

New Avenues for Peace and Climate Resilience in the Sahel: A Dialogue with Practitioners and Decision-Makers in Times of Political Upheaval

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Introduction

The **European Institute of Peace, TrustWorks Global** and **ECDPM** organised a knowledge-sharing event dedicated to addressing the deepening conflicts, political instability, and changing governance dynamics in the Sahel region through an environmental peacemaking lens. The focus of the event was on finding environmental avenues for mediation and climate resilience, with specific attention given to the transboundary area of the Liptako Gourma region, comprehending Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Given that conflicts in this region primarily revolve around rivalries over the use and management of agro-pastoral natural resources, exacerbated by climate change and exploited by jihadi groups, environmental peacemaking provides an entry point for peacefully addressing these risks in an integrated manner, building resilience to conflict and climate, and achieving peace dividends.

The objective of the event was to provide a space to rethink traditional modes of cooperation in response to the regional crisis in Liptako Gourma. International actors have predominantly focused on counter-terrorism, neglecting crucial governance issues, including widespread corruption in Sahelian states and the governance of natural resources like land and water. The event shares the experiences and lessons learned from two projects, the first being the "Environmental Peacemaking" initiative, implemented by the European Institute of Peace and TrustWorks Global with support from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. This project focuses on capacity and relationship-building between local, state, and regional actors involved in environmental peacemaking. The second project, CASCADES (EU Horizon 2020), contributes to a better understanding of cascading climate risks and informs responses for adaptation by European actors. Building upon the projects, the event hoped to contribute to developing strategies that integrate environmental and governance considerations into peacemaking, natural resource management, and climate resilience in the Sahel.

The event brought together more than 40 participants remotely and in person from diverse institutions and domains (foreign policy, development cooperation, peacebuilding, environmental protection and climate adaptation).

Summary of the sessions

The day-long event consisted of an opening and three sessions with open and frank discussions under the Chatham House rule. The summaries of the presentations and points raised during the discussions are summarised in this section.

The **opening session** began by setting the basis for the discussions of the day by mentioning the importance of addressing the environmental root causes of conflict in the Liptako Gourma region as a manner to contribute to addressing the security crisis through tailored and local peacemaking practices, bringing up the concrete experiences of the local partners of the "Environmental peacemaking in Liptako Gourma" project. Similarly, EU colleagues acknowledged the importance of strengthening the cooperation with local communities and authorities, especially in times of coups and uncertainty, stressing the willingness of European Member States to remain engaged in the

Sahel and intervene with cooperation and development programmes that address climate change with a conflict-sensitive lens. The final remarks of the opening session highlighted the need to address the agro-pastoral crisis, strengthen governance institutions, and enhance strategic planning in development, climate adaptation, and health systems. He stressed the failure of the development industry to understand local contexts in the Sahel and make strategic successes in poverty reduction, public services, and aid dependency. He concluded by calling on development partners to improve in listening to local populations, supporting them, and embracing their best practices.

Session 1: Responding to climate risks in the Sahel in times of governance crisis: a challenge for international cooperation

This first session set the context, opportunities, and challenges for supporting climate and environmental resilience in the Sahel in light of evolving governance, political and security dynamics. It allowed Sahelian and European practitioners to review diverse approaches to socio-economic development, environmental protection, and peacebuilding and highlight avenues for improvement.

Speakers described the dire security, ecological, and governance situation in the Liptako Gourma, marked by the marginalisation of pastoral populations, farmer-herder conflicts as well as the expansion of jihadist groups and their control over communities, natural resources, and illicit financial flows linked to mining. They discussed the impacts of the military coups on local governance, for instance, in Burkina Faso, where these changes were not necessarily a hindrance to environmental and development projects in practice.

Looking ahead, speakers highlighted the importance of engaging with local actors (communities and their representatives, local authorities, and traditional leaders, including women and youth) and supporting integrated measures for better living conditions, climate resilience, natural resource management and peacebuilding, for instance via local governance frameworks (e.g., land commissions). However, the decentralisation processes in Sahelian countries have failed to meet initial expectations. Promising, endogenous development processes are observed in different local contexts in the region and could be further supported through more politically-savvy approaches of international partners. At the level of national and international responses, speakers identified several gaps, including territorial coverage of interventions (e.g., crossborder, conflict-affected zones), the governance of minerals, access to climate finance, and the inclusion of displaced persons in national (climate) adaptation plans. Participants agreed that if the EU wants to meet its ambitions of staying a key partner in the Sahel, a shift in modes of cooperation is needed away from securitised, top-down approaches towards integrated support for local processes. Such support should connect EU-level political discussions with Sahelian perspectives locally.

Session 2: Addressing the Root Causes of the Conflict

The second session featured insights from local experts in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. They shared their experiences on the root causes of conflict and lessons learned from the environmental peacemaking approach and peace-positive natural resource management in the Liptako Gourma region. The experts included a traditional religious chief, a specialist in sustainable local land management, and a regional researcher who provided perspectives on local conflict prevention and resolution. They outlined various root causes of conflict, such as competition for natural resources, historical droughts, weak governance, and exploitation by armed groups. Two significant approaches were highlighted. Firstly, the crucial role of customary and religious methods in

mediating disputes, particularly those over land stemming from its commodification while the definition and knowledge of property right regimes remain weak, emerged as a solution for resolving conflicts in rural areas where the State presence is limited. The discussion emphasised the importance of inclusivity in environmental dispute dialogue, stressing the need to involve women and young people, who are often excluded despite their unique perspectives and significant roles in natural resource management. Secondly, the potential of peace-positive land management was explored, exemplified by local land charters showcasing best practices in local governance and dispute resolution between local farmers and farmers from other regions, as well as passing transhumant herders. The discussion concluded, suggesting that the piloted environmental peacemaking practices hold promise for fostering peace and sustainable resource management in the region, but there is a need for further financing and support to local actors and creativity in the international cooperation sector.

The third and final session, “**International Approaches in the Sahel**” built upon the previous discussions. It looked at new approaches to support resilience in the face of climate change and conflicts and explored how international partners can support local communities and governments in the Sahel. The speakers emphasised the importance of understanding the positions, interests, and needs of various stakeholders in the Sahel, encompassing political values, security, basic services, and development opportunities. Doing so would support efforts to shift a paradigm towards less militarised approaches to security, which emphasise dialogue and mediation and prioritise addressing socio-economic and environmental fragilities. Speakers further highlighted the need for multitrack approaches involving political and institutional collaboration with traditional authorities to contribute to peacemaking. It was noted that EU initiatives for security and partnership in the Sahel are designed to align with COP28’s framing on climate, peace, and security, including evidence-based policymaking to strengthen environmental protection and social cohesion. UN speakers stressed the need for a holistic approach addressing governance, natural resource management, and food security. This line noted the critical objective of reducing peacekeeping missions’ climate footprint.

The discussion converged on three main points. First, supporting integrated approaches and regional cooperation. Second, climate finance is urgently needed to tackle the multifaceted challenges in the Sahel, especially accessible funding for local actors to fund small projects that contribute to trust and resilience-building. Third, achieving peace dividends is essential for projects and state planning, including climate adaptation, which supports livelihoods and offers co-benefits for local development and peacemaking.

Key takeaways and recommendations for policymakers

1. Promote and invest in Sahelian endogenous knowledge, integrate it into programmatic responses and connect it with political dialogue and policy processes

There is a wealth of endogenous knowledge and experiences to address environmental, security and development challenges in the crisis-of-governance context of the Sahel, especially at the local level. However national and international responses **often fail to recognise and integrate endogenous knowledge and practices and invest in them so that they are further developed and widely shared**. Based on [ECDPM research](#), Sahelians and even Africans (women even more so) are highly underrepresented in public events that analyse the crisis in the Sahel and discuss solutions; meanwhile, only 3.8% of global funding for climate change research is spent on African topics, and those who receive this funding are largely based in Europe and North Africa ([USDA 2022](#)).

This fails to support locally-led processes (e.g., by creating aid-dependent parallel processes) and risks duplicating efforts. It also creates a disconnect between local experiences and expertise, on the one hand, and political discussions at national government and international levels (e.g., EU political discussions in Brussels), on the other hand. Participants mentioned examples of good practices at the local level, such as the *Chartes Foncières Locales* (local land charters) in Burkina Faso and the *Commissions de conciliation foncière villageoises* (village land conciliation commissions), and stressed the need for **increased investments in local research and strategic planning, and the creation of more mechanisms for dialogue** going both-ways between Sahelian local actors and policymakers.

2. Partner with local actors and engage locally-led processes to support integrated responses to socio-economic, environmental and security challenges

In the Liptako Gourma region, conflict-affected communities controlled by jihadist groups are inaccessible to government and international actors. Interventions supported by international actors are **not reaching the communities most severely impacted** by conflict and climate change. In this context, there is limited space for supporting affected communities, and any attempt at doing so should be made via engaging with local actors (especially local leaders, including customary leaders) and local dialogue processes.

Beyond the areas controlled by jihadists, interventions should follow joint objectives of re-establishing security, improving living conditions for communities, and reinforcing local governance actors and processes. An important measure in this regard is **strengthening the knowledge and capacities of local authorities (e.g., on environmental protection practices), and supporting intercommunal cooperation**, also across borders, to prevent the creation of 'refuge areas' for violent groups.

There are challenges to identifying and working with local actors, for instance, in Burkina Faso, where local authorities are no longer elected officials - although this does not necessarily create barriers and, in some cases, facilitates the work of local civil society actors. This points to the need for **case-by-case approaches to supporting local actors to lead endogenous development and stabilisation processes through a territorial approach** (with legitimate and accountable leadership and appropriate levels of autonomy and resources). Responses should also **accept a level of risk, experiment with approaches to identify good practices and work in an integrated way** across different sectors.

3. Increase support to Sahelian actors, including at the local level, for accessing financial resources including climate adaptation finance

Conflict-affected communities are among the most vulnerable to climate change. This is because they tend to be in climate hotspots and because conflict damages already dysfunctional public services and governance mechanisms - essential to manage climate shocks and slow onset effects of climate change. Sahel countries get only a fraction of international climate finance, and due to the conflict and the weakness of decentralised institutions, **local communities have even less access to climate adaptation finance.** This constitutes a double challenge, where global climate funds see conflict-affected settings as being too 'risky' to receive climate finance and where local actors lack the resources and capacity to absorb climate finance.

Participants mentioned promising experiences such as the UNCDF's [Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility](#), which supports local governments with accessing international adaptation finance directly (without an intermediary) and developing locally-led adaptation plans. Such support should be increased significantly in the Sahel to **improve direct access to financial resources for communities, including with systematic support for institutional capacities** of local authorities and organisations to increase the ownership and sustainability of efforts.

4. Ensure a continuity of European support by engaging pragmatically with actors at the regional, national and local level and promote a more unified EU approach to the cooperation with the Sahel

EU representatives who participated in the event recognised that the recent military coups in the Sahel pose real challenges to the EU's cooperation with the region. Still, the EU aims to remain a key partner for development and humanitarian support in the Sahel, including by seeking to address environmental and climate issues in line with the EU's 2023 [Joint Communication on the Climate-Security Nexus](#). **The EU is reevaluating its approach in the Sahel and sees the support of local actors as a way forward.**

As European actors reevaluate their cooperation with the Sahel, they have to jointly reflect on the drivers of this regional crisis, including their own interventions, and going forward, strive as much as possible for a unified approach to cooperation with the Sahel countries. There is a **widespread rejection of traditional partnerships (including that with France)** by the military governments and significant portions of the population in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.

Taking into account this reality, when it comes to dialogue with the Sahelian governments, European actors should focus on **showing their added value and communicating better about their long-term support for the region's development and security.** In a context where Sahelian governments are forming partnerships with 'non-traditional' partners (e.g., Russia, China), this would be a more productive approach than systematically condemning these partnerships. Such an approach should **communicate carefully but clearly about the failure of past interventions and about the change of paradigm in which European actors seek to operate.**

To remain an important development partner in the region, the EU must **approach partnerships with Sahelian actors more pragmatically**. This includes the need to reorganise its support to different actors at different levels.¹ In some cases, contacts with local authorities appointed by the national government (as is the case in [Burkina Faso](#)) will be required. If the EU wanted to support communities in areas controlled by jihadists, it would have to engage with local leaders who are in contact with jihadist groups, at least to an extent. Participants were clear that working with traditional and customary leaders offers significant avenues for conflict prevention and resolution, especially in rural areas without state presence, as illustrated by the experience of the Emir of Liptako. Such an undertaking will create political tensions but cannot be avoided if European cooperation with the Sahel is to be significantly improved.

Contacts

For any follow up remarks or requests, feel free to contact the co-organisers of the event, the European Institute of Peace (albert.martinez@eip.org), Trust Works Global (oli@trustworksglobal.com), and ECDPM (msa@ecdpm.org).

¹ At the regional level, this is also a necessity given recent developments such as [the exit](#) of Burkina Faso and Niger from the G5 Sahel resulting in Chad and Mauritania's plans to [dissolve](#) the alliance, in addition to more longstanding questions around the ownership of the G5 Sahel within the region. [More support](#) for smaller regional bodies like the Liptako Gourma Authority, which suffers less political tensions, has local contacts in the conflict-affected region and an experience of supporting agriculture and pastoralism, should be considered.