

# PEACEBUILDING IN THE SAHEL:

Proposals from civil society to go beyond the military response and commit to a 'civilian and political leap forward' from a feminist and human rights-based approach

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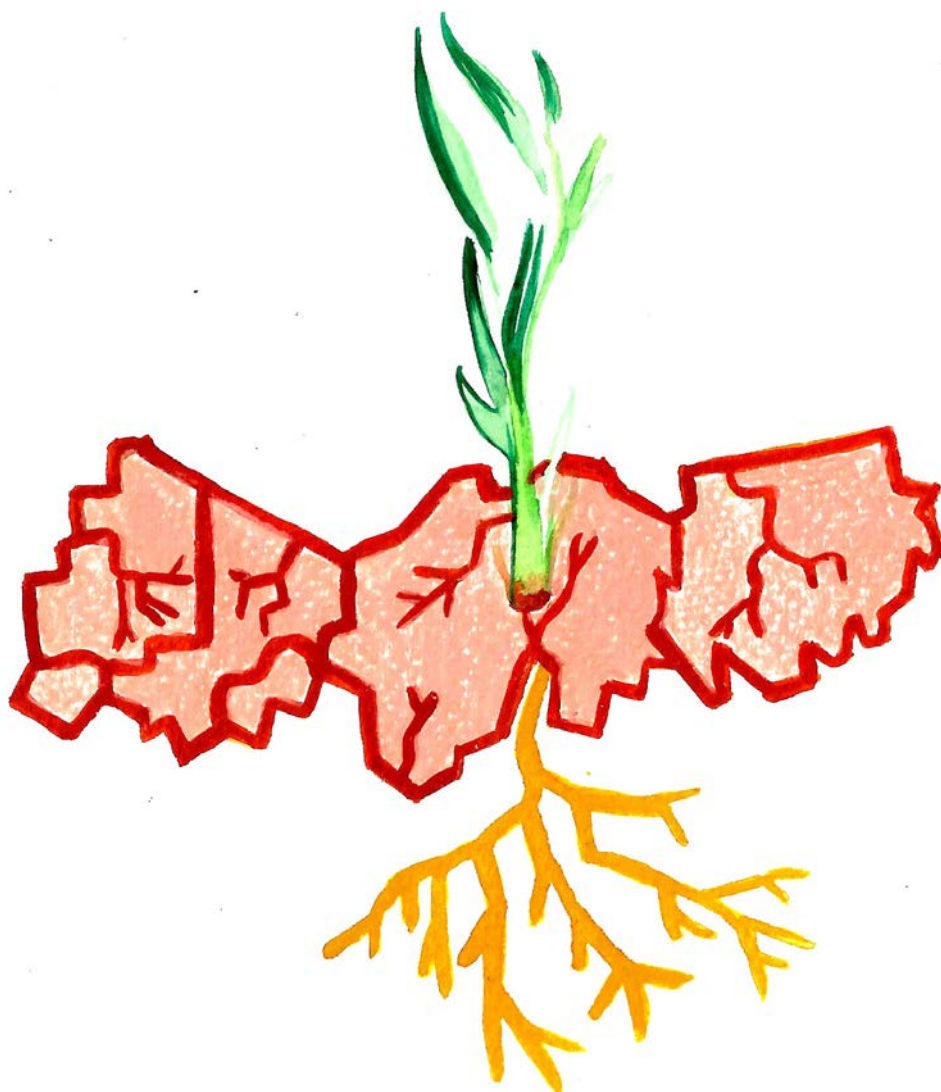
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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project *Peacebuilding in the Sahel: Proposals from civil society to go beyond the military response and commit to a 'civilian and political leap forward' from a feminist and human rights-based approach* emerged as the second phase of a collaborative initiative between Alianza por la Solidaridad, the Grupo de Estudios Africanos (GEA) of the Autonomous University of Madrid and Oxfam Intermon to elaborate on the role of Spain and the EU in the Sahel region and to formulate proposals for a feminist foreign policy.

Initially designed as a single international seminar focused on analysing and debating multidimensional crises in the Sahel, this face-to-face event became a series of virtual events due to the pandemic. To this end, every Tuesday from 1 February to 1 March 2022, five discussion sessions were held in which 18 speakers took part, 10 of whom were women (including five Sahelian activists and researchers and three institutional representatives).



## DEBATE CYCLE: 'DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CRISIS IN THE SAHEL'



***Different views on the multidimensional crisis in the Sahel***, is the title of the debate cycle that invited African, Spanish and European voices to discuss the various interrelated crises that plague the countries of the region. It also discussed the impacts of the response that the European Union (EU) and Spain have so far offered. Furthermore, the debate cycle aimed to reflect on the active role of Sahelian civil societies, learning the views of the African people who participated and the demands they make.

This initiative aims to reflect on the Sahel's main challenges (in particular Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) building stable and lasting

peace. Through the alternatives proposed by organized civil society from the region and other specialists in this space for dialogue, a series of recommendations are made to redirect Spain and the EU's current foreign policy in the area and bring this reality closer to a wider audience.

The starting hypothesis that lead to proposing this debate is recognizing that due to the complex situation in the Sahel, the presence of international actors in the area must be reviewed. To this end, their current logic of action – based mainly on security and the consequent military intervention – must be deconstructed, inviting them to reformulate such beyond the narrative of fatality.



## CONTEXT: THE SAHEL CRISIS

The subjects addressed during the five **Sahel debate cycle** sessions were influenced by the region's current circumstances. Interestingly, the opening session discussed the nexus between security and development in the EU and Spain's Foreign Policy in the Sahel, just one week after the coup d'état in Burkina Faso and the imposition of collective sanctions on Mali. The debate cycle opened on the same day as the failed coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and two weeks before the African Union-European Union (AU-EU) summit.

Governance and democracy problems, together with the security crisis, marked the peacebuilding debates, which were held as news was received about the French ambassador being expelled from Mali and troops withdrawing from the 'Barkhane' (French) and 'Takuba' (European) military operations.

The debate on the role of Official Development Assistance coincided with civil society in the Sahel strongly demanding greater horizontality in donor-recipient relations just two days before the AU-EU summit. The conference on feminist foreign policy was held within the framework of presenting the new Spanish Cooperation Law's progress. Finally, the closing session reviewed the previous debates focusing on the climate emergency, with a view to the next COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022.

At present, state fragility or the absence of a state in the Sahel countries, human rights violations, social and economic inequalities, the growing insecurity and instability in the region – mainly due to the incursion of armed groups – and the consequences of climate change

have had a strong impact on the population. A humanitarian crisis of alarming proportions is taking place in the Sahel, according to UNHCR in its 2020 report, which outlines that various conflicts have provoked the displacement of more than 2.5 million people and 850,000 refugees.<sup>1</sup>

The situation has worsened to the extent that other international organizations warn that **'35 million people in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger will face acute food and livelihood crises**. They will have virtually **nothing to eat** and will suffer food insecurity and malnutrition in the next period between harvests'.<sup>2</sup> After three years of ongoing degradation, the Sahel faces the worst food crisis in a decade.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis#\\_ga=2.73236243.1836858246.1649156308-1465924472.1648465182](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis#_ga=2.73236243.1836858246.1649156308-1465924472.1648465182)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.accioncontraelhambre.org/es/sahel-actuar-ya-para-evitar-crisis-alimentaria>

<sup>3</sup> Sahel and West Africa: unprecedented food and nutrition insecurity, The Regional Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) West Africa

# SUMMARY OF THE SESSIONS

## SESSION 1. The security and development nexus in Spanish and European foreign policy in the Sahel. Assessment, challenges, lessons learned and opportunities for change to respect human rights.

- Beatriz Novales, Programme Director at Oxfam Intermon, who opened the discussion cycle
- Bernard Quintin, Deputy Managing Director for Africa, European External Action Service (EEAS)
- Alicia Rico, Africa Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (MAUC in Spanish)
  - Ornella Moderan, Sahel Research Officer, Institute for Security Studies (ISS)
- Moderator: Ivan Navarro, School for a Culture of Peace, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)

### - Governance crisis

The governance and democracy crisis in the region leads to the need to reconsider the state, meaning that allies (the EU and international organizations) must act differently, Ornella Moderan (ISS) stated. She revealed that the democratic model in the region has been reduced to the electoral dimension, which is not sufficient to exercise democracy since it must include a comprehensive dimension of good governance and accountability.

### - Global strategy and a less militarized approach

The counter-terrorism response promoted by international actors, including Spain and the EU, has been useful, but it is clear that it has not been sufficient, Moderan stated. To devise a global strategy, the stratification and nature of the region's societies must first be heard, because the international community talks about strengthening confidence, but leaves understanding the area's different social realities to one side.

She also noted that Russia's arrival in the region has an impact in terms of human rights – although French and European military operations have also had an impact. However, the problem lies in the ultra-militarized approach to peacebuilding and, in Russia's case, the privatized approach. To overcome this scenario, she proposed that European actors reposition themselves towards an alternative peacebuilding approach that is not exclusively military, but which also has an impact on humanitarian response and protection.

### - Sahel civil society

African voices reiterated an important point: the need for the EU and Spain to listen more to the demands and proposals of civil society in the region. In this context, the EEAS Deputy Managing Director for Africa, Bernard Quintin,



acknowledged that the EU's focus on the fight against terrorism has pushed into the background factors that play a role in the root causes of this multidimensional crisis (such as social inequalities, economic inequalities, the climate crisis, etc.). There is a clear need to design policies based on a comprehensive analysis of the context in which they are aimed, not to mention consulting with civil society.

### - World Bank, IMF and austerity policies

Moderan commented that analyses of the crisis's causes often overlook the impact of the World Bank and the IMF's structural policies, as well as the states' austerity policies, which lead to a reduced capacity to provide public services. In turn, socio-economic and gender inequalities have increased in all countries of the region.

### - Resource management

During the debate, mention was made of the importance of not participating in simplistic narratives about the ethnic groups in the region to explain or justify existing conflicts. Analysing what mobilizes ethnicity is crucial because, it is generally more about unequal access to resources, and in this, both governments and allies (EU and international organizations) can contribute to change by promoting, for example, agrarian reforms.



## SESSION 2. Different views on peacebuilding. Changing the narrative and belief systems about the Sahel and consolidating civic space.

- Julio Herraiz, Spanish Ambassador on a Special Mission for the Sahel
- Assitan Diallo, President of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AFARD Mali)
- Naomie Ouedraogo, member of the Network of Women of Faith for Peace (NWFP Burkina Faso)
- Moderator: José Naranjo, El País journalist, based in Senegal

### - Crisis causes

AFARD Mali President, Assitan Diallo, noted that bad governance is the root of the problem. She also mentioned paternalistic neo-colonialism, as well as aggressive globalization. According to Diallo, there is a combination of causes in which – moreover – traditional inequalities in the region such as those affecting women and different ethnic groups intersect. All of these causes have generated somewhat of a *bouillabaisse*<sup>4</sup> in the countries of the Sahel, marked by conflict, insecurity and uncertainty.

Naomie Ouedraogo, NWFP Burkina Faso, added that unequal access to resources is another cause. The Spanish Ambassador on a Special Mission for the Sahel, Julio Herraiz, highlighted the breaking of the social contract and bad governments, adding structural challenges for development, such as education, the private sector and security.

### - Civil society and cooperation

Assitan Diallo noted the need to review development cooperation systems and pointed to the general public's suspicion of the EU's altruistic actions. To this end, she called for more importance to be given to local initiatives. She stressed that civil society's first proposal is that allies listen to them when designing

policies aimed at the Sahel region. Furthermore, they requested that the solution go beyond the call for elections in the countries concerned and lastly, called for the cooperation model to be transformed. Along the same lines, Naomie Ouedraogo explained that the countries of the Sahel must be able to develop and provide aid themselves, which requires refocusing collaboration with the EU towards less extractive and more egalitarian models in the spirit of a true partnership.

### - Inclusive initiatives

Diallo stressed that civil society also demanded the need for inclusive partnership initiatives, since women's associations play a crucial role in citizen mobilization, as do young people. She spoke of encouraging greater interaction with European civil society.

### - The environmental challenge

Ouedraogo pointed out that one of the challenges is the climate crisis, which causes problems among farmers and forces internal migration. Diallo observed that climate change is not a priority issue for governments, yet people face shortages of natural resources and competition between groups for those resources, weakening the social contract.

<sup>4</sup> A French expression referring to a disorganised mixture of things or ideas

## SESSION 3. The role and priorities of official development assistance in the Sahel. Preventing 'fragility', promoting good governance and human security.

- Franck Viault, Principal Administrator of the European Commission and Head of Sector for the G5 Sahel, Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA)
- Babacar Ndiaye, West Africa Think Tank Research Director (WATHI)
- Moderator: Elsa Aimé, lecturer at Comillas Pontificia University

### - Civil society's contribution

The Director of Research at WATHI, Babacar Ndiaye, noted that the underlying issues of the crisis – governance, justice and equality – must be addressed. He also mentioned the need to listen to Sahelians and to pay attention to the research, advocacy and awareness-raising work that takes place within civil society.

### - More than elections

Ndiaye agreed with Ornella Moderan, from a previous session, in mentioning that the first obstacle to transforming the democratic model in the region is thinking that elections make democracy. He maintained that good governance requires that the state can take charge of its population's needs and implies accountability for the use of public funds, the fight against bad practices such as corruption, and reducing the hegemony of presidential power before the other institutions.

### - A new relationship between Europe and Africa

WATHI's director said that a win-win situation must be established between Europe and West Africa: a political and social pact that benefits both continents and leaves behind the current asymmetric relationship. He estimated that one of the cooperation challenges with the EU is to strengthen justice and the judicial system in the subregion countries. It is important to guide

countries so that the benefits of potential plans for their natural and mineral resources have a positive impact on the population.

### - The role of young people and women

Ndiaye highlighted that the civilian population, especially youth, must be involved in job creation, although foreign allies must accompany and support these initiatives. Given that the majority of the population in the Sahel is young, emphasis must be placed on education and health with a development strategy that facilitates mass job creation for these young people. On the other hand, he explained that, historically, women have had a stabilizing role in Sahelian countries, in terms of social cohesion and peace, so they must be integrated into the strategy for achieving peace in the region, but also for working – side by side – with men, to help, support and contribute to peacekeeping.





## SESSION 4. Constructing a feminist foreign policy. Challenges and opportunities on the Spanish agenda in the Sahel.

- María Jesús Conde, Ambassador on a Special Mission for Feminist Foreign Policy, Spanish Government
- Kadiatou Idani, President of the Young Women's Association for Reproductive Health (AFJSR Niger)
- Moderator: Itziar Ruiz-Giménez, African Studies Group Coordinator, Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM)

### - Security

AFJSR Niger's President, Kadiatou Idani, reminded the session that security is the priority, because it conditions everything, not without first clarifying that security 'is not only military but is also social'. Idani spoke about initiatives to promote the economic autonomy of women and young people at the local level.

### - The role of women

Idani reported that women are not taken into account in decisions that involve them, nor is there funding for their initiatives, and when there is, these funds are not adequate for the existing reality or are difficult for women to access on grounds of discrimination. She recommended that Spain and the European Union should not consider women as beneficiaries, but as agents of change: they can lead the process, make decisions and act on the ground.



### - Against the various manifestations of violence against women and gender discrimination

Kadiatou Idani pointed to awareness-raising among women so that they can report violence and demand a world in which they are not victims of violence. She demanded support for reporting violence and more guidance for the organizations that help victims of different types of violence: psychological, physical, sexual, symbolic, work-related and economic. She also called for specific, structured programmes to help women obtain justice. She urged the European Union and Spain to listen to organizations that defend women's rights and fight against gender-based violence.

### - Causes of inequality

Idani mentioned that there are social, cultural, and religious causes of inequality. She remarked that the societies being discussed are patriarchal and favour gender inequality and violence against women. The weight of religion is also present because religious texts are interpreted in such a way as to promote the marginalization of certain groups.

## SESSION 5. The link between the climate emergency and conflict. Links between climate and conflict, natural resources, climate and gender justice.

- Anna Strzaska, Head of the 'Green Transition' Unit, European External Action Service (EEAS)
- Mariam Diallo, President of the Women's Association for Leadership and Sustainable Development (AFLED Mali)
- Oyewole Ongini, researcher at the Center for Research Development, Bonn.
- Moderator: Oriol Puig, researcher at Pompeu Fabra University and the Autonomous University of Barcelona

### - The experience of women at the discussion table

The Center for Research Development researcher, Oyewole Ongini, said that women should be asked about the work they do, so as to understand the details, for example, how they access water points on a day-to-day basis, how they access arable land and how they travel to public spaces and cities. The aim is to bring Sahelian women's daily experiences to the table because their realities are linked to the crisis.

To achieve lasting peace, women must be involved in decision making. He said that states should fund the Women, Peace and Security agenda to strengthen women's resilience. This agenda, approved in 2000 by the Security Council, has led to other UN resolutions and the inclusion of a gender agenda in all peace and security architectures of the African Union, African regional organizations and also the EU. Implementing these resolutions is urgent.

### - Gender inequality and climate emergency

Displacement is a challenge for women because they are not able to rent houses in cities and also have to learn new skills to earn a living, said Ongini; Mariam Diallo, President of the Women's Association for Leadership

and Sustainable Development, explained that gender inequalities were apparent in the access to power and in social, political and economic structures.

Diallo reported cases of sexual violence, forced marriage, high maternal mortality and difficult access to better physical and mental health conditions for women and girls in refugee camps.

She also believed that climate change is a conflict-enhancing issue. In the Sahel, pastoralist communities have always had tense relationships, but with climate change, these tensions become stronger.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## - Work beyond the security-development binomial

Given the multidimensional nature of the crisis in the Sahel, after more than 10 years since the 2012 coup d'état in Mali, the regional and international militarist response has not produced the expected outcome, not only in the fight against terrorism. In fact, it has actually exacerbated anti-western sentiments and reinforced the humanitarian crisis. Due to this situation, Sahelian civil society demands a comprehensive strategy that, while addressing the military aspect, will bring awareness to and include the wider social reality of the region.

In addition, the participating activists insisted that working towards stability in the Sahel requires a multidimensional strategy that goes beyond the security-development binomial and that includes the active involvement of women and young people – trained and mentored thanks to technical support from allies like the European Union – in policy reforms, overcoming gender inequality and implementing integration and development projects in the field to ensure food security and employment.

## - Strengthen states

Poor governance and state fragility were identified as structural causes of the crisis. Participants agreed that the absence of states in certain parts of the territories has an impact on unequal access to rights and services,

among other consequences, such as insecurity, the deployment of armed groups and the helplessness of the population.

They pointed out that the return of states to parts of territories – now in the hands of armed groups – must also be based on health and education aspects.

At the same time, they pointed to a democracy crisis, and therefore, specifically called for the strengthening of democracy and not for it to be reduced to merely holding elections and constitutional reforms.

## - Listen to the local population

For the panellists, the people of the Sahel must be listened to more. Activists also requested that local initiatives be valued and recognized – especially women's initiatives – as true social drivers. To achieve this, they believe that European cooperation must be reconsidered to balance support policies. 'Our goal must be to go to the community first and then to the state,' summarized Oyewole Ongini,



a researcher at the Center for Research Development.

At the time, they believed that communication bridges need to be built between European and Sahelian civil societies and that solutions to crises should go beyond governmental and institutional political decisions.

They recommended that European and international mentors pay attention to the population, especially local leaders, who know the ground, are able to share their conflict-resolution experiences and make recommendations tailored to their life systems and traditions.

### - Deconstruct the patriarchy

One of the activists' main demands was to promote women's empowerment by making it easier for them to access funding that allows different initiatives to be developed. They reported that women often lead projects that financially rely on international cooperation funds. However, the decision making linked to paying or granting these funds is in the hands of men who are not only ignorant of female leadership, they also restrict it.

While the EU's support for women and young people's entrepreneurship was highlighted, activists reported that these initiatives face cultural obstacles and a patriarchal system, making it essential to promote awareness of the scope and the importance of women's and feminist work.

Similarly, Sahelian women's organizations and associations called for a more pragmatic view of women's initiatives with training and projects tailored to their conditions and realities. For example, economic undertakings must be profitable to guarantee women's autonomy.



### - Reclaim the central role of women and young people in peacebuilding

The women of civil society spoke up during the debate cycle to demand that women and young people, who make up the majority of the Sahel's population, take on a leading role in peacebuilding by responding to their local realities and needs and not to colonialist and interventionist criteria.

One important action is to give women space in governments, parliaments and all decision-making bodies. To introduce this dynamic, they pointed out that allies and international cooperation bodies need to stop seeing them as victims, but rather as agents of change.

The aim is for the Sahelian people to take the lead in resolving the crisis, with their own view of democracy and with sustainable development policies. This objective, they commented, would need European support to guide Sahelian civil society to demand transparent management from the governments and to monitor adequate accountability for the administration of natural and mineral resources in the region.



## - Educate to overcome gender inequalities and promote respect for human rights

Sahelian civil society believes that working toward peace requires projects that promote schooling and training. This would bring young people and women closer to decision making and leadership, as well as empower them in peace-building and development policies.

They also propose educating for awareness and respect for human rights as fundamental for consolidating equality policies. They stressed that, to achieve gender equality, understanding the local reality is essential, so that resilience can be promoted.

The activists reported that gender equity training should not be limited to politicians and citizens, but should be extended to the Armed Forces and other social groups that – according to their reports – are responsible for a large percentage of sexual violence against women, especially girls, in the occupied territories and camps for displaced persons.

## - Combat violence against women

The participants in the different sessions stressed the importance of building a true, sound gender agenda that promotes equality, empowerment and defending women's rights in any of the areas in which they work. Promoting this agenda would address the different types of violence and discrimination to which they are currently subjected.

In this regard, they call for support to fund and strengthen the Women, Peace and Security agenda as a mechanism to ensure substantial participation of women in building the ways out of the crisis. In the absence of state protection, activists call for viable strategies so that the judicial system protects women and assists them in the situation of vulnerability and helplessness in which they find themselves.



### - Create employment for young people

The majority of the population in Sahelian countries are young people (for example, half the population in Niger is under 15), so mass job creation is essential, in addition to schooling and training. Participants pointed out that this encourages young people to remain in the region, to not join armed groups that generate violence and become a key element for development and stabilization.

They, therefore, called for more support for the private sector, the emancipation of women through profitable ventures and the promotion of investments in the energy field. 'We cannot only consider the Sahel as an area of violence, terrorist attacks and insecurity. It has to become a land of resistance, of economic prosperity; a place that young people can see as somewhere that contributes to development,' explained Babacar Ndiaye (WATHI).

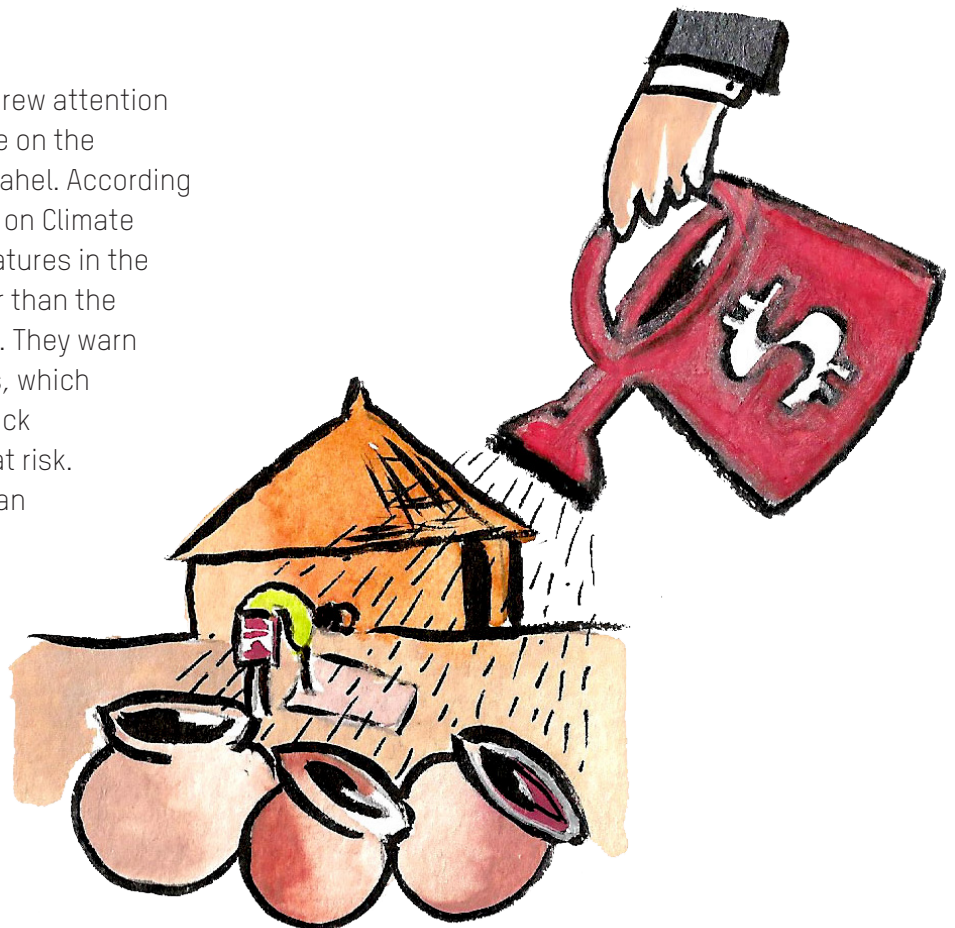
### - Prepare the population to face the climate crisis

Both activists and academics drew attention to the impact of climate change on the multidimensional crisis in the Sahel. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's latest report, temperatures in the Sahel are rising 1.5 times faster than the average in the rest of the world. They warn of extreme floods and droughts, which will affect both land and livestock farmers, putting food security at risk. They demanded that both African governments and allies contribute by developing instruments to tackle the climate crisis such as agrarian reforms and agreements to ensure more and better access to water, as well as a balanced distribution and transparent management of resources.

Panellists call for governments and local authorities to intervene promptly to resolve issues related to accessing land, as well as putting in place the agreements that can help determine where to make investments and to develop projects with the least environmental impact possible and with participation from local people.

Forum participants believe that we must understand that security and climate change go hand in hand in the Sahel, so any solution to the multidimensional crisis must take these two elements into account.

They drew attention to the fact that the climate crisis deepens gender inequalities by highlighting that women have unequal access to resources, despite them being the main labourers on the land, and are disadvantaged when they require funding, fertilizers or irrigation systems.



## - The role of Spain and the EU in the search for solutions

They expect Spain to play a relevant 'support' role at the head of the Sahel Alliance to reconsider and broaden the militarist approach to one of inclusive and egalitarian development. Furthermore, requests were made to strengthen dialogue with the G5 Sahel (Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) to promote this alliance at the international level.

Spain is expected to reconsider its position with other approaches, aware of the progress and European cooperation limits in the Sahel and the poor results achieved to date.

From a regional perspective, debate participants urged that the European Union also reformulate its policies in the region and that it support the cooperation and collaboration with states to strengthen their development, promote good governance, efficiently manage public resources and funds, and fight against bad practices such as corruption and the hegemony of power.



# CONCLUSIONS

In light of the poor results from the stabilization actions in the Sahel region, there is an urgent need to review the approach with which the multidimensional crisis in the region is addressed. Human security must be at the centre of the action with protecting the population as the main objective.

Such reformulation of the strategy for action must ensure a collective, sound and inclusive response, which goes beyond the reductionist approach of military action and the resulting geopolitical and geostrategic interests, to accommodate a comprehensive strategy with transversal and transformative values and foundations that are truly peace-oriented.

A response to the multidimensional crisis in the Sahel involves multidimensional measures that consolidate cooperation that is more democratic, feminist, decolonial and anti-racist, based on horizontality, recognition and respect. Most importantly, local representatives must be called on to lead in building the destiny of their societies.

Only by deconstructing the vertical, interventionist and patriarchal logics that have prevailed in policies aimed at the Sahel can we move closer to a radical, socially fairer way out that contributes to the stabilization of the region and safeguards indisputable values such as the right to life, equality, security, mobility and access to resources by and for the population.

The inclusion of local and international feminist, ecological and sustainable development

agendas is key to finding a possible way out of the crisis in the Sahel. Said agendas will not only address the impact this crisis has had on women and the environment, but will also slow down the interests of the actors that lead to conflict.

Representatives of civil society and other sectors such as academia cry out for sound, permanent spaces of communication, which are neither unidirectional nor merely formal, to give a platform to commonly ignored sectors, such as women and young people in the Sahel. These two sectors are not only the main victims of the crisis but are called on to become the fundamental pillars of peacebuilding.

There is therefore a need to cement alliances with Sahelian civil society, as well as with international organizations and experts promoting and protecting human rights to design a coordinated work, focused on humanitarian aspects and aimed towards consolidating new spaces of understanding.

Similarly, it calls for the commitments made in international treaties and conventions, particularly in the field of human rights, to be met and respected.

Finally, other ways out of the crisis in the region are possible with the necessary political will and social strength, which to date has been limited by national and international interests that feed off the escalation of violence.



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