
Beyond Military Responses: An African-Led Approach to Security and Development in the Sahel

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sahel region faces an intricate crisis characterized by persistent insecurity, socio-economic vulnerabilities, governance deficits, and transnational threats. Despite significant international attention and numerous interventions, particularly those led by the European Union (EU), stability remains elusive. The EU's security-development nexus (European Union External Action Service, 2011), while aiming to integrate military assistance with development aid, has been criticized for inadequate alignment with local needs and contexts, prioritizing European strategic interests, including migration control and counterterrorism (Roupert, 2012). Additionally, reliance on incentive-based policies, including aid conditionalities and diplomatic support, has created mutual dependency dynamics, reinforcing external agendas at the expense of local governance reforms (Bah & Emmanuel, 2022).

Moreover, the persistent instability in the Sahel is deeply rooted in historical and

geopolitical complexities involving both domestic governance challenges and external interventions. Abu Bakarr Bah (2025) describes these intertwined local and global factors as a "glocalized" security dilemma, where domestic grievances, such as corruption, poor governance, and ethnic tensions, intersect significantly with international geopolitical rivalries and military actions. Consequently, external approaches alone often fail to address core issues effectively, inadvertently exacerbating local tensions.

This policy brief advocates for a strategic shift towards a Pan-African-led approach, emphasizing South-South cooperation, regional integration, and economic resilience tailored specifically to the unique socio-cultural and political realities of the Sahel region.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The policy brief employs qualitative research methods, based on a review of scholarly literature and policy documents related to security and development strategies in the

Sahel region. It analyzes the outcomes of previous EU-led initiatives using reports from regional and international organizations and expert critiques. In addition, it incorporates data from multiple sources, including EU security and development initiatives and African regional integration frameworks. These diverse data points provide a comprehensive understanding of the regional dynamics. Comparative analysis highlights the gaps between external interventions and the local priorities of affected communities. Moreover, the insights inform a set of clear, actionable recommendations aimed at policymakers and regional stakeholders, providing a pathway for aligning future interventions with local needs.

3. KEY INSIGHTS

Military interventions alone are insufficient without addressing socio-economic challenges.

Military efforts have repeatedly proven inadequate in resolving instability in the Sahel, primarily because they fail to tackle underlying socio-economic challenges and governance deficits. Libya's collapse in 2011, for example, led to widespread arms proliferation, the growth of transnational criminal networks, and the exploitation of local clan rivalries (Eljarh, 2016; Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2016). These

events highlight the inherent limitations of military solutions when unaccompanied by broader policy measures.

The region's persistent instability is compounded by entrenched socio-economic vulnerabilities, including poverty, unemployment, and the marginalization of rural and nomadic communities (United Nations Population Fund, 2019). These conditions have allowed extremist groups to flourish, as they exploit these grievances by establishing alternative governance structures, providing economic incentives, and controlling strategic smuggling routes. In turn, these activities undermine state legitimacy and reinforce the presence of such groups (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2016).

The challenges are further exacerbated by rapid population growth and inadequate educational and employment opportunities, which leave many young people vulnerable to radicalization or criminal involvement (United Nations Population Fund, 2019). State neglect of peripheral regions due to resource limitations intensifies their exclusion and fuels resentment. Meanwhile, institutional weaknesses, such as underfunded public services and centralized governance, create a vacuum that armed groups readily fill by positioning themselves as alternative authorities (Boås, 2019).

As Bah (2025) notes, the conflict’s complexity arises from both local and external factors. This “glocalized” security dilemma, where domestic grievances like corruption and ethnic tensions intersect with international geopolitical interests, makes it difficult for purely military responses to succeed. Instead, they often reinforce dependency, deepen existing insecurities, and inadvertently worsen instability.

In this context, military-centric approaches by external actors can alienate local populations. The resulting disenfranchisement of communities, coupled with the empowerment of extremist narratives, only perpetuates the cycle of insecurity.

The EU's security-development nexus lacks local legitimacy

In response to growing security challenges in the Sahel, the EU developed an integrated approach known as the “security-development nexus.” This strategy, first outlined in the 2011 Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (European Union External Action Service, 2011) and updated in subsequent policies (2015, 2021) (Pichon & BÉjart-Rasmussen, 2021), combines military assistance, humanitarian aid, and governance reforms. Notable EU missions in the region include

the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali, the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Mali, and EUCAP Sahel Niger. These initiatives aim to strengthen national security forces. At the same time, development projects, funded by mechanisms such as EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the European Development Fund (EDF) (Marangio, 2024), focus on poverty reduction, governance improvements, and migration management (Venturi, 2017).

Despite these significant investments, critics argue that the EU’s approach reflects a Eurocentric agenda. Its strong emphasis on border security and irregular migration control often aligns more closely with European domestic political concerns than with the region’s pressing socio-economic needs (Rouper, 2012). This prioritization has overshadowed key local development goals, such as fostering inclusive economic growth, expanding youth employment, and promoting sustainable state-building.

Furthermore, European incentives, predominantly based on aid and diplomatic support, have created a pattern of mutual dependency between the EU and African governments. As Abu Bakarr Bah and Nikolas Emmanuel (2022) note, this dependency diverts attention from essential governance reforms and local

socio-economic priorities. By focusing on short-term migration and security objectives, these strategies risk reinforcing existing governance failures and ethnic marginalization, as well as undermining the long-term legitimacy of state institutions (Bah, 2025).

Pan-African regional integration offers a sustainable path to peace and economic resilience

A Pan-African-led approach—grounded in regional collaboration, sustainable development, and South-South cooperation—provides a more effective and culturally responsive path to long-term stability in the Sahel. Strengthening regional integration frameworks, namely the 2023 Liptako-Gourma Charter that formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), is a significant step; it demonstrates the potential for coordinated efforts that address both immediate security concerns and underlying socio-economic grievances. By combining security measures with sustainable development initiatives tailored to the region’s cultural and environmental contexts, this approach ensures greater local ownership and long-term effectiveness.

As Eric Tevoedjre (2025) suggests, effective regional integration requires a project-based approach that emphasizes tangible, inclusive regional value chains. This approach fosters

equitable benefits, shared prosperity, and economic interdependence, thereby reducing socio-economic grievances and enhancing regional stability. By providing employment opportunities and building economic resilience, such projects directly target the root causes of instability.

A prominent example of Pan-African regional integration is the Atlantic Africa Initiative, which prioritizes South-South cooperation, regional solidarity, and co-development (Machrouh, 2024). This initiative strategically combines security efforts—such as intelligence sharing, maritime surveillance, and anti-piracy operations—with tailored economic development projects. For instance, the Nigeria-Morocco Atlantic African Gas Pipeline (NMGP) and the Dakhla Port exemplify how investments in infrastructure and regional connectivity contribute to both energy security and economic integration. The gas pipeline will foster regional energy security by connecting West African energy markets and allowing coastal and Sahelian nations, including Côte d’Ivoire (Perrin, 2021), Senegal (Soltes, 2025), and Mauritania (Onyango, 2022), to access newly discovered hydrocarbon reserves. Additionally, the development of maritime economic corridors, particularly the Dakhla Port in Morocco, is set to become a critical hub for the Sahelo-Saharan corridor,

mirroring the role of Lagos (Nigeria) and Lome (Togo) as entry points for landlocked countries (Delavelle & Dorson, 2020)

These initiatives embody the security-development nexus by advancing economic integration, expanding market access, and creating jobs. In doing so, they serve as preventive measures against radicalization and instability, ultimately supporting regional autonomy and self-sufficiency (Bah, 2025; Alaoui M’hammdi & Jaïdi, 2025). This Pan-African model highlights the importance of locally driven development strategies as a sustainable and effective response to the Sahel’s complex challenges.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop integrated socio-economic programs alongside security initiatives

Policymakers should prioritize integrated programs, tailored to specific local needs, addressing both security threats and socio-economic vulnerabilities (European Union External Action Service, 2011) simultaneously. Investments in education, employment generation, healthcare, and public service delivery—especially in marginalized regions—are essential to reduce radicalization risks (e.g., the potential recruitment). By addressing underlying socio-economic grievances, these programs can directly combat the drivers of instability.

Inclusive regional value chains should be a cornerstone of this approach, ensuring equitable participation and benefit distribution to marginalized groups. In doing so, these value chains can bolster economic stability and social cohesion (Tevoedjre, 2025).

Enhance local ownership and community engagement

International and regional interventions must involve local stakeholders to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness. Policymakers should facilitate inclusive dialogue and cooperation with local communities, civil society, traditional leaders, and youth representatives to build trust and sustainable peace. Additionally, external incentive-based approaches, including those employed by the EU, must incorporate robust human rights safeguards. This will strengthen local governance structures rather than undermining them (Bah & Emmanuel, 2022).

Strengthen Pan-African regional integration through infrastructure and economic interdependence

Policymakers must allocate financial resources to strategic infrastructure projects, such as those encompassed by the Atlantic African Initiative. This includes the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline (NMGP) Project and

maritime hubs such as Dakhla Port. Enhanced regional economic integration, energy connectivity, and trade corridors will reduce vulnerabilities exploited by extremist groups.

Building on this foundation, a project-based approach centered on specific and measurable regional economic initiatives can significantly strengthen regional cooperation, interdependence, and resilience. Furthermore, by leveraging regional solidarity and South-South cooperation, this approach can drive sustainable economic development, improved security, and long-term stability tailored to Africa's unique contexts and priorities.

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