



Caritas position for the Ministerial Roundtable for the Central Sahel

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Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 162 national Caritas humanitarian, social and development service organisations rooted in the Catholic social teaching and guided by humanitarian principles.

Context

Strengthened by their presence in the territory and their proximity to local communities in the Central Sahel region, our local members, Caritas Niger, Caritas Burkina Faso and Caritas Mali are on the front line in responding to the serious and deteriorating humanitarian and protection crisis affecting the region. Inter and intra-community violence is increasing, and human rights violations perpetrated by various actors against civilians are multiplying, leading to forced displacement.

Faced with the complexity and challenges of this protracted protection crisis, we have identified **five priorities with recommendations** for the Ministerial Round Table to address and which should guide the response to the crisis in the Central Sahel region, while being part of the new EU-Africa Global Partnership Strategy to be adopted in 2021.

1. Promote multi-dimensional and longer-term approaches to development, humanitarian and peace efforts to address the root causes of the crisis in the Central Sahel region

It is not enough to treat the symptoms of the crisis, governments need to understand and address the root causes in order to identify and act on appropriate solutions and restore social cohesion. The crisis in Central Sahel is rooted in issues of governance, the unequal distribution of wealth, lack of equitable access to resources, education and life opportunities by the poor, which in turn pushes many young people to join armed groups to escape poverty and injustice. Whilst all parts of society are impacted, the consequences for women and youth are particularly dire. Across the Sahel region, governments have also struggled to find effective responses to the nexus between challenges of insecurity, climate change and environmental degradation, which contribute to persistent food insecurity, cyclical flooding and drought. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated efforts to respond. If these complex root causes of the crisis are not addressed, people will remain vulnerable and increased forced displacement will be the inevitable consequence.

We therefore recommend that policy-makers take urgent action and find lasting political solutions to address poverty and inequality, failures of development and weak governance, corruption, arms sales, inter- and intra-community violence and attacks by armed groups and terrorist organisations.

2. Promote the role of national and local civil society organisations, and community-based approaches, to addressing protection, social cohesion, conflict prevention and peacebuilding

The protection of populations and human security must be ensured by adopting a human rights-based approach, while strengthening resilience of populations through early warning systems, providing safe access to basic services such as health, education, drinking water, food, shelter and enabling humanitarian actors to reach the most affected people.

To address protection, political solutions to the challenges of violence and contested governance must be found rooted in efforts on social cohesion, reconciliation and the restoration of good and accountable local governance. Particular attention should be given by policy makers and donors to promoting support for local peace mechanisms and initiatives that exist at the local level, but which lack sufficient support. Support should be given to the role of traditional leaders at the local level, including religious leaders, women and youth to participate in conflict prevention and mediation. Increased support for building trust, reconciliation and social cohesion through intercultural and inter-religious dialogue is also needed. Donors should further support inter-religious programmes, at all levels of society, in which Christian, Muslim and all other religious actors work together in unity to promote peace and social cohesion in their communities.

3. Strengthen support to the protection of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons

The protection of these vulnerable categories is especially important; in particular in hard-to-reach areas of the Central Sahel that few humanitarian actors have access to and a presence in. In particular internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often located outside of camps and deprived of rights and access to basic social services.

We recommend that policymakers and donors support actions aimed at:

(a) Ensuring the protection of vulnerable persons, in particular unaccompanied or separated minors and women, by granting "refugee status" to asylum-seekers and increased support to efforts on assisting and protecting IDPs. This would include support for actions to maintain family unity during displacement and family reunification, strengthening protection against human trafficking, the registration of stateless children pursuant to the Abidjan Declaration, and promoting the integration of IDPs with host communities;

(b) Promoting support and training for refugees and IDPs to act as community leaders to defend their rights and take part in decision-making that affects their lives. Linked to this, training and awareness-raising should also be promoted in host communities to ease tensions and promote social cohesion and coexistence with refugees and IDPs when voluntary and informed return is not possible.

4. Strengthen coordination between NGOs and the State and ensure benefits of multi-year flexible funding reach national and local civil society

Caritas national organisations in the Sahel have a good experience of working with across the "triple nexus" of emergency, development, peace and social cohesion programming. To enable their work in this integrated fashion, there is a need for donor funding to ensure that a greater share of flexible, multi-year funding reaches their work and that of other national and local civil society organisations. Efforts to strengthen coordination between humanitarian, development and peace actors also need to factor in engagement with national and local NGOs in a more effective fashion; in particular national and local civil society actors like faith-based organisations that are often 'off the radar' for mainstream humanitarian and development actors. Local organisations and the affected communities should be involved in contributing to early warning systems, needs assessments and the monitoring and evaluation of emergency, peacebuilding and development programmes. All of this requires increased flexible and multi-year support to those organisations best placed to facilitate such engagement.

5. Promote international solidarity and cooperation that invests in internal development capacity, equitable multi-stakeholder partnerships and in rebuilding trust and confidence between national governments, local governments and rural communities.

We encourage policy makers to strengthen inter-regional cooperation programmes, especially through a new framework for a EU-Africa partnership, which promotes a people-centred approach to peace, sustainable development, human security and the eradication of extreme poverty in line with the vision of Agenda 2063.