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**Coordination, programme and other questions: African countries emerging from conflict
Sustainable development in the Sahel**

Implementation of integrated, coherent, and coordinated support for South Sudan and the Sahel region by the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General*

I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) decision 2023/352, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General “to submit to the Council at its 2024 session for its consideration a report on the implementation of integrated, coherent, and coordinated support for South Sudan by the United Nations system”. Subsequently, in its decision 2023/353, the Council requested the Secretary-General “to report to the Council at its 2024 session on how the United Nations system was implementing integrated, coherent, and coordinated support to achieve sustainable development in the Sahel region.”

II. South Sudan

A. Country Context

2. South Sudan has faced multiple and complex challenges since it gained independence in 2011. Key development challenges include slow implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), high dependence on oil, sub-national violence, climate change-related floods, droughts, and heatwaves, which exacerbate food insecurity, internal displacement and vulnerability among members of South Sudan’s communities who are already marginalized.

3. The R-ARCSS was signed on 12 September 2018. Following delays in implementation, with most provisions not fulfilled, the parties to the R-ARCSS extended the transitional period of the Revitalized Agreement by 24 months, from 22 February 2023 to 22 February 2025¹. The provisions agreed on a new roadmap include the completion of pre-election activities necessary for the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections in December 2024, two months before the end of the transitional period. Some key tasks agreed upon by parties in the roadmap that remain pending as of 15 March 2024 include²:

¹ Resolution of the RJMEC 2nd Extraordinary Meeting, Beijing Juba Hotel, 1st September 2022, Juba, South Sudan

² Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC)-Ref: RJMEC/C/2024/L/158

* Late submission of draft report due to comprehensive review by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General.

- a) enactment of the revised National Security Service Act (Amendment) Bill 2023 to inter alia, create an enabling civil, and political space for citizen participation in governance, the constitution-making process, and elections;
 - b) completion of the judicial reform process and adequate funding for the three newly constituted institutions, the Political Parties Council (PPC), the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC), and the National Elections Commission (NEC) to enable them to fulfil their mandates;
 - c) completion of Phase I and Phase II unification of forces and their deployment to provide security around the country, and funding for the implementation of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process;
 - d) establishment of the Special Reconstruction Fund/Board and the convening of a Donor Conference for South Sudan to solicit international support for the implementation of the Agreement;
 - e) implementation of the legal and policy frameworks related to Public Financial Management reforms (PPDA, Audit, Banking Act, Payroll) which enhance transparency and accountability in economic and financial sectors;
 - f) establishment and operationalization of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Compensation and Reparation Authority;
 - g) the drafting and adoption of the permanent constitution in accordance with the constitution-making process Act from 2022 to guide the conduct of elections.
4. There are concerns by R-ARCSS principal parties, signatories, and peace guarantors whether the outstanding provisions can be completed and elections be held in the time remaining until the end of the extended time horizon of the Revitalized Agreement. Negotiations to agree on the way forward for pending R-ARCSS provisions are ongoing.
5. The humanitarian situation remains dire, with millions of people in need of assistance. According to the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2024, about 9 million people in the country need humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, and healthcare, with a financial requirement of \$1.8 billion which, is 19.3 per cent funded as of 8 April 2024³. The humanitarian crisis resulting from floods and conflicts has also resulted in over 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). In addition, by 21 April 2024, there are 509,901 refugees mainly from the Sudan who are seeking refuge in South Sudan in 2024.
6. In South Sudan, 80 per cent of livelihoods depend on traditional rain-fed agriculture, crop farming, pastoralism, or animal husbandry. Climate shocks continue to exacerbate the already fragile food security situation in the country. This has contributed to the loss of crop production, grazing environmental degradation, and competition over scarce natural resources, which, in some cases, is fuelling conflicts and further disrupting livelihoods.
7. The food security situation has deteriorated due to multiple shocks, including flooding, ongoing conflict, displacement, and the high cost of living. During the peak of the lean season (April – July 2024), 7.1 million of the 12.4 million South Sudanese (57.26 per cent of the population) are expected to face acute food insecurity at crisis level - equivalent to level 3 or above - as per the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis of November 2023.
8. The economic situation remains challenging, with the country heavily dependent on oil exports, rising inflation, a depreciating currency, and high levels of debt. Oil exports account for almost all of the country's export revenues, contributing to over 90 per cent of overall government revenues⁴. The Government's oil revenues have been impacted by the Sudan crisis which has led to the shut down of some oil production fields and the heightened insecurity in the Red Sea, causing export delays, which have led to six months' salary arrears for civil servants and members of the armed forces.
9. On 11 August 2023, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) passed FY2023/2024 budget of SSP 2.1 trillion (\$2.3 billion) in expenditures and SSP 1.8 trillion (\$2.0 billion) in revenues and budget deficit of SSP 267 million (\$291 million)⁵. The FY2023/2024 is 28 per cent (\$906 million) lower than the FY2022/23 budget.⁶ Seventy-two per cent of budget is financed by oil revenues, 12 per cent by non-oil revenues, and 3 per cent by grants, and 13 per cent budget of deficit could be funded through borrowing.

³ <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/211/summary/2024>

⁴ In 2021, the top exports of South Sudan are crude petroleum (\$455M), refined petroleum (\$84.9M), forage crops (\$9.75M), onions (\$2.1M), and sheep and goat meat (\$1.99M)

⁵ <https://www.eyeradio.org/parliament-passes-budget-with-400-salary-adjustment/>

⁶ The FY2023/2024 assumed official and parallel exchange rates of SSP 917/USD and SSP 1,129.6/USD respectively.

10. The South Sudanese Pound (SSP) has depreciated by 47 per cent from SSP 1,087/USD on 2 January 2024 to SSP 1,603/USD on 2 April 2024 due to reduced availability of hard currency in the market. The Bank of South Sudan (BSS) has reduced the weekly auctioning of US dollars from 10 million to 5 million US dollars due to low foreign reserves. Furthermore, the country is heavily dependent on imports of essential goods and commodities, including food and refined petroleum. The Government is working to diversify the economy away from oil and attract investment, but progress has been slow. The Government efforts to promote growth in the agricultural sector are derailed by insecurity, climate change, and poor infrastructure, contributing to low production across the country. Only about 4 per cent of arable land in South Sudan is currently under cultivation, which is rain-fed because of limited irrigation, and generates low yields, despite the vast untapped agricultural potential. The country is also vulnerable to regional instability.

B. South Sudan's Key Development Issues

11. South Sudan continues to face significant challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) due to conflict, economic instability, and limited infrastructure. The country's progress towards all the 17 SDGs is severely hindered by the conflict that began in 2013 and ended with the signing of the Revitalized Agreement in 2018 and subsequent establishment of the transitional government in 2020, resulting in significant humanitarian and development challenges: displacement of millions of people, high levels of food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare, education, and other basic services. Of the estimated 12.4 million people living within South Sudan's borders, over 8 million are estimated to be living in extreme poverty (affecting progress on SDG 1) and in need of some degree of humanitarian assistance. Over 7.1 million people face severe food insecurity and malnutrition with children showing stunting and wasting effects (affecting progress on SDG2).

12. Little or no progress has been made on SDGs 3-6 over recent years. Life expectancy at birth remains one of the lowest in the world, at 56.4 years for men and 59.4 for women in 2019 (the most recent available data). The maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births is the highest in the world, at 789 in 2019. The majority of the population is not using safely managed water sources, drink contaminated water at households and practice open defecation. Inadequate water, hygiene and sanitation facilities and practices contribute to the poor health and nutrition conditions. The country also has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world at 27 per cent of the adult population (15 per cent for women)⁷, whilst an estimated 2.8 million children are out of school (59 per cent of all children aged 3-17 years, of whom 53 per cent are girls). There are limited technical and vocational education and training opportunities for young people with demand far exceeding supply.

13. Harmful practices resulting from insufficient progress on sustainable development, such as gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination, child marriage, and early childbearing continue to place additional obstacles for women and girls. They are perpetuated by conflict, often-times weak community and social support systems, and weak capacity and investment for preventing and addressing GBV. There is little national investment in social protection with most of cash transfers, food for assets programs, and livelihood support being provided through donor funding. The pattern of high donor dependency is repeated across the social sector, affecting its accessibility and sustainability, and negatively impacting medium- to longer-term institution-building processes at the central and state levels. Institutional systems and capacities with respect to policy formulation, planning, design, implementation, monitoring, and oversight, including data generation and utilization, are severely limited, negatively impacting on targeting and delivery essential services.

14. Floods, droughts, and insecurity have prevented access to farmlands for many households, especially for women/female-headed households, during planting, growing and harvest periods. They have impacted agricultural production and compounded conflict over pasture and livelihood. Despite the Land Act (2009), allowing all citizens to own and access land irrespective of their sex, ethnicity or religion, many women continue to be discriminated against due to patriarchal laws and practices.

15. The energy infrastructure is under-developed with limited grid connectivity and low levels of investment. Less than eight per cent of the population has access to electricity. The majority of the population relies on traditional biomass fuels for cooking and heating, which contributes to deforestation, indoor air pollution, and long-term health issues.

16. Only one per cent of South Sudan's 20,000 kilometres road network is paved. This is not only a major barrier to trade and market integration, but also contributes to the high cost of delivering humanitarian assistance. The poor transport and communication infrastructure has led to persistent marginalization and inequitable access to social and economic opportunities.

⁷ World Bank (2022) World Development Indicators, <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>

17. South Sudan's national budget cycle is characterized by weak oversight and is not gender responsive. Every fiscal year, the allocations, execution and spending show considerable divergences. There is underfunding of both service sectors (education, health, and social services) and productive sectors, such as agriculture.

18. DDR processes have not started as envisioned in the R-ARCSS due to, inter alia, a lack of progress in the unification forces and funding constraints of the national DDR commission. There have been state-level disarmament campaigns to disarm civilians. Law enforcement agencies are severely under-resourced, with low capacity to apprehend and arraign suspects in court. The prisons and detention centres across the country are overcrowded, with many inmates enduring extended periods without trial.

19. The Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) has prioritized SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). According to the parties to the Transitional Government, progress on SDG 16 will act as an 'enabler' to unlock pathways in other SDG areas and build the foundations for longer-term development, as long-term progress on the SDGs in the country will require more inclusion of marginalized groups and increased accountability in the political and governance spheres.

20. South Sudan's Revised National Development Strategy (R-NDS) 2021-2024 is aligned with both the Agenda 2063 of the African Union and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a focus on peace, governance and accountable institutions; economic diversification, resilience and economic growth, basic social services delivery and youth and women empowerment.

C. United Nations Approach and Response in South Sudan

21. The United Nations development system in South Sudan has developed the 2023-2025 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework that articulates the collective offer of the United Nations in support of the country's national priorities across all dimensions. The Cooperation Framework has four mutually-dependent and reinforcing strategic priorities: (i) consolidation of peace and transparent, accountable and inclusive governance (in support of SDGs 5, 16 & 17; (ii) sustainable economic growth and diversification; (iii) social development with protection of the most vulnerable; and (iv) women and youth empowerment for sustainable development, with a focus on food systems, education and health, and climate action. Overall, these priorities are intended to contribute to progress across SDGs. In laying the foundation for the country recovery and progress on the SDGs, the United Nations' political engagement in South Sudan through the United Nations Mission's strategic vision, one UN integrated/coordinated support to the implementation of the peace agreement (including through the Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)), and support to electoral institution-building (jointly by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) remains important, given the critical political period in South Sudan in 2024.

22. In January 2024, the Ministry of Finance and Planning organized a workshop on the Budget Plan Preparation Programme for Fiscal Year 2024-2025, where the Ministries, Departments and Agencies presented their sector progress and priorities. During the workshop, the Accounting Officers agreed to extend the South Sudan R-NDS by one year from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025, subject to approval of Cabinet and Presidency. The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in South Sudan has requested an extension of the Cooperation Framework by one year to December 2026.

23. As part of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, the UNCT is supporting the Government of the Republic of South Sudan on its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) of SDGs at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, in New York in July 2024. South Sudan has presented VNR key messages at the African Regional Forum for Sustainable Development (ARFSD) on 23-25 April 2024 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Under the leadership of the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator (DSRSG/RC/HC), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the wider UN system are providing technical assistance and financial support for the VNR process.

24. The integrated office approach that commenced in 2023 in the Office of the United Nations Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, the DSRSG/RC/HC is expected to provide better coordination and collaboration among UNMISS, HCT and UNCT and build synergies and coherence in the United Nations' response. There is also expansion of UN-government coordination both at the national and state level, including the establishment of a joint UN-Government Steering Committee for the UN Cooperation Framework and the PBF. Furthermore, the decentralization of the RC/HC function was piloted in 2023 in three states - Western Bahr El Ghazal, Unity and Upper Nile - to facilitate better coordination within and between development and humanitarian actions.

25. Discussions with partners are ongoing at the country level on possible alignment and use of funds from RSTSF, PBF and the SDG Joint Fund, with a focus on options for cross-initiative exchanges and possible synergies to support fundraising and financing. It also involves identifying ways to move from funding of individual projects towards financing of results through larger project portfolios.

26. Co-led by the South Sudan DSRSG/HC/RC and the Sudan RC/HC, and in collaboration with the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), the two RCs continue to coordinate to implement the Abyei joint programme across the peace, humanitarian, and development pillars to address conflicts and build community resilience and community cohesion. The overall objective of the joint programme is to mitigate conflict, maintain stability, foster intercommunal reconciliation, and facilitate the return of displaced persons as well as to create conditions for an inclusive environment for peace and enhance resilience for women, youth and targeted vulnerable communities across Abyei. This is in line with Security Council resolution S/RES/2609 (2021) para 18, which invites UNISFA to coordinate with the Juba-appointed administration in Abyei, the Misseriya administration in Muglad and the Khartoum-appointed administration, “using appropriate civilian expertise, to maintain stability, foster intercommunal reconciliation and facilitate the return of displaced persons to their villages and the delivery of services.”

27. In the energy sector, there are initiatives underway to improve access in South Sudan, including the UNDP-led project “promoting renewable energy for productive uses in South Sudan” and “solar installation to ease service delivery in South Sudan’s health sector” to increase access and improve reliability of power supply through renewables.

28. There is ongoing collaboration between the United Nations in South Sudan with the international financial institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank (WB) and the African Development Bank (AfDB). UNDP is working closely with the WB and AfDB to support the Government of South Sudan in implementing the Public Financial Mechanism (PFM) reform agenda as required by Chapter IV of the R-ARCSS. They have deployed technical staff to the Ministry of Finance and Planning to support PFM reform process. In 2024, the WB sought UNCT inputs to its South Sudan Strategic Plan.

D. Way forward for our future work and support in South Sudan

29. Going forward, the United Nations in South Sudan will continue to support the implementation of the Cooperation Framework to advance progress on the SDGs by 2030. The United Nations will continue to pursue:

- Supporting peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan through PBF projects and continued engagement with Peacebuilding Commission, by promoting inclusive and sustainable development that prioritizes women’s leadership, political participation, and youth empowerment
- the localization and decentralization agenda for area-based programming and support, including in the provision of life-saving humanitarian assistance and creating durable/permanent solutions, access to basic social service, and conditions for return of displaced populations;
- building and strengthening coordination mechanisms at the national and state levels to leverage synergies, avoid duplication of interventions and ensure continuous engagement to strengthen collaboration among stakeholders,
- Continuing to prioritize strategic and catalytic investments in support of the R-ARCSS and the UN early transition planning.
- strengthening collaboration between UNCT and UNMISS on the implementation of the early transition strategy developed and submitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council in 2023, peacebuilding and governance aspects to build synergies on the rule of law, human rights, protection, climate action, and energy, including the development of renewables;
- developing and implementing joint programmes on food systems, education and health and climate action guided by the Cooperation Framework to catalyze and accelerate progress on SDGs in South Sudan;
- advocating for greater investments in data collection and management, infrastructure, knowledge management, risk management, innovation, research, and technology including digitalization/e-governance, as well as changes to service delivery modalities with significantly increased public funding;

- engaging the Government of the Republic of South Sudan to convene a Donor Conference for South Sudan to solicit international support for the implementation of the Agreement.

E. Recommendations

30. Member States may wish to consider the following recommendations to support the implementation of integrated, coherent, and coordinated support for South Sudan:

- a. Development partners should explore comprehensive solutions to support and place people and communities at the forefront while ensuring coherence between peace, humanitarian and development activities.**
- b. The international community should build on the momentum created by the efforts made to enhance durable solutions by offering programming that attends both to the immediate needs resulting from emergencies and disasters, as well as the need to enhance longer-term resilience and development. This requires flexible and long-term financing.**
- c. The international community should support the development of a long-term, comprehensive, and inclusive approach for tackling challenges related to energy, food security and food systems transformation, basic services, governance and the economy in South Sudan, and advance economic diversification and transformation as well as a clean energy transition.**
- d. The international community should continue to provide the necessary political support to the parties to overcome the current political challenges to the full implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, which would enhance the country's efforts towards sustainable development. This may include support for the permanent constitution-making process, creating political and civic space, addressing inter-communal conflict and provision of technical assistance and advice for electoral preparations.**
- e. The international community should build on the successful first-ever International Women's Conference held in South Sudan in February 2023 to support efforts to ensure that women and youth are empowered and meaningfully engage and participate in political, social, and economic processes and decision-making, especially as the country prepares for elections.**
- f. The international community should work with South Sudan to strengthen efforts on the ongoing PFM reforms and diversify the economy to increase domestic non-oil revenue resources to create enhanced fiscal space for basic service delivery, infrastructural development, and the development of data ecosystems, among other priorities. This should also include enhancing the UN-IFI engagement.**
- g. The international community should provide resources for the implementation of the UN Cooperation Framework to lay the foundation and build the capacity for South Sudan's medium to long-term recovery and resilience building to reduce humanitarian needs by enhancing sustainable development.**

III. Sahel region

A. Context

Sustainable development

31. The Sahel region⁸ registered slow progress in its sustainable development efforts despite recording some positive indicators of economic growth. UNECA's 2023 report on SDGs projects that most of the Sahel countries will not achieve most of their goals by 2030, due to successive crises that are impacting some of the positive trajectories reached before the COVID-19 pandemic. On the social dimension, unprecedented challenges faced in 2023 could reverse development gains in the Sahel on the people-related SDG goals (1 to 4), prosperity (SDGs 6 to 8) and peace (SDG-16).⁹

32. The Sahel also faces significant challenges in the labour market, primarily due to security issues, political instability, and underdevelopment. These factors often lead to high unemployment rates and underemployment, particularly among the youth. The World Bank highlights that considerable progress has been made in the Sahel on education. Governments have taken important policy steps in support of high-level commitment for education. Primary enrolment has doubled, and secondary enrolment has tripled in the region. However, approximately 40% of school going age children are still out of school. For those children who are in school quality remains low, and many young people completing primary school lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.¹⁰ On average, Sahelian countries spend about 2 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on education, which is below the optimal level of 4-6 per cent suggested by some good practice standards.¹¹

33. The 2023 SDG Index report¹² shows, at continental level, Africa's SDG index was at 53 per cent. With the exception of Burkina Faso and Niger, the West African Sahel countries have achieved SDG Index scores surpassing the continental average. Yet, the countries of the Sahel continue to rank at the bottom of the UN Human Development Index. 7 out of the 10 countries in the Sahel reported a deterioration on their overall SDG performance recently.¹³

34. The region's GDP is projected to grow at 3.8 per cent in 2024. This projection remains contingent on regional and global factors, including the consequences of the announced withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and, possibly the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). This growth rate is higher than the average from previous years but still may not be sufficient to significantly alleviate poverty in the region.¹⁴ Niger's GDP growth slowed to 2.3 per cent in 2023, significantly below the initial forecast of 6.9 per cent. In 2023, the GDP growth rate of the Sahel region stood between 2.9% in Nigeria and 5.9 % in Guinea.¹⁵

35. The expected socio-economic impacts of an eventual exit from ECOWAS likely have various implications, notably in trade between the landlocked countries and their neighbours, free movement of labour and capital mobility, and in finance, through declining trends in foreign aid and the suspension of budgetary support. The humanitarian crises and instability could further exacerbate these impacts.

36. The lowest annual inflation rate in the Sahel was observed in Burkina Faso (1.4 per cent) and the highest in The Gambia (17 per cent), compared to an average inflation rate of 20.9 per cent in West Africa, which comprises 7 out of 10

⁸ The Sahel region in this report covers the 10 Sahelian countries covered by United Nations Integrated Strategy (UNISS - 2013) and its Support Plan (2018) are: Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, The Gambia.

⁹ UNECA, 2023

¹⁰ (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099435212132112883/pdf/P17575207b1dce0580a677098f731b3625b.pdf>)

¹¹ (<https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/press/education-sahel-peace-interview-ousmane-diagana/>)

¹² Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Drumm, E. (2023). Implementing the SDG Stimulus. Sustainable Development Report 2023. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2023. 10.25546/102924

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://desapublications.un.org/un-desa-voice/more-from-undesa/march-2024/west-africas-economic-prospects-pivotal-moment-regional>

¹⁵ Data on GDP, inflation, fiscal balance, and government debt are from the International Monetary Fund (IMF): Regional Outlook Report for Sub-Saharan Africa (October 2023) and World Economic Outlook Report (April 2023) for Mauritania.

UNISS countries¹⁶. Fiscal deficits of five Sahel countries crossed the threshold of 3.0 per cent of GDP in 2023 —, namely, Burkina Faso (-6.6 per cent); Mali (4.8 per cent); Niger (4.9 per cent); Nigeria (5.4 per cent); and Senegal (5.0 per cent), while Chad displayed a positive fiscal balance of 8.3 per cent of GDP mostly driven by high revenue from the oil sector. The remaining four Sahel countries experienced a fiscal deficit of less than 3 per cent of GDP—Cameroon 0.8 per cent; The Gambia 2.7 per cent; Guinea 2.3 per cent; and Mauritania 2.9 per cent).

37. The climate crisis and the occurrence of extreme weather events continued to increase vulnerabilities and fragilities of communities, pushing some countries to adopt responsive measures: (i) Nigeria declared a state of emergency over food insecurity; (ii) Senegal adopted climate-smart agriculture practices to achieve food security and broader development goals; and (iii) Burkina Faso developed water resource management for its climate resilience strategy.

38. In central Sahel, women and girls experienced some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) globally. In response, despite many challenges, including unprecedented funding shortages and access concerns, aid organizations developed and implemented robust multisectoral humanitarian response plans to address the urgent needs of the most vulnerable.

Political and security situation

39. In 2023, the political situation in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger was marked by ongoing political transitions against the backdrop of governance and security challenges. The increasingly critical situation in the Sahel led to large and ongoing displacements of populations fleeing insecurity in the central Sahel and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. These countries continued to experience political instability caused by unconstitutional changes of government coupled with challenges related to weak governance institutions, shrinking civic space, and the effects of weak social contracts.

40. On 17 September 2023, in Bamako, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter, establishing the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and further strengthened their collaboration in the subsequent months. On 1 December 2023, the authorities of Burkina Faso and Niger jointly announced their withdrawal from the Group of Five for the Sahel.

41. Moreover, on 28 January, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced their immediate withdrawal from ECOWAS. On 24 February, ECOWAS convened an Extraordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government to discuss implications of this announcement, after which it announced the immediate lifting of a large part of the sanctions against Niger and Mali. Some individual and political sanctions, however, were maintained. The AES countries are yet to respond to the ECOWAS' actions.

42. In 2023, the African Union Peace and Security Council raised serious concerns about “the persistent and deteriorating security crisis in the Sahel region, resulting from the increasing terrorist attacks and the growing number of victims, particularly civilians, including women and children, as well as the social and economic challenges that continue to undermine the peace, security, stability and development in the region”¹⁷. The statement also condemned “attacks deliberately targeting national and international forces, including State security forces and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)”¹⁸.

43. In Mali, following MINUSMA's withdrawal, renewed hostilities between the *Forces armées maliennes* (FAMa) and the *Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement* (CSP-PSD) saw the retaking of Kidal by the FAMa and their foreign security partners in November 2023. On 25 January 2024, Mali's transitional authorities ended the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. Political unrest in Mali has been steadily mounting since the transitional authorities announced, in September 2023, the postponement *sine die* of the presidential elections, and following the expiration on 26 March 2024 of the 2-year timeline – agreed in 2022 with ECOWAS – for the holding of presidential elections. On 31 March 2024, a large spectrum of political parties and groupings as well as civil society organizations

¹⁶ ¹⁶ Data on GDP, inflation, fiscal balance, and government debt are from the International Monetary Fund (IMF): Regional Outlook Report for Sub-Saharan Africa (October 2023) and World Economic Outlook Report (April 2023) for Mauritania.

¹⁷ Communiqué of the 116-2nd meeting of the AU PSC held on 20 July 2023, on Updated Briefing on the Situation in the Sahel: <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-1162nd-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-20-july-2023-on-updated-briefing-on-the-situation-in-the-sahel>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

(CSOs) issued a joint statement requesting a timeframe for the presidential election. On 10 April, a Presidential Decree “suspend[ed] all activities of political parties and all political activities of CSOs for reasons of public order”.

44. In Niger, following the unconstitutional change of government on 26 July 2023, Niger Transitional President General Tiani unilaterally announced on 19 August 2023 his intention to lead a transition of up to three years. ECOWAS rejected this possibility. To date, no progress has been observed in convening the national dialogue, deemed to set the transition priorities and endorse the *Programme de Résilience pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie* (PRSP). Meanwhile, the political space continues to shrink, with no signs of inclusive dialogue emerging on the direction of the transition.

45. In Burkina Faso, the elections supposed to be held in July, as agreed with ECOWAS, were postponed indefinitely as the transitional authorities stated their current priority is the restoration of territorial integrity.

46. Senegal held presidential elections on 24 March 2024. Opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Diakhary Faye was declared the winner by the Constitutional Council with 54.28 per cent of the vote in the first round. The pre-electoral period was marked by a steady rise in political tensions, which escalated following the 3 February decision by former President Macky Sall to rescind the decree scheduling presidential election for the 25 February and the subsequent adoption by the National Assembly of a constitutional amendment postponing the electoral process until 15 December 2024. Both decisions were subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Council paving the way for the completion of the electoral process prior to the end of President Macky Sall’s term on 2 April. The region also recorded general elections in Nigeria and municipal, regional and legislative elections in Mauritania¹⁹, and local elections in The Gambia.

47. Transnational organized crime continued to fuel armed conflicts and instability in the region by increasing tensions, violence and competition over illicit profits and territorial control. Armed groups exploited vulnerabilities in terms of governance, rule of law and lacking State presence to conduct their criminal activities, which ranged from smuggling of human beings, to trafficking medical products, firearms, fuel, drugs, and gold. The non-renewal of the mandate of the Panel of Experts as set out in resolution 2374 (2017) reduces the ability of the international community to monitor the implementation of the Mali sanctions regime, including illegal activities and financial transfers.

Climate change and impact

48. In 2023, over 350,000 people in the Sahel region were directly affected by floods, which had a devastating impact on homes, agriculture and fishing, schools and health centres, and hampered access for the delivery of life-saving aid. The water crisis was a major concern exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, as disruptions in hydrological patterns led to desertification, in addition to floods, and deprived many of access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

49. Food insecurity remained a challenge in 2023 across the Sahel region and will remain a cause for concern for 2024, according to the Harmonized Framework data. This is due to the fact that the effects of climate change exacerbate food insecurity, particularly amongst the forcibly displaced and stateless persons, while fuelling additional conflicts and social tensions among communities over scarce resources. Thus, an estimated 41.4 million people are projected to be food insecure in the ten countries covered by the UNISS in 2024, representing 11 per cent of the countries’ total population. Compared to 2023, there is a noted 3 per cent increase in the absolute number of food insecure populations; however, the proportion of food insecure populations (compared to the total population) decreased slightly due to population growth and/or migration (-3 per cent).

Humanitarian situation

50. As of 31 December 2023, 35.2 million people were in need of assistance.²⁰ By December 2023, about 9.8 million people were in situations of forced displacement, within or across borders and the region²¹, many of whom had to flee multiple times and remain displaced for many years²². The number of people who rely on basic, life-saving aid across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria increased by more than 3 million since the start of 2023. By 31 December 2023, 12.3 million vulnerable people were reached with humanitarian assistance and protection services in 2023,

²⁰ OCHA, 2024

²¹ OCHA, 2023

²² UNHCR, 2023

representing 52 per cent of the total of 23.6 million people targeted. The region faces a serious humanitarian funding deficit of \$3 billion as only \$1.8 billion (37 per cent) of the \$4.8 billion required in 2023, was received.

51. Sustained violence against civilians in the region is concerning. In October and November 2023 alone, nearly 700 civilians were reportedly killed in Central Sahel countries²³. In Niger, following the unconstitutional change of government in July 2023, protection incidents including kidnapping, gender-based violence and domestic violence increased by 52 per cent in August.²⁴ Burkina Faso experienced one of the world's most dynamic displacement crises, with the number of displaced reaching 2.1 million by the end of November 2023, according to the latest update from the International Organization for Migration (IOM)²⁵. In Mali, fears for an escalation of hostilities following MINUSMA's withdrawal did not materialize, yet an increase in the severity of humanitarian needs across country was observed as a result of conflict between the Malian armed forces and the violent extremist groups causing more than 391,000 IDPs.

52. By December 2023, Chad was the largest refugee-hosting country in the region with over 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers, followed by Cameroon with approximately 488 thousand.

B. United Nations support for the Sahel

53. In 2023, the United Nations system including the Office of the Special Coordinator for the Development in the Sahel (OSCDS), was actively involved in implementing actions aimed at addressing the many challenges facing the region, ranging from strengthening governance systems and resilience, to peace and security support across the humanitarian, peace, and development pillars. In particular, OSCDS worked closely with the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Special Political Mission mandated by the Security Council to, *inter alia*, support efforts in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, sustaining peace and mediation in West Africa and the Sahel, the Resident Coordinators, and the entities of the United Nations, regional directors who lead the UNCTs and regional offices throughout the Sahel, ensuring a coherent United Nations approach at the national and regional levels.

Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel

54. To ensure coherence of United Nations actions, the OSCDS actively promoted cross-pillar coherence, which resulted in: (i) the set-up of a platform for informal policy dialogue between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations in the Sahel; and (ii) the training on cross-pillar work of 90 experts and professionals in the Sahel at regional and national levels. The training led to the establishment of a Community of Practice, which will continue to be expanded in 2024.

55. On UNISS positioning, OSCDS co-led a multi-country high-level joint mission to the Sahel, which included engagements with governments and other stakeholders, such as donor partners, in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Mauritania. During this mission, the Special Coordinator advocated for continued engagement for accelerated progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNISS and the Agenda 2063 of the African Union. This mission produced greater visibility on the existing situation in the Sahel, allowed for crucial exchange with the populations and national authorities, and enhanced awareness of UNISS.

56. OSCDS continued to mainstream the UNISS/UNSP into country and regional processes and programmes, achieved through combined efforts with the Development Coordination Office (DCO). By December 2023, UNISS/UNSP was integrated into Common Country Assessments (CCAs) and new Cooperation Frameworks in nine of the ten UNISS countries, with the exception of Mali.

57. OSCDS continued to support the production, and dissemination of knowledge products/data on evolving issues affecting the Sahel. An example is the UNISS-UNODC Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA) on (i) firearms trafficking; (ii) fuel trafficking; (iii) smuggling of migrants; and (iv) trafficking on medical products. The Office disseminated and advocated for the systematic use of analytical and strategic documents on the Sahel, including: (i) the Sahel Vision Paper; (ii) the Sahel Predictive Analysis; and (iii) the 5W mapping of UN interventions.

58. OSCDS advanced on priority development areas for the region, notably, water. Jointly with the wider UN system, ECOWAS, the Inter-Governmental Authority on combating Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought and Desertification Control in the Sahel (CILSS), and the Governments of Burkina Faso and Italy, OSCDS facilitated a joint side-event at COP 28 on water to accelerate climate resilience and development in the Sahel. The main outcomes of the

²³ Source: IASC statement of 12 December

²⁴ Source: Protection Cluster

²⁵ <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/burkina-faso-crisis-response-plan-2024>

side-event were: (iii) a renewed commitment of key partners for continued support to water-related interventions through a “*Mega Sahel Coalition on Water*”; and (iii) increased awareness of the dynamics in the Sahel and key initiatives around water resources.

59. On UNISS funding, OSCDS continued to widen the UNISS partnerships and resource mobilization landscape. The office worked with United Nations entities to submit proposals to the Prevention Window funding of the Bank's Transitional Facility. Nine UNISS countries submitted project proposals for the 2023 window. Five United Nations and one of these Sahel projects were selected in Africa among 17 recommended for selection and one in the Sahel. OSCDS will continue to support the wider UN system to develop similar joint projects for the next round. Led by the Special Coordinator, OSCDS facilitated a number of outreach and fundraising efforts, including joint visits to donor countries.

Security

60. The United Nations system implemented several initiatives aimed at achieving peacebuilding, prevention and resolving conflicts. In October 2023, the United Nations Regional Youth, Peace, and Security Coordination Platform (YPS) in West Africa and the Sahel region was launched by UNOWAS, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNDP, composed of United Nations entities, government, and civil society. The multi-stakeholder platform aims to strengthen coordination, promote accountability, and ensure harmonization of United Nations entities' YPS interventions. In the same light, in October 2023, UNFPA supported by OSCDS, organized a training of trainers in Yaoundé, Cameroon, for the development of National Action plans on YPS for eleven countries from West Africa and the Sahel. In Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia and Mali, UNFPA led a comprehensive approach to countering radicalization and violent extremism.

61. In 2023, the peace and security pillar of UNISS continued to carry out efforts aimed ensuring the effectiveness of the judicial systems in the Sahel, in particular, to strengthen national, regional and cross-border institutional capacities for effective border management and tackle illicit trafficking, terrorism, and transnational organized crime.

Governance

62. Through initiatives highlighted below, the Governance pillar in 2023 has supported efforts aimed at promoting political stability and resolving conflicts in the Sahel using a range of tools/initiatives.

63. On strengthening cross-border and regional cooperation for stability and development, the United Nations through UNDP's stabilization programme in the cross-border areas of Lake Chad and Liptako Gourma have supported over 1.6 million people, of whom thus far over 500,000 have returned to their homes. The stabilization programmes in these regions are anchored in regional intergovernmental organizations, such as the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and Liptako Gourma Authority (LGA). Strategically, stabilization efforts have contributed to the implementation of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Lake Chad Basin, and to the development of a similar strategy for the Liptako-Gourma region. These flagship initiatives will continue to serve as the fundamental backbones of stabilization, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions in the two regions.

64. The United Nations system through the good offices of UNOWAS actively engaged with key stakeholders, including the ECOWAS Commission, Member States, transitional authorities, and key regional and international partners, to support efforts for stabilization in the region. Regarding the political crisis in Niger, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, and Head of UNOWAS, undertook several missions across the region and participated in the 64th Ordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government in Abuja, Nigeria and Extraordinary Summit on the situation in Niger and following the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS.

65. The Governance pillar provided key support in regional and cross-border integration by enhancing socio-economic empowerment activities, including trade. For example, UNECA supported the Sahelian countries to develop and implement the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) national strategies in collaboration with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), to implement 20 activities identified from their respective AfCFTA action plan. As a result, more than 1,000 representatives of governments and the private sector, including women and youth entrepreneurs, were trained and sensitized on AfCFTA protocols and provisions.

66. On strengthening civic space, efforts were made in Burkina Faso with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which led to the establishment in May 2023 of a National Consultation Framework on civic space comprised of key Ministries, as well as the national media regulator, the Police, the National

Human Rights Commission, CSOs, journalists, and bloggers. In Senegal, OHCHR organized two consultations with women and youth respectively, focusing on political participation, and violence against women and youth including in the run-up to the elections.

67. On women's and youth empowerment, the United Nations system conducted activities through UNESCO and IOM in Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, implementing a project on “Empowering young people in Africa through media”. The project aims to raise awareness about the migration-related risks faced by the population, especially young people, of key countries of origin. Likewise, the “Joint programme for the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women” by UNESCO, UNFPA and UN Women aimed at enhancing access to quality education for adolescent girls and young women in Mali. UNESCO, FAO, and IOM also implemented a project on “Supporting self-employment of rural youth, vector of peace and cohesion in Mali”, aimed at creating sustainable jobs and setting up a framework for inclusive dialogue for peace and social cohesion, targeting rural communities.

Resilience

68. On promoting social services and effective social protection systems, resilience programmes developed by WFP and UNICEF since 2018 continue to serve as catalysts for community resilience building of over 3.5 million people, including 2.7 million children across Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The programme’s second phase extends from 2023-2027. Partnerships with IFIs have also helped advance United Nations programmes to strengthen public health infrastructure (UNOPS in Chad, Mali and Niger); to promote adaptive social protection (UNICEF, WFP); and women’s and girls’ empowerment (UNFPA). IOM and FAO in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with funding support by the PBF, carried out activities aimed at promoting peaceful transhumance in the Liptako Gourma region.

69. The United Nations system invested in water for development with a focus on local communities. For example: (iii) the “One Million cisterns for the Sahel Initiative” by FAO; (ii) WASH programming by UNICEF for greater impact on health and nutrition; (iii) “Improved access to water resources in Mali” by UNESCO in collaboration with the government; and (iv) “Water access for livelihood, irrigation, and livestock” provided by WFP.

70. UN Women, FAO, WFP continued to provide support on climate-resilient agriculture implemented in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Thus, more than 30,000 women had access to skills, information, and technology to enhance climate resilience along different value chains. The programme strengthened the capacity of more than 200 women cooperatives and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and worked with local authorities to enhance women’s land rights. UNFPA made investments in creating community-based safe spaces for adolescent girls and young women across Sahel countries namely, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

71. In Mali, following MINUSMA withdrawal, the Mission’s Trust Fund was turned into a Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) to continue financing resilience-building activities in the country. However, as several traditional partners suspended their engagements in the country, its funding has stagnated.

Coordinated Framework in the Sahel

72. 2023 witnessed heightened coordination by United Nations entities around UNISS. The 15th UNISS Steering Committee held in Dakar, Senegal on 14 December 2023, provided an opportunity to reflect on the implications of the current geopolitical, socioeconomic, humanitarian, security, human rights, and climate situation in the Sahel and to assess overall implementation of UNISS. Some conclusions and recommendations included:

- a. acknowledging that the transformations of the Sahel are linked to global geopolitical tensions and long-standing governance and development grievances and the need for the United Nations to continue to support Sahel countries while being guided by its values and the Charter, asserting its neutrality and impartiality in the current geopolitical context and adopting a communications strategy clarifying its limitations and added value.
- b. examining governance in a holistic manner rather than through process-based approach and interventions.
- c. The meeting also stressed the importance of the persistent need of change of narrative and shift in perception on the Sahel, from that of a region in crisis to a region in transition.
- d. Emphasizing stronger regional integration and the free movement of people, goods, and services in the region.

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- e. advancing the development agenda in the Sahel in relation to climate, food systems transformation, peace and security issues and the link with sustainable development.
 - f. placing women, and youth at the centre of the United Nations' thinking and actions.
 - g. increasing funding through enlarging partnerships including new actors and promoting the Integrated National Financing Frameworks.
 - h. Strengthening UNISS implementation through (i) diplomacy; (ii) knowledge products on peace-security-governance challenges and (iii) the creation of an ad-hoc Advisory group made up of private sector, civil society, IFIs, young people, civil society, and the United Nations system.

C. Recommendations

73. The transformations of the Sahel are linked to global geopolitical tensions and long-standing governance and development challenges, hence the need for the United Nations to adopt a change of narrative and shift in perception of the Sahel, from a region in crisis to a region in transition in order to exploit available opportunities and forge new partnerships.

74. The United Nations will recalibrate its engagement which requires the enforcement of neutrality in understanding the sovereign choices of member States, while taking critical decisions based on its core principles and values, including the respect of human rights and support for democratic rule.

75. Continued support for sustainable development investments in the Sahel will be critical to address the needs and ensure the prosperity of its people. This includes advancing just energy transitions, access to water, transforming food systems and reshaping education. It also includes making investments that address economic and gender inequalities, lack of access to basic services, political instability, and the heightened impacts of climate change.