related projects implemented by other aid organizations in the Sahel are rare, given (inter alia) the difficulty of finding a common approach between aid organizations and their donors who are mainly interested in migration containment. OCHA's regional strategy deals only with forced displacement. The aim of the EU trust fund seems more to co-opt the governments of African countries into migration control and encouraging them to accept forced returns. Another possible objective of this initiative is to show European public opinion that the EU is reacting to the migration crisis.

Indirect influence does not mean no influence. The EU push on illegal migration impacts on the environment in which humanitarian agencies work and on the ways in which programs are conceived. For example, displacement resulting from conflict in the region is considered as a situation of forced migration demanding a humanitarian intervention, while trans-Saharan migration is considered as economic migration, regardless of the origin of people on the move and of the dangers of the route. The EU's influence is also evident in its support for the few types of programs for non-refugee populations that are currently implemented by humanitarian NGOs (focused mainly on assistance to deportees). The issue of the humanitarian needs of irregular migrants remains somewhat "taboo"—as some interlocutors have noted—and projects aimed at providing life-saving assistance in the desert are very limited (for example IOM has a presence in Agadez in northern Niger and, through local partners, provides some bare-bones assistance to people on the move). Moreover, the EU's containment wishes create an unfavorable environment

for new ideas and programs and hampers the acknowledgment of the potential detrimental side effects of border control programs not only for migrants but also for pastoralists and trade.

#### **f. Humanitarian architecture: The regional approach**

The emergence of regional approaches for the Sahel is a recent development. In 2012, the UN developed a regional strategy centered on three pillars (governance, security, resilience) and appointed a Special Envoy (UN 2013). Between 2012 and 2013, several organizations and donors—including the EU, the US, the UK, the African Union, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the World Bank, and the ADB—developed regional strategies and appointed special envoys (see for instance EU 2011, WB 2013, AU 2014). Regarding in particular the humanitarian sector, the first-ever regional humanitarian coordinator (RHC) was appointed in April 2012, and in 2013 OCHA launched a three-year regional strategy aimed at ensuring stronger coordination and coherence across the region (OCHA 2014). In the same period, the EU adopted the European Union-led Global Alliance for Resilience initiative (AGIR), while major donors such as ECHO and DFID developed their own internal regional strategies and ECOWAS adopted a “humanitarian policy and plan of action” (2012–17).

These various regional strategies are mostly compatible with one another, even though no internationally accepted definition of the contours of the “Sahel region” exists. Each organization defines the region differently according to its own needs, interests, and perceptions. However, five countries are at the heart of almost all of these strategies and initiatives: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (ISS 2015).

We can identify two main triggers of this impetus for regional approaches. First, the drought that hit eastern Sahel in 2012 generated an urgent requirement to address food security, so as to avoid the same devastating consequences that occurred in Somalia in 2011. Second, in the wake of the developments in Libya and Mali, these crises clearly appeared to have strong transnational ramifications and the potential to destabilize the entire region. These two factors match with a broader process of regionalization (internal restructuring) that many agencies (donors, UN agencies, and NGOs alike) were undertaking since the mid-2000s. West Africa is increasingly considered as a sub-region, with its hub in Dakar.

The function of the RHC is unique. For the moment, only two other similar positions created by OCHA exist, notably for the Syrian crisis and Yemen. Donors and other UN agency representatives appreciated the comprehensive regional approach catalyzed by the RHC because they recognized that many issues (from food to conflict) were transnational by nature, or in any case interlinked, and they were aware that such dynamics are difficult to grasp from single-country operational perspectives. UN agencies and NGOs representatives in Dakar mentioned that they found this function useful for advocacy and fund raising purposes, highlighting that the RHC’s action resulted in increased funding available for the region. A fundraising strategy for the region allows more freedom regarding fund allocations across the region, so that priority

countries and sectors benefited from funds that otherwise would have not been allocated to them. The RHC has also been effective in raising the profile of humanitarian issues related to conflict. Interviews with senior UN staff, including the current RHC, indicate that the focus of the function is shifting progressively to core humanitarian life-saving issues and that conflict is much higher on the agenda of the current incumbent—“at least 50 percent of my time”—than his predecessors (who had a predominantly development background).

However, from an operational point of view, including strategy development at the country level, the RHC position appears weaker and not very influential. Many informants highlighted that the RHC does not carry much political weight with or direct authority over policy-makers at the country level. Although the incumbent has a senior UN level (ASG), the RHC has no functional authority over the UN humanitarian coordinators (HCs) at the country level or the OCHA country offices. Moreover, because the HCs are also UN resident coordinators (RCs) and the RHC only deals with humanitarian matters, there is no close fit between the issues covered by the RHC and the RC/HCs. The HCs in Bamako and Niamey and many UN agency country directors made it very clear that they had no reporting line to the RHC and that they saw him mainly as a figure of support for their work and/or for bringing attention to fund-raising gaps or neglected issues. As in Syria, the RHC’s lack of direct management authority over the country HCs works against an effective “whole of Sahel” approach which many interlocutors felt was essential given the transnational nature of humanitarian as well as conflict related issues.

OCHA’s regional strategy fits with those of the main humanitarian donors and agencies, which are mostly consistent with one another. But at the country level, the regional coherence and convergence diminishes. Coherence on paper does not necessarily reflect operational coherence. Many interlocutors noted that on the ground, agencies were “doing their own thing” (or the thing the donor, or sometimes the government, wanted them to do). A strong tension exists between donors/political actors/coordinators preparing top-down strategies that aim to achieve coherence and operational field offices designing bottom-up projects that reflect what they can and want to do. The regional strategies mainly respond to the donors’ need for coherence to ensure consistency in problem definition and to the agencies’ need for coherence in advocacy and fundraising. But more than one informant mentioned that the regional strategy was “too intellectual” to be translated operationally.

For example, if we look at how OCHA’s 2016 Strategic Response Plan (SRP) for Mali. It reads more as a bottom-up information-sharing exercise aimed at producing a fundraising tool, rather than a coordinated effort aimed at designing the humanitarian strategy for the country building closely on the objectives outlined in the regional strategy. The information contained is, de facto, a compilation of the projects that agencies hope to implement. Each NGO puts in the basket the projects that they wish to implement based on their respective expertise, national strategy, and the indications received from their main donors rather than on the basis of common regional objectives. Similarly, the regional SRP is, in turn, a compilation of national SRPs.

Operationally, the national scale remains the key decision-making level for strategy and coordination. In Mali, for example, the regional scale is seen as very distant. Bamako remains the key place for program development and coordination, for both internal and inter-agency programming. Regional envoys are seen by most respondents as bringing no direct added value to their programming work. In Mali, especially for NGOs, the role of the RHC does not come up at all in their work. In Niger, the situation is slightly different as some of the issues are cross-border (conflict in the Lake Chad area, Malian refugees in the west) and require inter-country coordination, which the RHC can mobilize.

A further factor that explains the operational weakness of the regional dimension is the lack of convergence between the internal administrative structures and reporting lines of the various humanitarian organizations. While it is true that Dakar is becoming a regional hub for West Africa, at the same time, the countries covered by the regional offices based in Dakar vary and the internal functions and importance of the regional offices do not always match with each other. For example, OFDA and USAID mentioned that while their offices were heavily concentrated in Dakar, the humanitarian agencies and NGOs were still more country based, which hampered their tasks of strategic coordination and monitoring. In particular, they stressed the asymmetry with their OCHA counterpart office in Dakar given that most of OCHA's strategy development takes place at the country level. UNHCR has a peculiar system in which some operations are country based and others regional, with some country operations—the most important or sensitive ones—reporting directly to HQ.

Several informants cited as a possible game changer the recent involvement of ECOWAS in disaster management and emergency response. A specific unit for disaster risk reduction (DRR) was created within the ECOWAS Directorate for Humanitarian and Social Affairs in 2006. A “DRR Plan of Action” for 2010–15 was adopted in October 2009. Meanwhile, the “ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework,” adopted in 2008, established an ECOWAS “standby force” as well as a new unit, the ECOWAS Emergency Response Team. ECOWAS also established an “early warning and response network” (ECOWARN).<sup>11</sup> There is clearly potential for a more active involvement of ECOWAS in humanitarian affairs including in operational disaster response. Reportedly, the African Union is also developing humanitarian capacity and has deployed scoping missions to the region but so far no actual response activities.

### **g. Humanitarian architecture: Leadership, coordination, and the role of OCHA**

Coordination mechanisms are proliferating: regional and national, thematic and area-based, clusters and government-run sectoral groups. This proliferation is due to the multiplication of the actors involved in the system, and in some cases it is a contextual response to the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms already in place. In addition to OCHA and the IASC-mandated clusters and UNHCR's coordination of refugee response, donors, in particular ECHO, have set up parallel coordination structures with the NGOs they fund. Based on interviews with many NGOs, both in Mali and Niger, the ECHO coordination system is considered to be more effective than OCHA

and the cluster system. In both Mali and Niger, “sectors” for development coordination exist, nominally run by the government.<sup>12</sup> The sectors are supposed to be for development activities, but inevitably there is overlap on issues such as nutrition and food security. NGOs reported a growing tendency of NGOs to create platforms, not only at the global and regional levels (for example ICVA, which has a regional office in Dakar) but also at the national level. Most NGOs present in Mali are part of FONGIM (*Forum des ONG Internationales au Mali*) (80 members), and humanitarian NGOs gather within the sub-group GTAH (*Groupe technique aide humanitaire*). In emergency situations, NGO heads of mission gather informally. All informants expressed frustration with the time spent in coordination meetings, but few can afford not to attend, because the information shared is still valued, and participating in such meetings gives visibility to the organization. The situation was summed up by a donor who lamented that the humanitarian architecture had become so complex and layered that it was like “a millefeuille” (puff pastry).

In both countries visited, OCHA appeared to have a weak reputation. In Mali, OCHA faces institutional constraints related to the integrated mission (see h. below) and to the challenge of operating in a context historically dominated by development actors and rationales. NGOs see OCHA as having no capacity for strategic orientation or advocacy on humanitarian issues within the UN mission. ECHO is considered by NGOs as “more neutral than OCHA.” OCHA strives to find its place and focuses mainly on information sharing (but the problem is that in order to collect information from partners, it needs some leverage). The same applies in Niger, even if there is no political UN mission and NGOs tend to rely more on OCHA’s coordinating role.

A key factor in OCHA’s weakness is the dysfunctional nature of the OCHA-HC relationship: The HC reports to the ERC, while the Head of the OCHA office (HOO) reports to the OCHA head of programs at UNHQ. In other words, the HC has no functional authority over the HOO.<sup>13</sup> As in other countries visited, effective leadership rests on the personal chemistry between the HC and the HOO. When this is lacking and when, as happens in some countries, the HC has his or her own humanitarian advisory staff, problems arise. Moreover, in the countries visited, the HCs continue to put their RC responsibilities ahead of their humanitarian ones. Several NGO informants mentioned that, contrary to Mali, in CAR, OCHA was vocal, committed, and effective. This was attributed to a more conducive relationship between the HC and OCHA head of office, facilitated by the fact that the HC had a humanitarian background having worked previously for MSF and UNHCR.

Opinions differ on the quality of the single clusters. Most informants in Mali mentioned that at the beginning of the crisis, the clusters had an essential role in establishing a division of tasks. The assessments of their utility and effectiveness over time are more mixed. The lack of clear accountabilities leaves the leadership and the functioning of the clusters dependent on the creativity and the contextual initiative of concerned offices and personalities.

An informant mentioned that existing coordination mechanisms only ensured “superficial coordination,” i.e., they were concentrated far from the field, where they would be needed most. Some informants mentioned that the idea of a separate entity responsible for comprehensive, countrywide need assessments was being proposed as a way of optimizing resources and lessening the performative sides of need assessments where agencies jostle for position based on their area of competence and expertise rather than the most urgent needs on the ground. As in other contexts, the implementation of such an approach would be a possible game changer.

#### **h. MINUSMA integrated mission: Blockages and malaises**

MINUSMA (Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali) was created in April 2013, with the mandate to support the political process and the stabilization of the security situation in Mali following the 2012 coup d'état. It replaced the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). At the time of our visit, it had some 12,000, mainly military, personnel. The UN military contingents are spread between HQ in Bamako and several bases in the north of the country. Most contingents come from other African countries.<sup>14</sup>

MINUSMA is one of the several integrated missions that the UN has set up since the early 2000s to carry out peace-keeping and peace-building functions in situations of internal conflict. The objective of these structures is to ensure coordination and coherence among the UN forces and agencies deployed in a country: All components—military, political, humanitarian, and development—are placed under the responsibility of a Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG). The humanitarian coordinator is the highest humanitarian representative in the country. He chairs the humanitarian country team. The HC nests the humanitarian component deeply in the political and military mission as he accumulates the function of UN resident coordinator and deputy SRSG.

Many humanitarian actors, as well as several studies,<sup>15</sup> have expressed serious reservations about integrated missions, highlighting that placing the UN humanitarian wing under a UN Security Council political and military mandate leads to the politicization of aid and the degradation of humanitarian space. This conflict of priorities and the contradictions related to the plurality of roles assumed by the UN are exactly the main elements that emerged from interviews with humanitarian actors in Mali. The fact that the UN is at once a security actor through the Blue Helmets, a political mediator through the political mission, and a humanitarian actor through UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNHCR polarizes the relationship between NGOs and the UN, creates tensions between the UN mission and UN development agencies on one side and UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs on the other, and puts OCHA in a thorny position.

UN aid agencies, humanitarian NGOs, and donors alike highlighted that the largest and most visible presence of the UN in Mali is the military and stressed that this makes Mali a difficult terrain for humanitarian actors as it hampers access to the field and the establishment of relations

of trust with the local populations. Humanitarian agency staff are perceived by the local population as an extension of the foreign military presence. Three elements, (1) MINUSMA forces use aid initiatives as a strategy to win hearts and minds among the local population (e.g., quick impact projects), (2) most NGOs present in the north of Mali arrived at the same time as the French forces and the Blue Helmets, and (3) private actors (for example security contractors) are present, make it difficult for NGOs to be seen as separate from external military actors. And this further exacerbates the blurring of the roles of foreign organizations, with deleterious consequences for both acceptance and security of humanitarian agencies.

MINUSMA has suffered one of the deadliest tolls in the history of UN peace missions.<sup>16</sup> In the north of Mali, MINUSMA convoys are the main targets of attack by insurgents. This exacerbates the contradictory relationship between the UN mission and the NGOs. On the one hand, NGOs avoid traveling with MINUSMA convoys and refuse the offer of armed escorts as a way of dissociating themselves from military actors as well as a basic security measure to protect their staff. At the same time, as they are often assimilated to the foreign presence, some NGOs also expect the Blue Helmets to provide a secure environment in the areas in which they operate and even ask MINUSMA to secure these areas.

NGO informants voiced a deep malaise vis-à-vis MINUSMA, stressing that the mission had a particularly bad reputation. This concerns first its actual capacity to protect the local population, due both to lack of military training but also to the strict internal security rules aimed at protecting its own staff. In January 2015, in Gao, UN peace-keepers opened fire, killing civilians during a demonstration against MINUSMA. Other informants voiced criticisms concerning the effectiveness of the mission, referring to the long delays in deployment (not yet completed as of end 2015) and the absence of a clear mandate. Several informants linked the bad reputation of MINUSMA to the public behavior of its military personnel (prostitution, alcohol).<sup>17</sup>

In this context, OCHA finds itself in an uneasy position as it sits between a rock and a hard place—that is between NGOs and humanitarian donors (essentially ECHO) on one side and the UN mission on the other. The relationship between the OCHA office and the HC is difficult. The head of OCHA reports to OCHA HQ rather than to the HC, but is clearly seen as part of an integrated mission in which the HC is a deputy to the SRSG. Several informants, including OCHA staff, cited the triple-hatted functions of the HC as one of the main blockages. The development-oriented background of the RC/HC is considered an additional obstacle. The fact that the humanitarian country team is seen as embedded in MINUSMA paralyzes OCHA's capacity to develop strategic orientations and to act as a broker in reflecting the NGO malaise vis-à-vis the integrated mission. Within OCHA, this impossibility of mediating between the mission and the NGOs community is lived with frustration. The NGOs on their side, voice dissatisfaction and consider OCHA's weakness as a main blockage for humanitarian action.

All these tensions have crystallized around the debates on the use of Kidal airfield in the northeast of the country. Since 2012, road access has become difficult due to frequent attacks

along the main routes. After MINUSMA took control of the airport, it was closed due to the deterioration of the runway. MINUSMA proposed to the NGOs that they use MINUSMA flights, which land on the runway inside the MINUSMA base. The NGOs refused, insisting on the importance of using ECHO or UNHAS flights and landing outside the base so as to separate themselves from the military actors. They requested MINUSMA to repair the old runway and secure the airport area instead. NGOs informants mentioned that after bringing the issue to the attention of OCHA several times in vain, they resolved to raise the attention of the donors directly through an open letter requesting the resumption of humanitarian air access to Kidal. This decision created tensions between the signatory NGOs and OCHA and the HC, who felt bypassed.

The malaise in the context of an integrated mission raises broader issues about the ambition of the United Nations—an organization whose main purpose and main authority is in the field of peace and security and whose main decisional body is controlled by few powerful countries—to portray itself as humanitarian actor and claim neutrality. In the context of a peace-building mission like Mali, this paradox appears forcefully. Integrated missions show that such claims to neutrality are problematic and might be even detrimental to the legitimacy and to the reputation of the UN.

#### **i. Upholding peoples' needs or organizations' mandates?**

The situation in the Sahel is complex and multidimensional: Several factors—environment, climate, poverty, conflict—coalesce in creating humanitarian needs. Aid agencies struggle to conceptualize and tackle this situation in ways that are holistic and at the same time compatible with their mandates, responsibilities, expertise, and desire to safeguard their “territory.” The system does not seem well equipped to deal with complexity: Agency mandates, areas of expertise, and strategies of institutional positioning tend to shape the situation analyses, the needs assessments, and the responses. For example, the somehow artificial difference between issues pertaining to food security and those pertaining to nutrition is very much influenced by the mandates and the intervention strategies of WFP and UNICEF, and by whether the solution should be sought through a developmental or a humanitarian lens. Similar tensions arise between UNHCR and OCHA over which agency should be in the lead in the Diffa/Lake Chad displacement crisis. This in part relates to the fact that the way organizations look at the world is inescapably influenced by their purpose, as defending their mandate and demonstrating its relevance is a way of ensuring the organizations' existence. This self-referential stance is exacerbated in a context of increasing institutional competition for funding and “space” within the humanitarian system.

The risk is that reality is read and acted upon through the prism of existing legal and policy categories rather than through a genuine concern and effort to grasp the complexity of ground realities and the actual needs of people. This often results in isolated, compartmentalized analysis and interventions that are disconnected from one another as well as from the needs on the

ground.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the risk is that one person's status vis-à-vis aid institutions—i.e., the category of beneficiary he/she falls in—becomes more crucial than his/her actual needs to determine the assistance he/she will benefit from.

An interesting case to reflect upon is UNHCR, whose populations of concern according to the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees delimit the field of intervention of the agency. UNHCR struggles to keep the difference between refugees and non-refugees as clear-cut as possible and claims its exclusive mandate is to provide protection and assistance to forced migrants. Yet sometimes the difference between refugee and non-refugee populations is not so easy to draw. It might be because the lack of identity documentation is so widespread in the Sahel region, because of the complexity of actual mobility patterns, or most of all because in very poor areas (such as Mbera in Mauritania or the Lake Chad region) the needs of the refugees or IDP populations are not necessarily higher or different from those of the local population and the risk of discrimination might rise. Several observers and informants were critical of the UNHCR approach that artificially divides populations based on criteria deriving from its mandate rather than from the actual vulnerability and needs of the people. Several interlocutors noted that despite its rhetoric about community-based approaches and alternatives to camps, UNHCR's strenuous defense of its mandate still denotes a somewhat "imperialistic" stance aimed at safeguarding its own domain of intervention, as the agency historically has built its expertise and its institutional role of coordination around the notion of refugees (and more recently to conflict-related IDPs).

As in other contexts (see the PFF case study on Syria, also Niland et al. 2015), the tension between focusing on needs versus status/mandate of affected groups was palpable in the Sahel. This is partly related to concerns by agencies, in particular UNHCR, vis-à-vis the role of OCHA, which is seen as encroaching on agency responsibilities. It partly relates to the wider issue of the demarcation of responsibilities in situations where there are mixed flows—refugees, IDPs, ISPs (internally stuck persons), migrants—where the IASC coordination system (clusters) only covers part of the caseload and UNHCR is protective of its own coordination role for refugees. The tensions around whether a "whole of caseload" approach was warranted came to the fore in the Diffa region of Niger where UNHCR was reluctant to agree that OCHA should coordinate a response where there were mixed flows: refugees, IDPs, affected local communities, and Nigériens who had come back from Nigeria because of insecurity.

Contrasting UNHCR with IOM, an agency not bounded by a mandate anchored in international law, is interesting. IOM is multipurpose in nature. While this makes the agency more dependent on donors and opportunistic, it also gives it flexibility to expand into new sectors and become more eclectic. IOM's programs range from migration policy development to training in border management, protection, and assistance services to IDPs and to migrants stranded in the desert, data collection, and integration of returnees (IOM 2014). The main donors' geopolitical interest in migration control and UNHCR's primary focus on refugees create a favorable environment for the expansion of IOM. The agency is boosting its size, occupying the interstices and residual categories left over by the UNHCR, such as, in several cases, IDPs, as well as "migrants caught

in crisis,” i.e., migrant workers trapped in a conflict or displaced as a result of a conflict. IOM is also becoming increasingly involved in environmental migration. All these new notions derive from the refugee/non-refugee distinction and show us to which extent mandates, expertise and institutional competition are influential in shaping analysis and programs.

There are significant differences in the access to protection for refugees, IDPs, and vulnerable migrants. Refugees, and to a lesser extent IDPs, have access to humanitarian assistance, at least when they are in camps, but labor migrants have little institutionalized assistance. The protection umbrella is porous, and its functionality has serious gaps. Official refugee and IDP sites are overseen by IOM and UNHCR, and in some cases partially protected by UN peacekeeping forces, such as MINUSMA in Mali. Many informal settlements, border camps, and other sites—for example the mixed flows in the Lake Chad area—lack any services or protection afforded by an international presence. In general, migrants are denied basic rights upon arrest, including the opportunity to contact a lawyer or an interpreter. Some governments (such as Algeria) restrict the movement of UN and international humanitarian organizations, hindering their ability to conduct assessments and programming along the border (IDMC 2014). Although government crackdowns are followed by a decrease in migration, new and more dangerous routes open up, allowing smugglers to charge migrants even more (Lewis 2014, interviews in Dakar and Niamey). Restrictive measures also push the smuggling business further into the hands of violent criminal gangs (UNODC 2011).

Agency rigidities around mandates also affect the way in which protection issues are conceptualized and addressed. UNHCR is in the lead in convening a regional protection cluster meeting that meets (infrequently) in Dakar and the protection clusters in Mali and Niger. Some informants in Niger felt that protection issues were being ghettoized in the clusters and were neither being mainstreamed nor pushed up to the HC/HCT level when urgent issues arose. Generally, knowledge of the secretary-general’s “rights up-front” agenda or the IASC statement on the “centrality of protection” was not widespread beyond UNHCR and the few protection officers in other agencies. Nor did protection issues appear high on the agenda of the HCs in the two countries visited, as they were mindful of their relationship with the government and longer term development goals. The protection needs of migrants who fall prey to smugglers in the Sahara or are stranded in the desert seemed to be especially under-served.

### **3. So What? Lessons Learned and Implications for Humanitarian Action**

While the crises in the Sahel are a mix of structural, governance, conflict, and displacement factors—all of which are still being played out—much can be learned from this complex case. The following are some of the key points and their implications for humanitarian action in the future.

- *The Sahel is rapidly changing.* Until the early 2000s, it was on the margins of geopolitical interest and of humanitarian action and debates. The emergence of conflict, the protracted and intractable nature of the structural issues, conflict-induced displacement and migration to Europe, as well as transnational criminal networks have brought the Sahel center stage, especially after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. International donor interest is dictated more by the risk that the Sahel will “export” its problems to the northern shores of the Mediterranean and beyond than by concern for the human condition of its population. For the population, one of the most striking manifestations of the step change in geopolitical interest is the sudden appearance of the narrative of borders and control of population movements in a region where not only pastoralists but also tradesmen and ordinary people were free to move at will. Since the outbreak of conflict, the humanitarian discourse is itself rapidly changing from a focus on food security, nutrition, and rebuilding livelihoods to an increasing emphasis on the consequences of conflict and displacement and issues of humanitarian security and access. Conflict and GWOT, and to some extent migration, are now becoming the key determinants through which the Sahel is viewed by donors and to some extent by mainstream aid agencies.

*Implications.* Securitization measures, and the militarization of their implementation whether in the context of conflict or border control, are likely to further fray the social contract between the population and their states. Disaffected youth will be increasingly tempted by Islamic militancy and migration. This will pose increasing challenges to humanitarian agencies in terms of security and access as well in defending the humanitarian imperative against political/military and development agendas.

- *Indirect rather than direct instrumentalization.* While most informants agreed that there was little direct instrumentalization of humanitarian activities in support of political or GWOT agendas, the strong sense was that conflict had put humanitarian issues (and funding) on the donors’ political agenda. Two areas of concern were nonetheless raised by humanitarian actors: (a) the presence of donors in the HCTs and particularly of ECHO and DFID in many coordination structures; (b) the fact that although direct instrumentalization is not widespread, a de facto or “genetic,” rather than direct, collusion seems to exist between UN agencies and state agendas—both those of donor states and the states of the region. In Mali, the elusive quest for coherence between disparate political, military, development, and humanitarian agendas—because of the UN integrated mission—was seen as more problematical from a principled humanitarian perspective than in the other countries of the region.

*Implications.* This perceived alignment with external agendas and the fact that few humanitarian actors are attempting to negotiate access with insurgent or radical groups does not bode well for respect of humanitarian principles and staff security.

- *The humanitarian aid system has still not found its footing;* it is struggling to deal with complexity and the significant tensions around the definition, contours, and nature of the

crises affecting the Sahel. The development narrative was until recently the dominant frame of reference for governments and aid agencies. Issues of geopolitics, conflict, and migration feature more prominently in discussions about strategy, but the default position of many senior aid agency staff is to downplay their importance—in part to safeguard the development relationship with Sahel states. The internal tensions on strategic developmental issues—natural resources versus agriculture, role of the state in the economy—are now compounded by the uneasy coexistence with more recently arrived humanitarian actors who are seen to be state-avoiding, short-term driven, and in competition for scarce external resources. The focus on resilience has so far not been able to ease these strategic and conceptual tensions. Moreover, the context is one of weak international funding in spite of general increased attention since 2012: Response to UN humanitarian appeals for the Sahel countries rarely go above a 40 percent watermark.

*Implications.* Humanitarian action in the Sahel is likely to continue to be underfunded and targeted to donor priority areas—conflict, displacement—rather than based on need. Tensions around the relationship between humanitarian approaches and development or resilience are still not properly managed. Localization and more support to national NGOs and civil society groups could represent a possible way forward to bridge these tensions.

- *Innovation at the regional level.* The regional dimension and the appointment of a regional humanitarian coordinator for the Sahel has been an innovation but it is unclear whether it has made the system any more effective. It has brought some strategic clarity, enhanced advocacy, and has had some success in fundraising as well as the first ever OCHA regional plan. However, while different (UN, EU, ECOWAS, individual donor) strategies are mostly compatible, operationally, a country-by-country focus, if not tunnel vision, still rule. Programs have very little interconnectivity across countries. The added value (or not) of the RHC function is still debated. For some it is a “toothless” role because the RHC has only limited ability to influence what happens at the country level. For others, the function was only necessary because the HCs at the country level did not have the right (humanitarian) profile and/or were not doing their job. A change in the reporting lines of the HCs to the RHC rather than directly to the ERC (as is the case now) would be a significant game changer, but one that would face considerable resistance. Another innovation at the regional level is the more active and prominent role of regional organizations (in particular ECOWAS, which now has its own fledgling humanitarian operational wing and early warning system: ECOWARN), as well as agencies dealing with desertification and food security (AGHRYMET, Club du Sahel, CILSS).
- *The humanitarian architecture: complex, duplicative, bogged down in coordination,* lacking in vision if not leadership. The multiplication of coordination structures at the country level—OCHA/clusters, government run “sectors,” donor-INGO meetings, more-or-less formal INGO coordination meetings, INGO and NNGO mechanisms—are indicative of the

complexification of the system and distrust vis-à-vis OCHA, which is perceived by many as weak or not delivering. This is compounded by the lack of clear management and reporting lines between the RC/HCs and the OCHA offices. This results in high transaction costs and a layered system—a “millefeuille”—that creates barriers to entry for local actors and that many see as in need of simplification.

*Implications.* These findings are not surprising and resonate with other PFF case studies. They point to the need for some simplification of the humanitarian system and possibly the re-thinking of the role of OCHA and its relationship with the HC. For a region where the humanitarian presence is relatively light, the transaction costs of coordination seem particularly high, as are the impediments to the emergence of self-sustaining national and local humanitarian NGOs.

- *Decreasing fieldcraft.* One of the striking findings of this study is the decreasing fieldcraft of mainstream humanitarian agencies. This has partly because the system is becoming more risk averse—“massively so” in the words of one agency country director. Agencies find it difficult to remain operational in fraught contexts like Diffa or northern Mali. “Even in Timbuktu,” quipped one observer, “when the town was controlled by the insurgents, humanitarian space was there to be taken. Those in charge valued our services, but we just did not try.” The increasing disconnect between the “superstructure” of the humanitarian system—the strategic planning, programming, assessment, coordination mechanisms—and the realities of humanitarian practice on the ground are a key and worrying finding of this study.

*Implications.* As in other contexts, the complexity and proceduralization of the mainstream humanitarian system continues apace. Much time is spent feeding the machine, to the detriment of operational work on the ground. Local organizations often are better placed to work in hard-to-reach or insecure areas but their skills and capacities are undervalued. Practical ways, including through support to national and local organizations, need to be found to redress this situation.

- *Potential game-changers.* Two issues raised in conversations in the field could become potential game-changers. The first relates to needs assessments, which inevitably are still based on individual agency priorities. Conceivably, an independent and credible needs assessment mechanism delinked from agency operational desiderata could go a long way in fostering a more impartial response. The second issue relates to the emergence of national NGOs and CBOs and a potential localization agenda. So far, humanitarian action in the Sahel has been the near exclusive preserve of international agencies, but this changing. Many local groups are emerging but they butt against the barriers to entry and the top-down culture of the organized system. It has become commonplace to argue for the lifting of these barriers, including by finding a way to allow local NGOs to directly receive international funds.

*Implications.* Both the issues mentioned above are important but do not lend themselves to a Sahel-specific solution. They reinforce the findings of the PFF research: Solutions are

available to make the system more effective and more in sync with the aspirations of the populations it purports to serve. What is lacking, for now, is the political will. The takeaway is that the humanitarian system in the Sahel, as elsewhere, is becoming more remote, top-down, donor driven, functional to the needs of the main players, and still very much “of the North” and perceived as such.

- *Securitization of humanitarian action.* Many analysts noted that the increasing centrality of the notions of “security,” “access,” “risk,” and “humanitarian space” in the framing of the challenges NGOs face in the field is a consequence of the changing nature of armed conflicts. The armed conflicts in the Sahel are asymmetrical and transnational; they often involve extremist groups that are not necessarily interested in gaining legitimacy among local populations, as well as radical Islamic movements hostile to the West. At the same time, it is important to note that this securitization and bunkerization of aid agencies is also a consequence of processes pertaining to the humanitarian system itself, i.e., the devaluation of the field; remote management and the consequent decreasing fieldcraft of humanitarian agencies; their increasing risk-averseness due to security, insurance, and GWOT concerns; and their inability to build relationships of trust with local populations.

*Implications.* The loss of fieldcraft and the increasing distance between international agencies and the populations they purport to assist and protect go together. They paint a picture of a humanitarian system where the chains of intermediaries are ever longer and where affected groups have little agency in matters crucial for their wellbeing. This has become a topical issue in the run up to the World Humanitarian Summit and one on which there is a near consensus that things must change or, in the words of one study, that the system needs to be turned on its head (Oxfam 2015).

A final consideration relates to the vexed issue of coherence between political/military agendas and humanitarian action particularly in the context of UN integrated missions. Rather than lamenting the difficulties of coordinating the military, political, and humanitarian mandates and framing these difficulties as an issue of failed coordination (a bureaucratic problem that can be solved with bureaucratic solutions), perhaps coherence should be recognized as something fundamentally impossible to achieve as it stems from an internal contradiction both conceptual and practical. Mali shows us the inherent difficulty if not impossibility of incorporating humanitarian action—an activity that derives its legitimacy from the universal values of IHL, international refugee law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—within a political process that is based on the art of the possible as seen at a particular moment in time by the UN Security Council. It may be more useful to recognize that these two forms of international action in countries in crisis are perhaps both necessary but fundamentally irreconcilable, especially in situations of conflict.

## References

- African Union. 2014. “The African Union Strategy for the Sahel Region.”
- Alliance Globale pour la Resilience. 2013. “AGIR – Sahel et Afrique de l’Ouest: Feuille de Route Régionale Adoptée le 9 Avril 2013.” OCDE.
- Bonnecase, V. 2011. *La pauvreté au Sahel: du savoir colonial à la mesure internationale*. Karthala, Paris.
- Bonnecase, V., and J. Brachet. 2013. “Les ‘crises sahéliennes’ entre perceptions locales et gestions internationaux.” *Politique Africaine*, 130, 5–22.
- Collectif. 2012. “Le Sahel en crises.” (La Documentation française).
- De Haas, Hein. 2010. “Migration Transitions: A Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry into the Developmental Drivers of International Migration”, IMI Working Paper No 24, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford.
- Donini, Antonio. 2010. “Afghanistan: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Integration or Independence of Humanitarian Action?” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92–880.
- Donini, Antonio, and Daniel Maxwell. 2013. “From Face-to-Face to Face-to-Screen: Remote Management, Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments.” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 95 (890), 383–413.
- EU. 2011. “Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel.”
- Galy, M., and B. Badie. 2013. “La guerre au Mali.” La Découverte.
- Gingerich, Tara, and Marc Cohen. 2015. “Turning the Humanitarian System on Its Head: Saving Lives and Livelihoods by Strengthening Local Capacity and Shifting Leadership to Local Actors.” Oxfam Research Report. Oxford, UK: Oxfam International.  
[https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/rr-turning-humanitarian-system-local-capacity-270715-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/rr-turning-humanitarian-system-local-capacity-270715-en.pdf).
- Humanitarian Policy Group. A2015. “Regionalism and Humanitarian Action in West Africa and Southeast Asia.” ODI, November.
- IDMC. 2014. “Regional Instability Overshadows the Fate of Remaining IDPS” (October 29).  
<http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/chad/2014/chad-regional-instability-overshadows-the-fate-of-remaining-idps>.
- Institute for Security Studies. 2015. “Sahel Strategies: Why Coordination is Imperative.” March.

- International Crisis Group. 2015a. "The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm."  
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/west-africa/227-the-central-sahel-a-perfect-sandstorm.aspx>.
- . 2015b. "Mali La paix à marche forcée?" *Rapport Afrique* 226.
- International Organisation for Migration. 2014. "Regional Strategy for West Africa and Central Africa 2014–2016."
- International Policy Institute. 2012. "Threats to Peace and Security in the Sahel: Responding to the Crisis in Mali." Issue Brief. December.
- Lacher, Wolfram. 2012. "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Lewis, David. 2014. "Special Report: Despite Deaths, Crackdown, Saharan Migrant Trail Thrives," Reuters, May 15. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/15/us-europe-immigration-niger-specialrepor-idUSBREA4E08W20140515>.
- May, J. F, and Jean-Pierre Guengant. 2014. "Les défis démographiques des pays sahéliens." ÉTVDES 4206.
- Niland, Norah, Riccardo Polastro, Antonio Donini, and Amra Lee. 2015. "Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action." Norwegian Refugee Council, Geneva.
- OCHA. 2015. briefing note on Niger.
- . 2014. "2014–2016 Strategic Response Plan." Sahel Region. January.
- OECD. 2014. "Un atlas du Sahara-Sahel : Géographie, économie et insécurité, Cahiers de l'Afrique de l'Ouest." OECD Publishing, Paris. [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/un-atlas-du-sahara-sahel\\_9789264222335-fr](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/agriculture-and-food/un-atlas-du-sahara-sahel_9789264222335-fr).
- Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. 2011. "Aide humanitaire ou aide au développement? La 'famine' de 2005 au Niger." *Ethnologie française* 3 (41), 415–29.
- Saqalli, Mehdi. 2008. "Le pouvoir des savoirs : enjeux et impacts des concepts sur le développement rural pour le Sahel nigérien." *Vertigo* 8: 1.
- Trench, P., J. Rowley, M. Diarra, F. Sano, and B. Keita. 2007. "Beyond Any Drought. Root Causes of Chronic Vulnerability in the Sahel." London. June.
- UN. 2013. "United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel." UNISS.
- UNDP. 2015. "Human Development Report, December 2015."

- UNODC. 2011. "The Role of Organized Crime in the Smuggling of Migrants from West Africa to the European Union." New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- Warner, Leslie. 2014. "Center for Naval Analyses. Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership: Building Partner Capacity to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism." March.
- Weir, Erin. 2006. "Conflict and Compromise. UN Integrated Missions and the Humanitarian Imperative." Kaipctc, Training for Peace. June.
- Werz, Michael, and Laura Conley. 2012. "Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in Northwest Africa: Rising Dangers and Policy Options Across the Arc of Tension." Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. April.
- World Bank. 2013. "The Sahel: Towards a Regional Approach." working paper. August 21.
- World Bank Group. 2014. "Forced Displacement and Potential solutions for IDPs and Refugees in the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger." Washington, DC: World Bank.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Parts of Algeria, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, and the Central African Republic are sometimes included in definitions of the Sahel.

<sup>2</sup> The 2015 UN Development Programme (UNDP) “Human Development Index” ranks Niger at 188 (lowest globally), Chad at 185 and Mali at 179.

<sup>3</sup> In the period 2013 to 2015, the amounts of funding devoted to the countries of the Sahel by the US and the EU—the two major donors for the region—ranked well behind the Syria, ebola, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, and DRC emergencies (<https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=Profile-donorCountrylist>, consulted January 11, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: UNODC 2011, Lacher 2012, Werz and Conley 2012, IPI 2012, Warner 2014, ICG 2015a.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with donors in Bamako and Niamey and with government officials in Niamey.

<sup>6</sup> See also: “UNISS approach is premised on the integration of humanitarian and development interventions, ensuring that lifesaving activities meet immediate needs while building the resilience of people and communities as part of a long-term development agenda.” “A way to make a block for fundraising and advocacy.” “Coherent, mutually reinforcing and harmonized planning and implementation through humanitarian and development activities will help to deliver a successful resilience package to the most vulnerable communities.” (UN 2013)

<sup>7</sup> See for example AGR 2011, EU 2011, UN 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See PFF case studies on Somalia and South Sudan.

<sup>9</sup> See PFF case studies on Somalia and South Sudan; also Donini and Maxwell 2013.

<sup>10</sup> This rationale (more development equals less migration to Europe) is at odds with well-documented facts, such as that emigration is most intense not in the poorest societies but in those that start developing and that demography in the Sahel will explode in the coming decades (De Haas 2010). In addition, border management programs are unlikely to make the long Saharan international borders any less porous, regardless of the funds and energies spent. Moreover, the numbers are actually small: IOM representatives, interviewed in Dakar and Niamey, estimate that around 20,000 migrants cross the Sahara every year. Also, many informants felt that the governments in the Sahel region actually benefit from migration, as restless youth would be leaving and remittances would be coming.

<sup>11</sup> On the ECOWAS approach to humanitarian action, see HPG 2015.

<sup>12</sup> In Mali, these are called *Partenaires Techniques et Financiers*.

<sup>13</sup> Until 2011, HCs had a much more direct supervisory role of the HOOs. Now as per OCHA policy instruction on the relationship between HCs and HOOs (July 2011), the performance appraisal of the HOO is no longer done by the HC but directly by OCHA HQ.

<sup>14</sup> French military forces (between 3,000 and 3,500 soldiers) are currently engaged in the Barkhane operation, whose aim is to fight the armed jihadist groups in the entire region (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad) in partnership with the governments. France is not part of the MINUSMA peacekeeping forces and prefers to manage relations bilaterally.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Donini (2010) and Weir (2006).

<sup>16</sup> With 81 fatalities as of February 2016, MINUSMA had the fourth-highest mortality rate after the peacekeeping missions in Tajikistan, Georgia, and Somalia.

<sup>17</sup> According to NGO informants, the restaurant La Terrasse that was attacked by insurgents in Bamako in early 2015 was mainly patronized by MINUSMA soldiers.

<sup>18</sup> The potential innovation of a possible future agency responsible for needs assessment should be analysed in this light.