



The G5 Sahel: At the nexus of fragility, conflict, and climate

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- The G5 Sahel region, comprising Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, is suffering from the triple crises of fragility, conflict, and climate.
- Home to more than 89 million people, these countries are amongst the least developed in the world, with around one-third of the population living below the international poverty line.
- Despite contributing a minimal 1% to global greenhouse gas emissions, the G5 Sahel is highly susceptible to climate change, and the region is predicted to warm at a much faster rate than the global average.
- The last decade has seen increasing frequencies of climate and conflict events, which necessitates a better understanding of their mutually reinforcing manifestations.
- Addressing the polycrisis unfolding in the G5 Sahel will require a multi-pronged, sustained, and long-term approach. Stakeholders should coordinate and align on the low-hanging fruits and high-impact interventions, design innovative approaches to engage with governments and non-traditional actors, understand how climate finance fits into the aid architecture, and involve local communities and Indigenous populations to create tailored solutions.

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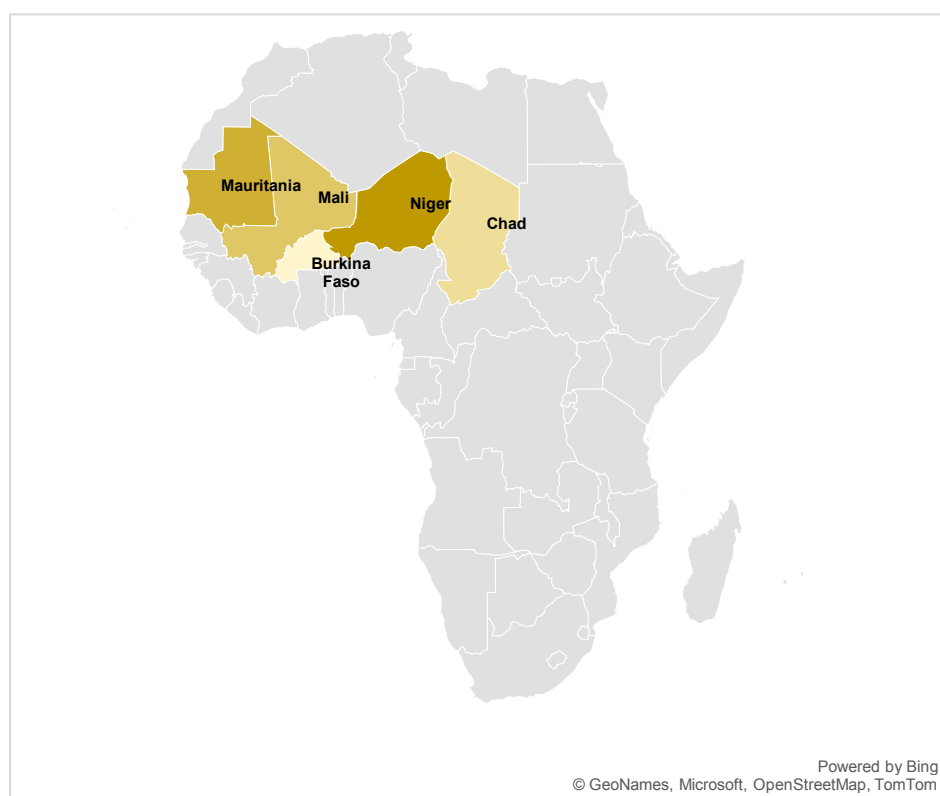


The Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) was created in February 2014 and is comprised of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The objective was to combine efforts for the development and security of the member states (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). By December 2023, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger - under military juntas - had left the bloc. Thereafter, Chad and Mauritania declared they were prepared to dissolve the alliance. For simplicity, the rest of this document will retain the G5 Sahel nomenclature. This policy brief reviews existing literature and available data and attempts to understand the complex challenges at the intersection of fragility, conflict, and climate change unfolding in the G5 Sahel region. It concludes with policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders.

Introduction

The G5 Sahel region is comprised of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (Figure 1). Situated between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanese savanna to the south, the region spans around 5 million square kilometres and has a population of more than 89 million (World Bank Group, 2022). The G5 Sahel countries are amongst the least developed in the world, with GDP per capita averaging USD 790 in 2021 (when data was last available) and rank poorly on the Human Development Index (HDI), with 31% of the population living below the international poverty line (World Bank Group, 2022).

FIGURE 1: G5 Sahel



Fragility, conflict and weak coping capacities

Under the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) multidimensional fragility framework, all the G5 Sahel countries are characterised as fragile, with Chad categorised as extremely fragile (OECD, 2022a).

Economically, these countries are highly dependent on natural resources, both: (i) renewables for the food sector (for example, land, water and biomass) representing 27% of the G5 Sahel GDP and employing 80% of the workforce; and (ii) extractives (primarily gold). This makes them susceptible to external shocks and violence from factions seeking to gain control over the resources (OECD, 2022b). The public debt as a share of GDP has been increasing over the years and was expected to be 51% in 2023 (Aemro Selassie & Kramarenko, 2023). The demographic growth has not been matched by employment opportunities offering decent incomes. Electricity access challenges are profound, with only a third of the population in the region connected (World Bank Group, 2022). Poor road infrastructure and high transport costs (all the G5 Sahel countries except Mauritania are landlocked) make the movement of goods and essential public services difficult (World Bank Group, 2022).

Politically, there is prevalence of clientelist relationships resulting in transfers to a select population for political support, often at the expense of long-term public goods (such as health and education), restrictions on political rights and participation and freedom of electoral processes, high levels of corruption that fuel grievances and greed, and fear of violence committed by the government (OECD, 2022a). Since 2020, four G5 Sahel countries (the exception is Mauritania) have fallen to military rule (Security Council Report, 2023).

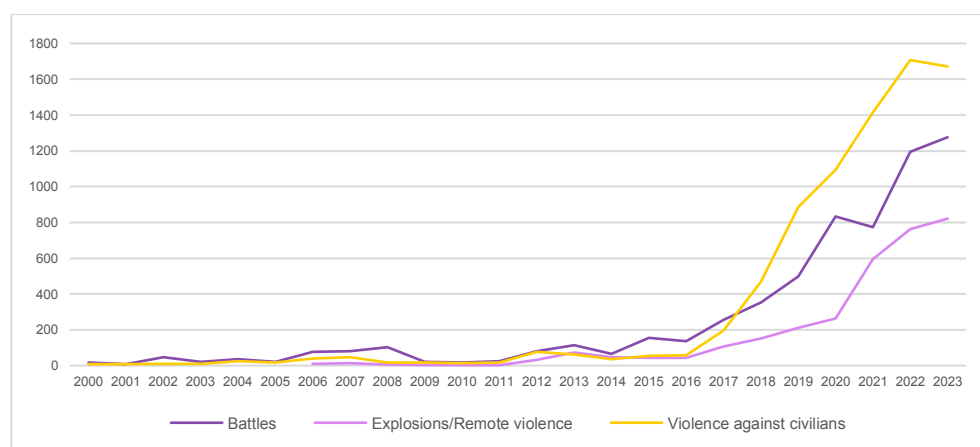
Socially, the region's demographic profile will alter significantly as the population grows, with the number of people under 20 expected to double by 2050. Already, a high proportion of the youth are unemployed (Tesfaye, 2022). Income inequality is high. In Chad, the richest 10% of the population receive twice the national income as the poorest 40% (Denis Crola, 2019). Rapid and unplanned urbanisation has left cities struggling to provide basic services (World Bank Group, 2022).

The G5 Sahel has been plagued by violence and conflicts for years. The last decade saw an alarming surge of violence and conflict (Figures 2 and 3) that spilt beyond national boundaries, posing a considerable threat to other countries in the region and beyond (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). The Liptako-Gourma region in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and

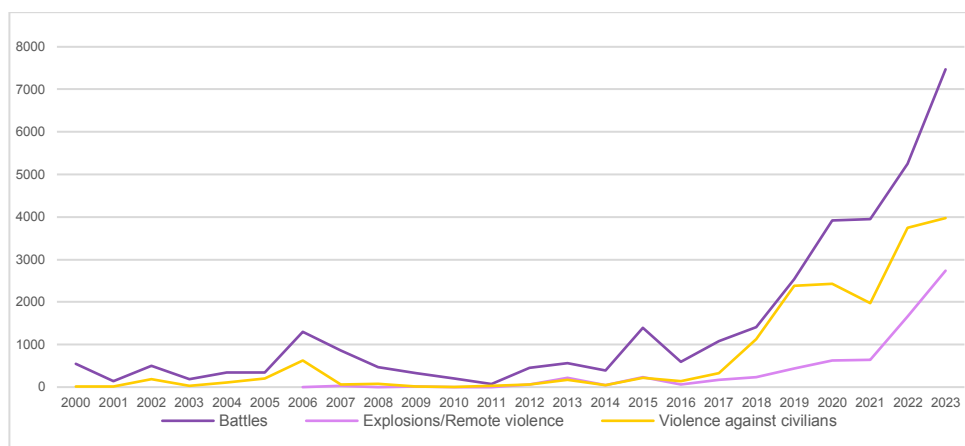
the Lake Chad Basin is the epicentre of the violence and conflict. Insurgency in the last decade has displaced 2.6 million people in Liptako-Gourma and 2.8 million people in the Lake Chad Basin (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). Conflict drivers include low public confidence in state institutions resulting from a lack of political inclusiveness, natural resource competition manifested in communal tensions between pastoralists and cultivators, unequal distribution of basic services (health, water, education, etc.) with remote and border areas being left behind, and weak judiciary and security services, forcing citizens to pursue non-formal approaches (World Bank, 2022).

The persistence and prevalence of fragility and conflict in the G5 Sahel signal the weak coping capacities of these countries. The 2010 decade saw the region averaging 4.9% in real annual GDP growth rate. However, recent years have seen slower growth and recession perpetuated further by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the rapidly increasing population, growth in the GDP per capita has been limited and insufficient to reduce the high poverty rates (World Bank, 2022). Tax revenue generation is almost half that in rich countries (Denis Crola, 2019). Lack of access to quality education and health implies that a child born today in Chad will reach only 30% of her full productive potential, with similar trends in the other four countries. Food insecurity is manifested in high levels of malnutrition and stunting in children, resulting in reduced future productivity and growth (Denis Crola, 2019). Women are amongst the poorest section of the population (Denis Crola, 2019) and possibly the most marginalised. The education gender gap is among the largest globally (World Bank, 2022). In Burkina Faso and Mali, women constitute 40% of the labour force but own only 10% of agricultural land (Oxfam, 2019).

FIGURE 2: Frequency of conflict events in G5 Sahel



Source: ACLED, acleddata.com

FIGURE 3: Conflict-related fatalities in G5 Sahel

Source: ACLED, acleddata.com

Climate-related shocks

Despite contributing a minimal 1% to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the G5 Sahel is highly susceptible to climate change (World Bank, 2022).

Annual temperatures are estimated to increase by around 1.5 to 4°C compared to pre-industrial levels by 2050, and the region is predicted to be warming much faster than the global average (World Bank, 2022). Extreme weather events such as floods and drought are becoming more frequent and intense over the years (Figure 4).

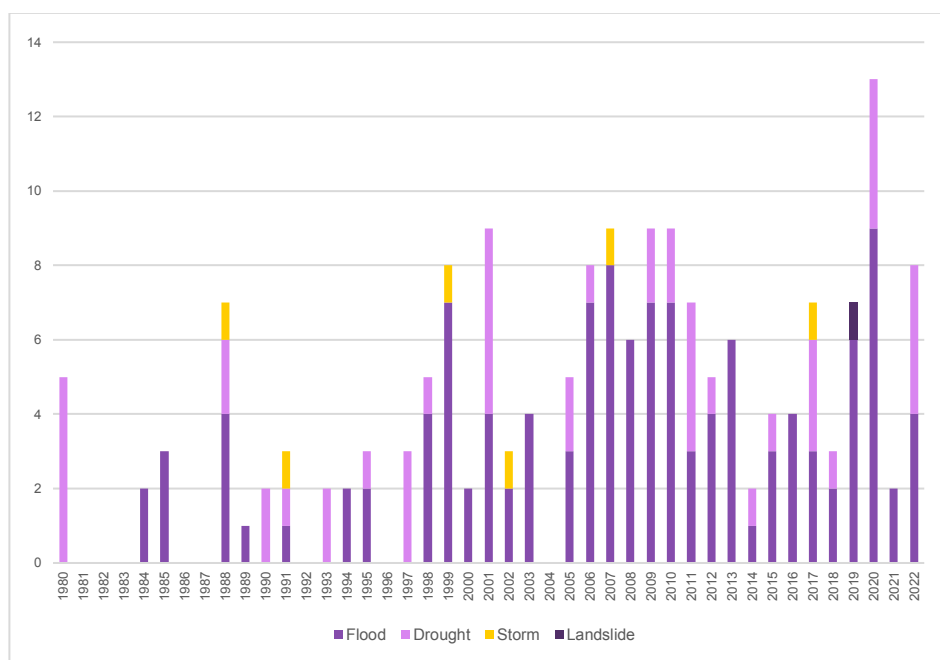
Natural capital in the form of farmland and forest is fast-degrading primarily due to human activity (with households using wood for cooking). Almost 80% of the farmland has degraded, putting further pressure on forest cover as demand for cropland increases (World Bank, 2022). The availability and predictability of water resources is increasingly threatened by climate change. This does not bode well for the region, where 80% of the population is dependent on subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing (Tesfaye, 2022).

High population growth, land degradation, and water stress have increased competition over scarce natural resources, triggering mass migration. It is predicted under a pessimistic scenario (where climate and development action are absent) that Niger could experience internal climate migration of more than eight million people by 2050 (Rigaud et al., 2021).

All the G5 Sahel countries are in the bottom quarter of the ND-GAIN Country Index, which ranks countries on a combination of factors that assess their vulnerability to climate change and readiness to improve resilience (Figure 5). This underscores that the G5 Sahel countries are not prepared institutionally (due to political instability or weak regulatory quality and rule of law), socially (because of societal inequality, low education levels, etc.), and economically

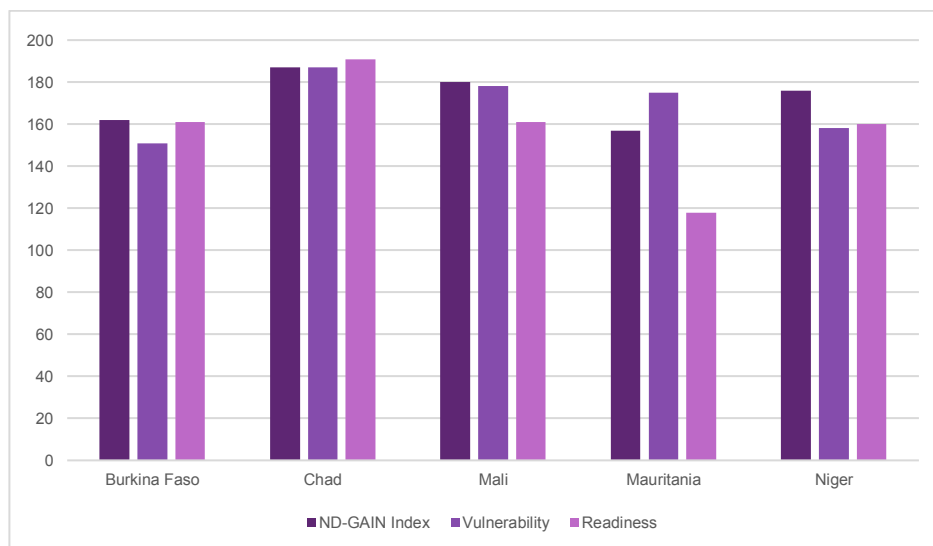
(unreadiness of the domestic business environment for climate adaptation investments) to cope with the climate change challenges that the region faces.

FIGURE 4: Frequency of climate events in G5 Sahel



Source: Climate Change Dashboard, IMF

FIGURE 5: Climate risk ranking of G5 Sahel



Source: ND-GAIN index, University of Notre Dame

Note: ND-GAIN Index ranks 191 countries in ascending order, starting with the best performers.

Climate change as a stress multiplier in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

It would be useful to revisit Figures 2 and 4 to understand the intersection between climate change and conflict in the G5 Sahel. Both figures show

increased climate and conflict events over the last decade. While this does not determine causality, it provides sufficient ground to motivate a better understanding of the mutually reinforcing manifestations of both.

Indeed, climate change can exacerbate fragility and conflict, especially when the government lacks the capacity or otherwise fails to support communities' adaptation to climate change, further undermining the social contract and the legitimacy of the state (Crawford, 2015).

Chad has appeared on the World Bank Group's list of Fragile and Conflict-affected Settings (FCS) consistently every year for the past two decades since the World Bank started publishing such a list in 2006, Mali 12 times, and both Chad and Niger six times. Mauritania has appeared once and has a better ND-GAIN readiness score (as shown in [Figure 5](#) above) despite being as highly vulnerable to climate change as the rest. It may be inferred then (or at least in the case of the G5 Sahel) that countries with lower levels of fragility and conflict have a better ability to invest in adaptation measures and absorb the impacts of climate shocks.

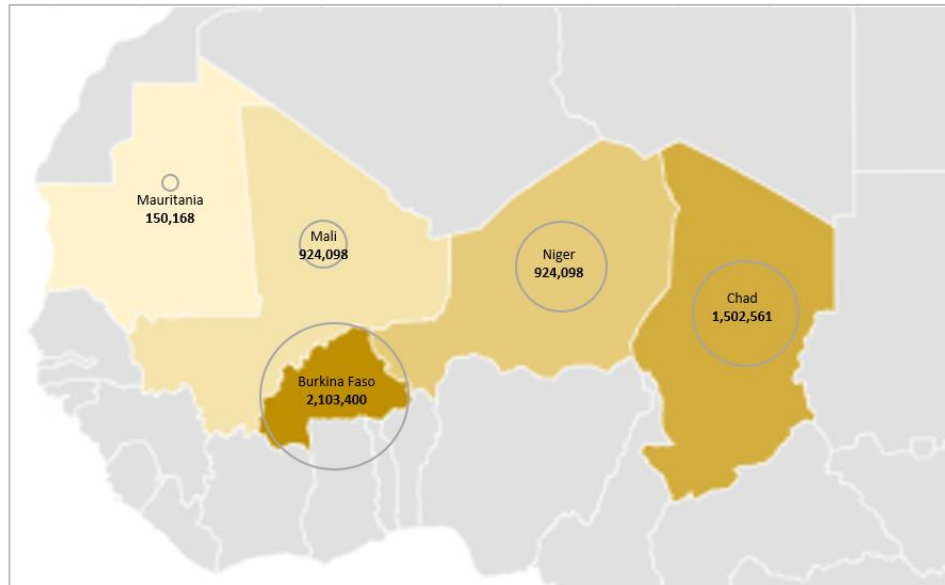
At the local level, seasonal migration has long been a coping mechanism of the G5 Sahelian communities as they seek to diversify their income when faced with environmental hardship (Tesfaye, 2022). This mobility is facilitated by existing government agreements (Crawford, 2015). Traditionally, pastoralists and cultivators have cooperatively shared natural resources, but in recent years, tensions have been rising between these groups. As land productivity declined, partly because of rainfall variability and partly due to unsustainable farming practices, cultivators have encroached over pasturelands. The pastoralists have also been extending further into agricultural lands in search of water. This has triggered a growing number of clashes between the two groups as they compete for the same dwindling resource base (Tesfaye, 2022).

Climate change can exacerbate the prevailing security risks imposed by terrorist and criminal networks. The demographic dividend is a window of opportunity for the G5 Sahel. However, if the livelihood opportunities offered to youth continue to be centred on climate-dependent natural resources, and if the governments fail to help them cope with the impact of climate change and provide alternative livelihoods, the grievances could be exploited by terrorist and criminal networks.

The G5 Sahel are host to more than five million forcibly displaced persons ([Figure 6](#)). This acute crisis is primarily the result of conflicts and could be further aggravated by the effects of climate change. Climate migrants may have to compete with host communities over scarce resources (land, livelihoods, and

public services). Tensions could also occur when climate migrants and host communities belong to different ethnicities, altering local demographics and ethnopolitical balance (Koubi, 2019).

FIGURE 6: Forced displacement in G5 Sahel (2024)



Source: Coordination Platform for Forced Displacement in Sahel, UNHCR

Sahelian communities in the G5 have built innate resilience and adapted to the climate for centuries. It may, therefore, seem unreasonable to propose that they may react to climate pressures through violence and conflict. At the same time, however, the scale of climate change effects predicted for the region is unprecedented, and it will be unwise to assume that the communities would be able to continue to cope with these using the same traditional mechanisms as they have in the past. The path towards peace and development in the G5 Sahel will be contingent upon designing policies and programmes that build resilience and adaptive capacity of communities and the government (Crawford, 2015).

Pathways for policy action

Addressing the polycrisis unfolding in the G5 Sahel necessitates a multi-pronged approach. For macroeconomic stabilisation, institutions with technical and absorptive capacity to effectively utilise resources are needed. In conflict-affected areas, policy actions and designed interventions should abide by the principles of do-no-harm and peacebuilding. Addressing the impacts of climate change requires concerted global action on adaptation strategies along with mitigation support. All these efforts will need to be aligned to avoid parallel structures and making matters worse.

Most importantly, however, will be to ensure that the efforts and support directed towards G5 Sahel are sustained and long-term. Institutional building requires time and the fortune of willing political actors. Conflicts are becoming more protracted: existing evidence shows that in 2022, 55 active conflicts had been ongoing for around eight to 11 years on average (Beals & Salisbury, 2023). The frequency and intensity of climate shocks are increasing alongside persistent slow-onset climate events (such as loss of biodiversity, high temperatures, etc.) Against this dismal backdrop, the G5 Sahel region must further compete for attention from traditional donors and actors who are themselves faced with competing priorities and are distracted elsewhere.

Following are proposed recommendations to strategise policies and actions for key stakeholders to consider.

Align on the low-hanging fruits and high-impact interventions: The heterogeneous composition of the five countries discussed here makes it challenging for external actors to define singular policies that generate positive externalities beyond the targeted scope. However, there is an opportunity to combine efforts for greater collective impact on issues that affect multiple countries. Countries supported by international actors can start by identifying and prioritising their national needs. Where these overlap with others, for example, in the case of transboundary climate risks and external displacements, the countries can work together to address these issues at source. While doing so, it will be important to ensure that mitigation measures in one place (for example, water conservation activities) do not result in adverse effects in a different place (for example, endangering water supply for neighbours further downstream) (J. T. Klein et al., 2023).

Coordination will be key: Intra-country coordination between different administrative levels within the government (centre-periphery), as well as with non-public stakeholders (civil society organisations, advocacy groups, local leaders and communities, and Indigenous groups), will be crucial to overcoming the overlapping manifestations of fragility, conflict and climate. Where possible (and feasible), inter-country coordination between the G5 Sahel should be at all relevant levels, with line ministries working at the forefront of these issues, such as the ministries of finance, climate change, agriculture and water resources, encouraged to cooperate regularly. International players are also encouraged to collaborate beyond their defined mandates. Given the long-term nature of these challenges, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts should be better aligned to ensure policies and actions are complementary, coherent, and results-oriented so limited resources are maximised.

Understand how climate finance fits into the aid architecture and build the necessary capacity: Estimates from the five countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)¹ submitted in 2021 place investments needed for adaptation to cope with climate change impacts (on agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and food security; biodiversity, ecosystems, and forests; energy and infrastructure, social protection, gender, health, and education) and GHG mitigation at USD 33 billion and USD 50 billion respectively by 2030 (World Bank, 2022).

A study conducted by Oxfam² on the scale and type of international public climate finance received by West Africa (the G5 Sahel plus Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal) found that the region received a total of USD 11.7 billion during the period from 2013 to 2019. This equated to around USD 5 per capita per year, a massive shortfall from the estimated USD 58 per capita per year required based on the combined NDCs needs assessment. Almost two-thirds of this international public climate finance was in the form of debt instruments, and the remaining was grants. The largest providers, both bilateral (France, contributing more than USD 1.2 billion) and multilateral (the World Bank, contributing close to USD 3.5 billion), provided finance in the form of debt instruments (Martín Casas & Remalia Sanogo, 2022).

It is no hidden fact that international commitments on climate finance are trailing behind targets and that climate finance continues to be geographically concentrated in developed economies (Buchner et al., 2023). The 29th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) closed dramatically with high-income countries agreeing to take the lead to triple the climate financing committed to low- and middle-income countries from USD 100 billion to USD 300 billion every year by 2035 (UNFCCC, 2024a). The COP29 also launched a call to action to scale up support and finance for climate-sensitive actions to support climate-vulnerable countries affected by humanitarian challenges and conflict (UNFCCC, 2024b).

The G5 Sahelian governments and international supporters should capitalise on this momentum. For the G5 Sahel, grant-based and concessional adaptation finance would matter greatly (Martín Casas & Remalia Sanogo, 2022), as would easing the process (in terms of complexity, bureaucracy and timelines) and building local capacity for accessing international climate finance (Robinson, 2024). Innovative financing instruments such as debt-to-climate or debt-to-nature swaps, whereby foreign debts of countries are cancelled to allow the funds released to be then used for climate-related activities, should be

¹ NDCs are national commitments by signatory countries to the Paris Agreement to reduce GHG emissions and adapt to climate change impacts. Countries are expected to submit an update on their NDCs to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) every five years.

² Oxfam is a group of non-governmental organisations working towards reducing global poverty and injustice.

promoted (Ellmers & Straub, 2024). Finally, capacity-building support should be provided to help these countries develop and scale up carbon markets.

Design innovative approaches to deal with governments and non-

traditional actors: The last few years have seen a shifting of the guard in the G5 Sahel. French troops have been stationed in the region since 2013 to lead counterterrorism operations against rebel groups (Asala, 2021). In 2023 military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and later in the year, Niger asked the French forces to withdraw (Kabandula, 2024). By the end of 2024, Chad had also ended its military alliance with France and joined the rest in demanding the French troops leave (Silja Fröhlich, 2024), and the United States had closed its military base in Niger (de León Cobo, 2024). New alliances are now being formed with Russia, Turkey, China, Iran, and Gulf Arab countries (Laessing, 2024). With these rapid geopolitical developments unfolding, it would be interesting to observe how traditional funders would react, especially France and Europe, which have delivered aid and assistance to the region for years.

In these testing circumstances, it would be important for international actors to take the principled stance of leaving no one behind. Humanitarian and peacebuilding organisations are well-versed in operating on the ground with all contesting parties. Development agencies will also need to develop and strengthen their protocols on continuing to remain engaged. The G5 Sahel will serve as a test case for international actors on how to deliver for the most vulnerable.

Engage with local communities and indigenous populations: The G5 Sahelian communities have endured decades of insurgencies and violence. Communal fissures along tribal, ethnic, and religious lines continue to fester. Climate change has made natural resources even more precious and can lead to further fracturing of the pastoralists' and cultivators' way of life. In these challenging settings, finding common ground and building consensus on key issues will not be possible without engaging the local communities and indigenous populations. Their input must be sought in the initial phase of problem identification and prioritisation and when finding solutions. Policies and interventions can be expected to be long-term and sustained if they are community-led and community-owned. Only then will they be able to generate the greatest collective impact.

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