HUMANITARIAN ACCESS IN CENTRAL SAHEL:
SCENARIOS

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Possible developments in humanitarian access in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger during 2021
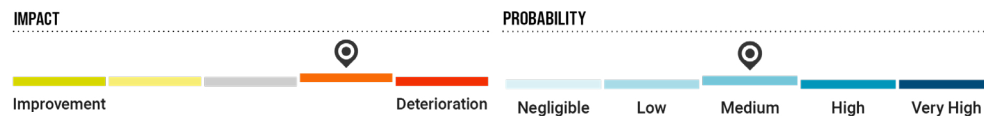
Scenario 1
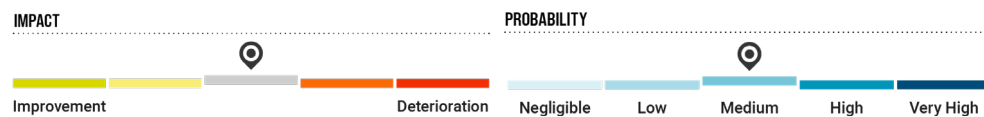
State governance remains weak. The intensifying of conflicts and local floods restrict humanitarian access.

IMPACT

Improvement — Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible — Low — Medium — High — Very High

No effort has been made to improve land management, access to and use of resources. Basic social services and infrastructure are still lacking in a large part of the territories. Electoral processes are not always transparent, and authorities have limited support from the population. Safety decreases considerably as non-state armed groups (GANE) and national defence and security actors increase attacks to control territories and their resources. International security forces are also increasing their operations. When above-average amounts of rainfall are recorded in some areas, they are short-lived but more violent, causing localised flooding. This has an impact on seasonal migration routes and harvests and creates tensions between livestock farmers and agricultural farmers. Humanitarian access is becoming more limited because of the political and safety situation.
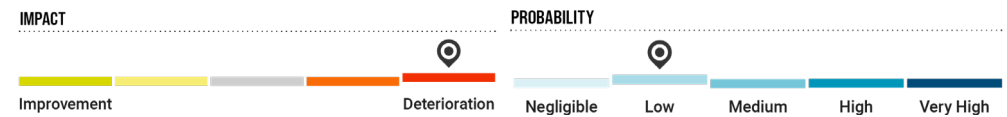
Scenario 2

The conflict is stalling and central state governance is crumbling as the influence of local actors increases. Humanitarian access is decreasing despite improving climate conditions.

IMPACT

Improvement — Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible — Low — Medium — High — Very High

The central governments are weakened and public confidence in them has further eroded. Local militia groups are gaining prominence in communities through their actions in relation to order and security. Non-state armed groups benefit from the weakening of central governance to offer basic social services to the population under their influence, therefore adopting a strategy of territorial influence. The improvement to climate conditions helps to stabilise displaced populations, which contributes to the consolidation of the parties' positions towards the conflicts. Although the number of clashes between state and non-state actors is decreasing, conflicts remain unresolved and local populations are subject to constraints on access to services and aid, as well as to abuses on the part of all the actors in the conflict.
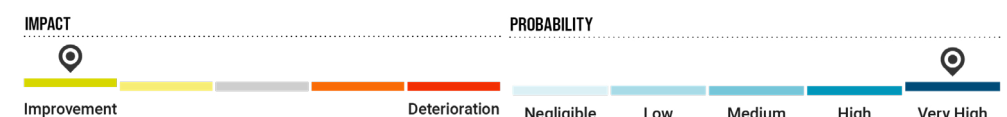
Scenario 3

International disengagement and sharp deterioration in state governance. A major worsening of conflicts and climatic hazards sharply reduces humanitarian access.

IMPACT

Improvement — Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible — Low — Medium — High — Very High

State governance and safety conditions are deteriorating due to increased social and political problems and the political and military disengagement by international actors. France and the United States are starting to progressively retreat their troops; the burden of defence falls on national and local actors who lack capability. This situation gives way to an increase in attacks by non-state armed groups (GANE). Extreme weather events are on the increase: the number of floods is increasing compared to 2020 and periods of drought are prolonged depending on the region. The climate and political problems have caused significant negative socio-economic effects, but the response from the government remains weak. These events lead to inter- and intra-community conflicts over access to resources and fuel crime. The humanitarian space is greatly reduced.

Scenario 4

Reduction of conflicts and strengthening of the state governance; humanitarian access is increasing despite seasonal climatic hazards.

IMPACT

Improvement — Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible — Low — Medium — High — Very High

State governance begins to improve at both the national and local levels, as new governments make progress in terms of inclusion and accountability. The increase in the number of local peace agreements allows for resource management and a more equal distribution of resources. Consequently, this leads to a gradual reduction in inter- and intra-community conflicts. The new governments are more inclined to recognise humanitarian principals and consequently train the defence and security forces, which are also more present in the territories. Nevertheless, abuses are still reported in some regions and some populations remain unprotected. Floods are still affecting some regions, while others are experiencing a rainfall deficit linked in particular to bush fires. Despite temporary difficulties linked to climatic hazards, humanitarian access is easier overall.

INTRODUCTION

Context and Problem Statement

The three countries that make up the Central Sahel - **Mali, Burkina, Faso and Niger** are the epicentre of a regional humanitarian crisis where the number of people affected has rapidly increased between 2019 (6.7 million people in need in the three countries) and 2020 (9 million people in need, OCHA 2020). The origin of this crisis is the cross-border conflict which involves numerous national and international military actors and several non-state armed groups (GANE) and which is taking place in a context of inter and intra-community tensions. The state presence in certain areas is weak, which leads to a reduced supply of basic social services as well as protection services (MINUSMA 28/12/2020). Climate change and increasingly frequent extreme meteorological events exacerbate existing needs. All of these factors impact humanitarian access, namely the ability of humanitarian actors to have direct access to affected populations and the ability of affected populations to access basic social services in the vicinity to meet their needs.

Purpose and overview of the report

This report presents several ad hoc scenarios regarding the evolution of humanitarian access in the Central Sahel in **2021**.

The starting research question is: how could humanitarian access change during 2021 in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? The majority of the scenarios include the Liptako-Gourma region's so-called «three borders», but some scenarios also look at other areas in the three countries.

Based on prospective scenarios on one hand, the evolution of access of people in need to services and aid, and on the other hand, on the difficulties that operators aid workers could meet, this report aims to raise awareness of the contexts, support the strategic planning of the humanitarian community and promote the preparatory activities of humanitarian and political actors in the central Sahel.

The time period considered is the year 2021. However, the scenarios could still be usable for a few more months.

Definition and methodology

In application of the methodology developed by ACAPS, the key terms used are defined as follows:

- **Variable:** development or event likely to cause a change in the situation.
- **Hypothesis:** direction that a variable might take (i.e. growth, decline, etc.).
- **Mini-scenarios:** set of hypotheses or mini-narratives that form the basis of the detailed scenarios.
- **Scenarios:** presentation of the various developments, more or less probable, that a particular situation could cause.
- **Trigger Factors:** developments which must happen so that each scenario materialises.

The scenarios, the development of which involves speculating about an uncertain future, envision different possible outcomes for the situation that was initially given. They predict different ways in which the situation could evolve. Therefore, these scenarios are a description of situations which could happen over the course of 2021. They are not an attempt to predict the future, but rather are designed to highlight the possible humanitarian impacts and consequences associated with each scenario.

Using the ACAPS methodology, the following steps were taken: identification of the initial research question, review of relevant information, definition of the geographical and temporal framework, identification of the variables and analysis of the relationships between them, selection of the variables and transformation into hypotheses, creation of mini-scenarios, quantification of impact and probability and selection of mini-scenarios.

Staff from 15 humanitarian, human rights and research organisations working at national or regional levels were consulted and they contributed to the development of these scenarios by participating in bilateral consultations and two workshops that took place in early December 2020.

During the consultations, many variables that could cause changes in humanitarian access were identified. The **three macro-variables** that have been retained are state governance (1), safety and security (2), and climate conditions (3). The level of state services, the dynamics of conflict and climate change are the key elements in explaining humanitarian access to the Central Sahel. These three macro-variables were used to stimulate group analysis, but other variables affecting humanitarian access were also considered for scenario development.

Four scenarios were developed from assumptions about how these variables could cause possible changes. Then, the scenarios, their impacts and humanitarian consequences, particularly in terms of humanitarian access, have been developed. The four scenarios are mutually exclusive. A list of potential indicators / trigger factors is also given in appendix 1. It should be noted that the appearance of a single trigger factor is seldom sufficient to generate a scenario or to impact humanitarian access. In reality, a combination of several factors is usually necessary. By following the indicators in appendix 1, it is possible to determine the direction in which the crisis is heading and which scenario(s) is more likely to materialise, and therefore a probability.

For more information on how to develop scenarios, please consult the Technical Brief on Scenario Building written by ACAPS.

Scenario limits

Scenarios can seem to simplify a situation or an issue. The analysis leads to an interest in specific events whilst considering more general hypotheses. Scenario building is not an end in itself; it is a process of generating new ideas which, in turn, should lead to changes in designing and editing projects and in decision making.

The Central Sahel is not a homogeneous area: situations can vary considerably from one country to another or from one area to another. Thus, one scenario - or the elements of a scenario - may be more likely or relevant for one area, while other scenarios may be more likely elsewhere.

HOW TO USE SCENARIOS

The objective of scenario building is not to try to predict the future, but rather to understand the range of possible situations and to select the ones that have several consequences and humanitarian impacts that are generally different.

The selected scenarios may in particular:

• Support the strategic planning of humanitarian organisations

• Identify the hypotheses that are the basis for anticipating needs and related interventions

• Improve the adaptability and design of in-depth assessments

• Influencing monitoring and evaluation systems

• Raising awareness, sharing early warnings and promoting preparedness and rapid response activities of humanitarian organisations

The structure of the report

• The four scenarios are summarised in the introduction to this report. They are presented in order of probability, from most likely to least likely, according to the participants in the different work groups. The report is structured in the following manner:

• Presentation of the current situation in the Central Sahel.

• Description of 4 scenarios and their humanitarian consequences.

• Identification of potential aggravating factors which could intensify the humanitarian consequences of one or several scenarios.

• A summary of the trigger events that could give rise to the situations described in the scenarios is appended at the end of the report. Following the indicators presented, it is possible to determine the direction in which the crisis is heading and which scenario(s) is more likely to materialise.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IED	Improvised explosive devices
ISGS	Islamic State in the Grand Sahara
NSAG	Non State armed groups
IMSG	Islamic and Muslim Support Group
UNMISMM	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
QIP	Quick impact projects
GBV	Gender Based Violence

CURRENT SITUATION IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL

General Situation

The intensification of the conflict in the Central Sahel and more particularly in the cross-border region of Liptako-Gourma has led to an increase in population displacement and humanitarian needs in **Burkina Faso, Mali** and **Niger**.

First, the situation is on a **regional scale** for various reasons. Non-state armed groups (GANE) and national and international military actors act beyond the borders. The nature of non-state armed groups is also complex. There is sometimes a superposition of ideological groups over community self-defence groups and groups linked to serious crime, which is very important in the region.

The regional crisis is also a crisis of the **legitimacy** of a government which offers **limited basic social services** particularly in remote areas and areas that are affected by the conflicts. Public infrastructure, community leaders and state officials are also frequently targeted by armed groups (OCHA 10/2020, Conference on the Central Sahel 2020).

Finally, climate change and the frequency of extreme weather events contribute to inter- and intra-community tensions for access to resources and impact agricultural and livestock productivity as well as food security (Solidarities 13/03/2020). All these factors result in a number of internal and cross-border population movements.

To respond to these multiple and multisectoral crises, national governments and the international community continue to prioritise security issues to the detriment of humanitarian issues. The increase in national budgets dedicated to security coupled with a reduction in the budget for basic social services create a **vicious circle** in which conflicts feed on inequalities in access to natural resources and basic social services, generating more social tensions. Moreover, **civil-military cooperation** is weak and the distinction between humanitarian and military is sometimes undermined - for example when military actors implement quick impact projects (CSIS 17/11/2020). In addition, the absence of a common definition of the **triple nexus** (the humanitarian-development-peace nexus) and the political and military context tend to reduce the humanitarian space (discussion with operational partners 11/2020).

The restrictions linked to **COVID-19**, although reduced, remain in effect on the land borders of the three countries, where crossings are not officially authorised except for the transportation of goods. Nevertheless, the Malian and Burkina land borders are porous and the passage of people continues. Air borders are open with the requirement of having a negative PCR test, in which the validity varies from one country to another. A quarantine of seven days and withholding of passports by the authorities, is imposed upon arrival in Niger for a stay of 14 days or more (United States Embassy in Niger 08/12/2020; United States Embassy in Burkina Faso 26/11/2020; United States Embassy in Mali 02/12/2020).

The **administrative constraints**, such as measures imposed in connection with counter terrorism provisions in the context of the growing conflict, restrict access (OCHA16/10/2020, discussion with operational partners 11/2020). In addition, humanitarian actors sometimes face the risk of **political exploitation** of their actions, especially during an election period, or after military operations which coincide with the forced return of populations (discussion with operational partners 12/2020).

Armed participants in the conflict

The populations of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are subjected to violence by various armed groups operating in the **Liptako-Gourma** cross-border region and beyond (ECFR 2020). Since the end of 2019, the rivalries between **the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS)** and the **Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM)**, affiliated to Al-Qaeda, have rendered the dynamics of the conflict more complex (CTC 11/2020, ICCT 20/03/2020). Furthermore, the development of **self-defence militias** has led to a proliferation of armed groups in the conflict. Taking the form of community self-defence groups, some of these militias are accused of having killed civilians suspected of collaborating with the NSAGs (Atalayar 05/10/2020).

Amongst the active military groups in Central Sahel, the main players are the national armies, the national police forces and the police, the French-led Operation Barkhane fighting against terrorism, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European civil and military training missions in Mali and Niger (ISPI 09/09/2019, IAI 06/2020). France and the United Nations have the largest number of troops deployed in the Sahel. At a regional level, the G5 Sahel was created in February 2014 to coordinate security and development policies between the governments of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad (ISPI 09/09/2019). In 2017, the network also created a joint cross-border military force (the FC-G5S) (INTERPOL).

The military groups involved and the NSAGs have **a limited understanding of the mandate, of the mission and of the principles of the humanitarian organisations.** The operations of the military groups involved and the tactics of the NSAGs have an impact on the security of routes used by civilian populations and humanitarian organisations. Even in 2019 and more recently since 2 September 2020, the Niger State Government imposed the use of **armed escorts** for diplomats and humanitarian organisations travelling outside major cities. This has significantly **constrained access**, and certain humanitarian operations have been cancelled in the name of neutrality (ECHO consulted on the 04/12/2020, WFP 23/10/2020).

Peace, reconciliation, and dialogue processes

Local peace agreements between civilians and the parties in conflict are **at an early stage**, and therefore **precarious**, and are highly dependent on external factors. In Mali, discussions regarding the Alger agreement are currently at a stand-still and do not involve the NSAGs in the Islamist jihadist ideology, the cause of most of the current incidents of violence (Le Monde 09/07/2020). Other more local peace agreements have been signed, but they are seldom respected (discussions with operational partners 11/2020). Despite this, local mediation continues at the instigation of the Malian junta which has been in power since the military coup of 18 August 2020 (RFI 08/11/2020). In October 2020, negotiations between the Malian government and the NSAGs led to the release of four hostages in exchange for 200 people, including imprisoned members of NSAG (RFI 10/10/2020). The government of **Burkina Faso** had previously refused to enter into dialogue with the NSAGs, preferring to pursue more military strategies (Le Monde 20/11/2020, discussions with operational partners 12/2020). However, during the recent electoral campaign, some of the population requested dialogue (discussion with operational partners 12/2020) and negotiations are now underway in the province of Soum. In **Niger**, the question of entering into talks with the NSAGs has divided the government for several years. In 2020, priority was given to a military approach.

Population movements

Insecurity has led to **a rise in the number of displaced people and refugees** in all three countries. The **Liptako-Gourma** region had nearly **1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDP)** as of the 30 November, an increase of 36% since January 2020 – 1.05 mil lion in Burkina Faso, 295,000 in Mali, and 140,700 in Tahoua and Tillabéry in Niger. Population displacements are also **cross-border,** with movement towards one of two other countries or towards third countries. As a result of the security crisis in central Sahel, there are about **173,000 refugees** spread across Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali et Mauritania (IOM 7/12/2020, UNHCR 05/11/2020, UNHCR 10/11/2020). There are also 198,000 Nigerian refugees in Maradi and Diffa. This increase in movements leads to **additional pressure** on natural resources and host communities, especially in zones that have been affected by conflict (discussions with operational partners 11/2020). Also, these constantly moving populations tend to be young and therefore more vulnerable, meaning that they can be more susceptible to being recruited by NSAGs and to contributing to the vicious cycle of inter-communal reprisals (discussions with operational partners 12/2020).

Source: DG ECHO 19/10/2020

Governance issues

These three countries are classified as **«partially free»** as far as civil liberties and politics are concerned (Freedom House 2020). **Corruption** is considered to be a major problem, particularly in Niger and in Mali, which are placed 120th and 130th respectively out of 198 countries in terms of perceived corruption (Transparency 2020). A **low-level state presence** in remote areas and an inadequately implemented decentralisation policy also limits the central government's ability to protect and meet the needs of the people (ACF et al. 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the crisis in Central Sahel is also a **legitimacy crisis** for the governments involved (Round table ministerial consultations Central Sahel 2020). Due to a lack of investment in public institutions, the offer of essential services such as **justice, health** or **education** is limited, particularly in villages and in zones affected by the conflict (ACF et al. 2020). Educational equipment, as well as medical equipment and medicines are not always available. Poor working conditions are often the cause of strikes by health workers and teachers, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso (ACF et al. 2020). Despite the progress that has been recorded over recent years, social welfare services remain unsatisfactory and are not extensive enough (ACF et al. 2020).

On a national level, each government faces **specific challenges**. Limited or non-existent coordination between national and local authorities contributes to the failure of governance, especially in **Mali** (CSIS 6/12/2019). In **Niger**, a climate of mistrust has evolved between some local populations and the defence and security forces in Western regions (discussions with operational partners 11/2020). In **Burkina Faso**, at least 300,000 people were prevented from voting in elections on 22 November due to a lack of security (Deutsche Welle 23/11/2020).

On a regional level, the three countries face common problems, especially concerning the atrocities committed against their civilian populations, which are endemic to the security response (Amnesty International 10/06/2020).

A lack of political will to resolve structural, social and territorial inequalities also leads to tensions, and disadvantages some ethnic groups such as the Peuls, the Fulsé and the Touaregs in certain zones or populations such as the Nomadic herders (ICG 24/04/2020, discussions with operational partners 12/2020).

Means of subsistence and food security

The economy of Central Sahel hinges on **agriculture** and **livestock farming. Gold mining** has boomed in recent years (ICG 13/11/2019, Anticipation Hub 2020). In general, **informal transactions** are essential for regional trade. All three countries have low national incomes and around **40% of the population** live below the national poverty threshold (World Bank). Competition for access to resources is fierce due to the conflicts, the weak State presence, poor governance, climate change and agricultural land expansion which encroaches on pastureland. This is particularly problematic when communities become displaced - deprived of their land and consequently their livelihoods (ICG 24/04/2020, discussions with operational partners 12/2020).
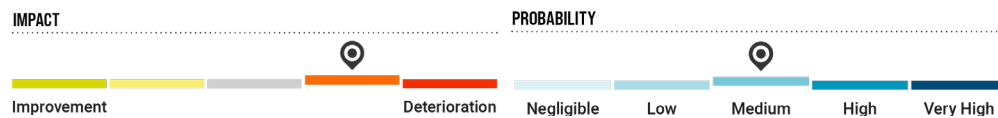
Food insecurity and poor nutrition in the zones affected by conflict have increased dramatically over the last five years. Conflicts and climate change are major obstacles to agricultural production. A lack of state investment in rural areas, the absence of efficient means of agricultural production and increasing pressure on the land also contribute significantly to food insecurity (ACF et al. 2020). As a result, levels of **acute food insecurity** have gone up by 225% in Burkina Faso, by 91% in Mali and by 77% in Niger over the last five years (UNICEF 20/10/2020). In Central Sahel, it is estimated that 7.4 million people were experiencing food insecurity (phase IPC 3 or higher) during the lean season of 2020 (OCHA 16/10/2020). In addition, 900,000 children experienced **acute severe malnutrition** in all three countries (OCHA 16/10/2020). Zones receiving Nigerian refugees fleeing the activities of groups affiliated with the Islamic State, such as Diffa and Maradi in Niger, as well as the zones receiving thousands of IDPs, such as the provinces of Soum, Oudalan, Séno, and Sanmatenga in Burkina Faso, are facing particularly complex food challenges (Cadre Harmonisé 10/08/2020, FEWSNET 11/2020).

Climate-related events

The Sahel is one of the regions of the world where temperatures have risen most rapidly in recent years and where the effects of climate change are most evident (UNHCR 02/12/2020, Solidarités 13/03/2020). The Sahel is regularly affected by localised natural disasters such as **drought, flooding, storms and wildfires.** Long-term natural degradation processes are also ongoing. **Soil degradation** and **damage to vegetation**, desertification as well as the silting up of water resources and changes to the hydrological cycle affect agricultural productivity, fishing and livestock farming (ACF et al. 2020). These extreme phenomena, associated with seasonal anomalies, have a direct impact upon livelihoods: agricultural yields, the availability and access to water are reduced and lead to the loss of livestock (UNDP, Anticipation Hub 2020). Climate change, natural disasters and inadequate government responses all contribute to food insecurity in the region. They are contributing factors to population displacement, to inter and intra-community conflicts and they exacerbate preexisting tensions between **livestock breeders and farmers** regarding the use of land and of water resources (OCHA 16/10/2020, Solidarités 13/03/2020, ICG 24/04/2020). If population growth and the increasing scarcity of resources at a regional level is taken into account, competition for available resources is likely to worsen (Solidarités 13/03/2020, IOM 2020).

1. The governance of the States involved remains weak. The intensification of conflicts and localised flooding restrict humanitarian access.

IMPACT

Improvement   Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible   Low   Medium   High   Very High

No effort is made to improve land management and access to natural resources. Administrative and basic social services, as well as infrastructure continue to be absent or inadequate across much of the territory. Electoral processes are not always transparent and are discredited. The authorities have limited public support. Lower than average and sporadic periods of rain are recorded in some areas, which impact agricultural production. When above average levels of rainfall are recorded, it results in localised flooding. This has an impact on migration routes and on harvests, and heightens tensions between livestock breeders and farmers regarding access to land, seasonal migration corridors and water sources. Levels of safety and security decrease significantly as the NSAGs and the defence and security forces increase their offensives in order to take or take back control of both land and resources. International security forces are stepping up their operations as well. The G5 Sahel Joint Force is also being redeployed. Consequently, an increasing number of populations are being forced to move internally within these countries and in the wider region, putting additional pressure on already limited resources and services. Tensions between refugees and host communities increase as a result of the additional pressure placed on natural resources.

Possible trigger factors

Governance

- No increase in investment in infrastructure and services
- The State continues to be absent across much of the region
- Basic social services remain inadequate
- Electoral processes remain largely discredited

Climatic conditions

- Heavy rain in certain areas of Mali, as well as in areas surrounding the Niger river basin, cause localised flooding

Safety and security

- Social tensions against representatives of the central States increase
- Community tensions in relation to the management of natural resources and basic social services worsen
- The NSAGs and the defence and security forces fight to gain control of land and resources
- More aggressive international military operations are conducted against the NSAGs (including those by Operation Barkhane and by the revival of the G5 Sahel)
- In the short term, quick-impact projects and other military interventions presented as humanitarian activities, increase

Affected areas

Liptako-Gourma

Overall impact

Efforts to bring about peace and promote inter and intra-community dialogue persist, meaning that levels of social cohesion remain the same. However, confidence in the State has not been completely restored due to weaknesses in the legal system and in the administration of justice. In fact, the atrocities committed by military actors are not always tried in court and military justice is not applied appropriately.

Humanitarian impact

Heightened insecurity, flooding, as well as weak governance require that humanitarian agencies have access to people in need and that people have access to services and aid. These factors bring about an increase in the number of people affected, an increase in the number of IDPs, and a localised exacerbation of needs. Nonetheless, the scale of this increase is modest when compared to the serious deterioration described in scenario 3.

Due to both flooding and the intensification of the conflict, natural resources are becoming increasingly limited in some regions. Migration routes and harvests are affected and some food reserves destroyed. As a result, household budgets and food security are undermined. In the rural zones that are most affected by both the conflict and by extreme weather events, and which are inaccessible to humanitarian agencies, the number of households that find themselves in food insecurity phase 2 ('Stress') or 3 ('Crisis') of the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) is increasing.

Households are losing their homes because of the flooding and conflict. Basic needs, especially with regard to shelter, are more easily dealt with in urban and peri-urban areas due to the fact that they are more accessible; problems persist in rural areas.

Access to humanitarian aid and services by affected populations

Rural and nomadic populations, as well as people living in areas controlled by the NSAGs, remain those that have most difficulty accessing aid and services. In relation to protection, women, children and all survivors of GBV have difficulty accessing the necessary support services because such programmes are currently not accepted either by the communities or the local authorities. Discussion of protection issues within communities is limited. There is also a need to guarantee the safety of those who migrate in order for them to access basic social services and humanitarian aid when military operations intensify. Access to WASH services is also limited due to a reduction in the amount of water sources available and to a lack of infrastructure.

Humanitarian access to affected populations

The strong military presence has an effect on the humanitarian response and leads to the militarisation of aid. In the short term, quick-impact projects and other military interventions presented as humanitarian activities, increase. As far as the population and other interested parties are concerned, the distinction between what is military and what is humanitarian is blurred. Successive military operations mean that access gradually becomes more restricted and some areas are cut off.
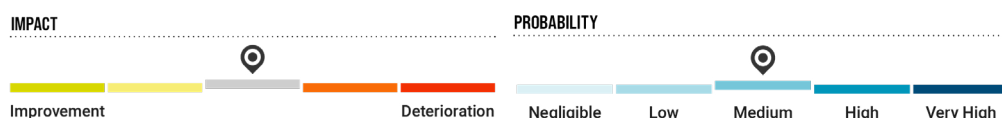
In addition, donor funding becomes increasingly politicised as it is linked to military objectives and State policies. Consequently, humanitarian relief is not always distributed where it is most needed.

Maintaining restrictive measures of security prevents, in certain cases, negotiations on humanitarian access with armed groups. Overall, the government in Mali remains more flexible and tolerant towards humanitarian organisations, unlike Niger and Burkina Faso, where the crisis and strong humanitarian present are more recent. Nevertheless, France, whose influence on Mali's politics is important, continues to refuse contact with NSAGs, which also limits the humanitarian negotiation opportunities.

Some zones are only accessible by air (for example, flooded zones or insecure zones). Consequently, rural zones may be neglected in humanitarian responses. The presence of improvised explosive devices (IED) in conflict zones puts the local population as well as the humanitarians at risk, especially during flooding when they can become displaced.

2. The conflict drags on and the central governance of the states crumbles as the influence of local actors increases. Humanitarian access decreases despite improvements in weather conditions.

IMPACT

Improvement   Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible   Low   Medium   High   Very High

The central governments are weakened and the populations' confidence in them is further eroded. In particular, the governments' control outside of urban areas is diminished and the rural population feels more and more ignored by their government. Local militias gain importance in these communities through their actions to maintain respect for order and security. Armed groups take advantage of the weakening of governance by offering basic social services to populations under their control. This, as well as the rivalry between Al-Qaeda and groups affiliated with the Islamic State, leads them to move to a new strategy of territorial control rather than a strategy of spontaneous attacks. Consequently, the actors in the conflict fall back on their positions and the conflict loses its momentum.

The improvement of weather conditions favours local integration of displaced populations due to greater availability and better sharing of resources. This contributes to a consolidation of the conflicting parties' positions.

Even though the confrontations decrease, the conflict is still unresolved and the security situation remains tense. Local populations are still subject to restricted access to state services and aid and to abuse from all actors in the conflict.

Possible trigger factors

Governance

- The junta in Mali broke its promise of a transition towards a civil government and loses the support of the people. International sanctions put further pressure on the country

- Attacks on the community leaders in Niger diminish local governance and the State's influence on remote areas

- Fall of governance in Niger following the cancellation of elections in certain communities as a result of insecurity

- Isolated communities in Burkina Faso are becoming increasingly frustrated by the situation and feel more isolated from the central government. Self-defence groups avoid state control

Climatic conditions

- The weather is favourable to agriculture with less extreme hazards and good rainfall during the rainy season

Security and safety

- Violent incidents continue to occur, but each actor concentrates on maintaining their positions

- The conflict and inter-communal tensions persist, with regions cut off from the rest of the region and where access is impossible

Areas concerned

In Burkina Faso, the eastern and Sahel regions, but also other regions affected by the conflict; in Niger, Tillabéry, Tahoua, Diffa and Dosso; in Mali, the three borders zone, but also the north, centre and certain areas in the south.

Overall Impact

The hold of different actors of the conflict on territories heightens the problems linked to a lack of civil-military coordination. Negotiation for humanitarian access must take NSAGs and the self-defence militias into account, which fuels government mistrust towards humanitarian actors. Community leaders and decentralised authority play a more important role in the community administration and the distribution of humanitarian aid.

In Mali, military operations take place in an attempt to remove NSAGs from newly gained territory. The loss of state control on self-defence groups increases mistreatment of civilians suspected of collaborating with NSAGs in Burkina Faso. The humanitarian response in Niger and Burkina Faso is greatly impacted by continued insecurity.

Humanitarian consequences

Part of the population continues to move towards urban centres to escape insecurity and/or to access basic social services, humanitarian needs persist for displaced people and host populations. The improvement of the weather situation does not necessarily mean a noticeable improvement in food security, as insecurity and territorial control of different actors prevent access to better agricultural lands and impact the means of subsistence. Inter-communal tensions linked to the division of land between seasonal migration corridors and agricultural fields continue. Women are still targeted by violence and the need for protection and follow-up for survivors of GBV is still a priority.

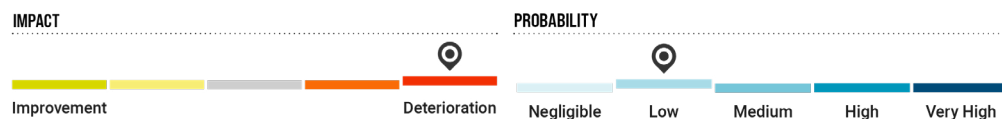### Access to humanitarian aid and services by affected populations

The populations' restricted access persists. In certain host communities who have welcomed a high proportion of long-term IDPs, infrastructure remains under pressure. In Mali, WASH facilities in host centres are not adequate to handle the addition of new arrivals. This is less problematic in Burkina Faso and in Niger, where camps of displaced people have access to adequate WASH facilities to respond to their needs. Access to education and health facilities continues to be limited in conflict zones with closures due to violence. Open schools and health centres are overcrowded.

Some NSAGs limit women's movements. In territories controlled by these groups, women's access to basic social services and humanitarian aid, as well as their ability to support themselves are restricted.

Humanitarian actors' access to affected populations

Operational restrictions increase with the imposition of conditions by the various actors. Self-defence militias must be taken into account during negotiations on humanitarian access. The conflict's loss of momentum allows for a start in discussions negotiating humanitarian access to certain areas that were not accessible until now.

3. International disengagement and a strong deterioration of the governance of the States. A significant escalation of conflicts and climate hazards largely reduces humanitarian access.

IMPACT

Improvement — Deterioration

PROBABILITY

Negligible — Low — Medium — High — Very High

The already low level of governance of the States and the security conditions deteriorates due to increased social and political unrest and a progressive disengagement of international actors in the region. Electoral results are contested and sometimes lead to clashes or violent protests. Consequently, the authorities lose their legitimacy. National governments and the international community stay focused on security, to the detriment of the protection of the civilian population and the inclusive governance which remains overlooked (e.g. the political participation of marginalised communities). The populations' resentment towards security forces increases, particularly French forces. France and the United States start a gradual withdrawal of their troops without replacement, creating a major international military disengagement. International political focus given to the governments of the three countries also diminishes. The defence burden falls on national and local actors who lack training and skills. NSAG attacks in both rural and urban areas increase, except during the rainy season, during which a temporary reduction can be observed. The forced recruitment of civilians by NSAGs is also more frequent. In addition, the frequency of extreme weather events, as well as the number of floods increases, causing significant negative socio-economic effects. The State's response to the consequences of weather hazards and political turmoil is insufficient and the humanitarian space shrinks drastically.

Possible trigger factors

Governance

- The results of the elections are violently contested, and the governments lose legitimacy
- Military and political withdrawal of the international community leads to a reduction in military support and political pressure exerted on the government to improve their performance

- Policies are further focused on security rather than on protection and inclusion
- Government responses to climate and political challenges are weak

Climatic conditions

- Climate change and seasonal cycles cause an increase in the number and duration of floods and drought

Security and safety

- There is a withdrawal of international military forces to the detriment of national and local security actors in terms of defence
- The distrust of local communities towards military actors increases
- Competition between communities and groups (e.g. hunters, farmers, herders) for access to increasingly scarce natural resources increases
- NSAGs proliferate

Areas concerned

The three countries, but especially Niger.

Overall Impact

The deterioration of governance increases the populations' distrust towards authorities and divides communities. The populations increasingly resort to traditional and religious authorities. The effects of adverse weather conditions, aggravated by the authorities' inability to control access to natural resources, push farmers to exploit grazing areas and herders to use agricultural areas. The scarcity of resources, such as pastures and water, thus highlights the inter- and intra-communal tensions and criminality.

While the inter- and intra-communal conflicts escalate, as well as the confrontations between defence and national security forces and the NSAGs, the non-recognition of humanitarian principles and the violations of human rights and international humanitarian rights by different actors increases. The escalation of conflicts also has an impact on trade and causes a decrease in national and international investment, as well as a loss of capital and a decrease in taxes. Countries experience serious economic crisis. The state of emergency already imposed in Liptako-Gourma is reinforced and extends to other territories, which restricts individual and collective freedoms (free movement, a ban on the use of motorcycles, a ban on convergence of populations...). This implementation impacts all factors of production and constitutes an access barrier to basic social services.

Humanitarian consequences

The number of people in need increases significantly. The needs affect all sectors and cannot be easily met due on the one hand to the populations' lack of access to basic social services, and on the other hand to the humanitarians' decreased access to affected populations. With the escalation of natural catastrophes and conflicts, resources become increasingly scarce. Insecurity also affects the free movement of persons. This impacts production and, consequently, the means of subsistence and food security. Categories of potentially vulnerable people (children, the elderly, pregnant and breastfeeding women, people who are physically disabled) risk being more severely affected, especially by the increase in waterborne diseases and acute malnutrition impacting public health levels.

Access to humanitarian aid and services by affected populations

En raison du conflit et de l'augmentation des déplacements de populations, de nouveaux besoins de protection émergent alors que la sécurité des personnes qui se déplacent pour accéder aux services sociaux de base et à l'aide humanitaire est compromise. Cette situation est aggravée par les inondations qui endommagent le réseau routier.

Due to conflict and an increase in population displacement, a new need for protection emerges while the security for those who travel to access basic social services and humanitarian aid is compromised. This situation is aggravated by flooding which damages the road network.

Due to problems with access and/or prolonged periods of drought, households are unable to obtain food supplies. The expansion of the state of emergency, in particular, and the resulting ban on motorcycles deprives some of an essential mode of transport. In some zones the affected population still manages to use alternative modes of transport.

The right and access to education is severely compromised due to an increase in attacks against schools as well as the deterioration of buildings and the dangers on the way to school. In the dynamics of conflict, the schools, students and teachers become the primary targets as they are seen by certain armed groups as an extension of the central authority of the states. In addition, there is no strong governance allowing the financing of alternative educational paths, especially in Burkina Faso and Niger.
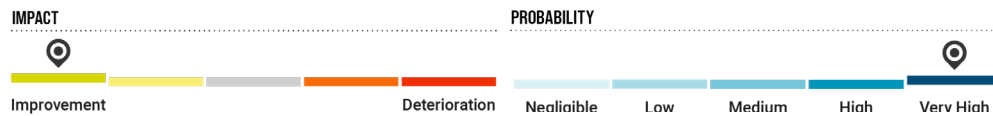
Insecurity and flooding hinder access to health centres, causing a drop in vaccinations and an interruption of antiretroviral treatments for people living with HIV.

Humanitarian actors' access to affected populations

While the conflict is escalating in the region, aid progresses in an increasingly militarised environment. Therefore, the imposition of armed escorts in Niger and Burkina Faso is extended, impacting the application of humanitarian principles. This causes a reduction, even suspension, of certain projects. Development projects focused on resilience are hindered due to the volatility of the context. A refocusing takes place on urgent humanitarian action which remains, nevertheless, complicated to implement. Some NGOs disengage due to increased insecurity and the risk of political recuperation. For NGOs and agencies that remain, supply is hampered not only by major logistical problems, but also by a negative perception by governments towards humanitarian operators. Due to flooding, already heavily damaged road infrastructure cannot be repaired due to insecurity. They become temporarily impassable. The presence of improvised explosive devices in conflict zones puts the local population as well as the humanitarians in danger, particularly during floods when they can become displaced.

4. A reduction in conflicts and the reinforcement of governance of the States; humanitarian access increases despite seasonal weather hazards.

IMPACT   **PROBABILITY**

Improvement   Deterioration   Negligible   Low   Medium   High   Very High

In the three countries concerned, governance begins to improve, at both the national and local level, as new governments make progress in terms of inclusion and accountability. They benefit thus from a reasonable level of legitimacy and the support of the populations. Abilities in terms of crisis management slowly improve. Resources begin to be shared in a more equitable manner, following strong political decisions in this regard and the progressive increase in the number of local peace agreements. These agreements are even more sustainable as mechanisms to prevent and resolve conflicts by national and local authorities are implemented. This results in a gradual reduction of inter- and intra-communal conflicts and an improvement in social cohesion. New governments are more inclined to recognise humanitarian principles and consequently form defence and security forces accordingly. As a result of better organisation, they are also more present in the field. Abuses are still reported in certain regions and some populations remain without protection. Weather hazards persist: an erratic weather season causes flooding in certain regions and conversely, a rainfall deficit and an arid climate cause moderate drought and brush fires in other regions. The parties to the conflict are sometimes start these fires.

Possible trigger factors

Governance

- Civil society is growing stronger and develops more citizen watch and campaigning for more transparency and government accountability
- Financial pressure exercised by the international community on governments has a positive effect on its performance
- Peaceful elections assure governments of a higher degree of legitimacy
- Judicial systems grow stronger and an improved application of the law contributes to the mitigation of conflicts

- Governments further invest in basic social sectors

Climatic conditions

- Rainy seasons are still erratic (flooding)
- A rainfall deficit and an arid climate persist in other regions (moderate drought)

Security and safety

- Communal mechanisms of conflict mitigation and resolution have been developed and implemented by national and local authorities
- Central governments are more willing to participate in inclusive discussions on key issues
- National and international authorities are more respectful of humanitarian principles and the civilian nature of aid
- The presence of defence and security forces on the ground and their training slowly improves
- The number of local peace processes increases and they become more sustainable

Areas concerned

Areas of Mali where the authorities already have a stronger presence (the south of the country) and the Central Plateau in Burkina Faso.

Overall impact

Central governments address more essential social issues, such as rapid demographic growth. New policies aim to reduce this growth and, as a result, to reduce pressure on resources. Greater attention is given to urban development dynamics and the expansion of agricultural land that encroaches on seasonal migration corridors. Thanks to better planning and increased efficiency in the judicial system, there are less conflicts between livestock breeders and farmers and the local authorities are more reactive.

The political transition process continues in **Mali** and enables preparations for elections in 2022. The transitional government involves some armed groups in the peace agreement, leading to the stabilisation of security conditions in the areas where they operate. In **Niger**, following a broadly transparent second electoral round, the new government has greater legitimacy. The increase in trained military personnel contributes to the improved safeguarding of populations in conflict zones.

Humanitarian impact

Population displacement becomes more predictable overall. On the one hand, population displacement due to conflict becomes more manageable because it is less frequent. Localised protection incidents continue but the number of victims declines overall. On the other hand, short- and long-term displacement to urban centres continues due to the adverse weather conditions (drought, flooding) that persist in some areas and result in reduced agricultural and pastoral income. Following natural disasters, the adaptive capacities of affected populations remain weak: their property, homes, harvests – and therefore their livelihoods – are destroyed or severely damaged, resulting in new humanitarian needs. Those who remain in flooded areas are exposed to waterborne diseases (e.g. malaria).

Access to humanitarian assistance and services for affected populations

Overall, civilian populations are better protected and have greater access to basic social services when the authorities' governance improves. For example, thanks to the construction of new wells, access to water has improved in some remote areas. Governments also increase the number of teachers deployed, thus improving children's access to quality education. This more equitable distribution of resources helps reduce inter- and intra-community conflicts. The improved security situation enables populations living in flooded areas to continue cultivation. Some households resume development of their agricultural lands and therefore have access to several livelihoods. As a result, the number of people experiencing food insecurity decreases.

Humanitarian actors' access to affected populations

The improvement of the security situation and more effective governance on the part of the authorities reduce constraints to operational access and open the humanitarian space. For example, armed escorts are no longer necessary in Niger and the ban on using motorbikes has been lifted in the three countries. Humanitarians have new access to populations that were previously isolated due to conflict and, therefore, meet the needs of a greater number of people. The acceptance strategy is implemented which involves promoting the humanitarian mandate to populations and armed groups in the target areas, thus contributing to the reduction of the humanitarian-armed actors amalgam. Military operations are reduced and armed conflicts decrease. Access to State-guaranteed basic social services is strengthened. The better provision of services and the improved security situation enhance coordination among humanitarian actors, development actors and the authorities, reinforcing efficiency in actions. The number of quick-impact projects (QIP) is reduced as well.

Nonetheless, logistical access difficulties persist, especially during the rainy season (June-October) in the most affected areas, where the roads become temporarily impassable. The presence of explosive remnants of war in conflict zones endangers both local populations and humanitarian actors, particularly in cases of flooding as these remnants can be displaced.

POTENTIAL AGGRAVATING FACTORS

The factors below may come into play at the same time as one or several of the scenarios presented and have the potential to significantly change the humanitarian situation.

COVID-19

COUNTRY	RATE OF NEW COVID-19 CASES REPORTED PER 100,000 INHABITANTS OVER 14 DAYS TO THE 5TH WEEK OF 2021
Burkina Faso	5.7
Niger	1.1
Mali	1.0

Source: ECDC 11/02/2021

As of February 2021, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 remains low in the three countries concerned. In view of the increase in daily cases between November and December 2020, a larger wave of COVID-19 is a possibility. Having adopted strict measures during the first wave of the epidemic, the governments could adopt less restrictive measures this time, considering the severe economic repercussion observed (OCHA 16/10/2020, discussion with operational partners 12/2020).

Such lighter measures could contribute to increasing the number of confirmed cases, especially in urban centres where the testing capacity and population density are higher.

A larger wave of COVID-19 could result in already weak health systems being overwhelmed (Refugees International 08/06/2020). Populations might then avoid health centres, even if they need help. This could also affect the treatment of malnutrition.

Restrictions on movement and border closures had an adverse economic impact, which could be further exacerbated if the authorities have to re-implement these measures. The reduction in livelihoods has especially affected workers in the informal sector (e.g. gold mining, trade, nomadic herders), who account for a large share of the working population (Refugees International 08/06/2020), as well as families who receive funds from the diaspora, which have greatly decreased.

A new tightening of restrictions could also have a greater effect on the humanitarian sector, especially in importing and distributing aid, as well as in the displacement of national and international staff (IDMC 10/2020, discussion with operational partners 12/2020).

Foreign policy and instability in neighbouring countries

The military and diplomatic decisions made by foreign actors involved in operations in the Central Sahel are always likely to have a significant impact on the dynamics of conflicts. The policy of the new United States administration, led be President Biden, has not yet become clear. It may either continue towards the military disengagement planned by the Trump administration, to the detriment of national and European troops, or conversely it may increase its engagement with the new governments of the three countries (EEAS 03/12/2020, Foreign Policy 12/09/2020).

At the European level, France has tried to find allies for its military operations so it can reduce the number of its troops deployed (al Jazeera 06/11/2020). It remains to be seen how the increasing involvement of European actors (e.g. Sweden and Estonia) will develop and how these states interpret the «Triple Nexus».

The interactions between the new Sahelian governments and their foreign counterparts must also be considered. It has not been clearly established how France will continue its involvement with the Malian authorities, who have explicitly shown their intention to begin dialogue with certain armed groups – an intention opposed by the French government (Financial Times 27/10/2020) and which may also affect the provision of French humanitarian assistance.

Instability in neighbouring countries will continue to affect the Central Sahel. In fact, the continuous flux of Nigerian refugees would further increase pressure on resources in Niger (CSIS 17/11/2020), while a new outbreak of conflict in Libya could increase the number of NSAG movements active in the Sahara (al Jazeera 23/01/2020).

Institutional funds and conditionalities

Confirming the trend during recent years, state and institutional funds dedicated to defence are likely to be well above funds allocated to basic social services in 2021. Moreover, available funds for aid are likely to be guided by the political or security interests steering humanitarian action (ACF et al. 2020).

Changes to national and international laws on fighting terrorism may also impact humanitarian access and influence project implementation (CSIS 17/11/2020).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

APPENDIX 1 TRIGGER FACTORS

Scenario 1

Governance remains weak at the State level. The escalation of conflicts and increased flooding restrict humanitarian access.

Scenario 2

The conflict reaches a stalemate and state central governance crumbles as the influence of local actors increases. Humanitarian access is reduced despite improved weather conditions.

Scenario 3

International disengagement and sharp deterioration in governance at the State level. Exacerbation of conflicts and weather hazards greatly reduce humanitarian access.

Scenario 4

Reduction in conflicts and strengthening of state governance; humanitarian access increases despite seasonal weather hazards.

It should be noted that the introduction of a single trigger factor is rarely sufficient to create scenarios like those described above (or to impact humanitarian access). In reality, a combination of several factors is usually necessary. By monitoring the indicators below, it is possible to determine the direction a crisis is taking and which scenario(s) are becoming more likely to materialise.

SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4	CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION
Humanitarian access and access to services are likely to improve if:					
Favourable weather conditions with less extreme weather hazards are observed		✓			
Civil society is strengthened, develops more civilian watchdogs and pushes for greater accountability from the government				✓	According to the World Alliance for Citizens Participation (CIVICUS), civic space is currently obstructed in Burkina Faso and Mali (level 3/5) and repressed in Niger (level 4/5) (CIVICUS 2020). New restrictions on civil liberties were introduced in Niger in 2020 (CIVICUS 29/06/2020).
Financial pressure from the international community on the governments has a positive effect on their performance				✓	
Peaceful elections take place, ensuring that governments have greater legitimacy				✓	**Niger:** the presidential election took place on 27 December 2020. The second round of the presidential election was held on 21 February 2021 between Mohamed Bazoum, former Minister of the Interior, and former president Mahamane Ousmane (France24 21/02/2021). Municipal and regional and elections were held on 13 December 2020. **Mali:** the transitional government is expected to lead the country until elections in 2022. **Burkina Faso:** the presidential election was held on 22 November 2020. Municipal elections will take place in May 2021 (EISA 12/2020).
Formal judicial systems are strengthened and improved application of the law contributes to conflict prevention and resolution				✓	According to the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index, Mali is ranked in 111th place (out of 128 countries) and in terms of effectiveness of the civil judicial system, Niger ranks at 102nd place, with Burkina Faso in 90th place (WJP 2020).

	C1	C2	C3	C4	Evidence
Shared conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms are implemented by the local and national authorities			✓		
Central governments are willing to participate in inclusive discussions on key questions			✓		
National and international authorities recognise the humanitarian principles and the civilian nature of aid			✓		
The presence of defence and security forces on the ground is strengthened and their training is progressively improved			✓		
The number of local peace processes increase and the agreements are more sustainable			✓		
Humanitarian access and access to services is likely to deteriorate if:					
The junta in Mali fails in its promise to transition towards a civilian government and loses popular support		✓			A military coup ousted elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta on 18 August while demonstrations against the president were ongoing. Former Defence Minister Bah Ndaw became president (BBC 05/12/2020).
International sanctions exert strong pressure on Mali		✓			After the military coup in Mali, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed sanctions on the country. Following negotiations with the Malian junta, these measures were lifted in October 2020 (Reuters 06/10/2020).
Attacks on community leaders in Niger intensify		✓			NSAGs attack community leaders because they represent the state. Leaders receive death threats, some are assassinated, their family members are kidnapped, especially in the Tillaberi-Tahoua region (OCHA 31/10/2020, OCHA 24/11/2020).
Vigilante groups are beyond state control		✓			
Governance in Niger declines due to elections not taking place in some areas because of insecurity		✓			The day before municipal and regional elections in Niger, Saturday 12 December, an attack by ANSA in the Diffa region was reported, which prevented elections from taking place in this region (VOA News 13/12/2020).
Long periods of sporadic, below-average rainfall cause prolonged drought			✓		Regional droughts are recurrent in the Central Sahel, resulting in losses of crops, livestock and pastures (FAO 04/2019, OCHA 16/10/2020).
Social tensions against State representations increase	✓	✓			
Community tensions linked to the management of natural resources and basic social services are exacerbated	✓		✓		
NSAGs proliferate and fight national defence and security forces for control of territories and resources	✓		✓		
More aggressive international military operations are carried out against NSAGs	✓				
Election results are contested and governments lose legitimacy (protests, violent confrontations)			✓		Disorder, violence and confrontations took place throughout 2020, as Malian protesters demanded President Keïta's resignation (BBC 08/08/2020 ; BBC 06/08/2020).

The progressive disengagement of the international community reduces pressure on the government to improve its performance			✓		Several international actors have shown a certain inconsistency in their political strategy and their deployment in the Sahel, particularly the United States and certain European Union member states (Deutsche Welle – DW 31/01/2020 ; ECFR 01/12/2020).
Climate change and seasonal cycles cause flooding	✓		✓		During the summer of 2020, flooding affected areas of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (WFP 30/09/2020), affecting 516,000 people in Niger, 106,000 in Burkina Faso and 85,000 in Niger as of 12 November (WFP 12/11/2020).
International military defence forces disengage, to the detriment of national and local security actors			✓		
Local communities' distrust of military actors increases			✓		
The politicisation of aid and funds increases	✓				
Quick-impact projects and other military interventions presented as humanitarian operations increase in the short term	✓				
Humanitarian access and access to services is unlikely to develop if:					
Violent incidents continue and all armed actors maintain their positions		✓			
Armed conflict and inter-community tensions persist, cutting some areas off from the rest of the region		✓			
There is no new investment in infrastructure and services	✓				
The state continues to be absent from a large part of the territory and functioning basic social services are not guaranteed	✓				
Electoral processes remain discredited in the three countries	✓				
The rainy season remains erratic and causes seasonal flooding and drought				✓	
Policies are even more focused on security and not on protection and inclusion			✓		
Government responses to climate challenges and policies remain weak			✓		
IEDs are present, which are likely to be displaced by flooding	✓		✓	✓	