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Between Security Discourses and Sustainable Development: The Challenges of Socioeconomic Transformation in Francophone Sahelian States

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Abstract

The contemporary Francophone Sahel, particularly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has witnessed an unprecedented rise in security challenges, including terrorism, armed insurgencies, political instability, and forced displacement. These challenges have significantly shaped governance structures, development priorities, and socioeconomic realities across the region. This study examines the intersection between security discourses and socioeconomic transformation in Francophone Sahelian states, with particular attention to how governments, international organisations, and the media construct and disseminate narratives of security in response to persistent crises. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and insights from postcolonial and security studies, the paper investigates the ways in which security narratives influence policy formulation, resource allocation, and development agendas. It argues that while security-centred policies are often justified as necessary responses to threats, they frequently reshape national priorities in ways that affect education, employment, social cohesion, and economic development. The study further explores how dominant security discourses can legitimise exceptional political measures while simultaneously obscuring structural socioeconomic inequalities that contribute to instability. The paper contends that security and development are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Sustainable socioeconomic transformation in the Sahel requires a holistic approach that addresses not only military and political threats but also poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, and governance deficits. By critically interrogating prevailing security narratives, this study contributes to broader scholarly debates on security, development, and discourse in contemporary Africa. It offers a nuanced understanding of how language, power, and policy interact to shape the prospects for sustainable development in Francophone Sahelian societies.

Keywords: Security Discourses, Socioeconomic Transformation, Sustainable Development, Francophone Africa, Sahel Region

1. Introduction

The contemporary Francophone Sahel has increasingly become a focal point in discussions surrounding security, governance, and development in Africa. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have, over the last decade, experienced persistent security crises marked by violent extremism, armed insurgencies, military coups, political instability, and large-scale population displacement. These challenges have significantly altered the political and socioeconomic landscape of the region, making security one of the most dominant issues in public discourse and policy formulation. Recent reports indicate that the Sahel has emerged as one of the most affected

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regions by terrorism globally, with escalating violence continuing to undermine governance structures and development efforts. The growing prominence of security concerns in the region has also transformed the language through which development challenges are understood and addressed. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, migration, food insecurity, weak institutions, and social exclusion are increasingly framed within the broader context of national and regional security. Consequently, governments and international actors often prioritise military interventions, counterterrorism operations, and security reforms as central strategies for stabilising the region. While these measures are frequently presented as necessary responses to insecurity, scholars and policy analysts continue to question whether security-centred approaches alone can effectively address the deeper structural conditions that sustain instability. Recent studies have identified poverty, weak state capacity, social exclusion, and governance deficits as some of the fundamental drivers of insecurity and violent extremism across the Sahel.

Understanding this phenomenon requires attention not only to security policies but also to the discourses that shape them. Michel Foucault (1972) argues that discourse functions as a system through which knowledge and power are produced and legitimised. Discourses do not merely describe social realities; they actively construct them by determining how issues are perceived, discussed, and addressed. Within the Francophone Sahel, security narratives have become powerful instruments through which governments, international organisations, and media institutions define threats, justify interventions, and influence public opinion. Through repeated references to terrorism, state fragility, insurgency, and regional instability, security discourse increasingly shapes policy priorities and development agendas across the region. The intensification of insecurity has also produced significant political transformations. In recent years, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced military takeovers largely justified through narratives of national security and state survival. These developments have reshaped regional alliances and altered relationships with international partners. The withdrawal of the three countries from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) reflect the growing influence of security-centred political narratives in redefining governance and regional cooperation.

Despite the prominence of these security interventions, violence and instability continue to persist. Reports from recent years suggest that military-led governments have struggled to significantly reduce extremist attacks despite promising improved security outcomes. In some cases, insecurity has expanded geographically while humanitarian conditions have worsened, leading to increased displacement, economic hardship, and social vulnerability. This situation raises important questions regarding the relationship between dominant security narratives and sustainable socioeconomic development. It also calls for a critical examination of whether the securitisation of governance has overshadowed broader developmental priorities such as education, employment, healthcare, and social inclusion. Although existing scholarship has extensively examined terrorism, conflict, and governance in the Sahel, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the role of discourse in shaping development priorities and socioeconomic transformation. Much of the current literature focuses on military strategies, political instability, and international interventions, often paying less attention to how language and representation influence policy decisions and public perceptions. Yet discourse remains a crucial site through which power operates, priorities are established, and development agendas are legitimised. Examining security discourse therefore provides a deeper understanding of how certain policy choices emerge and how they affect everyday socioeconomic realities within the region.

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This paper investigates the relationship between security discourses and socioeconomic transformation in the contemporary Francophone Sahel, with particular focus on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It explores how dominant security narratives are constructed and circulated by political leaders, international organisations, and media institutions, and how these narratives influence development policies and socioeconomic outcomes. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucault's conception of discourse and power, the study argues that sustainable development in the Sahel requires moving beyond narrow military understandings of security towards more inclusive approaches that address poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and governance challenges. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. Data for the study are drawn from official government speeches, policy documents, reports from international organisations, media publications, and recent scholarly works on security and development in the Sahel. Through textual analysis, the paper examines how security narratives are produced, reproduced, and mobilised to shape public policy and development priorities. The selection of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is informed by their central role in contemporary security debates and their shared experiences of political transition, insurgency, and socioeconomic challenges.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing debates on security, discourse, and development in contemporary Africa by demonstrating that sustainable socioeconomic transformation cannot be achieved through military responses alone. Rather, lasting stability in the Francophone Sahel depends on the integration of security strategies with policies that promote human development, economic inclusion, social justice, and effective governance. By interrogating the language through which insecurity is understood and addressed, the paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between discourse, power, and socioeconomic transformation in the region.

2. Security Discourses and the Politics of Development in the Francophone Sahel

The contemporary Francophone Sahel presents a compelling case for examining the relationship between discourse, power, and development. Over the past decade, security has evolved from being one among several policy concerns to becoming the dominant framework through which political leaders, international organisations, and development partners interpret the challenges facing the region. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the language of security increasingly shapes public policy, governance priorities, and development interventions. As a result, questions of terrorism, insurgency, border control, and state stability often overshadow broader discussions of socioeconomic development, social justice, and institutional reform. The rise of security discourse in the Sahel is closely linked to the expansion of violent extremist groups operating across the region. Since the outbreak of the Malian crisis in 2012, governments and international actors have consistently framed insecurity as the most pressing threat to regional stability and development (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). This framing has been reinforced through political speeches, policy documents, media narratives, and international security reports that portray the Sahel as a fragile region threatened by terrorism and state collapse. Such representations have contributed to what the Copenhagen School describes as the process of securitisation, whereby issues are presented as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures beyond the normal procedures of governance (Buzan et al., 1998).

In Mali, for example, successive governments have relied on security-centred narratives to justify military operations and emergency measures aimed at combating extremist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Similar patterns can be observed in Burkina Faso and Niger, where

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military juntas that seized power between 2020 and 2023 legitimised their actions by arguing that civilian governments had failed to address growing insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2024). In each case, security became a powerful political language through which state actors sought to gain legitimacy and public support. The recurring promise to restore security was presented not merely as a policy objective but as a prerequisite for national survival and development. From a Foucauldian perspective, these developments demonstrate the productive nature of discourse. Foucault (1972) argues that discourse creates systems of knowledge that shape how reality is understood and governed. Security discourse in the Sahel does not simply describe insecurity; it actively constructs particular understandings of threats and determines which responses are considered legitimate. Through repeated references to terrorism, instability, and state fragility, political actors establish security as the primary lens through which national challenges are interpreted. Consequently, alternative explanations rooted in poverty, inequality, governance failures, or historical marginalisation often receive less attention within public debates.

International actors have also played a significant role in reinforcing security-centred narratives. Organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and international development agencies have consistently linked development assistance to security concerns in the Sahel (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024). While these interventions are frequently motivated by legitimate concerns about regional stability, they have contributed to the growing securitisation of development. Development programmes that once focused primarily on poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and economic growth are increasingly designed around counterterrorism objectives, border management, and conflict prevention strategies. This trend reflects what Duffield (2014) describes as the merging of development and security agendas in contemporary international relations. Under this framework, underdevelopment is often viewed as a potential security threat, while development interventions become tools for managing instability. In the Sahel, this convergence has encouraged policymakers to treat socioeconomic challenges primarily as security concerns rather than as developmental issues requiring structural reforms. Although security and development are undoubtedly interconnected, an excessive emphasis on military and security solutions risks obscuring the deeper socioeconomic conditions that contribute to conflict and instability.

The media has further amplified these security narratives. International news coverage frequently portrays the Sahel as a region defined by terrorism, coups, humanitarian crises, and political instability. While such reporting draws attention to genuine challenges, it often reduces the complexity of the region to a narrow security framework (Molenaar, 2023). This tendency influences international perceptions and can shape donor priorities, investment decisions, and foreign policy responses. Consequently, narratives of insecurity become self-reinforcing, creating a cycle in which security concerns dominate public discourse while long-term developmental issues receive comparatively limited visibility. The political consequences of this discursive shift are significant. As security becomes the dominant policy priority, governments allocate increasing portions of national budgets to defence and military operations. According to recent reports, military expenditures across the Sahel have risen substantially in response to persistent insecurity, often at the expense of investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and social welfare programmes (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2024). While strengthening national security institutions may be necessary in the short term, the diversion of resources from social development raises concerns about the sustainability of current policy approaches.

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Furthermore, security discourse often shapes citizenship and governance practices in ways that affect democratic participation. The invocation of national security can be used to justify restrictions on civil liberties, limit political opposition, and centralise state authority. In several Sahelian countries, emergency measures introduced in response to insecurity have expanded executive powers and reduced opportunities for public accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Although such measures are frequently defended as temporary necessities, their long-term implications for democratic governance remain a source of concern among scholars and civil society organisations. The dominance of security discourse in the Francophone Sahel therefore reveals the complex relationship between language, power, and development. While security challenges undoubtedly require serious attention, the framing of regional problems primarily through the lens of terrorism and instability can narrow policy options and marginalise alternative approaches to development. By privileging military responses over structural reforms, security narratives risk addressing the symptoms of instability while leaving its root causes largely intact. Understanding how these discourses operate is therefore essential for evaluating the prospects for sustainable socioeconomic transformation in the region.

3. Security Narratives and Socioeconomic Transformation in the Francophone Sahel

The dominance of security discourse in the Francophone Sahel extends beyond the political sphere and has profound implications for socioeconomic transformation. As governments and international actors increasingly prioritise security concerns, development policies and resource allocation are often shaped by the urgent need to combat terrorism and restore stability. While security remains essential for sustainable development, the persistent framing of regional challenges through a security lens has generated consequences for education, employment, governance, social cohesion, and human development. In many instances, the focus on military solutions has overshadowed the structural socioeconomic conditions that contribute to instability in the first place. One of the most visible impacts of insecurity is on education. The Sahel has witnessed widespread attacks on schools, teachers, and educational infrastructure, particularly in areas affected by extremist violence. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2024), thousands of schools across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have either been closed or rendered inaccessible due to insecurity, depriving millions of children of educational opportunities. Beyond the immediate disruption of learning, prolonged school closures increase the likelihood of child labour, forced migration, early marriage, and youth recruitment into armed groups. Education is widely recognised as a critical driver of socioeconomic transformation; therefore, the erosion of educational systems undermines both present and future development prospects within the region. Youth unemployment represents another critical challenge. The Sahel possesses one of the youngest populations in the world, with a rapidly expanding labour force and limited economic opportunities. While security narratives often portray violent extremism primarily as a military threat, many scholars argue that unemployment, economic exclusion, and limited prospects for social mobility contribute significantly to instability (UNDP, 2023). Young people who face persistent poverty and marginalisation may become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organisations that offer financial incentives, social belonging, or a sense of purpose. Consequently, the relationship between insecurity and unemployment is cyclical: insecurity discourages investment and economic growth, while unemployment fuels the grievances that sustain insecurity. The economic consequences of prolonged insecurity are equally significant. Persistent violence has disrupted agricultural production, commercial activities, and regional trade networks across the Sahel. Agriculture remains a major source of livelihood for a large proportion of the population

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in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. However, insecurity has restricted access to farmlands, displaced farming communities, and reduced productivity in many regions (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2024). At the same time, investors often view conflict-prone areas as high-risk environments, leading to reduced domestic and foreign investment. These conditions limit job creation, weaken local economies, and hinder broader development efforts.

Forced displacement further illustrates the socioeconomic consequences of insecurity. The region has experienced an unprecedented rise in internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees over the past decade. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024), millions of people across the Sahel have been displaced by conflict and violence. Displacement not only disrupts livelihoods and access to essential services but also places additional pressure on host communities that are often already struggling with limited resources. In many cases, displacement contributes to increased competition over land, water, and employment opportunities, thereby creating new sources of tension and vulnerability. The influence of security discourse is also evident in governance and public policy. As security concerns become increasingly central to state decision-making, governments frequently prioritise defence spending over social investments. Recent data indicate that military expenditure in several Sahelian states has increased considerably in response to growing security threats (SIPRI, 2024). While strengthening security institutions may be necessary, the long-term diversion of resources from sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure can undermine broader development goals. Socioeconomic transformation requires sustained investment in human capital and public services, yet these sectors often receive reduced attention when security dominates policy agendas. Furthermore, security-centred governance can affect democratic participation and social trust. Emergency measures introduced to combat insecurity frequently grant expanded powers to state institutions while limiting civic engagement and political dissent. Scholars have noted that excessive securitisation may weaken democratic institutions by normalising exceptional governance practices and reducing opportunities for accountability (Bagayoko & Ibrahim, 2023). When citizens perceive governments as prioritising military responses without addressing underlying socioeconomic grievances, trust in public institutions may decline, potentially exacerbating instability rather than resolving it. Social cohesion has also been affected by dominant security narratives. In many instances, security discourses categorise certain communities or regions as potential sources of threat, leading to stigmatisation and exclusion. Ethnic and communal tensions have intensified in several parts of the Sahel as governments and armed groups compete to control territory and resources. Such dynamics can deepen social divisions and weaken the collective sense of national belonging that is necessary for sustainable development. As Ibrahim (2024) observes, sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through military victories; it requires the strengthening of social relationships, inclusive governance, and equitable access to economic opportunities.

The evidence discussed above suggests that security and development are deeply interconnected. However, the persistent dominance of security discourse often results in policy approaches that prioritise immediate stability over long-term transformation. By framing insecurity primarily as a military challenge, policymakers risk overlooking the socioeconomic realities that contribute to conflict and vulnerability. Poverty, unemployment, educational deprivation, social exclusion, and weak governance are not merely consequences of insecurity; they are also among its root causes. For this reason, sustainable socioeconomic transformation in the Francophone Sahel requires a broader understanding of security—one that places human wellbeing at the centre of policy

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formulation. Such an approach recognises that security is not limited to the protection of state borders or institutions but also includes access to education, healthcare, employment, social justice, and economic opportunities. Without addressing these fundamental dimensions of human security, efforts to achieve lasting stability and development are likely to remain incomplete.

4. Rethinking Security for Sustainable Socioeconomic Transformation in the Francophone Sahel

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that the persistent reliance on security-centred narratives has not been sufficient to address the multidimensional challenges confronting the Francophone Sahel. Although military operations and counterterrorism strategies remain important components of state responses to insecurity, the continued expansion of violence, displacement, poverty, and social vulnerability suggests the need for a broader and more inclusive approach. Sustainable socioeconomic transformation in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger depends not only on the restoration of territorial security but also on the creation of social, political, and economic conditions that reduce the drivers of conflict and foster long-term stability. A useful starting point for this rethinking is the concept of human security. Unlike traditional security approaches that focus primarily on protecting the state, human security places the wellbeing of individuals and communities at the centre of policy considerations (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). It recognises that threats to security extend beyond armed violence to include poverty, hunger, unemployment, disease, environmental degradation, and social exclusion. Within the context of the Sahel, this perspective is particularly relevant because many of the conditions that sustain instability are rooted in socioeconomic deprivation rather than purely military concerns. Addressing insecurity therefore requires policies that improve living conditions and expand opportunities for vulnerable populations.

One of the most important areas requiring attention is youth development and employment creation. Young people constitute a significant proportion of the population in the Sahel, yet many face limited access to education, vocational training, and decent employment opportunities. The absence of meaningful economic prospects contributes to frustration, marginalisation, and vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups (UNDP, 2023). Governments and development partners must therefore invest in programmes that promote entrepreneurship, technical skills acquisition, and labour market inclusion. Creating sustainable employment opportunities is not only an economic necessity but also a security strategy capable of addressing some of the root causes of instability. Education also remains central to long-term transformation. Beyond its role in human capital development, education promotes civic participation, social mobility, and national integration. In conflict-affected areas of the Sahel, rebuilding educational infrastructure and ensuring safe access to schooling should be treated as both a developmental and security priority. Recent studies have shown that communities with stronger educational systems are generally more resilient to extremist ideologies and social fragmentation (UNESCO, 2024). Expanding educational opportunities, particularly for girls and marginalised groups, can therefore contribute significantly to social stability and economic growth.

Equally important is the issue of governance. A recurring challenge across the Francophone Sahel has been the perceived disconnect between state institutions and local communities. In many rural areas, citizens experience limited access to public services, weak institutional presence, and inadequate political representation. These governance deficits often undermine public trust and create opportunities for non-state actors to gain influence. Consequently, efforts to improve security must be accompanied by measures that strengthen accountability, transparency, and

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citizen participation. As the African Development Bank (2024) notes, inclusive governance remains a critical pillar for sustainable development and conflict prevention across Africa. Another dimension that deserves attention is regional cooperation. The security challenges facing the Sahel transcend national borders and cannot be effectively addressed by individual states acting in isolation. Issues such as terrorism, arms trafficking, irregular migration, and organised crime require coordinated regional responses. While recent political developments have altered traditional patterns of cooperation in the region, there remains a pressing need for collaborative frameworks that balance security concerns with development objectives. Regional initiatives should not focus exclusively on military coordination but should also promote economic integration, infrastructure development, and shared strategies for addressing poverty and environmental challenges.

Furthermore, development policies must recognise the growing impact of climate change on insecurity in the Sahel. The region is particularly vulnerable to desertification, irregular rainfall patterns, and resource scarcity, all of which contribute to competition over land and water resources (World Bank, 2024). Environmental pressures often intersect with existing social and economic vulnerabilities, creating conditions that can intensify conflict. Sustainable development strategies should therefore incorporate climate adaptation measures, support for agricultural resilience, and investments in renewable energy and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, the challenge facing the Francophone Sahel is not simply one of defeating armed groups or restoring state authority. Rather, it is a question of how to build societies in which citizens have access to opportunities, public services, political participation, and economic security. Security and development should not be treated as separate or competing objectives. Instead, they must be understood as mutually reinforcing processes. A secure society is more likely to attract investment, support economic growth, and strengthen institutions, while inclusive development reduces many of the conditions that give rise to insecurity.

The future of the Francophone Sahel therefore depends on moving beyond narrow security discourses that prioritise military responses at the expense of broader developmental concerns. While security interventions remain necessary, they must be integrated into comprehensive strategies that address poverty, inequality, unemployment, governance challenges, and environmental vulnerability. Only through such a holistic approach can the region achieve meaningful and sustainable socioeconomic transformation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between security discourses and socioeconomic transformation in the contemporary Francophone Sahel, focusing on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It has argued that security narratives have become dominant frameworks through which governments, international organisations, and media institutions interpret and respond to the challenges facing the region. Through the language of terrorism, instability, and state fragility, security concerns have increasingly shaped governance priorities, policy interventions, and development agendas. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis and Foucault's conception of discourse and power, the study has shown that security discourse is not merely descriptive but also productive. It influences how problems are understood, which policy responses are considered legitimate, and how resources are allocated. The paper demonstrated that while security-centred approaches may be necessary to address immediate threats, they often fail to adequately engage with the structural socioeconomic conditions that contribute to instability. Issues such as poverty,

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unemployment, educational deprivation, displacement, weak governance, and social exclusion remain significant drivers of insecurity across the region.

The analysis further revealed that the dominance of security narratives has important implications for socioeconomic transformation. Increased military expenditure, disruptions to education and economic activities, large-scale displacement, and the securitisation of governance have all affected development outcomes in the Francophone Sahel. These realities suggest that sustainable development cannot be achieved through military interventions alone. The paper therefore advocates a shift towards a more inclusive and human-centred understanding of security. Such an approach recognises that lasting peace and stability depend on investments in education, employment, good governance, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. By addressing the root causes of insecurity rather than focusing solely on its manifestations, governments and development partners can create conditions that support both security and socioeconomic transformation. In conclusion, the future of the Francophone Sahel lies in the integration of security and development rather than the prioritisation of one over the other. Sustainable socioeconomic transformation requires policies that place people at the centre of security strategies and recognise that development itself is one of the most effective foundations for lasting peace.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the need for a fundamental shift in the way security and development are conceptualised and pursued in the Francophone Sahel. While military interventions and counterterrorism measures remain necessary in responding to immediate threats, they should not constitute the primary or sole framework through which the region's challenges are addressed. Governments, policymakers, and development partners must recognise that insecurity in the Sahel is deeply intertwined with socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, weak governance, and limited access to education and public services. To achieve sustainable socioeconomic transformation, development policies should be integrated into broader security strategies. Rather than focusing predominantly on military expenditure and security operations, governments should invest more substantially in sectors that directly improve human wellbeing. Education, healthcare, youth empowerment, infrastructure development, and job creation should be prioritised as essential components of long-term peacebuilding. In particular, expanding educational opportunities and creating sustainable employment pathways for young people can help reduce the vulnerabilities that extremist groups often exploit.

There is also a pressing need to strengthen democratic governance and rebuild trust between citizens and state institutions. Security policies are more likely to succeed when they are accompanied by transparency, accountability, and meaningful citizen participation. Governments in the region should therefore pursue reforms that promote inclusive governance, protect civil liberties, and encourage community engagement in decision-making processes. Such measures can enhance state legitimacy and foster social cohesion in communities affected by conflict and instability. Furthermore, regional and international actors should adopt more balanced approaches that place equal emphasis on development and security. International assistance programmes should move beyond short-term stabilisation efforts and support initiatives that address the structural causes of insecurity. Greater investment in climate adaptation, agricultural resilience, social protection programmes, and local economic development can contribute significantly to reducing conflict drivers and improving living conditions across the Sahel.

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Finally, media institutions and policymakers should be cautious about framing the region exclusively through narratives of terrorism, conflict, and instability. While security challenges are undeniably important, a singular focus on insecurity can obscure local resilience, economic potential, and community-led development initiatives. More nuanced and balanced representations of the Sahel are necessary to support policies that promote both security and sustainable socioeconomic transformation. Ultimately, lasting peace in the Francophone Sahel will depend not only on the defeat of armed groups but also on the creation of inclusive societies where citizens have access to opportunities, justice, and human dignity.

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