POLICY BRIEF

Comparing Approaches to the Security-Development Nexus in the Sahel and their Implications for Governance

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This essay explores how the competing and complementary dimensions of the security, governance and development nexus have been brought to bear in the three core countries of the Sahel - Mali, Mauritania and Niger - and in doing so identifies the main challenges to peacebuilding and state consolidation in the region.

Introduction: A shaky foundation

The three core countries of the Sahel region – Mali, Mauritania and Niger – are among the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the world, ranking at the very bottom of global human development indicators (UNDP, 2013). Famed for their vast 'ungoverned spaces', the Sahel countries sit at the heart of a perfect storm of human insecurity, facing multiple challenges in terms of extreme poverty, the effects of climate change, frequent food crises, rapid population growth, fragile governance, corruption, internal tensions and conflicts, the risk of violent extremism and radicalisation, illicit trafficking of different kinds – notably drugs, and terrorist-linked security threats. The problems in the Sahel are cross-border and closely intertwined, and few regions better exemplify inter-dependence of security, governance, human rights and development challenges. This essay explores how the competing and complementary dimensions of the security-development nexus have been brought to bear in the Sahel, and in doing so identifies the main challenges to peacebuilding, governance and state consolidation in the region.

Although poverty is characteristic of the entire Sahelian band, the cultural makeup of these states is extremely diverse. Historically, semi-nomadic tribes lived in the region, and the area was marked as a major trade route – comparable to the Silk Road in Asia – where the free movement of people and goods served both as an economic and social resilience strategy (Reitano and Shaw, 2014). In the wake of the decolonisation of Africa, artificial boundaries imposed by colonial powers divided several ethnic tribes and clans, and dispersed others across national borders that span the Sahara desert. Colonialism translated into highly centralised, often authoritarian modes of governance and triggered the domination of one clan or ethnic group over others. Some transitioned into weak multi-party democracies, with little capacity to project influence or realise development for their populations – most notably those communities in hinterland areas. Perceived inequality in human rights, ethnic discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation, laid the foundation for many major conflicts throughout the Sahel, in particular for the nomadic populations who sit astride many of the Sahel borderlands. These issues continue to be the trigger for conflict to the present day, including the recent conflict in northern Mali in 2012 (Reitano and Shaw, 2013).

Human rights and security

Despite formal subscription by the countries in the Sahel to regional and international standards of governance and human rights, the reality is that poor governance, corruption and human rights violations are far more characteristic of states. Access to justice is typically minimal in all of these countries, and a growing Islamic fundamentalism is encroaching upon the rights of women in particular, as well as other human rights principles (Affa'a Mindzie, 2013). Mauritania is notorious for its highly repressive regime, brutal military and security institutions, restrictions on the freedom of speech and expression, torture, discrimination and forced disappearances (Amnesty International, 2013a). As the threat of terrorism grows in the region, the human rights and security picture for the Sahel is further complicated. As Stewart points out 'a government's failure to protect its people from such [terrorist] acts has come to be considered a human rights violation itself' (Stewart, 2006: 267). The challenge then becomes how the state chooses to respond to terrorism, and in some countries in the region, this has resulted in human rights abuses or severe repression. Two years of crisis in Mali, from 2010–12, led to serious human rights violations committed by both Malian security forces and

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the various armed groups in the north, including extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests and detention (Amnesty International, 2013b). These violations are to be addressed in the recently established Malian Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission. Niger's otherwise positive human rights record is marred only by abuses related to terror suspects (Amnesty International, 2013c).

Integrated strategies for the Sahel

Since the United Nations Secretary-General firmly asserted in 2004 that there was an 'inextricable link' between security and development, the concept is now well secured in the rhetoric of international affairs (Stern and Öjendal, 2010). Even earlier debates on the subject recognised the need to create 'capable states' able to provide security, well-being, and justice' if vicious cycles of conflict, poverty and human vulnerability were to be avoided (International Peace Academy, 2004: 6). But enacting an effective response has proved more challenging. As a recent book on the subject regretfully concluded:

> The policies driven by the nexus approach also suffer from a huge disparity between policy and implementation, an absence of real local involvement, and a scarcity of resources. Moreover, the security-development nexus has led, to a certain extent, to a conceptual chaos. (Amer et al, 2012: 2)

In post-conflict environments in particular, there are some systemic differences between the security agenda and the development agenda that have created challenges in the deployment of an integrated approach. These tend to centre on the need to secure rapid security gains and stabilise the conflict, promoting a strategy of quick wins and visible impact; whereas to realise true development gains, establish capable institutions and build a culture predicated on human rights and the rule of law, requires a commitment of resources and engagement over multiple generations. Similarly, for a sustainable resolution to crises and the prevention of further instability the longer term approach is required, yet few donors have appetite or political will to support this degree of intervention (Stern and Öjendal, 2010). Taking things another step forward and deploying security and development interventions in a preventive way, before threats have been overtly realised, requires a donor mind-set that is in short supply or may indeed be prevented by conditions placed on development financing (OECD, 2012).

The EU was the first to issue an integrated strategy for the Sahel whose objectives explicitly recognised that 'security and development in the Sahel cannot be separated, and that helping these countries achieve security is integral to enabling their economies to grow and poverty to be reduced' (EU, 2011: 1). In response to the growing terrorist threat presented by the affiliation of the group now known as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), discussions began on the need for an integrated approach in the Sahel as early as 2008, but the EU

strategy was not published until 2011. Merging security and development, the strategy seeks to recast existing links and initiatives through the allocation of additional funding from versatile funding instruments, better alignment of the existing funding instruments deployed by the EU, and the formulation of more specific policies on a security framework.

This approach by the EU was followed by a number of other actors, including individual EU Members States, the USA and Canada, when the threat from terrorist acts targeted at foreign interests in the region continued to escalate both in Mali and Niger as well as further north in some of the Maghreb states. While it is reasonably overtly understood that Western countries in the Sahel are motivated by a desire to mitigate threats to their own interests – controlling terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal migration – to do so requires addressing the 'arc of instability' of the Sahel borders (UNSC, 2013). It is asserted that if approaches to the Sahel are to bring tangible results, existing policies focused on addressing the region's long-standing development and governance challenges need to be supplemented with support to the justice and security sectors through an integrated approach that combines security and development (Hatzigeorgopoulos, 2013). Policies need to be targeted at the disenfranchised nomadic populations of the Sahara, to subdue discontent and reduce the growth of violent extremism (Center on Global Counter-terrorism Cooperation, 2013).

Accountability, impunity and international intervention

The paucity of viable economic alternatives in the region has made the countries of the Sahel highly responsive to donor needs and interests. Amadou Toumani Touré, President of Mali from 2002–12 was famed for his courtship of foreign donors, ceding key sovereign responsibilities to international actors, including the right of passage and border control (Thurston, 2012a). Given the sheer volume of EU funding – the EU is by far the biggest donor in the region (Reitano et al, 2014) – it has unparalleled capacity to leverage states' priority-setting and there are a number of examples where EU development assistance has been made conditional on specific actions from Sahel states. In 2009, the EU suspended its development assistance in Niger in response to the continuation of elections regardless of an opposition boycott protesting unconstitutional proposals made by the President whose policies had become increasingly hostile to occidental interests. The successive government took a far more conciliatory approach (ICG, 2013).

Corruption, however, extends to the highest levels of government, the state and the private sector, and permeates down through all levels of state institutions and societal fabric in the Sahel (Thurston, 2012b). The experiences of citizens described at community level paint a picture of pervasive corruption that taints all aspects of their lives and their understanding of citizenship and statehood. Across the region, even to get the most basic of state services – an identification card, healthcare or judicial

services – requires bribery, influence or connections. 'Impunity is everywhere, because there is no state and no authority' (Reitano and Shaw, 2014). Elites have proven connections to illicit trafficking, terrorism, corruption and graft (Lacher, 2012), which has undermined citizens' trust in their leadership and institutions of state (Reitano and Shaw, 2014). It has been recognised that the fight against corruption often sits at the heart of the security, development and governance nexus, as exemplified in this quote from the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon:

> Corruption undermines democracy and the rule of law. It leads to violations of human rights. It erodes public trust in government. It can even kill – for example, when corrupt officials allow medicines to be tampered with, or when they accept bribes that enable terrorist acts to take place. (OHCHR, 2013: 3)

Corruption diverts funds, limiting the capacity of the state to deliver services to its citizens, and serves as a spoiler to the realisation of all human rights – civil, political, and developmental (OHCHR, 2013). Policies driving the anti-corruption agenda, development strategies and human rights protection are typically rooted in common principles of equity, transparency, justice and non-discrimination (Gruenberg, 2009), so responding to corruption within a governance and rule of law framework in the Sahel is a core requirement if other goals of development and security are to be achieved.

For all the Sahel countries, the security priorities of Western donors – in particular fighting terrorism – has been made central to state prioritisation of funding and attention, though interviews with state officials in the region make it clear that this is not considered a domestic problem *per se*. As a senior security official in Mauritania recently explained:

> Mauritania… serves as an instrument to end the complex global terrorist phenomenon. This is a cross-border threat that requires a concerted regional response. Since 2009, Mauritania has responded to the requests of all and acted promptly to stifle this gangrene before it spreads further throughout the region. (Chebani, 2013: 27 – translated from French)

Both senior political and government officials, as well as ordinary citizens, seem to recognise that development assistance is used both as an incentive and also to camouflage overtly security-related objectives. For example, the Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in northern Mali (PSPSDN) plan put in place after the 2006 Tuareg rebellion, and funded by the EU, was clearly foremost a security strategy 'designed to position Mali as a key partner in the global war on terror', rather than a development programme (Reitano and Shaw, 2014: 27) . The funding that was realised against the plan was predominantly deployed for security activities such as the training of security forces, rather than the limited number of development activities also envisaged (Wilandh, 2012).

This integrated security strategy which has been pursued in the Sahel over the last decade has not proved itself to be effective, however, as the collapse of the central state in Mali and the surge in Salafism in the north clearly demonstrate. Recent analysts have explained that this is due to 'the agency and agendas of various actors, including biased regimes that may be complicit in the proliferation of violence, and state policies that create instability through neglect, marginalization, corruption and/or collusion' (Raleigh and Dowd, 2013: 2). A lesson learned, therefore, is that if integrated strategies are to be effective, the provision of social goods must be motivated by the intention of providing benefit to the people by whatever means are appropriate to the local context. Turning the concept of the security-development nexus on its head, for example, it is only the military that can reach into the ungoverned spaces at the furthest limits of Mauritania's borders. Despite the fact that the Mauritanian military is generally deplored for its human rights abuses, the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) commencing in 2014, will provide DAC funding to support the delivery of development assistance by the Mauritanian military (Reitano et al, 2014).

The security-development spectrum

By contrast, excessive focus on terrorist threats and security concerns runs the risk of ignoring crucial internal dynamics – such as governance and human rights – and can come at the explicit cost of development. Senior government officials in Niger have had to cut budgets for social services and the economy to meet the demands of the international community for strengthening security capacity following the Mali coup (ICG, 2013). Given that President Issoufou took office on a platform of governance and development, diversions of this sort are unlikely to establish or reinforce a bond of trust between the state and the people. In May 2013, the UN Security Council issued a statement on security in the Sahel recognising that 'terrorism will not be defeated by military force or security forces, law enforcement measures, and intelligence operations alone' and underlining 'the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, including, but not limited to, strengthening efforts for the successful prevention and peaceful resolution of prolonged conflicts, and also promoting the rule of law, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, tolerance and inclusiveness' (UNSC, 2013: 5). In short, the call from the UN appears to be for a rebalancing of focus away from security, and towards development and human rights. However, some analysts have proposed that an over-emphasis on human rights in the context of peacebuilding and state consolidation can be counter-productive, as human rights and peacebuilding are antithetical disciplines. Human rights has a tendency to work in 'black and white', with its focus on meeting high standards, delivering justice and retribution. By contrast, creating the foundations for peacebuilding and statehood in a post-conflict environment requires more inclusive, more accommodating and more

conciliatory approaches that bring a diversity of parties to the table (Bell, 2006).

For the countries of the Sahel, a variety of approaches along this spectrum have been applied. In post-conflict Mali, the emphasis appears to have been on the human rights led approach. In June 2013, the Malian transitional government and some armed groups in the north – including the MNLA – signed a 'Preliminary Agreement for the Presidential Election and Comprehensive Peace Talks in Mali', but this agreement did not include three other principal armed groups (Ansar Eddin, AQIM, and MUJAO) that are purported to have terrorist linkages. While these groups may still be able to influence the debate remotely, they are not included formally or legitimately as part of the peace/statebuilding process. The terms of the cessation of hostilities also stipulated a cantonment process for armed groups, and provided for 'the establishment, as soon as possible, of an international commission of inquiry into war crimes, crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, crimes of sexual violence, drug trafficking and other serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law throughout the entire Malian territory' (Amnesty International, 2013b: 9).

By contrast, the reconciliation arrangement put in place in Niger following the coup in February 2010 was considerably more inclusive and provided significant concessions to the various conflict parties. It also created a number of new institutions to protect and reinforce good governance, including bodies for corruption monitoring and financial transparency. This included provisions to promote the inclusion of civil society and religious groups into the democratic process, including the convening of regular meetings, known as 'peace forums', in the major conflict theatres. Involving representatives of government, civil society and former members of armed groups, these forums continue to this day (ICG, 2013). While inclusiveness requires a greater degree of negotiation, concessions and coalition building on the part of the leadership, there is a broad-reaching investment into democracy and peace in Niger that is not found in neighbouring countries in the Sahel and West Africa.

Towards a context driven strategic approach

The value of open and inclusive debate and widespread consultation allows a degree of self-determination and ownership of the governance process. Raleigh and Dowd argue that in the Sahel specifically, the emphasis by international donors on state-centric democracy may in fact not provide an appropriate mode of governance for the region, particularly in the hinterlands, and to continue to attempt to project the central state into the remote areas, typically characterised as 'ungoverned', through decentralisation is to ensure a continuation of the cycle of state failure (Raleigh and Dowd, 2013). Instead, recognition should be given to local power brokers who hold potent sway over community dynamics – recognising that this may include groups perceived as 'terrorist' by foreign powers. They argue that terrorist acts undertaken against both the state and foreign interests are more likely 'rebel

groups dedicated to changing the regime within a state, militia groups organised by regional or local powers to secure power therein, or those engaging in the communal contests' than groups with a classic jihadist agenda (ibid, 2013: 4). Furthermore, while illicit trafficking and migrant smuggling may fund insurgency movements, terrorism and criminal acts, they also provide necessary livelihoods and social capital in regions where few legitimate alternatives exist (Reitano and Shaw, 2013). Excluding those groups from the peacebuilding debate makes their acts more flamboyant and provocative, rather than less so. Genuine efforts to listen to and respond to their priorities – which more often than not are a request for equality of treatment and access to sustainable development – will pay greater dividend for long-term stability (Reitano and Shaw, 2014).

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, what this analysis has shown is that the security-development 'nexus' is best understood as a spectrum of activity. Although a security strategy for the Sahel focused on strengthening the capacity of state institutions to combat organised crime and controlling borders is necessary, given the vast expanse of borderlands in question, to do so comprehensively is an impossible task, and all evidence thus far in the region has demonstrated that it is unlikely to be effective on its own.

International actors need to move towards a more nuanced, situation specific, and broader community based approach, that does not simply repeat the mantra of the security-development nexus. They should not assume a simple trajectory of progress towards democracy and sustainable development when in reality corruption disrupts and distorts processes of governance and infringes human rights. Instead, genuine, long-term development-centric approaches are required, based on locally derived and owned solutions. This approach will ensure that when the international community turns its attention away from the Sahel once more, they do not again leave behind weak and hollow states and disenfranchised people, a situation that provides the pre-conditions for insecurity far more potent than the current perceived terrorist threats.

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