Since 2015, European partners have funded interventions in the Sahel to help countries like Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali increase their capacity to regulate and control migration. Through these interventions, the European Union has set precedents and encouraged securitised policies that reinforce the security interests of governments in the Sahel, and undermine the capacity of regional and continental organisations to establish comprehensive migration frameworks.
Key findings

The European Union (EU) has favoured a route-based approach to migration in the Sahel aimed at deterring northbound journeys to North Africa along the Central Mediterranean Route and targeting irregular migrants ‘at the source’. This approach is inadequate in a context like the Sahel.

The EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel specifically aims to counter irregular arrivals in Europe but lacks a strategic vision and an associated protection framework.

The EU’s approach does not address the fast-growing displacement crisis unfolding in the Sahel due to rampant instability. Such instability is, paradoxically, what drives Europe’s engagement in the Sahel.

Recommendations

Sahelian governments should:

Promote area-based approaches: Together with European partners and international organisations, they should focus on the delivery of assistance, protection and aid to those in need. In a context of mixed movements and high vulnerability, area-based approaches are key to addressing the needs of whole communities, hosts, refugees, internally displaced people and migrants.

The EU should:

Recalibrate its approach to migration in the Sahel: Interventions should be strategically aligned with a range of migration interests to increase governance capacity in the Sahel, support regional free movement at the regional and continental levels, enhance immigration and refugee regimes in the region, and prevent irregular movements across the Mediterranean.

Give greater priority to displacement in its migration approach: European investments in countering irregular migration have excluded the protracted displacement crisis unfolding in the Sahel. Policymakers should consider displacement their first priority in the region. Doing so is paramount to addressing the Sahel’s humanitarian, governance and security crises.

Acknowledge the long-lasting effect of EU migration policy: The approach should be recalibrated to encourage African countries to adopt a more progressive position on migration policy that builds on existing regional and continental frameworks to improve protection for migrants and displaced persons.

EU-funded efforts to curtail irregular migration have focused on returns of people back to their countries or regions of origin. This has set a precedent for governments in the Sahel to prioritise border protection over the protection of people on the move.

The EU intervention assumes that people leaving North Africa’s shores transit first through countries like Niger. However, some migrants, such as those in Libya, have used sea crossings to escape violence, abduction and extortion in Libya. By targeting Niger as the ‘low-hanging fruit’ of migration cooperation instead of Libya, EU-sponsored counter-smuggling policies may not achieve their goal of stopping transit migrants.
Introduction

Chief European Union (EU) diplomat Josep Borrell said in a 2020 interview that, ‘Europe’s border is not in the Mediterranean, but south to the Sahel.’ This quote explains why the EU and European member states have significantly increased their engagement on migration in the Sahel over the past decade. Europeans’ focus on migration in the Sahel is not new. But it has intensified – first in 2011 following the eruption of a regional security crisis swelling from central Mali, and more so after 2015 when Europe witnessed a surge in arrivals from the Mediterranean.

Since 2015, European partners have funded interventions in the Sahel with the objective of increasing states’ capacities to regulate and control migration to reduce northbound migration flows transiting through the region. Initiatives such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) (with Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali as the top beneficiaries) placed greater emphasis on strengthening parts of the security sector responsible for migration control.

Research suggests that this intervention logic has had several complex negative consequences across the region. These include increased insecurity and instability, disrupted livelihoods and modified smuggling practices and migration routes. It has also put migrants’ lives at risk, and eroded already fragile relations between populations and states.

At the time of the 2020 interview, Josep Borrell and the EU Commission were preparing to launch a new partnership with Africa that included, among other priorities, the promotion of ‘balanced, coherent, and comprehensive partnerships on migration.’ The new strategy has suffered from two years of global pandemic and a lack of political traction, but the attention to migration from the Sahel to the Mediterranean has remained high.

Despite the criticism, the EU’s migration approach in the Sahel was deemed a replicable success story.

Despite coming under criticism, the EU’s intervention logic on migration in the Sahel was deemed as a replicable success story and continues to follow the same model. Following an uptick in irregular arrivals to the EU at the end of 2022, the EU released an Action Plan for the Central Mediterranean. The plan reiterates the importance of cooperating with countries of origin and the transit of migrants in North Africa and the Sahel – specifically Niger.
The spread of the conflict from central Mali to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso, the intensification of attacks on civilians, the militarisation of the region, and local conflicts over resources have resulted in a generalised situation of insecurity leading to unseen levels of displacement. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that the Sahel conflict has displaced over 2.5 million people in the past decade – of whom 2.1 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs)."14

Efforts to stop transit migration in the central Sahel region since 2015 are unlikely to stop there. If anything, the perceived threats that have motivated these policies have only increased – armed conflicts, mass displacement, terrorist activity; especially as they occur in a context of growing political instability. It is therefore paramount to take stock of the recent migration interventions in the region to inform future policymaking.

This report evaluates the EU’s approach on migration and its influence on policy developments in the Sahel region. The analysis centres on the period after 2015 which saw an intensification of the EU’s engagement in the region. The research is based on a series of interviews conducted with national policymakers and migration practitioners in Niamey (Niger) and Dakar (Senegal); remote interviews with external donors, and international and regional experts; and an online expert discussion held under the Chatham House Rule in April 2023. The full anonymised list of interviews conducted for this research is available in the Annex. The report answers the following questions:

• What is the EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel?
• How has the EU played an influential role in migration policymaking in the Sahel?
• To what extent is the EU’s approach adequate to current migration dynamics in the region?

The report starts by reviewing the EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel. It then analyses the EU’s influence on regional migration policy frameworks and the effects of the reinforcement of borders on regional mobility. Thereafter, the situation of refugees and IDPs in the Sahel and solutions to the crisis currently are explored. The report closes with a series of recommendations to European and African policymakers.

EU approach to migration in the Sahel

The EU’s approach over the past decade has three main characteristics, each of which are discussed below:

• It is a route-based view that intends to halt north-bound mobility
• It conflates security and migration policies
• It is a funding-based policy.
Halting northbound mobility

A decade of conflict in the Sahel has changed the regional migration ecosystem. The 2011 fall of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi – who had previously dealt with Europeans to halt migrant departures – and the country’s subsequent descent into violence, pushed migrant workers to seek refuge across the Mediterranean. The spread of the violent insurgency from central Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger provoked an unprecedented displacement crisis, with over 2.5 million displaced in the past decade.\(^20\)

In this context, and as irregular arrivals from the Central Mediterranean increased (Chart 2), the EU and European member states sought to reinforce partnerships with countries of origin and transit to curb the increase of irregular migration along so-called migration routes.\(^21\) In 2015, the EU gathered African heads of state at the Valletta Summit and declared the management of migration a shared responsibility of ‘countries of transit and origin of migrants.’ The EUTF was launched to fund initiatives implemented by international organisations and UN agencies to increase state capacity on migration governance and border control. The aim was to reduce transit migration in countries like Niger, Chad and Mali.

International partners also embraced the route approach as they benefited from dedicated EU funding. In 2015, the UNHCR appointed a Special Envoy for the Mediterranean with the attribution of funds to target mixed movements in the Central Mediterranean following a regional or route approach.\(^22\)

‘Externalisation’ isn’t only a product of European migration interest, but a negotiation with partner countries

Researchers describe this process as an ‘externalization process of migration policy, which means transferring the management of migration policy to the countries of origin and transit by the European Union.’\(^23\) However the process of externalisation is not only a product of European migration interests, but a negotiation with partner countries. In Mali, for instance, national authorities refused to include migration in the mandate of the two EU civilian missions.\(^24\) Niger, by contrast, saw interest in cooperating with EU partners. This was mainly out of humanitarian concerns, due to EU funding; and given the small Nigerien diaspora in Europe, which meant

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Chart 2: Irregular border crossings, Central Mediterranean Route, 2009–2020

Source: Frontex, Detected irregular border crossings, FRAN data as of 8 December 2020
Niger was free from European governments’ pressure to return its nationals.25

Security concerns are also pressing for governments in the Sahel. Niger’s former president Mahamadou Issoufou justified cooperation with international actors with reference to preventing migrant smugglers from smuggling arms into Niger. And former president Mohamed Bazoum considers migrant smugglers to be involved in broader criminal networks linked to terror groups.26 The EU’s approach is thus tied to national policy changes in partner countries, which are analysed below.

Data available on transit movements and irregular arrivals to Europe suggest that this approach succeeded in reducing the scope of journeys along the Central Mediterranean Route. Irregular arrivals to Italy decreased in 2018 (Chart 2), and transit journeys through Niger also reduced drastically (Chart 3). However, the data is hard to interpret. While detected transit journeys through the Sahel and arrivals to European shores may have dropped, arrivals to Libya and Algeria have not.27 According to one mixed migration specialist, policy changes did impact migration flows, but ‘Libya very much remains an [unknown] black box.’28

Data available for assessing the policy’s success is patchy. But despite this, the EU’s approach remains centred on solidifying borders and transborder cooperation along migration routes. Recently, the EU Commission unveiled two Team Europe Initiatives for the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes. They collate EU-funded and member states’ projects and initiatives along these routes.29 New EU initiatives expand the route-based approach to foster cooperation between the Sahel and coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea to increase border capacities and slow the spread of regional security threats.30

Conflating security objectives and migration interests

European policymakers perceive the central Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to be at the centre of an ‘arc of instability’ stretching all the way to the Gulf of Guinea and the Mediterranean shores. As the EU’s strategy for the Sahel recognises that ‘instability also contributes to irregular migration,’31 countering unwanted migration flows has been a central pillar of European engagement in the Sahel. This is even more so since 2015 when the EU witnessed a surge of arrivals. In fact, the spike of EU interventionism on security in the Sahel in 2016 was concomitant with migration interests.32

Over the past decade, Europeans have multiplied political, military, and civilian interventions in the region to address the root causes of instability (Chart 4). The result is a conflation of security threats and migration and overlapping mandates for EU foreign policy tools in the Sahel. This shows how ‘security concerns also determine the formulation and implementation of other parts of EU foreign policy.’33

Chart 3: Reported incoming and outgoing flows in Niger, 2016–2020

Source: Niger Flow Monitoring Report 38 (IOM, DTM)34
For instance, the EU Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP) for its internal security forces saw its mandate expanded in 2016 to cover the fight against irregular migration: ‘At the time, in 2016, everyone was mobilised to work on migration [...] To add migration to the mandate was to show the political commitment to the question.’ Including migration in the mission’s mandate resulted in more funding being allocated to the mission, although researchers estimate that EUCAP showed only limited results on implementation.

Following a recent agreement between EUCAP and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the mission envisages strengthening training on risk analysis on migration. Added to that, Joint Investigative Teams (JITs) and Joint Operational Partnerships (JOPs) bringing together Spanish and local law enforcement forces, led field investigations to halt smuggling activities in Niger and Mali. In Mali, the Common Operational Partnership (COP) further builds police and justice capacity to prosecute cases related to smuggling and irregular crossings.

Despite the multiplication of migration and security initiatives in Sahel countries, EU interventions suffer from a lack of coordination and coherence. A protection specialist explains that EUCAP is irregularly represented at the meetings of the migration working group convened by Niger’s ministry of interior. ‘As for Frontex, I don’t even know if they have someone working here [in Niger].’

Source: https://emuni.si/ISSN/2232-6022/15.55-82.pdf, author’s elaboration

Chart 4: EU initiatives addressing security and migration interests, 2016–2022

- Research focus countries
  Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

- **INITIATIVES FIGHTING IRREGULAR MIGRATION**
  - Rabat Process
    Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Benin, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Libya (observer), Morocco, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Togo and Tunisia
  - EUTF Sahel and Lake Chad window
    Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and The Gambia
  - Frontex risk analysis cells
    Mauritania, Niger, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo
  - **Common Operational Partnerships**
    Niger, Mali, Senegal, Libya

- **SECURITY INITIATIVES WITH A MANDATE TO FIGHT IRREGULAR MIGRATION**
  - EUAM Libya
    (EU Border Assistance Mission)
  - EUCAP Sahel Niger
    (EU Capacity Building Mission)
  - EUCAP Sahel Mali
    (EU Capacity Building Mission)
  - GAR-SI
    (Groupes d’Action Rapide / Surveillance Intervention)
    Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal
  - Frontex working arrangement with EUCAP Sahel Niger
    Niger
  - Joint Investigation Teams
    Niger
  - Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI
    (EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation IRINI) (previously Operation Sophia)
‘Governing migration through funds’

A common criticism of the EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel is its short-term vision. Many argue that the EU has reduced ‘a multi-dimensional crisis […] to narrow security concerns, more aligned to short-term European needs than aiming for a long-term, sustainable solution to the crisis in the Sahel.’43 While the EU has clear objectives behind its migration intervention in the Sahel, the strategic coherence of these objectives is lacking. EU actions result in the sum of programmes, technical projects, political fora, and funding channels that do not align with the objective of implementing an ‘integrated security and development strategy’ for the region (Chart 4).44

For instance, the current situation of humanitarian emergency unfolding in the context of an acute political and security crisis should compel European partners to review their strategy on migration and displacement. But according to humanitarian and migration practitioners, funding and political attention to questions of forced displacement (refugees and internally displaced) are lacking.

‘In absolute numbers, the EU targets relatively small numbers of migrants compared to the scope of displacement in the region.’

Source N13 interviewed for this study

Humanitarian actors say they struggle to increase donors’ attention on the displacement crisis unfolding in different regions of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, especially in the tri-border area. Political attention, they say, is on northbound movements, and as these have abated, so has funding for migration initiatives.45 National authorities, too, would like international and European donors to invest more in displacement: ‘We are trying to get partners involved as much as we can.’46

However, in reviewing the EU’s strategic action plans for the Sahel, addressing the forced displacement of IDPs or refugees is rarely mentioned as a priority while the objective combating irregular migration is repeatedly quoted.47 On migration, the EU’s Sahel regional action plan for 2015–2020 states that ‘the EU should focus on 1) […] irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking in human beings; and 2) […] maximising the development impact of migration and mobility; 3) promoting international protection; 4) organising mobility and legal migration.’48 As a migration specialist interviewed for this report said, ‘In absolute numbers, the EU targets relatively small numbers of migrants compared to the scope of displacement in the region.’49

It can be argued that the EU governs ‘migration through funding.’50 As Evangelia Tsourdi et al. explain in a brief, funding emerges as a ‘vital non-regulatory instrument linking policy formulation and implementation.’51 In 2015, the EU had no specific funding scheme dedicated to migration governance and established the EUTF to finance migration initiatives in its southern neighbourhood for a total of €7 billion.52 As funding and projects under the EUTF end, the EU has decided to anchor migration governance in broader development funding channels.

The new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI, or Global Europe) aims to simplify and streamline various funding channels dedicated to international cooperation. Out of the total envelope of €79.5 billion, 10% is meant to be spent on migration initiatives (equivalent to the scope of the EUTF). Projects funded under the EUTF were controversial, as many did not necessarily address issues related to migration governance, but targeted what the EU Commission referred to as ‘root causes of migration and displacement.’53

A Commission official estimates that about a third of all projects funded under the EUTF targeted root causes in a very broad sense.54 In turn, due to the criticism, the NDICI uses a new methodology to attribute ‘migration funding’. To be funded under the migration envelope of the NDICI, projects need to either have migration as a main objective (amounting to 100% of the project budget) or as a significant objective (40% of the project budget).55

Reinforcing national borders impedes regional migration

Regional policy frameworks under influence

Migration in and through the Sahel region consists of a vast majority of intra-regional movements. Data suggests that more than 80% of all immigrants living in West and Central Africa originate from another country in the region.56 As such, the Economic Community of
West African States (ECOWAS) is a pioneer of regional free movement in Africa. The 1979 Protocol on Free Movement, Right of Residence and Establishment allows ECOWAS citizens to travel visa-free within the region. The 1990 Protocol further enshrines the right to establishment for traders.

However, the ECOWAS Protocols were never fully implemented by their member states, which made the project of free regional movement vulnerable to adjustments driven by interests to slow down regional migration. This explains why, while cross-border mobility is an important source of livelihoods in the region, the portion of ECOWAS nationals permanently settled in another country of the region is only 3%.

According to Rahmane Idrissa, ‘The ECOWAS Protocol appears as an orphan policy.’ For instance, much of ECOWAS work on migration since the mid-2000s seems to have emerged from International Organization for Migration (IOM) activism under EU influence and funding. A case in point is the Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA), the dialogue process initiated by the IOM. It initially didn’t spur interest from ECOWAS and addressed topics mainly in the interests of EU counterparts. A concrete result features in the 2008 ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration which states that ‘the management of intra-regional migration and migration to Europe in all its dimensions was a priority for the organisation.’

A similar trend can be observed at the continental level. The African Union has developed numerous migration frameworks that spell out its vision for the continent, including the:

- Migration Policy Framework for Africa, which provides the basis for regional strategies such as that of ECOWAS
- Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention)
- Ouagadougou Plan of Action on Employment, Poverty Eradication and Inclusive Development
- Free Movement of Persons Protocol, which lacks the political support of national governments.

However, these frameworks have failed to effectively streamline migration regimes to encourage and facilitate regional migration. To explain the gulf between theory and practice, experts point to the lack of funding, capacity, and political will in continental and regional organisations to effectively steer policies.

National governments also bear responsibility for the weak implementation of regional and continental migration frameworks. Governments in the Sahel have an interest in controlling the mobility of specific groups of citizens, especially those with mobile or nomadic livelihoods such as herders and seasonal workers. They also have an interest in regulating national borders in regions that are isolated from the rest of the country, leading to disputes between central authorities and local communities. This is often tied to post-independence and nation-building struggles.

**Governments in the Sahel region have an interest in controlling the mobility of some of their citizens**

A case in point is the adoption of the 2015-36 law in Niger relating to irregular migration and its facilitation. With the help of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and EUCAP Sahel Niger, the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air was transposed in the country’s legal framework. By doing so, Niger set a precedent as the first country in the region to pass legislation specifically targeting the smuggling of migrants.

The operationalisation strategy was spelt out by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development and the implementation led by joint investigative teams redeployed in 2017, after a first regional deployment in 2011–13. The law, adopted in May 2015, remains highly contested and is undergoing a national revision process in an effort to appease tensions between regional communities in Agadez. These communities were primarily affected by the law and central authorities.

The law effectively sanctions all forms of migrant smuggling, whether linked to transnational organised crime or not. In addition, it criminalises not only the
facilitation of irregular migration, but also the attempt to migrate irregularly. This is in an effort to curb northbound travel to Algeria and Libya, with a heavy focus on policing in the Agadez region, which has had drastic effects on the local economy. It also criminalises the ‘irregular exit’ from Niger, a notion referred to by some observers as a legal fiction, but which also features in Algeria’s 2008 law on irregular migration. However, according to Nigerien authorities the legislation serves to protect regional movement in the ECOWAS region (see quote below).

‘Niger authorities considered that they were responsible for the most northern border of ECOWAS. The rationale was that protecting the border was protecting free movement in ECOWAS.’

Source D8 interviewed for this study

Another example is Mali’s national migration policy in 2014, formulated with the support of the IOM. On paper, the policy strikes a balance between enforcement and protection. But in effect, its implementation was heavily influenced by projects funded by the EU and member states that targeted the reinforcement of capacities at the border. This is concomitant with Malians’ efforts to curtail criminal and terrorist networks that hinder regular cross-border movements. Malian security forces apply anti-terrorist laws to intercept migrants and pressure them into bribery. As a result, many foreigners are trying to get their hands on fake Malian identity cards to cross more easily into Algeria or Libya.

Increased difficulties at the border

In the past decade, the expansion of the regional conflict and the growing perception of the threat has led national authorities in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso to conflate organised crime, the activism of armed groups, and people on the move. The toughening of borders has further tested national commitments to regional free movement enshrined in the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol. According to research, migrants perceive security and police forces to be the biggest threat on their journey – ahead of smugglers and armed groups. The reason is that migrants have become more exposed to security personnel, with negative outcomes. Cases of extortion of migrants are reported in all three central Sahel countries.

‘Border control somewhat backfired. We would expect that with more money spent on border control, border guards would be better paid and would not need to extort migrants. But instead, we see more checkpoints with more guards demanding more money.’

Source D10 interviewed for this study

Interactions with law enforcement officials have for example led to the stigmatisation of mobile groups – displaced, herders, or migrants. Herders, traditionally from the Peul and Fulani communities who are perceived to be more sympathetic to rebel groups, tend to be stigmatised and discriminated against by national security forces. Many resort to using roads and crossing points that are outside of the control of security forces and potentially more dangerous. This was particularly the case for herders and cross-border traders who incurred economic losses due to the closure of borders and markets imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol should guarantee the free movement of people in the West African sub-region, and despite the enactment of legislation cracking down on smuggling of persons, research shows that the number of migrants using smugglers has increased. For example, travellers from coastal countries (Ghana, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire) on paper enjoy facilitated access to central Sahel countries, but they have been reported to employ smugglers from their countries of origin to their destinations. In the region of the central Sahel – Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali – people systematically resort to smugglers to travel ‘because they do not have many other options to navigate the system.’

‘People think, if I use a smuggler, I can agree on a fixed price, and I know what I am paying. It is an economical solution.’

Source D10 interviewed for this study
In Burkina Faso, the rising role of smugglers as facilitators is also a result of the conflict and the shrinking of areas under government control. Border crossings have become increasingly more dangerous and difficult. This is also the case in northern Togo, northern Benin, and at the Niger-Nigeria border. In some of these areas, border crossings are facilitated by armed groups who control the border area.

In Niger, at the northern checkpoint outside the city of Agadez, migrants travelling without proof of identification have reportedly been placed in custody or authorities have confiscated their belongings. Nigerien nationals themselves are pressured into paying fines and some going northward to Libya have been reported to use smuggling services.

For observers, this is a side effect of the 2015 Niger law. According to a protection specialist, ‘People heard about the law and are convinced that the only way for them to cross is to use smugglers.’

Security forces at internal checkpoints in Niger have reportedly pushed back IDPs on several occasions because of their lack of identification.

Sahara estimates, over 10 000 people were returned to Niger. In 2022, Médecins Sans Frontières recorded over 36 000 deportees at the Algerian border. Some deportations have reportedly been carried out at the Malian border as well, although not to the same degree. To a lesser extent, migrants are also deported from Libya to Niger’s northern border.

Deportations from Algeria mostly target Nigerien nationals by virtue of a 2014 Algeria-Niger return agreement, but increasingly nationals of other Sub-Saharan African countries too, although no official data is published on the matter. Migrant roundups occur systematically in Algerian northern coastal cities (on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays according to local researchers), after which migrants are taken to detention centres in Algeria.

Deportations back to the southern border are carried out on an ad hoc basis, which contributes to the ‘opacity of the Algerian migration policy.’ After their detention, migrants are brought by bus to the southern border and the so-called ‘point zero’ in the middle of the desert near the Nigerien city of Assamaka, where they are left to cross into Niger.

Humanitarian aid on site is extremely limited and is completely overwhelmed. For instance, the only accommodation solution is run by the IOM and can host up to 1 100 people, when one convoy of deportees from Algeria can total over 700 people. For humanitarian workers, the lack of infrastructure for deportees reflects the lack of funding available to protection-oriented migration projects. As transit flows through Niger and Mali have abated, donors (primarily European partners) have decided against renewing projects that had flourished in northern Niger to support local infrastructure to accommodate migrants and potential migrants in the region.

Migrants use routes less likely to be policed, but these are often more exposed to armed groups

Protection specialists active in the region have noticed an increase in the number of unaccompanied minors being intercepted by border forces. In most cases these minors were abandoned at the checkpoint by their guardian, who feared being confused with a smuggler. To avoid confrontation with law enforcement authorities, migrants are resorting to routes less likely to be controlled – such as the Western Tahoua-Ingall-Assamaka route in Niger or the Douentza-Tombouctou route in Mali. These routes however are often longer, less maintained, and more exposed to armed groups.

Deportations from North Africa on the rise

Deportations from Algeria and Libya to mostly Niger have intensified in recent years. Although cross-border mobility significantly slowed down during COVID-19, the flow of deportations from Algeria remained uninterrupted and significantly increased. Between January and March 2023 alone, the activist group Alarme Phone
The IOM estimates that close to 700,000 migrants were in Libya at the end of 2022 and most were in some form of employment. Since the 1980s, coastal countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria have also received migrants from Western and Sahelian Africa. According to the IOM, the migration corridor between Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire is the second largest in Africa in terms of number of migrants.

Regional mobility in the Sahel is motivated by similar and overlapping factors, such as the search for work opportunities, including seasonal agricultural or mining work, or moving to urban centres. For example, traders, herders, transporters and seasonal workers have long relied on circular and cross-border mobility for their livelihoods. Today, many seek to escape violence and conflict situations, or the effects of climate change such as floods, drought and environmental degradation.

The Mixed Migration Centre notes that ‘intra-regional mobility in the West African Sahel should inherently be understood as mixed migration, involving people with various legal statuses moving for a variety of reasons and facing many of the same protection risks.’

Between 2018 and 2022, the total number of refugees and asylum seekers almost doubled, while the number of internally displaced persons increased almost 14 times, mostly due to the explosion of internal displacement in Burkina Faso (Chart 5). The UNHCR estimates that the Sahel faces one of the ‘fastest growing displacement crises in the world.’

**Refugee movements**

Refugee numbers in Mali and Niger have reached unprecedented levels. In Niger, the number of refugees doubled between 2018 and 2022 to almost 300,000 (Chart 5). Over 200,000 of them come from the northern Nigerian states (their number fluctuating with the levels of violence in the region).

‘We can directly link the intensification of the activism of armed groups to the increase of refugee arrivals.’

*Source N13 interviewed for this study*

Refugee arrivals from Mali that had stabilised since 2012 picked up again following the 2022 and 2021 military coups to reach 66,000 people. Small numbers of Burkinabes crossed into Niger as well following the peak of violence in 2019. Mali has seen a nearly four-fold increase in its refugee population between 2018

**Chart 5: Comparison of IDP and refugee numbers in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2018–2022**

Source: UNHCR data
and 2022, with over 27 000 Burkinabe, close to 20 000 Nigeriens and 15 000 Mauritanians. The refugee population in Burkina Faso is mostly made up of Malians (35 000 out of 36 000) who settled in the country when the conflict in central Mali first started a decade ago, which explains the stable number.

Refugee regimes in the Sahel region grant prima facie refugee status to nationalities that correspond to the larger refugee groups. The attribution of prima facie status avoids cumbersome administrative procedures and provides access to basic rights and services. In Niger for instance, Malians and Nigerians from northern states benefit from the prima facie recognition of their refugee status, and the UNHCR is advocating for refugees from Burkina Faso to be granted the same benefits.

But the protection framework for refugees remains weak overall in the region, and relies almost entirely on the intervention of the UNHCR. With the expansion of conflict, refugee groups have started making their way from the southern Sahel to coastal states such as Benin, Togo and Côte d’Ivoire, where refugee protection frameworks are either non-existent or weak, and where refugees are considered ‘temporarily displaced persons.’ Refugee groups from Burkina Faso find themselves in perilous situations as they cross into regions that have been deserted by state services, which makes the identification and registration of refugees all the more complicated.

Refugee return projects are gaining traction in the region. For host countries like Niger, large refugee groups pressure already stretched public services in border regions traditionally isolated from the political centres. For refugees’ countries of origin, like Mali or Nigeria, the return of their refugees is an important symbol of the securitisation of territory and signals progress in the fight against armed groups.

In early 2022, for example, the governor of Borno in northern Nigeria initiated the return of thousands of Nigerian refugees settled in Niger’s south (the Maradi region). Returns happened overnight without coordination or notification to national authorities or international actors in place. As a result, the UNHCR pushed for the conclusion of a tri-partite agreement between Niger, Nigeria and the UNHCR. Although the ‘circumstances do not lend themselves to sustainable returns, we have the agreement as guidance.’

**Evacuations from Libya**

Next to refugees from neighbouring Sahelian countries, Niger also hosts asylum seekers and refugees from countries further afield, including Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan, as part of the Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) established in 2017. The ETM established a humanitarian corridor for protection seekers from Libya to countries of resettlement in the global north, via Niger. Migrants detained in Libyan prisons are evacuated to Niger where they undergo the refugee status determination and resettlement procedures. The scheme is run by the UNHCR, in cooperation with the Nigerien authorities, and is funded by the EU.

The EU focus on Niger as a facilitator of return and resettlement aligns with the country’s migration strategy

A second scheme created in 2017 run by the IOM under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration (also funded by the EU) offers assisted voluntary return to Sub-Saharan migrants stranded in Libya and Niger. These initiatives have put the spotlight on Niger as a facilitator for returns and resettlements, which aligns with the objectives of the country’s national migration strategy. An official at Niger’s interior ministry confirms that: ‘Niger is a trailblazer in the region. We opened a humanitarian corridor for refugees from the Horn of Africa.’

A side effect of the ETM ‘humanitarian corridor’ has been to attract people to Niger in the hope of obtaining resettlement. Increasing numbers of migrants from Horn of Africa countries have reached Niger and Agadez following the announcement in 2017 of the creation of so-called ‘assistance hot spots’ for asylum seekers in the region. The problem, says a protection specialist, is that the ‘people that benefit from the ETM from Libya and those that come to Niger to seek resettlement have a similar profile.’

Whereas Agadez used to be a transit hub for migrants, it is increasingly turning into a default destination. Local
authorities have warned about pressures on public infrastructure and tensions with locals. Sit-ins and demonstrations occur regularly, and several incidents have been reported in the humanitarian centre of Agadez hosting people awaiting resettlement. Some of those evacuated from Libya are not eligible for refugee protection and resettlement, which leaves them in limbo with little protection in Niger. ‘We see a lot of young, frustrated men that demand resettlement that they cannot obtain.’ For those eligible, resettlement procedures are lengthy in Niger.

‘There is a clear emphasis on returns that started in 2017, concomitant with a surge of attention on people that were detained in Libya. Initiatives like the ETM or the EU-IOM Joint Initiative have a similar objective: to keep people away from routes and points of departure.’

Source D10 interviewed for this study

The objective of these evacuation mechanisms is clear: to reduce the number of people crossing to North Africa and onwards to Europe. At the same time, experts in the region see decreasing interest and funds for these initiatives as transit numbers to Europe decrease. Return initiatives are highly political and tied to EU and European states’ interests, rather than IOM or UNHCR programming. With new European actors expanding their presence in the region, like the EU border agency Frontex, it remains to be seen who and how the return file will be taken over.

Exponential growth of internal displacement

Internal displacement makes up for the greatest majority of forcibly displaced persons in the Sahel. Traditionally, internal displacements are mostly proximity displacements of communities moving to nearby villages or settlements. But the growing insecurity in the border areas of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, and the targeting of IDP settlements by armed groups, is pushing people to relocate outside of their community of first settlement. And it creates repeated situations of displacement and, therefore vulnerability among long-term displaced groups:

IDPs undertake displacements that are further away from their regions of origin and increasingly find themselves settling in urban areas that are deemed safer and that offer more economic opportunities. In southern Niger, people are moving out of border areas, like Nguiguimi and Bosso, heading for larger cities like Mainé-Soroa and Diffa. In Mali, IDPs are not only moving to regional capitals like Mopti or Douentza, but also directly to the capital city of Bamako.

A regional protection specialist said local teams ‘recently saw a group of 200 IDPs, mostly women and children, arriving directly in Bamako.’ Central authorities in Sahelian capitals are wary of a rural exodus to cities where public infrastructure is already stretched and are trying to rebuff IDPs from settling in cities by preventing the distribution of aid in cities. Burkina Faso has been actively pushing IDPs out of major cities like Ouagadougou. Recently, IDPs have started relocating from southern Burkina Faso and Mali into coastal states such as Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana.

As economic frustrations grow, IDPs may turn to armed groups for protection and assistance

These repeated displacements and relocations of IDPs are proof that IDPs’ resources and access to livelihoods deplete as the crisis persists. As the situation continues, and distances from home regions increase, family and solidarity structures and traditional safety nets weaken. IDPs have limited access to land, cattle, or any other asset. Documentation is an issue, especially for those crossing into coastal states with the intention of claiming asylum.

Some choose to commute between their areas of origin, if the security situation allows, and their area of
settlement to care for their homes, crops, or animals. Others resort to harmful coping strategies – including prostitution, child marriages or putting children to work. As economic frustrations grow, experts fear that displaced persons may turn to armed groups for protection and assistance, especially in pockets of insecurity deserted by the state.

**Few durable solutions to displacement**

With the rise in IDP numbers, all three Sahelian countries have launched policy processes to improve the protection framework for the internally displaced. Niger made a pioneer move in 2018 and became the first African country to incorporate the provisions of the Kampala Convention on IDPs into its national legislation with the law 2018-74. Niger’s government is also working on a narrative of ‘durable solutions’ with the humanitarian community – including improved service provision and increased protection. The repeated movement of IDPs within and across national borders is however symptomatic of a lack of protection and assistance to IDPs in their regions of origin.

The return of IDPs to their regions of origin trumps all other durable solutions to the displacement crisis. While sizeable groups of IDPs have already returned to their home regions as local security situations improve, governments prepare for large return operations of their IDPs populations.

The return of IDPs is strategic in many ways. First, it is part of a policy of the return of the state and of countering the spread of the insurrection. Second, returning IDPs to their home regions decreases their dependency on aid, since people returning to their homes, lands and cattle are less reliant on assistance. For instance, authorities and humanitarian actors in Niger have noticed several cases of groups of people relocating themselves to mimic displacement and trigger the delivery of aid. Third, returns are a matter of national sovereignty to regain access to empty pockets of insecurity. The presence of populations in deserted border areas encourages state security in these areas and allows humanitarian organisations to focus on more vulnerable groups.

Governments in the Sahel have been preparing to launch large operations for the return of people displaced in the region in recent years. Mali’s 2020 ‘plan for the return and reinstallation of internally displaced persons, refugees, and for the stabilisation of return areas’ seeks to return 80% of all IDPs and refugees to their regions of origin by 2026.

In 2021, Niger decided on a policy to return some 130,000 IDPs. Although the poor security situation in many of the target regions blocks the implementation of these return plans, governments in the Sahel are multiplying return initiatives.

In practice, return has often proved more complicated. The first operations in Mali and Niger showed that the security situation did not meet the conditions for a sustainable return. Many of the returned IDPs left the area again once military convoys were gone. The military presence also attracted attention and made returnees potentially more vulnerable to armed and criminal groups in the area, particularly in Mali.

The repeated movements by IDPs within and across borders are indicative of a lack of protection and assistance

In Burkina Faso, the return of IDPs may spur local conflicts between the communities who left and those who remained and potentially aided the rebels. Nigerien authorities carried out two return operations of IDPs to the regions of Diffa and Tillabéri in 2021 that were quickly followed by new displacements of the returned IDPs. This indicated that the conditions for sustainable return were not met:

> ‘It is unclear whether people had all the information about what was happening or gave their explicit consent to be returned. If anything, these returns were premature and not well planned.’

*Source N13 interviewed for this study*

**Conclusion**

This report finds that the EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel is inadequate to address the overlapping
crises of displacement and mixed migration that unfold in the region, in a context of heightened insecurity and political instability. Over the past decade of engagement in the region, the EU has set precedents and encouraged securitised policies concomitant with Sahel governments’ own security interests and regional and continental organisations’ inability to establish comprehensive migration frameworks.

The report identifies five main shortcomings to the EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel. These are outlined below.

**Route-based approach**

The EU has favoured a route-based approach to migration in the Sahel with the objective of hindering northbound journeys along the Central Mediterranean Route and targeting irregular migrants ‘at the source.’ This approach targets people on the move on the grounds of their migration destination – and not on the grounds of their needs or vulnerabilities. Such an approach proves inadequate in a context like the Sahel that’s characterised by mixed migration movements where people move for a variety of reasons but in a context of limited access to protection.

**Internal displacement falls off radar**

The EU’s approach to migration and mobility in the Sahel has exclusively and narrowly focused on countering irregular migration, as opposed to addressing the fast-growing displacement crisis unfolding in the Sahel. That is, IDPs and refugees are forced to flee because of rampant instability – which paradoxically is at the centre of all European engagement in the Sahel.

**Incoherent and disparate initiatives**

The EU’s approach to migration in the Sahel has had very specific and narrow objectives of countering irregular arrivals in Europe, but no strategic vision for its intervention. In effect, the EU’s migration intervention is a collection of disparate projects, political fora, and ambitious funding schemes that lack coherence. Migration initiatives and foreign policy tools serving security objectives often overlap in their mandates, which encourages the conflation of migration interests and stabilisation imperatives.

**Niger: low-hanging fruit of migration cooperation**

The initial assumption for the EU’s intervention was that people leaving North Africa’s shores transited first through countries like Niger. While this is true to some extent, research shows that many among those who cross the Mediterranean had no intention to do so. Migrant workers in Libya have found in sea crossings an escape to the violence, abductions, and extortions in Libya.139

The negative perception of living conditions in Libya certainly acted as a deterrent factor for some, but they may also have forced migrant workers to find refuge in Europe. In targeting Niger as a ‘low-hanging fruit’ of migration cooperation, EU-sponsored counter-smuggling policies may not have reached the objective of stopping transit migrants.

**Fixing people to places**

The EU has sought to fix people to places – whether protection seekers or migrants – through mechanisms that place greater responsibility on Sahel partners, and especially Niger. However, efforts to increase protection for these groups in the Sahel remain limited and hampered by security-oriented initiatives and discourses sponsored by the EU that are concomitant with Sahel countries’ own security interests.

EU-funded efforts to curtail irregular migration have focused heavily on returns and pushing people back to their countries or regions of origin. In doing so, they have set a precedent in the region that prioritises border protection over the protection of people. That in turn, allows Sahel countries to develop and pursue return policies targeting other vulnerable groups such as IDPs and refugees.

**Recommendations**

**Recalibrate EU’s approach to migration in Sahel**

Political instability in the Sahel is forcing the EU to revise its intervention logic in the Sahel. Successive coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have eroded relationships with European partners. Military interventions have failed to arrest rampant insecurity. And foreign powers like Russia are making advances in a region Europe long considered its extended neighbourhood.140
Likewise, EU policymakers should think strategically about their intervention in the region and about how to align a multitude of migration interests. These include increasing governance capacity in the Sahel, supporting regional free movement at the regional and continental level, and enhancing immigration and refugee regimes in the region. They also include preventing irregular movements across the Mediterranean in the context of a heightened security and political crisis. Complementarity between migration, security and foreign policy should not mean overlap or conflation.

**Greater EU priority to displacement**

European efforts to counter irregular migration have excluded the protracted displacement crisis that has unfolded in the Sahel. Considering the unprecedented scope of displacement, as well as secondary and tertiary displacement of IDPs and refugees, European policymakers should consider displacement to be the first priority of their action in the region.

Addressing displacement is paramount to addressing the humanitarian, governance and security crisis in the Sahel. The repeated displacement of IDPs within and across borders is symptomatic of the lack of assistance and protection in their regions of origin. Research shows that half the world’s refugees were IDPs before they were compelled to cross national borders. There are signs that more and more IDPs would cross into coastal states south of the Sahel should the security situation continue to worsen.

As such, displacement is tightly connected to the stabilisation of the crisis and requires long-term efforts, and strong buy-in from national and local authorities, as well as civil society and IDPs themselves. Such inclusive approaches are precisely what crisis-hit communities need to rebuild local post-conflict compromises.

Europeans should also encourage their Sahelian partners and humanitarian workers onsite to better monitor and evaluate the return policies of refugees and IDPs.

**Promote area-based approaches**

Sahel governments, European partners, and international organisations should focus on the delivery of assistance, protection and aid to those in need. In a context of mixed movements and high vulnerability, area-based approaches are key to addressing the needs of whole communities, hosts, refugees, IDPs and migrants.

Area-based approaches have been replicated in several high-risk areas, and avoid the creation of ‘assistance hot spots’ that would pull people to specific regions to seek aid. Cities for example have become an important destination of displaced persons – a trend that governments have tried to rebuff. For Europeans, this would require an important change of perspective from the route-centred approach that has prevailed since 2015.

**Acknowledge long-lasting effects of EU migration interventions**

As a partner and a sponsor of initiatives that aim to increase state capacities on migration, the EU has a responsibility in the way these policies are developed, executed, and replicated. The EU has enabled partner countries to adopt tougher policies and set precedents on migration and displacement that are detrimental to the long-term objectives of enhancing regional free movement and protection of vulnerable migrants and displaced persons. It should take this responsibility as a normative power on migration more seriously and use its leverage to incite states to adopt more progressive approaches to migration building on existing regional and continental frameworks.
Annex: List of interviews conducted for this research

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Notes
2. The Sahel is a semi-arid region of Africa stretching from Senegal to Sudan. Political initiatives targeting the Sahel region however often centre on the central Sahel region comprising Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. The European Union’s (EU) strategy for the Sahel focuses more specifically on the G5 Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad). This report centres on Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, three countries at the epicentre of the political and security crisis spreading from the tri-border area.
3. E Tsoardi, F Zardo and N Sayed, Funding the EU’s external migration policy: ‘Same old’ or potential for sustainable collaboration?, European Policy Center, www.epc.eu/content/pdf/2023/Funding_the_EUs_external_migration_policy_Dr.pdf, 3 April 2023.
17. The UNHCR definition for mixed movements only refers to people who have crossed a border, and therefore excludes internally displaced persons (IDPs). Other organisations refer to mixed internal movements. In this report, IDPs are included in mixed movements as some internal displacement translates into cross-border displacement.

21 The trend of externalisation and of strengthened external borders is concomitant with the EU’s attempts to remove inner-European borders and can be traced back to the 1980s. See E Nagyné Rózsa et al. (eds.), Mapping Migration Challenges in the EU Transit and Destination Countries, EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study, European Institute of the Mediterranean, www.iemmed.org/publication/mapping-migration-challenges-in-the-eu-transit-and-destination-countries/, 2017.

22 D14.


28 D10.


30 N11.


36 N9.


42 N1.


44 Ibid.

45 N3, D7.

46 N6.


49 N13.

50 E Tisouri, F Zardo and N Sayed, Funding the EU’s external migration policy: ‘Same old’ or potential for sustainable collaboration?, European Policy Centre, p.4, www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2023/Funding_the_EUs_external_migration_policy_DP.pdf, 3 April 2023.

51 Ibid.


54 B11.

103 According to the UNHCR 10-Point Plan in Action 2016, mixed movements are `movements in which a number of people are travelling together, generally in an irregular manner, using the same routes and means of transport, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have varying needs and may include e.g. asylum seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied minors, and migrants in an irregular situation.’ UNHCR, The Refugee Protection and Mixed Movements: The 10-Point Plan in Action, 2016 – Glossary, www.refworld.org/docid/59e69eb64.html.


107 For 2018, the earliest comparable data available is used (as of January 2018). For 2022, the latest available data is used (as of August 2022 for Mali and October 2022 for Burkina Faso and Niger).


110 D14.

111 Ibid.

112 N13.


116 N6.

117 N13.

118 N5.


121 D10.

122 N13.

123 A Fakhry and E Golovko, Clingendael policy brief, forthcoming.

124 D14.


126 D7.

127 Ibid.


130 D7, N2.

131 N2: ‘For instance, we received information about parents at the Burkina-Niger border that accepted to trade their children for money with armed groups.’

132 A Fakhry and E Golovko, Clingendael policy brief, forthcoming.

133 In Mali, the government estimates that close to 700 000 IDPs returned to their home regions, UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Country Situation, Mali, as of November 2022, https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/mli.

134 N2.

135 N6; N3.

136 Malian Ministry for Health and Social Development, Plan de retour et de réinstallations des personnes déplacées internes, des réfugiées et de stabilisation des zones de retour, June 2022.

137 D7.

138 Ibid.


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