The Sahel

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Photo: OCHA/Brandau

CONVERGING CHALLENGES, COMPOUNDING RISKS

A REGION UNDER HIGH PRESSURE

In the Sahel, extreme poverty, fast-growing populations, climate change, recurrent food and nutrition crises, armed conflicts and insecurity are building up to a perfect storm threatening the lives of communities already living on the brink of crisis.

The region is one of the **world's climate change hotspots**. Increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, more frequent droughts and floods and land degradation threaten the livelihoods of a population in which the majority relies on agriculture for survival. Environmental shocks, insecurity, chronic hunger and malnutrition have a dangerously symbiotic relationship in the Sahel. A **spike in armed conflict and violence** worsens the Sahel's chronic hardship and has led to new peaks in displacement across the region. Lack of opportunities and unemployment, deteriorating security, economic and social inequality expose youths to risks of radicalization and recruitment. Many seek brighter prospects elsewhere, fueling the **global migration crisis.**

Faced with serious threats, Governments risk channeling more resources to address security challenges at the expense of social development. Past gains and future development prospects are at stake. If these challenges remain unaddressed, the prospects for the region are dire, and the most vulnerable communities will suffer the most.

150 million
people live in the Sahel region*

3 in 4
younger than 34 years old

4 in 5
relying on agriculture are particularly vulnerable to climate change

1 in 6
is food insecure

1 in 4
is living in areas affected by conflict

In this document, the Sahel comprises of Burkina Faso, Chad, The Gambia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, northern Cameroon and Nigeria, and Senegal

HOTSPOT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION HITS THE MOST VULNERABLE FIRST

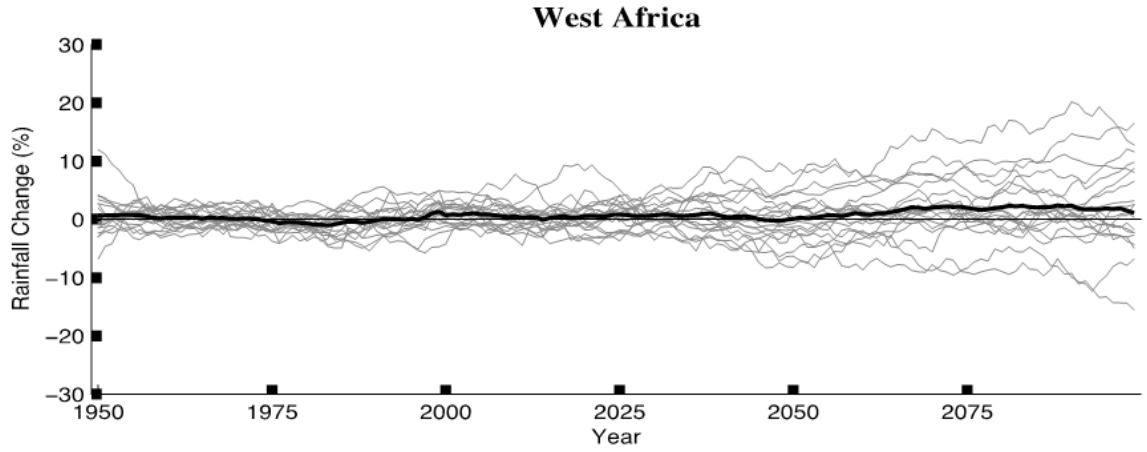
Although their region has contributed the least to global carbon emissions, Sahelians are paying a steep price for the consequences of human-induced climate change. Experts predict that West Africa and the Sahel are becoming a "hotspot" of climate change, with unprecedented climates not seen in the rest of the world. Analysing exposure to extreme events, vulnerabilities and adaptive capacity, experts identify Chad, Niger and Nigeria amongst countries at "extreme climate risk". All other Sahel countries will be facing a "high risk". Considering the fragility of its economies, reliance on natural resources, fast population growth and weak governance, the repeated exposure to extreme climate risks further deteriorating the region's existing vulnerabilities.

UNCERTAINTY IS THE NEW NORM

The impact of climate change is already being felt. Over the past decades, growing climate fluctuations and more frequent shocks have pushed Sahelians on the brink of humanitarian disasters. Over the past two decades, the start of the rainy season has become erratic, annual precipitation amounts variable, with longer drought periods. Extreme weather events such as floods are more frequent and severe. The regional climate trends observed over the last 40 years show that overall average temperatures have risen. The most recent severe drought, in 2012, was the third to hit the Sahel in less than a decade. With climate shocks coming at a higher rate, vulnerable households are increasingly less able to cope with crises and struggle to recover in time before they are hit again. Many have to adopt survival strategies, such as selling livestock, cutting down on meals or taking children out of school, which is making them more vulnerable over time. Today, vulnerability is such that millions of households require only a relatively small shock to fall into crisis.

GROWING NEEDS, SHRINKING RESOURCES

The population of the Sahel grows at a runaway rate of an average 3.5 per cent every year, doubling every three decades. Experts fear that available food resources will not be sufficient to sustain a growing population. Projections estimate that twice more cereals will need to be available to sustain the food needs of the population by 2050. Water for the region's agriculture –which 98 percent is rainfed- is getting scarcer.



A more unpredictable weather: Projections show that while average rainfall will remain fairly constant, current climate variability will be exacerbated, with alternating episodes of extreme droughts and rains.

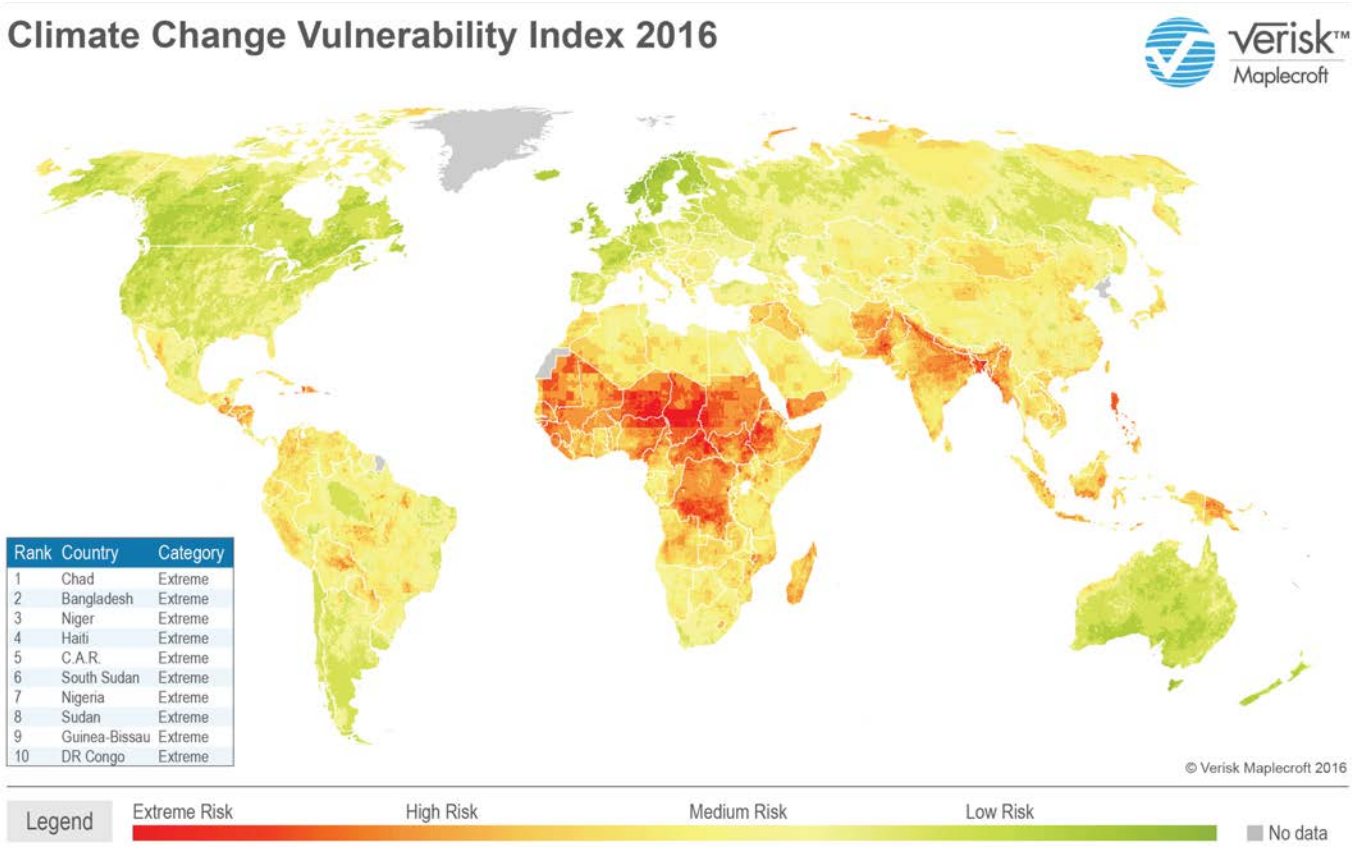
© "A global perspective on African climate" in Climatic Change

300 million
people expected to live in the Sahel by 2045.

3°C - 6°C
Projected increase in temperatures in the Sahel by the end of the 21st century (IPPC report V)

7
droughts in Niger over the last 23 years

20%
expected average loss of production for main cereals crops by 2050



Water availability per inhabitant has dropped by over 40 per cent in the past 20 years due to population growth and decreasing resources.

A LAKE DISAPPEARS

The shrinking of Lake Chad is one of the most striking examples of environmental degradation in the Sahel region. Previously straddling the borders of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, over the last fifty years the lake has shrunk to a small proportion of its original size. The dramatic reduction of its surface, equally attributed to shifting climatic patterns with less rainfall and to high demands for agricultural water, has contributed to crop failures, livestock deaths, collapsed fisheries, soil salinity, and increasing poverty throughout the region. Communities that were previously living on the shores of the lake have seen their livelihoods destroyed. Many head to neighbouring countries or further afield in search of opportunities that the Lake Chad region can no longer provide.

EXACERBATING EXISTING VULNERABILITIES

If not addressed, climate change effects across the region will continue to threaten the food security, health and nutritional status of millions, particularly the vast majority who depend on agriculture and farming for their livelihoods. Experts predict that a temperature increase of 1,2 to 1,9 degree Celsius (°C) - which is below projections for the region - will be enough to increase by 95 per cent the number of malnourished people in West Africa by 2050. Some studies have shown that a 3 per cent temperature increase will lead to a 15 to 25 per cent decrease of food production. According to experts, if the trends do not change, Africa will be able to meet only 13 per cent of its food needs by 2050. Increased temperatures, rainfall and flooding also risk to increase the incidence of water-borne diseases such as cholera.

6 million
people face severe food insecurity

1 in 5
children under five year is malnourished

"When the rains start, hope returns. But it doesn't rain as it used to. The last season hit us really hard. The rains simply stopped. All is gone again."

Musa
Sahel, Burkina Faso

CONFLICTS, CRIME AND CONTRABAND

SECURITY CHALLENGES THREATEN THE REGIONAL STABILITY

Increasing violence, conflict and insecurity over the past two years have driven millions of people from their homes across the Sahel and devastated livelihoods.

POPULATION DISPLACEMENT

Throughout the region, as many as 4.5 million people now live in displacement. This is almost three times more than in 2012. Over a short period of time, turmoil in Libya, profound instability in northern Mali, and the escalation of violence by Boko Haram have had a devastating impact. Increasingly interlinked, they are deeply affecting thousands of communities and families that already counted among the world's poorest.

STRETCHED RESOURCES

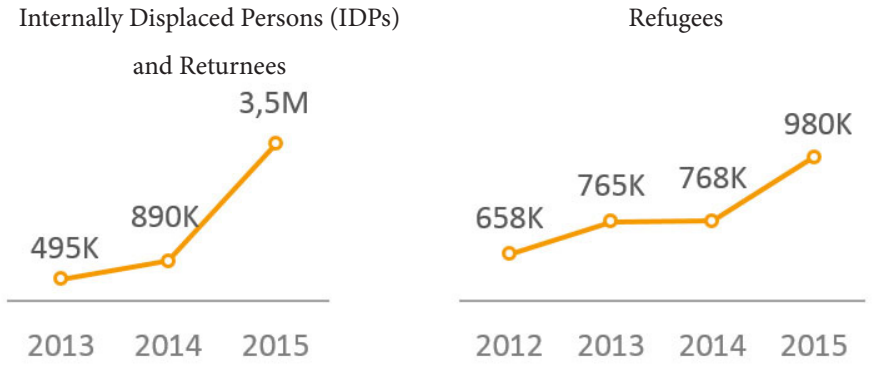
Large-scale displacement has exacerbated an already fragile humanitarian situation. Both the displaced and their hosts are at ever greater risk. Around the Lake Chad Basin in particular, food insecurity has dramatically spiked. Acute malnutrition is also on the rise, surpassing the emergency threshold in many areas. Essential services, health facilities and schools have been decimated. Violence and border closures prevent farmers from accessing their lands and impede crucial trade and transhumance routes, all undermining the livelihoods of communities that are still recovering from a decade of periodic droughts.

The story of Diffa –the poorest region of the poorest country in the world- tells, in a nutshell, that of displacements patterns in the Lake Chad region. One in every five people in Diffa was not there some months ago and has now fled from the raging violence. The provincial capital has become a safe haven for many. But its capacity to cope with the arrival is stretched to the limits. Humanitarian indicators were already in the red zone prior to recent waves of displacement. Almost three quarters of Diffa's population were food insecure. One health clinic provided services for 12,000 people. These meagre resources are now shared with another 150,000 of their exhausted and traumatized fellow human beings.

CROSSROAD FOR COMMERCE AND CRIME

Wedged between sub-Sahara and North Africa, the Sahel is a vast thoroughfare across the continent that also connects to Europe and the Middle East. Extensive, impoverished and sparsely populated in vast areas, it has increasingly been exploited by criminal and trafficking networks. Ancestral trade and migration routes between the Sahel and Sahara communities are now often being used for smuggling drugs, migrants or illicit products filling the space left by conflict, weak governance and lack of cross-border cooperation. Criminal activities come with huge profits and have reached a level that poses a threat to governance and social stability locally and beyond.

DISPLACEMENTS TREND IN THE SAHEL (2012 - 2015)

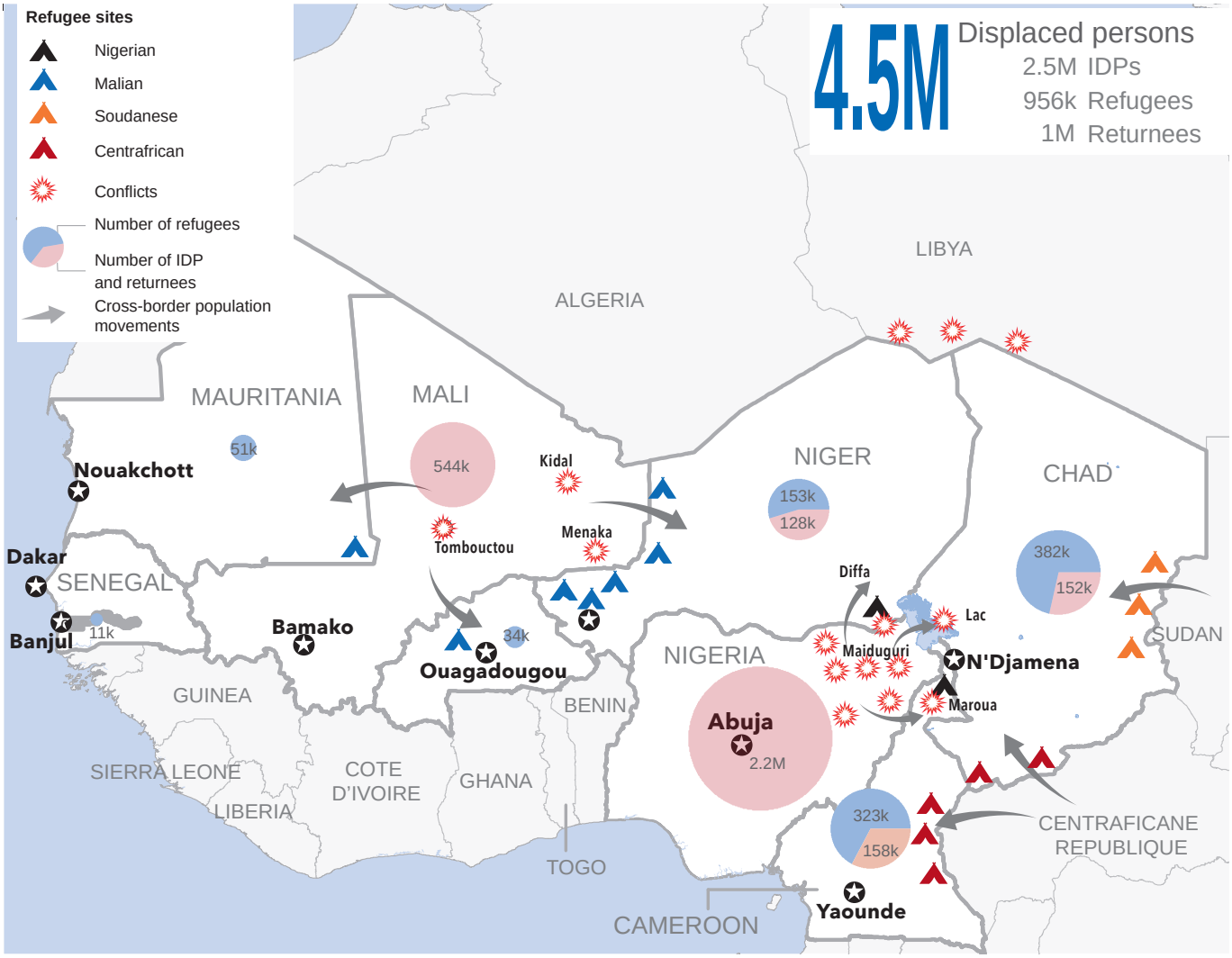


$3.8 billion
estimated yearly profit generated by arms, drugs and human trafficking in the Sahel

30%
drop in foreign investment in Nigeria since 2010, following the surge in violence and insecurity

1.5 years
average length of school enrolment for children in Chad

60%
of victims of human trafficking detected in the region are children



INSTABILITY AND YOUTH RADICALIZATION

The Sahel faces numerous political and socio-economic challenges. With 60 per cent of its population under 25 years lack of education, unemployment, poverty and exclusion make fertile ground for disenfranchisement, grievance and radicalization. Many risk their lives crossing the desert and sea to Europe. Frustration due to lack of life opportunities and the perception of neglect can draw youths into extremist groups. In Nigeria, 10.5 million children are now out of school, 70 per cent of whom living in the poorest and violence-hit northern regions.

In many instances, radical groups fill an existing vacuum and proposing alternatives to the classic governance and security model, including provision of essential services, and sometimes succeed in doing so.

STAY AND DELIVER

Amid the increasing presence of armed groups and ongoing conflicts, the preservation of humanitarian space remains a top priority for aid organizations. Across conflict-hit areas, they have scaled up operations and logistics to deliver assistance to people in hard-to-reach or insecure areas, where needs are the most acute. In north-east Nigeria and in Mali, over 60 and 90 aid organizations respectively are delivering critical assistance to communities affected by violence. In areas around the Lake Chad Basin, north-east Mauritania or northern Mali where safe road access is difficult, humanitarian air bridges provide a lifeline enabling timely assistance to millions in need.

155
aid workers attacked between 2001 – 2015

1.4 million
children displaced by brutal violence in the Lake Chad region

"I didn't leave for fear of the insurgents. I left to protect my sons from being recruited into Boko Haram."
Asasbe
Kaduna, Nigeria

AFRICA'S MIGRATION HUB

DEPARTURE POINT AND CORRIDOR OF DANGEROUS MIGRATION ROUTES

The Sahel has been characterized by a long history of migration. Most movements continue to take place within West Africa, and the presence of migrants has been tolerated for years as a vital component of the intraregional economy. Today, the region is also part of mass migration and human trafficking towards Europe, increasingly fuelled by the impact of demographic pressure, environmental degradation, poverty and conflict.

THE WAY TO EUROPE

The Sahel is both the departure point and a key corridor in the migration routes to Europe. The proportion of West African migrants to Europe has steadily increased over the last four years, with Sahelian migrants mostly originating from the Gambia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. On the so-called 'backway' to Europe, almost all other West and Central African migrants also pass through the Sahel to cross the desert into Libya and Algeria. With some 120,000 people expected to transit through Niger in 2015 alone, migration also has become an important economic driver. Smuggling networks are making hundreds of millions of dollars every year, and diaspora remittances are a significant pillar of economies throughout the region.

COMPOUNDING FACTORS

With its fast-growing, young and increasingly urban population, the Sahel is undergoing rapid demographic change. The lack of opportunities for young people - low wages, lack of employment, limited education - is a powerful driver of migration. Droughts, flooding and land degradation have further increased competition over resources and contribute to movements inside and outside the region. Recent conflicts in Mali and the Lake Chad basin have triggered massive population displacements and destroyed the scarce livelihoods of millions.

MIGRANTS ARRIVING IN EUROPE FROM SAHEL COUNTRIES (2009-2014)

Source: Frontex

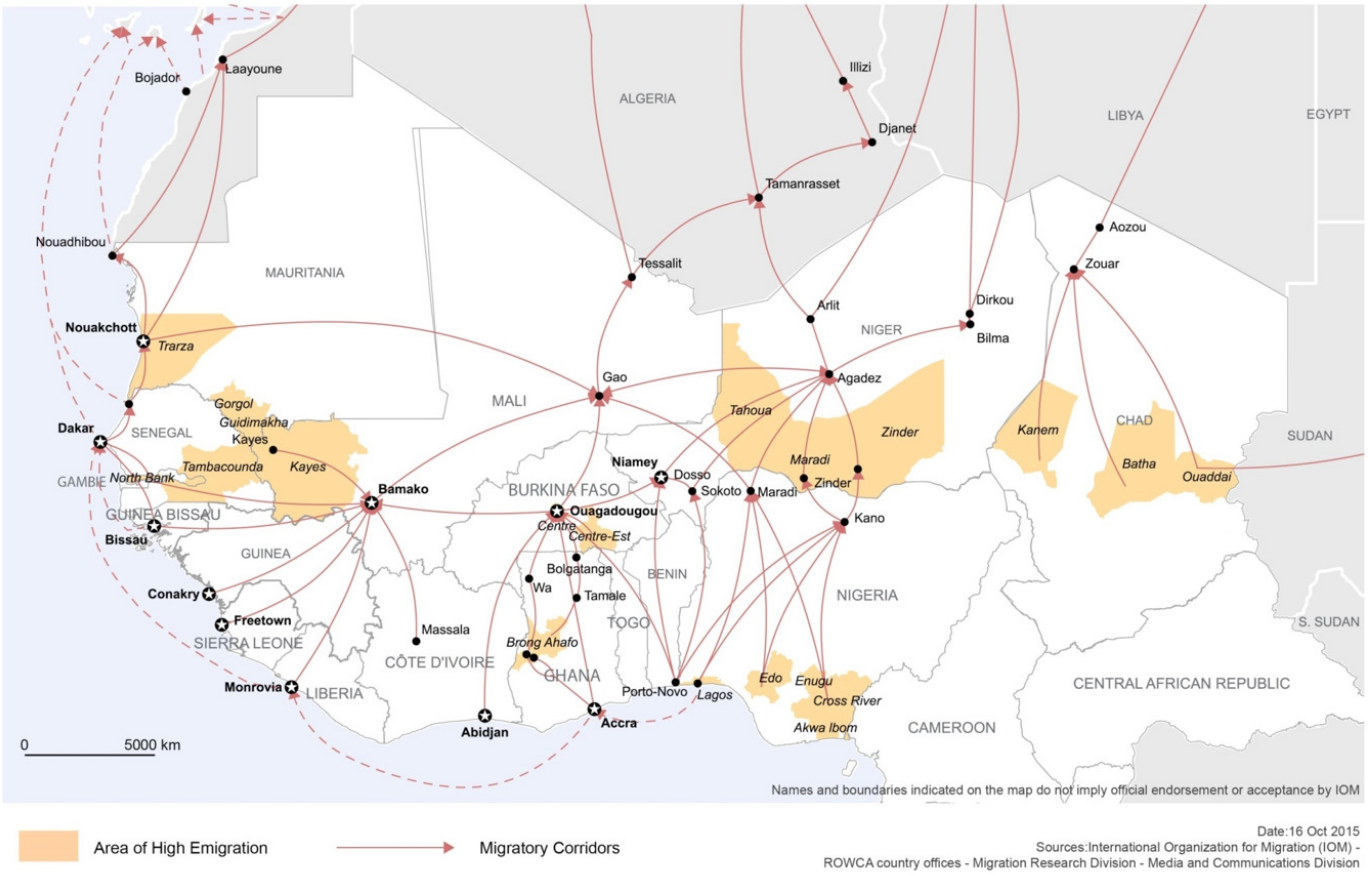
75%
of the Sahel's population are younger than 35 years old

up to 4,000
migrants pass through Agadez every week

2,800
migrants died on the Central Mediterranean route in 2015, half of them from West Africa

$150 million
migrant smugglers' estimated yearly profit on the West Africa - Europe axis

West and Central Africa
Areas of High Emigration and Migratory Corridors



MIXED MIGRATION

Migrants and refugees increasingly make use of the same routes and means of transportation to get to a destination. Many migrants from the Sahel are young men looking to improve their living conditions, whereas refugees include highly vulnerable single women who are particularly exposed to exploitation, and unaccompanied children at risk of abuse, exploitation or trafficking. It is estimated that 60 per cent of the human trafficking victims detected in the region are children.

The Central Mediterranean route used by these mixed migration flows from the Sahel also is the most dangerous. In 2015, over 2,800 people lost their lives, more than half of them from West Africa. The desert often proves to be as deadly as the sea.

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Irregular migration also is increasingly perceived by Governments as a security threat. Several countries in the region are gathering migrants and deporting those who are found undocumented. Migrants sent back from North African countries often find themselves without assistance or means to return to their countries of origin. Migrants, and particularly the most vulnerable categories, need to receive protection and emergency humanitarian assistance, which includes food, medical services, psychosocial support, family tracing, legal counselling and counter-trafficking.

1 in 4
migrants from Nigeria is a woman or a child

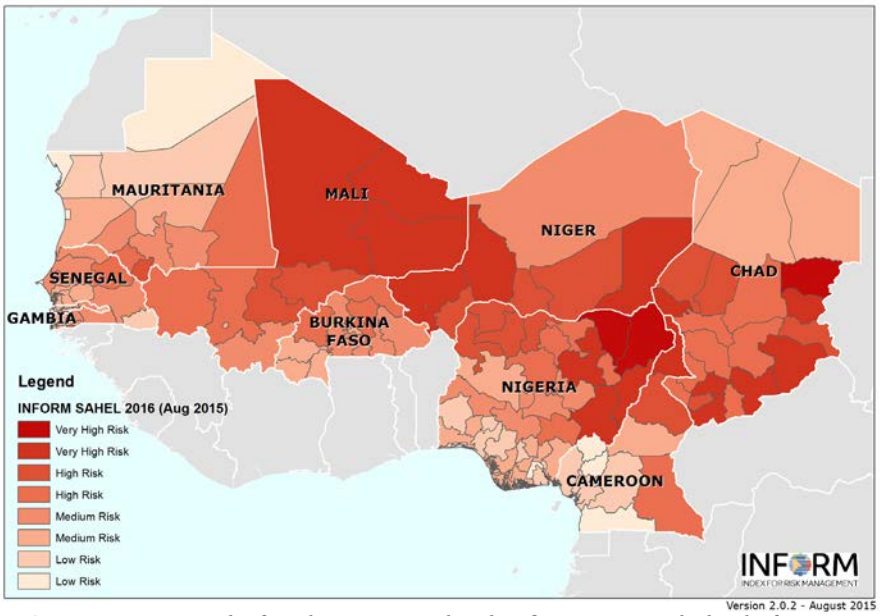
$24 billion
of remittances to Sahel countries in 2013

"Harvests are worse every year. Our fields near Lake Chad are unsafe. What else to gain a living? Look elsewhere. The young men are leaving."
Achta
Kanem region, Chad

MOUNTING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

More acute threats and risks arising from an increasingly hostile environment have made communities more vulnerable today than twenty years ago. In 2016, the Sahel countries count amongst the world's most at risk of crises and disasters.

Some 24 million people are expected to fqce food insecurity in 2016, about a fourth of whom will require food assistance at the peak of the lean season. Malnutrition rates are reaching emergency levels in many communities throughout the region, often rapidly increasing in conflict-affected areas. Chronic poverty, lack of access to basic services, and the absence of social safety nets make communities extremely vulnerable to disease and epidemics. Natural disasters such as droughts, floods and animal pests continue to exhaust the resources of millions.



INFORM is a composite index for risk management that identifies countries at a high risk of humanitarian crisis which are more likely to require international assistance.

As violence spirals in the Lake Chad Basin and protracts in northern Mali, millions are increasingly dependent on the generosity of their vulnerable neighbours and humanitarian assistance.

NEW PARTNERSHIPS NEEDED TO CURB THE TREND OF GROWING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

These increasing humanitarian needs are affecting the most vulnerable families. Furthermore, they are the most visible symptom of the Sahel's triple crisis - humanitarian, governance and security - which is eroding its population's legendary resilience.

Simultaneously facing multiple challenges, humanitarian teams continue to save lives as a first priority and are trying to help communities to bounce back faster. Year after year, humanitarian action makes the difference between life and death for millions.

But humanitarian action can only buy time for permanent solutions to be found and deals to be brokered. The region's poorest families must be at the heart of coordinated and sustained action from Governments, humanitarian and development actors to break the cycle of crises and instability in the Sahel.

Efforts undergone by the region's Governments and the international community to attack its drivers are encouragingly on the increase. But the sheer scale of the crisis, its complexity and potential for further deterioration call for a new sense of urgency.

23.5 million
people expected to be food insecure in 2016

1.9 million
children under five years are severely acutely malnourished (SAM)

4 million
children under five years are moderately acutely malnourished (MAM)

4.5 million
people are displaced by conflict

110
aid organisations are responding to emergency needs accross 9 countries

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