CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE WEST AFRICAN SAHEL AS A PREREQUISITE FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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Origin

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ABSTRACT

The West African Sahel is grappling with interconnected crises of terrorism and violent extremism, climate and environmental challenges, governance fragmentation, and socio-economic marginalization, among other things. Armed groups exploit porous borders and weak state presence in remote areas to their advantage. These challenges exacerbate insecurity and instability in border areas, threatening regional peace and heightening the risk of spillover into coastal States. This is the context within which the Austrian Forum for Peace in July 2025 convened a diverse group of stakeholders, including regional security specialists, representatives from state institutions, civil society actors and international partners, in a two-day expert workshop to explore the critical need for cross-border cooperation in the West African Sahel. This policy brief discusses key security threats in the region, the current state of cross-border security frameworks, and lessons from other regional cooperation initiatives. It then presents key insights and highlights actionable recommendations from the workshop. Overall, this brief argues that the path forward requires moving from isolated interventions to integrated, multi-stakeholder strategies that build on community resilience and grassroots owner-ship while fostering regional solidarity. The recommendations converge on a central principle that strengthening cooperation is indispensable.

INTRODUCTION

The West African Sahel region has become a hotspot for complex security and governance challenges, with groups like Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) reshaping the security landscape[1]. As these security threats, coupled with irregular migration and adverse effects of climate change intensify, regional and international actors increasingly recognize the need for coordinated cross-border responses to pave the way for sustainable peace and development.

However, regional cross-border cooperation itself has faced several challenges, including the fragmentation of the regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with the formation of the Alliance for Sahel States (AES) by Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali[2]; and the withdrawal of certain key international mechanisms, such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European Union Military Partnership Mission (EUMPM) in Niger.

In addition, the multiplicity of international actors within national and regional borders poses its own obstacles in the absence of coordination and co-operation.

Moreover, emerging alliances with new actors such as Russia and China raise questions about their implications for regional cooperation, peace, and stability.

These shifts, among other factors, have deepened regional divisions and further complicated regional cooperation efforts.

For more than ten years, the Austrian government has contributed to humanitarian action, peace, and development in the region through its Capacity Building for Humanitarian Assistance in West Africa (HAWA) programme – a programme led by the Austrian Centre for Peace (ACP) in cooperation with the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). However, despite this and other initiatives by international partners and ECOWAS, significant gaps remain in the cross-border governance and security cooperation needed for sustainable peace and stability. Several frameworks have been established to improve cross-border cooperation, including, inter alia, the ECOWAS Cross-Border Cooperation Programme (CBCP)[3], the Accra Initiative, and the G5 Sahel Joint

1 Nsaibia, H. (2025, March 27). New frontlines: Jihadist expansion is reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria borderlands. Retrieved on 26 August 2025 from https://acleddata.com/report/new-frontlines-jihadist-expansion-reshaping-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands.

2 Dzirutwe, M., & Adetayo, O., (2025). Jihadist violence and coups test West Africa ECOWAS bloc at 50. Edited by Felix, B. & Maclean, W. Retrieved on 26 August 2025 from Reuters: https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/jihadist-violence-coups-test-west-africa-ecowas-bloc-50-2025-05-28/.

3 Implementation of ECOWAS cross-border cooperation programme: Member States' focal points hold discussions on free movement and regional funding mechanism. Retrieved on 26 August 2025 from https://ecoroadsgroup.com/implementation-of-ecowas-cross-border-cooperation-programme-member-states-focal-points-hold-discussions-on-free-movement-and-regional-funding-mechanism/#:~:text=Recall%20that%20the%20ECOWAS%20cross,of%20fifteen%20ECOWAS%20Member%20States.

Force[4]. While these mechanisms play a crucial role, their effectiveness is fraught with many challenges.

The escalating insecurity and humanitarian needs in the West African Sahel have evolved into a transboundary challenge with widespread spillover effects. Strengthening cross-border co-operation is now more vital than ever to promote peace and foster development.

This workshop convened key stake-holders from across different sectors, including experts in regional organization frameworks, civil society organisations, academia und policy experts, inter-national development partners as well as representatives of regional initiatives. The objectives were to facilitate regional dialogue, assess the effectiveness of existing frameworks in promoting cross-border cooperation, identify relevant lessons learned from existing initiatives in other regions, and formulate policy recommendations for strengthening regional cooperation to promote sustainable peace and security. Using panel discussions, interactive group activities, individual presentations and roundtable sessions, the workshop aimed to develop recommendations to enhance cross-border collaboration in the West African Sahel region.

4 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (2023). PSCC Talk: „African Sub-regional Counter-Terrorism Cooperation and Initiatives: A Cross-Examination of the Accra Initiative, the G5 Sahel and the Multi-national Joint Task Force (MNJTF)" Retrieved on 26 August 2025 from https://pscc.fes.de/e/pscc-talk-african-sub-regional-counter-terrorism-cooperation-and-initiatives-a-cross-examination-of-the-accra-initiative-the-g5-sahel-and-the-multinational-joint-task-force-mnjtf.html?utm.

SECURITY THREATS AND CROSS-BORDER CHALLENGES IN THE SAHEL

The following key factors were identified as major cross-border threats to peace and security in the Sahel.

1. **Porous borders and weak state presence:** Armed groups operate across porous borders, using established trafficking routes, while taking advantage of weak state institutions and fragmented state presence.

2. **Eroding state legitimacy:** In many cases, local populations in border areas express greater confidence in non-state actors than in their central governments, due to unmet basic needs engendering a longstanding lack of trust.

3. **Economic incentives and youth recruitment:** Economic incentives play a significant role in radicalization[5]. Youth recruitment into these armed movements is driven by a combination of poverty, corruption and religious manipulation.

4. **Climate and environmental pressures:** Recurrent droughts, advancing desertification, and erratic weather patterns, as forms of environmental stress, have heightened tensions over natural resources, especially in border-region agricultural and pastoral communities, fuelling inter-community conflicts and dis-placement.

5. **Geopolitical rivalries:** The Sahel has become an arena for geo-strategic rivalry between Russia, China, Turkey and Western powers, creating risks of proxy confrontations, deepening instability and undermining national sovereignty.

5 In Mali for example, young shepherds are offered up to 100,000 CFA to join jihadist groups

KEY CHALLENGES TO CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Several regional cross-border initiatives and frameworks govern the region. These include: the Accra Initiative, designed to counter terrorism spillover from the Sahel to coastal States and combat cross-border organized crime; the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Joint Force, focused on fighting terrorism; the Joint Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC), intended for counterterrorism and cross-border crime efforts; the Dakar+10 Irrigation Initiative, focused on climate resilience; the African Union Niamey Convention (2014) on cross-border cooperation; and the G5 Sahel. The implementation of these frameworks faces several challenges including the following:

1. **Regional fragmentation:** Deepening political divisions within ECOWAS, including the founding of the AES, undermine cross-border cooperation on security and development, strain collective responses to shared challenges, and hinder progress toward sustainable regional integration and peace.

2. **Overlapping mandates of regional initiatives:** Multiple regional initiatives often have overlapping mandates in counterterrorism, response to violent extremism and humanitarian needs. As countries frequently belong to several initiatives simultaneously, they are required to commit financial and security resources to multiple operations, straining already limited national capacities and reducing overall effectiveness.

3. **Competing stakeholder agendas and coordination challenges:** Rivalry among investors seeking influence, the retreat of classical aid actors like USAID, and top-down decision-making that prioritizes political considerations over effective delivery together fragment donor efforts and undermine the coherence and impact of international support.

4. **Unrecognized role of local actors in cross-border peacebuilding:** Local community efforts - particularly those led by civil society, youth, and women - are often overlooked in regional and national dialogue as well as decision-making processes, despite their critical role in sustaining peace and fostering resilience in conflict-affected areas. Women-led microcredit schemes for displaced populations and mediation in farming–herding disputes, for instance, demonstrate how these groups act as vital bridges between formal institutions and local communities in cross-border contexts.

LESSONS FROM OTHER REGIONAL COOPERATION FRAMEWORKS

During the workshop, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin[6] was recognised as a prime example of a regional collaboration initiative that can be replicated. This framework demonstrates how a shared

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6 The Lake Chad Basin, which is shared by Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, has long been subject to environmental degradation, violent conflict and humanitarian crises. In response, regional and international organisations have launched various security, environmental and socio-economic initiatives. One notable example is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which is a prime example of effective cross-border cooperation.

Originally established in 1994 and reactivated in 2015 to counter Boko Haram and other extremist groups, the MNJTF comprises troops from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin. Supported by the African Union and the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the MNJTF has conducted joint military operations that have reclaimed territory, improved security, and facilitated the return of displaced persons.

threat can bring states together despite their complex political histories. Its practices - such as joint planning, intelligence sharing, and pooled resources - improve coordination and operational sustainability. Regional ownership, combined with inclusive engagement of civil society, women, and youth, strengthens legitimacy and cohesion, while civil–military cooperation and locally informed planning help build trust among local stakeholders and support stabilization efforts. However, further research and analysis will be required in order to be able to transfer this model, or elements thereof, meaningfully to other parts of the Sahel, whilst learning from existing weaknesses and gaps.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Pillar 1: Security and Governance

Objective: moving beyond military approaches by restoring interstate trust, decentralizing security management, and integrating local actors into early warning systems.

- **Conduct comprehensive mapping of cross-border hotspots:** Undertake detailed and comprehensive analysis of conflict and organized crime hotspots to enable evidence-based, targeted interventions.

- **Strengthen local police and security personnel:** Redeploy and build the capacity of police and security personnel in border regions, facilitating joint patrols and intelligence sharing with neighbouring countries.

- **Empower traditional authorities:** Legally recognize and formally engage customary leaders in cross-border conflict resolution and early warning systems to leverage their local legitimacy and cultural knowledg.

- **Decentralize decision-making:** Empower local authorities and community structures in border regions to ensure governance is responsive, inclusive, and context-specific.

- **Strengthen stakeholder capacities:** Provide continuous training for traditional leaders, and local government representatives. Establish regular dialogue platforms to build trust and improve coordination.

Pillar 2: Economic and Social Co-operation

Objective: To foster cross-border community resilience and socio-economic development through collaborative action on shared environmental and resource challenges.

- **Leverage climate change and nature-based solutions as a catalyst for collaboration:** Develop joint cross-border programs for climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable management of scarce natural resources (e.g., water, pastures).

- **Regulate small-scale mining in border areas:** Introduce harmonized regulatory frameworks to formalize artisanal mining, reduce environmental degradation, and prevent conflict over resources.

- **Invest in social infrastructure through joint initiatives:** Prioritize the rehabilitation of schools, health centres, and water systems in border regions. This can be done through participatory planning and joint committees involving communities from both sides of the border, ensuring that infrastructure meets shared needs and builds lasting local partnerships for resilience and development.

Pillar 3: Community Engagement and Grassroots Solutions

Objective: Re-centre peacebuilding on community practices by valuing local knowledge, treating peace as a social process, and prioritizing youth inclusion and women's empowerment as stabilizing factors.

- **Enhance community resilience through capacity building:** Implement targeted programs for women and youth to improve socio-economic opportunities and reduce vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups.

- **Foster inclusive participation:** Actively engage border communities in the design, planning, and implementation of all policies and programs affecting them.

- **Promote social cohesion through dialogue:** Support community-based dialogue platforms to foster peaceful co-existence and enable the safe return and reintegration of displaced persons.

CORE PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

For these recommendations to succeed, they must be guided by several core principles:

- **Local Ownership:** Ensure policies are co-created with border communities - especially women, youth, and traditional leaders – whose agency is essential to legitimacy and sustainability.

- **Integrated Approach:** Address security, humanitarian needs, development and environmental sustainability in tandem to avoid siloed interventions.

- **Policy Coherence:** Harmonize mandates of regional initiatives to fill gaps, avoid duplication and maximize scarce human and financial resources.

- **Regional Solidarity:** Foster mechanisms for dialogue and joint action between ECOWAS and AES around shared security and economic interests, despite political divisions.

- **Sustainable Funding:** Reduce reliance on donor cycles by developing and/or advancing regional financing mechanisms, including tapping into non-traditional funding, e.g. from the private sector.

- **Conflict Sensitivity:** Embed conflict analysis, early warning systems and culturally rooted conflict resolution mechanisms in all interventions.

CALL TO ACTION

The challenges facing the West African Sahel are too vast for any single state or actor to tackle alone. Thus, strengthened cooperation offers a pathway to greater stability, resilience, and prosperity. This brief outlines a roadmap for transforming border regions into spaces of collaboration and shared opportunity.

Regional bodies (ECOWAS, AES, and AU), national governments, international donors, and civil society must commit to:

1. Harmonize Efforts

Align mandates and resources of existing initiatives to prevent duplication, reduce competition, negotiate complementary mandates, thereby maximising impact.

2. Champion Inclusivity

Recognise women, youth, and civil society not merely as beneficiaries but as essential agents in humanitarian, development, and peace processes.

3. Reengage in Dialogue

Revitalize high-level political dialogue to bridge the ECOWAS-AES divide and restore regional unity.

4. Prioritize Funding

Invest in locally led, multi-year initiatives that integrate security, development, and governance.

CONCLUSION

The West African Sahel Workshop at the Austrian Forum for Peace emphasised that cross-border cooperation is not merely an option but a necessity. In the Sahel, where states and communities face overlapping crises of institutional fragmentation, violent extremism, and climate pressures, collaborative action is the only viable path forward.

The synthesis of policy recommendations from the discussions revealed that even under these difficult conditions, inclusive dialogue can bridge divides. However, to be effective, co-operation must be locally driven, multi-dimensional and integrated; connecting peace, development and governance into a unified strategy. Only through inclusive, adaptive and regionally coordinated efforts can borderlands transform from crisis zones into spaces of resilience and shared prosperity. In contrast, fragmented, top-down or isolated approaches risk deepening instability and leaving communities to confront threats in isolation.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in the West African Sahel is possible. However, this will only be achieved if border regions are transformed from fault lines of instability into engines of human security and resilience. This requires an unwavering commitment to collaborative, inclusive, and sustained cross-border co-operation.

About the authors

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