Since the early 2010s, increased volatility in the Sahel has aroused widespread concern, spurring the establishment of regional and international groupings to deal with the many security and governance challenges that have undermined stability in the region. Among those efforts were the creation of the G5 Sahel cooperation framework (2014), the G5 Sahel Joint Force (2017), the Sahel Alliance (2017) – and more recently, in June 2020, the International Coalition for the Sahel, to tackle instability in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Those five countries are the focus of this paper.

The spread of the pandemic across the Sahel

The first COVID-19 case in Africa was recorded on 14 February 2020 in Egypt. The initial rate of infection led to alarming projections, but so far the virus seems to have spread less widely through the continent than initially feared.

The Sahel presents many risk factors that make it particularly vulnerable to the pandemic, including weak health systems, densely populated urban areas, difficulties in implementing social distancing, armed conflicts and human displacement. It is notable that Burkina Faso was one of the first countries in the region to be hit by the virus, while also experiencing the fastest-growing displacement crisis in Africa; the country has only 35 hospitals and a mere 11 ventilators for a population of about 20 million, and the pandemic could still have dramatic consequences there.

Fortunately, however, after an initial rapid increase in the number of infections in the region – mostly in urban centres, especially capital cities – COVID-19 seems not to have followed the pattern seen in a number of European countries or the United States and so far the number of recorded cases and deaths is relatively low.

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This is the first in a series of monthly papers aimed at understanding and analysing the multiple ways the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is affecting stability in different parts of the world. Specifically, the papers will concentrate on the pandemic’s impact on security, governance, trade and geo-economics.

COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SAHEL

KEY MESSAGES

- COVID-19 could compound an already-dire humanitarian situation in the Sahel by exposing up to 50 million more people to food insecurity.
- There is a risk of governments using the pandemic for political gain, or to repress dissent, which would further destabilise the region.
- Because the informal economy provides most of the employment in the region, it should be better protected against shocks such as the disruption caused by COVID-19.
- Despite the financial contributions European and other non-African nations have made to the efforts to combat COVID-19 in the Sahel, African nations and institutions should take ownership of the response to the crisis in the longer term.
But the figures are uncertain: testing has been very limited, and the official number of deaths comprises only people who died in hospital. By June, only 3,483 tests had been conducted in Mali, 6,020 in Niger and 2,583 in Mauritania; there is no data available for Burkina Faso or Chad. More generally, it is premature to reach conclusions about the spread of the virus in the Sahel as there is incomplete understanding of how the virus has been transmitted in the region. Analyses of the situation currently range from overly optimistic to bleakly pessimistic.

Public perception

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has compounded already-existing difficulties for the most vulnerable people in the Sahel – internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, marginalised groups – and also for the wider population. However, it does not represent the main threat to life. The people of the region face existential challenges on a daily basis, such as finding enough money for food and coping with diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis.

The level of awareness around COVID-19 remains low. Except for the richest section of the region’s population, generally living in the capitals, most people do not have access to testing or treatment facilities and can expect little in the way of medical assistance if they contract the virus. In addition, as observed during the Ebola crisis in West Africa, conspiracy theories are widespread, with many individuals not trusting their governments and indeed accusing certain political leaders of ‘faking’ the pandemic.
IMPLICATIONS

Impact on security
Along with the risks posed by COVID-19, the threats and challenges that the region experienced before the pandemic – such as insurgencies and organised crime – continue to be very serious. Chief among them is the intensification and geographical expansion of jihadist activity in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and the risk of civilians being caught in the crossfire between armed groups and national armies.

Though it has been argued, for example by senior diplomats such UN Peacekeeping chief Jean-Pierre Lacroix, that jihadist groups in the region are taking advantage of the pandemic to step up their attacks, the data does not support that analysis. And as most of the territories controlled by Sahelian militants are remote from the capitals, these groups have not been directly affected by the virus, and hence their aims and resources remain largely unaltered.

Meanwhile, military operations by France and its partners in the G5 Sahel Joint Force have continued at pace, and given the strategic importance attached to counter-terrorism operations in the region, especially by Paris, COVID-19 is unlikely to deter these efforts in the coming months. French and regional troops have conducted a series of joint operations against the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Liptako-Gourma region around the tri-border between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and French forces killed the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdel, on 3 June. Overall, 2020 has seen a stepping-up of military operations accompanied by a rise in the number of extrajudicial killings and disappearances perpetrated by national armed forces. As a result, during the first quarter of the year, those armed forces were responsible for more civilian deaths than jihadist groups.

The Sahel is also a region with extensive networks for the smuggling of goods and people. In late March, the stringent travel restrictions imposed by Chad and Niger to combat the pandemic had the initial effect of disrupting the trafficking of migrants. Coupled with Algeria’s and Libya’s increased deployments of border guards, these measures deterred the traffickers, especially along the Sahel–Libya route. But with the relaxation of travel restrictions in mid-April, they resumed their activities while opting for more remote routes, in some cases the same ones used by arms and drugs smugglers. The heightened risk associated with these new routes has prompted some human traffickers to switch to the smuggling of goods such as fuel and gold.

During the pandemic, migrants detained by local security forces have been subjected to harsh treatment. COVID-19 also appears to have changed the attitude of destination countries such as Italy and Malta, which have temporarily stopped receiving migrants. This has led, in some cases, to migrants remaining for weeks at sea in overcrowded vessels.

Impact on the humanitarian situation
With the worsening of the security situation in the past two years and the increase in violence committed by both state and non-state actors, the Sahel is facing a dire humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian organisations were already concerned by the food-security situation, especially in conflict-affected areas. In April, the Food Crisis Prevention Network (Réseau de Prévention de Crises alimentaires – RPCA) declared an ‘unprecedented humanitarian crisis’, with 11.4m people in immediate need of food (potentially rising to 17m in June–August) – more than double the average number over recent years.

With a growing number of IDPs throughout the region (particularly in Burkina Faso, where in April there were 850,000, compared with only 80,000 registered in January 2019), humanitarian organisations were struggling to deliver aid even before the outbreak of the pandemic. They fear now that it will become even more difficult for displaced persons to access food, water and health assistance, due to the disruption caused by armed groups and the restrictions and sanitary measures that limit the scope of humanitarian operations.

COVID-19 will increase the risk of hunger in the region, with sanitary measures inevitably making it
more difficult for people to work and trade, and hence buy food. According to the RPCA, another 50m people across the Sahel and West Africa could experience a food crisis as a result of the pandemic.9

**Impact on the economy and the ability of businesses to operate**

In April the IMF projected that the economy of sub-Saharan Africa would contract by 1.6% in 2020, the worst performance on record.10 Whether that forecast proves accurate depends largely on the spread of the pandemic.

Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger are low-income countries whose economies were already fragile, and now business and trade in the Sahel have been significantly hampered by the pandemic. The same is true of Africa as a whole – for example the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), previously scheduled for July, has been delayed by at least six months.

The closure of borders particularly affected small traders, and the inability of landlocked countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger) to access ports in coastal West Africa, for example those in Cameroon, Nigeria and Senegal, has been detrimental to trade in essential goods.11

Urban economies, which according to the World Bank account for 64% of Africa’s GDP, are likely to suffer significantly. Small and medium-sized enterprises, responsible for the lion’s share of African employment, are very vulnerable to shocks, as are the tens of millions of people employed in the informal economy (about 80% of Africa’s workforce, including at least 60% of female workers).12 The sharp rise in the prices of food, manufacturing and utilities as a result of the pandemic and related restrictions is putting further strain on already-precarious lives.13

For the rural population of the Sahel, 80% of whom rely on subsistence farming, restricted access to the markets where they sell produce and buy seeds and fertilisers has become a serious problem. As governments focus expenditure on responding to the pandemic, agricultural subsidies will have to be put on hold. Additionally, May–August is the Sahel’s ‘lean season’, between harvests, which even in normal circumstances sees increased food prices.

Fragile economies are expected to be hit particularly hard by disruption to supply chains and the sharp decrease in demand for agricultural products from China and other foreign markets as a result of the pandemic. The World Food Programme predicts that Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger will be the West African countries most severely affected.

The economy of oil-exporting Chad is sure to be damaged by the fall in oil prices as a result of COVID-19-related disruptions, while in Mauritania, which already had a heavy debt burden, efforts to contain the spread of the virus might force the government into further borrowing.

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**Urban populations in the Sahel**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Urban Population (%)</th>
<th>Population (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>19.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COVID-19 and government legitimacy
Sahelian governments’ responses to COVID-19 have in many cases further eroded their political legitimacy. Their poor record in providing basic goods and services, including healthcare, predates the outbreak and was already a source of popular discontent, but responses to the pandemic such as the closure of public spaces, especially markets and mosques, have been widely perceived as a means to prevent protests and therefore as restrictions on civil liberties. The Burkinabe police’s brutal enforcement of curfews is just one example. In Niger the level of distrust between the authorities and the population in the run-up to Ramadan (23 April–23 May) was particularly high, with hundreds arrested for protesting against lockdown.

Furthermore, COVID-19 is set to have a serious impact on elections in the region. Electorates will be going to the polls in November in Burkina Faso, where the government is already on shaky ground given its handling of the violence in the country’s north and east, and in December in Niger, where a power transition is on the cards and a biometric electoral register is being introduced. In both countries it is likely that the pandemic will reduce the number of people able to reach the polling stations. The Nigerien government has stated that public security and combating the virus are more urgent priorities than organising the election and has suspended voter registration in the capital Niamey. The Burkinabe government has gone even further, suspending voter registration across the entire country.14

In Mali, voter turnout for the long-delayed legislative elections in March and April was low – barely above 35% in March,15 including an all-time low of 7.5% in the capital Bamako.16 Malians already had little faith in their political system but it is probable that COVID-19 also deterred them from going out to vote.

FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC

National responses
Sahelian governments have been quick to adopt measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. Starting in early March, they suspended international flights, closed their borders, shut down schools, limited public gatherings and introduced curfews, especially in urban areas.

Border control is a key aspect of the response, but border areas are precisely those where the presence of the state tends to be weakest. Also, although border officials have been playing an important role in preventing the spread of virus, most of them lack testing equipment and adequate training to raise awareness of the virus among border communities. With the re-opening of borders expected in July, an inability to carry out tests or isolate people means that the movement of vehicles and traders could pose serious sanitary risks – an issue already highlighted by the International Organization for Migration.

Lockdowns and market closures have inevitably deprived many people of their sources of income, and hence reduced their ability to buy food. And precautions such as hand washing or social distancing are virtually impossible to adopt as a large proportion of the Sahelian population do not have access to washing facilities at home (46.1% of Burkinabe, 75.7% of Chadians, 23% of Malians and 20% of Mauritanians)17 and live in crowded conditions with multiple generations under the same roof.

To address food scarcity, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, together with Cabo Verde and Senegal, had provided CFA francs 400 billion (US$687m) for a package of measures to be implemented this year, including subsidised cereal outlets in Burkina Faso, assessment of the pandemic impact on nutrition in Niger, and building the resilience of the Malian agricultural sector.18 But the pandemic has undermined the implementation
of some of these plans both in terms of logistics and resource availability.

**Multinational responses**

At the continental level, the African Union (AU) activated an Emergency Operations Centre and Incident Management System in late January as part of its Africa Centres for Disease Control (CDC) initiative. Meanwhile African health ministers endorsed the Africa Joint Continental Strategy on COVID-19, aimed at coordinating the efforts of AU members and institutions (and their international partners) with those of the World Health Organization (WHO), and at promoting evidence-based public-health practice for surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and control of the virus. Since then, pandemic-specific train-the-trainers programmes and simulations have been rolled out across the continent, and the CDC has worked to procure medical stockpiles. Additionally, on 26 March the AU established the African Union COVID-19 Response Fund to mitigate the pandemic’s humanitarian and socio-economic impact. The United Kingdom is its largest national donor, with a £20m (US$25m) investment.

At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which includes Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, appointed Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari as its ‘Champion on the Fight against COVID-19’, a role supported by the newly established Ministerial Coordination Committees on Health, Finance and Transport. In mid-June, Buhari tasked the ECOWAS Commission with producing an economic-recovery plan to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the region. Nigeria’s capital Abuja is the regional hub for the distribution of medical supplies and equipment, both procured and donated.

At the sub-regional, Sahel-specific level, the responses of several European and international organisations are channelled through the Sahel Alliance, resulting in both multilateral and bilateral initiatives. Members are coordinating their efforts with the WHO and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and provide direct aid to non-governmental organisations and to health and humanitarian actors. Fundraising initiatives have also intensified. Interventions have included building the capacity of the public-health system in Niger, the delivery of protective equipment, and funding laboratories and disease screening.

International institutions’ financing of the response to COVID-19 in the Sahel has included the approved disbursement of IMF funds under the Rapid Credit Facility of US$200m to Mali, US$130m to Mauritania, US$115.3m to Burkina Faso, US$115.1m to Chad and US$114.49m to Niger. Sahelian countries were also among the first recipients of World Bank support through the COVID-19 Fast Track Facility. The bank has approved US$25.8m of financing for Mali and US$21.15m for Burkina Faso, along with grants of US$16.9 for Chad, $13.95m for Niger and US$5.2m for Mauritania.

**CONCLUSION**

The fight against COVID-19 is a global one and the development of a vaccine will potentially benefit hundreds of millions, including the populations of the Sahel. In the short and medium term there are likely to be tensions, in terms of allocation of resources, between the health-oriented initiatives highlighted in this paper and the resources needed to address long-standing challenges such as jihadism, human displacement and the food crisis. If those challenges are neglected because of the pandemic, the likely result is increased violence, a continued lack of political legitimacy and a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Indeed, the
The confluence of new and old threats calls for a closer integration of response mechanisms in the security, humanitarian and development sectors, given that their remits increasingly overlap.

There is ample evidence that many of the problems affecting the Sahel stem from poor governance and weak institutions. It is paramount that measures to contain the pandemic do not become excuses for repressive measures such as the curbing of political opposition and civil society. Similarly, if governments exploit the COVID-19 crisis for political gain, for example by delaying elections or ruling by decree, that would further erode public trust in them. It could also exacerbate social unrest, as the example of Niger illustrates.

Whereas strict sanitary measures are an important means of limiting the spread of the virus, the national governments in the Sahel ought to strike a balance between enforcing those measures and ensuring that their implementation does not in itself aggravate the economic situation. Given the size and also the vulnerability of the informal sector in the region, efforts to protect informal employment should be a priority during the COVID-19 crisis. This includes recognising and engaging with informal economic actors and acknowledging that the sector is very fluid, with a significant proportion of the workforce moving in and out of informal employment.

Despite the financial contributions European and other non-African nations have made to the efforts to combat COVID-19 in Africa, their capacity to support the Sahel is likely to be reduced by the imperatives of dealing with the consequences of the pandemic at home. This is just one of many reasons why sustainable, long-term solutions to the challenges highlighted in this paper ought to be Africa-owned. For instance, though the pandemic has caused the operationalisation of the AfCFTA to be postponed, it has also brought into sharper focus the importance of deeper regional economic and trade integration, through economic diversification and the elimination of tariffs, as a buffer against shocks such as the recent decline in demand from Asian and European markets.

### Additional resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chad's pivotal role in the Sahel</td>
<td>IISS webinar recording</td>
<td>16 June 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS militants pose growing threat across Africa</td>
<td>IISS Analysis</td>
<td>2 June 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Armed Conflict Survey 2020</td>
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<td>May 2020</td>
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<td>Humanitarian action in the Sahel during COVID-19</td>
<td>IISS webinar recording</td>
<td>12 May 2020</td>
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<tr>
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<td>IISS Analysis</td>
<td>29 April 2020</td>
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<td>Niger: Curtailing migration has unintended consequences</td>
<td>IISS Analysis</td>
<td>8 November 2019</td>
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<td>West Africa: shifting strategies in the Sahel</td>
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<td>1 October 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso and jihadism in West Africa</td>
<td>IISS Strategic Comments 25(23)</td>
<td>August 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihadist violence and communal divisions fuel worsening conflict in Mali and wider Sahel</td>
<td>IISS Analysis</td>
<td>20 June 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Notes

3. [https://covid19.who.int/](https://covid19.who.int/)
7. [https://player.captivate.fm/episode/6f6abc6d-case-49aa-bbcb-of40436dd843](https://player.captivate.fm/episode/6f6abc6d-case-49aa-bbcb-of40436dd843)
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