Common Effort 2019: A Comprehensive Approach for the G5 Sahel

Challenges and opportunities in the Sahel

In order to understand why the G5 Sahel region merits our attention, the following quote from the Sahel Partnership Action Plan that has been published by the G7 in Biarritz this August shows the potential, but also challenges the Sahel region is faced with:

“With considerable human, cultural and natural resources, tremendous opportunities exist in the Sahel. However, the region currently faces acute risks of destabilization, with security crises fuelled by multiple factors of fragility. These fragilities weaken institutions, weigh heavily on the budgets of Sahel States and are reinforced by inequality, extreme poverty and lack of access to basic social services and economic opportunities, especially for young people and women. In addition, long-term trends, including demographic pressure, food insecurity and environmental degradation, aggravate the complexity of the challenges.”

Yet, in order to understand the complexities of the Sahel fully, let us begin at the start.

The Sahel region

The Sahel is a vast, semi-arid region on the African continent that separates the Sahara Desert in the North with savannas in the South. Located within it are, amongst other countries, the G5 – Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. Together, the five of them are home to approximately 80 million people who mostly depend on subsistence farming, agriculture, fishing and occasionally mining for a living. Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger score very low on the Human Development Index (HDI), with Niger on place 187 out of 188 countries. Mali (place 175) and Mauretania (place 157) score a little better, although the overall situation regarding development in all G5 countries is dire. The five former French colonies face a multitude of challenges: frequent outbursts of violence, trafficking and organized crime, terrorism, little economic prospects, lack of political authority and capacity, corruption, gender-based violence, and restricted access to basic social services. Additionally, they struggle with the first consequences of climate change, which brings severe weather conditions such as droughts or extreme flooding. In turn, these often enhance food insecurity and fuel local conflicts over resources.

One area in the region, called Liptako-Gourma, is especially fragile. Liptako-Gourma is located in the cross-border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso and spans a total of 370,000 km², which is around the size of Poland and the Czech Republic combined. It is sometimes considered the “epicenter of the Sahel crisis” since many of the worst
terrorist attacks, food insecurity, instances of trafficking and violence occur regularly in this region, which has caused great suffering to the people living there.

The G5 Sahel
Hence, in 2014 the G5 countries have banded together and created an alliance with a rotating presidency that is focused on delivering security and development to the Sahel. It is an African initiative that seeks a combination of military, political and developmental solutions to the instability in the region. Furthermore, it wants to foster cooperation between the involved countries.

A feature of the G5 that has received a lot of attention is the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel (FC-G5S), which was established in 2017. Its mandate includes combatting terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking, but it is also allowed to help restore state authority, support humanitarian efforts and facilitate development projects. The force consists of just 5,000 soldiers from G5 Sahel countries who cover the whole area of Liptako-Gourma and more. The men and women can operate within a 50km strip on either side of the joint borders between the five countries, which is especially helpful when dealing with cross-border instability. In addition, the FC-G5S also contains a police component that is aiming at safeguarding the creation and extension of judicial power in FC-G5S operations and ensuring the effectiveness of the criminal justice chain in each of the G5 Sahel countries. It should be mentioned that the initiative receives its funding largely through donations from the international community.

The Alliance Sahel
Not to be confused with the G5 Sahel is the Alliance Sahel, which consists of the EU, some European countries, as well as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program. It is a donor coordination group whose goal is to support and enhance development and stability in the region together with the G5 Sahel. Some European countries, for example Germany, see the region as a crucial factor when it comes to creating stability on the African continent – which in the long run will help manage migration flows to Europe. Others, especially France, hope that, by supporting the G5, their own military engagement in the region can be lessened and eventually ended.

The Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel
During the G7 summit in Biarritz this summer, a Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel has been established within the framework of the Sahel Alliance. It is a cooperation between G5 Sahel countries and their international partners that focuses on identifying security needs and increasing the effectiveness of domestic defense, especially also by improving international coordination, supporting security sector reform and working on the strength of local security forces. Thereby, it is stressed that real stability can only be achieved when security and development efforts go hand in hand.
Some foreign actors are not only politically, but also militarily active in the Sahel. In 2013, after violent uprisings in Northern Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) was established to provide security and help with the stabilization of Mali. With approximately 16,000 personnel, it is one of the biggest security providers in the field. Yet, a large percentage of MINUSMA military comes from G5 countries, raising the question of how long G5 members can sustain staffing both security actors (MINUSMA and the FC-G5S) in large numbers. Additionally, France is active in Chad, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso to assist in the fight against insurgent groups. Operation Barkhane has around 4,500 personnel deployed throughout the G5 Sahel countries. On top of that, the EU offers training and capacity building assistance in Mali and Niger. Germany, as part of its ‘Ertüchtigungsinitiative’, sends military personnel to assist African countries, especially in Mali, to increase their self-reliance and security capabilities. The Netherlands, while having recently ended most of its contributions to MINUSMA, remains an active partner in the Sahel to help the countries create security capabilities and implement human rights fully. For any course of action in the G5 Sahel countries, coordination with the existing security actors from abroad will be crucial.

### Regional actors with influence: ECOWAS and Algeria

Yet, apart from foreign actors, regional stakeholders cannot be neglected. Firstly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) considers the G5 Sahel as a rival organization initiated by three of its own members (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger). It has decried the G5 Sahel as exclusive and instead prefers the Nouakchott process, which is well suited to tackle regional conflicts as it brings West African and Maghreb countries together. Algeria, which is historically weary of anything involving the French government, insists on integrating the G5 Sahel into the Nouakchott process. Hence, it is absolutely vital to prevent rivalries between the different organizations and instead find ways for coordination and cooperation that allow best possible outcomes, even in such a crowded field.

### Tribes and Nomadic Peoples in the Sahel

Getting a grasp of the Sahel is impossible without knowing its tribes and ethnicities. While there are many more, the Fulani and Tuareg people are the most well-known ethnicities in the region. With 25 million members, the Fulani (also known as Peul) are one of the bigger tribal communities in the Sahel, albeit they still often are minorities since their people are spread all over the region. In the G5 countries, they can be found predominantly in Mali and Niger. Their group is split into nomads living from pastoralism...
and more settled farmers. Although all Fulani adhere to Islam, their religious fervor is stronger pronounced among settled and urban communities.

Apart from the Fulani, another major group in the Sahel are the Tuareg. Sometimes they are referred to as “the blue people” due to their indigo-dyed clothing, which tends to rub onto the skin. Their three million members are largely concentrated in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, while some are also found in Algeria and Tunisia. The Tuareg have also split in settled agriculturalists, while some remain nomadic cattle breeders. Pastoralism and caravan trading are their main source of survival. Again, the Tuareg are a Muslim people with a clear social stratification and a rigid caste system. This system includes Islamic scholars, nobles, craftsmen, but also slaves. Hence, although slavery has been formally abolished, it remains a practice in the Sahel.

Tuareg and Fulani people are often in conflict: internally, with each other or with the state they are forced to live in. Especially in Mali, where a large percentage of Tuareg live, recurring conflicts with the Malian government have created animosity. Recently, their grievances have been exacerbated by jihadist uprisings in the area as well as changes in climate that threaten the nomadic lifestyle and the survival of the people dependent on it. Many Tuareg would like to see more autonomy, respect and future perspectives being afforded to them by their government. Following earlier rebellions, in 2012 some Tuareg formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which has aimed at establishing a Tuareg-owned area of land in Mali. Yet, this has not succeeded and instead some Tuareg radicalized and joined terrorist groups. While the remaining MLNA members might even be useful in counter-terrorism due to their extensive knowledge of the region, the peace process with the Tuareg has stalled.

Yet, historically, the Fulani and the Tuareg are also in conflict with each other, whereby the Fulani responded to the Tuareg uprisings by establishing their own militias. This has been fostered and abused by jihadists who recruited among the Fulani population to attack Tuareg and other parts of the population. The so-called “Peul á Moto” are targeted by the Malian government together with the French. However, in a complex conflict like this, Fulani people now run the risk of being categorically associated with terrorism – a connection they sometimes pay with their lives.

As smaller groups, the Dogon and Bambara should be mentioned. The Dogon, who count a population of approximately 350,000 live in the East of Mali and once originated from Burkina Faso. They have their own language, follow own rituals and beliefs and are mostly known for their highly-developed artwork of masks. The Bambara live in the Southeast of Mali and neighboring areas in Burkina Faso. The four million people rely on farming and the vast majority of them adhere to Islam. Yet, they are also in conflict with the other tribes. For example, a Dogon-village in Mali was burnt down and more than 90 civilians died as retaliation for two attacks on Fulani villages by Dogon-militia, in which more than 150 people died. Due to the involvement of extremist religious groups in the region, it would be tempting to identify religion as the main driver of conflict. Yet, ethnic and tribal fault lines, as mentioned before, are of equal
importance to understand and mitigate the dynamics at play. It is obvious that efforts to prevent violent extremism and to curb the influence of jihadist groups are needed as otherwise a lack of opportunities, lack of education and insecure livelihoods will drive more and more youth in the arms of extremists. Furthermore, in the absence of state action, extremist groups present themselves as social liberators in societies that are strictly hierarchic. Additionally, they promise people to help them settle their old scores if they join the organization, which can be appealing in countries where the judicial system is underdeveloped. Hence, the development of counter-terrorism narratives is important to prevent the extension of such parallel systems that challenge the government.

There are no ready-made solutions for highly dynamic and culture-specific conflicts like this one. Mediation efforts between the warring factions are needed to improve social cohesion. The capabilities of women, who can be more interested in creating networks and achieving a peaceful social fabric, should be made better use of. And coordination, on the one hand between the government and communes, but also regarding projects between communes, should be strengthened. On top of that, different languages and dialects between the different countries and tribes can complicate communications and inter-cultural understanding.

**Jihadist groups in the region**

As mentioned, jihadist groups are influential actors in the Sahel. Therefore, let us take a closer look at the organizations and groups that are threatening the stability of the area. It helps to begin with *Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen* (JNIM), who act as an umbrella organization for al-Qaeda-aligned groups and is headed by the Tuareg militant leader Iyad Ag Ghali. *Ansar Al-Din*, a terrorist group founded by Ghali around 2011 and is composed mostly by Tuareg fighters, is part of JNIM and partly responsible for the attack at Aguelhoc in 2012, where many Malian soldiers were killed. Another sub-group of JNIM is *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM). It operates widely in the Sahel, but is especially strong in Mali. The group *Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJAO), also known as the *al-Mourabitoun*, split from AQIM and later joined JNIM. It has focused especially on soft targets, such as hotels or cafés. Also, *Katibat Macina*, led by the Fulani preacher Amadou Kouffa, is part of JNIM and one of the most active in Mali, where it has attacked hotels and UN forces. It was especially successful in exploiting the conflict between Fulani communities and pastoralists.
Outside of JNIM, the group Ansarul Islam operates in Mali, Burkina Faso and along the border with Niger. It began as a localized insurgency under the leadership of Malam Ibrahim Dicko and is largely made out of Fulani fighters. Ansarul Islam holds strong ties with Katibat Macina. Other jihadist organizations, for example Katibat AAA with the Tuareg leader Almansour Ag Alkassoum, and other smaller groups support jihadist activities in the area. Furthermore, Boko Haram has been active in Niger.

All of them strive to implement Islamic law (shariah law) and to drive out foreign forces embodied by the UN, EU or French missions. Primarily, the jihadists target foreign military, local government officials and civilians who are opposing them, but also business personnel and private organizations are often attacked as they are seen as ‘looting local resources’. Often, the terrorist groups also exploit local grievances and present themselves as an alternative to a corrupt government, which can appeal to the population.

**What measures have been tried so far? Two examples of counter-terrorism**

Of course, this is not going to be an exhaustive list of all measures that have been implemented in the region regarding the fight against terrorism. Instead, this will focus on two examples that have been tried so far that should demonstrate the complexity of the task.

*Ban on Motorcycles and Pick-up Trucks*

Firstly, states in the Liptako-Gourma region have implemented a restrictive ban on motorbikes and pick-up trucks as they have often been used to carry out attacks. Additionally, terrorists often buy food supplies on the weekly markets of villages. Hence, in some areas these markets have also been closed. Yet, these counter-terrorism measures have restricted the freedom of movement of local populations significantly and affected their livelihood. For instance, prices for transport have risen and supply chains have been disrupted, which in turn created a spike in food prices and added to the risk of food insecurity in the region. Furthermore, in some regions, medical personnel, who use motorcycles for their daily work, refuse to visit these areas under the conditions of the state of emergency. An important point that should not be forgotten is that markets are also social hubs and spaces for cultural and political exchanges of the population, so that their closure has affected social cohesion negatively. Therefore, it is questionable whether the measures taken by the government are effective – especially considering that terrorists adapted quickly and numbers of attacks are on the rise again. It becomes obvious that any measure in such a difficult environment can produce unintended consequences.

*Sticks and Carrots for jihadists*

Mauretania, which is the smallest G5 member population-wise with only 4 million inhabitants, has followed a different approach. Although the government did use ‘hard’ counter-terrorism measures against jihadists that included arrests, raids and increased border patrols, they also did not shy away from tackling the issue of theology and doctrine. For instance, Mauretania’s religious scholars engaged
imprisoned jihadists in dialogue about the legitimacy of using violence for their goals and supported them to reintegrate into society after their prison term, using the Quran and contemporary Islamic thinkers for their argumentations. Additionally, Mauretania allows clerics to continue preaching as long as certain red lines, such as incitement of violence against the government, are not crossed. Indeed, Mauretania has not suffered major terrorist attacks, which is quite astonishing, considering the increase in violence from 2005 to 2011. Whether this is due to the dialogue is debatable. Other reasons can be Mauretania’s decision not to join the French Operation Serval (which came before the above mentioned Operation Barkhane), which appeased AQIM. Therefore, it is not easy to tell whether Mauretania has unlocked the key to successfully combatting terrorism. Yet, it does show an interesting local approach regarding the treatment of terrorists.

Comprehensive Approach

It has become evident that lasting stability and peace in such difficult conflict situations like the ones in the Sahel can best be achieved through a Comprehensive Approach (sometimes also referred to as the Integrated Approach by the EU for instance). This means that military, political and civilian means need to be combined to tackle crises and conflicts head-on. Therefore, governmental institutions, the military, IOs or NGOs and the private sector all come together to work on agreed-upon goals, albeit from different angles. While differences in mandate, decision-making speed and strength need to be taken into account, information sharing and mutual understanding of goals allows for decisive crisis management. The Comprehensive Approach is best characterized by pro-active engagement, shared responsibility and understanding as well as a unity of aim.

For such an effort to work, the following cross-cutting elements should be considered in all syndicates wanting to come up with a Comprehensive Approach for the area.

Cross-cutting elements through all syndicates

One crucial element is mediation, because long-held grievances, which need addressing, are found all over the Sahel. Often, traditional means to conflict resolution and mediation exist, but their practice has subsided or become inefficient and must be reactivated again. This should be a priority as dialogue between different groups, especially farmers and pastoralists, is needed more than ever. Otherwise even small, local disputes run the risk of being turned into militarized conflicts – which in turn can be exploited by terrorist groups for their own goals.

Furthermore, the UN considers the Sahel region as “one of the most vulnerable to climate change”. Effects from climate change and environmental degradation are affecting the daily lives of people in the Sahel tremendously: droughts, flooding, storms, and the drying up of formerly fertile grounds reduce possibilities for pastoralism and threaten the livelihood and food security of millions of people. Additionally, gender-based violence and oppression endanger especially the women of the Sahel. Forced marriage, sexual violence and rape, human trafficking, domestic slavery and harmful traditions such as female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) are widespread in the Sahel. As illustrated by Dr. Nafissatou Diop from the UNFPA in an Amnesty International Report, “The girl who undergoes FGM/C is the same girl who is taken out of school early to marry. And this is the same girl who dies before she reaches age
20, giving birth to her third child.” Before real change is possible, these harmful realities of women in the region need to be addressed with utmost urgency.

The Sahel is one of the most youthful regions worldwide with more than 60% of its population aged below 25. In order to increase resilience against the lures of terrorist groups and the difficult environment these young men and women grow up in, viable perspectives for their future are needed. It is crucial to find ways for **female and youth empowerment** in which they can meaningfully take on responsibility and leadership in their communities and society as a whole. Especially the position of women in that regard should be strengthened since they often face even greater challenges to have their needs and voices heard compared to their male counterparts.

Last but not least, **coordination** efforts are of major importance in an arena with so many stakeholders and organizations. Hence, the government, its institutions and the military within Liptako-Gourma should work together more closely, but also relief and support efforts by NGOs, IOs, foreign governments and other actors can increase their synchronization efforts. It is especially important to ensure that no rivalry develops between the different actors, but that they pool resources and divide tasks in an efficient manner. Additionally, the question remains who is in a position to facilitate such coordination between the different actors in various areas best.
Syndicate I: The FC-G5S and the Comprehensive Approach

How can the FC-G5S integrate development support into its security framework?

One of the most discussed features of the G5 Sahel is without doubt its military force component. Although it also has the capability to support humanitarian and development efforts, its solutions to the challenges in the Liptako-Gourma region and the Sahel zone in general have been decidedly military.

On the one hand, even in the military realm it faces challenges. Its weakest members (Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali) face the brunt of responsibility for action in the Liptako-Gourma region, where the biggest threats culminate. On top of that, it is difficult to clearly identify military targets as civilians and members of terrorist groups are hard to distinguish – and sometimes civilians knowingly or unknowingly assist the terror groups. This has led to the use of military force against civilians and fueled hatred and mistrust among the population vis-a-vis its own military. None of this was helped by the fact that the military committed human rights abuses against its own people. For instance, a Human Rights Watch Report titled “By day we fear the army, by night the jihadists” shows the predicament the people of the Sahel are caught up in. This has tarnished the reputation of the military at home and abroad and shown the need for better accountability and oversight of the military, so that the legitimacy of the force can be increased again. And again, strong coordination with the other security players in the field is absolutely necessary.

On the other hand, the military faces a challenge regarding how to incorporate its development mandate into its agenda and to foster the comprehensive approach. Focusing only on military efforts has so far not won the hearts and minds of the people the military is trying to convince. Hence, a stronger effort to incorporate human security (which includes personal, economic, food, health, environmental, community and political security) in its actions would be helpful. For example, it could already help when teachers or foreign health workers are adequately protected so that they can safely execute their services to society. Additionally, support for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the millions in need is strongly required. Last but not least, the police force of the FC-G5S should be adequately incorporated and prepared to take on tasks of law enforcement so that the military will not be forced to take on this task as well.

**Food for thought:**
- Which mechanisms are available/should be created by whom to hold the force accountable?
- How can civil-military interaction and communication be improved?
- How can development support be integrated into the work of the FC-G5S?
Syndicate II: Innovation for Development and Stability (I4DS)

*How can innovation be used to increase stability and future prospects in the Sahel region?*

The Sahel region is depending on innovative, effective approaches that can transform its economy and with it the lives of millions of people. High poverty, high youth unemployment and dependency on development assistance characterize its current economic situation. Agriculture is the major economic sector for the majority of Sahel’s population. Nevertheless, the Sahel zone has a huge potential for renewable energy, especially when it comes to solar and wind. Additionally, its young population is eager to work and the Sahel zone is rich in natural resources (oil, gas, gold, diamonds, copper, iron, ore, bauxite, precious woods etc.). Still, in order to turn the resource curse into a resource blessing, taking action is required.

For instance, the “Great Green Wall” is an African-led movement that aims at building 8.000km of plants and trees across the entire width of the African continent. It has started roughly ten years ago and is 15% completed. By restoring degraded land, the initiative gives people a reason to stay, improves food security and increases resilience to climate change in the region. Yet, the actual success of this project is contested. Another approach is Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration, which is a method developed by Tony Rinaudo in the beginning of the 1980s in Niger. He discovered that many trees in the region only appear to be dead and during rain periods actually sprout shoots. Farmers often let their cattle graze the sprouts or let the trees be consumed by fire when burning down their own fields after the harvest. Yet, with the right technique, these trees can blossom. Not only are they then accustomed to the climate there, they also provide food, firewood and protection of farmland from storms and erosion. So sometimes just overcoming fixed ideas and traditions around farming can already lead to innovative, effective approaches securing livelihoods of people.

Additionally, local start-ups, micro- or small-scale-businesses and technological innovation often need initial financial support to take off, which is hard to secure in Liptako-Gourma. Yet, they can be powerful tools in tackling climate change and youth unemployment among men and women. The question is how new technology, adaptation of existing ideas and the merge of traditional and new business approaches can boost local business. For example, the Ghanaian start-up “Anitrack” inserts a small tracker into the rumen of cows. The tracker can then transmit information about the health and whereabouts of an animal, which helps farmers to prevent diseased or locate escaped or stolen animals easily. Another start-up named “Complete Farmer” works like Farmville in real-life: investors from all over the world supply the money and then Ghanaian farmers cooperating with the platform grow their foodstuff. Investors can monitor what is happening on “their” farm in real-time and decide when to sell how much of the grown food. Such projects can make farming an attractive future-perspective for young people.

**Food for thought:**
- How can the natural resources in the Sahel zone best be used to foster the economy of the country?
- How can digital innovation meet traditional business for boosting economy and income?
Syndicate III: Good governance

How can the reach of the government and the trust in its institutions among the population be increased?

A major issue in the Sahel region is the lack of trust in the state and its institutions, especially in the marginalized rural border areas. The population often regards the state as a foreign entity that has abandoned them and does not provide the services and security the people need. Due to a lack of basic service provision, corruption and the inability of public servants to carry out their duties, populations have turned to jihadist groups, who present themselves as pious, emancipatory alternatives to the incompetent government. The governance crisis has been worsened by high unemployment, low education and literacy levels and inadequate health care systems.

Additionally, many people, and among them a significant number of children, are vulnerable to fall victim to labor and sex trafficking organizations in the Sahel. Especially already marginalized communities face a risk of being forced into domestic servitude or prostitution. Yet, the government struggles to afford them protection. Furthermore, adults and children from traditional slave-casts - and also the NGOs that work to help them - are sometimes not adequately supported.

Due to the on-going conflicts and instability, currently more than 4.2 million people are internally displaced in the Sahel region. “Food insecurity and malnutrition, fueled by poverty, climate shocks and conflict continue stalking the Sahel region,” said Abdou Dieng, Regional Director for the UN World Food Program in West and Central Africa. Hence, humanitarian assistance and emergency relief needs to be given to the most vulnerable, particularly women and children, as fast as possible. Yet, this is often hindered by poor road conditions where usually bribes are required for using them. Additionally, the aforementioned ban on pick-up trucks and motorcycles makes relief efforts harder.

Apart from the failure of government itself, some of its sectors are severely lacking in capacity. Firstly, instead of trusting in courts and the judicial system as a whole, many people prefer to use traditional approaches or jihadist interpretations of Sharia law to settle conflicts. This weakens the rule of law and undermines state structures. When reforming the judicial system, special attention should be paid to include programs which enable women to fight gender-based violence with judicial means. Secondly, the military often takes on tasks that should ideally be carried out by a police force, for example regarding the pacification of conflicts emerging from cattle theft, which is a continuous source of disruption in the region. Reliable, independent police forces with investigative capabilities the military does not (and should not have to) possess are needed.

Food for thought:
-How can decentralization processes be fostered so that government reach extends to rural areas far away from the capitals? How can the cooperation between government and local entities be improved?
-How can humanitarian assistance be better provided to those in need?
-What role can the government play regarding mediation and coordination efforts in the region?
-Should the government be in dialogue with jihadists or outright reject any contact?
**Sources and further reading**

The following sources have been clustered according to which general topic they fit best in order to provide some orientation to the reader. Yet, most sources contain information on a multitude of issues so that their categorization should not be seen as finite – instead, broad reading is encouraged.

**General Information and Cross-Cutting Topics**


**The Joint Force of the Sahel (FC-G5S)**


Good Governance and governmental approaches to preventing/ countering violent extremism


Innovation for development and stability (I4DS)


