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Note: In this document, use of the masculine is generic and applies to both women and men.

Mitigating the ongoing crisis in the Sahel — the key role of pastoralists



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Recommendations

- Pastoralists are amongst those hardest hit by the ongoing crisis in the Sahel. This crisis has resulted in increased violence, food insecurity and hunger, and an overall increase in internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. **Humanitarian interventions** in the Sahel should therefore take pastoralists' concerns into account and be **appropriate to their production system and livelihoods**.
- Pastoralism represents a huge economic potential for the Sahel, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The pastoralist economy in these three countries needs **targeted and adapted investments**, as part of a holistic approach to security. Pastoralist civil society organisations should lead this process along with local governments and be part of discussions on the security development nexus.
- Existing policy frameworks enabling pastoral mobility at a regional level need to be updated and implemented at national level. This process should also be guided by pastoralist civil society organisations, to ensure acceptance of the legislation in pastoralist communities.

Abstract

On 18 August 2020, the Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was forced to resign, as a result of a military coup. This event is the latest in a series which have increased instability not only in Mali but in the entire Sahel region. The situation reflects a profound crisis of governance and politics. Central governments are losing territorial control to armed military and jihadist groups, who now control large parts of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. This instability has led to a crisis resulting in increased violence, food insecurity and hunger, and has led to millions of internally displaced people and refugees. This situation has been further aggravated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Targeted investments are needed in all programmes related to the Central Sahel to safeguard pastoralists' lives and livelihoods. This requires a holistic approach to security development in the Sahel

The Sahel is home to millions of pastoralists. These mobile livestock keepers have turned the variability of the climate in the region to their advantage to produce milk and meat in a sustainable way. In doing so, they provide important economic benefits to their households and also to their national economies. Because of their predominance in the Sahel, **pastoralists are at the forefront of the ongoing crisis**. However, whenever they are mentioned in this context, narratives usually focus on conflicts between herders and crop farmers. Although clashes between these two population groups do occur, in reality they are equally affected by the lack of an empowering socio-economic and policy environment, resulting into conflicts over access to and control over natural resources. Climate change and increased demographic pressure are only making the situation worse, creating the perfect breeding ground for military and jihadist movements to recruit impoverished and dissatisfied pastoralists. The current situation is profoundly affecting the livelihoods and production systems of most pastoralists, without even mentioning the consequences of COVID-19.

As an organisation working with and for pastoralists, Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Belgium is committed to addressing this situation. We are calling for **pastoralist-specific measures**, both in the short and long term. Targeted investments are needed in all programmes related to the Central Sahel to safeguard pastoralists' lives and livelihoods. In order to be effective and contribute to the rule of law, these should be led by pastoralist civil society organisations and local governance structures, because otherwise investments will lead to nothing. In addition, this requires a **holistic approach to security development in the Sahel**. It is time we moved away from the idea that security is a prerequisite for development and instead considered the two aspects to be interdependent and intertwined. We also call for an **update of pastoralist policies**, such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance (1998) and Supporting Regulation (2003). These should be translated into national policies, and ownership of these policies by pastoralist communities should be encouraged by pastoralist civil society organisations.

1.

The ongoing crisis in the Sahel

The word 'crisis' has been associated with the Sahel for many years. Back in 2013, the UN regional strategy for the Sahel aimed to "respond to the 'triple crisis' (...) affecting [the region]" (UN, 2013): a humanitarian, food security and refugee crisis. In 2020, the word 'crisis' continues to be associated with the region.

If the situation was already critical a few years back, it has since become worse than ever, as we now have to deal with new elements. The Food Crisis Prevention Network has highlighted several simultaneous crises in the region: "security, food, health and a possible plague of locusts. The expected effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutrition security are aggravating an already difficult situation. Some 50 million additional people could be hit by a food and nutrition crisis." (FCPN, 2020a).

A security crisis

Over the past decade, insecurity has increased significantly in West Africa, especially in the Sahel. The fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011 and the coups in Mali in 2012 and Burkina Faso in 2015 are just a few examples of events that have contributed to the further destabilisation of the region. **The weakening of central governments has directly benefited non-state armed groups, causing a huge rise in violent conflicts** (NRC, 2020).

An average of 205 incidents are being reported monthly in 2020, about four times as many as in 2012 (OCHA, 2020). In the past year alone, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Cameroon have recorded a 44 per cent increase in the number of casualties (+ 10 000 deaths between May 2019 and May 2020) (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). Between January and September 2020, violent attacks against civilians resulted in 748 deaths in Mali, 833 in Burkina Faso and 291 in Niger, not to mention the many people who were forced to leave their homes (ACLED, 2020)¹. As of 31 August 2020, more than 847,198 refugees and 1,863,439 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) were reported in Chad, Niger, Mauritania, Mali and Burkina Faso (UNHCR, IOM, 2020).

In spite of a strong international military presence – the French Operation Barkhane, the UN Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy missions – and international training support to the Sahelian national armies and police, violence is still widespread (Gorman, 2019).

¹ No fatalities from battles, remote violence, riots or protests are included.



A food security crisis

Since September 2019, the World Food Program (WFP) has considered the crisis in the Sahel to be a 'Level 3 emergency' (WFP, 2020). This is the highest crisis level, putting the Sahel on a par with Syria, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Yemen (Sova, 2020). This designation "allows the UN World Food Program to use its entire global or 'corporate' human or financial resource base to respond" (WFP, 2020). This clearly illustrates the significance and scale of the ongoing food security crisis.

According to the WFP emergency dashboard for the Central Sahel, 5.5 million people suffered food insecurity in August 2020 and 9.7 million people needed humanitarian assistance in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. In other words, in a population of about 64 million people, about 15% need humanitarian assistance. The number of refugees and IDPs mentioned above clearly contributes to this situation.

A public health crisis

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is causing a public health crisis with a severe impact on the different aspects of the existing crisis. The numbers of COVID-19 cases in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are quite low, like everywhere in Africa (WHO, 2020). However, in spite of the limited numbers of infected people and deaths in the Sahel, **the impact of the pandemic on jobs and livelihoods is huge.**

In a report dated May 2020, the OECD highlights how lockdowns and mobility restrictions are threatening jobs and livelihoods, especially in the informal sector, at the expense of food and nutrition security (OECD, 2020). To make things worse, humanitarian assistance to conflict zones and refugee camps has been disrupted. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement are a threat to the majority of people in the Sahel, who have no choice but to go out to buy and sell food, access water and work. Although restrictions on mobility have been gradually lifted in most countries in the Sahel, the current focus of the international community on COVID-19 reduces awareness on other topics such as food security.

In addition to the pandemic, the sanitary and food security situation has been aggravated by recent flooding, in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in particular. In the summer of 2020, 110 people lost their lives as a result of these excessive floods in West and Central Africa, including 71 in Niger alone (Celestial, 2020).

2.

Pastoralists at the centre of the Sahel crisis

Pastoralists in the Sahel

The Sahel is home to pastoralists and has been so for centuries. The Fulani are the best known but the Tuareg, Arabs and many more share pastoralist livestock keeping as a way of life.

Defining pastoralists or pastoralism is a difficult task and many different definitions exist. In general, pastoralism can be thought of as "a wide family of livestock-based, livelihood/food production systems, highly diverse but all **sharing a specialisation to make a**

A political and governance crisis

The most emblematic dimension of the ongoing crisis in the Sahel is probably the security crisis. The prevailing insecurity reflects the incapability of governments (and the international community which supports them) to come up with adequate socio-political responses. This results in the loss of control over large areas of territory, especially in rural areas, and causes a 'security paradox'. As national governments – supported by the international community – are over-reliant on military and security responses to local conflicts, they neglect much-needed investment in health, education, justice and employment. This lack of investment eventually leads to a significant rise in violence and conflict rates (Kwaja & Smith, 2020).

Investments in public or social services are known to address the root causes of conflict and should therefore be considered to be part of conflict resolution. If they focus solely on public spending for the military and security, governments are unable to meet the basic needs of their citizens (UNHCR, 2020). This focus on military spending, combined with a general lack of consideration for rural areas, has contributed to the food security and nutrition crisis. Investments in rural and overall economic development remain insufficient. Conflict resolution systems suffer the same fate, leaving many disputes unsolved. Ultimately, this leads to far more complex and violent conflicts (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020).

The word 'crisis' has been associated with the Sahel for many years. Back in 2013, the UN regional strategy for the Sahel aimed to respond to the 'triple crisis': a humanitarian, food security and refugee crisis.

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living from the variability of the natural environment, consisting in improving the animals' diet and welfare by managing their grazing itineraries at a variety of scales in time and space" (Krätli, 2019).

The West African Sahel is ideally suited to pastoralists, who have made the regional climate variability part of their production strategy. Mobility enables them to access grazing areas and water points at certain times throughout the year.

Counting the number of pastoralists is equally difficult and can only be done by approximation. Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to have around 50 million pastoralists, half of them living in the Sahel (Rass, 2006). Tracking the number of cattle proves slightly easier. Figures from the Food and Agriculture Organization reflect the importance of pastoralism as dominant livestock-based livelihood in the Sahel: in 2018, Burkina Faso had 9,788,225 heads of cattle, while Mali's livestock was estimated at 11,758,377 and Niger's at 14,363,595. These numbers show the huge **socio-economic importance of pastoralism** in the region. Its impact is not limited to pastoralists but also benefits all stakeholders in the livestock value chain: from livestock traders to butchers, dairy sellers, processors – many of them women – and craftspeople.

Around 70% of the active population in West Africa works in the livestock sector (Nugteren, H., Lecomte, C., 2016). In Burkina Faso, it provides an income for 80% of the population (Kiema, A., 2014). In the Sahelian countries, the livestock sector contributes between 10 and 15% to the national GDP, with a contribution to the agricultural GDP that is as much as 44% in Mali. Pastoralists also contribute significantly to food security and nutrition, as they are estimated to provide more than half of the meat and milk consumed locally. The livestock trade also has a huge economic importance in the region: commercial livestock transactions were estimated at 150 million dollars in 2009.

But **the importance of pastoralism in the Sahel goes far beyond the livestock sector**. It influences the entire agricultural sector, as agricultural farmers and pastoralists tend to live alongside one another. The cattle feed on crop residues in the farmers' fields while directly fertilising the soil with their manure, which increases crop yields.

Finally, pastoralism also has a significant **environmental significance** as it contributes to biodiversity and landscape functionality (Krätli, 2019). It is also very well-suited to keeping rangelands 'healthy' through sustainable grazing management. This benefit is far from negligible, considering that grasslands cover between 30 and 40% of the world's land surface and have a huge potential for carbon sequestration in the fight against climate change. A benefit which was recently confirmed by the FAO Committee on Agriculture as it took significant steps forward in adopting an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

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3.

The impact of the crisis on pastoral communities

Weakened pastoralists

The ongoing crisis in the Sahel is having a severe impact on the population in general and pastoralists in particular. In spite of its importance and economic potential, pastoralism has not been seen as a priority by governments and international donors in terms of investments. This has left many pastoralists vulnerable, a situation that is exacerbated by climate change and increased competition for natural resources.

This competition for natural resources is often inaccurately perceived from an excessively narrow perspective as 'conflict between herders and agricultural farmers.' Pastoralists' interests are often seen as inherently opposed to those of crop farmers (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). Although farmer-herder conflicts do occur in the Sahel, it does not mean that the two groups have opposing interests. As explained earlier, they usually co-exist in a mutually beneficial relationship. However, their complementarity has been reduced by the lack of appropriate, implemented policies.

All over the Sahel, both pastoralists and agricultural farmers have lost land to large-scale agriculture, irrigation schemes and dam projects (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). Mining activities also affect the quality of the land, contaminating the surrounding soil and water reserves, as is the case at the Komabangou gold mining site in Niger (Dan-Badjo et al., 2019). As the land used by pastoralists to graze and water their cattle becomes privatised, transhumance is compromised. They therefore have no choice but to take new routes and enter areas that are predominantly used for other activities (UNOWAS, 2019). This has led to competition over exclusive land use between different groups, including pastoralists who are becoming increasingly aware of the value of land and the importance of private land ownership.



A breeding ground for armed groups

The weakening of pastoralists has created a breeding ground for terrorist and extremist groups. They recruit weakened, destitute pastoralists who join what is referred to as 'new fringe pastoralism', i.e. the practice of transnational licit and illicit activities, including human trafficking and trading of arms and drugs (UNECA, 2017).

Motives for young pastoralists to join these activities include political grievances, criminal opportunism, self-protection and above all the need to make a living. In Mali, terrorist movements are believed to pay about 150 000 CFA (230 euros) upon recruitment (Benjaminson & Ba, 2019). Criminal and jihadist groups skilfully exploit these motives, fuelling the false ethnic and religious narratives and divides (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020). There is often talk of a 'fulanisation' of the ongoing crisis, which refers to Fulani pastoralists' alleged participation in criminal activities. This perpetuates the false idea that pastoralists are a public security threat and that the majority of pastoralists join armed and jihadists movements, which is of course false.

Production systems under pressure

Although some pastoralists do join these movements and engage in violent acts, the majority of them continue their traditional livestock-related activities without posing any security threat. They are actually the first to suffer from the security crisis, which disrupts their lives and production systems. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), terrorists and armed groups often take an interest in pastoralists for the livelihoods they can provide. They also use them as human shields or to transport weapons and other illegal goods (IOM, ICMPD, ECOWAS, 2019).

As large parts of pastoralist areas in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are now controlled by armed and terrorist groups, the pastoralist production system is increasingly coming under threat. To cope with insecurity, pastoralists adapt and change their migration routes, reduce transhumance or move in larger groups. This in turn has a negative effect on the wellbeing of their herds and makes their relationship with other land users more and more difficult. They are also increasingly forced to flee their homes, with or without their herds, at the risk of losing their only means of subsistence. A large proportion of the many internally displaced people and refugees in the region are in fact pastoralists whose cattle have been stolen and whose belongings have been burned.

COVID-19

The pandemic is aggravating this situation, with further restrictions on mobility, which is at the core of pastoralist production systems. Access to pasture is reduced and pastoralists find themselves locked in and unable to cross national borders (FCPN, 2020b). Because of the health situation, pastoralists have also been denied access to markets, making it even more difficult for them to sell their livestock and milk and, in turn, to buy other foods (FCPN, 2020b).

According to the latest updates by Réseau Bilital Maroobe and Action Contre la Faim on the impact of COVID-19 on pastoralism in West Africa, the situation has evolved positively and markets now seem to be largely open (about 97% of them were open on 25 September 2020). However, mobility remains limited, at about 49% of the 'normal' pastoralist mobility level.

4.

How to support pastoralists to mitigate the multidimensional crisis in the Sahel?

Humanitarian support

In light of the importance of pastoralism in the Sahel and of the multidimensional crisis affecting it, pastoralists should clearly be supported in their efforts to deal with the current situation. Their socio-economic and environmental potential makes them key players to solve the ongoing crisis in the Sahel. **Special attention should therefore be given to pastoralists in humanitarian interventions in the Sahel.** Appropriate humanitarian interventions in the Sahel should be developed and tailored to pastoralist needs. Pastoralist community organisations have the best insight to identify these interventions, which should **focus on protecting their lives and livelihoods.**



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Special attention should be given to pastoralists in humanitarian interventions in the Sahel. Appropriate humanitarian interventions should be developed and tailored to pastoralist needs.



This means, for instance:

- securing transhumance corridors to enable pastoralist mobility,
- adapting food aid to match the dietary constraints of pastoralists to improve food security,
- providing animal feed and animal health services to preserve optimal production in pastoralists' livestock.

Targeted investments

Along with humanitarian interventions, more structural support should be designed for pastoralists in the Sahel, through **targeted and appropriate investments aimed at developing the pastoralist economy**. The Food and Agriculture Organisation recently analysed the consequences of the lack of investment in pastoralism. These include reduced food security, increased conflict over land, loss of livelihoods and displacement, all of them very topical in the Sahel (FAO, 2020).

As mentioned above, pastoralism has a huge potential for socio-economic development in the Sahel and in the fight against food insecurity and hunger. In order to reach full potential, pastoral livelihoods in rural areas of the Sahel should become a priority for massive investments. Again, these investments should be guided by pastoralist civil society organisations, which are best placed to identify their own needs and discuss how they can be addressed with local governments. Involving communities (and pastoralist communities in particular) is clearly vital to mitigate the ongoing governance crisis. If this is not done, all other investments will be wasted.

International donors should also invest in pastoralism in the Sahel through their development co-operation and allocate the same importance to pastoralism as to other types of smallholder

farming. Military expenditure in the region is enormous and whilst some of it is undoubtedly necessary, investment in pastoral livelihoods should be part and parcel of a holistic approach to security which should put development and humanitarian objectives at the forefront.

An enabling policy framework

However, these investments can only be sustainable if they are accompanied by **an enabling policy framework, effectively implemented and guided by pastoralist communities and their organisations**. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) already has a Transhumance Pastoralist Protocol and Regulation. It is a good starting point as it allows transhumance mobility between ECOWAS states. However, it requires some serious updates and better implementation in national legislation.

Although the countries of the central Sahel have extensive legislation on pastoralism – Niger has the most advanced legislation, with its 'Code Rural' – effective adhesion to the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol is still weak. This is particularly the case in coastal countries where pastoralism is less predominant. This is problematic, considering the transboundary nature of transhumance. In Benin for instance, national boundaries have been closed intermittently since December 2019, in an attempt by the government to deal with conflict. These decisions were mostly based on negative perceptions of pastoralists as troublemakers. In order to avoid this, regional policies on pastoralism need to be updated and implemented at a national level, under the guidance of pastoralist civil society organisations.

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It is vital to invest in pastoralism as a way to mitigate the ongoing multidimensional crisis and to fight insecurity and violence, food insecurity, hunger and further soil degradation.

Conclusion

The ongoing crisis in the Sahel manifests itself in different ways. Endemic violence, food insecurity and hunger are all signs of a deeply entrenched governance crisis, currently aggravated by COVID-19.

In the heart of the Sahel, millions of pastoralists suffer from a lack of investment in their significant socio-economic potential. This has fuelled the current crisis and increased competition for the control and use of land and natural resources, not only amongst pastoralists but also between them and other land users. Increased demographic pressure and climate change are making the situation worse. In this context, some destitute pastoralists have joined non-state armed groups and committed violent acts. However, the majority are looking for ways to continue to make a living from livestock production in the current context. They have had to adapt their production strategy, which has impacted the productivity of their cattle and therefore their livelihood. Under these conditions, they are unable to realise their significant socio-economic and environmental potential. Many have had to flee their homes, with or without their cattle, swelling the ranks of refugee camps.

It is therefore vital to invest in pastoralism as a way to mitigate the ongoing multidimensional crisis and to fight insecurity and violence, food insecurity, hunger and further soil degradation. The huge socio-economic and environmental potential of pastoralism in the Sahel should be fully realised through targeted investments. This process should be led by pastoralist civil society organisations and local governance structures to



consolidate the rule of law in the Sahel and thus to address the ongoing political and governance crisis. Nevertheless, the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons – often pastoralists – also require appropriate humanitarian interventions which should take pastoralists' lives and livelihoods into account.

Finally, as pastoralism has no borders, specific efforts should be made to create an enabling policy environment, to update the ECOWAS Transhumance Pastoralist Protocol and Regulation and to convert it into national regulations in order to facilitate trans-boundary transhumance. Just like investments, this process should be steered by pastoralist civil society organisations and local governments.

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