Sahel elites must move away from 'zero-sum' policies, report urges

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Los Angeles/DNA - A dual economic strategy focusing on domestic economic development and international partnerships to address the underlying challenges facing the Sahel region could help Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Sudan to build more resilient institutions and foster long-term development, a recently published report says.

The report by the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) argues that the four countries should aim to transition away from relying exclusively on resource extraction. It attributes much of the challenges facing the four countries on unsustainable economic policies which focus on the export of raw materials.

Despite some improvements in terms of public goods provision - in particular regarding social and environmental public goods - these countries continue to face significant developmental challenges, ranking among the world's poorest.

Titled "Political Instability and Economic Development in the Sahel: Governance in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Sudan since 2000", the report provides a comprehensive analysis of the political instability and economic challenges facing the region. It evaluates scores from the Berggruen Governance Index (BGI), which is based on data from 2000 to 2019.

The four countries rank among the 20 lowest ranked nations on the United Nations' Human Development Index. All of them have experienced at least one coup or coup attempt since 2020. In Niger, the military took power in July 2023, in Burkina Faso in 2022, while the most recent coup in Mali took place in 2021. In Sudan, an ongoing violent power struggle between different military factions has caused the world's largest refugee crisis of the past year.

"This political upheaval is both the result and the cause of economic difficulty", the report states. "Scarcity breeds instability, which in turn makes development, investment, and growth more difficult, further fuelling dysfunctional governance, and deepening dependencies."

Before the coup in July 2023, Niger was seen as the last democratic partner of the Western industrialized nations in the region and an ally in the battle against terrorism and migration to Europe. Neighbouring countries Mali and Burkina Faso have also turned against the West and have improved relations with Russia.

The four Sahel states are highly dependent on overseas development aid (ODA), which makes them more susceptible to the policies of their donors. Colonial-era economic structures in the region have led to underdevelopment and inequality. The effects of this legacy can be felt until the present day and have resulted in a hugely uneven distribution of wealth as well as corruption, rent seeking and uneven infrastructure, the report finds.

The former colonial power France has scaled back its military engagement in the Sahel, as have the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations. Washington recently agreed to withdraw around 1,000 troops from Niger, while 12,000 UN peacekeepers are to leave Mali at the end of the year. The European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) in Niger is also forced to leave.

However, this leaves the door open for other players, the authors argue. Russia has become increasingly active, for example via the Wagner group. Trade between the country and the Sahel region has also benefitted from the coups. "China is also an increasingly important player due to its control over supply chains of critical minerals", the report adds.

In the Sahel region, most of the economic output comes from exporting raw materials. Gold, for example, accounts for 74 and 73 percent of export value in Burkina Faso and Mali respectively. Other commodities exported include oil, radioactive ores such as uranium, raw cotton, livestock or palm oil.

With elites competing over the unevenly distributed resources, politics becomes what the authors call "zero sum", with no-one trying to develop the economy further. This dynamic, they say, also serves as an explanation for the recent rash of coups in the region.

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The climate crisis adds to the situation, according to the report. For instance, erratic rainfall exacerbates malnutrition, indirectly contributing to violence. On the other hand, the Sahel has a lot of potential for generating solar power. Partnerships with more developed countries or international donors could be particularly helpful to develop the sector.

"The public goods improvements we have witnessed in the Sahel are likely unsustainable in the context of low (and often declining) democratic accountability and a continued reliance of extractive export models and subsistence agriculture, in particular given the high fertility rates in the region, which are among the highest in the world", the report says.

If the states in the Sahel area emphasize domestic economic development, including a focus on the production of value-added goods and sustainable agriculture, they can build resilience and reduce dependency on external actors, the report concludes.

"The EU's best chance at facilitating strong connections and countering geopolitical competitors is by building strong economic ties and mutually beneficial relationships", it says. This is especially vital, it adds, in the face of the rising influence of Russia and China. +++

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Caption: Turning away from the West towards Russia and China: Supporters of Niger's National Council of Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) wave the Chinese flag and flag bearing the logo of private military Company Wagner, in Niamey on September 16, 2023. (Photo by AFP/DNA)

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