

BEYOND HUMANITARIAN AID: THE EU'S APPROACH TO ALLEVIATING FOOD CRISIS IN THE SAHEL AT A TIME OF GLOBAL INSECURITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The European Union has always devoted strong attention to humanitarian issues in the Sahel, especially as regards the food crisis. Since 2010, the EU has helped more than 100 million people lacking access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food, making it one of the world's major donors in this area. In the Sahel region, the EU has been the second biggest donor after the United States with 850 million euro of aid, 35 per cent of which was allocated to the food security livelihoods (FSL) sector and 25 per cent to nutrition.

However, since 2021 its capacity to act in the region has been reduced both due to the deterioration of the security situation and the souring of relations between the EU and local governments occasioned by a series of military coups. This has happened in a context in which Sahelian countries' economies had been deeply weakened by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine which exacerbated food crisis in Africa. Considered the granaries of the world, before the conflict Russia and Ukraine produced 25 per cent of the world's cereals. Some 50 countries were 30 per cent dependent on the import of their grain, and 36 (of which 12 are African) were over 50 per cent dependent on it. Within a few weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prices of many foodstuffs had risen considerably due to (expected) supply shortages.

The EU, faced with greater difficulty in implementing its development policies, has nevertheless continued to support the countries of the region through humanitarian aid. From this point of view, and given the growing challenges, the Union has also increased the funds dedicated to food-safety emergencies. However, in addition to its commitment to humanitarian support, the EU must look for effective solutions to address excessive public debt and climate change due to their significant impact on food insecurity in the region of the Sahel.

INTRODUCTION

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Food security has been at the centre of European Union (EU) humanitarian action worldwide. Since 2010, the EU has helped more than 100 million people lacking access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food, making it one of the world's major donors in this area. In the Sahel region, the EU has been the second biggest donor after the United States with 850 million euro of aid, 35 per cent of which was allocated to the food security livelihoods (FSL) sector and 25 per cent to nutrition.

In the 2021 Strategy for the Sahel, food security was among the EU's top strategic priorities together with security, governance and development policies. The strategy was built around two principles: the so-called humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) triple nexus and the transactional approach to humanitarian assistance for the beneficiaries' countries. The idea is that the European Commission no longer does "development" but implements "international partnership" with beneficiaries' countries. This approach is based on the concept of a relationship between equals, striving to avoid a paternalistic approach. Yet, since 2021, the Sahel has faced unprecedented political, security and humanitarian challenges that have sorely tested the EU's ability to implement its strategy in the region.

Furthermore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine exacerbated food crisis in Africa. Considered the granaries of the world, before the conflict Russia and Ukraine produced 25 per cent of the world's cereals. Some 50 countries were 30 per cent dependent on the import of their grain, and 36 (of which 12 are African) were over 50 per cent dependent on it. Within a few weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prices of many foodstuffs had risen considerably due to (expected) supply shortages. Against this backdrop, the EU had to make a greater effort to help reduce the regional food crisis in the Sahel. This effort has consisted of continuous humanitarian support, which, however, has gone hand in hand with

a reduction in European development aid. Political instability – in particular, the numerous military coups that have taken place in the region since 2021 – has diminished opportunities for development cooperation between the EU and local governments. Yet, despite the global food crisis, the EU has continued to dedicate funds for food security in the Sahel – without, however, spearheading structural reforms that, in the long run, should help African states to better cope with general difficulties in the food sector.

In this paper, we will look at how the EU has historically addressed food crisis in the Sahel and how it intended to do so through its 2021 strategy, the regional context and the humanitarian challenges the Union has faced in recent years, and the responses it has been able to provide to the Sahelian population in the light of the global context.

1. FROM FOOD AID TO FOOD ASSISTANCE: THE EU'S AMBITIONS TO TACKLE FOOD SECURITY IN THE SAHEL REGION

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Providing food assistance to victims of food crisis and investing in sustainable solutions are at the centre of EU humanitarian action worldwide. The document that explains part of its policy towards food security is “Humanitarian Food Assistance. From Food Aid to Food Assistance”, published in 2013. As described therein, the aim of the EU’s humanitarian food-assistance policy is to ensure the consumption of sufficient, safe and nutritious food before, during and after a humanitarian crisis.¹ Actions to ensure this outcome range from the direct provision of food to the dissemination of agricultural skills and/or knowledge. The document also explains that in order to achieve this goal, the EU has changed the focus of its humanitarian food assistance – shifting from a food-aid perspective to one of humanitarian-food assistance. The Union’s aim was no longer to provide solely a default response to emergency food needs but, moreover, to develop a broader set of humanitarian food-assistance tools tailored to tackling the diverse causes and symptoms of transient food insecurity.² In this document, the EU essentially expressed its willingness to move from an emergency response to a structural one.

Underlying this change of perspective was the understanding that trends such as climate change or conflicts are increasing the vulnerability of the world’s poorest people, who are most notably affected by food and nutrition insecurity. Therefore, humanitarian resources had to be more efficient and effective than hitherto, adapting to this more complex environment and responding rapidly to crises. In this new approach, humanitarian food assistance was dealt with by the EU’s Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) through its humanitarian

instruments. But in addition to that, DG ECHO can draw on dedicated contingency funds under country allocations of the European Development Fund (EDF)³ to respond to food and non-food needs in humanitarian crises. As explained in the strategy, in immediate post-crisis situations, other EU instruments – such as the Instrument for Stability (IfS) – can contribute to restoring national food security, whereas longer-term food-security support can be implemented as part of a broader strategy for poverty alleviation and might be financed by the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI), drawn from the EU budget, as well as by the European Development Fund (EDF) for African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) countries.⁴

Yet, according to an analysis by the European Commission itself,⁵ between 2016 to 2020, DG ECHO was the third major donor for food security and second major donor for nutrition globally. Overall, the work of DG ECHO has been deemed relevant as most of its actions were designed and implemented to take into account the needs of the most vulnerable populations, with multi-country and multi-sector projects being the most effective. Yet, despite DG ECHO having been considered a flexible donor, capable of adapting and scaling-up its actions according to evolving needs, its adaption in this case was relatively slow because of a lack of expertise. From a coherence perspective, DG ECHO has mostly focused its attention on responding to emergency needs, scaling down the scope and funding of resilience programmes and adopting a more regional approach.⁶

However, in terms of quantity, the EU has helped more than 100 million people lacking access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food since 2010.⁷ This action made the Union one of the world's major donors in this area. In 2021, around 25 per cent of the EU's annual humanitarian-aid budget was used to provide emergency food assistance and nutrition. In 2022, given the severity and scale of the current food crises, the share was over one third of all EU humanitarian funding, meaning 950 million euro for humanitarian food assistance and nutrition. From 2020 to 2024, the Union has planned to invest 8 billion euro worldwide – including in the Sahel, where food crisis challenges the lives of millions of people. This focus on the Sahel region is nothing new. Between 2016 and 2020, the EU was the second biggest donor after the United States with 850 million euro of aid, which corresponded to about 13.5 per cent of the global humanitarian-aid funding in the Sahel in that period and reached approximately 107 million beneficiaries.⁸ Most of that funding was allocated to the food security livelihoods (FSL) sector (34 per cent), followed by nutrition (25 per cent) and health (10 per cent).⁹

Since the start of the security crisis in Libya in 2011 and the acceleration of irregular migration flows from sub-Saharan countries in 2015, the Sahel has turned into a priority for the EU's foreign policy and neighbourhood influence.¹⁰ The region, due to its geographical proximity, is considered a crucial component in outlining a secure EU-integrated border-management system. The presence of multiple crisis in the Sahel, which undermine the stability and security of the Mediterranean, has been a major concern for the EU pertaining to its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).¹¹

In April 2021, the Council of the European Union approved the new EU Integrated Strategy in the Sahel.¹² The strategy was formulated at a time when most of the current, worrisome crises – such as Russia's war against Ukraine and the several military coups in the Sahel region – had not yet emerged. Probably also because of this, it expressed an optimism towards the region that is far removed from the current reality. This optimism was grounded in the type of actions the EU intended to pursue in

the region that were based on an equal partnership with local governments. In the strategy, food security is listed among the top strategic priorities together with the need for stabilisation, the fight against terrorism, reforms of the security sector, the provision of basic services, governance and the rule of law, efforts to combat corruption, human-rights violations, the implementation of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, giving youth a central role in policies, and sustainable and inclusive development. However, it must be emphasised that the importance of food safety compared with state-security issues (i.e. the fight against terrorist groups) is minor.

However, food security is considered part of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis which is provoking an increased number of internally displaced persons and refugees, forced displacements, abuse, inter- and intra-community tensions, an increase in health needs and difficulty establishing state services in conflict areas. As explained in Article 37 of the Integrated Strategy, the EU – aware of the major challenges to sustainable development and the stabilisation of the region posed by the issues of access to land, water and other natural resources – wants to promote sustainable, integrated and inclusive development and cooperation in this regard at regional, national and local level. To reduce severe food and nutrition insecurity, the Union was willing to promote the strengthening of sustainable agriculture systems.¹³ These actions were part of a broader vision of intervention that was articulated on a security, development and humanitarian nexus. Alongside support on security and governance, the EU has pledged development assistance to the Sahel with a focus on fighting the consequences of climate change but also combatting food insecurity through promoting sustainable agriculture practices, helping reduce food and water insecurity, and addressing the increasing competition over land and resources characteristic of the region.¹⁴ Furthermore, the EU wanted to continue to provide the Sahel countries with humanitarian assistance, with the specific aim of tackling the growing needs of displaced and conflict-affected peoples.

The 2021 strategy was built around two principles. The first is the so-called HDP triple nexus that stems from the 2017 Council conclusions.¹⁵ As explained in this document, considering the complex nature of today's crisis, the humanitarian system alone cannot address needs of such magnitude and diversity. As a consequence, the EU recognises the linkages between sustainable development, humanitarian action, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, as well as the importance of diplomatic and political solutions to support peace and security, in line with the EU Global Strategy and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. In the Council conclusions, the Union stresses the importance of investing in prevention and addressing the underlying root causes of vulnerability, fragility and conflict while simultaneously meeting humanitarian needs and strengthening resilience, thus reducing risks. More concretely, at the European level, this meant a close collaboration between the External European Action Service, DG ECHO and INTPA, the European Commission agency responsible for formulating international partnership and development policy. The second element in which the EU strategy is rooted is the transactional relationship between the Union and the countries benefitting from humanitarian assistance. The idea is that the Commission no longer does "development" but implements "international partnership" in order to establish a relationship of equals which should be, by definition, less paternalistic than in the past.

Yet, the waves of military coups (i.e. Mali, 2021; Burkina Faso, 2022; and, most recently, Niger, July 2023) and constitutional changes (Chad 2021), combined with growing multipolar competition across the Sahel and the weakening of regional organisations, have demonstrated that the Integrated Strategy was conceived through an optimism about the region's development that was detached from reality.¹⁶ This misreading had consequences not only for the security and political relations between the EU and the region but also for the former's capacity to implement its humanitarian and development actions related to food security. This happened for several reasons, which will be described in the next section. Above all, due to the military coups, the EU found itself unable to cooperate with local

governments and, therefore, to implement its policies related not only to security but also to its humanitarian and development actions.¹⁷

Due to growing insecurity in the region, the EU faced difficulties in intervening in areas of critical need for the population. As a result, its overall capacity to act in environments characterised by a highly challenging security situation was diminished. Finally, despite many difficulties, the EU has retained these countries among its priority states in which to make humanitarian and development interventions, but on the other hand the new Sahelian governments have turned their backs on traditional partners and opened their doors to new foreign powers. Among those, the most important is Russia, whose growing presence dates from 2014 when the first Western sanctions against Moscow pushed the Kremlin to go back to the African continent.¹⁸ This change in bilateral relations has clearly worsened relationships between EU and Sahelian countries, especially in the light of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, it has highlighted the fact that Central and West African countries claim their sovereignty and the right to diversify their relationships with external actors. Moreover, together with Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Burkina Faso and most probably the new military junta in Niger are at the forefront of this new era of African politics, in which former colonial powers – especially France – are heavily criticised. From a global perspective, this new trend in Africa fits into a wider positioning of the so-called Global South, which includes ascendant global powers like India, China and Brazil.

2. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE EU IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY FROM A FOOD-SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

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About 20 per cent of the African population is facing food insecurity and is undernourished, a number that is twice as high as in any other region of the world. The worst-affected regions of the continent are Central and Southern Africa, where more than 18 per cent of the population is facing high levels of food insecurity.¹⁹ Within these, the worst-affected countries are the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria and Sudan. In the list of other countries with more than 30 per cent of the population in crisis, there are no Sahelian nations: on average, 8.6 per cent of the region's population is in crisis. This is happening in a part of the world that faces most of the recognised food-crisis drivers, such as conflict, weather shocks (especially drought and floods) and poverty – affecting the demand, supply and availability of food.

The main driver of food insecurity in the Sahel region is conflict, especially for Burkina Faso and Niger. In 2023, the Sahel crisis entered its twelfth year with the region becoming the new epicentre of terrorism. Between 2007 and 2021, the number of terrorism-related deaths has increased tenfold – accounting for 35 per cent of the global total in 2021, compared with just 1 per cent in 2007.²⁰ By 2022, the violence had expanded in intensity and geographic reach: nearly two thirds of the districts in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have experienced violent Islamist attacks.²¹ The worst-affected regional areas are the Tri-Border, North-central Burkina Faso, Central Mali and Western Niger – mostly areas where there is a reduced security presence and natural resources, such as gold. Violence is also potentially expanding in neighbouring countries of the Gulf of Guinea, such as Togo, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire.²²

In addition to general insecurity, climate-change predictions indicate that rising temperatures and more frequent extreme-weather events will continue

to hit the Sahel harder than other parts of the world. While in the past the region's populations have adapted to environmental difficulties in various ways (i.e. through seasonal migration: a peaceful cooperation between farmers and herders), the confluence of evolving economic, political and social factors, combined with the impetus of environmental change, presents new risks.²³

Climate change can be seen as an indirect “threat multiplier”, exacerbating many local risk factors of conflict. Sahelian countries are simultaneously among the most affected by climate change and the least prepared to adapt to it. Although it is commonly known that Africa is warming faster than the global average, within the continent the Sahel has experienced the greatest average temperature increases. Five Sahelian countries (Sudan, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali) are in the bottom twenty-five of the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative Country Index, which ranks countries according to their vulnerability to climate change and readiness to improve resilience.²⁴ Climate change leads to droughts, floods and desertification. Drought has affected more than 20 million people between 2016 and 2020, due to food insecurity or economic hardship, and has killed up to 20 per cent of the region's trees, which can exacerbate desertification. The Sahel has been identified as a global tipping point if global average surface temperatures increase by 3°C compared with pre-industrial levels. Floods are expected to cause significant economic losses in West African countries over the next decade due to low levels of infrastructure and weak management capacity.

Climate crisis has significant social, economic and environmental impact, including reduced agricultural productivity, food insecurity, displacement of people and increased risk of conflict. Climate change is

also exacerbating existing challenges in the region, such as political instability, growing insecurity and uncontrolled urbanisation. All of this is happening in a context in which there is limited governance, weak public-sector capacities and inadequate institutions. The World Bank estimates that up to 13.5 million people across the Sahel could fall into poverty in 2050 due to climate-change-related shocks if urgent climate-adaptation measures are not undertaken.²⁵

In addition to this, the region faces structural poverty. On average, 30 per cent of people living in countries facing protracted crisis situations live in extreme poverty – a situation that prevents them from adapting to and recovering from shocks. According to the World Bank, in the Sahel region the poverty headcount ratio is at 3.65 US dollars a day. The human development indicator (HDI) – which takes into account the life-expectancy index, the education index and GNI (gross national income) – puts most of the region's countries at the lowest level of the HDI: out of 191 countries and territories analysed, Chad ranks at 190, Niger 189, Mali 186, Burkina Faso 184 and Mauritania – exceptionally – at 158.²⁶ For all these five countries, the situation has more or less remained the same over the last 30 years.²⁷

To these chronic situations, two factors have been added in recent years that have made the population's food security even more vulnerable and precarious. The Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have had a very strong impact on the economies of these countries. In Mali, for example, as ACCORD writes, the measures that were taken in 2020 to limit the spread of the coronavirus have had a devastating effect on the country's economy.²⁸

Russia's invasion of Ukraine aggravated food insecurity at the global level. Considered the granaries of the world, Russia and Ukraine produced 25 per cent of the world's cereals. According to the FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), in 2022 some 50 countries were 30 per cent dependent on the import of their grain and 36 (of which 12 are African) were over 50 per cent dependent on it. Within a few weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the prices of many foodstuffs had risen considerably due to (expected) supply

shortages. In March 2022, the food-price index – a metric that monitors price changes for a basket of commonly traded foodstuffs – increased by 12.6 per cent over the total for February of the same year, the month in which the index had already reached its highest level since it was created in 1990. In particular, the price of cereals increased by 17 per cent and that of sunflower oil (of which Ukraine is the world's largest exporter) rose by 23 per cent, which, together with the increase in the price of fuel oil, also inflated the prices of palm oil and soya oil.

The same applies to meat: the surge in pork prices, due to the shortage of animals for slaughter in Western Europe, pushed the FAO meat-price index up by 4.8 per cent to an all-time high. The consequences of this in Africa were devastating – not only in the Horn of Africa countries, such as Somalia, but also in West Africa and the Sahel. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), in June 2022 the number of people suffering from hunger reached a new record, quadrupling in just three years from 10.7 million in 2019 to 41 million in 2022. However, although the increase in prices of basic foodstuffs has been constant in all countries of the region, 2022 saw a staggering 40 per cent jump from the average of the last five years in all the Sahel nations except for Chad. The forecasts in 2022 were tragic: due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the number of people facing acute food insecurity would increase by between 7 and 10 million – and the countries that could be most affected are Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.²⁹

In this section, we have thus seen that the context in which the European strategy 2021 was to be applied was particularly affected by a worsening political and security situation, deteriorating weather conditions and a weakening of economies due to additional factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

3. THE EU'S RESPONSES BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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In 2021 and 2022, the EU had to review its development partnerships with Mali and Burkina Faso after the military coups in those countries – and is very likely to be facing a similar challenge in Niger against the background of its 2023 coup. As a rule, at the EU level, for development all policies for external action must be carried out in agreement with local partners. The fact that in these cases the Union had to work with governments that had emanated from a military coup made the partnership difficult to implement. From the humanitarian perspective, the EU doesn't need to operate in accordance with local government. But due to increasing insecurity, many areas are difficult for aid workers to reach or else the local governments themselves require that they go with armed escorts, which exposes them to attacks.³⁰ Therefore, it is becoming more challenging for development and humanitarianism to work together because the necessary security and political conditions are no longer in place.³¹

Against this backdrop, in 2022 EU humanitarian assistance to the Sahel region stood at 240 million euro, including a specific top-up made by the end of 2021 that provided aid to both displaced people and host communities and supported people affected by conflict and insecurity. Among its main humanitarian actions, the Union has provided shelter, emergency food and nutritional aid, access to health care and clean water, treatment for malnourished children and protection for the most vulnerable. In addition, EU funding was dedicated to safe access to education for children affected by armed conflicts. EU humanitarian funding also covered disaster risk-reduction initiatives, helping countries to better prepare for, and reduce the impact of, natural hazards related to climate change and their effects on food availability. In addition to this, the European Commission provided 100 million euro in humanitarian assistance to support the rollout of vaccination campaigns in countries in Africa with critical humanitarian needs and fragile

health systems.³² Particular attention was paid to malnourished children by supporting medical facilities around the region which, among other things, included care for severe acute malnutrition, curative consultations for children, prenatal and postnatal consultations, and help with reproductive health or mental-health care.³³

Given the complexity of the crisis, in 2021 the EU worked to increase funding. The most important initiative was the organisation of a high-level meeting between the Sahel and West Africa Club and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (SWAD/OECD) and the Global Network Against Food Crises (GNAFC). The meeting took place in April 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but its planning began earlier, stressing the Union's attention to food crises. The aim of the meeting was twofold: (1) to mobilise more emergency food security and nutrition assistance for the most affected populations; and (2) to renew a strong and long-term political commitment to structural policies addressing the underlying causes of food and nutrition crises, and to integrate humanitarian, development and peace dimensions for a more holistic approach.³⁴

The event was organised with the acknowledgment that the severity and magnitude of food crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions have increased from affecting about 11 million people in 2019 to nearly 41 million.³⁵

Malnutrition also remains a concern, with nearly 16.5 million children under five affected in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. As explained in the final communiqué of the meeting, food crises and malnutrition – together with an increasing number of internally displaced people and refugees – contribute to a deterioration of security, disrupt agro-pastoral and food systems, and hamper the life of future generations. However, even if the meeting

was planned before the war in Ukraine, comments on the effects of the war – such as the acceleration of inflationary trends and a surge in wheat prices, energy and transportation – expressed the concern that hunger riots such as those that occurred in the region in 2008 could erupt again, and that the progress made in recent decades could be reversed.

In order to meet the new challenges, the meeting gathered 2.5 billion euro of financial pledges, out of which more than 1 billion came from DG ECHO, INTPA and EU member states.³⁶ During the meeting, participants agreed to work with a long-term perspective by: (1) recalling that the priority was not to launch new initiatives but to support and strengthen existing institutions and mechanisms (national and regional); and (2) working on the prevention of food crisis and malnutrition rather than simply managing them.

From this perspective, they agreed to put the resilience of populations and food systems, as well as the management of malnutrition, at the top of their respective agendas for eradicating hunger and malnutrition in the region. They committed to prioritising youth employment, by relying in particular on the opportunities offered by the agro-pastoral economy and other segments of the informal economy. Additionally, they pledged to collectively act according to the humanitarian–development–peace nexus by improving financial instruments enabling the HDP approach; raising awareness among states to support the HDP approach; and, in particular, enabling humanitarian actors to support the more vulnerable people in conflict-affected areas.

Following this Paris conference, the EU mobilised additional funding to address the unprecedented food crisis in the region. Yet, arguably, this response has been limited compared with the needs of the African people, the Union's own objectives and Brussels' track record of effectively supporting external partners. In 2022, the EU pledged to G5 Sahel countries more or less 211 million euro of humanitarian aid, a large part of which was dedicated to addressing food security and malnutrition through cash transfers, vouchers and food rations

for families, as well as ready-to-use therapeutic food and essential medicines to treat severely malnourished children – but also the delivery of emergency food aid during the lean season (the crucial period of the year between harvests, generally from June to September) when food reserves are at their lowest. Yet, the Russian invasion of Ukraine then exacerbated the frustrations of local governments and the population, who compared the policies adopted by the EU towards Kyiv and the Sahel. In comparison with assistance to Ukraine, which intensified after 2022, and considering its commitment and track record of support for partners in its close neighbourhood, the EU's response has fallen short of the Sahel's needs.³⁷

Yet, even if to a large extent the EU humanitarian response to the Sahel was only a third the size of the one dedicated to Ukraine fighting a defensive war against Russia, at a global level the Union's response to the food crisis focused especially on Africa, where the crisis has hit the hardest. The EU response included 225 million euro for the Southern Neighbourhood, 1 billion euro for the Sahel and Lake Chad region through Team Europe and 600 million euro for the Horn of Africa. The EU has also provided an additional 600 million euro of decommitted European Development Fund (EDF) resources to a selection of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries to boost humanitarian action (150 million euro) sustainable production and resilience (350 million euro) and macro-economic support (100 euro). These actions towards this latter objective have been enacted through the Union's geographical and thematic resources under the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, which had already been allocated before the food crisis and the war. However, as stressed before, the EU response to the food crisis appears somewhat limited in scope compared with the challenges posed by the crisis. The Union has tried to address the long-term vulnerabilities of food systems, especially in Africa, but there are still questions on how well equipped it is to respond swiftly and adequately when multiple crises strike – e.g. Covid, food, energy, economic and climate-related. However, the EU's response has combined emergency aid with longer-term support for sustainable agriculture and food systems. The

EU has also invested in research and innovation, and provided technical assistance to improve agricultural productivity. Additionally, the Team Europe approach³⁸ has been used to stimulate cooperation between European countries and institutions in addressing the global food crisis.

However, neither during the 2022 Paris meeting nor afterwards did the EU undertake any political commitment to work on two of the main trends that affect food security in the Sahel: conflicts and inflation. From a political perspective, the Union has further disengaged its security action in the region, while from a financial perspective few decisions have been taken. As explained during an expert briefing by a food-security expert, “the issue of hunger cannot be solved unless the financial issue is addressed”.³⁹ In 2022, markets were well supplied but the rise in food prices was continuing and accelerating, particularly in the Sahel. These price surges were fuelled by economic inflation in some Gulf of Guinea countries, production cuts for the 2021–22 season, the security crisis, Covid-19 and soaring world prices for agricultural products, as well as persistent obstacles to regional trade.⁴⁰ From this perspective, the war in Ukraine was a further factor exacerbating these price rises but not the main cause. Faced with the challenge of security, Sahelian states are giving budgetary priority to their armed forces. In 10 years, spending on security has risen by 339 per cent in Mali, 288 per cent in Niger and 238 per cent in Burkina Faso.⁴¹ The fact that these states dedicate most of their budget to security matters reduces their capacity to stockpile food – especially cereals – a policy that West African countries have been implementing since the 1970s. Sahelian states have built up public stocks but, while at the beginning 15 per cent of purchases – mainly cereals – were stockpiled, today barely 1 per cent is included in national stocks.⁴²

Albeit to a lesser extent than others, the economies of the Sahel face an additional problem: the public-debt crisis, which, with the recent rise in interest rates, is jeopardising the growth prospects of some 20 countries on the African continent.⁴³ At the European level, the 2023 Paris conference⁴⁴ initiated by President Macron and supported by the

EU has recently been the focus of attention. Some 40 governments met in the French capital to try to tackle the problems of excessive debt and climate change, but they failed to bridge the gap between the countries of the North and South. On this occasion, some measures were announced – such as the issuance of 100 billion US dollars in Special Drawing Rights, of which 5 per cent will go to African countries. However, even this seems to be a palliative rather than a structural reform, since debt is the outcome of a structural imbalance between African countries and the more-industrialised economies. So there are either structural changes in the trading system – such as allowing trade preferences, i.e. for African products, to be produced by lowering customs barriers – or changes in the rules of the extractive sector that allow profits from extraction to be kept in the countries of origin, together with a willingness to favour lending by public multilateral organisations such as the World Bank or the BRICS (the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), which are concessions that can lend at long-term and more favourable rates.

CONCLUSION

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The European Union has always devoted strong attention to humanitarian issues in the Sahel, especially as regards the food crisis. However, since 2021 its capacity to act in the region has been reduced both due to the deterioration of the security situation and the souring of relations between the EU and local governments occasioned by a series of military coups. This has happened in a context in which Sahelian countries' economies had been deeply weakened by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EU, faced with greater difficulty in implementing its development policies, has nevertheless continued to support the countries of the region through humanitarian aid. From this point of view, and given the growing challenges, the Union has also increased the funds dedicated to food-safety emergencies. However, in addition to its commitment to humanitarian support, the EU must look for effective solutions to address excessive public debt and climate change due to their significant impact on food insecurity in the region of the Sahel.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ European Commission DG ECHO (2013) *Humanitarian Food Assistance. From Food Aid to Food Assistance*, DG ECHO Thematic Policy Documents, No. 1 (November), https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/food_assistance/them_policy_doc_foodassistance_en.pdf.
- ² As the document describes it, food aid was originally meant as assistance in the form of food commodities, or in the form of financing that supported the centralised procurement and distribution of food to beneficiaries. On the contrary, food assistance is now considered as any intervention designed to tackle food insecurity, its immediate causes and its various negative consequences.
- ³ The EDF was the main instrument for EU aid for development cooperation in African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) countries and overseas countries and territories (OCT). Funding is provided through voluntary donations by EU member states. Until 2020, the EDF was subject to its own financial rules and procedures, and was managed by the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB). The EDF has been incorporated into the EU's general budget as of the 2021–2027 multi-annual financial framework.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Esteves, Sofia et al. (2022) *Combined Evaluation of the EU'S Humanitarian Interventions in the Sahel and in the Food Assistance and Nutrition Sectors 2016-2020. Final Report*, Publications Office of the European Union, November, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2795/933010>.
- ⁶ Ibid.
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- ⁸ Esteves, Sofia et al. (2022) *Combined Evaluation of the EU'S Humanitarian Interventions in the Sahel*, cit., p. vii.
- ⁹ Ibid.
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- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Pichon, Eric and Mathilde Betant-Rasmussen (2021) "New EU Strategic Priorities for the Sahel. Addressing Regional Challenges through Better Governance", *EPRS Briefings*, July, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696161](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161).
- ¹⁵ Council of the European Union (2017) *Council Conclusions on the Operationalising the Humanitarian-Development Nexus*, 19 May, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/24010/nexus-st09383en17.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Caruso, Francesca and Francesca Lenzi (2023) "The Sahel Region", cit.
- ¹⁷ Following the coups, the EU faced the difficulty of implementing a transactional approach with the Malian and Burkinabé military juntas. The same will most probably happen with Niger as, after the July military coup, the EU and its member states – such as France and Germany – suspended all aid to Niger with immediate effect after General Abdourahamane Tchiani declared himself leader of the country in a coup that ousted President Mohammed Bazoum. The EU stated that it would also stop all security cooperation.
- ¹⁸ Russia's presence in the continent is not unprecedented as the Soviet Union had strong cultural, educational, military and economic ties with some African countries such as Algeria, Mozambique and South Africa. But since 2014, it has intensified – as the actions of the Wagner group of mercenaries shows.
- ¹⁹ International Food Policy Research Institute (2023) *Global Food Policy Report 2023. Rethinking Food Crisis Responses*, Washington, IFPRI, <https://doi.org/10.2499/9780896294417>.
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- ²³ Tesfaye, Beza (2022) "Climate Change and Conflict in the Sahel", *Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder*, No. 11

(November), <https://www.cfr.org/node/243534>.

²⁴ Notre Dame Adaption Initiative (ND-GAIN) website: *Country Index*, <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index>.

²⁵ World Bank (2022) *Sahelian Countries Must Accelerate Growth and Prioritize Climate Adaptation to Alleviate Poverty and Address Food Insecurity - New World Bank Group Report*, 19 September, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/09/19/sahelian-countries-can-boost-and-diversify-their-economies-to-take-on-the-climate-crisis-and-food-insecurity>.

²⁶ Human Development Reports' Data Center (2022) *Country Insights*, data updated on 8 September, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ ACCORD (2020), "The Effects of COVID-19 on the Situation in Mali", *Conflict & Resilience Monitor*, 30 September, <https://www.accord.org.za/?p=30068>. The curfew imposed from 9 pm to 5 am prevented many people who worked at night from doing so, thus losing their source of livelihood. In addition, the closing of the borders has increased the cost of essential goods such as cement: before the pandemic, a tonne of cement cost 90,000 Central African francs (CFA) (about 135 euro); today, it costs 110,000 CFA – about 170 euro. In Chad, according to a study by Ground Truth Solutions, the containment measures resulted, for 60 per cent of respondents, in a deterioration in the population's ability to meet basic needs. See Ground Truth Solutions and CHS Alliance (2021), *Higher Prices, Less Aid: How Communities Experience COVID-19. Chad*, May, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3735896>.

²⁹ World Food Programme (2022), *Hunger in West Africa Reaches Record High in a Decade as the Region Faces an Unprecedented Crisis Exacerbated by Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, 8 April, <https://www.wfp.org/node/26648>. See also: Food Crisis Prevention Network (2022) "The Russo-Ukrainian crisis with worldwide humanitarian consequences", *Information and Watch Newsletter*, No. 1 (July), <https://www.food-security.net/en/document/information-and-watch-newsletter-the-russo-ukrainian-crisis-with-worldwide-humanitarian-consequences>; Food Crisis Prevention Network (2022) "A Major Food and Nutrition Crisis for the Third Consecutive Year", *OECD SWAC Maps&Facts*, No. 108 (March), https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps/collapsecontents/108-Food-Nutrition-Crisis_2022.pdf; Food Crisis Prevention Network (2022) *Restricted Meeting, 6-8 April. Summary of Conclusions*, <https://www.food-security.net/en/document/summary-of-conclusions-restricted-meeting-april-2022>.

³⁰ Interview with a EU official, Rome, April 2023.

³¹ Ibid.

³² European Commission DG ECHO (2022) *Unprecedented Hunger in the Sahel: How the EU is Helping*, 19 July, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/1302_en.

³³ European Commission DG ECHO (2022) *Sahel Factsheet*, 20 April, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/node/43_en.

³⁴ The conference was attended by high-level representative of Sahelian governments such as former President Mohammed Bazoum from Niger, European governments, the OECD, the European Commission, the African Union, African regional organisations such as ECOWAS and UEMOE, and international organisations such as FAO and WFP. See: Food Crisis Prevention Network (2022) *Food and Nutrition Crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad Regions: Time to Act Now and Better Mobilise in West Africa for the Future*, 6 April. *Final Communiqué*, <https://www.food-security.net/en/document/final-communiquehigh-level-consultation-6-april-2022>.

³⁵ Ibid.; see also: Food Crisis Prevention Network (2021) *Food and Nutrition Trends in the Sahel and West Africa, 2017-21*, April, <https://www.food-security.net/en/map-library/food-and-nutrition-trends-in-the-sahel-and-west-africa-2017-21>.

³⁶ See Annex in Food Crisis Prevention Network (2022) *Food and Nutrition Crises in the Sahel and Lake Chad Regions*, cit.

³⁷ 211 million euro of EU funding in 2022 for a 90 million population (41 million facing hunger) is hardly sufficient to cover the needs of the region. The author has consulted the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations pages related to Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger and Ukraine.

³⁸ Team Europe Initiatives ("TEIs") focus on identifying critical priorities that constrain development in a given country or region, where a coordinated and coherent effort by "Team Europe" would ensure results with a transformative impact. Team Europe consists of the European Union, EU member states – including their implementing agencies and public development banks – and the EIB and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

³⁹ Interview with a food security expert, April 2023.

⁴⁰ Rantrua, Sylvie (2022) "Crise alimentaire, inflation : le Sahel en état de siege", *Le Point*, 6 May, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/crise-alimentaire-inflation-le-sahel-en-etat-de-siege-06-05-2022-2474524_3826.php.

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In the 2021 Strategy for the Sahel, food security was among the EU's top strategic priorities together with security, governance and development policies. But few months after the adoption of the Strategy, the Sahel faced unprecedented political, security and humanitarian challenges. Furthermore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine exacerbated food crisis in Africa. All the above mentioned elements have sorely tested the EU's ability to act efficiently in the region. Political instability (i.e. military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) has diminished opportunities for humanitarian intervention and development cooperation between the EU and local governments.

In this paper, we will look at how the EU has historically addressed food crisis in the Sahel and how it intended to do so through its 2021 strategy, the regional context and the humanitarian challenges the Union has faced in recent years, and the responses it has been able to provide to the Sahelian population in the light of the global context.

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