Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

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<u>The Greater Sahel: How To Avert A Looming Tragedy</u>

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I am delighted to be here at Sciences Po – albeit only virtually - because if trainee policy makers anywhere are going in future to make a difference on today's topic, it will probably be you. My generation's ideas and actions in the Sahel region are simply not working.

I am tasked with dealing with the world's worst humanitarian tragedies. Nowhere scares me more than the Sahel. I fear the region is very close to a tipping point – and so by extension are its African neighbours, Europe, and the world. A preventable tragedy is looming.

Next week the UN, together with Germany, Denmark, and the EU, will host a major conference on the central Sahel. Leaders from the region and around the world will come together to pledge funds and make concrete policy commitments.

This is very timely because, as of today, most public policy efforts, at both national and international levels, are treating symptoms rather than their causes. In a talk I gave last year at the European Council on Foreign Relations in Brussels I made the obvious point that this is a surefire recipe for failure.

Barely 16 months on, we've moved far more quickly towards the abyss than I expected. Today I want to explain why that is and what we can do about it. I will start by trying to frame the issues and remind you of some of the basic facts.

I will then take a moment to look back a decade, take stock of where we are today, and imagine the Sahel's future. Finally, I will set out a few thoughts on what we should do.

Geographically, the Sahel is loosely defined. At its broadest it stretches across Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. But what I am focusing on today is the six countries of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, and the north-east of Nigeria – in other words, the central Sahel and the countries of the Lake Chad Basin.

Much of what I am going to say will strike you as gloomy. That is the reality. The problems are daunting and getting worse.

So let me at the outset make clear that it does not have to be like that.

West Africa and the Sahel have historically been home to great and powerful empires. They were centres of flourishing regional trade and wealth long before the arrival of European colonialists. Think of Mansa Musa, a Malian ruler who gave away so much gold when he passed through Egypt that he left them with a major inflation problem.

Sahelians have contributed their ample share to the world's artistic, musical, architectural, and scholarly heritage. Timbuktu, remember, was home to the world's first university. And to one of its oldest libraries. All six of the countries I am going to talk about host one or more UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The region is rich in natural resources, not least through its massive renewable energy capacity. There is so much human capital waiting to be fully tapped. So how have we ended up in the current situation?

Let's start with the basics.

Right now, people who live in the six Sahelian countries I've mentioned find themselves at a true epicentre of conflict and insecurity, weak governance, chronic underdevelopment and poverty, demographic pressures, and climate change.

Let me say a few words about each of those.

Conflict in the Sahel is complex. The causes and perpetrators of violence are many and they only seem to increase. There is conflict between farmers and herders, mostly arising from competition over increasingly scarce resources. There is conflict instigated by terrorist and extremist groups seeking to undermine states and control territory, like the campaigns being waged by Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa and others. Torture, brutality, abductions, sexual slavery, killings and other flagrant human rights abuses are the stock in trade for such groups. Then there is the violence of organised criminal groups, who run trafficking networks, stage kidnappings, loot assets and steal natural resources for profit.

State security authorities seek to combat all this, spending an ever-greater share of scare public resources doing so, but too often exacerbate the problem and drive citizens into opposition through their own violent excesses or failures to protect civilians.

All the countries I'm talking about today fare poorly on the World Bank's governance effectiveness indicators. State authorities offer few services, are neither accountable nor responsive to their own citizens, are too often led by people who think the purpose of public

office is self-enrichment rather than serving the community, and frequently reinforce rather than address legitimate grievances. Crucially they behave in ways that leave people feeling excluded. Justice is elusive, and that reinforces grievances too.

All this makes it hard to address poverty and under-development. The Sahelian countries consistently rank at the very bottom of human development indices, reflecting high poverty, low life expectancy, high infant mortality and low levels of access to education. Only 9 percent of girls complete secondary school. Traditional livelihoods are undermined by rapid population growth and resource pressures, and it is expensive to improve infrastructure in these large countries with dispersed populations. That applies to hard infrastructure like roads, power and water systems, but also to the softer sort of infrastructure, like schools and clinics.

And then comes climate change. Since the 1970s, the Sahel has warmed twice as fast as the rest of the world. That comes with serious consequences for the livelihoods of all Sahelians.

Meanwhile, fertility rates in the Sahel are the highest in the world, with annual population growth of 3 per cent on average. In Niger, the average woman has seven children, resulting in a doubling of the population every 17 years. Globally over the last 200 years, population growth has generally fueled development, especially during the period of the demographic dividend when States have a low proportion of dependents – young children and older people – compared to workers. But that dividend is not inevitable. There are examples, like Ireland (where many of my forebears were from) in the first half of the 19th century, where rapid population growth in the absence of economic diversification proved a recipe for catastrophe.

One of the striking things about the Sahel is that there is little dispute about the analysis or the challenges. And we certainly don't lack for diagnostics or "strategies". By my count, there are well over 20 international donor or multilateral strategies, including the UN's own, that cover the region.

And some regional leaders are doing their utmost to help their citizens.

But despite the potential and all the effort, things are still only getting worse.

I really want to try to understand why that is. Why are we seeing skyrocketing numbers of displaced and hungry people? Why is conflict spreading? Why do we see an increase in terrorist and militant attacks and influence across the region? And why is the response, nationally and internationally, so ineffective in turning the tide?

So even though I am the UN's humanitarian chief, I am ranging today beyond the humanitarian – mostly because if the causes are not addressed, the symptoms, like humanitarian suffering, will just get worse.

I have been travelling to some of these countries for nearly 30 years, and my first visit when I started as the Emergency Relief Coordinator in 2017 was to this region – to Niger and Nigeria. And since then, I've become more convinced than ever of two things.

First, humanitarian aid is a crucial lifeline for millions of people around the world. The humanitarian system – UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent family, and local and international NGOs – is amazingly effective at getting help to the people who need it most.

Without aid, millions more would die each year. For the six countries we're speaking about today, humanitarian organizations raised more than $1.3 billion this year, which is helping 22 million people. Last year humanitarian agencies ensured 9 million children were vaccinated against measles, nearly 3 million children were treated for malnutrition, and 4 million got food. And the vast majority of that support was delivered by local and international NGOs.

But second, I have come to realize more and more that humanitarian aid can only be a Band-Aid on a much deeper wound. And right now, the wound is growing faster than the Band-Aid.

No one really wants to live in a camp for displaced people, or receive food rations from a humanitarian organization. They'd rather buy or grow their own food and cook dinner for their children themselves, like everyone around the world.

So how do we start to address the underlying causes in the Sahel?

Let's start by recalling the Sahel region just as the year 2010 was beginning.

The previous decade was characterized by relative political stability and security, especially compared to some other parts of the continent.

From 2000 to 2010, we saw slow but steady improvement in indicators of human development across most countries of the Sahel, alongside improvements in governance indicators and macroeconomic growth.

Imagine a girl in Burkina Faso's northern Sahel province, on the border with Niger and Mali – let's call her Samira. (Samira is not a real person, but I've met many children like her). She is six years old in 2010. She has five brothers and sisters. Having survived early childhood – which 15 per cent of infants in her community back then did not – Samira can expect to live a full life, into older age.

Samira's parents are farmers, making a living by tending a small plot of land. From what they grow, they eat what they need to survive, and sell the rest at the market.

Samira's mother has high hopes for her. She is only six, but she's very clever. So her parents scrimp and save, and they send her to school. That is not to be taken for granted in this region. But they know that education can transform lives.

Now imagine another child, a new baby boy, Ibrahim, born in 2010, the first child of new parents in Borno state, in northeast Nigeria.

His parents are pastoralists: they make their living from their herd of livestock. They will also work hard to send Ibrahim to school. With Lake Chad, the historic source of livelihood for many across the region, visibly shrinking, and with competition for grazing land increasing and few other economic opportunities, Ibrahim's parents hope that education will provide him with an escape route.

Unfortunately, there is bad news for Samira and Ibrahim. Life is about to get much more difficult for them and their families, and for millions of others like them.

The year Ibrahim is born, an opposition group that has been quietly growing and evolving over the previous decade emerges from the shadows, and starts conducting terrorist attacks, bombings, kidnappings and abductions in his home state. The world becomes conscious of Boko Haram. In 2014 they attract global attention by kidnapping hundreds of girls from a secondary school - the Chibok girls. The following year they abduct even more in Damasak.

With the exception of Burkina Faso, every country in the region had experienced some degree of internal violence since the end of colonial rule – whether civil war, insurrection movements or terrorist activity. But this time the situation was different. Suddenly arms were pouring across the region's porous borders in the wake of the disintegration of Libya. And 2012 marked the overthrow of the Malian Government by rebel soldiers.

Before 2012, only one militant Islamist group, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, operated in Mali. But as the Islamic State's strength and territorial control grew in Iraq and Syria after 2014, extremist groups in the Sahel drew lessons from their ambitions and tactics. By 2018, more than 10 groups were active in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, in addition to groups like Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin. There were more violent episodes in 2018 alone than in the whole of the 2009-15 period.

Alongside the violence and instability, the last decade has seen an acceleration of resource pressures driven by climate change and demography, and unmitigated by economic development or adaptation.

Next, the changing climate. The Sahel is heating up at an alarming rate. Environmental assets are literally evaporating, and rainfall is increasingly erratic, undermining access to water, fisheries, livestock and agriculture. That fuels intercommunal tensions, and Governments are failing to establish fair and transparent land and resource management strategies to contain the situation.

The symptoms of these problems were becoming increasingly visible a decade ago, in the form of large-scale displacement and growing hunger.

A major drought in 2012 affected 18 million people across the region.

This was the moment when humanitarian agencies started to become heavily engaged in the region on a continuous basis. There were previous humanitarian problems, including food shortages in 2006 and 2010. But at the start of the last decade, many humanitarian agencies were still operating on the basis of one-off responses to what seemed to be short-term disasters. By 2014, there was a chronic, sustained and growing humanitarian problem affecting all six of the countries we are talking about. Humanitarian agencies started to set up shop for the long haul. What else was the international community doing this whole time?

Mostly supporting security interventions. From international efforts like France's operation Barkhane and the UN's peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, in Mali, to regional efforts like the G5 Sahel and the Multi-National Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad Basin. The focus was on remedying the shortcomings of military responses implemented by the security forces of the countries themselves. I'll come back to all that later.

But international support for development efforts - though vital - have, in relation to the needs, been piecemeal, underfunded, and lacking in coherence.

So now we are in October 2020. I want to say a bit more about where we stand now, and the rapidity with which things are deteriorating.

In March 2019, just over 4 million people were displaced across the region, just under 10 million were food insecure, and more than 22 million needed humanitarian assistance.

Today, eighteen months later, displacement has increased by 25 per cent, food insecurity by 40 per cent and the numbers in need of humanitarian assistance by 50 per cent.

There has been a sharp deterioration in Burkina Faso, Niger and some parts of Cameroon. And no improvement and increasing hopelessness in other places, including north-east Nigeria and Chad.

Burkina Faso, not long ago peaceful and developing, now has one of the fastest-growing displacement crises in the world. Some 700,000 more people need help today than eight months ago.

In Niger, we are seeing an increase in the number of extremist attacks and more displacement than ever.

In Mali, political instability, with the second coup in less than a decade, threatens to undermine efforts to tackle violent extremists in the north of the country and thereby to drive humanitarian needs higher.

In north-east Nigeria, nearly 11 million people, a record number, need humanitarian assistance this year.

The people of this region have become trapped on all sides: violent extremist groups and criminal gangs attack and rob them. State security forces struggle to protect them, and in some places they are just as mistrusted as extremist groups.

And now, just in the past few weeks, we are seeing another effect of climate change: unprecedented flooding is forcing people from their homes and depriving them of their livelihoods. Flooding so far this year has had a greater impact than in any previous year for which we have data. Across West and Central Africa, nearly 2 million people in 13 countries have been affected.

What are the prospects of children like Samira and Ibrahim in these circumstances?

Well, Samira is now sixteen years old. She and her family are among the many in the northern parts of Burkina Faso who have been forced to flee conflict and violence.

Last year, armed men attacked Samira's village. Like many teenage girls, she was raped, at fifteen. One of her older brothers was killed.

Samira's family has been living in a camp for internally displaced people since 2019. They have shelter and just enough to eat to get by, but Samira desperately wants to go home – but with more displaced people arriving every day, and famine alerts in her home province, it's hard for her to imagine when it might be safe to do so. She is no longer in school and unlikely to ever return. Her parents think the only option may be for her to marry.

And then COVID-19 arrives. Even though Burkina isn't hardest hit in terms of case numbers, the socioeconomic impact is very real. Young women like Samira are at greater risk of violence now, and many resort to risky survival strategies, like selling sex for money or food.

How is Ibrahim doing?

Well, he would be ten years old now. Since he was born, Boko Haram alone has staged more than 2000 attacks in his home state.

Families like Ibrahim's live in a state of fear, wondering if they'll be safe from attack, safe from coercion into joining an armed group, safe from blame from authorities suspecting them of collaborating.

But let's be optimistic for a moment. Let's suppose Ibrahim's family still live in their own home and have enough to eat for now.

And that they can keep him in school, which is critical for Ibrahim to have any chance of improving his prospects.

Those are just two stories. Altogether, there are now more than 30 million people in need of humanitarian assistance across these six Sahel countries.

Double the number of 2015.

The sharp increase in so little time is what alarms me the most – it's not a good sign of things ahead.

It is also getting harder to ensure aid reaches those who need it most, for two main reasons. First, funding for humanitarian response in the Sahel is always chronically short: so far we have received less than 40 per cent of the money we need for this year. The funding gap is consistently larger than elsewhere in the world.

Second, it's difficult to get help to people. There are all sorts of impediments. Sometimes they are bureaucratic, sometimes logistical, sometimes related to huge distances with poor infrastructure and harsh terrain.

But the most serious problem is the fact that the region is becoming an extremely dangerous place to be an aid worker. 2019 saw a record 85 attacks against aid workers: twice the number of the previous worst year. Getting help to people means facing the danger of being attacked, abducted or killed. I am sure you all read the tragic news recently of six French staff members from the NGO ACTED who were killed in Niger.

And although in many situations humanitarian organizations manage to negotiate access with parties to the conflict, terrorist groups like Boko Haram or ISWAP simply reject the role of humanitarian agencies. Murdering aid workers is a tactic of choice for them.

Now, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to imagine with you what the Sahel will look like ten years from now in 2030.

The basic point is that none of the responses or interventions over the last decade have improved the underlying situation or altered the trajectory. At best they have merely stemmed the flow.

First, there are the demographic pressures. In 2010, the population of the region was 240 million people. Today, it is more than 310 million. By 2030, it will be well over 400 million. And some projections envisage almost a billion people in the wider region by 2050.

Second, the Sahel is truly the epicenter of accelerating climate change. A canary in the coalmine of our warming planet.

As we have said, the consequences are already visible. But by 2100, worst case estimates say that the region could be up to eight degrees hotter than now – and average daily temperatures already reach 35 degrees Celsius. One wonders how in those circumstances life could continue in any way close to how it is lived today, where three quarters of the population depend on mostly rain-fed agriculture.

Of the world's 15 countries most vulnerable to climate change, 10 already have chronic humanitarian problems, for which we have been mounting responses every year for most of the last decade. And yet, these 15 countries – which include Chad, Niger and Mali – receive less than 6 per cent of all global multilateral funding for adapting to climate change.

Heat also has more subtle consequences. To quote David Wallace-Wells, "heat frays everything." Scientists have documented an increase in conflict, domestic violence and crime rates as temperatures rise. They predict that for every half degree of warming, societies will see a 10 to 20 per cent increase in the likelihood of armed conflict.

That brings me to my third point. As we have said, violence and extremism in the region are growing. Illicit networks are solidifying their footholds. Efforts to stem that are failing.

So one can only imagine that if nothing changes, violence will increase, and the average Sahelian citizen's sense of security and safety will fall even further.

In short, the Sahel in 2030 will be home to many more people, who will live in much hotter and more violent conditions. They will be hungrier and sicker. Fewer, especially among the girls, will complete secondary school. That is a huge problem, because we know that finishing secondary school means girls earn more, marry later, have fewer children and are more likely to send their own children to school.

So let's check back on Samira and Ibrahim.

Samira will be 26 in 2030. She is still full of potential, but her first decade of adulthood has been difficult.

Her eldest child is now ten. She may have four younger children. Only 17 per cent of women Samira's age currently have access to modern contraceptives.

She is still traumatized from the violence she experienced as a teenager. She desperately wants to be able to move back to her family's land with her children, but they still live in a camp for internally displaced people.

Even if Samira is lucky, and she is able to return home to tend her family's land, it will probably be less productive, and her crops will be more vulnerable to flooding and droughts. Some projections imply crop yields reduced by over 30 per cent by 2080, and that rain-fed agriculture could be unviable in Chad and Niger by 2100.

How is Ibrahim doing?

Let's suppose he managed to finish secondary school – an investment his parents worked very hard for. That is no small achievement.

Ibrahim is now twenty years old. He left school a couple of years ago. He had high hopes, but he's still looking for work. There are few economic opportunities for young men like him in Borno State.

He is becoming increasingly disaffected. And pressure is growing as he gets older: his family are relying on him to bring in an income. He wants to marry but needs money to afford that too. As a former child soldier told one of my colleagues, "Lack of hope, at a certain point, pushes humans into the devil's arms." Ibrahim is lured into a criminal group by the promise of money and a sense of purpose. Only after some months does he realize he has unwittingly joined Boko Haram.

What does Ibrahim experience there? Well, maybe a sense of belonging. But he will also be beaten as part of his indoctrination. He may be used as a human shield. He may be given drugs, winding up with an addiction. And he may be forced to commit unspeakable acts of violence himself.

Ibrahim will certainly experience profound psychological trauma. He will find it difficult to leave this group that he didn't even intend to join, for fear of violent retaliation against him or his family.

If he does escape, he will face stigma and rejection and potentially violent community reprisal.

He's unlikely to receive much support of any kind. And then he'll be back at square one, searching for economic opportunities where there are so few.

The consequences of failing to address all this more effectively in the next decade and beyond will be enormous and far-reaching.

Most important of all for the people of the Sahel themselves, who deserve a better future than the one in front of them. But the problems facing the Sahel will affect others too.

Political instability can be contagious. Some of the extremist groups behind a lot of the current violence and displacement have made clear they have bigger ambitions. Countries that are

currently relatively stable, like Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo and Ghana, are on the front lines. We have already seen extremists emerge in northern Benin.

The countries neighbouring the Sahel will also be the first port of call for the region's economic migrants and refugees.

The world beyond Africa will not be immune from consequences either.

Illicit trafficking and smuggling organisations, peddling drugs, guns and people, already target other regions, above all Europe.

More extremist groups, with more entrenched footholds, nearly unchecked and left to grow, will not take long to start planning and instigating attacks further afield. The problems I have described are large and deep-rooted. It will not be easy to turn the tide.

But it is possible to imagine a different future a generation from now, where people like Samira and Ibrahim and their families can live peacefully in their homes, feed their families, send their children to school and build better lives.

So what must be done if we want that future to be a reality?

The most important point is that public policy has to address the causes, not merely respond to the symptoms. And the second most important point is that the leading role and main responsibility must be taken up by decision makers in the region itself, above all legitimate national and local authorities. Unless both of those two things happen, the situation will not improve.

Then there are four pillars of necessary action.

First, and some people think the UN humanitarian chief should not be saying this, the state authorities in each country have to ensure control of their own territory. That means prosecuting a military response against the extremists and the organised criminals. Those extremists do not offer a better life for people under their control. Just ask the people who suffered so much under ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

But the military response needs to be conducted in a way which protects, supports and wins the backing of local communities. This is about countering insurgency, and no counter-insurgency effort in history has succeeded without the engagement of the people it is supposed to be protecting. Too often at the moment, the military response is too small and too badly managed to do more good than harm. It is unrealistic to expect national or regional authorities to manage this on their own. More and better international help is essential. In 2019, more than $2 billion was spent on multilateral security initiatives in the Sahel. On top of that comes the even larger expenditure on bilateral military assistance from powerful counties like France and the US to

individual Sahelian nations. But do not delude yourselves that this is a lot of money in relation to the size of the problem. It is not. More, not less, spending is needed, but the money needs to be spent better too.

Second, more comprehensive, longer term and larger scale humanitarian support is needed.

Donors contributed $1.5 billion to UN-coordinated humanitarian appeals for these six countries in 2019. We needed a billion dollars more than that. This year the costs are higher still, especially because of the COVID-19 crisis. Next year they will grow again. And the burden of paying for humanitarian action needs to be shared more fairly. At the moment just four donors pay 60 per cent of the world's bill for humanitarian action. Humanitarian action – food, shelter, education, protection and medical services - matters not just because it saves lives but also because it sends the message that people elsewhere do care about what is happening.

Humanitarian agencies, by the way, must up their game too, especially to work harder to empower the people they are trying to help - so they can solve more of their own problems - and thereby reinforce their agency and human spirit.

Third, there needs to be a much bigger investment in basic services, especially education, health, clean water, sanitation and family planning. Healthier, better educated people can do much for themselves, which is greatly to be preferred to relying indefinitely on external support. The international community will have to foot much of the bill for this. But national authorities should focus more of what resources they have on these priorities, and be willing to allow organizations that can deliver programmes efficiently and effectively – not least in many cases community-based organizations and NGOs – to do so, particularly while many national institutions remain as weak as they are now. It is particularly important that the needs of women and girls are explicitly prioritised and invested in. Gender inequality is more pronounced in this region than almost anywhere else in the world. If you look at any country which has prospered over the last century or more, one thing you always see is that the status of women has been enhanced. That is not a symptom or a consequence. It is a cause.

Fourth, it must be clear that the region's historic traditional livelihoods, especially nomadic pastoralism or subsistence farming, will not be able to support populations of the size that will soon be living across Sahelian countries. That is the brutal consequence of climate change, resource pressures and demographic trends. The process of development over recent generations in every region of the world has been a process of improving agricultural productivity and urbanization to develop new livelihoods. Development efforts in the Sahel need to be larger scale and more cognizant of the problems we are talking about here: infrastructure, agriculture viable in the conditions that are evolving, power, and well-planned urbanisation are among the priorities.

The bad news with this agenda is that doing all these things to the scale and standard necessary is very difficult. The good news, though, is that many countries have done them, some over the last

two hundred years – but many over the last fifty years. There is no reason why, with help, the Sahel can't do so too.

Right now, however, solutions being tried are both inadequate in scale and lop-sided in composition: too high a proportion of the effort on security and humanitarian need, and too little on the underlying causes of the problems. But the answer to that is not to reduce spend on security or life-saving humanitarian help. That would just make things even worse.

Let's also be honest that the only way the international community is going to invest heavily in solutions to the problems of the Sahel is if they have a higher degree of confidence in national and local leadership than they have had hitherto.

I offer these suggestions in all humility. I'm sure wiser people will have wiser ideas, so I look forward to your views and your thoughts.

But I do know one thing for sure. There is enormous potential in the Sahel region, and it's possible to see a much brighter future ahead. But we are heading in the wrong direction. Better change course quick.

I talked just now about bad news and good news. There is more. You, the policy makers of the future, will not have a choice about whether to pay attention to the Sahel. The issues I have been talking about are being thrust upon you. The good news, I hope, is that it is you they are I hope, is that it is you they are being thrust upon.