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Sustainable development in the Sahel

Implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan and the Sahel region by the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Economic and Social Council decisions 2023/352 and 2023/353, provides an overview of efforts within the United Nations system to implement integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan and the Sahel region since the previous report ([E/2023/92](#)).

* The present report was submitted late in order to reflect the most recent information.



I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to Economic and Social Council decision 2023/352, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its 2024 session for its consideration a report on the implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan by the United Nations system. Subsequently, in its decision 2023/353, the Council requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its 2024 session on how the United Nations system was implementing integrated, coherent and coordinated support to achieve sustainable development in the Sahel region.

II. South Sudan

A. Country context

2. South Sudan has faced multiple complex challenges since it gained independence in 2011. Key development challenges include slow implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, high dependence on oil, subnational violence, climate change-related floods, droughts and heatwaves, which exacerbate food insecurity, internal displacement and vulnerability among members of South Sudanese communities who are already marginalized.

3. The Revitalized Agreement was signed on 12 September 2018. Following delays in implementation, with most provisions not fulfilled, the parties to the Agreement extended its transitional period by 24 months, from 22 February 2023 to 22 February 2025.¹ The agreed provisions relating to a new road map include the completion of pre-election activities necessary for the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections in December 2024, two months before the end of the transitional period. Some key tasks agreed upon by the parties in the road map that remained pending as at 15 March 2024 include:²

(a) Enactment of the revised National Security Service Act (Amendment) Bill (2023) to, inter alia, create an enabling civil and political space for citizen participation in governance, the constitution-making process and elections;

(b) Completion of the judicial reform process and adequate funding for the three newly constituted institutions – the Political Parties Council, the National Constitutional Review Commission and the National Elections Commission – to enable them to fulfil their mandates;

(c) Completion of phase I and phase II unification of forces and their deployment to provide security around the country, and funding for the implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process;

(d) Establishment of the Special Reconstruction Fund or Board, and convening of a donor conference for South Sudan to solicit international support for the implementation of the Agreement;

(e) Implementation of the legal and policy frameworks related to public financial management reforms (Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Authority,

¹ Resolution adopted at the second extraordinary meeting of the reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, Juba, 1 September 2022.

² Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, document RJMEC/C/2024/L/158.

audit, banking act and payroll), which enhance transparency and accountability in economic and financial sectors;

(f) Establishment and operationalization of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Compensation and Reparation Authority;

(g) Drafting and adoption of the permanent constitution in accordance with the Constitution-Making Process Act (2022) to guide the conduct of elections.

4. There are concerns among the principal parties, signatories and peace guarantors of the Revitalized Agreement as to whether the outstanding provisions can be completed and elections held in the time remaining until the end of the extended time horizon. Negotiations to agree on the way forward for pending provisions of the Agreement are ongoing.

5. The humanitarian situation remains dire, with millions of people in need of assistance. According to the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2024, about 9 million people in the country need humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter and health care. The financial requirement of \$1.8 billion is 19.3 per cent funded as at 8 April 2024.³ The humanitarian crisis resulting from floods and conflicts has also resulted in over 2.1 million internally displaced persons. In addition, by 21 April 2024, there were 509,901 refugees, mainly from the Sudan, seeking refuge in South Sudan in 2024.

6. In South Sudan, 80 per cent of livelihoods depend on traditional rain-fed agriculture, crop farming, pastoralism or animal husbandry. Climate shocks continue to exacerbate the already fragile food security situation in the country. This has contributed to the loss of crop production and grazing land, environmental degradation and competition over scarce natural resources, which, in some cases, is fuelling conflicts and further disrupting livelihoods.

7. The food security situation has deteriorated owing to multiple shocks, including flooding, ongoing conflict, displacement and the high cost of living. During the peak of the lean season (April–July 2024), 7.1 million of the 12.4 million South Sudanese (57.26 per cent of the population) are expected to face acute food insecurity at crisis level – equivalent to level 3 or above – according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification analysis in November 2023.

8. The economic situation remains challenging, with the country heavily dependent on oil exports, rising inflation a depreciating currency and high levels of debt. Oil exports account for almost all the country's export revenues, contributing to over 90 per cent of overall government revenue.⁴ The Government's oil revenues have been affected by the crisis in the Sudan, which has led to the shutdown of some oil production fields, and the heightened insecurity in the Red Sea, causing export delays, resulting in six months of salary arrears for civil servants and members of the armed forces.

9. On 11 August 2023, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly passed the budget for the 2023/24 fiscal year, with 2.1 trillion South Sudanese pounds (\$2.3 billion) in expenditure and 1.8 trillion South Sudanese pounds (\$2.0 billion) in revenue and a budget deficit of 267 billion South Sudanese pounds (\$291 million).⁵ The budget for the 2023/24 fiscal year is 28 per cent (\$906 million) lower than that

³ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "South Sudan 2024: country snapshot for 2024", Financial Tracking Service database. Available at <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/211/summary/2024>.

⁴ In 2021, the top exports from South Sudan were crude petroleum (\$455 million), refined petroleum (\$84.9 million), forage crops (\$9.75 million), onions (\$2.1 million) and sheep and goat meat (\$1.99 million).

⁵ Emmanuel J. Akile, "Parliament passes budget with 400 per cent salary adjustment", Eye Radio, 11 August 2023.

of the 2022/23 fiscal year.⁶ Some 72 per cent of the budget is financed by oil revenues, 12 per cent by non-oil revenues and 3 per cent by grants, while the remaining deficit of 13 per cent could be funded through borrowing.

10. The South Sudanese pound has depreciated by 47 per cent from 1,087 pounds per United States dollar on 2 January 2024 to 1,603 pounds per dollar on 2 April, owing to the reduced availability of hard currency in the market. The Bank of South Sudan has reduced the weekly auctioning of United States dollars from \$10 million to \$5 million owing to low foreign reserves. Furthermore, the country is heavily dependent on imports of essential goods and commodities, including food and refined petroleum. The Government is working to diversify the economy away from oil and attract investment, but progress has been slow. The Government's efforts to promote growth in the agricultural sector have been derailed by insecurity, climate change and poor infrastructure, contributing to low production across the country. Only about 4 per cent of arable land in South Sudan is currently under cultivation, which is rain-fed because of limited irrigation and generates low yields, despite the vast untapped agricultural potential. The country is also vulnerable to regional instability.

B. Key development issues

11. South Sudan continues to face significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals owing to conflict, economic instability and limited infrastructure. The country's progress towards all 17 Goals is severely hindered by the conflict that began in 2013 and ended with the signing of the Revitalized Agreement in 2018 and the subsequent establishment of the transitional Government in 2020. This has resulted in significant humanitarian and development challenges, such as the displacement of millions of people, high levels of food insecurity and limited access to health care, education and other basic services. Of the estimated 12.4 million people living within the country's borders, over 8 million are estimated to be living in extreme poverty (affecting progress on Goal 1) and in need of some degree of humanitarian assistance. Over 7.1 million people face severe food insecurity and malnutrition, with children showing stunting and wasting effects (affecting progress on Goal 2).

12. Little or no progress has been made on Goals 3 to 6 over recent years. Life expectancy at birth remains one of the lowest in the world at 56.4 years for men and 59.4 for women in 2019 (the most recent available data). The maternal mortality ratio is the highest in the world, at 789 per 100,000 live births in 2019. The majority of the population is not using safely managed water sources, drinks contaminated water within households and practises open defecation. Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and practices contribute to poor health and nutrition conditions. The country also has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world at 27 per cent of the adult population (15 per cent for women),⁷ while an estimated 2.8 million children are out of school (59 per cent of all children aged 3–17 years, of whom 53 per cent are girls). There are limited opportunities for technical and vocational education and training for young people, with demand far exceeding supply.

13. Harmful practices resulting from insufficient progress on sustainable development, such as gender-based violence and discrimination, child marriage and early childbearing, continue to place additional obstacles on women and girls. They are perpetuated by conflict, often weak community and social support systems, and

⁶ The official and parallel exchange rates assumed for the 2023/24 fiscal year were 917 South Sudanese pounds per United States dollar and 1,129.6 pounds per dollar, respectively.

⁷ World Bank, World Development Indicators 2022. Available at <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators>.

weak capacity and investment for preventing and addressing gender-based violence. There is also scant national investment in social protection, with most cash transfers, food for assets programmes and livelihood support being provided through donor funding. The pattern of high donor dependency is repeated across the social sector, affecting its accessibility and sustainability, with a negative impact on medium- to longer-term institution-building processes at the central and state levels. Institutional systems and capacities with respect to policy formulation, planning, design, implementation, monitoring and oversight, including data generation and utilization, are severely limited, negatively affecting the targeting and delivery of essential services.

14. Floods, droughts and insecurity have prevented access to farmlands for many households, especially for female-headed households, during planting, growing and harvest periods. They have also had an impact on agricultural production and have compounded conflicts over pasture and livelihoods. Despite the Land Act (2009), allowing all citizens to own and access land irrespective of their sex, ethnicity or religion, many women continue to be discriminated against owing to patriarchal laws and practices.

15. The energy infrastructure is underdeveloped, with limited grid connectivity and low levels of investment. Less than 8 per cent of the population has access to electricity. The majority of the population relies on traditional biomass fuels for cooking and heating, which contributes to deforestation, indoor air pollution and long-term health issues.

16. Only 1 per cent of the 20,000 km road network in South Sudan is paved. This is not only a major barrier to trade and market integration, but also contributes to the high cost of delivering humanitarian assistance. The poor transport and communication infrastructure has led to persistent marginalization and inequitable access to social and economic opportunities.

17. The national budget cycle is characterized by weak oversight and is not gender-responsive. Every fiscal year, the allocations, execution and spending show considerable divergences. There is underfunding of both service sectors (education, health and social services) and productive sectors such as agriculture.

18. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes have not started as envisioned in the Revitalized Agreement owing, inter alia, to a lack of progress in the unification of forces and funding constraints of the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration commission. There have, however, been state-level disarmament campaigns to disarm civilians. Law enforcement agencies are severely underresourced, with low capacity to apprehend and arraign suspects in court. Prisons and detention centres across the country are overcrowded, with many inmates enduring extended periods without trial.

19. The Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity has prioritized Sustainable Development Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). According to the parties to the Transitional Government, progress on the Goal will act as an “enabler” to unlock pathways in other Goal areas and build the foundations for longer-term development, as long-term progress on the Goals in South Sudan will require further inclusion of marginalized groups and increased accountability in the political and governance spheres.

20. The Revised National Development Strategy (2021–2024) is aligned with both Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want of the African Union and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a focus on peace, governance, accountable institutions, economic diversification, resilience, economic growth, basic social services delivery and the empowerment of women and young people.

C. United Nations approach and response

21. The United Nations development system in South Sudan has developed the 2023–2025 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, which articulates the collective offer of the United Nations in support of the country's national priorities across all dimensions. The Cooperation Framework has four mutually dependent and reinforcing strategic priorities: (a) consolidation of peace and transparent, accountable and inclusive governance in support of Sustainable Development Goals 5, 16 and 17; (b) sustainable economic growth and diversification; (c) social development with protection of the most vulnerable; and (d) the empowerment of women and young people for sustainable development, with a focus on food systems, education, health and climate action. Overall, these priorities are intended to contribute to progress across the Goals. In laying the foundation for the country's recovery and progress on the Goals, United Nations political engagement in South Sudan through the strategic vision of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), "One United Nations" integrated and coordinated support for the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement (including through the reconciliation, stabilization and resilience trust fund and the Peacebuilding Fund) and support for electoral institution-building (jointly by UNMISS and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) remain important given the critical political period in South Sudan in 2024.

22. In January 2024, the Ministry of Finance and Planning organized a workshop on the budget preparation programme for the 2024/25 fiscal year, at which ministries, departments and agencies presented their sectoral progress and priorities. During the workshop, the accounting officers agreed to extend the Revised National Development Strategy by one year from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025, subject to the approval of the Cabinet and the Presidency. The United Nations country team in South Sudan has requested an extension of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework by one year to December 2026.

23. As part of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the country team is supporting the Government of South Sudan in its first voluntary national review of the Sustainable Development Goals at the high-level political forum convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council in New York in July 2024. South Sudan presented the key messages of its voluntary national review at the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in Addis Ababa on 23–25 April 2024. Under the leadership of the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, UNDP and the wider United Nations system are providing technical assistance and financial support for the voluntary national review process.

24. The integrated office approach that commenced in 2023 in the Office of the Deputy Special Representative, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator is expected to provide better coordination and collaboration between UNMISS, the humanitarian country team and the United Nations country team and build synergies and coherence in the United Nations response. Coordination between the United Nations and the Government at both the national and state levels has also expanded, including the establishment of a joint steering committee for the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and the Peacebuilding Fund. Furthermore, the decentralization of the resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator functions was piloted in 2023 in three states – Western Bahr el-Ghazal, Unity and Upper Nile – to facilitate better coordination within and between development and humanitarian actions.

25. Discussions with partners are ongoing at the country level on the possible alignment and use of funds from the reconciliation, stabilization and resilience trust fund, the Peacebuilding Fund and the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund, with a focus on options for cross-initiative exchanges and possible synergies to support fundraising and financing. This also involves identifying ways to move from funding individual projects to financing results through larger project portfolios.

26. Co-led by the Deputy Special Representative, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan and the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan and in collaboration with the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei, the two Resident Coordinators continue to coordinate on implementing the Abyei joint programme across the peace, humanitarian and development pillars to address conflicts and build community resilience and community cohesion. The overall objective of the joint programme is to mitigate conflict, maintain stability, foster intercommunal reconciliation and facilitate the return of displaced persons, as well as to create conditions for an inclusive environment for peace and enhance resilience for women, young people and targeted vulnerable communities across Abyei. This is in line with Security Council resolution [2609 \(2021\)](#), in which the Council invited the Interim Security Force to coordinate with the Juba-appointed administration in Abyei, the Misseriya administration in Muglad and the Khartoum-appointed administration using appropriate civilian expertise to maintain stability, foster intercommunal reconciliation and facilitate the return of displaced persons to their villages and the delivery of services.

27. In the energy sector, there are initiatives under way to improve access in South Sudan, including the UNDP-led project to promote renewable energy for productive uses in South Sudan and solar installation to ease service delivery in the South Sudanese health sector in order to increase access to and improve the reliability of the power supply through renewables.

28. There is ongoing collaboration between the United Nations in South Sudan and international financial institutions, including the World Bank and the African Development Bank. UNDP is working closely with both institutions to support the Government of South Sudan in implementing the public financial mechanism reform agenda as required under chapter IV of the Revitalized Agreement. They have deployed technical staff to the Ministry of Finance and Planning to support the reform process. In 2024, the World Bank sought input from the United Nations country team for its strategic plan for South Sudan.

D. Way forward for future United Nations work and support in South Sudan

29. The United Nations in South Sudan will continue to support the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to advance progress on the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The United Nations will continue to pursue:

(a) Support for peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan through Peacebuilding Fund projects and continued engagement with the Peacebuilding Commission by promoting inclusive and sustainable development that prioritizes the leadership and participation of women and young people in peacebuilding and political processes;

(b) Localization and decentralization for area-based programming and support, including in providing life-saving humanitarian assistance and creating

durable and permanent solutions, access to basic social services and conditions for the return of displaced populations;

(c) Building and strengthening of coordination mechanisms at the national and state levels to leverage synergies, avoid duplication of interventions and ensure continuous engagement to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders;

(d) Prioritization of strategic and catalytic investments in support of the Revitalized Agreement and United Nations early transition planning;

(e) Strengthening of collaboration between the United Nations country team and UNMISS on the implementation of the early transition strategy developed by the Secretary-General and submitted to the Security Council in 2023, as well as peacebuilding and governance aspects to build synergies on the rule of law, human rights, protection, climate action and energy, including the development of renewables;

(f) Development and implementation of joint programmes on food systems, education, health and climate action guided by the Cooperation Framework to catalyse and accelerate progress on the Goals in South Sudan;

(g) Advocacy for greater investments in data collection and management, infrastructure, knowledge management, risk management, innovation, research and technology, including digitalization and e-governance, as well as changes to service delivery modalities with significantly increased public funding;

(h) Engagement with the Government of South Sudan to convene a donor conference for the country to solicit international support for the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement.

E. Recommendations

30. Member States may wish to consider the following recommendations to support the implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan:

(a) Development partners should explore comprehensive solutions to support and place people and communities at the forefront while ensuring coherence between peace, humanitarian and development activities;

(b) The international community should build on the momentum created by the efforts made to enhance durable solutions by offering programming that attends to both the immediate needs resulting from emergencies and disasters and the need to enhance longer-term resilience and development. This requires flexible and long-term financing;

(c) The international community should support the development of a long-term, comprehensive and inclusive approach to tackling challenges related to energy, food security, food systems transformation, basic services, governance and the economy in South Sudan and advance economic diversification and transformation as well as a clean energy transition;

(d) The international community should continue to provide the political support necessary to the parties to the Revitalized Agreement to overcome the current political challenges to its full implementation, which would enhance the country's efforts towards sustainable development. This may include support for the permanent constitution-making process, creating political and civic space, addressing intercommunal conflict and providing technical assistance and advice for electoral preparations;

(e) The international community should build on the successful first International Women's Conference on Transformational Leadership held in South

Sudan in February 2023 to support efforts to ensure that women and young people are empowered and meaningfully engage and participate in political, social and economic processes and decision-making, especially as the country prepares for elections;

(f) The international community should work with South Sudan to strengthen efforts on the ongoing public financial mechanism reforms and diversify the economy to increase domestic non-oil revenue resources in order to create enhanced fiscal space for basic service delivery, infrastructure development and the development of data ecosystems, among other priorities. This should include enhancing engagement between the United Nations and international financial institutions;

(g) The international community should provide resources for the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to lay the foundation and build capacity for the country's medium- to long-term recovery and resilience-building in order to reduce humanitarian needs by enhancing sustainable development.

III. Sahel region

A. Context

Sustainable development

31. The Sahel region⁸ registered slow progress in its sustainable development efforts despite recording some positive indicators of economic growth. In its 2023 report on the Sustainable Development Goals, the Economic Commission for Africa projected that most countries in the Sahel will not achieve the majority of the Goals by 2030 owing to successive crises that are affecting some of the positive trajectories reached before the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. On the social dimension, unprecedented challenges faced in 2023 could reverse development gains in the Sahel on the Goals related to people (1–4), prosperity (6–8) and peace (16).

32. The Sahel faces significant challenges in the labour market, owing primarily to security issues, political instability and underdevelopment. These factors often lead to high unemployment rates and underemployment, in particular for young people. The World Bank highlights that considerable progress has been made in the Sahel on education. Governments have taken important policy steps in support of high-level commitments for education. Primary school enrolment has doubled and secondary school enrolment tripled in the region. However, approximately 40 per cent of school-age children are still out of school. For those who are in school, quality remains low, and many young people completing primary school lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.⁹ On average, Sahelian countries spend about 2 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on education, which is below the optimal level of 4–6 per cent suggested by some good practice standards.¹⁰

⁸ For the purposes of the present report, the Sahel region covers the 10 Sahelian countries under the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel (2013) and its support plan (2018), namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, the Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

⁹ World Bank, *The Wealth of Today and Tomorrow: Sahel Education White Paper* (2021).

¹⁰ Alliance Sahel, "Education is a key driver of stability, social cohesion and peace", 18 November 2022.

33. According to the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Index report,¹¹ the index for Africa at the continental level was 53 per cent. With the exception of Burkina Faso and the Niger, West African Sahel countries have achieved Index scores surpassing the continental average. Yet the countries of the Sahel continue to rank at the bottom of the human development index. Of the 10 countries in the Sahel, 7 recently reported a deterioration in their overall performance on the Goals.¹²

34. The region's GDP is projected to grow by 3.8 per cent in 2024. This projection remains contingent on regional and global factors, including the consequences of the announced withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and, possibly, the West African Economic and Monetary Union. This growth rate is higher than the average in previous years but still may not be sufficient to significantly alleviate poverty in the region.¹³ GDP growth in the Niger slowed to 2.3 per cent in 2023, significantly below the initial forecast of 6.9 per cent. In 2023, the GDP growth rate of the Sahel region ranged from 2.9 per cent in Nigeria to 5.9 per cent in Guinea.¹⁴

35. The expected socioeconomic impacts of an eventual exit from ECOWAS likely have various implications, notably in trade between the landlocked countries and their neighbours, free movement of labour and capital mobility, as well as in terms of finance through declining trends in foreign aid and the suspension of budgetary support. The humanitarian crises and instability could further exacerbate these impacts.

36. The lowest annual inflation rate in the Sahel was observed in Burkina Faso (1.4 per cent) and the highest in the Gambia (17 per cent), compared with an average inflation rate of 20.9 per cent in West Africa, which comprises 7 of the 10 countries under the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel.¹⁵ The fiscal deficits of five Sahel countries crossed the threshold of 3 per cent of GDP in 2023 (namely Burkina Faso, 6.6 per cent; Mali, 4.8 per cent; Niger, 4.9 per cent; Nigeria, 5.4 per cent; and Senegal, 5.0 per cent), while Chad displayed a positive fiscal balance of 8.3 per cent of GDP, driven mostly by high revenue from the oil sector. The remaining four countries experienced a fiscal deficit of less than 3 per cent of GDP: Cameroon, 0.8 per cent; Gambia, 2.7 per cent; Guinea, 2.3 per cent; and Mauritania, 2.9 per cent.

37. The climate crisis and the occurrence of extreme weather events continued to increase communities' vulnerabilities and fragilities, pushing some countries to adopt responsive measures. Nigeria declared a state of emergency over food insecurity, Senegal adopted climate-smart agriculture practices to achieve food security and broader development goals and Burkina Faso developed water resource management for its climate resilience strategy.

38. In central Sahel, women and girls experienced some of the highest rates of gender-based violence globally. In response, despite many challenges, including unprecedented funding shortages and access concerns, aid organizations developed

¹¹ Jeffrey D. Sachs and others, *Implementing the SDG Stimulus: Sustainable Development Report 2023* (Paris, Sustainable Development Solutions Network; Dublin, Dublin University Press, 2023).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "West Africa's economic prospects at pivotal moment as regional integration faces major challenge", UN DESA Voice, vol. 28, No. 3, March 2024.

¹⁴ Data on gross domestic product, inflation, the fiscal balance and government debt are from: International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Regional Outlook Report: Sub-Saharan Africa – Light on the Horizon?* (Washington, D.C., 2023); and IMF, *World Economic Outlook Report: A Rocky Recovery* (Washington, D.C., 2023), for Mauritania.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and implemented robust multisectoral humanitarian response plans to address the urgent needs of the most vulnerable.

Political and security situation

39. In 2023, the political situation in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and the Niger was marked by ongoing political transitions against the backdrop of governance and security challenges. The increasingly critical situation in the Sahel led to large and ongoing displacements of populations fleeing insecurity in the central Sahel and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Those countries continued to experience political instability caused by unconstitutional changes of government coupled with challenges related to weak governance institutions, shrinking civic space and the effects of weak social contracts.

40. On 17 September 2023, in Bamako, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States, and further strengthened their collaboration in the subsequent months. On 1 December, the authorities of Burkina Faso and the Niger jointly announced their withdrawal from the Group of Five for the Sahel.

41. On 28 January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger announced their immediate withdrawal from ECOWAS. On 24 February, ECOWAS convened an extraordinary summit of Heads of State and Government to discuss the implications of this announcement, after which it announced the immediate lifting of a large part of the sanctions against Mali and the Niger. Some individual and political sanctions, however, were maintained. The countries of the Alliance of Sahel States are yet to respond to the actions of ECOWAS.

42. In 2023, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union raised serious concerns about “the persistent and deteriorating security crisis in the Sahel region, resulting from the increasing terrorist attacks and the growing number of victims, particularly civilians, including women and children, as well as the social and economic challenges that continue to undermine the peace, security, stability and development in the region”.¹⁶ In its statement it also condemned attacks “deliberately targeting national and international forces, including State security forces and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali” (MINUSMA).¹⁷

43. In Mali, following the withdrawal of MINUSMA, renewed hostilities between the Malian Armed Forces and the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement resulted in the retaking of Kidal by the Malian Armed Forces and their foreign security partners in November 2023. On 25 January 2024, the Malian transitional authorities ended the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. Political unrest in Mali has been steadily mounting since the transitional authorities announced in September 2023 the postponement sine die of the presidential elections, and following the expiration on 26 March 2024 of the two-year timeline agreed in 2022 with ECOWAS for holding presidential elections. On 31 March, a large spectrum of political parties and groupings as well as civil society organizations issued a joint statement requesting a time frame for the presidential election. On 10 April, a presidential decree was issued to suspend all activities of political parties and all political activities of civil society organizations for reasons of public order.

44. In the Niger, following the unconstitutional change of government on 26 July 2023, the transitional President, General Abdourahmane Tiani, unilaterally

¹⁶ African Union, document PSC/PR/COMM.1162 (2023).

¹⁷ Ibid.

announced on 19 August his intention to lead a transition of up to three years. ECOWAS rejected this possibility. To date, no progress has been observed in convening a national dialogue to set the transition priorities and endorse the programme of resilience for national protection (programme de résilience pour la sauvegarde de la patrie). Meanwhile, the political space continues to shrink, with no signs of inclusive dialogue emerging on the direction of the transition.

45. In Burkina Faso, the elections supposed to be held in July, as agreed with ECOWAS, were postponed indefinitely as the transitional authorities stated that their current priority was the restoration of territorial integrity.

46. Senegal held presidential elections on 24 March 2024. The opposition candidate, Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye, was declared the winner by the Constitutional Council, with 54.28 per cent of the vote in the first round. The pre-electoral period was marked by a steady rise in political tension, which escalated following the decision on 3 February by the former President, Macky Sall, to rescind the decree scheduling the presidential election for 25 February and the subsequent adoption by the National Assembly of a constitutional amendment postponing the electoral process until 15 December. Both decisions were subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Council, paving the way for the completion of the electoral process prior to the end of Mr. Sall's term on 2 April. In the region, there were also general elections in Nigeria, municipal, regional and legislative elections in Mauritania and local elections in the Gambia.

47. Transnational organized crime continued to fuel armed conflicts and instability in the region by increasing tension, violence and competition over illicit profits and territorial control. Armed groups exploited vulnerabilities in terms of governance, rule of law and the lack of a State presence in order to conduct criminal activities, which ranged from smuggling of human beings to trafficking in medical products, firearms, fuel, drugs and gold. The decision not to renew the mandate of the Panel of Experts on Mali established pursuant to Security Council resolution [2374 \(2017\)](#) reduces the ability of the international community to monitor the implementation of the Mali sanctions regime, including illegal activities and financial transfers.

Climate change and its impact

48. In 2023, over 350,000 people in the Sahel region were directly affected by floods that had a devastating impact on homes, agriculture, fishing, schools and health centres and hampered access for the delivery of life-saving aid. The water crisis was a major concern exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, as disruptions in hydrological patterns led to desertification in addition to floods and deprived many people of access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene services.

49. Food insecurity remained a challenge in 2023 across the Sahel region and will remain a cause for concern in 2024, according to Harmonized Framework data. This is due to the fact that the effects of climate change exacerbate food insecurity, in particular among forcibly displaced and stateless persons, while fuelling additional conflicts and social tensions among communities over scarce resources. An estimated 41.4 million people are projected to be food-insecure in 2024 in the 10 countries covered by the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, representing 11 per cent of the countries' total population. Compared with 2023, there is a 3 per cent increase in the absolute number of food-insecure people; however, the proportion of food-insecure people (compared with the total population) decreased slightly (by 3 per cent) owing to population growth and/or migration.

Humanitarian situation

50. As at 31 December 2023, 35.2 million people were in need of assistance. By December 2023, about 9.8 million people were in situations of forced displacement, within or across borders and the region, many of whom had to flee multiple times and remain displaced for many years. The number of people who rely on basic life-saving aid in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria has increased by more than 3 million since the start of 2023. By 31 December, 12.3 million vulnerable people had been reached with humanitarian assistance and protection services, representing 52 per cent of the 23.6 million people targeted in total. The region faces a serious humanitarian funding deficit of \$3 billion as only \$1.8 billion (37 per cent) of the \$4.8 billion required in 2023 was received.

51. Sustained violence against civilians in the region is concerning. In October and November 2023 alone, nearly 700 civilians were reportedly killed in central Sahel countries. In the Niger, following the unconstitutional change of government in July 2023, protection incidents, including kidnapping, gender-based violence and domestic violence, increased by 52 per cent in August. Burkina Faso experienced one of the world's most dynamic displacement crises, with the number of displaced reaching 2.1 million by the end of November 2023 according to the latest update from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).¹⁸ In Mali, fears for an escalation of hostilities following the withdrawal of MINUSMA did not materialize, yet an increase in the severity of humanitarian needs across the country was observed as a result of conflict between the Malian Armed Forces and violent extremist groups, causing more than 391,000 people to become internally displaced.

52. By December 2023, Chad was the largest refugee-hosting country in the region, with over 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers, followed by Cameroon with approximately 488,000.

B. United Nations support for the Sahel

53. In 2023, the United Nations system, including the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, was actively involved in implementing actions aimed at addressing the many challenges facing the region, ranging from strengthening governance systems and resilience to peace and security support across the humanitarian, peace and development pillars. In particular, the Office worked closely with the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the special political mission mandated by the Security Council to, inter alia, support efforts in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, sustaining peace and mediation in West Africa and the Sahel, resident coordinators, United Nations entities, the regional directors leading the United Nations country teams and regional offices throughout the Sahel, ensuring a coherent United Nations approach at the national and regional levels.

Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel

54. To ensure coherence in United Nations actions, the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel actively promoted cross-pillar coherence, which resulted in: (a) the setting up of a platform for informal policy dialogue between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations in the Sahel; and (b) training on cross-pillar work for 90 experts and professionals in the Sahel at the

¹⁸ International Organization for Migration, "Burkina Faso crisis response plan 2024", Global Crisis Response Platform. Available at <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/burkina-faso-crisis-response-plan-2024>.

regional and national levels. The training led to the establishment of a community of practice, which will continue to be expanded in 2024.

55. On the positioning of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, the Office co-led a multi-country high-level joint mission to the Sahel, which included meetings with Governments and other stakeholders, such as donor partners, in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Mauritania. During the mission, the Special Coordinator advocated continued engagement for accelerated progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda, the integrated strategy and Agenda 2063. The mission produced greater visibility on the existing situation in the Sahel, allowed for crucial exchanges with populations and national authorities and enhanced awareness of the integrated strategy.

56. The Office continued to mainstream the integrated strategy and the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel into country and regional processes and programmes, achieved through combined efforts with the Development Coordination Office. By December 2023, the integrated strategy and the support plan had been integrated into common country assessments and new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks in 9 of the 10 countries under the integrated strategy, with the exception of Mali.

57. In addition, the Office continued to support the production and dissemination of knowledge products and data on evolving issues affecting the Sahel. An example is the transnational organized crime threat assessment by the integrated strategy and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on firearms trafficking, fuel trafficking, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in medical products. The Office disseminated and advocated the systematic use of analytical and strategic documents on the Sahel, including the Sahel vision aper, the Sahel predictive analysis and the “five Ws” mapping of United Nations interventions.

58. Furthermore, the Office made progress on priority development areas for the region, notably water. With the wider United Nations system, ECOWAS, the Permanent Inter-State Committee on Drought Control in the Sahel and the Governments of Burkina Faso and Italy, the Office facilitated a joint side event at the twenty-eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on water to accelerate climate resilience and development in the Sahel. The main outcomes of the event were renewed commitment by key partners for continued support for water-related interventions through a “mega Sahel coalition on water” and increased awareness of the dynamics in the Sahel and key initiatives relating to water resources.

59. With funding through the integrated strategy, the Office continued to widen partnerships under the strategy and the resource mobilization landscape. It worked with United Nations entities on submitting proposals for funding through the prevention window of the African Development Bank transitional facility. Nine countries under the strategy submitted project proposals for the 2023 window. Of the 17 United Nations projects recommended for selection by the Bank’s review committee, 5 were selected, including 1 in the Sahel. The Office will continue to support the wider United Nations system in developing similar joint projects for the next round. Led by the Special Coordinator, the Office facilitated a number of outreach and fundraising efforts, including joint visits to donor countries.

Security

60. The United Nations system implemented several initiatives aimed at achieving peacebuilding, prevention and the resolution of conflicts. In October 2023, the United Nations regional youth and peace and security coordination platform in West Africa and the Sahel was launched by UNOWAS, the United Nations Population Fund

(UNFPA) and UNDP, composed of representatives of United Nations entities, Governments and civil society organizations. The multi-stakeholder platform aims to strengthen coordination, promote accountability and ensure harmonization of the youth and peace and security interventions of United Nations entities. In the same light, in October 2023, UNFPA, supported by the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, organized training for trainers in Yaoundé for the development of national action plans on youth and peace and security for 11 countries in West Africa and the Sahel. In Cameroon, Chad, the Gambia and Mali, UNFPA led a comprehensive approach to countering radicalization and violent extremism.

61. In 2023, the peace and security pillar of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel continued to carry out efforts aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of judicial systems in the Sahel, in particular to strengthen national, regional and cross-border institutional capacities for effective border management and tackle illicit trafficking, terrorism and transnational organized crime.

Governance

62. Through the initiatives highlighted below, the governance pillar in 2023 supported efforts aimed at promoting political stability and resolving conflicts in the Sahel using a range of tools and initiatives.

63. On strengthening cross-border and regional cooperation for stability and development, the United Nations, through the UNDP stabilization programme in the cross-border areas of Lake Chad and Liptako-Gourma, has supported over 1.6 million people, of whom over 500,000 have so far returned to their homes. The stabilization programmes in these regions are anchored in regional intergovernmental organizations such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Liptako-Gourma Authority. Strategically, stabilization efforts have contributed to the implementation of the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region and to the development of a similar strategy for the Liptako-Gourma region. These flagship initiatives will continue to serve as the fundamental backbones of stabilization, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions in the two regions.

64. The United Nations system, through the good offices of UNOWAS, actively engaged with key stakeholders, including the ECOWAS Commission, Member States, transitional authorities and key regional and international partners, to support efforts for stabilization in the region. Regarding the political crisis in the Niger, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel and Head of UNOWAS undertook several missions across the region and participated in the sixty-fourth ordinary summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government in Abuja and the extraordinary summit on the situation in the Niger following the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger from ECOWAS.

65. The governance pillar provided key support in regional and cross-border integration by enhancing socioeconomic empowerment activities, including trade. For example, the Economic Commission for Africa supported Sahelian countries in developing and implementing national strategies for the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement in collaboration with the World Trade Organization and the Islamic Development Bank to implement 20 activities identified in their respective action plans for the Agreement. As a result, more than 1,000 representatives of Governments and the private sector, including women and youth entrepreneurs, were trained and made aware of the protocols and provisions under the Agreement.

66. On strengthening civic space, efforts were made in Burkina Faso with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, leading to the establishment in May 2023 of a national consultation framework on

civic space comprising key ministries as well as the national media regulator, the police, the National Human Rights Commission, civil society organizations, journalists and bloggers. In Senegal, the Office organized two consultations with women and young people, respectively, focusing on political participation and violence against women and young people, including in the run-up to the elections.

67. On the empowerment of women and young people, the United Nations system conducted activities through UNESCO and IOM in Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, the Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, implementing a project on empowering young people in Africa through the media. The project is aimed at raising awareness of the migration-related risks faced by the population, especially young people, of key countries of origin. Likewise, the joint programme for the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women led by UNESCO, UNFPA and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) was aimed at enhancing access to quality education for adolescent girls and young women in Mali. UNESCO, IOM and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) also implemented a project on supporting self-employment for rural young people as a vector of peace and cohesion in Mali, aimed at creating sustainable jobs and setting up a framework for inclusive dialogue for peace and social cohesion, targeting rural communities.

Resilience

68. On promoting social services and effective social protection systems, resilience programmes developed by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) since 2018 continue to serve as catalysts for community resilience-building for over 3.5 million people, including 2.7 million children in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger. The programme's second phase extends from 2023 to 2027. Partnerships with international financial institutions have also helped to advance United Nations programmes to strengthen public health infrastructure (United Nations Office for Project Services in Chad, Mali and the Niger), promote adaptive social protection (UNICEF and WFP) and support the empowerment of women and girls (UNFPA). IOM and FAO in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, with funding support from the Peacebuilding Fund, carried out activities aimed at promoting peaceful transhumance in the Liptako-Gourma region.

69. The United Nations system invested in water for development with a focus on local communities. Examples include the "1 million cisterns for the Sahel" initiative of FAO, water, sanitation and hygiene programming by UNICEF for a greater impact on health and nutrition, improved access to water resources in Mali by UNESCO in collaboration with the Government and water access for livelihoods, irrigation and livestock provided by WFP.

70. UN-Women, FAO and WFP continued to provide support on climate-resilient agriculture in Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. More than 30,000 women thus had access to skills, information and technology to enhance climate resilience along different value chains. The programme strengthened the capacity of more than 200 women's cooperatives and small and medium-sized enterprises and worked with local authorities to enhance women's land rights. UNFPA made investments in creating community-based safe spaces for adolescent girls and young women across the Sahel, namely in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria.

71. In Mali, following the withdrawal of MINUSMA, the Mission's trust fund was turned into a multi-partner trust fund to continue to finance resilience-building activities in the country. However, as several traditional partners suspended their engagements in the country, its funding stagnated.

Coordinated frameworks in the Sahel

72. In 2023, there was heightened coordination by United Nations entities on the integrated strategy for the Sahel. The fifteenth meeting of the steering committee for the strategy was held in Dakar on 14 December 2023, providing an opportunity to reflect on the implications of the current geopolitical, socioeconomic, humanitarian, security, human rights and climate situation in the Sahel and to assess overall implementation of the strategy. Some conclusions and recommendations were as follows:

(a) Acknowledging that the transformations in the Sahel are linked to global geopolitical tensions and long-standing governance and development grievances and the need for the United Nations to continue to support countries in the Sahel while being guided by its values and the Charter of the United Nations, asserting its neutrality and impartiality in the current geopolitical context and adopting a communications strategy clarifying its limitations and added value;

(b) Examining governance in a holistic manner rather than through a process-based approach and interventions;

(c) Ensuring the importance of the persistent need for a change of narrative and a shift in perception on the Sahel from that of a region in crisis to a region in transition;

(d) Emphasizing stronger regional integration and the free movement of people, goods and services in the region;

(e) Advancing the development agenda in the Sahel in relation to climate, food systems transformation, peace and security issues and the link with sustainable development;

(f) Placing women and young people at the centre of United Nations thinking and actions;

(g) Increasing funding by enlarging partnerships, including new actors, and promoting the integrated national financing frameworks;

(h) Strengthening implementation of the integrated strategy through diplomacy, knowledge products on peace, security and governance challenges and the creation of an ad hoc advisory group comprising the private sector, civil society, international financial institutions, young people, civil society and the United Nations system.

C. Recommendations

73. The transformations in the Sahel are linked to global geopolitical tensions and long-standing governance and development challenges, requiring the United Nations to adopt a change of narrative and a shift in perception on the Sahel from a region in crisis to a region in transition in order to exploit available opportunities and forge new partnerships.

74. The United Nations will recalibrate its engagement, which requires the enforcement of neutrality in understanding the sovereign choices of Member States, while taking critical decisions based on its core principles and values, including respect for human rights and support for democratic rule.

75. Continued support for sustainable development investments in the Sahel will be critical to address the needs and ensure the prosperity of its people. This includes advancing just energy transitions, access to water, transforming food systems and reshaping education. It also includes making investments that address economic and gender inequalities, lack of access to basic services, political instability and the heightened impacts of climate change.