

Unpacking governance within the EU's Sahel strategy

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The revision of the European Union's 2011 Sahel strategy takes place against a bleak backdrop: humanitarian emergencies are piling up and 2020 marks the deadliest year in the region since 2012 with violence characterized by abuses against civilians not just by extremist groups and militias, but also by state security forces in counter-terrorism operations.



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Within the last decade, the EU has dedicated billions to development and military aid in the region. Most of that aid has been driven by the desire to contain migration movements and the will to contribute to counterterrorism and stabilization efforts. Already under scrutiny, the effectiveness and impact of EU policies in the Sahel have been questioned again in the [aftermath of the coup in Mali](#).

A key component of EU strategic failures in the region lies in its [understanding of governance](#). In fact, while Europeans have long recognized governance as a root cause of instability, efforts to tackle it have remained parallel to existing efforts in the realm of security and development. As such, governance is perceived as a stand-alone pillar – that relies predominantly on technical assistance, rather than a cross-cutting issue mainstreamed across all European interventions.

The revised Sahel strategy risks being rather meaningless if the EU does not plan to unpack the lessons learned on demanding better guarantees from partners and devising a more political agenda.

The need for more politics

Governance challenges have been understood by the EU first and foremost as a lack of national capacity. Development spending was guided by detailed log-frames, theory of change and result-bound frameworks. Yet, this technical approach to governance remains inefficient, as existing EU frameworks have been unable to prevent widespread embezzlement, corruption and misuse of resources on the part of their partners.

While the EU has supported the increase of unprecedented levels of external assistance in the region, the lack of efficient oversight on potential mismanagement has had [undesired consequences](#). Due to time and diplomatic pressures constraining donors' actions, Sahelian stakeholders now orchestrate the utilization of international aid.

In addition, EU foreign policy goals have increasingly sedimented into development programming, made transactional on the containment of migration movements. This has consequences on governance: in [northern Niger](#), a tight focus on migration policies has been to the detriment of local governance needs.

Within the frame of security-sector assistance, [EU strategy is primarily premised](#) on the notion that re-deploying state actors – starting with the armed forces – to certain insecure regions will bring stability. The rapid re-deployment of undertrained and disinvested state armed forces creates additional backlashes as national armies have regularly been accused of [extrajudicial killings and varied exactions against civilians](#).

EUTM Mali is illustrative of the EU's predominant prioritization of technical assistance and capacity building. While minor advances have been achieved, this is contrasted by a lack of progress made in matters of governance such as human resources and anti-corruption systems.

Indeed, while defense and security budgets are skyrocketing in the region, [embezzlement scandals](#) in Sahelian ministries, [murky expenditure](#) channels and delays in provision of [troops' salaries](#) continue to weaken national defense and security forces' performance. The perpetuation of rent seeking government practices, to which corruption is a key pillar, fuels socio-political discontent among Sahel populations – both in civil society and within barracks. If EU governance programs persist in ignoring the problematic functioning of local institutions they support, they could end up causing more harm than good.

Introducing transactionality

The notion of a transactional approach to EU assistance – a “tit for tat” – has recently gained traction in Brussels and EU capitals. If implemented, advances or stalemates on pre-defined key policies are acknowledged through increased or decreased funding. Such an approach needs to rest on clearly defined indicators to measure progress and transparent monitoring and evaluation systems.

Rather than introducing an additional tension to ownership, transactionality should be applied to the concerns of Sahelian citizens and the real governance dilemmas at the heart of the crisis of instability: rule of law and the fight against corruption. There is no need to bring to the table European demands: external transactionality does not

automatically equate to less ownership and Sahelian governments have themselves vouched for a number of reforms they are yet to implement. In fact, tensions between EU and national priorities are aggravated by a lack of political will to engage in sustainable administrative reforms committed to on paper.

“EUTM Mali works for a safer world.”

To be successful, an evaluation of existing efforts will need to be conducted. For example human rights trainings should not just rely on quantitative measures, such as attendee numbers, but should include a more qualitative approach. Indicators could measure whether hierarchies match ranks or follow the actual use of transmitted resources in the longer run. The new EUTM mandate is a first step in the right direction, allowing to accompany Sahelian military trainees into battlefield, thereby establishing closer supervision of behavior and performance.

Accountability matters also with regards to previous allegations against the Malian armed forces. The EU should not just assess whether reports of human rights violations are true, but also demand that the Malian government act upon such allegations, lest funding will be impeded. The [recent appointment](#) of militaries to governors and the nomination of a militia leader to a key government position in Mali requires even more pressing that the EU positions itself on this issue.

An only partial transactional approach escapes its purpose: to be effective, it needs to encompass the entirety of EU engagement or else risks credibility and effectiveness. The introduction of transactionality across EU assistance, and including EUTM, might be perceived by EU member states as reverse to stabilization capacities of the Malian armed forces. Yet, the current EUTM approach of improving tactical capacities alone is not sufficient. The efficiency of national armies is indeed strongly correlated to the improvement of military ethos, i.e. the adoption of positive values, anti-corruption safeguards and human rights principles, in every aspect of military action.

Enhanced conditionality is a mechanism that has rarely been tried and tested in European stabilization efforts. Nonetheless, without concrete incentives for structural reform processes, as the past seven years have shown, there is a danger that EU security-development assistance won't have the desired effects.

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